

CASE PRESENTATION HOLOCAUST SURVIVOR THERAPISTS

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The case of Evelyn that I will present is hypothetical but drawn from many cases

General Approach

Type of Distress and Suffering

Though all types of psychopathologies and social dysfunctions may be found in second generation survivors, they can come up in psychological testing as normal or even better off than the general population.

Their distress is generally of the more pervasive unhappiness, whose saturated solution can at times crystallize into illnesses, but generally is felt as part of oneself, lived, often not noticed, like children may live their childhood traumas without understanding themselves, just seeing things as such, part of the world.

Only when their marriages, sometimes second, or their own children present problems, may they seek help, and even then they may not understand their problems' connections to their parents' Holocaust experiences.

In treatment, or when they note that they have been living out patterns whose origins they do not understand, they may eventually find that they have lived out identities which were not their own, but influenced by parental views of them in turn influenced by their massive Holocaust experiences. So second generation Holocaust survivors may have lived in cultures and roles quite incongruous with the Australian culture generally.

Mechanism of Transmission of Holocaust Experiences Across the Generations

Drinking in the milk of parental views starts from earliest life. That is why culture is so ego-syntonic. Means of identification with parental experiences take place according to Judith Kestenberg, in two ways; concretization and transposition.

Concretization

Expectations of the new life may start before conception. Survivor parents often married quickly and had children, something which they encouraged later in their own children. Generativity was to make up for major losses of people, to foil the genocide perpetrated on oneself. Often children were named after the dead, and were given roles accordingly. A frequent one was that of parents, where the survivor's child was given roles of parenting the parents. Roles may vary from time to time, and include a range of lost people, as well as perpetrators. Parents may see the child as Hitler in the home. "You are worse than Hitler. You are finishing what Hitler did not."

Concurrently the children may be given the role to rescue them from Nazis, as well as to establish a new life untainted by the Holocaust, to bring parents back into a normal stream of life.

Both tasks of what was called delegation, that is, living out roles for the family, and rescuing parents from the past are doomed to fail, and they create dissatisfactions and unhappiness in both generations.

Transposition

The child may also be transferred into the past situation. On the one hand. Parents live in the past and see the child in terms of it. On the other hand, for children to find their parents and their attunements, they need to ferret out their Holocaust to "feel at home". This is opposite to the usual transference where the child enacts parental relationships in later life. Instead, the parents' past lives are enacted on the child. The child reverberates with the feelings, images, emotions, of the parents and their experiences in a deep attunement, perhaps using the same means as therapists do in countertransference, and in a similar way they contain or carry parental problems. The different is that the child cannot assimilate and understand what is transferred into it, so it lives it.

The parents in this scenario see the child as vulnerable and persecuted, needing protection, but not having the confidence of being able to provide it. In normal times this is manifested as anxious overprotection. But the child may come to see him or herself as indeed in danger, and may have images of being pounced on, taken away, killed, according to parental memories and fears. Similarly, the child threatened

with starvation must be constantly fed. At times the parents enact on the child their own abandonment, when they may surprisingly leave the child in inappropriate situations. Or they transpose their own guilt for leaving their parents to die, thus blaming the child for abandoning them to die.

Taking concretization and transposition together, the child may be given alternate, confluent, contradictory roles at different times, or at the same time relating to different personas from the Holocaust. This alternates with fervent desires to eradicate the Holocaust for the child and through the child who provides fresh hope to have the Holocaust eradicated for the parents. Plus there are many normal delegations and transferences from the past.

Conspiracy of Silence

In the problematic area, what is passed down the generations is in addition frozen, silent. Sometimes there is a total lack of words. Parents may say they do not want to talk of the past, and may believe that they are protecting their children by not doing so. At other times there may be an overabundance of words, yet there is a silence about core parental traumas, guilt, shame, and meanings the parents made of their experiences. Broaching this silence can bring severe responses of anger or hurt, leading in turn to retreat from hurting parents who have already been hurt so much.

Indeed, parents may be treated like sacred cows, against whom one must not rebel, whom one must not question, in case one becomes like Hitler.

