

**The Address of Michaela Vidláková,
survivor of the Theresienstadt ghetto ,
On the Occasion of
The Day of Commemoration in Memory of Victims of the Holocaust
and Prevention of Crimes against Humanity
Senate of the Czech Parliament,
27th January 2021**

Dear all, no matter where you are right now,

Today is January 27, an anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, the largest extermination and concentration camp, which became a symbol of death and evil. It is the day dedicated to commemoration of Holocaust victims and the day of prevention of crimes against humanity.

I was approached to give a speech on behalf of us, the Holocaust survivors. At first, I was little baffled. 76 years have already passed since the liberation of Auschwitz. So much has been said, studied and researched and written over this long time period, what could my contribution be?

But then I began to swarm with thoughts and reflections that it was more a problem to sort them out a little. So, I will try to share with you a few of my personal views.

I will start with sharing my personal story and I shall reveal now that I was really lucky then. I was spared Auschwitz. If I had not been, I would not be here now. I was born as the only child of Jewish parents and I was 2 years and something when we were occupied by the Germans - and my first memories of persecution date back to this time, the time of my early childhood. I was not allowed to go to the park and play with Czech friends. I was not allowed to enter the school. We were moved out of our spacious flat into an old shabby flat where we lived together with other people. That flat was dark, there were no friends, we wandered among the prepared luggage in an overcrowded room.

Times got worse. During 1942, they gradually transported all our relatives to Terezín. Then, all 3 of us had to go to Terezín, too. I was just 6 years old at that time. However, we were very lucky. Several decisive moments along with dad's abilities always turned the switch in our favor and so at least we were not deported further, but remained there until the end of the war. We were, of course, separated from each other.

Coming to Kinderheim among experienced "old hands" who had their place on the bunk beds, while at first I only had two blue benches knocked together for the night, the benches we used at meal times and we sat on during the day when took illegal classes. But finally, I have friends again, after months when the children in my Prague neighborhood had to avoid me. Communality. Dad told me many times about his life in Palestine, in the kibbutz, so I was not afraid of community life. Our minders took a good care of us. They were gentle while persistent at the same time. Even though there was not much food, not speaking of its taste or composition, and even if I did not favour washing myself in cold water, nobody whined. We did not want to be viewed as spoiled sissies.

But then came the diseases: Terezínka. Terrible diarrhoea. There weren't many toilets, and people kept banging on the door "Come on, hurry up". All the nights I spent, weak, exhausted, sleepless, sitting on the potty next to the bunk beds, so weak that I no longer had the strength to be ashamed.

After a while, I got fevers, over 40°C, I was so sick. All I could see was a huge wheel rolling on top of me, and I didn't have the strength to move away from its path. Then, the doctor came, and he did not like my state of health at all. At night, two men came for me, wrapped me in a blanket, put me on a stretcher and carried me somewhere in a darkened ghetto. Above me was a clear sky full of stars, the stretcher was swinging, the cold air

pleasantly cooled my hot cheeks. I ended up on child's infectious disease ward. I was diagnosed with typhus, scarlet fever, and measles. I got all the illnesses at the same time. And immediately after that, even more diseases followed. There was no medication. It took me over a year to get released.

I got to meet a fear. It was not a fear from death. I did not understand it that much at that time. Even though it was walking past me and I just kind of got away from it very tight. I was most afraid when everyone except the sick had to go to the roll call to the Bohušovice basin and I was still in the hospital. I was afraid they will take my parents away. I was worried whether they will come back. Nobody knew what would happen next. At that time, my fear was not overcome even by an exceptional dose of liver pate for lunch. My parents were not allowed to visit me in an infectious disease ward, but I could still see them under the window. Will I see them again?

What was the saddest thing for me? When I returned from hospital, I went to get my lunch at noon. Along the lunch queue there stood old, sad, skinny Jews and they were asking us, with a spark of hope in their eyes: "Excuse me, will you be taking your soup?" A seven-year-old child, also rather hungry, at that moment full of compassion, sees those eyes. (The child remembers his grandmother and grandfather-perhaps - they are somewhere in Poland, maybe they are also hungry-does someone take pity on them and give them something to eat?) And so the child gives up her soup, takes a broken bowl from the old man or woman and lets him pour his soup into it. Those grateful eyes of a single person-but those disappointed, sadder eyes of the others ... I could not help them all, could I?

Autumn 1944. My father got an order to leave with the next transport. My mum wanted to join the transport voluntarily to keep the family together. My prudent, far-seeing, careful father talked her out of it. He told her that especially for me being weak after all those illnesses, we could not head to the unknown. When he was already waiting in the barracks to be soon transported to the concentration camp, a storm came and blew down and damaged a kind of a very important roof. SS-camp commander ordered an immediate repair. Though, the last carpenters, among which counted my father, had just been called to the transport. Three carpenters were allowed to leave the transport until it got repaired. Dad volunteered to be one of the three carpenters. They called him a "fool," they told him, "why don't you rest here, who knows what awaits us where, this job is a waste of your energy." Dad said that it would punish their companion if he had not fulfilled the order. So, along with two other men they started to fix the roof. And before they could fix the roof, the transport had left. It was the last transport to Auschwitz. We were really lucky then, though we only learned about that after the WWII came to an end.

