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3/29/11

One Passionate Voice

Why do we bother teaching children about the Holocaust? It's over. We can't change what happened. It just makes people sad. Maybe if we teach about the Holocaust, we can prevent future holocausts—but the mass graves in Rwanda, Cambodia, and Darfur are evidence against that. Maybe teaching about the Holocaust will silence those who deny it ever happened—but plenty still do, and probably still will. What, then is the point? A handful of savage, ruthless, megalomaniacs orchestrated the mass extermination of 11 million people while the other 2 billion people in the world did nothing. Why should we teach our children about that?

Because some did take action against the horror. Every generation needs to hear about people like Raoul Wallenberg, who saved perhaps 100,000 Hungarian Jews from Eichmann by sheer ingenuity and courage. He created “protective passes” that saved thousands from deportation, designated an area of Budapest as “Swedish territory” to be a safe sanctuary for Jews, and saved an entire ghetto by threatening the commander of the German troops in Hungary. He even ran beside trains to throw his protective passes through the windows and save the people trapped inside. People like Raoul remind us that creativity and bravery, together with a strong sense of justice, can do anything—even save people from doom.

And people like Oscar Schindler—a man who, if not for the Holocaust, would have just lived and died as an ordinary businessman in Poland. After the Germans invaded, Schindler got his start as the owner of a factory in Cracow and used Jewish forced labor to cut costs. But as he got to know the Jews in his employ, he began to sympathize with them, and eventually resolved

to protect them from the Germans. He is an example of someone who never aimed to be a hero. “I just couldn't stand by and see people destroyed,” he said. “I did what I could, what I had to do, what my conscience told me I must do. That's all there is to it.” (Paldiel, 1993). His story teaches us that if we see something we believe is wrong, we have the power to fight it, without being saints or heroes. Just because it is wrong.

Then there are people like Monsignor Hugh O’Flaherty, Archbishop Damaskinos Papandreou, and Shaykh Taieb el-Okbi—the first a Catholic priest, the second a Greek Orthodox archbishop, and the third a Muslim imam—all of whom used their religious authority to protect Jews. One would think that the religious difference would have made them indifferent to the plight of the Jews, but they each worked against the Nazis with great bravery and in the spirit of unity. Whether by hiding Jews, preventing their deportation, or calling on their coreligionists to treat Jews with respect and compassion, they each became heroic examples of religious tolerance in the face of great intolerance. From them, we can learn that even if *our* people are not the ones targeted, we still have a responsibility towards whomever is in need.

And finally, there are those who, though not in a position of power, took on the cause of the persecuted and strove to get the truth out to those who did have the power to act on it. People like Jan Karski, who managed to sneak into both the Warsaw ghetto and Belzec (a death camp) and reported on the Nazi atrocities to President Roosevelt, who created the War Refugee Board as a result. And Witold Pilecki, who voluntarily spent two and a half years in Auschwitz in order to record the truth of the conditions there and then escaped to send his report to the Resistance and the Allies. Even better than words are the photos secretly taken in Auschwitz by an unknown prisoner, known only as Alex. Smuggled out by David Szmulewski, they provide us

with undeniable visual evidence of the horrors of the death camps. The efforts of these men to show the world the extent of the awfulness of the Holocaust helped convince those fighting the Nazis to step up their efforts to aid the victims. They also left an indelible reminder of what can happen when baseless hatred gets out of hand. Learning about them reminds us that words and images have the power to move mountains. Even if we cannot personally send in troops to protect people suffering from violence and discrimination, we can convince others to.

One passionate voice can spread ripples of action across the world. Hitler used his voice for evil, with devastating effects. A few brave souls used their voices to fight for the weak, and succeeded in saving precious lives. That is the most important lesson the Holocaust teaches us: that even in the face of great danger and deliberate violence, it is possible to uphold justice and save lives. That message must be passed on to every generation. Each and every one of us has a powerful voice. The heroes of the Holocaust tell us we must use it. Now.

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