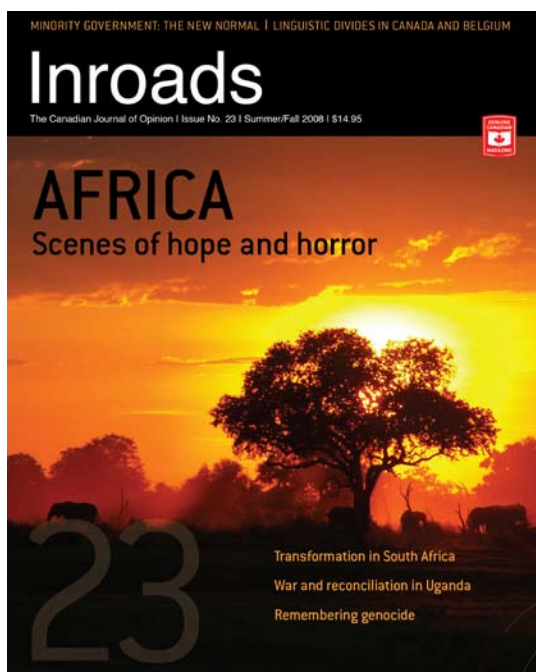


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# Remembering genocide

by Don Cayo

*No need for words ... Let the silence speak for you.*

– A visitor to Washington’s Holocaust Museum

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**My** travels over the last year have taken me to some of the vilest places on earth. I don’t mean landscapes that are ugly or unpleasant or unsafe. No, these places are home to such acts of evil that they are no longer fit as venues for ordinary life. So sullied have they become in human memory that their only remaining role is to serve as reminders of how low our species can stoop, how thin the layer of what we call civilization really is.

How well do they serve that role? What lessons do they hold for the world? What lessons do they hold specifically for me, a privileged citizen of the world who has never been touched by war and violence?

My first stop, in March 2007, was at Tuol Sleng, the high-school-cum-prison in Phnom Penh, and at the nearby Killing Field where Pol Pot’s Khmer Rouge minions murdered



20,000 Cambodians, many of whom had first passed through Tuol Sleng. In January 2008 I visited the chillingly efficient Auschwitz I and its sprawling suburban death camp, Birkenau, where the Nazis killed as many as a million and a half men, women and children, mostly Jews. Two weeks later I was in Rwanda. I hired a taxi in Kigali and set out on a self-guided tour of two simple churches in rural Rwanda, one small and one large. It was in these infamous buildings that frenzied machete-wielding Hutus beat their way through barred doors and windows, even gouged holes in the brick walls, so they could hack and slash to death

thousands of their Tutsi neighbours who had put their faith in the sanctity of their church and in God.

I also visited two powerful memorials to the world’s better-known genocides and their millions of victims. The first was the solemn United States Holocaust Museum in Washington. The second was the smaller, simpler but just as evocative Genocide Memorial Centre in Kigali.

I wish I could tell you that this series of visits had its origins in high-minded determination to track evil to its roots and probe the dark depths of the human soul. In reality, the

# One every 42 seconds

The Nazi death camps in Poland, the Killing Fields of Cambodia, the city streets, country roads, even churches, homes and schools of Rwanda – these are the sites that spring to mind when most of us think about modern-day mass murder.

But what happened in these places is in no way unique. According to Genocide Watch, a nonprofit group that monitors and works to prevent mass killings around the world, the toll in the last century includes:

- 1.5 million Armenians
- 3 million Ukrainians
- 6 million Jews
- 250,000 Roma
- 6 million Slavs
- 25 million Russians
- 25 million Chinese
- 1 million Ibos
- 1.5 million Bengalis
- 200,000 Guatemalans
- 1.7 million Cambodians
- 500,000 Indonesians
- 200,000 East Timorese
- 250,000 Burundians
- 500,000 Ugandans
- 2 million Sudanese
- 800,000 Rwandans
- 2 million North Koreans
- 10,000 Kosovars.

