

“REMEMBERING IS DOING”

That’s why you and I are here today. We remember during the Shoah (the destruction) there was the “triumph of the human spirit.” In the *Scrolls of Fire*, Abba Kovner recalls the resistance by the Warsaw Ghetto fighters who, for three months, fought against the Nazis. I want to dedicate my remarks tonight to the Warsaw Ghetto fighters who 57 years ago [today] resisted the Nazis and their collaborators.

Abba Kovner writes:

Warsaw, April 1943:

“On the evening of Passover, the Warsaw ghetto was surrounded. From the lookout I watched the army advancing in columns beside the wall. I saw masses of gleaming helmets in the morning sun, and my heart seemed to stop. I pulled the pin of the grenade and threw it out of the window. From that moment every house in the Warsaw ghetto became a battle position.

From the windows, on every floor, fire was poured on the Germans and the Ukrainians. Deborah stood in the window above me. A soldier noticed her and shouted to his friend as if shocked; ‘Look, Hans, a Jewish woman with a gun!’ They aimed their rifles at her, but Deborah was quicker. She threw a grenade at them; the only one she had.”

Warsaw, April 23, 1943.

“Every night seas of flame raged and tongues of fire circled above the Warsaw ghetto. House after house collapsed, and the sky took on a frightening light. And nearby, beyond the wall, life continued as usual. The Citizens of the Polish capital went for strolls, amused themselves and saw the smoke thick by day and a pillar of fire by night. There were some who dared to come close to the ghetto wall to get a better look at ‘how the Jews burn!’

And when the wind carried the flames and set fire to a house on the other side of the wall, firemen rushed there at once. Only our fire has no one to put it out”

Warsaw, April 25, 1943

(Commander Mordechai Anielewicz’ Farewell)

“I don’t know what to tell you.

Something has happened that is beyond our most daring dreams. The German Nazis have been driven out of the Ghetto.

. . .For three days the Ghetto has been trapped in flames. Tonight we are changing to guerilla warfare.

. . .I can’t describe our present conditions. Only a few will survive; everyone else will perish sooner or later. Our fate is sealed. In the bunkers you can’t light a candle for lack of air.

. . . Goodbye, dear friend, the last wish of my life has been fulfilled. I have been privileged to see Jewish defense in the ghetto, in all its greatness and glory.”

What happened in the Warsaw uprising that spring of 1943 will forever remain a re-affirmation of life, a pleas for human dignity. The heroes of the Warsaw Ghetto had no choice between life and death but to die in dignity fighting for life.

The Holocaust is the darkest single period of human history; the Holocaust is the systematic isolation, persecution, and destruction of eleven million people—Poles, Romanies (gypsies,) homosexuals, physically and mentally handicapped, priests, nuns, political dissidents, and intellectuals, all labeled “enemies of the State.” Six million Jews during the Hitler era (1933-1945) were annihilated! Hitler and the Nazis waged a special war against the Jews—a kind of war within the larger World War II. Elie Wiesel (a survivor) told us a few years ago; “Not all victims were Jews. But all Jews were victims.” The Nazis used the formula “The Final Solution” to refer to the determined destruction of all Jews within Europe. The Holocaust means “fully burnt”. The Hebrew name “Shoah”, meaning “utterly destroyed,” explicitly states what the Nazis did to the Jews of Europe.

We can describe three phases in the history of the Holocaust—the Shoah, namely:

1. 1933-1939: The isolation of the Jews in Germany and Austria

2. 1939-1942: Ghettoization of Eastern Europe
3. 1942-1945: The mass murder of Europe's Jews

PHASE 1: 1933-1939 - Isolation

From Hitler's rise to power in 1933 to the invasion of Poland in 1939, the Nazis' policy was to completely isolate the Jews. This was done by segregating Jews from every aspect of German life—social, economic and political.

The Nazi State, in September 1935, passed the Nuremberg Laws, which forbade citizenship to Jews and deprived Jews of their status as Germans. The definition of a Jew was, "A Jew was any person, three of whose great-grandparents had been Jews."

Jews were steadily pauperized as their property and assets were confiscated or forcibly transferred to the State or to private German ownership. Nazi policy toward Jews was meant to pressure Jews to leave Germany. In fact, nearly ½ of Germany's 500,000 Jews left by 1939.

On November 9, 1938, organized gangs of Nazis attacked Jewish synagogues, homes and businesses in Germany, Austria and Sudetenland. On this night, known as Kristallnacht, "The Night of Shattered Glass," over 100 Jews were slaughtered, 30,000 Jews arrested and locked in concentration camps.

