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The Difference Between Holocaust and Genocide

Violence inflicted by mankind upon mankind is nothing new. There have been many tragedies throughout our long history, including several in this century alone: the artificial famine in Ukraine, the prisons of Stalin, the terror of Idi Amin, and the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, to name a few. But is anything more terrifying than the brutalities inflicted by Nazi Germany against those that it classified as its enemies? It cannot be denied that the Nazis believed that they had many "enemies": for example, people from over twenty different countries were imprisoned in Auschwitz alone. But does a shared suffering, if not a shared fate, mean equality among the victims?

FORUM

JOHN A. DROBNICKI

Some might say that it is obscene to argue about who suffered more at the hands of the Nazis. But like it or not, there are groups arguing, and it has even appeared in these very pages. Many Polish groups have begun fighting for the recognition of the suffering of the Poles at the hands of Nazi Germany, implying, and in some cases even stating, that Poles and Jews were co-victims of the Holocaust. Does the fact that several million Poles were killed during World War II mean that they suffered as much as, less than, or more than the Jews? And what of the Roma (Gypsies)? Ian Hancock has written that "the Nazis would have gassed six million Gypsies too, if there had been six million Gypsies." And how about the homosexuals and the "mental defectives" that also suffered under Hitler? Is there a difference between Holocaust and genocide?

What makes the Jewish Holocaust unique is that an entire bureaucratic apparatus was created to define who they were, where they should live or be forced to live, and eventually, to see that they would live no more. This was not murder as a byproduct of war, not casualties as a result of skirmishes or partisan activities, but the end-result of an ideology that had for years been calling Jews vermin and also calling for

their destruction. This was a sophisticated machine, an industry developed to exterminate first and foremost the Jews of Europe. For example, although Auschwitz was not built to kill Jews, Jews became its primary victims: 1.35 of the 1.6 million killed there, according to Yehuda Bauer.

It is true that had the war lasted longer, the Poles probably would have shared the fate of the Jews. But it did not. We do not know what might have been, but only what was.

Of course, no one can deny the terrible treatment of the Poles by Nazi Germany, and by the Soviet Union—and the purpose of this article is not to diminish the suffering of the Poles. Poland had been wiped from the map and was in effect one large prison camp, where the penalty for helping Jews was death. Those Poles who helped Jews deserve our praise. Sitting here comfortably fifty years later, we cannot condemn those Poles who did not help Jews because we have no idea what they themselves were going through, trying to ensure their own survival and their families' survival.

To say that the Poles were not co-victims with the Jews in the Holocaust is not to say that the Poles were not victims of attempted genocide. But are genocide and Holocaust the same thing? The Jewish tragedy was unique in that even though all victims were not Jews, all Jews were victims (if they were caught). The same thing cannot be said of anyone except the Roma. In fact, a "Gypsy" was someone who had at least two great-grandparents who were Gypsies, an even stricter classification than that applied to Jews.

Many Jews tried to escape the terrible fate that awaited them by disguising themselves as non-Jews. Did any non-Jews try to survive in Nazi-occupied Poland by disguising themselves as Jews? Wearing a crucifix did not ensure a 100% chance of survival, but the odds were certainly better than if one was wearing a yellow Star-of-David. Yes, Poles and Jews suffered at the hands of the Nazis, but they suffered, in the words of Yisrael Gutman, two "separate frightfulnesses."