

PREFACE BY CRAIG HANLEY

In a roundabout way this book began a year before I met William and Rosalie Schiff. In the summer of 2004, I was watching the news on CSPAN. The main story involved Israel and viewers, as usual, were encouraged to phone in their thoughts. Fans of this particular program are accustomed to the occasional caller who cannot control his or her political passion, but the flood of hostility that morning was so steady and intense the host seemed shocked by the suddenly dark tone of his show.

There were denunciations of “the Jewish mafia” in the United States and claims that the Jewish state was responsible for 9/11 and for the death of American soldiers in Iraq. There was a demand for the White House to sever ties with its closest ally in the Middle East. Callers with a variety of regional accents were cautioned for their remarks and the more furious had to be disconnected.

It was a surprisingly ugly morning in America.

To get some background on the issues, I offered to volunteer a few days a week at the Houston Chapter of the American Jewish Committee. The executive director was tremendously hospitable and let me pitch in on minor chores. I watched the organization respond to the media firestorm created by Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* and review recent legislation designed to protect places of worship from terror attacks. It was news to me as a Christian that a long established American minority had to maintain these sorts of proactive public relations and defense strategies.

Out of the blue, a friend in Dallas called and said a client of hers was looking for someone to write a book about his parents. She said, “They’re Holocaust survivors who teach people about the dangers of hate.” The project sounded remarkably in line with my recent interests and I met with Michael Schiff, one of the driving forces behind the Dallas Holocaust Museum. Due in large part to the experiences of his family, Mike has a serious interest in mass hate as a social phenomenon.

He did not want this book to be a relentless tale of misery, and fortunately his parents have lived their lives in a way that offers a strong message of hope. They have also lived long enough to connect the Nazi genocide directly to our modern age of suicide bombers and burning towers. At eighty-eight and eighty-four, respectively, William and Rosalie Schiff are still waging a personal educational crusade that has deeply touched thousands of students and adults in North Texas.

During months of interviews, I got to know two people whose young lives in Poland were just as normal as ours before the current terror war began. Their biographies are parables we would be foolish to ignore, and their courageous response to the hardships they suffered is a lesson in how much good a single human being—or two—can accomplish in a relatively short period of time.

This is not a sentimental book, but many tears had to be shed and re-shed to make sure we got the facts straight. Day after day, the Schiffs went back sixty-five years in time to relive the loss of their families and their entrapment in the Krakow ghetto and subsequent journey through six different Nazi camps. While those events form the bulk of the narrative, in a real sense the story begins at the end, in the normal

American city where they continue their low-key and highly effective teaching.

I believe William is right when he describes this book as a love story. It contains plenty of the horrors that modern civilizations are capable of when, as Rosalie likes to say, “human beings take off their masks.” But after all the torture, the moral belongs to the survivors. The Schiffs tell it quickly and unpretentiously, and offer some timely advice on how to deal with mass hate, an evil that plagues the world now more than ever.

The story is built around personal recollections in normalized English. Longer first-person passages, from William or Rosalie or others, are inset and set in a slightly different typeface.

chapter one

“When will people stop hating?”

On this lovely Thursday at the end of summer the citizens of Krakow move as usual through some of the finest architecture in Europe. Towering gothic churches, stately Renaissance homes and trendy cafes with gilt lettering crowd together around the main square. The true heart of the city is the storybook castle up on the hill where the Polish kings are buried. Below its thick wall flows the shimmering Vistula River.

It's 1939 and radio is a big deal. People are amazed the technology can bring them news from the other side of the earth. Inspired by the breakthrough, many students at the university are obsessed with math and electronics. Four centuries earlier Copernicus learned enough math here to figure out that the earth goes around the sun.

Not everybody is caught up in the radio craze, however. The bearded men in long black silk coats walking under the iron streetlamps spend a good bit of their time mastering ancient religious texts. Some believe in a miracle-worker who lived in the dark mountains on the horizon where melting snow feeds the river.

Horse hoofs echo through the cobbled streets as wagons bring food in from the countryside and supplies to stores and shops. Twelve of the wagons belong to Benzion Baum. He and his partners sell firewood to bakeries, candy makers, and hundreds of homes. Twenty-five years ago it was just Benzion in one wagon. He carried the split trunks through front doors and back doors, making neat stacks by stoves, bread ovens, and pots of bubbling chocolate.

Customers liked the wood vendor. He was dependable, earnest, and fair. Today he owns a yard on the other side of the river where twenty employees unload wood from train cars into the delivery wagons. In the new factory next door thirty more workers can't keep up with orders for the insulation product Benzion designed ten years ago. During harsh Polish winters it helps people save money on firewood.

Benzion lives at 7 Dietlovska Street, a prestigious address in a neighborhood called Kazimierz, home to most of the 70,000 Jews in the city. His wife's name is Helena and the couple have two girls and a boy. His oldest daughter, Rosalie, is sixteen.

Our apartment was not far from downtown on a tree-lined street a few blocks from the river. From our windows we could see the Vistula and the castle on top of Wawel Hill. Mom and Dad gave us a home full of love. As committed as he was to his work, he stayed home if one of the kids was sick.

