

# 7

## The Story of Alex, an Armenian Man Who Encounters Evil Every Day

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### First Impressions of Alex

Alex is a 40-year old Armenian man, born in Azerbaijan, where he had lived until 7 years ago, when he came to the Netherlands, escaping from political and war violence, in search of asylum and safety. He is married to 36-year old Anna and is father of David, a 10-year old boy. In Azerbaijan, after completing high school education, he helped his father in the family business. At present, he is a refugee with a temporary residence permit and no right to work. He is still uncertain about whether he will be repatriated.

Alex is a small man, very anxious, sweating, his body trembling constantly, his legs moving restlessly. The smell of his sweat penetrates the air as he sits in the chair at my office. He has big, brown, wide-open eyes that look out at the world fearfully. He looks as though something awful has happened to him just a second ago, as though he has just encountered evil or been confronted with death and annihilation. He has looked like this throughout the 6 years of our acquaintance – the period during which he has visited me for treatment at the outpatient department of our Trauma clinic.

We talk to each other without help of an interpreter in English, and occasionally in Russian or Dutch. At home back in Azerbaijan Alex spoke Armenian and, at school or in public, Russian. He speaks Azeri as well and he learned good English from his mother, who was an English teacher. In the Netherlands, he has picked up just some basic words in Dutch. When with his wife and son, he speaks Armenian.

English is not my mother tongue either. Originating from Croatia, I was of course brought up speaking Croatian. Since this is a Slavic language, and because, through the years, I have treated many Russian-speaking clients (with help of interpreters), I now manage to understand a lot when people speak to me in Russian, but I can only speak a few words of the language. Living and working in the Netherlands for the past 14 years, I speak Dutch well – as well as English, French, and Italian.

## The History of Alex's Complaints

Alex cannot tell precisely when he started to feel bad. Actually, he says that before he was confronted with violence in Azerbaijan, 17 years ago, he felt much different from the way he feels now. He felt good and was healthy, but now he suffers from fears inflicted by the violence he has survived back at home. Talking to his wife, I heard that in the years following the outbreak of ethnic cleansing in Azerbaijan, Alex functioned pretty well, and that she did not think of him as being a sick person.

However, only a month after his arrival in the Netherlands, Alex was referred to the psychiatric services by the medical staff within the asylum seekers' reception centre (AZC), where he was living at the time. He was referred after a routine medical check-up because of evidence of high anxiety, sleeping problems, and social isolation. Alex himself did not ask for a referral, but did not resist it either.

The first medical records from the Crisis Department of the general psychiatric hospital of which our Trauma centre is a part, describe Alex as being very anxious, almost of psychotic intensity, paranoid and depressed. He was haunted by nightmares and could barely sleep. He isolated himself from others within the AZC and he was extremely alert. He expressed a wish to be dead, but still it was possible to make a non-suicide agreement with him.

Alex has never before been treated for psychological problems. As far as is known, there is no history of psychiatric illness or hereditary psychiatric problems in his family.

At that time he was given medication (Thioridazine, Levomepromazine and Citalopram), and he was seen a couple of times by a colleague of mine. Alex was diagnosed with complex posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression. Soon he was referred to the more specialized setting of the Trauma Clinic for continuation of his treatment. Upon referral, I was appointed as his therapist. This is when and how Alex and I met for the first time.

## Biography

Alex is the only child of married parents. He does not know why he has no brothers or sisters and has never asked the reason. In his country, it is usual for there to be more children in a family. When it was suggested that, as an only child, he might have had a lot of attention, his answer was that his parents had loved him very much.

According to Alex, in the town where they lived, his father was a famous man with a jewelry business. Alex finds it important to add that his father was also a clever man. He says that his mother was an English teacher and was also very intelligent. After he was born, she stopped giving lessons at school and stayed at home to look after Alex and the house. Both his parents are now dead.

When he was young, Alex had no close friends, although there were boys who said that they were his friends, he told – but when they came to his home and saw

how well he and his family lived, they were jealous. In his parents' house, there was beautiful furniture, and an imported television and fridge, paintings, etc. Alex puts this jealousy down to the communist idea that everyone must be equal. Therefore, he stopped inviting them to his home. Another problem at least as big was that these friends also might hear what people said in Alex's house and could pass this on to the neighborhood police officer, who would be sniffing like a hungry dog in search of any sentiment not complimentary to the communist regime. In those days, said Alex, it was not unusual for children to spy on their parents and vice versa. He points to corruption in the communist era and says that his father often had to pay hush money to the local police officer. If he had not done that, the family would have had problems. From a very young age, Alex was taught by his father that if he saw anything that might bring problems, it was better not to get involved in order to avoid that possibility. He also taught him to be careful what he said in public, and that "the Azeris are jealous of the Armenians because Armenians are diligent people, successful in business and rich, whilst Azeris are poor and lazy, but still boss in their own country – Azerbaijan".

At home the family were members of the Armenian church (Christian orthodox), but that too was something that was not quite acceptable in the communist era even though there was a church to which they would go now and again. All the rituals and festivities connected with their culture and ethnicity had to be conducted secretly within the four walls of their home.

Alex cannot tell much about his sports, hobbies and free time activities. He says he does not have many memories about that. Every now and then, he went swimming and at home, his mother taught him English language and literature. That is why he can speak quite good English. He describes his English lessons, too, as an activity that had to be kept secret from the outside world. For holidays, the family would make short trips to Russia or would go to their summerhouse on the coast of the Caspian Sea. Alex said that they would often come home earlier than planned because his father would be afraid that their house would be robbed.

On enquiry, it appears that, as a child, Alex was usually frightened, but there were no specific anxiety-driven dreams. He cannot tell any more about this. "That was so long ago that I don't know, and it's also not important any more. What are important is how I feel now and what my life now is," he says repeatedly.

Alex progressed through school in his land at that time from the age of 7 to 17 without having to repeat any years. At school, he did not feel happy because the teachers did not like him and other children bullied him. Alex said that the reason for that was that, on the one hand, they had their own jeweler's business, his father was not a good communist, was not a Party member, and was in fact not at all interested in politics. On the other hand, his grandfather on his father's side fought with the Soviet army against the Germans in the Second World War. Then he was taken prisoner and interned in Germany. At the end of the War, the Americans freed him. When his grandfather came back to the – at that time – Soviet Union, he was questioned about what he had been doing all that time in Germany and he was accused of being a traitor. As a result, he spent a long time in the Gulag in Siberia – an event that has had consequences for the family.

