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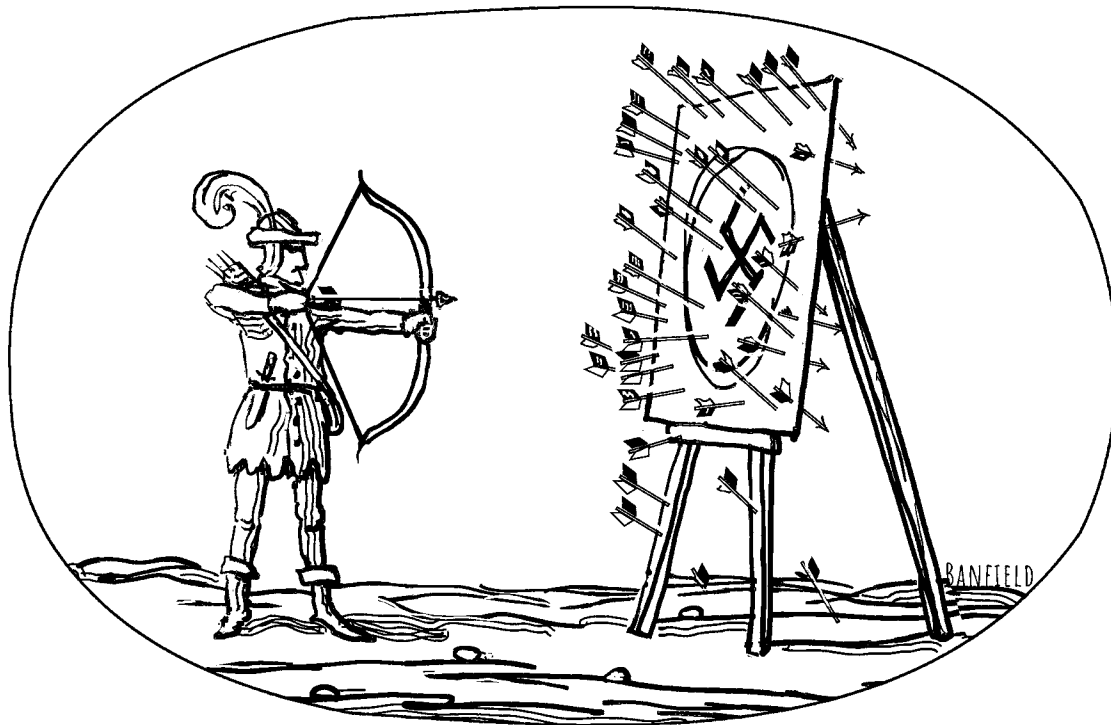
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Essay by Leonard Sax

# WE'RE TEACHING THE HOLOCAUST ALL WRONG

*A problem with human nature.*



**M**Y LATE MOTHER, DR. JANET SAX, was a student of German literature who minored in German at the University of Michigan. I can still recall her reciting Goethe's haunting poem *Der Erlkönig*, in which a dying boy hallucinates an elf-king who threatens to kill him. I knew by heart the lyrics to the final movement of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony before I was ten years old: *Seid umschlungen, Millionen! Diesen Kuß der ganzen Welt! Millions, be you embraced! This kiss for all the world!*

There was something ironic about her Germanophilia because my mother, born in 1924, defined her Jewish identity in ethnic, not religious, terms. And that meant an identity steeped in the Holocaust and the horrors of Nazi Germany. She grew up in Toledo, Ohio, with neighbors who listened to Father Charles Coughlin praising Adolf Hitler on the "radio priest's" nationwide broadcasts. I would ask my mother how, given the crimes of Nazi Germany, could she read and enjoy German poetry? Knowing my love of classical music, which she had instilled in me, she answered:

Bach. Beethoven. Brahms. Haydn. Mozart. Schubert. Schumann. Mendelssohn. Wagner. Mahler. Bruckner. All

of them spoke German as their first language. Most of the greatest music in the Western tradition was written by Germans. Beethoven is not responsible for the Holocaust. Neither is Goethe or Schiller.

