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“WHO WILL WRITE OUR HISTORY?” THE DEFENCE OF CIVILIZED VALUES IN EXILE, THE GHETTOS AND THE CAMPS¹

This essay argues that civilized values and norms persist in hostile circumstances inimical to such norms and values. Taking the Shoah as its key example but with reference to the invasion of the Ukraine by the Russian Federation, it is shown how even in the most terrible conditions human beings cling to traditional values of truth, justice, and goodness, but also learn how to develop new norms such as the solidarity between distinct communities. Various actors are considered in context to prove this contention, notably Levi, Baeck, Ringelblum, and Kelsen. It is observed how these agents, having preserved their ideals under the most harrowing conditions, transferred them to the apres guerre, in order to effect a reconstruction of civilized society. This is also be possible in the circumstances we observe today.

Keywords: Values, Norms, Institutions, Justice, Truth, Goodness, Baeck, Ringelblum, Levi, Zelensky.

The conventional historiography of the last century treats events in terms of rupture. The Third Reich, the Holocaust, the Zero Hour define these cataclysmic divisions. It would be perverse to deny that they occurred and that collectively they marked a caesura in world history possibly greater than the First World War and surely unknown since the French Revolution. I'm not competent to debate these issues. But what I would like to propose is that these sequestrations that desolated the past conceal an underlying continuity that Norbert Elias famously calls *The Process of Civilization*. According to Elias, violence is not antithetical to civilization. It remains as an abiding presence which the civilizatory process seeks to control and eliminate, albeit without ever achieving complete success.² Throughout this

¹ This is an expanded version of an article that first appeared in: Margit Dirscherl, Arturo Larcati and Ritchie Robertson, eds., *The heritage of humanism and enlightenment in exile literature* (Würzburg: Königshausen&Neumann, 2023).

² Jonathan Fletcher, *Violence & Civilization. An Introduction to the Work of Norbert Elias* (Cambridge, 1997), 178.

painful, cruel and malignant set of events certain aspects of civilized life remained more or less in place; certain individuals clung to civilized values; and certain groups continued to follow civilized norms, which, as Hans Kelsen argues, have the propensity to generate new norms.³ But how was this possible? Kelsen was a Viennese intellectual who belongs with Schoenberg and Wittgenstein, with Freud and Loos, as a founder of modernist culture. Later Anglophone scholars like Hart⁴ and Raz⁵ continue to exploit Kelsen's view of the basic norm. According to Kelsen generating new norms must be distinguished from following these norms. Hence new norms can even develop within a repressive regime. To quote Hölderlin: "*Wo aber Gefahr ist wächst das Rettende auch.*" Without this capacity for civilized society to rejuvenate, the subsequent efflorescence of culture after World War II – socially, materially, culturally, politically – would not have been possible. The superior norms maintained by certain individuals during the Shoah enabled new norms to establish themselves in the *après guerre*. I'm not sure if this is a ground for optimism. But it is a ground for hope. Against all odds, civilized life prevailed; and human beings reconvened around civilized values. This can be seen in the massacre at Babyn Jar in the ravine outside Kiev when 34,000 Jews were slaughtered on 29–30 September 1941. It was *Yom Kippur*, the holiest day in the Jewish calendar, and countless victims stood at the edge of the gorge saying their prayers to the God who "quickens the dead." They proclaimed a moral victory over their slaughterers. Ironically the Russians bombed the memorial to Babyn Jar in the first week of their war on Ukraine. In the words of President Zelensky: "History repeats."⁶ How this occurs can be seen in the response of the Ukrainian scholar Nataliya Torkut to my essay:

Thank you for your article, which I have read with a great interest. There are some ideas, which should be shared among Ukrainian scholars who are writing our history now, in the time of war. For my nation, that is facing the unprecedented aggression and cruelties of genocidal war the considerations on the values are vital. We are free in choosing our values and today all Ukrainians have found a common meaning in our lives. It is to protect our independence, freedom and dignity. Most of us cannot imagine our future without these values, and the awareness of this undeniable fact is one of the main sources of our courage, activity and will to win. We are all shocked by the atrocities of the Russians in Bucha and Mariupol,

³ Hans Kelsen, *Reine Rechtslehre. Studienausgabe der 2. Ausgabe von 1960*, ed. Mathias Jenstadet (Tübingen, 2017), 418–423.

⁴ H. L. A. Hart, *The Concept of Law*, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1997), 292.

⁵ Joseph Raz, *The Authority of Law*, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 2009), 122–145.

⁶ *The Times*, March 2, 2022.

the tortures and murder of our captured fighters in Olenivka, the everyday shelling of the Zaporizhzhya nuclear power station. It is hard to believe that such manifestations of cruelty, bordering on the demonic instinct to destroy everything beautiful, good and human, take place in the 21st century, after the Nuremberg trial, hundreds of books and scientific works about Auschwitz and the Holocaust. Rectors of Russian universities, their philosophers, poets, artists and almost the entire population of Russia support their putler and are ready to kill us just for our desire to be ourselves, to be Ukrainians.

