



## CONFRONTING THE HOLOCAUST THROUGH PSYCHODRAMA, SOCIODRAMA AND RITUALS

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### INTRODUCTION

Since 1995 we are engaged in a special psychodramatic project of "Confronting the Holocaust". In this work we explore the different ways people internalize the roles of aggressor and victim. We include in this encounters with the other side. This project was offered especially to second and third generation descendants of victims and perpetrators.

The purpose of our joint work is to gain better understanding and to recognize the moral, social and personal implications that the Holocaust left us with. In these workshops we explore spontaneous, expressive and creative ways of dealing with the relationship of the persecutor-victim roles within each of us and in the society. As a result the participants can learn to face their own history in a more genuine true manner.

The active work through the body allows an immediate safe opening of the inner emotional world and an encounter with the truth which lies within. The participants can share their memories, experiences, fantasies and feelings by giving voice to the suffering. It gives them an opportunity to win in the struggle against anonymity by telling and acting their stories and by breaking the family and social process of silencing.

The fact that as psychodrama directors we come from the opposite sides of the Holocaust is unique and special. We bring with us the story and the legacy of our families. Yaacov Naor is a son of both his parents Holocaust survivors and was born in 1948 in a Displaced People Camp in south Germany, moved with his parents to Israel when he was one year old. Hilde Goett was born in Romania 1953 and is coming from a family which was a member of the German minority in Romania and grew up with an inner turmoil. On the one hand was discriminated as a "fascist child" since both her grandparents served in the Nazi army. And on the other hand, her grandmother was deported to Siberia by the communist regime. When she was in her twenties she moved with her family to Germany.

In the psychodrama groups that we started to lead together we shared the same goals. We had the same drive to teach people how to respect the other, how to listen to the story, the narrative of the other, and the different one. While working together we became close to one another. Our families met and slowly we became good friends. This was possible because we agreed that our purpose was not to reach reconciliation but rather teach the Germans and the Jews and others who attended the workshops, to be witnesses to the unique personal way of the participants to express their feelings and create a dialogue.

### VICTIMS AND PERPETRATORS

The trauma of victims and perpetrators from the Nazi period is passed on from generation to generation. Gabriele Rosenthal has investigated both sides and her findings have had a strong influence on our work. She has asked questions about the formation of dialogue in families from both sides, about the influence of the past on the present. Rosenthal clarified how closely the general lifestyle of the family, everyday expectations, the feeling of safety, acceptance and

belonging, stems from the family's experiences during the Holocaust. She compares the problems of the descendants of victims and perpetrators and established both the things they have in common and the differences.

One of the things the two conflict groups frequently have in common is the silence, even if the motives for this are different on the respective sides. In the perpetrator families it is mainly the fear of prosecution, persecution, pursuit and condemnation which leads to silence about what occurred. In the victim families it is the sadness over murdered family members, the shame of such extreme humiliation and the desire to protect the descendants from these terrible events.

Another thing in common is the terrible effect of family secrets, which in the institutionalised family systems work against a thematic consideration of the past. This is mirrored again in the fantasies of the descendants, which can be expressed in many different forms. In this way descendants of the victims pose questions about the guilt of survival, such as: what did the survivors do in order to survive? , whereas the descendants of the perpetrators ask questions of their own potential guilt, such as: what would I have done in the same situation? These common events are investigated in our seminars, without being generalised as equal or identical experiences.

We look at the real history of the Second World War, the cause of so much violence, sorrow and destruction in Europe and which led to so many radical changes throughout the world, and we investigate the individual consequences between different sections of the population who were partners in conflict. For us the aim is establishing a dialogue through the encounters between both conflict groups. We let the subjective truth of the respective sides be represented on stage with all the sorrow, mourning, shame, despair, horror, rage and feelings of guilt this entails. Thus a bridge is built connecting the fate of the participants with the family histories of the opposing sides.

