WEDNESDAY OCTOBER 14 1999
AFTERNOON SESSION A 14:00-16:OO

Teaching the Hero in Holocaust History; The Cases of Raoul Wallenberg and Gysta Engzell

by
Paul Levine

A: Introduction

If the history of the Holocaust teaches us anything, it is how shockingly easy it was for ordinary humans to kill vast numbers of other ordinary men, women and children. Of the many human, social and institutional complexities of the event, few things are more difficult for students (and most others) to understand. The tragic truth of the Holocaust is that its primary story is one of Jewish death. However, even during the Holocaust, there are instances of Jews being saved by non-Jews, sometimes in an equally ”easy”, or routine fashion as the killing. We have both a pedagogic and moral duty to teach both sides.

All teachers know that teaching what is not fully understood is a difficult task, and it is not an easy thing to convey even a partial understanding of how the world could literally be stood on its head and turned into one in which life became death, and death became the norm. Students are not alone in experiencing the often helpless even paralyzing feeling of incomprehension when faced with unrelenting descriptions of fear, pain and death. It is an intellectual impossibility to understand the Holocaust in its entirety and we should not pretend otherwise to our students. Every bit of the puzzle grasped is a positive step. This educational unit will argue, and hopefully demonstrate, that teaching the opposite of unrelenting death, that is, teaching about choices which led to life, is a positive pedagogic way of promoting an understanding of important elements of the Holocaust.

Too often the Holocaust is taught as an enormous event clouded in human abstraction and mystery. Too often it is taught in a pedagogic context of inevitability, one which diverts attention from the historic truth. We know however that the Holocaust didn’t ”just happen”, that it was neither an accident of human history nor the result of impersonal social forces which simply ”made it happen”. (Whether or was or was not an aberration is another topic.) There was, for instance, nothing inevitable about the slaughter of over one and a half million children. Rather, we know that it happened because during a short period in many places throughout the Europe continent, tens of thousands of ordinary men and women decided that their continent would be better off without the presence of millions of ordinary Jewish Europeans. As historian Christopher Browning has written, ”Ultimately, the Holocaust took place because at the most basic level individual human beings killed other human beings in large numbers over an extended period of time.”[1]

The depressing clarity of this conclusion notwithstanding, what Browning fails to note is the primacy of choice. Large numbers of human beings were killed over an extended period of

[1] C. Browning, *Ordinary Men; Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*. (New York, 1992), p. xvii.

time because individual human beings decided, *they chose*, to kill their fellow men, women and children. There was nothing inevitable about these choices, and rarely were the perpetrators and collaborators genuinely forced to chose what they did. There is abundant evidence that other choices were also available, choices which could and sometimes did lead to Jewish survival. Evidence of these positive choices must also be taught to our students.

It is by now largely accepted that the primary historical actors in Holocaust history can be usefully and pedagogically divided into three basic and comprehensible categories; *perpetrator, victim and bystander*. Of the three groups, the first and last had a surprisingly wide field of choice in which to act. On the other hand the victims rarely if ever had positive choices to make; a situation which can effectively be labeled ”*the impossible choice*”.

The history of the Holocaust is suffused with those who seem to have always made the wrong choice—practically and thus morally. However, there are a number of illuminating examples of men and women who made the right choice. Illustrating such choices offers students the chance to think about the vivid and heuristic examples of the other possibilities than the negative choice, possibilities which existed even during that period of extreme crises.

This educational unit shall illuminate examples of the attitudes which lay behind some of the positive choices available to a couple of individuals belonging to the third group of historical actor—the Bystander. This group is important for a variety of reasons, not least because the ”bystander” was numerically the largest of the three groups in Europe during the Holocaust.[2] This apparent numerical difference is important, as we can speculate that in a similar future crises, this group will again most likely be the largest (and thus potentially most influential) group. That is, theoretically if not probably, our students have a greater chance of becoming a ”bystander” than they do either perpetrator or victim. We as teachers have therefore a moral and civic duty to inform our students about the range of choice available to those who during the Holocaust can be labeled bystanders. Such illumination will, we must hope, give them at least a greater chance that unlike their predecessors in the 1930’s and 1940’s, they will make the right choice—the one leading to life and not death.

