

Bruno Bettelheim — Blaming the Victim

Bettelheim: Life and Legacy, by Nina Sutton, Basic Books, 1996, and *The Creation of Dr. B: A Biography of Bruno Bettelheim*, by Richard Pollak, Simon & Schuster, 1997, reviewed by Helene Goldberg, Ph.D., a psychologist in private practice in Berkeley, CA (updated November 13, 1997).

On May 12, 1938, Bruno Bettelheim stood silent as around him crowds greeted the Nazi troops marching into Vienna with shouts of “Death to the Jews.” On that day, exactly fifty-two years later, he took his own life. Within weeks of his suicide, disturbing accounts of the man who had come to represent psychoanalysis itself in America began to surface. Accusations and controversy followed.

This year two new biographies begin to unravel the truth beneath the facade: Nina Sutton, *Bettelheim: Life and Legacy* and Richard Pollak, *The Creation of Dr. B*. Both authors begin with an admission of their bias. Sutton makes a valiant though ultimately inadequate attempt to defend Bettelheim’s reputation, while Pollak opens his book with an explanation of the personal harm his family suffered at the hands of Bruno Bettelheim. Pollak’s younger brother was in treatment at Bettelheim’s Orthogenic School (a treatment center for disturbed children) when the child fell to his death while on vacation with his family. Bettelheim insisted to Pollak that the accident was in reality a suicide and blamed Pollak’s mother for the family tragedy (as Bettelheim had blamed all mothers for causing childhood autism). Pollak is definitely a biographer with an ax to grind, and yet he is a skilled reporter and determined researcher. With no regret, Pollak lays open the unflattering truth about the esteemed Dr. B.

It is telling that although the authors begin with quite disparate aims, their conclusions are much the same: that Bettelheim was an inveterate liar, a fraud, and an arrogant brute. Sutton struggles hard to salvage Bettelheim’s reputation by lauding his accomplishments, but her appeals falter in the face of his rampant deceit. In the end, her portrait is no less damning than Pollak’s, though neither as robust nor as well researched. Both biographers dog the trail of inconsistencies between the history Bettelheim claimed for himself and the actual evidence, but Pollak shows the greater facility and tenacity for the job. Where Sutton is often stymied by dead ends and lost records, Pollak pushes ahead to get the interviews and expose the lies. Though Pollak was digging for muck, his excavations were thorough and he hit pay dirt. But, regardless of their original biases, both biographies portray Bettelheim as a damaged human being who constructed his life on a foundation of lies: a life riddled with profound dishonesty, cruelty, and bigotry.

There is no longer much doubt that when Bettelheim arrived in America in the early forties he fabricated a dossier of credentials that allowed him to step into an academic life he could only covet in Vienna. Pollak shows convincingly that almost none of what Bettelheim claimed on his curriculum vitae was true. Bettelheim had no training or connections to the Psychoanalytic Institute in Vienna, no degree in psychology (let alone Summa cum Laude). He had not been active in the resistance to Hitler, nor was he rescued from the Nazis by Eleanor Roosevelt herself. Before he came to America, Bruno Bettelheim was an upper middle-class lumber merchant; he had no direct experience teaching autistic children; and he used his wife’s connections and his own wealth to bribe his way out of Buchenwald.

These deceptions would be of only passing significance if Bettelheim had not parlayed his false credentials into a position of extraordinary influence in the academic and intellectual circles of the United States, and if his questionable assertions about the psychology of holocaust victims had not lent substance to some of the most regressive political ideas of our time.

Capitalizing on America's growing disinclination for empathy toward the helpless in the 1950s, Bettelheim introduced and popularized a perversion of the psychoanalytic method that pathologizes the victim and confounds suffering with the oppression that causes it. His analysis of the behavior he termed "ghetto mentality" of concentration camp prisoners provided a blueprint for today's rationalized indifference to the plight of single mothers, the disabled, and immigrants; and it offers a peculiar justification for turning our attention away from what we should do to help the needy, toward a debate about the pathology of the helpless.

Bettelheim's depiction of his eleven months as a prisoner in Dachau and Buchenwald was widely embraced by the American intellectual elite not only because his account was among the first published, but because Bettelheim cloaked his personal experiences in the mantle of psychoanalytic research. By disingenuously claiming the authority of psychoanalytic training he published his work not merely as a personal narration of suffering and injustice but as a scientific analysis of behavior in the camps. But Bettelheim's object of study was not the Nazi evil but rather the psychological reactions of their victims. Perversely, this warped analysis of the behavior of concentration camp inmates determined the tenor of much of the subsequent discussion of the holocaust and its victims.

