

Beyond mere historical remembrance. Commemoration, intergenerational consequences of war and Christian hope in times of trauma

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1. Introduction

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Often we think about war from a mere historical perspective; that means: with a clear beginning and end. 8 Mai, 11 November... these are moments that we dwell on the official end of a war. Or better: on the end of an armed conflict. Without any doubt these are important moments that enable us to honor those who fought for our freedom and to remember the horror of war. A lot of history books are written that describe how a certain war evolved, sometimes from hour to hour, or even with very personal, often heroic stories about war suffering from soldiers and civilians. But what is often forgotten, is that wars never began on the official first day of the conflict, and even more that wars absolutely never end exactly the day of an armistice. Often many more years people bear the consequences of a war. It suffices to broaden a mere historical approach with a psychological perspective to see or to picture also the aftermath of a war.

I want to show the importance of this perspective at hand of the burden of the war memory for Jewish victims after the Second World War. For the aftermath of this war had its effects throughout several generations. In this lecture I want to illustrate the consequences of the persecution of the Jews during this war for three successive generations. This needs to add force to the starting point of this lecture: only to focus on the historical data of war within remembrance narrows our perspective and makes us lose sight on the intergenerational impact of conflict.

In the second part of this contribution I will focus on the power of Christian hope in times of trauma. These theological remarks result from recent political and feminist theology and are – in my view – for Christians the pillars from the too often forgotten part of remembrance: recognition of and dealing with war trauma across generations.

2. The intergenerational aftermath of WWII for the Jewish people

2.1. The first generation

Psychoanalyst and son of a Holocaust survivor Samuel Luel noticed in his contacts with Jews from the first generation a painful self-confidence, obsessions and even extreme cases of nihilism and psychosis.¹ But one of the most striking features was noted in 1946 by William Niederland, namely the ‘survivors syndrome’.² A syndrome that is characterised by chronic

fear, disturbed associations and on-going remembrances. But also by chronic depressions and the impossibility to live a normal life. Other researchers found social retirement, isolation and apathy. All this has led to the loss of basic trust in human beings and the difficulty to enter again into relations. Also striking is that most survivors suppressed their post-traumatic symptoms by desperate trying to stay alive and to look ahead instead of looking behind.³

Mourning is a process of expressing pain, sadness, anger and guilt; a process that enables us to deal with the world with hope. "Survivors, however, have not mourned", Aaron Hass writes in his book *The Aftermath. Living with the Holocaust*. "They remain locked in their own sphere. Consequently, their bitterness continues to sear their soul."⁴

For survivors mourning appeared problematic. Those who were spared were to fearful and to disoriented to mourn after the liberation. Only tens of years later many survivors experienced the pains of the mourning process. Survivor Charlotte Delbo wrote in the fourth and last part of the commentary on her camp experience that she lives 'near' Auschwitz. Auschwitz is there and it is unchangeable, she felt. In contradiction with the skin of a snake, the skin of memory does not renew. She writes: "I have the feeling that the 'self' who was in the camp isn't me, isn't the person who is here, opposite you. No, it's too unbelievable. And everything that happened to this other 'self', the one from Auschwitz, doesn't touch me now, *me*, doesn't concern me, so distinct are deep memory [*mémoire profonde*] and common memory [*mémoire ordinaire*]."⁵ It is probably not so much a fact that the remembrance of Auschwitz only sometimes emerges, Lawrence Langer says, but that it is a big constant in the lives of survivors.

