

## The Political Context of Holocaust Forgiveness [Excerpt from Honors Thesis]

In the summer of 2017, I travelled to Terre Haute, Indiana to intern at CANDLES Holocaust Museum and Education Center. Interning at CANDLES allowed me to get to know Eva quite well. The story of her experiences in Auschwitz was undoubtedly interesting but the way she told it was unlike any Holocaust testimony I've ever heard— it included humor, sarcasm, and even happiness. I wanted to learn more about her and wondered if her forgiveness had impacted the way she shared her experiences. Additionally, I questioned if other survivors had forgiven in any capacity. Of course, I wanted to know *why*— why have so many survivors chosen to hold on to anger and resentment and why Eva, of all people, chose to forgive.

### Post-war Willful Amnesia

As is often cited in post-war accounts regarding the Holocaust, victims were unwilling or unable to talk about their experiences. Out of shame or embarrassment, many people kept their stories to themselves in what Phillip Roth calls “willful amnesia.”<sup>1</sup> Willful amnesia was present amongst survivors in Germany, Israel, and America and also took root amongst perpetrators in each of these countries. Although they would never forget such atrocities, it seemed as if no one wanted to talk about what they had done or what was done to them.

As Novick notes, “it is said that survivors’ memories were so painful that they oppressed them, that only after the passage of many years could they bear to speak of what they had undergone...but there is considerable evidence that many were willing, indeed anxious, to talk of their experiences but made the deliberate choice not to do so.”<sup>2</sup> After the war, the life of a survivor was marred by a fundamental misunderstanding of (or lack of desire to understand) their wartime experiences. Everyone had felt that they had suffered during the war— Germans and Jews alike— and therefore assumed Jews and other victims were overreacting about or taking advantage of their victimhood. Simultaneously, people in Europe, Israel, and America told narratives that villainized survivors. If a survivor had not acted blatantly heroic during the Holocaust, it was thought that they lived because they were inherently cruel or collaborated with the Nazis.

Initially, the Holocaust and its survivors were seen as the antithesis to the “ideal” Israeli who was strong and ‘daring.’<sup>3</sup> “There were harsh judgements of those who went ‘like sheep to the slaughter.’” In fact, this phrase was the title of a pamphlet by the Ministry of Education in the 1950s. Only those considered heroes of the war— those who escaped camps or participated in ghetto uprisings— were legitimized. All others were seemingly cast aside or disregarded. “The disdainful attitude towards the survivors, especially the accusation of Jewish passivity during the Holocaust, were prevalent amongst the Israeli-born youth.”<sup>4</sup> In the 1950s, Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Day was established to commemorate the “brave” victims who had attempted to thwart death. Similarly, in 1980, an amendment to the State Education Law defined “Holocaust and Heroism awareness” as one of the official goals of the state educational system.<sup>5</sup> Thus we see the emergence of a Holocaust and Heroism narrative. Aaron Appelfeld explains that

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<sup>1</sup> Novick. *The Holocaust in American Life*, 32.

<sup>2</sup> Novick. *Holocaust in American Life*, 83.

<sup>3</sup> Klar, “The “Never Again” State of Israel,” 126.

<sup>4</sup> Kangisser Cohen, *Child Survivors of the Holocaust in Israel*, 4.

<sup>5</sup> Klar, ““Never Again” State of Israel,” 127.

survivors were looked at as either heroes or demons. “One of the questions that circulated was: what kind of people are these survivors, who had managed to survive such horrors? “The consensus was that a selection had taken place within the Jewish nation, and the question remained, ‘Which sector of the community had been annihilated: the superior one or the inferior one?’”<sup>6</sup>

### **Post-war Selective Memory**

Victims were not the only people who experienced a silencing after the war. Perpetrators and the German society as a whole also employed willful amnesia. Those in charge felt that the only way to move forward as a nation and hide their complicity was to sweep the problem under the rug and continue living as if nothing had happened.

A *New York Times* article from 1986 entitled “Erasing the Past: Europe's Amnesia About The Holocaust” discusses the desire to suppress such memories and not openly address them. “Europeans have buried the past, they suffer from some kind of collective amnesia. Because Europeans have failed to examine their past fully and honestly, the argument goes, they have not come to grips with the causes of the war and the Holocaust, nor have they learned the lessons of history.”<sup>7</sup>

Robert G. Moeller understands it not only as a willful amnesia, but a case of selective remembrance. “Their memory of the Third Reich and the war was not wiped clean; rather, they remembered selectively.”<sup>8</sup> Instead of focusing on the 11 million people they were complicit in murdering in the Holocaust, Germans chose to focus on coming to terms with their own loss and suffering. Moeller believes that it was not the silence of Germans that was most telling but, rather, what exactly they chose to speak about.

The Germans attempted to employ selective amnesia for a number of reasons. To begin with, it was more practical. Given the sheer amount of Nazis who made up the workforce, the bureaucracy, and the institutions necessary for survival, it seemed difficult and downright unrealistic to attempt to “denazify” all of Germany.

