# Unhappiness transmuted on the banks of the river Ner

## Paulo Faria

**Translated by Patricia Anne Odber de Baubeta**

In France, on the Chemin de Dames, where four hundred thousand men perished in the First World War, I made friends with a man called Noël. Every year he is forced to harvest from his land the artillery shells which did not explode but could do so at any moment. Some are full of poison gas. On the day when I met him, he took me to one of his fields and, stooping over the brown earth, we gleaned pieces of shrapnel. Half an hour later, we had gathered three kilos. He then told me the story of his age-old oak tree. It was in 2018, one hundred years after the war had ended.

When I tell a story, I take it over, it becomes mine. Moreover, telling a story is the only way to make it mine. Even when it's a story in which I was the protagonist.

Between 1967 and 1969, while my father was away fighting in the colonial war in Mozambique as a medical militia ensign, Michael Herr covered the Vietnam war as a journalist. When he returned to the United States, Herr wrote that the war had taught him that you are as responsible for everything you see as you are for everything you do.

Representing memory involves taking responsibility for everything we see. Or rather, for everything that other people tell us. Taking on this responsibility only makes sense if it corresponds to a search for happiness.

Jorge Luis Borges wrote: "I have always felt that my destiny was, above all, a literary destiny. In other words, many bad things and some good things would befall me. But I have always known that all this, in the long term, would be transformed into words, above all the bad things, since happiness does not need to be transmuted: happiness is always an end in itself."

On his land, Noël had an oak tree that dated back to the time of the Great War, the only one to survive the slaughter of men and trees. A colossus, eighteen metres high. He swore to himself he would never cut it down. He demanded that his daughters swear the same oath. But one stormy night the oak came crashing down. The earth, dug up to build the trenches during the slaughter, battered by the artillery shells, no longer held firm. The roots of the tree could no longer support it.

I've thought a great deal about the reason why, only after my father's death, I felt impelled to transform the bad things in my life into words. And the reason is very simple. I didn't want to tell my father, while he was alive, that he was unable to create happiness around him.

Time and again I try to answer the question: "How is memory represented?" Basically, the question is: "How do we represent unhappiness?" Which is the equivalent of asking: "How do we tackle unhappiness?" Or even: "How do we turn the representation of unhappiness into an instrument for creating happiness?"

I keep watching the film *Shoah*, by Claude Lanzmann, over and over. In the first scene, Simon Srebnik, a survivor of the Chelmno death camp, ploughs through the river Ner in a barge, singing the songs the German guards taught him when he was thirteen years old. I approached the bank of the river Ner in the month of January 2022. It rained nonstop and was very cold, but I felt the need to go as far as the river bank that Simon Srebnik passed, singing, in the boat, with the church of Chelmno in the background, at the top of the slope. I have seen *Shoah* so often that now I seem to have become responsible for those images.

On 26 March 1968, a Tuesday, two platoons from my father's company returned to barracks in Niassa at the end of a four-day operation in the bush, during which, terrified of an ambush, they summarily executed a prisoner they'd taken with them. In his war diary, my father wrote: "I feel the most unhappy of men because I'm involved in this shit. Will I ever forget this day?" When he wrote these words, my father took on responsibility for what he had not seen for himself, but had been told about. And of course he couldn't forget that.

A man came with a metal detector and ran the gadget's sensor over the trunk of Noël's old oak to see if that body was housing in its vegetal flesh any shrapnel from shells fired in the Great War. The diagnosis was favourable. The oak tree was sold to a logger who sold it on to China to be transformed into veneers 1.2 millimetres thick, to cover IKEA furniture. Noël told me this with immense sadness because the oak was very, very old, and all that remained of it now was the memory, chopped into sheets of wood as fine as paper, covering cheap, characterless furniture. And because, even though he was not to blame for it, Noël knew he hadn't kept his promise.

