

REMEMBERING THE HOLOCAUST: LESSONS FOR OUR TIME

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May I preface my remarks with a personal statement. Whenever I speak on the Holocaust (the Shoah) I do so with a certain degree of humility, and not without a deep sense of pain.

For I am reminded of what my parents taught me while still a young boy – the profundity and pain of which I realized only years later – that there are things in Jewish history that are too terrible to be believed, but not too terrible to have happened; that Oswiencim, Majdanek, Dachau, Treblinka – these are beyond vocabulary. Words may ease the pain, but they may also dwarf the tragedy. For the Holocaust was a unique evil in the singularity of its genocidal intent, where biology was inescapably destiny, a war against the Jews in which, as Elie Wiesel put it, "not all victims were Jews, but all Jews were victims".

We meet at an important moment of remembrance and reminder, of witness and warning:

- on the 62nd anniversary of the liberation of the death camps – of the liberation of the surviving remnants of “Planet Auschwitz” – the most horrific laboratory of mass murder in history;
- on the 62nd anniversary of the disappearance of Raoul Wallenberg in January 1945 into the Soviet Gulag – this Hero of Humanity, this Saint Just of the Nations, whom the United Nations called the greatest humanitarian of the 20th Century, who showed that one person could confront evil, resist and prevail, and thereby transform history;
- on the eve of the 62nd anniversary of the United Nations, which as former U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan said, “emerged from the ashes of the Holocaust”, and intended “to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war”; and where, as he reminded us, “a UN that fails to be at the forefront of the fight against anti-Semitism and other forms of racism, denies its history and undermines its future”;

- in the aftermath of the 60th anniversary of the Nuremberg Principles, which became the forerunner of what has come to be known as international humanitarian and criminal law, but reminding us also of the *double entendre* of Nuremberg – the Nuremberg of jackboots as well as the Nuremberg of judgments, the Nuremberg of racism as well as the Nuremberg principles;
- on the first anniversary of the International Day of Commemoration in Memory of the Victims of the Holocaust – which is being commemorated for the first time in the Salle des Assemblées – the venue of the “gathering storm” of the Thirties that was not averted – so that we may remember and be reminded, bear witness and heed the warning – never again – not now, not ever.

And so, on this Anniversary of Anniversaries, on this day of days, some 60 years after the Holocaust, the birth of the U.N. – the *double entendre* of Nuremberg – on the eve of the 60th anniversary in 2008 of the Genocide Convention – the “never again” convention – and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights – we have to ask ourselves, what have we learned and what must we do?

May I now summarize the universal lessons of the Holocaust – the lessons to be learned and the action to be taken. For as Kierkegaard put it, "life must be lived forwards, but it can only be understood backwards".

LESSON 1 – THE IMPORTANCE OF HOLOCAUST REMEMBRANCE

The first lesson is the importance of *Zachor*, of remembrance itself. For as we remember the six million Jewish victims of the Shoah – defamed, demonized and dehumanized, as prologue or justification for genocide – we have to understand that the mass murder of six million Jews and millions of non-Jews is not a matter of abstract statistics.

For unto each person there is a name – unto each person, there is an identity. Each person is a universe. As our sages tell us: “whoever saves a single life, it is as if he or she has saved an entire universe.” Just as whoever has killed a single person, it is as if they have killed an entire universe. And so the abiding imperative – that we are each, wherever we are, the guarantors of each other’s destiny.

LESSON 2 – THE DANGER OF STATE-SANCTIONED INCITEMENT TO HATRED AND
GENOCIDE – THE RESPONSIBILITY TO PREVENT

The enduring lesson of the Holocaust is that the genocide of European Jewry succeeded not only because of the industry of death and the technology of terror, but because of the state-sanctioned ideology of hate. This teaching of contempt, this demonizing of the other, this is where it all began. As the Canadian courts affirmed in upholding the constitutionality of anti-hate legislation, "the Holocaust did not begin in the gas chambers – it began with words". These, as the Courts put it, are the chilling facts of history. These are the catastrophic effects of racism.

Forty years later, in the Nineties, these lessons not only remained unlearned, but the tragedy was repeated. For we witnessed, yet again, a growing trafficking in state-sanctioned hate and incitement, which in the Balkans and in Rwanda took us down the road to genocide.

