

## **The Future of Memory of World War II in Germany – Ethical Challenge and Burden**

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### **Introduction**

In Germany, World War II and the Shoa are obviously present: in educational programs, media and public monuments. By that, it's not predetermined how the "younger generation" of people living in Germany will relate to the events of the World War II and the Shoa: each generations has to build their own way of remembering, but also has to deal with possibilities and necessities of forgetting, given the conditions under which they are living. The group I refer to with "younger generation" cannot merely be defined with regard to age. I count those to the younger generation, whose relation to World War II is not based on personal experience. In this sense I may not even be part of the younger generation as I my grandparents told me about their personals experiences. I have vivid images in my had from my grandmother observing the burning city of Osnabrück after being bombed and have an idea about the personality of the French prisoner of war, who was forced to work at her farm. My grandfather told me, as his direct male descendants, about his baptism of fire at the eastern front.

I want to discuss the consequences of feeling personally more remote to the World War II and the Shoa, while remembering it is becoming a tradition that manifests itself in everyday life: People in Germany run across memorials, they learn about it at school, their government finances memorials at places where German troops committed mass murders and their president speaks at inauguration. Besides the growing temporal remoteness, it also has to be regarded that memory is located in a global, multi-cultural community that is not only rooted in a community defined by a national tradition. In what follows, I discuss, how a way of remembering Word War II and the Shoa can be build, under conditions of temporal remoteness and pluralization of society in Germany.

### **I. More than politically organized memory**

My, our ancestors remembered under different conditions: Speaking for West-Germany, the generation that actively participated in the war mostly repressed the memory, which seemed easy, given the opportunities for a joyful life the German Wirtschaftswunder gave them. Some of their children developed different ways of dealing with the deeds of their parents. Along with the activities of people such as the state attorney Fritz Bauer, who brought to court officers in charge in Auschwitz, they established the *memory culture* in Germany. Some explored the meaning of the memory of the Second-World-War by taking responsibility and initiating dialogue with the victims. This memory culture has become a tradition that influences younger generations. It has been established in the educational and political system. Consider two examples: Policemen and

recruits of the German Army get trained in politics of remembrance. Second, each year at the Holocaust Memorial Day the German parliament invites a survivor of the Shoa to give a talk or to read from their books to the German parliament. The two examples show that memory has become organized and institutionalized. It's a special type of memory politics.

I briefly want to dwell on the first example, as it points to an attempt to maintain memory culture by institutionalizing it in form of educational programs, in this case of policemen or soldiers. The goal of such activities and workshops, carried out by museum educators, is often described as *democracy education*. What does this goal imply for the meaning bestowed to World War II? Such education programs are supposed to motivate a democracy friendly attitude in order to show what can happen in different political settings that are based on exclusion and suppression and not on democratic values such as inclusion and participation. Hence, the engagement with the events of World War II has a purpose for the future: The knowledge about the decay of the democratic system in the Weimar Republic, the Rassengesetze, Deportation and so forth are supposed to make people aware of similar tendencies in their time and in the future. It's supposed to function as a moral warning sign.

The status quo is: the moral dimension of memory and politics of remembrance is organized and institutionalized in Germany. And as it is with each organization and institution there are people who rebel and complain about it. In Germany such complaints got a voice in a new right wing party, whose members would prefer fostering a different image of German history that puts an emphasis on the positive achievements of Germans in history. However, neither would I like to defend this moral dimension of memory nor would I like to criticize it. Rather I would like to discuss the possibility of a further, personal dimension of remembering World War II and the Shoa. Following the Israeli Philosopher Avishai Margalit, I may call it the *ethical dimension of memory*.<sup>1</sup>

Let me explain to what extend the ethical dimension of memory differs from the moral dimension of memory of democracy education:

First, there might be a moral obligation to remember the World War II. However, a moral obligation to remember may be universal, but constitutes only quite thin relations to other people. No particular relations to them is required, as a moral obligation is indifferent of the contingent particular relation one finds oneself in. An ethics of memory on the other hand would involve thick, particular relations to other persons by remembering them. To emphasize the particularity of ethical remembering Margalit presents it as a way of caring for others.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Margalit, A. (2004), *The Ethics of Memory*, Cambridge Mass./London: Harvard University Press, 7-8.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 26-40.

Second, unlike the moral dimension of memory, the ethical dimension of memory cannot be organized or institutionalized. That is, its meaning cannot be reduced to the function of securing a democratic political order in the first place and doesn't ground in mere knowledge of facts of what happened. Rather it's conceived in the individual activity of taking care of remembering another person. Hence according to Margalit the ethical dimension of memory is to be seen as part of leading an ethical life.<sup>3</sup> Within the relations that are created by caring for remembering another person, forgiving and reconciliation then is possible. That is, the way people think about each other and respond to each other is directly affected.

Against the background of the differentiation of the moral and the ethical dimension of memory, the question of the meaning of the memory of World War II for the younger generation in Germany, triggers two further questions:

First, is such an ethical dimension of memory of the World War II in contemporary Germany still possible?

