# A collective responsibility and a moral and historic commitment

31.01.2016 | Beate Klarsfeld

**Remarks given on the occasion of the United Nations Holocaust Memorial Ceremony, Wednesday, 27 January 2016, International Day of Commemoration in memory of the victims of the Holocaust.**

I am German Lutheran, born in Berlin in 1939 just weeks before the Second World War, which saw the creation of the United Nations after the failure of the League of Nations, which itself had been conceived during World War One a century ago.

It was a century that witnessed the perpetration of the genocide of Armenians in Asia, one that came close upon the heels of the genocide of the Hereros in Africa; two genocides that would precede that of the Jews in Europe. Together, Imperial Germany and Hitler's Germany were involved all three of these tragedies.

In spring 1945, Germany was at the margins of the community of nations. The Nazi powers had capitulated and Germany, as a political entity, ceased to exist. Millions of soldiers had been killed, and millions of civilians had also been killed, among them six million Jews, murdered by the fanatical anti-Semitism of Hitler's ideology. Germany was guilty of a crime against peace and against humanity and of a new world war. Europe lay in ruins. Major German cities were destroyed, the German people were starving; Germany was militarily occupied and it was divided. Millions of refugees poured in from the East to the West... Collective guilt hung over all Germans.

Where then to find a glimmer of hope for the future? How to rebuild? How to repair the mistakes and crimes? How to rebuild Germany and integrate it into the international community again?

Forty-four years later, Germany was re-unified, and today it is a powerful and prosperous state. It has regained the respect and esteem of its partners by affirming itself as a free nation and an exemplary democracy. It is the best friend and ally of France, a country against which it had conducted three wars in 70 years. As a German received by France and who also became French, I am pleased to have contributed to this unique Franco-German rapprochement, and I am happy to have been among the first Germans to build a bridge between the German people and the Jewish people and to have been nominated by Israel in 1977 and in 1984 for the Nobel Peace Prize.

Germany has built a deep understanding with Israel, with the Jewish Holocaust survivors to whom it makes reparations, and with the Jewish people, to the point that today 100,000 Jews now reside in Germany, whereas less than 30,000 were still alive there in 1945, at a time when one heard predictions of the end of Jewish history in Germany; one that had once been so rich and fertile.

Ever since my teen years, I always thought it was both exciting and difficult to be German. While the Cold War was raging, I didn’t I consider myself to be either from the East or the West, but as a reunified German citizen. And 45 years ago in Geneva, on the front of UN Headquarters, I set the affixed the flags of the two German states, so that the voice of Germany might be heard in this organization, whose mission is so critical for the international community and for world peace.

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It is logical that the democratic and humanist republican Germany of today, freed from Prussian militarism and Nazi ideology, should be as generously committed to the reception of political refugees as it currently is. It was also logical for a young German woman, beginning in the sixties, to commit herself to preventing former Nazis from polluting German political life on the one hand and, on the other, to ensure that Nazi criminals wherever they were in the world would be tried by the courts.

I believed then, as I still do, in the moral unity of the German people: whatever its ideology, each German has specific responsibilities. It is not a collective guilt that is passed onto young generations; it is a collective responsibility and a moral and historic commitment.

I tried to assume these responsibilities not merely in words but in just and difficult deeds; in Germany against a Chancellor who had been a former Nazi high propagandist, or in Austria against a President who had been General Secretary of the United Nations at the top of this very building where we now sit, while his file of suspected war crimes was kept here, downstairs in the basement. In South America I led many campaigns against Nazi criminals and against the dictatorships protecting them: against Colonel Banzer in Bolivia, against General Pinochet in Chile, against General Stroessner in Paraguay; and in 1977, against torture and repression in Buenos-Aires and Montevideo, when those countries were being led by military juntas. I also tried to demonstrate my solidarity with Jews persecuted everywhere in the world and with the State of Israel, the state of refuge for Holocaust survivors. I was arrested in communist countries; I went to Damascus after the Yom Kippur War to protest against the treatment inflicted on Israeli prisoners of war, to help the threatened Jews of Syria to leave the country and to ask for the extradition of the Nazi criminal Alois Brunner. At the summit of Arab States in Rabat and in Algiers, I also demonstrated in favor of a peace settlement and I spent one month in Beirut in the Muslim sector during the civil war, offering myself as a hostage in an effort to save the lives of the Jewish Lebanese hostages.

The strength to lead these actions is one I draw from the memory of the long columns of parents and children on the ramp of Auschwitz-Birkenau being led to the gas chambers; those gigantic slaughter houses in the heart of Europe, built by Nazi Germany to exterminate the Jewish people.

I am not alone on the path I have laid down in advance of my countrymen, and I am guided by men like Karl Jaspers, Heinrich Böll, Willy Brandt and by the example of Hans and Sophie Scholl, who showed the way, sacrificing themselves to save the honor of Germany.

Rallying around our Franco-German alliance have been many of the Holocaust’s orphans. They have supported us and many have campaigned with us. We fought for their rights and France has responded to our request and is now indisputably at the forefront of those countries making reparations to the victims of the Holocaust.

The Nazis and all those who participated in genocide or massacres took no account of the value of human life. If the United Nations does not strengthen itself so that peace and order reign everywhere; if the international criminal court is not supported by a permanent international police force loyal to the United Nations alone, then the mass crimes will increase, because we are no longer two billion people as we were in 1940 but rather, seven billion today, and human life is at risk of losing its value.

Memorials have increased in all the countries involved in the Holocaust: in those where it was perpetrated or who participated in it, and in those who did not intervene as they could have done to try to stop it. Germany devoted a key area for the Holocaust Memorial right by the old Reichstag, today’s Bundestag. Everywhere historical documentation centers have also increased, as well as literature, theses, historical books and films about the disaster – this Shoah – which is receding in time with its last witnesses, its last victims, its last executioners, but which remains and will ever

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remain so close to us in the questions it raises about Man, about History and about a constantly renewed anti-Semitism, one which has incarnated itself today in a violent anti-Zionism.

Six million Jews live in Israel and still live under the threat of a destruction promised them by enemies seeking nuclear weapons. Let us recall the threats made by Hitler against the Jews at a beer hall in 1920 or at the Reichstag rostrum in 1939; very few believed in them then, and yet they were made real in the end.

I have never been fascinated by the executioners; my feeling is for the victims of this genocide which my husband never ceased to identify by playing the role of pioneer 40 years ago, by acting on behalf of one victim, then another and ever another. Through our actions on the ground, through our reference publications, through the activism of our association of the orphans of murdered Jews, our group has done its duty and fulfilled the mission of memory and justice it set for itself. But history is unpredictable. Only the United Nations, provided they are powerful and effective, can master the unpredictability of history and safeguard the dignity of every human being.

Source: United Nations.
Beate Klarsfeld (born 13 February 1939) together with her husband Serge Klarsfeld (born 17 September 1935) are activists and Nazi hunters known for documenting the Holocaust in order to establish the record and to enable the prosecution of war criminals. Since the 1960s, they have made notable efforts to commemorate the Jewish victims of German-occupied France, and have been supporters of Israel.

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