

DAN BAR-ON

LEGACY



ENCOUNTERS

WITH

CHILDREN

OF THE

THIRD REICH

SILENCE

Legacy of Silence

Encounters with Children of the Third Reich

Dan Bar-On

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Designed by Gwen Frankfeldt

Shemà

You who live secure
In your warm houses,
Who return at evening to find
Hot food and friendly faces:

Consider whether this is a man,
Who labors in the mud
Who knows no peace
Who fights for a crust of bread
Who dies at a yes or a no.
Consider whether this is a woman,
Without hair or name
With no more strength to remember
Eyes empty and womb cold
As a frog in winter.

Consider that this has been:
I commend these words to you.
Engrave them on your hearts
When you are in your house, when you walk on your way,
When you go to bed, when you rise.
Repeat them to your children.
Or may your house crumble,
Disease render you powerless,
Your offspring avert their faces from you.

10 January 1946

Primo Levi, *Collected Poems*

(translated by Ruth Feldman
and Brian Swann)

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Legacy of Silence

Contents

Acknowledgments ix

Introduction 1

- 1 The Physician from Auschwitz
and His Son 14*
 - 2 Conjuring the Darkness 42*
 - 3 Those Blue-Eyed German Songs 71*
 - 4 The Camp Doll 96*
 - 5 The Hidden King 115*
 - 6 The Crown Prince 135*
 - 7 The Rabbi from Jerusalem 160*
 - 8 Freedom and Responsibility 179*
 - 9 Small Hills Covered with Trees 200*
 - 10 The Divided Self 218*
 - 11 Gathering Evidence 245*
 - 12 My Father, My Self 268*
 - 13 The Narrow Bridge 291*
 - 14 The Dark Side of the Mind 321*
- Glossary 337*

Introduction

It was the autumn of 1938. Andre was twelve years old and lived with his parents in a small town in northern Germany. One evening he came home from his youth movement meeting.

“Daddy,” he said to his father, “we were told at the meeting that tomorrow we are supposed to throw stones at the Jewish shops in town. Should I take part?”

His father looked at him. “What do you think?”

“I don’t know. I have nothing against the Jews—I hardly know them—but everyone is going to throw stones. So what should I do?”

Their conversation proceeded, the son presenting questions to his father, the father turning the questions back to his son.

“I understand,” said Andre. “You want me to make up my own mind. I’m going for a walk. I’ll let you know what I’ve decided when I come back.”

When Andre returned a short while later, he approached his parents, who were sitting at the table.

“I’ve made up my mind, but my decision involves you too.”

“What is it?”

“I’ve decided not to throw stones at the Jewish shops. But tomorrow everyone will say, ‘Andre, the son of X, did not take part, he refused to throw stones!’ They will turn against you. What are you going to do?”

His father’s sigh was one of relief tinged with pride. “While you were out, your mother and I discussed this question. We decided that if you made up your mind to throw stones, we would have to live with your decision, since we had let you decide, after all. But if you decided not to throw stones, we would leave Germany immediately.”

And that is what they did. The following day, Andre’s family left Germany.

* * *

2 *Introduction*

I learned this story from a colleague of mine who had heard it from Andre himself in 1942, in Lisbon, Portugal, where the family was then living. She had stayed with them while she herself was in flight from occupied France, awaiting a visa to go to the United States. "One can try to spoil the story," she told me. "The parents were probably deliberating such a move before this incident, they must have had the financial means to carry it out at once, and so on. Still, the fact remains that they made up their minds in this way. The question is, why did so few others do the same?"

As a psychologist, I was supposed to have an answer, but I could only pose more questions: Why did so few have the courage to speak out about what was happening in Hitler's Germany? How were Andre and his parents different from the majority, who would follow orders to throw stones—and later, to commit other atrocities?

