

Introduction

This volume is a summa of my writings, collected over the last seven years, penned for a range of local and international publications. In a way, it's bravura opinionating, a series of interior monologues that have gratefully found a public platform. Each piece included here is a springboard for reflection and represents a critical and scholarly engagement with the messy complexity of a phalanx of political, social and cultural issues, specifically antisemitism, the Holocaust, Israel and the Jewish world. Indeed, most of the impressionistic threads in this book pivot towards those ideas and events, though not exclusively. And although these are the subjects I am most at home with, I have taken the licence of digressiveness afforded to an essayist to stray into the unforeseen hinterland, and at times, trespass the usual band of thematic spaces I engage with. This cathedral of forays records the breadth of the large interests that have exercised my mind for decades and chronicles the epochal developments that have suffused the Jewish and Israeli universe during this century.

This work of erudition and passion is my attempt to come to grips with the elephantine rollcall of issues that have kept me up at night and have compelled me to put pen to paper. Writing, the sport of the cerebral, is my game. As Buffon remarked in 1753, "*Le style c'est l'homme même*" ("The style is the man himself"), pointing to the truism that you may learn a lot about a person through their letters. To wit, the cogitations contained in this book open a window into the themes that have fired me up to spend countless hours trying to understand the timber and wood of the ever-evolving political and cultural landscape that undergirds Jewish life. These are the epochal stars that, for me, glimmer most brightly.

I am a voracious reader, and I usually have something to say. I often disagree with the prevailing orthodoxy. This yearning for pluralism, this appetite for going against the grain, has allowed me to foster a profoundly complex relationship with a loyal cadre of readers who never fail to respond to my regular bursts of moral reckonings and

flashes of musings. I treasure dearly their equal intelligence and potent criticisms.

Writing for the masses is a Herculean labour, a hard caper that takes guts. I am always looking to nail down an argument without oversimplification and win the critics who can cut you down to size. Penning essays is an audacious task, akin to climbing a summit. It is an idealistic art form in which one needs to be at once truthful and zippy, playful and serious, so as to hold the jaded's attention. As Shakespeare noted, "Brevity is the soul of wit".

Moreover, it defines your public persona, tastes and ideologies, though it never entirely captures what you most love. It also means that you have a fight on your hands since roaming across a constellation of controversies invites splenetic censure, and, not infrequently, ruthless attacks that in the age of the information superhighway appear within lightning speed and are shared infinitely.

I try to season and leaven each meditation with authentic energy, keen judgement and probing insights. There is no cutting corners. Compression does not mean a lack of substance, and you will also be hard-pressed to find a trace of jargon. The persistent hope is that the general audience not only accepts my in-depth observations but appreciates the passion that crackles within the page. Putting false modesty aside for a moment, the ambition here is that these essays will have the capacity to surprise and delight, that they will not wane in value and will be granted a modicum of posterity. And if I have done my job properly, once you have tucked into the book, the entries will touch a raw nerve and provoke irresistibly heated conversations in cafés or on a long plane ride. At heart, I pray that they will serve as a source of enjoyment, as a good read, and that you come back to it again and again.

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ANTISEMITISM

The ADL's Global 100: An Index of Antisemitism – Insights from Australia

May 23, 2014

There is a lot to digest and some real insights in the monumental and landmark Anti-Defamation League's *Global 100: An Index of Antisemitism*.¹

You have to hand it to the ADL. There are very few groups that could manage the largest ever global canvass, polling 53,100 people in 102 countries. A bumper sticker conclusion would be that many folks out there in the world hold antisemitic views. More than a billion, in fact.

What the ADL did was to ask whether respondents agreed with an "Antisemitism index", consisting of eleven classic statements that it believes suggest antisemitic bias. And while you could point to methodological problems with the survey, it does tell us, plainly, that we still have a lot of work to do here.

As an organisation whose core mission is to fight antisemitism, the figures relating to Australian attitudes and feelings towards Jews and the Holocaust are of great significance. On the whole, we were not surprised. For us, antisemitism never takes a holiday. And while the unprecedented survey confirms the persistence of Jewish hatred, the good news is that, generally speaking, antisemitism in Australia is one of the lowest in the world.

But let's not break out the champagne just yet. The poll reveals that 14 per cent of Australians answered "probably true" to most of the questions.² And that's based on those willing to admit that they held such views.

This translates to about 2.4 million Australians expressing some hostility towards Jews. That's too many people harbouring such negative sentiments, and we should not feel comfortable about such numbers.

Particularly worrying is that 41 per cent of those Australians surveyed believed that Jews are more loyal to Israel than Australia. Notice, they believed it was Jews, not Zionists or pro-Israel advocates. That's a disturbing and staggering figure and shows the pervasiveness of the dual-loyalty libel.

