

## A Day of Their Own: Holocaust Survivor Day

On January 27<sup>th</sup>, 2020, in his speech during the ceremony commemorating the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, 94 year-old Marian Turski, Poland's best known living Holocaust survivor and -- like many survivors in their own countries, states or cities -- the moral conscience of Poland's Jewish community, spoke these chilling words:

Auschwitz did not fall from the sky. It began with small forms of persecution of Jews. It happened; it means it can happen anywhere. That is why human rights and democratic constitutions must be defended. The eleventh commandment is important: Don't be indifferent. Do not be indifferent when you see historical lies, do not be indifferent when any minority is discriminated, do not be indifferent when power violates a social contract.

We all know at least one survivor; we either grew up with her in our home, perhaps she was our grandmother (or mother), or at the very least we encountered them in our community at various stages. We, the next generations, have been privileged to meet these remarkable individuals and have tried to make sure they are taken care of in our family, our synagogues, our community centers. But as a society we must ask ourselves one question: have we done enough?

Have we treated this heroic, aging community with the respect it deserves, with the support it urgently needs? Sadly, we have all heard of tragic stories where these courageous personalities ended their lives destitute, lonely or simply in anonymity. Shockingly, inexcusably, there are reports of over 100,000 Holocaust survivors living in poverty.

We can do better.

The Jewish community in Israel and the diaspora understood the enormity of the Holocaust and that there needed to be a shift in our lives as a reaction to this loss--at the very least, a day, eventually two, would be added to memorialize European Jewry, and the six million Jews, among them one and a half million children; the horrors of Auschwitz/ Birkenau, Belzec, Majdanek, Chelmno and the tens of other camps. Yom HaShoah and International Holocaust Remembrance Day are fitting memorials to those cherished souls, focusing on the lives, families, and communities which were murdered and destroyed, with the goal of educating all to the dangers of prejudice, hatred, and intolerance and where, unchecked, they can lead.

But these days are mainly directed at the tragedy—What about the survivors? Their uncanny capacity to live on, their intensely Jewish attitude of life

affirmation, their superhuman strength to engage in what Holocaust survivor and Academy Award Winner Gerda Klein called “a boring evening at home.” They were able to do this while always keeping the monsters hidden inside their consciousness.

For Holocaust survivors the survival of the Jewish people became paramount. To them, and by example to so many of us, the ultimate lesson of Jewish history and Jewish memory must be about affirming life and not about dwelling on death and loss no matter how pervasive they may be.

Survivors exemplify resilience. Most have refused to let their victimization define who they are and what they sought to become as they rebuilt their lives. Many journeyed from the lands of their birth to countries that offered freedom and opportunity, a different path, a new kind of hope and they cherished their freedom in ways that those who had been deprived of it could not. Many became quite successful in creating new families, finding joy and prosperity due to hard work, perseverance and luck; others, however, were not as lucky. They are often nameless, faceless, living alone, barely able to make ends meet.

They still need our help.

There are numerous organizations doing significant work caring for Holocaust survivors and we applaud them. The Claims Conference has created an International Holocaust Survivors Night during Chanukah where survivors are honored at a beautiful menorah lighting ceremony at the Kotel as well as other satellite ceremonies around the world. Initiatives such as theirs are a valuable and meaningful step in the right direction; yet we must step up as a people and wholeheartedly commit to doing all we can for the survivors.

What if we instituted a special day dedicated to these unique souls? A global day in which each community would recognize those survivors living amongst them and find ways to enhance their lives. A day of lectures, symposia, and multi-generational experiences when these heroes can pass on their message of hope and resilience to the next generation as well as an opportunity to simply honor those tender souls who have withstood the worst humankind is capable of.

They deserve a day of joy; a day of celebration. Not a day to share with condemnation of the Nazis, but a day to celebrate their lives they built in response to the Holocaust. To celebrate what they have given and continue to give us.

A day for them and a day for us.

Historians can answer the question how; theologians, writers, poets and philosophers have not answered the question why. Yet survivors have taught us how to answer the question of what to do with this catastrophic history.

Embrace it, study it, wrestle with it, teach it to your children and theirs and ultimately transform it into a weapon for the human spirit to enlarge our sense of responsibility, to alleviate human suffering and strengthen our moral resolve. Holocaust survivors represent the best in all of us, the best of the human spirit. They are our treasure and our light and we must shine that light into every dark corner of our world.

It is for this reason that we must honor them with a day of their own!

We call on the world to join us and celebrate the inaugural Holocaust Survivor Day on June 26<sup>th</sup>, Marian Turski's 95<sup>th</sup> birthday.

[HolocaustSurvivorDay.com](http://HolocaustSurvivorDay.com)

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