

The Memory of Auschwitz and the Oblivion of Bloodlands

Robert Jan van Pelt

“*Lech, Lecha.*”—“Go for yourself.” The words God spoke to Abra(ha)m when he instructed him to leave his native Ur and realize his destiny flashed through my brain during a rude intervention in the middle of a major commemorative lecture on Auschwitz, given at the Radboud University in Nijmegen, the Netherlands, on January 26, 2010. In my lecture, I had raised the question why Auschwitz had become, for better or worse, a major symbol of the Holocaust. I felt I was qualified to both ask and answer that question, as I had researched the history of Auschwitz for more than a quarter century. Whilst talking, I noticed an increasingly agitated gentleman in the back of the room. At one moment he couldn’t control himself, stood up, and began to profess, with a loud voice, that Auschwitz was largely irrelevant for our understanding of the Holocaust and that my own work on the camp had been a waste of my time; he said that the only truly relevant work on the Holocaust had been undertaken by the French cleric Father Patrick Desbois, who, beginning in 2003, had been identifying and digging up mass graves in the Ukraine and collecting testimonies of witnesses, and who had published his findings in his best-selling and award-winning *The Holocaust by Bullets: A Priest's Journey to Uncover the Truth Behind the Murder of 1.5 Million Jews* (2008). “Why weren’t you like Father Desbois?” the man asked me. “He has done real work in difficult conditions, while you just studied blueprints in comfortable archives and make simplistic arguments sitting in front of your computer screen.”

The trigger for the man’s challenge was my discussion of an article that had appeared, seven months earlier, in the *New York Review of Books*. Written by Timothy Snyder, Professor of History at Yale University, who specializes in the history of Eastern Europe, the article offered a preview of his forthcoming book: *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin*. Snyder framed his argument in a polemic that assailed *both* the centrality of Auschwitz in our collective memory of the Nazi genocide of the Jews and the centrality of the Gulag in our collective memory of Stalinist crimes. Snyder claimed that historians had failed in their duty to provide a fair accounting of the mass killings of European civilians in the 1930s and 1940s. “Auschwitz, generally taken to be an adequate or even a final symbol of the evil of mass killing, is in fact only the beginning of knowledge, a hint of the true reckoning with the past still to come.” Auschwitz, so Snyder argued, distorted our understanding of the Holocaust because there were survivors—mostly West European Jews. He suggested that only these West European survivors could publish their memoirs. “This form of survivors’ history, of which the works of Primo Levi are the most famous example, only inadequately captures the reality of the mass killing. *The Diary of Anne Frank* concerns assimilated European Jewish communities, the Dutch and German, whose tragedy, though horrible, was a very small part of the Holocaust.” An Auschwitz-focused understanding of the Holocaust, Snyder argued, ignored the fate of Polish and Soviet Jews who had been murdered by bullets or those who died in the Operation Reinhard camps. And those Jews constituted the great majority of the victims. Therefore “Auschwitz as symbol of the Holocaust excludes those who were at the center of the historical event.” Snyder proposed that “an adequate vision of the Holocaust would place Operation Reinhardt, the murder of the Polish Jews in 1942, at the center of its history,” with the *Einsatzgruppen* killings providing the adjacent circle of historical importance.¹

Snyder not only rejected a historiography of the genocide of the Jews that focused on Auschwitz—a place that he identified as merely “an introduction to the Holocaust”—but he also rejected the primacy of the Gulag in the narrative of Stalinist repression. In the famines generated by the collectivization of 1930-1933, three million Soviet citizens died, mostly ethnic Ukrainians and Kazakhs. In the Great Terror many hundreds of thousands were executed. “Like Auschwitz, which draws our attention to the Western European victims of the Nazi empire, the Gulag, with its notorious Siberian camps, also distracts us from the geographical center of Soviet killing policies.” Auschwitz suggested that the center of the Holocaust was west of its actual center, and the Gulag, associated with Siberia, suggested that the center of Stalinist repression was east of the actual center. Both symbols took away the attention of the region that Snyder focused on: the ancient borderlands between Germany and Russia—the region in which the Holocaust of the Jews had been, in Father Desbois’s terms, a Holocaust by bullets.²

During my lecture, I expressed my agreement with Snyder’s contention that a key element in the centrality of Auschwitz in the memory of the Holocaust is the fact that there were many Auschwitz survivors who either had told their story or had written it down. I’ll return to this below. I said this in the context of an argument in which I sought to explain that both the Holocaust by bullets and the Operation Reinhard had only a modest place in the collective imagination of both the East and the West because, unlike Auschwitz, the *Einsatzgruppen* and the Operation Reinhard camps were, and continue

1 Timothy Snyder, “Holocaust: The Ignored Reality,” *The New York Review of Books*, July 16, 2009. Accessed July 5, 2013. <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2009/jul/16/holocaust-the-ignored-reality/>.

