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The Psychological Motivations of Nazism and Its Effect on the Superego According to Judith Kestenberg

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Abstract

Judith Kestenberg conducted extensive research into child victims of Nazi persecution. She sought not only to understand the psychological effects of the traumatic experiences and persecution experienced by those children but also to understand the psychological processes behind Nazi ideology and behavior. The objective of this article is to present some of her hypotheses about how Nazi ideology acted on both the victims' and the Germans' superegos, as well as to address her conception of the psychological motivations for Nazism. The author claims that Nazism managed to invade the superegos of both Germans and some of the victims, which meant that, in the case of the latter, the persecution continued, even after the end of the Nazi regime. She also states that the children of Nazis were also victims of this regime, whose ultimate motivation would be the Germans' impulse to kill their own children.

Keywords**:** Judith Kestenberg, Nazism, superego, survivors, Holocaust

1. Introduction

Judith Silberpfennig Kestenberg was born in 1910 in Krakow, Poland, and died in 1999 in Sands Point, New York. She studied medicine at the University of Vienna and specialised in neurology and psychiatry. In 1935, she began her psychoanalytic training with Eduard Hitschmann at the Psychoanalytic Society of Vienna. In 1937, she moved to New York to continue her education with the physician Paul Schilder in the Department of Child Psychiatry at Bellevue Hospital. In New York, she also continued her psychoanalytic training with Herman Nunberg at the New York Psychoanalytic Institute. In 1972, she founded and directed the nonprofit organisation Child Development Research (CDR), an entity devoted to the mental health of children (Sossin et al. 1999).

In 1974, Kestenberg established the *Group for the Psychoanalytic exploration of the effect of the Holocaust on the second generation*, intending to investigate the impact of the Holocaust on the children of survivors, from a psychoanalytic perspective. The author explains that the group tried to find similarities and differences in clinical material and isolate the influence of their parents' experiences during the Holocaust on the children's conflicts (Kestenberg 1992a). In 1981, together with her husband, Milton Kestenberg[1], she initiated the *Jerome Riker International Study of Organized Persecution of Children*, an international study that interviewed approximately 1,500 people who, as children, were victims of Nazi persecution (Sossin et al. 1999). In this project, they interviewed surviving Jewish children; Polish and German children, whose wartime circumstances could be understood as traumatic; as well as children of Nazi parents (Fass 2018). Kestenberg

[1] Milton Kestenberg, Judith's husband, was an attorney, who represented client survivors seeking compensation from the West German Governm
ent. To substantiate their claims, Milton Kestenberg had to help these clients document their lives under the Nazi regime (Kestenberg 1994a).

(1992b; 1998b) says she realized that, once the persecution of children begins, it encompasses not only the victims but also the children of the victimizers, so that, often, the trauma also extended to the children of the Nazis, which made her include who were children under Hitler in her research[2].

Judith Kestenberg developed an original psychodynamic theory of development, created a method for observing and analyzing movement called the Kestenberg Movement Profile (KMP), and produced extensive knowledge about the effects of early massive trauma on the psyche, the transgenerational transmission of trauma, and the psychology of Nazism. Through her work with child victims of Nazi persecution and with the children of Nazis, she sought to understand not only the psychological effects of severe trauma, but also the psychological processes underlying Nazi ideology and behavior.

According to Sossin, Loman, and Merman (1999), Kestenberg published approximately 150 articles and 7 books. The importance of her research on child victims of Nazi persecution has been recognised, particularly by scholars of the psychological impact of the Holocaust. However, there is a lack of studies that systematise and discuss her theoretical proposals, so that a significant part of her work remains neglected by most scholars of psychoanalysis and psychology.

This article aims to analyze some of Kestenberg's hypotheses as to how Nazi ideology acted on the superego of both the surviving victims and the Nazis, as well as to address her conception of the psychological motivations underlying Nazism. This analysis will be based on the following texts in which she addresses these issues: *The psychological consequences of punitive institutions* (Kestenberg 1981), *Child killing and child rescuing* (Kestenberg & Kestenberg 1987), *Children*

[2] For more informations about Judith Kestenberg's biography, see Naszkowska 2023; and for more information on Kestenberg's research trajectory, see Caropreso 2024.

