

# The Sense of Guilt Within Holocaust Survivors \*

by Ruth Jaffe, M.D.

“Ihr lasst den Armen schuldig werden,  
Dann ueberlasst Ihr ihn der Pein;  
Denn alle Schuld raecht sich auf Erden.”  
(Goethe: Wilhelm Meister)

A great deal has been written about the methods of dehumanization employed by the Nazi regime in the ghettos and concentration camps. Much less is known about the mental effects which the systematic use of these methods had, and continues to have, on its victims.

The almost absolute duty to preserve life, based upon Jewish tradition and reinforced by the experience of thousands of years of persecution, strengthened the natural instinctual drive for survival, and during the years of the holocaust helped people to adapt themselves to changed conditions of life on a low, barely human, level. At the same time, the eternal hope persisted that this persecution, like previous ones, would cease.

The process of dehumanization, inflicted on the Jewish people with the aim of annihilating them, frequently began in the ghettos, sometimes long before transportation to the camps, and this initial impact on the moral integrity of the individual was much deeper than is generally assumed.

Only a few organized communities with effective leaders were left by 1942.<sup>1</sup> Their genuine leaders were often deliberately annihilated and others were forced upon the Jews by the Nazis. Once an individual was deprived of spiritual and political guidance and felt isolated, he could become an easy victim of the process of dehumanization. The erstwhile feeling of solidarity with the community waned and this had the effect of undermining the community-spirit from within. The striving for self-preservation, reduced to the state of “every man for himself,” took over. These deleterious effects, initiated in the ghettos, increased still more in the concentration camps.

It is relatively simple to detect influences harmful to the body and to estimate their impact upon physical health. The situation is different regarding emotional influences on mental health. Although psychiatric literature about the Nazi persecution has become abundant, compilations of psychiatric findings<sup>2</sup> scarcely

<sup>1</sup> Gerald Reitlinger, *The Final Solution* (New York 1953).

<sup>2</sup> Walter Ritter von Baeyer, et al., *Psychiatrie der Verfolgten* (Berlin 1964).

mention the impact of the traumatic events upon the individual victim and how he came to terms with them. To date, this has been left chiefly to artistic and literary renderings,<sup>3</sup> while relatively few psychiatrists have dealt with this theme more extensively.<sup>4</sup>

Generally, the victims did not consider their emotional suffering as sickness, although this suffering was composed of all those experiences which the individual could not overcome, assimilate, and integrate into his later life. In fact, many survivors continually tend to question themselves about what they did or avoided doing or should have done differently. They persist in accusing themselves, frequently without justification. They are unable to resolve their dilemma of doubt, self-accusation, and shame.

In an important book relevant to the topic of self-accusation, Martin Buber differentiates between authentic guilt on the one hand, whether or not this is acknowledged by the afflicted person, and mere guilt-feelings on the other, the latter not being justified on an objective basis.<sup>5</sup> In holocaust survivors we sometimes find authentic guilt, but more often they bear guilt-feelings which are gross exaggerations of human frailties, and which are frequently unfounded.

It is not my intention here to describe guilt-laden acts such as were forced upon an individual, nor breakthroughs of sadistic impulses in a milieu in which the normal restraints on antisocial behavior were removed.

I want to describe, instead, three factors, each conducive to consequent guilt feelings, to which whole groups of people were exposed repeatedly or for prolonged periods: 1) the "Selection Parades," 2) the loss of relatives, and 3) the awareness of having been reduced to the existence of a degraded human being. The evocation of serious guilt feelings by one or more of these factors occurred generally after liberation, when the victims began to re-adapt to normal life. Instead of losing importance with the passage of time, these guilt feelings persisted or else would seem to have emerged for the first time only after years passed.

