



NEW TIMES, OLD DANGERS TO EUROPE'S DEMOCRACY

THE VIEW FROM MARIAN TURSKI, HOLOCAUST SURVIVOR,
AT THE 2018 EUROPEAN YOUNG LEADERS WARSAW SEMINAR

There can be few people better qualified than Marian Turski to link warnings from history with disturbing developments in today's politics.

As a teenager, Turski witnessed the Nazi invasion of Poland, joined a resistance group in the Łódź ghetto, survived Auschwitz and Buchenwald. After the Second World War, he became a renowned journalist, historian and Jewish rights activist.

He marched alongside Dr. Martin Luther King for civil rights in Alabama and, at 91, continues to be a driving force in efforts to preserve the memory of the Holocaust.

Meeting the European Young Leaders during their seminar in Warsaw, he recalled the slow creep of totalitarianism in the 1930s.

"Auschwitz did not happen just at once," he said. "It was prepared step-by-step."

Those steps came gradually – Jews forbidden to sit on a park bench, then banned from buying bread before 5pm, then excluded from swimming pools – steps so gradual that few realised the gravity of the threat.

"They were all getting used to it, step-by-step, the victims, the perpetrators and the bystanders. Day-by-day, they were getting used to it," Turski said. "This is what may be the most dangerous thing."

Although the phrase "never again" has been a bedrock of political discourse in Europe since the Holocaust, Turski warned that can sound like a banality at a time when events start to parallel dark days from the past.

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Key to that chance is responding to the wave of disillusionment that is leading voters to lose faith in mainstream politics. “Maybe this is a goal and a task for young leaders, to think how to exclude this alienation of great groups of people,” Turski said. “That is a challenge for you ... History is like a relay and you have to pass on the baton to the next generation.”

The conversation with Turski at the end of the three-day Warsaw seminar was a highlight for the around 50 past-and-present European Young Leaders attending.

Their questions sought his opinion on current issues such as Islamophobia, the role of the United Nations or Poland’s new law on historical references to the Holocaust.

The young leaders also raised more personal subjects, asking Turski what brings him joy, which modern leaders he admires and how to maintain hope at a time when many people are descending into despair.

In reply to that, he told a story of solidarity in the death camp that had strengthened his faith in humanity. It related how 10 comrades agreed to put aside part of their meagre bread rations to gather enough for a bribe that would procure the short-sighted Turski replacement eye glasses after his were smashed in a blow from a guard.

“Without hope, I cannot live,” he said. “Maybe I’m an optimist by nature, something in my genes.”

Led by Friends of Europe, each year the European Young Leaders (EYL40) programme brings together talented, established leaders, aged 40 and under, who have made their mark in a wide range of fields such as politics, science, business, media, NGOs, the arts and civil society. You can find more information about the programme in the EYL40 overview. The programme was originally conceived with EuropaNova.



2018 European Young Leaders Seminar, Warsaw