FORUM

Psychotrauma and Reconciliation

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Our goal was to analyze the phenomenon of intergenerational transmission of trauma-related feelings and propose a way to alleviate this process through reconciliation of conflicted groups. The genesis of psychotrauma, with respect to the organism’s defensive barrier being pierced by too strong external impulses, is discussed in terms of activation of the death instinct or by reactivation of childhood trauma. Genesis of the group trauma is explained in terms of chosen trauma, ie, activation of ancient national or other large group traumas, leading to the creation of malignant prejudices and hyper-activation of the social unconscious. Development of hatred, guilt, shame, and a need for revenge is illustrated with a number of examples from the 1991-1995 war in Croatia and the Holocaust, together with the influence they bear on an individual and a group. Therapy of psychotrauma could be a possible means of prevention of intergenerational transmission of traumatic emotions. Special attention is given to the retraumatization of Croatian war veterans in terms of the influence it exerts on future generations. A therapeutic model developed on the basis of eight years of clinical experience, designed specifically for veterans with posttraumatic stress disorder, is presented. The mechanism of intergenerational transmission of traumatic emotions as understood mainly through clinical experience in work with second-generation Holocaust victims is discussed.

Key words: Bosnia and Herzegovina; Croatia; emotions; feelings; Kosovo; psychopathology; psychotherapy, group; psychotrauma; sociology; Yugoslavia

A man was standing at the edge of the road, urinating. A policeman saw him and said: “You, you with your thing pulled out, you better stop and put it back in your pants.” The man replied: “All right, I’ll put it back, but I can’t stop.” This is a story from John Sack’s book, which a Hebrew mother told to her kids who were teased and molested by Polish boys (1). This was in Poland, just before the World War II. Having told the story she added: “You kids, all hatred that you possess, you can keep it inside of you, but you cannot stop it. Your hatred can’t do any harm to Polish boys. It can only harm you, for it destroys your soul.”

History is full of destruction and wars, as if the death instinct governs the world, like the apoptosis in biology, the programmed cell death. Destruction occurs in families and spreads to nations and groups of nations, as we observed in smaller war conflicts and the two world wars. It is an indispensable causative agent of trauma – individual and group likewise – generating the feelings of hatred, revenge, guilt, and shame, which are passed on to future generations. In a suitable moment, these feelings can cause new destruction, closing a vicious circle. It seems as if the deterioration helix will rise up until a nuclear catastrophe will resolve all problems.

We have tried to elaborate this topic in terms of war-related psychotrauma and its repercussions – the development of hatred, revenge, guilt, and shame. The treatment of psychotrauma should prevent its intergenerational transmission and the transmission of the feelings it causes. However, this happens only partially and intergenerational transmission still takes place. There have been different attempts to stop the intergenerational transmission and great efforts have been invested in reconciliation of the groups in the last decades.

Genesis of Psychotrauma

Trauma as a Wound

The word trauma originates from Greek where it meant piercing of the skin, or breaking the bodily envelope. In physical medicine, it denotes damage to a tissue. Freud used the word metaphorically to emphasize how mind can also be pierced and wounded by events, depicting the mind as being enveloped by a kind of skin, a protective shield.

An individual can feel able to take care of what he or she deems to be his or her own well-being. However, some events can overwhelm that capacity, knock out the ability to function, and throw an individual into extreme disarray (2).

Melanie Klein argued that if the loss of the good object around which the ego organized itself from the
beginning of life could not be mourned, it could cause a progressive deterioration in the personality (2). We believe that similar has happened to mothers, wives, and relatives of those who had disappeared, had been killed or violently taken away during the 1991-1995 war in Croatia. Consequently, their defenses collapsed, which manifested in symptoms ranging from total indifference and lack of interest, lack of will for any kind of communication with others, to total emptiness and annihilation. When a sufficiently extreme external event impacts on the mental organization, the effect is obliteration of all defenses against anxiety, which then overwhelms the mind. This anxiety comes from internal sources, although the anxiety-provoking event is external. Garland (2), on the other hand, claimed that some analysts did not accept the Freudian concept of the death instinct as a primary source of destruction, and connected it with an earlier history of a trauma, ie, a reactivation of previous trauma. We believe that the death instinct manifests in disclosed and concealed suicides and can lead to homicidal behavior and often to real homicide when projected outwards. It is well known that a compulsive repetition of trauma presents an attempt to get out of the vicious circle of trauma, but of course without success.

Gampel (3) tried to explain what was really going on in psychotrauma and how it influenced the personality. He compared it to the effect of radiation. He said: "(Trauma) gives rise to cruel and violent forms of identification. At times, these identifications can be likened to the effects of radiation, an external reality that enters the psychic apparatus without the individual having any control over their entry, implantation, and effects. This radioactive identification is comprised of non-representable remnants, remnants of the radioactive influences of the external world, which are imbedded within the individual. Occasionally, the effects to these remnants are not felt within the individual, but rather in future generations. Against penetrations of terrible, violent, and destructive aspects of the external reality the individual is defenseless. The individual internalizes the radioactive remnants of which he is unaware, and identifies with them and their dehumanizing aspects. Later, the individual acts out these identifications, which are alien to him, or they are acted out by his children through the process of transgenerational transmission."

Vamik Volkan (4,5) formulated another concept to explain the development of psychotrauma in groups, especially the large ones. He says: "I use the term chosen trauma to describe the collective memory of a calamity that once befell a group’s ancestors. It is, of course, more than a simple recollection; it is a shared mental representation of the event, which includes realistic information, fantasized expectations, intense feelings, and defenses against unacceptable thoughts. In time collapse, the interpretations, fantasies, and feelings about a past-shared trauma mingle with those pertaining to a current situation. Under the influence of a time collapse, people may intellectually separate the past event from the present one, but emotionally the two events are merged."

