

THE UNIVERSAL AND PARTICULAR DIMENSIONS OF THE HOLOCAUST STORY AND THE EMERGENCE OF GLOBAL ETHICS

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Abstract. In this paper I want to look at the Holocaust story as an example of a value-laden story which might become one of the foundation stones of the emergent global ethics, indispensable for bridging ideological divides that so often prevent a global society from living in peace and solidarity. My key suggestion will be that the stories that have the potential of becoming truly ‘global stories’, will in reality become carriers of global values only after undergoing interpretative transformation which will enable all citizens of the global village to identify with ethically positive aspects of the story, so that they will perceive this story as their own.

INTRODUCTION

Every potentially global ethical story is at the point of departure particular, not universal, because it usually speaks about only one group of people (defined along ethnic, national, religious, racial, political, gender or other lines) among other groups. Every such story is at the point of departure used by some particular group as the story constitutive of its ethical identity, by showing this group in positive ethical light, in contrast with some other groups of people. Every such group has inalienable moral right to its ethical stories (each group has many such stories, more or less central to its ethical identity). However, the challenge of our age, the age of globalization, consists exactly of the need to provide the global society with global ethical stories, by way of the universalization of the stories that are always primarily particular, often supremely particular (as in the case of the Holocaust of European Jewry, but also in such cases as the story of the slavery of the black peoples, the story of the fate of the native peoples of North and

South America, the story of the Soviet gulags, the story of South African apartheid, the stories of the Red totalitarian regimes of South East Asia, the story of the suffering of the Tibetan people, and many more).

In this paper I want to look at the Holocaust story as an example of such value-laden story, unprecedented and incomparable as it is, which might become one of the foundation stones and points of reference of the emergent global ethics, indispensable for bridging ideological divides that so often prevent a global society to live in peace and solidarity. My key suggestion will be that the stories that have the potential of becoming truly 'global stories', will in reality become carriers of global values only after undergoing interpretative transformation which will enable (in principle) all citizens of the global village to identify with ethically positive aspects of the story, so that they would perceive this story as their own.

Unsurprisingly the particular aspect of the ethical stories provides the main reason for which particular groups are likely to resist universalization of *their* particular stories. They feel threatened by the prospect of the universalization of their stories, afraid that the reinterpretation of their ethical stories (a reinterpretation whose direction and nature is usually difficult to know in advance) will rob the stories of their particularity, and ultimately will rob the group in question of their stories.

There is no need to deny that such a danger exists. However, I want to suggest that the universalization of particular stories does not have to result in the weakening of the particular aspect of the story as a matter of necessity. The whole point of the efforts of global ethicists is to construe global ethics in such a way as to strike the right balance between its universal and particular dimensions. It is in fact the precondition of the global character of global ethics, that it will never be operative if it is not accepted by some parts of the global society freely as their own.

There is, however, a different point to be made, in favour of the universalization of particular ethical stories, such as the Holocaust story, namely that from a certain point of view the universalization of the story may actually result in the positive transformation of the particular aspect of the story, thus strengthening the power of the story as a carrier of ethical values. And the reverse may also be true (at the same time), namely that a certain excessive stress on the particularity of the story and refusal to 'share' the story with the global society may result in gradual de-valuation of the story, in a gradual corruption of its primarily ethical character.

It seems that the Holocaust story, controversial as it may sound, is a story which may and should become the supremely global ethical story, while at the same time being a particular story in danger of ethical de-valuation.

Nearly half a century after the Eichmann trial, which marked the beginning of the intense efforts to engage the global public in ethical reflection on the Holocaust as the ultimate moral failure of humanity, one question keeps coming to the fore: where do we go from here? This question is put forward by people with very different agendas, including those who report being 'tired' of listening to the Holocaust stories through all these years. Some advocates of the 'let's move on' approach to the issue at hand are quite clearly motivated by anti-Semitic sentiments. However, the question about the future of the Holocaust story is taken seriously also by scholars of international ethics and Holocaust studies. There is a growing awareness that in the multicultural context of the multi-polar world that is emerging in the process of deepening globalization, new ways of formulating the moral lesson of the Holocaust need to be found, if the Holocaust is to remain (or to become) a stable point of reference for the global ethics that is slowly taking shape.

Whatever the specific characteristics and variety of these 'new ways' of communicating the moral message of the Holocaust to non-Jews, they all have to bring to the fore the 'universal' aspect of the Holocaust story with which non-Jews could easily connect. It seems that this can be done without diminishing the 'particular' (i.e. distinctly Jewish) dimension of the story. In fact – and this is the main point of this paper – without the reference to the universal core of the Holocaust story, the deeper meaning of its particularity cannot be appreciated by non-Jews and Jews alike.

THE BATTLE OF THE IDENTITY STORIES

A turning point seems to be emerging on the horizon for the Holocaust storytellers. It is not necessarily marked by the fact that the generation of the last first person witnesses of the Holocaust is passing away, though the passage of time does not make it more likely that new generations – as a matter of course – will be inclined to shape their moral attitudes (towards Jews and non-Jews) by drawing inspiration from the horrors of the Holocaust. Neither is this turning point marked decisively by the successful establishment and flourishing of the State of Israel. It has rather to do with the profound changes in the much broader cultural and ethical context that mark the beginning of a truly global age.

Since the 1960s, the colonial era has come to an end, and the bipolar world of the Cold War has been superseded by a multi-polar one. In this new world it is not only the case that many regional powers have joined

the chess game of global politics, but also ethnic groups and local cultures affirm their right to dignity and respect for their own 'identity stories', ignored for so long or perceived as destined to be replaced by non-indigenous, supposedly superior and supposedly 'universal' stories.

This new cultural revolution, on a truly planetary scale, has been tacitly taking place in the last few decades, especially since the fall of Communism and the rise of the Internet. Today it challenges the old 'made in the West' world in which the global story telling was dominated by a few political and cultural superpowers. It gives birth to a far more pluralistic world in which local cultures while willing to participate in the global market of ideas and goods, and ready to use the technical tools of communication developed in the West, at the same time resist foreign cultural domination. They reject the role of a cultural satellite and want to constitute their own centre, prescribing for all other cultures the role of satellites shedding some additional light, but not being the primary source of the light in which they perceive themselves as valuable and at least on par with other cultures.

However controversial (and perhaps outdated) the 'clash of civilizations' talk might appear to us today, there can be no doubt that there is growing balance between various cultural voices on the world stage. Unsurprisingly this new multi-polar and multicultural reality is characterized by tensions and cultural competition of a new kind generated by the new media that are far freer from external control than were the traditional mass media which sometimes represented the cultural and political agendas of their owners. This competition can be helpfully compared to a battle, but it is not so much a battle between cultures, but rather a battle for the cultural soul of a person who is a product of this new global situation. This is a person who, though primarily immersed in her local culture, is open to and bombarded by images, ideas and stories conceived in different cultures, to such an extent that it is no longer a matter of course that her cultural identity will in time simply reflect her local origin. In this new and fascinating cultural context it is more and more obvious that one's cultural identity (or worldview) is a very complex and fragile aspect of one's personal identity and is by no means a given once and for all.

This battlefield for the cultural soul of a growing number of individuals that are on a day to day basis open to the flood of information coming from cultures different than their own, is delineated by the distinct 'identity stories' that are foundational for each culture. Identity stories have the power of shaping, among other things, one's moral perception of oneself and other people, which in turn informs one's moral decisions and actions.

It is crucially important to notice that identity stories don't have to be old to be foundational. It may be a story about the events of September 11th, 2001, about the 2008 bombing of Gaza, or about President Obama being a descendent of Kenyan villagers. It may be a story that is shared by very many people (like the ones just mentioned), but may be a story that is foundational for a small minority (a cultural, religious, or social minority) functioning within a broader cultural entity (like the story of the Falashas – Ethiopian Jews, a story which was not shared for centuries even with the broader Jewish community; or a story 'codifying' the experiences of British miners losing their jobs in the Thatcher era, a story of which other members of the broader society would be aware but would not 'share' in the deeper sense of the word).

