

The Cunning of the Will?

Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann Jeruzsálemben. Tudósítás a gonosz banalitásáról* (Eichmann in Jerusalem. A Report on the Banality of Evil) Translated by Péter Mesés and Attila Pató. Osiris Library, Judaica. Budapest: Osiris, 2000, 340 pp.

Hannah Arendt's report on the Eichmann-trial¹ appeared almost forty years ago, in 1963. "Arendt's book," wrote Wolfgang Heuer in a recent commemoration, "gave rise to bitter disputes in the 1960s. At the heart of the controversy was the concept of the banality of evil, and her remark that with less cooperation between the Jewish organizations and the Nazi authorities it might have been possible for more Jews to have been saved. In the USA Arendt was accused of making Eichmann seem harmless, or even attractive. In Germany, the characterisation of Eichmann as unexceptional was rejected because, by implication, that could mean that many other Germans might find the spotlight turned on them next. And many Jews accused Arendt of being arrogant and not loving her own people."² Once the book was out, the argument kept flaring up at least for a decade, in the wake of every new edition, though it became more finely-tuned and objective. Hans Mommsen, for instance, in his introduction to the 1986 edition, clearly distinguishes between claims open to debate "from the standpoint of a professional historian trying to evaluate his sources precisely and thoroughly" debatable either because they are "not sufficiently critically verified", or because they reveal "limited knowledge of the evidence available at the beginning of the 1960s" – and uncontrolled "incidental information [gleaned] in her function as a journalist".³ Sensibilities, however, are slow to disappear, which is shown by the fact that in the two countries most concerned – Israel and Hungary – the book was first published only in 2000.⁴ The controversy immediately flared up in both countries.

Israel's special concern needs no elaboration. Note, nevertheless, that in Eichmann's trial the state of Israel was very much concerned – beyond Jewish sensibilities about the Holocaust.⁵ The Israeli public of the 1960s reacted to Arendt's text with unanimous

1 "A Reporter at Large," in: *The New Yorker* (in five parts, from February 13 to March 13, 1963) and *Eichmann in Jerusalem. A Report on the Banality of Evil*. New York: Viking, 1963. (Page references in this review are to the 1994 Penguin edition [New York].)

2 Editorial to the memorial block published under the title "Banality of Evil and Memory Discourse", *Hannah Arendt Newsletter*, No 4, April 2001, p. 4.

3 Hans Mommsen, "Hannah Arendt und der Prozeß gegen Adolf Eichmann", in: Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem. Ein Bericht von der Banalität der Bösen*. Munich-Zurich: Piper, 1986. pp. II-III.

4 Though in Hungary the appearance of the book must have been hindered not only by sensibility but by political factors. As for Israel, the delay was due not so much to politics as politicians: the book was immediately translated and was due to be published in 1964. It was, according to the translator, cancelled only because of the personal intervention of David Ben Gurion, then Prime Minister. (Cf. "European Humanism and the Jewish Catastrophe: Hannah Arendt's Answers to Questions in a *Maariv* Round Table", *Hannah Arendt Newsletter*, No 4, April 2001, p. 11.) Another difference is that in Israel – unlike in Hungary – only the publication was delayed, the book was never hushed up and the first reactions emerged almost immediately.

5 Because, from the perspective of international law in effect at the time, the jurisdiction of the Israeli court and the "arrest" of the defendant and his transfer to Israel – his kidnapping, that is – were questionable.

