



Interview with Boris Cyrulnik

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Boris Cyrulnik is a neuropsychiatrist who is known in France for having developed and popularized the concept of resilience. Born to a Jewish family in Bordeaux in 1937, he lost both his parents during the Second World War and, at the age of 6, escaped deportation himself by hiding during a round-up of Jews organized by the Nazis. His recollections of that event, forty years after the end of the war, provided the foundations for a reflection on post-war traumatic memory. In this interview for the Review, he talks about the relationship between memory, trauma and resilience, both at an individual and a collective level.

Keywords: memory, trauma, emotional response, denial, narrative, resilience.

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You are a child of the Second World War. For readers not familiar with your profile, could you tell us your story?

I was born in Bordeaux in 1937, which was hardly the most auspicious time to be born a Jew given that war broke out in 1939. My father joined the Regiment of Foreign Volunteers and vanished. In fact, nearly all of my family disappeared. I myself was arrested in Bordeaux in January 1944 during a round-up of Jews, but

* This interview was held at Seyne-sur-Mer, France, on 7 April 2017, and was conducted by Paul Bouvier, Senior Medical Adviser at the International Committee of the Red Cross; Vincent Bernard, Editor-in-Chief of the *Review*; and Thematic Editor Audrey MacKay.

managed to escape in quite an incredible manner. The word “incredible” has a double meaning because the story of my escape was so very unlikely that when I told people about it after the war, nobody believed me, condemning me to forty years of silence. When I tried to tell people my story, they laughed and didn’t believe a word, as it surpassed the realms of ordinary human experience.

When I appeared on France 3 Aquitaine when my first book came out, a lady called to ask: “Aren’t you little Boris, the boy whom I helped to escape?” She had left her phone number, so I called a taxi and went to see her. That incident marked the start of my search to find witnesses to my escape. For example, I remember that I had crawled under the body of a lady who was dying because of internal bleeding after being hit in the stomach with a rifle butt. The Germans had come to put her in a truck and take her away to avoid witnesses. Given their pact with the Vichy Government, they wanted to project a positive image. The truck drove off carrying the dying woman and me hidden under her body. Many years later, the lady’s granddaughter got in touch, and I remain on friendly terms with her son to this day.

Once I had found all the witnesses to my escape, I felt that I had both the right and the opportunity to speak out, something which I had found impossible during the previous forty years. I decided to delve into my memories to investigate whether my own recollections matched the information in archive records and the memories of other witnesses who had been present in the same place and at the same time. That research threw up a lot of surprises – it turned out that some of the things that were clear in my own memory did not correspond at all to the tangible evidence on the ground or in the archives or, in certain cases, were physically impossible. For example, one of my friends had been a doctor at the internment camp in Mérignac, where Jews from Bordeaux had been held. He showed me a record from the archives that read, “Boris Cyrulnik, 5 years of age, escaped”. The record was there, and yet I had never been interned in Mérignac. That archive record was as wrong as I had been. Similarly, when I met people who had been in the same place at the same time as me, it turned out that each person had a surprisingly different memory of the same incident and the same place. This got me thinking and eventually led to the publication of my first book, *Sauve-toi, la vie t’appelle* [*Save Yourself, Life Is Calling*], which is a reflection on the traumatic memory of the post-war period.

Traumatic memory has a curious structure. When you experience something intense, no memories are created if there is no emotional response, if no connection is made. Therefore, what we refer to as objective memory is a wholly subjective phenomenon. I can only put into my memory what you contribute to it – your emotions, your anger, your smiles. In short, our connection. My autobiographical memory only consists of what you’ve put into it; it is a relational memory.

If I feel no emotions, no memories can be constructed. When very intense emotions are aroused, as they were on the night of my arrest, that trauma leaves an imprint on a person’s memory. The circumstances of my arrest – in the middle of the night, by armed men in civilian clothes; heavy wool coats with turned-up collars,

felt hats and sunglasses even though it was dark, like characters from some pulp movie, and carrying a flashlight in one hand and a revolver in the other – were definitely enough to traumatize a 6-year-old child. When I went out into the corridor, I saw armed German soldiers standing guard and noted that the street had been blocked off as if to catch some dangerous criminal.

By combining verbal memory with neuroimaging memory studies, we have learned that such traumatic events leave an imprint in a person's memory, a trace that is hard to erase. And those trace images are extremely detailed, more so than archive records. I recall very precisely the armed men wearing sunglasses at night; it took me a long time to figure out that they had worn sunglasses and hats and had turned their collars up because they were our neighbours and did not want to be recognized. These extremely precise memories have a fascinating, hypnotic quality, but the recollection of everything else surrounding the incident is blurred. This lack of detail is surprising. Thus, traumatic memory is made up of a hyper-detailed core that is etched into a person's biological memory, within a blurry setting into which very genuine memories can be interpreted, imagined, dreamt and created. In my book, I tried to avoid telling lies. If anything made me uncomfortable, I didn't mention it; I only included things that I was prepared to share with others, but that were also honest and true. Then, when I went into the field to verify my memories, well, I was in for a surprise! In fact, there were more than a few surprises...

In traumatic memory, there seems to be a contrast between these very precise, very powerful images, and the absence of speech, of words, of a narrative. Constructing a narrative is a process that may take many years and can be extremely complicated. This is when remembered memories are confronted with other people's stories, archive material or other potential sources. It is this inquiry process that would ultimately enable you to construct a narrative and allow little Boris, now all grown up, to say: "I am the one who escaped from"... was it the synagogue in Bordeaux?

The synagogue of Bordeaux had been turned into a prison. There was barbed wire and there were soldiers, buses and machine guns on the site. Shots were fired. I was later shown the bullet marks in the walls of the synagogue, but I can't recall hearing any gunfire. There are things that are meaningful to an adult but not to a 6-year-old child.

Conversely, there are details which were extremely significant to a 6-year-old, things of great importance, which I remember in great detail but which have no value to an adult. For example, Maurice Papon, who organized the raid, went on record to say, "I made a humanitarian gesture because I asked for sweetened condensed milk and blankets for the children." He produced the order form as proof. Indeed, I saw the cans of milk and blankets with my own eyes. However, they made me uneasy because I immediately noticed that they could be used to keep the children grouped together. All the children who had been arrested

remained near the cans of milk and blankets. Then they were all put in a wagon that was sealed shut, and they were taken to Auschwitz to be murdered. Thus, while the archive record may be accurate, what it doesn't tell us is that the milk and blankets were, in fact, used to kill these children. That aspect is not mentioned. Thus, the record lies by omission because it can't tell us the whole story.

The images I remember are surprisingly detailed. I remember the torches, the revolver; I remember the soldiers looking up at the ceiling. Why were armed men looking up at the ceiling? I remember thinking, "That's strange. Why would an armed adult be looking up at the ceiling?" I'm not sure of the real reason, but I like to think he was looking up at the ceiling because he was ashamed to be arresting a 6-year-old boy. I'm not sure that was the reason, but I would like it to be true.

Then there were images that were all real but had somehow merged into one. In my memory, when they moved us out to load us onto the trains that were to take us to Auschwitz, I managed to sneak into the toilets, clamber right up to the ceiling and stay there, with my feet resting on the cistern and my back against the wall, like a mountain climber. Although the soldiers opened the doors, they never thought to look up. If they had, they would have seen a 6-year-old boy squeezed between the cistern and the wall. I was surprised because I managed to stay in that position for a long time without any effort. Then, once the noise outside had stopped, I dropped back onto the floor and went outside. The synagogue was empty. I went outside. I remember certain details: a ray of light, the members of the Gestapo talking among themselves. They saw me leave, but no one stopped me. When I emerged, I saw the nurse, Madame Descoubes. She beckoned to me and that's when I crawled under the body of the dying lady, Madame Blanchet.

