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Tradition as a dialogue between generations

in the perspective of the Holocaust experiences

topics:

- Remembrance in the shadow of the Holocaust-experience
- the written word as a symbol for life
- writing as (a) testifying, (b) prophetic formula and (c) a liturgy of memory
- the interconnection of writing, memory, and salvation

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Ladies and gentlemen,

we are here today to think about tradition. Let's consider the situation: *hic et nunc* we want to look behind us, to better perceive of what is in front of us. Which means, we want to fill our present time with the past as well as with the future. Tradition means also that every dimension of time is present in our *hic et nunc*, here and now. So, what is our *here and now* like?

We are about forty kilometres from the town of Oswiecim (Auschwitz).¹ The chimneys of the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp ceased to work fifty years ago. Let's take such a *hic et nunc* as the basis for our further reflections because it is the Holocaust which is the shadow of the past and is still putting a dark trail on our present time.

That is why I would like to submit the reflection upon tradition to the reflection concerning the Holocaust, the strategies aiming at accommodation and understanding of the Holocaust, and the burden of that heritage.

Associated with tradition is a continuous return to the sources, a re-reading of them from the beginning on. My reflection is a fruit of reading the Holocaust testimonies. Those preserved texts became a basic source for my reflection.

Word-grain symbolism

Memoirs and diaries written down by Jews in the ghettos and camps were very

¹ This lecture was held at the 10th International Seminar on Intercultural Pastoral Care and Counselling, taking place at Ustron/Poland. The day before, the participants of the seminar had visited the former concentration camp at Auschwitz

well hidden, usually buried. Let's ponder for a while on this symbolic meaning of such a situation. A paper upon which those chronicles of destruction were written was thrown into the soil as a grain for the future harvest. The Jewish poet Abraham Suckewer interpreted it as such in the Vilna ghetto in March 1943. His poem entitled *A wheat grain* became a commentary for the action of hiding the books and manuscripts of the Jewish Institute in Vilna and Vilna library. "*I am burying and sowing manuscripts here...*" says Suckewer, telling a story of a grain which had been hidden inside the pyramid in ancient Egypt. The grain taken from the pyramid after nine thousand years and put into soil grew and bore ears. The poet writes:

*"Maybe also one day these words will be taken up to the light
and maybe in the hour of destiny
they will blossom as unexpectedly
as that ancient seed
which grew an ear (...)"*

Seed – which is considered a basic food in the Judaeo-Christian civilisation – is a symbol of existence. The symbolism of the word as grain incorporates the process of writing in the ancient and everlasting order of sowing and harvesting. The text becomes a life-giving food. The symbolism of word-bread which is so deeply rooted in the Bible also leads toward such understanding. You can share a word with other people as a piece of bread. There are no limits of time and place for such a sharing of words.

The poem by Suckewer speaks about the hope for surviving in the reviving rhythm of culture. The grain resists the damaging influence of time because it preserves energy in itself, thus reviving the organic world. The power of a written word is this energy in the world of culture. A text may be hidden for a long time as a grain in the ground, until the season of crop comes, i.e. when being read it is alive again and blossoms.

The parable of the grain taken from the Egyptian pyramid after thousands of years determines the horizon of hope for all those Jews, who had written their texts and then hid them, believing they preserved a spiritual nourishment for the future.

The poem by Suckewer shows a mechanism of tradition as a process of handing over and receiving – amongst others by word. A deposit which reveals our identity and its roots, creates community, establishes links between the past (which is inexhaustible source of the new) and the future (which reveals itself as an explanation, fulfilment and reviving of the old). That bond is created due to the memory, which unites, joins and preserves. Memory is the first commandment of tradition.

So, let's read the preserved testimonies of the Holocaust carefully. Those texts should become for us a source of knowledge about ourselves, who live *hic et nunc*.

A reflection concerning the phenomenon of preparing testimonies about Extermination reveals three dimensions of writing symbolism: 1) writing as testifying, 2) writing as prophecy, 3) writing as a liturgy of the memory. Each of these dimensions relates in its own way to the traditional action and binds it with the universal heritage of the past.

Writing as testifying

Writing as an act of bringing testimony about the Extermination is deeply rooted in the Biblical and Talmudic tradition.

The Torah and the Talmud demand to testify about inequity. In the Book of Leviticus you can read, that a person sins heavily when “*he does not speak up when he hears a public charge to testify regarding something he has seen or learned about*” (Leviticus 5:1). In the context of this tradition a witness is not only the person who has seen what happened but also who “only” knows. The knowledge obliges. You should testify. Such a duty has both moral and religious obligation. Testifying is closely connected in the Jewish tradition with the legal process of determining all proofs to find out the truth and reach justice.

