

April 19–26, 2009

DAYS OF REMEMBRANCE

Never Again: What You Do Matters

There may be times when we are powerless to prevent injustice, but there must never be a time when we fail to protest.

—Elie Wiesel

The United States Congress established the Days of Remembrance as our nation's annual commemoration of the Holocaust and created the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum as a permanent living memorial to the victims. This year Holocaust Remembrance Day is Tuesday, April 21. The Museum has designated **Never Again: What You Do Matters** as the theme for the 2009 observance.

Few stories illustrate more powerfully the difference an individual can make in creating a more just and humane world than that of Raphael Lemkin. This year marks 50 years since the death of this Polish-Jewish lawyer who watched from the shores of the United States as the Nazis persecuted and murdered members of his family along with millions of other Jews, solely on the basis of their identity—Winston Churchill described this mass murder as a “crime without a name.” Lemkin was a prominent attorney and an expert in international law working in Warsaw when Germany invaded Poland in September 1939. He answered his country's call for able-bodied men to go eastward in the hopes of forming a new defensive line against Germany, but all hope collapsed when the Soviet Union suddenly occupied eastern Poland. Lemkin escaped to Sweden by way of Lithuania. There he completed arrangements to immigrate to the United States. He began work at Duke University in North Carolina in April 1941, shortly before the United States entered World War II.

In 1944, Lemkin became increasingly alarmed as the extent of the destruction of Europe's Jewish communities became apparent. He was determined to name the crime that had killed his family. He coined the word “genocide” as a first step in his relentless personal drive to help prevent its repetition. Lemkin next conceived the Genocide Convention and wrote its first draft. In the shadow of the Holocaust and in no small part due to his tireless efforts, the United Nations approved the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide in

1948. Lemkin did not celebrate but called it “an epitaph on his mother's grave.” He continued his efforts to prevent genocide until his death of a heart attack in 1959. Many others took up his passion and commitment to prevent genocide. One notable example was the late U.S. Senator from Wisconsin, William Proxmire. Starting in 1967, Senator Proxmire waged a singlehanded campaign to get the Genocide Convention ratified by the U.S. Senate. For 19 years Proxmire made a speech every day that Congress convened—a total of 3,211 speeches—until the Senate ratified the Convention in 1986.

The Holocaust demonstrates one of the greatest lessons about individual responsibility—that each of us has the choice to act or not to act, and that there are consequences to our decisions. The evidence of this “crime of all crimes” against humanity demonstrates that the Holocaust was not inevitable; it happened because ordinary people became accomplices to the process of targeting groups of people and eventually to mass murder. Whether through sheer indifference or motivated by career advancement, peer approval, or antisemitic prejudice, in the long span between words of hate and the machinery of death at Auschwitz, many had the opportunity to affect the outcome. Neighbors and friends, doctors and judges, businessmen and clergy, educators and policemen and, ultimately, even other governments chose not to act. Legions of others—government workers and professionals—enabled and assisted in the implementation of policies and practices targeting Jews and others.

Remembrance obligates us not only to memorialize those who were killed but also to reflect on what could have been done to save them. Those who survived tell us that as many faced their horrific deaths, their last words were “Remember us. Tell our story.” Survivors promised that they would, and that *never again* would the world stand silent or look the other way. That was the promise that drove Lemkin's lifetime of commitment.

The Holocaust reminds us of the fragility of democracy and the need for citizens to be both well-informed and vigilant about the preservation of democratic ideals. An engaged citizenry that embraces the power of the individual to make a difference is the frontline defense for strong, just societies. What we do—or *choose not to do*—matters.

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

BOOKS

Eltringer, Nigel. *Accounting for Horror: Post-Genocide Debates in Rwanda*. London and Sterling, VA: Pluto Press, 2004.

Marrus, Michael R. *The Nuremberg War Crimes Trial, 1945–1946: A Documentary History*. Boston: Bedford Books, 1997.

Lemkin, Raphael. *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe: Laws of Occupation, Analysis of Government, Proposals for Redress*. Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1944.

Power, Samantha. *“A Problem from Hell”: America and the Age of Genocide*. New York: Basic Books, 2002.

Smith, Helmut Walser, ed. *The Holocaust and Other Genocides: History, Representation, Ethics*. Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 1982.

Totten, Samuel, William S. Parsons, and Israel W. Charny, eds. *A Century of Genocide: Critical Essays and Eyewitness Accounts*. New York: Routledge, 2004.

FILMS

A Good Man in Hell: General Roméo Dallaire and the Rwanda Genocide (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum)

Ghosts of Rwanda (PBS Home Video)

Witnessing Darfur (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum)