Human Reciprocity Among the Jewish Prisoners in the Nazi Concentration Camps

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> We are all brothers, and we are all suffering from the same fate. The same smoke floats over all our heads. Help one another. It is the only way to survive. (Elie Wiesel, *Night*, p. 55)

It has become increasingly evident that cooperation for survival among members of the same species is a basic law of life. Throughout the history of man, sharing relationships have been a central mode of coping with and adapting to the environment. When the conditions of life are particularly harsh, making survival difficult, there is often an increase in reciprocal relationships. This has been demonstrated for example in the socio-cultural patterns of villages in the Arctic[1].

The Nazi concentration camp represents the most extreme situation for survival known to man. It was a central component in a system designed for killing many millions of human beings, primarily the Jews of Europe. These tormented people were all condemned to death, but the process took time and was not uniform, as it involved the killing of a scattered people in twenty-two different European states and regions. Even in the death camps, there was a technical limit to the numbers that could be killed every day. Meanwhile, as the processing for death went on inexorably, there was a delay in the death of those selected to work at various jobs in the death camp. Others were selected for a variety of slave labor under conditions that resulted in the death of many from injuries inflicted, exhaustion, exposure, disease and starvation. Furthermore, the motivation to continue with the struggle to live in the concentration camps was constantly and deliberately undermined by the ruthless system of unprecedented terrorization and dehumanization.

[1] Bent Jensen, "Human Reciprocity - An Arctic Exemplification," *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, Vol. 43, 1973, pp. 447-458.

Social Bonding in Extremity

This study relates to the phenomenon of spontaneously arising reciprocal human relations among the inmates of the Nazi concentration camps. It is postulated that interpersonal bonding, reciprocity and sharing were an essential source of strength for "adaptation" and survival in many of the victims. Apart from the limited opportunities for the starving inmates to share the sparse food rations, it was their interpersonal support that sustained the motivation to carry on with the struggle to live. There has been little systematic study of the social bonding in concentration-camp life. The psychiatric literature, mainly concerned with psycho-pathology and psycho-dynamics, and extensively derived from examinations for compensation claims and clinical studies of survivors in therapy, has emphasized the extreme and unprecedented nature of the Holocaust trauma and the destructive aftereffects. There has however been some study of individual "coping" and adaptive patterns of the victims within the concentration camps. These have been described in the psychiatric literature[2] in terms of denial, emotional withdrawal, cognitive constriction, constructive activity, hope, meaning or purpose in living, a belief system, the "will to live" and fantasy.[3]

Leo Eitinger, in discussing reasons for survival in the concentration camps, refers to survivors who believed that "their 'being together' had been significant," either because "they were helped by the others who were with them or because they themselves had to think of the others..."

[2] Joel E. Dimsdale, “The Coping Behavior of Nazi Concentration Camp Survivors,” *American Journal of Psychiatry*, Vol. 131, 1974, p. 792; Leo Eitinger, *Concentration Camp Survivors in Norway and Israel*, London, 1964; Hillel Klein, "Delayed Affects and Aftereffects of Severe Traumatization," *Israel Annals of Psychiatry*, Vol. 12, 1974, pp. 293-303 (see especially the discussion on fantasy and hope); Henry Krystal, “Trauma and Affects,” *Psychoanalytic Study of the Child*, Vol. 33, 1978, pp. 102-103; Robert J. Lifton, *Death in Life - Survivor of Hiroshima* , New York, 1968; P. Benner, E. Roskies, R.S. Lazarus, "Stress and Coping under Extreme Conditions," *Survivors, Victims and Perpetrators*. Joel E. Dimsdale, ed., New York, 1980, Chap. 9; Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, New York, 1968.

[3] A sustaining fantasy particularly relevant here is “attachment ideation” (preoccupation with important attachment figures, such as parents, siblings, children, if believed to be alive, which mobilizes motivation to live in the hope of reunion). Scott Henderson, Tudor Bostock, "Coping Behavior After Shipwreck," *British Journal of Psychiatry*, Vol. 131, 1977, pp. 15-20.

Eitinger comments:

Even though this help was often of a minimal and/or symbolic nature it seems to have contributed in a decisive way towards the individual's ability to retain part of his personality and self-respect, and this is given considerable importance in relation to the capacity for survival[4].