2.2. The second generation

Also the children of survivors often bear a shadow of the Holocaust with them. The cause of this lies in the over-identification with their parents. This way the children that try to loosen themselves from their environment that is reigned by the Holocaust remembrance, feel themselves guilty for the fact that they wanted to separate themselves from their parents in emotional need. At the other side there are children that feel that their parents are obsessed by the Holocaust and try to break open that narrow world of fear and pessimism.⁶

It is proven that because of the negative influences of the Holocaust experiences the capacities of the survivors concerning human relationships have been affected. The survivor no longer seemed able to be an effective parent. Exactly this shortcoming leads to the psychological damage with their children. These experiences were inevitably integrated within the worldview of the survivors – a worldview that they would pass on to their children. A lot of children of survivors show comparable problems. Fact is that a lot of survivors saw in their children the youth that was taken from them by the Holocaust. Their children became symbols of rebirth and repair. Such parents had magic expectations ; they expected that their offspring would undo the destruction of the Holocaust and replace the lost family members. That would give meaning to their proper empty lives and their suffering, and would justify their survival. These overwhelming expectations created in a lot of children the need to compensate for the hardships their parents had to undergo.⁷

In literature that described the children of survivors⁸ a returning theme is 'guilt'. Some identify themselves with their parents who are marked by guilt, others experience a need to share the suffering of their parents and that of the family members that died. At the other side an often diagnosed feeling is anger. The report of psychoanalysts Katz and Keleman⁹ points to the fact that a lot of children showed an exaggerated concern for their parents with the intention to please their parents. This originates from the conviction of the children that their parents already suffered enough, and that they shouldn't hurt them even more. Other children of survivors deny their anger or project it on the world.

Also striking are the descriptions of researchers like Sike and Rakoff that point to the fact that these children, more than their parents, are involved in aggressive and anti-social behaviour. An explanation for this is that parents put their energy in dealing with the losses and that this hindered the control over their children. Another suggested explanation¹⁰ is that children are, one way or another, encouraged to express the anger that their parents could express so difficultly. Also the distrust of others is something that has been found with children, and which is transmitted by the parents that looked at the non-Jewish world with anger and suspicion.¹¹ A lot of Jews of the second generation, even those that weren't confronted with anti-Semitic slogans, exhibited a deep rooted distrust for non-Jews. After all I said before it will probably be no surprise that the distrust and the cynicism of the survivors, and their fear for a new persecution was mirrored in their children.¹²

2.3. The third generation and the aftermath of a dark past

Compared to their parents, children of the third generation grew up in a more protected economic, social and psychological atmosphere.¹³ But a lot of the young of the third generation were confronted with the past of their grandparents when they were still pretty young. Nevertheless they only understood what it was all about when the Holocaust was brought to their attention at school. But that does not mean that they always showed openness for the stories of their grandparents.¹⁴ Although some of the young people think they are well-informed about what happened during the Second World War¹⁵, it was seldom a topic that was discussed. And during the rare occasions that it was discussed, the story was so long and the content so abundant that the child was completely overpowered and dropped out.

Also children of the third generation bear the marks of the persecution of their grandparents. In her research about the effects of the Holocaust on Jewish women from the third generation, Sandra Konrad mentioned above all 'fear'. Fear in several forms: often as fear for a new persecution, but in some cases also fear for the shower, or fear for 'too much organized systems'. But she also discovered with this generation a strong longing to have children before the grandparents die, and an adverse effect on the feeling of security. Moreover, as Konrad puts it, children of the third generation developed the art of banalizing their proper problems and crises because they compare it with the horror with which their grandparents were once confronted.¹⁶

It is clear that the bound with the past hasn't been cut, and that the stories and (some of) the psychological disorders will also be transmitted to the fourth generation. A lot of young people speak with love about their grandparents and feel their pain, but explicitly point to the fact that

they can't repair the loss. The Holocaust not so much drew a line through the lives of the grandchildren of the Holocaust survivors, but through their thoughts and hopes for the future. Often, but not always, there still lives more fear than hope within the families; and the present is loaded by the past, much more than by the future. As Dan Bar-On puts it: there is still more transfer than processing.¹⁷

2.1.4. Conclusion

The Holocaust marked three generations, and it is an ongoing process. One generation was affected and broken, and the second and third generation was forced to bear the consequences of the fact that they grew up in a world of brokenness. Also the second and third generation are submerged in a past of hatred and persecution, violence and destruction. And every moment of remembrance touches the wounds, points to the nightmare that, to avoid repetition, should never be forgotten.

