

# What a Beautiful World— So Why Do We Insist on Destroying It?

by Gilya G. Schmidt



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Every spring semester for the past twenty years I have been teaching a humanities course in which we explore the dark side of humanity. In the Jewish world, human beings are born with two inclinations—the good inclination (*yetzer tov*) and the evil inclination (*yetzer rah*). Throughout our entire life these two forces do battle with each other. One hopes that the good inclination will win out, for such a life will be worth living, making a positive contribution to society.

Likewise, all human beings harbor prejudice—thoughts and possibly actions that are not informed by knowledge but are the result of ignorance. We are born innocent as well as ignorant—knowledge results from learning, from education. If we are sensitized through education to the suffering that thoughtless or mindless speech and action cause, we are less likely to inflict suffering on our fellow human beings, unless we are just plain mean—and there are such people!

Ignorance of our fellow humans' values and traditions may be the cause of needless conflict. We may be prone to separating human beings of a different group or faith into "us" and "them," with the unfortunate result that one group will be seen as superior, while the

other is seen as inferior. Such categorization, as in the case of the Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda in 1994, the Bosnian Muslims in 1992, or the Armenians and the Turks of the Ottoman Empire, can be the beginning of what may end up as genocide.

Many of us know about the Holocaust, perpetrated by the German people under the Nazi regime between 1933 and 1945. The Holocaust had just such a beginning, born in ignorance, all the way back to the fourth century CE, when Christianity became a world religion. The ignorance and resultant religious prejudice festered for fifteen hundred years, some would even say for nineteen hundred (since the time when Jesus was crucified), in the entire Western, Christian world. At first stoked by the church, a pernicious anti-Judaism developed, which was based on ignorance of Jewish ways and baseless accusations, such as those regarding blood-libel (killing of Christian children to use their blood as an ingredient in food like matzah), Jews as Christ killers (complicit in the crucifixion), desecration of the host (stabbing the sacramental wafer with a dagger to symbolically kill Jesus a second time), usury

(exorbitant interest in moneylending) during the Middle Ages, and poisoning of wells during the time of the Black Death in the fourteenth century. When Jews were finally given civil rights at the beginning of the Second German Empire in 1871, the ignorance did not go away. Rather, added to it were fear and envy because the 1 percent Jewish minority was now able to move out of the ghetto; live where it wanted to; work in state positions, including the government; attend university; participate in public life—all of it leading to even more resentment and less desire to learn about Jewish traditions and values. The German backlash to civil rights for Jews in the 1880s and 1890s, though fought mostly in the press, was tremendous. German Christians after World War I found nothing wrong with accusing their fellow Jewish Germans of stabbing the nation in the back by

# Die Nürnberger Gesetze

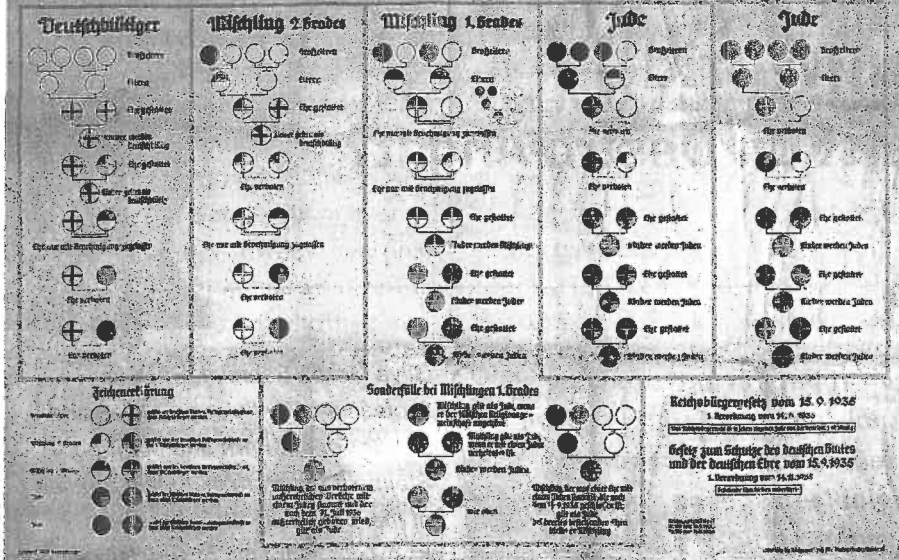


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Chart of the Nuremberg Laws of 1935. The laws employed a pseudo-scientific basis for racial identification. Only people with four German grandparents (four white circles in top row, left) were considered of "German blood." A Jew was considered someone with from three or four Jewish grandparents (black circles, top right). In the middle are people of "mixed blood" of the "first or second degree." A Jewish grandparent was defined as a current or former member of a Jewish religious community.

not serving in World War I. This was of course not true; many German Jews volunteered during World War I, the Jewish nation suffering wounded and dead in large numbers. Nevertheless, such ignorance by the population was grounded in the alienation that nearly two thousand years of separation into insiders and outsiders had spawned. A popular perception, though wrong, could not be reversed or redirected without massive public education. This process never happened, and when the Nazis played on all of the old fears and anti-Semitic tales, much of the population, in their ignorance, swallowed the poison without questioning its veracity.

