

The Second Generation of the *Shoah*: Taking on the trauma and the opportunity for post- traumatic growth

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Outline of this presentation

1. What can we learn from Holocaust survivors in terms of coping and resilience?
2. What impact has their coping had on their children, the „Second Generation“?
3. What is the relationship between resilience and „healing“?
4. Implications for victims of more recent “man-made disasters” and for us as healers

Trying to understand the Holocaust

- Not our primary task today, also hardly possible in the time allotted
- Gordon Allport, Harvard Professor of Psychology made an attempt shortly after World War II
- „Cruelty is not a favored human trait. Even the top Nazi officials who were tried at Nürnberg pretended that they knew nothing about the inhuman practices in the concentration camps. They shrank from admitting their part because they too wished to be thought of as human beings.“
- Assumption that the cycle of violence could be interrupted under certain conditions

Allport: the tolerant personality (1954)

- In today's terms: „mental health“
- Children are raised to „feel welcome, accepted, loved, no matter what they do“
- Security rather than threat
- Attitude toward parents is well differentiated ... without fear of being critical
- Mental flexibility/rejection of two-valued logic
- Frustration tolerance
- Tolerance for ambiguity
- Social intelligence
- Empathy
- Capacity for self-reflection/introspection
- Multi-factoral (family, environment, life experience)

After the Holocaust: in short

- Millions of Jews, Roma, Sinti, homosexuals, political prisoners, handicapped and other people were murdered
- Children and adults survived concentration camps, death marches, ghettos, hiding places or as refugees
- Loss of family members, homes, possessions, identities
- Beginning in 1945, started their lives over
- Living in “displaced persons” camps or as refugees in other parts of Europe, Palestine, North and South America, Australia and South Africa
- After having adapted to unimaginable conditions, having to re-adapt to “normalcy”
- Finding – or not finding -- family members
- Finding a (new) partner, starting a family
- Mildly - severely traumatized

Coping and resilience?

- The Holocaust or *Shoah* ended in 1945
- Why is it still relevant today?
- Most of the survivors have died or are aging: most of them demonstrated great examples of coping and resilience, surviving for decades without psychological or other supports
- Nevertheless: to some extent their symptoms and coping mechanisms might also be termed „resilient“ since they persist in some form still today and may have a detrimental impact on them and their relationships
- What are the prerequisites for healing, individually, in the family and in society?

Coping mechanisms

- The overwhelming majority of the survivors coped very well in making new lives for themselves: demonstrating enormous resiliency and resolve to get on with their lives
- Created a semblance of normalcy (family, work) in the Post-War world
- They displayed behaviors and symptoms which were not necessarily “pathological”, given the circumstances under which they had been forced to live
- It is safe to say, however, that **as parents** they were not unencumbered by their experiences during the War and the children could not be spared the verbal, physical and subliminal data which was passed on to them

Some typical symptoms/behaviors

- (Without diagnosing or labelling)
- Not dwelling consciously or verbally on the past/Denial
- Tendency to overlook or minimize vulnerability in themselves or their children; “being strong”
- Over-protection of children
- Anxiety
- Lack of trust
- Attachment difficulties
- Depression
- Lack of empathy, including toward the pain or anxieties of (their own) children (“empathy fatigue”)
- Self-absorption
- Tendency to see oneself as eternal victim
- Tendency to overlook one’s own aggression toward others
- Silence

Finding new meaning

- The birth of a child after the *Shoah* meant continuity and a connection to earlier life
- The children were to be given all that the survivors themselves had not had or had lost
- The children should be happy and successful and thereby give meaning to all that they had suffered.
- The children represented victory over the persecutors.
- The children must not under any circumstances know, either from retelling or from personal experience, about the suffering and losses of the parents.

Judith Herman (Trauma and Recovery, 1992)

- Empowerment
- Creation of new connections
- Basic capacities for trust, autonomy, initiative, competence, identity and intimacy
- Despite difficulty of accepting help, especially from psychotherapists (because it acknowledges neediness), the willingness to accept therapeutic support
- Therapist is technically but not morally neutral
- Therapy develops into a collaboration of non-coercive trust

Psychotrauma?

