

The Legacy of Auschwitz: Perspectives from the US

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I. INTRODUCTION

I'd like to begin with two quotes from one of the seminal American books on Auschwitz, Approaches to Auschwitz; The Holocaust and its Legacy:

“[R]emembering the Holocaust confers obligations in the present and the future.”

The second quote runs this way: “[The purpose is] to grasp both the Holocaust’s distinctiveness and its place in a larger social evolution.” Those 2 quotes contain many of the facets of the American approaches (emphasis on the plural) to Auschwitz that I will now present.

It’s critical to look at Auschwitz’s legacy today when the witness generation is disappearing fast. We will no longer have its intimate connection to the Holocaust. We are challenged to find creative ways to keep memory alive. It’s also important to re-double our efforts to remember in a time of rampant populism, nationalism and xenophobia, including anti-Semitism, declining tolerance and ongoing Holocaust denial. These phenomena are found across the globe, including in the US, as the Charlottesville march of neo-Nazis has demonstrated clearly.

In addition to the idea of Auschwitz as a specific location of the Holocaust’s horror and Auschwitz as a symbol for universal evil, my talk looks at the legacy in other differentiated ways. First, we have to identify whose legacy: Jews and non-Jews; non-governmental actors and official representatives;

survivors as the bridge between the past and the present, and young people as the bridge between the past and the future. My remarks focus largely on Jewish perspectives and the practice of remembrance.

Second, we can draw lessons in different realms of life: political, societal, religious responses. Those responses can be very public or behind-the-scenes. Third, we can see the purpose of remembering as both moral and pragmatic. Fourth, with respect to time horizons, Holocaust and Auschwitz remembrance activities are both short-term and ad hoc as well as long-term and institutionalized. Institutionalizing remembrance offers the best chance of keeping memory alive.

I will address 3 areas of remembrance: institutions; organized religion; and political actors.

II. INSTITUTIONS

There are 3 examples of institutions that I would like to highlight: a) the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum whose main purpose is to focus on the Holocaust, including Auschwitz; b) Facing History and Ourselves that has a broader ambit of using the Holocaust to teach about tolerance, race relations and anti-Semitism; and c) The American Jewish Committee which addresses Holocaust remembrance, but also many other issues facing Jews in the US and elsewhere.

A. UNITED STATES HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum emerged in 1979 from

the President's (Jimmy Carter) Commission on the Holocaust, chaired by Elie Wiesel. The government made available - in a prominent place just off the Mall between the Washington Monument and the Capitol - 1.9 acres to establish the Museum, which was dedicated in April 1993. The government has remained involved by appointing private citizens and members of Congress to the United States Holocaust Memorial Council, which governs the museum.

Donations for building and maintaining the museum have come from the private sector. One recent fundraising effort has been a Kickstarter initiative to raise funds through the Internet to translate, catalogue and preserve recently found diaries. The extensive use of new technology has allowed the Museum to extend its reach. Since 1993, over 40 million people have visited the museum, including over 10 million children. In 2015 alone, 1.7 million people visited.

The Museum's activities address both the Holocaust and genocides and the gross violation of human rights elsewhere. With the moral imperative of "Never Again!" and to honor the memory of victims and survivors, the museum records what happened at Auschwitz and other concentration camps, emphasizes witness testimonies, and educates and interprets through artifacts, archival documents, photographs, a registry of survivors, archival footage and oral histories. The Museum draws on survivors as volunteers and as subjects of oral testimonies. In 2014, there were 500,000 survivors in the US. By 2016, the figure had shrunk to 100,000.

Education efforts extend beyond the museum walls through its Museum Teacher Fellowship Program in which educators are trained to act as leaders in Holocaust education in their schools. The Museum also educates in the broader sense through the

work of its Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies which supports research and publications on the Holocaust.

An additional element of the museum's activities is the Committee on Conscience, a joint effort of the US government and private funding to advance global human rights research and to spotlight and prevent genocide in other places such as Sudan, Syria, Cambodia, Chechnya, Burma, Rwanda, Iraq, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Bosnia-Herzegovina. The museum sponsors visits to some of these locations for participants to bear witness to atrocities.

Connected to the Committee on Conscience is the Center for the Prevention of Genocide, which draws attention to ongoing and imminent genocides and to issues of justice and accountability. The Museum has developed an Early Warning Statistical Risk tool that anticipates where mass murder might happen, so that initiatives can be taken to prevent violence.