I am sure that their humanity scholars as well as their men of letters, teachers and filmmakers are responsible for this terrible war and are guilty of the deaths of tens of thousands of Ukrainian, the destruction of human destinies, cities and nuclear disaster that threaten our civilization. It is quite difficult to imagine how we will be able to live after victory, having such a monster country as a neighbor.

The challenges faced by anthropologists, philosophers, and historians in this Russian-Ukrainian war require increased interest in this complex issue, and your article can give a powerful impetus to the discussion of how and why the crisis of humanistic values occurred in Russian society in the 21st century. I am grateful to you for stimulating my proactive interest and enriching my knowledge on the discourse of values. Thanks to you, I have read Primo Levi (sorry to say but I did not read it before!) and have learned about Rabbi Leo Baeck and his ideas.

My son Igor is on the front [...]. The situation is very dangerous. I would ask you and your wife to pray for him and his friends.

The continuity of violence and barbaric crime cannot resist the overpowering rule of goodness that enables civilisation to continue. It is not aggression but the good that enables mankind to survive. Indeed, there is an unseen community of the good — one thinks of recent writers like Iris Murdoch and her book on the sovereignty of the good⁷ — which stretches across the centuries from Plato to Goethe.

The victims in Babyn Jar clung to what Rabbi Louis Jacobs calls Jewish values, the highest of which is peace.⁸ Embedded in our very identities, values uphold our actions and bind us together, and provide a cultural ground for our laws. We are a value society. Not a society of rules. These shared values gathered together individuals in exile, in the ghettos, and in the camps and bound them together into an invisible community. A community's values generate its norms. As Robert Merton writes, no society lacks norms,⁹

⁷ Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge, 2001).

⁸ Louis Jacobs, *Jewish Values* (London, 1960), 155–169.

⁹ Robert Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure*, revised and enlarged ed. (Glencoe, Illinois, 1957), 134–135.

but they differ with regard to the manner in which they are integrated into a hierarchy of values. When a society begins to disintegrate, as it did under National Socialism, these values become debased, and the norms become corroded by what Durkheim calls "anomie;"¹⁰ this concept means a moral sickness, a progressive normlessness. Yet within any general decline in values, true values may remain within the interstices of society to form a core of stability around certain norms. Such nodal points, overtly linked in an open society, will become hidden or go underground when anomie degrades a society. These values provide a focus around which a hierarchy of values pinnacled in goodness and truthfulness may cohere and even grow. This reproduction of values enables social norms to increase as can be seen, for example, in the resistance movement in Auschwitz. As Hermann Langbein the Auschwitz resistance fighter said:¹¹

Im Faschismus werden die Ärzte Mörder.
Und im Sozialismus die Arbeitersöhne Ärzte.
Ja, in Auschwitz geht man entweder zu Grunde oder man wächst.

Langbein asserts the power of adversity to create a positive good. I am talking here about the highest values: truth, goodness, justice, which require a positive normative behaviour. Such crystals of value remain alive even in oppressive or tyrannical regimes.

Value theory came of age with Max Scheler, who believed both that values were specifically attached to individuals and also that they were a species of Platonic idea inasmuch as they constitute real entities in the world.¹² He means ethical values that are not attached to objects (like money) but to persons: values such as "noble," "truthful" or "good" accrue to individuals. Society regards them as real and hypostasizes these values. David Graeber calls these "key values"¹³ which retain their validity even in the context of a disintegrating polity. Within the unstable framework of a well-nigh universal anomie, key values can retain their quality, and serve as points of reference. Anyone who has read Primo Levi's chapter on The Canto of Ulysses (and who has not read it?) will be familiar with this process.¹⁴ Levi

¹⁰ Talcott Parsons, *The Structure of Social Action*, vol. 1, "Marshall, Pareto, Durkheim" (New York, 1968), 334–338.

¹¹ Hermann Langbein, *Die Stärkeren. Ein Bericht aus Auschwitz und anderen Konzentrationslagern* (Vienna, 2008), 242.

¹² Max Scheler, *Der Formalismus in der Ethik und die materiale Wertethik*, ed. Christian Bermes (Hamburg: Meiner, 2014), 117–119.

¹³ David Graeber, *Towards and Anthropological Theory of Value. The False Coin of our Dreams* (New York, 2001), 18.

¹⁴ Primo Levi, *If this is a Man. The Truce*, trans. Stuart Woolf (London: Abacus, 1993), 115–121.

quotes Dante in the Camp: “you were made men / to follow after knowledge and excellence.” For Levi, this has the effect of “the blast of a trumpet.” In this quotation aesthetic and ethical values fuse into a single insight, which has the effect of undermining the world of the Camp. Levi has communicated a real value to his companion. He has given birth to a social act. He thereby demonstrates the superior place of value which encourages him to act according to a positive norm. The climactic moment in his tale comes when he encounters Lorenzo. Levi writes: “Lorenzo was a man; his humanity was pure [...]”;¹⁵ thus, Levi invokes Cicero’s ideal of *humanitas* – the highest value we have in the hierarchy of values.

