

**SIX MEDITATIONS
ON
AUSCHWITZ**

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***DEDICATED
TO THE MEMORY OF
ZALMAN GRADOWSKI
LEIB LANGFUSS***

Two Sonderkommando at Auschwitz-Birkenau who performed the saddest tasks in the saddest place on earth: the removal of their brothers and sisters and children from the gas chambers to the furnaces. Somehow they managed to keep journals. Langfuss's last entry reads: "We are now going to the zone. We are 170 men. We are the last of the commandos. We are being led to die." In boxes and jars under the courtyard of Crematorium Two, inside the grave full of bones near Crematorium One, and under the leveled bones on the south-western side of the same courtyard, were hidden the journals. We found them. We remember.

I

The Real Auschwitz

We could dismantle Auschwitz — the barracks, the miles of track and barbed wire, the crematoria, the boards and bricks of the SS quarters, the gallows, the instruments of torture, the guard towers, the chains that restrained snarling hounds. We could even call in earth-moving equipment to excavate the soil to a depth of a thousand feet, far below, one would hope, any trace of blood or bone or ash or contaminated water. Then we could load this cubic mile of horror and shoot it off into space, toward the sun, aboard a fleet of rockets named for Greek and Roman gods — Titan, Apollo, Saturn. As they approach the sun the rockets and their cargo glow and begin to melt -- burning timbers and fused concrete, incandescent rails and rocks turned to lava -- and long before they reach the orbit of Mercury they vaporize — that cubic mile of the tiniest of specks in an immensity of fire. In silence a fleet of comets form, the powerful solar wind stripping electrons off the atoms and accelerating their nuclei into space, a jet stream of particles. Perhaps some of them would fall to earth at the poles as aurora borealis, perhaps some would be drawn by the powerful magnet of Jupiter and mix with the perpetual hurricane of its atmosphere, and the rest would race into the infinity of ever colder and darker space, sometimes falling into a star, sometimes crossing light years and eons, alone. And this would be our exorcism of evil, and the rainbow farewell, cemetery and transcendent, for the tormented souls who lived in dreary darkness through years of grey misery and black pain. Has the sun enough brilliance to chase every shadow and light the bleakest cranny?

Auschwitz — a cloud of ions racing into the absolute zero of the intergalactic void. But it is not atomic particles that are Auschwitz. They are only the oblique manifestations of the unseen Auschwitz, the one we carry with us in our minds, part of us like bone marrow or DNA. This is the Auschwitz we merely decommission, the monster that slumbers on the seafloor, whose stirrings suffocate us in nightmares and send waves of panic and despair through our daytime thoughts.

In 1969 various police and military forces surrounded anti-war protesters in Berkeley. From special vans police fingerprinted, photographed and charged the protesters. Buses convoyed them into the desiccated interior of the country, to a concentration camp, where they were forced to lie face down in the hot sun. Any movement was punished by shocks from cattle prods. The concentration camp had lain dormant for over two decades, since last used to incarcerate Japanese-Americans.

Except that the images were in color and not in grainy black and white, the emaciated Bosnian prisoner staring through the barbed wire was eerily both contemporary and of the Holocaust. In the background strutted the same bullies.

On a wall in a Cambodian village row upon row of photographs, in black and white, demonstrate the oppressor's need to document his mayhem, each record a trophy to be gloated over. A human life is reduced to a statistic, to a dossier that can be folded shut and filed in an archive, perhaps the murderer's defense against ghosts, who, once counted and locked in a filing cabinet, cannot haunt the killers. The photographs of the victims, collected in such numbers and arranged like pixels on a giant screen, focus horror the way a lens gathers light into a beam that cuts through steel. Especially the eyes of the children. One child numbly holds askew his metal plate, on which appears his serial number in movable type. His face is bewildered at his betrayal. Across from them, in rows of shelves that echo the bunks at Auschwitz, piles of unearthed skulls stare, too, above bared teeth, as if frozen in mid-scream. Some of the skulls have tied over their eyes the executioner's blindfold. Some were hacked to death for being able to speak French, or because they wore glasses, or spoke elegantly. The slate was being wiped clean in the Year Zero, a time when Pnom Penh and every town was an empty husk, like the Warsaw Ghetto and its smaller counterparts throughout Eastern Europe.

On the wall of Mengele's laboratory were "pinned like butterflies" scores of human eyes taken from twins. The torturer must collect his trophies.

