

1971

# Burnt offerings; survivor guilt in victims of the concentration camps

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BURNT OFFERINGS  
SURVIVOR GUILT  
IN  
VICTIMS OF THE  
CONCENTRATION CAMPS



Richard Enoch Kaufman

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YALE



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BURNT OFFERINGS  
SURVIVOR GUILT IN VICTIMS OF THE CONCENTRATION CAMPS

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A Thesis  
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Medicine

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New Haven, Connecticut

April 1971



### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It seems that the concentration camp survivor is of interest to many people, and in doing this study many more people than I could possibly thank here have helped me in ways both large and small. There are three people, however, whom I cannot leave publicly unthanked: Robert Jay Lifton my official thesis adviser, for providing me with the guidance of his critical intelligence and the freedom of his catholicity of outlook; Jonathan Himmelhoch, for stylistic and intellectual gifts, and for his friendship; and my wife Susan, for all of these graces that a wife provides.







## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

The edges of the summit still appal  
When we breed on the dead or the beloved;  
Nor can imagination do it all  
In this last place of light; he dares to live  
Who steps being a bird, yet beats his wings  
Against the immense immeasurable emptiness of things.  
- Theodore Roethke

The history of the concentration camps should require no repetition. Yet, recent evidence indicates that in fact the events are being forgotten, and worse, where remembered, they are distorted beyond recognition. While it is not within the scope of this paper to reconstruct the tragedy of the Nazi years an understanding of the broad psychological implications for the survivor is essential. This introductory overview is also distorting, for by the very nature of its abstractness it will obscure and dilute the horrific realities of the camps. But perhaps it is only through this veil of abstractions that we may approximate realities that might otherwise be unapproachable.

The concentration camps were a moral-historical vacuum. A moral vacuum in the sense that all ethical distinctions were suspended: good and evil, humaneness and inhumanity were melded into a total negation of personal responsibility. The concomitant historical vacuum resulted from an abrogation of causality: the relationship



between deed and event, action and consequence was suddenly, and without the hint of an end, suspended.

Threats to the sense of existential well-being were everywhere implicit and too often explicitly executed. Prisoners saw their children die, their strivings rendered meaningless, their race on the verge of extinction, and the natural world itself, both human and non-human, rapidly disintegrating. On every level the sense of connection with the ambient and the remembered was severed. In the face of repeated exposure to brutal death, reasonless dying, and the disruption of the entire social matrix the concentration camp prisoner felt completely abandoned by and closed off from those herited modes by which his historical community maintained its psychic integrity. He was forced instead to confront all the terrors that connection with those communal modes protected him from.

The singularity of the experience lies in the distinctive manner in which it affects the survivor's sense of himself as part of an ordered universe. History records disasters of greater magnitude, the plagues of the Middle Ages for example, but as natural holocausts their origins could always be ascribed to some Grand Design. The concentration camps, however, represented the first time for a man-made violence in which no tenable motive could be found. Even prior wars were spoken of as "Crusades" - they either had the rags of reason or were considered to stem from uncivilized heathens. But here for the first time men who were part of a culture that could hardly be considered barbaric made savagery a mode of being, made brutality a cause for its own sake. Hiroshima was seen to become the sister image of tetipotent techn-



logical violence, but Hiroshima was vicarious; the pilots never saw the people they destroyed. The concentration camps are unique in that they ushered in a technological violence conducted on a face-to-face level without the psychological distance of the bombardier's telescope.

Simply, the survivor is thrust into a chaos where not only are the landmarks of his existence utterly dislocated but where any sense of, or hope for, ultimate purpose is negated by an all-too-real vision of human bestiality.

It has always seemed that the saving grace of this graceless period was that some had managed to survive it. For many, though, it appears that even this was no gift. Many survivors had permanent physical impairments and many more found themselves engaged in an interminable debilitating struggle with their memories of the camps. Rather than being grateful or joyful a large number of concentration camp survivors are scarred in such a way that guilt over surviving is their major affective response. They are tortured by self-recriminations for their "failure" to die, and thus for many the sequelae have become more unremitting than the camps themselves.

The Goethe Oak - under which, legend has it, Goethe wrote some of his finest poems - stood at the center of the concentration camp Buchenwald. I take this to be the central paradox we must confront when evaluating the efficacy of any reasoned inquiry, and if throughout these pages a dark pessimism seems to emerge it is because my own post-Holocaust sense is that of T.W. Adorno who said "No poetry after Auschwitz." Despite this, and perhaps simply because I knew of no other way, I have attempted to understand survivor guilt in the rather faint



hope that reason is the beginning of healing.

I came to this study with many questions. What is survivor guilt? Why does guilt rather than fear or anger appear as the focus of the survivor? Where can we place this guilt in the continuum between the normal and pathological? Does it fit into the classic psychiatric formulations? What are its implications for all of us who are in a sense survivors in an age of unprecedented violence? And the question one always dreads to ask for fear of the answer: Is there any relief to be found for those bearing this burden of guilt?

In an effort to answer these and other questions I have traversed a rather circuitous route. The problem turned out to be much different than that which I had anticipated. From a beginning involving classical analytic theories of guilt I found myself becoming more and more involved with elemental issues bearing on our perceived rhythms of life and death. I had the feeling throughout that I was piecing together a jig-saw puzzle in which each piece was meaningful in itself, and which then became even more significant as it began connecting to the whole. The format of the paper reflects some "jig-saw puzzle" aspects of my attempting to delineate a cohesive statement from some very disparate theoretical phrases.

The paper is divided into five major parts. Following this introduction, the second section deals with the clinical context of survivor guilt, delineating it from the total constellation of symptomatology known as the survivor syndrome. A third chapter, entitled "Images", is the data of this work and as such it is the central chapter. It documents the ways by which the survivor turns historical actuality into a distorted but crucial psychological reality with guilt as the primary



component. Various theoretical issues discussed in the psychiatric literature bear directly on this imagery and are brought together in a fourth chapter which provides the matrix for Chapter 5 - "Toward a Theory of Survivor Guilt", an effort to present a unified theory by which we may account for the continued misery that is the legacy of the concentration camps.



## CHAPTER II

### SURVIVORS

.... Neither does the actor suffer  
Nor the patient act. But both are fixed  
In an eternal action, an eternal patience  
To which all must consent that it may be willed  
And which all must suffer that they may will it  
That the pattern may subsist, for the pattern is the action  
And the suffering, that the wheel may turn and still  
Be forever still.

- T.S. Eliot

Survivor guilt for clinician and casual observer alike is often obscured by a plethora of seemingly more profound and pronounced symptoms. At once the problem in examining survivor guilt is to separate it from the encumbrances of its clinical setting and, at the same time, to preserve its integrity within that setting. This admixture of symptoms is known as the survivor syndrome and as it often acts, via its various component elements, to obscure the central dilemma of the survivor - that is, guilt - it becomes necessary to clearly delineate its borders.

"The theme is new, our nosologic categories are too incomplete to define it." This remark (translated from the German)<sup>1</sup> is one of the earliest reactions in the psychiatric literature to the constellation of symptoms we have come to term the survivor syndrome. As with any new diagnostic category there comes an array of names, each reflecting



a particular bias on the part of the author. The survivor syndrome is no exception as it has been variously called "Repatriation Neurosis,"<sup>2</sup> "Chronic Traumatogenic Anxiety Syndrome,"<sup>3</sup> "Persecution Syndrome,"<sup>4</sup> and "Concentration Camp Syndrome,"<sup>5</sup> among others. To indicate my own emphases I would refer to it as the "Concentration Camp Survivor Syndrome" to underscore its unique qualities as an experience developing from the concentration camps and, at the same time, emphasize those qualities that are shared with survivors of other disasters. For brevity's sake, however, and with the hope that my intentions are evident, I will simply refer to this constellation of symptoms as the "survivor syndrome" - discarding even the quotation marks.

The component elements of the survivor syndrome have been examined by several groups with the most extensive breakdown having been made by Nathan, Eitinger, and Winnik<sup>6</sup> who list a total of forty-seven different elements. Their clinical picture can be considerably condensed by noting the prevailing general categories. These are: depression, somatization, "affective anesthesia"<sup>7</sup>, intense anxiety with frequent nightmares, the inability to forget the experience, and guilt.<sup>8</sup> Generally the syndrome is marked by its chronicity.

The depression, referred to by Hoppe as a chronic reactive depression<sup>9</sup>, is all-pervasive, characterized by feelings of helplessness-hopelessness, and loss of self-esteem<sup>10</sup> which seems to be closely linked in intensity with the depth of the depression.<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, however, suicidal tendencies do not seem to be as



frequent in the depression of the survivor syndrome as compared to other types of depression; the most recent evidence indicates, instead, an exceedingly low incidences of suicides among concentration camp survivors.<sup>12</sup>

Related to the depression is a feeling of emotional coldness—an affective anesthesia. This may itself be an expression of depression or it may be the reverse, that

Having lost most if not all, of their early love objects, they now fear that to love anyone means to lose them and go through the pain all over again. Since they have not been able to work through their losses such a situation threatens overwhelming depression.<sup>13</sup>

Rather than an expression of depression it is a means of avoiding the depression. It may be an aspect of what Lifton has called "psychic numbing"<sup>14</sup>. Another observer considers it a carry-over of the defensive repression of affects that aided survival in the camps.<sup>15</sup> Whatever the case may be the depression and affective lameness are the major factors in the devastating social isolation frequently seen in these survivors.

Somatization of affect was among the earliest noted elements of the survivor syndrome. As early as 1948 Friedman noted the emergence of psychosomatic complaints.<sup>16</sup> In a more recent study Hoppe found psychosomatic complaints in 144 out of 145 survivors studied.<sup>17</sup> My own feeling is that there is a large element of "Hominis Credunt...." in his criteria for psychosoma, but even leavening the statistics with the proverbial grain of salt still yields an impressive psychosomatic ingredient in the survivor syndrome. A second issue, and a much more important one, is whether our labelling the somatic complaints of survivors as "psyche" in origin is realistic, or are we using the



term to define away our lack of knowledge about the physiologic effects of massive physical and mental trauma.

With these objections in mind, however, it is still worth noting that the idea of a markedly increased incidence of psychosomatic complaints is given credence by (and lends credence to) George Engel's thesis that the state of "helplessness-hopelessness" or "giving up-given up"--clearly present in the camps<sup>18</sup> -is the major psychic inducer of somatic complaints.<sup>19</sup> There is also the suggestion that these somatic ailments may be particularly related to guilt, for as Engel points out elsewhere, these are "pain-prone" patients who will frequently utilize pain as a means of expiating their guilt.<sup>20</sup>

The most apparent and well-known element of the survivor syndrome is the intense anxiety state of the survivor<sup>21</sup> manifesting itself in insomnia, nightmares, motor unrest, and fears of renewed persecution often culminating in paranoid ideation<sup>22</sup> as well as psychosomatic complaints.<sup>23</sup> The nightmares particularly may give us clues to the anxiety-provoking memories of the survivor. Trautman notes that the nightmares are nearly always characterized by an overwhelming fear of existential destruction, utter helplessness and a complete absence of counter aggression.<sup>24</sup> The last two elements have also been recognized in citizens living under the Nazi regime who had not been in concentration camps.<sup>25</sup> The fear of existential destruction however, seems to be unique to the concentration camp survivor. This is an important distinction, for, as Trautman suggests, the background of the survivors anxiety and its quintessential expression in the nightmare lies in his fear of being killed.<sup>26</sup> This and the observation that fear of death was a frequent complaint among survivors suggests the importance



of death fear in the survivor syndrome.<sup>27</sup> The positive side of the dream also supports this contention: survivors with happy dreams about their dead family members showed significantly fewer manifestations of pathology.<sup>28</sup> This is in accord with Gorer's work on mourning in which he observed that the incidence of sleep disturbances was highest among groups with the least well-defined, least ritualized, mourning processes,<sup>29</sup> and, the reverse, that comforting dreams indicated a relatively trouble-free working-through of mourning.<sup>30</sup> The well-documented sleep disturbances among concentration camp survivors may, then indicate a troubled mourning<sup>31</sup> which in turn may have some connection with the hypertrophied fear of existential destruction which Trautman describes.

Perhaps the most important feature of these nightmares is that each survivor seems to have a particular image involving a person, place, or event that continually recurs in his or her dreams.<sup>32</sup> This is the first suggestion of a theme that will be fully developed in this work: that there is a residual imagery abstracted from the camp experience which becomes the metaphor for the entire event and one's sense of place within that event. The quotidian recurrence of particular themes and images in fully-developed non-symbolic form (except in a synecdochic way) suggests that this imagery may be a major principle behind the neurotic manifestations of the survivor syndrome. The undisguised clarity of these dreams impairs not only the ability to find succour in sleep, but to escape from the waking memories as well.

I have saved the guilt component of the survivor syndrome for last because from this point on the paper will be primarily concerned with the place of guilt as component and cause of the survivor syndrome.



Almost immediately after the war Friedman noted that among survivors he met in the Displaced Persons camps "many often spoke openly of their guilt; in others however even this guilt was repressed or concealed."<sup>33</sup> Somewhat later as the presence of guilt among survivors became an established fact the nature of the guilt became elucidated. Eitinger noted that

Partly unconsciously, and more often than not without any rational foundation of the survivors upbraid themselves for not sharing the fate of the others, saying that they have betrayed them in this way, that they are indirectly accomplices to their death.<sup>34</sup>

The majority of cases with feelings of guilt and self-reproach for lack of activity prove to be of a neurotic nature, when they are examined more closely.<sup>35</sup>

In subsequent case histories survivor guilt is always phrased in terms of imagined causality and priority. The very expressions from various reports are all variations on these themes:

What right do I have to be happy when my mother and all my relatives had to die.<sup>36</sup>

If my neighbor gets killed before I do, I get another chance to live.<sup>37</sup>

Why am I the one who survived? Why didn't I save them? Why was I saved myself?<sup>38</sup>

Why was I not the one destined to die?<sup>39</sup>

Each question has in it the thread of self-reproach and an image of survival for another's sacrifice. This is a crucial difference between concentration camp survivors and the survivors of Hiroshima who retain a similar residual imagery. Where both have a sense of guilt over not having helped the dead it appears that it is only the former group that can avail itself of a set of distinctly articulated, grotesque



circumstances which both allows and fosters a perception that the dead willfully sacrificed themselves so that others might survive. Chedoff's clinical experience bears this out:

Feelings of guilt, mentioned spontaneously by seven patients and brought out by questioning in others, were related to the fact that they had survived the holocaust, while their parents, other relatives and friends had been killed... sometimes connected to a particular episode when the patient felt that different behavior on his part might have saved someone's life, but more often such feelings were related simply to their having survived when so many had been destroyed.<sup>40</sup>

The most comprehensive body of work on survivor guilt has been done by William Niederland<sup>41</sup>, individually and with Henry Krystal.<sup>42</sup> The conclusion of their work is that guilt stands out as the single most important pathogenetic factor in the survivor syndrome<sup>43</sup>:

feelings of guilt and shame are of the most profound order and stand at the bottom of many of their clinical manifestations.<sup>44</sup>

The clinical manifestations, in turn, are seen to arise from two separate, yet intertwined components of guilt. A depressive component gives rise to apathy, withdrawal, seclusion, permanent change of feelings to those of loss, sadness, and depression. A persecutory element engenders fear, vigilance, and paranoid reactions.<sup>45</sup> In other words, the whole spectrum of the survivor syndrome can be generated by guilt.

It is worthwhile to note here the similarity of responses seen among survivors of other extreme situations,\* particularly in examining

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\*Throughout this paper I will be comparing the experiences of the concentration camp survivor to two other groups of survivors. The first is the general category of hurricanes, floods, mine-cave ins and combat which because of their similarities in sequelae I have grouped under the heading of the Extreme Situation. The second group are the survivors of Hiroshima, or hibakusha. I have chosen to compare this group separately for their sequelae represent a radical departure from those of previous disasters and come closest to the experience of the camps.



the long-term sequelae. The studies of Archibald and Tuddenham on survivors of combat stress revealed a rather chronic pattern of psychopathology which they named the "Combat Syndrome." It is characterized by intense anxiety, recurrent nightmares, frequent headaches, and increased irritability.<sup>46</sup> If this has a ring of familiarity Chodoff's comment will make the connection evident:

Particularly striking is the marked startle reaction in both groups of patients i.e., soldiers and concentration camp survivors which instead of becoming attenuated as time passes seems to get reinforced each time it is activated by a new stress stimulus, so that the organism appears to become more or less permanently conditioned to this kind of reaction. As I see it the differences between the concentration camp patients and the combat fatigue group are quantitative rather than qualitative.<sup>47</sup>

The major difference between the two groups seems to be one of quantity rather than quality. Qualitatively there are marked similarities: more than half of those with the "Combat Syndrome" had been wounded in battle and the group as a whole had witnessed far more atrocities than a control group. Similarly, they are considerably more guilt-laden and show a heightened concern over harming people.<sup>48</sup> Here too the implication is that death imagery and guilt are interconnected major factors.