What occurs here can perhaps best be grasped in terms of Marx’s analysis in *Capital* whereby a value undergoes a metamorphosis:¹⁶ as the value passes from one person to another it undergoes a transformation; and it is thereby reconstituted. Levi’s companion is changed by the knowledge of Dante; and Levi himself is altered by his encounter with Lorenzo. This is what values do. They act as a repository of wisdom. They sustain the people who appeal to their ideals and invite them to act according to positive norms. In short, they enable the multiple transactions that allow society to persist and to develop; the traffic of values enables the civilizational process.

A theologian who understood these matters was Rabbi Leo Baeck. He was the President of the organisation of German Jews, the Reichsvertretung der Deutschen Juden from 1933–1938 and the head of the Judenrat (Council of Elders) in Theresienstadt. After the Nazi power grab he presciently announced: “*Das Ende des deutschen Judentums ist gekommen.*”¹⁷ This unsung hero of the Shoah, cruelly traduced by Hannah Arendt,¹⁸ maintained a moral continuity that stretched from the Weimar Republic via the Final Solution to the *après guerre*. He had studied with Wilhelm Dilthey, and the neo-Kantian philosopher Hermann Cohen regarded him as his natural successor.¹⁹ Accordingly, Baeck’s theology fused Judaism with philosophy in a way which recalled the *Haskalah* and developed modern liberal

¹⁵ Levi, *If this is a Man*, 128.

¹⁶ Karl Marx, *Capital*, trans. Ben Fowkes, vol. 1 (London: Penguin, 1990), 154.

¹⁷ Leonard Baker, *Days of Sorrow and Pain. Leo Baeck and the Berlin Jews* (New York; London, 1978), 145.

¹⁸ Jeremy Adler, “A Mystic among the Intellectuals. H. G. Adler in Debate with Jean Améry and Hannah Arendt,” in *A Modernist in Exile. The International Reception of H. G. Adler (1910–1988)*, ed. Lynn L. Wolff (Oxford, 2019), 165.

¹⁹ Michael A. Meyer, *Rabbi Leo Baeck: Living a Religious Imperative in Troubled Times* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021), 8.

values. He once called his religion "*moralische Demokratie*."²⁰ This nesting of the political norm of democracy within a theological framework based human legislation on Divine Law.²¹ This means that when Baeck defended the Jews against the Nazis he promoted a synthesis of liberal values, a democratic ideal, a legal norm, and a religious view. His actions were prompted by a stronger theory than his adversaries. We usually talk about resistance. But this is a negative concept. In many cases it might be better to talk about the preservation of value. With Baeck we are dealing with a guardian of value. Let me give a signal example. For 6 October 1935 on the Day of Atonement Baeck prepared a statement to be read out in every German synagogue. It culminated in the words:²²

Ganz Israel steht in dieser Stunde vor seinem Gotte. Unser Gebet, unser Vertrauen, unser Bekennen ist das aller Juden auf Erden. Wir blicken aufeinander und wissen von uns, und wir blicken zu unserem Gotte empor und wissen von dem, was bleibt.

Here is the invisible community being invoked to constitute itself ("blicken aufeinander") and to assert permanent values ("was bleibt"). An invisible congregation is being invited to overcome the secular authorities by asserting the God of Life. This constitutes a challenge to the authorities, and generates an alternative society: for Baeck transforms a spiritual value into a political one in order to reconstitute the Jewish community. This key value is embedded in the cosmos itself,²³ i.e. in the Heaven and Earth created by God, as a result of which Baeck's new society rests on a sound foundation. Adapting Marx again, in being used to combat adversity, such value will be tested and thereby made more viable for the *après guerre*.

Imprisoned in Theresienstadt, Baeck is said to have become the camp's moral conscience and the prisoners' spiritual saviour by virtue of what a fellow-inmate called "*der Widerstand des Herzens*."²⁴ There is a story about him which took place in April 1945 and cannot be told too often.

²⁰ Leo Baeck, *Dieses Volk. Jüdische Existenz* (Frankfurt am Main: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1955), 94.

²¹ Andreas Kalyvas, "The Basic Norm and Democracy in Hans Kelsen's Legal and Political Philosophy," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 32 (2006): 573–599.

²² Maurice-Ruben Hayoun, *Leo Baeck. R presentant des liberalen Judentums*, trans. Alexandra Maria Linder (Darmstadt: WBG, 2015), 271.

²³ David Graeber, "It is values that bring universes into being," *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 3 (2013): 219–243.

²⁴ H. G. Adler, "Leo Baeck in Theresienstadt," in *Worte des Gedenkens fur Leo Baeck*, ed. Eva Reichmann (Heidelberg: Verlag, 1959), 62.

As he later recalled, shortly after the death of a different Rabbi Beck, he encountered a Nazi officer:²⁵

The door opened and an SS officer entered. It was Eichmann. He was visibly taken aback at seeing me.

“Herr Baeck, are you still alive?” He looked me over carefully, as if he did not trust his eyes, and added coldly, “I thought you were dead.”

“Herr Eichmann, you are apparently announcing a future occurrence.”

