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Richard F. Curran

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'Babi Yar' and Babies

Richard F. Curran, M.D.

Babi Yar was a ravine in Kiev. Babi Yar means "Old Wives' Gully." There is no gully today. It is filled in, and over the fill runs a highway. Buildings are being erected along the stretch of highway. Where these buildings stand 200,000 lives were ended between September, 1941 and October, 1943. The dead were covered with dirt and later dug up and burned. "No monument stands over Babi Yar" reads the opening line of Yevgeny Yevtushenko's poem "Babi Yar."

This year an estimated 20 million lives will come to an end in a peculiarly similar way. The most important similarity is that death will be the result of another person's decision. These are unborn lives. The dead will be dug out and thrown into a toilet, sink or ash can. No monument will stand over their graves.

What is it all about? Those who waited their turn on the banks of Babi Yar are silent now, and cannot answer. They had only a few moments to ponder this question. But even though these moments were spent wrapped in the merciful numbness that horror invites, they were compelled to think of the meaning of life.

"Why must I die? What have I done? Who are these men? Why are they so angry? They took my clothes and laughed at me. They are in such a hurry. Keep the line moving. I fell and they set the dog on me. Even the dogs are angry and hurried. They smoke with one hand. They whip with another. They are amused, they are impatient. They smoke. They command. They scream. They know their job. They must have done it before. I will die and they will live. They will live to smoke another cigarette, to drink from their coffee tin, to sleep another night. But we are the same. We are human beings. We live as they. We breathe and feel and know each other. How could this happen? I am helpless. My brother is going to kill me."

In the womb another life awaits its end. There are no lines soldiers or dogs. While it waits there is warmth and growth and purpose. It is not

Dr. Curran is in private practice in Danvers, Mass. He is also the director of the Labourer's Center Mental Health Clinic. He is the author of "The Quiet Murder," LQ, Nov., '66.

silent nor still. There is a pulsation, an echo of fluids; the determined unhurried motion of life. It is life within a life. It trusts, it waits, it is compliant. But the guardian of that life has made a decision, "I will that another life should end."

We do not know who ordered the deaths at Kiev. Anatoly Kuznetsov in his novel "Babi Yar" does not reveal him. But we do know the author of death in the womb. She is the co-author of the life, that is there.

About the executioners we know more. At Babi Yar they were German soldiers. They were big and tough and well-fed. They had guns, fists, shovels and dogs. They were under orders to kill and bury. It is not known whether they were specifically ordered to spit, kick, bludgeon, strangle and beat with shovels. The intruder of the womb is also under orders. It may be a he or a she. The orders are simple: Kill, remove and destroy. Technique and style are left to one's discretion.

In Kiev it took only two days to eliminate the first 50,000. They were led in small, stunned groups to the edge of the gully and shot. The operation was precise and almost rhythmical. They fell into their grave, some dead, some alive. There was often movement and sound in the hole until more dirt and bodies pressed it out. Only one returned to tell of it.

To destroy the unborn takes no more than a few minutes. The life within is not evasive. It does not run or struggle. It is small. It is weak. It yields to the blade and the curette. It starts to die when the fluid leaves. It is finished by cut, tear or crush.

What to do with the dead, these special dead? They did not die

naturally. They did not die of an ill, for a crime, in self-defense, by accident. They were willed to die by another. They were killed. Those who are killed present special problems. They must not be found. They are evidence.

The removal of such evidence at Babi Yar was an after-thought prompted by the turning tide of the war. It was an operation that took weeks. Day and night the teams of Russian prisoners dug out the earthen womb of the "old wives." There were 200,000 bits of evidence to be changed into ashes. A plan was devised and instruments hastily shaped. As the living cling to life, so the dead stubbornly resist removal from the grave. Groups of workers were divided into diggers, hookers, goldseekers, furnace builders, stokers, crushers, and gardeners (disposers of ash). Thus, the task of the abortionist was mimicked by the teams at Babi Yar.

We return to our question. What is it all about? Why is life taken by another? By what right? As with the victims, the killers of Kiev are not available to answer either. The first 50,000 victims were Jews. The notices had been hastily printed and unsigned. They called for all Jews of Kiev to assemble by a cemetery in preparation for a trip. It was a short trip. It ended where the crisp bite of the machine guns was loudest. But why Jews? Were they all saboteurs? Were they a serious threat to the power of the German army? Or were they just hated? The infants who were swung by the feet into the gully were hardly subversive, nor were their mothers and grandmothers who followed them. So hate designed the bottom layers of the tomb. But why such hate?

At the time of Babi Yar hatred of Jews was a virtue in Nazi Germany.

The flame that was fanned by a madman had possessed the mind of a nation. But let it not be overlooked that their minds and hearts accepted the heat of that flame. This strange and insidious social climate was to spread beyond the Fatherland. It spread to Kiev.

Another social climate is with us today. It has to do with another group of lives, the unborn. This social climate has produced a new attitude toward human life. The essentials of this attitude are very simple. Life is important, especially my life. I have certain rights concerning my life. I have a right to expect as little pain, pressure, sickness, worry and work as is possible. I have a right to take as much food, sex and fun out of this world as I can. I have a right to eliminate whatever or whomever trespasses on my right. I have a right to choose who shall be born into my world and who shall not. I was here first.

These ideas actually take a practical and very appealing form. They appear as human efforts to correct man's folly, as in cases of incest and rape, to combat the ravages of infections and to serve as an antidote to the crippling after-effects of some wonder drug. The justification for this attitude is concern for the mental and physical health of the parents. The reasoning: one person's health is more important than another's life.

Hatred is something supple and elusive. It can change form and move in different directions. It did not spend itself with the annihilation of the Kiev Jews. It was present as a final sporting gesture for the Dynamo Soccer Team that the combined German athletes could not defeat in several games. Their prize was to taste the dirt of Babi Yar. The undefeated

Roman gladiator fared better. Hatred also rode the deadly "Gasengagen" to the gully from which the naked, local harlotry were carried to the furnace, supposedly gassed. But the dead do not snore and the prisoners reported snorers.

Even Titus did not behave like this. Titus was Kuznetsov's cat. He did not lose a pound in three years. He, too, was a killer, but an understandable one. He killed for food. He survived. He was an animal and his kill for survival was natural for him. The killing around him was not natural. The human beings of his time were not killed for food or in self-defense. He must have wondered.

It is true that no monument stands over Babi Yar. What monument would be proper? A stone? A flag? And what inscription would we propose? We could not say "Here lies the remains of — — — — —", for nothing remains. The evidence is gone. Perhaps no physical monument could be erected to bear witness to the awful truth of Babi Yar.

But I believe we can have a monument. We have a perpetual reminder. It is a simple statistic. One out of every four potential babies will be destroyed by another's wish this year. We will attempt to legitimize it.

We march bravely to the cadence of the modern beat. We are in step with the changing mores, the new social climate. We do not want to hear about Babi Yar. It is too threatening. It is too pertinent. It was only a generation ago and we shrink from the thought of it. We live for now and the fun of now. We want comfort and life. We abhor the thought of death.

We will kill our own kind of life at the rate of 20 million lives this year. Our monument to Babi Yar is murder.