

# What lessons can we learn about human nature from the Holocaust?



L. M. Stallbaumer, Ph.D.

PPT©2016

## Human Nature: Free will?

Myra L. Impromptu Self: Myra was a nurse in a ghetto hospital. All the patients were being deported to the east. A cousin of hers attempts to hide but the Germans find her and drags her away. The cousin screamed at Myra to save her, but Myra did nothing. "I couldn't save her. I also feared that I can be taken instead. And that's another thing that worked on me – that I couldn't save her. I did not probably want to go for ... my cousin the survival will was so big that nobody was sacrificing himself for anybody else."

Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies*, 126.

## Human Nature: Free will or determinism?

**“Harry Potter:** This connection between me and Voldemort... what if the reason for it is that I am becoming more like him? I just feel so angry, all the time. What if after everything that I've been through, something's gone wrong inside me? What if I'm becoming bad?

**“Sirius Black:** I want you to listen to me very carefully, Harry. You're not a bad person. You're a very good person, who bad things have happened to. Besides, the world isn't split into good people and Death Eaters. We've all got both light and dark inside us. What matters is the part we choose to act on. That's who we really are.”

Source: <http://www.imdb.com/character/ch0000987/quotes>



## Individual Choice?

“Hell, according to the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, is a self-service cafeteria – the worst suffering, in other words, is that which you inflict on yourself. Nazi planners seem to have understood that concept instinctively. By forcing Jewish leaders to involve themselves in decisions about the fate of people in the ghettos they both lightened their own sense of responsibility and increased the suffering within the Jewish community. Powerless as they were, the Jewish Councils had painfully few options. In a lose-lose situation where the options were destruction or destruction – death or death – there could be few, if any, right decisions. It should not be surprising that Jewish leaders based their strategies on the only two hopes available to them: that the Germans would be defeated sooner rather than later, and that somehow at least some Jews could be kept alive until that day.”

~ Doris Bergen, *War and Genocide*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 119

## Individual Choice?

“We must choose our language carefully here. Victims were not **reduced** to certain behavior by their hunger; they were **driven** to it. One term is judgmental, the other is *not*. But it is clear from the struggle of many witnesses, from their expressions as well as their words, that they inhabit two worlds simultaneously: the one of **‘choiceless choice’** then; the other of moral evaluation *now*. “

~ Lawrence Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* (1991), 83

Abraham Maslow's Theory of Hierarchy of Needs & Human Behavior:

