

UNITED STATES  
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CENTER FOR ADVANCED HOLOCAUST STUDIES

**The First Encounter**  
**Survivors and Americans**  
**in the Late 1940s**

Arthur Hertzberg

WASHINGTON, D.C.

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MONNA AND OTTO WEINMANN LECTURE SERIES  
30 MAY 1996

The assertions, opinions, and conclusions in this occasional paper are those of the author. They do not necessarily reflect those of the United States Holocaust Memorial Council or the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

THE MONNA AND OTTO WEINMANN LECTURE SERIES centers on Holocaust survivors who came to America, and on their families. Born in Poland and raised in Austria, Monna Steinbach Weinmann (1906-1991) fled to England from Vienna in the autumn of 1938. Born in Vienna and raised in Czechoslovakia, Otto Weinmann (1903-1993) served in the Czech, French, and British armies, was injured in the D-Day invasion at Normandy, and received the *Croix de Guerre* for his valiant contributions during the war. Monna Steinbach and Otto Weinmann married in London in 1941 and emigrated to the United States in 1948. Funding for the program is made possible by a generous grant from their daughter Janice Weinman Shorenstein.



THIS LECTURE GROWS out of a conversation Michael Berenbaum and I held some months ago. We were talking about what happened when the first survivors from the death camps arrived in the United States. We agreed that very little had been said or written about these earliest encounters between the survivors and America. During that conversation, I told Michael that I knew some of this history from personal experience. Fifty years ago, when this immigration began, I was a young rabbi, all of twenty-five, in a small congregation in North Philadelphia. I had, however, gotten to know many of the leaders of the Jewish community because I was very much involved in the Zionist movement. One of my friends among them succeeded in getting two nieces out of a DP camp in Germany and securing their entry into the United States almost immediately after the end of the war in Europe. One of these young women had even brought along her fiancé. My friend was an agnostic who refused to go near a synagogue, even though he had been brought up in a religiously traditional family somewhere in Slovakia, but his niece needed to be married, so he came to ask me if I would officiate. I said that I would, of course, be honored to read the service, and I offered to perform the ceremony in any way that would be intelligible to this young couple, that is, that any remarks that I might add to the Hebrew of the liturgy would be in Yiddish, not in English.

The next day the bride called me and, in a very tense voice, she asked to see me. Of course, I saw her within the hour. She came to my office at the synagogue, closed the door and said that she had to tell me her story. Even though it was summer, she had been wearing a blouse with long sleeves. At that point, she started to cry and said she did not know whether she had the right to be married. I asked her why. She rolled up her sleeve, and said: "this tattoo is, as you know, a concentration camp number, but what you do not know is that the initials before it (there were two capital letters, FH) signify something. FH means *Feldhur*. I was a 'field prostitute.' I survived in a brothel right behind the lines servicing the German soldiers. Am I entitled to be married?" I answered, without hesitation, that the question of women who had been raped during pogroms, or sold into slavery by their captors, had been faced by rabbis and communal leaders many times through the centuries. The collective decision had always been to permit such tragic victims to be married. I told the bride that I would describe her in her *ketubah*, her marriage contract, with the ancient formula *hada*

*betulta*, "this virgin," because all that had happened to her had not altered her inner intention or essential self.

After she left the room, I wept. And I weep every time I recount this story. That was my first encounter with the reality of the survivors. I have thought about that story many times in the fifty years that have gone by. I have spent those years in public life, and I have spoken about all the central issues of our time, but I have been able to force myself to write only three essays on the Holocaust. Tonight's occasion is the third public lecture that I have ever given on the subject. It is hard for me to write or talk about the Holocaust perhaps because I keep thinking about the incident of fifty years ago. I keep thinking about the sleeve which the young woman wore to cover the tattoo because she was attempting to cover the memory of the brothel in which she had survived. She wanted to establish a normal life as quickly as possible. I do not know what happened to this couple, for I left Philadelphia the year after I married them. I hope that they have had a decent life, but I suspect that they never really suppressed their tragic memories. They have had to deal with them.