Under The Nazi Yoke (Kestenberg 1982), and *Nazi fathers* (Kestenberg 1998). The author claims that Nazism managed to invade both the Nazis' superego and the superego of some of the surviving victims, which meant that, in the case of the latter, the persecution continued even after their liberation. She argues that the hostility of Germans towards their own children is behind their hatred of Jews and that many of the Nazis' children were also victims of Nazism and suffered the consequences of that regime. Her conclusions are drawn from patient analyses, interviews with victims of Nazi persecution, discussions in groups of psychiatrists, meetings with German and Israeli colleagues, and consideration of Milton Kestenberg's restitution practices[3].

2. The effect of Nazism on the Jewish superego

In *The Psychological Consequences of Punitive Institutions*, published in 1981, Judith Kestenberg comments that no matter how ill-conceived, traumatizing, and self-defeating penal institutions are, their declared objective is to rehabilitate, segregate, and prevent victimization by criminals, as well as to allow them to atone for their transgressions, through a punishment consistent with the crime. However, in the Nazi ghettos and concentration camps, there was no possibility of redemption or liberation for Jews. Nazi penal institutions were sadistically distorted. Unlike the political and criminal prisoners who were their fellow prisoners, for the Jews, there was no possibility of expiation for their actions and free return to society. She points out that even the Poles, considered inferior, could be Germanized, while the Jews had to be punished for being Jews, for their intrinsic evil. They should die to prevent their further evil deeds, so that the intrinsic goodness of the Germanic race would be preserved. In this text, she

[3] Kestenberg (1981) clarifies that these were the sources of the conclusions she presents about the effect of the Nazi penal institutions on the Jews' and Germans' superegos.

tries to show that the depreciation of Jews affected the image they had of themselves and led, in many cases, to irrational guilt, which especially affected the Holocaust victims.

Kestenberg (1981) comments that the image of ourselves as good or bad does not depend only on the record of our good or bad actions and thoughts. We acquire a general feeling of being good or bad because we feel good or injured and because of the stereotypes that people attribute to us, which contribute to raising or lowering our self-esteem. We are born with certain physical characteristics and belonging to a special ethnic group, however, if 'negative values are attached to such unalterable characteristics, we feel shame and guilt without regard to our actual thoughts and actions' (Kestenberg 1981: 17). According to the author, using isolation and deception techniques, the Nazis forced their way into the victims' minds and also invaded their superegos. Humiliated, starving, and deprived of natural defenses, many Jews began to see themselves as deserving of the inhumane punishment they received. That reality subverted their ideals and sense of justice, which made many of the survivors feel guilty for having survived. Thus, even after being liberated, many were unable to escape the feelling of persecution. In the following description, the complexity of the mental situation of some survivors after liberation becomes clear:

They were free, to be sure, but they were alone and unable to escape the nightmare of persecutions and the guilt of the mourner. They mourned for their families and friends they had lost and they mourned for that part of their past selves that accounted for the self-esteem and optimism of their pre-Nazi lives. They blamed their parents for not surviving and leaving them alone and they blamed themselves for not dying with them. Needless to say that this self-torture perpetuated the Nazi persecution and made for very strange bed-fellows: the survivor and the persecutor who visited him in his dreams (19).

In this way, the author considers that, although consciously rejected and hated, the sadistic Nazi institutions were successful in distorting the superegos of some of their victims. The persecutors' laws were internalized by the survivors who often felt guilty for having survived.

