

Late effects of early trauma. The psychological problems of “Children of the Holocaust” and “Sybiracs”

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The article compares the psychological problems resulting from early trauma suffered by two groups. The first group is composed of Holocaust survivors, the other by gentile Poles transported to the Soviet Union during the Second World War.

Key words: PTSD, early childhood trauma, Holocaust, deportation, Siberians

The “Children of the Holocaust” are people of Jewish origin who, as children, experienced at least a part of World War II in those countries affected by the Shoah. No older than sixteen by the end of the war, they had experienced life under the constant threat of death, in a continuous search for safety, removed to the ghetto or to one of a succession of hiding places on the “Aryan side”. Some of these children witnessed the deaths of their loved ones; many had been forced to leave their families for their own safety.

The name “Sybiracs” is used here to denote those people who were deported from the eastern fringes of Poland into the depths of the Soviet Union. Most were transported in four great deportations that took place in February, April and June 1940, and in June 1941. Arrests took place at night and families were given between fifteen minutes to two hours to pack. They travelled in unheated, sealed trains on a journey that lasted several weeks. Some died of hunger or cold on the way. The most numerous category of deportees were the so-called free settlers, who were primarily women, children and elderly people. They were usually sent to Kazakhstan, where it was up to them to find somewhere to live and a job on a collective farm. Mortality in this group was high, on account of the hunger, primitive conditions and the severity of the climate.

The findings contained in this article are based on interviews and psychotherapy with Holocaust survivors and interviews with deportees to Siberia. Psychotherapy with survivors is part of a program run by Professor Maria Orwid which includes individual and group therapy. For the purpose of this paper 63 Holocaust survivors were seen individually. The context and the specific problems that arise out of individual psychotherapy with survivors have been discussed in detail in “Psychotherapy” [1, 2]. Group therapy takes place two or three times a year in the form of three-day

residential workshops with around 80 participants divided into smaller groups. The groups and the subjects that arise in the course of the group psychotherapy have been described separately [3, 4]. The Sybiracs were interviewed at the Ex-Combatants' Outpatient Clinic in Warsaw. Eighty people have been seen so far. On-and-off contact with members from both groups was often connected with an assessment interview for a state War Allowance. The interview elicited details of pre-war family situations, wartime experiences and the influence of the latter on the interviewee's subsequent post-war history. They also included a psychiatric examination.

These two groups of people, who had experienced early, childhood trauma were chosen so that an analysis of their differences and similarities might cast light on the factors that predispose post-traumatic stress disorder. In both cases, the trauma came from outside the family group and the situation for the whole family was suddenly changed. Many of the interviewees came from well-off homes; the Sybiracs came from services or civil servant families, and the Jewish survivors generally came from educated, assimilated homes. Scenes of their transportation remained etched in the memory: packing within the hour, the weeks-long journey in crowded goods wagons, where people died and babies were born. Or: scenes of moving to the ghetto or to a hiding-place in a cellar, behind a wardrobe, in a hole in the ground. Some forms of persecution can be said to have been similar for both groups: extremely hard living conditions, hunger, heavy work. However, on top of this, the Jews also faced the constant threat of immediate extermination, a lack of social support and the necessity of parting from loved ones. Sometimes separation occurred in early childhood, which results in the survivors knowing nothing in later life about their families; sometimes the truth was concealed from them.

Low self-esteem

It is this author's opinion that the predisposing factor for later psychological problems in the groups being studied is their exposure to trauma in early childhood, at a time when there was no chance of influencing the situation in any way. People who experienced such hurt in childhood have low self-esteem and a feeling of humiliation that "something like this could be done to me".

Upon close analysis, the Sybiracs' sense of inferiority comes across as rather specific: "I'm ashamed that I never had an education", "my clothes were always worse than the other girls" (Jackowska [5], who cites emaciation, poor clothing and language problems as reasons for low self-esteem among Sybiracs). On the other hand, the feeling of low self-worth among Jewish survivors however is rarely linked to particular issues, but touches all areas of functioning, irrespective of later successes in life. In the course of psychotherapy many people volunteer that their feeling of inferiority is closely connected with being Jewish.

