

After the Catastrophe: Working with the Intergenerational Transmission of Collective Trauma in Jungian Analysis

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In 'After the Catastrophe' written in 1945 Jung states about his attitude towards Nazi atrocities that, "I much confess that no article has ever given me so much trouble, from a moral as well as human point of view. I had not realized how much I myself was affected." (CW10, par 402). Jung's use of the concepts of collective guilt and the collective shadow in regards to Nazi Germany can offer important insights also into the collective traumas of the Russian Gulags and the Cultural Revolution in China, as well as offering a path towards investigating intergenerational trauma from the standpoint of analytical psychology.

I would like to explore the psychological/emotional impact of these collective traumas and psychic catastrophes of the Jewish holocaust, Stalin's gulags, and Mao's Cultural Revolution upon the second and third generation of survivors in the U.S., China and Russia. I would like to share some of own my experience as a second generation survivor of the Jewish holocaust and how it has impacted my own identity development both as analysand and as Jungian analyst. It has been fundamental to be able to reflect coherently upon the transmission of holocaust trauma within my own family to be able to work effectively with cultural trauma both within the context of infant observation as well as in clinical analysis with children, adolescents and adults. In my work as a personal analyst and supervisor of clinical work as well as an infant observation trainer I have been studying/reflecting upon the intergenerational transmission of collective trauma in different cultural contexts. In Russia and China we have looked carefully at parent/infant interactions that may indicate that the intergenerational transmission of trauma is taking place. In infant observations this can be seen in the emergence of atypical attachment patterns in infants as well as in the narratives that are often shared with the observer related to family history, and in analysis these silent narratives often form the scaffolding of distorted perceptions of self and other, and impact the development of individuation and the formation of a coherent identity . Trauma can be transmitted from one generation to the next, often unconsciously, as the impact of collective trauma creates tears and holes in the emergent cultural and personal psychic skins of the infant, and later the child, adolescent and adult, that can impede the development of a coherent individual identity as well

as secure attachment relationships. These tears and holes in the cultural and personal psychic skins can later become the focus of analysis in second and third generation of survivors. I will present infant observation and clinical material from the analyses of second generation survivors of cultural trauma from Russia and China to demonstrate how analysis can become a space for both collective/personal mourning and healing as coherent symbolic, historical and personal narratives are co-constructed, generate meanings and are integrated within the analytical temenos.

During the course of the last twenty years I have been treating in Jungian analysis individuals who have suffered from personal and social trauma in the Soviet Union and other Eastern Bloc countries. Often these individuals have entered into analysis in order to work on the impact of trauma upon their current lives. I have found that as the trauma was elaborated in the context of a contained analytical relationship it became apparent that difficulties forming and maintaining secure attachment relationships were evident. Often these individuals suffered from avoidant, ambivalent and disorganized attachment relationships. The trauma which was elaborated in their analyses had its origins in both the interpersonal childhood, adolescent and adult histories of the analysands, as well as in their relationships to the wider repressive and authoritarian cultures in which they lived. The repressive culture became internalized as an inner persecutory presence and led to feelings of pronounced suspiciousness, loneliness, and isolation. These individuals often reported feeling suspicious of others, were withdrawn in the relationships with the outer world, and exhibited difficulties in maintaining and sustaining intimacy in their personal lives. As the origins of these difficulties were explored analytically it became evident that a culture of suspicion, persecution and terror pervaded their personal lives, and formed the internal background for their personal and cultural complexes. Lingering anxieties related to the holocaust pervaded all of the analysands who were of Jewish heritage. Terrifying memories of mass murders during the holocaust were communicated trans-generationally at both conscious and unconscious levels, and when spoken about in the analytical sessions filled the consulting room with a pervasive sense of terror. In this respect the analysis itself became a space of collective memory where cultural complexes could be contained and worked upon in the safety of the analytical temenos. Analysands who escaped clandestinely from Eastern block Soviet occupied countries realized in the course of analysis how they also carried the repressive and authoritarian cultures within themselves and painfully

