

Keynote Statement

European conference on antisemitism

Memory as warning

- by Elie Wiesel -

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That this conference takes place in Berlin is of great symbolic importance.

Once upon a time, when I and the world were younger, gigantic meetings were being held here for anti-Semitism; now we have assembled here to oppose anti-Semitism.

There is no capital, no city in the world where this conference is more meaningful and more compelling.

After the war I naïvely thought that, for years and years to come, whenever a Jew would be seen anywhere in Europe, he or she would be carried on people's shoulders and enveloped by everyone with so much tenderness and affection that he or she would at last feel secure and welcome.

Had any pessimist told me then that, in my lifetime, I will hear stories of Jews in Berlin or Paris being advised by friends not to wear a kippah in the street, so as not to attract hostility and peril, I would not have believed it.

But it now has become reality.

There are too many cities in the world plagued by vocal and violent hatred towards the Jewish people. Profanations of Jewish monuments, Jewish cemeteries desecrated, synagogues vandalized or burned, violent anti-Jewish incidents, extreme left wing banners unashamedly slandering Israel and comparing Sharon to Hitler, mass incitement to hysterical violence disguised as anti-Israeli propaganda, shrieking voices in a variety of languages "Kill the Jews, death to the Jews", anyone

expressing solidarity with victims of terrorism in Israel being scandalously branded as anti-Arab: these are frequent if not daily occurrences. Particularly contemptuous are efforts by antisemites or pseudo-antisemites, from the extreme right or the extreme left, to usurp Holocaust language and place it in the context of the Middle Eastern conflict. For a time, the fanatics among them used to deny the Holocaust. Now they move in a different direction, with a different objective. They say: Jews are now doing to Palestinians what the Nazis have done to them. The Jew in me finds this repulsive and outrageous. For in a way, this is an attempt to exculpate the guilty who now could say: What do you want from us? They, the Jews are not different from the worst among us... Well what does all this mean? It simply means that, as a social disease, theological scandal and political perversion, antisemitism is clearly on the rise in so many, too many parts in Europe, but not only in Europe.

The Jew I am belongs to a traumatized generation that has witnessed and endured antisemitism in its apocalyptic expression. As such we have antennas, better yet: we are antennas. And if we tell you that the signals we receive are disturbing, indeed alarming, people better listen.

But Berlin is special. If the roots of anti-Semitism were everywhere more or less the same, its ultimate consequences in this place were singular, sui generis, unequalled and unprecedented, for they made the plague of Jew-hatred grow to calculated yet unimaginable cruelty. It is here that it initiated a State sponsored program aimed at wiping the last Jew off the surface of the earth. It is here that the anti-Semite hated me even before I was born.

Granted, what we so poorly and hesitantly call Shoa or the Holocaust had many ingredients. But no one will deny that it would not have taken place had anti-Semitism not been its driving force.

If in other countries, good people could remain passive when anti-Semitic propaganda was flourishing, claiming that they did not know what its outcome would be, today, in Berlin, no decent person would invoke such argument of ignorance for his or her silence. Today they know, today everyone knows.

We know where it comes from and where it is heading, where it leads its victims. It leads them to isolation, exclusion, condemnation—and worse. But we also know that anti-Semitism is dangerous not only to Jews but to countries too, where it is allowed to flourish. How did Kafka phrased it? When a Jew is slapped in the face, humankind itself falls to the ground. Take its newest phase: suicide killing that used to wound Israel is now affecting the whole world.

Antisemitism is rooted in hatred, its language is a language of hatred, its doctrine is filled with hatred—and hatred, by its nature, always runs overboard, crossing geographical boundaries and ethnic affiliations. It is a contagious disease. He who hates one minority will hate all minorities—religious, political, ethnic, social and cultural—and is bound to wind up hating himself.