Sadness and loneliness

Holocaust survivors' experiences often include separation from loved ones. This can give origin to a feeling of inconsolable sadness and loneliness. Similarly, those of the Sybiracs who were separated early from their parents and found themselves in local children's homes also experienced sadness and loneliness all their lives. Robinson[6] compared people who survived the Holocaust alongside their parents with those whose parents perished. The orphans were much more prone to being persecuted and were totally without support after the war. Today, they present more severe symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder and strong feelings of isolation.

Anticipation of imagined disaster

Both groups had experienced a sudden, unexpected and extremely difficult change in their life situation. This can later lead to a sense of foreboding that a dangerous change could happen at any minute. Food hoarding and constant anxiety about having enough to eat were frequent in both groups. Most Sybiracs either said that they understood their return to Poland to mean an end to their exile, or that they lived in fear of deportation for several years after returning. The Jews, on the other hand, never stopped being afraid. It would seem that this difference was a consequence of the nature of the respective threats. In the Sybiracs' case this was the result of a specific political situation, but for the Jews, taught not only by their experience of the Holocaust but also by later pogroms and murders, the danger was intrinsic to being Jewish.

Separation problems

Feelings of sadness, loneliness and anticipating the worst were substantially reduced when survival was shared with a loved one. In most cases this was the mother. One Holocaust survivor recalled that her mother's presence made her feel safe, even when their hiding-place behind a wardrobe was discovered. A Sybirac remembered how she was saved from freezing by the sense that her mother was waiting for her.

Surviving such harsh experiences with someone close resulted in the formation of a very strong bond. This in turn led to substantial separation problems in the future, which could manifest as an inability to form other close relationships. This was particularly apparent among Holocaust survivors, where often no one else from the entire family or friendship network survived. "She was all I had", said one survivor about her mother, thus explaining her utter subordination to her mother's wishes when choosing a husband. Another survivor saw his strong bond with his mother as the repeating cause of breakdown in his relationships with partners. Separation could be difficult not only with respect to co-survivors but also partners and children. A recurring problem among the survivors was feeling rejected when their children left home. Sometimes this feeling was so strong and painful that it ruled out any further contact with them. It is interesting that both in Poland and in the USA separation has often been the direct cause behind survivor's decision to seek help [7]. Divorce, the death of someone close, children leaving home are all current traumas that reactivate the old loss.

While Sybiracs could be seen to have deep connections with the people they were deported with (including siblings), these rarely led to particular problems of separation

or difficulties in subsequent relationships.

Guilt

Survivors' guilt feelings have been extensively discussed in the literature. Aaron Hass (1995) wrote that this is guilt about having survived; that you, instead of someone else, are alive. Sometimes this crystallises around a particular family member, perhaps a younger sibling or someone talented who "deserved" to survive. The ghetto or the camp sometimes forced adults into heartbreaking decisions about whose life would be saved.

"There were forty thousand tickets – little white chits of paper with a stamp. The German gave them to the community council and said: "Distribute them among yourselves. Those who have the tickets will stay in the Ghetto. All the others must go to the Umschlagplatz." [8].

Adults decided who should get forged documents and a place on the Aryan side. Children did not make these choices. Despite this, as adults they felt guilty about their own survival in the face of the loss of their whole world, as though they should have shared the fate of their people.

Sybiracs' guilt feelings were usually connected with specific events and often concerned the sharing out of food. As children they were not always able to control their hunger, so they nibbled at the bread they were bringing home or ate berries they found in the woods instead of sharing them with the family. One woman was racked with terrible guilt for accidentally spilling her whole family's entire soup rations for the day.

Concealment (secret trauma)

Both Jews and Sybiracs concealed their war experiences, although the reasons for this were different. For many Sybiracs the critical moment came when they were writing their CV. The head teacher or manager told them that it would be better not to mention deportation, or to say that it was a trip to the East that they had undertaken of their own accord. But not being able to tell the truth about their lives was not humiliating. On the contrary, the Sybiracs expressed gratitude to these people who showed they cared, instead of following the political line of the day and barring them from school or work.

