

A Workshop in Ethics

Adolf Eichmann was the principal logistical military officer of the Nazis' mass murder of 6,000,000 Jews during World War II. After the war, he escaped a prisoner of war camp in Germany, and eventually made his way to Argentina. In 1960, agents of the Israel government captured him and transported him to Israel where he was put on trial for his Nazi war crimes. This trial, the first ever televised, was for many people their first education about the Holocaust. Eichmann freely admitted to most of the accusations concerning his participation in a coordinated conspiracy which sent millions of Jews to their deaths, but claimed that he was powerless to resist orders from his military superiors. A 16-week trial featured the testimony of scores of survivors whose lives were shattered. Eichmann was found guilty on all 15 counts of the criminal indictment against him. He was hanged [and it was decided that no grave would mark his life, so] his body was cremated, and his ashes were scattered [in international waters] in the Mediterranean Sea.

Terms to Know

Wannsee Conference -- A 1 1/2 hour meeting on January 20, 1942 in Wannsee, a Berlin suburb, at which the details of the "Final Solution" were worked out. The meeting was convened by Reinhard Heydrich, who was the head of the SS main office and SS Chief Heinrich Himmler's top aide. The purpose of the meeting was to coordinate the Nazi bureaucracy required to carry out the "Final Solution," which provided for deportation of Jews to killing centers, immediate death for those who were unable to work (the very young, the old, and the weak), segregation by gender of the remaining Jews, decimation through forced labor with insufficient nourishment, and eventual death for the remnant.

Adolf Eichmann -- At The Wannsee Conference, Eichmann presented estimates of the numbers of Jews that would be deported from each country and gassed in the camps. Fifteen high-ranking Nazi officials were in attendance, including Heydrich, for whom Eichmann prepared the conference's opening speech. Most of the debate [during the meeting] centered not on the morality of [the Final Solution], but rather what proportion of Jewish blood would merit this "special treatment" and the methods used to effect genocide. Heydrich made it clear that all organizational and logistical requirements would be the responsibility of Adolf Eichmann. Through-out most of the war, Eichmann was the top official of a bureaucracy designed to deport, concentrate, and murder millions of Jews. He [traveled] from occupied country to occupied country and [assisted] in making the arrangements for the Jews to be slaughtered. According to Eichmann, it was he who coined the term "Final Solution" to mean the annihilation of the Jewish people.

Wannsee Protocol

"...the Jews should in the course of the Final Solution be taken in a suitable manner to the East for use as labor. In big labor gangs, separated by sex, the Jews capable of work will be brought to these areas for road building in which task undoubtedly a large number will fall through natural diminution. The remnant that is finally able to survive all this -- since this is undoubtedly the part with the strongest resistance -- must be treated accordingly, since these people, representing a natural selection, are to be regarded as the germ cell of a new Jewish development, in case they should succeed and go free (as history has proved). In the course of the execution of the Final Solution, Europe will be combed from West to East..."

On June 1, 1962, Adolf Eichmann was hanged for crimes against the Jewish people. Standing under the gallows before witnesses to the execution, he spoke his final words:

"Long live Germany. Long live Austria. Long live Argentina. I owe a lot to these countries and I shall not forget them. I had to obey the rules of war and my flag."

Fact Situations

1. A classmate who is part of the same "cool group" that you belong to brings a knife to school in his backpack. You see him showing it to several students and swearing them to secrecy. (If you don't think this is realistic for Ann Sobrato – try this one. Replace 'a knife' with 'a stolen actual copy of the current SAT exam.')
2. You have just moved to a new school and been accepted by the "cool kids." You quickly notice that these kids go out of their way to make fun of a quiet kid who lives near you and was friendly to you when you moved.
3. At the end of the school year your school holds a charity auction of items students had brought to school against the rules. You are able to purchase a cell phone with built in camera. The student who brought it to school is absent the day of the auction.
4. A local homeless shelter that helps mothers who have lost their homes because of abuse, addiction and mental illness calls your home to ask for a donation. Your parents are reluctant to contribute, but they ask for your opinion.
5. You are helping a youth leader purchase supplies for a picnic. When you are unloading the car you realize the store has mistakenly given you \$20 worth of soft drinks beyond what you paid for. The leader tells you to unload and store it for future use.

Some Questions to Consider

1. Is there any value to continuing to search for Nazi war criminals and bringing them to trial, when most are feeble old men who are unlikely to cause any more harm to anyone?
2. If you had been a teacher in pre-war Germany and Adolf Eichmann had been in your class, what types of lessons/courses would you feel might have been effective in order to have affected how he participated in mass murder?
3. Discuss the sentence Eichmann received. Would there have been any value in having him sentenced to life imprisonment?
4. Why, after all of this public education concerning the Holocaust, does genocide recur? What strategies can you devise to minimize outbreaks of genocide?
5. After the end of the war, the U.S. government encouraged the immigration of hundreds of German scientists, many with Nazi backgrounds and questionable activities during the war, to the United States. Discuss whether this was appropriate.
6. In 1998 Swiss banks agreed to pay \$1.25 billion in restitution to survivors of the Holocaust. The deal settled a class-action lawsuit claiming banks failed to return funds to survivors and relatives after the war. Does Switzerland bear a responsibility for relinquishing these assets after more than 50 years?
7. Had Eichmann not had such an obsession with killing Jews, how effective could he have been in saving Jews from extermination?