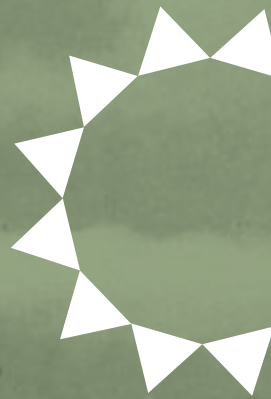


Briefly about Wannsee





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On 20 January 1942, a romantic place near Berlin hosted one of the strangest meetings in the history of the 20th century. For decades to come, the Wannsee Conference became a metaphor for the birth of a terrifying concept: the final solution of the Jewish question.

What all is wrong with that phrase? Why is the concept of murdering Jews associated with a question? No final solution is final. It was no conference. Nothing new was born there.

Acting Reich Protector Reinhard Heydrich traveled to Wannsee from Prague. He shared with the meeting participants the decision he had reached with other Reich functionaries, including the Führer. Just a brief discussion on technical and logistical issues followed.

What else terrifies us eighty years after *Wannsee*? Certainly, the statistic of eleven million condemned to death only on the grounds of Jewish origin. Certainly the six million victims, who were killed with the use of industrial methods and, before that, humiliated beyond the limits of all human parameters.

The horrifying message to this world, however, is the course of the meeting at the lake:

A group of representatives from the executive sectors of one empire met for a working meeting, reviewed several previous concepts for the complete destruction of one cultural group of inhabitants of the old continent, refined some details, and then went back to their workplaces. What followed was the largest genocide in human history. The participants had coffee at the beginning and refreshments after the meeting, which lasted no more than an hour and a half. It was a great demonstration of the dynamic workings of the bureaucratic apparatus of the Reich. Today, in an age of poorly working civil service and constantly criticised European bureaucracy, we could perhaps even admire this performance of civil servants.

We could, if we ignored the fact that the real content of the participants' practices somehow trickled away from the Wannsee meeting's agenda.

In our times, we also have certain problems with real content in the bureaucratic processes. That's the reason why the Memorial of Silence organised a public discussion on the timeless legacy of the *Wannsee Conference*.

We approached a group of prominent personalities and offered them a relatively short space of time to express their views on two questions regarding the links between Wannsee and our contemporary reality.

We borrowed the format from the "Pecha Kucha" architectural presentations, whose dynamics offer a concentrated display of multiple perspectives on the modelling of public space.

Our intention was to offer in a public space – or rather through a public dialogue – a series of distinctive perspectives on a significant event that took place 80 years before 20 January 2022.

During the meeting held at Prague's mayoral residence, eight participants of the *opinion forum* offered their perspective on the Wannsee Conference and its legacy for the present day to the audience in the hall as well as to the viewers on a Czech Television stream.

The title of the meeting – *Briefly about Wannsee* – was inspired by the title of Václav Havel's memoirs, *Briefly, Please*.

The moderators from the Vosto5 theatre ensemble monitored the time limit for the contributions of our guest speakers. The symbolic ending of the meeting was Daniel Pešta's video art piece titled *The Chain*.

The reactions to the first *opinion forum* by the Memorial of Silence confirmed that there is always something new we can bring to the language and style of recalling dramatic moments of the past. And also, that parallels between the past and the present are an essential key to understanding, or rather trying to understand, the events

that have happened in the past and that could happen in the future!

When we first decided to publish the booklet *Briefly about Wannsee*, we had no idea that five weeks after our opinion forum, the next European war would break out. And that it would take place in the territory Timothy Snyder called “Bloodlands”. And that it would be presented by one of the 21st century’s autocrats as a special military operation to denazify Ukraine. And that it would become another contemporary genocide of a civilian population that, according to the instigator of the invasion, has no historical right to a state of its own...

The largest military operation since the end of the Second World War only confirms that the past is our reality and that we have grown accustomed today to tolerating parallels to demagogic interpretations and calculated ideological commentaries on the events that have happened in the past and are happening now again.

**Pavel Štingl
Memorial of Silence**

A letter from the Director of the Memorial of Silence to the participants of the discussion forum.

Dear guests of the Forum for Memory of the Wannsee Conference,

Following our past communication, I confirm that the planned event organized to remember the Wannsee Conference will take place on an anniversary day, 20 January 2022, at the Residence of the Mayor of Prague, starting at 3 p.m.

The following guests have confirmed their participation: Petr Fischer, Fedor Gál, Pavel Kosatík, Petr Koura, Petr Pithart, Jakub Rákosník, Karol Sidon and Jakub Szantó.

Our intention is to invite primarily a student audience. We are approaching university clubs and partner secondary schools (of course observing all valid anti-pandemic measures).

Instead of organizing a conference, we have decided to create a space for a mosaic of enriching observations and opinions with the aim of reviving the importance of this significant historical event. The original motivational questions are still valid:

How do you perceive the message of the conference of fifteen Nazi planners of the new world order at Wannsee, and what do the course of the conference, its nature and its outcome indicate for today?

