

REMEMBERING THE HOLOCAUST

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My name is John Loftus. It is probably kind of silly to have an Irish-Catholic as president of the Holocaust Museum.¹ A lot of us wonder why we even have a Holocaust Museum for Jews. Every ethnic group has genocide. What was the largest number of people killed? During the middle passage of slavery, tens of millions of Africans died during the slave trade. What ethnic group had the highest percentage of their people killed? It was not the Jews; it was the Armenians. One out of every three Armenians in the world died in Turkish deportations in World War I.

How about an Irish Museum? The population of Ireland went from eight million to five million. How about a museum for the Native Americans? More than 700 tribes completely disappeared several centuries ago. They were just murdered.

The genocide against the Jews was terrible, but more terrible than I realized. When I first became involved, I discovered that there was something critically different from all the other genocides. Murder was just a means to an end. Nobody wanted to kill all the Africans; they were valuable property. Instead, they wanted to keep them as slaves. Even the Turks did not want to kill all the Armenians; they just wanted the land back. People did not want to

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1. The Florida Holocaust Museum, located in St. Petersburg, Florida, is the fourth largest Holocaust museum in the country. The purpose of the museum is to educate the public on the devastation of the Holocaust, promote tolerance and respect, and honor the millions who lost their lives in the Shoah. Fla. Holocaust Museum, *General Information* <<http://www.lholocaustmuseum.org/ourpurpose.htm>> (accessed Aug. 14, 2000).

murder the Native Americans; they just wanted to steal the land. They wanted the Native Americans out of the way. But for the first time in the history of man, someone said, "Let's kill all the children." The Holocaust was the first time there was an organized government effort to systematically wipe out an entire ethnic group. It was a crime so monstrous, it had never been conceived before. Arguably, the Holocaust was the lowest point in human history.

I did not know much about the subject at all, but I had a special interest, because, during the Carter and Reagan administrations, I was a Nazi War Crimes Prosecutor.² To be honest, I joined because I thought it would look good on my résumé, and I might get a free trip to Germany out of it. But when I became involved, I had a most unusual assignment. They sent me to work with the intelligence agencies. I received all these top secret clearances to work with the Central Intelligence Agency and all the other groups to see if I could find any clues to whether there could be Nazis in America.

I never did get my free trip to Germany; instead, I got lots of free trips to Suitland, Maryland — a nice little town right outside of Washington, D.C. That is where the United States government buries its secrets — literally. There are twenty storage vaults underground. Each vault is one acre in size. The last scene of the *Raiders of the Lost Ark*³ is what these underground vaults are really like — only not as organized as they are in the movie. Quite by accident, I got lost and ended up down in the nuclear warfare document storage vault. In the nuclear vault, I stumbled across a group of Nazi files that neither I nor anyone else was supposed to see until the year 2015. I discovered, much to my embarrassment, that many of the Nazis I had been assigned to prosecute were already on the government payroll as part of a Cold War spy operation that got all messed up. The British secret service was supposed to be dumping freedom fighters in America to be trained and sent back behind the Iron Curtain. Instead, the head of the British operation, a Communist double agent named Kim Philby, was sending us war criminals instead of anti-communist freedom fighters.

2. A war crimes prosecutor is responsible for the investigation and prosecution of people responsible for serious violations of international humanitarian law, namely breaches of the Geneva Convention of August 12, 1949. Serious violations may include willful killing, torture, willfully causing serious bodily injury or great suffering, and extensive, unjustified destruction and appropriation of property.

3. *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (Paramount Pictures 1981) (motion picture).

I received permission from the Central Intelligence Agency to blow the whistle. In 1982 I appeared on *60 Minutes* in a thirty-minute interview with Mike Wallace. It was the longest episode he had ever done. When the episode about Nazis in America aired, it caused a minor national uproar. Congress demanded hearings, Mike Wallace got an Emmy Award, and my family got death threats. Ever since that *60 Minutes* show, I have become a lawyer who represents people in the United States and in other governments who want to be whistleblowers. They want to bring up some of the truth of what happened. When I was in the underground classified vaults, I found that there were secret files on the Holocaust. Now, in the last couple of years, the British government has started to release some of its files.

During World War II, the Allies broke the Nazi codes, which were called the “ultra secret.” After breaking the codes, the Allies were able to read some of the secret intelligence. One of the first codes they broke was for the Nazi Einsatzgruppen, the mobile killing units that were the first attempts of the SS at organized massacres of Jews. Every week the British secret service would decode these Nazi documents and show them to Winston Churchill. Churchill was amazed, but would not say anything. In fact, as early as September 1941 the British government was getting accurate weekly totals of the number of Jews being killed. Churchill was reading the orders to kill the Jews sometimes before they were received in the field. The problem was too much paperwork for the code breakers, so they sent a memo to Churchill that said, “It is now clear beyond any doubt that the German police are killing every Jew they can lay their hands on. Therefore, we won't even bother reporting on this issue in the future.” That memo was sent in October 1940, just after the war had started, and the massive killing machinery was underway. British policy was to say nothing about Jews being killed, because they did not want to have Jews immigrating to Palestine. It might have upset the Arabs or interfered with the oil supply.

