

Antisemitism is The Problem in Pittsburgh

by Michael Curtis



On January 27, 2017, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres delivered remarks at the International Day of Commemoration at the UN in memory of the victims of the Holocaust. The world, he said, has a duty to remember that the Holocaust was a systematic attempt to eliminate the Jewish people and so many others. He warned that antisemitism was alive and kicking, irrationality and intolerance are back.

Nothing could better illustrate the warning of Guterres than the murder by the 46 year old Robert Bowers of 11 Jews and injury of 7 others at the Tree of Life, Or L'Simcha, synagogue in Pittsburgh, PA, on October 27, 2018 during Shabbat services. It is probably the deadliest such incident in U.S. history. Its significance is crucial and vital. People will legitimately differ over political priorities which are countless, and preferential ranking of those priorities will continually change. But antisemitism, hatred of jews, is the

continual manifestation, perhaps the only one, throughout the history of evil. Pittsburgh is but one illustration that antisemitic hate remains a potent factor. As Jeffrey Myers, Rabbi of the Tree of Life, sadly but wisely remarked in view of heated political differences in U.S. politics, hate does not know religion, race, creed, political party. It is and must be categorized as pure evil.

In spite of those political differences, the message could not have been clearer. The brutal murderer Bowers proclaimed, "All Jews must die." Jews he alleged were committing "genocide to my people. I just want to kill Jews." The brutal murder of middle aged and elderly pillars of the Jewish community in the Squirrel Hill neighborhood of Pittsburgh was an echo of the tragedies of the past suffered by Jews, the culmination of millennia of hatred and discrimination against Jews.

It should be clear. One can understand the existing strong political differences on a number of issues between President Donald Trump and opponents. But the massacre had nothing to do with so called political rhetoric by President Trump that has supposedly fuelled the increasing antisemitism in the U.S. as in many parts of Western Europe. Indeed it was a national disgrace that the simple ceremony by Trump, paying respects and offering condolences to the victims, the placing according to Jewish ritual of a small stone on the memorials to the 11 victims by the President and his entourage was not honored as such and that he was regarded as political opponents as not welcome. Many of those opponents of the President disgraced themselves by signing an open letter, up to 70,000, denouncing his supposed policy of "white nationalism."

Shamefully, the *New York Times* on October 31, 2018 gave equal prominence to the "solemn marches of protest," as to the honoring of the dead Jews. It emphasized not the carnage but the visit of Trump that "laid bare the nation's deep divisions." As Adam Schiff, the indefatigable searcher for Russian collusion in 2016, remarked, with no apparent relation

to Pittsburgh, "The president's modus operandi is to divide us." He appeared to be less dismayed about the victims than about the political dimensions of the event.

The opponents and disrupters of the event should have remembered a number of pertinent things. Antisemitism has a long history in the U.S. and is still present. Peter Stuyvesant, Governor of New York, New Amsterdam, 1647-64, tried to block Jews from entering the city, stopped a synagogue, prevented Jews from joining the local militia, confiscated Jewish property, and imposed a special tax on Jews. In December 1862, General Ulysses Grant issued Order No 11 expelling Jews from Kentucky, Tennessee, and Mississippi. It was revoked by President Lincoln in January 1863.

The list of American antisemites over the last century or so is considerable and ugly: Henry Ford, Charles Lindbergh, Charles Coughlin, Joseph Kennedy, General George Patton, Louis Farrakhan, Mel Gibson, John Galliano, Roald Dahl, as well as the list of Holocaust deniers and advocates of hate crimes. The current trial at Harvard is a reminder of the 1920s when the University imposed a quota on Jewish admission. Present figures show that antisemitic incidents, 1,986, in the U.S. in 2017, rose 57% from 2016. Antisemitism is well organized. A significant number of antisemitic messages on Twitter, 30%, come from automated accounts, bots.

Rabbi of Tree of Life, Jeffrey Myers, was in the synagogue when the murders took place, had a phone and called 911 to get police help. What is relevant here is that carrying a phone in synagogue is unusual, but he was advised to do so in August 2018 by a security adviser. There was no relation to current political discourse.

Pittsburgh now is in the general context of murders of Jews, Hyper Cacher, Copenhagen, Toulouse, Jewish Museum in Brussels, and in the ongoing antisemitism among the members of the British Labour Party, and the continuing refusal,

unwillingness or inability by the Party leader Jeremy Corbyn to address the issue in forthright fashion. What is interesting here is that according to the Populus poll, 38% believe Corbyn is antisemitic, his actions and past history point to his being antisemitic. The poll was carried out when the issue of antisemitism in the Labour Party was no longer being reported in the press.

A third issue is the impact of hatred and ensuing violence in the world. The prevalence of antisemitic myths and tropes has consequences. Jews may be hesitant to participate in Jewish traditional gatherings, or participate in public sphere as Jews. Jewish organizations may be spending heavy security costs, leaving less for cultural and educational activities. In all, they may be obliged to lead a less full communal and individual Jewish life, and Jewish identity.

Political liberals in the U.S. currently hold nearly all cultural power positions, in universities, art institutions, music events, and the media. As the elite they should make clear the real meaning of Pittsburgh. Antisemitism is here in the U.S. and must be ended, whatever the existing political differences on other issues.

There should be no room for antisemitism and murder of Jews in the 21st century. All political forces should be on the frontline in the battle against this evil, rather than bypassing it as a simple derivative of other more important issues.