

rethinking
the
holocaust

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appendix
Speech to the Bundestag

On January 27, 1998, the German Holocaust Memorial Day, I spoke to the Bundestag, the German house of representatives. What I said there is really the conclusion I can draw from everything I tried to say in this volume.

Mr. Speaker of the Bundestag; Mr. President of Germany; Mr. President of the Bundesrat [upper house of Parliament]; Mr. Chancellor; Ladies and Gentlemen; dear friends. On January 27, 1945, the Soviet Army conquered the Auschwitz complex of camps. Still, only some 7,000–8,000 people were liberated, of which the majority were ailing people whose lives had been miraculously spared by the S.S. The other 58,000 had left a few days earlier on a death march.

They were followed, during the four months leading to the end of the war, by many hundreds of thousands from almost all of the concentration camps, marking the last spastic and endlessly brutal impact of the cruelest regime that the world has ever seen. On January 27 the horror

was still far from over, even though Auschwitz was no longer in the hands of the murderers.

Have we learned anything? People seldom learn from history, and the history of the Nazi regime constitutes no exception. We have failed as well to understand the general context. In our schools we still teach about Napoleon, for example, and how he won the battle of Austerlitz. Did he win it on his own? Maybe somebody assisted him in this? A few thousand soldiers perhaps? And what happened to the families of the fallen soldiers, to the wounded on all sides, to the villagers whose villages had been destroyed, to the women who had been raped, to the goods and possessions that had been looted? We are still teaching about the generals, about the politicians, and about the philosophers. We are trying not to recognize the dark side of history—the mass murders, the agony, the suffering that is screaming into our faces from all of history. We do not hear the wailing of Clio. We still fail to grasp that we will never be able to fight against our tendency toward reciprocal annihilation if we do not study it and teach it and if we do not face the fact that humans are the only mammals that are capable of annihilating their own kind.

The American sociologist Rudolph J. Rummel arrived at the conclusion that between the years 1900 and 1987 governments and government-like organizations murdered 169 million civilians, apart from the 34 million fallen soldiers. Who committed those crimes? Mainly nondemocratic regimes. Even though democracies committed crimes as well, they were responsible for only a fraction of 1 percent of the civilian victims.

These statistics are only partially useful. Actually, they do not reveal the tragedy but cover it up. We do know that it is people who were tortured and murdered, not statistics, but—it happened to an impossibly huge number of people who were just like you and me.

The war, which was instigated by National Socialist Germany, mainly for ideological reasons, cost the lives of about 49 million people, most of whom were civilians. If we adopt the definition of *genocide* used by the

United Nations, then what happened to the Polish nation and to the Roma, called Gypsies by others, was indeed genocide. The Polish nation as such was meant to disappear. The policy toward them was accompanied by mass murders: the Polish intellectuals had become the target for annihilation—universities and schools were shut down, the clergy were decimated, all the important economic businesses were confiscated, children of Polish families were deported to Germany to undergo “Germanization.” The Sinti and the Roma of Germany were slated for disappearance by means of mass murder and sterilization. Nomadic Roma were supposed to be murdered wherever they were in Europe (those of them who were settled, would be tolerated). Millions of Russians and other Soviet peoples—but Western Europeans, Italians, Balkan peoples, and Germans as well—became victims of the regime.

Why? I think that we have to be clear that a radical revolution had been planned, a mutiny against everything that had been before. It was not a new order of social classes, of religions or even of nations that was envisioned, but a completely new hierarchy—one constructed of so-called races—in which the invented master race did not only have the right but the duty to rule over the others and to enslave or murder all those it considered different from itself. This was a universalistic ideology: “Today Germany belongs to us, tomorrow the entire world,” as the Nazi song had it.

How was it possible for a people of culture who lived in the midst of Europe and who had developed one of the greatest civilizations ever, to subscribe to such an ideology, to instigate a war of annihilation because of it, and to stick to it until the bitter end? Terror was not the only reason, Ladies and Gentlemen. There was a consensus based on a promise of a wonderful utopia—a utopia of an idyllic community of people governing the world, devoid of friction, without political parties, without democracy, one that would be served by slaves. To achieve such a goal, it was necessary to revolt against everything that had been before: middle-class and Judeo-Christian morality, individual freedom, humanitarianism—the whole package of the French Revolution and the

Enlightenment. National Socialism was, in fact, the most radical of revolutions that had ever taken place—a mutiny against that which was, until then, thought of as humane.

