

# THE HOLOCAUST AND TODAY'S KIDS

BY ROBERT COLES

The German Nazis took power in what was considered one of the most educationally and culturally advanced nations on earth. The question of how it could happen—and with so little resistance—remains a critical one to ask in today's classrooms. Coles offers insights for raising that question with kids.

**F**orty years ago the murderous Nazis were well on their way to achieving what would later be known as "The Holocaust," a genocidal assault on European Jewry, as well as on other men, women and children whose background, interests, views or activities made them enemies of the German state of the early 1940s. Since the end of the Second World War, the entire world, in one way or another, has lived in the shadow of that unspeakable tragedy. No longer would Europe's cultural and scientific advances hold the promise they once did: signs of civilized man's advancing possibilities. The Germany of the 1930s had no group that we might have called "culturally disadvantaged" or "culturally deprived." Nor did that Germany have illiteracy as a burden. The *Gestapo* and the concentration camps emerged in the nation of Goethe and Schiller, Beethoven and Brahms; in a nation whose people, in impressive numbers, had a thorough mastery of science, philosophy, art, psychology and sociology. Moreover, in no time Hitler and his henchmen were quite able to count on the support of professors, doctors, lawyers, journalists, architects and, I regret to say, many of my kind—psychiatrists and psychologists—who submitted with no protest to the dictates of those who ran the Third Reich.

We will, one hopes, never stop contemplating that set of events—the rapid accommodation of a once exquisitely civilized nation to a political regime whose explicit purposes, from the very start, were declared to be viciously hateful.

John Milton, the seventeenth-century poet, once told us that the power of truth would make men free. Yet, there was no absence of truth in Weimar Germany. Freud's truths were available, as were Einstein's and Thomas Mann's. And in art, expressionists were much concerned with the nature of German social reality. In engineering, in the social sciences, and even in the contemplation of religious and moral issues, Germans excelled mightily. Still, the devilish fascist thugs took power quickly in January 1933, and consolidated their rule without great turmoil. Within five years a nation went through an enormous transformation—a descent into hell; and nothing at home (or even, alas, abroad) seemed likely to change that state of affairs.

How are we to comprehend such a turn of events? One hastens to insist that such a question not only be turned into abstract speculation, but also be grounded in real, human situations—parents informing their children, teachers doing likewise with their students. There is, in any case, no series of sociological or psychological abstractions that explains, definitively, the emergence of Nazi power, the hypnotic spell Hitler exerted over so many people, the murderous behavior his followers demonstrated openly by 1938.

In *retrospect*, we see everything: the trickery, the lies, the bluffs that, tragically, German politicians, church leaders and, ultimately, the political leaders of other countries failed to call. In *retrospect*, we know that the Hitler who became Germany's chancellor in January 1933 became a mass

killer, conquered much of Europe, presided over the utter destruction of his own nation—and all the while, commanded a fierce loyalty from thousands of followers.

**A**s one goes through the newspapers of the 1930s, the magazines, the news documentaries made for the movie houses, and yes, the personal letters and diaries of all sorts of people—Jews and Gentiles, the rich and the poor, the educated and the less educated—one finds no such clear, collective awareness of what awaited the people of this planet: an unparalleled spectacle of our capacity for bestiality. Rather, even among the vulnerable Jews who lived under Hitler in the mid 1930s—or maybe *especially* among them, given their desperate situation—there never ceased to be hope.

In *Never To Forget: The Jews and the Holocaust*, an excellent historical account of Jewry's fate under Hitler (an account that was written for children and that draws heavily on recorded memories, firsthand observations, fragments of letters, diaries, songs and poems), Milton Meltzer asks: "How could anyone have overlooked the signs [of the coming Holocaust]?" He hastens to answer his own question in this instructive way:

*With the advantage of hindsight, it is not hard to ask that question. But the Jews living through the experience could behave only on the basis of what they knew then. The German Jews, the first in Europe to fall victim to Hitler, could reach no*

real agreement on the nature and extent of the danger threatening them. Nor could they agree on what to do about it. We must realize that there was no historical precedent for the Holocaust. It was a new event in world history; the mechanical mass-murder system of an Auschwitz had never happened before. Like any person anywhere, each Jew thought and acted on the basis of his own level of understanding, his own degree of courage, his own moral judgment.

Those last two words, of course, challenge all of us: What capacity does each of us have for "moral judgment"? How might we react in the face of political evil and madness such as that which came to prevail in Germany during the 1930s? And that latter question, of course, cuts both ways: How might we have acted had we been Jews, or had we been so-called Aryan Germans? Meltzer does not shirk asking such questions even as he conveys for his young readers the enormous outrages, the blood-thirsty excesses of the Nazis—who, by the late 1930s were acting like craven animals of the lowest kind, yet also like mischievous and canny human beings who were able to play on the inevitable mix of optimism and despair we all have as our psychological inheritance. Meltzer is at pains, in that regard, "to indicate how hard it is for anyone to resist a ruthless totalitarian power which commands modern weapons and employs elaborate means to crush opposition."

I have read a fair number of books written for young readers, and among such books, Meltzer's is especially edifying. He has no interest in brushing the complex truth of his subject matter under this or that ideological carpet. The Jews of central Europe had to face a devil hitherto unknown to humankind: the modern, technologically buttressed state as an instrument of wholesale terror and murder. Under such circumstances the resistance of even a handful becomes a major miracle.

Given the singularity and atrocity of the events, one appreciates the challenge to any historian, any writer. Several storytellers, nevertheless, have aimed to convey to children what it was like—for, say, boys and girls their age—to witness hell itself unfold. Similarly, those who were actually there, Jews and non-Jews, have used autobiography as a means to reach youngsters today. Finally, some essayists have aimed at prompting reflection in young people through

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## We all must wonder what we would do now, about this or that political and human tragedy.

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narrative exposition, accompanied in some instances by questions meant to provoke moral self-scrutiny.

**I**n *The Holocaust: A History of Courage and Resistance*, Bea Stadler takes her youthful readers, step by step, through the rise of Hitler and the subsequent horrors visited upon the Jews. The narration is strong, lucid, compelling, and it is interrupted by powerful personal accounts—remembrances of men and women of what they saw, heard and, not least, experienced. On the evening of November 9, 1938, for instance, the Nazis struck at Germany's Jewish people. Synagogues were destroyed; the Jewish sacred books burned; thousands arrested, hurt, killed. It was called *Kristallnacht* (Night of the Broken Glass), because glass was smashed all night long, the glass of Jewish homes and businesses and places of worship.

Sentence after sentence confronts today's schoolchildren with one of the worst nightmares mankind has ever experienced. Then "things to think about" are presented, and surely to good effect. The "things" are a mix of statements and questions, as in these two examples:

*Many Jewish homes were robbed, looted, or destroyed; and many Jewish men were hauled to concentration camps during the night and morning of Kristallnacht. Do you think it was possible that the Nazis alone were responsible for such a terrible event?*

*We have heard of people in large apartment buildings watching a person being robbed and murdered in the courtyard and not even calling the police for help. Is this any different from the attitude of Germans who watched their Jewish neighbors being taken away,*

*or beaten, or robbed, without saying a word? Would you be able to sleep through a 'Kristallnacht'?*

Given what takes place in all too many of our schools, one can only be grateful for such a line of moral inquiry. How many of our schoolchildren, one wonders, have been asked to read about and ponder the significance of the Holocaust—or for that matter, of some recent events in our own nation's history: the civil rights struggle of the 1960s, for instance? How many of *us*, young or old, know how to answer the question of responsibility? We realize that the Nazis somehow had to enlist the active complicity or passive acquiescence of millions of fellow citizens to accomplish the Holocaust. Might we have been among those citizens, had we been Germans? Might we even have been one of the many neighbors who watched silently as Jews were threatened, attacked, forcibly removed to camps? We know that in any society a criminal assault upon one is, in effect, a criminal assault upon all; and we know that the person who does nothing to interfere with such a collapse of the legal and moral structure of a democratic nation is himself or herself made a criminal. Still, each of us wonders how we might have acted, had we been living, say, in Berlin during the 1930s, as neighbors to Jewish people. The Nazis were quite shrewd on that score, understanding our self-protective and self-enhancing instincts. They comprehended brilliantly the workings of fear and greed and guilt: how we lose self-respect as we clutch at what little privileges we have, and then turn on those less fortunate, on victims of all sorts, with scorn, because they remind us of our flawed and corrupted morality.

One wants with all one's heart and soul to say, confidently: "No, I'd not sleep a wink through *Kristallnacht*. Never! Nor would I merely stay awake. I'd run into the streets, try to save my neighbors, help them in any way possible. If necessary, I'd fight the Nazis to the death." I have, in fact, asked children I know about such hypothetical situations: What would you do, if you saw a Klan mob attacking a black child, say, or a grownup? How would you sleep, if you heard the police on a rampage outside against people you believed to be innocent—a family, perhaps, condemned by virtue of their background, their skin color, their accent, their religious avowals? Almost invariably, the children respond as I