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In word and deed: A scenic story about guilt in the third generation

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Sometimes memory does not speak, it acts. Our paper provides an insight into psychoanalytic research in the aftermath of the Holocaust and the effects of extreme trauma in post-Nazi Germany. Examining this, we introduced the concept of ‘scenic memory of the Shoah’ several years ago. This concept elucidates how traumatic memory performs – in word and deed. In this paper, we return to this concept as we listen to the story of an amulet and witness a scenic constellation arising in an encounter with third-generation participants. It is a story of loss, survival, severe feelings of guilt and how these themes present in the third generation. We discuss how the transmission of extreme trauma has emerged in our research process and allude to why, when it comes to trauma and guilt, we need to broaden our view on how these stories are told.

Key words: enactment; group dynamics; scenic understanding; survivor guilt; third generation

Remembering in the third generation

Stories are not always told in words alone. Especially when dealing with trauma, we quickly reach the limits of what can be said – not just in our individual abilities, but in language itself. What was misunderstood as silence in survivors’ families has often been an unspoken dialogue. Non-verbal communication in small acts, gestures, facial expressions, emotions and interactions; or what we like to call *scenes*. In our psychoanalytic research, we focus on stories of Shoah survivors and their offspring examining how their stories are told, experienced, mediated and passed down, particularly beyond the spoken word.¹

Our paper provides insight into psychoanalytic research on the late effects of the Holocaust and transgenerational transmission of extreme trauma in post-Nazi Germany. Examining these complex memory and transmission processes, Kurt Grünberg introduced the concept of ‘scenic memory of the Shoah’ several years ago (for his English publications: 2006, 2007, 2013, 2022 and with Friedrich Markert: 2012, 2017), which we will consider in further detail. As a research group at the Sigmund Freud Institute (Frankfurt) we conducted several studies on second- and third-generation descendants of Holocaust survivors. Now we continue this study as part of an interdisciplinary research network that investigates how experiencing antisemitism today may reactivate extreme trauma in descendants of Holocaust survivors. Our study incorporates focus or encounter groups, qualitative interviews and clinical case vignettes as well as quantitative data.²

The main focus of this paper lies in a scenic constellation³ that arose in an encounter group with members of the third generation, i.e. grandchildren of at least one survivor of the Shoah. The group was co- conducted by group analyst Elli Kaminer-Zamberk and psychoanalyst Kurt Grünberg, both of whom belong to the second generation. In addition, the research group included graduate psychologists, some in psychoanalytic training, and students. In the first session, the analysts as well as all participants were asked to introduce themselves briefly. The further discussion followed a non-structured, open format, in which the two analysts only intervened carefully. All sessions were audio recorded and then transcribed.⁴

We want to highlight the story of an amulet as exemplary of scenic memory of the Shoah. It tells a story of dramatic loss and survival, severe feelings of guilt and how they present in the third generation. Along the way we will revisit certain psychoanalytic concepts and constellations, including dissociation, scenic understanding, enactment, sibling relationships and survivor guilt.⁵ Due to the parameters of this research paper we can only touch upon all these ideas briefly. We discuss how extreme trauma has emerged in the research process and emphasise the necessity of expanding our perspective on the transmission of trauma and the manner in which these narratives are conveyed.⁶

The unfolding of the amulet's scenic universe

The story we are about to tell evolved from memories shared by Yael, a granddaughter of Holocaust survivors in her 40s and a mother of two children, who participated in our encounter group. This story involving an amulet belonging to Yael's grandmother ran like a thread through both the sessions of the encounter group and our subsequent meetings in the research group. A thread shimmering golden in places, sometimes invisible, even seemingly lost. The amulet and its story exerted a strong pull that fascinated everyone involved and exceeded our interpretation.

It began with Yael's recollection of how as a child she liked to play with her survivor grandmother's amulet when sitting on her lap. Her grandmother always wore the amulet, which was more like a locket, around her neck. It bore pictures of her two children murdered in the Holocaust. Sometimes Yael was allowed to open it and look at the pictures, but often had to close it abruptly. A shadow intruded on the seemingly secure atmosphere between Yael and her grandmother. As a child, Yael did not understand the harsh orders to let go and close the amulet. In her memory, 'a skimpy shirt' (1st session, 00:21:39) did little to cover the number on her grandmother's arm. It attracted her strangely, yet she knew it should not be touched. Yael remembered the feeling of not being able to ask her grandmother any questions, otherwise 'she started crying and that meant: don't ask any questions' (ibid).

Yael then led the group further back into her memory of the grandparents: living as Jews in Poland under German occupation, they found out about the upcoming deportations and conceived a plan to take their two children – three and five years old – to a neighbouring non-Jewish family to hide. However, during their last visit to the hideout, Yael's grandmother discovered the children full of lice and decided to take them back home. Yael remembered her as a very meticulous person. Soon afterwards the whole family was deported to Auschwitz. At the selection on the ramp, which Yael's parapraxis spoke of as 'separation' (ibid, 00:23:51), the children spotted their maternal aunt in the crowd and ran to her. Yael's great-aunt was sent to the gas chambers with her niece and nephew. Yael's grandmother, alone, was assigned to the labour camp. Her grandfather and grandmother survived the concentration camps separately and found each other after liberation with the help of the Red Cross. Although they received a visa for the US, they never left Germany. They hoped to find their two children again.

Soon after liberation, Yael's grandparents had two more children, ten months apart. Yael's mother and her aunt had a very difficult relationship since childhood and still have to this day. Yael remembered her grandmother, whom she knew for the first twelve years of her life, as a petite woman who spoke in a very low voice, was very restrained and never laughed (ibid: 00:36:42). She summarised her impression several times in a metaphor concluding: 'Her light was off' (ibid). Her grandmother 'simply lived to get life over with ..., simply lived because she lived' (ibid: 00:37:03). Yael recounted that she died relatively young after she stopped taking her medication. On the day of her death, her grandmother set up a small altar by the bed with pictures of her murdered children. Finally, Yael concluded: 'She seems to have died of a broken heart' (ibid: 00:38:09) and reported that she named her own two children after her grandparents' children murdered in the Holocaust, which the grandmother herself would never have allowed if she was still alive.

In the following session Yael was absent. Ricci, another participant and also a mother of two in her 40s, informed us that Yael had an acute flare-up of a serious chronic illness. When asked about the participants' experiences after the first session, Dasha, a 30-year-old artist, said the stories had created images in her mind and that she had begun to draw them. The day before, a friend had given her a new pen, which was 'actually terrible because you can't gloss over anything with it' (2nd session, 00:12:53). She drew with this pen and it made all the pictures very dark. Above all, she drew Yael's grandmother's amulet, 'because it touched me very much, the interaction that she described with her grandmother, who on the one hand was probably very close to her, physically close – because I imagined how she sits on her lap as a small child and touches her and also plays with this amulet – and on the other hand the whole horror that is also in this interaction' (ibid). The scene between grandmother and granddaughter fascinated her and she closed with the remark: 'Yet I can't say whether I find something of myself in it, but I think it has to be like that' (ibid). The group then circled the different meanings and interpretations of the Yiddish saying 'makhn a lebn' [make a living] (ibid: 00:36:52), whereupon the analyst addressed Dasha's drawing again and interpreted it as a playful way of dealing with the terrible history. Dasha replied that she had her drawing with her and offered to show it to the group. In a brief exchange, the analyst indicated that he would prefer if Dasha did not reveal her drawing to the group until next time when Yael was back. Dasha concurred with the proposition; however, she added that the image had spontaneously come to her (ibid: 00:42:23) and thus it was not necessarily related to Yael and did not constitute 'a portrait of her story' (ibid: 00:42:38).

In the following session Dasha was absent and, therefore, could not present and share the drawing with the group as agreed. It was striking how the group did not mention this fact at all. In the discussion that followed, those participants present said they did not know the stories of how their grandparents survived, that it was a 'riddle' to them (3rd session, 00:03:17). It was generally agreed that these stories were never told in the family, the details were not discussed and no questions were allowed to be asked. Yael took up this thought and once again referred to the amulet: the only traces that she could hold on to were the amulet, the number on her grandmother's arm and, in late adolescence, her grandfather's testimony at a court trial. However, these few traces contrast with the obvious reality that the burden was passed on. Yael believed she could see this burden

clearly in her family: in the personalities, in the close relationships, in their severity, their lack of zest for life, their inability to get close, show love, attention and patience towards one another.

At this point, we shall divert our attention from the immediate situation within the encounter group and delve into certain psychoanalytic concepts that can aid in comprehending these phenomena more deeply. We will then revisit the narrative of the amulet.

Taking part in the play: Scenic understanding and enactments in psychoanalysis

In our research, we focus on non-verbal, scenic aspects of memory processes, narration and storytelling. We look closely at interactions between patient and analyst, or in our case between participants of encounter groups and researchers. It is our way of trying to find the hidden connotations, to speak the metalanguage, and to understand the ‘counter-sense’ (Morgenroth 2010: 279) of a story told.

It is no coincidence that psychoanalysts, in trying to grasp this meta- communicational level of what is happening on and off the couch, refer to the realms of theatre, dance and cinema. In a psychoanalytic setting, to rely on the spoken word alone would be like relying only on the dramatic text and ignoring all other aspects of the play: acting, facial expressions, gestures, movement, vocal qualities, pitch, tone and rhythms of speech.

