

THE TAB

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ARTS & LETTERS

Lee Bollinger, Columbia University's Invisible Man

The man who presided over the growth, enrichment, and intellectual and moral decline of New York's greatest university embodied the workings of 21st-century power through a masterful two-decade-long disappearing act

BY ARMIN ROSEN

There is often an inverse relationship between how frequently a person is profiled in the media and how important they really are.

For over two decades Lee Bollinger's home and office have been a measly three miles uptown from the *New York Times* building and the rest of the Manhattan-based national media. They all tended to forget the Columbia University president was even up there. Anonymity was one of Bollinger's great accomplishments during his 21-year run as leader of the Ivy League's NYC outpost, which will end with his retirement this coming July. Last week, the university announced that Minouche Shafik, an Egyptian-born economist and director of the London School of Economics, will succeed Bollinger, filling an office that Dwight D. Eisenhower held between 1948 and 1953.

Bollinger was the man in charge of Manhattan's largest landowner, as well as principal shaper of the political and moral priorities of a national elite he

helped lead. Few people consciously thought of him in these grandiose terms, but the occlusion of power is built into the architecture at Columbia. The university's campus is designed as a miniature acropolis walled off from Broadway and Amsterdam Avenue, with a colonnaded classical temple crowning a vast symmetrical plaza of terraces and stairways. Until 1934, Low Library was the institute's center of learning, towering somewhere near the geographic midpoint and elevational apex of campus. Then it became the university's central administration building. The students on College Walk now look up at where the tuition checks go, rather than at a monument to truth and learning, although the word "library" is still in the structure's official name. Low is Columbia in miniature: the great academic center, situated at the loftiest point in all of Manhattan, which quietly morphed into a corporate and political behemoth.

Bollinger's success was built on his recognition that Columbia is a "university" in the same sense that Low is a "library." He understood Columbia

wasn't just an educational institution but a key New York-based pillar of a much larger edifice of world-spanning power. Protecting and deepening this status required inflicting the university's interests and values on others, something that could only happen alongside a public image of institutional stability, even conservatism.

It seems impossible that a major Manhattan business leader and nationally prominent public intellectual should have his success reflected through the world's ability to ignore him, but power becomes a banality if it is wielded deftly enough. Over decades of trial and error, Bollinger developed into one of the great managerial geniuses of 21st-century New York, and America more generally—someone who knew that power can be measured in how seldom people notice you're even there.

Lee Bollinger, an even-toned, mop-headed First Amendment theorist-turned administrator-turned University of Michigan president with an elusive sense of humor and a passion for running laps around the Central Park reservoir at early hours of the morning, became Columbia's 19th president in 2002, at a time of civic and national crisis. His first decade in office was not seamless, although nothing was in those days. In the mid-2000s Columbia became engulfed in a bitter dispute over the treatment of Jewish students by star professors in its Middle East languages and culture department, which attracted national attention and divided students and faculty. Both sides claimed the other was suppressing their academic freedom with the administration's help. Bollinger, drawing on his experience as one of the nation's top academic authorities on free speech, helped draw up a Solomonic difference-splitting solution. He made no decisive statements as the university convened an investigative panel, which issued a report critical of a single professor, the Palestinian political scientist Joseph Massad. No one was satisfied.

Bollinger would commit a much more serious blunder the next time he tried to chart a sensible middle path through a high-profile campus Middle

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East controversy. In September of 2007, Bollinger gave an uncharacteristically vituperative introduction to the Holocaust-denying Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, a guest of the World Leaders Forum. The WLF was a Bollinger-era initiative in which the university offered a more or less open speaking invitation to the heads of state and government in town for the opening of the U.N. General Assembly. Live on every cable news network, Bollinger came off as hectoring and ungracious—nothing wrong with that, given the awfulness of the man he was introducing. What wasn't fine is how very obviously freaked out Bollinger looked at having to star in this nightmare inversion of his own cherished idea of Columbia's global role. Bollinger apparently believed he'd get credit both for allowing the event to take place and for eloquently denouncing its horrific headliner. Instead he discovered, practically in real time, that free speech and institutional image (not to mention basic decency) were in naked conflict with one another.

Bollinger explained in his now-infamous introduction that providing a platform to someone did not mean signaling approval of what that person did or said. He argued that someone he'd just called a “cruel and petty dictator” wasn't being hosted in order to legitimize or benefit

the speaker, but instead to reinforce or perhaps even strengthen the university's culture of intellectual openness—an echo of the “tolerance theory” of free speech that Bollinger had developed in his academic work in the early 1990s.

Bollinger spoke these words like a man who barely believed them, like it was dawning on him that this particular lesson in Columbia's institutional virtue hadn't been worth it, and was maybe proving the opposite of what he hoped it would prove. As a sophomore in the joint program between the Jewish Theological Seminary and Columbia's School of General Studies, I was in Roone Arledge Auditorium for the Ahmadinejad mess, and could sense that the university's president was terrified to discover he'd cornered himself in front of millions of live TV viewers. A smiling Ahmadinejad replied, in effect, that in Iran, we don't treat guests this way. How do you lose a public faceoff with Ayatollah Khamenei's top henchman? Bollinger found a way.

Except the Ahmadinejad incident didn't discredit anything. Bollinger ensured that any potentially troubling contradictions in his view of himself or the university he led would never again be subject to such dramatic public exposure. During the next 15 years of his presidency, the big higher education controversies all happened at Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Oberlin, Bard, Stanford—but not in Morningside Heights. Meanwhile Columbia's physical footprint practically doubled with the construction of its Manhattanville campus. The endowment more than doubled, growing from around \$5 billion in 2005 to \$13.3 billion today.

In some ways, a president of Columbia set on subtle reinvention gets an automatic assist from the university's muted public image and its alumni community's remarkable degree of indifference to the place. Yale is a cult; Harvard grads are exhibitionist in their swings between pride and shame. Stanfordinians believe they run everything, while a shared experience of remoteness, darkness, and suicidal alcoholism bind Cornell and Dartmouth students to their schools and to each other.

Columbia is exhilarating for some,

and alienating for others, because it seems so much smaller than everything else in sight. True to the city that surrounds it, Columbia is largely treated as a means to an end, a way to access extracurricular networks of cultural and financial power at a young age. Columbia becomes a status vector almost by force of gravity, regardless of individual intentions: I wasn't one of the undergraduates making tens of thousands of dollars working in finance each summer, but I did successfully wheedle my way into the once-fascinating lower rungs of the city's cultural journalism scene (RIP *L Magazine*, *Impose*, and *New York Press*) and had a habit of venturing deep into Bushwick on weeknights. At the time I thought this made me cool, but it really made me a product of Morning-side Heights, where everyone harbors dreams of trading up.

The university has little psychic or spiritual significance beyond itself. It has no Skull and Bones-type secret societies, no final clubs, no recent history of high-profile athletic success. Nobody has time for that crap in New York. Career and student services in general were notably thin 15 years ago, as if the institution wanted you to leave the neighborhood and make your own way as quickly as you possibly could, or else decamp for some other environment you could actually handle. The greatest fictional Columbian of the 21st century, Meadow Soprano, got stuck with a mentally ill roommate, dated an unbearably pretentious film student, and quickly moved off-campus, proof that the show's producers knew a little something about life there. The greatest non-Alexander Hamilton, real-life alumnus in the school's history, Barack Obama, almost never talks about the place.

On the other hand, it is very hard to hide the existence of an Ivy League institution in New York City, however quickly its students and alumni move on from it. It's even harder to acquire and then raze 17 acres of Manhattan, especially when it's part of an impoverished, historically Black and Hispanic neighborhood where several of the incumbent landowners don't want to sell to you. Bollinger's masterpiece as Columbia president, clinched in the years

“At Columbia the woke wars were over and done with before the word ‘woke’ was even in casual usage.”

after the Ahmadinejad fiasco, was the construction of a second campus in the Manhattanville section of west Harlem, a dour enclave of Renzo Piano-designed monstrosities built through hardball negotiating tactics and the threat of eminent domain. The estimated price tag for the eventually 6.8 million-square-foot campus was \$6.5 billion as of 2019, much of it raised on Bollinger's watch. Purchase of the land started in 2004, early in Bollinger's reign. In 1968, the construction of a gym in Morning-side Park was enough to set off riots on campus.

Bollinger's vision was unyielding: There was never any question Manhattanville would get built. Today it's like the second campus has always been there, as if Hamilton himself had walked the halls of a martially featureless concrete pile called The Forum at Columbia University.

Under Bollinger, Columbia has been a venue for the same *Kulturkampf* that's gripped the rest of American higher ed this century. But how often have you heard about any of it? The few political positions Bollinger has publicly taken—defense of racial affirmative action in college admissions, support for government funding of the private sector media, opposition to

“disinformation”—haven't been risky or novel, at least not within elite higher education or the broader American establishment it both produces and serves.

The Harvard administration has a masochistic enjoyment of national uproars over awarded or withdrawn “academic” fellowships for flashy mediocrities like Ken Roth or Sean Spicer, a kink that Bollinger-era Columbia did not share. Labor relations haven't been any better at Columbia than they have been at Harvard; both schools have experienced strikes by grad students, adjuncts, and support staff in recent years. Elizabeth Warren joined the picket line at Harvard in 2016, but at Columbia the unrest was always dealt with before it leaked into national or even local politics. Columbia has not gotten sued over racial discrimination against Asian Americans, unlike its rival in Boston.

At Columbia the woke wars were over and done with before the word “woke” was even in casual usage: Fifteen years ago, the campus was already an archipelago of affinity groups, literary societies, cultural houses, food co-ops, and fraternities that lived and died by the university's willingness to give them a brownstone. A fortuitous NYPD cocaine raid more or less solved the administration's frat problem in 2010.

On academic freedom, Bollinger's Columbia mulled over its share of difficult tenure cases but never did anything as outrageous as Princeton's firing of Joshua Katz. The apparent tenuring of Joseph Massad—the kind of fanatic who believes that Zionists are the real antisemites and that the gay rights movement is an Orientalist cat's-paw for Western imperialism, and also the focus of a federal Title VI investigation in 2011—happened sometime in the late 2000s without any public

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announcement, celebration, or condemnation from much of anyone.

As best I could tell as a student journalist at the time, there was protracted behind-the-scenes oscillation on the Massad question, with the administration moving toward denying him tenure before arriving at the sensible conclusion that a public end to his Columbia career wouldn't be worth the outcry. I argued in a *Columbia Spectator* column that tenuring Massad would disgrace the university. Bollinger was right not to listen to me. Columbia is bigger and richer than ever, and nobody cares about Joseph Massad.

The few speech incidents that have cropped up on Bollinger's watch were met with merciless efficiency. My favorite of these was over *Orgo Night*, one of Columbia's few actual traditions, during which the marching band—the Columbia University Marching Band, the incomparably named CUMB—would commandeer the Butler Library Reading Room the night before the high-stakes organic chemistry final exam and launch into a musically backed comedy routine that was, against all odds, actually pretty funny, and very often on the bluer side. *Orgo Night* briefly shattered the campus's icy atmosphere of relentless self-seeking and also tended to be unsparingly critical of the administration. Alas, this annual outburst of parrhesia was too funny, too obscene, and perhaps too critical. Low Library waged a brilliantly subtle pincer maneuver against CUMB, banning *Orgo Night* from the Butler grounds in 2016 and cutting the organization's stipend. Conveniently enough for Low Library, the band doesn't even exist anymore, having self-deported from reality during the racial reckoning of 2020.

As best I can tell, Bollinger had the sense not to make any public comment on the CUMB situation. Neither has he commented on the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression naming Columbia the least free of the 203 campuses it surveyed in 2021, finding the university to have an “abysmal” speech climate, a restrictive campus speech code, a culture of “disruptive conduct” against people with opposing points of

“Bollinger showed that the elite university could still be a locus of competent managerial liberalism.”

view, and little meaningful due process for students accused of wrongdoing.

Bollinger did, however, write an essay in *The Atlantic* in 2019 arguing that there is no crisis of free speech on the nation's college campuses. Contrary to what he characterized as Trumpist calumnies against higher ed, Bollinger argued that American universities are in fact the site of a rich, ongoing debate over the limits of acceptable speech that mirrored a broader national conversation. “From flag burning to Holocaust denial, Americans of all ages have been grappling with basic questions about offensive speech for decades and will continue to do so for as long as the country strives for this ideal of openness and freedom of expression,” he wrote. “Exchanges over the boundaries of campus speech should therefore be welcomed rather than reviled when they take place.”

This passive-voice rejection of excessive speech tolerance on college campuses is one of the few interesting lines in the piece, which is a masterpiece of Bollingerian subtlety. The article reads like a blandly stated defense of open discourse—who could hate open discourse?—but is in fact an apologia for an industry in peril, namely the elite higher education industry. “In light of the long evolution of free expression in

the United States,” he writes, “we should be careful drawing conclusions based on a handful of sensationalist incidents on campus—incidents sometimes manufactured for their propaganda value. They shed no light on the current reality of university culture.”

Bollinger showed that the elite university could still be a locus of competent managerial liberalism, a creed that emanated from the windswept cliffs of upper Manhattan to reach the most benighted corners of the planet. In the 2000s, Columbia was awash in rumors about how much the school had given the star development economist Jeffrey Sachs to pry him away from Harvard. In Morningside Heights, Sachs carved out a durable headquarters for his ideology of top-down, expert-affected transformation of the poor and stupid masses of the Global South. The trip from Columbia to the United Nations, Manhattan's other campuslike redoubt of global power, comes out to 20 minutes when traffic cooperates, and Sachs became one of the ideological and spiritual architects of the U.N.'s quasi-authoritarian, globally influential, and more or less useless series of 21st-century development goals and 10-year plans.

