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FEB 26 1986

United States Holocaust Memorial Council

February 21, 1986

Dear Friend:

On Wednesday, February 19, 1986, the U.S. Senate approved the United Nations convention against genocide, and it has been sent to the President for ratification.

Council Vice Chairman Mark E. Talisman and Council Member Hyman Bookbinder are among those who have worked very hard for this action, which was pledged to us by Senator Bob Dole at the official groundbreaking of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum last October.

In March, 1985, our Chairman, Elie Wiesel, testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on behalf of the convention. We are pleased to send you a copy of that testimony taken from the Congressional Record of March 7, 1985.

With all best wishes.

Sincerely,

Marcia Feldman
Director of Communications



United States Holocaust Memorial Council

TESTIMONY
OF THE
HONORABLE ELIE WIESEL
CHAIRMAN

U.S. Holocaust Memorial Council
before the
Senate Foreign Relations Committee
March 5, 1985

As printed in

Congressional Record



United States
of America

PROCEEDINGS AND DEBATES OF THE 99th CONGRESS, FIRST SESSION

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United States Holocaust Memorial Council

Testimony

The Honorable Elie Wiesel
Chairman
U.S. Holocaust Memorial Council
March 5, 1985
Senate Foreign Relations Committee

Mr. Chairman, Senator Boschwitz, Senator Dodd, I thank you very much for inviting me to appear before your committee to give testimony on an issue that seems to me of vital importance to our generation and to the world today.

I speak to you not as a professor of law -- I am not a professor of law -- nor as a professor of political science -- I am not a professor of political science. I am a professor in the humanities, and I would like to speak to you, Mr. Chairman and my friends, in the name of humanity. And it is in the name of humanity that I humbly urge you to approve this treaty.

I speak to you as an American. I came here as a refugee, a stateless person, without passport, and it is in this country that I found haven and hope and all the possibilities offered a young man, to work and to try to justify his work for the sake of his contemporaries in this nation and outside of this nation.

As a Jew, I grew up believing in justice and carrying with me memories of fire and anguish and trying to do something with those memories of fire and anguish in order to reduce fire and to curtail anguish.

But above all, Mr. Chairman, I speak as a witness. I speak as someone who has seen genocide at work. Of all my predecessors here at this table who have the privilege to speak to you and before you, I think I am the only one who has seen the results and the workings of genocide. I have seen it recently in Cambodia where I went to see what was happening. I have seen in a way the Miskito Indians and their suffering. But above all, what I have seen from forty-odd years ago should not be seen nor endured by anyone alive ever.

And this is why I came to be with you today.

It happened some forty-odd years ago, Mr. Chairman. In Biblical terms, as surely you know, forty years mark a generation. So a generation ago hundreds and hundreds of communities were wiped out in a tempest of blood and steel and reduced to ashes. When the Jews of my town arrived at the place unknown to us then, Auschwitz, the death factories annihilated 10,000 human beings a day. At times their success was so great that the figure was much higher, 17,000; and once they recorded for their history 22,000 a day.

Mr. Chairman, I have seen the flames. I have seen the flames rising to nocturnal heavens; I have seen parents and children, teachers and their disciples, dreamers and their dreams, and woe unto me, I have seen children thrown alive in the flames. I have seen all of them vanish in the night as part of a plan, part of a program conceived and executed by criminal minds that have corrupted the law and poisoned the hearts in their own land and the lands that they had criminally occupied.

Then it was called "the final solution." Today it is called genocide.

Mr. Chairman, it is the honor of our country to have led the war, and what a war, what a heroic and noble war, against those who practiced genocide. Tens of thousands of young Americans have given their lives to defeat Nazis, and their war, our war, was not a political war. It was a moral war. And therefore, it is still being glorified and extolled by all of us with justified pride.

I submit to you, Mr. Chairman, friends, that my plea today is also morally inspired and not political. Though a consequence of political and economic machinations, genocide transcends them all and becomes as a reminder and warning, a powerful call to conscience, and therefore, I urge you to ratify the convention against genocide. In doing so you will declare for all to hear, yes, crimes against entire peoples did indeed occur.

