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Private Memories and Historical Studies: problems of Identity in the Survivors of the Holocaust

“Becol dor va dor haiav adam learot et azmò chilu u iazà mimizraim”
*“In every generation it is the duty of each of us to imagine that it is we who were saved from the
bondage of Egypt ”*
From the Passover Haggadah

Introduction

Most historians born during Nazism explicitly or implicitly acknowledge that to dig up the historical events of those years implies not only searching and interpreting a historical past similar to any other, but it also involves the process of recovering and interpreting basic elements of their own life and the capacity to cope with these elements. Acknowledging it is far from producing an agreement on how to define the Nazi regime, or how to interpret its internal dynamics, or how to put it in a wider historical context. By admission of the historians themselves, however, in describing that past there is a personal involvement which is full of anxiety for the work to be done.

In a paper published in the International Journal of Psychoanalysis in 1968, William Niederland who has treated survivors of persecution for many years, describes a "survivor syndrome", which appears to be characterized by the persistence of multiple symptoms, and in particular chronic depressive conditions and anxiety reactions, insomnia, nightmares, personality changes, and far-reaching somatization. More specifically, clinical observation of about 800 Nazi persecution survivors revealed that the survivor syndrome is composed of the following manifestations:

- i. *Anxiety*—the prevailing complaint. It is associated with fear of renewed persecution, sleep disturbances, multiple phobias, anxiety dreams, and characteristic "re-run" nightmares. Regarding the latter, I have observed that many patients suffer from chronic insomnia partly as an attempt to limit their hours of sleep because their dreams and nightmares, reflecting the *in concretu et situ* concentration experience, are unendurable for them.
- ii. *Disturbances of cognition and memory*, such as: amnesias, hyperamnesias, and, especially upon awakening from nightmares, confusion with disorientation between the present and the period of persecution. Also, "lost and bewildered" states as well as dissociative phenomena.
- iii. *Chronic depressive states*, covering the whole spectrum from masochistic character changes to psychotic depression. The incidence and severity correlate closely with the "survivor's guilt" and certain specific traumata, such as loss of children, parents, siblings, history of rape, etc.
- iv. *Tendency to isolation, withdrawal, and brooding seclusion*; tenuous and unstable object-relations, with a marked ambivalence notable in lasting disturbances of object-relations.

v. *P sychotic and psychosis-like pictures* were observed with a relatively high incidence. Regressive and primitive methods of dealing with aggression result in schizophrenic-like symptoms without the relevant consistency or "process". Isolated symptoms like night-time persecutory hallucinations, states of depersonalization, hypochondriasis, or paranoid manifestations have in this group a very specific history and determination.

vi. *Alterations of personal identity*; impairment in the sense of personal identity, in the sense of time and space, body image and self image. These alterations are subjectively felt and lasting, as evidenced by the patients' frequent complaint: "I am now a different person" (in severe cases: "I am not a person".)

vii. *Psychosomatic conditions* including: (a) diseases related to chronic tension states; (b) gastrointestinal conditions, peptic ulcer and related symptoms; (c) cardiovascular disturbances, with or without hypertensive states; (d) typical "survivor's triad": headaches—persistent nightmares—chronic depression, and various other psychosomatic complaints.

viii. Of great importance—not only phenomenologically—is a certain "*living corpse*" appearance or behaviour which many of the victims show and which seems to originate from the prolonged exposure to death in the camps. This "walking" or "shuffling corpse" appearance gives the victim a macabre, shadowy or ghost-like imprint, difficult to describe, but which seems to be in the nature of an all-pervasive psychological scar on the total personality.

(Niederland, W. G. (1968). Clinical Observations on the "Survivor Syndrome. *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 49: 313-315)

Psychoanalysts who have worked with the survivors of the Holocaust, like Jay Lifton - "The Nazi Doctors" (1986) - know very well that a kind of *survivor syndrome* can be found in a transitory and partial way in those who have dealt with this subject. Sheldon Roth, a Brooklyn psychoanalyst, for instance, tells how he felt "overpowered by terrifying emotions" and couldn't find "words to give form to his feelings" "All was embedded in a mild but distinct depressive affective tone" while he was reading literary works such *Night*, by Elie Wiesel or *Survival in Auschwitz* by Primo Levi, and "the present seemed less real".

