

Without Parents: Learning from Journeys of Children Shipwrecked by History

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ABSTRACT – Journeys of children, who were “shipwrecked by history”, can teach us about the way they built themselves as they were separated from their parents, often irreversibly. The objective of this article is to highlight what could be thought and implemented today for children in need of protection measures, based on these specific experiences. Two pieces of research are put into perspective. The first refers to “the children of Terezin”. A. Freud reported on the evolution of these children for over a year. Thirty years later, Moskovitz wanted to find out what happened to them. The second piece focuses on children of Reunion Island, exiled to mainland France. Two salient points are common: filiation and affiliation; the clinic of symbolization.

KEYWORDS: without parents, children of Terezin, children of Reunion Island, affiliation, narrativity

Sem Pais: Ensinos dos Percursos de Crianças Naufragadas pela História

RESUMO – Os percursos de crianças “naufragadas pela História”, muitas vezes separadas de seus pais de forma irreversível, ensinam sobre formas de construção de si próprias. A partir destas experiências, o presente artigo destaca o que poderia ser pensado e implementado hoje para crianças que necessitam de medidas de proteção. Dois fragmentos de pesquisa serão colocados em perspectiva. O primeiro refere-se a “os filhos de Terezin”, no qual A. Freud relatou a evolução das crianças durante mais de um ano. Trinta anos depois, Moskovitz questiona o destino destas crianças. O segundo fragmento centra-se nas crianças da Ilha da Reunião, exiladas na França metropolitana entre 1962 e 1984. Dois pontos comuns nos parecem relevantes: a filiação e afiliação e a clínica da simbolização.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: sem pais, crianças de Terezin, crianças da Reunião, afiliação, narratividade

How can we tell our story when we don’t know who we are or where we come from, and when we barely know our family roots? For it is indeed our story, about our past, our present and our future which is at stake, and that constitutes the lever for our reconstruction...

Journeys of children, who were “shipwrecked by history”, can teach us about the way they built themselves and became adults as they were separated from their parents, often irreversibly.

Thus, the intention of this article is to highlight what could be thought and implemented today for children in need of protection measures, based on these specific experiences. These serve as a magnifying glass effect of what children

can experience as they are separated from their families and placed under protection from a traumatic living context.

These singular experiences stem from two major research studies which we will delve into after a brief theoretical introduction, one on Jewish children hidden in France during the Second World War (2008; 2009), the other on children displaced from Reunion Island to metropolitan France between 1962 and 1984, separated from their parents by the French administration of child protection, to serve a political project (Feldman, 2018; Bertile *et al.*, 2018; 2021).

On the one hand, we will talk about experiences of Jewish children who survived the Shoah and became orphans after their parents were murdered in the death camps. We will

discuss how the journeys of these children, and the way they were able to reconstruct themselves, show the importance of filiation and affiliation.

And on the other hand, we will talk about children from Reunion island who were separated from their parents, from their island, on their own or along with siblings, 10,000 km away from home, to be placed in homes, foster families or adopted by relatives in mainland France, as part of a public policy implemented between 1962 and 1984 (Feldman, 2018 ; 2021a ; 2021b; 2022; Feldman, Mansouri, 2018; 2021, 2022). We will then discuss the importance of a narrative re-appropriation of one's own history and the weaving of envelopes, with the intention of a transmission to descendants.

For as Bernard Golse points out, each time history is targeted by dictatorships (2017, p.83) - for depriving beings of their history is perhaps the very essence of violence -, and each time our psychological or psychopathological models omit history, we are at risk of a reductive and damaging theoretical violence. Here we question the narrativity of these situations, because a story is co-constructed between children and adults, as a result of active co-writing.

There can be no filiation without storytelling, without a story, and without the narrativity of filiation. How can we reflect on / heal this filiation as well as the narrativity of children deprived of their history?

Furthermore, Konichek (2001) points out that filiation is formed by ties and continuities, as well as by separations

and discontinuities. And for Houzel (1999), "one of the fundamental aspects of a child's psychological development consists in making continuity with discontinuity" (p.107).

Thus, discontinuities are as inevitable as they are necessary for each child's individual psychological organization. The quality of one's elaboration on a mental and phantasmatic level can make these discontinuities easier to live with and to accept.

