Yom Hashoah Remarks

Presented by Alfred Schneider

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In the time of Hadrian, Emperor of Rome, the study and practice of Torah were forbidden. Israel's leaders said: 'How survive without the Tree of Life? Why live when the soul is dead?' And so they taught and learned and did God's will. Israel's ten leaders, among them the great Rabbi Akiba, were taken and doomed.

On 10th May 1933, German students burned upwards of 25,000 volumes, including books by Sholem Asch, Bertolt Brecht, Sigmund Freud, Franz Werfel, Stefan Zweig.

On 8th July 1941, in my hometown of Czernowitz, SS soldiers arrested Dr. Abraham Jacob Mark, the Chief Rabbi, and several leaders of the Jewish community. They were incarcerated in the elevator pit of the SS headquarters building. The next day, Dr. Mark was taken to the roof of the building to witness the torching of the Temple. Sixty Torah scrolls were thrown into the flames. Dr. Mark and 160 Jews were then shot.

Shimon Dubnow, the great historian, told the inhabitants of the Riga ghetto: "Yidn, shreibt un farshreibt" ("Jews, write and record"). On 8th December 1941, Dubnow was among thousands of Jews from the Riga ghetto who were massacred in the Rumbula forest.

On 12th August 1952, thirteen of the most prominent Yiddish writers, poets, actors and other intellectuals were executed on the orders of Joseph Stalin, among them Peretz Markish, Leib Kwitko, David Hofstein, Itzik Feffer and David Bergelson.

Alas, our history is replete with stories of violence against Jewish scholars and leaders, book burnings and the destruction of institutions of learning.

As we have done for many years, we remember and honor on these hallowed grounds the memories of our brothers and sisters who perished during the Shoah. We recall all of them: the young and the old, the rich and the poor, the wise and the simple-minded. But today, I would also like to review the extent to which Jewish scholars and Jewish scholarship have survived the Shoah and the contributions of the survivors.

In 1946, having somehow survived three years of German and Romanian fascist occupation and two years under a harsh Soviet regime, I came to Munich, Bavaria, in the U.S. zone of occupation, hoping to join my uncle in New York. This part of Germany was to be turned into a huge waiting room for hundreds of thousands of emigrants trying to escape the miseries of a Europe destroyed by war. Initially, there were several thousand Jews in the Western zones of Germany, most of them concentration camp survivors. By 1946, many Jews who had survived in Eastern European countries or had returned form places of refuge in the USSR, streamed into this area, hoping to go from there to Eretz Israel, USA, Canada, and other countries. Most of them lived in makeshift camps, officially known as Displaced Persons or DP camps, supported by international and Jewish relief organizations. The Jews did not care much for the DP designation and referred to themselves as the She'erit Hapleyta (escaping remnants). It is estimated that as many as 250,000 Jews passed through these camps until they were closed in 1951.

Munich, with several institutions of higher learning, attracted many young survivors who were anxious to prepare for new lives after emigration. I was accepted, along with several dozens survivors, at the Technical University of Munich. Thus, in a classroom where those who developed the "CYKLON B" for the gas cham-

bers may have studied, I started an academic career that was to end half a century later in a lecture hall at MIT.

The highest Jewish official in the Bavarian government at that time was Dr. Philipp Auerbach, the State Commissioner for Political, Racial, and Religious Persecutees, himself a concentration camp survivor. (Incidentally, I found out many years later that Dr. Auerbach was the uncle of our own Ben Hirsch.) Dr. Auerbach had been very helpful in the complicated admission processes, an "affirmative action" of sorts, ahead of its time. I often remembered his statement that Jewish students had the right and obligation to recover and take with them the bones of scholarship from universities where Jewish professors once taught. Ben told me that his uncle had been raised in a religious family so it is likely that the allegory of the bones of scholarship referred to the promise Joseph exacted from his brothers shortly before his death in Egypt.

וַיַּשְׁבַּע יוֹסֵף אֶת־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר פָּקֹד יִפְקֹד אֱלֹהִים אֶתְכֶם
וְהַעֲלִתֶם אֶת־עַצְמֹתַי מִזֶּה׃

And Joseph took an oath from the people of Israel, saying, God will surely visit you, and you shall carry up my bones from here. Genesis 50/25

I often wondered what Dr. Auerbach had in mind with his allegory of the bones. Did he mean the work of scholars and scientists who were Jewish, or specific studies at Jewish Institutions, or the pursuit of Jewish studies at Europe's venerable universities? We shall never know, but today I shall touch on all of the above.