This Biblical and Talmudic tradition of testifying reveals one of the foundations upon which the authors of the Extermination period could build their decision about writing. In the light of that tradition an author of a diary or memoirs can perceive his role as a fulfilment of the duty to testify. Diaries, memoirs and reports as well as other written records of the Holocaust reveal themselves to be a fruit of an attitude which can be drawn from the sources of Judaism. Even more, the subject of the testimony itself can also be compared to the original Biblical models. The Bible and the Rabbinical literature provide a model for this situation and a language to describe it. Traditional ways of describing misfortunes, suffering and the triumph of evil, are written down there. The text created in the face of extermination and the text which testifies to extermination has that Biblical model behind itself. The description of reality seems to repeat the original archetype: the Biblical paradigm of common banishment, destruction, national defeat and individual disaster of a suffering Jew. Jeremiah, weeping his lamentations over destroyed Jerusalem, the fall of the Temple, defeat, captivity and disgrace, was the archetypical eulogist of the extermination. The Bible provides all later witnesses of national disasters with a well formulated “rhetoric of martyrdom” and “liturgy of disgrace”.

Listing all disasters which afflicted Jews and handing them over to posterity has a long tradition. The period of crusades, expulsion from Spain or the Cossacks uprising of Bohdan Kchmielnicki in 1648 gave birth to numerous chronicle writers of pogroms and persecution.

Writing as prophetic formula

Some of the Holocaust testimonies seen from the perspective of the Biblical tradition can be compared with inspired writing contained within a framework of specifically understood prophetism. The special meaning of this prophetism is due to the fact that it does not mean forecasting future events, revealing a Divine message or being a medium for a Divine Voice. This prophetism means the unquestionable duty of writing and testifying. The author understands himself as fulfilling a mission. He has to speak in the name of those who cannot speak. He has to preach the truth which should be known by the world. The imperative of writing is so strong you can not resist it.

A prophet acted despite the dangers awaiting him, despite despair and discouragement, even despite his own human and weak will. You can find the same de-

termination among the testimonies of the Holocaust. The author is in a compulsory situation. It is not up to him to choose but he is chosen himself, he is called.

Writing as a liturgy of the memory

The sheets of paper, covered with texts, can resist a death inflicted on a mass scale and may overcome the destructive power of time. They are like monuments made out of words, in which immortal messages have been sculpted like in granite. They are like a sanctuary preserving and immortalising the names of victims. The registration of sufferings is an obligation for the descendants. Memory is a keyword for that strategy of duty. And the action of writing in and at itself becomes a liturgy of the memory.

An essay by Rachel Auerbach entitled “*Izkor*” of 1943 has exactly this liturgical form of celebrating a memory. The essay was written in November 1943. Its title means in Hebrew “*You will remember*” and it is a begging prayer said four times a year for the blessed memory of all the deceased of a family. These days are: the last day of the Pesah, the Shavouot, Shemini Aseret (the end of the feast of Tents) and Jom Kippur. All the deceased are named during the prayer.

The essay starts with a description of flood which is a great metaphor for the deportation of the Warsaw Jews, of which only a mute scream and silence have remained. Then we can find a ceremony of bewitching, casting a spell on memory, inscribed into excerpts taken from the Psalm 137: “*If I forget those I had seen may me myself be forgotten and my name damned*”.

The *Izkor* prayer itself is a chain of acclamations of the particular groups or classes of the Jewish nation. In such a group portrait of the nation you can find little children, boys and girls, young people, pious Jews, rabbis and teachers, craftsmen, grandmas and grandpas, scientists, artists, musicians, painters, professors and tailors, watchmakers and doctors, poor men from dark town lanes and petty thieves, smugglers and street tradesmen, beggars and starving displaced people. They all pass in front of our eyes.

Rachel Auerbach ends her prayer commemoration with a declaration to say continuously this rite of memory, listing names of the murdered nation. This declaration becomes a call, addressed to all of us at the same time.

Writing – memory – salvation

We are now at the climax of our consideration. The reading of the Holocaust testimonies has introduced us in the dimension of tradition, on which the decision to write itself was founded and which to a great extent modelled the language of description. And if now the voice of Rachel Auerbach’s prayer is reaching us, calling for cherishing the memory, it is exactly due to the phenomenon of persisting in defiance of death and destruction, regardless of the distance in time and space. The voice coming to us from the very bottom of the destruction reveals a great mystery, around which we are circulating in our reflection. Memory is the key to this mystery.

