WHOSE HOLOCAUST IS IT?

An address for National Holocaust Memorial Day

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I feel a great obligation on me on this the first Holocaust Memorial Day to try and explain what we are remembering and also at the same time to try to draw some lessons from this occasion. Obviously the central point of such observance must be the decision by the Nazis to destroy six million men, women and children - an event which marks out and defines, I fear, the century which we have just left - indeed even the millennium which we have just left. Six million is a number that is almost impossible to comprehend. But let us try to envisage six million. Try perhaps to count - 1, ...2, .., 3, on a regular basis. Give yourself a 40-hour week, a 48 week year, and it would be over two years before you reached 5,999,000, and that is only numbers - not even the names. And when I say 'destruction', I do not merely mean killing - I mean that many of them were gassed, put into furnaces so that there should be no relics left, in order that they should be destroyed physically, and if the furnaces were not hot enough and if there were fragments of bone that were left, bone crushers were introduced in order to make sure that there should be nothing left other than a fine grey tilth, a fine grey ash. And what was the crime for which they were sentenced to this appalling death? They had chosen the wrong grandparents; they had two, three or four grandparents of the wrong sort. They themselves might not even have known that their grandparents were Jewish; their parents might well have been born into the Christian faith. Their grandparents might well have been converted, have been baptised. They were now subjected to this appalling fate. And this was not done by accident; this was not done purely by chance. This became the deliberate policy of a civilised government in a civilised continent - the government of an extremely civilised country. It became the official policy, and it is worth spending a couple of minutes just to think about the steps by which that was achieved. Because the steps by which it was achieved have in themselves a lesson for us, today and in the future.

The first stage was to draw a distinction between the Jews and those who were not Jews, to try to exclude them from participation in society. To exclude them from participation in government; to exclude them from participation in public transport, in the amenities of life such as sitting in a park on a park bench, or the use of a swimming pool, or even going to hotels, until gradually, after three years, the government could issue an edict which said that, in effect, the Jews could not be part of a German state - they were to be excluded. They were to be the 'other', the significant 'other', of which increasingly you had to be scared, and above all you had to avoid. And gradually more and more oppressions were pushed upon these people.

Immediately after Kristallnacht, in November 1938, at a conference held by Goering, the head of the German five-year plan, the minister in charge of dealing with the Jews - when he had decided all the measures to be taken against the Jews, in effect not to be employed except under state direction, not to participate in anything - he said 'I would not like to be a Jew in Germany today'. And if you ask 'Well why did these Jews put up with it?', 'Why did they not attempt to leave Germany?' - Yes, they wanted to leave Germany, but they could not leave Germany with any money and there were no countries in the world who wanted to take them without money. At a conference in the summer of 1938 Canada was asked to take a quota, and the official comment was 'A quota of none would be too many.' Australia announced 'We have no Jewish problem, and we have no intention of having a Jewish problem.' About the only place in the world which took in large numbers of Jews was Shanghai. Why? Because Shanghai was one of the few places in the world where there was no effective government that was in a position to bar new entrants. It was under an International Committee which could not agree on virtually anything. And when the British government said to the British Consul in Munich, 'Why are you issuing so many visas for people to go to Shanghai? They will die there.' The British Consul replied 'Far better that they should be able to starve in peace in Shanghai, than die in misery in Germany.' And when after Kristallnacht, when everyone in the world began to realise what was happening, perhaps a little too late, let us say straight away how important it was that the British Government immediately announced that it would accept 1,000 Jewish children a month for as long as there were Jewish children to come into the country. So that eventually 10,000 children were saved by Britain through the 'kindertransporte', and if all other countries had done as much as Britain had done there would have been far less of a Jewish problem as far as Germany was concerned.