I keep thinking about myself on that occasion. I tried to help them to return to normal, and I wanted to pretend to myself that I could go back to my own life, as usual, after their wedding. I knew that day that I really could not, even though, or perhaps because, I soon would read H. Leivick's famous poem "In Treblinka, bin ich nisht geven" (I was not in Treblinka.) He knew that there forever would be an impassable gulf between those who were there and those who were not. There I was, that day in 1946, confronting this impassable gulf. I have never stopped reflecting on my first encounter with that divide. I keep trying to understand the couple whom I married and myself, the young rabbi who married them. Now, preparing for this occasion, I have put what I have been thinking into some semblance of order. Some of the reasons why I have resisted putting my thoughts together will soon appear in this lecture. What I knew then, and what I have learnt in the years since, lead to fairly radical, and perhaps even startling, conclusions.

My first observation is that in the American community as a whole, there was deep resistance to dealing with the question of the Jewish survivors as a unique problem. Even the friends of the Jews wanted to think about the survivors of the death-camps as part of the larger refugee problem. One of the watchwords of the mid-1940s was that Jews constituted only twenty percent of all the DPs. This was repeated like a mantra. It was a statistical truth—and a moral lie. Yes, in 1945, right at the end of the war, there were eight million displaced people. Four million were almost immediately repatriated; of the other four million who did not quickly return to their homes, Jews were twenty percent. These calculations take into account the Volksdeutsche in the hundreds of thousands, many of whom, perhaps even most, had been Nazi-sympathizers or collaborators in their various countries of origin. This number included Soviet soldiers, under the leadership of General Vlasov, who had defected to the Nazi side. It included volunteers who had come to Germany from the Baltic states out of opportunism or, more usually, Nazi convictions. These people had become part of the refugee problem, broadly defined, not because they were victims of the Nazis but because they had chosen to be among the criminals.

In America the battle was on: Do we want more refugees? How many can we admit? In those very years, the mid-1940s, repeated polls kept showing that antisemitism, which

probably had been at its high point in America in 1944, was still quite virulent, and that admitting many more Jews to the United States was not a very popular idea. The majority of Americans were opposed, then, to large-scale immigration of any kind and they clearly did not want an overwhelming proportion of the postwar immigration to be Jews. There was also, in those days, a red scare, which seemed to echo the first "red scare" of after the end of World War I. The cry was being raised by 1946 and 1947, at the beginning of the Cold War, that some, or even many, of the Jews who wanted to come over were likely to be communists. Supposedly they would bring Bolshevism with them. An honest account of this period must conclude that this was not the day of Emma Lazarus' poem in which America says to the world, "give me your tired, your huddled masses." This was the day of an inhospitable America. The top priority was the postwar absorption of millions of returning soldiers. We were willing to help Europe rebuild but not to have its problems brought to the United States.

What I have just said is the tale of those days as I have gleaned it from contemporary documents. This account agrees with my own memories. Even the Jews in America were largely reluctant, then, to present the Jewish DPs as a special case—as a group who deserved large-scale easy access to America. I lived in north Philadelphia, in Oak Lane, in 1946 and 1947. Not very far up the road, in Elkins Park, there lived a prominent Jew named Lessing Rosenwald. He was, as many will remember, the leading spirit of the American Council for Judaism, the anti-Zionist group. The earliest tape that I possess of a public appearance of mine is an enormous reel of a two-hour debate that I had with Lessing Rosenwald about Zionism on a Philadelphia radio station. The American Council for Judaism included many of the "best" people in America, that is of the "German Jews," though the bulk of the Jewish establishment had turned away from anti-Zionism. On this point, of playing down the special pain of the Jews as an argument for admitting survivors to America, they did carry the Jewish establishment with them. In response to the prevailing antisemitic mood in America, leading Jews, together with non-Jewish friends, organized a Central Committee for Displaced Persons. The ideology of the CCDP was that they were interested in overall humanitarian relief for refugees. This organization even published literature in which the Estonians, the Latvians and the Volksdeutsche were described as victims of Nazism. The CCDP based its appeal not on the specific Jewish tragedy, on its unique intensity, or the horror that one-third of the Jewish people had been done to death in four to five years, but on America's long tradition of humanitarian concern for refugees. The message was: let us at least do something appropriate and decent for all the refugees.

