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Auschwitz, Politics, and the Twentieth Century

In "Signature," the last piece in *Difficult Freedom*, Emmanuel Levinas (1906–1995) tells us that the list of items in the first paragraph, his biography, "is dominated by the presentiment and the memory of the Nazi horror."[1] Hitler, Auschwitz, and Nazi fascism meant a great deal to Levinas, to his life, of course, to his philosophical thinking, and to his thinking about Judaism. Yet at times, Levinas talks about Nazism – Auschwitz in particular – as part of or characteristic of a larger phenomenon, one that encompasses the horrors of the twentieth century overall – before, during, and after the Holocaust. In this chapter, I will first set out and discuss what Levinas says about this larger phenomenon and later focus on the Holocaust in particular.

Levinas's ethical and philosophical views provide him with a perspective on human living and the everyday world that expresses itself often in his occasional writings, interviews, and more popular essays. A particular focus of this perspective is Auschwitz and twentieth-century life. We have not looked yet at his ethics and philosophy, but we can consider its expression, one of its manifestations, even prior to examining its details, and that is what I will do here, without any preparation or theorizing. What does Levinas say about life in the twentieth century, especially about the "decline of the West" and the crisis of modernity?

LEVINAS ON GROSSMAN'S *LIFE AND FATE*

During the last 15 years of his life, Levinas frequently and passionately cited one work as emblematic of this crisis and his own special response to it. He referred to it at least twice in print, in 1984 and 1986, and also in 1984 in one of his

[1] Levinas, *Difficult Freedom* (1963, 1976), 291; cf. Jill Robbins (ed.), *Is It Righteous to Be?*, 39.

annual Talmudic lessons.[2] In interviews in the 1980s, however, he was drawn to it numerous times, almost compulsively. The work is Vasily Grossman's *Life and Fate*, a massive realistic novel about Hitler and Nazism, Stalinism, and the Battle of Stalingrad, but more generally about the crisis of European culture and life. Trained as a mathematician and engineer, Grossman began writing in his twenties and by 1934 had written his first novel and stories that caught the attention of Maxim Gorky. During World War II, while Levinas was in a prisoner-of-war camp, Grossman was a journalist for a Soviet newspaper. He was the first to expose the atrocities of the Nazi death camp at Treblinka. Later, he collaborated in the compilation of *The Black Book*, a collection of documents related to the Nazi death camps.[3] Grossman's writing is realistic, direct, and powerful, and while it has a homiletic and didactic quality at times, it is riveting overall. It is no wonder that Levinas was so impressed by Grossman's magnum opus.

Life and Fate was written in the 1950s, when Grossman was realizing a good deal of public success, albeit in the wake of postwar attacks on him and a formal letter of repentance. Completed in 1960, the novel was promptly rejected for publication as anti-Soviet, and the manuscript was confiscated by the KGB.[4] Depressed and upset, Grossman died of cancer in 1964.[5] *Life and Fate* was eventually published in Russian by a small Swiss press and then translated into French, and German, and finally English in 1987.[6] I imagine that Levinas, who read it in Russian, did so in 1983 or 1984, when he cites it extensively at the end of his Talmudic lesson "Beyond Memory." It begins to appear in his interviews about 1985–86.[7]

The novel is about large events and tiny ones and about people, their sufferings, thoughts, acts, hopes, and anguish. The large event is the German siege of Stalingrad in the fall and winter of 1942–43 and the Soviet victory over Hitler's forces.[8] Robert Chandler, who translated the work into English, captures the themes of this large event nicely:

[2] See Levinas, "The Bible and the Greeks" in *In the Time of the Nations*, 135, originally in *Cosmopolitique* 4 (Feb. 1986); "Beyond Memory" in *In the Time of the Nations*, 88–91. This discussion of Tractate *Berachoth* 12b–13a of the Talmud, originally delivered in December 1984, was first published in 1986. See also Levinas, "Peace and Proximity," *Alterity and Transcendence*, 140.