In his description of his experience in the camps, Bettelheim held himself apart from other internees. Where most concentration camp survivors credit the generosity and aid of fellow prisoners, their own profound spirituality, or just plain luck for their lives, Bettelheim took personal credit and attributed his survival to his own psychological acumen and training.

In *The Informed Heart* (1960), Bettelheim explicitly blamed the death of Anne Frank on her father's self-indulgent choice of "business as usual" over the safety of his family. He held up Otto Frank as a prime example of "ghetto mentality" for hiding passively instead of procuring a gun to kill the soldiers who came for the family in the last months of the war. Without any regard for the facts, Bettelheim professed that "most Jews in Poland who did not believe in business as usual survived the Second World War."

Bettelheim despised European Jews for going passively "like sheep to the slaughter." But his own personal shame at being a victim himself blinded him to the extraordinary courage and opposition that persisted even in the camps. Inmates were regularly tortured, humiliated, starved and worked to death, and yet, though many of them had already lost everything they cherished and that had given their life meaning, even their own health—they organized and helped each other. There was a resistance movement in every camp. The crematoria at Dachau were continually sabotaged and still stand unfinished — an albeit small monument to the power of resistance within the larger monument of its defeat. What Bettelheim failed to see was that survival itself was an act of resistance to the Nazi's aim of extermination and therefore a moral act.

Part of Bettelheim's need to deny his own shame about having been a victim expressed itself in his disdain for those who resisted less dramatically than the Warsaw fighters. Maybe it is easier for most of us to savor the brave struggle in Warsaw against the German army than picture the

mother comforting her child on the way to the gas chamber, far more appealing to make a popular film about a German rescuer like Schindler than about a starving prisoner in Auschwitz. We yearn for heroes, even after Nuremberg. But Bettelheim struggled more than most to idealize heroes at the cost of the victims. Unfortunately, the experience of the Jews wasn't about courage in battle, and certainly not about triumph. After all, the Jews were defeated. Germany may have lost World War II, but the war Hitler waged against the Jews was a stunning victory. Hitler eradicated the Jewish European culture he so despised. Bettelheim insisted that the Jews should have revolted or fled into the countryside in order to resist or escape their murderers. The enormity of the powers waged against them, the indifference of the rest of the world, and their own belief in reason and negotiation made these alternatives unrealistic. In fact, some Jews did escape and fought back — but not every Goliath can be downed with a sling.

In his *The Informed Heart*, Bettelheim goes so far as to accuse the Jews of taking on the values of their oppressors in order to survive. Which values? Racial supremacy? Glorification of death?

One reason Bettelheim's absurd allegations aroused so little outrage among American intellectuals is that the power of survivor guilt undermined the victims' ability to defend themselves against this kind of accusation. If you read many Holocaust memoirs you are struck by a recurrent chord of self-condemnation, disillusionment, and despair. The authors are dogged by thoughts that they might have done more to save themselves or others. The survivors were tormented by the very fact that they lived while others died, as if they lived because others died. They were anguished at outliving their parents, spouses or children. In the face of so much slaughter, how to explain that they were spared? But this is evidence of survivor guilt, not confirmation of Bettelheim's accusation that the survivors of the camps "took on many of the values of the guards." It may well have been that in warding off his own unacknowledged guilt, Bettelheim shifted it to those most vulnerable to taking it on.

Survivors were prey to "victim guilt" as well as survivor guilt. Victim guilt rests on the pathogenic belief that all suffering must have some meaning, that stigma signifies fault, that pain implies punishment and hence crime. Not that "victim guilt" is limited to Holocaust victims; it is common in abused children, AIDS and cancer patients, and rape victims (to name but a few). Cancer patients may even find an iota of comfort or control in taking responsibility for their disease; as if the cells invading and destroying their body were not so alien; and that somehow, either through will or diet, the patient might have prevented their misfortune. It has been repeatedly noted that abused children feel guilty for their mistreatment; they live out their lives in an effort at placation. For some children a portion of guilt may be adaptive — a better choice than the despair in believing that their parents, on whom they are totally dependent and who are representatives for the rest of the world, might be malevolent. To paraphrase the psychologist Fairbairn, it is far better to live as a devil in a world of angels, than an angel in a world of devils.

