

# The Elie Wiesel Prize in Ethics

First Prize - 2000

*The Secret of Redemption -  
Memory and Resistance: A Lesson for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*

Alexa Kolbi-Molinas

Smith College

Northampton, MA

PROPERTY OF  
The Elie Wiesel Foundation for Humanity  
529 Fifth Avenue Suite 1802  
New York, NY 10017  
NOT FOR PUBLICATION  
MATERIAL MAY NOT BE REPRODUCED  
IN WHOLE OR IN PART WITHOUT PERMISSION

## The Secret of Redemption – Memory and Resistance: A Lesson for the 21st Century

*In February 1948, Communist leader Klement Gottwald stepped out on the balcony of a Baroque palace in Prague to address the hundreds of thousands of his fellow citizens packed into Old Town Square. It was a crucial moment in Czech history - a fateful moment of the kind that occurs once or twice in a millennium.*

*Gottwald was flanked by his comrades, with Clementis standing next to him. There were snow flurries, it was cold, and Gottwald was bareheaded. The solicitous Clementis took off his own fur cap and set it on Gottwald's head.*

*The Party propaganda section put out hundreds of thousands of copies of a photograph of that balcony with Gottwald, a fur cap on his head and comrades at his side, speaking to the nation. On that balcony the history of Communist Czechoslovakia was born. Every child knew the photograph from posters, schoolbooks, and museums.*

*Four years later Clementis was charged with treason and hanged. The propaganda section immediately airbrushed him out of history, and obviously, out of all the photographs as well. Ever since, Gottwald has stood on that balcony alone. Where Clementis once stood, there is only bare palace wall. All that remains of Clementis is the cap on Gottwald's head.*

*It is 1971, and Mirek says that the struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting.*

- Milan Kundera,  
The Book of Laughter and Forgetting

### The Secret of Redemption: Introduction

The opening passage to Milan Kundera's 1979 book, The Book of Laughter and Forgetting, demonstrates the absolute power, but also the absolute fallibility of totalitarian rule. At the root of this political and psychological paradox is the persistence of memory. Yet given what we know of Stalin and his legacy, how can I suggest that a system whose very nature is so violently methodical be considered fallible? The totalitarian state surely knows no bounds on its own behavior, knows respect for no authority other than its own - where, then, is its weakness? Its weakness, Kundera reveals, lies in

in the fact that in a system fortified by the absence of alternate and dissident thought, that is all that is needed to topple it. Its undoing is Clementis's hat.

According to Kundera's account, the Czech Communist Party immortalized Clementis, reproduced his picture by the thousands and inundated a nation with the image. Only four years later Clementis's immortality was revoked; he was hanged as a traitor and his past, as well as his present and future erased. Kundera's selection of this story is key. It is reflective of the central purpose of totalitarianism; to change, and control, the very nature and direction of humanity. More importantly, however, the passage is indicative of the essence of totalitarianism - the pursuit of a goal which, while destructive and even murderous in its means, is unattainable in the end. In terms of power, the neutralization of resistance, and the command of history Clementis's hat is emblematic of totalitarianism's failure.

Once revealed, the totalitarian's reign is irrevocably undermined. In losing control of the past, its hold on the present and future is doomed. This can be of little comfort to those, like Clementis, who suffer during terror's reign, but the understanding is crucial. Humanity is far more complex than totalitarianism either allows or expects it to be. "Memory," Hans Buchheim explains in Totalitarian Rule: Its Nature and Characteristics, "can help us enormously not to overestimate the danger in the long run, and especially not to feel that we are involved in a lost cause. We are not confronting a monster that is destined and in a position, through inner necessity or as a consequence of historical development to devour us sooner or later."<sup>1</sup> The absolute state has absolute power in that its influence is both morally and ethically limitless, but it is fallible because its objective can never be realized. Memory, recognizing the significance of the past and the fluidity of history, is this State's greatest weakness and the people's most powerful weapon.