This adds up to one death every 42 seconds – about the length of time it takes to read

this list aloud – all day, every day, for 100 years. Not to mention the ongoing, slow-motion slaughter in Darfur where God knows how many – at least 200,000 – have perished. Or the carnage in the Democratic Republic of the Congo where, five years after the purported end of an awful war that has killed 5.4 million, as many as 1,000 people a day (one every 86 seconds) continue to die from unabated violence.



**TUOLSLENG PRISON, PHNOM PENH:** Tuol Sleng is a large lycée in the city centre, dating back to the French colonial period. The Khmer Rouge converted it to a prison for cadres accused of ideological deviations. Upon entering the prison, prisoners were photographed. After interrogation – and torture – most were taken to the Killing Field for execution and burial in mass graves.

genesis was much more mundane. This was a quest born by accident, a byproduct of an unusual itinerary. Other duties were taking me to Cambodia, to Rwanda, to Washington and within cheap-flight side-trip range of Poland. This happenstance prodded me to overcome my reluctance to witness these sites of horror that I knew only from the printed page. That plus the belief that it is the duty of every human being to think about evil from time to time and it would be wrong to pass up an opportunity to enhance that reflection.

I came away from these visits with a dull ache in my head and in my heart. What I saw, read and heard underlined what all of us know but I, for one, have too rarely thought about in depth: that some flaw in our species not only allows these kinds of things to happen – it makes them commonplace (see page 132).

I set out with a lot of questions. I accepted from the beginning that I would never be able to fully grasp what goes on in the minds of the people who conceive and orchestrate horrors such as these. But I thought it important to try to understand how the leaders of oppressive regimes can persuade so many ordinary people to buy into their designs, or at least to keep their heads low and say nothing.

I thought it just as important, perhaps more so, to personalize my reflections. It's easy for people like me to maintain lofty convictions when we live coddled in one of the safest countries on earth. But if my life unrolled in a different time and a different place, would I find the courage to act in the way my beliefs demand? Or would I too be complicit in such crimes?

Moving beyond the hypothetical, what of my actual responsibility as a citizen not only of Canada, but also of the world? If the perpetrators of these vile acts are guilty of the ultimate crime against humanity – and they are – then what of the rest of us? Do I and my generation share the guilt for turning our heads away from the unending chain of horrific events that have happened in almost every corner of the world?

Finally, how can we – as individuals and as the world at large – draw lessons from these failures of humanity? How can we ensure – or at least improve the odds – that they don't happen again? All of us, ordinary folks and world leaders, always vow "Never again" when confronted with such horrors. How do we ensure that, the next time we say it, we finally mean it?

You won't find many answers in the paragraphs below. But these visits crystallized the important questions in my mind.

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## The amusement park of evil

Some people walk through these sites in tears, many in thoughtful silence.

And then there are the louts. One jerk argued loudly with his guide who wanted him to turn off his cell phone in Birkenau, and I couldn't help hearing two loud-mouthed women dissect the petty dramas of their lives as we stood in line to see where tens of thousands had died in the crematorium. I saw a man sneak a smoke behind one of the less visited cell blocks at Auschwitz. I chafed at the gigglers with their private jokes, at the know-it-all doggedly expounding this theory and that, at the shameless picture-takers who popped their flashes everywhere they were asked not to – even inside the Auschwitz crematorium.

The lout's lout was Ken. He and I had nodded to each other but didn't speak as we strolled our separate routes through the notorious Killing Field at Choeung Ek, just outside Phnom Penh. This is a place of meandering pathways, littered with scraps of victims' bones and clothing that have surfaced over the years. The pathways link dozens of mass graves that have been excavated so far. I, for one, felt the need to be alone with my thoughts.

An hour after my tour ended – Ken had finished a little faster as he had found the time to visit another “attraction” before lunch – we found ourselves sharing a table in a busy restaurant.

