

8. When Telling the Truth Demands Courage

Telling the truth can often place you in an uncomfortable minority position, exposed to the pressure of the majority. Standing up to this pressure requires courage. Therefore, courage is not only the virtue of political action, but also quite evidently the virtue of truth-telling. Telling an inconvenient truth is not only talk but at the same time an action.

To say what is, to set truth against lies or corruption, dissent against conformism, a scandal against the silence of an indifferent or a hostile majority, transparency against censorship, or diversity against dictatorship – all that requires civic courage, which may be interpreted as provocation or treason and does not find consent or admiration by the majority in the same way as the courage of soldiers, firemen and those practicing extreme sports. People prefer to talk about their unquestioned courage.

Telling the truth of facts is possible in two ways: as the action of courageous men at their workplace, in public or in politics, or as the narration of a spectator.

I analyse in more detail both these forms of truth-telling – first, the actor: I will present some examples of courageous truth-tellers in dictatorship and democracy and ask for the source of courage. I will then discuss two narratives about the same reality but from quite different perspectives: Arendt's report about the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem, and Spielberg's "Schindler's List".

First, I shall present some people who told the truth in different ways and who by doing this acted courageously: people under the conditions of dictatorship in Eastern Europe before 1989, a whistle-blower in the EU administration in Brussels, and finally a politician fighting the Mafia in Italy.

To Live in the Truth

First, the people under the conditions of dictatorship. I will start with a fictitious person in Vaclav Havel's exceptional manifesto "The Power of the Powerless"¹, writ-

1 Vaclav Havel: *The Power of the Powerless*, London: Hutchinson 1985, pp. 23–96.

ten in 1978. The German title calls this power: “An attempt to live in the Truth”. This essay reflects the alienated life in “real socialism”, a life in the lie as Havel calls it, and considers a strategy to defy this system and to overcome it. This reflection chooses a new way beyond the usual categories of public and private life. It is neither about a political opposition running the risk of ending in the same logic as its adversary, nor about the withdrawal from any political controversy into the niche of private life. It is about non-cooperation, the refusal of conformism.

Havel describes the example of the manager of a greengrocer’s shop. Every year for May Day, the manager had to display the slogan “Workers of the World, Unite!” in his window between the onions and carrots. He no longer believed in the slogan, but did this every year, although on closer examination it turns out to be simply a symbolic act of submission to domination. When this slogan is stripped of its content, this act in fact meant: “I am afraid and therefore unquestioningly obedient.”² The greengrocer did something which he considered in its content as completely senseless. The meaning of this act consisted in not getting into trouble with the authorities.

The same happened when those who ordered and controlled the display of these slogans marched past in a May Day demonstration. Few of them cared about the content, but all played their part so that this ritual went off without a hitch. “They need not accept the lie. It is enough for them to have accepted their life with it and in it. For by this very fact, individuals confirm the system, fulfil the system, make the system, *are* the system.”³

Now, this system is challenged by the “aims of life”, that is the tendency of life to move “toward plurality, diversity, independent self-constitution, and self-organization, in short toward the fulfilment of its own freedom”⁴. What happens if this greengrocer simply follows his own aims in life? If he does not display the slogan anymore, because he no longer wants to ingratiate himself? If he does not go to vote in elections because he knows that he does not have a choice? Or if in assemblies he no longer says what he does not believe, but expresses his real opinions? Then there could be trouble⁵. But what is more important is that he breaks the rules of the game and finally has “disrupted the game as such”⁶. He will have transformed himself from an anonymous part of the system, someone who displays the signs sent to the shop, into a personality with his own face, own voice and own will.

Something is at work here that Arendt calls the Socratic morality, the inner dialogue of the two-in-one, the dialogue of a man who wants to live together with

2 Ibid., p. 28.

3 Ibid., p. 31.

4 Ibid., p. 29.

5 Ibid., p. 39.

6 Ibid., p. 40.

himself and not with a liar. It is a “negative” morality, “the only working morality in borderline situations, that is, in times of crisis and emergency.”⁷

To say what is

Havel’s ideal-typical person represents dissent and opposition as a cultural movement emerging in Eastern Europe. I also found this aim of life to plurality, diversity, and the fulfilment of its own freedom, in my research about the emergence of civic courage in oppositional people in the GDR.⁸ They not only refused a life in the lie but also told the truth and provoked the disclosure and self-disclosure of the regime. Their main motives were freedom of movement and speech, recognition and justice. I will present four of them here.