In a variety of different survivor groups Wolfenstein<sup>49</sup> and others<sup>50</sup> have noted elements of survivor guilt. For the most part, however, it was considered relatively rare and inconsequential. The important point is that even among those groups in which guilt does not appear in significant fashion, it is most pronounced among those who have been closer to, or witnessed, death. The degree of guilt seems to be directly related to the extent of death anxiety felt by the survivor. In the case of the concentration camp survivor his



guilt appears to be a magnification of this universal phenomenon resulting from the singular psychohistorical makeup of the victims and the structure of the camps which played on this makeup.

This conjunction of circumstance and psychodynamics produced in the concentration camp survivor a complex of guilt-induced manifestations that may emerge in a variety of forms. It can be seen clinically as a form of pathological mourning

in which the survivor is stuck in a magnification of guilt which is present in every bereaved person. The ambivalence, or more precisely, the repressed aggression, toward the lost object prevents the completion of the work of mourning. Hidden in the self-reproach ... is their repressed rage against the now murdered parents who failed to protect them from the persecution.<sup>51</sup>

On the other hand it may escape clinical detection by being channeled into socially condoned or acceptable activities. At other times this all-important guilt may simply elude the unwary clinical eye.

Since survivor guilt represents an almost intolerable burden it is usually not permitted to enter consciousness, remains for the most part repressed, and tends to manifest itself clinically in the depressive, persecutory, psychosomatic, and neurovegetative symptoms of the patient, or very rarely in complete denial.<sup>52</sup>

What we have is akin to an archeological excavation site in which the death imagery is buried beneath the later village of guilt images which in turn is covered by a more recent city of the survivor syndrome. The refractoriness of the survivor syndrome may lie in the fact that simply to uncover its various levels is a long arduous process frequently yielding only fragmentary results.

In the next section we will excavate the repository of memories that is the survivor's legacy by examining the shared imagery retained by many as their personal remnant of the experience. It is this imagery



which stands at the root of survivor guilt, and hence, of the survivor syndrome.



## CHAPTER III

### IMAGES

We, the rescued,  
From whose hollow bones death had begun to whittle his flutes  
And on whose sinews he had already stroked his bow -  
Our bodies continue to lament  
With their mutilated music.  
We, the rescued,  
The nooses wound for our neck still dangle  
Before us in the blue air -  
Hourglasses still fill with our dripping blood.  
We, the rescued,  
The worms of fear still feed on us.  
- Nelly Sachs

#### The Data

The data from which the imagery of the survivor is abstracted derives from two sources: the fictions and memoirs of survivors, and, the major source of the material, a series of interviews conducted by one David Beder during 1946 in the Displaced Persons camps of Europe. The first source needs no introduction; the second, however, requires some discussion and description of the methodological problems associated with its use.

Dr. David Beder, at that time a psychologist at the Illinois Institute of Technology, recorded and subsequently translated, mainly from German, Yiddish, and Polish, seventy interviews with displaced persons. The object of these interviews was to leave a record of survivor experiences for future researchers and as a valuable object in itself. Eight of these interviews initially appeared in a book



entitled I Did Not Interview the Dead <sup>53</sup> - the title emphasizing the fact that no record could be complete because the experiences of those who perished could never be known. The full compilation of interviews is titled Topical Autobiographies of Displaced People: Recorded in Displaced Persons Camps with a Psychological and Anthropological Analysis. <sup>54</sup>

There are several problems in using data in which one serves as a vicariously vicarious interpreter, at best. The interviews lack, outside of what we may make of the words themselves and the occasional editorial note by Boder to indicate crying during the interview, those non-verbal indicators of meaning-innuences of expression and diction that often change entire meanings. The issue of linguistic distortion inherent in any translation must also be considered. In essence the analysis must be incomplete, and, in a sense, inauthentic, for rather than examining the expression (in the sense of the total mental operation) of the speaker we are confined entirely to the statement (the meaning of the words alone.) <sup>55</sup>

In a similar vein are the problems that arise when using someone else's interviews. In this case I consider these interviews too have been far too directed, and the direction itself unsatisfactory. The emphasis is on what happened rather than on how one felt about it. Though never quite printed this way my frustrated psychological predilections often felt that the transcripts read as follows:

Survivor: I really felt .....

Interviewer: Never mind that, let's get back to the facts.

Despite this emphasis the psychological facts do emerge, and in a rarefied form, demonstrating that human description even of the historical



events of one's life is always a psychohistory no matter what the interviewer's or interviewee's intentions may be.

This brings us to the matter of the interviewer's biases. In Beder's case they were extraordinarily minimal. Though the title implies some interpretive proclivity, the text has little in the way of analysis either before or after the interviews. He began the interviews, sitting behind his subject, with this preface:

We know very little in America about the things that happened to you people who were in the concentration camps. If you want to help us out, by contributing information about the fate of the displaced person, tell us your personal story. Tell us what is your name, how old you are and where you were and what happened when the war started.<sup>56</sup>

A set of "psychological" documents, in the sense that they were done by a psychologist, without a gross theoretical bias is a rare thing indeed, and Beder's documents stand out in that they seem to have been done with no polemic intention. By being this kind of undistorted document it provides an opportunity for a certain methodological purity in which the interpreter's bias has nothing to do with the shape of the interview. To my mind this was an extraordinary aspect of these interviews, for within their framework the possibilities of a disciplined subjectivity in interpretation was much enhanced.

Whatever cavils I have made aside, the importance of these interviews is that they represent an aspect of a total psychohistorical experience which is accessible, detachable from the whole, and, hence, subject to scrutiny. As what follows will, I believe, reveal, there was much in this scrutiny.



## Survivor Guilt and the Imagination of Contingency

The survivor syndrome appears to be connected with shared residual imagery of death; and the guilt manifest as part of this syndrome seems particularly related to this imagery. The origins of the guilt, however, do not lie in the neurotic expression of the syndrome but instead are found most clearly in a less well-defined nexus where the relationship of man's egocentricity and the fact of death is realized--the sphere of existential guilt. There the emphasis is on the moral relatedness of man and his universe, and as such it provides an important perspective from which to view a sense of guilt that surely has its historical roots in a loss of connectedness. It seems to me that certain aspects of the concentration camp survivor guilt can better be understood from this standpoint of ontic or existential guilt rather than from psychoanalytic epigenetics.

Ontological guilt has three components:

1. Denial of, and failure to fulfill, one's potentialities; a guilt involving the eigenwelt or one's "own world."
2. The inability to understand another; this guilt is central to our existence and is part of the mitwelt--the world of our contemporaneous human community.
3. Separation from, and loss of connection with, the world of nature; this involves not only the Umwelt--the surrounding world,--but the Eigenwelt and Mitwelt as well.<sup>57</sup>

The important point is that all of us share in this guilt. Where neurotic guilt has the possibility, however small, that beyond the formation of a matrix it can be avoided, avoidance of ontologic



guilt is by definition an impossibility. Where neurotic guilt has its source in the remembrance or expectation of a lex talionis ontological guilt has its psychohistorical roots in nothing but the existential condition itself. Essentially ontic guilt is provoked by fear of dying in an unfulfilled manner which engenders a sense of absolutely lost connection within the framework of human continuity. Unfaced ontic guilt may produce neurotic guilt, which serves to impair the sense of interpersonal awareness and commitment requisite for feeling existential guilt.<sup>58</sup> This suggests a mode by which survivor guilt may be adaptive. The neurotic guilt can serve to help the survivor avoid confronting the core of his dilemma: the loss of existential continuity. It is considerably less painful to experience neurotic guilt than to face the tensions of an ontologically-rooted death imagery, loss of symbolic immortality and a severed sense of connectedness. In this way neurotic guilt may be an extension of a "closing-off" process<sup>59</sup> which impairs real efforts toward formulation.

The concept of an ontic guilt derivative of man's relatedness to his existential condition is corroborated by the anthropological studies of Robert Redfield.<sup>60</sup> According to him the primitive bears a "greater burden of guilt than civilized man, for he feels morally related to the entire universe as well as to his group."<sup>61</sup> Although Redfield does not make the distinction it is clear that the guilt to which he refers is ontologic. Redfield's supposition, however, is in contradistinction to Freud's dicta that with increased civilization there is increased guilt.<sup>62</sup> It is in the resolution of these seemingly contradictory hypotheses that the distinction between ontic and



neurotic guilt becomes evident. In terms of a conscious sense of guilt, the kind Redfield refers to, ontologic guilt contingent upon a sense of death-defying continuity with the universe is an atavism. Neurotic guilt has become the greater burden of the modern because the loss of our natural connection has submerged the conscious sense of relatedness to the universe that we term "primitive," and provoked, in a far more intense fashion, our fears of death. The dilemma was clearly adumbrated by Wordsworth:

The world is too much with us, late and soon  
 Getting and spending we lay waste our powers:  
 Little we see in nature that is ours  
 We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon.

The point is this: the kind of guilt we consciously feel has changed, although both forms are still present in varying degrees in each of us; it is the distribution of their expression which has altered. The concentration camp survivor, however, bears the full burden of both forms of guilt. Survival in the camps necessitated a regression to a more primitive state and the encounter with death that accompanied this regression placed the survivor in closer touch with the elemental death-immortality imagery that is at the core of the primitive's existential universe. The experience of the survivor places him in a position of increased contiguity with his ontologic guilt, for as primitive, in this sense, he is faced with a greater feeling of moral relationship to a feared universe. At the same time, however, the survivor also bears the guilt of modern civilization. He bears the burden of Freud's "civilized" neurotic guilt by virtue of the fact that he is psychologically conditioned by his experience as a modern who needs to suppress his encounter with images of the primitive



and the absurd. The survivor's confrontation with the primitive--both in reality and symbolically--may reinforce and exacerbate a heretofore latent ontologic guilt, but his psychohistorically determined modernism, with particular consideration for his ambivalent feelings surrounding his role in the greatest of modern immoralities, has given him an even greater share of the neurotic guilt indigenous to the modern condition.

From this vantage we can perceive the residual imagery of the concentration camp survivor as multiplex in nature. At its base level it is a memento mori, a singularly intense reminder of our mortality. The existential terror engendered by this imagery in turn gives rise to feelings of guilt as the mode by which one removes his concerns from death; guilt is able to effect this removal by several means.

To feel guilty is a way of feeling control, even in distant retrospect, over events. Erikson speaks of existential guilt as inexplicable when he refers to it as the "tendency on man's part to feel that he has caused the face to turn away which happened to turn elsewhere."<sup>63</sup> To some extent the maneuvers of the survivor may give some explanation. When a sense of control over events is lost the essential fear evoked is that of death which represents the absolute loss of our ability to control. By imagining oneself to have caused our misfortunes we place them within the realm of punishment, and this gives the sense that we have caused that which we received (by a perfectly circular reasoning) thus mitigating our fears by reaffirming our causal role. The mythic paradigm is the expulsion from the Garden



of Eden; it is one of our earliest efforts to account for the fact that we must die and it is made within the context of man's complicity in his fate. For the survivor as well to be guilty is to be in control, and to be in control is to remain connected to the possibility of immortality. This may serve to explain another of the differences between concentration camp survivors and survivors of other extreme situations. In the latter group there is often a feeling that an element of luck was involved in their survival; concentration camp survivors do not, for the most part, share this feeling, for luck implies a sense of happiness over the outcome and, more importantly, a loss of control over the possibilities for survival. As Eugen Kegen put it: "Chance? Yes - but only insofar as 'luck' is a component of personal ability."<sup>64</sup> The concentration camp survivor feels he has made his own luck. Thus he attempts to deny any element of happiness over the outcome and refuses to absolve himself from a self-imposed liability for all events that occurred - including the death of his comrades. In essence he assumes an omnipotence for every aspect of the event thus assuring his guilt for the outcome.

Guilt also serves as a primitive way of affirming life. The concentration camp survivor has considerable difficulty in giving free rein to his emotions, for in doing so he runs the risk of being overwhelmed since the crux of his most important memories revolve around images of death. Thus for a survivor in a self-imposed state of affective anesthesia to feel guilty is one of the few avenues of feeling that is available. Even if they are excruciatingly painful they affirm life by being feelings nonetheless. Guilt further removes death by being a form of emotive life itself.



Perhaps the most important aspect in all of this is the event itself: the psychohistorical actuality of the concentration camps not only lends itself to, but foments, a highly charged guilt imagery. The dehumanization process was so complete as to blur the distinction between victim and victimizer, almost forcing the victim to perceive himself as accomplice to the event. This blurred distance between assailant and victim inherent in the residual imagery of the camp experience allows the survivor to further distort the relationship between guilt and innocence, motive and result, and to create, by a convoluted logic, an imagination of contingency. The survivor assumes a one-to-one organic relationship between the lives of individuals in the camps so that every survival is balanced by a death. A connection between the individual and the fate of the community-at-large is also made: communal destruction is also seen as a consequence of individual action.

The most patently explicit of this complex of images in which death is subsumed by an imagination of contingency concerns itself with "guilt over survival priority." Here the perceived causal connection between one's own survival and the resultant death of a comrade is made clear. The novelist Jorge Semprun articulates the beginnings of the process:

It wouldn't take much for me to find myself suspect. It wouldn't take much for me to tell him it's not my fault. It wouldn't take much for me to start apologizing for having survived. <sup>65</sup>

But maybe it's true, maybe I'm the one who left him, who abandoned him. <sup>66</sup>

The death imagery that causes this suspicion to become an outright accusation is to be found in the frequently made connection between memories of one's own survival and memories of other's deaths:



I was beginning to weaken. And my friend with whom I had been together all the time, all these years...was telling me...You have to hold out, you have stood it so long. Keep your strength. And meanwhile everyday my best friends were dying. My buddies perished.<sup>67</sup>

About the others where they were led no one knew. Only the next day we saw the huge flames and the smoke from the crematory where they were being burned. And we went into the barracks.<sup>68</sup>

Hannah Bluhm, in her examination of the survivor autobiographies, has said that for the investigator "death in a Nazi concentration camp requires no explanation. Survival does."<sup>69</sup> The issue is no less problematic for the survivor who, in the face of the sheer statistical odds against survival, must determine how he did it.

I don't know how I survived, that is hard to conceive how people were saved.<sup>70</sup>

One who survived his wife, child, and brother is asked how he managed to stay healthy enough to withstand the physical trauma of the camps. He replies:

I really don't know. My brother who died he was possibly of even better health than I.<sup>71</sup>

In this reply lies the dilemma of many survivors: if expected criteria for survival were of no value, by what measure of "luck" did they survive? The quest for rational explanations remains elusive.

I don't know today, myself, how the epidemic of spotted typhus had spared us, because around our barracks... there were barracks with spotted typhus.<sup>72</sup>

The question of the unnaturalness of the deaths is also part of the survivor's difficulty. These words, by a young survivor who before being interned in the concentration camps was a member of the French underground, make this added dilemma clear:



I often wonder why I got out and why they remained there. But one should not talk, it does not help. Everyone understands what it does to a persons heart to lose his parents in such tragic times, because we know when a person dies his own death, nothing can be done. That is a matter of nature. But when one knows that the parents have gone into gas that is very hard; it is very hard to bear such a thought.<sup>73</sup>

There are major issues in the plight of the survivor implicit here. Survival priority is clearly brought up: why did I survive when the others died? The inability to explain the deaths rationally is also an issue: when one cannot speak of it, it is because it defies reason or logical comprehension. This is related to what the survivor feels is the absolute indescribability of the experience:

Impossible, to make a picture of it...Words are of no avail.<sup>74</sup>

To tell that is the hardest thing for us. Why? Because there are no words. No way of expressing it that can describe what happened from the day when we disembarked from the train in the lager Auschwitz.<sup>75</sup>

When the experience transcends the realm of the describable it enters the domain of the irrational or a-rational. This stems from a sense of inappropriate or mutant death which is not "a matter of nature" and which is impossible to apprehend and rationalize.

This issue comes back to the central difficulty of the survivor, that of trying to place the concentration camps within a framework of reason: Why did I survive?

Why did I not go together with them? Why did I remain alive?<sup>76</sup>

To be unable to answer this question means that the survivor risks an inevitably self-destructive confrontation with the imagery of absurd perforce choose an alternative imagery. He can begin to find blame



within himself simply in the fact that to survive in the perverse landscape of the concentration camps was an anomalous form of existence. Survivors are an overwhelming minority and, as with all minorities, they are troubled by their being different and nagged by the doubt that perhaps they did do something wrong not to have gone the way of the many. The value of survival itself must be considered:

I was lucky - I say "lucky" because now I have thought it all over and I see that it has led, that it was to the good...<sup>77</sup>

Even if the answer is in the affirmative the survivor still wonders whether in order to survive he did something wrong, or endured what humane beings should not. The ability to close off the environment, to engage in a psychic numbing, is questioned by the survivor on ethical grounds:

... so they piled people in mounds and poured gas over them and burned them over open pyres. One got accustomed to such a sight as if it were something ordinary. It is terrible to say that. And to this day I can't conceive how I was able to bear this stench which would not only come through the nose but would stick to one's palate as if it were something palpable; this repugnant pestilential stench that filled the air. <sup>78</sup>

The environment was an inhuman one and those who returned from it are viewed with suspicion. And where survivors are viewed with suspicion the dead are seen as dying because of a higher ethical sensibility that would not sustain living in such conditions. The survivors may be the lucky ones, but the dead are the virtuous.

