

Holocaust could occur again—possibly in U.S.

Personal view / Yechiel Eckstein

WHATEVER ELSE may be said about the TV show “Holocaust” and the reaction to the Nazi-Skokie issue, one thing is clear: These two events raised the consciousness (and won the sympathy) of millions of Americans who previously were not aware of the scope of evil and human suffering characterized by the term Holocaust.



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Also, they stimulated a good deal of soul-searching. Millions asked themselves, many for the first time, whether our society had finally learned from the cataclysmic Holocaust that silence, apathy and a business-as-usual philosophy are not a form of response. Many agonized over whether a similar event could occur again, perhaps here in America. Jews asked Christians, and Christians asked themselves, what their response would be if Jewish life in America were threatened.

Many, both Christian and Jew, sought to resolve these quandaries by pointing to the tremendous outburst of Christian support for the Jews of Skokie. The Christian show of solidarity, they felt, clearly demonstrated that the response would be far different from that “offered” in World War II. Jews would never again stand alone.

To be sure, much has changed in the relationship between

Christians and Jews in the last 30 years. Official Catholic and Protestant statements strongly condemn all forms of anti-Semitism. The Jewishness of Jesus has been rediscovered. Christians have initiated Holocaust services and even have come to sanctify the insistence of Nazi victim Deitrich Bonhoeffer—a Lutheran theologian—that blind obedience to the state can be idolatrous.

Yet, the United States is not Nazi Germany. Frank Collin is not Adolf Hitler. We must ask ourselves: Is the outburst of Christian sentiment for the Jews of Skokie a valid, indication of their response if their own lives and the lives of their families were jeopardized by their support? Has Christology been universally and totally expunged of its anti-Jewish biases? If not, could these feelings surface under certain social, economic and political conditions? Finally, could Jews rely on Christian martyrdom? And could non-Jewish minorities, if they were threatened, rely on Jewish heroism?

WHEN OUR OWN LIVES are threatened, we all react in different ways—and possibly not the way we anticipated. Our lives, for the most part, revolve around our own interests, problems and preoccupations. And the concerned individual, facing massive and indifferent bureaucracy, often feels impotent. Given all this, what can we expect of the American people if Jews or any other minority were threatened with genocide?

Our society has not yet begun to address this question. The Holocaust and other instances of genocide are not being taught in our schools, and the moral implications of these events are not being absorbed by the next generation. The disease of anti-Semitism has not yet been eradicated the fear of the “foreigner” has not yet dissipated and true respect for

religious, ethnic and racial diversity is still somewhere down the road.

What happens to our morality in crises? Who and what are deemed expendable during an oil embargo, an economic depression or prolonged periods of unemployment? Israel, Jews, blacks, Latinos? Despite the Holocaust, Vietnam and Watergate, don't we still tend to give blind obedience to authority? Couldn't we just as blindly obey authoritarianism? How energetically are we opposing the current genocides in Uganda and Cambodia, or the racial and religious bigotry and violence in Lebanon, Northern Ireland and South Africa?

I BELIEVE THAT MAN IS NOT inherently evil, but he does have the potential and perhaps even the propensity for it. I don't believe that a Holocaust of Jews or any other minority will occur in the United States, but I recognize that it is not beyond the realm of possibility. Given the right circumstances, decent and ethical people—Jews, Christians, other Gentiles—can be swayed to the point of “each for himself.” No religious, ethnic or racial group is immune to becoming either the victim or the practitioner of hatred and violence.

None of us should be fooled into believing that, through the TV show and the Nazi threat to march in Skokie, we have spiritually and culturally leaped from raised-consciousness to moral conscience. The truth is that we have only just begun to ponder the questions crying out to us from the ashes of Auschwitz.

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