

## **The victim role and other less obvious emotional consequences of the Second World War victimization and the process of forgiveness**

**Tomaž Erzar<sup>1</sup>**

It is well known that with any new experience of injustice, old unhealed injustices resurface and deepen. In consequence, people who were exposed to injustice in the past continue to see themselves as victims for a long time and have problems distinguishing between the old and new injustice. In their perception, the old injustice blends with the new one, reaffirming their negative view of life, people and themselves. For them the world becomes ever more uncertain, unpredictable and unfriendly, and people ever less trustworthy. They also see themselves as ever less competent to fight the abuse or injustice and ask people for help. In the decades after the WWII, we saw many instances of this kind of behaviour in victims of all kinds.

Very often in the life of victimized people the *primary* injustice, i.e. injustice done to them by other people, is followed by the *secondary* injustice, i.e. injustice done to the victims by the victims themselves. For example, victims blame themselves for the primary injustice, experience unworthiness of compassion and support, remain passive, subordinate themselves, or try to avoid negative emotions with self-destructive behaviour.

In order to understand emotional dynamics behind this process, we distinguish and at the same time look for connections between two levels of human suffering that are the result of unjust actions of other people. The first level is the level of overt victimhood when someone is a victim of violence and abuse, and suffers pain and bears injustice; the second level is covert or intrapsychic when a person perceives oneself as a victim of injustice and adopts the victim role. This latter role resonates deeply within a person and his/her perception of oneself and other people. The difference between the two levels becomes clear when we bear in mind that out of the many people who were victims of inhuman cruelty and humiliation in the Second World War only a fraction remained chained to past injustice for their whole life, while others managed to turn their life in the other direction. Judging from their testimonies, it seems that they succeeded in doing so by stopping the spread of secondary injustice inside them: they made sense of the injustice (e.g. Viktor Frankl), they did not adopt the victim role despite the injustice (e.g. Slovenian writer Boris Pahor), they had the

---

<sup>1</sup> Tomaž Erzar, PhD, Associate Professor, Faculty of Theology, University of Ljubljana, Poljanska cesta 4, SI – 1000 Ljubljana, [tomaz.erzar@guest.arnes.si](mailto:tomaz.erzar@guest.arnes.si)

support of good people who made them feel worthy and loved (e.g. hidden Jewish children in French and other European families), they practised charity and forgiveness (e.g. Corrie Ten Boom).

In the past few decades, professionals in the field of psychotherapy thoroughly researched how people, due to past injustice and trauma, get caught in a vicious cycle of their own negative thoughts, feelings and emotions, and how this internal turmoil affects their perception of the reality around and inside them. This also applies to the research and treatment of the psychological consequences of the Second World War, which is chronologically quite distant from the present, though not entirely left behind, as evidenced by its long-term, cumulative effects. These effects are found not only in the people who were directly affected by the war, but also in the generation of their children and grandchildren.

### **The victim role**

When we speak about victimhood, we have in mind the entire system of feelings, behaviour, emotionality, and perception of the affected person. Research shows that how the person copes with the victimhood is closely related to the type of current injustice, how the person sees oneself, how the person learned to bear and overcome injustice in the past, especially in relationships with family and friends, and how the person is seen by the environment. In our study on the fate of Slovenian orphans and children from the Second World War, their coping strategies were found to be related to their age, the support of family and friends or the lack of it, the perception of oneself, and the general unresponsiveness of the environment to the distress of children.<sup>2</sup>

When people find themselves in great distress that surpasses their usual ways of confronting problems, they tend to take on the role of a victim. The victim role means that besides all external and material circumstances making someone eligible to receive help and eliminating all doubt that one is the victim, this person also sees her/himself as the victim, feels justified in being passive and helpless, avoids responsibility for recovery and tries to gain other people's unconditioned sympathy and support. In the short-term, the victim role helps the wounded person overcome the shock caused by the injustice: it tries to re-establish

---

<sup>2</sup> Tomaž Erzar, "Disenfranchised, Unwanted and Unrecognised Grief: Analysis of the Phenomenon based on four documentary films about Slovenian war children and orphans", *Bogoslovni vestnik* 2 (2015): 275–285.

as soon as possible the old order in which there was no injustice and where no injustice was allowed to happen.