The next Auschwitz is being built even now in someone's mind, awaiting only the right combination of fear and stress for it to be ferried on Charon's barque to the corporeal world. This is the real Auschwitz, built of materials far more durable than bricks and mortar and barbed wire. The real Auschwitz is constructed of primitive regression to our archaic primate past, drawing its energy from fear and its attendant paranoia, leading to aggression. Unlike any other creature, even our primate cousins, man can apply his intelligence, his imagination, his foresight to torture, control and death. Only man could industrialize mass murder. As a species we are born with a number of biologically based tendencies in behavior, no longer adaptive, but replicated in each newborn.

I

Crucifixion is an icon of how men use their intelligence to prolong torment. With just a few pieces of wood and a few nails, the victim can be placed in such a way that gravity and the body's natural response to contortion will perform the torture over a period of hours. At the same time, the victim is in a helpless position in which further torments can be conveniently visited upon him, such as smashing his shins or lacerating his flesh. The victim's agony, furthermore, was prominently displayed to the public.

Someone in antiquity had to plan such an instrument of torture, had to test it and refine it. The result was a horizontal beam (patibulum) and joined to it in a T-formation, a vertical beam (simplex). The victim's arms were spread across the patibulum and fastened to it with one nail driven through each forearm. The legs

were drawn up and twisted to one side until they were parallel to the patibulum. Then the heels, placed one over the other, were nailed with a single nail to the simplex. A small plank, called a sedecula, supported the buttocks. Without the sedecula the body would sag, causing death by asphyxiation in a relatively short time. Hence, the sedecula's purpose was to maintain the body's contortion and prolong the agony. In this twisted position, the muscles would have gone into spasm and cramped, eventually spreading to the diaphragm and lungs.

In 1968 archeologists discovered, in a cave-tomb north of Jerusalem, the remains of a man who had been crucified. When his heels had been nailed to the cross, the nail had hit a knot in the olive wood and bent sharply. In order to take the body down from the cross the feet had to be amputated. The bent nail could not be removed from the heel bones and was buried with the corpse.

When our ancestors began walking erect, the face became much more prominent. As social animals it was imperative to identify who was an interloper, as well who had cooperated and who had shirked. To this day facial features and difference in skin color trigger automatic responses of suspicion and fear. These reactions can always be overridden by the higher centers of the brain, but only if one is trained to do so. Regression to fear and hate are easier and faster than stopping to think. This is why Auschwitz can only be dismantled but never banished from human history. We commemorate the Holocaust in Europe or Cambodia, but watch, like a man paralyzed by sleep, as another holocaust rages across Rwanda.

What of men like Hitler, the failed painter, or Goebbels, whose withered leg would have made him eligible for his own policies of exterminating the crippled (but he escaped by being awarded a special racial category, "wizened Aryan"), or the SS guards dispensing random terror, or the so-called doctors, like Mengele, a grotesque imitation of Christ (or Jehovah) on Judgment Day, dividing humanity with a stick into two streams of immediate and lingering perdition? They are facades, like the fire-breathing, stentorian props of the Wizard of Oz, only their fire really consumed and their harangues incited fear and hate. Behind the facade is a frightened little boy, who lives at the core of every paranoid. Unable to accept responsibility, it must be someone else's fault. A low class, ignorant nobody can inflate his importance by imaging he has been singled out by powerful secret organizations for persecution, terrified and envious as they are of his nobility, insight and potential to overthrow the rulers. Hence, like noble Siegfried stabbed in the back by an evil Hagen, the dwarf's son, so Germany was undermined by the Jews. The unquestioned and unarguable conviction that Jews, despite their small numbers, control the world economy through secret councils. The delusional belief in long-range conspiracies to dominate the world and the Gentiles. Hence, the Protocols of the Elders of Zion. A nobody suddenly given membership in the master race, along with a uniform, a machine gun, whip and attack dogs, could act out the

fantasy of a Norse god gripping the leashes of his panthers, just as obese Goering did at his carefully staged psychodramas. In addition, many Germans and other Europeans suffered the wound of offended narcissism because the Jews were the Chosen People. Narcissistic rage is ferocious, in proportion to the anxiety people feel when, as they see it, their very existence is called into question. The Nazis, the Rwandan leaders, the Red Guards draw their boundless energy by touching the third rail in which is concentrated the fears and paranoia of millions of ordinary people under the stress of economic collapse or military defeat or internal strife.

In the West, the Jews are terrorized on *Kristallnacht*, and in the East the charred corpses of Chinese lie curled in their looted, gutted shops. In the South, East Indians find themselves refugees in the New World, their African homes, shops and generations of toil confiscated by thugs in uniform.