Who cared if there was so little evidence that Sachs-style “sustainable” development through aggressive outside intervention actually worked, or if Sachs became an apologist for China, Russia, and seemingly every other dishonorable regime on Earth? His gospel of elite global stewardship and his diagnosis of the world's problems, as expressed through Columbia's Earth Institute and the Center for Sustainable Development, are now establishment commonplaces. Most of our elites really do live in a world where every big problem is downstream of climate change and other people's overconsumption, and where the world's leading free economies must pay for their mistakes by imposing social-scientific “solutions” on as much of humankind as possible. The Sachs worldview has the virtue of being both self-lacerating and self-flattering: Wealthy, educated Westerners are the cause of and answer to all the world's problems, which can only be addressed through millions or even billions in

government and nonprofit spending that they themselves will oversee.

Sachs' activities epitomized what Columbia became in the 21st century, a place where "thought leadership" didn't have to appear in scare quotes. Bollinger's oft-stated objective was to turn Columbia into a "global university," and Sachs represented one of many cases in which he made a smart investment in a world-spanning virtue gift so elegant that people stopped caring how cynical it all was.

Last week, Columbia announced that Minouche Shafik would be Bollinger's successor. The 62-year-old economist, made Baroness Shafik in 2020, is probably qualified to run a leading university in New York. Moreover, she is a Bollingerian, which is to say she's a senior participant and theorist in the broader industry of academic and policy elites telling vast numbers of people what's best for them. Before leading the London School of Economics, she'd been the youngest vice president in the World Bank's history and served as a top official in the British government's international development agency. Shafik is the author of a recent book called *What We Owe Each Other: A New Social Contract*, a title that presupposes that the whipping-up of social contracts is the proper role of economists, baronesses, and college presidents.

But there is one thing Shafik lacks, and it is something that in all likelihood it is too late for her to attain. Bollinger got his undergraduate degree from the University of Oregon, a good but decidedly nonelite state school, and spent 20 years leading Dartmouth and the University of Michigan. He clerked for Chief Justice Warren Berger, oversaw the acquisition of 17 acres of Manhattan real estate, and had a stint as chair of the Federal Reserve Bank of New York in the early 2010s. Shafik has spent much of her career in the U.K., but Bollinger is someone with a canny and hard-earned grasp of how America works, something you can only really acquire after a few decades of close contact with the actual operations of national power.

The Ahmadinejad controversy wasn't

Bollinger's first moment in the national spotlight. It certainly isn't the thing he's likeliest to be remembered for in 20 or 50 years. In the early 2000s, Bollinger was the defendant in two affirmative action-related cases that made it to the Supreme Court, each stemming from the University of Michigan's admission policies during the time he served as that institution's president and law school dean. In some sense the entire mission principle of post-1960s American higher education—the idea that the universities were central to an expert-guided project of liberal social improvement—hinged on whether the lawyers representing Bollinger could convince the court that diversity was a compelling enough interest in academic settings to justify the rejection or acceptance of applicants based partly on their race. Bollinger's side was successful: The Columbia president boasted in a 2022 essay he co-authored in *The Atlantic* that *Grutter v. Bollinger* was the first time the court established that affirmative action was "constitutional under the Fourteenth Amendment" and thus consistent with equal protection under the law.

The Bollinger precedent didn't last long in Michigan, where voters opted to ban affirmative action in state institutions in 2006 by a 58%-42% margin. It might be coming to an end in the rest of the country, too.

Bollinger has a book out in early February arguing for the constitutionality of affirmative action. Perhaps he will submit an amicus brief when two affirmative action cases come before the Supreme Court later this year, one of them resulting from Harvard's alleged discrimination against Asian American applicants. The same Supreme Court that overturned *Roe v. Wade* seems likely to overturn *Grutter v. Bollinger* too, but by then the namesake of that now-endangered legal breakthrough will be just weeks away from retirement as Columbia's president. In his final disappearing act as a master bureaucrat, he will have made the navigation of a post-*Bollinger* world someone else's problem. ■

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THE REST

→ Ahead of the new shipments of heavy artillery from the United States and Germany, **Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskyy is cleaning house, accepting the resignation of several top Ukrainian officials to stem concerns over government corruption in Kyiv.** “We have made personnel decisions... regarding officials of various levels in ministries and other central government bodies, in the regions, and in the law enforcement system,” Zelenskyy told Ukraine in a televised address on Tuesday night. Ranked 122nd out of 180 nations in Transparency International's latest Corruption Perceptions Index, Ukraine has long been criticized for misused public funds and the influence of oligarchs across the government. Along with five regional governors and a deputy head of administration who stepped down from their posts, Deputy Defense Minister Vyacheslav Shapovalov, who was recently tied to inflated food shipments for Ukraine forces, tendered his resignation to Defense Minister Oleksiy Reznikov, a move the ministry said “will preserve the trust of society and international partners and ensure objectivity during additional clarifications and possible investigations.”

→ **Number of the Week: 25%.** That's how far **home values will drop from their record peaks** in San Jose, Austin, Phoenix, and San Diego, according to a new Goldman Sachs analysis sent to clients this month. That prediction comes after the chief economist at Pantheon Macroeconomics, Ian Shepherdson, predicted last October that 2023 would see a nationwide fall in home prices between 15% and 20%. Both forecasts see trouble brewing in mortgage rates that could remain around 6.5% by year's end. Even though the decline in prices is sharp, rivaling the housing bubble burst that sparked the 2008 Great Recession, it shouldn't kick off similarly widespread foreclosures this year, the bank predicted, though cities like Austin and San Diego could see localized housing market distress because of home prices that became so inflated during the COVID-19 pandemic.

→ TGIF could have new meaning in Maryland as both chambers in the state legislature take up the **Four-Day Workweek Act of 2023**, the latest step by government and private **officials toying with the idea of shortening the workweek by a day.** While government offices would be encouraged to shorten their week for the pilot program through 2028, Maryland's bill would incentivize the private sector with tax credits up to \$750,000.

→ You see that pile of papers on your kitchen counter? You might want to make sure they don't include any classified documents, as secret files seem to be popping up everywhere these days. Former vice president **Mike Pence's attorneys recently found “a small number of documents bearing classified markings that were inadvertently boxed and transported” to the Pence residence,** according to a letter written by a Pence advisor sent to the National Archives last week. The former VP was unaware the documents were in his house, according to the advisor, Gregory Jacob, and they had only been found after he solicited an attorney to review his files in the wake of several batches of classified papers recently discovered in the home and former office of President Joe Biden.

THE BIG STORY

Following a flurry of phone calls with European leaders, President Joe Biden announced on Wednesday that he would send 31 M1 Abrams tanks to Ukraine. Though it could take at least a year for the American-made tanks to arrive on the battlefield, the announcement opens the door for Finland, Poland, and other Western nations to send their tanks as well. Several of the countries use German-built Leopard tanks, which German Chancellor Olaf Scholz said as recently as Wednesday morning that he would not allow to be sent to Ukraine unless President Biden was willing to send tanks in kind.

The U.S.-led decision to provide Ukraine heavy artillery that's primarily offensive rather than just defensive decisively escalates the tension between Russia and the NATO alliance and adds new complications for Germany. Already, Russia's embassy in Berlin warned Germany that its “extremely dangerous decision” to send Leopard tanks to Ukraine “destroys the remnants of mutual trust” and could drag Germany into the conflict. Moscow's belligerence aside, Scholz's refusal to send tanks without first having the promise of parity from German allies left some analysts wondering what he could gain from causing so much political tension with the United States only to capitulate at the eleventh hour.

—Sean Cooper

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Did Washington Ignore Warnings About Fentanyl?

Conversations with former DEA agents reveal how a nexus of Chinese producers and Mexican cartels brought the deadly drug into the U.S.

BY JONATHAN ALPEYRIE

We are losing an entire generation due to drugs,” said Michael Cole, the founder of Lauren’s Wish Addiction Triage Center, an organization named after the daughter he lost to a fentanyl overdose. Growing up in West Virginia, Lauren was a strong student, athletic, and kind to others. At 16 she became addicted to opioids. She died on July 9, 2020, at the age of 26.

Driven largely by fentanyl, drug overdoses are now the leading cause of death among Americans ages 18 to 45. In 2020, close to 92,000 Americans died of a drug overdose, but the number rose sharply during the pandemic and lockdowns. In 2021, life expectancy in the U.S. hit its lowest point in two decades. In 2022, there were 109,000 overdose deaths, according to provisional data from the Centers for Disease Control, with deaths from synthetic opioids up 80% over the same period and most of those attributable to fentanyl.

Other countries in the world don’t come close to America’s level of illegal drug consumption—or to its death tolls. The U.S. now consumes about 85% of all the world’s opiates. As a result, the rate of overdose deaths is around 20 times higher in America than the global average.

To understand how it is that a deadly and highly addictive poison has flooded the streets of American cities and small towns, one has to untangle the knot of

connections linking Chinese drug manufacturers, Mexican cartels, and a homegrown culture of addiction that uses chemical remedies to treat economic and spiritual woes. That globalized and lethal supply chain, which is enriching criminal cartels while undoing the fabric of American life, is in part the result of shortcomings in U.S. policy, multiple former agents from the Drug Enforcement Administration told Tablet. According to them, the federal government failed to respond to repeated warnings about the coming fentanyl crisis, even as the casualties began to mount.

On Dec. 11, 2001, China was brought into the World Trade Organization—the culmination of a bipartisan commitment to free-market fundamentalism among America’s political and economic elite. In short order, China became the world’s factory, first developing into a regional and then international power, competing directly with the U.S. and Europe for commercial opportunities, patents, and political hegemony. No longer just a producer of cheap consumer goods, today China exports high level and strategic products like semiconductor chips, industrial chemicals, and pharmaceuticals to Western markets.

Derek Maltz, a former agent in charge of the Special Operations Division at the Drug Enforcement Administration who retired after working for the agency for 28 years, has long believed that China is the driving force behind America’s fentanyl crisis. 2005 and 2006 were

marked by “a massive [number of] fentanyl deaths in the Midwest, but no one knew where it was coming from and who was producing it,” Maltz told Tablet. An investigation in partnership with the Mexican Authorities identified the lab in Mexico producing the fentanyl and shut it down. Then in 2007, more than \$200 million was discovered in a house in Mexico City. DEA officials were surprised to learn that the Chinese national who owned the house was holding a Mexican passport and, according to Mexican authorities, had close ties with Sinaloa cartels. At that time the DEA did not conclude that Chinese criminals were involved in the production of fentanyl—only that the country was involved in the production of large amounts of precursor chemicals to assist the Mexican cartels in the production of methamphetamines. Maltz later became suspicious of China’s role in the fentanyl crisis in 2012, when Americans began dying of drug overdoses at an even higher rate. “I knew in my mind that there was a correlation between Chinese criminals and Mexican cartels,” he said.

More DEA investigations and raids found that various Mexican cartels were receiving the chemical component for their fentanyl labs—N-(1-Phenethyl-4-piperidyl) propionanilide citrate—directly from China. As their investigations developed, the DEA discovered that two main Mexican cartels, Sinaloa and Jalisco New Generation, were working closely with Chinese nationals to bring the chemicals to Mexico.

These investigations did not, however, disrupt the production labs in China or Mexico, nor did they slow the growing overdose epidemic in the United States. Even with Chinese nationals turning up in Mexico, it was difficult to prove the Chinese government had any direct involvement in the fentanyl trade. According to Paul Campo, a retired DEA official with 25 years of experience (he has since founded a consulting firm, Global Financial Consultants, which focuses on anti-money-laundering securities), few in the DEA recognized how bad the fentanyl problem was becoming. “When I was working cases in the early 2000s, we did not think initially that fentanyl was much of an issue, as it was produced,

transported and sold legally to the U.S. for medicinal purposes,” he explained. “Furthermore, fentanyl was mixed into heroin, making it very hard to trace at the time.”

But the death count continued climbing, with limited federal government intervention. In 2014 and 2015, senior DEA officials tried to communicate the urgency of the issue to the Obama administration, and met with Eric Holder, then the U.S. attorney general, telling him that the deadly issue would get worse if the government failed to take action. Increasing amounts of fentanyl—and increasingly strong product—was entering the country. “In Arizona alone,” Maltz said, “we went from zero in 2015 to seizing more than 25 million pills in 2022.” Much of that growth is the result of the Obama administration’s inaction. “As far as I’m aware, the Obama administration never pressured China,” Maltz said. It was only during Trump’s presidency in 2019 that China placed fentanyl and its analogues on a regulatory schedule, making them more difficult to produce and distribute. By then, however, it was too late: In 2022, over 50.6 million fentanyl-laced pills and 10,000 pounds of fentanyl powder were seized in the U.S. by the DEA—enough to kill every American citizen.

China’s chemical output has proven difficult to monitor. “It is almost impossible to see what is going on inside that country,” Maltz said. “Both the Mexican cartels and the Chinese government are very creative in countering our federal agencies.” Chinese traffickers are using various strategies to circumvent new regulations, including producing more chemical precursors (chemicals that are transformed into fentanyl), relocating some manufacturing to India, and re-routing precursor shipments through third countries. China’s weak supervision and regulation of its chemical and pharmaceutical industries also enable evasion and circumvention.

While tracking the chemicals coming from China to Mexico is difficult, tracking the vast sums of money being made by Mexican cartels in U.S. drug markets is even harder. By using complex Chinese financial technologies, mobile banking apps, and social media

networks to evade authorities, money made by Mexican cartels often ends up washed and cleaned in China, and cooperation between the United States and China remains limited. U.S. law enforcement agencies have established working groups, conducted high-level meetings, and shared information with their Chinese counterparts—and this has led to the dismantling of a few illicit fentanyl networks—but it seems that it has hardly made a dent in the exportation of chemicals, which still flood America’s streets.