My sister Lucy was fourteen and my little brother Henry was eight. We played in the parks and jumped on the backs of the wagons the horses pulled up and down our street. In winter we went sledding and on

sunny days we played kickball. In Poland back then children didn't have many toys or dolls. In my favorite game you tried to flick pebbles into a hole with your finger. I kept coming home with dirty hands and Mom was afraid I was turning into a tomboy.

I went to a little school not far from home. History was my favorite subject so I loved it when our class went to the castle. It has an ancient hall with a winding stair that goes way down into the dark. This was supposed to be the cave of Smoke, the Krakow dragon. When we were little we were terrified of Smoke because the legend says he liked to eat children. None of us was afraid of the Germans because we were not informed about politics at all. At that age I never really thought about being Polish. It was just the country where I was born.

My dad's best friend owned a soap factory and lived directly above our apartment. Their daughter Mania was my sister's best friend. Dad and Mania's dad would drink coffee and listen to news on the radio. Hitler was kicking Polish Jews out of Germany and Dad helped three of these refugees find a place to stay. My uncle Isaac lived in Germany. He could tell what was coming and moved to England. He kept urging my father to come with him but Dad said everything would blow over.

I had no idea what was going on. At sixteen you walk past nightclubs and wonder when you'll finally be able to go out dancing. Once in a while we would go into downtown Krakow to visit the dress shop owned by my mother's younger sister. She looked like a super-

model, tall and skinny, blond hair and blue eyes. She always wore gorgeous clothes and broad-brimmed hats. This woman was my idol.

Basically I was still a child. My main interest in life was probably the powdered sugar napoleons at the restaurant across the street. Dad's customers always gave him samples and one night he came home with a huge box of chocolate-covered cherries from Suchard's, the gourmet chocolatier. Mom locked this in a cabinet but I found the key and ate every one. Before the invasion, that stomach ache was the biggest trauma in my life.

The Schiff family lives half a mile from the Baums, on Krakow Street near the Jewish Community Center. They don't have it quite as easy. Up on the third floor of a big gray housing block the five family members share two bedrooms and a large kitchen. The whole family shares a bathroom with the Applebaums next door. The Schiffs' kitchen serves as dining room, family room, and conference room. According to William, the middle child, money discussions frequently required encryption.

When my parents wanted to keep secrets from us they spoke Yiddish. Dad was a terrible businessman so we heard a lot of Yiddish. At one point my father and his partner had two barber-beauty shops and we lived in a much nicer apartment. Then he made some bad deals and lost his partner. We ended up with the smaller shop and had to move into the little place on Krakow Street. He had four employees and five chairs in this shop. I

swept the floors when I was young to help out.

Dad had been a medic in the army of the Austro-Hungarian monarch in World War One. He trained as a corpsman and learned to dress wounds. I was born right after the war. What can I say? I grew up in a family where the woman was the smart one and the man wouldn't listen. I loved my father but I never really liked him a whole lot. When I was six I wanted to buy some candy and he wouldn't give me a nickel. After I cried for two days he finally gave in. I was so excited running to the store I tripped and the nickel fell in the gutter and went down the sewer. Our whole relationship was kind of like that.

My mother I loved dearly. She and I had to scramble to get the family finances back on track. She ran the shop and Dad just cut hair. My older sister Dorothy was studying to be a pharmacist. To help pay her tuition I quit school at fourteen and got a job in a sewing machine repair shop. Over the next six years I also became a bicycle mechanic and learned how to fix radios in the same shop. I was fascinated by radio technology and started taking night school classes. When I was eighteen I was making ten zloties a week and giving most of it to my mom. This was more money than my uncles were making. My younger brother Bronek helped Dad at the shop.

I couldn't afford to be full-time sports crazy like other kids, but working in a bicycle shop you couldn't avoid sports. In Poland at that time bicycle racing was like football and baseball and basketball combined. I did road races with a Jewish club called Maccabi and

won a few events. When I turned sixteen I discovered girls and it was bye-bye bicycles.

Throughout my childhood I had always been painfully shy around girls. My sister saw how pathetic I was and said, "William, let me teach you how to dance." She was a phenomenal dancer and after a few years I got very good at classic styles like the tango, foxtrot, and paso doble.

Dorothy and I would save our money, dress up, and go dancing with older friends at popular spots like The Gypsy Club. We thought we were Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers and we could clear the dance floor when we felt like showing off. I could sing, too, so things started to open up for me socially and I was dating a lot.

That was my life when the Germans seized our city. I was just an average guy. I worked all day fixing bikes and radios, studied electronics at night, and chased girls on the weekend. We didn't have any money, but I was ambitious and excited about my future.

When the sun goes down on the lovely end-of-summer Thursday the Schiff and Baum families sit down to their dinners. Three hundred miles west of their tables an enormous force is gathering in silence on the German border. After six years in power, Adolf Hitler has completed his plan to invade Poland. While the Schiffs and the Baums sleep, his diplomats publicize the excuses. They claim their army has to cross the border to put down Polish rebel attacks. Nazi intelligence agents have faked the terror incidents, but newspapers and radio stations controlled by the government support the shaky argument for war.

