

## **ONE DEEP EMOTION UNLOCKS ANOTHER.**

**Christine from London did not know that she was Jewish. Michael's father did not want to talk about having built rockets in Nazi Germany. Men and women, oppressed by the silence of the previous generation, come together at the workshops of the Group Analytic Society, London. They come from all over the world. Their meeting place: the Soonwald, one of Germany's largest forest areas.**

By Ulla Fröhling

A colourful silk shawl, like a bunched rainbow, glows in the darkening room. Twelve women and men regard this riot of colour as it unfolds. The 13th chair is empty. The vivid fabric comes from Nepal and is a present from the friend of a friend, the friendship having long since come to an end. However, the cloth reveals an older fragment of memory: children's shoes, 54 years old. Johanna puts them into the centre of the circle. Tiny, brown, shabby, dried earth on the soles from streets in which, for a long time, no children have been playing.

In the woodburning stove, in one corner of the 90 square meter room, almost a ballroom, the beechwood crackles. There is no other noise.

"It's good to know," says Ruth from London, "that some children who wore shoes like that did reach adulthood." Everyone immediately visualises the alternative: heaps of children's shoes in the extermination camp Majdanek. Their owners never grew to be adults.

Then, once again, there is silence.

To break the silence, to re-establish severed contacts, this group is getting together for a week-end in the Soonwald, a remote corner between the Rhine and the Nahe in Germany. They have come from England, Denmark, Croatia, New Zealand, Germany and South Africa. Men and women between the ages of 30 and 70: therapist, priest, analyst, teacher, journalist, engineer, architect; baptised

Catholic, turned agnostic; brought up atheist, converted to Judaism; born Jewish, brought up Catholic. Complex family histories; signs of family secrets.

Christine from London discovered only recently that her silent mother was Jewish. It was through one furious sentence from her angry 95 year old father that the truth emerged: "Stingy like your Jewish mother!" Michael from Augsburg in Germany doesn't know why his father broke off all contact after he, the son, had invited him to Peenemünde where his father had been involved in building rockets 50 years earlier. Andy from Norwich wonders if his daughter is suffering from Crohn's disease because for generations the family had endured more than they could digest. Mirjana, from Croatia, fears that she may remain childless as the men in her family had all lost their lives in the war. It was dangerous to have sons.

The Workshop, organised by the Group Analytic Society, focuses on the children and grandchildren of the generation that experienced the Second World War either as victims, perpetrators, participants, passive observers, witnesses or in the resistance. One could almost say on anyone alive today in Europe or on those that fled to all parts of the world. The object of the workshop is to uncover burdensome memories hidden by the silence of an earlier generation and to preserve and keep alive that which is significant before it is lost forever.

The participants of the group meet for the first time. Contact is made via internet, like a conspiracy. The setting is appropriate: The Soonwald Schlösschen, previously a hunting lodge, today a conference centre, has something magic about it. It could have been the Sleeping Beauty's castle.

So much for appearances.

The reality is that world heavyweight champion Max Schmeling hunted boar here. But that is some sixty years ago. There are no longer any hides or hunting trophies. Many of the animals have disappeared, too.

"How will I recognise you at the airport?" asked Petra who left Germany for England at the age of 16, ashamed of the deeds committed by the previous

generation. Andy replied by e-mail: "Just look for a small Jew." He is the second person she approaches at Heathrow airport. The way to the workshop is not easy. One participant lands at the wrong airport, gets into a taxi and manages to arrive anyway. One chair remains empty to the very end. The absence of one person becomes significant. The theme of the workshop is painfully close to each individual's life story. Our way here reflects this, says Teresa Howard, the leader of the workshop. She herself has come a long way: born in England, raised in New Zealand, the daughter of a man who, as a fifteen year old had fled Berlin with just ten marks in his pocket, the son of a Jewess and an Austrian aristocrat.

Perhaps because of her own long journey, Teresa quickly gets to the point. Group analysis has its own laws. Little guidance but much communication. A human being is a social creature and not really suited to just being alone with a therapist. Psychoanalyst S.H. Foulkes developed the concept of this form of therapy from psychoanalysis, gestalt therapy and a sprinkling of sociological group theory. In the Second World War he treated groups of traumatised British soldiers. The original name of S.H. Foulkes was Sigmund Heinrich Fuchs. He lived in Karlsruhe in Germany until he, too, had to leave in 1933. In 1952 he founded his Institute and called it GAS (Group Analytic Society). Was it a macabre joke of the Jewish founder who had escaped the German gas chambers?