Since China’s government began monitoring fentanyl, however poorly, the amount of finished fentanyl (fentanyl that is fully produced) shipped directly from China to the United States has declined while the amount shipped from Mexico to the United States has increased. It is impossible, however, to know by how much. DEA officials believe that Chinese traffickers have shifted from primarily manufacturing finished fentanyl to primarily exporting fentanyl’s chemical ingredients to Mexican cartels, who manufacture the final product and then push it across the border.

Additionally, U.S. law enforcement has seen a growing trend of Chinese nationals in both Mexico and the United States working with Mexican cartels. As Chinese suppliers coordinate more with international partners, former and current members of the DEA are concerned that fentanyl, like almost every other product Americans consume, be it cars or pharmaceuticals or iPhones, has found success by globalizing its production chain.

Cartels have become skilled at producing and refining fentanyl. These cartels are also savvy and entrepreneurial—they were quick to understand how addictive and profitable fentanyl would be after observing the success of Oxycodone, which was foisted onto the general public by America’s pharmaceutical companies.

Fentanyl, like most synthetic drugs being produced in Mexico, is so cheap to make that almost anyone with a bit of startup money and can-do spirit can get into this new business venture. It is far cheaper (and therefore more profitable) to produce than other drugs: The opium needed to produce a kilogram of heroin,

for instance, can cost producers as much as \$6,000. The precursor chemicals to make a kilogram of fentanyl, meanwhile, costs \$200 or less. With chemicals easily imported from China, a fentanyl entrepreneur only needs a pill press, protective gear, and a few underlings willing to risk their lives for money to create a fentanyl fiefdom. “What worries me is how proficient these cartels have become in synthesizing and producing these drugs,” Campo explained. “It is truly the devil’s work.”

Not only is it easy to produce, but it is also easy to hide. “We used to catch loads of fentanyl hidden in Lego box sets, or even inside coconut fruit containers,” Campo said. Now that so many small criminal organizations in Mexico are jumping into the frothy fentanyl market, it has become much harder. “This has created numerous independent groups who do not need powerful criminal syndicates to make and sell their product.”

San Diego has become the epicenter of the illegal fentanyl market. Last year alone, more than 5,000 pounds of fentanyl were captured by border authorities based in the city—more than 60% of the fentanyl apprehended nationally. This constitutes a small portion of what is actually being sold in America. Campo believes that barely 20% of the fentanyl that comes into the U.S. is seized by authorities. “In truth, no one really knows what the real number is. All we know is that even if 20% is captured each year, it is worth it. The cartels are making so much money on synthetic drugs.”

Romain Le Cour Grandmison, a senior expert on transnational organized crime at the Global Initiative, believes it’s far less. “From our calculation, the U.S. authorities do not catch more than 10% of what is going through. It is so low because the drugs are hidden within legitimate containers and therefore integrated within legal goods.” This strategy

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makes it impossible for the authorities to check all containers, as it would seriously impair global trade. “Only 3% of containers around the world are checked by legal authorities,” Grandmaison explains. Countries cannot afford to do much more checking, as they would lose too much money by doing so.

The drug also moves fluidly across heterogeneous communities of the United States, making addicts of all kinds of Americans. This is both because of how powerfully addictive it is, but also because it’s now used to cut virtually every other drug on the market. A person who uses meth or heroin or cocaine might be taking fentanyl without realizing it, and can easily end up addicted to a drug that is profoundly lethal. A dose of 2 milligrams of the drug is enough to kill most users—an amount so minuscule that in a test tube it looks like a few grains of salt clinging to the glass. Crime labs now keep auto-injectors of Naloxone, the lifesaving opioid receptor antagonist, within reach in case their personnel

are accidentally exposed to traces of the drug.

Yet fentanyl’s addictive qualities don’t explain why the European Union suffered only 6,400 overdose deaths in 2020 while the U.S., with a significantly smaller population, suffered more than 90,000. While the U.S. does prescribe and sell more synthetic drugs, that does not explain the uniquely American phenomenon of the overdose epidemic either.

One cause of the illegal drug crisis is America’s *legal* drug crisis. Opioid-based legal drugs have been pushed onto the general public for over a century, enriching pharmaceutical companies. From 1939 to 1959, drug sales rose from \$300 million to \$2.3 billion, with prescription drugs accounting for almost the entire increase. By 1969, prescription drugs made up 83% of consumer spending on pharmaceuticals. All of this has amounted to extraordinary profits for the pharmaceutical industry. In 2010, prescription drugs constituted \$291 billion of business; in 2022, \$424 billion. In 2017, 4.1 billion prescriptions were filled; in

2021, 4.69 billion. These profits have become a dependable form of tax revenue for the government.

In contrast, the European Union has far more stringent laws regarding the accessibility of opioid-based prescription drugs, and while American pharmaceutical companies lobbied doctors to prescribe these pills, EU doctors were directed to severely limit their use.

With illegal addictive drugs produced just over the border and legal addictive drugs pushed by domestic producers and pharmaceutical companies, Americans find themselves squeezed from both sides. The chains of production and supply that have contributed to unprecedented prosperity in the United States by relying on cheap labor and goods from Mexico and China, are hollowing America out from the inside, creating a permanent underclass of addicted citizens and a spiraling crisis of dependency and death. ■

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COMMUNITY

The People With Purple Triangles

Jehovah’s Witnesses share the story of their unique experiences during the Holocaust—and the lessons that can be applied today as they face continued persecution in Russia and elsewhere

BY MAGGIE PHILLIPS

Jehovah’s Witnesses were among the very first groups persecuted by the Nazis, from 1933 until 1945. By the end of WWII, thousands had been imprisoned or sent to concentration camps. Hundreds of *ernste Bibelforscher* (“earnest Bible students,” as they were called by many Germans at the time) died by

guillotine, shooting, hanging, lethal injection, in gas chambers and medical experiments, and as a result of the harsh conditions they endured in detention.

Often Aryan and fluent German speakers, many Jehovah’s Witnesses had an atypical experience in concentration camps, compared to other groups (accounts describe some working in the homes of SS officers). A 2017

article in the journal *Genocide Studies* theorizes that their race and language, combined with “group cohesion, mutual support, and religious faith,” meant a higher-than-average survival rate for Jehovah’s Witnesses compared to other groups. Like the other descendants of groups persecuted during the Holocaust, followers of the faith today continue to honor both the profound suffering and the steadfastness of their forebears who faced deprivation, torture, and death. But their fellow believers today draw particular inspiration from the way that Jehovah’s Witnesses of the time were committed to communicating their faith to their fellow prisoners, and the horror they were living to the wider world.

This legacy continues, as Jehovah’s Witness publications and media speak out about the persecution of their co-religionists in the oppressive regimes of the 21st century, as Jehovah’s Witnesses around the world continue to experience state persecution for their beliefs.

Faith-sharing is at the core of who Jehovah's Witnesses are; they are best known for their door-to-door evangelism. Even when the COVID-19 pandemic stymied their trademark in-person approach, they switched to handwritten letters, inviting recipients to learn more about Jehovah's Witnesses' perspective on suffering (they resumed door-to-door ministry just last year).

Originally calling themselves simply Bible Students, Jehovah's Witnesses came out of the Adventist movement of the 1830s, which believed in the imminent return of Christ. When the movement broke up into factions in the 1840s, the Bible Students were led by a man named Charles Taze Russell. Russell departed from much of Christian orthodoxy, preaching that the doctrine of the Trinity was unscriptural, and that Christ's second coming would be an invisible manifestation of his presence. Today, Witnesses continue to oppose Trinitarian beliefs, rejecting the idea that Jesus is one with God, while remaining distinct, manifesting through their relationship a third person, known as the Holy Spirit. Rather, they see Jesus as subordinate to God, his father. Jehovah's Witnesses remain convinced of Christ's invisible, spiritual second coming, which they hold began in 1914, based on a prophecy in the Book of Daniel, and which they believe is leading up to the final triumph of God over evil.

Publishing is in their DNA: Russell also established the Watch Tower Society, which was dedicated to the publication of tracts and other religious literature, still a feature of Jehovah's Witnesses' proselytizing today. In fact, the Bible Students' leadership was imprisoned in Atlanta in 1918 for violating the Sedition Act, due in part to the publication of a book, *The Finished Mystery*, which criticized the U.S. government and the militarism that it asserted led to America's involvement in WWI. According to a Jehovah's Witness publication on the history of their denomination, when their leaders were released in 1919, the Bible Students approached their mission of sharing their beliefs with renewed vigor; 1927 saw believers formally encouraged to devote some of their time to "witnessing," or

"The Third Reich began putting Jehovah's Witnesses in concentration camps after they realized their 1933 ban on the group's activities had failed."

sharing their faith with others. In 1931, inspired by a verse from Isaiah ("You are My witnesses," said the Lord, "And I am God."), they changed their name to Jehovah's Witnesses. By 1933, when Hitler came to power as chancellor of Germany, their numbers in Germany had grown to an estimated 30,000 since their arrival in the country at the end of the previous century.

Jehovah's Witnesses' faith commits them to remain neutral toward secular things like politics, military service, and nationalism. In Nazi Germany, then, they resisted joining the military or the Nazi party. They abstained from participation in elections, from working in government factories that supplied the military, as well as from saluting the swastika, the Nazi flag, or Hitler.

"In the distribution of their literature and in door-to-door missionary work," writes one 2001 reviewer of a book of essays on the Jehovah's Witnesses in the Holocaust, "the Jehovah's Witnesses [...] offered a real and visible challenge."

The Third Reich began putting Jehovah's Witnesses in concentration camps after they realized their 1933 ban on the group's activities had failed. Jehovah's Witnesses, who were drawn primarily from the urban working classes, and whose earliest converts were within a

generation of the existing contemporary communities, carried on their proselytizing and meetings in secret, even after members were temporarily jailed by authorities.

Once they were placed in camps, Jehovah's Witnesses were made to wear purple triangles. Because they were some of the earliest detainees, according to the authors of the 2017 *Genocide Studies* article, Sabrina C.H. Chang and Peter Suedfeld, Jehovah's Witnesses often served as mentors and advocates for those who arrived after them. In contrast to the Jews and the other ethnic, religious, and sexual minorities the Nazis put in concentration camps, Jehovah's Witnesses were allowed to recant and leave if they so chose, by signing a statement repudiating their beliefs. While some certainly did, it is thought that, per the 2001 review, appearing in the journal *Kirchliche Zeitgeschichte*, "the majority of Witnesses simply refused to give to the state what they knew belonged only to God."

Unlike other Christians who were persecuted during the Holocaust, usually interned and killed for speaking out against the regime, or for hiding Jews, Jehovah's Witnesses were a different case. Not an ethnic or sexual minority, "[w]hile other opponents of the regime were persecuted for what they did, the Jehovah's Witnesses suffered because of what they refused to do," wrote Jon S. Conway of the University of British Columbia, in a 2004 review of the same essay collection (*Persecution and Resistance of Jehovah's Witnesses during the Nazi Regime 1933-1945*, edited by Hans Hesse).

For this reason, Conway asks in his review whether Jehovah's Witnesses, who were often treated more favorably by their captors due to their race, could properly be thought of as engaging in resistance. Similarly, Chang and Suedfeld observe that Jehovah's Witnesses could perhaps afford to conduct themselves differently than other prisoners, since unlike the Jews, they were not "marked for annihilation," and accordingly, "presumably felt less imperiled."

Even so, Jehovah's Witnesses did suffer torture, abuse, and death in the camps. Jehovah's Witness women were

often sent to Auschwitz's female camp, the horrific conditions of which are documented in an educational module on the Auschwitz memorial website. Those who survived faced ongoing physical, mental, and emotional trauma after the war ended and camps were liberated. First-person testimonies from interned Jews include Charles de Gaulle's niece, Genevieve, who attested to the inspiration other prisoners drew from Jehovah's Witnesses, and their daily refusal to renounce their faith, even in the face of deteriorating conditions. Their faith and courage, she said in a recorded interview through a translator, made them stronger than all the SS officers together.

However, even if their religion prohibited them from political activity, the Jehovah's Witnesses may be thought to have offered one crucial form of resistance: They continued to publish. By writing about the persecution their fellow believers were experiencing, they added to the chorus of voices working to inform the world about Nazi atrocities. And it seems every voice was needed. Despite a steady stream of news out of Germany since the 1930s about Hitler's demonization of Jews and human rights conditions in the country, half of American respondents to a 1943 opinion poll believed the murder of 2 million Jews to be rumor, and while the next year as many as three-quarters were willing to acknowledge the existence of concentration camps, they still severely underestimated the death toll.

As early as 1936, according to a 2001 article in Jehovah's Witness publication *The Watchtower*, "some 3,500 Witnesses distributed tens of thousands of copies of a printed resolution regarding the ill-treatment that they were suffering. Respecting this campaign, *The Watchtower* reported: 'It was a great victory and a sharp stab at the enemy, to the indescribable joy of the faithful workers.'" By the war's end, the article says, Jehovah's Witness publications had named and reported on the conditions of 60 different camps and prisons.

Critics assert that the Holocaust narratives put out by the Jehovah's Witness organization tend to ignore antisemitic statements made by different members and, indeed, leadership, at the time.

“The detention, torture, and execution of Jehovah’s Witnesses under Hitler were not widely talked about in the first few decades following the war.”

