

Essay by Anna Ornstein

I don't recall any time in my life when I was not aware of anti-Semitism. The village in which I was born and lived the first 15 years of my life in northern Hungary, was an agricultural community; among the about 3,300 peasants lived 40 Jewish families, socially and culturally totally separated from their neighbors. The Jews constituted the middle class; there was a doctor for the whole district that included several communities, a pharmacist, a baker, a tailor, a shoemaker, and several shopkeepers.

There was no high school in this village nor was there a library or a hospital. Those of us who were ambitious to enter high school either had to hire a tutor or our parents had to prepare us for an examination we would take at the end of the school year in the nearby city. By the time I was growing up it would have made no sense to try to get into a college preparatory high school; severe anti-Semitism had closed the doors to all universities to Jewish girls and boys in Hungary. My two brothers, one five years older and the other three years my senior, attended college preparatory high schools in a town 40 km from where we lived. My brothers had a great deal of influence on my intellectual and emotional development. Eventually, I also attended a college preparatory high school for one year.

But anti-Semitism was not new in Hungary in the modern era. Persecution of Jews began in the first millennium soon after King Steven converted the pagan Magyars to Christianity while the Jews refused conversion. They paid dearly for their refusal. From then on, almost every 300 years the history of the Jews in Hungary was punctuated by massacres and expulsions. After a few hundred years, they would be invited back when the country needed to lift the economic conditions of an impoverished nation.

A number of unusually fruitful periods of collaboration also occurred during which the Jews would be lulled to believing in the permanence of the newly won status. These were the years between 1848-1914, the golden years in Hungary during which Jews established financial institutions and made noteworthy contributions to art, literature, medicine and the law.

However, once the monarchy lost WWI in 1918, new problems emerged: the ensuing anarchy brought a bloody communist regime to power. Many of the leaders of this transient regime were Jews. Admiral Horthy's counter-revolution engulfed the Jews as scapegoats. The Horthy regime exploited the ever-present anti-Semitism and the lives of Jews had become more restricted. This coincided with the time that Hitler came to power in 1933. Because of the military and cultural connection with Hungary, Hitler's coming to power effected the conditions of the Jews in Hungary. Hungarian anti-Semitism became more vocal and more powerful; there were demands to eliminate the Jews from civil service, the army, and the professions.

I still remember the atmosphere in our home that was permeated by fear, every step we took was controlled by fear. We spoke in hushed tones; silences were interrupted by my father's periodic sighs. Gone were the days when my mother would be preparing me and other children of the village for our Hanukkah play. I remember when she managed to tame a dove to stay on my shoulder for the performance of Cinderella. I was aware of my parent's struggle to maintain a semblance of normalcy in our home. How did to my parents remain functional in those long years of persecution and discrimination? What were those psychic forces that were summoned to cope with the increasing levels of anxiety over the many years?

My father, and other heads of Jewish families, was arrested and taken to jail on trumped up charges. Young Jewish men, among them my brothers, were inducted into forced labor camps. Neither of them survived the harsh conditions and the severe treatment.

By 1940 the German war machine was in steady advance. The Jews of Hungary were condemned to a slow but sure death.

Increased restrictions on our lives and the many that followed, did not prepare the country for the German occupation that occurred in March 1944. By then, the Germans had suffered severe defeats on the Eastern front. The Hungarian Jews clung to the hope that the war would come to an end before they, too, would suffer the fate of the Jews of German occupied Europe.

The very same day that German troops occupied the country, Jews were not permitted to use public transportation. They were arrested wherever they happened to be. I was living with my aunt at a distant city but was determined to be with my parents at a time like this. Taking chances, I made my way to my village.

The occupation was swiftly followed by the deportation of the Jewish population from the countryside. Strangely, our arrival in Auschwitz in the first week of June 1944 coincided with the landing of American troops on the beaches of France. By the summer of 1944 my mother and I were inmates in a concentration camp in Plaszow, near Krowow. I recall our morning routine vividly, the shrill sound of the whistle woke us from a fitful sleep. We were not used to sleep on wooden slabs covered with straw mattresses under lice-infected blankets. Having carried heavy slabs of stone for 10 hours during the day we yearned for a few hours of sleep. Falling asleep when hungry and with bedbugs feasting on our emaciated bodies was not easy.

In the morning, the whistle was blowing before the sun was up. There was no escaping the day in the quarry, in the heat without water and rest. Sitting up straight, a bit bewildered, my mother fell back on the mattress, trying to steal a few more minutes of sleep. I touched her shoulder gently and she looked at me pleadingly: "could we stay just for a while"? She knew we could not. She lifted her 46-year-old body and let me guide her to the increasingly long line in the front of the latrine. Before we could get our thin soup that was to be to be our breakfast, we had to line up for the headcount that would last for an hour. This completed the morning routine before we entered the quarry and begin the aimless carrying of the stones from one pile to the next.