In my memory, I had scrambled down the steps of the synagogue, like in the scene in the film *Battleship Potemkin* where you see a pram bouncing down the steps and realize that it is moving faster and faster and that there is a baby inside who is about to get hurt. When I went back to the synagogue forty years later, I realized that there were only three steps. In my memory, I had scrambled down those steps – and I promise you that in my memory, the image is quite clear. No doubt about it, that's how it was; it really happened like that. Only, I had conflated two sources of memory: my actual experience, which had created an intense emotional response, and my memory of the film *Battleship Potemkin*, which had also triggered an intense emotional reaction. The emotional response to the film corresponded to what I had experienced when I ran out of the synagogue and I merged the two memories into a single image of me scrambling down the steps of the synagogue, even though it would have been impossible.

There are many other similar examples. When I saw Madame Descoubes again following my appearance on France 3 Aquitaine, she had grey hair. Forty-five years after our first meeting, we met up and started chatting. She would sigh, "Ah, Boris, do you remember?" Although I had not seen this lady for many years, it was important. I said, "You know, I thought you were very beautiful, with your blonde hair." Without saying a word, she got up and brought me a

photograph of herself from when she had worked as a Red Cross nurse – in the photograph she had raven-black hair. But in my mind, she had been blonde, I swear. So, what happened? Once again, I had conflated memories from two different sources. That lady had saved me. Alone on the streets, I would not have made it very far without her help. It was she who had entrusted me to a network of righteous gentiles who had protected me. In my memory, I had merged her beauty – and she was beautiful – with images of actresses that I also found beautiful; during the post-war years, beautiful women – the women in American films – were blonde.

Once again, I had combined memories from two different sources. I had created a composite image, and I think that the term that best describes my reflections on the memory of war is “chimera”. All the parts that make up a chimera are real in themselves: the wings of an eagle, the legs of a lion, an eagle’s beak... Although everything is real, the chimera is nevertheless a mythical beast. I believe that when you write your autobiography – at least that was the case with my book, *Save Yourself, Life is Calling* – you are not writing an autobiographical work but a revisited childhood memory, where everything is as real as chimeras are.

Why did you wait for so many years to tell these stories? In what way were these memories difficult to share?

I remember the moment when I understood that we were going to be killed – it wasn’t a difficult thing to comprehend, as the members of the Gestapo who had arrested me said so. Madame Farge, who had been hiding me, had said to the Gestapo officer: “We won’t tell him that he is a Jew, let him live.” I had never heard the word “Jew” before, as my parents were not religious. In that one sentence, I learned that I was Jewish – a fact that I had not known before but which was a death sentence – and that if you kept your mouth shut you might just be allowed to live. I picked up a lot of information from that single sentence. To my childish mind, it seemed quite simple: if I just kept quiet, I would be allowed to live. I kept quiet for forty years, most probably because people did not believe my story. After the war, when I spoke of what had happened to me, no one believed me. If I had not found all the witnesses to my escape, I might have kept my mouth shut until the end of my life.

During the war, it had been in my interest not to tell anyone who I was or where my parents came from because I would have been denounced. At first, I used to be sent out to the shops like the other children, although I did not go to school as I would have been arrested. I used to go to the shops until, one day, Madame Farge said to me: “Don’t go shopping any more – you run the risk of being denounced.” Denounced? Was I to be condemned to death for being Jewish – even though I had no idea what it meant to be a Jew? Denounced for a crime that I might have committed, although I had no idea what that crime might be? Thus, during the war, I learned to keep quiet. People would tell me, “Keep quiet and don’t tell anyone your name, because if you tell people your name, you will die and your

loved ones will die because of you.” That was enough to silence anyone. It had a profound impact, because it caused you to question whether you were descended from criminals. Where did I come from? During the war, I learned to keep quiet. I had a false name that protected and hid me, but it was not my real name: it was not me.

And after the war, my mother’s sister found me and took me in. She also found it hard to talk about the war because, out of a family of around thirty people, only three had survived. She used denial as a mechanism to avoid suffering. Nevertheless, from time to time, comments she let slip would reveal her pain. For example, I remember that she often used to say, “Jeannette...” – this was her 15-year-old sister – “...disappeared; she wasn’t arrested, she didn’t die, she vanished and no one knows where she is.” When, from time to time, my aunt came out with comments like that, I would think: “It’s a serious matter, being Jewish, a very serious matter”, even though I still had no idea what it meant. Indeed, to this day I am not sure what it really means to be Jewish, but at the age of six I had even less of a clue. So, in this wounded family made up of three seriously damaged survivors, no one talked about the war, save for the occasional cryptic comment from my aunt. Uncle Jacques, who had joined the Resistance at the age of 18 and had a chest full of medals, didn’t talk about the war either. This was in spite of the fact that, at the age of 20, he had liberated Villeurbanne near Lyon, had risen to the rank of an officer and had umpteen programmes made about him because he had served in the *Main-d’Oeuvre Etrangère* [MOE]¹ – the MOE was a very active group of resistance fighters that had made life hell for the Nazis by carrying out two or three attacks a week. He did not talk about the war because all everyone wanted was to learn to live again and, above all, to avoid becoming a prisoner of the past or sharing their personal, horrific experiences. Nobody knew what had happened to my aunt, little Jeannette, who was only 15 years old. We did not know where my parents were, where they had died or where they had been arrested. All we knew was that they had once been with us and now they were dead. We did not know the details. You cannot live in the horror of the past. So, in order to escape from that prison, you have to avoid talking about your experiences, as a protective mechanism. However, that approach did not build resilience. It was a protective factor because it prevented suffering, but it did not foster resilience because instead of facing up to the trauma, you avoided it. It is true that by avoiding traumatic memories, we avoid suffering. But how can we deal with a problem when we ignore it, or sweep it under the carpet? That is precisely what we have done for decades.

When I told my story – just like that – to a friend at school, he didn’t believe me. He told his parents; his father was a jeweller who lived next door. Later, he came back to fetch me. “Do you want to tell your story?”, he asked. I

1 Editor’s note: The MOE, also known as the *Main-d’Oeuvre Immigrée*, was an association of immigrant workers set up by communist organizations in the 1920s in France, which was actively involved in the French Resistance during the Second World War. Further information is available at: www.cheminsdememoire.gouv.fr/fr/les-etrangers-dans-la-resistance.

couldn't believe that I had been invited to tell my tale. When I went over to his house, I saw a gentleman sitting in a chair, with other people standing around him. I concluded that the seated man must be a very important person, so I told him my story. When I had finished speaking, he took a coin out of his pocket and said, "You're a good storyteller – go and buy yourself some sweets." At that point, I thought to myself, "Well, it seems that adults can't be taken seriously. It's not worth speaking to them about my past." Eighty years later, I don't think that I've changed my mind: I still think that adults can't be taken seriously! So that's how it is: for personal or emotional reasons, denial functions as a defence mechanism in the psychoanalytic sense of the word; it protects the psyche but impedes resilience.

Collective mechanisms of denial also existed, because France needed to rebuild itself. The country had hardly covered itself in glory during the war. In 1940, the French army had turned on its heels and fled. The only regiment that had managed to slow down the German advance even a little was the one that my father had joined, the Régiment de Marche des Volontaires Étrangers [Foreign Volunteer Regiment], which consisted mainly of Spanish Republicans and Jews from Central Europe. Out of the 11,000 soldiers in that regiment, 7,500 were killed. It was the only regiment that had slowed the German army down a little. Nicknamed the *régiment ficelle* ["string regiment"], it earned the plaudits of the German military because its soldiers had stood their ground and fought.² It was the only French regiment that had fought "to the death", as they say in B-movies.