As simple as this thought seems, it was revolutionary for psychoanalysis. The concept of the ‘scene’ and ‘scenic understanding’ was introduced by Alfred Lorenzer and Hermann Argelander in the late 1960s and early 1970s during their time together at the Sigmund Freud Institute and Goethe University Frankfurt. These concepts open a whole new chapter (see Bohleber 2016; Rothe, Krüger & Rosengart 2022). They emphasise the importance of not only ‘logical’ or ‘psycho-logical’ but ‘scenic’ understanding of what is happening in front of the analyst, in the relationship with the patient and also in the analyst themselves.

Argelander points out the importance of scenic understanding as an analytic and therapeutic tool, especially for the initial interview with a patient (1967; for his single translated article 2013). In these first few moments a much greater story is told than one would assume if only looking at the factual information shared. The real drama takes place at the latent or unconscious level. But to gain access to this hidden meaning one must be willing to go on stage and take part in the play, as Lorenzer (1983; translated 2016) writes:

The analyst does not remain aloof from the patient as if contemplating his drama from the vantage point of a box at the theatre but must be prepared to join in the play with the patient – which means that he must tread the boards himself. He takes a real part in the play. (2016: 1412)

Bereswill, Morgenroth and Redman (2010), all prolific interpreters of Lorenzer, suggest that his concept stems from the earliest phases of life. It is the preverbal way in which the neonate experiences the world: multisensory, affective, and embodied; in other words, scenic.

[T]he scenic – understood as an ongoing register of affective and embodied experience and meaning – does not disappear. Rather, it persists throughout life, infusing, animating, and, importantly, resisting what is consciously known. ... Lorenzer viewed this scenic register as being closely allied to the unconscious. It is, in some sense, that on which the unconscious works or the language through which it speaks. (ibid: 226)

A remarkably similar concept of enactment emerged in the Anglophone psychoanalytic community around 20 years later which is, however, more confined to the analytic setting. Theodore Jacobs (1986) introduced the term enactment as a form or aspect of counter-transference, which is often subtle and scarcely visible.⁷ Like Argelander before him, Jacobs began his seminal paper on enactments with the initial situation of a patient entering the analyst's office. Whereas Argelander depicted the way his female patient moved through his office as non-verbally transmitted communication, Jacobs focused on the reaction of an analyst of extremely small stature upon first seeing a very tall patient. With a shrug of his shoulders and a resigned gesture, he commented: 'Come on in, anyway...' (ibid: 289). Both Argelander and Jacobs emphasise that these openings carried with them worlds of meaning – for analyst and patient. These small scenes, although often overlooked, are highly complex and consist of diverse behaviours. Jacobs (1986: 289-290) notes:

It highlights the well-known though sometimes overlooked fact that from the very outset of treatment, transferences are activated in the analyst as well as in the patient. Whether overt or disguised, dramatic or barely perceptible, the analyst's transferences may exert a significant influence not only on his [sic] perceptions and understanding, but on the particular form and manner in which the patient's transferences emerge. Conveyed in tone and gesture as well as in words, these reactions may be expressed in ways more subtle than obvious – in the barest of nods, the most minimal of smiles, the scarcely audible grunt, the slightest variation in words of greeting or of farewell.

As in scenes, enactments can be viewed as 'symbolic interactions' with 'unconscious meaning for all participants' (Balsam et al. 2023: 211) or 'dramatic externalization of the internal world' (ibid: 213). All of these concepts stem from Freudian ideas, especially his remarks on repetition compulsion: 'not as a memory but as an action...' (Freud 1958 [1914]: 150). Furthermore, Freud, the storyteller, depicted his cases in a very scenic way (e.g. Katharina⁸). In psychoanalysis today, the use of the term varies widely and encloses repetition, re-living, externalising, acting out (Balsam et al. 2023: 215).⁹ Ilany Kogan, in working with second-generation descendants, specified enactments as 'compulsion to re-create their parents' experiences in their own lives through concrete acts' (2002: 251).

Remembering what cannot be told: scenic memory of the Shoah

Our concept of 'scenic memory of the Shoah' is based on scenic understanding according to Lorenzer and Argelander, but differs in some significant aspects, as Grünberg and Markert (2012) point out. Scenic understanding is an elaborate 'method for apprehending and decoding scenic content' (Morgenroth 2010: 276).

It aims to capture the dynamics and meaning of unconscious, mostly neurotic enactments – all of which have their origin in common or universal experiences – by relying heavily on the hermeneutic process and trying to grasp the inner essence of things.