In my class on the Holocaust and on other twentieth-century genocides, we study the pattern according to which genocide unfolds based on the pamphlet *1900–2000: A Genocidal Century*, developed by Dr. William L. Shulman of the Harriet and Kenneth Kupferberg Holocaust Resource Center and Archives at Queensborough Community College (New York: Queensborough Community

College, no year). This pattern consists of eight stages of genocide, stages that are discernible in most of the genocides that happened during the twentieth century. And there were many—the Armenian genocide perpetrated by the Ottoman Turks, the Ukrainian famine under Joseph Stalin, the Cambodian genocide perpetrated by the Khmer Rouge, the Bosnian genocide by the Serbs, the Rwandan genocide perpetrated by the Hutus, and of course the Holocaust perpetrated by Nazi Germany.

Following is a discussion of the eight stages:

Classification (1) into "us" and "them" is a powerful divider and quickly leads to symbolization (2). The Belgians, back in the 1930s, introduced a new idea into their mandate territory, Rwanda. Separating Hutus and Tutsis according to facial features, such as skin color and the shape of their nose, the Belgians divided an otherwise united population artificially, making the Hutus and the Tutsis carry identity cards. (See *A Genocidal Century* and Helmut Walser

Land	Zahl
A. A. Reich	131.500
Dänemark	45.700
Deutsche Ostgebiete	420.000
Generalgouvernement	2.284.000
Baltikum	420.000
Protektorat Böhmen und Mähren	74.200
Polenland	3.500
Letland	34.000
Litauen	47.000
Dänemark	5.800
Frankreich / Besetztes Gebiet	165.000
Unbesetztes Gebiet	700.000
Griechenland	75.000
Skandinavien	160.500
Norwegen	1.300
B. Bulgarien	48.000
England	370.000
Finnland	2.300
Irland	4.000
Italien einschl. Sardinien	50.000
Albanien	200
Kroatien	40.000
Portugal	3.000
Rumänien einschl. Bessarabien	342.000
Schweden	8.000
Schweiz	18.000
Serbien	10.000
Slowakei	88.000
Spanien	15.000
Türkei (europ. Teil)	15.000
Ungarn	742.800
UdSSR	5.000.000
Ukraine	2.994.684
Weißrussland ausschl. Bialystok	446.484
Zusammen, über	11.000.000

Photo: PPS

A page used at the Wannsee Conference on January 20, 1942, showing the Jewish population of each country under German occupation as well as target populations in unoccupied areas, such as Britain and the Soviet Union.

Smith, ed., *The Holocaust and Other Genocides: History, Representation, Ethics*, a project of the Tennessee Holocaust Commission [Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2006 (2002)], 201–22.) One of the approximately four hundred statutes passed by the Nazis to separate the Jews of Germany from their Christian fellow citizens decreed the wearing of the yellow Star of David (Magen David), a symbol that all European Jews were required to attach to their clothing starting in 1941. This was not a new idea but reminiscent of the round yellow patch that Christian as well as Muslim nations made Jews wear on their clothing during the Middle Ages.

Once the division was irrevocable through legislation—such as the Nuremberg Laws that revoked German Jews' citizenship and forbade any intergroup relations because of the Jews' perceived racial inferiority—the fire of hatred was stoked through the dehumanization (3) of the group that became the victims. German Jews who consorted with German Christians were called

race defilers and humiliated in public. Tutsis in Rwanda were characterized in terms of cockroaches. And once the concentration camps were established in Europe, those interned there were given a number for identification instead of a name.

It seems that once the level of dehumanization has been reached, turning back becomes harder and harder, for this stage is followed by a plan to organize (4) for the purpose of murdering fellow human beings without any moral inhibition. In Rwanda and in Germany, existing government organizations became tools of state-sanctioned destruction. In Rwanda legitimate work details were transformed into killing squads. In Germany political groups such as the SA (Brownshirts) and the SS (Blackshirts) became involved in the destruction of German Jews during Kristallnacht in 1938—burning, terrorizing, looting, and murdering their innocent fellow citizens at will.

