

# Towards Healing

CONFRONTING THE HOLOCAUST THROUGH PSYCHODRAMA,  
SOCIODRAMA AND RITUALS

YAACOV NAOR AND HILDE GOETT

## ABSTRACT

In 'Towards Healing: Confronting the Holocaust through Psychodrama, Sociodrama and Rituals', Yaacov Naor and Hilde Goett describe an on-going workshop project undertaken with second and third generation descendants of Holocaust survivors and perpetrators. They discuss the trans-generational transmission of trauma, and identify differences and commonalities between victim and perpetrator descendants as well as those from mixed backgrounds. They describe how they use psychodrama, sociodrama and ritual to bring about encounter, dialogue and the beginnings of healing.

## KEYWORDS

dialogue, encounter, generational, healing, Holocaust, perpetrator, psychodrama, reconciliation, ritual, sociodrama, survivor, trans-generational trauma, victim, warm up, workshop

## Introduction

Since 1995 Yaacov Naor and Hilde Goett, the authors of this article, have been jointly engaged in a special psychodramatic workshop project, 'Confronting the Holocaust through Psychodrama, Sociodrama and Rituals' designed for second and third generation descendants of Holocaust victims and perpetrators. Our purpose is to assist participants to recognise and understand the moral, social and personal implications of the Holocaust.

The fact that as psychodrama directors we come from opposite sides of the Holocaust is unique and special. We bring with us the story and the legacy of our families. Yaacov Naor is the son of two Holocaust survivors. He was born in 1948 in a displaced persons camp in South Germany and moved with his parents to Israel as a one year old. Hilde Goett was born in Romania in 1953, her family part of the German minority in that country. She grew up in turmoil. On the one hand both her grandparents served in the Nazi army and she was discriminated against as the child of fascists. On the other hand, her grandmother was deported to Siberia by the communist regime. When she was in her twenties she moved with her family to Germany.

We began to co-lead psychodrama groups and realised that we shared the same goals and drives. We both wanted to teach people to listen to the Holocaust story, to make room for difference, to respect the other. While working together we became close. Our families met and slowly we became good friends. This was possible because we agreed that our purpose was not to reach reconciliation, but rather to teach the Germans and the Jews and others who attended the workshops to be witnesses to the unique personal expressions of participants and to create a dialogue with one another.

## **The Trans-Generational Transmission of Trauma**

Professional interest in the concept of trans-generational trauma, the passing on of traumatic consequences from generation to generation, has been increasing over the last 20 years and is now well established. This is because case studies, psychotherapy reports and researchers have found that second generation Holocaust survivors report the same kind of emotional problems and a similar depth of suffering as the Holocaust survivors themselves. As early as 1994 Jürgen Müller-Hohagen, who has carried out psychotherapeutic work for many years, published his understandings about the way trauma is passed on. The diagnostic criteria of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) resulting from war trauma are frequently fulfilled, although the person has no personal experience of war. But the deep feelings of shame and guilt hinder a constructive discussion on the trans-generational transmission of perpetrator trauma. As far as we know there has never been an investigation in Germany. Identification with power, obscurity and the re-defining of perpetrators as victims are some of the characteristics that are passed on in the perpetrator families. If we want to stop the inheritance of trauma from generation to generation we must find an accessible and adequate way of dealing with and processing Holocaust trauma.

Gabriele Rosenthal (1998) has investigated the trans-generational transmission of trauma of both survivors and perpetrators from the Nazi period. Her findings have had a strong influence on our work. She asks questions about the formation of dialogue in families from both sides, about the influence of the past on the present. Rosenthal demonstrates how the general lifestyle of the family, the everyday expectations of family members, the feelings of safety, acceptance and belonging, stem from the family's experiences of the Holocaust. She compares the problems of descendants of victims and perpetrators, and identifies commonalities and differences.

One of the commonalities these conflict groups share is silence, but the motivations are different. In the perpetrator families it is mainly the fear of pursuit, condemnation, persecution and prosecution that leads to silence about the Holocaust. In the survivor families it is sadness felt for murdered family members, the shame of such extreme humiliation and the desire to protect descendants from the shadow of these terrible events. Another commonality shared by the respective sides is the terrible effect of family secrets, which in the institutionalised family systems works against a thematic consideration of the past. This is mirrored in the fantasies of descendants, who express it in many different forms. Descendants of the victims pose questions about the guilt of survival such as “What did the survivors do in order to survive?” Meanwhile descendants of the perpetrators ask questions that imply guilt such as “What would I have done in the same situation?”

## **The Workshop Settings**

We offer the workshop ‘Confronting the Holocaust through Psychodrama, Sociodrama and Rituals’ in two different settings. The first one encompasses a series of weekend seminars in a cycle of two to three years. These include visits to the memorials at Auschwitz and Birkenau and psychodrama in the Educational-Encounter Centre in Oswiecim. In Birkenau we conduct rituals created by the group participants. These settings offer time and space for discussion and analysis, and are suitable for small groups of 15 to 25 participants. We also offer three hour workshops at conferences and conventions to provide an example of our work, where 30 to 80 participants are able to confront and discuss the consequences of the Holocaust in the present time. At these we usually work with psychodramatists and professionals who are familiar with role theory and psychodramatic techniques. Participants have ranged in age from 22 to 78 years.