A pupil, very active and rhetorically gifted, very much liked to organize the affairs of her class as a secretary of the communist youth organization “Free German Youth” (FDJ). Moreso than her classmates, she dared to ask inconvenient questions in the class of “citizens’ rights and duties” (*Staatsbürgerkunde*) and increasingly the others in the class expected her to ask critical questions. Growing up in an atheistic family she joined the peace movement of the Protestant Church out of curiosity and increasingly got into trouble with the state.

The manager of a small theatre organized discussions about taboos in the GDR such as fear or dying, and resisted the censorship demands of the city authorities. In a similar way, he spoke about inconvenient topics as a member of the party in political assemblies. Other colleagues supported him and sometimes they asked him to put forward their demands. During the communal election in 1989 he organized supervision of the polling stations and made public the massive fraud. He always liked to be at the centre of a big group of friends and like-minded people. Recognition was especially important for him.

An engineer was angry, even when still at school, about the phrases of the official party declarations and their representatives and about the required submission much as Havel’s greengrocer had experienced it. In 1968 he was working as a researcher at the university when East German troops took part in the invasion of Czechoslovakia. He feigned illness to get out of having to supervise the student homes to report on any protests against the invasion. Only later as an engineer with a safe position did he feel strong enough to take revenge for all these humiliations.

7 Hannah Arendt: Some Questions of Moral Philosophy, in.: *Responsibility and Judgment*, ed. by Jerome Kohn, New York: Schocken 2003, p. 106.

8 Wolfgang Heuer *Couragiertes Handeln*, Lüneburg ZuKlampen 2002; Wolfgang Heuer Zivilcourage und Habitus. Öffentlicher Mut in der DDR, in Gerd Meyer / Ulrich Dovermann, Siegfried Frech / Günther Gugel (eds.) *Zivilcourage lernen. Analysen – Modelle – Arbeitshilfen*, Stuttgart LPB 2004.

He studied political topics thoroughly to unmask the stupidity of party functionaries at assemblies of the employees. He also used the legal possibilities to present non-party members for works council elections.

A schoolteacher of “citizens’ rights and duties” acted in a very altruistic way. She refused to join the party, which was very unusual for a teacher with this political topic; she instead defended open debates with her pupils to make them ‘fit for life’, as she called it, and did not evade inconvenient discussions in the classroom, or the displeasure of her superiors.

Freedom of opinion and criticism, resistance against humiliation, search for recognition and the defence of the weak were her motives.

To defend professional ethics

We find another form of being in accordance with oneself and justice in the second case, the action of whistle-blowers. Whistle-blowers make public the illegal practices of institutions or companies in which they are working. Among the better known are whistle-blowers are Daniel Ellsberg, who published the secret Pentagon Papers on the background of the Vietnam War, and Edward Snowden, who revealed the world-wide surveillance and spying practices of mainly American and British intelligence services, but also three who were nominated by *Time Magazine* as Persons of the Year 2002: Sharon Watkins, discovering the falsification of the balance sheet at Enron, Cynthia Cooper who discovered a similar deception at WorldCom, and Coleen Rowley who made known her complaints about the mismanagement at the FBI before 9/11.

The motives for whistleblowing are often similar to those of the employee of the EU administration in Brussels, the Dutchman Paul van Buitenen. Soon after he started his work as assistant auditor in 1995, he discovered corruption in the Leonardo vocational training programme under the commissioner Edith Cresson. His discovery began with a discrepancy about a laptop computer that had not been accounted for after the end of an EU-financed research programme. It went on with increasing numbers of documents proving deception totalling several billions of euros, including the beneficial treatment of the Mme Cresson’s dentist. The scandal was aggravated by the fact that at first the superiors did not take the complaints of Paul van Buitenen seriously, but he got more and more documents from colleagues in other departments and the affair finally ended with the resignation of the EU Commission after a long power struggle and a public debate in the European Parliament.

During the whole time, van Buitenen suffered insecurity, repression and anxiety, public defamation by his superiors and a 50 % reduction of his salary, the fear of the security company of the EU cooperating at that time with neo-Nazi groups, the siege of his house by the media, etc. He sought advice of his friends and became

a member of the Church to find consolation and strength against the power of the bureaucracy.⁹

Van Buitenen is an employee who takes his work seriously, the control of the spending, and does not tolerate corruption, as little as it may be. He is an inconvenient accountant, but not a cold bureaucrat, and less than ever an unconditional subordinate.

