PRACTICAL REASON

The Help Story - Transcript

Introduction

EPF Media presents Practical Reason. Stories that are unfamiliar or worth or worthy of examination. On this program, non-militant resistance that raised hope and saved lives. The Help Story.

Dr. Art Shostak:

You're listening to Art Shostak. I'm an Emeritus Professor of Sociology and I enjoy living with my wife, out here in Alameda, California, where I continue my research into the good behavior of good people who declined to accept the definition of them proposed by some rather not so good people. I have spent the last 12 years from 2006 through 2018, preparing a manuscript which was published in 2017. A book entitled Stealth Altruism. The subtitle is Forbidden Care as Jewish Resistance in the Holocaust. The book draws on 195 survivor memoirs. There are, by the way, over 10,000 such memoirs in English. The book draws also on my visits to 48 Holocaust museums worldwide, of which only 43 deal with the good behavior that I've been talking about behavior I call the help story. Almost all the museums instead focus on the horror story.

To understand the Holocaust is to understand that it contains three separate stories. The stories are inseparable. They're intertwined. There is no getting away from their coexistence. The first story is the familiar story we know as the horror story and that's the one which for over 70 years now has been highlighted by the museums, the education centers, the mass media, the movies, and it's basically the story of what the perpetrators did to the victims. The second story is what I call the hurt story. The hurt story is the militant reaction of the victims to the harm perpetrated by the Third Reich and its collaborators. So in the hurt story, you have Jewish partisans in the forests who put explosives on train tracks that are carrying lengthy trains of German soldiers and suddenly the tracks blow up and scores of soldiers die. That's the hurt story. It's the effort, militant effort of victims to hurt those who are aiming to hurt them.

So we have the horror story, the hurt story. The third story is the least well known of them all and the one in greatest need of overdue attention. And that's the help story. The help story is a story that gives us new and urgently needed pride in our capacity to rise to the occasion. Or as Spike Lee put it in a title of one of his best movies to Do The Right Thing. The help story is the confirmation that even in the hellish setting of concentration camps and slave labor camps, there were certain men and women who risked everything to alleviate the suffering of less fortunate others. Germany having conquered 24 countries and ruling supreme over all of Europe, that's the picture that begins the roundup of Jewry, and from 1939 through 1942, the housing of Jewry in what were known as ghettos.

Ghettos had first been employed in the 1400s in Italy, in Venice in particular, they invented the concept of ghettoization, and it hadn't been seen, this grouping together of Jewry since maybe the 1800s. They returned, the Germans returned to this concept and created ghettos all over Europe and the ghettos were a mixed fate for Jewry. Jews inside the ghetto had their own world and in that world there was a Jewish police that reported to the Nazis, to the SS, but the police was made up of fellow Jews. There was

a Jewish council, a leadership council known as a Judenrat. The members of which were chosen by the SS and their families, were held in jeopardy unless the council members did the Nazi thing and the Nazi thing was to steadily turn over to the German authorities, large mass groups of Jews who were sent by transport to the various camps which were being established outside of Germany, almost all of them.

Dr. Art Shostak: And the largest number of them, close to 90% of them in Poland, in Poland, the major camps. When the Jews were gathered in an assembly area and then forced to get into railroad cars, they first discovered the full extent of Nazi savagery. The railroad cars were well known by the numbers, 40 and eight meaning they had been designed for either 40 soldiers or eight horses with a horse attendants, 40 and eight, okay? Eighty to a hundred Jewish ghetto dwellers, men, women, adults to infants, elderly, the infirm, the whole panoply of Jewish ghetto dwellers were forced into a railroad car. They had no idea where they were going. They were all of them packed with their luggage, squeezed into the car, and then the train would go off and would go off with one barrel for human waste, urine and feces, and one barrel of drinkable water.

