

To honour all by burying one

Zsafia Kaplar finds many resonances in *Son of Saul*, the excoriating story of one man's mission to bury his son, slaughtered by the Nazis in a concentration camp

There are many ways to depict the unspeakable horrors of the Holocaust. *Son of Saul*, the 2016 Oscar winner for Best Foreign Language Film, is a dark counterpart to *Life is Beautiful*, which took the same prize in 1999. Both centre on a man's desperate action to save (something of) his son while captive in a Nazi concentration camp. The mission of one is to pretend that it's all a game, so his child survives in body and spirit; the other makes a heroic and desperate attempt to give his son, murdered in the Nazi gas chambers, a proper burial.

Hungarian director László Nemes' first feature film is far from easy viewing. The conveyor belt of systematic murders provides a relentless background to Saul's (Géza Röhrig) single-minded mission – to salvage some humanity for one child among the millions of people who have been systematically stripped of it.

This portrayal of mass murder without obvious emotion reminded me of how some clients recall trauma. As therapists, we often feel the buried emotion. Transgenerational and vicarious trauma are well known in the context of the Holocaust.

Saul 'earns' his own grim survival by working in the *Sonderkommando*, a team of captives charged with herding up and disposing of fellow Jews in return for slightly more food and a little more time alive. Although, as Saul puts it, these 'Keepers of Secrets', complicit in the lie that the gas chambers are showers, are also already dead.

Saul and his colleagues unearth a still breathing child from a mound of lifeless bodies hauled from the gas chambers. The child's life, like that of six million others, is soon extinguished by a German doctor checking the dead.

Saul becomes convinced that the boy is his own son and starts the dangerous



undertaking of giving him a proper funeral. While others plan an attempt to break out from the concentration camp before they are executed, Saul focuses on his equally impossible quest to find a Rabbi to say *Kaddish* for his son's soul.

Like *Antigone*, Saul's mission may be difficult to understand. At what point does our determination to do the right thing in extraordinary circumstances triumph over our survival instinct? In therapy, we often strive to carry hope when it seems to be lost. Sometimes, even that seems impossible and we have to live with no happy endings. I have tried hard to find a glimmer of light and to understand Saul's destructive choices. Perhaps to give a proper burial to one is to honour all? A funeral helps validate lives lost by sharing the experience. It can also relieve pain by expressing emotion through ritual. It is about honouring and celebrating the subject, a step towards living with a loss that may seem impossible to accept. That is a function of therapy, too.

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Son of Saul (2015; 107mins) is directed by László Nemes, and stars Géza Röhrig, Levente Molnár, Urs Rechn, Sándor Zsótér

Ruptures in the counselling room

When hurt remains: relational perspectives on therapeutic failures

Asaf Rolef Ben-Shahar, Rachel Shalit (eds)
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Reviewed by Nicola Strudley



There still appears to be a professional shame within counselling and psychotherapy, not so much around making mistakes but about speaking or writing about them. We rarely publicly

own or discuss ruptures that occur in the counselling room.

The editors of this book have brought together a collection of integrative writings on a range of hurts, injuries and ruptures from the counselling room in order to normalise therapeutic failure and to contribute to the learning process. The book is written for a wide audience, and presented in separate sections for trainee counsellors, clinicians, clients and the lay reader, with a mixture of case reflections, case studies, academic papers, biographies and interview-style conversations. The downside of this is that readers from one category might be left wanting more. The editors' attempt to provide a little insight to a wide audience may have been too ambitious.

I enjoyed the challenge presented in the section exploring the binary success–failure polarity. Although our ethical code provides clear pointers to what is right or wrong, life is not that clear cut. What happens as a result of the interaction in the therapy room is a dynamic process. Life involves risks, particularly when it comes to interpersonal relationships. While we cannot guarantee results for our clients, we can assure them of a level of quality in the service we deliver. Is that enough?

Another poignant relational perspective that provoked thought was the suggestion that the clients about whom we care most can be the clients we fail the most. By caring we are more exposed to hurt and to hurting.