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REQUIEM

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Dear Peter and friends:

Fifty years ago this month, an 18th century fortress town in northern Bohemia was turned into a concentration camp/ghetto. It's called Terezín -- Theresienstadt in German. I know, or know of, many people who walked its streets and lived in its barracks. I decided to go there this month, out of respect for them. So I could understand a bit more.

I don't know if I would want to go back to such a place if I were a former inmate. Indeed, many former concentration camp inmates don't talk about their past or revisit it. But thousands do. They hold reunions, form clubs, take bus tours of the camps.

Hundreds of former inmates were coming to Terezín this year, from as far away as Canada, for a week of special events. Israeli President Chaim Herzog would participate too, during his first official visit to this country (the first by an Israeli president).

Herzog's visit (Havel restored diplomatic relations with Israel and visited there last year) was one healing gesture, one piece of psychological restitution for Terezín survivors, especially the Jews still living in Czechoslovakia. Thanks to the 1989 revolution, honest newspaper articles finally are being written about the past, television programs shown (e.g., "Shoah"), memorial plaques to Jewish Holocaust victims put up.

The Communist regime had officially declared itself as having religious tolerance. It was just "Zionism" it was against. A plaque that had been scheduled to go up in 1969 on the collection site in Prague for transports to concentration camps was rejected because it contained the word "Jew," according to the Prague

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mayor´s office. Apparently Czechoslovakia did not want to upset its relations with Arab countries.

The first few transports from Prague headed for Lodz, Poland. After that, the trains went to Terezín. Terezín was dubbed the "Model Ghetto," because it was temporarily spruced up during the war as part of an elaborate plot to fool visiting Red Cross representatives into thinking camps weren´t such bad places after all.

About 150,000 Jewish prisoners from half a dozen countries passed through Terezín during World War II. About 117,000 of them did not survive, 33,000 of them dying in Terezín. (Today, fewer than 2,000 Terezín survivors are still alive, according to a survivors´ group called the Terezín Initiative.) There was overcrowding in Terezín, hunger, disease, and physical and psychological abuse. From there, prisoners were shipped to Treblinka, Sobibor or Majdanek. Starting with October 1942, all of the transports from Terezín headed for the newly built death camp Auschwitz-Birkenau.

This Oct. 16, exactly 50 years after the transports from Prague began, a plaque ceremony was held at last. About 600 people gathered on the grass in front of what is now the Parkhotel. Men wore suits, women pearls and fancy hats. People excitedly waved and shouted with joy when recognizing the face of someone they hadn´t seen for such a long time. They hugged, laughed, exchanged addresses, passed around snapshots of family members.

The festive scene could have been a school reunion. But these people were friends from a place that could be called the last stop before hell. Many of them are what´s left of the 15,000 children of Terezín. Most of Terezín´s youngsters went to Auschwitz. Fewer than 100 of them survived the war.

Fifty years ago, crowds of confused, frightened people clutching a few belongings reported to the Prague transport site. This time, they held handbags and video cameras. I heard snippets of conversations. "I´m from L 410" could refer to a dorm room instead of a Terezín barracks for girls. People jogged one another´s memories by saying "Remember, we lived below you," or, "I lived in the attic."

There were speeches, and a small military band played the achingly beautiful Czechoslovak national anthem. Then wreaths were laid at the foot of the bronze plaque, and everyone took pictures. A total of 45,513 men, women and children were transported from Prague from 1941 to 1945, the plaque says. It notes that more than 80,000 Czech Jews died in the war.

The plaque´s author, Helga Hošková, born Weiss, lived in Terezin more than three years. Now nearly 62, she was exactly 12 years and one month old when she and her parents were sent to Terezin on Dec. 10, 1941. She survived Mauthausen and Auschwitz too, and today is an artist in Prague. She began drawing as a child, and

took her drawing pencils and watercolors with her to Terezín. There, her father had told her to draw what she saw. The result was a haunting document through the eyes of a child robbed of her childhood. The drawings were preserved and are world-famous.

(When I went up to meet her, Ms. Hošková was standing arm in arm with a girlfriend from L 410, both women doing an interview for German television. When I talked to them afterwards, the friend perked up when she heard I was from the United States. She said there was one girl from their group they hadn't been able to find all these years. They think she lives in New York City. Her name was Ilse Reiner, born Eichner, in 1929. She moved to New York in 1946 and married there in 1950. The people searching for Ilse Reiner are Mr. and Mrs. Andreas Haas, 6000 Frankfurt a.M. 90, Ludwig Landmanstrasse 94, Germany. Tel: 069-763922. Mrs. Haas' maiden name was Justicová. I include this information here because well, you never know.)