In 1942 President Franklin D. Roosevelt found out about the secret codes, and he wrote the British, asking if they would join him in a public appeal to Hitler to release the Jews from the concentration camps. I will never forget the British response, “If we press Hitler too hard, he might do it.” And where, the British wanted to know, would all the Jews go? They could not get into Palestine. President Roosevelt could not get a single Jew into America. Every nation in the world had closed its gates to the Jews, so Roosevelt cut

a deal with the British. If Roosevelt would agree that the Jews would be expendable to the war effort, then, in return, the British would agree to a Nuremberg trial to prosecute the killers afterward. Think about the choices they made. As more and more of these classified files come out, we are faced with the fact that people like Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill might be accomplices to the Holocaust, because they kept silent. At worst, they were lying to the American public and saying there was no proof.

A friend of mine in an intelligence agency sent me a letter yesterday. He and his dad were assigned to the Vatican during World War II. President Roosevelt had a special emissary there trying to get the Pope to argue for the release of Jews. The State Department said we could pretend the Holocaust was not happening. And they did pretend this killing was not occurring. The indifference toward the treatment of the Jews went way, way back, and this indifference was not just against the Jews. One of the first things that Hitler did when he came to power was to sign a law that provided for the killing of retarded beings, because he believed they were useless. The retarded children were moved into sanitariums, and because sterilization was too expensive, the Nazis simply gassed them. Word of this got out, and all the churches in Germany, both Protestant and Catholic, got together and put an end to the program. They stopped the killing. What a choice that was. They stood up against the Nazis and successfully stopped that program.

Only a few months later, the people of Germany made another choice. They turned away and pretended the mistreatment of the Jews was not happening. The early mistreatment of Jews was a matter of world opinion. In fact, everybody knew what was going on. In 1939 there was a headline in the *Los Angeles Examiner* quoting Hitler as saying that he would kill the Jews if the West would not accept them. But what were they not saying? It is very clear. Why didn't the United States take the Jews in? We had plenty of room. There are about 5,000,000 Jews in America today, which is the largest population in the world, even though they are only about three percent of *our* population. Most Jews in the world are alive in America, because we let them in around World War I. We gave them sanctuaries from the persecutions going on in Russia.

In your grandfathers' times, when the Great Depression hit in 1929, people did not want to compete with immigrants for scarce jobs. As a result, they wanted to close the doors not only to Jewish immigration, but most immigration for that matter. Congress refused to budge, and the last bill to admit Jewish refugees died in

a Senate Subcommittee in 1939. Even though the war was going on, we still could have rescued the Jews. There was a Polish underground, and the Jews asked the Polish people to send their underground freedom fighters to liberate the concentration camps. The Polish refused, because they did not want to get involved. Every time the Jewish issue was raised, it was met with indifference. The Jews are not our people. The choice was made to do nothing and was repeated over and over again.

President Roosevelt, on the eve of the war, called for an international conference to try to find a place of sanctuary for the Jews. The Evian Conference found that there was only one country in the world, a little Carribean nation, that would take the Jews, but only if a substantial amount of money was paid. Everybody was willing to close their eyes. Part of the problem was that it was hard for people to believe that the most civilized nation in the world, Germany, was running around killing babies. There was actually a Polish agent who came to Washington and told Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter what was going on. Justice Frankfurter is Jewish, too. Justice Frankfurter turned to the agent and said, "I know that *you* believe you are telling the truth, but I do not believe it." It was hard for Americans to accept. Although the president, the intelligence agencies, and the State Department knew, the American public, by and large, did not know the full extent of the violence. There were a few newspapers, like the *Boston Globe*, that did a good job of reporting it. But most of the papers, like the *New York Times* and even the *St. Petersburg Times*, buried the report of the Holocaust on the back pages — if they mentioned it at all. There was a huge weight of indifference.

My friend Eli Weisel, who was a concentration camp survivor and won the Nobel Prize, said there were three great evils in this century — communism, fascism, and indifference — and indifference is the deadliest of the three. That is easy to say. Think of all the choices that people made. Even the Vatican kept silent. All people had to do was to speak out. The Catholic Cardinal of Bulgaria made the choice to speak out. The SS came to him in Bulgaria and said, "We want you to round up the 3,000 Jews for deportation." When the train arrived, out came 3,000 non-Jewish Bulgarians led by the Cardinal. The SS said, "Where are the Jews?" The Cardinal said, "Jews are Bulgarians. You want Bulgarians, we are Bulgarians. Take us." The SS was so embarrassed that they pulled the train out. There were 42,000 Jews in Bulgaria at the beginning of

the war, and there were 46,000 when the war ended. It was one of the few nations that actively made a choice to help save people.