Andre's story embodies a certain naïveté, a positive view of human beings one rarely encounters in dealing with the Holocaust; although unexpected acts of humanity occurred, they were the exception. My generation grew up with the terrible knowledge of the Holocaust, a knowledge that deprived us of Andre's innocence. Our awareness that such an enormity took place in a highly "civilized" society, in this century, and that no one tried to stop it, has constrained our view of the future. Some have given up the quest for hope, convinced of the inevitability of inhumanity. Others have maintained hope by suppressing part of that knowledge—and by avoiding disquieting questions—as if to push it to the dark side of the mind. Only a very few have succeeded in sustaining a belief in the possibility of hope—and this in spite of the disclosures over the past forty years of how the Nazis organized and systematically carried out the extermination process.

My family left Germany in 1933, early enough to have retained a positive view of their fellow human beings, but also late enough to have learned the harsh lesson that, in an instant, your neighbors can turn against you. Like Andre's father, my father made the decision to leave on the spur of the moment. It is still difficult for me to understand how he did so, because so many others did not draw the same conclusion. My parents regarded themselves as well-integrated German Jews. They both came from large families of mostly well-established bankers, physicians, and lawyers who had lived in Germany for more than two centuries.

In the memoirs my father wrote in 1979, the year before he died, he describes his own father as a German patriot: "He had served as a doctor in the German army; he liked his uniform so much that he

even wore it at his wedding.” If his family encountered anti-Semitism, it was marginal to the mainstream of their lives: “My father studied medicine at Heidelberg and became a doctor in 1897. He intended to start an academic career, but his professor told him that with the name Levy he could never be a lecturer or a professor. So he changed his name and chose his father’s first name, Bruno, as his family name.”

In January 1933, my father and mother went on one of their favorite cross-country ski tours in the Alps:

One morning, when we turned on the radio in one of the cabins, we heard the announcement of the Reichstag fire . . . But we were so completely involved in the enchantment of skiing that we did not grasp the importance of this event . . . The next day we arrived in Munich and found the whole town covered with Nazi flags and swastikas. Back in Hamburg, we went to a Furtwängler concert, showing off our deep tan and still-exalted mood. Our enthusiasm (today I would say euphoria) left us quickly when we met our relatives and Jewish friends; they were gloomy about political developments.

In April 1933, when Josef Goebbels ordered the boycott of Jewish physicians, my father, unlike many others, became alert:

Many of my patients turned up and said, “Doctor, I am not permitted to come to treatment today; but here I am.” Where I was working in Hamburg there were mostly socialists who hated Hitler . . . My mother came to “comfort” me. I still remember our conversation vividly. I said, “You should know, Mother, they start with a boycott and end with a pogrom. I shall definitely leave Germany.” She answered, “How can you say this? Everything will blow over in a few months.”

The next few months I spent mostly looking into where we would go when we left Germany. I first traveled to Holland, where one of my mother’s cousins worked as a doctor. He was willing to take me as his assistant till I could get my license there. I could not make up my mind immediately and promised to return some weeks later after having talked things over with my wife. When I came back to Scheveningen, where the cousin lived, the whole town, from the railway station to his home, was covered with Dutch Nazi flags. This decided the issue finally . . . Most of my cousin’s family were later deported to Bergen-Belsen and perished there.

My father considered Denmark, but with the same result. He also received suggestions about working in one of the French colonies, in

Algeria or Morocco. Some of his close friends decided to go to China, others to Brazil. But he finally chose to go to Palestine.

We had never been Zionists or shown any interest in Palestine before. However, our neighbor, Dr. Wiess, had been a Zionist all his life. For months he had brought us *Die Jüdische Rundschau*, the weekly of the German Zionists, without saying a word. His silence proved to be stronger than any eloquent propaganda . . .

We left Hamburg on October 30, 1933. When we came to the Austrian border, the German customs official checked our passports, saw our immigrant visa to Palestine, and looked at our little boy, sleeping on the bench; then he wished us all the best for our future. He seemed to be one of the “good” Germans. So ended the first period of my life.

