

Who Owns Auschwitz?¹

Translated by John MacKay

Holocaust survivors will have to face the facts: as they grow weaker with age, Auschwitz is slipping out of their hands. But to whom will it belong? Obviously, to the next generation, and to the one after that—as long as they continue to lay claim to it, of course.

There is something shockingly ambiguous about the jealous way in which survivors insist on their exclusive rights to the Holocaust as intellectual property, as though they'd come into possession of some great and unique secret; as though they were protecting some unheard-of treasure from decay and (especially) from willful damage. Only *they* are able to guard it from decay, through the strength of their memory. But how are they to respond to the damage wrought by others, to the Holocaust's appropriation by others, to all the falsifications and sundry manipulations, and above all to that most powerful of enemies, the passage of time itself? Furtive glances cling to every line of every book on the Holocaust, to every foot of every film where the Holocaust is mentioned. Is the representation plausible, the history exact? Did we really say that, feel that way? Is that really where the latrine stood, in precisely that corner of the barracks? Were the roll-calls, the hunger, the selections of victims really like that? And so on, and so on. . . . But why are we so keenly interested in all the embarrassing and painful details, rather than just trying to forget them all as soon as possible? It seems that, with the dying-away of the living sensation of the Holocaust, all the unimaginable pain and sorrow live on as a single, unified value—a value to which one not only clings more strongly than to any other, but which one will also see generally recognized and accepted.

And herein lies the ambiguity. For the Holocaust to become with time a real part of European (or at least western European) public consciousness, the price inevitably extracted in exchange for public notoriety had to be paid. Thus we immediately got a stylization of the Holocaust, a stylization which has by now grown to nearly unbearable

dimensions. The word “Holocaust” is already a stylization, an affected abstraction from more brutal-sounding terms like “extermination camp” or “Final Solution.” Nor should it come as any surprise, as more and more is said about the Holocaust, that its reality—the day to day reality of human extermination—increasingly slips away, out of the realm of the imaginable. In my *Diary From the Galleys*, I found myself compelled to write: “The concentration camp is imaginable only and exclusively as literature, never as reality. (Not even—or rather, least of all—when we have directly experienced it.)”² The drive to survive makes us accustomed to lying as long as possible about the murderous reality in which we are forced to hold our own, while the drive to remember seduces us into sneaking a certain complacent satisfaction into our reminiscences: the balsam of self-pity, the martyr’s self-glorification. And as long as we let ourselves float on the lukewarm waves of belated solidarity (or the appearance of solidarity), we fail to hear the real question, always posed with trepidation but still audible, behind the phrases of the official eulogies: how should the world free itself from Auschwitz, from the burden of the Holocaust?

I don’t think that this question is inevitably posed on the basis of dishonest motives. Rather, it expresses a natural longing, and the survivors, indeed, long for nothing else. Nonetheless, the decades have taught me that the only passable route to liberation leads us through memory. But there are various ways of remembering. The artist hopes that, through a precise description, leading him once more along the pathways of death, he will finally break through to the noblest kind of liberation, to a catharsis in which he can perhaps allow his reader to partake as well. But how many such works have come into being during the last century? I can count on ten fingers the number of writers who have produced truly great literature of world importance out of the experience of the Holocaust. We seldom meet with the likes of a Paul Celan, a Tadeusz Borowski, a Primo Levi, a Jean Améry, a Ruth Klüger, a Claude Lanzmann, or a Miklós Radóti.

More and more often, the Holocaust is stolen from its guardians and made into cheap consumer goods. Or else it is institutionalized, and around it is built a moral-political ritual, complete with a new and often phony language. Certain words come to be compelled by public discourse, and almost automatically set off the Holocaust-reflex in the listener or the reader. In every way possible and impossible, the Holocaust is rendered alien to human beings. The survivor is taught how he has to think about what he has experienced, regardless of whether or to what extent this “thinking-about” is consistent with his real experiences. The authentic witness is or will soon be perceived as being in the way, and will have to be shoved aside like the obstacle he is. The words of Améry prove their truth: “*W*ē, the victims, will appear as the truly incorrigible, irreconcilable ones, as the anti-historical reac-

tionaries in the exact sense of the word, and in the end it will seem like a technical mishap that some of us still survived.”³

