

THURSDAY OCTOBER 14, 1999
AFTERNOON SESSION A 14:00 – 15:30

Discussions Between Israeli and German Students on the Implications of the Holocaust

by
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For the last 10 years, we have been running a seminar entitled “The Psycho-Social Effects of the Holocaust on the Second and the Third Generations”, under the auspices of the Behavioral Sciences department at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev (Beer-Sheva). This year- long seminar is open to all interested students, both descendants and non-descendants of Holocaust survivors. In general, these seminars have a “group dynamics” atmosphere. They include three basic units which are as follows:

Each student interviews a survivor and one of their children (the second generation) using the method of “life stories” as devised by Rosenthal and Fisher-Rosenthal (Rosenthal, 1993 - detailed below). The student then undertakes a primary analysis of the interview and presents it to the class

- (a) The students read articles and books that deal with the psycho-social aspects of the effects of the Holocaust and present these materials to their classmates and
- (b) The students write a final paper on a subject of their choice. As a rule, these papers expand on the interviews that they did or connect to one of the theoretical issues arose in class.
- (c) Further more, two readers have been prepared on the basis of the participants’ papers –they span a number of issues and use a variety of methods (Bar-On & Selah, 1991; Bar-On& Frumer, 1994). Participants in the Yad Vashem conference will have the opportunity to view the readers.
- (d) In addition to these units, in which the students are the active participants, a number of guest lecturers are invited each year. including scholars, survivors, therapists and artists who have dealt with the Holocaust

During the last academic year, the course took a more “personal” turn and all of the participants were requested to interview a family member, regardless of whether or not they came from families of survivors, for presentation to the class. This change in requirement was based on the experience and gained over the last decade;. It is now very clear that understanding the long-term effects of the Holocaust in Israeli society is quite complex,.

This is due to a number of reasons, some of which include:

- (1) The ever-changing social and political context of Israeli society.- These changes have forced us to re-think our perception of the Holocaust and the survivors over the last 50 years (Segev, 1990).

- (2) People who never thought of themselves as survivors (perhaps because they escaped to the Soviet Union during the war, even if their entire families were killed), or as “children of...” (because their parents never talked about the subject, nor included themselves in the ‘survivor’ category) have now begun to re-think their identity and their connection to the Holocaust.
- (3) by looking at families who did not experience the Holocaust, we can begin to see what elements and/or family patterns are characteristic of families of survivors and which ones are not. We can also see at how non-survivors and their children understand the Holocaust,

During the last year, the students were also requested to keep a diary of what occurred in the group recording their reactions to the group process. These diaries are collected at the end of the year and provide a source of documentation concerning the group process. Finally, the students were given the choice to write a final paper in which they did an in-depth analysis of the “life story” interview that they had conducted with their family member. Alternately they could to address issues that arose during the group process, which influenced the way; they now view the Holocaust, the survivors and their descendants.

In order to demonstrate the interview process, a major requirement of the seminar (most of the year is devoted to the interviews), we will briefly present here the biographical method of interviewing using an example of results from one of the participant’s interviews. In the upcoming Yad Vashem workshop, we will present a few more examples from the seminars. . Participants will have the opportunity to comment on the findings and ask questions concerning the method and process.

A “Life Story” (Rosenthal, 1993; 1998) is an open interview, phenomenological method within qualitative research. By using the life story, the interviewer attempts to understand the life experience from the viewpoint of the interviewee. The interviewer seeks to uncover two fields of information from the participant - the actual experiences that the individual had in his or her life - termed the Life History and the significance which the person gives to the lived experiences - termed the Life Story.

The first basic assumption of this method is that in order to understand complex phenomena –(such as the experience of being a Holocaust survivor, or of being born into a family of survivors)- the interviewer - researcher must use a method which allows individuals to talk about whatever they perceive to be of relevance to their lives. When the interviewer tries to direct the interview through pre-set questions, she or he imposes his or her own framework of understanding on the situation. This often has the effect of preventing the emergence of the complex phenomena, which is at the basis of the meaning that the individual gives to their life experiences. Rosenthal (1993) asserts that we can only learn what the experience meant for the person by allowing him or her to feel free to tell their story in their own words, using their own system of organization, at their own pace. A second assumption of this method is that the life story is not a random collection of sentences but rather a gestalt - a holistic system - which reflects the person’s understanding of self and his or her social world. As a result, the life story can be systematically analyzed in order to uncover these meanings.

