

## **Remarks by Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, *Zachor* Event, April 11, 2019**

Thank you Norman, Andrew, and Ezra for allowing me to participate in this important gathering.

In preparing to speak with you today, I learned that *Zachor* means “to remember” and it is critical, especially in the times we are living, to remember, and yes, to honor, those who survived the darkest period in humanity.

The Holocaust Memorial Miami Beach accomplishes just that: remembering. Thank you to our host, Norman Braman, for that vision.

It welcomes thousands of visitors, particularly students, to visit and learn about the horrors of the Holocaust that we must *never* forget.

When I was just 8 years old, I came to the U.S. from Cuba with my parents and brother. Here, I saw the freedom, democracy, and respect for human rights that were, and regrettably still are, missing in my native country, and in so many countries around the world.

I understood that, though these are God-given rights, often time people are denied these rights by other humans.

Throughout my public service career, I worked to promote and defend these great American ideals and values.

And as I learned more about Israel, I was amazed at what I saw – a country that really did share the same morals and values as the United States – and was all the more remarkable because it did so in a sea of despots who only wish to destroy her and her people.

Israel has thrived, leaving its neighbors behind, because of those very ideals and values, and after the Jewish people suffered so much throughout history, look what they have achieved.

Many organizations, such as the Zachor Society, are critically important for the US-Israel strategic alliance to continue to flourish and for making Israel a strong nation in the face of constant threats, from Iran and its proxies like Hezbollah and Hamas, to the anti-Semitic BDS movement, to the anti-Israel bias at the United Nations.

I have fought against those who denied the Holocaust, and I have spent countless hours speaking with and visiting with the many survivors that I have now come to know as dear friends; listening to their stories; hearing them recall the atrocities that they somehow managed to live through; and then hearing how, even today, more than 70 years later, they still face the injustices of humanity's darkest period.

My good friends, David Mermelstein, Herbie Karliner, Alan Hall, Victor Farkas, Joe Sachs, Alex Gross, David Schaecter, Magda Bader, Alex Moskovic, and Wendy Rothfield from South Florida, and Renee Firestone, Leo Rechter, Jay Ipson, and Annette Lantos, and other survivor leaders from the Holocaust Survivors Foundation USA, are steadfast in their commitment to share narratives, grieve over loved ones lost, and recommit that these horrendous days of our history that

they survived will never again be repeated. And we will never forget my Congressional colleague Tom Lantos, and Jack Rubin, of blessed memory, and their deep commitment and passionate advocacy for survivors and for the memory of all who were lost.

We must cherish the time that we have left with these brave souls to listen and to learn about their tragic stories, stories that must be passed along to future generations about this brutal period of injustice, and ensure that no such tyranny ever happens again.

Nearly 75 years after the end of World War II, we are still debating property rights for Holocaust victims. This is astonishing. A substantial amount of property confiscated from European Jews has NOT been returned to its rightful owners or its owners haven't been compensated at all.

We must hold governments to their obligations and ensuring their property is properly returned. Holocaust survivors have waited too long for justice.

We cannot make them wait any longer. We have a moral responsibility to do more for survivors. We should legislate the right of our survivors to go to Federal court and fight for their justice.

In Congress, along with my South Florida colleague and friend, Congressman Ted Deutch, we passed a bill urging Germany to honor its commitments and moral obligations to Holocaust survivors by providing for their unmet needs.

There are an estimated half-million survivors worldwide, about a quarter of whom live here in the United States. Nearly 15,000 survivors call Florida home.

The sad reality, and humanity's great shame, is that about half of all Holocaust survivors live at or below the poverty line. Tens of thousands of survivors are suffering without basic, life-sustaining services and care that they need in their advanced years.

Many live alone or without family support and lack the funds for home care, from medicine to hearing aids, to food, to utilities, to rent.

Because of all of this, Holocaust survivors' needs are unique, more extensive and complex than the needs of other elderly individuals.

Let me leave you with three general observations about Holocaust remembrance and remediation.

