

A Sermon  
Preached  
in the Chapel of  
ALL SOULS COLLEGE

By  
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## *The Mystery of the Holocaust*

Despite the thousands of pages written and said about the Holocaust, I still am at a loss in trying to understand it. How one of the most cultured peoples in Europe, which produced the world's greatest composers, philosophers and poets could invent, enforce and docilely follow the first industrial genocide in human history remains for me an enigma.

I am grateful to the Warden and to the Chaplain for having invited me, a Jew, to preach in a College which showed me great kindness when I was a visiting fellow here and since then.

In my reflections this morning, I will speak of the mystery of the Holocaust, of its history and horrors, of the moral complicity of the bystanders, but also of the few righteous who risked their lives to help.

Our psalm of today and the selected readings have been chosen for the commemoration of the Holocaust. Psalm 22, far older than the crucifixion, with the heart breaking lamentation by Christ: "my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" I think of the countless victims of the Holocaust which may have thus lamented in their last moments.

The reading from the Old Testament, Genesis 18, the story of the destruction of Sodom, resonates with the scarcity of the righteous.

And the reading from the gospels, Luke 10, the parable of the Good Samaritan, reminds us of the goodness of those that despite great risks helped their neighbours.

It was amazing how easily, in auspicious circumstances, ordinary, reasonable, decent people could transform into victimizers.

Reading about the Holocaust, I was struck by how methodically it developed from an antisemitic project of persecution and aryazation of Jewish businesses, from ethnic cleansing to a project of mass killing, extermination, genocide. Hitler proceeded step by step wanting to make sure that the German public was supportive, or at least indifferent. Although the wearing of the distinguishing yellow star was introduced in occupied Poland already in November 1939, it was only in the summer of 1941 that Hitler approved it for German Jews in Germany. Some Berlin Jews were deported to killing camps as late as April 1943.

The killing of Jews was preceded by killing of handicapped non-Jewish German children in 1938 followed by Hitler's written order, the so called euthenasia order, directing the killing of disabled Germans.

No written order from Hitler ordering the Holocaust was ever found. But on a number of occasions, including in the Reichstag in January 1939, he spoke of the "annihilation of the Jewish race in Europe."

In the thirties, the Nazis tried to force the emigration of Jews from Germany. But most countries refused to take them.

The gases carbon monoxide and Zyklon facilitated the technology of mass killing and reduced their cost. On October 23, 1941, Himmler issued an order to the Gestapo and the SS forbidding emigration of Jews from Europe. Killing not emigration, became the preferred way of getting rid of Jews.

With the invasion of the Soviet Union - operation Barbarossa - well before the first gas chambers started functioning - four operation groups, the Einsatzgruppen, initially fewer than 3000 men divided into commando groups, aided by German police, local militias and occasionally the army, captured Jews and to economise on bullets did not kill them by machine guns, but by single shots in the back of the head, the first mass killings of the Holocaust.

And gassing was even cheaper. The Commandant of Auschwitz Rudolf Hoess testified that the cost of Zyklon gas for per capita killing in Auschwitz was about two German pfennig, less than one US cent in 1942.

The instructions to the Wannsee conference were signed by Hitler's deputy, Goering, in his letter he appointed Reinhard Heydrich, one of the top leaders of the SS, to prepare an overall solution for the Jewish Question in German-controlled Europe.

The attitude of the local populations was a major factor in determining country priorities for deportations and mass killings. In the Wannsee conference of January 1942, where the heads of the SS, the Nazi party and the ministries concerned agreed on the modalities and the logistics of the Holocaust, the Foreign Ministry warned about expected opposition in the Scandinavian countries. The Holocaust, although originally planned to start in Western Europe, thus started in Eastern Europe where the target population was concentrated, antisemitism was rampant and where there was little risk of local opposition.

