

The Fly, the Spider, and the Universe

Essays on Forgotten Victims

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I.

In the library of our Swedish holiday cottage I came across an old favourite: 'Shosha' by Isaac Bashevis Singer. I'm not sure if Singer, a Nobel laureate, is still widely read, but in my teenage years I adored his books on Ashkenazi Judaism before World War II and on the post-war lives of Jewish survivors and émigrés. 'Shosha' is about the love between the budding writer Aaron Greidinger, Singer's alter ego, and his childlike sweetheart Shosha who doesn't survive the war.

Browsing through the book, I landed on the epilogue in which, after the war, Aaron and his friend Haiml wonder where all has gone: the years, the friends. They've slipped away. There must be a place, says Haiml:

There must be a place somewhere where everything is preserved, inscribed down to the smallest detail. Let us say that a fly has fallen into a spiderweb and the spider has sucked her dry. This is a fact of the universe and such a fact cannot be forgotten. If such a fact should be forgotten, it would create a blemish in the universe.

Suffering mustn't be forgotten is what Haiml says. That would be unacceptable, unthinkable, maybe unbearable.

For Singer this must have been a personal theme. He emigrated from Poland to the United States in 1935 and did not experience the war. The world he left behind – the world of rabbis and intellectuals, childhood sweethearts and lovers – was lost and the fate of relatives and friends who perished unknown. How can one write about their suffering when one hasn't been a witness? How can one even imagine it? "The writers will write," he wrote, "but they will get everything topsy-turvy."

The theme from the epilogue of 'Shosha' reminded me of another book that I recently read: 'Sonderbehandlung' ('Special treatment')

by Filip Müller, which was translated into Dutch in 2023. Unlike Singer, Müller was a Holocaust survivor and a valuable witness to the horrors of Auschwitz, where as a young man he was part of the *Sonderkommando* – the group of prisoners who were forced to undress, drag, and burn the corpses of the victims. The members of the *Sonderkommando* were *Geheimnistäger*: bearers of the secret of the extermination of the Jews. The Nazis, therefore, took great care to leave as few members of the *Kommando* alive as possible. In the 1970s, Müller forced himself to write down his testimony.

In Müller's account, endless rows of victims pass by. Some named, like the deeply pious Fischl who continued to put his trust in God; some nameless but detailed, like the woman who managed to grab a weapon in the room leading to the gas chamber and killed an SS officer. But many victims remain without names and details: 'the people', 'the children'.

The task that Singer and Müller set themselves, that suffering must not be forgotten but must be preserved down to the smallest detail, is by definition unfeasible. Straight after hearing Haiml's monologue, Aaron admits that he doesn't remember talking about this before. He is doomed to failure in remembering the things that matter. Right after the war Müller indicated that he was incapable of giving a detailed testimony: "It's too much and so horrific that most people wouldn't believe it." Remembering is difficult and, when successful, incredibly painful.

This is why Singer resorts to a metaphysical solution. There must be a place where all suffering, big and small, seen or unseen, is recorded and never forgotten. Where that place is, remains uncertain. But where people – writers, survivors, those left behind – fail, the responsibility falls on the universe itself. On God, one might say.

In the Holocaust literature, much has been written about the struggle with God. Müller describes the daily routine of his team-mate Fischl, who was the first person to get up in the morning, put on his prayer straps and pray. The *Shacharit* (morning prayer) that must have been: "Blessed are Thou, Lord our God and God of our Fathers, (...) great, mighty, and awe-inspiring God..." But there were also countless prisoners who had lost their faith in God. How could they trust a God who allowed all this to happen? "There is no God," Müller quotes a fellow prisoner, "and if there is, he is a fool and a dirty bastard."

Singer seems unable to accept this. He searches for a life after Auschwitz, a life in which there is room for God, in which God has a duty that God does not forsake. His epilogue is not about why all this happened, why God failed to intervene – it is about how all this can be remembered, preserved, described down to the smallest detail. It is not about the almighty God who did or did not act; it is about the all-knowing God who sees and hears everything.

When years ago I was hiking in the Sinai Desert, where at night the stars lined the sky like lace, the Bedouin told the following story. God has many names. One hundred, to be exact. We humans know only ninety-nine. These names describe God's attributes: the Merciful, for example, the Comforter, the Patient. Why does the camel smile? It knows God's one-hundredth name.