The family got a bad “anti-revolutionary” stigma. Many years later, grandfather came home with a Russian woman whom he had met in the Gulag and divorced his wife. His grandfather died when Alex was still little and Alex can remember only the stories about him.

After getting his school certificate Alex did two years’ military service. He served in northern Russia far from his home. His parents came to visit him sometimes but in that period, he himself did not go home. He was an ordinary soldier. The regime in the army was very strict and, besides that, the Russians regarded the people from Alex’s region, the Caucasus, as inferiors and called them “the blacks”. He felt that he was discriminated against; he kept his distance and had little contact with his fellow soldiers.

After his military service, Alex went to work in his father’s business. He made jewelry. When asked whether this was his own wish, he answered that otherwise, he would have made his father unhappy, but he himself would have preferred something less dangerous. In order to be able to continue doing his business, his father sometimes had to smuggle gold or buy off officials. Alex was afraid of that. In spite of that, his father was an example to Alex and he adds that his father was an exceptional man. As an example, he quotes the fact that whenever his father went to the barber or the shoemaker he always paid more than he needed to. His father gave this extra money to those people (mostly Azeris) because they were poor. Moreover, these people, says Alex were in fact the first to turn against them when animosity began between the Armenians and the Azeris.

When he was 21, Alex married. His wife Anna is four years younger than he is and has the same education, plus a period at music school because she intended to go to a higher academy for music. Owing to the constraints imposed by war, nothing came of this. He knew his wife from their time at middle school. She lived in the same neighborhood. She is from a mixed ethnic background. Her father was Azeri and her mother Armenian. Her father abandoned the family when Anna was still very young and took no further part in caring for her. After that, her mother died and her Armenian grandmother brought her up in relative poverty. She grew up to be a nice, somewhat timid, physically fragile, caring person. Alex fell in love, but his parents (mostly his father) were at first against the relationship and the marriage, because she was from a mixed ethnic background and came from a broken home. Alex says that it was then that, for the first time in his life, he rebelled against his father in order to persuade him to agree to the marriage. He shut himself away for three days in his room and refused contact with his family. In the end, his father agreed to Alex’s wedding plans. After the marriage, Anna came to live with Alex and his family. She helped in the household and had good, intimate contact with Alex’s mother and a respectful but somewhat distant relationship with his father, who was and stayed the head of the family – a true *pater familias*. Later Alex and his wife had one son, who is now 10 years old. He was born after the beginning of the conflict in the country and during the time that Alex and his wife were living in hiding.

## The History of the Conflict

The armed conflict between the Azeris and Armenians in Azerbaijan began in 1987 when Alex was 21. In 1987, Armenia attacked Azerbaijan and overran the Nagorno-Karabakh region, where most of the Armenian minority lived. The Russian army was also involved in the conflict since both republics were then still part of the Soviet Union. Azerbaijan later regained its independence in 1991 at the time of the collapse of the Soviet Union and became a republic. In 1994, Azerbaijan had to resolve its conflict with Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh, and definitively lost the region. More than a million were killed and over 800,000 people became refugees. After that, the tensions between the Azeris and Armenians who lived in other parts of Azerbaijan increased and the Azeris began to show their dissatisfaction with the Armenians publicly. There followed a series of incidents in which Azeris attacked and killed Armenians, the aim being the ethnic cleansing of Armenian people from Azerbaijan. The Armenians were cast in the role of scapegoat, with all the dissatisfactions of the Azeri people being blamed on them. Armenians were openly painted as enemies and profiteers who had misused Azeri hospitality for centuries in order to further their own – particularly economic – interests (since Armenians were traditionally small businesspersons and tradesmen). This conflict also had a religious dimension because the Azeris are Muslims and the Armenians are Christians. Azerbaijan had to be cleansed of Armenians.

## Alex's Immersion in Violence

The first actions against Armenians took place in 1998. The wave of violence quickly spread throughout the whole country and reached the town where Alex lived, too. Alex talks how he was afraid and says that he repeatedly asked his father's opinion about the possible danger to the family. The father kept repeating that they just had to carry on with their work and that in their town most probably nothing would happen. Nevertheless, sometimes father said that whatever was going to happen he was not planning to leave his business and his house. Once his father told him that if the Azeris raped the women of the house they should take their own lives. A woman who has been raped shames the family, said he.

Then the animosity in the town between the Azeris and Armenians began with the breaking of Armenians' shop windows, demonstrations by Azeris and the burning of the Armenian Orthodox cross. The Armenians then gathered in the streets to block the way to the Armenian church. The women and children went to the Armenian Church in search of safety and the men began to defend the building. Alex and his father were among the men. During that fight Alex and his father were taken prisoner by the Azeri police. One police officer known to Alex and his father took them aside. He suggested that he would let one of them go in exchange for money from his father. Otherwise, he would kill both of them there and then. Alex says that his father spat in the police officer's face and said that he

would not give the money and that the police officer could kill him and let Alex go. The next moment, according to Alex, his father's head was severed with an axe in Alex's presence. Alex received a blow to the back of his head and fell unconscious. He thinks that another policeman hit him with the butt of a rifle.

When he regained consciousness, he found himself inside the Armenian church with his wife and mother. He learned that the Russian soldiers, who had intervened in the battle between the Armenians and Azeris, had found him unconscious and brought him to the church. In the meantime, the Russians had surrounded and protected the church against the Azeri mob. His mother and wife asked about his father, but Alex said nothing about his fate. He said that he knew nothing about it and at some point in the fighting had lost sight of his father.

There was panic in the church; women were praying loudly. No one knew what was going to happen next. People's fear of death was almost palpable. At a certain moment a number of people shouted at Alex and his wife, saying that they must leave the church because they didn't want an Azeri whore in their midst. Alex's mother went to a Russian soldier and asked for protection. She asked for her and her family to be taken to a village outside the town where a good friend of her husband lived. He would take in the family and protect them further. The Russian soldier agreed and drove Alex and the family away in a military jeep. The shop and their own house were left behind them and they took only some documents, jewelry and money with them. They have never gone back to their town.

## Life in Hiding: Adik's House

Their father's friend was a Jewish man, Adik, who lived with his wife in a big house. Alex and his family had the basement and Adik lived above them. They stayed in Adik's house for ten years and, apart from going into the garden, they could not go out. Even in the house they had to talk very quietly. Adik regularly reminded them of the fact that all this time Azeris were looking for Armenians and that he was risking his life to protect Alex and his family. And that only because of his good friendship with Alex's father. Now and again Adik took Alex and his family to an old house that was out of the way in the country where they could spend a few hours outdoors, but that was it.

