

## Staring into the void: God and the Holocaust

By Brett Buckner

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In a dark and damp cellar in Cologne, Germany, where thousands of Jews once hid from Nazi torment, an inscription was discovered not long after the end of World War II. Scrawled across a stone wall by an anonymous author who was likely killed, the words serve as a prayer against the unspeakable evil of the Holocaust.

"I believe in the sun even when it's not shining. I believe in love even when not feeling it. I believe in God even when He is silent."

Today, those words echo through time and memory as Holocaust survivors and those who search for meaning within the madness struggle with questions that have no answers.

How could God allow the state-sponsored mass murder of innocent Jewish men, women and children deemed "life unworthy of life" by the Nazis? Where was God when those Jews, along with more than 1 million other "racially inferior" groups, were being beaten and robbed, starved and humiliated, gassed and buried?

Why God? Why?

"No one emerged with their faith unchanged," says Holocaust scholar and author Michael Berenbaum, who currently serves as adjunct professor of theology at the University of Judaism in Bel Air, Calif. "Even the most devout believer left with the innocence of their faith shattered."

But even Holocaust victims who lived through the worst degradations and pain retained their faith.

"If it weren't for God, I would have died," says Riva (Schuster) Hirsch, a Holocaust survivor living in Birmingham. "He's the only thing I had left. They took everything else. Hitler was evil, but God never abandoned us. He was always there."

Hirsch will be the guest speaker Thursday night as part of Jacksonville State University's annual Holocaust Remembrance.

Ilse Scheuer Nathan, who now lives in Birmingham, witnessed firsthand the worst of humanity. When she was 9 years old, her entire family - mother, father, brother and sister - were transported to the concentration camp Auschwitz in the spring of 1944.

One morning, Nathan and her younger sister, Ruth, were forced to walk naked through the gas saunas where many Jews before them had died. And yet they came through the other side unharmed.

"The other prisoners looked at us like we were ghosts," Nathan says softly. "God spared us both that day."

Though one miracle may have saved their lives, Nathan was not completely able to avoid the brutality of the Nazi guards. While marching back from a forced-labor camp where they built landing strips for German airplanes, Nathan noticed that one of the prisoners dropped a piece of paper. Without thinking, she stopped to pick up the note. A female SS officer saw what Nathan had done.

Later that night, Nathan was horse-whipped with a thick leather strap while lying naked across a stool. She was made to count each lash out loud. One ... two ... three ...

"But I fainted and couldn't count anymore," she says. "They woke me up and made me start all over again."

In the winter of 1945, while Russian troops advanced towards Germany, the 800 girls were forced on a death march that lasted from January to March. The goal was simple, Nathan says. The Nazis planned to kill them all so that no one would learn of their imprisonment. And they almost succeeded - less than 50 survived, including Nathan and Ruth, who escaped one night by hiding under the wheel of an abandoned wagon.

Later, after learning about the end of the war from a Russian soldier, the girl found a razor blade. Scared and alone, sick with typhus and starvation, she contemplated suicide.

"We were so desperate that we wanted to die," Nathan says. "We didn't know what freedom meant. All we knew was pain and suffering."

"But through the grace of God, we stopped ourselves."

The girls eventually made their way to Holland and in the summer of 1946 came to America. Nathan struggles to understand why the Holocaust was allowed to happen.

"There has been so much pain in the name of religion," says Nathan, who attends a Birmingham synagogue regularly. "They killed 6 million Jews ... 6 million ... and why, because we went to temple and they went to church? That is something I'll never understand."

"Our God is the same. He is in all our hearts; some of us just speak to him differently."

Trying to understand

The conflict of God's presence during the Holocaust attacks so many of our most sacred beliefs, Berenbaum says.

“The Holocaust is about ultimate events – life and death,” he explains from his California home. “Consequently, it pursues the question of faith. How are we to grapple with that idea of a benevolent God balanced against the kind of evil that was the Holocaust?”

Coming to terms with God in the Holocaust is no merely a question for Judaism, Berenbaum suggests.

