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Sociopolitical Trauma: Forgetting, Remembering, and Group Analysis

Teresa von Sommaruga Howard

ABSTRACT

Sociopolitical trauma inevitably leads to fracture. Moving away, forgetting, or simply burying what is too painful disconnects the present from the past, making it difficult for subsequent generations to develop a coherent narrative of their history and identity. The author draws on her history as the daughter of a Jewish refugee from Hitler's Germany and briefly links this experience to the current world refugee situation and the aftermath of colonization in Aotearoa New Zealand. A group-analytic group, unlike individual psychotherapy, provides a temporary social context that evokes past group experiences in the present. Trauma is viewed socioculturally, and attention is paid to emerging cultures in the here and now that replicate the original silencing cultures of the past. This process offers an opportunity to find new connections and gain "outsight." The author concludes by describing a series of workshops held in Germany over 13 years.

KEYWORDS

Transgenerational transmission; sociopolitical trauma; cultural rupture; Shoah; refugee; group analysis; remembering

A Disconnected History

We were standing looking up at a huge steel memorial, Mahnmal Levetzowstrasse in Berlin, the memorial to the Transports to Auschwitz, when my father suddenly said, "I have just realized something. If I had not left when I did, I would not be here now. Neither would you. It's quite a thought, isn't it!"

Not only was he no longer living in the city where he had grown up, but before that moment, he had not been able to imagine what might have happened to him if he had not left as a lone 15-year-old refugee in 1936. Later he was interned to Australia by the British as an enemy alien in June 1940. When the war was over, and to get as far away as possible from the aftermath of war in Europe, we emigrated as a family to Aotearoa New Zealand.

Trauma had prevented my dad from recognizing the cost of his survival and the torment of the first 21 years of his life. To protect himself from remembering too much and to give himself a fresh start, he made a conscious decision to cut himself off from family and friends and to put his refugee and internment experiences behind him. He once told me, "It is not so nice to be reminded that you once had to take charity!"

This way of dealing with the past, while providing relief from painful reminders, creates a disruption in continuity, effectively disconnecting the present from the past. As Jonathan Wittenberg (2004), a British rabbi also of the second generation, asserted,

All people seek the secret of their own continuity. The light of where we come from shines into the uncertainty of who we are. For where we come from is always at the heart of who we are, and until we understand the greater journey of our family and people, we cannot recognize the direction of our own life. The past enters the present through the telling of stories. (p. 139)

When memories are loaded with anguish, few words can be found to tell the story. Instead, the history seeps through a mist of incomprehensible moods and silences inadvertently leaving subsequent generations with a *haunting* that cannot be easily understood (Schwab, 2010). German, Jew, refugee, enemy alien, internment, Dunera, Berlin were all words I had heard, but I could never fully grasp their significance.

Growing up, I knew the bones of my father's story, but it could not be connected to life in the down-to-earth abundance of the raw new country in which we lived. Located on the other side of the world, Aotearoa New Zealand was so completely different from the war-torn Europe we had left behind. I constantly tried to make sense of this dissonance, but there was nothing available to help. What I grasped about Nazi persecution, British internment, and the resulting trauma had no reflection in the world around me. Was it real or was I just imagining it? It was helpful to discover later that the British group analyst Patrick de Maré (de Maré, Piper, & Thompson, 1991, p. 77) suggested that prevailing cultures often prevent us from thinking certain thoughts. The invocation of Stunde Null, "hour zero" marking the fall of the Third Reich, provided one such social structure that systematically blocked off thinking about what had gone before.

Swedish journalist Göran Rosenberg (2012/2014), writing to his survivor parents after their death, drew attention to the difficulty of explaining such catastrophic experiences to those who were not there.