The money and jewelry that they still had were given to Adik, but Adik thought that they had more money because he believed that the father would have been clever enough to take care of that. That was not the case, but he kept putting pressure on them about it. The relationship with Adik's wife was good. She was ill and confined to bed. During their stay in the house, she died of cancer. At the beginning of their stay with him, Adik had promised to find a solution so that the family could go away, but that was not happening. He thought them ungrateful, threatened them with the police and humiliated them.

After a while, Adik began to demand more often that Alex's wife should come to his part of the house to help care for his sick wife. Alex's wife was forced into sexual contact with Adik. This was how she had to pay for the roof over their heads.

In the beginning, Alex did not realize this, but his mother told him indirectly and warned him to accompany his wife whenever Adik called for her. She did not say why. Alex did this but was repeatedly sent away by Adik. He did not dare confront him because, amongst other things, he was scared that Adik would murder him. Also, as a good friend of his father's, Alex respected him, did not want to be ungrateful and hurt him, and besides, was unsure whether to trust in his own suspicions about rape. He was afraid to be turned out of Adik's house onto the street where, as Adik said, the Azeris were still sniffing for Armenian blood. Alex was not certain whether his wife was indeed raped by Adik, but the story was told – and confirmed by the wife herself – during a session with both of them together.

After a few years, Alex's mother died, probably of heart disease, and Alex's son, David was born in the hiding place at Adik's house. The mother was buried in Adik's garden.

Finally, Adik organized an escape route for Alex, Anna and David out of the country, but thought it too dangerous for all three of them to go together. Alex had to go first and his wife and child would come afterwards. Alex did not like this in the beginning, but Adik pressured him (“if you love your wife, then you will do this”) and finally he agreed.

## Journey to the West

Alex was then hidden alone in a truck. He was told that he was going to the Netherlands. He remembers that the journey lasted a long time (about 8 days) and that he had to stay silent, but he no longer knows how the journey went or precisely how long it lasted. He was dropped off close to an asylum centre in the Netherlands where – according to the truck driver – he would have to report.

Adik had promised him that his wife and child would join him in a couple of months, and it was 4 months after his departure that the family was reunited in the Netherlands. Throughout that time, Alex had no idea how or where they were. He arrived in the Netherlands in 1999. He was then 33 years old.

One month after his arrival in the Netherlands Alex was referred to the Trauma Clinic for treatment.

## Course of the Treatment

On our first appointment, Alex walked slowly into the room and immediately showed behavior that was marked by somewhat variable but always latently present tension, nervousness, suspicion and fear. His facial expression, especially at first, appeared cramped, sometimes almost a spastic grimace with tic-like movements. He frequently scratched himself with both hands on his upper body and head. He had shaking knees and in his eyes a fixed look of fear. He was very wary and looked around the whole time, checking for danger, and expressed his suspicions immediately. He asked which country I came from and added that

I certainly worked for the KGB (secret services) and am a Russian because my name is Boris. I gave him a short summary of my background and about our clinic that gives help to people who have undergone terrible things in war and because of that have had to leave home. This calmed him down and we could continue with the conversation, but when the door rattled slightly because of a draft, that immediately brought a reaction of freezing and panic in Alex.

In short, during our first meeting Alex showed an extreme preoccupation, almost an obsession, with seeing a deadly threat. We talked further about his problems and I tried to find out what he thought of himself, his health, and the reasons why he was sent to me.

Our first meetings were spent in developing feelings of trust and safety by giving broader explanations about our institution and answering Alex's questions. His complaints were also aired. He complained about tension and fear, and that he could not sleep. He said that in the asylum centre he felt threatened and unsafe, and that other asylum seekers were watching him. That is why he rarely leaves his room and keeps his curtains closed. He lives with his family and 300 other asylum seekers in an ex-army barracks divided into units with small bedrooms, and a common living room with television, common kitchen, bathroom and toilets per unit. He has a small room with a little window and three beds, one table and one wardrobe. He does not dare to go to the toilet or to have a shower because he is frightened of the other residents. He only does these things when necessary – and then preferably at night when most people are asleep. At the end of one of our sessions, I offered Alex medication (Mirtazapine, Thioridazine, Risperidon).

He accepted medication despite the fact that he did not consider himself to be ill, but rather broken by war, violence and flight. He wanted to stay alert to prevent danger. I explained that, thanks to medication, he would feel somewhat calmer and that would give him more strength to stay watchful. I think that he also accepted the medicines out of respect for my authority as a doctor. We agreed that we would see each other once a week in my office to talk about how I could help him with his problems, and that I would also come to visit him in the Asylum centre to see his living conditions. He agreed to that.

In the months that followed, Alex always came on time to his appointments, accompanied by his wife and son, both of whom mostly stayed in the waiting room, although sometimes they were present at the sessions. Conversations about his past and painful experiences alternated with necessary interventions and mediation with institutions and authorities in order to improve Alex's daily life. Thus, a bigger room was found for the family and letters about the state of his health were written to his asylum lawyer and the asylum authorities. I noticed that Alex, in spite of his lack of trust and fear, talked a lot and in great detail about what had happened to him in Azerbaijan. Sometimes I even had to slow down the pace of his painful recollections in order to prevent dissociation and even more inundation by fear.

## Initial Transference

It was noticeable that after a few sessions Alex could no longer remember what he had told me before and was surprised when I reminded him of certain details of his life. It frightened him that I knew this, but he did not become suspicious towards me. He put it down to my expertise and this was for him the proof of my strength and special gift to empathize. He said regularly that, since he no longer has any parents or other family, I am his most important adviser and protector. I am not his doctor, but his family, told he. Alex also thought that we had a special attachment because I could understand him better than others did now that he is so far from home. He said that we both grew up in communist countries and knew how that system functioned and what dangers people had to watch out for. Moreover, this despite the fact that the societies of the former Soviet Union and ex-Yugoslavia had only peripheral similarities. In addition, I would be able to understand him well because we both belonged to a sort of “Slavic brotherhood”. And this in spite of the facts that his national identity is not Slavic and our religious backgrounds are also different (Alex is Orthodox Christian and I am Catholic).

