

The Holocaust

Voices of Scholars

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Edited by
Jolanta Ambrosewicz-Jacobs

Centre for Holocaust Studies,
Jagiellonian University
Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum



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Katarzyna Nowak
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Cover Design
Dorota Ogonowska

Layout
Izabela Witowska

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Table of Contents

<i>Foreword</i> by Piotr M. A. Cywiński	9
<i>Introduction</i> by Jolanta Ambrosewicz-Jacobs	13
I	
Yehuda Bauer: <i>Holocaust Research – A Personal Statement</i>	19
John K. Roth: <i>Gray Zones: The Holocaust and the Failure(s) of Ethics</i>	31
Ian Kershaw: <i>Working on the Holocaust</i>	41
John T. Pawlikowski: <i>The Challenge of the Holocaust for a Christian Theologian</i>	51
Zdzisław Mach: <i>Poland's National Memory of the Holocaust and Its Identity in an Expanded Europe</i>	61
II	
Michael R. Marrus: <i>Holocaust Research and Scholarship Today</i>	73
Charles S. Maier: <i>Holocaust Fatigue</i>	83
Omer Bartov: <i>My Twisted Way to Buczacz</i>	95
Shimon Redlich: <i>Some Remarks on the Holocaust by a Marginal Historian</i>	105
Dan Michman: <i>The Challenge of Studying the Shoah as Jewish History: Some Personal Reflections</i>	101
Maria Orwid, Krzysztof Szwejca: <i>Reflections on the Holocaust from a Psychiatric Perspective</i>	121
Jonathan Webber: <i>Auschwitz: Whose History, Whose Memory?</i>	135
Nechama Tec: <i>My Personal and Professional Journey to Holocaust Research</i>	149
Dalia Ofer: <i>My View Through Their Lens: The Personal and Collective in Writing about the Holocaust</i>	159
Feliks Tych: <i>A Witness and His Path to Research</i>	173
Debórah Dwork: <i>The Challenges of Holocaust Scholarship. A Personal Statement</i>	189
Robert Jan van Pelt: <i>Salvage</i>	205

Michael Berenbaum: <i>My Way to the Holocaust</i>	219
Stanisław Krajewski: <i>Speaking About the Holocaust in Today's Poland</i>	233
Moshe Zimmermann: <i>The Holocaust of the German Jews</i>	245
Wolfgang Benz: <i>Expulsion, "Ethnic Cleansing," Genocide</i>	257
Jan Woleński: <i>Executioners, Victims and Bystanders</i>	267

III

Eleonora Bergman: <i>Questions in the Polish Landscape</i>	281
Elie Wiesel: <i>Lift Your Eyes and Look at the Sky</i>	285

About the Authors	289
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Foreword

Beneath my office window opposite Crematorium I on the grounds of Auschwitz I Stammlager, many thousands of people pass by every day. Mainly young people. For the most part their faces are concentrated, dis-oriented, depressed. They have just seen everything that rouses the utmost protest in every person. Or should in principle. Because the problem is that it does not.

Every year many millions of people visit museums and educational centers devoted to the history of the Holocaust. These people very emotionally ask themselves how it was possible that the underground did not blow up the railroad tracks, that the Allies did not bomb the gas chambers, that the Red Cross did nothing, that moral and religious authorities did not call a spade a spade.

Over dinner the same evening, these same people, watching Rwanda or Darfur, will be asking themselves: What is NATO doing? Why are there no blue helmets there? What does the European Union have to say about it? How strange that no one is doing anything!

Watching the people passing by, finishing their tour of Auschwitz I and slowly heading for Auschwitz II Birkenau, I wonder sometimes how many days it will take before each and every one of them begins to shed their personal responsibility, today's responsibility, shifting it to various institutions, preferably international ones. Today they are appalled by the silence of the world back then. Tomorrow they will begin to be part of that silence. The number of visitors to the Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial is easily more than a million annually.

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So many teenagers all over the world have read Anne Frank's diary. They have very strongly recognized themselves in the person of young Anne. They have identified with her.

The majority of Holocaust education programs rely on that identification with the victims. Empathy is supposed to stimulate imagination, an understanding that the victims were real. Perhaps it stimulates understanding, but it does not convert it to a sense of personal responsibility.

In the Anne Frank book, today's teenager identifies with an innocent person. But the identification is with a defenseless person, condemned in advance, who has no influence – neither by herself nor with her parents – on her reality, surrounded by an unseen, faceless threat. A threat which in any case inevitably triumphs over her. A threat which is always external.

Empathy is not a bad thing. It is good that young people empathize. But let's not fool ourselves that it leads to a greater sense of responsibility.

• • •

The victim is not the problem. The problem for our understanding of human nature is the perpetrator. But who would be capable of looking at the camp's barbed wire from the point of view of the camp guard? And of putting one question to oneself: In what circumstances could I have appeared in that position?

Hatred and contempt probably can never be eliminated completely, but it can be opposed – actively. Every passive observer, then, let's face it, is also the problem, particularly when the passive observers number in the tens and hundreds of millions. In the age of the Internet, live television, cellphones, the growth of civil society, at a time when the average salary is enough to pay for a safe landing in a country where innocent people are being slaughtered, the passive observer has no excuse.

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Someday there will be new martyrdom museums which tell the tragic story of the African genocides of the early 21st century. Of the children murdered with machetes before the eyes of TV reporters. And then, young people visiting those memorials will walk through – concentrated, disoriented, depressed. And they will be unable to understand what we did back then. How was it possible that no one did anything? After all, they could have.

The greatest blame will then fall on today's teachers. And on us, unfortunately – those who create Holocaust education programs.

If, then, this collection of essays can to some small extent wrest that teaching from the conventional dry enumeration of facts, and vacuous empathy, and encourage at least some readers to ask themselves a few questions, it will have been worth it.

With hope,

Piotr M. A. Cywiński
Director, Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum

translated from Polish

Introduction

Because, friend, these are not just the bones
of murdered Jews lying in this grave.
The conscience of humankind
lies buried here as well.

My Żydzi polscy... *We Polish Jews...*, Julian Tuwim¹

“What lies behind the timeless persistence of a tragedy from more than sixty years ago, an apparition which, like a recurring dream, haunts ever-new audiences though the actors long ago vacated the theater? ...How can it be that more than half a century has not healed the wounds? No one can answer the question alone. ...The sociologist must look to the psychologist, the anthropologist to the philosopher, the scholar of literature to the historian. And vice versa.”²

That is how the cultural anthropologist Joanna Tokarska-Bakir put the problem, and in so doing described our reason for publishing this book. It is a collection of essays touching on some of the most confounding questions of Holocaust research, edited and published by the Center for Holocaust Studies of the Jagiellonian University and by the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum.

Answers to these questions are needed and sought, but in this book the intention is to portray the *pursuit* of answers, the struggle to come to terms with humanity’s most appalling experience.

The invited contributors are a diverse international group, each one representing a significant dimension of engagement with the problem of the Holocaust. Among them are distinguished professors, researchers and

1 Julian Tuwim, *My Żydzi polscy... We Polish Jews...*, Isaac Komem, trans. (Warsaw: Fundacja Shalom, 2008), p. 47.

2 Joanna Tokarska-Bakir, “Historia jako fetysz,” in: *Rzeczy mgliste. Eseje i studia* (Sejny: Pogranicze, 2004), p. 97.

psychotherapists, and the heads and co-founders of important institutions. They are based in Canada, Germany, Great Britain, Israel, Poland and the United States. Many of their writings are known as fundamental works.

The book presents the reflections of these scholars and public figures whose work involves the subject of the Holocaust. We asked them to write about difficulties they have faced, and we posed several questions to them: Do the analytical tools of the scholar, the researcher, the philosopher, the sociologist, the artist, prove weak or ineffective in dealing with the Holocaust? More than sixty years after the liberation of Auschwitz, are we intellectually and emotionally baffled by the genocide the Nazis committed there? If so, what are the paths taken to overcome this? How and why continue work on this most perplexing subject?

The essays are arranged from most general to most specific – only approximately, of course, as none of these papers are confined solely to reflections or to matters of practice. The five that form the first section directly confront the Holocaust as a phenomenon: the extent to which it can be understood, and the challenges it presents to research, to ethics, to Judaism and Christianity, to the Polish people and Europe, to our species.

The next and largest section takes us inside the work of these scholars and looks at how they do it, starting with papers broadly considering their approach to the task. Further on are essays describing problems encountered in the course of research – some of them methodological, some of them as tangible as organizational crises or court battles. Many of these writings have a very personal slant; this is what we hoped for from the outset of this project, and we thank those writers for their candor. Especially revealing are the descriptions of the context – academic, social, political, historical – in which the author has chosen and pursued his or her path. The last essays in this section grapple with particular topics in detail.

The last part is brief, but it serves as the coda to this book. If we have tried here to render the world of Holocaust research and writing, then these two contributions represent its two magnetic poles: Eleonora Bergman pragmatically explains why we must study the Holocaust despite – and because of – the puzzles it presents; then, speaking from the

experience of having plumbed the depths of that enormity, Elie Wiesel closes the book with a call for us to preserve hope – hope as the condition of our humanity.

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As this volume goes to press we mark the passing of Maria Orwid, a pioneer of the psychotherapy of children of the Holocaust and the second generation; teacher, thinker and humanitarian, child of the Holocaust.

Jolanta Ambrosewicz-Jacobs
Director, Centre for Holocaust Studies
Jagiellonian University

1

Holocaust Research – A Personal Statement

Yehuda Bauer

There is a very basic question that any research on the Holocaust faces, but that people rarely address consciously: was the Holocaust a historical event that, like all historical events, can be analyzed and understood, no less, though perhaps no more, than any other historical event? Or is it something inexplicable, something that transcends the capability of humans to understand and internalize? Is there perhaps some inner substance in this particular series of events that is beyond the grasp of humans?

I am only one of many researchers of the genocide of the Jewish people at the hands of National Socialist Germany and its collaborators throughout Europe, which we call the Holocaust, or Shoah; but I bear responsibility to myself and to my readers/listeners, to answer this first and very basic question. My answer is this: the Holocaust was an event or a series of events perpetrated by humans, for human reasons and with human motivations. No God or Satan, even if they exist, which is very doubtful, were involved. As such, it is, in principle though not in practice, as understandable and penetrable as the history of the Pilsudski regime, the British policy in India, or the French Revolution. Anything that humans do can be understood by other humans because of the similarity – not equivalence – in motivations, in contexts, and in the characters of the acting personalities. Our problem, then, is not that the Nazis were inhuman; our problem is that they were human. In every one of us there is a grain of a Himmler and an Eichmann, which could develop into mass criminality given different circumstances, social, political and cultural contexts, family background, and so on. There is nothing mystical about

the Holocaust – it was the most extreme mass atrocity we know of, but that in itself shows that it was the extreme end of something that is found in human history. It can therefore be explained and understood – which does not mean that we have actually understood it, or that there is a prospect that we will understand it in some near future. But, despite post-modernist arguments, I would claim that it was the result of an infinite number of causal chains, that we have a good chance, in the end, to understand and analyze the main ones, and that we can have an informed guess regarding a large number of others.

There is what Americans call the \$64,000 question: where does this urge to mass murder, and especially mass annihilation of groups, come from? The true answer is, of course, that I do not know, and that I doubt whether anyone else has an answer that can be proved; but my hypothesis is that we have the instinct of mass killing within us. After all, we all, all the humans now on this earth, Hitler, Stalin, Einstein, Australian aborigines, you and I, are descended from a group of *homo sapiens* that roamed the East African savannahs between 500,000 and 200,000 years ago, give or take a few hundreds of thousands of years. That has been shown by DNA analyses. That means that there are no races, and in a way the Biblical legend of Adam and Eve has a kernel of truth in it, because the story implies that we are all one human race descended from the same source (it also implies, probably unintentionally, because all three monotheisms are anti-feminist, that all knowledge comes from the woman, as she is the one who plucked an apple from the tree of knowledge). We are predatory, territorial mammals, like tigers or bears, and so on. But we do not have the physical equipment of the great cats or the bears, so humans depended on collaboration in order to hunt. Humans killed animals – they had to in order to survive. Anyone who invaded their real or their virtual territory, whether it was an animal or a human, was either absorbed, domesticated, “assimilated,” enslaved, expelled, or killed. Killing, then, en masse, in struggles over territory and hunting and collecting grounds, was essential, and developed into an instinct.

If this anthropological hypothesis is anywhere near correct, and the genocidal instincts are implanted in us, then the question arises whether there is any possibility of avoiding mass atrocities or mass killings. If there is

not, then all our political or educational efforts to prevent genocidal events are pointless. However, there is another side to our instinctive behavior: humans needed to cooperate, in hunting and in collecting fruits, and so on, and in order to do that, social bonding, care, love, sympathy, and a drive to rescue those whom humans deemed to be valuable to themselves, also developed and became a part of human instinctive behavior. To rescue someone whom one did or did not know, but who was or might become an ally and friend in the struggle for survival, is, arguably, the other side of human reactions. This is clearly evident in genocides: Yad Vashem has recognized over 21,000 “Righteous” rescuers, according to very strict criteria. My assumption is that that is roughly 10% of the rescuers, as the others either perished with those they tried to rescue, or the rescued never knew their names, or the victims did not survive to tell the tale, or the names were forgotten. In addition, there were whole communities that rescued Jews – the Danes, the Bulgarians who rescued the Jews in Bulgaria itself (but delivered those who were in Bulgarian-controlled territories to the Germans), most of the Italians (though there were antisemitic fascists and traitors there, too) and, arguably, the Serbs. When one adds all these up they are still a small minority; the vast majority of Europeans under Nazi or Nazi-allied rule were hostile to the Jews, or evinced a hostile indifference to their Jewish neighbors’ fate. However, the minority expresses the other side, so to speak, of human behavior under these difficult circumstances, and their very existence shows that the struggle against recurring genocides is not hopeless, though clearly very difficult.

Obviously, the Holocaust was a form of genocide, and indeed the UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (1948) was initiated by a refugee Polish-Jewish lawyer, Raphael Lemkin, in the United States, on the basis of what he knew in 1943–44 about the mass murder of Jews and Poles. Do we then accept the definition of genocide in the Convention? I know of no serious academic who accepts that definition, which is indeed very unsatisfactory. But the problem lies deeper: all our historical or social scientific definitions are abstractions from social and historical reality, and reality is much more complex than our definitions can be. That is not all: many of us, faced with these complexities, try to adapt reality to the definitions rather than

the other way round. As a result, many colleagues, myself included, have abandoned the quite useless discussion about definitions, and we search for alternatives. I think the best alternative probably is to use descriptions rather than definitions. When we do that, we can say that genocidal events, or genocidal massacres, or mass atrocities (the terms are really interchangeable), are directed against real or virtual groups, and they include “politicides” (a term coined by Barbara Harff), that is, mass murder of real or imagined political groups. Thus, the “kulaks” were not a real group but a constructed one, but once it was constructed it became very real, and people identified as kulaks became targets of mass atrocities. Tutsi and Hutu are not really ethnicities, because they speak the same language, adhere to the same Christian denominations, and share the same culture. They developed from a social class basis, a fact that was exacerbated by the German and Belgian colonialists to facilitate their rule in Rwanda, and once defined as separate groups they became what one might define as “virtual ethnicities.” What all these elements have in common is the intent, and the act, of trying to annihilate groups “as such,” as the Convention says, by means that will include mass murder (and by other criminal acts). Some researchers have suggested that so-called “cultural genocide” should be included. This is a contradiction in terms, because the term genocide means “murder of people(s).” A group deprived of a cultural heritage has the chance of recovery at a later date. When people are murdered they cannot recover.

Only now, a first book dealing with the history of genocide – and which will no doubt arouse controversy – has been published (Ben Kiernan, *Blood and Soil, A World History of Genocide*, Yale University Press, 2007). Research in this area is indispensable, because it is clear that mass atrocities intended to annihilate groups as such have been with us since time immemorial, and before that. They differed from each other in contexts, in ways and means, in motivations and in outcomes. But if what I said above is even approximately true, one can see the common basis of all of these human actions. Apart from that basis, what are the parallels between all genocidal events, the Holocaust included? Clearly, I think, the suffering of the victims, which is the same in all such mass atrocities. There is no scale of victimization, there is no genocide that is worse

than another, no murder that is worse than another murder, no torture, killing of children, or rape that is worse than another crime of the same kind. “We suffered more than you did” is a total, though psychologically understandable, distortion of life experiences, individual or communal. There is another parallel, namely that perpetrators will always use the best available means to commit their crimes. The Germans had gas, a first-rate bureaucracy, military might, advanced technology – and they used them. The Hutu had a very good bureaucracy, developed by the German and Belgian colonialists on the basis of a well-organized precolonial kingdom; they used radio to identify Tutsi everywhere according to their identity cards, and to order local Hutu in all the towns and villages whom to kill; they used machetes, knives, clubs, and firearms; they organized special killing units – the Interahamwe, who were parallel to similar units used by the Ottoman Turks to kill Armenians, and indeed to the special SS killers used by the Nazis. But in the German case there were also some quite unprecedented means used: for the first time in history, factories were established to produce corpses. And while in Birkenau, Treblinka and Chelmno also thousands of Roma were murdered, and several hundred Poles and Soviet POWs, some 99% of the victims were Jews, and it was in order to kill them that these factories were established. The term used here was coined by Erich Kulka and Ota Kraus in their book *Továrna Na Smrt*, (Prague, Naše Vojsko, 1957).