hostility: „A typical response to Arendt’s book in Israel at that time was the one written by Israeli chief prosecutor in the Eichmann trial, attorney Gideon Hausner, who wrote in his memoir of the trial Justice in Jerusalem that Arendt’s book was refuted by the criticism and, thus, was not worthy of his consideration.”⁶ Since then, however, political sentiment in Israel has undergone considerable changes – thanks partly to the shock caused by the Eichmann case (and perhaps Arendt’s book) –, a sign of which was that the article in the Israeli daily Ha’aretz’ “The Arendt Controversy 2000” “was characterized by a more balanced approach than its predecessor”⁷ in the 1960s. Hungary’s concern is of a different nature. (From this point on I shall try to choose my words very carefully, lest I make the mistake – made by so many in the heat of the argument – of attributing statements to Arendt she never made.) One of the book’s toughest assertions – certainly the one that provoked the most intense protest and that has been disputed with unabated vehemence ever since the 1960s – is that the cooperation of Jewish organizations made the Nazi destructive machinery more efficient. This is what makes Hungary especially concerned. Although Arendt strongly criticises other, primarily German and Polish, Jewish organizations and their leaders, her statement would be less forceful without specific and sometimes well-known Hungarian examples. Though her thesis does not depend upon the Hungarian examples, it is nevertheless worth making a few remarks. From our perspective, namely, it is far from immaterial whether what she claims about Hungarians, among them Hungarian Jews, is true or not – or, to be more precise, what she claims about Jewish leaders who were in contact with the Hungarian authorities and German occupiers during the deportation of Hungarian Jews, can or cannot be refuted.

The public debate following the Hungarian publication of her book indicates that many of Arendt’s statements about Hungary are questionable or open to argument. The recent controversy touched on issues similar to the disputes in the 1960s: Arendt’s account of the Jewish Councils, her concept of the banality of evil, and the accusation that she makes Eichmann seem harmless. Understandably, the controversy in Hungary focused, among these almost “classic” issues, chiefly on Arendt’s account of the Judenräte, especially the Central Council of Hungarian Jews. The most important – and most intensely disputed – elements of her statement are as follows: Jewish officials – beside willingly cooperating in collecting and handing over valuables – “when they became instruments of murder,” considered themselves masters of life and death, and made sure those who would survive were not chosen by “blind fate” (p. 118); they felt like saviors who “with a hundred victims save a thousand people, with a thousand ten thousand,” though the “truth was even more gruesome” (ibid.); it has emerged that those singled out for salvation were: “the functionaries and the ‘most prominent Jews’” (ibid.); they spent an immense amount of money on bribes, completely unsuccessfully, and resorted to bribery and negotiations

Major war criminals were tried by an international court in Nuremberg, while in the case of the rest the principle was to try them in their native country or the country where they committed atrocities. Israel claimed jurisdiction in the name of Jewish victims, which is an unknown term in international law, but as no international court was set up to try this case (and there was no permanent international court), and since the countries concerned according to the territorial principle did not demand Eichmann’s extradition – including the German Federal Republic –, all parties concerned eventually accepted the jurisdiction of the Israeli court.

⁶ Leora Btisky, “The Arendt Controversy 2000: An Israeli Perspective”, *Hannah Arendt Newsletter*, No. 5, November 2001, p. 41.

⁷ Ibid. – For a survey of the contributions see, pp. 42-45.

even when the Slovak example had shown that regardless of bribes, all Jews were deported (pp. 196-197).

After the first reviews written in a more or less neutral tone and discussing mainly the problem of the banality of evil,⁸ an article was published in the literary and public life weekly *Élet és Irodalom* under the title: "The Taboos of the Holocaust. Arguments and Facts"⁹. Although the author's intention was to confront some of Arendt's descriptions and statements with later holocaust literature, she was very cautious – probably too overcautious – when it came to the most sensitive question in Hungary: she spoke about a 'blank area' in historiography when it came to judging the activity of Jewish Councils. Both, the confrontation and the cautious attitude "we still do not know enough," immediately provoked an intense argument.

The first reaction came from one of the book's translators, Péter Mesés:¹⁰ he defended Arendt by saying that her interest in the trial was moral rather than historical. Two weeks later, both kinds of defence – blank areas in historiography and universal moral problems which are immune to historical facts – were disputed by the prominent historian and Holocaust researcher, László Karsai¹¹. There are no blank areas in historiography, he claimed, only ignorant reviewers: "monographs, dozens of articles and studies have been published in the last decades on the activity of Jewish Councils", he says.¹² His main charge, however, was directed against Arendt: while reporting on the trial of Eichmann, her main concern, according to Karsai, was to find support for her concept of totalitarianism. She was not interested in recounting the sufferings of Jewish people, she simply wanted to show that "people, in general, can be easily manipulated by any kind of totalitarian dictatorship," and "the morally deeply corrupted Jewish leaders" who were ready to cooperate with the Nazi authorities were presented to illustrate this tenet.¹³ Karsai also questions Arendt's characterization of Eichmann, which was based on the statements, the defendant himself made to his Jewish interrogators and judges in Jerusalem. As opposed to his self-presentation as an ordinary petty bourgeois, an average bureaucrat, an obedient executor of commands, Eichmann was "a fanatical Nazi and wild anti-Semite," who joined the Nazi Party as early as 1932, in Vienna.¹⁴ The next contribution to the dispute, the article of Judit Molnár¹⁵ corrects several errors Arendt made in her description of the situation in Hungary and the activity of the Central Council of Hungarian Jews. Beside mentioning trivial errors (like the presentation of forced

