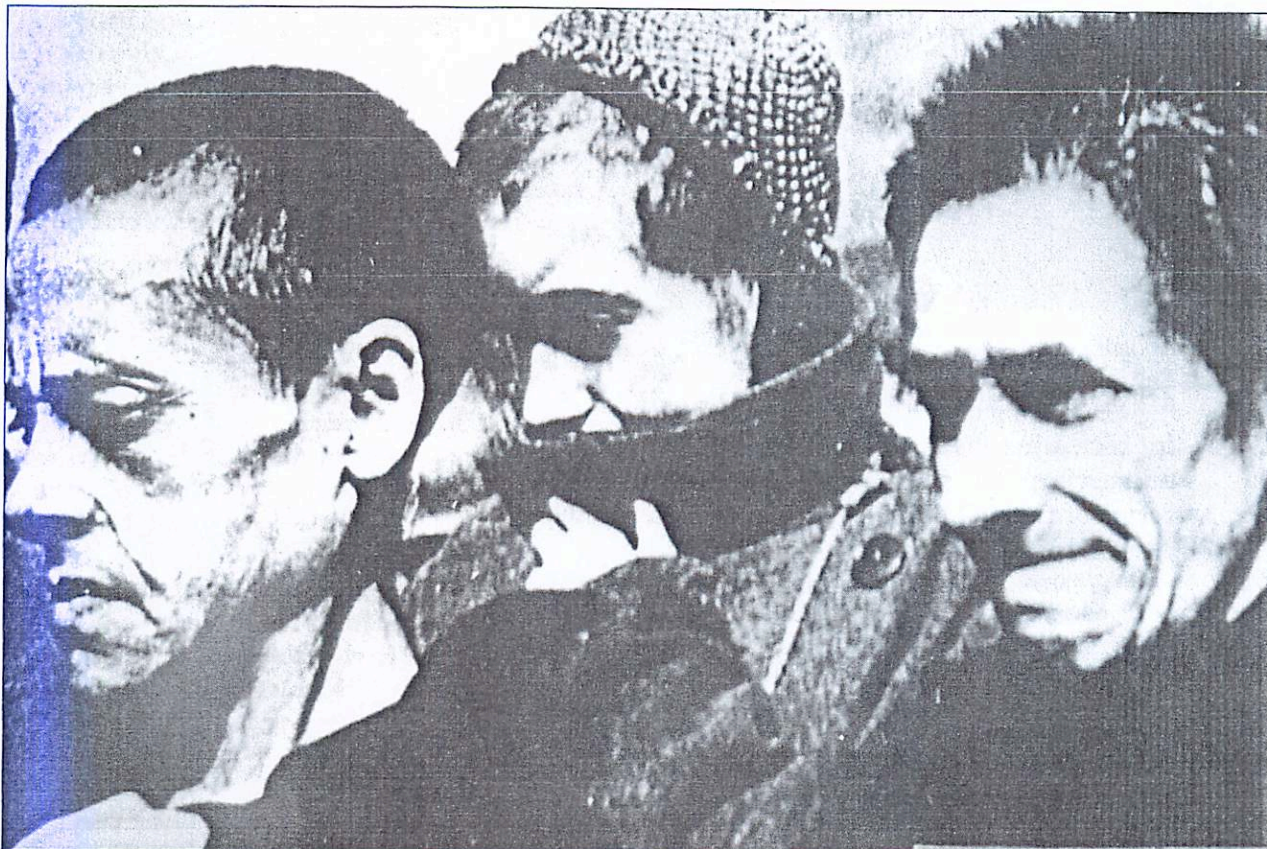


Tainted Legacy: Remembering the Warsaw Ghetto

Lawrence L. Langer



Does Holocaust “remembrance” have redemptive power? Although this assumption has nurtured an extensive commentary on the Holocaust, it is at odds, linguistically and ultimately factually, with the reality of the survivors’ memory. In framing the Holocaust through the lens of heroic rhetoric, Holocaust chroniclers exhibit their own discomfort with the facts left to us by Holocaust victims, dead and alive, and reveal the inadequacy of our language in the face of what there is to tell.

When the German administrator of the Warsaw ghetto told Adam Czerniakow, president of the Warsaw

Jewish Council, that starting on July 22, 1942 he wanted 6,000 Jews daily for “resettlement” to the East, Czerniakow, undecieved, decided that he did not wish to preside over the destruction of Warsaw Jewry: The next day, he committed suicide. This is a piece of incontestable documentary evidence, but like much other evidence of this sort, it offers us no guidance.