Chosen Traumas in Former Yugoslavia

We describe what we believe to be a chosen trauma for the Serbian people in the former Yugoslavia, to help understand the origins of the war that recently broke out in the region. It is known that the Turks defeated the Serbs in the Battle of Kosovo in 1389. The saying goes (not a historical fact) that the Turks, after their victory over Serbs, killed all male children and raped all young Serbian women so that they would give birth to Turks. In the Eastern religion, the father determines the child’s religious identity: the mother represents only the earth into which the father’s seed is planted. This myth about Turkish behavior after the Battle of Kosovo has remained vivid in the memory of Serbian people until today, and in this war, it has been the generator of revenge against the Muslims. During the last 10 years, the Serbs have been celebrating the Battle of Kosovo as if it was their victory, not a defeat. At one of our reconciliation group meetings, the Bosnian members presented their own chosen traumas. One of them said that for him it was the last meeting of the Yugoslav Communist Party Central Committee in 1989, when first Slovenian and then Croatian representatives left the meeting. He knew then that Yugoslavia would fall apart and that “Četniks” (members of the pro-royal and pro-Nazi military movement in Serbia during the World War II) would attack and slaughter again, just like in the World War II. He was unable to sleep for nights. Another member said that Tito’s death, the breakdown of the former Yugoslavia, and Yugoslav Peoples’ Army attack against Bosnia presented a chosen trauma for her. Another one yet said that for him and his nation in general, the chosen trauma occurred when the Bosnian Muslim aristocracy stood up against the Turkish government in the year 1830. In the first battle they defeated the Turks, but then the Turkish sultan marched a manyfold stronger army against the rebels and killed all the gentry (interestingly, the event took place again on Kosovo).

Hopper (6) deals with this problem within his theory of social unconsciousness. The concepts of the social unconscious and equivalence emphasize the importance of the experience of personal and social helplessness and powerlessness. They are, therefore, especially useful for understanding how groups re-create various aspects of social trauma, which have occurred at another time and another place. The anxiety connected with the trauma as well as the perceptions of the trauma itself are usually subjected to ‘denial’ and other forms of primal defenses. It is therefore to be expected that these anxieties will be enacted in situations in which people have regressed, as they are most likely to do in groups, especially large ones.

The phenomenon of the narcissism of minor differences and the related prejudices are an important factor in expressing destructive behavior that leads to psychotrauma (7,8). One could find many examples of narcissism of small differences among the South Slavic nations, ie, the nations in the former Yugoslavia. The most numerous and most important ones are those related to the question of language – one of the
most important elements of the national identity. When the national tent starts trembling, it is the language that is being attacked first. Croatian and Serbian are not so much different, but within the current confusion the differences are being stressed and augmented. For example, a Serbian movie playing in Croatian movie-theaters was subtitled in Croatian, although Croats and Serbs can understand each other perfectly well. In our parts, however, the narcissism of small differences is not only limited to the relations among the nations of former Yugoslavia. In Croatia, for example, there is an animosity between the continental and the coastal region, between the people from Zagorje (the northwestern part of the continental region) and the Dalmatians from the Adriatic coast, between the eastern and western part of the continental area, etc. After the war, a great animosity developed towards Croats from Herzegovina who fled in large numbers to Croatia. In the opinion of some native Croats, Herzegovinians have occupied the most important positions in the society and now govern the country.

Prejudice, Identity, and Superego

Prejudices serve to differentiate one group from another. They help people retain their group identity, which, in turn, supports their individual identity. Therefore, rituals that foster prejudice, e.g., telling ethnic jokes, psychologically help to secure group identity. Prejudice is normal when it is used to differentiate one’s self and one’s group from another without causing humiliation or destruction to the other. It is a human reaction and can range in intensity from normal to malignant. Feelings of malignant prejudice accompany malignant rituals in the relationships of emotionally bonded large groups (4). In former Yugoslavia, there were numerous prejudices, which could be understood as a product of a substantial mixture of nations, religions, and perspectives. Yugoslavia was a multi-national, multi-confessional state with people of very different cultural and civilizational background. With the collapse of Yugoslavia, prejudices that were suppressed more into pre-consciousness than into unconsciousness erupted onto the surface. Serbs revenged their chosen trauma on a sexual level, for example, by raping Muslim women and keeping them in camps until the end of pregnancy (9), so that they would give birth to a Serb. Men were also raped. Muslim fighters who got caught were mutilated by Serbian women who cut off their penises and testicles (10).

Mild forms of prejudices are manifested in jokes. For example, a Croat lady told the following joke during a reconciliation workshop we organized: “Before the war, Fata used to walk behind Mujo (both very common Bosnian-Muslim names). Nowadays she walks ahead of him. Why? She is clearing minefields”. Bosnians smirked very bitterly at that joke. On the last day of our workshop, a Bosnian woman described how hurt she was when it was said that Muslim women kept from their conservative husbands the fact that they had been raped. She added that all women would keep this as a secret.

The connection between the superego and trauma is very important, whether in terms of change of superego through traumatic experience or psychotrauma caused in other people by a pathological superego, which is more common. As the superego develops over a person’s lifetime, big changes are possible even in adolescence and post-adolescence. In warriors and other traumatized people, manifestations of a normal Superego, such as rules, inhibitions, or moral codes that were introjected during the childhood development, can be substituted with the rules of a war group. Identities made in life-threatening conditions lead to a creation of professional soldier or war victim’s Self and perpetuate manifestations of the newly learned behavior. What this means is the fixation of destructive drives with narcissistic manifestations in soldiers and feelings of tremendous guilt and shame in victims.

Development of Hatred, Revenge, Guilt, and Shame

Hatred

In interethnic conflicts, like in other conflicts between large groups, the basic problem is the generalization of the hatred. It is always the other group that is guilty and they are all guilty. The worst thing that the perpetrators and especially torturers in camps have done to their victims is the injection of permanent hatred, not only towards the torturers themselves but to the entire nation the torturers belong to. We saw enormous hatred in mothers and wives of people who were violently taken away or disappeared in Croatian war. “All Serbs are alike and there are no loyal Serbs,” is what they used to say. One of our patients with PTSD, Croatian war veteran, described what his torturer used to tell him: “You’ll always see me in your dreams and I’ll always be with you.” “And he was right,” commented the patient. This was the worst thing that caused most hatred in him. During the war in Croatia, Serbia threatened to destroy Croatia and in response the Croats threatened the Serbs in Croatia because no other identity was available.

