

Plenary Session

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Towards Responsible Citizenship: On Leaving the "Victim-Mentality" Behind in the Context of Central Europe

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Global Expectations, Group-Based Remembrances, and the Need for a more Inclusive Victimhood in Europe¹

At the turn of the millennium, it appeared that the official Holocaust remembrance in Hungary will resemble the remembrance that was already institutionalized in Western Europe and in the United States. Schools have introduced a memorial day, and Hungary – like many other post-communist societies - joined the international organization created to facilitate Holocaust commemoration and education. The Holocaust Memorial Center in Páva utca opened its permanent exhibition that documented the Hungarian state's culpability in the Holocaust, a notion reaffirmed by the speeches of state and government officials at various official memorial events.

However, in addition to the mentioned official memory, in the last decade an "alternative" way of remembrance has been officially accepted, too. The latter suggests that Hungary was "only" a victim of the German occupation and thus not fully responsible for the deportations and the death of its citizens (labeled at the time as Jewish). At the same time, the alternative remembrance did not replace the previously institutionalized memory of the Holocaust, which, from time to time, is even endorsed by figures of the same government. Consequently at the moment there are two parallel official sets of memories, canceling each other out and challenging not only the moral requirement of responsibility taking for the wrongdoings of the past but the collective memory of the victim group as well, freezing the group-based collective memories of the time of the genocide into an infinite future. This conflict has been manifested in a visible format in the double monument on the Freedom square in the center of Budapest.

In the last more than 25 years post-communist societies which wished to join the global Holocaust remembrance community – partially perhaps for pragmatic reasons and as a symbol of joining to the "West" - had to realize that their own hurts during communist occupation were not only overlooked by the greater international community vis-à-vis the trauma of the Jewish minority, but that they were also expected to adopt the "German model" and conduct a thorough self-examination due to complicity in a mythologized genocide, the moral weight of which has grown enormously since its execution. While post-communist countries were expected to "learn the lessons of Auschwitz" – whatever they are –

¹ A longer version of this paper has been published in Randolph L. Braham – András Kovács (eds.) *The Holocaust in Hungary. Seventy Years Later.* Central European University Jewish Studies Program – Central European University Press, Budapest – New York, 231-250.

“Western” countries were much less enthusiastic to “learn the lessons” of the communist dictatorships and the Soviet occupation, that is “the lessons of the Gulag”. Thus the moral normative of “face your past” was not balanced with paying respect towards the victims of communist past creating the state of “competitive victimhood” (see Noor et al, 2012) in many post-communist societies at the time they were struggling with the socio-economical problems of the transition and its consequences for social identities.

Characteristically, the details of the sufferings of the individual’s own group are better preserved in the collective memory than the hurts and losses which they themselves have caused. In the cases of asymmetric conflict, the persecuted group tend to preserve the traumatic memory for generations and that often becomes a central element of the group’s identity (Volkan, 2011), while the other groups (the descendants of the perpetrators and the bystanders) “remember” less and less with each generation about the losses and hurts of the other group’s members. They even tend to treat the event itself as more distant (Peetz, et al. 2010) than the members of the “victim” group. Moreover the motivation directed towards the protection of a group’s own moral integrity does not only encourage the denial of a past that might trigger a sense of collective guilt and shame, but it might also cultivate negative attitudes towards the victims as representing a potential threat of positive ingroup identity. The increasingly differing views formed about asymmetric violence will result not only in a constantly amplifying conflict between the two groups, but in negative attitudes toward each other and a lack of trust, though quite paradoxically the event becomes more and more distant in time.

A vision of a mutual future might aid reconciliation, while intergroup competition, which is present outside of memory policy as well, makes that goal impossible to achieve. Nevertheless the efforts towards reconciliation carry risks for both groups. Perpetrators’ descendants make themselves vulnerable in terms of their moral assessment by the other group admitting their wrongdoings and asking for forgiveness, because if forgiveness is not provided, they will not be released from the moral stigma affecting the group. The risk undertaken by the victims’ descendants is that choosing reconciliation may divorce them from their “elected trauma,” which, especially in cases of genocide, can be a central element of the group identity. Surrendering victimhood also results in giving up the derivative moral superiority.

Reconciliation is not only conditioned on agreement on the past, but also on the creation of a societal value system which is acceptable for both the descendants of victims, and the descendants of the active perpetrators, passive bystanders and rescuers as well, and which will respect the equality and human rights of all those involved while – thus can ensure the safety of all – and at the same time not threatening the social identities of any group. In Western countries the “lessons of Auschwitz” generally understood in the framework of the Post Holocaust human rights regime, as a negative reference point for a common value system. Post-socialist Holocaust memory is not only struggling because majority groups deflect facing the crimes of the past, but also because they do not feel that the post-Holocaust Western value system is fully their own while at the same time they struggle for positive social identity and respect. If we look at our human commonality with perpetrators and rescuers as members of the majority group at the same time we can reduce the motivation for competitive victimhood. The past can only be divorced from the present if a society divided into perpetrators and victims can think of itself as belonging to the same category once again. Group-based guilt and shame are not necessary conditions for the internalization of the global “Holocaust lesson.” This is why the lesson is called global: because anyone can identify with it, as long as the Holocaust is defined as a prime example of a crime against humanity.

The current dual official memory makes reconciliation impossible because it suggests to the descendants of survivors that the past was not confronted. As a result, more and more generations of victims' descendant will make solidarity with the trauma of their ancestors a central point of their group identity. Since a mode of collective remembrance that contains admission and forgiveness and is mutually accepted together with the majority is never formed, the group boundaries created by genocide will be retained and can easily become central issues for political games. Supplementing global Holocaust commemoration with the processing of local memory and consequent reconciliation could create a Holocaust remembrance that would be able to transfer the "Holocaust lesson" equally to the descendants of "victims" and "perpetrators". This could be facilitated through comparisons with other genocides and even with examining some of the parallels with communist dictatorships, thus fostering inclusive victimhood instead of a competitive one. Through this, an increased dedication to democracy and human rights could be ensured, and it might even lead greater trust and solidarity towards each other and towards groups that are victimized nowadays.