Is there anything we should worry about in the current development of inter-personal and political relationships in connection with the memory of 20 January 1942, when the concept of the Final Solution to the Jewish Question was born?

The program should not exceed 90 minutes. The length of individual contributions is limited to 5 to 7 minutes.

We are very much looking forward to seeing you and we want to thank you once again for accepting our invitation.

Pavel Štingl
and the team of the Memorial of Silence



Fedor Gál

Tell me how to reflect, how to grasp, how to share.

How can I reflect, grasp, or share the story of my grandmother, who, with a grandchild in her arms, got on a ramp in Auschwitz, joined the line, entered the gas chamber that was then filled with Zyklon B, and – as I’ve heard – was suffocating for fifteen minutes. How can a human brain grasp this?

And how to grasp the phenomenon of the Holocaust?

Tomáš Kraus was right when he said in his introduction that “conference” was not the right word. Even “working

meeting” isn’t the right phrase. It was a gathering of criminals. One fascinating fact, however, is that almost all its participants had a university education. Almost all loved Wagner. Most of them read Nietzsche and Goethe. It makes you wonder whether education itself can reform a human being’s deviant character. No, it cannot!

And there is another thing that is not discussed too often. Without the executive machinery, without the mass of collaborators and cowards, without the crowd of passive witnesses, there would have been no Holocaust. Those crowds of people joined in without feeling any remorse. Or maybe some did feel some remorse.

I come from Slovakia, and I want to say without mincing words that Slovakia was the first unoccupied country to

offer the Reich its Jews and their families. In the first round, the Germans only demanded young people who were fit for work. “No, no, take them all, let them never return.” They even paid 500 marks for each one of them. Soon after, they changed the legislation, and all Jewish property was seized. By neighbors. Often by friends and colleagues...

The president of this state was the Catholic priest Jozef Tiso. To this very day, a large portion of Slovakia’s citizens have not been able to accept this fact. Neither has the Catholic Church itself. I was born in Terezín. When it was liberated, I was just a baby. For much of my life, I have tried to build symbolic gravestones for my relatives and fellowmen who were murdered. I try to reconstruct their stories, digging in my subconscious for the traces of an inter-generational transfer, and I repeat what I said in the beginning: It’s impossible. Impossible. Nevertheless, I refuse to be an exhibit at commemoration ceremonies. I refuse to be a survivor serving as staffage for politicians at various public events. Many people active in politics use these events to increase their public popularity and win votes. It’s not easy to admit, but there is nowhere to escape. I have become quite disillusioned, and so I no longer believe that it’s enough to appeal to humanity. Unless that humanity is accompanied by power. If we are just human, we are seen as cowards.

There is a thought in the Talmud – I remember it word for word but prefer to paraphrase it: If someone comes to take away your dignity and freedom, get up, go to meet him, but be prepared! Be prepared. Speaking about the Holocaust and the fate of the Jews who were to be exterminated, I cannot ignore the fact that the Holocaust also concerned Romanies, the mentally ill, people with different sexual orientations, and those who expressed resistance to the Nazi

regime, i.e., antifascists. National Socialism – and I see this as an issue that is relevant today – was defeated thanks to a global effort. A global effort. The world we live in is globalized, and it will not change. When we look at the background of all the cataclysms of the twentieth century – and of the current century as well – we almost always come across a poisonous nationalism. Nationalism. Nationalism... I must repeat it three times. It is a plague, a cancer! But at the same time, it is a very popular slogan, one that many politicians who are currently in power hide behind.

I hate to point out that in Slovakia, for instance, fascists and national socialists are today in parliament, and that they were elected in free elections. It is a challenge for me. An everyday challenge. Those on the front lines who wave flags and call themselves patriots come from this group of people. They endlessly talk of national interests, since in their view national interests are the interests of the people with whom they share this planet and this civilizational space.

This same group produces the enemies of liberal democracy, and I dare to say – since this is a very topical issue today – also people who are against vaccination and those who cast doubt on how we have been fighting the pandemic. All sociological research that I know confirms this thesis. I don’t feel like naming concrete politicians, but it wouldn’t be difficult. What I want to say is that these people are asking to revive the things we are going to discuss here today. They sow the wind, and it is wrong.

Thank you for your attention.

The text presented by Fedor Gál for the Memorial of Silence (20 January 2022) was published in edited form in Slovakia’s *Denník N* under the title “A Memento Named Wannsee.”



Jakub Szántó

Ladies and gentlemen, a hundred years ago, when a child in any American household pecked at his food, his father or mother would tell him, “Stop pecking at your food. You can’t imagine how grateful poor Armenian children would be for it.”

