

What We Don't Consider

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Several weeks ago I was invited to lecture at St Andrews Episcopal Academy in Potomac, Maryland near Washington, D.C. St. Andrews happens to be the school of choice for many children of our nation's lawmakers, including our President's son. My lecture topic: Major Factors Leading to the Holocaust. The timing of my lecture invitation coincided with Holocaust Remembrance Week, plus a visit by the A.P. History classes to the United States Memorial Holocaust Museum in Washington, and was preceded by the students reading extensively about the Holocaust, as well as about the rise of Zionism.

My group of students were extremely well -informed, well-read, very bright, and asked excellent questions. But, even so, they were totally surprised by some of the less-examined aspects of Holocaust studies I raised. Interestingly, though, is that regularly I encounter similar unawareness among so many well -educated adults.

A number of the events and strategies I presented to these students about Nazism's rise have reoccurred throughout history in varying degrees. In fact, we've even witnessed many similar strategies being implemented today — not only in our country but world-wide. For instance, these include uses of propaganda to foment political or social unrest, public hate campaigns, increases in hate-crimes, stereotyping, and a method that's been used for centuries now referred to as "false news." According to data collected recently by multiple agencies, "hate crimes" were up by 21% from 2016. These data were consistent among reporting agencies, including: The Anti-Defamation League, Federal Bureau of Investigation, National Institute for Justice, Chronicle of Higher Education, Human Rights Watch Group and, sad to say, far too many to list here.

While I tried to focus my lectures toward the students' age-groups, my greatest hope was to help them recognize how important of a responsibility younger people have to engage in morally ethical conduct, as well as to think independently. Doing so is critical to being able to assess the accuracy of all information we receive. Questioning both the origins and validity of information and news is a habit they, and every one of us, must develop.

Next, I encouraged them to think globally about what the longer term impact of war is and, of course, what the consequences of wide spread traumas, and societal breakdowns might be. As a sociologist and researcher, I desperately wanted to convey one key point— that the Holo-

-caust, as well as every genocide throughout history, did not occur in a short time frame but instead, evolved and transpired over decades in the form of gradual and consistent desensitization of societal values and morals.



Among the questions I posed: Why do we still devote so much effort and scholarly work to studying and analyzing the Holocaust? What have we learned, and continue to learn, from it? What factors continue to perplex and plague us and why? In addition, we examined the similarities of all genocides, as well as the specific characteristics of recent ethnic cleansings.

In closing, I drew their attention to a field of study that only recently has been gaining validation and serious significance as it related to my lecture topic; trans-generational effects of trauma -particularly, second generation trauma that in odd ways have been proving to be both "inherited" and genetically transmitted. One of the most studied groups currently has, in fact, been second generation Holocaust survivors — otherwise known as Children of Survivors.

Without exception, every one of these students claimed that the long-term emotional impact survivors asserted upon their children is a consequence that they never even realized occurred. And, as a result, that provided an additional unplanned opportunity in which to raise students' awareness about the significant and irreversible impact global wars assert upon young people living in war torn regions, many of whom have witnessed their entire families annihilated.

I concluded by sharing with the St. Andrews group a brief essay I wrote, illustrative of the trans-generational impact of my father's Holocaust trauma. Unfortunately, this story represents a small snippet of daily events that were couched within the context of a much greater truth. Those daily events — whether they involved waiting with my parents in movie theatre lines, riding on crowded commuter trains, or (as in my story) the simple fall ritual of burning leaves, never would become mundane to my parents, nor to second generation adults such as me.

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Marlene's Column

The Story: A Burning Season

The first fall we lived in our new country, my father's hyper sensitivity to smoke — its odors, colors, and even a taste he perceived, dominated almost every one of our weekends. Before we moved to the Chicago area, we had lived in Montreal's inner city. There, fall's leaves accumulated across grass-barren yards and along curbs where they were left to disintegrate. But in America, as we discovered once we had moved here, fall's arrival was heralded by frantic leaf raking and backyard fires pervasive on all but the rainiest of autumn weekends.

I loved the wonderful earthy scent, a damp smokiness that carried with it an unfamiliar roasting aroma. It wafted harmlessly above surrounding village parks and houses. The weekend I first experienced those fires, I was at a classmate's house. The two of us were working on a school project inside while her father and brother spent the entire afternoon monitoring a bonfire outside in their backyard. The fire's aroma was so intense it penetrated through the exterior brick walls, mortar, and closed windows of her bedroom allowing me to enjoy it even from indoors.