[3] See Ilya Ehrenburg and Vasily Grossman, *The Complete Black Book of Russian Jewry* (originally completed in 1946; published in Vilnius in 1993; translated and edited by David Patterson in 2002).

[4] John Garrard and Carol Garrard, *The Bones of Berdichev*, 260–63.

[5] Garrard and Garrard, *The Bones of Berdichev*, 263–99.

[6] Garrard and Garrard, *The Bones of Berdichev*, 322–23, and Vasily Grossman, *Life and Fate*, 7–11.

[7] *Is It Righteous to Be?*, 79, 80–81, 89–90.

[8] See Garrard and Garrard, *The Bones of Berdichev*, 236–44.

Like *War and Peace*, *Life and Fate* contains many of [Grossman's] own reflections on history and philosophy. . . . No other writer has so convincingly established the identity of Nazism and Soviet Communism. . . .

The real battle portrayed in the novel is not the clash between the Third Reich and Stalin's Russia, but the clash between Freedom and Totalitarianism. At Stalingrad the Russian people believed they were fighting against Totalitarianism in the name of Freedom. . . . Grossman movingly describes the development of a genuine spirit of camaraderie and egalitarianism among the defenders of Stalingrad; he also shows how this spirit was stamped out by Party functionaries who saw it as a greater danger than the Germans themselves.[9]

But this is the grand scheme. In addition, the book contains a smaller, more local and particular one. The novel is also about the very precise decisions, challenges, anxieties, and reflections of its actors and actresses, painted in rich, personal touches by a master observer of humanity. Chandler sees this dimension of *Life and Fate* just as clearly:

'The clash between Freedom and Totalitarianism', however, is too grand and abstract a phrase. . . . The battle Grossman portrays is the battle we must fight each day in order to preserve our humanity, the battle against the power of ideology, against the power of the state, against all the forces that combine to destroy the possibility of kindness and compassion between individuals. . . . The true victors [in this battle] . . . [are all those] whose actions, however historically insignificant, are motivated by the spirit of senseless, irrational kindness. It is these spontaneous, dangerous acts of kindness that Grossman sees as the truest expression of human freedom.[10]

With grand sweep and extraordinary depth and detail, Grossman "has portrayed the life, not of a few individuals, but of an entire age."[11] Here is realism and scope, scrupulously portrayed individuals against the panorama of history, a throwback to the nineteenth century, a novel untouched by the Modernist sensibility of James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, or Robert Musil, a tapestry of lives, psychology, and events as detailed and concrete as it is broad and expansive.

Setting aside personal associations, we can see at a glance what Grossman's novel might have meant to Levinas. It is, in part, about totalitarianism and hence about institutions that seek to surround and dominate everything and everyone. It is also about very concrete events, actions, relationships, and experiences that seem to escape the totality, to grasp what transcends it and yet what enters it as if from the outside – acts of "senseless kindness." *Life and Fate*, moreover, exposes something about Europe and Western history, the immensity of their

[9] Grossman, *Life and Fate*, 11–12.
[10] Grossman, *Life and Fate*, 12.
[11] Grossman, *Life and Fate*, 13.

failures and the horrors that have engulfed them in our century. Levinas could be expected to take this judgment very seriously, with its sense of loss and despair. But in fact, there is no need to speculate. We are fortunate to have many interviews in which Levinas calls our attention to Grossman's great work and to details within it. Let us turn to these themes and details now, in order to see how and why Levinas read the book.

First, a detail. In the novel, Krymov – an old Bolshevik and once the husband of a daughter of the main character, Alexandra Shaposhnikova – is arrested and incarcerated in the Lubyanka prison in Moscow. When Yevgenia Shaposhnikova, his estranged former wife, hears that Nikolay Krymov has been imprisoned, interrogated, and tortured, she abandons her love affair with Pyotr Novikov, a tank commander, and moves to be near the prison. Daily she stands in long lines to make inquiries or to seek permission to leave a package or a letter. Levinas recalls Yevgenia's return to her husband as an "act of goodness, absolutely gratuitous and unforeseen."[12] In addition, he remembers and emphasizes a tiny detail in Grossman's description:

> In *Life and Fate* Grossman tells how in Lubyanka in Moscow, before the infamous gate where one could convey letters or packages to friends and relatives arrested for "political crimes" or get news of them, people formed a line, each reading on the nape of the person in front of him the feelings and hopes of his misery.[13]

Levinas calls this scene to mind in the course of explaining what he means by "the priority of the other person" and specifically what he means when he refers to meeting the other as "welcoming the face."[14] The face, he says, is not first of all a collection of features, their shapes and the color of its surface, or in general an object of perception. It is rather – *first of all and most significantly* – "expression and appeal," or what he describes as "the nakedness of the other – destitution and misery beneath the adopted countenance."[15] It is at this point that Levinas calls upon Grossman's image of "human beings who glue their eyes to the nape of the neck of the person in front of them and read on that nape all the anxiety in the world."[16] These are Levinas's words; Grossman had described the situation this way:

> Yevgenia had never realized that the human back could be so expressive, could so vividly reflect a person's state of mind. People had a particular way of craning

[12] *Is It Righteous to Be?*, 89.
[13] *Is It Righteous to Be?*, 208; cf. Levinas, "Peace and Proximity" in *Alterity and Transcendence*, 140.
[14] *Is It Righteous to Be?*, 191–92.
[15] *Is It Righteous to Be?*, 191.
[16] *Is It Righteous to Be?*, 192.

their necks as they came up to the windows; their backs, with their raised, tensed shoulders, seemed to be crying, to be sobbing and screaming.[17]

These words seem to have led Levinas to envision this line of people, to visualize in his mind's eye what it was like to stand in such a line, to focus on the person before you, and to see his or her pain and suffering in the posture of his back or the curve of his neck.[18]

What is it to be presented with another person in this way? What does it mean for our encounter or engagement with another person to be one of being faced with her misery and need first of all and most significantly? Levinas elaborates, in response to Grossman's image:

In the innocence of our daily lives, the face of the other [or the neck or the back] signifies above all a demand. The face requires you, calls you outside. And already there resounds the word from Sinai, "thou shalt not kill," which signifies "you shall defend the life of the other." . . . It is the very articulation of the love of the other. You are indebted to someone from whom you have not borrowed a thing. . . . And *you* are responsible, the only one who could answer, the noninterchangeable, and the unique one. . . . In this relation of the unique to the unique there appears, before the purely formal community of the genus, the original sociality.[19]

For now, I want to ignore Levinas's special vocabulary. What is he saying here? Levinas is drawing on Grossman's image to articulate the very particular experience of being faced with another person's pain and misery and realizing how one must respond to it, out of a sense of obligation, a kind of indebtedness, a sense that one cannot avoid acknowledging that misery, that one must care about it, not ignore it, and hence that one must do something. Levinas seems especially interested in the fact that all of this – the experience of the other's misery and the sense of debt and devotion – is what the other's presence, as a face or neck or back, signifies. This is what this kind of experience means; the meaning combines an exposure, a plea, a demand, and a recognition, all at once. Moreover, this is not what one sees in the features, the pallor, the shape of the other's face or body; it is what the other person means alongside all of this.

This conclusion leads me to another detail in *Life and Fate* that Levinas frequently calls to mind. Like Yevgenia's senseless abandoning of her love affair with Novikov and her allegiance to Krymov, it is what Levinas calls a "scene of goodness in an inhuman world."[20]

[17] Grossman, *Life and Fate*, 681–85, esp. 683.
[18] See *Is It Righteous to Be?*, 208.
[19] *Is It Righteous to Be?*, 192.
[20] *Is It Righteous to Be?*, 81.

