

# Bearing Witness –

The Story of a Holocaust Survivor's Journey from Escape to Being a Forensic Psychiatrist Specializing in Homicide

**Emanuel Tanay, M.D., is the author of *Passport to Life: Autobiographical Reflections on the Holocaust* and *Legal Injustice: Behind the Scenes with an Expert Witness***

**I do not use the word “evil” because it contains too much religious zeal and because it interferes with having empathy, even for one’s enemies, that might allow us to understand them and be ourselves survivors.**

Interviewed by Richard Gull, Ph.D.  
Photos by Joni Strickfaden

(Editors' Note: As we move further away from the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, the history of the Holocaust may feel distant from our Ann Arbor lives. Yet we still have survivors of the Holocaust in our midst, and it remains powerful and affecting to hear from them — to hear their stories, and imbibe their wisdom. We were approached a few months ago by Richard Gull, Professor Emeritus of Philosophy, University of Michigan, because he wanted to interview Dr. Emanuel Tanay for the *Crazy Wisdom Journal*. Knowing Richard Gull and having heard about Emanuel Tanay, we readily agreed.)

*Dr. Emanuel Tanay (his nickname is Emek) was born into a middle class Jewish family in a small town in Poland in 1928. Nazi Germany invaded Poland in 1939 and the extermination of the Jews began in 1942. His father procured a birth certificate giving Emek a non-Jewish name and allowing him to enter a Catholic monastery as a novitiate. After a year, one of his teachers strongly suspected that Emek was really a Jew, so he quickly left. He helped his mother, sister, and girlfriend escape from Poland to Hungary through Nazi occupied Europe. After the liberation, he returned to his hometown in Poland. He discovered that his father had been executed for hiding a Jew by Amon Goeth, head of the Plaszov labor camp (Goeth is portrayed in Schindler's List by Ralph Fiennes). Returning to Budapest, the family then went to Munich for six years. Emek received a medical degree and the family came to America. He tells this story in *Passport to Life: Autobiographical Reflections on the Holocaust* (2004). He then became a psychiatrist and an expert witness in murder trials. In a recent book, *American Legal Injustice: Behind the Scenes with an Expert Witness* (2010), he discusses his work on and views of high profile cases like Ted Bundy, Sam Sheppard, Jack Ruby, and John Hinckley.*

*In spite of his experiences in the Holocaust, Emek is optimistic about the future. He says: “Every survivor is a hero. Every survivor needed resourcefulness and the courage to endure. These attributes made them successful after the war.” Yet he warns of religions and ideologies that lead to hatred and genocidal killing. Why tell this story? To quote Eli Wiesel (from his book, *And the Sea is Never Full*): “Long ago, over there, far from the living, we told ourselves over and over that if we were to come out alive, we would devote every moment of our lives to denouncing by word and deed the cynicism and silence of mankind toward victims past and future.”*

**Richard Gull:** You are a survivor of the Holocaust. You tell your story in your 2004 book *Passport to Life: Autobiographical Reflections on the Holocaust*. You have also had a long and successful career as a forensic psychiatrist and expert witness in murder trials. You tell that story in your 2010 book *American Legal Injustice: Behind the Scenes with an Expert Witness*. You write: “My professional life was, for the most part, devoted to the study of people who killed someone; people who wanted to kill me dominated the early part of my life.”

**Dr. Emanuel Tanay:** That is correct, I am a survivor of the Holocaust. And maybe one should add that I am from Poland, because Poland was the killing grounds of Nazi Germany. In Eastern Europe that's where the Germans behaved without any kind of restraints.

**Richard Gull:** Wasn't there a greater percentage of the Jewish population wiped out in Poland than in Germany itself?

**Dr. Emanuel Tanay:** In Germany, itself, the percentage of German Jews killed was a proportionally small fraction of what happened in Poland. First of all, Poland had the largest number of Jews in the world, i.e., three and a half million. Germany at the highest point had maybe six hundred thousand Jews in a country of 60 million. Hitler encouraged emigration, so that by 1939, when the war started, there were only 200,000 Jews in Germany. By comparison, out of thirty-some million Poles, you had three and a half million Jews, more than ten percent of the population.