There are of course many differences between the different genocidal events, especially in regard to their backgrounds, motivations and rationalizations. However, I would claim that there are no elements in any genocidal event apart from the Holocaust that are not repeated in yet other genocides. Thus, if we take the genocidal event that is taking place before our eyes, in Darfur, we see several factors: a long history of dissatisfaction of African tribal societies with the central government in Khartoum, against the background of decreasing local natural resources on the one hand and a steep rise in national income in the Sudan as a result of discovery of oil on the other hand. This dramatic increase in government income went to develop and enrich the Arab tribes of northern Sudan who make up a disproportionately large part of the governmental and societal elite. The government itself is a radical Islamist one that has already committed

genocide against the Black Christian and animist tribes in the south, so that it has experience in using local militias who will “front” genocidal actions. The ideology of the local Bedouins who form the backbone of the militias supported by the government is explicitly racist and exterminatory. All these elements, including the ideological rationalization, can be found in other genocides of the past 150 years or so. The basis is economic, social, and in part racial/ethnic (anti-Black, although sections of the African tribe of the Zaghawa take an active part in the mainly Arab Bedouin “Aballah” murderous militias called the “Janjaweed”). A mixture of “ethnic” and economic motives accompanied the Hutu genocide of the Tutsi, although there the main motivation was political, namely the retention of exclusive political power by the Hutu elites from northwestern Rwanda, whose groups had never been part of the precolonial Tutsi monarchy, and who in a way continued their political struggle against the Tutsi with modern genocidal means. The military threat from the Tutsi was real, as was the threat in Darfur from an initially well-organized rebellion – by now (summer 2007) the rebels have splintered. All this has precedents.

German policy towards the Poles was most certainly genocidal: they fully intended to eliminate the Polish people as a recognizable and autonomous ethnic or national group. In order to do so, they eliminated all political opposition, and murdered as many of the Polish elites as they could. They destroyed or confiscated all Polish economic establishments, and utterly destroyed Polish higher and secondary educational institutions. The motivation was political and economic: they wanted to turn the Poles into Helots, slaving for the benefit of National Socialist Germany, as part of German rule over an East European *Lebensraum*. In the process they murdered millions. There are parallels to that in other genocidal events – a mixture of political/strategic expansionist themes to commit genocidal mass atrocities is unfortunately not new.

The Holocaust also contains some of these elements: a powerful genocidal central power, military supremacy (as in the case of the Ottoman campaign against the Armenians), a war situation (as in Rwanda – *mutatis mutandis* of course), and the economic utilization of Jewish slaves before their annihilation. But the Holocaust also included motivations and

acts that were totally unprecedented in human history. The Nazis aimed at identifying and murdering every single person they considered to be a Jew – without any exception; I don’t know of any precedent for that. They developed, in stages, the intention to do so all over the globe, as Hitler for instance told the Mufti of Jerusalem, Hajj Amin el-Husseini, on November 28, 1941 – again, a globally conceived genocide to which there was no precedent. The ideology was, contrary to the examples I have provided, and indeed contrary to the situation in all genocidal events I am aware of, completely non-pragmatic. They certainly robbed the Jews, but Jewish property was not the motivation for the murder; rather, robbery was the “natural” accompaniment of the desire, first, to expel the Jews, and then, to murder them. The Nazi ideology was not based on economic, cost-effective calculations. Had capitalist, cost-effective considerations been more important to them than ideology, they would have not killed their Jewish slaves while they were working for them; they would not, for instance, have annihilated the Lodz and Bialystok ghettos against the advice of the Wehrmacht and the local Nazi bureaucrats when these ghettos were producing essential goods for them. For the first time in history, as far as I can see, a genocide was committed for purely ideological reasons. To use Marxist terminology (although I am no Marxist), there were no relations of production that had produced this superstructure; it was the superstructure that was decisive in acting over and against economic and political interests. There are any number of cases in the Holocaust where Germans murdered Jews in contradiction to their own interests. This does not seem to have had any precedents.

Thus, the Holocaust can be defined as the most extreme case of genocide known to us to date – in other words, while it is part of a general picture of genocidal events, it contains unprecedented elements. When one uses the term “unprecedented,” one implies, as indeed I do here, that the Holocaust is a precedent that might be followed – and in some aspects it already has been followed (e.g., the Hutu genocidaires intended to kill every person in Rwanda they defined as a Tutsi). I would therefore argue that when one deals with genocides, one cannot avoid dealing with the Holocaust as a paradigmatic event that might presage similar extreme genocidal events in the future. This certainly holds true when one wants

to try and avoid, or at least diminish, future genocidal dangers. The extreme example of the Holocaust is the sword of Damocles hanging over humanity.

There is a special European angle to dealing with the Shoah/Holocaust. It happened in the midst of a supposedly liberal, or conservative, or social-democratic, but in any case democratic, well-developed civilization. It arose in a country which had developed some of the most advanced ideas and achievements of modern culture. The vast majority of Europeans looked on while their Jewish neighbors were being taken away and murdered, thus denying their own religious or political ideologies. As far as Christianity is concerned, and most Europeans were of course Christians at least nominally (i.e., at minimum they were baptized), the problem is even more serious: some nineteen hundred years after the appearance of the Christian Messiah, his people were murdered by baptized pagans who, by their action and inaction, denied their baptism, while the other nominal Christians, from most of the Princes of the Church(es) down, looked aside. It was, in a sense, a repetition of the denial by Peter of his Christ. Millions of cocks crowed, but few listened.

For religious Jews the problem is different. Where was God when His people were annihilated? How can one explain or justify a belief in a God that permitted over a million Jewish children under the age of thirteen to be brutally murdered? Jewish theologians and thinkers are agonizing over these questions, and frankly, I think there are no answers.

After all this, “are we emotionally and/or intellectually baffled by the Shoah?” Emotionally – certainly, because human psychology has problems accepting mass death. But there is no way out, and one should make every effort to accept the historical fact, and if what I said above is correct, then one has to understand that emotional rebellions against brutal facts have been the lot of humans since at least the beginning of the human race, that there is no solution to this, and that one must accept this lack of a solution. The way to deal with the emotional impact is to face it head on, to tell the stories of the murder and of the few escapes, and in fact to do belatedly what psychologists call the work of mourning. Instinctively, people understand this, hence the many museums, memorial places, plaques, memorial meetings of survivors of particular communities, and

personal investigations of the fate of relatives who perished in the Shoah. Hence also the many educational efforts to teach the Holocaust.

Intellectually, the problem is not about being “baffled.” I am not baffled at all. The problem is to clarify as far as is possible what actually happened, and what caused it. That is extremely difficult, and entirely possible. I would suggest that, methodologically, two parallel strategies should be pursued. One is to deal, simultaneously, with both macro- and micro-history. That means to ask the big questions about motivations, general policies, decision-making processes, social structures, economic issues, and the like; and at the same time, engage in detailed examination of local situations, small, local decision-making, the impact of particular personalities, the role of particular organizations and groups such as churches, administrations, and so on – and to try to combine the two. Second, to do what one might call the “globalization” of the Shoah, both vertically and horizontally. What I mean by a vertical examination is delving into the background history of the factors that produced the Holocaust in the context of factors that produced genocides generally, throughout history. What I mean by a horizontal approach is to study the context of the Shoah in world history, in European and specifically German history; to study the relationships between Jews and non-Jews in the different European countries against the background of the specific developments in these places; and, mainly and centrally, to study the history of the Jews, their communities, their cultural background(s); to study antisemitism from ancient to modern times and see the impact of that on the factors already mentioned. My assumption is that the Shoah was a turning point in world history, and that therefore a global approach, taking into account what is inaccurately known as “Western Civilization” as the point of reference, is a must. In other, simpler terms, the Holocaust has to be studied in its contexts, and they are global – historically, sociologically, politologically, and in every other imaginable way.

Let me conclude with my own personal example. I am engaged on parallel quests. I am trying to examine specific Jewish communities that existed in the *kresy*, in what in the interwar period was eastern Poland. I am doing that for a number of reasons, the main one being that while the perpetrators have been studied in great detail and much has been

discovered and learned in the past fifteen years or so, and while there is a real effort to examine the relationships between Jews and non-Jews in a number of countries, work on the victims has somehow lagged behind. There were promising beginnings, but not enough is being done. The image has been perpetuated of the Jews having been the object of German murder and bystander indifference or hostility. This is utterly wrong. The Jews who became victims were subjects, not objects; they had their culture, their societies (in the plural, because Jewish communities in Europe differed from each other), and their hopes. They became victims of something that was utterly incomprehensible to them, although they were, in a way, historically conditioned to persecutions and hatred. But why should they have been targeted for destruction? Jews had never been the enemies of Germans or of Germany – quite the contrary. All they had done was to contribute to German culture, and their men had participated in World War I on the German side far beyond their percentage in the population. What is central to any serious confrontation with the Holocaust is the reaction of the victims: how they reacted to threats before they became victims, and how they reacted once the process of their victimization, ending in mass murder, became obvious. This includes their relationships with the populations among whom they lived, and there is great relevance in the fact that these relationships differed with different peoples. Polish-Jewish relationships were different from Ukrainian-Jewish, Belarusian-Jewish or French-Jewish relations, and so on. We know that there is evil in the world, and we are fascinated by it, so we research it *ad infinitum et ad nauseam*. But what is no less important is how people react to evil, especially as there will, in all mass atrocities, always be more victims than perpetrators. Most of us are more likely to become victims than perpetrators, and we are actually, most of us, so-called bystanders already, that is, we are guilty, in relation to Darfur for instance. Hence my attempt to find out about Jewish popular reaction in these small communities (*shtetlach*) to the prewar situation, to Soviet occupation in 1939–41, and to the German onslaught. Did the Jews maintain their communal cohesion? Did they try to preserve semblances of organized life, of mutual help, of care for children, of basic cultural activities in order to boost morale? How did the leadership groups (*Judenräte*) behave? Was there unarmed or armed

resistance? Was there a remnant, at least, of prewar political organizations? Was there, in some ways, a continuation of the Jewish civilization that had developed over thousands of years, in these traumatic circumstances? I know that my answers will be pitifully lacking, but I hope that others will continue the quest.

I am engaged in the study of genocide as such, and of the place the Holocaust occupies within it. I am a pupil of colleagues who have been doing this for a long time, and I try not only to integrate what I learn into what I think (maybe wrongly) that I know, but I also try to translate this into action, within an informal but hopefully effective framework of an international group of academics with whom I share common concerns. That means that I try to bridge academic work with attempts to influence the political world, from the outside, of course, because I am not and I do not yearn to be a politician in any sense. But the idea of sitting in some ivory tower is repugnant to me in the extreme.

Within that framework I try to study, and to influence to the best of my ability, the struggle against radical Islam, a genocidal ideology that explicitly threatens the Jews with another genocide. I am no supporter of the Israeli government's policies vis-a-vis the Palestinians, but I am fully aware of the genocidal threats against my people and my country. Again, an ivory tower existence is not an option.

Finally, I am engaged in an internal debate as to what Jewish culture and civilization is, and what the place of religion within that may be. And I think that all these concerns are interrelated: the Shoah, genocide and its possible prevention or at least diminution, radical Islam as the most immediate, contemporary genocidal threat, and the internal Jewish debate. The Jews, you see, can be defined as a people whose existence is assured as long as the never-ending internal debate on what its culture is continues. Jews must debate these issues, because the discussion as such is the basic content of their culture. In this sense they are unequalled, and I am happy to be part of that.

Gray Zones: The Holocaust and the Failure(s) of Ethics

John K. Roth

Having studied the Holocaust – taught and written about that catastrophe – for almost forty years, the questions that confound me continue to grow. As historical research proceeds, issues about *how* and *why* the Holocaust happened have not been put to rest, at least not entirely. As a philosopher tripped up by history and by the Holocaust in particular, none of those issues provokes me more than these: What happened to ethics during the Holocaust? What should ethics be, and what can it do after the Holocaust?¹

Absent the overriding of moral sensibilities, if not the collapse or collaboration of ethical traditions, the Holocaust could not have happened. Its devastation may have deepened conviction that there is a crucial difference between right and wrong; its destruction may have renewed awareness about the importance of ethical standards and conduct. But Auschwitz-Birkenau also continues to cast a disturbing shadow over basic beliefs concerning right and wrong, human rights, and the hope that human beings will learn from the past.

The Holocaust did not pronounce the death of ethics, but it did prove that ethics is immensely vulnerable, that it can be misused and perverted, and that no simple reaffirmation of pre-Holocaust ethics, as if nothing had happened, will do any more. Too much has happened for that, including the fact that the shadow of Birkenau so often shows Western

¹ For more detail about my focus on these questions, see: John K. Roth, *Ethics During and After the Holocaust: In the Shadow of Birkenau* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005). The first three paragraphs of this essay are adapted from that book.

religious, philosophical, and ethical traditions to be problematic. Far from preventing the Holocaust, they were at times seriously implicated in that catastrophe.

On this occasion, I want to explore at least some of these themes in greater detail by reflecting on insights from the Auschwitz survivor Primo Levi. In particular, I will probe what Levi called “the gray zone,” which was the title he gave to one of the most influential essays to emerge from the Holocaust, a chapter in his remarkable book *The Drowned and the Saved*.

Levi’s Holocaust experiences led him to reflect on language. “If the Lagers had lasted longer,” he observed, “a new, harsh language would have been born; and only this language could express what it means to toil the whole day in the wind, with the temperature below freezing, wearing only a shirt, underpants, cloth jacket and trousers, and in one’s body nothing but weakness, hunger and knowledge of the end drawing nearer.”²

Arguably, the Holocaust did not last long enough to produce fully the new language of which Levi spoke, but as survivors and scholars continue their struggle to describe, analyze, and explain what happened during those dark times, new and, in their own way, harsh concepts have emerged. One thinks, for instance, of Lawrence Langer’s *choiceless choices*, a term now used to identify the dilemmas created by Nazi Germany and its collaborators, who often put Jews and other victims in circumstances where they had to make decisions among hideous options that could not even be described as involving the so-called lesser of evils.³ Or, to cite a second example, there is Terrence Des Pres’s *excremental assault*, the concept

he created to refer to the ways in which lack of sanitation in the Holocaust’s ghettos and camps – whether intended by the Germans or not – humiliated and besieged every prisoner and killed many of them.⁴ Even *genocide*, the word coined by Raphael Lemkin, was added to humanity’s vocabulary only while the Holocaust raged.⁵

No list of terms belonging to the new, harsh vocabulary required by Holocaust studies could begin to be complete if it failed to include Primo Levi’s *gray zone*. He used that phrase specifically to refer to the “incredibly complicated internal structure” of Auschwitz, which created moral ambiguity and compromise in ways large and small. He was struck particularly, but not only, by the ways in which the German organization of the camp led Jews, however reluctantly, to become complicit in the destruction of their own people. Focusing attention especially on the *Sonderkommando* units, the Jews who were conscripted to work in the gas chambers and crematoria at Auschwitz-Birkenau, the camp’s killing center and, arguably, the epicenter of the Holocaust itself, Levi said that “conceiving and organizing [those] squads was National Socialism’s most demonic crime.”⁶

Levi’s gray zone, however, was not restricted to such radical examples. Emphasizing “the extreme pressure of the Lager,” he noted that the number of “gray, ambiguous persons, ready to compromise” was and remains more the rule than the exception in any time or place, but in Auschwitz those ranks swelled, for survival depended on finding or taking some advantage that made nearly all survivors – Levi included himself – “the rightful owners of a quota of guilt.”⁷ Levi amplified those feelings in a chapter on “Shame,” which is an important sequel to the reflection on “The Gray Zone” that

2 Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz: The Nazi Assault on Humanity*, Stuart Woolf, trans. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 123. From his hiding place in Dresden, the German Jewish scholar Victor Klemperer documented how the Nazis themselves had contributed to a new, harsh language of violence and atrocity. See: Victor Klemperer, *The Language of the Third Reich (LTI – Lingua Tertii Imperii): A Philologist’s Notebook*, Martin Brady, trans. (New York: Continuum, 2002).

3 For example, see: Lawrence L. Langer, *Versions of Survival: The Holocaust and the Human Spirit* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982), 67–129. Choiceless choices, writes Langer, do not “reflect options between life and death, but between one form of abnormal response and another, both imposed by a situation that was in no way of the victim’s own choosing” (p. 72).

4 See: Terrence Des Pres, *The Survivor: An Anatomy of Life in the Death Camps* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976).

5 See: Raphael Lemkin, *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe: Laws of Occupation, Analysis of Government, Proposals for Redress* (Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1944).

6 Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, Raymond Rosenthal, trans. (New York: Summit Books, 1988), 42, 53.

7 Ibid., 49.

precedes it. “The ‘saved’ of the Lager were not the best,” said Levi. “What I had seen and lived through proved the exact contrary. Preferably the worst survived, the selfish, the violent, the insensitive, the collaborators of the ‘gray zone,’ the spies. It was not a certain rule (there were none, nor are there certain rules in human matters), but it was nevertheless a rule. I felt innocent, yes, but enrolled among the saved and therefore in permanent search of a justification in my own eyes and those of others. The worst survived, that is, the fittest; the best all died.”⁸

Levi’s understated philosophical view held that “each of us is a mixture of good and not so good,”⁹ but his interpretation of the gray zone rejected invidious moral equivalencies. “I do not know,” he wrote, “and it does not much interest me to know, whether in my depths there lurks a murderer, but I do know that I was a guiltless victim and I was not a murderer.”¹⁰ As Levi made clear by his analysis of Muhsfeld, a German perpetrator who momentarily, but only momentarily, showed pity when a Jewish girl somehow remained alive in Auschwitz after gassing, the gray zone could include a very wide range of men and women, but immense differences remained among them. Compared to Muhsfeld, Levi could rightly call himself a guiltless victim. Considering himself from other angles, Levi could not exempt himself from guilt, relatively minor though it might be.

In the main, however, Levi did not intend his analysis of the gray zone to result in condemning judgments but instead to show how Auschwitz could “confuse our need to judge”¹¹ – and rightly so – and then to warn his readers about the ambiguities and compromises that could be lurking for them, a point driven home at the end of his chapter on “The Gray Zone.” That chapter extends the gray zone beyond the confines of Auschwitz as it concludes with reflection on Chaim Rumkowski, whose fate it was to lead

the Jewish Council that the Germans forced the Jews to establish in the Lodz ghetto. Suggesting that Rumkowski’s story contains “in an exemplary form the almost physical necessity with which political coercion gives birth to that ill-defined sphere of ambiguity and compromise” that constitutes the gray zone, Levi’s chapter concludes that “like Rumkowski, we too are so dazzled by power and prestige as to forget our essential fragility. Willingly or not we come to terms with power, forgetting that we are all in the ghetto, that the ghetto is walled in, that outside the ghetto reign the lords of death, and that close by the train is waiting.”¹² Levi spoke of the gray zone in the singular, but his analysis made clear that this multi-faceted and multi-layered reality constituted gray *zones* that were not and are not confined to one time or place.

Throughout *The Drowned and the Saved* a crucial tension emerges between Primo Levi’s caution about making moral judgments and his persistent use of ethical evaluations. Levi understood that human cravings for simple understanding include the need “to separate evil from good, to be able to take sides, to emulate Christ’s gesture on Judgment Day: here the righteous, over there the reprobates.”¹³ The gray zone, however, defied such neat separations. Nevertheless, moral judgments resound in Levi’s writing. As noted above, for example, he never hesitated to call the creation of the *Sonderkommando* units a “demonic crime,” the worst committed by the National Socialists.¹⁴ In his introduction to the German edition of *Survival in Auschwitz*, Levi said that he had written that book “to bear witness, to make my voice heard by the German people, to ... remind them of what they have done, and say to them: ‘I am alive, and I would like to understand you in order to judge you.’”¹⁵ Levi added that he did not hate the German people, but then he delivered a comment whose moral critique was as devastating as it was understated: “I cannot say I understand the Germans.”¹⁶

8 Ibid., 82.

9 Primo Levi, “The Duty of Memory,” in: Marco Belpoliti and Robert Gordon, eds., *The Voice of Memory: Interviews, 1961–1987*, Robert Gordon, trans. (New York: The New Press, 2001), 232. This article is based on Levi’s interview with Anna Bravo and Federico Cereja, which was first published in Italy in 1983.

10 Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 48.

11 Ibid., 42.

12 Ibid., 67, 69.

13 Ibid., 37.

14 Ibid., 53.

15 Ibid., 174.

16 Ibid., 174.

That statement contained an ethical judgment that went much deeper than conventional moral evaluations, which assume that people are more or less in agreement about shared rights and responsibilities, even though they may violate those norms. For Levi the Germans were not understandable because, as he put it, they had willingly abandoned civilization. Levi clarified these points in comments that he made about collective guilt in 1961:

The very expression “collective guilt” is a contradiction in terms, and it is a Nazi invention. Every person is singly responsible for their actions. Every German (and non-German) who took part in the murdering is fully guilty; their accomplices are partially guilty ...; less guilty but still contemptible are the many who did nothing in the full knowledge of what was happening, and the mass who found ways of not knowing because of their hypocrisy or poverty of spirit.

In this way, we can build up a picture which belies the heroic inventions of Nazi propaganda: not collective guilt, but collective cowardice, a collective failure of intellectual courage, a collective foolishness and abandonment of civilization.¹⁷

Responsibility had to be assessed case by case, individual by individual, but when Levi took those steps, the accumulated judgments led him to see that moral reasoning could not comprehend Nazi Germany, at least not completely.

Levi’s ethical analysis did not stop there. Acknowledging that he lacked trust in “the moral instinct of humanity, in mankind as ‘naturally’ good,”¹⁸ Levi warned that the existence of Nazi Germany and the Holocaust meant that realities akin to them could appear again – were even likely to do so – because no community had guaranteed immunity against them.¹⁹ What could humankind do, he wondered, to keep such threats at bay?

One of Levi’s responses was to study the gray zone and to grasp why there must be caution as well as boldness in making moral judgments.

The existence of the *Sonderkommando* units, for example, raised questions for those who wanted simple understanding: “Why did they accept that task? Why didn’t they rebel? Why didn’t they prefer death?”²⁰ Historical inquiries, Levi emphasized, had done much to put such questions to rest. “Not all did accept,” he rightly stated; “some did rebel, knowing they would die.”²¹ As for those who went on to do the miserable work, Levi asserted that “no one is authorized to judge them, not those who lived through the experience of the Lager and even less those who did not.”²²

Levi did not find that imperative applicable to all prisoners in the Lager. Especially when the gray zone was under consideration, moral evaluations had to be made. Otherwise, important differences of power and privilege would be ignored, significant distinctions between individuals and their responsibilities overlooked. On the whole, however, Levi urged careful deliberation about any moral assessment of prisoner behavior, and he held that view for multiple reasons. First, quite apart from the Holocaust, it was illogical to think that ordinary men and women would behave like “saints and stoic philosophers.”²³ If the Lager’s realities were taken into account, Levi thought that the prisoners’ behavior could be called “rigidly preordained. In the space of a few weeks or months the deprivations to which they were subjected led them to a condition of pure survival, a daily struggle against hunger, cold, fatigue, and blows in which the room for choices (especially moral choices) was reduced to zero.”²⁴ Levi strengthened his argument for caution about making moral judgments by adding two more reminders: “one is never in another’s place,” he emphasized, and “nobody can know for how long and under what trials his soul can resist before yielding or breaking.”²⁵

Levi’s position harbored danger, if not some inconsistency. While defending the Lager’s victims against inappropriate moral judgments, would

17 Levi, *The Voice of Memory*, 180–181.

18 Ibid., 180.

19 See: Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 199–200.

20 Ibid., 58.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid., 59.

23 Ibid., 49.

24 Ibid., 49–50.

25 Ibid., 60.

his appeal to human frailty and even to a kind of behavioral determinism open the door too widely for rationalizations that undermined the moral accountability he so much wanted to support? However unintentionally, was Levi handing the Holocaust's perpetrators and bystanders lines of reasoning that they could use to excuse themselves? To disarm the danger, Levi brought attention back to the pressurized structure of the gray zone. "Certainly," he argued, "the greatest responsibility lies with the system,"²⁶ but the system was neither abstract nor anonymous, and it was definitely not something that its victims had chosen or created, even though their entrapment meant that they would contribute to weaving its ensnaring web. Levi minced no words about German murderers and their accomplices, the experts at planning and implementing the "useless violence" that was rife in the Holocaust.²⁷ They were the ones who initiated, built, and maintained the system. Apart from them – from Hitler and Himmler to Muhsfeld – the system had no reality, but with them its degradation and killing went on and on.

Levi's ethics is instructive. By learning to restrain moral judgment appropriately, by not misdirecting it in ways that blame the victims, one can better focus where the ethical critique and its accompanying senses of moral obligation belong. Moral judgment should focus on the persons and decisions, the institutions and policies that created the Holocaust and every other form of genocide. Accompanying that judgment should be an intensification of responsibility to resist such people and to intervene against those circumstances, to honor those who do so, to embrace the survivors with compassion, to mourn and remember those who were murdered, and to restore – as far as possible – what was lost.

Levi's moral agenda is demanding. One reason, as he knew, is that restoring what the Holocaust took away is not only difficult but in many ways impossible. So when Levi asks what we can do to prevent further abandonment of civilization, he is aware that this work must be done in ruins where words such as *justice*, *religion*, *ethics*, and even *civilization*

itself are deeply wounded, and not least because National Socialism co-opted them all. Nazism appealed to justice, used religion for its own ends, advanced its aims as ethical, and envisioned a new civilization even as it drew on science, technology, art, music, literature, and philosophy to attract its following. The creation of the *Sonderkommando* units, we should remember, was a key part of that vast project. Levi's gray zone of Auschwitz, then, creates additional gray zones of the Holocaust and its aftermath when we think about the meaning of such elemental concepts and developments. Study of the Holocaust's gray zones suggests that no question is more important than how – or even whether – ethics can be restored after Auschwitz.

Primo Levi was not sure that ethics could be restored after Auschwitz, but he knew that the failure to try would exact a price higher than humankind could pay. That theme is illustrated in "News from the Sky," an essay of Levi's that appears in his book *Other People's Trades*. There Levi notes that Immanuel Kant emphasized two wonders in creation: the starry sky above and the moral law within. "I don't know about the moral law," Levi muses, "does it dwell in everyone? ... Every passing year augments our doubts."²⁸ The starry sky seemed to be another matter, but even those considerations gave Levi pause. The stars remain, but the sky – the territory of bombers, hijacked planes, and missiles that can unleash terror and death – has become an ominous place because of World War II, the Holocaust, and their aftermath.

"The universe is strange to us, we are strange in the universe," wrote Levi, and "the future of humanity is uncertain."²⁹ Nevertheless, he had his hopes. "There are no problems that cannot be solved around a table," Levi said, "provided there is good will and reciprocal trust."³⁰ It could be argued that this judgment of his was too optimistic. In any case, much hinges on his qualification about good will and reciprocal trust, for both remain in

²⁶ Ibid., 44.

²⁷ See: Levi's chapter on "Useless Violence," in: *The Drowned and the Saved*, 105–126.

²⁸ Primo Levi, *Other People's Trades*, Raymond Rosenthal, trans. (New York: Summit Books, 1989), 20.

²⁹ Ibid., 22–23.

³⁰ Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 200.

short supply. That scarcity is one of the most confounding results of the Holocaust's gray zones.

The Holocaust did not have to happen. It emerged from human choices and decisions. Those facts mean that nothing human, natural, or divine guarantees respect for the ethical values and commitments that are most needed in contemporary human existence, but nothing is more important than our commitment to defend them, for they remain as fundamental as they are fragile, as precious as they are endangered.

Working on the Holocaust

Ian Kershaw

The questions I have been asked to confront in these brief reflections are challenging ones. Do the analytical tools of the scholar prove weak or ineffective in dealing with the Holocaust? Are we intellectually and emotionally baffled by the genocide the Nazis committed?

An answer to the first of these questions might depend in some measure upon an approach to the second. My problem with this second question is that I am baffled only by the presumed bafflement. For to me the Nazi genocide against the Jews, far from being historically inexplicable, is, regrettably, only too easy to explain. Of course, large numbers of people – historians among them – would reject this claim. They continue to see the Holocaust as beyond rational historical explanation. But this is for the most part because such people choose bafflement. They prefer to see in the magnitude of the crimes committed against the Jewish people something so unique, catastrophic and monumental that it stands beyond reason, beyond analysis, as a sort of mysterious event outside history, one of eschatological dimensions. My own experience as a historian compels me to reject such presumptions. Nothing in history seems to me in principle inexplicable – though, of course, we are often not in a position, for dearth of evidence among other things, to offer anything like a complete or satisfactory explanation, and often explanations where we have the material are to be found wanting. If I thought that the historian was in a peculiar state of weakness or effectuality in dealing with such a crucial, defining passage of history as the Holocaust, it would make me want to give up historical writing.

As I have remarked before now, what I have written – on the Holocaust as on other matters – has always been in the first instance to try to clarify in my own mind, to understand better myself what has happened in the past, and how and why. If others have gained something from my writings, then that is a matter of gratification and satisfaction – a bonus. But historical writing for me has always in the first instance been about my own personal understanding, since the very process of formulating written sentences compels a clarity of exposition and thinking which is often absent verbally, or in passive reflection. I have never regarded myself, or wanted to be, a specialist historian of the Holocaust. Rather, my work on the Holocaust over many years has always been a part of my wider work on the history of Nazism, and of modern European history in general, and has mainly been driven by the wish to understand better how it was possible that a modern, advanced, highly cultured country like Germany could produce the most appalling genocide known to humanity. I would like to hope that I have not been wasting my time altogether over the past decades. I think that, for myself (with no wider claims), through my own work and through immersing myself in the outstanding work of others, I *do* understand, far more so than when I began, how the genocide against the Jews could come about.

My own work on the Holocaust – a term which, I must confess, I do not much like (though I use it, since it is largely unavoidable) – has fallen into three parts. The first, undertaken in the 1970s and 1980s, explored the attitudes and behaviour of the non-Jewish German population towards the persecution, then extermination, of the Jews. The second, overlapping with the first in the 1980s and then becoming dominant in the 1990s, was concerned with the decision-making process in anti-Jewish policy and, in particular, the role of Hitler in this. A third aspect, not one of primary research but more of reflection and interpretation, has come to preoccupy me more in the last few years: the place of the Holocaust in a history of genocide.

What I have personally worked on, it goes without saying, are only partial aspects of the totality of the Holocaust. I have never carried out research of any systematic kind, for instance, on the experience of Jewish victims of Nazi persecution and exterminatory policy. I believe that only

Jews can themselves fully *feel* the extent of the suffering, the depth of the loss. I think I can rationally understand it, but I can't *feel* it because I was not affected by it. The emotional dimension is missing. That is, even so, not the main reason why I have never been drawn to attempts to explore the experiences of the victims. The central reason is that I can't see how these experiences, beyond the awfulness in their description, can help in tackling the explanatory problem of how it could happen, and how it could be driven by the government and people of a country such as Germany. The victims were helpless and blameless in the fate that befell them. It is little wonder, therefore, that from their perspective the Holocaust often appears an inexplicable tragedy, or at any rate a tragedy that can only be perceived in terms of monumental, irrational forces of evil. But "evil" is for me a theological, moral or metaphysical notion which can play no part in historical explanation, however convenient or comforting it might be for us to envisage something terrible happening because of evil forces.

Nor, to my mind, does the notion of "the banality of evil," as coined by Hannah Arendt and embedded in thinking on the Holocaust ever since, offer any help. What happened in the Holocaust was scarcely "banal," except in the twofold sense that, like Eichmann in the Jerusalem dock, the perpetrators, taken out of context of time and place looked like ordinary people, run-of-the-mill "middle-manager" types, not monsters with horns and a tail, and that there were plenty of "desk-top murderers" around at the time whose own actions were not overtly sadistic and who operated as small cogs in a big machine. But at least if, instead of grasping for the unusable and misleading concept of "banality of evil" as some apparent insight into the Nazi genocide, we confine "banality" to the activities of minor players, we are perhaps getting some way towards seeing the Holocaust as a process of political development which can, if not perfectly, be reconstructed.

When I look at what has been achieved through a mounting body of research on the political and ideological processes that underpinned the actions of the perpetrators, then I cannot accept the underlying premiss of the first question I was asked to consider, that the analytical tools of the scholar have proved weak or ineffective in dealing with the Holocaust. In fact, compared with many episodes of history, we are relatively well

equipped to explain the Holocaust, and historians have made great strides in doing so.

It is true that my work, and that of others, has sought rational explanations for the irrational. But that is a normal part of historical interpretation. Attempts, for instance, to understand the “witch craze” of the 17th century, or, perhaps more relevantly, Stalin’s paranoia about a perceived threat from a myriad of powerful internal enemies, face similar difficulties. In fact, we even encounter everyday experiences which demand trying to make sense of developments that spring from an action or belief defying rational understanding. Applied to the Holocaust, this means accepting that the underlying premiss of hatred of Jews was devoid of any rational basis, but operating on the accompanying premiss that the process by which that hatred could be converted into the politics of annihilation can nevertheless be rationally understood.

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Let me comment very briefly on each of the three areas on which I have worked.

