

The Holocaust: An Introduction
Cantor Mark Levine

Reading #1

"I saw them do the killing. At 5:00 p.m. they gave the command, "Fill in the pits." Screams and groans were coming from the pits. Suddenly I saw my neighbor Ruderman rise from under the soil ... His eyes were bloody and he was screaming: "Finish me off!" ... A murdered woman lay at my feet. A boy of five years crawled out from under her body and began to scream desperately. "Mommy!" That was all I saw, since I fell unconscious."

Reading #2

Why were the Jews singled out for extermination?

Answer: *The explanation of the Nazis' implacable hatred of the Jew rests on their distorted world view which saw history as a racial struggle. They considered the Jews a race whose goal was world domination and who, therefore, were an obstruction to Aryan dominance. They believed that all of history was a fight between races which should culminate in the triumph of the superior Aryan race. Therefore, they considered it their duty to eliminate the Jews, whom they regarded as a threat. Moreover, in their eyes, the Jews' racial origin made them habitual criminals who could never be rehabilitated and were, therefore, hopelessly corrupt and inferior.*

There is no doubt that other factors contributed toward Nazi hatred of the Jews and their distorted image of the Jewish people. These included the centuries-old tradition of Christian antisemitism which propagated a negative stereotype of the Jew as a Christ-killer, agent of the devil, and practitioner of witchcraft. Also significant was the political antisemitism of the latter half of the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth centuries, which singled out the Jew as a threat to the established order of society. These combined to point to the Jew as a target for persecution and ultimate destruction by the Nazis.

Reading #3

What did people in Germany know about the persecution of Jews and other enemies of Nazism?

Answer: Certain initial aspects of Nazi persecution of Jews and other opponents were common knowledge in Germany. Thus, for example, everyone knew about the Boycott of April 1, 1933, the Laws of April, and the Nuremberg Laws, because they were fully publicized. Moreover, offenders were often publicly punished and shamed. The same holds true for subsequent anti-Jewish measures. Kristallnacht (The Night of the Broken Glass) was a public pogrom, carried out in full view of the entire population. While information on the concentration camps was not publicized, a great deal of information was available to the German public, and the treatment of the inmates was generally known, although exact details were not easily obtained.

As for the implementation of the "Final Solution" and the murder of other undesirable elements, the situation was different. The Nazis attempted to keep the murders a secret and, therefore, took precautionary measures to ensure that they would not be publicized. Their efforts, however, were only partially successful. Thus, for example, public protests by various clergymen led to the halt of their euthanasia program in August of 1941. These protests were obviously the result of the fact that many persons were aware that the Nazis were killing the mentally ill in special institutions.

As far as the Jews were concerned, it was common knowledge in Germany that they had disappeared after having been sent to the East. It was not exactly clear to large segments of the German population what had happened to them. On the other hand, there were thousands upon thousands of Germans who participated in and/or witnessed the implementation of the "Final Solution" either as members of the SS, the Einsatzgruppen, death camp or concentration camp guards, police in occupied Europe, or with the Wehrmacht.

THE SUNFLOWER

by Simon Weisenthal

The Confession

Called to the concentration camp bedside of a seriously wounded and bandaged German soldier, I realized that this was, in reality, a death chamber.

“I have not much longer to live,” whispered the sick man in a barely audible voice. “I know the end is near. Then he added casually, “I am twenty-two.”

I was unmoved by his words. The way I had been forced to exist in the camps had destroyed in me any feeling or fear about death. Sickness, suffering and doom were the constant companions of us Jews. Such things no longer frightened us.

“I know,” muttered the sick man, “that at this moment thousands of men are dying. Death is everywhere. I am resigned to dying soon, but before that I want to talk about an experience which is torturing me. Otherwise I cannot die in peace.”

“My name is Karl...I joined the SS as a volunteer. I must tell you something dreadful... Something inhuman. It happened a year ago – a year since the crime I committed. I must tell you of this horrible deed – tell you because... you are a Jew.”

