

HISTORY EMPATHY COURSEWORK : LENT 1996

A Jew In Germany or Occupied Europe:

27/2/96

CATEGORY C

PROLOGUE (JANUARY 1935):

My name is Julian Zychevnik and I am a Polish jew. This is my diary which I have decided to write, so that I can hopefully relive my youth when I read this when I am an old man. I live in the south of Poland with my family which I adore very much since they mean everything to me. We have a small family business, a small shop, which supplies us with enough money to get by on during these hard times since the slump nearly five years ago. Life is hard but rewarding at the moment, soon there will be a new member to the family, since my wife is expecting our second child. I hope one day to see my children grow up and carry on the business which I started nearly eight years ago in 1927.

AUGUST 1936:

Today I received a letter from my sister Erika, who lives in Germany. She too followed the family tradition and set up her own shop in Germany with her husband, but in this letter she seems to be very distressed and worried. She says that life has started to become very difficult since 1933. There has been a new ruling body installed in Germany called NAZI and according to her newspapers it is led by a hero, who has come to save Germany; Adolf Hitler. These Nazis oppose our jewish religion greatly; nearly everybody does, but this is a new strain of hatred that I have no seen before.

In letter she states that some new anti-semitic rules called "The Nuremberg Laws" came into effect just this month which will practically sign her business' death warrant. Over the pass year her shop has been fire bombed several times and even her distressed children are receiving threats from kids their own age. Her husband has even been assaulted by brown shirted thugs belonging to this Nazi party. I hope she will write soon because I think she will not be able to cope with any more of this harassment.

DECEMBER 1938:

There is an air of uncertainty of the frost bittern streets of our city. We are currently celebrating "Chunakah", the festival of Light which coincides with Christmas. These celebrations are now hollow to us, hollow with the emptiness of absent relatives. Many of my friends like me are worried for our loved ones in Germany and Czechoslovakia. The Nazi power in Germany has grown like an petty acorn to a giant oak tree. There are daily reports in our papers about increased pogroms against our fellow jews and families in Germany. My family and I are very worried about my sister. We have not heard from here lately. My children keep asking:

"Daddy, Daddy, oh when we see aunty Erika again? Has she been gotten by that nasty Hitler man?".

I do not know how to reply to them, I just pray to God that she is safe from our new threat.

I feel immense anxiety due to the new reports of "Kristallnacht", the Night of Broken glass, which occurred two weeks ago quite near where my sister is living. The word on the street is that every synagogue in Germany has been ransacked by the Nazis. There are also rumours of immense numbers of Jewish books being burnt there as well. This, according to my neighbour, is a grave omen of what is to come since he says that when you start to burn books, you start to burn people. I am not too sure what he means by this, but it does not sound good.

JULY 1939:

It has been a long and worrying summer, I am now fearing for my sister's life since I have heard nothing at all from her. I think she may have been harmed by those pogroms ordered by those Nazis.

Today, the Shabbat (the Sabbath), as I was coming back from the synagogue, the large ominous black letters on a news stand caught my eye:

"HITLER DEMANDS DANZIG"

It suddenly struck home, not only was sister in grave danger, but now I was becoming distressed, I thought about my wife and my children, the people in my street, will we be safe? Could he invade Poland, like he did with Czechoslovakia? What has happened to my sister?

SEPTEMBER 1st 1939:

I tried to hold back the tears when I heard the news. The German army was coming. Hitler had turned on us Jews, now he was turning our country. The news came in the form of a alarmed voice of the newsreader on the wireless. We were all gathered around the radio ever since the rumours on the street had soared that we were in danger from the Nazi invasion.

Within an hour of the news breaking there was hysteria outside, people were running about, grasping their few possessions, the sound of screaming children and their crying mothers filled the air, even some men were breaking down after being strangled by the atmosphere of panic; all this done in a vain attempt to escape the onslaught of the reported army.

