The Use and Abuse of Holocaust Memory

Bradley Lecture
By Walter Reich
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I’m very grateful to Chris DeMuth and to the AEI for inviting me to give this Bradley Lecture. It’s a privilege to speak about a subject that means a lot to me before an audience that means a lot to me. This is a case in which the seriousness of the topic is matched and deepened by the seriousness of those who’ve come here to engage it. For this opportunity I thank you, Chris, I thank the AEI and I thank the Bradley Foundation.

The Irony of Holocaust Memory: Even as It Grows Stronger, It Grows More Vulnerable to Distortion and Misuse

This talk is about Holocaust memory, and I want to be clear, at the outset, about what I mean by that term.

By “Holocaust memory” I mean the public’s consciousness of the Holocaust in the years since the event—what the public has known, or at least what it has *thought* it has known, about the Holocaust. And that consciousness, in turn, has depended on a number of factors that have changed radically over time. Those factors have included the readiness of Holocaust survivors to talk about the Holocaust; the readiness of Jewish communities around the world to talk about it or to have it be talked about; the readiness of governments, the media and the general public to focus on it; and, once the Holocaust did become the focus of general interest some thirty years after the event, the ways in which it has been presented to the public, both accurately and, too often, inaccurately, and what the public has absorbed from those presentations.

To illustrate the striking differences between what Holocaust memory used to be like in the decades after it happened, and what it subsequently became, I’d like to tell you two stories. Yes, like all stories, they’re only anecdotes. But they’re anecdotes that are very typical and very telling.

The first story is one I heard from an Auschwitz survivor about ten years ago.

The survivor recalled that, in the late 1940’s, while teaching Hebrew in a Jewish elementary school in Queens, New York, she was asked by one of her students why she had numbers tattooed on her forearm.

“A few years ago,” she explained to the student, “there was a war in Europe, and I was in a kind of prison, where they put numbers on the arms of the prisoners.”

That night the survivor-teacher received an angry call from the school’s principal, a rabbi—who was, I should say, a highly-regarded educator. He said: “Phillip’s mother just called me. She’s upset. You were telling atrocity stories again!”

“But,” the teacher responded, “Phillip asked me about the number on my arm. What should I have told him?”

The rabbi’s answer was curt and gruff: “You should have told him that it was your phone number!”

That story was told to me by that teacher fifty years after it happened. We were sitting in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington while I was that museum’s director, and she was marveling that, against the background of long years of silence about the Holocaust, there was now a U.S. government museum devoted to telling the public about that event. She was even more amazed that the museum was located adjacent to the National Mall, and that, every year, two million visitors, 80 percent of them non-Jews, were surging through its exhibition on the murder of the Jews of Europe. For decades after the Holocaust, she observed, almost no one, either Jew or non-Jew, had wanted to hear about it. And when she’d tried to talk about it she was told by fellow Jews, including friends and relatives, that it was time to get over it, to get past it, to move on. Her principal’s chastising demand that she should have told her student that the number on her arm was her phone number was consistent with the pressure she felt from the Jewish community to not talk about the Holocaust, to not advertise
it, to let the memory of it get buried by the passage of time.

What were the sources of that pressure? Maybe there was a discomfort about displaying the immensity of the victimization that Jews had, once again in history, suffered—a victimization in response to which the world did almost nothing, a victimization that highlighted the fact that Jews have often been seen as alien and unwanted in the societies in which they’ve lived, and a victimization to which, they feared, they remained vulnerable—perhaps even in America. Why advertise the fact that one belongs to a group that is so hated and so weak that powers all over the world have repeatedly tried, during two millennia, to expel or murder it? There may also have been a sense, on the part of both some survivors and their families, that, if they dwelled on their victimization, they would be unable to pursue productive lives in their new country. Besides, victimization status in those years was very different from what it has since become, especially in America. In those years, that status was often the basis for both blame and shame. After all, why did the victims allow it to happen to them? Why didn’t they fight back? Why did no one want to help them? It was only decades after the Second World War that victimization came to be seen, especially in America, not as a mark of shame but as a badge of honor that elevated the status of those who had been victimized—a status claimed by numerous groups that had been the objects of discrimination and that had suffered in a variety of ways.

