

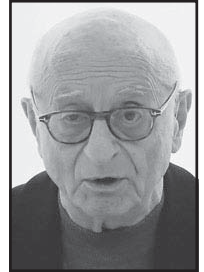
Holocaust

Bitter memory

Survivor seeks teens to bear witness for future

DRANCY, France, Feb 4, (AP): The girls and boys in the room were just a little older than Victor Perahia was when he was finally freed in 1945, his body wracked with tuberculosis and typhus, his mind anguished by the suffering and death he had seen. After 40 years of self-imposed silence, he now returns time and again to bear witness at Drancy, the transit center from where the French government deported tens of thousands of Jews into the hands of Nazis.

"From the day of my arrest to the day of my liberation, I will tell you my story," Perahia said. He sat with his back to the window overlooking the Drancy housing project, where he spent 21 months. It was the last place in France his father and grandfather saw before they were loaded into a train bound for the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp.



Perahia

The students from a middle school in nearby Livry Gargan held their breaths, their eyes fixed on Perahia's lined face.

Perahia spoke to the students last week amid a series of events to mark the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. Surveys in recent years, including one released this year, show young people in France and elsewhere in Europe increasingly question the scale of the Holocaust, although outright denial is rare.

Perahia told the students he was 9 when six German soldiers stomped upstairs to the family apartment in the coastal town of Saint-Nazaire. They kept him hostage while his mother ran to fetch his father, who demanded to know what was happening.

"We are here for a simple identity check. You will follow us, along with your wife and your child, and in 48 hours, you will be home again," the officer told his father.

Lie

The lie was revealed two days later. They were in a detention camp near the city of Tours when still more German officers separated men from women and children, Perahia told the teens, his voice steady.

The room fell utterly silent as he spoke. "My father looked me deep in the eyes, as if he felt that it was going to be a difficult moment to live through. Because maybe he thought that it would be the last time that we would see each other." Perahia paused briefly. "I'll tell you right away, that was the last time I saw my father... Because he was deported in convoy Number 8."

Convoy Number 8, like nearly all the convoys from Drancy, was bound for Auschwitz. The students from Livry Gargan – a town about 7 kilometers (4 miles) away – by then already had learned from their history teacher, Valérie Maloberti, that the vast majority of the 57,977 people deported from Drancy perished at the Nazi death camp.

But here before them was a man for whom this was not history but bitter memory. He told them about the children he had known, the teens who took care of babies whose parents were deported, before they themselves were gathered up and told they would join their families. He described what they experienced, nearly minute by minute, after they arrived on the platform at Auschwitz, where German soldiers greeted them with dogs and shouts, where they were told they were going to take a shower and instead walked into a gas chamber. And where every last one of them died.

"I who knew them, I who loved these children, I always talk about them with a lot of emotion, and I talk about them freely because it feels like when I talk about them again, it brings them back to life a little," he said.

By now, Maloberti's students were wiping tears from red eyes, thinking of their parents, their siblings, themselves being loaded into livestock cars from the French national railway like the one they could see through the window. Perahia and his mother barely survived the Bergen Belsen labor camp and were liberated by Russian soldiers on their way to Berlin.

"When we returned home, we thought we would reconnect with the past, rediscover an identity deeply altered by three years in the camps. But no one was waiting for us. We were confronted with an incredulous society, incapable of understanding us," he said. "So for decades we did not speak. I personally could not speak for 40 years, not even to my family, not even to my children, who had questions that I could not answer," he said.

Finally, he decided that he owed it to his family and to the future to speak.

Holocaust

In the French equivalent of ninth grade, classes spend about eight hours on World War II, which includes around two hours devoted to the Holocaust, Maloberti said. But visiting Drancy is different.

"It seems unreal to them. So there it is, it's true, it really existed," she said. "The numbers are there. The buildings, the documents are there. I have never had a student who denied the information once we gave it."

But what Perahia was after was something more powerful than just teaching the truth. An atheist, he has visited Auschwitz repeatedly to intone the Jewish prayer for the dead for his father and grandfather who died there.

And for the children listening to him on this day, organized jointly by the Drancy memorial and the Jewish umbrella organization CRIF, it seemed he had succeeded in leaving something behind.

"Victor Perahia will leave a mark. That's the thing that will leave a mark, what I will tell my family, my children, if I have any. This will surely stay with me the rest of my life," said Iness Boubaajat-Lebreton.