A Holocaust conformism has arisen, along with a Holocaust sentimentalism, a Holocaust canon, and a system of Holocaust taboos together with the ceremonial discourse that goes with it; Holocaust products for Holocaust consumers have been developed. Auschwitz-lies have appeared, and the figure of the Auschwitz con-man has come into being. Over the course of time we have come to know of one Holocaust guru, inundated with prizes for his achievements in literature and human rights, who gave first-hand reports of his indescribable experiences as a three- or four-year-old in the Majdanek extermination camp—until it was determined that between 1941 and 1945 he hadn’t left his bourgeois Swiss family’s house, except perhaps to take a healthy stroll or sitting in his baby carriage.⁴ Meanwhile, we dwell in the midst of Spielberg’s saurian kitsch and with the absurd chatter emerging from the fruitless discussions over the Berlin Holocaust monument. The time will come when Berliners—along with foreigners who end up in Berlin, of course (above all, I imagine groups of assiduous Japanese tourists)—will stroll, sunk in peripatetic reflection and surrounded by the roar of Berlin traffic, through the Holocaust Park, complete with playground, while Spielberg’s 48,239th interview-partner whispers—or howls?—his own individual story of suffering in their ears. (When I imagine the kinds of games that might be played in this Holocaust playground (conceived, according to an interpretation offered several months ago in the pages of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, as “a gift from the murdered Jewish children to their unknown playmates in Berlin”), I think immediately (and helplessly: a result of how my stock of associations was spoiled in Auschwitz, no doubt) of the “Boger swing,” a device made famous during the Frankfurt Auschwitz trial, and upon which its builder, the inventive SS *Unterscharführer* Boger, would physically strap his victims head-down, thus turning their exposed backsides into playthings for his sadistic mania.)⁵

Yes, the survivors watch helplessly as their only real possessions are done away with: authentic experiences. I know that many will not agree with me when I apply the term “kitsch” to Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List*. It is said that Spielberg has in fact done a great service, considering that his film lured millions into the movie theaters, including many who otherwise would never have been interested in the subject of the Holocaust. That might be true. But why should I, as a Holocaust survivor and as one in possession of a broader experience of terror, be pleased when more and more people see these experiences reproduced on the big screen—and falsified at that? It is obvious that the American Spielberg, who incidentally wasn’t even born until after the war, has and can have no idea of the authentic reality of a Nazi

concentration camp. Why, then, does he struggle so hard to make his representation of a world he does not know *seem* authentic in every detail? The most important message of this black-and-white film comes, I think, at the end, with the appearance in color of a triumphant crowd of people. But I also regard as kitsch any representation of the Holocaust that fails to imply the wide-ranging ethical consequences of Auschwitz, and from which the PERSON in capital letters (and with it the idea of the Human as such) emerges from the camps healthy and unharmed. If this were really possible, we wouldn't still be talking about the Holocaust, or at any rate would speak about it as we might discuss some event of which we have only a distant historical memory, like, say, the Battle of El-Alamein. I regard as kitsch any representation of the Holocaust that is incapable of understanding or unwilling to understand the organic connection between our own deformed mode of life (whether in the private sphere or on the level of "civilization" as such) and the very possibility of the Holocaust. Here I have in mind those representations that seek to establish the Holocaust once and for all as something foreign to human nature; that seek to drive the Holocaust out of the realm of human experience. I would also use the term kitsch to describe those works where Auschwitz is regarded as simply a matter concerning Germans and Jews, and thereby reduced to something like the fatal incompatibility of two groups; when the political and psychological anatomy of modern totalitarianism more generally is disregarded; when Auschwitz is not seen as a universal experience, but reduced to whatever immediately "hits the eye." Apart from this, of course, I regard anything that is kitsch, as kitsch.

Perhaps I haven't mentioned that I have been speaking from the outset about a film, about Roberto Benigni's *Life is Beautiful*. In Budapest, where I'm writing these lines, the film hasn't (yet?) been shown. And if it does get shown at some time in the future, it certainly won't give rise to the kinds of discussion that I've heard it has provoked in western Europe. Here the Holocaust is differently not-talked-about, differently talked-about (on those occasions when it's not possible to avoid talking about it) than in western Europe. Here the Holocaust has been a "touchy subject," so to speak, ever since the end of the Second World War, a subject shielded from the "brutal" process of truth-finding by defensive walls of taboo and euphemism.

So you might say that I saw the film with an innocent eye (on videocassette). I haven't read the criticism and don't know the specific reproaches leveled against the film, and—truth to tell—I can't well imagine what it is in the film that has provoked such debate. I suppose that once again a choir of Holocaust puritans, Holocaust dogmatists and Holocaust usurpers is being heard, asking: "Can, should the Holocaust be treated in this way?" But what is "this way," more precisely

considered? Those who have seen the film (or better: *not* seen it) with the ideological blinders on will reply: “with so much humor, and using the devices of comedy”—and they won’t have understood a word, not one single scene of the film.

