The Long Shadow of Treblinka

Description

Treblinka

Two weeks ago I was invited to a small conference in north-eastern Poland, in Å•omÅ¼a, a town about 150 km north-east of Warsaw. A small group of linguists who study the connection between language, environment and nature invited me to speak about a holistic paradigm in science. I took advantage of the time and took two days off. I used one of them to go to Treblinka. This is the place in north-eastern Poland where one of the three large Nazi extermination camps was located, the one furthest east and north. Treblinka is only about 80 km south of Å•omÅ¼a. And so I went to Treblinka.

Treblinka is well hidden and poorly signposted. First you come to a railway station resp. the stationâ??s memorial.

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Image 1 â?? Treblinka Railway Station Memorial

You can see the stylised railway sleepers in the background of the image. They symbolise the track that once came through here. In fact, everything has disappeared. Levelled to the ground. Erased from the material memory of nature and removed from the field of vision of posterity. Thatâ??s what the Nazis thought. Many still think so today.

The Nazis began to remove everything that pointed to the camp as early as 1943/44. For on June 2nd 1943, almost exactly 78 years ago, a prisoner uprising began in which several hundred armed prisoners confronted about 50 SS henchmen and about 100 Ukrainian guard helpers. About 100 armed prisoners escaped; more than 600 were shot. These escaped prisoners were witnesses, and the Nazis seemed to worry about eyewitnesses: They did not want the horrors they were committing to become known to the world. So the camp was disbanded, the gas chambers were slighted and everything was inconspicuously littered with lupines. Today, where the labour camp and the Treblinka extermination camp were, there is a beautiful forest.

I wonâ??t forget the cuckoo that called loudly and persistently as I stood about 2.5 km behind the extermination camp site at the execution site of the labour camp and looked at the rows of graves.

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Figure 2 â?? Cemetery at the Execution Site of the Treblinka Labour Camp

Initially, the forced labourers who died were buried there, later also those arbitrarily executed. In contrast to the cemeteries of the death camp, the identity of many of those buried here is apparently known. The crosses bear names, dates of birth and death. Most of those who died here were 20 or 30 years old, young resistance fighters, members of the Polish army, or those who had fallen foul of the law or had not paid their taxes and were therefore sent to the labour camp. About 2,000 forced labourers were interned there at any one time, a total of about 20,000 over the entire period of the campâ??s operation. Half of them died of hunger, disease and ill-treatment or were shot for some reason.

I learned from the historical documentation at the site that I might even find my grandfatherâ??s grave there. My father did not know his father; his parents were not married. He only knew that he was a Polish hotel operator who was active in the Polish resistance and was put to death by the Gestapo. Shortly before his own death, my father started researching him, and I had actually intended to continue this research for a long time. Thatâ??s what Iâ??m going to do now; maybe my grandfatherâ??s grave is also among the many hundreds of crosses, maybe not. Either way, Iâ??ll come with a rose and lay it down.

The Treblinka labour camp was built by the Nazis as early as 1941 on the site where a Polish company had a gravel pit. The existing infrastructure â?? railway station, tracks â?? was seen by Odilo Globocnik, the SS chief of the General Government for the Occupied Polish Region [1], who was in charge of implementing the plan commissioned by Reinhart Heydrich to exterminate the Jews, as a good prerequisite for the construction of an extermination camp. It was then built about 2.5 km apart from the labour camp, sometime in 1942, after the Wannsee Conference on 20 January, at which the â??Final Solution to the Jewish Questionâ?•, i.e. the

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extermination of the European Jews, was decided.

