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Memory

A HISTORY



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CHAPTER SIX

Trauma, Memory, Holocaust

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In Ruth Klüger's 2001 memoir *Still Alive: A Holocaust Girlhood Remembered*, the author recounts a scene that took place in Auschwitz-Birkenau in 1944, where, as a thirteen year old, she was imprisoned with her mother after being deported from Vienna via Theresienstadt:

It was the time of the transports from Hungary. The camp next to ours was suddenly full of Hungarian women. They had come directly from home and were uninformed. We talked to them through the barbed wire in fast, hectic sentences, without telling them much.... There was a woman who spoke excellent German and her daughter, about my age.... My mother identified right away with this other mother, who worried about the whereabouts of her husband and son. They had been separated on the ramp, she said. My mother remembered that she still had a pair of woolen socks, ran to fetch them, and prepared to toss them over the wire. I interfered:

I can throw better than you, give them to me. My mother refused, threw the socks, and they fell short, ending up stuck on the top of the wire, where no one could reach them. Regrets on both sides. A futile gesture. Next day the Hungarian women were gone, their camp empty like a ghost town, our socks still impaled on the wire.¹

Written decades after the events, this scene in Auschwitz-Birkenau narrates a small, emblematic episode in the author's own life story while simultaneously recalling a precise moment in collective history—the sudden, mass killing of Hungarian Jews late in the war. In setting an intimate encounter against the backdrop of genocide, Klüger provides an image for the traumatic rupture of the Holocaust: the juxtaposition of the empty camp and the still-present socks entangled in barbed wire captures both the ungraspable murder of the Hungarians and the mnemonic trace that reminds us of their fate. Klüger's powerful text—at once an account of her experience and a commentary on the postwar world's attempts to grapple with the legacies of the Nazi genocide—thus brings together in the surprising figure of a pair of socks the three terms I want to reflect on here: trauma, memory, and the Holocaust.

Besides mourning the loss of the particular, unnamed victims on the other side of the barbed wire, this scene also offers a more general expression of the paradoxical dynamic that marks the relation between memory and trauma in the context of genocide. As theorists from Sigmund Freud and Pierre Janet to Cathy Caruth and Shoshana Felman have taught us, trauma is precisely that which has no place in conventional narrative forms and yet persists nonetheless in the haunting aftermath of the events as an unwelcome and uncontrollable reminder.² Trauma is, in Caruth's resonant phrase, an "unclaimed experience" that returns to haunt us precisely because we were not prepared for it and

¹ Ruth Klüger, *Still Alive: A Holocaust Girlhood Remembered* (New York: Feminist Press, 2001), 103.

² See Cathy Caruth, ed., *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995).

have no pre-established means of processing it psychically.³ To her credit, Klüger does not see the need to say this directly: rather, she allows her text to *perform* the paradoxes of traumatic memory. While the gas chambers remain off stage in her account, the impact of the murders that took place there persists, unprocessed and stuck, like the socks “impaled on the wire.”

Trauma, memory, and the Holocaust—as Klüger’s intelligent and moving memoir confirms, these three terms seem to belong self-evidently together. Indeed, who could question the link between the historical event of the Nazi genocide of European Jews, the individual and collective suffering it entailed, and the evident need for remembrance of that suffering and the event’s horrors? That link has been so clearly engrained in collective consciousness that it even possesses its own slogan: *Never again!*—a call to preserve the trauma of genocide in memory in order to ward off repetition and guide action in the present. The ethical imperative to reflect on the conjunction of trauma, memory, and the Holocaust remains powerful. Yet, I want to suggest, the questions this constellation of terms raises are more complicated than they appear at first. Historical and philosophical reflection on the meaning of the genocide and its aftermath is necessary to prevent the conjunction of trauma, memory, and the Holocaust from degrading into common sense and losing the disruptive force it ought to possess. How we think about these keywords matters, as Klüger herself is very much aware, not just because we want to get the story straight about such a weighty past, but also because our conception of their relation has real-world implications in the present and future.