French collaboration with the Nazis was another source of shame. Fortunately, there had also been the Resistance. Most people, whether German or French, would have preferred to be left in peace and to avoid the war. However, Europe and indeed the world had embraced the language of totalitarianism, which then allowed a minority of its followers to unleash a socio-political process that dragged the entire globe into the tragedy that was the Second World War. Today, the language of totalitarianism is starting to come back into use. It is not the language of the Nazis or the imaginary biology of Nazism, but it is nevertheless a totalitarian language, and many people are being sucked in by it. These people are not monsters. It is easy to think: "The Nazis were monsters or barbarians." That is simply not true. Germany had given birth to a wonderful Germanic culture: it had produced great thinkers, musicians and scientists. And yet it was in Germany that the twentieth century's most shameful phenomena – genocide and the death camps – took root. Those horrors came into being in a country of cultured people, probably the most cultured in the West. Thus, when people say that Germans were barbarians, it's simply not true.

2 Editor's note: In June 1940, the three Régiments de Marche des Volontaires Étrangers held off the German advance for a number of days in certain parts of France. They were nicknamed the "string regiments" because their lack of proper equipment forced them to use string instead of a strap for their guns.

When you said earlier, “I had a name that protected me, that hid me, but it was not my name; it was not me”, it reminded me of the first book you wrote about resilience, in which – as we found out later - you told your own story. However, in your book you did not write about Boris, but about “little Bernard”, who was a proxy for Boris. When we attempt to tell a story, we test our audience to see how they will react, whether they will respond, in order to choose the right time to tell our tale; is that what happened to you?

Yes, that’s exactly it. I would have liked to talk about my experiences, but how can you speak casually about something like that? You can chat about your holidays, your studies, your school leaving certificate or your exams, or about life in general. But how can you chat about genocide? How can you chat about something that is outside of the realm of ordinary human experience? One and a half million European children were killed and their bodies destroyed in crematoria. How can you speak casually about something like that? You can’t. Basically, because you and those around you are struggling to talk about it, denial becomes an appropriate coping mechanism. Everyone is in denial, whether they have suffered or not. However, as I observed earlier, even though denial may constitute an appropriate reaction, it does not foster resilience because it prevents us from confronting trauma. I would have liked to speak about what had happened to me, but was unable to do so. Thus, I decided to tell my story in the more private sphere of a book because even if a book sells 200,000 copies, the relationship between an author and his or her readers remains a personal one; it’s like having a friendly chat with 200,000 people tucked up at home somewhere, reading my book.

I used to want to try to tell my story because I wanted to be normal, but it’s impossible to be normal with something like that in your past. I therefore invented a character who was my proxy and I named him Bernard, because that’s the equivalent of Boris in French. I created Bernard and gave him an excerpt from my own story to see whether people would believe me, whether the story would interest them. The narrative form allows us to speak through a third party: although I can’t speak about what happened to me because it is too difficult for me to tell and too difficult for you to hear, I can use someone else’s voice to tell you a story. It is not my own story, of course, but that of little Bernard. See here – my listeners are nodding, so they must be interested in my story. Look, they’re starting to believe the story, so maybe, just maybe, I can become normal again and rejoin the human race, because my listeners have agreed to hear the incredible story of what happened to me.

Perhaps, when expressed through an intermediary medium – a work of art, literature or psychological, social or political studies – things that we cannot bear to say and others cannot bear to hear may become acceptable. In fact, by giving the floor to little Bernard or a voice to friends or patients with experiences that were similar to mine, I let others speak on my behalf; I was able to tell my own story in the third person. That is to say, by using these people as my proxies, I was

able to get an idea of the public's reaction to my story and I thought, "Well, in the end, it seems that I'm not as abnormal as all that; I can speak about it."

There comes a time, some forty, fifty, or even sixty years later, when people are ready to listen and we can finally say, "That was me. That happened to me." It is an interesting issue: the distance necessary for a narrative – that is not only a narrative of trauma – to take shape, whether it be in terms of time, space, generations or people; this distance that allows a narrative to form in a way wouldn't otherwise be possible.

First of all, trauma is a recent concept. For a very long time, if a man returned from war, much changed; if he behaved bizarrely, said strange things, showed signs of self-harm or aggression towards others or at times seemed confused or delusional, nobody would have put that down to trauma. People would have said that the man was "possessed by an evil spirit" or, in a Christian culture focused on guilt, they would have said: "Well, if he is ranting and raving, if his behaviour has changed, then God must be punishing him for some mortal sin he has committed; God is punishing that man by possessing his spirit." Such explanations made it difficult to deal with the trauma rationally.

When we find an answer too quickly, as described above, we create pigeonholes; we are lazy and take intellectual shortcuts. Such easy labels prevent us from allowing ourselves the time to marshal our thoughts. We must be wary of easy answers. Indeed, in the post-war period, we all tended to latch on to explanations that impeded the thought process. One example of such an explanation involves singling out a "bad guy". This "bad guy" is, by necessity, someone else.

What we observe and what has now become widely accepted is that although someone may have been – as you referred to it – a "victim", they don't want to remain a victim for the rest of their life. Someone who has been a victim in the past has only one goal in mind: to start the process of building resilience in order to avoid spending the rest of their life as a victim. Nevertheless, we cannot deny that we have been victims. We have been dealt a very real blow. My family disappeared and nothing can ever bring them back: I have had to carry on living without them. Although, in reality, I was a victim, as far as my view of reality was concerned, I did not wish to spend my entire life being a victim. Very early on, I asked myself: how can a person overcome this kind of trauma – although I did not use that term – this situation?

We must work on the collective narrative so that individual wounds can finally be expressed because if there is a discrepancy between what I have experienced and what you are able to believe, you effectively prevent me from speaking out. If my story, which is hard for me to tell, is too difficult for you to hear, the discrepancy between our narratives – yours and mine – creates a split in my psyche. I am only able to tell you that what you can bear to hear; the rest remains hidden within and festers – a secret suffering. I have been torn asunder. My psyche is split. One moment I am cheerful and busy and then, all of a

sudden, I become gloomy, lonely and unhappy because I have never been able to express what happened to me and that affects me in the form of a festering, psychosomatic syndrome. I may seem fine and get on with my work or studies. However, I might suddenly be plagued by nightmares or experience anxiety; I might want to tell everyone to go to hell or pick fights with my loved ones. I will have failed to solve my problems because the discrepancy between my narrative and the narratives around me has split my psyche in two.

Between 1980 and 1985, the collective discourse and narrative in France changed. A film entitled *Shoah*³ brought home the fact that 6 million of the 9 million Jews living in Europe had perished during the war. In a political speech, Jacques Chirac acknowledged that the French Government had been guilty of collaboration.⁴ We mustn't forget that earlier films that showed French Jews being arrested had either been censored or any images showing French police officers' caps had been edited out, leaving only German uniforms visible. So, if a French police officer's cap was visible anywhere, that image was cut because it was not acceptable to non-Jews; it was unacceptable to think that French collaboration had facilitated these crimes. Everyone was suffering, absolutely everyone. Although they did not suffer in the same way, everybody suffered. These collective narratives – films such as *Shoah* and novels such as André Schwarz-Bart's *Le dernier des Justes* [*The Last of the Just*]⁵ – gradually spread the idea that these crimes could only be discussed through the medium of art.

“Yes, but it's a movie or a novel – it's not real.” Fiction does nothing but tell the truth. As I mentioned earlier, my autobiographical fiction consisted of real elements that combined to create a chimeric, imaginary whole. Nevertheless, I made every effort to tell only the truth. I did not include anything that wasn't true. I was honest in what I wrote. So, even the truth, a testimony, is a chimera. How could I possibly have mentioned only facts? Literary fiction and films, also, only speak the truth, *The Last of the Just* and *Shoah* show interviews with people who had committed crimes, but who were only just beginning to talk about them. You realize that these people had been possessed – you could almost say that they had lost their minds – because they had been sucked in by a collective narrative, by the language of totalitarianism, which prevented them from learning to make their own judgements. They lost their sense of judgment, they became caught up in a psychic epidemic, and they allowed themselves to get carried away because the emotional contagion was so strong that they lost their personal autonomy. That's why I prefer to describe them as insane. These were normal, healthy, educated people who lost their minds because they embraced a totalitarian narrative in which they believed. A belief epidemic of the type we are again seeing today.

