

Reflecting on Auschwitz Six Decades Later

by Thomas Buergenthal
Judge at the International Court of Justice in The Hague

“Nooit meer Auschwitz”-lezing
27 januari 2009 te Amsterdam

I am truly honored to have been invited to address you today on the occasion of the “Auschwitz Never Again” commemoration. Let me therefore thank the Dutch Auschwitz Committee, the Dutch Pension Fund and the Centre for Holocaust and Genocide Studies for organizing this event and for inviting me to reflect on the significance of this day more than six decades after the liberation of Auschwitz.

I begin these reflections with the conviction that those of us who survived the Holocaust have a special obligation to make sure that the world not forget this horrendous human tragedy that will forever remain a blot on mankind’s conscience. Annetje Fels Kupferschmidt, an Auschwitz survivor, lived up to this obligation by creating the Dutch Auschwitz Committee. It is therefore a particularly great honor for me to receive the award named for her. I do so also in the name of all those who believe in making “Auschwitz Never Again” the symbol of our commitment to a world in which all human beings can live in peace and dignity, with their human rights fully respected.

I was ten years old when I came to Auschwitz-Birkenau in 1944. There is much about the place I have forgotten, probably because I wanted to forget. The fact that I could forget is a blessing because it helped me preserve my sanity. But there is still much I remember, mostly the never-ending fear of dying and the constant hunger. As a child, I had to be especially afraid of the selections that Dr. Mengele, the Angel of Death, conducted with German precision, looking for more children, the sick and the elderly to send to the gas chamber. Outsmarting him and living yet another day became a game I used to play, and every time I did not get caught in his deadly net, I felt victorious.

Hunger was my constant companion in Auschwitz. We got a little piece of black bread in the morning, if we were lucky, and a dark fluid that looked like coffee. The only other meal of the day I remember receiving was a very thin yellowish turnip soup and maybe, but not always, another piece of bread. I ate my bread as soon as I was given it because, if I tried to save it for later in the day, it would invariably be stolen. As a child, I needed less food than the grownups, many of whom would on our diet gradually become Muselmen, as they were known, humans so thin that they looked like skeletons wrapped in a transparent skin. I don’t know why they were given that name, but what I do know is that once they had become so thin, they had only a very short time to live. When they dragged themselves past me, I believed I was seeing dead people walking.

While in the Gypsy camp, where I arrived a few days after the Roma and Sinti who were housed there had all been killed – entire families, men, women and children murdered! – I could on most evenings see the smoke and flames that bellowed out of the chimneys of the crematoriums. Each transport of new arrivals fed the flames of these monstrous ovens. Later, when I was moved to another set of barracks nearer to the crematoriums, I was close enough to hear the screams and pleas for help of the ever increasing number of human beings who were herded into the gas chambers. At night, after a while, I could no longer separate their screams from the nightmares they brought on, and was afraid to fall asleep.

I also remember that during my time in Auschwitz the ground we walked on consisted of nothing but thick brown mud in the summer and icy slush in the winter. I never saw grass, bushes or trees there. Nor did I ever see birds in the sky over Auschwitz. They stayed away because of the noxious smoke bellowing from the crematoriums that filled the sky. The birds could fly away; all we could do was wish that we could fly, and as the child I was, I believed that that miracle could happen. At night I sometimes dreamed that I was flying.

When I visited Auschwitz-Birkenau for the first time after the war in the spring of 1991, I noticed that there were birds in the sky. Wild flowers and high grass covered the empty spaces where once stood the many barracks that were torn down for firewood after the war. As I looked around, I

could not rid myself of the feeling that this transformed scenery symbolized nature's way of covering up the terrible crimes that had been committed on this blood-soaked ground. And I began to wonder, not without some trepidation, whether nature would in due course play the same trick on our collective memories so that we would gradually not only forget the crimes that were committed in Auschwitz and elsewhere during the Third Reich, but also relax our vigilance against those forces and ideologies that have throughout history visited terrible crimes on mankind.

That must not be allowed to happen. Auschwitz and the part it played in the Holocaust must never be forgotten. By remembering Auschwitz we help ensure that men and women of goodwill will not let their guard down when some political movement, some tribe or government is preparing to unleash yet another genocide in one part of the world or another, on one people or another. Only by not forgetting Auschwitz will we be able to make sure that our warning bells remain active and alert against this terrible crime. That is why "Auschwitz Never Again!" is such an important event. To remember and commemorate Auschwitz is to commit ourselves to preventing other genocides in any part of the world. If we forget this commitment and the duty it imposes on us to value and protect human life, we will dishonor the memory of those who died in Auschwitz and the Holocaust.

