

The Israeli-Polish Mental Health Association: Its History and Activities

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ABSTRACT

The Israeli-Polish Mental Health Association (IPMHA) was founded in 2000. It is a unique organization as it is not only one of the many associations for mental health professionals but also a platform for people from distant countries who share an important and traumatic past. IPMHA members have been engaged in studies of consequences of massive trauma, intergenerational transmission of trauma and help for trauma survivors. Keeping in mind the obligation of mental health professions to contribute to an enlightened and tolerant society, the IPMHA members have been trying to deal with "the past in the present," investigating the roots of the harm caused by racial and ethnic hatred, anti-Semitism and other forms of social prejudice.

The IPMHA activities included symposia with discussions facilitated by the use of the dynamic group formula. Some of the materials presented in the meetings were published in Polish professional journals. This article reports on the activities of the IPMHA with special focus on the accompanying emotionally loaded problems.

Psychiatrists as well as other mental health professionals have been organizing themselves forming associations on national and international levels. Care for professional standards, continuous post-graduate training, exchange of thoughts and experience, promoting research in mental health can be found among declared goals of the associations. Some of international associations, such as the World Psychiatric Association, have a global character.

Many group professionals with a specific orientation, such as the World Federation of Societies of Biological Psychiatry, also aim for a global character. Membership in some of the associations is restricted to medical doctors or psychiatrists. Others, such as the International Association of Child and Adolescent Psychiatrists and Allied Professions, accept all mental health professionals. Significant changes in Europe in the late 80s and 90s resulted in an idea of "bridging West and East." A good example of the bridging idea is a series of conferences organized by the American Psychiatric Association in Cracow (Poland), Prague (Czech Republic), Bratislava (Slovakia) and Budapest (Hungary) in cooperation with respective psychiatric societies in these countries (1). However, conferences rarely provide an opportunity for long lasting collaborations. Such opportunities arise in multicenter international research programs. Nevertheless psychiatric research, as important as it is, forms only a part of mental health care, and only a small number of professionals are involved in it. One can presume this to be a reason for the founding of bi-national associations of professionals. An example is the Polish-German Association for Mental Health (Deutsch-Polnische Gesellschaft für Seelische Gesundheit e.V.) which is based on partnerships between psychiatric institutions in Germany and Poland. Its main rationale has been promotion of community psychiatry in Poland and in eastern Germany after the reunification. Working together has been eased by the proximity of Germany and Poland.

FOUNDING OF THE ISRAELI-POLISH MENTAL HEALTH ASSOCIATION

Israel and Poland are not neighboring states, and Hebrew is not a popular language among Poles as German is.

But, in spite of the geographical distance separating Israel and Poland, and language differences, the Israeli-Polish Mental Health Association (IPMHA) / Polsko-Izraelskie Towarzystwo Zdrowia Psychicznego (PITZP) was founded and formally registered according to Polish law in 2001. The main form of the IPMHA activity has been organization of mental health care professionals meetings both in Israel and Poland. These events can be divided into three types. The most important have been binational symposia held alternatively in Israel and in Poland. The other type of conferences has been formed by a series of symposia commemorating Israeli, Cracow born, psychiatrist Hillel Klein. The third type of meetings have been symposia sponsored by IPMHA within the Israeli Psychiatric Association and the Polish Psychiatric Association congresses (2). Some of the lectures presented and discussed during these meetings were later published in peer-reviewed journals in Poland: the bimonthly *Psychiatria Polska* and quarterly *Psychoterapia* (both published in Polish), as well as quarterly *Archives of Psychiatry and Psychotherapy*, all of them official journals of the Polish Psychiatric Association, and in *Dialog* (published in Polish and German, and occasionally in English), an annual journal published by the German-Polish Mental Health Association.

The main purpose of this paper is to review the presence of the IPMHA activities, as well as their reception in Polish professional journals.

Mental health professionals, members of IPMHA, besides being active in various areas of clinical and community psychiatry, psychotherapy, family therapy, are all involved in studies on trauma and/or dealing with its consequences. They are specifically focused on the trauma of the Holocaust (3, 4).

