

## The role of the traumatic “Transgenerational unsaid” Historical, social, educational, psychological in life histories

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*L'articolo studia in modo interdisciplinare una questione urgente nelle scienze sociali ed educative: come è possibile creare uno spazio per un nuovo pensiero e una nuova consapevolezza nelle molteplici situazioni in cui la guerra e il conflitto condizionano negativamente l'individuo e le società e il modo in cui i loro racconti si tramandano tra le generazioni? Come può l'educazione rompere la crudele prigione della trasmissione trans generazionale dell'odio, della crudeltà, del risentimento, della vendetta? La riflessione parte da una recente esperienza dell'autrice, che partecipò a un Seminario in Polonia, dal titolo "Perpetratori europei e vittime. Allora e ora", focalizzato sull'eredità educativa e psicologica che conduce a perpetuare pregiudizi e relazioni violente nei diversi paesi e verso le loro popolazioni. I traumi sofferti dai nonni e dai genitori, durante le loro storie di vita, sono trasmessi ai figli e ai nipoti, alimentando le loro vite con un veleno invisibile. L'articolo discute alcuni esempi concreti, a partire dall'esperienza formativa e grupale sperimentata dall'autrice. L'argomentazione utilizzerà i concetti psicoanalitici di inter e transdisciplinarietà come pure quelli legati alla ricerca sulle esperienze traumatiche, sia sul piano personale sia su quello sociale. Proprio qui troviamo la connessione interdisciplinare tra storia, società, psiche e educazione. In verità, il concetto di eredità trans generazionale è anche un concetto educativo, perché esso si riferisce a ciò che è stato trasmesso attraverso le pratiche educative da una generazione all'altra. Verrà anche presentato e discusso il Metodo delle Group Relations, legato all'Istituto Tavistock di Londra.*

*The article addresses in an interdisciplinary way an urgent question in Social and Educational Sciences: how is it possible to create space for (new) thinking and awareness in the many cases where war and conflict infect individuals and societies in the telling of stories? How could education break down the cruel prisons of the trans-generational transmission of hatred, cruelty, resentment, revenge?*

*The reflection starts from a recent experience of the author, who attended a Working Conference in Poland, entitled "European Perpetrators and Victims. Then and Now", focused on the psychological and educational legacy that brings to perpetuate prejudice and violent relationships in the different countries and their populations. Traumas suffered by grandparents and parents, during their life histories, are handed on to children and grandchildren, festering like an invisible poison the life histories. The paper will discuss some concrete examples, from the author's experience. This issue will be addressed using the psychoanalytic concepts of inter and trans-generational legacy as well as the psychoanalytic research on traumatic experiences (Varvin & Volkan, 2003; Sklar, 2011; Oliner 2012), both on personal and social level. Here is exactly where we find the interdisciplinary connection among history, society, psyche and education. Actually, the concept of transgenerational legacy is also an educational concept, because it refers to what it is passed on the educational practices through the generations. The contribution of the Group Relations Method will also be discussed.*

**Parole chiave:** transgenerazionale, atrocità, educazione, elaborazione.

**Keywords:** transgenerational, atrocity, education, elaboration.

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## HOMAGE, BEFORE STARTING

I dedicate this article to the woman in red, without any weapons and protection, a symbol of peaceful protest against the government in Turkey, which is invested with anger and foolishness by a policeman who sprays on her a pepper spray.<sup>76</sup>

### 1. COLLECTIVE TRAUMAS AND PREJUDICES BETWEEN REVENGE AND ELABORATION

In this paper, I want to reflect in an interdisciplinary way about an urgent question in Social and Educational Sciences: how is it possible to create space for (new) thinking and awareness in the many cases in which war and conflict affect individuals and societies in the telling of stories? How can education break down the cruel prisons of the trans-generational transmission of hatred, cruelty, resentment, revenge? This reflection starts from a recent experience of mine. I attended a Working Conference in Poland, entitled “European Perpetrators and Victims. Then and Now “ (<http://p-cca.org/2012>), with 80 participants from all over the world, representatives of many conflicts (the Holocaust, Israel-Palestinian conflict, Balkans, and others). “It began with the need felt by a group of Israeli and German psychoanalysts to work on the deeply-lodged suspicion, hostility and unbearable guilt which marked the relationship between Germans and Israelis/Jews as a legacy of the Holocaust”.<sup>77</sup> The conference actually was focused on the psychological and educational legacy that leads to the perpetuation of prejudice and violent relationships in the different countries and their populations. Traumas suffered by grandparents and parents are handed on to children and grandchildren (Erlich, Erlich-Ginor & Beland 2009; Beland 2009), festering like an invisible poison. Stories, in these cases, appear to be filled with the legacies of the stories of others. “Major atrocities and other forms of historical trauma can produce profound and deeply lodged suspicion, hostility and enmity between perpetrators and victims. In turn, these ill feelings are transmitted and infiltrate the lives of their descendants” (Erlich et al., 2012). In particular, the Polish conference clearly illustrated how prejudices between different countries and their peoples are generated and maintained.

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<sup>76</sup> [http://www.repubblica.it/esteri/2013/06/05/foto/turchia\\_la\\_donna\\_in\\_rosso\\_simbolo\\_della\\_protesta-60392809/1/?ref=HREC1-8#2](http://www.repubblica.it/esteri/2013/06/05/foto/turchia_la_donna_in_rosso_simbolo_della_protesta-60392809/1/?ref=HREC1-8#2), cons. 7 June 2013. An icon against her will. An hero and a symbol of protest in Turkey. We had already seen her during the first days of fighting, but now images have become an extraordinary means of communication and aggregation on the Net. A red cotton dress, a white purse and her hair tousled by the launch of pepper spray by a police officer in Taksim square. The first one gets near the agents, then she is forced to go back after having been subject of a really unusual attack by the policemen. And the lady in red, as it was renamed, became the symbol of the revolt, thanks to the shots of Osman Orsal, Reuters photographer (reuters)

<sup>77</sup> <http://p-cca.org/assets/Uploads/2012>.

A striking example of this was the mutual representations of the Germans and the other nationalities, above all the Jewish people. The descendants of Germans who had lived during the Nazi period continued to be the object of strong prejudices - explicit or hidden, but in any case strong -, on the part of the descendants of other nationalities, whether these had been direct victims of Nazism, like the Jews, or allies, like the Italians, or bystanders. The Germans continued to experience a strong sense of guilt for the actions of their parents and grandparents, and bore the stigma and the prejudice related to acts that they themselves had not committed. The other nationalities expressed strong prejudices towards the entire German people, viewing them as persecutors and guilty of atrocious crimes. Although, in words, the due distinctions were made between the German participants at the conference and their forebears, an unspoken but palpable accusation of violence was being projected onto the contemporary Germans. It was clear that, despite the maintenance of politically correct outward behavior, there was a huge hidden burden of resentment, fear, distress and claims for redress. This phenomenon, known as a 'transgenerational unsaid', was particularly prominent in the Israeli participants, who laid an enormous load of blame on the German participants but, at the same time, were unable to "think the thought"<sup>78</sup> of the forms of aggression adopted by the State of Israel towards the Palestinian people. The Palestinian delegates at the conference, on their part, bore strong a priori resentment towards Israelis in general, even though they had had no previous dealings with the Israeli delegates at the conference. They themselves were unable to "keep in mind" the acts of violence committed by Palestinians towards Israelis. The conference was also attended by delegations of Bosnians, Croatians, Kosovars and Serbs who were survivors of the war in the former Yugoslavia. Relations amongst these groups, also, were marked by a climate of distrust, resentment, fear and blame, particularly in relation to the Serbs; again, this was not because any of the Serbian delegation present were personally known to the other participants but was driven by prejudices linked to past trauma suffered at both national and individual levels.

