

Judge Thomas Buergenthal delivered these remarks at United Nations Headquarters on 31 January 2018, at the Holocaust memorial ceremony marking the International Day of commemoration in memory of the victims of the Holocaust. Judge Buergenthal served as keynote speaker at the memorial ceremony.

Holocaust Education and Commemoration to Prevent Genocide

by Judge Thomas Buergenthal, a Holocaust survivor and a retired Judge of the International Court of Justice

Mr. Secretary-General, Mr. President the General Assembly, Excellences, Ladies and Gentlemen, Friends.

It is a very special honour and privilege for me to have this opportunity to deliver the 2018 UN Holocaust Remembrance Day keynote address. Allow me, therefore, to begin by honouring the memory of the six million Jewish and other victims of the Holocaust, among them my father, Mundek Buergenthal, who died in Buchenwald in January 1945, three months before the camp's liberation, and my maternal grandparents, Paul and Rosa Silbergleit, who were murdered in Treblinka in 1942. They must never be forgotten!

Most Nazi concentration and labor camps were liberated in the first few months of 1945. A majority of the inmates who were freed from these camps are unfortunately no longer with us. Because I was 10 years old when I was liberated from the Sachsenhausen concentration camp in April 1945 after surviving Auschwitz and the Auschwitz death march, I belong to that ever smaller group of Holocaust survivors who are still alive. We now have an ever more urgent and sacred obligation to ensure that the memory of all victims of the Holocaust be permanently preserved and to work for a world in which no human being will ever again have to suffer the horrors this terrible genocide inflicted on them.

One cannot have survived the Holocaust and not believe that genocides must never again be allowed to victimize any human beings regardless of the racial, religious, ethnic, national, political or linguistic groups to which they may belong. I am therefore profoundly grateful for the opportunity to speak at this annual United Nations Holocaust Remembrance Day. With its global reach, it provides a very special platform for the commemoration of the victims of the Holocaust and to explore ways to put an end to the genocides that continue to terrorize our world. Permit me, therefore, Mr. Secretary-General, to congratulate the United Nations for establishing this so very special Remembrance Day. It symbolizes the world's condemnation of the Nazi ideology that produced the Holocaust and like ideologies.

The Holocaust was not just a Jewish tragedy; it was a tragedy of universal significance. All humanity was its victim. Unless this truth is recognized and acknowledged, the Holocaust will be treated as a Jewish problem only, thereby diminishing the universal character and significance of the human tragedy it was. In remembering the Holocaust, the world must forever be warned against its repetition in the guise of comparable crimes that continue to threaten mankind.

I believe that genocide is a crime that must not be treated as being of concern only to the countries where it occurs or the people it victimizes. It is a human tragedy because of what humanity loses when human beings anywhere become victims of this terrible crime. By allowing genocide to be characterized as being

of merely local concern, we invite the world to look the other way just as it did when the Holocaust was in progress.

In remembering what the world lost in the Holocaust, I would like to focus for a moment on the more than one million Jewish children who were murdered in this terrible genocide. The number alone takes one's breath away; not just a thousand, not a hundred thousand, but more than a million children! Think of the physicians, scientists, historians, archeologists, theologians, poets, philosophers, writers, engineers, teachers and other professionals and artisans these children might have become. And how many potential Nobel laureates might have been among them? That we shall never know. But what we do know is that with the murder of these children, the world not only lost more than a million young lives, it lost enormous intellectual, cultural and scientific riches that would have benefitted humanity as a whole, making the Holocaust a human tragedy of catastrophic proportions, even without accounting for its other five million Jewish victims.

A few years ago, I found a veritable trove of letters my mother had received from various international search organizations during her two-year search for me after she was liberated from the concentration camp of Ravensbrueck. The letters informed her in so many words that hardly any Jewish children of my age had survived the Holocaust and that she should not continue to torture herself believing that I could have made it. Some of her friends gave her similar advice. My mother did not give up and continued her search. But how many mothers and fathers were as lucky as my mother and I? And how many Holocaust survivors never really emotionally overcame the loss of the children who were torn from them in the ghettos, in the labor camps, and in the concentration camps? We can only imagine the pain that never left them.

I believe that the Holocaust must serve as a perpetual reminder to all future generations to be on guard against political movements, against government officials and military leaders who might be tempted to unleash genocides in one part of the world or another. I am also convinced that "Never Again", that post-Holocaust clarion call, will become an empty slogan unless it is accepted as the expression of mankind's commitment to a world in which all human beings can live in peace and dignity with their human rights fully respected.