... the lucky ones; for instance I, remained alive. The strongest, the most beautiful have died.<sup>79</sup>

Viktor Frankl, the existential psychiatrist (or Logotherapist as he more accurately terms it) who survived four different concentration camps, has a similar perception:



there was a sort of self-selecting process going on the whole time among all of the prisoners. On the average, only those prisoners could keep alive who, after years of trekking from camp to camp, had lost all scruples in their fight for existence; they were prepared to use every means, honest or otherwise, even brutal force, theft and betrayal of their friends, in order to save themselves. We who have come back, by the aid of many lucky chances or miracles - whatever one may choose to call them - we know: the best of us did not return.

One of the most dispassionate of the concentration camp reporters, Eugen Kogon, similarly apotheosizes the dead at the expense of the living:

There were many dead martyrs in the camps but few living saints. <sup>81</sup>

With a progression from imagery of absurd death that is recollected in concert with one's own survival to the perception of the survivor's moral inferiority the step to an imagination of contingency is a short one. If the good and the beautiful died there- in complete perversion of our sense of justice - there must have been some way in which we contributed to their downfall. Where Frankl and Kogon are quite explicit in this thought for other survivors it becomes an implicit matter of faith. The following descriptions of two similar episodes give us clues to this kind of psychology:

A lot of women fell into the water and we ... not knowing it, would kill the drowning ones with our own feet because one was running over the other. <sup>82</sup>

The second survivor's description goes a step further in self-blame. She remembers being forced into a barn with several thousand other prisoners.

When we came out in the morning many comrades remained behind.

What does it mean "remained behind?"  
We ourselves have trampled them to death. With only <sup>83</sup> with our own feet we have trampled our brothers to death.



The sense of responsibility is present in both cases; it becomes unmitigated, however, in the second. There is a sense in the second passage of the victim becoming victimizer which, though present in the first, is a good deal more muted. In a letter received by a survivor from a friend who worked in the crematoria this self-blame assumes grotesque proportions:

I am already transformed into an animal. I have already gassed my mother. I have already gassed my father; I have already gassed my sisters and my brothers and the whole people; the whole Jewish people. <sup>84</sup>

Accident and circumstance are rendered irrelevant as the victim places himself in the role of killer.

From this pure implication of self in the death of others stems a more subtle and psychologically more useful imagination of one-to-one causality. Jorge Semprun distills the essence of it:

Each returning deportee who isn't his son reduced the chance that his son survived, that he'll see him return alive. My own life, having already returned, increases the possibility of his son's death. <sup>85</sup>

The survivor is no longer a murderer by any physical action as was the case in the preceding passages, Instead he is a murderer by his mere intention to survive. Since there are relatively few survivors who might actually feel they murdered the dead in an act of physical violence, it is simply more tenable to imagine the dead as dying "in lieu of" the living, which can still be considered a causal relationship, but is not as self-destructive as "because of". The memory is that one's life became a function of another prisoner's fate:

Every prisoner was dependent on his fellow prisoners, utterly at their mercy. <sup>86</sup>



Another survivor remembers an SS man speaking to him immediately after this same man had shot his closest friend. He wonders

how its possible that a man, a human being can be no more conscious... of having killed somebody and speaking to somebody who was only a chance that its not he who has been killed, like his comrade. 87

The question of survival priority is a profoundly personalized one: Why did he die instead of me? As "Crede quia absurdum est" is untenable for the survivor who has little support for this kind of transcendental stance, he must choose a belief in causality, and that which is most readily available in his residual imagery appears to be this imagination of contingency. The possibilities for assuming this causal role are expressed by a survivor who had been hiding in an underground bunker during a deportation raid. He had the opportunity to save some others being hunted and here he explains how he would have felt had he not opened his bunker to a family outside who were looking for a place to hide:

I tore open the cover of the bunker. I said to myself, I don't want to save myself and have on my conscience six, six burned offerings - Hungarian Jews. 88

Had he not saved them it would have been his fault; he sees their lives as contingent upon his action. The expression burnt offering is noteworthy in this regard. It will be discussed at greater length with the imagery of women and children, but suffice it to say here that it is the language of sacrifice and it implies that the dead would have been sacrificed for the sake of the survivor.

The ultimate guilt image is that of one being killed or taken away in lieu of another:

From the start people were under the impression that they



will look only for men. They would hide and leave the women and children... Yes they would hide and leave at home the children and wives. So they took the women and children. 89

There are refinements on this perception as well. The apotheosis of the dead leads to the belief that they willfully surrendered themselves to the system, and by this act saved the others.

... seeing that there was no way of saving oneself people simply surrendered so that death may come sooner because to live in such a manner was worse than death. 90

Many have also sought death. They couldn't look at that and endure all the ways in which we were tortured. 91

The dead rather than remembered as the weaker for being unable to sustain the brutality are the stronger in terms of their heightened sensitivity to inhumanity.

Just as the dead sacrificed themselves, so the living are seen, in some way, as abandoning the dead. A survivor, who we might note was already pregnant ten months after liberation, recalls vividly her attempt to save a child from the gas chamber. The SS man whom she asks to spare the child tells her

If you want to go to the crematory you can go with the child, And if not go away from the child. I could accomplish nothing .... I cried very much... And I parted from the child and left. 92

This same woman remembers that

The struggle for life was stronger than anything. I left my brother on the road. I do not know what happened to his bones. 93

In both memories there is a sense of abandoning the dead in order to improve one's own chance for survival. It is noteworthy that in the second passage she makes no real mention of the fact that her brother was already dead when she left his body at the roadside. The sense of sacrificing one life for another is present in both passages - even



if the sacrifice is viewed as a realistically useless gesture as in the first passage or benign abandonment as in the second. With the sense of benign abandonment there is often a sense of failed comradeship in which it is felt that a more forceful act might have saved the dead. Where abandonment is usually by pure passivity failed comradeship is felt to involve some constructive action, but not enough to be meaningful.

There we had to abandon two of our comrades who were weak. We wanted to take them with us ... but they said these people will come in the automobiles. And so they are "coming" to this very day. <sup>94</sup>

The survivor's feeling is that some small measure of protest or protection for the weak would have been enough to save them, but even this small measure could not be attained, and their impotence leads them to a further sense of fault, of guilt.

All of these variations on the theme of contingency strengthen the feeling of guilt. One is guilty not only by his inaction, but by a sense of ethical inferiority and a debt of gratitude which can never be repayed. (And as we know unpaid debts are a prime source of hate.)

These elements, beginning with the basic fear of death and the existential need to feel a sense of mastery over one's fate as well as to explain one's anomalous survival in an environment that defied description, impel the survivor to find some equation whereby the calculus of his existence can be defined. The distorted relationships between assailant and victim inherent in this system which forced its victims to become psychological accomplices - by their desire to



survive - reinforces the survivor's effort to establish a dynamic equilibrium in which every change on the side of survival is balanced by an equal change on the side of death.

Much of the imagery to follow is concerned with issues of survival priority and are themselves, though frequently significant divergences, variations, nonetheless on a theme of one-for-one contingency. The artificial distinctions I have made between varying aspects of this theme have been created for the sake of the clarity gained in examining the individual components of this admixture.

The pure imagery of survivor guilt and the alleys that follow provide a principle by which the survivor attempts to master the imagery of death. But we ought to bear in mind, as the manifestations of the survivor syndrome attest and as Elie Wiesel, a survivor of Auschwitz and Buchenwald, articulates:

To defeat death, to defeat it by accident, against one's wish, is neither victory nor blessing. <sup>95</sup>

### Selections

The "selections" were precisely that which they were called: roll-calls of the prisoners during which the decisions of who would live and who would die were made. It was common knowledge among the prisoners that they were divided into three groups: those able to work - they lived; cases of questionable work value - their survival depended on the priorities of that particular time, whether extermination or slave labor was deemed more important; finally, the old and the young - they were considered of no value and were sent to the gas



chambers immediately. Selections began upon arrival in the camps, and the prisoners were already aware of their significance.

We were fortunate to be assigned to the left side and it was said that we are still going to the lager, there is hope for us to live. 96

The SS man stood there eating candy bonbons. And with the bonbon in his mouth, he pointed, this one to the right, this one to the left. And what that meant - we know already. 97

Those who might not have realized what was happening found out very early, very explicitly. This young survivor remembers the announcement of an SS officer immediately before the selection began:

Jews, know that you are going to a life and death decision. 98

Continuing throughout the operation of the camps the frequency of the selections varied with the changing priorities. The memories of them are filled with images of death and guilt. Fears of death were apparent. Prisoners knew that to be sent to the wrong side meant an irrevocable death sentence, thus many of their images of death are pictured in terms of which side one was selected for.

There burned a huge fire. This was the fire of those who had to go to the right. 99

This memory is a retrospective one both visually and spatially; the psychological distance between symbol and meaning is what is remembered. Other survivors recall their prospective fears waiting for themselves or their families to be picked for the gas chambers.

And sure enough the mother was immediately assigned to group three which meant the worst. 100

Whether one remembers being psychologically near or distant the image is the same - fear of death, often accompanied by a sense of absolute impotence evoked by the inability to do something that might alter the



outcome of the selection.

... it was known that Saturday... Sunday morning he will be sent to the gas chamber but unfortunately I could not find a way, I could do no more than weeping or wailing. I had to look on not only when my brother, but all my friends, all my comrades, relatives, female cousins, male cousins, to look on, how they were sent away there and then. 101

Not only are the death images fear-engendering, but the feeling of impotence further serves to evoke fears of dying by forcing the survivor to come to grips with his inability to control his own life and death.

Again the survivor makes his painful choice. Rather than focus on this imagery and its implications he attempts to recall other aspects of the selections which provide images that in some way will alleviate the sense of existential powerlessness and hence, the fear of dying. But we are existentially powerless and the concentration camp survivor knows this better than anyone, so what he needs is an imagery that will help him avoid being reminded of the fact. He can find these particularly easily in memories of the selections because they contain elements of contingency in a palpable form. As with survival priority, by assuming a sense of guilt he give himself an artifice of power enabling him to forget the impotence and death fear that is inherent in the actual circumstances of the selections. The system of the selections, however, also provides the alternate imagery. The SS occasionally gave prisoners "control" over killing their comrades. In one camp a prisoner was called upon to select twenty-five people for the gas chamber. If he refused the SS would send seventy-five of their choice instead. The dilemma is well-remembered:

The prisoner, he could save the lives of seventy-five people. By doing this selection. But he would be the murderer of twenty-five. 102



Simon Wiesenthal , in his memoir The Murderers Among Us, recounts a similar story:

I once talked with a Jewish concentration camp trusty who saved his life by taking part in the execution of a fellow Jew. The devilish SS man told him it was either he or the other man. 103

The survivor's sense of one life traded for another, then, can have its origins in a real event, though for most survivors the part they played in this reality was little other than receiver of a story or, closer to the event, a helpless witness. Yet they feel that they too, though in exceedingly more subtle ways, willed the destruction of the other. Their guilt feelings about their thoughts are as harsh as the criticism of deeds. Wiesenthal continues:

The trusty's defense was that if he hadn't done it somebody else might have shot the Jew, and he would have died too. I don't accept this: murder is murder no matter who commits it. 104

There is no way out for this survivor who in an exaggerated fashion symbolizes the plight of all survivors. Thought becomes equated with action, and to have wished the death of another - as inevitably happened in this situation - is felt as being the equivalent of having collaborated in that other's death. One also feels guilty over having wished the death of another, and, as Bettelheim points out, this is a major focus for guilt feelings.

The argument that the biological urge for survival precluded moral responsibility is unacceptable, for the survivor feels that any ethical lapse is inexcusable. This is particularly so when the dead are remembered as sacrifices for their survival. The following excerpt exemplifies this memory of one-for-one balance inherent in the selections:



I pleaded with him that he should set the little boy free that he wasn't yet fourteen years old only thirteen... He is still a child... But the doctor said: Since I have set one free, I cannot set free the other. And we had to agree.<sup>105</sup>

A case history reported by Ruth Jaffe demonstrates dissociative phenomena having their origin in the guilt imagery of the selections. I quote from her report:

Katy was twenty-four years old when the war broke out. During psychiatric examination she suddenly turned her head, rose, bowed, made searching movements with her head, covered her eyes with her hand, as if to see better into the distance, talked to herself, and burst into laughter which resembled crying... After some minutes she regained composure and related that she had heard her sister's voice. Exploration in narcoanalysis revealed that this pantomimic scene is an almost exact repetition of a traumatic situation which she had gone through at her arrival at the railway station of the Auschwitz concentration camp. She had arrived there with her eight-year old son and her younger sister who was the boy's maid. After the journey of several days she had got out exhausted and dazed. When recovering after the first minutes of perplexity and confusion she saw two columns of people leaving the station in different directions, one consisting of the old and of mothers with children, and the other one of young men and women. She understood from previous experiences that this was a "selection" and that the first column was destined for death. Suddenly she realized that already at a distance her son and her sister walked in this column. Before she could run after them and take her sister's place in order to save her, she was kicked into the second column of those selected for work. She could hear her sister calling "Katy where are you? Why do you leave me?"<sup>106</sup>

Jaffe sees her attacks as repetitions of this scene, and notes the profound sense of sacrifice in the memory of it.

She is obsessed by guilt at having sacrificed her sister in order to stay alive and vainly tries to convince herself that she was not capable in her confusion of orienting herself more quickly.<sup>107</sup>

The recollection of the selections seem to provide two alternative images. The fear of death, however, is no real choice. What the survivor does is to pick up the subtle threads of an imaginary guilt and weave them



into a curtain of guilt which shields him from far more dangerous fears.

### Resistance and Blurred Complicity

The issue of resistance is a highly volatile one, but the question of why the prisoners did or did not resist cannot be taken up here. It enters into the subject of survivor guilt only insofar as the question plagues many of the survivors and the imagery connected to it is another from which guilt stems.

One of the best examples of the potency of this residual imagery came in the mid-Sixties with the publication of Hannah Arendt's Eichmann in Jerusalem. Essentially the book was concerned with what the subtitle termed "the banality of evil", and the failure of the Israeli courts to transcend, what Miss Arendt considered, parochial matters and establish a universal definition of, and approach to, "crimes against humanity." In making her arguments to this effect Arendt gratuitously stated ( the point was not particularly relevant to the thrust of the book ) that

...this role of Jewish leaders in the destruction of their own people is undoubtedly the darkest chapter in the whole dark story. 108

Stemming in large part from this sentence a heated and often virulent debate ensued in the intellectual and scholarly communities. The rather vituperative nature of many of the arguments indicated more, I think, than mere intellectual gymnastics or pure scholarly polemics.<sup>109</sup>

The issue was a sensitive one for many survivors prior to this



debate. Almost immediately after their liberation they were plagued with questions of why they did not resist. In speaking of members of the French resistance, the Maquis, this survivor indicates her sensitivity to the matter:

I emphasize sixty Jewish women, sixty Jewish girls because it is being said that the Jews have worked for the Germans. It is being said that the Jews were hiding and that the Jews did nothing. 110

With this emphasis on those who actively resisted are implicit accusations against those who did not; the following passage has this more openly:

Among this group who were fighting, who took chances with their lives, were significantly less casualties than among the Jews who were hiding or were sitting with their hands crossed waiting to be arrested. 111

The accusation comes to this: by failure to resist one becomes, in effect, an accomplice to his own and his comrade's destruction. That this may be true is a possibility that nags at the survivor each time he remembers an event in which he felt particularly powerless. And the memories of his impotence which connect with the deaths of his friends evoke fantasies that perhaps things might have been otherwise had he acted.

The failure to resist was recognized as a way of clinging to survival, yet, paradoxically, it meant an almost sure death not to; and it meant death to act as well. The imagery of death-if-you-do or if-you-don't that is connected with issues of resistance may explain the vacillation between defensiveness concerning the inability to resist and the exultation when speaking of those who did. This excerpt is fairly typical:

Once the Christian block trusty reproached me: "Why are they going with such indifference to death? Why don't they



fight? Why don't they kill somebody?" So I replied "You haven't been in a ghetto. You have not seen how Jews went away in transports with congealed nerves. A human being can cry himself dry; a human being clings to life and up to the last moment there is a ray of hope and they are defenseless. And they have no arms... And the same day a miracle happened. The Jews siezed the oven... And I thought then maybe we shall still survive. 112

Resistance for most meant death; yet as a meaningful death it was preferable:

I in part assisted in this revolt in Auschwitz which was for all of us a satisfaction to know that if we shall have to die, we will know, that as far as it was possible for us we have obstructed the work of extermination. 113

What this survivor is saying stands as an accusation which those who did not resist have to contend with: for some of us the ethical impulse superceded the biological urge to survive. The pride with which stories of resistance are told, even, as in the following case, where the form of rebellion was suicide, are in marked contrast to the shame felt by most survivors for their failure to act. A girl about to be hanged is remembered with particular esteem:

... she was cutting up her arteries because she did not want to go to her death... by their hands, but that she wanted to die her own death. 114

Those who did not resist, then, cannot even call their deaths their own. Survival is held specious because of the survivor's failure to avail himself of the possibility of a noble death. And the dead who died without resisting are also tainted with this mark of impurity.