According to Kestenberg (1981), the survivors' uncertainty about whether or not they should have been murdered by the Nazis was reflected in the way they treated their children, who perpetuated their survival and represented the defeat of Hitler's genocide. She reports that some surviving parents told their children that they should have killed them, a statement that expressed their doubt about whether or not they deserved to have survived. She also says that many surviving women referred to their children as 'Nazis' to express how bad they were, which indicated a dichotomous reasoning that equated 'good' with a Jew and 'bad' with a Nazi. These facts lead her to infer that the persecutors convinced some of their victims that they should not compensate for their losses by producing Jewish children. She comments:

> In a sense, each child Born to a Jew belies the Nazi-made destiny of total annihilation or 'final solution'. Every wish to get rid of a child who represents a lost family member and serves the vindication of Jews as worthy of survival can be used to perpetuate the laws of Nazi Germany in the internalized penal institutions of survivors (27).

The author also describes the impact of this distortion of the victims' superego on their children, who are considered to constitute the second generation of survivors. She explains that children understand what happened to their parents both when they are

informed and when the story is silenced. The analysis of the children of survivors of concentration camps, ghettos, and the early stages of Nazi persecution showed that some of them involuntarily lived in a double reality, the present reality and that of Nazism. Kestenberg calls this mechanism 'transposition'. She realized that: 'Children learn from their parents to live on two levels, such as looking at the haystack as a place to play and at the same time selecting it to hide from the Nazis as if they were present today' (Kestenberg 1980: 28).

Kestenberg (1981) concludes that the irrational guilt and internalized distorted values of the Nazis were often also transmitted from survivors to subsequent generations and she describes how this was manifested in family relationships. According to her report, in some cases, children of survivors felt unique and saw their parents as heroes, as they were exalted as bearers of hope for the family. However, other children of survivors saw their parents' survival as a crime greater than the acts of their persecutors. The author states that the survivors, because they had survived while their family and friends had died, asked the question: Why me? As for the children of survivors, the survival of their parents raised the question: Why my parents? How did they escape? What did they do to deserve this? She points out that some children of survivors feel they have a mission to accomplish something truly worthwhile to provide an answer to the question on the legitimacy of survival. However, others see themselves as having been destined to be the true victims of the Holocaust, that is, to be sacrificed to God.

The author observes that, especially in adolescence, with the reactivation of Oedipal issues and the emergence of opposition to parents, it was common to question whether the parents' survival occurred through legitimate means. At one extreme, some children rebelled, accusing and condemning their parents. On the other extreme, some were grateful and spared their parents additional

suffering. In Kestenberg's opinion, neither of the two attitudes would be useful in the search for a solution to the conflict between feeling united with their parents and separating from them to build their own identity, which leads her to the following question:

> To develop their own conscience must they abandon the teachings of their parents and ally themselves with the 'good' in non-Jews? Must they retain the ties to their parent's past or should they dissociate themselves from their parent's persecutors to rid themselves of the 'heritage' of the Nazi's distorted superego? (Kestenberg 1981: 22).

> She answers that 'whichever way they go, there is no doubt that they must come to grips with their own conscience rather than with the external persecutors and advocates of sadistic penal institutions' (11).

She claims that in order to help with the rehabilitation of survivors, as well as to think about how the persecutors should be punished, which were tasks posed to them at the time, it was necessary to have a point of reference that made sense. In the case of the psychoanalyst, this point of reference would be the questions: How did this happen? Where did this come from? Can we see its sources in the behavior of children who have not yet reached the age of reason? The author seeks in *The Psychological Consequences of Punitive Institutions* and in texts published later to answer these questions by reflecting on the origins of Nazism and how this regime acted on the German superego.

3. The action of Nazism on the German superego

In the text *Children Under The Nazi Yoke*, Kestenberg (1992) claims that Nazism developed over a long period of time and was introduced

into the souls of children who heard stories such as those of the Brothers Grimm[4]. Germanic children were taught to depreciate and torture Jews and to feel superior and omnipotent because of their magical possession, the 'Aryan gene'. In this way, she saw Hitler as the incarnation of a grandiose ideal and a corrupt superego transmitted through the centuries.

