

TRANSFORMATIONAL STORIES

Voices For True Healing In Mental Health



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– Peter Lehmann

PETER LEHMANN'S STORY

In 1977 I was displaced into a madhouse. During the final state of my university studies, I had experienced struggles. At this time I also had social problems with different women that I had relations with. In this stress situation, I got mad and crazy. So I got involved against my will in the psychiatric system.

It was a very pressured time in Berlin, where I lived since 1970, because I had a big fear of the final examination. I never really went to the university where I studied. I had a bookshop I worked in, and I never sought to finish my studies. Then a friend told me, "Oh, Peter, you should finish your studies."

So I started my final diploma thesis on *How Reform Strategies Become Revolutionary*. It was on initiatives by tenants. So I brought my first draft three weeks before the deadline. They said, "Oh Peter, it's fine but you can do it better. Can you please start again?" It was really horrible. I started again and I worked day and night.

During this time I had relations with a woman, and she thought she was pregnant from me. I was in love with another woman, who I knew for a longer time. She appreciated what I wrote and helped me. This was shortly after my divorce. With this divorce, I lost the bookshop and my future as a bookseller.

This was the time before there were computers. I had a mechanical typewriting machine and got a tennis arm from writing. One day, I drove 700 km – these are about 440 miles – to my friend Ricci in southwest Germany because he had an electric typewriter and had offered to stay in his flat and finish my diploma thesis. But shortly before I arrived, he had gone away for the holidays. I was a little manic at this time, and I had forgot to call him. So I went to my parents who also lived in this state near Stuttgart. My parents did not make it easier because they were afraid of me. They said, "Peter, why are so crazy? Peter, what is this? Peter, what do you mean?"

In their desperation they called a general practitioner, who was my doctor when I was a child. I accused him, saying that rich people were treated better by him, because they had a separate entrance to his practice and did not have to wait for hours like the other patients. So he said, "Ah, this guy is mad. He should be in a madhouse." He wanted to give me an injection, but I rejected it. I did not hurt anybody and was no danger to myself. But my parents were very afraid, and the next day they called the doctor, and he called an ambulance. I was outnumbered and they caught me.

The madhouse was in a small town, a few kilometers east of Stuttgart. There were some positive things about the hospital – not the hospital, but the inmates. Most of the other persons there were in solidarity. From the beginning they told me that you should never complain about anything. You should always say, "Fine, great," no matter how much you suffer. I did this for some time, until I got so bad from all these drugs. I was on 600 drops of Haldol each day. I don't know how this converts into milligrams, but it was a very high dose. It gave me a very hard akathisia and Parkinson syndrome. I could not sit for one minute.

I made a mistake. I had studied social science and read about schizophrenia. I demanded psychotherapy instead of making baskets. I succeeded in having a psychotherapist, and I told her that I suffered so much from the treatment. Of course that was the mistake. She at once went to the doctor and said, "Peter Lehmann is complaining about his treatment." So the dose was raised.

But the solidarity was very good. My parents, my brothers and my friend when he came back from the holiday, visited me every day for hours. They gave me the impression that I was not lost. In my desperation I called the woman, from whom I was divorced, and she came from Berlin to southwest Germany. In April or May 1977, she promised me that if I was still imprisoned at Christmas, she would bring me poison so that I could kill myself rather than stay the rest of my life there. This gave me some relief. I do not know whether she would have done it.

When my friend came back from the holidays and visited me, within minutes I remembered who I was. All the crazy ideas left, that I was Randle McMurphy in the film *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*, and that my brain would be extracted. So when my friend came back, I realized that I was Peter Lehmann, and that I was in the madhouse.

I went to the doctor and said, "Oh, my craziness is gone now. I recognize that I was in another world. Now I'm back here." Nobody was interested, not at all. I was oriented in time and place, but they weren't interested.

A friend in Berlin arranged for me to be transferred from the madhouse in southwest Germany to a Berlin madhouse. There I caught their attention after a few weeks, because I had completely neglected myself. I was kicked out, totally drugged and unable to live on my own anymore. I had no energy for anything. I went to live with friends. I must have been unpleasant to look at because I had tardive dyskinesia, a so-called rabbit-syndrome. I did not participate in their social life in the flat. So they wanted me to move to a flat outside.