Auschwitz is a death factory. It relies on dehumanization to function efficiently. Degradation justifies cruelty. When a well-fed, clean, heavily-armed guard looks down upon a filthy, louse-ridden prisoner in striped pajamas, weak, all skin and bones, shaking with fever, eyes downcast — then cruelty is visited easily on the subhuman wretch. After Auschwitz we can frustrate its legacy by bestowing dignity on the dead and walking wounded. To the tattooed numbers must be attached, where possible, faces, personal histories, photos, memories, the social matrix of family and friends, neighborhoods and, of course, names. Most of all we must celebrate the victories of people like Korczak who led his orphans from the ghetto to the cattle cars in a festive parade, their courage winning salutes from the German soldiers. Or the dancer from Warsaw, named Horowitz — this is all that is known of her — who on the ramp leading to the gas chambers did not go quietly. She took off her high heeled shoes, struck an SS guard with it, took his gun, shot him to death and wounded another. In the chaos of screaming, fighting women the guards were routed and order was only restored when hours later the women were surrounded by steel helmeted troops armed with machine guns and grenades.

Auschwitz is the logical consequence of dehumanization in another sense: the attempt to deny our human nature of diversity, of non-specialization, of adaptability to any environment and substitute for it the nature of the social insects. Insects are highly successful and efficient creatures, as a cross-section of a termite mound or an ant farm will amply illustrate. Like us, termites and ants are social animals, but unlike us, a termite today is virtually the same as one tens of millions of years ago. The success of insects depends on the ability to replace individuals with identical copies. A discarded individual is not mourned, nor is he memorable in any way.

Neither did he suffer from doubt or thrill at the mystery of the world or feel the need for humor. The men who want us to be insects yearn for the simplicity of uniformity, just as they feel inadequate, therefore frightened of, diversity. It is so much easier to regress to a world of unchanging certainties, of black-and-white realities and clear identities. The inadequate inflate their sense of self by partaking in group narcissism, hence the Nuremberg rallies.

Auschwitz is a portal to the human shadow world. When under cover of night frightened men in uniform or in ski masks abduct and torture the innocent of a distant continent, the atrocity takes place in Auschwitz. When a faceless technician in East Germany, just doing his job, imagined a fence whose links were razor sharp and would amputate the fingers of those attempting to flee to the West, that imaging took place in Auschwitz. The potential is in all of us, just because we are human, and the antidote is to look it straight in the eye, to know the shadow is monstrous and powerful. Auschwitz grows stronger as we deny the dark side of our nature. Once light is shone on it, it is no less repulsive, but it loses its nameless terror - much as did the SS thugs when the camps were liberated: many survivors report marveling at how ordinary their tormentors looked in defeat.

Auschwitz is a psychic scar, for many an open wound that won't quite heal. It is like Hiroshima and Nagasaki, where burnt flesh fell off their victims. We have seen what we can do; we have seen how our intelligence can magnify our cruelty. We have looked into the abyss inside ourselves. Yet it has not deterred us. One has only to recall Barry Goldwater's calm voice explaining how atomic weapons could be used on the Vietnamese.

II

Das Laufende Band

Elie Wiesel said, "Between our memory and its reflection there stands a wall that cannot be pierced. The past belongs to the dead and the survivor does not recognize himself in the words linking him to them. We speak in code, we survivors, and this code cannot be broken, cannot be deciphered, not by you no matter how much you try."

Perhaps only Bach's St. Matthew Passion or Mozart's Requiem can express what words fail to convey. Perhaps only a painting by Goya or Velasquez can leap over words in their death throes to blaze in the mind something of the experience of the Holocaust.

Yet what sets the Holocaust off from the numerous pogroms, massacres and genocides before and after the war is its organized efficiency, its ruthless application of the principles of industrial production to the commodity of death. Its efficiency made concessions only to sadism, which diverted victims from the conveyor belt (das laufende Band) that ran day and night to the crematoria. The Ottoman Turks force marched as many as a million Armenians into the Syrian desert, and committed atrocities such as taking off the roof of the church, the strongest building in the village, and pouring boiling oil upon the men, women and children who had taken refuge there. The Khmer Rouge emptied the cities and towns in an effort to regress to the Neolithic, executing perhaps two million people. But the Khmer Rouge's methods were as primitive as their goals: victims were dispatched by clubbing with ax handles. The Rwandans preferred the machete. There is nothing in history to compare with the Holocaust. To compare with Topf & Sons, the manufacturers of the ovens that reduced the corpses to ashes. In the autumn of 1943 experts from Topf performed gruesome experiments to determine the best burning load for their ovens. Their conclusion: a combination of one well-fed corpse, one emaciated corpse and one child's corpse provided the most efficient incineration. There is nothing in history to compare with the mobile extermination camps. One was set up near a Jewish cemetery, whose granite tombstones were used to build the nonce furnace that consumed the Jews in that locality. Nothing was wasted. Local materials were used. The extermination camp moved on.

