

[Special Review Issue 2007](#) / [Special Issue 2006](#) / [Newsletter 2](#) / Newsletter 1

[Archive](#)

[Books](#)

Book
Reviews

Dina Wardi, Memorial Candles:
Children of the Holocaust. London,
Taylor & Francis Books Ltd, 1992.
288 pp.
(In German under the title Siegel
der Erinnerung. Das Trauma des
Holocaust – Psychotherapie mit den
Kindern der Überlebenden.
Translated from the Hebrew by
Almuth Lessing, Antje Clara
Naujoks, Christoph Trunk.
Preface to the German edition by
Tilman Moser; foreword by Prof.
Haim Dasberg, former director of
the psychiatric hospital "Esrat
Nashim" in Jerusalem.)
Page references are to the English
edition.

Frederik van Gelder, Frankfurt am Main "It's hard for me to cope with life. With the dead it's easier." Dina Wardi's book about the children of the Holocaust

The *yahrzeit* (the anniversary of the death of a loved one) is remembered by lighting a twenty-four hour memorial candle, by making a charitable contribution in memory of the departed, and by reciting Kaddish. Kaddish is recited at the Shabbat service that precedes the *yahrzeit* and at Yiskor services throughout the year. The *yahrzeit* occurs on the same date every year according to the Hebrew calendar. In Hebrew, *yiskor* means "May He Remember".

Definition of "memorial candle" found on the Internet

A review of this book in Germany must of necessity touch on two different themes, and they are not easy to keep apart. Theme (A) is the innerpsychoanalytic debate about the nature of (psycho)trauma, the psychic mechanisms involved, the process of theoretic and therapeutic reorientation going on within the psychoanalytic profession as it comes to terms with the legacy of the Holocaust; as well as the growing ubiquity of violence in contemporary society. Theme (B) has to do with the fact that this book on *Holocaust* survivors is being discussed in *Germany*, with all which that implies in terms of the (unequal) confrontation between children of victims and children of perpetrators going on in this country. The attitude of dispassionate objectivity which the medical and therapeutic professions aim at – an ideal which, as the literature on *vicarious* traumatization shows, is difficult enough to maintain even in ordinary circumstances, i.e. when faced with the clinical consequences of brutality, murder, torture – is strained to the limit in a situation in which everything to do with trauma is already highly politicised; here in Germany more so than anywhere else.
I confine myself, for the moment, to (A).

"The echo of the shot which killed my mother ..."

Men and women now in their fifties, who are of Jewish extraction, who were born in Europe or after immigration somewhere else after 1945, were raised in circumstances which are historically unique. The very existence of "child survivors" or the "second generation" is a statistical improbability; the atmosphere of their childhood was so extraordinary that a literature is now emerging the purpose of which is to document and analyse the identifications which were operative during their formative years. A literature which shows every indication of marking as fundamental a challenge to the psychoanalytic paradigm as any which the profession has had to face since the death of Freud on the eve of the Second World War.

Dina Wardi is an Israeli group therapist who has specialized in the treatment of children of Holocaust survivors. Her book is the result of twenty years of observation, therapy, theoretical reflection with regard to the way in which that unprecedented, state-organized policy of systematic torture and mass murder we have come to indicate with the inadequate word "Holocaust" leaves its scars even on subsequent generations. (Not to mention those directly involved.)

From the notes I took during a lecture she held at the *Sigmund Freud Institut* in Frankfurt some years ago, concerning a case history she presented:

The echo of the shot that killed my mother has accompanied me every hour of the day of the forty years since it rang out; the only difference has been, in recent years, that I've occasionally, with great pain, been able to *talk* about it.

In her book this case history is fleshed out. Mina, a woman of 55, herself now a mother of a grown daughter, witnessed the murder of her mother. I quote:

When I heard the echo of the shot at my mother, who was marching behind us in that death march, I was stricken dumb. I couldn't utter a sound. For more than a month I was unable to speak. [...] When I returned from the camps no one was able to understand me. I felt a hundred years old, ancient in my soul although my body was only sixteen years old. I no longer had any desire for a spiritual or social life, or for a marital life. Nothing interested me any more. Very slowly we returned to the cycle of ordinary life, but we never came back to ourselves. We did not remain embittered, we did not hate anyone, but we did not want to remember, we only wanted to forget. (11)

The question which Dina Wardi seeks to answer in this book is: if this is the kind of world which so many survivor parents carry with them, then what are the effects on their children?

That the psychic "closing-off" described here (the despair, rage, fear, mourning, pain and guilt, as well as the defense mechanisms mobilised to contain them) are of such intensity that they "mark" the individual for their mostly short lives (in those cases where they survive them at all) has been known since the sixties, if not earlier. However harrowing these case histories may be, these reactions have been documented before.