I think the world you survived into is populated by two categories of people, those who know and those who don't. Faced with people who know there's not much that needs to be said, and faced with people who don't know, it's hard to say anything that doesn't risk being perceived as unreal or exaggerated or pathetic. Before long you also discover that what you have to say risks being perceived as frightening and repugnant. In any case, the world stops listening, because it can't bear looking back either. (p. 280)

The past often reverberated dramatically for me. One day I came home from school saying something about the Jews killing Jesus. As a 7-year-old, in a predominantly Christian country, I did not know that this interpretation of the early Christian church had generated 2,000 years of anti-Semitism. My father, not surprisingly, became extremely upset and started shouting. I had no idea what I had said to cause so much uproar. The next day he went to see the head teacher with the result that I was withdrawn from morning assembly. At an age when I was too young to understand, I had unwittingly reminded my father of a disturbing experience of his own. It was not until much later that I learned there had been one morning assembly that had played a pivotal role in my father's life. I now know that in Germany, beginning on 28 July 1933, the greeting between people was changed from "Guten Tag" to "Heil Hitler." If

you did not use that phrase, “you put yourself outside the community.” In 1934, after Nazi party members had replaced senior staff in schools, the content of lessons changed and so did the format of morning assembly. Tired of singing about “Jewish traitors and scum” and writing “as if” history essays, my father walked out of morning assembly and was immediately expelled for “putting himself outside of the community.”

How does a small child make sense of such experiences? It is no wonder that I spent a great deal of time trying to make sense of what did not make any sense in my daily experience. Growing up, I was constantly being told, “You think too much,” “You are so serious, lighten up.” I often felt criticized for not being able to take life in the easy, uncomplicated manner of many people around me.

The painful past continues to endure in subtle ways. Recently, reading *The Smell of Apples* (Behr, 1993, pp. 122–123), it dawned on me that I had not taken in a page and a half. I went back and read again and then started to find myself phasing out until I finally glimpsed the content. It was a description of a family having to escape from Tanganyika after leaving everything behind. The key phrase for me was, “He never turned to look back!”

Transmission of Trauma

I quote once again from Rosenberg (2012/2014):

Like Lot’s wife, people in your situation can go on living only if they don’t turn around and look back, because like Lot’s wife, you risk being turned to stone by the sight. Nor, however, can you go on living if nobody sees and understands what it is you’ve survived and why it is you’re still alive, in spite of everything. I think the step from surviving to living demands this apparently paradoxical combination of individual repression and collective remembrance. You can look forward only if the world looks backward and remembers where you come from, and sees the paths you pursue, and understands why you’re still living. (p. 280)

Never looking back seems to be the key to understanding how trauma is transmitted. Despite the fact that this was my father’s experience, I felt his pain. Without mental digestion, traumatic memories, even though blocked from consciousness, live on as “foreign bodies in the mind” and are transmitted to the next generation in an undigested form. For the first generation, like my father, flashbacks of unmetabolized episodic memory will occasionally impinge on consciousness triggered by associative cues. Living with the aftermath of trauma leaves a residual negative core belief that arises directly from those who inflicted the original atrocity. Such mindsets—in this instance that Jews were considered subhuman—then dominate and imprison a survivor’s mind so that few experiences can be seen as they are in the present without being infected by reverberations from the past. My father could never listen to brass bands, and there seemed to be a good number of them as I was growing up in New Zealand. They had a very different meaning for New Zealanders, but for my father they brought back the terror associated with being beaten up in the street. And why did everybody else think the Volkswagen Beetle was a wonderful car? Every time it was mentioned, I saw my father shudder. Within the New Zealand context, his reactions seemed a bit over the top, to say the least, but the past was forcing its way

perhaps not so subtly into the present in a way that a young child could not comprehend.

From a Kleinian perspective, transmission of trauma is a form of *projective identification* (Segal, 1975, p. 36). The following story illustrates the mechanism. My father was only 19 when he was interned—or should I say deported—although I never heard this word used to describe what actually happened to him when he was shipped to Australia on the *Dunera*. Almost as soon as he embarked, he watched his change of clothes, toothbrushes, and precious possessions being thrown overboard. That was the start of a terrible journey and the one experience my father could never talk about. I grew up with the feeling that something powerful had happened, but I had little idea about what it was or what it meant.

