Forgiveness and the Holocaust

P370; The Holocaust: Philosophical & Theological Reflections

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The Holocaust represents the single most devastating historical account of genocide in modernity. It cannot be overlooked that from 1939 to 1945, the European Jewish population was under siege of Adolf Hitler and his radical Nazi party whose intentions were to eradicate primarily Jews, along with other minorities, from the European continent. Allie forces brought a close to World War II by mid-1945 but the decimation of the Jewish people across Europe had been driven by the Nazis for far too long, allowing the mass murder of six million Jews in the cruel and inhumane methods administered by Third Reich. There has yet to be an atrocity of this same magnitude and because of the Holocaust being of such an extreme nature, there are many aspects of it that spark heated discussion and leave some of greatest thinkers of our time uncertain. In many cases, though maybe more mundane, when an individual or a group of individuals are wronged, whomever is the wrong doer often arrives at a point where they feel remorse after they understand the flaw in their actions. Some times there is an act of forgiveness by the victim toward the individual who has become aware of the negative nature of their action but are there exceptions when it comes to forgivable scenarios. Is the Holocaust one of these exceptions? Is it in fact unforgivable? Forgiveness in regard to the Holocaust can be divided into two different approaches for its application. Many survivors and their families adhere to a concept of forgiveness that requires certain specifications be met in order for one to be forgiven and in respect to the Holocaust, some of these necessary specifications are impossible. There is in fact an additional ideology of forgiveness, though a minority, which focuses more closely on
the sense of closure that is achieved by the victim after forgiveness rather than the
pardoning of the wrongdoer.

I would like to begin by restating a definition of forgiveness that is suggested
by Dr. Fred Luskin, professor at Stanford University, who with Dr. Carl Thoresen,
conducted research on the interaction of forgiveness in the relationship between
victim and offender. Luskin’s definition reads, “Forgiveness is the journey of a
moving from telling the story as a victim to telling the story as a hero. Forgiveness
means that my story changes so that I, not the grievance, am in control.”¹ Moving on
from here, I next want to point out some reflections on the unique nature of
forgiveness that are shared by scholars and survivors who focus their works on the
Holocaust, including Berel Lang, Primo Levi, and sustained in Simon Wiesenthal’s,
The Sunflower. They are as follows: forgiveness is necessary where it is
appropriate to be applied; forgiveness is dangerous when observed carelessly
because of its capability of leading one to overlook the seriousness of an offense or
marginalize responsibility; distinguish requirements for qualified forgiveness to
combat the possibility of harming the validity of an offense; forgiveness can only
occur among the relationship of living beings; forgiveness is a gift that can only be
offered by a victim who is willing to grant it.² Berel Lang analyzed the encounter
with a Nazi SS officer that Wiesenthal recounts in The Sunflower. Keeping in mind
these qualities of forgiveness, it is easy to approve of Wiesenthal’s reaction of not
acknowledging the request of the SS officer for his forgiveness after the violence and
abuse he inflicted on the Jews during his service. Consistent with the qualities, it is

¹ Forgive.org
² Roth; “Forgiveness Extends to Holocaust”
not possible for Wiesenthal to forgive the SS officer because the victims of the officer are the only individuals equipped to forgive him and they are no longer living as result of his actions. Also, forgiveness is not to be a result of the persuasive efforts exhibited by the officer. Rather it is to be initiated by the victimized upon observations of the repentance and not just a desire for a clear conscience of the offender. Wiesenthal was doubtful whether or not his reaction to the officer’s request for forgiveness was the right one but his reaction was in fact just according to these requirements for forgiveness. ³ Lang does make a point to take note of the possibility of a resulting unjust action in the event that a forgiveness is deserved by an offender who shows the proper measure of repentance though the victim denies them of forgiveness.⁴ Here arises a personal moral conflict in which now the victim has gone from being the one who was wronged to being the one who is now acting unjustly shortening the gap between themselves and the primary offender. I do feel that Wiesenthal could have engaged in a forgiveness that was not in direct response to the specific actions described by the officer. Instead, forgiveness for his overall conduct toward the Jewish people as a whole, which Wiesenthal is a constituent of. This forgiveness is sought after by the offender though there is another forgiveness that is for the benefit of the victim.