A hundred years ago, it was almost four years to the day that one of the most senseless and twisted conflicts of that era had come to an end, one part of which was the first systematic genocide in the biological sense, just like the one which was planned later by those men we are talking about today. At that time, between the two wars, in the early 1920s, the entire world – not just the United States but also war-ravaged

Europe, the entire world including the Middle East – knew unbelievable details about this dreadful genocide, which took the lives of 1.5 million women, children, old people, and men who had been burned, drowned, quartered alive, starved, shot, or beaten to death.

Today, however, we don’t have any diary of an Armenian Anne Frank. We don’t have any Oscar-winning films like *Schindler’s List*, which deals with the Jewish version of the same. Maybe people with higher education have some awareness... On the other hand, today’s Turkey – the successor of the culprits’ state, meaning the Ottoman Empire – goes so far as to deny the existence of this million-times proven historical fact of the racial murder of 1.5 million people based only on their ethnic origin and religion. And it even dares to sanction countries that officially recognize the existence of this genocide.

The participants of the meeting held twenty years later were the successors – or rather, the one generation younger representatives – of a country that had been an ally of the Ottoman Empire during the time I have been speaking of, meaning a hundred years ago, during the First World War. Imperial Germany's military officers directly witnessed various acts that later combined to make up that mass murder of 1.5 million Armenians.

Twenty years later, their younger successors in a new country – but still in the same Germany – organized this brief meeting lasting just ninety minutes. An hour-long opening speech by its convener, Reinhard Heydrich, was followed by just thirty minutes of brief instructions regarding the division of administrative duties and financial flows that condemned the eleven million people who had been declared Jews by the Nuremberg Race Laws to systematic physical extermination. Many of them were not religious and didn't even consider themselves Jews (the so-called "first- and second-degree mischlings").

What the Nazis bureaucratically described using the all-encompassing term "Final Solution" included, among other things, mass discounts on the Reichsbahn, since the SS leadership had to pay the railways to transport such huge numbers of people.

The first death camp, an extermination camp, was established around this time. It was not a concentration camp where people were merely concentrated, but a place truly intended for the physical extermination of an entire race. Six of them in total were built later.

Treblinka, Chelmno, Auschwitz, Sobibor, Majdanek, and Belzec are today represented by a single name that has become a kind of symbol: Auschwitz.

But it was in Belzec where this plan, which was made eighty years ago, was implemented almost perfectly. Of the 500,000 people who entered the camp, only seven survived. Seven out of 500,000! Belzec is not as known as

Auschwitz, which was many times bigger but in which a comparable number of people died. Belzec was the third largest and the worst as far as the extermination of individuals was concerned.

National Socialism's biological racism has of course its historical roots. We could discuss the origin of antisemitism for hours. Many thick books have been written on this subject, and there are hundreds of different hypotheses and theories. One important fact nevertheless is that antisemitism is older than what is often considered its root: Christian anti-Judaism, meaning the Greco-Roman revenge on the Jews for not having understood that God, as the Christians believed, had sent his son to Earth and he was sacrificed by the Jews – although in fact it was Romans who performed the act.

Antisemitism is even older, as documented by the three wars led in ancient times by Rome against the Jewish kingdom – later Judea or, in Hebrew, Eretz Yisrael. These wars led to the systematic murder of approximately 500,000 to 1.5 million Jews using the methods of that time: starved or murdered by the Roman Army using close-combat weapons.

These events presaged what would be repeated a little less than 2,000 years later.

Where antisemitism comes from and why it is different or seen as different from racism is quite obvious. Racism reacts to certain, let's say, external features – differences in skin color, body height, etc., while antisemitism, I am convinced, goes much deeper, assaulting far deeper instincts and perhaps also certain fears and concerns. And hatred.

It is the same kind of hatred as misogyny, the distrust and hatred of women. Or homophobia, the distrust and hatred of people with a different sexual orientation. The conclusion the Nazis finally made, meaning that single meeting that we are commemorating

here today, was just one of hundreds of similar events that eventually resulted in the murder of six million human beings just on the basis of their origin.

According to one of the best historians of the Holocaust, the well-known contemporary Czech-Israeli historian Yehuda Bauer, this was not something that just emerged during the war. The Holocaust, the Shoah, was not a kind of by-product of the Second World War but had been proclaimed as one of the main aims of National Socialism since the very first edition of *Mein Kampf*. Quite clearly proclaimed: the physical extermination of the Jewish race.

Efforts to explain this idea and the irrational hatred of Jews by pointing to their alleged wealth, their alleged influence on society, and so on only retroactively serve to rationalize something that had been one of the main aims of Adolf Hitler and his executioners from the beginning: that there would be no place for the Jewish race in the new world order established by Nazis.

Why did I bring up the Armenians? Why did I bring up that earlier genocide? Because, however similar it was, the fate and the memory of the Armenian genocide in the public mind is much weaker than the memory of the Jewish one. Because it shows what might happen with later generations.

People like my grandfather were among those who could talk about the Holocaust because they experienced it first-hand. He was the only member of his family to survive. But many survivors are no longer with us. My grandfather died in 2014, and now it is up to people from the second post-war generation, people like Fedor Gál and me, to commemorate individual life stories – to prevent the victims of Shoah, the Holocaust, from having the same fate as those of the Armenian genocide.