To love the public or oneself

Finally, the third example, the former mayor of Palermo, Leoluca Orlando, who in the 1990s successfully managed to end the influence of the Mafia in his city. Its influence consisted in the control of politicians, public spending, contracts with waste-collection companies and water companies, and the provision of school buildings. The consequences had been the neglect of public spaces, the dereliction of the historical centre, the closing of cultural institutions, public silence, and many people killed. At the end of eight years of his government, the public works were again in the hand of companies free from the control of the Mafia, a part of the old centre was restored, the Teatro Massimo reopened, and nobody was shot anymore. The inhabitants had readopted the public spaces.

The reason for this astonishing change was not only the reestablishment of the public order but above all the mobilization of the population. Orlando won the power struggle not only because he intensified the police activities and criminal prosecution but also because he fought against the support and toleration of the Mafia. If he had relied solely on the legal system he would hardly have been successful so quickly. He had to act among the inhabitants which was much riskier and required much more courage. He appealed to the pride of the *palermitana* for their city and created a system of sponsorships for the reconstruction of Palermo. By his fearless actions for the democratization of the city, he gained so much recognition and support that the fight against Orlando seemed more and more unwinnable for the Mafia. Orlando's goal was to liberate the cultural identity of the Sicilians from the hegemony of the Mafia.¹⁰

Leoluca Orlando is similar the politicians praised by John F. Kennedy in the 1950s in his book *Profiles in Courage* as examples of political common sense and independent judgment. Kennedy contrasted them to contemporary populist politicians who were responsible in his opinion for the decline of public politics. He described eight

9 Paul van Buitenen *Unbestechlich für Europa. Ein EU-Beamter kämpft gegen Misswirtschaft und Korruption*, Basel Brunnenverlag 1999. Wolfgang Heuer *Der Glockenläuter von Brüssel. Porträt des mutigen EU-Beamten Paul van Buitenen*, Radio Kultur, rbb 25 September 2004.

10 Leoluca Orlando *Ich sollte der nächste sein. Zivilcourage – die Chance gegen Korruption und Terror*, Freiburg Herder 2002.

senators in American history who distinguished themselves by their courageous behaviour towards their own party, their supporters, and the electorate. Whether their opinions were right or wrong, they had freshened their country with the necessary political life by fighting for their convictions and not acting out of opportunism.

Kennedy not only addressed his book to the politicians but also to the people, asking them to assume their unavoidable responsibility, “for in a democracy, every citizen, regardless of his interest in politics, ‘holds office’; every one of us is in a position of responsibility; and, in the final analysis, the kind of government we get depends upon how we fulfil those responsibilities.”¹¹

Where do we and these role models get the power to act in this way? Kennedy answers:

it was not because they ‘loved the public better than themselves’ (John Adams, WH). On the contrary it was precisely because they did *love themselves* – because each one’s need to maintain his own respect for himself was more important to him than his popularity with others – because his desire to win or maintain a reputation for integrity and courage was stronger than his desire to maintain his office – because his conscience, his personal standard of ethics, his integrity or morality ... was stronger than the pressures of public disapproval.¹²

And the historian Allen Nivens, advising Kennedy writing this book, alludes that a man without character may occasionally give fitful exhibitions of courage, but “moral courage is allied with the other traits which make up character: honesty, deep seriousness, a firm sense of principle, candour, resolution.”¹³

So, the answer is: To love oneself and the conscience, which is guided by a strong and straight character with firm moral norms.

Comparing the three forms of truth-telling, we can see that keeping one’s dignity against a life in the lie under dictatorship with its limitations and humiliations resembles the life in the truth of whistle-blowers. The latter do not want to be complicit with lies, corruption, fraud and violation of law because it would be against their dignity and in the case of van Buitenen their work ethic. Questions of conscience, moral criteria or character are not mentioned, but the defence of oneself and at the same time the relationship to others. The life in the truth is potentially a life shared with others, it is what Arendt calls the common world or also the truth in its diversity of perspectives because of the human plurality.