The Serbs were surrounded by an aura of criminality and collusion with the war crimes, charged against the former Serbian president, Milosevic. In sum, anger, resentment and the desire to get revenge, to attack and to punish, were omnipresent, carried on the wind of past history, and falling heavily on the citizens of today. Also the conference delegates young already carried an enormous weight on their shoulders, due to the legacy of prejudices passed onto them by others. The conference set out to answer a key question: to what extent does all this bad feeling, distress, anger and resentment, caused by past events, condition the current functioning of the European Union? How much do they contribute

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<sup>78</sup> Let's think about Winnicott's and Bion's theories of thought

to difficulties in reaching agreements, making shared decisions and achieving the mutual trust required to build common institutions acting in the common interest? This question is clearly dramatically relevant at the present time, in which the serious social and economic crisis at the global level is forcing the leaders of the different European countries to come out into the open, with regard to the role they envisage themselves playing within European power relations. During the recent difficult years, the media have served up to European public opinion the exchanges of reciprocal representations taking place between the German people, their leaders and their European partners. One of the thorniest issues that has emerged concerns the political decisions made regarding the weaker countries such as Greece, Spain and even Italy, in some instances. In certain cases, the media has reported expressions such as the “clearing out” of dead wood. Whether or not this is a fair representation, the critical point is that Europe, and not only Europe, is still extremely imbued with these reciprocal representations between peoples that have fought one another and committed terrible crimes against humanity in the past. These representations have become fixed (Allport & Kramer, 1946) and have acquired the status of pre-judices (Gadamer, 1992). They behave somewhat like the seeds of a plant, hidden in one place, but then the wind carries them everywhere (Farr & Moscovici, 1984). These representations, that have become ingrained prejudices, are imbued with very strong, violent and long lasting feelings. The current economic crisis, raging in Europe and claiming victims as a modern plague, saw Germany, and some of its political leaders, in particular, take very hard positions towards all other nations, especially those of the Mediterranean area. Beyond the socio-political reasons linked to the economic and financial dynamics, and the right criticisms of waste of public money and corruption which is spreading in many countries, what is amazing is the attitude taken by Germany, who is heading by its own a real modern war, carried out through the economy rather than through the use of weapons. The tone of political discourse has had, in recent years, the taste of moralistic lessons under which you might glimpse a subtle but profound satisfaction for the revenge on the countries that had punished Germany after the Second World War and the extermination of the Jews and other minorities. Therefore we need to remain alert with respect to the many affective and cognitive affective and cognitive latencies, often intertwined with each other in an obscure way in the various social phenomena, with the aim to deconstruct their appearance (Massa, 1993). They can be rhetorically presented as something logical, sensible, obvious, while in reality the size of apparent common sense is secretly manipulated for unconfessable emotional purposes. The blame and the shame for the abuses and the atrocities committed are a burden that is not often declared in public, neither there is a public space where it is possible to express the desire for revenge for having been socially loaded by a huge sense of guilt .

This is the real problem: “what if the atrocities of the apartheid [ ndr.: and other atrocities] era continued to live on subconsciously in people’s minds? What if these were to fester and breed, and lead in time to demands for revenge and retribution”<sup>79</sup>, If we use the pedagogical and psychological analysis that investigates how different generations pass on traumas, prejudices and, generally, unsolved problems, we observe how traumas of the individual are lavished on the social sphere and vice versa, in a vicious circle, which maintains, often concealed during periods of calm, the potential for explosive aggression.<sup>80</sup> These stereotypes were based not on the qualities as individuals, but was a general stereotype connected to the Holocaust: Jews could, quite simply, not be expected to trust Germans. In particular, we observe a double issue: on the one hand the desire for retaliation and revenge of the victims slaughtered by the torturers, on the other hand the resentment and retaliation of those who, as torturers, have felt the sense of guilt and the international blame. If the torturers have not made a serious and painful work of comparison with the historical truth and their entanglement with the tragedies - even going to investigate their personal stories - they can often show a false and formal repentance. However, they must be accompanied to identify the connections with their own life history, which predisposed them to be attracted by authoritarian and sadistic leaders (Miller, 1985). However, even if they appear clearly manipulative, authoritarian, despots and sadists, these charismatic leaders are able to seduce the masses, composed not only by

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<sup>79</sup> See note 3

<sup>80</sup> You can see what Desmond M. Tutu - Archbishop Emeritus - Anglican Church of Southern Africa wrote, <http://p-cca.org/articles/foreword-to-fed-with-tears-poisoned-with-milk/> Foreword to “Fed with Tears, Poisoned with Milk”, Oct 2009, cons. 6th June 2013. . “When our politicians negotiated a peaceful transition from the horrors of the apartheid era to the genuinely free South Africa that so many of us had, over the long years, argued, prayed, struggled, fought, and laid down our lives for, the joy in our hearts knew no bounds. At last our beautiful land – a land so richly endowed by God with wonderful natural resources, wide expanses, rolling mountains, singing birds, bright shining stars, and blue skies filled with radiant, golden sunshine – would be there for all God’s people to share and enjoy. For us this had been so precious a dream that we hardly dared hope it would come true, and yet here, in our own lifetimes, that moment finally arrived. Years of pain, hardship and suffering were giving way to joy, freedom and justice. Nelson Mandela, so long a living symbol of the chains imprisoning our country, was free at last and, as he had vowed, his freedom and that of our country went hand in hand. The magnitude of joy in our hearts that we should be alive at such a moment could only be a gift from God. Our happiness, however, was tempered by one small but nagging worry: what if the atrocities of the apartheid era continued to live on subconsciously in people’s minds? What if these were to fester and breed, and lead in time to demands for revenge and retribution, unleashing once again the dark and destructive forces associated with the apartheid era, turned now on the former apartheid masters, their offspring or their perceived collaborators or beneficiaries? When we looked to precedents in the wider world around us we realized that we had to take seriously the danger of such a grave and worrying outcome, even though it seemed so out of keeping with the generosity of spirit that characterized our new dawn, and try to do something about this”.

people of low educational level, as unfortunately the story dramatically testifies<sup>81</sup>. What would the perpetrators say now, if they could talk and feel they have the right to speak (Shapiro, 1997)? For example, during the conference, Serbs and Germans stated that they feel they do not have the right to speak. There are in fact many kinds of silences, of the torturers and of the victims. Desmond Tutu presents the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which he chaired, set up to find a way to make the work of revision? “It was based on the hope that if the truth were faced openly, squarely and honestly, this might have the power to heal the wounds of the past and thus to help to bring closure to past atrocities. In the sessions of the Commission we witnessed again and again what a powerful instrument facing the truth is. It brought to life most powerfully the pain and anguish of the victims of atrocities carried out by the apartheid regime (and also sometimes by members of the liberation movement) and by being there we, the commissioners and committee members, could experience something of the cruel and unbearable burden our fellow citizens had been carrying. And we were encouraged by the fact that in many cases, even when the atrocities concerned were so horrific that a wish for revenge might be entirely understandable, the experience of having their stories heard and fully acknowledged seemed to open up a process by which anger and hatred could be mitigated and stilled, helping many victims to find closure, which often involved forgiving the perpetrators and moving on. On the side of the perpetrators, too, one could sometimes see that facing the truth of what they had done brought forth the terrible pain of guilt and remorse. I felt privileged and humbled to be in the presence of such profoundly moving and transformative emotional experiences”<sup>82</sup>. As you can see, Desmond Tutu often emphasizes, in his story, how this process of revision through the comparison with the truth has not always been completed neither extended to all the perpetrators and the victims. It was possible with some-

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<sup>81</sup> See <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/11am-3-september-1939-this-country-is-now-at-war-with-germany-we-are-ready-1115621.html> (cons. 6 June 2013): “In the evenings, I crossed the Austrian frontier to go the music festival in Salzburg. Just as I was preparing to leave Bayrisch Gmain, I received an invitation to go to Nuremberg to attend the annual Nazi rally. In the stadium at Nuremberg I watched the German forces, military and voluntary, parade en masse while Hitler took the salute and then made some rousing speeches. One evening, moving up the centre gangway of an indoor meeting, he brushed against my shoulder. Hitler looked much smaller than I had imagined, and very ordinary. His face had little colour and his uniform seemed more important than the man. But when he spoke he was transformed into the mob orator, the demagogue, playing on every evil emotion in his audience. There was no doubt in my mind about the inherent skill or perhaps natural instinct with which it was done. It was this power that led Europe to the brink of oblivion” (Sir Edward Heath’s *Autobiography, ‘The Course of My Life’*, Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1999)