- The concepts we know today of „trauma“, „PTSD“ and „posttraumatic growth“ were unknown
- Survivors were left to their own devices, most of them had a strong will to get on with their lives and to cope with what had happened and what might come their way ***on their own***
- No psychotherapists, no groups, no graves to visit, no awareness of **trauma** in the community
- the resources to cope had to come from within-- depending on their pre-War life experiences-- or were projected as expectations onto their children

Survival vs. healing

- No therapists available after the War
- Not many wanted to hear their stories
- **Empowerment** could be experienced when they were able to establish a family, learn a new language and adapt to a new environment, develop themselves professionally in the new context and find meaningful relationships with others

Irony of „resilience“

- We applaud **resilience** as a trait in survivors of trauma
- But symptoms may also be „resilient“ and may enhance the transfer of the trauma to the next generation
- As helpers, by validating the success stories of the traumatized we may also be cementing those coping strategies which:
 - prevent interrupting the cycle of violence
 - May hamper the mental health of future generations

Overshadowed childhood: Impact on the „Second Generation“

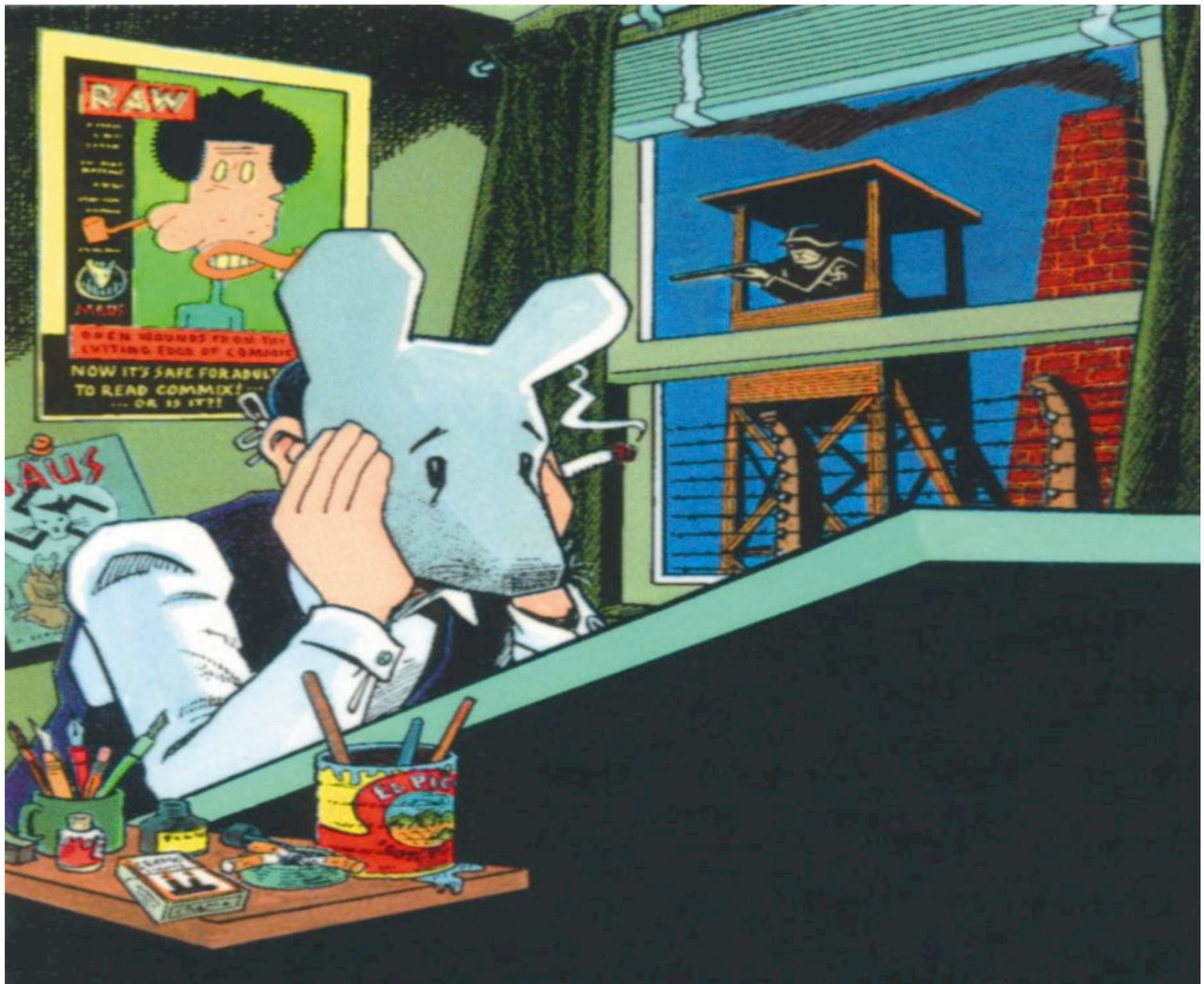
- Their children were born chronologically after the end of World War II, but emotionally they were born in the midst of the Holocaust
- Many of the new parents had had no opportunity to recover from their physical and emotional wounds and from the overwhelming losses they had suffered.
- Few of them had had any opportunity to mourn since in most survivor families the death dates--and often even the circumstances of the deaths of close family members--were never known and there were no graves to visit
- The parents' goal, to spare their children the anxiety and losses to which they had been exposed, could—despite their best efforts -- not be fulfilled