Let’s start rethinking this conjunction by historicizing what might seem to be the most empirically obvious of the three terms: the Holocaust. Ongoing scholarly research has sought to determine when a broad public recognition of the particularity of the genocide of Jews emerged,

³ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

but one thing is clear: the English word “Holocaust” only belatedly became the singular, capitalized name of an event considered unique, and this belated naming probably took place sometime in the 1960s. The issue is not just one of semantics; now-classic historical surveys of different national contexts by Peter Novick, Tom Segev, and Annette Wieviorka have sought to demonstrate that the perception of the genocide’s singularity took decades to emerge.⁴ For instance, the sociologist Jeffrey Alexander has traced how the events of the Shoah were initially subsumed under the more general concept of Nazi “atrocities,” and only later recognized as a policy driven by a genocidal intention.⁵ Recent scholarship has sought to complicate that now-familiar postwar narrative: books by Hasia Diner on the United States and François Azouvi on France, among others, have contested the idea that in the first fifteen years after the end of World War II there was no collective recognition of the treatment of Jews as a distinct and particularly extreme facet of Nazi policy separate from the waging of the war.⁶

Yet, despite this new, emerging consensus, it still seems evident that broad public consciousness of the events of the Nazi period did change starting in the early 1960s, and that that change had something to do with the powerful international impact of the Eichmann Trial in Jerusalem. That 1961 event—parts of which were broadcast on television in the United States and elsewhere, while Israelis followed it in the courtroom and on the radio—brought a large number of victim-witnesses into the public sphere and helped create both a new identity (the Holocaust survivor) and a new genre of discourse (oral testimony). The trial was also explicitly staged by the Israeli state to create an understanding

⁴ Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (New York: Houghton Mifflin); Tom Segev, *The Seventh Million: The Israelis and the Holocaust*, trans. Haim Watzman (New York: Picador, 2000); and Annette Wieviorka, *The Era of the Witness*, trans. Jared Stack (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006).

⁵ Jeffrey C. Alexander et al., *Remembering the Holocaust: A Debate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

⁶ Hasia R. Diner, *We Remember with Reverence and Love: American Jews and the Myth of Silence after the Holocaust, 1945–1962* (New York: New York University Press, 2009); François Azouvi, *Le mythe du grand silence: Auschwitz, les Français, la mémoire* (Paris: Fayard, 2012).

of the Nazi genocide of Jews as unique and unprecedented, an understanding meant to shore up support for Israel as a necessary bulwark against future holocausts. Discussion about the afterlife of the Holocaust and the periodization of its memory will no doubt continue, but for our purposes here, the primary lesson of this scholarly debate about the origins of Holocaust consciousness is simply that what we now take for granted—that people have always recognized something called “the Holocaust” as a unique, isolated event—is the outcome of postwar histories that have played out differently in diverse national contexts.

In contrast to the emergence of the word “Holocaust” and the conception of the uniqueness of the Nazi genocide, which are belated in relation to the events, the concept of trauma preexisted National Socialist crimes. Recent genealogies show the category of trauma emerging out of what Roger Luckhurst—inspired by the science studies scholar Bruno Latour—calls a “knot” of overlapping modern discourses and histories in the late nineteenth century: from the invention of the railroad to the practices of insurance companies and developments in medicine and science.⁷ In Freud’s influential theories of the early twentieth century, trauma vacillates between being an intra-psychic crisis—related, naturally, to sexuality and illicit desires—and the product of external histories of extreme violence.⁸ Even when mass violence is at stake, it is of course not the Holocaust that sparked Freud’s thinking, since Freud, although a refugee from Nazism in the last months of his life, did not live to see the genocide; rather, for him, it was World War I and the problem of shell-shocked soldiers that raised the issue of trauma. Even after World War II, it was not uniquely the Holocaust that drove the reemergence of trauma in the 1970s and 1980s, but once again another war—the Vietnam War—as well as more intimate forms of domestic abuse that propelled the establishment of the category of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in 1980.

⁷ Roger Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

⁸ Ruth Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

Concern with memory is likewise a phenomenon that long precedes the Holocaust—as this volume richly demonstrates—and that will no doubt long outlive the Holocaust’s centrality to European and North American cultures. Even in the twentieth century, the literary work of Marcel Proust, the psychoanalysis of Freud, the philosophy of Henri Bergson, the art historical investigations of Aby Warburg, and the sociology of Maurice Halbwachs—all of which encompass intensive reflection on memory—predate the Holocaust. As with the category of trauma, World War I had also already placed questions of commemoration at the forefront of concern. The memory boom that has been ongoing since the 1980s in public culture and academic scholarship certainly correlates with increasing interest in the events and legacies of the Nazi genocide, but it cannot be seen as the direct outcome of that interest; once again, diverse forms of memory coexist and feed off of each other. Although traumatic events have often been at stake in the memory boom, they have not been limited to the Holocaust and have included other wars as well as private and public forms of suffering.

