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Telling the Truth

It is commonly assumed that telling the truth about events that occurred during the war may have an important role in reconciliation and social reconstruction processes. Even if there is an institution where telling the truth could result in the sentencing of crimes, there are still many obstacles to rebuilding confidence among nations that participated in the war.

We witness reactions such as:

- we are the nation that suffered the most
- we were the victims, we could not commit war crimes
- the perpetrators of war crimes in Vietnam should be sentenced first
- those who founded the ICTY do not have political credibility

"The truth" has different interpretations by the three parties that are involved in violent acts – the victims, the perpetrators and the bystanders. Each party has its own interests that could significantly influence the process of telling the truth about what happened.

For the victims the interest is clear – to tell the truth so that the damage they suffered will be recognised, confirmed and appropriately compensated for. But victimisation is very often followed by

- a feeling of shame because of the act that made her or him a victim
- a fear that telling the truth will lead to reprisals or revenge by the perpetrator or by those who are close to him and his way of thinking

Very often telling the truth incurs a huge emotional strain on the victim, which – even if it happens within the justice system – often leads to feelings of hurt and exposure rather than the expected outcome. This may happen even if expectations are very realistic and appropriate. Also, it is very hard even to say what it means for the victim to expect a "realistic and appropriate result" if she decides to tell the truth. There are several possible motives to testify about the incident that hurt her and changed her life forever:

- to make it known so that it will not happen again
- to speak in the name of those who cannot speak anymore
- to contribute to the perpetrator's punishment
- to get some kind of compensation

Only the goal expressed in the Latin sentence "Dixit et anima mea salvavat" could for sure be achieved by the victim's truth-telling. It undermines that the victim in spite of the damage she or he suffered has the capacity to testify if she could achieve any other result except the highly spiritual goal of telling the truth to herself. Any other goal becomes highly uncertain

- if the truth of her testimony would reach those who are ready to learn from her or his suffering
- if truth-telling in the name of those who are not able to speak any more for her would entail survival guilt
- if the perpetrator after all testimonies would be punished so that it would constitute an appropriate compensation for what was damaged by his act and the emotional burden of testimony
- if the compensation would ever be of the extent to give the victim dignity to amply compensate for what was lost

According to Judith Herman, behind all victim's dreams of revenge and compensation lies a wish for compensation on a psychological level: a wish for the perpetrator's regret, remorse and asking for forgiveness. Since that almost never happens, according to the same author, only the grieving process following the hurt and loss caused by victimisation could bring back dignity to what trauma has damaged forever.

The perpetrator's interest is to keep the truth hidden as long as it is possible, or if it is told, to discredit the victim's testimony by blaming the victim and questioning her credibility.

The psychological background is the same that made him a perpetrator: the denial of the victim's emotional and human needs on an existential level. The practical background is an attempt to avoid punishment for what he has done.

One must not forget that perpetrators in war are always a product of some group which has common attitudes towards "another side". These attitudes make this group closer to perpetrators, at least by not doing anything against the perpetrator's acts. In order to maintain their attitudes toward the victims (the other side) it is necessary not to accept – not even to hear – any opposing views: not to accept even the idea that what has been done should not be done – to dismiss the other side on an existential level.

Given that there is more than one interest, we consequently have "more than one truth" in the community that is supposed to go through the process of reconciliation and social reconstruction.

Two conditions must be met if truth telling is to have an impact on mental health and social reconstruction:

1. A readiness must be created among all three parties to listen not only "their own truth", but also to the "truth of others" and to search for possible motives on the other sides.

The truth cannot exist only in part, and listening to the entire truth calls for a painful change of convictions and self-image on all three sides. To make it possible to speak of more than one truth in practice means to search for the possible motivation of all three sides for telling and listening to "the truth of the others" – victims, perpetrators and bystanders – in order to make them to dare take this hard and painful step. It is painful because it means giving up the idea each side has of "clear and simple" explanations for what happened:

- The perpetrators may discover that they were at the same time the victims of manipulation who did the dirty job for someone who now takes the role of incidental and innocent bystander and leaves them alone with the evidence of crime on their hands.

