

REFLECTIONS ON THE 75TH ANNIVERSARY OF LIBERATION COMMEMORATIONS

From Auschwitz-Birkenau to Berlin

ROBERT GOOT



“HERE were no cheers or cries of joy. When the first Red Army soldiers opened the camp gates, we no longer had the strength to cheer.”

That is what Giselle Cycowicz, one of the survivors, recalled in Jerusalem last week. “We are survivors today,” she said. “Seventy-five years ago, we were more dead than alive, doomed to follow the millions before us. The soldiers called out to us: ‘You’re free! You can go wherever you want!’ Us? Us – the last people left in our families? With no parents, no children, no sisters, no brothers, no home, no name – where were we supposed to go?”

Those were the words Frank-Walter Steinmeier, the President of Germany, chose to commence his powerful and important address at the ceremony to mark the Day of Remembrance for the Victims of National Socialism in the German Bundestag in Berlin in the presence of Reuven Rivlin, the President of the State of Israel, on the January 29, 2020.

That Day of Remembrance was the culmination of a series of commemorative events starting at Yad Vashem and followed by the commemoration at Birkenau of the 75th anniversary of the Liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau, with 3000 in attendance and 100 survivors and their families who were honoured probably for the last time, at that infamous site – the largest Jewish graveyard in history.

For President Steinmeier it was his first visit to Auschwitz-Birkenau and he later said, “Never before did I find it so difficult to put one foot in front of the other” as we walked together through the camp gate in Auschwitz.

He also observed, “If you imagine – even for a moment – the utter despair a child would have felt in Auschwitz, you may have some inkling into what it means for a survivor to return there.”

But return they did. The survivors are all old now – some very old, but that they were able to be there, bore testament to the determination, courage and optimism that marks them as Jewish heroes.

I knew that these few days in Poland and Germany were likely to be painful and emotional, but they were also as inspiring as they were overwhelming.

On Friday night, we davened at the historic Remu Synagogue in Kazimierz, before attending a Shabbat dinner with some of the Krakow Jewish community.

Later, Senator Scott Ryan, the president of the Senate, Lloyd Brodrick, the Australian ambassador to Poland and I, met with a Sydney survivor of Auschwitz-Birkenau, Yvonne Engelman, her three children and one of her grandchildren, in advance of the commemoration of the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau on January 27, 2020.

Mrs Engelman, who with members of her family had just visited her home town in what was once Czechoslovakia, related some of her experiences during the war, her internment in and liberation from Birkenau, her travel to Sydney via Fremantle at the end of the war and making, with her husband, a new life in Australia.

Both Ryan and Brodrick remarked on Yvonne’s astonishing courage, determination and optimism, displayed in her



King Willem-Alexander and Queen Maxima of The Netherlands along with Dutch PM Mark Rutte attending a candle-lighting ceremony at Auschwitz-Birkenau last Monday.

Photo Robin Utrecht/ABACAPRESS.COM

inspiring story. They were also taken by her insistence on the need to educate coming generations on the evils of the Shoah, noting the role her late husband had taken with others, in founding the Australian Association of Holocaust Survivors and Descendants and convening the International Gathering of Survivors in Sydney in the 1970s.

We discussed her experiences volunteering for so many years as a guide at the Sydney Jewish Museum and in particular the reaction of the more than 28,000 students who visit the SJM each year, to what they see and hear there.

“Too many people in too many countries made Auschwitz happen.”

Ronald Lauder

President, World Jewish Congress

On the eve of the commemoration event, at a dinner in Krakow held in honour of the survivors and attended by more than 700 people, there were many emotional moments – a survivor holding aloft a kiddush cup miraculously rescued from his home, that had been used at every simcha in his family over the seven succeeding decades; recollections from survivors; and a survivor from Israel – the sole survivor of her pre-war family, with all four generations of her family – children, grandchildren and great grandchildren – 40 people on stage, reminding us what might have been for Klal Yisrael, but for the catastrophe.

The 75th anniversary commemoration took place on International Holocaust Remembrance Day, in a purpose built “tent”, one end of which was constituted by the infamous structure containing the Birkenau gate of death through which the rail tracks passed.

The heads of state, representatives and dignitaries from many other countries heard searing accounts from survivors of their experiences and urgent pleas in the face of resurgent antisemitism particularly in Europe and the US not to let it happen again.

In a powerful extemporaneous address the renowned scholar and survivor,

Marian Tursky explained how Auschwitz did not simply “fall from the sky” but was the culmination of a series of events – bans, boycotts and exclusions progressing to violence and abandoning and crushing the rule of law and democracy, all which occurred as a result of indifference.

Ronald Lauder in his keynote address pulled no punches in saying other countries were complicit: “While Germany and Austria caused, created and carried out this shattering evil, practically every other European country helped the Nazis gather up their Jewish citizens.

“Too many people in too many coun-

tries made Auschwitz happen. When European Jews begged the world for a safe harbour – some place to go – the entire world turned its back on them. Even my own country – the beacon of freedom – turned out its light on the Jewish people when they needed it the most.”

He referred to the foundation of the Jewish state of Israel “exactly three years, three months and three weeks after the liberation of Auschwitz”, when the Jewish people fled Europe, and were forced out of every country in the Middle East, and instead of living in refugee camps and turning to terror, building a vibrant democracy in a place where democracy does not exist.

In an emotional reference to the murdered Jews, he pleaded with world leadership: “They are watching us today, and they cry out, in one shattering chorus: Do not be silent. Do not be complacent. Do not let this ever happen again to any people.”

Two days later in Berlin, as all the flags on the Reichstag and precincts flew at half-mast, we gathered in the Bundestag for the ceremony to mark the Day of Remembrance. In President Steinmeier’s truly remarkable speech, he expressed his gratitude to President Rivlin: “for allowing me to speak in Yad Vashem as a

representative of Germany, for allowing me to be at your side when we commemorated the liberation in Auschwitz and for travelling with me to Berlin to speak here in the German Bundestag today”.

He described as a “gift” President Rivlin’s willingness to take the painful steps of remembering the past with his German counterpart and for speaking in the Bundestag, “in the heart of our Republic” and said that he saw it as “a duty to prove ourselves worthy of Israel’s willingness to seek reconciliation with us” a reconciliation that “expresses the grace that we Germans could not hope – let alone expect – to receive”.

He referred to the Shoah being part of German history and identity, saying, “Democrats in this building do not deny that addressing our historical guilt is now part of what defines our country ... we need to spell out our historical responsibility to our neighbours, and say that it was Germans who did this.”

And he warned of the need to find new forms of remembrance for a young generation that asks what the past has to do with them and their lives, because all of us are responsible for the here and now; and the need to pay attention to the words we use if we want to prevent our remembrance from becoming an ossified ritual.

Those words have never been more relevant than today, when we witness the erupting scourge of antisemitism. In a closed meeting between Jewish leaders from around the world and President Rivlin, I appealed to the president to use all of his undoubted influence, to promote unity of the Jewish people. There are issues that stand between us, such as the need to recognise non-Orthodox streams of Judaism to dispel the sense of frustration and exclusion felt by millions of Jews. Complex as such issues are, with determination and goodwill solutions can be found, so that all of us together, can fight our fight, for and as one people.

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