<sup>82</sup> Desmond M. Tutu - Archbishop Emeritus - Anglican Church of Southern Africa wrote, <http://p-cca.org/articles/foreword-to-fed-with-tears-poisoned-with-milk/> Foreword to “Fed with Tears, Poisoned with Milk”, Oct 2009, cons. 6th June 2013

one, but not with everyone. In addition, a doubt remains strong, as he himself expressed: "what if the atrocities of the apartheid era continued to live on sub-consciously in people's minds?". These kind of processes require a lot of time, a constant thoughtful return and an emotional contact. What can be seen and accepted as a first step does not necessarily remain within a stable and unchanged awareness. What is undoubtedly necessary is a constant and continuous reflexive work to accompany emotionally the wish to get in touch with the sense of guilt, which is generated by a real and deep understanding of the harm done to others. If the sense of guilt is not fully understood and is not completely worked out, it will remain inside the subject as something suffered from the outside. Besides when, as in the case of the Holocaust, we speak about indescribable and quantitatively enormous violence, the weight of guilt becomes a burden so strong and overwhelming that it can generate, on the contrary, an opposite movement of counterattack. It is, in this case, a clear acting out, due to the need of shaking off a burden perceived as unbearable. In fact, for the individual is an intolerable burden. The ongoing dilemma round which the various groups of participants kept going on was, in fact - without breaking the vicious circle -, related to the question if the fault of the atrocities had to be ascribed to the previous generation, to a single nation or to individuals. This scenario may seem too broad and general for those who work with the stories of individual lives, however I believe that it would be a serious mistake not to take into account the strong links between the socio-historical and individual levels. The socio-historical level determines the culture into which we are born and constitutes us as subjects (Gadamer, 1989; Foucault, 1975; Foulkes, 1983) insofar as our forebears, grandparents and parents were born and grew up in a particular historical and cultural context and transmitted it to us through their educational models, stories and unconscious communication of fears, worries, representations of the world and prejudices (Cramer, 2000). Therefore the macrocosm, filtered through the microcosm, pervades us, defining us as people independently of our own intentions and guiding our actions. Historical and social events create the concrete conditions within which life stories are played out, modifying them according to specific turns of events. In order, therefore, to free ourselves of the legacies that unbeknownst to ourselves we incarnate in our individual life stories, we need to thoroughly develop our awareness of these links between the historical, social, cultural and psychological levels. In particular, in the second postwar period of the twentieth century, after fifty years of war, violence, crimes and atrocities of every kind, there was an attempt to start afresh: however, sufficient containers may have not been sought out, within which to work out all the hatred that was still circulating between the different nationalities and within individual countries, in which civil wars had been fought. Of course, it may be asked: but how can this hatred that, like a hidden poison, has remained in circulation be worked out? It is so great and so deep, born of an attack not only on the mind and on identity but

also on people's material bodies, that were killed and tortured. Indeed, the hidden hatred due to torture and acts of sadism, is different to the anger and aggressiveness linked to killings and imprisonments without torture, although the latter are legitimately very strong too. What instruments can we draw on to deal with dimensions such as these? How can psychology, psychoanalysis and pedagogy work together on this enormous challenge? How can politicians, scholars and individuals be made aware of these aspects, that tend to be ignored insofar as too extreme to be contemplated? The united resources of all those with "an adult state of mind" will be required to deal with the aftermath of our recent European history. A further key question is this: can such instruments be thought of and managed by the victims and perpetrators of war crimes or by their children and grandchildren?

In the last years, a group of German and Israeli psychoanalysts and psychotherapists found that lurking beneath a polite and courteous exterior was a deep sense of unease, suspicion, prejudice in the way they related to each other. They made a systematic attempt to address this legacy of the Holocaust, using a refined psychoanalytic method that relies not on rational reflection but on trying to engage the irrational feelings that prejudice hides. They organized a special "conference" setting, away from the problems of everyday life, in which each group can explore its own most deeply held prejudices, assumptions and beliefs in the presence of the other group (Erlich et al., 2009). "I was always deeply impressed with how, when victims and perpetrators came face to face, the reality of past atrocities stored in the mind were powerfully brought to life in front of us so that we shared in feelings that were often quite overwhelming"<sup>83</sup>. The written record cannot possibly open the door to the full, "three dimensional texture of these events as they unfold, and I believe that it is one's willingness to be fully involved that carries the potential for healing". For example, a German woman spoke about her mother as "an ordinary Nazi mother", with a deep acknowledgment of what does it mean this definition, said with an apparently normal way. "How poignant to be able to acknowledge that the tender loving care – the very care that allowed a child to grow into a beautiful human being – coexisted with something more sinister that involved the extermination of others. What unspeakable pain, shame and humiliation must have been faced in recognizing the truth that this was indeed part of her inner legacy?" As a matter of fact, she must have felt safe enough in the conference setting for this important communication, and the linked work to take place. Another participant declared that "tears are better than blood and words are better than tears". The problem is,

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<sup>83</sup> Desmond M. Tutu - Archbishop Emeritus - Anglican Church of Southern Africa wrote, <http://p-cca.org/articles/foreword-to-fed-with-tears-poisoned-with-milk/> Foreword to "Fed with Tears, Poisoned with Milk", Oct 2009, cons. 6th June 2013.

therefore, how to find a way to analyze together the responsibility of the individual and of the social-historical group as well as how to make emerge and work out this dramatic theme, which has been surviving for decades in the minds of victims and torturers. We need a setting that could work, at the same time, for the individual, for the group, for the nation and for the encounter of very different social groups.

The 'Group Relations' method developed by the Tavistock Institute in London (Miller, 1989; Brunner, Nutkevitch & Sher, 2006) has been put forward, in recent decades, as a possible instrument for addressing the challenging issue of the consequences of hatred for society and the individuals making it up. This method appears particularly suitable for such a delicate task, because it combines psychoanalytical and systemic perspectives to foster both collective and individual narration, hence creating a fertile, reciprocal intertwining between the personal and the social. From a psychoanalytical perspective, this process evokes repressed unconscious fantasies in the group (Shapiro, 1997; Khaleelee & Miller 2000). The Group Relations method draws on the systemic model because its focus is not only on the personality of the individual but also on the connections between individual behavior and the psychosocial and systemic processes, of which the individual is part. The method simultaneously explores the functioning of organizations viewed as dynamic systems, of groups viewed as organizations, and of individuals in terms of both their internal functioning and their links with other individuals, groups and organizations (Armstrong, 2005). A key component of the method is the emphasis on boundary processes, that is to say what happens to the psychic life of the group and its members when someone joins the organization-system, when someone leaves it or when someone passes from one subsystem to another. However, the method also investigates aspects of individual functioning that have been shaped by the individual's life story, for example how early experiences with authority (parents, teachers) may have influenced a subject's behavior, in terms of the tendency to take on the role of leader or follower, persecutor, victim or bystander, within an organization or within society in general. In particular, it is emphasized that work groups are found to continuously oscillate between a focus on completing their primary task, the one that the group has officially been set up to carry out, and the tendency to satisfy their own unconscious needs (Bion, 1961). Groups have a psychic life of their own, made up of desires, anxieties, emotional needs and defensive strategies: in order to enact these, they make unconscious use of their members. The members of a group are, therefore, usually not the masters of their own will as they believe, but become instruments of the group. Each group member carries, as a function of their own life story, particular needs and tendencies, which Bion refers to as 'valences' and which incline them to allow the group to use them in a certain way, to fulfill unconscious needs pertaining to the life of the group. The individual's behavior within the group is, therefore, the outcome of two forces,

their own personal needs and the pressures generated by the group. While the group as a whole is discussing any given topic, it is actually also tracing its own internal moves. This perspective provides insight into the explicit and implicit functioning of groups and helps group members to become aware of these modes of functioning. A non-cognitive and non-intellectual learning mode must be activated, based on direct experience and on emotional understanding of the group and organizational processes, experienced by the participants, in the “here and now”, that is to say at the very moment in which they manifest themselves.