Ms. Hošková and I took a tram downtown together. We talked about the difficulty of dealing with anti-semitism in Czechoslovakia. She said she was worried that if it was talked about too much, people would tune out. She also worried about vandalism to her plaque. After all, not even the Jan Palach plaque in Prague (the young man who'd set himself on fire and died to protest the 1968 Soviet invasion) was sacred. Someone kept spray-painting Palach's face.

We didn't talk about the two Jewish cemeteries in Slovakia that had been vandalized, fascist and anti-semitic symbols spray-painted on the tombstones. We didn't talk about the anti-semitic literature circulating in Slovakia. We didn't talk about the fact that Fédor Gal, a Slovak Jew and the former leader of Public Against Violence, now lived in Prague, because of concerns for the safety of himself and his family. Gal was born in Terezín. (Public Against Violence was the Slovak arm of Civic Forum, the umbrella movement that won the first democratic elections after the 1989 revolution. It recently voted to transform itself into a conservative political party.) We didn't talk about the fact that a plaque again has been put up in Slovakia to honor Jozef Tiso, the clergyman president of the fascist Slovak State during World War II who was hanged for his crimes after the war.

A similar plaque was put up last year but was removed after a public outcry. There's been no outcry this year. (An Israeli newspaper criticized Herzog for not being vocal enough during his visit, faulting him for not questioning Slovaks about the Tiso plaque while he visited Bratislava.)

Slovak Prime Minister Ján Čarnogurský seems to have no problem with the Tiso plaque. He hasn't said that he does; just that he didn't know it was going up. He recently wrote that some of his constituents have "good memories" of the wartime Slovak State, and that he has to "respect" those viewpoints. Apparently some Slovaks are proud of the fact that they had their own state -- never mind what kind, and never mind that President Tiso paid the

Germans to take the Jews away.

Čarnogurský and František Mikloško, head of the Slovak Parliament, caused an international stir last month when they became upset that the prologue to an agreement with Germany said the Czechoslovak state has existed since 1918. They wanted the Slovak State mentioned -- to be historically correct, they say. But legal experts say the Slovak State was established unconstitutionally. Besides, they note, if the world had recognized it, the Slovak State would have been of the side of defeated Nazi Germany, and as such could have been subject to post-war ramifications, such as paying reparations.

As for the cemeteries, authorities say they still are looking for the perpetrators.

Young people I know here tend to tune out when I mention anti-semitism. They tell me they were force-fed information about Nazi atrocities all throughout school. But there's one thing that wasn't drummed into them: The fact that most of the victims were Jewish.

Czechs like to tell themselves they are not as bad as the Slovaks when it comes to anti-semitism. Maybe it is expressed more openly in the eastern part of the country. But anti-semitism is alive and well even among "civilized" Czechs. This really hit home for me when I was visiting a very nice couple who live with their two children in a village about a half hour outside of Prague. They'd been very kind and giving, going out of their way to help me when I needed something. We were sitting around having coffee when the woman asked me, "Is it true that there are a lot of Jews in the government?" She explained that some friends told her that Jews are controlling economic reform and tailoring the government to suit them. I think she also mentioned some kind of international conspiracy theory. It took a lot for me to stay calm and respond rationally. But I did, and at least they looked somewhat embarrassed afterward.

When President Havel and Herzog held a joint news conference during the Israeli leader's visit, a foreign journalist asked Havel about the "small" anti-semitism in his country, and what should be done about it. Havel answered that it's part of a "wider palette of expressions of hatred, intolerance ..." and has to do with a complicated time in which "one system has collapsed and the new one hasn't yet been able to build up authoritative democratic institutions." He said he speaks out against anti-semitism whenever he can.

But is it enough to keep explaining it away like this? Yes, Havel's presidential powers are limited. But he still is such a powerful, larger-than-life figure, at least when it comes to moral issues. He can exert pressure on political leaders and prosecutors to act. I'm not saying it will change things a great deal. But I think it's important to strongly say, "This will not be tolerated here," and then to act accordingly.

