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Some Thoughts on Teaching a Course on the Holocaust

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Some Thoughts on Teaching a Course on the Holocaust

We didn't plan to found a course on the Holocaust, we really didn't. A committee was formed in 1985 to organize an interdisciplinary course in the social sciences for the newly revised "gen ed" program. Members of the committee soon agreed that we needed a good case study to focus on and it now seems inevitable, in retrospect, that the case study would be the Holocaust — the destruction of the European Jews and other specific groups during World War II. What didn't seem so obvious initially, although it soon became so, was that the Holocaust would become the complete course. Since I was the designated leader of the course, I felt a deep reluctance — a feeling that doesn't ever disappear — to deal with an event so utterly horrible.

Despite the horror, there is probably a kernel of truth in Conrad's reference to the "fascination of the abomination." Some of us do seem to be curious about the worst crimes that humans will commit. Inevitably, most everyone asks the same question: but how could anyone become involved in the mass murder of old people, children, even babies? One cannot go very far to answer the question unless one is willing to explore the utter depths to which humans are able to descend.

An excursion into the best of the social science literature which bears on this subject does begin to answer questions about this abomination. Some are surprised, I think, to find that they don't unlock huge doors and stare at monsters easily identifiable as such. Instead, they confront people much like you and me. Circumstances certainly vary: the Germans had suffered a humiliating defeat (in their own eyes) and had experienced a runaway inflation with the attendant fear and mental suffering that goes with rapid social change.

In such an unsettling environment, people do listen to the politicians who identify the culprits guilty for these problems and indicate in no uncertain terms who can make things right. But the process of change still takes time. There are excellent studies which focus on the everyday life in certain German towns and detail the economic and political struggles as they unfolded. There was intimidation by Nazi thugs to be sure. But what most Germans experienced was far more commonplace and recognizable.
to us. Like ourselves, most Germans were apolitical and deeply concerned whether they would remain employed and what the price of eggs and potatoes would be at the market.

These people did not clamor for a saviour to bring miraculous solutions to their problems. But when Hitler and his cronies organized their talks and rallies, they found more than a few persons sufficiently upset with their economic and political lives to listen. There are excellent studies which connect the collective fears and needs of these German people with the symbols and words expressed by Hitler. With his intuitive genius in such matters, Hitler spoke in a language his audience could understand.

Inevitably, there was the theme of the Jew. Nazi Germany was not possible without Hitler, and Hitler’s success depended on a deep anti-Semitism. Statistics can be found that point to considerable integration of Jews into Germanic society, but probing beneath the surface reveals a longstanding hatred and contempt for the Jew. When Hitler declared the Jew as *untermenschen*, he was playing an old song the Germans knew by heart, for long ago Martin Luther had referred to the Jews as both “rejected and condemned.” He urged Christians “to set fire to their schools and synagogues, to forbid rabbis to teach on pain of loss of life and limb, and to abolish completely safe conduct on the highways for the Jews.” Small wonder that Julius Streicher, a Hitler propagandist, would cite Luther in his defense at the Nuremberg trials. Historians and other scholars have done much to inform us of this stain on the German psyche and how significant it was in the ultimate destruction of European Jews. Once the Jew was generally defined as subhuman, his destruction was much easier to execute.

Even so, the process of elimination was incremental, not sudden. One of the most difficult and subtle of the lessons about the Holocaust concerns the limited perspective of humans, even when evil is under consideration. The road to hell is paved one step at a time.

Even Hitler himself, in *Mein Kampf*, where he was free of constraints and indulged in 700 pages of blathering, thinks small. In the one passage where he is specific, Hitler writes: “If at the beginning of the War and during the War twelve or fifteen thousand of these Hebrew corrupters of the people had been under poison gas, as happened to hundreds and thousands of our very best German workers in the field, the sacrifice of millions at the front would not have been in vain.” Hitler may have been thinking small in terms of numbers, but he is ghoulishly prophetic.