The pervasive desolation that had settled over Europe did not seem a propitious place to think about a renaissance of Jewish scholarship. Theodor Adorno, the eminent critic and philosopher even concluded "writing poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric…" And yet, these temporary camps quickly became beehives of learn-

ing and cultural activities. Newspapers were published, theater groups were formed, religious and secular schools were functioning, and young people who could not remember the luxury of reading a book, were striving to make up for lost time. I worked one summer at the children's camp at Aschau, a temporary home for orphans collected by the liberating allied soldiers at various concentration camps. Here they were preparing for their eventual Aliya. Each child spoke several languages and they were industrious students at the ORT vocational school. You may have seen some of these children in newsreels or in the movie about the ill-fated ship "Exodus".

The U.S. Army, the JOINT, some German authorities and the Rabbinical Council of the U.S. Zone helped in an ambitious project to publish a 17-volume edition of the Talmud. Printed in an extremely limited edition, the "Survivors' Talmud" is now a collector's item.

In one of the camps, one might have met a ten-year old boy from Zloczow, Eastern Poland. Roald Safran's father was killed in 1943 and he and his mother were hidden by a Righteous Gentile in the attic of a schoolhouse for fourteen months. After some wanderings, Roald Hoffmann, who had been adopted by his stepfather Paul Hoffmann, came to Brooklyn, NY. In 1981, he received the Nobel Prize in Chemistry.

Another young survivor from Romania had found shelter at an orphanage in Paris. Though still a teenager, he audited philosophy courses at the Sorbonne, but for ten years he refused to talk or write about what he had endured and seen during the Shoah. Eventually, Elie Wiesel became the voice and conscience of the survivors and in 1986 he received the Nobel Peace Prize.

Until the advent of the Nazis, Jewish scholarship in Europe had greatly prospered, rivaling some of the "Golden Ages" of our history. Following the liberalization of their civil rights, Jews were eminently successful as scientists, engineers,

doctors, writers, philosophers, composers, artists, and architects. Great institutions of higher learning came into being, and there was renewed interest in the languages Jews had used throughout centuries: Hebrew, Yiddish, and Ladino. Religious institutions, covering the entire spectrum from traditional yeshivot to progressive rabbinical seminaries, were established in many lands.

Twelve years of Nazi rule brought an end to most of these, and along with much of Europe what remained were mountains of ashes. But, a few embers were still glowing. The Nazis had seized Jewish religious artifacts and books and had preserved some to be used in later research as samples of a vanished culture. Of the 2.5 million books that the U.S. Army had assembled at the end of the war at the Offenbach Archival Depot, 500,000 books formerly owned by Jews or Jewish Institutions were declared "ownerless" in 1946. The Jewish Cultural Reconstruction Organization was established in New York to distribute these cultural treasures to Jewish institutions throughout the world. There was a similar distribution of "Prague Torahs" to many synagogues, including some in Atlanta, thus providing a tangible link between our vibrant contemporary synagogues and the vanished congregations of Czech and Slovak Jews.

Adorno's admonition about the end of poetry after Auschwitz did not materialize: Primo Levi, Paul Celan, Elie Wiesel, Aharon Appelfeld, Imre Kertesz, Nelly Sachs, Rose Auslaender, Vasily Grossman, nearly all survivors, devoted much of their writings to the human tragedy of the Holocaust.

Of course, the reestablishment of a Jewish state in Israel was a major factor in providing not only for the survival of Jewish scholarship but also for an unprecedented explosion of creativity in nearly every field of human endeavor. The Hebrew language, once largely considered an ancient biblical relic, was transformed into a rich modern language for everyday use. Israel's preeminence in the sciences and literature already makes it appear that we may be witnessing the

realization of that ancient hope: כי מציון תצא תורה And from Zion shall come the Torah.

But, to return to the Munich Jewish students and the She'erit Hapleyta:
Nearly all students either completed their studies in Munich and then emigrated or they left and completed their studies in their new homes. Most had successful careers. Thus, Zosia delivered several thousand babies, Steven became a renowned theoretical physicist who headed the Physics Department at Brandeis University, Emanuel is a leading forensic psychiatrist, Henry designed antennas for space vehicles, Fred helped build a nuclear powerplant in Antarctica, Netania charmed the audiences of great concert halls, Amos designed and built industrial plants, Joachim managed large construction projects, Kurt made life better through Chemistry, and so forth….