For this reason, events such as this one should not just be empty rituals that commemorate just one particular event once a year. For instance, International Holocaust Remembrance Day on 27 January, which marks the liberation of Auschwitz by the Red Army. We should reflect on it, as Fedor Gál said, and constantly consider its meaning, as Tomáš Kraus pointed out. The meaning of what came before.

It's important not only in order to prevent it from happening again – in Rwanda in the 1990s, it unfortunately did happen again – but also because as long as we speak about these things, as long as we read Anne Frank's diary, and as long as we keep on looking for the diary of an Armenian Anne Frank, then the memory of these people will live on.

And that, in my opinion, is one of the most important things we should remember at occasions such as today's.

Thank you for your attention.







Petr Koura

In the materials we received from Pavel Štingl, there was the question, “What, in your view, is the key legacy of the conference of fifteen Nazi visionaries?” The word “visionaries” caught my attention. Knowing Pavel Štingl, I would say he certainly meant it ironically, since those men – as has already been mentioned today – were certainly no visionaries. They were mostly bureaucrats or SS officers.

I perceive the word “visionary” in its positive meaning, so even if I were to admit that these men came up with the plan for the Jewish population’s mass murder, I would never call them visionaries. They were bureaucrats, and at that conference – which, as has been stated before, should rather be called a meeting – they were instructed on how to carry out the plan. There were no visions presented; they were just told what to do. It was not a conference in the academic sense, a place of discussion. The participants were essentially given orders, and any discussion only dealt with how to effectively carry out the extermination of the Jewish population.

Of these people, I often talk about Wilhelm Stuckart. In the picture, he is the first from the right in the upper row. He was a Nazi legal ace, a man who studied law and was a State Secretary at the Ministry of the Interior. As you probably know, the Minister of the Interior in the Nazi government was Wilhelm Frick, later the Reichsprotektor in Prague. He was succeeded at the ministry by Heinrich Himmler in this function. You probably won’t know Stuckart, but he was a very important figure in relation to Czech history.

It was Stuckart who, at Prague Castle on the night of 15 March 1939, wrote the document that was presented the next day as the decree establishing the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. Stuckart also contributed to shaping the so-called Nuremberg Laws.

A man in the background. Undoubtedly an educated gentleman, but I would call him a murderer behind a desk.

After the war, when he was accused of war crimes, he said, “I just sat at the Ministry. I didn’t establish any concentration camps. I didn’t murder any people.”

In my opinion, he did murder people. He murdered them with the ideas that he created through legal regulations, through the documents he wrote. It is incredible that for all his crimes, Wilhelm Stuckart was sentenced, I think, to just two years in prison.

So that’s the story of one of the people who met there, and as I have already said, for me they are all bureaucrats, executive officials who stopped using their own brains and carried out orders very much in the spirit of the Nazi slogan, “The Führer commands, we follow.”

And that’s what I find so atrocious. Those people stopped using their own brains and just followed orders from above without thinking about them in any way. None of them stood up and said, “What we are doing here is absolutely insane. Future generations will condemn us for it.” No. Not one considered it. The Führer commands, we follow.

This is where I see the legacy for today’s era. Let’s not allow any leaders to order us around. Let’s keep using our own reason, our own judgment, so that we will never have to answer for actions decided for us by others.

There is another thing I would like to mention: We live in an era of media simplifications, and – as has already been mentioned today – it shouldn’t be called a conference but a working meeting. A similar media simplification suggests that the extermination of the Jewish population was decided at Wannsee.

This is not true. The decision was made at some point earlier in the past, during conversations between Adolf Hitler and Heinrich Himmler. In other words, Heydrich went to the conference to convey a decision, and the bureaucrats were expected to act. But the media simplification that everything was decided at Wannsee lives on.

I come across this notion among my students at the Faculty of Education, who learned about the Wannsee Conference at secondary school but believe that its participants made the decision.

I ask them, “Okay, who was there?” And they say, “Heydrich.”

“Who else?” But they don’t know the names of the others. And when I tell them the names I ask, “Do you think these people, whose names you don’t know, had the authority to make such a decision? They were not in a position to decide.”

My students then concluded all on their own that the decision had been made elsewhere.

This is how I try to educate these young people. Not in the sense of, “You are mistaken, you’re wrong.” But by asking them to consider whether those ministerial secretaries or even undersecretaries could have decided on anything. There weren’t even any ministers at the meeting, just their secretaries or undersecretaries.

That’s the media simplification. We live in a world where we must expect them.

Some ten years ago, I was asked by Czech Television to say something about

the Wannsee Conference on the news. A journalist, a colleague of Jakub Szántó’s, asked me, “Tell me what the Wannsee Conference was about.”

I started to explain, and he said, “That’s great, but say it in less than two minutes.”

