

Why Remembrance?

A few months ago, students from various schools came with their teachers to visit what had been the Drancy camp. Jews who had been arrested in France were held there before being transferred to Auschwitz. I welcomed the students and teachers by saying: “We have brought you here, children, to see the Drancy camp ... and yet there is nothing to see.”

There is in actuality nothing to see. And so many people are unaware that tens of thousands of people, women, children and old people spent their last hours there. This ‘holding camp’ would actually turn out to be their waiting room to be murdered by gassing.. for them to disappear forever in the ovens of the crematorium.

And yet! And yet one only needs to listen to the cobblestones to hear the weeping of those who could not understand why they, who were guilty of no crime, would have such hatred unleashed upon them by those who considered them sub-human (*untermenschen*). Those who would exterminate them in the name of a deranged ideology of exclusion. One only had to listen to the weeping etched into the walls, to hear the laments of the mothers, rocking their babies, holding them close and humming sorrowful melodies from an unknown place whose origins are lost in the mists of time.

One only needs to simply listen with care, and even compassion, to feel the suffering of those who, after several terrifying days in a cattle truck, would be dead. The wagon that took them, like a herd of cattle, to the industrial abattoir of psychopathic genocidal murderers.

So that is what I would like, or rather, would have liked to describe to the young students one day. But rest assured, I didn’t actually tell them about all that. Why? Because despite all I have been through, I talk about what happened because of my unwavering belief in humanity. It was this conviction which allowed me to survive such a hellish ordeal.

Certainly, human beings are capable of committing the most horrendous acts. This is well-proven by the Holocaust and the murder of the Romani peoples. But there are also many more recent examples, the massacres of the American Indians and the Armenians. As well, even if the motives are of a different nature, the killings in Zaire, Uganda, and Algeria where everything seems to be starting again.

In the former Yugoslavia, where the people of Kosovo were tortured and killed, and where the Serbs slaughtered in bombings. In Chechnya, where massacres have resulted in hundreds of dead with barely any protest from so-called civilised nations. And, in so many other places all over the world.

There has been, and continues to be, horrific bloodshed. However, I cannot forget there have never been as many philanthropic organisations made up of women and men who devote body and soul to the well-being of humanity.

Despite that, what allows me to live almost normally is the hope and certainty that, if we do all we possibly can for this purpose, one day people will be better. That we will realise the

only way to exist is to live strictly to the ethos, which includes of the utmost importance, respect for “the other”.

We who were the unfortunate witnesses of these horrors of world history, we know that there are other perpetrators constantly lurking in the shadows waiting to strike again. They are just waiting for us to forget so they can kill again. That is why one of the ideas driving the *Cercle Mémoire et Vigilance* (Association for Remembrance and Vigilance) is to preserve these memories so they are not wiped from the annals of history. Notwithstanding the view of some survivors who would prefer to forget than remember history.

We want these memories to evolve in to an everlasting Remembrance. Not to feed any feelings of revenge whatsoever, but out of respect for the victims, and especially so that the lessons of history can guide those who will build the world of tomorrow. Remembrance should serve as an example, an alarm bell. Knowing what happened in the past we should be suspicious of all fanaticism, all dogmatism and all hatred.

Up until now, people were limited to writings from the past to inform them as to what they should do, in the light of history, to talk about the future and to build the future. We had to, without overwhelming people, show that violence, often murder and sometimes even automatised serial murders, held such a fascination for some people that they were able to commit such acts, the memory of which was in fact unbearable to them. They had to be taught that their indifference and their inaction in the face of suffering was not only criminal, but consigned such suffering to being something inevitable and everyday, as if it was imprinted in their genes.

