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STUDIES

## THERAPEUTIC DREAMS IN AUSCHWITZ

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In 1973, psychiatrists of the Kraków Medical Academy sent out to former prisoners of Auschwitz camp a questionnaire about dreams. 147 persons replied. Four years later, the authors summarized the prisoners' responses (Jagoda, Kłodziński and Masłowski 1977). The responses constitute immensely rich and diverse material, which inspires multiple interpretations. On 579 pages of manuscripts (which I recently received from the Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum Archive), the former Auschwitz inmates describe the dreams they had during the Nazi occupation, in prisons, in the camp, after liberation, as well as later in life. They report nightmares and enchanting visions. They write about their attitude towards dreams. They give accounts of the daily camp ritual of dream interpretation performed by "professional" diviners.

In this article, I decided to focus on one selected aspect of camp dreams, namely on those dreams which seem to have a therapeutic function.

From 208 accounts of camp dreams, I selected those from which it followed that a particular dream had some kind of a positive influence on the dreamer: on his or her mood, frame of mind, faith in the possibility of survival and liberation, or even his or her health condition. My only criterion in ascertaining such an influence were the clear and unequivocal

declarations of the dreamers themselves. Thus, I took into consideration only those dreams which the dreamers openly described as helpful in one way or another. I identified 51 such dream accounts (almost 25% of all camp dreams).

It is impossible to determine a common feature which would characterise all therapeutic dreams and at the same time distinguish them from the rest. What one can discern, however, are three dominant groups of such dreams. I called them “caring” dreams, “freedom” dreams, and metaphorical dreams.

The most numerous category (comprising fourteen dreams) are the “caring dreams”, i.e. those in which the dreamer experiences care or support from his or her relative or some other figure, often a supernatural one. Four cases featured the appearance of Virgin Mary. The caring role was assumed also by an angel, St. Theresa, Winston Churchill, the dreamers’ closest relatives or friends. The most common and, one could say, “model” version of these dreams consists in the caring figure simply announcing the dreamer that he or she would survive the camp. This can be exemplified with the following dream account:

I dreamt about the figure of the Holy Mother of God in white robe with a blue ribbon... . She smiled at me and said: “Don’t worry, you will survive this hell”. ... I have always been a believer, though sometimes “at odds” with religious practice. This dream, however, was strongly present in my unconscious, and in tough moments in the camp I “clung” to it as my only life saver.

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Sometimes the dream vision is more complex, full of symbolic elements:

I dreamt that I was walking towards a small river with very turbid waters. On the other bank, my eldest brother was coming towards me; he had already been dead when I had this dream. Both of us stepped into the water at the same time; my feet were sinking into the mud, the river was deep. When we met in the middle of the river, my brother handed to me a huge, fiery fish. I was screaming, terrified: “Stachu, I can’t carry it, I can’t carry it”. And he calmly replied: “You’ll carry it, you’ll carry it”. When [later] I was down with typhus ..., his words consoled me in my illness, gave me hope that I would survive typhus. And indeed I did.

The helping effect of this dream does not result from the interpretation of symbolic elements (as is the case in what I call metaphorical dreams), but solely and directly from the consoling words of the dreamer’s brother.

In “caring” dreams, dreamers adopt a passive attitude: rather than initiating actions or interactions, they simply benefit from the actions of other dream figures. It appears that those

