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Heroes and Bystanders

ONE of the great heroes of the 20th century was Auschwitz prisoner No. 4859, who volunteered to be there.

Witold Pilecki, an officer in the Polish resistance to the Nazi regime, deliberately let himself be captured by the Germans in 1940 so that he could gather information about Hitler's concentration camps. Inside Auschwitz, he set up resistance cells — even as he almost died of starvation, torture and disease.

Then Pilecki helped build a radio transmitter, and, in 1942, he broadcast to the outside world accounts of atrocities inside Auschwitz — as the Nazis frantically searched the camp looking for the transmitter. He worked to expose the Nazi gas chambers, brutal sexual experiments and savage camp punishments, in hopes that the world would act.

Finally, in April 1943, he escaped from Auschwitz, bullets flying after him, and wrote an eyewitness report laying out the horror of the extermination camps. He then campaigned unsuccessfully for an attack on Auschwitz.

Eventually, he was brutally tortured and executed — not by the Nazis, but after the war, in 1947, by the Communists. They then suppressed the story of Pilecki's heroism for decades (a book about his work, "The Auschwitz Volunteer," was published in 2012).

I was thinking of Pilecki last week on the 70th anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camps. I had relatives killed in Auschwitz (they were Poles spying on the Nazis for the resistance), and these camps are emblems of the Holocaust and symbols of the human capacity for evil.

In the coming months, the world will also commemorate the 100th anniversary of the start of the Armenian genocide — which, despite the outrage of Turkish officials at the time, was, of course, a genocide. There, too, I feel a connection because my ancestors were Armenian.

Then, in the summer, we'll observe the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II — an occasion for recalling Japanese atrocities in China, Korea, the Philippines and elsewhere. All this is likely to fuel more debates focused on the past. Should we honor Armenian genocide victims with a special day? Should Japan apologize for enslaving "comfort women"?

But, to me, the lesson of history is that the best way to honor past victims of atrocities is to stand up to slaughter today. The most respectful way to honor Jewish, Armenian or Rwandan victims of genocide is not with a ceremony or a

Genocide isn't a World War II relic. What are we doing to fight it now?

day, but with efforts to reduce mass atrocities currently underway.

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington is a shining example of that approach, channeling outrage at past horrors to mitigate today's — from Syria to Central African Republic. But, in general, the world is typically less galvanized by mass atrocities than paralyzed by them.

Even during the Holocaust, despite the heroism of Pilecki and others like Jan Karski, who tried desperately to shake sense into world leaders, no one was very interested in industrial slaughter. Over and over since then, world leaders have excelled at giving eloquent "never again" speeches but rarely offered much beyond lip service.

This year, I'm afraid something similar will happen. We'll hear flowery rhetoric about Auschwitz, Armenia and World War II, and then we'll go on shrugging at crimes against humanity in Syria, Central African Republic, Sudan and South Sudan, Myanmar and elsewhere.

Darfur symbolizes our fickleness. It has disappeared from headlines, and Sudan makes it almost impossible for journalists to get there, but Human Rights Watch reported a few days ago that the human rights situation in Sudan actually deteriorated in 2014.

Indeed, the Sudanese regime is now engaging in mass atrocities not only in Darfur but also in the Nuba Mountains and Blue Nile regions. Sudan bombed an aid hospital in January in the Nuba Mountains, and the Belgian branch of Doctors Without Borders has just announced the closure of operations in Sudan because of government obstructionism.

A decade ago, one of the most outspoken politicians on Darfur — harshly scolding President George W. Bush for not doing more — was an Illinois senator, Barack Obama. Today, as president of the United States, he is quiet. The United Nations force in Darfur has been impotent.

Granted, humanitarian crises rarely offer good policy choices, but there's no need to embrace the worse option, which is paralysis. We've seen in Kosovo, Sierra Leone, Kurdistan and, lately, Yazidi areas of Iraq and eastern Congo that outside efforts sometimes can make a difference.

So, sure, let's commemorate the liberation of Auschwitz, the horror of the Holocaust and the brutality of the Armenian genocide by trying to mitigate mass atrocities today. The basic lesson of these episodes is not just that humans are capable of astonishing evil, or that some individuals like Witold Pilecki respond with mesmerizing heroism — but that, sadly, it's just too easy to acquiesce.