Alex did not feel comfortable growing up in the former Soviet Union, but it seems as though he is idealizing the “old times” before the disintegration of the country. These were the times of peace, relative safety and order. They were also the times of corruption, double lives, times when it was necessary to have a public and private self in order to survive, but people were not murdered. Alex told me that even in those times Armenians and Azeris did not like each other, but nobody dared to do anything about it or say anything publicly for fear of the KGB, which kept watch over the different peoples of the country. In the Soviet times Alex could behave as an Armenian mostly in private, almost in secret. After the break up of the country and the formation of the states of Armenia and Azerbaijan suddenly it was possible, and even important, to express publicly one’s national identity. One could be more himself and show more of himself. Soon this ended in bloody national conflicts. Now in the Netherlands, Alex and other asylum seekers were told that they were free and could freely express themselves. The tradition of Western democracy made that possible. However, considering Alex’s earlier experiences in life, how could he believe that? To him it seems safest to follow the only example of safety known to him from Soviet times by reacting to the new environment in a careful and suspicious manner. In his eyes, I was a powerful combination of a transitory object representing the safety of the Soviet times and a father figure who could be his guide in his “new life” in the Netherlands.

## Alex Wants to Die

During that time, Alex twice tried to commit suicide. Both times, he intended to cut his wrists with a razor blade. It did not succeed because his hands began to shake. He said that he was a bad man who did not deserve to live. He had failed as a son and husband because he could not protect his father and his wife. He

thought only of himself and how to save his own life. He is a coward. A successful suicide would be for him proof that he is not a coward. He did not manage to take his life and became even more convinced of his own worthlessness as a human being.

The suicide attempts brought us to the topic of guilt that burdened Alex. This topic will be present for a long time in therapy and regularly return in our talks. Alex especially reproached himself that in the few seconds before his father's murder he did not say to the police officer that he should kill him and let his father live. A grateful and good son who respects his elders would have to do that. In addition, in his culture, Alex said, respect for your elders is very important. Instead of that he said nothing because he was afraid to die.

Actually, from fear of death Alex froze up and years after that he still finds himself in this frozen state. The first attempts to reframe his thoughts about his feelings of guilt were successful and his suicidal behavior disappeared. It was suggested to him that he should not commit suicide precisely because of respect for his father who had given him the gift of life. The father wanted Alex to live, and to take his own life would be a sign of ungratefulness and cowardice. Alex was also given an explanation about the automatic reactions that people exhibit when confronted by extreme stress – such as the freezing up that happened to him and his father's fighting back by spitting at the police officer. Alex does not need to feel guilty about something that is biologically determined, I suggested.

## Systemic Aspects: Alex's Life at "Home"

During my visits to his home, I got a better insight into how Alex functioned inside the family. At home, Alex mainly occupied himself with taking care of the family's safety, but in an extreme fashion. He checked that the doors were locked, took care that the windows were always shut and the curtains drawn and he listened to the noises from the corridor to be able to recognize possible danger in time. This behavior kept them safe back home in Azerbaijan when the conflict began. He spent little time with his son and wife and spoke of nothing but safety. He talked about how he was teaching his son, then six years old, to be prepared for all the evil in life and the inescapable threat of violent death. He wanted to pass onto him the strategies for survival. He also told his son that he must not live his life as the son of "bad" parents. The son did not understand him and ran repeatedly to his mother looking for protection. That angered Alex, who felt powerless because a child should listen to his father, as he himself had listened to his father's words. He felt that he was failing as a parent. He was also unclear about his role as a husband. He told me that inside the family Anna completely took over control of the household and did not listen to him any longer. And in his parents' house his father's word was law. Alex wanted Anna to ask his permission for everything and to leave the room as little as possible. The necessary contacts she had with the personnel of the asylum centre and their lawyer, he considered

both unnecessary and dangerous. “Anna is a good woman, but she is stupid because she trusts people. She is also becoming dangerous inside the family because she is pulling all the power to herself,” said Alex.

It appeared that Alex had an ambivalent relationship with Anna. This had to do with his suspicions that Adik had raped her. The father had once said that women who had been raped should take their own lives because otherwise they would bring shame to their own family. Anna did not do that. In the traditional segment of Armenian society, the picture that Alex’s father sketched out did prevail, but there is also another way to avoid shame. The husband of the raped woman should kill either his wife or the rapist, and in that way cleanse the family’s name. However, Alex cannot and does not want to kill anyone, neither Anna nor Adik. He still loves Anna, he has become dependent on her and, after all, she still looks after their son well. Is this one more sign of his weakness; is he failing again, as a man? Alex reminded himself of his grandfather, who was accused by the Soviets for collaborating with the Germans during the war whilst he was a prisoner of war in Germany. It was said that, for a Russian soldier, it would have been better to commit suicide than to fall into enemy hands; he was a traitor. The theme “it is better to be dead than to bring shame” seems to have deep roots in the history of Alex and his family. Besides feeling guilt for the death of his father, Alex was also burdened by a feeling of guilt for not protecting Anna, and for leaving her and their son behind when he left for the Netherlands.

## Encounters Unfolding

I confronted Alex with another perspective concerning rape as part of the politics and violence of war. I told him of the systematic rape of women that is part of ethnic cleansing, for example in Bosnia, and that the culprits, when they let the raped women live, do it on purpose, taking into account the traditional way of thinking rooted in the victims’ society. They know that these women will have no life left and will have no more children. I told him about the “blaming the victim” strategy and the paradox of the secondary victimization by their own culture. He said that I was trying to soften his feelings of guilt, whilst he “must” feel the guilt – and only God can forgive him.

The relationship between Alex and God was characterized by dependence and ambivalence. Alex believed in God and was brought up in a religious background, but now he asks himself if God is good, because He has allowed so much violence, pain and loss in Azerbaijan. For Alex God became a fearful symbol of punishment, someone who protects bad people. Alex became afraid of God and in that time he went regularly to church to pray. He was afraid that otherwise God would punish him even more. At the same time, he expected a sign from God one day soon that He would forgive him all his sins. Obviously, Alex was also ambivalent towards himself as well. He considered himself to be a bad person, but at the same time he didn’t expect God’s protection which, according to Alex, was given only to bad people.

As time went on Alex felt more and more under pressure, because of the cumulating of stress in his everyday life. It was decided that, as well as our individual consultations, two colleagues would, in addition, start both family consultations and individual consultations with Anna. The family agreed to it, but at that time Alex was getting steadily worse.