Jewish children learned during the war that, in the words of one survivor, being a Jew "was a death sentence". After the war this particular survivor ran away from the Jewish children's home many times, presenting her Catholic prayer book as evidence that she was not a Jew. Jews were not the only ones to be uncertain whether it was safe to "come out" at the end of the war. "Can I stop hiding now?" asked one survivor who had returned from Germany and was staying with a safe person. But he did not know and sent her to ask some other Jews, who might know better. Pogroms and individual assaults that took place just after the war convinced the Jews that they should stay in hiding after all. Research by Orwid et al [1] confirmed that survivors

living in Poland concealed not only the trauma of the Holocaust but also the fact that they were Jewish.

The Sybiracs concealed their experiences from the Communist rulers; the Jews hid their identity from everyone. This was due on the one hand to the terror left over from the war, and on the other to a fear of rejection caused by the anti-Semitism in Polish society. Fear of rejection sometimes caused an opposite reaction: an immediate declaration of Jewish identity intended to guard against unpleasant confrontations in the future.

Nightmares and flashbacks

Both groups often displayed typical symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder in the form of nightmares and flashbacks. These were set off by something in the present e.g. films, anniversaries, reminiscences. Differences in the severity of these symptoms would appear to be related to the degree of fear experienced. One survivor recalled her reaction at a ceremony commemorating the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. Being in that place, with the added pressure of a police ID check, brought on a recurrence of fear, a feeling of extreme danger and a desire to escape. After returning home she began to dread going out and finally required to have psychiatric help. The appearance of such a reaction can be viewed as constant anxious apprehension of a repeat of the threatening situation. Sybiracs experience recurrences of unpleasant memories, but generally without such symptoms of panic.

The subject of trauma within the family

Elzas [10] divided survivor families into those that make the subject of the Holocaust taboo and those for whom it is the point of reference in various situations in their lives. Conditions in Poland caused Jewish families in this country to be the 'silent' type. Children knew nothing about their parents' experiences until they reached the "appropriate" age for this knowledge. The appropriate age, as formulated by a group of survivors during therapy, was "the age at which a child is able to hide". After they had told the children of their Jewish origins there was still silence on the subject of the parents' experiences. This was connected with the intensity of the fear and with apprehension on behalf of the children. The only Sybirac who admitted that this was a taboo subject in his family was, for years after his return home, afraid of being deported again. Some of the Sybiracs reported that the poverty and the hunger that they had to bear in Siberia were a frequent point of reference in family situations.

Identity

To ensure their survival, Jewish children were placed away from their families, e.g. in Polish families or convent boarding schools. Older children understood their situation and took an active part in hiding. While this was a constant source of fear for them, it also gave them a sense of clarity about their place and their loyalties. Most

of those interviewed had a sense of the impermanence of their situation and, irrespective of how they were treated, looked forward to the end of the war and the return of their families.

Younger children who did not remember their families were in a completely different position. Often their foster parents never told them they were not theirs by birth and they found out by chance from neighbours, other children or members of the extended family. Sometimes a foster mother only confessed the truth on her deathbed. Two people who were in individual therapy received detailed information about their pasts, although their foster mothers continued to deny the facts divulged by other members of their families. Discovering the truth caused considerable identity problems, related to ethnicity, religion and the continuation of tradition. During therapy, one of the survivors talked about how important it was for her to have discovered three years earlier her real name and who her parents had been. She was also given some childhood photographs. Suddenly she started feeling that she no longer came from “nowhere”.

Many of those who survived as young children shared this need to belong and to find out about their lost families. For the woman in question it was particularly important that her aunt had looked for her after the war. She said that she started feeling like “somebody”. What did it mean to be “somebody”? “It means being wanted by someone”. In many accounts it was this emotional aspect, rather than the purely factual, that was key in filling gaps in self-definition. Not simply “they existed” but rather “they loved me”, “they cared”, “they did everything to ensure I survived”.

