Lost Childhood
and the
Language of Exile

Edited by

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***A Note** from the* Freud Museum

Lost Childhood and the Language of Exile was first published in 2007 jointly with the Freud Museum London, and its themes and approach chime strongly with the work of the Museum. The original idea for the book came from the work of a cross-European project, including a conference held at the Freud Museum London.

The Museum has worked closely with Imago for many years on conferences, events, and publications, taking psychoanalytic approaches to key issues. We are very pleased to see the reprint of such an important book, whose themes of exile and migration have, if anything, become even more pressing.

The Freud Museum London runs an active and inspiring public programme of events exploring the history and practice of psychoanalysis, and its influence on contemporary culture and thinking. The rich thinking and diversity of approach found in this book characterises the conferences, courses, talks and events that make up the public programme. Events are held in person and online, and are widely accessible. Full details can be found at www.freud.org.uk

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To our sons (Mark, Etienne and Dani).
Our stepdaughters (Rachel, Minnie and Anne).
And to all other children.

Preface *in* ***Three Voices***

Judit Szekacs-Weisz

But how do you protect your children from history?

This picture is about two absent figures. It is about a missing generation. It is about historical constructs and personal memories. It is about the type of memory that one finds in posters and monuments, and the type of memory that lingers in your eyes and makes you what you are. It is about history's beautiful lies and bleak truth. (Daniel Dayan, 1994)

I am quoting from Daniel Dayan's description of a photograph by Frederic Brenner. His words capture something of the essence of this volume; they make inroads into the unconscious.

Though the concrete image is missing from our text, the space does not stay empty for long: the mind will select from our internal archive the very picture that belongs to the words. By now the words might also undergo mutative changes – they may speak another language – the language that stores and carries original and essential meaning or is simply associated to a definite time-and-place where those things happened in our lives.

The memories of that world; images, ideas, smells, words, touches, tastes and feelings seemingly forgotten.

Are we ready to face the pictures that are going to emerge? Can one do it alone? Will anybody be present to share the stocktaking of what has been lost and what has been found while going through the passages of moving from one country, language and culture to another?

These questions were in our minds when the three of us decided at the turn of the New Millennium to go in search into the domain of Lost Childhood.

The last century has seen waves of migrations. Refugees escaping persecution and threats to their lives, traumatised and disappointed. For them entry to a new country meant the possibility of staying alive.

Others had to leave for social and economic reasons. They left in the hope of a better life for themselves and for their children.

There were also those who just moved to some place else driven by personal, historically less dramatic events.

We have been listening to their stories, both in our consulting rooms and our personal lives, trying to grasp some of the fundamental aspects of changing context. We are all experienced, one could say “professional” fellow travellers.

Three women, Hungarian analysts brought together by Sandor Ferenczi’s ideas. His psychoanalytical concepts regarding the development and function of reality testing, the nature of individual and social traumata, mutuality, technique, methodology and his surprisingly vivid and contemporary theory of mind.

…or was it the Danube flowing majestically and determinedly through the landscape of our Budapest childhood that provided the real linkages?

Cross roads… The saga of all emigration is told through stories of those who get up and leave and those who will stay.

Who is really moving? And where to?

For Kathleen (and Peter Pan, of course) the country of lost childhood has become the “never-never-land”, the secret domain of unconscious phantasies, funny sounding little words of affection, dreamscapes of the woolly-hills of Buda and the art nouveau buildings of Uj-Lipotvaros. ‘New-Lipotville’, the proud pre-war district which was erected on the bank of the hardly-ever-blue Danube across Margaret Island, celebrating the industrial-intellectual Jewish potency of the Capital.

Kathleen belongs to the class of emigrants who were taken away as children by parents looking for a safer place, a distant land that would be welcoming enough to accept them to live and allow them to create new, detoxified memories for the next generations.

How can social traumata be elaborated in one lifetime? How many generations are needed to establish a livable distance from history in those families whose continuity of being was traumatically interrupted? What happens to the identity and the sense of reality of these immigrants, their children and grandchildren? And what happens to the majority who stay in the land of their fathers and mothers and never leave their country?

