

Since 1991,
the Holocaust
Education
Project has been
part of the
intellectual and ritual
life of the College,
speaking to its soul,
posing questions that
defy answering.

By S.L. Wisenberg



It Can't Be Taught.

It **Must** Be Taught.



It is a Monday night in spring and about ninety of us have gathered in the Frick Center to remember people who were murdered sixty years ago and an ocean away. In a school founded to train German Evangelical ministers and teachers, Rabbi Marla Spanjer is standing before an audience reciting the Kaddish, the Jewish prayer of mourning. A few of us murmur along. The sunset blazes through the windows of the Founders Lounge and we shield our eyes.

The Kaddish is said by mourners, and yet I find it comforting. It can be recited only in a group, has been recited by one generation to remember the previous generation for at least eight hundred years. My father said it for his father. I say it for my father on the anniversary of his death. On the *yahrzeit*, the anniversary, we light a twenty-four-hour candle.

Up at the front of the room, seven yellow candles burn on a table. Yellow is for the fabric stars that Jews were forced to wear during the Nazi years. Six of the candles stand for the six million Jews who were murdered. The seventh candle is for the five million Roma, Poles, homosexuals, dissidents, disabled people, and “undesirables” who were slaughtered.

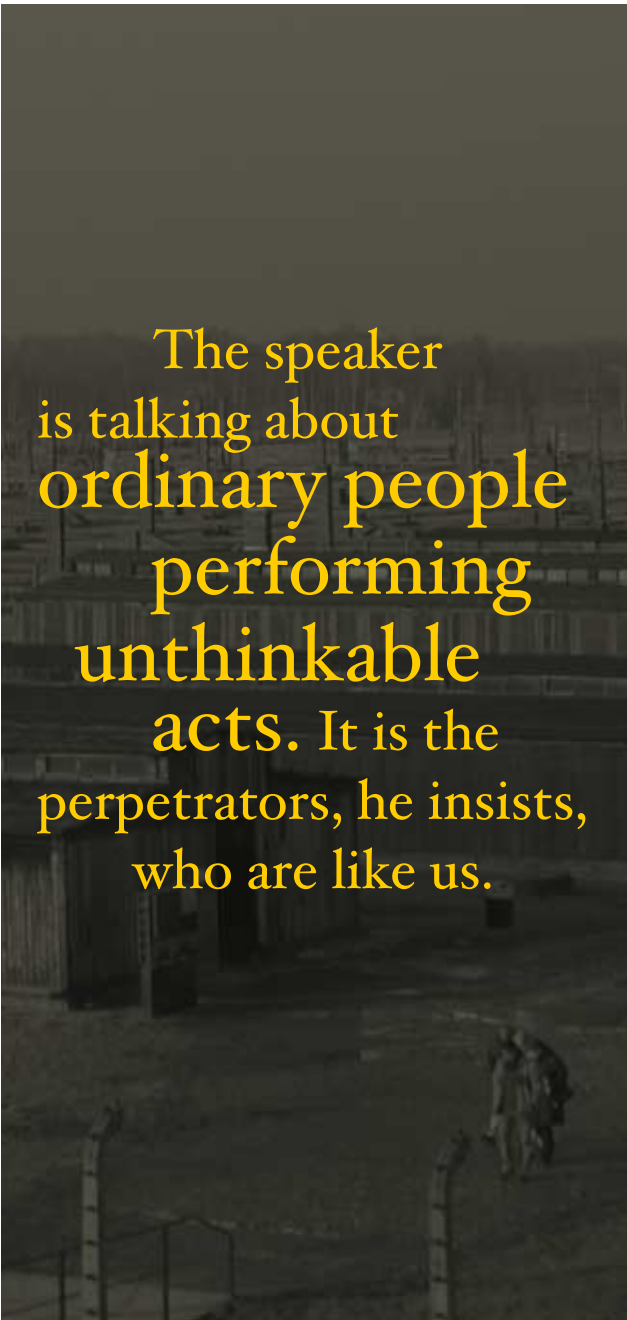
I don’t know when I first saw a lonely *yahrzeit* candle, burning on a tray on the kitchen counter in a grandparent’s memory. I don’t remember when I learned the Kaddish; I don’t know when I first heard of the Holocaust. Growing up in Texas in the 1960s, I didn’t know many adults who had been, as it was put, “in the camps.” Yet the Holocaust was always there, and with it the message: The six million were like us. We are like they were. Anne Frank could be you.