The *guilt* of the survivor (guilt to have survived) will therefore fall not only upon his children, but also upon those who were not directly affected by the memory of the Shoah but who got in touch with that memory. We agonize over events which we are no longer able to control, on deaths which we are no longer able to stop and something within us tries to bring back to life the victims of this tremendous injustice. We go on reading, we insist in the effort to understand, and the more we go on with reading, with listening to the witnesses, with watching those unbelievable pictures, the more we feel detached from the present time. This unstoppable bewitchment is common with people who experienced the study of the Shoah.

Also Claude Lanzmann, the director of the film "Shoah", mentioned that he had been *demented* as long as he was making "Shoah". Trying to understand the Holocaust only in historical or biographical terms seemed to him an "intellectual scandal" or "an absurd dream of a non-violent death", an attempt to justify murder and mass murder.

Saul Friedlander, one of the most important contemporary scholars of the Shoah, repeats how for his generation "To be at the same time a guardian of the historical memory and a part of that memory may produce a disturbing dissonance but also create intuitive interpretations that otherwise would be barred" (1997)

Hanna Arendt, in 1956 speaks of a "lapse between the past and the present [...] between what has *irrevocably* happened and what *inevitably* exists." In order to understand this lapse it is necessary to analyze the *meaning* of the past, the unaware shifts of meaning which characterize the historical progress and represent a darkening of the original meanings. For Arendt the past exercises a double-edged authority on the present: on one hand it passes along a somehow indissoluble legacy to the next generations; on the other the very same legacy degenerates because of the several reversals of thought and of its following stratifications.

Giorgio Agamben (1998) says that thanks to wider and more accurate research the problem of the historical circumstances - i.e. material, technical, bureaucratic, legal circumstances - in which the Shoah happened is now clear enough. However, he says, the ethical and political meanings of the Shoah, not to speak of its human comprehension, are far from being understood.

Auschwitz cannot be explained only intellectually: he who would like to understand it has to seek it and experience it.

Historical studies and private memories

The Hebrew Torah seems to have no hesitations in prescribing memory as a mitzvah (obligation). In the Torah the Jews are ordered to remember *and* not to forget. As Yerushalmi points out (1982) the word *zakhor* (remember) is repeated at least 160 times in the Bible and has God or the Jews as subjects (that is, not only Israel must remember, but God as well). In the beginning of this paper I quote a famous passage from the Haggadah: "In every generation it is the duty of each of us to remember that it is we who were saved from the bondage of Egypt" (and later on it insists: "Avadim ainu le Pharò bemizrahim *"Remember that you were a slave in Egypt"*).

But together with this final order to remember, in the Torah there is some sort of desperate frustration with the awareness of how unstable and short-lived human memory is. The order to remember seems to deal with the fear to forget not *what* happened in the past, but *how* those past events happened. In the Talmud the various Rabbis seem always engaged in the continuous and tiring exploration of the meaning of the history handed down so far. They are also engaged in the effort of interpreting this history in useful terms for their own generation and the future generations. For those rabbis history has only one purpose: the re-establishment of God's kingdom on Earth, and collective memory was handed down more actively through ritual than through chronicle.

So what is the meaning we can give today to the word *remember*? What is the moral, historical, civil, political, psychological need to remember in present time society, a lay society, which no longer has unchangeable foundations, where history no longer means to follow God's commandment to become the holy people, where the past no longer corresponds to a biblical past and the future to a messianic future?

Modern historians know very well that historiography and memory, by their own nature, share a definitely different vision of the past. Historiography implies a reassessment of the recollections of the past. In its endless research it brings back events, vicissitudes, texts evoking a past full of details and nuances which were lost to the memory. Furthermore historians critically review all personal memories which have remained unchanged in our memory. Besides trying to rebuild a global image of the past, historical research goes against the current when compared with personal memories which are selective by definition and, as psychoanalysts know very well, subject to censorship.