In a place called Hurtebise, the plateau of the Chemin des Dames becomes very narrow. Here, the French lines were almost glued to the German lines. This was explained to me by an historian friend of mine named Philippe. On 16 April 1917, a corps of Senegalese marksmen attacked at this point. In fact, the soldiers weren't all Senegalese. There were Senegalese, of course, but also Malians, men from the Ivory Coast and Guinea, from

Dahomey and many more, brought from the French colonies. But it was simpler just to call them “Senegalese marksmen”. They threw themselves into the attack, charging up the slope. Philippe turned his back on the plain that stretched out below our feet and pointed to a depression on the opposite side of the plateau. The land forms a kind of funnel, which lured the soldiers towards a steep drop. The men who had come from so far away, summoned to settle on European soil a dispute between their own colonizers, rushed towards the valley of the river Ailette. No one ever saw them again. They all perished in that place, caught in the crossfire of the German machine guns. I went down with Philippe through the forest to the bank of the Ailette. The dead leaves were slippery, and I had to take care not to fall. I try to construct some kind of happiness on top of the unhappiness, mine and other people’s. Fifty years after the African soldiers were massacred in Hurtebise, my father and his comrades went to Africa to kill and die. They too were summoned to defend the rights of the colonizers. Fifty years after my father returned from the war, I met Noël and Philippe. Drawing lines that link faraway places, linking lives that never intersected, the deaths that were only in vain if we forget them. That’s a kind of happiness.

In *Shoah*, Srebnik reaches the clearing, in the forest, where the bodies were burned, four kilometres from Chelmno, looks around, heaves a sigh and says: “It was here”. The rain was pouring down. I crossed a line of trees at the foot of the slope, beside the village, and walked along the edge of a field. I usually avoid walking on land that has been ploughed, I know that farmers hate people who do that, and rightly so. I slipped and almost fell. I reached the bank of the Ner, looked around, sighed, and said: “It was here”. I felt greatly relieved, because understanding exactly where places are, measuring distances with the naked eye and one’s steps, all this is a kind of happiness. I just didn’t know for sure whether the Ner, at my feet, was flowing from my left to my right or my right to my left. Despite the rain, the current was weak, it wasn’t easy to make out. It isn’t easy to make out in the images in Lanzmann’s film either.

Whenever I can, I talk to veterans of the Portuguese colonial war, of other colonial wars. Later on, I tell the stories they tell me. I recount my memories of their memories. I spoke to a veteran of Guinea who told me that once, in an operation, they captured a woman with a baby. The baby began to cry. So as not to give their position away to the enemy, the captain ordered them to kill the baby. And the baby was killed. Another veteran of the Guinea war told me they captured a Cuban nurse in the bush. All the men in the platoon raped her. A platoon is made up of thirty five or forty men. A French veteran of the Algerian war told me he was part of a contingent guarding a bridge near Oran, so that the guerrillas couldn’t blow it

up. They searched all the Algerians who crossed the bridge. Peasant couples often came along, with a donkey. The man riding the donkey, the woman on foot. He told me that whenever this happened, they ordered the man to dismount and told the woman to get up on to the donkey. Only then would they allow them to continue on their way. And he told me: "We knew that one hundred metres ahead, round the bend in the road, the man would make the woman to dismount and continue on foot while he would ride the donkey. But for five minutes, we had liberated the woman".

I've not yet written the stories of any of these veterans, I've not appropriated any of them. Perhaps because none of them has struck me as especially unhappy or especially aware of his unhappiness.

I didn't manage to cross over to the other bank of the Ner. There wasn't anyone in a barge to take me over. The Ner isn't very wide, at first sight I'd say I could cross it in a jump, but that was an illusion, there was no way I could cross. I threw a twig and realised that the water was flowing slowly from my left to my right. I wanted to get to the left bank to see the river from the same angle as it appears in the first sequence of *Shoah*. Nothing doing. The church where the victims spent the night before being gassed in the gas vans was behind me, at the top of the hill. Entwining my memories with those of other people, no matter how tragic these may be, is also a kind of happiness. Ahead of me I could see the A2 highway, which didn't exist when Lanzmann filmed here. The cars and the TIR lorries rattled constantly along the damp tarmac. If Lanzmann were filming the opening scene of Shoah here today, this background buzzing would taint the limpidity of Srebnik's song.

Paulo Faria, January 2022

Originally published (in Portuguese) as an afterword in *Des-Cobrir a Europa*, Margarida Calafate Ribeiro and Fátima da Cruz Rodrigues (ed.), Lisbon, Afrontamento, 2022