But of course the problem was that it was not just Germany that was involved. There was an enormous mass of antisemitism, based on heaven's knows what, - in Poland, in Hungary, in Romania, in many countries in Europe - and all that was needed was a spark to set it off. And the spark was of course Hitler's invasion of Poland which meant that after he had been through Poland, Norway, Denmark and western Europe and Russia, by the end of 1941, there were some eleven million Jews either in his immediate control or likely to come under his immediate control. The eleven million included the Jews in Britain, so perhaps it was a little less concrete than might have been expected. But they were the same problem for Hitler, and a decision was made that since no-one else wanted them he could eliminate them. And thereafter the process of elimination began - efficiently, steadily, with all the power of a modern government. And this is one of the features which marks out the uniqueness of the Holocaust - a lesson which I think applies to all of us still.

Eichmann was the lynch-pin of the plan; he organised the trains. If today we are meeting on the anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz camp it is because Auschwitz has become the great symbol of this destruction. One one of the symbols, for the litany of camps strikes a horror still - Belzec, Chelmno, Sobibor, Treblinka - death factories set up for no other reason than to process the millions of Jews in Poland and eastern Europe. And when, after nine months, they had completed their work they were destroyed in the hope that no trace would be left of them. I have had students who have come to me to discuss the 'Archaeology of the Holocaust', and when that point was first put to me I wondered how on earth do you have an

'Archaeology of the Holocaust' until I realised it was only by the techniques of archaeology that you can work out precisely how big these camps were, and where they were, and what they did. And it is only then that you realise that if you go to Belzec and walk through the grey ash which pervades everything in Belzec, even the houses of Belzec, you realise that the ash was a person. And it was all done by the railway system. Trains regularly coming into the camps, either on the short journey from Warsaw to Treblinka, or the long journey from Amsterdam, or Paris, or Nancy or Lyons into Auschwitz .And when Eichmann was on trial in Jerusalem he almost boasted of the efficiency of the railway system, and the ways in which he would take a thousand in each train , all nicely packaged units, for delivery to whichever camp it was. And his complaints, justified according to his lights, that he had organised trains and the people responsible for filling them had not done so. Make no bones about it, this war against the Jews waged by Hitler and Eichmann and the rest of that group - a total war - was one to which they were committed. In the summer of 1944 in western Europe, railways engines were at a premium. The allied fighters - British, American, allies - were shooting up railway engines whenever they saw them, and they discovered that if you hit a steam engine at full steam with a rocket it makes a nice satisfactory 'splotch', and they decorated their planes with little symbols indicating the number of engines they had shot up. So it was extremely difficult to find railway engines in western France. But Eichmann, in July 1944, when the allies were about to break out of the bridgehead, realised that there was an orphanage in Paris --a Jewish orphanage that had not yet been cleared - and he had no problem in finding a railway engine, sending for those orphans, and despatching them from their orphanage into Auschwitz. So far was he determined that this should be completed. So this is one of the issues that we are now remembering.

Let us remember other things about the Holocaust. Let us remember the three classes of people involved - victims, perpetrators, and the bystanders, and let us remember the victims, and in recalling Auschwitz we are particularly recalling the victims. The victims had little or nothing they could do. There could be little or no resistance. There have been all sorts of arguments amongst historians over the last sixty years about resistance, and the nature of resistance. On the one hand you had the obvious resistance of the Warsaw ghetto uprising, and it is the Warsaw ghetto uprising which Jewish communities for the past fifty years have chosen to link with their own remembrance of Yom Hashoah. They had no hope of winning; they had no chance of winning, but at least they would go down fighting and show that they would take one with them. As one of them remarked, 'We were dead; we had surrendered our parents and our children in the various *aktionen* of the autumn of 1942; we were all that was left and we were already living on borrowed time.' And the other victims, the other resisters, were those perhaps who had the opportunity of escaping but who decided to stay with their wives and children, to show that perhaps human dignity was more important and to face their fate with courage; or the resistance of those in camps. Elie Wiesl tells the story of when he was in Auschwitz they went around saying 'please' and 'thank you' to each other because that was an element of resistance. *Nazi sprach* - the language of the SS - did not include 'please', or 'thank you', or 'good morning'. By using these words they were resisting. Or the Jews in camp with appalling low rations who were still able and insisted on retaining their fat ration when it came to the festival of Hanukah in the wintertime so they could light a candle as a reminder to them themselves and as an element of resistance. So broadly speaking the victims could not resist, for they had nothing to resist with. And if of out of all the victims,

