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## PRESENTATION OF ALEIDA AND JAN ASSMANN

Meine sehr verehrten Damen und Herren, chères collègues et chers collègues, cari amici, care amiche. If you want to be formal, you speak German. If it's about your reputation in the République des Lettres, the Republic of Letters, you should know French. When it comes to friends, Italian is best. If you want to be understood by everybody, you have to choose English. And so I will do this presentation in English, but Jan and Aleida Assmann will speak in German.

When the Balzan Foundation announced this year's awards, one newspaper chose the headline *Prizes in Unusual Categories*. This referred both to Gender Studies and to Collective Memory. Indeed, the Balzan Foundation has usually announced Prizes that are quite close to university disciplines. However, we felt, and we feel, that in the last decades, considerable innovative research has originated from theoretical and methodological concepts that have had a major impact in many different academic disciplines. Memory, and collective memory in particular, are among them. I can just hint at the reasons for this conjuncture in the humanities, leaving aside the evident boom in neuroscience. In the French tradition, one usually goes back to the sociologist Maurice Halbwachs and his *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire* of 1925. Pierre Nora, the editor of the *Lieux de mémoire*, 1984, controversially and somehow nostalgically contrasts «cold» historiography to «warm» memory. Warm memory creates collective identities, especially of nations. Unlike historiography, it does not focus on change, but on continuity. A different context was important mainly in Germany and the US. Since the Nineteen Nineties, the memory of the victims has become a key element of Holocaust and genocide studies. The moral and legal debates about responsibility and restitution have often provoked and relied on such research, also because the generation who lived through or witnessed this terrible past was aging or passing away.

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Aleida Assmann has been at the front of these discussions from the beginning. She has focused on what one calls *Vergangenheitspolitik* in German, the politics of care, use and abuse of the past. With a finely balanced sense of judgment, she regularly takes part in public debates, pleading the case for dialogical remembrance in a world where many cultural collectives cultivate conflicting views of the past. This is what one can call «political memory», a culturally transmitted memory that wants to create collective identity.

This is, however, just one form of memory as discussed by Aleida and Jan Assmann, and this discussion itself is arguably their greatest and most enduring contribution to international scholarship. They are both very distinguished scholars in their own fields: Aleida in English Literature and Comparative Literature at the University of Konstanz, and Jan in Egyptology at the University of Heidelberg. But what brought them together in the true and the metaphorical sense was archaeology, their interest in and curiosity for advanced civilizations of antiquity as well as the *Archäologie der literarischen Kommunikation*, or archaeology of literary communication. This German term refers to a variously composed group of scholars who have worked with the Assmanns over decades now, producing over a dozen edited volumes on the constitution, selection, transmission and the media of cultural corpora, which are seen as indispensable for structuring societies.

For Jan and Aleida Assmann, scholarly insight is thus collective work among friends, as well as the work of a couple with five children and many shared interests. They have proven how small disciplines – what we call *Orchideenfächer* in German – can coin concepts that orient and change research in the whole field of cultural studies. What was essential for this purpose, in the best German tradition, is erudition and conceptual clarity. If one tries to get an overview of the impressive number of publications written by Jan and Aleida Assmann individually, and to a lesser extent, jointly, one can retrace a growing nomenclature of different forms of memory. We must distinguish collective memory as opposed to individual memory, although both are socially determined. Furthermore, communicative memory among people who know each other is often transmitted orally and lasts only for the time of three or four generations, kept alive by those who live together. To this, we can oppose the social memory of just one generation that shares experiences, even with people whom they do not know personally, such as the famous generation of 1968, to which Aleida and Jan belong in a certain sense, with their creativity and their curiosity, but certainly not for their ideological beliefs.

Above all, however, cultural memory must be mentioned. The concept results from the insight that collective memory relies on many different

imprints. In the long run, the most important is the cultural, symbolic, and often written tradition, a gigantic archive or deposit of potential memories. The Assmanns have introduced cultural memory as a concept to look at what earlier civilizations and ourselves as well do with our past and with our pasts, and how we do it in selecting, censoring, categorizing, and so on. The past is not living in the past – it's alive, and lives on only if remembered in the present time. This is the case even in Jan Assmann's arguably most controversial thesis about the Mosaic distinction, the exclusive claim for the one uncontested truth of a monotheist god who demands an unrelenting struggle and the annihilation of heterodox enemies. If there was a historical moment when the Mosaic distinction was introduced, this does not mean that it is a tradition wherefore its Jewish inventors would have to assume responsibility. Every generation, every present time, selects its very particular memories, and what they stand for, out of an immense archive of possible memories.

So do scholars in the humanities. The Assmanns have illustrated the erotic relation between curiosity and the secret – our great experience in scholarly work. In the introduction to one of their joint volumes on literary communication which I mentioned, Jan and Aleida quote the Kabbalah to show how the curious lover, a student, sees things that others do not notice, while the beloved, the Torah, who hides from everybody else, grants brief insights into her secrets only to him. The oeuvre of the Assmanns is a product of their joint discovery – an erotic discovery – of secrets hidden in tradition, in theories, and in our current world. And now, they will tell us about their experience, describing their expedition and where it will go with the Balzan Foundation. Thank you very much.