

Polity and Changing of Holocaust Memory

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Abstract: The concept of Holocaust memory hails from a past process, which sought to define the existence of the Holocaust in the years succeeding the tragedy, in various forms of commemorative exercises. The Holocaust museums, commemorative sites, and annual commemorative events formed the hallmark of these exercises. This paper examines the nature of Holocaust Memory in the 21st Century and its *relevancy* as to public sentiment under current geopolitical realities. To begin with, it is a presupposition by the author that Holocaust shaped memory has shifted within world Jewry from what was at one time linked to variations of survivor testimonies and second and third generational syndromes toward newly embedded cultural sentiments that are related to a designed public memory, without linkage to specific events, people or places. Along with the shifting of Holocaust Memory the Israeli State narrative has developed alternative mythologization that serves the nation-state by inserting the notion of military might. It is paramount that newly minted memory sets become identifiable and definable. A mixture of Jewish religiosity along with Israeli statehood ideology largely drives the morphosis of this memory. While seemingly disconnected from geographic boundaries, it is linked to political sentiments, which are surprisingly similar in Israel and the Diaspora, and are seen as trending along Right vs. Left ideologies. The objective of this work is to inform the public about a current configuration of Holocaust Memory that has evolved rather recently and is currently poorly defined in academic and social discourse.

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Defining Memory

This article is addressing Holocaust memory ensconced in the discipline of history. The concept of history as memory is a relatively new notion and was first introduced by Halbwachs [1]. The interpretation of history as a form of collective memory was at first considered as both, outstanding and revolutionary, and received a tremendous amount of scrutiny. As it took traction, Pierre Nora was refining the principle as a mechanism through which the transmission of history is carried forward via the notion of collectivized memorization [2].

Stepping into the fray of historical controversy-as an almost a purposeful challenge to the conventional recording of history-Hayden White labeled all historical writings as "storytelling" and added a measure of distortion that was soon discarded by mainstream academia [3]. Nonetheless, his concepts of metahistory helped built the imaginative and memorializing characteristics of historical reporting through academia at large [4]. The basis of Holocaust Memory is partially transmitted via these definitions but also

belongs to a unique formative aspect of Jewish history as well as Judaic ideology. The quasi-religious and certainly spiritual notion of memory is an age-old practice defined as *Zachor* [5]. Thus the commemorative transmission of grieving for, and remembering the departed, is part of weekly service in synagogues and its hallmark is the *Yahrzeit*-remembering the anniversary of the dead and saying *Kaddish*.

The basis of Holocaust memory is an amalgamation of the age-old religious practices as well as the academic development of the notion of collective memory. In particular, the Holocaust as a tragic event cried out for commemorative practices that were readily developed. The Holocaust museums are one of the products emanating from the notion, as are annual commemorative ceremonies such as *Yom Hashoah* (Holocaust Remembrance Day) and *Yom Haatzmaut* (Israel Independence Day).

Formation of Holocaust Memory

As alluded to in the foregoing, the Holocaust casts an eternal shadow over the present and

future history of the Jewish people [6]. It was a tragedy beyond description [7] and, in the beginning, the only way to discuss it was to mourn and create commemorative memorialization processes. As early as 1942, the vast proportion of the tragedy—the Shoah—began to seep through the mindset of Jews and Mordechai Shenhavi first proposed the necessities of commemorative action [8]. After the end of WWII, the Jews were scattered throughout Europe, in refugee camps and some attempting to find life in their old communities [9].

Common knowledge held that during these early post-war years the survivors were reluctant to talk about the afflictions. However, this was prior to the formation of formal commemorative observations. Hasia Diner's research showed that in the US Diaspora, every community, synagogues and other Jewish venues were in constant states of mourning [10]. These were small and scattered efforts and did not have the mass exposure of future events and the influence of the Holocaust museums to come. Similarly, in Israel, the earliest commemorative efforts were in small clusters of communities [11].

The earliest of established communal efforts that would go on to become museums were in the Ghetto Fighters' Kibbutz, which would go on to become a well-known museum. In Jerusalem, it was Martef Hashoah that was the central point of sorrow and the centerpiece of observation of Kiddush Hashem [12]. Among the religious groups, the mourning rituals took center stage [13]. In 1953, the Law of Yad Vashem [Martyrs' and Heroes] established an official and highly respected impetus for Commemoration of the Holocaust [14].