So I said, “Okay, I’ll do my best. Omit this and that, and let’s try again.”

I somehow managed, and the journalist said to me, “That’s great. Please squeeze it into one minute.”

And I understood that, with this media simplification, we have to be really brief.

In the end, they used just twenty seconds.

We have to reduce, to be brief, but let’s try our best to keep the precision and accuracy and not to simplify too much.

Thank you for your attention.



Petr Fischer

I get a strange feeling that we are gathering here at a time that is marked by different words than “memorial” or “memory.” Instead, a so-called “cancel culture” prevails in today’s media, one that promotes the erasing of memory, the erasing of certain people or certain events from memory in order to forget them forever. In order not to see the horrors anymore. To not see people who don’t deserve to be seen. To not remember them, to let their names sink into oblivion.

What we are doing here today is the exact opposite: We are bringing to light certain names nobody has heard of. Or, more precisely, names that are completely unknown for people who haven’t extensively studied the Wannsee Conference.

I believe that we are doing the right thing. That we should go against the stream of today’s “cancel culture.” Especially when it comes to that event, that monstrous thing called the Holocaust.

I long thought that “Wannsee,” the name of the place where that “operational meeting” of the Holocaust implementors took place eighty years ago, was written *Wahnsee* with an “h.” From my German classes, it made me think of *Wahnsinn*, madness, and *Wahn*, meaning illusion or delusion. *Wahnsee* – the place where the “production plan” for one of the greatest insanities of the modern era was created. Today I know that it is written Wannsee, but in my mind it will forever remain *Wahnsee* – the lake of madness. *Nomen omen*.

According to those documents written in that official language, it was necessary to find a legal way of cleansing Germany of the Jews to make it *Judenfrei*. To free it of the Jewish element. This idea of doing it legally caught my attention: The most monstrous feature of that Nazi machinery was the bureaucratic nature of the entire process. It was an attempt at creating an impersonal system of rules, laws, etc. that would appear lawful and even legitimate. That is the craziest part of the Holocaust.

There is a greater purpose to opposing cancel culture and, instead of deleting names, to start to remember and expose

them, since there is no guarantee that the Holocaust as an industrial genocide won't be repeated in the future. There is no doubt that it was an exceptional event, but it is not a unique one. As the Jewish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman explains in his great 1989 book *Modernity and the Holocaust*, the possibility of mass genocide is contained in the very nature of modern civilization.

We generally think that the Holocaust was a consequence of the Germans' profound hatred of the Jews. But historians have shown that popular, irrational anti-semitism was much weaker in prewar Germany than, for instance, in France, and that the Nazis' anti-Jewish frenzy in the 1930s did not have much support among the general public. According to Bauman, the Jews later played the role of a mobile enemy who was made responsible for everything, and as a legislative figure they were incorporated into the bureaucratic depersonalizing apparatus of the systematic planning and building of the future ideal empire. The Holocaust was a *categorical murder*. Please remember this: a *categorical murder*. Not intuitive killing out of hatred. Nothing personal, one might say: "Just" an obstacle to a plan that needed to be eliminated.

Modern civilization, with its machine-like detachment and bureaucratic compartmentalization, dehumanizes victims and creates an environment of moral indifference. After all, killing and violence in the world are so far away. An assembly-line worker making bombs, Bauman writes, is not concerned with where the bombs are dropped, nor does the railway official filling in the transport records to Auschwitz worry about what is going to happen to those people. And yet, all these characteristics of modern civilization, which astounds us with its astonishing technical achievement, continue to be a part of modernity, which today has merely moved on to the next, digital, phase of global communications. The possibility of organized mass killing and destruction is the dark side of modernity, one that cannot be shed easily. It remains with us like a huge Jungian shadow of our civilization.

It probably won't disappear until modernity somehow enters a different phase where this dark side – the writer and philosopher Walter Benjamin spoke of every civilized act hiding an act of barbarism – no longer exists. Perhaps it will reach a stage where we have enough safe tools for coping with this dark side of modernity.

Remembering the bygone event at Wannsee has primarily a preventive meaning for today. It warns us of modern dehumanization and of the machine-like banalization of killing (war today is, after all, a computer war, a remote-controlled war), and it also challenges us to shape modern civilization while being constantly aware of its dark and destructive side as a potential possibility that, under certain circumstances, can materialize again. Our task today is to do everything to continue to reflect on this shadow of modernity and to work together to keep it from reawakening as destructively as it did during the time of the Nazi death factories.

I have one wish for us all: That one day, perhaps, modern civilization will overcome its shortcomings.



Jakub Rákosník

The Wannsee Conference is a good example of how some historical events take on meaning only when we look back on them. After all, we only heard of it after the Second World War, when the meeting minutes that we are still working with today were discovered.

As said before, it was an informal meeting of now-unknown bureaucrats, except for its convener, Reinhard Heydrich, and no ground-breaking decisions were made there. More likely, it was a part of Heydrich's power games aimed at increasing his political influence within the Nazi establishment.