In studying the Holocaust, we learn about the choices we make. I had a similar choice when I was in those intelligence vaults and saw all the records of Nazi recruitment by the Central Intelligence Agency and other agencies. Quite frankly, I was told to keep quiet about this, not to mention it. The choice I made was to quit the government, to leave my nice job as a federal prosecutor, and sit down and write a book about what I had seen. I saw something down in those vaults that would haunt me for the rest of my life. When I was in the nuclear vaults, I stumbled across a diary stamped secret. It was written by a Jewish man named Sol who lived in that borderland between Poland and Russia. Today, we call it Belarus, but in the days before World War II, the Jewish people called it the Pale of Settlement. For several hundred years, there was a seventy-five mile wide strip of land between the borders where Jews were allowed to live. And you could go from Vilna to Minsk to Baranovitche to Pinsk, all the way down to Romania. Some of these cities and towns were ninety percent Jewish. The Pale was the most densely populated Jewish settlement on the face of the earth. Unfortunately for the Jews, they were right in the middle of Hitler's invasion path for Russia. When the German army came through, they did not have enough German soldiers to take care of the huge Jewish population. Consequently, they asked the local, non-Jewish citizens to serve as volunteers. People made choices.

One of the volunteers in charge of Sol's life was Dr. Stankievich, an educated man and doctor of humanities. It was ironic for the Jews, because they soon recognized Dr. Stankievich as the inventor of the sardine method of execution. Dr. Stankievich would have his police force and local collaborators round up the Jewish people and march them out to a road where ditches had been dug on either side. At gunpoint, the Jews would be forced to disrobe, climb in the ditches, and lay on top of each other head to toe. Stankievich arranged them in this manner so he could shoot through a double layer of bodies and save ammunition. A layer of dirt over the wounded, a double layer of bodies, a layer of dirt, and so on. However, the worst thing about the sardine method of execution was not discovered until after World War II when American Red Cross doctors conducted autopsies on the graves. They found no evidence of wounds on the smallest victims. Apparently, to save the price of a bullet, Dr. Stankievich ordered that the babies be buried alive.

As a reward for his efficiency, the SS promoted Dr. Stankievich and made him the mayor of Baranovitche, the second largest city in Belarus. That is where Sol lived. On the day that Dr. Stankievich arrived, there were 50,000 Jews in the ghetto of the central part of the city where Jews were being imprisoned. Six months later, there were only 5,000 Jews; the rest had been killed. Six months after that, only 500 Jews were alive to work as skilled laborers in Dr. Stankievich's concentration camp. Sol lost his wife, his 3 kids, and all 110 members of his family. Think about that. Every relative, every friend, every face he had known on earth had been murdered. This little Jewish barber did an amazing thing. Sol dug a tunnel under the Nazi concentration camp and led the last 126 Jews in a breakout. They made it to the swamps, as far as the fields of Russia, and joined up with other Jewish fugitives. They did not run away. Instead, they made a choice. Hundreds of miles behind Nazi lines, this tiny group of young Jews, some of them in their early twenties, organized into a partisan resistance brigade, called the Bielski's Brigade. They took up arms, went back, and fought against the men who had murdered their families. The young women in particular were so adept at blowing up railway lines that they crippled Hitler's supply trains to the Eastern Front.

Dr. Stankievich put a price of 10,000 marks on Sol's head. Six of Belarus's SS police battalions were assigned to track down the Jewish Brigade. At the end of World War II, Bielski's Brigade was the most highly decorated partisan unit on the entire Eastern Front. But there were only a few thousand survivors, and Sol was one of them. Sol remarried a young woman whose life he had saved during the breakout of the camp, and, by the end of the war, she was pregnant. Sol did not want to have his child grow up under Communism, so he and his young bride took up their rifles again, shot their way across the Russian border, and escaped across central Europe to Italy. They then immigrated to the United States.

When Sol got here, he did not put the past behind him. He sat down and wrote his memoirs about what had happened to the 50,000 Jews from his little corner of the world who would never be able to speak for themselves. Proudly, Sol took a copy of his manuscript to the United States government. Someone, somewhere in our State Department, stamped Sol's memoirs secret and then hid them down in the nuclear vaults where I stumbled across them four decades later. I knew within a little while what they were trying to hide. One of their anti-Communist freedom fighters, who the British secret service had recruited, was Dr. Stankievich. They

asked our State Department to hide him and we did. We brought Dr. Stankievich to New York and gave him a job as a broadcaster at Radio Liberty. You have to remember it was the McCarthy era, and nobody believed all the charges about war criminals in America. Dr. Stankievich told the State Department that he could find more freedom fighters. By 1952 the record showed Dr. Stankievich had relocated almost the entire Nazi government of Byelorussia to the little town of South River, New Jersey.