The end of the war was approaching-and then came the worst nightmare for me: in April 1945, a train arrived in Terezín. Of course, when something was happening, the children had to be present. They chased us away claiming that there were sick people on that train. We saw them anyway: skeletons covered with skin, in striped rags that hung on them, even from afar you could see gaping eyes in emaciated faces, they could not even walk themselves, there were always two men supporting them and dragging them to the barrack's gate. Some of those people were carried out on stretchers. Wrecks of human beings from the transports of death. My father told my mother that he would try to find out if Franci, his brother, my beloved uncle Franci, was among them. I started crying, "I don't want my uncle to be there ". " You don't want Franci to come back?" "I don't want him to look that bad." Franci wasn't one of them. There was no more Franci. Long after that I still cried from sleep. Of my relatives, except for my parents, nobody returned.

Sure, such childhood was not easy. Nevertheless, I was still a bit better off compared to my 4 years older friend, Pavel. He ended up in Terezín aged 10. He lost his beloved younger sister there. He got to Auschwitz as 12-year-old boy. A boy this age is still a child. He was lucky, too ("luck" is very relative word!): he passed the selection. He was

assigned to a hard physical labor. His parents were sent to the gas chambers and Pavel knew he was alone in that cruel world of the Auschwitz concentration camp. He was not among the few people left, those 7,000 liberated Auschwitz prisoners. He had just turned 13 when he was made to walk the march of death with thousands of prisoners. He survived that, too. He went through 3 other camps later on, one being worse than the other. After 4 long months he finally experienced the liberation. He was 13 and he had nothing, no family members, no home.

And this is what one particular crime against humanity looks like. Memories like this were the memories of the majority of Holocaust survivors. One can hardly imagine the horrors that some people experienced. The incredible thing is that they could have been survived at all. Then there were those 6 million men and women killed in gas chambers, shot, burned to death alive in burning synagogues. Those people were not that lucky. That was Holocaust. Those were 6 million crimes against humanity.

Of course, the suffering does not know the nationality. Poles, Roma, Soviet prisoners of war, political prisoners and others also suffered and died in Auschwitz. Holocaust differed from other crimes against humanity in one specificity, though: it was the Nazi policy of systematic, state-operated persecution and mass murder of persons of Jewish nationality with the aim of completely eliminating the entire Jewish ethnicity.

How many crimes against humanity at all did WWII bring, the crimes that were unleashed by the Nazi! It is calculated that together they stood at 56 million victims, fallen soldiers and civilians. Terrible numbers! Compared to this, the 6,000,000 Jewish victims, of which 1 ½ million were children, seems to be only a minor part of a huge killing spree. However, if 10 to 15 % of the citizens of particular nation perish, this is already cruel in itself. But at least 85-90% of its citizens will remain. Bad scars will remain, but the source of its life, its culture, its future is preserved.

Speaking of the Jewish population of the occupied Europe, more than 90 %. Among them, there were children, too. Thus, the source from which generations of rabbis, thinkers and philosophers would come, the source from which the co-founders of European trade, industry and banking would arise, as well as many artists, scientists, doctors and lawyers. The source of the entire European Jewish culture, the own heart of the entire Jewish people, with its old songs and wise anecdotes, all this was completely destroyed. This is the full meaning of the word Holocaust. Who knows, maybe this destroyed source could bring someone who would invent a cure for the current pandemic, as once, thanks to the Jewish doctor Salk and Sabin, almost managed to eradicate polio.

WWII, unfortunately, did not begin or end with the genocide. In the 20th century there were millions of victims of Stalin's purges, the Armenian genocide, after the war there were more and more - in China, in Cambodia, in Africa...even these were crimes against humanity. I suppose the majority of people would like to live in peace, the majority of people do not desire for murder. How is that possible, then, that throughout the known history of mankind, the bad would always repeatedly take the helm of events? Why would those establish the evil and start wars? How is it possible that dignified citizens turn into murderers?

And today's situation shows how easily democratically accepted demonstrations for one idea or another become a raging mob that destroys and burns everything within its reach, damaging cultural monuments and historical sites. Moreover, this happening in countries with long-lasting democratic tradition and culture. We know from the history of Nazism how easy it is to get such people to commit crimes against humanity. From time to time I am sceptical: we can remember the victims, but is there a way we can do something about it? How can we prevent the crimes against humanity from happening?

So what can we do about it? Is there a way? With all the skepticism at place, there is only one thing left: We should never give up! It is necessary to fight against evil as much as

possible, it necessary to fight constantly and in its beginnings. Everyone can help in this fight with evil by some small act. 2,000 years ago, a Jewish thinker, by the Hebrew name of Yehoshua, "Jesus" in Czech, exhorted: "Be good, do not be overcome and conquered by evil! "And yet another, wise rabbi Hillel, only a few years earlier said, as it is written in the book of wisdom of the fathers:" If not you, then who? If not now, when?"

If we all learned these two lessons and followed them, perhaps it would help to make the world at least a little better place...