

Prof. Gert Weisskirchen spricht zum Holocaust- Gedenktag vor dem Europaparlament

Reden/Artikel

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Auf Einladung des Präsidenten des Europaparlamentes, Prof. Hans- Gert Pöttering, des European Jewish Community Center und der Europäischen Koalition für Israel, sprach Prof. Gert Weisskirchen zum vergangenen und gegenwärtigen Antisemitismus.

Europaweit seien Antisemitische Vorkommnisse, wie ein Handgranatenattentat auf eine Pariser Synagoge, ein Bombenwurf auf einen jüdischen Friedhof in Malmö oder der Angriff auf einen Wachmann vor der Berliner Synagoge, ein erschreckendes Zeichen von Intoleranz und Aggression.

Der Kampf gegen kultur- und menschenverachtenden Antisemitismus ist daher auch 2009 geboten und müsse immer wieder neu aufgenommen und verstärkt werden.

In seinem Vortrag ging Gert Weisskirchen der Frage auf den Grund, welche Form Toleranz in Gesellschaften einnehmen muss, in denen unterschiedlich schnelle Modernisierungsprozesse ablaufen? Im Kern gehe es darum, Toleranz - das Gegenmittel gegen antisemitische Intoleranz - als Ergebnis geteilten Lernens in jedem europäischen Staat gesellschaftlich zu erarbeiten.

Hier der Originaltext der Rede (geschriebene Version):

Speech at the European Parliament, Brussels 27.01.2009
Gert Weisskirchen

In my understanding, the fight against Antisemitism needs a consolidated foundation consisting of normative principles. One of these is the enduring commitment of the political class to fight against any form of Antisemitism. The laying ground for this conviction is the responsibility to protect Jewish communities. They should live their life autonomously. At the same time historians are creating a model of narrating the Holocaust, not closing up a horrifying past, but to create for the generations to come the sensitivity for a common future in peace.

How can we meet the problems when we face the consequences emerging out of the technology revolution of our time? I feel growing fears coming. Whenever the aim has been to rob people of their intellectual identity and to cut off their respective roots at the roots linking them to their sources - there are nowadays more technical possibilities than ever agents to try this. If a person is robbed of the medium of memory, as well as that of utopia, he becomes as drifting sand that can be blown in any direction. The more the flood of the media increases in which one event is pushed aside by the next and surrendered to a quickening process of forgetting, the more we become aware that we need a mainstay so that in the ever faster current of forgetting that sweeps everything along with it, we can preserve what is important to us, and thus remain who it is that we want to be. One of the things what is badly needed is to formulate an integrated historiography of common and deep memory. With his outstanding work Saul Friedländer is one of the growing number of historians working on this new model of understanding the past. He got the motivation of Hitler's messianic Obsession with exterminating all things Jewish.

Saul Friedländer speaks of an "Erlösungsantisemitismus" a "redemptive Antisemitism". The persecution lasted almost 12 years. The extermination campaign lasted 3 years. That is a short span in the long history of Antisemitism and in the history of civilization. But from an existential viewpoint the dictatorship of Nazi-Germany annihilation machine stripped the world of its naivete and destroyed the "sense of basic trust" in the moral power of civilization. "Out of the ashes of the death camps", wrote Yosef Yerushalmi in 1995, "a grotesque new tree of realization has grown. ... All of us have tasted its bitter fruit and know what our predecessors did not know. If this is possible, anything is possible."

Saul Friedländer documents the fact, that Himmler himself gave the order to incinerate, not bury in mass graves, those who had been gassed. "Moreover", Rudolf Höss reported, "the ashes should be disposed of in such a way that absolutely no conclusions could be drawn in future about the number of people incinerated."

Saul Friedländer has given a place in memory and a name of their own (yad va shem) to those who, through Himmler's command, were meant to be erased from the earth without a trace. Simon Dubnow, an 81-year-old historian of Judaism, was among the last inhabitants of Riga's ghetto as they were being transported to their execution. According to survivor testimony, Dubnow called to his younger compatriots: "People, do not forget. Talk about this, people. Record it all." Moments later, he was shot in the back of his head by a Latvian auxiliary policeman.

The images of memories are becoming fewer. However, these few images are entering into the memory of more and more people, and - paradoxically - even the politically motivated denial of the Shoah serves to further publicize the historical events.