This experiential training methodology is often adopted at residential seminars on group relations or at Group Relations Conferences (Perini, 2007). These conferences are structured along the lines of a system made up of subsystems: the conference leaders plan a series of work sessions that alternate small, medium-sized and large groups. The primary task assigned to each subsystem is that of becoming aware of what is going on at an emotional level, and of trying to identify and label the group dynamics as they continuously evolve. In Poland, and previously in Cyprus and Israel, conferences were held with the aim of shedding light on the participants’ experience of anxieties and atrocities, and raising awareness of their enduring traces in current lives<sup>84</sup>. A Jewish participant wrote (referring to his meeting with a German), as a report of his personal experience at the Working Conference: “Meeting a real person who acknowledged and accepted the horrors his father had committed was a consolation for me and it caused the wish for revenge to dissipate. It was his ability to listen to my voices, those voices of millions of people shouting out to him, to his father, from the ground: What have you done? And for him to have sat there and confronted his own truth, the fact that his father’s deeds destroyed and hurt so many, including his father’s own humanity, well, that was for me—and him too, no doubt—a healing experience. His compassion and my own automatic compassionate response forced the hatred to a corner. I will not forget, I will mourn but I feel I must move on to build and to live and love” (Weiss, 2012). Being present in these meetings, where is active the process of confronting the truth of how the atrocities of the past live on in the mind, is usually deeply moving, and this involvement may be life-changing, as many of the participants say. It helps to normalize their relationship with members of a group that previously oppressed

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<sup>84</sup> A new organization, Partners in Confronting Collective Atrocities (PCCA), has been set up, whose specific aim is to apply what has been learnt from work that focused on the Holocaust to other atrocities that live on in people’s minds. “I particularly welcome the fact that what has been learnt from work on the aftermath of the most widely-documented atrocity in human history will be made available for helping others who, though their suffering may be less well known, are equally deserving of our help”, Desmond M. Tutu - Archbishop Emeritus - Anglican Church of Southern Africa wrote, <http://p-cca.org/articles/foreword-to-fed-with-tears-poisoned-with-milk/> Foreword to “Fed with Tears, Poisoned with Milk”, Oct 2009, cons. 6th June 2013.

them. Left unseen, these ghosts of the past can be exploited by “unscrupulous politicians for their own cynical gain, as we saw in the 1990’s following the breakup of Yugoslavia, and also in the Rwandan genocide. There are quite simply too many wars that build on grievances and prejudices passed down through the generations, and every known method by which they might be effectively laid to rest deserves to be made widely known”<sup>85</sup>.

## 2. LITTLE HISTORIES

I now wish to discuss some concrete examples, from my own experience, of how difficult and painful, enlightening, but also paradoxical, it can be to witness the awakening of individual and social ghosts, and to (try to) analyze and transform them. The conference described here was held in Kliczkow Castle in the depths of the Polish countryside, destroyed during the Second World War but later rebuilt and redecorated with dark furniture and furnishings. The outside weather was very harsh, rainy and cold. The conference leaders, 15 psychoanalysts from all over the world, many of whom were Jewish or German, had planned a totalizing device for the participants, with a programme that began at 7.30 a.m. and continued until 21.30 each evening, with some breaks. The aim was to lead the group into a regressive condition, so as to facilitate the lowering of defenses and to allow the fantasies, concerns and mutual prejudices between the participants of the different nationalities to emerge. After a couple of days, in the small learning group that I was participating in, an elderly German psychoanalyst, from a family of Nazis, told us in tears of her brother who had been traumatized by the events in their family history – so closely caught up with the events and history of the war – ending up with severe depression and unable to lead a normal life. The woman told us that one evening her brother had showed up at her and her husband’s home, where he normally never wished to visit, and the following morning they found him dead: he had committed suicide, leaving a note saying he “had never succeeded in finding his place” in the family. The next day, in the same small work group, this same lady suddenly turned to her friend, another German psychoanalyst, saying to her: “Do you know that I am having the fantasy that if we were both in a concentration camp, I would survive and you would not?” All the group members were disconcerted by this and the friend was clearly shaken and disturbed by the woman’s words. Yet it was a moment of truth, of critical importance to everybody in terms of finally allowing the poi-

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<sup>85</sup> Desmond M. Tutu - Archbishop Emeritus - Anglican Church of Southern Africa wrote, <http://p-cca.org/articles/foreword-to-fed-with-tears-poisoned-with-milk/> Foreword to “Fed with Tears, Poisoned with Milk”, Oct 2009, cons. 6th June 2013

soned and untouchable collective unconscious surface in the form of the spoken word.

Meanwhile, other things were going on, this time taking the form of acting out. For example, an Italian woman was having lunch at a long table with Bosnian, Serbian, Croatian, Kosovan participants and one Israeli participant. At one point, she left her seat to serve herself some food and when she came back her place had been taken by a Bosnian woman, despite the fact that she had left her bag there. When the Italian woman discovered this, she was extremely taken aback, but nobody got up to give her back “her” place. She later shared having experienced a deep sense of marginalization, isolation, humiliation and guilt, as if it was her fault that her place had been taken.

All the system was invaded by projections and projective identifications<sup>86</sup>. Thanks to a process of deep reflection on her own life story and on the group and organizational dynamics, the Italian woman realized that – although this did not lessen her hurt and anger – she was in a situation of identification with the aggressor and with his feelings of guilt (Ferenczi, 1974). She sat at another table, where she was later joined by the Israeli psychoanalyst who had silently witnessed the earlier scene of “occupation of somebody else’s place”. He told her that he felt very bad about not having defended her, or at least protested, but he had felt like his father, the “little Jewish policeman”, humiliated and oppressed by the Nazis without being able to defend himself. He, the clever psychoanalyst son who had devoted his life to helping Israelis to elaborate the trauma of the Holocaust, himself still carried inside of him the sense of combined guilt and shame, that he had inherited from his father. Guilt as though the humiliation received was somehow the fault of the victim, shame on account of having allowed oneself to be oppressed without managing to assert oneself. This man said that he realized to his great distress that he had reproduced, in the stolen place situation, his father’s behaviour. At the same time, it emerged in an upsetting fashion that the others seated at the table, the heirs of the terrible internecine war in the former Yugoslavia – in which each country had laid claim to its “own place” – had enacted this very dynamic to the detriment of other parties.

A little while later, the Palestinian delegates, for the most part very young, set up their own separate work group, called the “Fight Club”, as a symbol of their anger and resentment towards the conference leaders. They said that they felt that at this specific conference, held in Poland and not in Israel, there “was no place” for their conflict. It was true that the conference title only made reference to European conflicts. The theme of the “stolen place” had come back and continued to recur throughout the entire week of the conference. All the angry delegates of different nationalities, those especially full of anger and resentment, end-

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<sup>86</sup> Let’s think about Melanie Klein’s and Wilfred R. Bion’s theories

ed up joining “Fight Club”<sup>87</sup>. In the case of the young Palestinians, the theme of the “stolen place” was clearly “the” problem par excellence in relation to the current Arab-Israeli conflict. Each of them spoke in the group about parents and relatives who were dead, wounded or evicted. It was clear that they incarnated in their individual life stories a legacy of hatred, revenge and aggressiveness that had been there to welcome them at birth and that made up the fabric of their daily existence. The evening before the last day of the conference, the young Palestinians organized a party in the castle, inviting all the participants and the leaders. During the evening, the head of the young Palestinians proposed a game of musical chairs. There were fewer chairs than players and when the music stopped, the players had to run to grab “their own place”. Whoever was left “without a place of their own” was eliminated. At the end, two women had remained in play: one was the German psychoanalyst mentioned earlier (the daughter of a Nazi family, who had told her friend in the small group that she would have been able to survive in a concentration camp while her friend would not have, and whose brother had committed suicide, leaving a note saying that he had not succeeded in finding “his place” in life). The other remaining contestant was the Italian woman whose “place had been taken” at the luncheon table as described above. When the music stopped, the Italian participant sat down on the last remaining chair but, just as she had almost finished seating herself, an elderly German male psychoanalyst, whipped the seat from under her at the last minute, leading to her falling heavily on the ground. All those present, participants and some of the conference organizers, laughed loudly, applauding the elderly German lady as the winner. This showed the truth of her fantasy of being capable of survival, in contrast to those around her, first and foremost her brother. The young head of the Palestinian group, who was also spokesperson for the Fight Club, jumped up and down taking the elderly German psychoanalyst by the hand and proclaiming her the winner of the party.

