



Pictures of a Therapy¹

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We have been treating severely traumatized patients, survivors of humiliating processes or torture for 10 years in the frame of the **CORDELIA FOUNDATION for the rehabilitation of torture victims**. We treat mostly refugees but sometimes Hungarian clients also apply for therapy either in our clinical praxis or in the Centre.

What does torture mean and what are the sequelae of torture?

As to the ways and means, human fantasy is inexhaustible. The humiliating proceedings of prisons are qualified as torture, but it is also torture, what the world have heard from the Albanian women from Kosovo. Serbian soldiers raged nursing mothers with their babies at their breasts in a village in Kosovo. The soldiers filled the nursing bottles with human blood, and then forced the mother sat gunpoint to feed the babies with the drink.

The "**survival syndrome**" as it was described by Chodoff in 1969, is one of the first approaches to the current understanding of **PTSD** (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder). Several researchers tried to separate and define "torture syndrome" as a distinct entity, but it is still subject of discussion, because of such diversive symptoms as chronic anxiety, depression, cognitive injury (memory deficiency, decrease of interest) and lack of self-esteem (Somnier and Genefke, 1986). The defense mechanisms and coping strategies applied during a stress experience play a significant role in the development of the symptoms (Somnier and Genefke, 1986).

Recently a number of scientists attempted to describe a new diagnostic entity, the „**complex PTSD**” or the „Disorders of Extreme Stress Not Otherwise Specified” (**DESNOS**). DESNOS can be the result of early interpersonal traumatization—e.g. child abuse trauma—or the result of maltreatment and/or torture that is an extreme stress to the survivor.

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The syndrome has six characteristics:

1. Alterations in the regulation of effective impulses, including anger and self-destruction.
2. Alterations in attention and consciousness, leading to amnesias, dissociative episodes, and depersonalization.
3. Alterations in self-perception, such as chronic sense of guilt, responsibility, and/or shame.
4. Alteration in social contacts, such as not being able to trust other people or to feel intimate with them.
5. Somatization without any organic background.
6. Cognitive problems.

The earlier the onset of the trauma and the longer its duration, the more likely that a person will suffer from serious and complex symptoms of Desnos (van der Kolk, 2000). The very essence of torture is that it attacks "the seed (the central part) of the personality", making the victim, then his/her children, then their children unable to go on with their everyday lives (Rauchfleisch, 1996). Torture affects not only the torture survivor but it leads to a transgenerational trauma and, without proper therapy, there is the transmission of traumata to the next generations.

The personality of the survivor can be damaged on five levels (Vesti, Somnier, Kastrup, 1992): on physical, psychological, social, legal, and spiritual levels. There is little chance of spontaneous recovery without therapy at a certain amount of patients.

A 54-year-old Hungarian male patient asked for therapy suffering of depressive symptoms: sleep disorder, cardiac pressure, tachycardia, depressed mood, anhedonia, inactivity, loss of appetite etc. He came to therapy after a separation trauma – his wife wanted to divorce him – precipitating his earlier traumata. In the process of an analytically oriented psychotherapy he brought several drawings and poems expressing his mental state both visually and verbally.

We compare three creative periods:

the *first* between the age of 10-14 – after the first separation trauma but before the repetitive trauma of being tortured,

the *second* period between the age of 20 and 30 – being traumatized by the political regime. Through this period he didn't paint but wrote poetry.

the *third* period after 54 year of age to 60– pictures drawn while in psychotherapy – after having experienced trauma.