realized that they were enacting persecutory fears both within their external lives as well as within the analytical transference. Managing and working with the countertransference was problematical as the analyst (myself) came from a Jewish Lithuanian/Latvian background and grew up in the shadows of the Lithuanian/Latvian holocaust. My own analysis over the years was also filled during long periods with such collective memories which were transmitted to me often unconsciously or in hushed tones by my family. The intersection of cultural, social and historical trauma between analyst and analysand became important and critical factors to reflect upon during the analytic work as aspects of projective identification and syntonic countertransference were powerful forms of communication of both collective and individual pain, grief and mourning. Following Jung's alchemical metaphor, both analyst and analysand were deeply submerged in the analytical alembic, and both deeply impacted by the analytical process in which unconscious communication was a significant component of the analytic process. Progress could be made in these analyses as symbolization processes unfolded, and traumatic experiences could be expressed in dreams, memories, and given some coherent narrative form. I would liken this process to the creation of an analytical theater where each of the internal characters has an important part to play and where each internal character needs to find their own unique voice.

The intersection of two collective traumas: Vilnius and Odessa

According to Jung the analyst's psychological maturation and individuation is fundamental in the working with others. In this regard I have found in working with Jewish clients with holocaust backgrounds that the working through and integration of my own familial trauma in the form of a powerful cultural complex has been important. Vilnius, where much of my family was from, was on the eve of the German occupation, a city of extraordinary Jewish culture and learning, and home to some 60,000 Jews. By the end of the war 250 Jews remained alive. The Lithuanian Jews were systematically murdered, among them many of my own relatives. Two of my Lithuania relatives miraculously survived the holocaust after being sent to concentration camps and later came to the United States and bore witness to the atrocities. They became the historians of the Lithuanian holocaust within my own family, and I remember as a child looking with awe, terror, and dread at the numbers that they kept tattooed to their forearms. I had the feeling then that they were serving the function of keeping the memory of

the dead ones alive so that there could be the possibility of mourning. At an early age I began to realize that without memory there can be no mourning.

The second collective trauma, that of my analysand Peter, occurred in Odessa, in the Ukraine. Odessa had a large thriving Jewish population of approximately 180,000 before the war. During the Nazi occupation of Odessa approximately 22,000 Jews were herded inside four large storage buildings in which they made holes for machine guns. The doors were closed and the soldiers were ordered to fire into the buildings. In order to make sure that nobody had survived, they set the buildings on fire. The next day grenades were thrown into the buildings. Other Jews (approximately 19,000) were herded into the harbor square in Odessa, sprayed with gasoline and then set on fire. My analytical client Peter's maternal family lived in Odessa before the war. Some, like his mother and grandmother who was a party member, escaped to Siberia before the German invasion, while others stayed in Odessa. One of Peter's close relatives murdered her two infant children before they were taken by the Nazis, as she knew they would be killed. She survived the war yet became chronically psychotic, living in the ongoing nightmare of her actions. Another close relative, who had a university degree from Germany, believed the Germans would do him no harm as he idealized the high level of German culture he knew first hand, but as an elderly man he was shot and killed on his way to the harbor square where the Jews were being collected, as he was not able to keep up with the fast pace of the marching group.

I mention these two traumatic events as they were, in an on-going way, in the background or at times in the foreground of the analytic work over a number of years. They provided the stage upon which our inter-subjective communication took place. I never mentioned to Peter details of my own background during the analytic work, but I sensed that he experienced in both a conscious and unconscious way my empathy and familiarity with his family narrative. I think that the intersection of our two narratives provided a kind of container, or primary analytical skin function which helped to hold the experiences of terror, alienation, persecution, dread, and anxiety which emerged during our work together.

In our first session of what became a five year mostly four times weekly analysis Peter told me that he wanted to enter into analysis with me because my name sounded Jewish, as he stated that he was fearful of not being understood by a non-Jewish analyst. Later I came to realize