The priority Kennedy gives to the love of oneself excludes this inter-subjective perspective. His pleading for the duty of public responsibility and individual self-

11 John F. Kennedy: *Profiles in Courage*, New York: Harper & Row 1961, p. 245.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 238/39.

13 Allen Nivens: Foreword, in: John F. Kennedy: *Profiles*, op. cit., p. xvii.

perfection is marked by a Christian, non-political idea of man. Arendt's inter-subjectivity in contrast offers a standpoint, which is neither the place of the liberal individual nor the place where John Adams asks to love the public better than oneself. It is the place of a common judgment and common action where we act as individuals and citizens, as spectators and actors. How much this place differs from our common concept of the lonely subject demonstrates Arendt's entry in her diary about reason and imagination: "Because it is not the self-bound reason but only the imagination which makes it possible to 'to think in the place of each other', it is not the reason but the imagination forming the bond between the men. Against the sense of oneself, the reason, living by the I think, stands the sense of the world, living from the others as common sense (passive) and as imagination (active)."¹⁴

Also, action in Arendt's definition differs from both Kennedy and Adams: for her it is not only about self-accordance and not about the plea for a higher esteem of the public but the need to share the world with others by action. Arendt called this the sheer delight to act, which she discovered in men in local associations, councils and similar spontaneous forms of organization. They correspond to what Tocqueville ascertained with regard to the French Revolution, "that a genuine love of freedom is ever quickened by the prospect of material rewards ... What has made so many men, since untold ages, stake their all on liberty is its intrinsic glamour, a fascination it has in itself, apart from all 'practical' considerations. For only in countries where it reigns can a man speak, live, and breathe freely, owing obedience to no authority save God and the laws of the land. The man who asks of freedom anything other than itself is born to be a slave."¹⁵

When truth-telling is dominated by moral and religious criteria or interests, the truth is exploited and finally destroyed. Therefore, again and again the distrust towards courageously acting persons: Aren't they dogmatic people or serving unknown, secret interests? Is van Buitenen not a strangely fanatic person? And why did the Mafia not kill Orlando?

Telling the True Story

This leads us to the second part, the question how to narrate the truth. "Who says what is ... always tells a story, and in this story the particular facts lose their contin-

14 Hannah Arendt *Denktagebuch 1950–1973*, eds. Ursula Ludz and Ingeborg Nordmann, Munich Piper 2002, p. 570.

15 Alexis de Tocqueville: *The Old Régime and the French Revolution*, Garden City N.Y.: Anchor Books/Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1955, chap. III. 3, p. 168f.

gency and acquire some humanly comprehensible meaning.”¹⁶ In this sense everyday life stories, reportage, historiography, and literature are very similar. There is no understanding without thinking and judging about truth and finding the right words for it.

Arendt’s report *Eichmann in Jerusalem* manifests two characteristics: it is first the product of a courageous thinking, what Arendt called “thinking without a banister”, analysing the specifically new of the totalitarian mass-murder organized in a bureaucratic way. And second, Arendt chose a corresponding form of narration, what Leora Bilsky rightly called a “counter-narrative”. After the publication of the report, a storm of protest arose against content and tone with consequences till today. It was the fiercest controversy ever about the Holocaust. Arendt was aware of writing inconvenient truths, and the campaign against her showed that she had hit the truth exactly.

***Eichmann in Jerusalem* – Arendt’s ‘Heartlessness’**

For Arendt, the trial “offers the most striking insight into the totality of the moral collapse the Nazis caused in respectable European society – not only in Germany but in almost all countries, not only among the persecutors but also among the victims.”¹⁷ As Leora Bilsky explains in her essay “Between Justice and Politics. The Competition of Storytellers in the Eichmann Trial”¹⁸, the trial was about judging the events that led to different narrative forms. While the prosecutor Hausner split the history and only wanted to tell the classical Jewish history by concentrating on the stories of the victims to underline the importance of the state of Israel, Arendt concentrated on a story which included all facts. She wanted to prevent the emergence of holes in the collective memory by concealment or self-deception., Arendt did not aim at “a final judgment’ that would master the events once and for all.” Her book “was not meant to produce consensus but to set in motion a process of deliberation and public debate.”¹⁹

Therefore, Arendt wrote her counter-narrative, in Bilsky’s words “the story that was not told but should have been told in the courtroom.”²⁰ She concentrated on the

16 Hannah Arendt: Truth and Politics, in: *Between Past and Future*, ed. by Jerome Kohn, New York: Penguin 2006, p. 257.

17 Hannah Arendt *Eichmann in Jerusalem. A Report on the Banality of Evil*, New York 1963, p. 125f.

18 Leora Bilsky: Between Justice and Politics. The Competition of Storytellers in the Eichmann Trial, in: Steven E. Aschheim (ed.): *Hannah Arendt in Jerusalem*, Berkeley: University of California Press 2001.