The second story I want to tell you is about an event that I experienced myself.

In 1963, during the decades of silenced memory that the survivor-teacher in the first story mentioned, I reviewed for my college newspaper, the Columbia Daily Spectator, an exhibition at the YIVO Institute in New York, an organization devoted to the study of Jewish life in Eastern Europe before the Holocaust. The exhibition, sparsely attended and unusual for its time, had been mounted to mark the twentieth anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. While walking on Columbia’s campus the day my review appeared, I came across a teacher with whom I’d grown close, a non-Jewish philosophy professor. “I saw your article in the Spectator today,” he said. “Why are you still hung up on the Holocaust?”

That exhibition was displayed two decades after the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. More than four additional decades have now gone by. Yet the uprising, and the Holocaust itself, are discussed incomparably more now than they were, or could have been, at the time of the exhibition. America, like much of the Western world, has seen an explosion of Holocaust consciousness. Beginning with the 1978 television miniseries, The Holocaust, seen by hundreds of millions of viewers in this country and abroad, the public has been exposed to a torrent of documentaries, commercial films and fiction about the murder of Europe’s Jews. Many states now mandate Holocaust education in their school systems. Congress has mandated the observance, every year, of National Days of Remembrance for the victims of the Holocaust, and an elaborate ceremony is held annually in the Rotunda of the Capitol attended by members of Congress, the administration, and the Supreme Court, as well as by members of Washington’s diplomatic corps. U.S. military units carry flags in full military dress. Presidents and Cabinet members speak. And a Lutheran soprano, a Master Sergeant in the U.S. Army Band, also known as “Pershing’s Own,” has regularly sung, in Yiddish, Es Brent (It Burns), a song about the destruction of a Polish Jewish village, which was sung in ghettos and camps during the Holocaust. Similar ceremonies are held, during those congressionally designated days, across the country. And at least twenty Holocaust museums have been opened in the United States alone, in addition to the national museum in Washington.

And I should add that, two weeks ago, even the UN, hardly a friend of Israel, declared an annual Holocaust Memorial Day, an event marred only by the comments of the Egyptian ambassador to the U.N., who complained that “no one should have the monopoly on suffering.”[1]

Yet, despite this international recognition, public education, commemoration and discussion, especially in America, not all is well in this revived landscape of Holocaust memory. Ironically—and some would even argue predictably—together with this torrent of information about the Holocaust has come, even in America, much misinformation about it—as well as distortion, trivialization, politicization, competition for victimization, resentment and ever-mounting kitsch. And, worst of all, this torrent of Holocaust memory has been accompanied by the hijacking of that memory in the service of ends other than memory itself.

This evening I want to touch on some of the elements of this irony—its sources, its threat to the future of Holocaust memory, and what I fear will be lost if that memory is lost.

Assaulting Holocaust Memory

Distorting the Very Definition of the Holocaust—Six Million vs. Eleven Million

In cataloguing the distortions of Holocaust memory, there’s no more telling place to begin than with the definition of the word “Holocaust” itself. Yes, we know that it’s a word derived from the Greek, and that it means a total destruction, a complete consummation by fire. It’s a kind of translation of the Yiddish word khurbn that was used
for years after the event, a word borrowed from the Hebrew word hurban. The Hebrew word that has long been used in referring to the event is Shoah; Holocaust Memorial Day in Israel is known as Yom HaShoah. What these words refer to is the effort by Nazi Germany between 1939 and 1945, overwhelmingly successful, to murder all of the Jews it could get its hands on simply because they were Jews.

But something amazing happened to that word in the late 1970s. And I’d like to spend a few minutes describing what happened because it can teach us a lot about the transformation of meaning and of memory, including Holocaust memory. It’s a fascinating story that illustrates how, sometimes, history is trumped—or even officially written—by the powers of political expediency and rhetoric. In telling part of this story I want to acknowledge drawing from research done by Peter Novick and Edward Linenthal.