**It took a teenager to take risks and do certain things that an adult was not up to. I arranged through various contacts for us to escape from occupied Poland to Hungary.**

**Richard Gull:** You come from a small town in Poland named Miechow and your family was middle class.

**Dr. Emanuel Tanay:** My father was a dentist and my mother was a physician dentist. There was a distinction in Poland.

**RG:** September 1939 is when the Nazis came into Poland. What happened to you then?

**ET:** On September 1, 1939, Nazi Germany invaded Poland and within two weeks Poland was defeated. Most Jews attempted to flee, to go east, and my parents did, too. But the German army came from two directions. We had to return to our town. The extermination process did not begin until about late 1941.

**RG:** How did you become separated from your parents? How old were you?

**ET:** I was 14 years old when my mother, through an acquaintance, arranged for me to be accepted at a well-known monastery in Krakow, not as a Jew, but as a Pole. Polish Jews were not assimilated, unlike the German Jews, so it was very difficult for a Jew to pretend that he wasn't a Jew. But I came from an assimilated family, which meant that I spoke perfect Polish. It was the only language I knew at the time. I was already somewhat familiar with the Catholic practices. My father secured a birth certificate from a priest who was his patient. The birth certificate was in the name of Janek Wojcik. I entered the monastery under that name and studied for the priesthood.

**RG:** So what was that experience like for you?

**ET:** It was extremely difficult. I didn't know the prayers so I had to learn them. I was assigned to a choir but didn't know the songs, so I pretended by lip-syncing. Due to the constant danger of betrayal, my motivation to learn was quite high. I learned prayers in Latin, the history of the Church, and the Saints, and so on. But posing as another person was tricky. The birth certificate my father got was of a peasant boy my age who was born in a village. In Poland peasants spoke a peasant idiom, but I came from a cultured family and spoke a Polish that didn't go with my name.

A good friend of mine in the monastery, about my age, was, like me, named Janek (John in English). In Poland you didn't celebrate birthdays. Instead you celebrated Name's Day, the celebration day of the saint who is your namesake. I made the mistake one time of assuming that my Name's Day was when John the Baptist's day was celebrated (my friend's namesake), whereas John Chrysostom (my namesake) is a

different date. I did not know that my patron saint was John Chrysostom. This confusion nearly revealed my true identity. Ironically, I now know more about Catholicism than Judaism.

**RG:** How did your time in the monastery end?

**ET:** One of my teachers in the monastery, a really dedicated anti-Semite, preached often how wonderful it was that the Germans were getting rid of our Jews. After a year in the monastery (it was 1943), he approached me and asked me some questions and then corrected my pronunciation. And that was like a siren going off: he suspected, or knew, that I was a Jew. That very night I was afraid to sleep in my room, so I hid in the big bellows of the church organ. Incidentally, that whole episode was depicted in a documentary called *Courage to Care*, which was nominated for an Oscar. I escaped from the monastery and then lived on the run. I helped my mother, little sister, and my girlfriend, Gina (who now lives in Israel), escape from Poland. It took a teenager to take risks and do certain things that an adult was not up to. I arranged through various contacts for us to escape from occupied Poland to Hungary.

**RG:** So your family saved you by getting you into the monastery and now you are the one helping family members and your girlfriend to escape. But in the meantime what happened to your father?

**ET:** My father was educated in Vienna and spoke perfect German. He was placed in a labor camp located at the Nazi Air Force base. He had a dental office in the labor camp and treated not only the Poles who worked there but also the Germans. This was contrary to Nazi principles: a Jew was forbidden

bodily contact with an Aryan. It was called *Rassenschande*, meaning race contamination. But they had no choice since they didn't have a dentist. For a Jew to be touching a German and working on his teeth was unheard of.

**I am not religious, nor were my parents religious. Even when I was in great danger, I did not turn to a higher power.**

My father had a dental assistant named Leon Storch. Leon developed typhus. A Jew who suffered typhus was "treated" by a bullet to the head. So my father hid Leon in his office and didn't report his illness. A Gestapo man, Amon Goeth (portrayed in *Schindler's List* by Ralph Fiennes), was in charge of all the Jews in the Krakow area. When Goeth discovered that Leon suffered typhus, he shot him on the spot. He then wanted to kill my father, but the head of the Air Force base, who had the rank of Major, ordered Goeth, who was a Captain, to leave my father alone. When this Major went on vacation, Amon Goeth came to the Air Force base, picked up my father, and took him to the Plaszow labor camp. He executed my father in front of the whole camp.

