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The Holocaust, Logotherapy and Viktor E. Frankl

Michael F. Shaughnessy

Abstract:

This paper discusses the Holocaust and the system of psychotherapy developed by Viktor E. Frankl, a survivor of the Holocaust who went on to form the "third Viennese School of Psychiatry". This paper cursorily reviews the basic tenets of logotherapy and links the theory and practice of logotherapy and the concept of meaning and purpose in life to the Holocaust.

Keywords:

Logotherapy, Existential Analysis, depression, paradoxical intention, The Holocaust.

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The Holocaust, Logotherapy

As is well known, more than six million Jews died during the period of history known as the Holocaust. One of those who did survive was a psychiatrist who noted in the camps that those who survived seemed to have a meaning and purpose to their lives- some goal beckoning them, something they wanted to do, someone they wanted to see, a project they wanted to finish, or some book that they wanted to see completed.

The book that one Viennese Jew wanted to see written and finished was "Man's Search for Meaning" (originally titled "From Death Camp to Existentialism"). The book was based on his experiences in Dachau, Auschwitz, Theresienstadt, and his system of logotherapy has spread literally around the world.

Other books have followed (The Doctor and the Soul, The Unheard Cry for Meaning) and Dr. Frankl's message has provided a balm for the souls of many and provided comfort and consolation to those who have lost loved ones in the Holocaust, and have expressed an inner emptiness regarding a lack of meaning in their lives.

Frankl found in the camps that some individuals would give up their meaning and purpose in life and run into electrified fences.

Others simply became depressed and "gave up the ghost". Others were overwhelmed by depression and by the fact that they could discern no meaning in their suffering and no purpose to their lives. They may not have had a philosophical underpinning to help them cope. Frankl (1984) often quoted from Nietzsche ; " Was mich nicht umbringt, macht mich starker. " (That which does not kill me, makes me stronger) (p.89), in order to assist those individuals who despaired.

From his experiences, Frankl developed a system of therapy called "logotherapy"; loosely translated this means "therapy through meaning". "Logos" is a Greek word which roughly translated means "meaning". As opposed to Freud's "will to pleasure" and Adler's "will to power",

Frankl believes that it is "will to meaning" which is crucial. People seek a meaning and purpose in life to make their lives meaningful.

For Primo Levi (1986) "perhaps..for me, the Lager, and having written about the Lager, was an important adventure that has profoundly modified me, given me maturity, and a reason for life." (p.174)

For Viktor Frankl (1967) "it is my task to give testimony before you of how Viennese physicians labored and died in concentration camps; to give testimony of true physicians- who lived and died as such; of true physicians who could not see others suffer, who could not let others suffer, but who knew how to suffer themselves, who knew how to achieve the right kind of suffering-courageous suffering ! ! (p.107)

Yet it is more than physicians that Frankl acknowledges. He says that "former concentration camp inmates, and refugees ALL had to contend with great suffering, yet under the pressure of circumstances were not only forced, but were able to do their utmost, to give their best ! "(p.116)

And from the concentration camp experience and the Holocaust, some individuals did find a meaning and a purpose to their lives and to their existence.

Frankl (1992) indicates that there are three ways in which we can discover the meaning of life : " a) by creating a work or doing a deed, b) by experiencing something or encountering someone and c) by the attitude we take toward unavoidable suffering." (p.115)

For those in the concentrations camps of Theresienstadt, Auschwitz and Dachau, the one freedom they had left was an attitudinal one- they had the choice of the attitude that they would take toward a condition they could not change.

Part of the attitude that one can adopt is the attitude of hope. Frankl speaking to his fellow prisoners indicated that "they must not lose hope, but should keep their courage in the certainty that the hopelessness of our struggle did not detract from its dignity and its meaning.

I said that someone looks down on each of us in difficult hours- a friend, a wife, somebody alive or dead, or a God, - and he would not expect us to disappoint him. He would hope to find us suffering proudly- not miserably-knowing how to die (p.90-91).

In a sense, this is Frankl's legacy that he has left us. He indicates that "everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms--to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances . To choose one's own way. (p. 75)

The books of Elie Wiesel, Primo Levi and Frankl,

"mention only a few names.. but include all who died there. The few stand for the many because about the many one cannot write a personal chronicle. However, they need no chronicle; they need no monument. Each deed is its own monument, and more imperishable than a monument that is merely the work of human hands. Because the deeds of a man cannot be undone, what he has done cannot be removed from the world; although past, it is not irrecoverably lost in the past, but therein is irrevocably preserved. (Frankl, 1967, p.109)

Those who suffered and died in the Holocaust remain forever in what Frankl terms the "museum of the past".

Here is an example of this "museum" from a counseling session with Anna.

"Imagine there are about a dozen great things, works which wait to be created by Anna and there is no one who could achieve and accomplish it but Anna. No one can replace her in this endeavor. They will be your creations, and if you don't create them, they will remain uncreated forever. If you create them, however, even the devil will be powerless to annihilate them. Then you have rescued them by bringing them into reality. And even if your works were smashed to pieces in the museum of the past, as I should like to call it, they will remain forever.

The Holocaust, Logotherapy

From this museum, nothing can be stolen, since nothing we have done in the past can be undone " (Frankl, 1969, p.128).

In other words, those who suffered and died in the Holocaust can remember that what they have suffered can never be taken from them. To paraphrase Frankl, "those who have gone through the hell of despair.. can offer their sufferings as a sacrifice on the altar of humankind" (p.102)

One example will serve to demonstrate what logotherapy is, and how Frankl was able to help another individual deal with the Holocaust.