Identification problems, that is an actual lack of information about family and a conviction that one belongs not only to a different family but also to a different people and culture, were particular to the Jewish survivors.

Another way of understanding identity is as a sense of the continuing self, as personal identity stretching over the entire life span. Based on survivors' accounts, Lawrence Langer [11] showed that identity understood in this way undergoes change as a result of extreme experiences. Survivors talked about burying their wartime selves, for example, “I have the feeling that the ‘self’ who was in the camp isn’t me, isn’t the person who is here opposite you...” They also talked about living with a sense of having a dual self, one from the pre-war reality, the other living the ‘truth’ of the camps. Sometimes the wartime self was altogether out of line with the direction the person’s life had taken up to that point and with their previous moral values. Extreme experiences prevented the integration of past and present.

Such identity problems also came up in the Sybiracs’ accounts. Most often they were connected with the deaths of close family members and with being left completely alone in a strange environment. One example was a Sybirac who, as a little girl, had to go to the local children’s home after her mother died. She stopped speaking Polish and answered to a different name. After her family found her she still introduced herself by the new name. Slowly she rebuilt her identity, while a substantial part of her wartime self became forgotten. Another example of difficulty in integrating selves was the Sybirac who joined a gang after the death of his family. Talking about this period he had a feeling of it being totally separated from the moral values that he held before and after. “It was and it wasn’t me.”

Jewish Sybiracs

The psychological position of Jewish Sybiracs also raised questions. A large proportion of this group were Polish Jews who were deported along with other inhabitants of the eastern parts of Poland. Their flight from the Nazis brought them east and they were then labelled “absconders” and transported into the depths of the USSR. Like the other Sybiracs, during their exile they experienced extremely difficult conditions and the deaths of loved ones. On their return to Poland they often discovered that they were the sole survivors of their families. Gentile Sybiracs felt hard presented in comparison to Poles who remained in Poland. Jewish Sybiracs talked about how they were unworthy of being singled out and how they felt guilty about their families and friends who perished in the Shoah. During the war they had not needed to conceal their identity, so they did not have a great fear of “coming out”. If they avoided talking about being Jewish, it was because they were worried about anti-Semitism and not because they were afraid of a repeat of the Holocaust. Being “in between” they had difficulty feeling they belonged to either of the two groups described here. On the whole they felt they had more in common with Jewish organisations, but during the course of therapy they clearly stressed the different nature of their experiences.

Conclusion

The similarities between the two groups examined would appear to arise directly from the ages of the victims and their weakness, powerlessness and the ease with which they could be hurt. According to research results quoted by Herman (1997), traumatic experiences particularly affect children and adolescents, who are prevented from completing the adaptive tasks necessary for creating their own identity gradually separating from family and establishing wider social contacts. These types of problems arose in both groups but, despite the similarities of their psychological problems, they differed in the actual scope of their disorders rather than merely their severity.

The scope of the disorder refers to those areas of functioning affected by the trauma. For Jews the trauma of the Holocaust had an influence on every part of their personality, changing their family and social relationships. For the Sybiracs the disorder had a more discrete character, connected with particular experiences and not encroaching on all areas of functioning.

The severity of fear and nightmares would appear to be rather more connected to individual fortunes. After all, both groups included a wide variety of human experience. Thus, some of the deported children attended school and suffered the same hunger as much of the population during the war. At the same time others were transported right up to the Arctic Circle, where they were subject to extreme climatic conditions and had no chance of obtaining extra food. The experience of Jewish children in the ghetto, watching the extermination from close quarters, was different from that of those who were passed off as gentile children in boarding schools and children’s homes. It can be said that situations of greatest peril and sometimes humiliation manifest themselves through dreams and flashbacks, so-called ‘interference’ symptoms.

From a therapeutic point of view it is important to isolate the factors instrumental in causing post-traumatic stress disorder. Within the above groups it is possible to identify persons with particularly disordered areas of functioning. These are people who underwent early separation, found themselves in situations leading to identity problems and were without support after the traumatic experience. They require therapeutic help in changing their image of themselves from someone weak and helpless to that of a strong person who could survive the worst.

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