**RG:** So you went with your mother, sister, and girlfriend Gina from Poland to Hungary? What was the journey like?

**ET:** It was a real exploit. We had to cross the Tatra Mountains. As I said

before, it took a teenager to function under these circumstances. At one point we had to cross a road and encountered a German patrol with dogs. Our guides, who were mountain people, escaped quickly. It seemed we had no chance of escape, but I noticed a ravine with a stream. I quickly pushed mother, sister, and Gina into the stream. Because I had read Karl May, who wrote about American Indians, I knew that walking upstream would prevent the dogs from finding us. The mountain people were conscientious enough to return the next day searching for



**“Emek” Tanay and his wife, Sandra, have been married for 41 years.**

us. To make a long story short, we made it to Hungary. That is where we were ultimately liberated in January 1945. Hungary at that time was like a paradise for Jews until March 1944 when the Germans occupied Hungary.

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**RG:** After the liberation you returned to your home in Poland seeking your father. What was the journey back to Poland like?

**ET:** Yes, I returned to my hometown. I rode on roofs of freight cars by tying myself to protrusions. I came searching for my father. I didn't know that he had been murdered until I returned. People who knew didn't tell me right away. Returning to Poland after the war was dangerous for a Jew. You have to keep in mind that in Poland there was tremendous anti-Semitism. The hatred of the Jews was so intense that it is difficult for an American to imagine. For example, when I was on false papers in Poland, a German couldn't distinguish me from a Pole. But a Pole might. When I came back to my hometown, our neighbor, Mrs. Wroblewska, begged me not to stay overnight, because they would kill me if I did. Many Jews were killed when they went back. This hatred of the Jews continued into the post-war communist era in Poland. Before the war, Jews were often accused of being communists; in the communist era, they were often accused of being capitalist sympathizers and were expelled. I resumed my false identity. I pretended not to be a Jew again. I returned to Budapest.

**RG:** So you were liberated in Budapest. Where did you go after you were liberated?

## The turning point in my forensic career came when I was asked to be an expert in the Jack Ruby case on a retrial (Ruby murdered Lee Harvey Oswald).

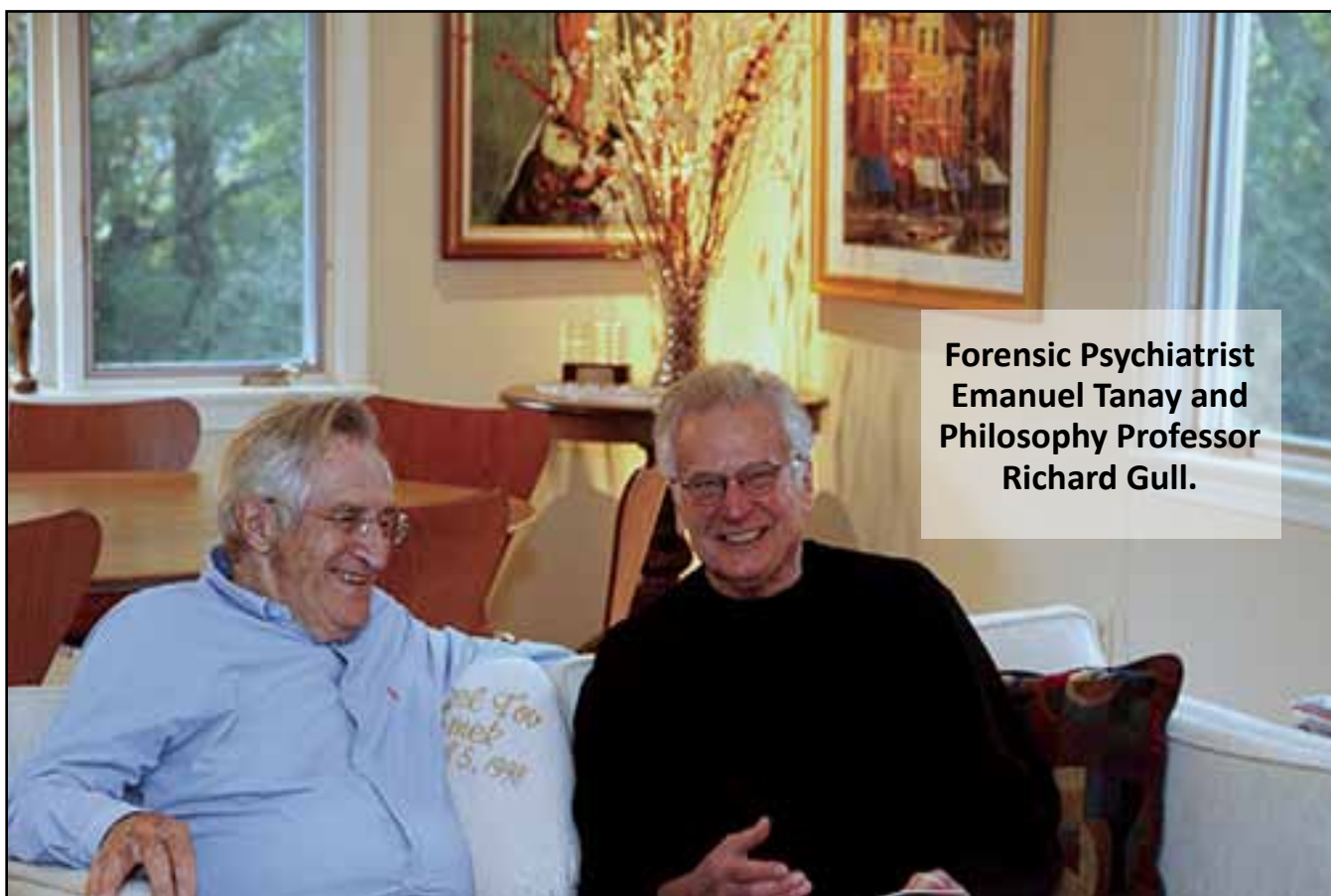
**ET:** I heard that in the occupied Germany there was now American zone, French zone, English zone. The American zone of Germany was the biggest. We went to Munich. It is bizarre, but we were perfectly safe in Germany and were given a place to live right away. There were displaced person camps, but my mother, sister, and I were not in one. The point is that no country wanted us. You couldn't go to United States; you couldn't go anywhere. Ironically, there was a Polish quota that was not oversubscribed. For the next six years we lived in Germany. I learned German. Eventually I attended medical school. I graduated from medical school and then we came to the United States because there was a new law passed called Displaced Persons Act allowing us to come to the United States. That's where I got my internship and psychiatric residency.

