

REMEMBERING THE HOLOCAUST

David Kilgour

Jean Piggott Room

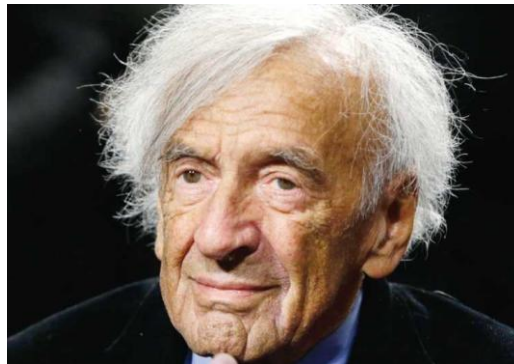
OTTAWA CITY HALL

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Your Excellencies, Members of Parliament, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Today is the day the United Nations General Assembly designated in a 2005 resolution to commemorate the Holocaust.

Professor Elie Wiesel



Prof Wiesel, who survived hell and was the first to name what happened The Holocaust, died last year at 87 and deserves the respect of all. As Beryl Wajsman of Montreal put it last July 2nd, “Elie Wiesel - We shall not see his like again. He now belongs to the ages... Here are some details of his life from a tribute to him by Dr. Joel Rappel, founder of the Elie Weisel Archive at Boston University:

He was born in Sighet, Romania in 1928. In April, 1944, all of the Jews there were taken to Auschwitz. His mother and younger sister, Tzipora, were murdered soon after their arrival. He and his father, a rabbi, worked as slave labour in sub-camps of Auschwitz until January, 1945, when they were taken on a death march to Buchenwald. His father died there shortly before the Americans liberated the camp.

He believed in the Creator of the world throughout his life despite what he termed his “wounded faith” as a result of the Holocaust. Rappel: “But his wounded faith never brought him to negate or abandon it. In fact, the opposite is the case.”

He “dedicated his life to the preservation of the memory of six million Jews who were murdered during the Holocaust, weaving that memory into global consciousness so that no similar event can ever take place again.”

His first of 57 books, *Night*, was published in 1956 and was later translated into more than 30 languages. Over 100 books have been published about him. In all his works, he emphasized the beauty of Judaism and Jewish life. He was awarded honorary degrees by 138 educational institutions.

He wrote, “More than anything, I wish to be remembered by Jewish history as one who acted on behalf of Soviet Jewry...The Jews of Europe were physically destroyed by the Nazis. The Russians wished to destroy Soviet Jewry spiritually. Both were bent on destroying us. (We) were unsuccessful in preventing the former. We are obligated to prevent the latter.”

Wiesel’s defence of human rights and his attempts to stop the genocide in Uganda, South Africa, Cambodia and in Brazil won him the Nobel Peace Prize in 1986. As Rappel notes, “...the constant smile on his face erased the distance between the Nobel Prize laureate and the good student (usually the excellent student) who sat in his class.”

Wiesel Reflections:

Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, which has turned my life into one long night, seven times cursed and seven times sealed...Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust. Never shall I forget these things, even if I am condemned to live as long as God Himself. Never.

“At Auschwitz, not only man died, but also the idea of man. To live in a world where there is nothing anymore, where the executioner acts as god, as judge-many wanted no part of it. It was its own heart the world incinerated at Auschwitz.

No human race is superior; no religious faith is inferior. All collective judgments are wrong. Only racists make them.

Sometimes we must interfere. When human lives are endangered, when human dignity is in jeopardy, national borders and sensitivities become irrelevant. Whenever men or women are persecuted because of their race, religion, or political views, that place must - at that moment - become the center of the universe.

In the face of suffering, one has no right to turn away, not to see. In the face of injustice, one may not look the other way. When someone suffers, and it is not you, that person comes first. One's very suffering gives one priority. . . To watch over one who grieves is a more urgent duty than to think of God.”

Four Ottawa Residents

Let me mention briefly four Ottawa residents with differing experiences of the Holocaust:

Dr. Truda Rosenberg



Only last week, survivor Truda Rosenberg, the U. of Ottawa's outstanding graduate in 2011, told me that she has somehow forgiven those involved in the Holocaust, and hopes that there will never be another. Carleton U's former dean of arts and science, John Osborne, wrote in the preface to her book *Unmasked*: "How many people have I met who have jumped from a moving train carrying them to a death camp?" She survived the Holocaust in Germany by pretending to be a Catholic. Later she became a nurse in the U.K. and came to Canada. She obtained her Ph.D. in psychology and practised as such in Ottawa for 32 years. She is not well enough to join us today.

Alex Polowin



One of Canada's WW2 heroes, Alex Polowin, is with us. As the war ensued, he, then 17 and an Ottawa resident, felt guilty that he was not doing "something" to help family members being murdered in Lithuania and enlisted in the Canadian navy. He blamed the Nazis, not Germans, and indeed his mother had told him about a German soldier in WW1 who borrowed a bag of flower from her in Lithuania, but returned it the next day. Today, Alex is the last person still alive from among the 450-500 other crew members who served on the HMCS Huron and HMCS Pictou and the HMCS Poundmaker. The Huron helped to sink or disable 56 enemy ships in the English Channel. Today, Alex has spoken in many schools and has jettisoned the malice he earlier bore, saying his life

experience has taught him to believe in forgiveness. He was one of the first Canadians to win the legion d'honneur from the president of France.