19 Leora Bilsky: When Actor and Spectator Meet in the Courtroom: Reflections on Hannah Arendt’s Concept of Judgment, in: Ronald Beiner / Jennifer Nedelsky (eds.): *Judgment, imagination, and politics: themes from Kant and Arendt*, Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield 2001, p. 273.

20 Leora Bilsky: Between Justice and Politics, op. cit., p. 232.

moral, political, and juridical aspects of the trial, discussing them on several levels: the trial as a theatre with its own dynamics, the personality of the accused, his capacity to judge, his conscience and the deconstruction of the radical evil, the description of the course of events of the destruction of the Jews and the shortcomings of the court and the final speech in defence of the establishment of an international court of justice.

- *The trial as a theatre*: The trial not only took place in a building originally planned as a theatre, but it adopted inevitably the form of a play with all its actors and their interaction: the prosecutor, the accused, the judges, the witnesses, and the audience. The accused proved to be neither a conventional mass murderer nor certifiably insane in his stereotype language and ridiculousness. The judges were old-fashioned and tried hard to understand the criminal and his crime. Finally, the audience in the often half-empty room consisted of “‘survivors’, with middle-aged and elderly people, immigrants from Europe, like myself, who knew by heart all there was to know.”²¹

Nothing corresponded to the common anticipation of a trial and the role the participants usually played. Arendt’s counter-narrative culminates in the statement that “it was precisely the play aspect of the trial that collapsed under the weight of the hair-raising atrocities.”²² The accused no longer stood in the centre of the trial and in some respects “the lessons were superfluous, and in others positively misleading.”²³ At least the witness ‘KZetnik’ still had some theatrical character, because on being interrupted in his interminable testimonies he promptly fainted.

Finally, the witnesses were hardly able to contribute anything new to the trial, they were not able “to tell a story”²⁴. An exception was Abba Kovner’s account of the rescuer Anton Schmidt, which appeared in Arendt’s strong image “like a sudden burst of light in the midst of impenetrable, unfathomable darkness”²⁵.

- *The personality of the accused*: Eichmann as the main character of the trial proved at the same time to be an anti-personality which in all important aspects did not correspond to the image of a monstrous criminal. Remarkable was “his almost total inability ever to look at anything from the other fellow’s point of view”²⁶, his language was bizarre, an “heroic fight with the German language”²⁷ mixing

21 Ibid., p. 8.

22 Ibid., p. 8f.

23 Ibid., p. 10.

24 Ibid., p. 224.

25 Ibid., p. 231.

26 Ibid., p. 47f.

27 Ibid., p. 48.

metaphors and stringing together clichés. “The longer one listened to him, the more obvious it became that his inability to speak was closely connected with an inability to *think*.”²⁸

- *The description of the course of events of the destruction of the Jews*: The course of these events showed not only the details of the mass crimes but also the common moral collapse. When during the trial the role of the Jewish councils came up Arendt called it “undoubtedly the darkest chapter of the whole dark story”²⁹. She never asked why they did not resist – a question Arendt found “both foolish and cruel”³⁰ when posed by Judge Hausner. But her following sentence provoked an outrage: “The whole truth was that if the Jewish people had been really unorganized and leaderless, there would have been chaos and plenty of misery, but the total number of victims would hardly have been between four and half and six million people.”

Schindler’s List – the Courage of the Bystander

Spielberg’s film differs in all essential aspects from Arendt’s “to say what is” and her judgment about the “totality of the moral collapse”. Spielberg does not need courage to tell the truth because it is the truth of the mainstream, and his truth differs essentially from Arendt’s.