Whatever the criticism of postmodern theories of cultural and linguistic expressions of group identities, it is hard to deny that such stories can be used as a tool in a power-struggle. However, it is only at a certain level that a conscious affirmation of one's own 'local' or 'particular' identity stories gives rise to a fragmented and polarized picture of the global community. What postmodern theorists seem to ignore is the fact that 'particular' stories are not the only ones that decisively shape cultural identities. Simultaneously with the process of polarization along the lines defined by the particular identity stories, another process is taking place, namely the increasing absorption of 'universal' identity stories across the cultural, religious and ethnic lines, and indeed on a global scale.

Stories exemplifying certain 'universal' values, such as peaceful resistance against the violation of human equality ('the Gandhi story', 'the Martin Luther King story', 'the Mandela story'), or the value of charity and compassion transcending ethnic and religious boundaries ('the Mother Theresa story', 'the Dalai Lama story') become parts of the web of interwoven identity stories not forced upon local cultures but accepted by them voluntarily as a part of the universal story of humanity. It is important to note that in some cases the values that such stories codify were not at all universal as recently as 100 or even 50 years ago. The point is that some stories are being accepted as universal or global (or perhaps better put as 'trans-local' and 'trans-particular') because of their compatibility with the local or particular identity stories, while other stories are likely to be rejected as clashing with particular stories and undermining local identities.

THE HOLOCAUST STORY: PARTICULAR AND/OR UNIVERSAL?

Thus it appears that the most characteristic feature of this new global cultural context, in which the Holocaust story will also have to be transmitted and passed to new generations, is defined by a complex interplay between the particular and the universal, the global and the local aspects of individual and communal identities that are being formed and shaped in the circumstances of an unprecedented flood of information. This co-existence of two seemingly opposing tendencies is only to be expected when one takes into account the information revolution that marks the beginning of the Global Age. It is the easy access to the technical tools that allow for spreading the local identity stories, which by being shared become quickly rooted in the soil of the local societies. It is also the access to these new mass media (largely uncontrolled by anybody who might like to promote a specific cultural agenda) which allows for the trans-local stories being quickly transmitted and absorbed by very different local cultural communities.

It seems that in this new situation only those elements of one's cultural and ethical identity which will be authentically appropriated, will retain their transformative force. To put it differently, only those stories which will be accepted in an unforced way as an integral part of particular identity stories of various peoples and cultures will become *de facto* universal, that is to say, *de facto* shaping local identities in various places of the globe. Thus some stories have a chance of becoming trans-local and trans-particular identity stories, while some stories may be rejected and so *de facto* remaining particular and local, whatever the efforts towards presenting them as universal and valid across the cultures.

This is a context which can make it at the same time more difficult and easier to tell the story of the Holocaust to various people in various places in such a way as to be voluntarily absorbed and accepted as a moral guide. The power of identity stories consists, in the last resort, in the fact that they serve as guides for action and sources of orientation in the otherwise morally ambiguous world. However, not all stories that people remember and share serve as true identity stories, that is stories that possess motivational power, defining individuals and groups to such an extent that they constitute points of reference in their self-perception and moral decision making. The vast majority of stories that fill books and human memory are just old narratives which have lost the fundamental importance they once possessed (for some people), or are just more or less accurate accounts of past historical events which in time have lost their power of firing people's

moral imagination, on the basis of which people act. Some ancient wars, past international conflicts, lost religious beliefs, nearly forgotten national or religious heroes, works of art or literary narratives which conveyed ideas that have ceased to inspire, can serve as examples of 'stories' that in the past served as identity stories, but were replaced by new stories or have retained only secondary status in the complex web of identity stories.

Bearing in mind these subtle dynamics of stories gaining and losing prominence, which in the era when people are bombarded with an unprecedented quantity of stories can take place in a relatively short period of time, one needs to conclude that only a very limited number of stories can have a secure place in the pool of universal stories shared across the cultures. There is no reason to think that without intentional efforts to turn the Holocaust story into a universal story, it will become one. After all, few Holocaust scholars will deny that before the Eichmann trial the Holocaust story did not achieve the status of an identity story even for the Jewish People as a whole (even though it is hard to believe today that this was indeed the case). But achieving the status of an identity story for one particular group of people does not secure its place among the universal stories, and the Holocaust story is after all in the first place a particular story, its particularity being implied even in its name: the Shoah, or the Holocaust (of the Jewish People).