The war was progressing without our awareness. Sometime in the early fall, I believe it was September, they herded us back to the train station and locked us in the cattle wagons again. After a short drive, we could see the electric barbed wire of Auschwitz. After some days in Auschwitz, we spent a long, cold winter in a labor camp in the Czech Republic. The day of our liberation did not come until May 8, 1945.

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As fear gripped me, as it did many Americans on election night 2016, I revisited the years of my adolescence. This time, as I began to feel the tightness in my throat and the heaviness in my chest, I asked myself: in what way did the experiences of those years resemble what is happening in this country now?

Discussions with members of my family and friends were not reassuring. We all agreed that there will be no extermination and concentration camps in this country, however, the progress that began around the middle of the 20th century will likely come to a halt. With many obstacles in the way and with a great deal of effort, progress has been made to integrate public schools, to ensure voting rights and

human rights. While advances were made, there is still much to do. As Obama stated many times, “this almost perfect union needs a great deal of repair.” Not all members of the Union had been equally protected by the constitution. We have to remember that even under the most “normal” conditions our laws have been written by people in powerful positions, securing their stations in society forever.

The behavior of the president over the last four years affirmed our initial fears. From the beginning, there has been a search for scapegoat. In Europe, the Jews made the perfect targets. In this country, Muslims and immigrants became the hated minority, also reactivating the ever-present anti-Semitism. People fleeing from violence in their home countries were portrayed by the president as murderers and criminals. When we consider that immigrants are badly needed in this country, anti-immigrant policies are patently self-defeating.

The current anti-immigration rhetoric, fueled by deeply entrenched racial attitudes in this country, is reminiscent of the Nazis’ dependence on centuries old anti-Semitism to ensure the passage of anti-Semitic legislations.

The president’s determination to stop immigration by all possible means created some of the most brutal images on the southern border. When, on the news, a little girl calls out a phone number her dad gave her in case they were separated, I was reminded of a good friend of mine whose father gave her a phone number of a bank where he deposited some money. He hoped my friend would survive, while he did not think he would. My friend was 15 years old when she had to carve the number into her memory. It was five years later, at the end of the war, when she phoned the bank and was able to claim her inheritance. The little girl from Honduras was not successful in gaining the attention of the border police. The border police’s directive demanded that the child remain separated from her father. The president’s policy is to keep families divided.

The United States has known many periods of high anxiety affecting all ages from school children to the elderly. For example, during the cold war, in the context of the threat of nuclear war, schools conducted periodic exercises to teach children to hide under their desks at the sound of an alarm indicating the presence of an approaching danger. Schools no longer run these drills, but the threat remains. The nuclear danger will be with us forever, but the anxiety associated with it has become deeply repressed and resides in the background of our daily lives.

Most importantly, there is a crucial difference in the way in which high anxieties have been dealt with by previous presidents and what is happening currently. In the past, times of high anxiety were handled by our presidents with actions designed to protect the population. Our current president enacts measures that protect primarily his own personal safety and wealth without considering the citizens of the nation. A self-centered and short-sighted attitude affects every aspect of his presidency: twisting issues including climate change, gun safety and politicizing scientific data to suit his personal needs.

The president’s actions undoing regulations designed to address climate change in order to support big business have accelerated the already existing anxiety related to the health of the environment. “Eco-anxiety” associated with rapid climate change is affecting children as young 12 and 14. They are terrified and depressed by their awareness of climate change. Some refuse to go to school: why should I study for a future when I will not be here? Those that come to school bring their supplies of anti-anxiety medication with them. While the parents are proud of the children being knowledgeable and informed, they are also worried about children being overwhelmed as environmental predictions become more and more dire.

As I thought about the children's sense of anxiety about the future, I was reminded of a particular conversation I had with a young boy, soon after we were collected in the ghetto. I was 17 years old and he was a few years younger. We were anticipating deportation when he asked me "do you think they will kill us?" Without hesitation, I said "yes." I had no knowledge or indication about our future, but the whole Jewish population of the village was crowded into a few houses without adequate sleeping arrangements and not enough food; there was no reason for us to think that we had a future.

