

Address to the Bundestag, by Professor Yehuda Bauer

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Mr. Speaker of the House of Representatives (Bundestag); Mr. President of Germany; Mr. President of the Bundesrat; Mr. Chancellor; Ladies and Gentlemen; dear friends:

On January 27, 1945, the Soviet Army conquered the Auschwitz complex of camps. Still, only some 7000-8000 people were liberated, of which the majority were ailing people whose lives had been miraculously spared by the S.S. The other 58,000 had left a few days earlier on the Death March.

They were followed, during the four months leading to the end of the war, by many hundreds of thousands from almost all of the concentration camps, marking the last spastic and endlessly brutal impact of the cruelest regime that the world has ever seen. On January 27, the horror was still not over by far, though of course, Auschwitz was no longer in the hands of the murderers.

Have we learnt anything? People seldom learn from history, and the history of the Nazi regime constitutes no exception. We have failed, as well, to understand the general context. In our schools we still teach, for example, about Napoleon and about how he won the battle of Austerlitz. Did he win it all on his own? Maybe somebody assisted him in this? A few thousand soldiers maybe? And, what happened to the families of the fallen soldiers, to the wounded on all sides, to the villagers whose villages had been destroyed, to the women who had been raped, to the goods and possessions that had been looted? We are still teaching about the generals, about the politicians and about the philosophers. We are avoiding the recognition of the dark side of history - the mass murders, the agony, the suffering that is screaming into our faces from all of history. We do not hear the wailing of Clio. We still fail to grasp that we will never be able to fight against our tendency toward reciprocal annihilation if we do not study it and teach it and if we do not face the fact that humans are the only mammals that are capable of annihilating their own kind.

The American sociologist Rudolph J. Rummel arrived at the conclusion that between the years 1900 and 1987, 169 million civilians were murdered by governments and by government-like organizations, apart from the 34 million fallen soldiers. Who committed those crimes? Mainly non-democratic regimes. Even though democracies committed crimes as well, those were responsible for only a fraction of one percent of the number of civilian victims.

These statistics are only partially useful. Actually, they do not reveal the tragedy but cover it up. We do know that it is people who were tortured and murdered, not statistics, but it happened to an impossibly vast number of people who were just like the likes of you and I. The war, which was instigated by National-Socialist Germany, mainly for ideological reasons, cost the lives of about 49 million people, most of whom were civilians. If we adopt the definition by the United Nations of genocide,

then what happened to the Polish nation and to the Roma, called by others "Gypsies", was indeed genocide. The Polish nation as such was to have disappeared; this was accompanied by mass murders; the Polish intellectuals had become the target for annihilation - universities and schools were shut down, the clerics were decimated, all the important economic businesses were confiscated, children of Polish families were deported to Germany in order to undergo "germanization". The Sinti and the Roma of Germany should have disappeared by means of mass murder and by means of sterilization. Nomadic Roma were supposed to be murdered wherever they were in Europe (those of them who were settled, as it was termed, would be tolerated). Millions of Russians and of other Soviet peoples - but Western Europeans, Italians, Balkan peoples and Germans as well - became victims of the regime.

Actually - why? I think that one has to be clear that a radical revolution had been planned here, a mutiny against everything that had been before. It was not a new order of social classes, of religions or even of nations that was envisioned, but a completely new hierarchy - one constructed of so-called 'races' - in which the one invented master race did not only have the right but the duty to rule over the others, and to enslave or to murder all those it considered different from itself. This was a universalistic ideology: "Today Germany belongs to us and tomorrow the entire world," as the Nazi song had it.

How was it possible for a people of culture that lived in the midst of Europe, and which had developed one of the greatest civilizations ever, to subscribe to such an ideology, to instigate a war of annihilation because of it, and to stick to it until the bitter end? It was not only terror, Ladies and Gentlemen; there was a consensus that was based on a promise of a wonderful utopia - a utopia of an idyllic, world-governing singular people's community, devoid of friction, without political parties, without democracy, one which would be served by slaves. In order to achieve such a goal, it was necessary to revolt against everything that had been before: middle class and Judeo-Christian morality, individual freedom, humanitarianism - the whole package of the French Revolution and the Enlightenment in general. National Socialism was in fact the most radical of revolutions that had ever taken place - a mutiny against that which was, up until then, thought of as humane.