These accounts, they say, also omit initial attempts by Jehovah's Witnesses in Germany to reach a kind of detente with Hitler in the early years. There are examples of Jehovah's Witness publications and public remarks trafficking in stereotypes about Jewish financial and political control of America, responsibility for Christ's death, and supersessionist theology (a view that God's covenant with the Jewish people has shifted to Christianity). This was the case even in a 1933 document, known as the Declaration of Facts, which was co-written by Jehovah's Witness President Judge Rutherford. The declaration was a defense in the face of persecution by Hitler's government, intended to clear up misunderstandings about their religious activities and literature, and to correct a Nazi claim that their work was supported by Jewish financing (the so-called "Anglo-American Empire" and Irish Catholics also come in for sharp criticism in the declaration).

But as noted by one reviewer of Hesse's book, Richard Singelenberg, although German-language Jehovah's Witness publications did not become critical of the Nazis until after Kristallnacht in 1938, English-language ones were condemnatory "from the moment that Hitler started to persecute the Jews." Nevertheless, contemporary

antisemitic tropes and stereotypes, and the Declaration of Facts, remain controversial parts of the Jehovah's Witness legacy. Singelenberg, writing for a 2002-03 edition of *Journal of Law and Religion*, sounds a note of caution, however, stating a belief that "post-Holocaust social sensitivity concerning anti-Semitism" may cause present-day observers to engage in a backward projection of outright Nazi sympathies onto the Jehovah's Witnesses of the 1930s and '40s.

Estimates vary on just how many Jehovah's Witnesses were held in captivity by Hitler's government. Numbers published in the Jehovah's Witness publication *The Watchtower* estimate around 1,500 members died in the Holocaust, and about 10,000 were either imprisoned or held in concentration camps, with about 2,000 estimated specifically to have been interned in the camps; *Genocide Studies* cites roughly similar numbers in its 2017 article. Moreover, the children of some Jehovah's Witnesses were forcibly removed and placed with Nazi families or in reeducation camps.

Conway notes in his review that the detention, torture, and execution of Jehovah's Witnesses under Hitler were not widely talked about in the first few decades following the war. Conway attributes the scarcity of information to a belated realization by Jehovah's Witness leadership, around the turn of the 21st century, that there was value to sharing these stories. He writes that the denomination then began in earnest to confront this part of their past, holding meetings for survivors, and making an effort to document and record contemporary accounts.

As with all Holocaust survivors, opportunities to hear their firsthand recollections are increasingly scarce. While this is a problem from the standpoint of posterity and the historic record generally, more scholarly interest in this field could be of more immediate use, as well.

For example, the authors of the *Genocide Studies* article point out, "the fact that Jehovah's Witnesses are still being persecuted in other parts of the

world, such as Russia, Singapore, and China, may give researchers the opportunity to compare Witnesses who are currently being persecuted to those who have lived through their persecution.” The result, they say, could be “a fuller understanding of the impact of these experiences on the survivors, and of the latter’s subsequent readjustment,” which may be a benefit not only to today’s Jehovah’s Witnesses, but persecuted minorities around the world.

That reporting on the camps, by Jehovah’s Witnesses and others, failed to gain much moral traction in the United States may also be instructive for our time. In 2018, the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum mounted an exhibit, *Americans and the Holocaust*, which sought in part to dispel a common perception that Americans simply weren’t aware of the ongoing atrocities perpetrated by the Nazis against Europe’s Jews. “It’s not that the story was buried,” curator Daniel Greene said in a *Time* magazine interview about the exhibit. “Just like news is there today of Syria or of the danger to the Rohingya, it punctures through our consciousness at certain times.” But with the Depression dominating the news for most of the 1930s, he said, and the Roosevelt administration’s prioritization of defeating the Nazis militarily, rather than freeing their victims, it simply wasn’t the most salient topic for most people when they considered the U.S. war effort. To understand how this might be possible, add to Greene’s examples, which are still applicable in 2022 as they were in 2018, the relative lack of popular outcry over reports of the imprisonment and forced sterilization of Uyghur Muslims in China, the ongoing ethnic cleansing campaign in Ethiopia, or Russia’s forcible deportation of Ukrainians to Russia and Russian-controlled areas.

There is also the continued persecution of Jehovah’s Witnesses in Russia today, where the religion was banned in 2017 as an extremist organization, in violation of the country’s anti-extremism laws. The Jehovah’s Witnesses’ internal statistics as of late last year estimated that approximately 643 Jehovah’s

Witnesses had been charged with “organizing the activities of an extremist organization” in the country, where, as in Germany in 1933, their literature and their refusal to serve in the military brought them under the government’s suspicion. According to the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, persecution of Jehovah’s Witnesses is practiced throughout the former Soviet Union. Speaking on an October 2022 USCIRF podcast, Jehovah’s Witness spokespeople Jarrod Lopes and David Williams described abuse and poor living conditions for imprisoned members of their faith, increasingly facing “longer and harsher sentences,” and the trauma visited upon their families.

“Every day at the moment,” said Jehovah’s Witness international spokesman Paul Gillies, “I’m getting information fed through to me about various fellow believers who have been convicted. I think most days this month we’ve seen examples of that.” The day we spoke, Gillies said a regional court in Russia had upheld a Jehovah’s Witness’ six-year sentence to a penal colony for reading the Bible.

Gillies said he was at the Russian Supreme Court in Moscow in 2017 when they banned Jehovah’s Witnesses. “They were very adamant that all they were doing was banning the religious organization, but believers could believe what they like, and they could practice their faith. That’s not what’s happened in practice,” he said. “They removed our facilities, our branch office,” just outside St. Petersburg. “All our Kingdom Halls, places of worship, throughout Russia were closed. They felt that by doing that they would put a stop to our activities, but people continued to worship in the way that they do,” said Gillies. “And so then now the authorities have moved against them just for practicing their faith.”

Gillies sees parallels between what happened to Jehovah’s Witnesses in Germany in the 1930s and 1940s, and what is happening in Russia in 2023. Their members’ preaching activity, outreach to people interested in discussing religious questions, political neutrality, and conscientious objection to military

service, are once again attracting government suspicion in Russia.

The Russian government has investigated and banned Jehovah’s Witness literature, including the Bible and a book of children’s Bible stories, he said, with one court deciding that Jehovah’s Witnesses were sowing religious discord by claiming they were the true religion (something, he notes, the Russian Orthodox Church, among others, also do).

Gillies believes that Jehovah’s Witnesses’ neutrality, coupled with their insistence that a divine kingdom is being established, make governments nervous. He also notes the irony of labeling conscientious objectors alongside violent terrorists as “extremists.”

“We say that Jesus at his time will intervene, but there’s nothing Jehovah’s Witnesses are going to do to bring that on,” Gillies said. “We don’t try and replace governments today. In fact, our relationship with governments is very clearly defined.” He cites Romans 13:1 as the basis for that practice: “Any government that’s in place, we’re subject to the laws of the land,” he said in summary. However, per Jesus’ command to his followers in chapter 22 of the Book of Matthew, Jehovah’s Witnesses hold that while they must render under Caesar what belongs to Caesar, they must also render to God those things properly belonging to God.

“We’re obedient to the laws of the land,” Gillies said. “But when the law asks for worship, then that’s a red line for us.” ■

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The Minyan: Holocaust Survivors

A roundtable discussion about the rise of antisemitism in America, the importance of education, and who will pass on the lessons of the Shoah when the last survivors are gone

BY ABIGAIL POGREBIN

The Minyan is a series of moderated roundtable discussions about the state of the Jewish community in America from a variety of perspectives. By bringing together at least 10 people from a shared demographic or background—“everyday” people with personal opinions, not “experts” or titled professionals who earn their salaries by crafting statements on these issues—we hope to foster conversations that will illuminate how different kinds of people think about the larger Jewish community, and their own place in it.

As of January 2023, only 23 states in the U.S. require Holocaust education. Two-thirds of Americans surveyed could not say how many Jews died in the Holocaust. A survey of Americans ages 18-40 found that 48% could not name one concentration camp or ghetto. Meanwhile, hate crimes are at their highest since the Anti-Defamation League started reporting in 1979 and attacks against Jews exceed any other group in America, according to the Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism.

We thought this was an important moment to gather representatives from a group that is, sadly, fast disappearing: survivors of the Shoah.

The stories of what they endured as children during the Holocaust are harrowing: Ben survived two ghettos, nine concentration camps, and two death marches. All the members of Sam’s family, except for two sisters, were deported to Treblinka and murdered. Judith saw her parents loaded onto a cattle car bound for the death camps when she was just 5 years old; she never saw them again. Ruth was hidden by a neighbor, but only after enduring two years in the Vilna ghetto, and seeing her father

deported to Dachau; even in hiding the horrors loomed large: “Any knock at the door produced terror,” Ruth recalled. “There were almost daily events that reminded us that any Aryan could kill us, with impunity, at any time.”

All of these survivors eventually came to the U.S. Thanks to age and infirmity, we are losing these eyewitnesses and storytellers by the day—it is estimated that the national population of Holocaust survivors will be at 36,800 in 2025—and many worry that their searing accounts will perish with them. What do they want to tell us while they can?

THE PARTICIPANTS

Where and when they were born, when they came to the U.S., and where they live now

Ben: *Born in Warsaw in 1921, came to the U.S. in 1946, currently living in Berkeley, California*

Lilly: *Born in a small town on the Polish-Russian border (now Ukraine) in 1929, came to the U.S. in 1949, currently living in Forest Hills, New York*

Mark: *Born in Poland in 1933, came to the U.S. in 1961, currently living in Livingston, New Jersey*

David: *Born in Slovakia in 1929, came to the U.S. in 1950, currently living in Coral Gables, Florida*

Sam: *Born in Demblin, Poland, in 1935, came to the U.S. in 1947, currently living in Kildeer, Illinois*

Fran: *Born in Sokol, Poland, in 1938, came to the U.S. in 1949, currently living in West Orange, New Jersey*

Ruth: *Born in Vienna in 1933, came to the U.S. in 1940, currently living in Seaside, Oregon, and Palm Springs, California*

Kati: *Born in Transylvania in 1939, came to the U.S. in 1983 (“I lived all over the place, in different countries, before coming to America”), currently living “on a farm in New Hampshire”*

Sigmund: *Born in Berlin in 1932, came to the U.S. in 1948, currently living in Sarasota, Florida*

Rosalyn: *Born in Lodz, Poland, in April 1945, came to the U.S. in 1947, currently living outside Portland, Oregon*

Judith: *Born in Piešťany, Czechoslovakia, in 1936, came to the U.S. in 1956 (after first immigrating to Israel in 1951), currently living in Greenwich, Connecticut*

Erika: *Born in the Nyíregyháza ghetto in Hungary in 1944, came to the U.S. in 1948, currently living in Springfield, Missouri*

Tablet: All of you are survivors. Where were you during the war?

Ben: In 1942, I was taken to Majdenek. In '43, I was taken to Auschwitz, then to Buna-Monavice, Jawischowitz, Buchenwald, Ohrdruf, Grafinkl, Celten Lager, and Liebenau. These were all camps I visited. I paid my dues. At the end, I was at the displaced persons (DP) camp Zeilsheim near Frankfurt. We obviously wanted to go to Palestine. I married a girl after the liberation and we intended to go to Palestine. The Kibbutz Authority said Israel did not want young married couples.

Lilly: I survived the war together with my parents. I was very lucky. We were hidden by a Polish gentile—in a bunker for two-and-a-half years.

Mark: During the war, I was

hiding in the forests and farms [of righteous gentiles].

David: I was in Auschwitz-Birkenau since January 1941. Then in November of 1944, we were transported to Buchenwald. I was found by the Czech underground, and then I was taken to a field hospital. Six weeks later, Patton liberated Prague and Brno, Czechoslovakia, and I was taken to an orphanage in Prague. I stayed at that orphanage for five years. And I was asked to take an aptitude test, which I was kind of resenting, but finally I was talked into it, and I've never regretted it because almost nine months later, I was advised that I was accepted as an international exchange student to the United States.

Sam: I was first in a ghetto. And then the Germans put us in the Deblin concentration camp. From there, we went by cattle car to Czestochowa concentration camp. And then I was liberated by the Russians in January of '45.

Fran: I was 2 years old when the Germans came into our town. My father was murdered along with 400 other Jewish men at that time. They said they were taking them to work. We spent 22 months being hidden [in a pigsty] by a Polish Catholic woman and her daughter. In our town, there were 6,000 Jews before the war. After the war, 30 survived—and this Catholic woman saved 15.

Ruth: We escaped by the skin of our teeth.

Kati: I was persecuted under the Hungarians. I come from a mixed family: My mother was Catholic. My father was Jewish. There were 38 members of my father's family. I'm the only survivor. He, too, had nine brothers and sisters. Everybody was deported. I was saved by a Hungarian peasant girl who hid me on her farm in the attic where I was totally alone for three months. And they came looking for me and tried to poke a bayonet in my head, but they didn't get me.

Sigmund: After my father was imprisoned in Dachau in 1938, we fled to Shanghai. We spent the war years in Shanghai.

Rosalyn: I spent a month during the war in occupied Poland, essentially in hiding because my parents were still

nervous about coming out of hiding after I was born [in April 1945]. The first ship we started out on was damaged in the ocean as we were coming out of Germany. (We lived in Germany the first two years of my life after I was born.) And so then we had to come back to Bremerhaven and board another ship and finally arrived in Boston harbor in 1947. Exactly on my birthday. There is an article in *The New York Times* about the ship and all these refugees that were on it. There were 33 orphans. So it was considered a big deal.

Judith: We escaped to another town in Czechoslovakia, and we lived as non-Jews—my family, my parents, my six siblings. Then the Gestapo found out that we are Jews, so they came and they got us. They took my parents. Four of us survived. I was taken by peasants over to Hungary, to Budapest. And in Budapest I was hiding under The Glass House [a building used by a Swiss diplomat who saved many Jews] in 1944. Then I went back to Czechoslovakia—to school in a convent, then I was in an orphanage. I went from there on the last Kindertransport to London, which was in 1948.

