

First Babi Yar Speech - Denver Petroleum Club / Helen Ginsburg, 1971

Since the time of the Czars, over 400 years ago, Jews have been faced with the persecution of anti-Semitism in Russia. With the end of the Czarist regime and beginning of the communist take-over, the situation of Jews in Russia went from bad to worse. Jews in the Soviet Union numbered over three million in the 1950's. In spite of hardships to be endured and overcome, they managed to continue their culture. However, since the death of Stalin, the ability of the Russian Jews to maintain their identity has been further strangled. There are no open synagogues, their books and newspapers are forbidden. They may in no way openly perpetuate their culture or heritage.

In the early 1960's, realizing that to maintain their Jewish identity they would have to leave Russia, a small movement began toward that end. After the Six Day War, some 300,000 Jews petitioned for exit visas. Approximately 30,000 were permitted to leave but for those remaining behind, conditions were to become intolerable. Crushing social stigmas were brought to bear. They were spied upon and ostracized. They were refused or lost employment. They have faced imprisonment on trumped up charges. And yet, today the over 200,000 remaining applicants struggle on, as they hopefully await their visas. In spite of all they are witness to...subjected to...they have not...will not give up their struggle to immigrate to Israel.

Here in the United States, precipitated by the plight of Russian Jews, a major effort is being made to secure right of immigration for any people seeking that privilege from any country. Now under consideration in the House is the Mills Vanneck legislation which would, along with the Senate's Jackson Amendment, deny *Most Favored Nation* status to any nation restricting right of immigration by levying other than appropriate taxation upon those desirous of leaving a country.

Colorado Representatives Don Brotzman serves on the House Ways and Means Committee and is one of the co-sponsors of the Mills Vanneck Bill. He, as well as all of Colorado's congressmen and senators favor the Mills Vanneck Bill and the Jackson Amendment and we would hope that men and women of conscience throughout our city...throughout the United States, will voice their support by writing letters to their representatives in Washington.

1973 will have seen some 35,000 more Jews leave Russia under gross taxation. But what of those still remaining behind under the present conditions? They remain jobless. They continue to be capriciously arrested and sent to prisons camps. Their children are refused any education at all. They dare not speak openly with American tourists. They are forced to be, in the words of Elie Weisel, "Jews of Silence". They may not assemble in large groups, not even to mourn their dead; as was evidenced in Kiev, at a place called Babi Yar, when, after the tragedy of the Munich Olympics, a small group of Soviet Jews gathered a Babi Yar for a memorial service. The wreaths they carried were confiscated and returned only after ribbons bearing the word Jew had been stripped away. They were then forced to disband on threat of arrest...some of them actually suffering 15 days imprisonment.

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In Kiev, Babi Yar will forever be a classic restatement of this people's sorrow that even in death, the Russian government still denies Jews the dignity of being Jews. In life they are permitted none of the dignity and freedom we, the people of the United States, take so easily for granted. The Soviet Jew really asks only one thing of the free people of the world, "Do not forget us".

The words Babi Yar probably mean nothing to most of you present today but, by the time you leave, Babi Yar will represent a period in time, a place and a promise you may never forget. The words Babi Yar are Russian and have a different sound to American ears. The park bearing that name is different too, in that it is destined to become a landmark of national significance as a growing symbol of conscience. It is the story and meaning of that park that I am here to speak of today.

My name is Helen Ginsburg. As president of the Foundation I invite you to sit back and enjoy your drinks as we begin our program.

We are here today because of Russia's Babi Yar ... A Babi Yar sown with the seeds of human agony--the brutalized flesh and bone of man's inhumanity to man. We are here today because in 1969 the men of City Council, represented today by Councilman Paul Hentzell of District, and present board member of the Babi Yar Park Foundation, recognized the moral, humanistic implications of a group of petitioning Denverites protesting anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union.

The 1969 Council answered the petitioners by unanimous vote, appropriating choice acreage at Havana and Parker Roads for a public park to be known as Babi Yar--A place and an act that would demonstrate a unified public protest that would have to be recognized by the Russian government-- A place that might eloquently proclaim to the Jews of Russia that, "we have not forgotten and we will not forget".