In May of 1978, President Jimmy Carter, in a ceremony on the White House lawn in honor of Israel’s 30th anniversary, announced that he was establishing a commission to explore the creation of a national memorial “to the six million who were killed in the Holocaust.” I won’t dwell here on the political dimensions of the decision to establish the commission at that time, which had at least something to do with difficulties that Carter was then having with America’s Jewish community.

On the day after Carter made that speech about the six million, a White House aide suggested that the new commission might expand the number six million to eleven million so as to include in the definition of Holocaust five million non-Jewish victims.[2] Eleven months later, in April 1979, at the first national “Days of Remembrance” ceremony in the Capitol Rotunda, President Carter spoke of “eleven million innocent victims exterminated—six million of them Jews.” And five months after that, in September 1979, Elie Wiesel, the chairman of the Carter-appointed President’s Commission on the Holocaust, delivered the Commission’s report, which stressed the specifically Jewish essence of the Holocaust, noting that “any attempt to dilute or deny this reality would be to falsify it in the name of misguided universalism.”[3] The report didn’t deny that the Germans had other victims as well; but it stressed the Jewish focus of the murderous Nazi enterprise.

A month later, a White House aide urged Carter that, in his executive order creating the United States Holocaust Memorial Council, the permanent successor to the temporary President’s Commission on the Holocaust, he, the president, should “make clear the memorial is to honor the memory of all victims of the Holocaust—six million Jews and some five million other peoples.”[4] Another White House aide pointed out that this definition—eleven million—had been originated by Simon Wiesenthal, “whose Holocaust credentials are as good as anyone else I know.”[5] Elie Wiesel resisted this broad definition of the Holocaust, trying to finesse the matter by separating the “systematic state-sponsored extermination of six million Jews” from “the millions of other Nazi victims.” But in the end Carter refused this wording, and in issuing his executive order establishing the United States Holocaust Memorial Council he referred to eleven million victims.

And so the executive order creating the federal body that would in turn create the Holocaust Museum officially defined the Holocaust in a way that realized Wiesel’s great fear—that the Holocaust would be defined as an event in which eleven million people, six million Jews and 5 million non-Jews, had been killed, and that the crucial distinction between the planned and systematic extermination of all Jews on racial grounds, and the killing of civilian non-Jews on, say, political grounds—in response to resistance, or because of acts of collective reprisal or brutality—would be lost.

The difference between the two types of killing wasn’t in the final result. A Jew who was killed in a gas chamber as part of an extermination program to kill all Jews was no more dead than was a non-Jew who was killed by a bullet because he or she was a political opponent of the Germans; and the death of the Jew was no more tragic than the death of the non-Jew. The difference was that the first death was part of a ferocious, total, systematic and industrialized program of genocide, the most ferocious that has ever occurred, and the latter death was part of the savage brutality of Nazi Germany. It was the totality and intent of the first process that made it unique, and that the world must understand, in order to understand the nature and possibilities of murderous racism and genocide. The second process, alas, the world has seen all too much of; the Germans, during the Second World War, brought that process to a high pitch, but it wasn’t a unique one. The difference isn’t in the death; it’s in the context and intent of that death. If one erases the difference by merging the deaths under the single rubric of “Holocaust,” one erases our ability to understand the peculiarly evil nature of the mass extermination of an entire people. That’s why Carter’s almost casual redefinition of the event—his broadening of the Holocaust to include victims killed for other reasons—was so troublesome.

From an historical point of view, all of this has a great and strange irony behind it. Where, in fact, does this eleven million number come from? Yes, it came from Simon Wiesenthal, the Nazi hunter. But where did he get it? Yehuda Bauer, the Holocaust historian, was puzzled by this question. As he has written, "The total number of non-Jewish concentration camp victims is about half a million—which is half a million too many, but it is not five million. On the other hand, the total number of dead in World War II has been estimated at thirty-five million. Deduct the nearly six million Jews, and you have many more than Wiesenthal's five million. Yet there was no premeditated plan to murder all these people—all the members of any group. If you were a Polish peasant or city-
Trivializing Holocaust Memory

I’ve focused so far on one way in which Holocaust memory has been distorted--by the official and capacious definition of the Holocaust itself. But there are many processes at work today that are affecting how we understand, think about, and remember the Holocaust. Let me, in the time we have remaining, focus on just a few.

