

Remarks of Mayor Noam Bramson
Yom Hashoah Commemoration
April 19, 2009

Before he died fourteen years ago, my father described to me the day in 1939 when the German army marched into his town of Pultusk in Poland. His most vivid memory was an image of his own father, a baker, standing in their small cellar, arms outstretched to piles of coal in which valuables and keepsakes had been concealed, weeping as he said to his wife and only child: “take what you can, take what you can.”

Moments later they and half of their Jewish neighbors were ordered to march into the east towards Russia. The old and the sick would fall along the road, but most on the eastern trek would reach refugee camps . . . and survival. The other half of the Jews were sent into the west, and we guess their fate.

My mother, who I note with gratitude is here today, lived with her parents and siblings in Przasnysz, also in Poland. As the front collapsed, they raced desperately, by horse and buggy, to join their extended family in Warsaw, but too late. By the time they arrived, the city was already encircled by troops, and they were turned away – to their great distress at the time, only in retrospect, to their salvation.

Years later, my maternal grandparents would settle in Israel and, in the fullness of time, were buried on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem. Before she died, my grandmother instructed my uncle to inscribe on her tombstone the names of her mother and father, her brothers and sisters, with no stones of their own.

I think often of the great hardships endured by my parents. What it must have been like at the ages of eleven and six to be wrenched from everything familiar and cast into a broken world.

And then comes the realization: that in the strange and tortured logic of the Shoah, they were the lucky ones. Nomads in Siberia and central Asia and the Middle-east, but never caught directly in the net of the expanding Reich. Bereft of countless relatives, but their immediate families somehow, improbably, emerging whole. The lucky ones, with no numbers on their arms.

And I am not sure even whether it is proper to call them “survivors,” lest in so doing, one disrespects those whose trials weigh more heavily on the scales of suffering and loss.

Yet I begin by sharing their stories today because I suspect that I’ve been given the difficult honor of addressing you, in the expectation that the child of such parents might have special insight to offer this observance.

If so, then I fear I may not be equal to the challenge.

For my three brothers and myself, for most of us here, blessed to live free from fear and want, the darkness is far distant and only dimly perceived. And even if we could somehow relate to the experience of that time and that place, so utterly different from everything we have known, how

frail and fragile are words of a speech for conveying the truth of things, when music or poetry or silence serve better.

So I do not seek today to explain the past. I seek rather to better understand the duty of the present, the duty of fortunate children, the duty of the living to the dead.

In humility, and with no claim on wisdom, I suggest three responsibilities.

First, to know.

To know truly what happened. And this is more difficult than it seems. For as the Shoah recedes into history and as voices of living memory are silenced, the magnitude of what occurred can too easily slip from our grasp.

Perhaps the human mind is not equipped to comprehend it.

Why else at memorials and museums dedicated to the Holocaust, do we find objects, do we find shoes and candles and fields of stone pillars. Things real and tangible to bring solid shape to loss so vast and empty that it exceeds any instinctive frame of reference.

Victims as numerous as stars, and then each victim itself a world.

In the story of my father, I spoke of the old and the sick who died on the road as though they were peripheral characters, but all were the centers of their own tales – loved, dreaming of some extinguished future, mourned. How hard it is to see these single sparks of flame in the bonfire. And then they are gone.

How do we measure such a thing?

Think of a more proximate event. Think of September 11th, when almost 3,000 perished. It is still an open wound for families and communities, for our nation.

And then think if the staggering loss of September 11th had recurred on September 12th. And then again on September 13th. And then again on September 14th. And then again and again and again. Every day for five years, for 2,000 days.

This is the Holocaust.

We are not equipped to comprehend it. And yet, in tribute to the past and in prayer for the present, we must.

Second, it is our responsibility to act.

Not simply the comfortable action of solidarity with those who are most familiar to us. Action instead based on the broadest conception of the Holocaust's lessons.