The Baal Shem-Tov said that “In remembrance lies the secret to redemption.”<sup>2</sup> Although this essay focuses primarily on totalitarian systems, memory exists as the greatest threat to all repression and the greatest universal obstacle to atrocity and genocide. Through Heda Kovaly’s autobiography, Under a Cruel Star: Life in Prague 1941-1968, we are able to understand in greater depth the atmosphere evoked by Kundera at the outset of this paper. We are offered, in Kovaly, a prime example of how the commitment to individual memory facilitates resistance. Similarly, we also learn of the adverse impacts of a deficient national memory, one which does not adequately reflect history nor the individual memory of its peoples; for where totalitarianism seeks to narrowly define and limit human existence, memory enables us to retain our complexity and freedom.

As the 20th century comes to a close, we are presented with a profoundly depressing list of mass atrocities, gross human rights violations, and incidents of extraordinary evil. The struggle of memory against forgetting is the struggle to reclaim humanity, but it does not end once the reign of terror has fallen. In Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed: The Story of the Village of Le Chambon and How Goodness Happened There, by Philip Hallie, it becomes clear that even after the fall of a repressive regime, memory remains a crucial part of the healing process. Using the story of a small French village that resisted the Nazis, and exhibited an ethical code that was by far the exception to the rule during that time, Hallie demonstrates the importance of the study of courageous behavior, and how this memory can redeem our faith in the power of goodness over evil. Together, Kovaly and Hallie present a compelling precedent for the 21st century to follow: remembrance, and through remembrance, redemption.

### The Secret of Redemption: Individual and National Memory

Totalitarianism does not take hold of a nation overnight. Its power feeds on the growing powerlessness of the people - a certain degree of mass bewilderment and passivity, certain negative

rather than positive states of the mass mind are required.<sup>3</sup> It is the election of either memory or forgetting which determines the direction, either positive or negative, of a country's collective mentality. While memory forces a confrontation with a possibly uncomfortable past, forgetting permits an individual to look the other way, and disregard all that is problematic and troubling. When individual denial and the suppression of memory occurs on a large enough scale, the negative mindset of totalitarianism is born. And when an individual becomes committed to memory, resistance to totalitarianism is born.

In Under A Cruel Star, Heda Kovaly describes the insidious takeover of Czechoslovakia by the Czech Communist Party and the Party's subsequent shift to dogmatic Stalinism. In doing so she also documents the struggle of memory against forgetting and of her own battle for survival. Through each phase of Communism (the idealistic rise to power, the paranoid and ruthless purges, and the self-destructive decline), Kovaly retained an understanding of truth amidst its many mutations. Although this inner strength did not protect her from persecution, it ultimately saved her from dehumanization.

Kovaly, an escapee from the concentration camps, returned to Prague to participate in its triumphant liberation from Nazi Germany in 1945. Once the excitement of freedom faded, however, she, like other Czech people, were troubled by their memories of Nazi occupation. "We were, we thought, burdened with obsolete ideas, prejudices, weaknesses," explains Kovaly. "Why had we surrendered to Hitler? Why had we allowed ourselves to be locked up in concentration camps and prisons?"<sup>4</sup> These were hard questions to ask, let alone answer, as they challenged the strong liberal traditions of Czech culture. The war had

uprooted everything we thought we knew about life, people, history, ourselves... We had listened with only half an ear when our history teachers discussed torture or the persecution of innocent people. Those things could only have happened a long time ago, in the dark ages. When it happened in our time and in a form far worse than we could imagine, it felt like the end of the world. It seemed to us that we were witnessing a total break in the evolution of mankind, the complete collapse of man as a rational being.<sup>5</sup>

The loss of personal and national identity was devastating. The need to rationalize Hitler's rise to power was overwhelming the need to understand it. In effect, it was this initial suppression of memory, this refusal to look closely at the deep rooted fears, hatreds and prejudices which allowed for the atrocities of Nazi rule, which led to the emergence of the Czech Communist Party. Conversely, it was at this juncture that Kovaly's enduring sense of memory led to the appearance of her resistance.

For many, the Party returned the confidence that the experiences of the war had destroyed. For Kovaly, however, it seemed too easy. "They offered such clear and simple answers to the most complicated questions," she writes, "that I kept feeling there had to be a mistake somewhere."<sup>6</sup> Kovaly distrusted the ideological conversion which many of her peers underwent. Again, Kovaly found it too simple, a misrepresentation of the recent events which had so effected her life.