Now, against this background it is easier to notice that the aforementioned 'lets move on' approach, to the issue of the teaching of the moral lesson of the Holocaust, brings with it more dramatic consequences than one might initially expect. This approach is advocated with special urgency by those who think that the Holocaust story has been successfully transmitted on the global scale and brought about desirable affects, clarifying sufficiently the issues of moral responsibility, retributive justice, atonement, forgiveness and reconciliation with regard to the perpetrators and the victims. They argue that the post-Holocaust generations can look upon the Holocaust as a historical event from which a moral lesson ('never again') has been learnt. Moreover, they argue that a prolonged discussion of the moral responsibility for the Holocaust, when conducted in a manner that implies that the Holocaust guilt has been somehow inherited by the Europeans born after the Holocaust (and not just by the descendents of the German Nazi perpetrators, but by the entire 'Christian civilization'), may in fact make it more difficult for these new generations to form a compassionate approach towards people of different origin, culture, or religion.

This line of argument can not only be motivated by various agendas, but may be developed in different directions leading to strikingly different

conclusions. One possibility is to argue that the Holocaust was a horrific event which took place in very specific socio-political circumstances and took place as a result of exceptional deterioration of the moral standards of one specific nation (Germany), and as such it concerns clearly defined groups of people, namely certain group of Germans (plus perhaps certain non-German collaborators) on the one hand, and a certain group of Jews on the other. The Holocaust – advocates of this line of thought want to say – is an event in which in the strict sense only these two groups of people participated, and such considerations as moral responsibility for the Holocaust, or the rights and responsibilities dictated by the idea of retributive justice, cannot really concern the descendents of the perpetrators and the descendents of the victims. In short, they want to suggest, once the last perpetrator and the last Holocaust survivor will pass away, the way the Holocaust story is to be told has to change significantly. How should it change? What the proponents of the ‘move on’ model most probably have in mind is lowering the expectations as to the status of the Holocaust story as an identity story. They seem to presume that it is unrealistic (and perhaps even undesirable) to expect that in 50 or 100 years from now the Holocaust story will be a universal identity story that would be defining for the moral sensitivities of people of various ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds around the globe, and not just the sensitivities of the Jews. There are respected mainstream Jewish thinkers and politicians in Israel and elsewhere who also stress the need of shifting at least partly the focus of the Israeli identity from the Holocaust to other elements of Jewish history and Jewish values, but in this paper we are not at all concerned with the role of the Holocaust story as an identity story for the Jews, i.e. a particular story, but as a candidate for a universal or global story accepted as their own ethical identity story by non-Jews.

However, the above reasoning – in effect advocating playing down the importance of the Holocaust story – does not have to be the only version of the ‘move on’ approach. By stressing the need to ‘move on’ one can in fact have in mind making a move from the current way of speaking about the Holocaust to some new way of speaking which would be expected to result in making the Holocaust story even more central and more ‘effective’ (in the sense of effectively shaping people’s moral perceptions). Advocates of this line of thought are simply concerned that without ‘moving on’ from the exclusive focus on the *particularity* of the Holocaust understood as the Shoah of the Jewish People, and without framing the moral lesson of the Holocaust in more *universal* terms, appropriating the lesson of the Holocaust will in the future be more and more difficult for non-Jews. And

so the Holocaust story told in this particularist mode will simply be 'un-effective', which certainly is not the outcome that those who make efforts to transmit this story hope for.

MAKING PLACE FOR SOMEONE ELSE'S STORY IN ONE'S OWN IDENTITY STORY

These 'let's move on' defenders of the universal importance of the Holocaust story call for shifting (somewhat) the focus from the particular aspect of the story (that is foundational only for the Jews) to the universal aspect of the story which would allow us to make the story foundational for Jews and non-Jews alike. Such a suggestion does not presuppose changing anything in the story itself, but rather – drawing on the multifaceted reality of such stories as the Holocaust story – encourages bringing to light the universal message that is implicit in the heart of that story.

