



The OCU Chronicle

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Finding Humor In His Father's Holocaust Story

As Holocaust awareness slips away at an alarming rate, "Pass The Trauma, Please" author Todd Diamond took an unlikely approach.

THE OCU CHRONICLE
SEP 24, 2025
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When Todd Diamond set out to write about his father's experience during the Holocaust, he didn't expect humor to drive the conversation. What began as a solemn retelling quickly transformed into *Pass the Trauma, Please*, a memoir that combines the brutal truths of his father's trauma told with unexpected wit and humor.

In our conversation with the author, Diamond tells the story through the lens of both the interviewer and son, showing how laughter can coexist with unimaginable loss. He tells The OCU Chronicle why he chose an unconventional approach to (finally) recounting his father's story, how the inherited trauma he retells has shaped his own life, and the importance of embracing new approaches to Holocaust remembrance today.

The OCU Chronicle: What inspired you to write your father's story in such a candid and often humorous way, taking the approach you did?

Todd Diamond: There's only so many times you can hear your Holocaust-survivor father say, *"When are you going to write my story? I'm not getting any younger over here,"* before you give in and start filling up a Notes app and a pile of Moleskines.

He's one of the last survivors, so there was urgency to get his story out there while he's still alive, still able to answer tough questions. Ideally, he'd reveal things he never shared before.

My first draft was shaping up, it was a somber, historical account—very reverent. He read it and said, *"Meh, I don't like it. Doesn't sound like you. Doesn't sound like me."* Suddenly my father was my editor. Then he laid down the real challenge: *"Do me a favor, son. Don't drown the book in darkness. Everyone knows the horrors already. It's okay if people cry reading my story. But you've got to make 'em laugh, too."*

That was the turning point. My father is blunt, sometimes wildly inappropriate even when describing the darkest parts of his past. Yet the book wasn't a true reflection of him...no cranky humor, and not a single F-bomb. The book finally found its voice.

The other inspiration? A second-generation duty to family, Judaism, and the future: to keep Holocaust stories alive in new ways that engage a wider audience, especially at a time when antisemitism is rising and Holocaust awareness is slipping at an alarming rate.

OCUC: Why do you think the timing was finally right to share his story when/how he did?

Todd Diamond: I grew up knowing my father was a Holocaust survivor and that he fought in Israel's War of Independence. But he never shared the details. For example, at 12 years old he was arrested by the Gestapo for

smuggling medicines into the Warsaw Ghetto so that his father, a physician, could continue treating patients. He was sent to Germany as a slave laborer, viciously abused, and eventually liberated by a Russian soldier before making his way back to Warsaw on “top” of a train, like Tom Cruise. And so much more, that you could fill a book...

My father chose to hold back this part of his life because he saw what happens when survivors unload trauma and war experiences too early on their kids. It crushes them.

I was 19 before he gave me any real details. After a Holocaust lecture at college, I came home and finally asked him, “Who are you, Dad?” It was Father’s Day. He left the room and came back with a worn document from when he was twelve. It had a swastika on the cover and his picture on the inside. The name? Tadeusz Lipski. Not David Diamantstein. It was his false identity papers. Well, that kicked off a slow drip of stories.

OCUC: How did you find a balance between the subject matter and humor?

Todd Diamond: Despite the horrors he experienced, humor is what kept my father sane. I inherited that reflex, though I often push things too far, crossing the line between funny and *too soon*. I’m working on curbing my enthusiasm for inappropriateness.

But irreverence isn’t disrespect. It’s a sharp tool in the survival kit, a way of saying to deniers and those who still want to erase us: “Yes, it happened, it’ll never happen again.” In fact, it’s what makes the Jewish people so resilient, then and now. Humor, irony, and the absurd can also act as trojan horses; cunning ways to disarm readers long enough to let the miserable truths and trauma in.

And I had role models: Mel Brooks brought the “haha” to the Holocaust, Philip Roth and Woody Allen mined Jewish anxiety for entertainment,

demonstrating how you can take generational trauma and present it in ways that make readers laugh and listen.



