Behind An Eye for An Eye

Revenge, Hate and History

John Sack

Three years ago I was scheduled to speak at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The speech was announced in this brochure and also on the Internet. But then the Museum canceled it.

For the next forty-five minutes, I’ll say here what I’d planned to say at the Holocaust Museum, and then, just as I’d have done at the Museum, I’ll stay here as long as you’d like, answering questions. The audience at the Museum would have been historians, mostly, and I’d have said something like …

Thank you. Thank you for inviting me, thank you for listening to me. What I’m going to talk about happened fifty years ago. And for fifty years, no one, no historian, no one at all has spoken about it in public anywhere in the world. Not until now.

Now myself, I’m not an historian, I’m a reporter. And what I write is the raw material of history, something that historians will – I hope – someday make some sense of. I go places. I watch events. I listen to people. And then I tell stories. And I’ll start by telling one now. A true story about a teenage girl.

Lola

Blonde hair, brown eyes, very pretty. In high school she’s doing the flying rings, trapeze, acting in Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs. She’s one of the title characters. She comes home. She’s skipping through the streets singing, “On the Good Ship Lollipop …” Not exactly. She’s really singing [in accented English], “On the Good Ship Lollipop …” Because she’s a Polish girl, and she’s in Bedzin, Poland, in the 1930s.

Her name is Lola Potok.

And when she’s 18 years old, the Nazis invade. Lola is put on a train to the town of Oswiecim – we know it as Auschwitz. Her baby, one year old, is ripped from her arms; she never sees the baby again. She isn’t sent to the cyanide chamber, but her mother is. Her mother is killed, her brother and sister, nieces and nephews are killed. Fourteen people.

(You know, I wasn’t going to say this at the Holocaust Museum, but in this particular room I know there are people who don’t believe there were cyanide chambers at Auschwitz. I believe, and Lola believes, there were cyanide chambers at Auschwitz.)

Her mother was killed. Her brother and sister, nieces and nephews were killed. Fourteen people. The one brother at Auschwitz who’s still alive stands on the gallows and says in Yiddish, “Nem nekumah! Take revenge!” Then he’s hanged.

Revenge

In January 1945, Lola escapes. She weighs sixty-six pounds. Her eyes are hollow. Her hair is this short. Her back has been broken. Her hand is mangled. She’s wearing two left shoes. All the people she loves are dead, or she thinks so, and she is just bursting with hate. She wants to release that hate, to spew it onto the Germans. One of her childhood friends is in the Polish government, and Lola goes to him and tells him, “I want revenge.”

And two months later the war is still going on, and Lola is now in Germany, the part occupied by the Russians and administered by the Poles. Lola’s in an olive-colored uniform. On her jacket are brass buttons. On her collar, what the GIs call scrambled eggs. On her shoulders are stars. On her hip is a Luger. Lola is working for the Polish government, she is the commandant of a prison for Germans, and she is attempting to take revenge for the Holocaust.

Now, Lola is a Jewish girl. She’s studied the Torah, and the Torah says, “You shall not take revenge.” Lola knows that. She’s disobeying that.
But is there any of us here who’d condemn her? Any of us who can’t understand her? I can understand her, and I can have rachmanis, compassion, for her.

I met Lola Potok. It was in April 1986. I’m living in Hollywood. I’m a writer, and I have a meeting at Paramount. And the secretary there, she’s reading something I wrote about the Billionaire Boys Club. She tells me, “I like it. It reminds me of my family.”

I say, “The Billionaire Boys Club? Your family?” Secretary says, “Yes, all those murders. My mother, Lola, was at Auschwitz.” I say, “Oh.” Secretary says, “And after that, my mother commanded a prison full of Nazis.” I say, “What? She commanded …” I say, “Do you know there’s a movie there?” I say, “You should tell Lynda,” Lynda is the producer, the secretary’s boss, but the secretary tells me, “I know there’s a movie. I won’t tell Lynda. I want to produce it myself!”

There’s a saying in Hollywood: a producer is someone, anyone, who knows a writer. I’m a writer, the secretary knows me, and therefore she’s a producer. We’re in business together. The deal is, I’ll write a magazine article on Lola, her mother, and the secretary will make a movie from it.

Cut. A few days later. Hollywood, the Moustache Cafe. I’m having spinach crepe. I’m having dinner with Lola. An elegant woman. Coral lipstick, black eyeliner, like on a femme fatale. Speaks five languages fluently. She’s sixty-six years old. And Lola starts telling me her story.

Gleiwick

At the end of World War II, she tells me, she commanded a prison in Gleiwitz, Germany. She says the inmates were German soldiers. But she says some were Nazis, even SS, pretending to be German soldiers, and Lola was looking for them. Looking for Höss and Hössler, the commandants at Auschwitz. Looking for Mengele, the man who once said to her mother, “Go left, you die”; who said to Lola, “Go right, you live.” And if Lola ever found him, she didn’t know what she’d do. But she’d do it.

