

Otto Dov Kulka

Remarks Upon the Awarding of the Buchman Prize

Yad Vashem, 9. 12. 98

Members of the award committee, my friend Aharon Appelfeld, colleagues from academia, distinguished guests,

The importance I attach to the award and the honor that you have bestowed upon my book on German Jewry and its leadership under the National Socialist regime transcends the fact that I am its author and editor. It would be amiss of me on this occasion not to mention my assistant and partner the late Dr. Ezriel Hildesheimer and my present assistants Anne Birkenhauer and Louise Hecht, who are now working with me on completing the additional volumes of the project. I would also like to express my appreciation, from this platform, for the important financial support the project has received from the Israel Academy of Sciences, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, the German-Israeli Binational Foundation, and the Leo Baeck Institute, which published the book as part of its scientific series.

Though the prize is an acknowledgment of the rigorous scientific research that informs the book – like all my studies, whether dealing with the sixteenth, the nineteenth, or our own century – I also regard it as an expression of esteem and a kind of homage to that multifaceted, fascinating Jewry which was the first in Europe to pave a way into the modern era and, tragically, also the first to experience the beginning of the end. A community that was the first to cope with the wave of decrees and destruction that eventually engulfed all of European Jewry.

I will not relate here the odyssey that marked the genesis of the project of which

this book is a part, the discovery of archives which had previously been thought lost and the reconstruction of sources which were truly lost, nor will I elaborate on the illuminating findings and the diverse theses that underpin the work. Those aspects were addressed extensively in the two symposia which were held upon its appearance by the Leo Baeck Institute, the Israel Historical Society, and the Zalman Shazar Center for Jewish History, as well as here at Yad Vashem, and now once more in the instructive grounds cited by the prize committee.

With your permission I would like to deviate somewhat from this framework and to enlarge it to encompass another question: the phenomenology of the methods for addressing the unprecedented historical event of the Jewish fate in the National Socialist era. But I would also like, perhaps paradoxically, to narrow it to a personal aspect of a kind of first public confession, fifty years after, on the duality of the revealed and the hidden in my personal path in dealing with this historic past.

There are several ways by which those who lived through that time – and I, who spent the years from age ten to twelve at Auschwitz-Birkenau, am one of them – can shape the historical memory.

The first way is by giving personal historical testimony, unmediated and contemporaneous, or recorded soon thereafter. Such as that by Yitzhak Katzenelson or Emanuel Ringelblum from the Warsaw Ghetto, Victor Klemperer from Nazi Germany, or the hundreds of testimonies that were taken here at Yad Vashem shortly after the war. Another way is through later autobiographical historical testimony, usually in the form of a memoir. Yet another shaping of the historical memory is achieved by viewing the past through the prism of the various types of artistic creation. And there is also the way of intellectual reflection, whether theological or non-theological.

Standing apart from all of these, though incorporating, at least potentially, elements of all the other approaches, is impersonal historical research, which seeks to integrate the period into the sequential continuum of human and Jewish history, and to pose the question of its distinctiveness and its meaning within the continuum.

And there is also the way of silence.

I chose, or perhaps did not so much choose but found myself following, the two last roads.

I imagine that most of those who are here today, including my colleagues and students, identify my way unequivocally with the attitude of the strict and impersonal remoteness of research, which is always conducted within well-defined historical categories, as a kind of self-contained method unto itself. Fewer are aware of the existence of a dimension of silence, of the choice I made to sever the biographical from the historical past. And fewer still – in fact, until recently it was a minority of one, my friend and colleague Saul Friedlander, – knew that for the past eight years I have been tape-recording the pictures of the memory and the study of the memory of what in my private mythology is called “the metropolis of death,” or with deceptive simplicity: childhood landscapes of Auschwitz. This is neither historical testimony nor autobiographical memoir; it is the reflection by a person in his late fifties of the fragments of memory and imagination that remain from the world of the wondering child who then was.

In addition to these audio recordings there are also diaries, which include hundreds of notations of these materials, which have been preserved consecutively over the course of some thirty years.

Despite Saul’s advice several years ago to publish the recordings – parallel to but without connection to my scientific work – I decided, unlike his way, to set aside

these views of childhood vistas and to postpone the preparation for their publication to later years: “Sometime, when I have completed the large research projects on which I have embarked, or perhaps I will leave it to others to handle these things, after I am no longer here.”

