



Professor Yehuda Bauer, Academic Advisor to Yad Vashem and the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research delivered the "Remembrance and Beyond" keynote address at the United Nations on January 27, 2006.

The United Nations Holocaust Memorial Day January 27, 2006

On January 27, 1945, the Red Army liberated the concentration and death camp of Auschwitz. This was not the end of the slaughter of World War II, which cost the lives of some 35 million people, most of them civilians. The war was to continue for over three months more. Some ten days prior to the liberation of Auschwitz, 58,000 inmates were marched away because the Nazis did not want them to fall alive into the hands of the liberators; instead, they had to go on what has become known as the Death Marches. Over half of them would die as a result. They left behind the ashes and bones of over a million human beings, more than 900,000 of them Jews, most of whom died by gassing, and some 7000 sick and dying inmates, including Jewish and Roma children on whom the German doctors had performed murderous medical experiments.

What had caused that war, the most terrible conflict in human history so far? It was not primarily a matter of economics; Nazi Germany had emerged from the economic crisis of the thirties, had vanquished unemployment, the standard of living had returned more or less to that of the twenties, and was improving. Nor was Germany threatened by any other country – in fact, it was threatening others. Nor did the German people want a war, as all the observers of the time stated unanimously. It was caused by the Nazi leadership for purely ideological reasons, and the ideology contained two major elements: one, the desire to rule Europe, and through it, the world, and achieve a global racial hierarchy with the Nordic peoples of the Aryan race on top, and everybody else under them. In order to do that, Eastern Europe was to be conquered. Germanic populations would settle there and guarantee the exploitation of the agricultural and industrial resources of the region in Germany's favor, thus assuring supremacy over all enemies. The Poles and Russians and others were to become slaves, toiling for the benefit of the master race. The second major element in Nazi ideology was antisemitism. They saw the Jews as the Satan that controlled all of Germany's enemies. At one end, in their eyes, stood Hitler, the new Jesus Christ, the Savior who would lead humanity, under Germanic rule, to a glorious future. At the other end was the satanic Jew, who tried to prevent this utopia from achieving its aim of global rule. It was in the name of that utopia of a wonderful new racist world that the vast majority of the German people were persuaded to abandon accepted morality, and in the process to commit vast murders, including three genocides at least: against the Poles, the Roma – Gypsies – and the Jews. We should never forget that utopias kill; radical universalist utopias, such as National Socialism, Communism, and today the radicals who support global terrorism, kill radically and universally.

Nazi antisemitic ideology was based on a distortion of Christianity; it was anti-Christian, because Jesus of Nazareth and his disciples had come from the Jews. Nazism developed Christian antisemitic traditions, such as the legend about the world Jewish conspiracy, which is being revived today by radical Islamistic ideologies. Christian antisemitism stemmed from the struggle in the ancient world between Christianity and Judaism over the souls of the Romans and Greeks. Accusations became murderous when Christianity became the state religion and used the power of the state to enforce its ideas. In the course of time, other inventions and



forgeries were added, such as the blood libel accusation, which accused the Jews of killing non-Jewish children to use their blood for their food – a deadly superstition which is spread today among the same radicals that promote world terrorism.

But Christianity and Islam never planned a genocide of the Jews. That was left to the secularized, anti-Christian world of groups of European intellectuals frustrated by the crises induced by revolutionary economic and social developments.

Nazi ideology, then, was the force that motivated the German desire for war; pragmatic considerations certainly existed, but they were secondary. It is no exaggeration to say that World War II, and the death of tens of millions, the destruction of countries and cultures, the torture and death of children and adults, was caused in part by hatred against Jews. To all those who today hesitate to act against antisemitic propaganda, wherever it comes from, the question must be posed: have you not learned your lesson? Do you not know that this is a poison that kills, including those who propagate it? Some of us, such as the 55 OSCE countries, who are committed to fighting antisemitism, appear to understand this.