We use sociodrama as a dialogue for dealing with the burden of trauma stemming from incidents of the previous generations. As a rule, the trauma of the Nazi period has not been personally or directly experienced by participants in our workshops. They are not survivors of the Shoa or the Holocaust and are not Nazi perpetrators, but the children, grandchildren and family members. In short, we deal with trans-generational trauma.

## **THE TRANS-GENERATIONAL TRANSMISSION OF TRUMA**

Trans-generational trauma is simply the inheritance or passing on of trauma from generation to generation. Professionally, this concept has been increasingly discussed in the last 20 years. This is because researchers have increasingly focussed on the second generation of Holocaust survivors, due to the sufferings and emotional problems which they have. In the first scientific work on the subject there was an astonishingly high agreement concerning the unusual nature and high degree of emotional problems, which were very similar to descriptions from the survivors themselves. The theory of trans-generational passing on of consequences of the Holocaust resulted from this.

Case portrayals and psychotherapy reports on the children and grandchildren of Holocaust survivors or of those suffering from trauma clearly verify that the passing on of trauma from generation to generation is a serious problem. The diagnostic criteria of a Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) resulting from war trauma are frequently fulfilled, although the person has no personal experience of war.

Germany (as perpetrator country) lies well behind in this essential area of trauma and therapy research. It has been established that trauma of the victims and trauma of the perpetrators is inherited, but the deep feelings of shame and guilt hinder a constructive discussion on the trans-generational passing on of trauma. As far as we know there has never been an investigation in Germany into how the trauma of perpetrators is passed on. As early as 1994 Jürgen Müller-Hohagen (who has carried out psychotherapeutic work for many years) published assumptions based on his experiences, of the way trauma can be passed on. Identification with power,

obscuration and the re-defining of perpetrators as victims are part of the characteristics that are passed on in the perpetrator families.

If we want to stop the passing on of trauma from generation to generation we must find an accessible and adequate way of dealing with and processing the trauma.

## **THE FRAMEWORK**

We offer the theme "Confrontation with the Holocaust" in two different settings.

The first one: A series of seminars in a cycle of two to three years. Several weekend seminars take place including a journey to Auschwitz. There we visit the memorials in Auschwitz and Birkenau and conduct psychodrama work in "The Educational-Encounter Center" in Oswiecim. In Birkenau we conduct Rituals created by the participants with the help of the group. This setting offers time and space for discussion and analysis. It is suitable for small groups whose number is limited to 15 - 25 participants.

The second setting is during conferences where we offer workshops of three hours and where we give an example of our work. We make it possible for the participants themselves to confront and discuss the consequences of Auschwitz in the present. The number of participants in these groups was 30 - 80.

## **OUR BASIC ASSUMPTIONS**

We start out with the premise that the experience of force or violence is innately experienced and that the trauma sits tightly in the body where it has found its place and is physically felt. As psychodramatists and advocates of an action-oriented method, we know that a lasting effectiveness occurs when the active analysis and discussion of a subject is deeply felt and penetrates the thought process, opening up new horizons and illuminating the problems. Thus our concern is to initiate deeply meaningful personal discussions on the stage and to find a language for this and to be aware of the different truths, in order to overcome the consequences of collective trauma during the Nazi period.

This means that during the work one's body must be in some way self-determined and attentively involved. The body- and encounter- exercises which we offer help make this possible and also help establish real contact between the participants in the group.

## **WHO COME TO OUR WORKSHOPS AND WHAT IS THEIR MOTIVATION?**

During the conventions we normally work with psychodramatists and professionals. The age of our participants has ranged from 22 to 78 years. Psychodrama is familiar to most of them so staging scenic drama and working in roles is natural for them.

The people who come to our workshops have an idea about the fate or the history of their families during the Second World War, or have concrete knowledge of what happened. Or they learned fragments which trouble them and which they cannot stop worrying about. The silence in the families weighs so heavily on them that they feel the need to decipher it. Others want to comprehend the sorrow, despair and mourning of the family which seems to have no apparent end. In all these areas the feelings of the participants are deeply involved and relate to themselves as individuals, their own complete family and not least with the respective "opposite side".