## **The Participants: Survivors and Perpetrators**

Jewish participants who come to our workshops have some idea about the fate of their family members during the Second World War. They have concrete knowledge of what happened or retain fragments which trouble them. They mourn murdered family members and the loss of an intact family and social network, and feel outrage towards the perpetrators who have burdened them with this endless sorrow. They want to come to some comprehension of the sorrow, despair and mourning which seems to have no end. Participants from families of perpetrators express different feelings. They often wish to deny their family history and fight the feelings of guilt and shame, and have difficulty distinguishing between personal and collective guilt. They seek a better understanding of themselves and their families and want to break loose from their identification as perpetrators. Many grew up with the constant fear of retribution and want to address this. They also seek help to come to terms with the affection they feel for their perpetrator father or mother. Some also hope for atonement or even for

pardon. Other participants come from mixed families because they share the experiences of both victims and persecutors, for example baptised Christians from a partly Jewish background and people from families who have experienced persecution for political, religious or sexual orientation reasons. These participants are often anguished about their identity and affiliation.

As well as differences, workshop participants share common ground and these commonalities are investigated in our seminars without being generalised as equal or identical experiences. The Holocaust silence weighs heavily. All feel the need to decipher it, and all feel deeply involved as individuals, as family members and with respect to the other side. As well, all the participants are seen as traitors by their families because they betray the taboo of silence and seek open discussion and analysis. They confront the family with its troubled past and are therefore viewed as dangerous by other family members. They become the family scapegoats, regarded as the causes of disaster and accidents. Dina Wardi (1992), a psychoanalyst from Jerusalem, describes Jewish family scapegoats as 'commemoration candles' who create subjectivism about the Holocaust and sustain the mourning for those who perished. In the perpetrator and mixed families, those who confront their families with their Nazi past are also punished and excluded for breaking the silence code. They carry the fear, shame, guilt and blame for the sins of the family, the community and the world. Our groups are made up of scapegoats from all sides of the conflict, from victim, perpetrator and mixed families.

## **The Work: From Encounter to Dialogue to Healing**

Our work is based on Moreno's concept of the encounter that can lead to dialogue. Activities include psychodrama, sociodrama, ritual, art-making and activities that build awareness, trust, empathy and acceptance. Our concern is to initiate deeply meaningful personal discussions on the psychodrama stage, to find a language for this and to be aware of the different truths in order to overcome the consequences of collective trauma during the Nazi period. We start out with the premise that the experience of force or violence is innately experienced. The trauma sits tightly in the body where it has found its place and is physically felt. As psychodramatists and advocates of an action-oriented method, we know that a lasting effect occurs when the active discussion of a subject is deeply felt and penetrates the thought process, opening up new horizons and illuminating the problems. This means that during the work one's body must be attentively involved and self-determined.

### ***Warm Up***

The body and encounter exercises that are part of our warm up begin to make this possible and also help establish real contact between the participants in the group. We utilise a wide range of small group exercises, with and without music, that are focused on the body and the senses. Some exercises are designed for participants to have fun together, to mirror one another and to build solidarity, while others see them combining forces to exclude others and break groups apart. The emotions and instincts of

participants from the context of their real lives are activated through this work, and participants from victim, persecutor and mixed families are able to encounter and experience one another. This helps create an atmosphere of attentiveness and openness for dealing with the sensitivity of the subject matter.

### *Psychodrama and Sociodrama*

As a rule, the trauma of the Nazi period has not been personally or directly experienced by participants in our workshops. They are not survivors of the Shoah or the Holocaust and are not Nazi perpetrators, but are their children, grandchildren and family members. We are dealing with trans-generational trauma. We allow the subjective truth of the respective sides to be represented on the psychodrama stage with all the sorrow, mourning, shame, despair, horror, rage and guilt that this entails. Thus a bridge is built connecting the participants with the family histories of the opposing sides.

Using sociodrama we explore the history of the Second World War, investigating the elements that caused such horrific violence, sorrow and destruction in Europe and that led to radical changes throughout the world. We consider the consequences for different sections of the populations who were partners in conflict. As we do this we aim to facilitate encounters between descendants of victims and perpetrators, and thus establish a dialogue for dealing with the burden of trauma stemming from the previous generations.

### *Rituals*

The Second World War and the Holocaust are a story of cruelty, pain and suffering which left scars on both the victim and the persecutor sides. The traces remain with us in the present and the process is long lasting. No matter how productive the workshops are in creating encounter, dialogue and healing, we know that words cannot fully and accurately express participants' reactions to the Holocaust. Phenomenological experience and expression are needed. Thus, while in Auschwitz we work psychodramatically on the stage, we also include a process of individual ritual creation at the Birkenau Death Camp.