But that raised a question that I still wrestle with 50 years later: how could the same culture that gave rise to Beethoven and Brahms, Goethe and Schiller, also have given rise to Adolf Hitler and Heinrich Himmler, Auschwitz and Treblinka? Before he became the Nazi propaganda minister, Joseph Goebbels earned a doctorate in German literature—under the tutelage of a Jewish professor, Max Freiherr von Waldberg.

## Good Guys and Bad Guys

**T**WO YEARS AGO, WHEN MY DAUGHTER was in 8th grade, she was assigned to read *Irena's Children* (2016), the story of Irena Sendler, who rescued more than 2,000 Jewish children in Poland during World War II. Sendler was captured and tortured as the Gestapo tried to force her to reveal the names of her collaborators. She never yielded a single name, despite the Gestapo breaking both her legs.

As I read the book along with my daughter, and discussed it with her, I began to wonder. I think that she, like most teens, may take the wrong lessons from such a book. Over the past 22 years, I have visited more than 460 schools in my role as an educational consultant—not only in the United States but also in Australia, Canada, England, Mexico, New Zealand, and Scotland. For many middle- and high-school students, their knowledge of the Holocaust comes from accounts in which the Jews are victims, the Germans are evil, and the heroes are brave. These stories are often deeply moving. But the lines are clearly drawn, whether in classics such as Elie Wiesel's *Night* (1956) or in more contemporary books such as Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1980).

To be sure, I have observed substantial variations among schools in their approach to the Holocaust. Jewish schools are more likely to place the Holocaust in historical context by reviewing the long history of European anti-Semitism, including medieval Jewish ghettos, the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492, and the Russian pogroms of the 1800s and early 1900s—sometimes including a gratuitous showing of *Fiddler on the Roof* (1971), which students at Jewish schools have already seen too many times. The Jewish schools also are more likely to complete the



unit with an exploration of the role played by Holocaust survivors in launching the state of Israel. Schools with a Protestant or Catholic affiliation typically portray the Holocaust as a manifestation of pure evil, putting Adolf Hitler alongside mass murderers and serial killers. Schools without a religious affiliation, both public and private, commonly present anti-Semitism as one kind of prejudice, and sometimes set the Holocaust alongside the genocide of Native Americans and the treatment of African-American slaves in the South before the Civil War. Twenty U.S. states now require the Holocaust to be taught in schools. In some schools, it's painfully clear that the teachers are assigning Anne Frank's *The Diary of a Young Girl* (1947) merely to fulfill this requirement; serious in-depth discussion of the origins of the Holocaust is absent.

But in almost every case, whether the schools are Jewish, Catholic, Protestant, or secular, public or private, the Holocaust is taught using books and media in which most of the German characters are cardboard caricatures of evil. The unintended effect of such books, 78 years after the liberation of Auschwitz, is to make moral judgment seem easy. It's obvious who the good guys and bad guys are. In *Irena's Children*, Nazis gun down children in cold blood and smash babies' heads against brick walls.

Well, what's wrong with telling such stories? These things did happen. Should we not remember them?

### Crooked Timber

**R**AHAV GABAY AND HER COLLEAGUES at Tel Aviv University have identified a personality trait they call "interpersonal victimhood." Gabay finds that you need not have suffered any trauma yourself to manifest interpersonal victimhood. You identify with the trauma of others and claim it as your own, thereby acquiring all the moral credit ordinarily ascribed to victims. One key component of interpersonal victimhood, according to Gabay, is *moral elitism*, the belief that you yourself are virtuous, especially compared to those you disagree with or dislike. Gabay and colleagues find that moral elitism is highly correlated with a lack of empathy, "the sense of entitlement to behave aggressively and selfishly." Moral elitism enables individuals "to feel morally superior even though they exhibit aggression."

Ruth Klüger, born into a Jewish family in Vienna in 1931, survived three Nazi concentration camps: Theresienstadt, Auschwitz, and Gross-Rosen. She wrote about her experience in her 1992 memoir *Weiter Leben*.