In the long-term however, when the person remains in the role of the victim regardless of the changed circumstances and the fact that other wounded people have already successfully confronted the situation, the role has many negative sides and represents the biggest challenge on the path to recovery. Because a victimised person is always right and because as a victim, the person has the right always to be angry and still get a positive reaction from the environment, it is often the case that people or groups hold on to their victim role in a much exaggerated or even manipulative manner. Hostile groups or parties in conflict often compete between each other about who is the bigger victim and thus morally more entitled to compassion and just settlement. Whether manipulatively or unconsciously, the self-victimized people present themselves as someone completely helpless, passive, innocent and ignorant regarding her/his own misery. Very often former victims of injustice who adopt the victim role provoke high levels of anger and aggression in their surroundings.

### **Seeking justice and allying with perpetrators**

A further problem arises when the victimised person spends all his energy on seeking justice, which maintains the state of shock, trauma, indignation, helplessness, unsettled injustice, anger and bitterness. Seeking a just settlement is a natural reaction to injustice as the victim tries to regain his status or dignity. However, this response must not become the only way to resolve the injustice. It is equally important for the victim to fully embrace the anger, helplessness and pain caused by the injustice, allow oneself to feel deep emotions of humiliation, worthlessness and shame, and to grieve about the loss. Giving continuous or excessive and predominant attention to justice will usually hinder the access to more vulnerable emotions such as humiliation, shame, pain, sadness and compassion, and thus suppress their expression and regulation.

Research further shows that although justice has been served, in many cases victims are not relieved. What is more: even though they expected the settlement and punishment of the perpetrator to bring them inner peace and satisfaction, the opposite happened. Victims were more occupied with the perpetrator than before punishment, because they underestimated the emotional consequences of the punishment and their own involvement in it. Since punishment is usually driven by anger and the desire for the deserved suffering of the

perpetrator, it does not lead to a significant improvement of the psychological well-being of the victim in the direction of confronting the pain and loss caused by the injustice. Excessive and exclusive reliance on a just settlement and punishment reflects the situation where victims remain feeling trapped and helpless and are in a constant state of smoldering anger. At the same time, they expect that with a just resolution of injustice they will not only regain everything they had but that it would also bring them a feeling of triumph, dignity and self-worth along with the satisfaction.

Fighting for the just recovery of damage and the abolishment of injustice keeps the victim's attention focused on the act of injustice and the perpetrator. Often, how fast justice will be served depends heavily on the perpetrator if, for example, he/she is aware of his/her action, regrets it, understands the consequences of the action for the victim and is ready to admit and settle the injustice. A problem with just resolution arises when perpetrators (or, as is the case in Slovenia, the political group associated with the former oppressive regime) do not show any signs of responsibility or remorse, or even have authority over the victim. The more the perpetrator evades justice, the greater the injustice.

The situation worsens if victims, not understanding and not able to understand the perpetrators, address themselves to them and seek, demand or ask for justice and the just settlement of injustice. Perpetrators are often masters of denial and pretence, successfully evading their responsibility and guilt for their actions. In consequence, the public either demonises or dehumanizes them. Wounded and helpless victims are often scared of perpetrators due to their seeming self-infatuation and emotional supremacy. Victims sometimes admire their perpetrators try to establish contact with them. Thus they only deepen their own helplessness and the feeling of being trapped since they are not able to get an answer to their distress from the perpetrators, let alone their confession or understanding. Ruminating and obsessing about their injustice, they go from one extreme (pitying the perpetrator, offering superficial forgiveness and minimising the blame) to the other (demonising and admiring the perpetrator) and back, until they finally get the feeling that they somehow must have contributed to their own misery, which makes them even more angry and frustrated.