Hillel Stein refers frequently to "cohesive pairing behavior" as a specific psychosocial coping response during the Holocaust. In his study of survivors in the kibbutz, he states: "These individuals attribute their survival to the existence of tightly-knit supportive groups during the Holocaust. Survival is intimately linked with community."[5]

Little systematic study, however, has been made of interpersonal resources, of social bonding and support, among the survivors. This is surprising, in view of the clear role of these resources as a protective and buffering potential while in the grip of traumatic processes as well as in the mitigation and prevention of the long-term effects of trauma. Even in the personal accounts of the survivors themselves, there is a surprising lack of emphasis on helping activities, on sharing and mutual support among the inmates of the concentration camps.

Terrence Des Pres in his literary analysis, The Survivor of published eyewitness accounts of survivors describing their experiences, shows a bold sensitivity in his understanding of interpersonal relationships in the concentration camps and their significance. In relating to the lack of emphasis on this aspect of behavior in survivors' accounts, he states:

> Primarily survivors stress the negative side of concentration camp existence because their accounts are governed by an obsessive need to "tell the world" of the terrible things they have seen. This determines not only the kind of material they select to record, but also the emphasis they give it. As a witness the survivor aims above all to convey the otherness of the camps; their specific inhumanity,... acts of care and decency seem so out of place in the camps that survivors themselves are perplexed... what impressed survivors most indelibly

[4] Eitinger, *op.cit.*, p. 79.
[5] Hillel Klein, Shulamith Reinharz, "Adaptation in the Kibbutz - Holocaust Survivors and their Families," *Mental Health and Social Changes*, Louis Miller, ed., Jerusalem, 1972. On the significance of relations between pairs of friends, see Klein (above, note 2).

> was death, suffering, terror, all on a scale of magnitude and monstrosity not to be faced without lasting trauma.... Reports by survivors regularly included small deeds of courage and resistance, of help and mutual care; but in the larger picture the image of viciousness and death grows to such enormous intensity that an else - any sign of elementary humanness - pales to insignificance[6].

Meir Dworzecki did pioneer work in his studies based on testimonies and interviews of survivors of the destruction of the Jews of Estonia in the ghettos and concentration camps. He comments on the stress laid on the various atrocities and on the "moral degeneration" of the victims in the camps, whereas relatively little mention is made of helping activities in the relations between the victims. In Dworzecki's opinion the "degeneration" among the victims was "an unexpected phenomenon in Jewish life," which left the survivors "utterly perplexed and astonished." On the other hand, the "good deeds" of the anonymous general run of the people in their relations with each other were taken for granted in terms of how they held on to their humanity, of their manifestations of solidarity, mutual help, and self-sacrifice.[7] The very acts which have the significance of enabling survival become those which pale into insignificance in everyday life.

Des Pres proceeds to demonstrate that the struggle for life in extremity depends on solidarity, on social bonding and interchange, that even in Auschwitz and Buchenwald life was intensely social. Scattered among the detailed descriptions of the terrors reported in the eyewitness accounts he quotes are many examples of mutual help, of continual sharing and, in some cases, of an intensely disciplined underground organization based on teamwork and the creation of a social network.

These activities point "to the radically social nature of life in extremity," based on "an awareness of the common predicament and of the need to act collectively," and that "the need to help is as basic as the need for help."[8] Furthermore, human reciprocity in the group and dyadic relations, by

[6] Terrence Des Pres, *The Survivor - An Anatomy of Life in the Death Camps*, New York, 1776, pp. 98-99;
[7] Meir Dworzecki, "The Day to Day Stand of the Jews," *Jewish Resistance During the Holocaust - Proceedings of the Conference on Manifestations of Jewish Resistance*, Jerusalem, 1971, pp. 153-155.
[8] Des Pres, *op. cit* ., pp. 136, 147.

sustaining the morale and the motivation to continue the struggle to live on in the Nazi concentration camps, increased the chances of eventual survival.

