

The Curators of Tomorrow

Emil Sher

Our people was consumed by fire. And the world is unchanged. The ash of human skeletons emits no odor. The atmosphere of the world is not contaminated. Our bread is fresh; our sugar is sweet. The scream of millions of victims of the crematoria were never transmitted over the radio waves. Hush, quiet; nothing ever happened. If we still had a heart, then it has turned to stone. I often sit and wonder: perhaps our souls went up in flames along with their bodies in Majdanek and Auschwitz.

— Abraham Joshua Heschel

Sweet Sophie and Molly,

Today is International Holocaust Remembrance Day, marking the date — January 27, 1945 —when Auschwitz-Birkenau was liberated by the Red Army. There will be ceremonies, speeches, recollections and calls to action. It is sobering and moving but by dusk the sun will drop and then disappear, taking a day's worth of public sorrow and private pain with it. Tomorrow morning passengers will step onto wheezing buses and pigeons will peck sidewalks and coffee will be brewed and life will go on, as it should, as it must.

I want this day to be more than just a day of somber reflection. I keep circling back to *Funeral Blues*, the W.H. Auden poem that's better known as *Stop All the Clocks*. Auden calls for pianos to be silenced and dogs to be bribed with juicy bones to stifle their barks. If you have seen *Four Weddings and a Funeral* you would have heard it recited in a poignant scene when a young gay man mourns the passing of his lover. A bit of digging revealed *Funeral Blues* was originally written as a satirical poem. I find myself plucking Auden's words and planting them into my vision for International Holocaust Remembrance Day.

On this day clocks the world over stop ticking. Rivers stop flowing. Flowers refuse to bloom. Not a single bird takes flight.

The unearthly stillness is filled with the haunting voices that were extinguished in the Holocaust. The gurgles of impossibly young infants, the laughter of children chasing a ball, a young couple whispering between urgent kisses, a woman tossing a key to her sister on the street below, an old woman reading a beloved book to a husband with failing eyesight.

Hush, quiet; nothing ever happened.

On this day I want everyone to be stopped in mid-step, mid-sentence, mid-forkful by the shock of what happened.

Heschel was right. Our people went up in flames and the world is unchanged. Not to mention unscarred. Can I borrow that prefix for a few more words? Untouched comes to mind, as does unknown. As in: the Holocaust is unknown to untold millions. This thought leaves me dispirited: those who deny the Holocaust are vastly outnumbered by those who don't know it ever happened in the first place.

I'm dispirited but not down for the count. You know me: an incorrigible optimist. (I know that can be maddening, that there are days when you want to pour that half-full glass over my head).

How do we change our unchanged world? Can we change it?

That's the sound of a plaintive shrug, accompanied by a wind section sigh.

That would be my shrug and my sigh. That I refuse to surrender to despair doesn't mean I'm willing to dance over and around harsh truths.

Here's a thought.

On this day — and on other random days throughout the year — cell phones the world over would vibrate with texts and photographs the likes of which we have never seen from people we have never met. A selfie from cattle cars crammed with frightened Jews, rumbling toward

Auschwitz. A text from a child cowering in a sewer in Lodz as Nazis march above. An Instagram shot of corpses piled like kindling on a horse-drawn cart.

Imagine how unsettling and unnerving these messages, these pleas would be. It would be like sugar suddenly tasting unbearably bitter or a loaf of warm bread turning to granite the moment it's sliced. Utterly confounded, we would crave an explanation. That could be the final text of the day. *The world didn't change when a fire fuelled by hatred turned Jews into ash. The world is changeable. Change it.*

Heschel laments how there were no microphones by the crematoria. Instead, ribbons of black smoke unfurled from the chimneys at Auschwitz with a finger-pointing silence. Some days I feel I'm trapped inside Edvard Munch's haunting painting: all scream, no sound.

Desperate texts and damning photographs from Jews on the brink of extinction is a fantasy. I want to live in a world where we don't need stopped clocks to stop us in our tracks. May dogs always bark and laughter flow and playground swings carve arcs in the air.

On this day of remembrance I'm struggling to find a workable balance. If we stand on rooftops each and every day and shout out the need to remember, to reflect, well, after a while those shouts become background noise. So what can be done to chip away at a stone-hard heart?

The first step is to humanize the horror, to name the ashes. At past Seders I have woven in the names of the family members killed in the Holocaust. These would have been your great-aunts and uncles, your cousins three-times removed. In this case, the word 'removed' is more than just about genealogy. It is at the heart of all genocides: to remove, to erase.

Otilia and Jacob Lustgarten, and their two children, Rutie and Freddy.

Helena.

Henry and Lola, and their daughter, Dorothy.

Stefania and Stefan.

Did Otilia have a favorite author, a favorite spot where she surrendered to the pleasures of a good book? How did Jacob take his coffee? Was there a pastry he loved to eat between sips? What did Rutie want to be when she grew up? Who did Freddy horse around with after school? What was Helena's oldest memory of her mother? Did Lola have a term of endearment for Henryk? How did young Dorothy spend a rainy day? Where was Stefania when she felt the first pang of love for Stefan? Did she tell one of her sisters before she told him? Who was within earshot of Stefan when he took his last breath?

The answers have been extinguished.

Some days I find myself treading in a sea of despair, gazing at a grim sky that rainbows can't redeem, bobbing in a world indifferent to the past, home to the disinterested, to the blissfully and wilfully ignorant, as if we were born detached from all who came before us and not stitched to a family narrative that is older than the Torah, the Bible, the Koran. A baby takes her first breath, and exhales the history of a hundred generations. And just as a newborn latches onto a breast, I avoid drowning by clinging to stories, saved by the ones who hold them like lifelines.

It has been years since you have seen my adaptation of *Hana's Suitcase* so I don't expect you to recall any specific lines. There is one bit of dialogue I hope you will carry with you as you hold your grandchildren in your arms: "Stories can die if there's no one to tell them."

Every family needs its own museum, for better or worse. You arrived with your tiny hands clutching the keys to ours.

Wear the past like a second skin. Remember that change is incremental. Take comfort — an uneasy comfort — from the knowledge that a single, heartbreaking photograph changed the course of history ever so slightly. When the body of three-year old Alan Kurdi washed up on a

beach in Turkey the Syrian refugee crisis suddenly had a name and wore a red shirt, blue shorts and palm-sized running shoes. The September 2015 photograph by journalist Nilufer Demir made its way around the world and changed Canadian policy seemingly overnight. The number of refugees we would take in went from 10,000 to 25,000. This is the same country that was home to an immigration agent who famously replied, in 1939, when asked how many Jews should be allowed into Canada after the war: “None is too many.”

And what if, after the ovens of Auschwitz were fired up for the first time, everyone the world over woke up the next morning with singed eyebrows. Would it have made a difference?

Best not to expend energy on what might have been. On this day, remember what happened. Remember our people, and the fire that left the world charred but unchanged. You are the curators of tomorrow. Protect the stories you have been bequeathed. Breathe them. Be them. Share them.

Remember that stories can break hearts of stone and turn them into dust, dust where you can write the names that need to be named.

Author and playwright Emil Sher writes for readers and audiences of all ages. His works include *Young Man with Camera*, a young adult novel, and acclaimed stage adaptations of *Hana's Suitcase* and *The Boy in the Moon*. He is currently writing a play commissioned by Seattle's ACT Theatre based on the true story of imprisoned Jewish teens who created a secret magazine in the midst of the Holocaust.