“Didja go gun-shooting?” the young Australian asked.

No, I said, I did not. I bit my tongue, not telling him my reaction when my tuk-tuk driver urged me to stop at an adjacent shooting range as I left the Killing Field. I was repulsed by the thought that, having just spent time contemplating the work of homicidal maniacs, I would then pretend to be one.

“Aw, that's too bad,” said Ken, compensating for what I thought was my obvious lack of enthusiasm with an excess of his own. “You get to empty the clip in an AK-47 for 30 bucks US. Or – I couldn't afford that much – I got to shoot a Colt 45 for just \$10. I never shot a gun before. It was great! Just great!”

This represents pretty well the worst of the “amusement park of evil” approach to remembrance. That's a phrase I encountered in a thoughtful blog entry by Christopher Tuckwood, a young Canadian on the student board on genocide prevention of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. For some, such sites are just one more stop on a tourist's must-see itinerary – a place to go, gawk and get the tee-shirt.

Tuckwood was writing last summer after being shocked by the Disneyesque atmosphere he found at Auschwitz. I visited there in winter, a quieter time of year. My timing was, by luck, such that I saw no young schoolchildren running all over and clambering onto the displays. But I understand his point.

I visited Auschwitz and Birkenau twice, mainly because as part of a tour group I felt rushed and crowded the first time. The second time, two days after the first, I travelled on a tour bus from the beautiful medieval city of Krakow, but I did not stick with the group. When they turned right, I turned left, and I



The notorious Killing Field at Choeung Ek, just outside Phnom Penh. This is a place of meandering pathways, littered with scraps of victims' bones and clothing that have surfaced over the years.



AUSCHWITZ: At a site noted for the businesslike efficiency with which its victims were murdered, Holocaust remembrance has come to be practised at something approaching an industrial scale as well. The footfalls of a million visitors a year are wearing deep grooves in the stairways of the most-visited prison buildings, and eroding the paved or cobbled walkways and roads.

made a point of staying well clear of the back-to-back tours making their identical rounds.

As I noted in an article I wrote for the Vancouver Sun, it is an irony that, at a site noted and despised for the businesslike efficiency with which its victims were murdered, “Holocaust remembrance has come to be practised at something approaching an industrial scale as well. The footfalls of a million visitors a year are wearing deep grooves in the stairways of the most-visited prison buildings, and eroding the paved or cobbled walkways and roads.”

I first came to realize the repugnance of “the amusement park of evil” at the Killing Field in Choeung Ek. There too I made the rounds twice, but in a different order and for a different reason.

Initially, early in the morning and with hardly anyone else present, I walked alone. I read the detailed signs, often written in stilted English but poignant nonetheless. And I tried to process this awful information and the dismal aura of the place.

Then I hired a guide to take me around again. I hoped he would fill in what I missed and give me a taste of what a typical tourist might expect. He turned out to be a bored, glib young man who did little more than read the signs I had already read myself. And he horrified me when he swung open the glass

door of the site’s dominant stupa – a towering memorial built to house recovered bones – and plucked out two conveniently placed skulls, one with a machete gash, the other with a cudgel bash.

By that time, late morning, several small tour groups had begun to arrive. I left, hoping to find a more solitary place to reflect on what I had seen.

I did not find other visitors or the process itself so intrusive at the other sites I visited. Tuol Sleng, though moderately busy, was much more conducive to reflective thought. Visitors respected one another’s space as we went through classroom after classroom after classroom now full of crude little cells, or steel bed frames on which prisoners had been tortured, or steel rods anchored in the floor and to which prisoners had been shackled, or gut-wrenching official photos of prisoners – some of them children – that had formed part of official prisoner documentation .

The Rwanda churches – left much as they were except for an ugly metal shell built over the smaller one to protect it from the weather – also fostered solitary contemplation. The country’s tourist industry is embryonic, and at both sites I was the only visitor. The guides, in both cases soft-spoken young women, explained the basic details. Then, making it

If I had to choose I would encourage more visitors, not fewer.