Both camps had to be reconstructed by archaeologists using modern equipment â?? aerial photography, earth-penetrating radar and other methods â?? because everything had disappeared and become overgrown. The documentation in the museum is impressive. There are also eyewitness accounts of some of those who escaped and gave documentation in the form of drawings and personal accounts to the archivists of the Warsaw Ghetto. This so-called â??Ringelblum archiveâ?• was found in a coffer after the war and is considered a valuable contemporary historical archive document. Therefore, despite the cover-up strategy of the SS, we are relatively well-informed about the functioning of the camp. We know the number of trains arriving, approximately. Their length, approximately. And from that we can estimate how many people died here in the 11 months or so that the camp was in operation: between 800,000 and 900,000, plus the 10,000 or so who died in the labour camp. Most came from Poland, from the Warsaw and other ghettos, but also from Greece, Bulgaria, Germany, Austria, Hungary, Ukraine and other countries. While the mass graves of Jewish people remained untouched during the archaeological investigation, in accordance with Jewish customs, and were only located with radar, the mass graves of the labour camp were investigated archaeologically. They were found, with a great many human remains, here a shoe sole, there a bone, a tin spoon.

You can walk along the â??Droga czarnaâ?•, the â??black roadâ?•, the connecting road built by prisoners between the Treblinka railway station and the labour camp. It used to be paved with gravestones from Jewish cemeteries, a deliberate sacrilege. Today they are cobblestones, many probably also from that time.

It is hard but necessary to imagine: 900,000 people were murdered here, in 11 months, thatâ??s just under 3,000 per day and about 800 people per train, all systematically exterminated there. They were driven off the trains. The young people who were able to work were separated and taken to the labour camp, the rest were separated into men and women and herded into two different â??changing hallsâ?•. From there they went via an alley, protected from view by hedges, to the extermination chamber, into which they were crammed. Naked, close together, about 400 at a time. The Ukrainian guards switched on the diesel. The exhaust fumes were introduced into the chamber and the people died in agony. In the back, they were first thrown into large pits dug by excavators. Later, after Himmler had visited the camp once in early 1943, they experimented with large open-air incinerators, grates made from railway tracks. This apparently succeeded badly. The charred remains were also mixed with sand and buried in mass graves. At the memorial, an attempt is made to symbolize the burning site with a pit of its own, into which molten slags of glass and other materials were placed. They represent the charred bodies (Fig. 3)

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Image 3 â?? Treblinka Death Camp Memorial â?? Incinerator Site

Today, on the spot where archaeologists believe the gas chamber has been located, stands a large memorial, around it, in a three-quarter circle, stelae as a stylized Jewish cemetery.

I did not succeed in capturing the monstrosity in the picture. Perhaps that is a good thing. Perhaps a memorial of this scale can only fully exist in imagination. I tried to estimate the number of stelae. Maybe itâ??s 10,000, maybe a little more. But for every 800,000 to 900,000 deaths, you would probably have had to clear several hectares of forest to put all the stelae there.

In the heat of midday, the memorial cast a sharp, almost painful shadow (Fig. 5). I sat down in the middle of the field of stelae, in the shade of a willow, and meditated for half an hour.

Shadows of the past

The shadow of the past reaches to today. The Nazis thought they could wipe out a spiritual tradition by destroying the material bearers of that tradition, killing the bodies, desecrating the cultural goods, burning the Torah scrolls. They were totally identified with a materialistic view in their blood-and-soil delusion. National Socialism was probably the first materialistic â??religionâ?• on this earth and in the history of mankind: fixated on genetics, on externals, on power, area, numbers, influence. Its colour was the colour of poop. Their symbol was a perverted swastika â?? originally an ancient Asian symbol of the sun, of luck and happiness. Himmler tried to establish in the SS a sinister equivalent of the medieval orders. The â??FÃ¼hrerâ?• was a narcissistic hobgoblin who appointed himself high priest of a materialistic and absurd religion and who â?? we should never forget that â??

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came to power with a majority of electoral votes. When Hitler finally saw his supposed mission fail in the artillery fire of the Red Army and took his own life, many thought the spook was over.

Figure 4 â?? The Monument at the Treblinka Death Camp (referring to the gas chamber, and the symbolic stelae cemetery marking the mass graves)

It isnâ??t over. The â??never againâ?•, which is also admonished on the Stelae Cemetery at Treblinka (Fig. 5), is a common wish, but I am not so sure that we have sufficiently agreed on what is needed so that there can â??never againâ?• be such monstrosities.

