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THE SOCIAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL INFLUENCE OF THE HOLOCAUST

The Holocaust was the state-sponsored murder of an entire ethnic group, the Jews, as well as the persecution of other undesirable groups such as the Gypsies, mentally and physically challenged individuals, Polish intelligentsia, political dissidents, Jehovah's Witnesses, Gays and Russian POWs. This paper will address the social and psychological influence of the Holocaust on the different groups of survivors, on the perpetrator nation, and on American society in relation to other genocides in the world.

Just a few years ago, nearly sixty years after liberation, Jewish Holocaust survivor Mira Kyczke Kimmelman from Oak Ridge, Tennessee, wrote, "Liberation was not the end. What followed afterward was a different kind of suffering, a constant reminder of the horrors of the past. The effects are still with me, although more than half a century has passed since the moment of my rebirth." (1) These words echo the sentiments of many who managed to reconnect and start over after twelve years of psychological, social, economic, political, and religious persecution. And the key here is that they were able to pick up and go on. That was not true of all survivors.

Survivors

What was the condition of camp survivors in 1945? Victor Frankl, renowned psychotherapist and Auschwitz survivor, summed it up as follows: "Those who know how close the connection is between the state of mind of a person – their courage or hope, or lack of them – and the state of immunity of their body, will understand that the

sudden loss of hope and courage can have a deadly effect." (96-97) After months and even years of incarceration, psychological and physical mistreatment, overwork, medical experimentation and malnutrition, camp inmates of all groups clung to one glimmer of hope – liberation. We seldom talk about the desperate mental state of the victims, and how many went mad at some point during their ordeal. We do know of the terrible physical condition many were in, barely more than skin and bones, some of them in a state of the "walking dead," or muselmen. Assuming that they saw the day of liberation in their emaciated condition, were they able to rally their spirit to even realize what liberation meant? Dr. Frankl recalls his own liberation. "With tired steps we prisoners dragged ourselves to the camp gates. Timidly we looked around and glanced at each other questioningly.… 'Freedom' – we repeated to ourselves, and yet we could not grasp it. We had said this word so often during all the years we dreamed about it, that it had lost its meaning. Its reality did not penetrate into our consciousness; we could not grasp the fact that freedom was ours. We came to meadows full of flowers. We saw and realized that they were there, but we had no feelings about them….In the evening when we all met again in our hut, one said secretly to the other, 'Tell me, were you pleased today?' And the other replied…'Truthfully, no!' We had literally lost the ability to feel pleased and had to relearn it slowly." (109-110) Reviving dead feelings was one challenge for Holocaust survivors. However, with the renewed ability to feel came new dangers. Survivors desperately clung to the hope that loved ones had also survived – parents, spouses, children, siblings, other relatives and friends. Displaced persons camps such as Bergen-Belsen in Germany which were often established on the site of previous concentration camps posted lists of survivors in their camps and lists of survivors in other

camps. Survivors secretly left camps and traveled to those other camps or even to their hometowns to see if they could locate family members. All too often their trips were in vain, as they confirmed the terrible reality that their loved ones were dead. When this hope was taken from them, the immensity of the trauma often overtook them; many suffered from what is known as survivors' guilt. Being faced with a future bereft of their loved ones, some could no longer go on with life and they succumbed to a temptation that they had staved off during their incarceration and they committed suicide. The suicide of survivors was not only an immediate post-Holocaust phenomenon, but a danger that follows survivors as long as they live. Life threatens to become meaningless at any moment. One such example is Pola Nirenska, wife of Polish diplomatic courier Jan Karski, who committed suicide in 2000. Her family had perished in the Holocaust. (http://www.ansers.com/topic/jan-karski, 3)

The other immediate danger for Holocaust survivors was physical. Having their intestines shrunk by malnutrition, many did not realize that well-meaning Allied army rations were entirely too rich for their fragile constitution. When they ingested chocolate, fatty meats, and other rich foods, they immediately died. Others were so emaciated and hanging on to life by a bare thread, so that any kind of medical help came too late. It would be a matter of hours or days or sometimes weeks, but they could not be saved. Surviving was therefore not without immediate psychological and physical dangers for Holocaust victims.