I was unable to take the advice of people who kept telling me that the only way back to life was to forget. I wanted to say everything, to cover up nothing, to pretty up nothing, to keep things inside me the way they had been, and to live with them. I wanted to live because I was alive, not just because by some accident I was not dead.<sup>7</sup>

Unfortunately others were not strong enough to reject the Party line and Czech society experienced a subtle but decisive change. Although her husband's high ranking position gave Kovaly status within the regime, Kovaly's psychological distance from Party afforded her perspective. When one of her husband's colleagues told him, "I consider you a good friend. But if I ever found out you had done anything to hurt the Party, I'd turn against you in a minute and do my best to make you pay for it"<sup>8</sup> she was convinced of the transformation taking place. "When ideology takes the front seat, human relations are pushed aside," she explains. "When every action and thought is geared to the building of a new society, there is little room left for feelings."<sup>9</sup>

To be sure, by 1951 all feelings except the feelings of loyalty to the State were swept aside as the Stalinization of the Czech Party reached its height. Soviet advisors were charged to purge Party

ranks and Kovaly urged her husband to resign his position as soon as possible. Refusing to stop and recognize where the regime was headed, Rudolf clung to the idealism of the original Party program. As the intensity of the arrests increased, Kovaly's memory again began to haunt her even more. "Doesn't it seem strange to you," she asked her husband, "that so many of the people who are being arrested are Jews?"<sup>10</sup> Her husband's response was one of anger and incredulity. Sadly, Rudolf was too dependent on Communist dogma and Party truths by this point to notice the repetition of history. Kovaly, however, through her devotion to memory, was removed from the artificiality that dominated Czech society - her conscience did not depend on endorsing it.

Eventually Rudolf too, was arrested. Kovaly's account of the infamous Slansky trials, within which Rudolf was implicated, reveals the extent to which the Party had been able to shape its members' memories at will. Lisa London, whose husband was on trial with Rudolf, wrote of the man with whom she had lived for 16 years, raised children and fought against Nazis in the French Resistance, "I lived with a traitor". Thomas Frejka, the 16 year old son of another defendant, Ludvik Frejka, wrote in a letter to the editor "I demand that my father receive the highest penalty, the death sentence...and it is my wish that this letter be read to him."<sup>11</sup> Even Rudolf's testimony, broadcast on national radio, reflected the power of totalitarian influence. As his confession unfolded, Kovaly realized that "he was simply reciting something he had memorized. A few times he stopped short, as though he were trying to remember his lines, and then he started up again, like a robot."

How could they have forced him to such testimony, my Rudolf who had never, in all the years I had known him, ever lied about anything? How could they have made him vilify his parents, who had been murdered in Auschwitz? What had he suffered before he broke down? How had they crushed him? At one point I heard Rudolf's voice say that he had been trained in espionage in London when, of course, he had spent the entire war as a prisoner in German concentration camps.<sup>12</sup>

Totalitarian regimes have no respect for the past. It can only be a tool for furthering their own future. The Party had used Rudolf's talents and skills as an economic advisor for years but when they were no

longer profitable, he was eliminated. A mere execution would not have been enough, however. Not only must the totalitarian state excise the past but also it must first render it excisable. According to the State, Rudolf's existence, as it was with many others, was malleable and disposable. But for Kovaly the memory of her husband's life and the circumstances of his death could not be modified. She maintained the memory of his innocence within her like Clementis's hat.

After Stalin's death in 1953, the grip of the totalitarian Communist state faltered. The figurehead of totalitarianism had fallen and with it the totality of its control. Throughout the Soviet Bloc political prisoners were suddenly, and quietly, being released. The three men tried with Rudolf who had been given life sentences instead of death were among those released and rehabilitated. That same year Kovaly was summoned to the Central Committee in Prague.