Vera Gara



Vera Gara and her family were forced into ghettos and then cattle cars, and months of forced labour before ending up at Theresien camp near Prague. One of the heroes highlighted in her book is Raoul Wallenberg, who saved the lives of tens of thousands of Jews by issuing them make shift passports of neutral Sweden and creating 'safe houses' in Budapest. One of Wallenberg's drivers described how his audacity immobilized the Nazis when he intercepted a trainload of intended victims about to leave for Auschwitz: "(Wallenberg) climbed up on the roof of the train and began handing in protective passes through the doors which were not yet sealed. He ignored orders from the Germans to get down, then the Arrow Cross men (Hungarian Nazis) began shooting and shouting at him to go away. He ignored them and calmly continued handing out passports to the hands that were reaching out for them..." Vera eventually relocated to Britain, from where she and her husband George later moved to Ottawa, where she devoted herself to promoting education about the Holocaust. Raoul Wallenberg became Canada's first honorary citizen in part because of Vera's lobbying campaign among MPs of all parties. Vera and George are with us today.

Cantor Moshe and Rifka Kraus



At the liberation of Bergen Belsen, Cantor Kraus weighed only 36 kilograms and was taken to hospital. Many years later, he decided to accept the German government's invitation to attend the opening of the Bergen-Belsen museum. It was an opportunity to

say prayers for those buried there, participate in the ceremony, bear witness to the opening of the museum and visit friends. “We saw each other. We remembered stories. We cried together... It was not easy...I had to come to the opening of the museum because I was involved there. Bergen Belsen is very, very touchy for me. I needed to go. The museum looks to bring out the truth and show it so it will never happen again,” he says. Cantor Kraus was moved to see many non-Jews and especially many younger Germans attend the opening ceremony. “I watched them in the museum with my wife Rifka. As they watched the videos, and read the stories of the inmates, they were using tissues to wipe their eyes... It was unbelievable...I appeal to people to go to Bergen Belsen, to see the museum and learn something, and also to give honour to the very dear people who should be valuable to (all of us).”

Indifference

Too many in my own faith community (Christians) stood by as the worst catastrophe in human history was inflicted on sisters and brothers of Jewish faith. There were outstanding individual exceptions in all countries conquered by Hitler, but many Christians in Canada and Europe did virtually nothing to honour the second great commandment. Canada's official indifference before entering WW2 is well set out in *None Is Too Many* by Irving Abella and Harold Troper. The best estimate of the number of desperate European Jews permitted to enter Canada in 1933-45 period appears to be approximately 4000.

Did the immunity provided for Nazi war criminals when the work of the Nuremberg Tribunal was stopped in 1948 somehow help to provide a licence for subsequent genocides in Cambodia, Bosnia, Rwanda, Sudan and what has been happening to the Falun Gong and other prisoners of conscience across China since mid-1999 (see, for example, www.endorganpillaging.org) ? 'Never again' became 'again and again'.

Lessons for Today

Permit me to offer two lessons I draw from the Holocaust for today:

(1) We need to stand united against hatred and indifference. The 20th century was the worst in history in terms of violence directed at believers of all faiths, mostly by totalitarian regimes. The major lesson for all faith communities is clear: if we stand shoulder-to-shoulder when anyone in our own or another religion is being persecuted anywhere, many innocent lives can be saved.

(2) The international community must condemn and deter aggression by regimes against another country or religion. As Rabbi Reuven Bulka says, "Holocaust deniers are not stupid; they are evil. The deniers would eagerly welcome another holocaust, which they and their ideological progeny would again deny ever happened."

Daniel Goldhagen

As you all know, increased interfaith harmony is essential for a more peaceful 21st century, so I'd like to close by drawing on a book, *The Devil That Never Dies-the rise and threat of global antisemitism*, by Daniel Goldhagen, formerly of Harvard's academic staff. His thesis is that antisemitism has exploded in recent decades, insinuating itself into the minds of hundreds of millions of persons around the world. The book is comprehensive, but permit me to stress two points:

- The resurgence of antisemitism has occurred around the world, especially and unexpectedly in Western countries "...among elites and common people... public media, places of worship, and in the privacy of homes."
- In religious communities, Christians were for centuries told that Jews, rather than Romans, killed God's son; the New Testament before modernization was replete with inaccurate references to the faith community into which Jesus was born and died (Fortunately, most Christians now repudiate these notions as the book notes). Muslims are told that Jews sought to kill God's prophet, Muhammad, and are the enemies of Allah. In the absence of reform of the Qur'an and the Hadith, some Muslims still advocate violence against Jews.

Conclusion

David Matas and I recently visited Latvia and Poland to raise awareness about another crime against humanity- the ongoing organ pillaging/trafficking from tens of thousands of prisoners of conscience across China. In Riga, we visited its Holocaust Museum and saw the names of about 25,000 persons of all ages killed by the Nazis there. We spoke in the Janis and Johanna Lipke Museum, built to honour a Catholic couple who saved the lives of approximately 50 Jews by hiding them in their cellar. An estimated 500 other Latvians attempted to save Jewish lives.

Permit me to end these solemn remarks with something you might also find funny. Alex Polowin noted over coffee this week that the estimated number of Jews across the world today is only about 15 million. He then added with a smile. "Some people think there are about 300 million of us."

Thank you.