

Between collective amnesia and saturation of memory: Narratives compared

Claudia Gina Hassan*

Abstract. In this paper the forms of memory concerning the Shoah - ranging from collective amnesia to saturation of remembrance - are compared. The overload and excessive presence of the information, images and initiatives related to the Remembrance Day results on the one hand in a sacralization of the message conveyed but also, on the other hand, in its hollowing out and trivialization. In relation to this media cacophony, education and appropriate curricula are argued to deserve absolute priority in order to prevent memory from turning into a spectacular and self-referential fetish. The different ways of representing the Shoah - a theme linked with memory are then investigated. In contemporary culture two ways of representing and narrating Auschwitz can be distinguished: its theatricalization on one hand, and emphasizing its ineffability on the other. The question of ineffability constitutes a backdrop against which the constant need for narrating, representing and commemorating can be understood. Relative to the end of grand narratives, the Shoah seems to have remained the one and only epic worth narrating and a new absolute worth probing. In this context, literature plays a special role. Several narrative models about Shoah are compared.

Keywords: Memory, Shoah, Oblivion, Remembrance

Silence and excess represent two opposing reactions to the same issue: the silence and collective amnesia of the post-war period and the excess and bulimic commemoration of today.

In the immediate post-war period, there was no talk of the Shoah until 1961, when Eichmann was brought to trial in Jerusalem.¹ The immediate urgency of rebuilding and post-war recovery meant that the narratives being constructed of the resistance in Italy, of the victory of democracy over dictatorship in America, of the patriotic war against the Fascists in the Soviet Union, and even of the idea of the new man, the pioneer, the *sabra* in Israel took precedence over examination of the Shoah.² National narratives required heroes - the partisan, the soldier, the pioneer - strong men who could serve as the foundation for each country's future, and memory. The survivor was not part of the collective memory nor did the nameless victim receive the attention that was, instead, reserved for the anti-fascist fighter or the political deportee.

There was certainly no lack of *fire alarms* - those who clearly saw how civilization had been fractured in Europe's recent past - but they were a clutch of intellectuals, isolated and on the fringes, including the group of German intellectuals, *émigrés* to the United States, whose condition of exile gave them, over all others, a thoughtful approach to the war and its immediate aftermath.

It would take until the so-called "Era of the Witness"³, which marked the emergence of the

* Professor of General Sociology, University of Rome "Tor Vergata", E-Mail <hassan@lettere.uniroma2.it>.
Coorespondence: Via L. Manara 15, 00153 Rome, Italy.

¹ H. Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem. A report on the banality of evil*. The Viking Press, New York, 1963.

² I. Zertal, *Israel Holocaust and the politics of nationhood*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2005.

³ Wieviorka A., *The era of the witness*, Cornell University Press, New York, 2006. pp .96. Original edition: *L'ère du témoin*, Plon 1998, Italian edition *L'era del testimone*, Raffaello Cortina, Milano, 1999.

figure of the survivor onto the public stage, for the Shoah to become part of contemporary cultural and public debate: the role of the mass media in this was particularly important not only for how it framed the debate, but also for the grammar with which it created the narrative. A general decline in ideologies and the critical state of progressive models and narratives⁴ created the space for a unifying story and the Shoah took its place amidst the other collective stories of the XX century. And so did the Shoah become the paradigm of memory, the past against which Western culture would measure itself, its present and its future.⁵ From then until today, there has been a growing arc of initiatives and attention; however, in the late 1980s, the memory of the Shoah was still defined as solitary and fragmented.⁶ Today, 18 years on from the institution of International Holocaust Remembrance Day in 2000, we certainly cannot talk of a choral memory or even of shared memories. Despite this, much work has been done in this time and we now need to understand the implications of this engagement and these activities, their ability to create cohesion, collective memory and critical analysis. The institution of International Holocaust Remembrance Day was intended to indicate a significant investment in creating an awareness founded on a relationship with the past. A true cultural turning point, however, is not based on a general idea of knowledge, but on the changes that knowledge creates in behaviours, ways of being, collective experiences and, perhaps most importantly, in producing a deep and permanent capacity for empathy with the victims of today and yesterday.

On the one hand, the overheating of information, bombardment of images and initiatives can sanctify, on the other it can contribute to the emptying and trivializing of the message. Inappropriate comparisons and episodic examinations of the theme confer a banality to the issue which hinders the critical understanding of history. Education and teaching paths, therefore, become an absolute priority to balance against this media cacophony, to avoid creating a memory that is a fetishist, self-referencing spectacle. In contrast to the collective, civic removal of a past, difficult to consider or even imagine, today public and political debate appears warmly attentive to the subject of the Jewish extermination. It has become the centre for a multitude of approaches, annually engaging thousands of students, civil and political projects, hundreds of television shows and a conspicuous production of films, to the extent that it now represents a canon and a style. A separate comment is needed for the *Viaggi nella memoria* – Voyages into memory - which have undergone great transformation over time, reflecting the role that society gave itself with regards to the deportation and extermination camps. Now included in the creation of Italian public collectivity, these memories have very different time frames. Until the 1950's⁷, most voyages were organized by ANED – *Associazione Nazionale Ex Deportati nei Campi Nazisti* (National Association for Deportees to Nazi Concentration camps) for survivors, with a clear commemorative intent attributable to a semi-private memory. The political dimension remained firmly in the background and the narrative of Resistance had not yet become the foundation myth for the rebirth of a nation, as it would only a decade later. In the meantime, these voyages began to constitute a solid map of memory, civil participation and historical awareness, becoming a ritual to be celebrated every year. The didactic element of the voyages became predominant between the 1970s and 1980s, with the participation of students and institutions.

