Memory within Trauma:

The Perception of Positive Experiences as Narrated by Holocaust Concentration Camp Survivors.

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The central theme of this paper examines the crucial role memory plays in the face of severe, long term trauma. Specifically, the focus will be on what I label the subjective perception of memory as recalled and narrated by survivors 50-60 years after the trauma. This was the subject of my doctoral research: “Positive Experiences Within a Severely Traumatic Framework as Perceived and Narrated by Holocaust Concentration Camp Survivors”.

I make a distinction between the perception of memory and memory per se. Memory is objective when it relates to the place of an event. It is objective because it is both reliable and validated by others. The physical existence of Auschwitz or Rwanda, or Sarajevo, or bombed out cities in Syria as a place can be verified. Perception of memory is subjective when it relates to the experience of that place. How each and every survivor of the place relates and tells his story of daily life becomes his perception of what he remembers. And because it is his perception, it is subjective.

elf is short lived such as an automobile accident or the sudden death of a loved one, etc. With most, to some extent, time and memory allow for healing and the return to normative living. But what happens if the trauma is of a long duration; weeks, months, even years? The trauma itself becomes the norm of daily life and if something positive happens within this daily life of horror it is quickly buried within the mind of the survivors' memory.

Memory can be seen as both a consolation and burden. There seems to be an irreconcilable polarity between loss and dread on the one hand and the forever hopeful expectation of the return to life before the trauma. In other words trauma retroactively obliterates positive memories so the past is no longer retrievable.

I interviewed 56 Holocaust survivors who were incarcerated in Nazi concentration camps. The emphasis was on survivors' narratives of perceived positive experiences within the horror of daily life in the camps. The focus of my five year study was unique. Thousands upon thousands of testimonies describing life during the Holocaust have been published, videoed, recorded. And although the survivors had participated in testimony-giving interviews previously, the stories of positive experience had not been recalled. These positive subjective experiences were often buried deep within the memory of the torture, starvation and dehumanization. There are even stories that talk about humor. But, up until the time of this research, the literature remained void of

e, non-life saving, positive experiences. When I refer to non-life saving experiences or events I am not speaking about the stealing of bread from a Capo or guard in order to prolong the life of a loved one. The positive experience I was looking for was an experience that could have occurred anywhere else by anyone, but it had occurred within that specific "place" and in that specific time.

A prime factor enabling the survivors to confront this question was the manner in which the interviews were conducted. I adopted the tenets of PCA (People Centered Approach) as developed by the late Carl Rogers, together with 40 years' experience as a clinical psychologist working with trauma victims. The major finding of the research was that over 50% of those interviewed were able to recall, state out loud and then narrate, for the first time in over half a century, subjective positive experiences.

A second major finding dealt with the optimism and pessimism of the survivors. At the beginning of the interview participants completed an Optimism/Pessimism questionnaire (Dember) to determine whether they were optimistic or pessimistic by nature. To our surprise, the majority of those who perceived and narrated positive experiences were found to be pessimistic and not optimistic as one would suspect. Please note being optimistic or pessimistic is a personality trait developed early in life having nothing to do with trauma.

erceived positive experiences shared three common denominators:

1. The positive event was perceived as being greater than it would have been under normal circumstances (in a non-traumatic framework).
2. They arrived at the camps in their youth; the last place in a long process of separation from loved ones, isolation in ghettos, boarded into cattle trains and shipped to the camps that dotted into the European landscape. They were young, but already old, with most of their lives behind them.
3. They appeared to share an abstract conceptual feeling, that permeated the interviews, of a longing to return to the place where the positive event occurred.

The meaning of place can be defined as a specific location, point in time but it also can be seen as situation, position, significance. The collective world memory of "place", of the Holocaust, of Auschwitz is for the survivors a major part of their identity. In order to honor the memory of those who perished they were asked to give testimony of the atrocities so the world would "never forget". They understood that within that "place" they could not share perceptions of positive memories because the events were only a tiny fraction of what they went through in that place. But no less important, positive experiences were not what the world expected to hear or wanted to hear.

efold: Theoretically, it sheds light on the specific neglected theme in the literature of the existence of positive occurrences within severe traumatic frameworks. Specifically, it documents narratives of positive experiences within the horror of the camps. Clinically, there appears to be a releasing and emotional cleansing effect resulting from the opportunity to narrate and share out loud something positive that happened within the framework of the trauma. The burden of a not completed picture can be partially lifted. And this may be significant when treating trauma victims in general. The survivors were given the feeling of legitimacy, that it is OK to see beyond the daily life of horror and the opportunity to remember and perceive something positive. They were able to complete and close an emotional circle. In so doing, they were able to incorporate within their own identity that they were both victims and heroes. Not only had they survived as victims of trauma and man's inhumanity to man but heroes who symbolized hope for a better place in this world. For many that memory was both positive and "liberating" and a testament to the human spirit. They urged me to tell their stories which led to the publishing of my book: "After Auschwitz, the Unasked Question". And in closing, I would like to share with you highlights of one of six stories that are included in my book.

Ida was my 32nd interview. We met at her home in Los Angeles. She was a well-dressed petite 84 year old woman. She excused herself, went into the kitchen and brought out home-made cookies and a pot of coffee.