There was another reason for wanting to play down the Jewish nature of the Jewish tragedy. By 1946-1947, the movement was in high gear to create the postwar German state. There is evidence even in a film that is still re-run, over and over again, with two fine actors, Burt Lancaster and Spencer Tracy. This work is the famous *Judgment at Nuremberg*. You will remember that the younger prosecutors working with the judge, who is portrayed by Spencer Tracy, are already very angry that American opinion is moving away from looking for Nazis. We were busy creating the postwar German state as a bulwark against the Soviet



Union. On this point, because Michael put me on notice that I am supposed to tell you a bit of autobiography, I shall add some evidence from those days. Towards the end of this period, in 1950, the United States got into the Korean War. The next year, I volunteered to enter the service as a military chaplain and I was soon in uniform. I thought I was going to be ordered to Korea but the Air Force sent me off to Europe. After a difficult sea passage in a gale (we almost capsized once), we reached dock in Bremerhaven. When we got off the ship, I joined five other junior officers who had shared a cabin; we walked over to the soft-drink stand. The other five did not speak German, so I was detailed to buy the Cokes. I approached the fellow behind the counter in the kiosk, who was clearly a former German soldier, and I asked him to tell me how much we would need in military scrip, which was all we had, to pay him for six Cokes. He did not reach to fill the order. First, he said "*wunderbar!*," how wonderful that you Americans are landing again in Germany in such numbers. You have realized that we are really allies. Soon we will march together against the *Gefahr vom Osten*, to deal with "the danger from the East." I was upset by his remark but even more by its glibness. He was not minding his tongue on an American military dock, because he obviously had made this comment before to other American officers getting off ships in that harbor, and he had heard approving responses.

The United States had been very busy bringing Werner von Braun and other rocket scientists to this country—never mind their Nazi pasts—because we were creating *assets* in the anti-communist Cold War. At that point, in the earliest years of the East-West rivalry, American policy did not want to deal with the singularity of Jewish pain, and of German guilt, because this issue might hinder or slow down the creation of a German state in alliance with ourselves. Henry Morgenthau's proposal, put forward before the end of World War II, that Germany be permanently divided in two and stripped of industry—this to make it incapable of sustaining a war machine, already had been dropped before the hostilities ceased. The dominant view was that postwar American policy would need Germany as a bulwark in Europe. The Holocaust could be dealt with only as refugeeism, a "normal" result of any war, and not as a moral issue which questioned the possibility of including postwar Germany as a major ally of the United States.

Even among American Jews, there was strong immediate reason for underplaying the Holocaust. Many of the DPs had organized demonstrations to show that they had the will, and demanded the right, to go to Palestine. Many people in the American Jewish community who were not Zionists were agreeing. The American Jewish Committee was suddenly in favor of the idea that 100,000 certificates should be issued by the British to admit Jews to Palestine. These "non-Zionists" were not, then, converts to Jewish nationalism. They spoke only of letting the DPs go where they wished: to Palestine. The overtly Jewish dimension of the problem of the DPs—that they wanted out of Europe and into a place where they would be the masters of their own fate, and would soon establish a Jewish state—was essentially ignored. Some of the non-Zionists even found a way to make peace with the nationalist fervor of the DPs. It could be included among the immediate postwar interests in the creation of new states

which would give new democratic hope to the people who had been beaten up by war. There was going to be a new Czechoslovakia, a new Yugoslavia, and a new Poland. Supposedly all the many new political arrangements would be a kind of recompense for what had happened to the peoples of central and eastern Europe. Why not, therefore, give the Jews such recompense by creating the state for which the Zionists were clamoring?