“I understand now. A man who is claimed dead lives longer.”

It was apparent that Eichmann was announcing Baeck’s imminent demise, but Baeck refused to be intimidated. When Eichmann blocked his path, Baeck simply put his hand on Eichmann’s arm, lightly pushed him aside, and passed through the doorway. As he walked down the steps into the street, Baeck could still feel Eichmann’s astonished glance following his departing steps. By means of what the Germans call *Zivilcourage* Baeck asserted his human dignity; and in so doing he demonstrated the superiority of his values. Eichman recognised a power inherent in value. He was morally affected and like his fellow prisoners recognised Baeck as a “*Mensch*.” The key value of humanity prevailed. Baeck’s liberal Jewish values survived.

Just as individuals operated within institutions in the camps, as did Leo Baeck, they also founded new institutions, as did Emmanuel Ringelblum in the Warsaw Ghetto.²⁶ Ringelblum was a representative of the Yiddish Revival. The intellectual ferment that drove him comprised Marxism, Zionism and Yiddishism. Following the call of the Jewish historian Simon Dubnow in the 1920’s he set out to establish a new social history to develop Jewish national consciousness. Like his predecessors in the *Haskalah*, Ringelblum opposed Rabbinical authority. His method was to organise groups of collectors to gather materials for an authentic Jewish history based on social realities. This was a central goal of the YIVO, the Yiddish Scientific Institute founded in 1925. This pre-war scholarship together with sophisticated pre-war organisation involving about eight political parties²⁷ provided the basis for wartime activity in the Warsaw Ghetto. Here Ringelblum organised a whole army of collectors, who gathered evidence of daily life under the persecutions, including the uprising, to provide a permanent record of the Final Solution. This was the *Oneg Shabbath* – a celebration of the sabbath. His archive comprised some 6,000 documents

²⁵ Meyer, *Rabbi Leo Baeck*, 162.

²⁶ Samuel D. Kassow, ed., *Who will Write our History? Rediscovering a hidden archive from the Warsaw Ghetto* (London, 2007).

²⁷ Yitzhack (“Antek”) Zuckermann, *A Surplus of Memory. Chronicle of the Warsaw Ghetto* (University of California Press, 1993), XVII–XVIII.

with 35,000 pages — statements, letters, testimonies, photographs, newspapers, documents & co. — which were stored in metal milk cans before the Uprising. They were unearthed in 1946. Ironically this method originated in the German historicism of Niebuhr and Ranke. The Warsaw activists worked systematically. Ringelblum produced questionnaires to detail the problems that he wanted to examine.²⁸ The headings include topics like “The Life and Appearance of the Shtetl Just Before the Outbreak of War,” or “Public Jewish Life” under the Germans. This enabled him to produce an objective, scientific view of events, with a strong emphasis on sociology. Topics treated included “Which classes and age groups fled?” the invaders. The data included social stratification, mental attitudes, and statistics. This went far beyond historicism and was highly progressive inasmuch as it anticipated the British Mass Observation begun in 1937. Methodologically the *Oneg Shabbat* was cutting edge, and like Mass Observation, it aimed to “systematically... record human activity.”²⁹ One of the activists, a woman called Jarecka Gustawa, described the project as follows:³⁰

The record must be hurled under history’s wheel in order to stop it [...]. One can lose all hopes except one — that the suffering and destruction of this war will make sense when they are looked at from a distant, historical perspective. From suffering, unparalleled in history, from bloody tears and bloody sweat a chronicle of days of hell is being composed which will help explain the historical reasons for why people came to think as they did and why regimes arose [*that caused so much suffering*].

The *Oneg Shabbat* bore witness. It was history as moral value. These social historians did not flinch from reality. For example, they recorded how girls would raise their petticoats and relieve themselves in the street or beggars on the sidewalk would expose their private parts.³¹ Under the force of persecution the normal sense of shame broke down. The victims displayed their degradation. The anomie gripped the whole population. In representing the truth, however shameful, the *Oneg Shabbat* testified to value. Thus scholarship was employed to oppose the humiliation inflicted by the tormentors. For, as Thomas Nagel argues in *The View From Nowhere*, it is not possible to have a neutral moral system,³² and if we do not wish to accede to the impersonal will that governs the world, then even the portrayal of disgrace will represent a positive value. It is often said that Raul

²⁸ Kassow, ed., *Who will Write our History*, 396–397.

²⁹ Charles Madge and Tom Harrison, *First Year’s Work* (London, 1938), 7.

³⁰ Kassow, ed., *Who will Write our History*, 6–7.

³¹ Kassow, ed., *Who will Write our History*, 254.

³² Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (New York; Oxford, 1986), 185.

