

80th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz discussed in Ottawa

Introduction

Hello to everyone at the Canada-Japan Society and to everyone who supports Canada-Japan relations.

In Ottawa recently, following Prime Minister Trudeau's announcement of his intention to resign, as we reported last time, attention has been focused on the Liberal Party leadership election and developments surrounding the imposition of a 25% tariff following the inauguration of President Trump. Events related to these issues are occurring every day and the media coverage is heating up. However, as Ottawa is the capital, in addition to domestic affairs, a wide variety of events and receptions related to politics, economy, diplomacy, culture, community, and more are held here. Naturally, the organizers put their heart and soul into each event, and they make careful preparations before it takes place. An invitation then arrives at the diplomatic corps in Ottawa. I am invited to various events every day, and many of them interest me, but the reality is that due to schedule constraints and other factors, the number of events I can attend is limited.

Meanwhile, in Ottawa, the International Holocaust Remembrance Day ceremony is held every year around January 27th, the day the Auschwitz concentration camp was liberated by the Soviet army. In particular, since this year marks the 80th anniversary of liberation in 1945, many related events were held. As conflicts continue around the world and xenophobia spreads, we are reminded once again of the importance of continuing to tell the story of the tragedy of the Holocaust.

So, in this issue of "Ottawa News," we will be talking about the 80th anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz concentration camp and Holocaust education.

The Resonance of "Never Again"

The decision to build the Auschwitz concentration camp on the outskirts of the city of Oświęcim in Poland, which was occupied by Nazi Germany, was made in January 1940, and it was opened in May under the leadership of Heinrich Himmler, the Reichsführer of the SS. More than 1.1 million Jews and others were massacred here. When Soviet forces liberated the camp on January 27, 1945, an estimated 7,500 people remained there. It was added to the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1979. It is a "negative legacy."

Ahead of the date of the liberation of Auschwitz concentration camp on January 27th, an "80th Anniversary of the Liberation of Auschwitz Ceremony" was held at 10:00 a.m. on Friday the

24th at the Sir John A. Macdonald Building in a corner of the Parliament district in downtown Ottawa, in collaboration with the Holocaust Remembrance Committee and Senator Marc Gold (Independent). Incidentally, this hall is an extremely prestigious venue named after the first Prime Minister of Canada.

Members of parliament, Jewish community members, Holocaust education officials, and the local diplomatic corps participated on the day. I was there along with ambassadors from Germany, Israel, Poland, Colombia, Argentina, Iceland and Eastern European countries.



(Photo) Ambassador Yamanouchi and Senator Gold (right) (Photo courtesy of the Embassy of Japan in Canada)

At the beginning of the ceremony, the following message from Prime Minister Trudeau was read by Senator Gold, co-host of the ceremony:

“What happened at the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp is a reminder of what happens when we give in to hatred. Eighty years later, we recall the unimaginable horrors inflicted on millions of Jewish people, and we reaffirm our commitment to the fight against hatred and anti-Semitism, and to "Never Again.”

The powerful message of “Never Again” permeated the venue.

Auschwitz Survivor's Heartfelt Testimony

The biggest highlight of the day's ceremony was a speech by David Moskovic, an Auschwitz survivor who now lives in Ottawa. Mr. Moskovic is currently 95. It was moving to hear him look back on his life, speak with vigor and a low, powerful voice, without even looking at a script.

“I (Mr. Moskovic) was born in 1929 in the rural town of Koňáš, Czechoslovakia. Although

we were by no means wealthy, we lived happily with our family in a beautiful village. The outbreak of World War II cast a dark shadow over rural life, but everyday life continued. But at the age of 14, I was forced to Auschwitz with my parents and older brother, and my life changed forever. The first thing we saw were piles of shoes and clothes, as families were separated and put into different lines. The line I was part of was put into barracks and sent into forced labour. I was a bricklayer. I repaired buildings that had been destroyed by Allied air raids. The food was awful. Those who were made to line up in other ranks were sent to the gas chambers.”

Mr. Moskovic spoke matter-of-factly. As a 14-year-old boy, he witnessed so many innocent lives being taken in such brutal ways. He thought carefully about what he was saying, his eyes were wide open, and his mouth was tightly pursed. This is a precious sharing of an experience from over 80 years ago that will never be forgotten. Many attendees were in tears.

“I can't believe I'm here, speaking in front of you all. I survived hell and I never forgot hope. Life is beautiful,” he concluded.

After the ceremony, I had the opportunity to speak briefly with Mr. Moskovic. I had the opportunity to shake his hand, and I was impressed by how firmly he shook my hand and said, "Thank you for listening to my humble story." I said, "Your words struck me deeply, and I was reminded of the importance of passing on these stories. As an ambassador, I will do my best.”



(Photo) Ambassador Yamanouchi shaking hands with Mr. Moskovic (left) (Photo courtesy of the Embassy of Japan in Canada)



(Photo) Mr. Moscovic's granddaughter (second from the left in the front row), Mr. Moscovic and his wife (right) (Photo courtesy of the Embassy of Japan in Canada)

The International Holocaust Remembrance Day Ceremony

Then, on the 80th anniversary, Monday, January 27th, at 11:00 a.m., the International Holocaust Remembrance Day ceremony was held at the National Holocaust Monument. The Prime Minister usually attends this ceremony, but this year, a ceremony commemorating the 80th anniversary of the liberation was held at the site of the Auschwitz concentration camp in Poland, and Prime Minister Trudeau attended there instead. The federal government was therefore represented by Minister of Official Languages Rachel Bendayan, a Moroccan-Jewish woman.

