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From Politics to Poetry

ANNA HUENEKE, Sydney, Australia

ABSTRACT *Violent and dangerous socio-political dynamics affect each individual powerfully. This is particularly true after profound trauma, such as the pogroms of Europe, the most disturbing being the Holocaust or Shoah. Trauma such as this can be internalised and preserved in symbolic form for generations. Many psychodynamic theorists describe how traumatic repetition can continue across generations unless the trauma is integrated or transformed in some way. One important way to integrate trauma is through poetics. Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung and others provide the foundations for the contemporary work of Russell Meares, who shows that metaphor and imagery are vital to the integration of traumatic experience. The psyche is structured around associative and imaginative process and responds best to poetic communication and relationship. As daughter to both Russian Jewish and German emigrants/immigrants, the author has experienced remnants of the dynamics of the pogroms and the Holocaust in the internal dynamics of her own family. As well as describing some of this story, she crafts her own present-day response to the emotionality of this experience by speaking in a poetic voice.* *Copyright © 2012 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.*

Key words: transgenerational trauma, poetics, psychodynamic, Holocaust, pogroms

INTRODUCTION

I attempt here to create a whole experience. I will move associatively from theory to history and poetry in order to create an experience that links thinking and feeling and to create an experience that is like the movement of psyche: symbolic and emotive, but also analytical and detailed. Downing, a scholar of depth psychology, said that:

> Freud suggests that it might be more appropriate to recognize that the animistic, subjective, mode of apprehending and organizing experience which brings together thought and feeling and works by way of symbols and association is the original mode of psychic functioning, the psyche's primary process. This more poetical, mythic, way of functioning is not a distortion of normal psychic process but rather the form of the psyche's uninhibited activity; it represents the core of our being. (Downing, 2000, pp. 62–63)

I am working all the time from the premise that traumatic experience is best integrated through a kind of language that can be seen. This is my premise as a psychotherapist. I

*Correspondence: Anna Hueneke, Sydney, Australia.
E-mail: Anna.Hueneke@bigpond.com

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attempt to recreate this psychotherapeutic approach in the way I present this material here. Meares, Emeritus Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Sydney, has written that:

> The therapist's first task is to develop a relationship with the patient in which it is possible for a mental activity, which is non-linear and feeling based, to emerge. Second . . . Whereas inner life is visualised, the traumatic system is not. In order to facilitate its integration, it must slowly be converted, in the context of a relationship in which the associative form of mental activity is operative, into an experience which can be "looked at". Visualisation is fundamental to the process of integration . . . the traumatic systems . . . must slowly be "brought before the eyes", and built up, bit by bit, through imaginative immersion in the patient"s experience. (Meares, 2000, pp. 130–131)

I am imaginatively immersing myself in two particular traumatic systems today: the Russian pogroms of the 1880 s and the Nazi terror of the Second World War (WWII). Traumatic experiences like this have the scale of cultural complexes. As Singer and Kimbles (2004) put it: "the psychology of cultural complexes operates both in the collective psychology of the group and in the individual members of the group" (p. 2).

The experiences of the Russian pogroms of the 1880 s and the Nazi terror of WWII live on in the lives of individuals here in Australia. As an investigator of these phenomena I am aware that for the most part traumatic experience is often split off from the personality, buried and unseen. Unintegrated traumatic experience like this is often enacted by individuals at crucial moments of pressure. Here, I consider moments like these in my own family as well as imaginatively immersing myself in the collective psychological history that causes them.

THE BIRTHS

I begin with birth. Birth is a fundamental moment in each of our lives. As a baby our emotional experience of pregnancy, birth and our first relationships form the primitive image schemas for our later more refined complexities (Knox, 2004). Knox, a Jungian analyst and a specialist in early developmental theory, has said that:

> The image schema is a mental gestalt, developing out of bodily experience and forming the basis for abstract meanings. Image schemas are the mental structures which underpin our experience of discernible order, both in the physical and in the world of imagination and metaphor. (Knox, 2004, p. 9)

The infant absorbs everything. The infant belongs to an interpersonal collective. Where there are gaps or hidden dangers, these are imprinted on the infant and stored in primitive pre-linguistic memory systems (Meares, 2000). These primitive memories are often only accessed through the body's illnesses or the body's movements or in re-enactments of behaviour (Diamond, 2001).