In typical totalitarian doublespeak, the Party attempted to camouflage their past crimes with benevolence. Kovaly was allowed to read a paragraph from a larger volume stating:

The innocence of Rudolf Margolius has been established beyond a shadow of a doubt. He did not in any way harm the interests of the State. On the contrary, a thorough review of his case has concluded that he fulfilled his duties in an exemplary manner. Had his proposals and plans been implemented, our national economy would have reaped considerable benefits.<sup>13</sup>

"Comrade Jerman looked beseechingly at me," Kovaly relates. "Surely such a generous retraction would soften my heart." However, when Kovaly demanded an appropriate remedy, one that reflected the severity of their mistake - an investigation into the accusations leveled against her husband and their public refutation, along with a public investigation into the methods through which his confession had been obtained - it was clear that the Party had no intention of officially reforming State history. Still, empowered by their now obvious fear of the truth, Kovaly refused to concede her memories to the Party in exchange for a backwards apology. "You can keep your rehabilitation," she told them. "The truth will come out. Just wait, you can't prevent it. And then you'll have to account for this too. I've waited eleven years. I can wait a few more."<sup>14</sup>

When Kovaly was offered compensation by the Ministry of Social Welfare her response was similar.

You murdered my husband. You threw me out of every job I had. You had me thrown out of a hospital! You threw us out of our apartment and into a hovel where only by some miracle we did not die. You ruined my son's childhood! And now you think you can compensate for that with a few crowns? That you can buy me off? Keep me quiet?<sup>15</sup>

“It is astounding how terrified such men of action are of words,” Kovaly recalls. “No act is too sordid for them to carry out, no act disturbs their sleep, so long as it is not called by its proper name, so long as it is not put into words. In this lies the great power of words, which are the only weapons of the defenseless.”<sup>16</sup> Kovaly's memory had endured through years of abuse and now that her abusers were weakening her memory gave her additional courage.

In fact, the cracks in the totalitarian regime were soon releasing pieces of memory and truth beyond the Party's liking. In 1968 the Soviet Union invaded Prague in order to reestablish control. Psychologically, however, Communist ideology had lost the ability to dominate. The reemergence of memory had given authority and autonomy to the people who had once allowed totalitarianism to do their thinking for them. “During the invasion,” Kovaly writes, “when we lost everything, we found something that people in our world hardly dare to hope for ourselves and each other. In all those faces, in all those eyes, I saw that we all thought and felt alike, that we all strove for the same things. Prague resisted in every way it could.”<sup>17</sup> Where once the lack of memory had allowed for totalitarian rule, Czechoslovakia now responded with an arsenal of memories. Although they could not stop the tanks, the seeds of rebellion had been planted. “The spell under which the Soviets had held many die hard true believers was broken for good. There would be no more illusions, no more self-deception about the nature of Big Brother. The grim reign of ideology was over...”<sup>18</sup>

In 1993, after the overthrow of Soviet occupation, former political prisoner and current president of the Czech Republic, Vaclav Havel echoed Kovaly's sentiments. “It is astonishing to

discover how,” he said, “after decades of falsified history and ideological manipulation nothing has been forgotten.” Maintaining individual memory within a society which seeks to institute a very singular and restricted vision demands an enormous amount of personal strength. But it also, invariably, feeds that strength. Heda Kovaly’s memory of World War II and the Holocaust prevented her from becoming an inadvertent conspirator in the totalitarian/Communist takeover of her country. The memory of her husband’s illegal trial and execution sustained her when Party repression was at its worse, giving her cause for resistance when surrender and even death would have been easier. Finally, once the limitations of the State became evident, Kovaly was prepared to avail herself on its every weakness in order to assert the truth of her memories. Notably, she was not alone. Luisa Passerni writes in “Don’t Forget: Fragments of a Negative Tradition”, that “memory - or better: memories - can help us to find ways, in the era of equality and cosmopolitanism, to participate in the other, to share his/her being other.”<sup>19</sup> The appearance of individual memory on a national scale unified Czechoslovakia - a country on whose divisiveness totalitarianism had once thrived. Even though the country was punished with a military invasion, an ideological one had been rendered obsolete. Totalitarianism would no longer enjoy the same measure of supremacy as it once had. The mass revival of individual memory had permanently altered the dynamics of the struggle. The struggle of man against power, as Kundera termed it, was an inevitable victory now that the battle of memory against forgetting had been won.

### The Secret of Redemption: International Memory

In the prelude to his book, Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed: The Story of the Village of Le Chambon and How Goodness Happened There, Philip Hallie describes how he came to study and write about a small village of French Protestants who saved 5 thousand Jews from the Vichy

government in southern France. Before he stumbled upon the story of Le Chambon Hallie was a professor of philosophy, and a former World War Two gunner, who focused his life on a study of cruelty.

