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Enduring tension

For the first time since the Nazi era, psychoanalysts from around the world attended a congress in Berlin

By Ingo Way

<Illustration>

No place to relax: Sigmund Freud's famous couch can now be seen at the Freud Museum in London

The scene could be out of a movie: a hotel lobby full of men with gray beards, and diminutive older women with alert eyes. Exactly how you would imagine a typical psychoanalytic conference. The lobby is that of the Hotel Matorim in the Stauffenbergstrasse in Berlin, directly opposite the German Resistance Memorial Center. And this is where the International Psychoanalytic Association (IPA) is holding its 45th congress. This marks the first time since 1922 that the congress is taking place in Berlin - after psychoanalysis was driven out of Germany in the 1930s.

It took a long time for the IPA to decide on Berlin as the venue, partly because many of its members are Holocaust survivors or their children. The theme of the congress, "Remembering repeating and working through in psychoanalysis and culture today," had them in mind. About 2700 participants from around the world were in attendance; presenters included such prominent names as Margarete Mitscherlich, Judith Butler, Harold Blum, Nancy Chodorow, and the brain researcher Gerhard Roth.

The theme, "remembering" is reflected in many ways in the more than 200 presentations and breakouts, whether in the relationship between psychoanalysis and neuroscience, in discussions about art as a form of remembering, or in discussions relating to psychoanalysis itself. Given the place and the life histories of many of the participants, it is obvious, however, that the Shoah, survival, and how to treat the trauma experienced by victims and their descendents would run like a thread through the proceedings. A psychoanalyst from New York, originally from Poland, who has returned to Germany for the first time since 1945, when she waited in a displaced persons camp for her emigration papers to the United States to be processed, exemplifies this generation. "Many of the older Jewish participants found it difficult to return to Germany," says Arnold Richards, co-director of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research in New York, who has been to Berlin several times before. "They ask themselves how things might have looked here if Jewish life hadn't been destroyed." The "presence of absence," is how Richards characterizes the atmosphere. Still, this is one of the best IPA congresses he has ever attended. "This confluence of history, culture, and psychology is unique," he says, regretting only that he will be unable to visit all of Berlin's museums.

Naturally, the often difficult relationship between German and Jewish psychoanalysts comes up again and again. Shmuel Erlich and his wife Mira Erlich-Ginor from Israel, have since 1994 organized the so-called Nazareth conferences, at which German and

Israeli analysts have gotten together a total of five times. The Erlichs, and Ursula Kreuzer-Haustein and Hermann Beland -- as the German contingent from the Nazareth conferences --, report about their encounters, which were at first characterized primarily by mutual projection. At moments like this it becomes palpable how seriously analysts take self-reflection, openness, and the lack of illusion. Erlich-Ginor talks about the deep distrust, even hate, she evinced toward the Germans at the first conference. During her presentation she falters, close to tears. "Please excuse me, I wasn't nearly as emotional when I wrote my presentation as now that I am giving it." Her husband hands her a tissue; she wipes her eyes, takes a deep breath, and continues. She tells of her ambivalent relationship to her own negative emotions, how hate lent her a sense of power, how her clear image of the enemy strengthened her sense of identity. At the same time, the Germans' "guilt exhibitionism" got on the Israelis' nerves because it was perceived by them as submissiveness. Kreuzer-Haustein talks about the deep desire of the German participants to be recognized by the Israelis, and to receive absolution from them. Their reserve, however, continually triggered anger in the Germans. Nonetheless, both the Germans and the Israelis view the Nazareth conferences to date as largely positive. It will be interesting to hear their evaluation in 2008, after Palestinians have joined the mix for the first time. The question that Beland raises at the conclusion of the session, however, remains unanswered: Can concepts from individual psychoanalysis such as the unconscious and the superego be transferred to collectives such as "Germans," "Israelis," or "Palestinians."

Just how a relationship between Germans and Israelis, between Jewish and non-Jewish Germans -- and not only between psychoanalysts -- might look beyond the concepts of "normality" and "reconciliation," both of which merely bridge the abyss rhetorically, is the subject of the Vera Teplin's presentation. Teplin was born in Cologne in 1938 and deported to Terezin as a child. After the war, she was constantly confronted with open anti-Semitism even -- or more precisely, especially -- at the institutes where she received her psychoanalytic training. And this well into the 1980s. She was told, even by respected authorities in the field, that her personal neuroses had nothing to do with her concentration camp experiences, and that in any case it was time to make a clean break with the past. According to Teplin, any productive encounter between perpetrators, victims, and their descendents is possible only by "maintaining the tension" (and in fact enduring it) -- in the full knowledge that reconciliation is impossible. It should be noted that Teplin is married to a non-Jewish German who had as a boy been a member of the Hitler Youth.