

Article on history and memory

## **But Just Remember This**

**Richard Cohen**

I was a competitor at the Munich Olympic Games in 1972 when the Palestinian terrorist group Black September killed eleven Israelis hostages, along with a German police officer sent to rescue them. At first the Games continued, but mounting pressure on the International Olympic Committee forced a suspension. During the hiatus, I organized a group of teammates to visit Dachau concentration camp, set some fifteen kilometers north-west of the city: it seemed a fitting way of marking out the time.

A German soldier drove us there—Herman, a short, slightly-built twenty-year-old doing his national service before returning to work as a reporter for a left-wing magazine. He was well-versed in the history of the place, and during our walk round the camp told us that of the 160,000 inmates—Jews, but also Communists, trade unionists, judges, lawyers, doctors, schoolteachers, army officers, Republican soldiers from the Spanish Civil War, Jehovah's Witnesses, Freemasons, spiritualists, gypsies, homosexuals, vagrants, thieves and murderers—some 2,720 had been clergymen. After the war, four religious memorials to different faiths were erected, and we visited one, where, Herman explained, the current caretaker was one of the very priests who had been interned at Dachau.

Almost on cue, a green-baize door at one side of the chapel opened, and a slightly overweight cleric, probably in his late fifties, walked towards us and introduced himself as the priest in charge. In lightly accented English, he told us of his imprisonment, his fight for survival, and what life had been like in the wake of liberation. He went on to describe the national elections that had taken place in April 1946, and how in the Eastern territories the Communists had won, mainly

due to the strong-arm practices of the Soviet Army. At this point, Hermann looked uncomfortable, and raised a question about how much support there had been for the Communists. That was when the transformation happened: the priest took a step towards Herman, and began shouting, “Nein! Nein! Nein! Nein!” I thought he was going to hit him. Then the moment passed, the avuncular tones returned, and the ex-prisoner quickly excused himself and hastened back the way he had come, shutting the green-baize door behind him.

What had just happened? I am no expert on the 1946 elections in what became East Germany under the combined rule of the Communist Party and the Social Democrats, but Herman’s question seemed reasonable enough. Then I thought back to the priest’s history: what had it taken him to survive, as he’d told us, for nearly three years in such a hellhole, where 324 of his fellow clerics had died after being exposed to malaria during Nazi medical experiments. There was typhoid to contend with too, let alone the inhumane behavior of the guards. His strength of mind and body must have been extraordinary, and extraordinarily tested. And then he decided to return to Dachau, the site of all his torments. He must have created one reality to hang onto, one that continued through the immediate postwar events. It was too painful to have it questioned: it had to be all of a piece.

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So I reasoned. In recent days, I have been reading the last book that Oliver Sacks wrote, a collection of essays titled *The River of Consciousness*, which contains a chapter on Freud’s early work as a neurologist. Freud was prescient in his understanding of memory as a “transforming, reorganizing process”—essentially a creative process, in which memories are perpetually revised and re-categorized to shape identity and support a sense of continuity as an individual. Writing in 1896 to his close friend and collaborator Wilhelm Fleiss, Freud uses the

word *Nachträglichkeit* — “re-transcription” — to describe the brain’s action of calling up a memory and revising it in response to fresh circumstances. As this can happen many times in a life, a person’s memory might be described as having a geological history, with different strata going back through time, “representing the psychic achievement of successive epochs of life.” Our psychological health depends on that ability constantly to revise and refashion memory to allow for growth and change, and the absence of this process — the stagnation of a memory, the brain’s treatment of it as something fixed — leads to pathology.

That is but one aspect. The index for Paul Ricoeur’s seminal study, *Memory, History and Forgetting* [Chicago University Press, 2004] has no less than 79 individual entries under “memory,” from Plato’s “present representation of an absent thing” to blocked memory, manipulated memory, obligated memory, personal memory, collective memory, archived memory, unhappy memory, to the dialectic of memory and history.

We are still discovering how complex memory is, how much our sense of the past is an imaginative reconstruction. Eyewitnesses or their equivalent, for instance, can be entirely unreliable. On 14 July 1789, Louis XIV’s game-book entry reads, simply: “Rien” — the very day the storming of the Bastille took place. Dean Acheson, when writing his memoirs, reportedly called a friend to corroborate his own recollection of an important meeting. The friend said his description was accurate except for one thing: Acheson hadn’t been present. Of course, it is the job of the historian to separate history from story. Gerald Wellesley, the seventh Duke of Wellington (1885-1972), was an attaché in St. Petersburg in 1912, attending the imperial military maneuvers, when amid great excitement he was brought to a nearby village where an unimaginably old Frenchman claimed that when a small child he saw Napoléon. “He was a very tall man, your honor, with a long yellow beard.” Evidently, to this sage any invading

emperor should be gigantic and Viking-like, and that thinking led to a convinced memory. The director of the Yad Vashem memorial to the Holocaust in Israel has said that most of the oral histories collected there were unreliable, however honestly contributed. As the historian David Walsh writes, “When the denial of reality becomes socially pervasive it may indeed be difficult to hold out against its preponderant weight.”

