

# Figures in the Holocaust Landscape

by Canon Albert Radcliffe

## Perpetrators and victims

I have borrowed my title, *Figures in the Holocaust Landscape*, from the world of art and paintings like Thomas Gainsborough's National Gallery portrait, *Mr and Mrs Andrews*, in which the two are shown against the background of the land they own. In a parallel way I want to paint the portraits of some key figures – perpetrators and victims – in the Nazi attempt to murder Europe's entire Jewish population. *Holocaust* is a Greek word which translates the "whole burnt offering" or "sacrifice" of the temple in Jerusalem, while the preferred word in Hebrew is Shoah, which means "Catastrophe". The chief perpetrators of the Holocaust were every bit as proud of the evil they had done in the destruction of entire communities as the Andrews had been in the transformation of their land.

But first let us remind ourselves of how that final death toll of six million Jews was so cruelly achieved. Building on ancient Christian theological prejudice, between 1933 and 1941 the persecution of Jews grew by small but appreciable steps, beginning with boycotts of shops and business, then exclusion from education, social and professional life and, after Poland was invaded, the creation of Jewish ghettos.

From 1933, when the Nazis came to power, to the outbreak of war in 1939, there was also a slow escalation in violence with imprisonment in concentration camps; then, with the invasion of Russia on June 22nd 1941, the gloves came off; within two days the notorious killing squads, the *Einsatzgruppen*, began their systematic shooting of Jews. At the end of July Herman Goring [1893-1946] instructed Reinhard Heydrich [1904-42], the Chief of Reich Security, to plan for the "Final Solution"



*The gate of Auschwitz*

of the Jewish problem. On November 1st work began on Belzec, the first of six "extermination" or "death" camps. On December 8th the first Jews were murdered in mobile gas vans at Chelmo. Eventually, by the spring of 1945, six million Jews had been "eliminated" in this "Final Solution". The now widespread remembrance of the Holocaust in national commemoration days and Holocaust museums is important because of the nature of the event; it was the coldest, most calculated and most scientifically organised evil in the world's long list of genocides.

## Hitler's team

We turn now to some of the men responsible for it. The first figure in the Holocaust landscape must be **Adolf Hitler** [1889-1945], the failed Austrian artist in whose obsessional imagination the Third Reich largely originated. Hitler fought in the Bavarian army in WWI, was decorated twice for bravery and promoted to Corporal. War and the army were his ideal life. During WWI it looked, as late as March 1918, as

if the German Michael Offensive might break through the British 5th army and win the war. When that last great offensive failed, and in November Germany sued for peace, Hitler was devastated. How could the impossible have happened?

In his search for meaning and a role in life he became involved in the extreme right wing politics of what in 1920 became the National Socialist Workers, or Nazi Party.

The Nazi policies that attracted Hitler were:

- the revision of the peace Treaty of Versailles
- the unification of all ethnic Germans in a single Reich
- the exclusion of Jews from German citizenship.

In 1923, after the failure of the so-called Beer Hall Putsch, Hitler was imprisoned at Landsberg am Lech where he wrote the first volume of *Mein Kampf* (My Struggle), which is both an autobiography and a political manifesto. In *Mein Kampf* he portrays himself as an idealist who only became an anti-Semite reluctantly when, on moving to Vienna, he came to believe that the Jews were plotting to take over the world.

In the 19th century the ancient, religious anti-Jewish hostility of the Christian Church – “You crucified our Saviour” – became the much more virulent, secular and racial, pseudo-scientific anti-Semitism that Hitler disastrously inherited. Hitler believed that humankind was locked in a struggle for world dominance between two races, the Aryan, the creators of culture, and the rest, the “inferior” races, of which the Jews, the destroyers of culture, were the most inferior and dangerous. For Hitler, civilisation’s only hope in a continuous struggle for survival was for Germany to create in the east, at Russia’s expense, *Lebensraum*, that is, living room for a greater Germany.

When he came to power in 1933 Hitler gathered around himself a group of like-minded and eager-to-serve confidants. Among these was Joseph Goebbels [1897-1945]. If Hitler was a failed artist, Goebbels was a failed writer who in 1933 became Germany’s Minister of Propaganda.

