

Rethinking the notion of a second Holocaust

Posted by [jneiderer](#) On 04/29/2016

As a documentary filmmaker, I change my mind about societal issues related to my projects much like kids experience growth — I only notice it months, sometimes years, later.

Directing and producing "Jessie's Dad," which captures the transformation of an uneducated truck driver into an effective child-protection activist following the loss of his daughter to a repeat sex offender, altered my point of view on mandatory sentencing. Making "Discovering Gloria," which paints the portrait of an average teacher who became an innovative trailblazer after her inner-city school failed its No Child Left Behind exam, made me feel quite differently about standardized testing.

Gearing up for the May 4 Baltimore screening of my latest documentary, "A Wing and a Prayer," I've noticed that it's happened again: My thinking has shifted on a key topic and my brain has only now bothered to notify me.

This time, it's the Holocaust.

You see, the screening occurs at the start of Holocaust Remembrance Day.

"A Wing and a Prayer," an hour-long PBS film that tells the story of World War II aviators who risked their lives and American citizenships in 1948 to save newborn Israel, has strong connections to the Holocaust. It was the images of liberated Nazi concentration camps that motivated many of the WWII veterans to join the Al Schwimmer-led operation.

They viewed their mission as an effort to prevent an imminent "second Holocaust."

This phrase often came up during the nearly 30 interviews I conducted in the United States and Israel. Initially, I didn't get it. I realized the 600,000 Jews living in Palestine faced annihilation. Their Arab neighbors threatened to eradicate the Jewish state as soon as it declared independence in May 1948. But I also knew that most of the Arab leaders never vowed to fulfill Hitler's Final Solution. So where did the notion of a second Holocaust come from?

As the grandson of two survivors — my Grandma made it through Auschwitz and my Grandpa concluded his self-described "tour of nine Nazi concentration camps" at Buchenwald — I found the concept of a second Holocaust detached from reality. It clashed with my belief that the first was too singular to ever happen again.

In my mind, a combination of three factors set the Holocaust apart from all atrocities:

- The Nazis officially set out to entirely wipe out another people. They went after every single Jew. Rarely have the monsters of history aimed for such diabolical perfection.
- The Nazis diverted desperately needed wartime resources to this massive undertaking. For instance, many of their trains continued transporting Jews to Auschwitz and other camps when they should've exclusively aided the war effort by, for instance, carrying supplies to the starving, freezing German troops on the Russian front.
- The Nazis sought no economic or military gain from the Final Solution. Most regimes operate according to their self-interest. Killing the Jews hurt the Third Reich in many ways. They pursued this national objective purely for its own sick sake.

Added together, these factors distinguished the Holocaust in my mind. However, spending time with members of the operation, including Schwimmer, I started to reevaluate my thinking. First, I came to understand why they viewed a loss by Israel as a second Holocaust. It would've meant the death of tens, possibly hundreds of thousands of people; the destruction of the only entity on Earth willing to take in Holocaust survivors; and the stamping out of the Jews' 2,000-year aspiration to return to their ancient homeland.

My cognitive shift led me to realize that although Israelis dodged a second Holocaust in 1948, others may not have been so lucky. Just ask the Cambodians, who lost 1.5-3 million people in 1975-79, and Rwandans, who lost 500,000-1 million people in 1994.

In a sort of a time-travel twist, a second Holocaust may have occurred a few decades before the first, when the Ottoman Empire killed 1.5 million Armenians in Turkey in 1915-16.

A second Holocaust may be happening today in the country that separates Turkey and Israel — Syria, which has been ravaged by a civil war.

The refugee crisis created by this civil war has further influenced my thinking about the concept of a second Holocaust. Recently seeing this humanitarian disaster up-close when I spent 10 days in Greece with a group of Penn State journalism students made me realize that regardless of how we may label different atrocities, we should always act the same.

Isn't that what Holocaust Remembrance Day is all about? To make sure it never, ever happens again?

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