2 Ibid.

to be, simply “beyond narrative.” The *Einsatzgruppen* killings generally occurred without much warning, as the element of surprise was centrally important in the success of the operation. And in both the *Einsatzgruppen* and the Operation Reinhard killings there were hardly any survivors to tell the story—hence the importance of Father Desbois’s attempt to interview bystanders who had been silent for more than fifty years. And whatever stories might have arisen from the massacres in the forests and fields or in Belzec, Sobibor, and Treblinka did not really fit into the broad understanding we have of the possible stories that can be told, based on the range of stories that we have heard.

My argument that January day in Nijmegen anticipated an argument made later that year by the sociologist Arthur W. Frank in his path-breaking *Letting Stories Breathe: A Socio-Narratology* (2010). “Each story is singular; none is a mere instance,” Frank observed. “Yet stories depend on other stories: on recognizable plots, character types, conventional tropes, genre-specific cues that build suspense, and all the other narrative resources that story tellers utilize. A typology of narratives recognizes that experience follows from the availability of narrative resources, and that people’s immense creativity is in using these resources to fabricate their stories.”³ In my lecture, I made such an argument with less eloquence, to be sure, but with the back-up of one of my favorite books: Christopher Booker’s *The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories* (2004). Booker distinguished seven basic shapes of the stories that we tell, and during the lecture I looked at these plots to compare the Auschwitz narratives to those generated by the *Einsatzgruppen* and Operation Reinhard killings. I noticed that plots that center on the rise from rags to riches (*Cinderella*) and the quest (*The Lord of the Rings*) did not apply to either. Neither did the plot of the traditional comedy that emerges from confusion and misunderstanding and ends with a party (*Four Weddings and a Funeral*), nor the plot of the traditional tragedy in which a tragic flaw brings down the hero (*The Picture of Dorian Grey*). I proposed that the complexity of motives and images that are summed up in the image of Auschwitz do relate to the plots of overcoming a monster and a thrilling escape from death (*Dr. No*), a voyage to a strange world and the return home (*The Third Man*), and, of course, the plot of death and (symbolic) rebirth, either in heaven or on earth (*A Christmas Carol*).

I argued that each of the three last plots assumed some form of survival: those who were destroyed by the monster, those who did not return, or those who were not (symbolically) reborn remained at best supernumeraries. Hence it should not surprise that the substance of the Holocaust narrative were survivor stories. This meant that both the *Einsatzgruppen* killings and the Operation Reinhard were beyond narration because the few survivors (only one of the 550,000 Jews deported to Belzec was alive in 1945; some 50 to 70 of the 250,000 Jews brought to Sobibor and 40 from the at least 800,000 Jews sent to Treblinka saw the end of the war) were freaks of history, whereas the millions who were killed cannot but dominate our understanding of the situation. And their fate is beyond a story. Compared to the *Einsatzgruppen* killings, in which the Jewish population of the towns and villages where the mobile killing units arrived were almost completely wiped out, or the Operation Reinhard camps, which offered a survival rate of between 0.03 % (Sobibor) and 0.0002% (Belzec), relatively many Jews deported to Auschwitz saw the end of the war: some 8% of inmates were able to tell a tale of their deportation, selection, imprisonment, evacuation, and liberation. And in the tale of one survivor, one heard the echoes of the stories of other survivors, and in all those stories one heard the echoes of what George Steiner labeled as “the millenary pornography of fear and vengeance, cultivated in the Western mind by Christian doctrines of damnation.”⁴ And the environment in which those stories were set could be imagined, because it had been largely preserved and made easily accessible to visitors. Unlike Auschwitz, the locations where the *Einsatzgruppen* did their work were many, haphazardly chosen, and largely forgotten. And although the locations of the Operation Reinhard camps were marked, there were no remains to augment the testimonies of survivors like Thomas Blatt (Sobibor) or Richard Glazar (Treblinka), and there were too few testimonies and too little regularity in the life of the inmates of those camps to generate the powerful resonances that take place when we listen to the testimonies of Auschwitz survivors.