He was born as the youngest – third – child of a very poor tailor and an intelligent but very puritan, strong mother. The family was so poor that he was given to an uncle to be looked after during every school-year. He was living in the forest in a small house with his uncle and felt very lonely being separated from his parents, brothers and sister. He was a



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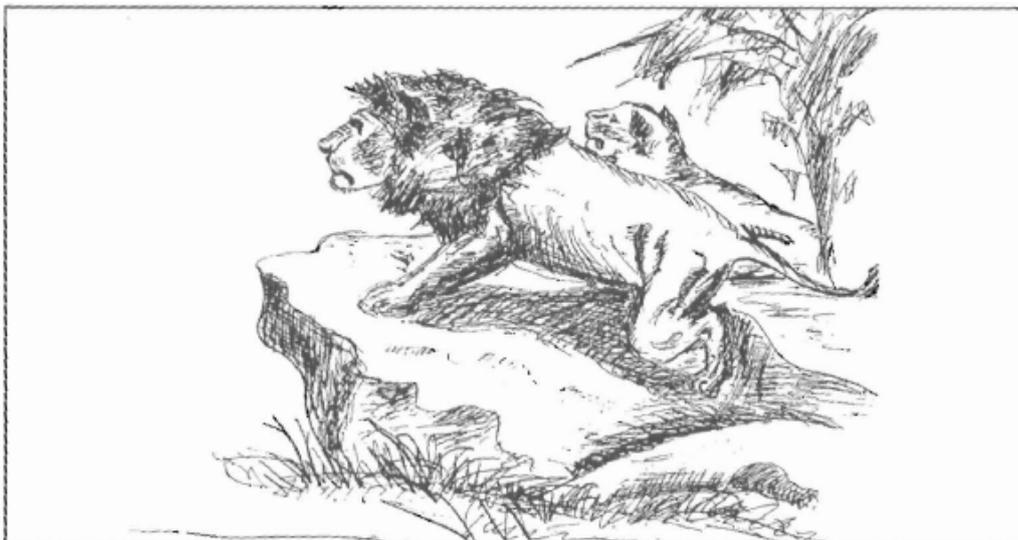
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very good student and in his fantasies he studied hard so his mother would “forgive” him and take him home.

The **unconscious feeling of guilt** appeared at the age of 10. His drawings from this period (10-14 year of age) illustrate that he used to be a lonely, isolated, perfectionist boy escaping from reality into the free world of fantasy.

On the other hand the lions (1), the panther (2), and the bird of prey (3) are moving, they want to take something as prey, perhaps seizing something. Going farther in the case history we got to know that this could be the symbol of his ambivalent, passive-aggressive attachment to his mother who had left him.

PICTURE 1.



PICTURE 2.





PICTURE 3.



His **idealised ego** can be seen in his “Indian pictures”. The brave, clever and strong Indian is undefeatable, he looks (4) through the problems of reality with his wise smile, or (5) stands proudly on the top of a rock looking into the sun. Even his picture (6) about isolation illustrates his hopefulness, the rays of the stars can be the symbols of attachment, the wish and ability to cling onto a motherlike object. At the age of 16 he was taken to a communist labour camp, where he was severely tortured for 9 months.

PICTURE 4.

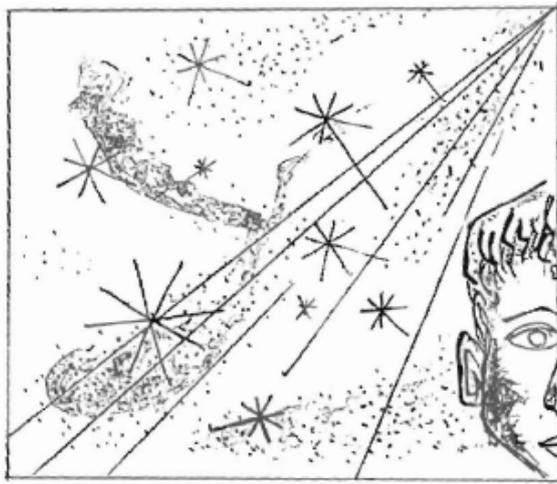




PICTURE 5.



PICTURE 6.



“I didn’t know what had happened, I didn’t do anything except attending school” – he said. After 9 months of torture he was released. In his fantasies “he was taken to prison by mistake, instead of another person”. The true reasons were never revealed, but it was a miracle that he survived. (A lot of people were imprisoned at the beginning of the 50s for unknown reasons. Either they never returned home or some years later they appeared again totally destroyed mentally as well as physically.)

