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Holocaust Literature
Interviewing a Holocaust Survivor (Mr. George G. Heller)
05/01/2008

It's possible!

Introduction:

Going to the “Day of Learning” event in San Francisco, on April 13, 2008, was truly a life changing experience for me. I’ve been reading about the Holocaust for a long time now; but never attended any event like this one. I was in the audience of the “Hate, Propaganda and Cartoons” workshop. And I met Mr. George G. Heller there. George is a Holocaust survivor from Hungary.

At one point, he told us the following story:

After graduating from M.I.T. with two engineering degrees in 1959, George was hired by IBM to work in Kingston, New York. When his wife found a place to rent, George asked the land lady, “I hope you have no problems with the fact that we are Jewish”? The land lady couldn’t believe it; the shock changed her facial expression abruptly, according to George, as if “looking for horns on this strange creature”. But soon the land lady’s surprise subsided, and they were able to rent the place; eventually a great friendship developed among them.

After listening to his story, I decided to talk to George after the workshop, and also hoped to interview him, if possible. I eventually succeeded in interviewing him, after I read one of his stories online, in a blog titled “The Top of the Wall”. My goal here was not only to document factually, what has happened to him during World War II, but also to show how it shaped his life and influenced others around him. His story influenced me as well, I learned about a very effective way to work for peace and freedom, of which I will talk about a little bit later.

Part I: A Brief Sketch of George’s Life

Before the War:

George G. Heller, the son of a book printer, was born in Budapest, Hungary, in 1924. He was the youngest of three children; he had two older siblings, a brother and a sister. His father, Kálmán Heller, and his mother, Gizella Heller, owned a printing business. His brother, who was nine years older than he, was a master printer; and his sister, who was seven years older than he, also worked in the family business. Young George dreamed to become a printer (a type setter - graphic designer) like his father and brother.

George grew up in a predominantly Jewish neighborhood. Budapest had a large active Jewish population. The Heller family was part of the Neolog (Hungarian

Conservative) Jewish Community; therefore, members of the Heller family practiced the Conservative tradition of Judaism. George believed in God strongly, and also followed his religion. Hungary had an anti-Jewish law since 1920, which was known as “Numerus Clausus”; it severely restricted the number of Jewish students the Hungarian Universities could admit. But, in general, the relationship between Jews and non-Jews was quite good, even though Anti-Semitism always existed.

George went through four years of elementary school, eight years of secondary school (Gimnazium), and he was a college student when he became a slave laborer. He studied several languages, Latin for eight years, German for seven years, and English for four years; he also knew Hungarian, Hebrew and some French. Beyond languages, he also studied various sciences and advanced mathematics (integral calculus). His education was so intensive, because his parents taught him, that the only thing nobody could ever take away from him was his education. Indeed, that is what happened.

As Hitler came into power, things started to change in Hungary, and it was getting worse continuously; life was exceedingly difficult. People in the Jewish community were aware of what was happening in the rest of the Europe. Since Hungary was governed by anti-Semitic leaders and there were anti-Jewish laws; Hitler initially wanted them to solve the Jewish problem by themselves. But eventually German forces entered Hungary to take matters in their own hands.

During the War:

In 1942, at the age of 27, George’s brother was sent to the Russian front, where he died as a slave labor.

It was 1944, life was harsh, and every new day was worse compared to the day just passed. One day in early 1944, the Heller family was ordered to leave their apartment in one hour. One hour? Yes, and therefore, most of their belongings were left behind. They moved into the apartment of an aunt, a block away. His father died during the month of May from “natural causes”. The Heller family was able to give him a proper burial; and George did visit his father’s grave several times since then.

In early May, George received an order from the Hungarian Labor Service for Jews, which was under military command; and he became a slave laborer. After he left, his family had to move several times before they moved into the Budapest Ghetto. In the Ghetto, his sister and a cousin tried to hide; but soon they were reported and brutally murdered, in late 1944; his sister was 27 years old. George remembers his experience of the first day in the slave labor camp as “strict military discipline”; it was just like the military services, only with even harsher treatments. When his father died, George was allowed to attend his funeral. In the Hungarian slave labor camp he had sufficient food to eat; and also did receive medical treatment whenever he was sick.

But soon all this changed, after several months of laboring in Hungary; George was transported to Austria, along with many other slave laborers. He was put into a cattle car along with 79 others; the transportation was hellish, with no food or water or a window to breath properly. How could anyone deal with their need to go to bathroom in a cattle car of

80? I can imagine that men could deal with it in front of other men; but how about women in front of men, and men in front of women? Fortunately, George's cattle car had only men. George survived this transportation, but many others perished, due to hunger, thirst and diseases. In Austria, he worked as a slave laborer for six months, where he had to dig holes with very little food and water. How could human bodies survive such torture? It is beyond my comprehension; but George did survive, even though of the 150 slave laborers in his unit, approximately one third died in the first four months.