In early 2000, I was in Melbourne and bought a copy of *The Dunera Affair: A Documentary Resource Book* (Bartrop, 1990). In the Foreword it says:

These victims of Hitler's pre-war persecutions (most of whom were Jews), were re-victimized through internment during Britain's invasion scare of 1940, then shipped out of the country in appallingly crowded and unsanitary conditions, as well as in the care of brutal military guards who pilfered and destroyed their precious personal belongings. On arrival in Australia, the majority was sent to Hay, into extreme heat and to an alien, treeless landscape. Later - doctors, lawyers, businessmen and academics included - many were enlisted to pick fruit or work on the waterfront. (p. 1)

I was pleased to have found this book because it documented the experience that my father could not talk about, and I naïvely took it to him to read. His response was not as welcoming as I had hoped. "At my age, I have decided that I don't have to do anything that I don't want to," he said. I agreed. With the pressure off, he suggested I leave the book with him while he thought about it. Three weeks later, he held it out in a small carrier bag barely holding the handles, as though it would contaminate him, saying, "I don't want to read it. You know we were not so well behaved either." And with that, he pushed me out the door. I stumbled out overwhelmed with sadness. As I sat in my car and burst into tears, at first not understanding what had just happened, the light dawned. This experience was the transgenerational transmission of trauma. As the unwitting bearer of the unbearable, I was pushed out of sight in the same way that the unbearable had always been pushed out of my father's consciousness. In this flash of a moment, that unbearable pain was transmitted to me. I have no doubt that this kind of transmission happened many times while I was growing up, but when I was younger I had no idea where all the feelings that flooded me came from.

It was not until my father was in his nineties that he told me over the breakfast table, "I know it's stupid, but I feel such shame for not being able to stop what happened to me and the others." He was talking about being interned by the British as an enemy alien. After he died, I discovered his diaries and many letters, all in pencil on anything he could find, including toilet paper, written to newspapers and politicians pointing out the injustice of the situation.

After the harrowing experience of internment, my father was given the opportunity to return to the United Kingdom on the troopship *Stirling Castle*. On the way, they stopped in Auckland, and while anchored there for a week or so to take on New Zealand lamb, he had his first taste of dignity for many years. The

beautiful harbor, the welcome he received from the Jewish community, and the “wharfies” (those loading/unloading cargo ships) sowed the seeds of our eventual emigration.

Ruptured Cultures

The millions who were forced to move after World War II faced “tectonic shifts in the world’s geopolitical arrangements that followed the main earthquake” (Hoffman, 2004, p. 78). The consequences live on. Now, the world is in the midst of an even more massive geopolitical shift with an estimated 68.5 million displaced people in the world (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2018). The long-term consequences are difficult to contemplate as entire milieus are ruptured and lost. Not only does the physical environment disappear but so too do communities, cultures, and ways of life. Nowhere feels like home, and nothing can be taken for granted. It is as if the past and the feelings associated with it never existed. US-based poet Fatimah Asghar was asked by the BBC Woman’s Hour host Jenni Murray, “Partition, between India and Pakistan, happened a long time before you were born. Why is it such a consistent theme in your writing?” Asghar (2019) answered, “It is such a violence divorcing people from their history.”

Trauma is a sociopolitical phenomenon, so why, as Patrick Bracken (1998) noted, has the current discourse “systematically sidelined this social dimension of suffering; instead it promotes a strongly individualistic focus, presenting trauma as something that happens inside individual minds” (p. 38). As Asghar eloquently described, for the next generation, with the narrative thread of their history ruptured, the present cannot be related to the past in any easily traceable way. This makes it almost impossible for them to make sense of their own identity. Although children intimately know about their parents’ longing and the reality of the present, the stuff and flavor of their former lives is often so out of reach that they find themselves struggling to bridge different and disconnected cultures.

Looking for others with similar experiences can help, but often, without appropriate mirroring or cultural resonance, wounds remain invisible and little if any healing can occur. The new social context often informs the newcomers that there is something unacceptable about their reactions, feelings, and thoughts. This is a form of racism, even terrorization, that insists newcomers fit in and forget their origins. As Dalal explained, black people born in Britain do not belong to the British “us,” which is made identical to whiteness, but to a different category, Black-British, which is “not us” (Dalal, 2002, p. 205).

When living with a history of traumatic experiences, in a culture where few people know about it, and where “getting on with it” is applauded, it is almost impossible to acknowledge what has happened to families with refugee backgrounds. Aotearoa New Zealand, while a beautiful and bountiful country, presented my parents with a completely new set of dilemmas to solve for which they were unprepared. Initially, finding us a house and a means of generating an income were not easy. Subsequently, the self-help, do-it-yourself mode of living demanded skills they did not have. All the

expectations that made sense in Europe could no longer be applied. As the eldest child, it meant I had to grow up fast.

Beaglehole (1995) wrote eloquently about the dilemmas of growing up in an environment that is so isolated and so different from what was left behind that resultant dissonances and discontinuous fractures are very deep. We tried to fit in as best we could, but something deep within the culture was not open to listening to our experiences, and so they were not talked about. For the next generation, such unacknowledged experience becomes an internal disconnection that is felt as a nagging anger, vulnerability, or loneliness, without description. It just is, and it goes on through life without end until the connections between the original experience and the present life can be made and described. It is difficult to resist denying one's history in order to try to fit in.

The second generation from the Middle East today have a similar experience living in Europe and other Westernized cultures. They too live with their parents longing for a home that no longer exists. Growing up in a culture full of animosity to Islam while the country of their parents' origin is being bombed out of existence, they are suspended between two disconnected cultures and watch helplessly as the physical and social infrastructure connecting them to their history, culture, and identity is systematically destroyed. As a young Syrian refugee recently told me, "There is a constant oscillation between exile and refuge. Nowhere feels like home."

The importance of a community that can support and understand is demonstrated by the story of a small community, Roseto, that moved as a whole village from Italy to Pennsylvania in the United States during the mid-twentieth century. Despite the upheaval, this close-knit community exhibited half the national average rate of heart disease. The puzzle was why. Scientists concluded that the "Roseto Effect" was caused not by careful diet and exercise but by something that could not be seen through a microscope. It was a connected history nourishing the human spirit that bestowed on this community its good health (Wolf & Bruhn, 1998).

For survivors of sociopolitical trauma, whether it be as a result of the Shoah, wars in the Middle East, or colonization of countries such as New Zealand, there is a deep need to find a way of living with disconnection from communities of origin and to mourn the loss, decimated without ritual or commemoration. Life as it was lived just disappeared. It can never be recovered, but the loss needs acknowledgment. Assmann (2015) explained that when events are only remembered by individuals and not publicly recognized, they become silenced. It is important to consider what forms of ritualized commemorations occur where they can be continually reconstructed (p. 4). That is why it is so important that the German government decided to pay reparations to victims of the Shoah and the New Zealand government instigated the Waitangi Tribunal to redress land grabs from Maori. This is a way of publicly bearing witness to the crimes that were committed, admitting something real and terrible did occur.

Without such public acknowledgment, group-analytic groups can provide an alternative, a place to acknowledge what happened and for each individual to dare to look back to see what was lost.

Group Analysis

S. H. Foulkes, a German-Jewish psychiatrist and psychoanalyst who was forced to settle in the United Kingdom in advance of the Shoah, developed a form of group work known as *group analysis*. It is a method that focuses on the individual, the group, and the relationships between the two in a constant shifting of figure and ground. He believed that because human beings are innately social, the concept of the individual is an abstraction. "Each individual ... is basically and centrally determined, inevitably, by the world in which s/he lives, by the community, by the group, of which s/he forms a part" (Foulkes, 1948/1983, p. 10). (Note: "s" added to "he" by author.)

Group analysis is an interactive approach to working with groups that emphasizes the social nature of human experience. The "conductor" encourages—through a constantly inquiring, reflective group-analytic attitude—free-floating communication. At the same time, she or he accepts unconscious projections of an omnipotent primordial leader who is expected to deliver magical help. Instead of fulfilling this regressive need, she or he uses it to enable the group "to replace submission by co-operation between equals" (Foulkes, 1964/1984, p. 65). This means she or he has a special role as a group member: to listen carefully but also to have the capacity to be in the group and be part of the group. At the same time, she or he occupies a metaposition from which she or he pays attention to the many levels of experience in the service of the group as a joint enterprise.