Minister Bendayan gave the opening speech. She powerfully stressed the importance of preserving the legacy of Holocaust survivors and introduced the federal government's efforts. At the same time, she stressed the need for a bipartisan response, saying that decisive action against anti-Semitism is an urgent issue.

The next speaker was Conservative Party leader Poilievre. He talked about how, as a young man, he took part in the march from Auschwitz to Birkenau. He then pointed out that unfortunately, anti-Semitism is rampant in Canada, and while emphasizing solidarity with Israel, he said that strong measures, such as revoking visas and deporting immigrants who incite anti-Semitism, are necessary.

In this regard, Canada is an immigration-based country that values multiculturalism, diversity and inclusion. Therefore, Arab and Jewish citizens are equally Canadian and make up part of society. However, the situation in the Middle East is affecting Canada's Arab and Jewish communities in both direct and indirect ways. In particular, the anti-Israel terrorist attack by Hamas in October 2023, the Israeli attacks in response, and the severe situation in Gaza have

led to intense conflict and antagonism between Arab and Jewish people in Canada. This has led to frequent incidents of anti-Semitic violence. This is the background to their statements.

National Holocaust Monument

I would like to briefly mention the National Holocaust Monument, where this memorial ceremony was held. The monument is in Ottawa's downtown area, adjacent to Parliament Hill, the Supreme Court of Canada and the Library and Archives Canada. It was built to commemorate the 6 million Jews who lost their lives in the Holocaust. Designed by renowned architect Daniel Libeskind, it opened to the public on September 27, 2017. The monument's design represents a landscape of loss, memory and survival. Viewed from above, the monument is shaped like a star, representing the rank badges used at the camp. The monument is designed so that Parliament's Peace Tower, a symbol of freedom, can be seen beyond it.

Its construction was made possible through the efforts of Laura Grosman, granddaughter of a Holocaust survivor. This is an extremely important facility for learning about the history of the Holocaust in Canada and commemorating the victims.

The Story of Italian Jews

On January 27th, the 80th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, there was another event held in Ottawa that I would like to share with you that made a deep impression on me.

The event, held at the Canadian Museum of History and co-hosted by the Italian Ambassador to Canada and the Holocaust Education Center, explored the journey of Italian Jews.

The biggest highlight was the preview of the documentary film "Liliana," directed by Ruggero Gabbai, which was screened at the Rome Film Festival in October 2024. The film features the testimony of Liliana Segre, a Holocaust survivor born to an Italian Jewish family in Milan and now an Italian senator for life.

First, some brief historical background. Italy has had a long-standing Jewish community, which has been active in the fields of politics, economics, and culture. You may recall this from Shakespeare's "The Merchant of Venice." Then fast forward to the 20th century. Things began to change in 1922 when Mussolini's National Fascist Party came to power. Although Mussolini did not initially take an anti-Semitic stance, in 1938 the "Racial Laws" were introduced, stripping Italian Jews of their civil rights. World War II began, and in 1940 the country allied itself with Germany and declared war on the Allies. Then, in July 1943,

Mussolini's government collapsed and Italy entered into an armistice. However, the situation changed dramatically when Nazi German forces occupied northern Italy and the "Republic of Salò" was established. In October 1943, the "Raid on the Roman Ghetto" took place, in which Jews were arrested and deported to Auschwitz.

So, let's return to the testimony of Liliana Segre. In January 1944, at the age of 13, she attempted to flee to Switzerland with her father but failed. They were arrested and sent to Auschwitz. She was forced to do hard labor and was separated from her family, but she survived. After the war, she never spoke about her experiences for nearly half a century. However, in the 1990s, she began giving testimony to younger generations and continues to work to convey the memory of the Holocaust. In recognition of her achievements, she was appointed a Senator for life.

It would be easy for a critic to say that it is important to pass on these stories because of the unimaginable suffering. However, when you have experienced indescribable suffering, when your family, friends, and acquaintances have all become victims and you are the only survivor, I imagine that talking about your experience with others places an enormous psychological burden. I was touched by Liliana's courage in speaking out after half a century.

Conclusion

This year marks 80 years since the end of World War II. Holocaust survivors are aging. It is extremely important to ensure that their voices are passed on to the next generation. From this perspective, I feel there is a need to further enhance Holocaust education.

In this regard, the humanitarian and selfless acts of Japanese diplomats and civilians who assisted the Jewish refugees in their escape, including Chiune Sugihara, who issued transit visas to Japan for Jewish refugees in Europe under extremely difficult circumstances, are important to continue talking about as well.

In March of this year, Akira Kitade, author of books such as "Visas of Life and the Epic Journey: How the Sugihara Survivors Reached Japan," who has researched the details related to the Sugihara visas and is also a frequent lecturer, will be visiting Winnipeg and Ottawa. Canada has the largest Jewish community after Israel, the United States and France. I would like to fully cooperate with him to make his visit to Canada meaningful as part of Holocaust education.

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