With these harshly ambivalent memories of death and the dead inherent in the images of resistance come questions of fault. By not having resisted one becomes, effectively, part accomplice. There is no neutral position: one is either rebel or collaborator in a blurred vision which perceives only distant ends of the spectrum. Though there



were actual collaborators who are blamed the survivor sees himself as having gone along with them - whether wittingly or unwittingly does not matter.

...account of Menek Merin and his crew. He lulled us into such a state of sleep we didn't think, we didn't consider the possibility of resistance. 115

The survivor psychologically transforms his passivity into a perception of collaboration by default. The feeling that "I too might have resisted" has its obverse in "I too might have been an accomplice."

I put myself into his situation. I imagine what would I have done if I had been in his place? ... Today one can say if one does not want to be truthful 'Yes, I definitely would have refused.' But one can never be sure that if it would come to it, that one would simply have replied 'I don't want to do it.' Because a human being is only a human being. 116

Since the memory of non-resistance most frequently revolves around memories of other's deaths and, hence, one's fears of dying, the survivor cannot afford to view the image objectively. Rather he distorts the perception of himself in the event and the event as a whole, eliminating any mitigating circumstances. The very valid reasons why he may have been unable to resist or why, as it was in most cases, it may have been utterly futile to have done so, are conveniently dispensed with as the survivor becomes plagued with the thought that he might have done more to save himself and his fellow-prisoners. Instead of remembering his real impotence and fears of being killed when the imagery of resistance is reawakened he perceives it as a guilt-laden challenge. A song emerging from the concentration camps, Es Brent (It Burns), contains this challenge:

If your life is dear to you,  
Take the buckets and quench the fire.



Quench it with your own blood!  
 Prove that you can do it.  
 Don't stand brothers looking on  
 With folded arms!  
 Take the buckets and put out the fire  
 Because our village burns! 117

The perception is that those who did not resist stood "looking on with folded arms" when they had the opportunity to do something. The survivor confronts himself with this blurred vision of complicity for he intuits it far safer to feel guilty than to be paralyzed by fear.

#### Shared Terror

To this point we have spoken of an imagery of lives in organic continuity purely on an individual-to-individual basis. There is, however, another form of this imagination of contingency that is part of the psychic residuum of the survivor. I refer to a sense of communal interdependence in which the survivor perceives his actions as having an effect not only on individuals but on the fate of the community-at-large; and at the same time his fate is seen as reciprocal with the actions of the community. This theme may be unique to the concentration camp survivor, and it may be particularly pronounced in the Eastern European Jewish survivors, stemming, as I see it, from that specific cultural milieu and its singular sense of communal interdependence.

The ideological origins of this stress on communal responsibility may be found with the biblical answer to Abel's "Am I my brother's keeper?" to which the reply has always been a firm "Yes." The Prophets in turn made a sense of community part of the national ethical impulse.



But only the exigencies of historical circumstance provided the impetus whereby individual responsibility for communal events reached its most complete form. The isolation of the Jew and his shtetl, or ghetto-village, necessitated, on pragmatic grounds, a communal consciousness in which caring for the poor and the stranger was in harmony with the theocratic demands of the religious heritage. One's relatives were of the utmost concern, and in an extended kinship system where the most obscure and distant relationships are searched for and considered valuable the "relatives" may have included most of the village; when there was no blood relationship to be established the dictum "All Israel are brothers" elevates them to the level of family anyway.

This sense of communal responsibility is felt not only in the realm of charity but in the area of individual action as well. To sin in public, for example, is far worse than to commit the same indiscretion in private for it may also mislead others. If one is known to have committed some ethical or legal indiscretion it is incumbent upon members of the community to make the transgressor aware of what he has done, to deter him from recidivism in the future, and to remind him that individual actions have communal implications in the eyes of both God and man.<sup>118</sup>

This last is the key point: individual actions have communal implications. The biblical pattern is again instructive. In the destruction of Sodom God offers to save the city if Abraham can find fifty righteous people in it. Later, as in the prophet Jeremiah, the nation is collectively punished because its individual members "hearkened not nor inclined their ear to turn from their wickedness."<sup>119</sup> This tradition of community punishment for individual and mass sin extended



deep into the life of the shtetl; it provided the rationale for persevering pogroms and the continued oppression that was their historical lot.

With this legacy we can readily see how the concentration camp survivors, many of whom were from Eastern European origins and imbued with this communitas, might have a good deal of their residual imagery revolving around issues of communal responsibility. This sense is explicitized by Chaim Kaplan's description of the Warsaw Ghetto:

Everyone has come to realize that he is an organic part of a whole body. Anything good for the whole body is good for him, and the reverse... The concept that "all Jews are responsible for one another" has stopped being merely a slogan or metaphor. It is realized in us. <sup>120</sup>

This is markedly distinct from the experience of extreme situation survivors in whom the initial response was an illusion of centrality, a feeling that "I alone am affected." <sup>121</sup> This, however, seems to me to be a function of actual aloneness, or of disasters of sudden impact for which there was no preparation. The first reason is given credence by the finding in mine cave-ins where groups of men were trapped together there never seems to be this perception of aloneness. <sup>122</sup> When one sees his fellow victim, no matter what type of disaster, the illusion of centrality disappears, but even when no longer present it is never replaced by a sense of communal suffering. The concentration camp survivor, on the other hand, never has an illusion of centrality. His perception is always one of the community being threatened by and responding to the disaster in a shared way.

Some of this realization was pleasant for the community meant respite, as it had throughout Jewish history, from the brutal realities of oppression:



The reception given to us by Jews in Poland after deportation there who had been informed, was so warm and marvelous, that for a moment one was able to forget the pain, the misery and the want... The people sacrificed everything.<sup>123</sup>

In the camps this communal liability had practical implications for survival:

There were unfortunately such people who fell in disfavor to the great gentlemen the SS and they beat them constantly. So we agreed among us that we shall go with a proposal that daily ten men would report for beatings to soothe their bestial instincts and to request that in a lager of seven hundred people that on every seventieth day each one would be beaten and not to beat day in and day out the same people with the result that they were being beaten to death.<sup>124</sup>

The pleasantries however, are the exception rather than the rule. For the most part it is the communally shared horrors that are remembered. Survivors not only remember their own terror, but in a way that seems singular to this experience they remember feeling, together with their individual fears, a sense of communal despair, of shared terror.

I don't want to talk about what they have done to me. I want to talk about what they have done to all of us.<sup>125</sup>

We started to wail and scream. The screams were rising to heaven. It became like a choir...<sup>126</sup>

In this last passage there is a hint of connection with a community beyond the contemporary. "Screams rising to heaven" suggests identification with a historical community as they are perceived residing in heaven and as fellow sufferers, as well as a form of supplication to the divinity. This becomes more clear in the following brief description of the first days of internment at a French deportation camp:

Every time a woman or a child would raise their voice crying the whole Velodrom, as many as there were, could cry with them. The destruction of the temple!<sup>127</sup>

Reference to the Temple is indicative of a sense of connection with a



biblical community of victims that has represented the historical fate of the Jew for some two thousand years. From the liturgical literature to the commonplace idiomatic expression every tragedy that has befallen the community is placed within the context of the greatest of tragedies - the destruction of the Temple of Solomon. Elie Wiesel's recent novel, A Beggar in Jerusalem, characterizes the significance of the Temple and its geographic location Jerusalem.

A name; a secret. For the exiled a prayer. For all others, a promise. Jerusalem; seventeen times destroyed yet never erased. The symbol of survival. 128

This has significant uses as a defense against threats to one's real and symbolic life. To be firmly rooted in a continuing historical process, even if it is one where the role is that of victim, is to be part of an immortalizing process. What the survivor feels is that being a link in an unbroken chain of sufferers insures one's ultimate survival: just as Jerusalem has survived repeated ravishings so too will the people of Israel survive, even this catastrophe. Being part of this community that has shown a gift for survival can be a mode of achieving a sense of immortality, and being part of a victimized community does a good deal to assuage one's guilt by reminding him that his is a historical role of victim rather than assailant, and that he has always been a sufferer rather than a victimizer.

This is a double-edged sword however, for in the historical context the community is always seen as suffering for its sins. Thus to identify with the community as victim also entails assumption of role as one who has traditionally brought misfortune down on himself. The historical context this time festers the maneuvers by which the victims become causal agents. The "Chosen People" has incumbent upon it a higher



moral responsibility, which if not fulfilled will bring down the wrath of God. Again, via a devious, but nonetheless psychologically real, route, guilt gives one the ability to place his misfortunes in a rational context. Within the concentration camps the negative image of a brutal Jew gives each survivor an epitome of his own possible guilt by complicity or by failure of communal responsibility.

The Jewish militia of the ghettos and the "block elders" or "capes" in the camps are the major sources of this negative imagery. The contrast between the German gentile and what is expected of the Jew marks these collaborating Jews as deviants:

The Germans, well I can't expect anything from them..  
One Jew wants to do that to another. That is something  
horrible. <sup>129</sup>

These were individuals whose behavior was completely alien to the expectations and the norm of the shtetl:

... a Jewish capo. But that torments a person. It makes one a revolutionary. Here is a Jew and he beats me. He is the same as I am, but because he has more to eat and because he is no longer in the lager he behaves that way... It does something to a person... And to my great regret I also have to tell you, it is true, and I am still ashamed that I have to tell such a thing, but it is the pure truth. <sup>130</sup>

With this sense of shame is a sense of guilt over failed responsibility in not having deterred one who is "the same as I am" from becoming an accomplice. Not only did rare individuals fail to live up to the ethical ideal but

a Jewish lager; one was only under Jews and still one was ready to kill the other for a little bread, just so out of irritation, the other fellow was not considered a human being. <sup>131</sup>

The entire community, even though placed in extreme and extenuating circumstances, is felt to be guilty of becoming the same as the oppressors.



Even if their actions were infinitesimal in relation to their persecutors and understandable under the circumstances the moral lapse is inexcusable and places them in the same category as the SS. In this landscape of ethical absolutes magnitude of action is not recognized, only purity of intention is reckoned. So where the distinction between assailant and victim diminishes, the survivor, by neither deterring his neighbor or being absolutely blameless in his own mind, perceives himself as contributing to the downfall of his friends and his entire people. In essence he can only see himself having done this to insure his own survival. The language of a Lithuanian survivor who had been in the camps as a twenty-year old indicates this feeling: the Jewish militia

in the moment when their own lives were in peril they preferred to beat kapos the lives of other Jews so that they could remain alive <sup>132</sup>

The language, like that of "burnt offerings," implies sacrifice. Beating kapos is a ritual that was carried out the morning preceding the Day of Atonement in which a hen or rooster is sacrificed in lieu of one's sins for the year. In the words of the survivor this reflects the feeling that one sacrificed the life of another in order to survive. Each survivor maintains this imagery of communal responsibility in which individuals and the community as a whole is in some way at fault for allowing or being accomplice to the sacrifice.

The temptation to place blame on a few aberrant individuals cannot be succumbed to because "he is the same as I am."; the sense of total communal interconnection disallows this way of freeing oneself from a shared guilt. Individual responsibility is seen as always having its origin in communal responsibility, and an individual action is seen as



a possibility for every member of the group, and in some ways a reflection of the group animus.

The concentration camp atmosphere was one in which individual action could only be a negation of the sense of community. Primo Levi, author of Survival in Auschwitz, speaks of the contrast: before the camps

I had not yet been taught the doctrine that I was later to learn so hurriedly in the lager: that man is bound to pursue his own ends by all possible means... 133

But in the lager things are different: here the struggle to survive is without respite, because everyone is desperately and ferociously alone. If some Null Achtzen vacillated, he will find no one to extend a helping hand; on the contrary someone will knock him aside, because it is in no one's interest that there be one more "musselman" dragging himself to work every day; and if someone, by a miracle of savage patience and cunning, finds a new method of avoiding the hardest work, a new art which yields him an ounce of bread, he will try to keep his method secret, and he will be esteemed and respected for this, and will derive from it an exclusive personal benefit; he will become stronger and so will be feared, and <sup>134</sup>who is feared is, ipso facto, a candidate for survival.

One's chances for survival were improved by a self-centered renunciation of everything but self-seeking. So for those who survived the note of discord remains: we are of the same skin, what is there to say I would not have done the same if given the opportunity; and more plaguing, I did survive-that in itself is proof that I did do the same, for survival, by definition, is impure by the fact that it means living beyond another's death. The whole experience may be apprehended in communal terms: the survivor has suffered with, shared and renounced ties to, and lived beyond his community. In each aspect of the experience the central fact is that of death, and although the imagery of community serves as a historically-derived base for examination of group culpability it also



sets the stage for the individual survivor, as part of this blameworthy community, to be concerned that perhaps he too beat kapores with the lives of the dead.

### Mutant Death and the Sins of the Fathers

The death of children and, to a lesser degree, women presents a profoundly painful series of images for the survivor to deal with.

Nearly every survivor has retained memories of children dying.

[What is the most terrible story you remember from the concentration camp?]

It was when we came to Birkenau and they took the children with the women and they started to throw them in the fire.<sup>135</sup>

the children... they experienced the worst. They were simply murdered. They were exterminated. Not like human beings.<sup>136</sup>

Never shall I forget the little flames of the children, whose bodies I saw turned into wreaths of smoke beneath a silent sky. Never shall I forget those flames which consumed my faith forever...<sup>137</sup>

There are a number of themes here which give particular intensity to the images of dying children. The issues of symbolic immortality and mutant death are particularly important. Lifton speaks of symbolic immortality as:

Man's need, in the face of inevitable biological death, to maintain an inner sense of continuity with what has gone on before and what will go on after his own individual existence. From this point of view the sense of immortality is much more than a mere denial of death; it is part of a compelling, life-enhancing imagery binding each individual person to significant groups and events removed from him in place and time. It is the individual's inner perception of his involvement in what we call the historical process. The sense of immortality may be expressed biologically by living on through (or in) one's sons and daughters; theologically in the idea of a life after death or other forms



of spiritual conquest of death; creatively, or through "works" and influences persisting beyond biologic death; through identification with nature, and with its infinite extension into time and space; or experientially, through a feeling-state - that of experiential transcendence - so intense that at least temporarily it eliminates time and death. 138

Herein lies the critical point for understanding the heightened intensity of mourning where loss is felt as being out of the natural order, involving a child or mother, or simply being unexpected. In all cases the sense of organic continuity is lost, and with this loss comes the dissolution of man's sense of symbolic immortality. Erikson describes this feeling (under another name) with exquisite clarity:

an ego-chill, a shudder which comes from the sudden awareness that our non-existence - and thus our utter dependence on a creator who may choose to be impolite - is entirely possible. Ordinarily we feel this shudder only in moments when a shock forces us to step back from ourselves, and we do not have the necessary time or equipment to recover instantaneously a position from which to view ourselves again as persistent units subject to our own logical operations. Where man cannot establish himself as the thinking one (who therefore is), he may experience a sense of panic; which is at the bottom of our mythmaking, our metaphysical speculation, and our artificial creation of "ideal" realities in which we become and remain the central reality. 139

An ego-chill - this is the essence of it. In witnessing death the sense of connection is lost and it terrifies, for it brings us the specter of our own mortality. The poet's insight is most astute:

And yet you will weep and know why...  
 Nor mouth had, nor mind, expressed  
 What heart heard of, ghost guessed:  
 It is the blight man was born for,  
 It is Margaret you mourn for. 140

A correlate of the lost immortality-fear of death motif is the concept of appropriate death - the feeling that death has come in its proper time and place. Although the original papers of Weisman and



Hackett <sup>141</sup> dealt with feelings about death of self their parameters are equally useful in delineating attitudes toward death in general, both of self and other. The sense of appropriate death requires reduced conflict, compatibility with an ego ideal, the feeling that important relationships will be restored by death, and that death will bring about the consummation of a wish. It can be seen that each of these categories has inherent a sense of completeness and continuity. If a mourner feels that the deceased "appropriately" died, that their lives were complete, that the dead had found their niche within a historical superstructure, then mourning can proceed relatively unhindered. When we speak of one's life as a "closed book" this is what we mean. To take it a step further, if the potential for appropriateness is seen this too makes mourning more peaceful. To restate it from the obverse side: it is only when death is seen as senseless, as totally unpredictable, as the premature termination of an incomplete life are our symbolic defenses broken down. Each of these categories is important: senseless-beyond what we know as the natural order; unpredictable-death operant in what seems a sudden historical vacuum provokes our worst fears; premature and incomplete-a function of the first two and itself the antithesis of our basic hopes from life, maturity and completeness. In a word it is mutant death which evokes our fear of the absurd, of our non-existence.