How shall we, generations later, judge this act? Does it represent courageous defiance or a withdrawal from responsibility? Czerniakow, after all, was the leader of his community, and his voice might have summoned his fellow Jews to some act of public resistance. Decades after the war, Marek Edelman, one of the few surviving leaders of the Warsaw ghetto uprising the following spring, criticized Czerniakow for failing to make a public declaration of the truth—that the Jews were about to

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be murdered. "One should die only after having called other people into struggle," Edelman charged. He and his dead friends reproach Czerniakow "for having made his death his own private business."

But as Yisrael Gutman, also a member of the Jewish Fighting Organization during the uprising and today a distinguished Israeli historian and director of research at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, points out in defense of Czerniakow, at the time "even the various underground factions were unable to concur in an appraisal of the situation, address the masses of Jews with a common appeal, or call for resistance as a means of response." We also know from Czerniakow's diary that only two days before the deportations were to begin, he went to half a dozen Gestapo, S.S., and civilian officials seeking confirmation of the persistent rumors that a massive "resettlement" operation was about to start, and to a man they denied the rumors as utter nonsense.

Lies and deception were integral parts of the German strategy; Czerniakow's mistake was to believe what he needed and wanted to believe, but he can hardly be blamed for that, since he shared that weakness—or naiveté—with most of his fellow Jews in the ghetto. His death must have been an admission to himself that he had been a tool of the Germans all along, and a sign of his refusal to accept that role any longer. Since there was no organized resistance in the ghetto in July 1942, and little possibility of any appearing, Czerniakow seemed to have had little choice. But this does not make his final act any easier to assess so many decades later.

Edelman tells another story: When the Germans entered the ground floor of the children's hospital in the Warsaw ghetto to round up the young patients for deportation to Treblinka, on the upper floor Adina Blady Sz wajger, a Jewish doctor, was busy poisoning the sick children to

“rescue” them from that doom. “She saved these children from the gas chamber,” says Edelman. “People thought she was a hero.” This is perhaps the most bizarre definition of heroic behavior we will ever encounter. The issue is not whether the designation is correct; the issue—here, as in the case of Czerniakow’s suicide—is the poverty of traditional moral vocabulary when we address the subject of human conduct during the destruction of European Jewry.

Much writing about the Holocaust, including some works of history, illustrates the failure of language to grasp the thoroughly disruptive, not to say disintegrative impact, of that event on familiar value systems. Marek Edelman goes so far as to call the Warsaw ghetto uprising “undramatic,” because for him dramatic action depended on choice, on making a decision. The fate of every Jew in the Warsaw ghetto, including those who took part in the uprising, was predetermined by the Germans: It had already been established that they were all to be killed; any exceptions (and there were very few) would be owing to chance and luck, not choice. As a cardiologist (after the war), Edelman knew that doctors often made decisions that might save a patient’s life. But in the Warsaw ghetto, he admits, “It was always death that was at stake, not life.” The victims, especially those who joined the uprising, knew that they were supposed to die. If we raise that awareness to a public level, it means that historians of the period must accept the fact that they are writing of a moment in time without a future. The challenge to us is to try to suspend the privilege of having a future in order to enter sympathetically into the daily ordeal of human beings who could not share it.

Fortunately, we have the testimony of survivors and victims to help us make this transition, but we must be prepared to face a reality that cannot be normalized or sanitized by romantic references to heroes and martyrs. Most victims did not see themselves that way. Listen to the voice of Abraham Lewin, whose recently translated *A Cup of Tears: A Diary of the Warsaw Ghetto* is one of the most important sources providing us with an account of the daily struggle to stay alive. Lewin writes:

The proportions of life and death have radically changed. Times were, when life occupied the primary place, when it was the main and central concern, while death was a side phenomenon, secondary to life, its termination. Nowadays death rules in all its majesty; while life hardly glows under a thick layer of ashes. Even this faint glow of life is feeble, miserable and weak, poor, devoid of any free breath, deprived of any spark of spiritual



content. The very soul, both in the individual and in the community, seems to have starved and perished, to have dulled and atrophied. There remains only the needs of the body, and it leads merely an organic-physiological existence.