Between 1979--when Jimmy Carter provided a politically-useful but invented definition of who were the Holocaust’s victims--and now, much has happened in connection with the role of the Holocaust in human discourse. It has become an ever more common subject of discussion--which is, of course, from the point of view of remembrance, fundamentally for the good. But it’s precisely because the word “Holocaust” carries such moral weight that it has come to be applied, for polemical reasons, to situations other than the German extermination program against the Jews during the Second World War.

If you check that great index of human thought and experience, the Internet, you’ll find websites that will give you an idea of the ways in which the word “Holocaust” has been appropriated by a wide variety of groups to crystallize their sense of their victimization. For example there are sites for the Waco Holocaust, the Abortion Holocaust, the Kashmir Holocaust, the Bangladeshi Holocaust, the Hindu Holocaust, the Taiwanese Holocaust, the Assyrian Holocaust, the Greek Holocaust, the Kirishtan Holocaust of Japanese Christians. There are websites in which Scientologists compare their experience in contemporary Germany to that of the Jews in Nazi Germany. This is not the place to comment on these claims of victimization. Many communities in the world have truly suffered, and many have had members murdered in great numbers. Some claims of suffering are certainly and massively true, and some are highly questionable and even absurd. But these websites provide an indication of the degree to which the word “Holocaust” has been embraced and used, and makes one wonder what will happen as the term is used for ever more experiences, resulting in a dilution of the term’s meaning and specificity. We have already seen references to the Whale Holocaust and other environmental disasters. And the term is now being used in truly absurd cases—for example, the Herbal Holocaust, a website condemning the Food and Drug Act of Canada by an organization seeking to protect the use of the marijuana plant and other plants, and the Chicken Holocaust, cited by those who protest the ways in which chickens are being processed by the poultry industry. These examples provide an idea of the degree to which the word “Holocaust” has become a useful polemical tool, a usefulness that, as the tool is used ever more frequently, makes it ever less meaningful.
**Dismissing the Victimization of the Jews to Advance the Victimization of Others**

Then there are, sadly, examples of some groups who have felt threatened by the power of the term “Holocaust,” fearing that the victimization to which it refers is seen as eclipsing theirs, as if there’s a competition for victimization. For example, a sociologist, recognized as a Jew, was challenged on the National Mall in 1995, during the Million Man March: “Which is worse,” he was asked, “what happened to six million Jews or what happened during slavery? Six million or 600 million?”[10] Tragically, the experience of true victimization is widely shared. Sometimes, though, the mourners of one victimization feel threatened by the success of the mourners of another victimization, and feel the need to enlarge the victimization that they represent, or to diminish the victimization of what they see as a competing group, even to the point of dismissing its claims and its language. For some, very sadly and unnecessarily, the word “Holocaust” has become, because of its very power, an irritant, and has been attacked as if it had been created to undermine the victimization of others. And some have simply appropriated the term precisely because of its power, as in the term Black Holocaust or Nanking Holocaust, or the various terms used on the websites I just mentioned, some of them relating to massively catastrophic experiences. The result, in any case, has been the dilution and universalization of the term “Holocaust,” which has become, increasingly, despecified.