Hilberg was the founding father of Holocaust studies in his monumental book *The Destruction of European Jewry* of 1961, but the subject originated much earlier, long before the war with Alfred Wiener's library created as early as 1933, and during the hostilities in projects like the *Oneg Shabbath*. Ringelblum's references to atrocities in towns beyond Warsaw such as Cracow, Tarnow, Czestochowa, Radom, Kielce and Ostrowiec³³ attest to a wider plan to portray the Final Solution. But there was another side to his appeal to values. As a public intellectual Ringelblum was also an activist committed to world revolution.³⁴ The longstanding alliance of Yiddishism and Marxism which had inspired him before the war still sustained him in the Shoah. The fight against Fascism was also a struggle for a Communist state. Indeed, as Nancy Munn has argued, actions can produce values,³⁵ and this is the case here. Ringelblum's political beliefs not only validated his actions, but sought to establish new values and new norms: he was not just writing about Jews, Germans, and Poles, but — as he wrote — creating an “objective documentation” to serve for “the good of mankind.”³⁶ The key values embodied in the *Oneg Shabbath* were intended to lay the foundations for a new and egalitarian polity after the war and a peaceful civilization.

Throughout the ghettos and camps, wherever they could, the prisoners tried to assert their values. This is how H. G. Adler describes the situation in a chapter on cultural life in Theresienstadt:³⁷

Kultur und dieses “Ghetto” müssen als unvereinbar erscheinen, und doch gab es, wie krampfhaft ihre Züge auch waren, in Theresienstadt Kultur, deren beste Leistungen wertvoll sind und allen Respekt verdienen. Was kann in diesem Lager unter Kultur verstanden werden? Zusätzliche Werte, die über die physische Selbsterhaltung der Gemeinschaft hinaus in Ansprüchen und Werken sich ausleben, erfüllen und ein Mindestmaß vital nötiger Leistungen übetrafen. Wann und wo es möglich war, wollten die Gefangenen sich geistig entfalten [...].

Whereas Ringelblum sets out to write history, H. G. Adler is here defining the superior value of cultural activity *tout court*. He conceives a typical hierarchy of value in which basic material needs are superseded by the spiritual values of cultural activity. This quest for higher values appears

³³ Emmanuel Ringelblum, *Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto*, ed. and trans. Jacob Sloan (New York, 2006), 262.

³⁴ Kassow, ed., *Who will Write our History*, 372.

³⁵ Nancy Munn, *The Fame of Gawa: A Study of Value Transformation in a Massim (Papua New Guinea) Society* (Cambridge, 1986), 267–273.

³⁶ Kassow, ed., *Who will Write our History*, 387.

³⁷ H. G. Adler, *Theresienstadt 1941–1945. Das Antlitz einer Zwangsgemeinschaft* (Göttingen, 2005), 584.

to have been universal in the camp. The inmates attempted to build a superior reality, in which a different set of norms prevailed than those imposed by their captors. Anna Hájková, the most recent historian of the camp, argues that art and culture in Theresienstadt established a connection to home, both to the pre-war and to the post-war situation.³⁸ What needs to be added, however, is that inmates such as Emil Utitz, the convenor of the so-called *Freizeitgestaltung*, the cultural organisation in the camp, became active after the war in reconstituting modern society. Inmates not only preserved human values in the camp; but translated them into the *après guerre* to help revive civilization.

What John Rawls calls "public values" that should uphold a state were inverted in the Third Reich; but they were restored by the prisoners. For it was the inmates who maintained the ideals of justice and civility upon which a liberal polity depends; and so it was numerous victims – if not all of them – who upheld a faith in a liberal society. They opposed what Max Weber has tellingly described as "*Wertirrationalismus*,"³⁹ an irrationality that reached its nadir in Auschwitz. The most extreme and controversial episode in all of the camps, the history of the *Sonderkommando*, testifies both to the annihilation and the survival of values. For Primo Levi the *Sonderkommando* represented "An extreme case of collaboration."⁴⁰ This echoes Bruno Bettelheim's sanctimonious judgement.⁴¹ To my mind such self-righteous critiques resemble what Adorno⁴² identified as victim-blaming, which was later explained by William Ryan. Against such priggish outrage Hermann Langbein set a more humane view. He quotes one of the *Sonderkommando* as saying:⁴³ "Wenn man bei unserer Arbeit nicht am ersten Tag verrückt wird, dann gewöhnt man sich daran." An inverted reality of this nature cannot be judged by any normal category. The question which needs to be put is not why these victims succumbed to torture – the answer is surely self-evident, – but whether they were able to cling to any moral values. From the evidence, what Havel calls a "parallel polis" remained *in situ* even under the most terrible conditions;⁴⁴ this was a sorry reflection of a better polity,

³⁸ Anna Hájková, *The Last Ghetto. An Everyday History of Theresienstadt* (Oxford, 2020), 178, 200.

³⁹ Max Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* (Tübingen, 1976), 508.

⁴⁰ Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved* (London, 2001), 34.

⁴¹ Miklos Nyiszli, *Auschwitz. A Doctor's Eyewitness Account* (Eastford CT, 2020), XIII; Nicholas Chare and Dominic Williams, *The Auschwitz Sonderkommando. Testimonies, Histories, Representation* (London, 2019), 2–3.

⁴² T. W. Adorno, "Wagner, Nietzsche and Hitler," *The Kenyon Review* 9 (1947): 158.

⁴³ Hermann Langbein, *Menschen in Auschwitz* (Vienna, 1972), 224.