In order to have the sort of profound moral impact on a person that only identity stories can have, the Holocaust story has simply to become her own story by becoming a part of the web of her identity stories. An absorption of stories which are to begin with someone else's stories will always be of the nature of a selective and creative 're-reading'. This process is necessary if the story is to fit the already existing web of the identity stories, which play the role of conceptual glasses through which a person perceives the moral realm.

It might seem that the Holocaust story is in such an obvious way the ultimate universal human story that it is enough to 'hear' it, in order to accept it as one's own identity story. Whatever the reasons, this does not seem to be the case. After a colossal effort of 'telling' the Holocaust story to as many people as possible, there are countless people in every corner of the globe, who close their ears to the voices preaching that the awareness of the moral responsibility of much of the human race for the Holocaust, should always remain as fresh as if they were themselves participating in the circle of evil that brought about the Holocaust of European Jewry. Very many people, even in the countries that were on 'Hitler's side', find the 'forever guilty' narrative too depressing to pay serious attention to it, and prefer to embrace the desire of making the Holocaust story a 'thing of the past'.

Be that as it may, making the Holocaust story an identity story for a non-Jew is not only desirable, but possible. This may not sound like a revelation, but what is worthy of attention is the subtle dynamic that allows for

such absorption of the Holocaust story by non-Jews. It is by studying this dynamic that one can draw some conclusions concerning the most helpful ways of promoting the Holocaust story as a possible universal story that could and should be the corner stone of a global ethics that would be free from moral relativism.

Let me present an example of a non-Jew who made the Holocaust story very much a part of his own identity story. It is worth noticing that he was exposed to the Holocaust story in a way that is practically not possible today and yet it appears that the absorption of the story by him was not an obvious thing.

This non-Jew, who turned the Holocaust story into a crucial part of the foundation of his moral vision, was a Catholic priest who became a Polish pioneer of the Christian-Jewish dialogue. In 1942, at the age of four, Stanisław Musiał, together with his family had narrowly escaped death, when they were to be executed by German soldiers for helping a Jewish neighbour. Sixty years later he described this event in the following words: "They aligned us in a row in front of our house. Then suddenly, led by some child's instinct, I threw myself down to the ground and nuzzled the knees of the German commander. He got emotional, sent the other soldiers away to look for other Jews in the houses of our neighbours and later said that he left a sonny like me in Germany. [. . .] And this Jew, whom we were trying to help, was tied by the soldiers behind a horse, brutally dragged through the village and killed." How surprising is his confession concerning the *memory* of this event: "I didn't think at all about this Jew, neither then, nor afterwards. Only many years later this image of the man dragged along the ground started to appear in front of my eyes, emerging from among the images of my early childhood. And it brings with it the sorrow and grief that I didn't save his life. This grief does not go away, even though I'm aware that I was only four years old then."

This is perhaps the most important message of Stanisław Musiał to all those involved in re-reading ethical stories in the new global context: his effort to recover and transform his memory, to discover in a stranger, in a person of different origin and different faith, a brother or sister, turning the fragment of someone else's memory into an important part of one's own memory.

What happened that after years of amnesia Stanisław Musiał regained the memory of the Jewish world that existed for centuries in the same space in which his own memory, the memory of a Polish Catholic, had been formed? This is how he spoke about it in 1998: "It was a mysterious

event. Conversion of heart. [. . .] One day I reached for a book about the suffering of the Jews during the war and I experienced a shock. I came across the story of the liquidation of a Jewish children's home in Ukraine. The Nazis bolted all the children in one room. The oldest children were only 7 years old. And someone had to kill them. The successive groups of soldiers had no heart to do it. And finally someone . . . [. . .] Reading about it I felt crushed. And I said to myself, that if I will be able to turn two or three people away from hatred and primitive anti-Semitism then my life will have sense."

Conversion of heart – the moral shock of a person whose own memory did not blind him to the point that he was not able to perceive, in the tragic history of a people of different faith, a call directed to himself to stand on their side. Here is the experience in which a man of dialogue is being born, a man with his heart and mind fully open to the 'other'. And a prophet who demands of his co-believers and compatriots that while cultivating their own memory – including the sacred memory of their own sufferings and their own martyrs – they voluntarily make space within their own story for the sacred memory of the sufferings and martyrs of 'other' fellow human beings.

