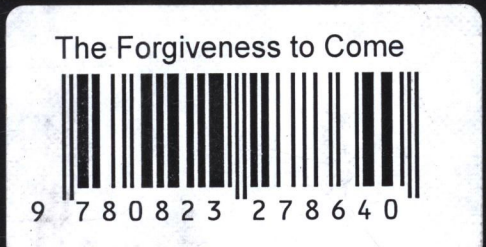
The Forgiveness to Come
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Banki The Forgiveness to Come Fordham University Press

THE FORGIVENESS TO COME

THE HOLOCAUST AND THE HYPER-ETHICAL

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FORDHAM UNIVERSITY PRESS
NEW YORK 2018

THIS BOOK IS MADE POSSIBLE BY A ÇOLLABORATIVE GRANT
FROM THE ANDREW W. MELLON FOUNDATION.

Visit us online at www.fordhampress.com.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
available at http://catalog.loc.gov.

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Marston Book Services Ltd, Oxfordshire

20 19 18 5 4 3 2 1

First edition

THE FORGIVENESS TO COME

just ideas

transformative ideals of justice in ethical and political thought

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Preface

This book addresses the difficulties posed by the Holocaust for a thinking of forgiveness inherited from the Abrahamic (i.e., monotheistic) tradition. As a way to approach these difficulties, it explores the often radically divergent positions in the debate on forgiveness in the literature of Holocaust survivors. Forgiveness is sometimes understood as a means of self-empowerment (Eva Mozes Kor); part of the inevitable process of historical normalization and amnesia (Jean Améry); or otherwise as an unresolved question that will survive all trials and remain contemporary when the crimes of the Nazis belong to the distant past (Simon Wiesenthal).

Why does the value of forgiveness impose itself in the literature of the Holocaust? What does this imposition reveal about Western culture, dominated by Judeo-Christian traditions? Scholars in both German and Jewish studies have argued for the necessity, in the light of the Holocaust, to rethink what forgiveness is, the conditions under which it supposedly takes place, and in particular its relation to justice. What the philosopher Vladimir Jankélévitch has termed the *inexpiable* character of Nazi crimes need not necessarily imply what he called "the death of forgiveness." However, the inexpiable, the idea of a crime or wrongdoing which cannot be atoned for or expiated, compels us to rethink the habitual understanding of forgiveness as a human possibility or power, moreover, one that, as Hannah Arendt believed, must be the correlate of punishment.[1]

Accompanied by an extended examination of Jacques Derrida's thought of forgiveness (as forgiveness of the unforgivable) and its elaboration in relation to the juridical concept of "crimes against humanity," I undertake close

readings of Simon Wiesenthal's *The Sunflower* (1969), Jean Améry's *At the Mind's Limits* (*Jenseits von Schuld und Sühne*) (1966), Vladimir Jankélévitch's *Forgiveness* (1967), and Robert Antelme's *The Human Race* (1947). In addition, I analyze the documentary film *Forgiving Doctor Mengele* (2006) on Eva Mozes Kor. Each of these works bears witness to "aporias," or unsolvable impasses, of forgiveness, justice, and responsibility in relation to the Holocaust. All of the texts chosen, and especially those written in the late 1960s, are at grips with the idea that the crimes committed by the Nazis are inexpiable. To this extent, they contend in different ways with the limits of a dominant understanding of forgiveness within the Abrahamic tradition.

While a great deal of secondary literature exists on the work of Jean Améry, Robert Antelme, and Simon Wiesenthal, in general this literature relies on an understanding of forgiveness grounded in the metaphysical presuppositions that Derrida's thought puts into question (i.e., the autonomous subject, the performative utterance, and the belief in an end or *telos* without remainder). Even when the value of forgiveness is declared to be dead (Jankélévitch) or superseded by the crimes of the Nazis (Améry), it is always the same metaphysical or "ontotheological" understanding of forgiveness that is presumed.

While I believe it is necessary and justified to assert that forgiveness of the Holocaust is impossible, today this response is, I argue, insufficient. In an epoch of "worldwidization" (*mondialisation*), it may not be possible simply to escape what could be termed *the violence of forgiveness*.[2] This violence consists in, among other things, the worldwide proliferation of scenes and rhetoric which almost invariably portray apology, reconciliation, and forgiveness as accomplishable acts. As a way to become more sensitive to this violence, one may consider a memorable statement by Primo Levi: "Forgiveness is not my word, it has been inflicted on me."[3] He was referring to being asked by audiences repeatedly whether or not he could forgive those who perpetrated what happened to him and others at Auschwitz. From where comes this strange insistence on asking a survivor of Auschwitz whether or not he or she can forgive? In relation to the political obligations which drove Levi and others to testify to what happened in the Nazi extermination camps, it is in no way necessary to speak of forgiveness. And yet, one may speculate that something deep, if not intrinsic to Western culture, dominated by Judeo-Christian traditions, drives this insistence. Even though Primo Levi had said that forgiveness is not his word and that it had been

