

Remarks by Ambassador Howard Gutman

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Contemporary Responses to the Holocaust

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I am truly delighted to be here in Antwerp among so many new friends at what looks like a fascinating conference.

And I must start with an apology. I had planned to stay long into the evening tonight and to learn from others and participate in the discussion that follows.

I had an emergency develop yesterday that requires me this evening to be in Brussels. I so did not want to cancel so I convinced the others to let me arrive just after 9:00pm. So I am going to have to leave after my remarks. But I so wanted to participate and am delighted to have the ability to share some thoughts on contemporary responses to the Holocaust and particularly as it relates to the Obama Presidency.

Indeed, for me, the connection between the Obama presidency and the Holocaust dates back to even before the election. Seven months before the election, in April 2008, I received a letter in the mail from a Jewish woman from North Carolina, a Jewish community leader, whom I had never met or spoken to. She wrote in the letter that I would burn in hell for the memory of the victims of the Holocaust. As I stared at the letter, I wondered what I had done in my lifetime to merit such hatred from a Jewish community leader.

Certainly on paper, I did not seem like an appropriate target for total loathing from the Jewish community. In fact, unbeknownst to the writer, much of my family, including two grandparents, several aunts and uncles and many cousins – some born and some never to be – were part of the memory of the Holocaust victims for which the writer was wishing that I suffer eternal damnation.

You see, my father, Gitman Mogulnitzski, grew up in a Polish town of Biyalia Rafska. As the Germans began to pressure the Poles, he left the town to try to join the Resistance. Having been rejected by the Resistance for looking too Jewish and having been gone but a week, he returned to find that the Jewish section of the town no longer existed. He spent the war with a few other escapees in the woods, never being caught, sleeping in dug out graves to avoid the bullets when the Germans fired along the ground, and stealing food in the middle of the night by risking missions to town. He often wondered whether any from the town of Biyalia Rafska had been taken to camps rather than just having been slaughtered on the spot. But having spent the years after the war searching in vain for even one survivor, he finally concluded that, had the town been taken to camps rather than being killed then and there, surely one person would have survived. There was simply no one left.

Having searched in vain for both survivors and employment in Warsaw and Berlin until 1950, he decided to come to the United States and start again. But the United States had quotas limiting the number of immigrants from Poland. So my father arranged illegally to purchase a false passport in which he transposed his first and last names, and Gitman Mogulnitski of Biyalia Rafska Poland became Mosher Gutman first of Danzig and then Max Gutman of the Bronx NY and the garment district in the lower East Side of NY. Certainly nothing in my legacy would hint that I should be hated by a Jewish leader I had never met.

Nor would a clue to explain such animosity be found in my upbringing. I attended public schools. My father died when I was 16, never having discussed the war with me and never having told me even his real name. Upon his death, I went to work after school cleaning tables in a restaurant and through the student loan program, I attended Columbia University and then Harvard Law School. Having finished among the top of my class, I then clerked on our highest court, the United State Supreme Court, an honor given to the top roughly 40 law school graduates a year, I spent 2 years as a Special Assistant to the Director of the FBI for counterintelligence and counter-terrorism, and 27 years as a lawyer at a leading law firm and as an advisor to government officials and Democratic candidates for office. I was on the Board of the Washington Hebrew Home for seniors and a member of two different shuls in Washington DC -- a reform shul and an Orthodox shul. Indeed, nothing in my background to suggest becoming the target of fury from a Jewish elder.

But in fact the letter went on to explain my alleged transgression. It had been written to me and several other high profile Jewish supporters of then Senator Barack Obama. That support for Barack Obama amidst the Presidential campaign was our sin.

Indeed, although none were as extreme, many American, European and Israeli Jews were concerned by the Obama candidacy. I heard the concerns often. I worked hard during the campaign to address every single one.

In the case of the letter, many advised me to ignore it. I tried briefly to do so, but I could not. Instead I called and then emailed the author. I sent her information about me and even moreso about then Senator Obama. Because I believed, then and now, that the more understanding that exists, the more we can get on with the business of making progress in making the world more prosperous and secure for us all.

Plainly my pursuit paid off in that case as my attacker ended up calling me a mensch, wishing me a happy pesach, and corresponding throughout the rest of the campaign. I never asked her for whom she voted; the increased dialogue and understanding were the true reward.

Unlike many officials and politicians, President Obama has addressed anti-Semitism and religious and racial hatred head on. I know Ambassador Levin in the Netherlands discussed the President's trip to Buchenwald with Chancellor Merkel in 2009 and his recent trip to Poland. They were wonderful expressions of his feelings.