Yet there was still no Holocaust museum at Yad Vashem; that would come years later. However, the recognition that a great deal of research was necessary for properly organizing a history that would promulgate the project was evident in Ben-Zion Dinur's article in the very first issue of "Yad Vashem Studies" [15]. Within the next decade or so, the proper role of history, remembrance, commemoration, as well as public sentiment, would amalgamate into what would become legitimate Holocaust Memory. As the "golden age" of Holocaust museums rose and dominated the 1990's up till approximately

2010, there was a general consensus over the definition and ideology connoted by Holocaust Memory. At the same time, by 2008, Marianne Hirsch wrote about postmemory as a way to address what was no longer survivor memory or direct archival historical research, but the proposition that such memory was now borne by a new set of individuals [16].

For some time there was a belief system that held that first and second generation survivors were the bearers of Holocaust memory somehow transmitted via an unexplained transmission route. Researchers were demonstrating the phenomenon by meticulous observation of the offspring [17] and what was labeled as superb psychosocial research [18]. However, and in retrospect, these are merely lachrymose attempts of storytelling for purposes of fame and publishing, or, at the worst, highly suspicious attempts to manipulate data for academic gains.

The truth is that there was no truth to any of these [19]. The terminology of generational transmission, however, is highly significant when one looks at what really did happen [20]. The reality is that "For the vast majority of contemporary Israelis the Holocaust is an acquired memory" [21].

Such a stark statement is more in tune with today's realities and is in no way an antithesis of previously formulated definitions of Holocaust Memory. It is a naturally expected progression of social evolution and memorialization maturity. While the Holocaust museums are still authoritative depositories of historical accuracy and the maintenance of trace memory [22] through artifacts exhibits, their service today is of the educational variety.

Transitioning Holocaust Memory

At some location in time, let's say during the early years of the 21st century, the memory of the Holocaust [23] entered a comparative stage *Vis a Vis* a multitude of genocides [24]. As the field of Genocidal Studies grew, the "uniqueness" placement of the Holocaust began to erode as efforts were being made to internationalize its meanings and lessons [25]. Such efforts inadvertently and unavoidably reached the mainstream of the political spectrum.

This took on a distinct course in Israel and an altogether different direction worldwide.

Enter Politics

Inevitably, the forces of politics and power became dominant and Holocaust Memory was being relegated to convenient venues of ideology. A major share of this morphosis belongs to Prime Minister Netanyahu and his Right-wing government coalition, as far as Israel is concerned. While no one doubts the existential threat nature of Israel's hostile neighbors [26.] The employment of Holocaust Memory is an exploitation of the most damaging variety.

It feeds into the convenient politics of the Right and, not too surprising, provokes a response from the Left [27]. As mentioned earlier, the notion of Holocaust Memory was being appropriated by a multitude of academics and pseudo-historians for reasons beyond the scope of the present article [28]. The cycling and recycling of concepts of memory further feed political ideology. Reinforced via means of cultural motifs ranging from literature to art and cinema, the public is overwhelmed [29].

Recently an increasingly political and right-shifted public discourse by Prime Minister Netanyahu succeeded in mobilizing supporters for the most recent elections in April of 2019. However, it resulted in exacerbating the diminishing of support among diaspora Jews who tend to be left leaning [30]. The dividing of Jewry into Right and Left camp are a partial outcome of the disturbing revisionism of memory and will define sociopolitical norms for the future [31]. These are lasting impressions [32] that

further partition Jewish ideology [33]. However, not all is lost as regards the support by the Diaspora of Israel as a nation of the Jews and much of this is due to tourism directed toward memorial sites [34]. In some ways, political controversies invite visitors who, out of curiosity, want to see "what all the fuss is about."

On the other hand, a series of opinion surveys by the Jewish People Policy Institute indicates that the Diaspora population is well aware of the utilization of Holocaust Memory by the state to curry favor and balances this against the backdrop of settlement politics [35]. The tensions between Left vs., Right politics is not lost on Diaspora Jews and they are increasingly becoming wary of the furthering of right-wing ideology in Israel [36].

Conclusion

It is a demonstrable factuality that Holocaust Memory, at one time a binding spirit among Jews, has veered off the horizon, enveloped by the politics of the Right vs. the Left. The current Israeli government is not doing Jews any favor. It is a pathetic truth that the current political leadership of the US and Israel are marching in sync toward the destruction of any remaining bonds between Israeli Jews and the US Diaspora community [37-90].

The memory of the Holocaust is a distant past, now reserved for use in the political arena and no longer a symbolic Jewish bond based on the age-old traditions of shared suffering. It is as if Pesach (Passover) no longer existed.

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