**RG:** How did you become a well-known expert witness in murder trials?

**ET:** While I was a psychiatric resident in Elgin State Hospital in Illinois in 1954, I had a patient named Alice, a teenager who was schizophrenic. She drowned a four-year-old boy. Because she was poor, the lawyer who defended her had no choice but to rely upon me as an expert witness. I knew very little about psychiatry at that time and my English was rudimentary. I began to study the subject and was successful in persuading the judge that she was insane. Lawyers came with other cases, even though I wasn't yet a full-fledged psychiatrist. The turning point in my forensic career came when I was asked to be an expert in the Jack Ruby case on a retrial (Ruby murdered Lee Harvey Oswald). Then I became well known.

**RG:** In your recent book about your career as a forensic psychiatrist and an expert witness, *American Legal Injustice*, you discuss the Jack Ruby case. Besides Ruby, you've been involved in a number of high profile cases like Ted Bundy, John Hinckley, Sam Sheppard, and Andrea Yates. In the case of Ted Bundy, you make the point that, unlike these others, Bundy was a psychopathic serial killer, which is rare.

**ET:** Ted Bundy was a psychopathic serial killer who ultimately confessed to murdering 30 women. He may have killed as many as a hundred women. But these cases are very rare. Yet the more crime declines, the more people fear crime because television feeds this fear night after night.



**Forensic Psychiatrist Emanuel Tanay and Philosophy Professor Richard Gull.**

**I'm 83 years old and I have cancer. Reaching old age and dying of it is an achievement of which I am proud; it is achieved, not bestowed.**

**RG:** Your book is in one sense a call to recognize the reality of mental illness and take it seriously in the law in a way it has not been. For example, the so-called insanity defense has virtually disappeared since the John Hinckley case, the would-be assassin of President Reagan. That Hinckley was sent to a mental institution was widely considered a failure of our justice system. But you defend the verdict in the Hinckley case.

**ET:** There is no doubt that the verdict was fully justified. The jury did what a jury is supposed to do, namely, they applied the law. The insanity defense exists on paper, in the textbooks of law, but in reality it is nonexistent. It doesn't matter how psychotic a person may be. Andrea Yates drowned her five children and then called the police and told them that Satan told her to do it. If she was not insane, then who is? Yet the prosecution saw to it that she was declared sane. I stopped accepting insanity cases because I said it was taking money under false pretenses. The outcome, no matter how meritorious the case, no matter how effective I would be as an expert witness, would be a rejection of the insanity defense.