John Sack (1) described clearly how the people filled with hate rationalize their hatred and try to justify it. We will present this with a sequence from his book: “So Adam saw the truth in his glass of vodka. He saw that to hate means to hate more and always more intensively. To spit a drop of hatred meant an increase in salivation and a 24 hours production of a drop and a quarter, and to spit it out meant a free production of a new drop and a quarter and he’d soon come up with 3, 4, 5 drops, till a spoon full of hatred, up to the size of a volcano. Hatred, it seemed to Adam, is something that he produces itself, like water in the Devil’s Pupil. The members of SS like him were not free of nausea because of the hatred... Lola was walking restlessly and asked herself if all the Germans were guilty. Not all the Germans who came to her camp had been in concentration camps before. Some of them came from the Russian front; some of them were forced to fight and did no harm to Jews. And those from Hitler’s youth formations were more or
less adolescents. Perhaps some of them were thieves or other criminals and there were those who were expressing anti-Polish views. They did nothing wrong to Jews."

Religion should fight hatred and bring peace among the nations, which should follow the words of Jesus: "God forgive them for they don't know what they are doing." But the reality is quite different. The religion in today's world is alive and healthy, and so is the violence (11). Moreover, it seems that today religion and violence are able to cooperate in creating deserts, as they did throughout human history. To quote John Sack once again: "Religions generally advocate non-violence while simultaneously finding out ways to make it legal in certain situations; their representatives preach against the war and bless the arms of their armies at the same time. So a deep religious wisdom about non-violence comes to a principle that no noble warrior who keeps his integrity would deny, ie, that you can be violent whenever you can't be non-violent if you have a justified goal (which they usually are simply because they are yours). With religious dialog or without it, without a principal statement that we should never use religion for violent purposes, ie, to justify morally the use of violence, religious icons and religious leaders will continue to be exploited by politicians and generals which implement violence" (1). If we consider what goes on today in the Middle East, where Palestinian suicidal killers take innocent lives daily, we have to ask how and why this happens. Religion may play an important role since it promises paradise with forty virgins and other pleasures for those who die in its name. Just like Laius left his son Oedipus on a mountain to be killed, the father of a suicidal killer announced proudly on TV how happy he was with the heroic act of his son.

Revenge

Talmud says: "By the measure that a person measures, it is measured to him." Revenge is a very complicated feeling that annihilates the personality whether brought to reality or not. The helix of revenge always rises - the violence feeds on revenge and revenge feeds on violence. Unfortunately, justice for one man is injustice for another and the need for revenge is not proportional to the suffering. We are seeing many people who suffered a lot but were free of a need for revenge. Of course, we have seen the opposite cases, too. The problem of delegated revenge is especially interesting. It is well known that some people who suffered in concentration camps, those who were tortured, or a fighter short before death, would ask with their last effort to be revenged. Those words echo for a long time or perhaps for a life that an enemy actually presents is an object for the actual position of the enemy. As elaborated earlier, what an enemy actually presents is an object for the subject's projections. It is not as important what happens or is done to the object, but who does it. It is our relationship with an object that counts, not the object itself.

Revenge taken toward the innocent is a special problem. Let us illustrate this with several examples. During the war in Croatia, there were Serbs who worked and lived normally in free parts of the country but went on weekends to the occupied parts of the country and heavily shelled the cities they came from. We called them "weekend Četniks". In a summer resort used as a refugee shelter during the war in Croatia, the last group of refugees located there left all water taps running while moving out one Saturday afternoon, when no personnel was present. The hotels were flooded. A young 4-year-old boy started beating his aunt's canary because he was angry with her. When asked why, he replied that he could not attack his aunt Mare, but could therefore beat her little bird.

Let this be an introduction to the following examples that refer to the Germans kept in camps after the World War II, which were governed by Jews from Auschwitz. The Jews revenged on Germans, most of whom were even not Nazis, just like the Jews had been declared guilty only because they were Jews (1). It all happened in Poland, where some 60,000-80,000 Germans died in concentration camps ran by Jews (1). Lola, the camp commander and an ex-Auschwitz detainee, asked her assistant why he was beating a German, and he answered: "This is what they did to me in Auschwitz". Lola showed an unhappy face. She was thinking of seven candles that reminded her of her adolescence in Bedzin and the words of a Jewish boy, which were still echoing in her ears just like the words of her brothers always ready to fight with the Polish lads who called them "dirty Jews" and "mangy Jews". "Who beat you in Auschwitz?" Lola asked the boy. "The Germans, dirty animals!" he said. "So you despise them?" "Of course, Ma'am commander." "OK, tell me then, if you despise them why do you want to be like them?" "What do you mean, like them?" asked the boy. "If you want to beat them... that is what animals do" said Lola, "Why do you hate them if..." she paused. She was struck by the fact that her mother was saying the very same thing to her and her brothers in Bedzin. "We hate the Poles!" her brothers shouted, and her mother reminded them:
“The hatred is wounding you, it is destroying your heart and crashes your soul.”

In a camp near the Baltic Sea, there was a shack full of prisoners – German babies weighting eight pounds. A Jewish doctor, who survived Auschwitz, did not permit the mothers to breast feed their babies. Out of 50 children, 48 died.

The German women detained in camps were forced to dig out the dead bodies of Jews from the graves to which Germans had put them. When they took the bodies out, they were forced at gunpoint to “embrace the dead bodies, kiss them, and have sex with them.”

These fragments inevitably raise the question on who is the victim and who is the perpetrator, and what are the differences between them. Our patients with PTSD got ill because of killing and torturing others as well as being tortured themselves. Both roles, that of the perpetrator and that of the victim got intertwined. It happens very often. We took Germans and Jews as examples (1), but could choose Serbs, Bosnians or Croats just as well. Muslims regard raped women as “dirty”. During the occupation of Kuwait, many women were raped. Since Kuwait men did not know which woman was raped and which was not, they did not marry after the war for a long time. Likewise, Serbs used to kill Albanians in Kosovo for decades. The Albanians fought back with a high birth rate and today they make 90% of population in Kosovo. In summer 2001, we witnessed fights between Albanian terrorists and Macedonian regular forces, where Albanians make 30-40% of population in Macedonia. In all of these situations, one can speculate on the victim and attacker – usually both roles go hand in hand.

