

Interview with Benjamin Meed - 11/29/30

WH: Would you say that every survivor who came to the U.S. after the war read the Forwards?

BM: I would say so. My wife Vladka's book is based on the weekly column that appeared in the Forwards.

WH: What is your opinion about everything that's been going on in Eastern Europe in the last month or so ?

BM: We never thought a Holocaust could happen again. But when I saw, on TV, the breaking of the Berlin Wall....naturally I was very much taken by the jubilation of the people at obtaining freedom. But I also said to myself where were the millions of people, where was the world when we were surrounded by a ten mile wall, just as high as this one, maybe not as perfectly constructed as this one, in Warsaw ? Our wall was built by the same people, by the Germans. I said to myself, how can I divorce myself from the thoughts that this is happening in our lifetime. I recall President Kennedy's famous words. I admired his energetic approaches. I'm not questioning his saying: "I'm a Berliner"; but when I watched the wall go down, I said: "I'm a Varshaver." And I cannot look at this without remembering the ghetto wall. I felt sad and angry. Also, I can't look at the Germans today without looking at the past. I'm not looking for vengeance, but no one ^(can) make me forget the past.

2

WH: A sociologist, a child of survivors, said to me, if these countries are going to ask the West for help, they should give reparations for all the property they stole from Jews in Hungary and Romania.

BM: You just touched on something that is typical of the pragmatism of Americans and of young people. I cannot agree. When I looked at this, I didn't think of the financial aspect. So what! Are you going to make a settlement for the lives of six million Jews--- let's say \$100.00 or \$200.00 per person ? I didn't take any reparation money. I was entitled and so was my family. I have no objection to anyone who took the money and I even was helpful to those who asked me to sign as a witness. But I didn't believe in it. Menachem Begin also didn't believe in taking the money while Labor favored accepting it.

WH: Why are you so opposed to taking it ?

BM: Because I don't believe you have the right to settle. You're not taking money for yourself. You're taking money in the name of those who perished. Who gives you the right ? They have to answer that question. In this country you have to obey a will when someone dies. As pragmatic as Americans are, they all have wills. I'm sure you have a will. And in your will you specify what should be done. Do you have a will of those who perished ? How can we settle who should get what; who should get the house; who should get the painting and the jewelry ? This is one thing. How about the lives? How do you put a price tag on a life and on 1,000 years of a way of life; of a culture ? How will you put a price on Jews who

3.

were brought up with culture, a theater, and 600 synagogues in the city of Warsaw ? Who authorizes you to obtain money? I know you didn't say it and I don't blame you, but this is the pragmatic way. We could have gotten money from the Germans for our organization, but we didn't accept it.

WH: When did you start the organization ?

BM: About 40 years ago. The American Gathering, WAGRO, exists 27 years. But I've been involved in organizations [with respect to the Holocaust] for about 40 years.

WH: When you organized it in 1963, what was its main goal ?

BM: It's main goal was remembrance, not letting others forget. Also, to build a memorial for eternity, for future generations. But at that time we never thought we'd have to tell the story to people who were not aware of what happened. Elie Wiesel is absolutely right when he says: "Everybody can come next to that pit of hell; but you cannot enter that pit of hell if you were not there and you cannot fully understand it if you weren't there." The Gathering, which has close to 70,000 members, was started to refute the charges that it never happened. When I sit with historians on committees, they will say: "Have you got any documents?" I say: "No." When we went through the Nazi Era we carried nothing because we wanted to be mobile. So all the documents are from the Germans. And they preserved these documents to justify their actions. At Treblinka they first buried the bodies. But later they burned the bodies to destroy the evidence of their murders. The American Gathering was created for the purpose to create the documentation

4.

that will help historians in the future. We have spent hundreds of thousands of dollars to record the names of those who were in the camps and information about them. We have recorded the names of 4,000 people in the U.S. who passed through Auschwitz.

WH: How many answered the questionnaire ?

BM: About 65%. Half of our budget is mail. But it's a very big problem for a survivor to fill out this form. How many people in the U.S. answer a form?

WH: Sixty five percent is actually very high compared to the average survey.

7 BM: We're doing basic documentation. Three Ph.Ds have already been completed based on this information. There's room here for a few hundred doctorates. Helen Epstein just wrote a wonderful piece about her relationship with her mother. I think I'm going to propose it for a Pulitzer Prize.

WH: Did you like her book, Children of the Holocaust ?

