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The Nightmare*

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With each year, the growing number of personal accounts, source publications and studies allows for a better understanding of the atmosphere that prevailed in concentration camps. However, anyone who had not experienced "this" may feel to some extent as Mrs Gudrun from the Gawalewicz memoirs, who inquired on bedside lamps in concentration camps, because she could not imagine how any cultured person could fall asleep without reading. Even those who survived the camp, thanks to the "benevolence" of human memory, may not recollect vivid pictures of camp life (it returns only in their nightmares), but only its' frayed reflection. Moreover, they cannot find a way to communicate their experience verbally; human language is incapable of accommodating these experiences. Even the most precise and suggestive description of camp life and suffering is not able to cross over to the verbal structure, which is understandable for everybody, but not suitable for this kind of experience. So the essential moments of camp life remain the exclusive property of the survivor, impossible to communicate to the rest of the world.

Concentration camps are often described with one word: nightmare. What is a nightmare? The basic meaning of the word is: "depressing, frightening dream; something monstrous, having a mood of such a dream". During sleep, in regular intervals of 60 to 90 minutes, periods occur that are characterised by rapid, low voltage waves on the electroencephalogram and rapid eye movements. A person awakened during this period easily recollects the content of his dream. It usually does not happen to people awakened in other sleep stages, and the content of the dream is easily forgotten. So, it is supposed, that characteristic bio-electrical brain activity and rapid eye movements are external correlates of dreams. Moreover, it is presumed that eye movements are caused by following the picture dreamt. The dreams are above all of visual character, but not only. There is some evidence that dreams appear rhythmically around the clock, provided the external world stimuli enforce a state of wakefulness and activity, and that the power of the dream experience can be stronger in comparison with experiences during wakening.

People have always been intrigued by the content of dreams and their meaning. Predictions of the future were sought after in dream content. Dreams were used to understand the deepest complexities of humanity and personality structure (psychoanalysis), were employed to enhance creative capabilities, etc. Unfortunately, memories of dreams, similar to memories from early childhood, are very scarce. However, that does not define their role in the conscious life. Maybe this role is even more than conceptualised now, and with the further development of our knowledge, dream psychology will become as important as the psychology of early childhood. Memory, as it is well known, is a good indicator of values; somewhat surprisingly, what has been forgotten is often more important for our further development than what we remember.

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Among the few dreams that are remembered are those that are described as nightmares. If all dreams could be remembered, the number of nightmares would be much larger. It is not known what influences the content of dreams - is it transformation of wake state experience only? Or as Jung declared, is it autonomous? Some dream motives recur independently from the personal history of a dreamer, in various cultures and epochs (archetypes).

A nightmare is above all a horrible dream; situations, figures, the whole entourage, are so distant from any experience in reality, fantasy, or other dreams, that this "strangeness" evokes horror accompanied by helplessness. Every dream is accompanied by helplessness, it being a characteristic of sleep itself. Nevertheless, in a nightmare, as a consequence of detachment from common experience, it becomes overwhelming. When everything becomes different than usual, one loses orientation and ability to plan action, and therefore feels paralysed. In a nightmare one fights for life; the characteristic of a nightmare is total danger.

Anxiety and tension in a nightmare are enhanced by the feeling of helplessness. Everything occurs automatically, independent of the dreamer, and action develops as in a horror movie; one is engaged, but has no influence on its course. In climax moments, one tries to liberate oneself and finds that this is only a dream, awakens tormented, with heart pounding, and covered with sweat, but relieved by reality which is dramatically different from the dream content.

The characteristics of nightmares can be listed as four features: horror, helplessness, total danger and automatism. These four also characterise the concentration camp experience.

The horror of concentration camps was especially felt at the first exposure. The majority of prisoners reacted with "transient mental reaction manifested with sadness, anxiety and fear, helplessness, disorientation and loneliness, lack of appetite and somnolence" (Teutsch). Similarly as in nightmares, vegetative symptoms were present: "polyuria, diarrhoea, tremor, sweating, sometimes nausea, even vomiting" (Teutsch). As happens in a nightmare, people tried to defend themselves, thinking that this was only a dream; a defense against camp nightmare was derealisation, a feeling of unreality of the surrounding reality. In his research, Teutsch found it relatively rare (at 5% of former prisoners interviewed); however, according to other researchers such a reaction was typical.