“In Bavaria in 1951, 94 percent of judges and prosecutors, 77 percent of finance ministry employees and 60 percent of civil servants in the regional Agriculture Ministry were ex-Nazis. By 1952 one in three of Foreign Ministry officials in Bonn was a former member of the Nazi Party. Of the newly-constituted West German Diplomatic Corps, 43 percent were former SS men and another 17 percent had served in the SD or Gestapo. Hans Globke, Chancellor Adenauer’s chief aide throughout the 1950s, was the man who had been responsible for the official commentary on Hitler’s 1935 Nuremberg Laws. The chief of police in the Rhineland-Palatinate, Wilhelm Hauser, was the Obersturmführer responsible for wartime massacres in Byelorussia.”<sup>9</sup>

Therefore it was decided to employ a policy of forgive, forget, and not speak of it.

Other reasons for willful amnesia and silence included the fact that some perpetrators felt shame for their actions, others believed that they had done nothing wrong, and a majority feared Allied persecution. Those who knew that they had committed a crime (or did nothing as they watched others commit crimes) most likely resented being reminded of it, so they willfully suppressed the memories.

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<sup>6</sup> Kangisser Cohen, *Child Survivors of the Holocaust*, 7.

<sup>7</sup> Miller, “Erasing the Past.”

<sup>8</sup> Moeller, “The Third Reich in Post-war German Memory,” 248.

<sup>9</sup> Coates, “The Selective Amnesia of Postwar Europe.”

## Allied Justice

Concurrently with the willful suppression of memory of both perpetrators and victims, the victors of war were attempting to bring about justice within the country. Seen as an imposition of Allied ideals on Axis peoples, German citizens had no choice but to comply. The common understanding of the retributive justice witnessed after the war was as a way for the Allied forces to prove their dominance, righteousness, and morality over Germans. Thus, there was little space for lenience or any political amnesty.

At the trials in Nuremberg, Germany, twenty-four important political and military Nazi leaders were tried between November 1945 and October 1946. The severity of sentences in both this and other post-war trials combined with the indifference to adhering to the international prohibition of trying *ex post facto*, prove the Allied desire to bring about justice through trials against all odds. This is also demonstrated in the alternative measures of justice that were suggested or carried out by various Allied leaders. Minow claims that many important Allies, including Winston Churchill, advocated for the arbitrary execution of war criminals.<sup>10</sup> The desire for murderous revenge, though ultimately neglected as a widespread policy in favor of the Nuremberg Trials, was carried out by some Allied troops on-the-ground in Germany. The Dachau liberation reprisals, for example, were acts of revenge in which American soldiers and victims liberated from Dachau, mortified by what they witnessed in the concentration camp, killed the approximately 30 to 50 SS men who still remained in the camp.<sup>11</sup> This is one example of Western ideals of punishment and vengeance and a demonstration of the cycle of vengeance that began even before the official end of the Holocaust.

## The Undoing of Allied Justice

Once judicial power was turned back over to Germany, criminal trials and measures of denazification administered by the Allies after the war were almost immediately followed by political amnesties and a policy of reintegration. The chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany from 1949-1963, Konrad Adenauer, had a *tabula rasa* policy of “let bygones be bygones.”<sup>12</sup> Adenauer seemed to represent the majority opinion that Germans must forget the past and move forward as he took actions toward political amnesty and criticized the denazification process. In a 1949 speech, Adenauer denounced denazification fearing it “would ‘foster a growing and extreme nationalism’ as the millions who supported the Nazi regime would find themselves excluded from German life forever.”<sup>13</sup> In the same speech, he announced his plan to set up an amnesty law for the Nazi war criminals and appeal to “the High Commissioners for a corresponding amnesty for punishments imposed by the Allied military courts.”<sup>14</sup>

This was encouraged by a majority of the German population. A 1947 *New York Times* article cited growing dissatisfaction amongst Germans toward the denazification program. Of the 3,400 individuals surveyed, only 34% expressed satisfaction with denazification. Many cited that the program was “too harsh” and that justice had already been served. “According to Norbert Frei’s *Adenauer’s Germany and the Nazi Past: The Politics of Amnesty and Integration*, by 1951, the amnesty legislation had benefited 792,176 people including 3,000 officials that brought

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<sup>10</sup> Minow, *Between Vengeance and Forgiveness*, 29.

<sup>11</sup> Sparks, “Dachau and Liberation.”

<sup>12</sup> Brudholm, *Resentment’s Virtue*, 73.

<sup>13</sup> Herf, *Divided Memory*, 217.

