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Who is Steve Moff?

Attorney/Professor Moff is known locally as the thoughtful German semester exchange program advisor and teacher at Pennsylvania College of Technology. Steve is primarily involved in teaching business at the college and other places around the world. However, Steve has a passion that has changed the world and doubtless has saved more lives than we can ever know.

As part of his interest in the German language, Professor Moff has developed a great concern for Holocaust survivors; Jews and non-Jews who survived World War II's catastrophic destruction of the European Jewish people. Moff, frequently using his own money, has traveled to Germany on many occasions and has filmed more than 100 hours of survivor stories. The good Professor then will bring Germans to America to speak about their experiences, to be further recorded, and to reach out to children.

Steve Moff's latest achievement is to bring Karl Rom to Williamsport and the Philadelphia area. Rom is one of the few German-Jews who chose to go back and live in Germany after the war. The horrors of World War II destroyed well over 1,000 years of Judaism in Europe. Very few Jews wanted to go anywhere near Germany or Eastern Europe after the war, but Karl Rom was an exception. Until his grandson nagged him to speak about his wartime experiences, Rom, like many survivors, preferred to try to forget what happened to him and his family members.

What is it that motivates people like Steve Moff, a Catholic Williamsporter, to work so hard on behalf of decency and humanity? Doubtless his soul is just a good one. We could try to come up with all kinds of fancy reasons why the good Lord blessed us with people like Steve Moff, but all that really matters is what he does and the impact it has on others. I looked around the Community Theater at perhaps 200 people listening while Karl Rom spoke.

The questions that many of the listeners at the Community Arts Theater asked of Karl Rom when he spoke, through an interpreter, about his World War II experiences, were almost as revealing as the comments themselves. Three items are worth focusing on:

1. The local people. The citizens of Lithuania were bloodthirsty in their desire to help the Germans in their slaughter of the Jews. That did not happen in every country. In Bulgaria and Denmark, where the citizens were not anxious to help the Germans, very few Jews died. In Poland, Hungary, Lithuania, Russia and many other Eastern European countries, the local people were "Hitler's Willing Executioners." One person or a small group of people can make a difference;
2. It was not the SS alone. Popular wisdom has it that Adolf Hitler acted with a small cadre of people, including the brown-shirted storm-troopers, in his destruction of more than six million Jews. As modern scholarship has shown, Hitler could not have done it without the strong support of the Wehrmacht, the German Army, the German people, and the locals in the countries of Eastern Europe which were ridden of their Jews;
3. Why did all of this happen? Rom's answer was understandable from a simple man whose parents owned a restaurant and was merely swept up in a tsunami of World War II; he did not know. Rom could not explain to the audience why Germany and Eastern Europe were so anxious to murder Jews that even friends turned against the Jewish people in their hour of need. There were heroic gentiles who are honored today in Israel for saving Jewish lives, but they were few and far between. Perhaps a few thousand Jewish people were saved here and there, but it was nothing compared to the mass slaughter which occurred.

The third question is more difficult to answer. The history of Europe is a history of anti-Semitism. The Jews settled peaceably in nations from Spain and France across Eastern Europe, before Christianity had even been adopted in those countries. Some of those Jews came as merchants and travelers, and others were brought by Julius Caesar's conquering army. The Jews served as soldiers, provisioners, and ordinary citizens. Cleopatra, in Egypt, was said to have had the highest opinion of her Jewish soldiers who supported her throughout her many civil wars. In return for that, Cleopatra gave the Jews the right to utilize their synagogue in the ancient city of Alexandria.

With the rise of the church-state in Europe, anti-Semitism was close to follow. The early church, through the time of Pope Paul XXIII, either used the Jews as pawns in its battle with civil government, or simply were the most horrid persecutors. The first crusade in Europe was accompanied by calls of "let's first kill the infidels in our own lands" and most of the Jews in the Rhineland, which later became Germany, were murdered. Jews were murdered in France, and in 1492 the entire Jewish community of Spain was expelled from that country. Long flow the tears that Jewish eyes have cried at the virtual destruction of its people in Christian Europe. Modern churchmen have asked for forgiveness of the Jewish people, and in most instances have received it.

Germany and Eastern Europe, during hard economic times, were ripe for an orgy of anti-Semitism beginning in the late 1930's. The crime against humanity, which was the Holocaust, was the "final solution" to the Jewish problem that had vexed Europe for well over a millennia. That problem was that the Jews had survived and continued to practice their faith notwithstanding every pressure for Israel to abandon its sacred calling.

Indeed, as the Bible says, Israel has wrestled with G-d and man and has prevailed. No understanding of the Holocaust is complete without an appreciation for the role of the teaching of hatred over many years. Just as we can learn to murder, we can learn to be tolerant. The choice, as individuals and a nation, is ours to make.

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