⁴⁴ Vaclav Havel, *Living in Truth* (London, 1989), 104.

in which civilised values continued to lead their existence; for, as Havel says, such a polis points beyond itself, to a more responsible world. This can be seen from the fact that the *Sonderkommando* resisted. After months of preparation, they arose on 7 October 1944, killing three SS men, wounding 12 more, and putting Crematorium IV permanently out of action.⁴⁵ This heroic rebellion was the only major revolt in Auschwitz. A total of 451 members of the *Sonderkommando* were executed.⁴⁶ Behind their actions it is possible to detect what Hannah Arendt calls the revolutionary spirit:⁴⁷ this involves founding a new body politic, a new form of government; for the ultimate goal of the *Sonderkommando* revolt lay beyond Auschwitz in a new state. The revolt was embedded in the political scenery of the camp, notably the *Kampfgruppe Auschwitz*, which was led by Communists and Social Democrats. The *Sonderkommando* had contact with the leadership of *KGA* which helped them to prepare their insurrection with gunpowder and explosives and intelligence.⁴⁸ *KGA* also provided the trigger for the uprising by informing the *Sonderkommando* that the SS planned to liquidate them on 7 October. Even under these dire circumstances the prisoners formed an effective political unit. They displayed all the features of a typical revolutionary group: a clear goal, a fixed ideology, communicatory skills, organisation, resolve, commitment, and a willingness to sacrifice their lives for a nobler goal. Crucially they also shared the will, the courage, and the means to carry out violent action. The legitimacy that is required by any revolutionary act stems from their values. Even the *Sonderkommando* were touched by a vision of goodness.⁴⁹ Their revolt may be interpreted as a *kiddush hashem* or the sanctification of the name. It recalls the mass suicide in Masada described by Josephus. In his speech to the Jews at Masada Eleazar ben Ya'ir declared:⁵⁰ "I consider it a particular grace that God allowed us to die as free men." Like the revolt at Masada the rebellion in Auschwitz was not just a political act, it appealed to Judaism's values, and reinstated the covenant. For, as Bonhöffer maintains, the very fragmentariness of a broken

⁴⁵ "The Sonderkommando revolt 70 years on," Holocaust Educational Trust Blog, October 7, 2014, <https://www.het.org.uk/news-and-events/blog/entry/the-sonderkommando-revolt-70-years-on>.

⁴⁶ Hermann Langbein, "The Auschwitz Underground," in *Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp*, eds. Yisrael Gutman and Michael Berenbaum (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1998), 500–501.

⁴⁷ Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (London, 1991), 214–215.

⁴⁸ Marcus Barnett, "Life in the Century's Midnight," *TRIBUNE*, January 27, 2019, accessed August 21, 2024, <https://tribunemag.co.uk/2019/01/life-in-the-century-s-midnight>.

⁴⁹ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 70.

⁵⁰ Flavius Josephus, *Geschichte des jüdischen Krieges*, trans. Heinrich Clementz (Berlin; Vienna, 1923), 658.

life invokes a loftier fulfilment.⁵¹ The several testaments written by members of the *Sonderkommando* and buried under the ground – Zalman Gradowski, Zalman Leventhal, Dayan Langfus and another anonymous writer⁵² – belong to the most harrowing documents in history. Gradowski describes the pathetic scene when the victims approach the gas chamber. This is one among many unimaginable such moments. He observes “Moral und Ethik – gehen genau wie das Leben ins Grab.” Yet this was not entirely true. Gradowski reports a typical scene involving female prisoners:⁵³

Einige hängen sich an uns, wie Betrunkene, Verliebte werfen sie sich uns in die Arme und bitten mit verschämten Blick, dass wir sie nackt ausziehen, sie wollen jetzt alles vergessen, sie wollen jetzt an gar nichts denken. Mit der Welt von gestern, ihrer Moral und ihren Prinzipien haben sie [...] abgeschlossen.

The episode shows the survival of moral values at the moment of annihilation: compassion and sympathy, solidarity and fraternity remain alive within this morbid universe.⁵⁴ It can be seen that the scrolls of Auschwitz constitute another form of value, which John Finnis rightly calls the value of knowledge. Thus the *Sonderkommando*, for all its abasement, manifested the values of knowledge and action.

This verges on Nietzsche's belief in suffering as the highest value: “Ihr wollt [...] das Leiden abschaffen; und wir? [...] wir wollen es lieber noch höher und schlimmer haben.”⁵⁵ The point is echoed by Franz Baermann Steiner:⁵⁶ “A life without suffering is valueless.” Steiner's vision of suffering as the measure of value wrestles meaning from death. As an exile he partakes of the victims' lot by becoming a witness. He, too, became a guardian of value.

⁵¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Widerstand und Ergebung. Briefe und Aufzeichnungen aus der Haft*, ed. Eberhard Bethge (Munich, 1961), 80.

⁵² Nathan Cohen, “Diaries of the Sonderkommando,” in *Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp*, eds. Yisrael Gutman and Michael Berenbaum (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1998), 522–534; Jadwiga Bezwirska and Danuta Czech, eds., *Amidst a Nightmare of Crime. Manuscripts of Prisoners in Crematorium Squads Found at Auschwitz* (New York, 1992).

