

We can never be sure we'd be the good guys

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Our unspoken mythology is that Britons would all have been resisters under Nazi occupation but that's far from likely

David
Aaronovitch



@DAARONOVITCH

It was a Boxing Day walk in Amsterdam and the family was ambling beside a canal when one of the girls said, "Look at this!"

All along the Nieuwe Keizersgracht, at the water's edge, were a series of small plaques that hadn't been here when I was last in the city. The plaques appeared at intervals, clustered around a number that corresponded to one of the five-storey houses on the opposite bank.

Looking down, each plaque had a person's name, an age, a date and a place name, as in: Clara van de Kar, 8 jaar, 06-10-1944, Auschwitz.

Opposite No 20, for example, were Hartog Bing, 44; Marianne Bing-del Canho, 37; Sara Bing, 9; Klara Bing, 5; Rachel Bing, 41. Presumably a father, mother, two children and their aunt. All killed at the extermination camp at Sobibor in Nazi-occupied Poland on June 4, 1943. Opposite No 26 were plaques for the five members of the Pakter family — the youngest, Sally, aged two — who all died in Sobibor on the same day one month after the Bings. And so on.

Here in living memory, 220 miles away from where I write this now, the Jews of Amsterdam had been carefully contacted, carefully assembled, then carefully transported, gassed and incinerated. It is one thing deliberately to visit the Anne Frank House, another to stumble — unprepared — across these truncated biographies.

I looked it up, the way you do. Between March and July of 1943, 19 transports carried 34,313 Jews from the Netherlands to Sobibor. Only 18 survived. This unobtrusive monument — the Schadowkade, or Shadow Wall — names a few dozen of them.

By complete coincidence I'd just finished watching a new Netflix documentary series called *The Devil Next Door*. It told the story of the trial in Israel, release and new trial in Germany of a retired US car worker from Ohio, John Demjanjuk. A young Ukrainian at the time of the war, Demjanjuk was accused of having been "Ivan the Terrible", a sadistic guard at the extermination camp Treblinka. By the end of the series it was clear to me that Demjanjuk probably was Ivan and had almost certainly also served at Sobibor. Perhaps he'd been there the day the Bings were murdered.

Demjanjuk died in Germany in 2012, with his American family firmly believing that their father and

In the Netherlands just as many resisted as actively collaborated

uncle had been a good man, incapable of such acts. In an interview Daniel Sivan, the series' co-director, addressed this apparent discrepancy. "The monsters," he said, "were not just pure sadistic evildoers. Many of them were just pure opportunist collaborators who did evil things, but they were not creatures from hell."

Less than half a mile away from the Shadow Wall is Amsterdam's Resistance Museum. I had half expected this to be a museum of national self-exculpation, in which it turns out that every Dutch citizen

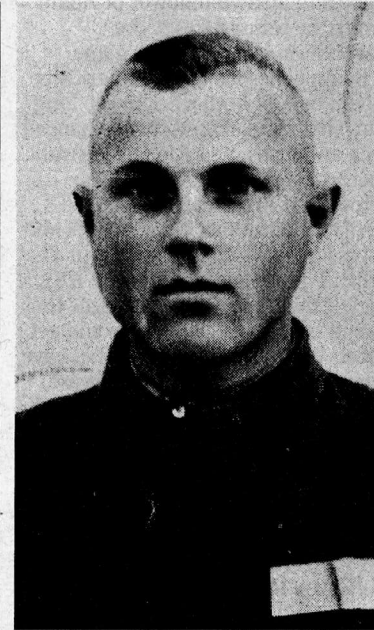
was a resister. That was wrong and the museum is misnamed. Instead the curators have gone directly to the heart of what being occupied meant for citizens. Should they (in the museum's own categories) adjust, collaborate or resist?

Most adjusted. Some resisted, actively and passively, and many paid for their resistance. And just as many resisted as actively collaborated. The same amount of space is devoted in the museum to the Dutch Nazi party, the communal police and other collaborators, some of whom acted as "Jew-hunters" receiving a payment for each captured Jew.

It happened to the Dutch, and many of them have looked it squarely in the face. It didn't happen here, so Britons were never tested. Our unspoken mythology (contradicted by the experience of the Channel Islands) is that we would all have been resisters. Or at the least, non-co-operators. "Don't tell them, Pike!" would have been our motto. But it's probably not true. In a real Nazi-occupied Walmington-on-Sea, the question would have been which members of the Home Guard chose to join the new National Militia, and who was it that revealed to the authorities that Mrs Fox had a Jew in her attic?

Back in August 1941 the great American journalist Dorothy Thompson wrote an article for *Harper's Magazine* called "Who Goes Nazi?" Thompson had been in Berlin at the time of the seizure of power and was expelled in 1934. And she invited her readers to consider an "interesting and somewhat macabre parlour game to play at a large gathering of one's acquaintances: to speculate who in a showdown would go Nazi".

She went round a speculative dinner party considering each person



John Demjanjuk may have been an opportunist rather than a born sadist

in turn. Mr A wouldn't. Mr B would. Mrs E, married to a bullying husband, "would go Nazi as sure as you are born ... She will titillate with pleased excitement to the first popular hero who proclaims the basic subordination of women." Whereas "Mrs F would never go Nazi. She has stood on her own feet since she was a child." And so on. Thompson concluded: "the frustrated and humiliated intellectual, the rich and scared speculator, the spoiled son, the labour [trade union] tyrant, the fellow who has achieved success by smelling out the wind of success — they would all go Nazi in a crisis."

We don't need here to stick to the Nazis. In a way they have become an unhelpful exaggeration whose sins are so monstrous they obscure other less but pernicious tendencies. It's

not just who would go Nazi, but who gets to work for the NKVD? For Chávez's revolutionary cadres? For the committee of public safety at the height of the Terror? Who agitates to expel the Rohingya, who locks up the Uighurs, who agitates for the innocence of Radovan Karadzic, who argues for Hindutva in Modi's India?

This seems to me a potent question as we enter a 2020 in which another economic downturn is possible and in which ethno-nationalist populism is still a rising force.

Even at the last election I saw, with dismay, just how blatantly some

I look at Republicans and wonder what they'd not be capable of

politicians could praise in honeyed terms the very things that they had been deprecating just weeks earlier. And doing it while using the language of moral certainty. As though they had no inner compass left. I look at the Republicans in the US defending in Trump what they would have described as treason in a Democrat and wonder what they would not be capable of.

And me. Can I be so sure that, if the test came, I wouldn't be a bad guy or a very quiet guy, rather than the good man I always complacently considered myself?

How can we know? But if there had been no Hitler, no 1933 seizure of power, no Bolshevik coup, no Milosevic, then Eichmann would have been an oil salesman, Beria would have been a local government officer and Karadzic would have been a professional swindler.

The moral, for this year as for every other, is to make sure that the test never comes.