Elie Wiesel dedicated the 18 acre park in 1971 and Mayor McNichols addressed the crowd gathered there by noting that the sky, on what had been a very bright, clear day, had suddenly become overcast. He expressed the feeling that the clouds that eclipsed the sun, casting a mournful shadow on their gathering, were indeed appropriate. For they were there that day to commemorate a time in history when the light of humanity was eclipsed by a cloud of hatred, such as man had never seen before.

The story of Babi Yar began in 1941 in the Ukrainian capitol of Kiev when man raised up in violence against the Jew and shed his blood by a deep ravine in the name of nothing, for the gain of none, to the shame of all humanity. Over 100,000 men, women and children were cut down in a 72 hour rage conceived of Nazi mind and abetted through the complicity of Ukrainian officials...as free men stood by...did nothing...said nothing...as people they knew so well, friends or shopkeepers, nice people, just people, like themselves...like you and me, were herded through the streets of Kiev by vicious dogs and soldiers bearing bayoneted guns.

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At the ravine's edge they were ordered to strip and pile their clothes in orderly bundles. An eye witness recalls how they were methodically machine-gunned and thrown, some still alive, into the now infamous ravine. The murderous teams halted only long enough to shovel sand over each layer of bodies. 36 hours after the massacre began, over 33,000 Jews perished. A record of efficiency unsurpassed even at Auschwitz. By the time the Germans were driven from Kiev, 100,000 - 200,000 Jews and non-Jews had been murdered at Babi Yar. The vile deed accomplished, the ravine was filled with dirt and time passed with not so much as even a marker to signify, "here lies a people".

Over 30 years have passed and yet the picture lasts, etched in profound sadness upon the souls of those whose loved ones perished there. The picture lasts because two young boys standing by a Kiev roadside in

September of '41 could not erase the horror they had witnessed; and grown to manhood each recreated that picture with words so that the world might never forget.

Anotoli Kuznetsov, one-time author of good standing in the Soviet Union, now living quietly in the free world, defected from the Soviet Union and unveiled the tragic events of Babi Yar in his great Russian novel of the same name. Yevgeni Yevtushenko, the other Russian boy who could not live with the crime of Babi Yar locked within his soul, grew up to write the now internationally famous poem, Babi Yar. The first two lines of that poem appear on the Babi Yar

Foundation letterhead, "There are no memorials over Babi Yar, only an abrupt bank like a crude epitaph rears".

There is a recent postscript to that last statement. According to TIME magazine and UPI bulletines, the Russians, under duress, have finally erected a huge memorial costing nearly one million dollars at the Kiev site. Standing 50 feet high, the memorial consists of 11 bronze statues representing such figures as the community guerrilla fighter, a red army soldier with clenched fists, and a sailor shielding an old woman. An accompanying plaque states the date and reads, "Here, the German Fascist invaders executed 100,000 citizens of Kiev and prisoners of war."

As TIME magazine states, "the Jews are nowhere mentioned or portrayed, thus underscoring, rather than answering Yevtushenko's plaint that..."everything here screams in silence." Even in death, the Soviet Union denies Jews the dignity of being Jews.

That was yesterday. Today, the Babi Yar Park Foundation seeks to etch indelibly the events of yesterday on the conscience of free men everywhere; somehow answering the now silent shrieks of the other Babi Yar with the promise that we have not forgotten...and we will not forget!

Sometime after the Park had been dedicated it was learned that the estimated date on which the city, in the normal course of events, would

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provide grass and irrigation to the site would be approximately 1977. The city's development would include some young trees and pathways, making it just another green spot; signifying little in its development and explaining nothing of its history.

In view of this, a handful of Denverites formed what became the Babi Yar Park Foundation. Our goal is to assist the City in properly commemorating the spirit in which the Park had been dedicated. That handful of people has grown in number to include men and women from throughout our community; people of various religions, professions, and interests all deeply committed to what has become a uniquely ecumenical endeavor. They are seated among you to further discuss any questions you have about the park over lunch.

The initial intent of the foundation was to memorialize the tragedy with a sculpture. We met time and again to research and soul search until it was unanimously agreed that an immobile, static sculpture was not the answer for Babi Yar. The appropriate memorial to those men, women and children methodically slain at the Babi Yar of yesterday should be a living memorial; for against all odds and inhumanities the Jew continues to live. Therefore we would answer the tragedy of Babi Yar with a symbol of hope...of life. And what could be more symbolic of life than water...a fountain. A few days after our decision upon water as an appropriate element of Babi Yar, a newspaper article appeared...In Kiev, when workmen began to bulldoze the ravine at Babi Yar to prepare the ground for an "amusement park", water rose up in the ravine bearing with it the bones of the slain. The workmen ran from the site declaring that even in death the bones of the Jews will not lie still. We became even more enthusiastic with our planning.

