

Jack Montgomery's *Soul Survivors*

by [Aaron Rosen](#) in the [May 2024](#) issue

Published on April 30, 2024



(All photographs © 1998 by Jack Montgomery)

This is an eerie time for Holocaust memory. Antisemitism is metastasizing in ways that many Jews, especially in America, hoped had finally disappeared, or at least retreated into the margins. The resurgence of antisemitism comes as the number of Holocaust survivors is dwindling, depriving us of firsthand witnesses just as their veracity and courage are needed most. What will the future of Holocaust memory be in a post-survivor era?

*Soul Survivors*, a project spearheaded by photographer Jack Montgomery, suggests some possibilities. The project began with a series of tender black-and-white portraits of aging Holocaust survivors in Montgomery's home state of Maine. The relaxed yet unflinching gaze of the survivors—a testament to the close rapport Montgomery developed with his subjects—suggests quiet determination. While the focus of Montgomery's project remains squarely on preserving Holocaust memory, his eye for resilience has the potential to communicate across generations, speaking to multiple contexts. For young people, inundated with bleak projections for a climate-changed world, the fortitude of survivors may sow seeds of resilience in their own lives.

Refreshingly, Montgomery forgoes technical wizardry or overt stylization in his analog photographs. By working in black and white, he invites audiences to read the images reverently, with an attention to their documentary quality. His subjects are not only aware that they are being photographed, they almost seem to look forward in time, aware of the symbolic weight their portraits will bear into the future. Rather than attempting to gamify the practice of memory, to adapt Holocaust testimony for a hyper-mediated present, Montgomery's project insists on slowing down the process of looking and reflecting.

Throughout his career, Montgomery has turned his lens to people in profoundly vulnerable positions. He's spoken of the first time he became aware of antisemitism: at a gathering in his childhood New Jersey neighborhood, where someone told an antisemitic joke. Without hesitation, Montgomery's mother declared, "I'm Jewish." (She was not.) In *Soul Survivors*, Montgomery channels this same reflexive impulse to identify with the other. While current progressive discourse tends to emphasize the ineffable, incomparable nature of a community's experience to anyone outside it, this risks mystifying the suffering of the other to the point that it is difficult to bear witness in tangible, meaningful ways. Montgomery's project reminds us of the essential moral clarity that comes from deep, empathetic identification with others' pain. Without practice, this skill atrophies—and antisemitism, like all other hatreds, thrives where moral imagination wanes.