Even among the Zionists, who were avowed supporters of Jewish nationalism, much of the support came from the notion that this was an international humanitarian concern. The very fervor of Jewish nationalism meant that the problem of Jewish DPs would be solved in Palestine. The American Legion and the Veterans of Foreign Wars were bitterly opposed to immigration. The labor unions were waffling, saying that some, but not many, refugees ought to be admitted. As the battle for Zionist aims in Palestine became ever more public, the American Jewish community was keeping its head down on American domestic policy. The organized Jewish charities were sending lots of money to Europe to help the DPs, and they were spending much effort on a United Service for New Americans to settle those who did come to the United States, but none of this required a frontal assault on American domestic sensibilities. We wanted not to upset the feelings of the enemies or even of some of the friends of the Jews. We were at war, then, with the hard-hearted British government, which would not open the door to Palestine, and with the Arabists in the State Department who dominated American foreign policy, but these were off-shore issues. Quietly, the Zionists agreed with the non-Zionists that this was a useful alternative to having to fight hard to open wider the doors of America. But the stark and unmistakable statement that this building, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum on the National Mall in Washington, makes—that something happened to the Jews that was unlike what happened to anyone else in World War II, and that America and the world must take notice—simply could not have been made in the 1940s. It was not.

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So what about the Holocaust survivors themselves, as they arrived in America? I have been reading the literature about them in these days, and I have, of course, been searching my memory. The survivors were not what they became by the 1960s and 1970s. They arrived in this country with some visible euphoria: finally they were free; finally they were in a country in which they would have a chance to remake their lives. Of course, they could not forget their grief, but the dominant decision was to wall it off in private chambers of their souls. In December 1948, *Commentary* magazine published a brilliant article by Dr. Paul Friedman, an American psychoanalyst who had spent some time in the DP camps. He reported that, on the surface, he found the young people to be joyous; they look as if they have completely returned to themselves. And yet, as he talked to them, he found a child who had been hidden in a *shtetl* by her parents' maid. She had seen her parents shot to death before her eyes but did not dare cry. She had not been able to cry ever since. For her to reach some form of normalcy, this

young woman would have to break through her emotional confines to cry over the murder of her parents. A book was published in those days by the United Service for New Americans about its clients. The same story is told over and over again. They come here from the camps; they look downcast. We find them some schooling; we help them get their lives started and very rapidly they have become just like other Americans. This book reminds me of the accounts that I have read of the work of the Education Alliance in New York City in the 1890s, or of any of the other settlement houses in the big cities to which the immigrants flowed in the mass migration after 1882. They come to our Americanization classes, Henrietta Szold wrote in her diary in Baltimore, from benighted places in Russia. We teach them English; we teach them table manners; we make them part of our society; we embrace them with affection, and soon they become just like us. But in the 1890s, and again in the 1940s, there was the same countertheme: the immigrants tend to huddle together. We, the volunteers, the social workers, and the teachers, need an enormous amount of inventiveness to bring them into the larger community.

In the 1940s, as before, the American Jewish community expected the survivors to be a model of integration, of wholeness, of wholesomeness, of achievement, so that one could say to the American people that these immigrants are carrying on in the praiseworthy tradition of American immigrants: they are very rapidly acculturating and they are becoming part of us. They, too, are part of the "American dream." They are blending into the mosaic of "Americans all." This theme was dominant in liberal America of those days. It had been at the center of the war films that Hollywood was producing. Over and over again, the story was told of a platoon made up of a Southern redneck, a "Negro" soldier, a Jew named Greenberg from Brooklyn, plus a few WASPs. They always began by not liking one another, in the name of all the classic prejudices and stereotypes. Soon they are under fire, and one of them even gets killed, perhaps the Black man or the Jew. By the end of the film, the platoon recognizes that all of its members are equally Americans. A new American nationalism was being taught: that this country consists of people of various origins, and that it is preserved by their united efforts.

A corollary to this doctrine was that people from various backgrounds really are becoming the same. This point was made in a very famous novel of that time, and in the film that was based on it. Laura Hobson's *Gentleman's Agreement* was published in 1947. The book and the movie denounce the antisemitism prevailing in America during those days. The hero of the story is a journalist, Phil Green, a Christian, who is assigned by a magazine of mass circulation to write about antisemitism. Needing a "new angle," Green decides to pose as a Jew for eight weeks in a "restricted" town in Connecticut. He discovers, of course, that the moment he is known as a Jew, he is attacked. Phil Green fights back. He answers his enemies by asking: Why are you doing this to me? I wear the same clothes that you do; my accent in English is the same as yours; I went to the same schools. There is nothing in my life that entitles you to treat me as different, because I am not. This argument is all the more believable in the film because the hero of the story is played by Gregory Peck, who suggests

by his very presence that the Jew whom he is representing is not different from everyone else. The American Jewish community relished *Gentleman's Agreement* because it was the first major film to attack antisemitism, even as we were not quite ready to agree with its assimilationist premise.