On a recent visit to America, I showed my seven-year old granddaughter Ruth the family pictures that are reprinted in my recent book, Een Gelukskind, where I deal with my concentration camp experiences. She pointed to a picture of my father and asked who he was. I explained that he was her great-grandfather. Then she pointed to two other photographs and I told her that those were the pictures of my grandfather and my grandmother. She thought for a while and asked: "Where are they all now?" I replied that they had died. "Were they sick?" she wanted to know. "No," I said, "they were killed." "Why were they killed?" she asked immediately. I did not answer right away, not knowing quite how to reply. Finally I said, "they were killed because they were Jews." She looked at me and sounded worried when she whispered: "Mommy says we are Jewish." I took her in my arms and assured her that those terrible things happened in a far away part of the world a long, long time ago when bad people tried to kill all Jews and many, many other human beings, but that we were safe now.

Afterwards I wondered whether those of us who survived the Holocaust really ever believe that we are safe. If the only crime that landed you in Auschwitz was that you were a child born of Jewish parents and that your father, your grandparents and many other family members were killed because they too were Jews, what would justify your belief that genocides such as those committed during the Holocaust would never be repeated, given that the world stood by and watched as the Cambodia, Rwanda and Srebrenica genocides took place? What guarantees do we have in a world in which these horrors occurred not all that long after Auschwitz, a world in which children are the first to die in wars, from hunger and disease?

Maybe some of us are safer today. But what about other human beings, other racial, religious or national groups, different ethnic minorities, are they safe in the sense that what happened to us might not also happen to them in the future? These are the questions we must continue to ask ourselves; these are the questions that future generations must keep asking themselves if "Never Again!" is to mean what it says. We must believe that genocides and crimes against humanity can be eradicated from the face of the earth. And we must commit ourselves to the achievement of that goal.

I have written elsewhere that to speak of the Holocaust in terms of a number – six million – which is the way it is usually done, is to unintentionally dehumanize the victims and to trivialize the profoundly human tragedy it was. The six-million number transforms the victims into a fungible mass of nameless, soulless bodies. It glosses over the fact that each of them was an individual human being – mothers, fathers, children, grandparents, artists, scholars, doctors, lawyers, people from all walks of life – with their dreams and hopes. Human beings each and every one, murdered in Auschwitz, Treblinka, Dachau, Buchenwald, Sachsenhausen, Bergen-Belsen, on the snow-

covered roads during the Auschwitz death march, in the ghettos and the work camps, only because they were Jews.

I have often asked myself what the world would look like today had these individual human beings been permitted to live. How many potential Einsteins, Mahlers, Freuds, Kafkas, Werfels, Zweigs and Chagals were murdered? What a reservoir of potential artistic, scientific and intellectual creativity trampled under the storm troopers' boots and asphyxiated with Zyklon B gas! We will never know what contributions they might have made to mankind.

Reflecting on this terrible loss, we must recognize that the Holocaust was not just a Jewish tragedy; it was a tragedy for the whole of mankind. Millions of lives lost in many parts of Europe, so many cultures deprived of artistic beauty and intellectual greatness that might have been!

Of course, the same can be said with regard to the millions of human beings that have been murdered in more recent genocides. Think, for example, of the lives lost in the killing fields of Rwanda, Cambodia, the Balkans and some other countries. In addition to the loss and suffering caused by the deaths of those who were murdered there, we shall never know what great intellectual, scientific and cultural contributions they might have made to the world at large. Let us never forget that mankind as a whole is the victim whenever we permit a genocide to occur in one country or another.

As you know, Jews and Gypsies were not the only ones who were murdered in Auschwitz. Many thousands of human beings from all parts of Europe ended up in Auschwitz and in other German concentration camps, and many died there, either in the gas chambers or from hunger, executions or beatings. Among them were resistance fighters, ministers of different religious faiths, men and women who all had the courage to oppose the Nazis even if it meant sacrificing their lives for their beliefs. They, too, must be remembered and honored whenever we commemorate the suffering that is synonymous with the Auschwitz name. In that sense Auschwitz must forever remind us of those who had the courage of their political and religious convictions, while shaming those who collaborated with a system that made Auschwitz possible.

The magnitude of the loss of life and destruction the Nazis visited on Europe is difficult to grasp. Millions of human beings were killed, maimed, made homeless, families destroyed, all because of a senseless war and racist ideology. Those of us who remember what Europe looked like at the time cannot but marvel at its subsequent transformation. But let us not forget how easy it was for the people of one of Europe's supposedly most civilized countries to follow or accept the murderous ideology of racial superiority that produced Auschwitz and Treblinka as well as a war that brought so much indescribable suffering to the entire continent and to many other parts of the world. In that sense, "Never Again!" must become a watchword for human beings around the world; it must be the clarion call for all future generations, reminding them not to permit a repeat of what happened in the 1930s and 1940s, and not to allow themselves to be misled or intoxicated by ideologies that advocate racial or religious hatred or ethnic cleansing, and that believe in the use of force to achieve their criminal objectives.