8 BM: No. I didn't like her approach, the psychological approach. I guess, it's my European background. I don't think survivors and their children are simply a subject for every psychiatrist and analyst. My daughter, who was a pediatrician for five years has given it up in favor a being a child psychiatrist and she is today an authority in Arizona.

WH: Do your children agree with your position ?

BM: No. They say: "Dad, you don't understand." Maybe they're right, but I don't like it.

WH: But if a person has problems.....

5.

BM: Then nothing is wrong with going. Years ago they said: "go see the rabbi." I think rabbis before the war were also good psychiatrists.

WH: What does your son Steven do?

BM: He's a rheumatologist. Lately I feel a lot of guilt that I don't spend enough time with my grandchildren.

WH: Do you ever relax ?

BM: No. Not even on Saturday and Sunday. My mind works 24 hours a day. I never sleep longer than an hour. After an hour I wake up and go back to sleep again. I went to many doctors about it but nothing helped. And when I awake, I'm tired.

WH: Do you dream about the war ?

BM: Yes, but not as much as before.

WH: Do you find that survivors you know are thinking more about the Holocaust now that they're older ?

BM: Yes. I get a lot of calls of people who are not interested in whether someone's alive, but rather in knowing how they died. What's the difference ? People lately are putting much effort into finding the graves of their loved ones in Poland. This is a stage in life.

6.

BM: Ninety percent of the survivors are married to other survivors. We found this in our studies and as a result of coming into contact with survivors. Many children of survivors marry each other too. Where this is the case they understand each other better. One of my children is married to a child of survivors and the other isn't. I wouldn't generalize on this point but there is a certain feeling they have.

WH: How do your children feel about your work ?

4 BM: They spoke when I was honored last year in front of 1,400 people. From what they said I gather they're proud that their parents made a mark in this area. I'm not so sure they're happy that we gave much more time to the community than to the family.

WH: What about the survivors' contributions to America ?

7 BM: When I travel I see the impact of the Holocaust on Jewish communities and survivors helped to make them aware of that. They're also very involved with Israel. Jewish organizations have raised funds by invoking the Holocaust and this year, at the Federation General Assembly, they made a commitment to increase their efforts in educating young people about what happened, in an in-depth manner. But the number of survivors who worked to institutionalize what happened was actually very small. People like Elie Wiesel and Simon Wiesenthal, you won't find many like them. What motivated them was a certain drive and commitment.

WH: When did the community become more receptive to hearing about the Holocaust ?

BM: After the Washington Gathering in 1983. We were received and

7.

addressed by the President and the Vice President on Capitol Hill. Every judge and every congressman was pushing themselves to be recognized as being there. The event was covered by 600 correspondents. How many events are covered by 600 correspondents?

And as a result they started to see a different survivor. *of this national gathering people started to see survivors in a different light. The image of survivors was based mostly on the post-war Nazi pictures portrayed often by the media. They thought the survivors were skeletons. That was their image. Then*

but when they saw how we responded to events of the day, our participation in Jewish Israeli and Israeli life, our concern for humanity and its future, and above all, our involvement in every aspect of life
the eyes of the world, they gained respect for us. I think that

every survivor probably knows my three sentence introduction to the President by heart. I said that who would imagine that a poor boy from the Warsaw Ghetto, feeling so ^{alone} lonely in the world at that time would be standing here today with the President, or something similar to that. I have it written down somewhere. The survivors felt that they, not Ben Meed, stood next to the President. Each one of the 20,000 survivors had that feeling. When I looked at the crowd, I never saw so many people crying together in my life as I saw at that moment.

WH: Isn't that in a way the real story, the rebirth of the survivors ?

BM: No. It's not the rebirth. To some extent they fulfilled the wish of those who perished. We can imagine that those who perished had a desire in their last moments that we should tell the world what happened to them. And that we should keep asking why did they do it to us ? Why did it happen ? Why did the world allow it to happen?

WH: Did you feel that President Reagan had genuine sympathy ?

8.

BM: Very much. Not only did I feel that but standing next to him I saw how moved he was. At certain moments I felt he was shaking. Mrs. Reagan was crying. Someone gave her some tissues. I thought it was extremely sincere. I also think that the President very much appreciated the ovation he received. It was not for political reasons. These were 20,000 people who came here in his lifetime with their children and rebuilt their lives in America.

WH: What went thru your mind as you waited to introduce him ?

