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### An Unanswered Letter, An Unanswered Call for Help: What the Holocaust Shows Us About Caring Enough to Take Action

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# **An Unanswered Letter, An Unanswered Call for Help: What the Holocaust Shows Us About Caring Enough to Take Action**

Thank you so much for having me here today, and especially to everyone on the organizing committee and who shared such moving readings and songs. I'm deeply honored to speak to share some of the story of the late Lou Frydman, who is the subject along with Polish resistance fighter Jarek Piekalkiewicz in my book *Needle in the Bone: How a Holocaust Survivor and Polish Resistance Fighter Beat the Odds and Found Each Other*. What Lou and Jarek would say echoes all of what we're contemplating today, especially what Rep. Paul Davis read from Elie Wiesel: "We must take sides," and from caring enough, we must take action.

I want to share with you warning signs of the Holocaust, on the personal and global levels, that went unheeded, and what we can learn from these answered calls.

## **1. An Unanswered Letter**

When Lou Frydman began sharing with me his oral history of the Holocaust, he started with me the most important letter he ever received: one his mother Rywa Frydman wrote 70 years ago and which Lou only received a copy of a decade ago. He was thrilled to see his mother's handwriting as she wrote to a family friend, imploring her to help place Lou and his brother Abe in Christian homes where they could be hidden for the war. The letter was probably written in March or April of 1943 when the Frydmans lived in the Warsaw Ghetto between years in hiding, and either death or concentration camps.

Rywa Frydman wrote with heart-breaking candor, "The world belongs to the brave, but I have lost my bravery, my nerve, with everything else. I have especially lost my trust in people....Thirty-two of us live in one room, sleeping on tables....it is not possible to go out to the street. We are with people who have, in most cases, lost most of their family members. They are demoralized, have no faith in anything, no longer even feel any pain. It is difficult to live in such surroundings." She went on to ask,

Regarding our placement, the truth is that I would like all of us to live together. Why should my fate be better than anyone else's? On the other hand, one would like to live. The world is so nice.

If you could place Lolek (Lou) by himself and me and Aba (her husband) together, I would never leave the house at all, but I would like to be assured that those around knew

of my family situation. Please kindly take care of this matter as I think that this is likely to be my last request of you. I worry that we may not succeed as time is fast running out. Whatever you can do, dear lady, please do it now – let's have a clear conscience that everything was done that could have been done. Beyond this, I feel at peace. I hold no ill feelings toward anyone.....At this moment I have become very emotional and am crying like an old lady. I have received so much kindness from you and I believe I have not deserved it – this causes me much pain.

We don't know if the dear friend actually received this letter, sent a reply that didn't arrive in time, or, fearing for her own life (as Poles who helped Jews were regularly sent to concentration camps or shot) didn't answer at all. But we do know that on April 28, 1943, the final residents of the Warsaw Ghetto were ferreted out of the 600 underground bunkers and other hiding places. They shipped to Treblinka to be gassed to death, or toward other camps to mostly die and, very rarely, survive. Lou's father Chaim Mejer Frydman was shot that day along with the other men from the bunker where his family had hidden with other 400 other Jews. Rwya Frydman went to a concentration camp, where she was killed. Lou and Abe, only 13 and 14 years at the time, went onto six concentration camps, starting with one of the most brutal, and three death marches, until, two years later, they found their way toward freedom and a new life. They were the only ones not murdered during out of dozens of people in their large and loving family.

## **2. Warning Signs**

When it comes to any genocide, and especially the Holocaust -- which was the most mechanized, planned-out, coldly calculated genocide in our history -- we need ask how this could have happened. In the case of the Holocaust, the warning signs were incremental, starting with Hitler stripping Jews of their rights, starting in 1933, in what seemed like a nonsensical pattern. Each small change conditioned the Jews to believe if they could just make it through the next incremental insult, they might survive. After 1933, when political demonstrations were first banned in Germany and the Nazis opened Dachau for their political opponents, each month brought new changes. In 1934, Germany began to sterilize people the Nazis considered "unfit." That same year, Jews were forbidden to act in theaters or grow vegetables. Jews were soon forbidden to own property, swim or buy milk. After Kristallnacht, when mobs were encouraged by German police and to smash the windows of Jewish businesses and burn synagogues to the ground, the German government began sending Jews to concentration camps as well as expelling Jewish children from German school and "aryanizing" - turning over to non-Jews - all Jewish businesses. The same year, Jews in Dresden were forbidden, oddly enough, to own combs or to cut flowers.

The overall state of denial, even among the victims, speaks to how the Holocaust's impossibility – or at least, its supposed impossibility – turned into the systematic annihilation.

