

The Shoah – between continuity and discontinuity

Sarah Birgani¹

In our cartel the question came up at different points, why it is still relevant to talk about the Shoah nowadays. The relation between present and past – this is close to the question of continuity and discontinuity. So, what continues to have an effect of the signifier Shoah today? Something lingers on, while at the same time one can't speak of a simple 'repetition' or 'continuation' of history.

Freud shows already in his text *Constructions in Analysis*², that history is not a reservoir of knowledge, like an objective fact, detached from the speaking subject, but that the past is written in the present, constructed in the moment of speaking. Furthermore, J.-A. Miller says in *Introduction à l'érotique du temps* that the Freudian unconscious is a structural illusion, because it gives the impression that the past "in so far as [it] contains everything that used to be the present [...] was there before the very experience of present"³.

Something of the signifier Shoah is very much alive. One can find Nazi-expressions in the every-day-speech of Austrians. I'm talking deliberately of Austria and the Austrian language, because it is the language I was born into. When I was a child of six or seven, I was often climbing in the mountains in Carinthia, where I grew up at that time. Once, I was told, when you are on the summit of a mountain, you should say to the other climbers, who you meet, 'Berg Heil'. I used the phrase as a child without understanding and was very shocked, when I found out how close this phrase is to the 'Heil Hitler' in Nazi times.

Something of the signifier Shoah has an effect until today. That is not the same as saying that the horror of the Shoah was 'transmitted' transgenerational. If we take Freud and Lacan seriously, it's clear that there is no simply 'transmission' from one member of a generation to the next. The word transmission is somehow misleading, because it suggests that there is a certain direction, an automatism – from the parent to the child – an automatism, that absolves the subject of this personal responsibility. In psychoanalysis, the so called 'transmission' is always an act of unconscious identification of the one to whom it's being 'transmitted'. Freud writes in *Group Psychology and the analysis of the ego* (1921) about identification as "the earliest expression of an emotional bond"⁴. He makes it clear in his text, that identification is not something to which the subject is at the mercy of, but the subject *takes* something, it is all about an unconscious choice of the subject.

Nowadays, the libraries are full of literature about the Shoah. Many of them deal with the question of how it came about – possible explanations, an attempt at history writing. I recently mentioned in a university seminar, that the Shoah has destroyed the psychoanalytic discourse in Austria. A student asked me: "What is the meaning of

1. Initiative Vienna.

2. Freud, S.: „Constructions in Analysis“, Int. J. Psycho-Anal., 19:377-387.

3. Miller, J.-A.: "Introduction à l'érotique du temps" ["Introduction to the Erotics of Time", excerpts published in Lacanian Ink, Issue 24/25], in La Cause freudienne, No. 56, Navarin, Paris, p. 77.

4. Freud, S.: „Group Psychology and the analysis of the ego“, German Study Edition. Book IX., Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch, p. 98



Shoah?”. I answered that it’s a Hebrew name that has been given by living witnesses to the Holocaust. I should have answered: “There is no meaning – the Shoah has no meaning and no sense”. Because the explanations are never enough. The Shoah is, and one can say that only because of what Freud and Lacan elaborated, a mark, a rudimentary inscription without any sense, a trauma, and all later explanations are already a try to give a meaning to something that is not in the register of the meaning, but in the real.