[T]oward the book's end, when Stalingrad has already been rescued, the German prisoners, including an officer, are cleaning out a basement and removing the decomposing bodies. The officer suffers particularly from this misery. In the crowd, a woman who hates Germans is delighted to see this man more miserable than the others. Then she gives him the last piece of bread she has. This is extraordinary. Even in hatred there exists a mercy stronger than hatred.[21]

If the core meaning of the encounter with another person is a sense of need and demand, the core response to it is an act of goodness or generosity that is beyond explanation, that in fact seems to defy explanation. More than that, as in this case of the woman's act of giving bread to a person whom she hates and whose suffering she seems to be enjoying, there are acts of goodness in a situation that seems to be totally inhumane. Levinas emphasizes that acts like Yevgenia's devotion and the woman's gift are "isolated acts." They are not prepared for and seem to surprise rather than to make sense. And they have no larger effect. They do not change things; the world remains as it was; they are anomalies.

Grossman's description of this episode is more gripping, frightening, and complex than Levinas's memory of it.[22] The scene was tense, as the soldiers removed the bodies from the cellar with the crowd of Russians so hostile and threatening. Then they brought out the dead body of an adolescent girl. The woman ran to the girl's body, straightening out her hair, transfixed by her features. She then stood up and walked toward the officer, picked up a brick on the way, hatred radiating from her, without the guard feeling that he could stop her:

The woman could no longer see anything at all except the face of the German with the handkerchief round his mouth. Not understanding what was happening to her, governed by a power she had just now seemed to control, she felt in the pocket of her jacket for a piece of bread that had been given to her the evening before by a soldier. She held it out to the German officer and said: "There, have something to eat."

Afterwards, she was unable to understand what had happened to her, why she had done this. Her life was to be full of moments of humiliation, helplessness and anger, full of petty cruelties that made her lie awake at night, full of brooding resentment. . . . At one such moment, lying on her bed, full of bitterness, she was to remember that winter morning outside the cellar and think: "I was a fool then, and I'm still a fool now."[23]

Levinas extracts from this episode an act of utterly senseless goodness. Senseless it is: The woman is filled with hatred; she is about to strike the officer, to kill

[21] *Is It Righteous to Be?*, 89; cf. 81.
[22] Grossman, *Life and Fate*, 803–6.
[23] Grossman, *Life and Fate*, 805–6.

him. Instead, she hands him bread to eat. Is it an act of generosity? The bread was given to her by a soldier; perhaps it represented to her that dead girl and giving it to the officer was an act of defiance, of repulsion, of hatred? Or was it more simply a way to avoid killing the officer, a virtually automatic way of preventing herself from doing what she both wanted to do but also could not bring herself to do? And yet, it was an act that gave the officer life rather than taking it from him, one that had no effect on her own miserable and resentful life, even with regret that she had not struck and killed him. Perhaps, for all its complexity, the episode has at its core the meaning Levinas found in it: There was an act of goodness, and it was wholly senseless and isolated. It was an act of goodness because it gave life to the officer and because she even sacrificed, it appeared, the little bread she had to do so. And it was done for no other reason; there was no explanation or justification for it – other than that it was what it was, an act of grace, of giving, of taking responsibility for the other person's need and life. And it was rare, isolated in an inhumane world filled with suffering and misery.

This point brings us to Levinas's other sort of citation of *Life and Fate*. Not only does he call attention to details or episodes; he also points out what Grossman shows us about the twentieth century and our world. This is a large and important theme. I want to discuss it in two steps. First, Levinas reflects on the meaning of Grossman's novel for our understanding of Stalinism, Nazism, and other totalitarian ideologies in the twentieth century. Second, Levinas refers to a letter from a strange figure in the novel, an old Tolstoian, that Grossman presents in what Levinas calls the central chapter of the book.[24] This character, Ikonnikov-Morzh, Levinas takes to represent Grossman's own views, but whether he does is not as relevant as what these views are, for Levinas clearly finds them very appealing and even, in a way, identifies with them.[25] "The essential teaching," Levinas says, "is articulated by a strange, socially marginal person who has lived through it all. Halfway between simplemindedness and holiness, between madness and wisdom, he doesn't believe in God anymore, nor in the Good that would organize an ideology."[26] Ikonnikov, that is, does not advocate or believe in systems, ideologies, theories, or totalities of any kind. What he does believe in are unique, discrete acts of goodness or kindness.