Of course, history is a long succession of abominations, as we have seen. To convince you, do I need to remind you of those SS guards who took babies by their feet and smashed them against walls? Just like that, without thinking they were doing anything special. But just because they saw them as the children of the sub-humans, these children were guilty just for being alive. Do I need to remind you of all the racial crimes committed in the world, and the horrors we are invited to on a daily basis on the 8 o'clock television news? To make people wake up, do we need to list all the countries where violence as the slave of blind hatred, has committed and commits still, abominable crimes? Do I need to remind you that at the very moment I am speaking to you, at this very second, some are the slaves of others, and tens of thousands of children are working in the worst possible conditions of servitude?

In order that the memory of all these atrocities are of use and serve the development of humanity, all such suffering, all these unjust deaths which are all throughout our history, must come out of the inert domain of statistics and memory to enter the world of action, the world of Remembrance. Because Remembrance is living. It is life, and it is the future, as memories do not only speak about past events which will never happen again.

If memories are knowledge and belong to those who have lived through them, Remembrance is universal as it is the understanding of life. It does not belong to any one person, it belongs to all of humanity.

I implore those who have been victimised for being part of a religious, ethnic or cultural group, to not appropriate such remembrance for their own ends. To stop taking the world hostage, as some kind of redemption wanting the world to mourn, because they have mourned, to suffer because they have suffered. To do so only feeds remembering the past,

whilst remembrance is something completely separate. Remembrance does not ask that some people suffer, in their heart and soul, all the horrors of the past. On the contrary, Remembrance hopes to provide all of humanity with the ways and means to avoid a repetition of such suffering and grief. Remembrance also refrains from holding all people responsible for the crimes committed by a few, instead encouraging forgiveness to prevent the mindset of revenge and reckoning.

That is why we must be wary of a misconception that often confuses two concepts, that of Memory and Remembrance. If memory is the past, if it is the history of our world, written in stone or written in books, Remembrance is the evolving future.

The other day, in a school, a young person asked me what will remain of Auschwitz when all the survivors have passed on. He questioned whether, once the survivors are no longer here to uphold its integrity, there is a risk the camp will be wiped from the face of the earth or become some clichéd place of pilgrimage. I answered that I feel it would be an injustice if the camp were to disappear from the face of the earth as its walls bear witness to such horrors. However in my view, if that happened it would not matter so much. What must not be lost after these abominations is the message they carry. That is, to be mindful of the dangers of the racist rhetoric of exclusion and xenophobia. Despite the horror of what occurred every single day at Auschwitz, this message, for me who lived through it, is not a message of death, but it is a message of life. In that place we all knew the value of living. We knew the value of life. Life was an eternal gift as we struggled to conserve and protect it in the face of the cruelty we endured. The lesson we learned was also that, if we are not ever-vigilant, we can also become monsters just like those who tortured us. We must pass on the message that for human beings the most admirable thing to maintain is the repugnance of standing by, powerless in the face of another's suffering. That is even more important than one's own personal suffering, which can be forgotten.

Even so, should we abandon these places where this all happened, the places where history was written? I am not saying that. I simply think that it does nothing for Remembrance to limit oneself to wallowing in front of memorials on special dates (be they an actual burial place or just symbolic). That is not enough. We must go where there is suffering, or rather where suffering might occur. We must seek out the horrible monster where it may appear. We must touch the hearts of all people, if we want that they did not die for nothing, our six million, as well as all the others who perished.

This is the message we take from Remembrance, even though memories are often reduced to building memorials to the dead, like the ones we find throughout our towns and villages. I

have the utmost respect for them. But I think they are more worthy of a Work of Remembrance because at worst they can foster feelings of vengeance, and at best they only speak of the memory of those who have died in battles between brothers, as all wars are battles between brothers. Those few stones piled one upon the other, as stonemason has designed them, are they enough to make all this stop? Do they increase awareness in those for whom selfishness is their only purpose in life? In other words, does Remembrance have the slightest connection with these structures, as lovely as they are? In my opinion it is wrong to call them "places of remembrance". Many times I have visited an American cemetery, where there are 10,000 white crosses, lined up as in a military parade. They speak of the courage of

these soldiers killed on French soil during the Allied troop landings. In that place I felt, as with all monuments to the dead, whilst they can be moving, such cemeteries are frozen in time and only convey to people memories frozen in the past. Instead, their message could be a catalyst for the future. I am sure that my father, a member of the Grand Lodge of France, would have wanted his sacrifice to serve as an example for the struggle against intolerance. Rather than only seeing his name engraved on the façade of a monument to the dead.