Auschwitz prisoners who considered their situation hopeless and were completely overpowered by helplessness awaited effective help only from the outside, from others; they were not able to look for it in themselves, in their own resources of psychic strength. In this respect, the “caring” dreams illustrate Calvin Hall’s hypothesis of continuity between dream content and the dreamer’s waking-life situation (Hall and Nordby 1972). At the same time, however, such dreams fulfil the compensatory function described by Carl Jung: they bring out aspects of the dreamer’s psyche underrepresented in his or her waking life (Jung 1974). Ernest Hartmann, who authored perhaps the most important of all recent theories of dreams, argues that the continuity principle and the compensation principle do not have to be mutually exclusive; on the contrary, they are often concurrent, and complement each other (Hartmann 2011: 82-83). This, I believe, is what happens in “caring” dreams. The prisoners pray, reminisce about their loved ones, they feel helpless, and dream of a saviour – and all this is directly reflected in the content of their dreams. At the same time, however, in these dreams they confront their own inner power, one whose voice they would not be able to acknowledge in the waking life. After all – if one rejects the possibility of real intervention of supernatural powers – it is none other than the dreamer himself – or herself who speaks in the dream, convincing oneself that he or she still has enough strength to survive the camp. Since in waking life this seems unbelievable to Auschwitz inmates, their dreams must resort to external figures of authority, such as Virgin Mary or their close relatives. Only in such form can this message be accepted by the dreamer. Dream constitutes an excellent means of facilitating the dreamers’ opening to possibilities which they did not suspect in themselves. It may be assumed that this happens thanks to a mechanism which Hartmann calls “hyper-connectiveness”. Comparing the effect of dreaming to the effect of psychotherapy, Hartmann writes:

Dreaming ... is a spontaneous state of extremely free association in which our associations are not bound by the usual waking rules, and self-criticism is greatly reduced (2001: 134).

The diminishing of self-criticism and enhancement of connectivity between ideas and products of imagination seems crucial for the therapeutic effect of “caring” dreams.

The power of such effect is proved in the following example. Like all his fellow prisoners, a man suffered hunger and thirst. For several nights in a row, he dreamt that his mother came to him and gave him milk to drink. After waking from these dreams, every time he felt the taste of milk on his lips, and he was not hungry. Such dream accounts suggest that “caring” dreams not only influence the dreamer’s mood, but they can also have physical consequences. Someone may

say that this is a matter of autosuggestion. Indeed – but we must remember that such autosuggestion would not have been possible if had not been aided by dream.

The second important group of therapeutic dreams comprises “freedom” dreams – a name often mentioned by the inmates themselves. In these dreams the dreamers find themselves in their native neighbourhood, at home, or among their loved ones, or they are simply aware of being outside the camp. I identified thirteen such dreams. They seem to operate on a very simple basis: after waking, the dreamers feel happy, because they were given the opportunity to meet with their family, return to the places they loved. Here is one of such dream accounts:

Not infrequently, there came to pass pleasant dreams of my pre-war life: family life, studying in middle school; then I used to wake up relaxed and happy.

Prisoners tried to keep this feeling of happiness as long as they could:

For a certain period of time, sometimes even several days, these freedom dreams allowed us not to feel the nightmare of camp life so acutely, this was some kind of inner absorbing look into images evoked by the dream, which one wanted to keep in memory.

Thus, the task of dream is to take the dreamer into a different reality. The “inner absorbing look into images” does not invite self-analysis or give insight into the dreamer’s situation, nor does it suggest a way of rescue; it simply allows him or her to forget about the here and now and live for a moment in a different world.

It needs to be noted that “freedom” dreams do not always have a therapeutic effect! The questionnaires feature many accounts which show that such dreams can be destructive. After waking, the dreamer feels despair and acute longing for family and freedom. Hence, the question arises as to the factors which determine why such dreams benefit some people and are harmful to others. I will refer here to my recently conducted research on the dreams of elderly people locked in nursing homes. All nursing home residents who dreamt about the olden, better days (their time of youth, their family, their home) unanimously declared these dreams to be helpful and mood-elevating. None of the respondents felt regret or even nostalgia for the happy past after waking from such dreams. My conclusion is that in hopeless situation, when one cannot expect the improvement of one’s fate, the only effective form of therapy may be to shift one’s attention from the present to the past (Owczarski 2014: 275). Perhaps this might solve the puzzle of the

varied effect of “freedom” dreams in the camp. Paradoxically, the prisoners who still had hopes of surviving reacted to such dreams with despair: they were terrified by the thought that their hope was just a dream. The prisoners who did not have any hope, on the other hand, found consolation in such dreams; for them, it was an escape from the hell of the camp life. Should this have been the case indeed, one could say that “freedom” dreams had a therapeutic effect on those dreamers who most needed it.

