

The Psychological Affects of the Holocaust

The Holocaust was a tragic point in history which many people believe never happened. Others who survived it thought it should never have been. Not only did this affect the people who lived through it, it also affected everyone who was connected to those fortunate individuals who survived. The survivors were lucky to have made it but there are times when their memories and flashbacks have made them wish they were the ones who died instead of living with the horrible aftermath. The psychological effects of the Holocaust on people from different parts such as survivors of Israel and survivors of the ghettos and camps vary in some ways yet in others are profoundly similar. The vast number of prisoners of various nationalities and religions in the camps made such differences inevitable. Many contrasting opinions have been published about the victims and survivors of the holocaust based on the writers' different cultural backgrounds, personal experiences and intelectual traditions. Therefore, the opinions of the authors of such books and entries of human behavior and survival in the concentration camps in Nazi-occupied Europe are very diverse.

The Survivors of the Holocaust: General Survey

Because the traumatization of the Holocaust was both individual and collective, most individuals made efforts to create a "new family" to replace the nuclear family that had been lost. In order for the victims to resist dehumanization and regression and to find support, the members of such groups shared stories about the past, fantasies of the future and joint prayers as well as poetry and expressions of personal and general human aspirations for hope and love. Imagination was an important means of liberation from the frustrating reality by opening an outlet for the formulation of plans for the distant future, and by spurring to immediate actions.

Looking at the history of the Jewish survivors, from the beginning of the Nazi occupation until the liquidation of the ghettos shows that there are common features and simmilar psychophysiological patterns in their responses to the persecutions. The survivors often experienced several phases of psychosocial response, including attempts to actively master the traumatic situation, cohesive affiliative actions with intense emotional links, and finally, passive compliance with the persecutors. These phases must be understood as the development of special mechanisms to cope with the tensions and dangers of the surrounding horrifying reality of the Holocaust.

There were many speculations that survivors of the Holocaust suffered from a static concentration camp syndrome. These theories were proved to have not been valid by research that was done immediately after liberation. Clinical and theoretical research focused more on psychopathology than on the question of coping and the development of specific adaptive mechanisms during the Holocaust and after. The descriptions of the survivors' syndrome in the late 1950's and 1960's created a new means of diagnosis in psychology and the behavioral sciences, and has become a model that has

since served as a focal concept in examining the results of catastrophic stress situations.

After more research was done, it was clear the adaptation and coping mechanisms of the survivors was affected by the aspects of their childhood experiences, developmental histories, family constellations, and emotional family bonds. In the studies and research that were done, there were many questions that were asked of the subjects: What was the duration of the traumatization?, During the Holocaust, was the victim alone or with family and friends?, Was he in a camp or hiding?, Did he use false "Aryan" papers?, Was he a witness to mass murder in the ghetto or the camp?, What were his support systems- family and friends- and what social bonds did he have? These studies showed that the experiences of those who were able to actively resist the oppression, whether in the underground or among the partisans, were different in every way from the experiences of those who were victims in extermination camps.

When the survivors integrated back into society after the war, they found it very hard to adjust. It was made difficult by the fact that they often aroused ambivalent feelings of fear, avoidance, guilt, pity and anxiety. This might have been hard for them, but decades after the Holocaust most of the survivors managed to rehabilitate their capacities and rejoin the paths their lives might have taken prior to the Holocaust. This is more true for the people who experienced the Holocaust as children or young adults. Their families live with a special attitude toward psychobiological continuity, fear of separation, and fear of prolonged sickness and death.

The experience of the Holocaust shows how human beings can undergo extreme traumatic experiences without suffering from a total regression and without losing their ability to rehabilitate their ego strength. The survivors discovered the powers within them in whatever aspect in their lives that were needed.

Survivors of Ghettos and Camps

The Jews, arrested and brought to the concentration camps during WWII were under sentence of death. Their chances of surviving the war minimal. Their brutal treatment on the part of the camp guards and even some of the other prisoners influenced the Jews.

The months or years already spent in the ghettos, with continuous persecutions and random selections, had brought some to a chronic state of insecurity and anxiety and others to apathy and hopelessness, even though passive or active resistance had also occurred. This horrible situation was worsened by overcrowding, infectious diseases, lack of facilities for basic hygiene and continuous starvation.

When the people were transported to the concentration camps, they lived in horrible conditions such as filth and lack of hygiene, diseases and extreme nutritional insufficiency, continuous harassment, and physical ill treatment, perpetual

psychic stress caused by the recurrent macabre deaths- all combined to influence deeply the attitudes and mental health of camp inmates. Observations and descriptions by former prisoners, some of whom were physicians and psychologists differ drastically. Some described resignation, curtailment of emotional and normal feelings, weakening of social standards, regression to primitive reactions and "relapse to animal state" whereas others show feelings of comradeship, community spirit, a persistent humanity and extreme altruism- even moral development and religious revelation.