Treatment

Usual trauma treatment involves remembering, recognizing, naming the original trauma, contrasting it specifically with current more hopeful alternatives in a dual focus of attention of high intensity, and remaking a story where the trauma is in the past rather than being relived, but where its history is part of a newly constructed meaningful life story - one which includes hope of a fulfilling future.

With second generation Holocaust survivors there is an extra significant step. Even if they become aware of their wounds and scars, their original contexts and meanings cannot be remembered and felt in their original state, for they belong in the experiences and memories of others.

So resolution of their sufferings includes recognizing sufferings, traumas, guilt and shame in relation to oneself, relating them to one's parents, and then the facets in the parents which they reflect in the parents' sufferings, traumas, guilt, shame and meanings. Then reconciliation must include a triadic focus of attention on oneself and parents in the past, parents in their Holocaust pasts, and current more hopeful alternatives for both parents and child. This also occurs in a state of intensity not only in oneself but also between oneself and the parents. Together, or at least with them in mind, second generation survivors reconstruct the transgenerational story in a new meaningful way. Again, this includes putting in place parental traumas, one's own subsequent traumas with one's parents, and new hopeful and meaningful alternatives.

EVELYN

The following is a summary of the initial sessions in her therapy, some years ago.

Evelyn was a beautiful dark woman who seemed to carry the particular wisdom of the suffering, but also their burden and puzzlement.

"I have been fearful and depressed. But things have been getting worse over the last few years, though I feel that somehow I have always been anxious and depressed. I don't know why." She could not give any specific reasons for her dysphoria, but her first vague memory related to being totally unhappy and anxious when her parents went on an overseas holiday when she was 8. "Till then they had not even allowed me to be baby-sat, suddenly they left me. I remember that that is when I developed asthma, and I supposedly almost died. I had asthma some years and it still returns when I am emotionally upset."

"But somehow my whole life has felt like not having enough air to breathe. It has in some ways always been so grey, joyless. This was particularly brought home when my child was born. In fact it is since then that my depressions and fears got worse. They thought maybe I had postnatal depression, but it's gone on so long. Evie is 6 now, and I am getting more anxious and depressed, not less, with time."

"I am no fun. At joyous occasions, I fear and become depressed even more. I am so sick of myself. My husband is also so sick of me that he is threatening to leave me. I don't

blame him, I would like to leave myself too. Do you think I can change after being morose for so long?

Actually, I am not always morose. Another part of me is the life of the party, and my friends would not suspect that I am seeing a psychiatrist and talking like this.

Evelyn was a psychologist who worked with a refugee organization many of whose clients were victims of political torture.

“I never have respite. My work is draining and depleting. Then I come home and am morose. Oi, what is to become of me? You are an expert on Holocaust matters, so can you help me?” She sounded older than her years, and the weight of the world was oppressing her body.

I pointed out that she had said nothing of the Holocaust, so why did she think the Holocaust was relevant?

“Oh, well, my parents are Holocaust survivors. Sure, my father never talked about it. He said it was too bad, he did not want to burden me, why should he darken the beautiful sunshine of Australia with the greyness of Europe? I should be happy, enjoy the freedoms he never had. He just worked hard, saying it was very important to have money in case of a rainy day. It only occurred to me recently that in his mind the rainy day was the Holocaust, or its repetition. So he clouded the sunshine of Australia anyway.

“He encouraged me to have a profession. Something portable. He could not understand the use of social work, and why on earth was I concerned with Chileans, and Vietnamese?”

My mother is different. She also went through concentration camps, but she never stops talking about it. But really, I don't know her experiences. It somehow just washes over me, though I know both of them had terrible experiences, and it must have affected them greatly. My mother has constant illnesses related to the war. Diabetes, arthritis, angina, shortness of breath. She is overweight, but she vowed to never go hungry again, so the fridge and pantry are stuffed full of food. When I was little, she stuffed me full of food, too. I was chubby for quite a while, and I have a sweet tooth to this day, I am constantly on a diet. And I eat more when I am depressed.

