

FED WITH TEARS – POISONED WITH MILK:  
THE NAZARETH GROUP RELATIONS  
CONFERENCES.

By M. Ginor, H.S. Erlich & H. Beland, with a foreword  
by Archbishop Desmond M. Tutu. Giessen, Germany:  
Psychosozial-Verlag.

This volume describes the preparation and the work of three consecutive Group Relations Conferences between 1994 and 2000 concerning German-Israeli relations in the post-Holocaust era. This is pioneer work: difficult, painful and brave, from the sides of the organizers, authors and participants, who were psychoanalysts from Germany and Israel. After the three conferences that are described in this book, the work has continued in including other groupings affected by the Holocaust, like Diaspora Jews and Palestinians. This has resulted in a new organization, *Partners in Confronting Collective Atrocities* (PCCA), whose aim is to learn from the Holocaust about dealing with other atrocities.

The authors underline the importance of the actual presence of the other in producing desirable change in one's identity, which is why they chose the format of a Group Relations Conference, which was modified for this special aim. In the first post-war decades, there was an inability to mourn as a group in the German Psychoanalytic Society (DPV), even if there was individual grief: "Individual awareness anticipated the collective one by a decade". In the second stage, from the early 1980s, German analysts acknowledged their personal responsibility with the help of Hillel Klein and Rafael Moses. This occurred in moving group experiences in, among other places, Wiesbaden, in 1984. It also meant the painful realization, in R. Vogt's words (quoted in the book) that "Hitler's heirs are embarking upon the heritage of Freud. The one heritage mixes with the other like fire and water."

In these conferences, the German analysts could fathom their heritage of the Holocaust only in the presence of Jewish colleagues. The Conference experience, grouped under different thematic headlines, is beautifully described in a collage written by 28 participants and staff. Identity issues dominate over emotional contents; this also applies to the image of the other, the "not-me". Another painful and striking finding is of

the Germans who had grown up in families as victims of parents who were emotionally unaware of the impact they had on their children. "I was raised by an ordinary Nazi mother", is a quotation that upsets any reader of this text. These German participants could be superficially pleasant but difficult to relate to fully. Furthermore, here was the issue of shame that the German members struggled with. The authors emphasize how this points to a possible deficit in the early object relations of many German children.

Among the Jewish participants, murderous rage and vengefulness was more evident, as was envy and even an unacceptable need to identify with the Germans.

It is interesting that the authors underline how the common aims of understanding, reconciliation and forgiveness are foreign to these conferences. The primary task is instead defined as exploration. This, however, seems to include working with group identity. The change of identity in the presence of the other has the burden of betrayal against the group affiliation as a particular counterforce. That people are willing to participate is an indicator that the work is valuable to them, even if we don't know what these people are looking for unconsciously. The authors indicate that the place and meaning of the Holocaust is a gaping wound that refuses to heal. We must therefore continue to deal with it, and this might be the unconscious reason for participating.

The conferences do not aim for dialogue either, but for each group to work in the presence of the other group. This seems to be in line with the Group Relations approach, as developed by the Leicester Conference (De Board, 1990). The authors underline that dialogue implies the prior recognition of the other's otherness, and that it can only emerge as a byproduct in a not yet dialogic process. I differ on this point, because I see dialogue as a way to facilitate a process where the other is experienced as an individual with his own humanity. If you speak to your enemies, they become less demonized. But this may be just a minor theoretical controversy in my mind as a reader of this book.

Although, as the authors write themselves, it is hard to describe this kind of experiential process in a publication, they have succeeded in overcoming this challenge. It is also noteworthy that they inform us that this

work has attracted a lot of attention in Germany, but hardly any in Israel. Maybe this illustrates the dialectics between German guilt feelings and Israeli rage through the post-war generations.

The new organization, PCCA, has already organized another broader conference: "Repeating, Reflecting, Moving on: Germans, Jews, Israelis, Palestinians and Others Today" in September 2008. This seems to be an important development, even if the organizers might have a somewhat optimistic view about how much conferences of this kind – geared to individuals who are motivated to work with psychological issues – can contribute to resolving political conflicts. They also emphasize that the "radioactive fallout" from the Holocaust still reaches places far removed from the original site of devastation, and that the Holocaust remains the energetic center of this work.

This book is an unusual presentation of a brave and unique project, where psychoanalysis is applied in an explorative way in the world outside of consulting rooms. I recommend it to any reader who wishes to learn about the trans-generational transmission of trauma and to anyone else interested in identity issues.

#### REFERENCE

De Board, R. (1990). *The psychoanalysis of organizations: a psychoanalytic approach to behaviour in groups and organizations*. Oxford and New York: Routledge.

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