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At the intersection of medicine and human rights – Helen Bamber:

Opposing an evil practice

Neil Belton's biography of Helen Bamber

Review

Neil Belton, *The Good Listener. Helen Bamber: A Life Against Cruelty*. London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1998.

Neil Belton, *Die Ohrenzeugin. Helen Bamber. Ein Leben gegen die Gewalt*. Aus dem Englischen von Hans Günter Holl. Frankfurt am Main, S. Fischer Verlag, 2000.

[Page references are to the English edition / Die Seitenangaben beziehen sich auf die englische Ausgabe.]

Helen Bamber is an impressive and compelling personality. A woman who has a strong sense of injustice, she knows what persecution and torture does to a society. It was an honour to have met the "human rights fighter" who feels that, by doing the work engaged in opposing an evil practice and at the same time helping people to overcome their experiences, she has made a life time commitment.

Due to that commitment, she continued her work through an organisation – the *Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture*. One could say that the undivided motivation of Helen Bamber is understandable because of her history. But must a person have a similar history or himself be a "victim" to show a comparable commitment to "human rights"?

Looking at her life's work, the question comes up of whether her work and her commitment to human rights have made a change in society. How does she feel looking back? How does she feel looking into the future?

Neil Belton was undoubtedly deeply impressed by Helen Bamber, as I was, a sentiment which is also reflected in his first book, the biography of Helen Bamber, *The Good Listener – Helen Bamber: A Life Against Cruelty*. Neil Belton's biography of Helen Bamber is a remarkable book with enormous sensitivity and tactfulness. He has managed to illuminate through the life of a moving character the stories of many people who have suffered evil practices. Neil Belton describes the history of these persons through the eyes and memories of Helen Bamber, without focussing entirely on her.

The only child of a Polish-Jewish family

Helen Bamber grew up in northeast London in the 20's and 30's, the only child of a Polish-Jewish family. She had to learn quite early what the world of politics looked like and what impact that world could have upon her and her family because of their religious beliefs. It seemed impossible to escape the naked reality during that time period. This precocious awareness was intensified and influenced by the relationship to her father, which had a deep effect on her. He could see no future, especially for Jewish people; he did not care how much an innocent child could bear. As Helen Bamber remembers her father: "He told me too much, made no attempt to protect me." (37) He was obsessed by the fascist threat and his daughter had to share that obsession with him: "At night, he read sections of *Mein Kampf* to me, or translated articles by Goebbels from the Nazi press". (37) She had a more emotional

relationship to her aunt than to her parents. When her aunt was killed in a Nazi air-raid in 1941, it was a decisive wound in the young life of Helen Bamber: something changed. Alone, feeling as though doors were closing her self-education had started.

In 1945, at the age of 20, she went to Bergen-Belsen. There she cared for the young survivors and helped to rehabilitate them, a task which she continued back in London. Helen Bamber was motivated compared to her father and not as pessimistic as he was. "It had nothing to do with feeling guilt, I think; it was about *trying to save what could be saved*. I know we can't save everybody, but I believe that we can save some. I think that was my principle then. It certainly is now." (69) What she saw in Germany never left her and she has since devoted her life to helping victims of state-sponsored cruelty.

Through her work with Dr. Maurice Pappworth, a physician who exposed unethical medical experiments, and her own personal experience, she came to understand the connections between the misuse of patients by medical scientists, the neglect of children in hospitals, and the maltreatment of political prisoners. Helen Bamber campaigned and fought for the rights of the oppressed through her work at Amnesty International. It became a central force.

The initiative of *Amnesty International* to look at cases of imprisoned people abroad was transferred to medical practitioners in order to campaign with written reports on medical causes. The Medical Group found that a number of people for whom they had campaigned while they were in prison were released and came over to Britain, with multiple physical and psychological problems. Physicians out of the Medical Group have been asked to examine the people to document torture.

The Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture

These facts and her experiences led Helen Bamber to establish, in 1985, the *Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture* (URL <http://www.torturecare.org.uk/>). According to Helen Bamber, the *Medical Foundation* is committed to human rights activities which include the fight against torture and repression. The MF is seen as a human rights organisation rather than a medical-psychotherapeutic institution. The intention is to understand the holistic picture of torture, by documenting the existence of torture and the political backgrounds of the countries which use torture.

To understand the consequences of torture one must have specific information about the methods applied. The methods of torture make up a list without end. To describe torture methods it is usual to divide them into three categories: physical torture, psychological torture and psychiatric-pharmacological torture methods. The aim of the torturer is to use the body to destroy the victims mind. Pain, scars, and deformities will be continuous reminders of the torture. The torture procedure is always aimed at the victims' physical and psychological points of vulnerability. Torture, which took place in the past, affects the present time and has far-reaching consequences, far into the future.

These aspects of cruelty and annihilation are exposed by Neil Belton's accounts of the experiences of the persons with whom Helen Bamber or one of her colleagues were working. Neil Belton's book affords an insight into the history of human cruelty in the twentieth century by looking in-depth repeatedly at the characteristic fates of human beings. As Helen Bamber said, even if you can not save all of them, you can save some. She tried to realise this in her work at the *Medical Foundation*.