8 See e.g. György Bence, "A közönséges tömeggyilkos. A filozófus mint riporter: Hannah Arendt Eichmann könyve magyarul" (The Ordinary Mass Murderer. The Philosopher as Reporter: Hannah Arendt's Eichmann-book in Hungarian), *Népszabadság*, April 21, 2001.

9 Ágnes Bóhm, "A holokauszt tabutémái. Viták és tények", in: *Élet és irodalom*, May 18, 2001.

10 Péter Mesés, "Arendtről, Eichmannról, Tényekről (On Arendt, Eichmann, and Facts) *Élet és Irodalom*, July 7, 2001.

11 László Karsai, "Arendt, Eichmann és a történelmi tények" (Arendt, Eichmann, and Historical Facts), *ÉS*, August 03, 2001.

12 An excellent survey of the huge international and Hungarian literature on the Holocaust from the past few decades is to be found in the detailed bibliography in a recently-published book on "the Jewish issue" in Hungary. Cf. János Gyurgyák, *A zsidókérdés Magyarországon* (The Jewish Question in Hungary). Budapest: Osiris, 2001, pp. 603-648, especially pp. 610-611, 622-624 and 626-627.

13 Karsai, op. cit.

14 Ibid.

15 Judit Molnár, "Arendt és a Magyar Zsidó Tanács" (Arendt and the Hungarian Jewish Council), *Élet és Irodalom* August 10, 2001.

laborers as Jewish troops in Hungarian uniform at the Eastern front, or the overestimation of the influence of Zionist movement in Hungary), Molnár deems Arendt's interpretation of the role of the Jewish Council and its leaders misleading. There is documentary evidence, she says, which throws a new light on the fact that the Jewish leaders negotiated with the German occupiers. Parallel with these negotiations they made continual—though vain—attempts to contact the Hungarian authorities. Both national and local authorities were indifferent or actually hostile towards Jewish organizations. Thus, the question of responsibility has to be examined more thoroughly, and we should expect a more sensitive evaluation.¹⁶

Though we might feel morally more comfortable if the Hungarian examples are at least disputable, we should not forget that Arendt's concern is not so much with Hungary as Jewish leaders in general. One of her toughest statements reads: „To a Jew this role of Jewish leaders in the destruction of their own people is undoubtedly the darkest chapter of the whole dark story.” (p. 117)

Sentences like this caused great indignation. In America an outcry already followed the journal installments of the book. In her letter of September 16, 1963, to her friend the American writer Mary McCarthy, Arendt already mentions attacks and malevolent criticism.¹⁷ A few weeks later, on October 3, she wrote what she thought about the increasing number of critical remarks, which she did not respond to in public. She thought there was a political campaign going on against her, which involved attacks that – with a few exceptions – had nothing to do with criticism or polemic as it is usually understood. The attacks were against an “image”, which had taken the place of the book: the question of Jewish resistance substituted for the real problem she had written about, i.e., that the members of the Jewish Councils would have had the possibility to say no, to refuse to act.¹⁸ On another occasion answering a question, Arendt actually specified when the Jewish leaders should have said “Enough is enough!” As the question was again aimed at the “image” – Jewish resistance – she began her answer with it: “There never was a moment when ‘the community leaders [could] have said: Cooperate no longer, but fight!’ as you phrase it. Resistance, which existed but played a very small role, meant only: we don't want that kind of death, we want to die with honor. But the question of co-operation is indeed bothersome. There certainly was a moment when the Jewish leaders could have said: We shall no longer cooperate, we shall try to disappear. This moment might have come when they, already fully informed of what deportation meant, were asked by the Nazis to prepare the lists for deportation. The Nazis themselves gave them the number and categories of those to be shipped to the killing centers, but who then went and [who] was given a chance to survive was decided by the Jewish authorities. In other words, those who co-operated were at that particular moment masters over life and death.”¹⁹ The distinction is sharp and precise: no one can tell what the victim should do in the insane