By and large, the outside world remained silent regarding the suffering inflicted upon German/Austrian Jews. An international conference convened at Evian in the summer of 1938 did nothing to help Jewish refugees.

PHASE 2: 1938-1942: Ghettoization

On September 1, 1939 Germany invaded Poland. Jews had been in Poland since the 12th century. In 1939 Poland had the largest Jewish population. Jews again were the target of “the Nazis War against the Jews.” Jews were thrown into ghettos all over Poland, all over Europe. These temporary gathering points (ghettos) were set up in the poorer sections of major cities and sealed off from the non-Jewish society. Here the Nazis attempted to starve and/or work the Jews to death. Yes, overcrowding, coupled with hunger, disease and terror devastated the ghettos. The Nazis tried to completely demoralize Jews.

The outside world continued to look on and do nothing! Apathy and indifference marked the world outside!

In three weeks the Nazis swallowed Poland, then Denmark, Norway, Holland, Belgium, Luxembourg and France. The Balkan countries followed. The world, including the Vatican, remained silent.

PHASE 3: 1942-1945: mass murder

Jews were left to stagnate—to starve, to die in the ghettos. While Jews therein attempted to cope and/or exist, the Nazis experimented with mass killings

in Eastern Europe. Special units, known as Einsatzgruppen, traveled at the front with the regular German army. Sweeping into cities, towns and villages, these “killing squads” rounded up the Jewish population with the forced help of Jews themselves. Jews were herded into trucks and freight cars, taken outside the towns to some ravine or ditch, stripped of their valuables and clothing—men, women and children—and shot! The countryside became one immense graveyard and the ground drenched with blood such as the place of Babi Yar in Russia where over 100,000 Jewish men, women and children were slaughtered. Other methods were used—mass drownings, burnings, the gassings in mobile gas vans/trucks.

WE REMEMBER! WE RECALL! One such massacre recorded by Jaffa Illiach: “On Rosh Hashanah, 1941 when all Jews awaited their fate in the shtetl’s synagogues, watched over by lunatics whom their Lithuanian captors had appointed as their supervisors, it was clear to Rabbi Shimon Rozowsky that his beloved shtetl was doomed.

A few days earlier he had called the town’s notables together and gave them this warning:

‘Jews, our end is near; our fate is sealed. But let us die notably, with honor. Let us NOT walk as sheep to the slaughter. Secure ammunition, we will fight to our last breath. Let us die like judges in Israel.’

Some supported him, but the opposition won out.

Then it was too late! From the synagogue, Jews were led out in groups of 250; first the men, then the women and children. They were driven by the Nazis to the old Jewish cemetery; told to dig their ditches.

All had to undress and stand at the edge of the open “graves.”

The Jews were shot in the back of their heads by Lithuanian guards with the encouragement of the local people.

Seven thousand were shot that September 25, 1941.

One of the shtetl’s teachers, Reb. Michalowsky and his youngest son, Zvi, age 16, were holding hands as they stood at the edge of the open pit. They were trying comfort each other. Young Zvi fell into the grave along with his father who had been shot.

Zvi felt the bodies piling up on top of him, covering him. He felt the streams of blood around him and the trembling pile of dying bodies moving beneath him.

It became dark and cold; the shooting stopped. Zvi made his way from the bodies—from the pit—the mass grave into the cold dark, dead night.

Zvi knew the area. At the far end of the cemetery, near a church, were a few Christian homes.

Naked, covered with blood, Zvi knocked on the first door. The door opened; a peasant held up a lamp to see who knocked.

“Please let me in,” Zvi pleaded. The woman shouted, “Jews, go back to the grave where you belong!” She slammed the door. Zvi knocked on other doors; there was no room in these inns!

Near the forest lived a widow whom Zvi knew. He tried again, but this time he changed his story. The widow opened the door and when she saw the nude body covered with blood, she grabbed a piece of burning wood to chase Zvi away.

But Zvi pleaded, “I am your Lord, Jesus Christ. I came down from the cross. Look at me—the blood, pain, suffering of the innocent. Let me in, please.”

The widow dropped the burning wood into the stove, crossed herself, and fell on her knees, praying, “My God! My God.”

Zvi walked in; he promised her that she would be blessed; her children, her farm, but only if she kept the secret for three days and three nights. He told her, “Do not reveal our secret to a living soul, not even the priest.”