I

I think research on comparative genocide and ethnic cleansing, such as that undertaken many years ago by Leo Kuper and more recently and impressively by Michael Mann, Norman Naimark and Mark Levene, among others, has played its part in helping greater historical understanding of the Holocaust. Looking at the Holocaust in this comparative sense does not mean denying its singularity. Logically, of course, singularity can only be demonstrated through comparison. And the approach through comparison does, indeed, reveal important aspects of the Holocaust that were singular – that is, unprecedented and unparalleled. But accepting singularity does not mean treating the Holocaust as a mysterious, unfathomable development. Rather, it means acknowledging some peculiar features of this genocide, within a historical context which, in fact, ushered in the emergence of genocide as a political solution to perceived ethnic problems. If we analyse a number of important developments which, when they

started to come together in the 19th century, altered the nature of mass killing and promoted the emergence of genocide, then the Holocaust, including its singular aspects, becomes more explicable.

I would point to five features of modernity that led to a new phenomenon of genocide, distinguishable in a number of significant ways from earlier forms of mass killing. I can do no more here than list them: (1) the creation of the doctrine, deriving from the French and American Revolutions, that a people was in effect synonymous with sovereignty over a specific territory (leading easily to a crucial link between ethnicity and popular sovereignty); (2) the spread of pseudo-scientific ideas of race in which biological determinants conditioned unalterable superiority and inferiority (flowing easily into notions – the essence of the new genocidal language – that inferior beings should be destroyed in the same way that parasites and bacilli are destroyed); (3) the incorporation of such ideas into a new kind of imperialism that blended with racism, nationalism and religion to produce a lethal brew (and had its own, perfect ideology in the doctrine of social Darwinism, in which the strong justifiably ruled over conquered, subjugated and settled territory while the weakest justifiably went to the wall); (4) the expansion of state control over its citizens with the notion of “total war,” which had its paradigm shift in the First World War of 1914 to 1918, bringing a quantum leap in state control over society, the intensified depersonalisation of potential victims, and a new emphasis on “the enemy within,” spread by the modern printing techniques of bloated propaganda machines; and finally, (5) the ideology of class warfare that, translated into political form in the Soviet Union, sent shock waves through the ruling class of Europe, spreading the fear of Bolshevik savagery and “Asiatic barbarity” and fostering its own variant of genocidal thinking under Stalin (and later Mao and Pol Pot), one justified on class, not ethnic lines.

The Nazi genocide against the Jews embraced all these components mentioned: race ideology blended into organic nationalism, an imperialist culture and expansionist ambitions, vitriolic, popular anti-Bolshevism, a state in crisis, and with a scapegoat-fixation, making total demands on its citizens even before embarking on total war with all the most modern technologies of mass killing. There is neither the space nor the necessity

here to elaborate on the singularities, within this genocidal paradigm, of the Nazi attempt to exterminate the Jews of Europe. But there is no difficulty in doing this. Here, we need merely note that the paradigm provides a model set of circumstances within which genocide could become at the very least a possible solution to perceived problems. The specificities of the German case then start to become clearer.

II

Here, the crucial development – which there is again no difficulty in explaining – is how a potentially genocidal elite was able to gain prominence and then eventually reach a position where it could attain power within the context of a profound embitterment following a lost world war, national humiliation, and comprehensive political, socio-economic and cultural crisis. Antisemitism had not been the prime vehicle for the route to power of this proto-genocidal elite, but posed no barrier to that process. The complex history of antisemitism in Germany can be explored to explain without mystery what part the hatred of Jews, instrumentalised by new forms of political mass movement after the lost war, could play in the new assertive nationalist politics and deep revanchist feelings. Germany's thwarted quest for her "place in the sun," the obvious search for scapegoats focusing, as it had done since the middle of the war at the latest, on the Jews, and the "salvationist" strain of nationalism on the neo-conservative as well as *völkisch* Right, provide further strands of a rational explanation of how Germany, despite her highly modern and cultured society, could produce a Hitler government, in which the Jews were immediately, and increasingly, endangered.

Once Hitler, the most radical of the radical antisemites, took power in January 1933, backed by a huge mass movement, and embodying the utopian aim of national salvation to be achieved through racial cleansing and, ultimately, a successful war of expansion, a genocidal logic underpins the treatment of the Jews, even if the road to Auschwitz was indeed a twisted one and the actual decisions for genocide were not taken until 1941. The task of the historian is to explain the process by which an initially vague, if menacing, ideological imperative – "removal of the Jews" – gradually took shape as outright genocidal policy without a clearly

laid-out programme of implementation. There are obvious difficulties in this task. But they are of the sort that historians often encounter – deficiencies of the sources, conflicting testimony, silence or lies from the main actors about their role, and complexities about the decision-making process arising from the nature of the regime. That is, an explanation might be hampered by all these things, and more, but there is no actual inexplicability about what took place.

Despite all the differences of interpretation that inevitably follow from such problems, and from the varying vantage points of historians, a great deal of progress has nevertheless been made in recent years in clarifying how the spiralling radicalisation of Nazi anti-Jewish policy culminated in genocide. My own work, closely linked to my biography of Hitler, has in no small measure focused on the ways in which the dictator's personal, paranoid hatred of Jews translated itself into action. I have placed the emphasis upon a sort of dialectic of radicalisation. Hitler's "green light" prompted activists, "working towards the Führer," to step up pressure for ever more radical measures against the Jews, which the dictator would then sanction. Each subsequent action ratcheted up the persecution and discrimination. Initiatives from Nazi paladins, or from local potentates, secure in the knowledge that they were accommodating the "wish of the Führer" ensured that the radicalisation could never fade and die. Moreover, as the core (and initial stage) of a gigantic racial cleansing programme, the quest to "remove" the Jews became institutionalised in the most ideologically dynamic and powerful agency within the Nazi state, the SS police organisation. The demonisation of the Jew as the mainstay of Germany's powerful enemies, both in western "plutocracy" and in Soviet Bolshevism, together with the self-created logistical difficulties of "solving" the "Jewish Question" when the overrunning of Poland brought millions more Jews under Nazi rule, meant that the regime's elites, at different levels, moved inexorably and swiftly to a genocidal solution between 1939 and 1941. And once Germany, its society having been subjected to eight years of intense antisemitic propaganda, engaged in a "war of annihilation" against the Bolshevik arch-enemy (identified with Jews), the genocidal whirlwind was ready to blow. The depths of inhumanity rapidly reached in the war in the east were terrible indeed, but not incomprehensible

or unimaginable. The same could be said for the industrial-style mass killing of the extermination camps. The technical shift, as a mode of extermination, from shooting to gassing that started to take place in the autumn of 1941 reflected the advanced nature and level of scientific development and bureaucratic organisational capacity of German society. In less advanced societies, such as Rwanda in 1994, the killing was done mainly by machetes. But the rate of killing in Rwanda even exceeded that of the Holocaust.

III

It goes without saying that trying to assess popular attitudes under a dictatorship, where there are no open expressions of oppositional opinion and where pluralist mass media are suppressed, faces any number of difficulties. The soundings of opinion regularly taken by the regime's own agencies can form no real substitute for the findings of scientifically framed opinion surveys in a democracy. But despite these real limitations, much research has reached widely accepted conclusions about the reactions of the German population to the persecution and extermination of the Jews which again assist in rational explanations of the irrational.

In my work on the reactions of the German population to the persecution and extermination of the Jews I reached the conclusion that most Germans – acknowledging widespread antipathy towards the Jewish minority – did not share the radical and dynamic ideological antisemitism of the Nazi leadership. I used the term “moral indifference” to describe the stance of this “silent majority.” Some historians, most notably Otto Dov Kulka, have preferred to see in the passivity of the “bystanders” complicity in and growing approval for Nazi policies of persecution and annihilation – though such an interpretation stood far apart from the crude generalisations of Daniel Jonah Goldhagen about a population thirsting for the “elimination” of the Jews. Much research has been carried out since I worked on this area in the 1970s. Most of it accepts the existence of a gulf between the radical antisemitic drive of the leadership and the passive acceptance of the population. That is, such research concurs that the persecution did not arise from popular demand (beyond that of a nazified minority), while recognising that, at the same time, latent antisemitism

prevalent in the population and deepened through propaganda provided no barrier to Nazi policies.

This research demonstrated that a popular climate existed, at the time of the Nazi takeover, which allowed the escalation of persecution to take place unhindered. It additionally emphasised growing support for the Nazi aim of removing Jews from German society, even though the methods of persecution were sometimes strongly criticised (as after the *Reichskristallnacht* pogrom of 1938). As propaganda associating the Jews with guilt for the war and “prophesying” their destruction as a consequence intensified, knowledge that they were suffering a terrible fate in the occupied eastern territories – even if most people had no precise information about the death camps and the scale of the extermination – became fairly widespread. From a variety of motives – among them outright approval, material benefit from the deportation of Jews, fear of recrimination for negative comment, suppression of unpalatable knowledge, displacement of interest in the fate of the Jews through existential concerns about the war, and moral indifference – the passivity of the majority accompanied by the dynamic hatred of the sizeable minority remained the most prominent feature of popular reactions (or the lack of them).

What all this showed was that policies of annihilation needed no extensive popular backing as long as there was no widespread opposition. That the latter was lacking under a repressive dictatorship is scarcely surprising since Jews had received little support during fourteen years of liberal democracy under the Weimar Republic and remained a widely disliked sector of the population.

My own avenues of research have, then, opened up to me insights into: (1) how modernity formed genocidal mentalities and possibilities; (2) peculiarities in the position of Germany after the First World War which conditioned the road to power of a potentially (then actually) genocidal elite; (3) structures of the Nazi dictatorship promoting “cumulative radicalisation” (Hans Mommsen) linked to Hitler's ideological imperatives – most prominent among them the “removal of the Jews” – and resulting ultimately in the decisions for total genocide taken in 1941; and (4) the passivity (amounting to acquiescence) of the German population when confronted by the spiralling radicalisation of persecution, and the direct

approval and involvement of a minority (though one backed by state power) in conditions of total war.

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I would draw two general conclusions from this on the questions I was asked to consider. First, although of course not all issues have been (or perhaps can be) satisfactorily tackled and some important questions remain open, the analytical tools of the historian have proved largely effective in dealing with the Holocaust – at least as effective as in the understanding of other major questions of historical interpretation. Secondly, this being so, that there are no grounds for claiming that we are intellectually and emotionally baffled by the genocide of the Nazis against the Jews. This is a point of no small importance. If we can understand how this most terrible of genocides could happen in the past, we have the potential to recognise how genocide can take place in the present and in the future. Whether what we euphemistically label the “international community” then has the collective willpower to do anything about it is, of course, another matter.

The Challenge of the Holocaust for a Christian Theologian

John T. Pawlikowski

I have reflected on the significance of the Holocaust for some forty years. For me the process began when I was in my first undergraduate year at Loyola University in Chicago. I took a course on modern German history from a professor named Edward Gargan who made the Holocaust a central aspect of his class presentations, not merely in terms of historical details but in terms of moral challenge for the Christian churches. It was next to impossible to walk away from his course without the Holocaust remaining imprinted on one's consciousness. That was clearly the case for me.

Over the years, as I have continued to struggle with the challenge Dr. Gargan laid out for me and the others in his class as a doctoral student, as a theologian with a specialty in ethics and as a long-time participant in the Christian-Jewish dialogue launched by the Second Vatican Council's Declaration *Nostra Aetate*, a number of questions have remained before me as still-unresolved questions. These include, among others, the possibility of God-talk after the experience of the Holocaust, the degree of culpability on the part of the Christian churches, and whether the Holocaust is viewed primarily as the final station in the long history of Christian antisemitism or as the result of a modern ideology which went beyond classical antisemitism in Christianity and which engulfed certain non-Jewish victims, as well as an inherent part of that ideology. I shall confine myself in this short essay to some comments on each of these core issues.

As a person who has taught and written about theology and ethics for the length of my academic career, I continue to believe that the question of how we can keep speaking about God in light of the Holocaust remains a persistent, unresolved source of tension. I have addressed this

issue, albeit without full personal satisfaction, in a number of published essays over the years.¹ While I am committed to a study of the Holocaust within a framework of sound critical scholarship, I remain adamant that we cannot confine ourselves merely to a presentation of the facts about this central event in human history. It is equally crucial, perhaps moreso, to confront the question of meaning in contemporary society. For me as a Catholic theologian this involves asking how we can understand any enduring divine influence on human history. For most societies, over the centuries fundamental meaning was rooted in notions of divine oversight of human affairs. But the Holocaust has shattered much of the classical understanding of such oversight, as Irving Greenberg, my long-time soulmate in reflecting on the Holocaust, has perceptively argued over the years. And in my judgment that represents a morally dangerous naiveté, for it undercuts the reality of enhanced human responsibility for the future of creation that is the central legacy of the Holocaust.

I must admit to a degree of frustration over the years in trying to argue the above point. Many people, maybe most, would prefer to ignore the issue. This includes many scholars of the Holocaust who stay away from the challenge of fundamental human meaning in light of the Holocaust on the grounds that it cannot be discussed within the context of objective historical scholarship. And within the world of the theological academy we hear calls from both Jews and Christians to rebuild a covenantal understanding of the God-human community relationship as it is in the biblical tradition, as though the Holocaust posed no challenge to the classical biblical understanding. For me such an uncritical effort after the Holocaust is rather blind and dangerous. If God had a covenantal obligation to care for his covenantal partners and failed to do so during the massive destruction of human life under the Nazis, then all we can say is

either that God is some sort of uncaring, unfaithful monster or that God is fundamentally impotent in terms of the commitments made as an integral part of the biblically based human meaning.

In short, the Holocaust forces us to redefine the God-given human community relationship, particularly in terms of responsibility for creation governance, in a major way. Until we are prepared as a human community to confront this challenge in a comprehensive way, a challenge that has been addressed at best in a very modest way up till now, our reflection on the Holocaust will remain incomplete.

Even those who may feel unprepared or even uninterested in the God question after the Holocaust cannot ignore the issue of human meaning. For as Irving Greenberg and other Holocaust scholars have rightly observed, the Nazi experience shook the foundations of liberal Enlightenment ideology and its emphasis on human progress every bit as much as it did the classical theological understanding of divine governance over creation. The Holocaust left us with a basic vacuum in terms of human meaning which, if it remains unfilled, can open the door to other ideologies equally destructive of human life at all levels.

The second and third questions are closely related. But I am considering them in the stated order because it is my conviction as a Christian ethicist that confronting moral failure is the necessary first step in responding to the challenge of the Holocaust. Obviously, given my vocation in life as a priest and as a professor in a Catholic theological school, my principal concern lies with the response of the Christian community during the Nazi era. But I certainly believe such moral evaluation must be extended to other major institutions in society at the time. The churches were not an isolated sea of darkness in the midst of a great moral light. If anything, their stance may have been slightly better than any number of other important institutions. That is of course merely a comparative statement in a situation largely dominated by widespread failure to protect the principal victims of the Nazis, Jews in particular.

Because religious institutions stake a claim to moral leadership far more than any other social institution, their responsibility is greater and their evaluation must be more severe. The Holocaust has not ended the possibility for religious institutions and leaders to play a decisive role

1 Cf. John T. Pawlikowski, "God, the Foundational Ethical Question after the Holocaust," in: Jack Bemporad, John T. Pawlikowski and Joseph Sievers, eds., *Good and Evil after the Holocaust: Ethical Implications for Today* (Hoboken, NJ: KTAV, 2000), 54–66; John T. Pawlikowski, "Das Gottesverständnis im Kontext des Holocaust," in: Tobias Daniel Weber, ed., *Das Heilige Nichts: Gott nach den Holocaust* (Dusseldorf: Patmos, 2007), 177–187.

in contemporary society. Clearly our globalized world stands in need of such leadership today, particularly when we have witnessed in the Holocaust how destructive its absence can be. But religious institutions, especially the Christian churches which dominated the societies engulfed in the Holocaust, cannot assume such leadership today without first acknowledging in a clear and decisive manner their failures during the Nazi era.

I address this issue of failure in moral response first and foremost as a Catholic Christian, though my judgments are applicable more widely across the spectrum of the Christian Church. I certainly have been heartened by some of the responses to date. The verbal and symbolic acknowledgement of Catholic Christian complicity in the Holocaust by the late Pope John Paul II on two important occasions, that is, the solemn liturgical ceremony in Rome on the first Sunday of Lent in 2000 and his subsequent visit to Jerusalem where he movingly placed the same text in the Western Wall, gave me considerable encouragement. And the courageous statements of repentance by the German bishops in January 1995 and the French episcopate in September 1997² boosted my hope that my Church could in fact confront in a totally honest and constructive way its failures in moral leadership during the Holocaust.