And second, what would it mean to burden oneself with remembering the evil and the monstrosities of World War II and the Shoa?

## **II. Is an Ethical Memory of World War II Possible Today?**

I turn to the question: Is an ethical memory of World War II possible today? Caring for others is meaningful to persons. Caring by remembering persons might be part of this. It affects the way an individual lives, insofar it involves the relations to others. In such relations harms and suffering can be articulated, forgiving and dialogue is possible. Those who are possibly included in such relations are considered in the way one lives and in considerations about what has to be regarded and taken care of. Now it seems less obvious that ethical caring for remembering World War II is in this sense meaningful for younger Germans and for future generations.

### *1) Temporal distance*

One reason why remembering second war may be not in the scope of ethical meaning of younger Germans, is that *temporal distance* is growing, which is related to one major fact: Not many contemporary witnesses are left, the world seems to face different and new problems related to new victims. Obvious is also the fact that a dialogue between perpetrators and victims take place under very different circumstances than a dialogue between their grandchildren. Thus it's questionable what future generations that have no reason to identify themselves as perpetrators

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 84-90.

and have no encounters with victims should actually care about: They don't have to forgive each other.

Arguing that because of temporal distance there was no ethical meaning and task to it, however rests on the assumption that one has to be affected directly in the sense that one's own life is threatened or that one made oneself guilty. This is not necessarily the case. Instead one could say, temporal distance adds a further ethical challenge to memory. The young generation in Germany neither has to feel urged to repress remembering their experiences, nor do they feel urged to fight against this repression. In temporal distance the memory of World War II is no longer something that is necessarily connected with their biography: They don't have to live with experiences of extreme violence or with the idea that their parents suffered or committed extreme violence. In consequence, remembering World War II of the younger German generation is much more dependent on the decision to engage with and to care about these historical events. By speaking about a decision, I mean that remembering rest on a purposeful activity. It's purposeful in the sense that a person has to develop an attitude of openness that makes one inevitably see the meaning and the burden of the memory.

## 2) *Pluralism*

The second reason why the second war may not fall into the scope of ethical meaning of younger Germans is related to cultural pluralism and the development of a cosmopolitan consciousness. Due to migration the German society has become more pluralistic in the last decades. This also means that people live in communities together with individuals that have different or no relations to this past. In Berlin you can see each year at 9<sup>th</sup> of May people with a background in former soviet republics celebrating the anniversary of Nazi Germany signing the capitulation. Differently, the German writer Navid Kermani, whose parents migrated from Iran, recently said that he's one of those Germans who do not feel directly related to Word War II.<sup>4</sup> Only when he had the German language patch on his jacket when visiting Auschwitz, he felt inescapably related through language. However, it also happens that teachers hear something such as "Well Hitler was terrible, because he killed children, but on the other hand he killed the damn Jews." from students with migration background, clearly challenging the social consensus in Germany about acceptable opinions in stating this. Such examples show that it would be naive to think about the possibility of the memory of World War II as collective memory of a homogeneous national community – entertaining this thought has been naive already before pluralization due to migration in the last three to four decades. Between perpetrators and victims, between east and west, between cities and countryside, between displaced and those who could continuously live in one place or house

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4 Kermani, N. (2017), Die Zukunft der Erinnerung. Auschwitz morgen, *Fankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, WEB: [www.faz.net](http://www.faz.net) (07.07.2017).

the difference in meaning they bestow to World War II is already quite big. However, for them the challenge in remembering was to undergo a development that enabled them to conduct a dialogue about the past: That is perpetrator and victim both had to develop a common ground. They had to take the decision to reconcile, to regret, and to forgive.

The decision taken by a person of the fourth or even fifth generation after World War II has a different focus than reconciliation. Instead it has to focus on what is commonly meaningful in those past events. That is, each generation has to develop an understanding of what is universally meaningful in these events. Only under this conditions, it's possible to encounter other memory cultures, as that of certain people from former soviet countries, as more than some kind of exotic appearance. Instead new forms of remembering may develop.

There is a particular consequence to this challenge of pluralism: The development of an ethical dimension of the World War II has to take place as development of a cosmopolitan memory that will be more and more unbound from national memory cultures.<sup>5</sup> At the same time it's not a form of remembering that is unbound from any location. Rather in a location, such as a city where different people with different cultural backgrounds live together, new ways of conceiving the meaning of World War II and the Shoa can develop.

I tried to show, the memory of World War II of the younger generation is connected with: First, a specific decision to remember and second with the development towards an understanding of the universal content of memory under conditions of cultural pluralism. Under these two conditions individuals of the younger generation can remember in an ethical way.

Developing such an ethics of memory different social challenges have to be met: Of course it's used by right wing parties as something to be castigated for undermining national ambitions and identity. However, there is also the tendency to claim moral superiority with reference to the German memory culture. Because there is the tradition of reflecting crimes committed by Germans during the World War II there is a tendency to moralize about the way other nations and cultures remember experienced and committed violence. As an example, one may take a look on articles and commentaries of Russian celebrations of the 9<sup>th</sup> of May. Also in the media, especially in TV, such practical urges can be found: In about the last ten years German TV-Stations produced movies on the lot of Germans in World War II, that emphasized that Germans were victims.