The Nazis had experimented with gas chambers previously, deportations to hostile landscapes with the aim of extermination had happened before as well, as had mass executions by firing squad. Even so, with a view to later developments, this meeting can be considered a turning point, for it was after this very meeting that the

previously vague term “Final Solution” acquired today's meaning. It also began to be implemented to a greater degree in the form of industrial murder, bureaucratically organized from Berlin. From this point at the latest, the Holocaust became official policy.

The question has already been asked today whether the Holocaust could be repeated within today's context. Until my early adulthood, I was sure that my answer to this question would be a categorical “no,” but today I share the previous speakers' concern that it could. I'll try to explain why.

As I was preparing this talk, I recalled the 2008 film *The Wave (Die Welle)* by director Dennis Gansel, in which a teacher's practical lesson about totalitarianism manages to turn a group of ordinary adolescents into a textbook fascist commando without them even fully realizing it. Moreover, it brings them personal satisfaction.

Fascism was based not only on forced conformity but also on the more or less active consent of the mass of common people about whose decency none of us would probably have any doubts, at least at first sight. The results of several West German

opinion polls from the 1950s are symptomatic in this respect: According to these polls, at the time Adolf Hitler was still respected by a large percentage of Germans, who were willing to consider him one of the country's greatest statesmen, had it not been for the Second World War. Now that is fascinating!

In my academic social bubble, I recently overheard a man who was not completely happy with the results of the elections ponder the idea of limiting the right to vote to just educated people – exactly in the spirit of Bertolt Brecht's sarcastic statement that “the people had forfeited the confidence of the government” and that it would be easier “to dissolve the people and elect another.”

Fifteen men met at that cozy guest house in Wannsee: ten with a university education and more than half of them with a doctorate... But an academic degree does not protect people from fanaticism and fundamentalism, nor does scientific knowledge provide any certainty. It is not a mirror of nature but instead reflects currently applied methods and continues to evolve. Race theory – which the meeting's participants didn't question – was not just limited to the National Socialists: At the time, one could find positive attitudes towards eugenic methods across the entire political spectrum, from the far right to the far left. Today's conflicts surrounding the pandemic have shown us how sensitive it can be when existing scientific knowledge comes into conflict with human dignity. The line between scientific knowledge and intolerant fundamentalism is very vague precisely in the sense of philosopher Zdeněk Neubauer's long-ago warning that science must not become a new religion associated with oppression.

Hitler could be a highly pragmatic politician, and we can find purely tactical deliberation even in his fanatical antisemitism. He knew very well how politically advantageous it was to “select but one enemy that everyone can recognize: he is the only guilty one... And this enemy was the Jews.” With his typical sense for analytical thinking, more than twenty years later Ferdinand Peroutka expressed the same idea even more brilliantly in his famous essay *Was Edvard Beneš Guilty?* “It's called personification. [...] In a depressing economic and

social situation, the ordinary man of the street almost cheers up when he hears that the Jew is responsible for everything. Because, as we know, the Jew is made of flesh and blood and is easier to strike at than the system.”

In conclusion, I would like to assign you, ladies and gentlemen, a small homework assignment: Try to remember how many times during a single month you have been confronted with a similar interpretation of reality. Everybody talks about the climate crisis, we are currently experiencing an energy crisis, the public debt is not yet critical but the pace of its growth is intimidating, we are facing an immigrant crisis (currently in a calmer period), we must contend with cultural wars as a consequence of globalization, an economic crisis is looming, and so on. How often do you hear explanations in the form of personalization? “Those people are responsible for it” – with the implicit message: “Let's punish them and take back what belongs to us.”

I believe that this form of thinking was the principal cause behind the Wannsee conference and that, as you might suspect, we in the twenty-first century are not protected against it any more than our forebears were in the first half of the last century.



Pavel Kosatík

Good afternoon. When I bring up this dreadful subject with my friends, I usually don't start with books, since people probably don't read so much these days, but with a movie most of you probably know – *The Wannsee Conference*. It was made perhaps twenty years ago but it is still shown on television. A brilliant conversation piece, it arouses a lot of emotions and outrage in viewers, including me. I am outraged even now as I think about it.

And yet I believe that outrage is not the right word on which to end or which should suffice for our relationship to this subject – among other things because the meeting's participants were not outraged in the slightest and, as some of today's speakers have already mentioned, the atmosphere there was, with some exaggeration, more like a meeting at nine on a Monday morning at any corporation in the world: very business-like and factual, since its participants didn't learn anything new.

Heydrich certainly didn't go to the meeting worried about whether what he was going to say would be accepted, and the participants didn't experience any surprise, since the "surprise" was already seventeen years old by then. It was all contained in Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, a book that they almost certainly had read long before the meeting.

Their problem, in my opinion, was that they had agreed to compartmentalize their thinking. They were even happy with it – it suited them to be responsible only for those things they were willing to do or that were assigned to them. In no way would they be responsible for everything.

