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## **The Dignity of the Perpetrator**

By Eva Madelung

*A Prologue by the Translator, Markus Abernathy*

The following text by Eva Madelung was composed for a German speaking audience. The context of her article is a strand of the public discourse of post-war Germany that is called "*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*." The word means "coming to terms with the past," with the assumption that everybody knows which "past" is being referred to: the period of Nazi-Germany, and the inconceivable crimes committed against humanity.

*Vergangenheitsbewältigung* invokes the period Eva Madelung talks about here, including the range of approaches of 'coming to terms with it.' To people from Germany the bulky word is as familiar, its meaning as clear, as the meaning of "Pearl Harbor" is to U.S.-Americans. Referring to a specific set of events, it invokes memories of a cultural trauma, as well as the historic context that bore it. In her article, Madelung does not need to spell out the word. The issue is all pervasive in this text, and the assumptions are clear.

*The Dignity of the Perpetrator* is addressing the German trauma in a careful and compassionate way. The author scouts out the landscape of her memories, finds contradictory feelings, and seeks to understand, name and somehow reconcile them. In doing so she expects us to be able to follow her line of thoughts, to be familiar with historic facts, and to be ready to skip over what has been said before so many times. A translation cannot imitate all those skips. To have certain passages make sense in a language that has not been shaped by the same experiences I therefore needed to add words and whole phrases. I hope that the translation does justice to the original.

It seems like it has been the accepted moral position in Germany for the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that we Germans somehow have to accept and carry the guilt, and face the shame in order to ultimately come to terms with "the past". This has proven to be very difficult.

In her article, and in her work with the families of perpetrators, Madelung contributes to this work. *The Dignity of the Perpetrator* is a powerful and courageous piece that documents an exploration of the German shadow. The author delves into an emotional maze of guilt and shame, illusions and justifications, and does what the English expression "to come to terms with it" literally suggests: with a patient, honest, and compassionate stance she names, she speaks, she confesses.



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From a systemic perspective, the linguistic root of the word *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* gives less helpful advice: while *Vergangenheit* means the past, "*bewältigen*" translates as "to master", "to handle", "to get under control", "to overcome", "to complete", "to dispose of" the past. We have learned that those approaches ultimately don't work. They are presumptuous, and cannot lead to a resolution. Madelung's forgiving exploration shows us a different approach. Perhaps this is finally a way to come to terms with past issues: not by disposing of, but by retrieving the dignity of the perpetrator may we all find peace.

## **The Dignity of the Perpetrator. On the Necessity of Self-reflection**

**By Eva Madelung**

*Translation by Markus Abernathy*

NOTE: A German version of the article was published in *Praxis des Familien-Stellens* 2001/21

It's been more than 50 years that the Nazi regime ended, yet the task of coming to terms with those fateful years is far from over. The after-effects can be observed in systemic constellation work over and over again, often with dismaying clarity. The fates of those people who experienced the Nazi regime continue to affect their family systems today. The participants of constellation workshops are obviously subject to that: clients, representatives, and certainly also the facilitator. Given this situation, it is thus always possible that the facilitator may influence the course of a constellation, due to unresolved issues in his/her own life, either by their choice of sentences, or other interventions. To a certain extent the feedback of the representatives can serve as a corrective. Still, with his or her inner stance, the facilitator is prone to influence the constellation just as much as the representatives, whether he or she is being considered as part of the field, or as a factor influencing the process from outside. In order to reach that inner empty space, the state from where "phenomenological seeing" can occur, the facilitator needs to free him or herself from any personal entanglement in the issue.

### **Peculiar self-observation**

This conviction prompted me to give a talk on this highly complex topic. Furthermore I had observed something peculiar: every time I facilitated a constellation with descendants of perpetrators, it seemed to be of special importance to me that a specific human quality was being honored. I mean the "warrior-quality"<sup>2</sup> which had fallen into disrepute in Germany, due to the many crimes that were committed during the Nazi-regime. In other countries however, e.g. in Israel, this quality is held in great esteem.



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While I brought up this topic in an intervision-group meeting, I shared another surprising fact: the honoring of this "warrior quality," i.e. the "dignity of the perpetrator," is of special importance to me, even though I am the child of a father who had been active in the *Widerstand*<sup>3</sup>.