Guilt

Although we cannot yet speak about transmission of guilt feelings caused by the war in Croatia (1991-1995), we can expect it in the wives and mothers of men gone missing in the war. These women can neither elaborate their losses, nor go through the usual mourning process, because they do not know the fate of their sons and husbands. The very rigid and punitive superego of some groups of war victims makes every therapeutic approach and elaboration of psychic trauma rather difficult. The example are raped women and sexually abused men, who develop strong, unconscious feelings of guilt because of what happened to them and suffer narcissistic injury, shame, and loss of self-respect. The suicides in these groups, in our opinion, are a consequence of a “deserved” punishment by the Superego, because the Ego could not endure heavy reproaches of the Superego.

Survivor’s guilt (a phenomenon Freud described after the death of his father) can often be seen in the children (the second generation) of Holocaust victims (13). In our war, many of those who survived manifested guilt (14). Croatian war veterans often felt the guilt about their comrades or commanders who did not survive. Even the disabled and released war prisoners, who suffered a lot during the war themselves, felt survivor’s guilt. A special form of such guilt was demonstrated by mothers and wives of missing soldiers and by the elderly because they were left alive, whereas young people were killed.

Shame

Shame and fear of being of certain nationality was very manifest during the war in Croatia. There was suspicion, even open aggression, towards the Serbs who did not flee Croatia. Some people denied their own nationality by changing their first or last names, and then felt ashamed of their own action. A patient of Serbian nationality thought she would get a better job if she stated that she was of Croatian nationality. Afterwards, she said that she was very ashamed of that and that her father would have immediately disowned her if he had known.

Shame because of father was well documented in Freud’s work (15). He described in detail how he felt when a man took the hat from his father’s head and threw it in the mud, and his father calmly picked it up, swept it off, and put it back on his head. One of the authors of this text felt similar when he found out that during World War II his father converted to Catholic religion (although it did not help him). In both cases, the matter is related to the father loosing his status of magnitude.

Intergenerational Transmission of Trauma and Emotions

The factors that induce the development of hatred, revenge, guilt, and shame and their intergenerational transmission are diverse and complex, but retraumatization, or secondary victimization, is certainly one of them. Development or pre-existence of a pathological superego and unsuccessful therapy can also bear significant influence in this respect.

The factors that can help to abate the hatred, revenge, guilt and shame and decrease their intergenerational transmission are also difficult and complex. Successful therapy can certainly help, but turning to religion, even religious fanaticism, has also been shown to meliorate the psychotrauma effects and decrease its intergenerational transmission. Successful sublimation, which is extremely rare, can also help, as in the case of an American soldier who dedicated himself to raising pigeons and nurturing his wife’s son after surviving the famous Bataan march, where many have died during the Vietnam war (5).

Freud (16) wrote: “So the human being is subject not only to the pressure of his immediate cultural environment, but also to the influence of the cultural history of his ancestors.” In his “The Ego and the Id” from 1923 (17), he presented his thesis that many habits, cultural manifestations, ideals, ethical principles, and the like were inherited through the Superego. In his opinion, a child’s Superego is formed not according to its parent’s Ego but according to its parent’s Superego, and all precipitates of general principles of the Superego are thus being transmitted to future generations.

Vamik Volkan (4) defined intergenerational transmission as “[it] is when an older person unconsciously
externalizes his traumatized self onto a developing child’s personality. A child then becomes a reservoir for the unwanted parts of an older generation. Because the elders have influence on a child, the child absorbs their wishes and expectations and is driven to act on them. It becomes the child’s task to mourn, to reverse the humiliation and feelings of helplessness pertaining to the trauma of his forebears. The transmissions of traumatized self-images occur almost as if psychological DNA were planted in the personality of the younger generation through its relationships with the previous one.”

What is actually transmitted are some superego derivatives, but most of all guilt and projections of a destructive character. For example, a Croat from Herzegovina, a disabled war veteran, described how he had left for Croatia as soon as the war had broken out to fight the “Četniks”. One of the reasons was that he had held Serbs responsible for killing his father and grandfather in the World War II. But the fact was that his grandfather was a tobacco smuggler and was killed by the regular state police at that time. A similar thing happened to his father who was in the “Ustaša” army (official army of the pro-Nazi regime in Croatia during the World War II) and was killed by the partisan army. At another occasion, another Croatian soldier ardentely explained how he would do his best to kill as many “Četniks” as possible. He also said that “Ustašas” were his idols, that his uncle was a very respected “Ustaša” during the World War II and shot by the communists after the war, and that his army hat was still sacredly treasured in his family house. Furthermore, there is an example of a patient who came for therapy 20 years after the traumatic experience. When the patient was a child, his father used to work in Germany. Once, after he came home from Germany, he sung nationalistic songs and became so badly that he became psychotic and never recovered. At his check-in, the patient reported having difficulties in communicating with others for years and mixed feelings of revenge and forgiveness for the people who tortured his father and who he still meets in the streets of the small town in which he lives. His mother has not recovered from the incident either and bears tremendous hatred for these people, which she transmits to the patient’s children. The patient fights against that fiercely because he thinks there can be no good in it, just as there was no good for him to watch his sick father for years and live with the mother who only spoke of her hatred for the communists.

Mother’s unconscious fantasies are also conveyed to her child, who then exhibits their derivatives along with associated defenses and changes of function. As D. Minkowsky described (personal communication, 1991) a group of pregnant Palestinian Arab women: “they had such hatred in their eyes that one felt they were transmitting it to their unborn children.” As if there is a transmission of some kind of psychological genes onto the children, which can later result in negative feelings in the children. Another interesting example is that of “substitute-children”, described after the Holocaust – surviving Jews used to name their children after their killed relatives (18).

Intergenerational transmission presents the vicious cycle of psychotrauma and furthers the possibility of its happening again. How can the circle of intergenerational transmission of trauma be discontinued? The answer is simple but difficult to execute – the conflicted parties have to be reconciled.