In 1968 the Vatican issued its long-delayed statement on the Shoah, *We Remember*.³ There was some disappointment that it was not issued as a full-fledged papal encyclical but only as a statement of the Holy See's Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews. But it did include an introduction from Pope John Paul II which raised its status somewhat. Unfortunately, while it did bring the issue of Catholic involvement in the Holocaust to the consciousness of the global Church – and that was certainly an important advance – in a challenging way, its acknowledgment of culpability was not nearly as forthright as that found in German and

French episcopal statements. Two statements in *We Remember* especially undercut its honest assessment of Catholic responsibility. One was the claim that while some Catholics collaborated with the Nazi extermination of the Jews, many worked to rescue them. Even the most vocal supporters of the document have questioned this assertion. The actual number of Catholic rescuers in fact represented a tiny fraction of the Catholic population. The other troubling claim was that only some wayward Catholic Christians cooperated with Nazism, but not the Church as such. While this distinction is rooted in a theological distinction between institutional Catholicism and the theological understanding of the Church as a divinely instituted sacramental reality, it leaves the impression that only a relatively small number of members of the Catholic Church aided the Nazi effort and that they somehow stood on the margins of institutional Catholicism. But there is strong evidence of considerable cooperation between the key leadership in the Catholic Church of the time and the Nazi effort directed toward Jewish annihilation as well as its attack even on Catholic victims such as Poles and Roma. Cardinal Cassidy has indicated more than once that considerable pressure from the Vatican Secretariat of State forced some of these controversial statements into the final version of *We Remember*.⁴

While my disappointment with the final version of *We Remember* is considerable, my concern about the attitude toward Catholic responsibility during the Holocaust is even greater. Pope Benedict's remarks on the Holocaust, both in his address in 2005 at the synagogue in Cologne and during his visit to Birkenau in May 2006 (which I attended), raise some serious questions. The present Pope has certainly acknowledged its brutal horrors in making his own the words of his papal predecessor John Paul II in January 2005 on the occasion of the sixtieth anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz: "I bow my head before all those who experienced the manifestation of the *mysterium iniquitatis*." "The terrible events of the period," Pope John Paul II continued, "must never cease to rouse conscience,

² The text of these documents can be found in: Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Catholics Remember the Holocaust* (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1998), 31–37.

³ Text of *We Remember*, *ibid.*, 47–56.

⁴ For an analysis of the problematic aspects of *We Remember*, see: Judith H. Banki and John T. Pawlikowski, OSM, eds., *Ethics in the Shadow of the Holocaust: Christian and Jewish Perspectives* (Franklin, WI: Sheed & Ward, 2001), 3–231.

to resolve conflicts, to inspire the building of peace.”⁵ There is little doubt that Pope Benedict regards the Holocaust as one of the darkest moments in human history. In remarks at a general audience on November 20, 2005, he refers to the Holocaust of the Jews as “an infamous project of death.”⁶

It is with regard to the parentage of the Holocaust that Pope Benedict’s remarks have raised some eyebrows. He appears to regard it primarily, even exclusively, as a neo-pagan phenomenon which had no roots in Christianity but instead constituted a fundamental challenge to all religious belief, including Christianity. No reputable scholar on the Holocaust would deny its neo-pagan roots nor its fundamental opposition to a religious perspective. But equally reputable scholars would also insist on surfacing the Holocaust’s links with classical Christian antisemitism. The Holocaust succeeded in a culture that was supposedly deeply impacted by Christian values for centuries. Much of the Nazi anti-Jewish legislation replicated laws against Jews enacted in Christian societies since medieval times. We cannot obfuscate the fact that traditional Christianity provided an indispensable seedbed for the widespread support, or at least acquiescence, on the part of large numbers of baptized Christians during the Nazi attack on the Jews and other marginalized groups. Pope Benedict seemed to be supporting in his Cologne address a fringe interpretation of the Holocaust which presents it solely as an attack on religion in all its forms rather than as a phenomenon that drew extensively on a previous antisemitic base in the heart of Christianity. His remarks leave the impression, intended or not, that the Holocaust was simply the result of secularizing forces not dissimilar from the secularizing forces that now affect Europe in particular and which as Cardinal Ratzinger and now as Pope he has strongly challenged. His omission, at both Cologne and Birkenau, of any mention of the 1988 Vatican document *We Remember* or the earlier French and German bishops’ statements, as well

as his unwillingness earlier to associate himself with a major statement by a group of Catholic theologians in Germany acknowledging the Church’s responsibility for the Holocaust, remain disturbing.

I hope that in future addresses Pope Benedict might expand his understanding of the roots of the Holocaust to include the role that traditional antisemitism played in its development. Pope Benedict has shown some understanding of the link between traditional Christian antisemitism and the ability of the Nazis to carry out their program of Jewish extermination. As Cardinal Ratzinger, in a front page article in *L’Osservatore Romano* on December 28, 2000, he argued that “it cannot be denied that a certain insufficient resistance to this atrocity on the part of Christians can be explained by the inherited anti-Judaism in the hearts of not a few Christians.”⁷ This is a rather weak statement, but it gives us hope that as Pope Benedict he will expand and deepen his 2000 statement in some future address in a way that he did not do in either Cologne or Birkenau.

In his Cologne address Pope Benedict did urge Catholic and Jewish scholars to take up the difficult historical issues in the Church’s relationship with the Jewish people. This sounds similar to the so-called historians’ project of several years ago, jointly sponsored by the Vatican and the World Jewish Congress, which ended in acrimony. Cardinal Edward Cassidy, under whose leadership the project was launched, urged its continuation despite the difficulties it had encountered. If Pope Benedict would support the re-establishment of a similar project, this would mark an important step forward. It would show some awareness of a link between the actions of the Church and the development of the antisemitism culminating in the Holocaust that is absent from his remarks at Cologne and at Birkenau.

Let me make several points clear regarding any critique of Church action or inaction during the Holocaust. I am not urging papal support for some of the broad, sweeping accusations against the Church found

5 Pope Benedict XVI, “Visit to Cologne Synagogue,” *Origins*, 35:12 (September 1, 2005), 206.

6 The text can be found on the website of the Center of Christian-Jewish Learning at Boston College, <http://www.bc.edu/research/cjl/>

7 As quoted in: Edward Idrios Cardinal Cassidy, *Rediscovering Vatican II: Ecumenism and Interreligious Dialogue – Unitas Redintegratio, Nostra Aetate* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1995), 249.

in certain volumes (e.g., Cromwell and Goldhagen), but for a nuanced, serious approach using the best of modern scholarship.⁸ And such a study must also delve into other causes for a failure in moral responsibility during the Nazi era, beyond classical Christian antisemitism. Fear of the Spanish Civil war, for example, is one factor that is only beginning to receive necessary attention.⁹ Such scholarship may never clear up all remaining uncertainties, nor result in a consensus evaluation, for example, of the papacy of Pius XII. But it would demonstrate a fundamental commitment to honesty and integrity if the Church is to play a constructive moral role in contemporary global society. The “shadow over the Cross,” as some have termed it, must be removed once and for all.

The final point that remains a challenge for me in terms of Holocaust scholarship is related, as I have already indicated, to the second point just discussed. Are we to understand the Holocaust as simply the final and most gruesome chapter in the long history of Christian antisemitism, or did its ideology go beyond what classical thinking advocated. I have generally held to the latter perspective, with respect both to the Jews as victims and to others who experienced Nazi wrath. The ideology of the Nazis in my judgment was primarily rooted in modern forms of bioracism, as scholars such as Henry Friedlander and the late Sybil Milton have argued. It took classical Christian antisemitism beyond previous borders. Classical Christian antisemitism on the whole aimed at making Jews miserable and marginal in society (though admittedly an estimated one million Jews died over the centuries as a result of its influence). Nazi ideology’s goal was the total annihilation of Jews everywhere. Both were morally reprehensible but

the distinction should not be lost. Nazi ideology would never have had the success it did without the seedbed in European society provided by classical Christian antisemitism.

But I am unable to see the ideology behind the Holocaust as confined exclusively to the Jews. The bioracism on which it was built caused death and suffering for other victims as well, particularly Poles, Roma, the disabled, and gay people, as an integral part of its plan for supposed human purification and perfection. There is no question that the Nazis made Jews their priority victims. We can never lose sight of this fact. But the other victims were not merely accidental byproducts of the fundamental attack on the Jewish people. We still have a long way to go in acknowledging this in the world of Holocaust scholarship. I am not suggesting that all the victims were on the same footing, nor do I deny some special aspects in the attack on the Jews (e.g., the religiously based sanction for their murder). But I would argue for a continuum of victimization, with some gradation, under Nazi ideology, rather than regarding the victimization of the Jews and the victimization of others as totally distinct categories.

Overall I believe Holocaust scholarship has made tremendous strides in the past several decades. There is still much to examine. Some of it concerns nuances and small details. Such scholarship is important and I do not wish to minimize its role. But we shall not respond adequately to the challenge of the Holocaust unless we address more thoroughly the three areas I have highlighted in this essay: (1) its impact on contemporary human meaning; (2) the role of religion, Christianity in particular, in aiding its success; and (3) the ultimate roots and extent of the ideology that supported its implementation.

8 Cf. Frank J. Coppa, *The Papacy, the Jews and the Holocaust* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 2006); Otto Dov Kulik and Paul Mendes-Flor, *Judaism and Christianity under the Impact of National Socialism* (Jerusalem: The Historical Society of Israel and the Zalman Shazar Center for Jewish History, 1987).

9 Cf. Beth A. Griech-Polelle, “The Impact of the Spanish Civil War Upon Roman Catholic Clergy in Nazi Germany,” in: Kevin P. Spicer, CSC, ed., *Antisemitism, Christian Ambivalence and the Holocaust*, (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press in association with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2007), 121–135.

For me, as probably for the majority of people working in the social sciences, the Holocaust exists in two dimensions. As a human being and a citizen I think of it as a human and a civilisational catastrophe that has no parallel, is overwhelming in its enormity, and cannot be grasped as a normal moral problem. Much has been written on that subject already, and I certainly do not think I have been appointed to add my commentary to this human and moral aspect of the Holocaust.

For me as a sociologist, anthropologist and scholar of European studies, on the other hand, the Holocaust exists above all through its meaning for European civilisation in terms of contemporary European identities and cultural dilemmas. This is the perspective from which I viewed the Holocaust when I decided to establish a modest Holocaust studies unit in the Institute of European Studies of the Jagiellonian University. It was my response to the recurring question of why there is no unit engaged in Holocaust research at the Jagiellonian University even though it is the oldest and the leading Polish university, located only an hour's drive from Auschwitz. Also, I saw the Holocaust as above all a European problem, a tragic and ominous legacy of European civilisation, testimony to its greatest failure in history. Research on the Holocaust should be, I believe, part of European studies, because the kind of effect that the Holocaust had and still has on processes occurring in European civil society and European civilisation is a fundamentally important question.

The legacy of the Holocaust, and the memory of it, constitute an ultimate criterion, a reference point in setting moral standards. In today's European culture, invoking the symbol of the Holocaust is the strongest

argument one can use in judging someone or some event. On the one hand there is a prevailing conviction that nothing can be compared to the Holocaust, because of its unique scale and above all its unique character. On the other hand, though, the presence of the Holocaust in our collective memory sometimes brings out a kind of competition about who has suffered the most in history, whose tragedy was the greatest, and who therefore is entitled to collective sympathy, empathy, moral credit, and sometimes also concrete benefits. Personally, it pains and disgusts me to see things occurring in the Western world involving just such competition in suffering, though of course I acknowledge the right of societies, ethnic groups, social groups or nations to have public recognition of the enormity of their suffering, and to seek redress. However, I have many misgivings of a moral nature when such competition arises, when Roma, Ukrainians, Poles, Irish, Armenians, homosexuals, African Americans and other groups join in. My doubts do not concern the magnitude of their suffering, but whether suffering and genocide should be the subject of bargaining and political battles.

The Europe that is coming together in the European Union has been debating the meaning of the Holocaust for years. There are discussions in the media, in education, and generally in the public arena. The language with which we talk about the Holocaust has taken shape, and also there is an awareness of a special sensitivity existing particularly amongst Jews. The ongoing expansion of the European Union also means that the territory of united Europe covers countries, particularly those of the former Soviet empire, in which there was no discussion of the Holocaust, in which memory of the Holocaust was dominated by the state's political interests, and in which the public space was not an arena of free discussion. The question arises as to the extent to which the new EU member states will join in European debate of the Holocaust, whether they will bring new elements to it, and whether the legacy will take on new meaning in the new expanded Europe.

In this regard Poland is in a special situation, as a country on whose territory a large part of the Holocaust was carried out, where the most important symbols of the Holocaust are, and which still has trouble dealing with the Holocaust legacy within its own society or in its relations

with others, particularly with the Jewish people. Many things have happened and much has changed since 1989, and this applies to memory of the Holocaust as well, but several new issues have emerged. It is very significant that Poland as part of the European Union can no longer lock its discussion of the Holocaust within its borders but must connect to the European and world discussion. This concerns all EU member countries. Europe's collective memory and collective historical legacy are not a matter for some particular states but for all Europeans. It can be said that since we want to belong to a united Europe for its civilisational, political and economic benefits, since we want to take advantage of the collective achievements of Europe, we should also take ownership of those elements of the heritage that bring no glory or honour, that are hard to deal with. The Holocaust, like colonialism, is Europe's collective heritage and collective responsibility.

To understand the essence of the relation between Polish people and the Holocaust, and the genesis of associated conflicts, I am convinced that we have to look to things that are peculiar to the shaping of the Polish national identity. Poles are one of the European peoples who construct their identity according to an ethnic model whose core is a shared culture and a shared origin. Citizenship, the political community, civil society, co-operative work for the sake of the common good – these are not bound up with national identity in traditional Polish thought. For Poles the nation is the historical shaping of a cultural community, divided by cultural (above all linguistic and religious) boundaries from other peoples, regardless of how the political borders run. The memory of the 19th-century fate of the emerging Polish nation compels us to accept that one can be a Pole whilst being a citizen of another country; today this applies to the Polish diaspora, and it once described the reality of partitioned Poland. But this also means that belonging to the Polish nation is not a straightforward consequence of having Polish citizenship. These two categories – nationality and citizenship – are separable in the Polish mind. Members of ethnic minorities in Poland, especially the Jews, felt the impact of this, particularly in the interwar period. In this ethnic concept of the nation, fellow citizens are not countrymen if they are culturally “foreign.” The national border is a border of culture and origin. In the

case of European nations, including Poland, it means not so much a belief in the existence of biological bonds, for example in the form of a racial community, as the expectation that the members of the nation will share a common historical memory, will accept the mythologised history of the nation as it is presented in a simplified version of history, in literature, art and legend. National identity so conceived excludes minority communities, which have their own historical traditions.

One feature of the Polish national identity that was constructed during the period of the partitions in the 19th century is that Polish national history is presented as a series of wars, more often ending in defeat than in victory but always morally triumphant. In this mythologised vision of history the Poles have always been attacked by enemies, have defended themselves against overwhelming odds, and have sometimes won but more often suffered defeat; moral rightness and justice, though, have always been on their side. Historical events that would be difficult to present as just wars were thus either ignored or else presented out of their historical context. An example of this might be the Battle of Somosierra, a victory of Polish units fighting on the side of Napoleon against Spain. It would be hard to explain to Poles why that was a just war, in what way Spain had threatened Poland's liberty. And so, whilst the name Somosierra Canyon and the victory itself are generally known, few know where it was, who the enemy was, or what it was about. For such a memory would be inconvenient and would spoil the unclouded picture of Polish heroism and historical justice, which should always be on the Poles' side. In the age of 19th-century romanticism a messianic movement arose in Poland. It saw Poland as a messiah, the "Christ of the nations" that would bring salvation to humanity through suffering and death. Poland suffers and dies but is reborn, is resurrected, and through its suffering saves humankind. Such a conception presumes absolute moral purity and the superiority of the Polish people. It also precludes any culpability on the part of the Poles against anyone. Admitting that Poland bears any guilt would wreck the whole structure on which the ethnic and romantic version of Polish national identity rests. "Christ" cannot bear any blame; his moral superiority and the uniqueness of his suffering cannot brook the slightest doubt. Such a concept gave Poles a sense of superiority, and

the hope that despite defeats and suffering they would be liberated and that justice would triumph. Such thinking can also be seen in the context of compensation for past wrongs. Today, when Poland as an EU member receives large subsidies financed from the EU budget, some Poles who continue to hold the traditional messianic version of Polish history tend to consider those subsidies not as investments in the common European good but as compensation which Poland justly deserves for the harm suffered from, for example, the Germans during World War II, or from the Allies who after the war handed Poland over to Soviet rule. Poland accepts this compensation but does not feel bound to be loyal to those giving the subsidies, that is, to the European Union. After all, to them it is only reparations for the wrongs done.