However, for children with chaotic backgrounds, the discontinuities, which manifest themselves in evident and brutal ways, can be traumatic and disorienting. When there is a psychic break-in and the developmental process cannot be elaborated, we know to what extent these discontinuities can be disorganizing.

In this first study on the fate of former Jewish children hidden in France during the Second World War (Feldman, 2008; 2009; 2010; 2013), and in reference to the modalities of the (re-) construction of children who had been exposed to a severing of ties, we identified that in order to ensure a certain level of security and to feel contained, human beings are in a quasi-instinctive search to belong to a group. This refers to Winnicott's famous phrase: "A child does not exist alone".

Being deprived of a representation of one's biological filiation is to be deprived of one's affiliation, one's family and cultural heritage: what has become of the children who were separated from their parents, sometimes irreversibly?

FIRST STUDY: SURVIVING CHILDREN OF THE DEATH CAMPS, OR THE CHILDREN OF TEREZIN

This was the question which Sarah Moskovitz asked herself in 1979 when she discovered the "children of Terezin". As a reminder, these Jewish children were liberated from the Terezin camp, a transit camp where deportations were frequent. These children are orphans whose Jewish parents were quickly deported to Poland after their birth and killed in the extermination camps. During the first year of their lives, these children had different experiences. They moved from one shelter to another and finally arrived separately at ages ranging from 6 to 12 months, at the Terezin concentration camp. Two or three years after their arrival in this camp, in the spring of 1945, the six children were sent with others to a Czech castle where they received medical care and were given plenty of food. After a month stay, they joined a convoy of three hundred children and teenagers who had survived the camps and were welcomed in August 1945 in England by the *British Home Office*. It was decided that the six youngest would stay together for at least a year. They were directed to a country house of *Bulldogs Bank*¹.

The concern was to provide them with a peaceful environment where they could gradually adapt to "their new country, a new language, a new existence". Anna Freud² reports, for just over a year, on the evolution of this group of six children. In particular, she recounts that these children experienced intense sensory deprivation, lack of relationship with a mother or father, deficiencies in all areas starting from the oral stage of development, and the burden of the community. She also describes these children as physically holding on to one another, not being able to tolerate one of them being sick or absent, showing aggressiveness towards the outside world if one of them felt threatened: they thus formed a single body of six.

In the conclusion of her observation, Anna Freud reflects on all the factors that influenced the development of these children. Anna Freud's observations are very precise: they

¹ The Bulldogs Bank was part of an organisation called Hampstead Nurseries, financed by Foster Parent's Plan for War Children Inc. New York.

² This article entitled "An experiment in group upbringing", was published in Writings, vol. IV, pp.163-229. It was written in collaboration with Sophie Dann. It was originally published in *Psychoanalytic study of the Child*, 6 : 127-268 ; as well as in *Readings in Child Development*, New York, ed. Martin et C.B. Stendler, Hartcourt, Brace, 1954 : 404-421. There was a German translation, published in 1962: "Gemeinschaftsleben im frühen Kindesalter", in *Jahrbuch der Psychoanalyse*, 1961-1962, 2 : 201-248.

show an alteration of the spheres of development with the outline of neurotic symptoms.

Anna Freud notes that none of these children displayed manifestations of the Oedipus complex. She also states that none of them are deficient or psychotic. After their stay at Bulldogs Bank, these children were all adopted by American or English families.

Thirty years later, Sarah Moskovitz (1983) wanted to find out what happened to these children. She reported on the interviews she conducted with these adults who were then 37 years old, living in Great Britain and the United States. Sometime later, she contacted four of them a second time, to find out what had become of them (Moskovitz, 1985). In her writings, the author shows, through her encounters, the psychological fragility of these adults, and their difficulties in closing the wounds of the past. She reveals that most of them shared their difficulties with their adoptive parents,

especially regarding the choice they had made to keep their stories silent. One of them compares himself to an incomplete and culturally deprived person. He describes himself in these words: “I feel lost, waiting to be found” (Ibid, p.403).

These encounters allowed four of the adults to conduct research for one of them, to break their silence for the others, and, most importantly, to reveal their past to their spouses and their children, thus relieving them of the heavy burden they were carrying until then.