Over the years, I have often wondered how to explain the Holocaust and the genocide for which Nazi Germany is responsible as well as the terrible war it ushered in. The attempt to destroy a whole people, whole communities, whole nations and whole cultures: all that will never be adequately explained, and I certainly have not been able to do it to my own satisfaction. It would be all too easy, however, to seek to justify the enormous crimes for which Nazi Germany bears responsibility by attributing them to a few demented leaders. That would exonerate many millions of ordinary Germans, who in one way or another were active or passive collaborators in these crimes, from their responsibility. The real German heroes were those Germans who had the courage not to compromise their convictions and who opposed the Nazi regime. Many of them paid the ultimate price for their beliefs and courage. They deserve our admiration and respect.

Of course, it is only human to want to believe that no sane individuals could be responsible for intentionally causing all the suffering Nazi Germany caused. That normal, ordinary human beings rather than raving madmen share that responsibility is a truly frightening realization. It forces us to confront a reality few of us want to acknowledge: that ordinary human beings are capable, under certain circumstances, of committing or helping to commit such horrendous crimes. This fact compels the conclusion that others, in other parts of the world, may well be equally capable of supporting or participating in the execution of policies resulting in the commission of crimes similar to those of Nazi Germany. Maybe not on the scale or with the efficiency of the Nazi killing machine, but nevertheless with equally tragic consequences for the victims. How else to explain the genocides and massive crimes against humanity that have occurred with frightening regularity since the end of the Second World War?

We would all like to believe that only sadists are capable of committing such crimes, but history teaches otherwise. And unless we accept this sad truth and draw the necessary conclusions from it, we will never be able to prevent future genocides. That is why I consider this Auschwitz commemoration and similar events to be so important. Such ceremonies have an educational value that should not be underestimated, particularly if we believe, as I do, that no nation, no people have a monopoly on evil or on goodness. Without a proper education which seeks to draw the right lessons from the Holocaust, we will have little success in preventing future genocides in different parts of the world. Racial, religious and political tolerance must be the watchword of this educational endeavor, and it must never be deemed to have accomplished its goal, if only because intolerance has a tendency to rear its ugly head again and again, if not in one country then in another. It is a cancer that lurks under the surface of all our societies.

Every generation must be reminded over and over again of the danger and causes of intolerance and of the crimes it nurtures. Our schools and universities must play a lead role in this effort. Unfortunately, much too little is done in this regard by the educational authorities in most of our countries. The important role played by institutes such as the Netherlands Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies is therefore to be lauded and supported.

To remember Auschwitz without believing in and working for reconciliation with the Germany of today is to fail to recognize what contemporary Germany has achieved. Probably one of the most promising post-Holocaust developments has been the transformation of Germany from a militaristic, murderous Nazi state into one of Europe's leading democracies. Who during the Nazi period could have imagined the Germany of today? It is important, in my opinion, to acknowledge the democratic achievements of contemporary Germany, the positive role it plays in international relations today and its efforts to bring about reconciliation with the victims of the Holocaust. Germany has admitted its responsibility and apologized for the terrible crimes it committed in the past. It has done so unlike some other countries that to this day have failed to ask for forgiveness for the crimes committed in their names. While the Holocaust must not and cannot be forgotten, Germany's efforts to atone for it are unique in history. These efforts must not remain unique; they must instead serve as an example to other nations. There can be no reconciliation without the good faith effort to atone for past crimes. And there can be no end to hatred among nations and peoples without reconciliation and forgiveness.

As an Auschwitz survivor, I have had more than six decades to reflect on a subject that has been on my mind throughout all these years: the Holocaust produced many heroes and villains among the inmates of the camps, ordinary people who never lost their moral compass and those who became Kapos and barrack bosses and helped the SS torture and kill, frequently only for an extra piece of bread. For some, staying alive was the overriding concern regardless of the consequences, whereas others remained faithful to their religious or moral convictions, for which they were willing to sacrifice their lives. I wish I knew what drives a person in one or the other direction.

What I do know is that those human beings on either side of this moral divide cannot be easily identified ahead of time until they have to face the decision between good and evil. Is it upbringing,

is it education, is it religion? I wish I knew, but I am convinced that our schools and our religious institutions and the state itself all have an obligation to instill into future generations the will and ability to resist aligning themselves with political movements and ideologies that advocate hatred. Tolerance and respect for other human beings regardless of their race, religion, national or ethnic origin or sexual preference must be taught in our schools, in our military academies and religious institutions. Our political leaders, our governments, have an obligation to ensure that this be done.

