

International Day of Commemoration in Memory of the Victims of the Holocaust
Memorial Ceremony, General Assembly Hall
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Remarks by Ambassador David Pressman, Alternate Representative to the United Nations for Special Political Affairs

AS DELIVERED

Mr. Secretary-General, President Rivlin, Vice-President of the General Assembly, ambassadors, distinguished guests, survivors: seventy years ago yesterday, Red Army troops liberated the Nazi concentration camp at Auschwitz. Months later – on April 4th, 1945 – American troops marched into Ohrdruf concentration camp. Before fleeing the camp and forcing nearly 12,000 prisoners on a death march to Buchenwald, the Nazis made prisoners dig up the bodies from mass graves and burn them in a huge pyre, in order to destroy evidence of the killing. But as United States General George Patton wrote when visiting the camp a week later, “They were not very successful in their operations, because there was a pile of human bones, skulls, charred torsos.”

Visiting Ohrdruf with General Patton, General Eisenhower ordered all residents of the nearby German town of Gotha to be brought to the camp. The people of Gotha lived so close that they would have even seen the smoke from that massive pyre, and perhaps even taken in its smell. They were made to confront the horrors that had been perpetrated so close to where they lived.

When we come together to retell the story of the Holocaust, we rightly lionize the heroism of liberators, like Soviet troops who took Auschwitz or the Americans at Ohrdruf. We marvel at the immeasurable perseverance and humanity of the survivors, and the incalculable loss – will we ever understand how great? – of the millions killed. And we are revolted by the unspeakable evil of the perpetrators, which – even today – retains its power to shock us to our very core.

But in our retelling, we also must tell the story of people like the residents of Gotha – bystanders who knew what was happening, but who failed to act. And we must also speak of people whose seemingly trivial, routine daily acts helped enable the Nazis to kill more than six million Jews, as well as countless homosexuals, Roma, and others.

Consider the trains that carried the victims to the camps. For those trains to run, tickets had to be bought. Jews were often charged for the one-way trips carrying them to their deaths, with the exception of children under four, who rode for free. Their rates were often negotiated by bureaucrats from the official travel bureau; if the Jews numbered more than 400, at times, they received a discount.

And those trains had to be driven by Reichsbahn conductors, who knew what – or knew who – they carried. Those trains had to be maintained by engineers, cleaned by workers, who scrubbed the blood and other human waste from the empty cars.

Those trains had to pass through countless cities and towns along their journey, and sometimes stop in their stations. And in communities across Europe, so many people – so many people – watched passively as their Jewish neighbors were forced onto those trains, just as they saw that those Jewish neighbors never returned.

We know that the Holocaust could not have been perpetrated without the vile hatred of the executioners who manned the gas chamber and guard towers and the gallows. But we also must remind ourselves that six million Jews could not have been killed without the complicit passivity of residents of towns like Gotha, or the routine acts of people like the workers of the Reichsbahn.

If we are to live up to the promise of “Never again” – and we must – we have to recognize the role that these bystanders played in the Holocaust. People who somehow convinced themselves that they did not know or they were powerless to do anything.

Today, more than ever, we are acutely aware of the horrors being perpetrated worldwide, whether they are a town next door or across the globe. Now, as then, there is no claiming that we do not know; there is no excuse for the evil of passivity.

So today, as we reflect on the unparalleled horror of what happened more than seven decades ago, we must recommit ourselves – as governments, as communities, and importantly, as individuals – not to allow ourselves to become bystanders; to honor the Holocaust not only by memorializing it, but by acting every day to combat anti-Semitism, confront hate, challenge discrimination of all kinds, and prevent atrocities and the conditions that enable atrocities, like the evil passivity that helped allow the Nazis to murder so many.

We must continue to draw great inspiration from the survivors, draw courage from the liberators. But we must never forget the bystanders. We must never again find ourselves like the residents of Gotha, deafened by shameful silence. We must never again find ourselves like too many residents of too many towns across Europe, complicit by inaction. We must never again find ourselves asking: Where was I? Where were we? What could we have done? And what should I have done?

Thank you, Mr. President.

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