

Mohamed Sahnoun, a text written for the Caux Expo renewal

During the war for Algerian independence from France, a young Algerian nationalist, Mohamed Sahnoun, was – like many others – arrested by the security forces and tortured in the notorious ‘Villa Suzini’. That vicious war of decolonization left hundreds of thousands dead and displaced – and a deeply wounded memory, a history unhealed to this day. And Sahnoun has borne the consequences of those terrible weeks all his life – the beatings and half-drownings left him deaf in one ear.

Fifty years after these events, Sahnoun, published a book. He’d written the text for friends long ago, he said, for private circulation, but it was the torture in Abu Ghraib (Iraq) and elsewhere that reminded him of his ‘duty to protect’ through sharing his own story. (Presses de la Renaissance, Paris, with the title *Mémoire blessée - Algérie*, 1957, p.233 pages).

In his preface to the novel, Sahnoun’s predecessor as Initiatives of Change International’s president, Cornelio Sommaruga, former head of the International Red Cross, writes about ‘a terrible experience of the inhuman and gratuitous cruelty that humans can inflict on each other, an experience of intolerable and constant humiliation’. But he continues, the book is also ‘a hymn to human solidarity and this individual responsibility to protect’, a responsibility that must become a duty for us all.

Salem, the fictional character of Sahnoun, is saved and protected, sheltered and cared for by other French – so this book could also carry the title of ‘Memory Healed’. Salem, and Sahnoun, are both part of ‘this great family that shares the same ethical values’, along with others of all nations and creeds. Another of his characters, a French-woman who is helping him, says, ‘We must constantly be ready to accept suffering as a fore-runner to joy. Childbirth is perhaps the best example of what I mean. Isn’t life a constant process of birth-giving, of which we’re not always aware?’ Anna, this Frenchwoman, clings to ‘an incredible faith, quite irrational and totally mystical, anchored in what we call love’. Sahnoun quotes with approval a group of French priests who proclaim: ‘No race is superior; no race is inferior. We are all just humans, all sinners, and all loved by God as his children.’

The book oscillates between dream and nightmare, waking and sleep, pain and birth. The dream of ‘a re-made world, of dialogue, tolerance and cooperation’ even in a prison cell. We all have to break down ‘the wall of misunderstanding, of prejudice, and above all of fear’. All too often, the author concludes, we are hostages to the systems of thinking into which we are born and educated, systems that become sacrosanct dogmas, and we torture in their name. ‘But other paths, of benefit to all, are entirely possible.’

Mohamed Sahnoun has had a distinguished diplomatic career, serving as Adviser to the President of Algeria on diplomatic affairs; Deputy Secretary-General of the Organization of African Unity (OAU); and Deputy Secretary-General of the League of Arab States in charge of the Arab-Africa dialogue. He was Algeria’s Ambassador to Germany, France, the United States, and Morocco, as well as the United Nations. Mr. Sahnoun was UN Special Adviser to follow developments in Africa; Special Envoy

of the UN Secretary-General, on Sudan.(2001-2005); on the Ethiopian/Eritrean conflict (1998-2000); Joint Representative of the UN and the OAU in the Great Lakes region and Central Africa (1996-1998); and Special Representative of the UN to Somalia (1992). He also served as Special Adviser to the Director-General of the United Nations Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) for the Culture of Peace Program.

He was a member of the World Commission on Environment and Development (the Brundtland Commission), which produced the Report 'Our Common Future', as well as Senior Adviser to the Secretary-General of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED). He co-chaired the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty, which produced the Report on the 'Responsibility to Protect'.

He has been President of the International Association of the Initiatives of Change movement. Mr. Sahnoun is Founder and Chair of the Caux Forum for Human Security.

Sahnoun says, 'After two World Wars, the Cold War and numerous wars left induced by the colonial experience legacy, we are now told to focused on a "war on terrorism". But actually a more radical diagnosis is needed. The issue is not clash of civilizations but a lack of security for all people.

'The causes operate on two levels. On one hand, social breakdown, war, the humiliation of whole peoples, the unequal distribution of wealth... And on the other, this solid, tenacious block inside each of us made of bitterness and conflict, which kills hope and faith, and holds us back from renewal.

'A different approach is to change ourselves, to know ourselves better. The Initiatives of Change centre at Caux, Switzerland, has 60 years experience in creating the conditions for peace. The art of listening, of honest dialogue, is key to creating the conditions for peace.

'To find a preventive strategy that could tackle the root causes of insecurity and help manage conflicts and save millions of lives will require unprecedented trust and collaboration among all nations and actors. We need a truly global synergy that gives every person an opportunity to contribute to peace and human security.

'Humanity cannot avoid this kind of change that starts with each one of us, and that implies a personal challenge and learning to listen. Solving the conflicts of tomorrow demands a diplomacy that integrates the art of really listening to people and taking into account their hurts. Without this, there is no defusing the time-bomb of humiliation.'

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