Something else was going on then, and I know that I am treading on very sensitive ground to speak of it. In the 1940s and 1950s Jews were still not in the mainstream of American life. We wanted to shed our alienness so we were not then intent on emphasizing our unique and tragic history. The newest immigrants, the survivors, brought along their own discomfort, their own reasons for silence. The DPs in the camps in 1946 and 1947 had been insisting: give me Palestine, give me the Jewish land, or give me death. Demonstrations were organized to impress the Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry and all other visitors. Those Jewish DPs who came to the United States knew that they had let others go to the battlefields in Palestine. It was all too human for many of the survivors to want to recuperate in the quiet and plenty of post-war America. Even fifty years later, in 1996, this is an undiscussible subject, but I know about the silence of those who were newcomers to America, and their desire to bury their discomfort. I know because I was there when they arrived. They had to play down the Shoah then, because to play it up raised the question of why they had chosen to come to another "exile." They did not want to face the question because they were not yet ready to come to terms with themselves, with their own history. And so, quite apart from the personal need to reenter normal life, there was a deep moral question which the survivors could drive below the surface by driving the Shoah itself into a private chamber of their lives.

This silence was favored, and very nearly forced, by a deep, and as yet unnoticed need of the existing American Jewish community. Let us think back to the mid-1940s. The United States was, at that point, the great victorious power, and never mind that the Russians thought that they had won the war. The peoples of the Soviet Union have remained persuaded, to this day, that the Great Patriotic War was their victory with some minor help from the Americans. They remember that they suffered the bulk of the casualties in World War II. But at the end of the war the United States was the great power. It was the sole possessor of the atom bomb, and the American economy was soon doubling and redoubling. As Americans, the Jews of America were claiming their share in the victory. They were proudly telling of the outsize contribution of Jews to the armies, and to the entire war effort. In return, Jews were demanding full equality; they were claiming the right to be treated like all other Americans. One of the stages of that battle was that, in the aftermath of the war, the founding president of the American Jewish Congress, Rabbi Stephen Wise, sued Columbia University. He attacked the medical school on the premise that it had a quota against Jews and, therefore, that it was a private club which should enjoy none of the tax relief that was given to public service institutions. Private clubs are entitled to do anything they want, but not to be tax exempt. That suit by Stephen Wise was the beginning of going to the courts to reverse discrimination. That suit became the paradigm for the legal actions which undergirded the Black Revolution. At any rate, Columbia University decided not to defend the suit. It dropped the quota. The GI

Bill of Rights, which opened the universities to all the returning veterans, gave decisive impetus to the battle against discrimination which Wise had launched.

Those were heady days when American Jews wanted to be thought of as part of the American victory. As Americans, indeed, we were. On the other hand, as Jews, we were the great losers of the war. We had lost one-third of our people, most of whom had been murdered defenselessly. As Jews, we were identified not with Eisenhower standing and looking horrified at the pile of bodies at Ohrdruf but with the bodies at which he looked. To use a Hebrew term, the *kerá shebelev*, the rent in the heart of the American Jewish community, was, then, between its deep need to identify with the American victory and America's postwar success, and its knowledge that as Jews our people had lost the war. We were *the* major loser. No other people had lost one-third of itself, and certainly not so disastrously and in ways that were so hard to contemplate. American Jews had, then, to suppress their own guilt at surviving, and their even greater self-reproaches for not having succeeded in saving more of their relatives. Therefore, in the 1940s we did much to help those who came. We exerted ourselves prodigiously in the battle for Israel. But we could not yet deal with the unique dimension of the Holocaust. It was not yet possible in the 1940s, when the newest arrivals, the survivors, had reasons to be silent, and the Jews who were already in American wanted, above all else, to complete their journey towards "Americans all."