Classic metaphors of memory describe it as a registration – a waxed plate preserving an inscription (Plato, Cicero). The action of writing down is connected already

at its beginning with providing a confirmation to something volatile and transitory, – a transfer of our traces to the posterity.

The memory is one of the foundation of Judaism. The faith of the Jews is not based upon theological dogmas but upon the memory. History is a scene for the covenant with God. Judas Halevi, a medieval poet and philosopher, stresses that the Decalogue does not begin with a statement, or a dogma but with a reminder “*I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery*” (Ex 20:2). A Jew reassures his faith by continuously remembering events in which his ancestors took part. We can find a warning in the Book of Deuteronomy: “*Only be careful and watch yourselves closely so that you do not forget the things your eyes have seen...*” (Deut 4:9).

An impulse of writing down to preserve, interpret or hand over a sense of experienced events is based upon an ancient tradition. Writing down used to become an opposition against the destruction, an act of faith in a better future, an act of hope that coming generations would learn, understand, evaluate and compensate.

The pages of the dairies, memoirs or relations made by the witnesses of the Extermination demand to be read. In return the act of reading enables the text to speak, undertakes and revives the heritage of the memory. Writing can save the memory of existence i.e. the existence itself.

Handing over the heritage of the Holocaust – traps and dangers

If we understand the tradition as a space of dialogue – through texts – on the basis of the memory – so the dialogue about the heritage of the Holocaust has been exposed to special shocks and dangers. An optimistic conviction of Rene Casin seems to be far from real. So let’s sketch briefly those dangers which await such dialogue.

Barriers for the dialogue

First, it is difficult to open the dialogue because even those texts which survived hardly reached their readers. The history of discovering the manuscripts buried by Jews of the Auschwitz Sonderkommando in ashes is symbolic. They could not be searched immediately after the war because there was a Soviet camp for German war prisoners in Brzezinka (Birkenau). When the Auschwitz Museum was created, the digging that had already started had to be stopped because there was too much excitement among the “gold-diggers” prowling the surrounding region. So, the manuscripts were taken out and saved only in 1961 – although if the place where they were hidden was well know from the beginning, thanks to rescued witnesses. The last manuscript was found by chance in the late fall of 1980 when a group of school boys planted trees around the crematory in Birkenau.

Second, the dialogue is embroiled in contradictions resulting from a fundamental question about the possibility to express an experience of Extermination. An imperative to say a truth to the world about the Holocaust (that phrase “You should know”) runs into a resistance, resulting from a conviction that such truth can not be expressed as “no words can express it”. And the world would not be able to understand it anyway.

Third, the roles in that dialogue are not well suited. Witnesses, rooted in the tradition, believe in the value of a written testimony. According to them, it is not only a warning and a lesson for future generations but it can also save a sense of victims' and witnesses' existence. However, the addressees of the testimony, who declare a great crisis of the art of wording after Auschwitz, stating that language cannot express the inexpressible sense of the Extermination.

Multiple memory

The memory of the Holocaust has many dimensions. There is a common memory and an individual one. There is the memory of victims, witnesses and of executioners. There is the memory of those who encountered help, care or friendship and the memory of those who were pushed away, betrayed, sold. There is the memory of suffering and the memory of hate. There is the memory of humiliation, shame, hopelessness and stupefaction. There is the memory of heroic resistance and struggle, and the memory of resignation and defeat.

We should also take into consideration all those testimonies which will never reach us any more. The suffocated voice of all those, whose names did not last and who did not preserve any traces of their existence.

The deposit of the memory is scattered, hardly accessible and very often lost forever. The message of the memory is exposed to many dangers. It can be deformed on different ways and even completely blocked.

Oblivion

The memory which is a foundation of tradition does create an identity. Oblivion means a betrayal of grandfathers and fathers and a breaking of the bond. As a result it sentences us to non-existence.

What happens when the Holocaust becomes an area of oblivion? Is the message of the Holocaust really remembered in the contemporary world? When looking upon today's wars and slaughters, ethnic purges, living skeletons behind barbed wires in camps and upon mass graves, we must come to a conclusion that the world knows nothing, remembers nothing.

Henryk Grynberg, a child of the Holocaust and one of the most persistent of the Holocaust writers-witnesses, states that Holocaust does not teach us anything new or delivers a breakthrough. "Great evil, and the Holocaust was an expression of it, can teach us that there are values, without which the human world can not exist, that there are some bans which should not be broken if you want to remain a man. And we know about it for some thousand years" – says Grynberg. Is this knowledge covered by oblivion?

The memory of the Holocaust can become an arena for lies and manipulation. The expression "Auschwitz-Lüge" describes the activity of false historians, suggesting that gas chambers and crematoria never existed.