Socially, the end of World War II posed a great challenge to military peacekeepers. There were about seven million displaced persons, ranging from refugees to prisoners of war to camp survivors. All but the Jewish Holocaust survivors were

quickly repatriated, because most wanted to and could go home. But Jews had no place to go, they were stateless, and the communities they used to call home did not want them back. Nor did most have a desire to return to neighbors who had betrayed them. The most horrible experiences were suffered by some Polish survivors such as Yaffa Eliach and her family, who returned to their hometown, only to be attacked by their neighbors, resulting in many casualties. What to do with people who cannot be repatriated? It was a challenge for the world community. In 1945 the United States passed the Truman Directive, allowing some survivors to come to the United States. Especially important was that as a result of the Truman Directive, survivors could be sponsored by organizations as well as individuals, a huge step forward in the process of helping these unfortunate individuals. But it was a drop in the bucket. The United States also took in 10,000 orphans of varying backgrounds. In 1946 Great Britain and the United States convened a commission – the Anglo-American Commission of Inquiry – to examine the possibility of lifting the restrictions on Jewish immigration into Palestine for the benefit of Jewish survivors. No positive results were achieved. Only Truman's Displaced Persons Act of 1948 opened the doors to the remaining survivors, but by this time Jewish survivors had another option as well. The creation of the state of Israel in 1948 opened the floodgates of the Jewish homeland to Jewish survivors. Many survivors surged to the newly created Jewish state to participate in its upbuilding. However, many were not in any physical or psychological condition to participate in another war, and many were killed during the fighting in the War of Independence or succumbed to their weakened condition.

Is it possible to lead a normal life after an experience such as the Holocaust? One need only listen to the Second Generation, children of survivors, to know that growing up in a home of survivors was difficult. Parents suffered from physical and mental problems, their sleep disturbed by horrible nightmares, their days consumed with being overprotective of their offspring. Socially, they mostly associated with other survivors, because they shared a common bond and understood each others' pain. Although the parents often spoke in a language the children weren't supposed to understand, such as Yiddish or Polish, they had a sense of the terrible experiences their families had been through. Some survivors were never able to speak of their camp life to their family, while others gradually began to share also with non-Jews what had happened to them. Even in the United States, some Jews did not want anything to do with survivors, whether it was from guilt for not having done more when they should have, or from embarrassment. One sure source of embarrassment was the tattoo on survivors' arms. My friend Mira Kimmelman was taken in by family in Cincinnati, Ohio. When she started a job, her employer told her to cover her concentration camp number with a bandage, otherwise people would think she was a criminal. Social ostracism after the Holocaust was a hurt survivors did not expect. Yet it happened, and it pained and disappointed them all the more.

Holocaust survivors from groups other than Jews suffered from the same post-traumatic stress disorders as Jewish camp survivors, yet their social experience differed according to group. The most vilified group, at times more than the Jews, were the Gypsies, or as they are called since the Holocaust, Sinti and Roma. There are only about five million Gypsies in the entire world, a number of different tribes live throughout

Europe, the Middle East, and the Americas. The Nazis despised them as much as the Jews, but while they had passed parallel laws for Gypsy persecution that were based on the discriminatory legislation for Jews, they did not follow through with the Gypsies, because not every area commandant felt the same sense of urgency about the Gypsy problem. About half a million Gypsies perished in the Holocaust, and those who survived tell terrible tales of woe. Most Gypsies underwent horrific medical experiments that left them with lasting psychological and physical damage. Most horrible were the radiation experiments on their genitals and reproductive organs, because the ability to have children is extremely important to the Sinti and Roma. As the Gypsies do not claim a homeland, but adhere to a tribal structure, they resumed their respective ways of life in 1945 as best as they could.

A program that actually caused outrage among the German population was the Euthanasia program which targeted psychologically challenged individuals in mental institutions and those suffering from mental disorders as well as those with physical challenges such as blindness, loss of limbs, or other disabilities. The campaign was officially waged from 1939-41, but unofficially it continued throughout the Second World War. Many of these individuals were German Christians, yet few survived the Nazi effort to murder them. I am not aware of any survivors from this group. Oftentimes, where there is a monument to the Jewish victims of the Shoah in a particular town, there is no sign of commemoration for Euthanasia victims.

Political dissidents were arrested and incarcerated in concentration camps as early as 1934 in Dachau, for the Berlin Olympics in Sachsenhausen in 1936, throughout Germany during and after Kristallnacht in 1938, as well as later. In 1939, when Germany

invaded Poland, three million Polish citizens, mostly their political leaders and intelligentsia, perished at the hands of the Nazis. Following World War II they saw themselves as victims of Nazi persecution just as Jewish survivors did. Some Poles, like Jan Karsky, a diplomatic courier, entered ghettos and concentration camps and reported on the Nazi atrocities to the Polish government-in-exile, and the Allied governments of France, Great Britain, and the United States.

