

Night

Ann Meskens – December 24th 2019

Column 1: Week theme 'Young Voices'

The Neverending Park. De Grond der Dingen.

Children's rights is plural. One child is singular.

And it is this one singular child I have in mind. A child that in all the horror perhaps even did his best to embrace death, but unfortunately was too light to fall through life.

Who is the child? What was his name? What was his nationality? What did it do to earn this?

He is standing in the courtyard of Buchenwald, together with two older men, a sling around the neck. A silence reigns, frightened in itself, despite the fact that many were gathered.

The usual executioner has refused this task, although he has sufficient experience to kill people. But to put a knot on such a fragile child's neck?

Another hangman was quickly found.

In no time, two men are hanged to death on the gallows.

However, the child is too light in weight, hangs between life and death, time stops.

'Where is our God now?,' someone asks?

Another one answers: 'Look, He was just tied up.'

This is how I remember the witness-story I once read by Elie Wiesel in his novel Night. Wiesel was fifteen years old when he was released from the camps, actually also still a child. He vowed to remain silent for ten years, but how do you express the unimaginable?

How could it be true? For example, had he really seen what he saw when he arrived? Children received special treatment, yes. They were thrown into the fire still alive, it was too much of a hassle to gasify them together with the grown-ups.

Unfortunately, history was right. It was true.

It still resides deep in us from the very beginning. We all seem to share this kind of animal behavior. We take care of the vulnerable little ones, even if we did not give birth to them ourselves, even if they come from another pack or from a group hostile animals. This caring is shared by mother and father animals alike. It is a successful law of life. And this law essentially also applies in every human community. Kill someone, but at least wait until he or she grows up.

In the war this principle ensured that foundlings, lost and hunted children were nevertheless picked up, brought home and raised.

And yet. In times of war and madness, we humans are apparently very well able to ignore the strictest laws of nature.

We kick the vulnerable little ones to death.

We get toddlers out of their beds to take them to hell, without their little suitcase.

We throw babies in the air to shoot them. A game.

Children are holy, I sometimes say.

Both believers and unbelievers understand me.

One knew after the war. A strict treaty of human rights had never been so necessary. When the treaty was drafted in 1948, it should have been clear to everyone. Every child is a human. A human being has rights, first to life. No child may therefore be killed.

For whom it was not entirely clear what human rights entailed for children, a children's rights treaty was drawn up in 1989.

It sounds so natural.

The higher interest of the child (Article 3)

A child has the right to life, survival and development (Article 6)

The second article is also extremely clear. *All children's rights apply to all children, with no exceptions.* In any case, it was obvious to Elie Wiesel, so obvious that he was rightly awarded the Nobel Prize. He only died in 2016.

Today you can visit Kazerne Dossin, the Jewish Museum in Mechelen.

Visitors become physically unwell at the sight of the human suffering. That's how it is supposed to be. Visitors can stand it even less if they have to face the children's suffering. And that is even more supposed to be.

Children were in the Second World war on the same place shivering on the cobbles of this courtyard in Mechelen. They were hungry. They were scared.

They were crying. And yes, there were also very little ones there. Two thousand two hundred and one children boys. Two thousand and forty-five children girls.

The horror of war is still omnipresent. As people, we still have to learn to live together. Especially when there are children involved.

I know. The Mechelen inner court is a historical witness to the unique suffering of the Jewish people. The one boy who died in his sling in the courtyard in Buchenwald was also gathered at home one day. It is a memorial. That is important because the witness Elie Wiesel, like many other human witnesses, has died several years ago. As it supposed to be, from old age, and not as a result of an act from another human being. But Dossin reflects also the story of every person and every child, then and now, here and elsewhere.

The Mechelen Jewish Museum can be a holy place, holy not in the sense that it is valid for one faith, but because every person and certainly every child is holy. And because human beings have to take care for each other, because our gods usually don't show up when we need them.

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