Beyond the scope of the intrapsychic dynamic, these observations show the need to have access to one's origins, to be able to tell one's own story, to be an investigator of one's own history and to broaden one's perspective by considering the effects of the rupture of the group to which one belongs, and thus to take the measure of their fragility linked to the absence of a solid foundation or an “external cultural framework”.

DISCUSSION

Importance of filiation and affiliation in the construction of a child

The journeys of these children and the way they were able to reconstruct themselves show the importance of filiation and affiliation.

Let us recall that by his naming, the newborn is from the outset inscribed in the symbolic dimension. His birth necessarily occurs in a specific lineage which inscribes him in a genealogy, a history and a geography. As a child of his father and mother, he is necessarily affiliated to his filiations: paternal and maternal, to the families who bear him, as well as to the groups to which he belongs, who introduce him into his affiliations - hence the importance of affiliation, as a foundation that pre-exists every human being, even before birth. The term affiliation is borrowed here from anthropology: it is about belonging to groups (Levi-Strauss, 1973, p.132), whether cultural, social, ethnic, religious, or gender-related.

Affiliations are plural and, like filiation, these two processes are not simple processes of passive inscription, but rather interactive processes that suppose a constant elaboration of an individual throughout his development and the various ages of his life. Moreover, they both have a conscious, preconscious and unconscious dimension.

This refers to Guyotat's (2005) description of the three axes of filiation linking a child to its origins. The first is the genetic link between the child and his parents. The second axis concerns the instituted/symbolic filiation that is established through the transmission of the name, and through the symbolic recognition of the link. The third is the affective or “narcissistic” axis of filiation, which is built from the parental desire to raise a child, and the child's daily experience with his or her relatives.

In a recent study of former children in care, aged between 22 and 47 years, John Rideau *et al.* (2022) show that they suffer from a lack of knowledge of their own biography and parentage. After their placement, as adults, they became investigators of their history and genealogy. Most of them strongly regret the fact that child protection services did not help them to inscribe themselves not only in their filiations but also in their affiliations.

This research result is consistent with the one we are currently conducting with adults who, as children, have been placed, displaced or “exported” from Reunion Island to metropolitan France, within the framework of a clinical research and support system for these adults.

Second study: the children of Reunion Island, exiled in metropolitan France

Between 1962 and 1984, 2015 children aged from 2 to 17 were transferred to mainland France as part of a political project (Feldman, 2018).

In the sixties, Reunion, a French *département* since 1946, was faced with many difficulties: a demographic explosion, a serious economic situation with lack of qualified manpower and great inequalities in income (Ascaride *et al.* 2004, p.49). At the same time, rural zones in mainland France were experiencing a desertification process and population migration towards urban areas. The *département* of Creuse in central France is a particular geographical case in point, considered as being part of the French “empty zones”. As a result, during the sixties and the seventies, facing the demographic explosion in Reunion and because the metropolitan rural countryside was being deserted, the government officially organised the emigration of some 75 000 Reunion islanders through the intermediary of the

French bureau for the development of migrations in overseas territories³.

Two thousand and fifteen children were thus transferred to mainland France under the auspices of the French Child Protection Institution and the French Department of Health and Social Affairs (DDASS). Social workers travelled up and down the island to meet families whose situation had become vulnerable by social insecurity, inviting them to place their children first in care homes in Reunion Island. But these facilities were lacking on the island and there was frequently pressure from the Department of Health and Social Affairs on the parents, who were often illiterate. This eventually led the parents to willingly allow their children to be sent to mainland France. These parents were given the impression that their children's placement was only temporary and for their own good.

This decision was kept silent for a long time (Cherki, 2006). However, on February 18th, 2014, The French National Assembly proposed a motion, calling for an in-depth historical investigation of this affair, and its diffusion, as they believed that the State had failed in its moral responsibility towards its wards. A commission of experts was created in February 2016 and a report with proposals for the provision of accompaniment for the former minors from Reunion was expected for 2018⁴. This commission, composed of a sociologist, a historian and a geographer, was not asked to assess the psychological repercussions of this "transplantation". There was no psychologist. Furthermore, the information gathered in this report, most of it from archives, did not explore subjective aspects, i.e. the experience of this forced exile among those who had lived through it.