The nucleus of the strategy to annihilate anybody thought of as different was the Holocaust, the project of the total annihilation of the Jewish people and the actual murder of all the Jews the murderers could lay their hands on. And the most horrible thing about the Shoah is in fact not that the Nazis were inhuman—the most horrible thing about it is that they were indeed human, just as human as you and I are. When we claim that they were different from us and that we can sleep in peace, with untroubled consciences, because the Nazis were devils and we ourselves are not devils because we are not Nazis, that is cheap escapism. Escapism of the same cheap kind is implicit when we say that the Germans were somehow genetically programmed to execute mass murders. Because most people are not Germans, many tend to think that whatever happened can never be repeated by anyone else and that it could have happened only in Germany. This is reverse racism.

All this happened almost sixty years ago. One would have thought that the famous bottom line should have been drawn long ago, that interest in this specific genocide would have petered out. Yet the opposite is the case. Hardly a week goes by without a new book being published somewhere in the world, or memoirs or a novel or a scientific debate, without plays being staged, without poetry appearing, without television programs or movies being released, and the like. Quite a lot of it might be kitsch, but a lot of it is of value. Again, we must ask why. Why is the Holocaust the central issue, and not Cambodia or the Tutsi or Bosnia or the Armenians or the Indians of North America?

I am not at all sure whether my answer to this very central question is better than any other, but I would nonetheless like to present it to you. I do not think the sadism and the brutality with which the victims were maltreated could offer an explanation, because suffering, agony, and torment cannot be graded. I have published, in English, the testimony of a Sinti woman who lost her husband and who saw her own three

children die in front of her very eyes. How is it possible to compare this with the tragedy of a Jew or of a Russian peasant or of a Tutsi or of a Cambodian Khmer? It is, surely, impossible to say that the suffering of one person is greater or less than that of another, that one mass murder is better or worse than another. Such a statement would be repulsive. If so, is it the brutality and the sadism that makes the Holocaust so singular? Indeed, National Socialist Germany enriched this tragic repertory in an extraordinary manner, but brutality is no novelty in history. Is the distinguishing factor, possibly, the fact of its having been a state-initiated mass murder carried out with the aid of modern technologies and bureaucratic thoroughness? I do not think so. The genocide of the Armenians was carried out with the aid of the then available technological and bureaucratic tools, and the Nazis themselves carried out their crimes against the Poles and against the Roma with the same methods that they used against the Jews.

No, I think the answer lies elsewhere. You see, for the first time in the whole of history, people who were descended from three or four of a particular kind of grandparents—Jewish ones—were condemned to death just for being born. The mere fact of their having been born was in itself their deadly crime that had to be avenged by execution. This has never happened before, anywhere. A second characteristic of the Holocaust that was unprecedented was that anybody of Jewish descent was to be caught wherever in the world Nazi Germany exercised influence, be it directly or through allies—anywhere in the world, a world that tomorrow would belong to “us.” The murder of Jews was not directed against the Jews of Germany or the Jews of Poland or even the Jews of Europe, but against all the seventeen million Jews scattered throughout the entire world of 1939. All other cases of genocide had been perpetrated on definite territories, although the territories may sometimes have been very wide, whereas the murder of the Jews was construed to be universal. Third, the ideology. Numerous colleagues of mine have analyzed the structure of Nazism, its bureaucracy, the day to day operation of the murder apparatus. All their findings are absolutely correct—but

why did the bureaucrats, who were shipping German schoolchildren by train to summer camps and Jews by train to death camps with the same administrative means, do the latter? Why murder all the Jews who could be found and not, let us say, all the green-eyed people who could be found? To try and explain this away with social structures—although they may have been very important—is unacceptable, as far I am concerned.

