

Global Peace Services USA

...an idea whose time has come

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Greetings from John Eriksson, President, GPS USA.

This issue of the GPS Newsletter includes two articles that explore different aspects of a calamitous event that has impacted governments, civil society and individuals for almost a century: the Holocaust of 1939-1945. Both articles shed new light on previous themes of GPS Newsletter articles. The first article by GPS Board Member Dr. Robert Muscat, questions the morality of forgiveness when the protagonist pleads for forgiveness at the same time admitting to having participated in unspeakably evil actions. The article delves into these issues at a deeply personal level. The reader is drawn inexorably into the fundamental moral question. The article is a review of the book by Simon Wiesenthal, The Sunflower: On the Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness. The book describes the experience of the author as a prisoner in a Nazi concentration camp during World War when he is taken to the military hospital to listen to a young Nazi on his deathbed. The nature of the admission and request made by the mortally wounded patient and the agonizing decision made by the author form the crux of the article.

The second article, by GPS Board Member Dr. Mindy Reiser, is a review of Learning From The Germans: Race and the Memory of Evil, by Susan Nieman. While the first article by Dr. Muscat focuses on issues of admission of guilt and seeking forgiveness at a profoundly personal level, the second article by Dr. Reiser focuses on atonement from the German nation state as a whole. The book is an analysis and assessment of efforts since World War II by Germany to acknowledge its overall role in enabling and actively pursuing the massive genocide or Holocaust and associated crimes against humanity. Thus, the two articles are quite complementary with each other.

Dr. Reiser emphasizes a central conclusion of Neiman that the process of acknowledging accountability by the German polity was not smooth but rather moved through several stages, initially characterized by a feeling of “victimhood,” then recognition of guilt, to assumption of shame for the deeds done. Dr. Neiman calls attention to several events which she sees as turning the German tide from victimhood to recognition of guilt and to assumption of shame for the deeds done. One manifestation of acknowledgement of guilt is the many monuments to commemorate the Holocaust that have been constructed throughout the country.

Dr. Neiman draws some powerful conclusions, as summarized by Dr. Reiser:

... you cannot have a healthy present if you bury the shame of your past.

... Germany also created a precedent; it is possible to change a nation's deepest self-image, to switch perspective from self-pitying victim to accountable perpetrator.

... Germany has become palpably freer, stronger and easier since it chose to make that turn.

Since the book by Dr. Neiman has been published, the subject of reparations has gained increased attention in the United States, along with legislation at some local and state levels, to provide reparations to individuals whose ancestors had been enslaved and worked for local institutions, or had experienced redlining – denial of mortgagees by banks for home purchases in certain areas. Perhaps, Germany, and other countries, as well, may gain insight in addressing past injustices from the halting steps now underway in this country.

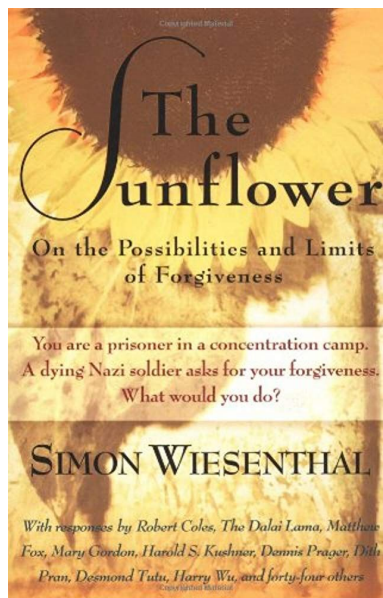
A personal note. About twenty years ago, my wife and I visited the site of the Nazi concentration camp, Buchenwald, the largest such camp on German soil, near the city of Weimar in East-Central Germany. We left with indelible memories of the evidence of the genocidal crimes perpetrated at Buchenwald (and by extension, throughout the evil Nazi system). However, we also carry with us a more poignant and even hopeful memory of school bus after school bus arriving at the camp parking lot. We subsequently learned that this was part of a nationwide program to expose German schoolchildren to evidence of the horrors committed during the Holocaust in order to help ensure that the lessons of that inhuman era are not lost on successive generations. This is certainly an aspect of the reckoning analyzed by Dr. Susan Neiman. As an evaluator by profession, I wonder to what extent the impact of the schoolchildren program is being analyzed so as to improve its effectiveness and sustainability.