### **Control of the media**

With all the media under his control – press, radio and films – Goebbels set out to control the German imagination. He did this by portraying the Jews as Germany’s chief enemy and establishing Hitler as Fuhrer, or Leader, the all-knowing genius who sacrificed himself on Germany’s behalf. As an enthusiastic Nazi and anti-Semite Goebbels led the effort to rid Berlin of its Jews: he helped to launch the Kristallnacht pogrom and in 1944 was made the Third Reich’s plenipotentiary for total war.

With a nation’s imagination under control there’s not much a deluded and corrupt imagination like Goebbels’ cannot achieve. While Himmler, Hitler’s chief henchman in the persecution of the Jews, avoided speaking openly of the “Final Solution” to the “Jewish Problem”, Goebbels was so unguarded that it is often only through his public pronouncements that historians can best track what was happening behind the scenes.

For example, in an editorial in his newspaper *Das Reich* in November 1941, Goebbels quoted Hitler’s 1939 “prophecy” that the Jews would be the losers in the coming world war. ‘Now’, he said, Hitler’s prophecy was coming true: “Jewry is now suffering the gradual process of annihilation it intended for us”.

Between them Hitler and Goebbels had established the national myth of German racial and cultural supremacy with the Jews as Germany’s racial and cultural nemesis,

a myth so prevalent and powerful that it dominated all public life and thought. The young especially found it difficult to escape its seductive and false reality. The Holocaust alerts us to what evils can follow when our national myths are created at someone else's expense – as national myths often are.

Until 1943 Germany's military efforts had been based on its success in blitzkrieg and the belief that the war would be a short one. But that changed with Goebbels' Sportpalast speech of February 18th. "I ask you," he said, "Do you want Total War....a war more total and radical than anything we can even imagine today?" The idea of Total All-Out War, a war you can't lose because it simply overwhelms the enemy, is one on which the imagination can get drunk.

Goebbels' "Total War" was organised by our third figure, Hitler's favourite architect **Albert Speer** [1905-1981] who in February 1942 became Germany's 'Minister of Armaments and War Production'. Under Speer's reorganisation the production of tanks and planes doubled, neutralising the effect of the Allied bombing of German industries. Although Speer played no direct role in the Final Solution, other than in the brutal employment of Jews as slave labour, without his intervention the war would have ended much earlier with the saving of many lives.

If Hitler's delusions were the origin of the Holocaust, and if Goebbels' talent for propaganda prepared German minds for their acceptance, it was Speer's provision of resources for the death camps and his delaying of the end of the war that resulted in the number of Jewish victims being so high. Until the very end, when he realised that Hitler was determined to take all Germany down with him, Speer enjoyed his Fuhrer's full confidence, so that for a time he was even reckoned as his possible successor.

After the war Speer was tried at the Nuremberg Tribunal and although he was the only Nazi on trial to apologise he was found guilty of war crimes and crimes against humanity and sentenced to 20 years imprisonment. He served his full term. Speer is another example of the utter loyalty Hitler was able to inspire among key figures in the Third Reich as well as of how diffused responsibility for the organised slaughter of so many could be.

If Speer was the man who bought more time for the Final Solution it was Heinrich Himmler [1900-1945] who became its chief agent and made it a practical possibility. In 1928, Himmler was a poultry farmer and a loyal party member. Although he was a deceptively insignificant-looking man in 1929 Hitler made him head of the Schutzstaffel, the SS, his 300-strong bodyguard. By 1933, when Hitler became Chancellor, the SS had grown to a strength of 50,000. Behind his schoolteacher image Himmler was a ruthless man and like Goebbels utterly devoted to his Fuhrer.

The turning point in his life came in 1934 when, at Hitler's command, Himmler drew up a list of Nazi enemies and in the "Blood Purge" known as the "Night of the Long Knives", employed the SS in their "elimination". His rise to power was now unstoppable. The SS became an independent organisation with Himmler at its head. After the invasion of Russia it expanded from 3 to 35 divisions and, as the Final Solution took shape, Himmler and his SS were involved at every stage. It was the SS, for example, which guarded and ran the six death camps and oversaw their mass gassings.