⁵³ Salmen Gradowski, *Die Zertrennung. Aufzeichnungen eines Mitglieds des Sonderkommandos* (Berlin, 2019), 190.

⁵⁴ G. W. F. Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (Hamburg, 1949), 421.

⁵⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, “Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe. Jenseits von Gut und Böse. Zur Genealogie der Moral (1886–1887),” in *KGW VI-2*, ed. Giorgio Colli (Berlin; New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1968), 167.

⁵⁶ Franz Baermann Steiner, *Taboo, Truth, and Religion*, ed. Jeremy Adler and Richard Fardon, vol. 1 (Oxford; New York, 1999), 84; Franz Baermann Steiner, *Orientalpolitik, Value, and Civilisation*, ed. Jeremy Adler and Richard Fardon, vol. 2 (Oxford; New York, 1999), 115–122.

In order to provide a means to action, values need to be translated into norms, whilst norms must be codified in laws which are entrusted to institutions. To achieve this the efforts of the allies, the exiles, and the inmates interlocked, as can be seen for example from the report by two Auschwitz escapees, Vrba and Wetzler. Their news travelled via Slovakia to the BBC in London, which broadcast details of Auschwitz and its gas chambers from their report on 15 June 1944.⁵⁷ Nothing more clearly illustrates the fellowship of prisoners, exiles, and allies. The overarching moral action, of course, stemmed from the allies. It was time to revive and restore Woodrow Wilson's hapless project for the League of Nations.⁵⁸ Franklin D. Roosevelt mooted his plan for the United Nations in his State of the Union address in 1941. He called it "a new Magna Carta of democracy,"⁵⁹ and unfolded it to Churchill and Stalin at Yalta.⁶⁰ This laid the groundwork for a new world order. Within this wider framework the exiles pulled their weight, notably the lawyers Hans Kelsen, Raphael Lemkin and Hersch Lauterpacht. The latter is celebrated in Phillippe Sand's biopic *East West Street*,⁶¹ but he leaves out Kelsen, who was no less important. Even before the war,⁶² Kelsen had worked on the reconstruction of Europe. He conceives of what he calls *cosmopolitan law*,⁶³ which he explains as follows:⁶⁴

Law is, essentially, an order for the promotion of peace. Its purpose is to assure the peaceful living together of a group of individuals in such a manner that they may settle their conflicts in a peaceful manner; that is, without the use of force, in conformity with an order valid for all.

What Kelsen envisages is a legal system uniting the world in a single legal body⁶⁵ that recalls Kant's plan for universal peace. The theories of the exiled lawyers and the efforts of the allies converged with the aspirations

⁵⁷ Miroslav Karny, "The Vrba and Wetzler Report," in *Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp*, eds. Yisrael Gutman and Michael Berenbaum (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1998), 557–558.

⁵⁸ Stephen C. Schlesinger, *Act of Creation. The Founding of the United Nations* (Cambridge, 2003), 27.

⁵⁹ Schlesinger, *Act of Creation*, 31.

⁶⁰ Schlesinger, *Act of Creation*, 53.

⁶¹ Phillippe Sands, *East West Street* (London, 2016).

⁶² Jochen von Bernstorff, *The Public International Law Theory of Hans Kelsen. Believing in Universal Law*, trans. Thomas Dunlap (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 93, 108–113.

⁶³ Siegfried Schieder, "Pragmatism as a Path towards a Discursive and Open Theory of International Law," *European Journal of International Law* 11 (2000): 674–678.

⁶⁴ Hans Kelsen, *Law and Peace in International Relations. The Oliver Wendell Holmes Lectures 1940–1941* (Harvard University Press, 1942), 1.

⁶⁵ Lars Vinx, *Hans Kelsen's Pure Theory of Law. Legality and Legitimacy* (Oxford University Press, 2007), 176–207.

of the prisoners in the camps. The lawyers' statutes became the new guarantors of value as in Lauterpacht's *International Bill of the Rights of Man*.⁶⁶ What these juridical guardians set their sights on was the anomie of the Third Reich. Nowhere can this be seen more clearly than in Lemkin's coining of the term "genocide" — the most violent manifestation of anomie, which is the antithesis of value.⁶⁷ It was his passion for philology that enabled Lemkin to coin a powerful new word made up of the Greek *genos* (race, tribe) and the Latin *cide* (killing) which became a unique rhetorical weapon in the fight for justice. Lemkin devotes a chapter to it in his *magnum opus*. The definition is remarkable:⁶⁸

It is intended [...] to signify a coordinated plan of different actions aiming at the destruction of essential foundations of the life of national groups, with the aim of annihilating the groups themselves.