***My first general observation*** is that *doing anything* about the Holocaust – anything other than just talking – is difficult.

- \* The greater the horror, the greater the wrong.
- \* The greater the wrong, the greater the involvement of individuals, corporations, governments, whole societies.
- \* The greater the involvement, the greater and wider the guilt.
- \* And, the greater the guilt and responsibility, the greater the desire and pressure to avoid adjustments in future behavior and avoid even modest remediation for past injustice.

Consider how the German Government has failed to fulfill Chancellor Adenauer's pledge in 1951, that Germany would take care of all of the needs of every survivor.

Although some of our friends in Germany have taken some steps to fulfill this pledge, those actions have been inadequate. The German Government has provided some support through income assistance programs and somewhat improved funding for health care.

But, the German Ministry of Finance itself has admitted that the level of care financed by its government has been vastly insufficient to date, especially for those who are in dire need of intensive, long-term care.

The Zachor Society has a long history of working on behalf of Holocaust survivors and seeking out their long-overdue justice.

This coming May 2 is Yom HaShoah, Holocaust Remembrance Day.

As we remember and honor the victims and survivors of the Holocaust, we are all compelled to do everything in our power to help those who have lived through those unconscionable atrocities.

It is our moral obligation to help, to now show them the best of humanity by ensuring that they can, indeed, live out their days in dignity.

Widespread injustice involves widespread guilt that many are not willing to acknowledge; and widespread injustice involves widespread remediation costs that many are not willing to pay.

So - \* if you want to be friends with everybody, you can't really support Holocaust survivors.

\* If you want to take only cost-free actions, you can't really support Holocaust survivors.

\* If you don't want to change the world, you can't really support Holocaust survivors.

**My second general observation** is that –

\* Remembering – truly remembering – is itself difficult.

\* Remembering is distressing.

\* Remembering is psychologically traumatic.

Remembering is so difficult because of ***what*** we must remember. And in the case of younger generations, what we must first *learn*; what we must then *believe*; and what we must then *remember*.

\* Not just the numbers.

\* Not just the gruesome facts.

\* Not just the antiseptic indictments of individuals.

***Instead*** - > We must remember that the Holocaust was not a single anomaly in a single country, but the product of centuries of hate that did not end in 1945.

> We must remember that the Holocaust was executed by tens of thousands of so-called “ordinary” people, was accepted as consistent with the rule of law, and was tolerated by an entire society.

> We must remember that the Holocaust against Jews could happen again; that there are leading international figures whose stated goal is to make it happen again; and that genocide against other ethnic minorities has happened again in our lifetimes.\

***Who wants*** to -- \* Recognize these truths?

\* Open their eyes to the reality of organized slaughter by tens of thousands of otherwise “ordinary” people?

\* Cope with the cognitive dissonance in our minds caused by recognizing cruelty in a cruel world, when we are more comfortable believing optimistically in justice in a universally just world?

**My Third general observation** is that we must never overlook the human capacity for *evil*; both the intentional commission of evil and the banality of evil committed by unthinking people. Until we understand human nature better, we have no choice but to use the concept of evil. We must not think of ourselves as so “sophisticated” that we have moved beyond “good” and “evil”.

Neither the detailed planning of the 1942 Wannsee Conference to structure the “Final Solution to the Jewish Question”, nor the routine implementation by tens of thousands otherwise “normal” people, can be grasped without embracing the potential for evil in the human heart.

“The line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being,” Alexander Solzhenitsyn cautioned us in his *Gulag Archipelago*.

And let us not forget the “*Heart of Darkness*”, in which Joseph Conrad warns us that “[t]he mind of man is capable of anything – because everything is in it....”



So we have a duty to sound the trumpet of Holocaust remembrance in the struggle between good and evil, for “if the trumpet give an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself for the battle?”

Each of us must respond with a strong voice against the forces of denial and forgetfulness and incomprehension. Each of us must respond as in *Isaiah*:

And I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” Then said I, “Here am I. Send me.”

Let each of us be that voice. Say it with me: send me; send me; send me.”

Thank you.