Now at the podium, the historian Christopher Browning is talking about evil, about ordinary people performing unthinkable acts. It’s the *perpetrators*, not the victims, he’s saying, who are like us. Browning is one of the world’s experts on the Holocaust. He has studied and written about the “ordinary men” in the German Reserve Police Battalion 101 who murdered Jews in Poland in 1942 and 1943. He refers to psychology experiments that bear out what he found: You can’t predict when a prison guard or an ordinary soldier will become cruel. All you can do is calculate the percentages. Roughly a third will go out of their way to punish; a third will follow directions to the letter; and a third will try, often surreptitiously, to help the powerless.

Weeks later, when the images from Abu Ghraib prison have become familiar to much of the world, Browning’s work will be quoted in articles that look for reasons for the American abuse of Iraqi prisoners.

He’ll tell the BBC that the abuse was “predictable,” considering what he saw as the attitudes of the military brass. But the actions of the U.S. soldiers, he’ll be quick to say, were in no way as horrific as those of the Germans he studied.

As for the whys, Browning asks: Who can plumb “the mysteries of the human heart?” Not historians, he answers.



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his night in mid-April is the opening program of the Holocaust Education Project for 2004. Since 1991, Elmhurst College has brought prominent scholars to campus to lecture about perpetrators, rescuers, hidden children, Holocaust denial, and related issues. Aiming to make a lasting impact on students, its organizers have taken particular care to have the lecturers step out from behind the podium and meet with students at receptions, in classes, and over lunch or dinner.

Most of the time (like this year), the events take place around Yom Hashoah, Holocaust Remembrance Day. The week always includes sessions for education majors, and often for local teachers, on ways to teach the Holocaust. One year, nursing students heard a lecture on treating elderly survivors of early trauma. Three years ago, thirty Holocaust survivors and witnesses came to campus, fanning out to more than seventy classes, where they were heard by about two-thirds of the student body.

The project was designed to explore responsibility and social justice, and to sensitize students to oppression. The organizers hope that the education that students obtain at Elmhurst will help make them better people, even as they try to figure out why, six and seven decades ago, higher education in Germany failed to do that very thing.

The education continues throughout the year. As part of the Common Experience program, new students discuss readings from "Facing History and Ourselves," a national teaching program on genocide, racism, and prejudice. Professors Wallace Lagerwey, Michael Lindberg, and Mary Selke offer classes on genocide and the Holocaust. The classes offer students a rare and powerful kind of emotional learning.

Last year, in the service-learning component of Lagerwey's "Holocaust and Genocide" class, sophomore Erik Hodges tutored Sudanese refugee children. He and a friend, he says, found "what it was really like to start over from nothing, like the Jews after the Holocaust." The class was difficult, Hodges says, but he loved it. "It changed my view of history. It changed me." He says he realized, for example, how gradually Hitler took over, while the German population remained complacent until it was too late. He found parallels between the Holocaust and the treatment of Native Americans in the U.S. He switched his major from psychology, where he'd planned to work in the business world, to secondary education. Hodges and his friend still keep in touch with the children's family. Once he starts teaching,

Hodges plans to take a week out each year to help his students learn about injustice and the Holocaust.

The Education Project also tries to integrate the study of the Holocaust into classes in English, geography, language and literature, and the arts. In 2001, Professor Tim Good wrote and directed a play, "The Fount of Life," about the Nazi Lebensborn project, in which "perfect" Aryan children were taken from their parents and raised in institutions to become the next generation of the "master race." The Concert Choir, led by Susan Moninger, devoted its 1996 season to performing a cantata, *Songs of Children*, by Robert Convery, based on poems by Jewish children in the Terezin concentration camp. The Schulhoff Trio three times has performed a concertino, *Honoring the Memories of Light*. The school also has displayed "The Book of Fire," a collection of lithographs by Murray Zimiles, representing destroyed synagogues in Poland. The exhibit was recently acquired by the A.C. Buehler Library.

The College's chaplain, the Reverend H. Scott Matheny, says the Holocaust project speaks to "the soul of the campus." By asking students to consider a distant tragedy, Elmhurst hopes to address what Matheny calls the profound dynamics of faith and society, the individual and the collective. "What is education? What is the role of education?" he asks. "Is it to produce technicians who will blindly follow wherever they are led?" Or will students receive what a liberal arts education is supposed to provide? Will graduates have "the moral, intellectual, and physical capabilities to engage in the fullness of life that God intends for all God's creations?"

