



HELSINKI COMMISSION HEARING

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SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

Testimony :: Mark Weitzman

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Mr. Chairman, Members of the Commission,

Any discussion that attempts to shed light on antisemitism must do so in the shadows of the Holocaust, the most extreme manifestation of antisemitism in our, or any, time. This is not to say we must dwell in the past, but that the past does create our present.

Just last week I had the privilege of once again representing the Simon Wiesenthal Center and being a part of the US delegation so ably headed by Ambassador Edward O'Donnell and his staff, to the biannual meetings of the International Task Force for Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research. This Task Force was originally set up in the wake of the conference convened in Stockholm, by Prime Minister Goran Persson of Sweden in 2000. It began with eight member countries who pledged to cooperate and encourage education about the Holocaust in Europe and elsewhere. In the words of the declaration from that conference "We share a commitment to encourage the study of the Holocaust in all its dimensions... to plant the seeds of a better future amidst the soil of a bitter past."

The good news is that today membership in the Task Force has grown to almost twenty countries. The bad news, however, is that the current rise in antisemitism has created a climate in which even teaching about the Holocaust has become a matter of controversy and concern.

Some examples should suffice to illustrate this alarming trend. In Sweden, a major newspaper published an article which suggested that instead of taking students to Auschwitz, to see where Jews were murdered by Nazis, the students should now be sent to Bethlehem to see where Jews are currently murdering Arabs. In Holland, the home of Anne Frank, a ceremony commemorating the Second World War was disrupted by students who chanted "Hamas, Hamas, Jews to the gas" In France, the situation was so bad that last year the minister of education had to make a major statement that disrupting the teaching of the Holocaust, along with other forms of antisemitism would no longer be tolerated. And in Germany, where the Third Reich originated, some teachers report that they are now hesitant and fearful to introduce the Holocaust into their classrooms.

Throughout Europe, in countries which suffered the most under the Nazis, who should be the most invested in educating to prevent any resurgence of Nazism, we see that very education

challenged on political grounds and itself becoming a flashpoint for antisemitism. This is no accident. Those who have a stake in spreading antisemitism know that a school is as important as a government ministry.

Today, there is much talk about the “new antisemitism”. Antisemitism, however, reflects the values of its period. Medieval Christendom had a religiously based antisemitism, while the scientific advances of the late 19th and early 20th centuries developed the concept of “racial science” that legitimized antisemitism and racism. Similarly, the economic boom and depression of the early 20th century helped create the space for the conspiracy theories of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, with its alleged Jewish plot to take over the world.

After the Holocaust, all these versions of antisemitism were repudiated by Western democratic society, and were preserved only in the extremes, or in the Communist and Arab worlds. Today however, we can see all these manifestations of antisemitism in their newest version, folded under the cloak of antizionism, and defended as a form of legitimate political discourse.

Israel, and thus all Jews are the now the new Nazis, murdering the Christ like figure of Yasser Arafat (as in some Italian political cartoons). In this mythology they have constructed concentration camps and even gas chambers, to use on the innocent Arabs. Jews have plotted and planned events ranging from 9/11 to the war in Iraq to the introduction of AIDS and SARS. And all this has been done to help create the climate in which that state of Israel, that tiny state the size of New Jersey could exist and through its surrogate, the US, with its military and economic power, control the entire world.

Thus, the new language of antisemitism is political, because that is the prevalent discourse of our times. And, the more that a government abdicates the responsibility for clearly repudiating the antisemitism that is apparent on both the elite and mass levels, the more that government allows and legitimizes antisemitism. In that vein, the Simon Wiesenthal Center has asked the governments of Greece and Ireland to publicly repudiate the antisemitic and neo-fascist LAOS party of Greece, after the election of its head to the European Parliament. Furthermore, we have asked the government of Greece to publicly condemn the stream of antisemitic invective that has become a regular feature in the Greek media.

If antisemitism is not challenged, it becomes acceptable. That is why we published the first full length refutation of the Protocols, entitled Dismantling the Big Lie, because this forgery lives on in both the charter of Hamas and in some circles of the Orthodox Church in Russia. And that is also why we produce and distribute our cd-rom report, Digital Hate and Terrorism 2004, which draws on our database of over 4,000 extremist web sites, in various languages and from all around the world. And, in our Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles, and our newly opened New York Tolerance Center, our Tools for Tolerance Program works with professional such as educators and over 100, 000 law enforcement and criminal justice personnel, to train them in bringing fresh perspectives to redefine personal responsibility and social action.

NGO's, like ourselves and the others represented here today, can help to identify the problems and to suggest possible solutions. But, ultimately, it is governments who represent nations, and

who set the tone for how their country will be perceived.

Far from being apathetic, governments can, and must, be active participants in the fight against antisemitism. They can, like France, work with NGO's like the Simon Wiesenthal Center and others in the fight against extremism on the internet. They must, in Germany, reject short-sighted legislation that could cut off funding to Holocaust memorial sites, such as concentration camps. They should not build memorials to the SS, in the name of a misguided nationalism, as Latvia did, but they should, like Latvia, France, Germany and all the other members of the International Task Force on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research, pledge themselves to use Holocaust education as a way of influencing the future. And, they must join initiatives, as the 55 member states of the OSCE did last April in Berlin, to commit themselves as active partners in the fight against antisemitism. As a member of ODIHR's Advisory Panel on Freedom of Religion and Belief, I look forward to assisting those efforts.

And, they must push the UN to not allow itself to continue to be a place where some countries use antisemitism as policy. Next Monday's U.N. conference on antisemitism represents a welcome first step in this direction. But the rejection of antisemitism by the U.N. must become a matter of practice and accountability, not just of isolated conferences and individual expressions of concern.

Years ago Simon Wiesenthal expressed the fear that we would "repeat the old mistakes under new conditions... (that) we are afraid to mobilize right against wrong". If the Holocaust has any lesson, it is precisely that we cannot stand by while antisemitism and other forms of bigotry take root. And, as our representatives, it is the role and responsibility of government to take the lead in that regard. Their silence can condemn the world; their protest can save it.