**Prevention of Intergenerational Transmission of Emotions and Trauma**

**Therapy**

We have had the most experience with group psychotherapy in homogenous and heterogeneous groups (18). From the very beginning of our work back in 1993, we organized homogenous group psychotherapy with PTSD patients. Generally, the only therapeutic benefit of such homogenous groups were in reducing destructive aggression. We believe that homogenous groups develop pathological cohesiveness with abundant projections against the outerworld, the state authorities, the therapist, and social injustice, which slow down or halt the process. The secondary gain problems, ever-present in this kind of groups, are further obstacles to the therapeutic process. Heterogeneous groups conducted in a group-analytic or group-psychotherapy technique, are assembled with patients with different diagnoses: post-traumatic stress disorder, neuroses, borderline personality disorder, and milder forms of psychoses.

**Therapists’ Countertransference**

A patient named Filip was a member of a military unit that did not officially exist. His appearance was horrifying; he had made two suicide attempts and was heavily medicated with different psychopharmaceutical medications. His father was an alcoholic, did nothing to support his family, which he finally totally disregarded and left. Filip got married pretty early and soon divorced. He had a daughter of eight. He was one of the most aggressive group members. Once he raised his voice in the group saying that they were all “Ustašas” and that everybody who was not a Croat should be killed. The group agreed with him and the group conductor (one of the authors of this text) felt tremendous anxiety, which he was not able to understand at the moment. The day after the conductor remembered an anecdote from his father’s life. In 1943 the father spent some time in Italy. He was a partisan officer and a Jew, and ran by pure accident into a group of “Ustaša” officers. After talking with them for some time he recognized who they were and somehow managed to get away. He was saved only by the coincidence that he never liked to wear hats, so he did not wear his military cap at the time. The conductor also remembered an incident from 1943 when an “Ustaša” soldier came to visit some friends of his family. He was seven years old and was very scared when listening the soldier telling about how he had massacred a partisan soldier. He was scared about what would happen to him if the soldier should find out that he was a Jew.
The crucial question here is whether a therapist’s Superego can empathize with the Superego of such patients (20-22). For the therapist, in the sequence above, it was really hard to empathize with what his patients did. Relating this, Tyson wrote: “Kernberg’s case material also raised the question whether widely differing moral standards would interfere with analyst’s neutrality” (23). He further discussed whether Goldberg felt that a shift in theory would lead to greater understanding as well as less intrusive interventions – or is it possible that idealization of a theory could lead to countertransference interference?

The therapist, from the sequence above, further reported that it was much easier for him to empathize with the patients’ suffering and hurt, which presented Superego punishment. And that he even felt pleased when they expressed remorse about the things they did to their own children. What causes the guilt in therapists working with such patients is a relative lack of therapeutic success in their treatment, which opens narcissistic wounds in the therapists. Also the “guilt of a bystander” often appears in these situations, which the patients regularly induce with questions such as: “Where have you been when we fought and suffered for your safety?” We would like to end this anecdote by quoting Kernberg: “The capacity to forgive usually reflects a mature superego. The capacity to forgive others stems from having been able to recognize aggression and ambivalence in oneself” (24).

Factors Determining the Outcome of Trauma Treatment

The success of the therapy depends most of all on the number of patients versus the number of therapists, and this ratio is almost always unfavorable. It also depends on the number of adequately trained therapists who will work with patients and also train other therapists. Unfortunately, our experience has shown that trained therapists generally tend to avoid these patients. The success further depends on the possible retraumatization factors and general attitude of the community which Hopper describes in the following way (6): “The open and honest discussion of traumatic events and their consequences should not be confined to situations that have been defined as ‘therapy’. In democratic societies this always presents a dilemma: if space is not provided for working through traumatic events, they will never be worked through; and if space is provided, those in power will have threats to their authority. Unresolved, this dilemma usually stops those in authority from providing the space for full discussion.”

Although we did try to provide help for all psychotraumatized people from the very beginning of the war (25), this was not possible mostly due to the disproportion in the number of traumatized people and therapists. Even today, we have an important number of psychotraumatized people needing help, the majority with PTSD, of course. What has to be stressed here is that it is crucial to perform a meticulous selection of those patients, through the interview, for different kinds of psychotherapy. This is a very difficult issue, also for ethical reasons, because if we decide that someone is not indicated for major psychotherapy, group or individual, it is as we had “sentenced” him in a way. Nevertheless one has to stay firmly in reality. Many different kinds of personality disorders comorbid to PTSD make patients very unperceptive for differentiated kinds of psychotherapy. They can be provided with better help by some shorter, support level models of psychotherapy, in conjunction with pharmacotherapy and sociotherapy.

The discussion so far has presented everything quite black, which can have the consequence of making everybody feel helpless and impotent. Supporting this impression is also the issue of retraumatization, which presents a serious obstacle in the therapeutic process. Retraumatization presents a reopening of the narcissistic wounds. The larger community attitude toward the veterans in Croatia is growing worse each day. Often enough nowadays one can hear people saying to the veterans: “Who made you fight? Who made you volunteer for the war?” At the beginning, the State authorities did not recognize PTSD as a valid condition. Now it is rated of second importance in comparison to physical injuries sustained in the war. Whenever our veterans feel like talking about their sufferings and about what happened in the war, the people around turn them down, saying they are boring, or something similar. From time to time they try to protect themselves by disregarding all this through their projections, but it does not work. What happens finally is that the veterans introject the larger community attitudes and develop tremendous feelings of guilt (26).

“Second injury” or “secondary victimization” happens when a traumatized person is not understood or believed by the Health or other Caring professions, or the extent of her or his traumatization is not recognized by the community or society and is even denied by various official institutions (27). A disappointing institutional response, lack of social support and understanding, together with lengthy and unsatisfactory litigation or compensation processes, further contribute to revictimization of traumatized persons. Very often, the victims feel that these long bureaucratic processes “made things worse” for them, as they relived the primal traumatic experience and were faced with disbelief in the legitimacy of their claims. Furthermore, the traumatized person loses her or his trust in other people and the society in general, and may be left with a sense of isolation and vulnerability in a world that may seem unpredictable and unjust (28).

