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**On the Holocaust and Other Genocides**

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WASHINGTON, D. C.



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JOSEPH AND REBECCA MEYERHOFF ANNUAL LECTURE  
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THE JOSEPH AND REBECCA MEYERHOFF ANNUAL LECTURE was endowed by the Meyerhoff family in 1994 to honor excellence in research and foster dissemination of cutting-edge scholarly work on the Holocaust and its legacy. Joseph and Rebecca Meyerhoff of Baltimore, Maryland, were active philanthropists in the United States and abroad, focusing especially on Jewish learning and scholarship, as well as on music, the arts, and humanitarian causes. Their children, Eleanor Katz and Harvey M. Meyerhoff (Chairman Emeritus of the United States Holocaust Memorial Council), have endowed this lecture, which is organized by the Museum's Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies.



There can hardly be a doubt that one of the most problematic documents in international relations is the 1948 Convention on the Prevention of the Crime of Genocide, which was ratified by most countries of the world. As we all know, it was originally the brainchild of Raphael Lemkin, a Polish-Jewish lawyer who managed to flee from Europe in the early stages of World War II, and who coined the term genocide. He was influenced, after 1945, by what he had come to know about the murder of Jews and Poles, so that what we today call the Holocaust, that is the genocide of the Jews, was at the beginning and the center of the development of the idea, which he had actually developed since 1933 at the latest, during the war and leading up to the Convention. However, the Convention as adopted differed markedly from Lemkin's original ideas. It was the result of horse-trading between the West and the Soviet Bloc, not an academic exercise. You know the wording, and I don't have to repeat it. It talks about the intent to annihilate ethnic, national, racial, and religious groups as such, in whole or in part, and lists five ways in which the perpetrators do it: killing members of the group; causing serious physical or mental harm to the group; creating conditions of life that prevent the group's existence; preventing births of members of the targeted group; and kidnapping children of the targeted group. It is unclear if all these

conditions, or only one or two, have to be fulfilled for the murder to be called a genocide. It is unclear when a mass killing becomes a genocide. It is rather pointless to talk about kidnapping children or preventing births, when all the members of the group are targeted, as was the case in the Shoah, and all the women and children are to be murdered anyway. Also, it is difficult to see shoving people into gas chambers as creating conditions of life designed to prevent the victims' existence. And, in the Shoah, not just certain members of the group were targeted, but all of them. In the case of Rwanda, it is equally problematic. Hutu and Tutsi are not ethnic groups—they speak the same language, have the same culture, and are members of the same religious denominations. The differences were originally class differences, and they were exacerbated by European missionaries and colonialists who introduced a basically racist terminology. Strictly speaking, the description of the Rwandan tragedy as a genocide could be challenged. But of course it was a genocide, so the thing that is wrong is the definition.

There is no historical research worth talking about regarding genocides before the twentieth century, though it is perfectly clear that the treatment of American Indians, throughout the American continent, was genocidal. So was the case of the destruction of Carthage, or even possibly the Irish famine. But we need sharper analytical tools than the ones provided to us by the 1948 Convention to call a genocide a genocide when we see it. At Soviet insistence, mass murder for political reasons, which we now call politicide, was excluded—obviously, because otherwise the USSR could have been accused of genocide. Religious groups were included, although there is a basic difference between them and ethnic groups. Religious allegiances, at least theoretically, though by no means always practically, are a matter of choice. European Jews and those in Moslem countries threatened with death in the pre-modern period could convert, and thereby save their lives, though even there one has to add—not always. But if you are born a Jew, a German, a Russian, an Arab, or a Chinese, you usually are stuck with your ethnicity, because after you are born it is too late to choose your parents. You can perhaps change, as an individual, the ethnicity of your children and grandchildren by making an effort to distance yourself from your original ethnicity.



