

National Days of Remembrance

SELECTED READINGS: JUSTICE AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Gerhard Kann

“Each day we see the walls around us grow higher, and each week brings new obstacles to leaving the country. Hopes and plans are buried. . . The fate of individuals has become unimportant, trivial. And one can only hope that the growth of the masses of people who are uprooted will make the world recognize the Jewish problem as one that it cannot ignore and not just a question that it can gloss over with a few conferences and speeches. You on the outside don’t of course see it with our eyes or hear what’s going on with our ears; we don’t share the same perspective. . . And yet, as young, strong people we rise up against such feelings of resignation. . . [W]e search for a meaningful position for as long as we are still here. In the end, nothing is worse than being forced to sit around vegetating and waiting.”

Excerpt from a letter to Heinz Kellermann, October 24, 1938. Kann was a German Jew still in Berlin in 1938, writing to his friend Kellermann, a German Jew who had already immigrated to the United States in 1937. Kann escaped from Europe before war began in 1939.

Letter by Gerhard Kann, Berlin, to Heinz Kellermann, New York, October 24, 1938, USHMM Acc.2007.96 Kellermann collection, box 4 (translated from German).

Mosws Schulstein

“I Saw a Mountain”

I saw a mountain
Higher than Mt. Blanc
And more Holy than the Mountain of Sinai.
Not in a dream. It was real.
On this world this mountain stood.
Such a mountain I saw—of Jewish shoes in Majdanek.
Such a mountain—such a mountain I saw
And suddenly, a strange thing happened.
The mountain moved...
And the thousands of shoes arranged themselves
By size—by pairs—and in rows—and moved
Hear! Hear the march.
Hear the shuffle of shoes left behind—that which remained.
From small, from large, from each and every one.
Make way for the rows—for the pairs,
For the generations—for the years.
The shoe army—it moves and moves
“We are the shoes, we are the last witnesses.
We are shoes from grandchildren and grandfathers.

From Prague, Paris, and Amsterdam.
And because we are only made of stuff and leather
And not of blood and flesh, each one of us avoided the hellfire.
We shoes—that used to go strolling in the market
Or with the bride and groom to the chuppah,
We shoes from simple Jews, from butchers and carpenters,
From crocheted booties of babies just beginning to walk and go
On happy occasions, weddings, and even until the time
Of giving birth, to a dance, to exciting places to life...
Or quietly—to a funeral.
Unceasingly we go. We tramp.
The hangman never had the chance to snatch us into his
Sack of loot—now we go to him.
Let everyone hear the steps, which flow as tears,
The steps that measure out the judgment.”
I saw a mountain
Higher than Mt. Blanc
And more Holy than the Mountain of Sinai.

Poem translated by Beatrice Stadtler and Mindele Wajzman in From Holocaust to New Life, edited by Michael Berenbaum (New York: American Gathering of Jewish Holocaust Survivors, 1985), p. 121.

Lilly Malnick

“And they said, ‘From now on you do not answer by your name. Your name is your number.’ And the delusion, the disappointment, the discouragement that I felt, I felt like I was not a human person anymore. They had shaved our heads, and I felt so ashamed. And also when they told us to undress and to shower, they made us feel like, like we were animals. The men were walking around and laughing and looking at us, and you take a young girl at that age who has never been exposed to a, a person, to a man, and you stay there naked, I wanted the ground should open and I should go in it.”

Malnick is a Holocaust survivor from Belgium who arrived at age 16 in Auschwitz-Birkenau. She also experienced a death march to Bergen-Belsen concentration camp before being liberated by the American army on April 15, 1945.

Hannah Arendt

“Comprehension does not mean denying the outrageous, deducing the unprecedented from precedents, or explaining phenomena by such analogies and generalities that the impact of reality and the shock of experience are no longer felt. It means, rather, examining and bearing consciously the burden which our century has placed on us—neither denying its existence nor submitting meekly to its weight.”

Arendt is a German-Jewish political theorist and philosopher. This excerpt is from the preface to the first edition of The Origins of Totalitarianism (New York: Meridian, 1958).

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

“We have been silent witnesses of evil deeds. We have become cunning and learnt the arts of obfuscation and equivocal speech. Experience has rendered us suspicious of human beings and often we have failed to speak to them a true and open word. Unbearable conflicts have worn us down or even made us cynical. Are we still of any use? We will not need geniuses, cynics, people who have contempt for others, or cunning tacticians, but simple, uncomplicated and honest human beings. Will our inner strength to resist what has been forced on us have

remained strong enough, and our honesty with ourselves blunt enough, to find our way back to simplicity and honesty?

“It remains an experience of incomparable value that we have for once learned to see the great events of world history from below, from the perspective of the outcasts, the suspects, the maltreated, the powerless, the oppressed and reviled, in short from the perspective of the suffering. If only during this time bitterness and envy have not corroded the heart; that we come to see matters great and small, happiness and misfortune, strength and weakness with new eyes; that our sense for greatness, humanness, justice and mercy has grown clearer, freer, more incorruptible; that we learn, indeed, that personal suffering is a more useful key, a more fruitful principle than personal happiness for exploring the meaning of the world in contemplation and action. But this perspective from below must not lead us to become advocates for those who are perpetually dissatisfied. Rather, out of a higher satisfaction, which in its essence is grounded beyond what is below and above, we do justice to life in all its dimensions and in this way affirm it.”

A protestant German theologian, Bonhoeffer wrote these words in a 1942 letter to co-conspirators in the German resistance. He was later murdered by the Nazi regime. This excerpt is from “After Ten Years” in Letters and Papers from Prison (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010). Translated by Barbara and Martin Rumscheidt.

Estelle Laughlin

“At dawn, the train jerked to a clanging halt. Those close to the bullet holes and cracks in the walls reported what they saw: ‘Armed German soldiers and Ukrainian guards, people—our people—behind barbed-wire fences, and chimneys. Oh! *Borze drogi! Gotinew!* (Dear God!) People sighed. Icy fear spread from my chest to every cell in my body. I could not stop trembling. I felt as if it were the world shaking with a ravage force. I clutched my parents, forced myself to sit upright, and tried hard to stay alert. My mind was no longer entirely mine. It was doing things as if in a nightmare. After a short wait and solemn postulations about our future, we heard unbolting bars and rude shouts. *‘Raus! Raus! Schnell!’* (Out! Out! Move!) And then they were upon us.

“The train had brought us to Majdanek, the infamous extermination camp located among rolling wheat fields in Lublin. In no time our tormentors rushed us into a fenced-in field jammed with bedraggled people. We had had nothing to drink since they had chased us out of our bunker. We pleaded for water. The soldiers playfully picked up garden hoses, aimed streams of water above our heads, and let the water arch to the ground. Unable to withstand our thirst, we bent to the ground, dipped our hands into the muddy puddles that formed around us, and scooped out droplets of water to moisten our lips.

“In this field of annihilation, I saw a faintly familiar figure of a young woman clutching a motionless child. I looked again and called out, ‘Mama, look! Piotrek’s mother!’

“In her vomit-stained arms lay our beloved Piotrusz, the last hidden toddler we had known in the last days of the ghetto. He lay as motionless as a clay doll with a tangle of black curls. Piotrek’s mother turned her ravaged face to us, pale as death. She moaned like a wounded animal and stammered, ‘I killed him. I killed him. I swallowed the cyanide too. I did not want him to die alone. God, why did I have to vomit? I want to die with him.’

“*‘Achtung! Aufstehen!’* (Attention! Rise!) A band of guards began to shove us into groups, separating men, women, and children from each other. *Maenner hier! Huende! Frauen dort!’* (Men here! Dogs! Women there!) They ripped screaming children out of the arms of hysterical parents. *‘Kinder da!! Los! Schnell!’* (Children here! Move!) Wham! Kick! Shove! And my father was torn away from us.

“Unable to hold onto him, we called, ‘Tata! Tata!’

“Mama screamed, ‘Samek! Samek!’

“Tata called back our names, ‘Mania! Fredziuchna! Estusiuchna!’

“We shouted encouragements: ‘Hold on! Endure! Stay alive! I love you! I love you!’ We craned our necks not to lose sight of Tata. With guns pointing at us—I could hear the click of the weapons’ safety catches—we were ordered to sit on the ground and wait for fate to roll over us. Gusts of biting wind lashed across the open terrain. Tata pushed himself to the front row and sat cross-legged on the muddy ground with the group of exhausted and grief-stricken men. We three sat with the group of women directly across from Tata, locking eyes with him. A short distance from us, children remained confined behind a wire fence in a muddy enclosure resembling a pigsty. I could not bear to look in their direction. I feared that I too might be taken away from Mama and Fredka and thrown in with them. The children clung to the fence, pleading and yammering, ‘Mama! Tata! Where are you?’ Their cries horrified me. They milled around in their isolated space desperately, frantically.

“Tata was ill. He had a high fever and shivered with a chill. He took off his jacket and wound it around his head to quell the chill. I could not stand the look of suffering I saw in his worn face. I was accustomed to looking into his eyes to find comfort—they always held kindness, steadiness, and reassurance. How filled with pain they were now!