That we still have a long way to go to rid the world of genocides is readily apparent from the events currently occurring in Myanmar, for example. In describing the massive killings, rapes and tortures being committed by Myanmar's military against the country's Rohingya Muslim population which have resulted in more than 600,000 Rohingya fleeing to Bangladesh with much loss of life, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights recently described that situation as "possibly amounting to genocide". This cautious statement should not be misunderstood because he justified it on the ground that "ultimately, this is a legal determination only a court can make". At the same time, though, the High Commissioner also called attention "to the decades of statelessness imposed on the Rohingya, policies of dehumanization and segregation, and the horrific violence and abuse, along with the forced displacement and systematic destruction of villages, homes, property and livelihoods". And he asks, "Can anyone rule out that elements of genocide may be present?" The answer, of course, is a resounding "No, it should not be ruled out because the facts in Myanmar speak for themselves".

It is frequently asserted that political, economic, social or historical reasons or conditions in one country or another may have caused a given genocide. These may be their immediate cause, but are they their root cause? In my opinion, the root causes of genocides must be sought in the failure of parents, schools, religions institutions and universities to effectively and forcefully advocate for respect and tolerance towards all human beings or groups of people, regardless of how they may look, speak or differ from one another. Intolerance or hatred of those who are different or those who espouse views contrary to those that are dominant in a given society are an acquired vice. We are not born with this vice! That is why the key

to fighting intolerance and hatred within our societies and between different groups of people is and must be education. Education in all its forms, not just formal education. And this education must start early and in the home.

Studies have shown that the most effective educational efforts to teach tolerance and intergroup respect are those that start early in the lives of children. Every generation must be warned over and over again about the scourge of intolerance and its terrible consequences. Tolerance and respect for all human beings must be lived and taught in our homes and in our schools, in our universities and religious institutions, and especially in our military and police academies.

An important element of education to protect the world from genocides must be serious and imaginative international and national efforts designed to familiarize all segments of society with the international human rights obligations all UN member states have assumed under the UN Charter and the international and regional human rights treaties they have ratified. These rights must become part of each country's instructional materials for students of different age levels. Compliance with these obligations, not lip service, must be the guiding principle if "Never Again" is to become reality for future generations. A similar approach should be adopted with regard to the development and utilization of relevant international human rights principles by military and police academies, by law schools, teacher colleges and similar institutions. Energetic efforts must also be made by the UN, its specialized agencies and national bar associations -- not only to get more member states to ratify all outstanding international human rights treaties, but also to demand rigorous compliance from them. I know that the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, the UN Human Rights Council, various UN treaty bodies and other UN organs and agencies seek to achieve these goals. But I also know that their effectiveness tends to be hampered by a lack of funds as well as the failure of various governments to cooperate fully with them. These problems must be regularly addressed at the highest levels of these institutions.

In my opinion, no nation has a monopoly on goodness or on evil. Under certain circumstances, genocides can take place in any of our countries. That is why we must always be on the alert against this crime. Without educational policies and practices that focus on the causes and dangers of genocides, we will have little success in preventing them. These policies must never be deemed to have achieved their goal because intolerance and hatred have a tendency to take hold in one country or another. They are a cancer that lurks under the surface of all our societies. Every generation must therefore be reminded over and over again of the dangers of intolerance and hatred and the horrendous crimes they lead to.

That is also why the UN Holocaust Remembrance Day ceremonies and similar national and international remembrance programs are so important. By honouring the memory of the victims of the Holocaust, we commit ourselves to never again allow any human beings to become the victims of genocides in any part of the world. This must be the watchword of all Holocaust remembrance days.

Discussion Questions:

1. 1. What is Judge Buergenthal's personal connection to the Holocaust?
2. 2. How does Judge Buergenthal explain his statement that "the Holocaust was not just a Jewish tragedy; it was a tragedy of universal significance"?
3. 3. What does Judge Buergenthal say is the consequence of "allowing genocide to be characterized as being of merely local concern"?
4. 4. What role does Judge Buergenthal argue Holocaust remembrance and education can play in preventing genocide?
5. 5. Judge Buergenthal provides several examples of how institutions can respond to hatred and intolerance. Discuss whether there is one example that is more powerful than another, or whether it needs to be a joint approach.

The discussion papers series provides a forum for individual scholars on the Holocaust and the averting of genocide to raise issues for debate and further study. These writers, representing a variety of cultures and backgrounds, have been asked to draft papers based on their own perspective and particular experiences.

The views expressed by the individual scholars do not necessarily reflect those of the United Nations.