He was even more frightened and developed thoughts about having cancer in his bones. In his youth, he knew a boy who died of this form of cancer. In addition, Adik's wife had died while in a lot of pain with cancer. He taught that cancer was the punishment that he deserved for his shortcomings as a son, father and husband. His preoccupation with cancer was so strong that during our sessions Alex left hardly any space for topics other than cancer. I thought that he was psychotic and falling apart and I prescribed him ever larger doses of anti-psychotics. However, medication had little influence on Alex's thoughts. Consequently, I suggested admission to a psychiatric hospital, but he refused that. He could not desert his family and leave them unprotected as he had done with Adik in the past. In the end I went along with his argumentation and did not try to bring him to a different way of thinking any more; instead I tried to modulate his existing ideas. All right, he had cancer, but I as a doctor could see that it was a form of cancer that grows very slowly. With it he could certainly live for another ten to twenty years. At that, Alex became calmer and his fear decreased. He was again open to talking about other aspects of his life. In the following period now and again, his preoccupation with cancer would increase in parallel with the increase of stress in his everyday life. He could always be calmed down by reminding him of the slow development of his "illness". It was possible gradually to reduce his anti-psychotics down to a maintenance level but I did not dare to stop them altogether. The pills helped me probably to moderate my feelings of powerlessness in my dealings with Alex.

A few months later in family therapy the great family "secret" was disclosed. Anna told of her rape by Adik. Alex did not react with panic. He asked for advice about how to go on living with this knowledge and shared with me his misgivings. He was preoccupied with three dilemmas – the fact that Anna, as a woman, is not "clean" any more, his feelings of guilt because of having failed as a protector, and his ambivalence towards Adik who was at the same time his/their protector and the culprit. During this period, Alex began more often to ask himself questions about his relationship with his father. He allowed himself to have doubts about his father's moral integrity. He took it against his idealized father that sometime has cheated his customers, among them Azeris, and that he did not prevent the tragedy to the family by, for example, leaving the town on time, as had a number of their Armenian acquaintances. The father thought the money and his possessions more important than his family, said Alex, disappointed.

I interpreted the emergence of ambivalent feelings in Alex as progress and the beginning of the mourning process for his many losses. However, one could not look after all the wounds at the same time and Alex soon stopped sharing his thoughts about Anna's rape with me. It seemed that this topic did not preoccupy him any more and that he started to suppress it as he had done in the past.

In the following months, Alex's state was variable and there were many changes in his life. One of these was the fact that the authorities refused his asylum application and his lawyer started a new procedure based on medical grounds. It has to be said that Alex understood little of the asylum procedure and it was mainly Anna who was in touch with the lawyer. In addition, the family was transferred to another asylum centre because the previous one was going to be closed. The change in his circumstances was very stressful for Alex and his psychological state deteriorated. Once again, he was preoccupied by the fear of cancer and felt threatened by the people in the new asylum centre. He thought that these people want to get him in order to get to his father's money and maybe even Adik himself will come to the Netherlands to get the money. They do not believe that he does not have the money and because they will not find anything, they will murder him and his family. It was difficult to influence these thoughts of Alex and the dosage of anti-psychotics went up again. That numbed and calmed him down somewhat.

I asked myself whether Alex was psychotic or whether his cognitions were a logical consequence of the experiences he had gone through in his life. Alternatively, are his cognitions the result of the changes in his core beliefs with just an added psychotic "edge" whenever there is an increase in stress in the here and now? Would he ever get better? Should he be getting anti-psychotics at all? He found his fears and preoccupations with danger entirely logical. "Because I was alert in Azerbaijan, I managed to survive. I cannot afford to let that control go now. Moreover, what you say about the Netherlands not being Azerbaijan and that there is no war here, that is no argument. In Azerbaijan, everything began very suddenly and people who used to be your friends became your murderers. So control and alertness are essential for survival, Alex told me repeatedly. In addition, because the anti-psychotics were not having the desired effect, I gave in to Alex's reasoning and the anti-psychotics were again reduced.

## Transference Developing

At the same time, I was becoming aware of my fears that I would never be able to help Alex get better. I also developed several fantasies about how to save Alex. In the event that Alex and his family did not get asylum in the Netherlands, I would get in touch with acquaintances who worked in television to make a program that would attract public attention to his case. In order to protect Alex I would write protest letters to government ministers and to the association of medical specialists. I asked myself as well whether I could continue my work as a trauma therapist after such a disappointment. However, at the same time I was afraid to attack the authorities. My own upbringing and growing up in ex-Yugoslavia played a role in that. I had learned that the government always has power and the citizen has only limited freedom to express his own opinion. And in the end the government always wins. I asked myself if I, a person of foreign origin, would dare to risk confronting the Dutch authorities. During my team's

interview session I became aware of the parallel processes in my relationship with Alex. We were both suspicious of the power structures and I was trying to compensate for his failures as a protector. And maybe, as a therapist, I was already doing everything that I could for him in the given circumstances – by having created a safe haven for him where he could share his fears, learn again to trust his fellow men and get stronger in order to be able to pick up his life again. Finally, even if rejected for asylum in the Netherlands, it doesn't mean that he has to go back to his own country to be killed there, or that he will commit suicide. He could still disappear into illegality or get enough money together to emigrate illegally to another country. Our contacts continued.

One of the focuses in our sessions was to list the remaining strengths in Alex's self with the intention of improving his daily ability to function (empowerment). Partly at his suggestion, his relationships with Anna and his son were examined, and we searched for points that could be improved on. It was noticeable that Alex adopted a regressive position. He had no knowledge of what a healthy adult relationship should look like. He could not remember what his relationship with Anna was like before the war, or what his parents' relationship was like. He asked me to give him concrete advice about how a grown up man should behave in the family, and what were his responsibilities. I had to tell him literally, how he could show his affection to Anna, how he would have to express his love and care, how he would have to play and talk with his son. It seemed that Alex understood my advice but he always asked for a delay in putting it into practice.

Alex did hardly anything with this advice in his domestic situation. His only – and the most important role – at home was that of a protector and he did not see any other aspects of his role as a father and husband.

## A Better Future?

When, after four and a half years in the Netherlands, Alex was the only one in the family to receive a temporary residence permit based on his bad psychological state, and he could exchange his one room in the asylum centre for a family house in a small neighboring town, his behavior and habits hardly changed. At first, yet another change in his life gave him great difficulties. "All the changes up until now have led to problems; why should this one lead to improvements?" he asked me. After some time, he was happy with the improved safety. In his house, he could have a shower and go to the toilet without being disturbed. He even went alone for a walk more often, but he restricted himself to doing this only when it was raining. Then there were fewer people in the streets and he felt himself less threatened. At home, he spent most of his time behind the large window in his living room, keeping an eye on the street from behind the blinds. Often he told me with pride about how good he had become at taking care of his family's safety. It seemed as though he had finally found a territory in which he could assume an identity and show competency. He was "the protector". At a certain moment, he was even ready to share with me the responsibility of safety. "The world is too

big and I can't deal with all of it. You take care that you get a good insight into the dangers that exist in the world and I shall limit myself to the safety in my immediate surroundings," suggested Alex in one of the sessions. After that, this became the agreement between us. Alex became more relaxed and our relationship seemed to resemble a more balanced partnership between two adult men.

