

International Holocaust Memorial Day 2015 St. Augustine's in-the-Woods, Freeland
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I want to begin, today, with some numbers: 10 million, 6 million, 1 million.

Some of that number are my relatives.

My Aunt Bertha - actually my second cousin - was born in England but married Jakob Schreiner, who was from southern Germany - on the border with Switzerland - which is where they settled after their marriage. Jakob was a Roman Catholic - his parents had converted from Judaism. When the Nazis came to power in the 1930's Jakob and Bertha moved to Zurich, Switzerland, where they stayed until the 1950's, but most of Jakob's family remained in southern Germany.

Aunt Bertha once told me - the only time she ever said anything about her German relatives - she once told me that they disappeared, and were never heard from again - they disappeared to a place called Auschwitz-Birkenau.

And those numbers? 10 million Slavs and Soviet prisoners of war, 6 million Jews (2/3 of all Jews living in Europe), one million Disabled, Romanis ('gypsies'), gay men, Catholics, Protestants, Jehovah Witnesses, and the list goes on. And these numbers are greatly under-reported.

Disposable human beings.

Last Tuesday - January 27 - is, every year, International Holocaust Memorial Day; it's the date in 1945 that Auschwitz-Birkenau was liberated, which made Tuesday the 70th Anniversary of that liberation. There were only 7,000 concentration camp prisoners alive on that day.

The people who survived that camp - and all the others are dying. In 2012 there were about 500,000 still alive. Two years later that number was 300,000. The last generation of survivors - now in their late 70's and older - is passing on. By the 75th Anniversary there will be many fewer - perhaps there will be none left to remember.

And as shocking as those numbers are, there are others that are worse and many that come close: Stalin is believed to have murdered 20 Million of his own people; Cambodia: over 2 million; The Armenian genocide carried away a million; Rwanda nearly as many; and the list goes on: Bosnia, Darfur, Syria.

On this continent the decimation of the native peoples through exposure to diseases and also the intentional policy of the government of this nation is estimated to have led to the deaths of perhaps ten million native Americans (some say many more), and is now referred to by some scholars as the North American Genocide.

The Nazi Holocaust stands as the symbol, witness, and reminder to all of us that we must never forget – never forget not only the evils Nazism perpetrated on the innocent populations of

Europe, but the evil human beings have perpetrated on other human beings across our planet across the ages. We must hold these evils and this evil in our collective memories and make sure we do all in our power to try and prevent these hideous crimes from ever happening again. Humanity is still scarred by genocide, ethnic cleansing, racism, anti-semitism and xenophobia. We as people of faith, committed to a vision of peace in community, share a solemn responsibility to fight those evils and this evil.

So you might ask, “What can I do? Isn’t this the responsibility of the policy makers, of governments?”

The answer, I think, is best expressed by the Jewish-Czech author Yehuda Bauer who proclaimed “Thou shalt not be a victim, thou shalt not be a perpetrator, but, above all, thou shalt not be a bystander.”

The Civil Rights movement taught us that policy makers act when they feel public pressure to act. Some of you here remember when segregation was not just a fact of life but the law in the southern part of this nation. More of us remember when apartheid ruled South Africa.

In this nation, and in South Africa, mass movements created the political will to change the laws and are gradually changing the cultures.

We have a particular place to and role in any such movement as this; religious leaders - and all people of faith - are (more perhaps than anyone else) called to “walk the talk” when it comes to this sort of issue. We must never forget what human beings are capable of; we must make indifference to genocide culturally unacceptable and politically impossible. We must educate and advocate, demonstrate and legislate.

Just as the nineteenth century was the century of the movement to abolish slavery, we can make the twenty-first the century the one when we abolish genocide. Genocide, like slavery, is caused by human will. Human will – including our will – can end it.

And the place to begin is with the Holocaust. Not only “never forget,” but “never rest” while whole communities are threatened with extermination by the powerful and the evil in our midst.

We do this because we are people of faith. But there is another reason, one hauntingly expressed by Leon Schagrin, a Polish Jew who survived three years in Auschwitz and now lives in south Florida. “What I want you to take away from my life story is just how important it is to defend your freedom, at all costs,” he said. “Experience has shown me that if you lose your freedom, you are condemned to fail.”

In the end, confronting evil is also about the struggle for freedom, and that is as much our story as his, and everyone else who is faced with the evils of totalitarianism and all the hate-filled ideologies of the Far Right and the Far Left.

Let us never forget; let us never be bystanders, let us never give up our cause of freedom and of peace.