Those of us familiar with descriptions of the Warsaw ghetto as a model for heroic resistance and the resolute will to survive may have difficulty reconciling Lewin’s desperate portrait with that more congenial version. The conflict leads us to consider the two planes on which the event we call the Holocaust takes place in human memory—the historical and the rhetorical, the way it was and its verbal reformation, or deformation, by later commentators.

Since the Warsaw ghetto has become the emblem of Jewish resistance for many of those commentators, we need to balance the attitude based on a rhetoric of heroism with the testimony from those who were there. Probably the most important witness, in terms of the archive of documents he collected and buried, was the historian Emmanuel Ringelblum. After the war, ten cases and two milk cans of his records, diaries, journals, and historical commentary were discovered in the ruins of the ghetto. They represent an invaluable legacy of a man who tirelessly inspired a staff of writers—Abraham Lewin was one of them—to preserve for history the narrative of their people’s ruin. This was not only Ringelblum’s life work; it was also his death work, since when he had an opportunity after the uprising to be smuggled out of the country by the Polish underground, he refused. He preferred to continue writing in hiding until, in March 1944, the Gestapo discovered him and his fam-

ily and thirty-five others and executed them all.

One of the most famous passages in Ringelblum's notes is the entry for October 15, 1942, about a month after the great deportation was temporarily suspended. Writing as historian rather than psychologist, Ringelblum raises an issue that continues to trouble many students of the Holocaust today:

Why didn't we resist when they began to resettle 300,000 Jews from Warsaw? Why did we allow ourselves to be led like sheep to the slaughter? Why did everything come so easy to the enemy? Why didn't the hangmen suffer a single casualty? Why could 50 SS men (some people say even fewer), with the help of a division of some 200 Ukrainian guards and an equal number of [Latvians] carry the operation out so smoothly?

Ringelblum neglects to mention at this point the role of the Jewish police in the roundups, although he was certainly aware of it. Promised exemption for themselves and the members of their families, the Jewish police in the ghetto played an active and sometimes a brutal part in helping the Germans with their plans. They did it not out of hatred, but fear—a natural, if not a particularly commendable response. Threatened by similar dangers, victims from other nations behaved in the same way. It was a human, not a Jewish, reaction, made ironic by the fact that in the closing days of the deportations, the Jewish police and their families were themselves shipped off to Treblinka. Ringelblum's rhetorical questions reflect the despair of a man who has witnessed the disappearance of hundreds of thousands of his people. But they are also a trifle naive, and if we continue to ask them today, when we know the total has risen to the millions, we share in that naiveté.

The questions Ringelblum raises are troublesome and remind us that documentary evidence is only the beginning of our inquiry, since it provokes the need for interpretations that threaten our comfortable belief in the redeeming power of memory. Remembering the Holocaust is the most unredemptive task one can possibly imagine. Ringelblum clearly knew that many hungry victims went voluntarily to the trains in Warsaw because the Germans promised bread and marmalade to those who complied with their order. Pleas to the human spirit, to brotherhood and cooperation, to say nothing of physical resistance, usually fall on deaf ears when those appealed to are driven to the verge of death by hunger. And even when, some months later, the Jewish Fighting Organization was finally molded into a resistance group in the ghetto, it numbered only several hundred—estimates range from 250 to 800—from the more than 50,000 to

60,000 Jews who were still alive in Warsaw in April 1943. Of course, the lack of weapons helped to keep those figures low. Still, the majority of the ghetto residents chose to defend themselves from the resumption of deportations by building secret hiding places or bunkers.

We who from the safe vantage point of the future expect heroic gestures from a weakened and terrified people betray an innocence of the fundamental nature of the psychology of despair. The Germans understood it well, which is one reason why, as part of their plan for extermination, they deliberately reduced their victims to a bare minimum of physical and moral energy. We don't need to guess what this must have been like; we have ample testimony from the documents. Lewin himself records meticulously his response when during the mass deportations his wife is sent off to Treblinka. His remorse is genuine; but so is his paralysis. "Eclipse of the sun, universal blackness," he writes:

My Luba [his wife] was taken away during a blockade. . . . To my anguish, there is no prospect of rescuing her. It looks like she was taken directly into the train. Her fate is to be a victim of the Nazi bestiality, along with hundreds of thousands of other Jews. I have no words to describe my desolation. I ought to go after her, but I have no strength to take such a step.

