Making Distinctions: The Ultimate Challenge

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“We were always afraid,” says a Jewish survivor who was thirteen at the time of the Warsaw ghetto, of which she is speaking.

They never knew when the Germans would make an incursion into the ghetto and round up a group for deportation. So they lived in constant fear for their lives. “We were always afraid,” says another witness, also thirteen at the time, whose testimony is also recorded on one of the tapes in the Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale University. But the second witness is a young Polish non-Jewish girl, and the fear and danger she is speaking of, though entirely real, are of another order. These two testimonies remind us of the absurdity of undertaking studies in comparative suffering. They also confirm, however, the need for making distinctions, if we are ever to understand the meaning and significance of the Holocaust experience for those who were its victims and for those caught in the web of Nazi oppression without being subject to genocide.

The perspective of the speaker is of primary importance, since it shapes the response of the uninitiated learner. The non-Jewish Polish girl is describing the illegal high school she attended in Warsaw, where presumably she was studying a trade but actually was receiving forbidden instruction in regular high school subjects.

Periodically, without warning, the Germans visited or raided these schools. Each classroom was wired with a buzzer to warn the teacher that an “inspection” was coming; promptly each student would turn to a sewing machine pretending that she was receiving instruction in making underwear. So they were in constant suspense, for discovery by the Germans meant punishment (though certainly not death in gas chambers).

Much is to be learned, therefore, as we listen to the voices of non-Jewish witnesses, about kinds of fear, kinds of suffering, and kinds of victimhood. We discover the imaginative energy required to move beyond one’s personal ordeal of deprivation, and we see how difficult it is to make that leap, when one’s own experience of the “worst” seems incomparable.

“They expect the worst,” writes Auschwitz survivor Charlotte Delbo in None of Us Will Return of unsuspecting new arrivals at the deathcamp. “They do not expect the unthinkable.”
But for the young non-Jewish Polish girl in the illegal high school, whose father apparently was a victim of the Katyn forest massacre, who saw several hundred Polish hostages executed in the streets in retaliation for the Polish Underground’s assassination of a German officer, the worst is the unthinkable. And we cannot dispute her point of view, nor fail to sympathize with her memory of ruin.

Yet the complexities of these taped narratives compel us to discriminate, while retaining a sensitivity to the ordeal of everyone who suffered pain and loss.

“We were always hungry,” recalls another witness, only a child during the German occupation of the Soviet Union, where he was born and where his family had to work in a forced labor camp. They did the best they could, but they never had enough to eat. Only occasionally could his father come up with a chicken, he remembers—stark evidence of one kind of minimal diet, but positive luxury when juxtaposed with the testimony of a woman who tells of watching a camp inmate steal food from her own daughter, or of another painfully revealing how she stole a piece of bread and margarine from the woman sleeping next to her on a bunk in Auschwitz.

“I felt bad all the next day,” she says, “but I was so hungry. So this wasn’t good and that wasn’t good; what choice did you have?”

The situation is summed up by a Jewish character trying to describe hunger to the non-Jewish narrator of one of Tadeusz Borowski’s Auschwitz stories: “Real hunger is when one man regards another man as something to eat. I have been hungry like that, you see.”

To our stunned silence the partial though inadequate response might be Primo Levi’s explanation in Survival in Auschwitz: “Just as our hunger is not that feeling of missing a meal, so our way of being cold has need of a new word.”

The need for new words becomes thunderously clear from the testimony of another non-Jewish survivor, who with perfect innocence fails to recognize the transparent transference of language which is taking place as he describes the persecutions he suffered during the war.

While his father was away in the army, the family home in Vienna was bombed, so the authorities sent him and his mother to live in a small village near Salzburg for the duration of the war.

As city people, he complains, “We were never accepted” there. He says that as a child he just could not understand why people rejected him. “Why did I look
like a Martian to them?” he complains. “Why did they think I was wearing funny clothes?”

The self as victim obviously wears many guises, or disguises, and the failure or refusal to make distinctions teaches us something about the ease of confusing anguishes.

This particular witness remembers his father’s appearance after he escaped from Russian captivity and walked a thousand miles westward across Czechoslovakia back into Austria. “My father, of course,” he matter-of-factly observes, “was a physically and spiritually broken man when he got home. He was down to 110 or 105 pounds.”

What is happening here (and the reader may interpret it as he or she will—the explanations are not simple) is an appropriation of the “imagery” of the Holocaust survivor to another kind of suffering.

“Well, it’s not like being stuck in a camp,” this witness admits; “but it was bad. Sometimes it’s easier to deal with bad certainties than huge uncertainties, because you have no way to plan.”

Now what is meant by “bad certainties”—the fate of the Jews in the death camps? And “huge uncertainties”—his family’s future, the father somewhere in Russia, the rest of them relocated in a village alien to the urban culture they were accustomed to?