Wounds of the memory and the memory of wounds

The horror of the Holocaust cannot be understood, cannot be expressed. However, this is exactly an experience which demands an extremely powerful expression. It is an expression of pain and suffering, as well as of loneliness, desolation, of abandonment, of being sentenced to non existence and to vanishing without any trace. That is why the struggle for memory becomes even more important than the struggle for life, it is a memory of the very bottom of hell, a memory of excruciating and never healing wounds.

So, the memory of the Holocaust is a memory of wounds and at the same time it is wounded itself. It is wounded, since it is torn between the possible and the impossible, between the human and the inhuman. The absurdity of the mass extermination cannot be understood, however it should be remembered, i. e. we should hand it over to posterity and furnish them with that terrible knowledge.

However, how can a normal human memory grasp the heritage of the Holocaust? Such wounded memory of the Holocaust can become a nourishment for diseases and fears, which worry the contemporary world, which worry ourselves. Sometimes we want to nourish our own prejudices with the message of the Holocaust in order to preserve comfortable stereotypes. For example, this is the source for the competition of martyrdom between Poles and Jews which is going on since the War. Which of the two nations was persecuted more and suffered more? We can find origins of some attempts within the Polish historic publications submitting to an ideology to purge the Holocaust of Jews, to purge Auschwitz of the Jews. The question is whether the Jews were just only one of many nations murdered in Auschwitz. That is also instrumental in the case for understanding of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising.

The Jewish wound has its sources in experiencing indifference and betrayal by Poles, in the memory of those who tracked and blackmailed Jews for money. Such thinking is transferring itself into stereotypes pretending that a Pole suck his anti-Semitism with his mother's milk, or the stereotype of Poland as the biggest Jewish graveyard – a graveyard and nothing else.

The Polish wound has its sources in the experiences of the September of 1939 and the behaviour of Jews in the Polish territory, when occupied by the Red Army. The experience of installing the communist regime in Poland supported the common conviction about a union between the Jews and communism. Such thinking finds its expression in the stereotype of a "Jewish-commune" and of "Jew-ubek" (Jews as officers for the Sovjet secret political police, which occupied Poland and persecuted Poles).

We should face the challenge

The heritage of the Holocaust is extremely difficult to accept. It cannot be completely judged and understood. It is a moral and a theological scandal. The horror of this heritage may be perceived of as an overwhelming burden which can justify our helplessness to some extent. It frees us from taking the risk of understanding, and it provokes to create different self-tranquillising therapies.

Zygmunt Bauman, in his book entitled *Modernity and Extermination*, criticises the tendency in the Holocaust research, which focuses on creating defence mechanisms rather than on searching for the essence of this phenomenon. The

thesis, that the Holocaust was a terrible aberration and a complete break of any continuity within culture and civilisation, is only the historians' wishful thinking. Rather, the Holocaust seems to be a fruit of modernity. The dark side of modern civilisation – not fully recognised and located beyond the horizon of our knowledge – is still presents a real danger. Neither anniversary celebrations, nor warnings against the repetition of the tragedy may effectively oppose it.

Condemnation of the evil by putting ourselves outside its range, and facing the challenge by trying to respond to the evil, are two different things. “The most horrible about the Holocaust is not the presumption that it could happen to us as well, but that it could be done by us” – says Bauman.

A grain buried in ashes

Let's come back to the symbolism of the word-grain, the symbolism of sown manuscripts, put into the ground with the hope that they would bring an abundant harvest. The collaborators of the Warsaw Ghetto Archives buried them with such a kind of hope in boxes full of documents and manuscripts. With the same hope, prisoners of the “Sonderkommando” in Birkenau, who worked in the crematory, hid their manuscripts in glasses, German army water flasks, mess kits, etc. and buried them in human ashes. The holes, where the ashes from the crematory furnaces were thrown, seemed the safest places to them. The history of the exterminated nation was hidden inside its own ashes.

There is an incessant request, a kind of a litany, in those manuscripts:

"Dear finder, look everywhere, in each piece of ground (...) look carefully and you will find a lot (...) Look for a hidden bigger material (...) Look over there in the holes (...) Keep on looking! You will surely find more!"

Ladies and gentlemen, you walked on the paths of Auschwitz-Birkenau yesterday. Please remember the manuscripts buried by the prisoners of the Sonderkommando. The grain taken out of the crematory like it was taken from the ruins of the Egyptian pyramid should not be lost in all this chaos and noise. Today, we should be courageous enough to listen to this request that is written down on shreds of paper. We should be courageous enough to respond to that hope, buried as a grain in human ashes.