As we survey the spectacle of Lewin remembering his wife, and his inability to do anything to save her, we begin to understand how little an expression like the "redeeming power of memory" can have for him, or for us. Holocaust memory redeems only when it falsifies; Lewin's subsequent reactions to his loss document the efforts of what I call unheroic memory to wrestle with a legacy that has tainted his consciousness with an indelible stain. The following day he writes:

I will never be consoled as long as I live. If she had died a natural death, I would not have been so stricken, so broken. But to fall into the hands of such butchers!

Lewin speaks of the tragic end of their life of twenty-one years together. But in tragedy, the victim is an agent, or at least a partial agent, in his or her own fate. We know, and as we slowly perceive, Lewin does too, that a main source of his anguish is his failure to find a role for his wife or himself in what happened to her. This fills him with an unappeasable grief: "My soul can find no peace," he records two days later, "for not having gone after her when she was in danger, even though I could also have

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TAINTED LEGACY

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disappeared.” The heroic imagination conjures up all kinds of knightly exploits that Lewin might have attempted, but these are the stuff of romantic literature or folklore, not life, and though some of us persist in imposing such exploits on the grim reality of the Holocaust, Lewin’s humble words remind us how humanly unexceptional most of us are, even in moments of extreme disaster. I think if pressed, Ringelblum might have admitted this too.

“Today is the seventh day since the great calamity that befell me,” Lewin writes after a week has passed. “If only I could die and be free of the whole nightmare. But I am still tied to life and it is still difficult for me to take my own life.” Whatever we may call his clinging to life, celebrating it as an affirmation of the human spirit, considering the immediate context of his loss, would be to misconstrue his situation and his attitude. Since virtually all surviving victims share a similar kind of loss, it is little wonder that they demur when we ply them with the rhetoric of heroic behavior. They know we do this to shield ourselves, not to praise them.

Lewin’s own vista of what lay ahead paid homage to the limitations, not the infinite vitality, of the human spirit.

“The burden on our souls and on our thoughts has become so heavy, oppressive,” he wrote, “that it is almost unbearable. I am keenly aware that if our nightmare does not end soon, then many of us, the more sensitive and empathetic natures, will break down. I feel that we are standing on the threshold of the intolerable, between existence and annihilation.” One can imagine Adam Czerniakow thinking those very words before he swallowed his poison.

These are not options that endear themselves to the contemporary imagination. But if we are to teach this history faithfully, we must heed without flinching the implications of testimony such as Lewin’s, written from within the cauldron. Students of the Holocaust need to know what life from the threshold of the intolerable looks like. Lewin did, and he leaves us the legacy of his vision:

If we ever live to see the end of this cruel war and are able as free people and citizens to look back on the war-years that we have lived through, then we will surely conclude that the most terrible and unholy, the most destructive aspect for our nervous system and our health was to live day and night in an atmosphere of unending fear and terror for our physical survival, in a continual wa-

vering between life and death—a state where every passing minute brought with it the danger that our hearts would literally burst with fear and dread.

If we ask today, sometimes with a faint if self-righteous air of disapproval, why Jews in the camps or ghettos behaved the way they did, the answer, more often than not, lies locked in a heart bursting with fear or dread. It is an answer beyond judgment—but not beyond compassion.

The language of moral evaluation simply does not serve us in situations like the ones I have been describing. Adina Blady Szwajger, the Warsaw ghetto doctor who poisoned her young patients as the Nazis arrived to seize them, survived the Holocaust and recently wrote a personal account of the episode, leaving us with the challenge of interpretation. She was not driven by her own fear or dread, she says, but by the fear and dread of the children, whose plea that she stay with them “until the end” she resolved to heed. She decided that she could best fulfill this pledge by becoming the agent of that end. She thus seized two large containers of morphine (the “poison” that Edelman spoke of), and calmly narrates how she proceeded:

I took the morphine upstairs. Dr. Margolis [head of the tuberculosis ward] was there and I told her what I wanted to do. So we took a spoon and went to the infants’ room. And just as, during those two years of real work in the hospital, I had bent down over the little beds, so now I poured this last medicine down those tiny mouths. Only Dr. Margolis was with me. And downstairs there was screaming because the Szaulis [units of Lithuanian collaborators] and the Germans were already there, taking the sick from the wards to the cattle trucks.

After that we went in to the older children and told them that this medicine was going to make their pain disappear. They believed us and drank the required amount from the glass. And then I told them to undress, get into bed and sleep. So they lay down and after a few minutes—I don’t know how many—but the next time I went into that room, they were asleep. And then I don’t know what happened after that.

