

{MARCH 19 2005}

REMEMBER WHAT? REMEMBER HOW?

From the well-chosen – as usual – words from Joschka Fischer, the German Foreign Minister, to the tortured – as usual – face of Eli Wiesel, the Holocaust professional, it was an appropriate commemoration of the historic crime.

But it was also a great victory for Israeli diplomacy. The chiefs of our Foreign Office openly boasted of this political achievement. The foreign guests met with the Israeli leaders and thus lent their indirect but clear support to Ariel Sharon's policy.

Altogether, it underlined the ambiguity of the Holocaust commemoration at this time.

When one of the leading Nazis imprisoned in Nuremberg first learned the full dimensions of the Holocaust, he exclaimed: "This will not be forgotten for a thousand years!" He was right. The Holocaust was indeed a unique crime in history.

It is difficult for foreigners to understand that for us in Israel the Shoah is not just a thing of the past. It is a part of the present. An example: at the time of the museum opening, I was flying back from Europe. In the airplane I got into conversation with an Israeli professor I had not known before, and he told me about the various stages of his life. I noticed that he passed quickly over several years of his childhood. When I asked him, he told me that he had been in Theresienstadt. He did not go into detail, so I did not ask what happened to his family.

From the concentration camp of Theresienstadt, most prisoners were sent on to the death camps. My aunt committed suicide there, her husband was sent from there to Auschwitz and was never heard of again. I remember this uncle laughing when my father decided to flee from Germany in 1933. "What can happen to us here?" he asked, "After all, Germany is a civilized country!"

The impact of the Holocaust is not restricted to the generation of the survivors. A young writer once told me that both her parents had spent time in the death camps. "I did not know that," she recounted, "They never spoke about it. But when I was a child, I knew there was an awful secret in our family, a secret so terrible that it was forbidden

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to ask about it. That filled my whole childhood world with dread. Even now I still feel anxious and insecure.”

Almost every day we hear stories that are connected with the Shoah. One cannot escape it. One should not try to escape it, either. Forgetting the Holocaust is a kind of betrayal of the victims.

The question is: HOW to remember? WHAT to remember?

After World War II, the Shoah became the center of Jewish consciousness. Yeshayahu Leibovitz, the philosopher who was an observant orthodox Jew, told me once: “The Jewish religion died 200 years ago. Now there is nothing that unifies the Jews around the world apart from the Holocaust.” That is natural, because every Jew knows that if he had fallen into the hands of the Nazis, his life would probably have ended in a gas chamber. We, in Palestine at the time, were quite close to that when the German Afrika Corps under Erwin Rommel approached the gates of our country.

There was no need for a conclave of the Elders of Zion in order to turn the Holocaust into a central instrument in the struggle for the creation of Israel. It was self-evident. The Zionists had argued right from the beginning that in the modern world there can be no existence for the Jews without a state of their own. The Shoah lent this argument an irresistible force.

It caused the Jews in the State of Israel, which was created in war and had to fight for its life, to crave total security, and so we became a military power. It is impossible to understand both the good and the bad in Israel without taking into account the impact of the Shoah on our national and personal consciousness. It was none other than the late Palestinian intellectual, Edward Said, who told this to his compatriots.

The centrality of the Holocaust in Jewish consciousness caused the Jews to insist on its absolute exclusiveness. We are shocked and furious when somebody tries to remind us that the Nazis exterminated other communities too, such as the Roma, the homosexuals and the mentally ill. We get very angry when somebody comes and compares “our” Holocaust with other genocides: Armenians, Cambodians, Tutsis in Ruanda and others. Really! How can one compare?

The Holocaust was indeed unique in many respects. Nothing compares with the organized extermination of a whole people by industrial means, with the participation of all the organs of a modern state. It may be that Stalin murdered no fewer, and perhaps even more human beings than Hitler, but his victims were drawn from all the peoples and classes of the Soviet Union, and were not subjected to a process of industrialized extermination.

But the concept of the exclusiveness of the Holocaust can lead to despicable perversions. Many among us argue that no moral restraints apply to us, because “after

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what they did to us” nobody can teach us what is or is not permitted. “After the Shoah” we have the duty to do everything to save Jewish lives, even by ignoble means. We are allowed to use the memory of the Holocaust as an instrument of our foreign policy, since Israel is the “state of the Holocaust survivors”. We are allowed to stifle all criticism of our behavior, since it is self-evident that all critics are anti-Semites. We are allowed to blow up every insignificant incident, such as the painting a swastika on a Jewish tombstone, in order to prove that “anti-Semitism is on the rise” in the world and raise the alarm.

I want to argue that now, 60 years after the end of the Holocaust, it is time to grow out of all this.

The time has come to turn the memory of the Holocaust from an exclusively Jewish property into a world-wide human possession.

The mourning, the anger and the shame must be turned into a universal message against all forms of genocide.

The struggle against anti-Semitism must become a part of the fight against all kinds of racism, whether directed against Muslims in Europe or Blacks in America, Kurds in Turkey or Palestinians in Israel, or foreign workers everywhere.

The Jews’ long history as the victims of murderous persecution must not cause us to wrap ourselves in a cult of self-pity, but, on the contrary, should encourage us to take the lead in the world-wide struggle against racism, prejudice and stereotypes that begin with incitement by vile demagogues and can end in genocide.

Such a people would truly be “a light unto the nations.”