WRITING ABOUT RAPE

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I recently read a memoir about rape in Russian-occupied Germany during WW2 - *A Woman in Berlin.* In the book, an anonymous young woman recounts her experiences during the first few weeks of Russian occupation. The memoir was written in real time. It reflects the urgency and immediacy of the moment. The recounting was stark, unsentimental and lacked self-pity. The young woman struggled with rape on a daily basis. She was raped by Russian soldiers and by officers, and by men, young and old. She traded sex with 'familiar' rapists for food, shelter, and protection from unfamiliar ones.

Although she used the word 'rape' to describe her experiences, she never used the term 'rapist' to describe any of the men. She saw the men who raped her as more than just Russian soldiers with weapons forcing themselves on her. The soldiers were young peasant boys from Tartarstan, or older toughened sergeants from the Urals, or middle-class Muscovites, or the handsome Pole from Lvov. Understanding Russian, and having travelled in Russia, and read Pushkin and Tolstoy, she did not have the 'luxury' of her neighbours, who could more easily lump all Russians together and dismiss them as 'barbaric' and crude men from the uncivilized East. She could recognize, and even almost come to like, the Russian occupiers as individuals.

She describes this parting scene of a major who had spent many nights in her bed (more sick and lonely, than violent and overpowering):

> The major looks at me a long time as if to photograph me with his eyes. Then he kisses me in the Russian style on both cheeks and marches out, limping without looking back. I feel a little sad, a little empty. I think about his leather gloves, which I saw for the first time today. He was holding them elegantly in his left hand. They dropped on the floor once and he hurried to pick them up, but I could see they didn't match – one had seams on the back while the other didn't. The major was embarrassed and looked away. In that second I liked him very much.

She could not dismiss or deplore Russians as a group, leave alone as a uniquely bad one. She made an effort to understand, even empathize with them, and their situation. She was tolerant, albeit dismissively, of men in general, and contemptuously so of German ones in particular. Her description of how the women of Berlin viewed rape in the context of a destructive war was laced with black humour. Referring to US firebombing versus Russian rape, she quotes Berlin women as saying – "better a Russki on top than a Yank overhead."

Her writing reminded me of Primo Levi - also a "victim" of World War II Germany (http://library.spokanefalls.edu/Survival_in_Auschwitz.htm#Works). While his experiences were very different from *A Woman in Berlin*, they shared a similar sensibility. They were willing to accept their shared humanity with their tormentors, even as they opposed and resisted them. Primo Levi's experience in Auschwitz and that of a woman in Berlin cannot be easily compared. Levi faced the systematic oppression of a Nazi state machine bent on humiliating and killing Jews. The woman in Berlin, by contrast, was oppressed in the context of the chaos of the initial days of a military occupation – that even she seemed to welcome. Rape was incidental to the military occupation, not intended by it. Her tormentors were uncomfortable with what they were doing, even as they did it. The Nazis who invented and ran the extermination camps viewed Jews as questionably human and therefore deserving exclusion from the human race, and extermination. "Even if the Nazis did not always believe in race theory wholeheartedly, they still denied the shared humanity of humankind." (http://www.codoh.com/reference/uniqofholo.html). The Russian occupiers of Berlin did not have a racial ideology that treated Germans as subhuman or deserving of humiliation as a race.

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The experience of *A Woman in Berlin* is also distinct from the reports of mass rape of Tutsi women in Rwanda or Muslim women in Bosnia, where rape was a weapon of war, not incidental to it. There is no record in the Soviet archives of rape being a policy of the Red Army. The memoir illustrates how a transaction that seems so completely dominated by brute force – men with guns forcing themselves on helpless women – can also involve negotiations between victim and perpetrator. Still, these rapes would be considered war crimes, even though there was no explicit order from Moscow to rape German women, and some women seemed to consent to some sexual activity, albeit under pressure. Each individual act would be a war crime because of the context in which it occurred – under military occupation – making consent itself, irrelevant to the crime. (http://www.peacewomen.org/resources/Justice/GBCICC.html). The conditions under which the choice took place already constrained it. (http://www.tannerlectures.utah.edu/lectures/scanlon88.pdf)

The experiences of Primo Levi and the "woman in Berlin" are disparate. Yet, there is a striking similarity in their sensibility. They write with a stunning moral clarity and deep human empathy. They never question the common humanity of humankind. Their writing is literary moral rather than political theory. Still, it expresses a sensibility that needs to be captured for a more-decent politics.

In *The Decent Society*, Avishai Margalit comes closest to the political theorizing of such a world. Leaders who mobilize their people against great injustice and oppression, even as they reaffirm the humanity of those who oppress and discriminate against them, contribute to creating such a world. In contrast, other leaders who also fight against the oppression of their people question the humanity of their oppressors, not just particular actions, or the politics that leads to these actions. Emerging from an ethos of oppression or discrimination of their people, their politics lacks moral imagination – the ability to create the sensibility of a common humanity. This is fundamental to a peaceful moral politics that is not just the accidental outcome of a balance of power.

Primo Levi or *A Woman in Berlin* appeal to us. They are inspiring tales of human survival in the midst of great adversity. They are self-reflective about their survival. They do not shy away from narrating the compromises they made to survive and the happenstance involved in it. Because they are unsentimental and lack self-pity – even as we are horrified and sometimes even saddened by what we read – we are never depressed, nor dejected. They are also ordinary people, whose heroism and survival stems from banal acts of goodness, not extraordinary ones. And they write with a clarity and precision about the ambiguously singular moment when evil and good intersect – and neither prevails, permanently.

This is because they take their particular experiences – as a Jew or as a Woman in Berlin – and make them universal. They do this not by telling us a story about how the oppressed and defiled – a Jew or a Woman – are a part of humankind; but rather by never questioning the common humanity they share with those who oppress and defile. We read them because they express the possibility of an inchoate universalism at the very moment when it seems to have been banished, forever – in the midst of the starkest divide between the self and the other. ■

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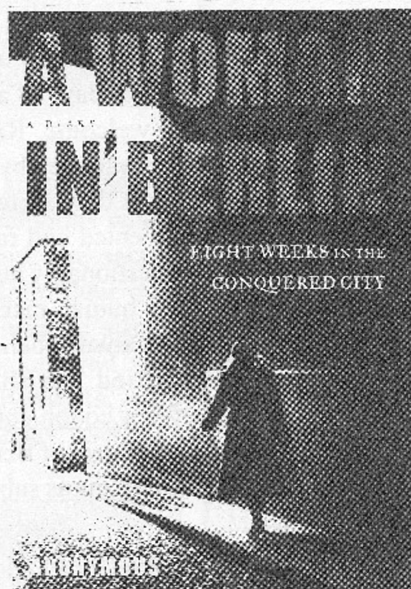

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