Dr. Szwajger managed to escape from the ghetto and live with false papers on the Aryan side for two years as a courier for the Jewish Fighting Organization, but

she confesses that those years “still didn’t manage to wipe out any of what had happened the day I gave the children morphine.” That’s why, she concludes, “I was always different from everybody else. And nobody ever understood this. Everybody thought I’d forgotten about everything and didn’t care any more.” This is a classic example of what I elsewhere call tainted memory, a concept vital for us to understand if we are ever to assess adequately the legacy with which the Holocaust has smitten our consciousness.

Since the children, like all the other Jews in the Warsaw ghetto, were sentenced to death anyway, does it matter how they died? Knowing what they were spared, we are forced by the circumstances to view the killing of the children as an act of mercy, and this itself reminds us of what the Holocaust has done to the systems of value that we cherished before its advent. The more we immerse ourselves in the personal ordeal of victims such as Abraham Lewin, Marek Edelman, and Adina Szwajger, the more we must adapt ourselves to an idea that in its relentless harshness shares the stage with the painful notion of being sentenced to die—and that is the anguish of being sentenced to live. The postmodern replacement of the death sentence that dominated western thought from Freud to Camus is the life sentence.

What can this mean? Because, unlike other crucial episodes in history such as the French or American revolution, the Holocaust is an event without a future—that is, nothing better for mankind grew out of it—memory is sentenced to confront it without any relief from expectation. Death is no longer a destiny to be postponed (or transcended), but a constant companion. During their ordeal in the Warsaw ghetto, inhabitants knew that daily survival was merely a respite, not a triumph. And even after the war, people like Marek Edelman and Adina Szwajger realized that little had changed. You don’t remake your life after an event like the destruction of the Warsaw ghetto; you simply are sentenced to live with the memory of the ruin.

One of the laudable rhythms of public or private history is that most human beings eventually seem able to resume their lives after a disaster. Superficially, this is true of Marek Edelman and Adina Szwajger too. But if we read beneath the lines of their testimony, we hear a muted theme, and it is here, in what I have called, following Auschwitz survivor and memoirist Charlotte Delbo, the realm of deep memory, that a darker truth emerges: tainted memory leaves a tainted legacy and a tainted life. For Marek Edelman, recalling details of the Warsaw ghetto uprising leads to a bitter discovery: history is not a chronology of events; rather, “historical order turns out to be nothing more than the order of dying.”

Dr. Szwajger turned to pediatrics after the war, spe-

cializing in tuberculosis in children, pursuing her belief that one becomes a doctor in order to save life. “But somewhere underneath,” she admits, “I thought that I had no right to carry out my profession. After all, one does not start one’s work as a doctor by leading people not to life but to death.” She knows there were reasons for her behavior during that time, but memory cannot appease such knowledge. She is unable to escape the feeling that “along the way something was not as it should have been.” And she concludes her formal narrative with a question that continues to echo in our own helpless minds: “Maybe it was too heavy a burden for the rest of my life?”

Possibly we can relieve that burden by adding some of it to our own consciousness. This requires us to accept and generalize Dr. Szwajger’s private conclusion: in the history of the Warsaw ghetto, along the way not only something; but *everything* was not as it should have been. The Germans were ruthless in their plans for total destruction. The Polish underground’s supply of arms to the Jewish uprising leaders was scanty and, as it later turned out, inappropriate: they provided pistols, when the Jews needed rifles and machine guns for the street fighting. Meanwhile, the outside world simply ignored pleas for help. The number of Jewish fighters engaged in the uprising was never more than between one and two percent of the remaining ghetto population. The majority of those who outlived the search and the subsequent burning of the ghetto were shipped to Sobibor or Treblinka. Few survived. On the fourth day of the uprising, the commander of the Jewish Fighting Organization, the twenty-three-year-old Mordecai Anielewicz, wrote to his Jewish liaison on the “Aryan” side: “I can’t begin to describe the conditions under which the Jews are living. Only an elect few will hold out under them. All the others will perish, sooner or later. Our fate is sealed. In the bunkers where our comrades are hiding, it is not even possible to light a candle at night for lack of air...” Two weeks later, the Germans discovered the command bunker; most of its inhabitants, including Anielewicz, died, either through suicide or the poison gas that the Germans pumped into the bunker after blocking the exits. A handful, including Marek Edelman, managed to make their way out of the ghetto through the sewers to the “Aryan” side. The ghetto itself was doomed.