One powerful motive for the victim to take on the blame for his own suffering is that it allows him to believe that there is an underlying justice, that virtue prevails, and that evil will finally falter in the face of innocence — it's often easier for the victim to believe that he deserves whatever befalls him than that he suffers for no reason. In a sense, victim guilt bears within it a sacrificial or restorative act. By accepting guilt for acts over which he had no part, the victim preserves and affirms the goodness of his universe at the cost of personal pain and great psychological suffering. But the alternatives, cynicism and paranoia, may be more destructive than pain.

As a therapist myself, I find it rare that patients (here I choose the word patient rather than client for the richness of its original Latin connotation of both suffering and passion) are free from this added burden of undeserved guilt. Popular psychologists on radio and television capitalize on victim guilt; too many people come to therapy painfully ready to accept an unrealistic degree of responsibility for their suffering. This self-blame actually interferes with their ability to understand the real causes of their troubles and stops them from living fulfilling lives. People who have survived childhoods of unspeakable chaos and cruelty are regularly directed to look for “their part” in their suffering. Pop therapists like “Dr.” Laura are direct descendants of this “blame the victim” tradition of psychoanalysis that Bettelheim introduced—a kind of misguided oversimplification of psychoanalytic determinism that encourages people to understand how “they have only themselves to blame” for whatever is done to them.

Despite his flaws, Bettelheim made real contributions to the treatment of children. The success and fame Bettelheim gained in the United States grew out of his ability to adapt the progressive ideas he had been exposed to in Vienna for use in new venues. The Orthogenic School that Bettelheim directed became a model in applying psychoanalytic principles in residential treatment for disturbed children. Bettelheim was able to combine what he gleaned of Freudian psychoanalytic technique with theories of milieu treatment for children and the child psychology of August Aichhorn and Fritz Redl to introduce a great advance in the treatment of troubled children. Bettelheim promoted the cause of an enlightened and humane treatment for autistic children in America and introduced psychoanalytically informed residential therapy as a way to work with children who previously had been warehoused rather than treated. Because of his prodigious writing talent, Bettelheim was able to excite and inform a generation of young parents about applying the principles of psychology to raising their children.

But though Bettelheim was eloquent in the cause of the suffering of autistic children, he always needed someone to blame. The most vulnerable targets at hand were the frantic mothers who came to him for help. He saw in their distress evidence of pathology and pointed to them as the cause of their child’s autism. Blinded by arrogance and charmed by the power of his own eloquence, Bettelheim falsely claimed to have discovered in “refrigerator mothers” the etiology and, in psychoanalysis, the cure for autism, and blatantly lied to the Ford Foundation, NIMH, and the public about his results in claiming a cure rate of 85 percent of the children.

By the end of the sixties, Bettelheim’s authoritarian leanings moved him clearly toward the right. In an apparent turnaround from his romanticization of resistance to Nazi oppression, Bettelheim used psychoanalytic jargon to denounce the student protesters in Chicago. He accused the demonstrators of being “spoiled by indulgent parents” and described their behavior as “an extreme defensive maneuver to avoid a total, a complete break with reality” (in other words, verging on psychotic). By the seventies his leanings put him solidly on the wrong side. He defended the Vietnam War, excoriated the protesters, defended Richard Nixon, and was outraged by the Watergate investigation and the threatened impeachment. By the time he took his own life seventeen years later, Bettelheim’s thoughts had become a staple for the political writers and academics who despaired of social change and attempted to prove the fundamental unworthiness of the oppressed.

My point is not to reproach Bettelheim for his personal imperfections, or even to begin to recount the numerous scandals and lies that pepper the two biographies. What I condemn is the toxic legacy of Bettelheim’s thought: a legacy that continues to enthrall the cynics and all those

who view humane values as a thin veneer, gives substance to those who deny suffering along with the evil that causes it, and lends a sham validation to those who disallow the possibility of innocence or truth. So it is extremely important to recognize these ideas when they surface in the editorial pages and columns of those who preach a vulgarized form of Bettelheimism and the discourse of blaming the victim, and to recognize that what Bettelheim brought to his analysis of human behavior was a cracked mirror rather than a psychoanalytic lens.