A group as a group cannot normally do it, though it can be assimilated into another ethnicity in the long run, either by force, or by a multi-generational process of voluntary or involuntary assimilation. However, in general, group changes of ethnicity are extremely difficult. The difference between them and religious groups is obvious. But there is no logic in including religious but not political groups in definitions of genocide, because in principle—again, not necessarily in practice—you can change your political allegiances. Millions of good communists became good Nazis in Germany, and after the war millions of good East German Nazis became good communists again. But if you want to exclude both religious and political groups, because they are in principle of a different quality than ethnic or national ones, then you have to limit the term genocide to ethnic groups only, and use other terms for the other kinds of mass destruction.

Another problem lies in the use of the term ‘racial.’ By now we know that all humans originate from a group of Homo sapiens who developed some half a million years ago in East Africa. All humans today, without exception, are descendants of that group, whether they are Australian aborigines, Central African pygmies, Einstein, Hitler, Stalin, Bush, Merkel, or Olmert. There are, in other words, no races. Differences in color of skin are secondary mutations caused mainly by climate. The Jews are an excellent example of this: go out on an Israeli street and you will find white Jews, black Jews, brown Jews—those are actually the majority in Israel—and if there were blue and green humans, you would no doubt have blue and green Jews, too. We are as pure-blooded as any Washington street poodle. Race should not be included in a definition of genocide; racial prejudice should, because people have it and it causes mass murder.

There is another problem—the definition talks about partial or total annihilation of groups. There is a difference between them. If every individual of a group is to be murdered, there are no chances of a rebirth of the group as such, and then all the other parts of the definition become inoperative. That is the main difference between the genocide of the Jews, which we call, inaccurately and wrongly,\* the Holocaust, and,

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\* The ancient Greek word “Holokaustos” meant “whole-burnt offering,” obviously not what happened during the Shoah.

say, the genocide of the Roma, the Gypsies. There was never a German plan to murder all the Roma, or all the Poles for that matter. But all Jews, anywhere, were to be murdered.

In the end, this playing around with definitions, so dear to us academics, is really quite pointless, except that we are stuck with the Convention's definition as a possible political tool, and of course we know that that tool has never been used. But it is worth remembering that our definitions are abstractions from reality, and reality is much more complicated than our definitions can be, and rather than trying to fit reality into the abstraction, we should adapt the definitions to reality. The reality is that humans are the only mammals that kill each other in large numbers, because quite obviously their psychological make-up makes that possible. The proof of this lies in all our laws that make murder illegal. If there was no inclination to murder, it would be unnecessary to have laws against it, and we would perhaps be left with nine, instead of ten, commandments; commandments that have always been suggestions, never commandments. The reason for this inclination, or basic instinct, is, some psychologists tell us, the desire, which we inherited from our prehistoric ancestors, to defend ourselves, our nuclear families, our clans, and mainly the territory necessary to maintain them from real or imagined competition, invasion, or other danger. We seem to be psychologically equipped to kill anyone whom we see, rightly or wrongly, as a threat.

If so, the question arises whether there is any way of stopping mass killings and genocides. On the face of it, the prospects are not rosy. Some years ago, the American sociologist Rudolph J. Rummel estimated the number of civilian victims of governments and political movements in the first eighty-seven years of the twentieth century—the dates were chosen arbitrarily—at 169 million, as compared to the thirty-four million soldiers who died during the same period, which includes the two world wars, or four times more civilians than soldiers. Thirty-eight million of the 169 million civilians died in genocides, as defined by the Convention, and of these close to six millions died in the Shoah. Rummel, who in the meantime has increased his estimates considerably, calls the murder of civilians democide, or the murder of people, and that

includes all mass killings, including genocides according to the Convention. Experts have their problems with Rummel's figures. But whether he is ten, or twenty, or even more percent off the mark, is not really relevant; the overall picture does not change.