It seemed to follow quite naturally to all present at our meeting that the entire Park should become a living memorial to those who died at the Babi Yar of yesterday...an eloquent promise to those still choked by the hand of oppression today...and to all men everywhere, Denver's Babi Yar Park of tomorrow should become a growing reminder that the deeds of man past, present and future stand unforgotten and accountable.

We became incorporated as the Babi Yar Park Foundation and, meeting with city officials, established our jurisdiction to design and develop the Park as we saw fit, subject to the approval of the City and the City's ability to

The intelligent heart knows that what is done cannot be undone. It does not deny the truth of yesterday but it can affirm that yesterday is not tomorrow. That affirmation lies in the concern of one man for another. From that premise grew the Foundation's belief that Denver's Babi Yar Park, though stemming from a great tragedy in the history of the Jewish people, must be developed as an ecumenical endeavor decrying man's inhumanity to man through time immemorial; be they Christian or Jew, whatever their color, whether in Europe, the Mid-East, at Hiroshima Viet Nam, Belfast, Wounded Knee, or Watts. Babi Yar must be a national, if not international effort to create a powerful coming together. A hope that never ceases that there will one day come a time when

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man may truly be his brother's keeper. Denver's Babi Yar Park will become a symbol of concern for the security and well being of men everywhere, a concern to be cultivated all of the time, without qualification of religious affiliation, race or national citizenship...for wherever a man is harmed, we are all hurt.

During the planning stages of this park, we were able to acquire an additional 6 acres of land increasing the park site to 24 acres. Within those additional 6 acres is contained the essence of Babi Yar...a ravine. Yes, at the foot of our gently sloping park site there is a natural ravine. A study has revealed that the flora, topography and climatic comparison of Denver and Kiev is astounding; and now dramatically symbolic is this particular site of the park with its own natural ravine

How do we begin to capture not only the emotional soul of people but their moral and monetary support as well? After much discussion and research the foundation began by contacting the internationally respected firm of Lawrence Halprin and Associates; a firm outstanding in their approach to environmental planning; including parks, plazas and fountains. Skyline Park, here in Denver, as well as San Francisco's Ghirardelli Square, Sea World, and the Portland Fountains, as well as the commissioned FDR Memorial in Washington are but a few of their designs with which you may be familiar.

Preliminary meetings with the Halprin firm resulted in the following proposed development of Babi Yar Park, through a program of phased development from a master plan and incorporating the following elements.

- (1) An amphitheatre or "People Place" to be used much the same as Boston Common is used-- A place to decry anti-Semitism, as well as anti-humanism anywhere in this world--of our humanistic nature with which all people may associate. A place to celebrate events as well as to memorialize; for Babi Yar Park is meant to be a place to celebrate life as well as remembering those who perished so ignobly in Kiev.
- (2) A spring or fountain whose bubbling waters will flow year-round, symbolizing the promise of a continuing life cycle.
- (3) A Grove of Remembrance wherein 100 trees will be planted; each tree symbolizing 1,000 Jews who perished at Babi Yar ravine. Through the seasons the trees are intended to symbolize the beginning of life in the spring; in summer the fullness of life; and in their withering and defoliation, the fall; and in winter, the barren end of life.
- (4) A bridge across the ravine will be of wood and only three feet wide. It will have vertical sides, six feet high, which will have no openings other than two horizontal slits at mid-span, through which only the ravine may be viewed. The symbolism of the bridge, its material and form are

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intended to remind you of the cattle cars, the imprisonment, the camps with no escape...the final experience of Babi Yar.

Progressing along the bridge you will see a rough granite stone. Hewn into the flat face of the rough stone there will be a vertical polished strip which reflects your own image as you approach. Standing before the rock, seeing your own image reflected in its heart, you have an opportunity to question your own heart..."why?"

The foundation now seeks to raise \$250,000.00 for the memorial elements. That will include the four dramatic and viable elements described. Once the park is completed there will be no further solicitation of funds and the park will be totally maintained by the city.

