

International Task Force on the Holocaust
Remarks
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Last week at the Claims Conference Executive Committee in Jerusalem, we were joined by several Israeli air force officers. They were representative of a larger group of officers who had visited Auschwitz earlier this year in a program supported by the Conference, and they had come to tell us about their experiences and to screen excerpts from a video they had made. Some had grandparents who were survivors of the Holocaust, and they spoke about how the trip had impressed upon them the importance of their role as defenders of the State of Israel and of the Jewish people. The film showed these young officers standing at attention, while three Israeli fighter jets swooped down in a salute from the sky. Interspersed with this was black-and-white footage taken from the planes' cameras showing their approach to the camp entrance.

I know there were some critics in Poland who thought this military display was inappropriate to the somber setting of the death camp. I was uncertain of my own views when I first read accounts of the episode in the press at the time. But as I watched the film and listened to these young pilots in Jerusalem, I could not help but think of that other black-and-white aerial photo of Auschwitz on display in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The death camp was photographed by Allied pilots but never bombed. Watching this video now, how could anyone not imagine what might have been, had there been a Jewish state, had there been an Israeli air force at the time? Politically correct or not, I realized my eyes were moist and I was on the verge of crying. On at least one elemental level, I knew that this was a proper response to the lessons of Auschwitz, one that, I believe, is shared by all Jews and, I hope, by others, as well.

Of course, we are accustomed to thinking about Holocaust education in more traditional, pedagogic ways, and we have witnessed remarkable advances in recent years. The meeting today of this international task force and the work that it does are among the most obvious examples. Last month's gathering of Holocaust survivors in Washington as part of the tenth anniversary commemoration of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum is another. Perhaps "celebratory" seems an incongruous word to use for such an event, but that does capture some sense of the weekend. Many of us can recall the early days of the Memorial Council and the modest sites in unfashionable Washington neighborhoods that were first considered for the permanent museum building. When the possibility emerged of locating it in so prominent a place as the National Mall, most people reacted with concern and anxiety. They were nervous that a museum of the Holocaust would be seen as a jarring and inappropriate insertion in a landscape of American memorials and museums, misunderstood and unappreciated by tourists who might accidentally walk through its doors. But in these ten years its popularity has defied everyone's expectations, and it is now a premier destination for diplomats, dignitaries, and millions of American and foreign visitors. Its founders, many of whom are survivors themselves, have good reason to feel proud.

In Jerusalem, Yad Vashem is marking its jubilee year with the construction of architecturally breathtaking new buildings that will establish it as the preeminent center for Holocaust research,

education, and commemoration, integrated thematically—and visually—into the present-day life of Israel and its capital. It is already hard to recall the early, modest building that was for many of us the very first encounter with a Holocaust museum.

We should also recognize the dramatic developments that have occurred in other countries, many of whom are represented here today. A growing number of nations have established official Holocaust commemoration days. Greece, the Czech Republic and Romania are among those that have done so during this year. Many have also erected memorials to mark the events of the Holocaust in their respective countries. Some states—including Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia—have established international historical commissions to examine the events of the Holocaust on their territories. Romania has recently joined this group. We are now witnessing for the first time in these new democracies the publication of critical, objective research on the subject. And in addition to the newly published books and articles, the commissions are leaving in their wake a cadre of Holocaust educators and teachers who will serve the coming generations. I also want to acknowledge the Government of Poland for its partnership with my own organization in the development of a proper memorial and museum at the site of the Bełżec Death Camp, which is now under construction.

Surely, fears that the Holocaust would fade from memory have been permanently put to rest.

But it is hard to be sanguine about these developments when at the same time we are witnessing a renewed wave of anti-Semitism that, we had assumed, Holocaust education and memory should have prevented. Paradoxically, it seems as though both have become stronger than ever. And adding to the offense is the fact that the language and images of the Holocaust have become the tool of choice for the anti-Semite.

Many of the very same Nazi-like caricatures that fomented Jew-hatred in the 1930s have found new audiences today, primarily, but not solely, in the Arab world. (Only last week the Political Cartoon Society of Great Britain gave its annual award to a drawing of Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon eating a Palestinian baby.) Traditional anti-Semitic tracts like *Mein Kampf* and the *Protocols* are being reprinted, and the latter was even adapted for Egyptian television. In June, Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Muhammed welcomed the Organization of the Islamic Conference with a speech that accused the Jews of controlling the world “by proxy” and bemoaned the fact that Europe had only managed to kill six million. Delegates applauded his words. Even the Western European press has seen fit to focus special attention on the Jewish background of certain Washington officials who were advocates of the U.S. war in Iraq, as though they bore special responsibility. The editors of one such article in the Berlin daily *Tagespiegel* decided to illustrate it with a photograph of President Bush meeting a half-dozen bearded, ultra-Orthodox rabbis in the Oval Office.

