

Fighting old battles

It was 66 years ago today that Auschwitz was liberated, but we still find ourselves dealing with the same hatreds and intolerance

By AVI BENLOLO, Freelance January 27, 2011



Children who survived Auschwitz II-Birkenau show their tattooed identification numbers after the camp was liberated.

Photograph by: REUTERS, Freelance

MONTREAL - Today marks the 66th anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz concentration camp -the jewel in the Nazi killing machine -and I find myself searching for the right words to convey what is both unimaginable and yet, paradoxically, all too familiar. What can be written about the Holocaust that has not yet been documented? What stories not yet told will have the power to move readers steeped in the knowledge of both the Shoah and more recent atrocities in far-flung countries like Bosnia, Rwanda and Sudan?

Despite the passage of time, it often feels as if we are fighting the same battles we once thought were won. Holocaust deniers, having found fertile ground for planting their insidious lies, multiply like weeds on the Internet and are spurred on by the hatred voiced by anti-Semites like Iran's Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who has made it clear he hopes one day to finish the job Hitler began. As Holocaust Remembrance Day is a United Nations-designated day of commemoration, it is my hope that the UN will begin to

pay greater attention to the Iranian dictator and others like him who once again have as their mandate the destruction of the Jewish people. Other ethnic communities, having suffered through their own horrific tragedies and atrocities, attempt to vie for the status of most persecuted victim.

The shadow cast by the Holocaust is a long one; it crops up in the most unexpected places. My office recently received a letter from a gentleman in Sudbury, Ont., who felt compelled (finally) to tell someone of an incident that had happened to him as a boy when, by chance, he found proof of a Nazi war criminal living in his neighbourhood. The year was 1958. He confronted the man who, predictably, disappeared the next day. For the rest of his life the man from Sudbury felt guilty about letting a Nazi war criminal escape. Although he wasn't even born when the war began, the malevolence that was the Holocaust found a way to penetrate to the most unpredictable of places and destroy yet another innocent life.

Echoes of horror remain with us to this day. The recently released annual Wiesenthal Status Report on the Worldwide Investigation and Prosecution of Nazi War Criminals (April 1 2009-March 31, 2010) details Canada's failure to pursue Nazi war criminals living in our midst. Government officials have yet to show the courage demonstrated by a young boy in Sudbury who was unafraid to name evil when he saw it.

Unfortunately, Canada is not alone in its reluctance to pursue justice. Just this week the German magazine Der Spiegel ran a five-page article about the libel case launched against Dr. Efraim Zuroff, the world's pre-eminent Nazi hunter, by a Hungarian Nazi war criminal named Sandor Kepiro, No. 1 on the Wiesenthal Centre's most-wanted list of Nazis still living.

How best to commemorate Holocaust Remembrance Day when hatred remains such a potent force? The Jewish community of Montreal was reminded of this inescapable truth just last week when an organized attack upon five synagogues and a daycare occurred. Elderly Jewish men and women, some bearing the tattooed scars of the Holocaust on their arms and an ever-present dread in their bones, are deeply concerned that they are being targeted once again. They thought Montreal was safe, so far from Hungary, Poland, Romania, Germany and Austria. Yet far from remembering, these citizens of Montreal fear they may be witnessing a rebirth of an ancient and powerful ideology.

I have been there. I had to see it for myself -the mounds of shoes, of hair, of skulls, of death, destruction and canisters of Zyklon B gas. I have walked the hallowed grounds of Auschwitz with both Jewish and non-Jewish friends who came with me to remember, to reinforce the memory of the millions of lives lost, and to once more promise, "Never again."

The Holocaust was a turning point for humanity. Recognizing the true evil of the systematic campaign to implement the Final Solution showed us the absolute depravity of which seemingly ordinary human beings are capable. Regardless of our desire to move on, we remain rooted in the past. It haunts us and continues to remind us of the imperative of commemoration. In an era that brings weekly news of new atrocities and crimes against humanity, remembrance, and the concomitant pursuit of justice, is our only option.

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