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The Aftermath: the Holocaust as a history of experiences, 1945 – 1949
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Happy Endings: Europe in the Aftermath of WWII

Over the past two days you have been deeply immersed in the Holocaust and its aftermath. I think it is important to acknowledge that this is not a pleasant subject. It is exhausting. I know that we all try to approach this subject from an intellectual point of view – in fact, the whole idea of a conference immediately puts us in an intellectual frame of mind. But even so it's impossible not to be affected by the things we have been talking about. It is emotionally very draining. When you add to this the fact that today is International Holocaust Remembrance Day, it becomes even more draining. Today, of all days, we have a weight of memory upon us that can be difficult to bear.

Now, I have the honour of giving the final lecture in this conference, but I imagine that some of you are secretly happy that it's nearly all over. After I've finished talking, we'll have the closing address, and you can all go home. You can have a glass of wine, be with family, watch a bit of TV, maybe read a book – whatever you want to do. The important thing is that you'll be able to let go of this burden that we have all been carrying. I'm not trying to suggest that we don't love our work. And I think all of us recognise how important it is to have the strength to confront this dark subject. Nevertheless – it will be a relief.

But before you all go home, I want you to hold on just a little longer, and take another look at this burden, this Holocaust. What I want you to do is to try and see it in its context – not only the context of Jewish history, or Holocaust history, but in the context of Europe as a whole. Because, of course, the Holocaust did not take place in a vacuum – it took place during the most destructive war the world has ever seen. And the aftermath of the Holocaust didn't take place in a vacuum either – it took place during a time of turmoil, when a new world was forming, with new superpowers, and new international institutions, and new national governments – all of them feeling their way through the chaos. So we shouldn't look at the Holocaust, or its aftermath, without at least taking this context into consideration.

So what did Europe look like after the war? Well, first of all, let's look at the cliché. When most of the world looks back at the aftermath of the war, particularly in Western Europe and America, what we remember is the victory celebrations. We remember people dancing in the streets of London, or walking arm in arm down the Champs Elysées in Paris waving Allied flags. We remember the fireworks above the Kremlin in Moscow, and sailors kissing nurses in New York's Times Square.

The end of the war must have been a huge relief for soldiers and civilians alike. Once it was over they wanted nothing more than to relax, to have a drink, and to go out dancing, and to tell themselves that after all the horror, the war had finally reached its happy ending.

The world as a whole has adopted these images because we too would like to believe in a happy ending. Evil had been defeated. Good had triumphed. And the whole world was reborn out of the ashes of war. As I've said, it's exhausting to remember only the horror – so we cling to these ideas, because they make us feel good. They are like the Hollywood ending that makes everything that has gone before seem OK at last.

But packaging the story of the war in this way has several consequences. Firstly, by focusing on a happy ending, it invites us to forget what a terrible state Europe was in. The physical destruction of the continent was so widespread, and in some places so total, that it was almost impossible to believe. Primo Levi called it 'anti-creation': he was so shocked by the ruins he came across as he travelled through Europe after the war that he compared the spirit of the destruction to the spirit of Auschwitz. When he saw the ruins of Vienna, for example, he said he was overcome by a heavy, threatening sensation of evil which he said 'was present everywhere, nestling in the guts of Europe and the world'.

Alongside this physical destruction, there was of course a huge amount of human destruction: between 35 and 40 million people killed; 40 million more displaced; 13 million children orphaned. Europe in 1945 was a continent in mourning. Everyone knew someone who had been killed by the war. And many had lost their entire families, even their entire communities.

We are accustomed today to remembering the Jews as a special case, because we know how they in particular were singled out for extermination. But there were many other exterminations during the war, especially at a local level. Whole villages had been massacred: Lidice in Czechoslovakia, Marzabotto in Italy, Distomo in Greece, Oradour-sur-Glane in France – and so on. To many people after the war it was difficult to imagine the Jews as a special case, because there were so many other special cases. Death and atrocity seemed to be everywhere.

Another kind of destruction that took place during the war was something a little more intangible – a kind of moral destruction that is almost impossible to imagine today. Violence, even extreme violence, had become a normal part of everyday life. Cheating, stealing, the black market, prostitution – these had also become a normal part of life. For many people in Europe, these were the only ways to stay alive during the war.