Following the two articles is a summary of a first virtual “GPS Forum” held on March 4, 2021 on the topic “Managing Artificial Intelligence in a Violent World.” We hope to sponsor more Forums over the year on such topics as: Peaceful vs, Violent Countries, Distinguishing Truth from Lies; Reasoning with Unreasonable People; Income Inequality and the Pandemic. Future forums will be widely advertised.

In order to continue and expand our current work, such as the GPS Newsletter, so that we can continue putting out our newsletter, with essays and articles readers are unlikely to find elsewhere and hold special events, such as the 2019 discussion of the Colombia Peace Process, we do need greater resources. Please consider making as generous a tax-deductible contribution as you can to GPS. This may be done by mailing a check to the postal address shown above or through our website www.globalpeaceservices.org. Phone: 301-681-6968.

Book Review: *The Sunflower: On the Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness*

In 1969, famed Nazi-hunter Simon Wiesenthal wrote a remarkable book that should be of particular interest to GPS members. (Published originally in German, the English version was issued in 1997 by Schocken Books.) Entitled “*The Sunflower: On the Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness*,” the book has two parts. The first part is Wiesenthal’s account of an extraordinary incident he experienced while a prisoner in a Nazi concentration camp during World War II. In the second part, called a Symposium, 29 invited commentators give brief reactions to the moral dilemma posed by Wiesenthal. The issue: how should one respond when a dying person who has committed violent evil asks for forgiveness?



Among the 29 (several now deceased) were the German cardinal Franz Konig, a theologian; the Dalai Lama, spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhism; Primo Levi, Italian writer and Auschwitz survivor; Theodore M. Hesburgh, president of Notre Dame university; Dith Pran, photojournalist for

the NY Times and Khmer Rouge survivor; Tzvetan Todorov, renowned Bulgarian writer and critic; Cynthia Ozick, novelist and essayist, member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters; Herbert Marcuse, political philosopher; Abraham Joshua Heschel, theologian and philosopher; Deborah E. Lipstadt, author and professor of Jewish studies at Emory University; and others who had pondered and written about the Holocaust and who came from different faith and cultural backgrounds.

One day, Wiesenthal was on a work detail outside the death camp, near the very building that had been his high school. It was now a military hospital. A

nurse suddenly appeared, took him out of his work battalion, and brought him to the room of a young German soldier who lay dying of war wounds. Although born to Catholic parents, instead of asking for a priest who could perform last rites of absolution, he told the nurse he wanted to obtain forgiveness from a Jew. The nurse’s choice of Wiesenthal was simply random.

Alone with Wiesenthal, the soldier, face completely covered with bandages, grasped Simon’s hand while recounting his life story over the course of several hours. Over his parents’ objection, he had joined the Hitler Youth in the 1930s. Later, to his father’s horror, he volunteered for the SS, the most deeply indoctrinated and sadistic Nazi military organization.

At death’s door, he said he was now remorseful for having participated in a particularly horrific massacre in which he murdered some young Jewish children. He asked Wiesenthal to grant him forgiveness. Wiesenthal felt a twinge of compassion for the soldier, allowing him to hold his hand (despite finding that distasteful, and the whole scene deeply upsetting), and brushing away with his free hand a fly buzzing around the man’s head.

Wiesenthal’s response to the man’s request was to remain silent and finally just leave the room. He then told two other prisoners he had befriended what had transpired. They debated the morality of his silence, looking at the encounter from different angles. After the soldier died, the nurse, following the soldier’s wishes, gave Wiesenthal the man’s few effects, wrapped in a bag. In a wrenching sequel after his liberation from the camp, Wiesenthal sought out the soldier’s now widowed mother to give her the effects. When the mother spoke of her love for her son, and what a truly good person her son had been, Wiesenthal decided to say nothing about the whole incident, leaving the mother’s illusions undisturbed.

Wiesenthal ends his account with a question: “You who have just read this sad and tragic episode in my life can mentally change places with me and ask

yourself the crucial question. ‘What would I have done?’”