BM: I was praying. I was hoping I'd live up to the importance of the occasion. I was scared. I felt it was a moment of respect and that it would not happen again in my lifetime. I was choking a bit when I spoke. It wasn't easy for me to come up and speak. It's actually much easier to speak for yourself than for others. Just like it's hard for the cantor to speak for the congregation on Yom Kippur.

WH: What has been the long-term reaction ?

BM: Wherever I travel, people come up and say: "We were with you in Jerusalem" or "We were together with you in Washington." Ernest came to me to do something about this; it was seen as a reunion. My outlook was to see it as a large-scale effort. I visualized it as a legacy and Elie Wiesel helped to translate it properly in a way that it ~~would~~^{should} become a legacy. It took a tremendous amount of work. Since 1983 I don't really make any money, just a small pension. I live in a co-op project, the same apartment in the Bronx I've lived in for the last 35 years.

WH: Do you see any differences between the survivor communities

9.

here and in Israel ?

BM: Yes. There it isn't as highly organized as here. The survivors there are living in Israel for 35 years. They've been integrated into the country. Here, the fact is that 25 years ago we couldn't raise \$200,000 to build a Holocaust monument. In the next five years the American Jewish community will spend one half billion dollars on Holocaust commemorations. The Washington memorial, the New York museum and other projects.

WH: Does all of this activity give you a hope that a Holocaust will not occur again ?

BM: No, but it means there is a small chance that it won't happen again.

WH: You've met many important leaders. Who impressed you most ?

BM: The top leadership all impressed me. They all have a genuine feeling for us. President Bush, for example. I invited him when he was Vice President, to my grandson's bar mitzvah and he said he'd try to come. I hope he will.

WH: How will a vehicle be created for the continuation of your organization ?

BM: I don't think the organization can continue. I'm looking for a way it could continue but I haven't found it yet. I can't find too many people who will continue the organization and who will come in every day. Maybe I took on too much responsibility. There will be many more people working on the Holocaust ten years from now than today. But they'll all be professionals, not survivors.

WH: What about the children of survivors ?

10.

BM: I believe they'll play a very important role ten or fifteen years from now when they reach an age when they no longer have to worry about making a living anymore.

WH: The survivors seem very concerned about intermarriage.

BM: Definitely. To them it's like a second death.

WH: Is there a special anger, as some have claimed, that would cause a child of survivors to do this or is it simply that they met someone, say, at college ?

BM: No. They just meet someone. When a young person falls in love....you cannot say it's because they're angry at their parents. I would say, knowing the parents, it's less among their children than among others. In smaller communities it's a problem. We were very comfortable living in Venezuela for four years, we had a leather factory. But my wife wanted to leave because she was afraid the children would not receive a proper Jewish education there.

WH: Compared to other Americans, do you find the survivors generous as a group ?

BM: Very philanthropic. At our dinner coming up December 10th we will have 90 people who gave over a million dollars.

WH: [I'm reading from an article given to me by Ben Meed that appeared in the Daily News Bulletin of the Jewish Telegraphic Agency of November 20, 1989 p.2] "Walesa Praised for Jewish Outreach, Criticized For Not Denouncing Glemp." by Alison Kaplan. "The most emotional moments during the meeting, observers said, came when Polish Jewish survivors of the Holocaust addressed

11.

Walesa. Benjamin Meed, President of the American Gathering of Holocaust survivors asked Walesa to see to it that the remnants of Jewish life in Poland that remained, including synagogues and cemeteries, be preserved. Such preservation was necessary, Meed said, to remind future generations of the once flourishing Jewish community in Poland and its destruction during the Holocaust.

"I will personally guarantee that any remaining Jewish holy sites will be declared historic shrines. Jews died in the concentration camps simply because they were Jewish. This must and will be acknowledged," Walesa said in response. Meed and others were pleased with Walesa's response."

WH: How do you feel about Menachem Rosensaft meeting with the Palestinians in Stockholm ?

BM: I still feel it was wrong, but I'm especially disturbed by the secrecy that surrounded it. Peoples' advice was not solicited.

WH: What are the main problems facing the survivors today ?

9 BM: Loneliness as they get older. We are reminded that we still speak with accents, we're still a little different. Wherever, you go you'll see them together.

WH: What does the saying "Mir zenen doh," mean to you personally ?

BM: When I see on the walls "I was here." I always wonder what that young man who wrote this, means. We survivors want to make sure that we're seen and heard. If people don't, then we'll say it aloud.