that he was painfully fearful of anti-Semitism, that he had also hidden his own Jewish identity in the Soviet Union where he grew up, and that he was highly conflicted and at times ashamed of his own Jewish identity. In the Soviet Union his family had changed their surname to a more Russian sounding one, and he was able to have an identity card saying he was Russian and not Jewish as he had one Russian non-Jewish grandparent. Peter's family only spoke of the past among themselves, behind closed doors and usually opted for silence. Peter felt that there was no secure space to talk about the holocaust or being Jewish. He had the distinct feeling that his family was both entrapped and encapsulated in a history that they could neither acknowledge or discuss. This familial/cultural complex pulled Peter into states of overwhelming terror and dread that he found inexplicable. The cultural complex formed by the holocaust existed alongside fears of anti-Semitism and persecution in the Soviet Union. When in primary school he remembered making a negative comment to a friend about Chairman Stalin, and in the next week he was expelled from the school for no stated reason. He believed that his 'trusted' friend told his teacher about the incident, and that he was persecuted because of his anti-Stalin sentiment, even as a primary school pupil. At the time he lost contact with all of his friends and teachers, and felt severely marginalized. Peter grew up isolated and lonely, not knowing who he could trust. His attachments were filled with anxiety, and he chose avoidance and withdrawal as a way of coping with betrayal and disappointment. He retreated into himself, in an abject state of despair and confusion which pervaded his life. His attachment to the communist state was equally insecure, especially since his life was completely structured from without leaving him with the feeling that there was little sense of choice or agency possible to create his own life space or identity. This was complicated as his family were Communist party members and academics who were afforded luxuries. His grandmother, an inspiring intellectual who spoke many languages and worked for the Soviet state library was the head of the Marx/Engels archives in Moscow, and was often asked to find quotes from the letters and texts of the two communist heroes to support party speeches and propaganda. Through her the family gained some stability by having a good apartment in Moscow, and being able to resist some of the Stalin approved anti-Semitism. When his grandmother died the family found itself in a precarious position, and they then began to try finding a way to emigrate from the Soviet Union to the United States. Fortunately, both parents were university trained, and through the help of Jewish organizations in the United States, were given permission to emigrate several years before the fall of the Soviet Union. Peter found himself in

the United States rather bewildered with the culture and still feeling underlying persecutory anxiety and dread of the future. He trained as an engineer, married and had a child. When he moved to California to work in Silicon Valley as a computer expert he felt a vague sense of malaise filled with dread and anxiety that brought up his memories of his Moscow years, bleak memories that left him feeling encapsulated and alone.

During the analysis he took a trip to Europe and reported having a serious phobic reaction on a train while entering Germany. When the train stopped on the border he began to feel a change in his state of mind and body. He described becoming dissociated, and felt that time had somehow changed. He started to feel anxiety, and was filled with fear and dread. He experienced the fantasy that when the border guard came to look at his passport he would be asked to take his pants down to see if he was circumcised, and hence Jewish, and then would be sent to a concentration camp. The phobic reaction occurred in a twilight state. When the border guard came onto the train Peter started having a panic attack. He was sweating profusely and unable to see clearly. When the border guard left the train he still felt a sense of anxiety and dread but was unable to get off of the train in Germany. As a result of this experience Peter realized that holocaust memories which had their origins in his family's cultural complexes were impacting him in a profound way and that he needed to work on them in more depth in his analysis.

As we began to discuss the implications of his symptom on the train, memories of the holocaust in the form of family narratives emerged. As he spoke, I found myself filled with sadness, terror and anxiety. Peter was lying on the couch and did not overtly see my physical reactions, but I am sure he sensed my being shaken as he spoke in depth about his knowledge of his family's history in the holocaust. He talked about the details of the family trauma in a hushed tone, as if fearing that someone may overhear what he was saying. He was crying and trembling on the couch as he spoke of the Odessa holocaust and I found that I had tears also streaming down my face. My own memories of the hushed family discussions about the holocaust came to mind, and I remembered vividly the horror I felt as a child when I was shown the tattooed numbers on the forearms of my relatives who survived the camps. When the session stopped Peter got up from the couch and said, "I don't understand why I keep thinking about these horrible things. It happens over and over again for no apparent reason; will it ever stop?" He reported that since his childhood he was plagued by nightmares

of the holocaust and the Russian Revolution all occurring upon the backdrop of anti-Semitism. I said that it seemed to me very important and meaningful that we could talk about it, although very painful, and I wondered with him if he ever had a safe space to reflect on the family history and to construct a satisfying narrative. He said that “yes, it was important and that he felt a great deal of pain when the memories emerged, but did feel some relief in talking about them.” Peter became preoccupied over a number of months with his memories, yet tried to give them some shape and form. These sessions spent working on the cultural complex were important to help Peter better contain his anxiety and dread, which were constantly spilling over into his everyday life. During this time he reported dreams of being strangled, suffocated, hanged and beaten. He appeared to giving symbolic expression to the cultural complex related to the holocaust. He realized that he was never ever able to fully talk about the holocaust history in Moscow, and that he was expected to split off any feeling about it as a citizen of the Soviet state. My own sense was that the family also had not sufficiently mourned the dead relatives, and that in part the work of the living was to provide a space for mourning for the dead at a personal and collective level. The analysis became a space in which personal and collective mourning could begin to unfold.