Saul Friedländer refers to a picture vividly evoked Jean-Francois Lyotard to describe the relationship between memory and history: "A seismic shock took place that was so strong it destroyed all instruments of measurement. As a result, scholars ... were unable to say much about the event, but the memory of the "common people" insisted that something unusual had happened. When all is said and done, it is the memory that historical research will produce." Lyotard's metaphor aptly describes what appears to have happened with the historiography of the Holocaust over several decades: its long-accepted Standards have been ruptured by memory. Whereas Ereignisgeschichte, or the history of events, seeks to describe what has happened, Gedächtnisgeschichte, or the history of memory, describes the remembered past.

Historical images are fixed now, the sites in one's recollection are set now, and the ratios of recollection to oblivion are set to each other now. A rough juxtaposition of what has happened to what has happened to what is remembered cannot solve the Problem of the modern. In today's world, we think we have solved the problem of memory and recollection by means of electronic storage media. But computer-aided oblivion has an even more lasting effect than all previously known agents of oblivion. Theodor W. Adorno spoke "about the nightmare of a humanity without memory."

In this sense, Saul Friedländer's work does not tell the story of yesterday, but leads instead into the core of our present. The social and economic mechanisms of our current existence, the acceleration of experience and its associated hostility towards memory, and the rule of the market which itself has no memory - all of these call for cultural supplementation. Once memory fails to lead to discourse, we become nothing more than our "own experiment", according to Johann Baptist Metz. Both historical perspectives (Ereignis- and Gedächtnisgeschichte) are dependent upon each other. But only cultural memory gives contour and duration to the event. Saul Friedländer's model of history prevents the formal rules of historical writing from suffocating individual voices. Instead, he intersperses memory and recollection into necessarily

alienating historical account so as to make visible the particular effects laws, ordinances and harassment have on individuals. This addresses the historiographical need to convey and explain facts but also to provide the context of an event that appears to have been the result of chaotic planning, but was in reality, planned in minute detail and "perfect" in its technical precision, incremental debasement of the victims and in the delivery Propaganda legitimizing each step.

In this regard read Saul Friedländer's section on the so-called "improvements", regarding the annihilation machine of Auschwitz in comparison to that of Treblinka.

Adolf Eichmann, for example expressed how far things had gone in Germany when, before the court in Jerusalem he said: „If this thing (the physical annihilation of European Jewry) had to be done, then it was better to have peace and order and to have everything work out." Saul Friedländer here succeeded in bringing together both the tyrannical bureaucratic order and the despair of those were subjected to it. At the same time, he has proven that silence plays an active role in history and that the act of public violence is predicated upon the silence of the masses of bystanders emerging from the dark of the past.

Saul Friedländer has provided an abundance of evidence for the phenomenon of the "spell" of public violence, which can only be understood in the triad of perpetrators, victims and bystanders. "Why are you doing this to us?", the wife of the butcher Marks implored of her neighbors, who stood and watched in silence, during the pogrom in Wittlich in November 1938. "What did we ever do to you?" It is in this way that the individual voice suddenly begins to speak in the course of historical narration. Friedländer himself has written an intellectually thorough and epic account of the persecution and the annihilation of Europe's Jews without "eliding or tempering" the sense of bewilderment that recollection demands in the face of such an event. A younger generation of historians began to abandon the lair of denial and obfuscation, as Aleida Assmann observed, that had persisted until

1985 for the West of Germany and until 1995 for unified Germany, which constituted a turning point in Erinnerungsgeschichte, the history of memory. This generation thus began "to engage with the trauma of collective guilt" by internalizing the phrase "It is our fault" and making it "part of the political self-determination" of Germany.

This self-understanding of more and more historians of Germany and the overwhelming majority of the Members of the German Bundestag are reflections of how Saul Friedländer describes the sense of his tremendous work: "Sixty years have elapsed since these voices and countless similar ones were heard. And yet, notwithstanding the passage of time, they touch us with an unusual strength and immediacy that resonate far beyond the borders of the Jewish Community and have moved vast Segments and successive generations of Western society.

In listening to these cries we are not facing some ritualized memory, nor are we being manipulated by commercial renditions of the events. Rather, these individual voices shake us due to the naive unawareness of the victims regarding their fate while many around them knew the outcome and, at times were involved in its implementation. Mainly however, the voices of those facing extermination reach us to this very day precisely because of their utter helplessness, their innocence and the solitude of their despair. The voices reach us beyond all reasoning, as they tear apart and put in question ever anew the belief in the existence of a human solidarity."

