

Survivors, educators, distinguished guests, and friends: It is a privilege to welcome you this evening, as we gather in support of this unique institution: Yad Lazeled and The Ghetto Fighters Museum.

A common bond brings us together: the commitment to confront the challenge of teaching the Holocaust to the young, to our future generations. This is no easy task in our turbulent times, where hatred, terror, death are constantly in the news.

Those who survived the Holocaust often ask themselves: "will history do justice to our Jewish world that is no more? Will myths or denials prevail? Will the young only learn historical facts, frightening numbers of dead, or will they be able to see beyond the statistics; to see the victims as people, as individuals. Will they be able to see in ghetto children their own peers? Will they learn the stories of their daily struggles? Will they try to understand?

Here in this hall are teachers who have already distinguished themselves by implementing Holocaust studies in their schools. They are writing curricula, organizing special programs and exhibits in their schools. You all make a *difference*, and we salute you.

Lohamei Hagetaot has long been associated with our Teachers Program, where we bring American High School teachers to train them in how to teach the Holocaust. For almost 25 years now I have been privileged to work together with both these teachers and the Ghetto Fighters Museum.

We first bring these teachers to Poland, so that they can see the sites of the former death camps, Auschwitz, Birkenau, Majdanek, Treblinka - to see the shoes, the hair, and the valises of the victims, so that they can touch history.

As I accompany the teachers to those sites of death and destruction, what I want so much is to be able to show them at least a trace of the vibrant Jewish life which had existed before there in Poland – a life which teemed with creativity, with work, with study, with belief in humanity and God - I want them to have at least a glimpse of the homes of our hard working

parents where dreams were spun of justice, of a better life, of a Jewish homeland.

As we walk together through the rebuilt street of Warsaw and Krakow, I see in my mind's eye the young people: the very young children, who in the shadow of death, became the providers for their families, trying to smuggle a few potatoes over the ghetto wall. I see the young people who, when all the Jewish schools in the ghetto were closed by the Germans, became teachers over night. They organized the so-called secret children's corners in their houses. They taught the younger ones to write, to sing, they staged performances that they themselves had learned *before* the war. They brought a bit of joy, of spirit to the young ones, until they all were caught up in the Nazi nightmare.

The children are no more. Some survived, many did not. But their pictures, their words and notes, remain. They are saved on the walls of Yad Leyeled. They speak to us today.

At this dinner, when we always honor educators of Holocaust studies, we present them with the Janusz Korczak Award, named for the internationally renowned educator, pediatrician, writer, and founder of children's orphanages.

I myself never had the privilege to personally meet him. But I did see him once, on the day of his final march with "his children."

It was in August of 1942 — the round-up of Jews in the ghetto for deportation was in full swing. Gloom and fear pervaded the ghetto. August 5th was hotter than usual. I had found refuge in the home of a friend. We remained in hiding, together with her family - *seven of us* were crowded into a small room, which was hidden by a huge credenza from the rest of the apartment. The air was stagnant, fetid, with only a tiny window.

The window opened on to the main route to the notorious *Umshlagplatz* - where trains were leaving with their teeming masses of Jews. We saw what was happening below. Suddenly, we heard marching steps - a procession of deportees. The steps grew louder and louder. The street below filled with masses of people, men, women, and children, young and old, with bags, surrounded by Germans and Ukrainian soldiers.

From above the faces blended together. They were all agitated, terrified. Some looked straight ahead. I couldn't recognize anyone. At one moment, we heard no voices - there was ... silence. And then, a new sound - the footsteps of children. They came into view - walking together, neatly dressed, all of them in straight rows. Holding hands, some were carrying blanket rolls, as if they were going on an outing. And, again, no voices - almost silence. Surrounding them all were German soldiers - with rifles at the ready. At the head of the column of children walked a stooped man, holding a small child by the hand.

"It's Korczak and his orphans," my friend whispered, her voice trembling. Yes, it was him.

It was their last march, to the *Umschlagplatz*— to the trains, to Treblinka. Later, it was rumored that at the *Umschlagplatz*, the Germans had *offered* to let Korczak go. But no, he would stay with his children and remained with them in the trains. That same day many thousand children were sent to their deaths.

Few had heard of Treblinka, the final destination of all those trains — the final stop for Korczak and his children and the others.

32 years later, on a frosty winter day, Ben and I visited what was left of Treblinka. The death camp of Treblinka was now a vast field, empty but for huge stones in many shapes and sizes, 17,000 stones in all, pointing toward the sky. The stones each had names inscribed of cities, of towns and villages. And one stone had the name of a single individual - Janusz Korczak. His stone rises toward the heavens with a silent but piercingly eloquent accusation.

We shall remember him.

Thank you