I could not believe the intelligence file. I actually had to go see for myself. I took a security detail, met with a local informant provided by the New Jersey State Police, and went to visit South River, New Jersey. It is an amazing place with a private cemetery for the Belarus SS. In the cemetery, there is a monument to the Nazi's president with his picture and title on it. Next to the local church is a monument to their SS division. To make things worse, all this time Sol had been living less than a half hour away. What a tragedy. Here is this heroic Jewish man who fought against the Nazis and Communists and came to America to find freedom, only to end up living in the shadow of the men who murdered his own kids. What would you do?

I knew it would be controversial, but I went to the assistant attorney general of the United States and asked permission to prosecute a British intelligence agent as a Nazi war criminal. I showed him the Stankievich file and permission was granted. Secretly, I ordered all the United States agencies to put a trace out for Sol as a key witness in the future trial of Dr. Stankievich, but everyone reported back no trace. Sol was missing and, in view of his age, had been presumed dead. It was terribly sad, but it did not stop my trial preparations. I had my staff run every Nazi document in the world that even mentioned Dr. Stankievich. It was an enormous research job, and Dr. Stankievich was ungrateful enough to die two weeks before we could bring charges against him. He died peacefully in bed, a citizen of the United States. There was a big sigh of relief in the British Embassy. The British government asked the American government to terminate further investigations of similar cases, because it was much too embarrassing for the British to dig up all their old Holocaust files. Better to let the Nazi's die of old age. I was ordered, for reasons of foreign policy, to stay out of the vaults and forget what I had seen. But how? How do you forget about someone like Sol?

I told the government that I would not participate in the cover up, and I resigned from the United States Department of Justice. I

sat down and wrote the manuscript of my first book. I dedicated the book to Sol, a Jewish man, who bore witness to the Holocaust, and to Meg, my newborn, so that she may never have to witness such a tragedy. My family has endured much criticism for the decision I made to keep fighting this battle, but we received one good thing out of it. After the *60 Minutes* show, I received a telephone call. I was told the government had made a huge mistake. It was Sol; he was still alive. My wife and I asked the old freedom fighter to keep his identity a secret, because he was an old man entitled to his privacy. Sol was still living less than a half hour away from the Nazi compound in South River, New Jersey. Apart from a few of my fellow prosecutors back at the Department of Justice, no one in America knew Sol, but they remembered him in Israel.

Years ago, the Israeli Secret Service tracked Sol down, and they flew him to Israel for the dedication of the Yad Vashem, the Israeli Museum of the Holocaust. Sol brought with him a picture that became part of the museum's collection. It is in our museum today, too. The photo, which shows a couple of rows of young Jewish men and women standing in a forest with crossed armbands full of ammunition and holding their rifles, is one of the most famous photographs of the era. The picture is titled, "A Jewish Resistance." Sol is in the front row, second from the right. Quite a guy. He lived an exemplary life.

I remember one day I was speaking to a group of high school students up in New Jersey of all places, and Sol came along. He was sitting in the audience. Nobody knew who he was. It was obvious from the questions I was getting that most of these students were of Eastern European descent, and their parents, church groups, and civic organizations had told them that the Holocaust did not happen. They thought that Germans may have killed a few Jews, but none of their people were involved — no Poles, no Ukrainians, no Russians. I tried to tell the students that the SS kept meticulous records. The armies in the Holocaust were not German, they were mostly local volunteers. They were men who got a kilo of sugar for every Jewish person they shot trying to escape. Sol told me the only German he ever saw was the commandant in his camp. Everyone else was one of Stankievich's local collaborators. I had all these documents, but the students did not want to see documents. Some of their parents had been there during World War II. They had not even been born then. They wanted a witness. Suddenly Sol stood up in the audience and said, "Tell them. Tell them who I am." He was

willing to sacrifice his anonymity, to risk his life again, to bear witness to the truth. It was an act of incredible courage.

I told my daughter Meg that there are still heroes in this world, because her father had met one. Sol made a choice to testify about the truth, and you have chosen to be here with us today. That is a very positive choice. Yours is the last generation on earth that will ever have the opportunity to meet with a Holocaust survivor. You are the hinge generation. Whichever way you go, that is how history will record it. Teach your children in the future that all of us, Jews, Gentiles, black, white, and brown, can never afford to let genocide come back again. It will always come back unless we work together to stop it. We have to make the right choices; we cannot be indifferent. I know from your very presence here today that you are people of courage, conscience, and commitment.