

**OSCE CONFERENCE ON ANTI-SEMITISM
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Written Contribution

Vienna 2003: on Antisemitism

- by Elie Wiesel -

When my good friend the United States Secretary of State Colin Powell, who believed in the importance of this gathering, asked me to come and speak to you, I had hesitations: what could I possibly tell you that most of you don't know?

Who doesn't know, if he or she has a sense of history, that antisemitism is a social disease and a theological aberration that all decent and intelligent societies are dutybound to confront and eliminate?

I am convinced that you are here because we share the same concern over its possible impact on today's generation.

What is it about antisemitism that it is still alive? Days come and go, cultures change as do political systems, yet the hatred toward Jews remains almost intact. So we try to understand: Why is the oldest collective hate-obsession in recorded History still incurable and immune to change? What makes it so popular, so attractive, so seductive in so many circles?

May I confess to you that, in this respect, I was naïve. I allowed myself to believe in man's capacity for reason and self-protection. Oh yes, in 1945, immediately after the defeat of Hitler's Germany, I became hopeful. I know: it sounds strange, even absurd. And unreal. If ever a Jew had all the motives in the world to submit to despair, it was then. Victims of hatred and indifference, six million men, women and children had been murdered only because they were Jewish. For them, being had become a crime punishable by death. The House of Israel was in mourning. Entire communities,

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some two thousand years old, vanished in a tempest of fire. For the first time in our history, our dead were not buried in cemeteries. Our hearts were their cemeteries.

And yet.

Somehow, deep down in my wounded soul, I felt an absurd optimism. I said to myself: there are certain lessons the world has learned from what happened. Never again will big nations go to war to conquer and oppress small nations. Never again will children die of starvation and violence. Never again will racism dominate policy. Never again will political fanaticism be an accepted national philosophy. Never again will Jews have to fight antisemitism, for now the whole world knows its nefarious consequences.

That was my hope. Hence my question: if Auschwitz hasn't cured mankind of antisemitism, what will?

Its history is old, almost ageless. Actually, it transcends both time and geography, religions and cultures, political theories and social spheres. From Pharaoh in Egypt to Nabouchodnosor in Babylon to Torquemada in Spain to Hitler and Stalin Jews lived in danger. In ancient Greece and Rome Jews were accused by pagan historians, including the great Tacitus, of being implacable enemies of mankind. There wasn't an era in which a Jewish community somewhere had not been persecuted, humiliated and/or expelled or driven to death.

The reasons invoked? Disregarding not only truth but also logic, they combined all possible contradictions. To some, we were too rich; to others we were too poor. Too religious and not enough. Too Jewish and too assimilated. Too learned and too ignorant. Too nationalistic and too universalist. Both too rational and irrational, chosen by both God and Satan. To Hitler we were all communists and to Stalin too anti-communist. They were mortal enemies—yet both hated Jews.

The antisemite is by definition ideologically fanatic and pathologically racist. He passes with

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ease collective judgments and group condemnation. He decides who has the right to live or to die. In other words: an antisemite is someone who has never met me, never heard of me, yet he hates me. Worse: he hates not only the living Jews but also their unborn children.

In simple terms, does he hate us because we are and want to be different? But who isn't? No two human beings are ever the same, isn't that one of the marvelous miracles in Creation? Does it mean that one is better than the other, that one should humiliate the other? On the contrary, it means that human society is essentially pluralistic, that although we are different, we all are the children of God, if we believe in God, or members of the human race if we make the race human for all its members.

Both amazing and intellectually disturbing is the realization that even renowned writers, thinkers and artists were infected by the anti-Jewish virus. Richard Wagner and Louis-Ferdinand Céline remain inexplicable examples: how could artistic greatness co-exist with stupid and ferocious racist hatred? And Hegel? Why did he state that "The great tragedy of the Jewish people cannot but arouse disgust"? Ezra Pound and Renoir, Kant and Dostoiewski: they all had something unpleasant, something ugly to say about Jews. And Schopenhauer who violently denounced what he called "Jewish stink" everywhere they are? Why did he accuse the Jews of seeing their homeland only in other Jews? Why did Luther who, in his youth demonstrated extraordinary courage in defying Rome, produce such anti-Jewish diatribes and curses when he grew old? Listen to Voltaire: "We find in the Jews an ignorant and barbarous people who have long united the most avarice with the most detestable superstition and the most invincible hatred for every people by whom they are tolerated and enriched...Still, he added with magnanimity, we ought not to burn them."

