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Working with first, second, and third generation of Holocaust survivors in Hungary

Teréz Virág's study on children of social trauma

Review

Teréz Virág, *Children of Social Trauma. Hungarian Psychoanalytic Case Studies.*

Illustrated by Sarí Gedrlóczy. Translated by Emma Roper-Evans. London and Philadelphia, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2000. 239 pp.

In her book *Children of Social Trauma: Hungarian Psychoanalytic Case Studies*, Dr. Teréz Virág, a Budapest psychoanalyst and child psychologist, describes her experience, beginning in 1982, in working with first, second, and third generation of Holocaust survivors who remained in or returned to Hungary after 1945 and with the families of these survivors. Virág's book blends together clinical case vignettes and historical, development psychological, and psycho-historical reflections.

Background

About 600,000 Jewish Hungarians were murdered during the Holocaust, a total of approximately 75% of the total Jewish population of the country. After the war, the majority of these survivors did not return to Hungary from the *Displaced Persons Camps*, and instead chose emigration to Israel and the western democracies.

Following establishment of the communist regime in Hungary, Holocaust survivors were subjected to massive re-traumatizing conditions and conflicts, since the active practice of Jewish customs was deemed incompatible with party rules. Jews who professed their faith were denied admission to certain fields of study at the universities and were effectively excluded or removed from influential positions in the Communist Party, public administration, the media, industry, and the economy.[1]

For most of the Jews living in Hungary after 1945, it was publicly unacceptable to be a loyal Hungarian citizen and, at the same time, profess their faith. As a result, the survivors' tendency to say nothing about family members who had died in the Holocaust and about their own experiences – as a response to the extreme traumatization in their lives – was reinforced. This tendency was further aggravated by the fact that, in the communist-dominated culture of postwar Hungary, the public expression of individual feelings and experience of subjects was suppressed in favor of integrating individuals into group processes. Thus, overcoming the personal and collective forces – both within the realms of psychotherapy and literature and beyond – which were directed towards driving out or even denying memories of the Holocaust proved to be an especially difficult, drawn-out process in Hungary. In the meantime, however, this process has also turned out to be especially creative.

Not until the political transformation of 1989 was Teréz Virág, whose family members were for the most part murdered during the Holocaust, and ten of her colleagues able to establish a clinic which focused on individual, family, and group therapies for Holocaust survivors and their descendents.

As a child analyst, Virág bases her work on the generally accepted assumption that it is impossible to understand the problems of these children without grasping the problems of

their parents and their environment. She is convinced that the fear and terror of children who are now in psychotherapeutic treatment are not of oedipal origin but instead the result of the terrors of war around them, of nuclear threat or, in particular, of the terrifying and often hushed-up past of their parents and grandparents.

A specific extract of the terrifying past

Virág demonstrates in her book – and herein lie similarities with the contributions compiled in *Generations of the Holocaust* (1982) [2] – that the transgenerational transmission of psychological problems can be abolished by appropriate interpretative work. Such treatments can be successful if current fears and symptoms can be linked, in the course of affective experiences, to old fears stemming from unforgotten but as yet ineffectually recalled traumatizations from previous generations and thus retrieved from socially produced unconsciousness and returned to the sphere of conscious experience and language. In order to produce such links, the therapist must aid his patient in liberating his frozen mourning and working through it. Once the pain of loss has entered consciousness, the full memory of loved ones who have been lost can initiate a process of healing and interrupt the mute repetition compulsion which forced the patient to unconsciously revisit the terrors of the past again and again, in a multitude of ways.

Grounding her analysis on the work of Ferenc Mérei (1946, 1985) [3], the author presents moving sketches of child therapies and "child analyses of adults" carried out in the tradition of Sandor Ferenczi from her own practice, bringing to light how repressed memories of the camps, the ghetto, or hiding places reemerge, but always as fragmented elements – in the sense of *pars pro toto* – and never as a whole. The severed part thus represents the totality of the universe of terror. Similarly, the child experiences only a specific extract of the terrifying past of his/her parents or grandparents. Virág, like Judith Kestenberg, describes the psychological transmission of such elements of the horrors experienced by parents and grandparents as a process which distorts both the self-perception of descendents and their perception of reality. The whole reconstructed from perceived parts becomes increasingly unconscious and opens the way, in the fantasy of survivor's descendents, for flights of imagination which can then no longer be scrutinized and corrected in direct confrontation with the reality of a traumatic family history.

The special tradition of Hungarian psychoanalysis

What makes this book interesting for readers – besides the sensitively recorded case vignettes of first, second, and third generation children of survivors – are its profound insights into the social dimensions of extreme traumatization inflicted on individuals, insights rooted in reflections on the special tradition of Hungarian psychoanalysis. The author takes up Alice Bálint's (1939) [4] distinction between archaic and civilized forms of mothers' attitudes towards their children. Archaic motherly love is based on the experience that the body of the child was part of the mother's body. The child's body therefore belongs completely to the mother and is the target of her passionate and destructive strivings. The Hungarian psychoanalyst and anthropologist Géza Róheim formulated the results of his research on these questions in 1932 and 1933, noting that this view was useful in understanding why, in primitive societies, infanticide is considered a family affair rather than a crime. In the sphere dominated by archaic mother love, the child leads a simple life. At first, it does not grow for the mother, the mother cannot allow it to grow, for otherwise, the mother would no longer have a child. Archaic motherly love is only gradually transformed into the attitude of civilized