The distinguished French historian Pierre Nora, in a collaborative project on French collective memories tried to disentangle the issue of collective memory and historiography. Through his notion of *Lieux de mémoire* he tries to separate the intricate paths of memory from the rational tracks followed by history, which is a representation of the past and a problematic and incomplete reconstruction of what no longer exists. Whereas for Pierre Nora memory is an existing space, where one lives in an eternal present time: "Memory is in continuous evolution, open to the dialectic of memory and forgetfulness [...] vulnerable to all the employments and manipulations, susceptible of endless latencies and sudden revitalizations" (Nora, 1984-1993)

Also Ricoeur's philosophical reflection on time and memory (1998) is helpful in explicitly referring to a *memory revisited by the project of the future*, and in suggesting to consider the analyst as a historian whose work enables the patient to acquire a *historical consciousness of his unconscious*.

Modern historiography with its documents and facts cannot represent alone a recovery of past memories and cannot substitute those collective memories that recreate and hand down the past, and also represent a manifestation of the will to maintain a constant and unchangeable relationship

with those already disappeared elements. Whereas, as Friedlander points out, personal memories can specifically arouse subjective intuitions in historical reconstructions.

The philosopher Paolo Rossi in his book “Past, memory and oblivion” (1991) reminds us that in the philosophical tradition, memory refers to a persistence, a somehow continuous and untouched reality, whereas remembrance or recalling refers to the capacity to retrieve something that one had in the past and that was forgotten. For Aristotle remembering implies a deliberate effort of the conscious mind, an excavation or a voluntary research. Whereas for the Platonic tradition memory is a form of knowledge connected to the true knowledge that the soul can achieve.

Thus we have memory/oblivion, on one hand, and remembrance/forgetfulness on the other. Although in common language memory and remembrance are synonyms like oblivion and forgetfulness, dealing with the *memory/oblivion* couple and going beyond the mere cognitive aspect of *remembrance*, we can try to retrieve in the past what constitutes the present and opens it to the future.

According to this conception we can have memories we could never remember that nevertheless constitute the deepest and most intimate identity of the person. We know very well that patients in analysis will not necessarily learn those events or traumatic experiences from which their symptoms or pains originated. Those past events may have happened before the development of the memory system which is capable to encode and retain the past experience in a way that can be consciously or unconsciously represented as a story.

Sometimes traumata occurred in periods of life when the traumatic experience was not representable, that is when the explicit memory wasn't yet structured. In this case we are dealing with the emotive and affective memory, the *implicit memory*, which communicates its mnemonic images through the perceptive-receptive canals. Sometimes traumatic experiences started at a very early stage of development and went on for a very long time, leaving clear memories in the patient, who, however, cannot stand the exposure to such memories. In other cases the traumatic character of the experience completely escaped everybody's notice and the suffering, or rather the defence from suffering, developed mainly through the mechanisms of denial and splitting, i.e. early primitive defences reactivated only for this purpose.

In my view, in the course of an attentive and empathic analysis we can restore the patient to a good enough memory of the Self, even without the development of proper memories from his past. The patient may testify to his experience, without being constantly forced to remember the traumatic elements. In fact I do think that through the experience of the transference-counter transference dynamics the analysis can restore human beings to the dignity of the memory and of the testimony, freeing them from persecutory recollections of the past or from the residual tracks of those recollections.¹

We must try to find a different meaning for the issue of memory and recovery of memories for the Survivors of the Shoah. We must also look for a different meaning in the relationship that these memories can have with the recovery of one's own identity as human being and with one's own dignity in the presence and in spite of those memories.

We have known for many years that the second and third generations are infected with the trauma of the Shoah through the encounters with the encapsulated memories of the previous generation. The following generations received from the previous one the task of interpreting and understanding what at that time was impossible for it to interpret and understand. As I try to explain, the concept of memory and testimony has to be reconsidered in order to understand this movement.