In this way Jewish participants take part, mourning over murdered members of their family, mourning about the losses of an intact family and a social network, enraged about the perpetrators who have burdened them with this sorrow.

The participants who come from families of perpetrators have different wishes. They would often like to choke the family history, are fighting the shame and feelings of guilt and often cannot distinguish between the personal and the collective guilt. They would like to have a better understanding of themselves and their families and break loose from their identification as perpetrator. Some also hope for atonement or even for pardon.

The participants who are baptised Christians and have a partly Jewish background, or who come from a family which has experienced persecution for political or religious reasons, or because of their sexual orientation, are also torn to and fro with the question of their identity and affiliation. We regard them as coming from "mixed families" because they share the experiences of both sides.

One thing they all have in common is that they are seen as "traitors" to their families. They betray the taboo of silence and confront the family with its troubled past. These "traitors" also seek discussion and analysis in the family and are seen as dangerous by the other family members. They become the scapegoats of the families.

Dina Vardi, a psychoanalyst from Jerusalem, describes people in Jewish families in the role of the scapegoat as "commemoration candles" which create subjectivism of the Holocaust and sustain the mourning for the murdered victims.

In the perpetrator families and the mixed families, the ones who are given the role of the scapegoat are those who confront the families with their Nazi past, betraying the taboo and therefore being punished and excluded. They seek help because they cannot come to terms with the affection they feel for their father or mother who were perpetrators. In a similar way, traces are left on those who come from perpetrator families and who grew up in a state of fear, constantly afraid of punishment or violence and who now want to work through this in the setting of our workshops.

Generally the individual persons or groups who are made "scapegoats" are regarded as the cause of disaster and accidents. The so-called scapegoats are burdened with the fear, the shame and the guilt and have to take the blame for all the sins and offences of the family, the community and the world. Generally speaking our groups are made up of scapegoats from all sides of the conflict: victims, perpetrators and mixed families.

## **WARM UP**

As usual in sociodramas we warm-up the group with a wide range of encounter exercises. These are exercises focussing on the body and the senses so that the participants in the group can encounter and experience each other. Warm-up exercises with and without music in groups of two, three or more help create the right atmosphere and a readiness for dealing with the sensibility and attentiveness of the subject.

In the exercises we teach the participants to have fun together, to mirror themselves, to build solidarity, to stick together and support each other or be supported, to combine forces to exclude others and also to try and break other small groups apart. Here the emotional states, feelings and instincts of the different groups are activated, those which the participants bring along to the workshop from the context of their real lives.

## **THE RITUALS**

While we are in Auschwitz we work psychodramatically on the stage, but we also include a process of creating individual rituals. These rituals are carried out in Birkenau Death Camp with the help of the group. Some of these rituals take a form of memorial ceremonies and some become theater performances including movement and singing.

We know that words cannot express fully and accurately the story of our reaction to the Holocaust. It is phenomenological experience and expression. Rituals create psychodramatic and sociodramatic forms of sharing the human individual way of interaction. Beyond all it is a therapeutic act which cannot be done by oneself. It needs the community effect of holding and containing.

Some of the rituals became the best and most profound way of confronting the Holocaust. Few Examples: Walking barefoot on the rail trucks leading to the main crematorium, throwing glass bottles on the wall in the woman barrack while screaming and crying, listening to the quite harmonica music inside of one of the barracks, reading Paul Celan poem: Black Milk, sharing dry bread in a circle and eating it very slowly, participating in a dream like ceremony of burial of a young woman and more.

The Second World War and the Holocaust are a story of cruelty and infliction of pain and suffering which left scars on both the victims and the persecutors sides. It is a long lasting process and it has traces in the present. In our work we aim to give the participants a chance to confront the Holocaust without judgment, criticism or blaming. The rituals in Birkenau serve this attitude. These sociodramatic rituals have a therapeutic effect, a kind of psycho-social healing.

