

OLEG AND HOPE

Irma Brenman Pick, London July 2022

I am very touched personally by this film about a refugee, Oleg. My own parents were, in the early 1900's, refugees to South Africa from Latvia; My father from a village called Kraslava, my mother from Daugavpils about an hour drive from Kraslava. They reached South Africa in the early 1900's. They never spoke of it, and I had always imagined that they had not only escaped the pogroms but had left behind a miserable place/life. In fact, I was invited to teach there a few years ago and I agreed, provided the group accompanied me to Kraslava. A deal was done; and I was stunned to find that Kraslava is an exquisite village with a beautiful manor house, trees, a river – and that antisemitism is still alive and kicking.

But to return to refugees; I too felt myself something of a refugee in the 1950s, emigrating to the UK from a then apartheid South Africa. I recall the film *Drive my Car*, which seemed to be a metaphor for put yourself in my shoes; and right now the world is full of refugees who may so easily identify with Oleg's plight. And so, I, and I am sure, countless others, can readily put ourselves in his shoes.

Oleg is purportedly based on a true story of a citizen of Latvia, but of Russian origin, who after losing his job becomes dependent on migrant workers, all now part of the Polish Mafia. True story or not, it surely must touch on the plight of countless migrants, who may, at the end of the day, in desperation, be drawn into the world of crime; this is then used to justify keeping refugees out - they are a lot of work-shy delinquents. Which comes first – the chicken or the egg?

The film, produced in 2019, opens with a picture of a very bleak landscape, icy snow and forests behind reminiscent of the Russian film *Loveless*, where against a background of frozen trees, suggesting an ice-cold physical environment, divorcing parents are quarrelling over their young son – not over each wishing to keep him but instead each wanting to be done with him...a cold bleak 'loveless' world.

In the opening scene of our film, there is a lamb in the snow, and then we see Oleg rolling in the snow (perhaps Russia) a lamb to the slaughter? The sacrificial lamb?

The question of ‘why a lamb?’ Jesus was seen as the sacrificial lamb – ‘oppressed and afflicted he opened not his mouth’ – like a lamb that is led to the slaughter (Isaiah 53).

And at the start we see Oleg drowning – as refugees on boats from France have been left to drown; and as climate change will inevitably result in countless humans, as well as animals drowning...the sacrificial lambs. The film emphasises at different points religion in this story of the sacrificial lamb which is put forward as being ‘for the common good’. *I would be interested to know what the director had in mind in this connection. To what purpose is Oleg sacrificed?* (When he's on the ice or in the ice-cold water we barely see any sign of physical suffering maybe just a bit of a struggle; is that possibly masochistic? Does he surrender too easily? We feel the cold, he does not.)

As well as identifying with the plight of refugees, we also don't want to be THEM! I believe it to be a fact of life that no one likes to be excluded, left out; this easily arouses such deep feelings, or rather fears, of being unwanted, these then so quickly projected into the other. By chance, some years ago, I came upon the Cyberball Experiment, where they say that though people react in different ways, no one wants to be left out; they conclude, that, neurologically, a broken foot goes to the same part of the brain as a broken heart.

Of course, people may also excite themselves with self-pity or defend against these feelings of being left out with mania (as we see at times in the film).

But now – Oleg, so marvellously played by Valentin Novopolskij (Intriguing the Polskij in his name); Oleg is a butcher, skilled at the carving up of animals; we are made to look at the carcasses which he is at different times seen cutting, and then we see them hanging in the fridge....a real reminder, as from those who are (in increasing numbers) becoming vegetarian or vegan, tell us, of the savagery of the meat industry; as well as the denial of the devastating effects on climate change of giving pasture to sheep and cows, a practice also threatening to make countless more millions of humans homeless. So, running throughout the film is the link between personal and socio/political devastation.

In a similar way we see a frequent quick resort to lying; the sort of lying to which our politicians so quickly turn; there is a momentary reference to a cat called Brexit, there to remind us of the effects of lying! And Oleg who is not paid the money he is owed; even though the film was made in 2019 – perhaps predicting the outcome of Brexit.

The film moves around quite rapidly, just as we are moved so quickly from one topic to another when watching the news – no time for it really to affect us. And when Oleg is looking for work or for a home, doors are relentlessly closed on him? How often does one feel, “please don’t disturb me”, when beggars come to the door?

Oleg’s co - worker has a finger cut off by a meat cutting machineand he, Oleg, is unfairly blamed for this; he loses his job and his lodgings.... Suddenly he is unemployed and homeless and, on top of it made to feel responsible/blamed for his plight; his work permit is now also at risk. He tries to find work and accommodation, but all doors are closed.