Based on these two assumptions, the participants in the seminars pose the following question to the interviewees: "Please tell me your life story - whatever you think is relevant". This question is aimed at eliciting a "narrative" about the person's life. The only questions that the interviewer asks during the narrative are questions of clarification or more detail. When the person has finished telling the life story, and clarifications and elaboration have been elicited by the interviewer, the interviewees can then be asked "extrinsic questions" (questions which are not necessarily a direct derivative of what the biographer said in the interview). There are many possibilities, but we often use questions which include:- how does the biographer's family celebrate holidays, who does the biographer include in his or her definition of "my family", how names are chosen for children, are there any objects or photographs that hold special meaning to them. We ask the biographer if he or she has a "message" that they would like to relate to others. In most of the interviews with the younger generations the interviewers also ask the biographers if they know what their elders experienced in the war, especially, If they do not talk about it in their own narratives. The interviews are tape-recorded, then transcribed word for word and prepared for analysis.

In order to demonstrate what emerges from these interviews, results from one of the interviews undertaken in the seminar will briefly be presented here. (we will examine more stories during the workshop, All names of participants are pseudonyms.)

Einav - a 24 year old women, interviewed her grandmother (a survivor from Poland) and her aunt (second generation, Israeli born) in 1997. Liora, a 25-year old woman participant in the seminar, interviewed Einav's father (who was born during the war when the family escaped to the Soviet Union). Einav was interviewed by Julia Chaitin, the facilitator of the seminar - During the same year. Einav continued studying the historical and social aspects of the Holocaust She has taken upon herself the role of "family historian". Except for her grandparents, she knows more details than anyone else concerning what happened to her family during the war. For her paper, Einav analyzed the family interviews and attempted to understand where she "fit" into the family picture In her own interview, Einav said:

...I have a good relationship with (my brother), but ... he is so different than I am and ... it angers me... he knows an eighth of what I know. About the Holocaust, about my grandma...he has no idea. He has his life, his job, his girlfriend...he will never offer to do things (with the grandparents) because ...it's Einav's role... he is close to them, but...he will never sit down with them and he won't ... listen to the tapes (of their life stories)... since my childhood, I remember that my grandmother always talked. At every opportunity, good things, life before the Holocaust, about her town... It began with my roots projects...in junior high school, and then ... in the university, I did a course about the shtetl, and ... this year it became even more important, because of the seminar... when I interviewed (my aunt)...I got such a shock, I was living under such a delusion, she has a very good relationship with them... she thinks that the story about grandma and grandpa is terrible, but it begins and ends with the fact that they were separated for four years, and that they found one another... I wanted to know: 'What else do you know?'...I am always jealous of them (the other family members) ... that they can ...express

their emotions and it passes, and I go on... thinking about it...it's bad, from my standpoint, because it effects me, for the worse... (my father) is the rational one and ... what's important is the historical significance of the Shoah...and along I come and ... I ask, and the fact is that they are talking... that's on the one hand. On the other hand, I feel that I am doing something to them ... which isn't good. Like ... to sit and listen to their tapes every day...due to the seminar ...I'll tell my father that I am taking upon myself roles that they should have, that's something that I never would have said a year ago...

As can be seen from this short example, by interviewing family members, and by being interviewed herself, Einav has an opportunity to explore her own understanding, emotions and attitudes toward the Holocaust, as well the understandings of other family members. However, the interview process is not a final stage, but rather another step along her road to working through the consequences of the past for her own life. While she still has much to work through, Einav is beginning to come to grips with the different ways people within her own family deal with the Holocaust.

German-Israeli Student Exchanges

In addition to the in-class activities mentioned above, once every two years, students in the seminar meet with non-Jewish students from one of the German universities who are also studying the effects of the Nazi regime on their personal life, family life and on the societal level. These exchanges span four weeks - two weeks in Israel and then two weeks in German. The major goal of these exchanges has been to help participants from each side better understand the complexities involved in understanding the effects of the Holocaust on the younger generations, over 50 years after the end of World War II. On a more specific level, the purpose of these encounters is four-fold:

- a. To help the students explore the connection between the traumatic Historical events of the Holocaust to the lives of the survivors, their descendants, themselves and other people within their community. Over-simplifications, empty generalizations and prejudices are examined.
- b. To become acquainted with the ways in which inter-generational transmission of life events and values occurs within families and within the society.
- c. To look at questions of personal and collective identity by examining and analyzing the "life stories" of people in one's family and community.
- d. To provide a vehicle for each participant to become acquainted with "the other" (the German, the Israeli) through the personal contact and through acquaintance with their community and country.