THE GERMAN

When WWII began, my grandfather was a draughtsman for Focke-Wulf, an aeroplane manufacturer in Bremen. When, in 1941, the bombing in Bremen became more frequent,

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Focke-Wulf moved their entire office south to Bad Eilsen, near Hanover in the north of Germany, where there were facilities for a health resort. My grandfather found a flat in the small village of Rolfshagen with another family. It was an hour through the forest to Bad Eilsen; in winter my grandfather went on skis. There was land in Rolfshagen where my grandparents could grow vegetables and the family never experienced a shortage of food.

My father was born there on 31 July 1944. At the time of my father's birth 10,000 Polish men were brought to the Hanover Concentration Camp; 10 months later there were only 200 remaining (Factual Factory, 1945). The Hanover Concentration Camp was a satellite camp of the Neuengamme Concentration Camp, the largest concentration camp in northwest Germany. The camp was established to the southeast of Hamburg in 1938 and existed until 1945. Over 100,000 people from throughout Europe were imprisoned there. At least 42,900 people died in Neuengamme, its satellite camps, and during the camp evacuations at the end of the war (Neuengamme Concentration Camp Memorial, 2005).

What cold horror was my father born into?
What terror did his mother feel lurking nearby?

A baby bathing in the murky waters of death?
What ignorance fortified?
What blindness numbed?

Vicious terror close
Clawing at the baby
Vicious terror
Right up close
Breathing it in
Eating it in our food
Drinking it in our water
Speaking it in our daily conversation
Vicious terror right up close

The story of remembrance
occurs in every cell of
our bodies.
What is not made conscious is left dormant in the body.
This profound disturbed horror.
This really happened.
And my father emerges from it.
With the dynamics preserved within him.

THE JEW

My grandparents were married at the Great Synagogue, Elizabeth Street, Sydney, on 6 December 1931 by Rabbi Cohen. Ten years later, and perhaps because of news from Europe, they moved with their son to Manly, cutting off ties to family and the Jewish community. My

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grandfather joined the Royal Australian Air Force in 1942. My mother was conceived just before he left. She was born on 23 February 1943.

My mother tells the story.
The story her mother told her,
of her homecoming as an infant.
How she screamed through her first night.
Alone.
Door shut.
"That'll teach her", my grandmother said.

Shutting out the screams of her newborn daughter.
What horror did my grandmother hear in the screams of the baby?
A dark distant pogrom?

Gitelman reported that in 1881–1882:

> Government inspired pogroms . . . rolled over the Ukraine and neighboring areas following the assassination of Tsar Alexander II. In the large Ukrainian cities and in Warsaw, in the small towns of Ukraine and Belorussia, mobs roamed the streets, attacking Jews, looting their homes and stores, smashing furniture, and generally terrorizing people, often with policemen looking on. Only after a few days of this would troops be called out to restore order and Jews begin the task of putting their bodies, homes, and lives together. (Gitelman, 1988, pp. 8–10)

Three of my great grandparents were 5-year-old children living in the Pale during these waves of pogroms; another was in Manchester, a child of those who had already fled. (From 1835 to 1917 Jews in northeastern Europe were confined by law to "The Pale of Settlement", a section of Eastern Europe that included Latvia and the Ukraine where my ancestors lived.) We see the effect of this original trauma on my great grandparents in my grandmother's action of shutting the door on her newborn baby.

We can take guidance from the literature on the transgenerational transmission of Holocaust trauma. There, research shows that lack of resolution of trauma is associated with parental fear in response to infant distress (Fonagy, 1999). Fonagy has suggested that: "some survivors . . . find the experience of child-rearing at times an intolerable challenge. At moments interactions with their infants may have triggered memories accompanied by unbearable psychic pain from which they could find refuge only in states of dissociation" (p. 97).