all the Jews in Europe, some 300,000 Jews remained in Europe in 1945 - it was not because of their own efforts, it was because of the efforts of non-Jews who had saved them, the Righteous Gentiles, the non-Jews who felt that what was happening was wrong and did something about it. This evening as part of the commemoration BBC2 is showing again *Schindler's List*. I am sure that most of you have seen it already. Oskar Schindler was fascinating. He was not a nice person; if you read Kenneally's book you can see how un-nice he was. And there are those who criticise Kenneally for not having interviewed Schindler's wife, because if she had been interviewed they would have discovered even more how un-nice he was. But here was a man who came to the conclusion sometime in his career that this was wrong. 'This ought not to be. I must do something about it. And he did do something about it, and eventually he died and was buried in Jerusalem, and at Yad Vashem, the museum to the Holocaust, there is a garden of trees planted to the Righteous Gentiles - those who did something about Jews, who saved even a single life - And there is a saying in the Talmud, 'He who saves a single life saves the entire world'. There is a tree in that garden for Schindler, and each time I go to Jerusalem I go to see that tree, if only to remind myself that there are people who are capable of doing brave and good deeds, even though they themselves are not brave or good, and more specifically to remind myself that Schindler was a German, so that I should not be guilty of that same racism which others had tried hard to teach.

So the victims could do nothing. What about the perpetrators? I confess I don't know how even to begin to understand the perpetrators. There is the story of the SS guard in the evacuation of the ghetto of Riga, in Latvia, who came up to a child with its mother, a terrified child with all the other terrified children, and said 'Do you like sweets?' The child was terrified and didn't know what to say and how to answer. The mother said 'Answer, answer, don't make trouble.' So he did. So he said 'yes'. And the guard said, 'well; open your mouth.' The child opened his mouth, and the guard took out his revolver and shot the child through the mouth. The story is authenticated. And if you look at some of these perpetrators you will see that they were loving fathers - adored their wives, were fond of animals. I can not even begin to understand these persons. In the same way I can not understand the story of one particular battalion of reserve police, older men mobilised for service behind the lines, coming from Hamburg, educated before the first world war - not imbued with Hitlerite education, upper working class - from Hamburg, dock workers and railway workers, men of the aristocracy of the working class, and Hamburg was always left wing and radical. And this unit was embodied and sent to Poland and told what they had to do, and the commanding officer said 'If you do not like it, we will find other work for you.' Some ten percent said that they would rather have other work. What they had to do was to round up the Jewish villagers, make them dig their own graves, and then shoot them - men, women and children. And after the first day another ten percent said 'Sorry, we can not cope with this'. So there were some twenty percent who said no, and eighty percent who said yes. And the twenty percent were never punished. But I do not know the difference between the twenty and the eighty percent. They have been analysed until the analysis comes out of the historians' ears, and still nobody knows. But we do know also that nobody was ever punished for refusing to act as a guard in a concentration camp. They might have been transferred to the eastern front - which might under certain circumstances be a death sentence - some of them were discharged because of mental instability, because obviously if you refused to kill a Jew you must be mentally unstable. But nobody was ever put to

death for refusing to act as a guard. So I cannot even begin to understand the perpetrators.