Gradually relinquishing the need for control in his life became the new target of Alex's therapy. We analyzed the difference between how to guarantee safety in time of war and in times of peace. Are his vigilance and the control that he used in times of war to stay alive the most appropriate survival strategies in his present life? Does he dare to trust me, after his disappointing experiences with protectors in his earlier life, and can he share areas of control with me? Would he ever feel safe enough to go through life without an external protector and could he internalize his feeling of safety? The terms "war mode" and "peace mode" within which he could function were introduced. How could he switch on time between the two modes, for example on the first day of an imaginary future war? Can he behave in peacetime as though it is peacetime, and in war as though it is wartime?

Alex told me about the first signs of unrest in Azerbaijan. Public transport ground to a halt, Armenians' passports were taken away, the symbols of his nation were destroyed, crosses were burned, Armenians' shops were smashed, there were riots in the streets. Only after that did the Azeris begin to kill. Therefore, there was time to escape and avoid the danger. Alex, as the experienced "danger specialist", has time to switch from "peace mode" into "war mode" if he is aware of these signals. He does not need to interpret everything as a threat and to generalize danger. Along with that, he can rely on my estimate of danger in the arena of world politics and take into account the fact that I will warn him in time. I also used the metaphor of "the commander and the soldiers on guard duty". The commander orders the soldiers when to be on guard and when not to be. He tells them when to relieve one another. Alex is always on guard duty, he takes no rest and because of that, he gets tired, exhausted and no longer capable of doing his guard duty well. Then he is not able to function well as a father and a husband. Although in the beginning Alex had difficulty in accepting these new ideas, in small steps over the course of time I could see changes in his way of thinking and his behavior.

He also realized that his suspicion might have something to do with other things as well and not only with his war experiences. Suspicion is something he had inherited from his father and is a historical legacy: on one hand, from the life lived by Armenians in Azerbaijan and, equally on the other, from life in the ex Soviet Union where people lived in great fear of the secret service (KGB). In addition, he began to see the relativity of circumstances to the expression of evil in people. Only during war do people change en masse into beasts whilst, when not at war, they can hate each other but are rarely destructive on a large scale.

In one of the sessions we looked back to Alex's own explanatory model for his problems. He does not consider himself a psychiatric patient, although he knows that I am a psychiatrist and helping him. He comes to me because he has problems with the governments of Azerbaijan and the Netherlands, is too weak

himself, and not influential enough to solve them. I am a doctor, but above all, for him I am a warm human being on whom he can rely and who will always be there for him. I also live in a town and he in a village. In the event of riots (that mostly take place in towns, he says) I can give him and his family a timely warning to flee. Then we shall flee together, says Alex. In terms of illness, Alex suffers from cancer but I cannot help him with that. The biggest secret kept from his family is his fear of failing them as a protector. By looking after them well, he wants to reduce his feelings of guilt and shame in connection with his previous failures as the protector. I tried to suggest to him other actions (rituals) that could rid him of guilt and would have no connection with his family. What could he do for the world, with his experience whom else could he help? Whom else could he care for? However, Alex was not open to that. At this moment he wants to focus on what more he can do for his family and he wants to think more about that. The world and the people outside his family and his therapist hardly interest him at all.

Only recently, interesting changes occurred in Alex's treatment. David started asking Anna for help with his math homework. Since Anna could not be of help, she referred him to Alex. Alex was at school always good in math, but did not understand David's assignment written in Dutch. This frustrated him so much, that he asked me for advice. He wanted to help his son and learn the language, but was afraid of loosing control over the "safety issues" while concentrating on studying. At that point, we have made an arrangement with Anna. While Alex is learning, Anna has to focus on the "safety issues". Alex is going to learn in blocks of 45 minutes, interrupted by 15 minutes breaks wherein he can take care of the "safety issues" by himself. This arrangement worked out well and Alex became the appointed person in the family when it comes to David's math homework assignments. He started to learn Dutch almost every day for a couple of hours, and he expanded his spectrum of activities at home beyond the role of the protector. He is now vacuuming the house and playing chess with David, who recently got interested in this game, while Anna is sitting on his place behind the large window in their living room, keeping an eye on the street from behind the blinds, and relaxing.

## Some Concluding Remarks and How to Proceed

This is the point that Alex and I have reached after having talked for five years. Following his rapid attachment to me in a superficial manner and his telling me the story of his life in detail at the beginning of our contacts, it took many years to build the foundations for a relationship of trust. Alex was brought up in a protected way and in an atmosphere where it was even necessary to maintain a strict division between his private and public self. In addition, his soul was torn apart because of the violence to which he was nakedly exposed, and someone in whom he had trusted deceived him. This is why he needed a long time before he dared take risks and once again form an attachment with someone. He also needed a long time because he was forced to leave his country and found himself lonely

in another – for him – unknown country, confronted with a different culture, language, society and political system. In the person of the therapist, he found a number of symbolic “lost certainties”. These are the understanding of the Russian language and knowledge of Slav peoples and cultures. Also, there were in his view equivalents between him and the therapist in terms of growing up in a socialist/communist society and being a migrant.

Alex strongly idealized me because I formed a protective layer around his tumultuous self, a cocoon to contain his chaotic feelings. With the passage of time, our relationship became more balanced and a partnership was formed concerning the guarding of safety in life. Later Alex developed ambivalent feelings concerning his father and Adik, the two important protecting figures in his past, so that, in my view, the way is now open for mourning the disappointments and losses he has suffered.

After five years of therapy, in small steps Alex begins to investigate the world around him and to rediscover himself in this world. He dares to share with me the responsibility for control over his life, which will hopefully leave more room to take up again his roles as husband and father. In family therapy, on which I haven’t focused in this chapter, the rape of his wife Anna was revealed and discussed, but apart from reducing tension in the relationship, this brought no significant changes in the way the couple were functioning with respect to each other. The secret was spoken about, but remained laden with shame and guilt. Alex remains the dysfunctionally functioning protector of the family, Anna the driving force who makes survival in the Netherlands possible. She cares for her husband as a patient and looks after their son David, who is a somewhat lonely boy trying to build the foundations for his life in the Netherlands by getting good marks at school and forming a few friendships with Dutch children of his own age.

Besides the consultations that are going to be continued, Alex is still treated with medication (Setraline, Topiramate, Clopixon in low maintenance doses). These drugs will hopefully protect him from the “psychotic edges” that currently manifest themselves at moments of great stress. They are a sort of “glue” that holds Alex’s broken soul together as he wrestles with the demons from his past and carefully examines the vacuum of the present, trying to find a road to the future for himself and his family.

