

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

1045 Old Academy Road
Fairfield, Connecticut 06824

Telephone: 203-259-5596



Date: January 8, 2017
Sermon Title: Holocaust Remembrance
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe and Rachel Zoe Baumann
Scripture: Holocaust Memorial Scripture Litany

Holocaust Memorial Litany

Deacon: Why do the heathens rage? Why do the wicked prosper? Why are those who do evil happy? (Psalm 2:1; Jeremiah 12:1)

Congregation: I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth.
And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God. (Job 19:25-26)

Deacon: Yea though I walk through the valley of the Shadow of Death, I will fear no evil. (Psalm 23:4)

Congregation: Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies; thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. (Psalm 23)

Deacon: Where can I go from your spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go to the heavens, you are there. If I make my bed in hell, you are there. Even the darkness will not be dark to you. Psalm 139:8-11)

Congregation: I will lift my eyes up unto the hills from whence cometh my help. My help cometh from the Lord who made heaven and earth. (Psalm 121)

Deacon:

And God said to me,
‘Can these bones live again?’
And I said,
‘O God, only you know.’
And God said,
‘Speak to the bones!
I will breathe into them.
The bones are Israel.
I will open your graves
and bring you up, back to the land of Israel.’
(Ezekiel 37:2-12)

Congregation:

Our Father who art in Heaven,
Hallowed be Thy name.
Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done
On earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread;
And forgive us our debts
As we forgive our debtors
And lead us not into temptation,
But deliver us from evil.
For Thine is the kingdom
And the power
And the glory,
Forever.

DAVID: I’ve long wanted to devote a Sunday to Holocaust remembrance. As the years go by, Holocaust survivors die off, and Holocaust deniers increase. Maybe we didn’t take that seriously. Then September 11th came along, and with it the “9/11 Truthers,” who claim our own government did it. The Jews did it.

Then Newtown came. Twenty little kids killed, six teachers killed, 20 miles from where we sit. And “Newtown Truthers,” Newtown deniers declare it all a fake, staged by actors.

It’s 2017. We live in a time of increased fake news, increased anti-Semitism, and ever-new genocides, ethnic cleansings, terrorism. And increased denial.

Our humble worship this morning is to echo the Jewish cry, “Never Again.” We have to be the people who remember.

There is a part of the Christmas story nobody likes to talk about: "The Slaughter of the Innocents." Just with that title, "The Slaughter of the Innocents," you can understand why nobody talks about it. We don't put it in our Sunday School Christmas Pageant. There are no Christmas carols about it, nobody sends out Christmas cards with a "Slaughter of the Innocents" theme on the front. We just avoid it. We don't want any connection to it.

It's actually part of the Wise Men story. The Wise Men show up in Jerusalem looking for the newborn "King of the Jews." The guy who was already king didn't want competition, so he ordered the killing of all baby boys born in Bethlehem under the age of 2. *The Slaughter of the Innocents*.

Moses began the same way. When the Israelites were slaves in Egypt, the Pharaoh became concerned that Jews were "becoming exceedingly numerous," is how the Bible puts it. *Exceedingly numerous*. Too many Jews. So Pharaoh ordered all baby boys thrown into the Nile River. Every baby boy drowned in the river. Moses was born during that time, and his family saved him by floating him down the river in a tiny basket where he was found and raised by Pharaoh's daughter. The rest is history.

There's a new biography just out, *Moses: A Human Life*. A very psychological study of this man whose life changed religion and changed history. "The central and boldest" statement in the book is that "Moses was born into a world of genocide" and "nurtured in fear." *Born into a world of genocide... Nurtured in fear*. That we can't know Moses if we forget the genocide. Jump ahead to the 20th century, and we confront the Holocaust. *THE Holocaust*. An unimaginable attempt to rid the world of Jews, or at least Europe.

An organized attempt, official, well thought out, rationalized, industrialized, or even theologized, and almost successful! Six million people. *Six million*, wrap your mind around that. Six million killed for this single reason: they were Jews.