Auschwitz has become a symbol for evil as such, and rightly so. For the Jewish people, it is the largest Jewish cemetery in the world, a cemetery without graves. But what was murdered in the death camps were not only a people, as though that were not enough; but as part of that, an attempt was made to eradicate Jewish culture, a civilization, a tradition that provided one of the foundations of modern civilization.

There are two aspects to the genocide of the Jews which we call the Holocaust. One is the specificity of the Jewish fate, the other are the universal implications; they are two sides of the same coin. The Jews were the specific victims of the genocide. But the implications are universal, because who knows who the Jews may be next time.

Of course there are parallels between the Holocaust and other genocides. The main one is that the suffering of the victims is the same. Murder is murder, child murder is child murder, torture is torture, rape is rape; starvation, disease, and humiliation are the same in all mass murders. There are no gradations, and no genocide is better or worse than another one, no one is more victim than anyone else. The other parallel is that every genocide is perpetrated with the best technical and bureaucratic means at the disposal of the perpetrators. Today's genocide in Darfur is perpetrated with the help of air bombardments, cell-phones are used, and the government bureaucracy supports the murderers and prevents effective outside intervention. In Rwanda, genocide was perpetrated with the help of a central radio station that provided the instructions to the murderers, and a centralized government bureaucracy that had been developed on a European model by intellectuals some of whom had studied at the best French, Belgian and Canadian universities. Nazi Germany used a modern bureaucracy, and the best technological means at their disposal. The Hutus and the Janjaweed did not and do not have gas; the Germans did, so they used it. Yes, it is true that the Holocaust was perpetrated at the very center of European and world civilization, and that the main perpetrators came from the same places from which some of the most wonderful cultural achievements of the human race had originated. The German people had produced Kant and Hegel, Mozart, Beethoven and Brahms, Dührer and Planck; unfortunately, these were not the names of the people who ran Germany in the thirties and forties. The fact of this tragedy happening at the center of supposedly advanced civilization was unprecedented. But the fact that



it was done with the best available technical means at the disposal of the perpetrators, that is paralleled in other genocides.

One American political scientist has argued that in the twentieth century 262 million civilians and unarmed prisoners of war were murdered by governments and political organizations. In addition, some 34 million soldiers died in all the wars of that period, including the two world wars. That means, at least seven times more civilians than soldiers were killed. Of those 262 million, more than 38 million died in what the UN Convention for the Prevention of Genocide defines as genocides, and of these, he says, close to six million Jews died in the most extreme case of genocide so far. Why is the Holocaust the most extreme case? Why do more and more people show an interest in this particular tragedy, why is there a flood of fiction, theater, films, TV series, art, music, and of course historical, sociological, philosophical, psychological, and other academic research, a flood that has rarely if ever been equaled in dealing with any other historical event?