Criticism of Israel is not anti-Semitism. But, since the onset of the second intifada, it has become commonplace to see Israel described as a Nazi state, its army likened to storm troopers and accused of genocide and other heinous crimes. There can be little doubt that such steady and vitriolic anti-Israel rhetoric has inflamed passions and even contributed directly to the physical attacks on Jewish targets in Europe. Most notably have been those carried out by Muslim youth in France. Despite a belated but serious crackdown by government authorities, the Chief Rabbi still

finds it necessary to advise Jews to wear hats over their *kippot* when going out in public, lest they make themselves targets. Thus, it is alarming, but perhaps not surprising, when a survey of EU member nations finds that 59 percent of the public considers the State of Israel to be the greatest threat to world peace today.

Central and Eastern European countries have not witnessed similar anti-Israel manifestations, but there are other factors that have kept anti-Semitism in play. Notable among them have been the political reactions to efforts aimed at securing the restitution of former Jewish communal property. Populist elements have frequently exaggerated the scope of such claims and their economic impact, which has fed anti-Jewish sentiments in places where there are today only faint shadows of prewar Jewish life. Some centrist political leaders, who themselves may recognize that restitution is the right and just step to take, are nevertheless fearful that it will be a political liability. And yet, even in those countries where the progress has been greatest, it has provided only a limited degree of self-sufficiency to small reviving Jewish communities, typically at levels well below that received by other religious confessions. But those who would stir up these age-old prejudices do not let facts get in their way.

One year ago representatives of the 55 member states of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), meeting in Portugal, agreed to hold the first conference focused solely on the problem of anti-Semitism. The U.S. delegation took the lead in pressing for this decision, and there were many who thought the consensus process of the OSCE would thwart final approval. Anti-Semitism had traditionally been addressed only as a subset of the more general problems of racism, xenophobia, and intolerance. Many in Europe were dismissive of the seriousness of the concern, and a few even suggested it was contrived by Americans to serve domestic political purposes. Sadly, it was not uncommon for people to ignore or deny the resurgence of anti-Semitism or to believe it was a demon that Europe had permanently vanquished from its soil. Evidence to the contrary—such as the EU Monitoring Center report, which many of us read in its draft form last February—was simply withheld.

This year—this week, in fact—OSCE ministers meeting in the Netherlands have resolved to hold a follow-up meeting on anti-Semitism, which will be hosted by the German government in Berlin next April. President Johannes Rau, accompanied by Israeli President Moshe Katzav, will open the conference. When OSCE delegates met in Poland in October at its annual Human Dimension Implementation Meeting, most spoke approvingly of these plans. Ironically, news accounts of the Malaysian Prime Minister's anti-Semitic remarks greeted delegates on the closing day of the meeting. And if this was timely evidence of the "new anti-Semitism" the old was still on display, too: For sale in the gift shop of the conference hotel in Warsaw one could find a carved wooden Jew, with hooked nose, squinty eyes, and hands grasping real Polish coins.

Anti-Semitism has been likened to a virus in society, something that can be controlled but never eliminated. Thus, most important are the measures we take to isolate and combat it and the speed and thoroughness with which we move. Acts of rescue and resistance during the Holocaust were painfully few, but they still meant that thousands were saved. And they demonstrated that many, many more could have done something. Today there are fortunately signs that people are at last beginning to take the problem seriously. The French President has established his own commission, and his Interior Minister has acted with vigor to prevent further acts of violence. The President of the European Commission has announced intentions to organize his own meeting on

anti-Semitism in Brussels early next year. In the face of repeated desecrations of Jewish sites and negative depictions in the media, the Greek Foreign Minister has sought international allies in confronting anti-Semitism in his country.

When organizations and individuals first sounded the alarm, some claimed that anti-Semitism in Europe was at its greatest level since the Holocaust. Others likened it to Germany in the 1930s. This itself engendered a heated debate as to whether such analogies were fair or useful, whether they were appropriate lessons drawn from the history of the Holocaust or a manipulation of its memory. Perhaps lost in the exchange was the emerging, irrefutable fact that the problem is real and serious. One should not need to prove that this latest wave of anti-Semitism is precursor to another Holocaust in order to confront it as though it could be. Surely, this is one lesson we can all draw from this darkest chapter in human history.