The Defiant Power of the Human Spirit
Lessons from the Holocaust in Addressing Ideological Violence and Crime in Contemporary Society

Teria Shantall
South Africa

1. INTRODUCTION

About myself
I am the course leader of a post-graduate training programme in Logotherapy (based on the work of the famous Holocaust survivor and psychiatrist, Viktor Frankl) at the Centre for Applied Psychology at the University of South Africa. Trainees are counsellors and psychotherapists, but also researchers, academics, teachers, administrators, and a wide variety of other professionals in the helping professions. A teaching of the Holocaust, from the point of view of its moral implications for contemporary society, forms a central part of the training in Logotherapy. I am hoping to use the greater depth of knowledge I would gain in participating in the conference on Teaching the Holocaust to Future Generations, to teach and stimulate the trainees in Logotherapy to render their professional services in community contexts and to foster a stronger sense of compassion, care, responsibility and moral integrity in the greater South African society in a more enlightened fight against antisemitism and every other form of racial prejudice and hatred.

Background
My doctorate research, written up in book form under the title of: Life’s meaning in the face of suffering. The testimony of Holocaust survivors (The Hebrew University Magnes Press, Jerusalem, 2002), focussed on the individual’s capacity to retain humane values in the midst of the cruelly unjust, violent and extremely dehumanising circumstances of the Nazi concentration and death camps. I have embarked on the writing of another book entitled: Adam, where are you? A universal call to meaning. My research interest has broadened to include not only an individual but also a national and international stand against the perpetration of senseless violence, murder and crime. Our contemporary world is once again plagued by an ideology of terror in the form of suicide bombings and terrorist acts. Once again, murder is sanctioned in the name of an ideological cause. And, once again, Jews have been singled out for annihilation, this time in the form of the destruction of the State of Israel. Drawing on the lessons of the Holocaust, how do we address such issues, not only in Israel, but the world over?

Major themes we are going to address in this workshop
The sociologist Staub (1989) sees the Holocaust as the end point of what he describes as a progression along a continuum of destruction. To take the lessons of the Holocaust to heart is to reverse the process that gave rise to it. Civil society must be based on a radical humanist response to the senseless perpetration of violence, murder and crime. This response must be based on a clear, unequivocal and highly informed stand on what is morally justifiable and what not. Bigotry, deceitfulness, blind prejudice and racial hatred, based on ignorance and fanned by ideological indoctrination on the one hand, and moral lukewarmness, ill-informed humanist sentimentality and hypocrisy on the other, must both be resolutely refuted in a clear exposition of the facts and the just course of action that is called for in the face of it.

A most challenging avenue of thought, so far little pursued and one to pursue in this workshop, is echoed in the works of Viktor Frankl (1970, 1985, 1986, 2000): The power of good, if mustered, eclipses the power of evil. Staub (1989) speculates what the final effect might have been if more than an insignificant number of people had resisted the Nazi program. Goodness has a power that increases along what Staub (1989) calls a continuum of benevolence. If one individual is empowered through positive action into a stronger stand for what is just, right and good, that power multiplies among a group of individuals united around a communal sense of what is just, right and good. A society set on upholding human
rights and advocating a respect for the dignity of human life and reflecting that stand in
dynamic community projects that seek to alleviate suffering among the victims of poverty,
violence and crime and rehabilitate (call to responsibility) the perpetrators who are brought to
justice, will perhaps signify what another sociologist, Bauman (1989) describes as a magic
threshold of defiance beyond which the technology of evil grinds to a halt.

Let us now debate the following issues:

5. What are the primary lessons that we can learn from the Holocaust in terms of what
   led up to it?
5. What have survivors of the Holocaust to say to us? What statements are made by
   such commemorative events like the March of the Living and Yom Ha’atzmaut?
5. What are the personal and universal significance of these statements?
5. Is human nature basically evil or good? How does one become the perpetrator of evil
   and how does one combat the perpetration of evil without falling prey to it yourself?
5. How do we educate towards a morally strong society and how do we produce
   inspiring leadership among those who can show us the way?
5. What is our role and mission as Holocaust educators? How can we meet the
   challenges we are facing today?

2. LESSONS FROM THE HOLOCAUST
Let us exchange answers and ideas around the first question:

What lessons can we learn from the Holocaust in terms of what led up to it?