The "Selection Parade" was a repeated event in most of the ghettos and concentration camps, whereby row upon row of prisoners had to stand in place for hours; at the same time, they tried to do everything in their power to be inconspicuous. The Nazi in charge went through the rows choosing a pre-determined

<sup>3</sup> Ernst Pawel, "Fiction of the Holocaust," *Midstream*, vol. xvi (June/July 1970), pp. 14-26. Isaiah Spiegel, *Licht funem Obgrunt* (New York 1952). Spiegel lived in the Lodz Ghetto until its liquidation in 1944. Most of his short stories which illustrate ghetto life were originally written in Yiddish and have been translated into Hebrew. Ka-Tzetnik 135633 [Yehiel De-Nur] *The House of Dolls* (London 1961). The pseudonym of the author, Ka-Tzetnik 135633, consists of the German abbreviation for Konzentrations-Lager (K. Z.) and Ka-Tzetnik was the designation for a camp prisoner. The number 135633 was tattooed into the flesh of the author's forearm and served as his official identification. Every prisoner at Auschwitz had such a number. The book describes the author's own experiences.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Chodoff, "Late Effects of the Concentration Camp Syndrome," *Archives of General Psychiatry*, vol. viii (1963), pp. 323-333; Klaus Hoppe, "The Psychodynamics of Concentration Camp Victims," *Psychoanalytic Forum*, vol. i (1966), pp. 76-79; Ruth Jaffe, "Dissociative Phenomena in Former Concentration Camp Inmates," *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, vol. ix, parts 2-3 (1968), pp. 310-312; Wilhelm Niederland, "Psychiatric Disorders Among Persecution Victims," *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, vol. cxxxiv (1964), pp. 458-474. Also Symposium, Israel Psychoanalytic Society, "Psychiatric Disturbances of Holocaust Survivors," *Israel Annals of Psychiatry*, vol. v, (1967), pp. 91-100.

<sup>5</sup> Martin Buber, *Schuld und Schuldgefuehle* (Heidelberg 1964).

number of prisoners for the "Liquidation." The selected victims were led into the nearby woods and shot; the shooting was often heard by the survivors. Sometimes they were led, instead, to a pit to be shot or burned; the pits had been dug by the prisoners themselves, who knew the use to which they were put. In later years, the "selected" were transported to annihilation camps.

The "Selection Parade," which struck first of all at the weak and unfavored, was the critical event for which many persons prepared themselves as well as they could in order to be saved from death. Every time a person was spared, he experienced relief. ("It was not me this time. I have another week ahead of me.") But the fact that one person was allowed to stay in the row meant, at the same time, that another had to die in his stead. This situation is entirely different from a state of war, where one man chances to be killed, while the next one survives.

Yet during the holocaust "selections," many did their utmost to survive. A few examples may suffice. Young women rubbed and colored their cheeks, in order to appear lively. They tried to smile. Others, engaging in a kind of auto-hypnosis, would transport themselves into a state which made them insensible to their surroundings and to feelings of fear, fatigue, and weakness, which would have meant death. Sometimes someone would move a few inches forward or sideways, in order to hide behind a neighbor, who might be taken in his place. Some invented special means for remaining inconspicuous. For example, a child made wooden blocks on which to stand, in order to appear taller. A young boy, whose usual place in the "parade" was in the first row, came late one day and hid in the last row. That day an old man was taken from the first row and the boy was convinced that the old man had been taken instead of him. Since then, he has accused himself of being the old man's murderer. One woman told of an unusual "selection," in which the Jews of the ghetto were divided and shut up in two different churches, one opposite the other. She was in one, with her small son and her mother, packed closely together with old people and other young mothers and their children. In the opposite church were the single young people who were selected for work camps. The woman knew the meaning of this "selection"—the people in her church were destined to be destroyed. Suddenly her mother whispered to her to try to escape alone. For a moment she was strongly tempted to do so, feeling that "every other mother" might be sharing this urge, but she quickly suppressed the idea. Later, she escaped with her son, but was unable to save her mother. The momentary temptation to abandon her child remained one of her most cruel and self-tormenting memories, perhaps because she lost her son in a later "selection." A young woman was deported with her family to a transit-camp, where a "selection" was performed and she was separated from the rest of her relatives. The camp consisted of several sections that were divided by simple fences. Suddenly one day she saw her mother in the next section. Believing that she was endangering her life by being seen with an old woman, she quickly turned her back without giving a sign of recognition. Although she would not have been able to save her mother anyway, she could not forgive herself this proof of egotism and lack of love.