Kestenberg (1981) states that the Nazi penal system was childishly distorted. She comments that, although the extermination and torture of Jews were not announced by the Nazi government, any German could see them being deprived of their possessions and their rights; could see them marching on the roads and being sent to forced labor. Just like an insidious chronic disease, the Nazis invaded Germans' superegos and progressively weakened them, so that they could accept or witness the enslavement and eradication of their neighbors without protesting. However, while the persecuted were attacked, the persecutors often upheld a double morality. A corrupt superego, based on a license to deceive, kill, and erect laws that served only themselves, was paradoxically associated with ideals of extreme loyalty to a God-like leader and an allegiance to the German family, in particular the glorified Germanic son. This double morality, in her opinion, expresses a type of functioning of the childish mind, which has not yet developed a cohesive superego. Kestenberg points out that the Nazis' arguments resembled the rationalization of a five-year-old child and mentions as an example the case of a boy of that age, called Johnny, who was the oldest of three brothers.

[4] In this text she mentions the story "The Jew in the Thornbush", by the Brothers Grimm. In "Child killing and child rescuing" (1987), Judith and Milton Kestenberg agree with Dorson's position (1966) according to which the most evident precursors of the Nazis were the Brothers Grimm, who propagated a nationalism that glorified their descent from cruel Teutonic tribes. They comment that, in Nazi Germany, Grimm's stories were reprinted many times and were greatly admired.

After a strategy created at the center where he received psychological treatment, the boy agreed to stop hitting his middle brother (Derek) but refused to stop hitting the youngest (Mitch). His justification for continuing to hit Mitch was that he was not hit by his father, like him and Derek. Kestenberg (1981) points out that the reasoning underlying this thought was that hitting is the prerogative of the strongest, therefore, he had the right to hit his younger brother. Also underlying his thinking was the idea that, as he was hit, his brothers should also be hit, which reinforced his right to hit. In this case, as in Nazi penal institutions, there was a double morality: there was no inconsistency in being aggressive towards some and not towards others. There was no cohesive superego, and inconsistent behavior was caught up in a web of reasoning that justified it. The author comments that, when she created the expectation that Johnny would stop hitting his younger brother once he had stopped hitting his other brother, she did not know that this request was incompatible with the boy's feelings towards his father. She was unaware of his image of his father as someone who punished and hit him. Johnny could tolerate his own punishment only if he passed it on to his younger brother, who he considered to be protected by his father.

Kestenberg (1981) comments that Johnny's parents wanted to imbue him with a sense of justice, however, as is often the case, their own behaviour were incompatible with their educational goals. The parents wanted their son to accept that it is the parents' prerogative to punish, but the way he understood this permission to punish was not what they wanted. She raises the questions:

> Can Johnny stop hitting his brother as long as his father hits him? Is there a danger that he will give up hitting when he feels weak and small, but will resume it when he feels strong through identification with this father? We have not yet

> touched upon the feelings of Derek and Mitch as victims. Are they to acknowledge that they must suffer because they are bad and accept their guilt? Should they provoke punishment to expiate their sins? Or should they become aggressors in propagation of preventive self-defense? (Kestenberg 1981: 24).

The author comments that, after liberation, educators were faced with the difficult issue of how to educate children to imbue in them lasting values of justice and consideration for others, without the need for revenge and self-flagellation. Thus, the Holocaust brought into focus the perennial problem of what is good and what is bad. She considers it to be possible to establish a parallel between Johnny's example and a question that was asked of those responsible for the education of liberated surviving children:

> The changing social status of 'liberated children' confronts the educators of today with questions they are not prepared to answer themselves. Is it justified to punish the transgressors or should they be forgiven and rehabilitated? If you are badly treated, can you or are you obligated to treat the transgressor badly? Can you repudiate your father´s bad deeds or must you be loyal to him and follow in his footsteps to keep the continuity of the family´s good-name intact? (*Ib*.).

