

# THE STOCKHOLM INTERNATIONAL FORUM ON THE HOLOCAUST

TALK AT HOLOCAUST CENTRE 30TH APRIL 2000

## INTRODUCTION

### *Historical Moment*

The International Forum on the Holocaust was an unprecedented event, perhaps one that could not have taken place in the last millennium. Perhaps it augurs well for the current one.

For the first time in history, presidents of 46 states met with invited scholars to learn about the greatest catastrophe of the past, in order to prevent it happening again. For the first time in history, victim, perpetrator and bystander countries examined the various roles.

### *What I will cover*

I will first tell you how the conference affected me personally, then something about the conference itself, and because I cannot cover the whole conference, I will pick some issues of interest to me, which I hope will also be of interest to you.

## **HISTORY AND NATURE OF THE CONFERENCE**

When as a result of surveys Swedish prime minister Göran Perssons and president Clinton realised that a proportion students in their countries were not aware of the Holocaust, they set in motion a task force of nine countries which then organised the International Forum.

In the Forum heads of state and scholars such as Elie Wiesel and Yehuda Bauer spoke. There were specific workshops as well as specific events such as in the parliament and synagogue.

## MY OWN RESPONSES

I wish more survivors could have been there. They would have heard presidents and prime ministers of the countries which persecuted and who stood by when this happened, give a true account of their countries' roles in the war. Leaders of Germany, the Ukraine, Latvia, Poland, Austria (through the outgoing chancellor Viktor Klima), Slovakia, Hungary, France, detailed and expressed sorrow for the active and passive collaboration by their citizens in the extermination process of Jews in their countries. They paid homage to the dead and the survivors, and promised to perpetuate the memories and lessons of the tragedy.

Personally I found it gratifying that the presidents of Germany, Slovakia, Hungary, Poland acknowledged, said sorry, for what their countrymen did, paid homage to the survivors and expressed a desire to learn and prevent.

## SPECIAL AREAS OF INTEREST

### *Memory*

Elie Wiesel said that memory was the key, and much of the conference was directed by the conviction that if the Holocaust is remembered, it will not happen again. How to remember the Holocaust was to be through museums, memorials, and education. But Wiesel had a tinge of pessimism as in spite of memory, genocides occurred after the Holocaust.

### *Methods of remembering*

were discussed by the large Holocaust museum curators, in plenaries and workshops. This was especially poignant as direct memory was passing into history. And **direct experience and personal remembering** is irreplaceable.

Therefore **indirect** ways is all that is possible for others.

It was acknowledged that **interest to remember** and what would be extracted from history would be determined by perceived **contemporary relevance**.

For instance, in the *sixties* museums like Yad Vashem concerned themselves with documentary memories. From those immediate conclusions were drawn, such as that Israel was the answer with its “Never again!” message. The immediacy and shortness of the conclusion was symbolized by the Shoah Memorial Day being immediately followed by the Day of Independence.

*After Eichman*, personal testimonies with flesh and blood people filled in the black and white statistics and pictures of corpses. This way the new generation of Israelis learned about the Holocaust.

*Now* experiential visits to museums are required to get relevant messages across. Thus visitors speak to survivors or imagine they are accompanying a single victim to his or her fate. In the future perhaps the massive numbers of testimonies will be analysed to learn about issues such as what makes people kill others.

Next, the *meaning of events* may be interpreted differently at different times. For instance, professor Schapira from Tel Aviv university noted that the meaning of the Holocaust is having to be changed from seeing it ubiquitously behind the intentions of Arab nations as Israel is making peace with them.

Lastly, *each country's identification* with the events requires different documentation. For instance, the Washington museum devotes some space to America not bombing the rail tracks to Auschwitz. In Australia it may be relevant to current visitors to know why there was a severe quota on Jewish refugees.

I would add two things which need to be taught about memory, even as we educate remembrance.

