

# Lessons of the Holocaust

By Terrence Des Pres



HAMILTON, N. Y.—Without doubt there is an upsurge of interest in the holocaust. We see it in novels, in films, in news articles and even on popular television programs. Most significantly, we see it in the increasing number of college courses, dozens of them in schools throughout the land, that focus on this subject.

There is a demand for such knowledge, a demand on the part of the students themselves, as if Erik Erikson's remark—that children live out the secret wishes of the parents—were indeed the truth of what is happening.

For the generation that lived through the war, for the men and women who suffered loss of family and friends on the battlefields or in the death camps, there was only naked hurt and a traumatic reaction that made any effort to confront the evil of the concentration camps a task beyond human resource.

Yet if we are to meet our present problems in humanly creative ways, we need most urgently to come to livable terms with our terrible past. And judging from the proliferation of holocaust courses, and also from my own experience in the classroom, a generation of young adults has arrived, Jewish and non-Jewish alike, who are now prepared to face the worst.

The question Why? will naturally persist. Why teach such stuff? Why enroll in such a course? Why, amid the quiet splendor of these upstate hills, allow such darkness to invade one's soul when, ostensibly, no good can come of it? And certainly, if by good we mean answers and rational explanation, if we mean atonement and redemption, then there is nothing to be gained by knowing the facts of the death camps.

Yet as if by miracle, this spring there are 141 students in "Literature of the Holocaust" at Colgate. The room is filled with an intensity of concern I am tempted to describe as religious. And for all their shock and depression and, yes, also their tears, what emerges finally are things so finely human, things so clearly good and life-enhancing, that the danger we run and the damage we share in meditation on the holocaust seem not too high a price to pay.

For Jewish students there comes a renewal of heritage and pride, and the

gap between themselves and their relatives closes as their sense of family deepens: "During vacation I did a lot of checking on who came from where."

A new appreciation of the problems of Israel comes to everyone; and again, for Jews and non-Jews, a sharpening of moral discernment, a release of ethical energies, a keener sense of prejudice and injustice.

A disregard for small irritations develops, the outcome of a constant, involuntary comparison between one's own suffering and the massive pain of the camps, with a resulting decline in self-indulgence: "Sometimes I catch myself complaining and then I think, well, why don't you shut up and drink your watery cabbage soup."

Also a broader, more sensitive care for others, accompanied by the feeling that personal relationships are supremely valuable—"little things, like meeting someone on the street and having a nice time talking, or seeing a person extend himself for another person."

There comes, too, a new lucidity about "the basics," and the real risk of all this is openly accepted: "What confuses me is whether knowledge of these events should make me rejoice that I am alive and aware of my good fortune, or whether the immense cruelty and destruction of the camps will ultimately undermine my faith in mankind."

For most, their own good luck, the simple facts of time and place, come to be "almost a miracle." Their lives, once taken for granted, now seem priceless gifts. And as odd as this must sound, for many of these young people there comes at last a small fierce joy.

"I am happy," says one student, "more appreciative of the great fortune I've had to be given this specific life to live."

Or as another said: "I was out in the snow running and singing and I yelled out at the top of my lungs, I'm alive—and I love it."

Or finally, in full knowledge of how terrible life can become: "Something is making living feel a whole lot better."

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