From Dean Acheson back to Oliver Sacks. Following his first volume of autobiography, *Uncle Tungsten*, Sacks too came to realize that his memories were not as reliable as he'd thought: after describing in detail the day a thermite bomb fell close to his family's house in the winter of 1940-41, he was told by his brother that he had not in fact been present, having been sent away to the relative safety of boarding school. More than this, though: as Sacks writes, “There is, it seems, no mechanism in the mind or the brain for ensuring the truth.... We have no direct access to historical truth ... no way by which the events of the world can be directly transmitted or recorded in our brains; they are experienced and constructed in a highly subjective way.... Our only truth is narrative truth, the stories we tell each other and ourselves — the stories we continually re-categorize and refine.”

Writing about the past is never a neutral act. In his authoritative study *The Creation of History in Ancient Israel*, Marc Zvi Brettler quotes the words of the theologian Ben Halpern: “Memory and history, as constructions of the past, are often more clearly adjusted to what really serves the present than to what may ‘really’ have happened and cannot in fact be altered.” Brettler then comments: “Texts are typically written or reshaped to foster or to overthrow particular perspectives or ideologies.” He goes on: “This tendency is especially acute in civilizations or subcultures where historical texts are of fundamental importance,

such as ancient Israel or the royal court in Assyria.” [London: Routledge, 2002, p. 137] He might have added that in oral cultures the same process is at work.

While researching my current book, *The History of Historians*, I looked at pre-Islamic Arab attitudes to recording the past, I learned that people *spoke* about the past; they did not write about it. Families, clans, tribes and confederations of tribes were held together by kinship, and written descriptions were not useful to them. With oral communication, content could be adapted to the changing requirements: those favored were integrated into a shared past (“we migrated together,” “we fought together”), while those out of favor were excluded. A tribe’s genealogy would thus change over time. Oral history could be as flexible as a society wanted it to be; the past was plastic.

For both pre- and post-Islamic societies oral history played a more vital role; what was transmitted orally was more reliable and more useful socially, allowing ideas to change in real time, the way they do in the mind during oral exchange. And as for the Islamic world, a Muslim proverb says it all: “Islam cancels all that was before it.”

Whereas written history *can* be made to conform to the imperatives of the present, oral history *always* does. It is more a barometer of social change, over how people come to terms with the present. The Ancient Greeks may have valued more what was committed to memory and scorned the written word, but for them it was also intellectual laziness to rely on what was written down—as Socrates had it, once people recorded an event on scrolls, they wouldn’t feel the need “to remember it from the inside, completely on their own.”

It is a view that goes well beyond Islam, however—witness in recent times Hugo Chávez during his reign over Venezuela declaring: “History will begin with me, and I will eradicate all that has gone before.” Erasing all mention of the past is obviously as fraught with problems as not being able to forget any of that past.

The troubles in Ireland have been kept alive by participants on both sides being unable to put injustices and sufferings behind them, but the Irish historian and former senator of his strife-torn country John A. Murphy has surely got it right when he says (if a little glibly): “History is a record of the past, not a chronicle of grievances.... A civilized people does not tear out the pages of its history, it simply turns them over.”

How does this help us when we consider memory in any dialogue about reconciliation? A useful study is David Rieff’s *In Praise of Forgetting* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016], in which he calls on us to remember less. He does not like collective memory, and sees the worldwide need for national myths as creating a false continuity and working against what is true. Collective remembrances are self-serving, often fraudulent, and frequently dangerous. Remembering, he says, prevents reconciliation, and he cites the Edict of Nantes in 1598, when Henry V of France told both Catholics and Protestants to “extinguish” memories in order to unite after the bitter wars of religion. Other examples would include Spain and Chile’s determination to entrench democracy rather than pursue justice for the victims of Franco and Pinochet. To those who hope that remembering the Holocaust might avert future genocides, Rieff’s reply is that this is “magical thinking,” given subsequent extermination campaigns in Bangladesh, Cambodia and Rwanda.

Yet on the personal level, forgetting may be dangerous too, and can undermine personality (as in the films *Memento* and *The Unconsoled*), relationships (*The Sense of an Ending*, *Before I Go to Sleep*), even society (*Nineteen Eighty-Four*, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*). At the other extreme, the protagonist of Jorge Luis Borges’s story “Funes the Memorious,” who is cursed with the gift of complete recall. Funes is not capable of thought, since “to think is to forget a difference, to generalize, to abstract.” It is not easy

finding the right balance between what to remember and what to forget, and the individual mind has its limits, as my Dachau experience shows.

Borges's story was published in June 1942. The following year saw the first English publication of Stefan Zweig's autobiography, *The World of Yesterday* [Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1943]. In the preface, he provides a personal credo, but one that has a broader application. Stranded in a rented house outside Rio de Janeiro, watching the world he knew consumed in flames, he feels cut off and alone. "I have nothing more of my past with me than what I have retained in my mind," he says.

*All else at this moment is unobtainable or lost. But the good art of not pining over that which is lost has been thoroughly learned by our generation, and it is quite possible that the loss of documentation and detail may actually be an advantage for my book. For I look upon our memory not as an element which accidentally retains or forgets, but rather as a consciously organizing and wisely exclusionary power. All that one forgets of one's life was long since predestined by an inner instinct to be forgotten. Only that which wills to preserve itself has the right to be preserved by others. So choose and speak to me, ye memories!*

One would like to think that that "inner instinct" is always a healthy guide; that the "reorganizing process" taking place is fundamentally working to one's benefit. The Louis Armstrong song from *Casablanca*, a film made at the same time as Borges and Zweig were writing, has not lost its basic message: one has to remember that the fundamental things apply.