

“Never Again” loses all its meaning—can Holocaust survivors survive again?

I have been a geriatrician for more than half of my nearly 74 years and a Jew all my life. In my early days practising in Canada, I felt privileged to look after veterans of the First World War. To me, these older soldiers (mostly men), who had suffered so terribly in the service of their country, were now safe. I enjoyed every minute that I looked after them: treating their lungs destroyed by poison gas, holding their gnarled and battle-scarred hands, listening to their war stories, and helping them with their post-traumatic stress disorder. Although I am not the crying type, when the last Canadian veteran passed away at the age 109 years in 2004, I felt like weeping.

Three decades later and long a citizen of Israel, I also felt tremendously honoured as a Jew to be able to look after an increasingly older cohort of Holocaust survivors. They had suffered even more than the veterans in that they had almost all been civilians—torn from their homes, brutally abused, and witnesses to the unspeakable horrors of friends and family being murdered all around them. So, as in the case of the veterans, I felt I had been granted a supreme privilege in being allowed to help these survivors pass through the twilight of their years in comfort and security. I had already had a lot of clinical experience with the veterans and the clinical switch to Holocaust survivors was not difficult.

When the Hamas rockets began to rain down on Israel a few days ago, I was not happy at all; but, having already experienced a few of these miniature wars, at first, I naively thought I knew what to expect. When we began seeing images proudly being posted online¹ by Hamas and other Palestinian groups of terrorists kidnapping civilians of all ages (toddlers, adults, and even older, wheelchair-bound people), however,

I simply could not believe my eyes. But the news got worse. I soon learnt to my horror that some of these older, helpless people were Holocaust survivors.² How could this be? I can only conclude that when humans stoop to depravity, there seems to be no lower limit to the depths.

The *Lancet* has rightly called for the Holocaust and the role of organised Nazi German medicine to be studied, and for the lessons learnt to be a part of the medical curriculum.³ A yearlong effort by a blue ribbon panel of commissioners will soon publish its findings,⁴ and it will be important to study and follow their recommendations. The underlying assumption of all this fine work will be that properly inoculated (both intellectually and psychologically) medical students will never again allow these outrages to occur. I have supported this effort all along.

But can someone, somewhere in this world tell me how to prevent an older Holocaust survivor from undergoing this outrage twice in a long lifespan? Perhaps some kind of answer is to be found in a story from an obituary of Simon Wiesenthal, a Holocaust survivor and, after the war, a famous Nazi hunter.⁵

The Economist had a cautionary tale to tell about Wiesenthal. At the end of the war, “[h]e was being taken by SS guards, in his faded striped uniform, away from the advancing Russians. Somewhere in the middle of Poland, he and an SS corporal scavenged together for potatoes. What, the corporal asked him mockingly, would he tell someone in America about the death camps? Mr. Wiesenthal said he would tell the truth.”

What was the Nazi soldier’s response? “They wouldn’t believe you.”

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