The anguished, poignant and thoughtful comments I read in various guest books tell me that, a minority of louts notwithstanding, most visitors do take away a powerful message.

RWANDA: At the small church in rural Ntarama, Rwanda, a murderous mob beat holes in the brick wall to get at the Tutsis seeking refuge inside. The clothes worn by many of the 5,000 victims at the site have been left inside the church as part of the memorial.



clear I could come back to ask questions, they left me on my own.

I visited the Smithsonian's Holocaust Museum in Washington with my wife. Like virtually of all the couples going in – it too was moderately busy – we drifted apart within minutes. Each gripped by different aspects of the powerful displays, we walked through at our own pace. We scarcely spoke for some time after we left.

I was by myself at the Kigali memorial, a simple, purpose-built building on a hillside overlooking the city. Its design follows, on a smaller scale, the Washington museum's pattern of tastefully dim interlaced corridors with simple, evocative displays and clear text to tell the awful stories. At the end, you exit

into a large, well-tended garden – a perfect spot to recover your equilibrium and assess what you've seen and read.

Despite my misgivings about being a part of the “amusement park of evil” syndrome and my distaste for the behaviour of some who come to gawk, I recommend the experience. The downside is too many people tromping through small spaces, but if I had to choose I would encourage more visitors, not fewer. The anguished, poignant and thoughtful comments I read in various guest books tell me that, a minority of louts notwithstanding, most visitors do take away a powerful message.

For anyone who pays attention, it is impossible not to choke up at the site of Choeng

Ek's notorious “killing tree” – the place where parsimonious Khmer Rouge thugs bashed babies' brains out to save the price of a bullet. You cannot overlook the vastness of Birkenau – a place built for the sole purpose of killing millions of “weak” Jews and housing hundreds of thousands of others for the short months it took to work them to death – without your stomach churning and your mind recoiling at the enormity of Nazi war crimes. You cannot contemplate the rough hole knocked in the wall of the tiny church at Ntarama without imagining that you can hear the Hutu mob running amok or that you can smell the fear of the 5,000 huddled here and in two even smaller outbuildings.

Tuol Sleng particularly touched me with its endless ranks of official photographs. These are just mug shots, not artistically remarkable in any way. But they are all that is left to mark the passing of the legions who died so pointlessly. Most looked despairing, some as if they had already died inside, though a few dared to stare at their captors in defiance. These institutional photographs somehow touched me even more than the crisper old portraits and snapshots of happier times – of lives that no one knew were soon to be snuffed out – that I saw in Washington, Poland and Rwanda.

In Auschwitz, what most disturbed me was the room full of human hair – a tiny percentage of what was “harvested” by the Nazis, who stooped so low as to steal the dignity of their victims and weave their tresses into blankets. In Rwanda, no one – certainly not I – got through the last display in the memorial building, a chronicle of the lives of children who died in the slaughter, without tears.

## Never again?

With so many opportunities to stare evil in the eye, and still no answers to the big questions, you may think I have failed. And you may be right.

But the experiences did clarify at least one thing in my mind. I am resolved to speak out stronger and sooner. I shall henceforth be a lot less tolerant of the myriad excuses that the “international community” falls back on – that is, that *we* fall back on – to dither and delay when everyone knows a slaughter is under way. I have no more tolerance for splitting hairs to determine if this atrocity or that one is technically a genocide, or merely mass murder. I am not interested in debating whether 10,000 dead Kosovars or 250,000 Burundians are “enough” to warrant action by the world.

I am resolved to speak out stronger and sooner. I shall henceforth be a lot less tolerant of the myriad excuses that the “international community” falls back on – that is, that *we* fall back on – to dither and delay when everyone knows a slaughter is under way.

Nor is the world doing better today in places like Darfur or Congo. We need a lower and simpler standard of when to say enough is enough, and we need the means and will to enforce it.