Parentification: the unacknowledged role which the children took on

- Parenting their own parents
- Taking on at an early age the emotional care of the parents: protecting, relieving, accompanying
- Inevitably leading to the loss of a sense of their own identity and emotional needs
- Enmeshment
- Preventing the possibility of age-appropriate separation from the parents in adolescence or early adulthood

„Memorial Candles (Dina Wardi, 1992“

- One child in survivor family, often female
- Rescuer of the family especially in times of family crisis during the lifetime of the parents
- Two levels: emotional and real
- Symbiotically enmeshed with their parents
- Need to relive the Holocaust, compulsively, again and again (catastrophic thinking, existential threats) and change the outcome



To tell or not to tell

- Most survivors of the Holocaust as parents “chose” one of two strategies:
 1. Telling their children (sometimes over and over again) about what they had experienced during the *Shoah*
 2. Never telling them anything or, at best, very little in order to spare them. Some even went so far as not to reveal their own Jewish identities to their children, perhaps hoping to make them invulnerable to future anti-Semitic persecution, like a sort of invisible protective shield
- Whether they grew up with the stories or the silence, their children could not be spared trans-generational trauma

Dan Bar-On: “double wall”

- Parents who don't tell
- Children who don't ask
- A thick wall of silence, of emotional distance, of fears, of unspoken fantasies, of unexpressed emotions
- Even when the parent or child tried to open a window in their own wall, they faced the wall of the other
- Can be repeated in other relationships, including with partners, therapists and one's own children in later life

Transgenerational trauma

- Developed when children were either overwhelmed by the inundating information of their parents or by their silence and abstinence
- Developed through the lack of protection from the “dangers” of their own fantasies
- Developed as a result of not having their boundaries and integrity respected by parents whose own boundaries were severely and constantly violated during the *Shoah*
- Developed through their unconscious identification with the unspoken or projected wishes of their survivor parents: feeling eternally threatened and victimized or becoming avengers

Double binds

- Two contradictory messages (not necessarily verbally expressed) from parent to child which can be very difficult or even impossible to carry out, confusing and possibly negatively impacting the mental health of the recipient of the message
- “Be (miserable) like me”/”be happy!”
- “I don’t need anyone”/”I’m vulnerable!”
- “stay close to (don’t abandon) me”/”be free!”
- “you do everything wrong”/”be competent and successful!”
- “remember!”/”(don’t know) forget!”

The taboo of identifying one's own pain

- In the families of *Shoah* survivors, the parents (not the children) are the victims
- There is a clear hierarchy of victimization
- Empathy is reserved for the parents, not for self or others
- Self-pity is not an acceptable form of expression for the Second Generation
- Expressing one's own victimization as if it were comparable to that of the parents is a source of shame
- Constantly faced with ambivalence and insoluble dilemmas
- Constantly faced with “catastrophes” and danger

Zero tolerance for ambiguity in trauma families

- The ability to accept two different truths or possibilities simultaneously
- Everything is black or white, good or bad, victim or perpetrator

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Coping and resilience in the Second Generation

- For this generation, there are therapists!
- Finding balance between parentification and individuation
- Learning to cope with ambivalence and ambiguities
- Acknowledging and pursuing one's own right to a full life and to happiness
- Achieving an emotional separation from the parents even at an advanced state of adulthood.
- Awareness of own feelings and needs
- Empathy for oneself and for others
- Giving own children security and continuity, openness and trusting environment (eg. age-appropriate information about the Shoah and family history)
- Bearing witness through books, film, memorials, Holocaust education

Survivors today: opportunities for healing

- The older ones are no longer with us...
- The Child Survivors (born between 1929-45) are aging:
 1. the decades of coping strategies and support systems are no longer so successfully entrenched
 2. resilience is wearing thin
 3. The memories return, cannot be defended against
 4. Need to talk is greater
 5. Holocaust is no longer a societal taboo: on the contrary, the media are full of Holocaust information, Holocaust memorials and Holocaust education—giving survivors a sense of validation

Can one put an end to the *Shoah*?

1. For the children: accepting the possibility of living a life relatively free of anxiety, guilt and pain even if it does not retroactively help the parents
2. For the Jewish people, for Germans and other impacted collectives:
 - facing the ambiguity of victim and perpetrator identities
 - Not allowing guilt feelings or hate to obscure the perception of one's own wrongdoing or the suffering of others
3. For society as a whole:
 - pursuit of nonviolence, social justice and reconciliation
 - Empathy as a value for all

Implications for us as healers

1. Offering debriefing and other forms of support as quickly as possible where new wars, persecution and genocide occur
2. Empowering without cementing victim identity
3. Coping with the ambiguity of our role:
 - respecting the denial and other coping strategies of the traumatized
 - supporting the need of their relatives to put an end to taboos and family secrets
4. Coping with our own helplessness

Literature

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