Of course, one often asks or is being asked: why anti-Semitism? Why such hatred? Is it because the hater's obsession is usually with power? His only way then to assert and confirm it is by using it so as to turn free persons into victims and victims into slaves and slaves into corpses. Never satisfied, never at peace with himself, suspicious of anyone unknown, the hater will forever be looking for

someone to shame and dominate and destroy. For the hater to feel alive, he needs to inflict suffering and death onto "the other". And the Jew was to him always "the other"—whose otherness he resented and feared.

Is antisemitism also due to the subconscious legacy of religious fanaticism alone? No, not alone. But for many centuries it was and still is. However, since Pope John the 23rd and thanks to Pope John-Paul the second, Jewish-Christian relations have improved. In fact, they have never been better. The oecumenical spirit has enabled both religions to conduct dialogues, encounters and initiate cooperation that bring honor to religion. (Incidentally, at that time, we should have invited Islam scholars and teachers to participate in these endeavors.)

Anti-Semitism had become, during the Hitler era, a pagan national religion whose god was Hitler and his hate-filled word considered to his worshipers as "sacred" dogma.

Why were so many Germans, of all ages and social spheres, attracted to him and to his ideas? Is it that hatred has seductive power? The hater lives in a world void of nuance and complexity. He entertains no doubts and admits to no hesitation. He knows what is good and what is evil, who is worthy of his sympathy and who of his anger, who must remain free and who must go to jail, who shall live and who shall die. To the antisemite, everything is reduced to primitive simplicity. He is unwilling and unable to see another point of view, another avenue of thought. He could never consider weighing both sides of a problem, or putting himself in another person's place, imagining himself as a Jew—his chosen victim..

Actually, the anti-Semite dwells in an unreal world of delusion and hallucination. He is persuaded that the Protocols of the Elders of Zion reflect a reality, that Jews do control or aim to dominate all other nations and their ways of life, that they treat all non-Jews as enemies. This belief is still being taught in certain Moslem countries where Jew-hatred is still part of official policy. In their schools, children are taught to go out and kill Jews—yes, not Israelis but Jews.

But here, in Berlin, I feel compelled to ask ourselves again the unavoidable question: if Auschwitz didn't cure the world of anti-Semitism, what can and what will?

What can be done to combat the reawakening of anti-Semitism? This question deserves to be given priority at this gathering. It is precisely that it takes place in Berlin, that a powerful message must be sent from here to governments and nations everywhere not to allow the anti-Semitic poison to spread for it brings dishonor to civilization wherever it exists.

Perhaps a manifesto is to be composed, distributed in all languages to all schools where, one day a year, one day every year, it be read and studied.

Is legislation the answer? It could be part of the answer.

Like racists, anti-Semites are to be shown not only as a source of peril but also as a vehicle of all that is irrational and threatening in the human condition. The racist is sometimes ugly and sometimes stupid; the anti-Semite, being the ultimate racist, is almost by definition both.

The history of Nazism teaches us that hatred is like cancer. It often grows underground, and when detected it is too late. If unchecked immediately, it will

invade its natural surroundings. What began in the mind will destroy the brain. Then the heart. And then? Remember: hatred destroys not only its target but also its carrier. Why not imagine proper punishment, be it as preventive social therapy?

In conclusion, I do not know the pertinent and total answer to human hatred. But I do know that anti-Semitism, in order to be defeated, needs to be first unmasked and then denounced, rejected and possibly outlawed.

For, contrary to most movements that have shaped history, it alone has no redeeming feature.

Like Nazism, it has nothing but a desire to destroy and remains a vision of implacable evil.

Let a warning go out from here to the world at large, and especially to places where anti-Semitism is still a threat: "Remember Berlin's past and learn from its dark memories. Whatever problems you may face, hatred must not be an answer. What anti-Semitism has done to Jews has left a burning scar on our grandchildren as well."

And to you, friends, who have come from near and far to oppose a common enemy, we say:

We shared with you our anguish; we offer you our thanks; and all we ask of you is that you share our hope.

Elie Wiesel