Forgiving and Remembering

RUTH KLUGER
is professor emerita at the University of California, Irvine. She has published work on German literature from the Middle Ages to the twentieth century and has served on the Executive Council of the MLA as well as the *PMLA* Editorial Board. Her most recent project is the English rewriting of her German autobiography, *Still Alive: A Holocaust Girlhood Remembered* (Feminist, 2001).

I WAS ASKED TO COMMENT ON JULIA Kristeva's observations on forgiveness and related topics presumably because I am a survivor of the Holocaust and have written a book on the subject, entitled *weiter leben* in German and *Still Alive* in English. When talking about this book to German audiences, I was invariably confronted with the anxious question whether I could "forgive." It was not clear whether I was to forgive the perpetrators or all Germans. I would answer that I wasn't, as it were, "authorized" to forgive what was done to others, to the real victims—that is, the dead, as distinct from survivors like me. I would elaborate that a person may forgive an insult or even a slap in the face if the other party apologizes, but how can I "forgive" the murder of my teenage brother when I have had my life and he didn't get to have his? And perhaps the adult I am now cannot forgive even in the name of the child I was then. This was not a free decision, I would explain; it was simply not in my power to grant the kind of absolution that is implied in the plea or demand for forgiveness. The question, I admit, irritated me, for didn't it hold an implication that I must be too damaged by my childhood experiences to distinguish between the guilty and their later compatriots? But also because I do harbor resentments that are not for display and that I cherish as my private property, like my memories, and that help me live by balancing the scales of justice. Remembering and resenting are, or may be, siblings, like their opposites, forgiving and forgetting. Besides, did those questioners, many of them younger than I (I was almost fourteen when the war ended), have a "right" to claim the guilt from which they wanted to be absolved? For to take on the guilt of others smacks somewhat of sainthood, and to do so in public can be a kind of sentimental self-castigation, the flip side of moral self-congratulation. This is a tricky complication, because the self-searching and attempt at restitution by the Germans and their government are praiseworthy and should be encouraged, not criticized. You do have a stake in your nation's past if you want to be embedded in a tradition, and if you are serious about claiming your heritage, you have to take the good with the bad and own up to the crimes that were committed by your parents and grandparents. But that isn't the same as guilt and doesn't require forgiveness. If I come to like a German student of the second and recently even the third generation since World War II, I don't have to ask how I feel about his or her Nazi past. There isn't any. But often they start talking about that past, and some talk of it as if they were guilty.

Missing in Kristeva's interview is a distinction between guilt, in the sense of an actual crime or sin that was committed, and guilt feelings. Perhaps the distinction is implied in the demarcation line she draws between social justice and psychoanalytic practice. The fact is that the criminal or the sinner often doesn't feel guilty at all, and the innocent, like my third-generation German students, sometimes do (or pretend they do—it's hard to tell which). Here is an indelible image of the difference between the guilty who feel innocent and the innocent who feel guilty: at the Frankfurt Auschwitz trial of the sixties it was the witnesses—that is, the survivors—who wept, while the accused, the murderers and torturers, laughed and joked. Common criminals often rationalize what they have done, perhaps to eradicate guilt feelings or

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081202X62060 Published online by Cambridge University Press

because they don't have any in the first place. Thieves think that society owed them; rapists think that women like to be violated; murderers think that their victims had it coming. And some victims, notably raped women, think it was all their fault. The witnesses at the Auschwitz trial did not need forgiveness, but perhaps they needed psychotherapy.

Kristeva has an important point at the beginning when she says that the concept of forgiveness is essentially religious. For the psychoanalyst to take on the role of the priest may be a tall order, but it is certainly not a new idea. Moreover, the concept of forgiveness blends into redemption, where it becomes a little more secular. Etymologically, redemption means buying back. In earlier societies, if you killed a man, you paid an agreed-on sum, perhaps in cattle, as an act of redemption. Your debt or guilt (the two are intimately related, as in the Lord's Prayer: "Forgive us our debts") was redeemed or forgiven. We say that criminals who have served their terms have paid their debt to society, meaning they have been absolved of their guilt, the "payment" consisting of the time they served in prison. The forgiving party is the community, represented by the courts that sentenced them. It would seem that some retribution, some "buying back," has to take place before forgiveness can set in. And that is how Kristeva sees it too.

