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The Paradigm of the Holocaust Will Not Last Forever

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“The paradigm of the Holocaust will not last forever”

It is February, and cold. I am walking down State Street, at the end of the University campus. I pull my parka closer to my body, and my mind conjures an image. It is the image of another person on another cold day: Saba Sigmund, my mother’s father, in the winter snow in Auschwitz. He had no parka. He could not predict whether he would survive the winter, and if he did survive it, whether he would see the next one. He was cold; I feel his cold; I know that I do not feel his cold.

The whole thought cycles through my mind in an instant, as it has on many other cold days, for as many years as I can remember. And as always, the next instant brings reproach. Why does the cold make me remember my Saba’s pain, as if there weren’t plenty of other pains to consider, many of them being felt right now? Why do I think of my Saba, who no longer feels the cold, rather than sympathizing with nearby people in need who are cold today?

But of course, I now am thinking of those who suffer today. My Saba is the gateway through which my mind passes on its way to them. I feel a bit of comfort at this thought. Not tremendous comfort: I have not relieved anyone’s suffering, and I should not congratulate myself for merely remembering that the suffering exists. But my mindfulness of my Saba is not dulling my concern for others. It is directing my thoughts to them, as I think first of him and then react. And I realize that my thought of my Saba is different from my thought about those who suffer now. Toward them, I feel pity, and, I hope, compassion, and some desire to help, and sadness for not helping enough. But I do not pity my Saba, even when I think of him cold and starving. My mind does not work that way. He is a source of strength.

This, then, is how my mind does work. First, the Holocaust. Then, the reaction, the attempt to figure out what else I should be thinking about, besides the Holocaust.

In college I studied political theory. In class after class, I noticed that instructors and students alike regularly used the Holocaust as a way to test ideas. Any successful principle of political morality must show that the Nazis were wrong; any successful theory of political institutions must be structured to prevent Nazis from rising to power again. These were the implicit rules of the discipline. I preferred to argue in other ways. The Holocaust was personal, and too big to be put to use. Surely I could ground my ideas in something else, some problem or event other than the Holocaust. But that was a conscious preference, not an instinct. My instinct was to go to the Holocaust first. My conscious self intervened, moving the grounds of my articulated ideas elsewhere. And so it went: my mind goes first to the Holocaust, and then I remember that this is not the world but just my corner of it, and that sends me out into the world.

Perhaps my sense that the conversation in my academic field was filled with the Holocaust was partly a matter of confirmation bias. I sense the Holocaust even when I am just pulling on my parka, so of course I saw the Holocaust everywhere in political theory. It was there to be found. To me, it appeared to dominate the conversation. I wanted to know why. So I set out to examine the ways in which the Holocaust structured normative theory in law and politics in the decades after the war. But just as my thought of my Saba ricochets to an uncomfortable thought about others who suffer in ways unconnected to the Holocaust, my fascination with the primacy of the Holocaust in shaping political ideas in my time and place led me to ask what other concerns had structured the field for those who came before the Holocaust. That question launched the project that became my entry into the guild of political theorists: a

book about three separate historical traumas, in three centuries, that successively reshaped American conceptions of political morality, with the Holocaust as the third.

One implicit lesson of that project was that the paradigm of the Holocaust will not last forever. New historical traumas come and move new concerns to the fore. I wonder how I would feel if I lived to see a generation of scholars for whom the Holocaust had no more resonance than any of a dozen other historical phenomena. My sister once wrote that we grandchildren of survivors share two things: a void, and the fear that we will lose it.

I have two daughters and a son. They did not know my Saba; he did not impart to them what he passed to me. They will know much of what I know, but they will not feel how I feel. My children do not think of the Holocaust when they pull their coats tight against the cold. I hope that they have the thought that follows that one.

(From God, Faith, and Identity in from the Ashes: Reflections of Children and Grandchildren of Holocaust Survivors, pp. 132-34 (Menachem Z. Rosensaft, ed., 2015))