

United States Mission to
the United Nations

Remarks at the UN Holocaust Memorial Museum Opening Exhibition

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AS DELIVERED

Good afternoon, everyone, and thank you for being here with us today. It is a great honor for all of us at the United States Mission to be co-hosting the opening of this exhibition along with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

“Some Were Neighbors: Choice, Human Behavior and the Holocaust” is poignant and necessarily discomforting—a display of the choices made by ordinary people amid the Nazi regime’s campaign of violence and terror across Europe.

I want to encourage everyone to explore the exhibition, absorb its sobering message, and allow that message to confront you. Because while most exhibits document the horrors of the Holocaust perpetrated by German soldiers and Nazi officials, this exhibit explores the stories of those whose inaction helped create the conditions in which violence could occur.

By illustrating the indifference of ordinary people, it puts to each of us the uncomfortable question of what we would have done when faced with the small indignities and moments of inhumanity that metastasized into unspeakable evil.

There was explicit intention on the part of Nazi Germany’s leadership to carry out the Final Solution. But as we learn from this exhibition, such an atrocity could not have transpired without the tacit assent of community leaders, religious figures, neighbors, and even friends.

The unsparing conclusion of these assembled documents, images, and stories is that the indifference of ordinary people facilitated the Nazi regime’s evil acts.

Some individuals gave in to fear, others to greed and opportunism.

But what is clear is that men and women—people like you and me—had a say in how they responded to the inhumanity they witnessed.

Their inaction was a choice when Jews were harassed in the streets.

Their spending was a choice when Jewish businesses were targeted for boycotts by authorities.

Their plundering was a choice when the possessions of Jewish families were left in their abandoned homes. And their silence was a choice when Jews, Slavs, Roma, persons with disabilities, LGBTI persons, and others were rounded up and taken away for imprisonment or worse.

However, some brave souls did resist. Inspiring examples come to mind, from Jan Karski and Irena Sendler in Poland, to the students of the White Rose in Munich, to the Swedish humanitarian and diplomat Raoul Wallenberg, to the French pastor André Trocmé and his wife, Magda. When they saw evil, they refused to stand idly by.

They were joined by thousands of others, whose choices to risk their own lives to save Jewish men, women, and children during the Holocaust led to their being recognized as Righteous Among the Nations.

We should celebrate, and draw courage from, these choices. But the central message of this exhibition—that, as German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, “Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act.” It is a message we need to hear now as much as ever.

In modern times, polarization grows within countries while feelings of community seem to wane. New technologies enable governments to threaten rights and freedoms of minorities that do not adhere to state-sanctioned ideologies. And of deep concern, especially during this time of remembrance, is the rise in antisemitism around the world today.

These realities should impress upon us the importance of preserving the memory of the Holocaust—how it happened, that it happened, and who perpetrated and abetted it. Today, political fringes on the far left and far right are trying to distort history—efforts that are deeply troublesome and must be frustrated.

As we have learned, it is the small habits we develop—a comfort with half-truths, a tolerance for small abuses—that pave the way for evil to enter our communities, our countries, and our world.

The United States is proud to play a central role in continuing to tell the story of the Holocaust, and working to right the wrongs that have flowed from it. We have done this through our leadership at the Nuremberg trials, annual events of remembrance, efforts to support Holocaust-era property reparation, and our commitment to grapple with the moral failures of that era.

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This is urgent work, but it cannot be done alone. All nations must commit to educating the next generation about what took place in Auschwitz, in Dachau, in Buchenwald, and at so many other sites that bore witness to the crimes of that era. Education is key. We must tell the stories of the victims of the Nazi regime. We must affirm the sanctity of every innocent human life. And we must commit to living out what is meant by the words “never again.”

I want to thank the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum for the work it is doing here in New York, in Washington, and around the world to remind us that every person, no matter his or her profession, has a role to play in standing against the demonization of “the other,” regardless of religion or belief, race, ethnicity, or sexual orientation.

And I want to thank the United Nations Holocaust Program, which is sending the exhibit and accompanying educational materials to dozens of its information centers and offices around the globe.

May this exhibition cause us to ask how we might be better neighbors to those whom we see suffering. And may it spur us to reject indifference; to fight for human dignity; and to be vigilant in defending against the antisemitism that precipitated the events we mourn and remember today.

Thank you.

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