Of course, it doesn't help when you have Bob Carr claiming the Israel Lobby exercised undue influence over the PM's office on behalf of Israel, or Malcolm Fraser asserting that the pro-Israel lobby wields too much power and others using the Ben Zygier affair to question the loyalty of Jews to their country.

A cause of great concern was that 71 per cent were either fairly unconcerned or not concerned at all about violence against Jews, Jewish symbols and Jewish institutions. Perhaps we are not doing enough to explain the tremendous psychological and emotional damage that physical attacks and racist graffiti have on the victims and how such crimes make everyone throughout the community feel unsafe.

So, for anyone who wants to dismiss antisemitism in Australia as insignificant or a thing of the past, this survey is a wake-up call.

The deep-seated and pernicious beliefs about Jews dominating business and having too much money are still heavily rooted in our culture.³ Consider that 24 per cent thought Jews had too much power in the business world, and 26 per cent thought Jews had too much power in international financial markets. The perception that Jews are somewhat different and powerful needs to be debunked. There are plenty of Jews who are poor and many rich people who are not Jewish. Elsewhere, 15 per cent thought Jews have too much control over global affairs.

A positive finding is that 93 per cent of those polled had heard about the Holocaust, with 88 per cent stating that the number of Jews who died in the Holocaust has been fairly described by history. Holocaust knowledge in Australia is one of the highest on the planet and validates the value of Holocaust education.

Still, 26 per cent believed that Jews talked too much about what happened to them in the Holocaust.

We need to continue investing in Holocaust education so its universal lessons reach a broad spectrum of groups. This will help a cross-section of young and old understand why it's essential to talk about the Holocaust.

There are several timely lessons that we need to take away from this study.

One is that we cannot afford to be complacent.

Second, we must be vigilant in confronting the hate-mongers and in denouncing anti-Jewish expressions.

Third, the survey should serve as a reminder of why the national conversation about the importance of laws such as 18C is crucial. We can take heart from the fact that 74 per cent believed that it is very important and somewhat important for the government to take a role in combatting antisemitism.

Fourth, we must recommit ourselves to countering such troubling attitudes with educational and interfaith initiatives that are focused and targeted to tackle such persistent views.

In an email I received last week, Abe Foxman, National Director of the Anti-Defamation League, told me that, “Our survey showed that Australians have a relatively low level of antisemitic attitudes, and have impressively widespread knowledge of the Holocaust, as compared with the 101 other countries and territories around the world.

“This should be a source of pride among Australians who celebrate the country’s diversity and tolerance. However, Australian political, civic and religious leaders in Australia must continue to publicly condemn acts of antisemitism and antisemitic discourse whenever it appears ... Australians can be set an example for many other societies by remaining steadfast against this hate and ignorance.”⁴

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THE HOLOCAUST

Let's Retire the Hitler Analogies

March 30, 2016

Question: what do President George W Bush, President Obama, Tony Abbott, Netanyahu, Putin, Trump, Campbell Newman, Taylor Swift, Obamacare, abortion, gun control, stem cell research, animal rights, Australia's immigration policies, and detention camps have in common?

Answer: they have all been compared to Hitler or have been Nazi-fied.

It is the mother of all analogies, comedic punchlines and worn-out clichés, tossed around glibly and with infinite flexibility. And although we should know better, in today's growing climate of hyperbole and cultural stupidity, anyone can be, or is, Hitler. It seems that Hitler mania and delirium know no bounds and are an equal-opportunity slur.

Nazis, who represent the ultimate evil, and conjure the most horrific visions of suffering and depravity, are popping up in our culture with disturbing frequency and obscenely littering our public square. We have soup Nazis,¹ grammar Nazis,² eco-Nazis,³ feminazis,⁴ Nico-Nazis,⁵ health-Nazis, Jazz-Nazis, ticket-Nazis, lunch-box Nazis⁶ and traffic-Nazis, to name but a few.

Consider, if all these people are Nazis, how terrible could the real Nazis have been? The actual neo-Nazis must be delighted with these distortions. And the internet has amplified the so-called Goodwin's Law: "As online discussion becomes longer, the probability of a comparison involving Nazis and Hitler approaches one."

I get why people are tempted to introduce Nazis into a discussion, why the appeal of invoking and exploiting this imagery is so alluring. The Third Reich embodies a unique historical evil and is a convenient metaphor for illustrating the concept of right versus wrong. And yes, it's a cheap trick that packs a punch as a scare tactic, is hard to beat for shock value, and is guaranteed to work as a sensational headline

generator. It's also an effective instrument in demonising and smearing anyone with whom you disagree. And yes, I acknowledge that sometimes people use the term Nazi to describe a person who is strict and uncompromising, an obsessive control freak.

