Editor's Note

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EDITOR'S NOTE

JOSEPH DREW

The 29th Annual Meeting of the International Society for the Comparative Study of Civilizations this year was packed with scholarship, another advance for the comparative study of civilizations. Held on the lovely campus of the University of South Alabama, in historic Mobile, Alabama, from June 8 through June 11, this year’s sessions addressed a special theme. It was “Janus: Looking Back to Look Forward.”

There were many action-packed panel discussions. Insightful papers were presented, themes discussed, points debated. Prof. Boris Erasov of the Institute of Oriental Studies in Moscow, Russia, was this year’s Distinguished Speaker. His lecture, entitled “Criminality As A Product of the Crash of Civilizations: A View From Russia,” gripped the attention of the audience. It is reprinted in this issue of the Comparative Civilizations Review.

The banquet on Saturday, offering the opportunity to exchange views with many individuals from all around the globe, each interested in the comparative study of civilizations, was a joy, too. So, when Sunday came, and it was time to depart, I left town thinking that the intellectual input from ISCSC had been wonderful – but was now finished for a while.

Was I wrong. On the plane, I took up two new books – both yet to be officially published – written by ISCSC members. I knew the two authors well. Dr. Midori Yamanouchi has been a longtime friend and colleague. She is, of course, not only Professor of Sociology and Anthropology at the University of Scranton but also Managing Editor of this journal. And Dr. Michael Palencia-Roth, who is Professor of Comparative Literature, Spanish, and Latin American Studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, served for many years as the very distinguished president of the ISCSC.

What I read astounded me. My conclusion: these books are blockbusters, beautifully written, shattering illusions. Each deals...
with those who perhaps can be seen as victims of World War II – soldiers drafted from the universities to fight for Japan, civilians caught up in the Holocaust as it was visited upon the residents of a small Polish town. In other words, if you have only two books to read between now and next year's meeting, make them these two. They may change your mind, and they'll surely pierce your soul.

The first is Dr. Midori Yamanouchi's work, Listen to the Voices from The Sea. Originally it was entitled Kike Wadatsumi no Koe. The book, published by the University of Scranton Press, consists of writings of Japanese university students who fell fighting for their country in World War II. It was compiled by the Japan Memorial Society for Students Killed in the War and published in Japanese in 1949. When it came out in Japan, it received instant acclaim. The book adds up to a plea for ending all wars.

In the beginning of the work, which Prof. Yamanouchi (with Joseph L. Quinn, S.J.) has translated into English and edited, she remembers how deeply she was moved by the predecessor compilation of manuscripts from fallen soldiers. "It not only moved me, but even deepened my sorrow over how those fine, able men from the University of Tokyo had to die in the war that they could not control and did not want." She recalls that "in the last stage of the war, many high school classmates of mine lost their older brothers in the same manner as did the authors of this book." Further, "Amazingly, as I look back at that time, hatred toward the enemy was not the primary emotion at all; in fact, it was almost absent – there was just the sense of fate, helplessness, and sorrow."

That sense of doom, of the inability of bright, young men to stop the onrushing tide of death, pervades the letters.

Prof. Yamanouchi also observes that "throughout the past forty-five years of my academic life in the United States, it has always been a very hurtful experience whenever some Americans made a statement to the effect that those Japanese who were killed as special attack forces members, i.e., so-called 'Kamikaze pilots', were mindless, robot-like figures, who simply followed orders and died."
As we read these letters home, we realize that (a) many of us have fallen for such characterizations of these enemy soldiers and (b) this is unfair to the men. These writers were young university students forced, drafted, into service. They generally deplored the war, did not approve of the Japanese military leadership, guessed at what was likely to befall them and often wrote as men already practically dead.

Is this the voice of a stupid, heartless kamikaze pilot?

"Now I declare!" exclaimed 25-year-old Sub-lieutenant Toshimasa Hayashi, a few months before he was killed over the ocean, in action, "I have nothing but a strong antipathy for the Imperial Navy – absolutely no positive feelings at all. ... How terribly we, the 13th class of pilots to come out of the "students mobilized for war" program, have been oppressed by them, the Imperial Navy! Who exactly is fighting this war now anyway? A full half of my classmates of the 13th class who were bomber pilots on carriers, and my friends, are now already dead....