That is why I believe that on occasions such as these, we need to remember and to honor the memory of one very special group of individuals. Here I think of the men and women of different nationalities and religions, including Germans, who risked their lives and their careers to save Jews during the Holocaust. Many of them are honored as the "Righteous among Nations" in the Yad Vashem Holocaust Museum in Jerusalem. But there were many more whose names and acts of humanity are lost in the history of those tragic days. The courage and convictions of all these individuals should inspire us and show us the way when yet another genocide threatens to undermine our moral beliefs. Permit me, therefore, to pay special tribute to the brave Dutch men and women who saved many Jews during the war and fought in the resistance.

None of our countries has done enough to honor individuals who throughout history have demonstrated great moral courage and conviction in fighting injustice, bigotry and intolerance. Because our schools rarely expose our children to the inspiring humanitarian deeds of such individuals, they leave school knowing little about these heroes and the moral history of their countries. This history must be taught and valued. And there are many questions that should be asked while teaching it, particularly when dealing with the Second World War. For example, why were there so many collaborators in some countries in Europe and not in others, why did some resist and not others. How can we make sure that our sad past not repeat itself? Unless these and similar questions are asked, "Auschwitz never again" will remain an empty slogan.

As a child survivor of the Holocaust, I cannot end this talk today without asking you to remember the hundreds of thousands of children who were murdered in the Holocaust. Many of them would still be alive today had they been permitted to live out their lives: the Anne Franks, the Petr Ginz, Ucek and Zarenka, my little adoptive brother and sister, and many, many others. And let us not forget the children who are killed or die of starvation in never-ending armed conflicts, those who were murdered in Rwanda, in the Balkans, in Cambodia, who will keep dying in other parts of the world unless and until we can create a world in which "Never Again" really means "Never Again" and not "Never Again until the next time."

JUDGE THOMAS BUERGENTHAL

Thomas Buergenthal is sinds 2000 werkzaam als één van de vijftien rechters van het Internationaal Gerechtshof in Den Haag. Hij werd in 1934 geboren in Lubochna in Slowakije. Als 10-jarig kind overleefde hij het getto van Kielce in Polen, het concentratiekamp Auschwitz en de beruchte dodenmars van Auschwitz naar Sachsenhausen in de strenge winter van 1944/1945. In 1951 emigreerde hij naar de Verenigde Staten. Gedreven door zijn oorlogservaringen wijdde hij zijn rechtenstudie en carrière aan de mensenrechten. Thomas Buergenthal heeft zich in het internationaal mensenrecht gespecialiseerd. Zijn studieboeken over mensenrechten worden nog steeds overal ter wereld gebruikt. Onlangs heeft hij zijn oorlogsverhaal getiteld 'Een gelukskind, van Auschwitz tot het Hooggerechtshof' opgetekend. Als hoogleraar Internationaal Mensenrecht heeft Thomas Buergenthal zich gedurende zijn hele loopbaan krachtig uitgesproken tegen genocide en schendingen van mensenrechten.

Zijn "Nooit meer Auschwitz"-lezing sprak hij uit op 27 januari 2009 in het Koninklijk Instituut voor de Tropen te Amsterdam. Aan de lezing is een onderscheiding verbonden die de naam draagt van de in 2001 overleden erevoorzitter van het Nederlands Auschwitz Comité, Annetje Fels-Kupferschmidt. De onderscheiding is ontworpen door Jan Wolkers en wordt toegekend aan een persoon of organisatie die zich op buitengewone wijze verdienstelijk heeft gemaakt voor het realiseren van de doelstellingen van het Nederlands Auschwitz Comité. In 2008 werd deze onderscheiding uitgereikt aan Irene Khan, secretaris-generaal van Amnesty International.

De "Nooit meer Auschwitz"-lezing wordt jaarlijks georganiseerd door het Nederlands Auschwitz Comité in samenwerking met de Pensioen- en Uitkeringsraad en het Centrum voor Holocaust- en Genocidestudies van de Universiteit van Amsterdam. Op de website van het Nederlands Auschwitz Comité worden samenvattingen van de lezingen gepubliceerd (www.auschwitz.nl).

Dit is een uitgave van de Pensioen- en Uitkeringsraad, Leiden
Nederlands Auschwitz Comité, Amsterdam, Centrum voor Holocaust- en Genocidestudies van de
Universiteit van Amsterdam, Amsterdam
Oplage: 900 exemplaren
Drukwerk: The Document Factory, Leiden