These "selections" were different in nature from the notorious "selections" at the Auschwitz railway station which caught many people unprepared and un-

aware of their likely destiny. There was, for example, a young boy who was separated from his parents. Seeing the gate shut behind his father, a feeling of relief overcame him, "Finally I am on my own. My father can't order me around any more." It was only many years later that this episode emerged into consciousness and brought on deep guilt feelings, accompanied by delayed mourning. There were, on the other hand, many boys and girls who could be separated from their parents and younger siblings only by force, and who later could not overcome their feeling of having saved their own lives by deserting their families.

These latter cases belong to the second group, those whose sense of guilt is based on the loss of their loved ones, although they themselves survived. The following examples may typify countless others:

1) A young woman from Czechoslovakia was the youngest of many siblings. When her father was taken to a labor camp and hunger and insecurity increased, her mother sent her (then a ten year-old child) to a well-to-do aunt in Budapest. Despite much better living conditions there, the girl missed her family and implored her mother (in letters) to let her return home. Thereupon her favorite brother was sent to persuade the girl to remain with the aunt. After his arrival in Budapest, he wanted to stay with her, but then they heard that their grandparents had also been sent away. The girl urged her brother to return home to help their mother with the other children, and he complied. Later, the mother wrote that this brother had also been sent to a labor camp. At this news the girl panicked and ran to the railway station in order to get home. She had neither money nor identity papers with her, only a pair of pajamas hanging over her arm. She was caught at the railway station and sent to a prison camp. After the war she learned that with the exception of her aunt in Budapest, none of her family had survived. Although she had undergone further traumatic experiences, it is the guilt feeling of having persuaded her brother to leave Budapest without having accompanied him that has continued to torment her ever since.

2) A young girl living in a ghetto lost her fiancé and her married sister; both were shot when their "underground" group was denounced. Only the sister's husband was saved. The girl's mother, hiding with Christian friends outside the ghetto, urged her to marry this brother-in-law in order to have a man's protection and economic support. The girl was loyal to the memories of her dead fiancé and sister and refused to marry him. She ultimately capitulated but only on the condition that her mother come to live with them in the ghetto. A year later the mother was seized in a Nazi raid on the ghetto. The daughter has never forgiven herself, believing that her mother might have survived had she not compelled her to return to the ghetto.

3) A young boy<sup>6</sup> was evacuated from Poland to Russia with his family, consisting of a grandmother, mother, and little brother, while his father was detained in Poland. As long as communication with the father was possible, life seemed bearable. During the outbreak of the Polish-Russian war, communication was inter-

<sup>6</sup> Ruth Jaffe, "Psychopathological Investigation of a Case of Periodic Hypersomnia and Bulimia," *Israel Annals of Psychiatry*, vol. v, (1967), pp. 43-52.

rupted and his mother became depressed and ceased caring for her children. The boy did not understand his mother's condition and subsequently quarreled with her and left her. Shortly afterward she died of dysentery. After the war the boy returned to Poland, hoping to find his father. He examined every man's face, and continues to do so to this day. Once he met a man who resembled his father but when he addressed him, he received a negative response. The boy's reaction was that, in fact, he had met his father but that the latter did not want to recognize him as his son, holding him responsible for the mother's death. His guilt-feelings about his mother's death and his indefatigable search for a pardoning father began with this tragic encounter.

4) A young girl was living and working with her siblings in a Polish concentration camp. When her brother fell ill with typhoid, the rest of the family managed to secure a few eggs for him. It was the girl's task to smuggle these eggs into the camp and bring them to her brother. When, on the way, she saw a menacing Nazi guard approaching her, she stumbled in terror and fell, breaking the eggs. The brother eventually died and she held herself responsible for his death.

5) A nine year-old boy drifted from village to village with his little brother after they had lost their parents. They succeeded in hiding in an apartment building in a large ghetto. One day the area was combed for children and the boy decided to try to escape with his brother, by jumping from their third-story window to the backyard below. The terrified little one was afraid to jump and clung to the window sill; the older one lost his grip on him when he jumped. The little one was caught in the raid; the older one broke his legs in the fall. However, he managed to crawl into a cellar where he was later found by neighbors and taken to a hospital. Although he was later caught and suffered the horrors of concentration and death camps, he nevertheless continued to feel responsible for his younger brother's fate and could not pardon himself for having "deserted" him.