Peter and I were able over time to co-construct through the shared intersubjective nature of our communications an analytical skin that helped to hold the intense emotions that were emerging in both of us during the elaboration of Peter’s affectively charged holocaust narrative. Within the analytical relationship the primary function of the analytical skin is to hold and contain the emerging affective states within the analytical couple and to provide a safe space within which different states of mind; infantile, sensory, imaginal, and affective, can be elaborated and reflected upon. The secure analytical skin is created through moments of meeting, moments of authentic person-to-person connection with the analyst that alter the analysands relationship with the analyst as well as the analysand’s perception of himself and his emergent identity. I think that the moments when Peter shared his family’s holocaust narrative constituted such a moments of meeting. These moments of meeting were co-created experiences which provided a scaffolding for the subsequent analytical work. These moments of meeting and of being (and at times non-being) became transcendent moments in the analysis and helped in the construction of a secure transitional space where memory, though and image could be elaborated . While I never shared my personal material with Peter, there

was a shared recognition of his pain, isolation and trauma, and as the analysis progressed he became better able to tolerate these affects within himself.

His transference during the first phase of his analysis was filled with suspiciousness, dismissiveness and avoidance, and he constructed the fantasy that I was probably a deluded Trotskyist. As the analysis progressed and his narrative took on more coherence, meaning and value avoidance and dismissiveness gave way to a deeper openness to both affective and imaginal experience. His dream life began to take on more coherence and he began to remember them with greater frequency and intensity.

The following is a dream sheds light on this period of the analysis.

I am drowning in a large and turbulent sea. I am crying and screaming to get some help. It feels ridiculous to be crying for help. It feels unlikely that anyone will hear me. I start crying more and more strongly, hoping that someone will hear me.

In his associations to this dream he said, 'I had trouble screaming in the dream, but I could scream, and I could ask for help even though a part of me said there is no point to it. I had the feeling that I achieved the result I wanted, I could scream and ask for help. It seemed to feel like there was a possibility of getting out of this awful situation.' It was not difficult for him to recognize that the dream related to the analytical couple and that he was beginning to feel that his screams could be heard, that his cries would be responded to, and that there could be the expectation of help. He was beginning to experience a sense of agency, that his cries and screams would be heard and responded to, and that he would not drown in the overwhelming terror and dread that he encountered when he focused on the family narrative of the Odessa holocaust, and the repressive and fear filled years of his youth in the Soviet Union. His relationship to me as well as to his internal world was transforming, and he was able to now risk that his cries and screams had a meaning that would be responded to.

The Intergenerational Transmission of Trauma as seen in a Chinese Infant Observation

The inter-generational transmission of trauma related to the historical events of the Mao era such as the Cultural Revolution and other historical and collective traumas is an important theme in infant observations in China. We have observed that cultural trauma could be communicated both

consciously and unconsciously to the infant by the caregiver. Often these are hidden wounds experienced by the individual and the collective that can only be integrated through elaboration at both symbolic and verbal levels of discourse.

During the years of the cultural revolution (1962-1976), between 1.5 and 2 million people were killed, lives were often ruined through endless denunciations, false confessions, struggle meetings and persecution campaigns. The Cultural Revolution was characterized by loss at many levels of Chinese society. The Chinese cultural skin became torn and tattered as historical temples and shrines were destroyed, and traditional spiritual values such as the ideas of Confucius and Lao-tzu were considered outmoded. Many experienced a loss of social and economic status, and many lost their careers as intellectuals and teachers and were sent to the countryside to work in the fields as universities and schools were closed. Students turned against those teachers and professors who were suspected of being against Mao's ideology. This loss of security and trust, usually provided by the cultural skin, created fear and mistrust that led to tears in the Chinese cultural skin that have been difficult to heal. These tears in the cultural skin can only be healed through processes of open dialogue and cultural atonement and in China this reparative process has failed to fully occur.

