Reflective Practice
Disremembering the Holocaust §
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1. The Nazis are coming

"The Nazis are outside the village!" Itzhak declared in a decisive tone. "They're approaching at night! Battalions of armed Germans!" His wrinkled face was anxious and uneasy; his blue innocent eyes expressed horror. He was petrified.

"I can't sleep at night, or even go to the bathroom. They're hiding behind this wall. In a moment they'll overtake the village and murder us all. I have to protect my family." His voice trembled and strained as he drew out these last words. He choked with tears of fury and frustration. His body was tense as he leaned forward on his comfortable armchair in his small sunlit village in the Ella Valley, 1 Israel, 2010.

His devoted Nepali caretaker, Chuck, the merciful nurse Aliza and I all looked at each other in despair. Itzhak, a Holocaust survivor, an 80-year old widow, survived the Nazi concentration camps. He suffered from advanced dementia and like many others in his situation, he had persecutory thoughts and hallucinations with threatening contents. From a pleasant, sociable elderly person he became a frightened old man, tormented by ghosts from his past, and subject to uncontrollable agitation.

Itzhak was not always like this. Just ten years ago he would come to the clinic, racing on his tractor with an air of youth and a thick mustache that didn't gray. A young smile, youthful bright eyes, with his wife Rosika at his side on the country vehicle: "Rosika came just to take a little blood pressure test. I'm healthy; I don't need anything!" He would wink at the nurse who tried to convince him to take a few general tests, and would tell me about the successful crops in his vineyards this year, giving a friendly slap on the back to a friend from the village he just met in the hallway. He was a tough, powerful farmer, full of humor.

I knew that he, together with the other founders of his village, was a Holocaust survivor. They immigrated to Israel with a youth movement from Hungary and Romania, young men and women who survived the German inferno, leaving behind parents and siblings who went up in smoke, underwent unspeakable horrors, but their young age, healthy bodies and strong spirits enabled them to start anew: to build a village, marry and have children. Rosika died. The two girls married and left the village. As the years passed, he began forgetting names and getting lost on the village paths and once he burnt the humble meal he was reheating for himself. He began saying incomprehensible things. His daughters sold the tractor, and brought Chuck, the Nepali caretaker, to accompany their father, support him and protect him from his whims.

I placed a comforting hand on Itzhak's arm. We had a deep fondness between us stretching over the years. During this visit I again had to remind him: "I am Ruth, your doctor, and this is Nurse Aliza... and immediately his face would brighten, he would clasp our hands and kiss our cheeks in a burst of warmness. "Of course, of course, Aliza, Ruth. Wonderful that you came."

"Please tell us more of what you see" I asked Itzhak, trying to protect him, while also wanting to encourage him to share with us his visions, so as not to be so utterly alone with them.

"The Germans are just outside the village. They have black dogs and black uniforms and guns and clubs. I alone stand before them. I
have no chance. There’s nowhere to run, nowhere to hide.” The 15-year old youth, starved, humiliated and orphaned, flickered from his kind face. Heavy tears clouded his thick glasses.

"Itzhak, 65 years have passed…you’re a grown man. You have children and grandchildren, a state and an army. The Nazis have paid the price and you are safe," I tried.

Itzhak suddenly began speaking in the past tense: “Let me tell you about the day of liberation. I didn’t tell this even to my children or grandchildren…A good friend of mine was standing beside me. We slept for an entire year on the same board in the concentration camp, wrapped ourselves in the same blanket, the fleas didn’t discern between us. He was a friend from school. We dreamt that after the war we would immigrate to the land of our forefathers. We shared our bread…the Germans already left the camp. Fleed. The Russians were coming, The Capo took us out of our shack. Musselmanns, you know what that is? Skin and bones, half-dead. He insisted on counting us. I stood next to my good friend. We were closer than ever to fulfilling our dream, to the end of the war. Suddenly, randomly, without any reason, the Capo hit my friend on the head with a club. His brains and skull splattered on me. He fell without a word. I was already indifferent. A few hours later the Russians arrived…”

Aliza, Chuck and I had tears in our eyes. Itzhak softly sighed and cried. This terrible story from 65 years ago was palpable in the room. He was senile, forgetful, unable to recognize places and people, confined to his chair and totally dependent on his caretaker. Only his memories, now utterly real, existed in his current nightmarish old age.