When Rachel first joined our Pastoral Team, we discovered a shared passion for the Holocaust. For me, I was always haunted by the question of what kind of a pastor would I have been in 1935, 1938, 1941, if I had been a pastor in Germany? And the world around me was going mad? If a duly elected government started turning on its people, crushing the Free Press, trampling on human rights, forgetting the powerless . . . where would I stand? What would I preach? How would I pastor? What would I do?

For Rachel it is personal. It is her family. Her roots. Her history. Today we honor Rachel's history, Moses's history, Jesus's history . . . we honor by remembering.

RACHEL:

My Story, And You

I am 11, and I am leaning over my older sister as she works on a large navy blue scrapbook.

"Why do those papers say Peru and Chile?" I ask her.

The picture has three stamps on it, and is dated August 1939. I see an eagle with a swastika. Two of them. I pester my sister, leaning more into the scrapbook.

"They're not pieces of paper, Rach. They're visas in a passport."

"But I thought Papa and Oma were German and American," I said.

"Oma had the chance to leave Berlin during the Holocaust. She had a way out, but she wouldn't leave because she was in love with Papa," my sister explained.

"Wow. So that was her choice?" I asked.

"She didn't have a choice. She was in love," Sarah said.

Sarah flips slowly through the book. I see the weird, long, foreign words, the black-and-white pictures of people in happy times, the beautiful cursive of "Max Horst Segall," my Papa. I looked at his application for U.S. citizenship and read, "Have you ever in the United States or any other country, been arrested, charged with a violation of any law or ordinance . . . convicted, fined, or imprisoned?"

"Why did Papa check 'yes'?" I wonder out loud.

"1938. Germany. Concentration camp. Outcome of case: Deported to Poland," my sister reads. "1941. Concentration camps. Offense involved: As a Jew. Outcome: Returned to Ghetto. 1953-4. Chicago, Illinois. Offense involved: Two parking violations. Outcome: \$3.00 — Fine paid, each."

"Why was it an offense to be a Jew?"

I was in middle school when I started to ask questions about my grandparents, because I was little when they passed away. My grandparents, Max Horst Segall and Frieda Esther Lopatka, were 17 years old when Hitler came to power in 1933.

During my time at Bates College, I received a Phillips Fellowship to construct my own project in Berlin and Warsaw. I wanted to retrace my grandparents' footsteps in Germany and Poland during World War II. And it was also my hope to interview scholars, Holocaust survivors, and Jewish and non-Jewish Berliners to discover what Germany has done to commemorate the Holocaust.

My Grandfather Max was arrested in the middle of the night on October 28, 1938, from his parents' apartment in Berlin. Citizenship in Germany was based on *your father's* birthplace. Max's birthfather was born in a disputed area between Poland and Germany, so Max was never able to obtain citizenship.

As is often the case, families do not discover important information about their parents until after they die. From translating a family document from February 28, 1936, we discovered that my grandmother's love for my grandfather was otherworldly. My grandmother's father was Jewish and her mother, Christian. However, according to Jewish law, my grandmother was not technically Jewish until she converted. The document stated that Frieda Esther Lopatka has officially become a member of the Jewish community.

What does this mean?

It means that my grandmother had opportunities to leave Nazi Germany with visas to Peru and Chile. It sounds crazy, but she formally converted to Judaism in 1936 because she wanted to attempt to stay with my grandfather — and to also claim the true religion that she felt.

During my time in Berlin, I often wondering why my grandparents survived and others did not.

Based on my grandparents' testimony I retrieved from archives in the city, I was able to find the exact date my great-grandparents and grandmother were deported: November 1, 1941. The Grunewald Train Station sits behind a S-Bahn subway station in the outskirts of Berlin and serves as a Denkmal, which is German for memorial. Most people who were sent to this train station were deported to extermination camps. I have no idea why my family was not transported to Riga, a forest where they shot all of the Jews

who were taken there. Or Auschwitz. Instead, they were deported to the Warsaw Ghetto.

What does this mean for Greenfield Hill Congregational Church in 2017?

It means that we need to be able to talk about the Holocaust. Yes. Still, in 2017. Toward the end of my stay in Berlin, I sat with a wonderful woman who had survived the Holocaust and had moved to New York City with her husband. She did not return to Germany until after her husband died in 2010 and stayed.

"It is my duty to be here in Germany and to tell the children what happened," she said.