In many areas, things did not get better after the war, they got worse. The end of the war brought with it a total collapse of institutions, law and order, and food distribution. Everyone in Europe was hungry in 1945 and for years afterwards. And along with hunger came not only crime, but also exploitation and degradation. In his famous memoir of Naples after the liberation, Norman Lewis describes how men would routinely approach him, offering their wives or their daughters in exchange for a hot meal. I came across stories of Greek girls as young as nine years old, who had to be treated for venereal disease because they had been prostituting themselves for food.

The black market was everywhere. In 1946, the head of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration wrote a letter outlining how bad the problem was. He said, 'It is hardly an exaggeration to say that every man, woman and child in Western Europe is engaged to a greater or lesser degree in illegal trading of one kind or another. In large areas of Europe, in fact, it is hardly possible to support existence without so doing.'

So, you see, when we imagine that the war had a happy, Hollywood ending, we ignore the fact that life for most Europeans in 1945 was actually quite desperate. Europe was not, generally speaking, a continent of smiling, dancing people. It was a continent of damaged people, people in mourning, exploited people – and above all people who would do literally *anything* to put food on the table for themselves and their loved ones.

This leads me to a second problem with our images of people celebrating and dancing and so on. As I've said, we would all like to believe that the war had a happy ending. Well, not only was this ending not quite so 'happy', it wasn't even an 'ending' at all. On the contrary,

there was a huge amount of unfinished business in May 1945. There were war criminals who needed to be caught. There were collaborators who needed to be identified and punished. There were massive injustices that needed to be avenged. Europe in 1945 was not only a continent full of hope, it was also a continent full of hatred.

I'm going to read you a description of Europe, written by the New York Times journalist Cyrus Sulzberger, which sums up the Pandora's Box that was opened up by the Second World War. He wrote, and I quote: 'Europe is in a condition which no American can hope to comprehend. Virtually every ancient hatred has been revived with new intensity. Frenchman, Italian, Russian, Pole, Czech, Serb, Greek, Belgian, Netherlander, Rumanian – each in his own way hates the German with a personal frenzy.

'But worse, and not to be ignored, is that hatred, renewed by the present war, of Greek for Bulgar, Serb for Croat, Rumanian for Hungarian, Frenchman for Italian, Pole for Russian, which has developed among many population groups basically and broadly united in the final effort to crush their common German enemy. And worst of all is that fratricidal hatred of Greek for Greek, Frenchman for Frenchman, Serb for Serb and Pole for Pole, based on differing social and political conceptions fostered and encouraged by chaos and unleashed by the war.'

All of these hatreds were acted upon in 1945 and the following years. Almost everyone wanted some kind of revenge upon Germany. German soldiers were sent to gulags in the Soviet Union, but they were also badly mistreated in American prisoner of war camps. German civilians were also hated. Before the war, there had been large German communities throughout Europe, especially in Czechoslovakia, Poland, Hungary and Romania. After the war these populations were forcibly expelled – often with great violence. Official figures suggest that between 14 and 16 million ethnic Germans were expelled from their homelands after the war.

But as Cyrus Sulzberger suggested, it was not only the Germans who were hated. There were other, local hatreds that were just as strong. Let's take a look at eastern Poland, for example. Before and during the war, eastern Poland was home to a large Ukrainian minority. In 1942, the Nazis enlisted some of the most nationalistic elements of this Ukrainian minority to help them round up and massacre Jews. These Ukrainian nationalists did not mind doing this, because it helped to achieve something that they had always wanted – an ethnically pure homeland. But why stop at Jews? Later in the war, these same Ukrainian nationalists used the techniques they had learned during the Holocaust to massacre Poles as well. Then, of course, the Poles reacted in kind – and a cycle of ethnic cleansing started up that lasted long after the Germans had left, and in fact long after the rest of the war was over. It culminated in 1946 and 1947 with a population exchange between Poland and Ukraine, and the total expulsion of Ukrainians from the Polish borderlands.

This is just one example. Similar hatreds existed between Serbs and Croats, who also massacred one another; and between Hungarians and Slovaks, who also expelled one another; and between Greeks and Bulgarians, Hungarians and Romanians, Italians and Slovenians. And so on.