Kitty Hart, an Auschwitz survivor, wrote: "I soon realized that alone one could not possibly survive. It was necessary, therefore, to form little families of two or three. In this way we looked after one another."[9]

Richard Glazar, a Treblinka survivor, stated:

> Of course there were people who survived who were loners. They will tell you now they survived because they relied on no one but them. But the truth is probably - and they may either not know it or not be willing to admit to themselves or others - that they survived because they were carried by someone, someone who cared for them as much, or almost as much as for themselves. [10]

Women who met Anne Frank in Bergen-Belsen in the month before she died believed that neither the hunger nor the typhus killed her but the death of her sister, Margot. One of these women said: "It was frightening to see how easy it was to die for someone who had been left all alone in a concentration camp."[11]

Eugene Heimler, the ex-Buchenwald inmate and social therapist, put it simply: "None of us who have survived would be here unless there had been others who helped us in our survival."[12]

All were marked for eventual extermination; it was merely a question of time, but meanwhile, froze hour to hour and day to day, as Des Pres states, "through innumerable small acts of humanness, most of them covert but everywhere in evidence, survivors were able to maintain societal structures workable enough to keep themselves alive and morally sane."[13]

It would seem that whenever conditions were relatively predictable and routine, no matter how extreme the dehumanization and brutalization, spontaneous bonding occurred between the victims. After the violent shock of

[9] Kitty Hart, *I Am Alive*, London, New York, 1962.
[10] Gitta Sereny, *Into that Darkness - From Mercy Killings to Mass Murder*, London, 1974, p. 186.
[11] Ernest Schnable, "A Tragedy Revealed: Heroines' Last Days," *Life,* August 18, 1958, pp. 78-114.
[12] Eugene Heimler, *Resistance Against Tyranny*, London, 1966, p. 161.
[13] Des Pres, *op. cit* ., p. 142.

induction into the camp system, and within a few days of arrival, pairing and group formations would develop.

Luchterhand, the sociologist, has made a highly illuminating study of the social behavior of fifty-two concentration-camp survivors, based on interviews shortly after their liberation. The survivors originated in the main from Central European countries, and their ages ranged from the teens to the fifties. The majority had been in camps for over two years and "had a sharing relationship of mutuality with one or more prisoners." He discusses the emergence of a prisoner social system, based on pairs and groups, which clearly enhanced survival chances.

"Stable pairing was the most common type of interpersonal relationship pattern." When one partner died or was removed, replacement was swift. Luchterhand states unequivocally:

> With all of the raging conflict in the camps, it was in the pairs that the prisoners kept alive the semblance of humanity. The pairs gave relief from the shame of acts of acquiescence and surrender. The pairs produced expertness in the survival skills known as "organizing".

The pair was thus "the basic unit of survival" and, as one of the survivors stated: "one could not exist in the camp without participating somehow in a sharing relationship."[14]

When survival conditions became even more extreme, however, as on the "death marches" after the evacuation of the camps, it became increasingly difficult to maintain interpersonal bonds in the desperate struggle not to fall behind and be shot. One survivor, a researcher of Holocaust literature, Eli Pfefferkorn, states:

> The group ties that I developed in the last camp were of an expedient nature determined by mutual usefulness between the group and myself... these rapidly dissolved in the course of the "death march" as the survival conditions became more extreme.[15]

[14] Elmer Luchterhand, "Prisoner Behavior and Social System in the Nazi Camp," *International Journal of Psychiatry* , Vol. 13, 1967, pp. 245-264.
[15] Eli Pfefferkorn, “The Case of Bruno Bettelheim and Lina Wertmueller's Seven Beauties” in this book, pp. 663-681.

On the other hand, Luchterhand insists that even in death march conditions, friendship pairs and trios were maintained and actively sustained one another. In a revealing paper ,based on interviews with ten survivors, he describes the transport of evacuated Auschwitz prisoners for periods of seven to fourteen days from Gleiwitz, Silesia, to various camp destinations in mid-winter, in roofless, low-sided freight cars. The vast majority died on the way, and, after the second or third day, there were recurrent fights, resulting in the deaths of many, for the coveted corner or side positions. However, even in these unendurable conditions, "some degree of acts of sharing and cooperation was maintained or re-emerged" among the handful of survivors in each car.[16]