The infant's distress is a horror,
a screaming horror.
Like the screams of the pogroms,
a screaming horror.
An unspeakable horror
comes in the night.
A menacing demand.
A long forgotten monster.

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A dark call.
An unspeakable horror
screams through the night
An unspeakable horror
passed from mother to baby.
An unspeakable horror is buried in night.

The dissociated core of my grandmother's experience was passed on to my mother in infancy. As Fonagy (1999) put it: "The dissociated core of the self is an absence, rather than genuine psychic content . . . The dissociative core permits the direct transmission of unconscious traumatic fantasy from mother or father to child" (p. 105). The traumatic experience of the original persecutor inhabits the infant, from pogrom to child across the generations.

DISSOCIATION

Dissociation is a kind of psychic death. Kaplan has written this about suicide during the final years of the Holocaust:

> This suggests another reaction to the persecution: the determination of one's own form and . . . time of death . . . it was a way of escaping the persecutors . . . In all, the number of Berlin Jews who killed themselves during the time of the deportations is estimated at 2,000 to 3,000 . . . There was a growing acceptance of suicide at this time, fostered by the increasing deadening of emotions. (Kaplan, 2005, pp. 366–367)

I wonder if, as a fellow Jew, my grandmother was feeling this deadening of emotions too. I wonder if she knew of family in Latvia and the Ukraine that were now lost?

Cut off from culture.
In the dark of night.
Cut off from love.
In the dark of night.
Cut off from life.
In the dark of night.
A mother
consumed by the need to
feel nothing.
A dead mother
consumed by loss.
A baby abandoned
consumed by loss.

Fodorova, a scholar in London and a child of children of Holocaust survivors, has said:

> One may speculate about what is projected into a baby by a mother who is in psychic pain, who, perhaps only a few months prior to its birth had learned that her entire family were brutally murdered. Such an infant must be at great risk of introjecting a painful, secret trauma, a "psychic hole". . . Andree Green describes a mother

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> traumatized and preoccupied by loss as "the dead mother", "a mother who was . . . unreachable without echo, but always sad. A silent mother even if talkative". (Green, as cited in Fodorova, 2005, p. 303)

After liberation the family doctor discovered that my grandmother had gone completely deaf. I found his note in my grandfather's service records: "This is to certify that Mrs Josephs is suffering from Total Deafness and neurasthenia. Her condition is deteriorating and she is quite unable to supervise her two young children" (Connolly, 1945).

THE TRANSMISSION

Volkan, Emeritus Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Virginia, has written this about the transgenerational transmission of trauma:

> Transgenerational transmission involves the depositing of an already formed self or object image into the developing self-representation of a child under the premise that there it can be kept safe and the resolution of the conflict with which it is associated can be postponed until a further time. The "deposited image" then becomes like a psychological gene that influences the child's identity . . . and manifests in "tasks" the child is unconsciously impelled to perform, such as conducting the mourning that the mother cannot perform, or repairing the mother so that she will regain psychological health . . . If the children cannot deal with what is deposited in them, they, as adults, will in turn pass the mental representation of the event to the next generation. (Volkan, 2001, pp. 86–88)

So here I am, the child of the child of the child of the child of the Russian pogroms attempting to integrate something of this transgenerational transmission, by visualising its patterning, its image schemas—image schemas of violence, fear and dissociation. I am also the child of the child of a WWII German Family. Volkan has suggested that:

> the shadow of the Nazi era and the German people's complicity in the Holocaust continue to influence how individuals and Germans as a group conceive of themselves today . . . the inability of previous generations of Germans to mourn this period involves a shared defense against identification and association with the Third Reich and feelings of shame for its atrocities. These unresolved issues have passed on to the subsequent generations. (Volkan, 2001, p. 88)

VIOLENCE

We are at my father's house.
Eating lunch.
He has framed two of my paintings.
They are cheap frames and I don't like them so I say so.
Suddenly without warning he is grabbing me and forcibly pushing me out of his house.
Like a criminal.

