

Professor Adam Daniel Rotfeld
(Warsaw)

Memory of Nations. About the Right to Forgive and Reconciliation

Preface

Thank you for inviting me to join you in this meeting.

I believe the organizers asked me to share some of my reflections of a more general nature, not necessarily my personal experience concerning the past. As for the latter, dozens of thousand of more reliable testimonies have been already recorded. Mine are not of any special value. There must be many people here, in this room, whose experiences were much more dramatic. Their observations deserve more regard also because these persons were more mature participants and watchers of the war and all that went with it 70 years ago. Therefore I will not bother you with my wartime memories. They would not add any new nor meaningful message.

Anyway, to me, sharing memories is not the most valuable element of such gatherings. In this respect, may I repeat myself, we have plenty of testimonies which are trustworthy, well documented and shattering at the same time. It seems to matter much more, what we do infer from that tragic chapter of the world and mankind history. Which of our perceptions and thoughts are worth remembering for the sake of the future generations as a kind of collective testament? There was a firm belief among the survivors of the Holocaust that it could not happen again. Now, seventy years later, to my bitter regret I know I was wrong. As a child, during the war and in the early post-war years, I was sure that such a paroxysm of hate would inoculate humankind for centuries against any recurrence of a similar disease. I was wrong. We have witnessed mass murders, such as genocide in Indonesia and Cambodia, in Rwanda and Sudan; and ethnic cleansing in former Yugoslavia, in the Caucasus region, in various parts of Africa and Asia. In other words, the experience of the post-war decades persuaded me that the Holocaust was the unprecedented event in the world history, but it did not prevent such crimes happening again.

Ten or fifteen years after the war, I was puzzled by the fact that the conscious memory of what had happened was being suppressed, not only in individual minds but also in public discourse. The suppression occurred in totalitarian states, such as the Soviet Union and its satellites under Stalinist regimes, as well as in democratic ones, in Western Europe, the United States or even in Israel. The reasons must have been multiple and should be, perhaps already are, the object of study in sociology and psychology, both individual and social. It took half a century for the matter to reappear as an important subject of public debate, still very heated and emotional. It has been a case also in Poland, with serious nation-wide discussion on the sorest and most difficult issues. The dispute has related to the moral judgment of collective attitude and behaviors. Similar debates have been held in other countries, but usually within limited elitist circles. Undoubtedly, in Germany the educated elite did enormous work as far as re-educating the general society was concerned. Still – and let us be clear about it – even if this work measured up to the responsibility of Germany and Germans for the Shoah, it did not bring about a complete shift in the popular attitude and has affected mostly the educated elite. Man in the street, millions of them, blotted the truth out of their minds, and preserved their indifference. You need a proof? Last week, on a plane I took to go to a conference in Salzburg, I read *Spiegel*. A German bishop was quoted in the journal: “Certainly, this Holocaust took place in this scope with 6 millions killed. But the abortions must have already exceeded that number.” „*Es hat diesen Holocaust sicher in diesem Umfang mit sechs Millionen Getöteten gegeben. Wir haben diese Zahl durch Abtreibungen aber bereits überschritten.*”; *Der Spiegel* 32/2011, p. 16). With such an incongruous utterance, a bishop seems to voice a more general phenomenon. It is an expression of a quite popular perception of the past. The Holocaust and terminating pregnancy have been equaled. For the Germans the gravest crime of World War II was what they had experienced – bombing of Dresden and Hamburg, sufferings of German women, children and the elderly, being expelled from their homelands... Let us remind here the controversies over memorial sites, such as the Holocaust memorial in Berlin. The German elite has eventually

compelled the rest of the society to confront its past. Yet in the society, the crime of the Shoah, which engulfed 6 millions of innocent victims, remains an abstraction. The memory of the experiences of one's own family seems the only wrong worth remembering and passing on to next generations. In this sense, we can expect genuine debate to come back in the public discourse in Germany and Austria, France and Belgium, Romania, Hungary, in Slovakia, Croatia and many other countries.

Not everything has been discovered and comprehended yet. I have not found the answer, for instance, to the question, how come that the extermination of European Jews was the subject of secret diplomatic correspondence between the leaders of the allied powers, but it never surfaced, not with a single word, in any public document defining the goals of that alliance. I have my own presumptions in this matter, but they are hardly relevant to the present occasion.

