

The Cost of Obedience by Anne Springfield

It begins with one subject strapped into a chair and an electrode strapped to his arm. He is the “learner.” The “teacher” is ordered to ask the learner questions and to shock the learner if he answers incorrectly (“Milgram Experiment”).

It is 1919 in Germany. The Army's political department commands a young man named Adolf Hitler to investigate a group called the "German Workers' Party." Hitler ends up joining the group and takes over organization of the party's propaganda (*Christy's* sec. 15). The party is renamed the Nazi Party, and they adopt a flag with a swastika as their symbol. Hitler quits the army, enabling him to devote more time to his party.

The “teacher” starts off with low voltage shocks of 15 volts. With each shock the “learner” receives, the voltage is raised by 15 volts (“Milgram Experiment”).

It is 1921, and Hitler gains leadership over the German Worker's Party after threatening to quit. Hitler is an unlikely leader; he is short-legged, and has a hollow chest. He has a nervous tic in his face and is not a very imposing figure. When he speaks, he begins very nervously and his speeches are rambling (*Nizkor*). Nevertheless, Hitler is able to captivate his audience by controlling their emotions (*Nizkor*). He always speaks in the late evening when people are tired and their defenses are down. He makes dramatic entrances, usually escorted by storm troopers and a band playing a fanfare (*Nizkor*).

Hitler exercises his power cautiously at first, but in 1923 he takes over a government meeting. Nazi storm troopers seize official buildings and Hitler is arrested on account of treason (*Project GCSE* sec. 2). Though Hitler spends the next ten years in prison, he and the Nazi party get incredible publicity (*Project GCSE* sec. 5).

While Hitler is in jail he publishes *Mein Kampf*. Hitler is very devious in his writing of *Mein Kampf*. It is a glorified autobiography mixed with political propaganda, but he writes it like a fairy tale:

In this little town on the river Inn, Bavarian by blood and Austrian by nationality, gilded by the light of German martyrdom, there lived, at the end of the '80's of the last century, my parents: the father a faithful civil servant, the mother devoting herself to the cares of the household and looking after her children with eternally the same loving kindness. (qtd. in *Nizkor* sec. 1)

Sometimes the “teacher” will question the orders given by the experimenter. He is told the experimenter assumes full responsibility for any harm caused to the “learner.” The “teacher” is hesitant but continues to shock the “learner” (“Milgram Experiment”).

In 1933, Hitler is appointed chancellor to President Hindenburg of Germany. He passes the “Enabling Act” giving himself total dictatorial power over Germany. He passes the Nuremberg Laws to begin his persecution of the German Jews (*Christy's* sec. 15). Hitler gains an incredible following in the Nazi party, and his power over his party is almost like magic: “He gazed into the police officer's

eye with that fatal hypnotizing and irresistible glare, which swept the poor officer right off his feet. Clicking to attention he confessed to me this morning: "Since last night I am a National Socialist. Heil Hitler!" (Frommer 369).

Every "teacher" continued to shock the "learner" with up to 300 volts of electricity. 65% shocked the "learner" with the maximum, lethal 450 volts ("Milgram Experiment").

It is 1939. Hitler has just set up the concentration camp Auschwitz. This is just one of the many camps where millions of people will die. Jews are herded from ghettos to the death camps. Women, children and older men who could not work are killed first (Nizkor sec. 1). At the camps the Jews are gassed, shot, die of starvation or disease. Hitler's "final plan" begins to extend beyond Germany. He reaches Norway, France, Italy, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, Yugoslavia, and Greece. Hitler succeeds in killing over six million Jews (Nizkor sec. 1).

An old man stood in the front of our classroom with a thick Polish accent. His raspy voice quivered as he described his time in Auschwitz. He rolled up his sleeve displaying the numbers on his arm to our wide eyes. He was one of the few who survived Hitler's plan. He had watched his entire family die. However, he said he was lucky. Standing in line for the gas chambers, he says God told him how to escape. He crept into one of the outhouses and crawled through one of the holes into a container of raw sewage. He waited there five hours until dark.