Possible answers:
The Holocaust was rooted in the soil of German and world antisemitism.
The dormant and not so dormant antisemitism could be used in the hands of a
ruthless, cunning and power-hungry dictator such as Hitler, as a tool, a means to an
end, namely,
one of securing a position of world domination.
The climate which allowed Hitler to eventually seize power and in which the
flourishing of antisemitism could take place, was one of economic deprivation,
disillusionment, bitterness and social unrest.
The explosive energies of dissatisfaction in Germany at the time, had to be focussed
and directed, either positively or negatively. The National Socialist Party under the
forceful and charismatic leadership of a Hitler, provided a negative focus and
direction by singling out the Jews as a convenient target of hatred. The Jews are our
misfortune was the slogan of the day. Focussing all the resentment on the Jews as a
scapegoat, nationalistic zeal for German glory and supremacy could be whipped up,
especially in the sense of lauding it over the Jews as the superior or chosen nation in
their stead. Envy of the Jews, living as a distinct, cohesive, educated, and
astoundingly successful minority in their midst, was another factor giving rise to the
Holocaust.

A propaganda war had to be waged in order to legitimize acts of violence and punitive
measures against the Jews of Germany and to win over public opinion for the so-called
solution of the Jewish problem (which, in ultimate terms, meant the
annihilation of the Jewish people).

Left unchecked, the fanatical Nazi ideology could gain in strength and eventuate in
the mass killing of millions of innocent people.

Parallels in our day:
Growing antisemitism.
A militant Islam seeking world domination.
The fertile soil of societal unrest in Arab countries and especially among Palestinian
Arabs.
The focus of negative energies on Israel as a target of hatred and the creation of a militant Arab nationalism.
The waging of a propaganda warfare worldwide to single out Israel as the cause of the Middle East conflict and Israel’s existence, therefore, as a threat to world peace.
Legitimizing suicide bombings as the desperate acts of a suffering people against the so-called aggressive intents and actions of Israel and the swaying of popular opinion against Israel (with the eventual destruction of the State of Israel in mind).

2. TESTIMONY OF HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS
Let us consider *the testimonies of Holocaust survivors* in the face of what they were made to endure. What they have to say to us closely parallels two major commemorative events in the post-Holocaust period of Jewish history, events that have not only personal but also universal significance. The one event is celebrated each year on *Yom HaShoah* and the other on *Yom Ha’atzmaut*.

In the following hand-outs of some of the stories of Holocaust survivors recorded in the book: *Life’s Meaning in the Face of Suffering*, we will set out together to trace the main themes or messages reflected in these stories.

*Possible findings:*
*  Their suffering brought them into the reality of the immediate moment
*  They felt presented with choice: how were they going to deal with their suffering?
*  Things that were precious in their lives were presented to them as tasks, as things they ought to preserve despite their sufferings and even because of it.
*  The preservation and realization of such values in their lives sustained them and helped them through the trials they were made to bear.
*  Their active efforts to maintain moral values in the face of the onslaught against them, made their lives take on greater spiritual content and meaning.
*  Living with a profound value-directedness and moral responsibility, they experienced a sense of true destiny (something or someone to live or survive for) with peak-moments of triumph and even joy.

*The personal and universal implication of the findings of these Holocaust accounts:*

We can attain the peaks of moral excellence through suffering. Suffering can call us out of the moral apathy and mindlessness of mere existence. It can serve to make us realize what is truly meaningful in life and encourage us to actively preserve and foster the things that make life worth the living. Having a deeper insight in life and living for values that have become deeply our own, can make us mature and grow and attain a moral stature far above the ordinary.

The *March of the Living*, an event that takes place every year on *Yom HaShoah*, followed by another commemorative event, *Yom Ha’atzmaut*, personify what a famous Auschwitz survivor, Viktor Frankl (1968), described as the *defiant power of the human spirit*, namely, the human ability to transform a tragedy into a triumph by the courageous moral stand that is taken in the face of tragedy and how we heroically deal with and gain victory over it. There is no greater testimony of this triumph in Jewish history than in the fact that only three years after the Holocaust, the greatest tragedy ever to befall the Jewish people, the State of Israel came into being.
3. **THE CHOICE BETWEEN GOOD OR EVIL**

Let us consider the testimonies of the survivors in addressing the following questions:

*Is human nature basically evil or good? How does one become the perpetrator of evil and how does one combat the perpetration of evil without falling prey to it yourself?*

**Possible findings:**

We become what we constantly *choose* to be. The stories of the survivors were stories of *choice*. Viktor Frankl (1968) contended that our generation has come to know human beings as they really are. Human beings are the ones who invented the gas chambers of Auschwitz. They are also the ones who entered those gas chambers upright, with a prayer on their lips. Human beings can prove to be evil. They can also prove to be saintly. What accounts for the difference?