## Systemic compensation by the facilitator

My own interpretation of this phenomenon was that it presents a systemic compensation that is passing through me. In principle, this stance helps the facilitator in finding a good resolution. I was asking myself, however, if in following this impulse in my work, I was not going too far sometimes. A colleague commented: "You are defending the despised enemy" referring to a statement by Bert Hellinger. Hellinger had once said in regard of the Neo-nazi extremists: "They are seeking retaliation for their despised fathers."

How does all this make sense?

## Some details from my own family history

### Guilt, innocence, belonging

While I reflected upon this situation, memories began to surge in my mind, memories that puzzled and engaged me. It seemed to me that in this case the family-conscience expresses itself together and simultaneously with a "movement of the soul."

As already mentioned, I am the child of an active opponent of the National Socialists. At the same time of course I belong to a nation that supported and endured this regime for 12 years. I was only 14 years old when the war ended, and therefore neither victim nor perpetrator in the strict sense of the term. Nevertheless I was tied up in the fate of that time. Compared to the sufferings that so many had to endure, I had been rather fortunate. The death of my elderly father in 1942 - I was eleven years old - hit me much harder. I knew nothing of his activities in the *Widerstand*, and thus his angry comments about Hitler often scared me. My father's remarks were incomprehensible to me, as I had been kept in ignorance about his role and position in the resistance movement. If I had been in the know, I would have been a potential danger to him and our family. This led to confusions, and I often felt ashamed about my father. I envied my best friend, whose father was serving in active duty, as a doctor at the front! I also enjoyed the activities of the *Jungmädel*<sup>4</sup> a lot. There I felt that I belonged to a community; and I don't recall any incidents of anti-Semitic agitation or the like. That kind of agitation, however, was familiar to me from the speeches



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of Hitler and Goebbels. On a regular basis, the radio at our house resounded with the "*Führeransprachen*,"<sup>5</sup> just like everywhere else. As a child I often sat in front of the apparatus, fascinated and scared at the same time by the power of the speeches.

My father had already passed on, when the news broke of the attempted assassination of July 20<sup>th</sup> 1944. I vaguely remember how, after the blast, I listened to a brief speech by the "*Führer*" [who had miraculously survived the attempt on his life]. In indignation I exclaimed to my mother: "I don't understand how people can do such a dreadful thing!" She had looked at me silently, with a strange smile on her lips. For a moment I was aware that I had touched a family secret; I was ashamed, and asked no further questions.

If I had been a little older, I would have probably become a BDM-leader myself. After the war however, when I found out that father had been on the "right" side, I imagined that in due time he would have shared his views with me. But then again, who knows what my reaction would have been? Of one thing I am sure however: had I been raised by different parents, and had I been a bit older, I most probably would not have resisted the propaganda of this regime! I have had too much exposure to its hypnotic public appearances.

## Confusion, projection, uncanny sadness

Many years later I had another astounding experience: I had become interested in the newly published books that discussed the era of National Socialism, and came upon the "Memoirs" of Albert Speer (Hitler's architect)<sup>6</sup>. I was very impressed by his descriptions. Even though he had for a long time been a close confidant of Hitler, and had been deeply entangled in the Nazi movement, he had managed to gain some distance towards the end. By boycotting Hitler's strategy *Politik der verbrannten Erde*<sup>7</sup> as much as he could, he was able to spare the country from an even worse outcome. For the most part of his life he had cherished the "warrior-quality"; yet in post-war imprisonment in Berlin-Spandau he was able to take account of his life, and acknowledge his guilt.

The further I approached Hitler's death in the book, the more I was fascinated, and kept reading until late at night. When I finally got to the end, and put down the book, I was overcome by an inexplicable and uncanny sadness, - a solemn longing for something lost. I was perplexed, this was confusing: in the months preceding the defeat of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Reich in 1945, it had begun to dawn on me<sup>8</sup>. The collapse had actually been a relief for me, and not a disaster. Therefore my feelings made no sense to me...!



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The next day those strange emotions were gone. All that remained for some time was a feeling of regret that the fascinating reading experience had come to an end. Had I adopted the father-projection upon Hitler that Speer obviously had had? Did the fascination of my teenage years come alive again? Or did I defend the "despised enemy," as a colleague had put it, in the same way as others take revenge for their despised fathers?

Recently I read a book that describes Hitler's life as a path from a life in utter human poverty to dictatorship (David Clay Large, *Hitler's München*)<sup>9</sup>. In reading this description it became strikingly apparent to me to what extent this person had been driven by an inner force, entangled in the historic circumstances, so much so that he sometimes seemed to be rather a victim than a perpetrator.