## Comments on the Cultural Formulation of Diagnosis

### *Alex’s Cultural Identity*

Alex is Armenian and belongs to the minority in Azerbaijan, the land of his birth. The history of the Armenian people and their presence in what we now know as Azerbaijan goes back approximately 3,000 years. “Historic” Armenia (the area traditionally inhabited and, for very brief periods of time, ruled by Armenians) encompasses the eastern-most part of Turkey, southern Georgia, Armenia, most

of Azerbaijan and north-western Iran. It is uncertain whether the Armenian people were the original inhabitants of this area or were migrants from Europe and Mesopotamia. The Armenian language has developed from a very early form of Indo-European and the alphabet was developed around 400 A.D. largely out of fear of losing their Armenian identity after being partitioned by the Byzantine and Persian empires. The uniqueness of the alphabet and language along with the Armenian religion have allowed the Armenian culture to survive for 3,000 years in the face of nearly constant occupation and foreign rule.

In the third century A.D., the Armenian dynasty adopted Christianity in order to limit the influence of the Iranian resurgence of the Zoroastrian religion. This resulted in an invasion of Armenia and the destruction of their capital. Rome intervened on behalf of the Armenians leading to the eventual division and subjugation of Armenia to Rome (Byzantium) and Iran. The adoption and strong adherence to the Armenian Church has distinguished the Armenian people and has contributed both to their history of genocide at the hands of the Turks and to their close historical ties with Russia.

The more recent history of Armenians in Azerbaijan includes the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, which like so many territorial disputes in the Caucasus, has its roots in the “divide and rule” ethnic policies of Stalin and the Soviets. In 1918, Armenia experienced a brief period of independence, but this ended in 1920 when the entire region was invaded by the Bolsheviks and incorporated into the Soviet Union. Soviets divided Armenian territory between Azerbaijan, Georgia, Turkey, and the area which eventually became the Armenian Soviet Republic and was based on the administrative district of Yerevan, a backward and impoverished area. Since most Armenian wealth was located in the cities of Tbilisi (Georgia) and Baku (Azerbaijan), Armenia became one of the smallest and one of the least influential of the Soviet republics. Through Soviet rule, the Armenian economy was transformed from agriculture to industry and the Soviet authorities under Stalin made every attempt to break Armenian culture and heritage. Despite this, Armenian culture survived and prospered, 99% of ethnic Armenians listed Armenian as their primary language. Additionally, Armenia as a whole prospered, their per capita income was higher than that for the Soviet Union as a whole and 70% of Armenians were urban. Because of their prosperity, despite the early hardships suffered under Stalin, Armenians continued to be very pro-Russian. In the case of Alex, the Soviet Union symbolizes the peaceful times of his past, when life still seemed to be controllable.

Alex cannot identify himself with Dutch society, above all because he is afraid of everything that is unknown to him. He feels unsafe and that feeling does not seem to depend on the situation in which he finds himself. In that sense, he shows no interest in the context of his life in the Netherlands and he remains preoccupied with safety and the protection of his family. Despite the fact that the only connections he has are with his family, his therapist and the system therapist attached to the family, Alex does not feel alone in the Netherlands. For him, more contact means less clarity and the greater the risk, and that is why he avoids it. For these reasons, Alex has not been able to take on the identity of a migrant

in the Netherlands. His identity is that of a victim of violence and of a failing protector, pierced by feelings of fear and guilt.

Alex does not understand the asylum procedure in the Netherlands and does not feel involved in it. For example, he does not know the difference between the status based on political grounds and the status based on medical-humanitarian grounds, or what falls under the Dutch government's policy concerning trauma. Alex has not seen his lawyer for about two years. He does not find the asylum procedure important. The procedure is a peacetime phenomenon that has to do with the future, whilst in terms of his feelings Alex is still in the war and is solely focussed for the moment on survival.

Alex's native language is Armenian. He also learned Russian and Azeri at home and at school, and English from his mother. Because of fears, attention and concentration disorders on the one hand, and the unavailability of language courses for asylum seekers on the other, he has not started to learn Dutch. He has only learned a few words from the television or from his wife and son. Only recently, he started to learn the language by himself at home in order to restore his paternal role.

Alex has no contacts with his compatriots or with the Dutch because of mistrust that can be seen as a damaged core belief or basic assumption (Janoff-Bulman, 1983) within the framework of his complex and chronic post-traumatic damage.

## Cultural Explanations for Alex's Complaints

The terms that Alex uses most often to describe his complaints are tension, fear and sleeplessness. He does not consider himself to be ill or a patient. He is broken by the war, violence and enforced flight. He does not see his excessive vigilance and suspicion as ego-dystonic, but as a logical consequence of the experiences in his life and an important part of his survival strategy. He feels that he is a bad man who, according to the norms and values of his culture and upbringing, has failed as son, husband and a man. The somatic complaints in the form of pain and itching that Alex often presents, have a partly organic basis (eczema), but he puts them forward as symptoms of cancer. Cancer is the punishment for his failure in life.

The fact that Alex does not consider himself a psychiatric patient and does not see his therapist as a psychiatrist but as an advisor, might also have to do with the standing of psychiatry in the former Soviet Union. Alex is afraid of psychiatry because it was an instrument of oppression. Enemies of the state and dissidents were declared psychiatric patients and were locked up in psychiatric hospitals and tortured.

The culture from which Alex derived his identity is a culture in transition from a collectivist "We" culture to an individualistic "I" culture. In the communist Soviet Union and the traditional cultures of the Caucasian nations collective norms and values were seen as the most important and most valued, and as such

were the basis for the creation of the public self of the individual. The group and the society expect of all its members that they will share the same morality and accept and respect the same norms and values. Those who do not hold to that get personally punished, but their misdeeds can also have consequences for their descendents. The stigma can be attached to the descendents by the political system (the “anti-revolutionary” family), religion (God’s punishment) and by the culture (the family’s name must be purified). At the same time, Alex also had a more individualised identity, a private self that he could only use “underground” and within his family life. He was aware that he was “different” from his environment because he belonged to the ethnic minority and to a family that cherished anti-revolutionary and intellectual values.

Whilst in an individualised “I” culture the individual is himself held responsible for his behaviour and its consequences, in the “We” culture the responsibility is also assigned to the family and the group. In the “We” culture illness is a social, not just an individual, problem. In Alex’s case, both explanations are valid. Alex could not protect his father and wife against, respectively, the death of the former and rape of the latter, and for that, he has to pay. Because his faults are irreparable, his punishment is an incurable illness – cancer. Alex had internalised the feelings of guilt that are prevalent in his culture, and this formed the basis for his depression and hypochondriac ideas. At the same time, Alex tries to correct his faults and relieve his feelings of guilt by being obsessive about the protection of his family in the Netherlands. The improvement of his own ability to function is Alex’s reason to accept professional help.