These encounters are intensive ,emotional and include a range of activities: the students host one another in their homes, participate in group dynamics - in which they tell their own "life story", They visit sites connected to the Holocaust, hear guest lecturers and present the interviews that they did with family members and/or survivors and their children to the participants in the seminar. Based on analyses of the exchanges from past years, we have learned that the majority of the participants

(both Israelis and Germans) perceive these encounters as being a very significant life experience. In addition, the analyses of the encounters have shown, that in spite of the time that has elapsed since the end of the war, and in spite of the fact that all of the participants belong to either the second or the third generation (that is, all were born after the war), the Holocaust remains a very painful and personal subject.. Due to the complexity of understanding the consequences of the Holocaust, many issues remain unresolved at the end of the exchanges (Bar-On, 1995, 1996, 1997; Bar-On, Hare & Chaitin, 1997; Bar-On & Ostrovsky, 1997).

During the October conference, we will discuss a number of the interactions which have typified these group exchanges over the last decade. In order to demonstrate the kinds of issues, and the intensity which members of the second and third generations exhibit during these encounters, we will present a short example here, taken from the 1997 seminar. The exchange began with the German visit to Israel in March of that year. On the formal level, everything ran smoothly. The Israelis were excellent hosts and very polite. Friendships between some of the Israeli and the German students began forming and both sides were interested in personally getting to know one another. The Germans were very sensitive to the Israeli students' feelings, and they only vented their anger over the program schedule to their facilitator. Alongside the informal, personal interaction which was taking place, there was a latent conflict which arose over the outward, physical differences between the German and Israeli women. While most of the German women had very short hair and wore no make-up - a symbol of their extreme left political attitudes, according to them - the Israeli women tended to have long hair and to use cosmetics. One of the informal 'messages' which reached the ears of some of the Israeli participants was that the German women did not consider these Israeli women to be 'politically correct'. However, this issue was never stated directly in the formal meetings and only came out in the Israeli group, after the German students had gone home. As can be expected, this phenomenon caused an uproar among the Israeli students who then termed the Germans "hypocrites".

There was much anger in the Israeli group when they went to Hamburg in early August. The first "explosion" occurred immediately during the first joint session and continued for most of the two weeks. The group crisis, which colored most of what was to come afterward, occurred when Mira, an Israeli woman screamed at the German group, the day after the joint group made the trip to Neunegamme concentration camp. Mira (who had heard the statements about being "politically correct" in Israel) shouted:

...you Germans respect garbage more than you do people! At Neunegamme, sure that the only signs in English (so that non-Germans could understand them) were on the garbage cans. Heaven forbid we should mixpaper with glass! You treat people as if they are garbage and then you talkabout being 'politically correct' and about left-wing politics. I didn't want to come here to Germany, and I'm sorry that I came...

After her outburst, she ran out of the room and refused to participate in any of the joint discussions that followed. While Mira's outburst and accusations never were fully resolved, in our opinion, it had the positive result of actually pushing the group

forward. That is, instead of concentrating on being nice and careful about one's words, many of the German and the Israeli participants were finally able to talk about what they were really feeling to one another, not only in the informal gatherings, but in the formal meetings as well. In addition, this paved the way for the students to share their own "life stories" with the others - a vehicle which proved to bring the two groups to a better understanding of what it really is like to be "the other". At the end of the second encounter, participants of both groups asserted that in spite of the difficulty, they felt that some real headway was finally being made.

As mentioned above, in the workshop at the upcoming conference, we will take a closer look at other group interactions which have occurred in the German-Israeli exchanges and the participants will have time to discuss the issues and their implications for working through the Holocaust. In sum, then, we propose to undertake the following activities:

- a. We will present the approach which is the basis for the uni-national and the bi-national encounters.
 - b. We will present some of the specific techniques that we use in order to (try to) achieve the goals stated above. We will briefly explain and demonstrate the "life story" method of interviewing. The participants will receive interview guidelines and methods of analysis of life stories and have the opportunity to ask questions concerning implementation of these tools.
 - c. We will lead a discussion concerning the effectiveness of our approach and our choice of techniques in helping the younger generations confront the traumatic past on a personal, familial, group and societal level.
 - d. We envision the discussion as dealing with topics such as:
- (1) What skills and training are necessary for facilitators/teachers of such seminars and exchanges? What is the facilitator-teacher's role?
 - (2) What dynamics and what degree of flexibility is involved in the planning and running of such a program? How "set" should the format be?
 - (3) How can the teacher/facilitator successfully combine theoretical materials with the personal experiences, as touched on by the life stories and the personal encounters between the Jewish and the non-Jewish German participants?
 - (4) What is the contribution of the Jewish and non-Jewish (German) exchanges to the working through processes of the participants? What wider effects do these exchanges and interviews have on the participants' family, friends and social group?
 - (5) Is this approach suitable for high school students as well as for university aged adults? Which populations should be targeted for such programs?

It is our aim that this workshop will aid educators who are considering the implementation of a similar program. Similarly we will provide detailed bibliography during the workshop.