When winter came I did not remember how to cook on my own or how to wash my clothes or how heat the oven. My parents offered me a room in their flat to be a chronic outpatient, and they would care for me. So I went to them. I also went to the psychiatrist there. Each week I received a depot neuroleptic called Imap, which was the brand name of the generic Fluspirilene. It had a half-life of one week. Then the doctor wanted to go for two weeks, so he gave me another drug, Semap, which was the brand name of the generic Penfluridol which is not on the market any more in Germany, but still on the market in some countries like India and Mexico. It has been suspected in Germany of causing cancer.

I forgot to take this drug, and when there was no relapse, I thought, *they lied*. At the same time, there were four professors I had to speak in front of and answer questions for my final examination. They had, however, been accused of being sympathizers with a left-wing student who was accused of being a sympathizer of terrorists. This was back in the time when there was a terrorist wave in Germany in the 1970's, the Red Army faction. I was afraid that the professors would be kicked out of the university because there were public accusations against them. Of course, they were not sympathizers with the terrorists. They were just left wing.

So I was under neuroleptic treatment, and I knew that nothing fine would happen in my life again. No development, nothing. I would never finish the university. In this time when I had these thoughts and had forgotten to take the drugs, I thought, *Well maybe what they say is not correct because the relapse did not come within a day*. Of course, that was silly because when you take depot neuroleptics you are still full of these drugs for some time after stopping. They had always told me and my parents and everybody, "Peter Lehmann, the relapse will come at once if you do not take your medicine in time." It did not come.

At this time I lived with my parents, and maybe after two, three or four weeks, I could watch television again. I started to recover. I could read a newspaper. I started to read a book. They saw me change and asked, "Peter, what is going on? You are improving." When they found out what happened, they said, "By God, you stopped the drugs. The relapse will come. You should go to the doctor. He's now back from the holidays."

My totally frightened parents called the doctor. "Peter, you will be treated very good. You do not have to wait. You can have your check up at once." I said, "I'm sorry. I will not go back." My father says, "Yeah, but Peter, you must. You must. Your mother cannot sleep anymore. The relapse will come. Go to the doctor." I said, "Beat me to death. I will not go."

My parents went to my friend. "Oh Ricci, you're the best friend of Peter. You should tell him that it's best for him that he should take his drugs." Ricci said, "Peter is an adult person. He knows best what to do."

So I recovered. Later, my parents were interviewed for a TV documentary film about me, and they said at the end, "It was the most idiotic thing we did in our life, when we saw him improving, after we had seen how before bad his health was, and how everything went down, and how hopeless the whole situation was, and then when he recovered, even then we still believed in the doctor." But this was cut out because one of the film makers was close to the community psychiatric movement and these things these people want to hide.

My parents since then support me, and I support them. They are now very proud of me. I don't know if they read my books, but they know that Peter Lehmann goes to conferences, and all my books – maybe ten – are in my father's library.

After my recovery from the psychiatric treatment, I finished my studies. I had been invited by the university professors to become a lecturer in charge and to write a dissertation. I started a dissertation about my own so-called schizophrenia and thought about explaining my own craziness. There was one chapter about "What can I learn from the effects of neuroleptics and about the understanding of my own craziness?" I understood that the so-called side effects of neuroleptics, really defined its *main effects*, especially Parkinsonism and the suppression of – in German we say *Lebenskraft* – the power to live. In homeopathic science, this is a basic idea, this power to live. Homeopatical means empowered and strength. I recognized the effect of the drugs were simply to suppress one's *Lebenskraft*, or the power of life, the vitality.

When I recognized this, I started to write a book and when I tried to find a publisher and did not find one, I recognized that I have to become a publisher myself. Parallely, I fought for the right to look at my own psychiatric records with the idea that it has to do with the dissertation, to learn about myself, and that there might be something useful in the records which could use in the dissertation and help me to understand myself. This was, of course, a more tactical argument.

They refused it, and I went to court. There was a television documentary film about my case. A lot of other people got in contact with me, and I started an antipsychiatry group, *The Lunatics Offensive*. This was in 1980, when I began to write and organize.