1. it may be insufficient to simply offer or even shout the truth as it and memory are manipulated individually and socially according to needs. So we must also study how and **why truth is denied and distorted**. Education must include this, and techniques to fight such distortions.

2. The Holocaust can be learned only if the lessons are **felt to be relevant** to the targets of education. The Holocaust is continually relevant, because we are always victims, perpetrators and bystanders to different degrees. If today in Australia we allow ourselves to see, we see victims of genocide among aborigines, we see refugees being denied access like Jews in Hitler's time.

Perhaps Holocaust education and museums in the future will be centres of documentation and teaching about violence more generally, and its causes and prevention.

Perhaps as people and direct memories fade, the need for lessons is becoming more urgent. Questions can now be asked which could not before, when perpetrators and bystanders were still defending themselves.

My own impression is that the Holocaust is not being forgotten. Indeed, surprisingly, in Australia as elsewhere, hardly a day goes by without it being mentioned in the newspapers and media. And the Stockholm conference was a symbol of this unprecedented interest.

### *The Universality of the Holocaust*

Delegates mentioned how coloured people demonstrating against injustice naturally rallied at the Washington Holocaust museum. The Holocaust museum is in the symbolic soul of America. Similarly the Berlin memorial will be in the centre of that city.

I asked a Romanian ambassador to Sweden who sat next to me in the synagogue what he thought of the conference. He said he was very moved. He identified with it closely. How come? Because for years they lived in fear that his father who was periodically removed by the secret service would not come back. He understood the arbitrary power and removal to concentration camps or in this case Siberian gulags of innocent people.

### *Contemporary and local lessons*

There are always contemporary and local lessons. For instance, as each country expressed sorrow and willingness to learn, as an Australian delegate I was very aware of the unwillingness to take even the first step of apology toward the aborigines in this country.

On the other hand, the Holocaust through Ron Caston and its image in the background has been instrumental in furthering awareness of the violence and injustices done.

### *Uniqueness of the Holocaust*

There was a sense of uniqueness about the Holocaust in its ferocity, magnitude, totality, and bureaucratic and industrial mindlessness. I also think that the victims were unique in being civilized, a people of the book, who also write and remember. That is why this is the best documented genocide. Gypsies homosexuals and the disabled who were also exterminated did not leave a Holocaust literature.

To my mind the Holocaust is an unprecedented wealth of information on which other genocides, group violence, and even personal violence can draw, and will do so for a long time. The lessons are very wide and well documented. They include not only political issues, but issues such as of memory, physical and mental health and illness, transgenerational issues, and so on.

### *Meaning from the Holocaust*

One of the greatest sorrows from the Holocaust has been that so many good people died for no good reason.

It has been said that the allies did not negotiate and insisted on total German defeat because of the inhumanities of the Holocaust. If this is a kind of revenge on the German people, it still provides no meaning.

Of course as Jews we will be somewhat cynical and sceptical of what this International Forum on the Holocaust can and will achieve. Yet there is unquestionable progress over the last decade which we could not have predicted, such as unfreezing of Swiss bank accounts, or compensation for slave labour a decade ago. It is difficult to predict what momentum this conference will generate.

Perhaps the clamour of those departing to the gas chambers, "Tell the world what happened to us." is being put to effect by another small step. Rather than simply forgetfulness, distance may also enable extraction of lessons which perhaps the world is more willing to hear.

At least all countries present agreed to subscribe to a declaration which declared the Holocaust the greatest scar on civilization, and which committed member states to promote education, remembrance and research of it, in order to learn how to prevent such occurrences in the future.

Sweden agreed to host annual follow up conferences in the future.

Once again, I must emphasize that for me this was a very important part of my Holocaust journey. I did not think that I would be representing Australia and hear leaders of anti-Semitic countries whose citizens persecuted me pay me homage and express sorrow. However little any in the audience may say this means, this conference was an inconceivable step even in the recent past, and it should be cherished.