The Gift of Memory

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Based on a talk given in London at a Pax Christi conference on 3 September 1989 marking the 50th anniversary of the outbreak of World War II.

We are told to remember the Second World War, but how? I was born just a few days after Hiroshima and Nagasaki. I have no stories to tell of my own. Maybe that does not matter. Remembering something as awful as the War can only happen later, long after it is over. To remember is not just to sit back and let the facts surface. It is the creative business of putting things together, re-membering, so that we discover for the first time what it was really like. Robert Kee was a RAF bomber who kept detailed diaries of the war, but afterwards they did not turn out to be of much help: 'For all the quite detailed evidence of these diary entries I can't add up a very coherent picture of how it really was to be in a bomber squadron in those days. There's nothing you could really get hold of if you were trying to write a proper historical account of it all ... No wonder it is those artists who recreate life rather than try to recapture it who, in one way, prove the good historians in the end.'[1]

It is like the writing of the gospels. It took forty years before the disciples could tell the story of Jesus, and of how they betrayed him and ran away. It took about the same length of time that separates us from the Second World War before the disciples could cope with remembering what had happened, and so write the first gospel. Like them we are just getting to the point where we can begin to remember.

Primo Levi was an Italian Jew who was at Auschwitz for two years. One day he was rebuked by another prisoner because he was not bothering to wash. Why wash? Because 'the Lager was a great machine to reduce us to beasts, we must not become beasts; that even in this place one can survive, to tell the story, to bear witness; and that to survive we must force ourselves to save at least the skeleton, the scaffolding, the form of civilisation.'[2] So one had to survive so that the memory would not perish. Levi emerged from Auschwitz as a man bursting to tell his story. As he writes in the opening poem of his book *If this is a man,*

I commend these words to you.
Carve them in your hearts
At home, in the street,
Going to bed, rising;
repeat them to your children.

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Or may your house fall apart,
May Illness impede you,
May your children turn their faces from you.

This echoes the *shema,* the daily Jewish prayer of remembrance of the commandments. To remember the Holocaust was the new commandment.

In the camp he had a dream, and it was a common dream, the dream that all the prisoners had. It is of no one listening to their story. They tell what happened, but everyone is indifferent. And indeed when Levi first published his book after the war, no one took much notice. When he wrote what I think was his last book, *The Drowned and the Saved,* before he committed suicide in 1987, he had come to see just how difficult it is to remember. The people who really touched bottom either did not survive or could not remember. The people who really knew the horror left no memories behind them. He wrote:

> We survivors are not the true witnesses....; we are those who by their prevarications or abilities or good luck did not touch bottom. Those who did so, those who saw the Gorgon, have not returned to tell about it or have remained mute, but they are the 'Muslims' (*camp word for 'the helpless'*), the submerged, the complete witnesses, the ones whose deposition would have a general significance.[3]

The *Sonderkommandos* were the special squads of Jews who took people to the gas chambers, removed the bodies, extracted the gold teeth and the women's hair, sorted the shoes and after cremation took out the ashes. The Gestapo regularly eliminated these squads so that no one should survive to tell the story. And those that escaped have almost always been unable to talk.

For all the survivors there was the shame of gradually seeing what they had become, of letting the memories surface. There was the guilt of surviving when the best had died. It was then that so many of the survivors committed suicide. Their memories too are lost. So then it is not easy for us to remember what happened in the Holocaust. We must never forget, but the worst is impossible to remember.

If the Jews find it difficult to remember the Holocaust, what about the Germans? What story can they tell? In 1961 Primo Levi's book *If this is a Man* was published in German translation. In his introduction he said that he wanted the book to have some echo in Germany, so that he could understand them. 'I am alive and I would like to understand you in order to judge you.' (p. 143) It is fascinating to read some of the letters that he got back from Germany but they do not offer a way to understanding. One woman wrote, 'In your preface you express the desire to understand us Germans. You must believe us when we tell you that we ourselves are incapable of conceiving of ourselves or of what we have done. We are guilty.' (p. 150)

In his speech to the Bundestag on the fortieth anniversary of the end

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of the War, President von Weizsacher said:

> All of us, whether guilty or not, old or young, must accept the past. We are all affected by its consequences and liable for it ... Anyone who closes his eyes to the past is blind to the present. Whoever refuses to remember the inhumanity is prone to new risks of infection.[4]

