

The Holocaust - One Generation Later
by Bruno Bettelheim

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p. 84 Denial is the earliest, most primitive, most inappropriate and ineffective of all psychological defenses used by man. When the event is potentially destructive, it is the most pernicious psychological defense, because it does not permit taking appropriate action which might safeguard against the real dangers. Denial therefore leaves the individual most vulnerable to the very perils against which he has tried to defend himself.

p. 86 The first use of the gas chambers was not for the elimination of Jews, but in the so-called euthanasia program, the elimination of those the Nazis considered misfits--mental defectives and inmates of psychiatric hospitals. This was the first group to be systematically killed off, quite a few of them in the first mobile gas chambers. Although this program of extermination was camouflaged--initially, it was claimed that some new, potentially dangerous treatment would be tried out on these people, which had some chance of success although it entailed serious risk of death, etc.--it soon became known what was really going on. There was such a strong reaction against this slaughter of mental patients among religious leaders and the common people that despite massive propaganda and much against their desire, the Nazis had to discontinue this important part of their official eugenics program.

This demonstrates that when unpleasant facts are not dealt with by means of denial but are faced squarely, even the most ruthless totalitarian regime can be forced to back down by determined public action.

pp. 86-87 Today, after all these years, it is easily forgotten how many Germans--by now means only Nazis--derived tangible advantages from the persecution of the Jews. The vast majority of Jews either owned business enterprises or held lucrative positions; nearly all owned nice homes. They were deprived of these, which were handed over to Germans. During the last year before the war, when Jews emigrated they could take none of their possessions with them, and the same was true during the war when they were sent first to the ghettos in Poland and later into the camps. Rather than see the Nazis acquire all their possessions, on being forced to leave most Jews preferred to give their art objects, jewelry, valuable furniture and clothing, and whatnot to gentile acquaintances, either as presents or for safekeeping. The end results were nearly always the same: the Jews died in the camps, and nobody was left to claim what was left in safekeeping.

With a Jewish family's enterprise or position going to one gentile German family, their home to another, and their possessions to three or four others, easily five or more German families profited greatly from the persecution of a single Jewish family. Enough reason--if not to be happy with--at least not to object to a policy which greatly enriched them without any effort on their part.

pp. 87-88 As the hardships became more severe, the greater the Jews' need to take protective action became. But unfortunately for many, the protective action they took consisted of engaging in denial, in order not to give up, fall into despair, or commit suicide. With each new and harsher treatment--abuse, beatings, deportations--the Jews were pushed into two opposite groups.

p. 89 Such denial was not restricted to the Jews of Europe, who at least had the excuse of terrible straits for using such a desperate and ineffective psychological defense; it was also the characteristic attitude of the West, very much including the U.S. Most nations which engaged in such denial did so mainly out of self-interest. From 1933 until the beginning of the war--for over six years--the Nazis were more than ready to let the Jews go; as a matter of fact, they tried everything to get rid of the Jews, provided they left all their belongings behind. But no country, not excepting the U.S., let more than an entirely insignificant trickle immigrate to it. The justification was again based on denial: things were not all that bad for the Jews; the Nazis did not really mean what they said, etc.

Later, after the extermination policy was in full swing, and after the American government knew about it, the Nazis offered to American Jewish

groups a clandestine deal: they would let the Jews go, if they received in payment for them a number of trucks. (First they had asked for war material, but accepting that this could not be done, had reduced their request to trucks.) When American negotiators raised the question of how they could trust Germany to keep its promise, the Nazis offered a down payment. Without it being suggested or requested by the Americans, the Nazis delivered, free of charge, a trainload of Jews into Switzerland to prove that Jews were of no value to them, that all they wanted was to get rid of them. After that, when it was obvious that the Nazis meant business, the negotiations were broken off because the American government would not permit the deal.

p. 93 Thus while these millions were slaughtered for an idea, they did not die for one.