Everyone is encouraged to make use of this group-analytic attitude to listen to each other carefully in a nonjudgmental, nondirective, nonmanipulative way. Free-floating dialogue is an important concept because it enables free speech. Honest descriptions about how it feels in the room and how it has felt to live with one's history are usually heard with relief, thereby giving others an important sense of reality.

A defining feature of group analysis is Foulkes's concept of the matrix. He noticed that when a group of people meet for the first time, they are likely to unconsciously bring with them expectations and beliefs based on their life experiences, history, and culture. It is as though each individual brings along her or his own inner group of assumptions and expectations of relationships through which she or he views any new group. These inner groups carried by each individual combine to form the ground from which the work develops, which Foulkes (1971/1990) called the "foundation matrix" (pp. 212–213). As members interact with each other, they actively and consciously develop a new system of relationships based on how they actually experience each other. As the limiting assumptions they brought with them begin to lose their power, a *dynamic matrix* that supports the work of the group gradually evolves. It can be thought of as a "hypothetical web of relationships" that evolves from the interactions and gives meaning to material as it emerges (Foulkes, 1964/1984, p. 292).

The advantage of a group-analytic group—in contrast to individual therapy and most other forms of group therapy—is that working with the matrix provides a new context in which the complexity of the original experience can emerge and be made manifest in the here and now. This occurs through a process of *transposition* whereby whole contexts are unconsciously brought from the past into the present, thus enabling new connections to be more easily made (de Maré et al., 1991, pp. 103–104).

Transposition makes it possible to observe previously oppressive cultures in the here and now while providing an opportunity to gain “outsight” into the sociopolitical origins of our parents and how these influenced their way of being in relation to us (p. 129).

Breaking the Silence: Mending the Broken Connections in Germany

Learning to creatively make use of my painful history led me to conduct annual workshops in Germany for 13 years under the auspices of the Group Analytic Society (London). Initially, these focused on providing a space for people of the descendent generations whose parents and grandparents were caught up in the Shoah. As time went by, we discovered that they also had appeal for many people with different catastrophic histories. The legacy from the past included pogroms, famine, genocides, wars, or just a deep sense that something terrible had happened back then. So, in addition to descendants of Jewish survivors and refugees from all over the world, forebears included German soldiers, bystanders, and mass murderers; survivors of the Armenian genocide; immigrants from the Irish potato famine; survivors of many wars in the Balkans; and survivors of Nazi occupations in Denmark and Greece. The intention was to provide a safe space to talk about our own experiences without any field trips or lectures. It proved to be very validating as we discovered that just by telling our different stories, we could each begin to piece together a more complete history.

When the initial workshop was advertised, it brought some interesting responses. Many thought it a good idea and wished us luck, but few were willing to join us. “Why are you doing it? It has all been done before,” “You’ll never get children of perpetrators,” and from a Jew, “It is time Jews got up from moaning.” Despite all the discouragement and the clearly distancing encouragement, we did it anyway and continued for a total of 13 years. Each time, the workshop attracted a different cross section of participants, but it always turned out to be a profound encounter.

Choosing a venue in Germany was a deliberate decision. For many Germans, it was perhaps too close to home because few joined us after the first workshop. For the descendants of Jewish survivors and refugees, Germany was a place where many feared to tread. To join the workshops, many had to defy long-held family rules that everything to do with Germany must be boycotted, but those able to make the leap of trust were often happily surprised. Just being in Germany meant they rediscovered familiar language, poetry, music, and food.

We met in a beautiful, comfortable house, a “Schlösschen” on the edge of the Soonwald in the Hunsrück. It was a quiet, restful place. The good food and shelter gave us just what we needed for a task that seemed both awesome and exciting. It helped us find the courage to proceed. Each time we all knew that we were about to embark on a very significant experience. There was a real desire to make sense of, and perhaps find a way of actively repairing, the past through talking and reflecting. It was not only our individual experiences, but also our experiences of societal reactions that had preoccupied us.