He had to work in a rock-mine 14 hours every day. He was suffering of hunger and thirst,



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of cold weather and of having been tortured and humiliated in several ways. Still today he is unable to dance as he was forced to dance naked with an also naked young girl on a table, which was a table of nails and at every centimetre nails stuck into his feet, causing a horrible pain for every movement. He nearly died when he was released after having signed the papers about keeping silence. He left the camp humiliated and mentally broken being desperately silent.

He tried to continue his “normal life” on a rational level. He didn't speak about his experiences to anyone. He finished his studies at the university and found a job. He married and had children, as well.

In the 60s we were living in a socialist country in the frames of a so-called “mild socialism”. It wasn't as dangerous to express our personal opinion than in other countries, there was a special sense of humour in Hungary, even political comedies were allowed in the theatres.

In spite of the mild regime, the Secret Police had found him and threatened him that his family members would be in life danger if he did not offer them his services. Up to these days it is only his therapist but no one else, not even his family, knows about these activities. He was always in danger and was permanently anxious about his family. From this period we don't have any drawings or paintings.

He expressed his feelings in poems at this time. Here is a part of his poem written on his 26th birthday:

*“Listen, Universe! ...Your sons, like you, don't hear
My voice! No receiver can work on the
wavelength of my pains.
If the Sirius is a million light-years away from the Sun
I am a billion light-years away from my mates.”*

We can imagine the Indian of his youth being humiliated, isolated from the world around him, gazing empty into the universe. It seems impossible to be able to paint the emptiness of the soul, but the following lines are very illustrative:

*“The bars of my cage are weaved from nerves.
If my claws reach out of the slits,
They are hit by those who live free
Without any bar.
(I know, envy people standing around
want to stone me to death with pleasure.)”*

Being successful in his career and in his private life he kept on carrying his secret with him through the years of his life: 9 months in the labour camp and 20 years in the labyrinth of the secret police. Even his wife didn't know anything about this field of activity but as the years passed his anxiety was gradually increasing. The ways of open communication were blocked as well.

His marriage was broken, his wife has left him and he came to psychotherapy in a



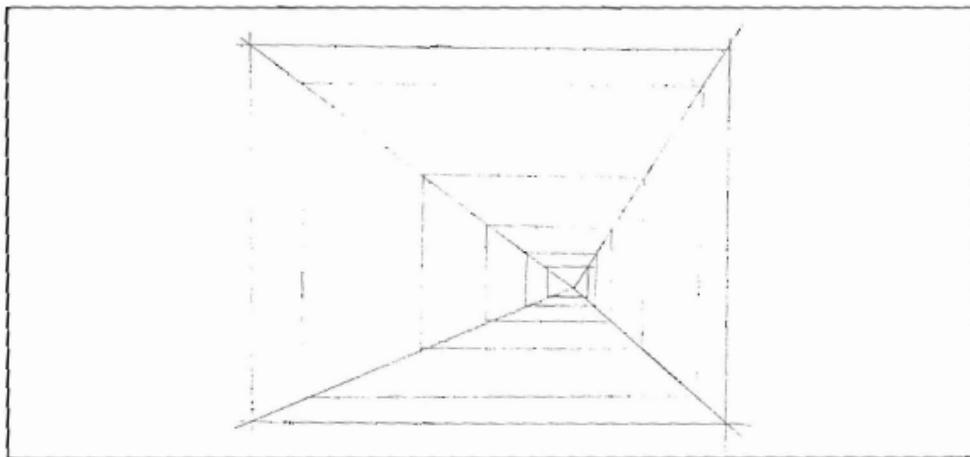
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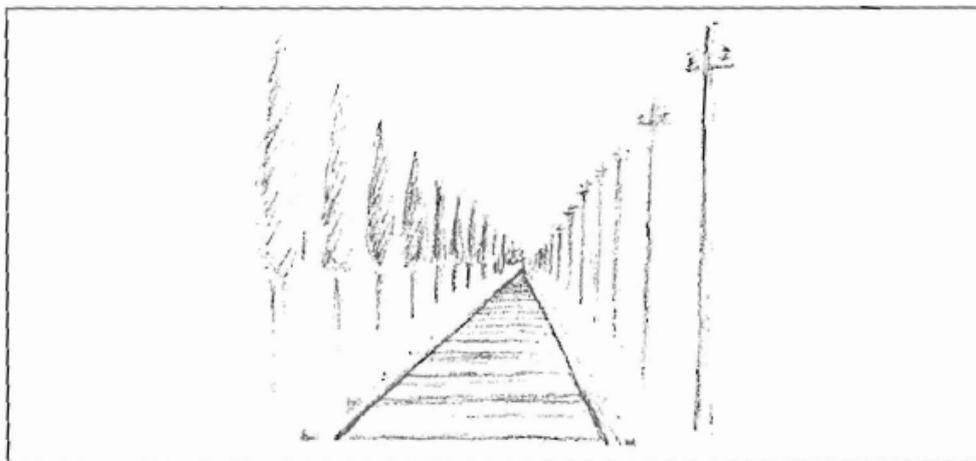
depressive state. In the course of psychotherapy he got relieved working through the separation trauma. In a year he reappeared in the consultation room in a very depressive-anxious state. He was working on a ship, where cholera infection was detected, so he was isolated for six weeks in the quaranteen. This repetitive isolation trauma activated the first separation trauma, and the feeling of guilt and humiliation raised again. He spoke about cholera as if it was leprosy, he felt “the scarlet letter” on his forehead.