⁴ Alexander J. C., *The Meanings of Social Life. A cultural Sociology*. Oxford-new York, Oxford University Press, 2003. Italian edition, *La costruzione del male. Dall'Olocausto all'11 settembre*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 2006.

⁵ D. Meghnagi, *Ricomporre l'infranto. L'esperienza dei sopravvissuti alla Shoah*, Marsilio, Venezia, 2005.

⁶ Rossi Doria A., *Memoria e storia: il caso della deportazione*, Rubettino, Soveria Mannelli, Catanzaro 1998, p. 36

⁷ Bisacca E. & Maida B. (editors), *Noi non andiamo in massa, andiamo insieme. I treni della memoria nell'esperienza italiana, 2000-2015*, Mimesis, Milano 2015

During the last quarter of the XX century, the Shoah assumed a universal value upon which Europe was to base its identity. These are the years which see the release of the film *Holocaust*, the emergence of latent anti-Semitism with the 1982 attack on the Synagogue of Rome, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the 50th anniversary of the 1938 racial laws which became an opportunity for new commemoration and reflection. In an atmosphere of intense media and popular attention, the voyages began to include a significant number of participants. However, the real explosion into mass travel occurred after 2000 and the law which instituted the Institutional Holocaust Remembrance Day. The voyages, which had offered a solid experience of the memory of the Shoah, then jettisoned connection to the historical facts to segue into a representation of absolute Evil, a meta-historical evil. The voyagers set off without the appropriate historical baggage, instead often intent on discovering an absolute Evil, positioned as being outside of history⁸. As if the story was really an irrelevant frame for a much more interesting painting. However, only by placing the knowledge of the facts at the centre of the painting, can we ensure a healthy relationship between history and memory. The growing lack of historical knowledge in the younger generations is accompanied by a bewildering spread of short episodic versions of the story, offered in historical dramas and novels, which create a short circuit between truth and storytelling. Adorno's warning is as relevant as ever in this perverse intertwining of teaching paths, creation of events and media appropriation of the Shoah.

Narratives of the Shoah

From the 1960s onwards, Adorno identified Auschwitz as the priority for all education, an essential ethical principle for every foray into teaching. Teaching, thus, takes on a central role in handling the inevitable anthropological questions that arise: What is a man? Who are we if we did what we did? Difficult questions, with answers that are intertwined with our being, our identity and, above all, with our social structures, organised bureaucracy and a targeted reasoning no longer linked to an ethical dimension.

The existence of Kant and Goethe was not enough to prevent Nazi barbarism. The refined culture we identify with has lost sense, demonstrating its impotence and its inability to be effective in the real world. How could civilization become so fractured, humanity so ruptured, in the very heart of Europe, the very cradle of progress and culture? And why was it that no one said anything, or perhaps even thought, about what was happening? It all took place with the active participation of the few and the silent consent of the many.

It would be easy to provide an answer, as some actually have, that blames a collective madness or historical accident, for a deviation in the glorious path of the progress of civilization. These are all answers that we give to reassure ourselves that we are 'other', unconnected to those barbarities, and that we are not directly involved. A focus on the nature of humanity itself, which includes our beings and our responsibilities, is much more uncomfortable. In his monumental *The destruction of the European Jews*, Raul Hillberg says that, as a historian, he limited his scope to providing a simple description and not an explanation for the reasons of the Shoah. The risk of offering

⁸ In 2014, I organised a trip to Auschwitz, with Cerse - *Centro Romano di Studi sull'Ebraismo* (Roman Center of Jewish Studies), for 30 students of the *Università di Tor Vergata*, many of whom had followed my course on "Modernity and Holocaust" for the entire year. Our voyage intersected with one organized by the Region of Lazio allowing us to be present for witness reports from survivors. A collective reflection took place one evening in the hotel sparked by the irritation felt by one student on seeing young Israelis with their flag.

unfounded explanation was too high, and he preferred to opt for detailed descriptions and reconstruction using documents and mountains of collected papers⁹. At the very least, this is where we must begin - with History, with what happened, the way it began and how it developed. There is the risk in the ritual of memory that misinterpretation removes the event from its historical context, placing it in a moral world of Good and Evil. In contrast, the examination of history aims to put the pieces together, to understand the mechanisms, the social structure and the ideology where the Shoah developed and came about. For those operating in the world of memory, work can often be reduced to organizing the International Holocaust Remembrance Day in a new, original way every year or of repeating the same day again.

