



The Uses of Remembrance

By Martha Roth



Shoah Memorial in Paris

When we say our lives are made out of stories, we usually mean memories.

What do we remember—the night our cat kittened or the day armed soldiers invaded our home? Winning a game from the league champions or getting beaten up by bullies? What memories become the stories we pass on to our children, from which they build a sense of history, a sense of self?

When the state enters the garden of memory, it has a political motive: Remembrance Day; “*Je me souviens*”; commemoration of survivors. Every year as November rolls around I think about the thinness of the line between memorializing dead soldiers and glorifying war. So many places boast triumphal arches, bronze statuary, memorials in stone or steel to honour soldiers who died defending a city—a country—a bridge—a wall. Can I weep for their young lives without celebrating the ghastly farce of war?

There are memorials to resistance, like the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, or Nat Turner’s rebellion. These heroic acts kindle a spirit of resistance to injustice, surely a good thing, even if all the resisters were crushed. Spartacists ... Cathars... the inmates who blew up the crematorium at Auschwitz ... survivors of the Ludlow massacre ... heroes who went to their deaths in inquisitions and persecutions and who left behind their loved ones and their writings to inspire all who come after them along the same path. These are the remembrances I want to pass on to my grandchildren.

In David’s Grossman’s novel, *To the End of the Land*, an Israeli mother named Ora (“light”) goes

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hiking in the Galilee with her friend Avram. Memorials to soldiers who have died in the service of the IDF dot the landscape. The militarism of Israeli society runs through the book like a bass line; Ora thinks continually of her son Ofer who has been called up by his reserve unit, and she and Avram keep meeting armed soldiers. As she walks she remembers her sons’ childhoods, their war toys, war games, computer simulations of war, and their actual national service. *To the End of the Land* is about the terrific strength with which these people cling to their memories of violence and the deep prints war has made on their souls.

A soft North American, I grew up during the Second World War and had no direct experience of its violence, and yet it imprinted me. As an infant I had a German-speaking Jewish nursemaid, part of my mother’s caseload at the Jewish Social Service Bureau. My parents, thoroughly secular Jews, answered all my questions about the war, and as far as a small child can, I understood that the Nazis had tried to wipe out the world’s Jews. I was proud that my uncles served in the military. At my nursery school—run by women who had studied Pestalozzi-Froebel education in Berlin—we played air-raid, dropping twists of red and yellow crepe paper on cities made of blocks.

Like almost everyone else who was alive in North America, I saw the photographs taken when Allied soldiers liberated the Nazi concentration camps. After World War II, the State of Israel was established under the rubric “Never again.” Never again could Jews be persecuted and killed just because they were Jews; now they had a country

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that would safely welcome them. But sixty years later it seems that the price of safety is constant mobilization, frequent war, and violent oppression of the Palestinians.

Uses of the Shoah

Jews who came to Israel after the war— whether they had fled to safety or survived in hiding or hung on through starved and tormented imprisonment— were deeply imprinted by the Nazi extermination campaign. As stories from this war are told and retold, several generations of writers, poets, painters, and filmmakers have inherited a specific vocabulary of brutal images.

The horror (*Shoah*) wasn't publicized as "the Holocaust" until Israel's victory in the Six Day War of 1967, but since then Holocaust memorials have sprung up throughout Europe and North America. As Yves Engler wrote in a 2010 article on the Canadian campaign for a national Holocaust monument:

"Holocaust memorials proliferated after Israel smashed Egyptian-led pan-Arabism in six days of fighting. Nearly three decades after World War II, in 1972, the Canadian Jewish Congress and its local federations began to establish standing committees on the Nazi Holocaust. The first Canadian Holocaust memorial was established in Montreal in 1977.

"Nazi crimes, particularly Canada's various ties to these atrocities, should be widely studied and commemorated. The Nazi Holocaust, however, should not be used as ideological cover for Israeli crimes. That is an injustice to Palestinians and an insult to Hitler's victims."

As Israel has grown more bellicose and imperialistic, it has criminalized "Holocaust denial," the neo-Nazi movement I would call, after German socialist August Bebel, the new patriotism of knaves. *Nakba* (Arabic for *catastrophe*) is what Palestinians call their displacement and the destruction of hundreds of their villages to make room for Israel. Writers, poets, and filmmakers have given the Arabic-speaking world a vocabulary of images for the *Nakba*. Israeli schoolteachers have told me they are not permitted to teach these works or to talk to their students about the word or the events. Who will speak against *Nakba* denial?

In his book *The Holocaust Industry: Reflections on the Exploitation of Jewish Suffering*, Norman Finkelstein calls what Israeli Zionism does with the *Shoah* an "extortion racket"—using the horror and sadness of those memories to extort emotion from children by jumping them up with invented or exaggerated atrocities that could be called Holocaust porn; extorting impunity from the world, at least from the West, because of its complicity with Nazi

crimes; and, perhaps worst of all, brandishing a fiction of Jewish exceptionalism that extorts forgetfulness of other genocides: those of indigenous peoples of the Western hemisphere, Armenians, Africans, Pacific Islanders, Cambodians, Bosnians

....

In his book *Exterminate All the Brutes: A Modern Odyssey into the Heart of Darkness*, Sven Lindqvist describes the genocidal effects of Europeans' colonial adventures in Africa. If anyone believed that the Holocaust of the Jews was an event unique in history, this book will disabuse the believer. Cen-

turies after the Spanish invasions of the New World, European colonialists exterminated whole peoples, and they are not memorialized because no one is left to remember.