OCUC: What does the title *Pass the Trauma, Please* mean to you personally?

Todd Diamond: While researching, I found a Mount Sinai study concluding that trauma can be passed down from Holocaust survivors to their children. That was the *aha* moment. It became clear that inherited trauma was at the heart of my story—it explained my relationship failures and career meltdowns, and ultimately, it inspired the title *Pass the Trauma, Please*.

But the title also captures the book’s humor and irreverence. It nods to the unlikely setting where many of my father’s long-buried truths finally surfaced: a Chinese restaurant.

If a title like *Pass the Trauma, Please* can get a few more people to pick up the book and grapple with the darkest parts of our history, then it’s doing its job. If you can make people laugh, you can get them to pay attention.

OCUC: What was the most surprising thing your father shared?

Todd Diamond: Most surprising: how, where, when, and with whom he lost his virginity. Most surprising runner up: He opened a pharmacy in Manhattan with a \$50,000 loan from a Madam who ran the brothel next door. Most disturbing: the story about his uncle’s choice to go into hiding with his mistress, leaving behind a wife and daughter to die in the Warsaw

Ghetto (I weep each time I think about it, and yeah, I'm reaching for a tissue right now...).

OCUC: Does hearing his experience now contextualize your family life or things that you may have misunderstood growing up?

Todd Diamond: Learning what my father did to survive forced me to see him, and myself, differently. The easy-going, self-made man who loved to tell off-color jokes, was also carrying unimaginable pain.

I realized I'd inherited not just his ability to lighten up the dark, but also his way of pushing conflict, anger, and anxiety deep into an emotional vault. Except my vault leaks, stuff gets out, and when it does, it affects others around me, people who deserve better. I've got it under control now, it took time.

And it also clarified my Jewish identity: I'm not Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, or a High Holy Days Jew. I am a *Holocaust Jew*: child of a survivor, shaped by inherited trauma and systematic genocide, carrying the constant presence of death, mistrust, vulnerability, and the duty to remember.

OCUC: What do you hope readers take away about your father's legacy—and Holocaust remembrance more broadly?

Todd Diamond: I'd like readers to believe the Holocaust isn't a once-a-year tragedy binge on Yom HaShoah. I'd rather people carry a low-grade heaviness all year, a reminder that today sure feels a lot like Germany in the 1930s, or Argentina in the 1970s and 1980s.

I also want readers to see that humor in this context isn't disrespect; it's a survival strategy and a coping mechanism. Jews have always used

storytelling, irony, and comedy to defang stereotypes and push back on antisemitic rhetoric. It's how we humanize ourselves against attempts at dehumanization. That, plus a mighty Israel contributes to our longevity.

As I continually remind my own kids; their grandfather's story is horrific and miraculous, but it's not the only one. Other cultures carry trauma too, and their stories deserve to be heard.

That's why I'm excited to see what third generations will create, and not just the stories they will tell, but also the platforms they'll use to carry their messages forward.

So, here's my advice: talk to your parents, get them chatty over dinners, loosen them up with cocktails, even cannabis. You'll probably hear things you never knew. And you might discover a few things about yourself in the process.

OCUC: How do you hope younger generations may connect with Holocaust stories like yours today, especially as firsthand witnesses become fewer and misinformation and denial spreads online?

Todd Diamond: It's a challenge: getting younger people to care about a story they think they already know, especially in a time when denial and misinformation is overtaking facts.

I'm an advertising creative director. Pushing boundaries and pushing past people's resistance is my job. So, I treated it like a branding problem. Get people to stop, listen, connect, and most importantly... share. First thing, address "not-another-Holocaust book" fatigue by breaking a few norms of the genre. Sure, those eyewitness accounts are among the most important books ever written, but I felt I could do more to help my father's story stand apart.