Across all these studies, the pattern of the strong crushing the weak kept repeating itself and repeating itself, so that when I was not bitterly angry, I was bored at the repetition of the patterns of persecution. When I was not desiring to be cruel with the cruel, I was a monster-like, perhaps, many others around me - who could look upon torture and death without a shudder, and who therefore looked upon life without a belief in its preciousness. My study of evil incarnate had become a prison whose bars were my bitterness toward the violent, and whose walls were my horrified indifference to slow murder. Between the bars and the walls I revolved like a madman. Reading about the damned I was damned myself, as damned as the murderers, and as damned as their victims. Somehow over the years I had dug myself into Hell, and I had forgotten redemption, had forgotten the possibility of escape.<sup>20</sup>

For Hallie, if only such evil things were possible, then life was too heavy a burden for him. “The lies I would have to tell my children in order to raise them in hope - which children need the way plants need sunlight - would make the burden unbearable,” he writes.<sup>21</sup> Without hope, both children and adults are susceptible to helplessness. A hopeless and helpless populace is a dictator’s dream. Once helplessness is secured within us, action, especially that which puts oneself at risk, seems a useless endeavor. We lose the resources with which to fight. Thus even with memory and even with a heightened understanding of the processes of evil, great crimes will be repeated because few will have the strength to stop them.

When we remember horror it is essential, then, that we remember the goodness that was marshaled against it, no matter if it was the exception to the rule, no matter that the “moral brilliance” of a few “does not light up the darkness...as much as it makes that vast darkness seem darker by contrast.”<sup>22</sup> The comparison of evil and good, when evil is so great and goodness so small, can be a depressing and disheartening one. But memories of goodness also include the following: they teach us that just as evil does not appear out of nowhere it also is not avoided automatically. Instead, it is

avoided by conscious decision, by deliberate choice among competing priorities.<sup>23</sup> It is only with this understanding that within memory lies redemption.

Hitlers rely on the degradation of humanity. If the Jews were less than human it was easy to round them up and allow them to die in the inhuman conditions of the concentration camps. The people of Le Chambon remind us that all people, even a precious few, are worth saving, even at great personal risk. Hallie had devoted himself to a study of cruelty because he was determined to understand the ordinary processes of extraordinary evil. Hallie strove to never forget, but in doing so was unable to remember goodness and how evil was fought; he saw only its existence and was understandably numbed. The story of Le Chambon and others like it force its students to remember goodness and the limits of evil. Writes Hallie, "I needed this understanding to redeem myself - and possibly others - from the coercion of despair."<sup>24</sup>

It has already been shown that individual and national memory are integral pieces of resistance and survival. On an international level, memory is essential to motivating future resistance. Remembering cruelty and evil in those terms is an important first step - it gives credence to those who were victimized and identifies the guilty. But if the people who attempted to stop cruelty and evil are not remembered as well, then it is more likely that the negative mindsets of State terror will emerge again.

### The Secret of Redemption: Conclusion

In considering what specific actions must be taken to prevent the 21<sup>st</sup> century from repeating the mistakes of the past, I could write pages and pages more than I already have. I am content to say here only that without memory at its heart, any and every human rights policy will inevitably fail. In her article, "Fragments of a Negative Tradition", Renate Siebert asks:

Is it possible to skip recent history, the history in which our mothers and fathers were protagonists - because it is rotten - and connect to previous traditions? I do not think so. Can 'not forgetting' become an uncomfortable, yet living, radical and accepting tradition? I believe so.<sup>25</sup>

The questions Siebert poses are central to this paper. In Heda Kovaly's memoirs we find that a shortage of individual and national memory invites the mindlessness, and brutality, of totalitarian rule. Fortunately, we also find that in memory exists the key to courageous resistance.

International memory presents a challenge to the greater world community. We too have a responsibility to remember because the implications of all repression - the Holocaust, ethnic cleansing and genocide - are universal. Without the development of memories of courageous resistance alongside the bad, then extraordinary evil may remain unchecked in the future. The knowledge that goodness exists and that it is successful counteracts evil's influence. In Philip Hallie's account of the village of Le Chambon, the existence and power of goodness is demonstrated. More importantly, in the act of recording the story of Le Chambon, Hallie demonstrates the potential of its memory.

