Emcke posits herself in the classic mode of bearing witness and giving voice to the powerless.

Dear friends,

I have been back for two weeks. I do not know how to answer the questions about my time in Albania and Kosovo— as if I hadn’t been there or hadn’t returned yet. The experiences are present, the images, the smell, the sound— everything is clear yet it is impossible to transform it into an adequate and intelligible narrative of horror. (p. 3)

Echoes of Violence started life as a series of emails to friends. From 1998, Carolin Emcke worked as a reporter for Der Spiegel magazine, specialising in human rights reporting from war zones. On returning home from assignment to Berlin, she would send a group email in English to her friends throughout Europe and North America, and at some point one of her friends showed them to a publisher. The emails were translated and published first in German (Emcke 2004) and subsequently adapted back into the original English. The messages describe the people she met and whose stories she reported, her personal reactions to them, and their attitudes to her.

The emails followed trips to Kosovo (twice, in July 1999 and October 2000); Lebanon in 2000; Nicaragua and Romania in 2001; New York, Pakistan and Afghanistan between September 2001 and February 2002—she was in Manhattan when the twin towers were hit; Colombia in 2002 and Iraq twice—in 2002 and early 2003.

Born in 1967, Emcke did her Masters degree with Jürgen Habermas and her doctorate with Axel Honneth, both at the J.W. Goethe University in Frankfurt; she has studied at the London School of Economics and at Harvard, and taught political theory at Yale in 2003–04. While studying she freelanced as a writer for German television, and then started at Der Spiegel in 1998. Both academically and journalistically, she has an elite institutional pedigree, and the book’s reception has extended that trajectory. In 2005 it was proclaimed Political Book of the Year in Germany, and was a finalist in the prestigious Lettre Ulysses Award for the Art of Reportage. In 2006 Emcke was awarded the Ernst-Blöch-Förderpreis, a German award given to scholars and philosophers of extraordinary promise. Her 21,000 plus Google entries attest to her prominence on the lecture circuit in Europe and the United States.

Reading the book, it was not immediately apparent why it enjoys such stellar regard in Europe and the United States. This seems a remarkably ungenerous judgement to make about personal writing not intended to be read by strangers, that was produced as an attempt at catharsis and transcendence, that deals with appalling human suffering in our own time, and whose prose is clear and elegant. And it is most certainly a powerful and moving book.

But there are lots of fine books, articles, films, and podcasts dealing eloquently with the infernos destroying people’s lives in contemporary conflicts. There are analyses by journalists that are more probing and incisive in their assessments of their own work. And there is no shortage of arguments that delineate the politics of these conflicts in more rigorous terms, and hence afford the option of a response beyond the personal, which is what is desperately needed.

The outstanding success of the book may perhaps be best considered in the context of North Atlantic liberal sensibility, shocked by the cascading horrors of unending war but paralysed in response to their own societies’ roles. I suspect the attraction of the book lies in Emcke’s honest revelation of what she calls her ‘blinders’ as a person coming to grips with the power she exercises as a journalist, which the audience welcomes as a crack in the facade of journalistic self-
By what right does any journalist assume that people should converse with him/her?

Emcke posits herself in the classic journalistic mode of bearing witness and giving voice to the powerless:

What I really care about is the relation between violence, trauma, and the loss of language. … What upsets me particularly, what makes me go to these areas, is anger at the fact that if people lose the ability to describe what happened to them, the perpetrators win twice (p. 8).

An incident early in her first visit to Kosovo illustrates this loss:

I cannot forget the ten-year-old girl in Gjakova who stood in front of the burned out ruins of her former house and could not say two complete, intelligible sentences. She spoke without pausing, as if her speech was making sense. She did not stutter or hesitate, she formed one incoherent sentence after the other.

Finally we understood that in this house her father, her brother, her aunt and two cousins had been killed. Her uncle and her two other brothers had been arrested by Serbian units and deported the day before the arrival of NATO troops.

She told us, her father had fallen off the roof when celebrating the long-awaited NATO intervention. He had broken his leg and could not move when the Serbian soldiers arrived at their house. They had told the girl and her mother to leave the house – and killed everyone else in it.

I cannot forget how she stood there in her pink shirt, in front of her former living room wall, slightly oblique because the floor was no longer flat. And I cannot forget that she could not speak properly, and that she occasionally only stared at us and then continued to speak. And that she did not seem upset at all (p. 8).

The urge to bear witness to such trauma drives Emcke’s prose to powerful narrative, but as she acknowledges in reflecting on this and her second visit to Kosovo, the tide of war can turn, and today’s victims become tomorrow’s oppressors. Emcke ponders whether in so strongly reporting the Kosovar suffering she and her fellow journalists provided justification for NATO’s unrelenting bombardment of the Serbs, which itself caused untold suffering to civilians. But beyond that consideration, Emcke largely takes for granted the moral rectitude of bearing witness.

Other journalists have probed this issue more deeply. In many circumstances war criminals want their actions to be reported and publicised. Indeed, some may stage crimes for the cameras to intimidate and terrorise their opponents, as the al-Qaeda videos of beheadings demonstrate. In Denise Leith’s excellent anthology Bearing Witness: The Lives of War Correspondents and Photojournalists (2004), several high profile journalists explore the ethics and impact of bearing witness to suffering. Sorious Somora in Sierra Leone (pp. 308–330) and Penny Tweedie in Bangladesh (pp. 350–355) had to decide whether to film and report random executions of prisoners, both from the point of view of the possible survival of the persons about to be killed, and the larger politics of the conflict. Philip Knightley (1997) has reflected critically on his work and that of the Sunday Times team in their exposure of the Thalidomide tragedy, and Nadine Gordimer (1985) has explored the relationship of the creative arts to political responsibility in liberation struggles.