The founding of the IPMHA had been preceded by an inspiring Israeli-Polish exchange. Maria Orwid, who for years had been involved in studies of the Holocaust survivors living in Poland (4), invited recognized Israeli students of the survivors' problems: Haim Dasberg and Yosi Hadar. They both took part in the conference on post-traumatic syndrome which Orwid had organized in Cracow in 1998. Unfortunately the conference proceedings were not published. Nevertheless the meeting was so interesting that in 1999 the Jagiellonian University Department of Psychiatry, in cooperation with Deutsch-Polnische Gesellschaft für Seelische Gesundheit e.V. (DPGSG), organized a Polish-Israeli-German symposium, Myths and Taboo, and in 2000 Polish and German psy-

chiatrists attended the congress of the Israeli Psychiatric Association (IPA) and the congress symposium on fighting trauma and its consequences.

Haim Knobler, at the time the Secretary of the IPA, arranged a next symposium dedicated to the memory of the common past of Jews and Poles. The introductory lecture by Polish historian Marcin Kula appeared in print (5). Israeli and Polish mental health professionals were accompanied then by a significant group of German colleagues from DPGSG.

On April 19, 2000, thirty Israeli and Polish participants in the Jerusalem symposium decided to create the Israeli-Polish Mental Health Association / Polsko-Izraelskie Towarzystwo Zdrowia Psychicznego (founding members are listed in Appendix 1). Ten of the founding members were born before 1945 and half of them were Holocaust survivors. A Temporary Board was appointed and the Association statutes were accepted (temporary board members are listed in Appendix 2). The preamble of the statutes summarizes the Association goals and tasks:

“Having in mind the shared commitment of Polish and Israeli psychiatrists to the victims of the Holocaust, and having in mind a common wish to investigate the roots of the harm caused by racial and ethnic hatred, anti-Semitism and other forms of social prejudice, and having in mind the obligation of mental health professions to contribute to an enlightened and tolerant society, we hereby establish the Israeli-Polish Mental Health Association to further the above goals and to contribute to the improvement of mental health care in our two countries.”

THE IPMHA ACTIVITIES

Among early activities, the IPMHA and DPGSG co-sponsored the plenary session of the 60th Congress of the Polish Psychiatric Association in Cracow, 2001. The session commemorated the late co-founder of the IPMHA, Professor Adam Szymusik and focused on relations between totalitarian systems and psychiatry (6). Maria Orwid spoke on Cracow's Auschwitz Research Program. Maria Orwid and Adam Szymusik were members of the Program's team directed by Antoni Kępiński. Orwid, among others, discussed hypothetic reasons for not including the Jewishness of Auschwitz survivors among factors influencing the consequences of concentration camp trauma. According to Orwid, this exclusion in the late 1950s when the project was carried out could be best explained by an idea of the “conspiracy of silence”

(7). Henry Szor focused on the immense damage done to the survivors' psyche, particularly in the area "beyond representation" (8, p. 167). He pointed out that in spite of great work done and immense achievements of clinical psychiatry and psychoanalysis to help survivors, and those to whom trauma was transmitted, the experience of trauma caused by totalitarianism, such as Shoah trauma, is inconceivable (8). Other lectures in the session were presented by: Jim Briley, a British psychiatrist and opponent of abuse of psychiatry by totalitarian regimes (9); Semyon Gluzman, an Ukrainian psychiatrist, himself victim of Soviet abuse of psychiatry and also opponent of political abuse of psychiatry (10, 11), and German psychiatrist Niels Pörksen (12). Their presentations concerned abuse of psychiatry by totalitarian political systems in the past and contemporary times.

TRAUMA OF THE HOLOCAUST

Inevitably, the trauma of the Holocaust, its uniqueness and consequences became one of the main problems the IPMHA has been dealing with.