Put into action by extensive coordination between government agencies, this denial made killing easy, almost second nature, for those involved. Furthermore, because it tended to traumatize German soldiers to shoot hundreds of Jews each day, the mechanized gas chambers took hold, often staffed by concentration camp prisoners who would lead new arrivals in, and afterwards, remove and sort any remaining valuables for the Nazis.

Yet there's another element that Lou pointed out to me that was essential to the plan: the power of the group. Lou said that Hitler succeeded in making the German people feel like they belonged. That sense of belonging is key, connecting people to a common identity. From sharing such a strong sense of belonging and purpose, it's easier for one people to dehumanize another people, to see them as less than livestock or manufactured products; as only a problem to be eliminated.

We just celebrated Passover, a holiday based on a story of oppression and liberation in which Pharaoh hardened his heart against the plight of the Jews. A hardened heart is what fueled the machinery of mass murder and the heartbreak for generations for come. A hardened heart -- playing out in indifference or hatred, turning away from those in pain or turning toward them with anger -- allows us to distance from the reality of other people's very real and beating hearts.

### **3. An Unanswered Call**

“Let me tell you a story,” Lou says. “In 1975, Jane and I visited the death camps, including Treblinka, where most of the Jews from Warsaw were gassed. To get to Treblinka, at least to where the gas chambers were, you had to pass over an inland bridge. It wasn't over water. If this bridge were destroyed, Treblinka would be useless until they could rebuild it. It would take them years. The Underground never touched the bridge, but neither did the damn Allies.”

This story is one of many. The Underground government of Poland, while very effective at damaging the German war effort, and even more so, the Allies, hardly ever liberated a camp, nor attacked a transport so that people could escape.

Lou continues, “With Dachau, the camp I was liberated from [at the end of the war], the American troops were sent in by accident.....We were written off. We were prematurely dead. Nobody expected us to survive.”

In the end, there were only verbal protests. The U.S. Government held that planes to

bomb the camps couldn't be spared, asserting that "such an effort, even if practicable, might provoke even more vindictive [acts] by the Germans," in the words of John J. McCloy, the U.S. Assistant Secretary of War. Other fighters in this conflict, while sympathetic to the plight of the Jews in ghettos and camps, were focused on their own agendas.

Lou went on to tell me, "In fact, Hitler, in one of his speeches, in 1939 or 1940, commented on it. He said, 'Look, nobody will cry for what we are doing to them.'" Lou showed me documentation of a British diplomat who said the Jews were the Nazi's responsibility, and the Allies shouldn't interfere.

What Lou says is confirmed by my research. "The terrible truth was that in ten crucial years, 1933-1943, there were over 400,000 unfilled places within U.S. immigration quotas for refugees from countries under Hitler's rule. Each place unfilled was a sentence of death for a European Jew." According to the United States Holocaust Museum and other statistics I've found, many countries turned away from taking on refugees who might have escaped the gas chambers had their visas been approved.

There is ample research to show just how much the Allied governments knew about the Holocaust, and just how little was done. There are millions of people -- including very likely one third to one half of all Germans, according to research, who knew what was happening and didn't intervene. While the whole tangle of unheeded calls is infinitely complex, the result is simply horrendous. We know that approximately 9 million people died in concentration camps, 6 million of whom were Jews, and even those who survived carried and carry within them galaxies of loss.

#### **4. Heeding the Warning Signs: Answering the Call**

"Wherever men and women are persecuted because of their race, religion, or political views, that place must – at that moment – become the center of the universe," as Elie Wiesel said and Rep. Davis shared with us. Answering the call also means stepping into the center of the universe: into what makes us human, into our birthright to care for each other and live with dignity. "The world belongs to the brave," Rwyra Frydman wrote in her unanswered letter, and also, "One would like to live. The world is so nice." The world is so nice, despite and because of that space that lies between devastation and the life force.

Educating ourselves, in greater depth over time, about what humans are capable of at their worst, and what signs to heed as well as wonders to protect, is part of what makes us our best.

“What do you want people to know about the Holocaust?” I ask Lou.

“Everything! As much as possible.”

Yet learning what we can, grasping what we're capable of grasping, and considering deeply the best course of action for the good of all must come first from opening our hearts, however hardened they've become, to seeing others as precious and alive, and through this vision, as part of who we are. Only through cultivating such compassion can we find the necessary clarity to see what is and what is needed, and the essential courage to speak, act and live with integrity for ourselves and dignity for all.

As Christians, as Jews, as Moslems, as Hindus, as Buddhists and as members of other faith traditions, and as Republicans or Democrats or Independents, we must overcome what divides us to step into the center of the universe at such crucial times. To get there, and to stay there, especially when it means working with others who have different perspectives than us, we are called upon to unhardened our hearts so we can care enough to speak to injustice, speak for those who cannot speak for themselves, and speak up for life. Let's not leave such calls for help unanswered.