

CONTENTS

Preface	9
Acknowledgements and Dedication	11
Chapter 1: Background of the Study	13
A Personal Provocation to Study the Meaning of Suffering	13
The Research Focus	15
Chapter 2: What is Meant by Meaning?	17
Defining Meaning	17
The Ways in Which Meaning is Experienced	18
An Essential Description of the Concept Meaning	26
Chapter 3: The Question of Suffering	28
How are We to Understand Suffering?	28
The Auschwitz Experiment	33
The Call of Suffering	38
The Meaning of Suffering	39
Mankind With a Mission: A Post-Paradise State of Being	43
Aspects which have Emerged in the Contemplation of the Meaning of Suffering	45
The Meaning of Suffering in the Context of the Holocaust	48
Chapter 4: The Holocaust as a Crisis of Meaning	49
The Holocaust as a Personal Crisis	49
The Holocaust as a Jewish Crisis	50
The Holocaust as a Crisis of Western Civilization	61
The Holocaust as a Crisis of Conscience	71
The Holocaust as a Challenge to Meaning	76
The Jews and the Challenge of History	83
Chapter 5: The World of the Holocaust Survivor	86
Suffering a Trauma Beyond Belief	86
A Battle of the Mind	88
Memory Recall of Survivors	89
The Survivor's Quest for Meaning	95
The Dignity of Suffering	98
The Unsung Heroes	104

The Hidden Human Spirit	107	
Beyond Coping and Hardiness	109	
A New Approach to the Study of Survivor Experiences		111
A Concluding Statement of Research Intentions	112	
Chapter 6: The Quest for a Human Science: A Heuristic Study into Holocaust Survivor Experiences		113
The Humanistic Revolution in Science	113	
New Paradigm Research	114	
Heuristic Inquiry: The Internal Search to Know	115	
The Heuristic Research Process	116	
The Question of Reliability and Validity	121	
Chapter 7: Heuristic Research in Action: Entering the World of the Holocaust Survivor		122
The Preparatory Phase	122	
A Visit to the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Jerusalem	123	
The <i>She'erith Hapletah</i> : Among the Surviving Remnant	124	
Issues that are Important to Holocaust Survivors	127	
The Concentration Camps in which the Research Participants were Imprisoned	133	
Chapter 8: The Holocaust Experiences of Five Survivors		137
Esther: Eva Weisz	137	
Malka: Magda Haydu	166	
Sarah: Leah Leibowitz	177	
Deborah: Dinah Benedikt	192	
David: Don Krausz	216	
Concluding Thoughts	249	
Chapter 9: Life's Meaning in the Face of Suffering		250
Suffering as a Watershed	250	
Suffering as a Challenge: A Composite Picture	250	
A Creative Synthesis: Similarities between the Account of Frankl and the Accounts of the Research Participants	251	
Optimal Living: Human Functioning on the Dimension of Meaning		270
The Commission	278	
Appendix: The Research Process: Acquisition and Explication of the Data		280
References		287
Index of Subjects		312
Index of Authors		319

PREFACE

Suffering and death are inescapable realities of life. We are confronted with these realities virtually every day of our lives. It is when we ourselves are struck by senseless and tragic suffering that we question whether life has any meaning.

The aim of this book is to explore this painful question. Nobody can help our understanding of this question as much as those who have deeply suffered themselves. What have survivors of the worst imaginable sufferings to say on the subject? Viktor Frankl was a survivor of Auschwitz, a Nazi death camp. He has also written extensively on the subject. His experiences and views, along with the experiences and views of other Holocaust survivors, form the focus of this book. The search for life's meaning in the face of pain, tragedy and death on which these sufferers have embarked, can lead us in our own journey to find meaning in life despite the suffering we so often have to endure.

Since the focus of this research was on the suffering of the Holocaust survivor, the Holocaust, as the context of the present study, was studied as a crisis of meaning for all mankind. How can we come to terms with the evil in human nature, with man's inhumanity to man, that an event such as the Holocaust revealed? The senseless killing (to include suicide bombing) of innocent victims, of men, women and children, is continuing the world over. Newsreels confront us daily with evidences of man's inhumanity to man. What answers can we give to the meaning of life in a world so full of evil and hatred?

