

Two Tales of the Holocaust

by

Melvin Landsberg

1. Humpty Dumpty

2. Emergency Room

Afterword: You Do Humor

Two Tales of the Holocaust

Published by Melvin Landsberg, Department of English,
University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas 66045

© Melvin Landsberg

1996

All rights reserved

Humpty Dumpty

For nine years preceding my mother's death in May 1993, she could barely walk short distances, and only with a four-legged aluminum walker. In her final years she needed a wheelchair. My brother, Philip, who was four years younger than me, took care of her in her apartment in New York most of the year. For four weeks during the summer and for three during the winter break, I would leave the midwestern university where I taught and take over her care, thus allowing Philip some relief.

A widow since 1963, Mother lived in a six-story building, one of several in a small park-like complex subsidized by the city. Her apartment consisted of two and a half rooms on the fifth floor. When the weather permitted I would take her down by the single, small elevator in the building. On the same trip I would also carry down one or two folding aluminum-frame chairs, so that she and I could sit by the house and talk to her neighbors. Sometimes the elevator stopped working. Once, crippled as she was, she had to climb back to her apartment, supported by me and sitting to rest on stairs on her way up.

Mother was under five feet tall, and in her late years was white-haired and frail. But a passport photograph of her at about twenty-two shows her with black hair, regular features, intelligent eyes, and an expression of resolve on her face. She had come to the United States from the village of Tarnograd, Poland, in about 1922, leaving her father and half-brothers and half-sisters. Her only immediate family in the United States was an elder sister, my aunt Betty.

Some time after Mother left for the United States, her father sent her a picture of part of the family that remained behind—of himself, Mother’s stepmother, two of Mother’s half-sisters, and one of her half-brothers. It was a formal portrait, sepia-colored and four by six inches in size. The family is grouped before a painted screen showing trees, hills, and a chateau. My grandfather, Jacob Stem, is seated with his wife, who sits about a foot away from him. Jacob, a man of about fifty with a narrow untrimmed beard and a look of patience and reflection on his face, is wearing a handsome double-breasted coat and a yarmulke. To his right stands a daughter of about sixteen, holding a purse in her right hand. To his wife’s left stands another daughter, of about fifteen, holding a book under her left arm. Both the purse and the book must have been photographer’s props. Between my grandfather and his wife stands a bright-eyed boy of about eight, with his right hand on his father’s shoulder. His face bespeaks thought, curiosity, and intent to see the posing through. This was Herschel, who was so outstanding a scholar that Tarnograd’s Jewish community later sent him to study in a yeshiva in Lithuania. Several other children are not in the picture, probably because they were older and no longer lived at home.

Mother more than once, in telling the story of her life, remembered the tears in her father’s eyes when he said good-bye to her. She and her father never saw each other again. During World War II, the Germans sought out and shot almost all the Jews of Tamograd. Ben, a half-brother of my mother, was the only member of her family in Poland who survived. After the war, he came to the United States and told his sisters what had happened. The night before the roundup of Jews, in 1942, a German soldier slipped in among them and warned them of what was coming. (I have often wondered about this man, his origins, his personality, his fate.) My mother’s stepmother told the family, “What will come will come. I’m staying here.” Ben climbed a tree and hid amid the foliage. Later a Polish farmer whom he knew helped him to pass

as a non-Jewish laborer for the remainder of the war. Ben said that the Germans seized his father for forced labor, and worked him to death, and that they shot his mother. I did not hear further details. But in 1985 the *New York Times* reported that the Jews of Tarnograd had been forced to dig a pit and then been shot and thrown into it. Now, forty-three years later, the paper said, the mass grave, containing more than 2,500 skeletons, had been found. Herschel did not perish in Tarnograd. The Germans killed him after they occupied Lithuania.

But my mother and my aunt Betty lived to grow old in the safety of America. Betty died of a ruptured artery in 1983, when Mother was eighty-three years old. The shock to Mother led to a physical collapse, that crippled her permanently, and a mental collapse, from which she recovered after several months. It was only after she became ill that my brother moved in with her.

Mother usually went to bed at 10:15 P.M. Her bedroom adjoined the living room, beyond which was a tiny kitchen. When I was with her, I would gather the proper medicinal pills and place them and a glass of water on a lamp table near her bedside. Next I would give her a glass of warm milk. Then I would help her into the bedroom, open or close windows, and perhaps switch on the electric fan, then turn off the lamp, leaving only a night light, and kiss her good night.