**Distorting the Holocaust in Popular Culture, Especially Film**

Surely the most important source of Holocaust consciousness is commercial films. In the wake of the success of *Schindler's List*, a good film about the Holocaust, other mass-market films, as well as books, have appeared that have used the Holocaust as a backdrop, often distorting the reality of the history beyond recognition—and in ways that leave vast numbers of the public with an utterly inaccurate sense of what the Holocaust was. The celebrated and award-winning 1998 film *Life Is Beautiful*, for example, seen by more Americans than any other foreign film, left many of its viewers with the idea that in concentration camps children survived and played games, that the camps themselves were clean places, and that people looked like well-fed human beings. The claim of the leading actor and director, Roberto Benigni, that he had created a fable focusing on love, was self-serving. What he created was, in fact, a chewable and digestible confection, what one critic has called, very aptly, a sentimental lie; it’s a movie that was supposedly set in the Holocaust but that has left many of those who saw it, and who knew little else about the subject, with the impression that the event just wasn’t so bad. One film like that will distort the ideas of many times more people than any book can straighten out. Some Jews who saw the film were enchanted by it. The Holocaust is not an enchanting subject, and we should all be worried that future generations, which will know even less than ours does about that event, especially people who are not Jews, will find the subject ever more enchanting, and ever more unreal. It’s no accident that the most brutally honest commercial film about the Holocaust, *The Grey Zone*, a most unenchanting depiction of the grisly experiences of the Sonderkommandos, the Jews who were forced to burn the bodies in Auschwitz, failed miserably at the box office when it was released in 2002, and closed in many theaters within days. There was nothing uplifting about this film; no Jews who were saved in it, no children of survivors who, in living color, marched past the grave of the man who had saved their parents, and no fable about a man’s love for his son. This film wasn’t without its flaws; but a large audience would have learned something true about the Holocaust had it not been scared off by reports of the film’s graphic honesty. That honesty was made clear in a review in the *New York Times*, in which the reviewer concluded that *The Grey Zone* was an honorable film. “But honorable,” the reviewer warned, “is not always watchable.”[11] And, in the end, it turned out that almost no one watched.

**Academicizing the Holocaust**

Another problematic arena is academia. There, the Holocaust has, too often, become grist for the ever-churning mill of academic trends. It has been deconstructed, reconstructed, genderized, multiculturalized, and in other ways intellectually sacrificed on the altar of academic fashion. In the halls of academe the experience has become, sometimes, just another object of jargonized analysis. According to one observer, Gabriel Schoenfeld, a sociologist has asserted that “the environmental impact of ‘thousands of pounds of human ash dumped into lakes and rivers’ is no less urgent a subject than the Holocaust itself and that its study would serve usefully to ‘decenter narrowly anthropocentric views of human destruction.’” And a feminist writer on the Holocaust has compared Nazi “sexism” and the “exploitation of Jewish women by Jewish men.”[12] It is to such distorting nonsense that even those students who are serious about studying the Holocaust are all too often exposed.

**The Effects of Holocaust Kitsch**

Yet another factor that trivializes the Holocaust is the trend toward Holocaust kitsch. Let me mention just one example, the routine developed by the French Olympic swimming team in 1996 that featured swimmers who goose-stepped into the pool and then, switching identities, and against the background of music from *Schindler's List*, impersonated women victims going to be gassed. One official of the French Swimming Federation justified the routine by arguing that it had been “created to denounce not only the Holocaust in particular, but all forms of racism and intolerance that we see rising.”[13] The introduction of the Holocaust into swimming routines emblemizes the extent to which the subject has permeated the popular culture, and is vulnerable to that culture’s
distorting vicissitudes.

The Effects of the Seamier Efforts to Recover Holocaust Assets

And one factor that in recent years has cheapened Holocaust memory has been the less seemly aspects of the effort to achieve Holocaust-related reparations and restitution. I believe strongly that Holocaust reparations are just, and that they represent truly concrete forms of apology. But the circus of reparations-chasing lawyers, evoking ambulance-chasers, has served to debase, in the public’s mind, the meaning of the Shoah itself, suggesting, for those who wouldn’t mind seeing it that way, that the Holocaust was all about money and that money can fix it. It wasn’t about money, and money can’t fix it.

The Effects of Using the Holocaust to Achieve Political, Diplomatic and Military Ends

One of the most troubling developments in connection with Holocaust memory has been the politicization of that memory—the use of the event, and of the institutions that represent it, for political or diplomatic purposes. The danger here is the use of the Holocaust as a tool to accomplish something else, thereby making the subject itself ever more usable, and ever more distorable. It’s hardly surprising, of course that the Holocaust is so useful for political purposes. After all, anything that evokes powerful and compelling emotions is vulnerable to misuse. Politicians and diplomats will use whatever they can to convince people of their cause, and if the Holocaust is available for such usage then it, too, will be used in this way.