The guest lectures, says Matheny, have become part of the intellectual and ritual life of the College. Matheny hopes that students will leave Elmhurst College knowing that genocide was considered an important thing to know about and study. One day, he says, they might pick up *Night*, the classic by Elie Wiesel, one of the best-known Holocaust survivors and the winner of the 1986 Nobel Prize for Peace. The Holocaust Education Project brought Wiesel to campus to lecture in 1995. A thousand people came to listen.

The drive to study the Holocaust at Elmhurst, a church-related school with few Jewish students, has several origins. Among them: The service tradition of the College's affiliated denomination, the United Church of Christ. The activism of the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, the Elmhurst alumnus who in the 1930s and '40s fought indifference among his fellow pastors and theologians—indifference to the threat of totalitarianism.

The acknowledgment of complicity among Christian leaders in “the teaching of contempt toward Jews and Judaism,” according to a history of the Holocaust Education Project.

The specific impetus for the Project, however, can be traced back to an Easter weekend in the 1950s in Erlanger, a small town in northern Kentucky. A seven-year-old Erlanger boy named Steve Monhollen was home from school for Good Friday and watching a Passion play on TV with his younger sister. During the trial of Jesus, the mob on TV grew violent and began shouting, “Crucify him! Crucify him!” Steve and his sister became angry, crying and shouting, “We hate them!”

His mother admonished them. “We do not hate people in this family. Jews are people, too.”

For the first time, Monhollen recalls, he became aware of anti-Semitism, which was ubiquitous in that time and place. In time, after he was ordained as a minister, Monhollen studied Hebrew, Judaism, Jewish history, and anti-Semitism, along with Christianity’s role in it. In 1988, he was appointed chaplain of Elmhurst College. Early in his eight-year tenure, Monhollen assessed the interest on campus of having a Holocaust lecturer. He sent out memos and organized meetings, which from the beginning included Rabbi Steven Bob of Congregation Etz Chaim in Lombard.

The first Holocaust lecturer came to campus in 1991. Subsequent guests have included world-renowned authors and scholars, including Deborah Lipstadt, expert on Holocaust denial; Yehuda Bauer, director of the International Center for Holocaust Research at Yad Vashem; and Nechama Tec, a sociologist and child survivor who had been sheltered by Polish Christians.

As it evolved, the Holocaust Project came to include much more than just guest lectures. Every few years during January Term, Lagerwey takes students to Amsterdam, Berlin, and Warsaw, and to concentration and death camps. Lindberg, an assistant professor of geography, and Selke, chair of the education department, have team-taught a January Term honors course, “Facing History and Ourselves: Individual Influence on History through Ethical Decision Making.” They study the influence of the American eugenics movement—the study of the hereditary “improvement” of the human race through controlled selective breeding—on Nazi racial policies and actions.

“What we do in ‘Facing History’ is use the Holocaust to get to other things,” says Lindberg. “Oftentimes when we try to explain this to people—even colleagues on campus—there’s the assumption it’s just another history class.

But it deals with ethical and social responsibility, with morality. It’s not just dates and facts and names.”

Students take the Holocaust classes for both intellectual and emotional reasons. They struggle to understand the genocide. They empathize with the victims. Going through the classes, they say, involves self-examination: What would *you* have done? Would you have opposed Hitler, even though your family might have been punished if you were caught? Will you speak up now against injustice? Have you?