Perhaps Singer, who seems to me mild and wise and kind, like the camel knew the one-hundredth name of God. Maybe that name is 'The One Who Never Forgets'.

II.

What has always fascinated me is the connection between morality and cleanliness in both our language and mind. Innocents, like children, are depicted as pure and clean. They are unstained, which means as much as: they are blameless. The guilty are seen as dirty: guilt sticks to them.

Of course, many violent events really involve sticky substances: blood, tears, semen. Something stains the body that doesn't belong there. But once the wounds have been bandaged, the tears dried, the semen washed away, the feeling of being dirty can linger, both in the perpetrator and the victim. A famous example is Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth, who feverishly washes her hands after the murder of King Duncan. But victims of sexual violence too can endlessly try and wash away feelings of dirt and guilt after an act they could not prevent.

So when the epilogue of 'Shosha' speaks of a blemish, it can safely be assumed that a moral boundary has been crossed. "If such a fact should be forgotten, it would create a blemish in the universe." If suffering is forgotten, even that of a fly, the universe becomes a little dirtier. The universe is guilty. The same applies to people. Remembering each other's suffering is not simply a nice thing to do; it is a moral duty.

My patients feel the same way. I work with traumatised police officers who have been involved in life-and-death situations. They try to save a child from drowning or a driver from a burning car. Sometimes they succeed, sometimes they don't. Then they're troubled by endless self-reproach and a never-ending moral duty. One of my patients, a former policeman, described it as follows:

I can't seem to let go of those images; I force myself to remember them. It's almost a compulsive thing that says: you should never forget. I have to keep that pain and

those emotions inside, preserve them; they belong to that moment. You were the last to see those people alive; you were there; you should never forget that.

My patient has become a place, “a place somewhere where everything is preserved.”

What is this moral duty to remember others’ suffering – why do people feel it so strongly? According to the Moral Foundations Theory by American psychologist Jonathan Haidt, all our moral beliefs are based on five pillars: care, fairness, loyalty, authority, and sanctity. Regardless of time and place we all believe, to a greater or lesser extent, that it is right to care for each other, to share our resources fairly, to stay together, to lead or obey, and to respect each other’s lives and bodies. This especially applies to those who are close to us, of course: to members of our family, our group, our species. In times of war and conflict, the opposite is true for those outside our group: we want to harm them, dispossess them, exclude them, humiliate them, and defile them. They do not deserve our care and respect. This also is a moral belief that we try to keep in check with laws and rules.

The moral duty to remember the suffering of others is not on Haidt’s list. And yet it seems to undergird the five pillars. If you cannot keep another person and their needs in mind, how can you act morally? You turn into an egotist who ignores the needs of others, goes his own way, and uses and discards others at will. Or, at the very least, it makes you unreliable and unpredictable.

Psychologists call the ability to keep another person in mind *object constancy*. It is an ability that we’re not born with, but that we acquire through stable, predictable contact with attachment figures. As a baby and toddler, seeing that friendly, animated face in front of us at fixed moments teaches us to

expect that face, and ultimately we learn that it will reappear even when it is temporarily absent. The ability to keep another person in mind keeps our relationships stable.

The problem with my patient is: he is too capable of this, as it were. The fact that you can keep other people in mind doesn’t mean that you should do that all the time. It is actually quite healthy to forget about other people every now and then and just think about yourself. Part of my work, therefore, consists of exploring with the patient how these things may be balanced. There may be a place in your mind where you preserve what you have seen, but there must also be a place in your mind where it is all about you. You may *have* a place, so to speak, but you shouldn’t *be* a place.

Or maybe I should put it differently, thinking of Rutger Kopland. The famous Dutch poet Kopland was also a child psychiatrist, so apart from language, object constancy was his cup of tea.

Come now lie down my love in the garden,
the empty spaces in the high grass, I have
always wanted to be just that, an empty
place for someone, to stay.

You may *be* a place, but mostly for your loved ones. You keep it a bit exclusive. For all those whose suffering you have seen, you may *have* a place. But a limited place. Otherwise, you will be so busy as a former police officer; it all becomes so much to deal with.

III.