Here I want to say how much I admire and appreciate the efforts of a small group of Polish statesmen and intellectuals, who had the courage to take a firm and unequivocal stand in this matter when Poland regained its full sovereignty. I mean Jan Błński and Władysław Bartoszewski. Over twenty years ago they have inaugurated the ongoing debate on the causes of the passivity, if not indifference, of a major segment of the Polish society towards what had been happened in front of their eyes: the tragedy of their neighbors.

Denouncing and judging Germans as the initiators, architects and perpetrators of this crime did not require any bravery. Such denouncing was justified and understandable: without the Germans, without Hitler's genocidal ideology and practice, that crime would not have happened. Yet, the problem of inactive bystanders and active collaborators in the German occupied Europe was tabooed for a long time. A few political figures spoke out about it as clearly and explicitly as the Polish Presidents: Aleksander Kwaśniewski. On the 60th anniversary of the Jedwabne crime he had the boldness to declare: "Here in Jedwabne citizens of the Republic of Poland died from the hands of other citizens of the Republic of Poland. It is people to people, neighbors to neighbors who forged such destiny"; as Lech Kaczyński, who himself inaugurated the action of recalling the memory and of honoring the forgotten heroes – Poles who were saving Jews during the Holocaust. On October 10, 2007, in the Grand Theater in Warsaw, the first ceremony was held at which state decorations were granted to the as yet unacknowledged Poles, who at the risk of their own and their families' lives, had been saving their friends, neighbors or strangers in need. Jan Karski and Irena Sendler were awarded the highest decoration of the White Eagle, while Żegota, the Council for Aid to Jews, was commemorated by the special act passed by the Senate of the Polish Republic on March 14, 2007.

Professor Władysław Bartoszewski observed once ingeniously: "You can await courage and heroism from people, you even ought to expect it. But you have to accept that they are just human. Catholic Church expects sainthood from its congregation, but what percentage of the faithful do in fact meet such expectations? I do not know. But I know that there were and there are such people. They are few. But they do exist. And to me this is reassuring." For many of us Professor Bartoszewski himself is such an reassurance. He is a guiding light or signpost that teaches us decency, even in times when decency requires heroism. Here is the right moment to refer to the momentous role of Pope John Paul II, whose pontificate brought about unprecedented changes in the Catholic church. The decisions of John Paul II are irreversible.

The great and important debate in Poland would not have happened without the books of Jan Gross, Jan Grabowski and Barbara Engelking. Their expertise and civil courage are truly commendable.

Nonetheless, let me steer away from these general reflections and dwell upon the question of whether there is such a thing as collective national guilt and collective responsibility. And if the answer to the question is a 'yes', how can you free yourself from it and who has the right to forgive.

Collective guilt? Collective responsibility?

In recent months some important books have been published in Poland, whose authors bring up these issues: collective historical memory, responsibility and forgiving. I mean Karolina Figura's *Wina narodów. Przebaczenie jako strategia prowadzenia polityki* [The Guilt of nations. Forgiveness as a political strategy], published by Scholar, Gdańsk-Warszawa 2011, and an ample volume by Anna Wolff-Poweska, *Pamięć – brzemień i uwolnienie* [Memory: burden and liberation], being an analysis of the attitude of Germany and of Germans towards their Nazi past, published by Zysk i S-ka, Poznań 2011. None of these important publications is focused on the memory of the Shoah. They both deal with much broader phenomenon.

Guilt of the nations? Forgiveness? These were never before an object of scholarly study – at least not at such a scope and from such a wide historical perspective.

Ivan Krastev, an outstanding Bulgarian intellectual, formulated a question: Does Europe still need any memory politics? And does the policy of forgiveness continue to be a significant element of European identity?

In an attempt to answer these questions, Krastev said: “European identity project is thus based not just on the public apology policy, but also on the policy of silence. Memory and forgetfulness seem to be equally important components of identity”. I have to confess that applying such terms as guilt, apology, forgiveness, to collective notions – such as country or nation – evades my comprehension. I do accept there is a phenomenon called collective memory, which is often falsified, distorted, and/or misused instrumentally to serve some immediate political goals; I also believe that there are states whose nations have reasons to confess collective guilt and responsibility for the crimes committed on behalf of their state and nation. They can be ready to repent, too. It seems natural and understandable. What I find hard to accept is the concept of collective forgiveness. The living cannot forgive in the name of the murdered.