When the discrepancy between my personal narrative and the collective narrative is resolved, I can finally tell my own story, as honestly as possible, even

3 Editor's note: *Shoah* is a French documentary film released in 1985. It was directed by Claude Lanzmann and contains nine hours of interviews with witnesses of the Holocaust.

4 Editor's note: In 1995, Jacques Chirac became the first French president to acknowledge the role played by the French State in the deportation and extermination of Jews during the Second World War.

5 André Schwarz-Bart, *Le dernier des Justes*, Seuil, Paris, 1959.

if it seems shocking. I now know that there are people who will seek to comprehend; I can rejoin the human race, I am normal, I have a voice and my divided self becomes whole once more. I no longer have to be split in two; I can say what I think. You might agree with me or not – it is up to me to convince you, to find convincing arguments – but at least I am able to speak. I have become whole again; my torn ego has been sutured.

Let's come back to the concept of resilience. How do you define this very important concept that has been widely discussed for the last twenty years?

Initially, from my point of view, resilience did not start out as a concept or idea, but rather as the anger that I felt. I did not label it “resilience” at the time, but it was absolutely clear to me that I had to find a way to overcome my experiences and not forever be a slave to my past. As a result, I felt a kind of rage. Later, while I was studying medicine, psychology and psychiatry, when my tutors told me that a child who had experienced trauma was beyond help, I thought, “That is something I cannot accept; either I must commit suicide or I quit my studies.” When I heard my tutors say, “Look at these children; look at their backgrounds. How else would you expect them to behave?”, or “Look, these children have been abused and so they are destined – nay, doomed – to repeat that abuse”, I couldn’t accept that either. My theory had no set label. In fact, back then, I did not even think of it as a theory. I simply thought: “This is something that I cannot accept; it affects me too much. I cannot accept the thought of being cursed for life.” I talked to my tutors about it; I discussed it with people I admired very much and who were flexible and open-minded enough to say, “Yes, you are right. We need to think a little more about that issue.”

Then I came across Emmy Werner’s⁶ methodologically flawless study of a population of 700 children in Hawaii who did not attend school, who had no family and who were likely to never recover from the sexual and physical abuse that they had suffered. While 72% of these children never overcame their experiences, 28% managed to do so. These children learned to read and write without ever going to school, they learned a trade, had a family life and friends, and when Emmy Werner conducted social and psychological assessments of these children, they did not perform any differently to others. That doesn’t mean that they were just like other children – and here we come to the definition of resilience – but they had managed to pick up the threads of their life, albeit a different life to the one they would have led had their childhoods not been shattered.

6 Editor’s note: Emmy Werner is an American developmental psychologist, born in 1929, who specializes in the field of resilience and carried out the first studies of resilience in children. The study referred to here is the Kaua’i Longitudinal Study, which continues to this day. The study has resulted in many publications: see, for example, Emmy Werner, Jessie Bierman and Fern French, *The Children of Kauai: A Longitudinal Study from the Prenatal Period to Age Ten*, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, HI, 1971; Emmy Werner, “Findings from the Kauai Longitudinal Study”, *Research, Policy, and Practice in Children’s Mental Health*, Vol. 19, No. 1, 2005.

At that stage, I thought, “Well, here we have a scientific and clinical approach that seeks to understand how we can overcome our experiences, how can we help children, adults and even elderly people. There is scope here for further research.” In Toulon, I set up the first international research group on resilience, a concept attributed to Emmy Werner but which existed long before her and which has been used by writers, psychologists, engineers and geographers. In any case, the origins of the idea are irrelevant, as Emmy Werner’s work is so brilliant that it is only fitting that she should be thought of as the creator of the concept of resilience. So thank you, Emmy Werner!

So, we started to work on the subject of resilience. The definition put forward at our first meeting in Toulon was as follows: resilience is the resumption of a healthy developmental path, a renewed developmental path, after experiencing psychic agony or trauma. There can be no simpler definition than that.

It seems too simple a definition, but when you’ve been left shattered by the trauma of war, domestic trauma or a twist of fate, there are only two ways in which you can respond: you can either remain in a state of shock or you can struggle to pick up the threads of your life. Neuroimaging supports the idea of trauma victims as stuck in a state of shock, as we can see that when someone experiences extreme psychic suffering, their brain shuts down and stops processing information; it remains grey. The layer of neurotransmitters stops working. Out for the count. The brain becomes “disconnected”, and neuroimaging confirms this.

If, instead of remaining in a state of shock, I fight to pick up the threads of my life, that is what we call resilience. However, the new developmental path that I have begun to tread does not obviate my past experience. Traces of trauma remain in my brain, in my mental habits, in my memory. I think a lot about the terrible things that I suffered; my trauma becomes a dark guiding star – a star that leads me along my new-found path. Nevertheless, I try to live as well as I can. There is not a more stupidly simple or more logical definition of resilience. By contrast, efforts to identify the factors that foster resilience require the involvement of multidisciplinary teams and affiliated research scientists. We now know that there are neurological, biological, emotional, psychological, social and cultural factors that relate to resilience. And we need multidisciplinary teams of researchers, including scientists, to all focus their efforts on that subject because we cannot know everything or be everywhere at once. However, we can and do meet regularly to try to identify the factors that foster resilience.

How does this process of resilience work? And, of course, the question that also springs to mind is, how can professionals contribute to this process? Or, indeed, how might they hamper the process, possibly by making mistakes?

We can simplify things by looking at the following stages: the situation prior to the trauma; during the trauma itself; and after the trauma. It’s a little didactic, but it does simplify the thinking process.

Before the trauma, we have the very early acquisition of protective factors, which are not necessarily related to resilience. One of these factors is the preverbal acquisition of a *secure* attachment. We use the English term “secure”, as it is not the same as *sécurisé* in the French. *Sécurisé* has the sense that I, as a preverbal infant, need my attachment figure to be there with me, physically, and I feel insecure when they aren’t. As a *secure* preverbal infant, I feel safe and secure when my attachment figure is present, but I still feel safe and secure when they aren’t there, because they are present in my memory and in the emotional and relational style that I’ve acquired through contact with them. I am safe and secure and not *sécurisé*. The second factor is mentalization. Is a child capable of mentalization? Yes, the majority of children are. They mentalize surprisingly early, even before they learn to speak – something that has been proven, from a biological and behavioural point of view, through statistically validated questionnaires on attachment. These two key aspects – secure attachment and mentalization – have been scientifically assessed.

Our group of experts on resilience recently invited André Galinowski, a psychiatrist at the French National Institute of Health and Medical Research in Paris who works with a team on imprinting, facilitation and the neurological circuits that form early traumas. Resilience is not a case of returning to a previous state, because returning to a previous state is healing, whereas resilience is a matter of getting back on the right track, although you can’t refer to it as “normal” development, because you never forget the trauma. When you’ve been a child caught up in war, when you’ve been sexually assaulted, when you’ve been hunted, you don’t ever forget. However, you are no longer a slave to your memories because you’ve managed to make something out of those experiences, and that’s the next chapter.

If you acquire a secure attachment before you learn to speak, you have a valuable defence mechanism. All our children – whatever their culture and regardless of whether their language is easy or hard – learn to speak between the ages of twenty and thirty months. This is true of all children in all cultures. It is a form of biological determinism – and probably a critical or hypersensitive period in the child’s development – that is determined by neurotransmitters, essentially the secretion of acetylcholine, which at that moment creates a unique period of hyper-memory that we will never again experience in our lives. A baby is able to learn a language in ten months, without the help of any school, any books or any teachers. I’ve been struggling with my English for sixty-five years! If I’d been born in England, I could have picked it up in ten months!