“I broke loose from the group of women and dashed across the field that separated us from Tata. He motioned me back, his face contorted with fear for my safety. I reached him and knelt down on the ground in front of him. ‘Please, Tata,’ I said. ‘You need not worry about me. They will not get me.’

“I flipped the lapel of my coat and showed him the tiny vial of cyanide sewn to the lining. We all had it to use as a last resort. ‘They will never get me, Tata. Remember I have cyanide?’ I meant to reassure him.

“He shuddered, his eyes burning with anguish and love. He pleaded, No, no! Don’t do that! You must live!’

“All life was coming to an end for me, crushed under the boots of barbarians. All lessons of nobility and sanctity of life were piled on a pyre. From these ashes came Tata’s message to me: ‘Live!’

“Tata vanished like a dream, sheathed in the radiant light of virtue and unyielding values. He remained my archangel of humanism, calm and gentle as a whisper, dignified as the Masada site. He remained an immortal voice, a mantra as eternal as the current in a stream. ‘Yes, yes, there is a separating line between the worst and the noblest in men; neither purges the other.’ He vanished during a Walpurgis Night, leaving a pulse of goodness when the wrath of evil danced like Satan, setting my world in flames.”

Laughlin experienced the Warsaw ghetto uprising, the Majdanek extermination camp, and two forced labor camps before being liberated by the Russian army. This excerpt is from her essay “Tata’s Last Word” in Echoes of Memory, Volume 5 (Washington, DC: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2008).

Regina Spiegel

“We who survived Auschwitz or other concentration camps advocate hope not despair, generosity not bitterness, gratitude not violence. We must reject indifference as an option.”

Spiegel experienced Auschwitz-Birkenau, slave labor in Germany, and Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. Regina was liberated by the Soviet army on April 20, 1945. This is an excerpt from First Person: Conversations with a Holocaust Survivor, July 8, 2009, a public program of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

Leon Merrick

“When I was in the camps I kept thinking how nice it would be on liberation day. Yet, when this day finally arrived, after so many years of suffering and waiting, I felt all alone. I did not know if my family or those dear to me survived ... The one profound regret I have is that so many people I loved did not live to see this glorious day. Our experiences are reminders to all people, in every place, in every corner of this earth, to become guardians of human rights, dignity and freedom forever.”

Merrick experienced the Lodz ghetto, forced labor camps in Poland and Germany, Buchenwald concentration camp, and a death march. This is an excerpt from First Person: Conversations with a Holocaust Survivor, April 29, 2009, a public program of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

Nesse Godin

“You young people, you are going to be the leaders of our country, the senators, the representatives, maybe president. Make sure that this country of ours, the best country in the world, the United States of America, should be an example for the world. This place and everywhere in the world, every human being, regardless how they pray, regardless how they look should be respected and honored.”

Godin experienced the Stutthof concentration camp, concentration camps in Poland, and a death march. This is an excerpt from First Person: Conversations with a Holocaust Survivor, May 12, 2009, a public program of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

Louise Lawrence-Israëls

“A million and a half Jewish children were killed, and people let it happen. What did people think when the trains came in? Families came off the train, mothers with children in their arms, or dragging them after three days standing, after a transport? People in the towns never saw these children laugh or sing or play. They just disappeared. Why didn’t they ask? Why didn’t they tell each other, ‘What is going on? What is happening to those children?’ Why didn’t they stand up and say something?”

“It could have been stopped. And it takes a lot of courage to do that. I realize that. But again, that would have been a snowball. One good person stands up, says something, and says, you know, ‘Hey, what is happening to these children? We need to find out.’ And then people would follow. One courageous person and the rest of the people will follow.”

Lawrence-Israëls hid with her family in Amsterdam during the war. This is an excerpt from First Person: Conversations with a Holocaust Survivor, June 17, 2009, a public program of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

Robert H. Jackson

“In the prisoners’ dock sit twenty-odd broken men. Reproached by the humiliation of those they have led almost as bitterly as the desolation of those they have attacked, their personal capacity for evil is forever past. It is hard now to perceive in these men as captives the power by which as Nazi leaders they once dominated much of the world and terrified most of it. Merely as individuals, their fate is of little consequence in the world. What makes this inquest significant is that these prisoners represent ... living symbols of racial hatreds, of terrorism and violence, and of the arrogance and cruelty of power ... Civilization can afford no compromise with the social forces which would gain renewed strength if we deal ambiguously or indecisively with the men in whom those forces now precariously survive.”

The chief prosecutor for the United States of America Justice Jackson delivered these opening remarks at the International Military Tribunal in Nuremberg, November 21, 1945. This is an excerpt from Trial of the Major War Criminals before the International Military Tribunal: Nuremberg, 14 November 1945–1 October 1946, vol. 2, p. 99 (November 21, 1945).