When did the freeze begin to lift? It took twenty years, until the 1960s. By then, Jews had achieved essential equality in American society. The social barriers had only half fallen, but what difference did it really make whether some golf club still did not admit you because you were a Jew. The professional barriers were down, and the political barriers were down or they were beginning to come down very rapidly. In the 1960s it became possible for Jews to look at the Holocaust from a new position of security. Having arrived at equality, they could now dare contemplate the Holocaust for the unique horror that it had been. This was all the more possible in the 1960s because these were the years of the Black Revolution and of the intense quarrels over the war in Viet Nam. It was the era of "let it all hang out." In this new America, one could let his individual differences and his individual hurts and angers be "up front." At that point the Holocaust survivors, who had established their new lives in America, begin to tell about themselves. After two decades in America, they, too, had come to some substance and they now felt more secure about being themselves—their real selves. Now they would tell their story, and, if necessary, make others listen. It was decisive that, in the 1960s, the bulk of that generation was reaching the beginnings of middle age, when thoughts of mortality, and of what one is passing on to one's own children, begin to be troubling. The survivors had to tell their tale, at very least in order to hand on the memory of their uniquely tragic, and essentially triumphant, lives to their own children.

I can date this turning in the mid-1960s from my own experience. In 1961, a bit before the beginning of the new openness, I invited Elie Wiesel, whose book *Night* had just been published in English, to speak at my synagogue in Englewood. Our mutual friend of those years, Rabbi Wolfe Kelman, had asked me to extend the invitation to help Wiesel who

needed, then, both the exposure and the lecture fee. I advertised the occasion, and worked the telephone to pressure friends to come, but only eighteen people showed up. There were more than eighteen Holocaust survivors in Englewood, not to speak of its Jewish population of some thousands. The subject was not yet on, not until a few years later.

Something else was happening by the end of the 1960s and into the 1970s. A new generation of American Jews was growing to maturity. They were the baby-boomers who had been born after the war, for whom the Holocaust and Adolf Hitler were not a living experience or a living memory. Their elders feared that this generation was assimilating out of the Jewish loyalty, very rapidly and in astonishing numbers. They had become alienated from, or indifferent to, Jewish concerns. The Jewish journals of the late 1960s and 1970s are full of pained essays: what are we going to do about a younger generation which will martyr itself for the Black Revolution (remember the murder of Goodman and Schwerner in Mississippi), but which really does not care about Jewish concerns. The American Jewish response was to do what American Jews have always done: to remind the Jews that they have enemies. The characteristic American Jewish organizations, the ones that were formed here at the turn of the century, are the American Jewish Committee, the Anti-Defamation League and the American Jewish Congress. They had long been in the business of anti-antisemitism, but what could they do with the college generation which was growing to maturity in a new America? These young people might have to face some social antisemitism but they were on the way to professional or business careers open to talent. For that matter, now, thirty years later, the process is complete. American society is totally open to Jews. One striking index of the change is that the majority of the presidents of the Ivy League colleges are, at this moment, Jewish. That Jews were arriving at the very center of American life was clear in the 1960s, but the American Jewish community still knew one continuing tune. It kept saying to itself and to its young: don't imagine that the world is open! You've got enemies out there.

The Holocaust suddenly became a usable past for the American Jewish community, to remind Jews that they are different and that they have a different destiny. In the 1970s, the Holocaust was made into very nearly the *raison d'être* of Jewish life and education. The widespread pressure for Jewish studies programs began, then, usually with a grant to a college or university from the local federation of Jewish philanthropies to teach some courses on the Holocaust. The theory was that such courses would remind Jewish students, who had become bored years before in Sunday School and knew too little from their families about Jewish culture or traditions, that there are nasty people out there who murder Jews. A younger generation which had no personal experience of antisemitism, at least not where it really hurt, was being told about it vicariously, but searingly, by studying the Holocaust. Resisting antisemitism was invoked again as the principal force which united Jews and gave them reason to be Jewish. Remembering the Holocaust, which had made the American Jews uncomfortable in the 1940s and 1950s, was welcomed in the 1970s as the way to continue the separate life of the Jewish community on the time-honored basis which the establishment understood: anti-antisemitism.

