

Inauguration of the Human Rights Monument in Ghent, 1996 - Frank Beke, Mayor of Ghent, Belgium
Lecture for 75 years of UDHR - 2023

Let me quote Jean-Paul Sartre, who once wrote: 'it's the look of others that kill'. For sure, to a large extent our life and existence are defined by our environment. The clearest example of this statement is what happened to the Jewish people during the Nazi-regime. It did not make the slightest difference if a German Jew showed his mark of honour in World War I, neither did it make any difference if he or she was an important Goethe-scholar. The men in power split them up into separate groups, they were no longer considered as human beings belonging to the same society.

There are many gradations in the way our life, i.e. private as well as public, is socially determined. Of course the most important criterion still is of physical nature. But we cannot always decide by our pure, individual free will if we are going to live on and how we are going to do it. Very often the civil society claims the right to decide on life or death. In Europe, we once had a system by which someone could be declared as being civilly dead. That person, even still physical present, no longer got corporal capacity and was excluded from fundamental rights. Until today someone can still be denied any political rights.

The utmost aspiration of each totalitarian regime is to reach unanimity and to impose on everyone a common ideology they are all supposed to agree with. You must not necessarily recur to physical liquidation to gag someone. There are many ways to stifle the voice of the weaker, to rub them out or to banish them to irrationality.

Although those who aspire after absolute power might regret it, dead people don't always remain silent. On the contrary, their death is not only deterring, but also mobilising. Sometimes deceased heroes are more powerful in the struggle for what they stood for than living activist are. Just let us think of the phenomena of martyrdom, as well in a profane as in a religious sense.

However, any statute is denied to disappeared people. The twilight state between being and not being makes the person invisible. The living can call on taking action, the dead can still mobilise by serving as an example. But somebody who disappeared cannot fulfil that task. Most often, the impact of someone's disappearance is limited to the private sorrow of the immediate entourage. It hardly results in the society as such taking up solidarity. It underlines the fragmentation of social life. Above all, it makes clear that any resistance against the anonymous oppressing power is senseless, since that can strike everyone in silence .

Indeed, political opponents dissolve in "Nacht und Nebel" (night and nebula), they disappear into nothingness. Since no murder was committed, there is no murderer. Nothing has happened, silence is almost undisturbed, nobody is turned into nothing. The next step is not only making disappear all opponents, but also all those who don't fit in the system, who disturb the quietness and what is considered to be 'normality', such as street children, beggars, prostitutes, in short all the scratches on the lacquer of perfection. Not poverty disappears, but the poor themselves.

Who isn't recognised while being alive, is being forgotten once he has disappeared. Who never existed, never can be dead. It's no co-incidence that here, just nearby the Castle of the Counts in Ghent, a monument for the disappeared is erected. Nearby the 'forgotten well' stands a sign of memory, a refusal to forget. At the same time, we are recognizing as valuable human beings the anonymous peasant, the mineworker without a face, but also the street scoundrels and the prostitutes of the slum. Things can disappear, people can't. In that way this monument also is a warning against all dehumanisation in our world.