

The Memory Chalet

T. Judt

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Tony Judt has ALS. This means that the nerves to the muscles do no longer fire. You become captive in your body, while your mind remains razor sharp. The predicament is one of pure distilled horror. There is no pain, just discomfort, all of the terror is mental, because there is no longer anything physical. It makes the idea of death an impending extinction, terrifying in any condition, singularly sharp and poignant. It is literally a life sentence with no reprieve in sight. You are often admonished to make the best of things when struck by calamity. This is easy to say if you are an outsider, quite another thing if you are struck. An intellectual, a mental man, ought to have an advantage. This is what finally gives some grim comfort to Judt. As long as he is able to communicate some of his rich inner life to the outside it is not all in vain. This book is a collection of stories made up in the mind and committed to memory by a well-known trick of mnemonics. Associate each link of a story to a particular house, the interior of which you know intimately. Then you may recall the story by making a virtual trip in the interior. It works well. It worked very well for Judt.

Those stories were originally published in the NYR where I first encountered them not too long ago. I was delighted, looking forward to new stories at each subsequent issue. Yet reading them collected in a book is somewhat different. They appear more flat, much of the fizz is gone. Part of it may be due to the fact that I have read them before, even if many of them bear up well to a rereading. You may also have higher expectation of a book than a journal. The former should stand up to time, the latter provides entertainment for the moment, much of it bound to become obsolete.

Maybe the most striking stories are about education. Judt is a leftist, but also an elitist. The two are not supposed to go together, although in practice they go together very well. Education means equal opportunity not equal outcome. The educational process is ruthless, it becomes very evident who have talent and who have not. The former should have the privilege. With fondness he recalls his teacher of German. Politically incorrect even back in that time. He humiliated the weak, hence he also made people work. He did not tolerate sloth. He was not a sadist, he used no physical corrections, he relied on verbal censure. It worked, at least for some. And for those whom it worked for it worked very well. Of course today such a teacher would be hopeless. Also the university - Oxbridge to be more exact, which Judt entered in the mid-sixties was very different from what it has hence become. It was a sanctuary for the privileged, those to whom the life of the mind surpassed anything else. Faculty, even at Cambridge and Oxford, tended to be obscure. They did not necessarily publish. Theirs was not the life of fame, just study. Such idealism is laudable, especially in retrospect, comparing to what modern universities have become. No sanctuaries but places where you publish or you perish. It does not matter what you publish, as long as you churn it out. Efficiency rules. A legacy of Margaret Thatcher? Of course. But she was just sensing the winds that were blowing.

The most charming of the stories are those of reminiscences. Long bus rides through London from one suburb to the other. Mini-adventures. Or train travel. He is a buff, and who is not. Traveling by train is the civilized way of travel. A modern airport has no charm at all, but an old railway station smack in the middle of a city, certainly had. The saddest thing about being strapped to his bed or wheel-chair, Judt muses, is that he will never be able to ride on a train again. Dying is a matter of losing options. Dying of ALS makes those losses to stand out so much more.

He has had many wives. A man with many wives often makes up a strange mixture of misogyny and love of women. Misogyny because divorce is generally bitter, while only a love of women would make you try again in spite of all the odds against you. A man with many wives also tend to marry younger and younger women. We are not made privy to those affairs, past wives only make brief anonymous appearances. This is a private matter, and maybe he is shy of exploring it for fear of prurience. Yet it adds a tantalizing dimension that simply is not explored.

Judt was a Marxist and a Zionist in youth. By the age of twenty he had graduated from both and would remain deeply skeptical of them. Thus he never fell into the easy traps of his contemporaries. He had seen it in practice. Now Marxism lost much of its original allure by the 90's. Regrettable to some extent, as Judt is still a Socialist and finds the current management oriented capitalist lifestyle simply abhorrent, longing back to a gentler more human past imbued with social virtues. He is also an anti-zionist being hard on Israel. This has, unlike his aloofness from Marxism, earned him many an enemy. He is Jewish, but in the same way Isaac Deutscher proclaimed himself Jewish. It does have nothing to do with shared religious rituals, Judt was brought up with Christmas trees and all that. It has to do with an externally enforced identity from which there is no escape. In fact, the most potent symbol of identification nowadays is the Holocaust. The moral basis for the existence of the state of Israel is solely based on it. And they know it. Yet, if there had been no Hitler, what would have been the fate of Judaism now? Maybe it might have more or less disappeared, save from some minority sects. The Jews might have become totally assimilated. The Jewness would have made no sense anymore. How ironic that the enduring legacy of Hitler is the revival of Judaism. So far he does not go, but almost. He himself wants to live on the edge. Not to be part of anything but be where all kinds of ethnic identities meet and clash. This is why New York is so congenial to him. New York may be the last great city still alive. London had its time of glory, being the financial center of the world until the First World War. Paris, had its time as the cultural center. But for Paris Judt never felt any real love. Vienna too had its finest hours. Those were not many, but while it lasted it might have been the most intense of them all. What is left of the idea of a world city? If there is anything, New York may be the one which embodies it the most. New York, as I realized when I lived there, is not really part of America. It is on its very edge and it is embarrassed by its hinterland. The attack on the Twin Towers was supposed to be an attack on America. But to most Americans was it not an attack on New York, and serves them well too. Of course such sentiments, while vibrant in the air, never got an opportunity to condense. Instead the tragedy was usurped for patriotic reasons. Of this Judt does not say a word. Maybe he would have agreed?

What else? He is a historian by profession. What made him stand out? Perhaps his

mid-life crisis when he started to learn Czech realizing he knew nothing of the country, its history and its culture. It enlarged his views, as the saying goes. he would never have been able to produce such an integrated piece of work such as 'Post-War' had he not been introduced to the other part of Europe. The Eastern part, where life somehow was far more serious than in the cuddled West. Marxism had another face there, it had to be taken seriously, and when so done, it led to quite unexpected insights. The West. The notion is losing some of its sting, as eastern Europe is rapidly converging to it, and through the processes of Globalization, all the world seem to assume its values. West is associated with prosperity and its inevitable consequence consumerism. Is that sustainable? Is it compatible with a serious life? Austerity has its charms, at least in retrospect, and Judt fondly recalls his earliest days in postwar Britain. Yes indeed, it seems idyllic.

There is of course no conclusion to the book, that would go against its grain. Yet if the book has a message it is to treasure the happy memories of happy places. Maybe a rather trivial conclusion, but when it comes to emotions, lack of sophistication is not the issue, sincerity is. A sincerely evoked memory of a true emotion may be the last we have left as we are about to expire.

February 19, 2011 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* ulfp@chalmers.se