And Lola tells me: One day in her prison she found a Gestapo man. Fat, forty years old. Under his arm was a tattoo. It said A or B. It was his blood type. Everyone in the Gestapo had it. Lola freaked out. She started screaming, “Du schmutziges Schwein! Du verfluchtes Schwein! Du … How many Jews did you kill?” She slapped him. The man was down on the floor. He was hugging her boots, saying, “Gnade! Gnade! Have mercy on me!,” and Lola was kicking him and kicking …

This story of Lola’s: Is there anyone here who likes it? I didn’t like it. I didn’t want to write it. I thought it was ugly. Lola didn’t like it. She told me her mother, if she were alive, wouldn’t like it. Her mother used to read to her from the Torah and tell her, “You mustn’t hate. It only hurts you. It corrodes your soul.”

And Lola said that after some months in Gleiwitz, she remembered this. She was in the prison one day. And there was a Jewish guard there. His face was red. His teeth were bare. There was spit on his teeth. Ugly, ugly. The man had a whip. He was screaming in Polish, “You son of a whore.” He was whipping a German prisoner. Lola said, “Stop.” Lola said, “Why are you whipping him?” The man said, “Well, the Germans did it to me!” Lola said, “And now you hate them?” The man said, “I despise them!” Lola said, “Well, if you despise them, why do you want to be like them?” Because to Lola, to Lola, this Jew, he looked, talked, acted just like the Nazis she’d known at Auschwitz.

At that time, Lola didn’t care about the Germans, the German prisoners. They could have dropped dead for all she cared. But she told me she cared about the Jewish guard. For years the Nazis had called him a pig, a dog, and if now he’d truly become a beast, then who had won, the Jew or the Nazis? So according to Lola, she called all the guards to her office and said to them, “You mustn’t hate. It only hurts you. It corrodes your soul.”

Writing Lola’s Story

Now, this story I liked. If it was true, this was a story worth telling. I had this dream: maybe the Serbs and Croats will read it, the Irish Catholics and Protestants will read it, the Hutus and Tutsis, the Israelis and Palestinians … Maybe they’ll read it, and maybe they’ll learn, as Lola did, that to hate your neighbors may or may not destroy them, but it does destroy yourself. And maybe these people will stop their revenge, stop their genocide.

We Jews always say of the Holocaust, “Never again. Never again will people hurt us simply because we are Jews.” But Lola was apparently saying, “Yes, and never again will I hurt a German simply because he’s a German.” Fifty years ago, Lola was apparently saying, “Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me.” This story I wanted very much to write. So …

I start interviewing Lola. At the Inn of the Seventh Ray in Los Angeles. At a Jewish cemetery in New Jersey. On the Champs Elysées in Paris. I interview Lola on and off for two-and-a-half years. Her memories just pour out, and she also introduces me to a dozen other people, all Jews: people who knew her in Gleiwitz, prison guards in Gleiwitz, even the man who appointed her the commandant in Gleiwitz.

I write a twenty-page article on Lola’s revenge and Lola’s redemption. Lola reads it and likes it. The story runs in California magazine. Lola, at her own expense, comes to Washington to promote it on National Public Radio. The story is sold internationally, and it’s reprinted in Best Magazine Articles, 1988. We have movie offers. Bette Midler and Suzanne Somers want to play the Lola part.
And then I write a book proposal. I write, “It’s Lola’s redemption, not Lola’s revenge, that this book’s about.” I’ll go to Germany. I’ll find some prisoners maybe. I’ll go to Poland. I’ll find some more guards, maybe. I’ll write a book. The title will be Lola. And in August 1988, the publisher Henry Holt in New York City says, “Okay! We want it!” Good news, and I phone it to Lola.

And Lola on the telephone says, “Listen, John, I don’t want you to write it.” I say, “Lola? Lola, this is the first time you’ve told that to me.” I say, “Lola, we signed a contract.” We had signed one. Lola had written, “I grant you the exclusive right to write and to publish a book about my life.”

Threats

That night I go to Lola’s apartment in Hollywood. Anyone here ever been in an encounter group? Remember your first night? Everyone shouting and screaming. You’re just sitting there stupefied. You’re thinking, “What is going on?” Well, I’m in Lola’s condo. Lola is saying, “Lookit, John. I don’t like the way you write. You write like a reporter. If you start writing this book, I will stop you. I will stop you!”

Lola’s daughter is there. She’s saying, “John, give it up. I’m begging you to give it up. John! Give it up!” Another daughter of Lola’s is there. She’s a lawyer, and she says, “John! You’re going to have instantaneous and very expensive litigation!” Lola’s saying, “I’ll go to court.” The daughter’s saying, “John, I want you to sign this release. John! Sign the release!” The other daughter’s saying, “John! Just leave us! Just go!” Lola’s saying, “John! Get out of our lives!”