WH: What about the survivors' charitableness?

BM: Ernest Michel always wants to see the survivors give more. I

12.

7 have to remind him that Bukiet and Wilf, who give, are survivors. But he wants to see a massive movement. He's a collector. The survivors, as a group, buy 10% of the Bonds. Quite a few local Federation presidents are survivors. For example, the ones in Fort Lauderdale, San Francisco, and elsewhere.

WH: Those that really succeeded financially----Chase, Ungar, Pantirer, do you see anything that set them apart from the rest? Was it more drive, greater intelligence ?

BM: No. My experience with these people is that they're very happy when I call them. Not that they wait for my call, but they always have time to talk to me. Those that really succeeded give me the greatest encouragement for my work. Just the teachers' program costs us \$200,000 a year.

WH: Why are they so responsive now ?

BM: I don't know. Maybe they recognize that I give my time for a cause. They're people who understand this and they know they don't have the time. They feel they owe something to the past.

WH: Maybe they feel they want to make the world a better place than it was when they came in ?

8 BM: They don't think about that. We're going to leave a better world ? I don't think the world changes in one generation. What does it mean to leave a better world ? To have more technology ? To live in a better environment ? To have a microwave oven ? What does it mean to have a better world? All it means to me is how moral will the world be ?

WH: Do you think the world is more moral today ?

13.

BM: No. I don't think we made tremendous inroads. Maybe we're better off in some ways, but we're worse off in other ways. Sexual life today is more open. Look at AIDS. Maybe nature is reacting to abnormality. I don't know. More and more people, on the other hand, seem to be saying it's normal [homosexuality.]

WH: People today often ask: "Why did the Holocaust happen?"

BM: We don't ask this question. Murderers are created to kill. We know why it happened. We're asking, why didn't the rest of the world do anything? Why were they bystanders? How did they allow it to happen?

WH: Why did the world let it happen?

BM: A human being only feels pain when it hurts him directly. Other than that he only feels bad for a moment when he sees it. An hour later, he forgets.

WH: Can we change that?

BM: We should try to change it. That's why we have these programs. And we feel it helps. I've been watching these programs for years. The people develop enormous attachment for the work they do. I do believe education will have to play the major role in preventing another Holocaust.

WH: In the camps those who had a trade could survive. They didn't have much use for, say, professors. Yet the survivors value education tremendously.

BM: No. If you had a trade you could only last a few weeks longer. After all, they were killing people whom they could have used for their industries.

14.

WH: What about the people described in The Holocaust Kingdom, the printers? Because they had a trade, they survived longer,?

BM: Yes, but then they were also sent to the gas chambers.

WH: So that wasn't the key?

BM: The question of education goes back for generations. We're brought up that way. There was tremendous respect for learned men.

WH: You've done a tremendous amount in the last forty years. Of what achievement are you proudest?

BM: That I brought the survivors together. I kept them as a family. I gave them a name. I nourished them. And above all, we're together.

WH: Was it difficult?

EM: Very difficult.

WH: What was the hardest thing?

BM: First of all, the one thing survivors share in common is distrust. Survivors were so cheated by the world that they don't trust anyone. To overcome their distrust was the hardest thing. They were always thinking: 'What does he have in mind?' That's why my satisfaction now is that when I call up people who I feel have the ability to help, they trust me.

WH: How did you overcome the distrust?

BM: I don't know. Many know me only when they see me. I didn't speak to them very much. I don't think I have the answer.

WH: Is there anything, as you look back, that you regret not having done?

EM: I regret that what's being done today was not done thirty or

15. THE CHURCH

forty years ago.

WH: Could it have been ?

BM: Possibly yes and possibly no. But I regret that it did not happen.

WH: What would you say to me as I'm writing this book ?

BM: You have a historic responsibility. Don't take what you're writing lightly.

WH: I spoke with a man who was bothered by the fact that some kapos in the camps got away with it. People told him not to say anything because then people would say: "You see; the Jews were just like the Germans."

8 BM: I don't buy this. One shouldn't be afraid. It's a very difficult question. Sometimes people carry a grudge against the person who was giving out the soup. Sometimes it's a justified grudge. Sometimes you have a grudge against people who beat you up. Brothers and sisters also beat each other up. But there were some dirty things too. There was a Jewish chief of police in Warsaw. He did dirty things. And we decided to kill him.