The nucleus of the strategy of annihilation of anybody thought of as different was the Holocaust, the project of the total annihilation of the Jewish people and the actual murder of all the Jews the murderers could lay their hands on. And the most horrible thing about the Shoah is in fact not that the Nazis were inhuman - the most horrible thing about it is that they were indeed human, just as you and I. When we claim that they were different from us and that we can sleep in peace since the Nazis were devils and we ourselves are not devils because we are not Nazis, that is sheer cheap escapism. Escapism of the same cheap kind is when we say that the Germans were somehow genetically programmed to execute such mass murders. Since most people are not Germans, many tend to think that whatever happened then can never be repeated by anyone else and that it can happen only in Germany. This is reverse racism.

All this happened almost sixty years ago. One would have thought that the famous bottom line should have been drawn long ago, that the interest in this specific genocide would have slowly petered out. Yet the opposite is the case: hardly a week

goes by without a new book being published somewhere in the world or memoirs or a novel or a scientific debate, without plays being staged, without poetry appearing, without TV films or other movies being released and the like. Quite a lot of it might be kitsch, but a lot of it is of value. Again, it is necessary to ask: why? Why is the Holocaust the central issue, and not Cambodia or the Tutsi or Bosnia or the Armenians or the natives of North America?

I am not at all sure whether my answer to this very central question is better than any other but I would, nonetheless, like to present it to you. I do not think the sadism and the brutality with which the victims were maltreated could offer an explanation, because suffering, agony and torment cannot be graded. I have published, in English, a testimony of a Sinti woman who lost her husband and saw her own three children die in front of her very eyes. How is it possible to compare this with the tragedy of a Jew or of a Russian peasant or of a Tutsi or of a Cambodian Khmer? It is, surely, impossible to say that one mass murder is better or worse than another, that the suffering of one person is greater or less than that of another. Such a statement would be repulsive. If so, is it the brutality and the sadism that makes the Holocaust so singular? Indeed, National-Socialist Germany enriched this tragic repertory in an extraordinary manner, but brutality is no novelty in history. Is the distinguishing factor, possibly, the fact of it having been a state-initiated mass murder carried out with the aid of modern technologies and bureaucratic thoroughness? I do not think so. The genocide of the Armenians was carried out with the aid of the then available technological and bureaucratic tools, and the Nazis themselves carried out their crimes against the Poles and against the Roma with the aid of the same means which they used against the Jews.

No, I think the answer lies elsewhere. You see, for the first time in the whole of history, people that were descended from three or four of a particular kind of grandparents - in this case Jewish - were condemned to death just for being born. This, the mere fact of having been born, was by itself their deadly crime, which had to be avenged by execution. This has never happened before, anywhere. Secondly, anybody of Jewish descent was to be caught wherever in the world Nazi Germany exercised influence, be it directly or through allies, which means all over the world, a world that tomorrow would belong to "us". The murder of Jews was not directed against the Jews of Germany or the Jews of Poland or even the Jews of Europe, but against all the 17 million Jews scattered throughout the entire world of 1939. All other cases of genocide had been perpetrated on definite territories, though they sometimes may have been very wide, whereas the murder of the Jews was constructed to be universal. Thirdly, the ideology. Numerous colleagues of mine have analyzed the structure of Nazism, its bureaucracy, the day-to-day character of the murder apparatus. All this is absolutely correct, but why did the bureaucrats, who were shipping German schoolchildren by train to summer camps and Jews by train to death camps with the same administrative means, do the latter? Why murder all the Jews that could be found and not, let us say, all the green-eyed people that could be found? To try and explain this away with social structures - though they may have been very important - is something I cannot accept.

The motivation was ideological. The racist anti-Semitic ideology was the rational outcome of an irrational approach, an approach which was a cancer-like mutation of the Christian anti-Semitic ideology that had sullied Christian-Jewish relations all throughout their two millennia of existence. Nazi anti-Semitism was pure ideology,

with minimal relation to reality; the Jews were accused of a worldwide conspiracy, an idea stemming from the Jew-hatred of the Middle Ages, whereas in reality Jews were not capable of achieving unity, not even on a partial basis. Between you and me, they are still not capable of it now. There existed indeed a conspiracy, but it was not by the Jews, it was by the National Socialists.