When I told her that my grandparents did not like talking about what had happened to them — that it was too traumatic to relive their experiences over and over again — she thought that this was a deep flaw.

Because my grandparents were not there to defend themselves, I needed to speak up.

"I do not think it is a deep flaw," I said. "Everyone has vastly different reactions to trauma and for some, not talking about it was the only way they were able to get up every day, go to work, and raise my mom and my mom's brother."

My grandparents never spoke much about what happened in the Warsaw Ghetto, and my grandfather rarely mentioned the concentration camp he was imprisoned in for six months. I know they were beaten and starved and mistreated. But I also know that they would not have survived without Sgt. Josef Glinski, who was a Nazi officer in the German Army, who helped them escape to the Warsaw suburbs — not once, but twice — where they pretended to be Poles. I do not fault my grandparents for their decision to shield their children at such a young age from what had happened to them. Not at all. However, this does not mean that I believe we should all stay silent.

I'm sure many of you have heard of Elie Wiesel, who was a Romanian-born American Jewish writer and Holocaust survivor who passed away recently. In his 1986 Nobel Peace Prize Acceptance Speech, he said, "We know that every moment is a moment of grace, every hour an offering; not to share them would mean to betray them. Our lives no longer belong to us alone; they belong to all those who need us desperately."

Here in this world of 2017, we do not always feel like we belong to each other, do we? Perhaps we do a little bit more as members of a community such as this one at GHCC. We gather with high school kids every Thursday, eighth-graders every Monday, and as we all know, church does not just happen on Sundays here. We gather to serve, we gather to study, we gather to pray, and we gather to show up together in community. If we were to summarize Alida and David's compelling sermons and the mission of this church in a few simple words, we could say that we gather to celebrate a common belief that in the end love will conquer hate.

Many of you knew Anita Schorr, who recently passed away, beloved by many members here at church. She spoke for more than 10 years to the youth of our church about her experiences in the Holocaust. She was and remains so many young people's hero in this church. She spoke about what it takes to be a good person and what that might look like in our everyday life. That it's not just about the big stuff. It's about the little stuff that people might not think matters. It's standing up to a bully on the school bus. It means standing up against bigotry in your own community. It's about gathering together for a healing prayer service at our church only a week after the election. After the prayer service, about 20 of us gathered in the parlor for a dialogue. Two children of our church joined us with their mom. The young boy spoke about how some of his friends in his class are "terrified about being sent back to their country." He spoke boldly and courageously, and I hope he doesn't mind me quoting him. He said, "This is just as much their country as it is ours."

Kids say the darnedest things, don't they? They're watching, they're observant, and we should involve them in important conversations.

So what does this have to do with the Holocaust in 2017? And why am I telling you my grandparents' story? There are only a handful of survivors left and even fewer who are able or want to share their story. That is why I feel a personal responsibility to tell the story of my grandparents.

I want to tell the story not just about my grandparents, but also about the people who helped save them. Because it is those people — the ones who stand up for kids on the bus and that young boy in our church who **knows** it is wrong to kick people out of our country because they are from "somewhere else" — who grow up to be the heroes that Anita always talked about.

In 1944, my grandparents decided to risk returning to Berlin by train. They had been hiding in the Polish countryside after escaping from one concentration camp and then the Warsaw Ghetto. In Berlin they hid in an

attic, which was checked several times by the Nazis. We never knew the names of the people who helped them, and before I went to Berlin, I did not know that I would be able to find the people who saved their lives.

Determined to thank these people and learn more about them, I tracked down the family of Mr. Bendig, who helped my grandparents. They gave me a photograph of Mr. Bendig standing in a field of flowers, smiling softly, with a rose in his hand.

I've saved this photograph to remind me that there is so much more to the story than I could ever know or understand. We will never truly understand what my mom's parents went through. However, this is not a cop-out. It means we need to try to imagine what they went through.

How we choose to remember the past has a profound impact on how we live in the present. I will continue to tell bits and pieces of my grandparents' story, not just because we need to fight apathy and cruelty, but because I believe that there is not a specific reason my grandparents survived and someone else's did not. Max and Esther met some of the "good" Germans and someone else met the "bad" Germans.