The death of children epitomizes all of the negative aspects of symbolic immortality, and is the prime example of mutant death. The death of a child interrupts the natural order and flow of generations; this is more threatening to one's sense of symbolic immortality than the death of a contemporary because it is a disruption and cessation



of the living example of one's persistence beyond the biological self. Immortality through one's children is the most palpable mode available and is probably the most important component of the entire symbology that projects us beyond death. It follows from this that bereavement over the death of a child is the most distressing and long-lasting, for it requires greater reconstructive work on a fractured symbology.<sup>142</sup> There is also evidence, shown primarily in childhood, but I think valid throughout life, that loss of the mother provokes more intense grief than loss of the father.<sup>143</sup> That this is the case, I believe, is because, as R. J. Lifton has pointed out in a different context, "the focus from which woman's psychological life emanates - is close identification with organic life and its perpetuation."<sup>144</sup> Not only does the woman herself have this perception, but she is equally perceived by others from the aspect of her "motherliness." Women, just as children, are, respectively, the repository and incarnation of symbolic immortality. This emphasis on motherliness is noteworthy in the language of the survivors who frequently refer not to women but to mothers.\*

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\*The old are also part of this general imagery of innocence in that they are felt in their old age to have grown wise beyond sin. This is expressed in lines from Nelly Sach's mysteriously beautiful poem "Even the old men's last breath:"

Even the old men's last breath  
 That had already grazed death  
 You snatched away  
 .....  
 You thieves of genuine hours of death,  
 Last breaths and the eyelids' Good Night  
 Of one thing be sure:

The angel, it gathers



The death of a child in the concentration camp is not only out of the natural order but it represents a total dislocation from the natural setting as well. Death in the concentration camp

cannot be compared with a case when a child dies, is sick and dies in its own bed. <sup>146</sup>

In this sense of dislocation, that even a child dies away from home, the connection with communal survival is evidenced. In most cultures the child symbolizes the future survival of the culture. Thus, the image of the child goes beyond individual immortality to include in it the survival of the community. For European Jews this was no less the case:

The child murdered in sleep  
Arises; bends down the tree of ages  
And pins the white breathing star  
That was once called Israel  
To its topmost bough.  
Spring upright again, says the child,  
To where tears mean eternity <sup>147</sup>

whimpering of little children in little smoke  
mother's cradle songs in smoke  
Israel's way of freedom in smoke- <sup>148</sup>

In both excerpts the child is the means by which the nation gains or loses its immortality. This being the case, the child was protected above all else. This is a common recollection:

Father told him: "For the sake of the children, go."  
He himself remained there. <sup>149</sup>

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What you discarded  
From the old men's premature midnight  
A wind of last breaths shall arise  
And drive this unloosed star  
Into the Lord's hands! <sup>145</sup>



This protection was extended even to death:

When the children were found many mothers wanted to go with the children together because it was announced that the children will be shot. 150

A mother who was burned alive is remembered as calling out from the flames:

My child stay alive. I will watch over you.  
I will keep you in my hand. 151

The following survivor who had been through Auschwitz and its neighbor-camp Birkenau, the sole survivor of his entire family, and saw there what he believed to be the annihilation of the Jewish people was moved to Terezin (Theresienstadt) just prior to liberation. There he saw

Jews well-dressed, little children...Children the kind we had not seen for two years. Children like the which we have seen ourselves, how they were burned in the crematories, so now we could not believe these were Jewish children. 152

For him survival of his people is difficult to believe and it is crystallized in his reaction to seeing the children. A directress of an orphanage for displaced children, most of whom had been in concentration camps, and who herself was a survivor, makes apparent the significance of a group of children who had been hidden in monasteries during the war and had nearly died there (the monasteries were virtually under siege at that time) and who were nursed back to health under her care:

These children are as if they belonged to us. They belong to the entire Jewish people. I believe that their place is in Palestine. 153

The children are felt to be part of the entire community, and as symbols of communal survival they are to be sent to the place that is symbolic of the national aspiration for continuity.

It is clear, I think, how the images of children symbolize on two



levels the sense of immortality, as representatives of communal survival, and the coherence of the natural order. This is why the imagery of dying children is so profoundly engraved in the memory of the survivor. It is an accurate psychological response that in Semprun's novel The Long Voyage the death of children is the central and most moving image. It serves as the raison d'etre of the work:

And maybe I shall be able to tell about the death of the Jewish children, describe that death in all its details, solely in the hope - perhaps exaggerated, perhaps unrealizable - that these children may hear it... The story of the Jewish children in the name of the Jewish children.<sup>154</sup>

Aside from its intimate connection with lost immortality and death fears we are horror-struck at the death of a child because of a tradition which believes in the innocence of the child. For the survivor as well

The death of a man is only the death of a man, but the death of a child is the death of innocence, the death of God in the heart of man. <sup>155</sup>

Since the child is himself innocent there must be another reason for his mutant death aside from personal guilt. The challenge posed by the poet Yitzhak Katzenelson becomes a vital one:

They, the children of Israel were the first in doom  
and disaster...  
Say then, how have these lambs sinned,  
Why in days of doom are they the first victims  
of wickedness... <sup>156</sup>

With the disruption of the natural order the specter of the absurd is reevoked, and again the tendency is to supply reason where none is available. Here "reason" takes the form of a myth of retributive continuity. The cultural residuum - derived from and best expressed as the biblical "The sins of the fathers shall be visited on the children" - provides the psychological rationale. Reasonless mutant death is unaccep-



table, so the child is seen as punished because of the parent, serving as both means and object of that punishment. To be sure, this is a universal phenomenon seen in many instances where the parent watches his child die. With the memory of dying children confronting him the concentration camp survivor finds it easier to feel himself at fault than live with absurdity and a defunct sense of symbolic immortality. He remembers that

Hundreds of youths fell as burned offerings<sup>157</sup>

The phrasing is important: burned offerings recurs frequently when survivors are speaking of the dead, and particularly when they are speaking of children. I believe it to be more than idiomatic. Burned offerings were the animals sacrificed at the temple in expiation for one's sins. It is the language of sacrifice and implies exactly that perception: the child is sacrificed for the sins of the parents. This mother who survived her young daughter remembers the daughter's last words before deportation:

Au revoir, Maman. Courage. I am already sacrificed. See that you save yourself with the little ones. I give myself up already as a sacrifice.<sup>158</sup>

That this memory is guilt-laden there can be little doubt. The following tale reinforces the sense of the child as sacrifice.

My ten year old daughter said to me, "Mother why do you suffer so on my account? Just leave us here and try to save yourself"... "Mother," my little girl would say, "pray to god that we may have an easy death, and let us go by ourselves"... Later on the Ukrainian guards reiterated her words "Four lives must not perish on account of one. My life is lost anyhow." <sup>159</sup>

And so we see it again here: death fear subverted to guilt. For the survivor the question posed by Dostoyevski's Grand Inquisitor has an answer: A child dies because of the guilt of his parents in a scheme of



things that if unfathomable is at least orderly.

### The Landscape of Hell

The concentration camp survivors remember many of the atrocities performed on them by individuals and various groups. At the same time they retain a subtle sense of the landscape itself collaborating in their destruction. In an almost Miltonic way the natural environment seems to be part of the plan for extermination as it takes on aspects of the sinister. This symbolizes for the survivor a feeling of total abandonment and victimization. The point of comparison is the beneficence implicit in the tradition that the sun always shines on Jewish holidays. In marked contrast to this it is remarkable how frequently the malevolent elements are remembered. Rain, snow and winter appear to have become tools of the Nazis:

We went out to work, it rained. Winter and we frozen, hungry.<sup>160</sup>  
As we shall see with the imagery of work, the elements also take on the import of foreboding:

We sensed when we arose that something is not good  
in that day. It was a little chilly. <sup>161</sup>

The connection with death images becomes quite explicit as nearly every recollection of the death marches recalls an un hospitable environment linked with pictures of dead bodies. This passage by a Polish orphan who was in the camps as a thirteen year-old is representative of the recurrent imagery:

The whole road... it snowed. It was winter when we went  
out. Every ten meters there was a corpse. <sup>162</sup>



Where the image of landscape as collaborator is a more nebulous one the image of the camp itself is brought into a very specific frame of reference - that of Hell.

This is Hell. Today, in our times, hell must be like this. 163

Again it is remarkable how often the camp is spoken of in terms of hell, and more startling is how frequently the name of Dante is mentioned.

After the camp experience it is felt

... one could understand the meaning of Dante.<sup>164</sup>

Yet for the reality of the concentration camps the imagination of Dante is merely a starting point. On watching the flames from the crematoria one survivor realizes with bitterness

Dante was just a dog. They the SS knew it much better. 165

As another survivor noted with less acrimony:

In hell one does not see such sights as one has seen here. 166

The brutality and absurdity of the camps could only be placed in an extrahuman setting, for otherwise it defies comprehension. As we noted earlier the survivor's sense of the experience is that of utter indescribability. The imagery of hell provides one more frame of reference whereby there can be a comprehensible imagination of the holocaust that was the concentration camp.

In a broad sense the imagery of a malevolent landscape is part of the imagery of hell. Dante and the Bible both testify to the unkindness of the elements in Hell. Dante's Hell is a place of "endless night, fierce fires and shramming cold;" Biblical Hell is a dimly "dark place where there is nothing but grief ... during the obscurity of



night and the severity of the cold." But the images of hell and a malevolent landscape are important to the survivor for reasons other than the similarity in inclement weather - one reason is sensory, the other psychological. The sensory basis for the imagery is the sheer physical environment of the camps: the sight and smell of burning bodies conjured up one's nightmares of hell. Flames and vile odors are part of the archetypal imagery of hell and the concentration camp survivor had ample opportunity to associate both with hellish implications:

What...I am unable to forget is the fire by day and night ...and the pits, which were installed in the year 1944 when again Hungarian transports were arriving, rendered a sight which does not yield to description, because one imagined himself in a living hell. One was encircled all around by fire. 167

The second reason for the intensity of this imagery, and the prime psychological underpinning for their vividness and frequency lies in the way they relate to issues of death and guilt. The relationship between hell and death is clear: the malignance of the elements and the horrors of hell are part of our shared imagination of death. Also, for the concentration camp survivor the historical facts speak for themselves - when the weather got worse more of their fellows died.

The imagination of the dark and fiery hell has its roots in the dynamics of guilt as well. No hero in literature, for example, dies with the sun shining, for only the malicious of heart are consigned to the eternal inclemence of hell, or eternal death. The imagery of hell is that of lost immortality, lost because these in it have sinned. The image of hell is not simply the arch-fire image or the metaphor by



which we describe horrors, it is the mind's place of punishment, the place where the guilty go. It is on this level that the connection with guilt is realized, and here again on a communal level as well is the process by which the victim feels he has had a hand in his victimization. This shared residuum of guilt imagery that is part of our universal mythology provides the context by which the victim gains mastery over his situation. Suffering for one's sins means that one is in control of the factors producing punishment. To be able to blame oneself for the vagaries of history means that we are in a sense in control of that history. Thus the survivor focuses on the imagery of hell in order to establish the context of guilt and thus, in a monstrous fashion, to establish a context of rationality. The concentration camp is a distinctive hell in which result has no relationship to motive, and this is the absurdity that the survivor faces:

The capos or the SS men without fault on our part they called out prisoners and flogged them to death.<sup>168</sup>

The disruption of cause and effect is beyond belief and difficult to cope with:

Never in life had we dreamed that we completely blameless people will be put in a concentration camp only because we are Jews. <sup>169</sup>

This landscape of the absurd cannot be psychologically sustained because it contains within it the threat of existential annihilation, a threat that we simply cannot cope with. Mental balance depends on a perceived rational relationship between action and result; the third law of thermodynamics is a psychological requirement as well as a physical one. The concentration camp survivor whose hold on causal



relationships must be somewhat more tenuous by the nature of his experience has need for a cautious sense of control over his environment. Human historical experience provides the psychological modus vivendi. The survivor feels guilty this time by placing the entire event within the metaphor of hell and placing his role in the event as that of victim-for-sins. He makes an economical choice in his struggle for mastery, but one with terrible consequences.

#### The Clothes of the Dead

This is the first of three images which we may term relational in that all three—clothing, food, and work—are markers whereby the modern perceives the regularity of his universe. Together they form a triumvirate of the mundane; where the previous imagery has been one of relatively esoteric abstractions this imagery is distinguished by its ubiquity, and because of its ubiquity it may be frequently present to provoke unpleasant memories in the survivor. What we may consider the banal of the ordinary may be for the survivor highly charged symbols of a well-remembered past that are intimately connected with thoughts of guilt and death.

As relational symbols they also represent, in and of themselves, aspects of organic continuity; and conversely, as survivors make evident, their disruption provokes fear of lost connection. When clothing was immediately taken away on entry into the camp, a survivor recalls



That was a big blow because these were the only tokens of remembrance <sup>170</sup>

One's clothing symbolized the style and order of his former life as well as a link to that life. Just as the natural relationship to one's former clothing was dislocated so too were the symbols of that former life annihilated.

Once in the interstices of the concentration camp clothing became both a prized and despised commodity. It was prized because of its practical value for survival in conditions that were always less than benevolent; despised because it became inseparable from images of the dead and dying.

When we went to the shower hall we saw the clothing of the people who were not anymore, lying there. The clothing was still there. We recognized the clothing of the people who had left and returned no more. <sup>171</sup>

Clothing becomes a metaphor for death

From the laundry, the laundry I come  
from washing the garments of death  
from washing the shirt of Eli,  
Washing out the blood, washing out the sweat  
child-sweat, washing out death. <sup>172</sup>

As every survivor knew

the clothing was that of the killed <sup>173</sup>

and it became symbolic of those lost lives. And survival inasmuch as it depended on adequate clothing, then became a function of others' deaths:

In Auschwitz there was enough to wear. There was the clothing of the dead. They were burning people every day. <sup>174</sup>

In a sense that was not entirely unrealistic the survivor felt himself profiting from those deaths. Compounding this only slightly, at the other end of the Nazi machine clothing meant an unwilling act



of charity, for after the survivors were given the rags the intact goods went to the German citizenry at home. This too the survivors knew.

The clothing of the dead also entered into communal imagery in that it was often symbolic of a disparate but total destruction of the community:

The clothes and all the belongings were taken away and were distributed even to other prisoners... In Buchenwald we were later the suits in Auschwitz. 175

There is a sense of shared fate with those in other concentration camps. However they knew this or imagined it the concentration camp survivor feels via the clothing a sense of communal loss and at the same time a sense of guilt that he has benefited from even these distant deaths.

As a further imprint of this memory the sight of a lost friend's or relative's clothing was often the last contact the survivor had with any remnant of the dead and with the dead themselves. The shock of recognition could be frighteningly profound:

... they were gassed and the next day the clothing that these people were wearing was already back in the laundry. It was in this manner that I recognized the clothes of one of my colleagues who came with me from Berlin. His number was marked on the clothes. 176

It was said they go... to Lublin. But since within an hour the same clothes, that means the uniforms with the numbers ...would come back. We knew exactly that people were not transported to Lublin in the nude, and it did not take long before we got the word... that the people were gas-killed. 177

As the imagery of clothing becomes symbolic of the dead it evokes the problematic relationship to the dead that the survivor must continually cope with. To use the clothing of the dead for purposes of survival means, in effect, using the death of another to one's



advantage. Clothing is part and parcel of the mien of the dead which should be sacred and untouchable. Not only is the survivor using the dead for his gain but he is violating their sanctity as well. The difficulties associated with utilizing anything belonging to the dead is testified to by this survivor who went about in his underwear for a time after his pants had been torn off:

[Couldn't you get yourself another pair of pants?]  
 No that was impossible unless I would have taken them from a dead man.<sup>178</sup>

The choice he made might well be considered pathologic but to take from the dead was tainted with feelings of guilt. Even though clothing might mean a better chance at survival it was always at the expense of others. In this story of forty-four men taken to be executed the only one rescued recalls the event through the metaphor of clothing:

The truck with forty-four heaps of clothing stood in front of the clothing shed. Wiesenthal was told to get his clothes and shoes 'without disturbing the other heaps.'<sup>179</sup>

The image of clothing is linked to his escape in which it became the equivalent of the lives he could not save, who died in his stead.

The entire step-wise process from questions of priority to causality is again psychically reenacted so that the imagery of clothing of the dead evokes not so much the memory of death as the accusations of guilt:

afterwards they had to take the clothes which everybody recognized from her mother, from her sister, from her children They cried with bloody tears. They had to take those clothes and sort them. And everybody was thinking 'Why did I not go together with them? Why did we remain alive' <sup>180</sup>

Again the survivor is given to feel as if he had a choice in the matter.



The clothing of the dead becomes symbolic of his failure to "go together with them" - which means instead of them.

## Food

Recollections of starvation and hunger can be heard from every concentration camp survivor. For most they are part of a factual recounting of the deprivations suffered, but in others these memories are of life and death struggles and hence have rather painful symbolic implications. The memory of food, contains, as does much of the survivor's residual imagery, dual aspects. It is related to the death of another in that food was the object of many internecine struggles between the prisoners. Apart from the struggles producing guilt, food has its own symbolic meaning in the sphere of organic connection by its value in aiding survival, eg. bread is the "staff of life." On the first level, the struggle for food was well - remembered:

They simply fight each other for food..both of them would throw themselves on it. 181

The memory of having taken part in these struggles is a debasing one for the survivor. He sees it a pure selfishness in which his desire for survival exceeded his humaneness.