Afterwards in the living room, I would sit in a recliner chair, very tired, and read the *Times* and watch television. In my home I had no TV, for I did not want seductive trivia to encroach on reading time. But when I was in my mother's house, I would explore the universe of the cathode-ray tube.

One night after Mother had fallen asleep, I turned the TV to a documentary, *The Adolf Eichmann Trial*. It was being presented over a commercial channel, and was advertised in the

Times. I knew that Eichmann had been a Gestapo official who planned transportation to death camps for millions of Jews during World War H. Years after the war Israeli agents captured him in Argentina and spirited him off to Israel. There he was given a public trial, which received international attention. A West German lawyer came to Jerusalem to defend him. Israel almost never gives criminals the death penalty, but after the court found Eichmann guilty, the state hanged him

When I tuned in, the documentary had already been on for a long time, and most of the background information had been presented. On the TV screen I watched highlights from the conclusion of the trial. Everything took place on a raised platform with four levels. On the highest were three judges, in black robes. Beneath them, on the next level, were translators, so that the court and the accused, and his lawyer, could communicate. On the level beneath were a glass booth, with Eichmann in it, and a witness box; the booth and the box were positioned so that the accused and each witness faced one another. Below, on the lowest level, were the prosecutor, his staff, and Eichmann's lawyer.

Eichmann had been found guilty of crimes against the Jewish people, crimes against humanity, and war crimes. From the bottom level, the Israeli Attorney General was asking that Eichmann be sentenced to death. A narrator translated portions of his speech into English:

“It is true that this punishment does not match the enormity of the crimes, and will leave the terrible things that were done as if no proper retribution has been exacted for them. But this is the maximum that we can exact and *at least* this is to be exacted.”

Now Eichmann's lawyer, Dr. Robert Servatius, was responding:

“The accused must be seen as an integral part of the existing group hierarchy. He was subject to the dynamics of this group. One’s own emotional aspects were neutralized, a coordinated opinion was the only one allowed.”

Now Eichmann was speaking from his booth:

“I would stress that I have been guilty of being obedient, having subordinated myself to my official duties and the obligations of war service and my oath of allegiance and my oath of office, and in addition, once the war started, there was martial law.”

Now the presiding judge was sentencing Eichmann:

“The objective of the crimes against the Jewish people of which the accused was found guilty was to obliterate an entire people from the face of the earth . . .

“The dispatch of each train by the accused to Auschwitz, or to any other extermination site, carrying one thousand human beings, meant that the accused was a direct accomplice to a thousand premeditated acts of murder . . .

“Even if we had found that the accused acted out of blind obedience, as he argued, we would still have said that a man who took part in crimes of such magnitude as these over years must pay the maximum penalty known to the law, and he cannot rely on any order even in mitigation of his punishment. But we have found that the accused acted out of an inner identification with the orders that he was given and out of a fierce will to achieve the criminal objective . . .

“This court sentences Adolf Eichmann to death.”

Now there was a break for a network commercial. I was looking at a hall decorated with festoons of brightly colored paper. Young people wearing party hats were dancing energetically

and waving New Year greetings at me. "Join the Pepsi generation," they sang, as they bounced about together in joy.

I turned to another channel, and was startled to find that here too the show was about Eichmann. A Jewish professor with a German accent, Hannah Arendt, was commenting on him. Eichmann was an ordinary man and a careerist, not a monster of depravity, she was saying; besides, in European cities and in death camps, some Jews had cooperated with the Germans against their fellow Jews. The Jews were themselves partly to blame for their fates, since most of them had not hidden in trees. Her provocative book *Eichmann in Jerusalem* dealt with these matters. That work, first published in the *New Yorker* magazine, had added to her fame.

Suddenly the program was interrupted by another commercial, this time for language tapes. On a split TV screen I saw dual versions of a thirty-five year old man. On the left side of the screen the man was moving cartons in a warehouse. On the right side he was sitting at a large mahogany desk, with a picture window behind him. An announcer pointed to the left and then to the right and explained that Success Language Tapes made the difference. Most people's vocabularies stopped growing at age twenty-five. But the larger a person's vocabulary, the greater was his likelihood of success.