Many people vacillated for years before deciding to come, and once having made the decision, they were often late arriving. Difficulties seemed to lie in wait in the

wider matrix, reminding us of the resolve needed to take this journey. Air traffic control computers failed, and taxis did not turn up. Most participants suffered sleepless nights in the week before, yet on arrival, found an enormous release of energy. Almost as soon as we started, participants expressed relief about finally finding a place to talk. Here, at last, was a space in which they did not expect to be told to stop talking. They would not be moaned at for going on about all that Holocaust stuff again!

Working Method

The workshop was designed for a maximum of 15 participants and facilitated as a group-analytic experiential process. This meant that apart from the title, there was no agenda or suggested content. Throughout, I worked with the colleagues who are acknowledged at the end of this article.

Participants chose themselves in response to the advertisement or after hearing about it from someone else. They arrived with their own stories and experiences and were encouraged to use the processes we offered to make sense of what they brought. The workshop was always residential and held over a weekend. It included ten sessions, each 90 minutes long, with a break on Saturday afternoon.

The first workshop was designed with a combination of small groups and a median group (larger than a small group but smaller than a large group as defined by de Maré in Lenn & Sefano, 2012) as is usual in group analysis, but for the second workshop, we changed this pattern. To encourage dialogue that included the social dimension, we decided to work with everyone together in a median group for the whole weekend. With this approach, individuals were more likely to be able to link their family history to the wider historical sociocultural conflicts their forebears lived through (de Maré, 1990, pp. 347–352).

We also decided to add a drawing exercise in which we asked participants to draw a map of their journey to the workshop. This instruction could be taken literally or symbolically. We discovered their life journeys were embodied in whatever they drew. Many drawings included spirals that seemed to depict endless journeys. Others were filled with blackness, clouds, swastikas, yellow stars, and coffins indicating death and destruction. At first the idea of drawing was threatening—"I can't draw!"—but with some encouragement, almost everyone settled down and became absorbed in the process. The maps were then propped up around the room and used as a resource for the work of the weekend. People were free to comment on their own and each other's drawings, but they were not asked to directly describe or explain them.

Later we added a social dreaming session after breakfast each morning. Social dreaming is a method for discovering the social meaning and significance of dreams through sharing them with others (Lawrence, 2005). This is not personal dreaming and interpretation but a session in which dreams are shared in an associative way. They may have been dreamed the previous night, or they may have been dreams that recurred or that had been forgotten until something in the session acted as a reminder. There may be daydreams also. When dreams are told in this way, they illuminate social situations long past that have been transmitted through the unconscious network of family life. Time collapses, and the past becomes the recognizable present.

Once a dream is voiced, it becomes an image that everyone present is free to relate or associate to. The collection of dreams, straight from the unconscious, creates the tangible quality of a new reality and provides a powerful, shared social context that can be discussed in the median group sessions. Individuals can then use the collective experience as a new meaning marker for their lives.

Each of the methods used—drawing, social dreaming, and group analysis—provided a place for words to be found for previously wordless experiences. Drawing encourages a journey straight to the inner dilemmas and questions that have long preoccupied people and allows them to be depicted on paper for others to see. Social dreaming also enables the sharing of personal experience in a collective setting and discovering what we thought was just ours is shared by others. Median groups enable a digestive process that gives participants the opportunity to more consciously put words to what they have discovered, thereby building the beginnings of a coherent narrative for themselves.

The First Workshop

Surprisingly, in the first workshop, all ten participants came from Germany. Confusion about heritage was a theme that wound its way through everything. Some participants knew they were descendants of perpetrators. Others were not sure about their history. Hunger for the truth had dominated many of their lives. Some suspected they also had a Jewish heritage that had been buried. Even after all these years, the legacy of the Nazi era was strongly evident. It was still difficult to let others know about a Jewish heritage.

It seemed almost unbearable to think about being born to parents or grandparents who had committed atrocities. To whom does one look for one's identity? Is one doomed to live a life of guilt and shame on one's parents' behalf? The usual response to this inescapable dilemma is either collective silence or indifference. The guilt and shame never seem to go away. As one participant explained, "The injection of fear, hate, and conqueror mentality comes with the mother's milk. It is an overall problem of generations in and of the German society. It is not only an individual one." As another person explained, she was there to look into the internal archives, not the external ones.