But in the meantime something happened, and the misty horizons that divide here-and-now from “sometime” and well beyond, abruptly turned sharp and tangible: less than a year ago I was diagnosed with a malignant disease and I had to face up to the fact that there is no more “sometime.” There is only here-and-now or a large question mark hanging over all that material.

I made my decision and I played some passages from the recordings for a friend who is also the director of an important publishing house. His reaction was forceful and concise: “There is nothing else like this.” And he added, as one who has dealt with a considerable number of publications from estates, “If you don’t prepare it for publication here-and-now, there is no more than a twenty-percent chance that others will do so afterward.”

Indeed, my decision was for “here-and-now.” Henceforth there is no more setting aside. I have prepared the material and have guided those who are assisting me, so that it can be published and also heard, as a vocal document, while I am still here; and in any event the work can be completed even in my absence.

This occasion, upon which my work is being awarded the Buchman Prize, encourages me also to complete within the shortest possible time, with the help of my assistants and my partners in Israel and abroad, the other volumes of the project according to the same rigorous scientific norms and a consistent separation between the different spheres. But I thought it would be appropriate, on this festive occasion, to announce publicly the existence of this other sphere that underlies the silence and its

removal from the private storehouse to which I had consigned it.

I am taking advantage of this opportunity to have read an unedited transcript from the vocal document. This text is taken from the third recording, of May 1992, and it describes one episode from the epic sequence and the reflective observation that informs the chapter. The provisional title of the entire series is “Landscapes from the Metropolis of Death.”

The point of departure is an event at a place that was called the “family camp of Theresienstadt Jews” at Auschwitz-Birkenau, in the children’s and youth bloc that existed there for nearly a year until the final liquidation of the camp and nearly all its inhabitants in the summer of 1944.

I thank the moderator, Mr. Benny Hendel, for agreeing to read the text.

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There were things that were quite extraordinary in that camp, which are part of my private mythology and have remained lodged in some corner of my memory and flutter around there in one form or another. One of them – and I am not talking now about the mass liquidation and the events that determined the fate of everyone, but about myself – one of them, which was particularly bizarre, crystallized in my memory, or took shape, in my memory, entered my memory in two very peculiar stages in the life of that camp. In the children’s barracks there was a conductor of choirs. His name, as I recall, was Imre. A big man. Quite huge. He organized a children’s choir and we held rehearsals. I don’t remember if we also gave

performances as a choir, not as part of the opera, which was another matter. The rehearsals almost always took place in one of the long halls, I mean one of those long barracks that were used as lavatories for prisoners. Pipes with holes drilled in them running along about 50 meters of the structure – an excellent German invention that I came across once later on, after the war, in the public toilet of the Friedrichstrasse station in East Berlin, immediately after I arrived there. Within seconds the sight took me back to that place in Auschwitz. But that is something else.

That barrack had exceptional acoustics – when there were no prisoners there, of course. In the morning or in the evening, after work, it was packed with thousands, but during the day it was empty. There, in the fall months – we arrived in September – in the fall and winter months of 1943 we held the rehearsals. I remember mainly one work that we sang and I also remember the words. The words had to do with joy and with the brotherhood of man. They made no special impression on me, and I am sure I would have forgotten all this completely had it not been for another incident in which the experience and the melody and the text came back. About half a year later, when the camp no longer existed, when most of its prisoners had already been cremated or sent as slaves across the Reich, and only a few dozen of the youths remained and we had moved to the adults' camp, the large slave camp, a harmonica somehow came into my possession. I learned to play it and I played things that entered my mind, including one of the melodies we sang in the children's choir. It goes something like this: [the melody is hummed; insert the notes].

I am playing the melody in one those rare moments of quiet and tranquillity in that camp, and a young Jewish prisoner from Berlin comes up to me – I was then a boy of eleven – and says: “Do you know what you are playing?” And I tell him: “Look, what I am playing is a melody we sang in that camp – which no longer exists.” He then explained to me what I was playing and what we sang there and the meaning of those words. I think he also tried to explain the terrible absurdity of it, the terrible wonder of it, that a song of praise to joy and to the brotherhood of man, Schiller’s “Ode to Joy” from Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, was being played vis à vis the crematoria of Auschwitz, a few hundred meters from the place of execution where the greatest conflagration ever experienced by that same mankind that was being sung about was going on at the very moment we were talking and in all the months we were there.

