

Ignatz Bubis, the Chairman of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, warns against Relativizing the Holocaust (November 9, 1998)

Abstract

Deeply hurt by what he viewed as a relativization of the Holocaust, Ignatz Bubis, chairman of the Central Council of Jews, spoke out against Martin Walser's critique that Auschwitz was being used as a "moral club" to enforce political correctness. Bubis accused Walser of "intellectual arson" and argued that appeals to forget were a form of "latent antisemitism" that had to be stopped. His remarks were delivered on the 50th anniversary of the "Kristallnacht" pogrom of November 9, 1938.

Source

Speech Commemorating the Night of the Pogrom of November 9, 1938

The speech has been shortened.

[...]

Mr. President, Mr. President of the Bundestag, Mr. Chancellor, I alone am responsible for what I am about to say, not "all Jews." Just as Mr. Walser alone is responsible for his speech and not "all Germans." The latter cannot be true, for then I, too, would be responsible for Walser's speech. Let me begin, however, with a statement by the historian Fried, who said these words during his opening remarks at the 42nd *Deutscher Historikertag*^[1]: "Whoever tries to escape history will fail in the long run."

I have been criticized by many; it was said that I went too far in my criticism of Walser and that I misunderstood him. Martin Walser is one of the leading writers of the postwar republic and is a man of words. He must therefore accept that his language and his style will receive more attention than the language and style of a mere mortal like myself.

I don't know what there is to interpret in his statement that he had to learn to look away, that he is well-practiced in deflecting his thoughts, and that he cannot participate in the disqualification of repression. Here, Walser is clearly speaking for a culture of looking away and of not thinking, which was more than customary under National Socialism and to which we must not become accustomed again today.

We must all confront history, and that includes watching movies not only about Goethe or Bismarck, but also about the period of National Socialism. We also study the history of the Thirty Years' War and the history of the *Vormärz* revolution of 1848; naturally, we take pleasure in the biographies of Goethe, Schiller, Beethoven, or Bismarck. All of this is part of German history. But it also includes Hitler and Himmler. One cannot search out only the pleasant sides of one's history and repress the unpleasant ones. Whoever is unwilling to address this part of history, and instead prefers to deflect his thoughts or forget, must be aware that history can repeat itself.

This shame was there, period, and will not disappear by wanting to forget, and it is "intellectual arson" if anyone sees in it an instrumentalization of Auschwitz for present purposes. Those are the kinds of assertions that usually come from right-wing party leaders. Society has gotten used to having such statements and assertions come from the right-wing camp. But if someone who belongs to the

intellectual elite of the republic makes such a claim, it carries a very different weight. I don't know anyone who invokes Frey or Deckert[2], but now right-wing extremists, too, will most certainly invoke Walser.

We cannot dispense with showing films about the shame just so that Mr. Walser and others can remain undisturbed in their sense of self and find peace of mind, and so that the impression of instrumentalization does not arise. Since I assume that Walser, like I myself, does not advocate "collective guilt," I don't understand why Walser feels attacked as an accused when watching these films.

The word "Auschwitz" is not a threat routine or a means of intimidation or merely a compulsory exercise. If Walser sees it as a "moral club," he may even be right, for one can, should, and must learn morality from "Auschwitz," though one should not regard it as a club. I must posit that it may be necessary, according to Walser, to use morality as a club because otherwise some may not want to learn it.

One can hold different opinions about the Holocaust memorial in this form or that, and one can oppose the erection of such a memorial in the first place. But in no case is one allowed to call the design a nightmare, even with poetic license, and most certainly not a monumentalization of the shame. The shame was monumental and is not made such only by a memorial.

These parts of his speech are unworthy of the winner of a peace prize. I have already expressed my thoughts on the speech. Recently, this trend [in Walser's thinking] has become clearly evident in his utterances. Intellectual nationalism is on the rise and it is not entirely free of a latent antisemitism. I am especially irritated by a whole host of magazines that expressed their surprise that I am criticizing Walser so harshly, for he merely said what most were thinking, anyway. In all of this, Walser and many others also express concern for "normality." I don't know what they mean by that. For me, normality is, for example, that Jews believe they can live in Germany once again, that Jews are engaged in social as well as political life, and that we have the kind of democracy that has not previously existed on German soil. But "normality" cannot mean suppressing remembrance and living with new antisemitism and a new racism of the kind that is coming to light in right-wing extremist parties. [...]

We in the Jewish community have learned from childhood that remembering is an important part of our history. As the Talmud says: "The secret of redemption is remembering." [...] We owe it to the victims of the Shoah not to forget them! Whoever forgets these victims murders them a second time!

NOTES

[1] * *Deutscher Historikertag*: an annual professional meeting of German historians – trans.

[2] * Gerhard Frey, head of the right-wing extremist party German People's Union [*Deutsche Volksunion* or DVU], and Günter Deckert, chairman of the National Democratic Party of Germany [*Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands* or NPD] from 1991-96; Holocaust denier; in jail from 1995–2000 – eds.

Source: Ignatz Bubis, "Gedenkrede zur Pogromnacht am 9. November 1938", *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, November 10, 1998.

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