Some time later Evelyn complained that she had been asked to debrief a large number of helpers, who had been particularly busy in a recent flood of refugees. Yet nobody debriefed her. She noted resentfully that this was typical of her role in the organization, that is to help the staff, without this being reciprocated. She also resented the paradox that in spite of deep reverberation with refugee clients, her deficiencies in treating them (highlighted in supervision), led to her having to assume ever higher organizational roles, instead of clinical ones. Yet she had to debrief counselors with whom she would have dearly like to be able to change places. She was at an age where she wanted more satisfaction in her work, as well as in the rest of her life.

It became clear that her position at work reflected Evelyn's position at home. Really both her parents were chronically depressed, pessimistic, anxious suspicious and extremely needy. In therapy it became clear that as a result of their own tortures, her parent - refugees had assigned her the job of being their caretaker. The only rewards she received (though still sparse), were when she was 'good' to them, that is looked after them. She had to comfort them, never cause them anguish, but relieve theirs. Evelyn had never been recognized as a child in her own right. Any claim to have a sense of herself as a child belonging to her parents was at the cost of being turned on in overwhelming anger, causing her in turn overwhelming guilt and shame.

At such times father retired hurt, while mother said, "What have I done to deserve this?! I should have died in the Holocaust, rather than have my own daughter be Hitler in my home!" So she never made demands for herself, and certainly did not rebel.

So she had to do a job at home of parenting her parents for which she was not equipped and she failed. Similarly she was an administrator in her organization but ill equipped to look after the clients of the organization, or the counsellors she had to debrief.

Evelyn remembered that at other times her parents overprotected her. She was not allowed to go on camp, play sports, to come home late was a disaster. And if she was to be close to her parents, she had to ferret herself into the parents' Holocaust world where children like her were killed. So she

was at home with fear and depression even if she did not know why or where they came from.

Evelyn joined a second generation group. She was amazed to find people there with whom she had been friends as a child, but with whom she had never communicated about the Holocaust. Some were helping professionals like herself. Evelyn immersed herself into reading about the Holocaust.

Perhaps resulting in part from her therapy, and encouraged by others in her second generation group and some of the books she read, Evelyn decided that she would visit the places of her parents' pre-war life and persecution.

Her parents were frightened, angry, denigrating, puzzled, but when it became clear that she would go, also somewhat excited. They reminisced a little more vividly about their childhood experiences, and said Evelyn must visit this place and the other. They warned her not to accept propaganda about the concentration camps, and to understand that the locals were anti-Semites to their core and hated Jews. Mother nevertheless remembered some who had helped her and gave their names. Father was much more reticent, and gave only places of persecution, no prewar data, except where he had been born.

Through her external trip and her internal journeys, Evelyn came to flesh out some of her parents' experiences and their subsequent views which formed part of her grey envelope world. She came to understand some of her anxieties and dreads of sudden calamities as relating to that world. She could not understand all her dreads and phobias, such as a total panic driving through a spa village, expecting dogs to jump out of people's houses, mauling her to death. She had to drive through that village without stopping.

An unfortunate development which confirmed some of our speculations was a stroke which her father suffered. This propelled him back into his Holocaust world through loss of his defenses because of organic deficit, and through the helplessness consequent on his condition. In many different ways his experiences were cues reevoking past terrors and griefs. For instance, he saw doctors as Nazis, their injections as them killing him.

During one period Evelyn's father saw her as persecutor. At times he accused her with rage, for betraying him, claiming

that she was instrumental in him being in a transit camp for extermination, as he interpreted the rehabilitation hospital. Once he called out when she arrived, “Here comes my capo.” and he hid under the cover in terror.

What became uncanny too, was the intensification of roles demanded from Evelyn. She had to be more obviously the parent, and at times was called Mama and Papa. At times she was called all sorts of other names some of which she recognized as her father’s siblings’ names. At times father screamed things out in German or Polish.

What was quite amazing was the look of love he cast on her sometimes, total adoration she never saw before, but what she sensed he had deep down. Then he would burst into deep sorrowful sobs the likes of which was heart rending and she had not seen, and mutter something like her name, she supposed in Polish.