Nobody raised the issue that the victory had been obtained by cheating. For all those present, it was “as if” this was something completely normal. Everything was lost sight of in the total blindness of the big group, which with its regressive power, pulled the majority into the incapacity to think; despite the fact that not only were all the participants well-educated and well-trained professionals but they were present at the conference for a very specific purpose. The de-

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<sup>87</sup> During a plenary session of the big group, a young German woman stood up saying that she wished to announce that, outside the castle grounds, there were stray dogs that attacked passers-by and therefore participants were recommended to be careful and to avoid going out on foot. Although this was true (a conference delegate had been bitten by a dog), nonetheless the text of the communication could also be interpreted as a metaphor, explaining the emotional moves of the conference-system, linked to the perception that being together had become significantly more dangerous.

clared aim of the conference was, indeed, to attempt to acquire an in-depth understanding - using the system made by the group of participants - of “how” the holocaust could have happened openly, in front of everybody and not been stopped. Only the daughter of a Serbian general, who had served under Milosevic and had been condemned for carrying out massacres, went over to the loser and victim, the Italian woman, consoling her and saying that, in her opinion, the game just played had been a “Nazi-game”. This Serbian woman had been greatly helped to think by the Italian woman in the days preceding this episode when, oppressed by her sense of guilt for being “the daughter of” a persecutor, slumped over herself and speaking in a monotone, she spoke of her life history and told of the terrible experiences of the Serbian war. This beautiful Serb woman told the story of her father, “as though” she herself had committed these acts of violence, and she displayed shame for the crimes committed by her father and by her people, giving the impression that she was carrying the crushing weight of an entire nation on her own slender shoulders. This woman had been helped to think by the Italian woman, who had offered her a mental listening space. This space for interpersonal listening had had particular characteristics, functioning as a psychic container, in which things could “find a place” – here again we find the role of “place” – and could be looked at together, in order to search for possible meanings<sup>88</sup>. When the Nazi-game happened, the Italian woman had the favor returned to her.

### 3. TRANSGENERATIONAL AND ITS PSYCHO-PEDAGOGICAL TREATMENT

The conference overall was a highly complex experience, obviously so because a device had been created in which to pour, all together and at the same time and in the same place, immense experiences of distress caused by many of the most serious conflicts of the twentieth century. It is, therefore, an equally complex task to analyze this experience; however I believe that at least some key threads of understanding may be identified as a starting point for further reflection (as I have attempted to do in this paper). Interpretation may usefully be informed by the psychoanalytic concepts of inter and trans-generational legacy (Schutzenberger, 2012; Racamier 2003; Cramer, 2000; Cigoli, 2011), and specifically the notion of telescoping (Faimberg, in Kaes et al., 1995). Psychoanalytical

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<sup>88</sup> Here we may refer to the theory of the container proposed by Bion (1962), and to his description of the transformation of ‘beta’elements into ‘alpha’elements, thanks to the capacity for reverie of the mother, or of a person with an adult state of mind. This person can receive the child’s worries, predigest them in the child’s “place” and give them back to the child in a renewed state. Thus, the child is enabled to transform its fears and worries, that is to say the fragmented and indigestible elements, thereby giving rise to a sense of hope.

research has devoted decades to the study of the legacies that are passed on – for the most part unconsciously – from one generation to the next. This is termed transgenerational transmission. Intergenerational on the other hand is used to describe the intentional passing on of models, traditions and behaviours (Schutzenberger, 2012; Racamier, 2003; Cramer, 2000; Cigoli, 2011). Faimberg (in Kaes, Faimberg, Enriquez, Baranes, 1995) introduces the concept of telescoping. “By the telescoping of generations I mean the appearance [...] of a special kind of unconscious alienated identification that condense the history of three generations and are revealed in the transference”. This form of identification may be found, thanks to the phenomenon of transference, in all relationships but, without training, it is difficult to identify and deconstruct it. The alienated dimension of the telescoping of generations involves not only the content of the trauma transmitted, but also the way in which the parents have or have not spoken about it. In fact, that for which the first generation was a trauma often becomes an unsaid for the second generation and for the third genealogically unthinkable. It is precisely in this perspective that we find the interdisciplinary link between history, society, psyche and education. In fact, fantasies and beliefs are passed on to descendants through educational practices, which are imbued with the social models and historical characteristics of the period the educators live in. Thus, the complex issue at stake for us regards how pedagogy may work with the other social sciences, such as history, sociology and psychology to facilitate descendants in gaining the awareness, required to emancipate themselves from the legacy received from their forebears and to attain personal individuation in the construction of their life stories. During the conference new generations expressed, with pain, anger and despair, their need for historical and psychic truth. Middle and new generations ask the elders to tell them “what did really happen in the past”? But the old “don’t tell us anything, and so everything remains unspeakable,” shouted angry. A Jewish woman of the middle generation told: “My parents told me ‘you are blonde and have blue eyes. This will help you in your life’. They did not say anything more, but I understood that there was something that had to do with sex that was necessary to survive”. In some obscure way, this lady was then sentenced by previous generations to be pervaded, in her imagination and in her inner world, by the dimension of sexualization, as if it could be confused indistinctly with the possible way to place oneself in the existence. New generations recounted their experience, according to which older generations do not want to tell their terrible secrets to young people, but in doing so they condemn all subsequent generations to suffer for something we do not know, though dimly and massively perceiving it inside themselves. The problem is the persistence of ghosts, sometimes in the form of terrifying images - deaths, torture, Hitler’s black boots – sometimes in form of fragments and flash, other times in form of recollections and memories invaded by fixed and obsessive thoughts, or by holes and sudden blocks, sometimes dramatically expressed by the body, with diseases

of various kinds. In the dark folds of the relationship between the generations pass blackmail, sense of guilt, transgressions. For example, some participants remembered the talk of their frightened parents: "If something happens to you, I'll kill myself." This was perceived by the children as a terrible responsibility to bear. What kind of burden does the previous generation leave on us? What messages are passed on, explicit or hidden? In this direction, the whole narrative and autobiographical research in education has emphasized the importance of telling its own story in training and self-training (Demetrio, 2012; Formenti, 2000; Biffi, 2010; Cambi, 2005; Olivieri Stiozzi, 2009; Olivieri, 2011).

Transgenerational research has been interwoven with psychoanalytical research on traumatic experiences (Varvin, & Volkan, 2003; Sklar, 2011; Oliner, 2012), at both the personal and the social levels, as in the case reported here of the trauma caused by the terrible experience of the Holocaust and other atrocities. The Group Relations Method provides a valuable opportunity to project outwards the anguish and fears introjected by the individual onto a collective scenario. In this way, the fears can be made visible and it is possible to initiate a process of gaining awareness of them. This method, applied to the study of the traces left in descendants by the traumatic events, whether individual, familial or collective, suffered by previous generations, showed most dramatically how individual life stories have been heavily influenced by the experiences of earlier generations and how the consequences of the traumas affecting forebears also heavily condition the relationships between different nationalities.

