Statement of Mr. Marian Turski
Holocaust Memorial Ceremony marking the International Day of Commemoration in memory of the victims of the Holocaust

United Nations Headquarters, New York,
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Friends,
In Auschwitz I had no name. In Auschwitz I had nothing but a number - B-940 - tattooed on.
I was in Auschwitz almost until the last day until the so-called ‘evacuation’, which was a matter of fact, the death march to Buchenwald. Then I was ‘privileged’ at the end of the war with a second death march. From Buchenwald to Theresienstadt. Where I was liberated the same day with Inge Auerbacher.

I meet people very often- it’s my duty and responsibility- and they used to ask a question: “tell us please, what was the worst in Auschwitz? What was the worst when you were there?”
They expect, probably you too, expect a response: hunger... Yes, you are right… In a way you are right…
People who are normally fed today, if they are not survivors of the Holodomor in the Ukraine, if they don’t live in Yemen or in Sudan, if they get their daily portion – larger or smaller – of nourishment, they can not imagine what is hunger. To say it very shortly: imagine that a specter of a potato, a specter of a spoonful of soup is still before your eyes, a bite of bread is before your eyes…
Always…,
Always…
But nevertheless – I wouldn’t say this was the worst.

So, what was the worst? The winter of 1944-1945 was extraordinarily cold. Horrible winter. Minus 20 centigrade. And we were in our inmates’ dresses, inmates’ uniforms…
And I covertly cut out an underwear from a cement sac…
And when the German supervisor noticed it he started shouting: “Du hast deutsches Vermögen gestohlen” - “You stole German property!”
And he gave me such a savage beating.

So, was cold the worst? No. What? Not cold, not hunger. Maybe so called “living conditions”?...
We were settled in the barracks 800, 1000, 1100, 1200 people. You are jammed on a bunk 5, 6, 7 people. And when you are settled in the barracks in Auschwitz – you start to think where to be settled? In the top bunk or the bottom bunk? Of course it is better in the top bunk because the bladders of the prisoners don’t hold out and they leak – so it is better to be in the top bunk. But on the other hand – if there would be a sudden roll call, which happened very often and you are very weak and have to climb down from the top bunk, it is dangerous because you have to be very quick to get to the roll call or you can be beaten almost to death.
But even this was not the worst.

So, what, you would ask?
Maybe: lice.
This was something, just a curse really. Lice. I admit that in so called Stammlager (basic camps) Auschwitz and Buchenwald I don’t remember lice. However, we were very often put in so called commandos, special units, to clean up an oil refinery next to Auschwitz, to clean up a coal mine not far from Buchenwald, and here everything was destroyed. Bombed. We were sent to clean it up. All facilities were bombed. There was no possibility to wash.
The hundreds of thousands of lice were so horrible during the death march. As a matter a fact, a louse infected me during my last death march and I ended the war with typhus…
But still I wouldn’t say this was the worst.

So, if not hunger, if not cold, what was the worst?
The worst was: h u m i l i a t i o n!
Humiliation…
If you were Jewish, and precisely because we were Jewish, we were treated not like a human being, we were treated like a louse, like a bed bug, like a cockroach. And what do people do with cockroaches, lice and bedbugs? They step on, they crush, they suffocate, they kill, they annihilate…

Dear friends, very often I’m asked: you who survived the hell, you who experienced all those evils, what did you learn from your experience? What would you like us to tell young people alive today?
If I would have to choose among all the lessons and all the words, one or two, I would choose the following:
Empathy. Compassion.
These are the most important in life.
Dear friends, we commemorate today the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz and therefore it is natural to use more often the phrases: ‘Never more’, ‘never again’, ‘never again Auschwitz’.
But if we want this call to not only be a mere slogan – an empty phrase, we must learn to understand other people, people who are different from us, who are motivated in their way of life in a different way than we are.
This is what I would like to advise you as a survivor.

Two days ago, I was honoured to be invited to Rabbi Schneier’s Park East Synagogue together with many UN diplomats.
In his very touching speech, Rabbi Schneier used the biblical phrase, "וְָהַבַּתְתְּ בֵּהֶרְאַהָה קַמוֹךְ", ("v'ahavta l'reacha kamocha") - “and you should love your neighbour, your fellowman, like yourself”.
I wouldn’t go as far, Rabbi Schneier. I think: before we start love, let’s start with something else. Let’s start with reducing, with cutting, with lessening hatred, animosity, hostility!
We must do it!
If not – who will protect our children, our grandchildren, from a world disaster, from a world catastrophe?