Massive Psychic Trauma

Psychiatrists since the 1950s have been studying incarceration in the Nazi concentration camps from the standpoint of Massive Psychic Trauma[17] and its long-term effects. "Massive" or "catastrophic psychic trauma" refers to extreme situations of death and dehumanization, which lead to overwhelming and paralysis of the adaptive and recuperative mechanisms of the psyche. As a result, long-standing mental impairments of varying severity are liable to occur. These disturbances constituted a new diagnostic modality known as the "Concentration Camp Syndrome."[18]

Krystal, the American psychoanalyst who has conducted pioneering studies on Holocaust trauma, has described the stages of the "catastrophic trauma" process when the psychic defenses are overwhelmed: (I) confrontation with death; (II) affective blocking and numbing; (III) constriction of cognitive and executive function; and, finally (IV) defeat and surrender (the Muselmann state in concentration-camp slang) leading frequently to death.

Krystal's thorough and in-depth description of the traumatic process relates essentially to individual intrapsychic events. The interpersonal dimension,

[16] Elmer Luchterhand, “The Gondola-Car Transports,” *International Journal of Social Psychiatry*, Vol. 13, 1966-1967, pp. 28-32.
[17] Henry Krystal, ed., *Massive Psychic Trauma*, New York, 1968.
[18] William G. Niederland, "The Problem of the Survivor," *Journal of the Hillside Hospita l*, Vol. 10, 1961, p. 233.

however, was not studied, although Krystal understands and clearly states that "in the acute traumatic state one stands alone and abandoned by all sources of feelings of security" and that this can lead to the "giving up of all hope of satisfactory human contact resulting from the destruction of basic trust." [19]

In recent years there has been increasing awareness of the fact that survivors of social catastrophes suffer from collective trauma in addition to the individual trauma.

Collective Trauma

When a community is destroyed, it appears that in addition to the individual traumatic process there occurs a further psychic impairment which enhances the individual traumatic process and makes recovery from the effects of the individual trauma more difficult. Kait Erikson has made a study of the psychological after-effects resulting from the scattering and fragmentation of the community after the 1972 Buffalo Creek, West Virginia, flood disaster. He described collective trauma "as a blow to the tissues of social life that damages the bonds linking people-together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality." The three main behavioral manifestations of this collective trauma are demoralization, disorientation, and loss of connection.[20]

These observations are especially valid in our studies of Holocaust survivors. The survivors of the Holocaust were not only uprooted from their familiar social environment and unable to return to it after liberation, but most of their families and their entire communities were totally destroyed. The extended family and communal bonds were an integral element in Jewish life in Europe, and this collective trauma deeply undermined their basic sense of security and identity. The fact that the Nazi Holocaust was deliberately perpetrated by men who belonged to a highly regarded and advanced culture added another important dimension to the process of collective trauma. This affected, threatened and undermined the self-image of the victims and the basic trust in

[19] Krystal, *op. cit* ., p. 105.
[20] Kait Erikson, "Loss of Communality at Buffalo Creek," *American Journal of Psychiatry*, Vol. 133, 1976, pp. 302-305.

their fellow-men. Their future adaptation to society suffered from this important aspect of psychosocial trauma.

Social Bonding and Massive Psychic Trauma

For many years the main emphasis in work with survivors of catastrophic stress has been on the long-term clinical sequelae and specific psychiatric vulnerabilities of survivors and their families. However, the vast majority of the large survivor population have not become psychiatric patients, and recently we have begun to examine the differences between "clinical" and "non-clinical" groups of survivors. Our objective is the understanding of those factors which can have an important mediating, buffering, protective and strengthening influence in situations of major stress and in the recovery from the traumatic process.[21]

In the trauma process toward the regression of the Muselmann state, the individual trauma and collective trauma culminate in utter helplessness and hopelessness; all hope of human response has been given up.

From our survivor studies it has become clear that interpersonal support, by buffering and protecting the psyche in the face of even catastrophic stress situations, can mitigate the traumatic process, and the progression to the final state of apathetic resignation and surrender may be prevented or even averted. In this way social bonding could mitigate the destructive process that led to the overwhelming and paralysis of the coping and recuperative resources of the psyche. Thus the psychologically damaging states of severe regression, with the later long-term psychiatric sequelae, could be modified and even prevented.