ARQ Centrum'45 celebrated its fiftieth anniversary in 2023. Some of our patients are really attached to the institution and have been coming there for a long time. Patients from what we call 'the first generation' – resistance fighters, camp survivors – are entitled to lifelong care without ever being discharged. On Fridays, they come to Rijnzichtweg in Oegstgeest with their taxis and walkers. Fridays are the only days when we serve cookies at the coffee machine in Oegstgeest.

A colleague who works with first-generation patients posted a message on the intranet.

Last Friday, a lady in the contact group brought all these books and donated them to the reading shelf in the waiting room at Rijnzichtweg. "So we may never forget," was her phrase. She herself experienced the war as a little girl in the former Dutch East Indies.

The accompanying photo showed a dozen books: about life in the Dutch East Indies; about the wounds the war left behind in victims and their descendants; about the suffering of women and children due to hiding, oppression, and slavery.

This post got me thinking. I have read so many eyewitness accounts, from writers like Anne Frank, Aharon Appelfeld, Marga Minco, Eli Wiesel, Etty Hillesum, Viktor Frankl – but I can't name a single comparable writer from the Dutch East Indies. While my father was born in Batavia (now Jakarta) and my great-aunt and her daughters were captives in a Japanese internment camp, I haven't read a single book about the war in the Dutch East Indies.

With all the emphasis on never forgetting, we sometimes forget that our knowledge of the past is limited and selective. Some stories are told and heard, written down and read. They determine our perception of reality. But some stories are better forgotten.

Not only by the public, who couldn't care less, but also by survivors themselves.

Perhaps this has to do with 'mattering', a wonderful social-psychological term I recently came across in the New York Times. Mattering is a coin with two sides: on the one hand, it is about contributing, adding value – on the other, about feeling that your contribution is valued by others, and that therefore so are you. Carrying weight is another way of thinking about it. This also requires a weight and a scale.

To ensure that your suffering is not forgotten, you need to feel that you matter, that your story deserves to be heard and taken seriously. And you need others who actually do that – hear it and take it seriously. This is not always the case. Some people find themselves lower in the pecking order and matter less both in their own and others' eyes. This makes them vulnerable to trauma. Trauma can further reduce a person's value and make it even more difficult and risky to share stories, which closes the loop.

Remembering my negligence, I went to the ARQ library and borrowed a book about the Japanese internment camps: '50 Years of Silence' by Jan Ruff-O'Herne. Ruff-O'Herne grew up in the former Dutch East Indies, and as a young adult was interned during the war. After a selection round, together with six other Dutch girls she ended up in a house where for three months she was abused as a 'comfort woman' – a term she opposes:

We were never 'comfort women'. Comfort means something warm and soft, safe and friendly. It means tenderness. We were war-rape victims, enslaved and conscripted by the Japanese Imperial Army.

Few experiences are as damaging to the feeling that one matters as sexual violence. Sexual abuse, where the body is used without regard for the boundaries, wishes or integrity of the victim, often leads to a profound sense of worthlessness. But outsiders too can devalue victims and label them as bad, guilty, or dirty. Contrary to the adage 'this must never be forgotten', Ruff-O'Herne spent 50 years living according to the motto 'nobody must know'. This was enforced by the Japanese, who silenced the girls on pain of death, but also by her own sense of shame.

Nobody can imagine what it means to have something within yourself so terrible that you would love to talk about it to other people, but you cannot, because you feel this terrible shame. Nobody must know, and you carry the burden all your life and you are always afraid that somehow, sometime, it is going to come out.

Sexual violence can happen to anyone, but is generally more common among women and children and those with a psychological, social, or physical vulnerability. They have less power and less protection so they are silenced more easily. Consequently, many victims of sexual violence end up in the proverbial closet. This is hard for the victims who have to bear their experiences alone, but it also leads to an incomplete picture of trauma, war, and violence.

Rape of Jewish women during World War II, for instance, is a relatively unexplored area of research. The assumption that rape occurred regularly is seen by some researchers as a blemish on the reputation of the survivors. For similar reasons, estimates of the number of women forced into prostitution in the Dutch East Indies range from 300 to 70,000. And it was only in 2008, after the wars in the Former Yugoslavia and Rwanda, that rape was officially recognised as a war crime by the United Nations Security Council.

