

“EVIL IS NOTHING NEW”: REMARKS ON
HOLOCAUST REMEMBRANCE DAY - APRIL 24, 2017
BEFORE THE U.S. ARMY NATICK SOLDIER SERVICES CENTER

by C. Peter R. Gossels

Before beginning my formal remarks, I would like to thank Colonel Raymond for his kind and gracious welcome. I would also like to thank Command Sergeant Major Pintagro, George Bernard, and the people who put this program together. I understand that a special committee began preparing for this occasion a few months ago and generated all the literature, advertising and practicalities we will enjoy today. It takes an enormous amount of energy and skill to organize an event like this, and I sincerely appreciate all your hard work.

Rabbi Stern, thank you so much for adding grace and solemnity to our program. And I would especially like to thank the veterans, community leaders, family, friends and other guests who have joined us for this very special observance. I'm grateful that you made this a priority. I know this day is as meaningful for you as it is for me.

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I was born in Berlin, Germany on August 11, 1930, three years before Hitler came to power. My father wanted to call me Claus, my mother preferred Peter, but they agreed on my Hebrew name, Reuven, which they Germanized into the name “Rolf”, a name often given to German shepherd dogs.

My mother, Charlotte Lewy Gossels, was a housewife when I was born. Her father, my grandfather, Isidor, was a manufacturer of children’s clothes, whose family had moved to Berlin from Chemnitz and Leipzig. One of my cousins on my mother’s

side, Leo Lewy, had served in the German Army as an officer during the First World War.

My father, Max Gossels, had driven a potato wagon to feed the German troops at the front during the First World War. After the Armistice, in 1918, my father studied at the University of Berlin, became a lawyer, a judge and served as a Magistrate of the City of Berlin from 1927 to 1933. In that capacity, he was responsible for the building and administration of housing and redevelopment projects in Berlin as well as veterans and other welfare programs and the administration of the hospitals in his district.

Max's father, my grandfather, Gottfried, was a tailor, who had moved to Berlin from Emden, near the Dutch border, where much of the Gossels Family had lived for centuries after fleeing Spain, which had expelled all its Jews in 1492.

Adolph Hitler was born in Austria in 1889 and served in the German Army during the First World War. He became a politician during the turbulent 1920s as Germany was suffering from hyperinflation, civil war and the sense that they had been mistreated by the Allies (namely, France, England and the United States), who had barely bested the German Army during the First World War. Backed by the SA, the militia he had raised, and a loyal cadre of politicians, Hitler used his oratorical skills to persuade the German people that Germany had lost the war only because of the treachery of Communists and Jews, many of whom had also served in the German Army.

Hitler promised to restore order, fix the economy and make Germany great again. Although he gained only one third of the votes during the 1933 election, the traditional parties on the right decided to give him a chance to carry out his policies and made him Chancellor, or prime minister, of Germany in 1933.

Instead of working as a political leader in the democratic government that had lent him the authority to lead the nation, Hitler used this power to turn Germany into a totalitarian state that soon dominated the lives and actions of all its citizens.

Hitler despised Slavic people, gypsies and homosexuals. He also hated Jewish people for reasons that no one has yet discovered. And he created a regime that sought revenge against those who had defeated Germany during the First World War and built a murderous system to kill people he hated so much. Unlike his contemporary, Stalin, who killed millions of his Russian compatriots, who challenged him and his Communist government, Hitler hated and killed innocent people, who lived in and had contributed to the well-being of Germany and the lands he subsequently invaded.

The tragedy of Nazi Germany was that so many Germans joined Hitler to help him commit his evil deeds.

In 1933, my father lost his job at the University of Berlin because he was Jewish. In 1936, my grandfather, Isidor, died and my parents were divorced. As life became more and more difficult for Jewish people, my 38 year old mother decided to move my 3 year old brother and me into my grandmother's apartment where she lived with my 33 year old Aunt Hilde. Since Jewish kids were no longer allowed to go to a public school, my mother enrolled me in a religious school operated by the Jewish Community. As Jews lost their jobs and businesses, my mother bought and set up a barber chair in our living room in order to make a living by catering to women who needed help with their skin and hair.

And she began to visit the French Embassy in order to obtain a visa for her two young sons, which might allow them to escape the bullying that they frequently

experienced from strangers, who called them dirty Jews and threatened to hurt them.

Meanwhile, in March, 1939, my father was told by Gestapo that he would be arrested, unless he left the country within the next three days. He managed to reach the border of Belgium within those three days and came to live for a time in Antwerp.

At about that time, my grandmother was forced to sell the apartment building where we lived to a member of the Nazi party at a bargain price, which was placed into an account from which she was allowed to withdraw only a small amount each month. I will never forget being present, as this transaction took place as two police officers who made my grandmother sign the deed.

In June, 1939, good news: The French Embassy issued visas for my five year old brother, Werner, and eight-year old me. And on July 3, 1939, my mother and grandfather, Gottfried, put Werner and me on a train with 38 other children ranging in age from 5 to 16 that we had never met, bound for the Chateau de Quincy, twenty miles southeast of Paris, without either of our parents.

In 1941, my 67 year old grandfather, Gottfried, was forced onto a train bound for Riga, Latvia, where he was murdered by firing squad along with many other German Jews. My cousin, Benno Lewy, was also murdered there on January 25, 1942.

We have since learned that my 67 year old grandmother was sent to a concentration camp in Terezin, Czechoslovakia, where she died in November 1942, because of the miserable conditions there. Meanwhile, my mother and her sister were forced to work in a factory making weapons for the German army.