I leave. I telephone Lola but she doesn’t answer. I write her, but she sends the letters back, unopened, inscribed “refused.”

And not just Lola. Lola’s second-in-command at the prison in Gleiwitz was Moshe, also a Jew. He won’t talk to me. His wife on the telephone says, “We don’t give you the permission to write this.” I say, “I … You …” That’s what I say, “I … You … One doesn’t need permission!” I have permission, from the Constitution of the United States. Moshe’s wife hangs up.

And then there is Jadzia, also a Jew, she was one of Lola’s guards in Gleiwitz. Jadzia says on the telephone, “I was never in Gleiwitz!” Then she says, “Yes, I was in Gleiwitz, but I’ll never talk about it!” And then she talks for an hour saying, “I don’t know nothing, nothing, nothing. Nothing! Nothing!”

People won’t talk to me. People tell other people, “Don’t talk to John Sack.” People talk to me, and they lie to me. People say they’ll sue me, they’ll destroy me, they’ll kill me. One man takes my driver’s license, writes down my address, and says, “If you write about me, I will call the Israeli Mafia.”

Here’s some advice. Never tell a reporter, “You’d better not write this.” I have a contract with Henry Holt. I’ve made a promise to Henry Holt. I keep my promises.

Doing the Research

In April 1989, I fly to Germany. I go to this castle, this concrete castle, high on a hill above the Rhine. It’s the German Federal Archives, and they’ve got forty thousand statements there by Germans who lived in what now is Poland during World War II. The statements of course are in German, in German script, and I find five statements from Germans who were in Lola’s prison.

I go to another place in Germany: a great medieval hall, with banners on the stone walls. It’s a reunion of a thousand people from Gleiwitz. They’re drinking beer. They’re eating sausages and sauerkraut. They’re laughing and singing, “Ein prosit, ein prosit …” And I’m like a little flower girl. You know, the girl who goes from table to table selling roses? I’m going around asking, “Uh, excuse me. Anyone here who was in prison in Gleiwitz?” Yeah, I am a party pooper. I admit it. But eventually I find five of Lola’s prisoners.

I take the train to Gleiwitz. Now it’s Gliwice, Poland. And going through Communist East Berlin, I’m arrested, taken off the train, and locked up in a little room because with me I have a copy of the book Die Vertreibung der deutschen Bevölkerung aus den Gebieten östlich der Oder-Neisse [“The Expulsion of the German Population from the Territories East of the Oder-Neisse,” published in the 1950s by the Bonn government]. Hours later I’m let out and I get to Gleiwitz/ Gliwice at four in the morning. It’s a city of two hundred thousand people, almost none of whom speak English. I don’t speak Polish, but I find three of Lola’s guards. They remember her well.

It’s 1989, Poland is still Communist, but I get into Lola’s prison, into the prisoners’ cells. I tell them, “Djien dobre. Good morning.” I see the prison records. Remember when, according to Lola, she went to the Polish government and said, “I want revenge”? Well, I find her application, in her own handwriting. She wrote, “I want to cooperate against our German oppressors.” I find the official document appointing her commandant in Gleiwitz.

After that, I go to Germany eleven more times, to Poland three more times, to France, Austria, Israel, Canada, and all around the United States. Through interpreters I talk to two hundred people in Polish and Russian, Danish and Swedish, German and Dutch, French and Spanish, Yiddish and Hebrew. I left out English. I get three hundred hours of tape-recorded interviews, and I see thousands of documents.

And what do I learn? Well: Lola was telling the truth. She was the commandant in Gleiwitz. And she was taking revenge. She slapped the Germans around. And just as she said, she stopped. I remember one day in 1989, I’m having lunch with one of her guards at the Hotel Leszny.
John Sack: Behind An Eye for An Eye - Revenge, Hate and History

We’re eating wiener schnitzel. And out of the blue the man says, “You know, Lola stopped. She told us, ‘Stop!’ She said, ‘We’re going to show the Germans we’re not like them.’”

The Facts Come Out

So Lola was telling the truth. But, she wasn’t telling the whole truth. Lola had told me the people in her prison were German soldiers. And yes, twenty of them were German soldiers, men who worked as painters, carpenters, and such. But there were a thousand other prisoners there, and they were German civilians: German men, German women, German children.

One prisoner was a fourteen-year-old boy. He had been out in Gleiwitz wearing his boy scout pants. A man cried out, “You’re wearing black pants! You’re a fascist!” and he chased the boy and tackled him at the Church of Saint Peter and Paul, and then took him to Lola’s prison. Now, the boy was completely innocent. So were most of the people in Lola’s prison. They weren’t Gestapo. They weren’t SS. They weren’t even Nazis. Out of a thousand prisoners, just twenty were ever even accused of it.