"I had no idea burning leaves smelled so sweet!" I marveled to my friend.

"They don't really," she explained. "What you're smelling are acorns toasting. They get raked up with the leaves and when the acorns heat up they explode just like popcorn does. That's what they smell like."

The next weekend, an incredibly sunny and clear one, proved perfect for leaf burning. From the front window of our apartment above the Winnetka Post Office, I watched smoke rise from old metal oil drums in the gardens of nearby houses. All the drums were packed to the brim with raked leaves, but because most of the rakings were damp, flames rarely shot up. Instead, the tall smoke spires swirling toward heaven always reminded me of Jack In the Beanstalk. The smoke and fires, raking contests, and the laughter of so much outdoor activity in our neighborhood seemed incredibly exotic to me, all enhanced by such a pleasant aroma.

One October Sunday afternoon, I'd gone with my parents to the nearby deli for lunch. A four block walk from our apartment, it had become a ritual for the three of us while my brother worked at his part time job. But that particular Sunday revealed one of my father's secret scars to me. It was different from any I'd yet seen in my fourteen years.

The moment the three of us walked out of the restaurant after lunch, my father sniffed the air deeply. His

head tilted upward like a hound dog searching for prey. He stared into an aqua sky that, but for the scattered smoke pillars, was cloudless. My father continued to look up, his head twisted awkwardly while he observed multiple smoke pillars that swirled into the air from adjacent streets like synchronized dancers. Then, without a word, he spun in a circle around and around as though hopelessly lost and trying to make sense of his surroundings. On his third rotation, my father spotted even more smoky columns in the distance ascending to heaven.

Suddenly, he turned back toward my mother and me. He was a man transformed, his face darkened with terror. Perspiration bubbles erupted across his forehead and upper lip where they glistened like miniature glass shards. For the next few seconds, he neither moved nor uttered a sound. He was frozen in space, rendered breathless and entirely inanimate.

Without warning, his voice exploded in a growl of anger. In Yiddish, my father hissed to my mother, "They should all burn in hell along with all their God-damned burning leaves! If they saw what I saw from so much smoke *mit* fires, they never again would think to burn anything for the whole rest of their lives as long as they would live!"

He left my mother and me standing in front of Lenny's Deli. We watched him take off at a run, watched as he cut across lush Village Green lawns, and watched his gait transition into a lope like a wild gazelle — pushing him ever faster across the remaining distance to our apartment.

Shortly after he'd taken off on his own, my mother and I walked home, our steps slow and measured. We found that my father had locked himself inside his bedroom but he had also closed and locked every window in the apartment. I envisioned him like a panicked animal, bounding room to room, frantically closing and locking every conceivable opening in a rush before hiding himself away.



Marlene's Column

My father refused to leave our apartment until Monday morning, by which time the weekend's fires would have burned themselves out. On Monday mornings, the air would once again be suburban clear. During every fall weekend but for the rainy ones when no one ventured out to rake leaves nor make fires, my father's reactions remained consistent and predictable.

"Dad, why don't you like this smell?" I asked him one Sunday evening at the dinner table. Earlier that day, he had refused to join my mother and me at lunch, regardless of how much we had pleaded. For him to have agreed would have required my father to step outside the safety of his bedroom. What I was incapable of comprehending then was that my father knew that he risked confronting the debilitating assaults on his memory always inflicted by pervasive smoke. "I think it smells really nice!" I said, hopeful that my enthusiasm held a power that might sway his reactions, possibly even convince him to join us on our future lunch outings. I was thoroughly unprepared for my father's response.

It was during that first American fall when my father explained the deeper meanings of smoke and fire to me. It

proved to be the one and only time ever for his explanation because we never spoke of it again. I never asked again.

"So, I will ask you now such an easy question," my father said, "but it's the only question that will help you to understand what it is this smoke business with me." I nodded to convey my understanding — the well proven method for urging him on. "So, *nu*? Do you think you would still like such smoke, this smell you say is so nice, if you were where it is I was?" he asked, rhetorically.

I stood still and quiet. I waited to hear what I was positive would follow. And my father did continue, his voice becoming a monotonal whisper, devoid of all emotion. "If you saw such smoke like what I did," he said, "smoke what filled the whole sky from so many crematoriums, and if you smelled such a thing what you knew for one-hundred percent sure was other Jews burning in Auschwitz — Jews who were your family, friends, children, neighbors, maybe only then will you be able to answer me. *Nu*, so could you still again in your whole life think such a smoke is smelling so nice?"