

HOLOCAUST - A BENCHMARK

Paul Valent, Founding President Child Survivors of the Holocaust

Soon after the war it was imperative for the exact facts about the Holocaust to be known and remembered. Testimonies of events and Holocaust museums memorialized the extremities of the suffering and injustice. It was thought that if etched into people's minds and memories, the inevitable horror would prevent further persecution of Jews and perhaps other people.

As the Holocaust has been passing from memory into history, two opposing trends have emerged. One trend has been the somewhat actualized fear that with time the Holocaust will lose its vividness, it will be forgotten, relativized, even denied. With other genocides having followed the Holocaust there are fears that its historical meaning will be lost.

On the other hand, rather than being forgotten, there is increasing worldwide interest in the Holocaust. It has come to stand as a universal symbol of ultimate evil, a symbol to be explored for the understanding of that evil. It can also be explored for understanding goodness, for extremes of virtue and altruism were also features of the Holocaust.

Fortuitously a number of factors have made such explorations possible as never before. First, there are extensive records of all facets of suffering, as no suffering was spared in the Holocaust. For the first time too the lasting vibrancy of audiovisual records and testimonies can be dissected from a historical distance. Lastly, the scientific atmosphere of this century will enable objective exploration of good and bad as never before, without presumptions of divine will or innate evil.

So how will the Holocaust be remembered in this century? It will stay as a historic flagship of all that can go wrong in civilization, an admonition to beware of what is possible. But more importantly, it will stay as a unique benchmark of scientific knowledge which will offer information in sharp relief for very important questions, both contemporaneous and universal.

For instance, how are communal and individual catastrophes generally remembered, and suppressed out of awareness and memory? How are they transferred down the generations? How are they denied and reenacted? What aspects of humans in what circumstances motivates them to act atrociously? What does the Holocaust mean about the existence of God? What is the real source of good and evil, justice and injustice, ideology and religion? The Holocaust will act as a springboard and measure which cannot be ignored in the answer to these questions. The answers scientifically explored will provide the clues of what can be done pragmatically to prevent recurrence of major unnecessary human induced catastrophes.

So the plea "Do not forget us, let our suffering not be in vain!" will be remembered but in a much more complex and wide ranging manner than the initial victims have imagined. And the Holocaust will contribute to "Never again!" too, but in a more intricate and tortuous manner than has been sensed as imperative for persecuted people around the world.