During the Holocaust the bystanders were present throughout occupied Europe, in the neutral nations and in the Allied countries. In the case of neutral Sweden, generally if incorrectly considered in Holocaust historiography a ”bystander” nation, we have for consideration the stories of some individuals who risked their lives to save Jews, the most famous example is of course Raoul Wallenberg. Yet there were others who entered the historical stage who did not risk their lives but were still presented with the sometimes risked their lives, but sometimes did not. Yet they too could have chosen to ”stand by”. Both types of individuals merit description, explanation and contextualization.

The first type is the best known, and personified in Raoul Wallenberg’s well known story. His heroic deeds on the streets of Budapest and his tragic fate in Soviet captivity compel our attention. In many ways he fills our need for a hero. But heroes can and do take other forms. Such as when a man or woman dares to change previously held ideas, attitudes and prejudices. When such a change can come in recognition of a situation which demands such changes, but during which still many do not manage to make such changes. This is a quieter, even more

[2] This is of course a rough estimation of numbers based on common sense rather than a strict statistical calculation.

normal type of heroism which should also compel our attention. Indeed, it is this latter type which seems more numerous, and thus more likely to ”make history”.

The two individuals in question here are Raoul Wallenberg and Gösta Engzell. Wallenberg is of course one of the best known (in the positive sense) individuals from Holocaust history. His story has been told in dozens of books, films, lectures and other representations. He was an eager, ambitious young Swede, scion of one of Sweden’s most important families, who accepted the task of going to Budapest Hungary at the height of that country’s Holocaust to do something to assist the city’s Jewish population. Although the numbers of lives saved associated with Wallenberg have generally been greatly exaggerated, there is no exaggeration to the idea that this individual chose to help Jews in need when he could well have chosen something else, without placing himself in mortal danger.

The other is Gösta Engzell, a life-long civil servant in the Swedish government. A career diplomat who died in 1997 at the age of 100 years, this quintessential bureaucrat (without which Western society cannot function), it can be argued, saved through decisions taken and choices made, even more lives than Wallenberg. His story from the Holocaust, of a bureaucrat who made decisions from the safety of his desk in Stockholm, provides a vivid and important contrast to that of the archetypical ”desk-top” killer. In our days the bureaucrat is often the subject of derision, even scorn. During the Holocaust the bureaucrats of the perpetrator and collaborator nations become ”desk-top killers”. Engzell was a ”desk-top” rescuer, while Wallenberg was a man of action directly on the scene.

The charismatic type may well be easier to teach, perhaps even more satisfying. However, to reiterate the point, we are in the future more likely to see larger numbers of bureaucrats than we are dynamic, charismatic heroes. Students should be made aware of both types of hero.

b: Methodology

There are of course today many different ways of teaching Holocaust history. But for the historian in a history class one of the most effective methods remains the use of primary documents. In spite of this being the *MTV Age* and one in which everyone under the age of 20 knows only how to ”surf” in order to gather information, some years of teaching at both the secondary and university level leave no doubt that students still like to read, and that they can and will concentrate with fascination when confronted by a relic from the past. In this case the relic is a primary source documents which often encompasses large amounts of relevant and useful information which helps to illuminate the what and when of the Holocaust.

This unit argues that effective teaching can be conducted around an informed and detailed discussion of primary documents. That primary documents (copied and translated to the operative language when necessary) are useful can be demonstrated in many ways, but one of the most important is that they are authentic and very human relics of that past and not current representations of it. Extensive experience shows that secondary and university students obtain an aspect of comprehension using this method. Though an ambition to quantify a qualitative difference is generally desired, in this case it has neither been done nor desired.

It goes without saying that the instructor must have an adequate understanding of a series of contexts surrounding the document. In order to set a primary document into an understandable context for the student, explanation is required. ”Cold documents” are generally met with a

cold reception. These contexts are, among others, chronological, cultural, political/military, geographical, etc. Without some grasp of these contextual factors, the document will not only be misunderstood, it can be incorrectly understood, which is different. Thus teaching with documents requires preparation-- not an impossible amount, but certainly some.

