

## **Keynote Address**

**Burbank Human Relations Council Observance of the Day of Remembrance, May 2011**

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I want to begin by thanking Rabbi Mark Sobel, Temple Beth Emet, the Burbank Human Relations Council, and all the congregations participating in this evening's program for the opportunity to speak with you on this Day of Remembrance.

The holocaust began in 1933 when Adolph Hitler rose to power as head of the Nazi Party and the Third Reich. Beginning in 1933, the Nazis, under Hitler's leadership, engaged in a downward spiral in its treatment of Jews, political dissidents, Gypsies, gays and lesbians, the disabled, the mentally retarded, and the poor.

Hitler came to power in January of 1933, and within two months, the Nazis had already opened the Dachau Concentration Camp, followed by the concentration camps at Buchenwald and Sachsenhausen. They also opened the Ravensbruck Concentration Camp, designed specifically for women. By the time World War II began in 1939, there were many other concentration camps in full operation, and yet other concentration camps would become functional during the war, together with forced labor camps in Europe and North Africa.

Back in 1933, the Nazis also passed a law against those whom they called "habitual and dangerous criminals." The Nazis used this law to deport beggars, homeless people, alcoholics and the unemployed to concentrations camps.

In 1933, the Nazis also established a Hereditary Health Court and passed a law allowing forced sterilization of all Germans—found by the Court—to have genetic defects. During World War II, the Nazis extended forced sterilization to entire communities of teenage girls, such as the Jewish community of Salonika in Greece.

I had the privilege of meeting Jilda Joseph and her husband Jack when they were already in their eighties. Jilda was born and raised in Salonika. At age fourteen, Jilda was forced to lie on a narrow cot next to other Jewish teens in a hospital ward, while Jewish doctors were forced—at gunpoint—to sterilize them. A doctor with kind eyes performed a procedure on a young lady who was lying on a cot next to Jilda, and then he leaned over and whispered in the girl's ear,

“don’t worry, I just made a mark on you. You will be still be able to have children.” Jilda heard the doctor’s whisper and so did the Nazi guard, who shot the doctor to death on the spot.

Immediately, another Jewish doctor was forced into the role, and Jilda and the other young teen were sterilized within minutes. After the war, Jilda fell in love with Jack who was also from Salonika. Jilda refused to adopt a child so as not to hide the horror of what she had experienced. Jilda wanted the world to know, and in addition to telling her story, she used her motherly instincts, and her incredible cooking and baking skills (which I had the opportunity to experience personally!) to provide meals and delicacies for friends, neighbors and members of her congregation until the end of her long and very full life.

Going back again to 1933, in that year, Jews were forbidden from owning land in Germany, which caused many Jews to lose their homes or their businesses. In 1934, Jews lost their health insurance; in 1937, they lost their tax deductions, and their dependent deductions for children; and in 1938, approximately thirty thousand German Jewish citizens who had been born in Poland were stripped of their German citizenship, forced from their homes in Germany and dumped at the Polish German border with no food, no shelter, no resources to provide for themselves, and no place to go.

A teenage girl who had been transported to the Polish German border together with her parents, sent a desperate postcard to her seventeen year old brother who had relocated to Paris to look for work. When her brother received the postcard, and read of his family’s plight, he went berserk. He purchased a gun and went to the German embassy in Paris and shot and killed a German official in revenge for his family’s plight. The German government punished the entire German Jewish population for the murder of this official, with a twenty-four hour purge known as Krystalnacht, the night of the broken glass.

On Krystalnacht, November 9, 1938, German soldiers smashed windows in synagogues, Jewish centers and Jewish businesses throughout Germany, and set the buildings ablaze. The following morning, all German Jews were stripped of their German citizenship, there were mass arrests of Jewish men who were taken to concentration camps or forced labor camps, and over thirty thousand Jews were murdered—all within twenty-four hours.

My dear friend and colleague, Rabbi Ted Alexander, was a teenager on Krystalnacht. His father was the rabbi of a synagogue in Berlin, and was also a businessman and ran a shop. Ted and his father went into hiding for three weeks following Krystalnacht to avoid arrest. After three weeks, they came out of hiding, and while walking down the street, they ran into the Chief of Police for their District in Berlin.

“I have been looking for you!” exclaimed the Chief of Police, “Where have you been?”

“Under the circumstances,” said Ted’s father, “I can’t tell you.”

