

Of Stereotypes and Heroes

by Richard C. Lukas

(Catalyst 7/2002)

Nowhere is the politicization of history and its practitioners more evident than in the recent writings of a number of historians of the Holocaust era. The temptations of glitz, glamour and money seem to have influenced some historians to sensationalize their subjects to get noticed by the media.

Instead of writing history as it really is—filled with complexity and nuance—these historians offer us morality plays. They consist of monocausal interpretations of complicated subjects with the lines of good and evil sharply etched. Too often they allow their biases, prejudices and personal histories to blemish the integrity of their craft.

Today it is intellectually acceptable to target certain individuals and groups for the death of five to six million Jews. Pope Pius XII, once widely praised by Jewish leaders and communities, has now become the most conspicuous target of a number of pope bashers, who have created a quasi-historical genre of their own. The writings of John Cornwell and David Kertzer are distinguished by their obsession to depict the Papacy in the worst possible light. In his highly publicized tome, *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, Daniel Goldhagen wants us to believe that ever since the nineteenth century, the German nation wanted to eliminate the Jews. According to this bizarre interpretation, Hitler was almost an incidental chapter in the history of the Holocaust. Is it now historically acceptable to place collective responsibility on the entire German people that was once employed by anti-Semites against the Jews? It is the same Goldhagen who was allowed by the editors of the *New Republic* to write an article that suggests there is a moral equivalence between the Roman Catholic Church and the Nazi

party. Theologian Michael Novak perceptively observed:

"The reason Goldhagen is quite guilty of the charge of anti-Catholicism lies in the breadth and passion of the smears he spreads across a broad history, the distortion and hysteria of his tone, the extremity of his rage and the lack of proportion in his judgments."

No people have been more viciously stereotyped than the Poles. Forgetting that the Poles were Hitler's first victims and that the Nazi-established killing laboratory in Poland would later be used against the Jews and other groups, writers have sought to stereotype the Poles as a nation of willing collaborators with the Nazis in the genocide of the Jews. Despite the fact that Poland ranks first among the nations of the world which rendered help to the Jews during the Holocaust, the Polish role in aiding Jews has been largely ignored or denigrated.

A highly-touted book, *Neighbors*, by Jan T. Gross, claims that Polish Catholics in the village of Jedwabne in northeastern Poland were entirely responsible for killing their Jewish neighbors while the Germans allegedly remained passive bystanders. Even though relations between the two groups had been good before the war, Gross presents a tableau of hundreds of Catholic Poles mindlessly slaughtering Jews because now, quite suddenly, they despised them and lusted after their property.

Gross, who is a Jewish sociologist, never proves his claim. He prefers to rely on questionable evidence and fails to investigate German archives to substantiate his grave allegation. Despite the fact that *Neighbors* raised more questions than it answered, it is testimony to the enduring power of the stereotype that the National Book Foundation nominated the book for an award.

There is strong evidence, which Gross denies, that the Germans, not the Poles, were the organizers and major

executors of the massacre. Only a few Poles, a small criminal element, were involved in the crime. In an interview published in Inside the Vatican, Dr. Tomasz Strzembosz, Poland's leading authority on the history of eastern Poland, described Gross's book as "a journalistic work, written without [a] serious scientific basis."

It isn't too surprising that books that sensationalize and distort serious and controversial subjects receive uncritical acceptance by members of the popular media who themselves have internalized the stereotypes of particular individuals and groups. Even respected university publishers have been complicit in printing volumes which do not meet the rigors of historical scholarship and are more akin to propaganda than history.

What we have is the worst kind of revisionism, which treats history like a loose-leaf notebook. Historians remove the pages which disagree with their opinions and substitute those which support their views. Much of the historiography of the Holocaust era reveals a kind of Gresham's law where bad history drives out good history, making it difficult for even professional historians to determine where sensationalism, propaganda and martyrology ends and history begins. History becomes a major casualty and the integrity of the historical profession is seriously compromised.

There are criminals in every society, including our own. No people have a monopoly on good; no people have a monopoly on evil. Do we further the interests of history by defining a nation by its worst elements? Historians have succeeded in unearthing the evils of the Holocaust era. But they have been far less conscientious and resourceful in revealing to us the thousands of heroes and heroines in all countries of German-occupied Europe who took enormous risks in helping others during the Nazi era.

Many years ago, Rabbi Harold Schulweis remarked that we need

heroes and heroines, these exemplars of good, to teach us and our children about goodness. We need them as a counterweight to the evil of Nazism and what it perpetrated upon Jews and gentiles. Historian Istvan Deak echoed the same sentiments in the pages of the New York Review of Books, "We ought to celebrate, more than ever, such heroes, whether Polish saviors of Jews, Jewish ghetto fighters, Bulgarian bishops and politicians, Jehovah's Witnesses, or Polish guerillas, who stood up for their beliefs and died fighting the worst tyrannies in modern history." Historians need to ask themselves today why are the names of Bormann, Himmler, Heydrich, Goebbels and other Nazis universally known and reviled while most of the names of the Christian saviors of Jews have been forgotten?

Among the hundreds of thousands of men and women who should be celebrated for their courage and goodness is Irena Sendler, an extraordinary Polish Catholic woman, who did not have the benefit of the diplomatic position of a Raoul Wallenberg or the financial resources of an Oskar Schindler.

After the Germans forced the Jews of the Polish capital into the Warsaw Ghetto, Sendler brought food, money and medicine to the Jewish people. Wearing an armband with the Star of David to show her solidarity with Warsaw's Jews, she obtained documents from the city's social welfare department to enable her to move freely within the ghetto without interference from the Germans and Jewish police. Approximately 3,000 Jews received help from Sendler.

Even more remarkable and dangerous was Sendler's work for Zegota, a unique clandestine organization, organized in December, 1942, which assisted thousands of Jews who fled the Ghetto to avoid being transported to the German death camps. Risking automatic execution if they were caught by the Germans, Zegota operatives found shelter, provided food and medical assistance and gave forged documents to Jews under their care.

The primary focus of Zegota's work was to save as many Jewish children as possible. Zegota officials recognized that Irena Sendler was the best qualified person for the daunting task. This fearless woman was largely responsible for saving the lives of 2,600 Jewish children.

Sendler, who had several close calls in her ceaseless efforts to avoid the Gestapo, was finally arrested in October, 1943. Confined to the infamous Pawiak Prison where she was brutally tortured, Sendler expected to be shot by the Germans. But thanks to a well-placed bribe by a Zegota official to a Gestapo officer, Sendler's life was spared. After her release from prison, Sendler lived like the Jewish children she has rescued—in hiding. Still wearing the scars of her beatings by the Germans, the elderly Sendler lives today in obscurity in Warsaw. She deserves her historian and her Spielberg to tell the world her compelling story of sacrifice, courage and goodness.

In time the extremist, sensationalist accounts of Pope Pius XII, the Catholic Church and the Poles during World War II will be winnowed out and more credible interpretations will remain to explain their respective places in modern history. Perhaps a younger generation of historians will discover the rich resources, as yet largely untapped, of the good people who stood up for their beliefs against totalitarianism and celebrate their remarkable lives.

We will finally get what we should have had all along—history that is custom fit in an off-the-rack world.

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His book, *The Forgotten Holocaust*, went through several editions, including a Polish one, and is now considered a classic. His *Did the Children Cry?* won the Janusz Korczak

Literary Award, sponsored by the Anti-Defamation League and the Kosciuszko Foundation.

Both volumes, published by Hippocrene, are available in paperback.