

To Forgive and to Forget

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One of the issues that has most attracted my attention in recent years is that of forgiving and forgetting. This is a question that seems to be ever more important, perhaps because I am getting older, or because I have experienced terrorism up close. We have to forgive, but it isn't reasonable to forget. I hear the expression "I will forgive, but I won't forget" relatively frequently; the tone that the person is using normally leaves me with the impression that he or she has not really been able to pardon, having a heart that is still full of rancor. Forgetting is not a voluntary act, but forgiving is.

In the summer of 1995 I had the opportunity to visit Killary Harbour in Connemara, Ireland, an isolated bay where Ludwig Wittgenstein had stayed for several months in 1948 in order to recover from a nervous breakdown. In order to prepare my visit I had read the impressive biography of him written by Ray Monk. This book described the tenor of his life in that abandoned place and mentioned some of the difficulties he had had with his only neighbor, a man named Mortimer, due to the barking of a dog.

When I arrived at the site with my friend Seamus Grimes, I was depressed to see that Wittgenstein's cabin had been turned into a noisy youth hostel, where only a small plaque served as witness to the fact that the famous philosopher had stayed there. Since there was no other sign of the old dwelling, I took a short trip around the environs. In the only house I encountered I saw an old man leaning on the door frame, and I crossed over to ask him about Wittgenstein: "He was completely crazy!" he spat in a loud voice. "The dog was barking in order to protect the sheep from a fox. He crossed my land and the fields I had planted. After he died, we men reached the moon!" I asked him, "Are you Mortimer?" "Yes, I'm Mortimer, why?" he answered. I was really amazed to see that Mortimer spoke of his conflict with Wittgenstein as though it had happened just the day before. In his anger, he maintained alive in his heart something that had happened 47 long years ago!

This memory came to mind when I read a recent article by Eric Lichtblau in the *New York Times* about the task of documenting all the ghettos, concentration camps and forced labor camps that the Nazis constructed all over Europe (in all, more than 42,500!) The comment by Henry Greenbaum, a survivor of six concentration camps, stood out for me: "Everything should be documented. This is very important. We must try to explain all this to the young people, so that they can know what happened and remember it". These words brought to my memory, in contrast, what a son of Jacques Stroumsa, the "Violinist of Auschwitz", told me in Jerusalem a few years ago when he discovered in his library a shelf with all the books of Primo Levi and other Holocaust survivors. His father, who had undergone so much suffering, didn't tell his children anything until they reached adulthood: "He didn't want to fill our lives with bitterness," explained Guy Stroumsa, "by teaching us to hate." Indeed it was only when his children were already older that he decided to publish his memoirs.

In the case of Spain, what should we teach our future generations about the atrocities of our civil war, about the world wars, of terrorisms of every stripe? And how should we do it? Since young people are especially emotionally sensitive, I believe we should always spare them those details that might encourage hatred, since this means poisoning their lives. At the end of his *Trilogy of Auschwitz*, Levi concluded that "knowing what happened is necessary, because it could occur again; consciences can be seduced and once again

clouded over: including our own.” Nevertheless, this does not mean we should teach the new generations to hate: quite the opposite.

We should not forget, but, above all, we must teach the practice of forgiveness. “Forgiveness means,” wrote Jutta Burggraf, “renouncing revenge and hatred”. And this implies a manner of understanding the past which forgives people and their deeds, no matter how horrendous they might have been. “Forgive them, because they know not what they do”, exclaimed Jesus from the Cross, but his resurrected body retained the memory of the cruelty of his executioners.