The 29 responders had different perspectives. Some said they could not possibly change places and imagine themselves in Wiesenthal’s position in such circumstances. Some said silence had been the correct response because Wiesenthal had no moral right or authority to act on behalf of others who were the actual victims. Only the victims could forgive a perpetrator; but all the victims in this case, of course, were dead. A few thought the soldier deserved to be forgiven and eased as he died; Wiesenthal should have spoken words of absolution. Others questioned whether one could know how genuine or deep was the man’s remorse: would he have made atonement if he had survived, or would he have lapsed back into ingrained convictions of hatred and impunity. Some thought, in the face of truly unforgivable sin, that the final judgment belonged to God alone. Others thought the SS man deserved to be sent to hell; “the easy forgiving of such crimes perpetuates the very evil it

wants to alleviate.” This last observation seems particularly apt for thinking about how to cope with the aftermath of extreme violence and injustice.

There is a vast literature on post-conflict political, social, and moral effects and repair, drawing on the Holocaust, the Rwandan and Cambodian genocides, and other conflicts and mass atrocities. (In a two-part essay in the GPS Newsletters of December 2015 and May 2016 – “Apology: A Cement for Peace?” – we explored the record of group or government apology as one instrument for public, not individual, remorse and reconciliation.)

The Sunflower is one of those rare books that speak to a reader directly, forcing one to introspect and reach one’s own judgment. For myself, I ended up agreeing with those who endorsed Wiesenthal’s silence.

What would you have done?

✿ Robert Muscat

Taking Stock: Germany Confronting Its Nazi Past

In his review of Simon Wiesenthal’s *The Sunflower: On the Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness*, Robert Muscat notes that 29 eminent individuals were asked to respond to the dying German soldier’s call for forgiveness for his participation in a massacre of young Jewish children.

But what if a broader atonement for horrendous crimes committed was sought not from an individual German soldier, but from the nation state, itself? And how would such a process be undertaken, what antecedent steps would have to be put in place for such an acknowledgement to be made? Susan Neiman, an American Jewish woman, by training a philosopher; by occupation, director of the Einstein Forum (described as a “public think tank”) in Germany and long-time resident of Berlin, provides a detailed, nuanced, multi-layered response to this question in *Learning From The*

Germans: Race and the Memory of Evil. Her book, now in paperback, was originally published in 2019 in New York by Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Of surprise, perhaps, to a contemporary reader, is to learn from Dr. Neiman’s book, that immediately following World War II, most Germans saw themselves as victims – their cities bombed; their sons, fathers, husbands dead on battlefields or bearing lifelong injuries; their economic future uncertain. German territory was now occupied by former enemies. Rather than seeing themselves as having brought about their own predicament, Germans saw themselves in need of compassion and support. *Learning from the Germans* lays out the long, complex path through which the vast majority of Germans came to acknowledge Germany’s role as a perpetrator, as bearing responsibility for the millions of deaths in the concentration camps and in countless cities and

towns, and villages. Neiman calls attention to several events which she sees as turning the German tide from victimhood to recognition of guilt and to assumption of shame for the deeds done.

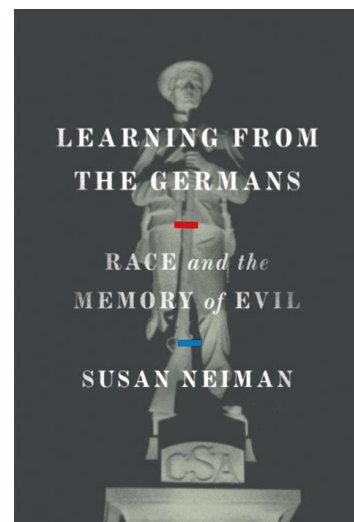
She also introduces the reader to a multi-syllable compound German word – *Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung* – working-off-the-past – the term employed to describe the long, slow process of Germany coming to terms with its past, making recompense, atoning in diverse ways at diverse times. Writing in 2018, Neiman notes that “all told since 1945 Germany has spent more than a billion dollars building monuments to commemorate the Holocaust and many millions every year to maintain them.”