But the Germans in Lola’s prison were slapped and whipped. And I’m so sorry to have to say it, but they were also tortured. The boy scout: the guards poured gasoline on his curly black hair and set it on fire. The boy went insane. The men: they were beaten with a Totschläger, a “beater-to-death.” It’s a long steel spring with a big lead ball at the end. You use it like a racketball racket. Your arm, your wrist, the spring: they deliver a triple hit to a German’s face.

Lola didn’t tell me, but the Germans in her prison were dying. I found their death certificates in Gleiwitz city hall. One of Lola’s guards told me, “Yeah, the Germans would die.” He told me, “I’d put the bodies in a horse-drawn cart. I’d cover them with potato peels so no one would see. I’d ride to the outskirts and, after I threw the potato peels out, I’d take the Germans to the Catholic cemetery. To the mass grave.”

We all know about Auschwitz. But I have to tell you, the Germans in Lola’s prison were worse off than Lola had been at Auschwitz. Lola at Auschwitz wasn’t locked in a room night and day. She wasn’t tortured night after night. She herself told me: “Thank God, nobody tried to rape us. The Germans weren’t allowed to.” But all of that happened to German girls at Lola’s prison in Gleiwitz.

One woman I talked with wasn’t even German. She was Polish. In 1945 she was twenty years old: a tall, blonde, beautiful medical student. The guards at Lola’s prison pulled off her clothes and told her, “Let’s do it!” They beat her and beat her, night after night, until she was black and blue. One morning, she came back to her cell and fell on the floor, sobbing. Her cellmate asked her, “What, what is that blue thing you’re wearing? Oh, oh, it’s your skin.”

And ten feet away was Lola’s office. Lola in her brass, braid, and stars. I once asked her, “Lola, where did you get that uniform?,” and Lola said, “Well, the Russians must’ve given it to me.” That wasn’t the whole truth either.

Lola was in the Polish secret police. Its name was the Office of State Security, in Polish the Urzad Bezpieczenstwa Publicznego. The Germans called it the Polish Gestapo. One of its missions was to round up Nazi suspects. But for all practical purposes, if you were a German, you were a Nazi suspect. So the mission was to round up Germans, imprison them, interrogate them, and if they confess, prosecute them.

In the Office of State Security, the lower ranks were Polish Catholics, but most of the leaders were Polish Jews. The chief of the Office in Warsaw was a Jew. (When I was in Poland he wasn’t alive, but I met some of his family.) The department directors, all or almost all of them, were Jews.

In Silesia, the province where Lola was commandant, the director of the Office of State Security was a Jew. I met him in Copenhagen, a little bald-headed man. The director of prisons was also a Jew. I met his whole family in Tel Aviv. The secretary of state security was a Jew. I met him time and again at his home in New Jersey. And in the Office of State Security in Silesia in February 1945, of the officers – not the enlisted men, not the guards, but the lieutenants, captains and such – one-fourth were Catholics, and three-fourths were Jews.

Solomon Morel

I interviewed twenty-four of them. And I learned that the Office of State Security ran 227 prisons for German civilians like Lola’s. It also ran 1,255 concentration camps, and I interviewed four of the commandants. They were also Jews. One was Lola’s boy friend, a man who’d lost in the Holocaust his mother, his father, all his brothers (he had no sisters), all his uncles and aunts, and all but one of his cousins. I hope that, like me, you can all have compassion for Solomon Morel.

But one night in February, 1945, Solomon went to his concentration camp in the city of Swietochlowice. He went into the Germans’ barracks, and said, “My name is Captain Morel. I am a Jew. I was at Auschwitz. I swore I would take revenge on you Nazis.” They weren’t Nazis, but Solomon said, “Now! Everyone! Sing the Horst Wessel song!” That was a Nazi anthem. No one wanted to sing it. One boy, fourteen years old, didn’t even know it.

Solomon had a club. He said, “Sing it!” Some people began, “Die Fahne hoch! Die Reihen fest geschlossen ...” “Sing it! Sing it, I say!” They started singing, “Clear the streets for the brown battalions. Clear the street for the Storm Section men.” Solomon had all this hate inside him, and he released it. He picked up a wooden stool and he started beating the Germans to death. For this one camp, I found the death certificates for 1,583 Germans.
Death Toll

In other camps and other prisons, thousands of German civilians died. German men, women, children, babies. At one camp there was a barracks for fifty babies. They were in cribs, but the camp doctor, Dr. Cedrowski – he was a Jew who had been in Auschwitz – he didn’t heat the barracks, and he didn’t give the babies milk. He gave them only some soup, and forty-eight of the fifty babies died.