The last category is perhaps the most difficult one of all - the bystanders, the people who saw what was going on, and the people who for the most part did little or nothing. Let me tell you one anecdote. If you were a Jew in Germany after 1942, it was because you were married to a non-Jewish wife, you were protected. Your wife kept you alive, and there do not seem to have been many cases where wives had rows with their husbands, marched out, divorced their husbands and thus had their husbands sent to a camp. But in 1943 Goebbels, who was the gauleiter of Berlin, wanted to make Berlin free of Jews - after all the other big cities were Judenrein, why should he not get the same brownie points? So he arrested all the Jews who were still under protection. Whereupon the wives gathered in the Rosenstrasse outside Hitler's headquarters and demonstrated, and demonstrated, and demonstrated, until eventually Hitler gave instructions to Goebbels that those Jews were to be released and those who had been sent to camps were to be released from the camps and sent back to their wives. Nothing ever happened to the wives, and their husbands survived. But why did nobody else demonstrate? We know that there were a large and significant number of Jews in Germany who had married out of faith. So there were significant numbers of Germans who had Jewish relations. They themselves were perfectly good Aryans, nothing wrong with them, but there was Aunt Gertrude or Great Aunt Mathilda who always had had sweets for the children. Why did they not demonstrate about their relations? But they did not. What about other bystanders? I've just been reading the diaries of Victor Klemperer who was in Germany, protected by his wife, and the dreadful stories of the way in which conditions deteriorated, but also about the way in which strangers would come up to him, shake him by the hand and then disappear, or smuggle some food to him - all things forbidden by the German law - but they did it as a mark of solidarity. But why did they not do more than that? And this, I think, is one of the issues that emerges from the Holocaust, emerges in terms of general interest and general concern. The bystanders: because we can all be bystanders; we are all bystanders. The big question mark that comes over the Holocaust that has to be considered is that of the bystanders. What do **we** do?

Inevitably, National Holocaust Memorial Day has focused and will focus upon the losses of the Jews, and inevitably there are arguments and discussions as to the uniqueness of the Jewish experience. And you will forgive me if I say that, yes I think it was unique - for reasons which I shall explain. It does not mean that we ought to have no concern with other groups as well. The expression of the uniqueness of the Holocaust points out the significance of the other things as well. We are not detracting from the Holocaust by remembering the Ibos of Nigeria, - except of course who remembers the Ibos of Nigeria? Cambodia is perhaps little bit more in our minds; more recently the Hutsis and Tutsis in Ruanda have come very much to mind. And if we say these are far away places of which we know nothing - a phrase which I remember we have used in the past; 'Bosnia, Kosovo, are they far away places of which we know nothing?' - and before then Hitler himself made the comment on Armenians; 'who has heard of Armenians?' , and in terms of the years 1939 to 1945 we have other groups as well; gypsies, homosexuals, Jehovah's witnesses - all of those who are 'asocial', who do not fit into the pattern of the state as laid down by our beloved leader, Adolph Hitler. There is this difference, and I would be unfair to myself if I did not point out these differences. There were for example five tribes of

gypsies; two of them were pure gypsies and three were mixed gypsies. Now you might have thought, in an ironic sort of way, that at least the mixed gypsies stood more chance of being safe than the pure, but it was the other way round. It was the mixed gypsies who were hit, who were rounded up all over Europe and sent to camps. And we all know about gypsies; from childhood we have heard stories about gypsies; and there has been for a thousand years stories about gypsies - gypsies steal children, gypsies steal this, gypsies can not be trusted, for they are the almost universal outcasts of society and have been so since the middle ages. And the gypsies undoubtedly suffered. The point is that of all the gypsies in Europe that came under Hitler's control some twenty three percent perished; there were perhaps 900,000 gypsies in Europe and about a quarter of them went. And about eighty five percent of the Jews in Europe perished. And when it comes to homosexuals and Jehovah's witnesses, they too suffered but only if they had 'come out'. Homosexuals who remained passive were left untouched; Jehovah's witnesses who were prepared to sign allegiance to the regime also were left untouched. You see they had not committed the crime of having the wrong grandparents; it was their personal behaviour that was at fault. So these are parallels that make the point but which do not detract from the 'uniqueness' of the Holocaust.