In other words: also today the aftermath of the Holocaust has not yet disappeared. It is “expressed in suspicion (...) or hidden in pain, anger, or fear” that was transmitted to the next generation.¹⁸ We are dealing here with a problem without a quick solution; we have too little knowledge that should enable us to avoid the transfer from one generation to another. It asks for so much clinical help to help only a few people, and in the meantime new violence happened that causes aftershocks. By now it will be clear that the problem of intergenerational transfer is not restricted to the domain of the Holocaust. Every act of violence – from sexual and physical abuse within the family, at work, with friends and partners, to social dominance and hatred between enemies, war and terrorism – puts in operation a system of aftershocks against which we still haven't an efficacious remedy.¹⁹

3. Christian hope in times of trauma as a pillar for contemporary remembrance

In the previous part I have tried to make clear how war does not end on the day of an armistice. Seen from a human point of view it marks the beginning of an epilogue in which the past war has still an enormous impact on the life of people. In the second part of this contribution I will try to clarify how we, as Christians, can offer hope at people that suffer trauma, and how that is a part of the recognition of the past, and thus remembrance. To show this I will start from the traumatic experience that the terrorist attacks of 9/11 were for a lot of people.

The attacks of September 11 were undeniably a cultural trauma: an unexpected horrible event that left an indelible scar on the consciousness of community, and had the capacity to fundamentally and irrevocably change the future identity of that community.²⁰ But also a trauma in which – as is often the case – the trauma of others (other groups) isn't recognized and that makes it much more difficult to take a well-balanced and nuanced moral

standpoint.²¹ In short, the trauma of 9/11 was community and identity interrupting, but at the same time it made that community and its identity also more solid.²²

On an individual level trauma resulted from the knowledge that those powers in which people put their trust, were not capable of offering the necessary protection. Trauma arises from the brokenness of the illusion of safety. And so the events of 9/11 were a brutal remembrance at the fact that all safety is an illusion.²³ After 9/11 trauma wasn't only fed by the impossibility of the state to offer the expected protection and security, but also by the unnecessary erosion of fundamental liberties in exchange for little or nothing. So, remembrance is intensely political; something that not only or not so much wants to maintain the past, but that can lead to a social resilience that needs to be the engine of possible political change. The protest that wants to set going this political change avails itself exactly from this remembrance and uses it as a form of resistance.²⁴ Exactly therein lies the source of hope for a future that breaks with the voice of despair that rises from trauma.

Like some feminist theologians write, hope has a lot to do with imagining, imagining that goes with hypothesizing and that has as its goal to get out of problems on a creative but at the same time realistic manner. Hope and imagining create freedom and broaden the possibilities; they intent to offer perspective (again). Imagining is closely connected with hope, and it is the enemy of the absolutising power that comes from our instinct.²⁵

But hope is not only imagining, it is also imagining *with*; that means that imagining is not the mere individual spiritual event that we often make from it. Hope is a communal event, and that community can be two people, but also a nation or a church community. It brings us to a world where the thinking and imagining of others becomes influential. That is why we state that hope asks for a lot of acts of trust and belief. "People", theologian William F. Lynch wrote in his book *Images of Hope*, "develop hope in each other, hope that they will receive help from each other. As with the imagination, we tend always to think of hope as the final act which is my own, in isolation and in self-assertion. But it is not this at all; this interpretation is, in fact, one source of its dubious and sentimentalized reputation. Hope is an act of the city of man, an act of what I call the public order, not in the external sense of that word but in the sense that it must occur between persons, whether they be man or God."²⁶