On top of that, secure attachment – which is strongly preverbal – is relational. As an infant, I acquired a secure attachment because I had a stable sensory niche, which was safe and provided stimuli: my mother of course, my father, my elder sister, my dog, my aunt and so forth. Six to eight people, but not too many. If there are too many people involved, it’s the same as having nobody around. If there’s nobody, then there’s nobody. And if there’s just one person, that’s almost the same as there being nobody around. You need between six and eight people to create a cluster that protects a child: the mother of course, the

father and perhaps an effective maternal proxy, a grandmother or nanny, or someone who works in the field of early childhood care. I've included professions relating to early childhood in this list because the experience in northern European countries has been very interesting. These countries made a political decision to train professionals working in early childhood care and education in line with attachment theories. They then assessed the results, namely the return on their investment, after the political and educational reforms had been implemented. A decade after these reforms were rolled out, illiteracy stood at 1% – the equivalent figure in France was 15% – while the teenage suicide rate had halved and there had been a significant reduction in cases of psychopathy, relationship issues and socialization problems. Investing in professions relating to early childhood care represents a good deal for your money. The alternative, which is also a possible policy option, is to place the entire burden on women's shoulders and tell them, as happened in Germany, that "If your child fails to develop properly, it's because you went out to work." It's a political decision. If you think about it, the choice is straightforward.

Investing in occupations that relate to early childhood means that everyone benefits. Children benefit because they have a sensory niche within a framework of multiple attachments: they will learn to love their mother in one way, their father in another, their grandmother in yet another way and their nanny in a big way. When things go wrong, their sensory niche may change, but these children have acquired self-confidence and know that they can call for help, stretch out a hand, tug on someone's arm, or make an offering of food. They may suffer, but they won't lose hope: they will either look around for help or look within themselves for support. We foster resilience by allowing them to acquire a protective factor during the first few months of their lives.

The second preverbal factor is mentalization, namely a person's ability to create a private world to which they will respond, because we as human beings respond to how we perceive our environment. We are all biological creatures, we need oxygen and water; we may fight against gravity but we are still nothing more than products of biology. And the human condition essentially consists of representations. These can be verbal or visual; adults have the capacity to verbalize and discuss these representations, whereas children tend to use drawings. My mother has gone away, so I'm going to cope with her absence by picking up a piece of cloth that represents her or a teddy bear that will make me feel safe as she made me feel safe, or by drawing a picture that represents her. When I trust her, I trust myself. When she's not there, I might be a little upset and a bit stressed, but I'm going to quickly do a drawing that represents her, and when she comes back – because I know that she'll come back because I trust myself and I trust her – I'll give her the picture and tell her, "You see, mummy, I've drawn your hair, I've drawn your high heels, I've drawn your dress." I'm going to tell a story, to verbalize my feelings and to give meaning to an image and to words, to create a narrative to maintain our relationship: regardless of whether my mother is physically there or not, she is there for me. I've brought her to life.

The second chapter is the trauma. That is where the conflict begins. Natural traumas that claim many lives, such as floods, fires and earthquakes, give rise to fewer psychosomatic syndromes than intercultural traumas, such as war or physical or sexual assault. This is because we can forgive nature, as it never meant to destroy us. However, those people over there who have destroyed my people fully intended to do so. That is to say: the closer an aggressor is to us, the more damaging the trauma. Perpetrators are nearly always people close to us, people in our immediate surroundings, family members or others. In the case of a sexual assault, my attacker might be my uncle, my father or my father-in-law. Thus, the closer the trauma is to us, the greater the damage it inflicts. This is because, in addition to the physical assault, psychological assault or rape I might have experienced, or death I might have witnessed, I've also been betrayed. I've been attacked by someone who I expected to protect me. This isn't a trauma like an earthquake, but rather it's a sequence of traumas that destroy all the defence mechanisms that I had previously acquired. I trusted my attacker because I had acquired a secure attachment. By assaulting me, that person has destroyed the defence mechanism that my mother, or that perhaps the attacker himself, had instilled in my biological memory. I no longer have a defence mechanism; I've acquired a factor that prevents resilience.

The final chapter is the situation after the trauma. The conflict has ended, and we've reached the post-conflict phase. I was invited into the Occupied Palestinian Territory to talk about resilience. After the trauma they had experienced, I was surprised to see that Palestinians found it difficult to think about resilience because they were still in the "resistance" stage. I accept the term "Palestinian resistance", as long as it doesn't involve launching terrorist attacks. When they are involved in a conflict, they fight to resist those who seek to crush them and to limit their territory. However, when they attack civilians and children, that's not resistance – it's an act of terrorism. During the Second World War, the French Resistance didn't want to appear on television as they would have been arrested. They only attacked their attackers. They targeted convoys of arms or supplies, or attacked high-ranking officers. They did not plant bombs in German schools – not a single one. I'm drawing certain distinctions here. I can forgive, I can understand and I can let myself believe in an act of resistance, but certainly not in an act of terrorism.

After a person experiences trauma, the first thing they need is support. If I am given no support, I remain alone. If I remain alone, as I was after the war, I can do nothing but dwell on what happened to me. I cannot process my trauma in order to explain it to someone else, I cannot create a representation of it, I cannot construct a narrative, or a drawing or a film or a novel out of my experience. I cannot reflect on it from a psychological, philosophical or political point of view. I cannot process my experience because I am alone and I stay silent – I am made to keep quiet. I cannot process my experience; I can only dwell on what happened to me. Silence has forced me onto the treadmill of depression. I cannot develop resilience.

If support is provided, I can start to feel secure again. Once I feel secure, I can take a step back, as we mentioned just now, and then I can try to process the trauma – to identify words and images in my past and to create a narrative out of them that I can tell to someone who wants to understand me. And I'll make the effort to make myself understood. I will try to process the trauma – I will work on it, I will toil and suffer. I will make the effort to process my experiences. Today, neuroimaging reveals that when someone tries to talk about their trauma, it changes the way that their brain functions, and if that process continues for some time, the cerebral structure itself will change. From the moment that I start, over several months, to process my terrible experience, I cease to see the world in the same way as before. I gain a degree of freedom, provided that I can process and work on my trauma, and I am no longer a slave to the past; that is when the factors that foster resilience come into play. It's wonderful, isn't it?

The sequence that you're proposing is very interesting: before, during and after the trauma. Before, there's protection; during, there's resistance; and afterwards there's resilience. Humanitarians often use the term "resilience" to mean the opposite. For example, when a child is freed after several years in slavery, you might read that this child "showed resilience throughout their years in captivity". The child has indeed survived and resisted, but it's certainly a little early to say that he or she is resilient.

There is a distortion in meaning here, but that happens with all concepts. Any concept that becomes part of our cultural vocabulary always gets distorted; it's inevitable. I think that you have to be specific, to be precise, to specify in order to limit these distortions. Having said that, the definition of resilience itself is rather stupidly simple: resilience is the resumption of a healthy developmental path after experiencing psychic agony or trauma. You have to start from there.

What can professionals do when they have to deal with people or communities who have suffered trauma?

I spent some time in the field when I was still practising psychiatry and I've also worked with UNICEF. When facing such a situation, I would suggest adopting the same line of reasoning. You have to identify the protective factors. Imagine you find yourself in the middle of some serious upheaval – most probably caused by politics, although these days we also have a lot of climate-related migration – or relating to faith, such as ideological or religious conflict. We need to determine what you were like before. Did you have a stable family? Did you go to school? Were you able to mentalize? Had you acquired any protective factors? If, before the upheaval, you had acquired factors that hampered resilience – if you had a dysfunctional family, had been sexually assaulted, undergone psychiatric treatment or been involved in crime – then you have acquired factors that make

you vulnerable, meaning that you will find it difficult to develop resilience because the trauma you will suffer will further undermine your already weakened development.

