

The Scourge of Antisemitism in 2019: An Overview

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Address by Menachem Z. Rosensaft, WJC Associate Executive Vice President and General Counsel

It is a distinct privilege for me to be here with you on behalf of the World Jewish Congress. I want to thank my friend Karel Fracapane of UNESCO for his role in organizing today's workshop. The World Jewish Congress is proud to be a part of this important initiative together with UNESCO, ODIHR, the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, and Ahmed Shaheed, the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, with whom I am honored to share this session. I would also like to acknowledge the work of my colleague Leon Saltiel, the WJC's Geneva representative, in the preparation of today's program.

Seventy-five years ago today, my mother was an inmate in the Nazi concentration camp of Bergen-Belsen in Germany. She had previously been a prisoner at the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp for 15 months. My father, meanwhile, had only recently arrived at Langensalza, a sub-camp of the Buchenwald concentration camp, also in Germany after months of being tortured in the notorious Block 11, known as the Death Block, at Auschwitz. Both were literally alone – their entire respective families had been murdered in what we now call the Holocaust. Both had been subjected to unspeakable brutalities. Both had witnessed fellow inmates endure harrowing agonies. For both, the mass-murder of Jews, what we today refer to as genocide, had become commonplace.

For both my parents, four long months of harsh, implacable imprisonment still lay ahead until their liberation at Bergen-Belsen on April 15, 1945.

One year later, December 16, 1945 fell on a Saturday and thus the International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg had recessed for the weekend. The day before, one of the American prosecutors, Major William F. Walsh, had concluded a two-day overview of Nazi Germany's "Persecution of the Jews."

"The slaughter of the Jews in Europe," Major Walsh told the Tribunal,

"cannot be expressed in figures alone, for the impact of this slaughter is even more tragic to the future of the Jewish people and mankind. Ancient Jewish communities with their own rich spiritual, cultural, and economic life, bound up for centuries with the life of the nations in which they flourished, have been completely obliterated. . . I have not attempted to recount the multitudinous and diabolical crimes committed against the Jewish people by the state which these defendants ruled, because, with sober regard for contemporary and historical truth, a detailed description of some of these crimes would transcend the utmost reaches of the human faculty of expression."

I preface my presentation this morning with these observations because they highlight the critical importance of our being here at this workshop on combating antisemitism through education.

The Holocaust epitomizes the no longer merely theoretical consequences of antisemitism in its most viral and

savage form. Let us not delude ourselves into thinking that it is a mere prejudice, a mere dislike, that can be excused or ignored. On the contrary, there is no question that unless it is effectively checked, this hatred can and will grow in force and intensity, and we know for a fact that antisemitism taken to its ultimate level not only can result – but in fact has resulted – in genocide. Period. Paragraph.

Why is this relevant to us today? Why, indeed, should we focus on antisemitism separately rather than as one of many racial, ethnic, or religious hatreds, one of many bigotries?

I submit that we must do so because antisemitism is not only the oldest such hatred – it is also the most multifaceted, the most complex, and in many ways the most insidious.

Let me be clear – I do not for a moment suggest that we should ignore or downplay the severity of other hatreds, be it Islamophobia, or the genocide, ethnic cleansing, or other mass atrocities being perpetrated against the Yezidis, the Rohingya, or other ethnic groups across the globe, or the persecution and mass killings of Christians in the Middle East – and I will return to this point later on. However, in order for us to combat antisemitism, we must first understand it. This requires us, first, to be aware of and take into account its unique characteristics, and, second, to be able to identify and address its current-day incarnations.

In this connection, we cannot lose sight of the fact that over the centuries – indeed, over two millennia – the hatred of Jews that we call antisemitism has had numerous distinct identities.

The oldest of these is religious antisemitism rooted in the specious charge that it was the Jews – not the Romans led by Pontius Pilate – who killed Jesus (who by the way was himself a Jew). It was this religious antisemitism that resulted not just in the Inquisition but also in countless massacres and expulsions of Jews. This religious form of antisemitism also was the cause of Jews being barred from most professions across Europe and elsewhere.

This type of antisemitism provided at least a theoretical escape hatch – Jews were given the option of renouncing their faith and converting to Christianity. Lest one think that this was an antiquated medieval phenomenon, it is worth recalling that Gustav Mahler, toward the end of the 19th century, needed to convert to Catholicism at the age of 36 in order to be eligible for the directorship of the Vienna Court Opera. Mahler was one of many such pragmatic converts.

