

# **CAN HOLOCAUST TRAUMA BE TREATED?**

*Holocaust Aftermath Conference Monash University*

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**I will look at “Can Holocaust trauma be treated?” under 5 headings:**

- 1. Should it be treated?**
- 2. Is it meaningful to treat it?**
- 3. What is there to treat?**
- 4. How can it be treated?**
- 5. In whom and how can Holocaust trauma be treated?  
Adult and child survivors, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> generation?**

## *1. Should it be treated?*

**Before considering whether Holocaust trauma *can* be treated, the question arises whether it *should* be treated. I mean, suppose it is treated successfully, what may result?**

**Suppose the suffering as a result of the Holocaust is dissolved. The wound is healed, the memory stops plaguing. Is that desirable?**

**Many feel that it is indecent for the wound to heal; that it is obscene and a betrayal of the dead for the painful shards of memory to be blunted. It is a sacred duty to keep the memory alive, the flame to keep burning.**

**It may even be dangerous for memories and feelings to fade and eventually pass into oblivion.**

## *2. Is it meaningful to treat Holocaust trauma?*

**Suppose we accept that Holocaust trauma may be treated. The next question is whether it is *meaningful* to treat Holocaust trauma? I mean,**

**can you treat a major historical event? Could we have treated the Inquisition? How can you treat something that has happened, that cannot be undone?**

**Further, is it not *rational* to suffer from the major wounds the Holocaust has inflicted? It makes sense to treat a germ that has infected us or to cut out a cancer. But the Holocaust is not a germ that can be killed or a foreign body that can be excised.**

**Survivors have asked me, ‘What can you do? You can’t undo what happened. You can’t bring back the dead. You think I’m sick to suffer after what I have seen? I’d be sick if I didn’t suffer.’**

**The same survivors had no qualms being treated for the physical consequences of the Holocaust. What worried them about psychological treatment was that it would obliterate the *meaning*, the *soul*, of their experiences.**

### ***3. What is there to treat?***

**If we think of the Holocaust as an earthquake that has put an indelible rift in one’s mind, then that rift can itself cause waves and tsunamis that can flood subsequent post-earthquake environments. Further, the mind is vulnerable to aftershocks.**

**Not only that: survivors may blame themselves for their behaviours during the catastrophe, and their consciences may plague them unnecessarily. Let me give you 3 short vignettes of what I mean.**

***Genia*** was sick and was admitted to hospital. There she mistook doctors for Nazis, and injections as their lethal murderous weapons. Understanding staff were able to reassure her. This shows how the earthquake forms tsunamis that can flood normal environments.

***Juliette*** (whose story I tell in *Child Survivors of the Holocaust*), always felt that beyond her father’s distance from her was a loving father, one she had known in the first 4 years of her life, before the Holocaust.

On his deathbed, her father confessed his guilt for not having left Holland before the occupation, as his brother had entreated him. His decision had cost his wife’s life and been the cause of suffering to Juliette.

Juliette gave a heartfelt response that she never blamed him for being human. She just wanted him.

Juliette and her father regained their pre-Holocaust closeness even if belatedly.

**This case illustrates how rifts and accompanying tortures of conscience can prevent wholesome loves from continuing, and also how such situations can be rectified as long as one lives.**

Whenever as a child *Robert* was enthusiastic or vivacious, his father admonished him to be serious.

Late in life Robert found out that his father had had a previous family who had been murdered, and that he was named after a previous Robert son of his father.

Robert's father could not accept that he himself or Robert might be happy when the father's previous children had been murdered.

Robert grew up as an unwitting memorial candle for his father's family. Robert became a haunted, unhappy adult.

**Robert had long psychotherapy and eventually reclaimed his own life.**

**Genia, Juliette, and Robert indicate in different ways that though the Holocaust cannot be undone, much unnecessary suffering can be ameliorated.**

#### *4. How can Holocaust trauma be treated?*

Trauma therapy of all types requires

1. That the trauma be recognized
2. That the current world be clearly delineated from the trauma world
3. That distressing symptoms be treated
4. That the dynamics and meanings of the trauma world be assimilated into new meanings in the current world and the person's life.

#### *Recognition*

**It is amazing how a person may be known for many years socially or medically but the Holocaust remain unexplored.**

**The person's Holocaust history must always be borne in mind and recognized.**

***The Holocaust must be clearly delineated from the present***

**For Genia it was explained that she was not in a concentration camp 'hospital' but among well meaning family and carers. Juliette's father needed to know that he was not constantly making wrong decisions that endangered his family. Robert had to understand that he had his own life to lead, and that he need not continue to be an eternal memorial candle for others.**

***Distressing symptoms***

**Holocaust survivors have had an excess of physical, emotional and social problems throughout their lives. Each problem, like sleeplessness, palpitations, digestive and cardiac disorders, anxiety, depression, suspiciousness, food hoarding, overeating, overprotectiveness, cynicism, can be addressed in their own right.**

***Establishment of new meanings***

**Genia could learn that hospitals, doctors, and nurses could be kind and trustworthy; in other words, that the world can be cruel but also kind, and that she had a right to enjoy the kindness.**

**Juliette's father's guilt for having caused his wife's death and his child's misery took on a new meaning when he could accept forgiveness for being a lovable human. He could express at last his love for Juliette, who herself could at last bridge her image of a loving father from her early childhood with her current world.**

**Robert came to understand the role he was given by his father as the memorial candle for prior murdered children. He came to understand too that his father gave him life as an antidote to death. He owed it to his father and the dead children to move beyond the moment of their murder; to have a life like they would have had had they not been murdered. His father would love all his children to develop into happy adults. Robert slowly assumed his right to happiness.**

### ***5. In whom and how can Holocaust trauma be treated?***

**Recognition of the past, historical narrative, symptom relief, and creation of purposeful meanings can be achieved in different ways. For instance, the March of the Living, especially where survivors visit places of trauma with their grandchildren, testimonies, memorials and conferences all ameliorate and shape past trauma into purposeful futures.**

**Trauma therapy as such has different forms. It may be individual, family, group, or transgenerational. In Melbourne we have led the way with transgenerational therapy.**

**On the whole, child survivors and 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> generation survivors are more likely to enter therapy because of ever greater generational acceptance of unconscious forces, lack of a sense of betrayal of the dead, and because their symptoms are more hidden from their origins.**

### ***Conclusion***

**While it is impossible and wrong to even attempt to ‘treat the Holocaust’, it is possible and kind to treat the secondary consequences of traumatised bodies and minds.**

**Treatment does not obliterate memory. It puts it into clearer perspective.**

**Treatment does not diminish meaning and soul. It retrieves purposeful meaning and love.**

**It was bad enough for survivors to suffer what they did. To allow snowballing of unnecessary suffering would give a needless victory to Hitler.**