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The history of Holocaust Remembrance Day

How Israel and the world contended with the challenge of selecting a single date to mark an unspeakable tragedy that happened every day for years.

By Elon Gilad | Apr. 27, 2014 | 1:01 PM | 6

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The Holocaust is marked in Israel on the 27th day of the Jewish month of Nisan. This date was reached after much deliberation.

The Holocaust spanned years, from before the start of World War II in 1939 and through to its end in 1945. As Jews and other victims of Nazi brutality were harassed, tortured and murdered on every single day of the year, it was impossible to single out a single date as the "most appropriate" Holocaust Remembrance Day. Also, due to the unprecedented nature of the horror – industrialized genocide – the question arose of how to mark the Holocaust on the chosen day.

The following describes how Israel and other nations went about answering this question in the aftermath of this calamity.

The systematic destruction of Jewish life in Europe became widely known before the war's end, but it was only when the war ended and the death camps were liberated by Allied troops in 1945 that the true dimensions of the calamity became apparent.

In 1947, the Chief Rabbinate of Mandatory Palestine set up a committee to think of possible dates for an annual memorial. This committee thought the date should be related to the annihilation of Warsaw's Jewish community, which before the war was 500,000 persons strong and the second-largest Jewish community in the world (after New York).

One proposed date was the 8th of Av, because on that date in 1942, the Nazis began sending Warsaw's Jews to death camps. Another was the date of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, which began on the eve of Passover in 1943. Both dates were rejected: Av 8 is a day before Tisha B'Av, a day of mourning over the destruction of the Temple, and the holiday of Passover was not considered an appropriate time.

In December 1949, the Rabbinate decreed that Holocaust Remembrance Day would be the 10th of Tevet, a day of mourning and fasting commemorating the beginning of the siege of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar II of Babylonia in the 6th century BCE.

The first Holocaust Remembrance Day

The first Holocaust Remembrance Day took place on December 28th, 1949, a year-and-a-half after Israel's independence. The ashes and bones of thousands of Jews were brought over from the Flossenbürg Concentration Camp near Munich. They were placed in a crypt, together with decorated Torah scrolls, in a Jerusalem cemetery. A rabbi appointed by the Rabbinate presided over the religious ceremony. The public was invited to an overnight vigil at the crypt and in the morning a prayer service and Talmudic study session were held in honor of the victims.

That evening, a special radio program on the Holocaust was broadcast at 9:30 P.M.

The following year, in December 1950, some 70 ceremonies were held around the country. The events were organized by the Rabbinate, organizations of former European Jewish communities and the Israeli Defense Forces. They mostly took the form of funerals, in which artifacts and the ashes and bones of the dead brought over from Europe were interred. The Israeli parliament, the Knesset, did not have a special ceremony.

But in March 1951, the Knesset decided to take an active role, and set about choosing a new date for Holocaust Remembrance Day. Three were proposed: again 10 Tevet; Passover; and September 1, the date the war broke out on.

In April the Knesset approved the 27th of Nisan, a week after Passover. It remains the date until today.

The 10th of Tevet: A date to honor loved ones whose date of death is unknown

Nonetheless, the Rabbinate instructed people to continue observing the 10th of Tevet as a memorial day for Holocaust victims whose date of death is unknown. Though over the years the association of this day with the Holocaust diminished, it is still observed in that way.

Thus on Nisan 27, which in 1951 worked out to be May 3 (the Jewish and Gregorian calendars do not coincide), a Holocaust Remembrance Day took shape as a more official, and less religious, ceremony.

The main event remained at the Holocaust Crypt on Mount Zion, but in addition to the religious services, Zionist leaders gave speeches. The Israel Post Office issued a special commemorative envelope and a bronze statue of Mordechai Anielewicz, the leader of the Warsaw Ghetto revolt, was unveiled in Yad Mordechai, a kibbutz named for the hero. The Israeli government also held a Holocaust Memorial Day ceremony in New York.

The following year the events included planting a memorial forest and lighting six beacons in memory of the six million Jews killed by the Nazis. The beacons have become a regular feature of Holocaust Memorial Day.

