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Theoretical Perspectives

Remembering the Holocaust through Collective Memory:

Collective memory is exactly how it sounds, the passing of memories through a group or culture. This is a field of theory that Maurice Halbwachs and other theorists alike studied in hopes of understanding how or why this activity occurs. The Holocaust, an event that is known through generations and societies, is a prime example of the existence of collective memory. The question then is why is the Holocaust such an important event that it is remembered across such a vast array of dimensions? Through the passing of information in the form of historical information, the memorialization of such an event, and the passing of information that comes from memorialized influence, the Holocaust can be analyzed through the perspective of collective memory.

The event of the Holocaust would be the most logical place to begin with when discussing how the memory of such an event is passed down through the ages. There are two common forms of historical documentation which are used: survivor’s experiences and historical texts. Most people, on the topic of the Holocaust, begin with texts and media information presented about the events which took place during this genocide. From history classes to documentaries found while browsing through the internet, the information of the factual and event based details of the Holocaust are not unknown to mass amounts of people from all across the globe. Halbwachs mentions in the article speaking on collective memory about literature and its influence upon memories created (Halbwachs [1941, 1952] 1992, Pg. 46). When literature is first read, it is information taken in at a time where this is a pure experience and any other time after that the information is influenced by other memories made in between. This comes from the intake of new information whether it pertains specifically to the Holocaust or not, or over something that shares similarities to the event. But some hold conflicting opinions such as Jan Assman who speaks on the idea that Halbwachs, if still creating theory on the topic of collective memory, would not consider historical texts collective memory but collective history (Assman 1995, Pg. 128). This belittles in a sense the fact that all history texts stem from memory be it the writers own or another they have adopted along the way. There is no text in existence that can be presented without at least one thread of memory woven into its lines.

One of the rarer forms of memory passing pertaining to the Holocaust would be speakers on the topic. Speakers on this topic are commonly victims, sometimes normal civilians that were alive during the time, and even those who partook in the prosecution of the victims. In the article written by Jan Assman, the idea of “communicative memory” is discussed both individually and in relation to the writings of Halbwachs. While Halbwachs speaks on the idea that memories when shared via communication in a group is recalling memories in the light of a group setting, Assman mentions that there is a “limited temporal horizon” (Assman 1995). This directly pertains to Holocaust speakers in the sense that a group of persons once prevalent is not only shrinking but losing the clear memories they once had. When the final victim of the Holocaust passes there will be no person to pass on the first hand experiences and instead persons will have to turn to textual information. A sense of connection is what will be missing considering the idea that memories and information are passed down commonly through word and communication rather than writing. According to the writings of Assman, these things can be translated from collective memory to cultural memory which is shared in different manners.

The hosting of the Holocaust Awareness Events on East Carolina Universities’ campus is an example of cultural memory. Cultural memory, as defined by Assman, is observed as “having a fixed point and memory is maintained through cultural formations and institutional communication” (Assman 1995, Pg. 129). The awareness event would be classified then as an institutional communication in the form of observance and remembrance of the events which took place in a set span of dates. The institution was taking time and efforts to communicate information about these events which took place by using a multitude of mediums practiced by those giving remembrance. Things like vigil lighting, the movie which documented a story of a group’s memory, and the Shabbat dinner which was specifically created to inform others of practices held by those who were unfortunately tied to the event of the Holocaust as well. All of these events were set in place to remember the tragedy of the Holocaust in different manners, some more melancholy than others, some more uplifting. The issue raised in some groups on campus then is who are we remembering through these events? And, as many other conflicts will show, only the Jewish victims for one reason or another.

While the Jewish constituted the collective deaths of six million persons, there were still four to five million victims of other creeds and “crimes” which again have been shadowed behind the grief of one group. This action of biasing the memorial is a form of conflict theory commonly had by many of the other groups exposed to the tortures and torments of the Holocaust. There were homosexual, disabled, Roma, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Polish, and even African Americans who make up the other five million people slaughtered and in this event they received no recognition for one reason or another. All of these groups to this day still suffer in a manner that is unrecognized as equivalent to the suffering faced by their Jewish partners. It raises then a concern about why this is happening. Does it have something to do with simply the fact that there were one million more of the Jewish victims, that more of the Jewish victims managed to survive, or that there are people who want to make note of the commonly oppressed Jewish persons. As for East Carolina, it could have simply been a planning or labeling error where those in charge did not give much attention to being inclusive, or something rooted far deeper in the way that the memory of the Holocaust is being passed down.

Another manner of passing on the memory are in memorials and museums which span the globe in large numbers. These bring many things to continue the memory of people that are more visual that simply reading a line or hearing someone speak. There are photos, personal possessions, hair, teeth, instruments used, and so much more. This puts the person in the shoes of those from that era rather than telling them through words that could never do it justice. When one stands in leftover train cars from concentration camps, smells the rotting of the shoes and hair in certain museums, and sees the faces of all those who had fallen, the memory almost becomes a first-hand experience. This is another way that cultural memory is exhibited through an altered sense of both cultural formation and institutional communication. Monuments and museums take many different approaches to portraying the events and persons that occurred in this time so that the participant is engulfed in emotions whatever they may be. The important part of this step is what results from it.

There are many unofficially recognized representations of the event of the Holocaust. Some are considered more valid than others. The documentation of experiences from seeing memorials and events, such as this paper, are deemed less official than a book written off of the experiences of victims. The amount of art, literature, and other mediums dedicating to passing the emotions from such an event are immense and informative of the fact that the memories were received. This is a manner of morphing the experiences, like creating a visual representation of one of the victims based on descriptions given of them. All of these products of receiving a memory creates the possibility for the memory to continue being passed on. The creation of books and art in this manner is yet another form of cultural memory where the artist or creator is participating in cultural formation (Assman 1995, pg. 129). These continuously growing amounts of arts and creations are keeping the “island” of the Holocaust in existence when the voices of that experience are fading away.

The conflict of this situation pertains usually to texts and stories written, mostly those that paint a romantic and thrilling tale of such events. While happiness may have existed in passing happy moments, does this not belittle the experience of victims who lived nothing but suffering during these times. And the question, especially when the author simply uses this event as a setting rather than a memory, is how does this change the ideas of this memory? Is it now less serious because it is used to make entertainment from, or is this another form of passing a memory through words which can connect the reader to these people not as a victim or a number but a person with life experiences. With all of the writings, memories, and other creations stemming from this event it is apparent that there must be some reason to continue passing it onward.

From the victims mouths and history books the establishment of the event known as the Holocaust was made. The memorials and forms of memorialization that came after were telling signs that this event which occurred is no simple passing span of years. It has importance, be it in the sadness and un-believability of the events or the understanding that this time in history is what happens when governments run rampant. This event will continue to be passed through multiple forms of memory until it is no longer necessary to remind people of such a thing. It has been seventy years since the end of the Holocaust and it has only made advancements in continuing to be an event remembered through all mediums from here on out.

For the group Ian and myself read the names and then posted flyers and chalk advertisements around campus. The group did not work very well together to be honest. Ian was the only member who communicated with me and attempted to make plans to create advertisement for the event. The rest only spoke in class with us and then never answered any emails or blackboard postings. Two of or plans fell through so I stuck to the name reading since they were lacking in readers.

References:

Assmann, Jan and John Czaplicka. 1995. “Collective Memory and Cultural Identity.”

*New German Critique* 65: 125-133.

Halbwachs, Maurice.  [1941, 1952] 1992.  *On Collective Memory.* Edited, translated, and with an Introduction by Lewis A. Coser. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.