

A Holocaust Commemoration

for Days of Remembrance



United States

Holocaust Memorial Council

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*for Communities, Churches,
Centers and for Home Use*

Prepared by
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Narrator

We come together for this memorial service to remember. Re-member means to bring certain events of the past together again, to make them whole in order that they may not be forgotten. We must make efforts not to let the great tragedy of the Holocaust slip from the mind of the world or to slip from our minds individually. For if the Holocaust is forgotten, the way will be paved for another, perhaps a final destruction of all of humanity. The massacre of six million Jews must not be a prelude to a future disaster. Our attitude toward the Holocaust may well determine that of our children and of our children's children. What we do today (this evening), now, is of extreme importance.

We pay homage to the dead in what must be seen as momentous Christian tragedy. If Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was right when he insisted that racism is really a white people's problem then we are correct in witnessing to the Holocaust as a Christian problem. It was in traditionally Christian nations that the murders took place. Many Christians died at the death camps of Auschwitz, Dora, Bergen-Belsen and the rest, and we gather today (this evening) to re-member these non-Jewish dead as well. Yet many non-Jews were able to save themselves by espousing the Nazi cause. No Jew was allowed to do so. While Poles and Germans and French and others were victims of Hitler's policies, only the Jews were victims of victims; that is, only Jews were singled out for killing *by* Poles and Germans and French and others.

Think of it! How many people does it take to kill six million Jews and perhaps an equal number of non-Jews as well. Who even thought of the plan of trying to rid the world of every Jewish woman, man, and child? Who thought of ovens for human beings while living in nations committed to Jesus Christ, called the Prince of Peace? Who designed the ovens and the gas chambers? Who engineered them, bribed high government officials to gain the murderous contracts? Who operated the demonic facilities, repaired them when they broke down, studied their operations to make them more efficient? When Nazi troops conquered countries, and did not know which people were Jews and which were not, who pointed out the Jews to the invaders?

The question remains: How many people does it take to cooperate in such a large scale slaughter?

And who among us can be certain that if we were in the wrong place at the wrong time, we too might cooperate with the forces of evil? Are we, in some way, doing exactly that by our subtle racism, our lack of interest in war torn nations around the world, our deliberate ignorance of genocide through starvation that some people are experiencing as we sit here, this very moment?

Let us beg the Lord God for forgiveness and make a firm purpose of amendment.

30 second meditation

1st Reader (a woman)

Written in Pencil in the Sealed Railway-Car

here in this carload
i am eve
with abel my son
if you see my other son
cain son of man
tell him i

— Dan Pagis

(translated from the Hebrew by Stephen Mitchell)

Narrator

The mother speaking in this poem did not have time to complete her thought. Death was too eager to take her. She went to her end like so many mothers and children without having a chance at life.

2nd Reader (a child)

These words were written by a young Jewish girl, imprisoned in a ghetto:

The Garden

A little garden,
Fragrant and full of roses.
The path is narrow
And a little boy walks along it.

A little boy, a sweet boy,
Like that growing blossom.
When the blossom comes to bloom,
The little boy will be no more.

—Franta Bass

Narrator

Over one million Jewish children under the age of twelve lost their lives in the Holocaust.

3rd Reader (a man)

And so a long line is formed in the front of the orphanage on Sliska Street. A long procession, children, small, tiny, rather precocious, emaciated, weak, shriveled and shrunk. They carry shabby packages, some have school-books, note-books under their arms. No one is crying.

Slowly they go down the steps, line up in rows, in perfect order and discipline, as usual. Their little eyes are turned towards the doctor. They are strangely calm; they feel almost well. The doctor is going with them, so what do they have to be afraid of? They are not alone, they are not abandoned.

Dr. Janusz Korczak busies himself with the children with a sober earnestness. He buttons the coat of one child, ties up a package of another, or straightens the cap of a third. Then he wipes off a tear which is rolling down the thin little face of a child...

Then the procession starts out. It is starting out for a trip from which — everybody feels it — one never comes back. All these young, budding lives.... And all this is marching quietly and orderly to the place of their untimely doom.