Seeing that there was nowhere no escape since the Germans were coming from the north-east and Nazi occupied Czechoslovakia was to the south we decided to try and hide. Maybe God will help us.

SEPTEMBER 3rd 1939:

We have remained hidden for three days. The attack part of the Nazi army has passed us by, in a hurry to occupy the whole of the country. I think it is the Nazi way of fighting, Blitzkrieg; lightning war.

There was a knock on the door. There was silence. Assuming the inevitable, we dismally gathered our meek possessions together and prepared to disembark. The door was opened. A woman's head could be seen extruding around its burred edges. It was Erika. We leapt in utter ecstasy, she was barley alive but where was her husband?

SEPTEMBER 5th 1939:

After breaking down on our doorstep due to exhaustion and emotional fatigue. She was covered in cuts and bruises, tears trickled from her ravaged face. We quickly got her to a bed and had nursed her for two days, before she finally came round.

Her ensuing tale was permeated with sorrow and anguish.

"Julian" she said in a frail voice, "You must leave, they did this to me, they are coming, they drove us from our home with racial violence and torture. I can't quite explain it, the pain, the lament, the violence; they've killed him! Julian, they've killed my husband!!!"

With this she collapsed in to a pool of tears. We all were effected by this startling event, our lives would never be the same again as we pondered in fear. The children had become aware of the dire situation, and their reaction was one of great grief and unstability.

That evening we gathered together around our lighted Menorah, locked in grief stricken prayer, was this the last time we would see each other? Were we going to be found? Were we doomed to die? Only time would reveal its dark secrets.

SEPTEMBER 6th 1939:

After being ripped from our sleep, we realised what was happening. Some black dressed Nazi soldiers with double thunderbolt inscriptions on their arms had surrounded and eventually stormed our house. They were the SS.

It all happend so fast, too fast. I was nummed with a paralytic fear which seized my prone body. After recovering from the numerous raining blows incurred on me by the SS soldiers, which rendered me unconscious, I sensed open air, I was moving, but what and where?

I managed to get to my feet, I was in the back of a truck. The smell was strange, almost a dark evil smell. Upon further inspection I noticed my family was here, except for my sister. Then it hit me.

I should have been strong. I could have saved her. Why did I let them knock me out. Why!

My wife explained; the SS troops dicovered her ill in bed at the house and just shot her there and then.

Why was this happening to me? Had I sinned? Is God punishing me? Maybe I deserve this?

SEPTEMBER 9th 1939:

It was the beginning of the end. We had journeyed for many days, by truck, by train and sometimes by foot.

Then we arrived.

I looked up. "AUSCHWITZ" uttered the large sign that hung above my head.

I looked forward. The parallel railtracks seemed to melt into the horizion.

I looked around me. Walking skeletons everywhere. The rumours were true!

Death was only at a breath's distance.

Then I saw the trenches. I looked again. "No, those aren't human!" I said to myself in unequivocal trauma, I felt sick, I was sick.

They were humans. The lifless bodies gazed up at me. I stared back down. Ten minutes I froze in that position.

My sinister contemplations were fragmented by a sound. A hard sound. It was the crack of a revolver.

Someone fell. Who fell? I turned. It was my wife. I turned again. I saw. It was the smoking revolver held by a guard which had just obliterate my life.

The children. They saw. They were in shock. They clung to their mother's lifeless body. A wave hit me. It knocked me over with a misery. I fell to the ground also cluching my wife, my dear, I had to be strong for the children's sake. How could man be so inhuman to man?

I looked up in the sky, the sky looked so calm. I wanted to be there. I began to recite the Kaddish, the Jewish prayer for the dead. I took the kids in my arms, and commanded them to think about God.

I pointed to the sky. I saw. We saw. The peace and light filled us.

The hail of shots rang out behind us like a death knoll, ripping our backs.

Red. I saw red. I am falling. We are falling. The ground. The sky. We are flying.  
We are going to the sky. We can see God.  
God.

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