

The Holocaust and Human Rights

“Never Forget” is the most prevalent pair of words that is associated with the Holocaust. But what is it exactly that we must never forget in the complex of issues that make up the Holocaust? It is a question that troubles good and many of those who care. Is it mainly the unprecedented atrocities and the emotional impact that they leave on us? Is it the issue of anti-Semitism that seems raise its ugly head time and again? Or maybe it is the concern that the memory of the Holocaust will fade and thus be foreign to the generations to come? And in this context – how can we preserve the memory of the most horrific experience of the Jewish people, or is it just a Jewish issue rather than a universal one, such that belongs to the entire world? These and other related questions come to the fore at all times. They seem to be accentuated, however, in the proximity of the Israeli Holocaust Memorial Day.

Strange as it might seem to be, a close examination of the public debate of these issues suggests, however, that what might be the most important aspect of all here is left untouched. This is that of the Human Imperative that results from the Holocaust – the Imperative of Human Rights, of Humanity in its very self.

Indeed, the most horrible thing about the Holocaust is not those atrocities committed so easily by the Nazis and their associates. Nor is it the aggregate suffering and numbers of the victims, mainly the Jews but not only them.

The Holocaust, it has to be stressed, goes beyond these unparalleled atrocities. Also, attempts to confine it by suggesting that it was just a manifestation - even if the worst ever in history - of anti-Semitism, is an escape from its far reaching horrors and an act of humanisation of those who caused the Holocaust and possibly also their actions. This way to look at the Holocaust might be an “easy” way to “explain” it but what it really does is to narrow the implications that should be drawn from the Holocaust as the most significant single event in the entire history of Humanity. It also enable an escape from the imperative of Human Rights that must never be ignored and brushed off. Because herein, in the Holocaust, lay the most important issue ever of Human Rights.

The truth is that the Holocaust can be explained, in a way, in a rather simple term that still touches on the crux of its evil nature. This is when we look at the Holocaust in its philosophical sense. Not only does it not allow for the slipping out of memory – collective as well as private – of the atrocities committed. But it adds what might be the main dimension to this memory: that in this way we point at the very heart of the Holocaust. It can be summarised as follows:

The Holocaust is the philosophical assertion by some humans that another group of humans and its members are devoid of their human traits and nature.

This philosophical assertion enables the regarding of fellow humans as non-humans – as it did in the case of the Nazis. The next stage is almost automatic then – one does no longer kill, slaughter or torture people but simply eradicate, exterminate and wipe out entire populations without the need to feel anything at all. Exactly as one behaves with mosquitoes or weeds. Once this is the premise, as was that of the Nazi regime – a single

and unique phenomenon in the entire Human history – one can become mechanical in performing the worst of atrocities. This is what happened. This is what the Holocaust has been all about. And this is the most horrific of all and it had happened only once in the entire human history – in Nazi Germany.

It is frightening how cold and simple it all is. Consider such atrocities as the mass massacres in Rwanda, for example, or the former Yugoslavia or other such events that frequent our planet. Therein the difference stands out. Of course, Massive massacres, and genocide, are widely condemned as they should be but when analysed, they appear for they are – human activity. Condemned – but still human. They are caused by human reasons and motives: hate, fear, jealousy, greed – all of which are human emotions and when in their extreme – a possible cause for such atrocities. Civilisation recognises these drives and also these acts and it is exactly because of it that it developed “laws of war” which are but an attempt to regulate these atrocities, based on the recognition in their human origins. Herein also fall the phenomena of anti-Semitism – or for this matter, also other types of racism and ethnic or religious discrimination. Again, here we are talking bad, condemned – but human feelings and activities.

The Holocaust, on the other hand, has never had – nor could it have – any excuse such as human feelings. Indeed, it has exceeded the boundaries of humanity. Once the philosophical assertion was there, all the rest could follow rather mechanically. It had functioned – and was treated – like any other good industrial process. The ultimate goal, like that of all industrial endeavours ever, has always been the ability to make a process where the product produces itself. This is exactly what happened under the Nazi regime. Consider the Death Factory of Treblinka, for example. In the few months of its operation, almost one million Jews literally evaporated through its furnaces and chimneys. It might be a surprise to many to learn that only two dozen or so of German personnel had run this factory of horror. Of these, the majority had mainly been busy in what would normally be regarded as “administrative” tasks – co-ordination of transport, bookkeeping, requisition management and other such jobs. The German layer was that of management, in business terms. Foremanship, “floor management” and production co-ordination was left to some hundred or so Ukraine thugs and likewise collaborators of other nationalities. But the actual workers of this death and horror factory, the labour force, who eventually executed the chores of the actual extermination, were the Jewish victims themselves. The product was thus producing itself in a fully automated process, a super efficient industrial endeavour. Here the immense force and inhuman face of Nazism reveals itself in its most horrific facet. Cold, matter-of-fact type, philosophically based and supported, totally alienated extermination policy and practice, deprived of any emotion or otherwise human consideration.