Some of the shameful inactions of the past are well known – the Allies’ failure to bomb the railway tracks that took more than a million to their deaths at Birkenau, or the UN’s refusal to stop the slaughter in Rwanda. Nor is the world doing better today in places like Darfur or Congo. We need a lower and simpler standard of when to say enough is enough, and we need the means and will to enforce it.

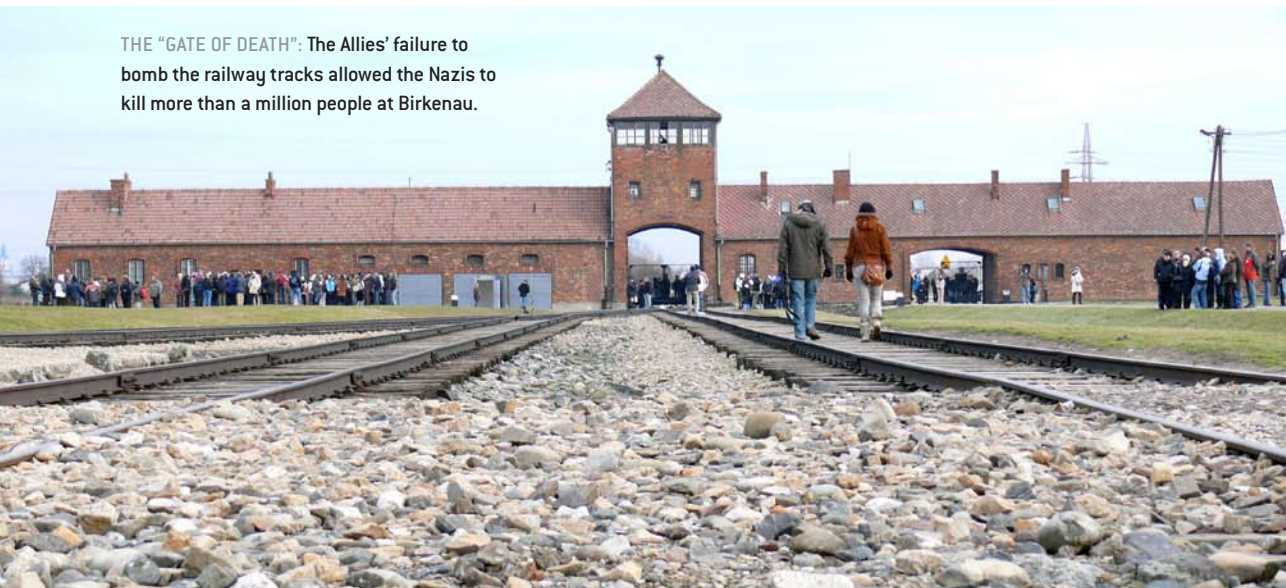
The idea of military intervention to protect a population at risk has taken an awful hit as a result of the postinvasion mess in Iraq. But like Paul Collier, the Oxford economist who wrote *The Bottom Billion: Why the Poorest Countries are Failing and What Can Be Done about It*, I still believe there is a potential that intervention can end evil. Collier refers to the example of the British in Sierra Leone.

A few hundred troops were able to end, in short order, a decade-long war that killed at least 75,000, maimed tens of thousands more and made the country, for most of the 1990s, perhaps the worst place on earth to live.

At least since the Rwandan massacre of 1994 there have been repeated proposals for the UN to mount a standing force that could respond quickly to urgent situations. Collier suggests such a force to protect fragile governments that are able to demonstrate they are legitimate and are acting for the good of their people. I think the mandate could and should be broadened to include protection of all people at risk, even – or perhaps especially – when the danger they face is the government that should be protecting them.

There’s no point saying “Never again” then settling for “Again and again.”

THE “GATE OF DEATH”: The Allies’ failure to bomb the railway tracks allowed the Nazis to kill more than a million people at Birkenau.



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