Confession of guilt and acceptance of moral responsibility are enough to initiate a process of reconciliation. Criminal totalitarian regimes created conditions and mechanisms of dehumanization of their victims. The aim of such efforts was to free the perpetrators of any sense of moral responsibility for their crimes. Brought to justice, such criminals always resort to the formula of “obeying orders”, regardless of their country or nationality, whether decades ago during the Nuremberg trials, or recently in The Hague, with the International Tribunal judging the perpetrators of war crimes in former Yugoslavia. The accused obviously believe that an order to commit a crime absolved them from any responsibility, because they were obliged to obey their superiors or their government. This is not true.

By no coincidence, the first German statesman who ventured to confess the guilt of the German people and show remorse, did not commit any crime himself. On the contrary and against the vast majority of his people, he resisted Hitler's machinery of evil and emigrated, to return to his homeland only in the uniform of a Norwegian army officer, which did not win him any popularity in post-war Germany. For lack of words, Willy Brandt spontaneously knelt down and bowed at the Warsaw Ghetto Memorial in Warsaw. The gesture was not appreciated by his compatriots in Germany. It also seemed to embarrass the Polish government, who dismissed it as a minor event, because Brandt knelt down “at the wrong monument”. It took the Germans and the entire world forty years to recognize Brandt's act of repentance as a major symbol. Somehow the picture of kneeling Brandt became an icon of new Germany. The silence proved more eloquent than words. In the retrospect of last four decades, Brandt's civil courage and moral power turned out to be more effective than political acts nor traditional diplomacy. The significance of confessions of guilt declines when they are used as an instrument of political manipulation.

After world war II, many prominent American and European intellectuals discussed grand themes of political history while disregarding completely the Shoah. Hannah Arendt wrote about the “banality of evil”. The destruction of Jews, planned and perpetrated in a civilized European nation's Great Project known as The Final Solution, was the specific culmination of that ‘banality of evil’ and intellectually did not, according to many authors, deserve any deeper study.

The Shoah happened. But was it inevitable? Only fifty years after did distinguished thinkers, Zygmunt Bauman in his *Modernity and the Holocaust* (1989), and three years later, Tony Judt in his important work *Past Imperfect: French Intellectuals, 1944-1956*, confronted the subject. In the interview printed in the 17.08.+23.08.2011 issue 34 of *Polityka*, Professor Bauman said: „It is a mission of the survivors of the Shoah to bring salvation to the world and protect it from repeated catastrophe: to expose those hidden from the world, but still suffering – to prevent another disgracing of civilization.” Bauman recalled an opinion of Raul Hilberg, prominent Holocaust historian, who believed that the structure of the machinery of the Holocaust had not differed from the ‘normal’ organization of the German society. He also quoted a theologian Richard Rubenstein, who said that slavery, wars, exploitation and concentration camps were the expression of Western civilization, just as much as subtle philosophical ideas, fine works of art or music were. With this understanding, the Shoah as an integral part of our civilization, in his words: “bears witness to the advance of civilization, not to its decline”.

I do not agree with this opinion. Still, I consent that progress as such has no moral nor ethical quality. Technological progress in the development of weapons or in the construction of killing centers cannot be qualified as ‘advance of civilization’. The twentieth century ideologies which laid the foundations for the two murderous totalitarian regimes, namely nazism and communism, did not signify the ‘advance of civilization’, but barbarism and regression. Such perfidious play on words is a sort of intellectual trap, as the producers of such puns, sometimes distinguished scholars, reduce their thinking *ad absurdum* on the basis of their own presumptions. To me Professor Bauman is absolutely right, when he says that “responding to nationalism with another nationalism seems like trying to put out a fire with a gasoline” and results inevitably in the emergence of a particularly “immoral variety of morality”.