Until he saw the war was lost Himmler was completely loyal to Hitler and his racial

vision of a Jew-free Europe. For example, he ordered the elimination of all Jews in the areas of the '*Generalgouvernement*' in Poland by the end of 1942. In June 1943 he arranged for the liquidation of all Jewish ghettos in Poland and the Soviet Union. But in 1945, when he was planning to surrender to Eisenhower, Hitler stripped him of his powers. Himmler fled, was captured by the British and committed suicide. Without the SS as Himmler's unquestioning, hands-on killing machine, the Holocaust would not have been possible. It was Himmler who made the dark side of Hitler's racist imagination a practical reality.

### **The plan for Kristalnacht**

If, however, there was one man whose very appearance could strike more terror than Himmler it was **Reinhard Heydrich** [1904-42], whom Hitler described as "the man with the iron heart". It was Heydrich who helped plan Kristalnacht, ordered the concentration of Polish Jews in ghettos, planned the deportation of Germany Jews, and organised the mobile killing units, the *Einsatzgruppen*, in conquered areas of Russia. He convened the infamous Wannsee Conference of top Nazi officials which finalised the plans for the Holocaust. It was his plan to round up and eventually exterminate all of Europe's Jews. In spite of strong rumours that he was of Jewish ancestry Heydrich had joined the SS and was appointed by Himmler as head of the new Reich Counter-Intelligence Service. Goering also made him head of the Gestapo, so that the whole apparatus of Nazi terror and intimidation was in his hands. Heydrich became one of the main organisers of the Holocaust. Then, in June 1942, while deputy head of the German protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, Heydrich was assassinated by British-trained Czech resistance fighters.

By late 1941 the organisational abilities of men like Himmler and Heydrich had produced a gigantic killing machine directed not only against Slavs, especially Polish and Russian prisoners of war, Gypsies and homosexuals and others the Nazis loathed, but against every European Jew.

Goebbels, Himmler, Speer and Heydrich had in common a great desire to please Hitler. The desire to please is something we all have. It is a motivation that can work for good or ill and like our imagination it needs constant vigilance. Evil can be defined as the targeted destruction of fellow human beings. Evil men do not even have to get blood on their hands, as every Manchester gang leader knows: they only need to organise and direct others to do the killing. Hitler, Goebbels, Himmler, Speer and Heydrich were good at this.

Someone who was not afraid to be more hands-on in the murder of Jews was **Dr Joseph Mengele** [1911- 1979], nicknamed "The Angel of Death". As a student Mengele became persuaded by the racial ideology of Alfred Rosenberg [1893-1946]. As a doctor he developed a theory that human beings had pedigrees like dogs. Mengele joined the the SS in 1938. In 1943 he was appointed camp doctor at Auschwitz where he volunteered for the job of selecting on arrival those Jews or Gypsies who were well enough for slave labour and those, such as children, who were not. The latter went sent to the gas chambers which were cynically disguised as the camp showers.

Among the first group were identical twins selected for his "scientific" research intended to show the primacy of nature, or racial heredity, over nurture. Experiments

included sewing Gypsy children together to create Siamese twins. All these unnecessary, sadistic, experiments ended in fatal septicaemia or the gas chamber. In 1945 Mengele escaped to Argentina, then to Uruguay, Paraguay and Brazil where he drowned accidentally, all attempts to have him extradited having failed. His son said that he never showed remorse.

These were just a few of the key executioners in the Holocaust landscape. Lack of time obliges me to pass over others like the zealous, SS bureaucrat **Adolf Eichmann** [1906-62] whose Gestapo office saw to the Holocaust's practical details. He too escaped to Argentina but was kidnapped by the Israeli Secret Service and tried and hanged in 1962 in Jerusalem.

The major figures in our Holocaust landscape, Hitler, Himmler, Goebbels and Co and their vast assembly of helpers, did an expert job in turning pretty well the whole of German life into a vast killing machine for Jews and others considered subhuman.



