

BERLIN WALL: BEFORE AND AFTER

Part III

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After the Berlin Wall, we're back to 1933 and starting all over again... Have the Germans really changed...?

Q: On the first day of September 1939, Hitler invaded Poland, triggering the outbreak of the Second World War. At the almost same time Poland was also invaded by Stalin from the east; it was a sandwich attack by two mighty armies. Dr. Thaler, you were only five at that time but can you talk about the things you remember?

A: I remember very well because of the bombs and the shooting. Air raids came from Germany, and my hometown was occupied by Russians within days. Modern Poland had been created after WW I when the Austro-Hungarian Empire collapsed. During WW II Poland was divided between Germany and Russia, and disappeared from the world map. Germany occupied western and central Poland, and Russia took over the eastern part, which became part of the Ukraine and Byelorussia, and soon afterwards also occupied Moldavia, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia.

I was raised in a family with an orthodox Jewish grandfather and a secular/Zionist father, whose ancestors had been settled in Poland for 350 years. As soon as the Nazis marched into Poland, a Gestapo Office was established in each community, and they immediately began terrorizing all Jews in various ways - by arrest, torture, murder, public execution and random seizures of people for deportation to death camps. Polish communists and some Catholic priests were sent to labor camps, and many Polish men were also deported to Germany for slave labor, but most non-Jewish Poles were unharmed. The killing of Jews was carried out throughout the Occupation until nearly 98 percent were dead.

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Q: Can you tell me about Jewish history in Poland and the political and social circumstances of Polish Jews before and after the Nazi occupation?

A: The earliest Jewish settlement in Poland dated from the 15th century; Jews who were expelled from Spain, France, England and Germany fled to Poland, because the Polish king needed their skills and let them in. The Jewish community in Poland grew rapidly and by the nineteenth century, during the period of European industrialization, it was the largest in the world. In the twentieth century it was second only to New York, which became the home of many Jews fleeing from pogroms in Poland and Russia. Warsaw in those years was the capital of Polish Jewry, an important center of Jewish social, cultural and commercial activity. Jews lived all over the city, but worked predominantly in crafts, industries and financial enterprises owned by Jews. Apart from doctors, professors and school teachers there were hardly any Jews in official government posts. In fact, Jews were generally barred from such positions. There was profound anti-Semitism among Poles. However, both Poles and Jews were unprepared and helpless in the face of the Nazi war machine that was about to engulf them. The social situation became even more intense - Germans enslaved Poles, Poles hated Germans, but both Germans and most Poles hated Jews. Meanwhile, Britain had declared war against Nazi Germany and the two countries were bombing each other. There was a lot of gallows humor. For example; "Britain bombs Berlin and Germany bombs London. But flying back and forth to bomb each other is a waste of gas. Instead, Germany ought to bomb Berlin and the British should bomb London."

The Holocaust in Poland was, however, a somewhat different story than in other places, because of the large Jewish population. Before the war there were 3.3 million Polish Jews - 11 percent of the total population; more than 3 million perished in the Holocaust. Many Jews were expelled from Germany to Poland by the German government, and the Nuremberg Laws were enacted, but most Jews in Poland had no idea that the Nazis intended to kill every single Jew. Many recalled the German occupation during WW I, which was orderly and relatively tolerant toward Jews. But this was nothing like that. The 'new order' was launched by Hans Frank, Nazi Governor General for occupied Poland, and Jews were immediately targeted for attack and discrimination; their properties were confiscated, they were deprived of their jobs, food and shelter, and their lives were paralyzed overnight. Then the Nazis quickly organized ghettos to isolate Jews from the rest of the population.

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All Jews were imprisoned inside the ghettos, including refugees who were expelled from other towns. Then six years old I with my parents was forced out of our house into a ruined and, old and terribly overcrowded building.

Q: Can you describe the ghetto and tell me about your life inside it?

A: There were at least hundreds of ghettos throughout Eastern Europe, mainly in Poland, Ukraine and Byelorussia. All were very similar and each ghetto was situated near the center of town. In Poland, the largest ghettos were in Warsaw, Lodz, Cracow, Lubin, and Lvov(Lwow). As soon as all Jews were forced into the Warsaw ghetto, the deportations began to Treblinka, an extermination camp north-east of Warsaw. Highly qualified professional people such as lawyers, executives, university professors, journalists, doctors, and white collars were the first to be deported. Then a registration law was ordered. Every Jew in the ghetto had to be registered at the Gestapo office. My father, who had been educated in Vienna, didn't trust the Germans, and was suspicious of what they were doing. The day of registration, he pretended to be ill and stayed in a ghetto hospital instead. This was the first of the miracles by which my parents and I survived.

