

Toward the history of the forgotten

The following are excerpts from a keynote speech delivered at the November 2006 International Conference of the Round Table on Archives in Curacao, on "Victims of Slavery and Displaced Persons: Toward the History of the Forgotten."

The assigned subject poses no *special* difficulties for me, and, to explain the reasons for this requires a brief personal comment on my background. My now-deceased parents were first-generation Jewish Americans, refugees at a young age before World War I from the tyranny of the Russian czar—displaced persons, to be sure, but hardly forgotten. Decades later, they watched as a mostly silent world stood by while six million European Jews were slaughtered in the Nazi holocaust of World War II, along with millions of other innocents—Russians, Poles, Chinese, Gypsies—in the cauldron of global conflict and aggression, both in Europe and Asia, during the 1930s and 1940s.

As for "victims of slavery:" Surely the legacy of U.S. slavery a century earlier has permeated the consciousness of all Americans. Those of us who worked, however modestly, in the civil rights movement of the 1960s in the United States shared in the satisfaction of watching positive change. In my case, that included the thrill of listening to Martin Luther King's famous speech at the 1963 March on Washington, a few feet from the speaker himself, joined by a quarter-million other Americans.

More recently, in the 1980s and 1990s, I founded and ran a non-governmental organization, the Center for Democracy, which (among other tasks) assisted "displaced persons and groups" that had been victimized in—among other places—Central America, Southern Africa, and the Balkans. . . .

Nor has almost a half-century's reflection, lecturing, and occasional writing on the history of slavery in the United States left me with anything but ambivalence on its legacy in my country. The troubled anti-slavery dreams of our founding generation, after all, morphed into a positive pro-slavery defense



and eventual civil war. In short, my country was born and grew seeking freedom but, at the same time, accepting slavery and (after emancipation) accepting for another century segregation and unequal treatment of African Americans.

Yet, in these past decades, increasingly if belatedly, we Americans have come to recognize the importance of preserving the archival records of the African American experience, both during the slavery era and thereafter. When I became Archivist of the United States, I discovered at the National Archives, for example, that over a million records related to the Freedmen's Bureau, established after the Civil War to assist newly freed slaves with advice and support, and which lasted less than a decade, were being preserved and processed by a professional-volunteer collaboration.

Study of the African American experience, I am pleased to report, is alive and well in the United States—though with much work remaining to recover the full archival legacy of slavery and the black experience.

Slavery, you might think, represents a brutalizing system from a past era, and thus a fit subject for a historian to raise at an archivist's meeting. Would that it were so; would that an estimated 600,000 to 800,000 human beings—the great majority of whom are women and children—were not (according to U.S. Government and United Nations figures) "bought, sold, and trafficked across international borders each year" at an estimated annual \$10 billion profit.

The very term "trafficking across borders" has become an unfortunate euphemism in polite company to describe an obscene subject, namely 21st-century slavery. The U.S. Department of Labor estimates that, if one includes "intra-country trafficking," the numbers affected exceed 2.4 million people.

When one shifts from focusing on slavery

to the broader issue of displaced persons and refugees, the word "forgotten" is almost *too mild* to describe the actual situation. The genocide in Darfur alone, by UN and other estimates, has seen over 400,000 killed in the past few years and 2.5 million people driven from their homes amidst widespread rape, pillage, and torture.

Here are some basic facts on the situation, provided by the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR) and other relevant institutions. . . .

At the beginning of 2006, the number of people of concern to the U.N. Commission was an astounding 20.8 million. They included 8.4 million refugees, 40 percent; 6.6 million internally-displaced people (IDPS), 32 percent; 2.4 million stateless people, 11 percent; 1.6 million returned refugees and IDPS, 7 percent; more than 700,000 asylum seekers, 4 percent; and almost another million "others of concern." . . .

But in pursuit of adequate archival and historical "truth" and "truths" about the anguished histories to be reviewed at this meeting, we might also wish to consider a cautionary word about the erosion of time, by F. M. Cornford, a distinguished classicist of the last century:

"Moment by moment the whole fabric of events dissolves in ruins and melts into the past; and all that survives of the thing done passes into the custody of a shifting, capricious, imperfect, human memory. . . the facts work loose; they are detached from their roots in time and space and shaped into a story. The story is moulded and remoulded by imagination, by passion and prejudices, by religious preconception or aesthetic instinct, by the delight of the marvellous, by the itch for the moral, by the love of a good story; and the thing becomes a legend. A few irreducible facts will remain; no more, perhaps, than the names of persons and places. . . ."

Only actual documents and other records, if these exist for a particular historical episode, can rescue us from this agnostic paradise of recalled but unverified memories. However, I do wish to call attention one final time to the urgency and

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(Continued from previous page)

importance of our subject.

All too often it is impossible *after the fact* to correct or even to provide succor for the abused and their communities or countries. As one of our great historians, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., wrote: "History is not a redeemer promising to solve all problems in time." And yet, we are charged as archivists with rescuing from oblivion as much as can be restored of the "history of the forgotten."

In H.G. Wells's still timely words, "human history becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe." Just as this race may never be fully won by those seeking to reconstruct the "forgotten" past, so must it never be fully lost through inattention or indifference by those of us mandated by our professional code to strive to know all that is knowable.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Allen Weinstein". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

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