Survivor Studies

Our knowledge of the struggle for life in the throes of the Nazi murder machine comes from the survivors. Our findings, derived from our survivor interviews, must be seen in perspective, within the context of the extreme

[21] Shamai Davidson, "Massive Psychic Traumatization and Social Support," *Journal of Psychosomatic Research*, Vol. 23, 1979, pp. 395-402.

situation of the Nazi concentration camp. Descriptions of behavior among the victims struggling for survival, and conclusions about the significance of this behavior, especially in relation to human acts versus amoral ones, are often widely divergent and even contradictory. Des Pres writes of this as "the double-vision at the heart of the testimony." It is based on a "duality of behavior" in the face of "irreconcilable conflicts" resulting from the "choice to live" in extremity.[22]

Some of the difficulties which have to be taken into consideration relate to the following issues:

The great diversity of concentration camps and the changing conditions in each camp.

The unprecedented nature of the camp system and the frequent sudden unpredictable changes which occurred in the daily routine of terror.

The heterogeneity and uniqueness of individual experiences, which, although horribly similar on the surface, varied greatly even within the same camp. Each could only see a small part of the inferno, and the meaning of each experience was uniquely related to the victim's mental and physical state at the time.

The tendency to focus and lay stress on those particular experiences and aspects of the trauma which were especially significant for the individual.

The influence of many factors in the life of the survivor since the Holocaust, which have changed him and which affect how he views the traumatic events in the time perspective since they were experienced.

The difficulty involved in recalling and verbalizing the many elements in each individual experience.

The complexity and pain involved in the process of interviewing, both for the survivor and for the interviewer.[23]

The Study of Social Bonding Among Survivors

[22] Des Pres, *op. cit* ., pp. 97, 100.
[23] On relating to traumatized persecuted people, see *Israel-Netherlands Symposium on the Impact of Persecution - II*, Rijswijk, 1981.

The systematic study of social bonding is a recent development in social psychiatry. These studies indicate that in situations of stress and adversity supportive bonds can have an important mediating and protective influence, and, when absent or deficient, resistance to psychiatric disorders may become diminished.[24]

Social bonding cannot, of course, be separated from individual psychological resources and the variations between individuals in their need for support and in their capacity to initiate and participate in reciprocal human relations.[25]

In our Holocaust and Psychosocial Trauma Research project, we have been studying the role of social support in the life-cycles of the concentration-camp survivors in the general population, i.e., "nonclinical" groups. A central issue relates to the possible protective and strengthening role of social support as an important variable in preventing or modifying the long-term effects of massive psychic trauma as manifested in the clinical Concentration Camp Syndrome.

Three time-phases in the life-cycles of Holocaust survivors are being studied in terms of coping behavior and social support:

the first period, while in the grip of the traumatic situation and "process" in the concentration camp itself;

the period after liberation and the re-entry into society;

the life-cycle of the survivor up to the present day.

We have been studying concentration-camp survivors by means of semi-structured interviews and questionnaires relating to the role of social support

[24] Scott Henderson, "The Social Network, Support and Neurosis," *British Journal of Psychiatry*, Vol. 131, 1977, pp. 155-191. In studies of Israeli soldiers suffering from combat reactions, it has been clearly demonstrated that the occurrence of breakdown during and after battle was directly related to the disruption of group-belonging and cohesion, causing loss of morale and self-esteem. Rafael Moses, "Adult Psychic Trauma - The Question of Early Predisposition and Some Detailed Mechanisms," *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, Vol. 59, 1978, pp. 353-363; Meir Steiner, Micha Neumann, "Traumatic Neurosis and Social Support in the Yom Kippur War Returnees," *Military Medicine*, Vol. 143, 1978, pp. 866-868.

[25] Matussek, in his study of a random sample of survivors, identified by factor analysis a personality dimension labeled "ability to make contact" characterized by active comradely and contact-initiating behavior. This personality dimension was clearly related to chances of survival in the concentration camp. Furthermore, it was demonstrated that this ability to establish interpersonal relations was formed in childhood and had its roots in the quality of the mother-child relationship. Paul Matussek, *Internment in Concentration Camps and its Consequences*, New York, 1975, pp. 248-249.

in their lives from the onset of the Holocaust trauma to the present. Now in their fifties, they were fifteen to twenty-one years old at the end of the war and came from East European and traditionally Jewish backgrounds. All had spent at least one year - and the majority up to two years - in concentration camps, most of the time in slave-labor camps. But all had been in concentration camps.