For this reason, I associate this meeting with another anniversary, by coincidence also ending in a 2 – the year 1642, when two interesting intellectuals, the philosopher René Descartes and Jan Amos Comenius, met in the Netherlands. I am sure that nobody here will think that I am trying to make Descartes the spiritual forefather of today's subject, but the subject they discussed was whether it was correct to divide the world into several describable parts that would subsequently be further

and further reduced and described with an ever greater emphasis on accuracy, or whether people should strive for a more holistic view of the world – and that people, besides the things they can describe, touch, and see, also need something immaterial to believe in, which in Comenius's case was God.

Of course, for people who don't accept the idea of God it can be some other internalized authority, one that can help to build the conscience we have been talking about. It can be a good teacher, a good parent, or a good friend, but that is not what happened with those people. From this perspective, I therefore think that our problem is in fact a problem of education. It is generally believed that the aim of education is to create an internally integrated person. When we are born or during adolescence we don't know how to deal with our own contradictions, and it is assumed that the aim of education is to move towards an ideal that is sometimes described as "harmony."

We all know how difficult it is to attain, and we usually encounter people who have remained somewhere halfway on the

path towards this ideal. And these people are often frustrated. We know that Hitler was the personification of frustration and that his entire movement was built on frustration. It was a movement of frustrated people who couldn't deal with themselves and who simply projected their hatred of themselves onto someone who was weak, close at hand, and easy to identify – the Jews.

I believe it should be our task to be righteously outraged by the crimes of the past.

But however hard it is, it wouldn't be right to just reject all those frustrated people we encounter almost every day on various occasions in public life. Although they are often a source of contempt, we should think about the reasons for it, and try to stop the worst of them, those that can't be changed anymore, and to help those who are somewhere in the middle between frustration and a state of mind that comes close to that state of inner integrity and harmony.

Thank you.



Karol Sidon

All this time, it has occurred to me that for us Jews this solution to the Jewish question shouldn't be anything strange. The Jewish people have experienced it throughout history. It is even found in the Passover Haggadah, meaning we sing about it on the night of Passover: Vehi Sheamda – a passage about what has happened and existed for every generation of Jews.

It wasn't just one person, for instance an Egyptian pharaoh, who wanted to exterminate the Jews. Such enemies have appeared in every generation. And it is the God of Israel, blessed be he, our only Savior, the Holy One, who has always saved us, though at great loss.

There is another old idea that appears in Torah. When the Israelites went out of Egypt, they were attacked by the Amalekites, led by Amalek. This happened when the Israelites came out of the sea, after those great miracles and wonders. Suddenly, they had problems with water, nothing to eat, nothing to feed the cattle. And

since these difficulties continued, the people asked: Is God with us or not? They didn't ask whether God existed or not, but whether God was with them.

I think this is a truly Jewish question. This is a Jewish question that we as Jews could still accept. The Jewish question is a question for the Jews. But that other Jewish question is presented in a completely different light, as a question for other nations, other states, other people who ask what to do with the Jews. Whether to expel them, to tolerate them, or even to kill them... And that brings us to the Final Solution.

It has been said several times here that there are two aspects to the concept of the *Endlösung*.

The first is the vision of a certain Mr. Hitler, and the second is the political situation. Yes, Hitler could imagine it his way, but the political situation was not yet ripe for it to be announced publicly. In fact, the Final Solution was not implemented entirely publicly.

And this brings us to the fact that the Jewish question wasn't actually invented only in Germany. It appeared in Spain during the Inquisition, and it has appeared in many other countries, too. But it wasn't until the war that the real solution became

what Hitler had come up with – which, I should add, was also what Amalek had come up with before: that it was necessary to kill the Jews... Problem solved.

In the end, this solution united other people in Europe as well. They joined the Nazis, or the Germans, since the idea had ripened with them, except they hadn't been able to imagine it for ethical reasons. The Torah already considers Amalek the head of nations. It isn't clear from the Torah that he is particularly important, but it is written there (*Rosh HaGoyim*). And compared to that we have God sending Moses to the pharaoh to tell him that Israel is His firstborn son.

That means there are two entities here. One is described as the foremost of the nations. And that is the one whom others can follow. The Son of God. And that's the point.

And the path that led to the implementation of Hitler's plan as he imagined it in his head is in fact the path of the Amalekites, which truly leads to extermination. And even if they aren't aware of it, the Jews somehow know it. Because there is no generation that has not been confronted with this issue. But as Fedor said, it is terribly difficult to find the courage in oneself to admit it.

And I think that those who are listening to us should realize this and take it to heart, and when someone around them begins to mention "the Jewish question" then they should ask what kind of question it is that the Jews are asking. And he answers, "No, that's my question about what to do with the Jews."

That's all. Thank you.



Petr Pithart

I'd like to talk about warnings.

And so I have taken the liberty of titling my talk a bit provocatively: "Wannsee was not a warning." After all, nobody knew about it at the time.