Eva Mosez Kor and her family arrived at Auschwitz I in May of 1994. Immediately after being unloaded from cattle cars that transported Jewish prisoners to concentration camps, she and twin sister Miriam were separated from the rest of their family to be included among the believed three thousand specimens of

³ Lang: “Two Views of Forgiveness”
⁴ Lang: “Two Views of Forgiveness”
Auschwitz’s *angel of death*, Dr. Josef Mengele. Mengele is notorious for his experimentation on human subjects, most notably, twins. She recounted from her time under the observation of Mengele, that on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays, she would be escorted to the blood lab where she would have blood drained from one arm while she received a minimum of five unidentified injections into the other arm. As she became more acclimated to the environment that she and her twin sister found themselves in, Eva was made aware that the life of her sister relied on whether or not she survived the injections that were sustained by her. Subsequent to the event of Eva dying, her twin sister, Miriam, would have then been rushed to the infirmary where should would receive a fatal injection so that Mengele could perform a comparative autopsy on the two bodies. She and her sister managed to survive the concentration camp and the dangerous experiments they were subjected to, moving to Israel after spending the initial post war period in orphanages. Once in Israel, Eva met another survivor by the name of Michael Kor who had since settled in Terre Haute, Indiana after being liberated. She would go on to marry Kor and move to Terre Haute where she established her “CANDLES” Holocaust museum and began her efforts to contribute to the platform of Holocaust remembrance and education. Sadly, in 1993, her twin sister Miriam died as a result of kidney issues. During their time in Auschwitz I, Miriam underwent one of Mengele’s experiments that ceased further development of her kidneys from their state inside the 10-year-old girl’s body. It is here that Eva’s story becomes even more profound. Even after the death of her sister whom she had donated one of her

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5 “Auschwitz to Forgiveness”
6 “Auschwitz to Forgiveness”
own kidneys to six years prior and all of the torture she endured in Auschwitz I, Eva granted forgiveness to her oppressors in 1995. Upon encountering a former Nazi doctor, Hans Munch, she was greatly intrigued by the respect and sympathy that he treated her with. Munch also agreed to confirm the existence and operation of gas chambers, an element of the death camps that Eva was defending in light of efforts by revisionists to deny their reality. Eva wanted to respond to Hans’ kindness when it occurred to her that a letter of forgiveness might be appropriate for the scenario. With the encouragement from a colleague, Eva took it a step further and on January 27, 1995, signed a “Declaration of Forgiveness” in which she forgave not only Dr. Mengele but also all those who played a role in her horrendous experience during the Holocaust. Unlike the more common renderings of forgiveness in relation to the Holocaust and its victims, the forgiveness she was offering her Nazi enemies was not for their sake in lieu of their crimes against humanity, but for her own personal well being. Consistent with the views of forgiveness that I have visited prior to Eva’s story, many of her fellow Holocaust survivors were appalled and met her public act of forgiveness with much controversy, holding to claims that forgiveness is not qualified if the victims of an injustice are deceased. One cannot grant forgiveness for an individual or individuals who are no longer living. This is where Eva’s view is differentiates itself from other views of forgiveness. It is not Eva’s wish to forgive the Nazi regime on behalf of those who no longer survive nor those surviving other than herself. She explains that in her own right, forgiveness is not for the perpetrator but for the victim. Being physically free from the Holocaust

7 “Auschwitz to Forgiveness”
8 “Auschwitz to Forgiveness”
was not adequate for her own closure, though through forgiveness, she achieved freedom from the hardships on her soul.⁹ Eva reached the realization that she possessed the unique power to forgive; a power that the man who caused all of his Jewish victims so much pain and terror during the Holocaust would never be able to obtain or deprive her of. She proclaims that a victim who does not forgive supports a willingness to remain a victim whereas through forgiveness, the victim restores the power that was once withheld by the victimizer back to the victim.¹⁰ This is similar to Lang’s idea of the negative result caused by the denial of a qualified forgiveness to a repentant offender. According to Eva, “anger is a seed for war, forgiveness is a seed for peace, and forgiveness is nothing more, and nothing less, than an act of self-healing.”¹¹

Eva’s forgiveness of the Nazis is more similar to Lang’s second view of forgiveness that he formulates in reaction to the event between Wiesenthal and the SS officer. Where in the first theory of forgiveness we visited, the wrongdoer was seeking forgiveness from his victims. When thinking about the Holocaust in relation to the first classification of forgiveness, one could indeed argue that the events of the Holocaust leave there no possibility of forgiveness for the Nazis. There are six million individuals who the Nazis brutally murdered resulting in the reality of the Nazis seemingly depriving themselves of any possibility of forgiveness for their actions. As for the second form of forgiveness is left to the victim, whether they be

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⁹ “Auschwitz to Forgiveness”
¹⁰ “Forgiving Dr. Mengele”
¹¹ “Auschwitz to Forgiveness”
effected directly or indirectly, and does not require the acknowledgment of the offense committed by the wrongdoer.
Works Cited:


