

Remarks by a Survivor

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Reflecting on the many excellent scholarly presentations we heard over the past three days, I would like to suggest that, while there is no denying the importance of carefully documented research and detached analysis of historical facts, statistics, and trends, we must remember that history is, in essence, the accumulation of human actions and experiences by leaders, followers, and ordinary people. Let us always be aware that factual narrative and interpretation of history is really rooted in a never-ending sequence of human striving and failure, of triumph and tragedy, of victors and victims. Tonight I would like to provide a little of this human perspective from personal experience.

Surviving, as a young boy, an upheaval on the scale of the Sudetenland ethnic cleansing in 1945 to 1947, causes deep emotional scarring, which persists throughout adult life. It serves a first-hand lesson in history as well, because the question of “why so much cruelty and mindless hatred from formerly peaceful neighbors” begs for some explanation and understanding. Writing a book about these experiences after fifty years, in the form of highly visual and personal vignettes within a larger historical frame, was both an emotional trauma and a welcome release. The catharsis of writing the story enabled me to view my personal fate as part of a larger drama, and gave me the perspective that allowed me to understand and even to forgive, without altering the fact that great injustice and crime reigned at the time.

I wrote the book to show the human impact of disastrous geopolitical machinations on ordinary people. I believe the main fault lies with political leaders whose virulent nationalism en-

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courages followers to act out their darkest instincts. I also wrote the book to tell about an ignored and forgotten chapter of European history, when 3.5 million Sudeten German people were expropriated and displaced in a spasm of nationalistic retribution, despite hundreds of years of peaceful coexistence, while the victorious Allies stood by and did nothing to prevent it. Finally, I wrote the book to demonstrate, from my own experience, that there are good people on all sides, even in the darkest of times. Humanity is never fully suspended—even when incited terror reigns.

My family and I lived through the Russian conquest of our city, Aussig on the Elbe, in May 1945, with some close encounters that luckily caused no harm to us, while others suffered badly. Soon thereafter the newly installed Czechoslovak government started waves of expropriation and primitive expulsion of the residents in whole segments of the city. Early expulsions were so cruel and disorganized and caused so many casualties that the Russian area commander forced the Czechs into a temporary halt. We then learned that my barely seventeen-year-old brother had been killed in a tragic accident during the last days of the fighting. Facing the rumored prospect of being shipped to labor camps in Russia, the three of us—my mother, my father, and I—after long deliberations, decided to commit suicide. We were about to turn on the gas and drink the poison, when we were saved by a cousin from Prague, who unexpectedly appeared and whose mixed ethnicity now placed him on the Czech side. He and my aunt behaved greedily, trying to save belongings and scheming to hang on to the villa, not caring what would happen to us. Despite their machinations our villa was soon expropriated by well-connected bureaucrats. We were marched off with fifty pounds of belongings each, in bundles that had first been picked over by them, and we were temporarily placed in a workers' flat in the industrial district. There my father, an executive previously under great pressure from the Nazi war machine, and now from Czech officials working with him on the takeover of the

company, required urgent medical treatment. He died a terrible death in the now Czech-run hospital, through incompetence—or likely worse—from a botched stomach operation.

My mother and I lived for another eight months in the workers' flat, and as a young male I had to work prior to being expelled. I was lucky to have a menial job first in a German bakery, and then in a Czech bakery, where I was very humanely treated, and was able to bring home some scraps of food. Working there I could see through a back window our villa way up on the hill, which represented another life—now remote and almost unreal.

During this time we witnessed many expulsion scenes and dangerous altercations, and had several close encounters ourselves. Once I almost wound up in the worst concentration camp run by the Czechs because my white armband, which we were forced to wear to be known as Germans, had shriveled in the rain from the required width of 5 inches. I was grabbed by a gun-toting soldier and only a miraculous and humbling intervention by my mother saved me from what was likely death under inhuman conditions. Another time my mother was caught in an extortion scheme run by Czech guards of German prisoners working to clear bomb damage. Her papers were confiscated and she had to report to the concentration camp in person. She went there as if in a nightmarish dream, knowing she would never return alive, and again was miraculously saved when the commander, a known chauvinist, inexplicably let her go. A third event was the massive explosion of a large munitions dump, which I witnessed from afar, and which became the signal for sudden brutalization and murder of white armbanded German civilians by rampaging mobs of mostly young toughs in the streets, on the river bridge, and in the city squares, with people beaten, drowned and thrown into the river, and many others marched off to the camps. I barely escaped, wildly riding my bike through parts of the upheaval. By the way, it is now understood that this affair was a planned act of terror by a radical

Czech group.