Poet Carolyn Forché, in the introduction to *Against Forgetting: Twentieth Century Poetry of Witness*, writes:

"The rhetorical question Hitler posed to his military cabinet days before his invasion of Poland in 1939—"Who, after all, speaks today of the annihilation of the Armenians?"—underscores the moral imperative of historical remembering" ("Armenian Genocide," p. 55).

"Memories"?

Psychologists tell us some memories are too painful for our conscious minds, and we keep them in a kind of psychic deep storage where they can't hurt us. Sometimes a patient succeeds in recovering these memories, with the help of a therapist, but great care must be taken. The helper—psychologist, psychiatrist, counselor, clergy—can influence the patient, subtly or blatantly, and in a phenomenon called false or induced memory, the helper may plant specific painful memories in a patient's mind.

In this way, people have sometimes "remembered" impossible things. Children are particularly susceptible to the induction of false memories, and if you believe that the mind's structure is more or less ontogenic—that its current state contains all of its prior states—the child's mind exists at some level of consciousness within the adult's. Once planted, such a memory becomes permanent and is accepted as a life-making story.

Years ago, when I worked on scientific publications, a student intern repeated to me a story that had been told to her confirmation class by a visiting rabbi, a concentration camp survivor. Let's say she was confirmed at thirteen, and she was perhaps nineteen when she told me. The young people in her class were gripped by the rabbi's narrative, especially the story of one of his fellow inmates, a little girl with large blue eyes. The camp commandant made a pet of the little girl and often sought her out, praised her beautiful eyes, and gave her

toys and candy. One day the little girl disappeared, and next day the prisoners saw the commandant wearing a new ring, in which one of her eyes was set, like a jewel.

My intern told me this story, which had moved and disturbed her. Its palpable falsity took my breath away. I said that—without holding any brief for Nazis—I was appalled by a teacher who would so exploit young people’s credulity. Nazis had done dreadful, documented things; why invent such an atrocity? Human eyes are viscous; you could no more make jewelry out of one than a raw egg.

I don’t think I changed my intern’s mind. Whether or not the rabbi believed his own story, he had planted it so deeply that the image became part of her sense of the Holocaust, and probably her confirmation classmates’ too.

A different sort of lie features in the film *Defamation*, a documentary about the B’nai Brith Anti-Defamation League. The filmmaker follows a group of Israeli teenagers on a trip to Auschwitz, where their minders tell them to be careful because the Polish people are all anti-Semites who mean to harm them. The young Israelis cringe as they leave their hotel, and they cower when young Poles address them in broken English. A trip to Auschwitz is a wrenching emotional experience, but the Polish youths who spoke to the Israeli girls were trying to flirt with them, not defame or persecute them.

It is cruel to deceive young people in this way, to plant falsehoods and mistrust in their minds.

Young Israelis with no personal experience of ethnic hostility—except their own culture’s deeply ingrained anti-Arabism—may see themselves as victims when they are told such things. Seventy years later, they “remember” the European Jews killed in the Holocaust. In just such a fashion, Serbians

“remember” crimes against them committed by Bosnians half a millennium ago.

Pointing out such malignant inventions won’t stop the flow of Holocaust porn. What will?

Currently the State of Israel is a heavily mobilized society, engaged in a seemingly endless war with the people whose territory it occupies. Not only does it occupy the Palestinian Territories in violation of the Geneva Convention,

but it constantly expands its illegal encroachments. Israelis have created a net of regulations that strangle any attempt by Palestinians to free themselves. Resistance, even nonviolent resistance, is met with crushing force. Attempts by the international community to influence the government are met with fresh *hasbara*, spin; rhetoric, not deeds. Many young Israelis are moulded—like young Germans seventy years ago—into racist thugs.

What will commemorate this state of permanent war? And how did “never again” become “always and forever”? ♦



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Libya’s oil fields.

Nor are Libyans—even those opposed to Ghaddafi—necessarily in favour of military intervention. One opposition grouping has called for a no-fly zone, enforced by U.S. and European air strikes. But others are against it, including one former army officer who defected to the opposition, and who said, “We can look after ourselves.” Libyan Canadians, in anti-Ghaddafi demonstrations on Feb. 26, made no calls for military intervention.

Such actions would poison movements for change by enabling regimes to portray them as products of outside intervention. As Seumas Milne wrote in *The Guardian* (March 2), military intervention “wouldn’t just be a threat to Libya and its people, but to the ownership of what has been until now an entirely organic, homegrown democratic movement across the region ... The Arab revolution will be made by Arabs, or it won’t be a revolution at

all.” What is needed is solidarity, not arming of groupings on any side or support for “regime change” through outside invasion.

The regional uprisings must also be accompanied by another democratization—an end to the decades-long Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. Only this can clear the way for a more democratic future for Palestinians, and Israelis as well, so that Israel, as Israeli philosopher Yeshayahu Leibowitz put it, can “liberate itself from this curse of dominating another people.” But on this issue Harper is firmly on the side of the occupiers, as is U.S. President Barack Obama, who vetoed a UN Security Council resolution against Israeli settlements. Opposition to dictatorships and regimes of occupation throughout the Middle East can only succeed through diverse civil society movements, including people of all ethnic and religious backgrounds, against state policies of both the U.S. and Canada. ♦