*The Garden of the Righteous Among the Nations at Yad Vashem, Jerusalem*

Their Total War involved Total Hatred and Total Commitment to their apparatus of destruction.

### **Righteous Among the Nations**

The marvel is that so many Germans nevertheless resisted such enlistment and even helped to rescue Jews. Across Europe over 25,000 such individuals have been identified and named as *Righteous Among the Nations*, an accolade awarded by the State of Israel to gentiles; many others worked anonymously, however, and are not listed at Israel's Holocaust Commemoration Centre at Yad Vashem.

- **Stanislawa Dawidziuk** was a poor, barely-educated pregnant factory worker in Warsaw crammed into a one-room flat with her husband, her brother and a waiter. A Polish policeman begged the husband to shelter, Irena, a Jewish woman for one night.



Stanislawka agreed. The one night turned into weeks. Everyone's life was in danger. When his wife would not put the woman out, the husband left. The Polish Policeman supplied them with what food he could. Incredibly they survived the 1944 Warsaw Uprising and the war. Irena emigrated to Israel and died in 1975.

Stanislawka stayed in Poland and in 1981 was declared Righteous Among the Nations. She could not explain why she had acted as she had done beyond saying that she felt she had to. Somehow, despite Polish anti-Semitism and the threat to her life this very ordinary woman retained her moral integrity and independence when so many across Europe had surrendered theirs.

- At the opposite end of the spectrum was the wealthy, privileged, Swedish architect and diplomat **Raoul Wallenberg** [1912-47] who in July 1944 became Sweden's special envoy to Budapest where the Germans were determined to extend the Final Solution to all of Hungary's 846,000 Jews. With the high-level involvement of the efficient Adolf Eichmann the chances of the Jews did not look good and through the co-operation of the Hungarian government and local authorities the deportation of Jews proceeded rapidly. What sabotaged the Nazi deportations was Eichmann's attempt to do deals with the allies to exchange "Jews for trucks" and other war materials. For this to work neutral states like Sweden and Switzerland were granted the power to issue a *Schutzpass*, a special passport, or letter of protection, to any Jew registered for emigration.

When Wallenberg arrived in Budapest Miklos Horthy [1868-1957], the President and Regent of Hungary, halted the deportations but the *Schutzpasses* remained valid. Some 300,000 Jews were left and Wallenberg granted

the passes by the thousand. Spain, Portugal and the Vatican did the same. In October, when Horthy announced a ceasefire, the Germans replaced him and recognised the anti-Semitic Arrow Cross as the new government. As the *Schutzpass* remained legal Wallenberg used the situation to shelter Jews in Swedish government property and with Carl Lutz, the Swiss consul, he helped to organise an "international ghetto" holding 33,000 Jews. Using bogus lists he was reckless in taking Jews off deportation trains under the very noses of the SS, buying trucks to take them to Budapest.

No one knows how many Jewish lives Wallenberg saved: thousands directly, tens of thousands indirectly. When Budapest fell to the Russians in January 1945, Wallenberg was arrested as an American spy and never heard of again. The official Russian explanation was that this remarkable man died of a heart attack in a Soviet jail in



*Hall of Names at Yad Vashem*

1947. Wallenberg's life is an inspiration and in 1981, Congressman Tom Lantos, one of the Budapest Jews he rescued, had him declared a US citizen, one of only three ever accorded the honour; the other two were Winston Churchill and the Marquis de Lafayette.

So far we have only looked at individual figures in our landscape but there are also entire communities there, for example the French village of **Le Chambon-sur-Lignon** which, after the Fall of France in 1940, found itself under the Vichy Government which co-operated with the German occupiers of France in its persecution of Jews. In the winter of 1940-41 a German-Jewish woman asked Magda Trocme, the wife of the village Huguenot pastor, Andre Trocme, for help. When she consulted the village mayor he told her to send the woman away as she was putting the village at risk. The Trocmes, however, decided to help, called the villagers together and told them that it was God's will and their Christian duty to help the Jewish refugees.