The Jews were accused of being revolutionary agitators as well as capitalists, which means that all the different phobias were reduced to one single denominator. Naturally, most of the Jews belonged to neither of these categories, but were lower or middle class people. They did not possess territories nor did they command military might, nor did they control any national economy, if only because they did not constitute any entity, but observed their tradition, as individuals, in mutually contradictory interpretations, within the framework of small religious-ethnic communities, or, when secular or atheistic, did not even belong to formal Jewish communities.

In all the other cases of genocide known to us, the motivation was, somehow, realistic, like in the case of the murder of the Armenians, where there was a nationalistic motivation, or in the case of Rwanda, where there is a deadly conflict over power and territory. In the case of the Shoah, the ideology at the base of the genocide was, for the first time in history, pure fantasy.

One can add a fourth element to the unprecedented characteristics of the Holocaust: the Nazis may not have invented the concentration camp, but they surely brought it to a totally new stage of development. Not only the murder and the suffering in those camps should occupy our mind, but also the elevated level to which they brought the art of humiliation through the control they exercised over people through their physiological needs. This is without precedent in human history. True, this was not perpetrated against the Jews alone, but Jews were the ones positioned on the lowest rung of that Hell. What the Nazis achieved by that was not the dehumanization of the Jews, but the dehumanization of their own selves - as, by doing so, they positioned themselves on the lowermost possible rung of humanity.

What did the Nazis leave behind? Where are their literary, their artistic, their philosophical, their architectural achievements? The Nazi Reich dissolved into nothingness. It left only one memorial: the ruins of the concentration camps and, crowning it, the only great achievement of Nazism - Auschwitz and the mass murder.

It is this lack of precedent, so characteristic of the Holocaust, I think, that is beginning to be understood all over the world. A very special case of genocide took place here - total, global, purely ideological. It might be repeated. Certainly not in the exact same form, but possibly in a similar, maybe even very similar manner and I have no way of determining who will be the Jews and who the Germans might be the next time.

This menace is universal and at the same time - as it is founded on the experience of the Holocaust - very specifically connected with the Jews. The specific and the universal cannot be separated. It is indeed the extreme character of the Holocaust that allows it to be compared with other cases of genocide and to be presented as a warning. It has, indeed, been already copied - not in the same form, but in similar forms. Should the warning be ignored? Should the Holocaust serve as a precedent for others who would like to inflict the same onto yet others?

How then could it have happened? I think that one must look at that ancient tradition included in the book that stems from my ancestors. In that book it is written that mankind has the choice between Good and Evil, between life and death. This means, at the same time, that mankind is capable of both, that both exist within the self - both God and the devil. Expressed in a more modern fashion: that the urge for life and the wish for death - our own or that of others - is inside us. Under certain conditions we might become Eichmanns, or rescuers.

Germany, then: we are not discussing guilt here; we are talking about the responsibility towards the future of a culture within which this monster could have developed. Because, Ladies and Gentlemen, you know very well that "Death was a master from Germany" - although the Jews were never enemies of the Germans or Germany. Quite the opposite. German Jews were always proud of how much good they had achieved for the German civilization.

So how can the Nazi regime be explained? I think that there was a pseudo-intellectual elite that took over power in Germany, and it did so not because the masses supported their potentially genocidal ideology, but because there was a situation of a grave crisis within which the potentially genocidal layer of leaders offered a way out, in the form of a wonderful utopia. The determining factor was that the layer of intellectuals - the academicians, the teachers, the students, the bureaucrats, the doctors, the lawyers, the churchmen, the engineers, joined the Nazi party because it promised them a future and a status. Through the fast growing identification of the intellectual layers with the regime, it became possible to have the genocide easily presented as an unavoidable step towards the achievement of a utopian future. When Herr Doctor, Herr Professor, Herr Director, Herr Priest or Pastor, Herr engineer became collaborators with genocide, when a consensus evolved, led by the semi-mythological figure of the dictator, it became easy to convince the masses and to recruit them to carry out the murders.