That being said, because they did meet so many good Germans, those stories need to be told because they connect us and give us hope for the future.

There have been many books about people full of goodness. Wesleyan Professor and ethicist Philip P. Hallie wrote about an entire village in his book, *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed: The Story of the Village of Le Chambon and How Goodness Happened There*. Hallie writes about a Protestant village in France that eventually took in every Jew they possibly could. They helped thousands of Jews by hiding them and finding ways to help them escape to Switzerland.

What made this community different from the other people who stood by and did nothing? As a teacher, Hallie's "own passion was a yearning for realistic hope," and he was determined to explore what was different about the people of Le Chambon.

For one, Hallie writes that the personality of the pastor, Andre Trocmes, and his wife made a difference. Trocmes had a great reverence for human life and always practiced the principles of nonviolence. However, it was not just Pastor Trocmes; it was the congregation who stood by him. When Trocmes was questioned about his steadfastness to not give up Jews, his response was often, "We do not know what a Jew is. We know only men." He would

ignore the Protestant church leadership in France, had to hide himself for a while when there was a threat to his own life, but the village never stopped helping.

So often the people of Le Chambon explained they were acting “naturally — what else could one do?” But we all know that it goes much deeper than that. It is about the moral ethics and values of the people in the village — their desire not to allow the Germans to go against the commandment not to kill. After all, if they allowed something like the Holocaust to happen, they would be condoning it and be just as guilty. Their will and plan was to save and prevent harm — no matter the cost. However, every single interview recorded with someone from that special village involved the person insisting that they were not unusual. That there was no choice in the matter. That they could not imagine doing anything different. They asked why everyone was calling them good, when they were just doing what human beings ought to.

Some might even say that it is easier to write and talk about evil than about goodness. Historians, religious figures, professors, ethicists, and maybe some of us here today have tried to ask the questions about the Holocaust. How did something like this happen? We should keep in mind Elie Wiesel’s words: “All questions pertaining to Auschwitz lead to anguish.”

In short, there are no real answers that will ever satisfy us. We know that anti-Semitism and hate were brewing for years. But we do not know how people could be so full of hate, so full of evil.

This does not mean that we need to stop asking questions or demanding answers. It might mean that we turn our questions into something that looks like love and feels like love. In 2017, that means bearing witness to suffering and injustice and not turning away. It means being knowledgeable about someone else’s needs above our own. I ask you to ponder the Book of Job. Wiesel questions his own survival in Auschwitz and God’s intentions, saying, “How I sympathized with Job! I did not doubt God’s existence, but I questioned His absolute justice!”

The prisoners in the camps and in the ghettos were experiencing something similar — disbelief that what was happening around them was actually happening. If we remember the Book of Job, Job not only sat with his anguish and suffering but also had the internal strength to question his own morality: “I sit and gnaw on my grief; my groans pour out like water. My worst fears have happened; my nightmares have come to life. Silence and peace have abandoned me, and anguish camps in my heart.” Wiesel and Job

tried to recreate the living hell gnawing at their souls, and in this way, resisted what was happening to them.

Prisoners during the Holocaust created writings in response to the silence of the world, of God, and of the silence that left innocent human beings to their doom. As human beings in 2017, we all have a moral obligation to hold their stories and words as sacred so that the brutal and painful realities of the madness of mankind can make us realize just how difficult it is to be a human being who fights and cares.

It is easy to not want to go on living after something like this. To throw up our hands and shrug. Or to sit in silence. However, it is my belief, that by continuing to talk about the Holocaust, bearing witness and sharing testimony about the Holocaust, we are paradoxically restoring the uniqueness of the human spirit.

I do not have answers. I only have stories. Stories about my grandparents and stories about the people who helped save them. Stories about how my grandparents did not want to talk about their suffering. Stories about my parents making sure they **knew the truth about what had happened to my grandparents**. We all have duties to one another in this world. We all have stories. My grandparents are not the only ones.

David likes to ask himself what he would have done as a pastor in Europe during this time. A good question for all of us. And what we should do now. Even though the situation today in Syria seems very complicated, we must welcome refugees, as we welcomed my grandparents.

Let us hope that we will all work earnestly to alleviate suffering, and that anguish will not camp in our hearts.