16 This was not the last word in the dispute – the final contributions were the answers of the debate's initiators, Ágnes Böhm and Péter Mesés (*Élet és Irodalom* August 10, 2001 and August 24, 2001), – but there were no new arguments in the last articles.

17 Carol Brightman (ed.), *Hannah Arendt – Mary McCarthy: Im Vertrauen. Briefwechsel 1949–1975*. Munich–Zurich, Piper, 1995, p. 231. In the letter Arendt mentions Lionel Abel's “The Aesthetics of Evil: Hannah Arendt on Eichmann and the Jews”, an article in *Partisan Review*, March–April 1963, in which Abel charges her with extenuating Eichmann's role, while portraying the Jews as repulsive.

18 *Ibid.*, pp. 238–240.

case of people being murdered on an industrial scale (whether to wait without resistance, hoping perhaps till the last moment that it will not happen, or to resist, taking the risk of an immediate if more dignified death), but it certainly can be stated that the line of conduct should be “non-cooperation” if one is forced to draw up the list of victims for the persecutor and one is fully aware of certain death awaiting those one puts on the list.

I think if we keep this distinction in mind, we have to agree with Arendt: the real problem was that there were some who cooperated when it was in their power to say no. This must be acknowledged even by those who believe – as many of those arguing with Arendt do – that today we have no right (nor had Arendt) to judge what the members of the Jewish Councils did then. Having to “acknowledge” the problem does not automatically mean we must blame those who did not say no but did what they were ordered to do; all it means is that in each case we must carefully consider the existential and moral risks accompanying “yes” or “no”. Though there is no general formula that can tell us how much existential risk a person should take, and in any case we cannot be sure that even knowing all the crucial circumstances will enable us to make unambiguous judgments, it would be unwise to suspend judgment *ab ovo*, as the actions in question raise the most fundamental moral issues. This was actually how otherwise good persons could be brought to serve demonic wickedness: it was to be expected that in their helpless, defenceless position people would often not weigh the consequences. And you did not even need demonic wickedness for this “calculation”: it was enough – and if we fail to acknowledge “the real problem” even afterwards, it may well be enough next time – to have such a mediocre, petty, “banally” evil person as Arendt describes Eichmann to be. It is still a question whether this description is acceptable. It was indeed contested by many commentators..

The argument ran along two lines: one concerned Eichmann’s character, the other the claim that the idea of “the banality of evil” with which Arendt describes the “Eichmann phenomenon” was ill-defined and controversial, and completely contradicted what Arendt had said in previous works on the nature of evil. I must confess I’m less interested in Eichmann’s character: to me there is almost no difference whether he was an ordinary man or a fanatic Nazi. What stuns me is what Arendt reveals in describing the defendant’s behavior during the proceedings and what he said to his interrogators and judges; it seems all that was needed to execute the infernal plot was a petty careerist with no independent ideas and fantasy, an ordinary, “banal” villain (or if we do not give credit to what Eichmann said about himself and his motives: a person with similar traits would have been enough). If this is the case, the situation is worse than Arendt previously thought. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism* she described this newest species of criminals, among them the operators of death camps, as people who embody “radical evil”: their act seems incomprehensible for us because they were not moved by comprehensible human motives.²⁰ But now she presented an ordinary criminal – an eichmann – as the

19 The question Arendt answers here was asked by Samuel Grafton in a letter dated September 19, 1963.

Grafton, who was about to write a report for *Look* magazine on the reception of Eichmann’s book, asked her a number of questions. The quote is from a thirteen-page, unpublished draft, which can be found in the Arendt Archive. It is quoted in Richard J. Bernstein, *Hannah Arendt and the Jewish Question*. Cambridge, Polity Press, 1996, pp. 209-210 n.

