

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

**Memorial Ceremony, General Assembly Hall**

**28 January 2015**

**Keynote Address of Mr. Avner Shalev, Chairman of the Yad Vashem Directorate Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon**

Vice President of the General Assembly  
The President of Israel, Reuven Rivlin  
Excellency's, Holocaust survivors, Veterans, Ladies and Gentlemen

On November twenty-eighth, nineteen forty-four, during the last months of the operation of the Auschwitz-Birkenau extermination camp, twenty Jewish children – ten boys and ten girls, ages six to twelve – were chosen by the notorious Nazi doctor, Josef Mengele Rivka, Edward, Mania, Roman and sister Eleonora, brothers Edward and Alexander, Jacqueline, Sergio, Leah, and ten others, were sent by train to the Neuengamme concentration camp near Hamburg, Germany.

Mengele was cooperating with the request of his colleague, the SS physician Dr. Kurt Heissmeyer, to supply him with subjects for his pseudo-scientific study of infectious diseases.

Upon arrival, the children were infected with tuberculosis, and the terrible effects of the disease upon them were studied for several months. As Dr. Heissmeyer testified twenty years later, at his trial, in East Germany: "I did not think that the children had full value as human beings... For me there was no basic difference between Jews and guinea pigs."

Auschwitz-Birkenau was liberated by the Red Army exactly seventy years ago, but the murder continued wherever the Nazis still held control.

In Neuengamme this meant the murder of the twenty Jewish children. Eight days before the British Army entered Hamburg, the children were brought to a school building where they were injected with morphine, and then hung to death on hooks set in the wall.

Nazi Germany and its collaborators had murdered one-third of the Jewish people. The extermination of six million Jews in Europe was motivated and driven by a murderous, racist anti-Semitic ideology – that viewed all Jews, everywhere in the world, as a lethal danger to the German nation and to Germany's new world order.

So every last Jew, everywhere, had to be destroyed, at any cost.

Recalling the horrible scope and nature of that genocide is the core of Holocaust remembrance, but Remembrance extends deeper and further.

When the War ended, much of the world rejoiced in the Allied victory. But the Jews who survived – could *not* rejoice. Mourning for their families and communities, scarred by their own horrible *Shoah* experiences, they COULD well have become desperate, bitter and vengeful. And yet, remarkably, they DID NOT.

In fact, the vast majority of the Holocaust survivors did the *contrary*: *They chose HOPE*. The majority of the survivors chose to strike new roots in their ancestral Land of Israel, my own birthplace, where they joined a viable and self-sufficient *pre*-Holocaust Jewish entity.

In EVERY place around the globe that the survivors reached, they demonstrated their restored commitment to human freedom, and faith in humanity.

Upon these values they rebuilt their own lives, and those of their new families and communities.

In two-thousand and two, hundreds of *Shoah* survivors gathered at Yad Vashem, on the Mount of Remembrance in Jerusalem, to participate in an international conference devoted to the Legacy of Holocaust Survivors.

They signed a joint "Survivors Declaration" Stating: *After the Shoah, we did not turn into wild animals, hungering only for revenge. This is a testament to the principles we possess as a people imbued with enduring faith in both man and Providence. We chose life.*

During the first decades following the Holocaust, many of its survivors expressed concern that it would fade from the world's consciousness. They feared that it would remain recorded only in history books. But it didn't.

My mentor, Professor Yisrael Gutman, himself a Holocaust survivor said: *"The Shoah refuses to become history"*.

In the decades since Spring nineteen forty-five, large portions of humanity have come gradually to perceive the Holocaust as a pivotal landmark event for modern civilization.

Even regions and cultures not originally related to the events of the Holocaust, find it compelling and meaningful.

But *why*? *Why* does the *Shoah* refuse to become history? *Why* does it remain so relevant to so many different people?

Genocides and other terrible human atrocities occurred *before* the *Shoah*, and – to our great sorrow – *since* the *Shoah*.

It is NOT the specific *Jewish* identity of the victims that provides the Holocaust with its *universal* implications.

Rather, I submit – that what resonates so powerfully in our modern and post-modern existence, is the shocking EASE and SPEED with which the Holocaust's perpetrators and their ideology succeeded.

To this day, we struggle to understand how Nazi Germany and its collaborators were able to implement their brutal and barbaric ideology.

How could hundreds of years of human progress yield such massive horror?

Modern society deludes itself that technological progress goes hand-in-hand with moral advancement. Sadly, that is *NOT* true.

The Nazis' sought to totally destroy the Jewish people and to impose a ruthless totalitarian regime. This was conceived by highly educated individuals and implemented by a technologically advanced German society.

The deadly mentality that the Nazis expressed and executed is not likely to return in its exact historical form of the nineteen-thirties and forties. But as Auschwitz survivor, author Primo Levi cautioned:

*It happened. Therefore, it can happen again.*

Nowadays, destructive evil, including vicious anti-Semitism, *re*-appears in *different* contexts and ideologies. These ideologies deny human rights and dignity in *other* dangerous ways and circumstances.

Confronted by this reality, I ask: How can we ensure that moral values will still be as essential to our lives as technology advances?

With this question, I have come to this General Assembly, a venue usually associated with statesmen and politicians.

I am an *educator*, and a teacher of *other* educators. It is as a Holocaust educator, that I accepted the UN's gracious invitation to address you today, on this tenth anniversary of the International Day of Commemoration for the Victims of the *Holocaust*. Together with partners and associates worldwide, Yad Vashem teaches Holocaust educators – thousands yearly, from dozens of nations, to draw contemporary insights from the annals of the *Shoah*.

They learn, that in addition to its immense atrocity, the Holocaust was *also* the context for a dramatic struggle of the human spirit.

The Jews fought to retain their humanity through countless acts of solidarity, mutual assistance and physical, cultural and spiritual resistance.

The Righteous among the Nations, though relatively few in number, chose heroically to endanger themselves while attempting to rescue Jews.

These inspiring role models help educators teach about our responsibility to act as a buttress against social hatred and violence.

To identify racism, xenophobia and persecution and to fight them – openly and effectively.

Of course, the responsibility for moral education rests *not only* upon teachers. Political, economic and social leaders – like many of you in this hall and those whom you represent, must also assume responsibility for shaping moral norms and ethical standards.

Our world today is plagued with cruel conflicts for dominance and resources.

In the shadow of those conflicts, we *can* and must educate the next generation of citizens and leaders *to choose* to behave ethically and humanely.

To Primo Levy's warning, *we* add:

It did not *have* to happen *then*, and so – It does *NOT* have to happen *again*.

My dear friends, from this podium, I call upon my fellow educators in every corner of the world - to strive and persevere in our constant battle for human morality.

A battle which helps ensure that no person will ever again be referred to, as were the twenty Jewish children at Neugamme, as having: "no value as human beings."

Holocaust survivor, philosopher Victor Frankel stated:

*Everything can be taken from a man, except the freedom to choose one's own way.*

For mankind, There is *always* a *choice*.

That choice, highlighted in the Biblical book of Deuteronomy, is eternal:

רְאֵה  
נָתַתִּי לְפָנֶיךָ הַיּוֹם אֶת הַחַיִּים וְאֶת הַטּוֹב  
וְאֶת הַמָּוֶת וְאֶת הָרָע  
וּבְחַרְתָּ בְּחַיִּים  
לְמַעַן תִּחְיֶה  
אִתָּה וְנִרְצָךְ

*Behold,  
I have set before you this day  
Life and good,  
Death and evil.  
Therefore choose life  
That you may live –  
You and your children.*

Thank you.