

**International Centre Multi-Generational Legacies of Trauma**  
United Nations International Day in Support of Torture Victims

**Elders Reflections**

Thursday 26th June 2025

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Whilst a student, John was arrested in South Africa for opposing apartheid, tortured, detained and deported. Establishing himself in England, he became a psychotherapist and then founding trustee at the Medical Foundation for Victims of Torture, now Freedom from Torture. He worked there as clinician and supervisor for 25 years; and at the Traumatic Stress Clinic.

He is now in private practice at the Bloomsbury Psychotherapy Practice.

He has a wide consultative practice that includes support to health practitioners and therapists in Ukraine. He teaches internationally in countries that include China, Denmark, Germany, India, Israel, South Africa, Switzerland, Ukraine, United States of America.

His publications include: **'When They Came For Me: The Hidden Diary of An Apartheid Prisoner.'**



# WHEN THEY CAME FOR ME

THE HIDDEN DIARY OF  
AN APARTHEID PRISONER

**JOHN R. SCHLAPOBERSKY**

Foreword by **ALBIE SACHS**

# Principles For The Political Applications Of Psychotherapy

**1: A Human Rights Commitment**

**2: Principle of Positive Intervention: commitment to rehabilitation with individuals and families**

**3: Organisational Commitment**

**4: Survival As A Creative Act**

**5: Survival as a process of bearing witness**

**6: Torture as a perverted form of intimacy**

**7: Torture as a secular inquisition**

**8: The reclamation of space and time**

# **When They Came For Me: The Hidden Diary Of An Apartheid Prisoner: John R. Schlapobersky**

**Berghahn Books, Oxford and New York; Jonathan Ball Publishers, Cape Town (2021)**

## **Appendix 3: Principles for the political application of psychotherapy**

**(pp 287. - 294)**

These guiding principles were developed over years of practice at the Medical Foundation For Victims Of Torture through the guiding inspiration of Helen Bamber, the organization's founder. These principles shaped our policy documents to guide our choice of personnel for the delivery of our services. Today they are carried forward by *Freedom From Torture* (the agency's new name), *The Helen Bamber Foundation*, *The Traumatic Stress Clinic* and other agencies in the field.

## **1: A human rights commitment**

- Torture is a social, political and moral problem often planned as a political strategy in time and place. Torture has historical precedents and designed social consequences usually associated with other features of political instability. The sequelae are often difficult to disentangle from trauma associated with other human calamities like warfare; political conquest and dispossession; concentration camps; imprisonment and solitary confinement; exile, deportation and refugee status in a foreign land.

## **2: Torture as a perverted form of intimacy**

Torture frequently involves an intimate and intense relationship between an individual and one or several others. The body and mind of the victim are a focus for concentrated attention, either in the form of an onslaught or assault, or in a process that is sustained over time and repeatedly applied. Injury thus arises in a direct and personal relationship whose purpose is the deliberate destruction of bodily and psychic integrity. Where the body is the primary site of attack, it is the torturer's point of access to the victim's identity and mind and every physical scar has an emotional scar.

## **3: An organisational commitment**

- The resources of a team are more useful than separate individual treatments and discrete, unrelated resources. Survivors' feelings of grief, rage and helplessness need a containing environment where staff can accept and work with them. Survivors need a relationship with a community rather than with a specific treatment. Only in a therapeutically structured community can staff feel sufficiently supported by one another, to endure repeated exposure to extreme experience.

## **4: Survival as a creative act**

- The dignity of those who survive torture is found in the importance they attach to transcending the identity of victims, re-acquiring a sense of agency and creative purpose to go forward as survivors. Meaningful services can aid peoples' remarkable powers of self-renewal. Ordinary social relationships contain agencies for change that can, when tapped, release profound self-healing, regenerative resources. Professional services and skills are a means towards this end.

## **5: Survival as a process of bearing witness**

- Disaster imposes a sense of isolation on each survivor. Reduction of this isolation must be a central part of recovery if people are to make genuine adjustments. Sustained and structured emotional support has the aim of sharing with survivors, acceptance that they have each witnessed disaster of incomprehensible magnitude. Many come to see that the testimony they provide in the process of bearing witness carries a responsibility towards the past that is one of the keys towards adjustment in the future. This can become one of the most powerful antidotes to the guilt of survival. The telling of stories and the recounting of narrative has become an integral and engaging aspect of the Foundation's life.

## **6: Torture as a perverted form of intimacy**

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## **7: Torture as a secular inquisition**

- Torture has always been an instrument of war. Today it is once again the means for maintaining a particular kind of 'peace' and to achieve social control through coercion or terror, torture is called upon as a secular inquisition. The suffering of the individual is thus the torturer's access to the community. The victims of torture are always individuals, but never individuals alone. For every person detained, there are mothers and fathers and wives and children who wait. Torturers deprive the community of its individuals. They deprive the individual of community by attacking the trust and coherence, that make up the fabric of any society.

## **8: The reclamation of space and time**

- The majority of those tortured do not survive. The testimony of those who do, casts a shadow upon us all. A survivor described himself and his fellow inmates as 'men without shadows', awaiting execution. We see our responsibility in reclaiming time and space for those who have suffered the loss of both. We attempt to help those who have lived 'without shadows' to discover a voice with which to speak of themselves. And, as people begin to speak for themselves, they can reclaim time and space, they can recover from the consequences of torture, entitlement to a lifespan that the process was intended to destroy. When people who have endured a nightmare begin to talk about survival, it behoves us all to take account of what they have to say. The poet Akhmatova writes that if you listen to her, 'You will hear thunder'.

## **‘The Writing On The Wall’, an unknown man’s name – Knox Masi**

**His unfinished fate left on a cell wall in Pretoria prophesies the doom of apartheid.**

**It can bring light to the dark places of human cruelty**

**‘KNOX MASI FOR MUDER I WAS SENTENCE ....’.**

He moved delicate patterns of imagination through sunlight and birdsong

As mysteriously illuminating as sunbeams among tenuous wraiths of smoke,

So when he died

Much, much of him was left behind

Like a patch of sun

Cast among many shadows

As if written on a wall,

But without a Daniel to

Interpret it.