But how? What story can the Germans tell? The usual way that we preserve important memories of the past is by giving them a place in the history of the nation. The nation-state is the subject of our memories. It is the story of the nation that holds a society together. It is the hero of our stories, whether in glorious victory or brave defeat. After the end of the Second World War the British decided that the cause of all the trouble was the story that the Germans told of their past. They had seen how effective German propaganda was and wanted to have a go themselves. We had beaten their armies and now we had to win their minds. What was needed was, in the words of the *British War Zone Review,* December 1945, 'to effect a radical and lasting change of heart in the hard-working, efficient, inflammable, ruthless and war-loving German people.'[5] We had to give them a new history, to 'stamp out the whole tradition on which the German nation had been built.'[6] We had to get back behind Bismarck, back behind German nationalism to the liberal traditions of early 19th century Germany. Typically, we chose a public school headmaster, Robert Birley of Charterhouse, to be one of the people appointed to teach the Germans how to be British. He wrote to *The Times* on VE Day: 'Every means should be taken to persuade the Germans that they themselves had such a tradition, however completely forgotten ... Germany was a land of liberal thinkers.'

This still did not give the Germans a way of remembering the Holocaust. The only available model for remembering the past, the story of the nation-state, simply could not cope with that obscene event. What the War really showed was that that way of telling history was bankrupt. The ultimate consequence of that idolatry of the State was the Concentration Camp. So the story of the nation could not find a place for that memory. It is inconceivable. As the woman wrote, 'we are incapable of conceiving of ourselves or of what we have done.'

The temptation is either to forget that it happened, or to discover that someone else did it. The young blame the old, and the East Germans believe that it was nothing to do with them. A correspondent of *The Financial Times* wrote about celebrations for the 40th anniversary of the end of the War: 'In nearly all accounts, the Nazis and their helpers are portrayed as a strangely alien people who were fought at every turn by upright German anti-fascists. At times it appears to the younger East Germans as if East Germany itself had fought beside their wartime allies to crush the Nazis'.

The easiest thing to do is to let the whole thing sink into oblivion. In 1976 a German educationalist, Dieter Bossman, did a survey of 110

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German schools. He looked at 3042 essays on 'What I have heard about Hitler'. He read that Hitler was an Italian, a Communist, he fought in the 30 Years War, he was the first man on the Moon, he was a CDU deputy in the Bundestag, he attacked his opponents, the Nazis, and sent them to the gas chambers.

What the War showed is that that whole way of telling world history is bankrupt. It leads to Auschwitz. It is that way of telling history that the victors still glory in. In 1982 a Gallup survey showed that 80% of Americans were proud to be American, whereas 80% of Germans were ashamed of their nationality. The history of the nation is deeply important for America, which has been described as 'the world's first and most successful ideological nation'[7]. President Reagan vigorously promoted the use of national and patriotic history as a way of binding American society together and promoting the values of 'family, work, community and religion'.[8] We find it hard to realise that this is a history that blinds us to what we did in the War. We demand of the Germans that they remember their crimes, but we cannot see our own.

On 10 September General MacArthur issued the first 'civil liberties directive' which ordered the Japanese government to impose standards of truthfulness upon the press and radio. The Japanese papers did this, and started to criticize the American use of Atomic bombs. On 21 September a ten-point 'Press Code' was issued which forbade any criticism of the Allies. That is what truthfulness means for the victor.

Recently there have been proposals to open a Museum of German History in Bonn. Maybe it has already been opened. It must be created, said Chancellor Kohl, to teach the young 'where we Germans come from, who we are and where we stand.'[9] The CDU deputy, Alfred Dregger said, 'Without an elementary kind of patriotism which other nations take for granted, our nation will not be able to survive.' And Mrs Thatcher would completely agree. *The Observer* reported on August 20th that she has intervened to tell Kenneth Baker's successor, John MacGregor, that he must insist on there being more time devoted to British history. These patriotic, national tales are those that our modern nation-states need to survive. But the obscenity of the last War is one that explodes that way of telling history. Many Germans have seen that. We have not. We are the ones who suffer from the deeper amnesia. How then are we to remember?

We must turn for help to our Jewish cousins. They are a people constituted by remembrance, from the destruction of the first Temple and the exile through the desecration of the second Temple in the second century BC, the crushing of the rebellion against the Romans in the first century AD, the expulsion from Spain, the pogroms of Russia. Jewish life is saturated with the remembrance of suffering. During the medieval persecutions they would keep what they called *Memor books,* that recorded all that they had suffered. And they have not remembered as a nation-state. There was no national history between 70AD and 1949.

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We, who are trying to learn what other tale can be told apart from that of the nation-state, can perhaps learn from them.