**RG:** Yet many people in prison are mentally ill.

**ET:** Not far from where we are now was Ypsilanti State Hospital where I worked for a while. It had 4,000 patients. You know what's on the grounds of the state hospital now? There is a "correctional" institution otherwise known as a prison. At one time, there were 600,000 psychotics in state hospitals. At this time, there are virtually no state hospitals, no mental institutions. All you have is psychiatric hospitals where a psychotic can be admitted for days, maybe weeks. It's not unusual for a psychotic to have been admitted 12, 14 times. Until he or she commits a crime and ends up in jail.

Half of the prison population suffers from mental illness. So what has happened? We closed the state hospitals and replaced them by prisons. This is dreadful from a humanitarian point of view and ridiculous from a fiscal point of view. A psychotic person in prison cost \$30-40,000 a year. The mental institutions were communities for the mentally ill. Patients worked there and had a setting suited to their needs.

**RG:** Why do you think these mental institutions were done away with? They got a bad name as reflected in the 1976 movie *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*.

**ET:** At the end of the Vietnam War, there were these idealistic liberals who, together with fiscal conservatives, got together and abolished the system. There was a lack of comprehension of what psychosis is. We have no cure for schizophrenia. The medications don't cure and don't even significantly change it.

**R.G.:** You contributed a system of classifications of homicides to the psychiatric literature.

**E.T.:** I proposed a classification of homicides based on personality structure. According to Freud, the anatomy of personality consists of the ego or self;

the id or the unconscious; and the superego or conscience. Behavior consistent with one's personality is egosyntonic; behavior that is contrary to one's self-image is egodystonic. Behavior caused by psychosis is psychotic; a psychotic killing is motivated by delusions. A homicide (every killing of human by a human is a homicide) is egosyntonic when carried out in accordance with the conscious wishes of the actor. Examples would be a policeman killing a fleeing criminal or a soldier killing the enemy in war. An impulsive killing is usually egodystonic, contrary to the wishes of the individual. Most homicides are impulsive (or egodystonic in my terminology) and committed not by criminals but by people who know each other.

**R.G.:** You argue in your book that Jack Ruby's killing of Oswald was impulsive. They did not know each other. Would you explain that?

**E.T.:** There is convincing evidence that Ruby did not plan to be in the basement of the Dallas Police Department Headquarters contrary to the conspiracy theory that Ruby was part of a plot to silence Oswald. Ruby just happened along when the transfer of Oswald to the county jail was taking place. He had been running errands and had left his beloved dog Sheba in his car, which he would not have done knowing that he would be going to jail. And he always carried the concealed weapon that he used on Oswald. The famous elevator door opens and Ruby fires the fatal shot. Ruby's killing of Oswald was impulsive or egodystonic.

**RG:** So both your early life and later life brought you into contact with killers. In your later life, you arrive at an analysis of acts of killing, like whether they are impulsive (or egodystonic) or the act of a sadistic psychopath, while in your early life you experienced first-hand another type of killing resulting from genocidal ideology. Was Amon Goeth, who murdered your father and many others, a psychopathic serial killer?

**E.T.:** No, Amon Goeth, like most perpetrators of genocide, thought of himself as doing "God's" work. Genocides are always carried out in the name of a "good" or "holy" cause. Goeth's killings were egosyntonic for him.

**R.G.:** But Goeth had the wrong God. His religion was Nazi ideology. Do you consider yourself to be a religious person? Are you a spiritual person? If one and not the other, how do you distinguish between the two in your own mind?