20 Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. New York: Harcourt, 2nd edn. 1958, p. 459. (The work first appeared in 1951, but the expression “radical evil” occurs only in the addendum to the second edition. Earlier

perpetrator of inconceivable outrages. So what are we to make of all this? These Eichmanns are motivated by vanity, self-interest, careerism, hunger for power and other – immoral but comprehensible – human motives: could it be possible that the incomprehensible villainy can occur as the sum of actions based on ordinary human motives and intentions?

Arendt was aware that in her Eichmann book she contradicted many of her earlier assertions. It is especially her letters that testify to this,²¹ as she made a point of not reacting to criticism and attacks in public forums. The only exception was when she answered Gershom Scholem's open letter in a like manner.²² Scholem said he remained "unconvinced" by Arendt's "thesis concerning the 'banality of evil,'" and found her earlier, "eloquent and erudite" thoughts on "radical evil" more persuasive. In her answer, Arendt admitted in so many words that she had changed her mind. "It is indeed my opinion now", she writes, "that evil is never 'radical,' [...] and that it possesses neither depth, nor any demonic dimension. It can overgrow and lay waste the whole world precisely because it spreads like a fungus on the surface."²³ Let me add two points to this. In a 1951 letter to Jaspers, in which she answers critical remarks on the manuscript of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt says the following: "What radical evil really is I do not know, but it seems to me it somehow has to do with the following phenomenon: making human beings as human beings superfluous (not using them as means to an end, which leaves their essence as humans untouched and impinges only their human dignity; rather making them superfluous as human beings). This happens as soon as all unpredictability – which in human beings, is the equivalent of spontaneity – is eliminated. And all this in turn arises from – or, better, goes along with – the delusion of omnipotence [...] of an individual man. If an individual man qua man were omnipotent, then there is in fact no reason why men in the plural should exist at all – just as in monotheism it is only God's omnipotence that makes him One. So, in the same way, the omnipotence of an individual man would make men superfluous."²⁴ Another pertinent point is that the problem that those unimaginable, horrible Nazi crimes were committed by petty, "banal" criminals occurs in the correspondence of Arendt and Jaspers as early as 1946. In her letter of August 17, 1946, in which she comments on Jaspers' *Die Schuldfrage*,²⁵ Arendt says that "[your] definition of Nazi policy as a crime ('criminal guilt') strikes me as questionable". Arendt thinks these crimes "explode the limits of the law"; for them "no punishment is severe enough". Jaspers did not agree with Arendt "because a guilt that goes beyond all criminal guilt inevitably takes on a streak of 'greatness' –of satanic greatness– which is [...] inappropriate for the Nazis", just as the adjective "demonic" is inappropriate for Hitler. Then he says what Arendt would repeat almost verbatim seventeen years later, in her Eichmann book and the letter to Scholem: "It seems to me that we have to see those

Arendt was using the term "absolute evil" in this sense.)

21 See, for example, her letter of September 20 to Mary McCarthy: Brightman, op. cit. pp. 233-234.

22 Hannah Arendt and Gershom Scholem, "Eichmann in Jerusalem: Exchange of Letters between Gershom Scholem and Hannah Arendt", *Encounter*, 1964:1. Reprinted in Ron. H. Feldman (ed.), *The Jew as Pariah*, New York: The Grove Press, 1978.

23 Hannah Arendt and Gershom Scholem, in Feldman, op. cit. p. 245 and 250, respectively.

24 Hannah Arendt and Karl Jaspers, *Correspondence, 1926-1969*, Lotte Kohler and Hans Saner (eds.), trans. by Robert and Rita Kimber, New York: Harcourt, 1992, p. 166.

