

# The Nazis didn't do it, people did

## *Making sense of Auschwitz 60 years later*

Auschwitz was a strange collaboration of madness and efficiency. The Nazis wanted both cheap labor and a way to rid themselves of people they deemed undesirable.

### **Worldview**

by Guy P. Harrison



THE EVIL WITHIN. Rails lead to Auschwitz, the former Nazi death camp. Some 600,000 people visit the camp each year. *Photo: AP*

Auschwitz was the answer, a place where people became living skeletons and children made the subjects of insane experiments. Death was everywhere, every day. Surely this was a place designed by demons and staffed by monsters.

If only that was so. If only the generals down to the camp guards had been beasts from beyond the borders of humankind, it would make it all so easy to condemn and forget. Unfortunately, these were not beasts. These were people, just like you and I.

As the world marks the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz death camp by the Soviets in the final months of World War II, it is a time not only to reflect on the more than one million people who died there but also to confront the reality of why they died there.

Humans at Auschwitz were treated like cattle or garbage to be tossed out because they had become something less than human in the minds of those in power. The Nazi death camps were the final stop for millions of victims on a long road that began years, even centuries, before. It was a road built by the weaknesses found in all of us to some degree: fear, jealousy, greed, insecurity and tribalism. Sadly, we are all still on this road. Recent stops include Bosnia, Rwanda and Sudan.

Do not doubt the possibility, at least the possibility, that you could be a willing participant in Auschwitz-type horrors. First of all, we certainly are still vulnerable to prejudice and

the dehumanization of people. Look at any society today and you will find deep prejudices. Most commonly they are based on gender, sexuality, economic status, religion and racial categories.

Secondly, the classic 1970s experiment by social psychologist Stanley Milgram showed that most of us will comply with an "evil" order, even if we recognize that it is wrong. Milgram's subjects were instructed to flip a switch and inflict an electrical shock to someone in an adjacent room if they answered a question incorrectly. The shocks and screams were faked, however, in order to convince the subject that he or she was causing severe pain to someone. The

fake shocks and screams intensified as the experiment progressed. Subjects who asked to stop were sternly ordered to continue, right up to a seemingly lethal shock. Stuningly, more than 60 percent of subjects (males aged 20-50) followed orders and administered shocks all the way to the end. The experiment has been replicated with consistent results. Women subjects were as likely as men to follow orders and inflict shocks.

As humans we are vulnerable to irrational group hate or fear (prejudice) and we are vulnerable to obeying authority figures to extremes. These are the same factors that built the walls and ovens of Auschwitz.

We are far more like

Auschwitz's criminals than we think. We are made of the same stuff. Their weaknesses and potential for evil lurk within us. A reluctance to accept this is perhaps the primary reason we have not yet answered the challenge of the Holocaust.

Something happens every time we hate. It happens every time we push our fellow humans into categories of race, gender, nations or religions, and think less of them as a result. Every time we give our deepest loyalties to something other than basic respect for all people, we take a step toward the next Auschwitz. ■

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