

## Mitch Albom: Hate must be remembered today. Here's why

**Mitch Albom** | Detroit Free Press  
Published 2:48 PM EST Jan 27, 2019

Some things you never forget, no matter how much you might want to. Guy Stern, of West Bloomfield, cannot forget the day he left Germany, in 1937, because he was the only member of his family allowed to go.

He had an uncle in America who could sponsor one person, and since Guy, at 15, was the oldest of their three children, his parents chose him, hoping he could find work and bring the rest of them over.

Why did they have to leave? Because their country was turning on them. The Sterns were Jews. And a rising despot named Adolf Hitler had begun blaming Jewish people for Germany's post-war woes, then harassing them, then targeting them, and as his power grew and the hatred boiled, his forces began rounding up Jews and killing them.



Michigan: Guy Stern landed in Normandy three days after D-Day as a member of the special military intelligence unit called the Ritchie Boys. A unit of German-born Jews recruited to provide insight to U.S. commanders and interrogate captured Germans.

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Guy had already seen his father's clothing shop boycotted. He and his siblings were harassed, bullied, forbidden to use certain facilities, all because they were Jewish.

"I remember in 1933 (when Hitler was named chancellor of Germany) we sat around the dinner table,"

Stern recalls, "and my father talked to my brother and me, and he said, 'You know, this too will pass. But in the meanwhile, be inconspicuous. Think of yourself as invisible ink. Don't make waves. Invisible ink can become visible again, once the horror has passed.'

"But of course, he was wrong. And it was 12 years before the Nazi horror stopped."

Twelve years. Really not that long in pure time. Three American presidential cycles. Not even a full generation. Yet in 12 years, Germany went from a member of the League of Nations, to a dictatorship, to a conquering force, to a world threat, to a genocidal murderer of nearly 19 million people and, finally, to a defeated nation in ruins.

Twelve years. That's how hot the fires of hatred burn. And what was made to be invisible, did not, like ink, reappear.

Sadly, it stayed invisible.

## **A hatred you can't forget**

Stern became a soldier in the U.S. Army, hoping to get back to Europe and fight this evil. In 1944, three days after the invasion of Normandy, he landed there himself, as part of a special U.S. military intelligence unit comprised largely of European Jewish immigrants, who spoke the languages needed to interrogate prisoners of war. Stern's work would earn him the Bronze Star.

But in 1945, once the Nazis were defeated, he traveled back to his hometown of Hildesheim, Germany, searching for his parents and his siblings.

"It was a shocking sight," he recalls. "Entire areas were destroyed. There was one street leading to the railroad station which had been heavily bombed, and I recognized one house that was left standing. It was as if you looked at a toothless person that had one tooth left in his mouth."



When Guy Stern initially applied to join naval intelligence, he was told that only native-born Americans were eligible. Then the military reversed itself when they figured out the utility of German-born Americans.

Handout

As he scoured for information, one night, he was invited to a small party. He met a German woman. She

was pleasant and attractive. She told Stern her family name — and he realized he knew her. She was the sister of a man “who years ago had tortured me at a swimming pool” because Stern was Jewish. The memories came flooding back and Stern quickly left.

Soon after, he discovered that his entire family — mother, father, brother, sister — had been murdered by the Nazis, somewhere between the Warsaw Ghetto and the concentration camps.

There were no graves. No place for him to lay flowers. An entire family wiped out. A family you want to honor, to commemorate, to remember, but can't, because of a hatred you can't forget.

## Anti-Semitism still part of our culture

Today is International Holocaust Remembrance Day. On this day, 74 years ago, the Nazis' largest concentration camp, Auschwitz-Birkenau, was liberated. That same year, the future President of the United States, Dwight Eisenhower, visited a concentration camp site and wrote that the evidence of “starvation, cruelty and bestiality were so overpowering as to leave me a bit sick.”

And then, very significantly, he wrote this:

“I made the visit deliberately, in order to be in position to give first-hand evidence of these things if ever, in the future, there develops a tendency to charge these allegations merely to ‘propaganda.’ ”

Eisenhower knew that time can erase things. That certain folks will try and spin the past. Indeed, today, with Eisenhower gone, you have people who deny the Holocaust ever happened.

And hatred towards Jews is again on the rise.

In the last three months alone — just three months — a Miami police officer was filmed throwing out a Jewish holy book and a box with a Jewish star, calling it “crap” and “s\*\*\*” and boasting, “Taking out the trash, dawg.” A police officer?

A Jewish professor at Columbia University found swastikas spray-painted on her office walls. Britain's Labour party was forced to open an investigation into anti-Semitism within its ranks.

And, most notably, a Pittsburgh synagogue was terrorized by a gunman who, spewing anti-Semitic epithets, shot and killed 11 people.

That's hardly all of it. And that's just the last three months.

One of the victims in Pittsburgh was an elderly Jewish woman named Rose Mallinger. She was 97.

Guy Stern just passed his 97th birthday. When I ask if he is living so long to make up for those who did not get the chance, he says, “Yes, very much so. I am either praised or cursed for being a workaholic, but I know in my soul of souls that it is a direct consequence of what I and my family have been through.

“If I have been privileged to live, then I need to see that my life has meaning.”

## Standing up to hate the only solution

Stern is an eloquent, erudite man. He still serves as a director at the Holocaust Memorial Center in Farmington Hills. It is a moving place that everyone should visit, regardless of heritage, to see what can happen when divisiveness takes us over.

As Stern says, hatred “is not just harmful to the persecuted, but it pulls apart person against person in the country.”

His particular focus is called the Harry and Wanda Zekelman Institute of the Righteous, which focuses on brave people who took risks during the Holocaust to do the right thing, to act ethically, even as those around them hid in the shadow of powerful evil.

We should all strive to be the more heroic types, the kind who stand up. Many Americans do this for certain causes. But hatred against Jews seems to lag behind.

Why is this? Why does the Pittsburgh shooting already seem so distant? Why, in general, do we not see the same media attention to acts of anti-Semitism as other hate crimes?

When I ask Stern if he believes a holocaust could happen again, he says, “Your question, in a way, is already largely answered. We see all kinds of genocide today, in Africa, in other parts of the world.”

And when I ask what his warning would be to ensure that doesn't happen here, he says, “Smother the

dangers in the beginning. It's the beginning, where you still can combat what might become a very dangerous development in our country, that matters most."

Which is why standing up now for small offenses matters. Why calling out anti-Semitism matters — every bit as much as calling out racism, homophobia and xenophobia.

The words of Stern's father are haunting: "Think of yourself as invisible ink." More haunting is his son's conclusion: "He was wrong."

Today is a day for remembrance, because some things you can't forget, and some things you should never forget. And once you remember what the old hate did, the new hate should make you furious.

*Contact Mitch Albom: [malbom@freepress.com](mailto:malbom@freepress.com). Check out his latest best-selling book, "The Next Person You Meet in Heaven," available online and in bookstores nationwide. Download "The Sports Reporters" podcast each Monday and Friday on-demand through Apple Podcasts, Google Play, Spotify and more. Follow him on Twitter @mitchalbom.*

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