Actually, by then I already knew about Beethoven. Which I hadn’t known when we sung him. Because between that first situation, when we sang, and that surprising situation of the discovery and identification of the melody, I had been in the hospital, ill with diphtheria, and above me was one of the young prisoners, about 20 years old. His name was Herbert. I think he did not get well, and if he did get well he ended up where he did at Auschwitz itself. One of our amusements, though mainly his, was to explain me, or convey to me, something of the cultural riches he had accumulated, as though he were bequeathing me that legacy. The first thing I got from him was a book, the one and only book he possessed, and I would read it. It opens with a description of an old woman and a young man who strikes her with an ax, who murders and is tormented – Dostoyevsky’s “Crime and Punishment.” That was what he took to Auschwitz and that was the first work of great literature I read since I was cut off from my parents’ library in Czechoslovakia at the age of nine. It didn’t stop with

Dostoyevsky. We went on to Shakespeare and Beethoven and Mozart and whatever he could cram into me from European culture. And I took in quite a bit.

When Schiller and Beethoven were afterward identified, I began to ponder, and I have pondered ever since, the reasons and the meaning of that decision by the conductor, that Imre, whom I remember, as though it were today, as a large, awkward figure in the blue-gray prisoners' clothes and the big wooden shoes, and the big hands of a conductor, urging on the choir, making it come together and then loosening his hold, and we are singing like little angels, our voices providing an accompaniment to the processions of the people in black who are slowly swallowed up into the crematoria.

Naturally, the question I asked myself, and that I keep asking myself to this day, is what drove that Imre – not to organize the children's choir, because after all one could say that in the spirit of that project of the educational center it was necessary somehow to preserve sanity, somehow to keep occupied – but what he believed; what was his intention in choosing to perform a text like that, a text that is considered a universal manifesto of everyone who believes in human dignity, in humanistic values, in the future - vis á vis those crematoria, in the place where the future was perhaps the only definite thing that did not exist? Was it a kind of protest demonstration, absurd perhaps, perhaps without any purpose, but an attempt not to forsake and not to lose – not the belief – but the devotion to those values which ultimately only the flames could put an end to – only that fire, and not all that preceded it raging around us, that is, as long as man breathes he breathes freedom, something like that?

That is one possibility, a very fine one, but there is a second possibility, which is apparently far more likely, or may be called for sometimes. I will not say when I prefer the first and when I am inclined to the other. I refer to the possibility that this

was an act of extreme sarcasm, to the outermost possible limit, of self-amusement, of a person in control of naive beings and implanting in them naive values, sublime and wonderful values, while he himself knows that there is no point or purpose and no meaning to those values. In other words, this was a kind of almost demonic self-amusement, of playing melodies to accompany those flames that burned quietly day and night and those processions swallowed into the insatiable crematoria.

The second notion seems more logical on the face of it. The first notion is very tempting to believe in. And maybe I believe in it, maybe it influenced me, maybe it influenced a great deal of what I am occupied with and believe in. But there are many times when I think I bought an illusion and sell it in various ways. Because that abysmal, ultimate sarcasm, beyond any possible limit, could also be a criterion for less extreme variations in the reality of a world where things do not proceed according to the unreserved belief of Beethoven and Schiller as such, but Beethoven and Schiller who were already once sung opposite the Auschwitz crematoria. That is of course part of my private mythology.

I often come back to all that and it also occupies me professionally, even though I never mention the episode directly. But when I come to interpret the continuity of the existence of social norms, of cultural and moral values in the conditions that were created immediately upon the Nazis' ascension to power and all the way to the brink of the mass-murder pits and the crematoria, here I am very often inclined, perhaps unconsciously, to choose the belief in that demonstration, a hopeless demonstration but the only possible one in that situation, though I think, as I said, that the illusion here is sometimes far greater than the sarcasm or the cynical amusement of a person who was still able to amuse himself with it in the face of that mass death. That approach was perhaps more – I will not say more realistic – but more authentic.

The subject remains an open one for me, like his large arms that opened to both sides and remained that way. Whoever chooses the left or the right, or when I choose the left or the right, that is in fact the whole unfolding of my existence or of my confrontation both with the past and with the present from then until today.