Then on March 2, 1943, my 39 year old mother, who had worked so hard to save the lives of her children, was forced onto a train bound for Auschwitz, Poland, where she was murdered shortly after her arrival. Her sister, Hilde, had been murdered at Auschwitz the day before.

So, why am I telling you these sad stories? We have, after all, heard all about the six million Jews that Hitler killed, the massacres committed by the Japanese invaders of China during the Second World War, not to mention the atrocities being committed every day by the murderous regime we call ISIS. Evil is nothing new! It is in the newspapers and on television every day.

The reason is that we can not fully understand or feel the reality of evil until it becomes personal. Imagine for a moment that the US government were to arrest your mother or father without warning tomorrow morning, drive her to South Station, put her on a cattle car with many others without food, water, heat or sanitary facilities bound for some place in Mexico where she would be summarily murdered on arrival. Think about that for a moment.

Now that we have a more intimate feel for evil, the next question is how do we respond and live with the knowledge that evil exists in many forms and is likely to persist in this world until the Messiah comes, as we Jews are apt to say.

The first thing we must do, of course, is to support the armed forces of the United States as well as our public safety personnel like the police and fire departments. So I want to take this opportunity to thank everyone in this room for your contributions to our continuing struggle against the forces of evil.

The second thing we must do, as individuals, is to contribute to good government, to support private organizations dedicated to helping people with limited means and to helping our friends and neighbors in need of help and love.

My brother and I were not imprisoned in a concentration camp. We were cared for, as much as possible, by an organization called Oeuvres de Secours aux Enfants, a Jewish welfare organization, even as the German Army fought its way across France. We were sheltered by the good people of Chabannes. And we were rescued and brought to the United States in 1941 by representatives of the American Friends Service Committee (the Quakers) and the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee. Upon our arrival here, we were placed with families in South Brookline and given the same opportunities that were available to American children at the time.

Although we received a last letter from my mother in November, 1941, shortly before Pearl Harbor, I allowed myself to think for many years thereafter that she was alive somehow, somewhere, although I knew better.

Instead of allowing the evil that the Nazis had inflicted on my family to poison my life by filling my mind with hate for German people, who had created and supported Hitler and his Nazi party, I thought that I had more constructive things to do.

Although my father, who was living in Caracas, Venezuela at the time, offered me a new home there, I chose to serve in the U.S. Army during the Korean conflict.

I also decided that I would try to challenge Hitler's evil designs by contributing to the revitalization of the Jewish community by renovating some of the archaic liturgy that most Jewish congregations were using sixty years ago and by recognizing that Jewish

women and Jews by choice should be welcomed and treated as equals in our communities.

So we joined Congregation Beth El of the Sudbury River Valley, a small congregation in Sudbury led by Rabbi Larry Kushner, because it was young and open to new ideas. And in 1980, Nancy, a friend, Joan Kaye, and I composed the first egalitarian Jewish prayer book, or siddur, ever published. Its publication was even noted on the front page of the Wall Street Journal and has earned a page on Wikipedia. Entitled *Vetaher Libenu*, this siddur introduced the matriarchs, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah into the Jewish liturgy for the first time and addressed God as “You” rather than treating God as a heavenly King seated on a celestial throne. Our siddur was so well received that our egalitarian liturgy was adopted by the entire Jewish Reform movement and many Conservative congregations as well. More than eleven thousand copies have been sold all over the world, including many to Christian nuns.

In addition to my work in trying to revitalize Jewish practices, I also tried to improve our lives by helping to create the first no fault auto insurance system that was enacted by the Legislature in 1970 and by making it possible to create condominiums in Massachusetts. Believe it or not, the only state that allowed condominium ownership in 1970 was Hawaii. In 2005, I served as co-author of the Boston Bar Association’s report on cost and time efficiencies in the Massachusetts courts. And I continue to tell people about my experiences at schools, synagogues and functions such as this, whenever I am invited to do so.

At about that time, after fifty years of trying, I managed to recover title to my grandmother’s apartment from the Nazi family that had forced her to sell it at a bargain price. My brother and I sold the building and donated the proceeds to a number of

charities, including the Wayland Public School's Gossels Family Fund for Academic Excellence and to Wayland's Public Library's Gossels Fund for Human Dignity. These funds now held by the Town exceed \$300,000.00.

I could go on and bore you with my contributions to our community as a lawyer and as Wayland's Town Moderator, who was elected by my fellow residents of Wayland for thirty years; but you get the point. As I was cursed by evil as a child, I have been blessed by the most marvelous of human beings, Nancy, my bride of 59 years, and three beautiful, talented and accomplished children, including Amy Gossels, a casting director in New York City, and Lisa Gossels, who made the film "The Children of Chabannes" that you can see this afternoon, for which she won an Emmy. And we were blessed five weeks ago by Sophia Rose, our first grandchild, who was born in New York City thanks to our son, Daniel, and his wife, Jackie.

So, let me conclude by sharing Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel's view on how to live with evil:

"The mitzvah (often inaccurately translated as a "good deed", which is), the humble single act of serving God, of helping (others and) of cleaning the self, is our way of dealing . . . with evil", he wrote, "Jewish tradition, while conscious of the possibility of evil . . . stresses the possibilities of further good . . . for one mitzvah leads to . . . another mitzvah".

Thank you for listening and I will try to answer any questions that you may have.