Primo Levi reports a recurrent dream that is also frequent in many camp inmates: “I'm at home, with my family. I'm describing Auschwitz and slowly the people around me leave, indifferent to the

¹In Latin the word *supertestes* (witness), is different from *testis* (the third), and indicates the person who has experienced an event until the end and is therefore entitled to give evidence of that event.

story.” His sister too, who is his friend, his best friend, turns slowly away. Nobody, nobody is interested in his story.

At the end of “The Truce” another recurrent dream is told. In a peaceful and relaxed home environment there is, however, a deep and sharp anguish, and the perception of an imminent threat. Slowly or all of a sudden, the essence is the same, everything falls apart and breaks into pieces and: “I’m back in the Lager, and nothing was true apart from the Lager. The rest was a short vacation, or deception of the senses, a dream: family, flowering nature, home. Now this inner dream, this dream of peace is over, and in the external dream I hear a well known voice; a single word, not imperious, quite the opposite, soft and low. It’s the order that comes at dawn in Auschwitz, a foreign word, mute and awaited: “Wstawać” “Get up”.²

Going back to the previous question, what’s the point of prescribing the memory as an obligation, if what the survivors tell is that memories from the past torture the present and condition the future? What’s the point of remembering, if the past no longer is a biblical past and the future a messianic future? What’s the point of telling your story to people who are unable to listen, unfit to understand, unwilling to hear? In fact, in the end, as many people have emphasized, the victims, not the perpetrators are those who are forever conditioned by that experience and by its useless repetition in their memory and their thoughts. Wouldn’t it be enough to leave the testimonies with the historians, who can offer them purified from those personal interpretations of memory and who do not deal with memory but only with testimonies - remembrances? What’s the point of talking about all this now, what’s the point of speaking of survivors, if the great majority of them is no longer alive? Only few people are now left to testify, living monuments to the absurdity of evil. However, only now we are seriously trying to understand the reasons and the causes of what happened as well as the ethical and political meaning of the Shoah. I think that all this is important. Auschwitz was a unique event, confronting the witness with the impossibility to tell and to remember, exactly because he wants to testify. To testify for those who can no longer do it now, for those who were left there, and were drowned, or for those who, although they survived, are no longer here, next to us, to testify.³ Testifying therefore means to bear the horror, to endure the impotence, to offer an acknowledgment. The final solution was a unique event in the history of humanity. Survivors and non-survivors were the witnesses and the victims of that event and at the same time the proof of its ultimate failure. The recovery of memory, by restoring significance, rescues the victims and their descendants, and those who got in touch with that memory, from the fate of Primo Levi’s dream, where everything vanishes and the only reality, that of the Lager, comes back again. To testify for those who can no longer do it, to recover the memories and to link them to knowledge, makes it possible to put the Lager back into its historical dimension, into a past that can be told, explained and understood even though it cannot be justified.

In my opinion we can offer some psychoanalytical answers to the dreams told by Primo Levi.

We should develop an approach to trauma, memory, and transference that implies sharing with the patient what has meant to survive the final solution. We should understand more deeply the meaning of the survivor’s guilt toward those who have not survived (particularly if they were his closest relatives, parents, spouses, children). We should understand and deal more carefully with the analyst’s defences toward the contents of the survivor’s stories, in order to avoid, as it has sometimes happened, the repetition of the original trauma: also in the analysis the patient finds himself with someone who turns his back and slowly moves away and withdraws from the horror he is recalling.

Therefore not only memories, but above all *recovery of the meaning of the memories*. Not only memories then, but above all *empathic sharing of the memories*. This is the difference from the historians’ testimonies, the difference from the texts and the archives, and the written memories, we have the possibility of offering a a specific, analytical answer: the capability to reconstruct together the offended dignity, the violated humanity through the acceptance of the unacceptable, by

² For another interpretation of Primo Levi’s dream see M.Mancia, *The dream and his story*, Marsilio 2004

³ See “*The drowned and the saved*”, by Primo Levi (1986)

recovering the significance of the traumatic material. The analytical listening should represent a different relational model, characterized by attention, comprehension, and, above all, consideration for the other, and should be able to tune in to the finest trasferencial and counter-transferencial elements. Only this kind of analytical listening can restore the human beings to the dignity of memory and testimony, and, as I already said, free them from persecutory recollections of the past or from the residual tracks of those recollections.