For two decades or more, the memory of the horrors of the Holocaust did give profound impetus to Jewish life in America. Together with pride in Israel, these two powerful forces were the main themes which dominated Jewish consciousness. They were particularly powerful in the aftermath of the Six Day War in June 1967. The Jewish communities of the world, and especially the largest of all, the one in the United States, were aroused as never before by the fear of a "second Holocaust," that is, of the destruction of Israel by its Arab enemies. Nonetheless, even the memory of unprecedented murder of the Jews and pride in the new Jewish nation in Israel, linked together, did not make an end of assimilation. On the contrary it increased year by year. By 1990 a population study, done on a large scale by the Council of Jewish Federations and Welfare Funds, established beyond doubt that a significant minority of the Jewish community was in various stages of ceasing to care about its Jewish identity. The reaction to this upsetting knowledge was that the new Jewish buzz word was no longer antisemitism. It had become "continuity."

This move to "continuity," is effecting a radical change in the discourse about the Holocaust. There is less talk now about the horrors, the pain and the woe; there is growing interest in rediscovering who the six million were in life. We seem to know as much, or even more, than we can assimilate about how they died; we now need to learn what they lived for. American Jews have reached the point of recognizing that they have not yet really remembered, or tried to link their lives, to the traditions, the beliefs and the texts which were destroyed. The awareness is beginning to permeate that before 1939, when the Second World War broke out, the center of Jewish culture was not in Tel Aviv and it was not in New York. It was in central and eastern Europe, and its capitals were Warsaw, Vilna, and Berlin. The most intense Jewish community was the three million in Poland, among whom were the most vital elements of almost all the versions of Jewish life and faith. Jews are a people who lost not only—dare I say, not merely—one-third of its entire population. Jews lost the essential center of their spirit and culture. To remember the Holocaust demands that we evoke the world that was destroyed and forge links with it.

This major shift in emphasis and interest is commanded not only by the changes in Jewish life but also by the new society that is emerging in America as a whole. The nativists are in bitter opposition, but multiculturalism is the future. As my own senator and friend, Bill Bradley, said in a speech in Congress some three years ago, the majority of the elementary school population in America will soon be non-White. America is no longer a country that is dominated by WASP culture; it has become a country in which many cultural traditions are represented. To work out these new relations is a very difficult problem, but we are not going to make the future by compelling everyone to assimilate to older WASP norms. It is inevitable that some balance will be found between ancestral memories of each community and the desire of all of them to belong together, deeply and passionately, to America as a whole. In such an American society, the rediscovery of the last great Jewish cultural and spiritual center, in central and eastern Europe, which was destroyed by the Nazis, is a matter of profound concern. This is our immediate past; its memory and teaching is our passport into

the American future.

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I must end these remarks very personally. There is a railroad car here in this museum which shattered me when first I saw it. It is one of the cars in which people were shipped to the death camps. It is not a picture; it is the real thing. My first reaction to that railroad car was distance. I defended myself against it, but then I looked into myself and began to realize that I was dealing with something within me that I did not want to come to the surface. Let me speak of it here, for the first time ever. That railroad car in which Jews went to their deaths evokes for me another scene at another railroad car. I am five years old. My mother and my grandmother (my father's mother; she was a widow) are taking me on the journey to the United States to join my father. It is the last days of June in 1926 and, under the National Origins Quota Law which was coming into force in the United States, if we were not at sea by the 30th of June, our visa would no longer be valid. We never could have gotten out of Poland after that, and, instead of being in that railroad car on the way to Antwerp to board a ship, I would, fifteen years later, have been on that other railroad car on the way to Auschwitz. The difference between my standing here and delivering a reasonably dispassionate lecture and being remembered in this museum as one of the six million is four days. I do not regard it as totally accidental that we arrived in New York harbor on the 4th of July 1926.

The scene that lives with me from that railroad station is my grandfather, my mother's father, who opposed her going because he did not want his daughter and his grandson to leave him, not even to rejoin her husband. He kept demanding that his son-in-law should come back to Poland. My grandfather, with his beard flying and his black caftan trailing behind him, is running along the platform as the train is leaving. I have asked myself for many, many years what was he trying to do. Now I think I know. He certainly knew that we were leaving and that he could not stop us. Was he trying to catch a last glimpse of his daughter and grandson? I do not think that he was that sentimental. That would not fit all the other descriptions that I have heard of him. He was running beside our train to impress on his daughter and his grandson that, no matter what they might become in America, we should never forget our links to him and to the culture, the religion, the piety, and the learning that he represented. I am now able, today, to look at the railroad car in this building—even though it might be the very car in which my grandfather went to his death—because I know what he asked me to remember when I left him in 1926.