25 Karl Jaspers, *Die Schuldfrage*. Heidelberg, Laubert Schneider Verlag, 1946.

things in their total banality, in their prosaic triviality, because that's what truly characterizes them. Bacteria can cause epidemics that wipe out nations, but they remain merely bacteria."²⁶

To me all these elements constitute a history, a development of ideas. Let me start with the letter quoted last, but dated earliest: Jasper thinks stylising the sins of the Nazis is dangerous because it lends the guise of greatness to the perpetrators. Arendt is adamant that the Nazi crimes are incomprehensibly insane, are not of a human scale, though she quickly acknowledges it is unnecessary to attribute "satanic greatness" to those who committed them.²⁷ A few years later she says "radical evil" depends not on human wickedness but the fact that humans as individuals become superfluous, because instead of the spontaneity of a multitude of wills, the human world is dominated by a will which is thought to be "omnipotent". Which is the idea that gets incorporated into the second edition of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* in the form that the perpetrators of the Nazi crimes are the embodiments of "radical evil": they think humans are unnecessary, they do not care if they themselves are alive or dead; their actions are incomprehensible for us precisely because their motive force is not human and comprehensible. In her book on Eichmann Arendt goes further and says the incomprehensible monstrosity can take place even if its perpetrators are not the embodiments but the mere instruments of "radical evil". In the world of Eichmanns even actions motivated by comprehensible human desires may serve the "radical evil". A frightening prospect, as if there were an abstract "radical" ill-will (or not even abstract, merely the "perverted" ill-will – in Kant's terminology: "the radical perversity of human heart" – of a man thought omnipotent) which tricks humans, exploits their "banal", human-scale evilness to make the humanly incomprehensible monstrosity succeed. But then what can you blame the perpetrators for? Can his judgment – and that of all the others who have been 'tricked' – weigh in proportion with the judgment of the terrible consequences of these acts? Scholem must have had something similar in mind when he wrote to Arendt that the "banality of evil" is an empty "slogan", which cannot be taken seriously "as a relevant concept in moral philosophy or political ethics".²⁸ Scholem would be right if Arendt's position on the nature of evil were reconstructed only from what appears in the Eichmann book. But even Arendt said later of the book that when she spoke about "the banality of evil" she "meant with this no theory or doctrine," but simply related what she experienced during the trial: "the banality of evil," she says, in this case meant that however "monstrous the deeds were, the doer was neither monstrous nor demonic".²⁹ The position of the Eichmann-book, however, was not without precedents.

In the chapter "Irreversibility and the Power to Forgive" in *The Human Condition*, Arendt says: "The alternative to forgiveness, but by no means its opposite, is punishment, and both have in common that they attempt to put an end to something that without interference could go endlessly. It is therefore quite significant, a structural element in the

²⁶ Kohler and Saner, op. cit., p. 62.

²⁷ In her reply to Jaspers dated December 17, she says she doesn't want to attribute "satanic greatness" to the Nazis, but she holds that "still, there is a difference between a man who sets out to murder his old aunt and people who [...] built factories to produce corpses". Kohler and Saner, op. cit., p. 69.

²⁸ Hannah Arendt and Gershom Scholem, in Feldman, op. cit., p. 245.

²⁹ Hannah Arendt, "Thinking and Moral Considerations: A Lecture", *Social Research* 38, (1971:3), p. 417.