Yad Vashem is established

In 1953, the Knesset passed a law creating Yad Vashem, the official Israeli memorial institution for the Holocaust victims. On that year's Holocaust Remembrance Day, schools were instructed, for the first time, to discuss the subject with their pupils.

In 1955 Yad Vashem began documenting the victims of the Holocaust. Israel's entire leadership - the government, judges, parliamentarians and other dignitaries – took part in that year's memorial event, in the memorial forest planted outside Jerusalem.

In 1959, the Knesset passed a law officially establishing Holocaust Memorial Day in law and sanctioning official ceremonies throughout the country as well as a two-minute moment of silence, indicated by sirens.

Since 1959, non-solemn entertainment has been banned in theaters and movie theaters on the 27th of Nisan (in the Jewish sense of the day - meaning, from sundown the day before to sundown on the actual day). From that year on, flags were lowered to half-mast. Another innovation added in 1959 was a WWII veteran parade in Tel Aviv, a tradition that didn't last. Also, schools began holding ceremonies.

In 1961 the Knesset amended the law, to close down cafes, restaurants and clubs on the 27th of Nisan.

On the Holocaust Remembrance Day of that year, New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller announced that from then on April 19 would be Warsaw Ghetto Remembrance Day in the State of New York.

A noteworthy event happened on the Holocaust Remembrance Day of 1966, which saw protests against the establishment of diplomatic relations with Germany a year earlier.

In 1971, Israeli television began broadcasting special programming for Holocaust Remembrance Day. Today, most channels don't broadcast on

Holocaust Remembrance Day and those few that stay on air, show only Holocaust-related programming.

On November 1, 1978 President Jimmy Carter signed an executive order making April 28 and 29 official "Days of Remembrance of Victims of the Holocaust." The date was chosen as the date in which U.S. troops liberated the Dachau Concentration Camp in 1945. The first of these days of remembrance was held in 1979 in a ceremony at the Capitol Rotunda, led by Carter.

Marking the Holocaust in the United States, France and Germany

That autumn, a presidential commission called for an establishment of a United States Holocaust Memorial Council, which was to oversee the observation of a Holocaust Remembrance Day in each of the 50 states and establish a national memorial in Washington DC. The United States Holocaust Memorial Council was established in 1980. Since then the eight Days of Remembrance of Victims of the Holocaust are set from the Sunday before the Israeli Holocaust Remembrance Day.

The first national memorial held under this new council took place in the White House on April 30, 1981, with President Ronald Reagan making his first public appearance following a recent assassination attempt.

In 1981, the Knesset amended the law to push Holocaust Remembrance Day back or forward a day if it fell on the weekend.

Since 1988, on Holocaust Remembrance Day, people from around the world have participated in "The March of the Living" from Auschwitz to Birkenau, in Poland.

In 1993, French President François Mitterrand proclaimed July 16 as a national day of remembrance for the Jewish victims of the pro-Nazi Vichy government. July 16 was chosen as on that date in 1943 the French police and gendarmerie rounded up the Jews of Paris and its suburbs and deported them to the Nazi death camps, where most of them perished.

Since 1996, Germany has observed January 27 as Tag des Gedenkens an die Opfer des Nationalsozialismus ("Day of Remembrance of the Victims of National Socialism.") January 27 was chosen as it is the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau by the Red Army in 1945. The day is marked by a ceremony at the German parliament and cultural events around the country.

Sweden observes its Holocaust memorial day - Förintelsens minnesdag - on January 27th too. The Swedes first began holding an annual memorial for the victims of the Holocaust in 1999.

In 2001, January 27 became Holocaust Remembrance Day in the United Kingdom. Greece followed suit in 2004.

That same year, Romania began holding its National Day of Commemorating the Holocaust, but decided to do so on October 9th, a date chosen because on that date Romanian Jewry began to be deported to death camps in 1942.

In 2005 the United Nations General Assembly passed Resolution 60/7, marking January 27 as International Holocaust Remembrance Day. The European Union adopted January 27 as its official Holocaust Remembrance Day that same year as did Italy and the Czech Republic.

In 2004 Israel officially made January 27th its official Day of Struggle against Anti-Semitism. Holocaust Remembrance Day continues to be celebrated on Nisan 27th, which this year is from Sunday evening to Monday evening.