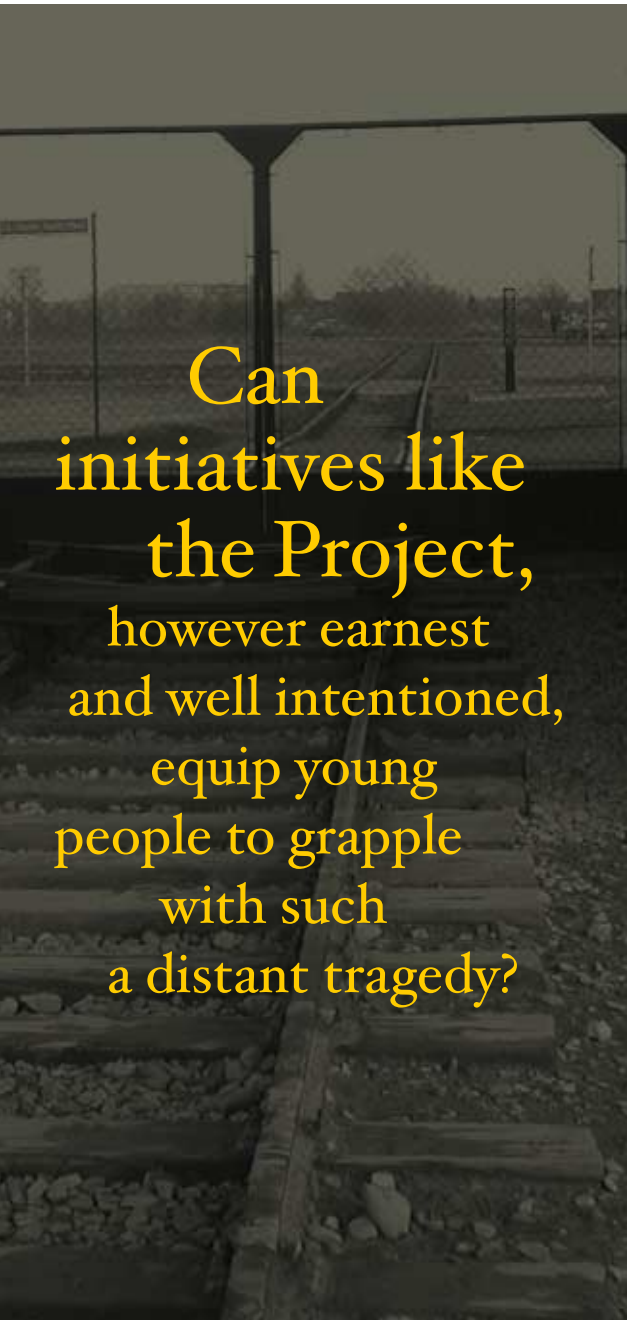
Senior Scott Tharp raves about the “Facing History” class. “It makes you look at yourself,” he says. “I think that’s something lacking today in education.” In the class, Tharp learned for the first time about the eugenics movement, the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, and church-sponsored anti-Semitism. Paradoxically, he says, the class has deepened his faith that people are good. Yes, people in the Nazi era engaged in systematic murder, he says; but people also resisted evil and rescued others.

“You spend a month there going to concentration camps and museums,” says Sarah Fehrenbacher, who enrolled in Lagerwey’s January Term study trip last year, “and it changes the way you think.” She took photos on the study trip, one of which was named the best of the J-Term photos. She also changed her major from business to art when she returned.

The Holocaust had no academic standing a quarter century ago, Browning tells a classroom of students the morning after the memorial service. The students are from Lagerwey’s genocide class and Lindberg’s political geography class.

Thirty years ago, when Browning told his dissertation adviser at the University of Wisconsin that he wanted to write about the German Foreign Ministry under the Nazis, he was told the topic had no future. He did the research anyway, and his book was published in 1978. In the same year, NBC broadcast its *Holocaust* mini-series, Representative Elizabeth Holtzman proposed federal legislation that coordinated and strengthened the government’s Nazi-hunting efforts, and President Jimmy Carter appointed a Holocaust commission. The commission led to the construction of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum on the National Mall in Washington.

This year, Browning published *The Origins of the Final Solution*, the first of a multi-volume, monumental history of the Holocaust to be completed over the next decade. The book was published jointly by the University of Nebraska Press and by Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Martyrs’



Can initiatives like the Project, however earnest and well intentioned, equip young people to grapple with such a distant tragedy?



and Heroes' Remembrance Authority, in Israel. Benjamin Schwarz, writing in *The Atlantic Monthly*, called Browning's work a "masterpiece."

In the years since Browning began his career, the effort to understand the Holocaust has become a part of American higher education. The scholar Stephen R. Haynes says that about a third of church-related colleges offer classes or programs on the Holocaust. Most of the institutions, he said, tend to be liberal, welcoming of students of all faiths or no faith. A professor at Rhodes College, Haynes was a guest lecturer at Elmhurst in 2000. The extent of Holocaust education at Elmhurst is "atypical" for a college its size, Haynes says, and a good example of faculty, administration, community, and students all working together.

Haynes says the Holocaust calls into question Christian complicity as well as the limits of a liberal arts education. Members and leaders of both social institutions—the church and the academy—failed to stand up to the Nazis. Not enough church leaders have acknowledged this, he says. In *Holocaust Education and the Church-Related College*, he notes, "The perpetrators were baptized and socialized as Christians."

