

Pre-workshop comment

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At the time of the collapse of Communism, there was a readily available, easily usable and successful frame to make sense of one's past. The alleged memories of child abuse, the issue of recovered memories, made so prominent by the second wave of feminism, the reemergence of Freud's seduction theory, Holocaust memories and the outpouring of testimonies, the popularity of the theory of trauma, post-traumatic shock disorder, all these developments provided a model for the survivors – most of them silent survivors – of the communist decades, to make sense of their own pasts. Communism withered away at the moment when claiming the return of the allegedly repressed seemed to make sense in different parts of the world; when such a claim provided a chance to redescribe the recent past and such an explanation offered a shield to protect one from the responsibility of non-resistance, of collaboration, of long decades of silence. Communism contributed in turn to the further solidification of the returned repressed. (Immediately following the fall of the Berlin Wall, Alice Miller, the noted Polish-born Swiss expert on child abuse, published her *Breaking Down the Wall of Silence, the Liberating Experience of Facing Painful Truth*. In the book according to her own words, 'Psychohistorical analyses of such brutal tyrants as Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin, and Nicolae Ceausescu show the obvious links between the horrors of their childhoods and the horror they inflicted on the world'.)

By the time of the collapse of Communism there was a discursive frame, available to any self-reflexive individual who, at the moment of the unforeseen and surprising collapse of Communism was confronted with the uncomfortable task of making sense of a past which somehow did not seem to make sense. The survivors of Communism, in their quest for individual and collective explanation, discovered, and started to compete with these highly successful, and by the beginning of the 1990s, respectable discursive models of remembrance. A frame became available in which claims about the relationship between present states and past events made legitimate, supposedly **scientifically authenticated** sense.

What counts is not so much competitive victimology rather than survivorship – under this description, most of us are survivors: survivors of incest, mass rape, domestic violence, of the Holocaust, second, third generation Holocaust, the Armenian genocide, of Communism, *Le Syndrome de Vichy* (published in 1987 with the subtitle, *History and Memory in France since 1944*) the survivors of history, carrying thick secrets in ourselves. 'Memoro-politics' – wrote Ian Hacking – 'is above all the politics of the secret, of the forgotten event that can be turned, if only by strange flashbacks, into something monumental. It is a forgotten event that can be memorialized in a narrative of pain. We are concerned less with losing information than with hiding it' (*Rewriting the Soul* p. 214). 'One feature of modern sensibility is dazzling in its implausibility: the idea that what has forgotten is what forms our character, our personality, our soul.'

The Holocaust archives, the oral history collections clearly served as a model, the standard, the rival for most of the similar post-Communist efforts. (At this very moment, the House of Terror in Budapest is being immersed in an effort to conduct more than 30,000 oral history interviews on the crimes of communism to compete with Spielberg's archive, with the oral history collections of the Holocaust Memory Museum in Washington, with the repository of the Yad Vashem in Jerusalem; to prove that the crimes of Communism were not just commensurate with the crimes of the Nazis, but they went deeper, forced a longer silence, left the survivors with more serious emotional problems which are more difficult to cope with than the memories of the camps. But this truly remarkable outpouring and overproduction of memories and recollections are intimately connected to secrecy, the inability to speak, to silence. It is supposed that in order to properly remember, instead of understanding, we need to experience the past. In the words of two Hungarian born French

psychoanalysts: what haunts us, are not the dead, but the gaps left within us by the secrets of others, that should be uncovered.

Around the time the last political prisoners were quietly released from the Soviet prisons in 1989, the year when Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago* could be officially published for the first time in the Soviet Union, there was already a well-established way in which people even in the eastern part of Europe could present themselves to themselves and also to others as survivors of bad times, who had just regained their voice belatedly, after the fact, who had been forced into muteness, into disguise, collaboration, and only the hidden transcript of their real self could be preserved in a disfigured form under the surface. (The journal *History and Memory* was launched in 1989 in Jerusalem and Los Angeles, the introductory essay of *Les Lieux de Mémoire* was published in the same year in English in *Representations*, and in 1989, Pawel Lewicky, the cognitive psychologist in connection with implicit memory wrote: 'What you don't know about what you know affects your behaviour more than you think it does'.