As Wiesel puts it so succinctly, "For the factories of death to emerge and function, philosophers and psychologists, scholars and engineers, attorneys and aristocrats, lovers of art and poetry, criminals and sadists had to join forces." The methods of Henry Ford, the engineering of chemical plants, the logistics of an industrialized state's transportation system, the planning of architects, the insights of psychology applied to terror -- all organized and flowcharted into an efficient system, then combined with the irrational: medieval Christian paranoia, fantasies of boundless narcissism, idiotic racialist claptrap, and fear, a fear so deep that menacing phantoms tormented the psyches of goose-stepping nonentities. The goose-step is itself symbolic of the primitive regression of the Nazis shaking the earth with synchronized steps to intimidate the enemy. Gorillas pounding their chests in unison.

The Holocaust was a human phenomenon, arising from the inner workings of the mind, occurring in a tragic confluence of time, place, circumstances and science that conspired to magnify mayhem to levels of horror unseen, unthinkable in history. The Ottomans, the Khmer Rouge and Rwandans lacked the expertise of the modern totalitarian state, but were not wanting in ruthlessness, hatred, paranoia, bloodlust and sadism.

The American Civil War spawned much of the technology of death that was

to characterize the twentieth century -- the machine gun, the submarine, aerial warfare,

ironclad battleships and total war, as seen in Sherman's March to the Sea. Who can look at the starving prisoners of Andersonville and not see a presentment of Auschwitz? The Andersonville railroad depot has the sinister, infinitely sad air of a proto-Auschwitz. Captured Union soldiers and sailors were locked in box cars for the long journey to western Georgia. Between February 5, 1864 and May 5, 1865 some thirteen thousand Union prisoners died at Andersonville. The dead were buried without coffins in long trenches, six feet wide, the bodies placed side by side. The transportation of the corpses in open wagons, the digging of the trenches, the burial, the covering of the mass graves were all done by prison labor.

After the Civil War the military and civil organs of the U.S. government coordinated their resources to exterminate the American Indian.

William Tecumseh Sherman, the father of modern total war, despite being named for an Indian leader who wanted to form a native confederacy to counter the incursion of white settlers and died fighting for the British in 1812, regarded Indians as savages obstructing Progress and Civilization. By the 1880s Sherman spoke of the "final solution of the Indian problem", which he spelled out as killing hostile Indians and segregating their pauperized survivors in remote places where they could not threaten white settlers. Of Indian children he said, "Nits beget lice". In a letter dated September 23, 1868, Sherman wrote, "All who cling to their old hunting grounds are hostile and will remain so until killed off." The army would have to "clean out the Indians as we encounter them". In time all Indians will "have to be killed or be maintained as a species of paupers." They must be "killed or humbled".

Such sentiments are not far from those underlying the Wansee Conference and the program to repopulate Eastern Europe with German settlers. This natural consequence of Lebensraum, the Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle (VOMI) or Liaison Office for Ethnic Germans, was the passion of Himmler, the former chicken farmer. Nor was Sherman any kinder to Jews, who to him were immoral speculators profiting from the cotton trade with the South, and thus indirectly financing the Confederacy's purchase of arms. "The country will soon swarm with dishonest Jews," he wrote in an angry letter to Washington. On December 17, 1862 Ulysses S. Grant, who wholeheartedly concurred with Sherman's anti-Semitism, expelled from his department "the Jews, as a class". Lincoln rescinded the order.

As at Andersonville so at Auschwitz: a prisoner rolls a corpse over the edge of the grave, where another prisoner below neatly stacks the bodies in layers, sprinkling each layer with lime. Stripped of their names and identity, human beings have become a waste product, whose disposal is an industrial problem to be solved by engineers and managers.

“Howbeit he will not stretch out his hand to the grave, though they cry in his destruction”
Job
30:24.

A rehearsal for Auschwitz: smoke rises from an incinerator at one of twenty-one hospitals in Germany, where some five thousand deformed and mentally retarded children were murdered, usually by lethal injection. Mental patients were dynamited in an experiment, but this was abandoned as inefficient.

“Thou liftest me up to the wind; thou causest me to ride upon it, and dissolvest my substance”

Job 30:22.

The Union Ironclad Essex on the Mississippi, Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

The CSS *Hunley*, hand-propelled by a crew of eight, sank off Charleston along with her first and only victim, the USS *Housatonic*.

Inflating the observation balloon *Intrepid*, June 1, 1862.

III

Did not he that made me in the womb make him? and did not one fashion us in the womb?
Job 31:15

Taking a Microscope to Evil

Even a brutal SS guard was once an innocent child. How did he become the heartless embodiment of cruelty, the thug pressing his jackboot onto the neck of a wretched prisoner? What has happened in his life to bring him to play this role? What frightens him so much that his hatred has reached these pathological proportions?

