

Remembering through Your Gut

Written by Mukesh Kapila

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

Remembering through Your Gut

<https://www.e-ir.info/2015/02/02/remembering-through-your-gut/>

MUKESH KAPILA, FEB 2 2015

The first General Assembly of the United Nations – born out of the horrors of the Second World War – met in January 1946 in London's Central Hall at Westminster. After being welcomed by British Prime Minister Clement Attlee to "this ancient home of liberty and order", the UN's first session was impressively industrious. It passed 103 resolutions on matters that are still very much on the world agenda. Resolution 1 was on the problem raised by the discovery of atomic energy and resolution 103 concerned persecution and discrimination. In between, the founding nations ruled on the extradition and punishment of war criminals (R3), decided on steps to convene the International Court of Justice (R21), considered the declaration on fundamental human rights and freedoms (R43), affirmed the principles of international law recognised by the charter of the Nuremberg Tribunal (R95), and started the debate that led to a convention against genocide (R96).

Even before the UN, the Suffragettes had used Central Hall to campaign for the vote for women and Mahatma Gandhi had called for India's freedom. Later on, the Dalai Lama and Martin Luther King Jr. had appealed to the world's conscience from under its huge dome – reputedly the biggest unsupported ceiling in Europe.

"But does anyone remember any of that?" I wonder as I sit there on 27th January, a guest of the splendid Holocaust Memorial Day Trust waiting for HRH Prince of Wales and other dignitaries to arrive amidst the tight security that is a hallmark of our times. This Holocaust commemoration is special, marking also the 70th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz.

The mood is suitably dignified and focuses rightly on the unimaginable suffering of the victims of the Nazis and the courage of the survivors. But my neighbour Miriam unsettles me. "I am a third-generation victim", she announces as the choir, conducted by Simon Wallfisch, grandson of Holocaust survivor and member of the Auschwitz Girls' Orchestra Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, strikes up. Is victimhood inherited? And was Miriam bringing up her children as fourth-generation victims? Surely this is not what is meant by "keeping the memory alive"? But when I quiz her, she simply says, "they still hate us. Anti-Semitism never went away. Look at what happened in Paris", referring to the Charlie Hebdo incident. Sadly, I agree that she may be right.

My other neighbour is Asif, a British Muslim leader. "I am a victim too", he whispers, and "why is our government creating more divisions by its policies". We will have many more victims then – on all sides". He refers to the arc of conflict spanning the Islamic world from Pakistan to Palestine, and the rising anti-Muslim sentiment in Europe. Reluctantly, I agree that he too may be right.

David Cameron moves solemnly to the podium. "As Prime Minister, I will ensure that we will keep Britain's promise to remember: today, tomorrow, and for every generation to come", he says, announcing £50 million for a national Holocaust memorial and education centre. My head agrees with him but I have to make a conscious effort to put away any unworthy comparison with the alleged offering of cakes by Marie Antoinette to the starving, abused peasantry of French history.

My friend Suliman from Sudan comments during the reception, "Ah... a new memorial. How does it help the genocides of today? Your Prime Minister said nothing about new policies to combat the longest running genocide in Darfur. Should we also start planning for our own memorial?" I agree with his anger. We appear to have forgotten

Remembering through Your Gut

Written by Mukesh Kapila

that the best way to honour the victims of past atrocities and to prevent their future recurrence is to act in the present. When I say this to a senior government civil servant he mutters, "Easier said than done". I agree with his realism even as I despise his spinelessness.

Waylaid by schoolchildren who want an interview for their project, I learn two shocking facts. First, two-thirds of all discriminatory abuse incidents in UK occur in primary schools. Second, most secondary school pupils can't name a single genocide. I agree with their teacher that you are never too young to learn to hate, and never too old to learn to love.

That message is reinforced by 91 year-old Auschwitz survivor Iby Knill during our preceding BBC TV Big Questions debate on whether it is time to lay Holocaust memories to rest? She argues strongly for reconciliation. I agree but wonder if this is possible without justice. And I am struck by my interactions with genocide survivors from the Holocaust to Darfur via Rwanda, Cambodia, and Srebrenica: why are they often the most forgiving while those around them the most condemnatory? Perhaps their healing helps them to manage their memories in a different way?

The previous day I had visited the National Holocaust Centre. Its remarkable Journey Exhibition allows you to time-travel back to share the experience of Jewish children facing Nazi persecution. The story of the Kinder transport that brought 10,000 to Britain is rightly celebrated. But the small print reveals that the UK government only agreed to let in the children without their parents and on the condition that their care costs were covered by private citizens or aid organisations.

I am accompanied by a Californian film crew making a documentary. In case they become too smug, I say, "You Americans are world saviours? Remember that for most of the war, your government was squabbling internally (as subsequently released papers indicate) on how not to 'annoy Mr Hitler'; thus, by the time the United States entered the war, two-thirds of the 11 million Jews and others slaughtered were already dead". It seems that remembering the past has to be done selectively in order to be palatable.

As I leave Central Hall that evening, I am in a strange mood brought on by the unusual (for me) stress of agreeing with everybody I had met. It has all been good and dignified. Why, then, am I a touch heavy-hearted? Because it has been just a little bit too reasonable and cosy?

Then I remember a quotation from survivor Arek Hersch: "What hurts the victim most is not the cruelty of the oppressor, but the silence of the bystander". At last, I can agree fully with someone – not on grounds of reason – but viscerally. That then is *why* and *how* we must remember.

About the author:

Mukesh Kapila CBE is Professor Emeritus of Global Health and Humanitarian Affairs at the University of Manchester. He is a former Director at the World Health Organization and the United Nations.