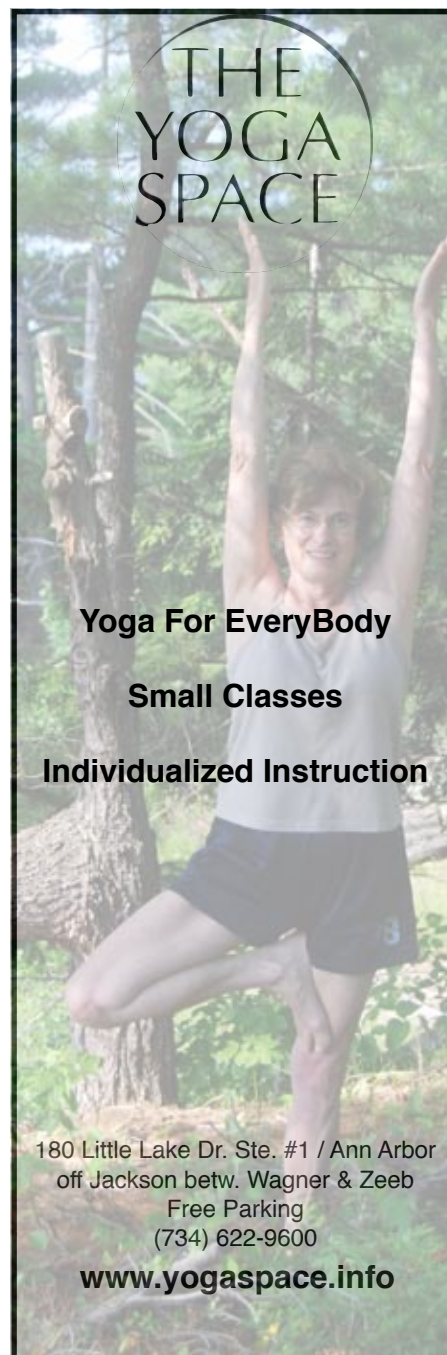
**E.T.:** I am not religious, nor were my parents religious. Even when I was in great danger, I did not turn to a higher power. After the war, some orthodox Jews argued that non-orthodox Jews brought about the Holocaust. I find this perplexing. Being an amateur student of religion, I think that many bad things have been brought about by religion. Religion and ideology have inspired genocidal hatred.

**If you did something to annoy me, I could express my anger directly to you and resolve the matter. But if your priest or rabbi tells you that you are not measuring up, you cannot express your anger directly because your religion cannot be the object of your anger. So this anger is suppressed and becomes rage. If rage, which must be expressed by some means, is suppressed, it comes out as hatred. Oppressed people need hated scapegoats as objects for their suppressed rage.**

In 1915, in the Ottoman Empire, Armenian Christians became victims of genocide. It takes hatred to perpetrate genocide because genocide is killing people for no other reason than their identity. Nazi ideology declared that the lives of Jews are "life unworthy of living." When the Israelites went to Canaan, the Canaanites did not just pick up and leave — they had to be killed. Most theologians agree that historically Christianity laid the foundations for the Holocaust starting in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D. when Christianity became the official religion of Rome. Christianity laid the foundations for the Holocaust by propagating a hatred for and persecution of the Jews. In November 1938, on Kristallnacht, Jewish shops were attacked in a pogrom in Germany and Austria and a hundred Jews were killed. It was a harbinger of things to come.

The September 11 attacks may similarly be a harbinger of something larger — at worst a humanicide. But I remain an optimist, perhaps because of my experience of the Holocaust. I do not use the word "evil" because it contains too much religious zeal and because it interferes with having empathy, even for one's enemies, that might allow us to understand them and be ourselves survivors.

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**R.G.:** Would you say that you are a spiritual person?

**E.T.:** I'm not sure what is meant by spiritual. Obviously, I am a person who pays attention to human feelings and intellectual reflections. I am interested in philosophical issues. In spite of my experience of the Holocaust, I am optimistic about the future. If you call that spiritual, then I am spiritual.

**R.G.:** You have said that you don't like calling the perpetrators of genocides evil? What would you call that other side, that dark side, if not the force of evil?

**E.T.:** I would call it a combination of oppression and hatred. Some religions and ideologies suppress rage and create hatred. If you are an orthodox Jew, your religion tells you which foot you are to put on the ground first when you wake up in the morning. If you are a devout Catholic, you don't engage in contraception. The most oppressive religions and ideologies control your life from A to Z.

## Another consequence of being a survivor is that I never read fiction.

Many people willingly subject themselves to these rules because that is their religion or ideology. Yet they can never live up to the expectations. You are a sinner; you are unworthy. Or if you are a communist, you are never quite a totally good communist. If you did something to annoy me, I could express my anger directly to you and resolve the matter. But if your priest or rabbi tells you that you are not measuring up, you cannot express your anger directly because your religion cannot be the object of your anger. So this anger is suppressed and becomes rage. If rage, which must be expressed by some means, is suppressed, it comes out as hatred. Oppressed people need hated scapegoats as objects for their suppressed rage.