The document itself can take various forms. From an official government report, to an internal memorandum not meant for public scrutiny, to the transcript of an interview with a camp or ghetto survivor or other contemporary. All must be handled and taught with care, but all are of substantial value in teaching the past. Of course the seed of understanding contained in the document must fall into an at least potentially fertile field. Using documents as a pedagogic tool is probably most effectively done in a somewhat extensive course on the Holocaust, but what exactly this means can vary widely from situation to situation. That is, a complete document(s) can be used well be used in a two hour lecture or element of a ”theme day”, etc., but it is likely more effective with at least some hours background information. They are probably most effective in a multi-session course, be that what it may.

In this presentation only a handful of examples of the bystander can be made discussed. It should of course also be underscored that documents and excerpts from them left behind by the other two heuristic categories, *perpetrators* and *victims*, are also enormously important and effective in teaching the Holocaust.

Informed, yet still *essentially informal discussion* of documents sheds light on many aspects of the terrible past of the Holocaust, but if instruction time is limited (and it almost always is) it is strongly suggested that emphasis can be placed, as underscored in the Introduction on illuminating *through directed discussion* the *elements and moments of choice articulated in the document.*

c: A Brief Contexualization

Sweden was acknowledged by all belligerents during the war as a ”neutral” nation in a war characterized by stark, morally clear ideological differences. During the war and even before, in relation to both the geo-political situation and single individuals, Sweden’s leaders sometimes made decisions which can be argued were morally dubious—this while maintaining a wholly admirable ideological position. They said often that *peace* was the highest value, and that they were fighting to keep their nation at peace. And who can argue with this? However it is clear that Swedish neutrality had both ”good” and ”bad” sides, and that in a war of such ideological clarity, the absolute maintenance of peace might not be the most absolute good.

Experience shows that students respond well to being confronted with instances of moral ambiguity, of not being sure, when first thinking of a problem, what is the ”best” choice and what is the ”worse” choice. Problems suffused with moral ambiguity almost inevitably compel the student to think about it, explore its various sides and nuances, ponder the issues at hand, and then make an analysis. Experience shows that from initial confusion often comes a most gratifying clarity.

d: Documents concerning Information

Great attention has been justifiably given the roll played by information during the Holocaust. This concern can be summarized under the rubric ”what did they know, and when?”, a question which applies almost equally to both the victims and the bystanders (the Germans and their collaborators of course knew about most everything, all the time, giving them a tremendous advantage). Information available about the persecutions during the 1930’s and then the accelerating murders in the early 1940’s had an impact not only on the actions taken by governments, but also those individuals. Indeed, it was often the impact (or lack thereof) of information on a particular individual which consequently decided a nation’s or government’s decisions.

With this in mind we can look at the first documents giving evidence of information available to the principals concerning the maltreatment of Jews by the Nazis. In Wallenberg’s case, it is more how his already well developed sense of humanity might have been affected, how he reacted to knowledge of the ever-worsening plight of the Jews. In Engzell’s case it is understanding how new information would influence Sweden’s very restrictive policy towards Jewish refugees, and the Jewish ”question” in general. Both examples should be seen in light of the fact that the Swedes, both public and private individuals, were very well informed about the on-going persecutions and expropriations in Germany by the considerable newspaper reporting begun in 1933 and which continued even after the war began.

In one case the information led to a strengthening of already existing attitudes. In the other, to the beginning of a major, even radical change in attitude.

Document A: (this excerpt is from an interview with a Swedish woman, Viveca Lindfors, who knew Wallenberg before the war).

”I was only sixteen and I met him at a family party. We danced together and then he invited me up to his grandfather’s office—I thought to make love to me. But he spoke to me in an intense voice, very low, almost a whisper, of the terrible things that were being done to the Jews of Germany. I just didn’t understand what he was talking about. I thought he was trying to win my sympathy or something. I was just a dumb girl at the time and I had a cold, Swedish soul.”[3]

Document B: (Prior to November 1942 the Swedish government pursued a very restrictive towards allowing Jews, even for just transit to other countries, into Sweden. From 1938 to 1942, that is, from the height of the ”refugee crisis” to the beginnings of systematic murder, this policy was formulated primarily by the Legal Division of the Foreign Office, headed by Gösta Engzell. Yet in addition to the abundant information found in newspapers, Engzell had access to other sources. The following is from a report written by Engzell on 7 September 1942 after a personal meeting in Stockholm with a Latvian Jewish refugee.)

