

The silent bystanders in the war against the Jews

Fearfulness, cowardice, avoidance of feared punishment—or silent approval—is precisely how Hitler triumphed.

by Phyllis Chesler



This piece is dedicated to Renia Spiegel, the so-called Polish “Anne Frank” who kept a diary in Premyslani where my maternal ancestors once lived.

Visibly Jewish civilians are being beaten on the streets in Europe and in North America. It reminds me of what happened in Germany in the mid-30s as documented by Erik Larson in his 2011 [“The Uncivil University: Intolerance on College Campuses](#) by Aryeh Kaufmann Weinberg, Gary A. Tobin, and Jenna Ferer (2009), Nora Gold’s novel [Anti-Zionism on Campus: The University, Free Speech and BDS](#) edited by Andrew Pessin and Doron S. Ben Atar (2018) and [The New Anti-Semitism](#).

I am not sure how successful any of us have been in breaking this cognitive war blockade. Linda Sarsour, no longer a women's rights leader, now the Pro-Palestine activist that she has always been, continues to appear on campuses around the country as do countless others who share her views.

This anti-Semitic/anti-Zionist onslaught also exists online, in private groups devoted to other academic subjects (psychology, psychiatry, the history of feminism), where no one is particularly expert in Middle East matters. This does not stop the poisonous propaganda from appearing.

In my time, I have left two online groups and was forced out of a third. Always, always, the same two reasons were at issue. An outpouring of raw anti-Semitism/anti-Zionism which was allowed to dominate the conversation—or an undigested piece of pro-Palestine and pro-Islamist propaganda which took pride of place instead of our usual discussion. Holding another, more knowledgeable or more positive view on Israel or a critical view of Islam, even in terms of women's rights, was always interpreted as a Thought Crime, a High Crime, a traitorous act, and as proof of racism, Islamophobia, and right-wing conservatism.

Encountering this was always sobering, enraging, demoralizing, and sometimes even traumatic. But what most got my attention was either the pile-on (when and if it occurred) or, something far more ominous: The silence, the utter silence of the bystanders.

Recently, I unexpectedly experienced yet another online anti-Semitic rant. I decided to share it with one of my Shabbos guests, a 92-year-old survivor of three Holocaust-era forced labor camps. I wanted her view of the matter.

Luna Kaufman is an amazingly beautiful and distinguished Polish-American Jew. She attended High School with the "Polish Pope," (John Paul II), is committed to interfaith work, is

also a musicologist—and believes that all important matters are exceedingly complex.

Kaufman published a Memoir, [*Anna Bikont*](#) about what happened in Jedwabne or [*Gross*](#) on this?

The woman responded. “I knew it would not be long before I heard from you, I was just waiting.” And then she let unleashed some filthy Jew-hatred. “Unless your writer has substantiation, this is defamation. Where are the accounts of this, the photos, the arrests, the police records, the death records? The Jews have exaggerated the role of Poles in the Holocaust; at least one hundred Poles died trying to save Jews—what about them? I am sick and tired of Jews who are still maligning certain countries in order to get financial reparations.”

And then, unbelievably, she writes: “My most recent boyfriend was Jewish...There is no natural animosity between Polish *workers* and Jewish *workers*. If there was any acrimony between Jews and Poles, I feel it is class-based NOT religion-based. Poor Jews were just as abandoned by RICH JEWS as they were by rich Poles. Poor Jews in the USA were just as oppressed by capitalist owners (in fur factories) as were poor Polish workers. Don’t be gullible Phyllis. There are many tricks they use when they are publicizing a cause.”

Appealing to class warfare and class solidarity did the trick. The first woman who spoke said that maybe she should “drop her grudge.”

What this woman wrote was raw, hot, and resentful, a function of newly found pride wounded to the quick. It was also totally ignorant.

However, what had my attention was how silent the online group became, how no one wanted to challenge or upend this Big Lie and risk being bullied. This kind of fearfulness, cowardice, avoidance of feared punishment—or silent approval—is precisely

how Hitler triumphed.

Luna nodded her head gravely and said nothing. We sat in silence for a minute. Then, she agreed with my observations and concerns. I continued.

“Perhaps many members in this online group missed this exchange entirely. Maybe they got to it weeks later, if ever, and felt it was too late to comment, the group had moved on. Everyone was already talking about other things. Two women wrote to me privately, safely, cautiously, but did not weigh in on this subject publicly, for all to read. Privately, I asked one woman:

“What would Flo Kennedy, (a high profile African-American feminist), have said if another feminist claimed that slavery had not existed, or if it had, that there had not been too much of it, and that at least 100 white people had died trying to save black slaves and that anyway, black people are now exaggerating the extent of slavery in order to get reparations?”

Her response: Flo would have given them a piece of her mind and moved on.

Readers: I said I would never again speak online in this group and I moved on. Yet again. Which is not always a good thing if one wishes to remain connected to cherished colleagues and to remain “in the know.” This is the danger involved when pro-Israeli or Israeli professors are not invited to speak—or may do so only under conditions of extreme hostility and harassment; when their papers are not accepted by academic journals, their projects not funded, etc.

Then, Luna told me a story.

“You know, Jews were also brutal to other Jews who were under their whip. That’s how it seemed to me when I was a young teenager in the camps. One man, a Jew, was put in charge of

the selections for who would go to Auschwitz. I hated him. But he told me that he knew who was dying anyway and that's who he tried to pick.

Still, he had an awful job but he performed it with great vigor. But things were complicated. This same kapo was in charge of the barracks where sick people were warehoused. The 'hospital.' I was there, I was quite sick. When the Russians came to liberate us, he knew that they were going to kill everyone who was sick or dying. He rushed in and threw me out of the barracks. This saved my life. So, when he was put on trial for his crimes, I refused to testify against him. They hanged him anyway."

And so: Things were complicated.

What useful conclusion, if any, may I draw? That one of these silent, bystander women may one day hide a Jew on the run? Or that this woman with Polish, Christian ancestry may one day come to regret her ignorant and hateful words and try to make amends? I no longer know how to relate to those with whom I once honorably served in battle in another war—but who are now my opponents in the war against the Jews.

First published in [*Israel National News*](#).