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<sup>5</sup> Sznajder N./Levy D. (2001), *Erinnerungen im globalen Zeitalter. Der Holocaust*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag.

### III. What Does It Mean to Burden Oneself with Memory of Violence?

Against this background, I turn to the second question: What does it mean to burden oneself with such memory violence? As I said, the ethical dimension of the meaning of World War II can be explored by younger and future generations under the conditions of taking the decision to develop an understanding of the universal meaning of historical events of World War II and the Shoa. Furthermore, the future of memory of World War II in Germany is situated in more or less stable economic and political conditions that enable leading a good, undisrupted life. People live a good life, that is they are not threatened by terror and extreme violence: Most people have the opportunity to lead their life based on their free choice and thereby enjoy a legal system that protects their rights as well as support from governmental institutions and from civil society.

Certain writers, who themselves were survivors of the Shoa, expressed that such happiness was unbearable and impossible. Theodor W. Adorno and Imre Kertész, for examples said it was impossible to affirm a particular culture or idea of the good life after the Shoa.<sup>6</sup> What they mean is that this monstrosity had to be consciously received by people, it had to become part of their life. Adorno as a rather academic writer, was seeking for the possibilities for raising moral and political consciousness in Post-War West-Germany that internalizes that civilization also brought about Auschwitz. For Kertész, a happy, self-determined life seemed not to be possible after Auschwitz – only the paradoxical life of a writer that sees no possibility of achieving happiness but consists in writing about the damaged, determined life.

This strong consequence, that was inevitable for Adorno and Kertész, may not be easy to grasp for younger and future generations, not only because they feel less affected by it. Consider remembering World War II and the Shoa without any urge that may emerge from biographical experiences, means to focus not only on possibilities for leading a happy life, but also to keep in mind the possibility of extreme evil and suffering committed by human beings. It means to not just take and enjoy the chances for leading a materially satisfied, self-determined life. To live with the memory of extreme violence and oppression means for the coming generations to make experiences of extreme violence and oppression a fact that bears on the way they lead their life. Remembering violence from which individuals suffered. means to take a burden. The difficulty is to grasp how one can live with such a burden.

One may try to highlight the importance of memory by giving all sorts of reasons for why it is important to be informed about history and why this might be necessary for public discourse – we

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6 Cf. Adorno T.W., "Erziehung nach Auschwitz," in *Gesammelte Schriften* Band 10.2, 5. Aufl., Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 674; Kertész I. (2002), "Der Holocaust als Kultur," in *Eine Gedankenlänge Stille, während das Erschießungskommando neu lädt*, Deutsch von György Buda, 2. Aufl., Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verlag, 67.

may need it to understand our stance in the world, that's is for example the design of institutions or the architecture of the cities we live in. But this understanding only requires the knowledge of facts about history and education of member of a community or a society.

Remembering, living with the burden of the memory of violence as an ethical activity is only possible in another way: It means to engage with what happened to individuals. It means to engage with the biographies of individuals. In this sense it's more similar to what can be gained from reading literature than to what can be gained from reading academic history books. Hence, engaging in this ethical way with World War II and the Shoa is in the first place an individual process of gaining an understanding of human possibilities that does not stand under the authority of academic history, a community or society – it's personal and individual. At the same time it always also means to engage in dialogue with others and to seek to conceive the universal meaning in the memory of individual suffering and experiences of violence. Understanding the memory of World War II and the Shoa in connection with an individual process of developing an understanding of the possibilities of humanity thus requires dialogue that is not predetermined by institutionalized politics of remembrance. Under conditions of temporal remoteness and cultural pluralism it's a dialogue in which an understanding of the past is acquired and not merely learned. Thus, for living with the burden of remembering violence institutions and organization are not sufficient. In the first place there is a need of relating to others in dialogue; that's where memory is interwoven with live.

There is quite new memorial and documentation center in a former labor camp in Berlin. These camps were different from concentration camps as they were mostly located in the middle of a neighborhood or city. This particular example is surrounded by houses from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. From the balconies inhabitants were able to observe what was happening inside the camp. When visiting this camp one cannot exempt oneself from thinking about what those sitting on their balconies might have seen. Inside the barracks, illustrations of biographies of the persons, who were forced to live there are exposed.

Such memorials may be able to convey not only factual information, but can also initiate dialogue and a process of developing an ethical dimension of the memory of World War II.

Now we see that the younger and future generation in Germany may also achieve something from remembering World War II and the Shoa: It may not be reconciliation, as for former generations, but forming cross-cultural ethical communities that share a memory of experiences of extreme violence, which created abysses between their ancestors who had to relate as perpetrators and victims to each other. This abyss, grounded in biographical experiences, is more and more replaced by temporal distance and pluralistic cultural contexts: Nevertheless, for the younger

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generation in Germany remembering World War II and the Shoa means to change the view on ones own biography by becoming aware of connections to this past and of current tendencies of violence.

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