The situation in the ghetto became worse day by day. There was a severe food shortage and hundreds of people, many of children, died of starvation everyday. The streets of the ghetto were like a graveyard with bodies all over. Everywhere I saw lame, cripples, and blind people, or people too weak to move. Every day young men came to the streets and piled the bodies on wagons and pushed them to mass graves. For my sake, my parents decided I should live outside the ghetto and in the winter of 1942, I was taken to a Polish couple, friends of my parents who were childless. I was then 8, and they kept me indoors with windows sealed to the outside world. They were very fond of me, and educated me as a Catholic. But after eight months, I was suspected by a neighbor and the Polish couple became extremely anxious, because anyone who kept Jews in their home was shot to death on the spot. And I went back to the ghetto to my parents. A few weeks later, the Gestapo suddenly took my father away to a labor camp. My mother and I were left alone. The ghetto was drastically becoming smaller everyday, and we thought it would soon be destroyed. We decided to escape. I found a small opening facing the outside that had been nailed shut. It was possible to open it and able to jump outside the ghetto. One night my mother and I made it.

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Q: Where did you go to hide and what happened to other people of the ghettos in Poland?

A: There was only one place we could go. We went back to the Polish couple. Since they loved me I instinctively felt they would not mind us hiding there. There was barn in the backyard of their house where we could stay in a loft with chickens and goats underneath. They allowed us hide under the straw and left food for us in the barn. A few days later we got to the barn, we heard sounds of shooting, the people screaming and horrifying cries from the direction of the Jewish cemetery. We were not very far from there, we could almost see it through the cracks. The Germans and Ukrainian police killed the last two thousand Jews of my town that day in June 1943. Around Passover of that year, the Germans also tried to finish the Warsaw Ghetto, but ran into armed resistance from a few thousand young Jews, the famous Warsaw Ghetto uprising; it lasted for four weeks.

Between 1940 and 1943, hunger and epidemics killed 85,000 people in the Warsaw Ghetto alone; 20,000 were children. The most of the half million Jews were transported to Treblinka to be killed in the gas chambers. In the rest of ghettos throughout eastern Poland and Ukraine where we were, the Germans did not even bother to transport them to death camps to kill in the gas chambers. Mostly elderly, children, women, and sick people were left in the ghettos until they starved to death or were taken outside of town, executed and buried in mass graves. Men were sent to forced labor, and when they became too weak to work, they were shot. The killing was conducted by the method used earlier by the Einsatzgruppen (mobile killing squads of the SS into Poland and Ukraine): the victims were forced to dig their own graves and lie down in them; then they were shot. Every ghetto was the site of mass killing and it went on throughout the war. And, eventually, by the fall of 1943, most ghettos were completely destroyed. (Except for the Lodz ghetto which lasted to till November, 1944.) After the destruction of the ghettos, some remaining survivors; those were young and still fit to work, were deported to labor camps. My father encountered one of them, a Jewish policeman who accidentally knew everybody in my ghetto, Brzezany. He was told that nobody saw me or my mother arrested and taken away by German soldiers. He was encouraged by this information to think that we might be alive. He knew where to find us. Within the next few days, he somehow escaped from the camp and we were reunited in the house of the Polish couple. After that, we hid in barns and forests. Our fugitive life continued for another year until we were liberated by the Russians in the summer of 1944.

Thaler 5

Q: How do you account for the rise of Christianity and the origins of anti-Semitism in Europe? And, how did Hitler's Holocaust differ from previous pogroms, and why was conversion out of the question this time as a way out for Jews?

A: There are obviously many factors involved. Firstly, Jews are a religious minority in the continent of Europe, which already makes them vulnerable to any kind of attack. Secondly, there is the special relationship between Christianity and Judaism; Judaism as the mother religion of Christianity. This made the Jews even more vulnerable, because the new religion, Christianity, behaved like any child who wants to grow up and replace the parent; Judaism. So as long as Jews persisted in denying the 'truth' of Christianity, Christian had the strength to suppress Judaism. Because of this father-son relationship, and because Christ himself was a Jew (which was a problem for Christianity), they had to believe that the reason for Christianity was that the Jews somehow were sinners, they killed Christ and they had to be replaced.