For example, during the conference many suffered witnesses have been brought relating to the belonging and double belonging to different nationalities which had fought between them, as in the case of many people who came from families of mixed origin, half of them Jews and half German. In some cases, the father was German and the mother was Jews. You can imagine the inner fragmentation with respect to loyalties, oriented at the same time in different directions: so dramatically different that one was the persecutor of the other. Which side to take? It is as if there was no place to stay, nor to belong to, where one could feel to belong to, or yet, one could feel to be able to let him/her go with confidence. There was a Jewish couple, mother and daughter, leaving at that time in Israel, but whose family was originally from Germany. The mother, a cultured university professor married to another university professor, constantly intervened in the plenary sessions, suggesting on the one hand rhetorical speeches extremely politically correct, inspired by the importance of being together in that context, Germans, Jews, Palestinians. On the other hand, the reference to the guilt of the Germans was constant and marked. However, as soon as it emerged some reference to the current fighting between Israelis and Palestinians, she was apparently no longer able to 'hold together' the formal and visceral deep. She delivered absolutely one-sided speeches in defense of the Israelis, without even wondering what might have been some violence perpetrated by the Jews, which

recalled the violence of the Nazi Germans. I was very impressed by the unconscious bias she expressed, which could also go unnoticed if you were not ready to vigorously resist the seduction of her refined rhetoric, supported by her personal experience to be certainly right. As evidence of this inside and outside double movement of the lady, clearly perceptible if you would listen to latencies (Massa, 1993), to non-verbal communication, to the emotions generated in those who stood around - but certainly not demonstrable by empirical positivistic evidences - there were the same behavior and life choices of her daughter. First of all, often, during the plenary sessions where the mother made many interventions, it happened that her daughter, suddenly and without apparent reason, began to laugh hysterically, sending a clear message to the group that it was necessary to face the problem that something unseen and picked up by the group demanded to be brought to light. One day her daughter - about 30 years old - told to be daughter of Jewish people expatriated from Germany for the racist persecution, but at the same time a militant of a Palestinian group, whose purpose was to fight against the Jews. It was no doubt that, beyond the possible and probable problems of revolt of the youth towards parents, the daughter expressed an ancient discomfort of transgenerational order, that in the mother - belonging to the middle generation - remained hidden under the guise of a rhetoric inspired, on the one hand to the importance of being together to reflect with Germans, Jews and Palestinians and on the other hand to the sure, as Hebrew- Israeli, to be on the right side. The daughter, however, revealed a discomfort expressed by a serious individual psychological symptom, under the form of a behavior inconsistent with the context, through which the young girl clearly expressed, with the activation of her psychotic parts, the deep division between the good and the wicked, between good and evil, that had been winding in his family for three generations at least, connected to this trauma. We can claim here to be in the presence of a phenomenon of *télescopage* (Faimberg, in Kaes et al., 1995), as described above, in which the grandparents' trauma is secretly passed on to the third generation, which is crushed and imprisoned by the chains of this hidden legacy. Using the Ferenczi's categories (1974), it can be assumed that the daughter was trying, with her behavior, to keep her distance from the transgenerational transmission present in his family, of unconscious identification with the aggressor. According to this process, those who have been abused tend to identify with the persecutor, presenting his behavior, in turn, with others, without clear awareness of the repetition put into practice. However, for the young girl, who always grew up in that context, it was not easy to identify alternative ways, especially towards her intellectual parents who had rationalized the family events, self-comprehending themselves as those always right and who understand everything. At the end of the conference the daughter, encountering along the stairs the Italian lady that had stolen the seat at the table and the chair during the game - as described above -, had stopped and told her: "Even though we have never

talked so far, I wanted to tell you that I watched you from a distance and that you have always been an important point of reference for me, because I saw that you were always both inside and out, never get carried away. “ This statement was truly amazing, especially expressed by a person who, up to that point and at least in public contexts, had shown herself only through acting out. It was as if the young girl had finally been able to identify someone who, although the victim of projections and heavy shakes by other participants -who, officially, were at the conference to reach the awareness of their own traumas and abuses committed by previous generations, yet automatically reproduced on other participants the persecution suffered or inherited - was, however, able to realize all of this and consciously observe it from outside. Somehow, a training and learning situation about a different possible way to cope with the traumatic burden of the transgenerational legacy came true. Such a learning may have happened thanks to the identification of the young girl with the Italian lady, in the sense that the young girl has found its two parts – that one who suffers and that one who does not want to deny and pretend nothing happened, channeling in it her aggression - in the Italian lady, but in a mature form which could be said. In such a way, her two parts founded an integration that no longer needed to show itself in the form of severe mental symptoms.

The Italian lady had consistently shown that the burden of her trauma, although very painful, could be said and mentioned, as well as a healthy aggression could be expressed as a rebellion against moralistic attitudes falsely reconciling. Going through the conflict between generations can let the descendants free to shake off the burden handed down, although it is certainly a very difficult path. In any case, it is essential that previous generations give, explicitly or not, the permission to youngsters to express the conflict. If there is a ban, then the descendants find themselves stuck with their hands tied searching for a way out., Observing the dynamics involved in the conference among Germans, Israelis and Palestinians, we can declare that there was a mechanism of identification with the aggressor (Ferenczi, 1974) in place, not only between individuals and generations, but even among nationalities in the sense that the Jews oppressed by the Germans in turn oppressed the Palestinians, unable to ‘hold together’ the fact that violence is on both sides. Each of the different nationalities was so polarized in claiming that the violence and the other was wrong and that they were just victims, and that there was no land to live their intermediate margins. Visceral feelings that were circulating were influenced primarily by a vision of clear division between good and evil, good and bad, who is wrong and who is right, torturers and victims.

Certainly, it is very interesting to wonder why so many people from all over the world spend money and effort to meet all together, between generations and nationalities very different one from the other, in a place where these powerful dynamics of splitting, denial, aggression, violence and creeping sadism, rooted

and indestructible prejudices and false good speeches are put in action. And It is as if every single person felt obscurely, at very deep and unsaid levels, that the profound and rigid internal division they have to bear does not provide them a wellbeing and they fail to find other roads on their own and within the emotional culture of their country. And as if these suffering people felt the need to gather all together because only together perpetrators-victims and victims-perpetrators can somehow find a bit of relief. It is as if there was a need for a material action to substitute a psychic process that always fails to take place. The contemporaneous physical presence of persecutors and victims in one place offers the possibility to have the feeling of finding the other half of him/herself. In fact, the couples perpetrators and victims are an intimate couple, who does not want to be disturbed, so to speak 'in its room'. Using the Freudian category of the child who wants to discover the primary scene, that is what happens in the 'parents' room'. The point is that perpetrators and victims want to be there, both of them present, with the apparent aim of talking together and the hidden one of getting to proclaim themselves the only ones to be in the right. As a matter of fact, they are afraid of the new, they fear that something new can happen in the here and now, that could break the old, unhealthy but routines and family ties with the past and with its own past visions of the world: a world rigidly divided in two. Of course the couple perpetrator-victim is a perverse couple, who shares a deep and obscure intimacy, often due to a violence that goes through a persecutor's action on the concrete body of the victim, then on something very intimate, private, where the skin, the moods and the sweat of human bodies facing and touching each other are at stake. The physical presence of the descendants of torturers and victims, sometimes, now persecutors in their turn, allows to show again, in the here and now, the dynamics of the past which are festering over the generations, producing rigid divisions between good and bad. Being all together allows to feel the warmth of bonds lost, even if perverse because never worked out, between persecutors and victims. Certainly, bringing to light the fact that between victims and perpetrators there is a very solid bond does not generate consent, neither the claim that this perverse relationship produces a kind of warmth in the people involved. Yet it is like that, as demonstrated by the so-called Stockholm Syndrome. The problem, of educational and psychological kind, is how to bring perpetrators and victims to build a little integration in themselves, so that they no longer need to stand in the presence of each other, firmly anchored to their rigid certainties but vitalized by finding in others the lost parts of themselves.