Launching into a study of the experiential world of the Holocaust survivor, research methods employed in Holocaust survivor studies were reviewed and found wanting. These methods failed to unlock the world of the Holocaust survivor. The choice and employment of a psychological research method known as heuristic research, allowed a sensitive entry into the world of the Holocaust survivor and yielded rich data which illuminated the following astounding facts.

Through a series of heroic choices Frankl, and the survivors who became the research participants of this study, could attain spiritual triumph in the midst of suffering caused by an evil and inhumane regime. Hitherto unexplored areas

of psychological maturity were revealed by these victims of suffering from which the following conclusions could be drawn:

We can attain the peaks of moral excellence through suffering. Suffering can call us out of the moral apathy and mindlessness of mere existence. It can serve to make us realize what is truly meaningful in life and encourage us to actively preserve and foster the things that make life worth the living. Having a deeper insight in life and living for values that have become deeply our own, can make us mature and grow and attain a moral stature far above the ordinary.

The Holocaust, one of the most tragic events in human history, contains, paradoxically, a challenge to mankind. Resisting the pressure to sink to the level of a brute fight for mere survival, Frankl and the research participants continued to exercise those human values important to them and triumphantly maintained their human dignity and self-respect. Furthermore, they reached untold heights of moral excellence under conditions that were aimed at destroying the human spirit.

An event like the Holocaust may reveal the evil that human beings are capable of committing. However, as was evident in the lives of those examined in this study, its greater lesson is that as human beings we have the power, and therefore also the task, to overcome evil with good!

Biblical quotations are from *The Revised Authorized Version of the Bible*, London: Samuel Bagster, 1982.

Teria Shantall
South Africa, 2002

The Meaning of Suffering

In the white heat of suffering and pain in the concentration and death camps, people were melted down to the essentials, to the human in themselves. What remained was not what they as human beings “had”, but what they as human beings were called upon to “be” (Frankl, 1967, p. 110).

Stripped of everything but naked existence, the camp inmates were faced with the question which, in the final analysis, is put to every person: *Adam, where are you?* This one question contains the many facets of the meaning of suffering.

Suffering is Intended to Challenge Us

Suffering corners and questions us. This, Frankl (1969) believed, is the very function of human suffering: “Suffering is intended to guard us from apathy, from psychic *rigor mortis*. In fact, we mature in suffering, grow because of it — it makes us richer and stronger” (p. 88).

Maslow (1968) spoke about the psychopathology of the average human being, of his or her fear of human greatness. Choosing to remain in hiding, the average man or woman is like an Adam that has come to like a self-complacent lifestyle.

Suffering rudely shakes us out of this less than human state by forcing us to look at ourselves and the quality of our own lives. “Suffering establishes a fruitful, one might say a revolutionary, tension in that it makes for emotional awareness of what *ought not to be*” (Frankl, 1969, p. 86).

Suffering Calls Us to Account

Suffering destroys every sense of false security. It makes us aware of our vulnerability and helplessness, of how fragile life is, how easily it can be damaged or lost.

We are faced with our own mortality. If life proves to be something we can lose, something we have to give up at one time or another, *what have we achieved with it?*

We have not given birth to ourselves, nor are we able to stop ourselves from dying. Life has been given to us and will be required of us. How are we going to hand it over or give it back? Will our lives testify for or against us?

Suffering painfully calls us to account, but it also challenges us to change and grow, to gain a stature that will enable us to stand the test or the verdict of our own conscience.

In Grief, Suffering Calls Us to Repentance

A powerful function of suffering is to break and soften us through grief. “For the inner biography of a man, grief and repentance do have meaning” (Frankl, 1969, p. 87).

Frankl asked us to consider the case of having lost a loved-one. Grief is felt not only at having lost a loved-one, but at having lost the opportunity to make up for the wrong, the hurt we have caused, the many times we have missed to show the deceased our love and appreciation.

