

Prague restitution :unedited draft

- by Elie Wiesel -

I remember: On April 18th, 1944, on a house to house operation destined to rob all Jewish families of their fortunes, a policeman and an elegantly dressed Hungarian lieutenant entered our home in Sighet and asked for all our valuables : he confiscated:

431 Pengös, our entire cash, 1 camera, my fountain pen, 1 pair of seemingly gold earrings, 1 golden ring, 1 silver ring, 3 ancient silver coins, 1 military gas mask, 1 sewing machine and 3 batteries for flashlights.

They dutifully signed a document, which I have in my possession, and left for my grandmother Nissel's home, two houses away.

She was a war widow. Her husband, my grandfather whose name Eliezer I try to wear with pride, fell in battle as a medic.

In mourning, a profoundly pious woman, she wore black clothes, rarely spoke and read Psalms uninterruptedly.

A similar official document listed HER valuables...

One Pengö, two coins, three smaller coins.

And two pieces of 21-cm tall solid brass candlesticks. That's all she possessed.

Bureaucracy was supreme and eternal even then: whether official murder or robbery, not fearing embarrassment or retribution, everything had to be recorded.

Why the Hungarian and German armies needed was her pitiful life's savings and her Shabbat candlesticks to win their war is beyond me. At times I am overcome with anger thinking of the red coat my little 8-year old sister Tsipuka had received for our last holiday: she wore it in Birkenau walking, walking hand in hand with my mother and grandmother towards.... A daughter of an SS must have received it as a birthday present.

Just measure the added ugliness of their hideous crimes: they stole not only the wealth of wealthy but also the poverty of the poor.

The first transport left our ghetto one month later.

Only later did I realize that what we so poorly call the Holocaust deals not only with political dictatorship, racist ideology and military conquest; but also with...financial gain, State-organized robbery, or just money.

Yes, The Final solution was ALSO meant to remove from Jewish hands all their buildings, belongings, acquisitions, possessions, valuable objects and

properties...Industries, art work, bank accounts...And simple everyday objects...Remember: before being shot by Einsatzkommandos, or before pushed into the gas-chambers, victims were made to undress...Six millions shirts, undershirts, suits, scarfs, pairs of shoes, coats, belts, hats...countless watches, pens, rings, knives, glasses, children's toys, walking sticks...Take any object and multiplied it by six million...All were appropriated by the Third Reich...It was all usefully calculated, almost scientifically thought through, programmed, industrialized....Jews were made to be deprived of their identity, and also of their reality...In their nakedness, with names and title and relations worthless, deprived of their self esteem of being the sum total of their lives both comprised all that had accumulated in knowledge and in visible categories...

When the war ended, what was the first response to its unspeakable tragedy? For us individual Jews, the obsession was not vengeance but the need to find lost family members. Collectively, in all DP camps, a powerful movement was created to help build a Jewish State in Palestine.

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In occupied Germany itself, the response moved to the judiciary. The Nüremberg Trials, the SS trials, the Doctors trials. Wiedergutmachung, restitution, compensation: were not on the agenda. The immensity of the suffering and the accompanying melancholy defied any expression in material terms.

In liberated countries, in Eastern Europe, surviving Jews who were lucky to return to their homes and/or stores were shamelessly and brutally thrown out by their new occupants. Some were killed in instantaneous pogroms. Who had the strength to turn their attention to restitution?

Then came the Goldmann-Adenauer agreement on Wiedergutmachung. The first Israelo-German conference took place early 1953 in Vassenaar, Holland. Israeli officials and wealthy Jews from America and England allegedly spoke on behalf of survivors, none of whom was present. I covered the proceedings for Israel's Yedioth Ahronoth. I disliked what I witnessed. I worried it might lead to precarious reconciliation. It did. The icy mood of the first meetings quickly developed in friendly conversations at the bar. Then also, deep down, I opposed the very idea of 'Shilumim'. I felt that money and memory are irreconcilable. The Holocaust has ontological implications; in its shadow monetary matters seem quasi frivolous. In the name of Israel's national interest, David Ben Gurion's attitude was, on the other hand, quoting the prophet's accusation of

David, 'Haratzachta vegam yarashta' : should the killer be his victim's heir? Logic was on his side, emotion was on mine.

In the beginning we spoke about millions, at the end the number reached billions. International accords with governments, insurance companies, private and official institutions in Germany, Switzerland and various countries. In Israel, local industry benefitted from the endeavor. As did needy individual survivors elsewhere too, including Europe and America.

Throughout those years, chroniclers, memorialists, psychologists, educators and historians discovered the Holocaust as their new field of enquiry. Some felt inadequate and even unworthy to loon into mystics would call forbidden ground. Having written enough pages on the subject, I confess that am not satisfied with my own words. The reason: there are no words. We forever remain on the threshold of language itself. We know what happened and how it happened; but not WHY it happened. First, because it could have been prevented. Second, the why is a metaphysical question. It has no answer.

As for the topic before us this morning, I am aware of the debate that was going on within various Jewish groups on the use to be made of the monies requested and received: who should get how much: institutions or persons? The immediate answer is: both.

However, it is with pained sincerity that I must declare my conviction that living survivors of poor health or financial means, deserve first priority. They suffered enough. And enough people benefitted FROM their suffering. Why not do everything possible and draw from all available funds to help them live their last years with a sense of security, in dignity and serenity. All other parties can and must wait. Do not tell me that it ought to be the natural task of local Jewish communities; let's not discharge our responsibilities by placing them on their shoulders. WE have the funds. Let's use them for those survivors in our midst who are on the threshold of despair.

Whenever we deal with this Tragedy, we better recall the saying of a great Hasidic Master: You wish to find the spark, look for it in the ashes.

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