Survivors, Psychology of: Survivors in Israel

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In the first years after the Holocaust, few studies were made in Israel of the psychological effects of Nazi persecution, although the number of Holocaust survivors was proportionally high. As time has passed, however, research has increased significantly. In 1964 a comparison was made between Holocaust survivors now in Israel and non-Jewish Norwegians who returned to Norway after being deported to camps. The results showed that the Jewish survivors suffered more from the total isolation in the camps, from the danger of death, which was greater for the Jews, and from "survivor guilt," than did the Norwegians. The study also showed that most Israeli survivors were suffering from symptoms of the so-called survivor syndrome, but were nevertheless active and efficient, and often held important and responsible jobs and social positions.

Another study, of Israeli Holocaust survivors in kibbutzim (collective settlements), revealed that survivors who could not mourn their losses immediately after the war began mourning and working through their grief when they adjusted to life in the kibbutz. The study also indicated that many Holocaust survivors had a low threshold for emotional stress. This became apparent during stressful situations that reminded them of the Holocaust—notably during the Eichmann Trial, when they had to testify against Nazi criminals, and during the 1973 Yom Kippur War. At such times, they suffered periods of depression and tension.

Surveys made in Israel more than thirty years after World War II did not show significant differences in the extent of psychological damage between people who were in hiding during Nazi occupation and former concentration camp inmates. The only difference found was that the latter experienced more pronounced emotional distress than those who survived the occupation outside the camps.

Research on elderly Holocaust survivors in Israel indicated that they encountered particular difficulties of absorption because of the serious problems they had to overcome (loss of family and of the social and cultural background they had known before the Holocaust). The community in Israel tried to provide them with personal and professional care. Nevertheless, for survivors who immigrated to Israel when elderly it was more difficult to adjust than for the younger survivors.

A controlled study carried out in a university psychiatric hospital in Jerusalem forty years after liberation revealed a difference between hospitalized depressive patients who had been inmates of Nazi concentration camps and a matched group of patients who had not been persecuted. The concentration camp survivors were more belligerent, demanding, and regressive than the control group, and this behavior may, in fact, have helped them in their survival. In a survey made in an outpatient clinic for the elderly at the same hospital, it was found that between 1983 and 1986, 25 percent of the new admissions were Holocaust survivors.

Despite the many difficulties faced by survivors in Israel, their general adjustment has been satisfactory, both vocationally and socially. For the most part, it has been more successful than that of Holocaust survivors in other countries.
Further Readings

Bibliography

- Eitinger, L. *Concentration Camp Survivors in Norway and Israel.* London, 1964


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