mothers, when the mother begins educating her child to perceive and adapt to reality by administering carefully measured dosages of denial. But if the outside world is full of terror and fatal dangers, the mother can no longer satisfy the physical and emotional needs of the child in the best possible way. Massive denial forces the child to develop a fundamental willingness to compensate for unsatisfied needs with increasing auto-erotic exploitation of its own body. Such personality traits developed early in childhood are difficult to change in later years; they impede the child's adaptation to reality and cause him/her to seek refuge in fantasies and auto-eroticism as an adult. The psychological after-effects of the extreme threats posed by Nazi terror and fascism stem not only from the fact that it was impossible for mothers to adapt to the horrible conditions of genocide or to develop strategies to care for their children and insure their survival. For women were usually separated from their husbands immediately after arrival in the concentration camps and death camps. This cruelly enforced rupture of the most significant human bonds promoted a deep regression of the women to the level of archaic motherly love, even when mother and child had already achieved higher stages of development. Thus, Teréz comprehends and treats the bizarre and sadistic, phantasmagoric world of second and third generation survivors not as a form of identification with the aggressors past down from the first generation, but rather as their fixation with the level of archaic motherly love, a fixation produced and transmitted by sustained and extreme dehumanizing conditions and by an unspeakably collective and as yet unresolved trauma. For children living in the modern world, motherly care can longer compensate for the sudden appearance of collective traumatization through world wars, genocide etc. Since the parents mediate the child's confrontation with an extremely traumatic and denying world, the parents are themselves represented in the child as the denying, traumatizing society.

It is in this sense that Virág, in developing her clinical and theoretical concepts, strives to fulfill Imre Hermann's call for the investigation of the social conditions behind psychic processes, formulated in 1945 in his work *Psychologie des Antisemitismus* [5]. She applies this approach not only to the Holocaust, but goes on to demonstrate its fertility in furthering – for her own work and for the growing numbers of readers who appreciate her work – an understanding of a wide variety of emotional disturbances resulting from developments in society, from the Inquisition to Bolshevik terror.

A comprehensive bibliography aids readers in navigating their way through the large body of literature about the psychological after-effects of Nazi terror and in critically reviewing these works. Unfortunately, the author did not (or could not?) refer to some interesting works, in particular, to Bergmann-Jucovy-Kestenbergs' *Generations of the Holocaust* [6] for her psychoanalytical framework, to Hans Keilson's pioneering work on sequential traumatization [7] for her social-psychological reflections on the transmission of Holocaust traumata, and to the work of Dori Laub and colleagues [8] for her interdisciplinary approach. But this does not reduce the richness of clinical experience, psychoanalytical competence, and deep humanity conveyed to readers with this small masterpiece, which, to date, has only been translated from Hungarian to English. Its publication in today's Hungary, where anti-Semitic tendencies remain alive, is a hopeful sign.[9] The publication of a German translation would be most welcome.

References

[1] The oral history study authored by Zsuzsanna Körösi and Adrienne Molnar investigates the public and private silence of the Kádár era, focusing on the fate of children whose parents were convicted following the repression of the 1956 uprising: Zsuzsanna Körösi and Adrienne Molnar, *Titokkal a lelkemben éltém*. As

ötvenhatos elitéltek gyermekeinek sorsa [I lived with a secret in my soul: the fate of the children whose parents were convicted after the Hungarian revolution of 1956] (Budapest: Intézet, 2000), 270 pp.

[2] Martin S. Bergmann and Milton E. Jucovy, eds., *Generations of the Holocaust* (New York: Basic Books, 1982).

[3] Ferenc Mérei (1946, 1985). As far as I know, none of his books is translated into English.

[4] Alice Bálint, *The early years of life; a psychoanalytic study*. New York, Basic Books, 1954. First published, 1953, under title: *The psycho-analysis of the nursery*. London, Routledge & Paul, 1953 (Translation of "A gyermekszoba pszichológiája").

[5] Imre Hermann, *Psychologie des Antisemitismus* (1945); "Az antiszemitizmus lélektana". Budapest, Cserépfalvi, 1990.

[6] See note 1.

[7] Hans V. Keilson and Hermann R. Sarphatie, *Sequentielle Traumatisierung bei Kindern (Sequential Traumatization of Children)*, (Stuttgart: Enke, 1979).

[8] Dori Laub and Nanette C. Auerhahn, "Knowing and not knowing the Holocaust," *Psychoanalytic Inquiry* 5 (1985; special issue).

[9] See also Ferenc Erös, Julia Vajda, and Eva Kovacs, "Intergenerational Responses to Social and Political Changes: Transformation of Jewish Identity in Hungary," in *International Handbook of Multigenerational Legacies of Trauma*, ed. Yael Danieli (New York: Plenum Press, 1998), 315-325.

Translation from German: **Paula Bradish**

Short biographical note

Dr. phil. Peter Bründl was born in 1942 and studied German philology and history in Munich and Berkeley, California and then worked for many years as a high school teacher, tutor, and director at various boarding schools in Southern Germany.

Bründl trained as a psychoanalyst for children and adolescents in New York and as a psychoanalyst for adults in Munich. He is a lecturer, supervisor, analyst-teacher, and longstanding board member of the "Münchener Arbeitsgemeinschaft für Psychoanalyse e.V."(MAP).

His research, professional practice, and publications focus on adolescence, psychological consequences of Nazi terror, migration, and male development.

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