

TRANSGENERATIONAL TRANSMISSION OF GRIEF; USING THE HOLOCAUST AS AN EXAMPLE

Paul Valent

NALAG CONFERENCE 20th OCTOBER 1999

In 1991 when I was on a panel with Judith Kestenberg in New York at the First Hidden Children of the Holocaust conference, a member of the audience asked, “When you consider the multiple murders within families, physical annihilation of communities, persecution, uprooting, torture, loss of a whole way of life and everything precious, how can survivors ever grieve all this? Is it not an insult even to expect them to ‘go beyond the Holocaust’?”

And Judith Kestenberg, one of the wisest and most prolific psychological writers on the Holocaust said, “You know it may be for the subsequent generations to grieve.”

Yet this may be more easily said than done. Traumatic griefs are hard to mourn for those primarily afflicted. But even if fragmented and defended, at least what has been lost is in the minds of the afflicted individuals. The next generation does not know what to grieve, for the afflictions are not in their memories. Yet they are pervaded by the losses, they carry the scars. One second generation person said, “I carry so many scars. But I don’t know what the wounds were. That is harder than having been wounded.”

General Approach

Type of Distress and Suffering

What I’ll do in this talk, is not to present results of questionnaires and statistics.

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. Similarly, though apparently living acculturated in new communities, their attitudes may belong to a culture which they have never known.

I will mention a little of how experiences may be transmitted unwittingly across the generations. Then I'll illustrate such transmission and the hard path which eventually did lead to proper grieving through a clinical case. I acknowledge the Holocaust Interest Group for their feedback when I presented to them a precursors of this paper.

Mechanism of Transmission of Holocaust Experiences Across the Generations

There are many ways of course in which parents transfer knowledge to their children. Drinking in the milk of parental views starts from earliest life. Two special means I concentrate on because they are so pervasive, early, and unconscious. Judith Kestenberg called them 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 corresponding unconscious roles. A frequent one was that of dead parents. Here the survivor's child was given the role of parenting survivors' 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 a guard, as Hitler. It is not too unusual for parents to have said, "You are worse than Hitler. You are finishing what Hitler did not."

Concurrently, 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 delegated 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 be transposed into the past situation.

From the parental perspective, parents who live in the past, when they look in their child's eyes, they see the past beyond. For children, to find their parents and to be attuned to them, they need to ferret out their Holocaust to "feel at home".

This is opposite to the usual transference of the past, 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, and at times act as minitherapists who identify with and try to carry and solve parental turmoils. The difference between children and therapists is that the child cannot assimilate and understand what is transferred into it, so it lives its responses without awareness.

How does this play out in real life? The parents who see vulnerable Holocaust children beyond their children's faces, see the child as highly threatened, manifesting 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, and the child herself may store excess food in the fridge and on her body.

On the other hand, otherwise overprotective parents may surprisingly leave the child inappropriately, enacting on the child their own abandonment, and the child may grow up with separation anxiety. Or they transpose their own guilt for leaving their parents to die, thus blaming the child for abandoning them to die.

Finally, as can be gleaned core frozen griefs are also transposed down the generations. In the Holocaust there was too much to grieve, and grieving by taking away concentration on survival was too dangerous. How was grief frozen? A man who saw his family murdered in the Holocaust described his heart renting apart.

"Something...tore loose within me as I sank to the floor. The small childish sobs did not come, instead my chest felt crushed.." (Kestenberg & Brenner, 1986, p 311) That crushed feeling was silently carried in a part of him while he survived from moment to moment, and for decades thereafter, when the sobs continued to not come.

Conspiracy of Silence

Traumas passed down the generations are pervaded by silence.

Sometimes there is a total lack of words. Parents may say that they are protecting their children from unspeakable horrors, and they may protect

themselves too. Even when, as may happen, there is 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. Taking together the conspiracy of silence, concretization and transposition, the normal post-Holocaust child nevertheless carries within a black hole of intense gravitational pull, with powerful shadows pervading the child and pulling strings over its life.

