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Raphael Lemkin

Internationally acclaimed as the man who coined the term 'genocide', Raphael Lemkin was born to Jewish parents in Eastern Poland in 1901. It is ironic that it was not the persecution of his own people which led Lemkin to not only invent the phrase but to dedicate his life to fighting its reality. This struggle did not start, as might be expected, after the atrocities of the Second World War but some years before they had even begun.

Raphael Lemkin was educated at home together with his two brothers. He studied philology at the University of Lwow before deciding on a career in law. He gained a doctorate from the University of Heidelberg in Germany and in 1929 began teaching at Tachkimoni College in Warsaw. He became a public prosecutor and for the next five years represented Poland at conferences all over the world. A prominent international figure Dr Lemkin also served on the on the Polish Law Codification Committee and helped draft the criminal code of a newly independent Poland.

In 1933 Dr Lemkin was deeply disturbed by the massacre of Christian Assyrians by Iraqis. His distress was compounded by earlier memories of the slaughter of Armenians by Turks during the First World War and the international jurist began to examine these acts as crimes in an effort to deter and prevent them. He presented his first proposal to outlaw such 'acts of barbarism' to the Legal Council of the League of Nations in Madrid the same year. However, the proposal failed and his work incurred the disapproval of the Polish government, which was at the time pursuing a policy of conciliation with Nazi Germany. He was forced to retire from his public position in 1934. Undeterred Dr Lemkin continued his work in private law practice until the German invasion of Poland in 1939 led him to experience at first hand the very acts that he was working to prevent.

Dr Lemkin was wounded whilst fighting the Nazis outside Warsaw. He hid in the Polish forests for six months before finally escaping to Sweden by way of Lithuania and the Baltic Sea. The exile was to save him. He and his brother Elias were the only members of the forty-strong Lemkin family that were to survive the Nazi occupation.

Now a refugee in Sweden Dr Lemkin worked as a lecturer at the University of Stockholm, using his time in exile to study Nazism from the standpoint of jurisprudence. He analysed the legal decrees that had allowed the Nazi occupation and identified the instruments that had worked to systematically eliminate a people. He labelled this premeditated crime 'genocide' from the Greek prefix genos meaning race and the Latin suffix cide meaning killing. His work was later published in 1944 in the landmark book *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe*. His analysis was used as one of the bases for determining the Nuremberg trials programme in 1945, where he served as legal adviser to the US Chief Prosecutor.

The recognition of genocide in the Nuremberg trials was a considerable achievement. However since the trials handled cases of war guilt only and genocide in times of peace was not punishable under those terms, Dr Lemkin resolved to carry on his campaign for the establishment of genocide as a crime under international law. He presented a draft convention on the prevention and punishment of genocide to the Paris peace conference in 1945. As in 1933, his proposal failed. He had no funding, no office, nor did he represent any government or accredited organisation. Yet with the dogged determination that had become characteristic of Dr Lemkin's life, he continued his struggle.

His persistent and persuasive lobbying paid off the following year when a further resolution in favour of an international convention was put before the United Nations. The resolution was approved and Dr Lemkin became an adviser in the writing of an international treaty to that effect. On December 9th 1948, the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide was adopted unanimously by the United Nations General Assembly. It represented a triumph in the struggle that Dr Lemkin had begun some 15 years earlier.

Once the convention was in place Dr Lemkin continued to lobby relentlessly for its ratification. He did so until his death in 1959. Dr Raphael Lemkin was twice nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize for his work and was honoured with a number of other awards. These included the Grand Cross of Cespedes from Cuba in 1950 and the Stephen Wise Award of the American Jewish Congress in 1951. On the 50th anniversary of the Convention entering into force Dr Rapael Lemkin was also

recently honoured by UN Secretary-General as an inspiring example of moral engagement.

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