The care of the *Medical Foundation* has an "holistic" approach concerning the needs of the clients. The objective is that external concerns and internal concerns are treated equally. It is seen as a complete picture of care, which can not exclude any need of the client. It may give more space for dialogical communication. It may be enough to have a place to relax, or even, as Belton describes: "It would have to be a place where time slowed down, if any good was to come of it: 'My body had time to think about pain,' said an Iranian treated early in the foundation history." (296)

The idea of the introduced and established model of care and treatment had to be appropriate to the needs of the survivors of torture. With a combination of different approaches from disciplines such as medicine, psychological and physical therapies, social- and casework and counselling, one of the aims is to cover the whole range of the needs of the individuals which they bring up and define.

Treatment of survivors of torture at the *Medical Foundation* is not meant to cure them from their suffering of an extreme psychological and physical trauma; the aim is rather focused on "freeing" the person from some of his suffering. As Helen Bamber says: "We don't talk in terms of cure, we think of releasing people from a type of bondage. Our job is to reclaim people, to help them find a purpose in life again" (*Medical Foundation*, Annual Review, 1995, p.1) to provide the person with the help, with the possibilities which is offered by the Medical Foundation. ("the purpose is to free victims rather than to heal them from the lasting effects of the torturer's own intervention." (292)) The concept of cure is seen as inappropriate, because the consequences of torture are not seen as a condition of illness but rather as a form of a bondage. They attempt to disengage the client from the bondage through which the torturer ensures that his interference will last forever.

The effect on the political situation

Besides treatment on a psychotherapeutical level, it was underlined that the work of the staff consists in large part in consulting about social problems. The emphasis is more on the sociopolitical environment of the individual, which attempts to fill the gaps which the British government does not take care of.

It provides records of human rights violations of governments, and these reports and documentation are used also as a part of an asylum-seekers application. They inform the Members of the Parliament about the effects of proposals and legislation on asylum-seekers and refugees who are survivors of torture. By bringing their concerns about their socio-political situation to the public and to the Members of Parliament, the aim is to keep these issues at the forefront of the political debate.

One of the important tasks of institutions like the MF and the professionals is to sensitize the population and the politics. One of the results of the work of Helen Bamber and her colleagues is the effect on the political situation – on the asylum legislation. It is not enough, but it is a beginning.

With the growing numbers of torture victims worldwide, the number of refugees who have survived torture will increase simultaneously. The treatment centres are increasing in Europe and the global numbers are increasing as well. Most of the victims of torture are refugees and asylum-seekers, which implies the experience of living in exile. The feeling of loss that is experienced is a significant effect of being uprooted by force from their country, family,

relatives, friends and the whole familiar social environment of the individual. For example, the political refugees, who were in prison, were seen as enemies of a cruel regime and they knew quite clear the reason why. It made sense. Coming to a country with racist tendencies, not being wanted, not knowing anybody most of them lose their sense of life.

Therefore the medical, psychological, and social problems of the refugees will be an important area in the therapy. This is and will be challenging for the professionals to respond with new integrated, multidisciplinary concepts.

Baker, who calls the psychosocial consequences of being a tortured refugee in western countries a "triple trauma paradigm" (a), stresses the understanding and insight into the world of the tortured refugee. The symptoms which are aroused by being in exile partly coincide with the symptoms of the experience of torture; therefore the situation in exile is an important part within the therapy of survivors of torture. All treatment services have the aim to integrate self-help principles for the client to gain self-confidence and are seen as a support to cope with situations in the host country. Additionally, a study of Hougen et al. showed that tortured political refugees living in exile had more severe psychological symptoms compared to non-tortured refugees. (b)

Looking at the cases which are illustrated by Neil Belton the question arises of whether a native professional, who works with tortured refugees, who has no idea what it's like to have been imprisoned, to have been tortured and to live in an hostile country, is able to help? Is there not a danger of medicalisation, professionalisation, because of feeling an urgency to heal and to help but not really being able to touch the core?

Diversity of therapeutical approaches

The MF does show that it seems important to have a much greater range of different cultures and national backgrounds and even to have therapists who are committed, because of their own experience with state oppression. Helen Bamber has managed to gather the "right" people, which also implies difficulties. As Belton also has pointed out: "She had to learn how to manage, to cope with the needs and anxieties of people working with her. The group around her was marked by exile and violence." (297) This means, as mentioned, that she must face different conflicts and confrontations within these diverse group. But a bigger diversity amongst the group also means a bigger diversity of therapeutical approaches and opinions. Every psychotherapist has her/his own model of approach. Building a relationship in which both client and therapist are transformed through the interaction, discovering and learning from each other requires the therapists to be flexible in their approaches.