I insist on that, Mr. Chairman, because we live now in a time where morally perturbed minds all over the world, even in our own country, to our embarrassment and shame, dare to claim that it did not occur, that Jewish people did not die in gas chambers. And what really do they think? We are still here. What happened to our people? But what happened to our parents? What happened to the 15,000 Jews of my city? And what happened to the 10,000 cities in Eastern Europe? Yet they place us in an untenable position that we have to defend our own testimony and say yes, it happened.

We don't do it with pleasure, we don't. We do not like to open wounds in public.

So to accept this convention, Mr. Chairman and friends, would serve a warning, yes, what we say, what we witnesses say is true, we are true witnesses, and this would be an act of morality, Mr. Chairman, that all of us would appreciate fully and totally.

Furthermore, in adopting this convention you will say that yes, it occurred, but it must never occur again, ever. By evoking the past, you will protect not only the memory of humankind but also its future. You will protect our children and their children from further shame and death.

Oh, naturally, although I am a humanist, I am not excessively naive, not to the point of assuming that laws, however lofty, could stop planned mass murder, but I am certain that the absence of such laws would encourage mass murder as it has in the past.

Do I need to remind you, who know so much of history, that Hitler and Himmler and Eichmann and their acolytes were convinced that what they were doing was decent, legal, and even beneficial to society? In his diaries, Goebbels, the arch propagandist for Hitler, mentioned his conviction that the Allies were pleased, he said it, that Allies were pleased with the final solution's theoreticians and practitioners for doing the dirty work for them.

The fact that the killers could kill and go on killing, and go on killing without protest or interference from [the] outside world was interpreted in Berlin as tacit consent to their policies.

Well, that doesn't mean that if the law were to be accepted and ratified, as I am sure it will, a law on genocide would stop future attempts to commit genocide against other people. But at least we as a moral nation whose memories are alive, we must make that statement that we are against genocide, that we cannot tolerate a world in which genocide is being perpetrated, and whoever engages in genocide, wherever that is, places himself outside the human community.

Now, why has not this convention been ratified by the United States? I told you, I am not a political scientist; I don't know. But I can tell you as a witness in all sincerity, Mr. Chairman and friends, this question, why not, has been a permanent trouble to us, to me. Our attitude is being questioned both at home, in schools, and abroad, wherever I go.

I teach in other universities, in France, and in Scandinavia. After all, that is my vocation. I am a passionate teacher. I believe that what we have received we must communicate. And I am proud to appear everywhere as a teacher from an American university who is involved in our political life and who believes in our system and in our ideals. But when they ask me why,

explain to me why hasn't the United States ratified the convention, what can I say? And in my own schools here in the United States, when my students ask me, you who preach humanism, and you who glorify the moral asset, the moral conviction of our nation, how do you explain that we have not ratified for 19 years something which is so simple and urgent and vital, I, their teacher, find it difficult to come up with a logical answer.

Therefore, I urge you to give me that answer, the right answer, and reaffirm our common belief that we have been and remain a nation governed by moral principles. When those principles were jeopardized, we had the courage to defend them. Now I am asking you, isn't genocide the greatest threat to those principles? Isn't genocide the greatest peril to civilization's ideals and visions of peace and compassion?

A French philosopher, Jean Rostand, once remarked, and I quote him, "kill a man and you are an assassin. Kill a town and you are a conquerer. Kill a people and you are a god."

Now, isn't it our obligation to stand up to those who wish to become gods by murdering people?

Mr. Chairman and distinguished Senators, murder is evil. We all know that. But genocide is absolute evil, and therefore, we have no choice there; we as citizens of this country and teachers to our generation, both in the field of politics, of statesmanship and education, we must tell the young people today, yes, we are against absolute evil, and we are absolutely against that evil.

To outlaw genocide means to justify our faith in faith. We owe it to our children, and we must tell them that we shall do whatever we can to see to it that they will never be confronted by the darkness that is piercing our light and by the wounds that plague our nightmares.

Oh, I know, the Genocide Convention will not bring back the dead. Mr. Chairman, friends, I know that. The dead, it is too late for the dead. But at least in signing such a convention we could remember the dead without shame. Not to remember them would mean to betray them and betray ourselves.

If we do not remember them, we, too, shall be forgotten.

In conclusion, Mr. Chairman, and in thanking you for your graciousness and kindness for listening to me this afternoon, I urge you that the Genocide Convention, when ratified, would become not only an act of justice, but above all, a solemn and noble act of remembering.

I thank you.