When I was hungry - and for all my relatively privileged position, hunger often twisted my vitals - I was like an animal. I did not think, I did not remember, I forgot my husband and my child, and I thought only about one thing: bread. 182

That he fought for survival with his fellow victim, that he in a



sense became part of the victimizing process by denying another's right to survival is a major source of guilt.

That bread particularly was equated with survival is clearly remembered by many of the survivors:

We had to sit around in silence because what did we have to defend ourselves with? And what could we accomplish? One was fortunate to get his twenty deca of bread. This was the only hope for survival. 183

... the best moment for me was before I had eaten because when I had my ration of bread in my pocket, in my knapsack ... that was the most happy moment for me, I knew I have something to eat when I want to eat. But as soon as it was eaten I had no hope anymore. 184

It is of note, along these lines, that many stories recount how people in the camps, when given the opportunity, could consume huge quantities of food. When these tales are recounted - as in the case of one prisoner who drank ten liters of soup at a sitting - there is the sense of the heroic about it. This in part derives from the view that in the camps eating was a way of affirming life, and the gargantuan ability to eat is heroic in that it embodies a particular aspect of the heroic: the ability to affirm life on a grand scale.

The image of food could also assume a perverse meaning in which, if it suddenly did become freely available, it was an ominous sign:

In the ghetto there already appeared a saying: If you get butter today there will be an action [a raid by the SS] tomorrow. 185

It also assumed a diabolical significance when it came to the children:

The way in which the children were taken was also interesting. The German SS entered and gave the children chocolate, so that the children would be willing to go. 186

Food which was formerly a symbol of life becomes unmistakably associated with death, either by its presence or its absence in an irresolvable paradox of feelings. The link between the dead and the struggle for



survival becomes inextricably confounded with images of food, as evidenced by the following passage:

And since I have suffered from hunger... and so this horrible thing came to happen. We enlisted a group of forty people and they brought us to the dead to the crematory and we received an additional dinner. <sup>187</sup>

He became part of the "Canada Commando" which delivered bodies from the gas chambers to the crematoria. He perceives this as using the dead to get more food and thus guaranteeing his survival; and for this he feels profoundly guilty.

The image of food then is one more image in which the central theme is that of one life traded for another. The survivor by the fact of his survival becomes a murderer and the whole community which took part in the struggle for survival is felt, by complicity or direct action, to be guilty of sacrificing the dead.

To steal this piece of bread is to choose another man's death to assure your own life, or at least improve your own possibilities... Any one of us could have stolen that piece of bread, we were all guilty. <sup>188</sup>

### Work and Forced Labor

The residual imagery of work or forced labor is also multivalent; on the one hand images of death and on the other reminders of guilt. The fear of death connected with this imagery is also at least two-fold in nature. It is as the two sides of the coin on both of which you lose: if you did work the sheer physical exertion would kill you, and if you didn't the gas chambers would do the job of extermination. Any way one turned work meant death.



The guilt images are of a somewhat different nature than the others we have cited in that, though the distinction between assailant and victim is compromised here as well, the resultant imagery of contingency is not felt in the same immediate way. The imagery of one-for-one sacrifice is muted as the victim perceives himself as victimizer only through a great deal of psychological distance. In a word this is an imagery of vicarious culpability. Nonetheless this imagery still provokes many unwanted feelings from the mind of the survivor because in working for the Germans he sees himself as contributing to the destruction of his fellow victims.

Prime Levi recounts his first image of the camp in terms of work:

We saw a large door, above it a sign brilliantly illuminated (its memory still strikes me in my dreams) Arbeit Macht Frei. Work gives freedom. 189

For the most part work was viewed as an attempt to survive. The freedom in the Auschwitz slogan meant only life for the moment, as long as one could work.

Work ! We too had worries about work ! The day my man was working we had hopes to survive that day. But when people came to the gates of the ghetto and said 'no more work' required' that was a dark day. 190

In the concentration camps as well

We were only conscious that during all the time we were in concentration camps we were always afraid to be unable to work. 191

Slave labor was a forced reason for being, part of the process of dehumanization in which

They were to earn their existence. 192

This imagery of work-equals-survival shifted with the changing directives of the "Final Solution." The psychohistorical connection



becomes evident in this shift: the nature of the historical process varies and the psychological imagery changes with it. As genocide became more important than slave labor the nature of that labor became altered, it

was not work! It was to exterminate people. It was not work, work that is of some use. 193

Work was no longer evoking fears of death by being equated with death's opposite; it became a death force in itself as it no longer held any guarantees for survival. The inscription over the gate at Auschwitz had a limerick ending composed by the prisoners to indicate the new image of work:

Work makes free  
In crematory two and three. 194

The only freedom to be found is in death. The connotation of the word "work" reflected this new historical emphasis. Early in the camp one would volunteer for work details knowing it had some survival value. Later the "request" for laborers took on ominous meanings:

They took us to work. We knew what that meant. 195

In Auschwitz there was no work. 196

Whether the work was of the survival-value type or extermination-work it evokes in the survivor images of impending death. Even the work which was felt to insure survival was risky for they were constantly being beaten on the job and death, even at the easiest work, was a commonplace.

Even under the assumption that work did hold some tenuous means to survival there were considerable conflicts attendant on the actual labor. The question of contributing to the cause of the oppressor was a particularly painful one. For some there was little question



To work in a fur factory? But for whom? The Germans...  
 A Jew in general should not move for the Germans even  
 a finger. He had a task to destroy them... That is what  
 I told my father. 197

The father on the other hand can find ways of justifying his actions:

One fur coat, two fur coats... You cannot fight the Germans  
 and with it you won't help the Germans. 198

Others felt similarly that not to work meant suicide and work had  
 little effect on anything except perhaps their survival. Work in areas  
 in which much of the psychological distance between labor and its effects  
 are bridged, as in the manufacture of weapons in which the victims  
 can see themselves impeding the chances of survival for themselves  
 and their friends, is much more difficult, for it evokes the sense  
 of complicity in a direct and undiluted fashion. Guilt is always the  
 major affect of the conscious conflict, and this produces a need to  
 justify having had some part in the war effort:

We had to do it, there was no way out. 199

We manufactured cannons whether we wanted to or not. 200

A young Polish girl makes the conflict generating these apologies  
 explicit:

To work! I should stamp cartridges for the machine guns,  
 with which Germans would shoot (and these were the last  
 munitions factories) the Americans who came to liberate  
 us. 201

She resolved her conflict by producing defective equipment. But for  
 most others this resolution was either impossible or suicidal, and  
 for them the question of a subtle complicity is continually revived  
 with the imagery of work. And with this intimation of guilt comes  
 the reminder of how closely it was linked to the death of self  
 and others. Though this may be complicity at a distance, or a vicarious



culpability, the guilt images are no less profound than if the imagery was that of sacrifice. For the survivor there is no respite even in a guilt that is far removed.



## CHAPTER IV

### THEORETICAL ISSUES

Guilt was not invented at Auschwitz, it was disfigured there.  
- Elie Wiesel

Images of the survivor are repetitions of similar themes in varying abstracted contexts, the common core being the memory and awareness of a violent and relentless mortality. Yet the residual images are retained in such a fashion as to shift the focus from death to guilt, and guilt in turn is also often barred free expression apprehended only by going beyond the more blatant elements of the survivor syndrome. Explanation for the labyrinthine maneuvers and defenses whereby this altered perception is achieved has been offered in a variety of theoretical propositions, but, as John Stuart Mill was apt to point out, "truth" is most often found in the multiplicity of part-truths that can be garnered from those offered as absolutes. The case is similar here: there are a number of astute and important theoretical formulations for survivor guilt, but, as I see it, a more accurate raison for the concentration camp survivor's dilemma is best discerned by gleaning various aspects of these formulations and joining them in a cohesive statement.

Perhaps the most dogmatic etiologic formulation of survivor guilt has been that of the "Anlage" school <sup>202</sup> which states that



the inability to recover from a traumatic experience must be and is without exception due to pre-morbid emotional disturbances; that the stress of a disaster alone - including an event with the massive traumatizing potential of the camps - can produce chronic symptoms is categorically denied. On these grounds during the early days of restitutions by the German government many victims who claimed emotional disturbances subsequent to and resulting from the concentration camp experience were denied reparations.

Anlage or pre-morbid psychological defects as the cause of an inability to recover from psychic trauma has been mentioned as a possibility in the *Extreme Situation* by Welfenstein,<sup>203</sup> and Archibald and Tuddenham noted that those with the combat syndrome had a higher incidence of childhood loss,<sup>204</sup> but both statements are somewhat speculative. Other studies on the concentration camp survivor have suggested precisely the opposite to be true. The conclusions drawn from several long-term statistical studies of disparate survivor groups revealed that "nothing from the preceptivity period was of significance in the development of the concentration camp syndrome."<sup>205</sup> One again suspects that neither absolute is entirely true, and that there is some connection between pre-morbid events (though not necessarily pre-morbid pathology) and the survivor syndrome. One example is the finding by Dr. A. Meir that those traumatic experiences of the camps most often remembered were those which could be linked to pre-camp experiences, either real or fantasized.<sup>206</sup> There is a melding of the childhood memory and the camp image. That this is the case seems quite reasonable and in accordance with general psychological thinking. To subscribe to the anlage theory in its entirety, however, is to deny



the destructive potential of a traumatic event as the concentration camp. On the other hand to entirely neglect the psychological equipment individuals bring to the events in their lives is to deny the varieties of human response. It seems that the most reasonable and precise answer lies in a concordance of opposites: individual psychology and historical experience are both valid aspects of the survivor's predicament.

A considerably more abstract formulation, but one that I would suggest is also more accurate is Rosenman's attribution of guilt to a regression-induced personification of the disaster in which he assigns the animistic assimilation of the disaster to the three separable units of the ego structure: the representation of the significant other ... the interrelationship between self and significant other, and the representation of the self.<sup>207</sup>

The roots of guilt lie in our sense of connection to others and in the mea culpa of our elemental egocentricity. The significant other of a disaster is usually conceived of as the divinity, but the origin of guilt lies in man himself.

The universal feeling is that when we suffer we must be to some degree at fault, and, hence, guilty. We have seen that this sense becomes hypertrophied in the mind of the concentration camp survivor to a self-accusatory "Why did I survive when I am at fault?." The self is the center of the question but the context is the relationship of the self to significant others, in this case the dead.

The representation of the significant other in terms of the deity is operant among concentration camp survivors particularly in the images of community. The interrelationship between self and



this significant other also operates in the same area, but it is Rosenman's third unit, the assimilation of the disaster to representation of self, that is a dominant feature of survivor guilt. The disaster is both consciously and unconsciously made part of one's self, and as an instrument of the self it not only manifests one's aggressive urge but also assures self-preservation since one is part of the disaster force rather than object of its wrath. Wolfenstein attributes the sense of guilt to an "I'm glad it wasn't me who died" attitude followed by a fear of the vindictive dead.<sup>208</sup> Similarly, Fenichel<sup>209</sup> in speaking of survivors in general and Bettelheim on concentration camp survivors in particular<sup>210</sup> have also stated that guilt over the death of another is guilt over the feeling of joy that it has not been oneself. Though I see the issue as a good deal more complex this reinforces Rosenman's point that the individual sees himself in some fashion as an integral part of the cause of other's destruction and as beneficiaries of that destruction. In psychoanalytic terms, the victims are forced to choose their own egos as love-objects to the exclusion of all else; and in striving for this psychic self-preservation they create an insoluble superego conflict resulting in a chronic survivor guilt.<sup>211</sup> Lifton makes this conflict explicitly clear:

The survivor can never inwardly, simply conclude that it was logical and right for him, and not others to survive. Rather he is bound by an unconscious perception of organic social balance which makes him feel that his survival was made possible by others deaths: If they had not died he would have had to; if he had not survived, someone else would have. Such guilt as it relates to survival priority may well be that most fundamental to human existence.<sup>212</sup>

This view, to be sure, is much different than the theory that the



survivor experiences "joy" over the death of another in his stead, and then self-recriminations for this death wish against others <sup>213</sup>, the reasoning which serves as the basis for Bettelheim's etiologic formulation:

I believe, on the basis of my experience, that this guilt is not for the death of the other but for how one felt about it... But it is the morally unacceptable feeling of happiness—that it was not I but another who drew a bad lot—which makes one feel guilty and not that one owes one's existence to a fellow human beings misfortune. <sup>214</sup>

... short of pathological cases such guilty feelings are more pretended than real. They are a pretense adopted mainly to avoid having to admit how glad one felt that it was they and not I who died. Thus, the claimed guilt about the dead is very much a denial of feelings that are morally unacceptable. But existential guilt is a luxury one can <sup>215</sup> afford only if one's life is not in immediate jeopardy.

The first issue here is one of definition: What is a pathological case? There are indications that to varying degrees the incidence of the survivor syndrome is quite high. <sup>216</sup> Similarly, it appears that this high incidence of undisputed pathology is accompanied by an equally high incidence of survivor guilt which appears to be existential in nature. There is also evidence that in any disaster there is a perception that the "other" sacrificed himself for the survivor; <sup>217</sup> and correlated with this is the higher incidence of guilt seen when the victims are children, for the doctrine of the child's innocence is absolute proof that they suffered for the sins of the survivor. I would agree with Bettelheim on a rather crucial point, that existential guilt is not a major consideration when one's life is in danger. The dynamic we have seen suggests that it is the imagery of existential connection that is inherent in the camps, but it is only later when hope for the return of the dead has faded and the concerns of the survivor focus more and more on painful images of



death and lying that the existential guilt itself comes into play. This is why there is a symptom-free interval - a period between liberation from the camps and the onset of symptoms - which marks the transition from a latent imagery to a manifest guilt. In other words Bettelheim is correct to the extent that existential guilt is possible only when threats to mortality are not present; it involves a confrontation with immortality that presupposes a safe mortality - for the moment at least. Bettelheim may also be correct that in the camps one's guilt was over feeling happy about another's death and that some of the residual guilt stems from those feelings, but it seems to me that the major part of the survivor's guilt is a "luxurious" one that deals with issues of organic connection, and that enables him to recover from the psychohistorical dislocations of his experience.

Bettelheim's formulation has been phrased in more doctrinaire psychoanalytic terms. Szatmari suggests that the survivor's problem is his inability to cope with "aregurgitation of the early aggressive fantasies now projected onto reality,"<sup>218</sup> that is, the fantasies derived from infantile aggressions and death wishes toward parents and siblings.<sup>219</sup>

This relationship between infantile fantasies and guilt suggests that there may be a relationship between the age during which internment took place and the nature of survivor guilt. The evidence here varies from the confusing to the contradictory. Theoretically speaking "the economic considerations themselves are subject to phase specific genetic development and are different in different age periods of the life cycle."<sup>220</sup> Yet Eitinger and Askevold concluded that age had no bearing on survivor guilt or any manifestation of the survivor syndrome.<sup>221</sup>



Niederland, on the other hand, directly relates the severity of both guilt and syndrome to the earlier the age of trauma. <sup>222</sup> Chedoff cites age-dependent differences in that children who survived showed frequent emotional maldevelopment and character deformation <sup>223</sup> ; he does not elaborate on how these differ from the emotional malaise of adult survivors. (Anna Freud and Sophie Dann who worked with children under three years of age who had survived Terezin found that they were markedly hypersensitive, restless, aggressive and difficult to handle. <sup>224</sup>) The age factor seems to be more specifically related to forms of symptomatology among older age groups. In the twenty to thirty year old group chronic anxiety dominated the syndrome and in the thirty to forty group depression was the major factor. <sup>225</sup> There does not appear to be any change in the form or type of guilt evidenced. This agrees with recent work in which it was found that thirty to forty year old depressives were generally characterized by chronic anxiety during their twenties. What we are seeing among survivors, then, appears to be no different in this respect, from the "control" population of depressed patients. We are left with the impression that age does relate to more general manifestations of the syndrome but that it has no effect on the form of guilt (except perhaps the very young in whom death guilt is incomprehensible) although Lifton does point out that adolescence is a time of heightened sensitivity to death guilt, and exposure to massive trauma at this time may produce a more intense and long-lasting conflict with death imagery and hence a more profound survivor guilt. <sup>226</sup>

Another external factor in the genesis of guilt may be that of differing cultural patterns of response. Here again there is no clear-



cut evidence either way, but there are some significant indicators that these factors may be important. Wolfenstein has noted several differences in response to the extreme situation among varying cultural groups,<sup>227</sup> and Zborowski's study People in Pain<sup>228</sup> showed very marked cultural differences in response to sickness and pain. Eitinger's study of Norwegian and Israeli concentration camp survivors showed markedly less guilt in the former group,<sup>229</sup> attributing it to the historical differences in the experiences of the two groups: in marked contrast to the Israeli group many of the Norwegians had initially been sent to the camps after arrest for acts of bravery and resistance, and when they returned home they were greeted as heroes. I would agree with this analysis and ascribe these differences to historical circumstance rather than cultural variable. In another study Gronner suggested that

the end of a mode of life as it has been known affects the German-Jewish victim much more than the Polish or Russian Jew who has always known a life of isolation and persecution.<sup>230</sup>

Despite my own belief in significant cultural variables affecting survivor responses, this statement strikes me as patently absurd. There are we know significant differences in the life styles of the Eastern and Western European Jewish communities, but to say that one group was affected more than another betrays a considerable intellectual myopia. Gronner seems to forget that this uprooting was not simply to a more oppressive ghetto, but to an extreme environment for which no former life pattern could have adequately prepared one. And among those who survived to leave the camps for elsewhere the annihilation of the Eastern European shtetl culture was



surely as dislocating as the geographical shift from one cosmopolitan center to another was for many a Western Jew. The difficulties for both groups were enormous and I, for one, would hesitate evaluating their relative severity. The issue as I see it is not who suffered more, but whether there are different responses to the trauma among those groups whose suffering can barely be fathomed, no less compared.

