GROUP ANALYTIC TRAINING IN THE UKRAINE:

WORKING WITH TRANSLATORS

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I would like to make some remarks about group analytic training in the Ukraine, an initiative of Alfred Pritz from Oesterreichischer Psychotherapieverband with some Austrian and German colleagues from two Foulkes-oriented training institutions, i.e. GRAS and Internationale Arbeitsgemeinschaft fuer Gruppenanalyse / Altaussee. The program was completed by trainers from four other leading methods in group work. It was on the Ukrainian side implemented by the director of psychiatry at the University of Lviv, Alexander Filz. The training project was realized in block meetings twice a year, planned for a five year period. Participants were psychiatrists and clinical psychologists from the Ukraine and from Russia. The small group I am referring to was co-conducted by a colleague and myself. The group members were (in the beginning) 13 Ukrainians and one Russian. They decided to express themselves in Russian language. Later on the group members wondered if by this decision they had established to be dominated by the Russian language and if this symbolically resembled to the history of their nation: the domination of the Russian culture and Russian ways of ruling had left wounds and feelings of deep humiliations in the Ukrainian mind. Now working with the translator meant that our –the conductors’- interventions came in Russian language to the ears of the participants. So they heard German and Russian from the trainers in the group, that is the two languages of the main oppressors they as Ukrainians had suffered from during this century.

After an endless seeming journey by train through Slovakia and the western part of the Ukraine we arrived at Truskavetz near Lviv, the place of the training workshop. When sitting in the train, thoughts and words between the Austrian and German colleagues went to the history of the Ukraine where 55 years ago German and Austrian soldiers of the Nazi regime had been welcomed in the hope they would bring freedom from stalinistic tyranny. But as we know this very soon turned out to be a terrible illusion.

Thoughts like that became part of our feelings to be in an alien situation out of our normal professional framework providing the impression to be justified and secure.

I want now to focus on the role of the interpreters in that training program and I have to say that my observations and reflections to me seem to be quite personal ones.

I got soon the impression that in different stages of the group process the interpreter played different parts.

In his recent Foulkes annual lecture, Brown has elaborated the basic law Foulkes found in groups: Foulkes showed „that group members collectively constitute the norm from which they individually deviate“ (Brown, 1998, p. 391). It seems to me that the development of a group norm is an ongoing process with typical stages showing in close groups and that the role of an interpreter can be described following this process.

In the beginning when we as co-conductors felt a strong tension in the group and in ourselves, it was as if group members tried to please us by telling stories of their childhood in nice voices. As a way of lowering the anxieties it seemed they tried to establish a group where each member apparently was ready to fulfill what psychoanalysts were considered to attend: stories of childhood, of mother-child and of grandmother-grandchild relationships, of being left alone etc. An atmosphere came up
of being in one boat or of being in a nest together where the temperature became warmer and warmer. In that phase our translator seemed to be the person who spoke with the loveliest voice. People let her time to express thoroughly what she had heard and it was as if we returned to early times of our lives when mother was reading fairy tales for her children. I had the impression that more and more by that the interpreter became the center of warm feelings and of an integration that in the first time of the group had been lacking in a terrifying way.

Group members thanked her and touched her arms when leaving the room. Warm glances seemed to be thrown onto her.

It was probably within this atmosphere of a very first togetherness that the co-conductor once when the session had ended started and tried to read an ukrainian poem in ukrainian language to the participants. This was like a step to do a similar thing that the members of the group and that by her translation in such a lovely voice the interpreter did: to establish a feeling of being in a positive emotional connection by the means of nicely told words, - a special form of what Bion (1961) referred to as the basic assumption „dependency“.

That each statement was repeated in the other language was – during this first phase of the group process – part of this atmosphere: spoken out slowly by the interpreter the translated contributions of participants and convenors took a good time each and got a solemn, narcissisticly gratifying quality.

When the co-conductor had tried to read the ukrainian poem to the group, this was an effort without much success: the group members soon started to confess that they did not understand a word of what she was reading. So she stopped.

The atmosphere in the group changed in the following sessions. Participants wanted to react to each other more often and showed to be irritated by the time the translation took. Not seldom they tried simply to continue speaking without translation, especially when some self-delineations got an aggressive shape. Now the interpreter gradually seemed to be considered as an inhibitor of phantasies and impulses.

She talled people to wait until she had translated. In other cases she got into the role of establishing an order into the sequence of contributions as several people wanted to speak almost in the same moment. She watched who’s turn it was in the queue of speakers

It was parallel to this development that in the large group once some members sprang up in excitement and gesticulated. Than the translater (another person than the translater in our small group I spoke above) jumped up himself shouting they should sit down and curb.