The city will expend some \$300,000.00 to develop the park as they normally would any greenbelt with grading, water, paths, grass and a minimal number of trees. The city's first \$50,000 appropriation to the park will be used in the paving of Yale Avenue and the park entrance, and in bringing water to the site. Their efforts will in no way convey the nightmare of Kiev's Babi Yar. The dream of the foundation is to create a living symbol of conscience and concern. In the proposed design of Halpern and Associates, this is dramatically and sensitively accomplished.

We can now approach people of conscience everywhere, inviting their support in creating this promise to past and present generations that as the martyrs of Babi Yar will not be forgotten, so too will all men be reminded...if such a thing can happen to one people, it can happen to any people.

Yes, the day is here that we can at last make a concerted effort to bring the plans of Babi Yar Park to public awareness.

Donations to the foundation are tax deductible as the foundation has been granted status as a tax exempt, non-profit corporation. We are raising funds for the development through private state wide solicitation. We recently received a donation from children of a tri-state area. In presenting the funds they said that "it could have been us in that ravine...they were kids just like us. If it happened again, it might be us." How well they seemed to understand that in the forgetting lies recurrence. Compared to our need their dollars were little dollars but the significance of those dollars is profound. Every little dollar is needed from every man and woman on the street because Babi Yar will speak on behalf of every man and woman on every street.

As mentioned earlier, the city will in time, through capital improvements and budgeting, assist the foundation. However, that is in the distant future and it is now that Americans must be heard expressing a unified voice of protest against anti-semitism in Russia as well as anti-humanism anywhere in the world. And just think, that voice will emanate from Colorado...inspiring against the outcome of hatred, warning against injustice, perhaps bringing some semblance of sense to a war maddened world intrigued with corruption, too often inoculated against compassion.

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We look to a completion date of **1976**, the bi-centennial of our great nation and the centennial year of our State of Colorado. With the help of people such as yourselves, the eyes of the entire nation will focus on our proud state and its symbol of conscience...the only one of its kind ANYWHERE in the world.

At this time I would like to read an excerpt from an interview with Batya Barg of Jerusalem. When a very young child, Batya witnessed the slaughter of 40 members of her family at Kiev.

Upon visiting Denver and seeing the Park site, she spoke to us through an interpreter saying, "In the other Babi Yar, in Kiev, Ukraine ~~Russia~~, there is no the ravine. When the war began, we were eight brothers and sisters. When the war ended, I was left the only child...one alone. My brothers and sisters lie in the ravine where there is not even a tombstone. My heart hangs low. I look in the ravine. I look and I feel great pain.

I imagine that it is I -- it is I being led to Babi Yar-- that they are burying me alive, that they want to kill me. I scream, but no one hears my outcry. My mouth is open but my voice is mute. People surround me but they cannot feel my pain. Here in Denver they have erected a sign, they have dedicated a site as Babi Yar. This Babi Yar speaks up in behalf of the other Babi Yar. This Babi Yar shall speak to all free peoples of the world. People arise. Be aware and act. Do not be silent--each of you must do something...this Babi Yar must prevent you from standing with folded arms."

The development of Babi Yar Park is not to be an atonement. It would be blasphemous to regard it as compensation. However, in forgetting, as the children knew, lies recurrence.

As president of the Foundation I am indeed proud that the spiritual meaning and national significance of our effort has won not only the support of our Mayor and Governor, both of whom serve as Honorary co-chairman, but also the enthusiastic support of a great American, citizen of conscience and man of conviction, Senator Henry M. Jackson, our National Honorary Chairman.

With their participation, you and I can enable Babi Yar Park to grow from seedling to strength, sending roots of permanence deep into Denver soil, roots from which its message may be acknowledged world wide, evoking a moment in history that signals an awakening; the emergence of a new concern for living.

You and I now have the opportunity to create this living symbol of conscience right here in our proud state and, create it we will. Creating as a civilized people should create...rich in trust and expectation of and for the future of all mankind.

Remember...in the words of Theodore Herzl, "if you will it...it is no dream."

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There will be no formal invocation before lunch. Talk together over lunch. Carry the conscience of Babi Yar with you into your homes, your boardrooms, your pulpits--hold it in your conscience. That is invocation enough as we know there is not a man or woman here today that does not pray that the Babi Yars of yesterday will remain of the past. We ask only that you now rise for a moment of silent prayer, that each in his or her own way might evoke a vigor of hope and resolve to renew mankind's faith in the future of man.