Martin Auerbach reported on enduring presence of the Holocaust consequences among Israeli users of mental health services (13). Organization and specificity of help for the Holocaust survivors and their descendants in Poland was reported by Maria Orwid and her co-workers (14). Haim Dasberg analyzed the dynamics in attitudes towards the Shoah consequences in Israeli psychiatry. In his opinion perception of the posttraumatic psychopathology in Survivors and its treatment has had a parallel evolution in mental health profession and in the Israeli community as a whole: from shock and shame, through focusing on grave psychopathologies, statistical assessment of anonymous non-patient survivors, to new narratives and "pan-European dialogues with the 'Other.'" Consecutive stages involved sequence of defense mechanisms from perplexity, isolation to projective identification (15). Changes in psychiatrists' approaches to the consequences of war trauma and in helping trauma survivors were studied in work of those Israeli and Polish mental health professionals who pioneered research and treatment of survivors of Nazi violence. Haim Knobler referred to works by his teacher of psychiatry, Cracow-born Survivor, the founder of Israeli psychiatry – Hillel Klein (16); Jacek Bomba reported studies of Antoni Kępiński (17), Krzysztof Gierowski and Adam Szymusik reported on Maria Einhorn-Susułowska (18). Some relevant papers by

Hillel Klein (19) and Antoni Kępiński (20-25) were published in Polish and English translations, respectively. However, results of current research focused on the Holocaust trauma were also presented and discussed at the symposia (26-28).

Specificity of the Holocaust trauma has remained the most important focus of the IPMHA members. As quoted above, Haim Dasberg (15) emphasized relations between psychiatrists' attitudes and the culture of which they are a part. He claimed that the Shoah is relevant for everybody independently of his/her, or his/her ancestors, position and role during the Shoah. Dasberg also pointed out that a neutral and objective attitude toward the Holocaust is impossible.

It is significant and meaningful for IPMHA members that the Jews were exterminated, and that the major part of the Holocaust was executed on Polish soil, in the presence of witnessing Poles. So, it is not unexpected that the debate covered relations between anti-Semitism and the Holocaust, between anti-Semitism and helping, indifference, hostile satisfaction, and last but not least, active participation of Poles in extermination of Jews. Finally, it was the problem of roots and sources of anti-Semitism that appeared especially important for the Polish IPMHA members.

All these problems have been topics at the symposia that the IPMHA has organized. Recognized scholars studying these problems have been invited to lecture. Many of them represented fields other than psychiatric research of the Holocaust. They were historians (e.g., Marcin Kula, 5), philosophers (e.g., Michał Markowski, 29), poets (e.g., Maria Cechnicka, 30), as well as Israeli, German and Polish psychiatrists (31-35). Their texts, published mainly in *Dialog*, form only a small part of contributions presented at the symposia by psychiatrists, psychologists, psychotherapists, theologians, philosophers, anthropologists and historians. The lectures were concerned with understanding a genesis of human attitudes forming a background of the behavior which made the Final Solution possible. Namely, it was the problem of anti-Semitism.

GROUP DYNAMIC SEMINARS

A very important part of the IPMHA work was carrying the debate on the problems presented in symposia lectures (these published, as well as those which were not published) in small groups, using group dynamics. The groups were composed of Israeli and Polish members.

At the beginning, German colleagues were invited. As the Israeli-Polish problems became very personal, the German colleagues were kindly asked to stand by. The groups were held in English, some in Polish, as some Israeli members are fluent in Polish. For the first years (the groups started in 2000) the number of groups grew. Newcomers joined the group process. Ten years later, in 2009, the groups were organized for the last time. This form of work failed. A similar problem was described by Volkan et al. (36). However, the significant difference between Volkan's group and IPMHA groups was in moderation. Volkan was invited from outside to lead the group of German-Jewish/German psychotherapy professionals. Our groups were moderated by leaders – Israeli and Polish members of the IPMHA. Nevertheless, as in the experience described by Volkan, our goal was to employ methods we use in clinical practice to solve the problems of Polish-Jewish relations, in the significant context of the Shoah.

As mentioned above, the content of symposia lectures served as a starting point for exchanges of reflections, and personal history, aroused memory of facts and emotions.