Last spring, in Dr. Lagerwey's "Holocaust and Genocide," first-year student Jennifer Groark wrote about David Draiman, lead singer of the group Disturbed. Groark's grandfather had said Draiman seemed like a "New Age Hitler." Her paper argued that there were no serious parallels. Another paper noted the similarities between the double lives of family men who oversaw concentration camps and Mafia bosses who in similar ways divide their domestic and "business" lives. Other students made group presentations on such phenomena as genocide in Rwanda, Cambodia, and Armenia; and racism, eugenics, and the decimation of Native Americans in the United States. "It's unreal, the amount of parallels between the Holocaust and these other events," says senior Bethany Molsner. Learning about bystanders and dehumanization, she says, "helps people make decisions about how they handle racism or hate in their lives."

It seems that participating in the classes is akin to time-traveling, but without the chance to change things, like in the movies. But the students learn they can vow to do the next best thing: when a manifestation of prejudice happens again, to speak out. They reflect on times they've gone along with the crowd. One student mentions making fun of the red dot that Hindus have on their foreheads—and then being called on it by a kid who was Hindu. The next time someone is making a joke about gays or blacks or Jews or immigrants, these students can choose to speak up; or if they don't, at least they will have thought about it; they know now what's at stake. Everything seems to be weighted now.

It's two days into the 2004 Education Project, and first-time author Peter Duffy is in Irion Hall, talking to students from three classes—Lagerwey's, Lindberg's, and Antoinette Countryman's English class.

Earlier, Duffy told me, "To be part of the same week with Christopher Browning is a huge honor. His book that just came out is the word on the subject for the next fifty years."

Duffy was brought to campus precisely because his work is different from Browning's. Duffy is a journalist. As a storyteller, he says, he tries to understand the motivations of individuals, rather than looking for larger explanations. The title of his book, published in 2003, pretty much explains its subject: *The Bielski Brothers: The True Story of Three Men Who Defied the Nazis, Saved 1,200 Jews, and Built a Village in the Forest*. It's a story that scholars knew about, but that had never risen to the public consciousness.

The Bielskis were Jews from Belarus who escaped deep into the forest in 1942 and created a settlement of other Jewish escapees. The leader was Tuvia Bielski, a man given to grand gestures and quick decisions, one of which was life-saving: to ally his group with Soviet partisans. Other Jewish partisans were attacked by anti-Semitic Poles. Tuvia also decided that all Jews were welcome to live in the dugouts and shelters, even the very young and the very old. He rode through the forest on a white horse, carrying a submachine gun, appearing as a mythic figure to Jews who had escaped within an inch of their lives, and who were used to seeing co-religionists who were beaten down and half-starving. Tuvia would send young men back into the ghettos to bring others out—or else. He and his brothers were not running a democracy, Duffy tells the students. "He operated as a feudal lord."

The Bielskis saved as many Jews as Oskar Schindler, and inflicted more enemy casualties than the Warsaw Ghetto uprising. Like Schindler, Tuvia rose to the occasion; but after the war, he had trouble making a go of it, barely earning a living as a New York City truck driver. "What do you do with tribal chieftains in Brooklyn?" asks Duffy. Tuvia wasn't a skilled writer or speaker. But soon the Bielskis may be as well known as Schindler, when Warner Independent Pictures and Cherry Road Films make a film based on Duffy's book.

The mantra of many scholars, survivors, and experts is: The Holocaust cannot be understood or imagined or taught. But it must be. Can students born in Illinois some forty years after the Holocaust comprehend the event's enormity? Can initiatives like the Holocaust Education Project, however earnest and well intentioned, truly equip young people to grapple with the meaning of that distant tragedy?

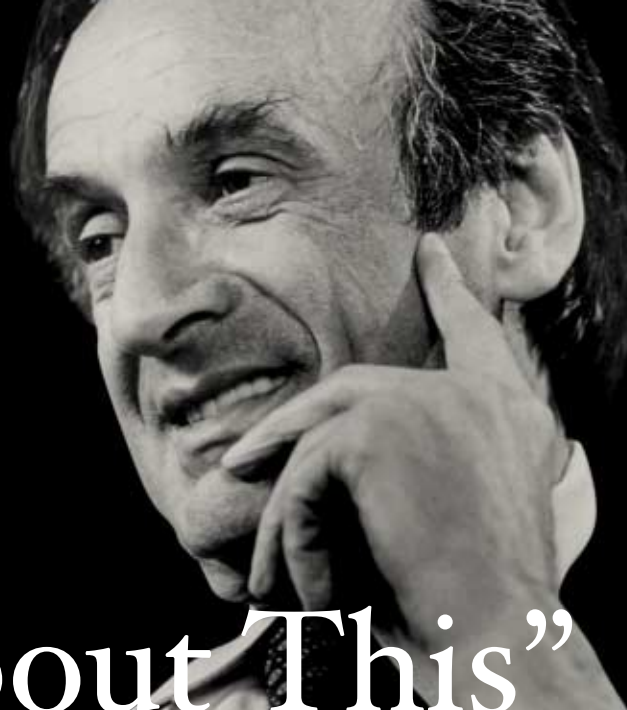
Duffy may provide an answer. He isn't Jewish; his ancestry is Irish and Italian. He didn't grow up hearing about the Holocaust from relatives. "Besides nods to it in history class, it wasn't something that was around me all the time," he says. He learned about the subject by immersion—including interviews with fifty "forest Jews" and three years of research.