Emcke’s assumption of the moral rectitude in the process of bearing witness is first challenged at a Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon:

Just around the corner, a few hundred yards away, Aayed Attwat waits for his flatbread to finish baking. He stands in front of a pizza oven and refuses to speak to me, thinking that I’m Jewish. I refuse to deny it. Why would I? Is the fact that I’m not Jewish a criterion for conversation? (p. 50).

Well, perhaps it is—in the context of a Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon, for some people, for better or for worse. An equally valid question to Emcke is why a stranger on the street should trust her motives, her affinities, or her sensibilities? And by what right does any journalist assume that people should converse with him/her? Emcke illustrates the pitfalls herself a short while later while interviewing a Muslim victim of torture by Israeli-affiliated forces in Southern Lebanon:
Emcke is to be applauded for the power of her writing.

He spent six months in this cell, 1.40m x 80cm, unable to stretch, stone floor, no window, no toilet, just a hole on top. Six months.

Secretly, I was searching for reasons to doubt his story. Worse, I searched for reasons to justify his treatment.

Hadn’t he been, according to his own account, a member of Hizbollah? What kind of crimes had he committed? How much more sadistic had his actions against Israeli soldiers been in comparison to his detention? Wasn’t it necessary for the troops in Lebanon to defend themselves against ruthless terrorists like Moujib? Maybe he had never lived in this dungeon? Maybe the Hizbollah had dictated to him every single word he told us?

We stared into this dark cell and did not want to, did not want to believe it – simply because none of us wanted to imagine it (p. 59).

In both Lebanon and Pakistan Emcke is affronted by people assuming she will be anti-Semitic because she is German. She articulates a ‘deep sense of connectness to Israel’s fate’ that she feels as a German in the light of the Holocaust, while observing that other Germans take this historical imperative to imply a guilt ‘about the situation of the Palestinians, whom they see as the last victims of Jewish displacement from Europe and the founding of the state of Israel. Few are able to reconcile the two views’. Including herself. ‘I believed I could be impartial. By my trip I exposed my sheer ignorance’ (pp. 44–46 passim).

This partiality should not be reduced to partisanship on the question of Israel/Palestine, but as Emcke herself says, it is a manifestation of her European identity, which for her extends across the North Atlantic. She was in Manhattan on 11 September 2001, and went south to report from Ground Zero. It affected her more profoundly than any of her other war zone experiences:

But since September 11, I have not returned home. I came back to Berlin for a couple of days, and then I left for Pakistan, and then I came back to Berlin for some time, and then I left again for Pakistan, and then I went to Afghanistan, and then I returned, and then I went to Pakistan, and then to Kashmir … and throughout all those weeks and months, and throughout all those days and weeks that I was in Berlin, I never left Manhattan (p. 158).

What is someone living in a Palestinian refugee camp for fifty years or more, with malnourished children, poverty and desperation their lifelong lot, or a slum dweller in Managua, or an Afghani peasant whose country over decades has been destroyed and turned into a narco-state, supposed to make of a Western journalist who asserts the moral right and responsibility to tell their story to the world, but with the proviso that their tragedy is less than that of September 11 for Americans and Europeans? Emcke neither asks nor answers that question of herself.

Other journalists and writers have and do. In the context of Jewishness and Israel, the likes of Ilan Pappé (2004), Uri Avnery (1986), Jaqueline Rose (2005), Arthur Neslen (2006), Eyal Weizman (2007) and the late Tanya Reinhart (2006) do. For Europeans and North Americans, John Berger (2007), Chris Hedges (2007) and many others do. And they do so not as pamphleteers or spruikers, but as Nadine Gordimer called on all writers to do, with unwavering commitment to the integrity and creative potential of their arts and professions.

I suspect Echoes of Violence has been so lauded in part precisely because it doesn’t ask that hard question of itself, that it reveals the challenge without addressing it, because it doesn’t cut too close to the bone of self-regard. And that is the reason why, when push comes to shove, the poor and the suffering cannot look to the favoured sons and daughters of the North for succour, because they are ultimately not prepared to question the centrality of their own histories, values, interests, and concerns. The oppressed of the world will have to do it for them, as ever.

Emcke is to be applauded for the power of her writing, her commitment to the importance of ordinary people’s suffering, and her honesty in laying out her thoughts and reactions for all to see. Interestingly, one gets the sense as the years progress and one assignment follows another that she accommodates herself to the power of her position, as most journalists do. The presumption of Germanic anti-Semitism is less affronting in Pakistan than it was in Lebanon. The piece about Iraq was written about twelve months after her second return, and reads like the capstone for a book
already contracted for publication: it has the feel of a considered reflection, rather than the rawness of a post-traumatic download of questions and emotions. In it, she concludes that ‘journalism is an almost impossible profession’ and acknowledges the limits of objectivity and human fallibility (pp. 250–251). Indeed. And not just for journalism, but for all professions and people working at the coalface of human conflict and suffering. But that recognition is just a beginning. The point is to go beyond what could be a comforting nostrum to confront the possibility that one’s own certainties and values might be part of the problem.

REFERENCES


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