In Poland the legacy of the Holocaust is treated as part of Polish national history. That is partly because in Poland the national dimension dominates discourse in the public arena. The Poles, treated roughly by history in this regard, are almost obsessively attached to national sovereignty and to the national identity, understood in the ethnic manner described above. At least this is the main, traditional, and still-dominant thread of social consciousness in Poland. Other dimensions of identity, such as regional, ethnic minority, class, gender or generational, do exist and gradually are becoming important; but national identity still dominates and has been no more than strained recently by discussions of whether the ways of interpreting it are one or perhaps many. Important historical events, and for Poles World War II was one of the most important events in history, are considered above all from a national perspective. After the war the communist authorities turned the memory of the Holocaust into a political weapon against the Germans, nationalising it a peculiar way. Evidence of this was the museum exposition of that time at Auschwitz, arranged largely as a symbol of the martyrdom of the Poles at the hands of the Germans. The Holocaust of the Jews was remembered and mentioned, but in that national context it appeared as only one aspect of the criminal actions of the Germans, and not as a unique and incomparable event. Amongst Poles there was often the suggestion that after the Jews it was supposed to be the turn of the Poles, who would have fallen victim to the same kind of massacre if the Germans had had enough time to carry out

that plan. In this way the Holocaust becomes simply one manifestation of Nazi genocide. During the war, six million Polish citizens died, half of whom were Jews and half ethnic Poles. That comparability of numbers became another argument for the thesis that there was no basic difference between the suffering of the Jews and of the Poles. What was overlooked in that interpretation, at least until the 1980s, was the fundamental point, generally known in the West, that other Europeans died for more or less imaginary sins against the Nazis, but Jews simply because they were Jews.

The European memory of the Holocaust concerns World War II, although it has its obvious consequences in the shaping of attitudes to Jews after the war and to persecuted minorities in general. In Poland it looks a little different, because destruction of the Jewish community and its culture on Polish soil continued after 1945 as well, and is associated with the most difficult fragment of Holocaust memory. For if the blame for the genocide committed against the Jews in the concentration camps and other Holocaust sites is borne by the Nazis, in national terms by the Germans, what Jews faced after the war weighs upon the Poles above all. Of course Poles were and are accused of collaboration with the Nazis, of passivity in the face of the slaughter committed against their fellow citizens, or even of expressing satisfaction with the “solution of the Jewish problem.” Certainly many of these accusations are grounded in historical facts, but when exaggerated accusations of participation in the Holocaust are formulated against the Poles, placing them at least on a par with the Germans in the degree of blame for the Holocaust, it becomes part of a schema familiar to Poles: the struggle against “antipolonism,” aggression from other nations, being attacked by everyone, the need to defend against the loss of national identity. Paradoxically, the heavier the accusations against Poles about participation in the Holocaust, the easier it is for them to handle, interpreting them in the familiar categories of the battle against unjust aggression and as yet another manifestation of the martyrdom of the Polish people. The aggressor might be both the Jews themselves who today bring up the participation of Poles in the Holocaust, and members of other communities of the West who join in the “aggression” against Poland. Polish nationalism only benefits from these attacks. It is worse with postwar history, recalled in two books by Jan Tomasz Gross (*Neighbors*

and *Fear*), which for that reason became the subject of particularly fierce attacks by Polish nationalists. These and other publications recalled that Jewish survivors of the Holocaust returning to their homes in Poland became the object of antagonism and aggression, and sometimes were murdered simply for wanting to dwell in their own homes and start life anew. From the perspective of the Polish nationalists there was no place for them in Poland anymore, nor any right to own property taken over by Poles who perhaps had not themselves participated in the Holocaust but were quite willing to benefit from it, occupying formerly Jewish property. Such a reaction was possible because in the interpretation of the Polish nationalists the Jews were not countrymen, were not Poles despite having Polish citizenship. The ethnic concept of the nation dominated.

The memory of these postwar events is a difficult, troublesome memory, not only in contacts with Jews or the international community, but even in internal discussions going on amongst Poles. For one can argue that during the war Poles did what they could to rescue Jews, and there was not much they could do in view of the extraordinary terror prevailing in occupied Poland; but it is much harder to explain crimes against those few Jews who managed to survive the Holocaust. Here the guilt of Poles is more evident and morally unequivocal. Attempts are made in Poland to explain these events and cast off the blame. It is said, for example, that the pogroms, such as the most well known one in Kielce, were Soviet provocations. Crimes against Jews are explained by the fact of the demoralisation of part of Polish society, for which the Germans bear the blame, and it is pointed out that the guilty Poles were a few criminal individuals. Another argument is raised, connected with a stereotype of the Jews rooted in Polish historical consciousness: it is said that the Jews were never allies of the Polish nation since they did not support Polish ambitions to independence, being loyal subjects of the partitioning powers in the 19th century when the Poles were attempting to recover statehood. From this it logically followed that the Jews were inclined to take the side of the Soviet occupier of Poland after World War II, and to join the ranks of the communist apparatus of repression. This was supposed to justify the enmity of Poles to Jews in those postwar times. For the Jews, an untrustworthy people, enemies of the Poles, there was to be no place in Poland. Indeed, Jews in the 19th

century were skeptical, especially in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, about the prospect of replacing the multinational and relatively tolerant Habsburg state with sovereign states created by the nations that formed the Empire. They rightly suspected that such national states would be much less tolerant of minorities, implementing an ethnic conception of the nation. As a persecuted minority, Jews were sympathetic to the prospect of realising socialist ideas that promised an egalitarian, classless society devoid of exploitation. Thus, many Jews were eager to get involved in leftist movements, including communist ones. For Poles, however, these tendencies formed part of a picture of the world in which the Poles were being attacked by enemies and in which to survive they had to shut themselves within their ethnic society and fight foreign aggression. The Jews were a symbol of such foreignness.

Despite these defensive mechanisms explaining crimes against Jews, the memory of them is difficult for Poles. These events were thus passed over in silence for decades, expunged from consciousness, absent from the Polish collective memory. At the same time, negative stereotypes of Jews were maintained, periodically strengthened by resurgent antisemitism, especially after 1968 when in response to the conflict in the Middle East the communist state launched anti-Israeli and anti-Jewish propaganda, which enabled the communist authorities to scapegoat the Jews, upon whom they could place the blame for their own failures.

The memory of the Holocaust, and especially recognition of the suffering of the Jews as unique, would have been difficult for Poles to accept. Against that background the suffering of Poles would have seemed less painful, and that would have called into question the messianic idea, critical to the Polish national identity. The memory of the guilt of Poles toward Jews is still more difficult, since it destroys the image of Poland as the innocently suffering “Christ of the nations.” That is why Poland’s opening to the West and the ongoing integration with the European Union is creating a new reality here. Poland, like other countries of the former Soviet Bloc, can no longer shut itself within the domain of its own collective memory. It must enter into dialogue on the European and global scales, to adopt both the content and the language of that debate, or propose its own. It can no longer nourish itself solely on its

national myths. It must consider how the past looks from the perspective of other societies and nations, see itself through the eyes of others. For Poles that new perspective is sometimes startling and painful, because it turns out that others do not see us as we do, and that it is hard to carry on dialogue with the new partners with whom we are supposed to build a shared Europe whilst sticking to a way of thinking in which “others” are enemies threatening our identity, against whom we must fight for survival. In the view of other European countries, Poland is not an innocently suffering victim but a country that often oppressed others and did not always wage just wars. This forces Poles to consider their blame and their responsibility. That is painful but paradoxically it can have a saving effect. It forces abandonment of historical myths, engagement in dialogue with other nations, adoption of a new European perspective, and consolidation with the family of European nations with which we share the past – the good as well as the bad and tragic. We are not “Christs of the nations” but a normal European society. For that to be, however, it is essential to take on a broader European perspective in thinking about the past, to draw new contours of memory, and to open up to dialogue.

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The memory of the Holocaust and of tragic events in Poland after 1945 occupies a special place in the Polish collective memory and identity. As part of the European historical experience, these events must be examined and remembered in the broader European context, with the use of conceptual categories and moral criteria developed in discussion beyond national bounds. Poland, like other new EU member countries, should be a part of this. It is a precondition for the kind of reshaping of the national memory that will allow understanding on European and global scales, the overcoming of barriers and stereotypes, and moral redress. A shared memory, developed in open dialogue, is a precondition for the creation of a shared European identity, for understanding between Europeans. In the case of events of such great moral weight as the Holocaust this seems particularly important, and the Polish experience is an example of a particularly uncomfortable memory and a particularly difficult challenge.

Without a basic revaluation of the foundation upon which the Polish national identity rests, it will not be possible to overcome the barriers preventing it from dealing with its past in accord with European standards, nor to be part of the collective European historical memory.



translated from Polish

Holocaust Research and Scholarship Today

Michael R. Marrus

Holocaust research and scholarship rest on a foundation assailed by questions. What is the context? Is the emphasis right? How do we find the right idiom with which to describe it? Is it unique? Is it misused? What to do next? There are lots of perspectives, and an abundance of authorities. Survivors have special preoccupations, although these are less easily collapsed into a single viewpoint than is customarily assumed. Jewish leaders may speak with one voice, but there are plenty of dissenters, and not all of them agree. Some use the rhetoric of the Holocaust for fundraising or political purposes; others are revolted by the prospect. Some stimulate Holocaust consciousness as a way of energizing Jewish identity, but others warn that it is unhealthy to define oneself as a perpetual victim, particularly when this defies current reality. Non-Jews are all over the map as well. Some have had enough. Some want to dig deeper. Other ethnic or national communities have special preoccupations and are concerned with how the presentation of the Holocaust might reflect upon themselves. There are different connotations on the left and on the right. Professors voice interest, but their students sometimes do not. Media offerings vary considerably, from the thoughtful and carefully executed to the shamelessly exploitative.

I come to these debates as a historian, and what I want to say here reflects how I bring professional preoccupations to issues that can easily be looked at from other standpoints as well. And since my starting point is often misunderstood, I begin with a word of explanation. Each of us has a variety of roles we perform in society, flowing from aspects of our personal identities: I am, at once, a Canadian, a Jew, a person occasionally

politically involved, a professor, and so on. Each of these roles involves responsibilities and aspirations, feelings and ways of looking at the world. To some degree, the Holocaust may be caught up in every one of these roles. At one time or another, the Canadian, the Jew, and so on responds to the wartime massacre of European Jewry in particular ways or defines himself in a manner that draws upon that catastrophe.

But when it comes to the Holocaust the historian in me is different. As a historian I have professionally declared responsibilities quite different from those prescribed by the other identities of which I have spoken. I remember, in the mid-1960s, debating with fellow graduate students at the University of California in Berkeley about the historian's craft. What was the historian's vocation? Opinions varied, but in my circle, in that heady Vietnam and civil rights era, most of us saw our task as social and political change. Politics lurked just beneath the surface of everything, we believed. (I even wrote a book entitled *The Politics of Assimilation*.) We were to hold a mirror to society, to show the seamy underside, and help set things right.

The challenge to that view, however, which I remember to this day, and which I now believe to have been the wiser course, came from one of our teachers, universally respected as a master at his craft – even if not admired by us for his politics at the time. “The historian's job,” he insisted – and I can remember his intonation still, after some thirty years – “is *to get it right*!” “Getting it right” was a sober injunction to youthful idealists, because it suggested the diversion (as we saw it) of extraordinary energy into detail and tests of accuracy. It meant the greatest care in research, wide-ranging reading, and seeing documents in their original form, learning foreign languages, and studying the idioms of particular contexts. More often than not it meant visits to dreary, ill-appointed archives, sifting paper for hours on end. It required plenty of *Sitzfleisch*. This was a program sure to bring high-flying generalizations down to earth, or discourage some from even getting off the ground. But it was the best advice we ever had.

“Getting it right” is what I try to do as a historian of the Holocaust. Jews and non-Jews, teachers and politicians, clergymen and artists, and everyone else will make of the Holocaust what they will, according to their

conscience, public commitments, and fundamental beliefs. I do not in the least disparage such different approaches – far from it; at various moments, in other roles I perform, I may well engage the wartime murder of European Jews in precisely the same manner. Some, however, have to make sure that the Holocaust upon which people act and ruminate is faithful to the historical truth of the events themselves, or at least as faithful as we can possibly make it. Some have to be counted on for narrative accuracy, for explanatory generalizations that match the evidence, and for a balanced view. Those are the historians' tasks, making him or her the custodian, in a sense, of the public memory of the event itself.

Just putting it this way, I know, makes some people uneasy, and quite often when I elaborate they feel even worse. No one takes kindly to assertions of external authority in matters close to the heart, and when memory has become sacralized, as has been the case with the murder of European Jewry, it can clash sharply with history as historians understand it. That is why academic lectures to the Jewish community on Holocaust themes sometimes finish in a stormy question and answer period, with the lecturer rushing for the door at the end of the evening. “When were you born?” I have been sometimes asked accusingly. (I am sixty-eight.) “Let me tell you, it was not *quite* the way you have told us.” “Getting it right” sometimes involves questioning the recollections of Holocaust survivors (although almost invariably there are other survivors who remember things differently), disputing received wisdom, pitting book-learning against or at least alongside cherished or traumatic memories. To younger colleagues contemplating this challenge, I can only say: *bon courage*!

For obvious reasons, we defer to those who have suffered and survived – and so we should in listening to people recount their own traumatic experiences. For the historian, trouble comes when the anguish and suffering of the victim becomes a warrant for historical analysis and wide-ranging generalization. For while they are experts in their own pain, survivors have to struggle like the rest of us to understand the bigger picture. To achieve a balanced, objective view, they frequently must lift aside a mountain of emotion; and it is hardly surprising that many do not care or dare to do so. I would be the last to say that they should try. My point, however, is that testimony is no substitute for historical inquiry.

Historians are necessary, therefore, and for at least two reasons we are sure to have more rather than less recourse to them in the future. First, historians become increasingly important as the ranks of survivors grow thinner. In a few decades, it is often pointed out, those who have firsthand recollections of these events will be no more, and historians will become the principal custodians of public memory of the Holocaust. Second, memory itself grows faint, at least in some cases, and needs constant verification. Primo Levi, the cultivated Italian Jew who endured a year in Auschwitz, was very preoccupied with this issue both for himself and others. "Human memory is a marvelous but fallacious instrument," he wrote in his last book *The Drowned and the Saved*. "The memories that lie within us are not carved in stone; not only do they tend to become erased as the years go by, but often they change, or even grow, by incorporating extraneous features." Levi worried about how memory, when "evoked too often, and expressed in the form of a story, tends to become fixed in a stereotype, in a form tested by experience, crystallized, perfected, adorned, installing itself in the place of the raw memory and growing at its expense." Memory, he felt, had constantly to be tested, analyzed, probed – something he did with his own memories, doubtless at great personal cost.

So there is much work for Holocaust historians to do. Yet there are some who feel that we already know more or less all that is important to know about the Holocaust, and that to insist on the kind of painstaking verification I am advocating here is to duck moral responsibility. To them, the real problem is not this or that detail, but rather Holocaust denial or the conceptual questions alluded to at the beginning of this essay. Like Virginia Woolf they might well prefer accounts of the Holocaust that are "more truth than fact." Some people have even been surprised when I describe university courses on the Holocaust. "Whole *courses*? Don't you get bogged down? Isn't this really just morbid curiosity?"

The truth is, however, not only that there is lots we don't know, but that the history of the Holocaust poses historical problems at least as challenging, and generally more challenging, than any other field one can find. In a word, "getting it right" is much more difficult and exhilarating than people assume. Leave aside the deepest questions: How could people

do it? How could others allow them to do it? These questions ultimately fall outside the historian's province, I believe, for the answers – if answers there are – are tied up with notions of humanity itself and its capacities for good and evil. But there are also garden-variety questions, asked all the time by historians, but which for the Holocaust are of extraordinary import because we are, after all, talking about the murder of millions of people: Who decided? How were decisions reached? Who acted? When? And how? What did people know? How did one place differ from another? What alternatives presented themselves?

"Getting it right" involves posing such questions and addressing them with the best tools the historical culture of our society provides. It also requires some measure of objectivity, which brings us to perhaps the most important methodological challenge for the historian of the Holocaust. Among the least appreciated and often contested attributes of the historian these days, objectivity is nevertheless what we insist upon in many other aspects of life. There are many appropriate ways to respond to murder, but if we are speaking about an investigating officer, a coroner, or a judge, for example, we feel that their task requires them to keep an open mind about the evidence they assess and a capacity to weigh evidence fairly and dispassionately. When it comes to serious illness of someone close to us, we can respond appropriately as friend, parent, spouse or whatever, but we have quite different expectations when it comes to the surgeon conducting an operation. Indeed, with surgery, as with the practice of law or many other professional activities, we usually feel that too intimate a relationship would interfere with sound discharge of professional responsibilities. Simply put, we feel that practitioners such as these carry out their responsibilities best when they act as professionals.

No one expects, or desires, historians to perform like machines. But there is a world of difference between history taken up as a sacred duty, keeping faith with those who were murdered – intimately involved with mourning, commemoration, denunciation, or a warning for future generations – and the quite different task of historical analysis, trying to make sense of it all in terms understood by the historical culture of our day. This last is the objective I am talking about here, an effort to integrate the history of the Holocaust into the general stream of historical

consciousness, to apply to it the modes of analysis, the scholarly discourse and the kinds of analyses used for other historical issues.