All too frequently, survivors had to watch relatives being captured, debased, tortured, raped, or killed, without being able to intervene and save them. Such situations seem to have been particularly traumatic to children, who suddenly saw their heretofore strong parents, on whom they were accustomed to rely, made into unresisting victims of atrocities. Such child witnesses were thereby reduced to utter helplessness, their world shattered.

This category of guilt-laden survivors differs from the first one in that the victims did not survive at the cost of others' lives. Here we are not dealing with true guilt or gross failure of effort, yet it seems that their guilt feelings are more severe and enduring than those of the first group. Many had been hoping to find at least some of their loved ones after liberation, only to find all of them irrevocably lost. It was usually then that they desperately started asking themselves what they ought to have done that would have kept their relatives alive. Frequently their reaction is "if only I could have perished with them."

The instinct for survival, so strong during the dangers of persecution, gradually changed into a longing for death after the anticlimax of liberation. These people live their lives with their dead, and thus neglect those with whom they came

to live afterward, even their own offspring. Not uncommonly, a mother looking at her child would say to herself: "By now my daughter would have been a young woman; why should this child live and be happy, when that girl of mine had to die?" These thoughts themselves induce a sense of guilt which adds new burdens to the old. Yet they afford us a key to the understanding of the guilt feelings generated by the experience of the loss of relatives.

This may be the appropriate place to recall psychoanalytic theory. It postulates that for the child, thoughts can be equated with deeds. It is recognized that during early life children are normally ambivalent in their feelings towards their siblings and parents; that is, at one and the same time they can be both hostile and loving. This may be seen in a child's attitude towards the birth of a new sibling. He may dislike and hurt the baby and even wish it to disappear, while also loving and protecting it. So, too, the wish for the disappearance of the parent of the same sex is a well-known facet of the Oedipus complex. Such hostile impulses, inevitable in family life, arouse guilt feelings. With harmonious development, these impulses are overcome and, so, too, are the guilt feelings they aroused. The child comes to realize that his hostile wishes are ill-founded, as are his notions that such thoughts can cause evil events, because his parents and siblings go on living, unharmed. It is this kind of reality testing which helps conquer the child's primitive magical thinking that confuses thoughts and deeds.

What happened, then, during the holocaust? Relatives met their deaths in reality, often in the presence of family members. Archaic death wishes of early childhood could thereby be revived unconsciously, that is, without the person's having any notion of their existence. Consequently, the survivor reacted as if the hostile wishes of early childhood had come true. The severe guilt feelings aroused thereby had to find a quasi-rational outlet, which took the form of self-accusation; namely, that they had failed to do enough to keep their family alive. This state of mind was especially significant if the untimely and violent death of close relatives happened during childhood, that is, before the conflict of ambivalence could be resolved, or in adolescence, when this kind of conflict is temporarily revived. This theory, incidentally, would shed light on the lesser frequency and severity of guilt feelings suffered by "selection parade" survivors, since there the loss of relatives was rare. It would also explain the severity of guilt feelings in the relatively young survivors.

The source of guilt and shame in the third category of people seems to lie still deeper, reaching to the very roots of human existence. The guilt of these people relates to the fact that they had to forego, in the process of life-preserving adaptation on an inhumanly lowered level, their humaneness and dignity. In other words, they were made to give up their image of themselves as human personalities.

As mentioned earlier, degradation, de-individualization, and dehumanization generally began in the ghettos and intensified in the camps. They were accomplished by many methods: the enforced stripping to the skin at the beginning, the shaving of heads, the wearing of identical ragged prison clothing which made the victims look alike. Instead of having names of their own, they were branded like cattle, only a tattooed number took the place of a brand. They were driven by

blows to forced labor, and herded and bitten by dogs. Their only value lay in their ability to work. These humiliating practices brought about a severe loss of self-esteem, which was further augmented by being alone in an undifferentiated mass of unfamiliar people. To all this there must be added the specifically individual types of humiliation, together with the enforced witnessing of tortures and murders of fellow-prisoners as so-called precautionary examples.

One of the most effective methods in the process of degradation, leading to dehumanization, was the systematic utilization of hunger. Its consequences were great enough to induce moral disintegration. Hunger powered the antisocial trigger which removed inhibitions, thereby causing some people to steal their neighbor's or even their own children's bread ration, their very life line. Others were reduced to devouring disgusting things.

