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UNTO THE THIRD GENERATION*

The last years have seen an alarming change in the political and socio-cultural climate: financial and social crisis, the rise of nationalism, neo-fascism and racism. This resulted in the return of a sense of insecurity and fear, frustration and rage in several countries of the world. In many of the former East-European countries, especially in Hungary, the curious phenomenon, the return of the *ghost of the original trauma* shocks and startles ordinary people and social scientists alike. As if linear time has been deleted: persecutory and traumatogenetic contents are being replayed and experienced in their pre-war, original version – attacking the sense of reality and a capacity of thinking for diverse generations. The valises, at least in the mind, are out again: people start packing. Statistics in Hungary reveal that a great number of – especially young – people contemplate emigration. The number of those who have already left in the last years is estimated nearing 500.000... The 1980s bitter joke is getting actual again: the last one leaving the country please switch off the lights!...

How is this possible 25 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the ‘new dawn’, the ‘changing of the system’; the new chapter in the socio-economic-political transformations in the most recent history of Europe?

The psychoanalyst, if truly interested in dynamic processes and does not focus entirely on the internal stage, has to try and capture something meaningful on the border of the external and internal and attempt to make sense of it in order to develop a view of the world we live in. Investing in such psychic work would – hopefully – contribute to opening up blocked passages for further exploration for ourselves and for the others, as well.

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To understand the present we have to go back and look at illuminated and dark moments of our past. One of the signs of the last “March for Life” in Budapest expressed it powerfully in six words: “About our past – for our future!” Sounds very simple, indeed – but quite often it is not possible as the texture of *history* and *individual and collective* memory are heavily torn and one is unable to follow the thread... To rebuild continuity: to make remembering and experiencing connections possible, it is the basic reparative work psychoanalysis attempts to achieve. We call it elaboration or working through... It proceeds simultaneously inside and outside and calls for parallel testing of external and psychic reality.

Where the continuity of being is interrupted over and over again, the identity of people becomes conditional and fragmented. This applies not only to individuals and families but ethnic groups, larger social units and sometimes whole nations. We are looking at psychodynamic processes which are embedded in socio-historical transformations. These processes have direct effects on the development of individual and group identity. They are also responsible for specific modifications in the perception of and the reactions to social expectations and requirements.

Facing the new edition of socio-political phenomena of the last century resurfacing with a vehement force in our time – showing a curiously malignant nature in Hungary –, it seems useful to turn back and take a second look at ideas formulated years ago and probe their validity for the present situation.

Applying John Byng-Hall’s concept of the *family script* to the *social sphere* in the 1990s gave a very useful methodological tool in our hands to explore transformations. It created a workable technical and theoretical frame for psychodynamic understanding of actual social systems – also in our clinical work. It enabled us to think about *survival strategies* as *scripts* which describe and convey possible modes of escape from extreme circumstances and threatening situation of crisis – formulated through personal experiences of the generations surviving danger. They contain elements of both external and internal reality, synthesizing conscious and unconscious aspects of the critical situation encapsulating information of vital importance. Survival strategies train the inexperienced how to be alert, they sharpen the skills for recognizing danger and the possible resources of help. They provide a blueprint for action: regulate the sequence of orientation and prepare for economic, fast reactions. They function as unchallengeable psychological axioms. They also ensure that these skills are not forgotten. From this aspect they serve as auxiliary multi-generational memory-traces. Carrying essential directives, survival strategies are handed carefully over to the next generation; most often by means of *family legends and myths*.

Listening to these powerful stories both in our consulting rooms and in everyday life one comes to realize how important it is that, through them, the voice of *relatives* address *personally* the next generations. They implant these stories in the mind so effectively partly because they use a special language. Woven from images, words, feelings and gestures they speak what Ferenc Mérei (this ingenious maverick who researched the internal life of communities throughout his life) calls *the language of allusions*. It is *the language of shared experience* which contains not only the *intellectual/mental* aspects but *the full scale of affects* associated to it.

Working with diverse post-war generations exploring survival scripts both in Budapest and London, it was striking to see that these stories live on as internal dialogues in *present tense* for several years before they become audible means of communication; breaking decades of silence.

The biblical 40 years of silence!... Why always 40 years? – I asked.

The meaningful answer came from a friend versed in religious studies. I was prepared to hear spiritual explanations with long quotes from the Old Testament – instead he said: “Well, it is quite simple, it takes about four decades for those generations having lived under slavery to die out...”

The sounds of silence!...

They are linked to a curious fact we know from accounts of psychodynamic research in the field of generational transmission of trauma, namely that the first generation of survivors very often “skip” the next, the children’s generation and share their experiences with their grandchildren.