Erika: My father, who was in a forced labor camp, somehow managed to escape the camp briefly, get my mother and me out of the Nyiregyháza ghetto just two weeks before all the transports to Auschwitz began. He got us to Budapest, where my mother went into hiding with me. We were the only survivors in our family. I never knew my father or any family members.

Tablet: I know this is a bit of a complicated, painful question, but if you could let me know how many in your family you lost.

Kati: Twenty-eight close members of the family. I'm the only survivor.

Mark: It would be easier for me to say how many from my family *survived*. Because I lost the whole family. With the exception of my mother and my sister—we were hiding. There was some family that escaped before the war, but very few. How many in my family were killed? Probably a hundred.

Ben: Hundreds.

Sam: We had a big family and I would say between 30 and 40 were killed.

Sigmund: All my family in Poland—in the Belzec concentration camp.

Fran: My father lost his parents, three brothers, and two sisters. My father was also murdered in Belzec. We were an hour away from that camp.

David: Our *Etz Hayim* [Tree of Life] had 105 branches. Each branch represented a *neshama* [soul] of our family. I am the only one that survived.

Rosalyn: In my mother's family, only she and her sisters survived out of hundreds and hundreds of family members. In my father's family, he was one of eight brothers and sisters and only a half-sister in Russia and a half-sister (who eventually moved to Israel) survived—out of *hundreds* of extended family.

Lilly: I'm the only one, with my parents, as far as my closest family. But on my mother's side, there were over 300 people who perished.

Erika: My mother lost her entire family, all of her siblings, their spouses, their children, her parents, her grandparents.

Ruth: We lost all our close family—aunts and uncles, cousins. Probably about 30 or 40 people. Most of them were sent to Auschwitz and died or were murdered there.

Judith: I would say countless.

Tablet: I spoke to all of you in our pre-interviews about the current rising tide of antisemitism and antisemitic attacks, particularly in the United States. What is your reaction when you hear some people say that the alarm some Jews feel is overblown or over-exaggerated?

David: It pains me. It hurts me beyond words to know that there's such a big element of our own people who are oblivious to what is happening in this blessed country of ours, in the universities, schools, everywhere. And nothing is being done, nothing is being said. I am so pained to hear some of the excuses. "*Zorg nisht!*" ["Don't worry!"] I have been *zorging* all my goddamn life! And I submit to all of you that you need to wake up and you need to know that antisemitism is blatant!

Ruth: There is an echo: What is happening here in 2023 is very reminiscent of what was happening in Germany in 1933. It's the same. But the only people who can really counteract it are

the gentiles. The Jewish people can try, they can argue, they can be aware, they can pack their mental suitcases. But there is no way to stop this unless the gentiles stop it. The tide is coming in. And we need to be aware. And those Jewish people in America who are so naive to think that it's nothing to worry about, all I can say is I feel sorry for them. "Don't worry" is a ridiculous statement, because if we don't worry, nobody else is going to worry.

Sigmund: I think for those of us who are fortunate enough to have survived, it is our duty to speak up. And the main reason for that is that if we don't speak up, we increase the probability of a horror like that occurring again. On the other hand, we can't always scream about it. It's important to speak when it is appropriate to tell our story in a straightforward way so that people know about it. I accept every invitation to speak, whether it is from an elementary school, junior high school, or any other. It doesn't matter whether there's an honorarium or not, because I think it is my duty to tell this story. I think it is all of our duty to tell this story so that a horror like that will not be repeated.

Tablet: You said we shouldn't always scream about it. What do you mean by that?

Sigmund: I think when you scream about it all the time, people get tired. It's important that this is perhaps the greatest catastrophe in the history of humanity: the murder of 6 million Jews. This is something which should not be forgotten. It should always be recalled. And it is our duty, as I said, to speak about it. Period.

Fran: For 70 years I didn't speak about any of this. In 2017, we went back to our town where I was born, Sokol, and we made a film of our experiences. There are three of us children who were left. I had never cried for my father, I had never mourned for him. But we went back to the old brick factory where he was killed along with 400 men and it's the first time I cried for him. His brothers and sisters—they were all in their 20s and 30s when they were murdered. It had a tremendous impact on me.

Rosalyn: I grew up in a Jewish suburb [in America]. And the first time I

"If we don't speak up, we increase the probability of a horror like that occurring again. On the other hand, we can't always scream about it."

experienced antisemitism was when I took a trip to Poland to see my birthplace. People didn't know I was Jewish, so they were open about speaking about their hatred and antisemitism. I had never seen it before. But it really made me aware that the only thing that we learn from history is that we do not learn from history. And we are right now in a state of what I call unconscious denial about what is happening. It's easier to go through denial than to really face up to what could happen because the outcome is too horrific to even imagine. People don't understand that. The Holocaust and genocide don't start with bombs, they start with words, they start with the hatred and bigotry. That's what I speak out about to anyone who will listen, any group who will listen: It starts with words.

Kati: I managed to pass a law in New Hampshire: They have to teach Holocaust studies in every single school. It's been signed into law by the governor. It's now being taught in every school. And I go to many schools to speak about the Holocaust. And I warn them against antisemitism. And no one has come to tell me that the Holocaust didn't happen, because I think I'd kill them.

Tablet: Several of you know professor Michael Berenbaum, an expert in Holocaust studies. He talked to me about

what he views as the recent "trivialization and vulgarization" of the Holocaust. He pointed to one example: the yellow stars worn by people protesting COVID restrictions during the pandemic.

Erika: Obviously it's awful when people talk about the Holocaust itself in ways that are untrue. But what has driven me nuts over the last several years is how easily things are compared to the Holocaust or to Hitler. You know, Trump was called Hitler. People who are trying to cross our southern border simply for a better way of life are being compared to the Jews who were trying to get out of Nazi Germany. I find that actually even more frightening because that's in mainstream media, it's opinion that's on the front page that is tremendously trivializing of the Holocaust.

Sam: Yes. People make comments about the Holocaust when they don't understand what it really was. Winston Churchill said the Holocaust is the worst thing that ever happened in the history of mankind. And it is. There's nothing like it. We are the yellow bird in the coal mine. You know, first they attacked us. The non-Jews have to know this. Like [German Lutheran Pastor] Martin Niemöller said: "First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a socialist ... "They didn't speak up and so on and so on. Then they came for the Jews. Nobody was left. If we make hatred a human problem, not just a Jewish problem (although they tried to eradicate us) but a human problem, that's what it is. If the most civilized country like Germany—with luminaries like Goethe, Lessing, Schiller, Einstein—can come up with the ovens and kill our families, why can't it happen here? And here in America we already have antisemitism. The yellow bird in the mines—the Jews—and the gentiles have to be the Niemöllers of the world and say, "Stop." And speak up when they see something that the people don't understand. Education is the only thing. I am so happy that everybody here is involved in working with education. And by the way, in Illinois, we are the first state that required schoolchildren to study

the Holocaust. I think there are now 20, 30 states. We started it in Illinois.

Tablet: Since we are facing the increasing reality of losing survivors to old age, when you look at the landscape of who the storytellers are going to be, can a few of you address the loss of eyewitnesses and what that might mean?

Ruth: I'm not sure how much of an influence we have had that will be long term. I've talked to thousands of children. I've caught the eye of a few dozen here and there who really understood what I was trying to tell them. I'm not sure that I would say that we've had that big an influence. I know that sounds very disturbing because we felt that we needed to tell our story and it would make a difference. But considering the situation at the given time right now, I don't know if we really did. We're going to find out when we are all gone. And by the way, congratulations to Ben—we should all live that long. I'm going to be very brief here, but I do need to say this: The first campaign speech that I heard by Donald Trump reminded me of the speeches I heard Hitler give when I was just a little girl. So there is a comparison. No, he's not that evil, maybe. But you don't know what the people around him who are evil will do. So we have not had that big an influence. And I'm so sorry that this is the case, but I see what's happening.

Tablet: Ben, I wanted to go to you on the question of losing survivors and who will keep telling the story.

Ben: Unfortunately, not many. Not many know the details of the Holocaust. They'll have to stand up for their own Jewish rights. There won't be too many who do. It's very unfortunate, but I don't see it. In our generation, we had to speak up, and we spoke up, and it worked. But when we are gone, not too many Jewish speakers will get up and give our defense. I don't see it.

Mark: I feel very strongly that yes, we should all talk, we should all present our history of how we survived, what we went through. And I do it a lot. I speak to a lot of kids, grown-ups, and organizations. But there is one thing that we cannot do: We don't have any power to create or influence the education system here, to do anything about it. So

say anything you want, we can talk as survivors till doomsday. But we're not going to accomplish anything; we're going to change the mind of one kid here, one kid there, and then what? We are not gaining anything. So what do we have to do? We have to talk to people who have control over this education. Of course, if I go to the Board of Education, they will kick me out; they're not going to talk to me. So who is the one? The reporters. The newspapers. They have to start opening their mouth. And when we have somebody running for the office, we should make sure that we go and influence people who are doing something to get the education system. Teach the kids from the kindergarten. You have some countries in the world that teach their kids from the beginning to hate the Jews. And later they even give their lives for the cause to kill the Jews. So education is the most important thing to do.

Sigmund: We human beings are the descendants of animals, and there is a bit of the beast in all of us. And I think it's important for us to acknowledge that and be on guard against it. It's important to speak out against genocide wherever it occurs. Of course, we speak out against the Holocaust, but I think we also should speak out, for example, about the genocide in Rwanda and other places. Wherever genocide occurs, it is a stain on the history of humanity, and we should do what we can to reduce its occurrence.

Kati: I absolutely agree with you that we have to include other genocides. The Holocaust is not just a Jewish tragedy. It is a human tragedy. I'm speaking to kids and I get tremendous response from them because I don't speak to them as a Jew. I speak to them as a survivor of a genocide. I make it somehow a little bit more inclusive.

Tablet: I want to talk about museums because so many of you are involved in them. Why are they so crucial in terms of the future when it comes to Holocaust history and memory?

Sam: I was involved and volunteered to build the Illinois Holocaust Museum and Education Center. What makes me most proud is seeing 12 yellow buses pulling up every day. We passed a

law in Illinois that all the public school kids have to study the Holocaust. And kids come not only from Illinois, but other states. For those who cannot get to the museum, we have created boxes with the information, free for any school anywhere. It's a great program. Education is the key. And we cannot conquer this alone. We have tried it for 2,000 years. We have to bring everybody else in to work as a team to eradicate antisemitism.

Rosalyn: You asked who will speak for us. The museums will speak for us. That's who is going to outlive us. So we have to support those museums and those programs.

Tablet: I want to turn to a very hard question: For those out there who can't conceive of the number 6 million, who can't personalize the horror, can any of you offer a snapshot that might make it more real to readers?

Erika: Because of what you said—the depersonalization—my family had a brochure printed up, and the cover says “10 of the 6 Million.” And it has the pictures of all of the members of my mother's immediate family who were murdered. I distribute it everywhere I speak. And I start my talk always by saying, “As I say these names, please look at these pictures. Because 6 million is a meaningless number. And they were individual people.” That's how I personalize it and make people realize.

David: I need to give you two examples. I was 11 years and 4 months old when I arrived in Auschwitz. You wanted me to explain how I survived. There's nothing magical about me. I was lucky. I had a brother called Yakov, who was four years and four months my senior. He was big and strong because he worked on the farm where we were born. Yakov took beatings that were meant for me. And he continued getting punished ... I'm the guy who started to create The March of the Living in Miami. I have taken over 50-some-odd-thousand *kinder* [children] on the March of the Living. They will never forget. I took them to the bunk, to the barrack where I was in Auschwitz for two years and eight months. I was on the lower level of this three-level bunk. And to my right, there was a 26-year-old guy: Rabbi

Huna. He was a redhead. Every morning we had to go outside to be counted. Rabbi Huna looked skyward and he was singing: *a gut morgn robeynu sheloylem*. ["A good morning, Heavenly Father."] And the Gestapo beat the hell out of him. And he kept on doing it. Then another mega-Gestapo arrived: He was nicknamed The Whip Man. And one Yom Tov morning, Rabbi Huna is reciting "*Modeh ani lefanecha*" [the morning prayer of thanks to God for restoring the soul another day]. And he's singing and this crazy killing bastard with his whip went ahead and snapped that whip and it wrapped around Huna. And I was standing there and crying because he was in pain. And I was saying to my brother, Yakov, "What about *robeynu sheloylem*, Yakov?" The guy pulled that whip and that rabbi went flying and wound up at the electrified fence. Within seconds, Rabbi Huna was dead.

Tablet: I'm so sorry.

David: I submit to you that we need to reach out to our *kinder* first. I ask every child that I meet, to please know who they are. I plead with them that they need to know what happened. But mostly, mostly—and I'm speaking to the rest of us here as survivors—I tell these *kinder*, "I want you to become my mouthpiece when I'm no longer here." This is the message that we need to give. I have confidence that the *kinder*—the second and the third generation—they will always know. And I thank my fellow survivors. I wish you *ruach* [spirit] and *koach* [strength].

Lilly: I wanted to tell you one instance that I remembered from my childhood. When we were going into hiding, it was in the middle of the night, it was dark and cold. We were going with my mother to a forest and the Polish person whose house we were going to, he led us, but when we came to a certain place, he told us that the day before, there had been "an action." All of us knew what was an "action": Jews were killed. They were brought to the forest, told to dig their own graves, and then they were shot and fell into the graves. When I had to cross that grave, I felt the soil heaving. That was the worst part.