Out the front of his home.
He wrestles me to the ground.

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Half strangling me as he does.
Scratching and clawing at my neck.
I scream,
a long dark fearful scream,
like I have never heard again from my own body.
And it is somehow over.
He is gone.
And I am in the car with my sister and her boyfriend.
Shaking.
And noticing the deep bloody gouges in my neck.

DISSOCIATION

Dissociation from atrocities.
Dissociation from trauma.

A few weeks later my father came to see my painting performance. In the performance I told stories of my ancestors: Wolf, Ukrainian Jew, who escaped from the Russian army; and Johannes, German soldier, who was castrated because of the depression he developed during WWI. I painted an enormous painting with my hands on stage in response to these stories. In the theatre foyer after the performance my father proceeded to speak about his daughter's "mad explosions" and his concern for her. Suddenly his violent explosion is mine. This is a dissociation. Kaplan (2005) has suggested that, during the war in Germany, there "was a clear dissociation from the major atrocities of the Nazis." (p. 354). She cited Levy:

> Over the course of the years there were individual arrests almost daily on ridiculous charges or sometimes anonymous denunciations—at any time of day or night . . . No Jew could be certain of living a peaceful, undisturbed life. The most innocent, harmless citizen could be accused of any offence or crime . . . Jail, prison, concentration camp, at the very least weeks of pretrial detention without any court hearing, frequently involving rough treatment, threatened all of us. (cited by Kaplan, 2005, p. 348)

Kaplan also said that:

> Immediately after the Nazis assumed power, their supporters took revenge on numerous opponents of the regime. In March, the SA beat a Jewish baker's apprentice in Berlin to death because he had filed a police report after Nazis had attacked him a year earlier. (Kaplan, 2005, p. 346)

My father cannot see, cannot visualise this history of violence, nor his own. Instead, through a process of projective identification, he imagines it is mine: he projects it into me. This is evidence of an undigested infantile experience that, because of the pain associated with it, has become necessarily unconscious and somatised. It is preserved in the body in pre-linguistic memory systems that can only be known through enactment in violence and violent explosions.

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REMNANTS

My father
the immigrant German
carries within him
an unconscious dynamic
revealed in moments like this.
The remnant of guilt.
The remnant of hiding and shame.
The remnant of rage.
At the moment
my father pushes me out of his house
I am "scum".

The National Socialists used the term "scum" to refer to those who were weak or unfit to live "to whom you must not belong if you are to survive" (Ermann, Pflichthofer, & Kamm, 2009, p. 230) and to justify discrimination in order both to destroy those discriminated against and to "save" oneself. My father has to discriminate against me in order to save himself. At the moment he pushes, strangles and scratches me to the ground I am no longer his daughter. Unconsciously he enacts a drama: the violent German and the Jewish scum. Kaplan has reported that: "A prime example of Nazi behaviour—the song with the refrain "When Jew blood spurts from the knife, then things are getting even better"—might even be sung when a Jewish child was hurt" (2005, p. 297).

THE CHILDHOOD IN WAR PROJECT

In 2003, a project "War Childhood during the NS Time and its Consequences" was founded at the University of Munich. It asked "what traces the intrusion of this confusing and devastating outer reality has left on the unformed inner world of these children—and how they were mastered" (Ermann et al., 2009, p. 226). Ermann, Professor of Psychosomatics and Director of the Department of Psychotherapy and Psychosomatics in Munich, has reported his experience of the interviews:

> The truth is that we have to bear the tension arising from the fact that trauma and perpetration lie so closely together in us Germans and the NS past of our country. It is hard to accept that the children of the perpetrators and the approving majority are traumatised children as well. Another truth is that the suffering of the children of Nazi Germany must not be offset against what the Nazis did to their victims. To bear this tension is the developmental challenge in dealing with our country's past, and hopefully a resource for mental growth. (Ermann et al., 2009, p. 228)

When analysing my father's reaction I need to take care to see both the victim in him as well as the unconscious identification with the Nazi—a complex empathic challenge.

