Holocaust Remembrance In The West – Between Coping And Trivialization

Excerpt from interview with Professor Yisrael Gutman
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Interviewer: Amos Goldberg

Q- You spoke about perpetuating Holocaust remembrance among the Jews. Can you explain why it is important for non-Jews to commemorate and concern themselves with the Holocaust?

G- It is important because the Holocaust was also a disaster for non-Jews. People realize that there is a limit to the possibility of being human at home and inhuman elsewhere. As Himmler said, we're very decent among each other, we'd never steal anything, we'll behave fairly and morally. And with respect to the Jews, murder is permissible.

It transpired — it could not have been otherwise — that such thinking boomerangs when it is carried to extremes. Thus, its eventual victims were not only Jews. Jews were the first victims, but the real victims were the human beings, human society, and society's way of life.

Q- But what about America, which had nothing to do with what happened?

G- Here is an interesting phenomenon to consider: those who learned the lesson of the Holocaust were not the European peoples. The nation that regarded the Holocaust as a lesson for people at large and for humankind was first and foremost America. Not the Jews; in the first place, the Jews were regarded as victims who had been killed, just as a person does not brag about a relative who had experienced or was victimized by such a terrible tragedy. The Jews put the Holocaust on low flame. The Holocaust may have enriched American Jewry in terms of internal organization, their claims on behalf of

Jews elsewhere, and their rights, but they used great restraint in speaking about it.

In the United States, however, things like the Diary of Anne Frank and Elie Wiesels accomplishments have had a great influence. People have become more knowledgeable. Some of this is due to melodramatic films that made a monumental impression. When people discovered these matters, they began to ask themselves basic questions. If a person could do such a thing in a country that had the great philosophers, soul-refining poets, and civilization, then what is really happening? Is it human nature or not? What caused it? These great, all-embracing questions, which pierce the root of matters, were taken up there. Today, as you know, some states in the U.S. have made Holocaust studies compulsory. It is also true that a banalization of the Holocaust has occurred and that the Holocaust is slowly losing its image. Even ordinary crime — not just homosexuals, not just the condition of the blacks — is defined today as a Holocaust. Any injustice is called a Holocaust; the term is becoming increasingly misunderstood.

Just the same, some in the United States are attempting to confront the Holocaust at a profound level. When this sort of confrontation gravitated to Europe, it did so largely from the United States. It is a fact that a national museum of the Holocaust was established in the U.S., not in Europe, and that official Holocaust memorial days were first introduced in the U.S. and not in European countries other than Poland, where the Holocaust occurred.

This lesson — that such an embodiment of evil endangers the very existence of man, that antisemitism is a distortion of human ethics that ultimately leads to this outcome — is now firmly entrenched. Take, for example, the document released not long ago by the Vatican, a document that some attempt to wrongly interpret as a political statement. It expresses exactly the same thing. When I read statements by the Pope and other religious thinkers and authors, Catholic and Protestant, I reach a dual conclusion: not only are they troubled by the responsibility of the Church and the faith for what happened in World

War II, but something else: they think that a human being who can reach such a state of affairs has already fallen outside the domain of God — outside the prerogatives that monotheism grants to the human being, outside “in the beginning God created . . .”, outside the Ten Commandments, outside the boundary that separates the human from the inhuman. They have also concluded that antisemitism contains a kernel that has poisoned the essence of man as a creature of ethics and conscience. They wish to effect a revision, not only for us but for themselves. We should follow this encounter and notice that we have a common interest in it as Jews and as human beings.

Q- In fact, then, are you arguing that the Jewish-Gentile relationship has been radically transformed since the Holocaust?

G- I will answer you by offering an example. Of course I do not argue that the State of Israel was established because of the Holocaust. That is not only simplistic; it is also a misunderstanding in regard to the mammoth undertaking of the Zionist movement. However, I definitely think the development of public opinion after the war, which prompted the UN to resolve to establish the State of Israel, is associated with the Holocaust. States-people and peoples usually act in the light of interests, not emotions or vacillations about justice and injustice. However, human history evidently has fracture points at which injustice, cruelty, and perhaps other manifestations reach such a critical magnitude that they lead to responses that transcend the mere calculus of interests. I think this is what happened in the context of the Holocaust.

Today, an enormous change is occurring in the churches attitude toward the Jews and antisemitism. What we call antisemitism today bears no resemblance to what happened in inter-war Europe.

Q- Very well. After all, there are almost no Jews in Europe today.

G- That may have nothing to do with it. After all, there is antisemitism in countries that have no Jews, but there is no antisemitism in European

countries that have Jews. In France, there are more Jews today than before the war. In Poland, there are none. Antisemitism today cannot possibly be compared to what antisemitism was in Romania, Poland, and even France.

Church leaders and the Pope are saying things today that were never said before. The question they are confronting transcends the Jewish tragedy. The Holocaust was the tip of an iceberg that shed a horrific light on the fate that awaits all of humankind. This is because, when all is said and done, Nazism and World War II, the concentration camps, the murder, and the destruction, afflicted not only the Jews. The racist idea of National Socialism, which in their original thinking pertained only to the Jews, began to threaten all of Europe and all of humankind. One may say that humankind and civilization reached the edge of the abyss and that all of civilization was at risk.

Today, the connection between this matter and antisemitism is understood, because the evil unleashed by antisemitism and its falsehoods released political and social forces that, ultimately, not only harmed the Jews but threatened the entire world — culture, human existence, religion, the Divine image of man, the elementary value of human life. This is the basic issue that troubles us without respite. It has made the Holocaust issue so important in a country as far away as the United States, where neither the Jews nor the population at large had anything at all to do with the Holocaust.

However, this awareness has created a trend of trivialization. The fact that the Holocaust has become part of the general human awareness and is treated so extensively — in the press, in the arts, in literature, in cinema, etc. — has led to a degree of simplification. Today, in developed countries and especially the United States, every social injustice is placed in the category of a Holocaust. This has created a problem of sorts: a great many people talk about things of which they know little.

Q- Have you seen Beninis film, Life is Beautiful? Does that film fall into this category?

G- No. I think it is a serious work of art. It continually walks the thin line between being ridiculous and penetrating the depths of the human psyche, but it does penetrate the psyche.

Q- Thank you very much.

Source: **Multimedia CD '*Eclipse Of Humanity*', Yad Vashem, Jerusalem 2000.**