The Police Chief leaned close to Ted’s father and said, “Who do you think boarded up the windows on your store and the other stores on your block?”

Ted and his father headed straight for the family business. The storefront was indeed boarded up and the windows were not broken, all their merchandise was still in the store, and when they opened the cash register, every Deutsch Mark Ted's father remembered leaving in the till was still there.

Anne Marie Yellin was ten years old on the morning of Krystalnacht, when she was expelled from school in Kamnetz, Germany because she was Jewish. Anne's father was sent to the Buchenwald Concentration Camp. Anne's mother obtained papers to show that her father would be going to Santiago, Chile. Because of the papers, the Germans stopped torturing Anne's father and released him from Buchenwald. In the end, Anne's family lacked the funds to emigrate to Chile, but they managed to pay smugglers to take them across the border from Germany into Belgium, where Anne was dropped off on the street to the care of a Catholic nun who arranged for Anne to be secretly enrolled in a convent school where she was baptized as a Catholic and took first communion.

There were eighty Jewish children and teenagers hidden and educated in the convent school that Anne Marie attended, and all together, Catholic convents in Belgium saved eight hundred Jewish children. There were so many Catholic priests and nuns throughout Europe who attempted to save Jews—particularly children—that the Nazis devised special torture for nuns and priests who were caught with Jews on their premises or in their care.

In 1939, Denmark agreed to take two hundred Jewish children from Czechoslovakia, and the Germans allowed them to leave. In Yad VaShem, the Holocaust Memorial in Jerusalem, there is a place where the numbers are listed for how many Jews died in each country. It says 2.8 million Jews died in Poland—although the number may have actually been higher—and for Denmark, the number is 50, because, when the Nazis took over Denmark, the Danish king donned the yellow star that Jews were forced to wear, and invited his subjects to wear the star so that the Nazis could not tell who were Jews.

My teacher, Rabbi Gershon Winkler said that when his grandfather and grandmother came back from hiding in Denmark at the end of the war, they found that not only had their flower garden been watered, but the laundry they had left at the dry cleaners had been picked up and was hanging in their closet.

Chana Dubova was one of two hundred children who were chosen to go from Czechoslovakia to Denmark in 1939. Chana was not as fortunate as Anne Marie. Anne Marie was able to be a student in a convent in Belgium, her parents hid not far away, and they were reunited after the war. Chana, on other hand, said goodbye to her parents for the last time when she left Czechoslovakia for Denmark, where she was taken in as a cleaning girl in a school at age fourteen.

Chana's Danish hosts gave her food, clothing and a roof over her head. Chana cleaned bathrooms and classrooms while her Danish peers pursued their studies and enjoyed play and social time, but Chana's life was saved, and until she died in her late eighties just last year, Chana was always grateful to the Danish people who saved her life.

When the Nazis invaded Denmark, strangers came to the school where Chana was working and told her that she had to leave. The strangers took Chana by the hand and led her to a boat that brought her to Sweden where she worked and hid until the war was over.

In Poland, Jews were not as fortunate as Chana and Anne Marie. In August, 1939, the Russians and the Germans entered into the Molotov–Ribbentrop Agreement. This was a non-aggression pact between Russia and Germany that allowed both countries to gobble up other countries without Germany and Russia having to attack one another. Guided by the Molotov-Ribbentrop Agreement, on September 1, 1939, Germany invaded Poland on the north, west and south, and Russia invaded Poland on the east.

The Germans and the Russians carved up Poland in seventeen days and by September 17, 1939, Poland was an occupied country, and the Germans began chasing, ghettoizing, torturing and murdering Jews in the cities, villages and country sides of Poland that were under their control. In 1942, the Germans violated the Molotov-Ribbentrop Agreement with Russia, took over eastern Poland, and began to liquidate the Eastern Polish Jewish population with mass murders and deportations to concentration and forced labor camps.

The German killing machine operated in many countries. In all, six million Jews were murdered. The six million dead constituted two-third's of European Jewry, and one-third of the world's Jewish population, but among the six million dead were also between eighty and ninety percent of the world's Jewish spiritual teachers, because spiritual leaders have a commitment to their calling, and their students, that transcends their connection with the material world and personal happiness. Many rabbis and Jewish scholars chose to stay in Europe when others were fleeing to Palestine and North and South America at the turn of the twentieth century, and in the years following World War I. Many Jewish spiritual leaders were offered papers and escape routes during the Holocaust, but they insisted that their communities needed them, and in the end, they died with those whom they had been called to serve.