It does not need to be proven that concentration camp reality significantly differed from free world reality to such a degree, that everybody thrown into it must have been shocked. Of course those who previously went through Gestapo prisons were, to some extent, accustomed to the new reality, and their reaction was usually less dramatic. Even an indirect confrontation with concentration camp life, e.g. visits to camp site museums, looking at photographs, reading memoirs etc., causes, to some extent, a similar reaction of bewilderment, anxiety, sadness, or a feeling of unreality. This reaction, however, is of course much weaker. Unusual situations always evoke anxiety, which can be described as "disintegrative", caused by disorganisation in the existing interaction structure, and built up throughout a lifetime between an individual and his or her surroundings. This structure enables the individual to foresee, to some extent, future events and enables activity planning. However, life constantly brings new and extraordinary events, and interaction structures change, are destroyed, and reconstructed; however, "new" is never completely new, and many familiar elements remain unchanged. In consequence, even in extraordinary situations one never becomes completely helpless. There is a limit in tolerance for extraordinary events that are understood as different from what one is accustomed to. When this limit is exceeded, an individual reacts with fear and helplessness. Panic paralyses purposeful action, inability to act increases anxiety – one enhances the other. Extensive discussion concerning factors influencing disintegration tolerance is beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, inborn predisposition and previous experience in dealing with unusual situations, which enhance the plasticity of reactions and adaptation skills, as well as nervous system efficiency, must be taken into account. Organic brain conditions evidently decrease disintegration tolerance; a new situation, therefore, may cause a Goldstein catastrophic reaction. Disintegration tolerance also commonly decreases in elderly, due to a senile organic brain condi-

tion; this is reflected in a proverb: "One should not transfer an old tree".

A "Welcome ceremony" performed when *Zugangs* arrived to concentration camps led to escalating confusion and helplessness in prisoners. If a prisoner did not manage to recover from this state, he or she would gradually become an automaton and "a muslim". Physicians who survived the camp emphasise that neurotic and psychosomatic conditions disappeared there. This could be interpreted as a beneficial consequence of the destruction of pre-camp pathogenic life-styles. Furthermore, a high level of biological risk could be a sort of mobilising effect, annihilating neurotic stagnation and disequilibrium.

Concentration camps were extermination camps, an integral part of the plan to destroy all which endangered the "wonderful German race". Therefore, total endangerment was an essential characteristic of camp life. We still do not know how survival was possible at all. "A diet intended for rats, which followed rules employed in concentration camps even when quantity restrictions were not used to experiment, leads to a hunger disease syndrome in animals within three months" – writes Kowalczykowa. Hunger was but only one of the types of suffering imposed on prisoners, and not all survivors rated it at the first position. Analysis of camp experiences, it seems, calls for a revision of the traditional medical approach which emphasizes the role of physiological and biochemical factors and neglects psychological ones. Violation of human dignity, loss of significant others, and lack of moral support within the group of co-prisoners were often more painful then the physical sufferings. The majority of camp survivors and writers on the topic agree that the factors essential for survival were a desire to survive, belief that the camp is not eternal, and mutual support within the group of colleagues and friends. The person who broke down, perished.

In life endangerment situations the first biological rule - fight for life preservation – is especially evident. In the camp, its manifestations were often quite drastic. Sterkowicz writes: "it is easy to be honest in comfortable conditions; it is much more difficult in *articulo mortis*". Brzezicki, in his memoirs from Sachsenhausen, describes himself and colleagues: "In a month all politeness slowly disappeared from all of us". It seems to be self-evident, that behavioural norms suitable for normal life were useless in the camp. In consequence, ethical assessment is difficult, especially by those who did not survive the camp themselves. Nevertheless – with all brutality and biologisation in camp life resulting from the highest value of food and death, all other aspects eliminated – to survive one had to escape from the imperative: stay alive at every price. Those who subdued to it were loosing their humanity, and with this, often a chance for survival. Among human characteristics essential for survival was the ability to build up an inner opposition against external reality, by the creation of an alternative reality in fantasy about the future, memories of the past, real friendships, help for other prisoners, efforts to organise other forms of living, etc. This was the only way to separate oneself from concentration camp life automatism. Rules of biology, when maximally intensive, change a human being into an automaton; he/she is no longer ruling himself/herself. Hunger, pain, and fear of death rule him/her as the first rule to preserve life; sexual drive rules as the second: to preserve species. In concentration camp life the second rule was pushed aside and the first one was dominant. It was a paradox: the fight to survive, a normal reaction to dominating the camp tendency to exterminate, increased the feeling of being a helpless automaton in the context of the biology needs. Automatism was a feature of the concentration camp nightmare that contributed significantly to annihilation of the individual. Thus the rule to preserve life was acting against itself. A person unable to oppose it, unable to combat his/her hunger, fear, pain, or to think even for a while about something other than the immediate agonizing surroundings sentenced himself/herself to death. He/she was becoming a will-less organism automatically wrestling for preservation of life, quickly loosing his/her strengths and changing into "a muslim".

Horrifying camp scenery, humiliation of human dignity from the first moment, physical and moral torture, hunger, pain, fear of death and an amount of suffering difficult to describe, caused every prisoner in the camp to feel completely helpless, at least in the beginning before one could become detached and develop his/her camp *modus vivendi.* The attitude from the out-

set was to treat prisoners as automatons, to exploit their powers to work until they were exterminated. Under enormous external pressure, and at the same time confused by the horrifying camp world surrounding him/her, the prisoner was forced to perceive himself/herself as an automaton deprived of will, pushed around, beaten, mistreated, that blindly followed orders, and was concerned only with fulfilment of basic needs. If unable to oppose external pressure, or to see himself/herself not as the perpetrators did, a prisoner quickly realised the plan of the perpetrators – he/she became "a muslim" and died in disgrace. Disgrace and disrespect for death was but one of characteristics of concentration camp life. Human culture is characterised by respect for death and the cult of the dead, expressing human longing for immortality. A prisoner of a concentration camp, who was no longer a human being, had to be deprived of this human aspect too.

