

# **Love, Holocaust, and Humiliation.**

## **The German Holocaust and the Genocides in Rwanda and Somalia**

© Evelin Gerda Lindner, 1999

We appreciate that you contact the author if you wish to quote from this text. Texts may usually be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies. No part of this file may be transmitted, distributed or reproduced in any other way without permission from the author.

Lindner, Evelin Gerda (1999). Love, Holocaust and Humiliation. The German Holocaust and the Genocides in Rwanda and Somalia. In *Medlemsbladet for Norske Leger Mot Atomkrig, Med Bidrag Fra Psykologer for Fred*, 3 (november 1999), s. 28-29.

(Dr. med. Evelin Gerda Lindner, University of Oslo, Institute of Psychology, P.O.Box 1094 Blindern, N-0317 Oslo, Norway, <http://folk.uio.no/evelinl/>)

### **Abstract**

Historians usually describe the Treaty of Versailles after the First World War (28th June 1919) as ‘humiliating’ for Germany (‘Schmach,’ ‘Schande’) and argue that this humiliation ‘pre-programmed’ Germans for the Second World War (see for example Norbert Elias 1989).

The ‘humiliation’ imposed by the Treaty of Versailles was the starting point for my current research project at the Institute of Psychology at the University of Oslo. In this project in the field of social psychology I am studying the genocide in Rwanda (1994) and Somalia (1988) against the background of the German Holocaust.

Could humiliation lead to Holocaust, genocide and ethnic cleansing? This is the central question posed in my research. This is a short text where I present the follow-up questions that have to be posed in order to approach this subject.

To understand more about Holocaust, genocide and ethnic cleansing seems especially urgent at present since it is an issue that continues to haunt us, not least in view of what is happening in Kosovo, Chechnya, East-Timor, Afghanistan, Tibet, etc., or with respect to international terrorism.

### **Introduction**

Historians usually describe the Treaty of Versailles after the First World War (28th June 1919) as ‘humiliating’ for Germany (‘Schmach,’ ‘Schande’) and argue that this humiliation ‘pre-programmed’ Germans for the Second World War (see for example Norbert Elias 1989).

The ‘humiliation’ imposed by the Treaty of Versailles was the starting point for my current research project at the Institute of Psychology at the University of Oslo. In this project in the field of social psychology I am studying the genocide in Rwanda (1994) and Somalia (1988) against the background of the German Holocaust. I am a German national, coming from what is known in Germany as a ‘refugee family,’ I grew up with the debate about the atrocities of

the two World Wars. I am also drawing upon my experience as a clinical psychologist (1977-1991, the last 7 years in Cairo, Egypt) and my fieldwork in Somalia and Rwanda/Burundi (1998-1999).

Could humiliation lead to Holocaust, genocide and ethnic cleansing? This is one of the questions posed in my research.

Anatol Rapoport wrote in 1997 that ‘... the most intense feelings experienced by human beings are probably those engendered by conflict and by love.’

Humiliated love is, perhaps, the most painful phenomenon in human psychology. Does it not lead to killings when it occurs in the relationship between man and woman? From almost any detective story we learn that ‘The murderer is most probably a member of the family.’ Could humiliated love lead to Holocaust?

Everybody knows how it feels to love somebody, admire somebody greatly, and badly want to be respected and recognised by that person. And everybody, I believe, also knows how deeply painful it is if that person laughs at you and makes fun of you or, even worse, ridicules your love, especially if he or she does this in front of others, mocking your admiration and your desire to be acknowledged. Nothing could be more humiliating than that.

The word humiliation stems from the Latin word *humus*, earth, suggesting that to be humiliated means to be made small, reduced to ground level, perhaps even to have your face forced into the earth. I believe that it is a universal human experience to feel terrible if put down and humiliated, especially if your love is being rejected in the very act of humiliation; even worse, if the wish to be loved back is being denied at the same time. The last is especially painful: namely, denial of the desire to have your love returned. Imagine (and I had a client who experienced this) that you are sitting in your mother-in-law's sitting room and she says in front of the whole family with disgust in her voice: ‘And you want to be part of our family? Who do you think you are???’ Hearing this, my client was deeply shocked and petrified, felt cold, could hardly breathe, and was unable to answer. For years afterwards, she could not remember this incident without deep pain.