This path toward taking stock of crimes committed and lives laid waste included the building of monuments to the dead – both grand in scale and execution – and others as humble as plaques affixed to buildings naming their murdered former residents, and brass-topped cobble stones (known as stumbling stones) in the vicinity where they once lived, with the names, birthdays and information about deportations and deaths of Nazi victims affixed. It was the former East Germany that had the majority of monuments to Nazi victims, financed by public funding. It was German reunification that led to the creation of concentration camp memorials countrywide – with federal funding now providing some support.

Germany did sign an agreement with the State of Israel and the Jewish Claims Conference – representing Jews not living in Israel – to pay compensation to Holocaust victims. “At Israel’s insistence,” Neiman writes, “Adenauer made a formal statement to parliament admitting German culpability for crimes against the Jewish people.” While certainly important for Israel and the Jewish people, Adenauer’s statement cannot be seen as a profound reckoning with the devastation Germany had wreaked and its vast consequences. The process for payment of reparations to individual victims was a laborious one, and indeed, until today, claims for return of or compensation for stolen property (especially works of art) are still being adjudicated.

A significant step along the path toward a more profound acknowledgement of what had transpired in the Nazi years, accompanied as were so many of these steps by controversy, was the May 8, 1985 speech by German President Richard von Weizsäcker calling the day that ended WWII, a day of liberation. Up to that time, May 8, the day of Germany’s surrender to the allies, was recognized as a day of defeat and viewed by at least some with ambivalence, if not mourning by some.

A milestone on the road to assumption of responsibility for the Nazi past was the 1995 Wehrmacht exhibition organized by the Hamburg Institute for Social Research, whose head and founder was Jan Philipp Reemtsma, whose father made a fortune supplying cigarettes to the German troops fighting across Europe. The Wehrmacht, or regular German army, to which millions of men were drafted to fight in WWII, had been exempted from indictment at Nuremberg and was seen in the eyes of a good number of Germans as “blameless” – in contradistinction to the SS, which could only



be joined voluntarily. The exhibition, "War of Annihilation: Crimes of the *Wehrmacht* 1941 to 1944," opened in Hamburg on March 5, 1995 and travelled to 33 German and Austrian cities with perhaps 800,000 viewers. Using written documents from the era and archival photographs, the organizers showed that the Wehrmacht was "involved in planning and implementing a war of annihilation against Jews, prisoners of war, and the civilian population." The exhibit focused on war crimes in Serbia, Poland and Belorussia and was prepared by historians Hannes Heer and Gerd Hankel.

The exhibit generated enormous controversy, led to a comprehensive review of the materials used and attributions made, and with relatively minor modifications, a second exhibition was mounted in

November 2001. The two exhibits provoked a wide array of reactions – enabling both perpetrators and victims to break the silences they had held since their return from the battlefield – decades earlier – what Konrad Adenauer, West Germany’s first chancellor, spoke of as “silent forgetting.” As Susan Neiman explains, “In both German and Jewish families, anything connected with the war was off-limits. Neither side could bear to talk about it, one side afraid of facing its own guilt, the other afraid of succumbing to pain and rage.”

Neiman observes that catalyzed by these and other events, it was often the younger generations in the families of the WWII veterans and former Nazi officials who sought to understand what had really happened in WWII, what roles their family members had played, and how they understood what they had done. She goes on to note that overt anti-Semitic statements are condemned in contemporary Germany, massive popular responses will occur in opposition if anti-Semitic incidents occur, and there certainly are a significant number of Germans who bear a sense of personal responsibility for the crimes committed by the German state in WWII.

Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung – the working-off-the-past still, indeed, continues in Germany. In her afterword to the 2020 paperback edition of her book, Susan Neiman cogently and movingly summarizes what she has learned in her multi-year study of how Germany and Germans have come to terms with their country’s past and in going on to play a positive and valued role in the international order. Through these actions, then, have they implicitly if not explicitly, gained a measure of forgiveness?

“For years, Germans have been discovering that undoing racist damage is a complex and multilayered process. In arguing for learning from the Germans, I’ve also argued for learning from their mistakes. Most initial German attempts to work off the past were slow, reluctant and

incomplete. But they combined to create a historically new insight: you cannot have a healthy present if you bury the shame of your past. They also created a precedent; it is possible to change a nation’s deepest self-image, to switch perspective from self-pitying victim to accountable perpetrator....Germany has become palpably freer, stronger and easier since it chose to make that turn.”