Nevertheless, if one follows Nazi policy from 1933 when Hitler came to power, to the establishment of the killing centers in Poland in 1941-42, one is struck by the way the Nazis, against the Jew, used extermination which made survival tougher. The extermination which the Nazis was to use against the Jews chose to do so what compulsion and compulsion, in the first place.

What I am trying to say is this: if you know the policy in small — and it is not the policy to drive into the War II gave time, and indeed, the extermination of Eastern Europe.

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The Nazis, their perpetrators, and their victims and perpetrators, considered inefficient, and the people, the gassing of “wage earning” and the people, to the crematoria.

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way the Nazis looked over their shoulders as they increased the severity of their policies against the Jews. They seemed to be potentially responsive to any major negative reaction which might arise. Relatively little criticism was heard and the policies became tougher. The evidence leads many observers to the conclusion that the goal of the Nazis was to force the Jews to leave Germany permanently. To Nazi surprise, most Jews chose to remain in this oppressive climate. The Jews of Europe were used to oppression and while the Nazis were viewed by Jews as the most despicable men possible, in the first few years under Hitler, no one foresaw Auschwitz.

What I am saying, in other words, is that humans, even Nazi humans, usually develop policy in small stages as they go along. The Jews were manipulated for political advantage — pointed out as the polluters and destroyers of Aryan blood. Then the Nazis sought to drive the Jews away. Unsuccessful at this, the Nazis then realized that World War II gave them “the cover” to carry out the destruction of European Jews. Even then, the extermination would take place away from Germany, in remote battle zones of Eastern Europe.

The killing process itself evolved incrementally. The first Nazi killing squads lined up their victims before shooting them in the back of the head. They soon realized that there were two serious limitations with this method: 1) it was very slow for dealing with thousands and thousands of people; 2) it posed serious stress problems to the Nazi killers: they were having nightmares and experiencing other symptoms of severe stress.

The Nazis then devised methods which placed greater distance between the perpetrators and their victims. First, they developed a van which would hold 40-50 victims and piped carbon monoxide into the rear area. Again, the method was considered inefficient, and there was the ghastly task of disposing of the bodies. It was only after such failures that the Nazis hit upon their ultimate process of destruction: the gassing centers where the victims were tricked into taking showers for “delousing” and then locked in only to be subjected to prussic acid before being sent on to the crematoria.

Even here the Nazis realized that it was beyond most of their men to do what had to be done in these death factories. They discussed a solution: the prisoners themselves would do the “dirty work.” These so-called Sonderkommandos performed the most grizzly tasks in the desperate hope that this might enable them to survive. Because they were eyewitnesses to the Holocaust, the Sonderkommandos were normally killed within four weeks. One of these special prisoners, however, managed to survive Auschwitz and has written one of the most gruesome of all Holocaust books.
Even in these death camps, social relations similar to those in normal prisons quickly developed: SS officers and guards considered the prisoners as vermin and other lowly forms of life. Lower life deserves the brutality it receives: this excuses the SS from any painful soul-searching. The prisoners typically regarded themselves as subhuman — getting what they deserve. A relatively stable environment results when such perceptions are in command.

Death camp prisoners wore colored triangles on their striped uniforms to designate the specific status the Nazis assigned to them. Homosexuals wore pink triangles, those who had committed political offenses wore red triangles, habitual criminals wore green, vagrants wore black, etc. Thus a very clever competitive social system was devised: those with red triangles were respected by some for bravely holding convictions — but were hated by most for their despised socialist or communist affiliation. The wearers of the green triangles normally ran the inside of the camps. The Nazis correctly understood that habitual criminals were most like themselves, most likely to be brutal, cunning and utterly cynical. Prisoner leaders were termed “Kapos” and normally came from the ranks of the habitual criminals. These men were often the equal of the most vicious Nazi guards and were rewarded with extra food and other favors for helping to keep order.