The same thing holds for the very special forms of identification encountered in the "second generation", which have been analysed under headings like "telescoping", "doubling" and "concretism" and have been widely discussed since the publication of Epstein's "Children of the Holocaust" twenty years ago. New in this book is Wardi's description of the very special super-ego formation of those "second generation" children she calls "memorial candles", and which is the main focus of this work.

In her extensive experience with such children (who are now of course in their fifties, often with children, even grandchildren of their own) she notes a recurrent pattern, in which one child in the family is singled out and both burdened and honoured with a life-long mission. If the unconscious demand on such children could be verbalised, it would run something like this:

[...] you are the continuing generation. Behind us are ruin and death and infinite emotional emptiness. It is your obligation and your privilege to maintain the nation, to reestablish the vanished family and to fill the enormous physical and emotional void left by the Holocaust in our surroundings and in our hearts. (30)

Frequently such children are named after murdered family members, as a symbol of the longed-for connection to a past which is vital for the fragile equilibrium of the parents,

and is at the same time a containment for the latter's feelings of loss, guilt, and rage. In effect such children are "deputising" for the dead – or as one client put it: "I want them to take their dead back, but they can't and they don't. I'm not the family hearse, yet after all that's what I am." (36) Which is not to say that these unconscious demands made upon them are exclusively negative: the child is also a "chosen" one, imbued with a "messianic mission" to mend the world – *tikkun olam* – is *also*, in spite of everything else, for its parents as well as the wider community, an ancient symbol of the hope for restitution and healing.

This division of labour appears over and over again in the families of many survivors – one of the children, the "memorial candle", remains emotionally tied to the parents; he is the emotional healer, who liberates his siblings ... (38)

Memorial candles

Although we feel, as we read it, intuitively, a tiny bit of the horror reported in the "shot that killed my mother" quote above (and defend ourselves automatically against it by brightly proffering our pet therapies) the actual mechanisms by means of which "trauma" is transmitted across the generations is not well understood. Such children, as Haim Dasberg puts it in his foreword,

[...] grew up in the shadow of psychic conflicts stemming from bereavement, mourning, guilt feelings, excessive anxiety, overprotection and overexpectation – with parents who were irreparably damaged, both physically and psychologically. But in the psyches of the children a struggle for an independent identity developed including personal, social and even historical identity. The survivors' children are bent almost double under the weight of the burden placed on their shoulders, yet at the same time due precisely to this burden itself, but also due to their therapy – they are becoming stronger. For what are involved here are not only emotional load, conflicts and the need for therapy, but also psychological strength, stamina, and the ability to identify with others. Indeed, many of the children of survivors chose careers such as social work, teaching, psychology, medicine and psychiatry. (x)

In some ways the excessive burden placed on such children is comparable to what happens in "scapegoating" families, in which one or both parents seek relief from their own suffering by hounding one of their children instead. (Interesting that "scapegoat" has the same etymology as the word "pharmacology" – such children are, as it were, the "ointment" on the wounded souls of their parents.) But there is a difference: survivor parents cannot be "blamed" – their psychic "closing off" is a normal reaction to intolerable suffering, and their unconscious appeal to their children is at the same time a preremptory cry for help and succour. The "memorial candle" *also* feels loved and special, so that there is very seldom that aggressive narcissism which is so typical of neglected or abused children. Ambivalence is not the same as cold indifference.

That is, the main role of the scapegoat in ordinary families is the discharge of the intrapsychic and interpersonal conflicts in the family relationships, while in the families of survivors this role is only one of the tasks imposed on the scapegoat. Not only must they fill an enormous emotional void, but they must also construct the continuation of the entire family history all by themselves, and thus create a hidden connection with the objects that perished in the Holocaust. Therefore, because of the unique significance of the role the children were chosen to play, the word "scapegoat" is not appropriate, and it would be better to call them "memorial candles". (30)

A candle is a thing, an instrument, which in itself is meaningless. A *yahrzeit* candle (or an "eternal flame", a commemoration, an anniversary) can play an important function in the "working-through" of grief and mourning, but is not – as an object or a point in time – in itself of any significance. This experience of being a "substitute" for something or someone else, a "symbol" of murdered family members, a link to the past, but not *in themselves* being of any importance for their parents is an experience which Wardi notes in very many of her clients. "They were not perceived as separate individuals but as symbols of everything the parents had lost ... " (27) – a kind of offshoot of their parents' egos rather than as autonomous individuals on the way towards creating their own biographies. This corresponds to the atmosphere of intense ambivalence they grew up with: on the one hand they are "lifesavers" for the confused souls of vulnerable parents

in need of protection; on the other they grow up in a disorienting, anxiety-ridden and neglectful environment in which there are few boundaries, much suspicion and little individual attention. The individuation-separation problems to which this leads in adolescence, the difficulties such people have when it comes to intimate relationship have been known since Keilson's book on Jewish war orphans in the Netherlands, and Wardi deals with them in her chapter "Self-esteem and sexual identity". In effect such families lack everything which object relations theory regards as essential for a happy and uncomplicated childhood, and great turmoil during adolescence is the more or less inevitable result.