My very brief genealogy of these three keywords has meant to suggest that the self-evident link between trauma, memory, and the Holocaust is the outcome of histories proceeding on different tracks that have ended up—contingently—knotting together. Indeed, Luckhurst’s description of trauma as a “knot” or “hybrid assemblage” seems even more germane for the culturally powerful conjunction we are exploring here. Taking a historical tack helps us to see the current conception of trauma, memory, and the Holocaust as the outcome of overlapping and crisscrossing—but still relatively autonomous—histories that came together at a particular moment. There was no guarantee that things would come together as they have; other knots could have been and sometimes were created. While such a moment of convergence cannot be dated precisely without speculation and simplification, a case might be made for the early 1990s as the time when trauma, memory, and Holocaust became definitively bound to each other in both scholarly and public discussions. For example, 1993 was described

by the ABC news program *Nightline* as "The Year of the Holocaust," a rather crude formulation meant to refer to the near simultaneity of the opening of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, the global success of *Schindler's List*, and the apparent return of genocide to Europe in the former Yugoslavia.⁹ It was also around this time that both trauma studies and memory studies became recognized academic fields of research in the humanities and that trauma and memory began to saturate the public sphere in the form of memoirs and sometimes lurid television talk shows.

Historicizing the conjunction of trauma, memory, and the Holocaust is not meant to suggest, however, that the conjunction should simply be put aside or that it fails to capture critical ethical issues. Rather, my point is that reflecting on its contingency can lead us to recognize the contingency and fragility of responses to events of extreme violence and to ask about other possible ways of conjugating the key terms. To borrow another bit of vocabulary from Latour, these concepts are better understood as "matters of concern" than as "matters of fact."¹⁰ In other words, investigating the aftermath of the Holocaust—its persistence as psychic trauma and collective memory—involves focusing not on the facticity of the historical events but on the way those events have become matters of concern: urgent public issues whose various dimensions link them to ongoing political crises and ethical dilemmas. Once we recognize the Holocaust not as a matter of fact but as a matter of concern we are forced to confront its intersection with other later and earlier histories. We are forced, in others words, to confront the problem of comparison.

Klüger's memoir helps us to think through some of these issues as well. As I've already mentioned, *Still Alive* does more than provide a factual account of her years as an adolescent girl under Nazi terror in

9 See Michael Rothberg, *Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), pt. III.

10 Bruno Latour, "What Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," *Critical Inquiry* 30 (2004): 225-48.

Vienna and various camps. She also recounts the Nazi genocide as a matter of concern, as a problem that demands reflection because it has critical contemporary implications. One of the ways she probes these implications is through engagement with the notion of the Holocaust's uniqueness—the conception that began to emerge with the Eichmann Trial in the early 1960s and became widespread, at least in Europe, Israel, and North America, by the 1980s and 1990s. As a survivor, Klüger does not need to be reminded of the singularity of her experiences and the extremity of the genocide. Instead, she seeks to shift discussion to the difficulty of fitting that experience into "the framework of social discourse."¹¹—of making it *Salonfähig*, as she writes in the German version¹²—and she reveals the complicated dynamic that accompanies discussions of the Shoah today. In the face of such difficulties, she holds up comparison as a risky, yet still necessary means of understanding. While describing a conversation with friends in Germany about experiences of claustrophobia, Klüger notes that she could not possibly recount her time in a freight train en route to Auschwitz in that context: "If I had, it would have effectively shut up the rest of the company.... And so my childhood falls into a black hole."¹³ She then stages a discussion of this problem with her friends:

So what do you expect of us? my friends say. Should we treat transport to Auschwitz like a stuck elevator, or even like an admittedly more dangerous night in an air-raid shelter? And again I am stumbling through the labyrinth of conflicting comparisons and asking the question how we can understand anything if we can't relate to it. Some comparisons work better than others, to be sure. An execution is not like a fatal car accident, though for the victim the result is the same.... And yet people like my friend Gisela from Princeton