Nothing can bring the loved-one back, however. None of our acts of commission or omission can be wiped off the slate as if they had never been. Nevertheless, contended Frankl (1969), “in repenting man may inwardly break with an act, and in living out this repentance — which is an inner event — he can undo the outer event on a spiritual, moral plane” (p. 87). Frankl (1969) quoted Scheler, who said: “Repentance has the power to wipe out a wrong; though the wrong cannot be undone, the culprit himself undergoes a moral rebirth” (p. 87).

Repentance cannot change the past, but it can certainly change the present and herald a new future. Our changed, more sensitive and caring lives can become a monument in loving memory of those whom we have lost. The past, by having served the purpose of changing us for the better, now has meaning!

A very painful factor in mourning is the lament we feel that the lives of our loved-ones had been cut short. If they could but have escaped their deaths, they could have enjoyed or achieved so much more with their lives. Such unfinished lives may, however, sometimes be of the most beautiful. “Not only are the unfinished symphonies among the finest, so also are the ‘pathetiques’” (Frankl, 1969). The pathetiques refer to lives that seemed to have been wasted or a failure. The grief over such a lost life is often the most difficult to bear. But who are we to judge, asked Frankl? (1967).

We live in a dimension lower than that of the Ultimate, for that reason that we can only trust that there is an ultimate meaning or answer for human suffering since on the human level, we cannot explain what that meaning is. Frankl (1970) gave the example of an animal who lives on a lower than the human dimension. If one points to something with one’s finger, the dog does not look in the direction at which one points; it looks at one’s finger and sometimes snaps at it. It cannot understand the semantic function of pointing to something.

And what about us? Are we, too, sometimes unable to understand the meaning of something, say, the meaning of suffering, and do we, too, quarrel with our fate and snap at its finger? Frankl (1970) asked: “Is it not conceivable that there is still another dimension possible, a world beyond the human world,

a world in which the question of an ultimate meaning of human suffering will find an answer?" (p. 145).

Jews say a prayer of remembrance for the dead, called *Kaddish*. It is a prayer, paradoxically, which celebrates life and praises the Creator. It is a prayer which acknowledges God's great wisdom. In His hands are the lives of us all. Mere mortals, we cannot explain God's doings, but we can trust that God's doings are supremely purposeful even though we cannot understand it.

Grief is a commission to the living. Rather than falling victim to survivor guilt, Frankl (1970) urged us, we have to rise to a level of survivor *responsibility*.

We can emulate the example of those who could rise from the ashes of the gas chambers to a new life. "Behold and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow" (Lamentations 1:12), is the lament of the Nazi death camp survivors. Those among them who could pick up the pieces and build a new life, are those who turned their grief into a mission. They felt imbued with a strong sense of responsibility towards the dead. Living full, rich and sensitive lives, the survivors could erect spiritual monuments in memory of those who perished. Their deaths were not in vain: it served to instill a sense of heightened responsibility among those who survived.

Jews yearly observe The Day of Remembrance (*Yom Hashoa*) for the six million Jews who perished during the Holocaust. A section of one of the services read: *If there is a lesson to be learnt, it is the cultivation of a profound sensitivity to that which the Nazis tried to destroy — the sanctity of life. Alleviating the many kinds of suffering we see around us is both a meaningful and challenging way to remember the millions whom we and all following generations dare never forget.*

Suffering is Meant to Inspire Us

A most unique value of suffering is that it can finally make us aware of the fact that we are living, not in some enclosed space, but before something or someone.

It is this thought with which Frankl (1968) encouraged his fellow-inmates. They were to think of themselves as being watched. He urged them to think of themselves as being surrounded by a cloud of witnesses. It was possible to think that, in the immediate moment, there was someone that looked down on them in their difficult hours — a friend, a spouse, somebody alive or dead, or God — and they would be expected not to disappoint such highly concerned and interested parties. They would suffer proudly, and not miserably.

They were, in fact, to observe themselves and how they were bearing their sufferings. They were to take note of themselves almost as if, at some future