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## What is ours to contend with

*Ce qu'il nous revient d'affronter*

*Onze uitdaging voor de toekomst*

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# WHAT IS OURS TO CONTEND WITH

→ Philippe Mesnard,  
hoofd van de redactie

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e are entering the commemorative calendar celebrating the 70 years of the end of the Second World War and the so-called “liberation” of Auschwitz. I have always been struck by the ease with which inadequate or ill-chosen terms are employed regarding such serious questions, passing as elementary truths. Indeed, even if Soviet soldiers represented liberators in the eyes of the deportees, we know that the camp had been abandoned by the SS before they arrived. I do not wish to once again pick up the refrain that the camps were never a strategic objective, but rather to examine how such words are employed, which are evidently used without any critical distance. When one word is excessively repeated from mouth to mouth, this should serve as a warning to immediately shift our attention from its referential value to that which its repetitive nature may opacify. Yet, it is generally the contrary. The more we hear the word, the more we repeat it until it constructs an entire doxa. This is the case for the expression the “disappearing of the witnesses”. Let’s take a closer look.

The expression owes its semantic power to the theological theme of the last witnesses, but not only. **FIFTEEN YEARS AGO, THERE WAS ALREADY TALK OF THE DISAPPEARING OF THE WITNESSES**, and I thought that it was quite unfortunate to inform these people about what they already knew, what everyone knows: the finiteness of life. And if, for

some, life is prolonged by “the dense grass of fecund works” (Proust), this continuation does not bear any incidence on the biological length of our ordinary existences. **WHY SHOULD ONE PERSIST, AT THE RISK OF HURTING THEM**, in harping on about this observation, a fortiori, to individuals who lived an experience loaded with violence and death, and who have come to represent it to the eyes of the world? There is admittedly fear behind all of this, but not only. Such fear did not arise with other events, 1914-1918 soldiers for example, nor was it turned into such a commonplace and adopted unanimously.

The great recording campaigns of the 1990s and years 2000 tried however to anticipate the absence. Initiated by the Fortunoff project at Yale, then spread worldwide by the Spielberg Foundation, the recordings enabled collecting multiple stories of the experience of Nazi terror by the people who today are leaving us, as we are told. But the accumulation of tens of thousands of hours, currently being filed away, and the promise of a digital eternity as it were, do not solve the question of the *disappearing of the witnesses*.

It does not temper the obsessive resurgence of this commonplace. I tell myself that the expression may point to the disarray of not having found a perennial model for the transmission of a collective experience, the radicalism and diversity of the violence having

lastingly exceeded the measures admitted by the time when they were perpetrated, and still today exceed our current time. Contiguous to the “disappearing of the witnesses,” **THIS DISARRAY IS MOST LIKELY COMPENSATED BY THE PEDAGOGICAL ENTHUSIASM TO REACH OUT TO YOUNG AUDIENCES,** in secondary school, sometimes even in elementary school, in order to teach this historical period. But again, as much as these initiatives are certainly necessary, we also have the impression that the boat continues to take water. Anti-Semitism, indeed, is not decreasing. It now pushes forward yet masked in different methods, and extremist parties have recorded a surprising progression in Europe, from its heart (Hungary) all the way to its Western and Eastern edges.

I recall that in his final book, *The Drowned and the Saved* (1985), and more precisely in the chapter about the “grey zone”, Primo Levi questioned the testimonial models of transmission. He reproached as much the deportees – himself in the first place –, as the youth for having mutually settled on stereotyped versions, thus not only limiting the understanding of the events, but also losing their relevance in today’s world, merely becoming “history”. After having spent twenty years testifying in schools, he acknowledged not the disappearing of the witnesses (on 11 April 1987 he who would throw himself from the third floor to the

bottom of the stairs in his apartment block), but the failure of transmission. This is where the real problem of our *time* lays. It is not necessarily about finding the answers, but finding the right *questions* which concern us – those “great ethical questions” that Imre Kertész referred to.

In his conference “The Holocaust as culture” (1992), Imre Kertész prolonged in his own way Primo Levi’s reflection. **IT IS NOT WITH “CONDOLENCES”, HE SAYS, NOR WITH “REGRET” THAT THE GENOCIDE OF THE JEWS SHALL ACQUIRE A PLACE WITHIN CULTURE** all the while escaping a fetichization, sacralization and reduction from an explicative discourse. For such a place to become an “indispensable” part of our consciousness, he goes on, it must be founded on a “value judgement” which cannot be restricted to a *lesson of morality*. Kertész, whose ideas have become universal since 1989, would surely agree that we carry on his work by stating that any investigation into the foundations of our “ideal” world, which we so resolutely want to establish on human rights, should reckon with Auschwitz and critically review the models that we have become too comfortably accustomed to. While the witnesses are truly disappearing, this is where lies the problem which is ours to contend with, 70 years after the “liberation” of Auschwitz. ■

Translation: Sarah Voke

**Errata** In nummer 118 verscheen het artikel ‘It happened seventy years ago, in Hungary’ van Szabolcs Szita (136-144). Het werd vertaald uit het Hongaars door Robert Istvan Bodi en gereviseerd door Janos Frühling en Anneleen Spiessens. – Het dossier ‘In naam van de slachtoffers’ (74-135) en de Nederlandstalige teksten uit de Kroniek werden uit het Frans vertaald door Anneleen Spiessens.