Tablet: Terrible.

Lilly: I also want to mention that I

"There were many non-Jews that *helped!* There were nuns and priests. So you cannot think that all people are bad."

received a letter from my best friend and she said to me in that little note, "Lilly, I know that you will survive the war, but I won't." I don't know how she knew. "So please remember and tell the world." After the liberation, when I met my husband, we were working all the time remembering the Holocaust, building museums in Washington, D.C., in New York. My husband was active in Yad Vashem and Bergen-Belsen. We had teachers conferences where the teachers were learning how to speak to the children about it, and many more, which I cannot describe.

Tablet: Lilly, you are one of the people on this call who was hidden during the war. Am I correct that you were hidden by non-Jews?

Lilly: Yes.

Tablet: And you had to lie down without actually standing up, bathing or changing clothes for over two years; your limbs atrophied and you had to learn how to walk again when you were finally freed?

Lilly: I had to learn how to walk, yes, and also talk, because we were always whispering. We never saw daylight. It was always dark.

Tablet: You know that many assume there is apathy and hatred when it comes to non-Jews fighting antisemitism. What does it mean to you that

there were non-Jews who acted to save Jewish lives? How does that sit with you today?

Lilly: You cannot say that all the non-Jews were antisemitic. There were many non-Jews that *helped!* There were nuns and priests. So you cannot think that all people are bad. That's my answer. And I always try to see the good in people.

Tablet: Fran, can I ask you to reflect on the kindness of the person who hid you in the pigsty?

Fran: We called her the "*malach*"—she was an angel. I can't explain it. She intimidated me when she'd come to give us food. We were never hungry—she took excellent care of us.

Tablet: You've previously recounted an episode where you were crying so hard—as a scared 4-year-old—that some in your group thought you would give away the hiding place and needed to be forcibly silenced?

Fran: Yes—I started crying and crying, and the owner of the pigsty said to the group, "You have to do something or it will be the end of all of us." The family came to a decision to kill me because 13 of us were in danger. The doctor in the group had brought poison with him—in case he and his two sons and wife were captured, they would kill themselves. I remember them pushing something into my mouth and I kept pushing it out, telling them, "I'll be good!" The doctor later described it: I fell asleep and they thought I was dead. The doctor went to pick me up and said, "I feel a pulse there. That child is alive."

Tablet: Incredible. I will end with one last question to all of you: When we speak about the Holocaust, we often say, "Never forget." What should future generations remember?

Ruth: Each person murdered was an individual. It can happen again. It started in a peaceful country, a democratic country, and it can happen anywhere where there are Jews.

Erika: Evil does and will always exist. And good people have to stand up to it.

Judith: I wrote my book, *A Candle in the Heart*, for the purpose that it should be remembered for generations. I became an orphan at the age of 4. Hatred

can start all this. I wrote my book to teach the children when I'm not here.

Kati: Education. Education. Education.

Fran: A strong State of Israel, which I am very disappointed that many Jews don't support, is the only thing that can help us. That's the only place that could have saved us during the war. It's not a popular opinion, but it's my opinion.

David: My message is very simple: *6 million of our people! A million-and-a-half of our kinder!* That's my message.

Sam: Remember the past. Because he who forgets is condemned to repeat it.

Ben: Do you want to know why I lived to 101 years old? To say, "Never forget."

Lilly: We have to remember. We have to fight it. And hope that it never happens again.

Mark: We have to make sure that the future generation will never forget what happened in this Holocaust, so that those atrocities will never happen again.

Rosalyn: What happens to one happens to all. The hate that we create produces more hate, and we cannot have a civilization that continues on that path.

Sigmund: There is a beast in us, and the beast is hatred of others. We are all capable of that hatred. And the beginning of the Holocaust is hatred. ■

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HISTORY

The Man Who Saved My Grandfather

A war reporter visits Slovakia to meet the peasant-turned-doctor who risked his life to hide Jews

BY DANNY GOLD

Milan Hucko understood why his aunt begged his father to stop hiding the Jews. The anti-Nazi uprising in Slovakia was failing, and the occupying German army was a constant presence in his village. Everyone knew the penalty for hiding Jews: The invaders or their collaborators would kill you and your entire family. "I can understand, not everyone was willing to die," Milan says.

Milan was 14 in the summer of 1944, when his family hid my grandfather from the Nazis. He was 89 years old when I went to Slovakia to interview him in November of 2018 and ask him why they decided to help save his life. I wanted to ask Milan what my grandfather had been through during a war that's now almost beyond living memory.

But my curiosity went beyond my family's history. Milan, I thought, could also explain what compels a person to

risk everything to save a stranger in a time and place where neighbors kill one another and behaving with basic humanity can be deadly.

I have spent much of my career in conflict zones. For over a decade, I have covered war and violent social collapse, often reporting on conflicts inflamed by ethnic and sectarian divisions, usually in the company of other journalists, aid workers, academics and analysts. We grasped for whatever thin logic or meaning appeared in the spasms of violence we witnessed. We were like the journalists in Sarajevo described by Peter Maass in *Love Thy Neighbor*, his seminal work on the Bosnian civil war: "They were possessed by war, by the madness of war and by the presumption that they were acquiring the ability to see into people's souls. It was true. They were getting closer to the truths of human nature, dark and horrible."

I sought these dark and horrible truths in places like Iraq, Syria, Ukraine,

the Central African Republic and Gaza. I tried to find something that could explain how people can embrace death and destruction on such an unfathomable scale. But in the course of my reporting, I would sometimes meet those on the opposite side of the moral spectrum: the minority willing to risk everything to rescue total strangers

Wars are propelled by an internal logic that becomes nearly impossible, and often actively dangerous, for the people caught up in them to reject. Ancient hatreds bubble to the surface. Lost territory must be reclaimed, old insults avenged. Crippling poverty, a changing world, dwindling resources, a rising demagogue—all can push entire populations to a violent breaking point. Not everyone, though, is willing to go along. Who has not asked themselves what they would do in such a situation? Who has not told themselves, or hoped, that they would be one of the few to resist the madness?

Milan held a very personal answer to these questions. The heroism of him and his family is literally the reason I exist. And, in a way, it was the reason I had been drawn into life in conflict zones.

When I was 22, I visited Auschwitz with my grandmother. It can be hard to grasp the significance of a place like that, decades removed from the horrors that occurred there, especially on a beautiful summer day. What I remember is watching my grandmother, then 80, walking the dirt paths and searching her memories. She muttered to herself, struggling to remember which housing

barrack was which. But she wasn't overcome with emotion.

She had spent years in the camps, primarily Auschwitz, after being sent from Slovakia as one of the earliest Jewish deportees in 1942. The number tattooed on her forearm was only four digits. She was imprisoned at Auschwitz, Mauthausen, Grossrosen, Bergen-Belsen, Breslau and the death camp at Auschwitz-Birkenau. She survived a death march and an examination from Dr. Mengele. Unlike her eventual husband, no one had been there to shelter her from the Nazis.

More than a decade later, I was in northern Slovakia in the small town of Vadovce, searching for the house where a 14-year-old Milan helped ensure that my grandfather did not also end up in Auschwitz. Vadovce is a picturesque Eastern European hamlet, nestled among hills and valleys. Crops grow in small tidy fields; there's a church and a town square, a babbling stream and apple trees.

My father had given me a photo of the house from an old manila folder, which also contained a copy of my grandmother's Auschwitz file and the fake identification papers my grandfather used during the war. The picture shows a simple structure, not more than a few rooms. The house isn't there anymore, and neither is the barn where my grandfather first hid out. In its place is a small chemical factory and a parking lot. The economy is booming in Slovakia, and the flush times have even reached the periphery. The country manufactures more cars per capita than anywhere in the world.

By the time I went to Slovakia, all four of my grandparents, all Holocaust survivors, had passed. My last surviving grandparent died in 2016 when I was on a flight to Iraq to cover the operation to take Mosul back from the Islamic State. Previously I had missed my maternal grandmother's funeral while covering the burgeoning civil war in the Central African Republic. There, some told me they had always lived peacefully next to people from other religions; others spoke of the rising hatred, the changing attitudes, their fear of what was to come and how it would shape their lives.

The Nazis exterminated nearly an

entire generation of my family, including all of my great-grandparents who were alive at the time. Two of my grandparents were the sole surviving members of their immediate families. My paternal grandmother had survived Auschwitz, but her parents and six siblings did not. Milan and his family made sure her future husband, Abraham, survived, but Abraham lost his mother and four siblings; one older brother who fought in the forests with the partisans survived. My mother's parents, both young and unattached, fled western Poland just after the Nazis divided up the country with the Soviets; both ended up as refugees in Siberian work camps before meeting at a displaced persons camp in Kazakhstan. Neither saw their parents again. Five of my grandmother's siblings survived, along with four who were killed. My mom's father, like my father's mother, lost everyone in his immediate family.

The Holocaust was a specter of my youth, shaping how I came to view the world. It was a reminder of what people were capable of and the importance of keeping the human propensity for evil in the back of one's mind. As a child, I would think about how much bigger my family would have been, how many more cousins I would have had, if the Nazi genocide had never happened. My grandmother would recall with a strange fondness how I was the first grandchild to ask about the tattooed numbers on her forearm. A blond child, I remembered being told that I was light-haired like my grandfather, and that this had enabled him to conceal his Jewish identity during the Holocaust. Perhaps I looked enough like him that I could also hide my Jewishness in a similar situation.

Back in Vadovce, I wanted to be sure I was looking at the exact place where the house stood. A man tending a garden across the street said he didn't remember any house. But soon, a curious elderly woman approached and led me right back to the factory. "Here it was where the Huckos lived," she told me.

I walked across the road and stood under an apple tree to snap a picture of the factory. There was no grand foundation

left to help me imagine what had been there, no plaque marking where something extraordinary had happened. It was just a factory.

That morning I had set out at dawn from the town of Martin, where Milan Hucko lived. It is a popular ski resort area, carved out of heavy forests at the base of the Mala Fatra mountain range. An early morning mist hung at the edge of town. The dew on the grass was thick enough to drench my shoes. It was autumn, roughly the same time of year in 1944 that my grandfather had fled from the northeast of the country, in the same direction I had just traveled.

Milan was a spry 89-year-old. He had a lightness of spirit and was all smiles and hugs. His eyes gleamed, as if he was constantly about to tell a risqué joke, which he sometimes did, whispering with a nudge and a wink. He was dressed in a beige corduroy blazer and black slacks, as dapper as a man in his late 80s living in a small Slovakian town could hope to be.

We met him in a parking lot near his daughter's house. She was worried about Milan doing the interview alone and was unsure of how he would fare emotionally. Discussing the war had a tendency to depress him, she said. She felt protective—some negotiation was required before she agreed to let me meet him. Despite, or perhaps because of, his heroism, Milan wasn't fond of reminiscing about those times.

I hugged him tightly as tears flowed down both our cheeks. We had met when I was much younger, but I barely had any recollection of it. He would go on to tell me later that day, in an unusually reflective moment, that sometimes he stopped to think about how if his family hadn't hidden my grandfather, my siblings and cousins and I wouldn't be here. I told him I sometimes thought about that too.

Jews who survived the Holocaust emerged from the horror with radically different views of reality. There were those like my grandmother who greeted the world with the joy that only someone who is not supposed to be alive can feel. And there were those who viewed the world as if it had tried to destroy

them and never forgave it for doing so.

I was barely a teenager when my grandfather died. His mind had died years earlier, ravaged by Alzheimer's and dementia. I never had the conversation with him about what it felt like to be hunted in a genocide. My memories of him are of a hard man, quick to raise his voice, gritting his teeth. Did the sharp edges develop after the war, when he had to rebuild his life with nearly everyone around him murdered?

It was only through trying to report this article that I learned a theory from my father. In Slovakia, the shipping of Jews off to the camps had taken a brief pause in 1943 before picking back up again in 1944. In that period, the Jews there were not safe, but they were not being hunted with the same intensity. In the summer of 1944, as the Nazis continued to collapse on the Eastern Front, it was clearly becoming dangerous again. Perhaps my grandfather tried and failed to convince his mother they needed to head into hiding or try to escape. He left to seek safety, and she was soon caught and shipped to the camps, never to be heard from again. Maybe he blamed himself for her death and could not forgive himself for surviving.

We left the parking lot and headed to Milan's daughter's house, a nice modern home just down the block. Milan had become a doctor after the war. He got married and had a daughter who became a judge and gave him three grandchildren. He was proud of his daughter's success, and spared no effort in the guided tour he took me on, naming all the flowers and plants in her well-manicured backyard. Milan was prouder still of his grandchildren, as he showed off the various medals and award certificates they had received for arts and sports.

Every Friday, he and his 8-year-old grandson had "man's night," where they gathered at Milan's apartment to watch *Star Wars* and eat pizza. The 8-year-old and his 11-year-old brother don't know the war stories just yet. Milan's 16-year-old granddaughter, a champion dancer, was old enough to learn what had happened during the war. She told me her grandfather was her hero.

On a sunny afternoon in September 1944, 14-year-old Milan arrived home from school and found a strange man in his backyard, working the sawmill with his father. He noticed that the man, who looked to be in his mid 30s, was dressed quite well, maybe a little too well, and was physically fit. Though clearly strong, he was unskilled at operating the small sawmill. Milan thought it odd that his dad would hire a man who didn't seem to know what he was doing, but he was awed by the stranger's physical strength. "If that guy hit me, I'd spend the rest of my life in the air," he thought to himself.