The intergenerational transmission of trauma emerged in the observation of baby Tao. Baby Tao appeared during the first year of observations to have developed a disorganized attachment with his mother. The observer was concerned about the high level of disorganization in the infant as the child's behavior included hitting himself, hitting his mother and grandmother, and not being able to manage separations from mother that were unpredictable and lacking in transitioning behavior. Mother told the observer that she was having difficulty managing her baby and grandmother was not able to provide adequate containment. Mother requested a referral for psychotherapy that she subsequently appreciated and benefited from.

The following observation took place at 12 months, 2 weeks

When I arrive for the observation Baby Tao is beginning to stand and walk on his feet with some difficulty. I become concerned because he is teetering on his feet holding onto the table and chairs and could fall at any moment. Mother is present but does not do anything to prevent the fall that is immanent. Tao starts to cry but mother does not come over to him but appears to ignore him. I feel

pain in empathy with the baby and after several minutes go over to him and lift him up. Mother then comes over to hold him and grandmother comes into the room. Baby does not wear diapers and has been taught to urinate into the trash basket that is on the floor. During the observation I notice that he pees on the floor and that there are wet spots on the carpet. Mother comments that he has not yet learned to control his bladder or poop. Mother then asks if she can talk to me and she asks grandmother to come into the room to take care of baby. She takes me aside and starts to tell me how difficult her life is with her husband, how she was traumatized as a child which included being chained to a bed when her parents were not at home. I listened and experienced her torment when she told me this. I began to think that the difficulty that she has with the separations from her infant might be linked to the childhood trauma she is telling me about. She then talks about how her parents were mistreated, ostracized and beaten during the Cultural Revolution as they were suspected of being capitalists. Some relatives were killed during this period and the family went through emotional upheavals, dislocations and loss. I stayed in an empathic mode of listening to her and she appeared calmed by this. When I left the observation I realized I spent as much time with mother as I did observing baby, but this seemed significant as mother appeared to be able to hold baby in mind more effectively after this conversation. She needed to have her own infantile/child self seen and acknowledged, and her rivalry for my attention in the observation seemed to diminish.

The infant observation method gives us a way of observing, through empathy, intuition and imaginative perception the profound nature of early interactions and their impact on the developing psyche of the child.

I think that the work of the Lithuanian born philosopher Emmanuel Levinas is also of importance in understanding the analytical and infant observation work. Levinas' family was Jewish, and while Levinas taught and wrote in France, his parents and brother perished in the Lithuanian holocaust. Levinas' philosophical work emerges out of that tragic cultural complex. Levinas is important for us because, I think in reaction to his holocaust experience, he has created a philosophy that is based on an ethical attitude that is rooted in inter-subjectivity and the ethics of the other. Ethics is defined by Levinas as a relation in which the self is its responsibility for the other. For Levinas, the other is not completely knowable and cannot be made into an object of reflection; he must always remain a subject. The other always maintains their irreducible subjectivity, and needs to be viewed in essence as ultimately

mysterious and unknowable. There are moments, those moments of being of which I spoke about, in which the analyst and other can meet each other in their own particular subjectivities, through shared experiences of dread, terror, awe and pleasure, and they can reach a transcendent position which is greater than their separate individualities. While Peter expressed his torment and pain about his family's holocaust experience, and I was experiencing mine within myself, we experienced with each other moments of mutuality, connection and transcendence. It is through this mutuality, contained and guided by the inter-subjectivity of the analytical process, that the capacity for both the mourning and healing of collective and personal trauma can ultimately take place. A similar process occurred in the infant observation in China as the mother experienced the observer as a secure base with whom she could elaborate and reflect upon her trauma.

Infant observation and personal analysis in China and Russia have taught me about cultural humility, the importance of maintaining an appreciation of differing cultural contexts and psychological frameworks. We enter into infant observation and analysis focused upon the present moment and utilize our imaginative and intuitive capacities to perceive what is happening both on the surface level of interaction and beneath the surface that include the nuances of inter-subjective and symbolic communication. In this way we are able to reflect upon what is common to us all as meaning making subjects and the richly woven tapestries of our divergent cultural heritages.