The workshop emerged as a place in which previously unspoken-about contradictions could be actively teased out. What happened reflected the dilemmas of the society in which participants had grown up. When the war was over, new laws forced changes in society, but many things in family life remained the same. During the war, you could choose life or death. The prevailing ideology at the time was, "If we don't win the war, life will not be worth living." It was not possible to contemplate capitulation or surrender. Several participants came from families who had, at that time, made pacts with their soldier men to kill themselves if the soldiers did not return. Luckily, in one case, friends came by and rescued a mother and her children from the gas stove before it was too late.

In many families, violence persisted as a way of life. Even though you had to learn to live without violence in the societal context, the abuse could continue within your

family without anyone ever knowing. How could you make sense of a father who was a revered man in the community while at home he treated everyone with continuing brutality?

With such a backdrop of unanswered questions in your life, how do you talk to others? The central question, "What did my parents and grandparents do in the Nazi time?" often led to a constant search for the truth.

Fonagy, speaking in March 1998 in Cologne at the Third Congress of the European Federation for Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy in the Public Sector (EFPP), described the way some survivors of the Shoah clearly found the experience of child rearing an intolerable challenge. When they become caregivers, their unresolved experiences of mourning and trauma appear to have caused disorganization in their infant's attachment relationships. In our workshops, we learned that the same kind of transmission occurred for children of perpetrators as well.

We were told a story about a young "psychotic" woman who "flew" to her death like a dove by jumping out a window. She could think of no other way to escape the unbearable pain. No longer able to live a life of feeling tortured by a destiny of never being able to escape guilt, she chose death. We wondered was psychosis an adequate diagnosis for someone suffering from the transmission of parental guilt?

As the end of the first workshop drew closer, participants thought about what they would be able to take with them as they left. They began to recognize that they could internalize the work of the group as a force for support in their lives. For one, it had provided the initiative to finish a book in the right way, for another to make a film about her parents. This was a pattern that persisted through subsequent workshops.

Afterward, I was left contemplating the price of humiliating a whole nation after World War I. The loss of honor, pride, and dignity was so great, it turned on a whole group of people within and set out to destroy them. The resulting loss of creative wealth was so huge that it can hardly be understood. Within the workshop, we heard many haunting poems, stories, and music. I will carry them with me for the rest of my life. Schönberg's (1947/1993) "A Survivor From Warsaw" and Itzhak Perlman (1995) playing his violin "In the Fiddler's House" gives a flavor of the richness we shared.

One participant from the workshop wrote this to me a week later:

I am so full of what happened in these two and a half days. It is amazing, I feel somehow shifted, I am not sure where to, but it feels overall positive, very intensive. I don't sleep well. Being in touch with great treasures is mostly bound with meeting all kinds of hells as well. During our days I met my biggest enemies inside myself on the way of learning: fear, shame, and guilt.

Workshops Over the Next 12 Years

Over the years, the participants in the workshops became more diverse. Although German people still participated, they were few in number after the first workshop, and those who did participate expected to be blamed for being German. Jewish participants were always present despite much foreboding. They often felt terrified that history would somehow repeat itself. Those who were neither German nor Jewish were afraid their experiences would be seen as somehow counterfeit.

Those who joined us despite all their fears discovered what had brought them to the workshop, and most found a place to make sense of their particular experience. Many had been haunted by a perception that life could only be filled with dread. Through discovering a shared context in which the present is not cut off from the past, such haunting could be questioned, and participants usually found relief in being able to think together with other people who had similar experiences. For example, a woman from the Balkans suddenly recognized why she had never had children: She could not risk the possibility of bearing a son who would be taken from her and killed in war.

Like many German participants, one woman said she never knew what her father did in the Nazi era, but perhaps at a deeper level she feared that she did. She drew an illustrated map of her actual journey to the workshop showing a long train traveling toward the Group Analytic Society labeled GAS, its acronym. Her conscious intention was to tell us that she had taken part in a previous group-analytic workshop that had encouraged her to join us. On seeing her map everyone gasped. She was gently asked to face her worst nightmare, the possibility that her father had been involved in shipping people to the gas chambers. Later that evening, at bedtime, there was a crisis when she realized she had forgotten to bring the hot water bottle she needed for sleeping. We found a substitute and she slept well. On the second night, the need for additional external warmth was forgotten. Something had shifted.