In 2004, at the IPMHA symposium with the leading topic Guilt and Responsibility, Barbara Józefik, Bogdan de Barbaro and Krzysztof Sz wajca presented their analysis of emotional and intellectual processes aroused in Polish psychotherapists taking part in the Israeli-Polish symposia (37, 38). They found that for many Polish participants the experience of the group process was seriously loaded emotionally, and even traumatic. They wrote:

“Israeli colleagues... were talking in an emotional way about their experience of Poland and Polish heritage for them, about constructing their identity and the meaning of the Holocaust and anti-Semitism for this process. Polish participants were not prepared for such a personal process. ... The problem was in what each of them was to do. ... How to build the Jewish perspective into their thinking about their own country and nation up to present time” (37, pp. 74-75).

Polish, or rather Cracovian, therapists decided to meet more often informally to talk and prepare for the next Israeli-Polish meetings. “Participation in these meetings appeared to be ... more difficult than expected. ... The emotional load was expressed in questions, but also in silence. Suggestions which appeared one could interpret as defences” (37, p. 77). Barbaro, Józefik and Sz wajca gave a description of the group debate: “... individual persons' verbal expressions, however in the meeting time form

a polemic dialogue, are ... ‘external voicing’ fragments present within each of the participants. As in each of us are many voices: a voice demanding objective truth, and a voice looking for justification and purification, and a voice of defence fighting with any violation of the myth of the decent Pole. At the same time there are efforts to give atonement to the Other ...” (37, p. 78). In the authors' opinion, the process started in this group disclosing “a dual view in a form of two perspectives: 1) explanatory, and at the same time deconstructive, and 2) ethical (37, p. 78). In their opinion “an explanatory perspective is justified only after taking responsibility for evident evil” (37, p. 79).

Several years later Bogdan de Barbaro, Barbara Józefik, Lucyna Drożdżowicz and Maria Orwid (39) discussed the goals of these group meetings and the possible causes of individual and group difficulties. They tried to find ways to prevent accumulation of these difficulties. Józefik and Sz wajca (40), Barbaro and co-workers (41) stressed that such work, leading to deconstruction of the Polish myths, is necessary, although this is not easy.

Further events seem to indicate that continuation of the dynamic groups failed. Many members declare openly their need and readiness to meet in small groups. Nevertheless, their organization encountered insurmountable obstacles.

One of these obstacles may be undiagnosed and unsolved traces of trauma inherited in our subconscious. Another one, that we forgot, or did not believe, may be Haim Dasberg's idea of an inability to come to neutral and objective attitudes toward the Holocaust.

Even if all authors quoted seem to include into their reasoning Dasberg's opinion, one can feel overwhelmed. On the other hand, there are indications that at least some of the dynamic groups' participants experienced some gains. An example can be found in Moshe Landau's article (42). Discussing his own work in the process, Landau is fully aware that a change “of ‘well known state of mind’ ... for example: inner attitude towards the diaspora, towards survivors, toward Poland, etc., is difficult,” and following Bion he treats it as a “catastrophic change” (43, p. 89).

The group meetings, both yearly bi-national and monthly, became so draining that in 2005, at the small IPMH conference in Shalvata Mental Health Center in Hod Hasharon, the question was raised whether the IPMHA work had any meaning for contemporary mental health care. This is a significant question, and has no clear answer until now. Haim Knobler (3) said that the memory

of past traumas played an essential role in treatment of actual traumas and loss. Henry Szor (44) pointed out that “transgenerational transmission of trauma creates the necessity of lifelong elaboration, thinking - conscious and unconscious, a process composed of memory and fantasy, ... crucial for a capacity to be alive in the threat of this, beyond the conceivable” (44, p. 177).

PROBLEM OF YOUTH

A parallel debate concerned the theoretical background supporting an idea of using the dialogue for realization of the IPMHA goals, as expressed in its statutes. But not only. The IPMHA has been involved in a young people exchange, especially Israeli teenagers' visits to Poland. The IPMHA suggested that it would be purposeful to extend the visits program to include the Jewish cultural tradition in Poland and meetings with Polish adolescents. The IPMHA sponsored such a model exchange. Andrzej Cechnicki and Haim Knobler have spoken and written about this (45).