I think the reason is that while all the elements of each genocide are repeated in some other genocides, there are elements in the Holocaust that were without precedent; they cannot be found in genocides that preceded it. There are five such elements, in addition to the fact that it happened at the center of human civilization. One, the perpetrators tried to find, register, mark, humiliate, dispossess, concentrate and murder every person with three or four Jewish grandparents for the crime of having been born a Jew. There was no precedent for that. Two, this was to be done, ultimately, everywhere in the world, so that for the first time in history there was an attempt to universalize a genocide. Third, there was a very unusual ideology. We know of course that every genocide is rationalized by an ideology based on some pragmatic factors, be they economic, social, political or military. Thus, in Rwanda, a Hutu supremacist ideology developed from the pragmatic background of a real power struggle within the Hutu establishment and a real military struggle against an invading force manned largely by people of the persecuted Tutsi minority. But with the Nazis, the pragmatic elements were minor. They did not kill the Jews because they wanted their property. They robbed their property in the process of getting rid of them, first by emigration, then by expulsion, and in the end by murder. They killed Jewish armament workers when they needed every pair of hands after the defeat at Stalingrad in early 1943; they murdered the people in the Lodz ghetto in 1944 who were producing almost 10% of all the clothes the German Army was wearing; they murdered Jewish slave laborers while they were building roads for the German military. If they had followed modern, capitalistic, cost-effective economic practice, they would have robbed Jewish property and then utilized Jewish slave labor for their own purposes, as they did with the Poles, for instance. But no, they had to murder the Jews because that was where their ideology led them. Nazi ideology had the character of nightmares. They believed in a Jewish world conspiracy – a mirror image of their own desire to control the world. That ancient fabrication was reawakened and developed in the notorious forgery called the “Protocols of the Elders of Zion”, produced in the early part of the 20 th century by the police in Tsarist Russia, which was used and adapted by the Nazis, and which is being propagated to this day all over the globe by antisemitic movements and regimes. They believed in the accusation of ritual murder of non-Jewish children by the Jews – again, a nightmarish legend that is still poisoning the minds of many in parts of the globe. The genocide of the Jews, then, was based on nightmares that turned into ideology, and that was without precedent. Four, there was the utopia of a global racist hierarchy which had one real satanic enemy, the Jews, who had to be eliminated. There are no races, we all are originally from Africa. Australian aborigenees, Russians, Americans, Chinese, Albert Einstein – we all come from the same stock. The Nazi racist pseudo-science projected a utopia which led to the murder of the Jews. And fifth, The Jews are the last



surviving remnant of the original three pillars of what is inaccurately known as Western civilization, namely Athens, as the originator of aesthetics, poetry, literature, architecture, philosophy; Rome, which gave us the idea of an orderly state, and also developed a literature and an architecture from which modern civilization has learned. And Jerusalem, with its prophets and their ethics, representing the aspirations of humanity. Modern Greeks and Italians do not speak ancient Greek or Latin, they pray to different gods and write different literatures. But the Jews still speak the ancient language, and their civilization is a direct continuation and development of the ancient culture. The Nazis very consciously opposed all the values of European civilization such as liberalism, democracy, socialism and humanitarianism, and wanted to destroy them. They saw in the Jews symbols of those values which they wanted to eliminate; the destruction of the people symbolizing them followed.

It is only natural that latter-day supporters of the Hitler regime and enemies of democracy should deny the Holocaust. What is extremely dangerous is the fact that those who support world terrorism, including even a president of a member state of the UN, in effect threaten another genocide of the Jews. You may say that it is just talk; but from past experience we should have learnt that when people say they want to commit mass murder, they really mean it.

The Holocaust was unprecedented, and we had hoped that it would become a warning, not a precedent. But we have been proven wrong. It has become a precedent, and other genocides have followed it. What does this mean for humanity, what does it mean for the United Nations? Is there any possibility that we may succeed when we try to prevent genocides, using our understanding of the paradigmatic genocide of the Jews, and the comparison with other genocides that must follow from that? Is the propensity to murder and murder massively something that we all somehow have within us? I do think that humans have in them the instinct to kill, whether individuals or groups, and we are the only mammals that kill our own kind in huge numbers. This may well be the result of the development of our species, when we defend ourselves, our families, clans, tribes, nations, and territory from real or imagined enemies by eliminating them. If we did not have that instinct within us, how then can we explain the fact that practically all societies have laws against murder? If we were not inclined to murder, these laws would be totally superfluous. Given different upbringings and socialization processes, and a different history of our communities, we all could become mass murderers. But if that is so, is there any realistic way of preventing outbreaks of genocidal murders? The Holocaust is one of the genocides that provide an answer to this question: at Yad Vashem, the Israeli and Jewish Institute for the Commemoration of the Holocaust, we now have over 21.000 names of individuals and groups that rescued Jews, and I think that the real number may be at least ten times higher – we just don't know the other nine tenths. They were only a small proportion of the European populations that did not help their fellow citizens, but they show that there is an alternative, that there is in us also the possibility of coming to the rescue of other humans at the risk of our own lives. The basic reason why you and I are here today is that we want to do everything we can to move people from nearer the murderous extreme within us to nearer the other one; because the Righteous of the Holocaust are most certainly replicated in other genocides.