The word "gas" appears in some of the drawings that had to be completed before the participants really get to know each other. Most of them are professionally involved in psychotherapy. They are not happy with this haste (?) at all. Ruth: "She wants to tap my unconscious." Teresa admits: "That's the quickest way to success." There they lie, on the floor, pictures of experiences, of fear and hope. One shows a cry, like that of Edvard Munch. Severed roots in another. Again and again long, confused paths. A treasure trove, hiding its content. A tree with words instead of leaves that fall to the ground, and burn – an auto-da fe.

Like burning at the stake is how a Swiss newspaper described the burning of 20 000 books in Berlin in May 1933 with a matter-of-factness barely hiding the horror of this auto-da fe. Books of distinguished writers were consigned to the flames. "Against decadence and moral turpitude! For law and order in the family and the State! I consecrate to the flames the writing of Erich Kästner."

And Kästner was standing in the crowd, his collar turned up, to watch the execution of his books.

Fire and cold. Hunger and death are the subjects of the paintings. There is tension that first evening. Can I trust these strangers? How safe am I here? Wouldn't it be better if I left right away? Questions they all ask themselves. They all stay.

The next morning there is an electricity cut. A storm is brewing in the valley. For the next three days there is, unexpectedly, more rain than usual in this region of Germany with statistically the maximum hours of sunshine a year. Many feel the cold beyond the temperature. In their childhood they often experienced cold, on their bodies and through their neglected feelings. One deep emotion unlocks another. The cold produces sadness. Their body remembers.

Bring something along, something that has significance. Reveal something personal. When the members of the group were asked to do that, Johanna Engelmann immediately thought of the shoes. The feeling that they still arouse in her today: to have your feet on solid ground right from the start. Her father had sent them when he was a prisoner in France in 1947, close to dying from starvation. It takes courage to show them now. Confidence grows slowly between the members of the group whose parents had come from opposing camps. In some it leads to envy. Ruth Barnett, teacher and psychotherapist expresses this: A million and a half Jewish children did not survive the Nazi period; others did but only just.

Ruth is four, her brother seven when their parents put the children into a sealed train in Berlin to take them to England. In December 1938, shortly after Kristallnacht. For a few more months, Nazi Germany allows Jewish families to leave - without any possessions. The tragedy is, that there is no country that will let them in. Not even the children, except for Britain.

"We'll join you soon," the parents lie when they see them off. Some 9354 children do manage to escape in this way to be looked after in relative security by English foster families. Relative security like Ruth's.

It was 50 years later that Ruth became aware of the fact that there had been a number of such Kindertransports. That was in 1989 at the first meeting in London of the surviving participants of the Kindertransport. It takes a long time for some memories to be retrieved. Especially those that cause the greatest pain. Ruth is suddenly hungry for the expanse of memory she had banished to hidden recesses of her mind.

Ruth's father was Jewish, her mother was not. For a time this protected her father. In 1943, however, he too was arrested and, along with 2500 other Jewish husbands of 'arian' women, was interned in the Rosenstrasse in Berlin. There was an immediate protest from wives and mothers. Publicly and loudly. They were not to be put off by the SS. For six days they protested, then Goebbels relented and ordered the prisoners to be released.

After that, this one public demonstration against the persecution of Jews in Germany was forgotten. For 50 years. How could that have happened? Only in 1996, a memorial in central Berlin reminded people of the women's protest in the Rosenstrasse.<sup>1</sup> One generation on and, perhaps, this whole event would have been obliterated from memory and from history.

A life story like that of the 67 year old Ruth takes one's breath away. The group needs fresh air. Some go swimming, others go for walks.

The Soonwald, one of the largest German forest areas lies in the south eastern part of the Hunsrück. Low mountain ranges, swampy marshlands, brooks running along deep gorges:

barren rather than idyllic. This is where Edgar Reitz made his prizewinning film series "Heimat". It is historic ground over which many peoples have wandered. This is where Schinderhannes lived: praised by the people as the German Robin Hood in literature<sup>2</sup>, films<sup>3</sup> and tourist boards. In reality he was nothing but one robber among many during the period of the French revolutionary wars. He took from those that had more and kept what he took. And for that he was executed in

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<sup>1</sup> «Block der Frauen» (Wall of women ) by sculptress Ingeborg Hunzinger, 1996 erected in Rosenstrasse, Berlin.

<sup>2</sup> «Schinderhannes», play by Carl Zuckmayer, premiere 13.10.1927 in Berlin

<sup>3</sup> «Der Schinderhannes» 1958, director Helmut Käutner, actors Curt Jürgens, Maria Schell

1803. Perhaps he had overstepped a borderline: So long as he robbed and blackmailed Jews, the peasants of the region were content. But when he started on them, all sympathy was gone.