Given that the leaders of the different nations carry the same imaginary as the peoples that have elected them, it is easy to imagine that, in the course of governing, they may be confronted with the traumatic contents, and the resulting prejudices, buried in the collective unconscious imaginary in Europe and not only in Europe. The key question for the social sciences – pedagogy, psychology, sociology etc.– is then how to effectively enable individuals and groups to

achieve awareness of the traumatic traces and their consequences and to work them out appropriately. The stakes are currently very high and concern the opportunity to defuse the sociocultural time bombs linked to the economic wars (as said before, the form that traditional war has taken in the contemporary era).

Through this educational and psychological analysis of these dramatic social and historical events, one may wonder what was the profound meaning of the constitution of the European Union in the Second World War. The historical roots of the European Union lie in the Second World War. Indeed, the idea of a European integration was born in order to avoid the atrocities, the destruction and those terrible events occurred during the Second World War. Immediately after the end of the war, Europe was divided into two blocks, Western and Eastern Europe. Thus began the Cold War, which lasted forty years. The Western Europe nations created the Council of Europe on May 9, 1950. The European community was formed with the explicit intent to create a way of relating between European nations not to allow the repetition of the violence. But the question arisen is how this very important initiative of political, legal and economic growth was accompanied by a simultaneous educational, psychological and cultural work in order to cross consciously the mutual reasons of deep hostility. If we have to judge from the way in which Northern Europe countries are handling the terrible current economic crisis it seems that there has been no working out at all. After having suffered for fifty years the sentence for the atrocities committed during the Nazi era, evidently swallowed but not at all digested, Germany and the Nordic countries are striking lot of blows on southern Europe, covering this action with their moralistic and uplifting speeches. It emerges, at intervals, a parental representation as to punish rascal countries who have not done their homework or countries guilty of sins unilaterally passed off as serious, relating to the management of state budgets. These are overloaded of importance, as if the only important thing was to have the economic budgets in perfect order; budgets that are controlled almost like a parent - the bearer of a traditional and prescriptive pedagogical model - controls in the morning if the child is duly dressed, hands and nails clean. What is striking, beyond the economic errors of the different countries, even though there may have been, it is the rage and the call to an inflexible severity that has the flavor of an authoritarian parenting model, typical of the so-called 'black pedagogy' ( Miller, 1985). It is as if there were a secret revenge on the countries that have condemned Germany for the Holocaust, under the guise of being 'squanderer' States, who have wasted public money. The reference to the severity, austerity, inflexibility call a lot the fantasies related to the typical Nazi's behavior, as well as they have been passed down to us in oral histories, into narratives and novels, in museums and in the movies. The persecutors and victims, be they individuals or nations, have a clear need, as stated above, to be together in order to give a complete course to the typical actions of the persecutors and victims, explicit or hidden. The contempo-

rary presence of the European states into the European Union<sup>89</sup>, from the point of view of the psychology of history and politics, can play this role of material substitution to the lack of a deep integration, which could arise only through a process of painful revision of the mutual commitment in the atrocities of the past.

The Group Relations Method represents an instrument for working on this complex area, which is partly ambiguous and contradictory and offers both advantages and disadvantages. Certainly, this method has the potential to construct a device – intentionally totalizing and regressive – suitable for bringing to light the traumatic and violent dimension hidden in the social unconscious imaginary of the various nationalities. However, I believe that it is more successful with regard to this initial aim, than in facilitating the subsequent stages of reelaboration and transformation. On the contrary, I would say that, in light of the episodes recounted above – instances of genuine acting out, that is to say of acting without thinking –, it may be concluded that the declared aim of participation in the conference (to gain awareness of the influence of trauma on the following generations) did not translate into enhanced understanding of what was happening, in terms of either individual or collective thinking. Even during the final plenary session, at which the conference leaders – as ever rigorously and intentionally impermeable and displaying a mask of coldness and distance – shared some interpretative hypotheses with the big group, the events of the conference and the words of the conference delegates were not referred to. The organizers chose instead to state some abstract hypotheses, informed by the theories of Klein and Bion, leaving the disoriented and frustrated participants alone with the task of interpreting these cryptic statements and making the link between them, the events of the “here and now” of the conference and their own life stories. One of the assumptions, underlying this approach on the part of the staff, is that it is more democratic to allow space for individual learning. However, in this way, individuals are left alone to deal with something very powerful (hatred, sadistic fantasies, distress), that have been reawakened thanks to the device prepared by

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<sup>89</sup> Spinelli in 1941 had already submitted a proposal with a European view, but it was only after the Second World War that European integration began to take its first steps, under the pressure of political necessity to remove the causes of conflict between the major countries of the old continent remained on this side of the Iron Curtain. On 9 May 1950 Robert Schuman (French Foreign Minister) stated: “World peace can not be safeguarded without the creative initiatives to the dangers that threaten us,” laying the groundwork for the creation of CZECH (the European Coal and steel), which resulted in the Treaty of Paris of 18 April 1951. The six founding countries (Belgium, France, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Federal Republic of Germany), first intended to secure peace between the winners and losers of World War II by giving power to take decisions about the coal industry and ‘steel to an independent body and supra-called “High Authority”, whose first president was Jean Monnet, cf. [http://europa.eu/about-eu/eu-history/1945-1959/index\\_it.htm](http://europa.eu/about-eu/eu-history/1945-1959/index_it.htm), cons. June 7, 2013

the conference leaders. They availed of the typical psychic force of the big group to bring into the “here and now” an imaginary that had been active but buried: a ‘transgenerational unsaid’. It is therefore unconvincing to argue that it was better not to offer too many interpretative hypotheses (food for the mind) so as not to seem antidemocratic, when the first part of the process had been entirely predefined by the organizers. The theme of the consequences of trauma as it is passed down the generations is a theme of extraordinary contemporary importance for education, psychology, sociology, that clearly illustrates the key link between individual life stories, the collective unconscious imaginary and the historical and social levels. While an adequate level of understanding of the phenomenon of transgenerational transmission - which links the individual and social levels – seems to have been attained, further research is necessary to define instruments for the elaboration and transformation of the contents of this transgenerational transmission, which must address – in parallel – both the individual stories and the social levels. It is necessary “to examine cultural trauma as something which is collectively constructed in the interests of political power and group identities”. “Psychological trauma is a significant theme for historians and its relation to collectively constructed cultural trauma can only be explored adequately through historical analysis, not through political polemics” (Richards, 2002). And we could add through a thorough educational and psychological analysis.

#### 4. TRAUMA AND MEMORIES: WHAT POSSIBILITIES FOR A PSYCHO-PEDAGOGICAL WORKING OUT OF MOURNING

There is an intimate relation between subjectivity and historical memory, as evidenced by the continuous process of historical revisionism, it would be interesting to investigate the perspective of the autobiographical educational research, looking for the transgenerational stories of those who proclaim a review of the interpretation to be given to certain historical events. When studying the atrocities committed in the twentieth century, it is important to keep in mind two levels: that one of a memory still suffering from the presence of living ghosts due to the traumas undergone and that one deriving from the search for understanding of the crazy world we live in, where mass killings, torture and violence of all kinds continue to be perpetrated every day. Just think of the violence that occurred during the so-called Arab spring, then in Libya and now in Syria and Turkey. The problem of how to manage the memory of the past, conscious and unconscious, is closely connected with the search for a deeper, radical and effective understanding of the continuous recurrence of war crimes and crimes against

humanity. In our twenty-first century that has just begun, war crimes and crimes against humanity have become a daily reality.<sup>90</sup>

“I am thinking, for example, of how polarised not only the relationship between Arabs and Israelis has become, but also those between Jews, Christians and Muslims in general, and what powder kegs they are in our world today”<sup>91</sup>. The polarization in opposite extremes, accusing each other and self-proclaiming innocent and righteous, is now rampant at all social levels, from the individual to organizations, to states and nationalities, in private life, in the family and in workplaces, in religions, wars and clashes between cultures. How much these rigid polarizations are indebted to previous generations? Is it better to know or not to know what happened? And then is this knowledge really the end? Does it really allow to work out the mourn? What are our personal connections with what we learn second-hand? Is it really possible to work out deaths caused by so serious atrocities in both protagonists and their descendants? A participant to the conference told, for example, that when she was a child she used playing in the river where, a long time after, she discovered they threw the ashes of the people burned in the ovens of the concentration camps. Her parents didn’t have told her. What can have lodged, in