How did the inmates cope with these unique forms of degradation? It was possible for them to commit suicide or to provoke situations which would result in death. Active suicide was in fact rare—it was not consistent with Jewish tradition. But many desired death and met it with calm and dignity. On the other hand, since the Jew is enjoined to preserve his life, the majority sought to avoid death. This avoidance was deliberate, out of a sense of duty to stay alive, and not merely due to the blind instinct to live. In addition, these people awaited liberation and the opportunity for revenge or the chance to testify to avenge the dead. To do this they needed to survive and therefore to adapt themselves, even to their inhuman conditions. They had to avoid all situations which might arouse feelings such as rage, fear, or shame. They insulated themselves emotionally from their surroundings, maintaining only such contact as was necessary for survival. The range of feeling, thinking, and acting were greatly narrowed. In other words, the ghetto situation and concentration camps enforced a mental and physical lowering of the level of human functioning to one closer to vegetating than to living.

Awareness of their enforced degradation, and consequently, renunciation of human values left a deep wound (seldom expressed in spoken words), which has accompanied these people ever since. It led to a basic self-depreciation which powers the wish to be delivered from the burden of a guilty and hateful self and thus from life itself.

During the period of persecution, only a few among those who survived were fully conscious of the impact which the inhuman conditions had on them because self-awareness was minimal and feelings were not differentiated. But after liberation, when the re-adaptation to normal life (with its disappointments) was resumed, and when freedom proved to be a functionless release without meaningful retribution, the survivors' sustaining hopes evaporated. Their past, being ineradicable, caused the emergence and intensification of guilt feelings, feelings that they had no right to live and, above all, no right to enjoy life. Grief for the innumerable dead, longing for the lost loved ones, together with their sense of guilt and feeling of isolation, produced a state of unrelieved depression and preoccupation with the past. Although the traumatic events seemed not to register when they occurred, they left deep and vivid memory tracings which appeared and still appear in dreams

and fantasies. Guilt, or rather what is reacted to as guilt, exercises a compelling pull from the past.

Many of these people, having been forced into traumatic situations which evoked in them a sense of guilt and shame came to envy their dead for their peace of mind and their innocence. Having to go on living, in the course of the years they came to develop certain mental attitudes toward their traumatic experiences which tend to persist even today.<sup>7</sup> There are those, for example, who do not allow themselves to forget, but instead are compelled by an inner sense of duty to "remember"; they deliberately deny and forbid themselves any joy in living. There are others who want to forget, but cannot. Any event, even a trivial one, is liable to reawaken the painful past which intrudes itself in dreams and fantasies. Still others have apparently forgotten the past, but are suffering instead from neurotic symptoms which have to be considered as substitutes for the suppressed memories. The largest group is comprised of those people who have succeeded almost completely in "forgetting." But to do this, many of them have had to pay a price, because their memories are merely suppressed and not erased. They function well in everyday tasks, but are impoverished in their emotional lives, since they have to expend a great deal of mental energy in order to hold their disturbing memories in abeyance. Ultimately, it is the ability of these people (or their inability) to come to terms with their sense of guilt and loss which determines whether or not they can once again become reintegrated into life and society.

The question naturally arises whether there are certain personality types who can achieve this. This question cannot be answered because there were too many variables influencing the destiny of the individual. Account has to be taken of pre-war personality, age at the time the persecution began, the massivity and duration of traumatization, and the familial and sociological conditions in which the individual found himself following liberation and in subsequent years. The general impression prevails that few remained unscathed, although most of them never sought psychiatric help.\*

<sup>7</sup> Ruth Jaffe, "Observations on the Remnants of the Concentration Camps Now Living in Israel," *Dapim Refuim (Folia Medica)*, vol. xxi, (February 1962).

\* All of the case material is taken from patients who were hospitalized in the "Shalvata" Psychiatric Hospital and treated by me personally. Questions of guilt feelings and their source were discussed with them, however, only after good psychotherapeutic contact was established, and this topic had to be treated with great caution. I regret that I am neither able nor allowed to give full documentation of the material presented here. In Israel, psychiatric records are strictly confidential and in our hospital the patient's personal identity card number is also his hospital file number. Therefore, while I understand scholarly interest in detailed documentation, my primary responsibility is to preserve the anonymity of the persons whose cases are cited.

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