I also made another point: for better or worse the genocide of the Jews is remembered and defined as “The Holocaust,” with a capitalized “T” of “The” and a capitalized “H” of “Holocaust”—that is, it is understood as a single phenomenon that may contain a phenomenal range of experiences and suffering, but that remains nevertheless a unique and as such singular event, and that therefore suggests the need for a unique and singular stage. Jews like Elie Wiesel have related the Holocaust to the *Akedah*—Abraham’s binding of Isaac—and Christians have related the Holocaust to the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth. Both world-historical events took place at a particular location. Abraham bound Isaac on Mount Moriah, the Temple Mount in Jerusalem described in many stories of the Midrash as the centre of the world. And the Romans crucified Jesus on Golgotha. I proposed that, therefore, the singularity implied by the concept of “The

-
- 3 Arthur W. Frank, *Letting Stories Breathe: A Socio-Narratology* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2010), 119 NB: Frank noted that the creation of narrative typologies, based on analyses of, for example, clusters of typical solutions to a common problem, was a work in progress, and he also counseled those who create typologies not to use these matrices to impose closure on what can be heard in stories or, worse, allow the typology to become a form of fetishism, in which stories are only seen as “exemplars of types, rather than the types helping what work the stories are doing for the different people who tell and receive them.”
- 4 George Steiner, *In Bluebeard’s Castle: Some Notes Towards the Re-Definition of Culture* (London: Faber & Faber, 1971), 46ff.

Holocaust” suggested a singular place of focus. Noting that the most deadly of the shooting ranges in the Holocaust by bullets (the Ponary Forest near Vilna) would always face competition (for example from the Rumboli Forest near Riga, or Babi Yar near Kiev), and arguing that the most deadly of the Operation Reinhard camps (Treblinka) would always face competition from numbers two and three (Belzec and Sobibor), we see that Auschwitz was the only camp that had been truly unique in its hybrid form as extermination camp and concentration camp, and in the character and scope of a killing technology that combined many gas chambers with many incinerators. Thus if we were to open ourselves to the history of the genocide of the Jews as a *Mythos*, we could not but recognize that Auschwitz was the only site that offered an equivalent to Mount Moriah and Golgotha.

Imre Kertész, who survived the deportation to Auschwitz, the selection there, transport to and sojourn to Buchenwald and slave labour in *Arbeitskommando* Troeglitz near Zeitz, suggested so much when some twenty years ago he defined Auschwitz as “the universal and eternal parable. In its name alone it gathers both the whole world of the Nazi concentration camps as well as also the general shakiness of the spirit. It must be kept in its mythically elevated place of display, so that pilgrims can visit it, like they visit for example the hill of Golgotha.”⁵ Kertész did not find it necessary to list objective “historical” reasons to understand why Auschwitz had obtained that central role. For him it was sufficient to invoke a concept first coined by Thomas Mann: the so-called *Geist der Erzählung*, or “spirit of story-telling,” the form a particular story must take in order to be believable and, possibly, become a *Mythos*.⁶ Kertész defined this spirit as “a kind of both secret and communal decision, which obviously reflects real spiritual motives and needs and which come forward in truth.”

They define the horizon of our daily life, those—in the final analysis—stories that deal with good and evil, and our world, surrounded by this horizon, is immersed in a never ending whispering about good and evil. I would make the bold claim that in a certain sense and at a certain level we only live because of this spirit of the story, that this constantly evolving spirit takes in our hearts and heads the spiritually not graspable place of God; that is the imagined gaze which we feel to rest on us, and everything that we do or leave, we do or leave in the light of this spirit.⁷

Kertész suggested that this bodiless, ubiquitous “spirit of story-telling” made witnesses and writers like himself decide on Auschwitz as the pre-eminent stage of the Holocaust and the embodiment of all Nazi concentration camps, even if, as Kertész admitted, there were countless other camps and countless other sites of suffering. Most of them are forgotten, and one should not quarrel with this fact. “The resolute spirit of the tale preferred to choose this camp instead of another, symbolizing the others through this one.”⁸