After that in the large group the trainers could witness again the virtuosity of participants in telling meaningful anecdotes and making jokes full of allusions to feelings of contempt and rage against the authorities.

The split between private and official life, between hidden opposition and manifest fellowship in the comunist party had perhaps resulted in a lot of people in a „false self“ – I mention this following the famous concept of Winnicott (1965).

The role of the translator, alsō in our small group can be seen as a result of projective identification (Klein, 1946). Her function was now to react to aggressiv phantasies and impulses and to the anxieties connected with the conductors by means of controlling. She brought the not ending cruel and frightful stories of the members’ childhood and youth into an orderer. She became a factor of lowering aggressiveness and persecution anxieties that sometimes became virulent in the group.
In such a session a participant tallied her dream where she was in a big hole as a prisoner of a foreigner who was operating with a motor-saw. She was speaking to him without interruption and she knew in her dream that when she ended speaking he would kill her by the saw.

The translator bringing order into the sometimes irritated and overlapping contributions in the group, speaking in her ongoing lovely voice, to me seemed to resemble Scheherazade in the Arabian Nights' Entertainment. Perhaps we as the convenors were unconsciously considered like King Shahryar of Samarkand in the frame story of the Arabian Nights'. There the first wife of the king had betrayed him during his absences. The king ordered to kill her and those with whom she had had her escapades. After that the king used to marry another woman each night which he ordered to kill in the morning in order to take his revenge on the whole female gender. Scheherazade, the elder and intelligent daughter of the king's visier was able to captivate the king by her stories. She used to stop each of her stories incomplete, announcing to finish it in the next night. When she had continued this procedure over a thousand and one nights the king decided to let her alive.

Gradually we got into a third phase of the collective atmosphere in the small group. At another workshop with this group we had to work with an other translator.

In this context I may mention that many investigators have described certain typical developmental steps in closed analytic groups (e.g. Tuckman, 1965; Saravay, 1978; Hayne, 1997). Following these observations, it is a sign of some progress in the development of the group when members start with a sort of „initiation“: they begin to rebel and to strive for gaining more possibilities of power and sexual potency. Such a phase of rebellion did not show in that group in the Ukraine for in my opinion a very long time. When it finally came up with some retardation, it was in terms of reproaching us the irreality of our activities as therapists and trainers: as the economic and social situation in the Ukraine had become worse the members talled us to see the reality in their society. „We as psychiatrists and clinical psychologists – they expressed – meet more and more people committing suicide because of poverty and lack of medical care. Now you are teaching psychoanalysis and group analysis .... what for?“

They turned to the marxian argument with the following famous contents: it is not people's mind that determines their existence. It is on the contrary the social situation that determines their mind. Or: the philosophers have allways continued interpretating the world. Now we have to change the world and to put the existence of man from the head to the feet!

Some time later, the interpreter left us and the group alone for the last two sessions of that workshop. I think it could be permitted to say that this seemed like an acting out of the opposition in the group against the convenors. As we were reproached only to interpret the people and their lives instead of changing the circumstances of their lives really, consequently the interpreter had stopped interpreting. And when we include the observations Mahler-Bungers (1999) reported on the situation without an interpreter where people got phantasies of dying, we can consider this attack to be an existential one.

After a while in that situation without a translator we found out that one participant and the conductors could communicate in french. We continued then with changed matters and a changed atmosphere. It was now like a sort of escape as tourists to France. I think we had perhaps shifted to another false self.

But when left alone by the interpreter there was also another side. This was an aspect that did not show overtly: we afterwards heard that many people experienced phantasies
of playing or singing together like children or to have bodily contact when it had become clear that the interpreter did not come. Perhaps we can say that this was possible when the language was omitted. But in the meantime we have to consider that in the 30 minutes without any translation everybody felt more inhibited than ever in that group.

We could now see clearer that without a common language and without a translator we did not come together at all. But with the activities of the translators we moved on paths of communication that were influenced or even fixed by social and historical patterns. So the interpreter showed, following the development of the group, the traits of a narrative tradition well known from slav (and of course from oriental) cultures producing a feeling of a warm and powerful linking.; then the traits of a controlling authority and finally the role of a marxian educated revolutionary appeared in the translators.

References


Hayne, M (1997): *Grundstrukturen Menschlicher Gruppen*; Pabst science publishers, Lengerich, Germany