By an act of judicial empathy Lemkin grasps exactly what occurred in the axis countries. His definition translates the Final Solution into legal terminology. It reflects key values, establishes a new norm, and outlaws genocidal acts. From here there lay a direct route to the Genocide Convention of 1948,⁶⁹ and genocide now stands at the apex of all crimes. Several institutions were charged with trying it, notably the ICTY, the ICTR, and the ICC set up in 2002.⁷⁰ Key values became enshrined in these bodies. The various post-war bodies combined to create a universal order intended to be more effective than Westphalia or the Vienna Congress. They are based on shared norms, which Kelsen now called "*Gerechtigkeitsnormen*."⁷¹ Such norms require a just form of behaviour to all humanity. Indeed, as Leo Strauss, another exile, argued:⁷² "The dignity of man consists in [...] freely choosing his own values." Strauss's appraisal establishes the decisive link between value and freedom. Thus exiles, inmates and allies converged to forge new

⁶⁶ Hersch Lauterpacht, *An International Bill of the Rights of Man* (Oxford, 2013).

⁶⁷ Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure*, 190.

⁶⁸ Raphael Lemkin, *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe. Laws of Occupation, Analysis of Government, Proposals for Redress*, 2nd ed. (Clark, 2008), 79.

⁶⁹ Mark A. Drumbl, "Genocide: The Choppy Journey to Codification," in *Philosophical Foundations of International Criminal Law: Correlating Thinkers*, eds. Morten Bergsmo and Emiliano J. Buiss (Torkel Opsahl Academic EPublisher, 2010); Larissa van der Herik, "The Schism Between the Legal and the Social Concept of Genocide," in *The Criminal Law of Genocide. International, Comparative and Contextual Aspects*, eds. Ralph Henham and Paul Behrens (London; New York, 2007), 76–77.

⁷⁰ David Bosco, *Rough Justice. The International Criminal Court in a World of Power Politics* (Oxford, 2014); Bruce Broomhall, *International Justice and the International Criminal Court: Between Sovereignty and the Rule of Law* (Oxford, 2003).

⁷¹ Hans Kelsen, *Reine Rechtslehre*, 618.

⁷² Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago, 1963), 44.

values, new norms, new laws and new institutions. Often a single individual established a civilisational continuity: the Polish Jew Yitzhak Zuckermann was an active Zionist before the war; he became a leader of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising; and after the war he assisted in the rehabilitation of camp survivors.⁷³ His life symbolises the moral continuity that spanned the Shoah. The wider situation is summed up by Norbert Elias. Writing at the end of *Über den Prozeß der Zivilisation*, which is dedicated to his parents who perished in the Shoah, he detects:⁷⁴ “die ersten Umrissse eines erdumfassenden Spannungssystems von Staatsbünden.” The process of civilization was not yet accomplished; but it lay within sight. The invisible community had done its work. It transformed what Woodrow Wilson called a “community of power”⁷⁵ into a value community to create a new world architecture. But having lasted a typical eighty to a hundred years, the peace upheld by the value community is now under attack. It is not just peaceful acts that multiply and progress. Indeed, as the Russian writer Maxim Osipov reminds us, there is an arc of evil that leads from the massacre at Babyn Jar, where many of Osipov’s own relatives perished, to what the Russians are now calling “the solution of the Ukrainian question.”⁷⁶ Since 7 October in the Middle East, matters have only grown worse: the postwar community of value faces its greatest test.

Conclusion

It follows from the argument of this paper which centres largely around the Shoah that the current hostilities across the world from the Ukraine to Gaza are best redrawn by developing the key liberal values and norms of truth, justice and freedom. This action is open to everyone. Any ordinary citizen can contribute to the maintenance of values. Whilst not teleological, as values are entities in themselves, this *modus operandi* should contribute to the cessation of hostilities and the recreation of civil society after the war. It is therefore essential to develop cultural activities during the fighting in order to develop new values, norms and institutions. By such means civil society should be enriched and enlarged. With respect to the Ukraine, it can be noted how the terrible history of pogroms against the Jewish people

⁷³ Zuckermann, *A Surplus of Memory*.

⁷⁴ Norbert Elias, *Über den Prozeß der Zivilisation. Soziogenetische und Psychogenetische Untersuchungen*, vol. 2 (Frankfurt, 1976), 452–453.

⁷⁵ Woodrow Wilson, “Address to the United States Senate, 22 January 1917,” in *Selections for Today*, ed. Arthur Bernon Tourtellot (New York, 1945), 131.

⁷⁶ Maxim Osipov, “The Fifth Day of the War. A Russian author faces the war in Ukraine,” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, February 28, 2022, accessed August 24, 2024, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/short-takes/the-fifth-day-of-the-war/>.

culminating in the horrors of Babyn Jar perpetrated by the National Socialists have been overcome by a modern, liberal Ukraine, as envisaged by figures such as Vernadsky. Bodies like the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences, inspired by Vernadsky are continuing to carry out their duty to the nation in this regard; but the same holds true for every Ukrainian citizen. It should, however, not be forgotten that the study of the humanities typified by the Ukrainian research and performance of Shakespeare by great Ukrainian scholars and theatre people is also playing a part in this procedure today. Whilst the politicians take a shine to NATO and the EU, citizens and scholars are continuing to effect what Norbert Elias calls the civilizing process.

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