"Only in retrospect do we recognise hell. While we are stewing in it, we call it 'Heimat' - our homeland."<sup>4</sup> In his recent novel, Robert Menasse shows us a breathtaking picture of the secret life of Portuguese Jews in the 17th century. Flight from the Inquisition, torture, burning at the stake. Living this secret life meant, above all, keeping silent. False names. Not trusting anyone. The secrets are passed on to the daughter, not to the son.

350 years later in London it was the son to whom Christine Manzi's mother divulged the secret. Both, mother and son, keep this secret all their life. Once, when Christine was 18, the mother said to her: "I'm sorry for what I did to you." But what it was, she never explained. It was not the custom in this family either to have conversations or to have fun. Christine remembers the odd sentence from her childhood, like: "Dinner is ready" or the accusation: "You are thinking things," to which her answer was always "no, no". She has remained silent for years.

When she was ten, she saw a tree in flower bloom and wondered how she could possibly not have seen such a sight before? She put herself on ice and survived her childhood. That is how she describes it today. To all appearances it was a normal, bourgeois life, school, and a normal, very Christian name: Christine.

When Christine herself had four children, she asked her old mother: "Do you have any Jewish blood? I've become such a Jewish mother."

"No, no," is the answer.

After her brother's death, and long after her mother's, Christine finds her passport with the entry: "Name: Alice Wiebcken changed to Webkin in 1915".

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<sup>4</sup> Robert Menasse, «Die Vertreibung aus der Hölle». Frankfurt 2001

The family had probably come from Germany long before 1900.<sup>5</sup> Christine's mother's mother was called Hannah Wiebken. She was said to have spoken Yiddish. No, Irish, says the old father; she was supposed to have been an Irish Catholic.

What is the truth?

Hannah had 13 children. They lived in London's East End and owned a pub called "The Germans". Around 1915 it was destroyed by arson. That is when the family changed their name to Webkin, some of the brothers calling themselves Johnson joined the army and fought against Germany. To her nine year old daughter Hannah said: "If they ask you, tell them your name is Webkin, just keep the rest to yourself."

She obeyed. The safest thing was not to say anything at all. But when, 85 years later, the old man, full of fury and hatred of Jews, blurted out the truth, Christine finally made sense of what had been incomprehensible. She doesn't see herself as Jewish. Only a little bit. Knowledge kept secret over two generations. A mother behind a mask all her life. It destroyed Christine's childhood but not her life.

Andy Sluckin, clinical psychologist and psychotherapist, works with mothers who don't succeed in establishing a relationship with their children. "I don't know this child, she has nothing to do with me" is the title of one of his essays. It could be describing Christine's childhood. To show feelings and understand them is what infants reflect to and learn from the adults that care for them. That is mostly their mothers. If the mother wears a mask, there can be no reflection.

There is a great demand for sweet things during the weekend. If, by chance, there happens to be no dessert, these successful soul doctors complain bitterly. They would call it regression. Reverting to childhood impulses. Had Hitler won, this too would have remained secret knowledge. Sigmund Freud's books were thrown into the fire with the words: "Against the overemphasis on sex and for the nobility of the human soul."

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<sup>5</sup> Today there is not a single entry of the name of Wiebken in any German telephone directory..

In 1939 a young Jewish trainee nurse in the Sudetenland applies for a place at a London hospital. She encloses a photo. That is why she is offered a job. Thus she is the only one in her family who escapes annihilation. There were similar escapes. Andy Slucken tells the riveting story of his parents.

To bring something of significance: For some it is music, others read poems, a prayer, show a piece of art work. Andy reads from his autobiographical novel "*Had it not been for Hitler*". Had it not been for Hitler, his parents told him, he wouldn't have been born. The parents would never have met. It is a confusing double bind, not only for a child: Andy owes the miracle of his birth to Hitler, the murderer, who was responsible for the death of nearly all his parents' relatives. Andy, however, felt that gratitude was inappropriate here.

Very near the end, Michael Albrecht finally manages to show us what he has brought. Up until now, the civil engineer from Augsburg has said little. He was friendly and cautious.

The others look at a photo and are taken aback. 40 elderly men and women are standing in front of a 14 meter high rocket, squinting into the sunlight - Michael in the last row. The rocket is a life-size model of the V2 standing on the land of the army testing station Peenemünde on the Baltic island of Usedom. The elderly people are colleagues of Michael's father, "Old Peenemundians". It is here that they celebrate the anniversary of the launch of the first rocket. Every year. Even Wernher von Braun's secretary is there, tall, proud and blonde, rather exceptional in an eighty year old. Ruth, bewildered, says: "Your father built the doodlebugs!" That was the name in England for the German V1 rockets. The "V" stands for *Vergeltung*, that is "retribution". No one who has ever heard the sound of it arriving can forget it. 2700 V1 and V2 rockets hit London and the south of England during 1944, killing almost 6000 people. In the relative security of England.