Auschwitz is a product of the human brain, and perhaps it is there that an answer should be sought. What psychiatrists term antisocial personality disorder has a prevalence of 3% in men and 1% in women, commonest among the urban poor, especially its mobile residents. Symptoms in boys appear at puberty or even earlier. Beneath the “mask of sanity” is tension, hostility, rage. The main characteristic is the lack of remorse for harming others. Such a person has no feeling for others except a desire to exploit them. Rationalizations come easily to him. At their trials many SS men adamantly denied the Holocaust. The chimneys at the camps belonged to bakeries. He runs from intimacy into social isolation. Many have suffered brain damage in childhood. The disorder has a genetic base.

The SS must have had more than their share of psychopaths. One thinks of the Treblinka commandant, Franz Stangl, meeting a new transport in a white linen riding outfit, replete with riding crop as merely eccentric, while Kurt Bolender of Sobibor, to work up an appetite before lunch, stood by the main gate and used a whip to thrash will all his might the heads of passing Jews. But even here some hardened men were sickened. SS doctors managed to get through selections by drinking heavily beforehand. Eichmann was sent to the Ukraine to time the experimental gassing vans, which the locals called *dushegubki* (soul destroyers). Eichmann followed the vans, packed with up to 150 victims, on their two-mile drive to the gravesite. During this short journey the carbon monoxide exhaust was piped into the hermetically sealed compartment. At its terminus, the occupants were dumped into the mass grave. Eichmann said it was “the most horrifying thing I had ever seen in my life”. So horrifying, in fact, that he neglected to carry out his original assignment of timing how long it took to gas the victims.

Lt. Kurt Gerstein of the SS was in charge of supplying Zyklon B, the pesticide which, when mixed with water, produced the lethal gas used at the death camps. As an engineer his responsibility had only involved procuring the gas, a task performed from his office in Berlin. In the summer of 1942, however, he was sent

to Belzec, Treblinka and Sobibor, where he witnessed firsthand the use of the gas which until now had only been a chemical compound listed in waybills and inventories. On the train back to Berlin he met a Swedish diplomat who, in his dispatches to Stockholm, reported that Gerstein, extremely upset and sweating profusely, felt compelled to tell someone the horror he had seen.

But the death factories were a psychopathic environment -- a psychopath had free reign to act out his sadistic fantasies of absolute control. Sgt. Maj. Otto Moll hurled live babies into the burning pits and used naked young women for target practice. He had his slave laborers dig drainage channels from the burning pits from which were collected fat, which was then employed as an accelerant on fire. Dr Dora Klein, a Jewish prisoner forced to work as a nurse in an SS clinic, said, "I had the feeling that I was in a place that was half hell and half lunatic asylum." Dr Wilhelm Hans Münch, at great personal peril, secretly treated sick inmates. He observed: "Once one had spent some time there, it was impossible to react normally. In that setup, everyone was sullied."

One thing must be clear: the SS men strutting in their regalia of death's heads were weaklings. No man who possessed inner strength -- self-confidence -- could choose hatred and death. Love of death is the deepest form of discouragement, the ultimate revenge for failure to embrace life and intimacy, the desire to drag down everyone with oneself. Hence Sgt. Maj. Moll's repeated destruction of young women and babies. A strong man was Rabbi Moishe Friedman of Bayone, who arrived at Auschwitz on Passover, 1944. Naked, he approached an SS officer, seized him by the lapels and said, "You common, cruel murderers. Do not think you will exterminate the Jewish people. The Jewish people will live forever while you murderers will disappear from the world. The day of reckoning is near. Our blood will cry for retribution. Shema Yisrael (Hear, O Israel)." This is genuine strength.

The SS men wore exoskeletons of black leather coats, jackboots and steel helmets to hide their soft interiors, their inner weakness, their bottomless fear feeding their rage. They were walking shells with weak egos, only an inner void they filled with bullying and mayhem in an attempt to convince themselves of their existence. The thirst for power and its frequent demonstration in acts of sadism and mass murder were in direct proportion to their inner sense of being nothing.

Like their counterparts in the Argentine military, the SS men could feel powerful as they tortured and killed unarmed, cowering civilians.

Many intellectuals and professional people joined the SS, a fact that substantiates Jung's comment that most psychopaths are well hidden in society. As masters of the con game and deceit, they are not only well camouflaged but often financially rewarded for their ruthlessness, even admired.

Impulses travel from networks of cells to other networks, connecting word

and image into concepts, memories, moods, pain, worries, visions, insights and, of course, the volition that controls our physical movements. Somehow the hundred billion neurons in the human brain create consciousness. Somehow they create a map of the human body. It is in this mental map in the brain that we experience pain, not at the part of the body which is being injured.