The motivation was ideological. The racist-antisemitic ideology was the rational outcome of an irrational approach, an approach that was a cancerlike mutation of the Christian antisemitic ideology that had sullied Christian-Jewish relations all through their two millennia of co-existence. Nazi antisemitism was pure ideology, with a minimal relation to reality: the Jews were accused of a worldwide conspiracy, an idea stemming from the Jew-hatred of the Middle Ages, whereas in reality Jews were not capable of achieving unity, not even on a partial basis. Between you and me, they are still not capable of it. A conspiracy did exist, but it was not a conspiracy by the Jews; it was one by the National Socialists.

The Jews were accused of being revolutionary agitators as well as capitalists, which means that all the different phobias were reduced to one single denominator. Naturally, most of the Jews belonged to neither of these categories, but were in the lower or middle class. They did not possess territories, nor did they command military might, nor did they control any national economy, if only because they did not constitute any entity, but observed their tradition, as individuals, following mutually contradictory interpretations, within the framework of small religious-ethnic communities or, when secular or atheistic, did not even belong to formal Jewish communities.

In all the other cases of genocide known to us, the motivation was somehow pragmatic, as in the case of the Armenians, where there was a nationalistic motivation for their murder, or in the case of Rwanda, where there is a deadly conflict over power and territory. In the case of

the Holocaust, the ideology underlying the genocide was, for the first time in history, pure fantasy.

One can add a fourth element to the unprecedented characteristics of the Holocaust: the concentration camp. The Nazis may not have invented it, but they surely brought it to a totally new stage of development. Not only the murder and the suffering in those camps should occupy our mind, but also the elevated level to which they brought the art of humiliation through the control they exercised over people through their physiological needs. This is without precedent in human history. True, the humiliations and the rest were not perpetrated against the Jews alone, but Jews were the ones on the lowest rung of that hell. What the Nazis achieved by subordinating Jews to that extreme, was not the dehumanization of the Jews but the dehumanization of their own selves. By establishing these horrific concentration camps they positioned themselves on the lowermost possible rung of humanity.

What did the Nazis leave behind? Where are their literary, their artistic, their philosophical, their architectural achievements? The Nazi Reich dissolved into nothingness. It left only one memorial: the ruins of the concentration camps and, crowning it, the only great achievement of Nazism—Auschwitz and the mass murder.

It is the lack of a precedent for the Holocaust that is beginning to be understood all over the world. A very special case of genocide took place here—total, global, purely ideological. It might be repeated—certainly not in the exact same form, but possibly in a similar, maybe even very similar manner, and we have no way of determining who will be the Jews and who might be the Germans the next time.

This menace is universal and at the same time—because it is founded on the experience of the Holocaust—very specifically connected with the Jews. The specific and the universal cannot be separated. It is the extreme character of the Holocaust that allows it to be compared with other cases of genocide and to be presented as a warning. It has in fact, been already copied, though not exactly. Should the warning be

ignored? Should the Holocaust serve as a precedent for others who would like to inflict the same onto yet others?

How could it have happened? I think that one must look at that ancient tradition included in the book that comes from my ancestors. In that book it is written that humankind can choose between Good and Evil, between life and death. This means that humankind is capable of both, that both exist within the self—both God and the devil. Expressed in a more modern fashion, it means that the urge for life and the wish for death—our own or others', is inside us. Under certain conditions we might become either Eichmanns or rescuers.

For Germany, we are not discussing guilt; we are talking about the responsibility toward the future of the culture within which this monster developed. Because, Ladies and Gentlemen, you know very well that "Death was a master from Germany"—although the Jews were never enemies of the Germans or of Germany. Quite the opposite. German Jews were always proud of how much good they had achieved for German civilization.

So how can the Nazi regime be explained? I think that a pseudo-intellectual elite took over power in Germany, and it did so not because the masses supported their potentially genocidal ideology, but because there was a situation of a grave crisis which the potentially genocidal layer of leaders offered a way out of, in the form of a wonderful utopia. The determining factor was that the layer of intellectuals—the academicians, the teachers, the students, the bureaucrats, the doctors, the lawyers, the churchmen, the engineers—joined the Nazi Party because it promised them a future and a status. Through the fast-growing identification of these intellectuals with the regime, it became possible to have the genocide easily presented as an unavoidable step toward the achievement of a utopian future. When Herr Doctor, Herr Professor, Herr Director, Herr Priest or Pastor, Herr Engineer, became collaborators with genocide, when a consensus evolved, led by the semimythological figure of the dictator, it became easy to convince the masses of the necessity of the murders and to recruit them to carry them out.