However, we feel such an attempt at understanding is prone to fail if we merely apply the same rules to the study of extreme trauma. Memories of survivors are, indeed, being enacted in scenes, in relationships with their family members as well as with people in their environment. They tend to *perform* their memories. Survivors do externalise and transmit the things that were inflicted on them, not only to their offspring who, therefore, become themselves witnesses and ‘experts’, but to us (see Grünberg & Markert 2017). They pass on their experiences of persecution above all non-verbally. They engross us in a scenic conversation, often remaining silent by speaking in a traumatic tongue, ‘in a language of the scenic, a language that contains something of the “unspeakable”’ (110). Through these mainly unconscious ‘entanglements’ we become bearers of what has been imparted to them. But dealing with experiences of the Shoah leads us into an area at the limits of what humans are capable of conceiving and understanding. If we aim at examining traumatic experiences that cannot be put into words, when analysing the fragmented, or dissociated, our mind works at the brink of collapse. The ineffable experiences, the memories beyond words can only be approached not through *understanding*, but scenic *remembering* only.

In our research, we seek out signs and traces of these moments of collaborative scenic memory of the Shoah. But traumatic memories act like a black hole. Instead of actively searching, our stance resembles ‘a penetrating beam of darkness; a reciprocal of the searchlight’ as noted by Bion (1990: 20). When we have a vague sense of coming into contact with the terror and the unbearable nature of the Shoah we try to identify our countertransference reactions and, therefore, our scenic memory. With the aid of reverie and ‘concentrated free association’ (Markert 2005) we investigate our immediate feelings, thoughts, fantasies and also bodily sensations, trying to connect what is happening in the present with the stories of life and persecution of the survivors. Our methodical approach is based on an oscillating movement, hence a:

systematic movement back and forth between a detailed reading of the data, reflection on the associations, emotions and bodily states to which these give rise, and consideration of the relations forming within the [interpretation] panel itself – so the contours of something previously hidden or difficult to think will tend to appear. (Morgenroth 2010: 277-278)

The oscillatory motion employed in our approach leads us back to the amulet of Yael’s grandmother. This peculiar artifact exerted a significant influence on our research endeavours, serving as a hypnotic pendulum that guided our investigations.

Caught in repetition: The amulet and the transmission of survivor guilt

The amulet symbolises the unhealed rift of relationships in Yael's family caused by the Shoah, which continues for generations. Immediately we felt its presence, which fueled transmissions of extreme trauma. We followed these transmissions in different directions, but the pull of the amulet was constant. The aura of guilt turned out to be particularly striking. Ever-present in Yael's account of her grandmother and family relationships, this aspect of the amulet repeated itself in both the encounter and research group.

In what follows, we examine the mechanisms of dissociation and fragmentation more closely, focusing primarily on processes within our research group. Subsequently, we redirect our attention towards the nature of the relationship between Yael and Dasha and the specific manifestation it assumed.

Broken again: Dissociation, fragmentation and guilt

From the outset, our attention was drawn to scenes revealing a significant disparity in Yael's recollections. Throughout our analysis, we repeatedly returned to these fragments, which continued to bother us and defy resolution. We could not let them rest. One particularly striking narrative construction emerged during Yael's account of the 'separation' (ibid) and subsequent murder of her grandmother's first children, as well as the circumstances leading up to their deportation. She told us:

Exactly, the children ran to their aunt the moment they saw her, ran to her, and were probably with her at the time of the separation. It was even different: before the deportation, a neighbouring family agreed to take their children and give them back to her after the war. When they heard that there was a possibility that everyone would be deported, they went back for the children. And she saw – that's just the story anyway – that her children were full of lice. And she was a very, very meticulous woman and said: 'No, I won't leave my children here!' and then took them back with her. (1st Session, 00:23:51-5)

In these few sentences, two distinct situations converge. Firstly, Yael details the arrival of her grandmother and her children at Auschwitz, their subsequent selection, separation and eventual murder. Secondly, she recounts how her grandmother reversed her decision and got the children out of hiding, which occurred before the selection. Notably, the perpetrators of these atrocities remained absent from the narrative, rendering them invisible. Even more so, a gap exists between the agency that Yael attributes to her grandparents and the reality of their situation. In emphasising the grandmother's decision not to leave the children in hiding, the narrative suggests the possibility of an alternative course of action that could have potentially prevented their deaths. The tragedy of the children running away to their aunt is linked to the situation in which the grandmother was unable to separate from her children and brought them back home. Yael introduced this account apologetically as 'just the story anyway' (ibid), indicating a blurring of actual events, memory alterations and retrospective adaptations. This deferred action can be interpreted as a defence mechanism against the overwhelming sense of hopelessness. The portrayal of only the survivors as active protagonists implies an illusion of agency, which serves to counteract the hopelessness while simultaneously generating a sense of guilt. Yael herself associated

the grandmother's alleged agency with feelings of guilt when asked how she thought her grandmother must have felt:

... Yes, maybe also feelings of guilt. I don't know. Maybe you always have in the back of your head:
'Well, now the children are no longer here. If I had left them there, lice or not, would they still be here after all?' I know, I thought to myself, I wouldn't have come to an agreement with myself. (ibid: 00:32:56-2)

The research process conducted by our team reveals that the experience of guilt in extreme traumatic situations is closely linked to a sense of powerlessness. This connection was evident in various interpretations of guilt and was also observed indirectly through the dynamics of dissociation and fragmentation. Dissociation is a crucial defense mechanism in the psychological processing of trauma (see Grünberg & Markert 2017 for detailed remarks). The individual traumatic elements, particularly sensory impressions such as visual, auditory, haptic, taste and smell, as well as states of fear and emotional numbness, are detached, encapsulated and then 'buried' (Abraham & Torok 1994: 130). This fragmentation serves as a protective function to shield the psyche from the unbearable pain and terror associated with the traumatic event. However, this defence mechanism is only partially successful as the fragmented elements of the traumatic experience remain unprocessed and unintegrated. They retain their traumatic and overwhelming effect and have the potential to re-emerge and reconnect through processes of re-association. Maintaining the dissociative split against the urge to re-experience requires a significant psychological effort.

During the initial session, Yael encountered difficulties in piecing together the narrative fragments, expressed a sense of losing coherence and concluded that she had 'lost the thread' (1st session, 00:21:39). The subsequent flare-up of Yael's illness, which prevented her from participating in the second session, can be attributed to the dissociative process that extended from the psychic to the physical level, symbolising a struggle for survival. Hirsch (2010) posited that traumatogenic dissociative splitting processes are fundamental to the formation of body-related, psychosomatic symptoms. Embodied dissociation serves to safeguard the self from the destructive impact of trauma, whereby 'the dissociated body is sacrificed *pars pro toto*, ingesting the destruction to save the total self' (ibid: 194). In a similar vein to Yael's loss of coherence between the individual elements of her grandparents' story, the group relations became fragile and suffered a rupture.

To illuminate the link between the grandmother's incapacity to save her children and the feelings of guilt, we will look at how the dissociative processes and the aura of guilt manifested themselves in our attempt at interpretation. The issue of the grandmother's (emotional) culpability engendered heated debates in our research sessions. We were stuck in a cycle of accusation, prosecution, defence and judgement, akin to a legal proceeding. Just as Yael could not come to an agreement with herself, we could not agree as a group either.

In our fixation on Yael's story, we repeatedly diverged from previously shared perspectives and common positions, arriving at disparate conclusions. Aspects that we believed were well-understood became

inscrutable. Throughout our research group sessions, the sensation of abruptly oscillating between opposing viewpoints intensified and we lost sight of what was right or wrong, true or false and which side we were on. This dynamic was accompanied by a sense of helplessness and disorientation. We perceived that the thoughts and ideas being conveyed and comprehended were consistently ‘diluted’, and the group was not making progress. We endeavoured to navigate towards a ‘centre’ in the sense of a meaningful midpoint, but at every turn, there was an ‘opposing centre’, with every ‘truth’ having a ‘converse’ at which point the ‘opposite was true’. This gave the impression of being stuck in a global dilemma, at the end of which everything was ‘always wrong’.

We interpreted this persistent untruth as a metaphor for the unbearable internal state of survivors and their descendants struggling with extreme trauma. Speaking about it, remaining silent and making contact through the memories all have the potential to touch on destructive aspects of extreme trauma. Remembering, as a process of re-association and merging elements of survivors’ stories, carries the inextricable risk of encountering extreme trauma oneself and involving those around you. On the other hand, talking about traumatic experiences is part of preserving the memory. Silence contradicts the often-felt obligation to uphold memory on behalf of antecedents and is, therefore, a source of guilt. There are no true or good options for dealing with trauma. This reflects transgenerationally the grandmother’s desperation at not being able to save her children. We posited that this gap between assumed agency and actual helplessness served as the genesis of Yael’s feelings of guilt. The emphasis on the potential for the persecuted to have acted differently obscures the fact that true guilt lies with those who committed murders and the society that permitted them. The tragedy of those who were born after the Holocaust encloses the impossibility of making ‘whole what has been smashed’ (Benjamin 1969 [1940]: 257). This tension is felt to be unbearable: you can’t help but deal with it in your own body. We researchers experienced this in those moments when our interpretation ‘collapsed’ again and again. The understanding in the research group also became a victim of fragmentation. We became part of the tragedy.