But in the case of major crimes, such as the Holocaust, there is no way to repay. Germany's so-called restitution payments to Israel and to individuals are a token of acknowledgment, but they are, of course, totally incommensurate. (Even the United States government's restitution payment for the far lesser offense of civilian Japanese American internment during World War II was never intended or received as more than an apologetic gesture, albeit a welcome one.) Where the crime surpasses a certain magnitude, we can't handle it, not with retribution, not with forgiveness. So we throw in the towel. Genocide is off the charts, as it were. The denazification program in Germany, which was meant to exclude former Nazis from holding public office and from sensitive posts like teaching, didn't work and was soon abandoned (some would say cynically). In Austria Chancellor Bruno Kreisky, a Jew, shrugged his shoulders and pointed out that there were no other people to rebuild the country than the Nazis he employed. Italian war criminals were never prosecuted at all, though there was plenty of incriminating material. In the meantime our worst enemies, Japan and Germany, became our close allies, and a close ally, the Soviet Union, became our worst enemy. It didn't make sense in moral terms, not if justice has to do with past actions, but that wasn't the point. We didn't forgive our past enemies. We just ignored the past. What else was one to do? There had been so many of them. We buried the problem of guilt and redemption, and perhaps that is the answer to the puzzling taboo that for several decades clouded all discussion of the Jewish catastrophe. Until the dogs of memory dug it up again, since it was unfinished business that had been neither forgotten nor redeemed.

Survivor guilt is in a sense a superstition, but in another sense it is deeply rooted in our perception of fairness. My brother was a mere boy when he was shot, and I visualize him healthy and alive at his own graveside. My father was a young man. Their ghosts are unforgiving. I can't give them some of my years to buy back, to redeem, theirs. So I remain in their debt, for a family is obligated to share, isn't it? I have had the fullness of life, many years, with their ups and downs, and they haven't had any of these. Whether a psychiatrist could "cure" me of this conundrum is irrelevant, for it is also a far-reaching social phenomenon, as our helplessness in the face of genocide has shown repeatedly.

Remembered history, written or oral, has to be selective, even though that makes it unreliable. Our minds cannot store everything that ever happened, including all the horrors we have inflicted on one another. These apparently started early. Scientists have speculated that our

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081202X62060 Published online by Cambridge University Press

ancestors exterminated another type of human being, perhaps a less aggressive sort than Homo sapiens sapiens turned out to be. But unlike Kristeva I think that there is an element akin to forgiveness in the sheer passing of time, in the changing of the guards, the young taking over from the old. Unlike her I think of redemption as closely linked to the flow of time. We speak of the virtues of memory, but forgetfulness has its own virtue. In the short run forgetfulness, the suppression of the past, is a risky business, for memory will haunt us if the fabric of society has been torn in our time or in the recent past, but in the long run memory rests or at least becomes blurred, the weights shift, different events become foregrounded, others move to the back burner. The present memorial cult seeks to inflict certain aspects of history and their presumed lessons on our children. But its favorite mantra, "Let us remember, so the same thing doesn't happen again," is unconvincing. A remembered massacre may serve as a deterrent, but it may also serve as a model for the next massacre. We cannot impose the contents of our minds on our grandchildren, who will remember what they need to remember and forget the rest, as society has always done. In any case, we aren't as free to remember and forget (in psychological and moral terms, to resent and forgive) as we like to pretend. The human mind is constructed to remember, and a mind that doesn't is diseased, with Alzheimer's, senility, or a similar abnormal condition. Normal forgetting sets in because our minds can hold and focus on only so much and have to cast aside what is unimportant. But we have our ineluctable memories, and these we can shift around like furniture we do or don't like, banishing some of these items to the attic or the cellar, where ghosts may stalk.

Not for us, not yet, the closure implicit in forgiveness or in justice accomplished. The upheavals of the twentieth century were too great, not just the Holocaust but also the genocides that followed, not to mention the wars. By no twist of the imagination can I assign meaning or "signification" (Kristeva's term) to what has happened in my lifetime, whether I suffered it in my own person or mourned for lost friends and family members or read about it in the newspapers. It was chaotic, it was senseless, it was the vacuum that, we are told, nature abhors.

Then I look at those who came after us, who are not guilty, at least not yet. Jews have always known, even theologically, that there is redemption through posterity. Of course, it's very likely that the kids will turn out to be no better than our generation, which was not "the greatest," not if you take a close look. But a child does not need to be forgiven, for it is a new beginning in itself. In retrospect it makes a blessed union of what was perhaps a bad marriage, redeeming its parents' mistakes by its mere existence. So we start hoping again. I am neither cynical nor starry-eyed. Given past experience, the odds are against hope. But you never can tell. Perhaps they'll find a way to "buy us back," to redeem us, before we become their unforgiving ghosts.

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081202X62060 Published online by Cambridge University Press