Something similar could happen elsewhere as well, but in Germany, where at least part of the elites had absorbed a radical anti-Semitism in the course of the 19th century, and some of them added a general racist ideology, it proved easier for the genocidal Nazi layer of leaders to turn the majority of German society into accomplices. The major role in this was played by the universities, the academics. I keep returning to the question of whether we have indeed learnt anything, whether we do not still keep producing technically competent barbarians in our universities.

And what about the churches? The Holocaust has brought to light a profound crisis in Christianity. 1900 years after the Christian Messiah spread the Gospel of love, his own people was murdered by baptized heathen. The churches, insofar as they did not collaborate, kept their silence.

On the other hand, one definitely cannot say that within German society a radical anti-Semitic norm had prevailed. There was, though, a general queasiness regarding the Jews, even among the non-anti-Semitic or even anti-anti-Semitic mutually antagonistic mass movements of the Social Democrats, the Communists and the Catholic Center that constituted the majority of the German voting population up to the end of 1932. This queasiness made it practically impossible for a general protest against the murder of Jews to develop. It was not as if the dictatorship was so fully totalitarian as to make protest movements totally impossible. This was proven not

only by the opposition to the murder of the German handicapped that brought about the stoppage, in August 1941, of the so-called 'euthanasia', at least partially, but also the demonstration of the German women in the Rosenstrasse in Berlin, in February-March 1943, which led to the freeing of their Jewish husbands. The fragility of the famous German-Jewish symbiosis came to light through the fact that a mass movement for the protection of the Jewish minority, which was at the least unpopular, was totally outside the sphere of possibilities.

It seems to me, that yet another factor is involved. European culture is composed of two pillars: Athens and Rome on the one hand and Jerusalem on the other hand. An ordinary citizen of two hundred years ago, if at all s/he owned any book, it would probably be the Christian Bible, which, as we all know, is composed of two parts - the Old Testament and the New Testament. Both of them were mainly written by Jews.

Greek and Roman literature, law, art and philosophy are and have surely been as important as the prophets and the moral commandments of the Jewish Bible. Still, modern Italy and modern Greece do not use the same languages any more, do not worship the same gods, do not create the same kinds of art, do not write the same kinds of literature as in ages past. Different peoples live there now. But my granddaughter reads what was written 3000 years ago, in the original, needing no dictionary. Try this out with Chaucer - and this was written only a few hundred years ago.

When the Nazis wanted to carry out their rebellion against western culture, was it not the Jews, those still living reminders of the source of that culture, that they had to annihilate? The Jews, whether they like it or not, are a central component of Western self-perception. This is spread all over the world by means of so-called Western civilization, as well as by means of popular kitsch culture - which also originates in the west.

There is an Auschwitz museum in a suburb of Hiroshima. Holocaust literature is read in South America. The Holocaust has assumed the role of universal symbol for all evil because it presents the most extreme form of genocide, because it contains elements that are without precedent, because that tragedy was a Jewish one and because the Jews - although they are no better nor worse than others and their sufferings were neither greater nor lesser than those of others - represent one of the nuclei of modern civilization.

The way I see it, an historian is one who not only analyzes history, but also tells true stories. So let me tell you some. In Radom in Poland there lived a woman with two sons. Her husband had gone to Palestine in 1939 for the purpose of preparing the immigration there of his entire family. The war broke the family apart. The husband became a Palestinian citizen and tried to save his family by including them in an exchange with German settlers in Palestine.

In October, 1942, when the woman was already familiar with what awaited her and her children, a Gestapo man summoned her to his headquarters and told her she was going to be exchanged. Within one hour she was supposed to turn up with her two sons at his office. Yes, said the woman, but my elder son is working outside of the ghetto, asking the man how she was supposed to summon her son. This was none of his business, said the Gestapo man; they had to show up in one hour. And if

not? The woman was desperate. Should she and her younger son share the fate of her first born? Or should she at least save herself and her younger son? At that moment her neighbor approached her and said: Look, you cannot save your son. Why, then, don't you take my son in his stead? My son is of the same age as your elder. Shocked and in tears, the woman showed up at the Gestapo headquarters with two boys. On November 11th, 1942 she arrived in Haifa. The two boys became, in time, prominent Israeli citizens, with children and grandchildren.