All this time my mother, suffering from chronic neck pains, went from bureaucrat to bureaucrat, under often dangerous conditions, to obtain a permit for us to travel about one hundred miles on the train. We sought to join her sister and family to the west in the American sector of the Sudetenland, and to be expelled together from there into Western Germany. After months of grueling queues and many disappointments she succeeded, and we joined the family. Three months later we were placed in a primitive holding camp, waiting for the next train of boxcars to transport us into Germany. A minor incident at the camp led to a break in family relations, and we were separately transported into war-ravaged Western Germany. There the difficult life of a homeless refugee began, with hardships, discrimination, and crowding into other people's homes. But a new life gradually took root. I was able to continue my schooling, and four years later I won a scholarship in the United States. My mother followed later, and I was able to work to achieve an excellent education and pursue a multi-faceted career.

What are the insights and conclusions a survivor can draw from these experiences? Apart from the wider geopolitical and human rights issues so well presented and discussed in this conference, there are several personal points I would like to make. The most important is that whatever the circumstance, one must never give up one's humanity. We learned that it is usually the "simple" people with little to gain or lose who show the greatest empathy and understanding. Also, the power of faith is immense in desperate circumstances, and we experienced a series of minor miracles that enabled us to go on.

I am often asked whether I carry feelings of bitterness and revenge. I do admit to sadness, because mankind seems unable to learn from these experiences and appears condemned to repeating such follies again and again. But I do not believe in hatred or revenge, because both are self-defeating and merely ensure the continuation of a vicious cycle of crime and retribution. I

do believe, however, that the law should be applied swiftly and firmly against those leaders and individuals who incited or committed such crimes, and that widespread public condemnation should be made of injustices done. Unfortunately, in the case of the Sudeten ethnic cleansing crimes a general amnesty granted to all Czechs soon after these events has never been repudiated, and the Czech government to this day is not admitting to the illegality and human rights violations involved in the indiscriminate mass expulsions. Moreover, the infamous official decrees by the then Czechoslovak president Beneš, which “legalized” the maltreatment, expropriation and expulsion of the indigenous Sudeten population still remain on the books.

I am also often asked whether I have been back to my home town. My answer is no, because there is no one left there to see, and I do not wish to deal with the emotional impact of re-visiting past experiences that have taken so long to heal. If I picture walking up to our villa and meeting strangers there, I have only a sense of futility. There would merely be negative emotions on both sides that are better left buried. The situation is no longer reversible at this point, especially since a new generation is now living in our properties, who had no direct involvement in the illegalities of fifty plus years ago. The Sudetenland has joined so many other parts of the world where ethnic cleansing has wiped out most traces of cultures and traditions many centuries old, and has permanently displaced whole peoples from their rightful place in their own corner of the world.

The main issue remaining for all nations is unqualified recognition and condemnation of the illegality and injustice of such actions, and taking a firm stand against similar transgressions that are evolving in our present time. Such recognition should also include past actions of this kind, held up to international law, and some effort for at least a token compensation should be made. Dealing with the past in this way clearly becomes increasingly difficult, the more time has passed, but such actions would serve to tangibly underline the notion that inhumanity cannot be

ignored.

I strongly feel that as individuals we must do all we can to practice tolerance and forgiveness, because we simply cannot afford to feed renewed waves of hatred and retribution. This is a difficult challenge indeed, but is there really another option for humanity? I should add that the Sudeten organizations formed in Germany right after the expulsion openly and immediately renounced any form of violence and retribution, and all along steadfastly encouraged peaceful means to obtain recognition and some form of restitution. This attitude never changed during all these decades, despite the indifference surrounding them. As it stands, however, a full and true recognition of the Sudeten tragedy has not been achieved in the postwar political climate of Europe, especially after the fall of the Soviet Empire which brought the renewal of relations between east and west. Thus another chapter in man's inhumanity to man fades into history.