Let me give you an example: in the tiny hamlet of Kurenets in today's Belarus there were 1500 Jews when the Germans occupied it. They immediately enslaved the Jews, and set up a barbed-wire enclosure in the village square for the masses of Soviet prisoners of war whom they took in the first weeks of their invasion of the USSR. Thousands were brought in every day, tattered, desperately hungry and thirsty, wounded and sick, and



next morning they were marched away towards the west. The Jewish slave workers had to bring in some barrels of bread and water for the prisoners. Among the slave workers there was one, Zalman Gurevich, who was approached by a Soviet captain, Pyotr Mikhailovich Danilochkin, who just said 'get me out of here'. Gurevich consulted with his friends, and then put on a second layer of working clothes, with the Jewish patch, went into the enclosure carrying a barrel; hidden by the milling crowds of desperate prisoners of war on the square, Danilochkin quickly put on the second layer of Gurevich's clothes, and became a Jewish slave worker for the rest of the day. There was no ghetto in Kurenets, and in the evening the workers could go home. Gurevich took Danilochkin with him to his parents, who nursed him back to health. Danilochkin became the organizer of the first partisan group in Belarus, and he did not forget the Jews who had rescued him. The group of eight became the first Jews to join his unit. When the Germans came to kill the Jews of Kurenets, some 300 fled to Danilochkin's partisans, who helped them as best they could. The young and strong became members of the partisan units; others were smuggled into unoccupied Soviet territory. Some 150 survived.

What have I told you here? I have just told you that during the Holocaust Jews rescued a non-Jew whom they did not know, at the risk of their lives, and then the non-Jew and his comrades rescued Jews most of whom they did not know, at the risk of their lives. Certainly, the Holocaust shows the depth of human depravity; but on its margins, there are the peaks of human self-sacrifice for others. It is that that shows us that there is an alternative, that the attempts made at prevention of genocides, as for instance by the office of the Special Adviser for genocide prevention of the Secretary-General, and by various NGOs and governments, are not a hopeless task. But the failure, so far, of the international community to deal with the ongoing genocide in Darfur shows how tremendously difficult it is. Nazi Germany could easily have been prevented from expanding, starting a war, and committing genocide – not because of the beautiful eyes of the Jews, but in the interests of the great powers, Britain, France, the Soviet Union and the US. They did not do so, and they paid, not only with the industrial murder of close to six million Jews, but with the deaths of tens of millions of their own citizens, and the destruction of Europe. If today they do not stop the genocide in Darfur, it will spread, there will be more genocidal massacres, and the price for the world will be heavy indeed. Economic interests are one of the prime factors in preventing prevention; but people should realize that it is much cheaper to prevent a genocide than to pay for the reconstruction later on. The fact that in many, if not most genocidal events the leaders of the murderers escape scot-free is yet another scandal that the international community is called upon to rectify. Impunity encourages more genocidal massacres. After the Holocaust, some of the top leaders of the Nazi regime were brought to trial, and a number of others were sentenced in the sixties of the previous century, mainly in Germany. But thousands of mid-level criminals were either not brought before a judge, or escaped by various stratagems. An effective international consensus should be sought to make all potential mass murderers realize that there is a heavy price to pay for disregarding basic moral principles.

We are all one human race, interconnected and interdependent. Politics that are not based on moral considerations are, at the end of the day, not practical politics at all. It is out of these considerations that I beg you to permit me to repeat here what I said, exactly eight years ago, in a speech to the German Bundestag: I come from a people that gave the ten commandments to the world. Let us agree that we need three more, and they are these: thou shalt not be a perpetrator; thou shalt not be a victim; and thou shalt never, but never, be a bystander.