What is being protected? Is it the self from revisiting the unbearable pain one had to survive? Is it the children? Surviving attacks on their whole being – physical, mental and spiritual – *upset the symbolic order of their world*. No wonder survivors had to *reinvent parenting* – and this was based on a *psychic wound central to their existence*. Keeping the children consciously/unconsciously far away from those experiences of destruction while not being able to set them free from *the secret knowledge preserved in their mind and body* (Bollas would call it the “unthought known”) resulted in *splitting* becoming *the* leading mechanism of defence for the first and second generation.

Does something really have to die out before these experiences can be shared? What makes communication and dialogue possible? What can we do to help open up the blocked passages and reclaim our own history: to put *past* in past tense and to – finally – arrive to the *present* so that we could look at our *future* together?

For the third generation receiving and absorbing the horror of their grandparents' life became a mission. The psychic task for them was to detoxify those memories of shame, helplessness, hate, guilt, desperation and also, to find a meaning in order to create a liveable narrative for themselves. The world psychically has not been able to work through the experiences of the great wars of the 20th century. World War II left *impossible* tasks for successive generations who grapple with this legacy. I want to emphasize here that am not talking only about Holocaust survivors but vast numbers of trauma survivors from diverse strata of society in most countries of the 'western world'.

When society changes too dramatically and/or too fast, integrating experiences of the previous phase will not be possible. In Central/Eastern Europe – one traumatic event followed the next. One could state with malignant pride that Hungary offers the widest opportunities for those who want to study the dynamics and effects of successive social traumatisations and cumulative trauma... There was no time for looking at dramatic social changes – let alone reflecting on them and/or working them through. Generations had to carry on living with unmourned losses, fractured structures, frames and regulations that did not make sense and contradicted all logical expectations. People had to swallow them and obey. They had to get on with their lives as well as they could – and hope that the next fundamental change will bring better conditions. For them the outside world was scary: “Do not trust!” became the overall survival commandment.

People learned and taught their children how to ‘double speak’, stay within the confines of their ‘little world’ and not venture outside too much. Envy and hatred coloured human relationships. In the 1990s studies of the *totalitarian mind* cast some light on the dynamics of the formation of false self, dysfunctions of thinking and ensuing cognitive and affective disorders. 25 years on we are observing altered, but not less alarming phenomena in several countries of Europe. It seems time has come to take a closer look at psychodynamic characteristics of the *post-totalitarian mind*.

Since 1989 inherent social conflicts – marking the area of unelaborated individual and social traumata – defined the lines of development. *Splits* became more visible and palpable. *Nationalism, racism, intolerance, corruption, loss of values and points of orientation* more and more explicitly overshadowed new possibilities. The long-awaited arrival of a democratic order, institutions and principles could not find a solid ground to grow. It was much sooner possible to open up the personal domain of multigenerational traumatic experiences far away from the *motherland* (in Hungarian it is *motherland*, many other languages call it *fatherland*). Just to give you an example: the first time I heard someone talk about growing up in a family where grandparents were active members of the Hungarian

Arrow Cross (the local fascist party) beginning to wonder about their beliefs and actions happened in my consulting room in London. In Budapest it took a lot longer before people started to speak. Frozen up contents of the mind melt out slowly...

The area of living experience related to basic changes could be approached very slowly by applied analytic methods. Kathleen Kelley-Lainé and I came to Hungary for several years to run workshops entitled *Personal Narratives of Changing the System*. We could observe that by the first decade of the new century the country was effectively divided. Split by political affiliations family members did not speak to one another. Sunk in indifference and passivity others gave up hope entirely. The symbols and slogans of the pre-war Hungarian Arrow Cross appeared on the streets. The extreme right Jobbik party became more and more organized and popular. They offered an alternative for identification – with uniforms, scarves, red-and-white striped flags and all the external ultra-right props to provide a populist sense of group security for a growing number from the second, third and fourth post-war generations. Meanwhile the liberal left was losing credentials.

I do not wish to talk about factors like economics, global crisis, growing poverty, controversial socio-political measures etc – as they fall outside my scope. Instead, I am going to further explore the realm of psychic functions altered by extreme circumstances. Gradually one was able to see in real time how unelaborated cumulative trauma over generations creates a particular '*time capsule*' enveloping the experience of living in this post-totalitarian world. Within this *time capsule* circulatory time prevails. Boundaries between the generations get obscure and confused and a sense of timelessness casts a shadow over individual and family experience. No linear time exists: past can happen tomorrow... today is going to be defined by current ideology...

In a sense it functions like the unconscious. Reality principle is overruled; primary processes overflow thinking and memory. Fragmented mythological elements, visual images, fairy tale motives, imagined landscapes and events co-exist with documented facts and arbitrary interpretations. A cavalcade in motion creating utmost disorientation. In a world which defies common sense – therefore is beyond comprehension – reality testing and flexible adaptation break down. Transformations in the outside world become alarming, a source of persecutory anxieties. Learning from experience is impossible: facts and interpretations are in sharp contradiction challenging elementary functions of the mind. What is real? What is to be believed? What calls for scrutiny? How about action?!