In Central Europe people have been aware for centuries that one does not need to move an inch to undergo major sociopolitical changes shaking their lives.

The Hungarians are professional survivors. No wonder they are – history made them learn the arts-and-crafts of survival. One of the traditionally powerful means of keeping the spirit alive has always been the famous sense of humour. Jokes and anecdotes helped people communicate unofficial views, ideas and feelings – otherwise forbidden criticism of the existing regime. They played an immensely important role in conveying the message that common sense was still alive and in spite of the tragic, painful and absurd experiences, human values have not been destroyed.

I remember the incredulous faces of colleagues at the New School in New York when, at the first American-Hungarian Psychoanalytical Dialogue, at the end of the 80s, one of our colleagues started his presentation with the popular joke of the day, which was asking the citizens of Hungary to please switch off the lights when the last one leaves …

Can a whole country fantasise about leaving ?!

In my family it so happened that we had been seriously considering emigration at every historical crisis of the last century, but for all sorts of rational and irrational reasons, we had always stayed. My parents stayed in 1939, they stayed in 1948 when the Iron Curtain descended upon the borders, and they stayed again in 1956. They survived, but the taste and smell of horror stayed with them forever, and the anatomy of danger became the subject of elementary lessons in survival strategies for all of us children born after the war.

For me the magic land was the WEST, and some of my adolescent and adult dreams spoke in English (and of course I did not have language problems in those dreams about my "never-never-land" due to the mercy of wish-fulfilment and the unconscious manoeuvres of desire).

During the past years I have often joked with Kathleen, conjuring up the image of these two young girls: one dreaming about Budapest in Toronto and the other about Toronto perhaps, in Budapest.

Mészáros Judit lives in Budapest. One wonders what landscapes does she visit in her dreams ?

In 1990 I moved to London to live and to work. When I came here I was not a refugee, 'just' an emigrant, moving to another country. Leaving was my own decision, a cumulative act of transgenerational dynamic forces wrapped in "free choice".

In this Babel of a metropolis I became part of a multilingual therapeutic world.

Experiencing over and over again how exploring and working through language barriers which stand in the way of self expression and understanding leads to finding better symbolic translations for diverse states of mind. This proved relevant in uncovering the often unconscious individual and social trauma of changing context, which is a crucial aspect of all migration.

As I said in my Paris paper, something fundamental happened at that time: I found myself in the company of other colleagues of many tongues interested in and struggling with similar problems. Together we started the IMAGO Multilingual Psychotherapy Centre (MLPC) in 1996. John Clare writes about the beginnings in more detail. We have been working together since that time (including the Hungarian Triad).

MLPC was launched to create a network of bilingual therapists offering analytical psychotherapy in their clients' mother-tongue (English has naturally been one of the more than twenty languages.) Soon it became evident that creating such a space, where the cultural and emotional climate of one's childhood, forgotten memories and words and syntax of the first language can be revisited and revived, is as important for the therapists as it is for their clients.

Colleagues started to tell their stories. Looking at them through the prism of analytical understanding made countertransference issues particularly alive. In the matrix of these accounts an archaic but timeless way of sharing and making sense of very different individual experiences has emerged, allowing a thinkable and livable personal narrative to develop, and a new integration to take place.

We witnessed the emergence of a peculiar transitional space where a kind of mutual self creation became possible. Language proved to be a very useful metaphor for understanding, misunderstanding and non-understanding. Translations and translatability, movement and change. Sharing and solitude, isolation and being with others.

In this community of narrators a new transitional container has been created facilitating the conception of several papers in our book.

The three *Lost Childhood* Conferences in Budapest, London and Paris obliged us to enter a territory which is not only multilingual but multidimensional: defined and shaped by history, politics, economics and socio-cultural transformations.

Exploring the area between the public and the private domain, we have discovered a novel sense of mutuality.