In *Schindler’s List*, the main character, Oskar Schindler, a rescuer of his Jewish forced labourers, confronts the SS-man Amon Goeth, commander of a labour camp, both surrounded by other Nazi officers and the group of Jewish victims. Unlike Eichmann, Goeth personifies sadistic evil. He gives his lust to kill free rein and in the course of time shoots down more than 500 camp inmates. In their historical study *Remembrance in a Global Age: The Holocaust* studying the changes in the public discussion about the Holocaust in Israel, Germany and the United States, Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider mention the difference between Eichmann and Goeth. Arendt emphasised that Eichmann was not Iago or Macbeth and had not decided like Richard III to become a bad man. “With this remark she wanted to depersonalize evil and place it in the system of totalitarianism. Spielberg brought the evil back again to the level of the individual. Goeth was Iago and decided to become a bad guy.”³¹ Goeth was ruthless, brutal, arbitrary and corrupt; he accepted bribes. Alcohol, women and violence were his passions beyond any limits.

28 Ibid., p. 49.

29 Ibid., p. 117.

30 Hannah Arendt: What Remains? The Language remains, in: Peter Baehr (ed.): *The Portable Hannah Arendt*, New York: Penguin Classics 2000, p. 15.

31 Daniel Levy / Natan Sznaider *Erinnerung im globalen Zeitalter Der Holocaust*, Frankfurt/M Suhrkamp 2007, p. 166.

Eichmann in contrast had no sadistic inclination and could hardly bear his visits in extermination camps, and he did not accept bribes. Though in Spielberg's film the interpretation of Goeth is historically correct, he does not represent the members of a totalitarian system. This system was dominated by ideology and party discipline excluding individual preferences and passions. It was based on rules and not on the absence of rules. What the film does not include is the fact that the SS arrested Goeth because of bribery and was about to bring him to court when the war ended. In a similar case, the former commander of Buchenwald, Karl Koch, was condemned to death and executed because of bribery. So, while the SS did not tolerate private enrichment, the Nazi system in Spielberg's movie appears as a system of unrestrained individualists.

But in the centre of the movie stands the figure of Schindler. A smart, amoral, self-made man, party member and bon vivant acting full of self-confidence. His strong point is his ability to present and commercialize his products, to corrupt influential people and to deal on the black market. After years of hope, he declares, he has finally become successful, but not with the help of good fortune but with the help of war. The war offers him the unexpected chance for the cheap takeover of a factory and the exploitation of cheap Jewish workforce. He comes into conflict with the SS who wants to deport his right-hand man, the accounting clerk. When the SS transports his workers into a labour camp, he can only keep them with the help of bribery, and only when other Jews ask him for help and call him a rescuer does he become aware of the fact that his workers are not only workforce but men and women. This evokes a strong humanity slumbering deep in his interior. In a moving talk he consoles Helene, the Jewish maid suffering under Goeth's untrammelled arbitrariness. And in a discussion with Goeth, Schindler explains that true power does not consist in the freedom to kill but in being able to kill but not doing it. For a short time Goeth actually hesitates to go on with his joyful killings. Schindler always tries to help where help is needed. So, he orders water to be sprayed over a deportation train waiting at the station to cool it down in the scorching summer sun. When the labour camp is going to be dissolved and the inmates are to be deported to Auschwitz he rescues again, this time by naming 1100 men and women on his famous list and transporting them to another factory in Czechoslovakia, where he starts to manufacture munitions. And once again he rescues with the help of bribery when the rescued women are transported to Auschwitz by mistake. Finally, in his new factory Schindler produces only defective munitions.

At the end of the story Schindler is bankrupt and confesses in a moving declaration to his workers that he had lived from slave labour and therefore would be pursued in the future. He leaves the decision to the security forces to liquidate the workers and become murderers or to let them free. He gives each worker clothes, vodka and cigarettes and regrets that he could not rescue more people.

The story shows how Schindler changes from an egoist to an altruist, from an exploiter to a rescuer. “What I have learned in that time more than any other thing,” Spielberg declared after filming, “is the insight that a single person really and indeed can change things. A single person can – in a metaphorical sense – more was necessary, because he was a morally sound and deeply humane man. Bigger than the others, handsome and in smart suits, rhetorically predominant and morally prudent he acted with the posture of Superman. He is the incarnation of the American businessman putting his feet on his writing desk. “The war brings forth horrible things”, he declares and means brutish behaviour. But the totalitarian domination, which for its part brought forth this war remains unmentioned.