I turned to a third TV channel, and again to my surprise, the program was about Eichmann. But now he was being sentenced by a different judge. Eichmann had played an important part in killing three million Jews, this judge was saying. The court was sentencing him to 240 years in prison. Most of his victims had been starved, beaten, and otherwise tortured, and Eichmann would pay for this too. Since Eichmann was fifty-six years old, he would suffer only perhaps twenty-three minutes of torture per victim before dying of old age. Actually fewer, as there would be no torture on the Sabbath.

The scene shifted. A panel of Jewish journalists was discussing the second judge's sentence.

"What is the lesson to be drawn from the Holocaust?" the moderator asked.

A tall, bespectacled journalist answered: "One lesson for the next couple of decades will be that Eichmann is being punished for it this very minute."

"How will he be able to stand the punishment?" asked a younger journalist. "When he's in danger of succumbing, physicians—maybe from the families of his victims—will restore him so that the tortures can start again," said the first.

"The Sabbath will give him time to reflect on his deeds," said the third journalist, a short man with a full beard.

A break for a commercial followed. It was for an indoor skiing machine. Eichmann was standing on a platform of the machine, moving his legs back and forth rhythmically. In his hands he held ropes which were attached to pulleys. An announcer, dressed like an athletic trainer, was commenting: "Only the Arctic Skier gives you a complete workout—exercises most of the muscles in your body."

I changed the channel. Unbelievably, the program was about Eichmann again. But now it was presenting a news story about an assemblage of World War II soldiers from the Allied countries. Some veterans of the German Wehrmacht had asked to join the gathering. An American TV journalist was interviewing a Wehrmacht officer, a tall, graying man of about sixty-five, with four medals on his military coat. Holding a microphone by the officer's face, the journalist asked, "How do you feel about the Wehrmacht's joining the allied armies in commemorating World War II?"

“It makes good sense,” the German officer replied. “We fought on different sides, but we all fought for a better world.”

Again a network commercial, this time from a chain of electronics stores named Crazy Eddie. A fat young man in a checkered suit was speaking rapidly and gesticulating wildly as he invited the public to shop at the stores. At the end of his message, he threw his hands as high as he could into the air. “Crazy Eddie’s prices are INSANE!” he shouted.

I turned to still another channel. And here again the second judge was giving Eichmann a 240 year sentence. Again I turned the channel selector, and once more a journalist was saying, “One lesson for the next couple of decades will be that Eichmann is being punished for it this very minute.” Again I turned the channel selector, and I got the Arctic Skier commercial. Perplexed, I went from channel to channel, until I have tried each a dozen times. But now all I could get was the Crazy Eddie commercial. Again and again, on channel after channel, the fat young man was accosting heaven with his arms and shouting, “Crazy Eddie’s prices are INSANE!”

Emergency Room

The Nazi leader was in full uniform when they wheeled him into the City Hospital emergency room at 10:30 Sunday night. His blood, flowing from a wound in his chest, drenching his brown shirt and splotching his Sam Browne belt, was of the identical hue as the bright red of his swastika arm band. Two ambulance paramedics, lifting the long spine board on which he lay, transferred him to a hospital gurney.

One of the two doctors staffing the emergency room, a tall, thin man of thirty-one, approached the two policemen who accompanied the paramedics. As he sighted the Nazi's swastika, he grimaced. Almost all his mother's family, Jews living in Poland, had been "exterminated" by Hitler during World War II.

"What happened?" he asked the nearer policeman.

"He got a couple of bullets in his chest."

The other policeman, who had already answered the question twice that night, explained. "About thirty members of the American Nazi Party were holding a torchlight march through a Jewish neighborhood a half hour ago. They didn't make any announcement of the march, and took us by surprise. Maybe they meant to threaten the Jews with arson. Some people attacked the Nazis—one man tried to run the marchers down with an automobile and someone threw a knife from a window. The Nazis had pistols concealed on them, and they fired shots . . ."

"This guy is the Nazi leader," declared the first policeman.

"A bystander says he saw him shot by one of his own men during the riot," the other said.

“The Nazis have been fighting each other over the leadership,” added the first. “I was called out to a fight between a half dozen of them two weeks ago. What I . . .”