One of the shadows of Treblinka is the colossal delusion of a materialist pseudo-religion: that the material foundations of whatever were the only things that mattered. The Nazis thought that if they eliminated the physical domain, everything immaterial would be done with it: that Jewish culture, Jewish religion, Jewish tradition, Jewish thought, all of which they hated so much, would be eradicated. As we know today, they did not succeed, despite all the atrocities. Thank God. In many areas of Central Europe, Jewish life has indeed all but disappeared; of the approximately 20% strong Jewish population in Poland that lived there before the war, hardly anyone is left. At least there is now the state of Israel.

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Figure 5 â?? The Memorial at Treblinka Extermination Camp

Ideational-spiritual parallels

To be very clear here: our political system is as far removed from the National Socialist regime as Attic democracy was from the tyranny of ancient autocrats, there is no doubt about that. So when I draw parallels between our culture/thinking and National Socialism, it is not at all political, but ideational-spiritual. What I mean to say is that our culture has not managed to free itself from the fixation on the material substrate of â?¦ anything, be it the substrate of disease, the substrate of consciousness, the substrate of happiness, the substrate ofâ?¦

The materialist pseudo-religion of postmodernism is one of the many long shadows of Treblinka. We believe that if we fight and destroy a pathogen, the disease will be gone. We believe that if we generate enough gross national product, poverty will be eradicated. We believe that if the brain dies and the human being is dead, the human being is completely gone. We also think the other way round: we believe that if we can show off enough possessions, a fast car, fine holiday destinations, a sailing yacht, then we are somebody. We think that when we will have understood the functioning of the brain, we know the human mind and the human soul.

As long as the sun shines, everything casts shadows. The shadow of Treblinka will grow longer and longer, and will continue to do so until we return to the spiritual roots not only of ourselves but of the world. How to do that, I do not know exactly. For the shadows of Treblinka and Auschwitz have also darkened religion and drawn the light of God into the abyss. For good reason RÃ¼diger SÃ¼nner speaks of the â??Black Sunâ?• in connection with the dark aspects of National Socialist pseudo-spirituality [2]. We will have to reinvent everything. Ourselves. A more humane society. A more humane medicine. And a spiritualized religion. One that is fed by inner

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experience, not by dictates and arid structures. Maybe it takes until our grandchildren and great-grandchildren inherit the earth to see the results manifest, that is if we still exist as human beings then. The way to get there, leaving the shadows enlightened, is relatively clear to me. I have described it several times [3] and will point it out again and again: We need a culture of consciousness. This is ultimately a simple, faithfully, steadily, daily repeated practice of mindfulness so that our inner being becomes palpable and audible to ourselves. Not everyone may need to practise this, but the more do it the better.

In the National Socialist ideology, the majority of an entire people projected the longing for contact with this inner being of theirs onto a leader, an outwardly visible and tangible supposed saviour. We know the consequences. Salvation rarely comes from outside. It almost always comes from within. And very often what is on the outside is what is on the inside. Carl Gustav Jung called this â??synchronicityâ?•. [4]

Synchronicity

As I was walking back from the labour camp past the death camp to the car park, a huge thunderstorm started. It started with big fat sporadic drops. The dry sand swallowed them greedily. I quickly walked back to the car, which was parked just in front of the car parkâ??s exit. The few other visitors had already left. As I slammed the door to the car, so much water started to pour down, that I would have been completely soaked within a second if I had still been outside. I was still sitting in the car, pondering whether I should wait for the thunderstorm to pass and then go for another little hike, when less than 20 metres in front of me a rather large birch tree, perhaps 15 metres high, fell like a barrier across the entrance to the museum. I quickly made my decision and drove away, out onto the road where the trees were far enough. After 20 kilometres I was outside the thunderstorm and drove along the leisurely flowing, mighty Bug River, on whose banks also lies Treblinka.

We must escape the shadow of Treblinka. Soon, before it is too late.

Sources and literature

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