## Therapeutic work with victim-perpetrator entanglements

### The psychoanalytical work with children of perpetrators.

For a long time the therapeutic techniques in working with children and grandchildren of perpetrators were derived from psychoanalysis. As an example I shall quote from Dörte von Westernhagen's text "*Die Kinder der Täter*," The Perpetrators' Children.<sup>10</sup>

The analytically oriented process Westernhagen describes deals with a compassionate investigation of the perpetrator's fate; the act of confronting horror; the honouring of the child's need for love; our own entanglements in threatening developments such as nuclear power. At the end of her report she writes:

"I was gathering all the books about the Holocaust, WWII, the '*Waffen SS*', the '*Leibstandarte*<sup>11</sup>,' the Baltic war, in order to return them to the library. I noticed that I felt not only relief, but also regret. I had been granted to feel the emotions of a proper love story: I had been allowed to love, revere, despise, desire, and hate the father. Now the time was up. I was to say good-bye to the father that I had known.

She ends with a poem from Hans Keilson, from his book "*Sprachwurzellos*"<sup>12</sup>:

In the cold days of November

when it becomes cold



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I think of your death  
father  
the birds flee from the skies  
the children breathe upon  
frosted glass  
more secretly  
without time  
is the hour of your dying  
father  
like my lament  
daily  
forget feeds them  
into the obvious  
I stand  
with covered head  
to speak the prayer for the dead

## The Systemic View and the Technique of Working with Constellations

Bert Hellinger's systemic psychotherapy facilitates new insights and different paths toward resolution. A summary of his findings on the victim-perpetrator relationship can be found in his book: *Religion, Psychotherapie, Seelsorge*.<sup>13</sup>



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**The first essential of his approach is:** A resolution requires that every family member find a place [in the system] where the others can meet him/her with respect. For a murderer, this is a place outside of the family [system], as he is being drawn to his dead victims. The others have to let him go.

"The children usually know about it when the father had been a member of the SS. However, if they should want to investigate the details of his doings, they would act as if they had the right to do so. Such an action, however, would have grave consequences for the soul. For the child, it is sufficient to know that the father was a perpetrator."<sup>14</sup> By assuming the latter attitude, the child of a perpetrator allows the father to keep his dignity, and is able to say: "I respect your guilt, and you are my father, just the way you are!" (*Ibid.*)

By saying the sentence: "I respect your guilt", the guilt - unconsciously taken on by the child - is being returned to the perpetrator, and likewise the dignity. The reason for this is: **The dignity of the perpetrator resides in his guilt.** The child leaves the perpetrator with his dignity, and leaves it to him to face his guilt. Hellinger furthermore points out that, if the child takes on the guilt, then "the perpetrator himself cannot see his guilt" (*Ibid.*, p 167).

This statement points out a significant new aspect in the systemic-phenomenological view (in comparison to the analytical, or the systemic constructivist view). It points out the integration of the reality of the dead within the reality of the living, as both are incorporated in the movement of the "greater soul."

## The Movements of the Soul

In developing his work further, Hellinger ventured into an even larger dimension. He found what he calls the "movements of the soul." Victim-perpetrator relationships obviously point toward a wider frame of reference beyond the realm of a family. War or ethnic cleansing are examples for those larger frames of reference. In cases like this he chooses a form of constellation in which he leaves the protagonists to follow their own spontaneous impulses. The facilitator rarely interferes or comments. Only the experiences of the representatives are shared [within the group] at the end.<sup>15</sup>

The scenes that we see sort of open up a space in which the mutual bind of perpetrator and victim becomes apparent, as they show them fatefully inter-woven in an all-encompassing whole. For the client, such a constellation provides a great opportunity to experience an extension of his/her personal family biography into a historical dimension. Some clients, however, have difficulty actualizing the step that leads from the family context to this meta-



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personal dimension, a step that deeply challenges the ideas of self-determination and free will.

## The Dignity of the Victim

While the dignity of the perpetrator lies in his guilt, the dignity of the victim lies in his innocent suffering. Bert Hellinger states: "The difference between 'free' and therefore 'responsible,' and 'un-free' and thus 'not responsible,' is not appropriate. However, even though the guilt is inescapable, it does not exempt the perpetrator from the responsibility for the consequences of his/her actions. The same is true for the victim: even though a victim has to suffer a terrible fate, it doesn't make him/her better than the others." (*Ibid.*, p.68)

Thus, by demanding reparation for the harm that was done to their parents, the children of victims take away their parent's dignity, and thus ultimately hurt themselves. In constellations that show the "movements of the soul" we can see again and again that whatever happens between perpetrators and victims is an autonomous process. It arises, unfolds, and eventually comes to an end. The descendants should not disturb this process, but should allow it to happen with respect. If they do otherwise, they trouble the peace of the dead, as well as their own. Again we can see the phenomenon: the victim-perpetrator bond weighs more than the bond of primary love that exists within the family-system.