Havel gave an eloquent speech about anti-semitism on Oct. 19, during a special performance of Verdi´s "Requiem" -- the Mass for the dead -- by the Czech Philharmonic. Havel and Herzog attended the concert with their wives. It was one of Havel´s best speeches in a long time, but the thought did cross my mind that he was speaking to an audience of mostly Terezín survivors. Preaching to the choir, as it were.

Unlike many special concerts by the Philharmonic, this one was neither televised live nor recorded for later airing. Havel´s speech was shown on television later, twice, but it was a shame the whole experience wasn´t preserved. Czech journalist Jan Urban wrote in a column in the newspaper "Lidové Noviny" that the fact that television didn´t air the concert was "the shame of all of us."

"Requiem" is a demanding, powerful piece. It has a special significance for the Terezín prisoners, who chose it for this occasion. One of the bizarre things about Terezín was the fact that its populace included many prominent artists, musicians (A group called the Ghetto Swingers played Big Band music) and actors.

One of the stars of Terezín was Rafael Schächter (1905-1944), a choral director and conductor who undertook the mammoth task of teaching his fellow prisoners "Requiem." His perfectionism included insisting that the singers memorize the entire Latin text, according to survivors. In the nightmarish atmosphere that was Terezín, he insisted on professionalism and absolute concentration. "Requiem" had its premiere in September 1943. Immediately afterward, the group fell apart because of a massive transport to Auschwitz.

Undaunted, Schächter put together a second 150-member chorus. That premiere was Jan. 2, 1944, but those voices too soon were silenced. Schächter began again, this time managing to recruit 60 amateur singers. They were ordered to play when Red Cross members conducted their sham of a tour of Terezín in June 1944. The chorus sang of death while the international guests and the Nazis listened. Not long after that, the whole group, including Schächter, were sent to Auschwitz. Schächter died during the death march during the camp´s evacuation at the end of the war.

After the presidents settled in, the orchestra played the Israeli and Czechoslovak national anthems. Members of the audience softly sang along. Their Czech may not be so good now -- many speak with accents acquired during years of living in Germany, Austria, the United States or Canada -- but they remember the words. Maybe they were remembering another group of Terezín inmates -- families sent to a special family camp built in Auschwitz-Birkenau to show that transported people were living well -- who´d sang the Czech anthem during the final seconds of their lives, when they had served their purpose and were sent to the gas chambers.

Havel then stood in front of the orchestra and delivered his speech. The following is a slight modification of the official President's Office translation:

"Mr. president, ladies and gentlemen,

"Whenever I am faced with documents about the Holocaust, about concentration camps, about Hitler's mass extermination of Jews, about racial laws and about the endless suffering of the Jewish people during World War II, I feel strangely paralyzed; I know I must say something, draw some conclusions from all of it, yet at the same time I feel that any word of mine would be false, inadequate, inept or deficient, and that I am unable to do more than to stand in silence and incomprehension. I of course know that one must not remain silent, but at the same time I am desperately speechless. That state of paralysis stems mainly from deep -- I would even say metaphysical -- shame.

"I am ashamed, if I can say it this way, of man, of mankind, of the human race. I feel that this is his crime and disgrace, and thus also my crime and disgrace. It is as if that paralysis suddenly threw me to the very depths of the experience of human guilt and of my own co-responsibility for human actions and for the condition of the world in which we live and which we create. As one specific human being, I suddenly feel responsible for man in general and, looking uncomprehendingly at his cruelty, I actually cease to understand myself to some extent because I too am one of us -- people.

"I have been thinking about what it means that the Jews are the chosen people. And it occurs to me that it may mean, among other things, that people chose them as their sacrificial lamb, or substitute sacrifice; being aware of their own small-mindedness, mediocrity and inadequacy, tormented by a desperate feeling of insufficient self-assertion, permanently disappointed by the world and by themselves, haunted by the demon of their complexes and unable to cope with their existential grief, people needed to find someone to blame for their misfortune, for their wretchedness, for their failure.

