Respecting the Holocaust

Fifteen years ago, when I was teaching at Boston University, I was asked by a Jewish group to give a talk on the Holocaust. I spoke that evening, but not about the Holocaust of World War II, the genocide of six million Jews. It was the mid-eighties, and the U.S. government was supporting death squads in Central America, so I spoke of the deaths of hundreds of thousands of peasants in Guatemala and El Salvador, victims of American policy.

My point was that the memory of the Jewish Holocaust should not be circled by barbed wire, morally ghettoized, kept isolated from other atrocities in history. To remember what happened to the six million Jews, I said, served no important purpose unless it aroused indignation, anger, action against all atrocities, anywhere in the world.

A few days later, in the campus newspaper, there was a letter from a faculty member who had heard me speak. He was a Jewish refugee who had left Europe for Argentina and then the United States. He objected strenuously to my extending the moral issue from Jews in Europe during the war to people in other parts of the world in our time. The Holocaust was a sacred memory, a unique event, he said. And he was outraged that, invited to speak on the Jewish Holocaust, I had chosen to speak about other matters.

I was reminded of this experience when I recently read a book by Peter Novick, The Holocaust in American Life (Houghton Mifflin, 1999). Novick’s starting point is the following question: Why, fifty years after the event, does the Holocaust play a more prominent role in this country—the Holocaust Museum in Washington, hundreds of Holocaust programs in schools—than it did in the first decades after World War II?

Surely at the core of the memory of the Holocaust is a horror that should not be forgotten. But around that core, whose integrity needs no enhancement, there has grown up an industry of memorialists who have labored to keep that memory alive for purposes of their own, Novick points out.

Some Jews have used the Holocaust as a way of preserving a unique identity, which they see threatened by intermarriage and assimilation.

Zionists have used the Holocaust, since the 1967 war, to justify further Israeli expansion into Palestinian land and to build support for a beleaguered Israel (more beleaguered—as David Ben-Gurion, Israel’s first prime minister, predicted—once it occupied the West Bank and Gaza).

And non-Jewish politicians have used the Holocaust to curry favor with the numerically small but influential Jewish voters—note the solemn pronouncements of Presidents wearing yarmulkes to accentuate their anguished sympathy.

All who have taken seriously the admonition “Never Again” must ask ourselves—as we observe the horrors around us in the world—if we have used that phrase as a beginning or as an end to our moral concern.

I would not have become a historian if I thought that it would become my professional duty to never emerge from the past, to study long-gone events and remember them only for their uniqueness, not connecting them to events going on in my time.

If the Holocaust is to have any meaning, we must transfer our anger to today’s brutalities. We must respect the memory of the Jewish Holocaust by refusing to allow atrocities to take place now.

When Jews turn inward to concentrate on their own history and look away from the ordeal of others, they are, with terrible irony, doing exactly what the rest of the world did in allowing the genocide to happen.

There have been shameful moments, travesties of Jewish humanism, as when Jewish organizations lobbied against Congressional recognition of the Armenian Holocaust of 1915 on the ground that it di-
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lion or more non-Jews who died in the Nazi camps.
To build a wall around the uniqueness of the Jewish Holocaust is to abandon the idea that humankind is all one, that we are all—of whatever color, nationality, religion—deserving of equal rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. What happened to the Jews under Hitler is unique in its details, but it shares universal characteristics with many other events in human history: the Atlantic slave trade, the genocide against Native Americans, and the injuries and deaths to millions of working people who were victims of the capitalist ethos that put profit before human life.

In recent years, while paying more and more homage to the Holocaust as a central symbol of man's cruelty to man, we have, by silence and inaction, collaborated in an endless chain of cruelties.

There have been the massacres of Rwanda, and the starvation in Somalia, with our government watching and doing nothing.

There were the death squads in Latin America and the decimation of the population of East Timor, with our government actively collaborating. Our church-going Christian Presidents, so pious in their references to the genocide against the Jews, kept supplying the instruments of death to the perpetrators of these atrocities.

I am reminded of the last stanza of the poem “Scottsboro, Too, Is Worth Its Song,” by Countee Cullen: “Surely, I said/now will the poets sing./But they have raised no cry./I wonder why.”

Then there are horrors that are not state-sponsored but still take a biblical toll, horrors that are within our power to end. Paul Farmer describes these in detail in his remarkable new book, *Infections and Inequalities: The Modern Plagues* (University of California, 1999). He notes the deaths of ten million children all over the world who die every year of malnutrition and preventable diseases. The World Health Organization estimates that three million people died last year of tuberculosis, which is preventable and curable, as Farmer has proved in his medical work in Haiti. With a small portion of our military budget we could wipe out that disease.

My point is not to diminish the experience of the Jewish Holocaust, but to enlarge upon it.

For Jews, it means to reclaim the tradition of Jewish universal humanism against an Israel-centered nationalism. Or, as Novick puts it, to go back to “that larger social consciousness that was the hallmark of the American Jewry of my youth.” That larger consciousness was displayed in recent years by those Israelis who protested the beating of Palestinians in the Intifada and who demonstrated against the invasion of Lebanon.

For others, whether Armenians or Native Americans or Africans or Bosnians, it means to use their own bloody histories not to set themselves against others but to create a larger solidarity against the holders of wealth and power, the perpetrators and collaborators of the ongoing horrors of our time.

The Holocaust might serve a powerful purpose if it led us to think of the world today as wartime Germany—where millions die while the rest of the population obediently goes about its business. It is a frightening thought that the Nazis, in defeat, were victorious: today Germany, tomorrow the world. That is, until we withdraw our obedience.

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