Time was running out, and I began my concluding remarks: “And thus we’ll remain stuck with Auschwitz as the center of the Holocaust, whatever Tim Snyder may argue in his forthcoming *Bloodlands*, or whatever Father Desbois may discover in the Ukraine.” As I said those words, I heard in my own voice an edge of triumphalism that I recognized as unnecessary, given the topic. But before regret could settle in, the man stood up in the back and began haranguing me. Initially I was defensive, and I tried to explain, once more, the key points I had tried to make. But the man interrupted me once again: “You aren’t a Father Desbois!” As I felt a sudden rage rise, I remembered (just in time) the words God had spoken to Abra(ha)m: “*Lech, Lecha*” (“Go, for yourself”). With these words came the Hasidic story that derives from them. Reb Zushia of Annipole told his pupils that when he was to face his maker, God would not ask him: “Zushia, why weren’t you like Moses?” or “Zushia, why weren’t you like the Mezritcher Maggid?” or “Zushia, why weren’t you like the Baal Shem Tov?” The only question God would ask—and this was a question he truly feared, as he had no answer—was “Zushia, why weren’t you Zushia?” Why didn’t you become what you could have been? And thus I decided to end my presentation by telling this story, drawing from it the conclusion that while Father Desbois had been realizing his destiny in the fields and forests of the Ukraine, I had try to realize mine in many different archives, walking and analyzing the Auschwitz site(s), and trying to make sense of all of that in front of a computer screen. I expressed my belief that it was unlikely that God would ask me, upon entering the afterlife, “Robert Jan, why weren’t you like Father Patrick?”

I must admit that it did not help much to dissuade my interlocutor: he was not in the mood to appreciate Hasidic wit or wisdom. But it made me think again about the problem I had tried to tackle. If it was proper that Father Desbois was meant to realize his destiny and I mine, could not the same be said about the many different places of Jewish martyrdom? Might it not be that the purpose of the forgotten killing fields in the Bloodlands and the erased remains and the few testimonies of the Operation Reinhard camps are to confront us with the Holocaust as oblivion, and the many remains and the countless and often repetitive testimonies of Auschwitz to confront us with the Holocaust as remembrance? “The world

5 Imre Kertész, “Die Unvergänglichkeit der Lager,” in *Eine Gedankenlänge Stille, während das Erschießungskommando neu lädt: Essays*, trans. Kristin Schwamm (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1999), 44f.

6 Thomas Mann, *The Holy Sinner*, trans. H.T. Lowe Porter (New York: Knopf, 1951), 3ff.

7 Kertész, “Die Unvergänglichkeit der Lager,” 43f.

8 *Ibid.*, 51f.

is filled with remembering and forgetting, / like sea and dry land,” Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai once observed. “Sometimes memory / is the solid ground we stand on, / sometimes memory is the sea that covers all things / like the Flood. And forgetting is the dry land that saves, like Ararat.”⁹ As I recalled Amichai’s lines, I realized that I had forgotten about Mount Ararat when I compared Auschwitz to Mount Moriah, and Mount Golgotha. Mount Ararat: the place where humanity began again, after the great flood began to recede. And I grasped that I had better pull up the stakes of what had appeared such an elegant and convincing argument and, indeed, begin again.

Lech, Lecha. . . .

Bibliography

- Amichai, Yehuda. “In My Life, On My Life.” In *Open Closed Open*, translated by Chana Bloch and Chana Kronfeld. New York: Harcourt, 2000.
- Frank, Arthur W. *Letting Stories Breathe: A Socio-Narratology*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2010.
- Kertész, Imre. “Die Unvergänglichkeit der Lager.” In *Eine Gedankenlänge Stille, während das Erschießungskommando neu lädt: Essays*, translated by Kristin Schwamm. Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1999.
- Mann, Thomas. *The Holy Sinner*. Translated by H.T. Lowe Porter. New York: Knopf, 1951.
- Snyder, Timothy. “Holocaust: The Ignored Reality.” *The New York Review of Books*, July 16, 2009.
<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2009/jul/16/holocaust-the-ignored-reality/>.
- Steiner, George. *In Bluebeard’s Castle: Some Notes Towards the Re-Definition of Culture*. London: Faber & Faber, 1971.

9 Yehuda Amichai, “In My Life, On My Life,” in *Open Closed Open*, trans. Chana Bloch and Chana Kronfeld (New York: Harcourt, 2000), 111.