Elie Wiesel tells of two Jews who, in the midst of the terror in Germany, fleeing from the Gestapo, met in a cemetery. And they talk:

> 'What did you do ... before?' 'I taught Jewish children to pray.' 'Really? Then heaven must have sent you to me. Teach me a prayer.' 'Which one?' 'The Kaddish' (that is the prayer of mourning for the dead) 'For whom?' 'For my children. For my mother. For my friends. For my illusions. For my lost years.' His friend made him recite Kaddish not once but ten times. It was not the Kaddish we know. We do not know, I fear we will never know, the Kaddish that two Jews recited in those days in an abandoned cemetery.[10]

The Jews had always remembered the endless sufferings of their people by turning them into prayer. Faced with every disaster they composed new prayers that somehow gave a place and meaning to what had happened. Prayer was that creative act by which they were able to remember. When these two Jews meet and pray in the abandoned cemetery, in the midst of the terror, they say a prayer, a *Kaddish,* that we do not know. Can we find that lost *Kaddish?* Can any prayer make sense of the Holocaust?

Albert Friedlander asks:

> Can there be prayers after the Holocaust? Theodor Adorno stated that no poetry could be written after Auschwitz. Prayer is poetry. Each catastrophe of Jewish life—the Destruction of the Temple, the blood-baths of the Crusades, the pogroms in Eastern Europe—was followed by an outpouring of Jewish prayers which fixed these events in the liturgy and in the memory of the Jewish people. The confessional prayers of the High Holy Days (*slichot*); the mourning chants of the Ninth of Av(*kinot*); the memorial prayers which included the martyrs of all the millenia of Jewish history: this was poetry of Jewish prayer for the times of darkness. Then came Auschwitz; and there were many scholars and rabbis who could no longer say the old prayers for the new event. The Holocaust was different. It was unique.' (p. xix)

Is any prayer creative enough to redeem the event and make it bearable? For many Jews, there has been only silence and the extinction of faith. If prayer was the only way to remember, then the Second World War meant the end of prayer. If what happened could not be told in the framework of the story of the nation-state, for some it even broke apart the story of God's dealings with humanity. There is no story. So can there be any memory?

But Friedlander protests:

> We need words. We need altars and rituals and worship. We know that the enormity of our loss cannot be placed into

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human discourse; the *tremendum* of the *shoah* (the Holocaust) is somewhere beyond the boundary of human understanding. But there comes a time, as it came to Job after his long and brooding silence, when one has to stand up and cry out. That cry is prayer. It addresses God, and it addresses humanity. (p. xx)

It must be possible to remember and so it must be possible to pray. Friedlander and Wiesel composed a beautiful series of meditations, to be used in liturgy in which they took up the stories of the War and placed them in prayer. They did this by placing them within the context of the story of Creation, the Six Days in which God made the World. That is the only story that could possibly bear those tales of destruction. But when they did this, something funny happened to the framework of the tale. The story of creation was disclosed as incomplete, filled with hints of lurking destruction. It was a story of how there was evening and there was morning and then there was evening. Chaos had not been entirely banished. The end of Creation is yet to come. No story just of the past is enough. 'Whatever response is evoked (to these prayers), let us remember that behind all our words is the reality of the time of destruction, and that, ahead of us, lies the time of creation.' (p. 58)

This is above all what we learn from our Jewish brothers and sisters. No tale of the past is enough to bear the weight of this suffering for 'ahead of us lies the time of creation.' The only way to be able to remember the War is to tell a story that reaches out to a time of creation. The gospels teach us the same thing.

The most painful memory that the Church had to face was that it was the disciples themselves who had betrayed Christ, run away from him, denied him at the hour of his death. That was the suppressed memory and St. John shows how remembrance comes as a gift, at the end, when the creative Spirit of God is given. The gospel is filled with hints that during the drama the disciples cannot see what is happening. During the cleansing of the Temple, when Jesus makes his triumphant entry into Jerusalem, they are blind. Afterwards they will remember and then they will see. When Jesus washes Peter's feet, on the night that Peter is to betray him, Peter is furious and says ' "Lord, why do you wash my feet?" And Jesus answered 'What I am doing you do not know now, but afterwards you will understand." ' (13:6)

Now is not the time of understanding. Now, during the crisis, during the betrayal, in the middle of the story, they cannot understand. Jesus says: 'These things I have spoken to you while I am still with you. But the Counsellor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you. Peace I leave you.' (14:25f). The Spirit is the one who brings memory and peace.

At the end of the gospel, after the Resurrection, Jesus appears to the disciples and says 'Peace be with you' and he shows them his hands and

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his side. And he breathes the Holy Spirit upon them and says 'Whose sins you forgive they are forgiven; whose sins you retain they are retained.' It is now that they can see the wounds that they have caused. Now they can remember their betrayal and be forgiven. Now they know for the first time.

