

TEL AVIV UNIVERSITY



אוניברסיטת תל-אביב

The Lester and Sally Entin Faculty of Humanities
The Chaim Rosenberg School of Jewish Studies
The Chaim Weizmann Institute
for the Study of Zionism

הפקולטה למדעי הרוח ע"ש לסטר וסאלי אנטין
בית הספר למדעי היהדות ע"ש חיים רוזנברג
המכון לחקר הציונות
ע"ש חיים וויצמן

28/05/03

Dear Mr. Berman,

I would like to add my comments to the discussion on whether the Claims Conference should continue its present policy of supporting cultural activity or should it change it and devote its funds exclusively to the support of needy survivors.

Being a survivor myself, I feel the need to tackle this problem openly and sincerely. It is important to note that not all survivors are of the same opinion in this regard.

It goes without saying that the existential needs of the survivors must be met. This is our first priority. No elderly survivor should be left without proper treatment and care. However, this would have been true even if no money would have been coming from the sources of the Claims Conference: every Jewish community has to take care of its needy. Every Jewish family should be taking care of its weak and feeble members. In a way, the restitution money that is being allocated by the Claims Conference, is like a treasure found unexpectedly. What would have happened had this money not been returned to Jewish hands? Would needy survivors been left to live and die in disgraceful conditions? Undoubtedly Jewish philanthropy would have raised to the occasion and found the money to support them. These days, Jewish communities and organizations as well as Jewish families, use the Claims Conference funds instead. This is a very unhealthy development, which is bound to hurt in the long run all needy Jews: the tendency to transfer responsibility from communal institutions does not bode well for future Jewish solidarity. The money allocated by the Claims Conference should enhance the standard of living of survivors, but not replace other funds, that should take care of the basic needs. In this regard, the extra 20% are small money and won't change things radically.

On the other hand, these 20% make a lot of difference when applied to cultural activities. Jewish tradition differentiates between "life of the moment" (hayei sha'a) and "eternal life" (hayei olam). This is the division between social needs and cultural activities. The importance of attending to the physical needs of survivors is obvious, but no less important is the need to cultivate cultural activities. The Nazi plan was not only to exterminate the Jewish people in the physical sense, but also in the spiritual. We shall never know how many potential winners of the Nobel prize, great Talmudic scholars, painters and composers, writers and philosophers, perished. The loss to humanity in general was immense, but the Jewish people lost such a font of creativity that can never be replaced. When the surviving remnant tried to rebuild their lives,

they could devote neither energy nor funds to reconstructing the lost culture. Today, however, it is our duty to try and do right that.

There are two venues to this task: first, cultivating the memory of the catastrophe that befell the Jewish people. The last decade saw the proliferation of museums, chairs, scholarly programs, educational programs etc. all of which attempted to bring the Holocaust into the consciousness of Jews and non-Jews alike. Slowly the Holocaust penetrates into the mainstream of western culture. It is a phenomenon that fifty years ago would have been considered impossible. The importance of this development can not be exaggerated. How important it is can be assessed from the fact that whoever wishes to delegitimize the Jews or Israel, first tries to deny the Holocaust or present it in a perverted way. While a lot of ground has been covered in this regard in the last two decades, there is a lot to be done yet, especially with regard to new materials that are still discovered in Eastern Europe. Research, documentation and preservation of memories are the main fields that should be pursued.

Second, we have a sacred duty to preserve and reconstruct the memory of the culture that was destroyed. Lately, the most important work of Meir Balaban, the History of the Jews in Krakow from the 14th century to the 19th century was published in Hebrew. Meir Balaban, the leading historian of Polish Jewry, perished in the Holocaust. The Polish Jewry, the most vibrant Jewish community at the time, perished too. I think that we owe to the memory of this and other vanished communities to bring to light the story of their life, the glory of their culture, not only of their martyrdom. The fact that the work of Balaban was published in Hebrew so many years after it had first appeared, is a reflection on the scant attention given by us to the commemoration of Jewish world that disappeared. The main reason for this neglect is the scarcity of funds.

The Jewish dictum is "Vehigadeta lebinkha" (you should tell your son) or "Zakhor" (remember). This demand of cultivating the people's collective memory is based on the assumption that a people without a past is also a people without a future. The 20% allocated by the Claims Conference to cultural activities are a relatively small amount, compared to the sums allocated to physical needs. But it has an enormous impact. I am sure that many survivors share my view that this policy should not be changed. This is the least we can do on behalf of our "eternal life".

Sincerely

Prof. Anita Shapira