Can we find, if not the royal, at least a "noble" road leading to an area of real mutuality capable of bringing about the mutative changes that Ferenczi was in search of? Can we embrace the others' stories and use them to fill in unconscious absent aspects of our own narrative?

In this book we present you stories of great diversity. They are powerful stories of the 20th century - our own twentieth century. They demonstrate not only how it is possible to save memories and vision but also prove how important it is to safeguard the psychically vital capacity of symbolisation, thinking and feeling - directly and organically linked to the broken mirror. The broken mirror reflecting back our identity embedded in our individual histories and personal narrative. Driven by the same curiosity and determination as the early discoverers, these explorations command respect.

They speak for themselves.

They speak for all of us.

Kathleen Kelley-Lainé

What is "lost childhood"? Why do we all have one? How can we talk about it? Why does it fall off the analytical couch so frequently and leave us lying there for years without noticing that it slipped away without a word?

We all know that Peter Pan flew away on the day of his birth because he did not like his parent's plans for him when he grew up. "All children grow up, except one..." Peter Pan did not want to lose his childhood and therefore he flew off to the "Neverland" where it is against the rules to grow up and where everyone goes round and round the island and never meet because all are going at the same rate.

But most of us do grow, and each time that happens we have to let go of what was before – we are constantly losing bits of our childhood and we try to retain some of it along the pathway of memories and nostalgia. Although all of us are born geographically in one place it is rather temporary because our real birth is that of the psyche, which gives us our true sense of place in the world. To be born as subject of our destiny involves the difficult task of symbolic creation, of metaphorisation that tears us away from the "real" in its material, sensual and immediate capacity to satisfy all our needs at once or dash them to the ground. Entering the symbolic order is to become human, to come to understand time, and to know that one day death awaits us, irrevocably. With this knowledge the innocence of childhood is lost, and we all become exiled from this initial paradise (which resembles our place of origin). Nostalgia squeezes

itself between what is lost and the belief or hope that it can be found again.

The language of "exile" is learned by those who have not had the leisure of taking their time to grow, to naturally accept that parts of childhood have to be lost so that symbolic meaning can gain its ground and become an integral part of the process of growing up. The language of exile suddenly takes over the slow process of symbolisation, and metaphor-making. When "lost childhood" combines with the loss of the land, the mother tongue, the smells, the sounds, and the tastes of "mother", then "lost childhood" becomes real rather than symbolic. The process of growing up, of maturation involves many fears, anxieties and narcissistic tribulations. While the ground we know and trust stays beneath our feet, when supportive parents are there to calm the nightmares in the dark, and "mother keeps the window open" so that we can fly back home when we so desire, we can accept to lose, to gain and to try again. If real loss does not take over the "symbolic", we have a transitional space in which to grow. However, when the terror of loss becomes real, we can no longer play with the metaphor of "fort-da", we become stuck within the "language of exile".

The psychoanalyst who ignores the "language of exile" may let pass some of the essential factors of "lost childhood". Not considered as a psychoanalytical concept, it is often difficult to discuss the contours of lost childhood and its psychic effects in analytical circles. This is all the more surprising as so many analysts, first of all Freud himself, experienced exile. In his letter of June 6th 1938 to Max Eitingon, Freud is almost euphoric about his arrival in London: he says that it all seems unreal, a dream, his room opens on to a garden like his summer house in Grinzing.

After the Second World War many refugees from Eastern Europe, having survived the holocaust, had to flee Stalin as their lives were again under threat. These families, including mine, were stamped as DP's, displaced persons: having lost their homeland, they lost their "place". Like Freud, my family was filled with joy to have escaped death and to have found safety in a new land. It was only after this initial period that the sense of loss set in: the loss of home, of language, of familiar sounds, smells and tastes. The loss of place soon became the loss of identity and the question "where am I" was confused with "who am I"? This is the beginning of the language of exile. Those who have never been displaced can continue to ask "who am I" from their place of origin, the shame and guilt involved in loss is not the same.