This constellation results in paralysis; facing social and existential threats only a very small section of society can preserve the capacity of thinking and reaction. Over the last years symptoms became more manifest. In 2011 it was announced that the government

wants to restore the image of the surrounds of the Parliament to its state *before* the year 1944 (the date of the German/Fascist take-over of Hungary during the war!) suggesting that the last 70 years, including the communist system, virtually did not happen. Meanwhile... a Shaman was dancing around the Holy Crown inside the Parliament and Turul, the magic bird of Hungarian legends acquired a cult state. A mother of two, recently divorced from her Jewish husband launched the lowliest attack on Jews and was accepted to the European Parliament as an MP of Jobbik – also meaning the ‘better one’ in Hungarian – obviously promoting the example of what a Jobbik Mother should be like... On the site surrounding the Parliament it was not long before word was followed by action: they started cutting out hundred year old trees, digging up the whole square, destroying certain monuments and preparing to deport others. The nation stood amazed...

Hungarian history could be told through stories of objectified symbols, like sculptures and monuments. Monuments pulled down, chopped up, renamed, removed... For a while after 1989 monuments of the previous regime enjoyed better treatment: they were placed in a ‘national park’ giving them an afterlife in a confined open air museum – one of the interesting tourist sights near Budapest.

Alas, history struck again... and there came a verdict on the bronze head of a most popular and valued poet, Attila József that he also has to leave the square of the Parliament where he’d been sitting over the past decades looking at the river as it flows by – recalling the lines of his famous poem “By the Danube”. As a matter of fact this did mobilize civil protests. Culture-loving people of Budapest and beyond tried to save him: 24-hour vigils were organized in deep snow with recitals of his famous poems living in the mind and heart of the young and the aging. It was all beautiful – but brought no triumph. The statue had to go. A nation which could not find a way how to protect – even – their statues!

The war of monuments has been raging ever since. Images from formative moments of the country’s history resurface, others disappear... yet others are being erected.

The last episode of this saga seems to open up a remarkable new chapter. The Living Monument group came into being in 2014 to create something actually meaningful in the place of a much debated and criticised official monument intended to be devoted to the memory of the German occupation of the country in 1944 (!). The design, a rather kitschy image of a helpless archangel Gabriel (symbolizing Hungary) being attacked by a sinister looking, dark eagle (symbolizing Germany). When this was presented to the wide public it provoked bitter protests from diverse communities involved in the memorial

projects of the Hungarian Holocaust. The message of this ill-fated monument suggests that Hungary would not take any responsibility for the persecution of hundreds of thousands of Jews, Roma, diverse minorities and people of other “defects” – atrocities and war crimes committed by official organs of the Hungarian State.

Instead of the usual forms of protest, the Living Monument group turned to the general public with the following message: “People who do not face their own history and are not prepared to take responsibility for the past will not be able to take charge of their destiny... Let’s turn the site of this false and rigid monster of a monument a place where Hungarians who are prepared to listen to the other and face their historic legacy can meet.”

Ever since that day a group meets on Szabadság tér (Freedom square!) in spite of the fact that the monstrous monument is being built in the background. In spite of the fact that police watch over it, sometimes come and carry people away from the site, subpoena them, and take finger print. In rain and in sunshine... They guard the chairs the symbols of dialogue and the little objects of great personal value people brought there. Pictures of loved ones who will never come back, books, drawings, stones, candles – and the spirit of something fundamental that is being born based on personal involvement, civil pride, mutual respect and care. An experiential community has been created, which people can join, write about, discuss and debate further.

The dialogues they started on Freedom square (hand in hand with another Facebook-initiated group called “Holocaust and my family” counting over 3000 members by now) mobilize enormous internal forces. They give voice to stories of the most painful memories: memories of humiliation, guilt, rage and hope – never before shared in a public space. The chairs on the square are visible symbols of formative steps in the direction of breaking through walls of splitting and denial, generating individual and collective self-awareness of national history. The debates and ideas voiced on the square facilitate the capacity of taking responsibility for a common history, to lift the paralysis caused by cumulative traumata, to reclaim the right of thinking, feeling, opinion formation and listening to the other. They repair broken linkages of a Hungarian legacy so that it could be remembered and kept alive in the mind of successive generations.

Observation of such phenomena *in statu nascendi* provides material for the development of psychodynamic understanding and *exploration of possible ways of* elaborating trauma in real time – and for our time.

And, last but not least... they also help us to find our professional feet in the no-man’s land between politics and psychoanalysis.

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