So hope is undeniably relative: hope looks at the outside world and is not afraid to ask for help. It is exactly this (relative) hope that counters and relieves suffering. Although that doesn't mean that there can be hope for everything; the challenge is to go beyond naivety and to close out from hope those things that are hopeless. In that sense hope also needs a realistic point of view, if it doesn't want to undermine itself.²⁷

In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of 2001 we were, and we still are, confronted with the way people are touched and marked by the drama, but also by the way people deal with that. That is in no case with openness for the individual and collective stories. On the contrary, on a political level the fears and negative feelings are intensified and exploited to achieve strategies that reinforce power, but that are not necessarily effective. In such a politics the human being and his or her traumatized emotional world is instrumentalized with as sole purpose political gain. This neglects every understanding of the trauma and the story that is hidden behind it. At the same time this drama, inspired by extreme religious views, also

questions the hope that is inherent at the monotheistic religions. That is the reason why, from the ashes of 11 September 2001 rises the urgent question we put central: Which hope can Christianity offer from a belief in God that is contemporary, concerned with life and that doesn't lose itself in dogma's?

In his analysis about historians and their bound with history during research, historian Dominick LaCapra writes that, a correct writing of history is not about the perspective of appropriation of the experiences of victims, but about what he calls 'empathic unsettlement'. A form of influencing empathy that marks the writing of history, but that can't be reduced to formulas or rules of methodology, because the historian is affected by traumatic stories, and should show openness for this 'desirable affection'. According to LaCapra empathy is important to understand the traumatic events and the victims.²⁸ In my view this offers an interesting perspective, because what counts for the historian, counts even more for those who, in their lives, are led by religion and who look through these spectacles at history. For those who want to stand with both feet in reality and who want to be close to people empathic openness is the corner-stone of sincere proximity. We cannot be close to traumatized people and offer them a counter-story of hope, if we are not first fully open for their story, and if we do not first understand them.

Accepting this viewpoint means breaking with the political closeness that made trauma to a means, and it offers Christianity an opportunity to connect with life and with the emotional world of people. From the filling up of the empathic emptiness a challenging and contrasting counter-voice can raise. Such an empathic association with people that are marked by trauma, not only emanates from the recognition that people, notwithstanding their injuries, are worth it, but also that – in spite of their story about the depth of the trauma – not all hope is gone.

The attention for trauma enlightens a hopeful path that, via the room for the (personal) story can lead to the revitalizing, the resurrection of people. Here the break or interruption in the 'mind's experience of the time', as Cathy Caruth calls the shock that causes trauma²⁹, is taken seriously and leads to the interruption of theology about which the German theologian Johann Baptist Metz already wrote. And it is this interruption that opens room for the story of people. It isn't already in this room that theology speaks; it is a quiet room where the story can and may be told without being countered or interrupted. But exactly in this story theology will find traces and starting points to answer from the same narrativity and to offer a form of hope. Because Christianity and trauma have in common that they both lean on the inconceivability of the possibility to survive.³⁰ In other words: for those who undergo trauma, the first sign of hope unrolls not so much in an eschatological event, but in life itself. Communities, and especially church communities, are confronted with the challenge to fight the senselessness and the meaninglessness of life in the perception of people. Throughout the openness for the traumatized story and the power of the Christian counter-story, that in spite of the passion is never overpowered by despair and death, hope and meaning can possibly find fertile soil. In this, Christianity has a chance and a duty to play a unique and privileged role.

Like this, resurrection becomes a real and close to life event. From this point of view resurrection is no longer a once-only, definitive and mere divine event, but an event that is

several times possible and at which we need to work day by day to continue it and to maintain it. Moreover it is an event in which the face of God becomes visible throughout the encouraging hands and stories of those who want to be near and act from a religious inspiration. Exactly therein lies the first and most close-to-life hope of people, that resurrection is possible, despair can be broken through or hindered where human proximity calls or supports the resilience of people. This way resurrection as revitalization heralds the beginning of a new cycle. Not a cycle that breaks with the past – on the contrary – but one in which the scarfs of the past got their place, and color present and future, but doesn't offer death its victory.³¹

Resurrection rises here as the ultimate image for resilience. The resilience that people, from their connection with and trust in God, can have to scramble on his or her feet and again to take their lives in hand. But also the resilience of those that, after the death of a loved-one, don't let themselves sink away, but (re)live in memory of the deceased.