He was interrupted by the appearance of a wheeled cot with a stretcher on it. In the stretcher a young woman lay alternately retching and shrieking, “I want to die.” Her two ambulance paramedics lifted the stretcher and rolled the woman onto a second gurney nearby.

“What now?” asked the doctor.

“She tried to commit suicide by swallowing bleach,” answered a paramedic. “The neighbors say it’s because her lover left her. She might have drunk more than a pint of the stuff.”

“We’re already working on a man with a coronary,” thought Dr. Gold. “He’s in his seventies and needs continuous attention. And we’ve got an eighty-three-year-old woman with a stroke. Now the riot . . . and the lovers! God, what a night—and on Memorial Day weekend . . .”

A clerk from the waiting room, a middle aged woman, walked up to the physician. “Dr. Gold, there’s a woman in the waiting room suffering terribly. Her son thinks she got food poisoning from canned salmon. He’s creating a disturbance because they’ve been waiting over an hour without her seeing anyone. The guard has called the police.”

“How many people are in the waiting room now?”

“Twenty-seven. One woman tripped on her dachshund when she was going down a flight of stairs. While falling, she ripped her arm on a nail in the wall. Her arm has a four-inch gash, but she’s more worried about having stepped on ‘little Gunther,’ the dachshund. And there’s a boy of ten who may have broken his leg skateboarding. All his father can say to him is, ‘When we get home I’ll break your neck.’ And there’s a baby who her parents say has a 105 degree fever. They’re scared to death. I haven’t had a chance to get up records on most of the other people yet—we’ve been so busy.”

“How do you do ‘the greatest good for the greatest number’?” Dr. Gold asked himself, recalling a political formula he had once learned in a philosophy course. “Triage . . . can something so inhumane be fully defensible? What about a Nazi?”

“Please bring in the woman who swallowed bleach,” he said to a hospital attendant, “and we’ll try diluting it. After that bring in the woman who may have food poisoning, and then the baby.” The attendant wheeled the suicidal woman into the examining room and into one of the curtained areas there.

“Dr. Haley has been on emergency duty for thirty-six hours,” Dr. Gold said to the waiting-room clerk, “and is sleeping on his feet. He’s worse than useless; in fact, he’s sure to kill a patient if he keeps working. I’m sending him home now. Please call Emergency Administration and tell them that Dr. Mitchell, who was supposed to replace Dr. Haley, had an accident. Dr. Haley stayed on for all of Dr. Mitchell’s stint. Now he’s due for a second stint of his own, but he can’t function any more. They’ve got to come up with a replacement.”

“I did that when you asked me two hours ago, Dr. Gold,” the clerk answered. “Mrs. Carlson said that she’s trying, but this is Memorial Day weekend, and everyone is out of town.”

“Well, please call her again. Call her every hour until a replacement comes.” The clerk returned to the waiting room, and Dr. Gold went back into the examining room.

“And what about a Nazi?” he thought as he went. He recalled a conversation on emergency room priorities by some residents and interns at medical school years ago. O’Neill, an intern, had said, “Say there’s a shootout between a policeman and a gangster, and both are brought in near death, and I can attend to only one. I’ll work on the policeman every time.”

“No, you shouldn’t formulate it that way,” Rossi, a resident said. “You’ve got to treat every patient equally. Maybe I’d knock a man down if I met him in the street, but when he’s in the emergency room he’s my patient, and I’ll do everything I can for him.”

“What if you had Adolf Hitler and Winston Churchill in there?” asked Goodman, an intern.

“It should make no difference in the emergency room,” Rossi insisted.

“If I’m ever taken to an emergency room, I don’t want to be questioned on my politics before I’m treated,” added Shapiro, a second resident.

Twelve minutes after Dr. Gold had spoken to the clerk, two more ambulances drew up by the emergency room entrance, and paramedics wheeled in an eighteen-year-old boy and a girl about a year younger. Both were on long spine boards. The boy’s entire face was lacerated, his left eye was minced, and he was breathing frothy blood and groaning. The girl was cut up about the mouth, and three of her front teeth were missing. “It wasn’t Richard’s fault. It wasn’t Richard’s fault,” she was sobbing.

Dr. Gold emerged from the examining room. “What a nasty accident!” he said to one of the paramedics.

“A head-on crash, with a drunk who was driving in the wrong lane. Some of the boy’s internal organs are probably damaged, and his spine might be broken.”