Three million Russian POWs perished at the hands of the Nazis because of neglect and exposure to the elements after they were captured. Those who survived this ordeal experienced abuse and disdain when they returned to the Soviet Union, because their countrymen saw it as shameful that they had allowed the Germans to capture them in the first place. Only after the fall of the Soviet Union were they able to tell their stories of German imprisonment and to reap the respect they deserved.

Although the Nazis were against all religion, they were not quite ready to take on Christianity, the state religion. That would have to wait until the war was won. However, they did single out one group, Jehovah's Witnesses, because they did not swear allegiance to worldly leaders such as Adolf Hitler. A number of the 20,000 Germans who belonged to this religious group were arrested and sent to concentration camps for reeducation. This did, however, not have any great effect on the individuals or the group, as they were strong in their faith, small enough in number so they could support each other, and when they returned after the war, they reintegrated themselves into their families and German society. There are some testimonies of their ordeal available.

Gays who were arrested and interned in concentration camps suffered a tremendous loss; ninety percent of those incarcerated did not survive. This high death

rate had several reasons. Already before World War II in Germany, being a Homosexual was a punishable offense, thus the social ostracism occurred already before Hitler came to power. The Nazi period intensified the persecution. When a Gay man was interned, he took abuse from inmates and guards alike, and fellow Gays feared for their own lives, so they did not openly support other Gays. Few returned from the camps and few have spoken or written about their experiences. Their reintegration into German society was difficult. The pink triangle which they were forced to wear while incarcerated became the official symbol of the Gay Rights Movement in the United States. Only recently is there a Gay Pride movement in Germany, with a huge annual parade in Berlin.

Perpetrators

The Holocaust, or Shoah, as it is called in Hebrew, was not a topic for discussion in Germany until the 1970s. An occasional neighborhood Holocaust memorial appeared in the 1960s, but most public monuments were only erected in the 1980s. Germany did not have a national Holocaust memorial until last year when American architect Peter Eisenman's memorial, consisting of a sea of 2,711 pillars in Berlin, was completed (slide 1). The discussion in the Bundestag of whether even to have a national memorial took a decade. It took several more years of heated debate to find a suitable design and execute it. Starting in the 1970s, the Holocaust was being taught in some schools. In the '80s and '90s, some cities and towns invited survivors to return for an all-expense-paid visit. Many survivors accepted, some repeatedly, and a number of them spoke to classes of school children about their experiences. This was an extremely important link in the healing process for survivors. Having been forced to leave their hometowns, they often had a strong emotional attachment, and were only too glad to reestablish the connection.

It was likewise important to the perpetrators, some of whom had been holding on to personal items for forty or fifty years that they wanted to return to the victims in person.

As early as 1953, Germany entered into an agreement with Israel to pay the state of Israel for the slave labor and persecution of Jews during the Holocaust, and to compensate for Jewish property that was stolen by the Nazis. Israel was established as the heir to those victims who had no surviving family. Over the next fourteen years, West Germany paid Israel three billion Deutsche Marks in reparations. Many Germans have visited Israel over the years, especially young Germans, who often seek answers to questions that have no answers at home. Aktion Suehnezeichen (Action Reconciliation), an organization that aims to build bridges between Germans and Jews, sends young Germans to Israel, the United States and other places to live in Jewish communities and work with Holocaust survivors, either on an individual basis or through Holocaust organizations. They work for a year on an Israeli kibbutz caring for elderly survivors or work with survivors who participate in the programming of various Holocaust Centers in American cities such as Pittsburgh, Pennyslvania. German Church groups have taken it upon themselves to visit Israel and to make contact with *kibbutzim* like the Ghetto Fighters Kibbutz (Lochamei Ha-Geta'ot) and *moshavot* like Shavei Zion near Naharia, established by 35 Jewish emigrants from Rexingen, Germany in 1938. Some German visitors to Israel also visit Yad Vashem (slide 2), the Holocaust Museum and Education complex in Jerusalem. Germans empathize with the Palestinians as the underdog, and are harsh critics of Israeli policies against the Palestinians. In light of this, one occasionally hears the sentiment that Germans have paid for the sins of the past and should be allowed to forget and move on.