## The Different Levels of the Therapeutic Process

In order to better understand the structure of the therapeutic process, it is helpful to imagine a model of levels, or "stories of a building." The different levels are tightly interwoven, and blend into each other.

The first one is the **analytical-biographical level**: here we attempt to understand the guilt of the perpetrator in the biographical context. This approach allows us to leave the guilt with him.

Beneath lies the **archaic level of the systemic fundamental order**. On this level we have to acknowledge that the bond between perpetrator and victim is stronger than the bond by primary love that exists within the family. The perpetrator is being pulled toward the victim. His relatives have to let him go. The dignity of the perpetrator resides in his guilt, [and in facing the consequences of his or her actions]. A descendant who despises parents or grandparents for not taking on their guilt or takes on this guilt onto him or herself



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actually disturbs that process. He or she takes away the ancestor's dignity, and thus at the same time harms him or herself.

Underneath this is the **level of the "movement of the soul"**. Here, everybody is equal, facing something greater, and each fate has its own dignity. For the child of a perpetrator or for the child of a victim the inner stance that facilitates resolution is a stance that integrates both parts. This stance pays equal respect both for the fate of the victim and the fate of the perpetrator. The necessity to develop this meta-personal view points to the **spiritual level**. Jesus says in the New Testament (Matthew 26, 24) that he will die according to the prophecy, "The Son of man goeth as it is written of him: but woe unto that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It had been good for that man if he had not been born." In John (13, 21-27), Jesus himself determines that Judas shall be the one who is going to betray him. Who here is the perpetrator, and who the victim?

We can interpret this uncanny story as a hint toward the "dignity of the perpetrators." Their actions are interwoven in, and part of, an unfathomable omnipotence. Ultimately, however, the story is beyond our grasp and understanding. And yet, if we expose ourselves to it, in a similar way as to a Zen *koan*, it may open our perception into a wider space of resolution.

A sentence of Buddha has been passed on to us: "Events happen, deeds are done, but no individual doer thereof." Still, every one of us nevertheless bears the consequences of what we do or not do, corresponding to the teachings of the karmic law.

While our intellect is searching for unequivocal answers and justice, the soul knows about the truth of the ambiguous, the contradictory.

Bert Hellinger once put this in the following words: "We reach for the bright truth, and hardly pay attention that it actually limits, excludes, and dazzles us. The dark truth, with blurred borders, is more exact. It makes us be more awake, just as when we move around in the dark we are prompted to be open to all our senses."<sup>16</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Published by *IAG systemische Lösungen e.V.*, Germany

<sup>2</sup> Hunter Beaumont in *Praxis des Familien-Stellens 2001/1*



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<sup>3</sup> The word means "to withstand". It refers to the resistance-movement that had to work undercover.

<sup>4</sup> *The Bund Deutscher Mädel*, or *BDM*; the Nazi's popular youth organization for girls

<sup>5</sup> propaganda speeches by Hitler and Goebbels. It was mandatory for everyone to pay attention, and it was safer to do so ostentatiously.

<sup>6</sup> Albert Speer: *Erinnerungen*, Berlin: Propyläen Publishing house 1969

<sup>7</sup> "Scorched earth policy."

<sup>8</sup> The big lies the propaganda-machine had been feeding us...

<sup>9</sup> Munich, Beck Publishing house 1998. English title: *Where Ghosts walked: Munich's road to the Third Reich*. New York: Norton 1997

<sup>10</sup> Munich, Kösel Publishing house 1988

<sup>11</sup> The *Waffen SS* was a sub-organization of the SS, the *Leibstandarte* was Hitler's notorious bodyguard.

<sup>12</sup> Gieß-,en 1986. Poem translated by M.Abernathy

<sup>13</sup> Kösel, Munich 2000

<sup>14</sup> Hellinger, *ibid.* p.158

<sup>15</sup> This was the "State of the Art". Today this setting is used far more extensively.

<sup>16</sup> Orally stated in one of his workshops.