By now, the light was fading but Perahia said he would join the class outside. More than two dozen teens surrounded him, slowing their pace to his as they walked toward the buildings where he had spent almost two years of his life, before being deported to Bergen Belsen.

The transit camp buildings were converted into apartments almost immediately after the war for people whose homes had been bombed. This troubled some of the students, but not Perahia.

"After all you have survived, all you have gone through, are you happy?" came one of the final questions of the day.

"I am happy," Perahia said. "But it is a little late."



Belgian soldiers patrol in a temporary military zone as vehicles arrive from a British naval vessel, taking part in US-led war games, at the Port of Antwerp in Antwerp, Belgium on Feb 3. The Defender-Europe 2020 exercises will involve approximately 20,000 American troops; the biggest deployment of US-based soldiers to Europe in 25 years. (AP)

Days after Brexit, UK navy arrives in Belgium for war games

Britain may have just left the European Union, but the country's navy was the first to arrive for US-led war games over the next six months across Europe.

The Royal Navy was busy Monday offloading heavy military vehicles in the Belgian port of Antwerp.

The vehicles will be involved in the Defender-Europe 2020 exercises, which will see the biggest

deployment of US troops - some 20,000 personnel - to Europe in the last 25 years. In all, around 37,000 soldiers from 18 countries, not all of whom are members of the NATO military alliance, will be taking part.

The war games are a test of the US military's ability to pour thousands of troops and equipment into Europe alongside NATO allies and partners in times of crisis. Many of the exercises will be held in coun-

tries neighboring Russia like Poland, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

The bulk of the forces are deploying in February, with the main exercises taking place in April and May. The maneuvers wind up in August. Some of the exercises will involve air-dropping soldiers to pre-positioned equipment or erecting temporary bridges for river crossings in combat-like conditions. (AP)



French President Emmanuel Macron takes part in a wreath laying ceremony at the tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Warsaw, Poland on Feb 3. (AP)



Grenell



Lukashenko

Europe

'Russia, China pose threats': Russia and China pose the greatest threats to national security of Lithuania, according to an intelligence report published by the Baltic nation on Tuesday.

The government and the Lithuanian national security agency said in a joint security assessment that Russia's foreign and security policies are "driven by the Kremlin's desire to ensure the regime's stability and demonstrate its indispensability to a domestic audience."

It also listed China, citing "the malicious use of Chinese cyber capabilities in Lithuanian cyberspace."

"Russia's confrontation with the West in the international arena encourages Moscow to coordinate its interests with China," according to the 324-page annual assessment by the Defense Ministry and State Security agency. "These countries maintain close political and military relations and coordinate positions on international issues."

Lithuania broke away from the Soviet Union three decades ago and joined NATO and the EU in 2004.

Russia's 2014 annexation of the Crimean Peninsula from Ukraine has raised new worries in the Baltic region that Lithuania and neighboring Latvia and Estonia – all former Soviet republics – could be next. (AP)

'Drop taxes on Serbian goods': US President Donald Trump's special envoy for Kosovo and Serbia on Tuesday urged the new Kosovo government to abolish punitive tariffs on Serbian goods that have blocked negotiations between the two Balkan rivals.

Richard Grenell, who is the US ambassador to Germany, said that "we expect the tariffs to be dropped immediately."

"We made clear to all the (Kosovo) party leaders that dropping the tariffs was in the best interest of Kosovo and its economy, and the desire to attract new businesses," he said in an emailed statement to The Associated Press.

A European Union-mediated dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo over normalizing ties stalled after the previous Kosovo

Britain

Govt vows to impose longer sentences

UK to end early release of terror convicts

LONDON, Feb 4, (AP): The British government said Monday it will introduce emergency legislation to stop people convicted of terror crimes being released after serving half their sentences, following two attacks in London by recently freed offenders.

The announcement came the day after an Islamic extremist who had recently been released from prison wounded two people in south London, despite being under police surveillance. Sudesh Amman, 20, strapped on a fake bomb and stabbed two people on a busy street before being shot dead by police.

"Yesterday's appalling incident makes the case plainly for immediate action," Justice Secretary Robert Buckland told lawmakers. "We will therefore introduce emergency legislation to put an end to terrorist offenders getting released automatically having served half of their sentence with no check or review."

He said terror convicts would have to serve at least two-thirds of their sentences, and wouldn't be freed before the end of their full terms unless the Parole Board agreed.