And, on August 9, 1945, the very day he died, "a clear day," he concluded:

Today I shall fly one of the very latest in war planes, a Ryusei, and will slam it into an enemy carrier. Good-bye, my dear parents, and everyone.
Thank you, all my comrades.

Those of us who are Americans have an image of the war in Okinawa and the Ryukyu Islands clearly in mind. Indeed, President Clinton recently spoke of that anguished conflict while at a conference on the island. But how do our half-century-old opinions about and characterizations of the kamikaze enemy square with the following ideas on liberty penned by a student taken to fight from the Economics faculty of Keiō-gijuku University? He was Ryoji Uehara, inducted into the Japanese Army’s special attack unit. Aged 23, he was killed as he dashed into one of our mechanized units in Okinawa.

My thoughts about all these things derive from a logical standpoint which is more or less the fruit of my long career as a student and, perhaps, what some others might
call a liberal.

But I believe that the ultimate triumph of liberty is altogether obvious. As the Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce has proclaimed, "liberty is so quintessential to human nature that it is absolutely impossible to destroy it." I believe along with him that this is a simple fact, a fact so certain that liberty must of necessity continue its underground life even when it appears, on the surface, to be suppressed – it will always win through in the end.

It is equally inevitable that an authoritarian and totalitarian nation, however much it may flourish temporarily, will eventually be defeated. In the present war we can see how this latter truth is borne out in the Axis powers themselves. What more needs to be said about Fascist Italy? Nazi Germany, too, has already been defeated, and we see that all the authoritarian nations are now falling down one by one, exactly like buildings with faulty foundations. All these developments only serve to reveal all over again the universality of the truth that history has so often proven in the past: men’s great love of liberty will live on into the future, and into eternity itself....

Anyone who wants to know anything about America, which is a free country, will first have to understand what liberalism is. Just what is liberty, after all? It is a fundamental feature of humanity itself and those who believe in it will always be powerful.

Some of these letters simply go straight to the human condition, and the reader forgets that it is an enemy soldier speaking. Thus, Hisao Kimura, while awaiting execution in Singapore for a crime he avers he did not commit, wrote home to his parents in the margins of a scholarly book he was allowed to read:

Perhaps many of my professors and classmates will grieve for me and think kind thoughts when they hear the news of my death. They will be sad and say in loving thought that "he could certainly have become such a great scholar" and so on.
I did everything I possibly could in order to stay alive, and also to prove my innocence. My superior officers strictly forbade me against making any true statement before the court; and, as a result, those same men, who ordered me, ended up being sentenced to imprisonment at hard labor while I, who had to follow their commands, was given the death penalty. This is clearly unreasonable, and I reflected on the fact that my life would represent, many times over, a greater contribution to Japan's future than the lives of those officers who issued the orders. Judging from the facts surrounding just this one case, it is quite obvious that the blame ought to have been placed upon the officers....

When I think of situations like this that exist throughout the world, then I can more easily accept my own death.... Finally, the only thing left for me to do is to die as the gods command.... If, as people say, there should indeed be "that other world," then it is there that I will be able to see my grandparents again, as well as those classmates of mine who were killed in action. I will go there, and will look forward to talking to them about this world. Again, if what people say is in fact possible, I shall always—even though from behind the scenes—be watching over my father and mother from there, and my younger sister and her family too. Please remember me now and then, even though I may perhaps be a constant reminder of some sad things.

I am holding onto life and ignoring the word—tomorrow—but my heart has not lost the desire to read. Civilizations clash, and nations fight. Yet, the ability to see the world through the eyes of the other broadens understanding. It is no wonder that this book is already scheduled for discussion on national and international news shows. Recently, it was featured on CBS News Sunday Morning. Another big media review is in the works this fall.

As I sat on the plane, reading Dr. Palencia-Roth's book, I cried. It arises, too, from the same time period, but its location
is half way around the globe from Japan. Entitled The Narrow Bridge: Beyond the Holocaust, it is a collaboration between Rabbi Isaac Neuman and Dr. Palencia-Roth and was slated to be published by the University of Illinois Press over the summer. I guarantee that if you read this book, you, too, will cry.