Trautman,<sup>231</sup> Chodoff,<sup>232</sup> Klein, et al.<sup>233</sup> have all indicated that they found no significant cultural differences in the nature of the syndrome. To my mind however the creative response to the experience shows the opposite to be true. The bulk of the work by Eastern European Jewish survivors has been of a fictional or memoir nature with the effort being a transcendent one: in the case of the fictions to place the experience within a universal spiritual framework; the memoirs are efforts at completing a mission - of bringing the truth to the world. In both categories the attitude toward the dead is that of unquestioning reverence. Among Western Europeans the work has been a good deal more analytical: psychological and historical evaluations in which, though they also attempt to place the event in a universal frame, the attitude is one of profound skepticism; and the dead are as much subject to the questions (and accusations) of this analytical skepticism as are the living. Admittedly I have picked a small distorted sample of survivors who are meeting their problems in the idiom of creativity, but nonetheless the differences are so marked that I think they bear mention.

A last point also worth mention: in Wolfenstein's study of Extreme Situation survivors<sup>234</sup> and Muller's work on concentration camp survivors<sup>235</sup> both noted a more pronounced element of guilt among Jewish groups.

Cultural and chronological variables aside, we have noted previously



the suggestion by Rosenman that survivor guilt may have adaptive potential by providing the illusion of control. An alternative benefit can be gathered from Freud regarding the possibility of guilt associated with mourning giving rise to

The self-torments of melancholics, which are without doubt pleasurable, signifying a gratification of sadistic tendencies and of hate, both of which relate to an object and in this way have both been turned around upon the self... the sufferers usually succeed in the end in taking revenge, by the circuitous path of self-punishment, on the original objects and in tormenting them by means of the illness, having developed the latter so as to avoid the necessity of openly expressing their hostility against their loved ones. <sup>236</sup>

This dynamic may be extended into the realm of survivors highlighting the relationship between ontologic and neurotic guilt. Just as there are aspects of melancholia that serve as adaptational subterfuges designed to avoid confrontation with a more provocative reality, so survivor guilt may also be a means of avoiding a more painful ontologic guilt. There may be an unconscious, purposively induced, neurotic guilt which is symptomatic of a deeper malaise, rather than being in and of itself the main problem.

Among Hiroshima survivors Lifton observes that

this identification with death, the whole constellation of inwardly experienced death symbolism is, paradoxically enough, the survivor's means of maintaining life, because in the face of the burden of guilt that he carries, particularly guilt over survival priority, his obeisance before the dead is his best means of justifying and maintaining his own existence. <sup>237</sup>

Gumbel also notes adaptational aspects of survivor guilt which serve similar purposes by different focus:

it seems to me that the unrealistic guilt feelings, common to almost all survivors, are not only of a regressive pathologic nature. There may be something positive about them. As against a devastating realization of a complete lack of



justice and of a moral order in the world and the feeling of utter helplessness, guilt feelings can be an affirmation of meaning and a person's ability to exert influence upon his own life and the course of events in general. He who believes in his own guilt and responsibility establishes or reinstates his active involvement and part in life and endows it with a purpose, thus repudiating his spiritual annihilation. 238

Gardner, extending Rosenman's concept to all forms of neurotic guilt, suggests that by giving one a sense of control guilt serves to allay existential anxiety 239 and thus is always adaptive. Chedoff sees other benefits derived from maintaining a constant state of guilt: survivors cannot give up their guilt

because unconsciously this would amount to forgetting their parents and siblings and thus betraying their memories. It may also be that ... unconsciously related to a need to suffer in order to continue to bear witness to the cruelty to which they had been treated, since to get well would amount to forgiving the German persecutors and this to striking another bitter blow of betrayal at murdered friends and relatives. 240

This last theme, of bearing witness, may be a carry-over from the camps where the sense of having a mission was often a life-saving defense; 241 similar themes served this purpose among hibakusha as well. 242 It is a source of strength and hope by which the survivor can carry on. It is a link to the past as the mission is most often to recount what happened, and at the same time it is a link to the future since the recounting is felt to be efficacious in preventing the same thing from ever happening again.

Though his maneuvers may be adaptive the unresolved issue is why the survivor finds himself unable to simply discard his residual imagery. Why, instead, does it remain so potent a force in his mind, and why can he not cope with it in a way that would successfully ameliorate its malignant effects? In short, why must the survivor engage in adaptive



manouvers around the imagery rather than achieve mastery within the framework of his experience?

Lifton's concept of "death guilt" in Hiroshima survivors is crucial to a projected answer; he speaks of it as

all forms of self condemnation associated with literal or symbolic exposure to death and dying, including those usually linked with a sense of shame. 243

The means by which this guilt is remembered is "the ultimate horror:"

a specific image of the dead or dying with which the survivor strongly identifies himself and which evokes in him particularly intense feelings of pity and self-condemnation. 244

The ultimate horror thus form the hibakusha's residual image - the pictorialization of his central conflict in relationship to the disaster. 245

We have seen this to be the case among concentration camp survivors as well, and in both groups particularly potent aspects of these images are those of women and children who could not be saved. There are two factors operant here. The survivor has been confronted with a joltingly irrevocable awareness of death,

not only has any preexisting illusion of invulnerability been shattered but he has disturbingly confronted his own mortality, with his own death anxiety. 246

Further,

since survival by definition involves a sequence in which one person dies sooner than another, this struggle in turn concerns issues of comparative death-timing. Relevant here is what we have spoken of as guilt over survival priority along with the survivor's sense of an organic social balance which makes him feel that his survival was purchased at the cost of another. 247

These factors are intimately related to one another: death fear is partly a consequence of the guilt that accompanies mourning over the death of another, and this guilt has an ontologic base in that its imagery is that of organic continuity. Thus images of women and children predominate for



they represent, above and beyond the issues of social balance, modes of immortality. Their deaths present the survivor with the ultimate threat to his sense of symbolic immortality by embodying symbols of severed connection with the historical continuum, mutant death, and disruption of organic continuity. This ultimate threat in turn evokes the ultimate guilt: that the survivor in some way bears responsibility for his loss. In a horrible way this has some basis in a reality which the survivor can distort for purposes of self-condemnation because it was true that that many survivors could not save the dying or even ease their passing. It is this sense of helplessness that inspires the self-reproach which gives rise to death anxiety and guilt.

The imagery fomenting death guilt is imprinted onto the psyche of the survivor. <sup>248</sup> Subject to the continual threat of symbolic reactivation - an event, word, or sight that reevokes the imprinted residual image - the survivor engages in what Lifton terms "psychic numbing." Having its roots in the defense mechanism of denial psychic numbing enables the survivor to utilize a "reversible form of symbolic death in order to avoid a permanent physical or psychic death." <sup>249</sup>

There may be efforts to break out of this numbing:

the urgency with which many Hiroshima and concentration camp survivors married (or remarried) and had children seeking not only to replace the dead but to reassert vitality and biological continuity. <sup>250</sup>

This "psychic opening-up" is all too frequently incomplete, and therein lies Lifton's dynamic for the survivor syndrome. He sees psychic opening-up as necessary to carry out the work of mourning; and the work of mourning is the essential repair that must be implemented by the survivor in order



to formulate his relationship to the dead. This relationship to the dead in turn defines his sense of immortality and connection. Psychic numbing which begins as a defense may end as a pathogenetic factor.

Extremely important is Lifton's suggestion that the neurotic process may be a manifestation of psychic numbing. The concentration camp survivor's experience suggests that this equation requires certain modifications. Neurotic guilt is akin to psychic numbing in that both are adaptational. For the hibakusha, however, numbing is utilized as a protection against images of death and personal culpability. For the concentration camp survivor self-condemnation is not denied. On the contrary, it is this sense itself that is utilized as the content of neurotic guilt which then serves to divert the survivor's focus from the more painful images of death and its concomitant ontological guilt. In other words, where psychic numbing anesthetizes feelings about the central images of death neurotic guilt inundates the survivor with peripheral images of guilt. In a sense this seems to serve as a kind of long-term psychic numbing (which itself, it seems, cannot be maintained over extended periods). Part of this difference in diversionary tactics lies in the differing nature of the two experiences. The concentration camp survivor is simply unable to deny the imagery of guilt for it is his only means of submerging the more provocative and painful ontic issues.

Just as psychic numbing, neurotic guilt also impairs mourning, but where numbing does not allow a resolution of death guilt by barring its expression neurotic guilt impairs mourning by effecting a permanent confrontation with this guilt which serves equally well to obstruct the work of mourning.



This distinction is implicit in Lifton's observation that concentration camp survivors, their trauma being more extensive in duration at least, are more "likely to retain more diffuse and severe psychic impairment while in hibakusha death imagery tends to be more predominant." <sup>251</sup> The key to this difference lies not only in the time differential but primarily with the symbolic elements that became the central imagery of the camps. The residual imagery of the Hiroshima survivor revolves around the dead and dying. The emphasis of the concentration camp survivor is on imagery of fault - that is, one's role in the death of others and, hence, one's moral (or ontological) connection to those dead. Where the Hiroshima survivor sees the dead in a direct light the concentration camp survivor views them through the penumbra of his own complicity. Thus the degree of death guilt is not only related to the sheer quantity of death imagery but to the kind of symbolic perceptions which accompany it. I would agree with Lifton that the massive encounter with death and its threats to the sense of symbolic immortality is the basic progenitor of survivor guilt. I would differ in regard to the concentration camp survivor for whom the encounter with death is intrinsically admixed with images of contingency thus mitigating the effects of psychic numbing. I would maintain that the historical circumstances of the camps and the cultural desiderata which the survivors brought to them place the survivor in a position where rather than avoiding guilt he immerses himself in it as protection from a more painful immersion in death.

This distinction is indicative of the fact that psychic numbing serves as a protection against threats from without - Hiroshima was essentially an external experience as regards the clear distinction



between assailant and victim. Where psychic numbing proves to be inadequate is in coping with threats from within. Although the historical actuality of the concentration camps was one from without the distinction between victim and victimizer became blurred and the psychological reality was transformed into an internal threat. The victims imagine themselves accomplices in their own victimization. This forced impulse to self-condemnation brings the survivor into proximity of his ontologic fears as the issues in his mind are death and an existential crisis about themes of complicity in causing death. The essence of this conflict, as our examination of the residual imagery has shown is the continuing struggle of the survivor to deal with his role in the event.

Trautman has made observations on concentration camp survivors which, to some extent, parallel Lifton's:

The background of the anxiety in survivors is the implanted fear of being killed. It is an existential fear connected with the dynamic of a traumatized self-preservation instinct... .. It is associated with conscious and unforgettable memories that are not repressed though sometimes pushed out of focus. <sup>252</sup>

They also showed a universal fear of death for their relatives <sup>253</sup>

which gainsays Bettelheim's contention that the survivor's motivations were entirely selfish. de Wind takes this a step further: he feels that it is the fear of death which is the pathogenetically important factor in the survivor syndrome.

... on returning to normal society, the ex-prisoner was unable to rid himself of the fear caused by the image of his own death. Too often he was - or is - inclined automatically to associate "future" with death... The avoidance of the image of his own death gives rise to a persistent syndrome in the ex-prisoner. <sup>254</sup>

I think that this statement by de Wind taken together with Lederer's



Lederer's suggestion that the fear of death which originally was only anxiety-provoking becomes a fear of life - a lack of trust in the world and the possibility of goodness <sup>255</sup>- defines the elemental genetic principle of the syndrome.

To explain survivor guilt dynamically, however, I would agree with Lifton and argue that the concept of impaired mourning must be taken as the crucial link between the fear of death and survivor guilt. Mourning, as the adult conceptualizes death as an absolute, is worked through via a complexly organized ritual. This

ritual is a symbolic transformation of experiences that no other medium can adequately express. Because it springs from primary human need, it is spontaneous activity - that is to say it arises without intention, without adaptation to a conscious; its growth is undesigned, its pattern purely natural, however intricate it may be. <sup>256</sup>

Though primarily intrapsychic ritual becomes centrifugal: it radiates outward from the needs of the individual to acquire a social usefulness. The role of mourner reestablishes a sense of place in, and belonging to, a community-at-large which sympathizes with his grief. There is reaffirmation of a supportive social order with assurances of continued kinship from members of this social order. Perhaps most important, mourning rites allow for a complete immersion in grief, and, at the same time, a gradual amelioration and systematic curtailment of this grief. <sup>257</sup> The social consequences of ritual in turn reflect back centripetally to meet the needs of the individual by allowing him to adopt a particular socially condoned style of mourning. Gorer has delineated eight general styles, only two of which need concern us here. <sup>258</sup> "Time-limited mourning," a specific temporally-predetermined sequence of grieving ceremonies, is felt to be the most efficacious of all the mourning styles in aiding



readjustment.<sup>259</sup> Conversely, "unlimited mourning" with a prolonged period of despair is seen to be least effective; it is this style that prevails among groups with no defined ritual. We can safely extrapolate and say that among those who ordinarily do have a ritual but are unable to carry it out, no matter what the reason, the tendency toward despair will become very pronounced. This is an important consideration, particularly for Jewish concentration camp survivors who prior to internment adhered to a highly formalized time-limited mourning sequence.

Even among those who have few religious ties, be it survivors or the general population, the social techniques for confronting death are primarily religious. As Gerer, succinctly puts it: Death is a religious preserve."<sup>260</sup> For the survivor this too presents a serious dilemma. The adherence to ritual was impossible and carrying out time-limited mourning in any way remotely resembling the proscribed manner was absurd even to think about. Even after the concentration camp experience was over achievement of ritual demands could not be met because the proper time - as - well as the emotional substrate upon which this timing was based-had long since passed.

The fact of cremation in the camps also contributes to the survivor's difficulty. Cremation is "felt to get rid of the dead more completely and finally than does burial,"<sup>261</sup> and, further complicating matters, it is taboo in Jewish ritual. Lifton's concept of the "missing dead" explains the difficulty:

the survivors sense that the bodies-the human remains - around which he might ordinarily organize rituals of mourning abruptly disappeared into smoke or nothingness. In these ways mourning is rendered shallow and unsatisfying.<sup>262</sup>

Distorted visions of death and the inability to conform to ritual in the



expected manner confound the survivor's efforts to mourn. There is every reason to believe that in addition to his other problems the survivor must also contend with impaired mourning.

It is along the same lines that Niederland<sup>263</sup> and Meerloo<sup>264</sup> have noted an unusually frequent emergence of survivor guilt in the clinical setting as unresolved mourning. Meerloo's patients complained of their inability to mourn in the camps, feeling that the necessary rituals would have been a threat to their survival. Again, I would offer that these rituals could not be carried out on a psychological level either; in the camps mourning was an impossibility for part of the work of mourning is to allay the death fear that is ubiquitous in the camp itself. Simply, the sense of immortality essential for completion of mourning could not be attained in the concentration camp for the sense of continuity is a function of man's historical perspective. We see ourselves as creatures of history firmly rooted in a psycho-historical process and bound to a vast concatenation of collective experiences. When this bond is severed, when we see ourselves outside of the natural progression of historical events, beyond the connection between past and future, the feeling that we are part of an organic continuum is lost. The death of another temporarily gives us this experience. The death of another that seems out of place in the flow of history further severs our sense of connection. The radical displacement of the concentration camp survivor shatters all connection. As one survivor put it:

For living men, the units of time always have a value which increases in ratio to the strength of the internal resources of the person living through them; but for us hours, days, months spilled out sluggishly from the future into the past



always too slowly, a valueless and superfluous material, of which we sought to rid ourselves as soon as possible. With the end of the season when the days chased each other, vivacious, precious, and irrecoverable, the future stood in front of us, grey and inarticulate, like an invincible barrier. For us history had stopped. <sup>205</sup>

The concentration camp survivor has stepped out of the shared historical experience. Outside what has been perceived as a continuum, inside this historical vacuum the survivor loses his sense of existential continuity, and the fear of dying pervades his psychic life.

If, in spite of all he must contend with, the survivor can somehow perceive death as appropriate his fears can still be allayed by a sense that all is proceeding according to plan and that we are still in control of our destinies. Mourning is part of the plan and we require no new protective symbologies to help it proceed unimpeded. Yet in the case of the concentration camp survivor even the sense of appropriateness could not be had. The tenor of the survivor's response is, instead, suffused - both consciously and unconsciously - with themes of incomplete lives and mutant deaths. He is terrified by the specter of absurdity and forced into what Kierkegaard has called a "belief by virtue of the absurd." For most of us, but even more so for the survivor, this belief is untenable for it requires a confrontation with primordial images of death and nothingness, images we cannot confront and remain psychically whole. The only recourse is in the elaboration of an ameliorating counter-imagery. In essence he cannot muster the prerequisite sense of transcendental persistence that is part of the work of mourning.