Something similar could happen elsewhere, but in Germany, where at least some of the elite had absorbed a radical antisemitism in the course of the nineteenth century and where many of them added a general racist ideology, it proved easy for the genocidal Nazi layer of leaders to turn the majority of German citizens into accomplices. A major role was played by academics. I keep returning to the question of whether we have indeed learned anything, whether we do not still keep producing technically competent barbarians in our universities.

And what about the churches? The Holocaust has brought to light a profound crisis in Christianity. Nineteen hundred years after the Christian Messiah spread the Gospel of love, his own people were murdered by baptized heathens. The churches, insofar as they did not collaborate, kept their silence.

On the other hand, one definitely cannot say that within German society a radical antisemitic norm had prevailed. There was, however, a general queasiness regarding the Jews, even among the non-antisemitic or even anti-antisemitic mutually antagonistic mass movements of the Social Democrats, the Communists, and the Catholic Center that constituted the majority of the German voting population up to the end of 1932. This queasiness made it practically impossible for a general protest against the murder of Jews to develop. It was not as though the dictatorship was so fully totalitarian as to make protest movements totally impossible. This was demonstrated not only by the opposition to the murder of handicapped Germans that brought about the stoppage, in August 1941, of the so-called euthanasia program, at least partially, but also the demonstration of German women in the Rosenstrasse in Berlin, in February–March 1943, which led to the freeing of their Jewish husbands. The fragility of the famous German-Jewish symbiosis became apparent, as any mass movement for the protection of the unpopular Jewish minority was totally outside the sphere of possibilities.

It seems to me that yet another factor is involved. European culture has two pillars: Athens and Rome on the one hand and Jerusalem on the other hand. An ordinary citizen of two hundred years ago, if he or she

owned a book at all, would probably have owned the Christian Bible, which, as we all know, is composed of two parts—the Old Testament and the New Testament. Both of them were written mainly by Jews.

Greek and Roman literature, law, art, and philosophy are and have surely been, as important to Western civilization as the prophets and the moral commandments of the Jewish Bible. Still, modern Italy and modern Greece do not use the same languages as in ages past; they do not worship the same gods, create the same kinds of art, or write the same kinds of literature. Different peoples live there now. But my granddaughter reads what the Jews wrote three thousand years ago, in the original, needing no dictionary. Try that with Chaucer—and he wrote only a few hundred years ago.

When the Nazis wanted to carry out their rebellion against Western culture, was it not the Jews, those still living reminders of one of the sources of that culture, that they had to annihilate? The Jews, whether they like it or not, are a central component of Western self-perception. This self-perception is diffused throughout the world by means of so-called Western civilization, as well as by means of kitsch culture—which also originates in the West.

There is an Auschwitz museum in a suburb of Hiroshima. Holocaust literature is read in South America. The Holocaust has assumed the role of universal symbol for all evil because it presents the most extreme form of genocide, because it contains elements that are without precedent, because that tragedy was a Jewish one and because the Jews—although they are neither better nor worse than others and although their sufferings were neither greater nor lesser than those of others—represent one of the sources of modern civilization.

The way I see it, a historian is one who not only analyzes history but also tells true stories. So let me tell you some stories. In Radom, in Poland, there lived a Jewish woman with two sons. Her husband had gone to Palestine in 1939 to prepare the way for his entire family to immigrate. The war broke the family apart. The husband became a

Palestinian citizen and tried to save his family by including them in an exchange with German settlers in Palestine.

In October 1942, when the woman already knew what awaited her and her children, a Gestapo man summoned her to headquarters and told her she was going to be exchanged. Within one hour she was supposed to turn up with her two sons at his office. Yes, said the woman, but my elder son is working outside the ghetto, and she asked how she was supposed to summon her son. That was none of his business, said the Gestapo man. They had to show up in one hour. And if not? The woman was desperate. Should she and her younger son share the fate of her firstborn? Or should she at least save herself and her younger son? She agonized over the decision back home. Her neighbor approached her and said: Look, you cannot save your son. Why don't you take my son in his stead? My son is the same age as your elder son. Shocked and in tears, the woman showed up at the Gestapo headquarters with two boys. On November 11, 1942, she arrived in Haifa. The two boys became, in time, prominent Israeli citizens, with children and grandchildren.