If you are assaulted by a stranger – which, of course, is appalling – I think that sort of experience brings people together. I’ve seen people who had fought side by side in the French Resistance who have remained friends for life: they are godparents to each other’s children, they’ve helped each other out, they keep in touch. The assault that Nazism inflicted on France, and on French Jews in particular, created a sense of solidarity between the Jews who survived. Ultimately, the Nazis had achieved the opposite of what they wanted. The shared experience of surviving Nazism brought the Jews who hadn’t perished – and a great many of them had – together. They contributed to resurrecting Judaism. Jews were becoming increasingly secular – but now their grandchildren are rediscovering the Jewish faith that their parents had ignored. It is these grandchildren who will go to see the rabbi to learn Jewish rituals and who will teach to their parents the Judaism that they had forgotten. Nazism killed a lot of Jews, but it didn’t kill Judaism; quite the reverse, in fact.

What I heard on the ground following the Bataclan⁷ attacks was that psychologists were saying to people, “You have to talk, you have to talk!” These were people who felt overwhelmed by horror, and they were being told, “You must talk about this immediately, otherwise your children will become psychotic!” What an utterly ridiculous notion! When people are in a state of shock like this, you first have to make sure that they don’t have any physical injuries. The SAMU Social⁸, founded by Xavier Emmanuelli,⁹ did an amazing job. Technologically speaking, they provided a masterclass. If they hadn’t been there, if they hadn’t practiced their emergency response in advance with the fire, police and ambulance crews and used displays that enabled them to know where resources were located, many more people would have died. For example, when a paramedic carried out an electrocardiogram, the guy looking at the screen could see it and, as he had a map and a satellite navigation system to hand, he was able to say, “There’s a cardiology unit just ten minutes from your location – I’ll call them and book a bed.” Lots of lives were saved because the SAMU Social provided an emergency response masterclass, from a medical and technical point of view.

Psychologically speaking, that was a good start. Many people were saved. However, there is still room for improvement – and here I’m quoting people who were working on the ground that day: the main criticism that psychologists working on the site of the attacks have raised about their own work is that they asked the victims to speak too soon. What a criminally stupid thing to do. You need to first offer the victim a cup of coffee and then simply stay beside them,

7 Editor’s note: On 13 November 2015, three men armed with assault rifles shot into the crowd at Bataclan, a theatre in Paris, killing ninety and injuring several hundred. Other attacks were carried out on the same day at cafes and restaurants in the city, as well as around the Stade de France.

8 Editor’s note: The SAMU Social is the French emergency humanitarian service.

9 Xavier Emmanuelli is a French doctor and politician who founded the SAMU Social in Paris and is the co-founder of Médecins Sans Frontières.

providing human support by talking about mundane, everyday things, which are fundamentally important in such cases. And then you say, “For now, let’s just drink this coffee together. We’ll get you a blanket. Is that okay?” You need to start by establishing a human connection.

We must remember that, on the promenade in Nice, a number of people said that they saw heaps of bodies. That’s an unimaginably horrific image. The witnesses would have had this image – as we have mentioned before – etched into their memories, given the extent of the horror they felt. That memory has been biologically etched into their brains. They see only that image. It is the only thing they can think about. They spend all their time thinking about that image. And then, when they fall asleep, they are woken up by nightmares.

At a later stage, you can say to the victim, “When you feel calmer, you will need to try to understand what has happened. You will have to figure out how to pick up the threads of your life and start living again after this tragedy.” That’s what resilience is about: being able to reflect on, make sense of and understand what has happened, and working out how, and with whom, to get your life back and start living again.

You cannot live your life alone, or you will end up on the treadmill of depression. Neuroimaging shows us the changes that occur in the brain if a person is left alone. This means that it is imperative not to leave people alone. Once they have calmed down, the work of rebuilding their lives can begin. But this is a matter of reconstruction, not of rehabilitation. People undergoing this process cannot return to their previous state: the trauma will remain in their memory or, what is worse, will now form part of their identity. If I say, “I lost my parents during the war” or “I lost my wife and young son in the Bataclan attack”, that loss becomes a part of my identity. However, I refuse to be chained to the past. I know that nothing can bring back my wife or my little boy, but I refuse to be a slave to the past; I will try to figure out how, after such a horrific experience, I can pick up the pieces of my life as painlessly as possible. And this is where resilience comes into play.

And there’s an important message here for humanitarians: that trauma, such as torture, affects a person’s identity, their history and their culture in a very fundamental way.

Exactly. And there’s also something else that we haven’t yet mentioned, namely that once people have been tortured, that experience becomes so deeply imprinted into their brains that it becomes part of their biological makeup. Françoise Sironi¹⁰ has studied this subject. She spoke about a year in Iraq: a soldier was ordered to torture an Iraqi woman. The woman was subsequently freed but the man continued to torture her. But he would generally torture her with just a single

10 Françoise Sironi is a French psychologist who specializes in torture, and whose works deal with victims and executioners.

phrase. He would phone her, and when she answered he would say, “It’s me” and then hang up. And then – no surprises for guessing - her anxiety and fear would immediately resurface and she would be driven insane by anxiety for a day or two. She would say, “He’s not dead; he’s going to come back.” Then the man would call again, saying, “It’s me”, and all the trauma that the woman had buried and had tried to fight with the support of her friends and by getting on with her daily life would resurface.

Let’s turn to the duty of remembrance, the notions of collective memory and historical memory. Do we have a duty to remember? Where do you place it in relation to this process of resilience, at the personal and group levels, and perhaps also at the national level?

I’m quite ambivalent about the idea of a “duty to remember” because all wars are triggered by exploiting what has been placed in the vault of memory. The war in Kosovo was started because the “bad Muslims” scored a victory over the “good Christians” in the fifteenth century. Arabs have their reasons for waging war against Christians, who pillaged their lands. Protestants have a bone to pick with Catholics, who haven’t always treated them as they should. Women have their reasons for waging war against men, who might possibly have held them back somewhat. If you are going to search the archives of our memory for past traumas, you’ll find that we all have reasons to wage war against each other. In doing so, you make yourself a prisoner of the past. So yes, memory is useful for making sense of things, but there is no “duty to remember”. The First Crusade was started on the grounds of this so-called duty. As you may remember, in 1095, Pope Urban II gathered the people together in Clermont-Ferrand and galvanized them by whipping up an emotional frenzy; he said to the masses, “Do you realize that those evil Arabs stole the tomb of Christ and now we can’t even go to visit it? Oh, those evil, evil Arabs!” And there you have it: the First Crusade. Memory can be used to wage war again and again, until the end of time. We can all find a reason to wage war. Every single last one of us.

On the other hand, without memory we cannot make sense of what is happening to us. You can only make sense of the things you experience, including social or everyday events, if you are able to remember the past. We give meaning to our experiences by integrating our memories, which allow us to assign a significance to what we perceive, and the direction in which we want to go. We might need memory to make sense of things, but we are not prisoners of our memory.

Let us look at some examples of the abusive use of memory: the Crusades, the conflict in Kosovo and virtually all other wars were started by unearthing a past trauma that legitimized war. We mustn’t forget that before the First World War broke out, French and German schoolteachers had already been preparing children for war. French teachers had been teaching them hatred of the Boche, who had stolen Alsace and Lorraine from France, while the Germans had been teaching children hatred of the French.

You can always rifle through the past to find a reason to wage war. However, you can't get away from the fact that memory also serves an important purpose. For example: imagine you've been outside, gardening, and you go into the sitting room and you see your teenage children lounging on the sofa – as usual – watching a film. You look at the screen and you see someone stirring a cup of tea. And you wonder why the teenagers are so horrified by the image, when all you can see on the screen is a cup of tea being stirred. The reason is that your teenagers remember that someone has put cyanide into the tea, whereas you don't have that memory because you were outside gardening. What makes no sense to you is upsetting and terrifying to your teenage children: "He'll die if he drinks that tea!" We need memory to make sense of our lives. For that, we need historians, novelists, philosophers, psychologists and writers – people to create a narrative. What we don't need are people who want to turn us into prisoners of memory; otherwise you end up using memories of real dramas to legitimize hatred and justify starting a war.

How can you reconcile these different collective narratives, these collective memories, without falling into such "memory traps"?