In choosing Poland for the location of 6 concentration - gassing camps - the Nazis were motivated also by the intent of creating a Lebensraum for repatriation of people of German origin, the Volksdeutsche from the USSR and the Baltic States. Killing of the local, non-Jewish populations was motivated by the policy of trying to feed the army off the land. Millions of Catholic Poles, especially the elites of clergy, intellectuals, officers were thus murdered.

Killing of Jews was facilitated by the success of the propaganda claiming that Jews were the enemy whose annihilation was necessary for the survival and self-defence of Germany. They were accused even of causing German defeat in WWI.

The tradition of obedience, loyalty to the group, and patriotism facilitated the task of gruesome killings. But the bloody sight was at times too much even for the executioners. Curiously, opting out of the killing was usually unpunished but it was rare and did not create logistical problems for the killing apparatus. There were more than enough willing participants.

If morality would not be a factor, I have been asking myself whether the holocaust was, economically, a good idea. I believe that such questions were not even raised during the Wannsee conference. This is not surprising because the slightest expression of doubt would attract suspicion, condemnation or worse. Besides, mad hatred would trump any economic considerations.

In his 2017 book, "Why, Explaining the Holocaust" - from which I learned a lot about the Holocaust - Peter Hayes shows that the Holocaust was a profitable exercise. Low tech, low cost, low investment, highly efficient. Plunder of Jewish property, real estate, art, gold and jewellery was enormous and provided means for Nazi trading with the neutral Switzerland and Sweden. Concentration camp labourers were lent by the SS to German industries which had to pay handsomely for labour. The height of the perversion occurred in Western Europe: the Nazis made Jews pay for their train transportation to the killing fields in the East.

The downside was the loss of thousands of scientists and engineers, first through emigration and then killing. Towards the end of the war the Germans did suffer a major lack of manpower.

### **The Bystander.**

Murders on the scale of the Holocaust are not possible when the body politic stands up for the rule of law, human dignity and equality for all. The murder of 6 million Jews would not have been possible without the acquiescence, if not complicity of the peoples of Germany and of occupied Europe.

The Holocaust could not have happened without those who diverted their eyes, while having a pretty good idea what the deportations were all about and yet did and said nothing. And yes, there are situations where silence equals complicity.

As a collectivity, the bystanders bear a heavy moral responsibility, but it is more difficult to assess in the abstract the moral responsibility of every individual bystander. Different roles of acquiescence, complicity, participation, each type of involvement attracts different and increasing moral responsibility. Every person's

situational circumstances such as knowledge, proximity, and ability to help must be taken into account.

In the rare cases where people rejected as immoral complicity with the Holocaust as in Denmark, or in the Protestant hamlet of Chambon sur Lignon in France, Jews were saved. Why did the majorities stand by?

The fear of German retribution against the rescuer and his or her family was a major factor. It was not only the rescuer but the protester that faced a heavy risk of severe Nazi retribution. And while the French Cardinal Gerlier, Archbishop Saliege, and a number of French Bishops and Protestant high clergy as well as the Archbishop of Berlin, the Graf von Preysing made statements in support of Jews without being sanctioned by the Nazis, this was not necessarily reassuring for lower profile priests. Still, such statements did lead to a considerable increase in shelter granted to Jews in catholic convents in France.

There was the antisemitism - the dehumanization of Jews so effectively disseminated by the Goebbels propaganda machine. And yet a country as antisemitic as Poland at the time has the highest number of Just proportional to the population who risked their lives to save Jews.

There was the societal stigma attaching to the Jews which discouraged others from speaking up for the Jews.

There was the satisfaction of getting rid of competitors or persons who often were different and resented and often envied by the majority. There was the self-interest in benefitting from Jewish property, medical and legal practices, university posts. There was the prospect of material advantage as multitudes benefitted from assets, businesses and apartments left behind by the murdered or deported Jews.

For some there was sadistic joy of getting rid of Jews.