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<sup>90</sup> See the Report of the United Nations Commission against war crimes and humanity, specially dedicated to violence in Syria civil war, presented at Geneva, 4 June 2013, <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/Media.aspx>. Conflict in Syria reaches new levels of brutality: The United Nations commission of inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic is presenting its latest report on the human rights situation in Syria. The Commission found that war crimes and gross human rights violations continue to be perpetrated on an ever larger scale as the violence escalates. Crimes against humanity are being perpetrated by government forces and affiliated militias as they carry out widespread attacks against civilian populations through indiscriminate shelling, unlawful killing, torture, enforced disappearance, and sexual violence. They are systematically inflicting sieges against towns perceived as hostile, while populations have been forcibly displaced. Anti-government armed groups have also besieged towns, especially in Aleppo governorate. They are committing war crimes on an increasing scale, including extra-judicial executions, torture, hostage-taking, and pillage. The violations and abuses committed by anti-Government armed groups did not reach the intensity and scale of those committed by Government forces and affiliated militias. The commission found reasonable grounds to believe chemicals have been used as weapons, but did not identify the chemical agent, or the perpetrator. The commission remains convinced that a political settlement is the only means of stopping the violence. This report covers the period from 15 January to 15 May 2013. The findings are based on 430 interviews and other evidence, collected during this four-month period. To access the report please go to: English—[http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/CoISyria/A-HRC-23-58\\_en.pdf](http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/CoISyria/A-HRC-23-58_en.pdf). To access the live or archived webcast please go to: <http://webtv.un.org/>. To access photographs: <ftp://VIEW2:LD16C8Ik@unis-ftp.unog.ch>. Background: The commission, which comprises Mr. Paulo Sérgio Pinheiro (Chair), Ms. Karen Koning AbuZayd, Ms. Carla del Ponte and Mr. Vitit Muntarhorn, has been mandated by the United Nations Human Rights Council to investigate and record all violations of international human rights law. The Commission has also been tasked with investigating allegations of crimes against humanity and war crimes, and its mandate was recently expanded to include “investigations of all massacres.”

<sup>91</sup> Cfr. Desmond Tutu, cit.

her inner world, this little girl, now woman, who played with the ashes of thousands of deaths, the absolute negation of the social community of adults and the elderly in which she lived? With such prohibitions to know and think, what gaps outlined in fear of 'not knowing not to know' but at the same time, perceiving that there are dark secrets untold? Of course, the Polish conference offered a great opportunity to many generations to meet and think together. However, one may wonder if you really can learn from old traumas? And then to go where, in what direction? And is mourning possible, once brought to the surface the wounds still open, the atrocities, the sadism perpetrated and suffered? Many torturing ghosts emerge: it is dangerous to speak among generations, because there is the fear that, after speaking, parents and grandparents die, kill themselves and no one knows if they are dead by age or by suicide because the young people wanted to talk about. A group leader said that the problem, in fact, is that you do not know anything about the trauma of others and do not want to know anything. There is a very strong dilemma between loyalty and learning, because if you remain loyal to your relatives, you do not learn more. Previous generations have the task of historical and psychological self-responsibility in finding ways, places and forms for a genuine and radical dialogue with young people in search of the truth. For example, they can give up to give precedence to the narcissistic need of 'saying always their opinion', which stops the possibility of thinking, because the working out is blocked by an action in the bud. What is the relationship between narcissism, mechanism of denial, sadism, ability to think? This is just one of the many complex questions that have emerged during the historical-psychological-educational experiment in Poland<sup>92</sup>. On the other hand, the victims have a very strong power too, to paralyze everything else, the others, the contexts, the events, securing themselves and forcing other people to remain fixed on their situation. With their violence, the perpetrators paralyze the abused, preventing them from speaking, not only with concrete means but with the fear that arouse with their presence and their power prevaricating on a psychological level. Even the complex task of remembering collides with the fear of speaking introjected in consequence of the threats of the persecutor.

"Historical information gleaned from the study of memory is essentially of two types. First, memory reveals positive facts about past events and about the experience of those events, be they wars, revolutions, or everyday realities in 'times of normality'. Second, and more important, it tells us how recollections of

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<sup>92</sup> For example, during a session with the method of the so-called Social Dreaming, a participant reported being paralyzed in thought and free association, as long as he did not think the 'unfortunate' Captain Schettino, captain of the vessel Concordia, recently wrecked with loss of human life, which has not adopted, betraying, their own responsibility. The metaphor must be understood with reference to the captain as a representative of earlier generations, who have not taken care of as entrusted to them, that is, the physical and psychological wellbeing of future generations.

events are acquired and subsequently altered in the constant forming and re-forming of identities. Memory is shaped by our changing surroundings and the way we interpret them...Whatever the period in question, the time-frame of memory stretches from the 'moment' events take place until the day memories are recalled and articulated. Thus, an important part of the historical interest in memory is the dynamic relationship between events and subsequent other facts...The ambiguities of acquisition, retention and retrieval are complicated once memories are expressed through language" (Loftus, 1979, p. 22; cfr. also Richards, 2002). In many cases, irony was a way for a popular counterpoint to the public monopoly of martial language<sup>93</sup>, to have kept alive a flicker of civil culture and memory, in a general world where the overwhelming sense was one of silencing. Collective and individual ways of explaining or dealing with traumatic events address the psychological and methodological dilemmas: how is the unspeakable to be expressed? Trauma is about memory and forgetting. "Awful experiences, especially of loss, are impossible to forget because they are beyond normal human comprehension or existing schemata and cannot be assimilated into personal and collective narratives" (Richards, 2002, p.5). The horrific experience of internment in wartime extermination camps is only the most obvious and dreadful example from twentieth-century Europe experiences of atrocities and crimes against the humanity.<sup>94</sup> "Memory is shaped by the nature of the events remembered. The relationship between remembering traumatic events, politically, culturally and psychologically, and 'forgetting' them is part of our collective framework of understanding the past and communicating about the future" (Richards, 2002)<sup>95</sup>. We need to ask ourselves a lot of questions: how is trauma dealt with in a context of 'normalization'? "Do memories of war shape responses to re-building and 'making peace'? Memories of violence, terror and loss seem inevitably to be part of everyday features of life (and 'development'), as suggested in post-war attitudes towards work (sacrifice), family (morals, guilt and generational conflict), and even housing (migration at any cost)" (Richards, 2002, p.5). We need to deconstruct the concept of violence, trying to free it from the moralistic implications, so that we can understand it and assume our individual responsibility with respect to possible actions in different contexts of life. Pagliarini (et al., 1993), who studied the atomic danger and the war with Fornari, quoted the words of the Latin poet Terence: "Nothing that is human is alien to me",

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<sup>93</sup> Vázquez Montalbán M. (1971), *Crónica sentimental de España*, Espasa-Calpe, Madrid.

<sup>94</sup> See Cuesta, Bustillo J. (ed) (1998) "Memoria e historia" in *Ayer*, 32

<sup>95</sup> "Many of the issues that are key to looking at the Spanish Civil War and memory are the same as those encountered in analysis of memories of Vichy France, or Fascist Italy, or, indeed, Nazi Germany. Several other European societies experienced something similar to a 'civil war' during the era of the world wars. In Spain, as elsewhere, the relationship between war and post-war is at the heart of collective memories of the twentieth century", Richards, 2002.

in which he invited not to make a separation between violent and non-violent, because the accusation of the other, and our complete discharge, generates a first form of denial of the problem.

#### IN CONCLUSION...

Much work remains to be done, starting from wondering about what there is in the middle between madness and the working out of mourning, yet it is essential for the very survival of the human kind, in an era in which human beings – each one perched in its vision of the world rigidly divided between good and bad – has powerful weapons of mass destruction. One of the possible answers that pedagogy can give is to devote energy and intelligences for the sentimental education of our generation and of those who will come afterwards.

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