And as we meet, we are witnessing yet again, a state-sanctioned incitement to hate and genocide, whose epicentre is Ahmadinejad's Iran – denying the Nazi Holocaust as it incites to a Middle Eastern one – an assault on Jewish memory and truth in its denial of the Holocaust; and a clear violation of the prohibition against the "direct and public incitement to genocide" in the Genocide Convention; which U.N. Secretaries-General Kofi Annan and Ban Ki-Moon respectively called "unacceptable" and "shocking".

LESSON 3 – THE DANGERS OF SILENCE, THE CONSEQUENCES OF INDIFFERENCE – THE
DUTY TO PROTECT

The genocide of European Jewry succeeded not only because of the state-sanctioned culture of hate and industry of death, but because of crimes of indifference, because of conspiracies of silence.

We meet today in the majestic Salle des Assemblées of the former League of Nations. It was here that Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie pleaded in vain for protection from Mussolini's 1935 aggression. Fascism marched ahead, winning one victory after

another. It was here that the gathering storm of war advanced, with Czechoslovakia surrendering to Hitler in 1938, and this Assembly Hall witnessed further dire appeals. The response was international indifference, a failure of moral resolve, and the result was world war and genocide.

We are assembled here on the banks of Lake Geneva, on the other side of which lies Evian-des-Bains. It was here in 1938 that the international community considered the plight of hundreds of thousands of Jewish refugees desperate to flee worsening persecutions in Nazi Germany and Austria. But the nations looked away, with the world divided into those places where the Jews could not live, and those places where they could not enter. Hitler drew his lessons.

As we gather here today to commemorate the Holocaust in this historic Assembly Hall, with the representatives of the international community and civil society, let us pledge that never again will we be indifferent to aggression, hatred and incitement.

And indeed we have witnessed an appalling indifference and inaction in our own day which took us down the road to the unthinkable – ethnic cleansing in the Balkans – and down the road to the unspeakable – the genocide in Rwanda – unspeakable because this genocide was preventable. No one can say that we did not know. We knew, but we did not act, just as we know and have yet to act to stop the genocide by attrition in Darfur, mocking the lessons of history, betraying the people of Darfur, and a standing repudiation of the Responsibility to Protect doctrine.

And so, it is our responsibility to break down these walls of indifference, to shatter these conspiracies of silence and inaction – to stand up and be counted and not look around to see whoever else is standing before we make a judgement to do so; because in the world in which we live, there are few enough people prepared to stand, let alone be counted, reminding us of the words of Edmund Burke, “the surest way to ensure that evil will triumph in the world is for enough good people to do nothing”.

Indifference and inaction always mean coming down on the side of the victimizer, never on the side of the victim. Let there be no mistake about it – indifference in the face of evil is acquiescence with evil itself – it is complicity with evil.

LESSON 4 COMBATING MASS ATROCITY AND THE CULTURE OF IMPUNITY– THE
RESPONSIBILITY TO BRING WAR CRIMINALS TO JUSTICE

If the 20th Century – symbolized by the Holocaust – was the age of atrocity, it was also the age of impunity. Few of the perpetrators were brought to justice; and so, just as there must be no sanctuary for hate, no refuge for bigotry, there must there be no base or sanctuary for these enemies of humankind. In this context, the establishment of the International Criminal Court must be seen as the most dramatic development in international criminal law since Nuremberg – to deter mass atrocity, to protect the victims, and to prosecute the perpetrators.

LESSON 5 – THE *TRAHISON DES CLERCS* – THE RESPONSIBILITY TO TALK TRUTH TO
POWER

The Holocaust was made possible, not only because of the “bureaucratization of genocide”, as Robert Lifton put it, but because of the *trahison des clerics* – the complicity of the elites – physicians, church leaders, judges, lawyers, engineers, architects, educators, and the like. Indeed, one only has to read Gerhard Muller's book on “Hitler's Justice” to appreciate the complicity and criminality of judges and lawyers; or to read Robert-Jan van Pelt's book on the architecture of Auschwitz, to be appalled by the minute involvement of engineers and architects in the design of death camps, and so on. Holocaust crimes, then, were also the crimes of the Nuremberg elites. As Elie Wiesel put it, "Cold-blooded murder and culture did not exclude each other. If the Holocaust proved anything, it is that a person can both love poems and kill children".