The need to achieve such integration has been obvious to many historians of my generation, those of us who received our historical training in the mid-1960s or just before. For us, at that time, the Holocaust was simply absent. A quarter of a century after the destruction of so much of European Jewry, mass industrial murder in the heart of Western civilization scarcely appeared in the historical record. Few would have thought to mention it in a lecture. Textbooks on the modern era skirted the issue. Discussions of the Second World War avoided it scrupulously. In 1953 a distinguished historian at my university wrote a modern history of Germany without referring to it at all. And when a colleague revised his book some years later, he included practically nothing on Jews or the Holocaust. And in this, I hasten to add, historians reflected the wider absence in the culture of the day.

Non-Jews spoke relatively little about the Holocaust. Western countries, it has been said, suffered from a “guilt complex” in the postwar years, explaining their reticence. But I have found no evidence of guilt back then, or indeed of any other strong feeling about the issue. People just weren’t interested in discussing it. Jews too, whether from shame or fears of renewed antisemitism, or relief that it was over, muted their discourse, or at least they did so outside the Jewish environment. Survivors found that their stories made listeners uncomfortable. In the immediate postwar period there was not even a word to designate what had happened. The term “Holocaust” hardly appeared before the end of the 1950s, and even then it was largely restricted to Jews – and specialists in the subject at that. Raul Hilberg’s landmark book *The Destruction of the European Jews* appeared only in 1961, and this was among the very first works on the subject intended for a wide, general audience. It was only toward the end of the 1960s that writings began to accumulate and that a few of these caught the eye of the general public. In 1968 the Library of Congress, for the first time, created a major entry card: “Holocaust – Jewish, 1939–1945.”

The great change occurred in the 1970s, a decade or more after the trial of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem, an event intended by its

organizers to stimulate public consciousness of the murder of European Jews. Major landmarks included the publication of Lucy Dawidowicz’s widely successful *War Against the Jews* (1975), the convocation of several international historical conferences, a lively dispute over a book by David Irving claiming Hitler’s ignorance, until 1943, of the Final Solution, and Gerald Green’s extraordinarily popular NBC docudrama *Holocaust* (1978). Historians and others began to publish well-researched monographs on the subject, intended for the wider audience of interested readers. Since then, historical inquiry has proceeded apace – to the point that it may be impossible, now, for a single person to master all of the literature that appears.

More than anything else, “getting it right” involves digesting this literature and asserting the place of the Holocaust in the wider history of our time. No one contemplating what has happened to mankind in the twentieth century can avoid the Nazis’ assault on European Jewry. Historians of the Third Reich now must all come to terms with it. Those who study the Second World War must do the same. Jewish issues are closely intertwined with the history of occupation regimes, the Barbarossa campaign against the Soviet Union, the functioning of the Nazi state, and the roles of Hitler, the SS, soldiers, bureaucrats, and popular opinion. And just as no one can understand the war without understanding what happened to the Jews, so the latter must be understood in terms of what was happening on the wider historical stage.

Most important, the effort to eliminate an entire people, set as a major objective by a highly developed industrial society and carried out on a European-wide scale, eventually using the most up-to-date technology, is now widely seen to be unprecedented, not only for Western civilization but for humanity itself. Germans, with helpers, not only intended this, but for three or four years actually set about doing it. In the past, peoples have constantly been cruel to one another, have tormented others in various ways, and have fantasized horribly about what might happen to their enemies. But there were always limits – imposed by technology, humane sensibilities, religious scruples, geography, or military capacity. During the Second World War mankind crossed a new threshold. Nazi Germany operated without historic limits, until crushed by military defeat.

As a result, we have a different sense of human capacities than we did before. Some, particularly Jews who suffered at the hands of the Nazis but who miraculously survived, draw the bleakest conclusions of all. “Every day anew I lose my trust in the world,” wrote the Austrian-born Holocaust survivor Jean Améry, not long before his suicide. Others think that a warning is all one can deduce. Primo Levi’s message was: “It can happen, and it can happen everywhere.” Levi too ended his life, but while he lived he argued that reflecting on the Holocaust might help prevent another catastrophe. Whatever one’s view, the Holocaust has become a major reference point for our time – constantly kept in view for one’s judgment about the state of the world, as might be the case, say, for the French Revolution or the First World War.

In addition to studying perpetrators, “getting it right” involves looking at victims and refusing to see them as endowed by their victimization with a special aura of righteousness or other admirable qualities. When the Israeli research and commemorative institute Yad Vashem was founded in 1953, it was denoted in English as “The Martyrs’ and Heroes’ Remembrance Authority.” At the centre of attention, according to the law establishing the institution, was a distinctly Israeli appreciation of the victims’ experience – “the sublime, persistent struggle of the masses of the House of Israel, on the threshold of destruction, for their human dignity and Jewish culture.” The accent was on combativeness, rebellion, and unwillingness to submit. The most important outcome was national regeneration through resistance and armed struggle. No sooner had Yad Vashem been established, however, than a different Israeli voice was heard. In 1954 the Hebrew poet Natan Alterman, who has been called “the uncrowned poet laureate” of his generation, and who lived in Palestine during the war, wrote a famous poem celebrating Jewish *opponents* of the insurgents – those who claimed that “resistance will destroy us all.” A dissident voice at the time, Alterman took care to appreciate as the real heroes those Jews who were caught in the middle – heads of the Jewish Councils or *Judenräte*, confused and harassed community leaders, those responsible elders who “negotiated and complied” rather than the relatively small number of young people who managed to take up arms. Following Alterman’s intervention an intense debate began, which has

renewed itself with new discoveries and new historical writing, and it has continued ever since. The result, I believe, has been a more mature historical understanding, enriched by research and the confrontation of different points of view.

Finally, “getting it right” involves finding the right language, expressing oneself in the right idiom – speaking with a voice, in short, appropriate both for the most terrible events, but also for the present generation, including young people. Holocaust history is like all history in this respect; it must constantly be rewritten if it is not to vanish from public perceptions or lose the significance we want ascribed to it. Here again, Holocaust history poses special challenges. In his *Reflections on Nazism*, Saul Friedländer dwells upon the difficulties historians and others have in finding the right words to discuss the massacre of European Jewry. Friedländer is disturbed by the continuing fascination with Nazism, evident particularly in films and literature. This is part of the problem of how we communicate things that are deeply disturbing but also strange to us and difficult to grasp emotionally. Historians neutralize horror, he seems to say; and he is concerned with expression that “normalizes, smoothes and neutralizes our vision of the past.” Does scholarly discourse anaesthetize in this way? Friedländer knows there is no easy answer. “There should be no misunderstanding about what I am trying to say: The historian cannot work in any other way, and historical studies have to be pursued along the accepted lines. The events described are what is unusual, not the historians’ work. We have reached the limit of our means of expression.”

There is no alternative, I conclude, but to keep at it. Historians of the Holocaust are called upon to provide one kind of explanation, and their preoccupation is not only the intractable material they work with, but also a public that is constantly renewing itself, coming forward with new layers of experience, new interests, and new unfamiliarity. Diaries and memoirs of survivors reflect a widely shared obsession of those who went through the Holocaust: “How will what happened to us be understood?” “Could a postwar world possibly grasp what we went through?” Imagine how those victims might understand the generation that now looks back on their agonies. The gap grows wider, and with it the challenge to the historians and everyone else.

To all of those concerned to see knowledge about the Holocaust extended, I think I can provide some reassurance. The Holocaust has become history, has entered into the historical canon, with all of its strengths and weaknesses. This means debate and disagreement, but also research, new questions, and new ways of looking at old problems. It means historians of many backgrounds applying themselves to the task, most of whom share concerns I articulate here that they “get it right.” This is the way, in our culture, that historical understanding is preserved and advanced. It seems plain now that after the shock of the postwar era the Holocaust has become history. And that is the best guarantee we have that it will be remembered.

Holocaust Fatigue

Charles S. Maier

By most standards I am not a good contributor for this volume. First of all, the history of the Holocaust is not a field that I really research or even consistently study. Second, I have gone on record with my concern that the historian of the Holocaust can become too motivated by a sense of collective or personal victimization. This concern connects to the third reason for my feeling disqualified – that I can no longer feel righteous anger enough, that I am weary of the inquiry, perhaps because I have become too comfortable with German history and culture and I don’t really want to be bothered again with this unfathomable tale of degradation and mass murder that many peoples contributed to but Germans unleashed and made possible. There are fine historians for whom the history of the Holocaust has been a life’s calling, a true vocation – the late Raoul Hilberg, Saul Friedlaender, Christopher Browning, and others, among them respected professional friends. But it has not been my vocation: I have been an occasional intruder at best.

Still, this very reluctance to get too involved gets at what for me are the “difficult issues” in Holocaust history. They are largely difficult for me – that is, personal – and not difficulties that inhere in the historiographical enterprise as such. But there are other problems that must arise for every historian of the Holocaust. I briefly discuss both in this response to the question that the editor has posed.

Personal Issues

No matter how it strives for objectivity, scholarship, as Max Weber emphasized, is rooted in personal value systems. The subjects historians

take up and those they may shy away from reflect their own individual formation, and they owe it to their craft to probe how and why, always aware, however, that every self-revelation may be designed to conceal an even deeper, painful disclosure of self. To raise these issues does not imply that the historian feels his own personal history is so important; it is just that it is inescapable. What I have had to recognize is an inner reluctance about taking up this field – not uncommon I think with some of us of German Jewish background.

Indeed my major foray into the field was not about the Holocaust itself, but the German controversy over so-called “relativization” of the Holocaust, the so-called *Historikerstreit*, and I was drawn by the intellectual debates surrounding the publication of a small book by Andreas Hillgruber – *Zweierlei Untergang: Two Sorts of Demise* – and a set of articles by Ernst Nolte of which the first was headed “The Past That Will Not Pass Away.” I was upset enough about what I believed was a misuse of historical argumentation to look at an experience to which I did not really want to devote my own scholarly engagement. Perhaps, to state it differently – finding a debate underway in historical interpretation, one side of which angered me, allowed perhaps a meditative effort I would have preferred to avoid.

Twenty years later, I believe that those of us who felt offended by the Hillgruber book probably were prodded by what might have been a tasteless comparison – the “disappearance” of Jews and Germans from lands where they had long lived in Central Europe – but what he wrote was not apologetic. Still, since his book appeared I’ve had reason to think that there was a profound truth in the events he described: Germans and Jews together had brought a quality of culture to the ethnically mixed lands they inhabited, and their disappearance brought profound changes. Of course, he would have done greater justice to emphasize that the “disappearance” had radically different causes, that after Hitler’s policies of *Lebensraum* the German expulsion was hardly to be unexpected, and that the mass murder of millions of settled inhabitants was different from even a harsh and brutal uprooting or ethnic cleansing. Hillgruber’s contribution was bound to be seen as insensitive and one-sided. Still, he wrote about the historical developments of 1939–45 without seeking to put facts into question or mitigate responsibilities.

This was not the case with Professor Nolte, who sought to imply that the Jews had in effect brought their murder on themselves and that Germans had just borrowed a Soviet precedent. I had found his 1963 volume on comparative fascisms an exciting one at a point when I was deciding myself as a graduate student that I wanted to work comparatively. What he was suggesting in 1986 seemed, however, just cleverly exculpatory: the use of comparisons to reduce the moral and historical importance (significance, not uniqueness, was at stake) of the murder of the Jews. He resorted to a continuing pseudo-questioning – “Might we not say that ...” – to chip away at the import of the Nazi murder. In any case, I don’t wish to rehearse that controversy. What was probably important for me was that it allowed discussion of the Holocaust without having to tell the story of mass murder firsthand.

My contribution to that discussion led to Professor Geoffrey Hartmann’s invitation to speak at a tenth-anniversary commemoration of the Fortunoff Archives. This was the occasion for the talk, which when published in Saul Friedlaender’s admirable journal *History and Memory* as “A Surfeit of Memory?” evoked both dismay and enthusiasm. In that article I tried to examine the role of Holocaust memory and advanced the thesis – in strong terms – that continually revisiting the memory of ethnic tragedy might reflect a certain failure of progressive political confidence, the flagging of a reformist spirit, which I think has gripped the Western world since the late 1970s. The thesis may be right or wrong. It was obviously strong medicine for some listeners and readers, although many tended to agree. The criticism that struck a chord came from an Israeli-American colleague, a historian of science, who said that as a Jew living in a large and powerful country it was easier for me to be critical of preoccupation with the Holocaust than had I been a member of a more precarious Jewish community. The argument doesn’t follow – the American Jewish community is as preoccupied by Holocaust memories as any other. But it led me to realize that my detached stance could seem heedless of others’ deep personal experiences and memories.

Still, I would defend the observation that fixation on the memory of group grievance and grief (not the same of course) can lead to a sort of paralysis in the world. Armenians, Irish, Poles, sometimes African-

Americans have all been tempted. None are wrong to believe that they were victimized. And it is too facile to insist that all should “build on” victimhood, “move on,” make it a “learning experience,” or any of those clichés that emerged from the 1960s. Nonetheless, the image that recurs to me is that of Lot’s wife, frozen into a pillar of salt as she looked back in tears. Of course, the Jewish communities in Vilnius and Warsaw and Vienna were not cities of the plain, and historians must look back. And even among the refugees from Sodom, did not someone have to look back? The question is how to look back without becoming a pillar of the salt of our tears.

I would also defend the thesis I advanced in “A Surfeit of Memory?” that some of the impulse to look back continually was the encroaching weariness in the late 1970s and 1980s with progressive politics. After the challenges by students, women’s groups, militant African-Americans in the United States, after the stagflation that followed upon installation of the Keynesian welfare state, Western (although not East European) intellectuals came to the conclusion that Marx’s injunction was flawed – that since they could no longer change the world, or didn’t like the changes that were resulting, they must just interpret it. By the 1980s so many Western intellectuals had come to accept that they should repent of the ways they had sought to transform the world from the 1930s through the 1960s. “When I was a child I spoke as a child...” Maturity apparently suggested that they must renounce collective projects and insist only on absolute individual liberties – certainly important enough, but a far different agenda from earlier socialist aspirations.

History, of course, can be a radical praxis, can be written in the service of social and political transformation. By the 1970s and 1980s intellectuals recognized that this sort of redemptive history is often dangerous and misleading. For better or worse, they became curators of the past, trying to defend it against ideological hijacking, restoring its complexity and inconvenient truths. Such an attitude and commitment, I believe, leads naturally to looking back – to seeing a past that is so powerful that it impedes seeing a future we can collectively shape. If redemptive history is sometimes written to hasten the future, curatorial history is written to sanctify the past.

Of course, the history of the Holocaust was often placed in the context of Zionist redemption. What greater legitimation could be cited for the State of Israel. But as exploited by so many of its Jewish readers, it could be used to justify Israeli intransigence on a territorial program. To paraphrase Leon Wieseltier, “Never again” could become “Not one inch.” In any case, my concern was wider than just Holocaust history – it was the issue of whether history writing more generally did not depend in some way on the abjuring of older, admittedly sometimes utopian, dreams. History would testify to the quicksand of hope.

Doubtless this analysis was too one-sided, and it provoked responses. Without abjuring what I wrote, I would concede that there are deep ethical and moral problems that do demand a reflection on the past precisely to take action in the present – and they cluster precisely around the role of repairing the past or providing reparation (for a past that obviously cannot be repaired, but only recompensed). Reparations, apologies, commemoration, museums, all form part of this effort, and I have participated, if only marginally, in those debates. History usually involves a dialogue between past and present. But part of my difficulty with the history of the Holocaust is that the dialogue remains at the level of cliché: no narrative is more laden with reproach about what was not done, few narratives (except perhaps for the history of appeasement in the 1930s) more mined for admonition about what should be done, and then, inevitably, more consigned to the storehouse of unusable “lessons” from history. More on these lessons at the end....

The most difficult personal issue to discuss might be sort of an analogue of survivor’s guilt – but in my case the reluctance to dwell on German crimes because of my ease with being among Germans over the past fifty years. Unlike the generation of Fritz Stern or Peter Gay, roughly fifteen years older than I am, I was not born in Germany and did not have to flee. My family emigrated in the 1890s or at the turn of the twentieth century. No very close relatives, only distant cousins, so far as I knew, were deported and murdered; no village to visit whence parents or grandparents had had their lives interrupted. My “problem” for many years was a nagging sense of unease that I felt precisely too at ease in postwar Germany, and when among an older generation

during the 1950s and 1960s not wanting to know too closely what they knew.

Well-meaning German society (if I can ascribe a collective response to a political and intellectual establishment a decade or so older than I was) rewarded this stance of critical benevolence, this capacity to let the past be over. They have rewarded us non-German historians. Did we not provide the hope of reconciliation and forgiveness, the feeling that all might be overcome, that most importantly we bore no grudges? German Jews – above all those living in Germany, but those, too, who maintained or restored a cultural connection – were a precious moral resource for the Federal Republic, and some of us were feted far more in Germany than at home. Jews of East European descent did not have these memories or rewards tugging at them. They could pull fewer punches; and sometimes they structured their narratives to demonstrate that the German-Jewish response – above all with its fetishization of the German language – had been pathological. (Only Peter Gay, so far as I know, has explicitly confronted this charge in his memoir.)