Treatment

Usual trauma and bereavement treatment, in a simplified form involves awareness, remembering, recognizing, naming the original trauma, contrasting it with current hopeful alternatives in a dual focus of attention of high intensity, from which focus is remade and projected a story where the past trauma is not relived, but 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 heavy wounds and scars, the original losses, contexts and meanings cannot be remembered, for they belong in the memories of others.

Trauma and grief resolution therefore must include a triadic focus of attention. First, on the frictions and losses within oneself inflicted in the relationship with one's parents, the sources of these frictions and losses in the parents' 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 parents in mind if they are dead, second generation survivors reconstruct the transgenerational story in a new meaningful way.

EVELYN (Composite and disguised, but from real people)

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

Evelyn was a tall, dark woman whose lively beauty was admixed with sad wisdom of the suffering. Yet she also looked puzzled.

"I have been fearful and depressed, especially over the last few years, though I've probably always been anxious and depressed. I don't know why."

Thinking about it, she said that she remembered 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 for 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 therapist.

Evelyn was a psychologist who worked in a mental health clinic which had a large population of refugees who had suffered large scale murder and torture.

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

She had said nothing of the Holocaust, so I asked why she thought 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 psychology, and why on earth was I concerned with Cambodians, and such like?

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 illnesses I think related to the war. She is overweight, but she vowed to never go hungry again, so her 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.

Evelyn complained that at work she was an unofficial debriefer for the staff. Yet nobody debriefed her. "I always look after the others, but noone looks after me!" 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 other counselors. 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. Both her parents were chronically depressed, pessimistic, anxious and extremely needy people. And it became clear that like at work now, she had always cared (inadequately) for tortured refugees. Her parents had assigned her the job of being their caretaker. And again, she was not cared for herself. Evelyn had never been recognized as a child in her own right. Any claim to be a child requiring attention and care was resisted, and if she rebelled, she was turned on with overwhelming anger, causing her in turn overwhelming guilt and shame. Her father would scream, "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!" while her mother retired hurt. So she did not make demands for herself anymore.

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. Parents always told her stories of tragedies which had happened to children, and they did not want anything like that to happen to Evelyn. Actually she found that talking about the tragedies allowed her a closeness with her parents which she otherwise could not achieve. Then they might reminisce about children in their own childhoods, and they would close the conversation with a profound sigh, a deep meaningful look at Evelyn, and an affectionate pat, and she was sent to bed, perhaps with a cup of cocoa. The cocoa appeased the fear and depression which she inexplicably felt when she retired to bed.

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 talked about the Holocaust. Some were helping professionals like herself. Evelyn immersed herself into reading about the Holocaust. Like some others in her group, Evelyn decided that she would visit the places of her parents' childhoods 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 than before about their childhood experiences, and said Evelyn must visit this place and the other. They warned her against Holocaust deniers, and to understand that the locals were still anti-Semites. Mother nevertheless remembered some who had helped her and gave one or two names. Father was much more reticent, and gave only places of persecution, no prewar data, though she found out 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 the grey envelope of her world. She came to understand that many of her anxieties and dreads of sudden calamities related to the Holocaust 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.

During therapy Evelyn's father suffered a stroke. Much that till now was dimly suggested became overt, because having lost many of his defenses and reexperiencing helplessness in the face of death, the father was propelled back into his Holocaust world. For instance, he saw doctors as Nazis, their injections as them killing him.

What became uncanny too, was the intensification of roles cast on to Evelyn. At times he accused her angrily for betraying him, being instrumental in him being in a transit camp for extermination, as he interpreted the rehabilitation hospital. At times she was seen as a direct persecutor, and father hid under the cover in terror.

At other times she had to be more obviously the parent, and she was even called Mama and Papa. At times she was called by her father's siblings' names.

What was quite amazing was the look of love he cast on her sometimes, an adoration she had never seen before, but a capacity she had always sensed that he had deep down. Then he would burst into deep sorrowful sobs the likes of which was heart rending. He muttered something like her name, she supposed in Polish.

After her father died, Evelyn had to go through her father's papers and belongings. To her puzzlement, 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?! Do you think you and dad have been fun for me?! Be a mother for a change! It is your duty to tell me who they are!” 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, especially the child. Oh, what have I done, I have betrayed him, he did not want you to ever know, 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, but mother actually jealous of a previous wife.

