

# To Be Human In a Place Where There Is No Humanity

**Sermon by Rabbi George Gittleman  
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In Jewish communities around the world, people are gathering tonight to remember those murdered by the Nazis during World War II.

Commemorations will vary, but most will light candles as memorials to the slain, hear the words of survivors, pray and yes, there will be music of some kind or another. When I was asked by Alan Silow, the Executive Director of the Symphony to introduce the concert this evening, I hesitated for a moment wondering if my place was more in my own congregation than here with you this evening.

But it is a mistake to think of the Holocaust as something only of concern to the Jewish community. It is true that we were the Nazi's main victims and one can not overstate the unimaginable trauma they inflicted on us — over six million slaughtered, whole worlds wiped off the face of the earth. It is also true that the Nazi's killed approximately five million others — homosexuals, Roma (Gypsies), the disabled, political prisoners, religious people of conscience and others. Five million, close to the population of the entire Bay Area. Remembering the Holocaust calls attention to the most painful truth: genocide is a universal human problem. There were genocides before the Shoah — the Native Americans in this country and the Armenians in Turkey, for example, and sadly, there have been a number of genocides since World War II — Cambodia, Bosnia, Rwanda and now, Darfur.

After World War II, a phrase arose in the Jewish Community — “Never Again!” “Never Again,” we proclaimed, would such a thing happen to us. “Never Again.” The phrase, “Never Again” is only truly meaningful, truly moral if it includes all people everywhere. To confront the Shoah is to confront the radical evil of genocide, a dark stain on the universal human heart. Until genocide is no more, we are all vulnerable, we are all responsible.

One of the cruel truths of genocide that was made horribly manifest in the Holocaust is the attempt, on the part of the perpetrators, to steal away every bit of the humanity from their victims; to brutalize them into oblivion. Some 2,000 years ago, a Jewish sage named Hillel, the greatest rabbi of his day, taught, “In a place where no one is human, one should strive to be human.” (Pirke Avot 2:5) This ancient teaching offers us a way to understand how and why the four composers who's music we will hear tonight worked as they did under the most difficult of circumstances.

“In a place where no one is human, one should strive to be human.” We see in these four composers and in many others in the camps, various forms of resistance, heroic attempts to be human in a place where there was no humanity, where every effort was made to deny them the most basic elements of what it means to be, b'nei adam, a human being. To be human is to care

for others. To be human is to learn, to teach, to pray, to sing, to create, to remember the past and to believe in the promise of the future. All this happened in the camps in spite of the constant threat of death, horrible violence, starvation, degradation, and disease.

A few examples:

Lillian Judd lives here in Santa Rosa. She is also a survivor of Auschwitz. She is a personal friend and hero of mine. She tells this story:

She was a slave laborer in a sewing factory. The workers there had to meet a certain quota every day or else... The Jewish Holy Day of Yom Kippur was coming and she and a few others decided that they would try not to work that day, but how? They made a few garments beyond their quota every day for a week and stashed them where no one could see them. On the day of Yom Kippur they would act like they were working but in fact they would not actually do the work and they would still meet their quota.

Yom Kippur came; they did their best not to work. In the end they were caught and beaten within an inch of their lives. Their plan failed but in a small way, they were redeemed by their heroic choice to assert their humanity.

“In a place where no one is human, one should strive to be human” Another example: Years ago I ran across a most unusual cookbook called, *In Memory’s Kitchen*. It was filled with recipes written by the woman interned at Theresienstadt; a cookbook written by women who were literally being starved to death. In spite of their hunger these women labored to leave a “memoir,” through food, a compilation of traditional dishes, of “dream” recipes, a cookbook not for cooking, but for remembering a time when the authors had children and husbands to feed, and reasons to feast and celebrate. This original manuscript, a hand-sewn notebook full of faltering script, is preserved in the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. Michael Berenbaum, the renowned Holocaust scholar, writes in his forward to the book:

“For some the way to deal with this hunger was to repress the past, to live on only in the present, to think only of today, neither yesterday, nor tomorrow. Not so the women who compiled this cookbook. They talked of the past, they dared to think of food, to dwell on what they were missing... therefore, this cookbook compiled by women in Theresienstadt, by starving women in Theresienstadt, must be seen as yet another manifestation of defiance, of a spiritual revolt against the harshness of given conditions. As such, this work... is not to be savored for its culinary offerings but for the insight it gives us into the extraordinary capacity of the human spirit to transcend its surroundings and to defy dehumanization...”

“In a place where no one is human, one should strive to be human.” Pavel Haas, Hans Krasa, Victor Ullman, Erwin Shulhoff, the composers we honor tonight, they strove to be human in a brutally dehumanizing place. Art, music, is an essential expression of our humanity. When survival becomes your daily dread, art becomes even more essential for life, “an unquenchable expression of who we are. Art is one of the ways in which we say, ‘I am alive, and my life has meaning.’” (Karl Paulknack).

One can only imagine the struggles these artists experienced. One can only admire their courage. In truth, only those who were there can fully understand. We can only look in horror and in awe from a great distance.

I conclude with words from the final entry in Victor Ullmann's diary. Victor Ullman composed 23 works while in Theresienstadt. On October 16th, 1944 he, along with most of the other cultural leaders of the camp, was transported to Auschwitz. He died in his second day there. His remains, like countless others, were turned into smoke.

He writes:

“I have composed quite a lot of new music here in Theresienstadt, mostly at the request of pianists, singers and conductors... It would be as irksome to count them, as it would be to remark on the fact that in Theresienstadt, it was impossible to play a piano as long as there were no instruments. Future generations will also not be interested in hearing about the appreciable lack of manuscript paper. The only thing worth emphasizing is that Theresienstadt has not hampered my musical activity but has actually encouraged and supported it. In no way have we merely sat lamenting by the rivers of Babylon; our cultural will has been adequately proportional to our will to live. And I am convinced that all who strive to wrest form out of resistant matter, both in life and art, will agree with me...” “To wrest form out of resistant matter”, to strive to be human in the face of inhumanity, to believe in the promise of the future even unto death; this is the legacy of our composers this evening, this is the prayer they left in their music we are about to hear.