inflicted on him, he nonetheless did agree to answer. Echoing a thinking deeply rooted in the Abrahamic tradition, he said: "No, I have not forgiven any of the culprits, nor am I willing to forgive a single one of them, unless he has shown (with deeds, not words, and not too long afterwards) that he has become conscious of the crimes and the errors, and is determined to condemn them, to uproot them from his conscience and from that of others, because an enemy who sees the error of his ways ceases to be an enemy."[4]

One must ask what are the limits of an understanding of forgiveness that is conditioned on the perpetrators' consciousness of their crimes and their determination to condemn and expiate them. In such an understanding the perpetrator as such is not forgiven, nor is the crime itself, but only the perpetrator who has later agreed to reform themselves; the one who in Levi's terms "ceases to be an enemy". One could go so far as to ask if in this understanding *there is really any forgiveness at all.* In the name of a more marginal strand of thinking within the Abrahamic tradition, one that emphasizes unconditional forgiveness, Jacques Derrida argues that a forgiveness worthy of the name *must not require* that the perpetrator be in conscious agreement with their victim about the nature of their crimes and that they reform themselves in conformity with this agreement. Rather, it should be extended to the perpetrator as such, that is, as unreformed and unrepentant, as they were at the moment when they committed their crimes. Such forgiveness would imply therefore that the perpetrator could commit the same crime again and again, even against the same victims without ever making a promise to reform themselves: "You kill me, I forgive you, you kill me again, I forgive you", and so on ad infinitum.

At first sight it may be difficult, even impossible, to understand the necessity of such a thought, which would seem to be in greatest proximity to the very worst, to the idea that through forgiveness the Holocaust could be permitted to happen again and again, as it were, in a sort of Nietzschean eternal return. And indeed, when I first heard Derrida speak of "pure forgiveness," it was this very implication, which he did not seek to hide, that I found to be most impermissible and even angering, for it challenged one of my most deeply held political beliefs. And yet, if such a thought has any justification, it lies perhaps in the insufficiency of a certain "worldwidized" language and scenography of apology and forgiveness in the context of what are called crimes against humanity. The unconditional forgiveness of which Derrida speaks is not the accomplishable act of a subject who could ever say

with good conscience "I forgive" or "I can forgive." If in an epoch of "world-widization" it is not possible simply to escape the violence of forgiveness, then it is necessary to rethink what forgiveness is, the conditions under which it supposedly takes place, and especially its relation to justice. The implementation in international law of a concept of "crimes against humanity" calls for—even necessitates—the thought of a forgiveness, which does not imply closure of the infinite wounds of the past. Such forgiveness would be distinguished from personal and political reconciliation. What are the conditions under which this forgiveness may be thought or dreamed? How can it be dreamed without renouncing political vigilance? Must this political vigilance itself today be rethought?

To forgive is not my verb. It has been inflicted on me.

—Primo Levi, *The Voice of Memory*

When talking about this book [*weiter leben* in German or *Still Alive* in English] to German audiences, I was invariably confronted with the anxious question whether I could "forgive." It was not clear whether I was to forgive the perpetrators or all Germans . . . [H]ow can I "forgive" the murder of my teenage brother when I have had my life, and he didn't get to have his? And perhaps the adult I am now cannot forgive even in the name of the child I was then. This was not a free decision, I would explain: it was simply not in my power to grant the kind of absolution that is implied in the plea or demand for forgiveness.

—Ruth Kluger, "Forgiving and Remembering"

Whether you are an agnostic or a believer, I do not know, but your problem belongs to the realm of guilt and atonement and . . . therefore is a *theological* one, and as such, it does not exist for me as an atheist who is indifferent to and rejecting any metaphysics of morality . . . Because I can only see the problem of forgiveness in political terms, I must abstain from approving or condemning your behavior . . . Politically, I do not want to hear anything of forgiveness! . . . What you and I experience must *not happen again*, never, nowhere. Therefore I refuse any reconciliation with criminals.

—Jean Améry, in response to Simon Wiesenthal's *The Sunflower*

We are asking forgiveness by reading. Somewhere I wrote that as soon as I write, I am asking for forgiveness, without of course knowing what will happen. But forgiveness is implied in the very first speech act. I cannot perform what I would like to perform. That is why things happen.

—Jacques Derrida, in response to Robert Gibbs

Die Welt ist fort. Ich muss dich tragen.

—Paul Celan

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