The most flagrant example was probably the use of the Holocaust by President Clinton in order to justify our military intervention in Kosovo. In talking about Kosovo, Clinton evoked images of Hitler’s murder of the Jews, and compared the Serb leader Slobodan Milosevic to Hitler. Our intervention in Kosovo may well have been justified, but Kosovo simply wasn’t the Holocaust, and the Holocaust shouldn’t have been invoked as a way to quash doubts about the military action. Kosovo was not genocide. It was not an attempt to murder an entire people. There were many good reasons to intervene, and in fact I agreed with that intervention; but invoking the Holocaust to justify the intervention was an attempt to manipulate and mobilize public opinion behind a serious decision of state. Do that often enough and eventually the Holocaust itself gets to be seen as equal to the situations to which it’s inappropriately compared.

Still other examples of trying to use the Holocaust for political and diplomatic purposes have involved the Holocaust Museum in Washington:

The most notorious of these occurred seven years ago, when the State Department and the White House, at the urging of the chairman of the museum’s board of trustees, sought to bring Yasser Arafat into the Holocaust Museum for a photo-op tour in order to make him appear to be someone who understood the pain of the Jews and who could therefore be trusted to make an honest deal with the Jewish state. I won’t pursue this matter further, I had a personal and intense involvement in that case when, as the museum’s director, I took a public stand opposing the invitation and refusing to participate in the visit. But I mention it here because it provides a stunning example of the way in which Holocaust memory can be an attractive tool to accomplish a political end—a tool that can be used, and therefore abused and distorted. Such kinds of abuse and distortion make Holocaust memory ever more fragile, and ever more vulnerable to further abuse and further distortion. That some of those who were charged with protecting the integrity of Holocaust memory were willing use the Holocaust in this way was, to me, especially disturbing. I was pleased that a Congressionally-mandated study, launched in the wake of the Arafat affair, cited concerns that “federal institutions, especially one that carries the moral weight of the Holocaust, are vulnerable to political pressure from the executive branch or the Congress” and that the Holocaust Museum "should not be used as a tool to achieve particular political purposes," as it had been in the Arafat affair.[14] That report was a vindication of my position that I would have preferred not to have had to receive.

I was pleased to read three years ago, in an interview with the current chairman of the museum’s board, that he wouldn’t permit the museum to be used in the way that the museum’s chairman did back then.[15]

And Holocaust memory is being exploited, in other ways, in connection with the current crisis in Israel and the West Bank.

In the West Bank, Palestinians have said, “The Israelis are behaving like Nazis,” and an Israeli member of the Knesset gave a raised-arm salute to Ariel Sharon, shouting, “Heil Sharon.”[16] In one statement to a reporter, a Palestinian said, “They have cut off water, food, medicine, supplies. What we are witnessing now in the occupied territories is a new Holocaust.”[17] The irony is that a community that contains members who insist that the Holocaust never happened, and whose current president actually wrote a Ph.D. thesis saying that it was an exaggeration and that the Zionists had promoted it, finds it useful when it wants to highlight its own suffering.

The Vatican newspaper, L’Osservatore Romano, said the Holy Land was being "profaned with bombs and with
fire and is on a daily basis the victim of an aggression that’s turning into an extermination”--a word that, critics have noted, the Vatican hasn’t even used in connection with the Holocaust.[18]

And in a statement of truly bizarre hyperbole, the Portuguese Nobel Prize in Literature laureate Jose Saramago compared the situation in Ramallah to Auschwitz, and Egyptian television called Israel’s incursion into the Palestinian cities a “Final Solution.”[19]

Protecting Holocaust Memory

The Dangers of this Assault on Holocaust Memory

Clearly, the future of Holocaust memory is in danger. But what’s so terrible about that? True, the Holocaust was an awful thing, but it happened over sixty years ago, other genocides have taken place since then, and we’re facing horrible problems today that could wreak immense havoc and widespread death, ranging from terrorists who use chemical, biological and nuclear weapons to the threat of an avian-flu-caused pandemic that could repeat the global flu pandemic that occurred almost a hundred years ago and that ended the lives of scores of millions around the world.