Buckland said the new rules would apply to people who are currently serving sentences as well as those sentenced in the future. More than 70 people convicted of terrorism offenses have been released in Britain after serving time in prison and more than 200 others are currently imprisoned.

Following Sunday's attack and a Nov 29 attack in which two people were killed near London Bridge in central London, the government has vowed to impose longer sentences for terror crimes and overhaul the conditions under which offenders are released back into the community.

"This is a liberal country, it is a tolerant country," Prime Minister Boris

Johnson said. "But I think the idea of automatic early release for people who obviously continue to pose a threat to the public has come to the end of its useful life."

He said the difficulty is how to apply new laws retrospectively to those currently in the system. He added that de-radicalizing people is a "very, very difficult thing to do" and that he was concerned about the way convicted terrorists in prison are handled.

"Do you detain them en bloc, in one group, and try to keep them together because that avoids them, as it were, infecting or passing the virus of their beliefs to others in jails, or do you disperse them and try to stop them re-infecting each other?" he said.

Convicted

Amman had been convicted in 2018 of publishing graphic terrorist videos online and had stockpiled instructions on bomb making and knife attacks.

He was sentenced to three years and four months. Taking into account time served after his arrest, he was freed a week ago, Buckland said.

Police on Monday continued to search a hostel near the attack site where Amman had been staying, and also raided another property outside of London.

Officers had been trailing Amman at the time of Sunday's attack, police said, but were unable to head off the bloodshed in the commercial and residential south London neighborhood of Streatham, where Amman struck outside a major pharmacy on a busy shopping afternoon.

The intelligence think tank SITE reported that the Islamic State group claimed that the south London attack was perpetrated by one of its "fighters."

IS has been responsible for deadly attacks in Europe in the past few years,

but also has a track record of claiming attacks as its own, often with no evidence to prove it. In some cases, the attacks turned out to be carried out by perpetrators with no known ties to the extremist group.

The attack in London recalled a November stabbing attack carried out by another man who had served prison time for terrorism offenses. Two people were killed in that attack.

Counter-terrorism officials have warned of the threat posed by militants unless the government couples prison sentences with effective de-radicalization programs.

London Mayor Sadiq Khan of the opposition Labour Party said Sunday's attack was clearly foreseeable in the wake of the London Bridge killings.

"One of the questions I've got for the government is what are we doing about those 70-odd people who have been released from prison?" he asked.

Ian Acheson, who led an independent review of Islamic extremism in the criminal justice system, told the BBC that the risk-management system was "broken."

"We are going to have to accept that we have to be much more skeptical and robust about dealing with the risk of harm," he said. "We may need to accept that there are certain people who are so dangerous they must be kept in prison indefinitely."

But civil rights group Liberty called the government's response to recent attacks "a cause of increasing concern for our civil liberties."

"From last month's knee-jerk lie detector proposal, to today's threat to break the law by changing people's sentences retrospectively, continuing to introduce measures without review or evidence is dangerous and will create more problems than it solves," said Liberty's Clare Collie.

stop the conflict.

Serbia and its allies Russia and China don't accept Kosovo's 2008 declaration of independence, although Serbia's former province has been recognized by about 100 countries, including the US and most EU nations. (AP)

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Lukashenko boasts about US ties:

The leader of Belarus boasted Tuesday about warming ties with the United States as his officials discussed alternative energy imports as part of efforts to win concessions from Russia.

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko has prodded his main ally and sponsor, Russia, to continue providing low-priced oil and gas to shore up his nation's Soviet-style economy. But the Kremlin has cut energy subsidies, arguing that Belarus should accept closer economic and political integration to keep getting cheap oil and gas.

Lukashenko said he expects to meet with Russian President Vladimir Putin on Friday for another round of talks. Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov confirmed that the meeting was planned.

The two leaders met twice in December but failed to resolve their differences, resulting in Russia cutting oil supplies to Belarus at the start of the year.

The transit shipments of Russian crude to Europe via Belarus have continued unimpeded, but the Belarusian oil refineries have been reduced to a minimum capacity. In the past, Belarus has cashed in on exports of petroleum products made from cheap Russian oil. (AP)



Spain's Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez 99 (left), embraces Argentina's President Alberto Fernandez at the Moncloa Palace in Madrid, Spain on Feb 4. (AP)