Anyone with detailed knowledge of the Nazi death camp knows full well just how bland my description of these regions of hell really is. The Levis and Wiesels were there and only they can properly describe the conditions, but whether your knowledge of these places is limited or rather rich, you may still want to repeat the earlier question: but how could anyone witness and participate in mass murder, mass starvation, mass despair? After all, the Nazis weren't in trenches shooting at an enemy. Instead, they lived in comfortable quarters, ate well, and “knew” what was happening to the trainloads of people dumped regularly inside the barbed wire fences. Of course they knew — and most of them managed to live a routine life with this knowledge. HOW?

In the documentary movie Shoah, there is an interview with Henrik Gawkowski, who drove the locomotive up the railroad spur at Treblinka to deliver boxcars of Jews to their destruction. He says that his job was very distressing to him but that it was made possible by drinking large amounts of vodka. "Without drinking, [I] couldn't have done it," he said. Indeed, accounts of heavy drinking by Nazi guards and other death camp personnel were commonplace.

But there are processes far more subtle and important involved. They are much more important because they are unconscious processes which grind on outside of human awareness and control. There are stories out of the Holocaust that underline the phenomenon at Auschwitz which I mentioned. They talked about things being turned a certain way. The stories of Oyvind Steiner, a sociologist who spent more than 300 forms in a camp, his official response to what he saw is what was happening, a response that was managed to sustain.

For those of us who have relatives and cannot admit it? Equally, many others conspire because Burns are still burning.

Much more was required of concentration, or the trainloads of people were not to be killed. Even those who were "duped" in the end, or who had been living such a routine existence that they hid from themselves what was happening, none of them were to be considered as something else. For them as for those of their victims...
the phenomenal human capacity for denial. One involves two Dutch survivors of Auschwitz who returned to the Netherlands to describe the horror they had witnessed. They talked with friends, clergy, and others who should have known, but they were turned away by everyone because such things ‘just didn’t take place.’ There are stories of Gypsies living within sight of Auschwitz denying its very existence. John Steiner, a social psychologist and survivor of Nazi death camps, has interviewed more than 300 former SS members from all ranks. He reports that in one case, a Gestapo official responsible for deporting Jews from Frankfurt/Main did not know until 1945 what was happening. Steiner also found several highly placed SS officers who somehow managed to shield themselves from the ultimate fate of the Jews.

For those of you who find this hard to swallow, think of family members, close relatives and friends. How many drink too much, are abusive or liars, but cannot admit it? Equally important, how about those close to them who share in the conspiracy because it is equally painful to them to admit the truth? The words of Robert Burns are still true: we cannot see ourselves as others see us.

Much more could be said at this point that is relevant: the role played by repression, or the training of the SS. Members of military organizations, after all, are trained to kill. Even Nazi doctors, as Robert Lifton has reminded us, could be trained or “duped” into killing humans in order to save a culture. The main point of this long section is the effort to convey the reality of the everyday life of the participants in what Bettelheim calls “vile mass murder.” It certainly was that, but it was experienced as something quite different for most of the perpetrators of this terrible monstrosity. For them as for any of us, life is basically a problem of coping. Nazi guards, some of their victims — even bystanders — became adept at knowing how to survive.

II

Any serious journey into the Holocaust literature will cause one to ponder the wisdom of teaching a course on the subject. Some contend that only those who experienced this ghastly ordeal have any right to comment on it. As I read the diaries of survivors and occasionally converse with them, I am painfully aware of the depth of the suffering which can never be understood or felt by others. One of these victims, David Mandel, survived Auschwitz and is somehow able to discuss his experiences with our students. But more than 40 years later, he breaks down and cries as he describes watching his 6 year old sister and his mother go up the “wrong” ramp to their certain death. How utterly beyond our experience this is! A little girl and her mother condemned to death because they belonged to the “wrong race.” I can “understand” this
intellectually (I think), but I cannot feel what he feels. Perhaps I don’t really understand it, either.