<sup>14</sup> Frei, *Adenauer’s Germany and the Nazi Past*, 3.

victims to jails and camps, 20,000 Nazis sentenced for "deeds against life," 30,000 who caused bodily injury, and about 5,200 charged with "crimes and misdemeanors in office."<sup>15</sup>

The Clemency Board of the US Military received thousands of letters from laity and clergy who used Christian arguments of forgiveness to condemn the Allied punishment of the Nazi perpetrators. "Christian attitudes of mercy and forgiveness were presented as superior to 'Jewish' calls for justice and judicial prosecution of perpetrators."<sup>16</sup> The motivation for forgiveness is completely different in cases such as these. Rather than encouraging forgiveness to be at peace with oneself and God or to promote reconciliation, it seems that church officials were encouraging forgiveness because they wanted to bury the past and not bring to light the crimes that they themselves may have had a hand in.

To elaborate on German feelings of guilt— or lack of guilt— Brudholm explains that Germans in general felt that they had "atoned enough through aerial bombardment, flight and expulsion."<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, a 1949 poll showed that 59% of people thought National Socialism was a good idea but poorly carried out.<sup>18</sup> A 1951 survey showed that 41% saw more good than evil in Nazi ideology. Heinrich Lübke, President of West Germany 1959-1969, "articulated the impatience of those in West Germany who had heard enough talk about the Nazi past, who did not want to be burdened by the actions of the 'small minority,' and who wanted the West German President to focus less on what the Nazis had done to others and more on the victimization of Germans by the Nazis and by the Allies."<sup>19</sup>

Overall, this debate serves to show the desire of the majority of Germans to "move on" and "get over" the Holocaust. Those who could not forgive and forget were labelled with "concentration camp syndrome" or an unwillingness to give up their victim status. Theodor Adorno wrote that, by 1948, "it was already considered a form of boring *ressentiment* to remind people of the extermination of the Jews."<sup>20</sup>

### **The Context of Forgiveness**

It is important to note the context within which Eva forgave as it was an era much more conducive to forgiveness than previous decades as perpetrator apologies and the celebration of forgiveness as a virtue made forgiveness more widely accepted.

As time passed, survivors became more comfortable sharing their stories. This shift first came with the 1961 trial of "desk murderer," Adolf Eichmann. The trial, which took place in Israel, was not only the first instance of Holocaust justice that was widely publicized, it was one of the first global media events that was broadcast on television. For the first time, non-survivors in Europe, Israel, and the United States were able to hear the gruesome details about what had happened to survivors during the war. Additionally, the 1978 screening of the *Holocaust* miniseries began to shift the narrative surrounding Holocaust survivors amongst the non-survivor population, subsequently allowing survivors to feel more comfortable sharing their personal experiences.

In an in-depth study of the American news sources regarding the Holocaust, it became clear that the period from the 1990s until today was a period which I began to call the "Era of

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<sup>15</sup> Herf, "Amnesty and Amnesia."

<sup>16</sup> Brudholm, *Resentment's Virtue*, 75.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

Apologies.” It was at this time that it became more and more common for perpetrators of the Holocaust— including the Catholic Church, various nations, and individual perpetrators — to apologize for their roles and ask forgiveness from their victims.

On April 12, 1990 the *New York Times* reported that the East German Parliament had announced their responsibility for Nazi crimes and officially declared that they would be willing to pay reparations to victims as well as seek diplomatic ties with Israel. In their speech, they apologized for the pain they had had a part in inflicting and asked for forgiveness: “we ask the Jews of the world to forgive us... We ask the people of Israel to forgive us for the hypocrisy and hostility toward Israel and for the persecution and degradation of Jewish citizens also after 1945 in our country.”<sup>21</sup> This apology was the beginning of many.

The Vatican in particular has made numerous apologies. In 1997 and again in 1998, Pope John Paul asked forgiveness for the role of the Church in the Holocaust. Whereas his initial apology was with the purpose of recognizing the wrongs of Catholic Europeans during the war, his second statement was with the goal of prevention; “may it enable memory to play its necessary part in the process of shaping a future in which the unspeakable iniquity of the Shoah will never again be possible.”<sup>22</sup>

This “Era of Apologies” was especially important to survivor’s perceptions of forgiveness. Again and again, scholars of political science and psychology highlight the value of perpetrator apologies in instances of mass atrocities. One way to lessen unforgiveness was for the perpetrators to perform esteem-lowering acts such as admissions of wrong, apologies, repentance, and asking forgiveness. Thus, in addition to apologies, actions taken by the perpetrators to prove to victims that they are taking steps to atone for their crimes could also contribute to a survivor’s willingness to forgive.

This celebration of apologies and forgiveness ultimately characterize the modern period and served as the backdrop for Eva Mozes Kor to forgive in 1995. In this analysis, the differences between the early years of forgiveness differed so drastically to the current understanding of forgiveness— with the early version benefiting the perpetrators and the modern version benefiting the survivors. Ultimately, this is only a small aspect of the many factors that led Eva to forgive but one that could be used to explain the context of such forgiveness.

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<sup>21</sup> Protzman, "The East Germans Issue An Apology For Nazis' Crimes."

<sup>22</sup> "John Paul's Plea: 'Never again'."

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