"From that came anti-semitism. And out of the breeding ground of anti-semitism grew the Holocaust. That is, that which throws us to the point where we begin to experience the true weight of our responsibility for the world. And because of that, we suddenly see that the Jews apparently were chosen also in another sense: They were chosen by fate for the horrible task of confronting modern man through their suffering with his global responsibility, throwing him through their sacrifice to the depths of his true metaphysical self-realization. When man looks at the horrifying extent of what he is capable of, it awakens in

him -- through a feeling of being ashamed of himself -- a sense of increased responsibility for the conduct for the entire human community. The senseless Jewish suffering during World War II thus acquires its tragic sense: It becomes a permanent challenge for every member of the human race to awaken to his humanity.

"It was the hand of a Czech official of the Protectorate that once wrote in an order, in Czech, the following sentence: `Seats may be used by Jews only when they are not needed for Aryans.´ And it was the hand of a Slovak journalist that once wrote, in Slovak, the following boastful headline: `The strictest racial laws on Jews are the Slovak ones.´

"I believe that orders and newspaper headlines of this kind, written by the hands of non-murdering murderers, should be, as a warning, a permanent part of all Czech and Slovak history books. I believe that the appeal to our sense of responsibility for this world that calls to us from the Holocaust era, when thousands of inconspicuous and non-murdering anti-semites helped send their fellow citizens to the gas chambers, must never again lose its voice, must not be silenced, hidden or concealed. It must be heard by all future generations.

"When I was a little boy I envied some other children because they wore on their chests a six-pointed yellow star. I thought it was some kind of honorary decoration.

"If it is not to ever happen again that any children be forced to wear on their clothes a brand designed to warn others against them and to indicate that they are inferior, then we have to remind ourselves time and again of the horrors that befell the Jewish people, chosen to rouse through their suffering the conscience of humanity.

"People instinctively avoid that which shocks them. But it is necessary that we all be repeatedly exposed to certain kinds of shocks, that is, the kinds of shocks that reveal to us that we cannot evade the universality of our responsibility.

"It is necessary to talk about the suffering of the Jewish people, even though it is so difficult to do so."

Each of Havel´s carefully spoken words hung in the air of the darkened hall. I recognized many of the upturned faces from the various events of that week, including the opening of the Ghetto Museum in Terezín.

Terezín has just a few thousand residents now, just like before the war. It´s about 60 kilometers north of Prague -- you can go by it if you´re traveling to Dresden. The barracks are still

there, housing young soldiers doing their mandatory service. The downtown is just a half-dozen blocks long. Up to 50,000 Jews were crowded into this place after the regular population was moved out in 1942. Don't expect any signs of barbed wire or gas chambers. There are trees and parks and candy stores.

The place hasn't changed much, former inmates told me. Some of them found the barracks where they had lived, others had trouble now that they could walk around freely. (During the war, some areas were off limits.) You can get an idea of what life was like for them by visiting the new Ghetto Museum, a nicely done exhibit of the wartime years. The display includes historic charts, photos of Terezín life, and period newspaper clippings. The one that shocked me the most was an anti-semitic diatribe from a Prague newspaper. The anonymous author, writing in Czech, listed names and addresses of Jews still having the nerve to try to live in the city and practically invited people to go attack them. Each word dripped with poison. There's also a silky dress on display, a yellow star sewn on (prisoners were allowed to wear their own clothes), children's toys and games, even some of the special money (with a picture of Moses holding the 10 Commandments on it) that was used in the ghetto.

Nearby, you can have a look at the crematorium, which replaced the mass graves of the Jewish cemetery in 1942. There's also a short stretch of railroad tracks, a remnant of the line that used to end near here.

A memorial ceremony was scheduled at the cemetery the afternoon of Oct. 17, with Herzog and other dignitaries speaking. It began to rain as I walked over. Other visitors gave me shelter under their umbrellas. When the rain turned to a strong downpour, we ducked into a shelter. There, a woman said to me, "My mother is 91 and a half." Yes, she was in Terezín with her, the woman said, smiling but with eyes full of tears. They survived Auschwitz together, as well as the death march when the camp was being cleared out. The Germans left them behind on the road when the mother couldn't go on. For some reason they weren't shot and made their way back to Prague. They hid in a rail station and in people's houses until the war ended.

The woman held her face very close to mine as she talked. I looked directly into her blue eyes, at the slight wrinkles surrounding them. I wanted, at least for a moment, to see inside of her.

I left as the ceremony was ending. I felt calmer than when I'd come -- more peaceful somehow. I had seen that there can be healing and new life. In a few minutes, the visitors would pile into their buses and go home.

All the best,

Jay

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