Commemorating International Holocaust Remembrance Day or organising a trip to Auschwitz is not the same as knowing history. To see, to visit, to feel, does not equate with understanding. At times, those who work in this field combine organisational efficiency with a low knowledge of history. While Raul Hillberg's warning, to focus on examining the 'how' with historical fact, is very loud, the question about the 'why' also remains out of reach. The most important answer comes from education and narrative. As Adorno asserted, if it is very hard to make changes in the objective world, we can however work on the subjective plane. In other words, if we can't change the world, we can do much at an individual level, with all the instruments available for education and narration.

The value of individual and collective memory and the study of methods for its transmission across generations are the central point for a reflection on the narrative that has children as its protagonists.

This is the case in two books recently published in Italy, Lia Levi's *Questa sera è già domani*¹⁰ and Mirella Serri's *Bambini in fuga*.¹¹ While apparently unrelated in writing style, approach and intention, these books have many points in common where they overlap. Both Levi and Serri evaluate the world through the facts of the past: Levi with minimalist calm and Serri with a strong inclination towards protest, evoked in the title itself. Both are able to balance on the thin line that separates narrative and history.

Levi's book is pure, conscious literature. History is the frame, events are continually referenced in such a way that there is no doubt that the story exists in a specific world, events beat out a rhythm and place us in a specific moment of the past (a 'there' in Italy and a 'then', which still are related to our present). In contrast to the storytelling often seen in films on the Shoah, here nothing is evocative. One line is enough to inform us of the unfolding of history, for example, when "the manifesto of the racial scientists appeared, framed, in the middle of the front page of the newspaper, with the violence of a rock", or the announcement that the German army had crossed the border into Poland on 1 September which appears, almost like a news bulletin, dry, apparently neutral. Levi uses many of these insertions, as if to help the reader refresh their memory. They may appear to be short illustrative comments, but their function is to create the temporal and geographical context that gives the story its shape.

⁹ Hilberg R. *The destruction of the European Jews*, Holmes & Meier Publishers, Inc., New-York-London, 1985. It. ed. *La distruzione degli Ebrei d'Europa*, Einaudi, Torino, 1995, introd. di Frediano Sessi, p. XII.

¹⁰ L. Levi, *Questa sera è già domani*, Edizioni e/o, Roma, 2018.

¹¹ M. Serri, *Bambini in fuga. I giovanissimi ebrei braccati da nazisti e fondamentalisti islamici e gli eroi italiani che li salvarono*. Longanesi, Milano, 2017.

Levi's book opens with the story of a child genius and, therefore, the expectation that this will be the story of an individual, a story with a single focus. What could be more individual than a story of a genius or failed genius? Although the expectation is that the book will rotate around this boy, the novel soon takes on a collective aspect, becoming the story of an entire family, a large group of people crisscrossed with strong relational bonds. By the end, it is the story of a people who discover their identity, in the most tragic moment of their history. A dense, satisfying book, it outlines the betrayal of Italy towards her 'other' children, but also talks of solidarity, fear and the strange optimism that veers into simple-mindedness.

History does the telling, in Serri's book, outlining the story, and creating a totally new historical parallel. An unprecedented comparison links the main story, of the children escaping, and the acts of the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, Amin al Husayni, indicating a responsibility that Serri identifies and clearly denounces. While the Italian residents of a small village near Modena do what they can to help and save the children led by Joseph Indig, Al Husayni, now in the graces of Hitler and Mussolini, works actively to destroy the Hebrew parasite cockroach, focusing particularly on children, to ensure that young forces do not make it to Palestine. Indirectly, but not entirely so, Serri identifies traces a *fil rouge* between Al Hussayni's actions and the cultural and thought structure at work in him. We find the same categories as Hitler's anti-Semitism, the same pseudo biological or scientific stereotypes. It is that anti-Semitism which was formed in the 1800 and 1900s and, melded together, condensed to produce the forerunner of the same approach that dominates the Arab world. This is why I believe this to be related to the present, to today's anxieties and difficulties and to this apparently overwhelming wave against which nothing works.

The book is full of references, history, agreement, accords, a distillation of many aspects, too many to remember. In this grafting of pieces of history, worlds open. For example, the reference to the Ghetto of Lodz, cited by Primo Levi, includes references to the Jewish Councils, in particular to Rumkowsky. A theme that undoubtedly shines light on a controversial issue. Serri describes a victim become executioner. Primo Levi asked if he were a monster? While he answer was no, it is also not yes. This is the grey area. The accusations made by Hannah Arendt echo in Serri's sentence. The general accusations against the Jewish Councillors who did what was possible in those extreme conditions, followed the logic of attempting to save what they could. Fortunately, Trunk's historical analysis comes to help us understand that nothing is ever the same as itself: there were different Jewish Councils, there were those who sacrificed themselves for their community, those who killed themselves so they would not have to decide who had to die and those who took advantage of the situation to exploit their own power.

One last element links the two books: Switzerland. Serri's children flee towards Switzerland, as do the characters in Levi's novel. In both writers, we see an attention to human hope, to salvation and solidarity. A clear analysis of what happened, an acute and penetrating look into history, that benefits from human hope and mercy.