The film emphasises at different points, religion and, as I have indicated, the story of the sacrificial lamb – sacrificed, Wikipedia tells us, ‘for the common good’. *I would be interested to know what the director had in mind in this connection. Maybe now the enlightenment of the film’s audiences?*

Oleg relating to his grandmother’s mantra; saying ‘it’s not a sad story. it’s a hopeful one’; suggests that he understands the story of the sacrificial lamb as told by his grandmother. Thus, she reassured him when he cried. That reassurance, which is so fundamentally not really reassuring, as for example Michael Feldman has written. *This grandmother seems to be almost the only really good figure/object in his mind; why is this the case?* And when he does speak with her on the phone, he reassures her with a (white) lie: “yes I have a job; everything is fine”!

We do not learn anything of Oleg’s early history, but his plight evokes a picture of an infant ruthlessly, maybe unexpectedly weaned; does he feel that happened because he was/is so bad? Oleg does, in fact, look straight faced and without expression through much of the film, more or less with the exception of an event where he, in desperation, gate crashes a party ; there he helps himself to all the food and drinks he wants; he gets caught up in a sexual encounter with the hostess who mistakes him for a famous actor; next day when she finds out who he is; there is no love....She may be unforgiving about his false entry, but is there also a loveless quality in her – she too a kind of homeless’ person seeking a home in status? Class so linked with racism and misogyny in general.

And his grandmother; was he, I wonder, in infancy sent from home to his grandmother as a ‘refugee’ – *so does his present plight echo a pre-history? And how do we diagnose his*

expressionless face? Might we think of him as a schizoid personality? Or as autistic? And if autistic, why so?

He struggles to find both work and lodgings and lives in dread of being found by the police..., also representing, perhaps a dread superego...but in continuing to try to find an open door he is also displaying HOPE – the theme of our meeting...

He is eventually given a place by a Polish man, even as the Poles are now, in fact, generously taking in Ukrainian refugees - so long as they are not black!

But the ‘rescuer’ turns out to be a seductive Bully – with a capital B! The second half of the film is a painful depiction of bullying.

So it is, as I have said, a particularly important moment for us as analysts to be thinking about the early antecedents to this practice. Colleagues have written on the topic, and we are reminded too of Bion’s account in his autobiography, *The Long Weekend*, of the bullying he, Bion, was exposed to, arriving from India as a young child, at an English boarding school.

What comes to mind too, in this context, for me, is Haneke’s film *The White Ribbon*, set before the 1st World War, the white ribbon was what shamed, bullied children were made to wear on the arm, suggesting both the black ribbon for mourning, but more, that which followed years later, the yellow star, that humiliated Jews were required to wear; those bullied children the precursors to Nazi behaviour? Passing on the bad treatment, as Anna Freud, as early as 1935 had written on Identification with the Aggressor, and before her, Ferenczi.

But let us begin with Freud who wrote about His Majesty the Baby – that ‘entitled’ infant, who, if he could, might well enslave the mother. Susan Isaacs’ premise that (unconscious) phantasy starts from the beginning of life and that every instinct is accompanied by phantasy, is central to my thinking So, when we ask is there a potential bully in everyone, my answer is YES!

Bion’s concept of a container to digest and metabolise these violent forces is, as I said, a crucial function of parents.

And it is touching that in the film, Oleg turns to the police in seeking refuge from the bullying Mafia.

Socially this is what is required of our leaders; and as we see, when this is missing all hell breaks loose! But very movingly in the film, as I said, we also see Oleg finding sanctuary with the police, here portrayed as caring supportive parents who listen to him and find a home for him and make contact with his grandmother.

I have described Oleg's desperate attempts to be given a home and then his experience of being bullied ...and now I would like to return to our theme of HOPE. At the mercy of such a bully, Oleg eventually decides to leave and return to his grandmother.... So, he loses hope – but his move back also exemplifies hope – he recovers a good object, his grandmother, who he knows will give him a home. So, a very important feature of hope is also connected to knowing when to let something go...neither holding on to grievance, nor omnipotently acting out some idea that if we hope for something it is bound to happen. So, the balance between holding on to hope, and also knowing when to let go, is fundamental to the quality of life.

It is important that we distinguish and differentiate between the hopelessness and despair of melancholia and suicidality, and the healthy recognition of when it is timely to let go - of life itself., time for death, respecting the really crucial significance of also knowing when it is right to let go of hope....and to accept the end!