However, just as one can say that mass murder has been with us since time immemorial, and most probably before that, one can also say that the opposite, namely selfless sacrifice for others, has been with us as well. The yearning for death and the yearning for life, the latter described by Freud in what appears to be a much too strong emphasis on the sexual drive, are both, apparently, part of our basic make-up. In the real world, as well as in the imagined world of literature that reflects it, both have a parallel existence. Righteous among the nations, and that includes whole communities, even whole ethnic communities, such as the Danes, rescued Jews; righteous Turks and Kurds rescued Armenians during the Armenian genocide; righteous Hutu rescued Tutsi in Rwanda, and so on. Often, such activities involved real self-sacrifice for a total stranger. It is that other pole of our mental and instinctual being that makes action against genocide a realistic prospect, albeit a difficult and perhaps remote one.

There is no doubt that we live in a small world that is threatened by human self-destruction, made possible by technological advances. Such threats include not only genocides and other mass murders, but also power struggles of nations armed with weapons of mass destruction; ecological disasters created by human interference with nature; and epidemics against which there is no known cure. Genocides, therefore, are not the only major problem we humans have created for ourselves. And, of course, one always has to remember that the human race began its meteoric rise not a few thousand years ago as the Bible says, but some half a million or a million years ago, and its presence on this planet is limited in time. Sooner or later we shall disappear, having run our course, so to speak. With us will disappear our cultures, our achievements and failures, our God or Gods, our beliefs, our hopes, and our vanities. But what we want to do, I think, is hope that should happen later rather than sooner.

Technological advances have been registered not only in weaponry, but in other fields that threaten us. In the U.S., social scientists have developed sociological and politological models based on a large number of variables that make it possible to make

realistic risk assessments of genocidal developments. It is possible today to identify places in the world where mass murder is going to develop unless something is done to prevent them. This has led to the development of a model of early warning, which enables us to predict, with more than a fair measure of accuracy, that within three to six months such threats may actually turn into mass destruction of human life. Not that one needed such predictions in the cases of Rwanda or Darfur; not only prediction, but close to actual knowledge was and is there, and it is political will, not early warning, that is needed to prevent genocidal developments. The U.S. and U.K. governments, among others, as well as the UN, have such predictive means at their disposal today.

At the genocide prevention conference in Stockholm, on January 27, 2004, in order to get around the Convention's problematic definitions, I suggested a description, not a definition. I suggested we deal with four types of what one may call genocidal events: one, genocides according to the Convention's definition; two, politicides, that is mass murders with political, economic, and social motivations; three, ethnic cleansing when the purpose is to eliminate an ethnic group as such; and four, global genocidal ideologies that preach murderous propaganda and practice mass murder, such as Radical Islam. In the meantime, a Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide has been appointed, Dr. Juan Méndez, who has been working now for about two years. No world peace is in sight, but in the future maybe some very small steps towards a reduction of the dangers could be achieved. You see, I don't believe in utopias: to turn Lord Acton's famous quote around, utopias always kill, and radical utopias such as communism, National Socialism, fascism, nationalism, religious extremism, and the like, kill radically. I therefore also do not believe in a good world or in the coming of an earthly or a heavenly Messiah to deliver us from ourselves. I think and I hope that with a lot of luck and very hard work, we may possibly make the world in which we live a tiny little bit better than it now is.

What are the options? We have to test options not in learned papers, though we must have those as a necessary background, but in the face of the terrible problems the world faces with genocides present and future. Today, this means that we have to discuss Darfur, which is clearly a genocide, even according to the Convention, and we

have to discuss the relationship between Darfur and the genocides that preceded it, and those that will follow it, as follow it they will.