Above all, they fail to see that Benigni’s central idea isn’t comic at all, but tragic. It is true that this idea, along with the central character of Guido, develops only very slowly. During the first 20 or 30 minutes, we feel as though we’ve been transferred onto the set of some old-fashioned burlesque. Only later do we understand how organically this apparently impossible introduction fits into the dramatic structure not only of the film, but of life itself. Even as one gradually comes to find the protagonist’s slapstick interludes unbearable, the magician slowly emerges from behind the clown’s mask. He lifts the wand, and from then on every word, every moment of the film is inspired. In the information packet provided with the videocassette, I read that the filmmakers paid careful attention to the way they represented the daily life of the camp, to the authenticity of the scenery, props and so on. Fortunately, in this they did not succeed. Authenticity lies, admittedly, in details, but not necessarily in material details. The gateway into the camp in *Life is Beautiful* resembles the entrance into the actual Birkenau to about the same extent that the battleship in Fellini’s *And the Ship Sails On* [*E la nave va*, 1983] resembles a real flagship of a real Austro-Hungarian admiral. But the point here lies in something totally different: the spirit, the soul of *Life is Beautiful* is authentic, and it moves us with the power of the oldest kind of magic, the magic of fairy tales.

At first sight, this fairy tale looks pretty awkward on paper. Guido deceives his four-year-old son Giosue into thinking that Auschwitz is just a game. Participants in the game receive points for successfully overcoming difficulties, and the winner will receive a “real tank.” But does not this device of the “game” correspond in an essential way to the lived reality of Auschwitz? One could smell the stench of burning human flesh, but still did not want to believe that all of this could be true. One would rather find some notion that might tempt one to survive, and a “real tank” is, for a child, precisely this kind of seductive promise.

There is one scene in the film that will no doubt generate a good deal of discussion. I am thinking of the moment when the protagonist Guido takes on the interpreter’s role and “translates” into Italian an SS man’s directives (informing the prisoners of the camp’s rules of order) for the inhabitants of the barracks, including above all his own son. What this scene contains cannot be described in rational language, and says everything there is to say about the absurdity of that atrocious world, and about those who stood in opposition to the madness, unbroken in their spiritual strength. There is never any gigantism here,

no sentimental or agonizing lingering over details, no red arrows shot demonstratively across a gray background. Everything is so clear and simple, so immediate and touching, that tears well up in one's eyes. The film's dramatic structure operates with the simple precision of good tragedy. Guido must die, and he must die at exactly the moment he dies and in exactly the way he dies. Before his death—and here we learn just how precious and beautiful life is for him—he performs a few Chaplinesque antics in order to give faith and strength to the boy after the latter has crawled out of his hiding place. That we don't see Guido's death when it comes says much about the film's unerring taste, its faultless style. But the swift, cracking report of the machine gun also has its dramatic function, and contains an important and shattering message. At the end, the boy sees his "prize" rolling toward him—the "real tank." But here, sadness over the ruined "game" overwhelms the story. We now understand that, somewhere else, the "game" would be called civilization, humanity, freedom—everything that humans ever regarded as valuable. And when the boy, reunited with his mother and suspended in her arms, cries out "we won!" his words come to resemble, through the power of this moment, an elegy shot through with grief.

I notice that Benigni, the creator of the film, was born in 1952. He is the representative of a new generation that is wrestling with the ghost of Auschwitz, and has the courage (and also the strength) to lay claim to this sad inheritance.

Notes

- 1 The following article appeared under the title "Wem gehört Auschwitz?" in *Die Zeit* 55 (19 November 1998). All endnotes have been added by the translator.
- 2 In Hungarian as *Gályanapló* (Budapest: Holnap Kiadó, 1992).
- 3 Quoted from Jean Améry's *Jenseits von Schuld und Sühne* (1966); in English as *At the Mind's Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and its Realities*, trans. Sidney Rosenfeld and Stella P. Rosenfeld (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), p. 80.
- 4 A reference to Benjamin Wilkomirski, author of *Bruchstücke* (in English as *Fragments: Memories of a Wartime Childhood*, trans. Carol Brown Janeway [New York: Schocken Books, 1996]).
- 5 Wilhelm Boger, tried during the Frankfurt Auschwitz Trial (1963–65).