

Speech at Nordic Dialogue Conference Stockholm

by Mattias Kalander

I would like to begin by introducing myself. My name is Mattias Kalander. I am a candidate for the priesthood in the Diocese of Luleå, and I am the grandson of a Roma Holocaust survivor. That means the Holocaust is not merely history to me. It is something deeply personal. I may not have experienced it firsthand, but I can still say that it lives on within me.

I do not believe the Holocaust was an accident in history.

I believe it was the result of human choices.

Of words that dehumanized.

Of silence that normalized.

Of societies that stopped seeing certain people as human beings.

My grandmother, Hanna Brzezinska, was one of the few Roma survivors of the Holocaust who came to Sweden after the Second World War. At the age of eight, she witnessed her entire family being wiped out. From a relative's window, she saw German soldiers execute her father and her siblings. At eight years old, she walked hand in hand with her five-year-old sister Anita to the gas chamber, knowing that within minutes, once she let go, her sister would leave as smoke through the crematorium chimney.

For the next six years she endured cold, starvation, physical and psychological exhaustion, beatings and torture in camps such as Auschwitz, Birkenau, Majdanek and Ravensbrück — just to name a few.

We might ask ourselves: what does an eight-year-old do with emotions after seeing her entire family destroyed before her eyes? When life consists of death, suffering, misery, and the removal of all human rights and dignity simply because others decided that the group you were born into was not worthy of being called human?

The answer is that you are forced to push your feelings away in order to survive.

And then another question arises: how does one find the will to keep living?

In my grandmother's case, I believe it was her faith in God that gave her strength. When she was beaten, mocked, and called degrading names, Jesus was there. When tears streamed down her cheeks during the cold winter nights and the longing for her family tore at her soul, Jesus

was there. When she was a hair's breadth from death and survived time and time again, Jesus was there.

My grandmother was liberated from the Nazis and came to Sweden in 1945 on the Red Cross "White Buses." But when she arrived in Sweden — the country that saved her from death — I would argue that she still was not truly free.

I do not say this out of ingratitude. Without Sweden, there is a strong possibility that I — and many of my relatives — would not exist today. But if Auschwitz was a prison of barbed wire and rifles, Sweden, in certain respects, became a prison of prejudice and closed doors.

She was no longer behind barbed wire guarded by soldiers, but when she met my grandfather in 1947 — who was also Roma — and married him, they were not allowed to live in a house, even though he had a permanent job in a state-owned mine in Malmberget. It was because he got that job that they ended up in northern Sweden. Before that, they were forced to move from municipality to municipality. They ran a small amusement business and were only allowed to stay a few weeks at a time before local residents wanted them gone.

Because they were Roma, they had to live with their children in a Volkswagen van — in northern Sweden, where winter temperatures can reach minus 40 degrees Celsius.

A vehicle became their home. Not because they lacked work. Not because they lacked willingness. But because society still saw them as less worthy.

It was not until 1956, when their youngest child was born, that they were finally allowed to move into a proper home — thanks to a compassionate social worker.

But the deepest prison my grandmother carried silently within herself.

She rarely spoke about what she had endured. But it was there — in her eyes. Even when her mouth smiled, there was always a sorrow in her gaze that testified to what she had lived through.

When we ask why humanity repeats its mistakes again and again, I believe three factors are decisive. Painfully, those same three factors can also be the keys to healing — if we use them correctly.

The three are: forgiveness, forgetting, and moving forward.

1. Forgiveness – when the inability to forgive dehumanizes

I am convinced that forgiveness is one of the most misunderstood words we have. For some it creates resistance. For others it brings hope. For most of us, it raises many questions.

Today we live in a culture of cancellation, where people are often reduced to their worst actions, their worst words, their most thoughtless moments. And once someone is labeled, there is no way back.

But history teaches us something crucial: dehumanization always begins when we stop seeing the whole person.

The Nazis did not begin with gas chambers.

They began with words.

With simplifications.

With pointing out certain groups as less worthy, less human, less deserving of being heard.

When we say today that some people can never change, can never be restored, can never be more than their guilt — we move in the same dangerous direction.

A society without forgiveness becomes a cold society. A society where we are not allowed to fail or learn from our mistakes becomes a divided society. A society where we refuse to understand one another is a society that can never truly unite.

Forgiveness is not easy. Often it requires choosing an action that does not match our feelings. It requires strength, courage and self-sacrifice. It is about refusing to let hatred shape the future.

I was eleven when my grandmother died, and I never had the chance to ask her if — and how — she could forgive the Nazis for what they did. I imagine it was something she wrestled with throughout her life.

But while it is impossible to forget what the Nazis did, we cannot blame today's generation for the sins of their ancestors. To create a prison of bitterness and hatred within ourselves does not give us a full life. Carrying the past like an ankle monitor will not move us forward as individuals or as a society.

I believe my grandmother believed in forgiveness — not because she thought what the Nazis did was acceptable, but because she wanted to give herself, her children, and her grandchildren a future free from hatred.

As Holocaust survivor Eva Kor said:

“Choosing not to forgive is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die.”

Hatred must never be allowed to have the final word.

2. Forgetting – not to become stuck, but to be able to live

The second word may sound provocative: to forget.

We often say — and rightly so — “Never forget.”

As a society, we must never forget what the Nazis did. That is precisely why I am standing here today.

We must never forget the actions.

We must never forget the consequences.

Memory is our shared responsibility.

But for those who have been victims — and for us who are their children and grandchildren — it is impossible to live every moment defined by what happened. A life where pain constantly stands at the center is no life at all. The past would continue taking what it has already taken.

That is why we must be allowed to live. To breathe. To love. To build a future without every moment being defined by the worst that happened.

At the same time, there is a responsibility that does not lie on the victims — but on society. We must never forget. Because when memory fades, we see again and again what happens: war, dehumanization and suffering repeat themselves.

3. Moving forward – without denying what has been

The third may be the most difficult: to move forward.

Today we sometimes hear voices saying:

“Why are we still talking about the Holocaust?”

“Other groups have also suffered genocide.”

“There is suffering today — why look backward?”

And it is true:

The Holocaust is not the only genocide in history.

And it will not be the last.

But remembering the Holocaust is not about competing in suffering. It is about understanding the mechanisms of evil.

At the same time, moving forward means not living in endless conflict about who started what. Not allowing the past to determine all future relationships.

Moving forward does not mean relativizing history.

It means allowing history to be a teacher — not a jailer.

Honoring the dead without giving hatred new life.

We cannot move forward by choosing silence about what happens when people are dehumanized, tortured and killed. We move forward by saying: this happened — and therefore we choose differently today.

Conclusion

The Holocaust did not begin with violence.

It began with thoughts.

With language.

With people ceasing to see one another as fellow human beings.

Therefore, Holocaust Remembrance Day is not only a day of mourning — it is a day of responsibility.

Responsibility to:

- choose forgiveness over contempt,
- choose memory over denial,
- and choose to move forward without repeating the past.

History does not repeat itself because we remember it — but because we refuse to learn from it.

Let us remember.

Let us heal.

And let us together build a future where no human being ever again has to question their human worth.

Thank you.