The victims appear as a homogenous cultural and religious community, innocent and cultivated. The role of the *capo* is only touched on, the Jewish councils remain unmentioned.

Decontextualizing the Story

Schindler's List deals with a narrative of the Jewish history, as did prosecutor Hausner during the Eichmann trial, but it is accompanied by a notable shift in perspective. We are no longer witnessing the totality of the moral collapse of the society but a pronounced egoism which makes use of war and the exploitation of the labour force, does not contradict a marked humanity ready for action in an emergency case. The distinction between right and wrong, good and evil works. “You can rescue, you only have to decide to do it.”³² This message clearly contradicts the threatening assumption of Arendt that we are facing the moral collapse of a whole society. Rescuers and victims are not affected by it. Similarly, the movie contradicts Arendt's assumption of depersonalization, of Eichmann's anti-personality. Arendt's theory of the banality of evil – often misunderstood as making evil harmless – is actually much more troubling than the radical evil of Goeth, which the Jerusalem judges would more readily have understood.

The troubling idea of a society being unable to judge adequately moral and political questions gives way for a clear confrontation between good and evil. The good ones who are not affected by totalitarianism in their capacity to judge confront the evil ones being succumbed to their unlimited passions and re able to put them into their place by reason and humanity.

Spielberg does not tell a counternarrative but on the contrary leads reality back to a safer world where the classical story of the fight between the protagonists of good and evil is still adequate. He follows the Aristotelian model of telling a story, which is still valid today and the recipe of almost all successful Hollywood films.

32 Ibid., p. 167.

To sum up, we can say that though the story of the film is based on facts, Spielberg fundamentally changed the perspective, he removed the story from its historical context and its place – he decontextualized it. He also changed the personalities: rescuers and victims correspond to the actual common citizen in liberal democracies with their intact moral judgment facing a tyrannical domination gone wild. In this way the movie proves astonishingly contemporary. Levy and Sznajder declare that “Spielberg always maintained that the film deals with Bosnians in Serbia or with black Americans.” When black youngsters in Oakland made fun of the scene in “Schindler’s List” showing the frenzied hunting of Jews, Spielberg rushed there and “created a new course in the local high school called ‘The Human Holocaust: The Afro-American Experience’.”³³

This decontextualizing involves a threefold change of perspective:

- Firstly the *emergence of the perspective of the witness* which the German post-war generations can identify with wholeheartedly. This explains the resounding success of the film in Germany. Levy and Sznajder summarize it as follows: “Schindler are all who want to rescue, Goeth are all who want to kill, and the Jews are the victims everywhere.”³⁴
- Secondly, this allows a *universalization of the Holocaust*. The Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington stands for this universalization. It gives the impression that the Holocaust is part of the American history; its exhibition starts with the liberation of the Jewish inmates of concentration camps by American troops.
- Furthermore, the Holocaust is not only an event of the past but a permanent threat, a warning of its possible recurrence. Therefore, the seriousness of the promise “Auschwitz never again” was put on the test bench in the cases of Bosnia, Kosovo and Ruanda and an obligation for all European countries since the Holocaust conference in Stockholm in 2000.
- Finally, the decontextualization corresponds to the *end of remembrance*. More or less, the generation of those involved in the events is not alive anymore. Hardly anybody still has personal experience of that time. This loss is not trivial and cannot be compensated for by information and knowledge. Because experiences are more than mere adventures and embedded deeper than rational knowledge. They are part of one’s orientation and knowledge bases which are shaped by an intersubjective everyday life, a so-called “conjunctive space of experience”³⁵. This conjunctive space of experience, according to Karl Mannheim’s sociology of knowledge, is the basis for understanding. The acquisition of history in the

33 Ibid., p. 166.

34 Ibid., p. 164.

35 See Ralf Bohnsack *Qualitative Bild- und Videointerpretation. Die dokumentarische Methode*, Op-laden Barbara Budrich 2009, p. 130.

sense of understanding takes place on the basis of shared implicit knowledge bases. The presence of the conjunctive space of experience is much stronger, it shapes the image of the past and decontextualizes it. Therefore, the temptation was great for Spielberg to emphasise the supposed actuality of the story, so that in the movie we meet ourselves and not the others, we understand our world and not the world of totalitarianism. Arendt's conjunctive space of experience is shaped by totalitarianism, Spielberg's conjunctive space of experience is shaped by liberal democracy.

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