To answer this question, you need to work as a team. You need sociologists, novelists and historians. As sociologists tell us, among the migrants currently arriving there are groups who integrate quickly and well, and there are those who struggle to integrate. It's important to know why these differences exist

Americans are a nation of migrants who hunted the Native Americans, confined them to reservations and claimed all the remaining land. However, today, they are making an effort and demonstrating that there are several ways of receiving migrants: some are harmful, while one is positive.

Harmful approaches include camps, which constitute the most harmful way of receiving migrants. In France, we had that kind of camp in Calais. At that camp, in the space of just a few days, a crude and primitive social hierarchy was established. I never visited the camp in Calais, but I've seen the same sort of thing in Mexico and Colombia. Within just a few days, gangs of teenagers – aged between 16 and 20 – began a reign of terror over a camp of several thousand people because they had weapons and because there was nothing to stop their violence. They terrorized people. They were rich because they trafficked drugs or engaged in racketeering. The gang leaders had three or four wives, all pregnant and aged between 13 and 15, and they ended up dead by the age of 20 or 22, killed by a rival gang. At the same camp in Calais, however, there were also people who made a real difference, who worked miracles: they set up schools, started to take care of the children, started to establish cooperative systems. However, they fell prey to this antediluvian socialization process which makes it difficult for people seeking to do good to get on with their work because they themselves were exploited by the violent thugs in charge. Violence is a radical

way of seizing power – indeed, it’s the most effective and efficient way of doing so. You don’t need to persuade anyone and it can be done quickly.

This was something I saw in the Palestinian camps. It’s worth noting that Palestinian migrant camps only exist in Arab countries; there aren’t any in Sweden. My Palestinian PhD students are currently living in Sweden, where they’ve received a warm welcome. One year after their arrival, they had learned Swedish, found work and were in the process of becoming Swedish. In Chile, there are 400,000 Palestinians who have now become naturalized Chilean. Like I said, Palestinian camps only exist in Arab countries, and especially in the Occupied Palestinian Territory. I’ve seen them. But how do we explain that fact? Why has this political decision never been questioned? There are no such camps in Chile, the United States or Sweden. In those countries, Palestinians integrate from the first generation to arrive. I’ve seen Palestinian camps in Lebanon that are guarded by armed members of the Lebanese army. What reasons could there be for that? This is a problem that has not been explained by our politicians. How do you expect these people to integrate? How are they supposed to learn a trade? They can’t get out of the camps. In France, the same sort of thing was done with the *Harkis*.¹¹ It is the result of poor or non-existent policies.

Another inappropriate solution is coexistence. In Béziers or Perpignan, for example, there are traveller or Maghreb neighbourhoods. Each community avoids and ignores the other, so there’s no problem, right? Do you know of a single culture that has no problems? At one time or another, problems will arise and these conflicts will have been started by something that might seem innocuous: a football match or two guys interested in the same girl. These things can spark violence between two communities because there is no mechanism in place to diffuse the situation.

The third problem is assimilation. Australia and Israel have introduced an assimilation policy, while other countries have rejected assimilation. The lone exception to this trend has been French politician Marine Le Pen, who has proposed that France should accept migrants only on the condition that they keep their origins quiet – namely, that they entirely reject a part of their personality and feel ashamed of their religion, their parents and their home country.

In her surveys of migrants, Rachid Bennegadi asked people how they would like to be welcomed in their host country. As far as I can remember, around 84% of the migrants surveyed said, “We understand the process of integration very well. You have to learn the language of your host country, and you have to learn its laws and its customs. However, you also need to be proud of your origins; you need to retain a sense of pleasure in your religion and a sense of pride in your roots. This means that we can contribute our cuisine and our music to your society – the things that are an important part of life – and we will all be able to live together.” Although, after two or three generations, people will have assimilated, they will have done so as, to a certain extent, they’ve had no

11 Editor’s note: *Harkis* are Muslim Algerians who served in the French army during the Algerian war of independence.

alternative. Assimilation has been achieved because, after two or three generations, people are no longer able to feel that they are anything other than French, Spanish, Lebanese or whatever, but that process has taken place without violence. And yet, three generations on, you still see Americans who are fiercely proud of their Irish roots. When did the potato famine take place? It was in the nineteenth century, wasn't it? Well, why shouldn't they be proud of being Irish? If it makes them happy, it certainly doesn't bother me.

Thus, there is a process which is based on respect, without the need for violence. Integrate and, if you so wish, assimilate. If you want to celebrate your pride in your Irish, Polish or Maghreb roots, then go ahead and celebrate it. You have also contributed something to the human condition. Those Arabs who are not always welcomed with open arms have nonetheless brought architecture, medicine, mathematics and philosophy into our culture, not to mention couscous! They've made an important contribution, so why not?

In the past, you've worked with this idea of narrative-based identity, namely the narrative that enables a person to develop resilience by rebuilding their identity around a narrative. The idea was first put forward by Paul Ricœur, but it's still relevant to the process of resilience. It's true at individual level but we see in these collective memories that it's also true at societal, group or cultural level. It is important to be able to reconstruct a collective narrative that enables you to survive and imagine your future as a group.

As far as the collective narrative is concerned, that's exactly what I meant when I spoke about narrative identity a moment ago – the trauma becomes a part of my identity and I will never forget it. In fact, I think that the trauma will remain a reference point for my entire life. For example, in his book *Les orphelins mènent-ils le monde?* [*Do Orphans Lead the World?*],¹² André Haynal explains that orphans either become prisoners of the past or are forced, like the child who draws a picture while waiting for their mother to return, to imagine the life they would have had with their parents had their parents not died – and that makes them creative.

At the time, it was thought that orphans were a lost cause, so institutions didn't take care of them. Near where we are at the moment, at Porquerolles and Port-Cros, there were penal colonies for children, with ditches twenty metres deep so that these “filthy urchins” could not get away. Of course, there were no beds: there was only a communal room where the children slept on the floor and there were these ditches, so they couldn't escape. Everyone said, “These children are wild animals.” What else could they have been? Their heads had been shaved. When an adult arrived, they pounced on them. That sort of thing would happen.

12 André Haynal, Pierre Rentchnick and Pierre de Senarclens, *Les orphelins mènent-ils le monde?*, Livre de Paris, Bagneux, 1979.

And people would say, “You see, they’re animals.” Of course they behaved like animals – how else were they supposed to behave?

Attitudes in these institutions changed because philosophers, psychologists and people like Victor Hugo and Charles Dickens played a big role in how these orphans were represented in the popular imagination. Everyone cried along with Cosette. Do you realize that this little girl had to fetch buckets of water at night? She was scared. Everyone was moved by Cosette and by Gavroche, the filthy urchin who climbed onto the barricades. Everyone admired Gavroche. Victor Hugo and Charles Dickens managed to transform, through their fictional – fictional, my foot! – narratives, the way in which orphans were represented in the collective imagination. Today, many institutions are making great progress with orphans. Together with Annick Dumaret and Richard Josefsberg, we assessed the work of Œuvre de Secours aux Enfants, SOS Villages and Les Apprentis d’Auteuil, regularly monitoring over 800 children until they reached adulthood.

The future has become much brighter for orphans since social attitudes, namely the collective narratives, have changed; people realize that these kids have faced hardship. If they are given the opportunity, many – although not all – will get back onto the right track. They will never get their previous lives back, but they will get back on track: that’s what resilience means. They can never resume their former lives because their parents are dead and because some of them have been abused. However, a good few of them will now follow a path of healthy development which, although different from that of the general population, is nevertheless a good one. For example, Richard Josefsberg at Œuvre de Secours aux Enfants did some excellent work in this field and demonstrated that out of a group of more than 800 children, the majority managed to live a relatively normal life. There was very little crime, very few suicides, very few pathological problems and very little anti-social behaviour in this group. However, a large proportion of these children didn’t want to go to university. Instead, they wanted to learn a trade, saying, “I don’t have a family. If I want to be independent and have my own family, I have to learn a trade quickly.” They learnt a trade while they were young and a high proportion of them went on to become entrepreneurs. Some of them have been very successful from a social point of view. They have families, which is a sign of stability.