Darfur is a region in Western Sudan, about the size of France, with more than four million inhabitants. These inhabitants are, in their majority, Black African farmers, divided into four main tribes, and some smaller ones. Cattle herders, who see themselves as Arabs, are a significant minority of the population. One Black ethnicity, the Zaghawa, are nomads, too. Practically all are Moslems, at least formally so. The area is semi-arid, adjoining the Sahara desert, and is slowly drying up. This leads to increasingly bitter fights over scarce arable land and water, and the herders, whose lands can no longer support their cattle, are trying to drive out the farmers, who are plagued by droughts and slowly disappearing sources of livelihood. The government in Khartoum is a radical Islamic government, which was been forced, more or less, to arrive at a seeming accommodation with the Black African Christian and animist tribes in the South, after a civil war that lasted about twenty years, during which the Arabs in the North tried to annihilate their enemies. About two million lives were lost there in what, again, was undoubtedly a genocidal conflict. The so-called peace signed between the North and the South increasingly seems to develop into another effort by the North to rule the Christian and animist South. In a sense, the rebellion of the Black tribes of Darfur against the increasing oppression by the Sudanese government, which supports the Arab herders, is a continuation of that other civil war. The Sudanese response to demands of greater autonomy and more aid to Darfur, was the organization, by the government, of militias called the Janjaweed, which, since 2003, have been systematically destroying Black villages, killing men and raping women en masse. Probably some 400,000 deaths have occurred, and not the 200,000–300,000 that you can read about in the press. Death occurred not only through direct killing but also through mass dying in refugee camps, within Darfur and in neighboring Chad; some 2.5 million people have been displaced and vegetate in refugee camps. Little sowing was done last year, and less will have been done after the current rainy season ended in late September. Humanitarian aid agencies are incapable of dealing with this disaster, and their security is increasingly threatened by the Khartoum government and its allies,

and we are therefore facing a continuing genocide by illnesses, hunger, and so on, especially of the weakest, namely the small children. In the meantime, spurred on by a worsening climate of violence, the rebel groups of the Black farmers that fought the Sudanese government, have begun setting upon each other in mutual massacres, and one of them, led by the nomadic Zaghawa, and headed by a gentleman called Minni Minnawi, has lately become an ally of the Khartoum regime. It is also the one group that signed a so-called peace agreement with the government. The others, representing most of the Black ethnic groups, have not. The great powers have been incapable of dealing with all this. China, which owns oil concessions in southern Sudan, does not want to displease the Sudanese government, and has openly declared that it will veto any resolution that may force that government to disarm the Janjaweed and stop Sudanese planes, largely supplied by Russia, from bombing Black villages. The U.S. Congress passed a resolution declaring the situation a genocide, but no action was taken. The UN and the other powers have not been able to agree on anything useful. The U.S. government itself is prevaricating. The parallel with Rwanda is obvious. The African Union sent a small, increasingly useless armed force into Darfur to oversee a truce that no one keeps; it has no mandate to protect civilians. A so-called peace agreement has been signed between the Sudanese government and the Minnawi former rebel group. The chances that it will hold are minimal.

What can be done? The UN Security Council has adopted a resolution to send troops there. But that is likely to take many months, the mandate of these troops is unclear, and member countries are reluctant to volunteer troops and money. However, the main thing is that the UN made any dispatch of troops conditional upon the agreement of the radical Islamists in Khartoum, headed by that great liberal and humanitarian, the head of the murderers, Omar el-Bashir. Under these conditions, there will be no UN force. But even if there was a UN force, the purpose would not be to prevent genocide in Darfur, because genocide is already happening there; if they are successful, which is very doubtful, they would aim to stop it. For prevention of genocidal events such as the one in Darfur, academics are now working on what we call a tool-box, that is, a series of graded non-military measures, to be employed in

situations where genocide is threatened, before it actually happens, and possible armed intervention to stop it if it does happen. But even if we have a tool-box like that, the really crucial question will be one of pressure on the political world. What do we do in order to help create the political will to stop mutual mass killings? Somewhat to our surprise, we found out that academics actually have much more clout than they think, and the general idea is to create coalitions of pressure groups that will come with practical proposals, with media campaigns, and similar actions, and that will work through politicians and sympathetic governments. Will this succeed? I have not the slightest idea. All I know is that we must try.

