

## Discussion of 'Those who remained', a film directed by Barnabas Toth

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I am honoured to have the opportunity to discuss this beautiful and moving film from a psychoanalytic perspective. The film is based on a 2004 novel by Zsuzsa Varkonyi. The film follows the lives of two Holocaust survivors in post-war Budapest and their struggle to come to terms with their traumatic past and to find a way to continue their lives. It starts in 1948, three years after the war, and ends in 1953, with the news about the death of Stalin.

I would like to say a few words about the concept of psychic trauma. In the book 'Understanding Trauma', Caroline Garland (2002) gives a clear and helpful introduction to this complex subject. She describes how psychic trauma happens when an event or a succession of events in the subject's life floods the mind and overwhelms it. The normal capacity of the ego to filter stimulation is broken. The situation evokes extreme anxiety. A traumatic situation can make the subject lose his belief in the predictability of the world and lose his trust in goodness. It evokes feelings of rage and hate as well as guilt for surviving. Being caught in a traumatic situation stirs up early, terrifying, internal anxieties of annihilation and of disintegration. The subject may feel that he loses his sanity. Early phantasies of being exposed to cruel objects and to extreme danger come up. Past and present become indistinguishable. The trauma disrupts the core of identity and the person tends to feel that he is not the same person that he used to be. It is difficult to integrate the trauma into one's conscious life and the trauma may have long term psychic consequences.

The two main characters in this film are Klara, an adolescent Jewish girl, and Aldo, a Jewish man in his 40s, a gynaecologist. Both of them are the sole survivors of their immediate families. Klara, who has lost her parents and sister, makes a contact with Aldo, who has lost his wife and children. She persuades him to adopt her, as a way of holding on to life and healing the terrible wounds of the past.

The film starts with a scene of a birth which indicates hope for a new life. Aldo, the gynaecologist, facilitates the birth. He seems kind and gentle, but also remote and lifeless. In a second scene, Klara is brought for a consultation with him as she has not got her period yet. We can think about the delay in her puberty as expressing Klara's unconscious wish to freeze time, to stay a child, waiting for her parents to return.

Meeting Aldo is a turning point in Klara's life. Being with him reminds her of the protected childhood she had lost. He is a doctor like her father used to be and he treats her in a thoughtful and caring way, which reminds her of her father. In a letter to her father, whose death she denies, she says, 'Papush, Aldo smells like you.' At the heart of her attachment to the doctor there is a powerful phantasy, 'if I find a father, I will not be an orphan anymore and I will have a home again'.

At the start of the film Klara lives with Olgi, a great aunt who found Klara after the war in an orphanage for Jewish children and has taken her home. It is interesting to see the split Klara makes between Aldo and Olgi. Aldo becomes in her mind the idealised, beloved father she had lost, while Olgi is seen as the devalued relative, representing reality of hardship, loss and emptiness. Klara's rage and despair about the parents who could not protect her from the horrors of the Holocaust and abandoned her by dying, are split off the love and projected into the great aunt.

We can see from the start that the two characters use very different defences to deal with the trauma they have endured. Klara denies the loss of her parents, she is angry, defiant and rebellious. Aldo, on the other hand, is quiet, withdrawn and emotionally cut off from the people around him. Klara has a need to tell Aldo her childhood memories as well as fragments from her traumatic past. In a moving scene she wakes up at night telling Aldo a nightmare in which a Nazi soldier ties her sister to a tree, letting her starve, while Klara is left helpless and unable to rescue her sister. In her dream Klara is tormented by terrible guilt of not being able to save her sister, but also on a deeper unconscious level, the dream reflects Klara's experience of being tied and imprisoned by the ghosts of the past, struggling to free herself and to move on.

Aldo cannot talk at all about the family he has lost and about his experiences during the war, but he allows Klara to look at his family albums and see photos of his wife and children. He becomes a containing, parental figure for Klara. The two of them understand each other and are drawn to each other, as they share the pain and the horror of the past.

Klara's need for a father becomes confused and mixed up with her attraction towards Aldo. She uses her sexuality to get close to him and to become special for him. He is not indifferent and he struggles with his own attraction to the beautiful, adolescent girl. An oedipal powerful tension builds up between the two of them. The mutual attraction is highly risky and threatens the delicate connection between the adoptive father and the adopted girl. The situation

becomes further complicated by the suspicion and phantasies of the people around them, who question the nature of their relationships. It is Aldo, the father, who manages to set boundaries in order to protect his relationship with Klara. Reluctantly he takes an important step by starting a relationship with a woman his age. In doing that he creates a triangular structure of a parental couple with a child. It creates clear boundaries between parent and child and eventually allows Klara to find a boyfriend her age and to begin to develop her independent life.

The film conveys vividly the political reality in post-war Hungary in which the communist governing party rules the country through terrorising its people. The citizens are encouraged to inform the authorities about their neighbours and friends and people are arrested and taken away from their homes at the middle of the night, sometimes tortured and often imprisoned. For the Holocaust survivors this reality is a fertile ground for extreme anxiety; it brings back the trauma and opens the wounds of the past. Aldo and Klara hold on to their connection and compassion for each other as their only way to protect themselves from the terror they both experience.

The film moves three years later to a scene in which Aldo, Klara and their partners celebrate the birthday of Olgi, the great aunt. It is a family celebration that gives a sense of normality and of a new life. The news in the radio is about the death of Stalin, indicating hope for a better and freer future. However, Aldo disappears into the bathroom and we can assume that he is struggling with a panic attack, while Klara is waiting for him by the closed door. We can understand from this scene that the massive trauma is never completely overcome. It exists internally and there is an ongoing conflict between the need to be alive and the guilt and pull to identify with the dead.

I think that at the heart of this sensitive film there is the idea that love and compassion can have the upper hand in the struggle with terror and the pull towards death. The mourning of the dead is never complete, but it is a necessary process and struggle leading to the possibility of new life and new relationships.

## References

Garland, C. (Ed.) (2002). *Understanding Trauma; A Psychoanalytical Approach*. London: Karnac.