And there are those who object to courses and other discourse on the Holocaust on the grounds that there is no language adequate to describe and analyze the subject. One should respectfully remain silent. Any sound is obscene. Theodore Adorno has written that “After Auschwitz, to write a poem is barbaric...the unimaginable ordeal still appears as if it had some ulterior purpose. It is transfigured and stripped of some of its horror, and with this, injustice is already done to the victims.” The Yiddish poet, Aaron Tsyshkin, writes: “The Almighty Himself would be powerless to open his well of tears. He would maintain a deep silence. For even an outcry is now a lie, even tears are mere literature, even prayers are false.”

III

I would honor such admonitions if I had concluded, as some have, that Hitler and those around him were demented beasts to the very core of their being. If I thought this were the case, I would gladly remain silent. While Hitler remains for me a special case of psychopathic perversity, Nazi Germany would have been impossible if ordinary people hadn’t been easily recruited into the forces of frenzy and murder.

As an educator and student of human behavior, I believe there are important lessons to be learned from the Holocaust which should be shared with our students. However, I don’t think that learning these lessons will necessarily prevent such an event from happening again because the experience of humans is almost never the same as its reconstruction makes it out to be. As ever, hindsight is thought to be 20-20. We experience life in immediate terms; the larger and longer view can only come retrospectively, always subject, of course, to reinterpretation. Furthermore, one of its terrible lessons is that humans can so easily be led to believe anything. I must agree with Loren Eiseley that man “has the capacity to veer with every wind, or, stubbornly, to insert himself into some fantastically elaborated and irrational social institution only to perish with it.” But one must still hope that some students, at least, will be seriously affected by studying and thinking about the Holocaust. I am reminded of the German students in Munich who dared to oppose Hitler and were beheaded for doing so. Brave, yes, but too little and much too late.

At the risk of offending my Jewish friends and colleagues, I submit that we have had Holocausts other than the one attributed to Hitler and the Nazis. I am here using the term as interchangeable with genocide. Hitler’s attempt to destroy the European Jews has its counterparts if we define both terms as the attempt by a nation
or other political group to destroy a nation, culture, ethnic or racial group. Experts argue, of course, over the application of the terms to actual events such as those described below. In any case, some insist the term Holocaust be used only for the catastrophe in Europe between 1933-45.

In 1915, the Turks killed or banished two-thirds of the “cankerous” Armenians then living in the Ottoman Empire. During the rule of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, perhaps two million in a population of seven million were killed by massacre, disease or starvation. The genocidal death toll in Bangladesh in 1971 may have reached three million. As I write this, the Bahai’i are being exterminated in Iran; the Guatemalans continue to kill the remaining native Indians. The murders committed by Stalin perhaps exceed all others. Millions were killed in 1932-33 in the man-made famine. Four to five million political opponents were murdered between 1936-39. At Vorkuta, the Stalinists beat Hitler to the punch; there, gas chambers similar to those at Auschwitz had been in operation since 1938. It is perhaps comforting to point to Hitler and the Nazis as the “mad dogs” of history, but it is terribly incorrect. The fame of the Nazis is due in no small part to the fact that it is the most documented crime in history. But they aren’t unique. All — or most all of us — are potential Nazis.

The Holocaust and some other instances of mass murder are primarily racial wars. One of the central goals of our course is to heighten student awareness of the terrible costs of racism. American Indians, Blacks, Hispanics, and Asians are primary victims of racism in this country, but we all pay certain costs. In our course we discuss the similarity in the mind-set most Germans held toward the Jew with the attitude most white Americans hold toward the American Negro. In both instances, one group held the other to be less than human. The Holocaust of European Jews is inconceivable without this deep and abiding “racism.”