There has been an effort, in the Museum's collections and presentations, to draw comparisons between the Holocaust in Europe and what happened in East Asia under the Japanese, including the practice of sexual slavery (the so-called "comfort women"). The sense of collective victimhood can also be seen in meetings and joint presentations between female Holocaust survivors and comfort women and in exhibitions about comfort women in regional Jewish museums.

The triad of the museum's work - detailing the horrors of Auschwitz, addressing annihilation in other concentration camps and focusing on other cases of genocide elsewhere in the world - also shapes its permanent and rotating exhibitions. The permanent exhibition includes the "Voices of Auschwitz" to highlight oral testimonies of

survivors. It also has a tracing of events divided into the various stages of Nazi persecution and mass murder. The special exhibition section of the Museum has included a description and analysis of the genocide in Cambodia from 1975 to 1979.

Aside from the Holocaust Memorial Museum, but sometimes using its tools, the obligation to educate about Auschwitz, the Holocaust and other genocides is also seen in the plethora of university programs and courses on these specific topics. More recently, learning from the past has manifested itself in reconciliation studies and human rights programs at universities across the US.

B. FACING HISTORY AND OURSELVES

Education in schools, as opposed to universities, comprises the main activity of Facing History and Ourselves, which was started in Boston in 1976, and today has offices elsewhere in the US. Its curriculum is also used in Israel, Northern Ireland and South Africa. Its work is funded by private donations from individuals and foundations. Since the 1970s over 10, 000 teachers, teaching over half a million students, have gone through Facing History's training program.

Facing History uses the Holocaust and Nazism in Germany to teach how democracy can be rapidly undermined and how racism, xenophobia, collective violence and genocide can quickly replace tolerance, acceptance, openness and cosmopolitanism. It also introduces other cases of extreme intolerance: racial segregation in the US, the decimation of Native Americans in the founding of the US, the internment of Japanese Americans in World War II, the Armenian Genocide and the Cambodian Genocide.

Facing History aims to prepare children to make moral choices in their daily lives and to reflect on what it means to be a citizen.

C. THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE

Unlike the other 2 organizations whose origins lie in the 1970s, the American Jewish Committee was a pre-Holocaust and pre-war invention, created in 1906 as an ethnic advocacy group. The timing of its creation accounts for Holocaust remembrance being one of several purposes of the organization. To quote AJC's own words: "AJC works to enhance the well-being of the Jewish people and to advance human rights and democratic values for all [across the globe]."

There are several ways in which AJC links the Holocaust directly and indirectly to contemporary Jewish life in the US and in other countries. First, in its programs, advocacy and initiatives the AJC supports and promotes the survival of the State of Israel, the concrete response to the Holocaust and Auschwitz.

Second, the AJC has been, since the beginning of the 1980s, one of the major advocates for compensation from Germany for Holocaust survivors who were excluded from Germany's post-war compensation legislation. It has connections at the highest levels of the German and American governments, rendering it deft at advancing its agenda of accountability and justice.

Third, the AJC's work in Germany and Europe has been facilitated by the establishment of an AJC office in Berlin in 1998.

Fourth, the AJC supported German unification, reflecting its long-standing belief that promoting a democratic Germany and nurturing German-Jewish reconciliation can act as a bulwark against extremism and honor the memory of the Holocaust's victims.

And, finally, just a few months ago, the AJC opened an office in Poland. Mindful of the often fraught history between Jewish and non-Jewish Poles, its chief executive officer believed the office could act as an optimistic symbol: “It is a new era, one we embrace. Rather than allowing ourselves to be captives of history, with its paralyzing effects, we rather seek to be authors, with its liberating possibilities.” The Jerusalem Post noted the connection between past and present: “[The] Facility honors haunting memories as it forges a brighter future for Eastern Europe.”

III. ORGANIZED RELIGION

I’d like to touch on 3 principles of Judaism that have been reshaped and possess new urgency in the US as a result of Auschwitz. First, Auschwitz has given rise to a fundamental theological questioning about where was God in the Holocaust and whether God had died in not preventing the mass murder of Jews. The radical view, articulated by Richard Rubenstein, claimed God had indeed died, but not Jewish institutions, rituals and practices. The more traditional belief centered on the oneness and omniscience of God and on Jews as the chosen people with all its privileges and burdens.

Second, in the traditional *Yizkor* service (Hebrew for “you will remember”), for example on Yom Kippur (the day of atonement), in addition to remembering and mourning the death of Jews throughout the ages, memory of the Holocaust is kept alive by the recitation of the concentration camps where Jews were annihilated. Thus, as part of the liturgy, remembrance of those events and those victims has been rendered eternal.