The following facts may emerge from the discussions:

* People choose to commit evil (and so *become* evil).
* People choose to be and to do good (and so *become* exemplary human beings).
* People choose not to choose, either right or wrong (and so *become* morally lukewarm or apathetic).

4. **EDUCATING TOWARDS MORAL RESPONSIBILITY**

From the previous discussions, we can ask the following question: *Who then are we, who are free to do both good and evil?*

Our discussions may bring us to the following conclusion:

The fact that we are *meant* to live by the highest moral dictates can be deduced from the simple observation that if we do so, we gain in human stature; if we do not, we can lose our human face.

* Concentration camp inmates whose sense of humanity through morally right choices remained intact, *grew in human stature (sainthood).*
* The perpetrators were people who, through morally unjustifiable choices, became mentally hardened and *inhuman (monstrous).*

It follows from the above that education towards moral responsibility should highlight the following facts:

* As human beings we have freedom of choice to do either good or evil.
* What we choose is what we become.
* We all have *conscience*: the awareness of what we are meant to be.
* Only by obeying the dictates of moral conscience can we attain the liberation and joy of full personal accountability (have self-respect by being an exemplary human being).

A simple exercise to determine who we really *want* to be or what we *must* or are *required* to be to feel really *good about ourselves and happy about our lives,* is the following:

What must the person we would like to *emulate* be like? What kind of leader or role-model do we really admire? What characteristics do they have that we ourselves would like to possess? In short, what is a truly *human* person like? What do we regard as truly great or admirable *human* characteristics?

5. **THE MISSION OF HOLOCAUST EDUCATORS**

We will finally reflect on the following questions:

*What is our role and mission as Holocaust educators? How can we meet the challenges we are facing today?*
In educating future generations on the Shoah, the following conclusions may emerge:

* We must clarify the basic lessons of the Holocaust, first in terms of the warning signs in contemporary society. To combat antisemitism, we should be fully acquainted with the facts of Jewish history and bear strong witness to the right of Israel to exist. Each nation has its own country. Jews should have theirs. We have as much a right to defend our freedom and right to exist as any other nation on earth.

* Contemporary threats to Jewish survival in terms of the existence of the State of Israel should be embraced as a challenge. Taking our cues from what Holocaust survivors have transmitted to us, namely, never to give in but to persevere in the faith that good has the power to overcome evil, we should seek to strongly identify ourselves with the message of The March of the Living and Yom Ha’atzmaut. We have survived the Holocaust and are saying: “Never again!” We will never again be at the helpless mercy of a majority culture as a defenceless minority. We have taken possession of our ancient promised land after centuries of dispersion. Emerging out of all our sufferings, morally stronger and more resolute, we express the defiant power of the human spirit by proclaiming: “We are back home. We are here to stay!”

* We are messengers of hope and good tidings to all who suffer. “You, also, can overcome and gain in human stature if you deal with your suffering in a morally upright way.”

* Throughout our history, and even today, we have been the recipients of man’s hatred of his fellow-man and of the envious onslaught of brother against brother. But we have also survived the downfall of one world dictatorship after another. We can bear witness to the fact that the evil choices of bitterness, hatred and vengeance and the perpetration of violence against innocent victims, can only lead to the eventual destruction of the instigator and perpetrator of violence. The mass murderer and terrorist self-destructs. They lose their human face and eventually, their place among the freedom-loving peoples of the world.

* In educating future generations, we have the task of instilling in them a sense of mission.

They are part of a greater destiny. The Jewish people, back in their land at the end of a long journey of persecution among the nations, have a powerful message to the rest of the world and, in the words of Viktor Frankl (1968), it is this:

There are only two races in this world: the race of the decent and the race of the indecent and this division runs through every nation. Let us join ranks with the decent in overcoming what is evil in our world.