Clinical example

Mrs. A. is a 50 year old woman. Born in a South American country, she has moved to Milan a few years earlier, following her husband. She has a son and a younger daughter. She has been referred to me by a colleague of mine for a long-lasting mild depression.

In the course of the initial consultations and of the first months of the analysis, she appears quite ordinary, at least on the surface.

However, when I listen carefully to what she says, I realize quite soon that something is out of tune. There are small discrepancies, inconsistencies, incomprehensible dissonances, which make me feel uncomfortable. Something is missing, for sure. One day, almost a year after, during her session she lets drop that both her parents came from East Europe. Something rings a bell in my head and I ask her whether they had escaped from racial persecutions. She answers, always in her typically casual way, that yes, her father came from the Warsaw ghetto. From there he had been sent to Auschwitz, together with all his family, consisting of 9 brothers and sisters, father, mother, grandfathers and grandmothers, uncles and aunts, for a total of 35 people, and he had been the only survivor. Her mother too had been caught in a small Polish town with all her family including 4 brothers, mother, father and both grandparents, and she had been the only survivor as well. The story is incomplete, because Mrs. A. doesn't know very much about her family before their arrival in South America. She doesn't seem too shocked while repeating this tragedy; she says that for her parents their past had been left in Europe and that they had rather not talked about it. Her father never said anything and her mother explained part of the story, without going into details. I ask her how she had felt. She answers that she too had rather drawn a veil over all that past and that even now if someone was speaking of the Shoah she wouldn't listen and changed the subject instead. I cannot give now full particulars about the story, but I want to report two episodes concerning memory and testimony. Mrs.A refused to know the historical facts of the Holocaust in Europe, which were directly connected with the historical facts of her family. Thus she was creating an extremely narrow personal universe, where the lack of those historical memories deprived many personal events of their meaning.

But if the causal connection between her parents's characters and personalities and their past was missing, then all the present would fall into a perpetual and inexplicable casualness. Many episodes of her life, in fact, gained a new meaning in the light of those events, but the refusal of Mrs. A. to make a temporal and causal connection turned them into continuous inexplicable catastrophes and transformed her life into the endless succumbing to a fate ruled by gods. For example as a child Mrs. A. had been a victim of a cruel and sadistic baby-sitter, who used to burn her hands with the iron to punish her, but she never thought she could tell her parents, because: "It was part of life, I had to accept it, and then they were already too busy."

After the end of Mrs. A's analysis her twenty-year old daughter came to visit me in order to get some information. Her mother wanted me to see her, also because, I suspect, she could thus avoid explaining what was so painful for her to tell. The young woman, very pretty and talented, told me that she had been literally obsessed with the Shoah for some time, and that she had spent many years trying to read books about the Shoah, personal testimonies as well as historical research. She knew she needed to reconstruct her family's past, in order to recover the roots which had been only

superficially cut, and that she relied on historical testimonies, because she couldn't ask her mother. She was going to move to Israel to study, and intended to undertake personal investigations on her mother's family. She had respected her grandmother silence too, and didn't expect any direct information from her.

To conclude, I want to show a painting by a contemporary painter, R.J.Kitaj. Child of survivors, as the years go by he has got closer to the recollection of the Holocaust tragedy . On the background of the painting Auschwitz is represented by a gas chamber, as the the other two paintings I showed earlier had the chimneys and the gate. This one, *The Tunnel*, portrays his young son and his wife going straight toward the gas chamber. The painter pictures himself trying to stop this deadly walk. Art, which allows us to remember and to represent the past, reconciles the past with the present and assigns the new generations the task of remembering and working out the tragedies of the past.

Unlike her mother, Mrs. A's daughter seemed determined to go on with a cathartic recovery of the past, and to accept what many survivors remember, the camp song:

O Auschwitz, ich kann dich nicht vergessen, weil du mein Schicksal bist...
O Auschwitz, I cannot forget you because you are my fate...
(the camp song)

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