For Kestenberg (1981), the prototype of Nazi justice consists of a combination of an aggressive Prussian father model and the model of what she calls the 'father who kills with kindness'. She points out that there is an intrinsic hostility between generations, which reaches a peak in the Oedipus complex. The father feels the child's hostility towards him, which arouses hostile feelings towards the child and the

desire to get rid of him. However, in some cases, with the reactivation of his own guilt, he forbids himself to realize these desires and engages in a non-hostile educational procedure aimed at teaching his children to renounce the aggression directed at their parents. The traditional Prussian father, however, allows himself to express his aggressiveness towards his son under the pretext of education. He places the child in the role of victim and acts as persecutor. But the punishment he imposes on the child is not proportional or has no relation to the act performed, for which the child is guilty. This punishment depends on the mood and will of the offending father. Kestenberg considers that Germans' submission to Hitler, as a leader who did not need to uphold principles of justice, was established based on the model of this cruel patriarchal father. However, she claims that there is another element operating there, which originates in another form of connection between the father and the child: the model of the father who positions himself as the victim of the bad child.

The author explains that one of the most difficult problems that parents have in their relationships with their children is a tendency to 'kill with kindness', that is, to sacrifice their own needs so that the child does not have to give up the immediate gratification of their wishes. This behavior creates a 'monster child' who continues to be 'bad' to serve as a partner in the father's role play as a good victim. In this way, an unbreakable bond emerges between the victim parent and the aggressor child. The prototype of Nazi justice would involve a combination of these two types of systems. The Nazis placed themselves as victims of the bad child (represented by the Jews and other persecuted people), however, they allowed themselves to act as the tyrannical father, killing and victimizing, according to their will. In this way, by placing themselves as victims, their cruelty was justified, and at the base of this would be the denial of their own hatred and desire to kill the child. By seeing themselves as victims and attributing

evil to children, they denied their own evil and, at the same time, allowed themselves to unload it, satisfying their death impulses towards them. From this perspective, there would be a difference between the behavior of the tyrannical father and the behavior of the Nazis. The tyrannical father does not have to play nice. He has the authority and does not need to justify his actions, just as he does not need to disseminate an ideology. The additional element in Nazi justice would then be the victimization of the aggressor and the creation of a justification, through the creation of a persecutor, who functions as a scapegoat.

4. The Nazis' death wish for their own children

Kestenberg (1981) claims that there is an intense unconscious desire for the death of one's own children in the foundation of Nazism, which was projected against Jews, gypsies, homosexuals, and other opponents of the Nazi regime. Thus, the perpetration of infanticide against Jews and other victims would have served to deflect and deny the Nazis' desire to kill their own children. This hypothesis is maintained and developed by the author in her later writings. In the text *Child killing and child rescuing*, co-authored with Milton Kestenberg and published in 1987, they state:

> In our study of Nazi atrocities committed during their reign, we came to suspect that all of Hitler´s wrath was in some way directed against children. The adult Jews and the adult Slavs, whom he subjugated, were reduced to the status of children. They lost power over their own bodies. They had to eat what was dished out to them, be dirty, full of lice, or suddenly cleaned by disinfectants at the behest of their 'caretakers'. They could not come and go as they pleased. Their work brought no income. They could only speak when spoken to.

They need to obey (Kestenberg & Kestenberg 1987: 147).

In this text, Judith and Milton Kestenberg remind us that infanticide was a common and sanctioned practice among the most diverse peoples throughout history, and mention several examples of myths and child sacrifice rituals that exemplify this. In the Middle Ages, infanticide was the most prevalent crime and the influence of the Judeo-Christian religion contributed to the Roman Empire's decision to treat infanticide as a crime. Although ancient legends refer to the murder of children by Jews, the Torah condemned such an act, they point out. Their hypothesis is that the renunciation of infanticide, as exemplified in the biblical story of Abraham and Isaac, marks the Jews for all time as rescuers and saviors of children. That way, 'the role of Jews as child rescuers and child lovers made them the target of those who cannot control their impulses to sacrifice children for the glory of the father and the fatherland' (139).