All of the major concentration camps like Dachau, Sachsenhausen, Bergen-Belsen, Ravensbrueck and Buchenwald have been turned into memorial sites and education centers, and some German school classes take field trips there. It is clear that the memorials are for Germans, as there is hardly ever any literature in English. Berlin now also has a very interesting Jewish Museum (slides 3 and 4), designed by Polish-born American architect Daniel Liebeskind whose architecture made headlines long before the project was completed. Jewish cemeteries belong to the *Israelitische Kultusgemeinde*, but are often kept up by local German volunteers, some of whom carry out their work with great dedication.

Even before there was an increase in Jews in Germany, there was an explosion of Yiddishkeit among Germans. Young Germans learn Yiddish, form Klezmer groups, sing Yiddish songs. It is amazing to see the play "Fiddler on the Roof" performed by Germans for Germans, with audience participation.

Immediately after the end of World War II (1947), a Jewish community was again reconstituted in Berlin. Led by a Greek Holocaust survivor, Cantor Estrongo Nechama, they were, for a long time, a lone voice in the wilderness. Until the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1990, there were just a few thousand Jews living in a handful of Jewish communities in Germany, some of them Holocaust survivors and some Israelis and Jews from other places who were working in Germany. With the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Germany invited Russian Jews and Jews from the Baltic states to come to Germany in an effort to replenish Germany's Jewish population. The incentives of citizenship and financial support proved very alluring, and today Germany has several Jewish communities totaling approximately 100,000 Jews.

Although there are some strong Neo-Nazi groups and a good number of sympathizers, especially in what used to be East Germany, Germans have developed a great sense of responsibility for doing the right thing. Article One of the German Constitution declares that the dignity and freedom of the human being is inviolate. Hence, any Nazi symbols are prohibited, as is Nazi literature. Germany supports zero tolerance for anti-Semitism, and their reaction to someone who offends against Jewish sentiments is strong and the action/punishment severe. Likewise, Germany has an asylum law, so that many individuals from oppressed nations in Central Europe and Africa have found and find refuge in Germany. Three million Muslims live among Germany's population of more than 82 million, all second and third generation children being German citizens.

When one considers the social and psychological influence of the Holocaust on the perpetrator nation, one sees a determination to make amends, but within reason; a dedication to the Jewish culture including Yiddish, often in the absence of any Jews; and a willingness to integrate Jews who wish to live in Germany into German society. Living with the knowledge of their parents' and grandparents' complicity in the Holocaust was difficult for the German second generation, and when one looks at individual families of a given town, one finds perhaps a higher number of suicides than would otherwise have been the case. Many older Germans today who were still affected by their Nazi past either want to come clean as they get closer to death and disclose their involvement or, as in the case of the German writer Guenter Grass who joined the SS, they are found out and have to integrate this new information into their identity. One thing is for sure, the Germany of today has little in common with the Germany of 1945. The population is as

multi-cultural as that of other countries such as the United States or Israel, and this mix of cultures helps to reshape the character of the German nation.

The United States

A poem on the base of the Statue of Liberty in New York's harbor (slide 5), written by a Russian-born Jewish immigrant in the 19th century, Emma Lazarus, called "The New Colossus," beckons, "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore, send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!" A beautiful sentiment, to be sure, and true for many an emigrant, but the United States has not always practiced what we preach for our citizens. Slavery continued officially until 1865, and unofficially well into the twentieth century, Native Americans were driven off their land and sent to inhospitable parts of the continent and settled on reservations. For foreigners who wanted to emigrate to the United States, the immigration laws of 1924 sharply curtailed the number who could enter the country, giving preference to cultured Westerners over those from other parts of the world. This also affected Jews who were in dire need of a refuge before and after World War II. Since the presidency of Jimmy Carter in 1978, the United States has made a firm commitment to keep the Holocaust in the forefront of the nation's mind as "the benchmark, the defining moment in the drama of good and evil." (http://xroads.virginia.edu/~CAP/holo/IMAGE.HTML, 2) The United States Holocaust Memorial Commission was established under the initial chairmanship of survivor Elie Wiesel. In 1993 the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum was completed (slides 6 and 7). The Commission and the Museum are American bodies, not Jewish organizations and institutions. Thus, they are supported by and belong to all of

the people, no matter their ethnic heritage. This also makes the Museum an important national educational tool for all Americans – while non-Jews learn about the Holocaust, and often for the first time of the involvement of their own group, Jews learn about the other groups who also suffered in the same tragedy. All learn about genocides that have occurred before and after the Holocaust and are unfortunately still occurring, such as Darfur.

