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NEUTRALITY, MORALITY, AND THE HOLOCAUST

HENRY I. SOBEL*

Today is *Yom Ha'Shoah*, a day of remembrance for the victims of the Holocaust. At eight o'clock this morning, the sirens went off throughout the land of Israel. From Metulla to Eilat, Israel froze in anguish. Every car stopped. The engines were turned off. Shopkeepers stepped out onto the sidewalk. Construction workers laid down their tools; soldiers laid down their weapons. Some looked down, some looked up, and some looked into their hearts. For two minutes, the nation was silent. This was no perfunctory moment of silence. This was no obligatory standstill. For two minutes, the nation genuinely mourned the six million who perished.

More than fifty years after the Holocaust, fresh revelations about the enormity of the crimes perpetrated against the Jewish people continue to repulse us. We are shocked to learn of the behavior of those who could have helped us—or, at least, not hurt us—but who instead actually helped the goal of those who wanted to wipe us out.

The world has lately learned that the Holocaust was not only the greatest genocide in the history of civilization, it was also the most sinister and cynical act of larceny mankind has ever known. All over Europe, Jewish assets, great and small, were plundered not just by the Germans and their henchmen who carried out the murders, but also by greedy exploiters who saw the slaughter of their neighbors as a golden opportunity to enrich themselves. Switzerland and other neutral countries that were spared the horrors of war, countries in which life went on undisturbed, dispensed with any moral considerations. While Jewish children were being gassed and burned, Swit-

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zerland's bank vaults continued to swell with gold and other valuables which Jews, in fear of Nazi persecution, had naively entrusted to Swiss banks for safekeeping.

The Swiss enriched themselves not just from the victims of the *Shoah*, but also from the perpetrators. Making money on both sides was the essence of Swiss neutrality. Protected by the veil of neutrality, Switzerland took advantage of the atrocious scenario of World War II to engage in monumental business transactions with Nazi Germany. It was Switzerland that supplied the German government with the cash needed to equip its army. The Germans purchased 150 million dollars worth of weapons from Switzerland with gold bars. The bars that arrived in Switzerland did not contain only the gold reserves taken from the central banks of the Nazi-occupied countries. Many of these coins were made from looted coins, personal objects, wedding rings, and gold dental fillings extracted by the Nazis from the corpses of Jews massacred in the concentration camps. Arguably, the Swiss had no knowledge of this gruesome component of the Nazi gold. After all, it was impossible to identify the molten objects that made up the already molded gold bars. It was, however, widely known that the German gold reserves from before the war had already been depleted. The Swiss, choosing to turn a blind eye, continued to receive tons of gold bars from the German Reichsbank without questioning their origin. Switzerland was the financial backbone of the Nazi government. At the time of the Nazi invasion of Poland in 1939, Germany was on the verge of bankruptcy. Without the Swiss gold-laundering operation, the Third Reich would not have survived more than two years, leading to a shorter war and saving hundreds of thousands of lives.

Switzerland's reputation as a neutral shelter during World War II is badly tarnished. The Swiss vigorously blocked the entry of Jews attempting to flee Germany and occupied Europe. As early as 1938, at the suggestion of the Swiss Chief of Police, Bern requested that Berlin mark the passports of Jews with a "J" to distinguish German Jews from German gentiles so that authorities could refuse them admission to Switzerland. Indeed, the great majority of those denied sanctuary in Switzerland perished in the German death camps.

Switzerland, however, was not the only country to use the pretext of neutrality to ignore moral considerations during the war. Sweden,

Portugal, Spain, Turkey and Argentina, among others, also worked together with the Nazi regime; although the complicity of each of these countries had its own specific characteristics.

South America is a case in point. The Nazis invested huge sums of money in German firms established in Argentina and Brazil. The continent offered the advantage of geographical distance from the stage of war, as well as greater fiscal flexibility. In exchange, these same firms provided safe haven to Nazi refugees. Thousands of fugitive Nazis are suspected of having fled to Brazil, Paraguay, and Argentina in the closing years of the war under the protection of pro-Axis governments in power there at the time. Although Brazil declared war on Germany in 1943 and even sent troops to fight in the Italian campaign, Getulio Vargas, the Brazilian President at the time, was a fascist sympathizer and historians claim that he only joined the Allies because of the imminent defeat of Hitler. Although it was not the Brazilian government's policy to protect Nazi refugees after the war, it failed to go out of its way to identify and arrest them.

Before we continue to criticize too harshly the neutral countries and those with ambivalent positions, let us not forget that even some Allied governments were, to a greater or lesser extent, accomplices of the Nazis. Even the United States of America in 1939 refused entry to 900 Jewish refugees from Europe on board the *St. Louis*. The ship was ruthlessly sent back to Germany and its "human cargo" dumped into the hands of the Nazi slaughterers.

The recent search for lost and stolen Jewish-owned assets has generated enormous publicity and excitement; but it has also created serious concerns. None of the "neutral" nations has fully assumed responsibility for its conduct during the Holocaust. The bankers, brokers, and businessmen who helped Nazi Germany now offer some money to survivors, but say little if anything about their collaboration. They utter not a word about how they sent fleeing Jews back to the Nazi machinery of destruction, nor about how they supported the Nazis in other ways. No admission of guilt. No regret. No expression of moral responsibility.

My friends, neutrality is nothing more than official indifference. Indifference always benefits the aggressor, never the victim.

The countries that embraced neutrality during the Holocaust are guilty of having encouraged the divorce of ethics from politics. At

first glance, it is possible to view their neutrality as a praiseworthy manifestation of pacifism. An objective reading of history, however, indicates that confronting totalitarian regimes with ambiguity causes far greater evil than the effective use of force against them. The rabbis in the Midrash *Kohelet Rabbah* say: "One who makes himself overly righteous toward the cruel, will end up being cruel to the righteous."

Neutral governments counter this accusation by saying that they acted as a shield between warring nations. But how realistic is that explanation, in terms of a positive effect upon either side? Ultimately, neutrality is an abdication of moral responsibility.

My friends, it is our mission to discover exactly what was behind the alleged neutrality of some governments and bring those governments to task for the immorality of their neutrality. Our priority is not to carry out an exercise in bookkeeping. This will occur in due time, as it should. The economists and the historians will chronicle and debate the magnitude of how much was stolen from whom, where and when. This international seminar, however, is not about money. It is about justice and morality. Above all, it is for the sake of future generations. Will we be able to look at our children in the face and tell them that we have done everything to right this historic wrong? The answer depends on us.

Thank you.