The last group which I would like to present here comprises metaphorical dreams. I identified eleven of them. Rather than saying something directly (like the “caring” dreams), they require interpretation by the dreamer. What is interesting, though, is that such interpretation is not developed in the course of strenuous mental effort undertaken after waking, but rather, in a sense, is given in the dream itself: the dreamer immediately grasps the meaning of his or her dream. This is exemplified in the following dream account:

I dreamt that I was crossing completely demolished, broken bridge suspended over deep, dirty, frighteningly rough water. As I walked, broken boards kept slumping from under my feet. There were holes on my way, and it seemed that I would fall into the abyss, down into the water, but I gripped some ropes tied above, and the fear of falling into the depths ultimately forced me to gather my strength, and, after hard effort – I did cross. When I woke up, this dream gave me great solace and the faith that I would survive.

A similar situation recurs in a number of variants: risky passage down a narrow path, using one’s last strength to clamber out of a well, and so forth. An inmate who dreamt about driving a tractor along a narrow embankment writes:

Having overcome this obstacle, I woke up with my heart pounding. After this dream I couldn’t get back to sleep. I associated this dream with my road to freedom, and indeed this is what it looked like.

Thus, auspicious future manifests itself to the prisoners in a metaphorical way, but one can say that the power of these metaphors lies in the fact that they are “alive”: they cause strong emotions already during dreaming, they are understood, but at the same time experienced by the dreamer.

Much has been written about the role of metaphor in dreams. Montague Ullman described dream as “a metaphor in motion”, indicating the dynamic and creative nature of dream images (Ullman 1969). Hartmann emphasised the role of emotions in the process of development of dream metaphors (Hartmann 2011: 49-59). Especially relevant for my considerations are Bert

States's findings, contained in his book *The Rhetoric of Dreams*. States understands dream "as a process of thought, instead of as a product" (1988: 139). Unlike the literary metaphor, dream metaphor is, he believes, "simply thought in transit, nothing formed but something forming, never an identity but always a passage. [...] It is not, then, something *used* by the dream, but the way of dreaming itself" (1988: 144). According to States, the essence of dream metaphor is its effect rather than its meaning. Meaning "might be found by an analyst or an interpreter, but that has nothing to do with the mode in which the image is experienced" (1988: 134).

It is precisely the "experiencing" of the metaphor that seems to bring the therapeutic effect of the dreams of Auschwitz prisoners. In contrast to the two previous types, the metaphorical dreams involve the dreamer's activity: rather than waiting for a "carer" or escaping into the world of memories and fantasies, the dreaming subject must use his or her own capacities to overcome a threat or enter a friendly space. Thus, the dream does not so much act as a good omen, but as an opportunity allowing the dreamer to experience his or her own strength.

In her article *Dreams as a Source for Holocaust Research*, Barbara Engelking writes: "In order to understand broad psychological aspects of the Holocaust experience, we need other sources than «objective» documents presenting just the events. Dreams are among such sources" (2013: 43).

Therapeutic dreams among such sources seem to be especially important. As can be seen, the operating mechanisms of therapeutic dreams in the camp were quite diverse. Regardless of these differences, however, such dreams often proved to be *the only* effective help in the hell of Auschwitz.

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ABSTRACT

**Therapeutic dreams in Auschwitz**

The aim of this article is to answer the question whether the dreams of Auschwitz prisoners had a therapeutic function. The author selected 51 dreams (out of 208 dreams reported in 1973 by former Auschwitz inmates) from which it followed that a particular dream had some kind of a positive influence on the dreamer: on his or her mood, frame of mind, faith in the possibility of survival and liberation, or even his or her health condition. The author found three dominant groups of such dreams: “caring” dreams, “freedom” dreams, and metaphorical dreams, and described their helping effects.

KEYWORDS

Dream, therapy, the Holocaust, concentration camp in Auschwitz

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