It was the Second World War that sparked these hatreds. But it is much easier to light a fire like this than it is to put it out. These hatreds lasted long after May 1945 – and in fact in some parts of Europe they are still smouldering today.

This brings me to my third problem with our cliché of a happy ending to the war. Whenever we imagine this happy ending, we are actually taking a very narrow view of what the Second World War *was*: we are really only seeing the war from the Allied point of view.

From an Allied point of view, the war was a simple conflict between Allied troops and Axis troops. But beneath this overarching conflict, there were all sorts of smaller wars going on. As I've mentioned, Ukrainians and Poles were also involved in their own civil war – what did they care when the Germans surrendered in May 1945? It didn't stop their war. Ukrainian partisans were also at war with the Soviets, as were Lithuanian partisans, and Latvian partisans and Estonian partisans. Again, what did these people care about May 1945? For them, the fighting would continue well into the 1950s. In Greece, Communist partisans and nationalist collaborators had started fighting one another during the Nazi occupation – but after the Nazis left, they carried on fighting one another for years. The Greek civil war continued all the way up to 1949. So, you see, by imagining that the war came to an end in May 1945, we are guilty of seeing the war from only one angle, and missing all the complexity that came with it.

Let me tell you a story that I hope will demonstrate just how complicated and multi-faceted the Second World War really was. It's a story I came across when I was researching the war in Italy, and I think it speaks volumes.

In the autumn of 1943 there was a group of Italian partisans hiding out in the forests at the foot of the Alps. This unit was part of a Communist brigade, and were committed to fighting not only the Germans, but the Italian fascists who were still in charge of northern Italy.

One day, these partisans were out in the forest when they came across three German soldiers. I should say that these German soldiers weren't on a patrol or anything – they were actually just soldiers on leave, who happened to have gone out for a walk in the woods, completely unaware that the woods were crawling with partisans.

Anyway, the partisans captured these three German men, and as you can imagine, they were pleased with their catch. But they were still quite inexperienced, and so they had no idea what to do with them. They couldn't keep them prisoner, because they simply didn't have the facilities, and they were constantly on the move. But they couldn't let them go either. So, after a lot of arguing, they decided they had no option but to shoot them.

So they drew lots to see who was going to do this unpleasant task. Unfortunately the partisans who got the short straw refused to shoot these Germans, and another argument broke out. The problem was that, during their interrogation of these three Germans, they had found out that they had been ordinary workers during peacetime. Surely it wasn't right for Communists to kill their fellow workers, even if they *were* German. Furthermore, these men hadn't volunteered for the army – they were all conscripts. In other words, they were the victims of capitalist forces that had compelled them to fight against their will. After a lot more arguing, the partisans held another vote, and it was decided that they should set the German prisoners free.

Now, this might have been a rare and refreshing example of empathy between enemies were it not for what happened next. Because, of course, as soon as these German soldiers were set free, they went back to their superior officers and told them what had happened. Three days later, the entire German army descended on the area and the partisans had to flee for their lives. So you see, by granting those Germans their freedom they had not forwarded the cause of international communism – they had just risked their

own death. This group of partisans would never make the same mistake again – from that day onwards they shot all prisoners without compunction.

Stories like this demonstrate that the war was nowhere near as simple as we like to think it was. These partisans were not only fighting against the Germans in a war of national independence; they were also fighting a civil war against other Italians, who were Fascists; and a class war, against international capitalism. Three different wars, all at the same time. As this story makes clear, these three different wars sometimes contradicted one another – and it was by no means clear which of these wars should take precedence.

After 1945, of course, things became much simpler. The Germans had been defeated and chased from the country. The Fascists had also been defeated and removed from power. But the class war – well, that was still unfinished business. Italian Communists continued fighting this class war right to the end of the 1940s. Indeed, on a small scale, there was still plenty of Communist terrorism in Italy right into the 1980s. This class war – a war between Communism and capitalism – is something that we like to categorise separately. We like to call it the Cold War. But as the story of these partisans makes clear, it was not something *new* – it was something that had been there all along.

And this brings me to my final criticism of our cliché of the happy ending. I've said that the idea of a nice, neat happy ending implies that we are looking at the war only from an Allied point of view. Well, it also implies that we are looking at the war from a specifically Western point of view. Because it ignores the fact that for half of Europe, May 1945 did not bring the end of totalitarianism: it merely announced the change from one totalitarian system to another.