”[He, Storch]…learned of the incredible atrocities and suffering which the Latvian Jews had been exposed to. Families which were deported were separated, with men sent in another direction than wives and children….Storch’s mother, in-laws and some others were probably in the ghetto in Riga, and if they were still alive they were enduring very bad conditions.

[3] Interview in 1980 with V. Lindfors in, E. Lester, *Wallenberg; The Man in the Iron Web*, p. 46. (New Jersey, 1982).

(Among other things, Storch stated that according to what he had heard, about 50 Jews had been gassed to death).”[4]

e: Documents concerning Attitudes

It may be assumed that information affects attitudes. Sometimes if an attitude towards a problem or issue is so strongly held than no amount of credible information can make a difference. However, if an attitude is open to change, then adoption of a new position, plan or idea is possible.

Document C: Here we see the beginning of an attitude change by Gösta Engzell, a change at least partly the result of an increasing amount of credible information that what was happening to the Jews on the continent was not just the by now well known persecution and expropriation, even deportation ”to the East”, but something else--Systematic, organized murder. The immediate preparation to mass murder was, as is well known, often deportation. The Germans organized a mass deportation of Norway’s tiny Jewish community in late November 1942. The following document was written by Engzell in response to news of that transport.

”….in reaction to the shocking character of the deportations and the harm these cause within Swedish public opinion, [the Foreign Minister] considers it necessary to at least try to do something for those with a connection to Sweden….If these Jews, of which at most two are Swedish citizens, are transported into Poland, we fear that there remains nothing left to do.”[5]

Documents D: (We know that Raoul Wallenberg was a man of considerable empathy and sympathy. It did not take much to activate his humanitarian spirit. Yet individuals with attitudes characterized by theoretical ideas obviously react differently to different concrete situations. In his case we see an individual whose willingness to help others increased. Wallenberg left Sweden for his mission in Hungary in early July, 1944 already determined to help. His attitudes were strengthened after arrival and initial appraisal of the situation.)

(Although Wallenberg was sent to Budapest as a Swedish diplomat, he was neither trained in the ways of the Foreign Office bureaucracy, nor particularly inclined to be limited by traditional ways of ”doing business”. Moreover, he was a product of his culture, one not particularly inclined to deviate from accepted practice. Yet we see his attitude to not be hampered by this already in something he said just before departure, and in some excerpts from his first report from Budapest).

”You have placed high expectations upon me….Of one thing you can besure: the Wallenberg family name will always prove to be respectable. With that tradition guiding me, there is no limit to what can be accomplished.”[6]

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[4] Cited in P.A. Levine, *From Indifference to Activism; Swedish Diplomacy and the Holocaust, 1938- 1944*, p. 126-127, (Uppsala, 1998), 2nd edition.
[5] G. Engzell to Swedish Legation in Berlin, #146, 30 November 1942, *Riksarkivet UD, Hp 21 An 1070/II*.
[6] R. Wallenberg, in a conversation with Jewish leaders in Stockholm prior to departure for Budapest, cited in H. Rosenfeld, *Raoul Wallenberg, Angel of Rescue*, (Buffalo, N.Y., 1982), p. 28.

(Wallenberg's first reports from Budapest were carefully written, lengthy accounts of the situation of its Jews as he found it, and them. Here we see his acknowledgment of several difficulties. Most important here is his attitude that such problems do not constitute a reason for not doing otherwise later. In other words, here we have evidence of the basis of choices later made by Wallenberg.)