So, when faced with the impact of massive trauma, society usually reacts with denial and rejection in order to maintain its illusion of invulnerability. Describing these protective social tendencies against trauma victims, McFarlane and Van der Kolk pointed out that: “Bearers of bad tidings are generally considered dangerous; thus societies tend to be suspicious that victims will contaminate the social fabric, undermine self-reliance, consume social resources, and live of the strong. The weak are a liability, and, after an initial period of compassion, are vulnerable to being singled out as parasites and carriers of social malaise” (29).
The Holocaust survivors who came to Israel after the war were also faced with the complex attitudes of Israeli society by being rejected and blamed for their sufferings (31). A relatively low interest for the victims' suffering on the part of the establishment, lack of proper treatment, and demand for the repression of their emotional problems marked Israeli's general public response to Holocaust, and that response in many ways reflected the attitudes of the helping professions.

In the Vietnam War, the lessons of the World War I, and II, were once again forgotten, and the distressed veterans' problems were ignored and opposed by American society, which could not come to terms with its own role in the war (32).

After the 1991-1995 war in Croatia, the return of displaced people and refugees presented a great retraumatization. We will try to present this with an example from the hospital in the town of Vukovar. One can only wonder how physicians and other hospital personnel of Croatian nationality feel nowadays working again with their colleagues of Serbian nationality who, on November 18, 1991, after the Serbian occupation of the town, used to mark people of Croatian nationality in the hospital for Serbian soldiers and officers to execute. How can the psychopathology induced by return be prevented in a situation like this?

Displaced people presented a special kind of war victims in the war in Croatia. Among them there were the old, women with children, handicapped people, and released prisoners of war (POWs), all of whom suffered tremendously. From the beginning of their torment that is from the day they were forced to leave their homes they had one dominant thought – that of returning home. The return home was elaborated in numerous fantasies, the most important were as follows: “When we return everything will be as it was.” “The return will be the best moment of my life.” “Everyone will help me to build my life even better and richer than it was before.” “It cannot be that everything was so badly destroyed as they say.” But the reality of return soon dismissed all of these fantasies. They soon realized that nothing would ever be as it was before. When talking to these people and working with them it was necessary to repeal this fantasy, but in a very tactful manner. Unfortunately, it seems that this was generally not done. The return will indeed be the most beautiful moment in those peoples' lives but there will be many things to spoil this beauty. The state, society, friends, neighbors, relatives all of them will help the returnees to make their lives better, but in small ways. The greatest part they will still have to do themselves. Everything was destroyed even to a greater extent than they had been told. It is only natural that these fantasies had to be dismantled very gradually and carefully. It is common knowledge that almost nothing was done in this respect, as it was a very hard and ungrateful job to do, requiring very specific skills and education. This kind of intervention would have prevented the post-return disappointments, which induced further psychological disturbances (19).

Apology and Asking for Forgiveness

The idea of a group or its leader asking for forgiveness from another group or its leader may be a potentially powerful gesture if the groundwork has truly been laid. Forgiveness is possible only when the group that suffered has done a significant amount of mourning. The focus should be on helping with the work of mourning and not on the single (seemingly magical) act of asking for forgiveness. Persistent large-group conflicts cannot be solved by an “instant-coffee” approach (4).

History teaches us just how hard and difficult it is to plead forgiveness from the victim, either for oneself or for one’s nation. It seems to be a narcissistic injury that people take very hard. In the recent war in the area of former Yugoslavia it was well documented that neither the Serbian people nor the Serbian Orthodox Church asked forgiveness for the atrocities they committed against Croats and Bosniaks. On the other side the Catholic Church in Croatia pleaded forgiveness from everybody Croats have done wrong on a number of occasions. A true and genuine plea for forgiveness requires great inner strengths, which people so seldom have!

After the peaceful re-integration of Eastern Slavonia and Vukovar, Croats were commemorating the day of the fall of Vukovar with placing wreaths on the tombs and with general mourning. In the previous years Serbs had celebrated that day as the day of victory in Vukovar. Since the liberation of Vukovar Serbs
did not react at all to that day. In 2001, a delegation of Serbs placed a wreath at a cross, a symbol of torture of Croats in Vukovar, for the first time. It is a very good sign and we hope this direction will be continued.

We will try to present these issues with some additional examples form our reconciliation groups. At one occasion, when the national tensions in the group reached their peak, one group member said: “It would be best for everybody if we could look for the perpetrators each in our own nation and apologize for the atrocities done by our nation.” Another one, a Croat, agreed and added that Croats should apologize for Jasenovac (concentration camp from the World War II), but asked who would apologize for Bleiburg (place in Austria where many thousands of Croats were extrajudically executed by partisans in 1945) and other atrocities done to Croats by “Cetniks”. He also added that he wanted to explain to everyone that he understood the fact that Croatian soldiers also did some atrocities, but right after saying this he turned to discuss general politics. A Muslim lady named Jasmina said how she used to trust the Bosnian Army, but the trust was gone when she heard, from a wounded soldier that she treated, about the things they have done. Another Croatian in the group said that he took part in the “Storm” offensive; but that he heard of no atrocities done by Croatian soldiers and that he knew that they did no such thing. He condemned individual atrocities done by Croatian soldiers, but there were many more done by the other side, which started the war in the first place. He continued by saying that it should be said who did what, for the sake of justice, truth and future co-existence. Then a Serbian member in the group, named Brane, started talking about some Serbian paramilitary forces, which he did not see personally but was told about. They used to invade Croatian villages, rob the houses and kill even the little babies in their cradles, because village people used to hide their gold there. He also said that the motivation to go to war was different for different people. Some were there to rob and some for vengeance, he said. Following this some other group members gave examples of soldiers murdering people of their own nation. At this point, the group conductor said that the group members finally came to talk about atrocities done by members of their own nations, but some still kept reservations. One of the group members said that he disagreed with the interpretations, given by the conductor on several occasions. He thought that conductor was equating the responsibility of Serbs and Croats in the war. It seemed to him as if the conductor was working for the USA or some other world power, although he did not want to continue about this topic in order not to sound paranoid. Then Brane asked how much guilt he should admit to for the group to be satisfied. Following this the conductor asked the group if they would be satisfied if Brane were to kneel down and beg for forgiveness. As a result he was attacked by the Croatian and Muslim members in the group. Svetlana, another Serbian member, said that she felt manipulated, because when coming to the meeting she didn’t know she would be involved in a reconciliation group. She came to learn something about psychotraumatology and to communicate with the colleagues, but instead she felt like she was under constant attack and as if nobody perceived her as a human being but only as a Serb. Saying this she cried. Another group member, a lady from Slovenia, said she did not want to participate in this group either. The group conductor intervened here saying that it seemed that the most important concern in the group was that they were all actually manipulated by him, that they were all his “victims”. A Muslim named Senad and a Croat named Dinko confirmed this. Dinko said that he believed the conductor was promoting the idea of a new Yugoslavia. He had known he was to attend a reconciliation group and he agreed with the idea, but nevertheless the conductor managed to manipulate everyone. He had to say this although the others might think he was paranoid. The conductor said at this point that, in spite of all his manipulation, he was still very concerned about two people in the group, namely Svetlana and Dinko. They were the ones who reacted emotionally, far more than the others did, but nobody paid any attention to them. One Slovenian member said here that he felt nothing against Svetlana and Brane and could speak with them quite normally. Also, one Croatian member said how she felt responsible for Svetlana and Brane because she invited them to participate the group, and here they were constantly under attack. At this point Svetlana expressed her gratitude to the Slovenian member for his support, and the conductor asked her if it was really necessary for someone to stand by them, the Serbs, here in the group. She answered: “Not really. You are right.”

