

Isaac Hellemn  
Plano, Texas

Imagine leaves falling in winter rain. One of those ancient, noble oaks shedding a mountain of foliage. And the supply of withered, brown leaves seems endless, as if it will never end. But at length it will. And the oak tree is barren. All its leaves are lost.

Now imagine that each leaf is a person.

Each leaf has a face, and a voice. It smiles when it is happy. It cries when it is sad. And in the instant that it passes onward, in that fraction of a second it makes a sound. The lightest, most silent of whispers.

If we listen carefully enough we can hear them.

There is nothing quite like the death of a human being. Nothing to equal its sadness, or its permanence. But through remembering the dead, we relieve that permanence. We can bring our loved ones back, for a while, through memory. We can allow them some time here again. And that is a very special power.

As for remembering the Holocaust, many people think that it is not our concern. It's one of those faraway events, distant both in space and time, so separated from our present that it seems as though it never happened. We cannot visualize the Holocaust any more than we can envision the Darfur genocide, or any other catastrophe that we have heard of and never seen. And after all, how is it possible to remember something that we did not ourselves experience? With each generation it grows more difficult, the Holocaust becomes more and more a part of 'history'. With each survivor that dies of old age, we lose a little bit of perspective. But we aren't really trying to recapture what is being lost. We sit in Starbucks, sipping coffee. And the memory of the Holocaust slips away.

We have become quite good at rationalizing it. The age of the great dictators is over, we tell ourselves. Better to let that 'unfortunate episode' fade quietly away. After all, remembering unpleasantness is unpleasant. Why should we still bear that burden?

Because the Holocaust is not dead. It will never be 'another episode of history'. Eric Lensherr, a Holocaust survivor played by Ian McKellen, says that "There is no land of tolerance. There is no peace. Not here, or anywhere else that men, women, children, whole families are destroyed because they were born different from those in power." And he's right. There may be no fascist dictators in the world today, but we are still just as hate-filled as in 1945. All across Africa, children are drafted into armies and die on the battlefield. In Turkey and the Middle East, the Kurds are treated with just as much humanity as the Jews once felt in Germany. Even in America, there are voices that call for illegal immigrants to be placed in special 'work camps' so that they can better contribute to our society.

The Holocaust was supposed to teach us that these things are wrong; it was supposed to show us where hatred leads. But we have already dismissed its lessons. Hitler is dead, the last of the Nazis have been tried and executed, and our society seems to collectively yawn and move onward.

To me, the true evil of the Holocaust wasn't the Nazis, it was the blind, pitiless indifference that allowed them to do as they pleased. How could an entire nation of people look away? How did they justify it to themselves?

And isn't that what we are doing now? By forgetting the Holocaust, we are collectively averting our gaze, avoiding eye contact with that miserable beggar on the sidewalk. It's ruthless. It's cruel. It's inhuman. Just as inhuman as the Nazis ever were.

But I think there's a solution. Several years ago, my family and I attended my great-uncle's funeral in rural Georgia. People grow very close there, and there were plenty of non-relatives at the service. My great-uncle had asked to be buried in a particular forest glade, and it was there that the ceremony was held. Family, friends, neighbors, mostly strangers to each other, yet united by a common thread. One of my great-uncle's friends delivered the final eulogy, telling us, reminding us, that my great-uncle had once been alive and well. He described the man so well that I could almost swear I saw him standing before us, smiling, enjoying the cool breeze. And not a soul present looked away. No eyes were averted. We were united by his memory.

Imagine if we still thought of the Holocaust this way. Arthur Schnitzler wrote that "the dead are silent", but if we would just remember them like my great-uncle's friend remembered him, we could give the dead voices again. And what might those voices say? They would tell us to stop talking about Darfur and act, or they might say that the treatment of the Kurds is not so different from the horrors of WWII. Most of all, I think the Holocaust's dead would remind us that we are all of us equally human, that death in the poor heart of Africa is as significant as the deaths of the rich and powerful. It is our task as humans to look after one another, and that starts by remembering the time when we failed in our duty.

It sounds like a difficult task. But I think my generation can help.

Most important of all will be to keep the Holocaust's stories alive. Those desperate first-hand accounts of suffering and those photographs of withered, starving people are useless if nobody sees them. I think it's time to bring those relics out of their dusty cupboards and show them to America once again. Movies like Schindler's List and The Boy in the Striped Pajamas

do a good job of seizing the public's interests, but the historical truth of the Holocaust is more powerful than any fictional depiction.

We should avoid forcing people to think about the Holocaust; we should try to inspire people instead. Contests like this are a good venue for that, but I think that we should go further still. There should be art contests of Holocaust remembrance, prizes for films that share the message of the Holocaust, contests for Holocaust poetry. What person is unmoved by the following lines from Abraham Sutzkever's "Frozen Jews"?

"Somewhere a flicker of a frozen soul - glint  
offish in an icy swell. All brood. Speech  
and silence are one. Night snow encases the sun."

Remembering is difficult. Forgetting is easy. But we owe it to the victims of the Holocaust, and to the descendants of its survivors, to continue the struggle. By reviving interest in the horrors of the Holocaust, we are also fighting the racism and hatred that persists around the world to this day. By sharing the images and accounts of suffering, we remind people that each of those 'leaves' has a name and a face, and we ensure that no person can remain an indifferent observer to mass murder.

"The first night of liberty, many hundreds of people died of joy."

-P. Gordon Walker, describing the liberation of Belsen

We must remember. For them, we must remember.

## Bibliography

- Bolz-Weber, Matthew. "X-Men." *Movie/Video Study*. 2005. Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Web. 9 Feb 2010. <index2.php?reqstyleid=0&start=#>.
- Halsall, Paul. "Hermann Friedrich Graebe: Account of Holocaust Mass Shooting, 1942." *Modern History Sourcebook*. Aug 1997. Fordham University, Web. 9 Feb 2010. <index2 .php?reqstyleid=0&start=#>.
- MediaMatters,. "Savage's Answer to Homelessness: "Why Not Put Them In Work Camps?". *"MediaMatters: For America*. 09 Jun 2008. MediaMatters: For America, Web. 9 Feb 2010. <index2.php?reqstyleid=0&start=#>.
- Morgan, Susan. "Remembering the Holocaust, Obama Must Act For Darfur." *The Huffington Post*. 23 Apr 2009. The Huffington Post, Web. 9 Feb 2010. <index2.php?reqstyleid=0&start=#>.
- Schnitzler, Arthur. "The Dead Are Silent." *Greatest Short Stories*. 'Comp'. P.F. Collier. New York: The Crowell-Collier Publishing Company, 1953. Print.
- Sutzkever, A. A. *Sutzkever: Selected Poetry and Prose*. Berkeley: University of California Press, cl991 1991. <http://ark.edlib.org/ark:/13030/ft5q2nb3z7/>
- Talhelm, Jennifer. "Goldwater's Call For Forced Labor Camp Angers Two GOP Lawmakers." *The Tucson Citizen*. 26 Jun 2006. The Associated Press, Web. 9 Feb 2010. <index2.php?reqstyleid=0&start=#>.
- Walker, Patrick Gordon. "Patrick Gordon Walker's Belsen Report." *Witnessing the Holocaust: Personal accounts of a crime against humanity*. 20 Apr 1945. BBC, Web. 9 Feb 2010. <index2.php?reqstyleid=0&start=#>.