I have for some years been talking about the Holocaust to many groups, and not least of all to children. And the question I am asked over and over again is 'Could it happen again?' It is always a question that people ask. In all times of stress people console themselves that it will not happen again. The 1914-18 war was a war to end all wars, but it may not have escaped your notice that twenty years afterwards they were at it again. Just as it was a war to make the world safe for democracy, almost twenty years later most of the new states that had emerged in Europe were being far from democratic. So never say 'never again'; and we have had in our own lifetime enough instances - Ibos, Ruanda, Bosnia, Kosovo - which come pretty near being 'again', and 'again', and 'again'. And so I said to a group of children to whom I was speaking yesterday, 'You must be very careful over the next sixty years. This is the first National Holocaust Memorial Day. I hope that in sixty years time there is still a National Holocaust Memorial Day observed.' But sometimes I wonder. I wonder if I may make a parallel without giving offence, and that is a parallel with the high waves of emotion that welled up on the death of the Princess of Wales. In the first year 'Diana Day' was remembered, and now to a large extent it has died away. And so I say to them that I hope very much that Holocaust Memorial Day will not die away as well. I hope that in sixty years time they will still remember how it all started, by making the distinction between this sort of person and that sort of person, and next time round it might not be the Jews - in fact it won't be the Jews because there are not enough Jews left in Europe to have a Holocaust. But I remind them of Pastor Niemöller's famous statement:

First they came for the Communists but I was not a Communist so I did not speak out.

Then they came for the Socialists and the Trade Unionists, but I was not one of them, so I did not speak out.

Then they came for the Jews but I was not Jewish so I did not speak out.

And when they came for me there was no one left to speak out for me.

So I say that next time round it might be those who are left-handed or who have red hair. And when I say that, almost invariably - particularly among school children - I see them looking around to see who has got red hair, or who is left-handed, and it thus comes home to them. And I say to them that I hope you remember this important lesson from the Holocaust. That you must not make distinctions amongst individuals; that you must not allow people to be discriminated against for reasons which are thoroughly irrelevant to the fact that they are human beings. I draw their attention to the importance of the bystanders; even more importantly to the need for them not to be bystanders in future years. And if that got through to them yesterday - and I hope it did - then it would have been worthwhile. It would have been important. For us of course it is too late, but after all perhaps it is not too late. Perhaps there are circumstances in this country, in the world, where it is important not just to be a passive bystander; when you see somebody throwing a brick through somebody else's window, you have a duty, a moral responsibility, to do something about it and to take action. That action might only be to phone the police; at least you know that the police will have to do something about it unlike in Germany in the thirties. Or even more daringly, going up to them and saying 'You must not do that.' It may be risky taking that action, but the risk of not taking it is, I think, even greater. So that lesson must be the most important feature of National Holocaust Memorial Day observance. The realisation that it is something which depends on each of us.

The question which I put originally and which is on your programmes was, 'Whose holocaust is it?' I think the answer now is simple and plain. It is **our** holocaust; all of us - Jews and non-Jews, whites and coloured. I know that the Holocaust as such was a Euro-centred operation, but countries outside Europe know nothing of it. Countries outside Europe may not even have such things as ghettos or antisemitism, but the lessons of the Holocaust are universal. And there is a phrase I have used over the years until my students got sick of it, and I have heard it so often over the last few days that I am becoming sick of it, but it is still relevant. 'Those who do not remember their History will be condemned to relive it.' And those of us who remember the Holocaust, either as somebody in this country observing it from the outside or those who suffered it directly, who are survivors, - none of us wish the rest of you ever to repeat that experience, to relive that part of History. And so therefore it is important to remember. But remembering is not something passive. If you do not know about something you cannot remember it. So inherent in remembering the Holocaust, in having a Holocaust Memorial Day, is the duty on the one hand to learn and on the other hand to teach. If you know about the Holocaust you go and teach it to others; if you have directly experienced the Holocaust you pass on that experience to others. And if you do not know about the Holocaust you must learn about the Holocaust. And if you do not learn, if you do not remember, then you will have to relive it.