

HOLOCAUST ONE OF HISTORY'S GREATEST TEACHERS

By Dr. Paul Valent

This year marks the 60th anniversary of the end of World War Two and the Holocaust. As those who remember the Holocaust directly die out, memory becomes history. Many fear that without living memory, the Holocaust may be on a path to being forgotten.

As against this, others say that the Holocaust is over-remembered, to the point of Holocaust exhaustion; that overexposure of the Holocaust is suffocating expression of other suffering in World War Two and in subsequent catastrophes; some say that the Holocaust casts a shadow over normal life.

The first group says, "The Holocaust must be taught in schools. Its memory must be maintained over the generations." The second group says, "We are weary of the Holocaust. We live in different times. It is time to move on."

I believe that the Holocaust cannot be forgotten, but from the beginning, memories of the Holocaust like memory generally, have been shaped by contemporary needs. The way the Holocaust will be absorbed and made meaning of, will depend on the inherited

reverberations of the Holocaust at any one time, and the circumstances and needs of those times that the Holocaust is required to inform.

Our intuition tells us that memory is like an objective documentary film, a narrative of our lives up to the present. We can access the film at will and rewind or fast forward it as we wish. Our memories, we sense, give us coherent knowledge about us and the world.

This view may be largely correct, but especially traumatic memories highlight the fact that memory, like other parts of the human brain and body may be harnessed for survival above everything in life threatening circumstances. For instance, to survive concentration camps, prisoners had to suppress past civilized expectations. They even had to suppress memories of perished relatives, lest grief weaken their resolve to live.

After the Holocaust there were two opposing survival needs - to remember and thereby not allow the Holocaust to ever happen again; and to build a new life

in which one would not be overwhelmed by memories. This meant that the 'memory film' was frequently distorted. Some scenes kept replaying in sharp relief; other scenes were left in shadows or they were not projected on to the screen at all. Thus survivors' children were often transmitted Holocaust memories through repeated incomplete images, dire warnings, silences, looks in the eyes, facial expressions and physical sensations.

UNDERSTANDING PARENTS

In order to understand themselves, children of survivors had to understand their parents' sometimes obscure films in which they were given roles to play. At the same time they had to live their non-Holocaust derived worlds. Often only half-knowing, they stayed loyal to the sources of their fears, the other half sometimes resenting that they carried wounds that they did not understand, and which were casting unnecessary shadows on their lives. The same sequence often occurred in a diluted form in their own children, who might recognise even more dimly sources of their distress arising from their grandparents' experiences, and being even more concerned about fulfilling normal lives.

To whatever degree individual and family memories can be influenced by contemporary needs, history is subject to even greater distortions. For instance, societies tend to re-interpret major national events, even negative ones, as eventual victories. In our own history we remember the liberation from Egypt and return to the Promised Land, not the travails of 400 years of slavery. Might the Holocaust too in centuries to come be remembered over a good family meal more as the heroic uprising in the Warsaw ghetto and the creation of Israel, rather than the slaughter of six million innocent Jews? In the wider world, may the Holocaust pass into historical attrition and be one of those sorry events like the Inquisition or the Children's Crusade?

I believe that the Holocaust will be remembered more truthfully and vividly than past historical catastrophes for three reasons, under the caveat of "a big if."

First, since World War One the truth of military and civilian suffering in war has infiltrated public consciousness beyond the sanitized propaganda of honour and glory. Especially in the western democracies, the Holocaust has permanently established awareness of the potential extremes of human violence.

Second, in the last 100 years the traumatic consequences of senseless suffering have become increasingly recognized. The Holocaust has contributed massively to this compendium of knowledge, and has served as a standard for its recognition and understanding. The Holocaust is at the forefront of research exploring the mental sets of victims, perpetrators, rescuers, and bystanders, as well as second and third generation reverberations in these groups. Therefore the Holocaust will be remembered not only as the moral flagship of evil, but also as the scientific flagship of trauma.

