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Yom Ha'Shoah in an Even More Special Context

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Yom Ha'Shoah in an Even More Special Context
Richard Weisberg
Founder, Cardozo's Holocaust/Human Rights Program
January 27, 2022

Dear Friends.

This always precious day of mournful memory is linked in 2022 to the 80th anniversary of the event that gave birth to all that unutterable sadness: the Wannsee Conference of 1942. In an otherwise innocuous building you can visit anytime you are in Berlin, a handful of men, over cakes and liqueur, devised the “Final Solution”. It took them around two days, well heated and protected from the ice and snow outdoors, to list mechanically their estimates of how many Jews lived in Europe’s various countries and how these Jews might be – though their written minutes never use the word itself – exterminated. They already knew of the bullet-to-head methods used in newly conquered eastern Europe against defenseless men, women, and children. But this would be extermination on a grand scale.

When I visit the site itself, I always anticipate meeting the ghosts of monsters and aberrational figures worthy of Mary Shelley or Bram Stoker. Then I remember how many Wannsee participants had law degrees, doctoral degrees, or the trappings of elegant middle-European educational training more generally. I remind myself that I was fortunate enough, as a Cornell graduate student at the University of Zurich, to study in German about such writers as Goethe and Schiller, Durrenmatt and Kleist. This was the background the majority of these men had enjoyed prior to Wannsee.

What led them down the path to this unique evil? Our Cardozo program originated in attempts by a few of us to answer that question and to make sure that “never again” would lawyers use their skills to create or even condone such aberration. Hundreds of our students have learned, by looking at relatively recent documentation, how these men and thousands of other lawyers across Europe actively assisted in the Shoah; we ask our students to think through the choices they might face if their careers present not such enormities but nonetheless issues of right and wrong that at one time or another challenge every lawyer in her professional capacity.

In writing about Wannsee’s most infamous participant, Adolf Eichmann, Hannah Arendt spoke of “the banality of evil”. But the dominant characters at the conference 80 years ago were trained in the traditions of high European culture. Some were brilliant men. We cannot escape the shocking thought that, unless we consistently scrutinize our own actions and words – and those of others in our profession – we might use **our** training to dip a toe into the waters



of wrongdoing. It is then only a short step into an ocean of misery for ourselves, and for others we have started to victimize.

Wannsee as it links to Yom Ha'Shoah affords an opportunity to learn, as our students do, the special place lawyers and judges had in the co-production of 6,000,000 Jewish deaths. NEVER AGAIN! NEVER AGAIN! NEVER AGAIN!

With all my best wishes on two sad anniversaries,

Richard