The trip, however, would go for days. Days, three days, four days, six days. The Greek Jews traveled for two and a half weeks in order to reach the German camps. During that time, suffering was extraordinary. They endlessly looked through holes in the side of the car to try to figure out where they were heading. There were certainly heading East, that is towards most of them camps in Poland, but they couldn't figure out exactly where and it got worse and worse because six of the camps to which they were heading, where what became known afterwards as death camps. Death camps meant that almost immediately on arrival, 90% or more men and women died within 48 hours of arriving. A million and a half people arrived at Auschwitz and there the arrival was different. The arrival allowed for a selection of as much as 10% of the new arrivals, selection of the 10% for slave labor.

They could let the other 90%, they died in 48 or 72 hours. All those though who arrived at Auschwitz were startled to see on the platform the loading deck as a tumbled out of the cars, 20 to 25% of the people in the cars had died during the course of transport. These were commonly the elderly, the infirm, the very ill, that bodies were just in a corner of the car. The rest of them tumbling out, found themselves guarded by heavily armed SS, frequently holding on tough chains, fierce dogs that themselves had been praying to snarl and attempt to hurt people to keep them in line. Also though on the platform there were prisoners, these were usually almost always men and they were in striped uniforms. They were there to remove this luggage that had riches and photos, stuff that the people had been misled to think would help them in resettlement.

The utterly confused, exhausted, starving, thirsty, remnants of the train cars were besides themselves with fear and bewilderment. That's when these striped pajama like prisoners, these wizened men who had done this over and over again, day in and day out. When these men performed a most unusual role. They would mingle up and down the platform, under the scrutiny of the SS officers and guards on the platform and the men would try and find people with whom they shared language, because for people arriving at the camps were coming from 24 different European countries and so it was a whole

mixture of language. One language was common across almost all arrivees, and that was Yiddish. And these men of course spoke Yiddish and they also spoke Polish and Russian, Ukrainian. Any case when they would find someone with whom they had language affinity, they would whisper instructions to that person.

Dr. Art Shostak: The very act of whispering violated the rule and the rule was no Jew helps another Jew. That's a fierce rule and the cost of breaking a rule was death by summary execution there on the platform or being sent to the gas soon thereafter. What the men would whisper was advice to the young Jews on the platform. They would whisper to the young Jews, "You are 16 and older." And a young Jew might astonish to hear this whisper might say, "But I'm 12," in which case the whisperer taking a second chance at life, the whisperer would turn and fiercely say, "You are 16." They would say to the men, "You are 40 and younger," and the men might recklessly say, "But I'm 52," and the same response would come. "You are 40 and younger." Both young and old were told in a whisper, "You have a trade."

Again, the men might say, "I'm a lawyer, I'm a doctor, I'm a corporate exec." To which the whisperer would say, "You are an electrician, you are a plasterer, you are a plumber, you are a carpenter." The advice that the striped pajama type old men were giving to the new arrivals was life saving advice, for down at the other end of the platform were SS officers who would ask two questions, "What is your age, and what do you do for a living?" If you gave the right answers, 16 and older, 40 and younger, and I'm a carpenter, you got sent to one side the side of the 10% who lived. If you didn't, if you told the truth about your age, if you boasted that you were a lawyer, you went to the left side which went to the gas and you didn't live.

The men giving the advice did not know any of the arrivals. The arrivals did not know any of the advice givers. The advice givers were under strict orders not to say a word. The 10% who were spared because they gave the advised answers later would look for fellow countrymen and many of the fellow countrymen would then welcome the new arrivals and take them under their wing, would school them, explaining to them that you've got about one week, seven days to figure out the code of life here in the camp, but the typical example of the code is you never look an SS guard in the eyes. The penalty for looking in their eyes is your death. You're always looking at the ground. A similar rule is you memorize immediately the number you're going to be assigned, the one that's either going to be tattooed on your arm or it's going to be stamped on a brass coin that will hang around your neck.