Although there is no federally mandated education of the Holocaust in public schools, teachers can choose to teach about the Holocaust in appropriate sections of their classes. Some states such as Tennessee have a Holocaust Commission which is an official body of the state government. Holocaust Commissions are charged with educating the citizens of a given state, such as Tennessee, in matters related to the Holocaust. Oftentimes that means supplying individual teachers in the public schools who wish to teach the Holocaust with resource materials, supporting trips for them and their students to the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. and sometimes support for a trip to concentration camps in Europe. Many Jewish communities have Holocaust Centers which pursue education of the general public about the Holocaust and who provide resources, such as survivors, videos, and books for schools.

Holocaust education is a grass-roots effort. By exposing one individual, the information often is shared by that individual, say a student, with roommates, family and friends, who again share the information with other family and friends. Oftentimes, individuals are deeply affected by the knowledge that Christians like themselves perpetrated these horrible crimes. While they recognize that there is nothing they can do about the Holocaust sixty years after the fact, they are aware that they can help those

unfortunate individuals in the world today who suffer similarly. The empathy aroused by their learning about the Holocaust often translates into direct action for today's victims, such as letter writing to their senator, grass-roots education campaigns, collecting money, food, and clothes, or sometimes even signing up with aid organizations. That letter-writing is useful can be seen by the fact that President Bush just recently approved a greater amount of funds for the victims of Darfur, something that was much overdue.

Conclusion

On the fortieth anniversary of World War II (1985), German President Richard von Weizsaecker declared in a speech, "Anyone who closes his eyes to the past is blind to the present….Whoever refuses to remember the inhumanity is prone to new risks of infection." (470) It does take a village, in Hillary Clinton's words, to educate all of humanity on the horrors of the Holocaust. The Holocaust, though primarily directed towards Jews and thus unique, was a genocide, not the only one occurring in the twentieth century. From the Armenians in 1915 to the unfortunates of Darfur right now, people have been murdered for their ethnicity. One useful document that serves as a guideline to the world community has been the Genocide Convention, passed by the United Nations on December 9, 1948. In Article II we learn that "genocide means any of the…acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic[al – sic!], racial or religious group." (460) Learning about the Holocaust has sensitized human beings to what genocide is, the Genocide Convention allows the United Nations to at least raise a red flag and condemn the aggression when it occurs. As Bosnia and Rwanda have shown, only direct involvement by individual governments with a strong condemnation of the atrocities and the provision of human power and supplies makes a

difference. It is repeatedly pointed out that Adolf Hitler noted that no one remembered the Armenian Genocide or for that matter the suffering of Native Americans in the United States and, hence, no one would remember the horrible actions he and his henchmen planned. As a world community, it is our responsibility to offer support in whatever way possible to a group under attack.

It is also our responsibility to never forget. The remembrance of the terrible events of the Holocaust by the victims and the perpetrators will act as a warning sign today and in the future. Remembering also allows us to celebrate the resiliency of the human spirit. As Viktor Frankl states, "…'saying yes to life in spite of everything'…presupposes that life is potentially meaningful under any conditions, even those which are most miserable. And this in turn presupposes the human capacity to creatively turn life's negative aspects into something positive or constructive." (162) When we look at the lives of survivors among us, it is amazing what productive lives many have lived. They got married, often had children, now with many grand and even great grand children, they became breadwinners for families, useful members of their communities, teachers to their children and the community's children, and often eloquent lecturers on the Holocaust. While their loss is always present, there are also moments when the spirits soars. Is it overcompensation for the impotence during the years of incarceration? Israeli psychologist Shammai Davidson sees it this way. "Many of them [the survivors], through speaking, writing, and other creative activities, are working on their memories centered on their Holocaust experiences." (193) The recovery from their traumatic experiences varies, depending on their personality resources, their predisposition, and their inner plasticity. (193) While a clear memory of events is crucial

for the healing process of the victims, it is also necessary for those of us who have to carry on. Soon there will be few survivors left, we will have to carry on Holocaust education without our one reliable resource, the witnesses. For one more generation we will still be able to say, yes, I heard it with my own ears, I saw the tattoo with my own eyes. Generations after ours will only have our memory, and then what? Let us make sure that the fear of journalist Richard Cohen, voiced in connection with the Armenian Genocide, will not ever come true. After a discouraging meeting with the Turkish ambassador, he reflected, "And so year by year, person by person, the genocide blurs, doubt corrodes it, and the easy word, 'alleged' creeps in to mock the Armenian anguish." Just as it is our responsibility to help prevent future genocides, so is it our responsibility to put educational mechanisms in place that will ensure the teaching of the Holocaust to future generations without eyewitnesses.

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