

How is and how will the Holocaust be Remembered?

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I would like to start with a poem *by Itta Benhaiem-Keller, 1996,*
Holocaust survivor:

*I want to remember my past
To see before my eyes
The image of my parents
The house in which I grew up
The village in which my family lived for generations
I don't want to remember my past
I fear for what my memory
Might bring before my eyes
I wonder whether I can continue my life
If I'll rescue from oblivion
What I want to recall.*

You see that survivors themselves have problems with memory. The dilemma is that to retrieve memories of family, nurture, and love may mean so much grief that life is so devoid of meaning and purpose that death may be preferable. The result is a compromise: memory is placed into a traumatic black hole that both contains and obscures survivors' Holocaust experiences.

How can we reconcile this with the fact that the Holocaust is the best

documented genocide? Never have there been before or since so many testimonies, museums, films, and literature relating to such a catastrophe. Nor have there been available such pedantic records by perpetrators that confirmed victims' stories. Together with CDs, DVDs and cyberspace, there is the promise that memories of the Holocaust will last forever.

With so much information, is it still possible to not remember the Holocaust? Here is a statement by another survivor: "I saw children carried by Nazi soldiers to the Pit and dropping them into the Pit.... At the time I didn't want to believe that was what I was seeing. I hid that in my memory until I saw the shoes."

Similarly, there are records of prisoners denying the significance of the chimneys in Auschwitz even when only meters away from them.

As in the poem we see that there is, at least at extremes, a kind of duality to memory.

Nature of memory.

We must question the myth that memory is like a photographic plate that records the world exactly as it is. In fact memory diverges from objective truth in both quantity and quality.

With regard to *quantity of memory*, Laub and Auerhahn described its various degrees from nil to total. There may be no memory at all; there may be reliving of events in dreams and fugue states; memories may be enacted in

behaviour, and especially in children in play and drawing; memories may first reach consciousness in undigested physical or psychological fragments; and finally there may be revelations and integrations of memory into ever more coherent mental pictures, words, and narratives.

The *quality of memory* is a balance between words and silence, thinkable and unthinkable, aware and unaware. In clinical experience when you see people who you know have catastrophes seared in their minds, and yet are confused about them, unable to talk about or remember them, you can have the feeling that you are on the cusp of mental illness or a neurological defect. So severe can be the suppression of memory.

I believe that the great divide between remembering and not remembering catastrophes does in fact lie in the brain. The brain, like memory is internally separated. It is divided into two halves, connected only by a relatively narrow bridge near its base. The two halves function quite differently.

The left hemisphere of the brain contains the speech centre. That half of the brain has words. It serves our verbal, thinking, numerical, conscious, self-aware, and time aware knowledge and memories. It is the part of the brain that can tell an intellectual story of the Holocaust and listeners can intellectually understand words like six million.

The right hemisphere of the brain in contrast, is non-verbal, unable to think, lacks a sense of time, it is emotional, psychosomatic, and unaware of the person to whom it belongs. It talks in terms of silences, black holes, emotions, facial expressions, and actions. The recipient responds in kind,

through emotions, feelings, somatic responses, and silent unawareness

In order to “get it”, but also to “give it”, both right and left hemispheres, both intellect and emotion, have to be engaged.

In order to not “get it”, survivors split their memories in two. The quality of their memories depends on the relative weighting in the two halves of the brain. The less one wishes to recall, the more are memories in the unthinking, unaware black hole of the right hemisphere. The more one recalls verbally and emotionally, the more are the two halves in harmony.

In order to understand what quantity and quality of events is remembered, we need to consider the purpose of memory.

The Purpose of Memory

The purpose of memory is twofold. The first purpose is to help us to negotiate the *external* world. Memory identifies our environment: where to find food, how to cook it; where dangers lurk, where it's safe; who is our friend, who our enemy. Memory helps us to survive.

Memory also helps us to negotiate our *internal* worlds. It helps us to identify ourselves to ourselves. It integrates the past into the present and is a bridge to the future. We are our memories. Without memories we don't know who we are. Therefore to truly know ourselves, to truly feel enlivened, we must

truly remember our experiences.

That is how we can understand Kestenberg and Krell when they said that we may hunger for memories as if life depended on them, but fear them (like the poet did), because they might unleash demons that will consume the already haunted. Memories may reveal our despairing internal worlds.

For the sake of physical and/or mental survival, we may sacrifice our memories and with them parts of our psychic lives. We may wish to retrieve our psychic lives, but this will cause pain.

How much pain we are prepared to suffer depends on how much meaning and purpose our memories will serve. If memories serve to retrieve our identities, if they will help to re-find family, albeit a new one, and love, the grief and pain may be worth it.

So far we have talked about personal memories and meanings. We need to know whether remembering the Holocaust will be meaningful more widely. What meaning can be derived from the Holocaust? That will determine whether and how it will be remembered.

Meaning of the Holocaust Over Time

Victims condemned to death said to the still living, “Remember us. Tell the world what happened to us.” They did not want to forgotten, and they wanted memories of their deaths to have some existential meaning.