Before their deportation to the concentration camps and separation from the family unit, the majority of these youngsters had spent periods of one to three years in ghettos and other specially designated areas for Jews under the Nazi regime. In this early pre-camp exposure to fear, death, brutality and hunger, they were to some extent protected by family and other supporting social bonds and went through an important preparatory process in learning "adaptive behavior" to the Nazi persecution and terror together with parents, older siblings, friends and others in these closely knit communities. Family bonds were often strengthened during this period; manual skills were learned; and guiding precepts and models for dealing with stress acquired, which were utilized later in reality and fantasy in the struggle for survival in the concentration camps, and indeed throughout their lives ever since. This preparatory stress period, undergone within the family unit, served to some degree as a "toughening" experience for many, which helped to mediate the impact of the initial acute, overwhelming trauma and shock upon arrival in the concentration camp and increased their chances of "adaptation" and survival.[26]

On systematic interviewing, all of them revealed that they had experienced helping relationships of one form or another in the camps. The formation of stable social bonds was related directly to the length of stay in one camp. The longer one remained in one place, the stronger the bonds that were formed. Those who were moved from camp to camp had less chance of forming stable reciprocal relationships.[27]

[26] This conclusion is supported by the higher incidence of clinical findings with survivors (e.g., from Hungary) who had not gone through an anticipatory period in ghettos and suddenly were torn from homes and families and transported directly to the camps.

[27] Survivors who had experienced constant changes of camp with no continuity of contact suffered more after liberation from withdrawal, inability to communicate, and the process of

Many different kinds of supportive human relations were reported. There were those who "found" a protector among one of the older inmates or even camp officials. Many of these relationships were reminiscent of father-son, mother-daughter, older-younger sibling bonds, and the person chosen was often a substitute for a lost loved one. Occasionally, actual family members (rarely more than two) found themselves left together in the same camp and would form a very intensely protective dyad. Pairing friendships were the most common bonding relationship and often the most effective. Choice and compatibility in these couples were related to the specific needs of the situation as well as to individual psychological needs, with each member of the dyad contributing reciprocally to the needs of the other. For example, in one couple of friends, one partner would steal food to share between them, whereas the other, a relatively passive youth, would supply a "listening" ear. Too frightened to steal himself, all his active, daring friend demanded of him was to listen empathically to his experiences and exploits. In this way food was exchanged for emotional support, each according to his needs and skills.
Halina Birenbaum, who spent three years, from age twelve to fifteen, in the Warsaw ghetto, Majdanek, Auschwitz and Ravensbrueck, describes simply and vividly the issues we are presenting here:

> The reality of Majdanek weighed me down even more than that pile of bodies under which I almost stifled in the railroad car...
> I was thirteen. The years of persecution in the ghetto, the loss of my father and my brother, and, most painful of all, the loss of my mother, had impaired my nervous system, and at a time when I should have forced myself to be as resistant as p, I broke down completely...
> We had to fight for everything in Majdanek: for a scrap of floor-space in the hut on which to stretch out at night, for a rusty bowl without which we could not obtain the miserable ration of nettle-soup which they fed us, or yellow stinking water to drink. But I was not capable of fighting. Fear and horror overcame me at the sight of women prisoners struggling over a scrap of free space on the floor, or hitting one another over the head at the soup kettles, snatching bowls. Hostile, aggressive women, wanting to live at any price. Stunned, aghast, famished, terrified, I watched them from a distance. Had it not been for Hela [her

their rehabilitation took longer. On the other hand, inmates who were moved from camp to camp as part of a stable group or pair were able to maintain helping relationships with each other.

> sister-in-law], her boundless devotion and constant care, I would have perished after a few days. Hela had vowed inwardly to my mother that she would take her place, and she kept her vow...
> Hela fought with redoubled strength - for herself and for me. She shared every bite she acquired with me...
> She gave me all the love she felt for my brother and did everything in her power to make easier my life in the camp. For a long time I could not rouse myself from my state of listlessness. Had it not been for Hela's efforts I would not have roused myself from my apathy and despair...
> Only here did I recognize the true nature of my sister-in-law, and only here did I come to love her.
> Later I was ready to make any sacrifice for her. Out of regard for her, and thanks to her help, I too finally joined the fight for life in the camp of death...
> I aroused myself from the state of apathy and despair that followed my mother's death...

