

International Day of Commemoration in Memory of the Victims of the Holocaust

Memorial Ceremony, General Assembly Hall

28 January 2015

Remarks by Mrs. Jona Laks, a Holocaust survivor

Mr. Secretary General of the United Nations,
The President of the State of Israel, Mr. Reuven Rivlin,
Honourable delegates:

My name is Jona Laks, from Tel Aviv, Israel. At Auschwitz I was just a number, which I still carry with me today – number A27725. There, on the ramp at Auschwitz, my twin sister Miriam and I were chosen to become Guinea pigs for Dr. Mengele's notorious experiments on twins.

Seventy years after Auschwitz's liberation, I stand here before you, representatives of all nations, to bear witness. To bear witness of a world that was and no longer exists; of a people that was and was decimated through the inhuman treatment inflicted upon us: men, women, and young children whose only sin was that we were born Jewish.

I stand before you to bear witness to what befell my family, my twin sister and myself. I am wondering how come some scholars pride themselves of understanding the great tragedy of the six million murdered Jews, while I myself cannot understand or explain the tragedy.

From the very beginning I took a vow that if I remained alive, I would try to describe my wartime experiences, so here you have a brief description of what I endured as I recall it.

--

I was nine years old when Hitler invaded Poland. Before the war our family lived a relatively peaceful and serene life in Lodz.

As the German troops invaded one town after another, our life had become a terrible daily struggle of survival. In those days, the Jewish community of Lodz represented one third of the total population. At the beginning the intention of the Germans was to evacuate the Jews to areas North and East of Poland that had not yet been annexed by the Third Reich. The evacuation order was issued on December 10, 1939. By October 1, 1940 the order had already been partially carried out.

At the same time Ghetto Lodz, probably the largest in Poland, was set up in the old part of the city – a very limited area. All the Jewish Citizens in Lodz were ordered to abandon their homes and move into the Ghetto area. Of course, we were subjected to all the known anti-Jewish measures: the confiscation of our properties, the wearing of the yellow star of David, etcetera.

It was just the beginning of a long and dangerous journey: life in the Ghetto was unbearable. We went

through horrors, starvation and illnesses. The concentration of a large number of Jews in a very small overcrowded area, the growing hunger, and the lack of sanitary conditions which caused epidemics – all these things took their toll.

One night my father, who lived some distance away from the children's concentration place, found out that the Germans ordered the deportation of the less productive inmates of the ghetto, including 20,000 children. He managed to sneak into the children's concentration area at night, and got my sister Miriam and I out of there. This is how my life was saved for the first time, because the next day, all of the 20,000 children were taken to the gas chambers and were exterminated.

As we witnessed the dead bodies of our relatives and friends piling up in the streets, we continued to fight for a small piece of bread. Over 43,500 people died in the Ghetto of hunger and disease.

To ease conditions, the head of the Ghetto, Haim Rumkovsky, was ordered to send a large number of inmates to concentration camps. He might not have known about the destination to which these people were deported.

In the beginning of 1942, following the Wannsee Conference where the "Final Solution" for the Jews was determined, a vast part of the Ghetto population was deported to the Chelmno extermination camp. My parents and brethren were eventually among them.

Chelmno, the first death camp on Polish soil, was the model for setting up the machinery of the mass murder. Mass killings, mostly of Lodz Jews, began in December 1941 and continued until the Red Army liberated Auschwitz in January 1945.

By 1944 Ghetto Lodz hosted the largest concentration of Jews in Eastern Europe. During the summer, the Germans started the mass extermination of those who were still alive then. Thus, in August of that year, my elder sister Chana, twin sister Miriam and I were deported to Auschwitz.

I remember very clearly the day we arrived there. We were lined up for "selection" and at the end of the ramp stood a tall, elegant figure holding a cane. Dr. Mengele. As we lined up, Chana, our elder sister who was afraid that I would not pass the selection since I was small and frail, gave me her wooden shoes to make me look taller, pinched my cheeks to make me look healthier, and pushed me to the back of the line.

In spite of her efforts I was marked for the crematorium, meaning immediate death, and was ordered to march there quickly, while my twin sister was sent the other way. Getting closer to the crematorium, I was able to see smoke coming out of the chimneys, and could even smell the burnt flesh.

My courageous sister, Chana, kneeled on the ground and begged Mengele to let my twin sister and I stay together, as we had never been separated before. Hearing this, Mengele sent an SS officer to bring me back from the line marching to the crematorium and add me to the group entering the camp. Here my life was saved for the second time.

