

SPEECH HELD AT GIESSEN UNIVERSITY
for students of Professor Erich Dauzenroth
to the occasion of receiving the
1990 GERMAN PRIZE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE'S LITERATURE
November, 1990

"Israel Bernbaum's painted Ghetto world, inspired by documents, photographs, and diaries from the Warsaw Ghetto, the "world of stones"(Tadeusz Borowski), of the "island of starvation" for 500,000, is a pungent lesson of the Hebrew precept "Wehigadeta levincha..." (Tell it to your son...). Israel Bernbaum does not only tell it to his children David, Aviezer, and Zvi - his lesson is for the children of the world, a "Lesson" against oblivion and against forgetfulness. In Israel Bernbaum's naive art, the way he dissolves the large paintings into fragments, it became an inexorable Memorial, a moral lesson of the Holocaust."
(From the book-jacket by Professor Dr. Erich Dauzenroth)

Professor Dauzenroth, Ladies and Gentlemen,

By reading this paragraph I wanted to express my sincere thanks to you, Professor Dauzenroth for inviting me here. I would like to take this opportunity to express my thanks to the Arbeitskreis für Jugendliteratur (German Section of the International Board on Books for Young People) for the great honor of awarding me with the 1990 Deutscher Jugendliteraturpreis. I came from my present homeland, the United States of America, to receive the Prize. I am happy to be this year part of this country's annual tradition of inviting authors and illustrators of children's and young people's books, including authors from countries of different corners of the world, to be honored by this special recognition.

It is remarkable that Germany accepts authors and artists from other countries to the ranks of recipients of its distinguished literary Awards. Germany has proven to be open-minded and tolerant to human thoughts and human values.

It is easy to understand the great responsibility of the jurors of the Arbeitskreis für Jugendliteratur. They are entrusted to select books which will enrich the lives, the human sensitivity, and high human values with which the German people wish their children to grow and live by as human beings. I am pleased indeed that MEINES BRUDERS HÜTER has met these requirements.

I would like to take this opportunity to express my gratitude to the President of Germany, Dr. Richard von Weizsäcker for permitting me to include in MEINES BRUDERS HÜTER excerpts from his speech of May 8, 1985 given to the West German Parliament. I am grateful to Frau Annemaarie Renger for her moving "Foreword." My sincere thanks also go to Professor Dr. Erich Dauzenroth for the beautiful paragraph on the book-jacket of MEINES BRUDERS HÜTER. The significance of the book was immensely enhanced thanks to these highly distinguished participants.

(more)

SPEECH IN GERMANY

Many thanks to Frau Alexandra Baumrucker for her excellent translation from English. My thanks to Mr. Roman Kovar, the publisher of MEINES BRUDERS HÜTER, for his courage, dedication, and kindness.

I would like to let you know that as an artist, I created my paintings having in mind the young viewer. Through colors, shapes, and lines I tried to bring the story of the Holocaust and a message of brotherhood to the children of the world. To communicate with them effectively, I tried to make my images simple and clear. It has been my dream to see my large paintings surrounded by children from countries of all parts of the world, because the language of art is universal.

My strongest motivation in creating my paintings and reviving in them the tragic events was to try to find a possible answer to two important questions: How can we prevent a repetition of such a tragedy from happening again, and how can we protect our children, the children of the world, and humanity from such a calamity as a Holocaust. My strong belief was that to help to find an answer lies in revealing the catastrophic consequences of practicing and promoting racism, hatred, and prejudices against other people. What more eloquent example of these catastrophic consequences can be found in human history than in the tragic lesson of the Holocaust?

As an artist, presenting historic events, I had considered it my sacred duty to use the truth as my primary tool. In my paintings I revealed not only the truth about the unspeakable tragedy which befell the Jewish people, but also I revealed the undeniable truth about the world in which a Holocaust of such magnitude could be masterminded and implemented. Just as I tried to show in my paintings that what happened to my people in the Ghettos and death camps so I did also try to present what went on in the world surrounding them.

On the first page of my book my readers are confronted with agonizing questions: "What happened to humanity? What happened to our civilization?" In my book on page 36, there is a symbolic image of a screaming head of a mother, emerging from the bursting flames into which live Jewish children are hurled by German soldiers. The question the head is asking: "Civilization where are you? Christian world, with all your teachings of love, where are you?"

In my book I could not provide my readers with an answer to these questions. There are limitless questions regarding the Holocaust which will never find answers. However, to the most important question, how can we prevent it from happening again I am telling my young readers at the end of my book, and I quote: "An answer we may find in ourselves." By coincidence, one month after the publication of MY BROTHER'S KEEPER, a similar answer to this question came in May, 1985 from the floor of the West German Parliament, from President Richard von Weizsäcker. Now in 1990 I am honored to have the words of President Weizsäcker in a five page Epilogue of MEINES BRUDERS HÜTER, in which he appeals to the German Nation:

(more)

Allow me to quote a few sentences from these pages:
"Anyone who closes his eyes to the past is blind to the present. Whoever refuses to remember the inhumanity is prone to new risks of infection."

On page 73: "What is asked of young people today is: Do not let yourselves be forced into enmity and hatred of other people... Let us learn to live not against each other but with each other."

To me it sounds like "Be your brother's keeper."
Thank you Mr. President.

I would like to conclude by quoting the last paragraph of my book

"We learned why the Jewish children were murdered. Their death will not be in vain when all children of all nations will join hands in brotherhood and love and will solemnly declare to the world of today and all tomorrows: I am my brother's keeper."

If it is impossible to bring together hands of children of all nations, as I show it in my "Utopian" painting, it is certainly possible that parents, teachers, educators, religious leaders, writers, and illustrators of all nations can bring together hearts and minds of the children of the world in the ideals of brotherhood, mutual understanding, and love.

Thank you again for inviting me and for allowing me to share with you my thoughts.