

## Attending to the Silence: The Birth and life of a Post-Holocaust-Trauma-Group



By Dr. Elya Steinberg. M.D.

When I grew up in Israel, as an Israeli Jew, the Holocaust enveloped us all the time. But as I had no other experiences, I was never actually aware of it. My mother would never listen to Wagner. We did not buy German products and horrid stories were floating around; those stories may have just floated around, but their full emotional content was never addressed directly. The message was clear: the Germans were the bad guys and the Jews were the good guys. We lived in this simple dichotomy of bad people and good people.

When I was a teenager, I realized that I lived on two planets, and I seriously struggled to integrate and make sense of my life. One was the reality in which I went to school in a democratic, free Jewish country, had friends and felt that I had all options open to me as a proud young Jewish person.

The other planet was in the shadow of the Holocaust, where food could disappear at any moment, and I had to carry mountains of it on a regular basis. A planet where I was force-fed just in case it all happened again, where dangerous people could always re-appear from the undefined past. Where the bodies of people in the shadows were reappearing in my life as disembodied souls, pulling me with their emaciated hands towards the dark world of helplessness and depression.

One planet was the here and now. The second was in the Holocaust, many years ago.

We lived the past during the now in a strange and distorted way, stuck in transposition. In mathematics, transposition is "a permutation which exchanges two elements and keeps all others fixed" (Wikipedia). The two elements in my life that had seemingly been exchanged were the Now and Then-in-the-Past – a past I never lived through, their reality. A past full of fears and terrors that were passed down to me via transgenerational and intergeneration transmission, mainly from my mother.

It pushed me to start to make sense of my life, to make sense of living on those two planets, as maddening as it felt. Back then, I was sometimes unsure of what was real and I could not bridge between the different parts of my life. This experience would later send me on a long expedition of

learning about myself and about the psychotherapeutic field which developed around the subject.

Many years later, in 1995, I moved to London to learn Biodynamic Psychotherapy; I explored several schools, one of which was managed by three Christian German people. Two of them interviewed me to see whether I was suitable for the school, as part of the regular procedure. That interview was the first time in my life meeting German non-Jewish people, and it was an overwhelming experience. The dichotomy of bad and good people that had engulfed my life up until that point did not work so well in the reality of a comfortable room with two kind men, and it created cognitive and emotional dissonance in me.

Throughout the interview, I felt my internal struggle to make sense of that dichotomy, in which I had been unaware that I was still captured, like an internalized trap. At the end, they asked me if I had any questions for them. My heart raced, my temples hurt, and I had to ask the only question that emerged from within me and filled every space in my mind. I said quietly: "I am a second-generation Holocaust survivor and you are the second generation of the Other side. I had many years of therapy to make sense of this experience – how does it feel for you to teach me?"

One of them responded by asking me: "Why is it important for you?" His answer angered me; I felt dismissed. I thought, *wasn't it clear why this was important for me?* From a place of frustration and anger I said, "This is my time to ask my question and if you don't want to answer, say so directly, but don't ask me questions in return."

The second person, a tall blond man who easily reminded me of an SS soldier, looked seemingly quietly into my eyes and asked me, "How do you think it feels to be the son of a murderer?"

My entire body shivered.

The dichotomy I grew up on—the Germans were all bad and the Jews were all good—was shattered. For that precious moment, we were just three human beings in the room without ghosts. Just three human beings with wounds and scratches from a past that we had never lived through. That simple sentence of his, almost brutal in its own simplicity, transformed me.

Twelve years later, at the end of 2007, I opened the group 'Attending to the Silence' with a German psychotherapist named Dr. Gottfried Heuer, as a group for the descendants of all sides of the Holocaust: victims, perpetrators and bystanders. We dedicated this group to the children and grandchildren of the victims, the perpetrators and all those who knew and did nothing.

Dr. Gottfried Heuer (2007) has since published an article about the bumpy start our group had, *"And Death Shall Have No Dominion" Attending to the Silence, A Preliminary Report on a Work in Progress.*

A few times, I too have presented my unpublished article "Sessions of a therapeutic group for the post-Holocaust Generation – 'Attending to the Silence'". After the seventh time, I left the somewhat alienated but at the same time familiar room trembling. Having presented that article a few times, I decided now to share it in public, with a permission from all group members.

After working together for two years, Dr. Gottfried Heuer had to stop running the group with me for personal reasons and Gerhard Payrhuber, an Austrian grandchild of an ordinary Nazi, join me to continue running the group. It has now been nine years since I started the group. This article is what has emerged from our experiences. Further, Gerhard Payrhuber and myself wrote a chapter about Trans-Generational and Inter-Generational Trauma in, *The Body in Relationship: Self-Other-Society* (Payrhuber & Steinberg, 2014).

The forces that drive me have emerged from many aspects of my life and the social constructs I was born into. It is about a voyage from paralysis to life, a voyage out of learned helplessness as a wounded victim. I, as a second-generation Holocaust survivor, was not in the Holocaust. I was the victim of my own parents and not the Nazis, parents who did not undergo psychotherapy and therefore transmitted the trauma to me, as many Holocaust survivors did to their children when they were unable to process the horrible atrocity. They did not have enough help from mental health professionals (Danieli 2009) who were also unable to process these horrible stories.

Yael Danieli (2009, page 4) wrote "The Resulting Conspiracy of Silence between Holocaust Survivors and Society (Danieli 1981, 1982a, 1988), including mental health and other professionals (Danieli 1982b, 1984) has proven detrimental to survivors' familial and socio-cultural reintegration by intensifying their already profound sense of isolation, loneliness and mistrust of society. This has further impeded the possibility of their intrapsychic integration and healing, and made their task of mourning their massive losses impossible."

Because of those internal and social processes, people from the first generation did not have the capacity or the necessary conditions to speak about it or to process their experiences, which enhanced the 'radioactivity' (Gampel, 2005) of the evilness and enabled it to intrude into the lives of the following generations. "What cannot be talked about can also not be put to rest; and if it is not, the wounds continue to fester from generation to generation" (Bettelheim, 1984).

As a child and a young adult, I had to live in a secular Jewish society in Israel, with the unspoken malignant complaint of 'How could they go like sheep to the slaughter?'

When friends of mine talked about how they played with their grandfather and grandmother, I felt in the silence, frozen in a question: Why didn't my grandfather run away, why didn't he at least allow my mother to run away? Even he knew what was happening in 1943. Even though he and

my grandmother, my mother and her sister had passports and tickets, they could all have run away but didn't as he did not permit it. So, why didn't they? Why he did not allow it? Why did he go like a sheep to the slaughter and take everyone else with him? Was this love or hate? I left with anger and a new dichotomy.

One side of that dichotomy was the learned helplessness that one may not be able to change their destiny, while the other option was that one can design their life as they wish and that 'failure is not an option' (Apollo 13 FDO Flight Controller Jerry Bostick).

Yael Danieli (2009) dedicated her book, *International Handbook of Multigenerational Legacies of Trauma*, "To the children yet unborn With the hope that we leave them a better world in which to grow."

However, I dedicate this article to all those who are already born with hopes of having a better world today in which we grow ourselves.

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