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Closing Remarks— The Next Fifty Years

By
Jakob Finci*

I cannot avoid starting with a short story:

A long time ago, the synagogue in Berlin tried to find a rabbi. Two rabbis from a small Polish shtetl took the train to Berlin to get the good job. One was a really wise rabbi, as rabbis can be; the other one, well, it is not polite to say of a rabbi that he was dumb, but he was not so good. Since you always know in advance what the topic in the synagogue and shul will be, the not so good rabbi asked the wise one during the trip what he would talk about. The wise rabbi told him everything. In Berlin, the community leaders drew up the list of who would speak on Friday evening, and who would go next on Saturday morning. The not so wise rabbi got the first chance and said absolutely everything that he heard from the other rabbi. Now, the wise rabbi spent all night thinking about what he could say. In the morning, he decided the best solution was to repeat absolutely everything. So, he repeated the same story. The board of the community then met to decide which one to choose. They chose the second one. First, he was as wise as the first one, and second, he repeated everything, which meant that he was a fast learner.

So I must also be a fast learner because almost all my lines have already been delivered during last evening's and today's discussions. I have really a very difficult task because it is not easy to find a summary for everything that we have heard here, or even to predict what topics would appear in a similar seminar in twenty or fifty years. I hope that the topics would not be similar to the one today—reparations and restitutions to the victims of different conflicts. I think we learn not only from the past, but also from this symposium, the following lesson: these compensations have been, so to speak, too little and too late. In the period between 1952 and 1990, almost nothing was done. Now, the real question is: is this a legal problem, or a political problem? It seems that in this case, when we are talking about reparations for victims of the Holocaust and of the Second World War in general, the reasons were mainly political.

It is clear that Jews in Eastern Europe were victims, first of the Nazis, who looted everything, and caused the disappearance of more than seventy percent of the Jewish population, and then, of the communists, who nationalized almost

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everything. When the Claims Conference, with the Americans, as we heard a few minutes ago, arranged reparations for the survivors, it was only for the survivors in Western Europe, the United States, and Israel, not for those in Eastern Europe. Now, when the average survivor's age is over eighty-one, it is a little bit too late to start to do anything. Maybe it is clear that the money is not an issue. I think that the German President Johannes Rau said rightly, "It is not really money that matters. What they want is for their suffering to be recognized as suffering and for the injustice done to them to be named injustice." That is the reason why, as we heard a few minutes ago, even the International Organization for Migration Holocaust Victim Assets Programme got a few of the questionnaires back empty with a letter saying, "Thank you, that's enough, we don't need the money."

In 1945, the world said, "Never again." Yet, the world has not been able to prevent atrocities, or to stop wars in the last fifty years. We have been witnesses to what happened in Croatia, in Bosnia, Rwanda, Chechnya, Kosovo, and who knows who is next. So I hope that in twenty or thirty years time, we will not again be discussing what to do with the victims of all these conflicts and whom we should blame for doing nothing. It is also clear that the Geneva Convention, and UN declarations and resolutions cannot help a lot. They are international instruments but, as always, it is a question of how you apply these instruments.

Now my question is, "What can help in this situation, what can help us to face reality, the reality in which we live today and with which we should live tomorrow?" The idea in Bosnia is to try with a truth and reconciliation commission. For war crimes, we have the tribunal in The Hague. The tribunal will take care of between 120 and 140 war criminals. This is not enough for the ordinary people, however. Many people on different sides suffered a great deal. All of them think that they are victims because, particularly in regard to the Balkans, victimhood is almost a myth. Everyone is ready to be a victim and no one is ready to take even the smallest part of responsibility. The war in Bosnia was stopped by the Dayton Peace Accords. After a war it is always the winners who write the history. In our case we do not have winners and losers. Maybe it is fair to say that we have three losers, and that each of them wrote their own history. Now we have three different histories in our country. Now we are teaching our children three different histories in which it is written that our neighbors are our enemies. When you teach your children that your neighbors are your enemies, what can you expect in twenty or thirty years but a new war? It is clear that so long as NATO forces led by the U.S. are on the ground, we will have peace in Bosnia. As long as the Bosnian government is fulfilling, at least formally, all the obligations from the Dayton peace accord, we will have some kind of financial help from international financial institutions.

Yet without reconciliation between the people in Bosnia, all this is of little use. That is the reason why reconciliation is so important. I know that the truth cannot always help. Sometimes truth is painful and will not lead us toward reconciliation, but at least we should have a forum for the people to say what happened to them; for them to realize that they are not the only victims, that the

victims have also been from the other side. At the same time, lots of people who were drafted into the army, and who are not war criminals because they were regular soldiers, need a place to say what they did during the war. In Bosnia, a general amnesty was granted to everyone except the war criminals, so the reason why people will appear in front of such a commission will not be to get amnesty, but just to say what happened to them, or what they did, and why they cannot sleep well at night.

This individual acceptance of responsibility will be one thing that will appear from all these testimonies. Naturally, we also have a huge third group, besides victims and perpetrators, which is people who helped others, who helped people from ethnic groups other than their own. Just because of that, they are treated as traitors within their own ethnic group. They too need a place where they can talk about the good deeds they did during the war.

I think that religion can be one of the vehicles toward reconciliation. It is written in each of the holy books of our respective religions in the region that we have to forgive our enemies. Maybe now is the time for religion in Bosnia to play a positive role. Unfortunately, during the war, while religion was not a *casus belli*, was not a reason for the war, religion was misused by the politicians. A lot of the clergy accepted this misuse, thinking that, "Whatever is good for my people is good for my religion." It is clear that a crime in the name of a religion is the greatest crime against a religion.

All the religious communities are ready to support this idea of reconciliation, together with many NGOs and political parties. Definitely, it will be on us, the people of Bosnia Herzegovina to do something for reconciliation. I think that the work of the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia will last for years and years, and that one day, the tribunal will be replaced by international criminal courts. This process is something which I think will last for years. Do not forget that the trials in Nuremberg were only the beginning of trials against the Nazi criminals. Three years ago there was the trial of Maurice Papon in France, two years ago that of Erich Priepke in Italy, and a year ago the trial of Dinko Šakić in Croatia. So, fifty-five years after the Second World War, these trials are continuing. Maybe something similar will happen for the war crimes in Bosnia Herzegovina and in the former Yugoslavia. It is clear, however, that we, or at least I, do not have fifty years to wait. We should do whatever is possible to compress the time and to reach some kind of reconciliation in a much shorter period.

When I was a law student, a long time ago unfortunately, one professor told us that a speech should last only so long as you can stand on one leg. This is as long as I can stand on one leg. Thank you for your attention.

