

On April 7, Benjamin Ferencz, the last living prosecutor from the Nuremberg trials, died at the age of 103. His passing reminds us that the survivors of the Shoah – the Holocaust – are becoming fewer and fewer. And when the last of them passes, the living memories of those witnesses will pass with them.

It is difficult and heartrending and painful to listen to those stories, much less view the photos and films from the camps. We recoil from them. It is tempting to shove them aside, and let them fade into history.

But the children of those survivors, and their children, refuse to let those memories die. They have vowed to keep telling those stories, and keeping passing them on, so that the world will never forget.

What made the Shoah so terrible was not just the intent, but the application of industrial mass production technologies to the mass destruction of human beings. The reduction of human beings to things, to objects without humanity.

Yom Ha Shoah is about remembering the victims, the survivors, and those who fought and resisted the Nazi death machine, alive or dead. It is necessary that we too must never forget what happened.

Why is that? Never Forget, Never Again is their vow and it must be ours as well.

History is rife with examples of genocide, starting with the Roman sack of Carthage in 146 BCE. Some of those have been more terrible than others. The Holocaust, Rwanda, Armenia, the communist gulags under Stalin, to name just a few. We can't forget those either.

Never Forget, Never Again.

First they came for the Communists

And I did not speak out
Because I was not a Communist
Then they came for the Socialists
And I did not speak out
Because I was not a Socialist
Then they came for the trade unionists
And I did not speak out
Because I was not a trade unionist
Then they came for the Jews
And I did not speak out
Because I was not a Jew
Then they came for me
And there was no one left
To speak out for me

That poem was written by Pastor Martin Niemöller.

Niemöller started out as an antisemitic Nazi supporter. His eventual split with the Nazi party came when they started to control the German Protestant Church. The Nazis appointed a National Socialist leader of the Church and changed the text of the Bible to remove what the Nazis saw as 'Jewish ideology'.

He was arrested in 1937, and eventually ended up in Dachau concentration camp, along with the Jews, the Roma, homosexuals, the disabled, communists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Poles, Russians, and other German dissidents. He got lucky and was freed by the Americans before he could be murdered.

In October of 1945, just a few months after the war ended, Niemöller headed a group of German churches who admitted they did not do enough to oppose the Nazi regime. Niemöller was one of very few Germans who called on their fellow

citizens to accept their responsibility for Nazi atrocities too, saying in a sermon in 1946:

‘We must openly declare that we are not innocent of the Nazi murders, of the murder of German communists, Poles, Jews, and the people in German-occupied countries... And this guilt lies heavily upon the German people and the German name, even upon Christendom. For in our world and in our name have these things been done.’

His story reminds us of the complexity of being human, that we do not fall easily into simple categories of ‘good’ and ‘bad’.

As Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn reminds us:

“The line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either -- but right through every human heart -- and through all human hearts. This line shifts. Inside us, it oscillates with the years.”

If we are truly honest with ourselves, we recognize that any human being could show up on either side of that line on any given day, that within us is a murderer, and a healer, both enormous love and terrible vengeance.

I happened across a short video the other day, a posting on Twitter by a young person, who – in referring to a mass shooting – said that the shooter had “unalived” the victims. Not killed. Not shot. Not murdered. “Unalived.”

This is how these things begin, with weasel words and doublespeak. First comes the othering of your opponents or your scapegoats. Hitler regarded the Jews as "a Gegenrasse: a 'counter-race' ... not really human at all". National Socialism regarded itself as a political revolution which realized a new image of the ideal

human, the Aryan Master Race. This seems to be the first real instance of ideological dehumanization, not simply othering an enemy.

Then came the euphemisms for murder and genocide. The term “Final Solution” (Die Endlösung) was a euphemism. The doctors and administrators charged with murdering ‘incurables’ were the ‘Public Ambulance Service’ ; the motorized death squads which first went into action in Poland in 1939 were ‘task forces’ (Einsatzgruppen); the massacre of nearly 34,000 Jews in the ravine of Babi-Yar after the capture of Kiev in September 1941 was a ‘major operation’ (Gross-Aktion). People identified for extermination in official Nazi documents were listed as those to be given ‘special treatment’ (Sonderbehandlung), sometimes abbreviated to ‘SB’, and from roughly mid-1943 the term ‘special lodging’ (Sonderunterbringung) was also used.

