Therapeutic Aspects of Working Through the Trauma of the Kindertransport Experience

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Massive childhood trauma involving separation and loss can severely affect adult life, especially if the sufferer does not reach a stage of ‘readiness’ to begin to process the trauma, reclaim severed roots and develop a stable identity. 10,000 children were brought to England on the Kindertransport trains between Kristallnacht, November 9th 1938, and the outbreak of war. This commendable rescue operation from almost certain death was, for each child, a massive loss and the beginning of a long struggle to adjust and acculturate without parents. After the war ended, the pain of learning their parents had been murdered or, if the parents survived, the difficulties of relating to parents that had become total strangers was added. This article considers what has been learnt from studying the experiences of former Kindertransportees.

Introduction

In this article I will focus on the effect on children of trauma that they survive but which was beyond their capacity to deal with at the time. In such cases, elements of the trauma, particularly the affects or feelings involved, are split off in a part of the mind that is not accessible to consciousness. This enables the child to adjust and appear to live a normal, even a very successful life. But this outward normality is at an internal cost of considerable emotional energy to keep the trauma repressed. Rather like a tree that lacks sound roots is more vulnerable to being blown over in a storm, such a person is more vulnerable to the emotional storms or crises in her life. Particularly, in later years, when their children have ‘left the nest’ and they have retired from their career, and various ailments set in, the mind is sometimes unable to keep the repressed trauma ‘locked away’. The energy of being busy with children, household and career, that kept the mind occupied, evaporates and tends to leave a sort of vacuum into which images and feelings from the past trauma may ‘implode’ in a distressing way.

I am defining ‘trauma’ as an experience that causes a ‘break in the continuity of being’, a break in the psychic skin that contains or ‘holds the self together’. As life itself is traumatic, the human make-up includes many features to protect us at the time of traumatisation and capacities for ‘working through’ trauma later to achieve resol-
ution. This means that the emotional ‘knocks and blows of everyday life’ can be processed quite quickly and overcome without leaving a lasting trauma, rather like minor illnesses and physical bruising heal relatively quickly. Massive trauma, such as separation in terrifying circumstances, and cumulative trauma, such as repeated violation, cannot be processed at the time of traumatisation but are repressed and encapsulated in the mind. Processing can only begin when the person reaches a ‘stage of readiness’. Various factors can help a person to reach this stage, but any pressure from well meaning relatives or professionals is more likely to delay this or even re-traumatise her.

By nature of their diminutive size and immaturity, children are vulnerable. The neglect, ignorance of children’s developmental needs and uncontrolled anger of adults traumatises children; in dysfunctional families this can amount to exploitation and abuse. Added to this ‘domestic trauma’ suffered by children, is the transmission of trauma through growing up with parents or carers who have not been able to process massive trauma in their own earlier years. Two world wars, and waves of asylum seekers from other wars and atrocities world-wide, means that our community carries an enormous amount of trauma that has not yet been acknowledged and processed. Many professionals working with vulnerable traumatised people have little understanding of how trauma operates and there are widespread fantasies, including in novels and plays, linking trauma with madness. The psychic wounds of trauma are not visible like physical wounds and this adds to the difficulty of understanding the affliction of the sufferer.

There have been many retrospective studies of children’s responses to trauma caused by war and/or persecution of their ethnocultural group. The emotional cost of war falls heavily on children and this was particularly so for German children living in Hitler’s infamous Third Reich. Nazism decimated families and deprived thousands of children of the most important element in their lives, their parents. Most Jewish families in Germany were assimilated and considered themselves first and foremost German until the Nazis created ‘race laws’. Many so-called ‘Aryan’ German families were split between Nazi supporters and anti-Nazis. Irmgard Hunt wrote a book in her 70s describing her experience growing up in one such family. In Germany there was no programme for evacuation of children from the cities, as there was in Britain, as the Nazis considered themselves invincible. Consequently, many German children suffered the trauma of being bombed out, of last minute