"The Jews of Budapest are completely apathetic and hardly do anything themselves to save themselves." (18 July 1944)

"There must be some way of overcoming the apathy concerning their own fate, which still characterizes most of the Jewish population. On the other hand, the feeling of indifference among the general population has changed noticeably since my last report. We have to rid the Jews of the feeling that they have been forgotten." (29 July 1944)

"I'm not aware of any case where someone has been successfully rescued from an internment camp, except the instance named in an earlier report….In general it appears that bribery takes place much less than one would have believed, among other reasons because the entire assembly and transport procedure has been so mechanized, quick and impersonal that outsiders who wish to help have quite simply not been able to speak with the relevant heads of the camps." (18 July 1944)

"Setting up any final goals for assistance activity is at the moment impossible because of shifting circumstances. What is important is getting the financial and organizational means so that in every necessary moment demanded by the situation, be able to take measures without asking for permission….It is regrettable that amongst those most interested in my trip here, there is a lack of understanding that money is necessary. There is suffering here without limits to try to alleviate."(29 July 1944)[7]

Documents E: (Prior to knowledge about the actual killings, Sweden's general response to Jewish suffering was one of bureaucratic indifference. Yet the information available to Engzell had an impact and made an enormous difference. Prior to the deportations from Norway Swedish policy had been predicated upon keeping as many Jews out as possible, and in the event that some were admitted, keeping the number as limited as possible. This changed after November 1942, as we see in the following document written by Engzell. The second document was written during the height of the crises in Budapest, when the Swedish Legation there was literally overwhelmed with desperate appeals for help.)

…We are conscious that there is no choice but to swallow the pill….However, we best act while there remains time….We have received word what is meant with Jews. Probably we should count on this meaning at least half-Jews….I have asked Richert [Swedish minister in Berlin during the war] to obtain a more precise definition. In the meantime, we assume that it is better to save too many than too few."[8]

"Finally I want to touch upon the provisional passports and want to emphasize that we must be restrictive with them. Everyone wants one and it would be a debacle if we conceded too much. It is partially chance who gets them. We don't really know what good they do…Much

[7] Report of 18 July 1944, *Riksarkivet, Hp 21 Eu 1095;* Report of 29 July 1944, *Riksarkivet Hp 21 Eu 1092.*
[8] Memo by Engzell, #35, 26 January 1943, *Riksarkivet UD Hp 21 J, 1049/XI.*

is a question of judgement which is difficult to decide from here…But if you see in individual cases that such papers can save someone, we of course have nothing against your decision."[9]

Documents F: (Wallenberg was of course in Budapest purely of his own free will and he could have, as a neutral diplomat, left any time he wanted except from the very last days of December 1944. His sense of adventure might well have been satisfied merely by showing up in Budapest in July, writing a few reports and then returning to the safety of Sweden. He chose, however, to do otherwise. Here we see two examples of choices he made to help others in need when he could easily and credibly have chosen otherwise. The first is a report written to the Foreign Office back in Stockholm and the second is a letter to his mother.

"The events of the 17th [of October, after the Arrow Cross coup] were disastrous for the section [the humanitarian assistance section of the Swedish Legation in Budapest]. We lost the entire staff, plus a car which had been placed at our disposal free of charge, as well as some keys to locked rooms, cupboards, etc. I spent the whole of the first day in streets filled with bandits, on a lady's bicycle, trying to straighten everything out. Day two was spent moving staff members in imminent danger to safer hiding places and hauling food to them in a sack."[10]

(The excerpts from the first letter are from 29 September, two weeks before the Arrow Cross coup. The second letter was written on 8 December 1944)

"I travel around in my DKW and visit various officials. I enjoy these negotiations very much. They are often extremely dramatic….I had hoped to come home right after closing down the section, as they said. Unfortunately, my trip home seems to have been quite delayed, since the closing of the section is also taking a long time."

"Among my staff alone there have been forty cases of kidnapping and beatings. On the whole we are in good spirits, however, and enjoying the fight….It is simply not possible to make plans at the moment. I really thought I would be with you for Christmas. Now I must send you my best wishes for Christmas by this means, along with my wishes for the New Year. I hope the peace so longed for is no longer so far away."

(Five weeks later, on 17 January 1945, Wallenberg chose to go into the front lines of the Soviet troops surrounding Budapest. He was never seen alive again.)

[9] Letter to Budapest by Engzell, 5 July 1944, *Riksarkivet UD Hp 21 Eu 1095/VI.*
[10] Report by R. Wallenberg, 22 October 1944, *Riksarkivet UD Hp 21 Eu 1096/II.*