But in fact, such discussions date back. Indeed President Obama tries to address the difficult issues and not to pander. So on January 20, 2008, as primary season during our election was just

beginning, then Senator Obama chose to talk about anti-Semitism. He said boldly in a speech: "The scourge of anti-Semitism has, at times, revealed itself in our community." Where did he choose to so proclaim – in a speech at AIPAC? To the B'Nai Brith?

No, Senator Obama talked about the scourge on anti-semitism in the community to an all-black church in Atlanta Georgia on Martin Luther King Day. He got no political flattery points from his frank talk that day. But in so doing and in his candor, he brought two cultural groups just slightly closer. Through his thoughts and his words – but mainly through his honesty and courage – Senator Obama brought us all just a bit further out of the shadows.

And then two months later, in March 2008, when the controversy over Reverend Wright was breaking everywhere -- remember that time? It was the news everywhere? -- then Senator Obama again chose not to take the easy way out. Political strategists and experts everywhere were calling for him simply to renounce Reverend Wright in the harshest terms, politically expediently wash his hands of the entire matter and get on with the carefully choreographed business of running for President. Few pundits believed that he should instead actually and seriously address the issue of racial and religious prejudice and hatred that exists among some in the shadows of U.S. and indeed European society, but is rarely even acknowledged. If you have not read it, President Obama's speech, delivered in Philadelphia on March 18, 2008 entitled "A More Perfect Union" is an important for all, like many in this room, who think about the issues of racial or religious prejudice that has not yet fully been eliminated.

The issue of Holocaust Remembrance continues to be a significant issue for this U.S. Administration. You will all recall that in January 2010, the world commemorated to 65th Anniversary of the Liberation of Auschwitz. During the road leading up to the Commemoration, it became known that President Obama would send an official Presidential Delegation to represent the U.S. at that event. Given my father's story, I thought I might have a chance to be part of that delegation. Surely my background must have qualified me from among those in this administration to participate in such a commemoration.

Surely not. As the Administration looked down its ranks, the number of descendants of the Holocaust survivors were many, many. I didn't even make the first cut. For, as the Administration made the next cut, checking people within the Administration who were descendants of victims of the camps, the numbers were still many. Even at the next cut, members of this Administration who were descendants of people who had been at Auschwitz, there were still too many to send as part of the delegation. My story – the son of a man who did not get caught and survived the War in Poland – did not come close to bringing me to the top of those with connections to Auschwitz in this Administration. Julius Genachowski, the head of our FCC, my good friend and one of President Obama's closest friends, whose then 5 year old father got out as his family perished at Auschwitz, led the delegation and delivered magnificent remarks. If you have not read them, they are on-line.

I know Ambassador Levin discussed the work of Hanna Rosenthal, our Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism. So that effort and the support for Holocaust Remembrance is a passion for this U.S. Administration.

Such Remembrance is in part an end in itself – we remember so as never to forget; to commemorate and honor those whom we have lost; to remember the face of true evil to always be prepared to respond.

But Remembrance is also a means to a broader end – the pursuit of true peace and real and lasting brotherhood among men. Remembrance keeps a major bridge erected, while we build additional bridges linking all. Thus, for the U.S. State Department today, outreach to the diverse Muslim communities also remains a top priority. In many cases, that outreach, is being undertaken by people like me – whose link to the Holocaust is direct and well-known. That bridge, the bridge creating the fellowship of man and particular of would-be opponents is that ultimate bridge and a vast element and benefit of Remembrance.

For indeed, to me, the issue of Remembrance is an important pillar in building the bridge towards the brotherhood of man, a bridge where previously pools of hatred existed. Remembrance should and must bring us a step closer towards the brotherhood of man. Denial is fostered by hate and is therefore the element that is destructive. Thus, we must never use the memory of those who perished, we must never use Remembrance, as an excuse to foster anger and hatred, as a source of retreat from the brotherhood of man.

Thus while we can never forget, while we will never forget, we will forgive those who have followed. Where we faced each other to the death, we will walk together to rebuild a better life.

Indeed, that is perhaps the most enduring message, the most enduring lesson of Remembrance – and it is a not just for Jews or Americans, but a lesson for Belgium, for Europe, for the Middle East, or for all places where tensions rooted in the mistakes or ill deeds of the past threaten progress today.

The lessons are that we should always Remember but we need not carry the blame nor clear the name of our parents and grandparents looking back.

Rather that we remember to build a better world for our children and our grandchildren going forward. That we must use the lessons of the past to carve a better future.

We are so used to the expression “Forgive but don’t forget.” And in pursuing Remembrance we proclaim that we shall never forget.

But in making sure we don’t forget, sometimes we don’t truly forgive.

We pursue Remembrance never to forget precisely so that we can forgive.

Thanks so much.

And all the best.