Source C: Charles Fenyvesi Reflects on a Conversation with Martin Himler

For use on Day 2 of the lesson "Snapshots in the Life and Power of Martin Himler"

Notes & Instructions

This piece by author and columnist Charles Fenyvesi appeared in the December 16, 2003 edition of *The New York Times*. In it, Fenyvesi reflects on a conversation he had with Martin Himler years ago, prior to Himler's death, in which Himler revealed a secret to him. Read and discuss it with your partner/small group, then respond to the questions that follow..

The capture of Saddam Hussein frees me from a promise of secrecy I made to a retired colonel of the Office of Strategic Services, the precursor to the CIA, in 1957. I was in my first year of college, and an old family friend called me to say that a friend of his who also knew my family was at his house for a visit and wanted to talk to me.

I knew the visitor by reputation: retired OSS officer Martin Himler, publisher and editor in chief of a Hungarian American newspaper who was recruited to work for the OSS during the war and became head of the Hungarian section. In occupied Germany it was his job to track down, arrest, interrogate and eventually return to Hungary suspected Hungarian war criminals.

In 1957 Himler was a bald, little old man in his sixties, but he was still muscular and quick on his feet. He had emigrated to the United States as a young man. He came from a Hungarian village not far from where my family lived. He was Jewish, and I remembered his name mentioned as one of several men who had been in love with my Aunt Elza, a red-haired, soft-spoken beauty whose life ended in Auschwitz.I called him Uncle Martin, as young people in the old country are expected to call their elders. He asked about members of my family. He knew who survived World War II and who did not, and he asked only about those who survived.

He asked me whether I knew that he had interrogated Ferenc Szalasi, head of the Arrow Cross, Hungary's equivalent of the Nazi Party, and the head of state for several months after the Nazi putsch of October 1944. I said yes and added that I also knew about the U.S. award he received for his interrogation of 71 Hungarian Nazi leaders in the summer of 1945 in Austria.

I passed a test. "There is something I need to tell you," he said, and he took the long breath of a man ready to unburden himself of a secret. "But could you keep it to yourself?" I said yes.

Himler told me that he was stern and impersonal, suppressing all emotion. His job was to gather information and report back to the OSS. He had completed at least a dozen interviews before he decided to have Szalasi brought into his office.

Himler said he barely looked at the man when asking the basic questions: name, place and year of birth. Szalasi answered, then he said that as a head of state, he was not required to answer any further questions.

Ignoring the comment, Himler asked the next question: “What is your profession?”

Szalasi said: “The leader of the nation.”

“Suddenly I lost my self-control,” Himler told me. “I got up from my chair, walked over to Szalasi, who stood ramrod-straight, and I slapped him on the face so hard that he staggered and almost fell. I walked back to my desk and sat down. After Szalasi straightened himself up, he said that he was ready to answer all my questions.”

Himler looked at me and said: “To this day I am ashamed of what I did. As an American officer I shouldn’t have resorted to violence with a prisoner of war.” Himler stared at the carpet in front of him. “Don’t tell anyone what I have done,” he said, “but knowing your family, I wanted to share my secret with you.”

“Uncle Martin,” I burst out, “you slapped that murderer for my family too, for those who perished like my Aunt Elza and those who survived. You have nothing to be ashamed of.”

Himler got up and kissed me on both cheeks. “Thank you,” he said.

Himler died many years ago. His memoirs do not mention a word about the slap. Nor does he mention my beautiful aunt.

Szalasi was hanged in Budapest. Nearly a half-century after Himler told his story, I am watching video images of American soldiers checking Saddam Hussein for lice and taking some of his saliva to collect a DNA sample. Soldiers of a democratic nation captured a tyrant and a mass murderer, and gave him the kind of human treatment he and his henchmen never accorded to those who disagreed with him. Two sets of standards, two kinds of humanity. But I will not criticize Himler for his loss of self-control, for his momentary lapse of appropriate conduct. I think he had nothing to be ashamed of, and I think that after 46 years his secret can be told. I admire the rules of civilized behavior, but victims and others outraged by mass murder cannot always hold back.

I watch Saddam Hussein on television, but the men I see in my mind’s eye are Szalasi, Hitler, and Stalin.

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1. What types of power seem present in this article? What types of power seem absent?

2. Thinking critically about this article as a historical source, is there anything that it makes possible or empowers? Is there anything that it prevents or challenges?

3. How does this article make you feel? Why might you feel either connected or disconnected from it?

About the Source

Citation:

Fenyvesi, Charles. “Two Men, One Evil.” *The Washington Post*, December 16, 2003.