One of the most difficult experiences of Holocaust survivors and their descendants has been the absence of a real concrete grave to mourn the dead. The rituals are an integral part of a psychodramatic or sociodramatic event because they provide symbolic concretisations. They create a new opportunity for burying the dead. They offer meaning and a sort of closure for the events of the past. They may take the form of religious services, memorial ceremonies, burial, poetry-reading and singing next to an imaginary grave. Some become theatre performances that include movement and singing. All are supported by the whole group, the community that is needed for holding and containing in such moments.

The ritual as a form of individual psychodramatic and sociodramatic sharing is a therapeutic act. It allows participants to confront the Holocaust in their own unique ways, without judgment or blame. It requires the use of imagination and creativity and gives voice, a stage, a form to emotions which have not been clearly expressed before.

Ritual creates a perspective, a liminal space, a surplus reality that exists simultaneously in the past and the present, bridging the space between a participant's inner and outer worlds. It leads to catharsis, change and a sense of integration. Some rituals have become for their creators the best and most profound way of confronting the Holocaust. Here are a few examples: walking barefoot on the rail tracks leading to the main crematorium, throwing glass bottles at the wall in the women's barracks while screaming and crying, listening to quiet harmonica music inside one of the barracks, reading Paul Celan's poem 'Death Fugue', sharing dry bread in a circle and eating it very slowly, participating in a dream-like ceremony of burial for a young woman.

These ritual ceremonies also allow sharing of the personal and the interpersonal simultaneously, and are thus therapeutic for the whole group. They focus on expressions of strong emotion such as anger, rage, guilt, fear, anxiety, shame, helplessness, hopelessness and humiliation, and are thus forms of acknowledgement of the suffering of the other side. A balancing between the individual and the group is created, a kind of psychosocial healing. The links between the individuals, the group and the community are strengthened.

## **Towards Healing and Reconciliation**

In these workshops participants investigate different ways that the roles of persecutor and victim are internalised within individuals and society. They explore spontaneous, expressive and creative ways of dealing with the relationship of aggressor and victim, and are encouraged to encounter 'the other side'. Active work through the body allows an immediate safe opening of the inner emotional world and an encounter with the truth which lies within. The participants share their memories, experiences, fantasies and feelings and give voice to their suffering. Opportunity is thus provided to win in the struggle against anonymity by breaking family and social habits of silence. Participants tell and act their stories and as a result learn to face their own Holocaust history in a genuine manner.

The psychodramatic, sociodramatic and ritual work assists the participants to move from projections, generalisations, prejudices, preconceptions and illusions to the process of learning. The participants learn to be centred, to take responsibility, to meet eye-to-eye, face-to-face with acknowledgement, empathy, respect and acceptance. These encounters between Holocaust second and third generation survivors and aggressors are often moving, frequently painful, sometimes impossible. These courageous people are taking the risk to meet and confront the other side in a safe way, working deeply on this theme in front of others in the group. Because the work facilitates intense experience for participants, we are aware of the danger of creating false closeness which can lead to premature forgiveness. We do not aim to reach reconciliation, but at times it happens spontaneously and naturally, in a step-by-step, long and slow process. Participants are brought together and united through this work and these rituals. They experience hope, a sense of belonging and relief from being alone, anonymous and overwhelmed by the enormity of the Holocaust.

## Reflections

Although the descendants of the Holocaust victims and perpetrators have an equal right to represent their sufferings on the psychodrama stage and to reflect on them in the context of real history, this does not mean that the sufferings of the two sides are looked at analogously. For us, it is much more important to find a way of expression that can be manifested in a common language that works diametrically against the traditionalised realities of that time.

As psychodrama directors from opposite sides of the Holocaust, we have looked back into our history and have succeeded in creating a safe place for painful expression, for trust-building, for a sense of belonging to develop. We want participants to accept the group from the opposite side, to exchange fear, hatred and prejudice for real encounter and genuine dialogue where the wounds can be felt, mourned and then healed. For us the extent of the destruction caused by Nazi power has become more complete and the loss of the Jewish people and their culture more perceptible. In the 15 years we have worked together we have developed a system of encounter and dialogue filled with mutual acceptance, respect, recognition and love. In the summers of 2008 and 2010 we carried out a new one week international psychodrama seminar in Krakow and Auschwitz for participants from many countries called 'Traces of the Holocaust in the Present'. Because of the success and meaningfulness of this experience, we plan to offer this format again in the future.

'Confronting the Holocaust through Psychodrama, Sociodrama and Rituals' is a painful and purifying experience for both sides of the Holocaust and frequently results in the decision to live an honourable and dignified future. We are all now responsible for ensuring that history does not repeat itself. An understanding of the pain that has become an essential part of a person's life can lead to a clear decision never to cause such hurt oneself and to realise a respectful and passionate relationship with other people.

*Yaacov Naor was the keynote speaker at the Australian and New Zealand Psychodrama Association (ANZPA) conference in Sydney in January 2010.*

*Further information regarding the work and workshops discussed in this article can be found on the Psychodrama Institute for Europe (PIfE) website at <http://www.pife-europe.eu>*

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