

Johan Lansen 1933 – 2019

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Johan Lansen, painting by Anne Pross, 2013.

Johan Lansen, a deeply valued colleague, teacher, advisor, clinical supervisor and personal mentor for many, died at age 86 on November 26, 2019 in his hometown of Amersfoort in the Netherlands.

I first met Johan at a human rights conference in Norway in 1990. His presentation “Psychiatric Experience with perpetrators and countertransference feelings in the therapist” (Lansen, 1991) impressed me profoundly.

It was unusual at the time for a trauma and human rights professional to talk about perpetrators. Reflecting on the abyss, the dark side of the human condition, was an important dimension of Johan’s professional life. His contribution to the first book published by the Berlin Center for the Treatment of Torture Victims carried the title “What does it do to us?” In this chapter he describes how caregivers working with torture survivors can be drawn into the client experience, and how the client’s feelings of humiliation, anxiety, powerlessness and worthlessness can be transmitted to the therapist. Johan had faced this abyss as a child survivor during the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands.

During that first encounter, I sensed some defense and distance, an unspoken message from him: “Can one trust this young German?” So it was all the more surprising that we eventually became confidantes and friends. How did this happen?

As head physician of the Sinai Center, a Jewish psychiatric hospital for Holocaust survivors in Amersfoort, he was invited in 1991 to assist the foundation of the psychosocial counseling center for Nazi Victims ESRA, located in the Berlin Jewish Hospital. During his trips to ESRA¹ he also visited our newly-founded Center for the Treatment of Torture Victims. Over time he came to appreciate our work and

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1) More information on ESRA can be found (in German): <https://www.hagalil.com/esra/esra-3.htm>

the “young German” who was its director. We hired him as our first clinical case-supervisor.

On his first visit to Berlin he only stayed a few days, on the next one a little longer, and so forth. He gradually managed to overcome his reservations and distrust of the country of his persecutors. After leaving the Sinai Center he shifted a large part of his work to Germany, where trauma therapy was unknown territory in the early 1990s. As a result, Johan was much in demand as an expert, consultant and supervisor for a number of German treatment centers.

These centers and I personally, are deeply grateful and enormously indebted to Johan. He was our anchor, guiding us through the difficulties of our founding period, seeing us on our way to professionalization and co-authoring some of our key publications.

I quote from the prologue of my book “Wounded Healers” (Pross, 2009) in which I portrayed Johan under the pseudonym: “Jens”.

Whenever an institution is on fire, it is Jens who will be called for help. At the source of the fire, where the ceiling is about to tumble down, at the hottest and most dangerous spot – that is where Jens sits. People run out of meetings crying, slamming doors, ranting and raving, insulting each other. Jens cannot be taken aback, does not lose control. He does not say much, he gets up and drafts a scheme on the flipchart. It is not so much what Jens says. It is how Jens says it. It is his appearance, his charisma. He sits amid this minefield with the simple message: “As long as I sit here, no bomb will go off.”

Jens conveys an aura of maturity, benevolence, heartiness and dignity but also of a certain strictness. He stands above things - serene, with a great sense of humor and a bit of rascality, as if saying: “Well this

is just how it goes, when human beings are together...” Everybody in the room feels that Jens is a man who has been confronted with much more severe and threatening situations in his life, who knows how to deal with that and what can happen to people working with survivors. Jens is a modest, rather inconspicuous man who does not make a big fuss about himself. One can imagine him as a coxswain on a fishing boat in the open sea. Such deep sea fishermen are often silent people who for days stoically endure a heaving deck, hold the rudder and ship the cutter safely back to the port.

Several times a year Johan came to Berlin accompanied by his faithful companion Harrie van Dooren. I went to see him as often as possible in Amersfoort. Eventually, Johan would invite me for an expert talk, where he presided amid his huge library. Here I was his student and he was my teacher.

One of Johan’s achievements is the co-foundation of the training institute for supervision in the Berlin Center for the Treatment of Torture victims in 2006. Johan together with his colleague, Ton Haans from Centrum 45, the Dutch trauma center for survivors of war and persecution, trained a dozen caregivers in Berlin – including me – to become clinical supervisors. Since then around 130 health professionals have been trained at this institute in the “Lansen/Haans” trauma-specific supervision technique. These training courses continue to this day, directed by the psychologist and supervisor Nora Balke at the Center Ueberleben (former Treatment Center for Torture Victims), and include instruction abroad in Turkey, Iraq, Georgia and Ukraine.

Johan served as a consultant, trainer and supervisor in many countries in Africa, the Middle East, Eastern and South Eastern

Europe. He worked for the International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims, the War Trauma Foundation of the Netherlands and the Editorial Board of *Intervention – International Journal of Mental Health, Psychosocial Work and Counselling in Areas of Armed Conflict*. His publications on trauma therapy, vicarious traumatization and supervision have served as a guide for caregivers worldwide.

For many of us Johan was a role model and a father figure. We have learned so immeasurably much from him and will always carry him in our hearts.

References

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