His father introduced the man as Ondrej, a distant member of the family from near Bratislava, the Slovak capital. Ondrej's actual name was Abraham Gold. He was a Jew from the east of the country. A horse trader, Abraham had so far been one of the luckier Jews in Slovakia, holding an exemption that a powerful former business associate had secured for him to prevent his deportation to the camps.

Slovakia was in chaos as summer turned to fall. The Nazis were panicking about the approaching Soviet army and sprinting toward their Final Solution to the "Jewish question." All exemptions like Abraham's were canceled, and after a brief respite, Jews in the country were once again under threat.

Slovakia belonged to a unique category in wartime Europe. In 1938, the Third Reich made a deal with the Slovakian government by which the country would split from Czech territory under German protection and form an "independent" rump state. This happened in 1939. While Slovakia was technically not occupied, it was not independent. It was a fascist-ruled vassal state fully aligned with Germany.

By 1941, the Nazi-allied government struck a deal with the Slovaks regarding the lingering issue of the country's Jewish population: The Slovaks would pay the Nazis the equivalent of \$200 per person to dispose of this despised minority community. The deportations started in 1942, and by the end of the first wave 58,000 out of the country's approximately 100,000 Jews had been shipped to the concentration camps.

Fewer than 30,000 of Slovakia's Jews would survive the war.

In 1943, the deportations halted and restrictions lessened. It was clear to many in the Slovakian government that the Nazis were losing the war in the east. The Germans wanted the deportations to start up again, but the Slovaks were reluctant. But in 1944, the Nazis invaded Hungary, showing what could happen to a German-allied regime that wouldn't cooperate with Berlin's demands. The Slovakian government ordered the Jews in the east of the country to go west, where Milan's family lived. By August of that year, a Slovakian uprising against the country's fascist puppet government had begun in earnest. The Germans finally invaded in order to put down the rebellion in the fall of 1944. That's when the second major wave of deportations began, and an additional 13,500 Jews were shipped to the camps. Death squads and local collaborators murdered many others.

Abraham had gotten by with a fake name and a work permit. But as the Nazis entered the country, he knew he needed to go somewhere safe. He needed to disappear.

The Einsatzgruppe H paramilitary death squad was created in August 1944 to implement the Final Solution as rapidly as possible, including in Slovakia. It would end up committing the two largest massacres in Slovakian history, in Kremnička and Nemecká, killing thousands and arresting some 20,000 others between November 1944 and February of 1945. The Soviets found hundreds of mass graves as they liberated this relatively small country.

The Nazis got help from the Hlinka Guard, a Slovakian nationalist paramilitary group. They knew the country well and would go house to house, hunting for Jews and partisans. The local population was mostly hostile to Jews looking for safety, especially since both Slovak and Nazi propaganda blamed the Jews for the uprising and the resulting invasion. Some Jews hid in the mountains and starved that winter. In September, it was announced that anyone hiding Jews would be executed.

Martin Bartek, a friend of Milan's family, was an engineer working in



Chelmno

On International Holocaust Remembrance Day

Chelmno, (Polish Chełmno, German Kulmhof) was the first camp established by the Germans in which to conduct mass executions. Situated on the Ner River in German-occupied western Poland, it reached its highest level of killing efficiency between April 1941 and December 1943. The facilities included three gas vans and two crematoria that were 32.5 feet (10 metres) wide and 16–19 feet (5–6 metres) long. Nazi records document the deaths of 180,000 people in Chelmno. After the war, Polish experts assessed the number of people who were executed, including Soviet prisoners and Roma, to be closer to 360,000. Today, Museum Kulmhof stands on the site of the death camp along with part of the “manor house” where camp prisoners were held and stripped of their valuable possessions.

construction. He had traveled across the country to work on various projects, including a major rail line in the east. He was also a staunch anti-fascist and the patriarch of a rebellious family that orchestrated an underground railroad-like network that helped place a number of hidden Jews in homes in the region around Vadovce, the small town where Milan and his family lived. He had met Abraham while working on a railway viaduct in the eastern Slovakian town of Hanušovce nad Topľou, and decided

to bring him west in hopes of finding him refuge.

Bartek was already hiding a Jewish family at his own home, so he took Abraham to his brother’s house in a town called Cachtice. This proved less than ideal, as Bartek’s brother had a radio and people would gather at his house to listen to news about the war. There were too many people passing through, and they worried someone would grow suspicious. Milan’s father, Jan, was approached to help figure out how to shelter Abraham. He could have easily done nothing. But something, perhaps his own rebellious nature, compelled him to say yes and take Abraham into his home.

The Nazis were already nearby, so Abraham had to be snuck into Jan and Milan’s house at night, through the forests and under cover of darkness. Stazka Hledkova, the daughter of another family involved in smuggling Jews to safety, brought him to the field behind Milan’s house, where Abraham crossed a stream to his new hideout.

The next day, he was working on the sawmill with Jan, who figured the fake cousin story would work for the time being. But the uprising was losing ground. Abraham needed to be hidden even more completely. Jan did away with the cover story and told his family the truth of who Abraham was. Instead of sending Abraham to certain death, they quickly built a lofted hiding spot in their barn for this total stranger.

Milan and his family were now outlaws. “At the time, we didn’t really think about why we were doing it,” he told me. But Milan and his parents agreed Abraham needed to be hidden, and they made the decision before conferring with Milan’s younger siblings. “It was on the radio and newspaper that if they discover some hidden Jews in your house, they would shoot the whole family,” Milan says. “It was very risky. People were afraid. I am not saying we were not afraid, but we were willing to take the risk to hide them as long as possible.”

Milan himself didn’t remember much hatred directed against Jews in his town before the war. When the fascists came, he said, you could hear propaganda on the radio. In Slovakia, there had always

been the traditional religious antisemitism, the kind that blamed Jews for killing Christ. Throughout the 1930s, more recognizably modern forms of conspiratorial or racialized antisemitism spread rapidly, casting Jews as exploiters of the poorer Slovaks, as rapacious capitalists or bloodthirsty Bolsheviks, or as a fifth column more loyal to neighboring Hungary than to their own country. They were not “true” Slovaks, and politicians and others promised to confiscate their wealth. By 1938, long before the Nazis showed up, Slovakia had its own “Jewish Question” committee. The government demonized Jews, robbed them of their businesses and property, and fired them from government positions. Deadly pogroms convinced thousands of Jews to emigrate. In her book *999*, which tells the story of the first all-female Jewish transport to Auschwitz, Heather Dune Macadam quotes a speech given by Slovakian President Jozef Tiso in August of 1942 as the deportations were in full swing. “People ask if what is happening now is Christian? Is it humane?” Tiso, also a Catholic priest, says to the crowd at a harvest festival:

Is it not just looting? But I ask: Is it not Christian when the Slovak nation wants to defeat an eternal enemy, the Jew? Is that not Christian? Loving thyself is a commandment of God, and that love commands me to remove everything that harms me, that threatens my life. And I believe nobody needs much convincing that the Slovak Jewish element has always been such a threat to our life, and I don’t think I need to convince anyone of that fact.

The speech was met with rousing applause. I add this not to indict modern-day Slovakia, but to put in context the type of people Milan and his family had to be. Everyone around them had been thoroughly conditioned to hate. It was not just the Nazi war machine. Jews had been demonized for years, all around them.

In his book about the sectarian tensions that tore apart Yugoslavia, Peter Maass

recalls the warning a Bosnian man gave to him: “[W]hen the call of the wild comes, the bonds of civilization turn out to be surprisingly weak ... The wild beast has not died. It proved itself a patient survivor, waiting in the long grass of history for the right moment to pounce.”

The first conflicts I reported on were brutal ethnic and religious wars in which entire societies were treated as the enemy. Throughout the 2010s, I traveled to Kurdish areas in Iraq, Syria, and Turkey, where conflict with ISIS or al-Qaida or the Assad regime was always on the doorstep and memories of Saddam Hussein’s genocide were still fresh. Young Kurdish men told me they were willing to die for their people’s freedom, and some of the ones I met did. Thousands of miles from the Middle East, outside the Rohingya concentration camps in Sittwe, Burma, Rakhine Buddhists told me it would be impossible to live next to their Muslim neighbors. Less than a year later, the Rohingya were targets of an even more violent ethnic cleansing campaign, classified as genocide by some organizations

A lot of the norms people in democratic countries believe to be durable facts of life can simply stop existing under the wrong conditions. Neighbors turn on neighbors. But war fosters other extremes. Recently I met Russians in Ukraine who had given up everything to fight along with Ukrainian soldiers to repel Putin’s invasion. I embedded with Sunni soldiers in Iraq who repeatedly faced death to liberate Christian and Yazidi villages, and interviewed young Buddhist activists in Burma who risked imprisonment to campaign and report on Rohingya persecution. They had all stood up to the madness around them despite the obvious and often deadly consequences.

Milan and his family were an anomaly, but there have been and will continue to be others out there like them, doing for others what the Huckos had done for my family.

Milan was born in 1931. A sister followed six years later, and a younger brother a year after that. The family struggled, and when he was barely a year old his mother, Eva, went to France

to spend a few years working as a maid. Milan describes his youth as a simple peasant childhood. His father, Jan, was stubborn and uneducated, having come of age during the end of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. But he was fair, principled, and had a natural distrust of authority. One night in a local pub in the early days of the war, the conversation turned to the Jews. The patrons were upset by the persecution, saying that if there were more people who were as disturbed as they were, this catastrophe wouldn’t be happening to the Jews.

Jan would have none of it. “You’re all saying you don’t like what’s happening, but it’s happening,” he shouted at them, drunker and bolder than usual. “So who’s letting it happen? Who?”

To young Milan, it was hard to grasp the gravity of the war. But in the midst of the German occupation, in a distant corner of Europe, it was tough for anyone to understand the true dimensions of the crisis. Some were convinced the Jews were only being shipped to Poland, and that they were building their own cities in their own territories, places similar to Native American reservations. “We didn’t know the consequences in the beginning, that people were being murdered and burned,” Milan claims. “Nobody knew it for a long time.”

Milan didn’t remember hearing much about the war until the uprising against the Nazis started in the summer of 1944. The partisans were operating in the woods close to the nearby Brezova and Myjava regions—Abraham’s brother, the only other member of his family who survived the war, was fighting alongside them.

At first, Abraham stayed in the loft above the barn, where he was well hidden but also capable of seeing out of holes in the exterior walls to keep a watch for German soldiers who conducted sweeps around the village. The family would sneak Abraham food, hiding it in what looked like dirty laundry. Any whisper, any hint, could have been a death sentence for all of them.

Months after Abraham arrived at the Huckos’ farm, two more Jews sent by the Bartek family arrived, Jan and Ladislav Gros. Other members of the Gros family, including their parents, were

hidden around the village. Milan and his family took to calling the hidden Jews “our boys.”

The winter of 1944 was brutally cold in Slovakia. The Nazis succeeded in gaining back ground from the Slovak partisans, although this only slowed the inevitable German defeat. Milan and his father spent every night for two weeks excavating a hidden cellar in the kitchen for the three men. Milan would stay up all night digging and then go to school the next day. The barn was becoming an increasingly risky hideout because the Germans were constantly pilfering supplies and food from the population they occupied. Eventually, Milan and the Gros boys moved into the cellar. But when spring came the melted snow flooded it, and the men had to be moved back to the barn.

Milan occasionally spent time with the hidden Jews. They would talk about the war, play chess, and discuss what they would do once the conflict ended. He brought them books, one of which was *The Count of Monte Cristo*, Alex Dumas’ novel about a man who keeps his spirit alive by plotting revenge during his wrongful imprisonment.

By the spring of 1945, the Third Reich was collapsing, and the Nazis were hunting down Jews more energetically than ever. After the Russians bombed nearby supply trains, the Germans went looking all over the village for horses to haul equipment and artillery back to the Czech Republic. Early one morning there was a knock on the door. It was a group of German soldiers demanding to be led to the barn, where Abraham and two Gros boys were sleeping.

If Jan was panicking, he hid it well. There were two locks on the door, one Jan could unlock and one on the inside that the hidden Jews kept bolted. Jan feared the soldiers would grow suspicious if he couldn’t get into his own barn. As he unlocked the door from the outside, Jan pretended he had left a key in the house. The Nazis followed him back to the house. One of the Gros boys caught on to what was happening outside. He slipped down from the loft, undid the bolt, and made his way back up to his hiding place. Jan came back, trailed by the Germans, and fidgeted a

bit as he finally got the door open. The Nazis took the horses and left.

“There were some difficult and very sad days,” Milan wrote in testimony provided to Yad Vashem in 1992. “We were praying quite a lot, and asking God when everything [would be over]. Even now, after so many hours, I’m still crying when I’m writing this, and remembering old times. But we survived.”

At one point, Milan’s aunts came to the house and asked his father to send the hidden Jews away. Jan gathered his wife, Eva, and Milan and asked them what they should do. They agreed that they wouldn’t give the Jews up. Milan’s aunts didn’t visit again until after the war.

The war ended in May 1945. With the Nazis defeated, Slovakia in ruins, and most of their friends and family murdered, the Gros family went to Palestine, where another war was soon to begin. Abraham went back east with nothing and no one, although his brother had survived his time with the partisans. Abraham soon met Malvina, who had survived three years in the camps but had also lost everyone and everything. They married soon after and had my father, followed by two more children.

When my father, aunt and uncle were young children, they would ask why they didn’t have grandparents. The Nazis had killed three out of the four; the fourth had died before the war. So Abraham and his wife took them to see Jan and Eva Hucko, who the young children took to calling ‘grandpa’ and ‘grandma’. The families remained close for years. My grandmother last visited Milan only a year before she died in 2016.