The lost sisters: A scene of symbolic sisterhood in the encounter group

Yael’s narrative had a discernible impact in the weeks that ensued. Despite her absence due to illness, the grandmother’s amulet once again marked the beginning of the subsequent session and a profound connection arose between Yael, who was not physically present, and Dasha. Dasha reported being preoccupied with the amulet and that its impressions had inspired her to draw. However, the group collectively decided not to look at the picture in Yael’s absence. The following week, Yael showed up for the third group session, while Dasha did not. Like the rest of the group, Yael never saw Dasha’s drawing of the amulet. The decision not to look at the drawing was reminiscent of the grandmother’s abrupt closing of the amulet or covering up the tattooed number in Yael’s childhood. The interaction between the two participants thus engendered a form of exchange that occurred in their mutual absence. Throughout the encounter group, Yael and Dasha did not meet face-to-face again.

The scene between Dasha and Yael repeatedly sparked a fierce debate in our research group, which in turn can be understood scenically as an expression of transmission of trauma. Dealing with the drawing resulted – once again – in a failure to reconcile two seemingly conflicting perspectives. On the one hand, the drawing evoked associations of a ‘gift’ and ‘special appreciation’. The drawing was a ‘pre-digested’ substitute. Dasha’s reluctance to show her drawing was interpreted as concern for Yael, as she had attempted to reach out to her through her drawing. According to one interpreter, they cautiously ‘reached out their hands to one another’, being ‘incredibly careful’ in doing so to ‘protect’ themselves, which may have led to them ‘not sitting in the same room together anymore’. On the ‘opposite side’ associations emerged to a sense of guilt that Dasha had incurred by drawing the amulet. As Dasha ‘digests’ the amulet, a sense of uneasiness developed and it was said that the drawing might even have something ‘cannibalistic’ about it. Dasha takes ‘the innermost part’ of Yael and ‘eats it away’ from her. This appropriation violates Yael’s boundaries because the drawing as an icon represents the amulet, the ‘sanctuary’ of Yael’s grandmother. As a transgression against the aniconism or *Bilderverbot* (prohibition of images), Dasha’s drawing resembles a ‘betrayal’, after which she finds herself guilty and can no longer face Yael.

Building on divergent perspectives regarding the relationship between Dasha and Yael, which vacillates between intimacy and rivalry, the notion emerged that the two had unconsciously adopted the role of sisters. Within their symbolic sisterhood, Yael’s family history is re-enacted or repeated scenically. Sisters, who were separated, lost each other and were left to bear an insufferable guilt.

The unconscious association between guilt and sisterhood permeates Yael’s account of the arrival at the concentration camp. Her recollection of the selection process implies a causal link to the murder of her grandmother’s sister, her great-aunt: ‘When they arrived at the concentration camp, they were divided into labour camp and gas chamber and her children stood there with their aunt. And so she [her grandmother] survived’ (1st session, 00:22:33-6). This revelation prompted the psychoanalyst to consider the possibility that Yael’s grandmother did not survive her sister by chance, but rather that her sister – as alleged mother of the children – was murdered in her place. After all, in Auschwitz children meant a ‘bridge to death’ for their mothers in contrast to Grubrich-Simitis’s ‘bridge to life’ (1981). Despite repeated inquiries from the psychoanalyst regarding feelings of guilt and familial tensions, Yael remained reticent in the group setting, attributing her grandmother’s feelings of guilt solely to her inability to save her children from the Nazis.

Traces of the grandmother’s guilt regarding the separation and murder of her sister recurred between Dasha and Yael and their effect on the research group. The intermittent absence of Yael and Dasha appeared as an interpersonal staging or enactment of the dissociative process, which was triggered by the transgenerational extreme trauma. In a world where children and siblings were subjected to death, sisterhood has become symbolically charged and makes it impossible for Dasha and Yael to maintain their relationship. A harmonious sisterhood, characterised by positive regard and solidarity, was not to come about between them. It stands to reason that the feelings of guilt are being passed on not necessarily only to Dasha but may have permeated the

entire group. The relationship between sisters is burdened by a heavy weight and a rift runs through them. This pattern has also been observed in the relationship between Yael's mother and aunt, sisters in the second generation, who are unable to reconcile their differences.

With a soft voice: Scenic memory of the Shoah in the third generation

We argue that stories of survivors and their offspring are not always told in words alone. Trauma affects not only our ability to speak about it, and to tell our stories, but language itself. The real drama often takes place in hiding, in the latent or unconscious meaning. It is vital not to blind ourselves to all that's happening beyond the spoken word. Our paper illuminates the aftermath of the Holocaust, introducing our concept of scenic memory of the Shoah. We suggest recognition of the scenic as the traumatic tongue. Traumatic memory does not speak, but rather acts. Remembering is a commitment in word and deed. To a certain extent, however, our research findings always remain speculative. And it is likely that our conclusions seem confusing or far-fetched for some people. However, it has not been 'plucked from thin air', as shown by Bereswill, Morgenroth and Redman (2010). It originated from precise qualitative research, careful analyses and our scenic response and involvement.