The breathing of the Spirit upon the disciples is a deliberate echo of the making of Adam at the very beginning. God takes the soil and forms Adam, and breathes his Spirit into him so that he becomes a living being. Now Jesus breathes the Spirit on the disciples, and makes them new human beings. The creation of humanity is something that is achieved at the end. It is then, in that time of re-creation, that they can dare to remember and to understand. That is the moment of truth and of forgiveness. Up to that moment they had no story to tell that could cope with something as obscene as their betrayal of their Lord. And the last chapter of John is of the healing of memory. Peter sits at a charcoal fire and three times Jesus asks him if he loves him, just as three times at a charcoal fire in the High Priest's palace Peter had denied knowing him. Now he heals that absence of memory, of the time when he forgot who Jesus was and who he himself was. 'Ahead of us lies the time of creation.'

The Baal Shem Tov, a great hasid, said, 'To forget is to prolong the exile and to remember is the beginning of redemption'. Remembrance is a sort of home-coming. It is the common memory that makes the home. And it is only at the end of the gospel, in the gift of memory, that the home, the Church, is formed. For to remember is to re-remember, to assemble the members, the limbs of the Body. In this moment of remembrance they come home to each other.

Can we remember the War as long as the subject of our stories is the Nation? It has been hard for the Germans to remember all that happened in the last War, because the sort of story which helps us to hold on to our identities is that of the nation-state. And that is a story that simply cannot make sense of this obscenity. We may demand of them that they remember but what story are they to tell? We too are still in the grip of just this story, of us in 'our finest hour'. And so we cannot remember what we did at Dresden, at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, every night in raid after raid, in the unimaginable brutality of war. We are like the disciples who could remember how it was the Romans and the Jews who killed Jesus, but it took them 40 years to remember that it was they themselves who killed him too. What we have to do is to remember for the first time what we all did in the War, what humanity did to itself. But to remember that we have to find ourselves one with others, not held in separation and otherness by nationalism. It is only a story that gathers us together, as God forms one humanity out of his children, a story that re-members us, that will let us recall what we have done.

After the War, the British went to Germany as teachers with a message. The Germans had 'to unlearn that it was the state which

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legitimated the individual rather than the other way round.'[11] The Germans had to be freed from idolising of the State. The irony is that our own policies show that this is just what we now do. The policy of nuclear deterrence is an idolatry of the State. As Roger Ruston writes:

> But in so far as we are prepared to transgress *all* moral limits in the service of any person or collectivity, we treat them as a god. In a real sense, usually obscured from us by the modern separation of religion and politics, we have fallen into idolatry. We have made a god of the state.[12]

Our policy of possessing and threatening to use nuclear weapons means that the story we tell of ourselves is one that makes the State absolute and so God. It is a story that therefore ultimately holds us apart from each other and denies our common humanity. Primo Levi said that 'Many people—many nations—can find themselves holding, more or less wittingly, that "every stranger is an enemy" '[13]. And the logical conclusion of that is the Lager, Auschwitz, and the threat to annihilate whole populations of innocent people with nuclear weapons.

It is only an end to the idolatry of the State and the worship of the one true God who would make of us one humanity, that would let us see what we have done and been. Then we can tell a story that promises ahead the time of creation and of memory. Then we will know the Peace of Christ. Then we will remember and be re-membered, One Body.

1 P. Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, London, 1975, p. 311.
2 *If This is a Man*, London, 1969, p. 47.
3 *The Drowned and the Saved*, London, 1988, p. 63f.
4 quoted by J. Ardagh, *Germany and the Germans*, London, 1987, p. 399f.
5 quoted in N. Pronay and K. Wilson ed., *The Political Re-Education of Germany and her Allies after World War II*, London and Sydney 1985, p. 88.
6 *ibid.*, p. 27.
7 Pronay and Wilson, op.cit., p. 11.
8 H.J. Key, 'History Hi-jacked', *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 6. 2. 1987, p. 13.
9 *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 24. 10. 1986.
10 Elie Wiesel and Albert Friedlander, *The Six Days of Destruction, Meditations towards Hope*, Oxford 1988, p. 50.
11 Pronay and Wilson op.cit., p. 1.
12 'The Idols of Security', in Alan Race ed., *Theology Against the Nuclear Horizon*, London 1988, p. 156.
13 op.cit., p. 15.

October Issue : Correction

James Mark: Wittgenstein, Theology and Wordless Faith

p. 432, Note 3. ll.1—2: The given Pears and McGuinness translation of the quotation from Wittgenstein should read 'what we cannot **speak** about we **must** pass over in silence' (**bold** here indicates the corrections). We apologise to the translators as well as to our readers.

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