Our conscious mental life is, as Searle argues, an *emergent property* of the system of neurons. Neurons and their impulses are not themselves conscious, nor can consciousness be explained as merely the summation of the properties of neurons. Rather, consciousness is explained by how the neurons act in a system. It is the system that has the property of consciousness, even though the individual elements that produce it do not have the property of consciousness. Searle offers the example of the liquidity of water. "The behavior of H₂O molecules explains liquidity, but the individual molecules are not liquid."

The human brain has a genetically controlled tendency to think in stereotypes. This is an example of epigenesis, "the sum of all interactions between the genes and the environment that create the distinctive traits of an organism." Participants in a study, for example, were asked to guess the occupation of a person who is shy, helpful and obsessed with detail. Whatever the subject's personal experience, they are more likely to choose librarian over other occupations. Stereotypes make the overwhelming complexity of life much simpler and can be used to make one group feel superior to another and to justify exploiting the "inferior" group or eliminating them and seizing their wealth and territory. If, of course, one is educated to examine stereotypes and question their validity, such tendencies, even with a genetic basis, can be overcome. But the SS guard brutalizing a Jewish or Gypsy or Slavic or "non-Aryan" prisoner has probably been recruited from the core of the Nazi following -- the working class, lower middle class and lumpenproletariat, where the means to be sophisticated and cosmopolitan were limited and where stereotypes, especially of Jews, had their roots in medieval paranoid fantasies.

The tragedy of Auschwitz is that every aspect of its horror resides in the human brain, in our genes and in the interaction of these with our culture. There is no escape from this lethal combination. There is no transcendence to a spiritual plane. This is a dangerous fantasy if it distracts us from confronting our potential to create another Auschwitz, especially now that technological innovations in genetics, chemistry and computing magnify our ability to control and exterminate. Few would escape. Few would survive to give their testimony. As Aharon Appelfeld put it: "I do not like to speak about the Holocaust in terms of mystery. There were victims and there were killers. So there is no mystery, and to call it a mystery is to take it out of the moral context into a mystical, religious context."

The Madhyamika Buddhists had it right: nirvana is here and now, if only we adopt the proper attitude toward reality.

Psychopaths who lead political movements derive their enormous energy by feeding off the fears and paranoia of the populace, especially in times of national stress. The leader combines two traits of the psychopath: the indifference to the suffering of others and the ability to manipulate for his own cynical ends. The eyes, however, betray the flat stare of the reptilian predator.

IV

Genocide in the Context of Human Nature

Tribalism permits the members of one group to be cruel to, even to kill, outsiders simply because they are outsiders. No doubt tribalism enhanced survival in the Paleolithic, but the genetically based tendency to favor such in-group thinking, especially its extension in the form of the nation state, is no longer adaptive and has led to a dismal history of broken treaties, suspicion, paranoid ideation, massacre and genocide on every continent in every age. Xenophobia and paranoid projection are the norm when it comes to dealing with strangers, even more so when their customs, religion and language are little known or understood. The only major religious system to place compassion at its heart, Buddhism, has generally also been the most tolerant. But even here, the tribal animosities between Buddhist Singhalese and Hindu Tamil have overridden the tradition of compassion and created one of the most enduring and bitterest of civil wars, fought in the paradise of Sri Lanka. Sadly, among the worst fomenters of racial attacks are Buddhist monks. Ironically, some of the fiercest and most intractable of tribal conflicts involve groups in which what they share far outweighs their differences: Jews and Arabs, Serbs and Croats, Protestant and Catholic Irishmen. The Western world has long been able to sanction tribalism and the imposition of its religion on conquered peoples of the Americas and elsewhere by referring to its sacred books:

“But of the cities of these people, which the Lord thy God doth give thee for an inheritance, thou shalt save alive nothing that breatheth: But thou shalt utterly destroy them; namely, the Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites”.

Deuteronomy 20: 16-17

The study of history has greatly benefited from recent advances in the biological sciences. Now it is possible to see events such as the Holocaust in the context of how human nature, human society and the brain have evolved. Furthermore, advances in archeology are adding to the understanding of Paleolithic and Neolithic material and social culture. Much of what led up to the Holocaust is indeed an old story.

Going back as far as the common ancestor of humans and chimpanzees, over seven million years ago, populations formed themselves into groups of individuals who became “eusocialized”, that is, members of the group cooperated in gathering food, which was then shared at a central camp. Thus, altruism was in tension with selfishness (as Freud pointed out in his *Civilization and its Discontents*, published, appropriately, in 1930, a year of deliberate starvation in the Soviet Union), or as scientists would say today, we have selfish genes and social genes. The result was that natural selection favored those groups that could best cooperate and could find a workable balance between the selfishness and altruism of its members.

