# How Jan. 27 came to be International Day of Commemoration in Memory of the Victims of the Holocaust

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**The choice of January 27 as the day of commemoration is the result of relatively recent initiatives by non-Jews. Without abandoning this now well-established date, the author invites to also participate in Yom HaShoah, a few months later, with the Jewish community.**

When, in the late 1980s, I began my research on the architectural history of the Auschwitz death camp, Jan. 27 wasn't marked on any official calendar as a special day of commemoration.

Since then, as a historian who has focused on the history of the Holocaust in general and the history of Auschwitz in particular, and who has with collaborators curated the Auschwitz exhibition now showing in Toronto, I have seen changes in terms of how the Holocaust generally, and Auschwitz in particular, is publicly remembered and commemorated.

Jan. 27 is now identified as an annual International Day of Commemoration in Memory of the Victims of the Holocaust. On Jan. 27 1945, the Red Army liberated some 7,000 remaining prisoners in Auschwitz, located in south-central Poland. How was this date chosen, and what issues or reflection might it raise?

Poland

With 1.1 million murdered victims — of whom one million were Jews — Auschwitz was the most murderous of the German death camps. It had already become by the mid-1970s a powerful symbol of the Holocaust.

Yet during the Cold War, European nations commemorated the dead of the Second World War on dates that were anniversaries of the end of the war. In Poland, a profoundly Roman Catholic country, the observances of the victims of the war were held on All Saints Day or, since 1955, the Sunday closest to the Ides of April, not Jan. 27.

In the early 1990s, the Polish government led by President Lech Walesa decided to make the 50th anniversary of the arrival of the liberating Red Army at the gates of Auschwitz into a major international commemoration in 1995.

Seventeen heads of state, including German Federal President Roman Herzog, attended the occasion on Jan. 27, 1995. It was, in a sense, a "coming-out" of the now firmly democratic Polish Republic. At that time, Warsaw was eyeing membership of NATO and the EU, which had been formally established by means of the Maastricht Treaty two years earlier.

In the 1995 commemoration, Jews were largely invisible — in fact, Walesa forgot to mention the Jews in his speech.

Dates in the Hebrew calendar

Among Jews, primarily in North America and Israel, Holocaust commemorations are typically associated with three dates in the Hebrew (lunar) calendar:

1. The ninth day of the Jewish month of Av: Since time immemorial, Jews commemorated on this day the destruction of the First Temple (in 586 BCE) and the destruction of the Second Temple (in 70 CE).

2. The 10th day of the Jewish month of Tevet: This day, King Nebuchadnezzar II began the siege of Jerusalem that was to lead to the destruction of the First Temple. Traditionally on this day, Jews say the prayer of the dead for family members whose date of death is unknown. As the date of death of most of the Jews murdered in the Holocaust is indeed unknown, the 10th of Tevet became quite prominent in Israel as a date of Holocaust commemoration.

3. The 27th day of the Jewish month of Nisan: This day in April, established in 1953 as Yom HaShoah (Shoah Day) by the Israeli government, coincides with the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, which is a point of great pride to Jews. Thus, Yom HaShoah was meant to commemorate not only the depth of the catastrophe, but at the same time one of the few points of light within the Holocaust.

In American society, a custom arose in the 1980s to hold a commemorative day of the Holocaust in the period that stretches from the Sunday preceding Yom HaShoah to the Sunday following Yom HaShoah, creating a clear link with the Jewish practice. In Canada, Jews mobilized to introduce provincial days of remembrance, insisting that they would follow Jewish practice and be held on Yom HaShoah.

Germany

Months after the 1995 Polish commemoration, the leaders of the allied nations and Germany gathered in Berlin on May 8, 1995 to observe the 50th anniversary of the end of the Second World War. German President Herzog noted that while many Germans still remembered May 8 as a day of defeat, in fact that day had opened a door to a future of peace and co-operation in Europe.

However, some Germans believed that it was now time to move on and stop talking about the the Nazis, the war and the Holocaust.

Herzog decided something had to be done to force continued engagement with the Nazi past, and to shut up revisionists who stressed German victimhood. He proclaimed Jan. 27 as Day of Commemoration of the Victims of National Socialism. It was a politically astute move. He knew that in any discussion about the meaning of the Third Reich, the name “Auschwitz” was the ultimate trump card that could not be beaten.

Sweden, U.K., EU, UN

In 1998, Swedish Prime Minister Göran Persson declared Jan. 27 to be an official day of Holocaust Remembrance. This move was to lay the groundwork for a larger Swedish-led inter-governmental educational initiative founded to combat rising antisemitism.

In support of this project, which lead to the Stockholm Declaration and the establishment of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), the British and Italian governments adopted Jan. 27 as a day of commemoration in 1999 and 2000.

A few years later, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia — plus Malta and Cyprus — joined the EU. Until then, it had consisted of countries that had been either stable liberal democracies since 1945, or had become such in the 1970s.

Most of the new members had been communist-ruled. There was nervousness about the baggage they would bring — especially persistent antisemitism. On Jan. 27, 2005, the European Parliament called on the European Council, Commission and member states to make Jan. 27 European Holocaust Memorial Day, to be observed across the EU.

The effects were profound: Aleida Assmann, a prominent historian of collective memory, observed that pan-European importance of the Jan. 27 day of commemoration since 2005 confirmed the Holocaust as a common “europäischer Gründungsmythos” or European foundation narrative.

Later in 2005, the General Assembly of the United Nations made Jan. 27 an annual International Day of Commemoration in Memory of the Victims of the Holocaust. The resolution establishing the date invoked the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and reaffirmed “that the Holocaust, which resulted in the murder of one third of the Jewish people, along with countless members of other minorities, will forever be a warning to all people of the dangers of hatred, bigotry, racism and prejudice.”

What to think of Jan. 27?

While deeply committed to the study of the history of Auschwitz and profoundly engaged with the commemoration of both the Holocaust in general and Auschwitz in particular, if forced to choose, I have a clear preference for Yom HaShoah over Jan. 27.

Jan. 27 as a day of commemoration emerged from initiatives taken by non-Jews at the highest political level, without much consultation with Jews.

A few of my now-deceased Auschwitz survivor friends told me that the entire Jan. 27 date should be cancelled as it has no or little meaning for Jews, and it certainly had no meaning for them as Auschwitz survivors, because they had been taken away from Auschwitz in a death march before the arrival of the Red Army.

Yet now it exists, and better to work with it. All the good reasons why Auschwitz became a symbol of the Holocaust are still valid — especially the fact that it ties a very complex series of events to a real place that everyone can visit.

But I would like to invite all who gather on Jan. 27 to remember the Holocaust to consider also its profoundly political origins. And I hope that they will decide to also attend a similar event a few months later, on Yom HaShoah.

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