The children are calm, but inwardly they must feel it, they must sense it intuitively. Otherwise how could you explain the deadly seriousness on their pale little faces? But they are marching quietly in orderly rows, calm and earnest, and at the head of them is Janusz Korczak.

All in unison

(or Narrator and congregation alternate stanzas)

Psalms 79

God, the pagans have invaded your heritage,
they have desecrated your holy Temple;
they have left the corpses of your servants
to the birds of the air for food,
and the flesh of your devout to the beasts of the earth.

They have shed blood like water
throughout Jerusalem, not a gravedigger left!
we are now insulted by our neighbors,
butt and laughing-stock of all those around us.
How much longer will you be angry, Yahweh? For ever?
Is your jealousy to go on smouldering like a fire?

Pour out your anger on the pagans,
who do not acknowledge you,
and on those kingdoms
that do not call on your name,
for they have devoured Jacob
and reduced his home to desolation.

Do not hold our ancestors' crimes against us,
 in tenderness quickly intervene,
 we can hardly be crushed lower;
 help us, God our savior,
 for the honor of your name;
 Yahweh, blot out our sins,
 rescue us for the sake of your name.

Why should the pagans ask, "Where is their God?"
 May we soon see the pagans learning what vengeance
 you exact for your servants' blood shed here!
 May the groans of the captive reach you;
 by your mighty arm rescue those doomed to die!

Pay our neighbors sevenfold, strike to the heart
 for the monstrous insult proffered to you, Lord!
 And we your people, the flock that you pasture,
 giving you everlasting thanks,
 will recite your praises for ever and ever.

4th Reader (a woman)

O the Chimneys

O the chimneys
 On the ingeniously devised habitations of death
 When Israel's body drifted as smoke
 Through the air —
 Was welcomed by a star, a chimney sweep,
 A star that turned black
 Or was it a ray of sun?

Oh the Chimneys!
 Freedomway for Jeremiah and Job's dust —
 Who devised you and laid stone upon stone
 The road for refugees of smoke?

O the habitations of death,
 Invitingly appointed
 For the host who used to be a guest —
 O you fingers
 Laying the threshold
 Like a knife between life and death —
 O you chimneys,
 O you fingers
 And Israel's body as smoke through the air!

— Nelly Sachs, from *In the Habitations of Death*

5th Reader (a man)

As it began to grow light, the fire was lit in two of the pits in which about 2,500 dead bodies lay piled one on top of the other. Two hours later all that could be discerned in the white-hot flames were countless charred and scorched shapes, the blackish-phosphorescent hue a sign that they were in an advanced stage of cremation. At this point the fire had to be kept going from outside because the pyre which at first protruded about half a metre above the edge of the pit had, in the meantime, gone below this level. While in the crematorium ovens, once the corpses were thoroughly alight, it was possible to maintain a lasting red heat with the help of fans, in the pits the fire would burn only as long as the air could circulate freely in between the bodies. As the heap of bodies settled, no air was able to get in from outside. This meant that we stokers had constantly to pour oil or wood alcohol on the burning corpses, in addition to human fat, large quantities of which had collected and was boiling in the two collecting pans on either side of the pit. The sizzling fat was scooped out with buckets on a long curved rod and poured all over the pit causing flames to leap up amid much crackling and hissing. Dense smoke and fumes rose incessantly. The air reeked of oil, fat, benzole and burnt flesh.

— Filip Muller, *Eyewitness Auschwitz*

Narrator

Master of the universe, help us to bear in mind always our potential for evil. And strengthen us, our God, so that we may fulfill our potential for good instead.

6th Reader (a man)

One day when we came back from work, we saw three gallows rearing up in the assembly place, three black crows. Roll call. SS all around us, machine guns trained: the traditional ceremony. Three victims in chains — and one of them, the little servant, the sad-eyed angel.

The SS seemed more preoccupied, more disturbed than usual. To hang a young body in front of thousands of spectators was no light matter. The head of the camp read the verdict. All eyes were on the child. He was lividly pale, almost calm, biting his lips. The gallows threw its shadow over him.

This time the Lagerkapo refused to act as executioner. Three SS replaced him.

The three necks were placed at the same moment within the nooses.

"Long live liberty!" cried the two adults.