What is the connection of the Holocaust to all this? The Holocaust, we said, was a form of genocide. Why then do we here deal with the Holocaust, and not with one or more of all the other genocidal events as central issues? I think the answer is that the Holocaust was the most extreme form of a malady that racks the human race, that is a danger to its very existence—not the only danger, as I indicated, but a very serious one—and therefore the Holocaust has become the paradigm for genocidal threats generally. From a Jewish point of view, there is an immediate topicality about the link of the Holocaust with genocide generally: Jews are, today, for the first time since 1945, again threatened, openly, by a radical Islamic genocidal ideology, whose murderous rantings have to be taken more seriously than the Nazi ones were, unfortunately, two and more generations ago. We should realize that there is a direct connection between the Shoah and present-day genocidal events and threats.

Where, then, are the parallels between the Holocaust and other genocides? The main one, of course, is that the suffering of victims of all genocidal massacres or mass murders is always the same. There is no gradation of suffering. No genocide is better, or worse, than another genocide. No murder is worse than another. No torture is better than another torture. The Jews did not suffer less, or more, than Tutsis in Rwanda, or Armenians in the Ottoman Empire. To argue otherwise, is not only morally unacceptable, but in actual fact provides a platform for an essential distortion of the Holocaust by setting it apart, outside of history.

Another parallel, in my view, is the fact that all genocidal events I am aware of

were always committed with the best possible means available to the perpetrators. Armenians were murdered with machine guns; telegraph, telephones, and railways were used; and Ottoman bureaucracy had acquired its efficiency by learning from French, German, and Austrian teachers. The Hutu in Rwanda used a centralized bureaucracy inherited from Belgian colonialism and radio communications to transmit detailed instruction to every corner of their country. They did not have gas, so they did not use it. The Germans had gas, modern military means, an excellent bureaucratic and propaganda machine, so they used these.

All elements in genocides that have occurred since the early twentieth century—and before—are repeated in one or more other genocidal events. But the Holocaust, while containing elements that can be found in other genocides, also contained elements that are not found in any other similar event. What are these elements?

One that might be controversial and not accepted by some is that all other genocides I know of were committed away from the center of the perpetrators' regime. Carthage and Melos, destroyed and murdered by the Romans and the Athenians, were not in Rome or in Athens. Armenians in Istanbul and Izmir were, except for the leadership mostly left alive, and the genocide was concentrated in the Anatolian provinces. In Rwanda, there was a reverse situation: the genocide was indeed committed at the center, but by Hutus who came from the north-western provinces that had never been under Tutsi rule—many of the victims were Hutus who opposed the genocide. The Holocaust took place in the center of what was probably the most advanced civilization of the twentieth century. It came from a country that had produced giants of human culture, the Beethovens, the Goethes, and the Schillers. Unfortunately, the people who ruled that country in the thirties and forties of the last century bore different names. The fact that the monster came from that center of modern civilization was, to my mind at least, an unprecedented disaster.

There are five more such unprecedented elements. First, the fact that the Germans searched for, found, registered, humiliated, dispossessed, concentrated, transported, and murdered every single individual whom they defined as being



Jewish—not self-definition, then, but definition by the perpetrator. Mark you, every single such person. A recent book called *Hitler's Jewish Soldiers* is, in my opinion, selling us a lie, a distortion. There never were Jewish soldiers in Hitler's army. There were a few people who were defined as half-Jews, Mischlinge, who received special dispensation so as to be included in the Wehrmacht, because the Germans did not consider them to be Jews, and they did not consider themselves Jews either. And, of course, there were so-called quarter-Jews, with one Jewish grandparent, who were considered, usually, to be German. So did they consider themselves. People defined as Jews were killed for the crime of having been born, and not recruited into the army. Second, Jews were to be killed everywhere the German writ ran, which ultimately was to happen all over the globe. "Today, Germany is ours—tomorrow, the whole world will be" screamed the Nazi hordes: "*Heute gehört uns Deutschland, Morgen die ganze Welt.*" In his interview with the Mufti of Jerusalem, Hajj Amin al-Husseyni, on November 28, 1941, Hitler said that after victory he would approach all governments everywhere to deal with the Jews as Germany was doing. Never before had there been a universally-conceived genocide.

