

Holocaust Remembrance day in Europe and Italy

Maria Rita Latta (January 28, 2010)



January 27 marks International Holocaust Remembrance Day, the date when victims of the Shoah are remembered in celebrations and memorial services throughout Europe, from Poland to Italy.

January 27, 2010 also marks the 65th anniversary of the liberation of the Nazi death camp at Auschwitz by the Soviet Red Army. Survivors and other visitors arrived at the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp in Oswiecim, Poland for the main ceremony. Up to 1.5 million people, mostly Jews, perished at the camp during World War Two. Chief Rabbi Israel Meir Lau of Tel Aviv, a Holocaust survivor, recited the Kaddish, the Jewish prayer of mourning, while sirens wailed across the barracks. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu vowed that his country would never allow anyone to erase the memory of the victims of Nazi Germany's extermination camps. Poland's President Lech Kaczynski recalled the pain of the Polish nation which was occupied by Nazi Germany throughout the war, but also acknowledged the unique suffering of Jews, who were targeted for extermination.

In Italy, President Giorgio Napolitano hosted the celebrations at the Quirinale. "The Shoah," he said, "was a tragic experience full of lessons and values. The rights of all peoples are inalienable, and among them is the right of the Jewish people and of the State of Israel to live in safety." At Montecitorio, the Speaker of the Italian Chamber of Deputies, Gianfranco Fini, introduced Holocaust



survivor and 1986 Nobel Peace Prize winner Elie Wiesel who delivered a major speech to Italy's Parliament. "Whether at the lowest level of politics or the highest level of spirituality, silence never helps the victims. Silence always helps the aggressor," Wiesel told parliamentarians and top officials including Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi. A source within Wiesel's entourage later told Reuters that the words "highest level of spirituality" were a reference to Pope Pius XII who headed the Roman Catholic Church from 1939 to 1958, and who is at the center of a debate over what he did or did not do to help Jews during the war. This is destined to remain a burning issue between Catholics and Jews, and Wiesel's reference to Pope Pius showed no sign of resolving it. In his speech Wiesel also renewed his demand for Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who has denied the Holocaust and called for the destruction of Israel, to be arrested the next time he leaves Iran. "He should be hauled off to the International Court of Justice to face charges for inciting crimes against humanity," Wiesel said.

Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi said that remembering the Holocaust was a duty "so that this does not happen again." Although this year marks the 65th anniversary of International Holocaust Remembrance Day, it has been observed in Italy only since 2000. Berlusconi continued by saying that "for 10 years, Italy has remembered the criminal Nazi plan that ended with the extermination of Jews, Roma [gypsies], homosexuals and political opponents. The memory and history of the Shoah should be a warning for rulers and citizens, youths and adults, so that each person's behavior may be inspired by respect for others, for human rights, for the dignity of the person, and the values of equality, freedom and justice." Berlusconi plans to make an official visit to Israel late next week which will include a stop in the occupied Palestinian territories.

At almost the same time, Pope Benedict XVI, speaking at the Vatican, recalled "the horror of crimes of unheard-of brutality that were committed in the death camps created by Nazi Germany. May the memory of those events, especially the tragedy of the Shoah that has struck the Jewish people, encourage respect for the dignity of every person so that all men can see themselves as part of one big family," he said.

Throughout Italy the departed victims of the Holocaust were commemorated and honored in different ways. The mayor of Florence, Matteo Renzi, presented the keys of the city to Jewish writer Amos Oz during an event called the "Triviality of Evil," organized by the Region of Tuscany and which hosted guests, victims of Nazi persecution, and nearly 9,000 students from schools all over Tuscany.

The Governor of Campania, Antonio Bassolino, used his website to discuss his visit to the Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Museum in Jerusalem, and promote his region's support for the Train of Memory, the program in which 100 students from the Campania region travel from Naples to Auschwitz. Bassolino also stated that during the visit to the concentration camp, each student would adopt the photo of one of the millions of victims of Nazi violence.

On the morning of Remembrance Day at Central Station in Milan, a train left from Platform 21 headed to Auschwitz. It was a way to remember the trains that left from that very track and brought so many Jews face to face with the horror of that concentration camp. This time, though, the passengers aboard the train included 600 students from schools in Milan participating in the "Journeys of Memory" event organized by the Province of Milan.

In Rome, Mayor Gianni Alemanno hosted a celebration in Casilino in front of an audience of Roma (gypsies) adults and children, many of whom traveled from other parts of Italy to participate in Porrajmos, a ceremony commemorating the extermination of gypsies, Roma and Sinti.

Franco Grillini, the representative of Gaynet, expressed his bitterness over "the forgotten victims – the homosexual victims of Nazi-Fascism. On January 27, Soviet troops found Pink Triangles which had been left by interned homosexuals who had been brought there under duress by the Nazis. Homosexuals were not freed but rather transferred directly from the camps to national prisons, continuing the horror of incarceration."

Renato Schifani, Speaker of the Italian House of Senate, was at the Risiera di San Sabba near Trieste, the only extermination camp in Italy. "Today I, too, am a Jew," he said in his speech, wearing a



yellow Star of David, the distinctive mark worn by Jews during Nazi persecution.

A dark shadow, however, was cast over the celebrations early in the morning when Jewish slurs appeared on the walls of several buildings in Rome, including on Via Tasso in front of the Museum of Liberation. The museum is particularly symbolic because during the Nazis occupation of Rome it served as a prison where so many cruel acts were committed against those who opposed the regime.

The offensive graffiti demonstrates that despite the many celebrations there is still a very real risk that what happened during the Nazi period could happen once again. Episodes like this should be taken very seriously and not simply dismissed as acts of stupidity. This is why the value of memory lies in maintaining its vitality and actively preventing it from becoming a sterile celebration and allowing it to lose its power.

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