Is it that, as the poet William Auden said to his friend Karl Shapiro, "everybody is antisemitic...sometime."?

Max Weber attributes antisemitism to the "election" of the Jewish people. Envy? Jealousy on the part of other creeds? But then, why do agnostic and atheists join them in their hate? Furthermore: is an agnostic Jew less hated than his or her religious brother or sister? And this question: can a Jew be Jewish and say nasty things about Jewish ideas and values? Yes, he can. During the Middle Ages learned Rabbis were forced to take part in disputations with converts who used their knowledge against their own people. Baruch Spinoza wrote terrible things about the God of Israel whom he called "The God of hatred". Is this why he was excommunicated? It is possible. Can a Jew be antisemitic? Of course, he can. Karl Marx' "Jewish question" could have been written by Goebbels. As for Otto Weininger, he despised all Jews. Hitler called him as the only Jew he would have allowed to live. But Weininger hated so much the Jew in him that he committed suicide.

Clearly, antisemitism grew and developed throughout the centuries. It was not the same during the Crusades and the Inquisition as in the era of Enlightenment. And surely not the same as during the Nazi period when neither assimilation nor conversion could save Jews from being massacred in Babi-Yar or shipped to Treblinka.

Modern antisemitism is even more complex. First of all, it emerged even in countries where there are hardly any Jews left—perhaps offering proof that antisemitism without Jews is also possible. Then, on another level, we witness the creation of an unholy alliance of the ultra-right and the ultra-left, which is often but not always directly linked to vulgar anti-americanism and disguised as anti-sionism draped in perverted outbursts against the so-called immorality and illegality of the State of Israel.

The methods are the same as is the objective. Old poisonous material is being rehashed. Jews are accused of usury, hypocrisy, egocentricity, vanity, double loyalty and of inventing Auschwitz just to get money from Germany and Switzerland. They are being held responsible for all that is unjust

and painful under the sun. The infamous "Protocols of the Elders of Zion" are being widely distributed and quoted. Does anyone really believe its slander that Jews want to dominate the world? Or that we need Christian blood for the baking of Passover Matza?

At mass demonstrations in Europe organized by leftwing and pro-palstinian groups, indecent shouts of "Death to the Jews" have been heard. Individuals were yelled at as "dirty Jews...Hitler hasn't finished his job!" Such hatred was not limited to words alone; its verbal violence provoked physical assaults, burning of synagogues, cemeteries profanated, swastikas painted on Jewish homes, Jewish children insulted by their classmates. More than a thousand such antisemitic incidents have occurred in one year only in various places in Europe.

What is the role of the Middle East conflict in all this?

Perhaps this is the moment for me to clarify my position with regard the Israeli-Palestinian crisis. Surely it is due to my upbringing and my past, I support Israel with all my heart—but I also believe, together with President Bush, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and Secretary Powell, that the Palestinians deserve to have their own State living side by side in peace with Israel.

I supported the Oslo accords and had high hopes for their implementation. However I fervently and consistently opposed terrorism wherever it brought destruction and death upon innocent civilians. The end does not justify all means and the killing of children was—and is—to me an aberration of idealism.

I believe that suicide-terrorism is evil. Is to be declared a crime against humanity. Those who preach its martyrdom bring dishonor to the sacredness of religious traditions. We Jews and Christians know something about martyrdom. Thus we may say publicly hat a martyr is someone who is ready not to kill but to die for his or her faith. Those who choose to murder defenseless parents and innocent children are carriers of hate; they are not saints, nor are they martyrs. They are murderers.

In the beginning, for a while, people thought that suicide-terrorists are not so dangerous since their target is just Israel the State or Israel the people. Now everybody realizes that suicide-terror is a threat to other people as well.

For such is the reality of hatred: it is like a cancer that goes from limb to limb, from person to person, from community to community. If not stopped, it could and would destroy villages and cities, both near and far.

That is why I believe your today's conference to be of great importance and urgency. Hatred of Jews must be denounced not only for our sake but also for the sake of others. As is the case with any organized prejudice and bigotry, it ultimately reflects on the nation in which it grows; it becomes its moral barometer. For History has taught us that he who hates, hates everybody. He who hates Jews will end up hating blacks, hispanics, moslems, homosexuals, gypsies, Turks and Arabs, and ultimately himself.

The answer? Whatever it is, education is its major component. Is it sufficient? Haven't we learned that many of the SS killers had college degrees? So I suggest we come back to the question I raised earlier: if Auschwitz did not put an end to antisemitism, racism and hatred—what can, and what will?