And perhaps the Holocaust will never again be simply an historical event for you – it will be that small town in Poland, Zdunska Wola, not far from Lodz. First it will be its people, each person with his or her uniqueness, a story to tell, often a beautiful and evocative one, and then, it will be the deliberate organized murder of the Jews of town by powerful thugs with weapons, from Germany. We walk in the book with Isaac Neuman. We begin with his entry into religious school at age three, and we are with him at his liberation by American soldiers, on May 5, 1945, at the age of 23. Left for dead, barely conscious and unable to move, he lived and was able to regain his strength, recall his story and, ultimately, work on this book.

And, through what Mills called the sociological imagination, the feel of the Holocaust emerges from the story of the people of Zdunska Wola. From individual journeys we learn of the group’s destiny.

Michael Palencia-Roth is such a talented sculptor of events that it is difficult to excise a few of the highlights, for fear of omitting the best stories. I found two, however, completely unforgettable.

Chapter Seven is entitled “Shlomo’s Last Prayer.” Local businessman Shlomo Zelichowski “was always cheerful, and his eyes radiated kindness.” Over the years he took on many roles: a husband, teacher, mediator, a singer in the local synagogue, a prominent manufacturer; he was a role model for many of the students in Zdunska Wola.

In the spring of 1942, the Nazis arrested Mr. Zelichowski and nine other Jewish men. The interlocutor for the Jews, a local doctor later murdered himself, went to the Nazis and asked why these men, the most pious in the community, had been selected. He was told that the men would be hanged because the Ten Commandments had been received by Jews. Since Shavuos, a
Jewish holiday, celebrates the giving of the Ten Commandments, they were to be hanged on that day "in the name of the Führer."

Mr. Zelichowski opted to celebrate the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur, early that year, and in jail. The reason: it would be the Day of Judgment for the ten men. "Tomorrow night we shall declare before the Holy One, blessed be he, that we ten are willing to atone for the sins of all the Jewish people." He led the men in a beautifully celebrated Yom Kippur service, excluding only the final, beautiful melody, "God of awesome deeds, God of awesome deeds, grant us pardon, as the gates begin to close." He told the others, "Let us not sing this melody now. Let us reserve it for the march through the square to the scaffold."

At midnight that evening he sounded the shofar, a ram's horn, conveying the promise of the Messiah, and the blast echoed throughout the town.

The next day all the Jews were herded into the square to watch the scheduled executions, in order, writes Dr. Palencia-Roth, "to teach Zdunska Wola a lesson in domination by the master race." But a different lesson was taught that day.

As the ten men walked toward the gallows they sang, in strong and clear voices, the beautiful closing refrain for Yom Kippur. Many in the crowd, several thousands, joined in and the Germans became frantic. Just as he was about to be killed, Shlomo Zelichowski "directed his voice heavenward and sang the Shema." This is the great credo of the Jewish faith. The crowd joined in the chant. Afterward, the Jews of Zdunska Wola stood still in silent homage. The Germans had to resort to rifle butts, whips and dogs to drive the crowd away.

The second unforgettable moment, for me, came near the end of the Nazi tortures of Isaac Neuman. Driven near the final moments of the Holocaust to Mauthausen, he and some other men were forbidden to enter the camp. They were to sleep outdoors. It was freezing cold, windy, miserable. He lay down for the night near a man, Shmuel, whose last name he never knew. Isaac heard Shmuel recite the death confession prayers. Then, Shmuel whispered to him, "I want you to have my coat tonight, for I am going to die, even with this thick coat. My time has
come. But you might live, for the coat has an extra lining."

Shmuel had decided to give Isaac the coat because he had studied Torah. "You must survive. You must live. You must remember me, as you must remember all of us. You have a duty Isaac. It is to teach Torah and to help others to try to understand what has happened to us." Isaac took the coat.

In the morning, parts of Shmuel's dead body were frozen to the ground. Many other men had perished but Isaac lived. The coat helped save him.

I think that through this book, Shmuel lives, and Shlomo Zelichowski sings.

When we compare civilizations, as when we read great literature, we often look for similarities across time and space. These two books, both beautifully written, inspire us to do just that. We are able to put ourselves in place of the victims, and thus these men and women will live on as long as we do.

Kibbutz Yad Hanna, Israel