The woman spoke little after that. She was a proud person and would not live supported by the pity of others. [Her husband died soon after she joined him in Palestine.] Until the end of her life she ran a small stall opposite the great synagogue on Allenby Street in Tel Aviv. It was said that she was a survivor of the Holocaust. Had she really survived? I am not sure.

The Holocaust, along with all the other horrible things that the National Socialists perpetrated, shows not only the evil that Man is capable of but also—at the margins, so to speak—the opposite, the good. Oskar Schindler has become a controversial figure because of the well-known movie. But look, when you strip away the myth, something does remain. Schindler was not only a member of the Party; he had been a spy as well, a womanizer, an alcoholic, and a ruthless exploiter and liar. There are few people to be found on whom you could pin more negative characterizations. Yet he apparently contributed to saving the lives of

more than one thousand people while risking his own safety. He or his wife carried severely sick and dying Jewish slave laborers from a freezing train to try to save their lives. He did not have to do that, but he did. He went to Budapest to warn the Jews there about the Shoah. He did not have to do it, but he did. Why? Because he was a human being—as bad as he was, he also was good.

His story shows that one could, even as a German, even as a member of the Party, behave in a different way from the executors of the Holocaust. Schindler and others like him, like Otto Busse in Bialystok, who supplied the Jewish resistance with weapons, show us that it was possible to save lives. The deeds of these people prove, on the one hand, the guilt of the others, but also, on the other hand, that hope is not lost.

You see, there is the story of Maczek. Actually, his name is Mordechai. His name is the only thing that he knows about himself. Before the war, at the age of three, he was handed over by his mother to a Jewish orphanage in Łódź. This is what he was later told. Then came the war, and he was raised in Cracow by a Polish woman named Anna Morawczika. Naturally he thought she was his mother.

At the age of six, while playing on the street, he was hit by accident by a car full of German soldiers. The soldiers wanted to take him to the hospital, but Anna Morawczika opposed it with all her might. She knew he would be murdered instantly if it was found out that he had been circumcised.

When the war was over, a woman presented herself at Anna's. Anna told Maczek that this woman was his mother. This time, both women took the boy and put him in a Jewish orphanage in Łódź. The mother disappeared, never to be seen again. Maczek was brought to Israel. Anna, who had saved him, passed away shortly thereafter. Maczek does not know to this very day who he is. All he knows is that a Polish woman saved his life because she loved him—a Jewish boy orphan.

There were the Annas and the Schindlers, but they were few, very few. And most Nazis were like the S.S. man in the next story. I do not know whether the story is true, but here is how it goes: An S.S. man told

a Jewish woman that he would spare her life if she guessed which of his two eyes was of glass and which one was live. Without hesitating the woman pointed at one of the eyes and said, "This is the glass eye." "Correct," said the S.S. man, "but how did you find out?" The woman answered, "Because it looked more human than the other."

I now return to the question of whether we have learned anything. Not much, or so it seems to me. But hope persists, even among the traumatized people, a group to which I belong. You, Ladies and Gentlemen, just like members of other democratic parliaments, carry a very special responsibility—especially as Europeans, especially as Germans.

I do not have to tell you that what happened in Rwanda or in Bosnia happened right next door. To be reminded, as a consequence, of the Holocaust, constitutes only a first step. To teach and study about the Holocaust and everything that transpired during the Second World War and thereafter involving racism, antisemitism, and xenophobia—that constitutes our next responsibility. We Germans and Jews depend on each other in undertaking this responsibility. You cannot carry out the task of remembering without us, and we must be sure that here, where the disaster arose, a new, humane, better civilization is being constructed on the ruins of the past. Together we carry a very special responsibility toward the whole of humanity.

There might be one further step. The book of which I spoke earlier contains the Ten Commandments. Maybe we should add three additional ones: "You, your children, and your children's children shall never become perpetrators"; "You, your children, and your children's children shall never, ever allow yourselves to become victims"; and "You, your children, and your children's children shall never, *never*, be passive on-lookers to mass murder, genocide, or (may it never be repeated) a Holocaust-like tragedy."

I thank you for your kind attention.