Judith and Milton Kestenberg comment that it is clear that the relationship between parents and children has evolved from cruelty to kindness. At the end of the 19th century, laws were instituted to prevent cruelty to children, and the 20th century was the century of child liberation, although maltreatment continued in other forms. From then on, children stopped being servants of their parents and acquired a freedom that often enslaved their parents and educators. However, their parents' hostility and murderous desires towards them remained repressed and could return to consciousness in certain circumstances, as would have occurred under the Nazi regime. In this way, the authors state that the desire to get rid of their children is omnipresent in the adults' minds and that there is a 'child-killing complex' in the human psychism, which has been systematically neglected by psychoanalysis.

In support of their hypothesis of the existence of a 'child-killing complex', Kestenberg and Kestenberg (1987) mention the work of

Devereux (1963). This author read the Oedipus complex in the light of the Laius complex and claimed that Oedipus impulses were stimulated by the murderous and incestuous wishes of a parent towards a child. Devereux argues that, although the tender and erotic elements of the Laius complex are occasionally referred to, the sadistic components of these complexes are ignored by psychoanalytic writers. He believes that this scotomisation of the Complementary Oedipal Complex is rooted in the adult's deep-seated need to place all responsibility for the Oedipal Complex on the child and to ignore certain parental attitudes that actually stimulate the child's Oedipal tendencies. Ross (1982) and Levy (2011) also pointed out that the sadistic element of the Laius complex has not been properly recognised in psychoanalysis. Levy (2011) argued that the Laius Complex has been largely ignored in the psychoanalytic literature, despite the fact that stories from myth and religion, as well as personal experience and clinical observation, provide ample evidence of parental aggression and hostility.

Judith and Milton Kestenberg points out that, among the 'enlightened' countries, Germany was the last to tame its violent impulses against children. However, with the rise of Nazism around 40 years after child protection laws were instituted, a regression occurred in that country, leading to the torture and murder of children. They argue that:

> The impulse to kill one´s children and commit genocide on one's own people is not easy to conquer. From time to time, it becomes more virulent and tempting than others. Its repression reversed itself during the Nazi regression to barbarism. To undo the commandments of Jews against infanticide and the protection Jews gave to children, the Nazis had to annihilate their opponents and kill their children cruelly in front of their eyes. Ridding themselves of the Jews, as

> saviors of children, freed them to commit mass murder on their own (Kestenberg & Kestenberg 1987: 152).

Kestenberg (1992) mentions several examples of Nazi behavior that show their desire for the death of their own children. Unwanted babies were left to starve and some of the Lesbensborn nurseries, where the SS raised German children, were abandoned when the war was ending. At the end of the war, Hitler ordered all Germans to kill themselves. Entire classes of junior and senior students were sent to the front in the last stages of the war when defeat was already certain, and many were killed. Deserters were hanged[5]. Wagons packed with German children returning from previously safe places were left unheated and some groups of children froze to death[6]. In *Child killing and child rescuing*, Judith and Milton Kestenberg (1987) report the following:

> German youths, born in 1925, 1926, and 1927, were thrown into the fighting at the front after a brief period of training. Some were still students in high school when they went to war. To avoid the bombs of the Allies, children were sent to camps and separated from their parents. Some of these children were sent to the eastern lands that were invaded. In the spring of 1945, when the Red Army conquered all of Eastern Europe, the unhappy camp children were surrounded by the chaos of the front. Taken by surprise in their 'safe' camps, they fled, chased by their caretakers, and, sometimes, abandoned by them. The children remained separated from their parents long after the war was over. Some of the

[5] When mentioning these data, she refers to Heck (1985) and Hard (1980).
[6] She mentions Heer (1983) as a source of this information.

> children died and some who returned did not find their homes (Klose 1982). It may sound that we are describing Jewish or Polish children. This happened to German children who lived for the glory of their Führer (147).