Third, every genocide, however defined, and most mass murders of all kinds, are rationalized by an ideology. These ideologies have a pragmatic background—issues of economy, politics, social problems, status, military interests, and so on. Darfur is a good example: a gentleman by the name of Ahmed Acyl Aghbash was the leader of the Chadian Salamat subtribe of the Juhayna, who themselves are part of the Razeigat, a large Arab Bedouin ethnicity in Darfur and Chad. He was an intellectual who developed an ideology that saw in the Juhayna the descendants of Muhammad's tribe, the Bani Kureish. As descendants or relatives of Muhammad, the Juhayna should rule from the Nile to Lake Chad, and remove, enslave, or destroy the Black ethnicities who stand in their way. Aghbash, who was killed in an accident in 1982, received his arms from Libya, which wanted to destabilize Chad. The go-betweens were the Urn Jalul, also part of the Juhayna, and their chief, Sheikh Hillal Mohammed Abdallah, who was tremendously impressed by Aghbash and befriended him. Sheikh Hillal's son is Musa Hillal, the commander of the Janjaweed in Darfur, the perpetrators of the genocide

there. So you have an ideology, but it is pretty obvious that the ideology is, to use a Marxist term, the super-structure for something very real—the craving for land and possessions, itself caused by an ecological disaster. You can follow the same development in all genocides I know of: the Young Turks developed the ideology of doing away with an ancient enemy demanding Armenian autonomy and accused of collaborating with the Russians, because they wanted to establish a new Turkic-speaking empire stretching from the Bosphorus to Kazakhstan, instead of the old one that was collapsing. North Americans developed ideologies of the essential primitiveness and barbaric behavior of Native Americans because what they were after was the land and the riches under the soil. But not so in the Holocaust. Nazi antisemitic ideology was not based on any economic or social or political basis. They did not kill the Jews in order to get their property. They took their property because they wanted, at first, to get rid of them, and then they robbed them on the way to killing them. Thus, to give you an example, they first robbed the Jews of Rhodes, because they needed their money, then deported them to the Greek mainland. There they stripped them of their wedding rings, and their last possessions. But then they did not use them as slave labor, as a rational tyranny would have done, but shipped them, at some cost, to Auschwitz to be killed. Why? Because the killing was ideological, and the robbery was a corollary to murder, not its cause. Nazi ideology regarding the Jews had the quality of a series of nightmares. They talked about the Jewish desire for world control, which of course was a mirror image of their own dream to rule the world. They accused the Jews of corrupting Aryan civilization, they revived the blood libel, and they accused the Jews of war-mongering. Most, if not all, of this was inherited from Christian antisemitism, but then, Christianity never planned a genocide of the Jews. In accordance with the teachings of St. Augustine, Jews should be punished for not recognizing Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God, they could be discriminated against, oppressed, dispossessed, even exiled, but not killed, because they had souls and killing a Jew was a cardinal sin. In practice, of course, this was not observed, and the history of medieval Christendom is full of incidents of murder of Jews; often popes and bishops had to intervene to try to rescue Jews from the results of their own incitement. And yet, there was some

protection through a Christian morality that took its cue from the Jewish heritage. The Nazis were anti-Christian, because Christianity, as their ideologues argued, was essentially a Jewish invention. They removed Christianity from Christian antisemitism, and were left with, so to speak, pure antisemitism. But Christian hatred of Jews was itself based on nightmares, which resulted, for instance, in 1348, in the accusation that the Jews had poisoned wells. Nazi Jew-hatred was purely ideological, again in the Marxist sense, and had no relationship to real Jews or real German problems. It was totally non-pragmatic. In 1942, for instance, they were building a military road from Lwow, now Lviv, to the Crimea, for their armored forces. Not too many Ukrainians could be recruited for doing the hard labor, so they took some 40,000 or so Jews from the ghettos near the planned road and established slave labor camps for them to build it. And as they were building the road, these Jews were killed. And then they had no laborers, and they had a problem. The killing was totally anti-pragmatic, anti-modern, anti-capitalistic, anti-cost-effective. They murdered the inhabitants of the Lodz ghetto although they were producing essential goods for the German Army; they did the same in Bialystok and elsewhere. I could give you many dozens of documented examples. There never has been a genocide based on nightmares, on ideological phantasies. There was no precedent for this in human history, as far as I can tell.