pp. 93-94 We could feel so much better if the victims had acted out of choice. For our emotional relief, therefore, we dwell on the tiny minority who did exercise some choice: the resistance fighters of the Warsaw ghetto, for example, and others like them. We are ready to overlook the fact that these people fought back only at a time when everything was lost, when the overwhelming majority of those who had been forced into the ghettos had already been exterminated without resisting. Certainly those few who finally fought for their survival and their convictions, risking and losing their lives in doing so,

deserve our admiration; their deeds give us a moral lift. But the more we dwell on these few, the more unfair are we to the memory of the millions who were slaughtered--who gave in, did not fight back--because we deny them the only thing which up to the very end remained uniquely their own: their fate.

pp. 94-95 Equating My Lai and the death camps denies the crucial difference between isolated homicidal outbreaks in war--the consequence of anxiety, exasperation, or a temporary breakdown of controls which, inexcusable and criminal though it may be, nevertheless remains within the human dimension--and the careful planning and precise, deliberate execution of "the final solution." The essential differences are the premeditation which went into the one, compared with the breakdown of rationality and taking-over by primitive emotions characteristic of the other; and the application of all the machinery and power of the state in one case, compared to the breakdown of controls in individual persons of which the state severely disapproves in the other.

p. 101 That is why they should be memorialized at the places where they were collected for transportation--because there, although their life drives had been terribly weakened by their preceding experiences, they had not yet been extinguished. They were still wishing and trying to live, not yet entirely incapacitated by their own death drive. During the terrible transportation into the death camps, the horror of which was unimaginable, the power of their life drives must have slowly drained away. Having been on two of these transports, I know that the horrors one was subjected to made one wish for death as a relief; that is, as the life drives recede, the door is opened for the death drive to overpower the individual. That is why the victims could be herded to the gas chambers without resisting: the transport had turned many of them into walking corpses. In those who were selected for slave labor, slowly the life drives returned, weak though they remained, and they tried their very best to survive.

And here, finally, I come to the American contribution to the holocaust--a sin of omission. The euthanasia program mentioned before had to be stopped, dear as it was to Hitler, because too much opposition was aroused by it. Had there been as much concern abroad about the extermination of the Jews as there had been about the killing of the mentally defective and the insane, then the Nazis would probably have had to stop their extermination of the Jews also. But the world

remained silent; the Pope, the world's clergy--all who had raised their voices for the mentally defective--remained silent when Jews were murdered.

This same lack of world concern, as it weakened life drives, reinforced the death tendencies in the Jews, because they felt completely abandoned, felt that nobody else cared, that nobody but they themselves thought they had a right to live. Unfortunately, one's own belief in one's right to live is not enough to keep the death tendencies within controllable boundaries. Most suicidal persons think they have a right to live; they try to commit suicide either because they are convinced that nobody else cares whether they live or die, or to find out whether this is so. They give up their suicidal ideas as soon as they come to feel that there is someone else who is deeply concerned that they live, and who is willing to go to great lengths to help them live.

The SS knew instinctively all there is to be known about the death drive; for good reason did the "death's-head units" of the SS run the camps and wear skulls on their uniforms. It was their systematic aim to destroy the strength of the life drives in prisoners.

pp. 103-104 The Nazis murdered the Jews of Europe. That nobody but the Jews cared, that the world, the United States, did not care, was why Jewish life drives lost the battle against death tendencies. This was why the camp inmates had already relinquished life as they dug their own graves, and why, as the poet put it, "there was earth in them." The most extreme agony is to feel that one has been utterly forsaken.

Murderers can only kill; they do not have the power to rob us of the wish to live nor of the ability to fight for life. Degradation, exhaustion, and utter debilitation through starvation, sickness, and mistreatment--all these seriously weaken our will to live, undermine our life drives, and with this open the way for the death drive. But when such conditions--in which the Jews found themselves because of Nazi persecution and degradation--are worsened by the feeling that the rest of the world has forsaken us, then we are totally deprived of the strength needed to fight off the murderer, to refuse to dig our own grave.