I had experienced the condition where you withdraw from psychiatric drugs. I wrote about this experience in my book "Coming off Psychiatric Drugs" which I edited in 1998 first in German language, the English edition I published in 2004. When I was at the university, I had the feeling that I should discuss what these people did to me. I had heavy tardive dyskinesia, in the form of the rabbit syndrome, as I told already. Your jaw moves like the jaw of a rabbit all the time, you cannot control this stereotype movements longer than a minute. I could not move my

right hand anymore. I had no feeling in it anymore. They told me, “Oh, it’s a symptom change of your schizophrenia.” When I started to research neuroleptics, I quickly learned that Parkinsonism syndrome is caused by the neuroleptics.

So first I’m mad, and now it’s a problem that went from my mind into my hand. I tried to tell them if you give the drug with this effect, you would enhance the fear of people. You could tell them that this is an effect of the drug. I had a really, really very big fear that I could never move my hand anymore. But they told me, “Oh Mr. Lehmann, if you quit your drugs, you know you can have an injection at once.”

When I was at an Adult Education Centre at a lecture about mental illness and wanted to speak about schizophrenia from my view, the teacher said, “Oh, we feel that you have your own mission, but you are wrong here.” This was in 1979, still a time when I thought I was schizophrenic and they could make it better.

The doctors meanwhile, not anymore in their treatment rooms, but in conferences or on panels, solved the problem for themselves because they told me that I’m hebephrenic, which means early dementia. Now they see me on panels and they look through me, as if I’m not there.

I remember when the German organization of psychiatrists ordered my first book, *The Chemical Gag* for review. They sent it back after a few days without any comment. Of course, they need me now a little bit. In June 2008, in Dresden in east Germany, when I was at the World Psychiatric Association they had to recognize me. “Oh, Mr. Lehmann....” These people who would never speak with me on the outside, are now in situations where they have to speak to me. It’s me in a function, however, not me as Peter Lehmann with my experience.

The topic was treatment and the chair of the committee and the President of the organization had invited MindFreedom International, the World and the European and the German Network of (ex-)Users and Survivors of Psychiatry. We talked it over before and decided to accept the invitation, provided that we have two keynote lectures, two symposia where our speakers don’t have to pay, information stands, participation in the opening press conference, and all survivors having lowered fees to participate. After he agreed to everything, we agreed to participate.

With Robert Whitaker, Peter Stastny, and Mary Nettle, I ran a symposium, we called it “Banned by Bio-psychiatry: What Users and Survivors of Psychiatry Really Want.” You can see the whole record of our parts on a special the web site, <http://ki-art-multimedia.de/dresden/dresden.htm>. One keynote lecture was given by Judy Chamberlin, and one by Dorothea Buck, who, by the way, wrote the first chapter of *Alternatives Beyond Psychiatry*, which I had just published. The chapter Dorothea wrote was entitled “Seventy Years of Coercion Witnessed and Experienced.” She was subjected to forced sterilization under Nazi Germany before 1945 and after the liberation from fascism to psychiatric treatment, insulin and electroshock, cold wet sheets, and permanent baths. She received the highest state decoration for the work she has done. She’s more moderate than me, and she has done many good things. Being in contact with government on a very high level, she also worked for the rehabilitation of the sterilized victims of psychiatry.

I was the one who had asked Dorothea to be a keynote speaker. She is 90 and sits in a wheelchair. She said, “Oh Peter. I’m too old. Maybe I’ll die before this conference.” I said, “Oh, that’s a good argument. We’ll make a recording and then show it on the big screen in the conference, like an internet conference.” She said, “Yeah?” I said, “If you think you are dying before the conference, this is a big chance to give your message in English worldwide. (She doesn’t speak English.) This convinced her and she agreed.