The fourth element is Nazi racism, which tried to establish a new world order based on a hierarchy of races—and we know, as I have said, that there are no races. The Nordic peoples of the Aryan race were to be at the top, perhaps with some allies, and everyone else in hierarchic order under them. No Jews, because there would be no Jews left alive. This was a totally new, revolutionary concept. We have had one religion replacing another, one nation instead of another, one empire instead of another, even one social class instead of another, as in the French Revolution, which brought the bourgeoisie to power instead of the aristocracy. From that perspective, communism was nothing new. But a world racial hierarchy was. It was, I would argue, the only really revolutionary attempt at reordering society in the twentieth century. And it was quasi-religious, as Saul Friedländer and Uriel Tal have discussed many years ago. The Aryans were the sons of light, and they had a messiah, Adolf Hitler, who would realize

their innermost dreams. At the great Nuremberg party rallies, vast numbers of people assembled in the open, and projectors beamed gothic arches over them. It was a virtual church. And there was a platform, an altar really, and behind was a huge cross—well, a swastika, reminiscent of a cross. And then the Savior himself appeared, and spoke to the people. There was a god, and there had to be a Satan, and there was one, namely the Jew. Based on a Christian antisemitic tradition, and therefore acceptable to many who had, after all, been brought up on Christian traditions, racism could take hold. This unprecedentedness of racism, with its historical background helps, I think, to explain the unprecedentedness of the Shoah.

Fifth, the Jews, the last remnant of the roots of European civilization, which is based on three pillars: Athens, Rome, and Jerusalem. Athens and Rome—the aesthetics, the philosophy, the great literature, architecture, orderly government ruling according to law, and so on. Jerusalem—the prophets, the moral message, Christianity, which is founded on ethical Jewish values. But Athens and Rome are no more. People who live there no longer understand the old languages, they pray to different gods, and write different literature. But the Jews were still there, and though their traditions developed and their beliefs changed, there is a continuum. My grandchildren go to non-religious schools, and in their first grades—what do they learn? The Bible, of course, because that is the foundation of our culture and our language. They read words that were written some two and a half thousand years ago, without a dictionary. You people who were raised in America on English literature, try that with Chaucer, and you won't go very far. And Chaucer lived less than seven hundred years ago. The Nazis wanted to destroy the civilization from which they came, they wanted to do away with the heritage of the French Revolution, with liberalism, conservatism, socialism, democracy, pacifism, and they were quite conscious of what they were doing. The Jews, reminding everyone of one of the main roots of European civilization, symbolized for them, in a way correctly so, what they wanted to destroy. The situation of the Jews, their place in history in the Nazi context, had no precedent.

You will no doubt have noted that I have avoided the use of the term “uniqueness.” I stopped using it almost two decades ago. Uniqueness might mean that

it happened just once in history, and will not be repeated in the future. But the Holocaust was not caused by a God or by a Satan; it was caused by humans for human reasons, and it can therefore be explained by other humans. And everything done by humans can be repeated by humans—never in exactly the same way, to be sure, but in very similar ways. And then, you see, uniqueness would indeed mean the intervention of some kind of transcendence in this very human history. This is absolutely false. There is no transcendence, here or anywhere else. It is a history of a huge crime, of death, of murder. People talking about transcendence mystify and therefore distort the Holocaust in order to live with it more comfortably. There is nothing to be comfortable about, and I oppose the kind of delusion that is hinted at with the term uniqueness. So I invented—what a chutzpah from a Jew for whom English is a second or third language—a new term: unprecedentedness. The term is awkward, I know, but it reflects exactly what I mean. The Shoah can be repeated, approximately, and Shoah theology is a fascinating intellectual exercise, but it does nothing to explain what happened.