As a Jew, I say this with respect and some trepidation. Our people have been persecuted for so long that it is bound up in our very identity. The Holocaust an exclamation point on a sentence written across thousands of years – the pogroms, the Inquisition, the destruction of the Temple, back even

to bondage in Egypt.

All have given ample justification to turn inward and regard others with suspicion – or to nurse and brood upon unique claims of injustice. And who could judge those who harbor such feelings. Yet I believe with all my heart that we are called by the 6,000,000 to hold and express a different view.

For although, beyond doubt, the Shoah was a profoundly Jewish catastrophe, the meaning of the Shoah, and its claim on the living, are universal.

During the conflict in the Balkans in the 1990s, the New York Times Magazine printed photographs of Kosovar refugees, fleeing the tide of war and ethnic cleansing. These were Muslim children and families, their faces blank, with vacant eyes staring out from the dust and disorder.

Accompanying these images was a short essay by Cynthia Ozick, the great author and chronicler of Jewish life. She wrote of these people from a different land and tradition, these strangers, with a simple, painful clarity, she wrote: “we know these faces.”

My father, remembering his own forced march from home, would have known these faces. Just as we know the faces of those forced to march and to die in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge. Or in Rwanda a decade ago. Or in the Middle Passage to the American south. Or in Darfur today.

When status and ambition, when luxury and even culture, when all that is stripped away to the bones, we are laid bare as brothers and sisters after all.

Let us then act with this knowledge of our common humanity.

We in America, in Westchester, most especially, whose soaring good fortune, a gift more than an achievement, lifts us materially above almost all those who walk the Earth or have ever walked the Earth.

Let it be our strength that we have made common cause with the weak and the innocent. That we have loved strangers, and not just our own, with empathy and mercy. And that when we have said “never again,” we have meant “never again” for every one of God’s children.

Third and last, it is our duty to hope. Hope in the face of our own imperfection.

I do not deceive myself with the illusion that we have been somehow cleansed, individually and collectively, of the capacity to perpetrate evil, or that this sickness threatens only some, and not others.

Those who say it couldn’t happen here, it couldn’t happen to us, should remember what Germany was before the madness came. Remember the genius of Beethoven and Goethe. Remember the free spirit of Weimar. And then know that civilization confers no immunity to hatred and violence.

Choice is the gift of God to all people. The choice to be cruel . . . but also the choice to be compassionate, both seeds ever-present in our souls, now until the end.

So some become executioners, others righteous gentiles. Some wage war to conquer, and others wage war to liberate. There are those who kill without sense or purpose, and there are those who

save without celebration or reward.

And which has proven the stronger?

For here we are – in the sunshine of a new day. In a place dedicated to an ancient faith that endures while empires have fallen.

Here we are, ready soon to return home to burdens and cares that are so light. And when we pass from the world – most of us – it will be on soft beds, the lines of age upon our faces, surrounded by those who love us and whom we love.

So let us believe that our better nature shall prevail. Let us hope.

Earlier, I suggested that poetry is better than prose for occasions such as this, so, in this spirit, I close by reading a work of the Polish poet, Adam Zagajewski that speaks of the resilience of beauty and of life transcending sorrow.

*Try to praise the mutilated world.
Remember June's long days,
and wild strawberries, drops of wine, the dew.
The nettles that methodically overgrow
the abandoned homesteads of exiles.
You must praise the mutilated world.
You watched the stylish yachts and ships;
one of them had a long trip ahead of it,
while salty oblivion awaited others.
You've seen the refugees heading nowhere,
you've heard the executioners sing joyfully.
You should praise the mutilated world.
Remember the moments when we were together
in a white room and the curtain fluttered.
Return in thought to the concert where music flared.
You gathered acorns in the park in autumn
and leaves eddied over the earth's scars.
Praise the mutilated world
and the grey feather a thrush lost,
and the gentle light that strays and vanishes
and returns.*

Thank you for the privilege of addressing you.