But the child was silent.

"Where is God? Where is He?" someone behind me asked.

At a sign from the head of the camp, the three chairs tipped over.

Total silence through the camp. On the horizon, the sun was setting.

"Bare your heads!" yelled the head of the camp. His voice was raucous. We were weeping.

"Cover your heads!"

Then the march past began. The two adults were no longer alive. Their tongues hung swollen, blue-tinged. But the third rope was still moving: being so light, the child was still alive...

For more than half an hour he stayed there, struggling between life and death, dying in slow agony under our eyes. And we had to look him full in the face. He was still alive when I passed in front of him. His tongue was still red, his eyes were not yet glazed.

Behind me, I heard the same man asking:

"Where is God now?"

And I heard a voice within me answer him:

"Where is He? Here He is — He is hanging here on this gallows..."

That night the soup tasted of corpses.

— Elie Wiesel, *Night*

7th Reader (a woman)

If as Christians we thought that Church and Synagogue no longer affected one another, everything would be lost. And where this separation between the community and the Jewish nation has been made complete, it is the Christian community which has suffered. The whole reality of the revelation of God is then secretly denied...

For in the person of the Jew there stands a witness before our eyes, the witness of God's covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and in that way with us all. Even one who does not understand Holy Scripture can see this reminder.

And don't you see, the remarkable theological importance, the extraordinary spiritual and sacred significance of the National Socialism that now lies behind us is that right from its roots it was anti-Semitic, that in this movement it was realized with a simply demonic clarity, that *the* enemy is the *Jew*. Yes, the enemy in this matter had to be a Jew. In this Jewish nation there really lives to this day the extraordinariness of the revelation of God...

When the Christian Church confesses Jesus Christ as Savior and the Servant of God for us, for all men, also for the mighty majority of those who have no direct connection with the People Israel, then it does not confess Him *although* He was a Jew...

No, we must strictly consider that Jesus Christ, in whom we believe, whom we Christians out of the heathen call our Savior and praise as the consummator of God's work on our behalf — He was *of Necessity a Jew*. We cannot be blind to this fact; it belongs to the concrete reality of God's work and of his revelation.

The problem of Israel is, since the problem of Christ is inseparable from it, the problem of existence as such. The man who is ashamed of Israel is ashamed of Jesus Christ and therefore of his own existence.

The attack on Judah means the attack on the rock of the work and revelation of God, beside which work and which revelation there is no other.

— Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*

Homily

(A brief homily by a pastor is in order here. Perhaps two short talks would be appropriate, one by a Christian minister, one by a rabbi.)

Narrator

Holocaust survivor and author Elie Wiesel has said this:

If someone suffers and he keeps silent, it can be a good silence. If someone suffers and I keep silent, then it's a destructive silence. If we envisage literature and human destiny as endeavors by man to redeem himself, then we must admit the obsession, the overall dominating theme of responsibility, that we are responsible for one another. I am responsible for his or her suffering, for his or her destiny. If not, we are condemned by our solitude forever and it has no meaning. This solitude is a negative, destructive solitude, a self-destructive solitude.

— From *Harry James Cargas in Conversation with Elie Wiesel*

8th Reader

Indeed we may not remain silent in view of the horror of the Holocaust. And yet we must choose our words carefully. We must not oversentimentalize the tragedy, we must not treat it with irreverence. How, then, are we to speak out? Rabbi Irving Greenberg has given us this guide: "Let us offer, then, as a working principle the following. No statement, theological or otherwise, should be made that would not be credible in the presence of burning children."

Narrator

There are times also, for silence, silence in the face of the awesome proportions of the tragedy of the Holocaust. We arrive at such a time now, as we ask six Holocaust survivors from our community [or, if this is not possible, six diverse members of the community] to each light a candle, one candle to represent one million Jewish dead, the totality, when lit, to symbolize all those who died in the Holocaust.

When the candles are lit, the overhead lights will be extinguished for two minutes while we each offer our own prayers. When the electric lights are turned back on, you may, of course, continue to pray, but when you do begin to leave, please do so quietly.

Lighting of the Candles

Lowering of the Lights (2 minutes)

Lights Back On

Dismissal

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