Hate propaganda played a large role in the successful demonization of German Jews. Hitler's propaganda minister spared no effort to portray Jews as

inferior and Germans as superior. This polarization (5) was quickly seized on to intimidate the moderates in the ingroup by threatening arrest and public exposure as "Jew lovers" and to secure the names of "the enemy," compiling lists in preparation for the terrorization (6) of German Jews, from civil exclusion to deportation via the German railroad to murder in concentration and death camps. The Wannsee Conference in January of 1942 was a ninety-minute meeting in a Berlin suburb during which the intended murder of the entire Jewish population of Europe was decided. At this point only massive internal protests or a united protest by the world community would have deterred those in the leadership from carrying out their evil plans. In the instances of the Armenians, the Jews, the Tutsis, the Bosnians, the Ukrainians, and the Cambodians, there were no loud internal protests, nor were there sufficient external voices, so that the seventh stage, which turns this human evil into mass extermination (7), could happen. During this stage there is no reason, there is no mercy, there is no humanity. The



Photo: PPS

*Terrorist attacks were made on Jewish synagogues and shops during Kristallnacht (The Night of the Broken Glass) in 1938. This photo shows a devastated synagogue in Nuremberg.*

world is drenched in blood. Innocent children and aged grandparents suffer the same fate as the able-bodied adults in the bloom of their life. There is only death, with an occasional survivor or two, who escape from the carnage by accident—the malfunctioning gas chamber; the shooter who misses his aim; the fall from a cliff, cushioned by the many dead bodies that had gone before. One out of millions.



Photo: PPS

*Jewish civilians are marched out of Warsaw during the destruction of the city's ghetto by German troops in 1943.*



*A Jewish survivor of the Holocaust, Hanni Vogelweid, holds up a picture of her savior, Chiune Sugihara, a Japanese diplomat in Lithuania who saved thousands of Jews during World War II, at a ceremony on May 11 honoring him at the Simon Wiesenthal Center Museum of Tolerance.*

A few, too few, were so fortunate as to encounter an angel. Such an angel was Chiune Sugihara, Japanese consul to Kovno, Lithuania, who took it upon himself to write transit visas for two thousand or more desperate Lithuanian Jews against the will of his government. They were spared, enabled to leave evil behind, escaping to Curaçao, a Caribbean country within the Kingdom of the Netherlands, and other places in the world where they were safe (Smith, *Holocaust and Other Genocides*, 239). In all, there are only about twenty thousand individuals worldwide who have been recognized as Righteous Gentiles by Yad Vashem, the Israeli Holocaust Memorial and Education Center. Out of a world population of slightly more than two billion in 1940, that is not a large percentage of human beings who chose to care. It is all the more important to recognize these brave and courageous people who provided a hiding place, a scrap of bread, false papers, money to pay for visas or for transportation to safety. Some of the better known among them were

- Czech businessman Oscar Schindler, who saved eleven hundred Jews by employing them in his factory, even if they were not qualified.
- Raul Wallenberg, the Swedish businessman and diplomat, who still in 1944 was sent to Budapest by the United States government to try to rescue some of the eight hundred thousand Jews in danger there. He managed to save about one hundred thousand by placing them in safe houses and giving them visas to safety. Unfortunately, after the war he disappeared behind the Iron Curtain and apparently died in Soviet hands.
- Feng Shan Ho, Chinese consul to Vienna, provided visas to Austrian Jews so they could emigrate to Shanghai. Today there is a room dedicated to his heroic deeds in the Shanghai Jewish Refugee Museum.
- Pastor André Trocmé and his wife, Magda, of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon in France, took in Jews who knocked on their door, as did many of the families in this Huguenot village.

- The Danes as a nation saved most of their seven thousand Jewish citizens by helping them escape across the water to Sweden. For two weeks boatmen risked their lives, journeying back and forth under the cover of darkness.

Why did Righteous Gentiles, known and unknown, feel compelled to help? The answer some of these heroes themselves give is simple—it was the human thing to do, the right thing, there was no question. The question that remains for us, then, is how did they know? What motivated them? What steered their moral compass? Why is it natural for some individuals to do the right thing but not for others?

Not all perpetrator individuals and nations have learned from their horrible path of destruction. While some nations eventually came around to owning up to the crimes against humanity that they committed, forming truth commissions or international tribunals such as the Nuremberg Trials or the trial of Serbian president Slobodan Milosevic by the International Human Rights Court in The Hague, some nations, such as the Turks to this day, deny the accusations of genocide (8) leveled against them. Even in the case of nations who have made amends and have paid reparations to some of their victims, such as Germany, there is audible grumbling by individuals that “we have done enough.”

When it comes to human life, we can never do enough to rectify murder. We cannot bring the deceased person back to life. According to Article 2 of the Genocide Convention, drafted by the UN General Assembly with the support of Raphael Lemkin and passed on December 9, 1948, no individual or body has the right to commit acts “with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group.” Such acts include killing members of the group, causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of

the group, deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part, imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group, forcibly transferring children of the group to another group (Smith, *Holocaust and Other Genocides*, 147; Shulman, 1900–2000, 5).