--

I wish I could spare you all the gory details of what came next.

The famous Dr. Mengele turned his genetic research into racial genetics – Into a tool of destruction of

what he considered to be an inferior race. There is nothing darker about the Holocaust than the role played by medical doctors – whose mission is to save lives – in executing the killings.

Mengele carried out his experiments on hundreds of pairs of healthy identical twins, as well as dwarfs and the handicapped.

My twin and I were a part of a large group of children between the ages of 4 and 16 who served his purposes and were used as guinea pigs for his notorious experiments. We were exposed to daily measurements of our limbs, our mouths, our noses, and foreheads. Our teeth, our sight, and our hearing were tested almost every day.

A strange type of medication which was used in our eyes left some of us partly blind. Mengele performed experiments deliberately infecting artificially inflicted wounds in order to produce gangrene and injected chemicals into young women's uteruses.

Then there were the blood tests. Every day, big quantities of blood were extracted from us. I remember that if one of the twins got sick and went to the infirmary, that twin did not return, and the other twin would soon disappear as well.

Furthermore, cases like that of a couple of identical twins whose bodies were artificially joined by surgery, like Siamese twins, with their backs, arteries, and internal organs stitched together, or of another survivor who recalled his twin brother becoming paralyzed after his third operation – they cannot be forgotten.

It has been proven beyond any doubt that the experiments performed on twins in Auschwitz were not only cruel, but also scientifically useless. It was just an additional way to torture. We were treated as inhuman creatures. Coupled with hunger and malnutrition most of us became anemic, and many died. We were treated like lab animals. Nothing more.

--

The twins remember that we were human guinea pigs used for medical experiments without our informed consent.

But when we, the last witnesses, will be gone, who will be able to describe what was done to us at Auschwitz, and its consequences?

Mengele was a sadist and a butcher. He disgraced the medical profession with his crude, depraved, and inhuman experiments.

Mengele was in a position to decide who would be sent to the gas chambers and who would be spared. In this way he sealed the fate of tens of thousands of Auschwitz prisoners, mainly Jews.

Mengele, who earned the title of the "Angel of Death", turned his back on his own humanity, and acted like a superior being, deciding on life or death just with the motion of his hand.

We, the remaining twins who survived, lost our childhood at Auschwitz at a very young age, never to be found again.

On January 27, 1945, Auschwitz was evacuated. My sister Miriam and I were sent to join the “Death March” – we walked to Ravensbruck and later to Malchow. The Nazi Himmler announced that no one camp prisoner should fall into the hands of the enemies, so as the Allied forces approached we were taken on additional death marches. One afternoon, the SS guards who supervised us ran away, throwing away their arms and uniforms. Then we suddenly found ourselves free, waiting for salvation by the Allies. That was precisely on May 8, 1945, the last day of the war.

We then paved our way to freedom. As a group of young girls, we made our way to Lodz, Poland, only to find out that our homes had been taken away and were occupied by new tenants who would not let us in.

In 1946, after the Kielce pogrom in Poland, my twin and I were brought to London where together with other children survivors we were placed in a hostel and later housed in local Jewish homes.

In 1948, an orphan and completely alone I made my way illegally to the then British-controlled Palestine. There, in the soon to be born state of Israel, I began to rebuild my life. Only then I began to get the feeling that I was a human being again, with a name and no more just a number.

As I stand before you today, seventy years later, the wounds and the immeasurable pain still remain in the depth of my being. For in the ashes of Auschwitz the hope of mankind was extinguished. In truth, Auschwitz signifies the failure of two thousand years of Western civilization.

Not only people died in Auschwitz, but the idea of humanity had vanished.

So for us, the last surviving witnesses, the message is not to forget anything. But also that human life is sacred, and that we all must do everything in our power to preserve and prevent future major tragedies like the one that befell my people.

As I stand here before you I am reminded of the days when the Jewish people paid with blood for the world’s ignorance and indifference. These days are over. Never again!

Now more than ever there are those who claim that the Holocaust is no more than a “myth”. It is imperative to make sure that the world never forgets what happened, because there are some who would like for it to be repeated.

--

I would like to thank the United Nations for the significant resolution it passed, making January 27 of each year an international day of commemoration of the Holocaust. This fills us with hope.

Thank you, Mr. Secretary General for allowing me to share my story with representatives of so many nations.

Thank you all for listening to me.