As an Israeli, I live in a victims’ culture. The Holocaust is still an open wound for many of the people around me. More than a quarter of the population has been affected, directly or indirectly. I meet some of them daily, at the university where I teach and during the course of my private practice: Alona is named after her father’s first wife; they both survived Auschwitz, but she died shortly afterward “of sorrow.” Zelda is named after her grandmother, who was killed in Auschwitz. Shlomo, whom I interviewed for my Ph.D. thesis, saw his mother murdered by an SS officer; he still screams in his dreams every night. Even people like my parents, who managed to leave in time but lost many friends and relatives, are “survivors”; like those who came out of the camps alive, they suffered from deep guilt feelings, although for years they did not consider it legitimate to have those feelings.

Within this culture, the perpetrators of the Holocaust are still synonymous with evil. Many believe that one should not relate to them as one human being to another because of “what they did to us.” Like other children of my generation, I inherited this “black and white” view of the world: the inhumane versus the humane, the victimizer versus the victim. At the same time, the culture exerted constant pressure on us to “learn from the Holocaust”: We must be strong so that no one can do it to us again. We must demand justice and punish the perpetrators. We must remind the world of what was done to us and educate our people so they will not forget. We must be alert, unlike those who went to the gas chambers “like sheep to slaughter.” We must document what happened and seek restitution for our loss.

Although these demands seem justifiable from a survivor’s perspective, they reveal little wisdom—pain and fear, perhaps, even a desire

for revenge, but little in the way of understanding. I am afraid that evil is more cunning (the “banality of evil,” Hannah Arendt wrote, after watching the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem, and she did not mean stupidity). One cannot defeat it with solutions like these. I have learned not to underestimate the minds that planned and executed the murder of so many of my people, perhaps because I draw on personal experience: the struggle with my own potential for evil.

One day when I spoke about this with my friend Naomi, a survivor of the Lodz ghetto who came to Israel thirty-five years ago, she looked at me and said, “Hitler is dead. Still, he may yet achieve his goal of destroying us if we internalize the hate, mistrust, and pain, all the inhumanity that we were exposed to for so many years.” She paused a moment and then added, “I have no mercy for those who did it to us, but I care about ourselves, and I am afraid we might have come out of it lacking the human capacities we had before—to hope, to trust, and to love. Have we acquired the wisdom to prevent such a terrible outcome?” I was much taken with what Naomi said. As the sole survivor of her large family, she was expressing the terms of her own personal struggle to maintain love and hope. Perhaps she spoke for others too.

It will take a long time to acknowledge the complex psychological issues Naomi defines so clearly. After the war, there was a widespread illusion that one could smooth over the actuality of the Holocaust by framing it “rationally” as a problem to be solved—by carrying out de-Nazification, bringing the decisionmakers and the perpetrators to trial, building a democratic welfare society in Germany, and making economic and legal restitution to the victims. But the shadow of the Holocaust became longer the more successful these measures were.

These approaches helped society distance itself from the Holocaust, as though one could be infected by getting too close to such an eruption of evil, but it was like covering a volcano with cement. The basic questions—How could it have happened? How could human beings do such things to each other within a civilized society? Why did no one interfere?—remained unanswered. More recently, Ronald Reagan’s visit to the military cemetery at Bitburg and the *Historikerstreit* or “historians’ quarrel” in Germany over whether the Holocaust was a unique event have only sharpened the feeling that many would prefer to “sum up” the past in order to forget it. Yet I sense that another process is beginning, a movement toward a deeper understanding of the Holocaust as a human possibility.

When my friend told me Andre’s story and asked me, rhetorically, why so few others followed his family’s example, I felt ashamed. It

seems that we psychologists do not succeed very well in our efforts to answer such questions. Despite all the knowledge we have accumulated in our laboratories, clinical experience, and field experiments, we can say very little about the psychology of those who carried out the Holocaust. How could civilized people commit such atrocities? How could they live with what they had done? In what ways are they different from us—if at all?