Hoping to parley what she has learned from one country’s journey to confronting its past and seeking avenues of redress, Neiman turns to her country of birth, the United States, and its failure to fully confront its legacy of slavery and its aftermath. She spends significant time at the William Winter Institute for Interracial Reconciliation, associated with the University of Mississippi during her visit there and now an independent non-profit organization, and explores the initiatives undertaken by the Institute to foster dialogue and help build a sense of a common future among Mississippians of diverse racial and ethnic heritages. She then devotes a considerable section of her book to discussing reparations as a means for America, as an entire country, assuming responsibility for all that was caused by slavery, and its aftermath both in the South and the North, East and West.

Since her book has been published, the subject of reparations has gained increased attention, along with legislation at some local and state levels, to provide reparations to individuals whose ancestors had been enslaved and worked for local institutions, or had experienced redlining – denial of mortgages by banks for home purchases in certain areas. Perhaps, Germany, and other countries, as well, may gain insight in addressing past injustices from the halting steps now underway in the United States.

✿ Mindy Reiser

“Managing Artificial Intelligence in a Violent World” - A GPS Forum

On March 4, 2021, GPS sponsored a virtual forum on “Managing Artificial Intelligence (AI) in a Violent World.”¹ AI and its challenges for social policy are making their presence increasingly felt in the realm of reality as well as in that of fantasy. The presenters and a number of the participants in the forum are part of the “Millennium Project,” which is devoted to exploring technological, social and economic trends over the next 30 years and beyond. The Project has devoted considerable effort to discerning and analyzing the trends in AI. The following is a summary of the main themes and issues covered by 39 participants over 90 minutes at the GPS forum.

AI is divided into three broad categories;² Narrow AI, General AI and Super AI. Narrow AI (NAI) is limited to the use of software to study or accomplish specific pre-learned problem solving or reasoning tasks. Applications are programmed by humans and respond to changes in environmental conditions in specified ways. Examples of NAI are plentiful and increasing, with applications to agriculture, education, energy, health and other fields. Specific examples include efficient, environment-friendly agricultural irrigation systems and “distributed renewable energy systems.”

Under General AI (GAI), often referred to as ‘Artificial general intelligence’ (AGI), an

autonomous, non-human entity or ‘intelligent agent,’ has the ability to understand or learn any intellectual task that a human being can. It thus takes a leap beyond NAI. Even beyond AGI, Super AI (SAI) implies a non-human intelligent agent with the ability to make substantial changes in response to varying conditions, and at an extreme, exhibit feeling, self-awareness consciousness and even the ability to replicate. While SAI is largely in the realm of science fiction, participants in the Millennium Project are thinking through the policy implications of both AGI and SAI. There was deep concern among Forum participants about the potential threat of AGI, in particular, the threat of illegal exploitation of AGI by rogue states and private organized crime. One participant concluded that AGI poses “huge choices here and now in where humanity goes next – huge new risks, new technology options,” with regulatory challenges as daunting.

The Q&A discussion following the presentations was provocative and stimulating. Of particular note was a question about the relevance of religious values to the potential threat posed by AI. A post-forum comment surfaced the role of religious values in “warning the human race of the deadly results of human pretension to master everything.”

✿ John Eriksson

¹ The Forum was proposed and organized by GPS Board member, Dr. Ronald Ridker. GPS is also grateful for the intellectual support of Dr. Jerome Glenn and his colleagues of the Millennium Project.

² The definitions in the following two paragraphs are drawn from the Forum presentations and discussion and from the treatment of “Artificial general intelligence” in *Wikipedia* and the accompanying Notes and References.

Global Peace Services USA

The newsletter of Global Peace Services USA is published regularly. GPS USA is incorporated in the State of Maryland and is tax-exempt. Current board members are: Anna Amato, Aline Dukuze, John Eriksson, Robert Muscat, Mindy Reiser, Ronald Ridker, and Sovan Tun. We welcome contributions and comments. To contact us:

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