



Address at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, March 29, 2006

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Transcript of an address at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, D.C., by Cardinal Jean-Marie Lustiger, retired Archbishop of Paris, March 29, 2006.

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[Jean-Marie Cardinal Lustiger](#)
Archbishop Emeritus of Paris

Have you read the novel by Elie Wiesel entitled *The Forgotten*?¹ In dramatic terms, it raises the question with which oblivion inescapably challenges human memory. And that question is of course that of the oblivion of the Shoah. Your Museum is precisely working to save the Shoah from oblivion. But then another question arises at once: how is it possible for the future generations to remember a crime of such magnitude? Also what goal can be envisioned? And what result can be hoped for?

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1. This crime without measure has first to be rigorously, scientifically documented. This is what your Museum is already doing with remarkable efficiency. Recent discoveries have proved the importance of this historical work. Some were made possible in Poland, at Auschwitz, by Professor Marcello Pezzetti of Milan, Italy, supported by the steadfast generosity of Dr Prasquier in Paris, France. They have first spotted and restored the *Judenrampe*, the “platform of the Jews,” where the convoys arrived and the deported persons landed down from the trains. The SS made a first “selection” there, and sent most of the deported straight to the gas chambers.

Also, by doggedly comparing aerial photographs, they have identified with absolute certainty Bunker 1 and Bunker 2, which were the first gas chambers, set up in farm buildings. Today, the plot of land where Bunker 1 was located is a large rectangular meadow, surrounded by a hedge, with a commemorative plaque in the middle. That plot of land and the building of Bunker 1 were retrieved after the war by the farmers who owned them. They had a house built where the gas

chamber of Bunker 1 was installed. Thanks to patient negotiations and to the funding provided by Dr Prasquier, the whole thing has been purchased and handed over to the authorities of the Auschwitz Museum.

You may have heard as well of the systematic inventory of the Ukraine mass graves. The corpses of a million and a half Jews killed by the *Einsatzgruppen* were abandoned there. This inventory has been undertaken by Fr Patrick Desbois under the aegis of the Yahad-In Unum Organization.

This historical work allows to bear witness to facts that the Nazi officials had stubbornly concealed, and that the communist officials had reinterpreted to serve their ideology. These discoveries are the best and most adequate answer to the revisionist theses that are inspired by neo-Nazi or anti-Semitic theories.

2. The living memory of the Shoah is shared by men and women who underwent that demented persecution—the camp survivors and those who escaped deportation by going underground. Among that generation, there was no need to speak much to understand each other.

One thing struck me as I listened to some of those survivors. Most of them were prevented, as if by some internal force, from speaking about those terrible trials. I was all the more moved by the kindness many of them manifested toward human beings generally. One could feel that precisely because they had undergone the most extreme forms of degrading hatred, after that they could stay alive and overcome despair only by banning all hatred from their hearts. Of course, it never occurred to me to ask them about their tormentors or the latter's accomplices. It was enough for me to strive to clarify my own feelings on this subject. The survivors' kindness appears to me as the paradoxical by-product of their ordeal. Their lives have been prolonged, and it looks as though the possibility to hate, and even the wish for revenge or the fascination with death had been wrung away from their conscience.

3. From this fundamental experience a lesson must be drawn, concerning the transmission to the generations who can learn about it only through historical narratives. (I leave aside the situation of the survivors' children, which is quite different.)

Here we come across the difficult problem that is dealt with in the novel by Elie Wiesel which I mentioned at the beginning. We must acknowledge that the experience of being abandoned in the abyss of evil cannot be shared.