2. Gathering the pieces

I wanted it to stop. I wanted to soothe him, place his head on my lap and help the young boy of 15 find some rest. I wanted to make him forget. I could have offered him medication: anxiolytics, sleeping pills, anti-psychotic drugs, anti-depressants…each with its heavy side effects and cost on his health, the remainder of his humanity and quality of life. It seemed cruel and unfair, to bury his horrible story in a mass grave together with other hundreds of thousands of stories dead and forgotten with their bearers in recent years.

I remembered the organization called ‘Amcha,’2 established to support and treat Holocaust survivors. I dialed them, my heart pounding in my chest. I recounted his shocking story, and I asked, with little hope, if they had a therapist who lived close to our village who could visit Itzhak at home. To my surprise, I found out they had a volunteer psychologist who lived in a nearby village and could try and talk with Itzhak.

Yaron, the therapist, met with me that very week. I asked if he could work with someone so senile he couldn’t remember you from session to session. Yaron also hesitated. Psychological treatment is based on insight, for which one needs a continuity of awareness, memory, a sense of identity, an ability to integrate…many capacities that Itzhak’s age and illness crushed.

However, Yaron was also touched by the story: At least I can listen to him, allow him to express himself, perhaps give him some support. He deserves at least that.

Every week Itzhak met with his psychologist. Chuck hosted them with watermelon or grapes, and Itzhak would talk. “How’s it going?” I asked Yaron anxiously. “Very well,” he smiled, “every week I introduce myself and he is happy to meet me. I inquire about his health, he shares stories with me. He usually doesn’t remember that he already told me those stories, and he repeats the same stories…” “And…is there any improvement?” I wondered. “Yes, he’s undergoing a process. With my patient listening and my unconditional containment during the therapy hour, I can say I sense improvement." With Yaron’s guidance, Itzhak was able to reconstruct a more complete narrative of his traumatic experiences. Creating a detailed coherent narrative with a beginning, middle and end helps bring together the fragmented pieces of memories and parts of oneself that dissociate during trauma. Telling the story from start to finish, complete with all the details is crucial to helping patients bring closure to traumatic memories, helping them overcome their victim narrative.

I was skeptical. During my next visits, I related mostly to his constipation, his aching joints, heart failure and blood pressure.

3. A new ending

On Holocaust Remembrance Day, after almost a year of “psychological” treatment with the Amcha therapist, I came for a regular home visit. After introducing myself and the nurse, we sat on the sofa beside him. “The Nazis are right outside the village!” Itzhak declared once again in his decisive tone. I was overwhelmed, unsure whether I could cope with yet another round of his detailed story, to witness the pain still alive in his frail body. “I need to protect my family!” Itzhak continued. I wanted to say: “Sh, sh…you’re here in your home, protected, you’re safe, everything has been over for over sixty years…” but I didn’t have to say a thing. Itzhak glanced at me and at the nurse with a clear, confident and lucid gaze, and said: “But you need not worry: I have a carbine rifle. I fought with it during the War of Independence. They’re afraid to come near me! I patrol here along the fence and they dare not come near!” I hugged Itzhak and thanked him warmly. I didn’t have to pretend; I felt a real sense of relief. This fragile, post-traumatic man succeeded, at the age of 80, to find unimaginable strength. He didn’t have any new insights, nor was he less afraid, but he had created a more complete narrative for himself with an alternative ending. He could now tell himself, and us, a small story of victory, mastery and regained control.

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2 Amcha – the code word that helped survivors identify fellow Jews in war ravaged Europe. An organization that gives the opportunity for survivors and their families to unburden their hearts and share their life stories with another person.