The rituals allow sharing the personal and the interpersonal at the same time. The rituals are forms of acknowledgement of the suffering of the "other side". It focuses on emotional expression of anger, rage, guilt, fear, anxiety, helplessness, hopelessness and humiliation. The rituals require the use of imagination and creativity. It gives voice, a stage, a form to emotions which do not have clear words.

The rituals are integral part of sociodrama events. These are symbolic concretizations in action of memorials. These symbolic acts are based at times on religious ceremonies of burying the dead, reading poetry, singing next to the imaginary grave.

One of the most difficult experiences of Holocaust survivors and their descendant's is not having a real concrete grave to mourn their dead. The rituals create a new opportunity of re-burying the dead. The rituals offer meaning and a sort of closure to the events of the past. Rituals strengthen the link of the group member, the individual with the group and the social community. These ritual ceremonies have an effect of healing by bringing people together, binding and uniting them. They give them hope, a sense of belonging and a relief from being alone, anonymous and overwhelmed with the enormity of the Holocaust.

The rituals themselves are therapeutic. They can create a perspective, a luminal space that exists simultaneously in the past and in the present. It is a form of "Surplus Reality". It is a bridge between the individual's inner and outer world. It leads to catharsis, change and a sense of integration. The rituals also have a balancing effect between the individual and the group.

## **FROM ENCOUNTER TO DIALOGUE**

Our work is based on Moreno's concept of the encounter which can lead to a dialogue. This structure include group and personal warm up, art making, trust building, empathy education, awareness and acceptance.

This psychodramatic and sociodramatic work and the special ritual performances allow the participants to move from projection, generalizations, prejudices, pre-conceptions and illusions into the process of learning to be in one's center, taking responsibility, look in the eyes of the other face to face with acknowledgement, empathy, respect and acceptance.

The encounter between Holocaust survivors and their perpetrators is most of the times painful or even impossible. The generation after and even the grandchildren are taking the risk to meet and confront one another in a safe way, working deeply on this theme in front of others in the group, especially from the other side.

As leaders we are aware in our work of the danger of creating false closeness which can lead to premature reconciliation or forgiveness. We do not aim to reach reconciliation, but at times it happens spontaneously and naturally, in a step by step, long and slow process.

## **SUMMARY**

Although the descendants of the victims and the perpetrators have an equal right to represent the sufferings they carry on the stage and to reflect them in the context of real history, this does not mean that the sufferings of the two sides are looked at analogously. For us it is much more important to find a way of expression that can be formulated and manifested in a common language that works diametrically against the traditionalised realities of that time.

This is painful and purifying experience for both sides and frequently results in the decision to live an honourable and dignified future. We are now responsible for ensuring that history does not repeat itself. We accept the group from the opposite side and look for a new way, through encounters and dialogue, where the wounds can be felt, mourned and then be healed. Seeing this pain as an essential part of a person's life can lead to a clear decision never to cause anybody else such hurt and to realise a different, respectful and passionate relationship with other people.

We can now look back into our history as psychodrama directors coming from opposite side of the Holocaust that we succeeded to create a safe place of expression, to create trust, a sense of belonging and exchange fear, hatred and prejudice with a real encounter and dialogue.

In the summer of 2008 we gave a one-week seminar in Krakow and Auschwitz for the first time, in a truly international context. Because of its success we plan to offer again an International Psychodrama Project in Krakow and Auschwitz for one week during the summer of 2010 called: "Traces of the Holocaust in the Present"

For us the picture of the extent of the destruction caused by Nazi power has become more complete and the loss of the Jewish people and their culture through the Holocaust is more perceptible. In the 15 years we have worked together we have developed a system of encounters and dialogue filled with mutual acceptance, respect, recognition and love. We sincerely hope to carry on this work in the future.