Why does Michael show them this photo?

When the wall between east and west Germany came down in 1989, Michael



invited his father to make a trip to his past, to Peenemünde in the former GDR. Now it was possible. But then it was the father who created a wall between them. He broke off all connection with his son. Michael has been trying to find out why ever since. In letters, by travelling to places connected to his father's childhood, he tries to get to the bottom of his father's life. What is the secret? His wife calls it 'love retrieval'.

They all know the power of silence. And yet they find it difficult to empathise with the grief of the rejected son. Because he is German? His father was not a convinced Nazi, just an engineer, like many others.

Later, Andy reveals that his daughter asked him on his return: "Were the nasties nice to you?" confusing "nasties" with Nazis and thereby showing the fears her father had aroused in her. But who did come to this group without prejudice?

Later, Ruth writes that Michael's story reminds her of the searing impotence she feels in the presence of her German family. At 14, Ruth was uprooted a second time. Her mother wanted her back home - but for Ruth she had, meanwhile, become a stranger. The son, already a student at Cambridge, was allowed to stay. After two sets of brutal foster parents, Ruth was happy with the third. When she refused to go to Germany, the police came and fetched her. "But", says Ruth, "my parents were no monsters; after nine months they allowed me to return to England." And here is where she stayed.

"I am German, Jewish, British", says Ruth, "but where am I really?" The brother, on the other hand, has been living in Mainz for decades.

How could people have known then? Who could have foreseen that a repetition of the experience of the four year old, not having been dealt with, would come to the fore again? Repeated suffering does not just double, it intensifies. The trauma becomes chronic. Millions of people in Europe are suffering post traumatic stress disorder. Those who had experienced air raids in London, Moscow, in German cities, who were, perhaps, trapped in rubble, looked at the pictures of the planes crashing into the World Trade Center in Manhattan on 9/11 - again and again and

again - because they could identify with the event.

The next morning the sun shines into the corner room of the Schlösschen. The house turns into a symbol: It was built by Karl Ewaldt, a factory owner, whose Jewish wife found shelter in it until she, too, had to flee to Switzerland. "Off she went to Switzerland," is what the villagers say, even today. As if she could have stayed. The place passed quickly from one owner to another: from occupying forces, to schools, sewing machine manufacturers, and wineries. Then the Americans: high fences, vicious dogs, security level 1, they said in the village. Was it because of the nearby air force base Hahn, the largest atomic weapons repository in western Europe during the Cold War?

Meanwhile the house has changed back again. It belongs to the Heintl family. Hildegund Heintl, orthopedic surgeon and psychotherapist, is a grand old lady of German psychotherapy. Here, the 82 year old sits by the tiled stove and she doesn't mind you interrupting her reading. On the table lies the book she wrote about how she dealt with her own stroke.<sup>6</sup> Next to it are books by her son, Peter Heintl, psychiatrist, psycho- and family therapist, working in London, Germany and Austria. Books about wartime and post-war trauma.<sup>7</sup> The core of the seminar programme deals with the consequences of early traumas.

The third day resource orientated: everyone here, after all, is a survivor. They love and work - Freud's definition of spiritual health. And how did they manage that?

Ruth's early years were stable. Horses became her friends in exile. Ruth: "If you lean against the neck of a horse when you are sad, it will immediately turn its head to nestle against you." With a few, quick strokes she draws a perfect picture of a horse. She has done it so often.

Christine was ten when a woman teacher made her feel important, with some simple little Christmas handiwork: cotton wool stuck on a loo paper cardboard roll, painted to look like a snowman, with sweets inside. One for each child,

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<sup>6</sup> Hildegund Heintl, «Und wieder blühen die Rosen». Munich 2001

<sup>7</sup> Peter Heintl, «Splintered Innocence. An Intuitive Approach to Treating War Trauma, Brunner-Routledge, London-New York 2001; Hildegund und Peter Heintl, „Körperschmerz – Seelenschmerz. 2004

including Christine.

Today she is a Social Worker with four children and six grandchildren. Three years ago she sailed around the world with her husband; it took two years. When they first met she knew exactly what she wanted: his family. A loving Italian family, full of music, laughter and good food.

"And my husband," she says, turning on her smile still a little uneasily like all those who learned to smile rather late in life, "my husband married me to bring a little sorrow into his life. Because joy and laughter are only one side of the picture."

(translated by Bea Green)

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