That is why, with many survivors we try to build a kind of 'Monument' in the hearts of the young - the schoolchildren and young people, those who will lead the world of the future. We are trying to teach them the concept of the value of 'the other', no matter their culture, the colour of their skin, their religion or their country of origin. Although some people think they are historians, they are quite close to being revisionists. We should not take children hostage by making them carry a collective responsibility for something for they had no part of. Without trivialising the crimes committed, which we ourselves endured, we encourage the young to question themselves, because bigoted aberrations often begin in oneself.

We try to build monuments, of course, but they are on a human scale as they affect them in a the most personal place.

No, dear Holocaust deniers, we are not taking children hostage as we are showing them the most beautiful of gifts. Instead of making them feel guilty for crimes they did not commit, we are telling them the opposite, to worship life, which is the only way to respect and love the lives of others.

Remembrance, which we uphold in the schools and in Lodges such as yours, even if it seems justified, and I will perhaps shock you, it is not the exclusive property of this or that culture or tradition. It is memory. Remembrance belongs to all people. It also teaches them that everyone is 'deportable', in the literal sense of the word. One day they can all become the targets for a new manhunt. No one can declare they will never be the scapegoats of another regime of hatred.

Of course a more egalitarian economy, with the right to work for all, respect for human nature, a struggle against the harmful effects of unbridled liberalism, a refusal to indulge in narrow-mindedness, a recognition of the dignity of all people, and as René Cassin has said, equal dignity for all people. Policies which are non-partisan, taking care of people, these are the best ways to fight for a more enlightened humanity. But there is another way, perhaps more subtle, more difficult to maintain as it can be risky, more humane certainly as it reaches people's souls. That is respect for remembrance as I have tried to describe it.

Such remembrance is both the History of Humanity and what will happen in the future. Combining in the one concept the past and the future, the present and what is yet to come. It is, to me, one way to combat blindness to hatred and to counter all totalitarianism.

Let us work so that memories become Remembrance for all people, and that we do this without any desire for vengeance. Let us make these memories the present.

That is why today, into your hands I pass the memory of my father, murdered by the Nazis in a gas chamber at the age of 53. Of my mother, gassed by the Nazis at the age of 45, and of

my little sister gassed at the age of 11. I pass into your hands my own memories, as a child of 16 years, savagely thrown into a purgatory of brutality and cruelty for nearly two years. I also pass to you to the countless victims, adults, children, the elderly, survivors or the sacrificed. Their crime was simply to have another cultural past to those who held power, and for this sole reason they were condemned to an atrocious death.

I pass into your hands the memory of those thousands of men and women who willingly joined the Resistance and who took such risks of which we are now aware. These people of all faiths, from all political persuasions, who championed the values of freedom. Who fought in great numbers with such courage to then become victims, slaughtered and murdered.

Allow me also, to most especially honour in universal memory, all those who regardless of the huge risks to themselves and their families saved, at great personal peril, thousands of Jewish women, men and children. They were truly incredible human beings. The Righteous amongst the Righteous. Human beings with heart and dedication, who did what they did with great courage, not to be awarded any accolades whatsoever, but just because they were human beings made of skin and blood. They could not abide injustice being done to their fellow human beings just because of their culture or religion. The poet, René Louis Laforgue immortalised them when he sang this song in the 'Grand Manitou'. It went a little like this:

“In a world of anti-blacks, I feel like an humble black person

In a world of anti-arabs, I feel like an humble Arab person

In a world of anti-Semites, I feel like an humble Jewish person.”