Third, it so happens that the Holocaust was perpetrated by a nation that compulsively kept records and documents, on a civilized people known as the 'people of the book'. These people have written,

recorded, documented, archived, filmed, and for the first time in history testified in their tens of thousands their experiences on video, digitally and on the internet. Unlike the gypsies, the victims of gulags, killing fields and other genocides, the Holocaust is the largest, best documented, and technologically best recorded atrocity in history. It cannot be wiped from human cognisance.

The 'If' caveat, I believe, is that the wisdom attained from the Holocaust has to inform contemporary needs. If not, it will be disembodied from the pulse of life.

Children, grandchildren, and further descendants of Holocaust survivors, perpetrators, rescuers, bystanders and collaborators have been and will be drawn to the Holocaust in order to understand themselves and their roots; and they have and will avoid the Holocaust in order to not understand its horrors and their inheritance. This explains in part the ambivalence to the



Youngsters in Auschwitz-Birkenau.

Holocaust that I mentioned above.

To understand the reverberations of the Holocaust in themselves, descendants of survivors need to understand the traumatic memories handed down to them over the generations. Descendants of perpetrators need to understand their heritage of denial of murder, claiming of victimhood, and anti-Semitism. Descendants of bystanders need to understand how some of their forebears risked their necks to help Jews, but most collaborated, looked the other way, and rationalised that the Jews deserved their punishment. All descendants will need to understand that if they avoid understanding, they will carry mindsets, even if in diluted forms, from the past; as if "from their mothers' milk."

Reverberations across generations may occur nationally and internationally too. It is tempting to equate current Arab anti-Semitism with Nazi antecedents, Israel with European Jews about to be annihilated, France and Western Europe with its earlier bystander forebears, England as the incidental rescuer, and America as the willing saviour.

Whether individual, group or national, such comparisons must be seen as resonances with reverberations from the Holocaust, but that intersect with contemporary dilemmas and aspirations. The Holocaust as a teacher must be tuned in to both the past and the present.

Some have asked the question whether the Holocaust belongs solely to Jews, or whether it is the heritage of all humanity. I believe the latter proposition,

because I have seen survivors of various types of abuse derive communal human sense from the Holocaust. If survivors of other abuses and tortures come to a Holocaust museum to learn about their traumas, I believe that it is insufficient to point to the six million and say, "Remember them; don't attack Jews again." To be meaningful, the Holocaust must tune in with a universal language of compassion. It is as if the Holocaust said, "Tell me your traumas, and see how my experiences can illuminate them for you."

VITAL KNOWLEDGE

Lastly, the Holocaust will remain relevant because it is the repository of still untapped vital knowledge. What makes people cruel? What makes people kind? Where is God when evil occurs? What are the vagaries of truth? What makes individuals, groups and nations violent? How is violence remembered, forgotten and re-enacted down the generations in victims, perpetrators and bystanders? How do we stop cycles of violence? How do we overcome the sources of hatred? Paradoxically, the generation that gave us their memories is too close to them to answer such questions. It is for later generations to explore the depths of survivors' testimonies and try to find some answers to these universal questions.

In conclusion, memories and history are remembered according to the needs and possibilities of the times. The work of survivors was to document the facts; of their children to keep the candle aflame; of later generations to make sense. The Holocaust will always

remain a symbolic flagship of evil, an admonition to beware of what is possible. But perhaps more importantly, it will continue as a benchmark of knowledge and wisdom informing universally important questions. We will have to dig deep into the facts and documentations that survivors have given us so generously. We will have to dig deep into ourselves and communicate with other groups in order to find some answers.

More than ever, the world needs peace, and freedom from redundant aggression. Inevitably, even if ambivalently, the world turns to the Holocaust to inform it how to achieve that freedom. If explored properly, the Holocaust may yet help to provide some germane answers.

How will the Holocaust be remembered? Technically, it has the potential to be the best remembered event in history. Because of its width and depth of experience, it has the potential to be among the greatest teachers in history. But people will delve into it only insofar as it may answer their own dilemmas. Those who want to carry forward the memory and history of the Holocaust must make it available as a ubiquitous gift to humankind, relevant to contemporary times and circumstances. I believe that the relevance of the Holocaust is still evolving. But it will be remembered according to its perceived relevance at any one time.

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