You no longer have a name, you're only a number, and if you hear that number over the loud speaker, you must respond to whatever the loud speaker is dictating. Other rules included things like carry a pebble where ever you can, suck on the pebble because it reduces the thirst quest you'll feel all day. The kind of altruistic help, it came this help from deep inside all of us. It comes from what is now known as the altruistic impulse. It would seem that everybody in the camp brought into the camp with them a need to respond to less fortunate others. Prisoners would pass one another and taking care to not have a guard looking, they would smile at one another. So something as small as a shared smile would light up a person's whole day and give a person new hope, new sense

of self. Nazism was dedicated to the dehumanization of its victims, of robbing victims of self esteem, of bringing victims down to the lowest possible level of life at work.

Dr. Art Shostak: Various people would notice the fatigue of others and they would move to in a stealthy way, help the weaker person meet the day's work quota. Back in the barrack, experienced prisoners would school the newbies in ways of surviving, of getting through, particularly in the importance of keeping up hope, keeping up the belief that you can make it through to liberation. That unarmed resistance in the camp, unarmed resistance in the camp would bring us through to liberation. Outlawed caregiving in the camp would have results, would have paid off. You can envision the camp as a civil war, where the perpetrators had the power of life and death, but the victims had the power to keep humanity alive and that made a huge difference. It was understood therefore, that prisoners who dared, for example, to whisper one another's real name, that that behavior could subject both the whisperer and the person addressed to serious beatings. The beatings could result in diminished productivity on their part at work and the penalty for diminished productivity was being sent to the gas.

If you was breaking a rule, there was a range of punishment. The least of the punishments was a beating. Or on your bare buttocks lashing. The lashing basically incapacitated you and you had to be ready the next morning to go to work. Alternatively, it's possible, but you would transferred to the infirmary. Nobody in their right mind in the camp wanted anything to do with the infirmary because the infirmary was the scene frequently of what were known as selection. Their numbers were then called on a loudspeaker the next morning and they were trucked to the gas. In the camps, men and women who did not have to share food, share clothing, in other ways provide a hand at risk of their own life and maybe even of their family members, they rose to the occasion.

Altruism in this regard is a very high order form of morality, of nobility, and it's much a part of a scene but secret. It's nothing that could be made evident and if it were ever noticed, the punishment was quite severe. Jewry insisted that, for example, to save one life was as if one saved the whole universe. I would like them to take away two lessons, the lesson of our capacity to do terrible to one another and the lesson of our capacity, despite opposition, to do well by one another, to take risks for one another. So that's motivation to create a new formula, a new understanding of the experience of the European Jewry from 1933 to 1945. We need to be reminded that we have a propensity to care for one another, that we are not born bystanders. We're born with the potential for being upstanders and this encourages our propensity to be Upstanders.

I have visited over 50 Holocaust museums and education centers around the world, and I have found in 95% of them very little, if any attention paid to this care sharing high risk behavior. This story is the one that has fallen off the table. It is the one that we have sidelined, the one that we have not given the attention we owe it. So to honor those people who did the caring, to honor the fact that any of us could also give caring, we have to make an effort to bring the Help Story forward and profit from that.

Dr. Art Shostak: We have to begin to get children to want to hear stories of heroism, stories of rescue, stories of relief provided by some for others. That's the way we move our species forward, not by being casual about media and other kinds of focus on the dark side. And the book is Self Altruism: Forbidden Care as Jewish Resistance in the Holocaust. The book is published by Routledge Press and it's a major press and their website is of course www.routledge.com. It's also available through Amazon. And the book is one that I hope will get attention, overdue attention to our need to see altruism in the behavior of victims, altruism which was hidden from the victimizers, altruism which was incredibly noble and admirable.

Ending: Practical Reason is produced by Larry Rattner. Special thanks to Dr. Arthur Shostak. Audio editing and post-production audio by Emmanuel Miranda. Original music by Christopher Cano. Additional help from Andrea Nakaya. Visit our website, PracticalReasonPodcast.com to find additional programs, materials, and links and EPFMedia.com to learn about the documentaries we distribute. Thank you for listening.

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