Group hunting and gathering led to ever more aggressive territoriality, as can be seen today in chimpanzees and humans. This is the origin of tribalism, with its suspicion of outsiders and its violence in defending and expanding territory. Even after the Neolithic Revolution this mentality persisted when cities, kingdoms and later states developed.

This is also the origin of Hitler’s policy of *Lebensraum*. It is one of history’s greatest tragedies that in the 1930s German and other scientists were on the verge of discovering the Green Revolution, that would have allowed Germany to feed itself, therefore eliminating the Nazi dream of colonizing Eastern Europe and annexing the bread basket of the Ukraine.

Human history, from the archeological record deep into prehistory, is strewn with graves of the massacred, with fortifications — walls, trenches, hillforts, castles, to name a few. Studies of burials show the great number of individuals who died of violence — split skulls, bones hacked with blades, arrow points, smashed ribs. War and accompanying genocide or ethnic cleansing, are as old as humankind. The raiding to gain territory, food and females is still reported by anthropologists observing remaining primitive tribes in Papua-New Guinea and the Amazon.

Hitler’s *Drang nach Osten* was essentially colonialism. Displacing and exterminating local populations in Eastern Europe imitated the colonial expansion into Africa and the conquest of America by European settlers. Indigenous peoples were thought of as subhuman savages and heathens who were an impediment to the progress of a superior race. Just as in Africa, the Nazis turned one group of “subhumans” against another. At one time or another Ukrainians and Poles could be enlisted to kill each other and to kill Jews, whom Hitler regarded as vermin polluting the Earth. The legacy of this vile colonial past led to a genocide in which

800,000 Tutsis were murdered by the Hutu in Rwanda within a few days. For weeks prior to the outbreak of this genocide the radio stations in Rwanda constantly referred to the Tutsis as cockroaches. In the same way Nazi propaganda dehumanized Jews and raised the level of fear by portraying them as a powerful enemy that controlled world finance and at the same time as the founders of international Bolshevism, headquartered in the Soviet Union.

It is significant that Rwanda had become the most densely populated nation in Africa; the availability of arable land was near its limit. This is the main reason for killing the Tutsis: for Hutus to take over their farms. One way the Nazis could encourage pogroms and justify mass murder was to allow Poles and others to move into houses and apartments and take over farms and businesses that had been vacated by Jews.

For most of the war the Einsatzgruppen, and even more so German, Polish and other East European policemen assigned to the SS and the Nazi Party, were responsible for murdering Jews; only later in the war was killing centralized in the death camps with their crematoria. By this time most Jews had already been murdered in Eastern Europe, as had great numbers of Poles, Belarusians, Gypsies, and the physically and mentally disabled. This is why Auschwitz, as abominable as it was, is not the Holocaust, although as a symbol it has become synonymous with the Holocaust.

What makes the Holocaust a dividing line in human history is its industrialization of death by combining several methods: mass shootings; gas vans; use of food scarcity to recruit men into killing squads; and later the mass gassing in death camps such as Auschwitz, Sobibor, Chelmo and Treblinka. Stalin had already used starvation as a weapon to subdue the kulaks in the 1930s during the campaign to collectivize agriculture. Some 3.3 million died of starvation, and another million in Kazakhstan.

The Germans found they could recruit men from the starvation camps to participate in mass shooting over pits. Thus the Germans succeeded in having a great deal of mass murder done by local people in Eastern Europe.

The anxiety over securing the food supply; the genetic predisposition to think tribally; the need to find simple solutions to complex problems by blaming a particular group; the enticement of taking property and land from a dehumanized group; the adoption of an ideology to justify killing (often religion, but here the Judeobolshevik myth and the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*); and the complex politics of Germany and Eastern Europe in the 1930s and 1940s, all combined to produce the worst genocide in human history, so far.

Ethnic Cleansing

The dehumanizing term “ethnic cleansing”, the notion that an enemy is filth whose presence is an affront to hygiene, spiritual and physical, originated at least half a century before it became current during the Bosnian war. In a letter dated December 20, 1941, the Chetnik leader, Draza Mihailović, listed among the aims of his military units “the cleansing from state territory of all national minorities and non-national elements”. The degradation of other human beings to the status of filth is not a monopoly of the Yugoslavs. In his memoirs Yigal Allon, who commanded the Jewish military in Galilee and later became Deputy Prime Minister of Israel, wrote: “We saw the need to cleanse the Inner Galilee and to create a Jewish territorial succession in the entire area of Upper Galilee. We therefore looked for means to cause the tens of thousands of sulky Arabs who remained in Galilee to flee...Wide areas were cleansed”.