“It challenges everyone’s fundamental faith, including the Christian belief that their own faith is able to withstand evil,” he says. “Christianity is a religion based on love. Knowing that, it should have manifested itself in acts of love – and there were a few, but they were far from dominant.”

Perhaps the only way that Jews who experienced the Holocaust are able to maintain their faith is to see the event as affirmation of a fundamental failure of humanity – not religion.

“It is God who has given freedom to human beings,” Berenbaum says. “Consequently, with that freedom, we can either do what is godly or we can betray God by destroying all that is beautiful and free in the world.

“The Holocaust was the fault of man, not of God. And while it has not taught us much about the nature of God, it has taught us a great deal about the nature of evil.”

But there are many respected Christian theologians who argue that, in the grim light of the Holocaust, the traditional doctrine of a benevolent and all-powerful God must be altered.

“It’s no longer possible to accept that God has such attributes,” says Dorothee Solle, author of *God’s Pain, Our Pain*. “Instead, we must acknowledge that God is all-loving, but not omnipotent. He suffers along with those who are victimized. God experiences our pain and thereby consoles the afflicted.”

Whether Jewish or Christian, we all must show certain modesty because we are completely incapable of understanding the divine, Berenbaum says.

“What the Holocaust proves is that the way we see him is far too simplistic,” he says in the measured tone of a man practiced in simplifying the profound. “Our age calls for theological humility. We do not understand God and therefore we should not pretend to understand God.”

“The Holocaust shatters faith – faith in God, faith in human decency and faith in meaningful progress,” Berenbaum writes in the forward to *The Holocaust Chronicle*. “The Holocaust shatters. Our task is to mend.”

Though never shattered, Aisic (Isaac) Hirsch, the husband of Riva (Schuster) Hirsch, has his faith tested.

He was 9 years old in September 1939 when German tanks rolled through his small town of Mogielnica, outside of Warsaw, Poland. The Nazis soon set fire to both Jewish synagogues in town.

“That’s when I knew just how bad the Germans were,” he says from his home in Birmingham. “If they’d burn temples, they burn people, too.”

In 1941, Hirsch, his mother and 5-year-old brother were transported to the Warsaw ghetto, the largest of the ghettos organized by the Nazis in Poland. A tiny section of the city – about 3 ½ square miles – became home to half a million Jews. Each building housed an average of 400 people. Daily food allocations equaled roughly 200 calories per day. Many ate only boiled potato skins and water.

“It was absolute misery – rats and sickness everywhere,” Hirsch remembers.

Watching helplessly as his 5-year-old died of typhus and his mother slid into madness, Hirsch escaped. After two full nights of walking, he arrived at the home of a family friend who agreed to take him in. He hid out in a barn for several months, studying a book of Catholic prayers the friend had given him.

“Somehow I knew those prayers would save my life,” Hirsch says.

After some neighbors became suspicious, Hirsch was forced leave. He arrived in a village named Goschyn one Sunday morning.

“And where was a little boy like me going to go on a Sunday morning?” Hirsch asks rhetorically. “I went to church. They knew that I was a stranger but not that I was a Jew.”

Because of his blond hair and blue eyes, Hirsch blended into the congregation. And when the children rose and made their way to confession, he followed right along.

“I knelt down, but I couldn’t confess,” he says. “All I could do was cry. I was paralyzed. At that moment, I thought I was dead.”

The young priest knew the boy was not Catholic yet showed pity on him. He slid open the confessional window and placed his hand upon Hirsch’s head.

“And I’ll never forget the words he said to me,” Hirsch remembers. “He said, ‘Listen, this world will not go on forever. It will end. One day, you will find all your loved ones again.’”

“That priest was my guardian angel. He lifted my life. He probably put in a lot of prayers to God that filled my heart. And is because of him that I’m here today, telling this story.”

With the priest’s help, Hirsch found work on a German farm, where he remained until he was liberated by the Russians. He met and married Riva Schuster in Israel in 1950. And

hardly a day passes where he doesn't think of God and the blessings given to him amid all the fear and suffering.