- The victims may become aware that the interest in them lasted only as long as their victimization was productive for scoring political points against another side, and that in fact they had little acceptance and support in the community which identified itself with their victimisation.
- By listening to the “other truth” some bystanders may become aware that they were naive captives of politics in which “the goal justifies the means”. Listening to the other truth gives them an opportunity to understand the guilt they bear by not doing anything. Perhaps they find that the ways of achieving goals were unacceptable, distance themselves from the means of achieving goals, stop supporting those in behind them, and reconsider their former view that the goals were only righteous. Telling and listening to the truth could save entire communities from being captives of certain politics and collective guilt.

2. Creating an atmosphere in which crimes could be regarded as an opportunity to learn from mistakes with a possibility for appropriate rehabilitation of criminals instead of (only) punishment.

A safe atmosphere and a chance for rehabilitation must be created by reconsidering the other sides’ motives and offering the perpetrators an opportunity to ask for forgiveness. On the victims’ side one must build capacity for acceptance and seek compensation on the nonmaterial (psychological, spiritual) level.

Even if it is very hard to envisage us reaching these goals given the present spiritual level of humanity, merely naming the goals we want to reach could provide some corrective guidelines. Although we have a long way to go I strongly believe that without looking at the problem from that unreachable point of view we can hardly bring humanity forward, and will fall into pitfalls of narrow or short-sighted goals. Setting far-reaching objectives will guide us in the right direction and prevent us from wandering from obstacle to obstacle not knowing their meaning and their place on the way to the goal. It is up to us to begin now or much later. The way towards the goal will be equally long and riddled with the same difficulties as today in 20 years.

But what should be done in the meantime in order to make the great emotional, professional and material investment of telling truth more efficient for reconciliation and reconstruction of societies affected by gross violations of human rights after a war?

In my opinion, three issues are linked to creating motivation for agreeing about the real truth and social reconstruction:

The trauma issue - consequences of “forgetting” and denying in terms of transgenerational trauma for all “sides” in conflict.

What makes the perpetrator a perpetrator? It is the act made on the background of psychological denial of others as the parts of his own self. So long as he is supported by his environment he does not have the chance to realize that by the same act he killed part of himself. And so half dead he satisfies himself with the identity of a hero or a martyr if he is sentenced of a court of “the other thinking side”.

What makes the victim a victim? It is the injustice done to her or him. Without acknowledgement and recognition of the victim's loss from her surroundings, and without grieving of the lost or hurt part of her, the only way the victim can continue life is to deny the lost or hurt part of herself. And so, "half alive", she satisfies herself with the partial identity of victim or martyr if her victimization is acknowledged, or with part-identity of loser if her victimized part was not acknowledged, forgotten, unmentioned, or even misused for political goals.

Communities that identify themselves according to superficial identities of victims or martyrs with one or another side are also only partly alive. New wars that begin with the calling for revenge for previous victimization are merely attempts to revive the collective self of the denied part. Have not all sides who begin wars called upon its previous victimization, devastation, violation, or subjugation...?

The violence issue - to demystify universal mechanisms of violence: isolation, imposing common guilt, not taking responsibility for own acts,... recognised in different life contexts on all "sides" role in capturing entire groups and nations in political interests and consequences of their fulfilling. To add knowledge about treatment of perpetrators to punish politics of war crimes that could create an opportunity for rehabilitation for war criminals by offering a compensation on nonmaterial level, which could be more satisfying for victims and have a therapeutic effect, instead of satisfying the need for revenge only by punishment

Spirituality - supporting spiritual recovery resources on the way that will not demand revenge and hurting the perpetrator as the only way of compensation for what is lost; diminishing the drives which are in basis of concurrent relations as a source of the idea that I could make myself safe only on some others cost; make attractive the wish to give up of any kind of abuse the power position.

Telling the truth in an atmosphere of mutual psychological compensation for a damage that each side finds it suffered, in form of honest regret for the act that have caused that damage could be a path to close forever the spring of potential future wars. It reminds at least one basic question: to whom it could be the real interest, or otherwise: how many are those whose real interest is not to close it?

All those who understand the importance of the motives for changing the paradigm of doing and the long term benefit that might be gained should in the meantime, **after a reconsideration their own barriers and an active work on their own capacities**, begin to work on teaching and sensitizing their communities for striving to these ideals.