John Rundle is one of these therapists at the MF. He remembered an Iraqi man who "in his fifties came to him with pains in his head and back. [...] He often wished he could kill himself. Tuesdays were particularly unbearable; it was as if he would go on only if he could find a way of abolishing that day of the week. It emerged that his son and brother had been executed on a Tuesday and, [...] typical of the Iraqi Ba'ath, he had been compelled to watch them die. He was beaten severely when he asked for permission to kiss the body of his son. Rundle suggested that on Tuesdays the man should go into a room on his own and think about his son." (309-310)

The thesis is not: the heavier the burden of being maltreated the better the results of the work. It rather depends on the way the professionals focus on the real needs of the people. At the same time they have to reflect their strength and their weak points regarding their work. A

person like Helen Bamber also had to learn that she was acting within a given subjective border.

Bamber, who has a clearly structured and rather radical position against any state-sponsored violence, had to make a decision which she describes as the hardest decision she has ever taken in her life. A tough woman who never made an attempt to hesitate condemning any human rights violating state politics in order to speak out for the victims, she had difficulties to do that once. In 1993 she decided to go to Israel to testify on behalf of a Palestinian prisoner. It cost her some effort to face that, from all the evidence she had heard, the Israeli, the Jewish state was also now a torturing state. Despite the difficulties and the disappointment, she consequently has done what she was convinced of – to be aside the victims of state-sponsored cruelty within any circumstances. A bitter taste, a disillusion arises when one admits the fact that this provoked the question of whether anything could be done in any time in the future to condemn annihilation and torture? Is there a deep "human" interest behind that? No doubt that a lot has been done by human rights organisations, but how involved are all these organisations (some have become big business concerns) in condemning torture?

Perico Rodriguez, one of the professionals at the MF, sees the danger of being functionalised; he "has an acute sense of how certain ideas - like that of the 'national security state' and its variants – invite torture to happen. He insists that torture is not a 'syndrome' but a strategy, and is repelled by the thought that he might be part of 'an industrial system of production in which somebody is torturing at one end, and we are curing at the other end'." (321)

It is important to be aware – especially as a professional – of running the risk to be a helping arm in this industrial system, to help produce victims of torture. There is a tendency of a tourism of human rights, and most of the "good people" who entrench themselves in the work are not aware of the consequences which could be caused. *Amnesty International*, which has become a huge organisation with a powerful influence on public opinion, has achieved that nearly no country will deny incorporating into its legislation a very specific law against torture or political oppression. Whether they abide to it or not, the fact is that in each country the legal body has the tool of maintaining power inbuilt. The consequences are, unbelievably, developments of highly sophisticated torture methods.

Bamber says: "You have to place torture in a proper context. [...], because it isn't only about sadistic impulses. It's about power, about privilege, about poverty and the distribution of resources; it's about something which is *most preventable*. [...] A whole structure of power, even in those states that don't themselves torture, seems to find it necessary to support, or at least not confront, torture states." (322)

A fascinating combination of biography, history, and moral reflection

Neil Belton portrays a fascinating woman, who was not always an easy person. Her work is honoured and highly respected but he does not refrain from criticising her as well. As one of her colleagues noted: "The Foundation is actually very good: a huge amount of work gets done. But we treat each other terribly; we dash in chaos; and Helen in her way is a complete dictator." (298) The support and respect is still there amongst the colleagues, but, as it was mentioned before, an institution which represents a high range of diverse meanings and approaches without having a dominating perspective seems important as whole in their attitude towards survivors of torture.

Neil Belton also carefully tells the story of a woman who was not as successful with her family as at her work. She "failed" at being a helpful person for her husband, and she was a problematic mother who could not reach her child. As David Bamber remembers his childhood: "he spoke of it as though he had been deserted by one parent, and treated and hardened as a survivor by the other." (301) Helen Bamber, according to her personal experiences, is terrified by how much the second and third generations are affected. It continues to the next generation. Her concern is with how the society can learn from the past, how trauma can be treated to end. She is trying to do everything she can – otherwise, she says she would get very depressed.

Neil Belton has masterfully managed to raise profound questions in his biography. This book is an important lecture not only for the professionals but also for a wide ranging readership. Neil Belton's style gives the reader the chance to gain an insight into the "unbearable" without getting bushed. His style is absorbing and gripping and at the same time he successfully manages to grasp a complex subject. Besides the fact of violence, annihilation and torture, Belton gives us an insight into the very private and personal life of his protagonist, of Helen Bamber. The reader gains an understanding of her upbringing and the consequences, her personal motivation, her fears and her hopes. The reader can also gain an insight into her very subjective feelings through the people she has met in her life. Neil Belton's book is a fascinating combination of biography, history and moral reflection.

References

* The editor would like to thank Ross Lerner who kindly revised Saniye Çelik's own translation from German into English. C.B.

(a) Baker, ***to be completed***

(b) Hougen et al., 1988, ***to be completed***, pp. 153-160.

Short biographical note

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Citation Saniye Çelik, Berlin, At the intersection of medicine and human rights – Helen Bamber: Opposing an evil practice. Neil Belton's biography on Helen Bamber. Review of Neil Belton, *The Good Listener. Helen Bamber: A Life Against Cruelty*. London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1998. In: TRN-Newsletter 2, Hamburg Institute for Social Research, June 2004.

URL <http://www.traumaresearch.net/review2/celik.htm>

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