But before all that came the soft cudgels – the demonization in the press, the social ostracism, the boycott of Jewish businesses, the criminalization of homosexuality, the outlawing or suppression of alternative viewpoints.

And that lead to the death camps.

Meditation:

6 million Jews died in the Holocaust. We remember them, even if we do not know their names or their stories.

Millions of others have died in other genocides in Rwanda, Cambodia, Russia, Armenia, North and South America, and many other countries. We remember them, even if we do not know their names or their stories.

There were those who tried to save the Jews and the other victims of the Holocaust. Many of those died in doing so. We know some of their names, but not all. We remember them, even if we do not know their names or their stories.

There were, and are, many who tried to prevent the other genocides. We remember them, even if we do not know their names or their stories.

We remember, and we grieve.

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I've long had a debate in my head about what constitutes the most dangerous phrase in the world. It's tossup between – "It can't happen here," and "It's different this time."

Because it never is. And it can. It's happened here.

Never Forget, Never Again

If we forget what happened, we forget what we are capable of. Us? Well, yes.

It's nice to think that if we'd been German citizens, we'd have been part of the resistance, or died defying the Nazis. A very romantic notion reinforced by movies and TV. But not borne out by history.

We just have to look around us at the people around us afraid to speak out against some of the beliefs of the group they belong to: Republicans afraid to speak out against Trump. Liberals afraid to speak out against the current woke orthodoxies. Average people in the middle afraid to call out either side.

Belonging is a powerful force, and the fear of being cast out is a deep one. It takes real courage to stand alone against the threat of losing your friends, your job, or being put in prison, or killed.

Believing that it can't happen here or that we are different creates the initial conditions that pave the way for all kinds of atrocities.

It begins with language, with the euphemisms, changing the meanings of words to hide the misuse of power inside the innocuous phrases.

It begins with use of language to dehumanize, to turn people into abstractions. Those are Jews, not people. Those are Tutsi, not people. Those are dirty savages, not people. Any descriptor can be used to do this.

Shutting down dialog and dissenting voices takes us further down the path.

Seeing the soft cudgel as not worthy of resisting is the next step. It's not me they're coming for, so why should I care? What's a little cancellation got to do with me? But the soft cudgel leads to the iron fist, and when the zealots run out of victims, they'll find more, seeking out the smallest differences to target.

Those are some of the signs, but I doubt anyone really knows how to predict when the line gets crossed, and things turn ugly and evil reigns.

To our eternal shame, there are genocides going on right now, and the international community seems unable to stop them. It can feel hopeless at times.

So let me close with this poem from Alexander Kimel, titled

THE CREED OF A HOLOCAUST SURVIVOR

I do believe, with all my heart,
In the natural Goodness of Man.
Despite the blood and destruction,
Brought by one man, trying to be God,
In the Goodness of Man, I do believe.

I do believe, with all my heart,
That God gave man the blessing and the curse.
Man can select the curse of envy, hatred and prejudices,
Or the blessing of love, harmony and beauty.
Despite the painful curses of the past,
In the blessing of the Creator, I do believe.

I do believe, with all my heart,
That God created a beautiful world,
The sun and the trees, the flowers and the bees.
And the best way to serve God, is
To enjoy the fruits of His labor of love.
Despite the painful memories from the past,
In the joyful celebration of life, I do believe.

I do believe with all my heart,
That God has created man in image of His own.
And killing of man, is like killing of God.
Despite the massacres in Rwanda, the cleansing in Bosnia,
The folly of Muslim fanatics, and the cruelty of Pot Pol.
In the love and compassion of the Creator, I do believe.

I believe with all my heart,
That the Messiah and the Kingdom of Heaven will come;
When man will conquer his destructive urge,
And learn how to live in harmony with nature and himself.
When all the preachers of hate will be silenced,
And man will become his brother's keeper.

Remembrance Day
Rev. Munro Sickafoose

Unitarian Congregation of Taos
April 16, 2023

When man will stop killing man, in the name of God,
And nation will not lift weapons against nation.
When it will be, I do not know, but
Despite all the signs to the contrary.
In the dawn of a Better World, I do believe.