Hillel Klein, however, sees the guilt itself as accomplishing, in a truncated way, the work of mourning, serving as a means of "identification with the destroyed world, thereby achieving a restitution by



identification with lost love objects." <sup>266</sup> It seems to me that this can hardly be the case. Though guilt does establish a sense of connection it is a highly distorted one essentially characterized by a high degree of ambivalence toward the dead and the entire mourning process. The survivor attempts to mourn via various formal rituals and to establish a sense of continuity with the lives of the dead, but at the same time he tries to rid himself of images of the dead which, though crucial for completion of mourning, he perceives as tainted and threatening. <sup>267</sup> This further heightens his sense of guilt, and rather than being a form of mourning this guilt becomes part of a vicious cycle which impairs mourning further.

This cycle may be the perpetual generator for the chronic survivor syndrome with guilt being the ever-present fuel. de Wind has noted that therapy often consists of breaking this cycle, that is aiding the survivor in carrying out the work of mourning. <sup>268</sup> Similarly, the profound and protracted mourning carried out by a survivor for recent deaths (even years after liberation) often reflects the reemergence of a heretofore impaired ability to mourn. <sup>269</sup>

I believe that the theoretical issues now begin to take form. The residual images imprinted onto the psyche of the survivor attains its potency by being closely linked to fears of death, issues of symbolic immortality, and the sphere of existential guilt. That these themes all affect the survivor's efforts to mourn for and define himself in relationship to the dead is clear. It is a long circuitous road closely bordered by elemental themes of life and death, guilt and innocence, but I believe we can now begin to delineate that end which has become the life of the



surviver.



## CHAPTER V

### TOWARD A THEORY OF SURVIVOR GUILT

A lie is often an expression of the fear that one may be crushed by the truth.

- Franz Kafka

No poetry after Auschwitz.

- T.W. Adorno

There seem to be two forms of guilt active in the psyche of the survivor - neurotic and ontologic. Neurotic guilt develops from the infantile conflicts which set the pattern for all later guilt feelings. Ontologic or existential guilt derives from the vagaries of an uncertain existence, coming to the fore with the development of a symbolizing apparatus that is capable of integrating the reality of death and a sense of symbolic immortality to defend against that reality. Both must develop simultaneously in order to spare the psyche a painful and terrifying confrontation with the image of one's own death. Ontologic guilt is the cost of human awareness. It is intimately bound up with symbols of continuity and connection, becoming manifest only when these symbols are threatened with annihilation. To avoid such threats the psyche will go to great lengths: it may produce a neurosis or, if need be, a psychosis to divert the mind from focusing on images of death.

The concentration camp survivor is faced with just such threats to his symbolic armor: death and destruction are the residual images of his most profound experience. He must confront a total abandonment by the



processes of existence. The concentration camp was a psychohistorical vacuum in which the normal flow of time and events became disrupted. Causality did not exist. "Only the here and now exists: yesterday and tomorrow are both equal and without reality" <sup>270</sup>, is the complaint of the survivor in the camps. The anonymity of time, as Bettelheim terms it <sup>271</sup>, destroyed the reference from which identity took its origins. Edith Jacobson speaks of disturbances of time sense among survivors of Extreme Situations.<sup>272</sup> This suggests that the role of time itself may play a more important part than we have recognized. I speak of time not only in the chronological sense, but of the cues and symbols we derive from the sheer flow of time in the individual life. The sense of time, linked to and perhaps derived from the sense of change, is essential to provide us with a sense of historical movement and of the individual's place within it. It is this sense of individual historicity garnered from the flow of time that enables us to live extrahistorically, that is, to envision ourselves surviving our historical time by a symbolic immortality. The loss of time's cues, of a sense of flux, is another burden of the survivor for it strands him again in a landscape of the absurd accompanied only by an imagery of death.

Another component of self-definition is the cycle of generations, the natural flow of life and death which provides us with a sense of place within historical change. This sense of place gives us, beyond immortality but part of it as well, a feeling for the immutability of our individual lives within a cosmic framework. But immutability requires more than being; it requires being within an immutable natural order. When this order is obliterated by what we have called inappropriate or (as it might be more accurately termed when referring to the profound



dislocations of the concentration camp) mutant death, the sense of place, of causal connection with history and the universe is radically altered. Again it is the absurd which the survivor faces, and this further engenders his fears of loss and dying.

This fear in turn is phrased in ontologic terms because they best express our inability to establish, even by our own standards of reality, not a sense of immortality but immortality itself, to overcome not simply fears of death but death itself. We have come to phrase our existential debilities in terms of personal culpability because in that dimly remembered ancient time of our past when we first encountered a disobedient external world the only causal agent, and hence the only thing that could be at fault, was ourselves.

This is the elemental guilt we are virtually born with. When we are able to conceptualize death then death becomes the archetype for our inability to come to terms with existence and it becomes the focus for our basic guilt. Ordinarily we do not confront it for we are shielded by those symbols which make up our individual and societal mythologies. When these mythologies, ordinarily firmly-rooted in the ordered landscape of our lives, are shattered by annihilation of that natural landscape we must either face our fear and guilt or find other defenses.

The concentration camps were just such a time. In an environment in which acausality was the rule, mutant death the commonplace, and the anonymity of time the convention, the survivor could in nowise rely on those indices that ordinarily mark the pattern of his existence and aid him in erecting the symbolic frame by which he might otherwise protect himself.

The concentration camp prisoner found himself in a situation where



a protective symbology was a crucial need but where he could not maintain one because all illusions had been shattered by stark realities. The images of absurdity, the ineluctable realities that are the end of every life, were multiplied many-fold for the survivor within a context of unspeakable violence. Rather than availing himself of a sense of symbolic immortality he finds himself in a continuous state of threatened mortality; and where hope for fulfilled life is the prerequisite for any symbols of immortality coping with prospects of premature cessation of life impairs any further formulations.

The psyche simply cannot cope with this poltergeist of annihilation. We know this to be so from the normal processes of mourning in which we all confront death but through a series of formal rituals not only cope with it but swiftly place it in a perspective that makes it meaningful. Within the concentration camp these rituals, and thus the anodyne conception of death, could not be achieved, so the concentration camp survivor must wait for a safer time to mourn the dead. While waiting for the opportunity to mourn, however, the survivor must seek some temporary defenses that will enervate the increasingly active and potent death imagery. Within the camps it appears that psychic numbing and regression are the most common escapes being maintained until some time after liberation. But these mechanisms cannot be used indefinitely because of the powerful death imagery imprinted on the mind of the survivor. Though the basic imagery is always present it forces itself into focus more significantly when hope for return of the dead cannot be realistically held to and the survivor is forced to confront the facts on very real and unequal terms. As he reckons with the deaths of family and friends and with harsh reminders of his powerlessness he must also face



the knowledge that he too is subject to the cosmic absurdity of events.

However one cannot remain psychically whole and continue facing the terror of death for any length of time. It has been suggested that schizophrenia may represent one adaptation in cases where the symbolizing apparatus is inadequate to ward off the imagery of death. The ego is left with another, less drastic, choice: it may find a way of diverting its focus from these images which are too painful to be sustained. It can choose rather than a psychotic disengagement from reality a neurotic interlude. Psychosis does not seem to be the diversion of choice; it appears that there is actually a lower incidence of psychosis among concentration camp survivors as compared with other hospitalized patient populations. Neurosis as we know, manifest by the elements of the survivor syndrome, is a very frequent finding among survivors; and survivor guilt is the dominant theme of the syndrome.

It appears that the survivor's reaction to fear of the absurd is the universal one. We all try to allay our fears by an immersion in a primitive ontological guilt which tells us that we are at fault for all that occurs. This represents man's earliest attempts to order his universe, even if in a recognizably specious manner, by giving himself a sense of control over events. It also serves to remove the sense of absurdity by implying a morally ordered universe. This vision has at its center the meaningfulness of death, and as such it makes death, however it may occur, the natural order of things. For the survivor things are more difficult: having seen the rhythms of life and death interrupted and profoundly altered he is unable to sustain any image of death, be it meaningful or otherwise, and since ontic guilt requires some death imagery the survivor cannot think ontically at all.



The first attempt at protection and formulation is a failure, and because the perception of an ontologically circumscribed universe cannot be realized the sense of symbolic immortality cannot be attained.

Without the sense of symbolic immortality any attempt at mourning that the survivor initiates would fail for as we have said the work of mourning requires that this sense be intact. So the death imprint of the survivor, and the continual symbolic reactivations of that imprint, impairs not only his efforts at denying absurdity but his efforts to integrate them by the means ordinarily available. With this task unsuccessful the survivor searches elsewhere for relief.\* As the herited modes by which he would protect himself prove of little value he has no choice but to look to the event itself for a way out.

The event does provide a way, one which can utilize the already-formed pattern of ontologic guilt, as well as a way in which certain historical forms may be recapitulated - which allows the survivor not only to reinsert himself into a moral universe but to recapture the immortality in being an integral part of a recurrent historical pattern.

But to look at the event means to look at death, and this is still impossible. The event, however, is disjointed, and varying aspects of it may be viewed independently - very unlike the totalism required by the ontic vision - thus providing the survivor with a means of circumventing the death imagery. The actions of the survivor are like those of a

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\* Any sense of temporal demarcation that may be inferred is a linguistic misrepresentation on my part for it appears that all of these psychological perambulations take place virtually simultaneously and disorganizedly deep in the survivor's unconscious.



microscopist: he is able to focus down with a high-powered lens of the imagination on a small circumscribed portion which he makes the central percept of the experience. The survivor's doubts about his role in the Holocaust is an aspect that has always been present, but now it is magnified and made of greater significance than the more frightening and central death imagery. The set of psychological maneuvers whereby the perception of guilt becomes preeminent is abetted by a blurred distinction between assailant and victim which foments a sense of complicity.

The sense of guilt derives from a subtle step-by-step process with multiple variations that leads from absurdity to complicity, from a conception of fact to fault, to an equation of thought and act. On three levels, individual, communal, and relational, the imagery of contingency gives the survivor a sense of being an accomplice in his victimization rather than simply an unwitting victim. He feels he has had an active part in his own demise, and that his worst thoughts became realities merely because he harbored them as thoughts. This transmogrification of psychohistorical reality begins with the death imprint, or the ultimate horror. Simultaneously the ontic pattern sets in, but if it is not to fail as a defense it must be reinforced. The first reinforcement is on an individual level. In defining his relationship to the dead the survivor cannot view them critically because to do so would be to asperse the validity and completeness of their lives. For one such as the survivor whose hold on his own possibilities is so extremely tenuous any kind of criticism of the dead can only remind him of the disintegration of his own life-value. So the dead are idealized in a move that makes death a mode of immortality by its becoming synonymous with fulfillment and, hence, an integral part of the cycle of generations. Complete lives,



in the next step of this psychic syllogism, are the supremely good ones, and those who died must have been good. The nature of the camps supports this by negative evidence: there were activities that survivors engaged in that were less than ethical, thus, a fortiori, the dead who did not benefit from this kind of activity were surely saintly. Survival is equated with wrongdoing, and the survivor becomes a guilty party.

The anomalousness of survival helps to reinforce the survivor's sense of inferiority. Witnessing the deaths of so many people he knew to be good he must conclude that in not receiving their lot he was not. The quintessence of this imagery is the death of children who, since they are presumed innocent and present the most profound problems of survival priority, could not have suffered on account of any actions of their own. By recourse to an archetypal legacy he can view the children as innocent sacrifices in his stead, and by only a small solipsistic extension he can view all the dead in this fashion. In many cases the residual imagery of the event, as I believe has been amply shown, lends itself to this perception, further entrapping the survivor in his feelings of moral inferiority and guilt.

A similar dynamic operates on the communal level, where the survivor has at hand a historical community of victims with which he identifies. By doing this he rejoins a historical movement and can attempt to share in the extrahistorical immortality of the community. Inherent in this communal legacy, however, are also another series of guilt images that again place the survivor in a position of responsibility for his friends and his nation as a whole. This sense of communal interdependence in matters of culpability may be seen as a prime example of how we defend against suffering's irrationality by means



of survivor guilt.

The relational imagery of the camps, that is the everyday aspects of life, contained similar dual imagery of death and guilt. It is connected with aspects of immortality as well as with memories of death and dying, but the whole image is distorted as it is viewed through a condenser of guilt.

These images and their variations all serve to disengage, and eventually disallow the survivor's focus on the imagery of death that initially threatened to overwhelm him. The price he pays is that of an immersion in guilt; by means of continual selfdeprecation and the impossibility of atonement by virtue of the fact that the objects of his guilt are no longer here (or were never here as he perceives them) the cycle of chronic guilt is established.

The only possibility for atonement lies in working through mourning with resolution of ambivalent feelings about the dead and integration of their memories in a cohesive self-system. The problem, though, is that the survivors inability to cope with any images of the dead continues to impair mourning. In effect the focus on guilt which diverts the concentration camp survivor from the imagery of death that threatens him also prevents him from dealing with images of death that might aid him in resolving the difficulties of mourning. Thus, via the labyrinthine connections between the guilt of mourning and the guilt of survival (both of which we may consider modern "refinements" of the primitive ontic guilt), the result is a paradoxical one: by an exclusive focus on the latter form of guilt the survivor cannot deal with the former. In other words, by being exclusively concerned with the imagination of complicity in which



guilt is the focus, a distortion of reality ensues impairing efforts to deal with relationships to the dead, especially those that are guilt-laden.

This is where the survivor stands: he cannot mourn because he cannot confront the dead. He cannot confront the dead for to do so means psychic disintegration, so he fixes on a guilt which further paralyzes him in various postures of the survivor syndrome. The guilt itself may be extremely painful and in a tertiary maneuver more amenable (in terms of psychic economy) aspects of the survivor syndrome may be taken up. This accounts for the frequent difficulty in locating elements of guilt on the landscape of survivor pathology, as it becomes further hidden in various other foci of the syndrome.

The survivor, as I have suggested at various points along the way, contends with a number of vicious cycles which impair efforts toward mastery of the experience. There are however those who have reported cures of the survivor syndrome by breaking these cycles at certain key points. There is also the heartening reminder of the many survivors who live normal lives, never seeming to require the therapist's aid, or even to have any difficulties in dealing with the event. The point, as many psychiatrists and social workers agree, is that there seems to be a way out of the survivor's dilemma. My own clinical experience is non-existent and the thrust of this paper is entirely theoretical, but on just these theoretical grounds I must take a radically pessimistic stance. If the dynamic of concentration camp survivor guilt is as I have posited it then I see "cure" as an impossibility, a totally unimpaired life as unachievable for these survivors. They are permanently marked and scarred by



an encounter with death and absurdity that is unparalleled in psychological history, and if these survivors feel, as some do, that they have been made the bearers of a unique vision I, for one, would concur. I have spoken of their confrontation with mutant death, but we ought to remember that it is mutant only by definition of the psychological defenses we have erected around the actuality of death. In existential actuality mutation simply does not exist, for life as it is lived (not perceived) is absurd, and since time immemorial man has spent effort trying to deny this by a host of defenses that can be categorized as a sense of ontological connectedness. Symbolic immortality and the many transcendental modes of achieving it are the major part of this attempt to deny absurdity, and for most of us the denial is achieved.

Even as I write that we live an absurd existence where death is the only inevitable order of things I do not accept it. True I believe it, but only in a distant, farfetched, highly intellectualized way; my viscera do not give any indication of belief. When we see another die we catch a glimpse of the truth, but even then we are protected from actuality by all the symbols we can muster to make it a meaningful event that is not really an end. We have no sense of an ending for even nothingness is given consolations.

But the survivor knows better. He has seen actuality as reality. He has lived with and by absurdity, not in the blur of a mushroom cloud or the flash of a flood, but as a daily routine in which absurdity could not be consigned to such intellectable denominators as "technology" or "nature." For the concentration camp survivor absurdity and death were entirely within a human frame. It was carried



out by and inflicted upon human beings in a face-to-face moment. For the concentration camp survivor there can be no rationalizing away of death, no philosophical elevation to some higher order of events - they breathed death in quotidian extremity. The absurd universe was part of their existence, and beneath the neurotic defenses they erect it remains such.

To put it very simply: survivors know death. For the survivor as for no one else this is a truth that cannot be adequately defended against by the usual means. So for those who would say that they can cure the survivor I would urge them to be wary. To remove the neurotic adaptations of the survivor may be to force him to look at a truth that he knows, one that could destroy his psychic integrity. The survivor must live an impaired life for not to do so would mean he could have no life at all. Perhaps the cycle of guilt can be broken in ways that will make it less severe, but again, to remove the impairment may be to remove the only defense.

I can only hope that the lack of clinical experience has distorted my purview of the situation. Perhaps I have not yet achieved a knowledge of the resiliency of the human spirit that can only be gained beyond the realm of idea and theory. If this is so, and my theoretical conclusions are mistaken, no error would be more welcome.



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