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Thoughts About Things

The Holocaust

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The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum is one of the most important exhibits in Washington DC. When I visited the Museum again in October 1997, I relived the horrors of Hitler's war against civilization and the Jewish people. To stand in an actual boxcar, which carried human beings to their death, is sobering. To see the actual bunk beds not suitable for one person, but which housed twelve, is heart wrenching. To see actual brick ovens in which human beings' bodies were burned was terrible. The sights and sounds of the Museum almost create a sensation of smelling and of feeling the human suffering caused by one group of human beings determining that another group of human beings should not live. It is incomprehensible to the mind that such things actually happened, but they did!

Each visitor to the Museum is given an "identification card," which gives the life history of a Holocaust victim. My card gave the biography of Fischel (Philip) Goldstein, born January 12, 1922 in Radom, Poland. As I walked through the floors of the exhibits, and as I read the details of Fischel's life, I was moved to tears. Only fifteen of the one thousand men who entered Auschwitz with Fischel survived. I don't know much about Fischel, and I know nothing of his life after Auschwitz, but he will always be my friend and my brother. Our lives are bound by tragedy, his actual and real, mine vicarious, but nonetheless real.

The systematic attempt by the Nazis to destroy European Jewry has not always been called Holocaust. Holocaust was derived from the Hebrew word *sho'ah* which referred to "a sacrifice consumed by fire; a thorough destruction especially by fire." *The Encyclopedia of the Holocaust* makes the following comment about the term "holocaust":

"In the 1950's (Holocaust) came to be applied primarily to the destruction of the Jews of Europe under the Nazi regime...The use of...*sho'ah* to denote the destruction of Jews in Europe...appeared for the first time in the booklet *Sho'ah Yehudei Polin (The Holocaust of the Jews of Poland)*, published...in Jerusalem in 1940. Up to the spring of 1942, however, the term was rarely used...It was still far from being in general use, even after the November 1942, declaration of the Jewish Agency that a *sho'ah* was taking place." (Israel Gutman, editor, *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust*, Macmillan Publishing Company, New York, 1990, p. 681.)

One's sensibilities are stunned by the thought of burning human flesh. One's sense of outrage is heightened by the realization that one by one, millions of men, women and children, whose only crime was ethnic and religious identity, were murdered and consumed by flames of hatred and prejudice. Fischel's story reminds me that the Holocaust was not a pogrom; it was not genocide, terms, which we often use to depersonalize personal tragedies. Fischel's story reminds me that the Holocaust was the real-life experience of real individuals, just like you and me.

The brief biography of my friend, Fischel, in booklet number 2074 of the US Holocaust Memorial Museum adds these few details: "In March 1941, the Germans set up a ghetto in Radom and on April 28, 1942, Fischel was deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau...Every day prisoners were beaten to death...At night, prisoners were dragged from their bunk at random and killed by the 'stubendienst,' prisoners who were assistants to the barrack elder." As the anniversary of Fischel's birth approaches, I remember my friend. He will be 76, if he is still alive. I pray that he has found peace in the fifty-two years since his release, April 30, 1945. Perhaps the knowledge that a Southeast Texan cares about him will add to his sense of worth and well being.

The irony of Fischel's number in the Museum should not be lost. The Nazi's gave Fischel a number by which to kill him. You see, it's easier to kill a number than a name. It's easier to abuse a person who has ceased to be a person to you. Ironically, though, the Museum, perhaps unwittingly, has chosen the same methodology to restore Fischel's humanity. The Nazi's used a number to cancel Fischel's name; the Museum catalogues Fischel's name with a number.

This should remind us that numerals, numbers, mathematics, science, technology -- all of the modern wonders of the world -- are amoral. They can be used for good or for evil; they can be used to build bridges or to burn the bodies of human beings. And, it is people who decide how they will be used.

One of the ways we can influence how "things" will be used is to never allow ourselves to treat a human being as if he or she is not a person. We must never allow anyone to use race, creed, color or national origin as a means of dehumanizing another human being. We must never imagine that because someone is different, they are inherently less a human being. We must never allow ourselves to believe that because someone is not as educated, as sophisticated, as wealthy, as _____ -- you supply the point of contrast -- they are not as fully human as you.

Happy Birthday, Fischel. Your life's story gives us a point of reference from which we can embrace all men and women, boys and girls, as our brothers and sisters. Thank you for that great gift. We will hold it in trust for the next generation to whom we owe the debt of our knowledge of the Holocaust and of you, our friend. As you become real to us, our neighbors become real to us. We shall bless you by our kindness to them. *Shalom*, my friend!