Within the framework of an on-going study assessing the psychological repercussions of this very specific life experience, thirteen interviews were conducted with people who had been transferred to mainland France between the ages of 2 and 15. These interviews were made possible by the Federation for uprooted children, under the auspices of the DROM (overseas territories) and took place between 2016 and 2017. There were eight women and five men, presently aged between 47 and 67. The average age was 58. Seven interviews were conducted with people from Reunion living in Creuse, a French *département* they had never left since their arrival in the years 1965-70; three interviews were conducted in the Paris region and three others in the south of France, where these six people were residing. Among the thirteen people, seven of them were aged 2 to 7 years when they arrived in mainland France, three were 9 to 11 years and

three were 12 to 15. There was only one specific "family" situation; one woman, born in Reunion, arrived in mainland France when she was 2 with her mother who was then aged 17⁵. The average age of the interviewees at the time of their separation from their parents was six years. The average age at the time they left for France was 8 years. Thus, the period of instability for their placement – involving many separations – lasted an average of two years. The thirteen people interviewed experienced between two and seven separations, with an average of three to four separations.

In a first step, a qualitative analysis of the narratives enabled the detection of what became of the traces of trauma at different ages, which proved particularly visible at key moments in life (Feldman, 2019): adolescence, maternity, parenthood, retirement, old age, becoming grand-parents, among others. These ages can be seen as milestones that are often periods of psychological upheaval, rendering the subject vulnerable, or conversely, they can be levers for potential change. In the case of the Reunion children, the same periods: adolescence, maternity and parenthood were particularly difficult milestones.

The analysis of individual and group interviews, as well as the analysis of our experiences through this research carried out over the last six years, lead us to think of these adults as de-opportunised people from whom their history have been taken away and even 'an-opportunised', with the privative 'a', because they have experienced deprivation, and even multiple deprivations. Their historicity has been so shaken that they have been deprived of history. These children have been discredited. These adults are disengaged.

This dimension reveals that their experiences are also symptomatic of the history of the Reunionese, marked by the violence of policies of cultural alienation (slavery, engagism) or 'continuous acculturation (a will)', of a 'French colonial assimilationist policy' (Ghasarian, 2002, p.664). The Reunionese population is made up of "deported populations, deprived of cultural references", in a relationship of "dependence (...) on France".

As for cultural representations, 'to subsist, one had to abandon one's language and sometimes one's religion, at least in its public version' (Ibid, p.668).

In addition to this history, which is a painful succession, which the 'Creuse' children carry with them as an inheritance, this research deals with yet another displacement, a new deprivation of history, or a new alienation from the historical work from which each person comes, because 'the entire population living on Reunion Island has its origins outside the island' (Ghasarian, 2004, p.315).

Reunion Island is a land of imports and exports of populations, referring here to the way the island was populated, by importing people to work in the sugar cane fields... Cultural alienation is at the heart of their history: in

³ BUMIDOM (Bureau pour le Développement des Migrations dans les Départements d'Outre-Mer).

⁴ I (first author) was auditioned on June 17th, 2016, at the overseas Ministry, during this commission, to shed light on the potential psychological repercussions of such experiences. An expert report dated April 10th of that year evidenced the fact that this transplantation had taken place in compliance with practices and regulations operating in child protection at that time. Therefore, no evidence of child theft or abduction was found in the files.

⁵ The subjects interviewed all signed informed consent before taking part in the research.

the imports, in addition to the prohibition of practicing rituals (notably Hinduism) and forced to adopt Christianity, these populations were obliged to abandon their language of origin.

Children who were forced into exile between 1962 and 1984 and 'sent' to metropolitan France had to forget Creole in order to assimilate into French and to assimilate into the French of metropolitan France.

It is from all these data emanating from the analysis of the encounters as well as from my countertransference, articulated with knowledge of the history of Reunion Island, that the notion of disempowerment appeared: the severing of kinship links leads to a suppression of cultural objects. This statement is in line with what Cambefort (2001) identifies as the effects of definitive uprooting: 'destruction of ancestrality (...), undermining of filiation by the suppression of original patronymics and their replacement by borrowed names (...), destruction of original languages (...)' (p. 61-62).

These attacks cause deep symbolic wounds. A disaffiliation from one's origins generates a primary narcissistic flaw which, at one time or another, blocks the subject in his or her psychological functioning or leads him or her towards "a most severe identity collapse, which analytical work is not guaranteed to stop" (Allouch, 2001, p.38).