Being torn away from the "familiar", that taken-for-granted second skin that contains those wordless, all embracing initial perceptions of the surrounding world, is a kind of loss that is not easy to negotiate rationally. In the life of a baby and a small child, the familiar is the "world". Exile can mean losing one's

world. Learning the language of exile means having to manage, live with, attempt to repair the loss and accept being a "foreigner", "étranger" (the word in French means foreigner, but also strange, bizarre). Being a foreigner is "not being" like others. One way of dealing with the language of exile is over-adaptation, becoming more "normal" than normal, not to stand out from the crowd. Although I learned to speak English in two weeks, to the astonishment of my parents and teachers, I always secretly knew how different I was from my friends. When they would ask about my grandparents, or where I was born, I knew that I would have to surprise them with my answers, so I would try to change the conversation. As I grew older I gradually became proud of my difference, and even found that others were interested in my foreignness. Because of the divergence of what one is, and what one seems to be as a foreigner, the language of exile teaches acute self-observation early on. Lost childhood implies precocious maturity, but also the desire to "never grow up".

"Lost childhood" reveals itself most intensely through the person's relationship to space and time. The "never-never-land" of those intimately and secretly guarded feelings, sounds, smells of the early skin is a very strange place in psychic economy. The lost world, the abandoned native land becomes an enormous beach on which to deposit one's most precious desires and illusions. The never-never-land is capable of capturing one's most far-fetched and fabulous fantasies. The real world of daily drudgery is a pale comparison next to this colourful island of make-believe. This secret place is where the lost child can curl up and feel safe, and because it was once real, the illusion that is does exist is infinitely tempting. The never-never-land has to be cultivated, nurtured and kept hidden. This is why it can be so resistant to analysis.

This is a timeless, wordless, staggering space where the lost child can revisit an idealised image of self, untransformed, without conflict. A space that cannot be symbolised or represented through words; it is more a taste than a sound. The never-never-land closes the self in a kind of narcissistic projection of what was, in a hidden attempt to preserve the past. It represents the struggle against the death of the infantile ideal of primary narcissism. The never-never-land is always a hiding place for "mother". Although Peter Pan has banned the word from the island, all its inhabitants, including "Captain Hook" are secretly yearning for their "mother"!

The sensual pleasure and pain that can be procured in this idealised space is undoubtedly what contributes to its resistance to change. Emotions and feelings remain locked within this split off part of the psyche. The lost object is incorporated, immobilised and sealed off from the passage of time. This desperate strategy leaves little space for life in the here and now, or for projecting into the future. The tendency is to withdraw libidinal energy from the pres-

ent and invest in memories of the past in a kind of delicious, masochistic painful nostalgia.

The lost child can also have the opposite reaction: no nostalgia, no dependence, no looking back, no history. All investment is in the present, in what is actual. Only the facts count; to act here and now is the most important. The immigrant becomes "hyper-adapted" to the new world.

Then there is the lost child who is always elsewhere, who needs to leave everything and everyone in order not to experience loss. To be able to love, is to love at a distance, to keep things "intact" so that nothing is destroyed. Time must be stopped! The image of the self and the object remains fixed to the land that was left behind. Pain is not attached to departure, nostalgia is not about leaving but rather about returning to find that things have changed. The self is threatened by homecoming, a reunion that abolishes the necessary distance with the frightening and desired primary object. Therefore the lost child provokes "breaking up" whenever he can in order to create a viable distance with the loved one and to bury the original, intolerable separation that was never mourned. To leave is to love, to better find oneself as subject of one's own creation.

Can the language of exile express the anxiety of returning, of going back, of facing what was lost, and lost forever? Exile is the metaphor of the human condition: lost childhood is the irrevocable representation of being human. The immigrant is a painful reminder of a truth that awaits us all but which we do not quite want to know – just yet.