11 Ruth Klüger, *Still Alive: A Holocaust Girlhood Remembered* (New York: Feminist Press, 2001), 92.

12 Ruth Klüger, *Weiter leben: Eine Jugend* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 1992), 110.

13 Ruth Klüger, *Still Alive: A Holocaust Girlhood Remembered* (New York: Feminist Press, 2001), 93.

equate disparate events by focusing on the one conspicuous point of comparison. That, in turn, provokes others to insist on the uniqueness of each event, which, these others say, will brook no comparison.¹⁴

In passages like these, Klüger employs dialogue and rumination to explore the knotted intersections of trauma, memory, and genocide in a post-Holocaust world. Aware of the opposed but mutually constitutive traps of banal equations and sacralizing claims of uniqueness, Klüger seeks to chart a path of specificity and critical juxtaposition in which comparison and differentiation work together. "Isn't all reflection about the human condition (or conditions) a process of deducing from ourselves to others?" she asks. "What tools are left if we don't compare?"¹⁵

Far from leading to the kinds of relativizing equations Klüger's friend Gisela continuously produces, Klüger's comparisons seek to transmit a more specific understanding of the Nazi-created concentrationary universe and its legacies:

Hitler's Europe was dotted with [camps], but there is a great reluctance to pay attention to their names. . . . Juggling a few names is less demanding than juggling many and doesn't require the differentiations that I am imposing on the reader right now. Yet I insist on them at the risk of alienating my readers . . . because we need to break through the curtain of barbed wire with which postwar sensibility has surrounded the camps, neatly separating us from them.¹⁶

In Klüger's formulations, differentiation is distinct from the discourse of uniqueness in two crucial ways. As this passage dedicated to clarifying the distinctions between ghettos, works camps, and extermination camps illustrates, a strategy of differentiation breaks down the overly

14 Ruth Klüger, *Still Alive: A Holocaust Girlhood Remembered* (New York: Feminist Press, 2001), 93.

15 Ruth Klüger, *Still Alive: A Holocaust Girlhood Remembered* (New York: Feminist Press, 2001), 94.

16 Ruth Klüger, *Still Alive: A Holocaust Girlhood Remembered* (New York: Feminist Press, 2001), 71.

homogenized collective memory of the Holocaust that has accompanied its rise to prominence as a global icon of trauma. Klüger's memoir allows us to see the heterogeneity of Holocaust experiences—a heterogeneity allegorized, for example, by the difference between the Hungarian women on one side of the barbed wire and the young Klüger and her mother on the other side. But the different sides of the barbed wire—as the passage on differentiation also reveals—are not simply closed off from each other: Klüger offers us a differentiated picture of the genocide in order to insist that we not "neatly separat[e]" ourselves from the events. Even though we who were not there cannot share the experience of the victims and survivors of the camps, we also cannot hide from the fact that such experiences remain a matter of concern for us: they persist into the postwar world, as trauma and as memory, like the socks "impaled on the barbed wire."

Klüger's nuanced approach suggests both that the Holocaust is unlike other histories *and* that confronting it demands breaking down our monolithic memory of the events and putting that memory into conversation with other histories. *Still Alive* is thus doubly instructive for thinking about the future of trauma and memory as the Holocaust continues to recede in time. It asks us to fight against the fading of memory by embracing complexity and particularity; and it asks us to refuse the dynamics of competitiveness that the discourse of uniqueness helps foster. In a world in which traumatic experiences are far too widespread to be forced into the schemata that have emerged from a single event, we need to develop our faculties of what Andreas Huyssen has called "productive remembering" and I have called "multidirectional memory":¹⁷ faculties that allow us to grasp traumatic pasts as relational without sacrificing specificity. Just as historians today have begun to situate the Holocaust in the larger field of comparative genocide studies,

17 Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003); Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).

students of trauma and memory need to follow Klüger in developing the tools of comparison.¹⁸ If the experience of violence isolates those who suffer it on the far side of the barbed wire, a critical and comparative work of remembrance can provide new forms of encounter and new possibilities for solidarity in trauma's aftermath.

¹⁸ See, for example, Dirk A. Moses, ed., *Empire, Colony, Genocide: Conquest, Occupation, and Subaltern Resistance in World History* (New York: Berghahn, 2009).