"I have no choice but to believe in God," he says. "God watches out over all of us. We just don't always understand what he is doing. But he is always there."

A knock on the door

The Holocaust entered the life of Riva Schuster (Hirsch) with a knock at the door.

One afternoon in early 1941, the 7-year-old was sitting at dinner with her family when a friend came by the house. The friend was in an obvious panic.

"Joe," the man said to her father, Joseph. "I think something very bad is coming."

Not wanting to scare his young children, her father calmly walked them outside. But as soon the door opened, the fear was unavoidable. The Germans had invaded her small village of Novaseletz in eastern Romania. The sky was black with the smoke of burning buildings. The ground shook with falling bombs.

Joseph led his family away from the village and into the forests that led to Chotin, where his parents lived. They would never arrive. Instead, they were captured by Nazi SS troops.

"We didn't know where they came from," Schuster says. "They were just there with their motorcycles and their shiny boots. All that we had in our hands they ripped away and threw to the ground."

Schuster, her mother, father and two older brothers were forced to join a convoy with thousands of captured Jews. For miles and miles, day and days, they walked endlessly. Schuster's shoes were gone. Her feet were frozen and bloody.

"Everywhere were dead bodies," she says, dread filling her voice. "Children. Old people – piles and piles of dead bodies with wild dogs ripping them apart. And me, as a child, I was terrified to even lift my head and ask ... 'Why'?"

Anyone who stopped, slowed down, spoke or made eye contact was shot. Everyone else just kept walking.

They finally arrived in the town of Sukarein, where trains were waiting to send Jews to camps at Belzec, Chelmno, Sobibor, Majdanek, Treblinka and Auschwitz-Birkenau.

Millions of Jews were transported to their deaths in cattle cars. Up to 100 people were crammed into these small livestock trailers. The terror was amplified because the Jews

didn't know where they were going. Once the doors were sealed, prisoners were deprived of food, water and proper sanitation facilities. Some died, others went insane.

Separated from her family amid the chaos, 7-year-old Riva Schuster was forced to travel alone.

"When they opened the doors ... that smell and the screaming," she says. "I still hear those awful noises sometimes at night in the dark. That's why I can't sleep when it's quiet."

After days in the cattle cars, standing on the bodies of dead children, Schuster and thousands of other Jews arrived at Luchinetz, a camp in the Ukraine.

"I was filthy," Schuster says. "My clothes were rags. I was starving, sick with typhus and malaria. The lice covered me and were falling into my eyes and mouth. I was more dead than alive."

"I was so miserable I wished they'd kill me, but it was only God who kept me alive."

Schuster lay in a corner of the barracks for weeks until late one night she felt someone pulling at her shoulder. At first she played dead, but the stranger wouldn't be ignored. He turned her over, placed a hand over her mouth so she couldn't scream and ran her out of the camp. Hidden in a wagon underneath piles of hay, she was taken to a local convent.

For two years – 1943 to 1945 – Schuster lay alone, naked in the darkness of a six-foot square room with only a blanket for warmth. Every few days the nun would sneak in to give what food they had. Sick and malnourished, she couldn't eat because her teeth. The rats took all they could find.

Finally, the door opened and she was pushed out into the road. Liberation had come.

"They just let me go. But where?" she says. "I was lost and alone, no family, no home, no hope. But God was with me always. God wanted me to live even if I didn't want to do anything but die."

She was eventually picked up by other liberated survivors and handed over to the Red Cross. She was reunited with her father, whom she didn't recognize. Her mother and one of her brothers died during the Holocaust. In 1948, at the age of 15, she arrived in Israel – where she met and married her husband, Aisic.

Today, reliving these stories is difficult for the Hirschs. It takes days for them to recover from the emotions that are churned up. But both agree that telling about their survival is important. Perhaps it is why they were spared.

"God was there ... always there, and I know this as good as anyone," Schuster says. "How could I possibly question that it was the will of God that allowed me to survive

when it was nuns – true people of God – who saved me from the evil that was everywhere.”