There are many who would argue, however, that memory effects a prison in the past. These people believe that memory is too easily turned into an obsession, an obsession that leads to vengeance and violence. They contend that reconciliation and progress depend on letting go. History proves otherwise. The legacy of the 20th century alone shows us that remembering is a constant process and one that insures both mourning and healing. Thus to stand in the way of memory is to stand in the way of progress. The collective histories of the Czech Republic and of Le Chambon illustrate in real life terms that memory is in fact at the heart of goodness and the resistance of and battle against evil. Clearly, memory is both a unifying and empowering social agent in all societies. Undeniably, the struggle of people against power will not be complete absent the victory of memory over forgetting.

---

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Hans Buchheim, Totalitarian Rule: Its Nature and Characteristics (CT: Wesleyan University, 1968) 109
- <sup>2</sup> Philip Hallie, Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed: The Story of the Village of Le Chambon and How Goodness Happened There (NY: Harper Perennial, 1994) 6
- <sup>3</sup> George F. Kennan “Totalitarianism in the Modern World” Totalitarianism, Ed. Carl J. Friedrich (USA: Harvard University Press, 1964) 23
- <sup>4</sup> Heda Margolius Kovaly, Under a Cruel Star: Life in Prague 1941-1963 (NY: Penguin Books, 1986) 63
- <sup>5</sup> Kovaly 64
- <sup>6</sup> Kovaly 55
- <sup>7</sup> Kovaly 72
- <sup>8</sup> Kovaly 81
- <sup>9</sup> Kovaly 81
- <sup>10</sup> Kovaly 103
- <sup>11</sup> Kovaly 139
- <sup>12</sup> Kovaly 141
- <sup>13</sup> Kovaly 171
- <sup>14</sup> Kovaly 173
- <sup>15</sup> Kovaly 175
- <sup>16</sup> Kovaly 169
- <sup>17</sup> Kovaly 191
- <sup>18</sup> Kovaly 191
- <sup>19</sup> Luisa Passerni, “Introduction” International Yearbook of Oral History and Life Stories. Volume 1 Memory and Totalitarianism. ed. Luisa Passerni (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992) ii
- <sup>20</sup> Hallie, 2
- <sup>21</sup> Hallie, 7
- <sup>22</sup> Hallie, xiii

---

<sup>23</sup> Fred E. Katz, Ordinary People and Extraordinary Evil: A Report on the Beguilings of Evil (New York: SUNY Albany Press, 1993) 14

<sup>24</sup> Hallie, 12

<sup>25</sup> Renate Siebert “Don’t Forget: Fragments of a Negative Tradition”, International Yearbook of Oral History and Life Stories. Volume 1 Memory and Totalitarianism. ed. Luisa Passerni (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992) 167

---

## WORKS CITED

- Buchheim, Hans. Totalitarian Rule: Its Nature and Characteristics. Connecticut: Wesleyan University, 1968.
- Hallie, Philip. Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed: The Story of the Village of Le Chambon and How Goodness Happened There. New York: Harper Perennial, 1994.
- Katz, Fred E. Ordinary People and Extraordinary Evil: A Report on the Beguilings of Evil. New York: SUNY Albany Press, 1993.
- Kennan, George F. "Totalitarianism in the Modern World." Totalitarianism. Ed. Carl J. Friedrich. USA: Harvard University Press, 1964.
- Kovaly, Heda Margolius. Under a Cruel Star: Life in Prague 1941-1968. New York: Penguin Books, 1986.
- Kundera, Milan. The Book of Laughter and Forgetting. New York: Penguin Books, 1979.
- Passerni, Luisa. "Introduction". International Yearbook of Oral History and Life Stories. Volume I Memory and Totalitarianism. ed. Luisa Passerni. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992.
- Siebert, Renate. "Don't Forget: Fragments of a Negative Tradition" International Yearbook of Oral History and Life Stories. Volume I Memory and Totalitarianism. ed. Luisa Passerni. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992.