The Shoah was unprecedented. But it was a precedent, and that precedent is being followed. In Rwanda, for instance, Hutu genocidaires wanted to kill every single Tutsi. Did their ideologists consciously learn from the Germans? I think we ought to examine that possibility. The main Hutu ideologue of the genocide, Ferdinand Nahimana, is alive and well in Canada. He studied at European universities. Did he never hear about the Nazis?

But, on the margins of the Holocaust, there are the Righteous, the non-Jews who rescued Jews, the Jews who rescued Jews, and, believe it or not, the Jews who rescued non-Jews, during the Holocaust. In the darkness of the Holocaust, in which the real story is not survival, but death, there are heroic attempts to live, to produce, to rescue, to maintain remnants of humanity. Let us not overdo them, but they are also part of the reality of that time, and it is they who give us a right to learn and to teach. If there was only despair and death, we could not do that.

A historian is not worth her or his salt if she or he does not tell a true story, because only to analyze, as I have done here, would be useless. Basically, a historian is someone who tells true stories. In the future, you may not remember my analysis, but I

hope you will remember the story. My story tonight is, like so many Holocaust stories, about ambiguity.

His name is Yossi Halpern, and he is still around, in Israel. He was sixteen years old when he fled, alone, from Nazi-occupied western Poland to the Soviet-occupied East. He wanted to go to school, but the Soviets forced him to become a teacher in a small Belorussian village, to teach small kids to read and write. The peasants supported him. They got him a wooden barrack, some benches, and a blackboard. They even got him some chalk. And he asked them to provide the children with a small playground in front of the school barrack. The land belonged to the only rich peasant in the village, a man by the name of Bobko, who had two sons, the younger one called Sergei. The Bobkos did not want to give up the small piece of land, but the peasants threatened them that if they refused, they would report them to the Soviet authorities. The land was obtained, but the Bobkos did not forget or forgive. Then the Germans came. The peasants promised Yossi they would protect him, but there was Bobko, and he would denounce the young Jewish teacher to the Germans. So Yossi left the village and managed to get false Polish identity papers; he went to Baranovichi, the nearest town, and got a job with a Belorussian collaborator as a supervisor of an agricultural estate some distance from the town. He did well, and got in touch with a group of partisans in the nearby forest, whom he supplied with medicines, salt, and sugar. He became too cocksure of himself, and in the end was caught by Belorussian militias while smuggling salt. He was arrested as a Pole and put into prison in Baranovichi to await trial. A commission composed of a German and a Belorussian was coming to check the jail, and Yossi went to the prison commandant, confessed that he was a Jew, and asked if the latter could rescue him: if the commission made a physical examination and found that he was a Jew, he would be killed instantly. The prison head said he could not help him, because he had already reported on him as a Polish prisoner and had to produce him to the commission, but he advised Yossi to turn to the Belorussian, not the German, in the hope that somehow he might be saved. Then the commission came, and Yossi opened the door to the Belorussian. When he entered, there was a table, and on the other side of it sat—who, if not Sergei Bobko. They stared at each other, and then

Bobko said—get out of here, and if I ever see you again, that will be the end of you. Yossi fled from the prison as fast as he could. After the war, Bobko was hauled before a Polish court, because he had served as a deputy commandant of a terrible concentration camp named Koldichewo, and had killed many Poles there. He claimed that he had saved the life of a Jew, called Yossi Halpern. The Polish authorities found Yossi, and Yossi confirmed that indeed, Bobko had saved his life. All the other Belorussians who had murdered Poles in that camp were hanged; Bobko instead received a life sentence, because he had saved Yossi's life. A number of years later he was released—a war criminal, with many lives on his conscience, but who had saved one life, of someone he had hated. Was he a bad person who had done one good thing in his life, or a basically good person whose upbringing and exterior circumstances had made him become a bad person? I don't know. Do you?

Most of us are neither completely good nor completely bad. Most of us are somewhere in the middle. Maybe it is that that gives us some hope for the future.





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