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The Holocaust and the Healing of Memory

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[translated by Geoff Vasil]

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We mark September 23rd as the day of remembrance of victims of the Lithuanian Jewish genocide, honoring the victims of the liquidation of the Vilna Ghetto in 1943. That was a dark day when the last surviving Jewish residents of Vilnius were murdered or sent to concentration camps. From that day officially there were no more Vilnius Jews, only those who hid among families who dared preserve their humanity, and those who withdrew to the forests to join the Soviet partisans. The Jerusalem of the North was strangled and we were all impoverished.

Occasionally there are attempts to calculate how much world culture lost to the Holocaust. Before the Second World War Jewish musicians, composers and artists actively expressed themselves in the cultural life of the majority of European countries. It is claimed we lost hundreds of thousands of works of art. One of the major streams of humanity adding beauty to the world dried up forever.

But statistics and the number of those murdered isn't the most important thing. That such a horrendous tragedy could happen in Europe, proud of its layers of civilization, means that we have to admit that we are never entirely safe from evil and that it is illusory to console ourselves that it is possible to control the genie of hatred after releasing it from the bottle. Unfortunately, it is not. Hatred spreads like a virus and expands like rising dough. And so today as well we do not have the right to dismiss with indifference all manner of scorn for human dignity, argumentation on who is

worthy to live and who is not, and to expressions of aggression towards Otherness.

Today we often hear that this happened long ago and we had nothing to do with it. The idea is to turn past this unpleasant page of history and to look toward the future. This is self-deception. If we do not accept the past without adornment, if we do not become co-owners of that indelible historical culpability over the fact that hundreds of thousands of people actively participated in the crimes of the Holocaust and millions feared opposing it, then this historical abscess will always poison historical consciousness and the tragedies of hatred will ever repeat themselves.

A Christian well knows that resurrection is impossible without crucifixion. To raise the history of the Holocaust on the cross of our memory means first of all recognizing with the heart that this isn't *their* but *our* pain and tragedy. This isn't the story of an oppressed nation demanding revenge. This is the story of the fall of man, this is the tragedy of all humanity, and today the healing of memory isn't needed so much by Jews who have survived the terrors of history as it is needed by us, Lithuanians, Poles, Germans, so that we can witness to the possibility that it didn't have to be that way, so that we wouldn't be concerned with counting who and of what ethnicity perished, but rather would pledge to defend every person's life and dignity.

Again I stress that the Holocaust is not the tragedy of the Jewish nation alone but of all humanity. This is especially obvious in Lithuania, because we were extraordinarily impoverished and lost the absolute majority of Lithuania's sons and daughters of Jewish ethnicity, and it's probably impossible to ever compensate for the cultural and social loss.

What can we do today? First, we can accept the past and stop running away from the blame that falls on all humanity that this could happen. To recognize that hate, no matter what theories it is based upon, is always a dead end. To firmly say, never again. Although there are still temptations, although the worth of human life is again greatly depreciated, although attempts are returning to stand in the place of the Creator and to decide for ourselves who will live, how they will live and for how long, although the conviction is being reborn that love of one's nation means contempt for foreigners, that there are *others* who pose danger to us, who become for us the incarnation of evil.

Just before World War I flared up, the dominant opinion was that eternal peace and a period of prosperity had arrived. Hitler's "final solution," which was the basis for the mass murder of the Jewish people, would have appeared absurd in the Weimar Republic. So let's not fool ourselves today by thinking that the most brutal crimes against humanity are behind us and that we live in the era of the peaceful End of History. History provides a multitude of examples on how evil really requires quite little to flourish: that good people would do nothing and look on indifferently, saying: "But what's in it for me?"

So I close this commentary with a call to remain vigilant and to fear not, neither the challenges of the future nor the painful mistakes and moral errors of the past. Only then will we be able to live responsibly and as befits human beings, rather than as the puppets of the genie of hatred.