After liberation, most of the Jewish camp inmates were too weak to move or be aware of what was happening. Prisoners were not restored to perfect health by liberation. Awakening from nightmares was sometimes even more painful than captivity. In the beginning of physical improvement, the ability to feel and think returned and many realized the completeness of their isolation. To them, the reality of what had happened was agonizing. They lived with their overwhelming personal losses whose impact is beyond intellectual or emotional comprehension. They also clung to the hope of finding some family member still alive in the new DISPLACED PERSONS' camps that were now set up. Many of the people admitted to those camps lost all sense of initiative.

After the war, organizations such as THE UNITED NATIONS RELIEF and REHABILITATION ADMINISTRATION, THE JOINT DISTRIBUTION COMMITTEE and the International Refugee Organization were founded. Their work was useful but their methods were not suitable. The ex- prisoner, now a "displaced person", was brought before boards set up by different countries which decided on his or her worthiness to be received by that country. Most survivors tried to make their way to Palestine. Then Israel was founded and they integrated quickly into a new society. The majority of the people adapted adequately to their changed life, in newly founded families, jobs and kibbutzim, many however still suffered from chronic anxiety, sleep disturbances, nightmares, emotional instability and depressive states. The worst however were those people who went to the United States, Canada, and Australia, some of them with extreme psychological traumatizations. They had to adjust to strange new surroundings, learn a new language, and adapt to new laws, in addition to building new lives.

After the survivors received compensation from the West German government, they were examined by specialists in internal and neurological medicine. In most cases, no ill effects directly attributable to detainment in camps were found. The reason for this was because the repeated selection of Jewish victims for extermination in ghettos, on arrival at the camps, again at the frequent medical examinations, in the sick bays, and at every transferment that all those showing signs of physical disease had already been eliminated.

Many survivors described themselves as incapable of living life to the fullest, often barely able to perform basic tasks. They felt that the war had changed them and they had lost their

much needed spark to life. Investigations show that the extreme traumatizations of the camps inflicted deep wounds that have healed very slowly, and that more than 40 years later, the scars are still present. There has shown to be clear differences between camp victims and statistically comparable Canadian Jews: the survivors show long term consequences of the Holocaust in the form of psychological stress, associated with heightened sensitivity to anti-semitism and persecution.

The survivors, normal people before the Holocaust, were exposed to situations of extreme stress and to psychic traumatization. Their reactions to inhuman treatment were "normal" because not to react to treatment of this kind would be abnormal.

Survivors of Israel

There were few studies done, following the Holocaust that were made in Israel of the psychological effects of the Nazi persecution even though the number of survivors was high as time passed, research increased and in 1964, a comparison was made between Holocaust survivors now in Israel and non-Jewish Norwegians who returned to Norway after being deported to camps. The results showed that the Jewish survivors suffered more from the total isolation in the camps, from the danger of death, which was greater for Jews, and from "survivor guilt", than did the Norwegians. It also showed that most Israeli survivors were suffering from symptoms of the so called survivors syndrome, but were active and efficient, and often held important and responsible jobs and social positions.

Another study, of Israeli Holocaust survivors in kibbutzim (collective settlements), revealed that survivors who could not mourn their losses immediately, after the war began mourning and working through their grief when they adjusted to life in the kibbutz. The study also indicated that many Holocaust survivors had a low threshold for emotional stress. This was brought out during situations that reminded them of the Holocaust- especially during the EICHMANN TRIAL, when they had to testify against Nazi criminals, and during the 1973 Yom Kippur War. These were the times when they suffered periods of depression and tension.

Studies made in Israel more than 30 years after WWII did not show significant differences in the extent of psychological damage between people who were in hiding during Nazi occupation and former concentration camp inmates. The only difference that was found was that the inmates experienced more pronounced emotional distress than those who survived the occupation outside the camps.

The research done on the elderly Holocaust survivors in Israel indicated that they encountered particular difficulties in absorption because of the serious problems they had to overcome (loss of family and of the social and cultural background they had known before the Holocaust). The community in Israel tried to provide them with personal and professional

care. Nevertheless, to those survivors who immigrated to Israel when elderly it was more difficult to adjust than the younger survivors.

There was also a study done in the University Psychiatric Hospital in Jerusalem 40 years after liberation. It revealed a difference between hospitalized depressive patients who had been inmates of Nazi concentration camps and the match group of patients who had not been persecuted. The camp survivors were more belligerent, demanding, and regressive than the control group. Oddly enough their behavior may have helped their survival.

Despite the many hardships and difficulties faced by the survivors in Israel, their general adjustment has been satisfactory, both vocationally and socially. In the end it has been more successful than that of Holocaust survivors in other countries.

When looking at it from a general point of view, the survivors, for the most part have shown to be as strong as humanly possible. Not one person who hasn't seen what they saw can possibly imagine how they feel. Many people are greatly affected by things the survivors would consider menial. There is no other way they are supposed to act. These people were lucky to have survived but there is no doubt that there have been times when their memories have made them think otherwise.

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