What form should tolerance assume in societies that are modernizing at varying speeds? Is it not possible for the rapid acceleration or abrupt braking of social change to throw people off track, disorient them or fill

them with fear? How can tolerance be maintained where trust has been shattered?

Is it not at such moments that the limits restraining the use of force break down? Previously, Citizens may have taken reasonable decisions mandating their State representatives to deploy force, though only subject to public scrutiny and solely using appropriate resources that could be accounted for. But once democracy has revealed how fragile it is, how can it regain the assent of civil society?

It is in conflicts with such profound implications that the virtue of tolerance particularly shows its real strength. Tolerance is a product of shared learning. This product multiplies its value when people from different backgrounds encounter each other with open minds and are curious to discover their differences. This sets off a process that enriches the individual's personal identity. Tensions grow between shared contextual and fundamental interests and diverse ethical and political pluralisms. These conflicts are perceived individually, managed at the social level and have an impact on the consciousness of the individuals involved in the learning process.

What concept of tolerance is best able to cope with today's conflicts? On its own, the permission majorities once granted certain minorities to maintain their separate cultures may have been adequate for the conflicts of the pre-modern period. Authoritarian Systems were dominated by hierarchical power relations that were sufficient to reproduce themselves. Modernity demanded mutual respect, which the members of a society have a reciprocal duty to show each other. Under democracy, the law-bound nation State has a legitimate monopoly on the use of force.

The modernity, in which we are now living, is able to compensate for the processes of decentring and the erosion of power. Action by civil society is becoming more urgent if we are to keep the limits on the use of force in place. A new division of labour is emerging between the State and the Citizen. The modular components of which society is constructed are becoming more reflexive. With the present modernity, the cognitive and emotional capabilities of society's Citizens are growing. They are its producers and, at the same time, its product. Simultaneously, the societies of the modernity are clearly characterized by increasing levels of internal complexity. More and more, they are attracting people from all over the world who migrate to them, increase their prosperity and enrich their cultures.

Tolerance can only survive in the long term if it also takes account of these changes. The second modernity relies on the mutual esteem of people who do not see a dialogue between culturally diverse ways of life as a threat to their own identities. Each individual belongs to various groups at the same time. Many paths lead to the Sites where identity is constructed. The core of freedom is the individual human being deciding for themselves which different priorities to select as they search for the building blocks of their own identity.

People's search for a self-determined identity is likely to be all the more successful the wider the range of the opportunities open to them to integrate into a particular society. Discussing this question, Amartya Sen writes in the UNDP Human Development Report 2004: "The inclusiveness of a society will depend greatly on bringing clarity to the role of choice in identity and to the need to [place] 'reason before identity'."

All Citizens in a democratic society must be able to take part in debates about its condition and its future. This right must also be guaranteed to those who have migrated to that society. This is essential because citizenship rights cannot be linked to ethnic criteria. It is necessary to

secure inclusiveness in order to create structures of power that give everyone the opportunity to assert their rights. This will create a climate that opens up social discourse, making it possible for different models of the future to be recognized as having their own value. If it does not prove possible to open up a society, if it even demands of minorities that they simply accept conditions as unchangeable, that society will become repressive. Repressive tolerance calls on minorities to tolerate injustice. This makes democracy hard, inflexible and therefore more fragile.

Democratic states in the modernity can cope better with their growing internal conflicts because their Citizens possess a greater wealth of personal competences, which they have acquired in open learning processes. These competences develop when people are willing to engage with the multiplicity of cultural liberties. However, Integration does not mean these different models of the future just standing together without connecting. They must learn to comprehend one another. Each should learn to appreciate the values the others represent. Might not, as John Locke feared, a tolerance that goes too far destroy the normative principles of society, especially if "unbelievers" were to call them into question? John Rawls has given the following answer to this apparently irreconcilable conflict: "The political conceptions are seen as both liberal and self-standing and not as comprehensive, whereas the religious doctrines may be comprehensive but not liberal." Fundamentalism in any form, whether religious or political, is intolerant and cannot demand to be treated with tolerance.

A democratic society needs normative principles. However, these should not consist exclusively of the values of just one group. If this were the case, society could not be either just or inclusive. In the modernity, political integration requires agreement that society is based on a set of moral convictions, provided that these moral convictions can be shared. If not, the results will be exclusion and disintegration.

As long as it remains committed to liberty and embedded in the idea of justice, tolerance will keep watch to ensure that no truth, and no religion, forces people to submit to Systems that are not prepared to justify themselves in a reciprocal fashion.

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