Our scenic entanglement in transgenerational transmissions may sometimes even go unnoticed. Often it is an enigma to us, most of the time more an allegory than a symbol. The scenes we play out together are highly complex and over-determined, as Freud would have put it (Laplanche & Pontalis 1988). We claim scenes of extreme trauma cannot be easily decoded or understood but only interpreted and remembered.

We listened to the story of an amulet belonging to Yael's grandmother, a Holocaust survivor whose two children and sister were murdered in Auschwitz. The amulet represents a rift caused by the Shoah that runs through Yael's family for generations. Yael told her story in an encounter group with third-generation participants; grandchildren of survivors. Yael told this story not only verbally but in small actions, gestures, facial expressions, emotions and interactions: in scenes. Together with Dasha, she re-enacted the tragic loss of her grandmother's sister. They became the lost sisters.

This loss repeated itself in both the encounter and research group. Immediately we felt the amulet exerting a strong pull and a compelling gravitational force. We followed these traces and fell in a traumatic black hole, where all shimmered in an aura of guilt. To describe our experiences adequately, we had to resort to figurative language. Judith Kestenberg (1982: 191) suggests for these kinds of dynamics the concept of transposition. It seemed as if Yael and Dasha traversed a time tunnel (ibid: 179) and descended into the horrors of the Shoah together. In our research group we felt the reflection of these horrors.

The core of extreme trauma eludes comprehension and is challenging to apprehend. The sister's story, in this instance, was not primarily conveyed through verbal communication. In fact, the majority of words spoken by Yael are quoted in this paper. Rather, her story was concealed within the closed amulet and only surfaced

through our countertransference, emotional reactions, enactments and scenic interactions. It was initially unconscious and only took shape in our collective staging. That is why, when it comes to trauma and its transmission, we need to broaden our view on how these stories are told.

Notes

¹ Publishing this paper alone can lead to believing all of it came out of my own head, that I am the sole creator of its content. An illusion, indeed, since most of our research and especially our interpretations were created in a group process, of which I can only reflect glimpses. That's why I am writing in a plural, first-person pronoun to emphasise this collaborative moment. Particularly the interpretative section is based on our unpublished manuscripts, interpretation protocols and research group session recordings. The basic ideas on the role of dissociation and fragmentation, as well as the relationship of the *lost sisters* come from the author but have been enriched in joint thinking and writing. I am, therefore, very grateful to my research group and co-authors in spirit, namely Lena Dierker, Matilda Urban, Jakob Eisemann and Elli Kaminer- Zamberk, but above all our *spiritus rector* and PI Dr Kurt Grünberg. I would also like to thank our colleagues on the research network Prof. Dr Yvonne Brandl, Prof. Dr Dr hc Monika Schwarz-Friesel, Sarah Hinckers and Markus Weiß. Over the years we owe a great debt of gratitude for the financial support of the International Psychoanalytic Association (IPA), the Hannelore Krempa Foundation and the Federal Ministry of Education and Research in Germany (BMBF). But, especially, I would like to thank all participants in our encounter groups and research interviews for the openness, honesty and trust that they show us

² Numerous studies have demonstrated the significant psychological, social, and cultural effects of extreme trauma on Holocaust survivors and their descendants (Bergmann and Jucovy 1982; Danieli 1984; Faimberg 1988; Grubrich-Simitis 1981; Kogan 1995; Laub & Hamburger 2017; and many more). However most research on transgenerational trauma transmission focused on survivors and their children – the first and second generations. Psychological investigations pertaining to the third generation have predominantly been conducted in the United States, Canada or Israel (Barel et al. 2010; Giladi & Bell 2013; Sagi-Schwartz, van IJzendoorn & Bakermans-Kranenburg 2008; Zohar, Giladi & Givati 2007). These studies yielded conflicting findings and overlooked the unique circumstances in Germany, such as the significance of contemporary antisemitism. Furthermore, prior research has predominantly focused on quantitative analysis, emphasising the verbal dimension of trauma transmission while disregarding the non-verbal or scenic aspects.

Dan Bar-On (1995) and Gradwohl Pisano (2013) have conducted noteworthy studies on the third generation in terms of qualitative and psychoanalytic research. Ullman et al. (2013) have carried out a distinctive empirical study in the German context, examining the prevalence of anxiety, depressive and psychosomatic symptoms, eating disorders, and issues related to separation and individuation processes – with alarming results.

