

on the dialogue, and to have my own silent prayers and quarrels with God.

Amen.

Questions

1. Why is the author reluctant to approach the question of the Holocaust? Why does he decide to do so?
2. Summarize the progression of Elie Wiesel's thought in the five novels cited in this article. What is the key event in the final novel that constitutes a breakthrough?
3. Why does Wiesel consider questions more important than answers? Do you agree, or disagree? Why?
4. How do Jews and Christians differ in their approach to evil, in the light of their differing views on the Messiah?
5. Wiesel comes to terms with the evil of the Holocaust by telling the story over and over. Do you think it would be better simply to put that event aside? Why, or why not?

Those Who Said 'No' to the Holocaust

David Kitterman

This article originally appeared in *Nonviolent Sanctions*, Spring 1991.

Is it possible to refuse cooperation with a murderous regime and still survive? Contrary to popular—and even scholarly—belief, even those under the direct control of Nazi Germany during World War II were able to ignore or even sabotage the systematic killing of Jews and others—and live to tell about it.

David Kitterman, associate professor of history at Northern Arizona University, gives examples of Germans who would not go along with the Holocaust. His prime example is that of Dr. Albert Battel, a lawyer and army lieutenant who used his troops to prevent Jews from being transported to the Belzec extermination camp. He could not save them all from the dreaded SS, but several hundred persons survived because of his heroic efforts. Despite threats of arrest, he received only a reprimand and was later promoted.

Others simply refused to carry out orders. In more than half the cases, no negative consequences were suffered by those who would not kill unarmed civilians.

The author concludes on the mournful note that, given more instances of non-violent resistance, the Holocaust might have been prevented.

This is Holocaust Remembrance Week. It is a time to remember the millions who were killed by the Nazis in World War II. It is also a time to remember those courageous individuals who saved lives by refusing to participate in Hitler's genocide.

Well-known are the stories of those who hid Jews or helped them escape from the Nazis. Virtually unknown, however, are the cases of resistance by Germans inside the Nazi extermination apparatus.

Historical research has revealed at least 100 documented cases of German soldiers, policemen, or members of the SS refusing orders to kill Jews, other unarmed civilians, or POWs. Not one of these Germans was killed for refusing orders and few suffered serious consequences.

These facts contradict the conventional wisdom held during the war by German combatants that any order given by a superior officer had to be obeyed or drastic consequences would follow. Many students of Nazi history have held the same view.

One dramatic case involved Dr. Albert Battel, a lawyer and first lieutenant in the army. His troops were stationed in Przemysl, Poland, where Jewish ghetto laborers were working for the army. On July 26, 1942, Battel used his troops to seal off a bridge, preventing the SS from taking the Jews to the Belzec extermination camp. He and his unit then forced entrance to the ghetto, which had been surrounded by police and SS troops, and relocated 80-100 laborers and their families to army headquarters.

The next day Battel was forced to allow the SS into the Jewish ghetto, with tragic results. The Jews were sent on death trains to Belzec, all but the few hundred Battel had managed to save. His actions constituted direct armed resistance to SS orders. SS leader Himmler threatened to arrest him. However, he received only a reprimand and was subsequently promoted before being sent to a front-line unit. Battel survived the war and was honored in Israel for his efforts to save the Jews.

What other tactics did Germans employ in refusing orders to kill? Unlike Battel, virtually all others used nonviolent methods. The majority simply stated their refusal to carry out such orders. Others protested to their superiors, which was especially effective when police or army units not under the direct control of the SS were asked to assist. A few cited damage to their emotional, psychological, or physical health. Others refused on grounds of conscience, religion, or moral scruples. Still others asked for transfers or feigned madness.

One army officer in Poland told Jewish captives to escape when his colleague, the security officer in charge of their roundup, was absent. The guards assumed it was approved and allowed the Jews to leave.

Some threw away or 'lost' their weapons. One shot wildly, deliberately missing an old man in a ditch. Others overlooked women and children hiding from search details. In one case, two men raised their loaded rifles in self-defense against their drunken officer. He had drawn his pistol to kill them when they wouldn't shoot twenty women and children encountered on a road.

What were the consequences of these acts? Each of the refusers interviewed had felt certain they would be shot or placed in a concentration camp for refusing to obey orders. But surprisingly, in 58% of the cases, those who refused suffered no negative consequences.

In only eight percent were there serious consequences. Two men were court-martialed and sent to concentration camps. Others were forced to participate in some minor way, such as driving officers to the execution site or digging the execution pit.

Lesser consequences happened in about one third of the cases. Some were transferred back to Germany (hardly a punishment) or to another unit. Such transfers sometimes resulted in demotions with lower salary, but several of those transferred were later promoted. Verbal or written reprimands, transfer to a combat unit, demotion in rank, and slower promotions were most common.

The Holocaust was an unparalleled tragedy. But in the midst of the horror heroes emerged, those who said "No!"; those who overcame fear, indoctrination, and peer pressure to refuse participation in crimes against humanity. Their stories show that it was possible to refuse participation in Holocaust killings. Contrary to popular belief, there was not an effective automatic system of "terror-justice" operating against those who refused. Indeed, the coercive powers of the wartime Nazi system proved to be impotent or ineffective in nearly every documented case of refusal to murder unarmed people.

If only more Germans had said "No!"; perhaps the Holocaust might have been prevented.

Questions

1. Picture yourself in the situation of someone who is ordered to participate in the killing of the innocent. List the consequences of your refusal to act. What would you do in such a situation? Why?
2. Why do you think none of the one hundred German soldiers and others who disobeyed orders were put to death? What does that tell you about the real power of a dictatorial regime?
3. Why did so many collaborate with the Nazis?
4. How does fear play into the hands of a tyrant or a bully? Give examples from your own experience.
5. What lessons do the example of these courageous Germans have for people in today's world who are told to carry out acts that are destructive to human dignity?