Levinas summarizes the main points of Ikonnikov's letter on several occasions. In the novel, the letter is read by an old Bolshevik, Mikhail Mostovskoy, in a German concentration camp, alone in his cell, after a lengthy interrogation during which he had been given "Ikonnikov's scribblings" and was questioned

[24] Grossman, *Life and Fate*, Part II, 404–11.
[25] See *Is It Righteous to Be?*, 216–18; cf. 89–90, 120.
[26] *Is It Righteous to Be?*, 120.

about them.[27] Levinas never mentions this context; he only calls attention to what he takes to be Ikonnikov's view of the world and human goodness:

> The essential thing in this book is simply what the character Ikonnikov says – "There is neither God nor the Good, but there is goodness" – which is also my thesis. That is all that is left to mankind. . . . He also says: "There are acts of goodness which are absolutely gratuitous, unforeseen."[28]

Levinas gives a fuller account in 1986, when his comments on *Life and Fate* were provoked by the interviewer's question about how upsetting Levinas found the book and a lengthy quotation from the novel:

> Grossman's eight hundred pages offer a complete spectacle of desolation and dehumanization. . . . Yet within that decomposition of human relations, within that sociology of misery, goodness persists. In the relation of one man to another, goodness is possible. There is a long monologue where Ikonnikov – the character who expresses the ideas of the author – casts doubt upon all social sermonizing, that is, upon all reasonable organization with an ideology, with plans. . . . Every attempt to organize humanity fails. The only thing that remains undying is the goodness of everyday, ongoing life. Ikonnikov calls that "the little act of goodness." . . . This "little goodness" is the sole positive thing. . . . [I]t is a goodness outside of every system, every religion, every social organization.[29]

In the course of Levinas's comments, the interviewer quoted from the text, but the passage makes little difference; he could have cited almost anything from that chapter.[30] No system houses the Good, nor can any evil harm or destroy what is really good. What Grossman calls "petty, thoughtless kindness," "senseless kindness," "a kindness outside any system of social or religious good" or "stupid kindness" is "what is most truly human in a human being." As Levinas notes, "[I]t is as beautiful and powerless as dew." Such acts are not found within systems, that is, not prescribed or justified by systems; nor can systems engulf or annihilate them. "[H]uman qualities persist even on the edge of the grave, even at the door of the gas chamber." "The power of evil . . . is impotent in the struggle against man."[31]

Levinas finds this letter extraordinarily congenial. He is moved by its optimism, by its commitment to goodness or kindness outside of systems, institutions, ideologies, something about how one acts toward the other person that is beyond theory, rules, and explanation and that is indestructible and permanent,

[27] Grossman, *Life and Fate*, Part II, 391–403.
[28] *Is It Righteous to Be?*, 89; cf. 120.
[29] *Is It Righteous to Be?*, 217–18.
[30] The citation is drawn from Grossman, *Life and Fate*, 407–8.
[31] Grossman, *Life and Fate*, 408–10; cf. *Is It Righteous to Be?*, 218.

albeit unique and particular. Furthermore, Levinas agrees that whatever this kindness or goodness is, it occurs in everyday life. It is what the human is all about; it is rare, in one sense, and yet it is fundamental and primary to human life in some sense or other. We can see, then, why it hardly matters for Levinas whether Ikonnikov really speaks for Grossman; what matters is how he seems to speak for Levinas. His is the voice of hope and the humane in the midst of the misery and despair of the twentieth century.

But one cannot and should not forget or mitigate the depth of the despair or the degree of the misery. Grossman does not, nor does Levinas read him that way.[32] Here I come to the last major reason that Levinas cites Grossman: as a true, accurate and compelling witness to the crisis of the modern world in the twentieth century, of which Auschwitz is a part and the principal paradigm. Grossman paints a vast, grim, horrifying panorama of dehumanization and suffering. It is a world in crisis, where the victors and the victims are mirror images of one another, in which indeed there are no victors, only victims.