There was the Catholic church with its great influence which was often antisemitic and mostly conspicuously silent and which nevertheless, especially in its convents, saved a great many Jews.

There was the tradition of respect and obedience for authority and leadership. This was a major factor for compliance even in a country historically as friendly to Jews as the Netherlands. In Germany there was a real cult of authority which may have facilitated the idea of supremacy of Hitler's orders: "Führer Befehl."

There was the ubiquitous tendency to turn away from the person in need next door.

## **The Righteous.**

The New Testament Story of the good Samaritan is inextricably linked with the duty to love one's neighbour. Who is the neighbour who must be helped? Were Jews regarded as such?

When challenged by a lawyer as to how to inherit eternal life, Jesus, as per Luke 10 (25. 29), answers, first, that he must love God and, second, that he should love "thy neighbour as yourself." And then in answering the lawyer's follow-up question, "and who is my neighbour", Jesus answers with the Parable of the good Samaritan. Our New Testament reading of today.

Helping a person in need is advocated not only by the Gospels but also by Philosophers of Ethics. Kant puts it well: *'beneficence toward those in need, is a universal duty of human beings, just because they are to be considered fellow men'* (Metaphysics of Morals 6:453).

Already the Old Testament Leviticus 19 (18) commands *'thy shall love thy neighbour as thyself.'* St. Augustine advocates the idea of universality of the concept of the neighbour. *'Every human being is a neighbour to every other human being'* whether Christian or not. Sermon 8.2.

At the times these texts were written, I would think that "neighbour" simply meant the person next door. But by making the victim anonymous, Luke makes proximity and identity irrelevant to our duties to universal humanity. And in the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5 (43-44) has Jesus go beyond loving one's neighbours to the duty to love one's enemies.

Perhaps the best example of good Samaritans were the people of Denmark. Their transporting all Danish Jews to Sweden was an extraordinary humanitarian rescue operation during the dark days of the Holocaust.

Yet the massive participation by the Danish people and the leadership from the King down, likely reduced the risk for individual Danes, as they acted within a culture of resistance that gave more protection from betrayal and punishment. Surprisingly perhaps it was in South Eastern Europe, in Bulgaria and partly in Romania, rather than in Western and Central Europe, that the opposition of the populations prevented the Holocaust from being fully enforced.

It is the Just or the Righteous Gentile who risked their lives to save Jews and did it not for gain or personal advantage, but for morality and shared humanity. And while a tiny number in comparison to the millions of bystanders, those that were given the Yad Vashem award of the Just still ran into close to 30 thousand.

And there were many who saved Jews but no one bore witness and reported on their deeds. I think of unknown, unsung heroes.

We should admire the Just not only for risking their lives and the lives of their families but also for doing something which at the time was not popular with their communities. I admire their altruism, their shared perception of a common humanity, their readiness to swim against the current, their heroism. It is the Just and the good Samaritans, always vastly outnumbered by the bystanders, who might restore our faith in humanity. Alas, they were so rare! They were always rare. In the biblical story of wicked Sodom, even 10 righteous could not be found to save Sodom from destruction which spared only the righteous Lot. Genesis 18-19 (25, 24). Our Old Testament reading of today.

In my reflections on the Holocaust I avoided discussing the role of God. If God whom we believe to be almighty and benevolent used the Holocaust as punishment for the sinners, why afflict the innocents, the children, the disabled. Was God in Auschwitz or Treblinka? How to reconcile what happened there with our belief in God? This is not just a Jewish, it is an ecumenical dilemma.

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But giving up our belief in God would mean also giving up on hope for a better world and the hereafter. Jurgen Moltmann in his book, *Theology of Hope* (1993) wrote: *'living without hope is like no longer living'* and that it is no accident that at the entrance to Dante's hell in his *Divine Comedy* the description reads: *'Abandon hope, all ye who enter here.'*

But not believing would make us neither happier nor better human beings. So let me conclude: Lord, have mercy; Kyrie eleison.