And then Evelyn’s inner grey depression turned to a stab in the heart, and an outflow of tears and sobs. She realized that the adoring love father showered at her in hospital, when she had thought he mumbled her name in Polish, was for his previous daughter Eva, with whom she was confused. It was this love which she had been deprived of all her life. She recognized that her sobs were like her father’s after he looked at her with love.

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, and mother really did not know.

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 that her father really loved his first wife, and had been over the moon with his daughter. Evelyn came to know her father as a loving man who had been horribly wounded. What she had always taken for granted, as normal, was not normal. 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. Reconstructing his phrases, sayings, postures, sighs at certain times, Evelyn came to understand as his silent grief, anger, guilt for not having saved his parents, his wife and his daughter. 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 understood father's looks - of desire to love her, stopped by guilt of deserting his first daughter, the unmourned grief for her, the looking past Evelyn's eyes, seeing the past. 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. A familiar dread enveloped Evelyn as she entered the village. An old woman had known her father's family. "It was terrible. It was August 1941. There was a round up of all the Jews. The SS emerged from houses with their dogs, first pushed old people on to trucks - your father's and Lena's parents included. A later truck took poor Lena. I saw her hanging on to her child, they were also driven away. Evelyn recognized the familiar dread as the panic attack she had driving through the spa town in Australia. She understood that the spa town with its European atmosphere) signified for her this very village, and she now understood the feared image of dogs running out of the houses. She hung on to her husband's hand, and managed to hear out the woman's story. When her father came home, they were all gone.

Evelyn went to Auschwitz to where the family had 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. Later 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, when her family suddenly abandoned her. Evelyn's asthma never returned.

Evelyn's mother saw the death of her husband as continuation of the extermination of her own family. She made greater and more overt 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.

Blame anger and guilt followed with Evelyn at last able to release her resentment at not having been recognized and loved properly. But she understood this time why this had been so.

Evelyn became more confident, less anxious. Light penetrated her grey envelope. She regained some interests such as drawing and swimming, and took on a course on Italian architecture. Such activities had been denigrated and squashed by her parents, because they did not have survival value, and therefore they were considered to be frivolous. She livened up her house with new decorations. Altogether, she had more fun.

Eventually Evelyn told her mother that her survival concerns both for herself and Evelyn were unnecessary and damaging. Actually the Holocaust was over, and the whole purpose of surviving it and having Evelyn was to have a life after it. Mother should not be a perpetual living Holocaust monument, because 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. Concurrently she was approaching the age of her father when his daughter died. It was when the crescendo of the impending tragedy was increasing that Evelyn came to therapy.

Evelyn was amazed to calculate that her own severe abandonment fears and asthma 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. The unexpected abandonment and smoke filled room symbolised Auschwitz even more closely. The third generation reenactment was to have occurred when Evelyn herself was going to be her father's age and when Evie was going to be eight.

Evelyn, though worried, did not expect death anymore, but life. Her daughter was going to live and be happy! The parents did not leave Evie. The family passed the poignant ages without mishap.

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

Evelyn also realized that at work she had been in the thrall of looking after tortured people beyond her capacity. Her capacities to empathize with clients and to be able to help them increased as she herself obtained care, understanding, and continued supervision. She took on more clinical work which she enjoyed, and was no longer the unofficial inadequate carer of the organization. Yet she was able to broaden and deepen the understanding of the institution regarding their clients as she had never done before. She became politically effective in sponsoring refugee rights.

And her mother, seeing a happy child, surprisingly, at times, left clinging to her Holocaust world. For the first time she connected in her mind Evelyn and herself 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, by at least to some extent and somewhat belatedly, now enjoying her life.

Conclusion

This simplified and condensed story, demonstrates how the second and even third generations can be unwittingly drawn ever deeper into the undigested script of parents who had been unable to deal with their traumas and griefs.

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 taking up a life story with meaning and purpose.

The coincidences in the story and their unconscious nature are not exaggerated, and indicate the very pervasive and subtle way concretization, transposition and the conspiracy of silence pass trauma down the generations.

Though challenging, the story indicates that it is never too late to deal with the biggest traumas. But sometimes it may take another generation's security and hope to grieve what was ungrivable.