All in all, sixty to eighty thousand Germans died. Some were killed by Jews, some by Catholics, and many by typhus, dysentery, and starvation, but sixty to eighty thousand died in the custody of the Office of State Security. Now, someone, a German, once told me that this was another holocaust. Well, I’m sure it seemed like a holocaust to the Germans.

But let’s not forget: sixty thousand is one percent of the number of Jews who died in the capital-H Holocaust. Jews didn’t do what the Germans did. We didn’t plot to exterminate the German people. We didn’t mobilize all the Jews and the Jewish state. (There was no Jewish state.) We didn’t send the Germans systematically to cyanide chambers.

But let’s also remember that sixty to eighty thousand civilians is more than the Germans lost at Dresden, and more than, or just as many as, the Japanese lost at Hiroshima, the Americans at Pearl Harbor, the British in the Battle of Britain, or the Jews at Belsen or Buchenwald.

Cover-up

All this was covered up for nearly fifty years. Jews who were involved didn’t talk about it. For example, the chief of police in occupied Breslau, Germany, in 1945, who was Jewish, later wrote a book about the Holocaust. And in telling about his time as chief of police in Breslau, all he says is, “We moved westward to Breslau and … from there … to Prague.” That’s it. And Jewish reporters who knew didn’t write about it. There’s a working reporter right now in New York City who was in Poland right after World War II. He told me, “Whatever, whatever the Germans tell you, believe me, it’s true.” But he himself, he never wrote about it.

The truth was covered up, and was still being covered up. In 1989, I went to Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, Israel’s central Holocaust center. As you may know, they have fifty million documents there about the Holocaust. I ask them, “Well, what do you have on the Office of State Security?” They have nothing. I ask them, “What do you have on the Jews in the Office of State Security?” Nothing. I say, “Well, there were Jewish commandants, Jewish directors, Jewish …” The chairman of Yad Vashem responds, “It sounds rather imaginary,” and the director of archives says to me, “Imm-possible! Impossible!”

Denial, denial. I know that denial is a very human thing. But historically I don’t think it’s a Jewish thing. When Abraham, Isaac and Jacob committed sins, we Jews didn’t deny it. Yes, Abraham, the father of our people, sinned. God told him to go to Israel, instead he went to Egypt, and we admitted it in the Book of Genesis. Judah (the word “Jew” comes from Judah) made love to a prostitute. We admitted it in Genesis. Moses, even Moses sinned, and God didn’t let him into the Promised Land. We admitted that in Deuteronomy. Solomon – good, wise, old King Solomon – did evil. He “worshipped idols.” We didn’t cover it up. We admitted it in the Book of Kings.

It seems to me that that’s the Jewish tradition. How can we say to other people – to Germans, to Serbs, to Hutus – “What you’re doing is wrong,” if we ourselves do it and cover it up? I wish it were someone else who was here today. Abraham Foxman. Elie Wiesel. I wish he or she would simply say yes, some Jews, some Jews, did evil in 1945. But when the Jewish establishment didn’t say it, then I had to say it.

I’m a reporter. That’s what reporters do. Someone kills sixty thousand people, we report it. If we don’t report it, it might become common, or more common, than it already is. But also I’m a Jew, and the Torah says (Leviticus 5:1), that if someone does evil, and if I know it and don’t report it, then I am guilty too.

So I start writing this book. The title now won’t be Lola. It’ll be An Eye for an Eye. And on the third page I write, “I hope that An Eye for an Eye is something more than the story of Jewish revenge: that it’s the story of Jewish redemption.” I write about Jews taking revenge, yes. But that is one tenth of An Eye for an Eye. Mostly I write …

I write about Zlata, Moshe, Mania, and Pola. They were Jews who refused to look at, much less work at Lola’s prison. I write about Ada, who visited the prison once, just once, and then fled to Israel. I write about Shlomo, who was in the Office of State Security and, at the risk of his life, told people in it, “You must stop doing this.”

I write about Lola. I write that in Gleiwitz she finally remembered how a Jew should act and, at the risk of her life, she got bread, her own bread from her own home, and smuggled it to the German prisoners. Now this isn’t something that Lola told me. No, the prison guards told me. They said that if Lola had been caught, she’d have gone to prison herself.

And I write that at Yom Kippur, 1945, Lola – again at the risk of her life – escaped from Gleiwitz, just as she had escaped some months earlier from Auschwitz, and came to the United States. Almost all the Jews in the Office of State Security escaped, at the risk of their lives, in September, October, and November 1945. And I write that too. They crept through the woods into Germany, or climbed the pass into Italy. They did what the SS never did: they deserted, they defected.
Rejection

I was crying while I was writing this. My advance from Henry Holt was $25,000, and for three years I was writing An Eye for an Eye. In September 1991 I finally finished it, wrapped it up, and mailed it to Henry Holt in New York. And I told myself: “Okay. I’ve done it. That’s the end of the cover-up.”