Reconciliation

To understand the concept of reconciliation one must first understand the issue of Large Group identity and everything associated with it. The fourth of the deepest levels of communication as stipulated by Foulkes is the primordial level representing the collective unconscious and the collective myths, archetypes, language etc within it. All of these together create the foundation matrix. Related to this Brown says that in the family and in social relationships, our manners and ethical standards operate automatically (33). These are taken in with “mother’s milk,” and are introjected through processes of identification and education so that they become natural – as one’s mother language seems natural. It is only when they are challenged by confrontation with another culture or language, e.g., through migration, or even on holidays, that they are seen as only one form of what is natural. Such confrontation can be threatening or enriching according to the basic security of the individual or the group: some manage to be enriched by exposure to diverse cultures. But if the changes are traumatic, or the challenges too incompatible with a continuing sense of security and worth, great damage can be done, especially to more vulnerable people.

Volkan defines the large group identity in the following way (34): “I define large-group identity – whether it refers to religion, nationality or ethnicity – as the subjective experience of thousands or millions
of people who are linked by a persistent sense of sameness while also sharing numerous characteristics with others in foreign groups. Individuals thus collectively define and differentiate themselves as Jewish, French or Kurdish. If a person is born into a family in which parents come from different large groups, or if a person becomes an immigrant voluntarily or is forcibly dislocated to a country or region dominated by a different large group, his or her sense of large-group identity may be confused and complicated.

In bringing together two large groups one must not ask them to give up their differences (34,35). The group identities have to be preserved and what needs to be built up is a mutual empathy and understanding. When in conflict, ethnic groups develop large group cohesion and a matrix filled with fear, distrust, hatred and lust for revenge. The growth of such matrix is supported by the mass media and leaders who profit from national homogenization on the basis of paranoid projections against the other nations. Changes in such matrix are hard to bring about. When the foundation matrix is that unfavorable, all one can do is to try to influence the dynamic matrix. During the last three years we tried to start a reconciliation process between Croatian, Serbian, Bosniak (Muslim), and Slovenian mental health professionals. We were considerably helped and guided by V. Volkan. One might wonder why it was only mental health professionals that we elected for our reconciliation groups. The reason was that they were usually quite influential people in their communities, who could pass on their ideas and experience in the median reconciliation groups onto their large groups. Hopefully, one could expect them to influence the decision-makers in their communities to support the idea of reconciliation groups, and even participate in them.

We will present a sequence from one of these reconciliation groups. Jadranka, a group member from Bosnia, started on about her ambiguous national identity. Her grandparents were of several different nations, and when the war in Bosnia started her Croat relatives were warned to flee because they were single out to be killed; the warning came too late and they were indeed murdered. Senad, a Muslim from Bosnia, also talked of his background, about his family and how when living in Sandžak (a part of Serbia predominantly populated by Muslims) he was a “Bosniak,” while later in Bosnia he was a Bosnian. His wife Senada also talked about her “Bosniak” background, pointing out that nobody paid any attention to that matter before the war. Stefan than said that all of his family was Slovenian and that he was Slovenian as well, but this has never been a major issue for them, not ever and not now, when they see themselves as Europeans. Brane talked about his mixed background, his father Dalmatian and mother Bosnian. Nevertheless, most of his life he lived in Vojvodina, a part of Serbia, and mostly he felt Serbian. Stanka now talked about her Croatian identity, her father from Baška Voda and mother from Zagreb, but there was never any special concern given to that in her family. Svetlana said that her family was Serbian, but they always lived in the Yugoslav province of Vojvodina together with many different nationalities and people, so their nationality never came out in any special way. Dinko said that he was born in Sarajevo, by pure chance. He always felt Croatian although having lived in a number of places, and never made any issue of that. Mirela spoke of how she was brought up as a Croat much more by her grandmother than her mother, but this never came out before the war, when the feelings started to grow. Making a resume the group conductor said that he perceived two sub-groups in the group, one with no significantly worked-out national identity and the other having some, but seeing no particular problem or issue there. And that everyone was distancing themselves from their national identity, as if that was of no importance and as if nothing has happened, leaving an impression as if we were not substantially traumatized in these past wars of ours, being now so kind and polite to each other. He asked: “Perhaps the war left its mark after all?” Senada said that she now felt excited remembering how her children were endangered during the war and how she would never forget that.