Jewish tradition teaches that he or she who saves a life saves an entire universe. The question is, how should we live life so that our focus will be on the preservation, even prospering, of human life and not on its destruction? To date, none of our existing world philosophies or religions has succeeded in teaching us how to successfully “choose good” all of the time and not evil some of the time.

As a beginning, no action is too small. Ordinary people often underestimate the power of their actions. Students will say to me, “What can I do? I am just one person.” Simple steps such as inclusion—accepting someone of a different ethnic group, orientation, or religion as one of our own—are a good start. Actively resisting those who would drive a wedge between members of society is also a step in the right direction.

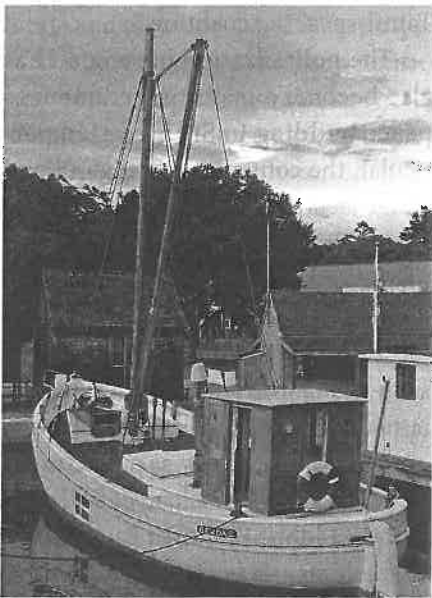


Photo: PPS

*The Gerda III, a Danish boat that brought hundreds of Danish Jews to safety in Sweden in 1943, is now moored at Mystic Seaport, Connecticut.*

When Pastor Trocmé was ordered to reveal the names of the Jews the village was hiding, he refused, saying, “These Jews are my brothers” (Smith, *Holocaust and Other Genocides*, 82). Speaking out when an injustice occurs is crucial. In studying past genocides, it is often pointed out that bystanders were as guilty as perpetrators because their silence translated into complicity. Raising one’s voice is a social responsibility; anything less is cowardice. Helmut Smith, in *The Holocaust and Other Genocides*, points out that if “the Catholic Church would have spoken out forcefully and openly from the beginning [of the Holocaust], it would have given moral and spiritual encouragement to opposition groups” (252). Not creating, supporting, or even listening to media hype about members of a particular group is important. Helping to prevent hate speech or hateful action is imperative. Protecting the right of free speech for all people matters. If in doubt, following the Golden Rule in Leviticus 19:18, “Love your fellow human being as yourself,” is an excellent basis for a life that will respect others. This is not difficult to understand, as Pastor Trocmé and his wife, Magda, showed, as did the citizens of Denmark.

Prejudice, or bias, which at first glance seems to be a benign and ordinary trait common to most of us, can indeed be innocent. A baby who spits out green beans or spinach acts spontaneously. The vegetables don’t taste good. As we grow up, we recognize the value of green beans and spinach. How do we get there? We have learned about nutrition and understand the contribution green vegetables make to our health. Prejudice or ignorance concerning our fellow human beings stems from moral immaturity, which if tutored, will turn into understanding and appreciation. During the Holocaust, the citizens of Denmark refused to see a Jewish problem. Jewish Danes were no different from Christian Danes. Danes were

Danes. Why can we, each of us, not do the same thing, and say human beings are human beings? Where is it written that one person has to be more or less human than another?

On April 24 of every year, Armenians commemorate the Armenian genocide; on April 19, Jews worldwide commemorate the Holocaust (Europe commemorates the Shoah on January 27, the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz). This year for the memorial service I was asked to read some words written by Elie Wiesel, a survivor of Auschwitz and a teacher. For a long time these words followed me because they speak about the future, our future, in relation to the past:

And now the boy is turning to me. “Tell me,” he asks, “what have you done with *my* future, what have you done with *your* life?” And I tell him that I have tried. That I have tried to keep memory alive, that I have tried to fight those who would forget. Because if we forget, we are guilty, we are accomplices. And then I explain to him how naïve we were, that the world *did* know, and remained silent. And that is why I swore never to be silent whenever, wherever human beings endure suffering and humiliation. We must take sides. . . . When human lives are endangered, when human dignity is in jeopardy, national borders and sensitivities become irrelevant. Wherever men and women are persecuted because of their race, religion, or political views, that place must, at that moment, become the center of the universe. (Elie Wiesel, via Jeff Gubitz, Knoxville Jewish Alliance Yom HaShoah observance, April 18, 2012, Knoxville, Tennessee. Emphasis mine.)

Such is the harvest of prejudice. It is a terrible responsibility to bear but also a great opportunity to do good. □