Third, the related concepts of *zedakah* (charity) and *tikkun olam* (repair the world) have been given new meaning in the post-Holocaust world, for example in the American Jewish World Service organization, created in 1985 to promote human rights, to end poverty, and to prevent genocide in the developing world. The organization raises some \$50 million a year to carry out its agenda. Those 2 principles were also expressed in signs outside numerous American synagogues with the word “Darfur,” as a way to show solidarity with the victims of famine and civil war in Sudan.

IV. POLITICAL ACTORS

So far, I have largely emphasized non-governmental actors in their responses to Auschwitz and the Holocaust. Let me now turn to the legacy of Auschwitz for the American government. I already mentioned the American official role in the long process to create the US Holocaust Memorial Museum. The Museum is active in 2 important remembrance days: International Holocaust Remembrance Day on January 27, enacted by the UN in 2005. That day marks the date on which Auschwitz was liberated. And, Days of Remembrance (late April/early May, the 27th day of Nisan on the Hebrew calendar), ushered in by Congress in 1979 to mark the anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising.

American presidents routinely issue statements on those 2 occasions. This year President Trump’s January remarks on the commemoration led to controversy as he failed to mention the death of six million Jews, a lapse seen as “troubling” by some Jewish organizations. Criticism of the president also focused on the fact that he chose to

issue his executive order regarding a travel ban to the US on mainly Muslim countries on International Holocaust Remembrance Day.

The president appears to have learnt, at least in the short-term, from this experience and in his speeches for the Days of Remembrance in April he recognized that “By the end of World War II, six million Jews had been brutally slaughtered.” He, like his predecessors in the presidency also reaffirmed the American commitment to the State of Israel as part of the “duty to remember the victims, honor their memory and their lives, and celebrate humanity’s victory over tyranny and evil.”

Shortly before that statement by the president, during Passover, the President’s Press Secretary got into hot water when talking about Bashar al Assad’s use of chemical weapons in Syria: “You look, we didn’t use chemical weapons in World War II. You had someone as despicable as Hitler who didn’t sink to using chemical weapons.” In this comparison the Syrian leader emerges as worse than Hitler, who, as you know, did use poison gas in the form of Zyklon B to kill many Jewish victims.

The issue of using chemical weapons against one’s own people has weighed heavily on US policy towards Syria. President Obama did not keep his promise that this was a red line the crossing of which would necessitate American military action in Syria. President Trump initiated a limited response by bombing a Syrian air base.

Some observers have seen a direct parallel between Assad’s atrocities and those of Nazi Germany. For example, a Holocaust survivor and Holocaust Memorial Museum volunteer spoke in March to Congress to highlight the suffering of Syrian civilians. His words are moving and demonstrate the limits of the Holocaust legacy: “[T]o me the greatest tragedy of the Holocaust isn’t to have grown up without a father or to have been

deprived the companionship of 2 older siblings, it is that while the world said ‘Never Again,’ the Holocaust did not spell an end to prejudice and hate or mean an end to state-sponsored atrocities and mass murder. One year it is the Cambodian people persecuted by the Khmer Rouge, another it’s the Muslims in Bosnia or the Tutsis in Rwanda. And today it is the people of Syria who have suffered unspeakable atrocities as the world looks on.”

V. CONCLUSION

I have tried to etch in broad strokes a picture of the legacy of Auschwitz in the US. That legacy has many different characteristics. It is specific and general, direct and indirect, short-term and long-term, religious and political, societal and cultural, weak and strong, institutionalized and ad hoc. All of the activities and initiatives are linked in 4 purposes: 1) to remember and honor the victims and survivors; 2) to ensure that a Holocaust against the Jewish people is never repeated; 3) to prevent genocide, mass murder and ethnic cleansing in other parts of the world and; 4) to teach tolerance.

Most success has been achieved in the first and fourth purposes, but those achievements are challenged today by the disappearance of the witness generation and the appearance of neo-Nazi White Supremacists in the middle of American national politics, enabled by an American president who draws an equivalency, regarding violence, between White Supremacists and anti-hate demonstrators. The legacy of Auschwitz has become fragile.

The 3rd purpose has clearly not been met. The second purpose has largely been realized, but this has not precluded the ugly phenomenon of anti-Semitism in the US where, according to a Spring 2017 poll by the Anti-Defamation League, 14% of

respondents had anti-Semitic views. The White Supremacist march in Charlottesville in mid-August is just the most recent example of blatant anti-Semitism.

The central task today is to keep memory alive among young people. The gaping hole once filled by witnesses can be addressed by promoting in creative ways education about the Holocaust and by demonstrating the relevance of lessons from the Holocaust for young people's daily lives in the twenty first century.