But there is a world of difference between such personality types and the human horror and unspeakable crimes of the Nazis in the 1930s and 1940s. One doesn't have to be a professor of history to know that Nazi and Hitler analogies are revolting and repugnant, or to be aware that they trivialise the indescribable atrocities carried out on an industrial, monstrous scale.

Just ask a Holocaust survivor, and they'll tell you that none of the comparisons today matches or even comes even close to the unbridled racial hatred, the immensity of the terrors and the barbarity of Hitler's Germany. Such promiscuous reliance on lazy and irresponsible analogies makes a mockery of the slaughter of millions, and is insulting and painful to the victims and the survivors. It also belittles and dishonours the sacrifice made by those who fought to defeat the Nazis and bring Hitler's reign to an end.

Consider, when you remove the historical associations and meaning from the Holocaust, you make it really hard to impart this tragedy's timeless and universal lessons to present and future generations. Such trivialisation makes it easier for Holocaust deniers who bombard the internet with lies and Jewish conspiracies. I have repeatedly spoken out about this kind of vile, ugly rhetorical device. Whether politicians, academics or celebrities, we hold them accountable and denounce them for their misguided and revolting equations and disregard for the truth.

There is no excuse for public figures to play the Hitler card, to misuse this supercharged and cruelly insensitive language as a blunt tool to score political points. If you feel the urge to reference Hitler just to stir the emotions and inflame the debate or win the argument, you are way out of line. Watch your language and think twice before lunging for the Hitler lexicon. Reflect on the systematic, planned extermination of innocents, including more than one million children; think about the emaciated figures staring from behind barbed wire, about the kids torn from their mothers' arms and pushed into gas chambers, about the crematoriums in Auschwitz, about the death marches, about the Roma, the mentally handicapped, homosexuals and others who were executed for being "different", about the mobile killing units, about the

ghettos ... and then stop to ask yourself whether the Nazi analogies you are about to spew out are appropriate.

During this year's Republican presidential race, a host of commentators, opponents and comedians have rushed to equate Donald Trump with the Fuhrer.⁷ I shouldn't have to say this, but although the billionaire businessman has said some troubling things and his ideas have rattled many as dangerous and bigoted, he is no Hitler. The shoddy comparisons and name-calling are just not connected to reality. Trump is not an antisemitic, butcherous dictator with a "Final Solution" to eradicate an entire race; he does not possess Hitler's genocidal objectives; he has no authority over paramilitary-style henchmen and storm troopers like Hitler did. Our language has plenty of strong words to criticise Trump's policies.

As one who has devoted his life to fighting antisemitism and Holocaust denial, who has taught and written books on the subject, I've had enough. So let's bury once and for all the improper Hitler and Nazi references.

And to those who accuse me of being a committed guardian of Holocaust memory, I say: You're right.

Video Games Defile the Holocaust

June 30, 2016

The mounting assault and perversion of Holocaust memory is a topic that is guaranteed to make my blood boil.

Nothing is sacred or off-limits anymore. Every form of abject manipulation, monumental insensitivity and commercial vulgarisation of history's darkest chapter is booming, and every aspect of this inexpressible tragedy is fair game for the entertainment industry. It's spreading like cancer around the world, along with antisemitism and Israel bashing.

The Holocaust has become marketable, as the proliferation of books, films, TV shows, plays, computer games and apps form part of a cottage industry milking dollars from blood and tears. Fools rush in where angels fear to tread, compounding the stomach-churning exploitation that lies at the heart of this phenomenon.

Often, it feels like a sick joke.

Last week, I took a deep breath when I learned of "Campo di Auschwitz", a game on the Android smartphone that invited users to live like a real Jew in Auschwitz or play a Nazi guard.⁸ This is not the first repellent game that makes a carnival of the Holocaust. Some years ago, "KZ Manager", a video game popular in Austria and Germany, placed the player in the role of a commandant running Treblinka, which included a chimney spewing smoke.⁹ Players earned points for gassing Jews and for selling their body parts, gold fillings and skin for lampshades so more gas could be purchased. Once Jews were gassed, players were awarded a sales office that bore the message "Spread it all over the world".

In 2015, Google apologised for putting Nazi death camps like Auschwitz, Dachau and Sachsenhausen into "Ingress", a virtual reality game played by millions on tablets, smartphones and computers, as a prize to be won by competitors who try to control portals as a way to conquer earth.¹⁰

ISRAEL, PEOPLE & EVENTS

We Weep for Children Callously Murdered

July 10, 2014

As Naftali Frenkel, Eyal Yifrach, Gilad Shaar and Mohammed Abu Khdeir were laid to rest, we all wept ... for children callously murdered, for lives cut short, and for a peace that these boys will never see.