Judit Mészáros

It was shortly after Kathleen's *Peter Pan* appeared in Budapest bookstores that we took a long walk along the Danube and started an on-going dialogue about exile, immigration, and "lost childhood". I have recently returned from Washington, D.C. where I had been doing research at the Woodrow Wilson International Center on the exil of Hungarian psychoanalysts who had fled fascist Europe in the 1930s just like their German and Austrian counterparts.

We were at the end of the 1990s. Less than 300 km away from Budapest, the successor states of the former Yugoslavia were fighting their long and desperate civil war. Day after day, we learned about the thousands killed, adults and children, and about the masses of those who lost their homes or were forced to escape.

The newly-born Hungarian democracy had inherited the burden of the coun-

try's recent historic past. This heritage contained unprocessed reminiscences: two defeats in the two world wars, an active participation in the Holocaust, then the ethnic cleansing of the German minority followed by the deportation to the countryside of the Hungarian aristocracy and bourgeoisie, proclaimed to be "enemies of the Stalinist regime." The young Hungarian democracy found itself with a very chaotic self-image after forty years of Soviet occupation.

Kathleen and I talked about our losses. Who lost what, why, under what circumstances – as individuals, as a society, throughout several generations. What were the losses of those who were forced to escape, what about those who stayed behind? How did it feel to have to leave home and country from one day to another, to abandon one's mother tongue and join the minorities in a new country? What was it like to stay, but lose one's identity, security and freedom – to have to give up one's *internal freedom*, as well as the *external freedom,* including the ability to move about in the world. What was it like to live behind the iron curtain, or the wall, cut off from the rest of the world? What was it like to live in "internal exile", or to have to adapt to a new social and cultural regime at the price of cutting off the present from the past? What was it like to grow up in a falsified Orwellian social environment where nothing was really as it seemed?

Why shouldn't we talk about this in wider circles, we thought. Perhaps we could try to represent, give an image of what it meant to a number of us to experience "lost childhood" in the 20th century.

We decided to see what happens to the individual when his/her optimal development gets hampered by traumatic experiences, both at the level of family and society. Are we able to get or give help in such traumatic situations - from/to ourselves, to others? How can the secret inner resources of the individual find the power to survive and what is the price to be paid? What are the psychotherapeutic tools, the social psychological instruments that can be mobilised to support the working through of trauma?

It was the "Danube conversation" from which the idea of the fifth international conference of the Sandor Ferenczi Society and the conference trilogy in 2001 was born: *Lost Childhood* in Budapest, *Lost Childhood and the Language of Exile* in London, and *Mother, Motherland, Mothertongue* in Paris.

Each city has its metaphoric meaning. Budapest is the linking thread that joins the lives of the three organisers of the conference trilogy. All of us were born here. It was here that the "two Judits" grew up, became adults and gave birth to their sons. With the exception of a few professional excursions out of the country, I am the only one who has been living in Budapest all her life. Judit

Szekacs was able to realise her long-held desire, and moved to London after the political changes in Hungary in 1989. Kathleen followed an equally strong desire by returning to Europe from Canada, her country of immigration, chosen by her parents as the new homeland. She picked Paris as the new center of her universe, a city with a river that divides it in two, but returns to her childhood roots with increasingly frequent visits to Budapest. It is true that we differ in many ways, but we share a secure, common ground, our past, our roots, our profession and our ways of thinking.

All three of us believe that psychoanalysis and psychotherapy help our patients gain their personal autonomy and freedom, and sustain their capacity for pleasure. Many years of working together has convinced us that, through our seminars and conferences, we have been able to develop an environment to freely discuss those interdisciplinary issues that are of passionate interest to many of us in the psychoanalytical field and to learn from each other. It has been in spite of – or rather because of? – the multiculturalism and multilingualism of our professional circles, that we have been able to establish a mutually comprehensible language as well as close friendships.

The creative force of the authors, represented by the selected papers of the conference trilogy, inspired psychoanalysts, social psychologists and literary people to show a way out for the working through of traumatic losses. In addition, we need to make it clear, that every loss carries within itself the seeds of the creation of a positive development.

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