As a consequence of long decades of politically motivated, ideologically sanctioned, centrally censored, officially published writing of history in the Eastern part of Europe, memory became seen as a tool to unmediated access to the past; what was considered by historians as a dubious source for verification, became exalted by the larger public as the source of authenticity, even spirituality, divine presence of the past, the Truth that has the power to openly and bravely contradict documents that came into light from the depths of archives until now guarded and surely forged by the authorities, who wanted to get their own version of history produced. Memory became hailed as the tool of retroactive resistance against the tyranny of facts. The sensibility of the times in the West, with its efforts to foreground mourning, healing, witnessing, testimonials, contributed to the emergence of the overproduction of until then allegedly lost traumatic memories in the former Communist world. 'The existence of profound disbelief is an indication that memories are real', as Renee Fredrickson claimed in *Repressed Memories: A journey to Recovery from Sexual Abuse* in 1992.

In East and Central Europe we have a scarcity of visible objects, places, relics that are connected to the Fall (of the Wall, of Communism). There were no real revolutions in any of the former Communist countries, just negotiations and dubious-looking compromises behind closed doors, round-tables, alleged coups, peaceful transitions, democratic elections. It is not quite possible to narrate heroic stories about ordinary, orderly elections, to maintain the memory of heroic deeds connected to privileged sites that are related to nothing else, simply to the first democratic election. Apart from Germany, where indeed the Wall fell, and the ruins, fragments of the Wall, or the photograph of Rostropovich playing the cello in front of the Wall, serve as memorials of the Fall, we do not have memorials, monuments, commemorating the transition, we do not even have the right, suggestive term for the moment of the change. The Old Regime and the New are somehow clearly separated but we do not quite know the way to get hold of it; even after twenty years we are uncertain about the nature of the changes. We cannot point at the key of the Bastille as the proof of momentous changes as the relic of our own involvement of the dismantling of the Old Regime. We did not take part in it, we were left out, we missed the moment, we cannot remember what happened, we do not have memories that would make sense. 'Our ability to recall is inextricably lined with our assumptions about how the world is.' And if there is a visible incongruence between the claims of an alleged revolution which undid the Communist regime and the present state of the world, there is no context in which to remember. As Moses Finley, the scholar of Greek antiquity stated: '[memory] is controlled by relevance' ('Myth, Memory, and History', in *History and Theory*, 4, no. 3. 1965, p. 297).

As François Furet writes in his *Passing of an Illusion*, compared with 'Napoleon, who founded a state that would last for centuries, the Bolshevik Revolution ended up by leaving nothing behind, neither principles, nor laws. Nor institutions, nor even a history' (p.viii.). Now, how can you remember the void, how can one find a historical context for the recollections of one's life outside history? Communism had no normal history, only promises; it could not be held responsible for anything, as it has never been fully itself – yet – it has always just been on its way to becoming its real self. Life was lived out of context. Naturally, all of us, who were born before the middle of the 1980s, have

memories of our lives during the time when the communist regimes ruled, but those recollections exist outside a firm, tangible frame, in which the recalled incidents would find a distinct intelligible location in a normalized historical continuity. Overnight the promises have gone; the alleged future became part of the past, and how can one remember the future that never was?

For John Locke a person is constituted not by a biography but by a remembered biography. We have told lives as in Plutarch's *Lives*. But as Allan Young contends in *The harmony of Illusions; Inventing Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder*, 'Our sense of being a person is shaped not simply by our active memories; it is also a product of our **conceptions of memory**' (p.4). What happens then, when we have no biography to remember, but still have a definite conception about how memory works? No real memories but a firm knowledge about Memory to frame what we do not have. ? Let me give you an example, an example that is relevant both to the memory of the Holocaust and the memory of Communism.

The Holocaust remained a non-issue in the Communist world even after the discovery of Auschwitz in Israel and in the West from the first third of the 1960s onwards. In Communist history writing, the concentration camps in Poland, Czechoslovakia and the GDR became retrospectively populated only with political prisoners, anti-fascists, mainly of Communist persuasion. Even the dead Jews became eliminated from the camps. The silence that surrounded the fate of Central European Jewry was not just officially induced; it would be highly misleading to characterize the situation as Kundera does it in his *Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, as if 'the struggle of man against power [were] the struggle of memory against forgetting'. No, there was a willing collaboration here; neither those in power, nor the surviving victims of Holocaust wanted to remember, to keep the memories of victimization alive. The Holocaust remained a taboo almost until the very end in most countries of Central and Eastern Europe.