Halina Birenbaum goes on to describe how eventually, with the constant support of her sister-in-law, she acquired the capacity to adapt to camp conditions. Then, tragically, Hela began to weaken, and gradually they changed roles.[28]

Most of the survivors interviewed reported having been involved in both a close pairing relationship (friendship) and in relationships in a group. Again, which situation was more important depended on individual needs and prevailing conditions.

The groups varied in size, but usually contained three, five, or eight inmates. The groups were well integrated and characterized by a high degree of mutual devotion, with mutual aid and sharing of everything. Group members changed frequently due to the vicissitudes of camp life and death, and would soon be replaced by new members, who would be accepted only if considered compatible with the group, so that cohesion would always be maintained. Loyalty and mutual concern were usually maintained only within the group, with little concern for those outside it. Sometimes the group had to defend its interests selfishly and aggressively against individuals and other groups of inmates. Groups were often formed on a nucleus of previous ghetto or

[28] Halina Birenbaum, *Hope Is the Last to Die - A Personal Documentation of Nazi Terror*, New York, 1971, pp. 95-96.

childhood relationships, or a common cultural or national background. The isolated "helping hand" experience, remembered by many as occurring at critical moments of particular adversity and which could be life-saving, often occurred between inmates with some common feature of collective identity and language. The communication of a familiar phrase, a reminiscence, a joke, gossip, even a smile, could be sufficient to arouse in an apathetic, despairing inmate the feeling of a touch of solidarity, humanness, the flicker of hope which would enable the "will to live" to reassert itself. Various roles and duties were often allocated within the group, according to camp conditions. Group activity included, apart from the basic collection and sharing of food and provisions, and whenever possible the dangerous activity of stealing food, etc., from the camp stores, also the sharing of information and advice in "organizing." Other activities, such as story-telling, reminiscing, playing, singing, "joking," were important for maintaining morale.

Each group had its own identity and culture, which manifested itself in the style of humor, specific activities[29], attitudes to others, shared hopes and fantasies, according to the psychosocial background of the members. Mutual-aid in the groups could involve direct protection and life saving, as occurred when, because of exhaustion or sickness, inmates could not function at roll-call or at work.

Larger groups were formed for any special venture. "Resistance" activities by groups of teenage youths in the camps, such as collecting the sweet substance distributed as jam and inserting it into the petrol tanks of the SS cars as an act of "sabotage," were essentially morale-raising activities. In fact, the maintenance of morale and the sustenance of hope[30] were a central effect of human relations in the concentration camp, for they strengthened the motivation to live, thus increasing survival chances. The promise and hope of bearing witness, of wreaking revenge, and of the creation of a new future, were central themes of group morale.

[29] See, for example, the article by Yaffa Clinch, "Jewish Tradition in the Life of the Concentration-Camp Inmate," in this book, pp. 195-206

[30] Hope, a basic survival ingredient, becomes augmented with a group. When hope is verbalized, it becomes more powerful through suggestion and confirmation in the group interaction. See Scott Henderson, Tudor Bostock, *op. cit* ., p. 18

Furthermore, the group helped to partially restore the lost sense of communality by creating a sense of belonging, restoring a feeling of identity, and preserving links with the destroyed cultural past. In the grip of the Nazi concentration-camp situation and its total domination, the victim became helpless, hopeless and dehumanized. The reconstruction of bonds of trust with significant other individuals in a friendship-pair or group became for the victim "a relocation in the social realm,"[31] transcending his state of numbered anonymity and restoring his individual identity.