World War Two begins with ultramodern tanks and planes and nihilism. Hitler tells his generals to forget their tradition of fair play. “Operation White” is not about taking ground and capturing flags. Secret units from the SS will be following the tanks. Their initial mission seems straightforward: to occupy local media and political offices and pacify the population. But the ruthless methods of the Death Head Special Forces scandalize several old-school officers.

Most soldiers in the regular army believe that Germany was dishonored by foreign politicians and betrayed by its own liberals twenty years earlier. Many grew up in homes squeezed by a hard economy, especially if their fathers were killed in World War One. They have been trained to view the Polish people as backward and treacherous “semi-Asians” and Eastern Jews as cockroaches.

Older soldiers who started as storm troopers embrace the racial politics of their leaders. Younger boots who came up through the Hitler Youth are even more extreme. They believe the future cannot be built until the present is destroyed. Raised on bonfires and the People’s Radio, they have idolized combat all their lives. They are schooled to be dominating, indifferent to pain, and free of tenderness. At fifteen minutes before five o’clock on the first morning of September this bitter generation erupts in rage.

Rosalie’s heaven is shattered.

A lot of it is still like a cloud in my mind. Right before the Germans came I had a very vivid dream. In this dream I was looking outside through the keyhole in the front door of our apartment complex. The street was full of dead people. I remember this so well because

I saw my favorite aunt, the beautiful girl who owned the dress shop, lying among the other bodies wearing a fancy hat.

The next day Dad came home early from work and said all the men had been told to evacuate. The Germans were calling everybody terrorists so they could shoot anybody they felt like shooting. Dad told us he loved us and kissed us goodbye. Then he left with his two partners and headed for the Russian border.

We never found out what happened to him. One of the partner's sons told me many years later that he was killed while Russian soldiers were chasing him. My last memory of the man I worshipped are the words he spoke to my mother when he kissed her as he went out the front door. He said, "When will people ever stop hating one another?"

A few days later we heard bombing and the soldiers came marching into the city. I went downstairs with my brother and sister and we walked to the main street to watch the parade. There were heavy tanks and miles of men with scowling faces. They swung their arms and stomped their boots and sang, "Germany! Germany! Number One!" We threw candy, one of the great regrets of my life. If I knew then what I know now it would have been poison.

Rosalie's father and his partners march toward the Russian border. All must go on foot because German bombers have crippled the train system. Once their hard targets are taken out, the Luftwaffe pilots tear into the huge column of men. William is in the thick of things with his father and younger brother.

We all headed for Lvov, a town 160 miles east. Before we even got started my brother was almost arrested by our own soldiers. He didn't want to give them his bicycle. Here come the Germans with a thousand tanks and the Polish army is scavenging bicycles from teenagers.

The first day on the road was not a problem. On the second day it was obvious the Polish air force was out of commission. The sky filled with German planes. Technically, they started bombing us because everybody was running away together and there were a lot of Polish soldiers mixed in with the civilians. The Germans didn't really give a damn. They just wanted to kill as many people as possible.

Wherever you turned there were explosions and horses and carriages full of men falling into craters. One bomb hit a wagon thirty yards in front of us and we got knocked over by all kinds of debris. I ran and looked down in the hole, but everybody was too mangled for me to help. Another bomb landed close behind us and we jumped up and ran. Dad fainted twice and we dragged him off the road into the trees. This went on for ten days and it broke my father psychologically. From that point until his deportation three years later he was pretty much like a little child.

Hitler and Stalin have an agreement on how they intend to divide Poland, but a Russian diplomat in Berlin discovers secret German plans to violate the pact and seize Lvov. To protect his nearby oil reserves Stalin rolls out the Ukrainian Front army. Ten days after the Schiff men leave Krakow

they run into a noisy and blinding wall of Soviet armored vehicles.

We had been walking forever and sleeping at night in the woods, eating whatever we could find along the way, usually nothing. When we reached the outskirts of Lvov it was almost midnight. The Russians came charging out in tanks and shined spotlights on us. They said, "Drop your weapons, turn around, and go home."

I was three months shy of twenty-one, the legal age for enlistment. Some Polish soldiers had given me an infantryman's jacket and a rifle anyway. They didn't give me any bullets and that was fine with me. I had never touched a gun before. I took off the jacket, put the rifle down and we marched back 160 miles. It only took us a week to get home because we didn't have to hide from the planes any more.

Dad was hysterical the whole time. He said the Germans were going to kill everybody. Based on his experience in the Austrian army he warned me that the Germans would do whatever their leaders told them. He said, "These people are fanatics and orders are sacred to them. They'd kill their own families if that's what they were told to do."

He begged me to listen to him but I thought he was crazy. I told him they were the most advanced people in the world. They had science, industry, Beethoven, everything. German was the universal cultural language, just like English is today. Who could believe that this sophisticated culture would send its army into a big important city like Krakow to kill a quarter of the population?