

WHY ARE YOU PROUD TO BE A JEW?" HE ASKED

The nice young man smiled in obvious embarrassment. "I want to ask you a question.,," he said in slightly accented English. "I hope you don't object to talking to me. You see," and there was a pause, "you see, I am German."

This was after I had given a lecture on the Holocaust at the Tolerance Museum of the Simon Wiesenthal Center. I speak there as part of a program of lectures by Holocaust survivors. My presentation delves less on my own experiences than on the reasons why the Holocaust should be relevant - half a world away and half a century later - to Americans today. I speak of good and evil, of the difference between heroism and suffering and between good deeds and good intentions. Often I address questions that had been asked of me in the past: a question by a girl who had asked me what the world would be like if Hitler had won the war or a letter from another girl who wrote that she hoped that nothing like the Holocaust would happen to her or her people, and then signed it with an Armenian last name, apparently unaware of the Armenian genocide in 1916.

I smiled at the young German. "I don't mind talking to you," I said. "My concern is with those who did evil in the generations before you. I have nothing against your generation. In fact, I appreciate the fact that Germany is the only country to acknowledge, apologize and try to make restitution for its crimes. Japan didn't. The Croats, Lithuanians, Ukrainians and all those others who massacred Jews never acknowledged it. China isn't speaking of the millions who died because of Mao's excesses. In the Soviet Union where, what? 40, 60, 80 million? died under Stalin, there have been no trials of the commandants, guards, executioners, judges. No one has been arrested or reprimanded, no one. There will never be any Nuremberg trials in Russia "

"Thank you," he said. "You are probably right, but still, I can't help feeling somewhat

ashamed of being a German. Yes, I know that I had nothing to do with the horrors, but the feeling is still there. Tell me," he said. "just as I feel ashamed of being German, do you feel proud of being a Jew?"

I had to stop and think. "Yes," I said. "I do feel proud of being a Jew."

"Why?" he asked. I told him and as I spoke I realized that this was yet another question that I should speak about in the future.

It does nothing for me personally to realize that I belong to a people who have produced great scholars, musicians, boxers or baseball players. I know that contributions to science, medicine, and general knowledge, by individual Jews is disproportionate to the total number of Jews in the world, but so what? We should also realize that for every Einstein there is a Lepke Buchalter or a Mickey Cohen, that a disproportionate number of gangsters, bootleggers, contract killers, and bookmakers were Jewish. There were Jewish prostitutes and pimps throughout North and South America. For every honest admirable Jew, there is probably one who is despicable, dishonest and disgusting.

I do not feel smarter because of Einstein or Fermi. I do not excel in music because of Bernstein or Berlin. I cannot cure people because of Salk or act because of Kirk Douglas or Tony Curtis. When I hear of an accomplished Jew I feel a mild interest, not pride.

I do, however, feel pride when I look at the history of the people I belong to and at what I think is our distinctive characteristic. Putting aside the outstanding examples of individual accomplishment - bad or good - one thing is very clear: overwhelmingly, Jews get involved in causes they believe to be good for mankind, for society, for humanity. They get involved when there are no benefits for themselves as individuals, or Jews as a whole. - we are the only affluent segment of the population that tends to vote against its own self-interest - for affirmative action, against school vouchers, for expansion of social and welfare programs.

Jews are disproportionately involved in struggles for what they see as justice. In Czarist Russia, in the 1890s, 26% of those arrested for revolutionary activities were Jews at a time when they were just 1 % of the population. Jews were over-represented among those fighting for equality for blacks; much of the money raised by the Black Panthers came from Jews. Any organization that advocates a cause or an idea that is perceived as humane and "good", attracts Jews -often drawn by emotion rather than by logic or a

dispassionate evaluation of possible consequences - environmental movements, nuclear disarmament, ACLU, feminism, homelessness, AIDS, public broadcasting, cruelty to animals .. Jews are in the forefront of movements that apparently have nothing to do with Jews - the current drive to stop the persecution of Christians in Moslem and communist countries is powered by Jews, as is the movement to expose and end slavery in Africa and Asia. Jews flock to causes even when the results are, in the end, evil and destructive, but the intentions are good - communism, Maoism, 60s nihilism, drug-induced mind expansion., support of the dictatorships of Castro and the Sandinistas.

I am proud of the fact that we, the Jews, keep trying to make this world a better place. I am proud that we are the only ones who have gone to the trouble, expense, and bother to keep reminding the world of the evil that people do - the Armenians, Ukrainians, Africans, Asians, don't speak of their genocides. Wealthy African-Americans do not create foundations to memorialize past slavery, or fight slavery in the world today. Chinese Americans do not make movies about the tens of millions slaughtered by the Japanese at the same time as Germans were killing Jews.

There are bad Jews. There are good Jews. There are religious Jews and agnostic Jews. There are Jews who know nothing about Judaism and care even less. As a group, however, they overwhelmingly have this in common: they will be there when they believe - rightly or wrongly - that there is good to be done and evil to be opposed. This makes me proud to be a Jew.

