

## **Shaping the Future by Confronting the Past: Germans, Jews and Affected Others**

*Ursula Kreuzer Haustein*

Jona Rosenfeld, the Israeli administrator of the inaugural Nazareth Conference, posed a question as to the meaning of the conference during the opening plenum and questioned whether or not the project could also be considered to be obscene. What he meant by that was the attempt to address the horrors of the holocaust in the form of a working conference involving the two nations, just as if the extent of the horror experienced were able to be 'processed' at all. Dangers posed by the obscene could also consist in blurring the boundaries between the victims and perpetrators. These are dangers whose explosiveness can arise, for example, if in the course of an extremely moving situation in which the trauma experienced by the Germans is being discussed the question is suddenly raised as to whether or not the generation of post-war children should also be referred to as 'children of the holocaust'. I will come back to the way in which the group answered this question later.

I believe that the subject matter of and the methods used in these conferences really do represent a contradiction which simultaneously allows both groups to make new, conflictuous experiences. One central contradiction is that it is about, on the one hand, feelings and fantasies regarding 'German' and 'Jewish / Israeli', i.e. it is about bloc affiliations with a high degree of destructivity and tensions between the blocs, disindividualized work in which the Jews and Germans are nameless and faceless. On the other hand, it is also about the work that goes on between individuals within groups, emotionally intense encounters, collegial and amicable relationships which have emerged from the conference's traditions. I would like to pursue this contradiction with the help of two questions:

1. What occurs when Germans deal with scarcely bearable affects of guilt and shame, with their despair and their hatred towards their own fathers and mothers or with their (mostly latent) anti-Semitism in the presence of Israelis?
2. What happens to the boundaries between perpetrators and victims of the Holocaust when Germans and Israelis come together for five days in a collective and intensive process of group experience?

## 1. German affects in the presence of Israelis

A female German participant – Shmuel has just described this scene – opens the plenum at the inaugural conference with a question as to the reasons for the Israelis' low attendance. An elderly Israeli women whose family had been killed in the concentration camps replied: "Why do you ask, you were the ones who killed them all."

This starting signal is as macabre and unreal as it is appropriate and true. The German participant, who is speechless, irritated, disgruntled and is dealing with her own feelings of guilt, attempts to take a position toward the end of the session: "I didn't murder any of you, not even one, but I am a German and as a German I share the responsibility for the Holocaust because our parents have imposed this historical obligation upon us."

At the inaugural conference the Germans were exceedingly scrupulous in pursuing their scarcely bearable affective entanglements. Many spoke of exhibitionistic guilt and mourning and this was considered by many Israelis to be an additional burden. The Germans were a pain in the neck with their incessant doubts and scruples in terms of what they could allow themselves as Germans.

A scene which illustrates the unconscious dynamic of these events:

*A form of hectic and irrational activity took place in the first group session of all German participants in the absence of Israelis: One should build smaller groups as quickly as possible because there would otherwise be no room left. The hotel was extremely spacious, there was more than enough room. The Israelis then interpreted this in the plenum that followed to be aggression in the sense of 'a people without land'. The Germans' attempts to rapidly break up into smaller groups proved to be an expression of a desire not to appear too powerful. Just as interesting was the observation that not men but women were the spokespeople of the group. The phrase 'occupy space' proved to be an important code for the national socialist catchcry 'a people without land' which the Nazis had drawn upon in order to legitimate their barbaric program of annihilation.*

The Germans' gradual overcoming of their reticence, mostly effected via the staff's interpretations, enabled them to begin to deal with their own particular 'German affects' - first and foremost with a threateningly high degree of angst.

One of those fears concerned the revenge of the Jews. This yielded paranoid fantasies that the Israelis had lured them into a trap and that the hotel was in fact a concentration camp and that perhaps not water but gas would pour out of the taps in the hotel rooms.

Some of the German participants considered departing on day 3. Beyond this it was about a fear of not being able to cope with the extent of guilt, shame, hate and despair regarding real and fantasized atrocities committed by their own fathers and their families' silence associated therewith.

It also came to pass that despair due to the Israelis' cold rebuffs and a yearning to manufacture a sense of closeness to them were expressed, for example in the case of a German woman's dream narrative in a small group setting. In this narrative she desperately wishes to warn an Israeli group participant about a planned Palestinian terrorist attack. A large degree of tension arose within the group. The Israeli concerned reacted to the dream with a cynical rebuff and interpreted the Palestinian's attack in the dream context to be solely shifting the blame, as this woman's aggression towards him and towards Jewish people. He began to speak about sadistic sexual fantasies which tormented him and concerned German women and also this German woman in particular.

There was no chance that closeness, concern and bonding could be induced, the Israeli group leader interpreted this aggression and simultaneous mutual fascination to be sadomasochistic stagings.