After 40 years he began to draw again. But this series of drawings differ very much from the previous one. He uses black pencil, the use of colours or even the black ink doesn't even occur to him.

PICTURE 7.



PICTURE 8.

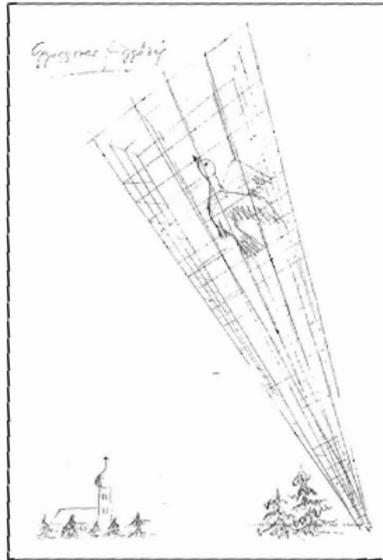




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PICTURE 9.



PICTURE 10.



PICTURE 11.





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His first picture is “The Nothing” (7). The space is tightening illustrating the depressive position. On “The Waiting for the Great Nothing” (8) shows a uniformed, simplified world also with tightening space where nothing really good can be expected. The “Drug Dependence” (9) symbolises his feelings perhaps the most accurately: the bird in the cage has no chance to be free again. The world is small underneath and we can nearly touch the bird wriggling in its cage. He delineates himself like “The Tired Viking” (10) or the tortured Jesus – “Ecce Homo” (11). What sort of perspectives are waiting for him? He returns (12) to the Indian-motives of his childhood, but these Indians gaze resigned to the uniformed future.

PICTURE 12.



SUMMARY:

We compared two series of drawings from our patient's two separate life-period. We wanted to illustrate how separation, humiliation and the permanent feeling of danger can change personality. Not only the forty years difference can be seen in them but the tightening of the character, the draining of the personality, the decolouration and the loss of flexibility can be also well followed. Rigidity, as a strategy of survival is a healthier way of coping than – for example – the identification with the aggressor, however, it still inhibits functional family life.

Torture, humiliation or repetitive traumatization and constant stress can destroy the



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healthy defence mechanisms of the ego by decreasing its adaptative functions. Even long psychotherapy can't recover the flexibility of the person. A relative healthy balance can be reached, but even the slightest trauma can brake this unstable equilibrium.

Fate or mental problem? A disease caused by fate or fate being the result of the disease? It might remain without an answer, because in the case of elderly patients the somatic, historical and other ethiological factors join the "key-trauma" of the mental problem.

The psychiatrist's task is to explore, understand and accept them evaluating the patient's further possibilities and fate through summarizing the actual values and options.

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