

GW HEBREW CONGREGATION CHAIRMAN'S YOM HASHOAH ADDRESS 8 MAY 2016 (1 IYAR 5776)

The maths associated with the *Shoah* is simple even if it is horrific. Before war broke out in 1939 approximately **nine** million Jews lived in the countries that would be occupied by Germany, by the time the war ended in 1945, **six** million had been either starved, shot, worked to death or gassed in the largest industrial killing spree the world has ever seen and hopefully will ever see and only **three** million survived- many displaced and living in terrible conditions.

In addition **five** million other unfortunates – Gypsies, the mentally and physically infirm, the politically and orientationally different, Poles and Russians - also perished for no other reason than who they were.

From the Atlantic in the West to the Volga River in the East, from Norway in the North to Algeria in the South, Jews were systematically deprived of all human rights, robbed of all their property, herded into Ghettos and either collectively shot in nearby woods or eventually deported to concentration camps under inhuman conditions and killed in purpose built gass chambers.

Four million were put to death alone in the camps at Auschwitz, Majdenek, Treblinka, Dachau, Buchenwald and Bergen-Belsen including over a million children.

At least one and a half million were shot in Russia, Poland and the Baltic States and at least five hundred thousand people died of starvation and disease in the Ghettos.

The geographic scale and reach of this enterprise is mind boggling - in a book of lists published in Paris by Serge Klarsfeld: *Le Mémorial de la Déportation des Juifs de France* in 1978, a list of eight hundred and seventy eight Jews who had been deported from Paris on 15 May 1944 to a Camp at Reval reveals that amongst the group were people who had been born in Jerusalem, in France, in Jaffa, Safed, Cuba, French North Africa, Baku, Baghdad, Damascus and London.

Tonight we mark *Holocaust and Heorism Remembrance Day- Yom Hashoah Ve-Hagevurah* which in fact fell on Thursday the 5th May, the 27th Nissan – the day ordained

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by Israel's Parliament, the *Knesset*, on the 12th April 1951 as the day on which henceforth the victims of the *Shoah* or *Whirlwind* would be remembered.

It is the day, as the former Chief Rabbi of England, Lord Jonathan Sacks, has said on which “.....we say to the souls of our people lost in Europe's dark night : we will never forget you, we will never cease to mourn you, we will not let you down, until Jews can walk the world without fear- witnesses against those who choose death- to the God of Life who told us choose life”.

No matter how much we reflect on and read about the *Holocaust* we who have not lived through it can never truly comprehend the reality and the enormity of the terror that accompanied it.

As the eminent British Holocaust historian Sir Martin Gilbert has said “.....it is impossible to take in, to absorb, to visualize the actual atrocities..... years ago I read the text of a letter which had been written in Warsaw just after the war. It was written by a survivor to a friend in Palestine, and was printed in a cyclostyled bulletin circulated in 1946 by the Jewish Agency, to let Jews and non-Jews know what had occurred during the Holocaust. The copy I saw, in the Foreign Office archives in London, was on disintegrating and yellowing paper. The survivor wrote: I am sending you a photo of my adopted daughter. Look well at her and remember that such children were flung into the burning ovens. Just imagine that my little Tulcia is one of the few who was saved, and that hundreds of thousands of children like her were lost in the gas chambers when they were torn away from their parents. If you have a pathological imagination you may be able to picture this yourself, but if you are a normal person you will never be able to bring this chapter of horrors to life in spite of all your imaginings.”

If this is true today, it was even truer when these events were actually taking place.

In 2015, journalist David Blair recorded that under the headline “**Germans murder 700,000 Jews in Poland**”, the Daily Telegraph in London had reported the “*greatest massacre in the world's history*” three years before the end of the war on the 25th June 1942.

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The story was remarkably detailed. All the facts were supplied by Szmul Zygielbojm, a member of the Polish government in exile who arrived in London from the Warsaw Ghetto in 1942 and made it his mission to inform the world about the Holocaust.

Zygielbojm used a clandestine network of contacts across occupied Poland taking immense risks to gather eyewitness accounts of the fate of the Jews. The particular information in The Daily Telegraph's story was smuggled to London on microfilm hidden inside a key and was meticulously accurate and verified after the war.

The newspaper was able to report that gas chambers were being used for industrialised murder from November 1941 onwards – and that *"an average 1,000 Jews were gassed daily"*.

The story methodically listed the death toll from massacres in seven different towns and cities. *"In many places "...it said... " Jews were deported to 'unknown destinations' and killed in neighbouring woods. In Vilna 50,000 Jews were murdered in November. The total number slaughtered in this district and around Lithuanian Kovno is 300,000. In Rovne the murders began early in November. In three days and nights nearly 15,000 men, women and children were shot."*

Blair states that in the pages of The Daily Telegraph, Zygielbojm succeeded in revealing the mass murder of Jews. But he was dismayed by the lack of public and political reaction which was one of indifference, disbelief or even suspicion. There was no wave of public revulsion sufficient for the Allies to take any steps to obstruct the Holocaust.

When The Telegraph's story appeared, Zygielbojm's wife, Manya, and their son, Tuvia, were still living in occupied Poland as prisoners in the Warsaw Ghetto. Both died during the razing of the Ghetto in 1943 – a process described in *"The Last Days of the Warsaw Ghetto"* by Zivia Lubetkin, a survivor, as follows :-

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"...the ghetto was burning for days and nights; the fire consumed house after house, entire streets. The Germans set fire to the ghetto from airplanes and on the ground. Men, women and children crawled out from underground hiding places and wandered about, loaded with their last bits of food, blankets and pots. Babies were carried; older children trailed after their parents. Below the smouldering ruins, at a depth of five metres, hundreds lay in absolute darkness on the floor of a bunker..."

Crushed by this tragedy - and by the weight of indifference towards the fate of the Jews - Zygielbojm took his own life on the 11th May 1943.

His suicide note is a fitting end to this address. It reads

"The responsibility for the crime of the murder of the whole Jewish nationality in Poland rests first of all on those who are carrying it out but indirectly it falls also upon the whole of humanity, on the peoples of the Allied nations and on their governments, who up to this day have not taken any real steps to halt this crime. By looking on passively upon this murder of defenceless millions of tortured children, women and men they have become partners to the responsibility."

Barney Horwitz

Chairman