People in eastern Europe don't remember the end of the war as a huge celebration. In Romania, or Poland, or Czechoslovakia there is no cultural memory of huge crowds turning out to greet the Allied soldiers. In a way, this is a shame, because there *were* in fact big celebrations in many of these countries, and lots of people *did* turn out to greet the Soviet soldiers. But these things are not really remembered today because of what happened next.

The Red Army was brutal in their occupation of eastern Europe. Soviet soldiers had seen so much violence that they thought nothing of raping the women they came across – especially if those women were German, or Austrian, or Hungarian. And they thought nothing of killing civilians – especially if those civilians were trying to stop them robbing and looting their property. The Red Army inspired fear wherever they went, even in those countries they were supposed to be liberating.

The Communists also inspired fear, because wherever they rose up in Eastern Europe, they always had the threat of the Red Army behind them. When the Communists finally took over in Romania, for example, there was no big civil war to announce it – but the threat of violence was always just beneath the surface. King Michael was very reluctant to hand over power to the Communists, even when he was instructed to by the Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister. He only gave in when the Soviets removed all Romanian troops from Bucharest and replaced them with Soviet troops.

In the end, it was the Red Army that made the difference. The fear that the Red Army inspired was the ultimate political tool. And so, you see, our clichéd view of May 1945 rings false to many Eastern and Central Europeans.

People in these regions can't quite bring themselves to remember the joy that came with the end of the war, because that joy was so short-lived. Totalitarianism was not defeated in 1945 – it was something that would remain for another 44 or 45 years.

So this is what Europe looked like in the years immediately following the Second World War. It was indeed a place of celebration, but it was also a place of desperation. It was indeed a place of hope and new beginnings, but it was also a place of hatred and resentment and unfinished business. When Jews returned from the concentration camps they found themselves in a continent that was physically destroyed, psychologically traumatised, and morally bankrupt. They were surrounded by starving people, who had their own worries, and who were not interested in hearing about the specific suffering of the Jews. They were also surrounded by angry people, people with grievances, people who wanted revenge. And in many areas, the war was still taking place – maybe on a smaller scale, sometimes under a different name – but often just as savage as the main war had been. The general atmosphere was one of chaos and lawlessness – certainly not an atmosphere where anyone, let alone a concentration camp survivor, could feel entirely safe.

Over the course of this conference you will have heard many stories about Jewish survivors and their experiences after the war. I could add many more. I could tell the story of a Jewish man I interviewed in London, who returned to Poland after the war to see if he could find his relatives. Instead, he found himself robbed and put up against a wall to be shot, and was only saved because of the fact that he was only a boy, and one of his tormentors took pity on him. I could tell you the story of another Jew I came across who freely admitted to beating Germans up after the war, throwing them from trains, and even killing one who he suspected of being a Nazi. There are many Jewish stories that fit in very easily with the picture of postwar and post-Holocaust chaos I have described.

But instead, I will confine myself to two stories – because they demonstrate how this idea of the happy ending affects our view of the Holocaust, and the people who survived it. The first one is something that American President Bill Clinton said in 1995. Clinton made a speech to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the end of the war, and this is one of the stories that he told.

‘During the war's final weeks, America's fighting forces thundered across Europe, liberating small villages and great cities from a long nightmare. Many witnessed an outpouring of love and gratitude they would remember for the rest of their lives.

‘Deep in the Bavarian countryside, Corporal Bill Ellington piloted his armored vehicle into a battle against retreating enemy troops. As a firefight raged, a rail-thin teenage boy ran, shouting toward the tank. He was a young Polish Jew, Samuel Pisar, who had survived 4 years at Auschwitz and other concentration camps, but along the way had lost his entire family. Samuel Pisar had seen the tank and its glorious 5-point white star from his hideaway in a barn.

‘As Ellington looked down at him, the boy dropped to his knees and repeated over and over the few words of English his mother had taught him: "God bless America. God bless America." And Ellington, the son of a slave, lifted the boy through the hatch and into the warm embrace of freedom.’

