

Keynote address, Centropa Summer Academy

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Delivered in Czernin Palace, the Foreign Ministry of the Czech Republic, 7 July 2010

As I was coming downtown from the airport yesterday I was suddenly overcome by a strange feeling of nostalgia.

I have been to Prague twice before, and each time I had the same feeling: somewhat ambiguous, but still present – a feeling of homecoming. There is a sign along the road that says Smihov and that's where this strange feeling begins. It's strange because I have never been there: All I have seen is the road sign. But of course I know where this feeling stems from: both my parents have, for a while, lived in Smihov and when I was a child, in Jerusalem, my mother would often mention it.

My parents had been students at a famous art school in Germany, the Bauhaus, and when the Nazis took over in January 1933 my father was arrested. Soon afterwards he managed to get away, together with his girl friend, later my mother, and they found refuge in Prague. They stayed here for about two years, and as far as I can tell these were the happiest years of their lives.

Prague apparently was vibrant and free and hopeful, something between Weimar and Paris and a safe haven for young talented political refugees from many countries. So there really is no reason for me to be nostalgic about Prague, but I obviously inherited that feeling from my mother.

Not personal memory, then, not collective memory either, but something in-between: *Family memory*, if you want, of the kind Centropa and Ed Serotta and his people are cultivating. It is a powerful and inspiring level of memory.

A few years before my parents found refuge here, another Jewish student came to Prague. He went to the Polytechnic College. His name was Simon Wiesenthal. I have recently completed a biography of Wiesenthal, and concluded that his years in Prague were also the happiest years of his life. Pretty much for the same reasons my parents felt happy here, or in Wiesenthal's own words – For the first time in his life he saw policemen he did not have to fear.

Shortly after he became 95 years old Wiesenthal received a letter from children living in a small town in America,

Highland Park, New Jersey. They had read one of his books.

Wiesenthal wrote back, stating: "It is only through knowledge and understanding that we can hope to prevent anything similar to the holocaust from ever happening again".

This is a strong sentence, I think, putting knowledge above all, before feeling, before understanding. The danger, in that first paragraph of the letter, still is another holocaust. In the third paragraph Wiesenthal states that there are few Nazis left to hunt, if any, and the emphasis shifts from preventing another holocaust to a much broader task: "To remember the ravages of genocide and to take individual responsibility for upholding human rights".

Between the top of the page and its bottom – Holocaust memory has thus become a weapon in the struggle for universal humanism.

There are many things to say about Wiesenthal, but more than anything else, he deserves to be remembered for his contribution to the culture of memory and the belief that remembering the dead is sanctifying life. Ironically, the more years went by and the more unlikely it became that the surviving Nazi criminals would be brought to justice, the more the Holocaust became a universal synonym for ultimate evil, a warning sign for every nation and every person around the globe. This happened, to a large extent, thanks to the efforts of Simon Wiesenthal. Nobody did more than he did in this respect.

Wiesenthal was not talking here about personal memory, nor about family memory, but about collective memory. Shaping collective memory, and utilizing it for collective goals – is a matter for decision, a political or if you wish a moral decision. We decide what the next generations should remember, and for what purpose.

Collective memory often rests on mythology and ideology, rather than on the knowledge of facts. Israel and the Jewish establishment in America have always tended to single out the Jewish victims of the Nazis. The lessons to be learned from the Holocaust are defined mostly in national terms, including the protection of the state of Israel.

Wiesenthal tended to view the murder of the Jews as a crime against the whole of humanity, and he tied it in with the atrocities committed by the Nazis against other groups, such as incurable invalids, Gypsies, Gays, and Jehovah's Witnesses. In his eyes, the Holocaust was not only a Jewish tragedy, but a human one.

Wiesenthal would be the last to say that his humanistic approach to the holocaust, including his interest for other genocides in recent history, in any way contradicted the obligation to protect the security of Israel, on the contrary. And indeed the so called national lessons of the Holocaust cultivated in Israel, can be fully compatible with the humanistic and universal lessons. Over the years the Holocaust has become a central element of the Israeli identity. Unfortunately this part of our identity does not prevent us from violating the human rights of the Palestinians, and at times even pushes us to do so. Obviously we don't cultivate the humanistic lessons of the Holocaust as much as I think we should.

I am saying this on the backdrop of tendencies to deny the Holocaust altogether, an effort led not only by various neo-Nazi groupings, but by Iran and numerous Arab countries, which I find particularly unfortunate, because you cannot understand Israel without understanding the role of the Holocaust in israel's identity and unless you understand your enemy you cannot make peace with your enemy.

In recent years, I am told, memory, especially in Europe, is not in good shape. The problem is not lack of memory, but too much of it. So much so, that more and more groups of victims' descendants are competing with each other, and many of them are competing with the Jews, for whatever benefits victimhood has to offer. Paradoxically, so the argument goes, the more we remember the Holocaust the more anti-Jewish sentiments we provoke. I don't know to what extent this is a real problem, I certainly don't know what the solution might be, but it is something to think about.

As far as I can see Holocaust denial or competition for whatever benefits memory can offer - do hardly affect the Holocaust as a source for humanistic values.

In his letter to the children of Highland Park New Jersey, Wiesenthal wrote: "You are used to living in freedom, but you should recognize the danger that lies in fast changes, that can take away your freedom before you even realize it. Freedom is like health (...) you don't recognize its value until you've lost it. Freedom is not a gift from heavens; you have to fight for it every day of your life". In

other words - The only way for democracy to be strong, is to remember that it is vulnerable,
precarious and mortal.

Wiesenthal had a good point here, for obviously the Holocaust has not been the last genocide. Since the end of World War II millions of innocent human beings have been exterminated anywhere between Cambodia and Rwanda.

This then is memory as a moral obligation, not only to the victims of the past but also a political obligation to life in the future. The question which concerns you people is how to do that. Wiesenthal also addressed himself to the methodological difficulty of conveying the lessons of the Holocaust. "What we experienced during the war was such a nightmare", he wrote, "that it is little wonder so many young people tend to look away and say, that's part of history, and has nothing to do with us today".

I don't presume to offer an answer to that dilemma, except to say that I find the Centropa project extremely impressive, particularly for its emphasis on that brand of memory, confined to the level of the family, the kind of memory that takes over me every time I come to Prague.

There is obviously something uniquely authentic about memory at this level- not too close and personal, not too collective and political. The family stories collected and so masterfully edited at Centropa, make the viewer identify with real people. Historians and authors of textbooks often forget that history is also about real people. Many of these family stories start years and even generations before the Holocaust - and thus very effectively demonstrate the monstrous magnitude of what has been lost in the Holocaust.

So I am glad that I have this opportunity to spend some time with you and I thank you for the wonderful work you do.