Or consider the way in which the same Death Factory was dismantled. Once realising that the extermination process must stop – just because Germany was about to lose the War, not because of remorse or any such human consideration. The consideration had now shifted to what would happen after the war. The Nazi Germany’s leadership did not regret its policy or actions, nor did it think there was anything wrong in these. Their concern was what they thought as the rest of the world’s lack of ability to accept these policies and practice. Two types of actions had to be taken under these circumstances. One, as no understanding of it was expected from the rest of the world, all traces of that industrial enterprise had better be eradicated. Again, cold and calculated operation

devoid of any human touch. But there was more to it, not less cold-blooded and if you wish – cynical, maybe monstrous would be a more suitable a term for it. The ever planning Germans had decided, in February, 1945, realising that the war is about to be over, to establish an institute that would actually begin to operate immediately once the war is over, not a moment earlier, when a new political leadership is instated in the land. Only one objective was set for this Institute: to bring about the improving of the image of the German people and the “New Germany.” It was to be achieved through dialogue and negotiations with countries around the world – mainly those of the Allies – so as to reach agreements that would affect their educational authorities and systems to this one carefully designed end. Again, not as a cynical play or ploy but as a planned policy. It might be noted here that no by any coincident, Germany has never, in fact – not even in its surrendering documentation – conceded and regretted its crimes against humanity.

Three other incidents might be also better looked at in this light. One is the German attempt, at the time, to release the one last prisoner of the Nuremberg Tribunals who was ageing and in poor health. The expenses were huge, they said and the man is anyway good as dead. Let us release him, they said to the Four Great Powers who held the Prisoner, Rudolph Hess, on humanitarian grounds. But Mr. Hess was in Spandau Prison not because he was a common criminal. He was sentenced because his were crimes against humanity. If there had been only one reason to keep him there it would still be based on exactly humanitarian ground.

The second incident that comes to mind is known as the Bidburg incident. When President Reagan had visited Germany, Chancellor Kohl insisted that the President would lay a reed of flower in what he suggested was been a military cemetery. Except that it was an SS personnel cemetery. What is the big deal, Kohl asked – they were soldiers and they died while defending their country, exactly as any other soldier. But unlike the regular national army, the SS was entirely different type of organisation, so recognised both by Nazi Germany and accordingly – and also so recognised by the entire international community. Indeed, the SS had as its declared and official goal to execute policies that stemmed - and resulted directly from its overt subscription to - the anti-human philosophy that allowed, indeed purported, the expulsion of human groups and individuals from the human species. Thus, the very membership in this despicable organisation was declared by the International Tribunal to be – in itself – a crime against Humanity. This is, of course, very much unlike service in the army, which is accepted as a mere manifestation of active citizenship even if such an army might engage in War Crimes or even in Genocide. What Chancellor Kohl had tried to do here must not be swept aside as a meaningless negligence or a mere diplomatic clumsiness devoid of aforethought planning. It was yet another step in the ongoing effort of Germany to push to banality its eternal responsibility for Nazism.

The third incident also falls in this pattern. Again it involved Mr. Kohl, this time when he visited Israel and was ushered through the halls of “Yad-VaShem” permanent Memorial and exhibition of the Holocaust. This is a visit that appears on the itinerary of every head of state or foreign dignitary who visits Israel and it is regarded as an important engagement. In his visit, Mr. Kohl not only appeared to be in a real hurry while there, but he was pertinent enough to dismiss the explanatory facts related to him by the official guide, suggesting that he does not have to be taught his country’s history.

Mr Kohl would not act as he did if he did not think that he could get away with it – which, one should acknowledge, is what really happen. Not much was there in terms of public uproar or protest, in either incident. In a way, it is quite understandable. Half a century after the high day of Nazism, with its industry of human extermination, most of the people who actually witnessed the era are no longer with us. Emotions, being what they are, become mollified and obtuse. And it is exactly what those who would like to eradicate the memory of the Holocaust welcome – to dwell on the emotional aspects of it and thus ensure that it fades out and away.

But if we made certain to look at the Holocaust as it had been in itself, a philosophical and political cold-blooded event, we could preserve its memory. Indeed, this philosophical assertion is the most horrific of all. This has to be perennially reminded lest it is repeated. If anyone would be allowed to exclude individual or groups of humans from the human species, as Nazi philosophy propagated, it would only be a matter of time and degree before we witness another Holocaust. War Crimes and Genocide must be fought and reduced but Holocaust must not be allowed and tolerated at all. The only one Holocaust that human history evidenced was much more than the world could and should take. Guarding from its recurrence must begin with the understanding of its nature, which in its coldness look - devoid of any emotion - at humanity, had so easily led an entire nation to participate in its application.

Emotions fade away in time and at best turn into meaningless habitual pattern of ritual performing. The Holocaust is – and should be – spared such a destiny. Preservation of Humanity requires that it becomes the ever-warning black flag that mark the limit beyond which humanity ends. The preservation of the memory of the Holocaust thus must be regarded as the first maxim of the very notion of “Human Right” itself, without which there is no room for any talk even, about violation of such Rights.