To add to the grief and disbelief, the usual calls for Israel to show restraint were heard, most loudly by the Obama administration. No one was surprised. This pattern has been around for a while.

With every homicidal bombing, with every killing of a child, with every rocket attack, with every bombing of a café or bus, Israel is denied its right of self-defence and urged to exercise restraint as its pallbearers bury countless victims.

Beyond the tears, I recalled how twenty years ago, on the day that the Norwegian Committee announced Peres, Rabin and Arafat as the winners of the Nobel Prize for Peace, Hamas kidnapped and killed Nachshon Waxman, a young Israeli soldier.¹ Even then, Israel demonstrated remarkable self-control.

Sadly, the Palestinian leadership has chosen war over peace and ~~have~~ established alliances with those who preach the cult of death.

In 1990, they embraced Hussein.

In 2000, they looked to Hezbollah as a model.

In 2006, they voted in legislative elections for Hamas, with its track record of killing sprees and a genocidal platform of openly obliterating Israel.

And this year, Abbas formed an alliance with ~~the~~ jihadist terrorist group who is at war with Israel, who views every Israeli as a legitimate target and whose official motto declares: “O, our children: the Jews – brothers of the apes, assassins of the prophets, bloodsuckers, warmongers – are murdering you, depriving you of life after having plundered your homeland and your homes.”²

The US and EU (who outlaw Hamas as a terrorist entity), as well as the UN, welcomed this new Palestinian unity government. Worse, the USA keeps providing \$400 million in American taxpayer dollars in the form of aid to the Palestinian Authority, which is then used to pay terrorists and their families.

Like Hamas, The Palestinian Authority officially refuses to recognise Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state. Surrounded by states and movements who reject its very existence and are sworn to wipe it off the map, Israel has faced threats to its existence since its creation.

Since 1948, Israel has been fighting against military invasions and terrorism. Not a single decade has passed without a new war and a terrible life and death struggle – 1948, 1956, 1967, 1969, 1973, 1982, 1987, 1991, 2001, 2006, 2008, 2012.

And yet, it has desperately sought accommodation with its neighbours, though its desire and attempt to negotiate a settlement with the Arab states and the Palestinians have not ushered an era of peace. Even when Gaza and the West Bank were in Egyptian and Jordanian hands, Fedayeen terrorists infiltrated the Jewish state to perpetrate the murder.

Israel's critics talk about the settlements as an obstacle to peace. Yet, if that was the issue, then the more territory Israel withdrew from, the more peace it would enjoy. But the more land Israel has conceded, the less secure and the more vulnerable it has become. Every compromise has been treated as surrender rather than as a gesture of reconciliation. It has emboldened Israel's enemies, who have subjected Israelis to a continuous campaign of violence.

The goodwill of The Oslo Accords was repudiated by Arafat who orchestrated four years of the second Intifada. Withdrawals from Lebanon in 2000 and from Gaza in 2005 led to heightened instability as Hamas and Hezbollah seized control of the power vacuum and escalated the conflict.

When Israel unilaterally turned Gaza over, the strip became a base of terror, as Hamas kidnapped Gilad Shalit and increased its unprovoked firing of rockets on towns and schoolyards in Israel.

The inescapable truth is that regardless of whether it's Labor or Likud, whatever the government's policy or whoever led the country, Israel has never experienced peace. As Ambassador John Bolton has noted, one of the reasons the PA has sabotaged every peace negotiation is because it's not an independent actor but a puppet of other countries

in the region that want to prolong the conflict with Israel and are using the Palestinians to project their hatred of Israel.

The PA continues to glorify suicide bombers, naming schools and streets after them, like a public square in Ramallah to honour Dalal Mughrabi, who in 1978 killed 38 Israelis, including thirteen children.³

Incitement in an animating passion. Palestinian schoolchildren are taught to hate Jews and learn from maps of the region from which Israel has been erased. Abbas has failed to inculcate Palestinian youth with a love of peace, poisoning their mind instead with a fanatical culture of hate and death.

As Israelis sobbed over the loss of life, Palestinians celebrated in the streets, giving out candies and sweets, and posting messages on social media congratulating the kidnappers. The mother of Amer Abu Aysha, one of the prime suspects in the kidnapping, said that if her son had committed the crime, she would be “proud of him”⁴

As author Thane Rosenbaum has noted, “Palestinians must be held accountable for their love affair with terror.”⁵

Peace has never seemed so out of reach.