### **Ignoring the Vichy regime**

When the Vichy authorities got to hear they demanded that these activities stop. They were ignored. "I do not know what a Jew is", Trocme said. "I know only human beings." He and others were arrested but released when they agreed to obey government orders in the future. The pastor's brother, Daniel, was later betrayed, arrested and in 1944 died in Majdanek concentration camp. Eventually pastor Trocme was forced into hiding, but his wife and the villagers continued to shelter Jews so that, between 1941 and 1944, 3,000 to 5,000 Jews were saved. Le Chambon-sur-Lignon is one of only two villages recognised as *Righteous among the Nations*.

But not all figures in the Holocaust landscape are as straightforward as these; some are controversial, among whom are **St Edith Stein** [1891-1942] and the SS Officer **Kurt Gerstein**. Edith Stein was the youngest of 11 children in an observant Orthodox Jewish family. She was intellectually-gifted and, as a teenager, was an atheist. At Göttingen she did her doctorate under Edmund Husserl, one of the 20th century's greatest philosophers. She also worked with Martin Heidegger, another important philosopher. Then, after reading the writings of St Theresa at the age of 30, in 1922, she was baptised and became a teacher in a Roman Catholic school. In 1934, she became a Carmelite nun and then, in 1938, she and her sister, Rosa, who was also a convert, were sent to a convent in the Netherlands for safety.

Her writings as a Christian philosopher had such titles as, *On the Problem of Empathy and Finite and Eternal Being: An Attempt to an Ascent to the Meaning of Being*.

In August 1942 both sisters were arrested as Jews and sent to Auschwitz. "Come, let us go for our people", Edith said to her sister. They were gassed a week later. The controversy began in 1987 when Pope John Paul II beatified Edith as a martyr and then canonised her eleven years later as St Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, saying that "the Church honoured her as a daughter of Israel who as a Catholic during the Nazi persecution remained faithful to the Lord Jesus Christ and, as a Jew, to her people in loving faithfulness".

Perhaps the strangest figure in this Holocaust landscape is **Kurt Gerstein** [1905-1945], an engineer and devout Christian who as a dedicated anti-Nazi knowingly and deliberately risked his immortal soul by joining the SS. As an engineer he found himself Head of "Disinfection" Services, a euphemism for the gassing of Jews. While

he claimed to have sabotaged and rejected supplies of Zyklon B he was nevertheless involved in mass murder and so morally compromised.

As a witness to the Holocaust, Gerstein succeeded in a number of attempts to alert foreign diplomats and the Papal Nuncio in Berlin to the horrors of what was happening in the death camps. In his attempt to do right Gerstein found himself obliged to commit the very evil he was trying to prevent. Nothing seemed to come of his efforts and after the war, in despair and psychologically destroyed by the moral contradictions he had so knowingly placed himself in, he committed suicide.

Gerstein's personal testimony given at great risk to himself is important testimony against those who deny that the Holocaust ever took place. Attempts to reinstate him posthumously and even have him declared Righteous Among the Nations have failed because of his involvement in the killing of Jews. Those judging his case have been unanimous in asserting that he should have left the SS. In the end the conflict destroyed Gerstein and confronted the rest of us with a moral maze from which we can find no exit.

And now a concluding thought about Hitler, without whose delusions and charismatic power to involve others the Holocaust could not have happened. Hitler is widely considered the world's most evil man; and yet he was a lazy fellow, staying in bed until midday, reading the papers and leaving the running of Germany and the murdering of Jews and others to hard-working figures like Himmler, Goebbels and Heydrich. I often like to provoke discussion by describing him as the 20th century's most spiritual man. How else can we explain his hold over Germany? If only there had been a good man or woman with his spiritual power, but there wasn't. We forget at our peril that evil, too, is a spiritual reality. Good people can easily be deceived when they are afraid. Hitler and Goebbels taught us that few things are easier than persuading good people to do bad things.

If studying the Holocaust does not make us wise to evil and give us the desire to be better human beings, then it is a wasted effort. Where evil is concerned we are all more vulnerable than we think.

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