Then he was on a death march to Mauthausen Concentration Camp, with no food or water, he marched on for three days. In order to survive, he ate grass from fields, every time he had an opportunity. But many others weren't as lucky; they simply perished or were killed if they could not keep up. In the camp of Mauthausen they no longer worked. Every morning they carried away the dead and contemplated on the thought that if the numbers are constantly decreasing, then how long would it take for everyone to perish? But George did not give up hope, his faith was strong

George had three other friends, Zoli, Robert and George, his classmates, in the Mauthausen camp, all of them 21 years old. One day Robert said, "I can't take this anymore. I have given up hope. There is no possible way we can come out of this alive". As soon as he finished saying this, he collapsed on the floor and died, as if his death was depending upon his verbal admission of giving up. What George learned that day, he didn't forget: when we give up hope and faith, we have chosen to die.

George believes that it was bad people doing evil things that created the Holocaust. His faith in his religion and ethics were strong before the war; they were strong during the war, and they are even stronger today. He believes that strong faith sometimes works miracles; to survive one need a tremendous amount of luck, and a strong determination to keep on going, no matter what.

After the War:

On May 5, 1945, all the German soldiers disappeared, and when dark fell George went out and found a bag of sugar to eat. By early morning, those who could move on their own started their journey to a new life. On the side of the road, they found freshly planted potatoes, and they dug them out and ate them. On the road, they found out from the American soldiers that the war was finally over, and they went to a warehouse the Americans opened up and found food to eat. They ate too much, and got sick, mainly from diarrhea. It was a sudden shock to their system.

Americans converted the Alpenjaeger Kaserne, which was originally built for German soldiers into a Displaced Persons' Camp for the survivors. Here survivors were deloused, and were given a place to sleep and food to eat. Trucks would come by the gate to take sick people to a hospital or to take the dead to be buried. George's friend George was taken to the hospital one day and that was the last time George saw him. His friend sounded full of hope, but in the end he didn't survive. Actually George found out what happened to his friend many years later, when he visited the Jewish cemetery in Budapest where on a Holocaust memorial he discovered Robert's and George's names along with

others who perished in Mauthausen.

Zoli set out to go home as soon as he could; but George believed that no one from his own family survived, and decided not to go home. George stayed in the Displaced Person's (DP) Camp. One year after the liberation, a friend from the camp who went home, brought the news to George that his mother did survive, and that is how he found out about his mother. His mother sent him an address of an aunt in America, hoping that he might be able to go there as well.

After Zoli left for home, George got weaker, and he was taken to a hospital. It was typhoid fever, George couldn't even move on the bed any longer. He was giving up; even the doctors were giving up. Everyone almost gave up, but things started to change for the better. One day, George was strong enough to weigh himself on a scale, he was only 80 pounds; and he was 21 years old.

Because George knew many languages, soon he was helping the American Army as an interpreter; and then he worked for the United Nations, helping to manage the DP camps till the spring of 1946. From his work there, George learned how it is possible to create order from total chaos; this lesson helped him later on in life.

George came to the U.S.A. during the spring of 1946 with the shirt on his back and two dollars in his pocket. He worked for a year as a busboy. Then, with the help of a scholarship he earned his B.S. in Management in 1951 from Temple University. Later he earned another B.S. in Electrical and Computer Engineering in 1959 from M.I.T.; and a B.S. in Humanities and Engineering also in 1959 from M.I.T.

In 1962, the US Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics reported on George's achievements in an article titled "Breakthrough in High School Computer Education".

In 1971 he was elected to the New York Academy of Sciences.

In 1983, M.I.T. awarded him the George B. Morgan award.

In 2004, he was listed in Who's Who in America.

George started to learn rock wall climbing when he was 76. Many doubted him; but he knew not to give up, he survived the Holocaust. Many years ago when he arrived at the Mauthausen Concentration Camp, he had to climb a hill. But before he climbed that hill, he thought that he could die at the bottom of the hill or at the top of the hill; and he also thought that if he climbed, just perhaps he might make it. And that has made all the difference. George eventually learned to climb the rock wall, and he does that now every week and every year on or around his birthday. On top of the rock wall, he hanged a four foot banner that says, "It's Possible"! He made the banner to encourage others.

George married Iby in 1954. They have four married children and nine grandchildren. His mother came to the US for their wedding and lived with them for 19 years.

Part II: Lessons Learned

Hate and Forgiveness:

During the 1971 war in Bangladesh my family suffered greatly. The war lasted about nine months, but it was enough to cause so much pain that it even propagated to the next generation. My parents were very young, but they suffered too, moving from one place to another, avoiding danger; sounds fun and adventurous, but in reality it was an extremely risky business. Some of my close family members were beheaded, some imprisoned and tortured, and few distant relatives were raped by the Pakistani soldiers and their collaborators. I was born long after the war, but I have not forgiven our enemies; not yet. As early as 2004, I hated every single Pakistani person that I came across, even though I didn't suffer directly like my parents' and grandparents' generation, and the Pakistani people that I met had nothing to do with the war. Since then my attitude has changed, I only hate those who were responsible; but I still hate, even though it is not as strong anymore. I never want to hurt them in anyway; I just want to avoid them at all cost, I want to stay away as far as I possibly can from them. As of now, I am moving toward forgiveness; and I am sure that some day soon I will be able to forgive them.