In this respect, a “duty to remember” has been evoked, based on the order, “Remember” given, as we know, by God to his people. But the Bible always specifies what is to be remembered: it is God and his commandments, his love and faithfulness, his gifts and his high deeds. On the opposite, the horror of the Shoah appears, as far as human eyes can see, as the worst denial inflicted to God’s goodness and might. We then have to try and make out what can and must be not simply recorded, but actually remembered and transmitted, what can be passed in memory from one generation to the next, from living person to living person, and not merely filed, as our civilization is now capable of storing data in more and more sophisticated and virtually unlimited ways, thanks to digitalization for example. As an archive, a store full of events, facts and feelings, human memory is capable of remembering or forgetting. Human experience shows—and this is what Elie Wiesel’s novel describes—that it is not the remembrance of tragedies which is transmitted to the following generations, but narratives that tell tragic stories. This transfer always runs the risk of new losses. For each successive generation the transfer depends on the determination to remember, and even more on the will and power to transmit this determination.

In a way, the recollection of the worst tragedy as a record, as a mass of events, fact and feelings, cannot be identified with the ability to remember or to forget. We then have to understand and to show how this determination can and must be transmitted, so that the heritage of human consciousness will not allow us to bury with the horror of the crimes the rejection of the hatred that made them possible. This is where the Bible gives us a key to understand the mystery of the human condition.

4. The Shoah does not belong with natural disasters, that is to say the events whose causes are beyond human control. Whatever the historical, cultural, ideological or even economic circumstances that have been mentioned to account for the Shoah, it was based on human, rational decisions, which were made and carried out by human beings. The Shoah raises the mystery of human liberty face to the choices that can turn a peaceful human being into an executioner. Also and above all, the Shoah asks how free individuals can become involved into those great collective events that are the subject-matter of History.

This suggests what is at stake in the transmission from one generation to the next: the taste of liberty and the ability to make choices have to be taught. Human intelligence must always renew its awareness of the stakes. Moral conscience must be educated and become able to evaluate any human action in the face of collective pressure, instincts and blind yearnings. To address the confusion of will and the enslavement of liberty, Deuteronomy proposes two clear cut alternatives: “Choose between life and death.” Yes, there are thoughts and deeds that lead the one who acts to his death, and others that give access to life. This human—and uniquely human—truth is revealed in the light of the One who asks man to choose and whom man cannot imagine or grasp: God himself, the Creator and Redeemer, the Living One, the source of each human being’s life. Any human conscience knows for sure that there exist such things as good and evil. But the definition of what is right or wrong can vary indefinitely according to the civilizations or to people’s collective options. A gang of criminals can be convinced that what is good for them is exactly what society considers as unacceptable.

The originality of Deuteronomy is to identify good and evil with life and death. What human freedom aims at is thus clarified, and what it wants in truth is made plain. For, if there are cultural differences and variations on the definitions of good and evil, a universal consensus exists when life and death are concerned.

5. This is where the experience of the generation who underwent the Shoah, the Holocaust, proves to be decisive. Western civilization once rushed into the abyss of death. What can be transmitted to the following generations is not so much the revulsion caused by the recollection of tragic horrors, with both individual and collective mistakes. But the transmission of memory will be useful and efficient if it allows to find out how some men, because of the choices they made, became the accomplices of death. In this light, the Shoah was a dive into the abyssal nothingness of death. The executioners were eventually swallowed up in the degradation and annihilation of their own humanity.

If it is to be transmitted, the duty to remember should unambiguously identify as a choice between life and death all the questions that any individual existence and any human society ask about good and evil. We must first transmit the love of life. The future generations will thus be able to refer to this infernal experience to discover in contrast the nearly divine beauty of the human condition. The tragic experience of the Shoah teaches humankind a lesson: that it is called to live up to its dignity and greatness. This is something the generation of the survivors has borne witness to: by their love of peace and kindness toward all humans, these men and women have manifested that dignity and greatness of life, because they knew that hatred leads to death.

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To conclude, the persecution of Jews by the Nazi ideology was no accident in history. It was motivated by the will to power that denies or subverts the fundamental, universal moral requirements. Remembering the terrible consequences of the temptations that fascinate humankind is inviting every one to identify and choose the way to life.

Notes

1. Summit, 1992; paperback: Schocken, 1995.

French original

[Video clips of the event](#)