In addition to murdering nearly three million Jews in Poland alone, the Nazis also murdered more than two million Polish Catholics, including twenty-five percent of Poland's Catholic clergy, twenty-five percent of Poland's scientists, and twenty percent of Poland's schoolteachers.

Before concluding, I would like to turn to Mousa Hakkakah's story.[\[1\]](#) Mousa was polite when he told his story this evening. He didn't tell you that when the Jewish refugees were dropped off in the cemetery in Tehran, the men and women were naked—they didn't even have underwear—because the smugglers who brought them took their pajama like stripped pants and shirts, because, if the Iranian officials had found them in pajama like pants and shirts like prisoners wore, they would be arrested. And they had no underwear, because the Nazis took their underwear. The Iranian Jews saved eighty thousand Jewish refugees; eighty thousand Jews were saved by the Jews of Iran.

In conclusion, I would like to share the teachings of two great scholars whose wisdom helps to illuminate the dark moment of remembrance of the tragedy of human suffering during the Holocaust. The first is Professor Yehuda Bauer, former Director of the International Institute (on the Holocaust) at Yad VaShem in Jerusalem.

In 1998, Professor Bauer, was invited to address the full Bundestag, the German House of Representatives, together with the President of Germany and the German Chancellor. Professor Bauer spoke of the Ten Commandments, and recommended that perhaps three additional commandments be added to the traditional ten. The three new commandments that Professor Bauer recommended to German leaders were these:

Commandment “Number 11 – You, your children and your children’s children shall never become perpetrators;”

Commandment “Number 12 – You, your children and your children’s children shall never never allow yourselves to become victims”; and

Commandment “Number 13 – You, your children and your children’s children shall never, but never, be passive onlookers to mass murder, genocide, or ... a Holocaust-like tragedy.”

The second, and last scholar, I wish to quote is Rabbi Dr. Donniel Hartman, President of the Shalom Hartman Institute in Israel. Rabbi Hartman sent a message to members of his Board of Directors in anticipation of this year’s observance of the Day of Remembrance, and I had the privilege to be on his email distribution list. As part of Rabbi Hartman’s remarks to his Board, he wrote the following:

“As the years pass, whether we like it or not, the horrors of the Holocaust fade and become a more distant memory. As the memory fades, I ... find myself connecting more and more to the memory of the hero. These heroes, however, are not the partisans [—the ones who hid in the forests, fighting and resisting courageously.] My hero is the young man or woman whose spouse, parents, and children were murdered before their [very] eyes. Who survived the horrors of the concentration camp with memories and experiences unspeakable and unimaginable. Who exited the gates of death and still had the courage to fall in love, have children, and begin to live again. For this memory, I don’t need a museum [and I don’t] have to travel on an airplane. While decreasing in numbers, the[se survivors] still walk amongst us. They are our—or our friends’—parents or grandparents, our neighbors, members of our community, or strangers we pass on the street.... These heroes have asked very little of us. It is time for us to recognize that we owe them everything.”

In closing, I would like to offer the following blessing: For those who have suffered and endured torture and murder all over the world in the name of ethnic cleansing, in the name of scapegoating, in the name of “I have the power and you don’t,” may their memories all be a blessing, together with the memory of the six million Jews and six million others who lost their lives during one of humanity’s darkest hours.

For those who survived the holocaust, and passed from this world after the holocaust, may they always be remembered, together with their stories and their courage.

And for those holocaust survivors who continue to be among us, those survivors who will light our candles this evening, and all the survivors who are sitting among us this evening, may their

lives be full of blessing and may we be blessed to know them, and to remember them, and their stories, and their courage, and all that they are able to share of what they have endured.

And let us say, Amen.

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[1] Moussa Hakakha is the father-in-law of Rabbi Mark Sobel of Temple Beth Emet in Burbank and father of Mark's wife Mina. With translation by Mina, Moussa recounted in his native Farsi the story of how he and his brother helped their uncle and aunt to save Jewish refugees by having clothing made for the refugees, and delivered to the cemetery, together with black ribbons that the refugees wore as they stood on street corners, so Iranian Jews would know to pick them up, take them home and provide jobs and places for them to live until the end of the war.