People react in different ways to humiliation: some just become depressed, others get openly angry, and others hide their anger and plan revenge. The person who plans for revenge may become the leader of a movement. Hitler, for example, began his adult life as a humiliated underdog who badly wanted recognition and acknowledgement but failed to achieve these things. One of his many deep disappointments arose from his desire to become a respected member of the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts. In October 1907 Hitler took the Academy's entrance exam but was rejected. In 1908 he applied for the second time and was not even admitted to the test. An incident such as this could have an impact. Eberhard Jäckel writes (1991) that ‘Hitler's *Mein Kampf* seems to provide us ... with four new aspects of Hitlerian antisemitism, namely its increased significance to Hitler himself; a new universalist-missionary element its link-up with the outline of foreign policy and, finally and above all else, an enormous radicalization of the intended measures. As far as the first of these aspects is concerned, Hitler now made his antisemitism the center of both his personal and his political career. He calls his time in Vienna, during which he had changed 'from a weakly cosmopolitan to a fanatical antisemite, 'the time of 'the greatest transformation' which he had ever had to live through or, as he calls it elsewhere, his 'most difficult change ever.'“ (the quotations come from pages 69 and 59 in the German edition of *Mein Kampf*; pages 83 and

72 in the English edition). Jäckel continues: ‘And one of the best-known passages of his book, a passage which is rarely quoted in its entirety and probably often misunderstood, reads: ‘With the Jews there can be no bargaining, but only die hard either-or. I, however, resolved now to become a politician.’ (quotation from page 225 in the German, page 269 in the English edition).

At this point readers may object and say: ‘One man can hardly incite a whole population, even if he is very angry and a gifted demagogue, if the population is not ready to follow him!’ On this point, Michael Bond, Professor at the Department of Psychology at the Chinese University of Hong Kong writes to me (1999): ‘I believe that you must draw a fundamental distinction between individual humiliation [you humiliated me] versus group [or national] humiliation [you or your group humiliated my group]. This personal/group distinction is important since people may act to avenge different sorts of affront [and create different sorts of affront for others!’

The issue is complicated. When you start studying the notion of humiliation, it is very easy to become very confused because there are so many different aspects and kinds of humiliation. You might, for example, find a ‘humiliator’ who deliberately sets out to humiliate somebody, but the targeted person simply does not feel humiliated, and just laughs; or, at the other extreme, imagine you want to be helpful, and unexpectedly, your help is interpreted as being humiliating; or, to take a third case, you might observe a couple and see that the husband continually treats his submissive wife in such a way that you think that she must surely feel humiliated and protest, and yet she does not; not to forget cases where people in fact enjoy being humiliated in so-called ‘sado-maso’ sex-practices or religious self-humiliation. These examples suggest that a perpetrator might want to commit humiliation but not succeed, that a ‘good-doer’ might humiliate while trying to do good, that a third party might observe ‘victims’ who do not see themselves as such (or fail to see victims in cases where they do exist), or that humiliation is sought instead of despised.

My research became even more complicated when I discovered that two deeply different definitions of humiliation seem to exist in today's world: ‘Humiliation II’ is connected with equality, while ‘Humiliation I’ is connected with the negation of equality. ‘Humiliation II’ is the more recent version of humiliation: namely, the deeply wounding violation of my dignity as a human being, where my dignity draws its justification from the Human Rights notion that ‘all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.’ (U.S. Declaration of Independence). By contrast, ‘Humiliation I’ is an older version illustrated by the case of two aristocrats who shoot at each other in a duel. They do this because they consider it their duty to ‘settle scores’ or ‘put right’ acts of humiliation even if they do not feel any deep psychological wounds. Humiliation II has the potential to be very ‘hot,’ meaning that humiliated dignity can cause deep emotional wounds which might lead to passionate retaliation, while Humiliation I can be answered by a coldly planned chess game of honourable stances.

A further complication is introduced by the fact that the humiliation which an individual feels might not be the same which a group or nation feels (see Michael Bond's comments). Can a country, a clan or an ethnic group ‘feel humiliated’? What about the case of humiliated leaders who incite their followers to believe in some more or less fabricated version of history that contains supposed humiliations which must be avenged with the leader's help?

I would like to let these questions make the readers think. In my own future work I intend to build upon these questions in order to try and shed light on the relationship between leaders

and followers in Germany, Rwanda and Somalia. The aim is to understand more about Holocaust, genocide and ethnic cleansing. This seems especially urgent at present since it is an issue that continues to haunt us, not least in view of what is happening in Kosovo.

### **References**

Elias, Norbert (1989, 1997). *The Germans*. Cambridge: Polity

Jäckel, Eberhard (1991). *Hitler's World View. A Blueprint for Power*.  
Translated from German by Herbert Arnold, foreword by Franklin L. Ford.  
Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press

Rapoport, Anatol (1997). *The Origins of Violence. Approaches to the Study of Conflict*. With a new introduction by the author. London: Transaction Publishers