The second type of antisemitism we must consider is sociopolitical, or socioeconomic. That is the type that sees Jews as the source of any and all social or economic problems. Capitalists saw Jews as communists or socialists because some Jews were communists or socialists, and communists and socialists reviled Jews as capitalists because some Jews were bankers. Along the same lines, the canard developed that Jews controlled the media because individual Jews played a role in publishing or editing newspapers.

Finally, the 19th century saw the emergence of a third type of antisemitism, which proved to be the most toxic. According to a spurious pseudoscience, Jews were deemed to be racially inferior to other groups, with white Aryans ensconced at the top of the human pyramid. The inherent problem with this type of antisemitism is that it was – is – impossible for Jews to escape from the perceived stigma.

As we know, it was the racial antisemitism of Nazi Germany, forged in the context of preexisting religious and sociopolitical and socioeconomic antisemitism, that resulted in the genocide of six million Jews during the Holocaust.

Why is all this relevant as we approach the end of the second decade of the 21st century? Because antisemitism has been resurgent in many parts of the world, even in places where there are few if any Jews. This phenomenon is exacerbated by the fact that antisemitic words and attitudes far too frequently morph into not just violence but lethal violence.

We need only recall the fatal shootings by white supremacists at synagogues in Pittsburgh and Poway in the United States and at Halle in Germany, or the brutal murder in Paris of Holocaust survivor Mireille Kroll who was targeted because she was a Jew. But these are only four of many present-day antisemitic manifestations – admittedly among the most horrific. The following are only a few others:

- In the United Kingdom, the Labour Party under the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn became so pronounced a haven for antisemitic mindsets, especially in espousing a virulent hostility toward the State of Israel, that Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis, Chief Rabbi of the Orthodox United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth, felt compelled to state publicly that what had once been a strong voice in the fight against antisemitism, had ceased to be “the party of equality and anti-racism.”
- Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad of Malaysia, a country with only a minimal Jewish presence, takes pride “to be labeled antisemitic,” claims that “Jews rule this world by proxy,” and has referred to Jews as “hook-nosed.”
- In Italy, parliamentarian Liliberto Segre, a survivor of the Nazi death camp of Auschwitz, was placed under police protection after being subjected to antisemitic threats. “I heard the words of hatred, hateful and insulting, and I saw with my eyes the realization of a ferocious program prepared from hatred,” Segre told a crowd in Milan that had rallied in her support.
- In the United States, after President Donald J. Trump last week signed an executive order extending federal protection to Jewish students at colleges and universities who are subjected to antisemitic vitriol on the part of groups that advocate the delegitimization of the State of Israel, World Jewish Congress President Ronald S. Lauder declared that, “President Trump correctly understands that the rights of Jewish students on college campuses must be protected, just like all other minority groups.”
- In France, after 107 graves at a Jewish cemetery in Alsace were defaced by swastikas and antisemitic graffiti, President Emmanuel Macron wrote on Twitter that “Jews are and make France,” and that “Those who attack them, even their graves, are not worthy of the idea we have of France.”

It is painfully obvious that antisemitism is indeed not just alive but flourishing. It is equally clear that the antisemites’ greatest ally is ignorance. This is why we are holding this workshop on combating antisemitism through education and others like it. We must counter the vile stereotypes that are being spread to audiences that do not have the tools to refute them as slander.

That is also why it is significant that we are meeting today in Geneva, the center of the UN’s human rights-based bodies and agencies. Indeed, the World Jewish Congress has been urging the international community for many years to use a human rights-based approach in combating antisemitism. Such an approach is in fact reflected in UNESCO’s pioneering guidelines for policymakers and in Ahmed Shaheed’s unprecedented report on addressing this oldest of hatreds.

At the same time, we must at all times remain conscious of the fact that the struggle against antisemitism does not and cannot exist in a vacuum.

In an address at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome last month, World Jewish Congress President Ronald S. Lauder reminded us that:

“Human fraternity is the core of our existence . . . Racism is absolutely unacceptable. We must eradicate it. Antisemitism is absolutely unacceptable. We must eliminate it. Islamophobia is absolutely unacceptable. We must erase it. Attacks on Christian communities and on Christian individuals are absolutely unacceptable. We must stop them — and prevent their recurrence. But the campaign against racism, antisemitism, Islamophobia and anti-Christian attacks will be infinitely more effective if it is united. Christians should lead the defense of Jews and Muslims. Muslims should lead the defense of Christians and Jews. Jews should lead the defense of Muslims and Christians. And we must all stand together against racism.”

We must not lose sight of the interrelated realities that when we fight against antisemitism, we fight against racism, xenophobia and bigotry generally, and when we prevail in this struggle, we prevail on behalf of society and humankind at large.