The case of Stanisław Musiał presented above sheds light on one crucial element in the complex dynamics of the absorption of the Holocaust story by a non-Jew, which seems a *conditio sine qua non* for the promotion of the story to the role of the corner stone of a global ethics. It is his 'discovery' of the *universal* core of the story that allowed him in a spontaneous and voluntary way to 'accept' this story as foundational for his own moral orientation. He was clearly aware of the factual aspect of the Holocaust and yet for many years could not 'connect' to what constituted the heart of the story. There is no reason to think that his 'awakening' to the moral truth of the Holocaust story was preceded by some gradual moral development and that his 'conversion of heart' could not be reached earlier because he wasn't yet morally sensitive enough. There is a far simpler and more plausible explanation of why the hearts and minds of so many otherwise morally sensitive persons remain closed to the transformative force of the lesson of the Holocaust. We can read it between the lines of Stanisław Musiał's testimony. Before the Holocaust story became his identity story, it was not his story. It was a story of some people whose identity stories he did not – up to that point – share. He was immersed in his own identity stories and until he could see the natural and profound *connection* between his stories and the Holocaust story, he was not able to see why he should absorb it. To

be more precise, one should say that in such situations people don't really take notice of the story, they simply don't 'see' this story in a way that is necessary for discovering the inner truth of the story for oneself.

SAVING THE PARTICULAR BY SAVING THE UNIVERSAL

There can be no doubt that this decisive *connection* that people make between the stories that are already *their* stories and the stories that are to become their stories, is possible thanks to the existence of some common moral ground that people apparently share across the cultural and religious boundaries. The very fact that people sometimes do awaken to the truth inherent in the until then 'alien' stories, provides an argument for the existence of this common moral ground, which may be described as defined by universal or global values. The use of the term 'universal values' does not have to imply the necessity for some philosophical or doctrinal (religious) consensus (i.e. one does not have to bother about the absolute objectivity of such values being supported theoretically beyond reasonable doubt). It suffices that 'it works' in practice, that is to say, that the (moral) identity stories from one culture do not lose the power of motivating people to certain clearly desirable attitudes towards other people. If such a phenomenon is observable on a global scale, it justifies calling the values pointed to by the stories universal or global.

Here we can see that the process of the emergence of global ethics and the dynamics of this process are exactly the same as in the case of the aforementioned battle of the identity stories. In fact, the former is just a species of the latter. In both cases the decisive thing is the 'power of attraction' of a story, which seems to be rooted in the universality of the values that the story points to or expresses. The emergence of global ethics seems to be a spontaneous process, and as such it has far more to do with the spontaneously emerging consensus between representatives of otherwise distinct cultural and ethical traditions, than with books written by academic philosophers and having 'global ethics' in the title. Global ethics takes shape at these numerous cultural junctions created by the process of globalization, at which people discover without coercion that certain truths are expressed in alien cultures, perhaps expressed more powerfully than in their own. This realization generates a process of a voluntary and free exchange of insights into the realm of truth and value, and a spontaneous exchange of stories that serve as vehicles of these insights.

From this analysis some basic conclusions of practical value seem to follow. Firstly, it is clear that the more 'particularist' and 'local' the particular web of identity stories is, the more difficult it will be for people who do not participate in the same culture to connect to these alien stories and absorb them, allowing them to resonate in their own value system. Secondly, the process of globalization, when accompanied by an unprecedented loss of control over the stories that are being transmitted and made available virtually to everybody on the globe, makes it far less likely than it might have been in the past that the stories one 'believes' are *de facto* imposed on one, and not accepted freely (in any meaningful sense of the word). Thirdly, and somewhat paradoxically, it seems that there is a certain circularity in the dynamics of the process of accepting or rejecting stories because of their universality and/or particularity. On one hand, the more particularist the alien story appears on the surface, the more likely it is that it will be rejected as having nothing to do with one's own world-view as expressed in one's stories. On the other hand, universal values are almost always expressed in stories which are *also* particular (because there are no 'universal' identities, as there are no 'universal' cultures). As a result, when a particular story is accepted because of its universality, it is very likely that the discovery of the positive value of the particular aspect of the story will follow, as the history of Stanisław Musiał and so many other 'converts' to the Holocaust story testifies.