The Holocaust divided people according to broad categories: the victims and the survivors, the perpetrators, the rescuers, the bystanders and the noninvolved. One could further refine these categories: survivors would include those who survived the extermination camps, those who succeeded in hiding in gentile homes, those who were transported at night to a neutral country, and those who fought with partisans in the woods. In the same way, one could define bystanders according to their proximity to the extermination process, perpetrators according to the atrocities they committed, and so on. Were these divisions incidental? Clearly not for some: the Nazis selected the Jews, the Gypsies, and the mentally retarded to become victims of the extermination process. For survivors, however, there is a subjective sense of incidence: part of their trauma is the fact that, by mere accident, they lived while others perished. The perpetrators, the rescuers, the bystanders—no one selected them. Was the role they played accidental? Could we find ways to predict who would do what?

In the years since the war, psychologists have tried to identify a clear-cut psychological typology or sociocultural profile for each of these categories: Perpetrators were defined as pathological sadists,¹ a personality type traced to their Germanic heritage.² Bystanders or followers were supposed to have an “authoritarian personality,”³ and rescuers an “altruistic personality.”⁴ But these labels have proved to be too simplistic. Others have wondered whether the psychology of the perpetrators was based on a dynamic different from that of the rescuers, or the bystanders, or the victims, or whether one particular psychological profile was especially susceptible to manipulation by other, more powerful forces.

1. G. M. Gilbert, *The Psychology of Dictatorship: Based on an Examination of the Leaders of Nazi Germany* (New York: Roland, 1950).

2. Elie Cohen, *Human Behavior in the Concentration Camp* (New York: Norton, 1953; Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1984).

3. T. W. Adorno et al., *The Authoritarian Personality* (New York: Harper and Row, 1950).

4. Samuel Oliner and Pearl Oliner, *The Altruistic Personality* (New York: Free Press, 1988).

Newer approaches have suggested a psychology of “ordinary people.” In his now-famous research, Stanley Milgram showed that, in obedience to authority, ordinary people could become involved in experiments endangering human life.⁵ Nechama Tec found that rescuers could not be sorted according to any particular personal trait, social class, religion, or education.⁶ Israel Charny has pointed out in this connection that psychologists have no way of identifying mass-murderers, because many would probably score within the normal range on all existing psychopathological scales.⁷ Being able to identify potential perpetrators and rescuers only in exceptional cases means that there is no simple way humanity can defend itself, psychologically, from similar future calamities. Coupled with this is the problem of disbelief. It is clear that the Allies (including the Jewish leadership in Palestine and the United States) did not believe the information they received about the nature and scale of Hitler’s extermination system, even during the years when intervention might have saved lives. Disbelief also characterized potential victims who, because they were unwilling to foresee their own devastating end, sometimes reduced their chances for rescue.

Obviously, these disquieting facts require a new definition of “normalcy.” If we cannot identify potential genocide victimizers (or rescuers) beforehand, since they are part of the ordinary population, and if we tend to normalize unexpected, extreme events and thus to ignore the danger they pose, how can we respond effectively when catastrophe threatens? What is this willed ignorance that does not allow us to acknowledge the human potential for evil? Does it have to do with the refusal to recognize the evil within ourselves?

One could claim that the Holocaust revealed the “weakness” in human nature: vulnerability to the influence of an evil and powerful person like a Hitler or a Himmler. Some psychologists have identified this tendency as inborn, the beast beneath the veneer of civilization. Still, this also sounds too simple. It is yet another kind of retrospective classification.

Could this “weakness” paradoxically be positive, a sense of trust within individuals that others can co-opt for evil ends? It is easy to observe such human trust among the victims of the Holocaust. It is

5. Stanley Milgram, “Behavioral Study of Obedience,” *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 67 (1963): 371–78.

6. Nechama Tec, *When Light Pierced the Darkness: Christian Rescue of Jews in Nazi-Occupied Poland* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

7. Israel W. Charny, “Genocide and Mass Destruction: Doing Harm to Others as a Missing Dimension in Psychopathology,” *Psychiatry* 49 (1986): 144–57.

also understandable that the same psychological explanation applies to those who heard about the extermination process and could not believe the reports were true.