By 1951, the DP camps were closed and nearly all of the She'erit Hapleyta had left for Israel, USA, Canada, or Australia. In retrospect, the years in the camps were not unlike the forty years the Israelites had spent in the desert. The survivors tried to draw a line under the tragedies of their earlier lives and set their sights on the future. In their adopted homelands, most overcame the problems of adjusting to new conditions and lifestyles and, eventually, were successful. What singled them out was their great concern with education, for themselves but mainly for their children. Survivors were often the movers behind the founding of new schools, the expansion of curricula, and the endowment of scholarships. Nothing would be spared for the education of their children. Many became teachers who helped foster the continuity of our traditions.

Outside Israel, many scholarly activities in Jewish areas are being pursued at Jewish institutions and at many great universities. In Europe, North America and Australia, nearly every major university has a department for Jewish history, or Yiddish literature, or biblical studies. International conferences on Jewish subjects are held in unexpected places, like the universities of Krakow, Vilno, Leip-

zig, Vienna, and others. There have been a few successful transplants: the famed YIVO from Vilno to New York, the Schocken Verlag from Germany to the U.S.A. and several famous yeshivot to Israel. The Israel Philharmonic Orchestra, home to some surviving musicians, continues to be the pride of music lovers and the Habima Theater has preserved the heritage of the great Jewish theaters of Europe. The modern synagogues in Europe and the New World provide an interesting architectural comparison with some of the restored old houses of prayer. They are a living proof of the vitality and dedication of today's Jewry.

Salvage and preservation of the legacies of those who perished in the Shoah has been an important endeavor. The chronicles of the historian of the Warsaw Ghetto Emanuel Ringelblum, the diary of Anne Frank, the poetry of Selma Meerbaum-Eisinger, the compositions and paintings from Terezin, the poems and songs of the Jewish partisans, and much more are now considered to be national treasures. The memoirs and recorded recollections of thousands of survivors provide an extensive documentation of the Shoah.

Several large museums, the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, Yad Vashem, New York Museum of Jewish Heritage, but also many smaller ones, like our own Breman Museum contribute significantly to the preservation of the histories of vanished communities, to the documentation of a great tragedy and to the education of a large segment of the public, especially young students.

There was a follow-up in the allegory of Joseph:

וַיִּקַּח מֹשֶׁה אֶת־עַצְמוֹת יוֹסֵף עִמּוֹ

A*nd Moses took the bones of Joseph with him Exodus 13/19*

And about four hundred years after Joseph's death

וְאֶת־עַצְמוֹת יוֹסֵף אֲשֶׁר־הֶעֱלוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל מִמִּצְרַיִם קָבְרוּ בִשְׁכֶם

And the bones of Joseph, which the people of Israel brought out of Egypt, they buried in Shechem… *Joshua 24/32*

It took four hundred years for the story of Joseph to have closure, but there is no closure to Dr. Auerbach's charge to the She'erit Hapleyta, though an end is now in sight to the lifespan of this unique group of survivors. I would have liked to apprise Dr. Auerbach on how we fulfilled his charge, but his life ended tragically in 1952. On his gravestone at the Jewish Cemetery in Munich I found an inscription expressing gratitude from the many he had helped. If I were to return to Munich, I would summarize the progress during the past sixty years as follows:

> Much of Jewish scholarship did survive the Holocaust and has recovered to an unprecedented level.
>
> The memories of our martyrs are being kept alive wherever Jews live.
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> Many members of the She'erit Hapleyta started new lives in their new homes and raised families with the traditional respect for learning. They were never able to forget the terrible years of the Shoah. But they persevered and passed on to succeeding generations our most important possession: הנפש היהודי - the Jewish soul.

Dr. Alfred Schneider spent his early years in Czernowitz, then part of Romania. In 1941 – 1944 he lived under the Romanian fascist regime, narrowly escaping deportation to the East. The Soviet army liberated Czernowitz in March 1944. In 1946, he started his studies in Chemistry at the Technical University of Munich. He emigrated to the USA in 1948. After working for twenty-four years in industry and research institutions, he joined Georgia Tech in 1975 and MIT in 1990 as Professor of Nuclear Engineering. He continued his consulting practice until his full retirement in

2002. He received awards from his alma mater and professional societies and the Antarctica Medal from the U.S. Navy. He has been a member of The Temple and Hemshech. Alfred and Tosia, his wife of 57 years, have three sons and five grandchildren.