And so it is our responsibility to speak truth to power, and to hold power accountable to truth. And those entrusted with the education and training of the elites should ensure that Elie Wiesel is studied in schools of law and not just in classes of literature; that the *double entendre* of Nuremberg – of Nuremberg racism as well as the Nuremberg

Principles – is part of our learning as it is part of our legacy; that Holocaust education underpin our perspective as it informs our principles – on justice and injustice.

LESSON 6 – HOLOCAUST REMEMBRANCE – THE RESPONSIBILITY TO EDUCATE

Sweden is a case-study of how Holocaust education, can not only teach an entire society of the importance of Holocaust remembrance and reminder – of witness and warning - but how it can engage that whole society in “living history” - in the teaching, learning, and internalization of Holocaust sensibility – where the particularity of the Holocaust has universal resonance.

In particular, in the spirit of the International Day of Commemoration in Memory of the Victims of the Holocaust, states should commit themselves to the constituent elements of the Declaration of the Stockholm International Forum on the Holocaust, which included, inter alia, the understanding that:

“the Holocaust fundamentally challenged the foundations of civilization...[its] unprecedented character will always hold universal meaning...[its] magnitude...must be forever seared in our collective memory...together we must uphold the terrible truths of the Holocaust against those who deny it.

We must strengthen the moral commitment of our people and the political commitment of our governments, to ensure that future generations can understand the causes of the Holocaust and reflect upon its consequences.

We pledge to strengthen efforts to promote education, remembrance and research about the Holocaust...

We share a commitment to encourage the study of the Holocaust in all its dimensions...a commitment to commemorate the victims of the Holocaust and to honour those who stood against it...a commitment to throw light on the still obscured shadows of the Holocaust...a commitment to plant the seeds of a better future amidst the soil of a bitter past...a commitment...to remember the victims who perished, respect the survivors still with us, and reaffirm humanity’s common aspiration for mutual understanding and justice.”

LESSON 7 – THE VULNERABILITY OF THE POWERLESS – THE PROTECTION OF THE
VULNERABLE AS THE TEST OF A JUST SOCIETY

The genocide of European Jewry occurred not only because of the vulnerability of the powerless, but also because of the powerlessness of the vulnerable. It is not surprising that the triage of Nazi racial hygiene – the Sterilization Laws, the Nuremberg Race Laws, the Euthanasia Program – targeted those "whose lives were not worth living"; and it is not unrevealing, as Professor Henry Friedlander points out in his work on "The Origins of Genocide", that the first group targeted for killing were the Jewish disabled – the whole anchored in the science of death, the medicalization of ethnic cleansing, the sanitizing even of the vocabulary of destruction.

And so it is our responsibility as government representatives – and, morally, as *citoyens du monde* – to give voice to the voiceless, as we seek to empower the powerless – be they the disabled, the poor, the refugee, the elderly, the women victims of violence, the vulnerable child – whoever they may be.

CONCLUSION

May I close with a word to the survivors of the Holocaust – for you are the true heroes of humanity. You witnessed and endured the worst of inhumanity, but somehow you found in the depths of your own humanity the courage to go on, to rebuild your lives as you have built your communities. And so it is with you, and because of you, and because of the righteous among the nations – like Raoul Wallenberg – that we remember that each person has a name and an identity – that each person is a universe – that in saving one life we save an entire universe.

We remember – and we pledge – and this must not be a matter of rhetoric but must be a commitment to action – that never again will we be indifferent to incitement and hate; that never again will we be silent in the face of evil; that never again will we indulge racism and anti-semitism; that never again will we ignore the plight of the vulnerable; that never again will we be indifferent in the face of mass atrocity and impunity.

We will speak and we will act against racism, against hate, against anti-semitism, against mass atrocity, against injustice – and against the crime of crimes whose name we should even shudder to mention – genocide.

And yes, always, against indifference, against being bystanders to injustice. For in what we say, or more importantly in what we do, we will be making a statement about ourselves as a people, we will be making a statement about ourselves as people. For in our day, more than ever, *qui s'excuse s'accuse*, whoever remains indifferent indicts themselves.

May this day be not only an act of remembrance, which it is, but let it be a remembrance to act, which it must be.