Kestenberg (1992) draws attention to the fact that, under the Nazi regime, young Germans were encouraged to be cruel to themselves as well, which was evident, for example, in the Hitler Youth competitions, where young people were treated without compassion and encouraged to hurt and mock the losers. Hitler taught Nazi young people to disdain weakness and turn against it. The author explains that the ideal ego of Germanic youth under Hitler was to please the Führer and that their individual superegos disappeared and were replaced by a corrupt conscience that allowed them to become the sadistic conquerors of the world. Hitler and his henchmen taught the young people that they should sacrifice their lives for Germany and the Führer and promoted a narcissistic investment in death. According to Kestenberg (1992), three methods would have been used to penetrate the psychic economy of German youth: directing self-aggression towards 'inferior' people; neutralizing the self-destructive desires by increasing individual and group narcissism fueled by slogans and pseudoscientific evidence of the superiority of the Nordic race; promoting the amalgamation of exalted self-esteem with the desire to die, producing a unique grandeur in which death was narcissistically invested as an ideal. That way:

> At the same time as he became the savior of German children, Hitler prepared them for death. He was their rescuer and destroyer. He gave them freedom, self-esteem, grandeur, ideals and a desire to live and he used all these aggrandizing features to promote death (149).

A critical approach to Kestenberg's hypothesis of the 'child-killing complex' underlying Nazism can be found in Kafka (1999). In a review of the book *The Last Witness: The Child Survivor of the Holocaust* (Kestenberg and Brenner 1996), the author argues that this hypothesis is the result of over-simplified speculation. He says: 'While the history and dynamics of violence, and especially of infanticide is pertinent to the story of the Holocaust, I believe that incomprehensible horror may have led here to an over-generalized and perhaps over-simplified speculation' (Kafka 1999: 279). Kafka doesn't develop his argument beyond that. This criticism is undoubtedly valid, however, Kestenberg supports her hypotheses with a variety of empirical data from the interviews conducted by her research group and historical data, as well as the analysis of patients who were children of Nazis. This makes it valid to recover her hypotheses and consider them to think about the psychological processes underlying the Nazi regime.

5. The transgenerational transmission of violence

Another important aspect the author considers in understanding the behavior of Nazi parents in the Nazi regime is the transgenerational transmission of brutality. Kestenberg argued that the destructive and self-destructive behavior of the Nazi youth was supported by their experiences at home, at the hands of abusive and emotionally distant parents. In *Nazi fathers* (Kestenberg 1998), she states that Germany's cultural setting fostered authoritarianism, intolerance, and, often, cruelty on the part of fathers and husbands, so the home environment and the Nazi environment reinforced each other. From the work of other authors and interviews she conducted with the children of Nazis, she seeks to show that the cruel behavior engendered by the Nazis negatively affected the fathering patterns of the Nazis and their collaborators. Therefore, although Nazi propaganda appeared to be

pro-family, it actually destroyed it[7].

In 'Children under the Nazi Yoke', Kestenberg (1992) had already pointed out that a very high number of children of Nazis described their fathers as cruel, vindictive, authoritarian, and violent towards them and their mothers. In 'Nazi fathers', she emphasizes that 'the maltreatment of the children had implicit or explicit parallels to the treatment of Jews and other Holocaust victims' (Kestenberg 1998: 128). In this text, she clarifies that, although fathers did not always mention their collaboration with the Nazis to their children, the children often identified with the victims of their parents' actions. Many identified with the Jews by feeling persecuted by their parents, and considered themselves 'the Jews of their parents'. However, she shows that, in some cases, double identification occurred, because, in addition to identifying with the victim of the offending father, the child also identified with their own father. There was, therefore, an identification with the persecuted and the persecutor, which sometimes led to contradictory behaviors, such as rejecting the actions of the Nazis and identifying as a victim and, at the same time, admiring Hitler and identifying as a follower of Nazism.

According to the author, an important fact to be considered in this context is the transgenerational transmission of brutality. Kestenberg (1998) claims that mistreated children are a result of parents who were equally mistreated, therefore, the more hostility a person experiences, the greater the risk of transmitting it to their children. Children who felt that their parents wanted to kill them will feel the same way toward their own children. Thus, the author claims that, although the hostile behavior of Nazi parents was reinforced by the Nazi environment, which required more loyalty to the 'fatherland' than to the family and

[7] She mentions the work of Juelich (1991, 1993) on the second generation of Germans, particularly on the children of Nazis, to support this hypothesis.

encouraged aggressive behavior, they were also a product of the aggression experienced in their childhood, which points out the transgeneretional problem of violence. Many of the aggressive parents were raised by brutal parents and raised their children in the same way. Thus, the abuse suffered by children would have become the model for their future ways of relating to others.