“Please help the paramedics bring him in,” Dr. Gold said to the attendant. “We’ll have to wait with the food poisoning case.”

“What about the Nazi?” asked a nurse who had emerged from the examining room.

Fifteen minutes later Dr. Gold summoned the nurse to the curtained area where he was working on the eighteen-year-old boy. “I’ll need your help to intubate the patient,” he said. “But

first please get that baby into the room, check her temperature, and if it's 105 degrees or over, give her a sponge bath with cold water."

Ten minutes later the nurse came back. "Dr. Gold," she said, "the baby's fever is over 106, and I've been sponging her . . . And the policemen asked me to tell you that the Nazi leader outside is dead."

"I hope the veterinarian finds little Gunther OK," Dr. Gold thought.

Afterword: *You Do Humor*

Explosives planted in the World Trade Center in New York City, on February 26, 1993, killed six people and injured over one thousand. What to me was even more frightening was that terrorists would one day soon be able to plant not conventional, but nuclear, bombs in buildings. Certainly there are hundreds of fanatics who would want to do this, and some of them have graduate degrees in engineering.

As I wanted to write a newspaper column on the subject, I telephoned Wilber Dixon, the Op-Ed editor of the *Premier City Journal*. Last year Wilber used two of my pieces as features. One was on the command of French needed to retrieve a pair of trifocal spectacles from the Paris Lost and Found Bureau. And the other was on entomologists' attempts to band the legs of ants and trace the ants' comings and goings in a Florida sand pile.

"I'd like to do a piece on the danger of terrorists planting nuclear bombs in our cities," I told Wilber.

"I can feel my sides aching already," said Wilber.

"Who said I'd make the piece funny?"

"You do humor, don't you?"

"I can do a serious column too."

"Look, Mel, if we want a piece on terrorists with nuclear bombs, we can get it from a professor of engineering at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology."

“But Wilber . . .”

“If we want another one we can get it from a professor of psychiatry at Columbia University.”

“Listen to me, Wilber . . .”

“If we want still another we can get it from an author of two books on fundamentalist extremists in the Middle East.”

“Yes, but . . .”

“The heads of the F.B.I. and the C.I.A. would jump at the chance to mislead us on what marvelous precautions they are taking.”

“Please listen to me, Wilber . . .”

“We can get interviews with a half dozen imprisoned terrorists dying to vent their hatred of the Great Satan. And from another half dozen who’ll say anything that might shorten their terms in prison.”

“We need better safeguards . . .”

“We can get pieces from police officials in Tel Aviv, London, Belfast, Paris, Berlin, Rome, and Casper, Wyoming. We can get dozens more from retired U.S. Army generals. Why should we use you?”

“Well, you used me twice, and congratulated me on my work.”

“We used you for humor For serious features we want experts, or a few veteran political writers like George F. Will.”

“I’ve got things to say that they haven’t said. And I want to say them seriously.”

“I’ll tell you a trade secret on how to get a serious message into the *Premier City Journal’s* Op-Ed page. Found a ‘Society to Save Our Cities from Nuclear Terrorism.’ Start the

roster of members with your wife, your brothers and sisters, your in-laws, and your dog—and be sure that they elect you Chairman. Print up letterhead stationery, and use it to send us a Letter to the Editor.”

“Would going through that rigmarole make me an expert?”

“It’s a matter of public perception. Be grateful, Mel, that you’re supposed to be funny. The advantage of being a humorist is that you can still write on anything without being an expert. You can write about marriage, mushrooms, automobile repair, interplanetary travel, sex, vacuum-cleaner salesmen, and congressmen. You can write about dogs, cats, frogs, caterpillars, yachts, submarines, rowboats, and Noah’s ark. You can even write about terrorists.

“Make the most of your freedom now, before the age of expertise comes to humor also. Then you’ll be allowed to be funny only about your specialty. If I were a humorist when that day came, I’d make my specialty food or the weather. They’re always topical.”

“Thanks for the advice about using my freedom,” I said. “There’s no way I can make jokes about the likelihood that fanatics will soon be planting nuclear bombs in our cities.”

“Sure there is,” Wilber said. “Stanley Kubrick did it with his movie *Dr. Strangelove*. Remember the subtitle—*How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*? Send me something really funny and I’ll use it.”