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THE "NAZARETH" CONFERENCES

In the 1990s and 2000s a series of historical meetings between psychoanalysts and psychotherapists from Israel and Germany took place, first in Israel and then in Germany (Partners in Confronting Collective Atrocities, 1994). Erlich, Professor of Psychology at the Hebrew University and an Israeli psychoanalyst, wrote about his observation of the self-image and identity of the Germans during these meetings:

> They are full of feelings of shame and guilt and their innermost desire is to be rid of them . . . One of the astounding findings regarding German participants was that they grew up without exception in families in which, in very different ways, they were the victims of "respectable" but the same time uncomprehending parents who cared for their material well-being but knew nothing of their emotions. (Cited in Ermann et al., 2009, p. 231)

Ermann and colleagues added that:

> It is also part of the NS ideology that shame and guilt are banned from the self . . . The war children live with an introjection that sees shame and guilt as signs of weakness, and weakness is unconsciously "not fit to live" and must be destroyed. It is then frequently the third-generation children who take on the task of living with the feelings of shame and guilt. They are the containers for the parents. Transgenerational transmission is also a way of coming to terms with traumas. (Ermann et al., 2009, p. 231)

Locked in a battle
with my father's guilt.
He is punishing me
depriving me
I am the shameful
guilty one.
He is the pure.

REMNANTS

Amigorena and Vignar, two South American psychoanalysts, writing in 1979, stated that:

> A totalitarian regime is not content with repressing the outer reality by forcing all members of society to live according to a precise code. It forces itself into the psychic world, too, where it establishes itself as a system of checks, hierarchies and surveillance within, as the inner structure of the subject. This is perhaps the most archaic and most disguised form of power. It imprints itself into the unconscious where it remains hidden, becoming a tyrannical, silently working entity. (Cited in Ermann et al., 2009, p. 233)

My father leaves an imprint
a mark
that was pressed
in upon him

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even in the womb.
The mark of political madness
a disturbed leader
directing a disturbed nation.
A disturbed world
an imprint of madness.
Führer, father
constricting powerful. . .mixed up love.
Disturbed confusions
mysterious intensities.
A nightmare.

Lost in a sea
of contradiction
and complexity.
Illusions
Battles
Explosions

I am running
towards and from my past
in every moment.
The immigrant suitcase
the Holocaust remnant.

CLAUSTROPHOBIA

Jewish historian Gitelman wrote that: "In May 1882 laws were passed that prohibited Jews from settling outside the towns and shtetlekh (hamlets)" (Gitelman, 1988, p. 10) He continued:

> Jews lived in self-contained environments. Restricted severely in their political, cultural, and economic opportunities, the Jews concentrated on creating a comprehensive communal structure . . . Jewish communities were very dense concentrations . . . Many welcomed the warmth and security of an all-embracing community, but some found it stifling and confining. (Gitelman, 1988, p. 29)

Russian Jews
inhabit tight small spaces of richness and complexity
surrounded by fear.
The fear is all pervading.
Unimaginable.
Anxiety pierces everything.
Creates claustrophobia, deafness.

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Kaplan has written about similar experiences during the Holocaust:

> Life in the family was seen as the "sole protection against a hostile environment." Nevertheless . . . the burden facing the Jews had an impact on families: "It would be wrong to say that the parental homes disintegrated, but in many cases home life was cheerless and full of troubles." Because Jews spent more and more evenings at home and conversations focused on the same thing—worries and problems—family life could feel too confining, and family members could take out their stress on those closest to them. (Kaplan, 2005, p. 286)

My mother tells me the synagogue is claustrophobic.
This is her experience of her family.
Of being Jewish.
She feels claustrophobic
in the belly
of her own culture.
Claustrophobic
She can't breathe.