"A child does not exist alone... and if it does not exist without the arms that carry it, it does not exist without the environment that carries the parents". This sentence by Winnicott (1965) is at the heart of the problematic of the history of these adults.

Making work is perhaps what underlies the actions of the life drives and transforms beta objects into alpha objects (Bion, 1962). Making work is the function of the mother with her baby. Making work is the function of the psychist, by lending his or her thinking apparatus to the psyche of the other.

Towards a weaving of envelopes, a narrative re-appropriation, a work to be transmitted... for a clinic of 're-working' and symbolization

"Thou shalt tell thy children" is one of the principles of Judaism and constitutes the basis of the work of re-development, of re-appropriation of history, with the intention of transmission to descendants. To stimulate a process of elaborative narrativity with the aim of transmitting and finally being the owner of one's own history and no longer alienated by the history of another is the intention at the heart of the clinical research set up for adults who, as children, have experienced this acculturation and are heirs to multiple cultural alienations.

The first stage consists of a reappropriation of its work, its history, its stories, its sometimes-multiple crossbreedings and its symbols, potentially via a discovery or re-discovery of the Creole language and its mediation media⁶.

Narrativity as a force of inscription and linkage allowing the historicisation of the ontogeny and the interactions of the subject with his or her surroundings is indeed at the centre of the 're-working' clinic. This is what we are currently trying to do in the context of discussion groups.

These adults are no longer attached to anything: neither biological parents whom they struggle to meet, to avoid talking about a reunion, after forty years of separation, nor adoptive parents who, for those we met, have not succeeded in taking care of them, nor referents from the ASE who could have been landmarks in their construction.

Without any envelope: neither psychic, nor family, nor cultural, they all have major psychological disorders. They are neither from here nor from there.

CONCLUSION

The director of the Guéret children's home, who was from Reunion, tried to introduce their cultural objects and understood the importance of working for continuity with their cultural cradle. He had even written to Michel Debré (deputy of Reunion since 1963 who had established a strong power there), to ask for the children to go back to Reunion for the holidays because they were, he said, "homesick". Later, the director of the home was dismissed (Ascaride *et al.*, 2004).

The introduction of cultural objects to help them rebuild their lives was suggested by the children who were taken into an OSA children's home in 1945 after leaving the Buchenwald camp. Gaby Cohen and Judith Hemmendinger, who ran the home, spoke of their difficult adaptation, which manifested

itself in high levels of agitation, violence, aggression and behavioural problems and in their relationships with adults.

This Buchenwald camp was liberated on 11 April 1945; in barrack no. 66, there were hundreds of children, all boys, aged between 8 and 20, Hungarian and Polish. These children and adolescents were taken in from 1945 onwards in Switzerland and England. France took in 444 of them. These children experienced Auschwitz, i.e. selection, terror, forced labour, the death march. They were then taken to Buchenwald.

This testimony about the children of Buchenwald highlights that their reconstruction was based on the security of early ties before the deportation associated with the symbolic presence of the group, which they were able to find after the horror.

These data are consistent with the accounts of the orphans of the Shoah about their experiences in the children's homes that took them in after the war. Homes such as the one in

⁶ Music, dance, Maloya in particular ("prohibited in Reunion by the French administration in the post-colonial period, from the 1950s" (Ghasarian, 2002, p.665).

Moissac (in the Tarn-et-Garonne) put Jewish culture at the heart of their reception project: the symbolic, via rites and festivals, which considerably helped the reconstruction of these children (Hazan, 2000; Lewertowski, 2003).

This reaffiliation was possible through a reappropriation of Jewish rituals, through the study of texts, dance, song, the celebration of holidays. Life in these children's homes has enabled many of these young people to repair the wounds caused by their various losses. The bonds built up between them are indestructible in the manner of fraternal ties. They

call themselves the "old Moissagais": their group exists, it has its own identity and a founding myth.

This is what led Marianne Rubinstein to choose the title of her book in 2002: Not everyone was lucky enough to be an orphan, in comparison with Jewish children who, at the Liberation, were reunited with either of their two parents, who had been transformed by the experience of the Shoah, of hiding, of separation, or with one of them, who more often than not had to be cared for because he or she was unable to take on his or her parental function again (Feldman, 2009).

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