“I was not born a murderer...” he wheezed. “My father was a convinced Social Democrat. My mother brought me up as a Catholic, I was actually a server in the church and a special favorite of our priest who hoped I would one day study theology. Instead I joined the Hitler Youth and that was the end of the Church for me. My mother was very sad. My father never uttered a word on the subject.”

“When the war broke out, I volunteered, naturally in the SS. My mother wept when I left. As I closed the door behind me I heard my father say: ‘They are taking our son away from us. No good will come of it.’ Those words were the last I ever heard my father speak.

Simon thought: All my instincts were against continuing to listen to this deathbed avowal. I wanted to get away. The dying man must have felt this for he groped for my arm. The movement was so pathetically helpless that all of a sudden I felt sorry for him. I would stay, although I wanted to go.

“Last spring we saw that something was afoot. We were told time after time we must be prepared for great doings. Each of us must show himself a man....He must be tough. There was no place for humanitarian nonsense. The Fuhrer needed real men. That made a great impression on us at the time.”

The soldier continued in a soft voice: “We came to a Ukrainian village. Everywhere there were abandoned cars and guns. Many of them still intact. Obviously the Russians left in great haste. On the other side of the square there was a group of people under close guard. I assumed they were civilians who were to be taken out of the town. And then the word ran through our group like wildfire: ‘They’re Jews.’...”

“An order was given,” he continued “and we marched toward the huddled mass of Jews. There were a hundred and fifty of them or perhaps two hundred, including many children who stared at us with anxious eyes. There were infants in their mothers’ arms, but hardly any young men; mostly women and elderly men.”

“A truck arrived with cans of petrol which we unloaded and took into a house. The strong men among the Jews were ordered to carry the cans to the upper stories. They obeyed – apathetically, without a will of their own, like automatons.”

“Then we began to drive the Jews into the house. A sergeant with a whip in his hand helped any of the Jews who were not quick enough. The house was not very large but ...after a few minutes there was no Jew left on the street. The door was locked and a machine gun was posted opposite.”

“When we were told that everything was ready, we went back a few yards and then received the command to remove safety pins from hand grenades and throw them through the windows of the house. Detonations followed one after another.”

Now the soldier was silent, and he raised himself slightly from the bed: his whole body was shivering.

But he continued: “We heard screams and saw the flames eat their way from floor to floor. We had our rifles ready to shoot down anyone who tried to escape from the blazing hell... The screams from the house were horrible. Dense smoke poured out and choked us.”

“Behind the windows of the second floor, I saw a man with a small child in his arms. His clothes were alight. By his side stood a woman, doubtless the mother of the child. With his free hand the man covered the child’s eyes...then he jumped into the street. Seconds later the mother followed. We shot...Oh God! I don’t know how many tried to jump out of the windows but that one family – I shall never forget – least of all the child. It had black hair and dark eyes....”

“Months later, we were approaching Taganrog, which was strongly held by the Russians. Lying in the trenches, I waited for the order to attack. It came at last and we climbed out of the trenches and charged. And then a shell exploded by my side and I lost consciousness. When I awoke in the hospital I knew that had lost my eyesight. My face and upper part of my body were torn to ribbons. The pain became more and more unbearable. My whole body is covered with marks from pain-killing injections.”

“Look, he said, those Jews died quickly, they did not suffer as I do – though they were not as guilty as I am. If only I had not survived that shell...” The pains in my body are terrible, but worse still is my conscience.”

“I cannot die...without coming clean. This must be my confession. Believe me, I would be ready to suffer worse and longer pains if by that means I could bring back the dead. I am left here with my guilt. In the last hours of my life you are with me. I do not know who you are, I only know that you are a Jew and that is enough.”

“I know that what I am asking is almost too much for you, but without your answer, I cannot die in peace.”

Two men who had never known each other had been brought together for a few hours by fate. One asks the other for help. But the other was himself helpless and able to do nothing for him. At last I made up my mind and without a word I left the room. The wounded soldier died that very evening.