TWICE FORGOTTEN MENTAL PATIENTS

At the symposium held in 2004 at the Józef Babiński Psychiatric Hospital in Kobierzyn near Cracow the question of the fate of mentally ill Jewish patients of the hospital emerged. All patients of this institution were killed by Nazis in June 1942. The majority were transported to Auschwitz, and those who could not be transported were killed on the hospital grounds. They are commemorated in a monument erected in the hospital park. Their names were saved by one of the administration staff who had hidden the last list of the inpatients. It was also remembered that the Jewish inpatients had been previously, in September 1941, segregated and sent to the Jewish Psychiatric Hospital Zofiówka in Otwock (46, 47). They perished together with all the Jews of Otwock. It was Anne Marie Ulman who found the document with the names of these patients in the Yad Vashem archives. These names could be added to the already existing monument. In 2006, the IPMHA cosponsored, within the Annual Israeli Psychiatric Association Congress in Tel Aviv, a session on the extermination of mentally ill in the Third Reich.

In 2007, an extension of the Kobierzyn monument was unveiled. The extension has a form of two commemorative plaques and carries the names of the “twice forgotten patients.”

DISCUSSION

Twelve years of the IPMHA activity has been relatively poorly reflected in professional publications, particularly in the main psychiatric journals. The majority of articles dealing with topics the Association had been working on have been published in journals concerned with psychotherapy. A close cooperation with the Polish-German Association for Mental Health resulted in using its journal *Dialog* as a medium for presentation of a large number of papers.

Keeping in mind that the main problem the Association has been concerned with is past trauma and its consequences in present times, one should not be surprised that the post-conference papers have been published in psychotherapy and community psychiatry journals.

For the last half-century the problem of trauma has been extensively studied by mental health professionals. It is extremely difficult to study the questions that remain unanswered because of the requirements of contemporary research standards. Nevertheless, trauma and coping with traumatic experience is a significant issue in the area of mental health: in prevention, treatment of disorders and psycho-social rehabilitation.

Another unanswered question is that of an influence of the Association activities on dealing with post-traumatic consequences of its members. Probably all of them experienced trauma of World War II and the Holocaust as survivors, witnesses, or offspring of survivors, or at least from treating PTSD patients. The fact of a fading need for continued work on the problem may be interpreted both as result of working through prolonged mourning and/or as a consequence of an inability to solve it. We can only hope the first interpretation refers to many of us.

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Appendix 1

Founding members: Jerzy Aleksandrowicz, Anna Bielańska, Kazimierz Bierzyński, Jacek Bomba, Andrzej Cechnicki, Jacek Dębiec, Ewa Domagalska, Igor Hanuszkiewicz, Maria Kamińska, Joanna Meder, Maria Orwid, Maria Pałuba, Adam Szymusik, Stanisława Szymusik, Krzysztof Szwajca, Daw Aleksandrowicz, Haim Dasberg, Peter Silfen, Meir Berger, Miriam Berger, Henry Szor, Zvi Zemishlany, Haim Knobler, Yoram Barak, Shmuel Fennig, Simona Naor, Ilona Mirecki, Zvi Fischel, Ilana Kremer, Martin Auerbach.

Appendix 2

The first temporary Board: president - Prof. Jacek Bomba, vice-president - Dr. Henry Szor, treasurers – Dr. Joanna Meder and Prof. Zvi Zemishlany, secretaries – Dr. Andrzej Cechnicki and Dr. Haim Knobler, board members: Dr. Yoram Barak, Dr. Shmuel Fennig, Dr. Maria Kamińska Dr. Ilana Kremer, Prof. Maria Orwid Prof. Adam Szymusik; Review committee - Prof. Jerzy Aleksandrowicz, Dr. Martin Auerbach, Dr Maria Pałuba. Prof. Peter Silfen.