The problem of automatism is connected with the problem of authority and the structure authority enforces on its subordinates. From an authoritarian point of view, the ideal organisation is to turn subordinates into performers, which blindly follow orders. To achieve this, they must be soaked in ideology and put into a structure, which is to be realised. This manoeuvre succeeding, the automatism of authority structure develops in a cascade reaction. Everything opposing the structure must be destroyed. The only ethical criterion becomes following orders blindly. Perception of the world becomes simplified: goodness is only that, which is congruent with the structure imposed by the authority; evil is that, which opposes. Destruction of "evil", which enables the realisation of aggressive tendencies present in every human being, develops in a chain reaction pattern. Outside the structure believed in, only evil is seen, and evil must be destroyed; destroying evil becomes merit.

Even if there is no real risk but a specific ideological construction is in use, life can be reduced to the first biological rule: "I win or perish". This pseudo-biologisation ("pseudo", as born out of a false concept of the surrounding world) leads to brutalisation of life, changes it into a nightmare of fighting for survival, and one cannot oppose being sucked into the nightmare. Both sides - persecutors and persecuted – are incorporated into the hell machinery of destruction; the former could not resist being overwhelmed by the idea of *Herrenvolk* and bind by obedience to authority, the latter – are crushed by it. For both - "I win or perish" - became the main axiom. The latter were in real biological endangerment, the former in fictional danger presented by the false ideology. Both could not be themselves: the automatism of life that was reduced to a biological fight for survival did not allow this in the prisoners, the automatism of being overthrown and the accepted ideology – in the persecutors.

The precondition of survival in the concentration camp was to escape, at least to some extent, from the camp nightmare. This required resistance to its four essential characteristics: horror, powerlessness, biological endangerment and automatism. Two mechanisms to achieve this were of special importance: blunting of affect and holding on to even weak elements of the former life structure.

"In majority of interviewed – writes Teutsch – during the first 3 - 6 months in concentration camp, desensitisation, blunting of affect, and decrease of emotional reactions to various stresses of camp life had developed." The author emphasised that emotional bluntness of this kind would be, in normal life conditions, recognised as pathological; in concentration camp it was "an adaptation phenomenon, helpful in tolerating camp life conditions, preventing breaking down and death."

The slightest memories of the former, non-camp life, allowed the prisoner, even for a moment, to escape from the overwhelming reality, and this way remain himself/herself, and not a prisoner-automaton. This was the first step towards inner freedom. Signs of human feelings, kindness, meeting somebody known before imprisonment, recollections of the past events, fantasising about the future, professors' lectures in Sachsenhausen, etc., all brought back the old life structure. Therefore, a dispassionate attitude towards real events, and, on the other hand, sensitivity to what supported the normal picture of life, enhanced perspectives for survival; the prisoner was not becoming an automaton, but was preserving his/her humanity.

An important aspect of being human is the ability to choose and make decisions. An automaton, as it is known, does not possess these fac-

ulties. Concentration camp organisation tended, above all, to destroy these features. This was the first step towards annihilation of humanity, and then biological extermination. Memories of former prisoners show that planning a choice, decision making and action taking were possible in the group. Alone, the prisoner felt powerless; in a group of co-prisoners, he/she became self-confident. "We can" was followed by "I can". Free space, necessary for all purposeful activities, was at first a collective space, and only later an individual one, when the prisoner, supported by companions, stopped feeling crushed by the camp machinery and was strong enough to resist it.

The role of "group psychotherapy" in the camp was emphasised by a psychiatrist from Vienna, Frankl, in his concentration camp memoirs. The Auschwitz Camp hospital, at the time when political prisoners had settled there, could, we can presume, be therapeutic not due to medication applied or operations performed, but rather due to the friendly atmosphere and humanitarian characteristics. Memoirs from the camp bring many examples of close dependence between physical and mental states. Regaining health was often dependent on regaining humanity. This is also supported by the fact that relations and friendships that developed in the camp survived time, and have been very important for many former prisoners. They can be regarded as the basic reference group for them (Orwid). Their role in resistance to the camp nightmare was essential.

A nightmare usually leaves a trace; even if its' content is forgotten one feels fatigue, unrest, sadness. A psychosis often leaves a similar trace, though stronger, especially schizophrenic psychosis, a kind of nightmare experienced during wakefullness. The character of post-psychotic changes in personality appears to be similar to those found in former prisoners of concentration camps: sadness, distrust, impulsiveness (Leśniak).

We do not know how much of our life in wakefulness is a realisation of our night dreams, nor do we know if the concentration camp nightmare had been – before realisation – a nightmare of many. Nevertheless, its' realisation left a permanent mark in the history of the human species. The role of this mark can be beneficial – if the remembrance of concentration camps will make wars and their false prophecies forever regarded as awful.

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