When empathic communication starts the opposing groups begin to become close. This closeness, however, is followed by a sudden withdrawal from one another and then again by closeness. The pattern repeats itself many times. This could be compared to an accordion – squeezing together and then pulling apart. On the first session everyone in the group was very polite. We understood each other and tolerated different ideas; actually we were like brothers. During the second session, Senad started by saying that he has thought a lot about the group yesterday and felt at unease with colleagues from Serbia. He knew, he said, that they were good and nice people, but nevertheless, his feelings overcame him. Now he remembered how hard it was in the war, with shelving and everything. He used to talk about the war on the local radio and in the newspapers at the time. Even then he had tried not to make generalizations, not to talk against Serbs but “Četniks”. He even quoted Prof. Matić from Belgrade, trying not to make generalizations and to stay rational. But, with all his effort, there were two things that struck him really hard. On an occasion he watched a Serbian TV broadcasting an open-air concert. Everybody had a good time there, children were playing around, while the songs went on about the Bosnian president Alija who should be killed and about Muslims who should be murdered, their corpses floated in the river Sava. He felt very bad indeed then. The other occasion was the parliament election victory of Milošević and Šešelj in Serbia, which meant that the people were actually on their side. Now Svetlana said that she had felt very bad after the group yesterday, feeling that everybody there was against them, since they were Serbs. She was afraid to come to Dubrovnik, not knowing what might happen. She was scared somebody might verbally or even physically attack her. She was calmed down by a taxi driver at the Dubrovnik airport, who assured her nothing like that would happen. But, earlier that day, just before the group, she heard some people at the beach saying how Serbs returning to Croatia were not welcome and how who-knows-what
might happen to them. This made her scared all over again. Drago then said: “I can’t take this any more. We should have talked about this yesterday I suppose. I fought against Serbs and they were my enemies, too. I cannot exclude anybody. I might have had some friends in Serbia, but in the war they also shoot at me, and they were my enemies. Today they are not my enemies any longer, but I like things being stated as they are.” Svetlana answered that she always thought that the Yugoslav Army protected the innocent people in Croatia. This reminded Brane of how he watched the Croatian liberation of the city of Knin, seeing all these many refugees fleeing, expelled; he felt really bad. Now Dinko opened up on Bleiburg and other atrocities done at the end of the World War II. Then Brane and Svetlana started on what the “Ustašas” did in World War II. This led to a discussion on who was worse - the “Ustašas” or the “Cetniks”. Mila remarked that it was not easy for her when in the former Yugoslavia she was not allowed to celebrate Christmas. Following this, a discussion opened up between Bosniaks and Mila, a Croat. Bosniaks stated that someone should pay for Sarajevo, Mostar and Srebrenica, while Mila asked who was going to pay for Vukovar, Dubrovnik, Šibenik, Zadar, Osijek, Vinkovci and other Croatian cities demolished in the war. When it was discussed if Croats should pay for the Old Mostar Bridge, which they destroyed, Mila said that she would pay for Vukovar not for Mostar. Vamik Volkan made a resume to the discussion saying that we should all pay for all the destroyed cities, not everyone for his or her own.

A very important issue for groups like this is that of who suffered more and who was the biggest victim. We will try to present this in next few examples; Senad, very excited, talked about Serbian hatred towards Muslims. He said that their hatred went back for centuries – from the battle of Kosovo. He felt that Serbs did not think of Muslims as human, but as dirt. He got more and more aroused saying that the bombs were falling on Sarajevo for three and half years. The Serbs were killing people, trying to erase the town. Nothing could be done here because Serbs did not perceive Muslims as human beings. Now Svetlana spoke out, saying that she felt very bad in the group, feeling that they were attacked here and that nobody perceived them as human but only as Serbs.

Also very important is the issue of language. Language is an attribute of national and even regional background, since some people of the same nationality but from different regions can hardly understand each other. We will try to present this with a discussion on this issue from the same reconciliation group. Someone in the group mentioned a swine. Vamik Volkan picked up on the discussion immediately and said that it was a very important symbol, which Muslims could use to project onto others, while the others could not project back onto them, as they have no contact with the swine. Janko then described how in Sarajevo it was impossible to buy pork legally; it was only possible to get some in the black market. Further he said that in Bosnia the swine was not even included in the school textbooks with the other domestic animals. In yet another group the matter of language was also discussed. The group conductor said: “It was described how the waiter acted very suspicious towards somebody who used the Serbian word for bread, yet it turned out that the person was from Imotski in Croatia.” Following this one group member from Slovenia said that at several occasions when speaking Croatian in some public place she felt very uneasy and rejected, all because she had learned Serbian in school and was probably perceived a Serb. For this reason she switched to Slovenian and felt much safer.

World experience as well as our own, Croatian, has taught us how hard, long and often unsuccessful the work of reconciliation was. Concerning the international community, NATO forces and other different medical and not-medical organizations, it seems that they are trying to reconcile the people in the area of former Yugoslavia by force. It is hard to understand their attitude, but the outcome is extremely poor. Perhaps this is an experiment for the others to learn from. For the people here this experiment is very painful. Recently we could witness several tragic incidents related to reconciliation as commanded by the important international bodies. We would like to mention a few of those. In the spring of 2001, it was ordered, by the UN authorities in Bosnia and Herzegovina, that a cornerstone for a new mosque in Banja Luka is to be planted. Banja Luka is a capital of Republika Srpska – a Serbian state within Bosnia and Herzegovina. The event provoked a huge incident. The Serbian population in the town organized large demonstrations and the installation of the cornerstone was postponed. One week later the stone was finally planted but only with a strong police and military forces protecting the ceremony and fighting back the demonstrators with tear-gas and water cannons. In the town of Mostar there are continuous conflicts going on between the local Croats and Muslims, and all the attempts of reconciliation have failed. Many Croats who have returned to their homes in Republika Srpska have been killed. In summer 2001 we had a very traumatizing incident here in Croatia. A 75-year old Serbian woman was killed. She had survived the whole war living in her village only to be killed now, after the war. Examples like these must make us wonder about who the one who performs the experiments here is and who the guinea pig is, who the colonizer and who the colonized is. With such a policy, the intergenerational transmission of the trauma and accompanying feelings will be hardly, if at all, put to an end.

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137