### **The victim becomes the perpetrator**

In cases where nobody takes care of punishing the perpetrators and where victims are under the moral supremacy of the perpetrators, the victim role can become an excuse for the victim's own revengeful and immoral actions. Psychologists have found that the feeling of entitlement in victims is not a direct consequence of the injustice suffered but changes according to the current experiencing of injustice and readily moves from one area to another. For example, someone who was cheated in a store will be less charitable to a beggar on the street. It was also established that the feeling of excessive entitlement is closely related to the narcissistic personality disorder and reaches into the core of personality and self-awareness. The feeling leads to selfish actions, a greater inclination to vengefulness and a reduced readiness for forgiveness and reconciliation. Thus it seems that the real danger of unhealed injustices lies in the fact that through the potentially selfish and vengeful behaviour of victims their misfortune befalls innocent third persons, most commonly partners, children and close friends who now become new innocent victims and may transfer their injustice yet further to other people.

### **Letting go of the victim role, compassion and forgiveness**

Nobody of course wants to deny victims the right to search for satisfaction and justice. This would be immoral and psychologically ineffective. Justice is part of the human interpersonal world and a vital condition for coexistence. However, all forms of justice are not equal in terms of their effects on the lives of victims. Forms of justice promoting compassion, forgiveness and connectedness bring greater satisfaction to victims and a greater sense that the injustice was settled in the right way.

Conflict resolution processes in different societies around the globe made clear that it is best when the effort to achieve justice is taken over by a third party, i.e. when neither victims nor perpetrators have a central role in the process. This allows the victims to free themselves from the subordinate relationship with perpetrators and focus on grieving, personal growth and fulfilment. It also allows the relationship between the victims and perpetrators to develop in the direction of confession, apology, compassion, reconciliation and forgiveness. The objective of conflict resolution and just settlement is that wounded people slowly let go of their victim role, regain their dignity and take on an active role in shaping the world, thus living a full life. The crucial role in this process is played by replacing negative emotions connected with injustice with positive ones directed towards other people and

possibly perpetrators. This of course cannot be achieved by the victim simply renouncing the revenge and resentment towards the perpetrator. Such renouncement or forgiveness will be seen as hollow if it is only thought of as following social norms or religious commands.

Therapy programmes for forgiveness emphasize what they see as a crucial step toward healing the pain of past injustice. In the so-called working phase of the process, victims are led to the realisation that they have not always been capable of bearing the injustice in a way that would not cause injustice to others and self. It has been shown that this realisation functions to prevent the wounded person from continuing to perceive oneself exclusively as a victim and allows one to gradually give up this role. The victim will experience or remember that she/he has sometimes received compassion even when causing injustice, which will redirect her/his attention to the fact that real compassion goes beyond the opposition of victim and perpetrator. The real compassion extends to everybody, regardless of whether the person is the victim or the perpetrator. This aspect of compassion and mercy is particularly emphasized in religious programmes for the treatment of injustice: the compassion of God, received by a man when he least deserves it, opens his heart to experiencing good. The man experiences this good as an objective good, i.e. as an independent source of the good in the world that does not depend on his efforts or diligence, nor his suffering and helplessness.

### **The case of Slovenia**

Trying to understand the long-lasting psychological wounds in victims of injustices caused during and after the Second World War against a part of the Slovenian population, we have to keep in mind that the process of uncovering the truth behind the Communist ideology has only begun with the political turnover after the year 1991. Long years of helplessness, suffering and passiveness on the part of the victims have, in many families, caused the transmission of negative emotions and trauma patterns to the younger generation. In our opinion, the greatest challenge in overcoming injustice in the older as well as younger generations of Slovenians is the relinquishment of their role as victims. War orphaned children who are now in old age often say that they feel permanently damaged, that the injustice has become a part of their identity, and that they cannot find any deeper meaning in it or move on. If such a stance is understandable for the older generation, it does not apply to the younger generation, which should do everything possible to get in touch with the pain or anger they inherited from their parents, open up to good, and gradually overcome its fears.

When victims follow through these steps, they have a chance to get rid of the victim role and take the first steps on the path of forgiveness. While the attitude of resentment and hatred has been shown to have many negative effects on human physical, mental, interpersonal and spiritual health, the decision to forgive restores one's mental and physical health. In our country, the ubiquity of self-destructive behaviours and the frequency of numerous illnesses are probably an indicator that we have only just started down the path to overcoming injustice and opening ourselves up to good.