"A rabbi turned to me and told me his story. He had lost his first wife and their six children in the concentration camp of Auschwitz where they were gassed, and now it turned out that his second wife was sterile. I observed that procreation is not the only meaning in life, for if it were, life in itself would become meaningless, and something that in itself is meaningless cannot be rendered meaningful merely by it's perpetuation. However, the rabbi evaluated his plight as an orthodox Jew. He despaired because there was no son of his own who would ever say Kaddish for him after his death. But I would not give up. I made a last attempt to help him by inquiring whether he did not hope to see his children again in Heaven. My question produced an outburst of tears, and now the true reason for his despair came to the fore: He explained that his children, since they had died as innocent martyrs, were thus found worthy of the highest place in heaven, but he, an old sinful man could not expect to be assigned the same place. Once more I did not give up but retorted, "Is it not conceivable, Rabbi, that precisely this was the meaning of your suffering, so that finally you too, though not innocent like your children, may become worthy of joining them in Heaven?"

Is it not written in the Psalms that God preserves all your tears? So perhaps your sufferings were not in vain" (p. 85-86).

In logotherapy, it is important for an individual to discern for themselves the meaning to their suffering. For many people still, they are trying to transcend the experiences of the concentration camps and the gas chambers.

Some have been able to transcend or rise above the experiences by calling upon what Frankl calls "the defiant power of the human spirit".

This power often helps one transcend their fate. Frankl (1979) relates the story of the mother being examined by her physician. He noted her gold bracelet of many children's teeth. She explained that each tooth was taken from the mouth of her nine children who were taken to the gas chambers during the Second World War.

The physician inquired as to how she could live with a reminder such as this.

She indicated that she now operated an orphanage in Israel.

Often the "defiant power of the human spirit" can be procured by calling upon the wisdom and philosophy of the ages. Frankl is fond of quoting Nietzsche's words "He who has a why to live for, can bear with almost any how."

He would also quote the German poet "Was Du erlebst, kann keine Macht der Welt Dir rauben." (What you have experienced no power on earth can take from you.) (p.90) Frankl refers to the "museum of the past". And again, despite those who would suggest that the Holocaust never took place, the reality is in the past, and is unchangeable.

The suffering that occurred can never be removed. And those who bravely suffered in Bergen-Belsen and the other camps can rest easy knowing that their suffering will remain forever and cannot be undone.

Primo Levi (1986), another survivor of Auschwitz, corroborates this thinking of Frankl when he indicates that "every human being possesses a reserve of strength whose extent is unknown to him, be it large, small or nonexistent, and only through extreme adversity can we evaluate it." (p.60).

In the concentration camps, one of Frankl's meanings may have been that he was able to come "to know man as he really is: the being that has invented the gas chambers of Auschwitz, and also the being who entered those chambers upright, the Lord's Prayer or the Shema Yisreal on his lips" (p.35)

Frankl, a survivor of four camps, but also a professor in two fields (neurology and psychiatry) has argued against blaming the Germans for the Holocaust. He indicates that "since the end of World War II, I have not become weary of publicly arguing against the collective guilt concept. Sometimes, however, it takes a lot of didactic tricks to detach people from their superstitions. An American woman once confronted me with the reproach "How can you still write some of your book in German, Adolf Hitler's language?

"In response, I asked her if she had knives in her kitchen, and when she answered that she did, I acted dismayed and shocked, exclaiming, "How can you still use knives after so many killers have used them to stab and murder their victims?" She stopped objecting to my writing books in German. (p. 150)

In his attempt to heal the wounds, and also to recognize those that have died, Frankl has written " In Memorium ", and recalls " a young surgeon Dr. Paul Furst, and a general physician, Dr. Ernst Rosenberg. I was able to talk with both of them in the camp before they died there. And in their last words, there was not a single word of hate, only words of longing came from their lips and words of forgiveness, because what they hated was not human beings- a person must be able to forgive humans- but what they hated and what we must all hate was the system, the system which brought some men to guilt and which brought others to death (p.109).

One may call the system Nazism or whatever, but it was a system that initiated and enforced an ideology.

The Holocaust, Logotherapy

In addition, special clinical tactics and techniques have stemmed from this school of logotherapy and have provided benefit to millions. These strategies are paradoxical intention and dereflection.

While it is impossible to indicate specifically how many individuals have been helped by these techniques, it is reasonable to assume that hundreds of thousands of patients have been helped by Frankl and that psychologists, social workers, counselors and psychiatrists have used his techniques to help alleviate the sufferings of literally millions of individuals.

Frankl's voice continues to be heard as there are logotherapy conferences and workshops around the world. And Frankl continues to tell the world about his finding meaning in the shadow of the gas chambers and how we can still find meaning in the Holocaust. He has written 26 books, published in 19 languages, and it is inconceivable to even attempt to place a number on the many individuals who have been helped by his books and his followers. His books, his speeches and his lecture tours have helped alleviate the suffering of many who have survived the Holocaust, and have provided a balm for those who have lost loved ones in the death camps. Further, his books have chronicled that disastrous period of history called the Holocaust- a period that should be remembered and that should never be forgotten.

For in Frankl's (1992) own words, we must "Be alert- alert in a two fold sense: Since Auschwitz we know what man is capable of. And since Hiroshima, we know what is at stake. (p.154)

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About the Author

Michael F. Shaughnessy
Eastern New Mexico University
Portales, New Mexico, USA.
michael.shaughnessy@enmu.edu