As I was growing up in Baltimore, along with my brothers and sisters, our parents reenforced what Grandfather had tried to say. They taught us to be connected to the intense Jewish world in eastern Europe. After 1945, my father would never speak of that world in the past tense. He never said "*in Raishe hat men gezogt*; they *used* to say in Raishe." To the end of his days, twenty-five years ago, my father always said "*in Raishe zogt men*; they *say* in Raishe," in the present tense. By an act of will, he would keep that culture alive. As a matter



of fact, for his children, he did. I never have been to Poland, though I have given money to take care of the cemetery in Lubaczow, the town of my birth. One of the reasons is, surely, that I do not want to see the destruction of Lubaczow, so that I will have to put these Jews into the past. I want to be able to continue my father's nourishing illusion of "they say in Lubaczow." What was the meaning of my father's charade? Of course, he knew that the Jews of Poland had been murdered, but he refused to think of them as victims who were dead and gone. Of course, he grieved over their deaths and he remained fiercely angry at those who could have helped save them during the war years—Roosevelt, Churchill, the Pope, and the Jews in America—but who did very little. This *tsadik*, this holy man, remained deeply upset with God Himself for having allowed the slaughter. But, my father remained united with the people who had been murdered. He revered their lives as even more sacred than their martyred deaths. Every time he talked of them in the present tense, they lived through him.

I come to you tonight to the national museum of the Holocaust as the messenger of my father and grandfather. Because I speak in their name, I have no right to mince words. This institution has been placed here on the National Mall, at the very heart of America, as an American museum. The mainstream of American society is coming here in overwhelming numbers, because what is inside these walls speaks to the conscience of all our people. They come here because they are ashamed of antisemitism and because they reject the bloody history of mankind. People in tens of thousands walk out of this building in contrition for the sins of the past and with the high resolve to make a better world. This important work will, and it must, continue. It has deepened, as your research endeavors center on the roots of race-hatred, in the hope that finding the diagnosis will help effect a cure to this murderous disease. But these endeavors will not guarantee your future as a useful and seminal institution. This museum must move to the task of celebrating the creativity of the Jewish heritage; it must become a paradigm for other traditions and communities in search of their own roots. It is not the task of this museum to become a cheerleader for some version of Jewish cultural revival. That responsibility belongs to the Jewish community itself. It is the task of this museum to help us understand the creative past of the Jewish people, and, especially, the grandeur of its life in the last years before 1939. This institution, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, bears witness to the tragic death of six million Jews; it must now breathe life into their dry bones. Here we remember the death of the six million. Let us now celebrate their lives.

These themes of death and life, of destruction and continuity, come together in a story that I want to put at the end of these reflections. I have a very good friend, a man of love and spiritual breadth, named Chaskel Besser. He is a high official of the Agudat Israel, and he is now in charge of the project which was launched in 1925, the *Daf Yomi*, "the folio of the day:" All over the world those who know Talmud study the same folio on the same day. By the way, at this moment, the students of the *Daf Yomi* are in the middle of the tractate *Menahot*, which deals with offerings of grain that were put on the altar in Jerusalem. One studies these rituals, in their exact procedures, as a way of remembering the Holy Temple as it

once existed. Rabbi Chaskel Besser tells that the Daf Yomi was studied in Auschwitz. People who knew the Talmud well studied together on their bunks late at night. They had no texts, but some remembered the whole of the Talmud by heart. One day there was a "selection" and a father and son were in line. The father was "selected" to be marched to the crematoria because he was no longer capable of working, but the son was left alive. As the father was being marched away (he was going to his death, and both know that this was happening), the father turned around and shouted to his son, "remember that the text of today is the 67th folio of the tractate *Sanhedrin*."

What stands before my eyes when I think of the Holocaust—I think of it every day—is my grandfather running after a train asking his five-year-old grandchild to remain linked to the Chassidic world, and the father on the way to the gas chamber in Auschwitz who told his son to keep studying the text which bound them together.

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