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COLUMN BY

Michael J. Franklin

I had considered not writing a column on the Holocaust this year. It is a morbid topic and the events and statistics of 50 years ago are difficult to make meaningful today. Moreover, it seems that beyond a few students, no one at MIT really cares.

"Why should I write a column this year?" I asked a friend a few days ago. "It seems that no one cares."

"I care," he responded. "Not all of my family made it out of Europe." He went on to explain that people are becoming insensitive to the horrors of mass destruction. Frequent news of deaths in Iraq or Kuwait, or of killings and rapes in the former Yugoslavia, numb the mind to any individual act and blur the distinctions between atrocities in the past and in the present.

The actions of the Germans were the culmination of centuries of Christian and German anti-Semitism. The propaganda produced by the Nazis was accepted by the populace partly because it was what they were familiar with. But the Jews knew the German nation, caused the German nation to fight the First World War and to rule the world. To purge the nation of tainted blood, to make Germany as strong as it once was, Hitler was determined.

Slowly but inexorably the Jews were deprived of their rights and their property both in Germany and the conquered nations. Jews and Gypsies were denied access to public schools, parks were closed to Jews, they were prohibited from using public transportation and were required to have a yellow star. But, as this "Final Solution" called for further action — most importantly, to exterminate the Jews, but to eliminate them entirely.

As regular German troops invaded and conquered territories, specialist forces called Einsatzgruppen followed to purge the area of Jews. Jews were shot by village, person by person, Jews would be gathered, stripped of their possessions and marched out into a pit. Slow but methodical, this process killed nearly 2 million Jews before a single concentration camp was open.

In cities with large Jewish populations, photos were constructed and filled to overflowing as Gypsies helped more and more people into the area. Relief came only through death by starvation or disease, or by "resettlement" into forced labor camps farther east.

Few initially knew the real reason for these camps — the German command seldom issued explicit orders, and the stories told by the few escapers were not easily believed. Eventually other governments learned of the massive killings, but chose to take no action.

There was little time for those that could escape. Few countries were willing to accept large numbers of Jewish refugees, and fewer still were willing to accept Jews. Boats of refugees were turned away and Allied forces which could have stopped the death camps did not. Pless for help went unheeded. For on killing rather than saving lives. Even as the war rumbled to a close, the Germans diverted important war resources to the process of killing Jews.

Why does it matter that millions of Jews died far across the Atlantic 30 years ago? It is certainly of great concern for the survivors and their culture, diminished by the loss of so many lives. And for those of us in the present, who did not live relatives or suffer from Nazi terror, the tragedy serves as an example of an era that was filled with age-old prejudice which watches, but does not act to save the victims of prejudice. And of a global society too numbed by events to learn from its mistakes, and intervene when necessary to save lives.

I could almost write last paragraph with some enthusiasm and a vague hope that I would never see a situation fitting that description. But as the war in Bosnia increases in ferocity, I see that the society in which we live cares no more about the victims of deadly prejudice than it did 50 years ago. As the western governments ignored and suppressed information about the death of Jews in Europe, so now are western governments attempting to suppress the evidence with "confidential centers" and "ethnic cleansing" in Yugoslavia.

By no means could I write that what is happening in the former Yugoslavia is even a shadow of the Holocaust against the European Jews. They are separate and distinct and the lives that are destroyed are those of individuals in differing circumstances that cannot be statistically compared. To simply fold them together under a heading of "atrocity, western mindlessly compares the virulence Nazi ideology with that of a regional conflict. This comparison denies each tragedy's uniqueness and diminishes if not obliterates the importance of anti-Semitism in the former. They are not the same.

While most of us in these violent times are content to glance at the paper, or even to write a column, it seems that some people care enough to act. An article in The New York Times this past month described the relief effort in the Balkans had met with success. This effort, supported by a number of Jewish organizations, had managed to get Jews out of besieged cities without the loss of life.

While other religions and countries pursue and prosecute, while cease-fires are signed and broken, while men are killed and women are raped, one group is saving lives. The successful was the effort, reported the New York Times, that "becoming Jewish" had entered the lexicon as a synonym for escaping. People who had never considered themselves Jewish searched for proof of a Jewish grand-parent to allow them to escape — an ironic contrast to half a century earlier, when such protection was denied to Jews.

This year, Yom HaShoah — Holocaust Remembrance Day — falls on Sunday. The Tech is pleased to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the liberation of the Nazi concentration camps and the death of 6,000,000 Jews. To commemorate the 50th anniversary of the liberation of the Nazi concentration camps and the death of 6,000,000 Jews.

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