When, under similar circumstances, I had said to myself, “I have to become a psychiatrist”, it was a sign that I was too much of a daydreamer! Dreaming about that kind of thing wasn’t normal in my situation. One of my friends reminded me about this not long ago. We had been at secondary school together. I had admired him greatly because he had run the hundred metres in eleven seconds – that made him the object of my ardent admiration. He was also good at maths, but I really couldn’t have cared less about that. To me, it was the fact that he could run the hundred metres in eleven seconds that was important! He said to me, “Do you remember that you wanted to become a psychiatrist, to write novels, live near the Mediterranean and see the sea through the trees?” I’d completely forgotten. You had to be insane to have those kinds of dreams in my situation. I didn’t have access to a grant – my parents were not officially dead, they had disappeared –

because my files were always incomplete. The conversations would go something like this: “Parents’ tax returns?” “I don’t have them.” “Why, are they dead? Death certificates, then.” “I don’t have them.” So, it was a crazy idea on my part. It’s a miracle that it all more or less worked out in the end.

If I had been in my right mind, I would have learnt a trade; I would have done the same as these kids. They manage to get back on the right track, build a family, learn a trade. Well done to them. Nevertheless, a very small level of vulnerability remains, as researchers such as Richard Josefsberg and Annick-Camille Dumaret have observed. These kids over-invest emotionally to such an extent that it unnerves them. Someone who has acquired a secure attachment might say, “I’d like to get to know this girl. If she accepts me, that’s great. If she turns me down, I might be upset but never mind, that’s life.” That’s how someone with a secure attachment would think. Of course, the first heartbreak is a crushing blow, no joke about it – but you get over it. Together with Michel Delage, we performed assessments, carried out tests and monitored the kids. After their first heartbreak, we saw changes in their emotional attachments. They were hurt and very unhappy. The majority of them learned to love better in their second emotional relationship. They would think, “I’ve gone a bit too far; I should have paid more attention.” They learn to love better, and for some of them, that [first heartbreak] is like a trauma.

However, they over-invest themselves emotionally to such an extent that they are scared of loving, scared of having children. They think, “I have to be a perfect father” or “I have to be a perfect mother”. It’s neither possible nor desirable to be a perfect mother. A mother or father sometimes needs to be less than perfect to teach their child to do things on their own and not to expect mummy and daddy to do everything for them. These orphaned kids end up being scared of having children. They might get married or start a relationship very late in life and, very often, they’re scared to have children. They get back on track: they learn a trade, they learn to read, they start a family and they have children whom they look after almost too well, which can also be upsetting to those children. They might be told by their parents, “I did everything I could so that you could go to university and you didn’t go.” Someone with a secure attachment will experience suffering just like everyone else and then they will get on with the business of living, they will learn to be a better parent and then they will get on with their life. They have got back on track and developed resilience – because there is a neo-developmental process at play that allows them to get on with their lives – but they have not healed; they’ve not returned to their previous state, and certain traces of vulnerability still remain.

To conclude, could you tell us something about the current state of play as far as research into resilience is concerned?

When we set up the first group on resilience in Toulon, I was convinced that resilience was going to expand into the fields of psychology, education and

sociology. What I hadn't predicted were the surprising developments in the field of neuroimaging, which confirmed the need for psychotherapy, and confirmed strange behaviours when resilience comes into play, for example the self-harming behaviour of traumatized and isolated children.

In Romania, we saw lots of children – those who had survived either a natural or inter-personal trauma – who self-harmed. They engaged in repetitive behaviours which – and I hadn't predicted this – had a soothing effect. When I was in Romania, or even when I was practising psychiatry in France, I saw isolated children, children who had been deprived of affection, children who scratched themselves, teenagers who cut themselves, babies who hit their heads on the ground or the against the walls with real force. It was so frightening to see these babies banging their heads so hard on the floor. It was frightening and it seemed completely illogical to us.

Now that we have access to neuroimaging, neuroradiologists can show us that when children, adolescents or adults self-harm, it switches off part of the amygdala because physical pain is more bearable than mental pain. Mental pain lights up the rhinoencephalic amygdala; this can be fear, anger, intolerable personal torture. When they cut themselves, they feel better because the physical pain is more bearable than the mental pain.

This explains certain things. For example, when I was working as a clinical psychiatrist and was briefly the head of the department specializing in schizophrenia, patients would start to scream in horror at the hallucinations haunting them, run through the corridors and then, all of a sudden, they would smash a tile, take a piece of that tile and cut their forearms with it. Once they'd cut their forearm, they would come to the infirmary and stretch their arm out and – if it wasn't too deeply cut, namely if only the skin and the underlying muscle had been cut – I would stitch them up. And then, suddenly, I was once again dealing with an apparently healthy patient. Once they noticed their injury, they would come to the infirmary and I would do my job as a technician and stitch it while we chatted. Back then, I had no idea why these incidents happened. Now, neuroimaging can show us that the physical pain brings patients back to reality and that they prefer that to the auditory hallucinations which terrorize them. Well, that was the first surprise.

There was also a second surprise. I presented a paper at the most recent World Congress on Resilience¹³ at Trois-Rivières, on what I referred to as “the five narratives”. First, we have the *preverbal narrative*, namely the narrative that you create for yourself when you cannot share your story. Then we have the *solitary narrative* and the *shared narrative*. If the narrative is shared within a safe environment – with someone who can provide this kind of safe space and has known how to do so in the past – it has a calming function. However, if it's shared within an unsafe setting – with an adversary, an enemy, a cop, or perhaps a judge – the function of the narrative changes. It fails to provide a sense of

13 The 3rd World Congress on Resilience took place from 22 to 24 August 2016 at the Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières, in Canada.

security; it doesn't have any psychotherapeutic effect. Next, we have the *collective narratives* that we mentioned before, provided by artists, people's prejudices and television series, for example.

The fifth narrative is the *technological narrative*, something that we haven't yet discussed. Hitler seized power largely thanks to the cinema and the stance taken by the world of opera. In the cinematic field, we had Leni Riefenstahl – the Nazis were crazy about cinema. All totalitarian regimes promote journalists and writers who reflect their ideas, but they torture, eliminate, kill and imprison any writers or journalists who sow doubt. This promotion work reinforces totalitarian narratives and leads, of course, to the elimination of dissidents. The Internet and television play a key role in the dissemination of narratives. In the blink of an eye, certain narratives become widespread, bypassing the dominant culture and parental control.

Something else that I've not yet mentioned, and to which we've not paid sufficient attention, is religion. When migrants arrive who have a religious faith, religion acts as an incredibly important protective factor. It is extremely important. When they are made to feel safe and secure by their religion, whatever that religion may be, when they experience solidarity through religion, when their self-esteem is strengthened by religion – when they think, “You've prayed well, you've helped those close to you, you've obeyed the law, you are really a good believer” – there is very little crime in their community, very little depression, and a strong sense of mutual support which helps them to socialize better. Problems arise when religion takes on a totalitarian aspect, as is the case in the Middle East at the moment, and even to a certain extent in France as well. People say to one another, “You don't have the same god as us, you're a heathen, you deserve to die. Even killing yourself would be a moral act because you're an infidel. You blaspheme against the one true God, my God, so of course you deserve to die.” We are seeing the reappearance of a totalitarian narrative that is rapidly spreading via the Internet and which evades control by inter-human regulatory mechanisms. People adhere to a perfect representation of reality that brooks no criticism, silences judgement and is, essentially, a totalitarian system. I mentioned just now that the Germans were cultured people but that a totalitarian language took root within their culture that made them lose the virtue of doubt and subjected them to a single narrative. We are currently seeing a resurgence of this. While religion is necessary for solidarity, security, moralization – among other things – it becomes dangerous when it turns into a totalitarian force.