No. Because then the people at Henry Holt say, “We don’t want it.” They don’t say it’s wrong. They know it’s right. They just say, “We don’t want to publish it. Keep the twenty-five thousand.” Okay. My agent and I send the manuscript to other publishers: to Harper’s, to Scribner’s – you name it, we sent it – to two dozen other publishers.

And let me tell you. The letters we get from these people, they’re practically blurbs. The publishers say: “well-written,” “extremely well-written,” “chilling,” “compelling,” “disturbing,” “dismaying,” “shocking,” “startling,” “astonishing,” “mesmerizing,” “extraordinary,” “I was riveted,” “I was bowled over,” “I love it!” And the publishers all reject it. The letter from St. Martin’s Press says, “I am always moved by Holocaust books, but I’d have trouble distinguishing this book … from other books … in this vast area of literature.”

Okay. My agent and I agree that if we can’t sell a book, we’ll try magazines. One of the chapters is on Solomon Morel. Remember? The man who lost his mother, father, all his siblings, uncles, and aunts in the Holocaust. The man who had so much hate for the Germans, he had to disgorge it, who commanded a concentration camp at Swietochlowice, and beat Germans to death.

Solomon is still alive. He’s wanted by Interpol for crimes against humanity. Interpol has an international warrant out for his arrest. But he’s fled to Israel. He’s taking refuge in Tel Aviv, and no one in America – no newspaper, magazine or television network – has ever reported it.

So we send the chapter on Solomon Morel to Esquire magazine. I’ve been a contributing editor there, a war correspondent in Vietnam, Iraq, Bosnia. Esquire says, “No.” We send it to GQ magazine. GQ says, “Yes!” The editor says it’s the most important story in GQ’s history. He even tells that to an editor of Esquire at a bar in Greenwich Village. He tells him, “Ha, ha! You don’t have it! We do!”

For six weeks GQ is fact-checking. They don’t find a single error. They send me the galley proofs, the page proofs, and on Wednesday the presses will roll. And then the telephone rings at my home in the Rocky Mountains. The editor of GQ says, “John, this isn’t a happy phone call. We aren’t going to run it.” He tells me to keep the $15,000 and to sell the story somewhere else.

So once again my agent and I are making calls, sending faxes, passing out the GQ page proofs. Harper’s magazine says no. Rolling Stone says no and “I’m sure you’ll understand.” Mother Jones, that great exposé magazine (“Extra! Extra! Cigarettes are bad for you!”) doesn’t even call back. The New Yorker (which has published ten pieces by me) refuses even to look at it.

The Attacks Begin


Because one day later there’s a telephone call to Basic Books. It’s from the executive director of the World Jewish Congress. He says he wants an immediate retraction, and if he doesn’t get it he’ll call a major press conference tomorrow. He says he’ll denounce me, Basic Books, and HarperCollins, and say, “They are all anti-Semites.” Well, we don’t retract, and the World Jewish Congress doesn’t denounce. But …

Then the reviews come out. And the reviewers say that An Eye for an Eye isn’t true, that what I wrote there never happened at all.

Please! Much of An Eye for an Eye had been fact-checked by California magazine, fact-checked by GQ, and, for the Village Voice, fact-checked by a woman who is the Fact-Checker from Hell. She and I checked every single word, even if we had to call up Poland. And when, after two weeks of this, night and day, we were finally done, the editor of the Voice gave an interview saying, “This may be the most accurate story in the history of American journalism.”

Much of An Eye for an Eye was corroborated by 60 Minutes, which found eight eyewitnesses I hadn’t found. It was corroborated by the New York Times and the International Herald Tribune. Historians hired by major newspapers in Germany went to the German Federal Archives and wrote, “The facts are true,” “The facts are right,” “The facts are iron-bound.”

But in the United States, one review was entitled “False Witness.” Another was headed “The Big Lie, Continued.”

The Jewish paper Forward said, “Sack is transparently writing docudrama,” and told readers that Lola Potok was not the commandant of the prison in Gleiwitz. Well, Lola herself had told me, “I was the commandant,” and thirty-five other people, including the current commandant, including the current director of prisons, said yes, Lola was the commandant. I have the document that says, “We appoint Citizen Lola Potok Commandant,” and I have a document signed by Lola Potok, Commandant. But still the Forward said, “The unlikelihood is overwhelming but Sack … seems … oblivious.” As I read this, I felt I was being lectured by Chico Marx. Remember? “Who you gonna believe? Your own two eyes or me?” I wrote a letter to the Forward. Over the last seven years, I’ve had to write, at last count, about 1,500 letters about An Eye for an Eye. And all those letters, added up, are twice as long as the book is.
Maybe you’re wondering. What sort of a crazy man am I? Why don’t I just say the hell with it? Why do I carry on?