(Later, after retiring from her position as professor of German studies at the University of California, Irvine, Klüger wrote a modified version in English, *Still Alive*; 2001.) At a book signing, a young woman came up to her and said "I love the Holocaust"—by which the woman meant, she loved reading about the Holocaust. Klüger wanted to tell this woman, "You shouldn't. Stop reading these books, including mine, if you enjoy them." Klüger understood that the good feeling some people get from reading stories about the Holocaust is a feeling close to the moral elitism described by Gabay. *I am so much better than those evil Nazis*. Klüger recognized that such feelings are a temptation that must be resisted, not indulged.

Historians remind us that the Nazi movement was itself launched and sustained by a sense of victimhood, beginning with the

learn is not *I am such a good person, so much better than those evil Nazis*. The lesson should be: *Moral elitism feels good, but it is a temptation that I must resist. I must recognize and acknowledge my opponent's humanity*.

As Klüger observed, "we like self-serving solutions"—the easy trauma of reading stories about the Holocaust—but "we should beware of them, because they lead away from the truth." The truth is that you and I are not morally superior to the Germans who made Nazism possible. On the contrary, we are made from the same crooked timber as most of them.

### Something Bigger than Ourselves

**B**UT I WOULD NEVER SMASH A BABY'S head against a wall!" protest the students when I talk with them on this topic. Of course you wouldn't. That's when I tell those students about Melita Maschmann. When Hitler came to power in 1933, Maschmann was 15 years old. Her parents disliked Nazism and Hitler, but Maschmann herself was fascinated by the Nazi promise of a *Volksgemeinschaft*, a community "in which people of all classes would live together like brothers and sisters." In her memoir *Fazit* (available in English as *Account Rendered*; 1965), she wrote, "I longed to hurl myself into this current, to be submerged and borne along by it.... I wanted to help create the national community [*Volksgemeinschaft*] in which people would live together as in one big family." She and her friends in the Nazi movement had no interest in Nazi racial theories, which they considered silly. They made fun of racist Nazis, calling them *n<sup>2</sup>*—*nordische Niete* (Nordic idiots)—or *b<sup>3</sup>*—*blau, blond, und blöde* (blue-eyed, blond, and stupid). She emphasized that what first drew her into the Nazi movement was not hatred—of Jews, foreigners, or Communists—but love for her neighbors. In other words: Melita Maschmann was a warm-hearted teenage girl who wanted to devote herself to helping others. She joined the *Bund Deutscher Mädel*, the girls' equivalent of the Hitler Youth, soon after, and served the party full-time upon reaching adulthood, until the end in 1945. The doubts only came years later, after the war.

Most of us have a desire to belong to something bigger than ourselves. Whether it's cheering at a football game, singing in a choir, or line-dancing at a wedding reception, there is a domain of human experience that can be enjoyed only in the company of *many* of our fellow creatures. Watching a football game on TV with a buddy at home is fine, but it's

#### Books mentioned in this essay:

*Irena's Children: The Extraordinary Story of the Woman Who Saved 2,500 Children from the Warsaw Ghetto*, by Tilar J. Mazzeo. Gallery Books, 352 pages, \$18.99 (paper)

*Still Alive: A Holocaust Girlhood Remembered*, by Ruth Klüger. The Feminist Press, 216 pages, \$15.95 (paper)

*Account Rendered: A Dossier of My Former Self*, by Melita Maschmann. Plunkett Lake Press, 294 pages, \$16.95 (paper)

Germans' sense of having been victimized by the 1919 Versailles treaty; the hyperinflation of 1923, which destroyed the savings of middle-class Germans; and the punitive reparations scheme imposed by the Allies. (The American proposal would have required Germans to pay massive World War I reparations annually to the Allies through 1988.) The moral elitism arising from victimhood, and the lack of empathy that accompanies it, can lead otherwise good people to be cruel to others.