Half-jokingly, this witness refers to himself as one of the first displaced persons in Austria, an unmistakable if unconscious adaptation of the language of Holocaust experience to the disruption of domestic tranquility.

Clearly, the differences between “bad certainties” and “huge uncertainties” still need to be explored and defined.

What I have called the humiliated imagination afflicts witnesses on virtually all of these tapes, as they wrestle today with their failure or inability to see clearly then and to have found a way of acting that would satisfy their vision now of how they should have behaved.

A long and often profound interview is with a non-Jewish Polish man, merely fourteen when the war broke out, who was recruited by the Polish Underground as a messenger and then trained as a transmitter to send radio messages to England during the war.

The job was fraught with unrelieved danger, since the Germans were searching for illegal transmitters around the clock. Although one of his responsibilities was to send information about events in the Warsaw Ghetto
and the death camps, including eyewitness testimony from two escapees from Maidanek (which may have been the first “hard” evidence about the gassings to reach the free world), this witness frankly admits rather apologetically that they didn’t understand at the time what the Jews were trying to say.

“It just didn’t occur to us that it was urgent and something great had to be done,” he confesses, reflecting the attitude of political leaders around the world. “We were thinking of other things ourselves.”

The honest testimony of this witness--and certainly he does not speak with pride--reveals something about the mindset of millions during this period.

He didn’t analyze the moral implications of what was happening to the Jews, he says, because other matters were more urgent. He had only fifteen minutes to get his messages through, then had to move on, since he was always hunted.

“It was routine work for me. My only obligation was to transmit the messages that were given to me.”

It is easy enough to condemn this as a bureaucratic insensitivity to the agony of strangers, or even a thinly veiled antisemitism. But I think it is neither. It is the recognizable voice of a generation and a century that has lived through repeated physical crises but has never been trained to view them or adjust to them with the moral urgency they demand.

Historians may some day record this as a crucial distinction of our era: our complacent (or suppressive) ability to endure actual and threatened crises without acknowledging their impact on the moral reality of our lives. Misconceptions, distortions, and evasions abound (one thinks immediately of the nuclear situation) because they are easier to cope with than the possible atrocities they conceal.

The education of our Polish Underground member illustrates the dilemma. He concedes that at the time he envied the Jews in the camps because, as he puts it, they could hold hands. They were together. They could face their fate even if they were killed with each other. (Here we see how “killed,” like “hunger,” requires a “new word” if it is to be properly understood.)

While the Jews were there, he continues, they could sleep “on time.” They could get up on time. He himself, on the other hand, was alone, hunted, always afraid of being shot and just left in a ditch and no one would ever know what had happened to him.
There were victims and victims under Nazi domination, each overwrought by his or her own sense of personal danger. This truism may help to explain the failure of imagination that prevented so many from recognizing the impending doom of the Jews.

Today, this witness confesses, “I understand that they were alone in a block, and that the moral vacuum they had to face was worse than what I had to face, but I didn’t understand that at the time.”

After the war, the truths of the death camp ordeal had penetrated his consciousness, and he is open in his admission of the shift in his perception.

Indeed, his present lucidity illuminates his remembered account of what it was like to live as a human being under perpetual stress, and his illustrations help us to distinguish between life in crisis as an Underground fighter outside the death camps, and as a helpless victim within. Outside, he says, you operate on two levels of response--a normal level and a level of tension.

During the city of Warsaw uprising in August 1944 he was going from home to home with a friend in search of German soldiers, when suddenly his friend moved around a corner, was shot, and fell down dead.

He darted around the corner himself, raked his machine gun back and forth, and he says, “I killed all four of them.” “Then,” he adds, “you suddenly go back to normal, and you realize your friend is dead, and you’ve killed four other people, and you feel bad, but you didn’t have time to think about it when you were doing it.”

During those tense moments, he explains, “you mobilize yourself on your survival instincts, and after it’s over, you come back. You need someone to hold you because you are in very bad shape.”

Much more needs to be said about the difference between two relentlessly painful ordeals: “coming back” from the tense context of killing as this member of the Underground describes it, and “coming back” from the tense context of a nearly successful program of genocide.

The inclusive vision of this witness culminates in an observation that poses the most problematic challenge of the Holocaust: “The tragedy of my life is that I cannot convey my experience to another person and make him better through my experience.”

In this brief discussion of distinctions, let me end with a most difficult distinction that faces all educators trying to teach about this event: although the Holocaust is not essentially a morally instructive experience, in the sense
that knowing about it improves our humanity, and perhaps not even a “tragedy,” if by that word we mean to imply learning through suffering, we must study it nonetheless for an adequate understanding of those much-abused terms on whose proper appreciation in our time and in time the future security of our universe may depend—suffering and humanity.