

Remembering Europe's Heart of Darkness:

Holocaust memory in post-war Europe, Tallinn 19 September 2019

First I want to thank the organisers of this conference for offering me the opportunity, and privilege, to share some of my thoughts and insights with you. I am humbled. And nervous. I was asked to talk about how the Holocaust has been dealt with in post-war Europe, reflecting on the difference between the development in the East and the West, which is not an easy task. I shall do my best, but I warn you that in doing so, in providing a general overview, I will necessarily have to oversimplify some things. I hope you will bear with me.

When I, as a young historian started to work with the history of the Holocaust two decades ago, it was at a time when the belief in multilateralism, international human rights and humanitarian law – what we generally call the „liberal world order“ – was still very strong. It was after the intervention in Kosovo and before 9/11 and the war in Iraq. At that time, around the turn of the century, there was no aggressive Russia – at least so it appeared -, no cyber attacks, and no Trump-administration.

It was a time when countries in Europe would examine their pasts in order to correct historical injustices by identifying and acknowledging them, and, in some cases, also apologizing for them. It was a time when memory politics became a general European phenomenon, and states would reveal their moral guideposts by opening museums and memorials, and by providing funds for new educational programs and activities.

It is in within this general development that we can explain how around 40 states could agree to keep alive the memory of the Holocaust during a meeting in Stockholm almost 20 years ago and sign a paper, the Stockholm Declaration, with the aim to remember, teach and support research about the Holocaust.

But how could it be that almost 20 years ago a group of countries could have agreed to keep the memory of the Holocaust alive? And why did it happen then and not before? How shall we explain that the subject of the Holocaust and its relevant lessons, after decades of neglect, became part of the agenda, curricula and of the memory culture of so many European states? During this short presentation I shall try and give you an answer.

Since 1945, the memory of Holocaust has been an animating element in European culture, at first only sporadically, then more systematically, and, in the last couple of decades, with an increased intensity.

In the beginning there was no Holocaust, stated the German Holocaust historian Raul Hilberg in 1988. For us today this appears a peculiar statement, to put it mildly. But what Hilberg meant back then was that when the crimes of the Nazi regime became widely known by the end of the war, they were not understood, nor were they fully grasped in the decades that followed. The Holocaust, not for the victims, but as a subject of study and public memory, was essentially ignored during the 1950s and 1960s, a time when Europe, only just recovering from the war, needed to devote its energies to cultivating the liberal-democratic culture of the optimism, development, and progress and to defend its position in the developing chill of the

cold war. That is why in the beginning there was not Holocaust. There was no recognition of the specific crime and its specific victims.

From the 1960s onward, however, the immediate neglect was turned into an increased interest and acknowledgement of this particular crime. In West Germany the trigger was a series of trials prompted by investigations into Nazi war crimes on the Eastern front. The first case was in Ulm in 1958, with proceedings against members of wartime 'Einsatzgruppen' (SS-mobile killing units). This case was followed by the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem, and then came the Frankfurt Auschwitz Trial, between December 1963 and August 1965.

During these proceedings, for the first time, camp survivors had the opportunity to speak publicly about what they had witnessed. As David Pendas notes the Frankfurt Auschwitz trial has to be understood as a political trial. Rendering justice on Auschwitz raised important contemporary political questions. And „the Cold War was a constant presence in the courtroom, but so too were questions about the nature of West German democracy and the relationship between the German past and the German present' (Pendas 2006: 2-3). The Holocaust became known during these trials, among the public and at political level.

The real transformation in Germany however was provoked by a series of events in the following decades. Context is important here. We have to go back to the late 1960s and early 70s. The Six-Day War between Arabs and Israelis in 1967, Chancellor Brandt's kneeling at the Warsaw Ghetto memorial in 1970, the Munich Olympics in 1972, when Israeli athletes were murdered, and the airing of the tv-series *Holocaust* in 1978-79 with more than 220 million viewers worldwide, all

contributed to a shift in the public memory and awareness of the Holocaust. For the German case the transformation in public memory was considerable. While in 1968, 471 school groups visited Dachau, by the end of the 1970s the annual total was approaching ve thousand

A complex series of events and social and political changes fostered the process towards a different public memory of the Holocaust, not only in Germany. Other Western European countries followed the same pattern. In Austria, a serious investigation of the country's experience with Nazism began in the 1980s when the then Presidential candidate Kurt Waldheim's activities in the Wehrmact's brutal occupation of Yugoslavia were revealed. Switzerland too, was late to admit the restrictive policy towards refugees before and during the war, and to acknowledge the Swiss requested use of J-passports as 'an intolerable racial discrimination'.

For the Netherlands, facing the dark side of Dutch wartime behavior began in 1965 with Jacob Presser's book *Ondergang*. This was the first full history of the extermination of Dutch Jewry and was followed by television documentaries and other programs about the years of the Nazi occupation. In the same year, the Dutch government offered to contribute to the memorial at Auschwitz for the first time.

As in Germany, the trials of the early 1960s triggered Dutch interest in Holocaust history. Every generation writes its own version of history. The postwar baby-boomers wanted to confront the silence of their parents. But even if the baby-boomers shed new light on Dutch occupation history, it took a long time before the full implications of Dutch behavior during the war would actually sink in. Not until 1995 did a reigning head of state, Queen Beatrice, publicly acknowledge the tragedy

of the Dutch Jews. And it was perhaps only with the image of armed Dutch UN peacekeepers passively watching while Serbian militia groups rounded up and murdered thousands of Muslims at Srebrenica in 1995 that the message finally got through: the Holocaust happened here, we did nothing to stop it, and we may even have contributed to it. A long postponed national debate about the price the Dutch paid for their cooperation and obedience could finally begin.