Obviously, one way in which you can replace a religion is by conversion. Until the last century the Jews were forced either to convert, to stay behind walls in their own place, or to leave the country. They were forbidden from mixing with others, and from interfering in the Christian world. The big change in the twentieth century was that instead of forcing them to convert or to leave; they were going to be physically eliminated. When Nazis came to power, they no longer forced the Jews to convert; they simply forced them into ghettos and concentration camps to die. So in addition to religiously based anti-Semitism, there was an additional form of anti-Semitism: secular and political anti-Semitism. Hitler quickly made anti-Semitism into an official government policy, and the Holocaust was ordered in the name of state law and order, and rapidly spread to every German-occupied European country. That's the way it happened to the Jews for the first time in 2,000 years of exile in Christian countries. That's why Hitler's Holocaust added an entirely new dimension and enormous scale. As a result, from 1938 to 1945 six million of European Jews were murdered, and European Jewish civilization was nearly destroyed. For centuries, as I said, many Jews were forced to become Catholic, baptized and raised their children as Christians and parents even never told their children about their Jewish background. During the Holocaust years, when the Gestapo came to arrest them, for many that was the first time they discovered that they were racially Jews. Many of Jewish Christians were killed that way. For Hitler, conversion was out of question. The "Total Extermination of Jewish Race"; that was his Final Solution.

Thaler 6

Q: In political terms, how did anti-Semitism escalate in Nazi Germany-occupied Poland?

A: In the case of Poland, anti-Semitism was in fact much deeper than in Germany, for instance. The average German didn't like Jews, but Jews in Germany numbered only 500,000, which was less than one percent of the entire German population. So most Germans, in fact, hardly met Jews in public. Whereas in Poland there was about a three and half million Jews, which counted 11 percent of the entire Polish population. So there were Jews everywhere and for Poles it was easy to recognize Jews; Jews couldn't hide in Poland. Their hatred of Jews was based on either religious, economic, cultural or social grounds, but especially on Catholic church doctrine. Poland was and still is, devoted entirely to Catholicism and they blamed Jews as Jesus killers and foreigners; their general attitude toward Jews was very negative. Although Germans and Poles disliked one another, both had a grass-roots hatred of Jews, which made it easy for the Germans to conduct a destructive policy supported by the majority of the Polish people. When it came to the Jewish question, both agreed in principle, with the official order of genocide against Jews. Therefore it was an easy task for Germans, assisted by the majority of the Polish population, to find and kill the Jewish population in Poland.

Let's take an example. The case of the Jewish minority, actually, applies to any other minorities as well. It is a social question of a minority among a majority. For instance, besides Jews, there are other minority groups in America or elsewhere; blacks, homosexuals, Hispanics, Asians, and so on. In normal social and economic circumstances, the majority can tolerate living with minorities even they don't like them. However, if a government has the power to do something against a minority, that changes everything. When politicians decide what they want to do about them, arrest or kill them or whatsoever, they can accomplish that. If they are supported by majority of their own citizens, they are able to deprive the human rights of a minority, because they have the co-operation of a majority of their own people. And, you cannot effectively resist an order by the state, whether you personally agree with it or not.

Q: How can you distinguish between Aryan and Jew; German Jews look like Germans, Russian Jews look like Russians French Jews look like French, and who is a pure Jew or pure Aryan? In the twentieth century world, I presume only outer space 'aliens' would probably be a 'pure race'. My question is why were Germans so obsessed with it?