Many of Jewish descent insisted that their childhoods were normal despite their day-to-day experience to the contrary, smiling while describing their own and their parents' awful memories. Others in the group always picked up such disjunctions. One woman described her mother dressed in rags even though her family was not poor. Another told us about always having to "walk on eggshells" around her parents. She and her siblings had learned to help their parents maintain their strong desire to keep the memories of the past shut off while discounting their own confusion about why their parents behaved as they did.

The social dreaming matrix each morning also made it possible to generate an external shared reality that could not be denied. In one such matrix, it felt as though a dense cloud filled the room. With further reflection in the median group, it became clear that the cloud described the impossibility for the second generation to have, let alone live, their own dreams so powerful and ubiquitous were their parents' dreams and nightmares. One recurring dream theme was, "Where is home? Where do I belong?" The following excerpts need no further explanation.

Last night, I was in a town I didn't know. I went into a theater; they were playing a piece from Goethe called "Seeking the Land of 'Heimat' with a Searching Soul." I had only read it and felt very anxious. It was booked out, only one ticket left. The stage was steep, like the roof of a house, but it was not a house; it was a labyrinth with a lot of people running through it at highest speed all the time. Then I woke up."

The associative chain led us to recall the series of films known as "Heimat," which means "Home," written and directed by Edgar Reitz about life in Germany from the 1840s to 2000. The series focuses on a family living in the Hunsrück area of the Rhineland, where the workshop was also held, and is set against the backdrop of a tumultuous social and political period.

The workshop participant continued, “The safe home of childhood is in another dimension today, and there is no longer a safe place. When I imagine being the director of a play, then I am in charge and not trapped. I can get out of the labyrinth.” Harshness and nothingness were connected with the German word *unheimlich* (the opposite of *Heimat*, meaning unhomely) or spooky, uncanny. “*Aus dem Häuschen sein* (to be unhomed) means to lose one’s temper. I lose my temper to keep my desperation at bay, and I also build a little house around me of anger and loss. There are many words in German connected with *Heimat/home*.”

The key word *Heimat/home* flew through the room like a fiery bomb. “Of course, everybody longs to be at home.”

Conclusion

The ongoing work of piecing together one’s lost history and enabling others to do the same is a process of becoming, of giving one’s inheritance the justice it deserves and finding out who one really is. Discovering how these huge and catastrophic events shaped the people we are releases energy for a more creative life. Many people arrive at the workshops wishing they could cut off their roots. They leave with something new beginning to grow and life continuing in a new way and knowing that massive trauma in one generation really does influence and inhibit subsequent generations.

To have experienced and survived what many cannot even begin to contemplate is a gift to society. Those of us who were the children of those who suffered through the Nazi era know that the unthinkable does happen. It is important to remind the rest of society that what is too difficult to contemplate has happened before and can happen again. To try to normalize these experiences is to repeat the atrocity and the original intentions of National Socialism. To not remember is a way of betraying what happened. It is important to honor our forebears. As Rosenberg (2012/2014) makes clear,

You’re the traces that must not be eradicated and that therefore you owe a particular duty to the life you’ve been granted, against all odds and beyond any notion of fairness, and that through this life you must justify the fact that you’re alive while the others are dead. (p. 279)

When a past is lost in another time and in another social context, disconnected from the present, there is something profoundly validating about finally having one’s experience heard at the deepest level by a group-analytic group. It provides an antidote to all the groups in one’s life that never seemed to understand. As the workshop group takes the role of witnessing each person’s trauma, and as it comprehends the experience, it delivers a freedom that for many, cannot be found in any other way.

After one workshop, I received the following from the son of a Jewish refugee who had been tormented by his father’s past:

I now feel able to embrace the “German-ness” that is such an integral part of my being, and in doing so feel more at peace with my Jewishness and Englishness. The anger and hatred that has been directed at these different aspects of “that who I am” seems to have lost its potency. Instead, it simply tells me how strongly I am attached!

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