Supportive Bonding in the Life Cycles of Survivors

It is well-nigh impossible, nearly forty years later, to clearly differentiate between the long-term effects on the psychosocial functioning of supportive bonds during each of the three specific periods referred to previously: in the concentration camps; the re-entry into society; the life-cycle up to the present. We have, however, found definite indications in our "non-clinical" group of survivors of a correlation between pairing and group relations in the concentration camps and good psychological, marital, family and social functioning.[32]

Many of the survivors whom we interviewed found themselves entirely alone as teenagers after the liberation. They underwent positive socialization experiences and spent important formative periods (of many months) in centers specially set up for their rehabilitation in Europe and England. In these centers based on group-living, group bonds developed rapidly, and relationships, which sometimes had originated in the camps, deepened. The active encouragement and utilization of these group bonds played an important role in the re-integration of these young people, now aged fifteen to twenty, into society, through the acquisition of values and positive social behavior.

The age of the survivors under consideration here is a central factor in all our deliberations. Emerging from the camps as late teenagers, many of them felt

[31] M. Lustigman, "The 5th Business - The Business of Surviving in Extremity," *The Human Context*, 1975.
[32] Davidson, *op. cit.*

that despite the loss of family and their great suffering, they had become psychologically stronger and autonomous during the years of living in the camps. The deprivation, hunger, hard labor, and perpetual danger of death had for some of them a quality of challenge that the friendships and group relations enabled them to face. This means that some aspects of personality development continued throughout their adolescent years during the Holocaust despite the destructive traumatisation. We believe that the supportive relationships they formed enabled this growth to proceed. This bonding capacity continued to be evident during the recovery period and throughout their life-cycle. The ability eventually to create well-functioning families was a central manifestation of this phenomenon. [33]

For many of these survivors, the bonds that were created in the concentration camps and during the rehabilitative period after liberation have continued as an important social support system throughout their lives, up to the present. In the different countries in which they now live, mainly Israel, England and North America, many have maintained close contact and affection for each other, often of a sibling-bond nature, with much mutual caring and helping behavior throughout the years.

The Significance of Reciprocal Human Relations in Extremity

From our studies of the experiences of concentration-camp survivors, we have learned that acts and activities of humanity and mutuality coexisted with the amorality stemming from desperation in the midst of human destruction, where the ethical categories of everyday life could not be upheld. We have understood that despite the lack of uniformity and the instability of supportive behavior in the concentration camps, the very existence of helping relations - however sporadic - and their spontaneous appearance implies a transcendence of evil and of faceless dehumanization with a preservation of the human image.

[33] Shamai Davidson, "Transgenerational Transmission in the Families of Holocaust Survivors," *International Journal of Family Psychiatry*, Vol. 1, 1980, pp. 95-112.

We have seen how the memory of the solidarity of mutual support in the Nazi concentration camps, where death was almost inevitable, accompanies the survivor throughout his life-cycle as a sustaining and humanizing influence. Halina, our Herzliya survivor, demonstrates for us what these words really mean:

> The number tattooed on my left arm - personal evidence from Auschwitz... for me it is a kind of certificate of maturity, from a period in which I experienced life and the world in their naked forms, a desperate struggle for a piece of bread, a breath of air and a little space, from a period in which I learned to distinguish between truth and falsehood, between manifestations of human feeling and animal instincts, between goodness, nobility and evil baseness...[34]

We must avoid at all cost any "whitewashing" of conditions or idealization of human relations in the most extreme creation of evil known to man: the Nazi concentration camp. On the other hand, ignoring the fact of human reciprocity among the victims in those camps leaves unchallenged the dehumanization deliberately wrought. The fact that the human image was preserved in such extremity counteracts the presentation of the Jewish survivor as having been entirely dehumanized and therefore to be avoided, or, at best, pitied.

The experience of the survivor of the death camps thus provides an added insight into the meaning of "survival" in extremity; that sense of the possibility of the transcendence of evil by the victims acting together in a spirit of solidarity and communion. Thus, however ambiguously, there is a reinstatement of human values in the service of the struggle for survival through the intrinsically social nature of this struggle. In this way the process of supportive social bonding transcends its psychosocial function and adds a further dimension of meaning to “survival.”

The experience of the concentration-camp survivor thus echoes the Jewish psychohistorical theme of survival in the manner in which a negative and destructive experience is transformed into a positive and enduring value.

[34] Birenbaum, *op. cit.*, p. 245.

Source: Shamai Davidson, "Human Reciprocity Among The Jewish Prisoners In The Nazi Concentration Camps", *The Nazi Concentration Camps*, Yad Vashem 1984, pp. 555-572.