A: Racially, it's very difficult to tell Jews from Aryans. In Poland it's easy physically because most Poles have slavic look: blue eyes, blond hair, wide feature straight nose. In general, most Jews have dark or brown eyes and dark hair. So, many times you can be identified as belonging to a certain racial group, but not always. For instance, I had brown eyes and red hair and, in Poland was easily recognized as a Jew racially. But in Germany I was like anybody else because many southern Germans look like me. Germans cannot tell I am a Jew unless I say so. With men it's easier to tell by physical examination because of circumcision. But that's not always possible, because many American and Anglo-Saxon males are also circumcised. So who is a Jew in that context? Someone who believes in the Jewish religion or identifies with that culture, or someone who thinks he's a Jew. As Joshua Heshel, a famous rabbi said: "A Jew is someone who suffers as a Jew." But it becomes even more complicated than that, because it isn't a religion like the Christianity. Christians had countries of their own, like England, France, Germany, Spain, Poland, Russia, Italy, in which to develop distinctive national cultures. The Jews had only religious customs. On this basis, the Jews developed a distinct civilization of their own in every country they lived in. From their own history, they developed a language, literature and tradition. Nazis even realized that there was no such thing as pure Aryans. What they planned to do was to eliminate the 'bad blood' that had been mixed into the Aryan race for centuries and to purify it. That's why they made laws to prohibit Jews marrying Aryans in order to breed pure Aryans for future generations. That was one of the first things they did. Therefore, even if only one of the grandparents was Jewish, they couldn't marry an Aryan because the children would be contaminated with Jewish genes. That was the basic plan for the Third Reich - a thousand year regime. Originally, Jews were supposed to be distinguished by religion, not race. But Nazi ideology irrationally mixed race and religion; once you were born as a Jew, that was 'forever'. You can be a Frenchman or an Englishman and be Christian at the same time. But if you are Jewish, you can only be a Jew. A Jewish Pole was not a Pole according to the Poles. Only a Christian Pole is a Pole. So there was more to being Jewish than the religion. But the only difference between Jews and other people is that the Jews lost their land base; they didn't have a country for 2,000 years.

Thaler 8

Q: How did the Nazis use their racial theories in support of Hitler and the Third Reich?

A: Nazi ideology contended Germany's defeat in WW I: the resulting order to pay reparations, state decline, and oppression by other people, was because they had lost their original racial purity. They blamed intermarriage and alien cultured influences. The whole concept of the Third Reich was that Germans would be purified into one nation, and one race again by getting rid of everybody else. Suddenly there was a man telling people, "You Germans, you are the best people in the world: the reasons you're starving, poor, oppressed, miserable, and sick are not your fault but the fault of the others. I'm going to make you strong again, you are the super race, you will be the leader of the whole world, you deserve that. I'm your ruler, follow me, I'll take you there!" That was Hitler. Of course, that's all nonsense. But people believed that. But real question is how many Germans still believe this today...? Germans didn't support him just because he was a magnetic and charismatic speaker. They really believed him because he expressed their innermost emotions and feelings, and provided simple solutions for their problems and made promises to them. The economic situation at that time made Germans believe that, and they needed to believe him: That was what happened. Just like a message from David Duke, a former KKK member, Hitler admirer, and Louisiana governor candidate, putting forward the theory that white people are superior, yet are forced to pay higher tax to support blacks, poors, and welfare cases without fundamental examination. He carries the same methods and same message as Hitler.

The interesting thing is Germany is highly industrialized nation, people are well educated, logical, intelligent and scientific, everything exact and precise and perfectionist. Yet they bought this mythology which was totally irrational. Let's take an another example. Besides Jews, gypsies, homosexuals, political prisoners and POW's and many others, they also killed 300,000 mentally retarded German children and adults. They considered people with inherited diseases or chronically ill people were also of inferior. So after terrible medical experiments were performed on them by 'perfectly logical Nazi scientists and doctors', they were gassed and incinerated just as in Auschwitz. Germans were killing their own people because they wanted to implement their theory and 'purify' the race. It's not a generally recognized story but true. A famous scientist once joked "If the theory doesn't fit the facts, throw away the facts". That was a characteristic of 'Nazified theory'.



Thaler 9

Q: If Nazi Germany had been successful in achieving a 'Judenrein' Germany, the total destruction of Jews, what would the next move have been for the Third Reich?