realm of human affairs, that men are unable to forgive what they cannot punish and they are unable to punish what has turned out to be unforgivable. This is the true hallmark of those offenses which, since Kant, we call 'radical evil' and about whose nature so little is known, even to us who have been exposed to one of their rare outbursts on the public scene. All we know is that we can neither punish nor forgive such offenses and that they therefore transcend the realm of human affairs and the potentialities of human power".³⁰ With this text in mind, I must disagree with Scholem: it is not the concept of "the banality of evil" but the idea of "radical evil" which is problematic. The "radical evil" – which man cannot punish or forgive – has become an "empty slogan", which cannot be taken seriously or used "in moral philosophy or political ethics", since the Nazis committed their crimes. The idea of "the banality of evil" actually helps to overcome the gap that yawned between the incomprehensible monstrosity of evil deeds and their perpetrators' punishability as long as Arendt tried to characterize the Nazi crimes with the concept of "radical evil". The notion of "the banality of evil" was necessary for Arendt to be able to say in the Epilogue to *Eichmann in Jerusalem*: "you must hang", because "no one, that is, no member of the human race, can be expected to want to share the earth with you", who – even if as an ordinary criminal, or even a man of "hard luck" – in fact "carried out, and therefore actively supported, a policy of mass murder"; whatever your motives, you actually carried out, even if only as "a willing instrument", those deeds which led, in accordance with the pronounced intention of this policy, "to the commission of unheard-of crimes" (pp. 178-179). In other words (if we add to this what Arendt said earlier in the chapter "Irreversibility and the Power to Forgive"³¹), no man can forgive you and those who, like you, cooperated in the carrying out of those evil, albeit individually "banal", acts which overwhelmed our human world and threatened it with destruction; you are one of those of whom even the son of God said that their "offences" are unforgivable, at least here on Earth: "woe unto him, through whom they come! It were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he were cast into the sea" (Luke 17: 1-2) – he then continues by teaching, as always, forgiveness for "trespassing"³² –; yet we humans cannot wait until you are subjected to the last, divine judgment, we must punish you here on Earth, we must cast you and your like out, because if your shallow evil proliferates it may exterminate even the possibility to make our human world more liveable. We humans make a liveable cosmos of the unpredictable, chaotic world of human actions, governed by individual wills, by making promises to one another and keeping to our promises; obeying, in an optimal case – if the maxim of the individual will can be made universal – the moral law. Arendt may have had something similar in mind, when what she said in her letter to Scholem about her new position was not only "that evil is never 'radical', [...] and that it possesses neither depth nor any demonic dimension", but also added that "[o]nly the good has depth and can be radical".³³

³⁰ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958, p. 241.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 236-243.

³² For Arendt's interpretation of this passage as Jesus speaking about sins man cannot forgive, and the following section (Luke 17: 3-4) as one where he preaches forgiveness, cf. *ibid.*, p. 241, especially n. 78 and n. 80.

³³ Feldman, *op. cit.* p. 250.

There is another statement in Scholem's letter which has been repeated by many people and in many ways during the debates: he wrote that Arendt's book scandalized her Jewish readers not only with its statements but also with its tone, which, among other things, accounts for the sharpness of the attacks. Scholem thinks Arendt spoke in a "malicious", "flippant", and disrespectful tone about the sufferings of the Jewish people, and she was guilty of "a kind of demagogic will-to-overstatement" concerning the role of the Jewish councils, and in any case, she lacked love for her people.³⁴ Let's consider these charges one by one. In the first, Scholem is bending the truth: Arendt does not speak about the sufferings of the Jewish people in a "disrespectful" tone, she only does not follow the principle that those who suffer deserve nothing but praise, and she does not consider suffering in itself a moral virtue. If I understand Scholem's objections correctly, he did not have the latter in mind – it would probably be noted only by someone who accepts the Christian principle that "suffering ennobles" – but reproaches Arendt for not considering the feelings of the survivors (this is what he calls "disrespect") when she wrote her book, and two decades after the events, re-opening painful still and perhaps never-healed wounds she reported everything, and what is more – and this is Scholem's second objection – "overstated" certain negative phenomena "demagogically". (I will not return to this again; we have already seen that some of Arendt's statements about the role of the Jewish Councils are either questionable or should be considered more carefully in the light of new evidence.) I think Scholem is right in claiming that when it comes to speaking about the terrible sufferings of Holocaust victims words are lacking and one feels (whether one is Jewish or not) that words can tell too little. Most people bow their heads and fall silent. But I also understand Arendt: she could have chosen not to write the book, but once she had decided to write it, she couldn't bow her head and keep silent at certain points.³⁵ Survivors may appreciate silence, it may be easier to forget what one is not reminded of, but "collective forgetting", beside being impossible to maintain for a long time, is always very dangerous: sooner or later we will find it hard to believe whatever is not discussed, whatever we leave out of our common history.