After her father died, Evelyn could not bear to go through her father’s papers for some time, but when she did, she found a prayer shawl, and inside it two photos. The prayer shawl came as a surprise, because her father was quite irreligious, saying “Where was God when we needed him most?” In one photo she recognized her father as a young man, with a young woman, both happy, looking into each other’s eyes. The other photo was of the woman with a child. On the back of the first photo it said in faded ink, Lena and Mietek, 1932. On the other it said, Lena and Eva, 1938.

Evelyn was shocked, numb and devastated. It took her weeks to confront mother with determination. “Who are they?” Mother cried, “Leave me alone. Have I not suffered enough already? Do you want to finish what Hitler started?”

Evelyn was adamant. “You have suffered! What about what I have suffered?! It hasn’t been fun for me either. Stop snivelling like you always do, and be a mother for a change! It is your duty to tell me who they are!” Eventually mother acknowledged that they were father’s first wife and daughter who were murdered.

“And what about their names? And my name?” “Yes” mother cried and sobbed, “You were named after them, well especially the child. Oh, what have I done, I have betrayed him, he did not want you to ever know, you were life, you were his new life, and what have I done now?!”

It took many weeks for Evelyn to put together many mysteries. The way father had held her, the memory of which

went back to her earliest times. Affectionate, but as if he was not there, looking deep into her eyes, but past her. Making her feel good, but strangely disquieted and unrecognized. The whisperings between her parents she had not understood. And the frequent arguments between her parents, with what she thought was her name in Polish being screamed by her mother, making her believe that her parents were quarrelling because of her.

She wanted to have details of what happened to Lena and Eva. Father had never said. The parents never really talked about their Holocaust experiences. They married quickly after the war, having come from the same district, and having known one or two people in common.

Evelyn visited her father's second cousin in Israel. She confirmed that father had been married with a child, and both died in the war. She said a few more things about them and father from before the war. How her father loved his first wife, and had been over the moon with his daughter. Evelyn came to know her father as never before. She understood more his prewar self, and the horribly scarred postwar father she had always taken for granted as normal. But he was not normal. His normality were distorted in his silences, rages, she had never understood, his overprotectiveness, his dependence on her - all these, she came to see, were not normal, they came from very, but very, abnormal circumstances.

Evelyn came to understand his silent guilt for not having saved his parents, his wife and his daughter. He had always blamed himself for their deaths. It was consistent with his views, postures, sighs at certain times which she had never understood. It resonated with her own guilt for causing her parents' deaths if she did not look after them properly. It certainly resonated with the near panic father felt regarding her own precarious security.

Evelyn revisited Poland. This time she visited her father's place of birth and the village to which he moved after his marriage - Lena's family's village. His parent had followed him to the same village. Evelyn felt dread as she entered the village. An old woman had known her father's family. "It was terrible. There was a round up of all the Jews. The SS emerged from houses with their dogs, pushed old people first on to trucks - your father's and Lena's parents included. A later truck took poor Lena, she just hung on to her

child, they were also herded on and driven away. Evelyn felt the exact panic attack she had had in Australia driving through the township coming on. She understood that the spa village signified for her a European village, as many Europeans used it for their arthritis. She hung on to her husband's hand, and managed to hear out the woman's story. When her father had come home from some business in the town, they were all gone.

Evelyn went to Auschwitz to where the family had all been deported. Her throat constricted, and she felt she was about to have an attack of asthma. But this time she cried for her father, for her relatives whom she had never known, for her village, for herself. She did a lot of crying for a long time. In therapy she connected the ungrieved smoke of the crematoria with the smoke from the oven which was supposed to have triggered her asthma when she was 8. Her asthma resolved and has not returned since, even if emotionally upset.

Evelyn's mother saw the death of her husband as continuation of the extermination of her family. She made greater demands on Evelyn. But this time Evelyn as it were, understood her mother better, and talked her language. She wanted to know her mother's story, and bit by bit mother confided it.

Some arguments developed, in which Evelyn blamed her mother (and father) for not recognizing her own needs, leaving her at the age of eight, not taking note of her own depressions, not caring for her child Evie when she was indisposed, and requiring too much care themselves.

Evelyn started to see glimmers of light through the envelope which had always enveloped her. She started to regain interests which had been squashed in her childhood. For instance, she started to draw, something in which her parents had not seen any survival value, therefore they denigrated it. Similarly, she took up swimming, and learned about Italian architecture. Altogether, she had more fun. She livened up her house with new decorations. The things which her parents had expunged from her mind as frivolous and therefore dangerous as it took attention away from survival activities, she started to enjoy.

Eventually Evelyn said that she was grateful to her mother for her survival concerns, and she liked doing some things for her mother, but actually the Holocaust was over,

and the whole purpose of surviving it and having Evelyn was to have a life after it. She should not therefore denigrate whatever she did in order to have a life. Mother should not spoil their survival by her incessant and unnecessary demands, as her parents survived and had her to actually enjoy life after liberation not in continued slavery to it. If mother insisted to be a perpetual living Holocaust monument, then she gave Hitler his victory, and was sacrificing Evelyn as well.

Evelyn connected her own concerns for her daughter (even naming her Eva) with her father's Holocaust experiences. She came to understand that her ever growing concerns for her daughter were associated with her approaching the age of death of the original Eva. Evie was destined for early death in her mind, and that is why she suffered fears and depressions after her birth. She reenacted her father's anxieties and helplessness in the face of this catastrophe. Incidentally she was approaching the age of her father when his daughter died. The crescendo of the imminent tragedy was impending when Evelyn came to therapy.

Evelyn was amazed to calculate that her own severe abandonment fears and asthma probably started at the age of 8, when she was the first Eva's age when she separated from her father and was taken to Auschwitz. That was the first reenacted crescendo, if you like. The parents abandoned the protected Evelyn like father's parents abandoned him, and how his daughter Eva may have felt abandoned by her father. The second reenactment, a generation later, was to have occurred when Evelyn herself was going to be her father's age and when Evie was going to be eight.

In fact the littlest Evie, and Evelyn passed the poignant ages without mishap. Mother, father and daughter this time did not separate, Evelyn and her husband did not even go on holiday. Evelyn, though worried, did not expect death anymore, but life. Her daughter was going to live and be happy!

Evelyn and her husband also had an improved relationship as both their understanding of Evelyn grew. The trip to Poland was a new bonding experience for them. Both he and Evelyn herself delighted in Evelyn's new zest for life.

At work Evelyn also realized that she had been in the thrall of repeating her position at home, looking after tortured

people beyond her capacity. This time she came to be able to empathize with the clients of her agency without being overwhelmed or asking for care herself. She took on clinical work, and enjoyed it. She was able to even broaden and deepen the understanding of the institution regarding their clients, and helped institute organizational changes to help them. She became politically effective in sponsoring refugee rights.

And her mother, seeing a happy child, surprisingly, at times left clinging to her Holocaust world. She connected herself and Evelyn with her own pre-Holocaust childhood with her mother, and she took on her own mother's role with Evelyn. She gained some faith in the fact that her daughter and granddaughter survived happily, and that she could fulfill her own mother's earlier hopes for her to some extent now by enjoying her life, even if somewhat belatedly.

Conclusion

This is a simplified and condensed story, but it demonstrates the difference between not dealing with the Holocaust and dealing with it. With parents who have not dealt with their traumas and griefs, the daughter and even granddaughter were unwittingly drawn ever deeper into the undigested story and its expected repetition.

On the other hand, recognizing one's own current and past problems, their context in one's relationship to one's parents, and in turn to their traumas, allowed contrasting and adjusting the past to current normality and fulfillment of life's purpose.

The coincidences in the story and their unconscious nature are not exaggerated, and indicate the very pervasive and subtle way things are passed down the generations.

Though challenging, the story indicates that it is never too late to deal with Holocaust matters, and it can be to one's advantage to do so.