The Germans were thus constantly dealing with a two-pronged problem: They had to deal with their inner taboos in terms of 'occupying space' and in the cases in which they were able to achieve this they were then confronted with a predictable coldness on the part of the Israelis, which was nonetheless difficult to bear.

I believe that the result of these conferences was that Germans were able to experience a sense of pain and liberation at the same time in the presence of Jewish people who encounter them with feelings of hate, coldness and deep mistrust: because they had the chance to accept the impossibility of receiving forgiveness from Jewish people. It was, however, possible to achieve a gradual acceptance amongst the Israelis with regard to the painful burdens Germans must bear.

This can also be illustrated by the following scene taken from a small group:

*A female German participant reports of having experienced a sleepless night in which it occurred to her that she came to this conference of the conviction that the dead are all equal. She followed this up with an association from the previous day that the second generation had been 'milked with tears' and that she herself had been 'milked with poison'. In the night she had felt this poison that her mother had passed on to her. From her point of view, the liberating aspect of this distressing experience was that she did not have to constantly battle the poison outside in the world, in her mother and in others, as she had felt it within herself. Her narrative was accompanied by acute pain and tears.*

This far-reaching scene was registered with sympathy by the group, including some of the Israelis. It is an example of an intense group process on the basis of an individual one, of 'humane' work as it were. It took place during the third conference in Germany. The collegial and amicable relationships which had grown in the meantime allowed, on the one hand, a greater extent of trustful work but, on the other hand, strengthened the defence of destructive affects between 'the Germans' and 'the Jews / Israelis'. This was reinforced by the choice of Germany as the conference venue. The Israeli participants were inevitably confronted with the fear of the terror associated with re-traumatization, their German hosts were in turn confronted with the fear of becoming perpetrators once more. The Germans spoke much more frequently about 'Israelis' and not of 'Jews'. The danger was too great that they could come into inner contact with murderous fantasies

The personal relationships which had grown, along with the dangerous explosiveness of choosing Germany as the conference venue, thus created a perhaps somewhat problematic defence which ran the risk of allowing the relationships between Germans and Jews to develop in a 'corny and syrupy' fashion. One group was engaged with this subject matter of 'Corniness and Kitsch between Israelis and Germans'. The Germans' "politeness" was suspect to the Israelis, and rightly so. It was a very difficult tightrope walk. On the other hand, the group scene concerning being 'milked with poison' shows that a deep sense of identification with the Nazi poison and the 'ugly German' amongst Germans were possible on the basis of primarily individual, extremely trustful work. And indeed to such an extent that German and Jewish participants attempted to understand the fascination inherent in Nazi songs and one female German participant began to sing part of the 'Horst Wessel' song, a well-known German military tune.

Questions concerning the 'obscene' are justified here, too. At the same time I consider one of the central results of this conference to be to reckon with the abysses, a disposition to

cruelty, with stagings of hatred and simultaneous fascination in the form of sadomasochistic relationships in each and every one of the participants, without this having led to a disregard of or attempts to qualify the dreadful barbarity of the Germans.

This brings me to my second point:

## **2. The boundaries between perpetrators and victims**

During the Germans' often moved accounts of their guilt and shame at the inaugural conference the question was raised as to whether Israelis and Germans can mourn together. An image which was brought up was that of the two perhaps being able to mourn together in one house, but in separate rooms. This was developed further during the 3<sup>rd</sup> conference into a question as to whether or not the post-war generation of German children could also be classified as 'victims of the holocaust'. A number of Germans and Israelis were fiercely opposed and insisted upon a clear distinction between perpetrators and victims and that the Holocaust had created a clearly-defined, enduring boundary in relations between the two countries.

I believe that these conferences are not about a misguided form of reconciliation or romantic fraternization which could lead to a trivialization of the atrocities committed. It is about **dialogue**, a dialogue in which the other's presence, in the case of the Germans the Israelis' presence, first makes the sheer weight of scarcely bearable feelings possible and helps to survive this inner work, to press ahead with it and to achieve somewhat more inner freedom and to be able to say, 'I am German.' Conversely – which Mira has already drawn to our attention – the Germans have perhaps enabled Israelis to question the cemented rigidity of Jewish Holocaust victim identity. Because when, for example, an Israeli woman mentions whether or not her mother was a 'Nazi mother', a 'Jewish Nazi mother', whose cruelty consisted in not speaking about their trauma, identities start to become destabilized. A similar situation can be observed with regard to the loyalty inspired by coercion amongst Jewish people meaning that they have to hate all Germans. This was expressed by an Israeli during the final plenum of the 3<sup>rd</sup> conference. Just prior to that, his mother in Israel, having heard that he was considering the invitation of a German to come to Berlin, replied, "Don't do it, don't trust them, they're the ones who murdered your grandparents."