Duffy wondered about his ability, as someone untouched by the Holocaust, to fully grasp the story he was trying to tell. But he says he soon found himself marveling at how his interview subjects showed their trust in him.

It is possible to understand the experience of someone different from you, he says. But it takes time. "You have to learn it by sitting with them."

S.L. Wisenberg is the author of a collection of personal essays, Holocaust Girls: History, Memory & Other Obsessions. A visiting scholar in gender studies at Northwestern University, her writing has appeared in The New Yorker and other publications.

At the Holocaust
Education
Project in 1995,
Nobel laureate
Elie Wiesel met
a man who was among
his liberators.



“You Must Talk about This”

Their paths almost crossed in the notorious Nazi concentration camp known as Buchenwald at the end of World War II. But it was not until 1995, when they came to Elmhurst College for the Holocaust Education Project, that Abner Ganet met Elie Wiesel. The encounter with Wiesel—the death-camp survivor, Nobel Peace Prize recipient, and acclaimed author—prompted Ganet, a trustee of the College and former mayor of Elmhurst, to end fifty years of silence regarding the horrors he saw when the U.S. Army liberated Buchenwald.

“Wiesel asked if I had been in the war,” Ganet recalled about their meeting in the anteroom of Hammerschmidt Memorial Chapel. “I said, ‘Yes, Buchenwald.’ He said, ‘You liberated me.’”

Wiesel had been slated for the gas chamber on the day Ganet’s unit arrived and the camp’s guards fled.

“I was so overcome,” said Ganet. “He said, ‘You must talk about this. You witnessed it; there are people in the world who say it never happened; you must talk about it.’ I had never been able to talk about what I experienced in World War II until then.”

Several years later, Ganet was one of about thirty survivors and eyewitnesses who gathered on campus to share their stories of the Holocaust. One incident Ganet described was an encounter with Ilse Koch, the so-called “Bitch of Buchenwald,” who bragged of making lampshades out of human skin.

“I took my .45 out,” Ganet recalled. “I cocked the pistol and was going to shoot her. My company commander said, ‘You can’t do this. If you do, you’re as bad as she is.’” Two weeks later, Koch was tried and hanged.

In his address to an audience of about a thousand gathered in the chapel in 1995, Wiesel spoke of the need

for telling and retelling even the most horrific stories.

“I am afraid of forgetting,” he said. “I am afraid of forgetting certain faces, certain episodes. I am afraid of forgetting because it is in the nature of human beings to forget. Memory is selective. We cannot remember everything. If we do not tell the story, forgetfulness will invade the collective consciousness of humanity, and then who knows what punishment could strike us?”

“There is no event in history which is as documented as [the Holocaust]. And yet, as you know, there are already all over the world people who dare, while we [survivors] are still around, to say it didn’t happen.

“It happened in Europe, in the heart of Christendom. It happened in Europe at a place where education had reached its highest level. I discovered that the commanders, the commandants of the Einsatzgruppen, all had college degrees; most of them had Ph.D.s or M.D.s. I cannot tell you the pain that I had—because I believe in education... It was a black day when I discovered how educated the killers were....

“I have said it so often, and I repeat it: I always believed that the opposite of love is not hate but indifference. What is the opposite of education? Not ignorance, indifference. The opposite of beauty? Not ugliness, indifference. Nothing is worse than indifference....

“My students will occasionally ask me, where should we begin? There are so many tragedies in the world... Where should one begin? Go to console the AIDS patients, prisoners of despair, cancer patients, homeless, drug addicts. Where does one begin?

“Anywhere. Start somewhere. Just start.”

BY WALTON R. COLLINS