Milan says that in their village there were four families who hid Jews. He thinks some of his neighbors must have known they were hiding people—“there were a lot more men’s clothes on the washing line,” he points out. There had only been one Jew in the village before the war, a man named Bron. He was taken to a concentration camp and never seen again. I asked Milan why he thinks others didn’t help, and he offered a simple explanation. “Fear. It was fear, I think. Fear is equal to death,” he says. “Maybe if we had thought about it more, fear would overwhelm us.”

Milan tried not to think about the war too much. He’s old, he said. His mind wanders. Things got lost in translation with some of my questions. Details were occasionally hard to recall. Pieces of the story of my grandfather’s rescue were already gone. He started to cry at times, his daughter glancing at me from across the room. Be gentle, she had said. Don’t push too much.

As the interview finished, he showed me some photos of his old schoolmates, of his family, of our families together just a decade or so after the war. He held up the medal he received in Bratislava in 1992 after he was honored as a Righteous Among the Nations by Yad Vashem.

I asked him: What should I tell my children one day about what he did? He replied: “Just what happened. Your grandfather was saved in Vadovce, together with others. It was good that such people were there [to save him] and it’s important that such people are here in the future. But the best would be if such things would never happen again.”

Later, he told me, “I think that, essentially, man is not evil. Something will make him a bad person. There must be some impulse, but it’s difficult to say. People were able to do such things ... it’s difficult for me to explain.”

I sat down for a last conversation with my grandmother shortly before she died in 2016. I already knew the details of her survival during the Holocaust: the three years in the camps, the death marches, the Mengele examination. She had spoken openly about everything, recording hourslong interviews for various remembrance projects. By this point, I had also been covering conflict for years. Although I often reported on actual combat, I had grown fascinated by how and whether the victims of war could ever move forward with their lives after the fighting stopped.

There would be no real answer forthcoming from my grandmother. There was no secret method for continuing to live after Auschwitz. She just did, she said. She didn’t have a choice.

Milan had told me something similar—that he didn’t have a choice but to act the way he had. There was no deep answer. My grandmother and Milan were not people who had fortuitously

discovered some clear meaning in their suffering. Surviving, and helping others survive, had been enough. They just did.

Perhaps “why?” is a question that can only be asked by a person living a safe life in a peaceful country. Caught up in the deadliest conflict in human history, Milan didn’t look for a deeper meaning, or for something that set him and his family apart. They were a little rebellious. They knew right from wrong. They had a sense of injustice. That was all it took.

A few days later, before I left Slovakia, I went to see Milan again at his apartment in a nondescript housing block. Teenage girls walked by playing American hip-hop on a loud portable speaker. Milan’s wife had passed away, and his apartment was a shrine to her. He was thrilled to have us visit him at home. He made tea and put out a plate of cookies. As we talked, I wondered if I would ever see him again, if I would ever have children that would meet his children.

Unfortunately, I wouldn’t get the chance. Milan died in January 2021, and with him my last personal connection to the Holocaust. I had more questions for him, but I don’t think his answers could possibly have explained everything.

Milan and his father did what they did because it was the right thing to do. They did it because they thought what was happening around them was wrong. On a collective level, that sense of justice can come far too late, and sometimes not at all, as I’ve seen in my own reporting. But individually, an offended sense of justice may be the best you can hope for. Fortunately for my grandfather, it was all that he needed.

“A man must be a man to another man,” Milan’s father had told him. “Not a wolf.” ■

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HISTORY

Tablet explores the past at [tabletmag.com/sections/history](https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/history)

Among the Spiritual Psychotics

Social media users trying to magically ‘manifest’ their desires are running into the hard limits of reality

BY KATHERINE DEE

Mass delusions—this sense that you can speak your reality into existence—are everywhere in our digital-first world.

To quote the writer Matias Viegner, we exist only in words, “less in the spirit of total revelation than total text.” We are transforming from embodied, biological beings into digital entities composed of zeros and ones, data sets and social media posts. The strange thing about a world subsumed by the digital is that we’re simultaneously aware of being under constant surveillance and yet convinced that we have complete agency over our self-definitions.

One striking feature of writings about early digital communities like Multi-User Dungeons, a type of text-based role play, is that people could say they were anything, and everyone would accept the terms of their narrative self-definition. For example, if you identified as “sexy,” nobody would litigate it. You were what you said you were. There was an unspoken, shared sense that “in-game” (online) reality had different rules than the physical world. In the digital universe, you could simply speak yourself into the existence you desired.

Satirized by the famous 1993 cartoon in *The New Yorker*, “On the Internet nobody knows you’re a dog,” this aspect of the internet was both a threat and promise. Of course it opened the door to deception—stories about malicious “catfishes” have circulated since time immemorial—but it’s also what, in conjunction with the promise of global connectivity, underpinned the utopian

vision of the web. The internet gave everyone the freedom to be whoever they wanted to be; we would no longer be slaves to the limitations the physical world imposed upon us. In *Life on the Screen*, sociologist Sherry Turkle wrote of this unique feature of the web. “You can be whoever you want to be. You can completely redefine yourself if you want. You don’t have to worry about the slots other people put you in as much. They don’t look at your body and make assumptions. They don’t hear your accent and make assumptions. All they see are your words.”

But as the internet grew up and—suddenly—became commercialized, things began to change. The boundaries between URL and IRL blurred. Social media was supposed to showcase who we really were, not mask it. Identity-play belonged in games like *Second Life* or else was considered a sort of deviant behavior. (Think of how trolls evolved from an annoyance to a potential danger in the public imagination.)

The idea that we could play with our identity wouldn’t disappear completely, though. It’d be suppressed, rechanneled into ideas like “curation.” Only post your best photos, but at the end of the day they’re still you. The “avatar,” text-based or not, was no longer a separate entity; an astral body floating above your physical form. Your online self and your offline self were, at least allegedly, coming closer to being one-in-the-same.

I open up TikTok. The first video on my For You page, TikTok’s algorithmically customized landing screen, begins with

a woman speaking into her phone, determined: “When your partner is saying things you don’t want to hear, and you want to use manifestation to fix it, you tune them out, respectfully, of course.” She continues, “You stop listening, and what you start doing instead is saying in your head what you want them to be saying.” As I continue to scroll, dozens of these come across my feed—videos touting the possibilities of “manifestation,” a New Age self-help strategy that suggests that one can will their ideal reality into existence through techniques like visualization.

“If there’s one video you save from my entire account, please, God, let it be this one,” another woman proclaims, sitting cross-legged on the floor. She goes on to offer tips on how to change your mindset and thereby call your ideal life into existence. The videos continue. From : If you’re seeing this on the 18th or 19th of January, you are about to receive the best news of your life ... All you have to do is focus on your intentions. Others offer affirmations. Some provide tips, like how to keep a manifestation journal or how to visualize what you want. Visualization is key.

And then, finally, there’s a video from Allie Priestly, another young white woman who’s gained popularity talking about manifestation on the app. Priestly, though, has a different tone from the rest. She’s talking about spiritual psychosis.

“Spiritual psychosis is a real term, and someone who is in a true psychosis is going to be different from someone

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who's experiencing a spiritual delusion, which most people are experiencing," she explains. "But long-term spiritual delusion, while technically being sane for a long-term period of time, can lead people to psychotic breaks [...] You can also have true psychosis that has a religious or spiritual bent."

Priestly isn't a mental health professional—by the looks of it, she's a full-time content creator. But her point is compelling even if it's not a clinical diagnosis. "Manifestation" often looks like a kind of willful delusion. The first video I saw instructed viewers to imagine that the person they're speaking to is saying something different, with the explicit goal of willing the idealized speech into existence. It's not a form of manipulation exactly, because the point is not to change the other person's mind but to overpower the effect of their actions. That's closer to witchcraft than it is to persuasion.

Contra its more moderate defenders, manifestation is not just about changing your mindset to be more confident. It's about trying to "reshape your reality." An affirmation here and there might help you shift your perspective to a more positive one, but what happens when it's a sustained insistence that you can change your life with your thoughts, a la "tuning out your partner and imagining them saying something else"? Priestly's theory that it can lead to a psychotic break, or at a minimum, a mental health disturbance, doesn't sound so outlandish. Manifestation is not new. It's also not, as people sometimes assert, "secular" or "New Age" prayer. It dates back to the 19th century and has ebbed in and out of popularity in American culture since then. It arrives in different guises. The popular Law of Attraction, which states that "positive thoughts bring positive results," is more than a century old. The concept got a nationwide boost from Oprah in 2006 when she popularized Rhonda Byrne's book *The Secret*.

Every time manifestation reappears in the national psyche, it's greeted with the same criticism. Manifestation is "toxic positivity." This is the New Age side of "hustle culture." It's Ayn Randian libertarianism for the spiritual set.

"Manifestation is 'toxic positivity.' This is the New Age side of 'hustle culture.'"

Setting aside the potential danger of relying on what's essentially magic to change your life, its critics argue that it places an undue burden on the individual. If you subscribe to something like the Law of Attraction, you're implicitly minimizing the structures and systems in place that prevent people from reaching their goals or, more broadly, leading happy lives. Popular counterarguments today might evoke race or class: Is it a lack of positive thinking that keeps certain people down, or systemic racism? A psychologist might worry that it prevents people from ever facing up to and making peace with the truth of their own lives.

Manifestation is not an alternative expression of religion. For it to be religious or even "spiritual," there would need to be something deeper there—some desire for truth, for something greater than oneself. But watching the TikTokers preaching manifestation, it is clear that few who've newly discovered this dressed-up prosperity gospel have even a passing thought about a Higher Power. The most modest proponents of manifestation want answers; the more ambitious want "to rebrand their lives." It is as transactional as it comes.

The 2020s fixation on manifestation feels less like an extension of "hustle culture"—that go-get-them, lift-yourself-up-by-the-bootstraps attitude that characterizes so many American self-help fads—and more like an expression of maladaptive daydreaming. It is about reaffirming that the world is defined by you and you alone, that you speak reality

to existence. We are all living in a lucid dream, it insists, and like dreams, the real fun begins when you know how to manipulate your environment.

The way we've been conditioned to manipulate our environments—and ourselves—is by way of the digital. On the internet, nobody knows you're a dog. This is true everywhere online, but it's particularly true of digitally native communities where there isn't necessarily an expectation of meeting in person. Social media, supposedly tied to our nondigital identities, has made us forget how easy it is to fabricate things. If somebody tells me they live in Cincinnati and are a paralegal, I have no reason to believe they'd be lying. But the scary thing is, online, people lie about these things all the time. Maybe it's for opsec concerns: They want to throw off the scent, and keep their identity under lock and key. But more likely, I've found, it's because the lies they're telling reveal an "emotional truth." They may not literally work as a paralegal in Cincinnati, but they are "spiritually." They feel like their identity is best expressed through this avatar, so the lie begins.

That's where manifestation comes in. It's what happens when you log off and learn once more that you're a dog, and that you can't eat at the dinner table with all the humans. Manifestation emerges as a coping mechanism. Not some libertarian entitlement, but rather an attempt to negotiate the gap between the physical world and the digital world.

The physical world is filled with limitations, where it's not always as easy to express your "emotional truth." The obsession with manifestation feels like an expression of running up against that wall—a desperate No! It is a desire to project my inner world onto an intransigent reality.

And of course, I write this only after visiting a psychic to ask about my identity as a writer, journaling about how I will be a writer, indeed that I am already a writer (that's the Law of Assumption), visualizing being a writer, and anointing a candle with cinnamon oil in the hopes that it speeds things up. ■

This article was originally published on January 25.

Kutuzov

BY TANYA MOZIAS SLAVIN

INGREDIENTS

FOR THE CAKE

- 4** eggs
- 1** cup sugar
- 1** cup honey
- Zest of two oranges**
- 2** tsp baking soda
- 1** Tbsp white distilled vinegar
- 3 ½** cups flour (adjust as needed)

FOR THE FROSTING

- 2-3** cups heavy cream
- 3-4** Tbsp sugar (use less or more, depending on how sweet you like your frosting)
- 1** cup walnuts, cut into pieces

PREPARATION

TO MAKE THE CAKE

Step 1

Separate egg yolks and egg whites and divide the sugar into two equal portions.

Step 2

Beat the egg yolks with 1/2 cup of sugar until the mixture turns pale and increases in volume.

Step 3

In a different bowl beat the egg whites until they foam. Gradually add the remaining 1/2 cup of sugar. Continue to beat until stiff peaks are formed.

Step 4

Combine the yolk and the white mixtures, Add honey and orange zest.

Step 5

Dissolve baking soda in vinegar and add to the batter.

Step 6

Gradually add the flour. Adjust the amount as needed: The result has to be something between batter and dough. Not liquid-y but sticky and spreadable, and not thick enough to be rolled.

Step 7

Prepare a steam bath. Boil water in a big pot and put the bowl with dough on top, covered. Leave it there for at least 2 hours.

Step 8

Preheat oven to 350F. Grease an 8- or 9-inch cake pan with butter, and spread a thin layer (about 3 Tbsp) of batter onto the pan using your hand. Bake in the preheated oven until lightly browned, about 6-7 minutes. Remove from the oven and let it cool until firm enough to remove. Repeat until you have used all the cake batter. You will have 8-11 cake layers. Be careful not to put hot cake layers on top of each other. You can stack them together once they're cool.

Step 9

Choose the least pretty of your cake layers and break it into crumbs. You will need it for decoration.

TO MAKE FROSTING AND ASSEMBLE THE CAKE

Step 1

Beat the heavy cream with sugar.

Step 2

Generously cover each cake layer with the whipped cream frosting and sprinkle with walnuts. Cover the top layer even more generously with frosting and use an offset spatula to completely cover the sides of the cake as well. Cover the top of the cake completely with walnut pieces. Using the spatula, cover the sides with the crumbs made from the broken cake layer.

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