What is much more difficult to accept is that the initiators of the extermination process shared a similar psychology. They knew they were killing human beings. How could they maintain their own sense of themselves as human, as moral people? Did they assume that ordinary people would go along with them and become murderers of men, women, and children? Or that these same people would not break down, even after exceeding their own inner moral or psychological limits? Did they have some unique insight into human nature?

We know of only a small number of Einsatzgruppen members and commanders who suffered a nervous breakdown while involved in the mass killings of 1941–42. Heinrich Himmler devoted part of his famous Posen address in 1943 to the “difficulties of carrying out this most important task.” He himself almost fainted while observing a mass-shooting, and he may have suggested that the gas chambers be introduced because they would provide “a more efficient process for overcoming these human limitations.” Still, very few of the shooting units asked to be transferred, and the vast majority did their “duty” without showing psychological stress.⁸ But how could they carry out the massive killing of women and children and then go home to their own wives and families? Many of them moved back and forth between these two realities for years. What kind of hope did they have, or transmit to their own children?

Historians tell us that Nazi bureaucracy and an indoctrination system describing victims as *Untermenschen*, as less than human, made it possible;⁹ sociologists emphasize the strong interpersonal bond between the leader and the group;¹⁰ and psychologists add the concept of “splitting” or “doubling,” which enabled perpetrators to go on killing Jews while maintaining their humanity within their own family circle.¹¹ Yet if these historical, sociological, and psychological explanations help us understand how ordinary people could commit atrocities under the Nazi regime without breaking down, they cannot account for what happened after the collapse of the Third Reich in 1945. Once the indoctrinators were gone and the enormous extent of

8. Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews* (Chicago: Quadrangle, 1961).

9. Ibid.

10. Joel E. Dimsdale, ed., *Survivors, Victims, and Perpetrators: Essays on the Nazi Holocaust* (Washington, D.C.: Hemisphere, 1980).

11. Robert J. Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors: Medical Killing and the Psychology of Genocide* (New York: Basic Books, 1986).

the atrocities became publicly known, what prevented these people from acknowledging what they had done? Certainly they were afraid of retribution (and fear helped maintain the “doubling”). But did the wall between their own moral selves and their atrocious deeds never crack?¹² One could argue that their need to be coherent and consistent in their own minds made them look for justification: “I only followed orders.” Although there are many ways to “leak” repressed and denied thoughts,¹³ some of these were foreclosed: Many people had left the church when they joined the Nazi Party and found it difficult to return. Few would have sought psychological treatment, since that would seem to admit weakness. Still, have they no moments of regret? No nightmares? No signs of sorrow or guilt after all these years, even now as they face their own deaths?

In the summer of 1984, I began my search for answers. To my surprise, I could find little information. The psychological literature was loaded with research findings and reports about the children, even the grandchildren, of survivors. But I could uncover hardly a word about the perpetrators and their children. Was it that the children remained unaffected by their parents’ past, or was it that nobody had tried to find out? At that time, I was not courageous enough to undertake the search myself. I had never traveled extensively in Germany, although once I had gone by train from Zurich to a conference in Stockholm and deliberated about stopping in Hamburg for a night—my mother had always urged me to go and see her “beautiful city” (though she herself went back only twice). I even took the first step during the train’s short stop in Hamburg by asking what an overnight stay would mean in terms of a ticket exchange, but the harsh, commanding tone of the ticket clerk’s reply put me off. I returned to my seat and traveled on to Stockholm.

An additional problem was the language. I had spoken German in my early childhood because I had stayed with my grandparents, who did not speak Hebrew, for long periods. But as an adult, I had used German only on isolated occasions. I wondered if I could handle the delicate conversation that would be required in interviewing perpetrators’ children.

Then one day, a German professor from the University of Wuppertal and his wife came to visit my department. Wuppertal and Beer

12. Gitta Sereny, *Into That Darkness: From Mercy-killing to Mass Murder* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974).

13. Donald P. Spence, “The Paradox of Denial,” in *The Denial of Stress*, ed. Shlomo Breznitz (New York: International University Press, 1982), 103–23.