Selected Responses

Precedence and Lessons for the Future

- If genocide goes unpunished, it will set a precedent for tomorrow’s genocide. Without justice, there can never be reconciliation and real peace. Only if Nazi crimes are not subject to a statute of limitations, only if everyone who committed atrocities is hunted down and finally caught, will the potential murders of tomorrow and the day after tomorrow be prevented from realizing their criminal potential.
- Can we advocate forgiveness toward those who have committed crimes against humanity? Should we not warn those who contemplate evil acts that there will be no mercy even on their deathbeds should they give in to the

seduction of killing? The consequences of participating in genocidal acts must include dying with a guilty conscience.

True Motives and an Unfair Request

- Only the awareness of imminent and certain death induced Karl to think that his actions had been crimes against humanity and God. Had he not been mortally wounded, he would almost certainly have continued to commit these crimes, along with his comrades, who had volunteered for these assignments of their own free will and in large numbers, never regretting their actions, but rather justifying them by claiming that they had only been carrying out orders.
- How can forgiveness be asked of someone whose death sentence will soon be carried out by the dying man's partners in crime, who are part of the same regime, when the dying person himself admits that he too had been committing these crimes against the Jewish people and was only stopped when the hand of God overtook him.

Unfair Request?

- Simon could perhaps have told Karl: "There is no way I can forgive you, since I cannot, dare not, speak in the name of the murdered Jews. But the God you believe in, and I too, is infinitely merciful, and asks of us only to repent of our sins. If your repentance is genuine, and I believe it is, and since you cannot make restitution, throw yourself on God's mercy.
- But is not this asking a great deal – perhaps too much – of Simon, given his situation. A situation of utter powerlessness and constant terror, totally devoid of hope, with death hanging over him every moment? I am struck not only by the agony of the dying man, but by his obliviousness to the suffering, the inhuman condition, of Simon and his fellow Jews.

- In our world, nothing any longer obeyed the laws of normal everyday life...The only law that was left as a reliable basis for judgment was the law of death. The effect on us was a mental paralysis, and...the clear express of the hopelessness of our lot. (Simon Wiesenthal)

Still Committing Sinful Acts?

- Even on his deathbed, Karl perpetuated the Nazi stereotype of Jews. Jews were not individuals with souls, feelings, aspirations, and emotions. Rather, they were perceived as an amorphous undifferentiated mass. Bring me a Jew, was the dying Nazi's request. Any Jew will do. Karl has learned nothing. Granting the murderer forgiveness would have been the final victory of Nazism.
- For a Nazi to expect that a Jew, languishing in a Nazi death camp, should must a measure of generosity toward a comrade of those who are likely to kill him, is not a proof of repentance. What it does prove is that Karl still thought of the Jew as an object.
- "They were not as guilty as I am." A stunning sentence! Is not the clear, indeed the only, implication of these words that the murdered Jews were guilty, and that he, one of their murderers, was only guilty, only their guilt was not as great as his!!!

Teshuvah

- Can one repent such a monstrous deed? I do not see how. The real test of the SS man's spiritual integrity came at the moment he received the order to shoot. At that instant he was still a morally free man (assuming he had not taken part in earlier crimes). By agreeing to shoot instead of deferring to a higher authority and disobeying the order, he failed the test and permanently cut himself off from the possibility of forgiveness. This may not be true for other crimes – but the mass murder of European Jewry is not an ordinary crime.
- According to Jewish tradition, teshuvah for acts committed against others calls for going through the wronged party before approaching God. Judaism believes that it is only through human interaction that the victim can best be

healed and the wrongdoer most profoundly changed. Making peace with God comes later.

- Maimonides teaches that we can only know the full truth of a person's repentance if the penitent encounters the same situation in which he first sinned, and then refrains from sinning.

Who May Forgive?

- Of course, the large majority of evil committed by people should be forgiven, *provided* that the evildoer's repentance is sincere and that he or she makes a real effort to undo the evil. But the difference between forgiving 97% of evil acts that are atoned for, versus forgiving them all, is significant. The killing and torture of innocent people is an ultimate evil, and the only ones who can grant forgiveness are, by virtue of their deaths, incapable of doing so.
- Rectifying a misdeed is a matter to be settled between the perpetrator and the victim. A third party has no proper role other than mediator. I may forgive one who has sinned against me. I may not forgive one who has taken the life of another.