I’ll tell you. There are eighty-five thousand books about the Holocaust. And none of them, if you ask me, has an honest answer to the question, “How could the Germans do it?” How could the Germans – the people who gave us Beethoven, the Ninth Symphony, the Ode to Joy, “Alle Menschen werden Brüder, All men will be brothers” – perpetrate the Holocaust?

This mystery, we’ve got to solve it. We’ve got to, or we’ll keep on having genocides in Cambodia, Bosnia, Zaire. Well, what I report in An Eye for an Eye is that Lola has solved it. The Jews from the Office of State Security have solved it. Because in their agony, their despair, their insanity, if you will, they felt they became like the Germans – the Nazis – themselves.

Wages of Hatred

And if I had been there, I’d have become one too, and now I understand why. Lola, like a lot of Jews, understandably, were full of hate in 1945. They were volcanoes of red-hot hate. They thought if they joined the Office of State Security, and spit out their hate at the Germans, then they’d be rid of it.

No. It doesn’t work that way. Let’s say I’m in love with someone. I don’t tell myself, “Uh, oh. I’ve got inside of me one, two pounds of love, so if I love her and love her, then I’ll use all of my love up, and I’ll be all out of love.” No. We all understand that love is a paradoxical thing, that the more we send out, the more we’ve got.

So why don’t we understand about hate? If we hate, and if we act on that hate, then we hate even more later on. If we spit out a drop of hate, what happens? Well, we stimulate the saliva glands, and we produce a drop and a quarter of it. If we spit that out, we produce a drop and a half, then two drops, three, a teaspoon, tablespoon, a Mount Saint Helens. The more we send out, the more we’ve got, until we are perpetual-motion machines, sending out hate and hate until we’ve created a holocaust.

You don’t have to be a German to become like that. You can be a Serb, a Hutu, a Jew. You can be an American. We were the ones in the Philippines. We were the ones in Vietnam. We were the ones in Washington, DC, for ten thousand years the home of the Anacostia Indians. They had one of their camp grounds at what now is the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

We all have it in us to become like Nazis. Hate, as Lola discovered, hate is a muscle, and if we want to be monsters all we have to do is exercise it. To hate the Germans, to hate the Arabs, to hate the Jews. Hate. The more we exercise it, the bigger it gets, just as if every day we curl forty pounds, far from being worn out, in time we are curling fifty, sixty pounds. We become the Mr. Universe of Hate. We all can be hate-full people, hateful people. We can destroy the people we hate, maybe, but we surely destroy ourselves.

That’s what the Jews in the Office of State Security have taught us. That’s what I tried to write, what I did write, in An Eye for an Eye. The very first words are the dedication. I’d like to read them: “For all who died and for all who because of this story might live.”

That’s what I’d planned to say at the Holocaust Memorial Museum.

Questions from the Audience

Question: I’m very much moved by your presentation. I wish to commend you for your courage. Did you mention that Solomon Morel was also the commander at Jaworzno? At Jaworzno, there were young people, young boys – fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, eighteen – Poles, Germans, and Lithuanians – and other ethnics were tortured and murdered there. There is now a group of Jaworzno, and also Swietochlowice, survivors (as they use the term), who are getting together, Poles, Germans, Lithuanians, whoever.

John Sack: Morel was at Jaworzno afterwards. Jaworzno was a camp for Poles. By that time they were putting Poles in the camp, rather than –

Q: There were Germans there also.

JS: There were? Thank you.

Q: What would you recommend on the hate train that we’re on here in the United States and the hate laws that are being promulgated?

JS: Well, I don’t think that we’re on a hate train. I’m writing an article for Esquire magazine about the revisionists and in the three conferences that I’ve been to, and certainly at this conference, I have not seen hate manifested. I don’t see people who feel hate. Even people who are called neo-Nazis, like Ernst Zündel, who is not a hate-filled man.

Q: No, I mean in the United States, we’re seeing hate laws, thought police, politically correct speech, people are winding up … as many have here, for that matter …

JS: Well, of course I’m for free speech, and even if what Fred Töben said was hateful – and it wasn’t – and even if what Germar was saying was hateful – and it certainly wasn’t – and what Ernst was saying and what Faurisson was saying was hateful – and none of it was – even if it was, it should be allowed, of course, and I’m glad it’s allowed in the United States.
Q: What has Lola’s reaction been to the book?

JS: Lola actually called me right before the book came out. We had a nice talk. We chatted. I sent her the book. It took her about half a year to read. Her only comment on it was that I had made a mistake, that she was first in Germany and then she came to Paris and there she met her husband and she went back to Germany and got married, and I had it the other way around. That was her only comment. She’s now living in Australia and I understand she has Alzheimer’s disease.

Q: Would I be correct in assuming that these people should be brought to justice, given a fair trial, and hanged? After all, we’re still prosecuting seventy-five-year-old German corporals.

