



The success of the “sub-humans” and Global racism and discrimination today

by *Professor Emeritus Kurt E. Shuler*

About the author



Kurt E. Schulherr in the late 1930s
(photo: private)

Kurt E. Shuler (Schulherr) was born in Nuremberg in 1922. In 1937 he emigrated to the U.S. and became an American citizen in 1944. After receiving his bachelor's degree in 1942 he served with the U.S. Army from 1944 until 1946. As a military intelligence officer he returned to Nuremberg in 1945. Discharged from the military he resumed his academic career: Ph.D. in chemistry (1949), postdoctoral fellow at Johns Hopkins University (1949 – 1951), promotion to senior staff member and assistant at Applied Physics Laboratories (1951 – 1955).

From 1955 to 1968 he worked at the National Bureau of Standards and finally was promoted to associate scientific director. He has also served as consultant to a number of corporations and the federal government. In 1968 Kurt Shuler became professor of chemistry at the University of California at San Diego, La Jolla, until 1991 when he retired as Professor Emeritus. Twice he was elected chairman of the department.

Shuler authored many scientific publications and was honored with the Distinguished Service Award of the National Bureau of Standards and the Gold Medal Award of the Department of Commerce.

Several invitations to submit proposals for the Nobel prize for Chemistry show his scientific reputation. In 2006 UCSD's Department of Chemistry voted to establish an endowed chair in his honor, the “Kurt E. Shuler Chair for Physical Chemistry”.

RIJO wants to thank our friend for his thoughtful contributions to our site.



Prof. Shuler in the 1960s
(photo: private)

The success of the “sub-humans”

A number of authors have addressed the question of the remarkable success of so many of the Jewish immigrants who came to the United States in the 1930s as teenage refugees from Nazi Germany. The creators and editors of *RIJO* have asked me to add my thoughts to this very interesting question based on their belief that as one of these successful immigrants I might have some useful insight. My comments are based on literature sources and on discussions with a number of my friends who fit the criteria of success in all respects. A very useful source specialized for Fuerth / Nuremberg are the yearly newsletters of Frank Harris (Hess) which detail the lives of the immigrants from Fuerth / Nuremberg practically from the date of their arrival in the U.S.

1) Self selection of individuals who escaped from Nazi Germany

In most stressful situations, the easiest thing to do is nothing and hope that everything will work out okay in the end. As is well known many (as a matter of record, most) Jewish families in Germany who were well integrated within the community at large simply could not and would not believe that the Nazi's really wanted to destroy them. My parents, whose roots in rural Franconia date back to the Middle Ages, were among them.

On the other hand there were young people who could more clearly foresee their future in Nazi Germany and who had the energy and, to borrow a famous phrase, the “iron will” to get out as fast as possible. As an example, I personally arranged for my immigration and left Nuremberg in 1937 at age 15 by myself – my parents chose to stay behind. I was clearly not the only one to do so.

I do believe, based on my reading of the literature and conversation with many of my friends and colleagues with similar histories that those of us who managed to escape one way or another for a safe haven (England, U.S., South America, Israel) were in general individuals with a greater determination to survive and succeed. A well-known poem by Dylan Thomas spells this out, “Do not go gently into that good night, fight, fight against the dying light”. And some of us did.

2) Freedom

The importance of the freedom to do what you want to do and be what you want to be in the U.S. cannot be overemphasized. You are no longer a second class “sub-human” – you are free, you are equal to all others. You are no longer limited by the bounds of “class” and / or the background and profession of your parents. You are now judged by what you can do and

you are free to pursue your dreams. This is probably what the historian Walter Laqueur, himself an example of a highly successful Jewish teenage immigrant, tried to express when he wrote:

“... weil diese Menschen wo immer sie hinkamen, von Neuem anfangen mussten. Infolge der neuen Situation sind bei den meisten Reserven geistiger Art wach geworden, was vielleicht nicht der Fall gewesen wäre, wenn sie in ihrer Heimat geblieben und in normalen Verhältnissen groß geworden wären.”



Arrival of an immigrant ship in New York Harbor

(photo: Amerika-Dienst - AD)

Forget for the moment the virulent anti-Semitism of the Nazis and focus on Wilhelmine Germany and / or the Weimar Republic. What were the chances of Henry Kissinger becoming Secretary of State or my friends and immigrant colleagues Walter Kohn and Raoul Hoffmann becoming Nobel Laureates in Chemistry, Walter Laqueur becoming a world renowned historian, etc. etc.? I repeat, one of the reasons the immigrants have succeeded is due to the freedom in their new homes to follow their dreams and be judged solely on their abilities and achievements. That freedom awakened the “mental reserves” postulated by Laqueur.