IV Penthesilea

Greek myths resonate deep in the psyche, like the songs of whales that carry across hundreds of miles through undersea channels. The myth of Achilles and the Amazon queen, Penthesilea, has many variants. In one version of the story, Penthesilea, fighting on the side of Troy, engages Achilles in mortal combat. Achilles, who has chosen, despite the pleading of his divine mother, the short, glorious life of a warrior for the long peaceful life of a farmer, is a ruthless opponent. Once a young Trojan soldier fell within the lethal penumbra of Achilles, who chased the lad about the battlefield till he threw down his arms and begged the hero for mercy. Achilles, with the veteran’s understanding of implacable war, told the boy to be still and die a warrior’s death. Then Achilles slew him. But now Achilles faces a fierce adversary who has devoted herself to military perfection, abandoning as Achilles had, the quiet rhythms of the land, with its growing seasons and harvests, the births of ewes and colts, the aroma of meals bubbling over the hearth, all given up to wander in foreign lands, scavenging for food, shivering in a bivouac, and, after the dread on the eve of battle, tasting bloodlust and the heart-pounding thrill of peering into the abyss.

Despite Penthesilea's transgression of male and female roles, Achilles, cold hearted behind his plates of bronze and fierce under his helmet with its bristling mane, looks into Penthesilea's eyes, and even as his spear pierces her heart, he knows he has fallen in love. In that instant he lives a lifetime with Penthesilea, growing old together, dissolving into the flow of time like the snow feeding the brook nearby.

Will we someday look into the eyes of our victim, into the eyes of a dying world, and with a sinking heart know irretrievable loss?

V

Mockery

In the case of Jesus his cross was inscribed with the initials INRI, standing for Jesus, King of the Jews (Iesus Nazarenus Rex Iudaeorum). At Treblinka, a heavy curtain, stolen from a synagogue, covered the entrance to the "bathhouse" in which Jews were gassed. The curtain bore the Star of David and in Hebrew the words, "This is the gate through which the righteous shall enter". On Yom Kippur, 1943, Mengele arrived at a soccer field at Auschwitz onto which some 2000 boys had been herded. A plank was nailed across the goal posts and the boys ordered to walk beneath the board. Anyone that did not reach this standard was sent off to the gas chambers. Mengele was mocking a hymn sung on Yom Kippur, the U Netaneh Tokef (Let us declare the power of this day's holiness...), written in the Middle Ages by Rabbi Amnon of Mayen. The hymn uses the image of the shepherd holding his rod over the sheep filing by to determine which will be slaughtered and which will live. The shepherd is God deciding the fate of individuals, who will die and who will live that year. Amid these uncertainties, the hymn teaches, we can control the quality of our life through prayer, repentance and acts of charity. This beautiful thought Mengele mocked with his board and nails.

The one who mocks puts himself in the position of judge, of a superior with the power to decide on everything one considers valuable. His imitation is designed to denigrate the very basis of one's outlook on life, one's whole cultural experience. He knows just enough to produce a caricature of one's beliefs, but has no deep understanding of them. His desire is to inflict the deepest, most hurtful wound by attacking the core of a person's identity. By aggrandizing his own sense of power while devaluing others, he facilitates his role as torturer, as exterminator of the worthless.

VI

And yet...

I remember the clarity of the summer light and the space that extended forever upward toward the Gothic vaults, or so it seemed to me at five years of age. The heat made my older sister drowsy and pale. Ushers stood by with smelling salts, for often a parishioner would faint on a sultry Sunday. My mother looked lost in thought. I was bored and wishing the mass would end soon. Bells tinkled and the priest raised aloft the host. For some reason I looked to the rear of the church, to the balcony that held a few rows of pews over the main entrance. There, suspended above the railing of the balcony, was an angel, its face beautiful and smooth, shining below golden hair. It too held aloft a host, illuminated by a shaft of light from heaven. The angel's robe was a fabric of gems, like a gorgeous mosaic, that trailed off into the air. Someone reached forward and his hand passed through the angel. Then it vanished.

I looked up at the face of my worried mother, intent on pleading, and then at my sister, who by now was probably thinking about listening to the radio when we got home. The congregation half-slumbered in its torpor. No one shouted about seeing an angel. I was speechless, numbed by the vivid detail and the beauty of the angel. I knew no one would believe me, that I would be dismissed with a smile and a pat on the head, and probably a sarcastic remark from my sister. But I was frightened, too, at having been singled out to see past the mundane reality of a stuffy church and pews creaking under the restless crowd. I never told anyone. Somehow it was a secret easy to keep.