4. Conclusion

The confrontation with every individual, and especially with every collective trauma confronts us with the question which position we, as Christian, as Christian theologian, as Church, should take in such an 'interrupting' event. And what religious people can mean for those that suffer trauma. Such questions do not only or not especially count for Christianity, these are questions that rise for every religious man or woman, whatever his or her religion may be.

It is true that Jewish suffering after the Second World War bears a certain uniqueness: at one side the history of anti-Semitism and the numberless persecutions, and of course the specificity of the *endlösung* that was pointed at the destruction of the Jewish people. Nonetheless this special case confronts us undoubtedly with how the horror of war works through the next generations that were never directly involved. For the moment we can strike the balance of three generations, and we cannot conclude anything else than that the events of seven decades ago still have concrete effects on the lives and the identity of the Jews.

The exceptionality of the Jewish situation doesn't strip it from the fact that what it bears in its core is illustrative: war does never stop immediately when the weapons are silent, and war memory should also mean 'giving a place at the living and the following generations that are marked by war, although they sometimes had never to do with war in a direct way. Such a point of view actualizes war memory in this sense that it is not only about the insanity and the horror of a war, but also about how wars that seem long gone still work through several generations. I tried to offer this viewpoint from the focus on the events of 9/11.

That is the reason for my plea for a more contemporary war remembrance: a remembrance attitude that not only puts death in the central of memory, but also traumatized life. And not only traumatized life of the direct victims and witnesses, but also that of the next generations. For too long in our memory we were only focussed on the death, the hero's, those who died because of our freedom. That focus blinded us for the perspective of the survivors and their

offspring. Those who fought and survived got the place in memory they deserved, those who underwent war and were left traumatized often disappeared within the folds of history. And the intergenerational working through of war, which means from indirect victims whose life and happiness was often touched by war, was often totally neglected. But remembrance shouldn't only be about the remembrance of the hero's, but also about the impact of war on society and on individual people. That is impossible if the intergenerational aspects of war are being neglected. The recognition and implementation of it should be one of the pillars of a memory to the measure of the 21st century. It is a plea for a collective remembrance that goes beyond mere history and much more puts man in the center.

From the Christian point of view there is a need for a theological fundament that doesn't put dogmatics, nor 'giving meaning to suffering', in the center, but this question: 'How can Christianity counter traumatized life with a 'story' of hope?'

I thank you for your attention.

Endnotes:

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- ¹ S.A. LUEL, *Living with the Holocaust: Thoughts on Revitalization*, in ID. & P. MARCUS (ed.), *Op. cit.*, p. 170-171.
 - ² A. HASS, *In the shadow of the Holocaust. The second generation*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990, p. 8.
 - ³ A. HASS, *The Aftermath. Living with the Holocaust*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995, p. 2-4. Zie ook: ID., *In the shadow of the Holocaust*, p. 8-9.
 - ⁴ A. HASS, *The Aftermath*, p. 41: "Survivors, however, have not mourned. They remain locked in their own sphere. Consequently, their bitterness continues to sear their soul."
 - ⁵ L.L. LANGER, *Holocaust Testimonies. The Ruins of Memory*, New Haven/Londen, Yale University Press, 1991, p. 3-5: "I have the feeling that the 'self' who was in the camp isn't me, isn't the person who is here, opposite you. No, it's too unbelievable. And everything that happened to this other 'self', the one from Auschwitz, doesn't touch me now, *me*, doesn't concern me, so distinct are deep memory [*mémoire profonde*] and common memory [*mémoire ordinaire*]." Geciteerd uit: C. DELBO, *La mémoire et les jours*, Parijs, Berg International, 1985, p. 13.
 - ⁶ A. HASS, *The Aftermath*, p. 7-9.
 - ⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 25-28.
 - ⁸ We verwijzen hiervoor naar: T. DEGRAFF, *Pathological Patterns of Identification in Families of Survivors of the Holocaust*, in *Israel Annals of Psychiatry and Related Disciplines* 13 (1975) 335-363; en L. ROSENBERGER, *Children of Survivors*, in E.J. ANTHONY (ED.) & C. KOUPERNIK, *The Child in His Family, Vol. 2*, New York, Wiley, 1974, p. 375-377.
 - ⁹ Zie: C. KATZ & F. KELEMAN, *The Children of Holocaust Survivors: Issues of Separation*, in *Journal of Jewish Communal Service* 57 (1981) 257-263.
 - ¹⁰ Zie: H. BAROCAS, *Children of Purgatory: Reflections on the Concentration Camp Survival Syndrome*, in *Corrective Psychiatry and Journal of Social Therapy* 16 (1970) 393-397.
 - ¹¹ A. HASS, *In the Shadow of the Holocaust*, p. 28-30.
 - ¹² *Ibid.*, p. 127-128.
 - ¹³ D. BAR-ON, *Fear and Hope. Three Generations of the Holocaust*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1995, p. 344.
 - ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 85-86.
 - ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 251-252.
 - ¹⁶ S. KONRAD, 'Everybody has one's own Holocaust'. *Eine internationale psychologische Studie über die Auswirkungen des*¹⁷ D. BAR-ON, *o.c.*, p. 92.
 - ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 332: "(...) expressed in suspicion (...) or hidden in pain, anger, or fear (...)"
 - ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 332-333.

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- 20 N.J. SMELSER, *September 11, 2001, as Cultural Trauma*, in J.C. ALEXANDER ET AL., *Cultural Trauma and*
21 *Collective Identity*, Berkeley/Los Angeles/Londen, University of California Press, 2004, 264-282, p. 265.
- 22 J.C. ALEXANDER, *Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma*, in ID. ET AL., *o.c.*, 1-30, p. 1.
- 23 N.J. SMELSER, *Psychological Trauma and Cultural Trauma*, in J.C. ALEXANDER ET AL., *o.c.*, 31-59, p. 44.
- 24 J. EDKINS, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003, pp. 4.
De aanslagen van 11 september 2001 kunnen gezien worden als een vorm van gewelddadige weerstand
waarop geantwoord werd met aan agressieve politiek, zowel binnen als buiten de eigen grenzen. In het
terugwinnen van de herinnering door diegenen die politieke verandering willen, ligt de kans om opnieuw
op niet-gewelddadige wijze weerstand te bieden en te breken met het geweld en de instrumentalisering van
het leven uit de aanslagen en de respons. (*Ibid.*, p. 216.)
- 25 W.F. LYNCH, S.J., *Images of Hope. Imagination as Healer of the Hopeless*, Notre Dame, University of
Notre Dame Press, 2003⁶, pp. 94; 243-244.
- 26 *Ibid.*, pp. 23-24; 249.
- 27 *Ibid.*, pp. 31-32; 37; 47; 50.
- 28 D. LACAPRA, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, Baltimore/Londen, The Johns Hopkins University Press,
2001, p. 41; 78.
- 29 C. CARUTH, *Unclaimed Experience. Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Baltimore/Londen, The Johns
Hopkins University Press, 1996, p. 61.
- 30 Caruth schrijft dat de onbegrijpelijkheid van het trauma niet zozeer ligt in de confrontatie met de dood,
maar in de onbegrijpelijkheid van het eigen overleven. (*Ibid.*, p. 64.)
- 31 L. DEWART, *The Church and Political Conservatism*, in J.B. METZ (ed.), *Faith and the World of Politics*,
97-108, p. 107.