And so, there are empty spaces on the reading shelf in Oegstgeest
and on my own bookshelf, with books that were never written
by victims who have been forgotten.

There must be a place somewhere where their memories are
preserved, down to the smallest detail.

Come now and stand my love on the shelf,
the empty spaces in the bookcase, I have
always wanted to be just that, an empty
place for someone, to stay.

IV.

I received an email from John, a former police officer whom I treated years ago for post-traumatic stress disorder. He wasn't well, so we arranged a phone call. On the phone he told me he was still having a lot of trouble with his memory. Burning the milk; climbing the stairs to fetch something and then forgetting what it was.

"I manage," he said. "I always think of that song by Daniël Lohues that you used to mention. *I've forgotten what I've forgotten*. Do you remember?"

"Uh yes...", I said hesitantly, while I frantically searched my memory. Such a big fan of the Dutch folk singer Lohues, but no recollection of that song. After hanging up, I immediately took to Google, the search engine that never forgets unless ordered to by a judge. Immediately the lyrics popped up on my screen: *I know that I've forgotten something, but I've forgotten what*.

It was funny that John emailed me, because I had recently thought of him. I had written a column for EMDR Magazine about an anecdote I had told John during his treatment. I considered asking John: "Do you remember that story I told you back then? I recently wrote a piece about it." But I was afraid he had forgotten the anecdote and would feel embarrassed.

John and I like to spare each other; we are gentle with one another. He shows me that he really does remember what I told him, even though his symptoms have returned. I gloss over what I do and do not remember from his therapy so as not to violate his memory. Although his treatment has ended, the bond between John and myself is preserved in those small memories of a lyric by Daniël Lohues and an anecdote during EMDR.

Forgetting and remembering – these things happen as automatically as breathing or looking. But nevertheless they are

actions, verbs, tasks that carry a certain weight. Remembering patients and their stories is an important task for a therapist. The patient gets a place in the therapist's mind, a little cabinet to store things: anecdotes, images, memories. That cabinet opens during therapy. "Last time you said..." the therapist says. Or: "That must be hard for you because in your past..."

With patients who have often been forgotten – as a child in a house full of war memories, as a refugee hidden away in a refugee centre – such joint remembering may be the therapist's most important task. Such remembering proves: I can distinguish you from other patients, I value you, and I make an effort for you. In other words: you matter. In the long run, patients will hopefully feel that they are unique and valuable and that others are reliable.

In busy times, I sometimes dream that I can't find that cabinet. Well into my adulthood, whenever I was under stress I would dream that I had to take a math exam without having followed any classes for a whole year. In recent years, I dream that I forgot about a patient after the intake interview. Apparently, that is my biggest nightmare, like a parent who makes the news because she accidentally left her child at a gas station along the German Autobahn – although I would never make the news by forgetting a patient.

To remember someone is to connect. To tame, is what it's called in 'The Little Prince' by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry. In the book, there is a fox who is skittish like my patients. He is afraid of people with guns. But because the little prince remembers him and comes to his den at the same time each day, he is tamed. The fox senses how unique he is to the little prince, one of a kind in the world. As they say goodbye, the fox cries. "You remain forever responsible for what you have tamed," he says to the

little prince – you remain forever responsible for those with whom you're connected. Maybe that is why I dream about forgetting my patients: because I cannot connect with them if I forget them, and because I am responsible for them once I've connected with them.

It's also true the other way around, of course. Once you've connected, it's hard to forget someone. That is actually what Daniël Lohues' song is about. In the first lines, he wonders what exactly it is that he's forgotten. An appointment, perhaps? Putting out the bin? Paying a fine or doing the shopping? He is like a patient with post-traumatic stress disorder; they can't remember those things either. But in the last line, the truth comes out.

One thing it can't be

I think about her all day long

Her I just can't forget

Although it might be time by now

Remembering forms the glue of our relationships, be it a romantic relationship between a singer and his beloved or a working relationship between a therapist and a patient. We remember people with whom we want to maintain a relationship; when the relationship is over, we start to forget. If we can, that is. Remembering each other is a way of cherishing each other. This we can do beyond a breakup, beyond the end of therapy, beyond death.

Humans are really good at this. It doesn't make sense to leave this task to the universe I think – there is so little cherishing involved in that. Unless we believe that the universe is love, of course, then perhaps it does.

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