Communism collapsed and buried under its ruins the promise that it would save the world from the return of evil, of fascism. Extreme right-wing parties became resurrected, with open anti-Semitic slogans, and inciting together with high-profile neo-Nazi groups invaded the public space, and the unprepared, surprised, anti-fascists and their children of Jewish origin, remained there almost alone, frightened and helpless. At this point, large numbers of these people and their children discovered the Holocaust; not the once buried personal experiences, the personal loss of human dignity, the lost relatives, the smoke of the gas chambers, the barely imaginable horrors, **but** the western construct of traumatic Holocaust memories, the construct of the unique, unrepresentable event, a tapestry woven from Paul Celan's poems, the Yad Vashem, the Washington Holocaust museum, the emblem of the unspeakable, the long-buried secret. By the time of the collapse of the Communist regime, the Holocaust became a highly respectable western import, a usable frame in which one's lost life under another horrible regime could be readily reframed.

As Alain Finkelkraut could write already in 1980, in his *Imaginary Jew*. 'The Judaism I had received was the most beautiful present a post-genocidal child could imagine. I inherited a suffering to which I had not been subjected, for without having to endure oppression, the identity of the victim was mine [...] without exposure to real danger, I had heroic stature; to be a Jew was enough to escape the anonymity and identity indistinguishable from others and the dullness of an uneventful life [...] I possessed a considerable advantage over the other children of my generation: the power to dramatize my biography' (Alain Finkelkraut, *The Imaginary Jew*, trans. Kevin O'Neill and David Suchoff, Lincoln and London, 1994; Originally published in 1980 p. 7).

There is a strange revival in Central Europe, the return of a figure who never was; the generic and authentic Holocaust victim, he who has never before thought of himself as one of them; the survivor of double traumas: that of fascism and of Communism, which forced him to repress the memories, and trust fake prophets who offered false promises. After the collapse of Communism, the Holocaust provided an 'ecological niche' that could be readily occupied by those who, having no other choice, by its help, could bracket the decades of Communism, that did not lead anywhere, almost as if it had never been. The Holocaust provided a solution at the moment when in the wake of existential anxieties it became imperative to find a new past on which a new, usable, seemingly continuous, although pastless identity could be built.

The example of the generic Holocaust survivor provided a fitting model for remembering and making sense of another tragedy: the horrors of Communism. The citizens of the former Communist world wanted to see themselves and be treated with the same respect as the real or imagined Holocaust victim or the survivor of child molestation. How the world relates historically and morally to the crimes of Communism is judged according to the standards of Holocaust memory. The aim is to judge (the crimes and the perpetrators), not to have them and us acknowledge and understand the past.

I do not want to argue that memory cannot be a useful tool in approaching the past, that we have to return to the practice of history writing as historians used to practice it under the spell of French and German positivism. As the philosopher, Ian Hacking, convincingly argued in his *Rewriting the Soul*, in the course of the 19th century, new sciences emerged, among them the sciences of memory – neurology, psychology, psychoanalysis – real, positive sciences, which were and still are not on the imaginary but on the 'knowledge-side' in the Foucauldian classification. It would not be necessary to draw a strict dividing line between history and the sciences of memory, characterizing one as a positive, factual science that aims at understanding, and the other as an ethical, aesthetic, or poetic but untrustworthy view of reality. Adherents of both sides accuse the other of an epistemological deficit, denying the possibility of positive knowledge one can gain from cultivating the other approach. Taking the knowledge, the sciences of memory seriously – and not using them as emotional political or moral weapons – should not mean abandoning positive knowledge; in fact, without proper knowledge of the *facts* of memory it is difficult to approach history in a way that would take ethical conduct into serious consideration. The aesthetical-rhetorical, and ethical representation of the past is not and should not necessarily be in conflict with historical knowledge; one is in fact in a close proximity of the other. Historians have learned, despite the dead-ends of trauma focused pseudo ethical claims of certain trauma and testimony experts that historical study can and should go beyond the reconstruction of causal relations, that intentions, interpretations, representations, self-fashioning are an integral part of the knowledge of history. By taking the sciences of memory seriously the historian may inquire into the 'indeterminacy of the past' without giving up the ambition of describing the past as it really was. According to the insights one may derive from the sciences of memory, the past is not indeterminate because it is not possible to give credence to documents, but because past actions are always newly described under ever changing new descriptions. Actions are intentional under some descriptions and not others. As the British philosopher Elizabeth Anscombe wrote: 'When we remember what we did, or what other people did, we may also rethink, redescribe, and refeel the past. These redescriptions may be perfectly true of the past; that is, they are truth that we now assert about the past. And yet, paradoxically, they may not have been true in the past, that is, not truth about intentional actions that made sense when the actions were performed. The past, in this sense, is revised retroactively'.