Fossion and his colleagues in Brussels have been doing family therapy work with third-generation survivors of the Holocaust. He has reported that: "Saying "I" was felt as a negation of the family contract, which required saying "We". . . separation from the family meant death; death in a literal, not symbolic sense" (Fossion, Rejas, Servais, Pelc, & Hirsch, 2003, p. 523). My mother and her mother's way of hiding this painful contract is—and was—to negate our Jewish heritage. When I ask my mother if I can have a copy of our family records, she says: "No!" "Find them yourself." My mother deprives me of history, culture and meaning, in the same way her mother deprived her of it. When, as a child, I asked my grandmother, "Are we Jewish?" she said, "I don't care if you are a Calathumpian, as long as you are a good person." In that one moment, my grandmother waives away relatives, loss, and the possibility of real connection. I wonder, in the pogroms and in the Shoah, what and who have we lost? Fodorova has said:

> The second generation is not only unsure about what they have lost but whom they have lost. Losing people whose names, likenesses and habits they know so little about fills many of them with guilt and shame, with a sense of inner emptiness. Despite not knowing the ones they have lost, they sense that, through losing them, they have lost a part of themselves. (Fodorova, 2005, p. 302)

I look, feel, breathe, learn, and discover that death and loss and longing exist in the bone marrow of our history.

FINDING LANGUAGE

British psychoanalyst Ogden emphasizes the importance of language in revivifying previously unknowable and painful aspects of human experience. He has said:

> The almost irresistible impulse to kill the pain, and in so doing kill a part of ourselves, is what is most human about us. We turn to poetry in part with the hope that we might reclaim . . . forms of human aliveness that we have foreclosed to ourselves. (Ogden, 1999, p. 992)

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Language is a cultural system. Sapir, an American linguist who was born into an orthodox German Jewish family in 1884 and emigrated as a child with his parents from Germany to the USA, said that:

> The "real world" is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group. No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached. (As cited in Besemeres & Wierzbicka, 2007, p. xvii)

The original language of my ancestors, the language in which the original trauma occurred, is the language in which the trauma can best be integrated and remembered: Hebrew, Yiddish, Russian, Latvian, and German. William Chomsky, father of Noam, and himself a linguist and specialist in the study of Hebrew, wrote:

> Every language, including English, has a stock of words which are charged with the emotional and intellectual experiences of the people employing it . . . The richer and the more intense the historical experiences of a people, the greater is the number of such words in its language and the more emotionally charged they are. (Chomsky, 1982, p. 6)

Through migration my ancestors lost the symbolic system in which they could process and make meaning from the trauma.

Without the language the experience was lost.
I attempt to translate.
I begin transplanting culture.
I search for European and Jewish complexity.
I put it in pots in this harsh Australian climate.
Transplanting culture.
Growing complexity.

Chomsky again:

> Hebrew has been the sacred language of the Jewish people—the language of its religion, culture and civilization. It has been, in sum, the language of Judaism and intimately identified with the national and religious experiences of the Jewish people throughout the generations. The Jewish people can no more be dissociated from Hebrew than they can be dissociated from their own spiritual identity—Judaism. (Chomsky, 1982, p. 3)

A breath of Hebrew
sustains me
in ways I never thought imaginable.
Listening to the Hebrew prayers
fills me with incomprehensible relief.

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With my two sons I trek to the small German built synagogue in Sydney.
For three years we make these trips.
Until slowly we begin to learn Hebrew from our home in Canberra.

THE BARMITZVAH

Nervous fever.
Sleepless nights.
Praying quietly as people arrive.

My mother stands at the Torah to say the blessings for the first time.
I stand at the Torah beside her and sing my portion.
My eldest son stands at the Torah beside me and sings his portion.
My youngest son waits and then leads the songs at the end.
From generation to generation.
A miracle of return.

The Torah is the self of the Jewish people.
The Hebrew its richly symbolic and poetic providence.
A community of voices.
Singing.
We arrive into this sound.

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