The woman spoke little after that. She was a proud person and would not live supported by the pity of others. Until the end of her life, she ran a small stall opposite the great synagogue on Allenby Street in Tel Aviv. It was said she was a survivor of the Holocaust. Had she really survived? I am not sure.

The Holocaust, and all other horrible things that the National Socialists perpetrated, shows not only the evil which Man is capable of, but also - at the margin, so to speak - the opposite, the good. Oskar Schindler has become a controversial figure, through the well-known movie. But look, when you strip off the myth, something does remain. Schindler was not only a member of the Party, he had been a spy as well, a womanizer, an alcoholic and a ruthless exploiter and liar. There are few people to be found on whom you could pin more negative characterizations. And yet he apparently contributed to saving the lives of more than 1000 people, while risking his own safety. He, or his wife, personally carried severely sick and dying Jewish slave laborers from a freezing train in order to try to save their lives. He did not have to do that, but he did. He went to Budapest to warn the Jews there about the Holocaust. He did not have to do it, but he did. Why, then? Because he was a human being - as bad as he was, he also was good.

His story shows that one could, even as a German, even as a member of the Party, behave in a different way. Schindler and the likes of him, like Otto Busse in Bialystok, who supplied the Jewish resistance with weapons, show us that it was possible to save. The deeds of these people prove, on the one hand, the guilt of the others, but also show, on the other hand, that hope is not lost.

You see, there is the story of Maczek. Actually, his name is Mordechai. His name is the only thing he knows about himself. Before the war, at the age of three, he had been handed over by his mother to a Jewish orphanage in Lodz. This is what he was later told. Then came the war and he was raised in Cracow by a Polish woman by the name of Anna Morawczika. Naturally he thought she was his mother.

At the age of six, while playing on the street, he was hit by accident by a car full of German soldiers. The soldiers wanted to take him to hospital but Anna opposed it with all her might. She knew he would be murdered instantly if it was found out that he had been circumcised.

Then the war was over and a woman presented herself at Anna's. Anna told Maczek that this woman was his mother. Both women took the boy and put him in a Jewish orphanage in Lodz. The mother disappeared, never to be seen again. Maczek was brought to Israel. Anna, who had saved him, passed away shortly thereafter. Maczek does not know till this very day, who he is. All he knows is that a Polish woman saved his life because she loved him - a Jewish boy orphan.

There were the Annas and the Schindlers, but they were few, very few. Most were like in the next story. I do not know if the story is true or not, but here is how it goes. An S.S. man told a Jewish woman that he would spare her life if she guessed which of his two eyes was of glass and which one was live. Without hesitating, the woman pointed at one of the eyes and said: "This is the glass eye." "Correct," said the S.S. man, "but how did you find out?" Answered the woman, "Because it looked more human than the other."

I then return to the question of whether we have learnt anything. Pretty little, so it seems to me. But hope still persists, even with the traumatized people to which I belong. You, Ladies and Gentlemen, just like members of other democratic parliaments, carry a very special responsibility - especially as Europeans, especially as Germans.

I do not have to tell you that what happened in Rwanda or in Bosnia, happened right next door. To be reminded, as a consequence, of the Holocaust, constitutes only a first step. To teach and to study about the Holocaust and everything that transpired during the Second World War and after, concerning racism, anti-Semitism and xenophobia - that constitutes the next responsibility. We, Germans and Jews, depend on each other in this. You cannot perform, without us, the task of remembering, and we must be sure that here, from where the disaster came, an old-new, humane and better civilization is being constructed, on the ruins of the past. We both, together, carry a very special responsibility towards the whole of humanity.

There might be one further step. In the book of which I have spoken before, are the Ten Commandments. Maybe we should add three additional ones: "You, your children and your children's children shall never become perpetrators"; "You, your children and your children's children shall never allow yourselves to become victims"; and "You, your children and your children's children shall never, but never, be passive onlookers to mass murder, genocide, or (let us hope it may never be repeated) to a Holocaust-like tragedy."