We can't say whether the fifteen people at the villa got into an argument, as they did in the Anglo-American film. If they did, then allegedly it was about the legal aspects of deporting the Jews and about who was a Jew and what kind of a Jew they were. In the last part of the meeting it became clear that its subject was the Final Solution, something without any legal aspects. At this point, the perfect positivist laws that the Germans were so proud of ceased to exist. Such laws did not count with any final solution.

Forty-three months before the Wannsee Conference, another international meeting was held. Convened by President Roosevelt, it was also held by a lake, at Evian.

Its subject was only seemingly different: Who, meaning what countries, would accept the Jews expelled from all the territories occupied by Hitler.

Only the Dominican Republic was willing to accept 10,000 Jews. Nobody else. The British wouldn't even allow Jews into their old homeland, which was then a British mandate. It is as if the two lakes were connected by a wide channel. Those who were not admitted to Geneva would have to go to Treblinka. That was a warning. Wannsee was merely a consequence made possible by Evian.

This impossible situation was saved only by individuals and their hurriedly improvised organizations. Raoul Wallenberg – at the end of the war. Sir Nicolas Winton. The town council of Proseč, which granted the brothers Mann right of residence. States and institutions failed. The German state did not: It liquidated those whom nobody else wanted like industrial waste.

At the time, people still didn't have a word to describe these crimes. For this reason, the British and Americans agreed in 1942 to punish them after the war, and they issued a public warning that they would not heed any bans on retroactivity.

Later, these crimes were defined as crimes against humanity, war crimes, and genocide.

Soon after the war, universal declarations of civil and human rights were adopted, meaning the rights of all people. This also concerned racially and politically motivated crimes and people without their own state. As a result, the Nuremberg trials could take place. But the participants in the Wannsee Conference were not tried there. Most of them were not tried at all. It was always possible to hide in some other country, which is one reason why the International Criminal Tribunal was established in the Hague in the 1990s for the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda – something that had been inconceivable before. Ever since, it has been possible to punish crimes committed anywhere in the world, provided the criminals were found – or rather, caught.

Another warning I want to mention is that the Czech Republic spent ten years refusing to ratify the international agreement establishing these tribunals... Along with Russia and China – an unfortunate alliance. And the United States, which at the time was bogged down in Afghanistan.

Additionally, the international agreement on human rights, known in the Czech Republic as the Charter of Fundamental Rights and Freedoms, was only approved with a cantankerous note by Prime Minister Klaus, who called it a blight on the Constitution. Because of this “blight,” the concept of “constitutional order” was created in our legal system so that the Charter could be approved at least on the level of the Constitution. Another warning.

This is why we must ask ourselves how we would vote at Evian tomorrow... When today we can boast being the only country not to accept any refugees.

As a rule, when institutions and states fail it is individuals who act: our soldiers who killed Heydrich, our neighbors who hid Jews, the rural people and mountain dwellers who even after the war helped liberated Jewish prisoners get from concentration camps across the Alps to the future state of Israel (again against the will of the British). There were always individuals who stood with the Jews. States act only sporadically and always too late.

I am proud to belong to the nation of Kubiš and the state of the Slovak Gabčík.

I am proud to belong to a nation and a state that today stands so firmly with Israel that it can even criticize it for its various mistakes, because that, too, is an expression of solidarity.

Individuals and their organizations can sometimes move states rather than the other way around.

Let's therefore never stop being empathetic, mindful, and with a sense of solidarity on the most basic human and civic level, because both those lakes and both villas still stand.

In the end, states are made up of hundreds of thousands of bureaucrats who will always devotedly and willingly stick their papers, their perfect legal codes, into folders and follow their leaders. They will pound their fists on the table as a sign of absolute agreement just like at Wannsee... in the movie, anyway. Or like at a party meeting in North Korea. They will fill the halls with their applause. Only then will the streets and stadiums resound with agreement.

After all that I have understood, as a politician I looked after rules and institutions – and I did well. But today, I believe more in the responsibility, strength, and courage of individuals. Here and now, or tomorrow at the railway station in Bubny.







Epilogue

With the publication of these proceedings, we would like to thank all those who contributed to the opinion forum, and also everyone from the physical and online audience for their attention.

Our meeting on the subject of the Wannsee Conference was held just a few weeks before the Russian invasion of Ukraine – a war that diplomats aren't calling a war. The media space has become filled with propaganda and endless amounts of disinformation. People are dying on battlefields that were being attacked around the time of the original Wannsee Conference. The warring parties are different, but in some respects the propaganda is almost conspicuously identical. History is applied to suit particular needs. There is talk of nations that don't have a right to their own borders...

The opinion forum "Briefly about Wannsee" was the first public discussion held in association with the exhibition *A New World Order*, which the Memorial of Silence organized on the occasion of the eightieth anniversary of the events associated with Reinhard Heydrich's activities in Prague.

Pavel Štingl, director,
Memorial of Silence





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