3) Lack of a “safety net”

In Germany and Europe in general there is and has been for generations an extensive social “safety net”. In addition, again forgetting for the moment the Nazi period, young people could always count on parental and familial help and support in charting their future. Visualize now the young (and not so young) emigrants in the U.S. There was neither a “safety net” nor parental help – the parents were just as exposed as the children. For us, the operative mode was expressed by the saying “sink or swim”. So we either swam or we sank. It was this knowledge

that, in most cases, there was really no one to turn to for help that caused us to swim 24 hours a day for 7 days a week lest we sank. Failure was not a viable alternative.

I might add that I have witnessed the identical scenario as a Professor at the University of California, San Diego among the young Vietnamese and other Asian immigrants who had to flee their country. They were always the best students with the highest grades. They too had no “safety net” and they now had the freedom to choose their future.



As it ought to be: Students of different ethnical backgrounds on their way to school, ca. 1955
(photo: Amerika-Dienst - AD)

In conclusion I want to return to the above quotation of Walter Laqueur. In discussing the interesting question posed by Gerhard Jochem and Susanne Rieger with some of my successful friends in academia and business, there was complete agreement that our career in the U.S. could not possibly have taken place in Germany completely leaving aside the Nazi period. None of us would have presumed to dream so high in this rather stifling, conservative, tradition bound society with its latent anti-Semitism.

California, August 2001

Global racism and discrimination today

Five years ago, Gerhard Jochem asked me to think about the whys of the remarkable success of many of the Jewish immigrants who came to the United States as teenage refugees from Nazi Germany (see my essay above). Gerhard has now asked me to put my 2001 perspective of racism and discrimination in Nazi Germany into the broader context of racism and discrimination around the globe today.

There is no question that the evil twins of racism and discrimination are still pervasive throughout the world. The basis of these are, depending on the period of time and location, religious beliefs, ethnological differences (clans, tribes), sexual (homophobia, discrimination against women), appearance (Blacks, non-Caucasian), financial envy, and simply mindless prejudices. This racism and discrimination is sometimes governmental policy – think Nazi Germany and many states in Africa (Sudan vs. Darfur for example) and sometimes practiced by small non-government groups – think Neo-Nazis, Ku Klux Klan, Minute Men in the U.S. and many others. The obvious question which arises is why racism and discrimination are so pervasive throughout history and throughout the world. I believe that homo sapiens was “hardwired” for racism and discrimination as a defensive mechanism from the very dawn of our development. Clan and family was a cohesive unit – all outsiders were a potential threat. As society developed and what we now call civilization arose, some organized entities, i.e. governmental, bodies began to realize that what may have been reasonable at the tribal dawn of history no longer made sense and interfered with the peaceful development of society.

I believe it to be demonstrable by many examples that the most successful fight against racism and discrimination is carried on by societies and their governments who believe in personal freedom and free enterprise. Simply stated, racism and discrimination interfere with the efficient functioning of society and the profitability of business. Thus governments in such countries (think U.S. and E.U.) outlaw racism and discrimination and try legally to enforce these policies. On the other hand, societies which are not oriented toward free enterprise and where the government is primarily interested in maintaining and enhancing its absolute power frequently use racism and discrimination as a means to maintain their power. Most of Africa and the Middle East are very visible examples. This formulation may not please everyone, but it is a fact that the flow of people who want to escape racism and discrimination and who want to build a more free and secure economic future is from dictator-ruled countries to the freedom and tolerance of the U.S. and the E.U.



Co-education at the kindergarten, ca. 1955

(photo: Amerika-Dienst - AD)

There is one additional tool in the struggle against racism and discrimination – moral awakening. This is, and can be, successful only in a democratic society. It is universally suppressed by dictatorial governments. The abolition of slavery is an interesting example of both moral awakening and the difficulty of overcoming our hardwiring. It was not the Greek or Roman civilization,

nor the theocratic middle-ages nor the Renaissance where there were any serious governmental initiatives to free the slaves. This was finally accomplished in Europe and the U.S. only by the middle of the 19th century – eons after the beginning of “civilization”. The de jure segregation of Blacks in the U.S. was not found illegal (unconstitutional) until the middle of the 20th century. It is interesting to note that the various segregation strictures against the Blacks in the U.S. were essentially identical with the strictures against the Jews developed by the Nazis in the 1930s.

This brings us full cycle back to my earlier analysis of the successful integration of refugees from Nazi Germany into the U.S. society. There is, without question, anti-Semitism and xenophobia alive and well in parts of the U.S. population. But this racism and discrimination are not government-sponsored. To the contrary, the government realizes that it is to the benefit of U.S. society for all its citizens and legal immigrants to succeed and prosper and not be the victims of racism and discrimination.

What you are reading here is an over-simplified analysis of a complex problem. It is my opinion that we will never be able to completely erase racism and discrimination by either education or legal pressure since this “hardwiring” appears to be very difficult to undo for a good part of our citizens. What we can do, however, is to work peacefully toward the establishment of tolerant democratic governments throughout the world.

California, November 2006