

The Holocaust

BY BERNARD S. RASKAS

(ED. NOTE: Rabbi Bernard S. Raskas serves on the United States Holocaust Memorial Council and is a member of the Committee on Days of Remembrance).

The week of April 26 through May 2 was designated this year as "Days of Remembrance of Victims of the Holocaust." The Holocaust was the most horrendous event of our time and the greatest mass murder in history. It was an event which implicated all who lived in the thirties and forties and in which some are guilty, all are responsible. History commands our remembrance, conscience requires our recollection and the future of humanity demands our recognition of its lessons.

Simply put, the Holocaust was the systematic, bureaucratic extermination of six million Jews by the Nazis and their collaborators as a central act of state during the Second World War. The decision was to kill every Jew everywhere. Into this net of evil were swept millions of Gypsies, Slavs, etc. who were also deemed unworthy of living. The crime was so unique in the annals of history that a new name had to be invented to describe it and so the word holocaust became The Holocaust.

When, after the liberation of the camps by the Allied Armies General Eisenhower insisted that the concentration camps be fully documented and photographed he began the process of remembrance. It took almost three decades before the formal recognition of the event by the American government. This occurred on November 1, 1978 when President Carter formed the President's Commission on the Holocaust and charged it with the responsibility to submit a report to create a proper memorial to the survivors. That eventually resulted in the establishment by Congress of the United States Holocaust Memorial Council under the chairmanship of the gifted and brilliant writer Eli Wiesel, the messenger of the martyred.

As part of its charge, the Council has urged all Americans as well as all humankind during the "Days of Remembrance" to stop, look and listen and, above all, to remember. Yet, remembering is not easy for it threatens to sear our souls and challenge our complacency. But, painful though it may be, like all processes of healing it must be undergone.

Americans have a distinct responsibility to remember the Holocaust. Millions of our citizens had direct family ties with its victims, our armies defeated Nazism, helped rehabilitate concentration camp inmates and thousands of survivors have since made their homes in this country. On the negative side, our failure to provide adequate refuge or rescue until 1944, even at the point of turning away life saving ships from our harbors, proved disastrous to thousands of Jews. Our unwillingness to bomb Auschwitz and our State Department's deception in the matter of saving the Hungarian Jews is a blot on our record.

Europeans have a special obligation to reflect on their involvement in the tragic events. The Holocaust did not occur in a vacuum. The long sad history of anti-Semitism in Europe is a sorry and dreary episode. Clearly, the Holocaust was the end product of centuries long process of vilification, defamation and persecution. Viewing the recent events in France, one wonders if the story is over.

Jews must reconsider the events of these years. Although there were heroic pockets of resistance, such as the uprising in the Warsaw Ghetto, why was there so much passivity? Why did American Jews practice denial? Was the Holocaust a unique event in Jewish history or is it a part of a long history of Jewish suffering? What is the connection between the Holocaust and the birth of the State of Israel?

Christians must reexamine their faith in light of the fact that over 90% of the German people belonged to the Catholic or Lutheran Confessing Church during the time of Hitler. Although there were "noble Christians" who risked their lives, and some even died to save Jews, why were so many Christians indifferent and why was the Vatican, which lived in the eye of the storm, silent?

Philosophers must rethink the nature of human beings. How could fathers kiss their children goodbye in the morning and then bestow

the kiss of death on other children in the afternoon?

Doctors must reconsider the state of medical ethics. What led German doctors to abandon the Hippocratic Oath to preserve life and spend their days perfecting instruments of death and performing diabolical human experiments?

Businessmen must review their orientation. German businessmen submitted competitive bids to construct the crematoria. I.G. Farben used human slavery in its industrial complex and reduced human beings to consumable raw materials and ashes for fertilizer.

The list is endless. But, the purpose of remembrance is not to cast guilt but to develop responsibility. As the American philosopher George Santayana has warned, those who forget history are doomed to repeat it. The Holocaust reveals a potential pathology in the human race. It reminds us of the consequences of the total exercise of power. Remembering can instill caution, fortify restraint and protect against future evil or indifference.

The purpose of the Days of Remembrance can be best expressed in the words of Elie Wiesel: "The Holocaust is an era we must remember not only because of the dead, it is too late for them. Our remembering is aimed

at saving men and women everywhere from apathy to evil. We hope to share our conviction that when war and genocide unleash their hatred against any one people or peoples, all are engulfed in the fire."

As long as we remember, there is still hope.

FIGHTING IN LEBANON CONTINUES

JERUSALEM (WNS) -- As fighting in Lebanon continued, Premier Menachem Begin, acting in his capacity as Defense Minister, ordered his military forces to do all it can to restore quiet in the border area. Begin also met with United Nations Interim Forces in Lebanon (UNIFIL) commander Gen. William Gallagher in an attempt to improve

relations with the forces.

Begin told Gallagher that Israel will exert what influence it could on Maj. Saad Haddad's Christian forces in south Lebanon to reduce the violence and tension. Begin also said that the Israeli armed forces would seek to avoid unpleasant incidents with UNIFIL personnel such as have occurred in the past.

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