The hypothesis defended by Kestenberg, therefore, is that brutality and authoritarianism in raising children creates a pattern of aggressive behavior, which can be manipulated by a leader with certain characteristics, and lead to an ideology, such as Nazism, which encourages and legitimizes the manifestation of this hatred, by creating a persecutor, acting as a scapegoat. In her words: 'The patriarchal father, German or American, creates a model for violence that a charismatic leader can direct into feelings of hatred and deeds of torment against any scapegoats' (137).

Kestenberg emphasizes that the same can occur in any other situation with similar conditions and specifically refers to the American context, stating that ' abusive American fathers might also have become Nazis had they been given encouragement from a government such as the Third Reich. There is danger everywhere' (*Ib*.).

Later works supported Kestenberg's view regarding the impact on Germanic children of their parents' practices and their education in accordance with the National Socialist ideology. Quindeau, Einert and Teuber (2017: 202), based on the results of the War Children Project, a project that interviewed Germans who were children during the Nazi regime, state that:

> it was not just the recurring nights of bombings, escapes, or displacement that had a stressful and traumatic impact, but also traumatic experiences within the family relationships. Childrearing during the Third Reich and the attitudes of

> parents toward their own children as well as the transgenerational transfer of ideology and ideals of National Socialism must therefore be regarded as important aspects in understanding (latent) suffering of the war children (*Ib*.).

The authors emphasize that, when thinking about the trauma of war children focusing only on their experiences resulting from war circumstances, the impact of National Socialism is denied or underestimated.

6. Final considerations

According to Kestenberg, Nazi institutions were childishly and sadistically distorted. They supported a double morality, which expressed a kind of infantile mental functioning, prior to the constitution of a cohesive superego, in which contradictory ideas and actions coexisted side by side, without arousing internal conflict. Nazi criminal justice would have infiltrated the minds of Germans and progressively weakened their superegos, leading them to accept and worship a leader who therefore did not need to follow principles of justice.

The environment of the Third Reich would have allowed many parents – raised on a model of violence that propagates through generations – to express their hatred of their children directly, or to direct them towards forged victims, acting as scapegoats. In most cases, the two things were together. Hostility was not only directed at Jews and other enemies of the Nazi regime but also, more or less directly or consciously, at their own children, so many German children were also victims of the Nazis. Kestenberg's thesis is that the Nazis projected their desire to kill their children onto the Jews and other victims, but at the same time, they fostered a culture that encouraged hostility and aggression towards their own children. Therefore, parallel

to the destruction of enemies there was a process of destruction of themselves. Behind the Nazi propaganda, which tried to highlight the value of the German family, was an impulse to anihilate it.

The author claims that Nazi penal institutions also infiltrated the minds of their victims, causing many of them to internalize the guilt attributed to them and begin to see themselves as deserving of the punishment they received. This internalization meant that persecution continued even after liberation, through irrational guilt and doubts about the legitimacy of one's own survival.

The distortion of values and self-image was reflected in the way many Holocaust survivor parents treated their children and spread to subsequent generations, according to Kestenberg. She shows that many of the survivors' children were forced to live in a double reality, that of the present and that of their parents' past. They inherited the guilt and distorted values and thus continued to be victims of the persecution engendered by Nazism. Thus, the end of the Nazi regime did not mean the end of persecution, as the damaging effects on victims' minds continued for generations.

Kestenberg considers that, for both the children of Nazis and the children of survivors, the way to break this cycle and free themselves from their parents' past and persecution is self-scrutiny and insight into oneself. Instead of confronting the persecutor or the persecuted, it would be necessary to confront oneself. This would also be the way to prevent the perpetuation of violence and to prevent another Holocaust.

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