He cried as he told us of the ugliness prisoners resorted to in order to survive. A young boy had saved half of his piece of bread from his morning ration. Afraid someone would steal it from him, the boy asked his father to hold it. That night the boy asked for his bread from his father, and his father replied, "I ate your bread, you should not have trusted me with your food." That night the boy died in his sleep.

The "touch - proximity condition" is added. The "teachers" now must hold the hand of the person, on a shock plate, for any shocks given above 150 volts. Thirty - two percent of the teachers held the hand of the "learner," on a shock plate, for shocks in excess of 400 volts ("Milgram Experiment").

The Nazis follow through with Hitler's plan to exterminate the Jews. Many of the soldiers who work at the death camps were not even members of the Nazi party originally. However, most follow orders obediently. Anton Lauer, Police Reserve Battalion 9, will never forget the horrors of the Holocaust:

There were two gas-vans in use. I saw them myself. They were driven into the prison yard and the Jews - men, women and children - had to get into the van directly from the cell. I also saw the inside of the gas-vans. They were lined with metal and there was a wooden grille on the floor. The exhaust gases were fed into the inside of the van. I can still today hear the Jews knocking and shouting "Dear Germans, let us out." (qtd. in *Shamash*)

Stanley Milgram conducted his experiment in the 1950s to observe peer pressure and the power of authority. The “learners” were never shocked, they were only actors paid to react to the “voltage.” The “teachers,” though, saw them screaming, pleading with the “teachers” to stop, and even held the “learners” hands as they shocked them, but few stopped. Milgram observed one of the “teachers” as an

initially poised and mature businessman enter the laboratory smiling and confident. Within 20 minutes, he was reduced to a twitching, stuttering wreck, who was rapidly approaching nervous collapse. He constantly pulled on his ear lobe, and twisted his hands. At one point he pushed his fist into his forehead and muttered “Oh God, lets stop it.” And yet he continued to respond to every word of the experimenter, and obeyed to the end (“Milgram Experiment”).

We are taught to obey authority from the time we are born. “Because I said so” echoes through our head as children. We obey our parents, teachers, and coaches, often with blind faith. If an authority figure offers us guidance, we trust he or she is doing so in our best interest. If you walked into a laboratory, would you refuse to follow the experimenter's instructions? You won't be held accountable for your actions.

Just push the button. Heil Hitler! They wouldn't really allow you to hurt anyone. The “learner” shouldn't have volunteered for the experiment if he knew he was going to be shocked. “All evil assumes the living shape of the Jew!” This isn't your fault. You don't want to make a scene. “Dear Germans, let us out.” Go ahead push the button. Just do it. Push the button. It won't be that bad after the first few times. Push it, you're strong. You don't even have to look. Go! Do it! Push the button!

Make all the excuses you need to. Millions of people just died.

Works Cited

- Christy's Garden Of History*. 7 Nov 2000 <<http://www.smokylake.com/Christy/hitler.htm>>.
- Frommer. *Blood and Banquets*. New York: Harper Bros. 1942.
- "The Milgram Experiment." *New Life Community Church*. 7 Nov 2000 <<http://www.new-life.net/milgram.htm>>.
- The Nizkor Project*. Ed. Ken McVay. 7 Nov 2000. <<http://www.nizkor.org/hweb/people/h/hitler- adolf/oss-papers/text/oss-profile-02.html>>.
- Project GCSE*. Ed. Matthew Woolland. 16 Nov 2000 <<http://www.projectgcse.co.uk/history/putsch.htm>>.
- Shamash: The Jewish Network Holocaust Home Page*. 6 Oct 2000. Hebrew College. 16 Nov 2000 <<http://www.shamash.org/holocaust/denial/testimony.txt>>.