I wanted to know about George's thoughts on "Hate and Forgiveness". Before the war, George was a young man, dreaming of a life ahead and for no reason someone comes along, and shatters all his dreams. How should that young man feel? Shouldn't he be angry? Shouldn't he hate the aggressors? Can he ever forgive if he can never forget?

On this issue, George has the following to say:

"Hatred is a very destructive behavior. It destroys the hater, not the hated. When you hate someone you are focused on your hatred. It is hatred that occupies your mind and your thoughts. You deprive yourself of the opportunity to spend your time enjoying life. The person you hate may not even know he is hated. I chose to spend my time rebuilding my life."

"You don't have to forget or forgive what happened to you. But life continues from this day forward. You have a choice."

"We have little control of the events around us, but we can control the way we act".

"Hate will ruin your life".

"Terrible things happen, but they don't have to be the end – they can be the beginning".

The day I met George, he made it clear that we have to judge only the individuals, and never the entire group. Primo Levi said the following, "For me, the only trials to be held, and then with caution in each case, are trials of single individuals". (*The Voices of Memory*, 276) This is the idea that we need to explore more and more, in order to reduce hatred in the world. I strongly believe that the idea of dealing with only the individuals is the key to avoid large scale atrocities. I learned a lot on the issue of hate and forgiveness from George, which will help me to be a better person, I am sure of it.

George's Belief in God:

I am an atheist; so, I was interested in knowing George's belief in God, and how it changed during the war. I assumed that his belief would change somewhat after surviving the Holocaust. How could you keep on believing in God is beyond me.

After analyzing Elie Wiesel's novel *Night*, it is my understanding that Wiesel's belief in God did change during the war. He believes in God, but it is not the same God anymore. In *Night*, Wiesel said, "Yes, man is very strong, greater than God. When you were deceived by Adam and Eve, you drove them out of Paradise. When Noah's generation displeased you, you brought down the flood. ... But these men here, whom you have betrayed, whom you have allowed to be tortured, butchered, gassed, burned, what do they do? They pray before you! They praise Your name"! (*Night*, 64) He also said, "... I was the accuser, God the accused. My eyes were open and I was alone – terribly alone in a world without God and without man ..." (*Night*, 65) It is fairly easy to derive from Wiesel's statements that in his mind God's status has changed; now God must face hard questions. When he uses the word "without", it indicates that he still believes in God, but the God he knew before the camp life, is not there anymore, he is in need of a new "definition" of God.

On the other hand, Primo Levi was an atheist before the war, and he remained one. Levi said, "I think I'm an extreme case: up till now I have never really worried about the problem of God. Mine is the life of a man who has lived and who lives without God, indifferent to God". (*The Voices of Memory*, 272) He also said, "You cannot invent your own God for your own personal use. It wouldn't be honest". (*The Voices of Memory*, 273)

Wiesel was a Talmud reading fifteen year old boy, when he went to the camp; where Levi was a twenty five year old man of science. As an adult, Levi did experience life in a much broader sense, compare to Wiesel, before he went to the camp; he also had the time and maturity to settle the question regarding the existence of God, in his mind. During the war they both suffered in Hitler's camp, in their own way. Their experiences in the camp were different but vivid; and they both survived to tell their tale. They both almost reached the end of their lives in the camp, yet somehow survived; but their beliefs, when it comes to God, are very different. George also suffered unimaginable horror in the camp; and it was important for me to find out his beliefs about God.

I had the following conversation with George:

I asked, "You say that it is not God, but the bad people who commit these atrocities. How could God not intervene"?

He said, "We don't always understand Devine Intervention. My wife's family left everything behind, fled and survived. People have many choices. We may not like these choices, but we must try to control our destiny as best we can. We may not always succeed, but we need to try".

Then I asked, "When we don't listen to God, then he punishes us; but what should we do when he doesn't respond to our prayers, in the face of such brutality as the Holocaust"?

And he said, "We are not always wise enough to understand God's response".

George's belief in God didn't change at all. His definition of God, to this day remains as it was before the war. Where does this tremendous strength come from? I don't know; but it exists, he is the proof of it. It's Possible!

Conclusion:

I found George to be extremely open minded, and easy to talk to. He has no hesitation when he talks about his experiences and beliefs. One thing that caught my attention from George's story is this: during Passover, George sits around the Seder table along with his family and friends, and they discuss the significance of this holiday, of survival and freedom, and George asks each participant what she or he has done since the last Passover to enhance the cause of freedom. They discuss how by accepting people, rather than just tolerating them, people are more likely to live together in peace.

This is something what I can do, anyone can do. We can select a day, when we can sit together with family and friends, and report and plan in order to bring peace, here on earth. I am a dreamer, and like George, I too believe that peace is still possible. I do plan to start this tradition, of discussing and enhancing peace and freedom, in my family as well.

Please note: most of the words here are George's; I just rearranged them, and put them in a chronological order.

Works Cited

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