> [Grossman] is witness to the end of a certain Europe, the definitive end of the hope of instituting charity in the guise of a regime, the end of the socialist hope. The end of socialism, in the horror of Stalinism, is the greatest spiritual crisis in modern Europe. Marxism represented a generosity, whatever the way in which one understands the materialist doctrine which is its basis. There is in Marxism the recognition of the other. . . . But the noble hope consists in healing everything, in installing, beyond the chance of individual charity, a regime without evil. And the regime of charity becomes Stalinism and [complicitous] Hitlerian horror. That's what Grossman shows. . . . An absolutely overwhelming testimony and a complete despair.[33]

Levinas makes a multiple assessment, that Europe has suffered a spiritual crisis, that it involves the failure of socialism or Marxism and the spiral of socialism into totalitarian violence and atrocity, and finally that this exposes a great truth: "[T]here isn't any solution to the human drama by a change of regime, no system of salvation."[34] Politics must give way to something else, to "ethics without ethical system" or to individual, discrete acts of goodness. This, moreover, is religion – not as it is, institutionalized and organized, but in spirit, as it might be, what "religion" really means. But here Levinas underlines the negative, what twentieth-century life has shown: that one cannot impose, legislate, or systematize goodness and charity. Grossman's novel shows this in its portrait of

[32] Grossman develops his picture of this despair and misery, starkly, in his subsequent novel, *Forever Flowing*.
[33] *Is It Righteous to Be?*, 80–81; cf. 120, 132; see also Levinas, *Proper Names*, 3.
[34] *Is It Righteous to Be?*, 81; cf. 132.

Stalinism and Nazism, which are images of each other.[35] If we rely on systems and ideology, the outcome is totalized domination and violence, despair.

[*Life and Fate*] describes the situation in Europe at the time of Stalin and Hitler. Vassily Grossman represents this society as a completely dehumanized one. There is, of course, the life of the camps; it was the same thing under Hitler and under Stalin. Life seems to be premised upon the total contempt of respect of man, for the human person. Nevertheless, as concerns Stalin, that society came out of the search for a liberated humanity. That Marxism could have turned into Stalinism is the greatest offense to the cause of humanity, for Marxism carried a hope for humanity; this was perhaps one of the greatest psychological shocks for the European of the twentieth century.[36]

Grossman, earlier in his career (1946), gave a very early report of the Nazi death camp at Treblinka and later coedited Russian documents dealing with the Nazi persecutions in Russia, *The Black Book*. But here, in these interviews, Levinas seems to focus his attention on Stalinism as the nemesis of Marxist socialism and the larger implication that even the small, discrete act of goodness that remains is "lost and deformed as soon as it seeks organization and universality and system, as soon as it opts for doctrine, a treatise of politics and theology, a party, a state, and even a church."[37] Hitler, Nazism, and the death camps are not discussed independently or on their own; their significance is swept up by that of Stalinism and its horrors. Levinas sees the twentieth century as a single story, as a failure of "regimes of charity," their transformation into regimes of violence and oppression.[38] This portrait calls to mind an image from Plato's *Republic*: In an unjust polis, the philosopher survives by taking shelter in caves and caverns, hidden from the storms of public life.[39] But Levinas's attack on systems, institutions, regimes, and ideologies is more pointed and much more global.

Levinas's attraction to Grossman's great novel is expressed in his recollection of details and his impressions regarding its large themes. My own reading of *Life and Fate*, underscored by reading his later novel, *Forever Flowing*, suggests that Grossman's great themes were freedom and domination. For Levinas, we might say they were goodness or kindness and domination. Clearly, the novel

[35] The opposition to all forms of totalitarianism, particularly to Nazi fascism and Stalinism, recalls similar themes in Hannah Arendt's famous *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1951).

[36] *Is It Righteous to Be?*, 216–17.

[37] *Is It Righteous to Be?*, 206–7.

[38] In *Forever Flowing*, Grossman's indictment is even more powerful and direct; see 176–237; cf. Levinas, *Entre Nous*, 119–20.

[39] See Plato, *Republic*, 496c–e.