Furthermore, Julia Bernstein (2013), Marina Chernivsky (2018) in qualitative social research and Luisa Banki (2023) in literary studies have contributed valuable insights regarding the third generation in Germany

³ The term ‘constellation’ in this paper denotes a specific group, arrangement or configuration of actors, transmissions, feelings, ideas, characteristics or objects that delineate each scene. Our understanding of a scenic constellation encompasses psychodrama, group analysis, and constellation work and can be perceived as a structural framework for the scene. Even more so, it is deeply rooted in the tradition of critical theory, particularly in Walter Benjamin’s concepts. His method of ‘thinking in’ or ‘reading of constellations’, which he explored in various texts from 1920 to 1940, with a particular emphasis on the Arcades Project, serves as a pivotal component of materialist philosophy of history, but remained fragmentary

⁴ Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Various measures have been taken to ensure the security and anonymity of material. All quotations are translated by the author

⁵ In our examination of guilt among survivors and their descendants, we specifically reference the work of William G. Niederland who, in his writing from the 1960s, delineated ‘survivor syndrome’ as a major psychosocial consequence of persecution. Niederland consistently emphasised the significance of a profound sense of guilt, which he termed ‘survivor guilt’. According to Niederland (1968), it ‘emerges clinically as a form of unresolved grief and mourning’ (314). He points out: ‘In order to understand more fully the pathogenesis of the survivor syndrome, I repeatedly stressed the need for a sharper focus on the all-pervasive guilt of the victim as well as the need for a sort of hyperacusis to guilt on the part of the analyst who has to be aware of the difficulties because of repression, elaborate defences, and denials that tend to obscure the guilt’ (ibid)

⁶ Writing a comprehensive and satisfactory statement on trauma poses a formidable challenge. Although often criticised for its lack of precision and its inherent vagueness, the term has become ingrained in numerous academic disciplines. A multifaceted and diverse research field has emerged as a consequence. Especially in literary studies, outstanding scholars such as Cathy Caruth (2014), Shoshana Felman (Felman & Laub 1992), and Luisa Banki (2023), for the German-speaking audience, have contributed extensively to it.

In my paper though, I primarily employ the term trauma within the context of the extensive psychoanalytic discourse of recent decades. Notably, even the pioneering figures of psychoanalysis, Freud and Ferenczi, did not maintain a consistent stance on the concept and terminology of trauma, as their perspectives evolved over time (Bohleber 2017). Of utmost significance, the treatment of Holocaust survivors necessitated a reevaluation of early psychoanalytic theories of trauma to account for the extreme and unparalleled traumatic experiences endured.

Arnold Cooper (1986) is credited with formulating one of the prevailing psychoanalytic definitions in the contemporary debate: ‘A psychic trauma is any psychological event which abruptly overwhelms the ego’s

capacity to provide a minimal sense of safety and integrative intactness, resulting in overwhelming anxiety or helplessness, or the threat of it, and producing an enduring change in the psychic organization' (44).

In a wider sense this definition is very helpful and comprises three main elements: an external event, the subjective experience, and the short- and long-term effects. But, as in most definitions, the emphasis lies on the external event and the suddenness of the traumatic disruption or shock. However different forms of traumatisations exist that follow distinct patterns and for which the aforementioned definition seems insufficient. These include sexual abuse, severe emotional neglect, separation or attachment-related trauma, cumulative trauma, and most of all extreme trauma of Holocaust survivors (Bohleber & Leuzinger-Bohleber 2016). As a consequence we focus on trauma in a way after the fact: it is a nuanced shift from the genesis to the aftermath (or nemesis in a sense). Henry Krystal (1988) proposed the experienced helplessness as decisive factor, whereas Niederland (1968) stressed the profound role of 'survivor guilt' (see Endnote 6), which both will play an important role later in the paper. In addition we emphasise the loss of trust in this world (Weltvertrauen), as the Shoah shattered a basic or epistemic trust and had consequences that reach deep down in mind and body. To summarise, a trauma is a psychic wound at the intersection of outer and inner world

⁷ Most of the psychoanalytic literature gives Jacobs credit for being the first describing phenomena of enactments in his paper in 1986. Indeed, it is undisputedly a milestone in psychoanalytic theory. Nonetheless, Hans Loewald had introduced the term as 're-enactment' already in 1975 (Balsam et al. 2023: 214)

⁸ Freud published Katharina's case together with Josef Breuer in the 'Studies on hysteria' and thus as a so-called pre-analytic work (Freud 1955 [1893]). The narrative begins with Freud going on a hike in the mountains and talking to Katharina, the waitress, in an inn. This gives the text a novella-like or 'scenic' quality. From Katharina's account, Freud deduces that she suffers from hysterical attacks with fearful manifestations, which he ultimately attributes to familial sexual abuse and its traumatic consequences. Katharina played a significant role in the progression of psychoanalysis, facilitating the transition towards free association and the development of the seduction theory

⁹ Due to space restrictions we cannot go into further detail on the theory of enactment. To get an overview, we recommend Balsam et al. (2023) and Bohleber et al. (2013)

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