What is remarkable about this book – where it seems to me to be probing the boundaries of what it is that can be conceptualised within the object-relations framework, perhaps within the therapeutic framework altogether – is the discussion of the role which death and destruction plays in the phantasies of the "memorial candles": she gives this chapter the title of "Identification with death".

Identification with death

A moment's reflection makes it plausible why, for "memorial candles", death comes to play such a central role in their phantasies and dreams. The road to their parent's affection leads to what it is that makes up the core of their – the parent's – existence: the Holocaust. Like moths caught in a flame, the world of the survivor-parents circles endlessly around the axis of their pain, and it is to this place of darkness and silence that the children have to follow them to find the attention and appreciation upon which their own ego-integration depends. Two dream sequences to illustrate:

A large hall. A smell of smoke. Darkness, torches burning. In the middle of the hall there's a black coffin with blood pouring out of it. The coffin is in the middle of the room and on the coffin there's a little bird. I am very afraid of the bird. Suddenly the bird comes down from the coffin and approaches me, and then a deathly fear attacks me.

At the end of the recital of the dream Ariela was silent and immersed within herself. After a while she began speaking again, with her head down, in a whispery and monotonous voice:

It's really strange, I can cope with the coffin pouring blood, but not with the live bird. I'm so scared and helpless. In general, in all sorts of areas it's hard for me to cope with life. With the dead it's easier.

What is exceptional in the phantasies and dreams of children of survivor parents, especially the "memorial candles", according to Wardi's findings, is not so much the anxiety in itself, but its extraordinary intensity, and the way this is interwoven with the death motif. It is a the combination of the two which is, according to Wardi, unique to the children of survivors.

A second dream sequence, which I include here for its uncanny invocation of a theme from Paul Celan's "Black Milk" poem:

Ruth, twenty-eight, the daughter of two survivors, related a recurrent dream: "My father and I are on a tour of the Weizmann Institute. The place is very beautiful and full of greenery. Grass, trees and flowers everywhere. We reach Weizmann's grave, and there, in the middle of the grass, under a tree growing near the grave, we take a picnic table and chairs out of the car and we start eating in the middle of nature. We eat lentil soup, like the kind my mother usually cooks at home. But suddenly, while we're eating, I sense a strange odour and taste in the soup. There's something sticking to the lentils, and suddenly I know that they are made of ground-up human bones. I stop eating and feel very nauseous. I look at my father, but it seems that he doesn't notice anything, and he continues eating with enjoyment."

A book review such as this is not the place to go into a detailed discussion of the many themes raised by Wardi's analysis of a mode of ego-integration which is both a reaction to great suffering and a search for restitution and healing. The big themes are all there: death, suffering, anguish, testimony, dissolution in the face of overwhelming fear, etching themselves on our mind like a Greek tragedy. But also their opposite: the search for truth, justice, beauty, serenity, a better world. That all this could be raised in

something as prosaic as a psychoanalytic case study fills me with wonder – as well as admiration and gratitude for Wardi's own courage and persistence. I can confirm what Haim Dasberg says in the preface: "*Memorial Candles* touched me deeply."

«

Dr. Frederik van Gelder
Institut fuer Sozialforschung
an der J.W.Goethe Universitaet
Frankfurt
Senckenberganlage 26
D-60325 Frankfurt a. M.
Email gelder@em.uni-frankfurt.de

Citation Frederik van Gelder, Frankfurt, "It ´s hard for me to cope with life. With the dead it ´s easier." Dina Wardi ´s book about the children of the Holocaust. Review of Dina Wardi, *Memorial Candles: Children of the Holocaust*. London, Taylor & Francis Books Ltd, 1992. 288 pp. In: Trauma Research Newsletter 1, Hamburg Institute for Social Research, July 2000. URL: <http://www.TraumaResearch.net/review1/geld.htm>

Short biographical note Frederik van Gelder is fellow at the Institut fuer Sozialforschung, Frankfurt/Main. He was born at the end of World War II in the Netherlands, of Jewish parents. Dr. van Gelder holds degrees in medicine, anthropology, and sociology from the Universities of Johannesburg and Natal, South Africa and a Ph.D. (Philosophy) from the University of Frankfurt. He was active in the anti-apartheid movement in the seventies (NUSAS).

Some of his latest articles can be read at the homepage of the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research <http://www.rz.uni-frankfurt.de/ifs/ifstexte.html>

Copyright © 2000, Frederik van Gelder and trauma newsletter, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the trauma newsletter. For other permission questions, please contact via email the editor Cornelia_Berens@his-online.de