Lessons of Silence

- There is much that silence might teach us, if we could but learn to listen to it. Not the least of its lessons is that there may well be questions for which there are no answers and other questions for which answers would remove the moral force of the question. There are matters that perhaps should always remain unanswered; questions which should lay like a great weight on our consciences so that we continually feel an obligation to confront their insistent urging.

God's Guilt?

- The crimes in which this SS man had taken part are beyond forgiveness by man, and even by God, for God Himself is among the accused. The God who had allowed the Holocaust did not, and does not, have the standing to forgive the monsters who had carried out the murders.

Some Christian Responses

- It is a cardinal principle of Judeo-Christian ethics that forgiveness must always be granted to the sincerely repentant. The only seeming exception to this in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures is in the New Testament allusion to the “unforgivable sin against the Holy Spirit (Mark 3:29). But this refers to a person’s rejection of God and therefore precludes an relation to forgiveness of humans. Contrariwise, in the same Gospel we read Jesus’ answer to the question of how many times one must forgive. Should it be “seven times”? Speaking out of his Jewish tradition, his answer was “Seventy times seven times” – a metaphorical way of saying always.
- One can well understand how the Jews in their camps had come to tell one another in the bitter sweet joke which the author recounts to us that God was on leave. Yet it is precisely the rejection of this blasphemy that surely religious faith demanded – demanded the belief that somehow, however difficult it might be to see how, “God is not mocked” and that, as with Job, “though He slay me yet will I trust in Him.”
- I am afraid of “cheap grace.” W.H. Auden’s Herod parodies a version of Christian forgiveness. He sees every corner newsboy remarking that he likes to commit sins and God likes to forgive them so the world is admirably arranged. Nothing should happen that would let the haters or murderers off the hook by assuring them that grace is readily available. The author’s silence in that hospital room was a guard against the cheapening of grace.

The following figures from work of Deborah Lipstadt reflect the annihilation of the Jewish population of Europe by (pre-war) country:

Country	Estimated Pre-War Jewish population	Estimated Jewish population annihilated	Percent killed
Poland	3,300,000	3,000,000	90
Baltic countries	253,000	228,000	90
Germany & Austria	240,000	210,000	90
Bohemia & Moravia	90,000	80,000	89
Slovakia	90,000	75,000	83
Greece	70,000	54,000	77
Netherlands	140,000	105,000	75
Hungary	650,000	450,000	70
Byelorussian SSR	375,000	245,000	65
Ukrainian SSR	1,500,000	900,000	60
Belgium	65,000	40,000	60
Yugoslavia	43,000	26,000	60
Romania	600,000	300,000	50
Norway	2,173	890	41
France	350,000	90,000	26
Bulgaria	64,000	14,000	22
Italy	40,000	8,000	20
Luxembourg	5,000	1,000	20
Russian SFSR	975,000	107,000	11
Denmark	8,000	52	<1
Finland	2,000	22	1
Total	8,861,800	5,933,900	67

Electronic Resources

1. www.ushmm.org (US Holocaust Memorial Museum) – Mapping
2. [www. Yadvashem.org.il](http://www.Yadvashem.org.il)
3. www.memorial-museums.net (Holocaust Memorials) – can take you to the camps
4. www.annefrank.nl (Anne Frank House)
5. www.annefranke.com (Anne Frank Center) – lesson plans
6. www.usc.edu/schools/college/vhi/ (USC Shoah Foundation Institute)
7. www.projectaladin.org (Holocaust: A Call to Conscience) – French Muslim memorials to the holocaust.
8. www.centropa.org (Centropa)
9. www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/avalon.htm (Yale Avalon Project) - documents
10. www.jewishpartisans.org
11. www.calvin.edu/academic/cas/gpa (German Propaganda Archive)