In 1934, Adolf Hitler was popular on the campuses of Germany's top universities. Leading intellectuals such as Martin Heidegger were members of the Nazi Party. German history, from 1932 to 1937, can teach us some lessons of tremendous importance if we are prepared to learn them. But the lesson to



not the same as singing the team fight song in a stadium in unison with 90,000 other fans. Maschmann's memoir shows how the Nazis understood and exploited this primal human longing. Nazi mass festivities—such as the yearly Harvest Festival at Bückeberg attended by 500,000 or more; the Mayday celebrations; and of course the days-long Nuremberg rallies—were skillfully crafted to elicit and sustain this transcendent ecstasy.

It is popular today among intellectuals to devalue tribal experiences. Instead of group ecstasy, we moderns focus on individual fulfillment, self-actualization rather than self-transcendence. But this emphasis on the individual impoverishes and flattens the human experience. To transcend oneself, to sacrifice oneself for others, to love all the world, can indeed be a pinnacle of moral experience. *Millions, be you embraced! This kiss for all the world!*

### A Place for Compromise

**I**N MARCH 1940, SIX MONTHS INTO WORLD War II and nine years before the publication of his dystopian novel *1984*, George Orwell wrote, "Nearly all western thought since the last war, certainly all 'progressive' thought, has assumed tacitly that human beings desire nothing beyond ease, security and avoidance of pain. In such a view of life there is no room, for instance, for patriotism and the military virtues." The Nazis, Orwell realized, understood something that the democracies did not:

Hitler, because in his own joyless mind he feels it with exceptional strength, knows that human beings *don't* only want comfort, safety, short working-hours, hygiene, birth-control and, in general, common sense; they also, at least intermittently, want struggle and self-sacrifice, not to mention drums, flags and loyalty-parades.... Whereas Socialism, and even capitalism in a more grudging way, have said to people, "I offer you a good time," Hitler has said

to them, "I offer you struggle, danger and death," and as a result a whole nation flings itself at his feet.

I have found this passage to be a useful starting point for group conversation with high school students. The passage itself is so provocative that it needs no introduction besides an explanation of when it was written. Just say, "What do you guys think about that?" and you will get a show of hands. The majority will agree that life should be about more than having fun and living comfortably. There will sometimes be one boy (and it's always a boy) who will say something like, "Life is a game. Whoever dies with the most toys,

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wins." But he is an outlier. Most of the kids are longing for something higher and deeper than social media and video games, something more than big homes, fancy vacations, and luxury cars.

Some students say that they have found their cause in politics. Those who are left-of-center will speak, sometimes passionately, about the evils of Donald Trump and the importance of fighting for abortion rights. Students on the right will talk with equal passion about the craziness of transgender activism and the unfairness of biological males competing against girls. Instead of responding to such claims, I call the students' attention to the street fighting that was common in German cities in 1932. Activists on

the Left and Right battled one another with fists, clubs, and, occasionally, knives and guns. Imagine that you were leading a political party on "your" side in 1932, I ask the students. Could you imagine some resolution of your differences other than the total defeat of your adversary? Can you see how the strength of democracy might lie not in one party's absolute victory, but in compromises between opposing parties?

These ideas are completely novel to most American teens today. But I am encouraged by how open most kids are to considering the possibility that there might be some way to heal our fractured republic other than one side triumphing over and utterly dominating the other.

Right now, in the United States, loud voices on both the Left and Right complain of being victimized. They trumpet that they are morally superior to their opponents, that their opponents are not only mistaken but evil. The way we are teaching the Holocaust actually encourages kids to adopt a perspective that us-versus-them is equivalent to good-versus-evil, which rules out compromise. But I have seen firsthand how the lessons of German history, particularly in the years between 1932 and 1937, can be instructive for American kids today.

In the *Politics*, Aristotle wrote that man is the worst of all animals when separated from law and justice. I recently shared a podium at a conference with Timothy Jackson, professor of theology at Emory and author, most recently, of the book *Mordecai Would Not Bow Down: Anti-Semitism, the Holocaust, and Christian Supersessionism* (2021). Dr. Jackson agreed with the points I am making here and then in effect applied Aristotle's dictum to this topic: "If you don't recognize your own inner Nazi," he remarked, "then you've missed the whole point of studying the Holocaust."

I think these lessons are useful. And I think my mom would be proud.

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