**RG:** The song from *South Pacific* says that we have to be "carefully taught to hate all the people our relatives hate." But your view is the opposite.

**ET:** Yes, the opposite. You have to be carefully taught not to hate because you don't have to teach a child to project his or her rage. A little child runs into a table. Who does he blame? His mother. When he becomes an adult, if he hasn't really matured, he might now blame the Jews. So I say that anybody who has been an infant has the potential to be an anti-Semite, a hater. Certain religions and ideologies are breeding grounds of hate when they declare certain kinds of people to be unfit for living. Every genocide is committed in the name of a "good" cause. Hitler said he was protecting the Aryan race, whatever that is, from destruction by the Jews. Every genocide is presented as self-defense, because hated qualities are projected onto the groups that are its victims out of hatred.

**RG:** As you look back on the events of 70 years ago, at the Holocaust, what are your current day thoughts and insights about that time in your life? Have there been any "gifts" that have emanated from that experience?

**ET:** My friend Elie Wiesel, a well-known survivor, has said that he did nothing to survive. But I disagree with him. Every survivor is a hero. Every survivor needed resourcefulness and the courage to endure. These attributes made them successful in life after the war. It is true that we all suffered from what we now call post-traumatic stress syndrome.

For myself, I have found that I have the ability to make good judgments about my family, my friends, my employees, my patients. I think my early experiences gave me an intuitive feel for people. I developed an intuitive sense of who to trust. Once, during that time, I had to entrust myself and members of my family to a Gestapo man who claimed to be a Serb in order to escape.

Another gift is gratitude. Cicero said that gratitude is not only a virtue, it is the greatest of the virtues. I am grateful for all of the many people who helped me survive. Another attribute of survivors is that they are not haters. Hate was characteristic of the perpetrators, but not the survivors. My analyst thought it odd that I did not hate the Germans after the war. I explained to him that hatred would not have been useful for survival.

Another consequence of being a survivor is that I never read fiction. In Germany, I once read an article in which the author wrote that my ability to empathize often fails me at the doorstep of my next-door neighbor, and yet fiction asks me to shed crocodile tears about some imaginary disasters.

**R.G.:** Are there ironies and lessons from having worked professionally with forensic psychiatry after the murderous insanity that you witnessed firsthand on a societal scale?

**E.T.:** I discovered studying homicides that they are perpetrated either by criminals or by people acting impulsively. There is a vast difference between the two groups. The people who were out to kill me were, they thought, acting in a noble cause. Most people are basically good, but one wouldn't know that by watching crimes enacted on television or in the movies. I believe in the goodness of human beings in spite of the fact of our history of slavery, genocide, and so on. The fact is that the civilization we have is based on cooperation. We all cooperate with each other. We focus on the "evil" deeds, but we would not be where we are without helpfulness, cooperativeness, call it love or anything you want.

So there is this struggle between those two forces. I believe that the force of cooperation we observe in the animal kingdom has been perfected in *homo sapiens* and our civilization is based upon it. People who claim that some invisible hand of the market will make everything right are mistaken. It takes people who get together and form a community and a government, who are people of good will, for society to survive.

**R.G.:** You came of age in a cruel, inhuman, and dark world. What is your view of Ann Arbor, where you now live?

**E.T.:** I was in Ann Arbor in the 50s in a post-graduate program while I worked at Ypsilanti State Hospital. I loved Ann Arbor then. So, when I retired 10 years ago, I decided to come back. I call it a mini-New York. It has some of the advantages of New York without many of the disadvantages. There are so many young people here who are enthusiastic. It is so encouraging to walk the streets and see the energy, the interest, and the future of this country.

I inherited my optimism from my parents. My optimism, I believe, was necessary for my survival. And it is necessary for our survival as a civilization. I'm 83 years old and I have cancer. Reaching old age and dying of it is an achievement of which I am proud; it is achieved, not bestowed. In spite of the early misery inflicted on me, I have had a good life. I have had three children and have six grandchildren. My children are successful and optimistic, and I like to think I've passed that on to them. I've been happily married to my wife Sandra for 41 years. She was raised in Traverse City and had a rather strict Lutheran upbringing. She has, however, mastered the art of Jewish cooking.

*The interviewer, Richard Gull, can be contacted at: rgull@umich.edu.  
Emanuel Tanay can be reached at: drtanay@umich.edu.*

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