JS: Well, I wish we wouldn’t. I think it’s too late for anybody to be brought to justice. But I think there should be a trial of Solomon Morel, if for no other reason than to bring out the facts. I would hate to see him go to jail, and as a matter of fact most of his prisoners at Swietochlowice, his former prisoners do not want to see him go to jail, but they want the facts to come out. They would like him just to apologize.

Q: Both the German government and the Polish government are wishy-washy on this. They aren’t really seeking to have Solomon Morel extradited from Israel.

JS: That’s true. The German government had a prosecution of him going and that just fell by the wayside, disappeared, and the Polish government was very strange. They could have accused him of murder. There were witnesses that saw him commit murder. They just accused him of brutality and other things that expired under the statute of limitations in 1965.

Q: Not only that, but Solomon Morel, living in Israel, is collecting a pension from the Polish government and the “Polish” government is not Polish. The Polish government is a Communist government, and most of them, not all, are Jewish – they call themselves “former Communists.” So, the “Polish” government is not Polish, and we heard about what’s happening in Germany a little while ago. So, what chance is there of catching this monster and exposing him to the world?


JS: I suppose that would be one answer. As I understand it Solomon Morel cannot collect his pension unless he’s in Poland – that’s why he wanted to stay there – I don’t know whether that may have changed.

Q: Has Solomon Morel said anything?

JS: Solomon Morel, people keep going up to his door every couple of weeks. Once they camped in front of his door for a couple of days, and his daughter comes to the door and says that he doesn’t want to give interviews and says that he’s writing a book about all of this. That’s just what they say. I don’t know if it’s true.

Q: You say that you believe in the gas chambers. Have you gotten far enough into it that you could produce any evidence that you could present here tonight?

JS: Do I have any evidence here tonight about the existence of gas chambers? No. I accept that people of good faith, honest people, can really look at the evidence and feel that there’s not enough evidence that there were gas chambers. I hope that you accept that other people can look at the evidence and conclude that there is enough evidence, and that’s my conclusion. I don’t think that anybody who disagrees is a “neo-Nazi” or an “anti-Semite” or a hate-filled person. I think that you just happen to have a different opinion from me.

Q: Can you talk about your own experience being discriminated against and called an “anti-Semite,” and yet you’re a Jew. These reviews and articles were obviously libelling you.

JS: On the Charlie Rose show I was called an “anti-Semite” and a “neo-Nazi” by Deborah Lipstadt. [laughter and applause] I called her up after that and reminded her that I’d read her book, and I sent her a nice note about it and told her what I was trying to do in my book, and I said “How could you have said that about me?” She said “You are worse than a ‘Holocaust denier,‘” and I said “Deborah, I’m worse than a ‘Holocaust denier’?” and she said “You are worse than a ‘Holocaust denier.”’ I said “Could you explain why?,” and she said “No. I have a faculty meeting,” [laughter] and that’s the last I talked to her. It doesn’t scare me. It doesn’t hurt me. It amuses me.

Q: Are there any Jewish organizations, major Jewish organizations which would permit our principal speakers to speak in front of them?

JS: Not only that, are there any major Jewish organizations that would permit me to speak in front of them? [laughter and applause] So far, none, and believe me I’ve asked. I asked Hillel at UCLA. I certainly asked the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum and no, so far, none.

Q: You refer to Nazis as a model for hate. As a German-American I consider the model for hate to be the Jewish Bolshevik regime that killed anywhere from thirty to sixty-six million people. I’ve just become aware of that by reading Solzhenitsyn’s three books and I’m wondering if you have read these books?

JS: I haven’t, but you know, when you talk about the Jewish Bolshevik regime be aware that just because, if most of the Bolsheviks, I don’t
know, were Jews, please be aware that most of the Jews weren’t Bolsheviks, and never were.

About the author

John Sack is one of America’s most eminent literary journalists. His reporting over more than half a century, from North and South America, Europe, Africa, and Asia, has appeared in such periodicals as Harper’s, The Atlantic, and The New Yorker. He has been a war correspondent in Korea, Vietnam, Iraq, and Yugoslavia, as well as CBS News bureau chief in Spain. He is the author of nine non-fiction books, including M, Lieutenant Calley: His Story, and Company C, as well as An Eye for an Eye (available from the IHR). The founding editor of Esquire magazine has compared his writing to that of F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernst Hemingway. For more about Sack and his career, see his Web site: http://www.johnsack.com.

This essay, slightly edited, was presented on May 29, 2000, at the 13th IHR conference. For more about his travails with the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, see “Suppressing the Story of Genocide Against Germans,” in the Sept.–Oct. 1997 Journal. “Inside the Bunker,” a lengthy article by Sack based on his participation at the 13th IHR Conference, appeared in the February 2001 issue of Esquire.

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