Another course objective is to make the student more aware of the abuse of language. As ruthless and cynical as the Nazi leaders may have been, they couldn't admit even to themselves that they were engaged in the murder of the mentally and physically disabled, Jews, homosexuals and others. They referred to the killing of retarded and disabled Germans as “Euthanasia;” Jewish murder was described as “The Jewish question,” or more frequently and euphemistically as the “Final Solution.” I have wondered how many Nazi bureaucrats would have continued to function if the motto: “Engaged in Mass Murder” were prominently displayed on their desk. Nazi self-deception or grim humor even extended to the entrance of Auschwitz where the motto Arbeit macht frei (Work is Freedom) was prominently displayed. If some of the people I am in regular contact with were running Auschwitz, I’m convinced they would greet every
prisoner with "Have a nice day."

Students are asked to comment on recent American examples, such as calling people "gooks," and using such terms as "preemptive attack" and "surgical strikes" for ordinary bombing missions. What difference does it make when we use ambiguous, flabby terminology to describe killing — even in time of war?

Modern science and modern technology are double-edged swords, at best. With modern science came the "disenchantment of the world" — to use Richard Rubenstein's term — wherein religious or mysterious forces completely lose their power to proscribe or limit human behavior. Humans are then free to master the world by their own scientific calculations. Hitler himself knew of few limits. Raised as a Catholic, he made it clear that his goal was to rid Europe of all traditional religions, and replace them with this state religion, an idea dissected so brilliantly by Orwell in 1984.

The technology unleashed by modern science has brought to the twentieth century newer and more efficient methods to the desire to rid nations and continents of unwanted peoples. Many of our students major in health related fields and take courses in various branches of science. Of all the questions raised by the Holocaust, none is greater than the one which asks whether science has really contributed to the improvement of civilization. Any student can enumerate the dozens and dozens of obvious benefits of modern science. But how many have ever thought about the consequences of a "value free" modern science? What part has ethics and discussions of moral responsibility played in the training of our scientists? To even ask such a question borders on the ludicrous, despite some signs of concern for the matter here and there.

The Holocaust course syllabus contains the following: On the first day in the new school year all the teachers in one private school received the following note from the principal:

Dear Teachers,

I am a survivor of a concentration camp. My eyes saw what no human should witness:

Gas chambers built by learned engineers.
Children poisoned by educated physicians.
Infants killed by trained nurses.
Women and babies shot and burned by high school and college graduates.

So, I am suspicious of education.

My request is that teachers help students become human. Your efforts must never produce learned monsters, skilled psychopaths, educated Eichmanns. Reading, writing, arithmetic are important only if they serve to make our children more humane.
A professor who teaches a Holocaust course at Harvard complains bitterly that his students hold to a “no fault, guilt free” historical view of the event. In their term papers, his students generally hold the Germans blameless on ground that, after all, they did suffer great damage during WWI and then experienced terrible inflation. “One might say,” he writes, “the virtues of responsible choice, paying the penalty, taking the consequences all appear at low ebb today.” He writes that if he ever teaches the course again, he will emphasize more that “single acts of individuals and strong stands at institutions at an early date do make a difference in the long run.”

It is on this point that I hope our Holocaust course at Grand Valley makes its greatest contribution. We are fortunate to have people in this area who did make a difference and are willing to talk about it. I turn a week of the course over to Jean and Peter Termaat who, as a young married couple in the Netherlands, chose to hide Jews from certain destruction. On the last day of their visit, Mandy Evans also visits the class. She is alive today only because people like the Termaats hid her from the Gestapo. She laughs when a friend reminds her that ‘she should have been dead forty five years ago’ — dead when she was a young Jewish girl in the Netherlands. Members of the class and I will never forget the day last fall when she first met the Termaats. With tears in her eyes, she gave simple and ever so eloquent thanks to those who had the wisdom to know what to do — and the courage to do it. If our students will carry that moment with them throughout their lives, I don't care if they forget everything else.