Role of collective historical memory

Puns and abstract musings are hardly sufficient measures to develop social consciousness which would rule out ‘immoral morality’. Nations and states are elements of historical process. No judgment of what happened, nor any attempt to prevent a ‘repetition of history’, can be based on ignoring the disagreeable and parading only the noble, high brow and praiseworthy. We often hear of the founding myths of a nation: for Serbs it is the defeat in the Battle of Kosovo in 1389, for Ukrainians – the Treaty of Pereyaslav in 1654, for contemporary Russians – their victory over the nazi Germany in 1945. And yet, the Serbian history is not just the Kosovo Polje defeat, and Ukraine had other outstanding leaders beside Bohdan Khmelnytsky, who accepted Russian predominance over his country in Pereyaslav. The victory of Stalinist Russia over nazi Germany did not explain, justify, nor revoke Stalin’s numberless crimes against all nations under Soviet domination, including Russian themselves, who were also persecuted by millions.

In a friendly chat during a coffee break at the conference in Salzburg I already mentioned, on the relations between the EU and Russia, the need to honor Russians killed on the Polish land was brought up. My Russian interlocutor was obviously irritated and said she could not comprehend how come that no one in the West talked about any other victims of the WW2 except for the Jewish victims of the Holocaust, whereas the number of Russians killed was even bigger. It was not right time nor place to discuss it at length, so I just suggested she read Vasily Grossman’s *Life and Fate*, which I consider a major novel of the 20th century. I mentioned this casual conversation, because its tone and message seem to echo at many other occasions. The language of political correctness often blurs new phenomena, such as the weariness with the subject and quest for a national rationale for the lack of interest in the universal significance of the understanding of the Shoah origin. To avoid such quest it is often easy to resort to political rhetoric, full of declarative generalizations, but devoid of any meaning. In the postmodern world even the quest for national identity is doubtful and distrusted.

Nations and societies, states and international community, these are the main pillars and structures of the international order. Mutual relations between a nation and a society, between a state and international structures embracing these states, are beset with all kinds of discrepancies. Sometimes they result in ferocious conflicts. The

search for new answers to old questions concerning the identity of nations and identity of individuals within a national denomination, is not an artificial nor fabricated problem.

Collective memory is a major component of identity. I had an opportunity to realize this while working at the Polish-Russian Group for Difficult Issues. Our joint reflection resulted in the publication of *Białe Plamy - Czarne Plamy. Sprawy trudne w relacjach polsko-rosyjskich 1918-2008* [Blank pages, black pages: difficult issues in Polish-Russian relations], publ. by PISM, Warsaw 2010. We owed the success of our work to the mutual agreement and recognition that all participants had the right to differ while interpreting various facts from our common history. The value of our meditations published in this volume consists in our effort to apprehend various explications of same historical processes from various national perspectives. If finding a common language in our joint research on the relations of Poland with Russia, Ukraine, Lithuania, and Germany, often encounters difficulties, it is due to the lack of symmetry and convergence as far as crucial moments in the memory of Poles, Russians, Germans, and Ukrainians are concerned. The history of Polish-Jewish relations, however specific because Jews did not have their own state, follows the same general rule. In the collective memory of both societies, Polish and Jewish, the same periods and events have been imprinted differently.

Professor Anna Wolff-Powęska, Polish outstanding intellectual, concluded her work on the burden and freedom of memory with the following: “The reality of last years has showed that it is impossible to leave behind the shadow of the past without the dialogue of memories. Respect for your neighbor and partner requires mutuality of listening and understanding. It is essential for human dignity.” She is right to write that “judicious memory cannot be dictated nor trained by a state foreign policy nor any memorial institution. This reconciliation, through listening to the other, ought to come from people.” In other words, steadfast reconciliation between nations involves millions of individual deliberations and willful acts. Hatred and crime arise in human minds and thus, similarly, rapprochement, reconciliation, and empathy for the pain and suffering of the other, need to emerge from millions of individual acts. The greatest evil of the 20th century was produced by colossal sociotechnical projects, whose absurd logic culminated in monstrous crimes. The New Europe, built on the ruins of the two totalitarian systems, was supposed to prevent their reappearance. I trust that this new project of a community of democratic states will succeed, if historical memory is based on truth.

Translated from the Polish by Olga Zienkiewicz