Then two survivors went to her with a camera, and she made her lecture for about a half hour. Another lady translated her, so you can choose between English and German, when you watch the video presentation. During the preparations, she got so excited that she decided to attend. At the same time when her lecture was shown in the big assembly in her presence, there was a WPA board meeting and during the meeting, they recognized her importance and stopped the meeting and went there. She was one of the main witnesses of the past and present of psychiatry. So Mr. Juan Mezzich, President of the World Psychiatric Association, came. They all appreciated her, and afterwards we met for hours with the board of WPA, David Oaks, Judi, me, and others. Together with Mr. Mezzich we decided to plan an ongoing discussion about human rights violations publicly on the internet in a user-survivor forum of the WPA.

But after the conference Mr. Mezzich – he's a very kind guy – was replaced by another psychiatrist as president of the WPA.. We never heard anything about the planned discussion about psychiatric human rights violations any more

Back to myself. When I was at the mad house, one idea I had was that I would be chair of the world's schizophrenic association and fight against the destruction of our brains. And now I represent that community of not all, but a very big organization worldwide. I saw it a little wrong, this schizophrenic organization, but it was a kind of prophetic vision I had, maybe. This idea I had to fly over the world in a plane, throw leaflets from above and call people for a revolution. Now I came with a plane to this conference in Toronto and bring my books. I see some tiny similarity.

I told the people when I applied to be Chair of the European Network that I had this approximate idea when I got crazy. Now I'm a board member of the European Multinational Organization of Users and Survivors of Psychiatry, but I was one of the founders and once I was their Chair. I succeeded in finding a follower, Gábor Gombos from Hungary. As the Chair you are responsible for that. The organization includes both people who define psychiatry as useful for themselves and also people who say they nearly have been killed by the psychiatric treatment. Both opinions are present within the European network. There are now members from 40 countries in Europe. Within the board I represent the users and survivors of psychiatry from Russia, Poland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Germany. I am responsible for this region. People from these countries turn to me and I have to bring their issues to the board.

The European Network is meant to be the European voice of independent users and survivors of psychiatry. With independence I mean independence from ambient influences, for example, from Big Pharma. More and more decisions on a political level are decided on a European level. On the European Union or European Council or European Commission, it's important to be represented there, to have a voice and be heard. This you can only do if you have a strong and democratic basis of national countries. This is the idea. Of course, our aims are to improve the legal and social status of those we represent. This network was founded in 1991, and it's very amazing for it has so many cultures and languages. You really learn to listen to people, especially when they don't speak English so well. Working and communicating with people from foreign countries with various cultures gives you a big richness. Once we have a joint congress with the World Network of Users and Survivors of Psychiatry. I like to travel to meet other people and learn from them.

There are two possibilities for the future. Either there is a kind of unification or there is the ongoing state. If there is no unification and people do not understand that the other side – I mean the pharmaceutical companies and the normal governments – are so strong and against us,

we will be lost and isolated. They play their games with us. So there is now the situation where there could be unification, but there could also be the opposite, ongoing state. It's really a pity in that situation with the internet which is really a very, very empowering way to communicate. You can read my chapter on self-help in the time of the internet, which I have written together with Math Jespersen from Sweden in the book *Alternatives Beyond Psychiatry*, published in 2007 parallelly in English and German. Together with Peter Stastny I gathered contributions from 61 authors from all over the world, from all continents on the existing and working alternatives and ways to implement human rights in the psychosocial system.

A lot of these organizations and people are now beginning to use the internet, so this gives an encouraging possibility to communicate and exchange information and to build organizations. For myself, I have one special interest where I want to gather the links of all international and national organizations of users and survivors of psychiatry. It could give access to all kinds of organizations across the world and information about psychiatric drugs, shock treatment, advance directives, books, and so on. So it could serve as a central information center in English language. You can find it at <http://www.peter-lehmann-publishing.com/info/alternatives.htm>.

(Editor's Note: Peter Lehmann, a long-time activist from Germany, runs a publishing house of information critical of the mental health system and offering support for those who interface with the system. In 2007, he co-edited a book with Peter Stastny, titled *Alternatives Beyond Psychiatry*. He was initially interviewed and recorded on 6/6/2008 at the *International Recovery Perspectives Conference – Action On Alternatives*, in Toronto. This history was subsequently edited and amended by Peter Lehman, 4/21/2020. More information about Peter and his work can be found on his web site at www.peter-lehmann.de)