From Family Ghosts to Family Members

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What follows can be seen as the story of an entire generation, colored by the specifics of our personal experiences as people, as family members and as psychoanalysts.

Both of us (Mira and Shmuel) grew up with family ghosts. What made them into ghosts was not merely that they were our unknown ancestors, but the uncanny way in which we experienced their existence. On the rare occasions that they were mentioned, it was clear that the memory evoked unbearable feelings of loss, abandonment, unspoken guilt and despair. This extreme wordless and formless emotional storm happened at least once a year, on the national Holocaust Memorial Day. But it also took place in a different way on a daily, even hourly basis. It had its cumulative effect on our personality, our development and our modes of coping as persons and professionals. Our ghosts occupied a place that was a mixture of silence and a glaring gap in our parents and our own childish and adult existence, coupled with flashes of unknown people and places.

These ghosts are the traces of family members and their entire lives that were exterminated in the Holocaust.

Despite certain differences, our stories have a great deal in common: in both our families one parent survived the loss of his or her entire family, of parents, brothers, sisters and their offspring, by moving to a safer country long before the Holocaust swept through and destroyed and eradicated what was left behind. This surviving parent, each in his or her own manner, became the sole bearer of the sadness and mourning of the loss, but also of the anger, bitterness and impotent rage it left behind. This role of the "bearer of memory" was transmitted to us, their children. We hope that through our belated awareness and working through we are not burdening our children with this role. In so many ways we grew up without fully and consciously understanding all this, as is the nature of this kind of transmission of unbearable painful memories. Yet it clearly became an integral part of us. As befits ghosts, it was an ephemeral and excluded part. And as is the case with ghosts, it was rejected on rational grounds as having no real existence and significance, even if it could be intellectually addressed.

In psychoanalytic literature there are many attempts to describe this elusive phenomenon, with which the second and third generations of survivors are afflicted. These range from the experience-distant notion of "transgenerational transmission of trauma" (Bohleber 2010) and “telescoping” (Faimberg, 2005) to the more experience-near notions of "radioactive fallout" (Gampel, 2005) and "postmemory" (Hirsch, 2012).

These notions represent an attempt to give form to the profound influence of the First Generation on the following ones. They have in common the understanding that the next generations are carrying the "phantom pain" or "phantom memory" of people and events of whom they have no "real" memory, yet they are inhabited by memories which were implanted in them.

Meeting the Ghosts of the Other

Does the choice to engage in mental health and later to become psychoanalysts have to do with these ghosts and the pain of our parents? Undoubtedly so. As one of us (MEG) has described it: "I was fed with tears". One of the well-recognized motivations to become analysts has to do with the wounds of parents and the unconscious and subsequently conscious wish for reparation.
But this influence took yet another turn. Many years later, well after the completion of our psychoanalytic training, and owing to several serendipitous circumstances, we met the ghosts of colleagues in Germany. It was striking that their ghosts too, though as different as perpetrators are from victims, were characterized by a similar silence: they were unacknowledged, difficult to comprehend and identify with, but mainly unmentionable and representing painful gaps in family lives and histories. We learned that the ghosts of the perpetrators could be as persecutory and harmful as the ghosts of the victims. "I was fed with tears" had its counterpart with "and I was fed with poison". What is instructive, however, is what has evolved out of this encounter, both in terms of professional initiative and development, and in terms of our own internal movement. On the professional level, we felt the need to respond to the gap experienced by the second generation of victims and perpetrators, a gap so readily filled up with their ghosts. We created and launched a series of Group Relations conferences designed especially for bringing together the bearers and representatives of these ghosts, of Germans and Israelis, Jews and others, and eventually also Palestinians. Out of these efforts an organization was formed: Partners in Confronting Collective Atrocities (PCCA), which has as its aim the continuation and implementation of this work. It was remarkable to what extent these conferences served to revive family ghosts and to enable different modes of encounter but also rapprochement with them. The following quotation from a member in the first conference describes it well: “I found out that the most powerful resistance came from my wish to keep my hatred alive and my enemy focused, clear and unchanged. It was one of the ways to remember the Holocaust and not to feel a traitor to my people and my family. Moreover, I could sense that in some ways the feeling of hatred gave me a sense of power that I found hard to renounce.”

Newly arrived members typically used the setting we provided to tell their stories. These were always stories of families, of parents who rejected or denied or even severed relationships with them if the quest for information was too close or parents who warned their children about the danger of associating with the children of their parents’ murderers. The complexity of living with unacknowledged and unspoken ghosts could be aired by experiencing the past in the present, and the ghosts often received new life and existence in their offspring’s renewed connection with them. We have described and recorded all this in our book about these conferences (Erlich et al, 2009). The focus of this work has shifted and expanded to taking in the European scene as a whole, with two conferences titled “Victims and Perpetrators - Now and Then,” and a third in April 2016 titled “A House Divided against itself? Identities and Cultures in Violent Conflict”.

Yet this involvement has its personal aspects as well. Our participation in the work meant that we became closer and better acquainted with our own ghosts. It made it possible to begin to imagine and share some of the silence that enveloped our parents, and to identify with their sorrows and need for mourning and to rediscover and reunite with lost family members. We could also understand how our professional activity stemmed from and was motivated by our own ghosts and our need to find and encounter them before it was too late. From a somewhat removed posture we have moved to an emotional encounter with the losses of our parents and their families, and the ways these have affected and influenced our own lives. It also made it easier to communicate some of this to our children. Meeting the ghosts rather than avoiding them serves to enhance the experience of historical continuity and thus our own sense of continuous being.

The great sorrow in our lives is that our readiness to transform the ghosts to ancestors by getting to know them as real people did not come about in time to receive it from our families of origin and now it is too late. The sources of knowledge are gone and we are left with the commemoration of ghosts.

A poignant recent event was a moment of reparation.
Traces of Memory: From Ghost to Grandfather

On a recent trip to Poland, we felt the need to visit the small town outside Krakow which was the birthplace of the father of one of us (HSE). The name of the town was just a meaningless Polish word for us, so that the experience of visiting it became the transformation of a virtual entity into a concrete presence. We went to get the key to the Jewish cemetery, which is not anymore a cemetery since all the graves were used and abused. Instead there is a “collage” of pieces of tombstones and a small memorial place. As we came to the municipality we were unexpectedly ushered into the Mayor’s office to what became a meeting between “our” and “their” ghosts. With a lot of patience and mutual interest, an unexpected story began to unfold. The first trace of the family was a picture of a survivor uncle on the website of the municipality, in a group of young Jewish men. Then, with the help of a journalist who was summoned for the occasion, a connection was made and a photograph was brought in from the hallway. It was a picture of the first Town Council in 1919. In the first row was my grandfather, whom I knew only from the one picture that the family had, and who perished in the Holocaust together with the rest of the family. It was an absolutely unexpected and uncanny moment in which a ghost became a person and a memory gap was filled with an actual presence. A huge leap was required to transform my grandfather from being a victim who died in a concentration camp (this was all I knew about him) to someone who was a member of a Town Council.

When the emotional moment was over I was left with the intriguing realization of how the person that was my grandfather was also murdered by his own family: He was reduced to one of the six-million Jews murdered by the Nazis, and his unique person and achievements were obliterated by being turned into a ghost.

References