The woman gave Zvi warm water to bathe himself; she gave him clothing and food.

Dressed in a farmer’s clothing, with a supply of food, Zvi Michalowsky made his way to the forest and began the Jewish Partisan Movement. Today, Zvi lives in Israel!

By 1941, over a million Jews had been annihilated by shootings; mass murder had become the official policy of Germany and the Nazis. (Just recently

on March 17, 2001, the true story of the killing and burning alive of 1600 Jews in a barn by Polish citizens at Jedwabne, not the Nazis, was revealed. A monument that blamed the Nazis has now been removed by the Polish authorities.)

However, this method of “getting rid of Jews” proved too slow; too difficult psychologically for the ordinary German soldier and/or other perpetrators. A new method of extermination was designed by the Nazis at the Wannsee Conference in 1942 (a suburb of Berlin); it was termed the “Final Solution” to annihilate the Jews of Europe.

The Nazi leaders designed the “gas chambers” which were to be built in six of the 60,000 concentration camps. These six “death” camps were specifically designed to gas the 11 million Jews of Europe and they were: Belzec, Chelmno, Sobibor, Treblinka, Majdanek and Auschwitz/Birkenau. Jews were deported from ghettos/labor camps to these death camps.

At the death camps, Jews were stripped not only of their belongings and clothing, but also their hair, gold teeth and false limbs. Even their bones were turned into phosphate; their fat into soaps; their skin into lamp shades.

From the spring of 1942 to the end of the war in 1945, Jews were deported to death camps from every country of Europe occupied by the German army. By the time the Germans met defeat in World War II, six million Jews were dead!—1 ½ million children!

The outside world peoples were by and large indifferent to the fate of the Jews.! They were silent!

Dr. Chaim Weitzman and his Zionist colleagues were tireless in their efforts to break the public silence. On March 1, 1943, Chaim Weitzman delivered a cry of anguish in Madison Square Garden in New York City, pleading that the world respond to this terrible unbelievable monstrous story of human slaughterhouses.

I am sure, you in your hearts, are asking, as I have asked again and again in trying to understand: “How could this have happened? And how could so many remain unmoved in the face of such horrendous suffering and evil?” What would I have done?

In 1983 and again in 1995, I made a prayer-filled pilgrimage to the concentration/death camps of Auschwitz/Berkenau in Poland. Never shall I forget what I saw therein! Rooms filled with human hair which had been stripped from the victims and then used to make rugs. Rooms filled with shoes (women’s, men’, babies’) each of these rooms filled to the ceiling. Another room piled high with suitcases and still another with wooden legs and arms! I began to comprehend the meaning of six million! In another room filled to the ceiling with eye glasses, I wept and asked, “How could this destruction of Jews—God’s People—have happened? Why were people so apathetic?”

What was the response within the Christian Community? Please remember that the Holocaust took place on a continent which used to call itself Christian. This in itself tells us that Christians who cared were few, indeed. Otherwise how could something like this destruction of a whole people—Jews—take place? True, the horrors of Auschwitz—the crime of genocide—were a product of modern technology and Nazi totalitarianism.

Yet, we may ask where was the cry of the Christian Community? All too few Christians raised their voices in protest.

Indeed, the Holocaust, as Dr. Franklin Little says, “Marked us Christians.” One of the challenges facing Christians is that each of us, with the help of our Jewish sisters and brothers, must come to grips with the Holocaust. It is true that the murder of six million Jews, only because they were Jews, was the work of the Nazis, not of Christians as Christians. But, we remember, too, that the virulent Nazi antisemitism which culminated in an attempted “Final Solution” of the Jewish people would NOT have been possible except for centuries of distorted false Christian teaching about Jews. Jules Isaac, a great French historian, rightly calls this “contempt teaching.”

Christians, if they take the Holocaust seriously, must admit that antisemitism stemming in part from this “contempt teaching” has played a devastating role in Christian history. Because of this “contempt “ about Jews, there was a readiness

within the minds, hearts and souls of many Christian people to accept the decisions of the Nazi government. These patterns of prejudice must be rooted out of Christian theology and ecclesiology. The consequences of these contempt teachings have been set before the world in a terrible way during the time of the crusades and during the Holocaust.

The great German Cardinal Bea, of Blessed Memory, in recommending the Statement on the Jews at the Second Vatican Council, stated forthrightly that “anti-Jewish ideas in the Christian teaching had done much to help Nazism.” The Rev. Thomas Stransky, now living in Israel, stated, “It is a painful thorn in the Christian memory and conscience to recall that the yellow star exhumed by Hitler had been instituted by the official documents of the Catholic Church in the Middle Ages.”

