

## **UN Update - Sister Helen Martinez - Journal for January 30-31, 2015**

I arrived yesterday in New York having been home for the funeral of my Uncle Robert. The snow storm delayed my return. This morning I went to the United Nations to view two exhibitions.

A Yad Vashem multi-media exhibit entitled, “Shoah - How Was It Humanly Possible?” was opened at UN headquarters, as part of a week-long series of activities to mark the International Day of Commemoration in memory of the Victims of the Holocaust (January 27) and the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz Birkenau. The exhibition told the comprehensive story of the Shoah and dealt with the major historical aspects of the Holocaust. It started with Jewish life in pre-Holocaust Europe and ended with the liberation of the Nazi concentration and death camps across Europe. It was moving to see the history unfold.

In the same area was the “Forbidden Art: an exhibition of photographs of cap art from the collections of the Auschwitz Memorial”. This presented the story of twenty priceless, rarely presented, and fragile works of art made illegally and at risk of death by prisoners of the German Nazi concentration camp. These artworks were recovered from the land around Auschwitz-Birkenau. Each of the photographs shown in the exhibition is accompanied by an historical commentary and excerpts from archival accounts.

The artwork is built around two themes, the first of which lays out the reality of life in the camp: scenes depicting the functioning of the camp and portraits of prisoners. The second theme focused on the types of escape created by the camp prisoners: caricatures, albums containing greetings and fairy tales prisoners wrote for their children. They enlighten us about Jewish families who endured the cruelty and nightmare of concentration camps. The artworks ranged from comedic caricatures of their Nazi captors to a very small hand crafted sarcophagus.

Many names of the artists are unknown yet I cannot but help think that these artists defied everything in order to express their dignity as human persons. I was moved to tears by the stark reality of the portrayals of life in the camps and the immense courage of these artists who risked their very lives to provide a means of telling the story. Each of the photographs was accompanied by a commentary and excerpts from accounts in archives. The art was really a lens through which I was able to see the intimate and emotional view of these prisoner-artists and the people they depicted. I was moved by the album of greetings that the men made for the women from a sub-camp. Most of it was graphic but there was an image of a bracelet from the Lodz ghetto found near the gas chambers. There was a colorful miniature figure of the devil that was created in Auschwitz from tape and a piece of wire. This was used to smuggle illegal letters by the prisoners.

I left the exhibit thinking I had not only had an encounter with art but also a significant lesson in history as a witness to the struggle for one’s own humanity.

In the afternoon, I attended the Co NGO Committee on Sustainable Development, NY. It was held at the UN Church Center.

We were given a brief introduction to the webpage for Beyond 2015: The World We Want 2015 ([www.beyond2015.org](http://www.beyond2015.org)). There are three sections to the website: engage, learn and join. This is a civil society campaign that works for a strong and legitimate framework to succeed the Millennium Development goals. It began in 2010 and is founded on a diverse and global foundation, ranging from small community organizations, 1000 international non-government organization, academics and trade unions over 132 countries. It aims to bring together groups from developing, emerging and developed economies. One of the principles is partnership between North and South civil society organizations.

Ms. Jennifer Kushell, CEO of Young & Successful Media and Founder of Your Success Now (YSN.com) addressed us via Skype on The Importance of Empowering Youth to Become Entrepreneurs. She spoke about the needs of young people who are entering the workforce. This gives the tools and resources to achieve success in their lives. Your Success Network [YSN.com] connects young people with experience, employment and entrepreneurial opportunities around the world. She addressed how the corporate and private sectors can support entrepreneurship. She spoke about the partnership with SUBWAY® which created a series of tools that teachers around the world can use in their classrooms to teach entrepreneurship and critical business skills.

I asked her a question regarding the challenges girls face in being involved in entrepreneurship. In reply, she said that in some countries, such as Slovakia, women are restricted in their society. Women are not supported and this is a global universal issue. Women create networks with each other. Google is the best friend in providing available resources. There is now no excuse not to know what resources are out there. Ms. Kushell encouraged media to promote the story of women. We have to get women involved in conferences.