I love this story. If you want a story that gives a happy ending to the war, you can't do better than this. Samuel Pisar was not only saved by the Americans at the end of the war, he also eventually – after many adventures – went to live in America, where he became a very successful lawyer. Samuel Pisar is the very epitome of someone who has turned

tragedy into triumph. But more importantly, from Bill Clinton's point of view, he is also a symbol of America's greatness. America, in this story, represents not only safety but also hope, and freedom, and goodness itself. Clinton used this story as a way to validate the American mission, not only during the war, but after it as well. God bless America. Because America fights against the Holocaust, and against slavery, and against everything that is evil in the world. This is the way that the Holocaust is often represented in American stories, American TV shows, American history books, and American commemorations. The Holocaust is evil – therefore America is good.

I don't mean to pick on America. We all have our own national mythologies, and my countrymen are just as bad as anyone. But this story shows how the idea of a happy ending to the war has been emphasised by the victors, because it suits their agenda. We all buy into this happy ending because it suits our agenda too. We all like to believe that the Holocaust taught us something, that we have risen above such horrors, like a phoenix rising from the ashes. I don't want to ridicule this belief. I am, in fact, a strong believer in it myself. But I do want to highlight the fact that is only one side of the coin. By emphasising this story above all others, we drown out other stories that are equally true, but not nearly as well known.

So, this is where I come to my second story. This one is the story of a Dutch Jew, called Rita Koopman who was captured by the Nazis in Amsterdam and sent to Neuengamme concentration camp. She survived the war, but apart from her two brothers, all of the rest of her family died.

When she came back to Amsterdam, she found the whole city in a state of celebration. There were parties in the streets, with lots of drunken Canadians, and she couldn't help feeling jealous. She wanted to celebrate too. She wanted to dance around in a big circle, and feel part of this great big happy ending. So she began to dance. Unfortunately she had forgotten that she had no hair, because it had all been shaved off in the labour camp. The only other women in Amsterdam who had shaven heads were those who had slept with German soldiers. No sooner had she started dancing than people started cursing her, and calling her a Kraut whore, and she was forced to leave.

Now that Rita was back in Amsterdam, she had nothing. Her home had been occupied by someone else, and most of her property had been stolen. Eventually, she managed at least to track down her coat. In her imagination this coat had become something beautiful and luxurious, made entirely of fur – but in reality it was actually quite a shabby thing, with just a little bit of fur around collar and the pockets.

When she confronted the woman who had taken it, the first thing the woman said was, 'I must say, quite a lot of your people seem to have come back after all. You're lucky you weren't here. We suffered such hunger!' There was no trace of irony in the woman's voice – she genuinely believed that non-Jewish Dutch people had suffered more than the Jews.

When Rita asked for her coat back, the woman refused to give it to her. No matter how much Rita argued with her, this woman refused to acknowledge that the coat had ever been Rita's. Eventually Rita burst into tears. She walked up to the woman and started attacking the coat. She ripped off the fur from the collar and the pockets and then went and threw these pieces of fur in the River Amstel.

This story is much less dramatic than the story of Samuel Pissar. There is no great moment of redemption, just a lot of misunderstanding and denial. Rita Koopman wasn't really rescued by anyone. She wasn't welcomed into the 'warm embrace of freedom' – she

was just expected to go back to normal life, keep her mouth shut, and pretend that nothing had really happened.

Our cliché of a happy ending excludes people like Rita Koopman, who were not allowed to join in the celebrations at the end of the war. It excludes the women who were raped, and the children who were orphaned, and the families that lost everything when they were expelled from their homelands. It excludes those who were beaten or tortured after the war because of their political beliefs, and those who were ostracised by their communities because of some wartime misdemeanour.

We tolerated the myth of a happy ending in 1945 because it gave us something we desperately needed: it allowed us to forget the horror of the past and imagine a better future. And we continue to tolerate this myth today, because it still gives us something that we need: it is a story of hope, which allows us to imagine that we can be better than our history. But at conferences like this one, amongst historians and academics and intellectuals; and on days like today, when we are admonished never to forget, it is important to acknowledge that Europe was not so easily reborn, that our societies were not so easily transformed, and that these human beings were not so easily redeemed. It is our duty – our burden – to remember the darker side of the story, even when it is a bit depressing, and exhausting, and emotionally draining. Because at the end of the day we can go home to our loved ones, have a glass of wine, watch TV or read a book. The people who lived through the chaotic aftermath of the Second World War did not have that luxury.