I have left the most difficult question to last, the rather elusive accusation that the tone of Arendt's book proves she was lacking in love for her people. Love for "the Jewish people" or "Israel" may refer to more than what Arendt concentrates on³⁶, because she interprets these words as if her Jewish identity were being questioned. Nevertheless, she answers this very important question in detail.³⁷ Her own Jewishness, says Arendt, "is one of the indisputable factual data of my life", but she does not think it is very important: "If

34 Ibid., pp. 241-243.

35 In a TV interview in the 1970s Arendt was asked whether she would write the book differently, now that she was aware of the intense criticism. She replied that she would not change a thing: she would either not write it at all, or would do as she had done and write everything she had experienced.

36 György Tatár is probably right to say that Arendt does not properly answer Scholem's charge: what Scholem thinks "is completely missing from Arendt's book is a concept of the Jewish tradition which is hard to define exactly because it is such a matter-of-fact and intimate thing. This concept is *ahavat Jisrael*, the love of Israel. [...] It reveals nothing about the concept and much about Arendt's personality that in a warm reply she asks about the origin and age of this 'theological' concept, and requests a bibliography for the study of this 'issue'". This incomprehension, thinks Tatár, characterizes, without exception, every assimilated elite intellectual who grew up in Germany, or anywhere else for that matter, because if European culture is of course not completely anti-Judaist "this culture in general lacks an – even indifferent – benevolence towards Judaism, so those who enter this culture are quick to get rid of the sentiment Scholem talks about." (György Tatár, *Israel*. Budapest: Osiris Kiadó, 2000, pp. 170-171.)

I can be said to 'have come from anywhere', it is from the tradition of German philosophy".³⁸ The first part of the answer should by no means be understood as if Arendt were speaking about "Jewish origin." In *The Origins of Totalitarianism* she clearly stated what she thinks about this: she called Disraeli the product of the controversial Jewish assimilation, a man for whom "belonging to the Jewish people degenerated into a simple fact of birth". Thanks to secularization, Jewish assimilation eliminated the national consciousness and turned the national faith into a denomination, so for an assimilated person, if he or she considered himself or herself Jewish at all, there remained only origin, the "blood" ties.³⁹ This is not what she means in her letter to Scholem. "The truth is I have never pretended to be anything else or to be in any way other than I am, and I have never felt tempted in that direction [...] I know, of course, that there is a 'Jewish problem' even on this level, but it has never been my problem – not even in childhood. I have always regarded my Jewishness as one of the indisputable factual data of my life, and I have never had the wish to change [...] what has been given."⁴⁰ But the second part of her answer refers not to what is a given but the consequence of what Arendt chose early in life: her "homeland" is German philosophy. True, she had teachers in the Germany of the 1920s such as Bultmann, Heidegger, Husserl and Jaspers. It is also true that she later had to acknowledge it was a mere illusion caused by the atmosphere of Germany in the 1920s that she could possibly become a part of German culture. She acknowledged this and left in time. She made herself a name in the 1950s, in the United States. She visited Germany after the war a number of times, but she never re-emigrated, neither during the big wave of returning German emigrant social scientists in the 1960s, nor later. Even the "spiritual homecoming" took a long time. Her reception in Germany began only years after her death in 1975 (she was 69). It was at least quick and thorough. Today Arendt is "present" everywhere: streets or squares have been named after her in several German towns, and the "Hannah Arendt" Inter-City Express crosses half of Germany twice a day, six days a week (leaving Hamburg at 7.11 a.m., and arrives in Stuttgart, via Hannover, Göttingen, Kassel and Frankfurt, at 12.33, returning to Hamburg in the evening).

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37 In her own way Arendt even touches upon the question Tatár describes as a unique peculiarity of the Jewish people, namely that it simultaneously exists outside history (as a "purely religious-ritual, yet non-denominational entity" [Ibid., p. 178]) and in it (as a people with a state). In her letter to Scholem Arendt recalls the occasion when an Israeli socialist told her: "You will understand that as a Socialist, I, of course, do not believe in God; I believe in the Jewish people." Arendt did not prove understanding. In her mind "the greatness of this people was once that it believed in God", but if this no longer is the case, if "now this people believes only in itself", then faith has nothing to do with the people. (Feldman, op. cit. p. 247).

38 Ibid. p. 246.

39 Arendt, op.cit., p. 73 and passim.

40 Feldman, op. cit. p. 246.