What was the Warsaw ghetto’s role in the history of the Holocaust? We will go on interpreting it for decades and perhaps generations, with the help of the immense number of documents from Jewish, Polish, and German sources. Simply celebrating the exploits of its courageous, if futile, defenders seems to me a hopeless effort at self-delu-

sion. I think Claude Lanzmann understood this as well as anyone, since he chose to end his nine-and-a-half-hour cinematic epic on the destruction of European Jewry, *Shoah*, with the voices of two figures who were central to the ghetto's defense. What they say allows Lanzmann to deflate the desires of his viewers, many of whom, when the subject of the Warsaw ghetto was finally raised in the film, must have expected some heroic relief from their long and dismal encounter with unnatural death. But they were to be disappointed. Lanzmann chose to let the ruins of memory prevail. One of his voices [Simha Rotem, known as "Kazik"] prefers facts to heroism:

I don't think the human tongue can describe the horror we went through in the ghetto. In the streets, if you can call them that, for nothing was left of the streets, we had to step over heaps of corpses. There was no room to get around them. Besides fighting the Germans, we fought hunger, and thirst. We had no contact with the outside world; we were completely isolated, cut off from the world. We were in such a state that we could no longer understand the very meaning of why we went on fighting.

That search for meaning was complicated by Rotem's description of the situation outside the ghetto:

In Aryan Warsaw, life went on as naturally and normally as before. The cafés operated normally, the restaurants, buses, streetcars, and movies were open. The ghetto was an isolated island amid normal life.

And there it will remain throughout history, unless we allow it to penetrate our consciousness and shatter the rhetorical shield of heroism that protects us. The other voice with which Lanzmann ends his film is that of Itzhak Zuckerman, second-in-command of the Jewish Fighting Organization in the Warsaw ghetto and, along with Edelman, the only surviving member of the leadership. Asked by Lanzmann to comment on his memory of the event, Zuckerman succinctly replies:

I began drinking after the war. It was very difficult. . . . you asked for my impression. If you could lick my heart, it would poison you.

If normal memory is an internal ordering of images from the past, then tainted memory is an internal disordering of those images, and Zuckerman's uncommon response to his Warsaw ghetto experience reveals the origins of that taint. It is an austere and vexing legacy, but the Holocaust, when truly faced, offers us little else. □

WORK

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because the society has no way of providing work for tens of millions of MBAs), most people nurture a very detailed story of how they personally screwed up their chances and condemned themselves to meaningless and frustrating work. Part of the reason that many workers don't want to invest in changing their experience in the world of work is that the whole topic of work is too painful for them, bringing up these feelings of self-blaming for having screwed up their own lives. In part, they have come to believe that they don't deserve work that is more fulfilling, because if they did deserve it they would have gotten it. The meritocratic fantasy, re-enforced by American social and religious tradition, permeates virtually every television show, and most public statements by America's political and intellectual leaders. So a first task in generating the psychological preconditions for the effectiveness of OSGs and OSHCs is the training of tens of thousands of people who can lead groups that could defuse inappropriate self-blaming and encourage a healthier sense of responsibility.

Undermining self-blaming need not create a new class of victims with a passive victim-mentality. Our research showed that when inappropriate self-blaming decreased, responsibility and self-generated activity increased. When people are empowered to go beyond the highly individualistic account of reality and to see themselves and their situation as part of a larger social and political world in which the options facing them in part shape who they are and what they can be, they are often in a better position to make realistic choices and to enjoy an increased sense of efficacy. What our OSG groups at the Institute for Labor and Mental Health definitively proved was that undermining self-blaming in this way led to an increased sense of power and efficacy, and a greater ability for workers to use existing social support systems (their families and friends, for example) as buffers to stress. Training people to lead OSG groups and to be activists in the creation of OSHCs must focus on these particular skills if the whole enterprise is to work.

To facilitate this process, POLICY RECOMMENDATION No. 6: The Department of Labor should create a program to train a corps of union personnel, worker representatives, and psychotherapists in the relevant skills to assist developing a new spirit of cooperation, mutual caring, and dedication to work. If done correctly, this training could produce a corps of people in every industry and workplace committed to the new ethos of caring, who would be representatives of a new con-