The next section focused on The Emerging Frontiers in Agriculture. Mr. Jorge Laguna-Celis Senior Programme Management Officer on Intergovernmental Policy Co-ordination, United Nations Environment Programme-NY Office (UNEP). He spoke about improving soil. He said there was an excess of nitrogen in the environment. The use of fertilizers n soil and its impact on pollution. There is enough food for the world but there is food loss and food waste. This is demonstrated in 30-35% of food loss in the USA after it reaches market. The Post 2015 agenda must have the engagement of civil society. We must change our perceptions and our lifestyle. Civil society is good at pooling resources. There is a need to ask the question, “What action or commitment do we make in September 2015 Summit?”

The next guest was Ms. Zubsida Rasul-Ronning. Ms. Zubaida Rasul-Ronning Co-Founder and Vice President Business Development/Strategic Operations, GreenGrow Ventures Inc. She spoke about key considerations about agriculture and technology in Africa. She informed us about the increase of price for fertilizer and how this impacts soil negatively as there is little regulation. Due to fluctuating and lower prices for produce, there is an inability to scale to market needs. The new technologies permit an increased supply of food locally in countries but there is also increased competition.

Today's world devalues agriculture as an economic activity. Genetic modifications versus conservation and tradition involves the choices between chemical or organic fertilizers. The difficulty is in meeting import codes and the requirements to bridge the gaps. There are no norms or regulations for fertilizers and what is the impact on soil.

The social changes and challenge is that men and youth are leaving rural areas for urbanization. This leaves women more responsible for food production and raises the questions of land ownership and security. Governments are decreasing their roles and there is a non-response from the private sector. Today's agriculture is influenced by unpredictable weather and climate change

Mr. Ben Flanner CEO/Co-Founder and Head Farmer of the Brooklyn Grange Rooftop Farm, New York City, presented on the farms within New York City. Brooklyn Grange's farms include two rooftop vegetable farms, totaling 2.5 acres and producing over 50,000 lbs. of organically-grown vegetables each year. They also operate New York City's largest apiary, with over 30 naturally-managed honey bee hives.

Brooklyn Grange is New York's leading urban farm education center, and has trained hundreds of young farmers since we opened in 2010. We are committed to sharing our knowledge with others, and to preparing the next generation of urban farmers for success by teaching important skills through a hands-on education program.

In collaboration with the Queens-based Refugee and Immigrant Fund (RIF), Brooklyn Grange has trained several refugees from Africa, Asia and Central America/Mexico, who bring with them cultural and agricultural traditions that enhance farming practices and community at the farm. The refugees obtain work experience and build their resumes, while engaging in therapeutic horticultural activities that allow them to escape the hustle and bustle of New York, their new home city.

Mr. Flanner also told that youth education is highly valued at Brooklyn Grange, and for that reason they supported the founding of City Growers, a non-profit education program based on the rooftop farms. Since its founding in 2011, City Growers has brought over 10,000 children and young adults to the farms for educational excursions and workshops where they learn about earth science, nutrition, and environmental sustainability.

At the top of E. 43<sup>rd</sup> Street is a set of steps connecting Ralph Bunche Park and First Avenue. The Sharansky Steps are named after Natan Sharansky, an Israeli politician and human rights activist who spent more than a decade imprisoned in his native Soviet Union for his involvement in the "refusenik" movement. I remember writing letters on his behalf when he was an Amnesty prisoner of conscience. I have also been reading for the past couple of months **When They Come for us, We'll Be Gone: the epic story to save Soviet Jewry** by Gal Beckerman. The book tells his story in detail in the chapter called "Pawns Again."

The engraved inscription is on what is known as the Isaiah Wall, in Ralph Bunche Park a popular gathering spot for demonstrators across the street from the General Assembly Building. The words now chiseled into the granite are a quotation from Isaiah 2: 4- the

best-known section probably being the admonition "They shall beat their swords into plowshares. And their spears into pruning hooks..."

On Saturday afternoon, I am joining Mary Margaret to go to Merton Society Corpus Christi Chapter of the International Thomas Merton Society. "Bearing Witness: Thomas Merton, Contemplation and Action" celebrating Thomas Merton's 100th birthday. Christopher Pramuk will be the keynote speaker while Lawrence Cunningham, David Golemboski, and Angela O'Donnell will be panelists: "Between Music and Silence: Merton and the Future of Faith".