As in The Netherlands, the Germans issued the orders to deport and round-up Jews in Austria, Switzerland, Norway, and Belgium, but they could never have done so without the collaboration of local authorities, policemen, and bureaucrats. In fact, the Germans issued the orders in all of the occupied countries except from one: France. In France, the Vichy regime itself gave orders. It helped the Germans by initiating collaborative projects of its own, such as the introduction of 'Jewish laws' in 1940 and 1941, without German pressure to do so. The Vichy regime even rounded up Jews on French soil.

For this reason, it took the perspective gained by a generation with no direct relation to the Vichy regime, before France could face its active role in the Holocaust. This affected not only France, but the whole of Europe, not because France behaved the worst, but rather because, until 1989, France mattered most in Europe.

As in Germany, the changes in France came with a series of trials during the 1990s. The first of these was that of Paul Touvier in 1994. Touvier had been an activist in Vichy's wartime *Milice* and stood accused of killing seven French Jews in June 1944. Touvier was not himself a major figure, but his trial served as a substitute for others that never took place.

The prosecution of another major figure, Maurice Papon, who served as police chief in Paris under de Gaulle after the war, was also to set an example. Due to insufficient evidence, Papon was not punished, but the trial made it clear that Vichy-France was not a closed historical parenthesis. People from the Vichy regime continued to serve in the French administration after the war, and their crimes had gone unacknowledged and unpunished.

The French president, Francois Mitterand, was himself an example of France's double standard. In his very person, Mitterand incarnated the national inability to speak openly about the shame of the occupation (Judt 2006: 819). Everything changed when Mitterand left office. In 1995, on the 53rd anniversary of the round-up of Parisian Jews, France's newly installed president, Jacques Chirac, broke the taboo and acknowledged his country's role in the Holocaust.

In analyzing these national cases, we can sum up some of the factors important for the changes in attitudes towards the killing of European Jewry during Second World War. Modern culture and communication technology must be considered as important factors in providing the Holocaust a central place in European public memory, as demonstrated by the success of and interest in the television series *Holocaust*. The trials, and the many national debates they provoked, especially in France and in Germany, were also important, primarily because they provided an opportunity to examine the past again and to retell history, but also because the trials, in and of themselves, were signs of the political will to confront the crimes. Moreover, there was the influence of new research based on new research questions, as illustrated by the Dutch case.

Turning to Eastern Europe, if we look at the response to the Polish American historian Jan Gross' book *Neighbors. The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne*, published in 2001, it becomes clear just how painful retelling the history of the extermination of the Jews remains in many European countries. This is the case not only in Western Europe, but also, and maybe even particularly, in Eastern Europe. Gross describes how 1600 Jews were slaughtered during the Second World War, not by the Nazis but by their Polish neighbors. The book prompted a heated debate in Poland about relations with the country's Jewish population. It also challenged the national narrative about the war and provoked a painful process of reinterpreting Polish history – a process that involved acknowledging Polish anti-Semitism.

Gross' book is an example of how the history of the Holocaust impinges on European society in a very specific way, raising a series of fundamental questions. The various reactions to Gross's book in Poland are important in their own right. Official Poland still finds it hard to confront this history, and perhaps even harder today than 20 years ago.

Poland is not the only post-communist country with difficulties coming to terms with this particular past. In Hungary, the country with the second largest Jewish population in Europe, the history of the deportation of Hungarian Jews is still a controversial theme in national debate, where the current government is being accused of downplaying national responsibility. In this sense, interest - be that research, education or remembrance - in the Holocaust can be seen as part of a grieving process -- not particularly pleasant and perhaps even unwanted-- but it

does represent an immense potential to drag Europeans into the same historical drama.

An illustration of how powerful this drama is – and how full of potential -- for developing a common European public memory is the Holocaust monument in Berlin. Here the crimes of the Nazi regime and their collaborators are remembered through the stories of six different European families from six different European countries, all with the same fate: murder at the hand by the Nazis. Walking around the exhibition connected to the Monument, visitors learn about how many Jews are estimated to have been killed in every European country. For Poland, the number is between 2.9 and 3.1 million; Germany 160.000 - 165,000; France 76.100 - 77.100; Norway 765; Denmark 116. The figures, together with the family photographs and, indeed, the exhibition as a whole, are a testimony to a part of Europe that no longer exists

Every attempt to understand how this Europe was destroyed can contribute to the process of integrating the Holocaust into a specific European memory, centered around the same crime, the same history, and with the same moral message: 'never again'. In Europe, learning about the Holocaust through films, television soap operas, documentaries, books, and exhibitions is part of an attempt to understand this fundamental historical problem -- this common legacy of European nation states.

It is by the other that we can recognize all things European, says Swedish historian Bo Stråth. It is through negative examples, that we can become aware of the characteristics of European civilization. In this sense, the Holocaust acts as a benchmark for what Europe should be and for what it must avoid becoming. The

Holocaust sounds a warning against nationalism, against xenophobia, against ethnic cleansing, against persecution on the grounds of culture, race, or religion. It warns against the direction in which rational thought, science and technology can take a society and indeed an entire civilization.

Or, as Hungarian writer Imre Kertész reflects, the Holocaust is a trauma of European civilization, and the decisive question for this civilization is whether this trauma will live on in European societies in the shape of culture or in the shape of neurosis, in the shape of creation, or in the shape of destruction.

I thank you for your attention.