And since I did the pioneer research and analysis of the most widely used Catholic High School religion textbooks, I know for a fact that indeed our religion texts prior to 1961 did have negative, prejudiced, false teaching about Jew and Judaism. (A Protestant self-study by Dr. Bernard Olson, of Blessed Memory, revealed the same results.) Thank God that Vatican Council II, on October 28, 1965, issued the document *Nostra Aetate* (In Our Times) which in 15 Latin sentences changed these negative teachings about Jews/Judaism to a positive one.

The Second Vatican Council’s statement removed once and for all times the false traditional Church teaching. In making it clear that the Jewish people were

NOT (and are not) responsible for the death of Jesus, the Vatican Council's Statement on the Jews removed all justification for the idea that the people of Israel—Jews—were destined perpetually to wander among the peoples of the earth without a homeland of their own.

As I indicated earlier in this talk, some Christians, some individuals did protest, did dare to speak out, indeed had the courage to care. Father Bernard Lichtenberg of Germany told his parishioners during Kristallnacht, "That synagogue you've seen burning across the street is a house of prayer." He dared to speak of the terrible suffering of Jews. The Nazis arrested him; he was beaten and died on the way to a concentration camp. Last year Pope John Paul II canonized Fr. Lichtenberger.

In France and in the Netherlands, a number of priests and ministers held public prayers for Jews.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer gave up his life. Archbishop Cassulo of Romania worked with the local Rabbi to save Jews. Archbishop Roncalli (later Pope John XXIII) issued false baptismal certificates to help Jews escape. The Sisters of Zion, and other Convents/Monasteries saved hundreds of Jews in Italy, France, Belgium and Holland; Sisters in Poland saved Jews. Thank God, there were some people who had the courage to care.

The great Swedish diplomat, Raoul Wallenberg, saved over 100,000 Jews!
Oscar Schindler—1,200 Jews! Research continues at the Yad Vashem Memorial
in Jerusalem to discover each and every person who risked his/her life to save
Jews. The Israelis have created a garden of “The Righteous among the Nations.”
For each non-Jew who saved Jews, a tree has been planted. Thus far about 12,000
trees with a plaque below giving the name of the non-Jew who saved Jews grace
the walk to Yad Vashem. (Speak of the Pope’s example of March, 1998.)

Pope John Paul II, by his historic visit to Israel, has done more than he ever
could have done by writing any proclamation. His visit to the Western Wall where
he placed his prayer asking God’ forgiveness for Catholics for teaching a false
theology that led to the Shoah, will ever be remembered.

God of our fathers,
you chose Abraham and his descendants
to bring your Name to the Nations;
we are deeply saddened
by the behavior of those
who in the course of history
have caused these children of yours to suffer,
and asking your forgiveness
we wish to commit ourselves

to genuine brotherhood
with the people of the Covenant.

Jerusalem, 16 March 2000.

At Yad Vashem he placed a memorial wreath and prayed:

In this place of solemn remembrance, I fervently pray that our sorrow for the tragedy which the Jewish People suffered in the 20th Century will lead to a new relationship between Christians and Jews.

. . . The world must heed the warning that comes to us from the victims of the Holocaust and from the testimony of the survivors. Here at Yad Vashem the memory lives on, and burns itself into our souls. It makes us cry out, “I hear the whispering of many, terror on every side! But I trust in you, O Lord. I say, You are my God. (Psalm 31:14-15)

At the last US Catholic Bishops Conference in November 2000, the Bishops issued a booklet, “Catholic Teaching on the Shoah” which outlines specific goals for Shoah Education and proposes a curriculum for all Catholic institutions.

Tonight, we remember the heroes of the Warsaw Ghetto, the martyrs of Treblinka, the children of Auschwitz-Birkenau, Sobibar, Dachau, Ordruff, Majdonek—6 million men, women and a million and a half children. They fought

alone, they suffered alone, they lived alone, but they did not die alone, for something of all of us dies with them.

Let us remember, too, those non-Jews who risked their lives to save Jews from the ovens of annihilation. We read in the Gospel of Matthew, “As long as you did it to the least of my brethren, you did it to Me.” And the Baal Shem Tov admonishes, “Forgetfulness leads to exile, while remembrance is the secret of Redemption.