What’s so terrible about the loss of Holocaust memory is that the Holocaust was the tremendum of human experience. Nothing happened like it before and nothing has happened like it since. Yes, what happened in Rwanda a decade ago was a real, massive and tragic genocide. And the deaths of six million white Jews are no more tragic than the deaths of 800,000 black Africans, except perhaps in terms of scale. But the nature of the Holocaust was unique in that a society that saw itself, and was universally seen, as the crucible of some of the greatest achievements in human culture focused its powers of organization and modernity on the systematic task of exterminating an entire people.

From that we can learn a lot about the limits of culture and civilization, as well as about the possibilities of human nature, and in the process we can learn things that we don’t want to know but that we must know. The Holocaust, better than anything else, can teach us that. And what we lose by losing Holocaust memory is that very important, very humbling and ultimately, one hopes, life-saving understanding of what we as societies can do or allow others to do.

Sadly, the comforting post-Holocaust admonition, “Never again!” has, in the six decades since the Holocaust, not worked. Rwanda alone demonstrates that. It seems as if we’re still stuck in a pattern of “Always again.” We seem to be able to teach “the lessons of the Holocaust,” but we can’t seem to learn them. But that doesn’t mean that we should be willing to lose the memory of the event that teaches us so much about ourselves and our possibilities for absolute evil. Just because we don’t live up to ideals doesn’t mean that we should let go of the tragic experiences that undergird the truths and importance of those ideals.

What Is to Be Done?

So what is to be done about these assaults on Holocaust memory? We should protest the abuse, distortion, appropriation and exploitation of Holocaust memory. Speech, culture and the arts are, and should be, free. Anyone can do what he or she wishes to do with terms or memories that are sacred to us. But that doesn’t mean that we can’t protest their misuse. Films turning the Holocaust into a chewable confection, a sentimental and distorting lie, will continue to be made. Exploitations of the event will proliferate. It will be exploited by the entertainment industry and, indeed, by governments that find its images and messages useful for some political or diplomatic purpose. We can’t stop that. But that doesn’t mean we should protest it. Rather, we should protest it, especially if it takes advantage of Holocaust institutions. The best we can do is to appeal to, and depend on, the decency of people of good will who will see in the Holocaust a way of understanding the ferocious possibilities of human behavior, and who will understand, as a result, the importance of protecting the essence and integrity of its memory. We owe that to ourselves. And, even more, we owe that to our children.

Real Remembrance

It’s now just over 60 years since Auschwitz was liberated, and a little longer since Treblinka, Belzec, Sobibor, Chelmo and Majdanek finished their murderous work. For me, the most moving memorial to the Shoah is an inscription on a monument to the Lublin Ghetto, which stands in the center of that Polish city, about 4 or 5 kilometers from the Majdanek death camp. If you go into that camp, you can see a massive covered urn, perhaps a hundred feet across, containing tons of earth and human ash. It’s located a few hundred feet from Majdanek’s crematorium. It’s not hard to imagine the sight of the few Jews from Lublin who survived the war returning to their town, asking their former Polish neighbors where their loved ones were, and being told to go to Majdanek. The inscription on that monument to the Lublin Ghetto reads, in Yiddish, “Ich zich die toyte meine in yedn bergl ash”--"I
search for my dead in every mound of ash."

In the end, that's what Holocaust memory is all about. It's about a search for the dead. But this time we know all too well that millions of those dead were turned into ash. And our search is a search into memory, an attempt to make contact, in our own souls, with the reality and immensity of what was lost. I hope that we're worthy of that attempt, and that we and our children and our children's children preserve that memory and that search for all time.

**Walter Reich of George Washington University delivered the third of the 2005-2006 Bradley Lectures.**

**Notes**