A: Here I have my own opinion, which is not so unique, but it's not common either. I think that the Nazi movement, which was meant to establish a Third Reich, was essentially an anti-Christian movement. It meant to replace God with the Fuhrer; they were very focused on the pagan period in the Gothic era, the Valkyries and all that Wagnerian mythology. Since Judaism was the foundation of Christianity, Jews were the first to be disposed of. The next step would have been to suppress the Christian leadership and the religion, and replace it with a state religion: Replacing the cross with the swastika and the Holy Bible with "Mein Kampf". But before they could get rid of the Christians, they had to kill the Jews. Jews were the first target because they carried all the ideas that were taken over by Christianity: the whole ideology of man being an image of God, of human life as being important in its own right and not merely as part of a people or a nation, all those ideas ran counter to the ideology of the Nazis. Also, the Jews were much easier to kill. They were relatively few, and everybody wanted to get rid of them. Once they cleaned the Jews who carried the germ of that ideology, then they would go after the Christians. Their goal was rule by the 'superior' Aryan race. That's why they introduced the concept of race on top of religion. They wanted to build a race of supermen based on an Aryan concept - which is not a Christian concept, but rather a pre-Christian concept. Hitler called Christ an "effeminate Jewish god," that was how he looked at it. The whole ideology of loving others, and turning the other cheek, all this basically Judaic ideology, was something they couldn't stand because to them, the strong should survive and the weak die. Their idea was that might is right, whereas the Judaic concept is that "the meek should inherit the earth."

In terms of military expansion, Nazi Germany was to take over the whole of Europe and Russia, and eventually to conquer the entire world with their ideology - master race, strength and power. Their ambitious plan was all written out. After occupying the central European countries, which Hitler called 'pygmy nations' and intended to make slaves of the Slavic people, and to take the most Aryan-looking children to make them into Germans. They saw the Slavs as "Untermenschen," lower forms of life. But Hitler, somehow, miscalculated. Attacking Russia before destroying England may have been his fatal mistake. If England was in his hands, then the establishment of the Third Reich may have been successful...

Thaler 10

Q: Why is there a relatively higher percentage of Jews among the intellectual professions? How do you analyze that compared to Germans?

A: The whole Jewish tradition is one of learning. The Jews are the original people of the Book. There is a heavy emphasis on education, and lots of prestige from study, from learning the Scroll of Torah. When you stop studying the Torah, because you no longer believe in God, the tradition still makes it important to study. And Jewish parents traditionally encourage this. Their principle is to produce highly qualified people, and Jewish parents prefer their children to be doctors or lawyers than athletes. They prefer to be intellectuals. Germans and Jews are similar in many respects. The differences between them are, I find, that Jewish intellectuals come from a profound moral tradition which was based on 5,000 years of Jewish experience, whereas Germans have emphasized physical strength, beauty, skills, and physical looks: The Germans emphasized esthetics over ethics, and Jewish tradition is precisely the contrary. There was a focus on the material and an obsessive emphasis on racial superiority, which they believed they fulfilled. Of course, the Germans also produced intellectual giants, a people who developed the most advanced western culture, and produced such as superb composers, musicians, great poets, scientists, philosophers etc., but my opinion is if you don't have the moral basis, you can be a mass killer. Without humanistic values, great people can become primitive form of barbarian very quickly. Lack of moral foundation caused a collapse of German intellectuals, I would say. The Nazi regime was, in a way, a good lesson for Germans, that truly showed up their problems.

Q: What do you think about the reunification of Germany that followed by the fall of the Berlin Wall and future for Jewish people?

A: As far as I'm concerned, Jews as a community have been well destroyed by the Nazis in Europe; European Jewry is finished, especially in Germany. So, today it's a different situation from 1933 for Jews, but not for Europeans. German reunification is no longer a Jewish problem because as I said earlier, Jews now have a country: The state of Israel. As long as Israel exists, Jewish people can survive.

Thaler 11

Germany's neighbors have the new German problem: they must wonder whether the "New Germany" will try again. After the Berlin Wall came down, how quickly things changed! There was an immediate resurgence of nationalism, of neo-Nazis and the border question with Poland, and so on, - all of which go back fifty years ago to the prewar atmosphere; it's like WW II never happened. The well-known cliché is that 'history repeats itself:' nevertheless, it happened shockingly fast. It really showed how the Berlin Wall and divided Germany had a significant meaning for Europe and world peace, you see...

Nazi War Crimes and the Holocaust must be openly discussed and re-examined. It was a half-century ago, but it simply cannot be pushed away as history. Germans are still Germans; their roots are still deep underneath - and it all came from inside Germans. The majority of young Germans today haven't learned about it at school and were never told about it by their parents at home. Now those new generations have entered a new chapter of German history without knowing or studying their past. It is really sad - and also very dangerous for their future.\*\*\*