Ida was born and raised in a small town in the Galitzia Province of Poland. At the age of 15 she, her parents, brothers, sister and relatives along with the entire Jewish population (of about 3000 people), were rounded up by the Gestapo and local police. They were marched a few kilometers into the forest where they were forced to dig a large pit and stand along its rim. They were then machine-gunned and fell into the one mass grave.

As sunset approached, little Ida found herself crawling out of the pit, physically unscathed but in a deep state of shock. She wondered alone in the dark forest for hours and was eventually picked up by partisans. She stayed with the partisans for over a month and was then turned over to a Christian family that hid her for a short time. She was discovered by a neighbor and turned over to the local police and was then sent to Auschwitz. After telling me in detail of a typical day in the camp she continued:

"In Auschwitz, one afternoon I am sitting on this rock by the fence, and I see one of the trains come in. I was in shock when I suddenly saw my girlfriend from school in our home village. She jumped from the train and I saw she was alone. Our two families had been close friends and we had shared the holidays together for years. I couldn't believe it, I thought I was dreaming. Later that day a guard told me I didn't belong there anymore; they were going to send me to another camp and I was marched off with a few other girls to another barrack.

s special in that camp? I'll tell you, every minute I survived was special. I lived among the dead and dying. I'm here with you, telling you my life, and for me that's a positive thing. I understand, you want to know if anything in the camp was positive but there wasn't one positive event and I had no special experience that could be called positive. There was nothing at all except lice, typhus, and starvation.

I don't know exactly what positive is or what you're looking for. I did have one experience that I will remember as long as I live. No, as long as I live I will feel it in my heart and in my stomach. I can't explain the feeling. Only those that were there and witnessed our suffering can know what I mean.

Anyway, the following morning I was put on the train. I was totally alone, thirsty and hungry, filthy dirty, my head was bleeding from the itching and scratching, and I thought of just jumping from the train, hoping maybe I would die. But I lifted up my head in that crowd of women and girls and looked. There was no screaming, no crying, no noise. We were all used to it by now, the transports, the trains, the cramped positions with a bucket in the corner to pee in. I looked around. And there she was, standing in a corner of the box-car. It was my girl- friend who I'd seen the day before by the fence. She had been in the camp for just one day and now she was here. It was like God had sent me a present. It was so crowded and packed I could hardly make my way over to the opposite end of the car. I started screaming Miryam, Miryam it's me Ida. Her face was dry, she had changed so. I wondered if I could have looked that dirty, sick and skinny. It took her forever to recognize who I was. I wanted to hug her, just to touch her, but there was no room to reach out. So we just continued to stand where we were and continued to stare at one another.

a stop. A woman screamed out that we had arrived in Bergen Belsen Concentration Camp. I heard guards and dogs as the box cars in front of ours were being opened. Women and girls were screaming. Some of us had died and didn't make it to the camp. They pushed back the wooden bar and our door opened. I looked down from where I was standing and I felt a lightning bolt of horror go through my body. I completely forgot about Miryam. I became part of a wave of chaos. It was nothing like when we came into Auschwitz. I looked over for a second to find Miryam, but she was gone. I was pushed out and fell onto the ramp. I began to frantically look for Miryam. I broke with the long line, a line that never ended. I needed to find the only person I knew

A long time passed. I figured she was dead. I began to mourn inside my stomach. I knew the feeling, that familiar feeling. I was sick inside. Believe me Tony, I know the feeling. You're sick to your stomach, you want to vomit, but there is no food or water in you. There are no tears to cry. Miryam was dead, maybe shot, maybe gassed, but she was no more. I said to myself right there and then, she is resting in Paradise and I am living in deep hell.

Suddenly, from behind me and over to the left, somebody was screaming Ida, Ida. I glanced over and there was Miryam looking right at me and waving both her hands. (Ida, for the first time, begins to cry.) *We rushed into each other's arms. We were in shock. We looked at each other and began to laugh. We laughed and laughed, and continued on laughing. We cried, we hugged, we hugged each other tight, but I mean tight, and we kissed, and we laughed.*

Again Tony, I don't know what is good and what the something positive you are looking for is, but I'll tell you one thing. I'm over eighty, and I've been through enough in my life.

minutes of my entire life, that were the most important and the most positive, liberating experience I could imagine. Till this day I remember the feeling of how happy I was to see her and be with her and know she wasn't killed, but I never really thought of it as a positive kind of experience at the time. I remember we made a pact never to separate. There we were, in the middle of Bergen Belsen laughing our heads off. If that isn't positive, I don't know what is.

We never let each other out of sight again. We stayed together, we worked together, we suffered together. But we were no longer alone. When the camp was finally liberated, Miryam was so sick she could no longer eat. She died in my arms, two days later. I still miss her and love her. She remains a part of me, like my children and grandchildren. I named our oldest daughter Miryam. She is the light of my life.

So there you have it. You traveled so far from Israel for a story like this. I can only wish you luck. You know, you kind of completed the circle for me, maybe the world needs to know that with all that atrocity and horror going on, there were five minutes, no more, when I laughed in Bergen Belsen. So, please Tony, finish the cookies and tell the world."