May these memories become Remembrance to challenge Lao-Tseu, who said that a lantern carried on your back will only light the path behind you. May it be that those who forget History are not condemned to repeat it.

A belief in remembrance will also make us aware that we are all linked to each other and affected by what happens to each of us. That is why I will not resist to my desire to read to you a very short poem. It was written in 1942 by a German Pastor, Martin Niemöller, when he was sent to the Dachau concentration camp.

I quote:

“When they arrested the intellectuals,
I was not one of them, so I said nothing.

When they arrested the communists,
I was not a communist, so I did not object.

When they arrested the Jews,
I was not Jewish, so I kept quiet.

When they arrested the socialists,
I was not a socialist, so I stayed silent.

And then when they arrested me,
There was no one left to object”

End of quote

Get people out of their apathy by demonstrating to them that all these notions which, like poisonous mushrooms, are sprouting up all over the world. Show them that many of these ideas are still madness and can lead to the worst atrocities.

Wake up those who are asleep and do not want to see what is happening right now. Show them that these brutal monsters were just ordinary people like you and me, and at the end of their days of brutality they went back to being attentive fathers and model husbands. If they carried out these most disgusting acts with such indifference, it is because they were hallucinating and conditioned, just as we could also be, if we do not continue to look critically, if we blindly follow leaders who are particularly gifted and compelling orators.

So, let us pose a question which has troubled me for a long time and which I regularly ask myself, “Am I myself capable, if I allowed myself to be lead by an ideology of hate and exclusion, discounting the suffering of others ... am I capable of doing to others, what others have done to me?” How can this agonising question be answered? I do not know, but I tend to worry that behind a screen of impunity all people can become a tyrant towards another. And so, to not become a monster, whose ethics and morality are deplorable, thanks to what we have learned from the past, we must be vigilant of anything that resembles fascist intolerance. Let us flush out the cunning enemy hiding deep within us all, so we do not one day, also become the tyrant of another.

So, I should share with you a memory that will lead you with me in remembering what was my life in a death camp.

I will only do this if your questions require me to do so because how can I choose between all the trials I underwent. How does one memory deserve to be revived over any other?

And then, should I talk about all this so you can take the challenge of remembrance in your hands, for it to then become the Remembrance of Humanity?

I don't know. Just know this, I have known what a man should never know, I have seen what the child that I was should never had had to see.

I have seen bodies writhe.

I have seen a bodies die.

I have seen the kapos* and the SS kill for the sole pleasure of killing.

I have seen murderers killing without pleasure, just like that, just for something to do.

I have seen the monster, that some people carry within them, which they unleash on others. Just because they can, with complete impunity.

I have seen the indefensible.

I have seen the unspeakable.

I have seen the horror.

I have seen the terror.

I have even seen the eyes of the dead.

If I refuse to forget it and I talk about the memories, it is only because Remembrance reminds those who refuse to look at the world, or to look at the turmoil which surrounds them. Those who ignore the horror that can follow all kinds of extremist ideas and theories. It is to do this today, tomorrow and perhaps forever more, so there will never again be vicious monsters like the ones I have known. It is up to others to analyse all the things that can cause them to forget their humanity and to take the necessary steps to protect freedom.

You have to work so that the victims of this horror did not die for nothing. All those who witnessed this horror have an obligation to be true to it, to not allow the memories to die. They must honour those who perished by working so they remain for eternity. They must use their suffering to prevent a resurgence of hatred, exclusion, racism and the rejection of others.

And when we are no longer here, the seeds we have sown will beget beautiful flowers to blossom in the garden of this Earth. And they, in turn will seed once again and flower for future generations to come.

Allow me to believe that as a witness I am an instrument for the future.

Sam Braun, 21/04/2000

* A *kapo* was a prisoner in the concentration camp who worked with the Nazis to supervise their fellow prisoners.