The solution wasn't to water down the history, instead I reframed it, appeal to readers who might otherwise tune out, while making sure the darkest

messages got through. In other words, write a “user-friendly” Holocaust memoir, with a fast-paced unconventional structure that disarms readers with humor, allowing horror to ride in on the backs of a few punchlines.

Regarding structure, many of my father’s most shocking stories came out at a Chinese restaurant, with the kind of biting humor only he can deliver. I made the decision to capture these rapid-fire jabs and revelations as a stage play running throughout the book, along with traditional narrative between each course of the meal.

I also break the fourth wall to connect the past to the present, let readers see my anxieties up close. I even include doctor’s notes from Mount Sinai’s inherited trauma research team, using them as “permission slips” for my questionable life choices.

The point is to keep it fresh, relatable, and unignorable. As Jay Rosenblatt, an Academy Award nominated director said, *“This is not your typical Holocaust story in any way, shape, or form, and therein lies its strength.”*

OCUC: Were there any other books/works on the Holocaust that helped guide you or shaped the way you told your father’s story?

Todd Diamond: Two books that really guided me were *A Year in Treblinka* by Yankel Wiernik and *The Last Jew of Treblinka* by Chil Rajchman. They’re brutal, but invaluable. Treblinka is where my grandfather was murdered, and where my father would’ve been sent if he hadn’t carried false identity papers. Rajchman’s book also taught me about the Treblinka Rebellion, which I write about in *Pass the Trauma, Please*, pairing it with a soundtrack by Muse and Atari Teenage Riot.

The book concludes with a visit to Treblinka. I take my father to the scene of the crime against my family’s humanity. It’s a heavy moment, but not without a few laughs, and a mind-bending encounter with spirits.

Another book that comes to mind is *Black Dog of Fate* by Peter Balakian. It explores the Armenian Genocide, the “original Holocaust.” It’s light on the humor, but heavy on the poetic descriptions of mouth-watering Armenian food. Don’t read it on an empty stomach.

In fact, my book talks to his in one of my Instagram campaigns called *Shelf Examination*, where *Pass the Trauma, Please* interviews other books it admires. Yes, I let my book get meta on Meta’s social media.

OCUC: What part of your father’s retelling stuck with you the most and why?

Todd Diamond: On a train from Warsaw to Krakow, my father suddenly broke down when we passed some farmland. He was sobbing, shoulders shaking, pausing just long enough to blurt out, “Oh my God, that’s where my Uncle Ike and Bella (his mistress) went into hiding...two years in a root cellar, oh my God.”

I thought he’d be inconsolable. Instead, within seconds, the waterworks dam up, he cracks a smile and asks, “Anyone for a game of cards?” It’s some sort of survivor superpower. He plunges into grief, but before he crashes, he jetpacks up to the surface of emotional stability.

Another moment was in Israel, when I took him to the grave of his best friend Shlomo, a kid who saved my father’s life. He rarely talked about his missions with the Haganah, but something about Shlomo’s grave opened the floodgates. He revealed things I never thought he’d share, wild wartime events that I include in the book, though let’s just say I redacted a few details. I don’t need the Mossad knocking on my door.

OCUC: What do you hope readers take away from this book?

Todd Diamond: No doubt we carry our parents' and grandparents' pain, but we also carry their resilience, humor, and ability to survive through life's toughest challenges. This book shows you can laugh and weep about the Holocaust's aftershocks, sometimes in the same sentence.

I also hope to dispel some of the misconceptions about second and third-generation survivors. We're not all detached and ready to "move on," and we're not all neurotic trauma vessels either. We each process family history in our own way. For some it's a burden, for others it's a badge of honor. And some of us are like vegans or protein proselytizers who just won't shut up about it.

And I want people to know that family stories aren't passed down as polished essays. They come in fragments, in overheard whispers, in spontaneous confessions while watching TV shows and movies. The challenge is piecing things together, understanding the impact on our parents, while still building a life that is not solely defined by their experiences or trauma.

One last hope? To see *Pass the Trauma, Please* on a few Western Civ and Holocaust Studies syllabi. That would feel like academic mission accomplished.

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