Recently, I was watching my 17-year-old grandson protesting in front of Ms. Pelosi's office and referring to the many wildfires around the country. He was appealing to the politicians to become more active regarding the climate change. I was impressed by his seriousness and determination; he was committed to be active and have an impact; it is now up to the young people to create environmental conditions that will permit living things to exist on this earth. As a Jewish child, he has additional fears. He just heard of the shooting in the Pittsburgh synagogue. I was deeply affected by what this young man has to experience. Are my grandchildren experiencing similar anxieties to the ones that I had at that age? As I was listening to my grandson, another little boy's image intruded into my memory. It was the anguished face of a 10-year old I met during a school visit. He has just learned from my description that children and older people were killed upon arrival in Auschwitz. It pained me deeply that I happened to be the messenger of this cruel reality

Among the young people I have had the privilege to speak with were two 30 year old women struggling with an urgent question about their desire to start a family: is it fair, would they even consider, to bring new life into a world in which the future is so uncertain? They work for change, but fear their efforts are not enough to undo the damage that is being perpetrated by our own government.

The past affects the perception of the current situation. Having the Holocaust in one's past may represent more than an ordinary level of distortion of the present. In writing this essay it has been important to me to listen to many people who could tell me how they have been experiencing the current political climate. I found that most people go about their daily business without focusing on climate change, gun control, or what is happening on the southern border. The reality is that many people are shielded from the immediate consequences of this political situation. For this very reason they have to become intentionally conscious of what is happening politically. While others are now enduring hardships, eventually everybody will be affected by the racist, divisive, long-term effects of a chaotic and poorly functioning administration.

Freud (1916/17) contrasted "realistic anxiety" to "neurotic anxiety." "Realistic anxiety," he wrote, "strikes us as something very rational and intelligible. We may say of it that it is a reaction to the perception of an external danger - that is, of an injury which is expected and foreseen...it may be regarded as a manifestation of the self-preservation instinct. (pp.393/394)" In its simple form, realistic anxiety ought to give one the opportunity either to consider flight, or if that is not possible to respond with defenses that protect the self from overwhelming levels of anxiety which would render a person dysfunctional.

I would suggest that the anxiety we had experienced in anticipation of deportation and what many are experiencing in relation to the current political situation is not simply "realistic anxiety." Rather, it is best described as existential anxiety: anxiety that originates in fear of annihilation. I first encountered

the description of this anxiety in Victor Fankel's book "Man's Search of Meaning." Published in 1946, one year after the end of the second world war, the book sold 10 million copies in the United States. What explains this extraordinary success? Search for meaning among death and destruction appears to have been responsible for the popularity of existential philosophy after the second world war. With death and destruction all around us there appeared a great urgency to find meaning in everyday life. Young people, in particular, were searching for meaning in life as the brutality of war, the industrialized nature of the genocide, and the extraordinary number of casualties threatened a whole generation with cynicism and nihilism

The United States appears to be in a situation similar to the one we were experiencing at the end of the second world war. At that time, Europe was divided into two parts, the East and the West. Today, the United States is divided between those who adopted the president's vision of the country and those who continue to adhere to the constitution and the rule of law.

America is at a critical junction: will it choose to live without the possibility of clean air and choose to continue to discriminate against people because of race and religion, or will it reassert its claim to democracy? At the end of WWII democracy triumphed in many ways around the world. Europe gave up their colonies, new countries emerged in Africa and one in the Middle East called Israel. The division in Europe was overcome by the success of the democracies and the defeat of communism. In the United State, this is not the time to yield to forces that would take us backwards. Rather, it is the time, individually and as a nation, we to have to live up to our democratic principles by which this country has been living since its foundation: principles for which many have given their lives

The end

- P.S. In this essay I made frequent references to the climate crisis. Along with the crisis came the need to create new sources of energy; the crisis exposed the urgent need new usable energy. The change from fossil fuel to clean sources of energy is a difficult process as it requires not only financial and technical but behavioral changes as well.

Strangely, the pandemic could change people's behaviors in a way that would bring about the needed changes that would be crucial at this time. Many authors, David Grossman among them, had suggested that the pandemic may become transformative to our way of life. In relation to the climate, the changes would have to be substantive and affect everyone around the globe. The northern part of the globe would have to reduce its appetite for energy in every form, while the southern part would have to develop technology, which on some areas, already had changed the desert into useful land.

Closer to home, in the North American situation, we recognize the division between those who have the means to consume energy discriminately and those who do not. Donna Orange in her book, "Climate Crisis, Psychoanalysis and Radical Ethics" makes a strong connection between ethical conduct and climate change. For example, those who take frequent plane trips for granted, would they would have to consider the implications each time they plan to travel. Certainly, the behavioral changes would require more than the modification in air travel. In order to really learn the lessons of the pandemic, we would have to learn how to practice Radical Ethics in many areas in our lives.