Survivors felt duty bound to bear witness to the dead. They also wanted their own suffering to be remembered and to have meaning.

However, as we saw, survivors often could not relate a coherently remembered story. They often conveyed their stories to their children and others like the poet, evoking emotions, and behaviour equated with a sacred mission, sensed as “Never again!”, but it was fuelled by a black hole where memory as a whole resided obscured.

Second generation children were memorial candles to those memories. Memorial candles still continue the mission of remembrance and ‘Never again,’ but the memories differed in quantity and quality to the memories of the parents. When second generation children went with their parents to the places of persecution, their purpose was not only to understand the historical events, but also their parents, and thereby themselves.

So each generation has different requirements of memories, and later of history. And just as survivors (and everyone) arranges their memories according to need, so does each generation. So memory and remembrance also have histories.

Returning to the history of Holocaust memories, starting in the 80’s and 90’s survivors’ memories became clearer. First, they had achieved meaning in their lives through occupational success, having children and grandchildren, and their country Israel. They had defeated Hitler. Second, the world was more willing to listen to survivors. Here was a chance at last to give meaning

to the deaths of families and communities, and to their own suffering.

The film *Schindler's List* symbolized the complementary needs to tell and listen. Out of that film came tens of thousands of testimonies. Hundreds of books were written. At last the victims' stories would be engraved forever.

But a subtle shift started to occur. That brings us to the present and the future.

Holocaust Memory in the Future

First, there was a disappointment. In spite of all the museums, testimonies, books, films, and archives, the Holocaust, has not prevented subsequent genocides. The Holocaust failed in its mission of 'Never again!'

There have been precedents. You may remember that it had been thought that the First World War would be the war to end all wars. Survivors of that catastrophe believed that as a result of unprecedented documentation of the horrors of war, senseless suffering of millions would never happen again.

We may have to accept the unpalatable fact that no matter how horrific and well documented are the stories of victims, they may warn, but they do not prevent further mass killings.

If we want to imagine how the Holocaust will be remembered, let us see how in fact we remember the First World War, or the Inquisition? Next, imagine that we visited shrines and museums to those events, and heard survivor testimonies from those times. No doubt individual stories would

move us. We would shake our heads and say such things should not happen.

Why would we even bother to visit these museums? What significance to us would we seek? We might wonder at how traumatic consequences have been the same over centuries. We may learn how an individual coped hundreds of years ago and that may help us individually.

But wouldn't we ultimately want to learn how such events came about? What were the circumstances, what motivated the perpetrators? What in human nature and the world makes them do it? Note the present tense 'makes' because such events still occur.

Here is the shift. Victims alert us but it is perpetrators that teach us.

Interest in perpetrators was initially limited to finding and punishing them. But already in the 1960s Hanna Arendt in her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, was interested in the mind of Eichmann and other perpetrators. Many others have taken this interest further, such as Lifton, Browning, Goldhagen, Kwiet and Foster, and currently our keynote speaker, Father Patrick Desbois.

In fact the Holocaust is unprecedented in the richness of documentation not only of victims but also of perpetrators and even of bystanders. This is what would interest every generation. To not allow the Holocaust to happen again, the current and subsequent generations would need to understand the psychosocial dynamics of perpetrators and bystanders.

Conclusion

Perhaps each generation has a role in remembering the Holocaust. The role of victims was to initiate a sacred mission of memory. The survivors' task was to bear witness and testify. The next generation's task was to be memorial candles and to keep the memories alive.

Our generation is at the cusp of being able to influence Holocaust memory to be more rewarding than memories of past catastrophes like the First World War or the Inquisition.

To be relevant to future generations with no experience, even indirect, of the Holocaust, the Holocaust story must be total and be able to speak to universal concerns of each generation. In other words Holocaust memory must speak on behalf of the world, not solely on behalf of specific victims, their descendants, and co-religionists.

To shift a significant part of the story of the Holocaust from victims to perpetrators is painful in two ways. First, to try to understand those who inflict wounds, to focus attention on them, feels like betrayal of the wounded. It feels like an immoral shift in sympathy. Yet to understand perpetrators (and bystanders) is not to forgive or forget. It is a practical part of the initial mission: 'Do not forget us. Make our deaths meaningful to the world.'

Second, to focus on perpetrators may feel like approaching a netherworld of

ultimate evil, a mission we may wish to avoid. But just as in illness we initially try to heal the patient, after trauma we initially support the afflicted, but eventually we turn to the causes of illnesses and traumas, so we must eventually, and it may take generations, turn our attention to causes and causers of catastrophes.

We still do not understand how the Holocaust came about and how we can prevent such events. That is the task we must address. Perhaps it is only this generation that can focus on perpetrators.

How will the Holocaust be remembered? Hopefully as the source of knowledge not only of evil, but also as the source of knowledge of the development of evil, and how it can be prevented.

If I am to be even more hopeful, perhaps such knowledge will provide a template for understanding and preventing not only genocides but violence generally.