

Confronting the history, learning the lessons

By Serafina Orekhova

Albert Einstein once said, “The world is a dangerous place to live, not because of the people who are evil, but because of the people who don't do anything about it.” The quote vividly comes to mind while thinking of the atrocities that the Nazi regime engendered. We expect that there are certain boundaries set by some presumably universal, simple moral code. The idea of people being able to consciously cause suffering to others of their own kind thus becomes inconceivable, and the reliance on some common virtue seems apparent even in the Hippocratic Oath: "I will prescribe regimens for the good of my patients according to my ability and my judgment". Yet, what happens when a person making decision that affect the course of the other's life has no regard for the social contract and or is incapable of processing emotions? Moreover, besides of the abundance of subjects devoid of any empathy in the society, there are also conditions that could turn susceptible individuals into monsters, as it was once was demonstrated in the course of the Milgram experiment.

It was a challenging task to deal with the topic of the medical torture. Most schoolbooks will give a straightforward account of the past events in a matter-of-fact, parabolic kind of manner, listing the crimes committed and leaving blank space for silent grief. However, rarely would they invite the reader to challenge their own moral standards. Similarly, in the course of our work, we discovered that many ethical issues continue to stir debate and many still remain unaddressed. The project turned into a test our own moral consistency.

As it was concluded by Baruch C. Cohen: Any analysis that fails to see realistically the Nazi data as a blood soaked document fails to comprehend fully the magnitude of the issue. From this point of view it is impossible to go any further, no matter which perspective you take to look at the subject of medical torture, it outrages your conscience. The 'data' obtained in the laboratories of the Nazi doctors represents nothing more than the appalling carnage, and its use for any reference is therefore profoundly immoral.

However, discussing our subject within the group, the comments received were often marked with certain ambivalence. Confronted with the topic, participants would either

express their lament or would simply remain silent. In fact, the mere mention of horror is taboo, the stories of it cannot be vocalized without causing a general malaise. There were also a few suggestions to attempt to find any comprehensible motive, or redeeming merit of the horrors committed by the Nazi perpetrators. The bitter truth was becoming apparent – continual fluctuation of moral values is intrinsic to human beings, whenever possible, we avoid putting our ethical conscience to the test, we tend to hide behind what we call reasoning, which in certain cases cannot be applied. Therefore, we must ensure the rule of law to protect us from ourselves.

In December 1948 the Declaration of human rights marked the recognition of the inalienable rights of human beings, and the Declaration of Helsinki signed in June 1964 provided the extension in the case of medical ethics. 'In medical research on human subjects, considerations related to the well-being of the human subject should take precedence over the interests of science and society'.

The principle that was adopted too late to save tens of millions of lives in WWII can now serve to protect the vulnerable groups of the present. Doing 'something about' the evil that lives in our society in the form of ignorance and indifference in regard to the past would be commemorating history, and cherishing those qualities that make us truly human.