The fact that Alex has psychological complaints and is being treated for them has influenced his asylum procedure and has led to an – at the moment – temporary residence permit. Nevertheless, the influence of his illness in other areas, has not until now been reflected in the way his therapy is unfolding. Above all Alex is focused on looking for solutions for his psychological, relational and physical problems and not on obtaining a residence permit. At the same time, the therapist is clear about his role in terms of formulating of his competencies and defining his professional boundaries. However, he is also prepared to support Alex’s asylum procedure by sending the medical findings to the relevant agencies – that is to say the lawyers and the Medical Advice Bureau of the Ministry of Justice.

## Cultural Factors in the Psychosocial Environment and Functioning

Alex misses his parents and especially his father, in the past his most important advisor. He does not miss the broader social context of his people and his country because he grew up with suspicion towards the outside world. That is now getting in the way of his integration into the new society in which he has arrived as an asylumseeker.

In Azerbaijan Alex was the breadwinner. Because of his enforced migration, illness and the seven-year period in the Netherlands during which he has been dependent on the support of the authorities, he has lost his social role as the breadwinner. In addition, his roles within the family have changed, because of the facts that he cannot be a good partner for his wife or a good father to his son. Alex is only “the protector” of his family and that comprises his total identity. That gives him a certain satisfaction, although from time to time he seems to be aware of his incompetence in fulfilling the other roles that a grown up man with a family should have. He asks for practical advice in that area, which makes me think that he has never possessed these competencies. He was never separated from his parents and became stuck fast in a dependent position during his development towards adulthood. In practice, Alex does almost nothing with my advice in connection with his relationship to his family. Psychological damage and strong anxiety are standing in the way. It seems that his wife and son have gradually abandoned their expectations towards him, and do not press him to behave in a different way.

## Cultural Elements in the Relationship Between Alex and the Therapist

In the trauma clinic, Alex has individual therapy, but the therapist discusses the progress of the therapy with his team. The trauma clinic’s team has a western education, but has a lot of experience with intercultural therapy and is used to thinking and working in a culturally sensitive contextual way. This makes it possible for them to recognize and interpret culturally dependent phenomena in Alex. Cultural sensitivity confers an attitude whereby the therapist structures, conducts the therapy, and at the same time is open to information from the patient related to cultural problems. Alex is the therapist’s guide in all culturally dependent matters. The therapist’s personal background is therefore not of great importance, but in Alex’s case it facilitated bonding between client and therapist.

Alex considers the therapist to be an authority and idealizes him. This attitude stems from his need to be protected because of his post-traumatic psychological regression, but it can also be partly culturally determined. In Alex’s culture the doctor is an authority figure who has to be respected – more so, for example, than is the case in western society.

It is clear that communication becomes more difficult the greater the cultural differences between therapist and client. However, if the therapist is prepared to be open and to develop sensitivity towards cultural differences between him and the patient, communication improves. He must combine his western professional knowledge with the norms, values and expectations that the patient brings with him to the therapy. The therapist should as a matter of course dare to take into account the experiences of the patient and from those analyze the signals and symptoms step by step.

## General Conclusions about the Role of Culture in Diagnosis and Treatment

Alex is a barely independent individual who, because of various traumatic experiences, has developed a spectrum of complex and chronic post-traumatic damages in combination with aggravated depression. These damages exceed the diagnostic criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder, as defined by the DSM classification (APA, 1994). For Alex, the exposure to trauma resulted in his ego being drowned by anxiety, and a regressive psychological state. The question is whether or not, Alex is suffering from a psychotic decompensation triggered by the traumatic experiences and stressful life events later on in life. In the case of psychosis, drug therapy with antipsychotics should be adopted, reinforced by a supporting, structured psychotherapeutic approach. Interventions focused on the trauma should be set aside or only be gradually employed during the course of therapy (gradual exposure).

In my opinion, Alex is not suffering from psychosis, but at the most, he develops phenomena at the edge of psychosis at moments when his fears are increased by actual stress. One could consider these phenomena as one of the many different “faces” of PTSD, and on a continuum of the same disorder. His conviction about having cancer can be interpreted in that way, although this conviction itself has, above all, to do with feelings of guilt and the conviction that he deserves punishment. The feeling of guilt by survivors is the well-known universal phenomenon in victims of trauma, and it is culturally determined. According to the norms of his culture, Alex had failed as a son and husband. He had not shown enough respect for his father when he “let” him die and he had not protected his wife against repeated rapes. In addition, he had not done anything to purify the name of his family following the rape of his wife.

Alex’s suspicions are also not of a psychotic nature, but can be ascribed to his upbringing and to his socio-cultural background. The suspicion is also a consequence of the porttraumatic damage done to his core beliefs. At the moment when a person is confronted with the evil in his fellow beings, he/she begins to generalize this experience and to position him/herself, whatever the cost, in such a way in life as to minimize the risks of any future confrontation with evil.

In spite of all this, Alex has always been treated with antipsychotic drugs. Their function can be to “glue” together the broken parts of Alex’s ego and to prevent a threatening psychotic fragmentation. He is also given other medicines to counteract symptoms like flashbacks, re-experiencing and nightmares, and alleviate dark moods.

During his treatment, Alex often could not remember that he had already shared with the therapist some of the most emotionally loaded moments from his past. Although this could point to the presence of dissociative phenomena, with Alex it is more probably a case of isolation and suppression as defense mechanisms against nasty, painful memories. Dissociative states are not something that Alex is known for, and his wife confirms this. Alex is also projecting and

shifting, in order to make bearable the inescapable self-reproach about what has happened to him over the past years. There are some narcissistic characteristics noticeable in Alex's personality structure. It seems that there is a suggestion of narcissistic compensation for his powerlessness. In addition, it is evident that he is strongly preoccupied with himself, often to the point where he makes himself completely reliant on the support of his wife, omitting to reciprocate with efforts of his own to get himself out of a given situation. The way in which he gets himself tied up in his problems shows the characteristics of masochistic self-torment.

Alex's treatment will continue for a long period. The outcome will depend on the support given by his wife and on the presence of various disruptive factors such as the stresses of everyday life and the progress of the asylum procedure. Moreover, even in the best case the question that remains is whether Alex's soul is irreparably broken.

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