This particular complex has faded because so much time has passed. The generation of whom one silently had to wonder, “What did they do? What did they know?” has gone. So many “good Germans” have repeatedly sought to teach the lessons and take on a transmitted responsibility, so many other issues have swept German public life, that these difficulties have faded. But they played a role.

“Objective” Challenges

Of broader significance are the objective challenges of doing Holocaust history that ostensibly face every researcher. Not all are equally disabling. Historians in the 1990s, taken up with the linguistic turn, described a supposed black box of history where explanation failed. The topic of Auschwitz, it was claimed, was shrouded in an aura of ineffability. I don’t think that the sacralization of descriptions really advanced our knowledge or even understanding of the limits of knowledge. Even at a more mundane level, I find it difficult to attribute the genocidal impulse to ideology. On the one hand, murderous action must follow from a mental framework. But what is the source of the mentality? Historians end up

not in the hermeneutic circle but the circle of motives, where every mental state has to be ascribed to another mental state. To my mind, trying to attribute the murder of the Jews to ideology usually leads merely to a desperate effort to put a name on some deeper and obscure repugnance and fear. It remains uncertain whether the mental state attributed – for example, eliminationist or even redemptive antisemitism – is meaningfully causal or in effect tautological. Killers killed from diverse impulses: for some perhaps the belief ceaselessly repeated by the regime, that any and all Jews were deadly enemies of Germany, for others the pride in carrying out any commands issued by the state no matter how counter to earlier ethical notions, for others an unwillingness to appear inwardly weak in front of comrades. This leads to the somewhat depressing observation that the contexts of obedience were crucial: the conclusions that the notorious Milgram experiment endeavored to demonstrate.

Issues of explanation – of causality – are different from issues of interpretation. The latter involve questions of significance; they require placing an event in a framework of meaning. As such they are not always to be resolved by historical evidence, because what evidence consists of remains at issue, as does what remains significant. Ultimately they tend to get answered differently by different communities of researchers. Preeminent among these issues was the question of uniqueness. The debate over uniqueness was perhaps necessary given the structure of apologists’ arguments – I devoted a chapter to it in my book *The Unmasterable Past* – but I’m not sure it was terribly fruitful. For every demonstration of uniqueness one could find parallels in other mass murders. Every genocide is unique, but they share the quality of brutality, cruelty, and slaughter. Of course, the Holocaust was unique in some important respects – a state project, ideologically rooted in a long history of prejudices, designed to kill everyone in an ethnic category which was biologically and not functionally defined, obsessed with hunting them down in as wide a region as might be controlled, equipped with state-of-the-art murder machines, sustained over many years and not just an explosion of wrath. Nonetheless, why be so preoccupied about the unique aspects.

Still, uniqueness isn’t what it was. And the Holocaust has lost some of the aura of ineffability that surrounded it – which makes it easier to write

about than it was. The attempted genocides of recent years – in Bosnia and Rwanda – have done a good deal to take the aura of ineffability away from the murder of the Jews. Historians have also provided an alternative aetiology – finding origins of the Holocaust not in centuries of antisemitism but in colonial wars and the casual annihilation of resisting tribesmen. We can't even claim anymore that mechanization was such a distinguishing factor. "Industrial" killing is at best a method. Death by machete claimed many victims very quickly.

Finally, in an age when terrorism is rife and continuous, when so many are recruited so casually for the killing of civilians, the more the better – and often because of issues surrounding the Jewish state – the task of fathoming the mind of killers seems less insuperable. There seem to be so many candidates available for murdering the unarmed, the unexpected, those born into another community. When presented under appropriate auspices, killing seems so logical an instrument of pressing collective claims. Indeed so many *bien pensant* onlookers are prepared to chalk up terrorism, if always with some regret, to the supposed despair of those who take it up, who believe that ultimately it's explainable as a final recourse after decades of political despair. True enough, they are reluctant to extend to Heydrich or Hitler the *de facto* complaisance they extend to Hezbollah. Still, it is less of a challenge to write about Hitler in the age of Hezbollah.

For this reason, too, some of the earlier sources of wonder about the Holocaust seem less remarkable. Historians have often dwelt on the bureaucratic terminology – "final solution," "selection," "treatment," as if this were some profound disguising of the project of mass murder. I think this is wrong – it simply reflected that murder was no big deal. The language wasn't a disguise; it described the objects of violence. The Jews were lice; they would disappear. The Nazis chose gas and cremation, not just because it was more efficient or less demanding for the executioners – after all the machine-gunners of the *Einsatzgruppen* murdered at as rapid a rate as they motored through the Pale – but because they pictured Jews as literally vermin. All those German newsreels of healthy young soldiers delousing the dirty detritus of conquered Poland! How small a step, so the hygienists of the Final Solution must have reasoned, to go from fumigating the lice they bore to the lice they were.

Challenges persist, of course. Historians have produced microhistories, but *histoire totale* remains difficult. How can the scholar do historiographical justice to both sides at once? How does the historian plausibly encompass victims and perpetrators, and do justice to bystanders – those who were too afraid to intervene and felt they could do nothing. Bystander history – that is, the story of the great masses of people in whose midst the prehistory and the history of the Holocaust unrolled – has become easier perhaps in the age of Srebrenica, Rwanda, and Darfur. For in the age of CNN, haven't many of us become bystanders – feeling powerless, averting our eyes, finding that we can do nothing in time. The undeservedly uncelebrated Gordon W. Horwitz, one of the notable recent historians of the Holocaust, is a scholar who has wrestled with these problems in an existential as well as scholarly mode. He followed up his study of the German Austrians around the greater Mauthausen camp with a study of the Lodz ghetto (*Gettostadt*, Harvard University Press, forthcoming 2008) – both as a Nazi utopian project and as a Jewish purgatory. Holocaust history must be placed in the context of its wider worlds – including the National Socialist worlds of decision-making or the German and European world of everyday antisemitism, and the world of the Jewish communities that were fenced in, shut down, and exterminated between 1933 and 1945. This is a formidable task. No doubt to do justice we should explore the vastly different world of Roma and Sinti as well, but that might be a counsel of perfection. I realize that I am unprepared linguistically and psychologically to take on this project. It has been easier to be a bystander as a historian.

Are there uses to this history?

This is the final question that gnaws. Of course, there don't have to be uses: we write history because it happened, and we believe it enhances our humanity to understand our history. Indeed, unless we study it and tell it, in effect we have no history. But the public wants more practical applications; it asks for and endlessly cites the so-called lessons of the Holocaust. But what are the lessons of the Holocaust? That it's bad to kill six million Jews? Yes, of course there are more general lessons – stereotyping and prejudice and race hatred are hateful and evil and lead to violence. And that occasionally there are courageous, even saintly people who will

put their lives at risk to help others in great danger. It is inspiring to learn that lesson, but tragic to have to learn it.

Is the lesson that antisemitism is bad, or that it is continually recurrent? This is a difficult issue, and I don't want to be seen as frivolous in discussing it. After the Holocaust, naturally enough, those who are disgusted by Jews or who feel that they must be enemies or who feel that they are just too assertive or prominent as a group deny they are afflicted with it. Recent efforts to ascribe the Holocaust once again to extreme antisemitism have restored the importance of intentionality to the genocide and not just the momentum of functional bureaucracy. Historians invoking a form of antisemitism have shown us an overall mental structuring of the syndrome. But one can still debate the nature of Eichmann's antisemitism and how great a motivation was any specific hatred of Jews. Of course, the murderers of Jews are antisemites, but we hardly learn why they murder just by labeling them antisemitic any more than we learn why some people murder casually by calling them psychopaths. If, however, we argue that antisemitism implies a whole mental structure or disposition – including a belief in the occult and clannish power of the Jews, their desire to exploit the host society, their facile capacity to mimic but not to create great art, etc. – then such a mentality may describe only a segment of those who are repelled by Jews. Do we gain enough insight by using the same term to describe Adolph Eichmann, Joseph Goebbels, or, say, Mrs. Covington, whose social dancing classes for Westchester County adolescents in the 1940s and 1950s excluded Jews?

The issue has become a critical one given the controversies over Israel and the language of Islamic extremism. I don't think that social scientists gain any political or moral purchase by labeling even the most one-sided and self-righteous critique of Israeli policies antisemitic. When such rhetoric calls for the destruction of Israel and of Jews as a political collectivity, when it sees the world in terms of murky Jewish conspiracies, we have little alternative for the term. But the division of opinion, for example as to whether last year's criticism by Steven Walt and John Mearsheimer of the alleged role of an American Jewish lobby is antisemitic, shows that the term is not always clear. If such a paper appeared in Berlin in 1930 with respect to German Jews, would we not cite it as a contributing

factor to what followed? This does not mean that it is necessarily abusive in an American policy debate. Contextualization is a supreme challenge for historians, but ultimately we can contextualize only in terms of results; and in applying lessons from history the results are not yet in.

One thing that even my reading-at-a-distance has taught is that historians have often oversimplified this prejudice. The supposed nineteenth-century transition from religious to racial antisemitism hardly captures its potency. Unfortunately, along with liberalism and the rule of law, antisemitism has been one of the constitutive ideas of Western and Middle Eastern societies, somewhat like “the dark side” in the Star Wars epic. Not every non-Jew has yielded to it, of course; indeed most have ignored or resisted it. Still, it has provided a recurrent simplification of the sociopolitical world since the Hellenistic era and became woven into the Christian experience. The reason is that Jews are not simply an outside enemy, a persistent adversary at the frontier, but an enemy within: one of the archetypes of human behavior, the betrayer, the subversive, the corrosive agent of modernity that dissolves otherwise supposedly cohesive communities. That most of the Jewish communities were mired in tradition was irrelevant; the agents of modernity and criticism did include a prominent Jewish presence. Much of what we call antisemitism, insofar as it went beyond mere physical repugnance, was the analysis of that fact especially in the nineteenth century.

For me, the problem raised today by the Holocaust – after being compelled as a historian to live so long in its presence, even if reluctantly – is not its uniqueness or its antisemitic content or its causation most generally. It is precisely the fact that its supposed lessons have so little practical impact. The lesson I have drawn is that while in theory genocidal murder should be easy to stop, in many situations nothing will be done to help potential victims because there are always good reasons not to intervene. Look away, then give speeches, wring hands, write history. There is really no choice. The results are never in.

My Twisted Way to Buczacz

Omer Bartov

I grew up in a country where the Holocaust was everywhere. There were many survivors on the street, mostly wearing long sleeves which they did not roll up even in the summer heat. Sometimes they would raise their arms when picking an item from the shelf of their grocery store or pointing at something on the blackboard, and a blue tattooed number would emerge on their forearms. Sometimes they went to the beach and took off their shirts, and we would want both to look at these numbers and to look away, because we were curious and ashamed at the same time.

There were even more who were never in the grocery store, in the classroom, or on the beach, but were always hovering in the background, ghosts that filled whispered conversations and photo albums, whose names would be the cause of tears and a flood of memories in languages unknown to my generation. They were always there, but not even in the manner of normal deceased relatives who could be spoken about with regret and nostalgia and love and longing. Because the manner of their disappearance, the unnatural age at which they were wiped out, the very fact that they were dead and that those who remembered yet hardly spoke about them were alive, were all a cause of shame and discomfort and something much deeper than sorrow; something more akin to the lingering effects of having watched a child run over by a bus, an event you could not prevent but wish you had, holding the child's hand in time, stopping the bus, even jumping under its wheel instead of or with the child so that its death would not be so lonely and so endlessly and eternally sad.

So the Shoah was all around me and never there at the same time. Then came the Eichmann trial, when I was seven and eight years old,

and the details of all the gruesome deaths of the Holocaust were spilled over the radio every evening as families sat down for supper on their balconies, the men in their vests, the women serving salad and cottage cheese and vegetables and subsidized caraway-seed bread and lukewarm water with sweetener, as the heat of the day was seeping out of the walls and the sun dropped like a ball into the Mediterranean through the clunky roofs dotted with hot water boilers and solar panels. The disembodied voices spoke about mass shootings and gassing, packed rail cars and selections, medical experiments and hangings. We children could simply not connect the people and the landscapes of our childhood with the tales of horror crackling through the old radios, seemingly emanating directly from the nether regions of hell.

Mine was a generation that took a long time to be able to study the Holocaust. We were too close to it to be able to think of it as an historical event; we were too far from it to be able to communicate with all those around us who had come from “there.” For the older generation it was part of their biography. For those younger than my generation it had moved sufficiently back into the past to become a legitimate topic of investigation. For many of my generation there was something detestable about the entire thing, the people with the numbers and the solemn commemorations, the empty speeches by politicians and the vacant gazes of broken men and women on the bus, the endless fear that suddenly a bunch of Nazis would show up on our street and kill everyone as they did then, and the never-ending bluster about showing them that we would never again go like sheep to the slaughter. Everything was too fresh: both the memories and the corpses.

Different people chose different ways to deal with this invisible yet overwhelming burden of a past known yet never articulated as anything more than a lesson and a moral. My own path led me to an interest in history. But since I could not conceive of the Holocaust as history, yet wanted to know what was the history within which this event occurred – an event that brought that other history directly into my own life on the coast of the Mediterranean in the then dusty little town of Tel Aviv – I simply studied European history. And since I grew up in a country where wars were a recurrent phenomenon, somewhat like the hot winds that blew every fall and spring from the Sahara that one just had to accept

behind closed shutters in darkened rooms, I began reading about Europe’s wars, which also reached in varied and mysterious ways right to my doorstep and the model aircraft I constructed as a boy.

And so I read about European history, and military history, and wars, and this quite naturally led me to Germany, that model of a nation created through war and a war machine equaled by none, that tiny Prussia that was an army with a state that became the great German Reich whose army marched from the English Channel to the gates of Moscow and Leningrad and Baku. And then I became a soldier myself, and did all the things that soldiers do for close to four years and wondered more than once why soldiers actually do what they do and what it is that makes young, fresh-faced and optimistic lads go out to the field of battle to kill and be killed. And I read some sociology on combat motivation, and some memoirs by generals on strictly professional war-waging, and some accounts about the devastation of individuals and lands and peoples in modern warfare, and I trained, and trained my own soldiers, and glimpsed a little of the toll of war on individuals and nations in 1973. And after my lengthy stint in uniform, I wanted to read and learn much more, and had formed an idea in my mind of what it was that I wanted to find out, and it seemingly had absolutely nothing to do with the Holocaust.

One day, not long after I began my studies at the university, I was called on reserve service and was riding at night along a patrol route on the Syrian-Lebanese border in an army vehicle with an older reserve soldier. It turned out he was a child Holocaust survivor from Romania. A simple, working-class man, he was curious about my studies at the university. I said I was training in history, and that what I wanted to find out was what the German army actually did in Russia beyond fighting so well, and what motivated its troops to fight so hard, and so bitterly, even when it became clear that they had lost the war. Then the man asked me whether I knew anyone who studied the Holocaust. I knew some. Are they going to earn a doctorate? I said that yes, some already had, others presumably would follow. Strange, the man responded. To think that one could make a career out of the Holocaust.

That was said to me on a cold night somewhere in the far north of Israel three decades ago, yet the phrase has stuck with me. No, I didn’t want

to make a career out of the Holocaust, I said to myself. For that matter, neither did I want to make a career out of studying history: so much for the cunning of history. I went on to write a dissertation on precisely the topic I had outlined, almost improvised, when speaking to the elderly reservist from Romania in 1978. The more I read German generals' accounts of the war, the less I believed them. The more I contemplated my own experience in the army and the reflections of friends and comrades about why they fought as fiercely as they did and why they were eventually so deeply disillusioned (and disillusionment was the main motif of the post-1973 mood in Israel), the less I believed the theories proposed by American sociologists about German soldiers' motivations in battle. Writing about belief without ever having believed is as difficult as writing about soldiering and being under fire without ever having experienced it. The theory was good; but it had little to do with reality.

But I also discovered that German soldiers were motivated – as soldiers invariably are – by a mix of positive and negative images. In the positive domain, they saw themselves and their leadership and people as superior and as deserving domination over others; in the negative domain, they saw others as dangerous and treacherous and threatening to pollute their own goodness and superiority and to undermine their noble goal of rule and domination. Those who stood in their way were working hand to hand with the devil. But among those who were working against them, the Jews seemed to feature as worse, more inferior, more insidious, and yet also more dangerous than anyone else. They were ridiculous, weak, degenerate, frightened, passive in their dying and entirely expendable in their absence. But somehow they also carried within them the seeds of one's own destruction, and contact with them, even as one was exterminating them en masse, was fatal.

And so as I was studying the motivation, indoctrination and crimes of the German army in Russia I was also moving slowly toward the heart of the matter, the genocidal core of the Nazi undertaking. Yet this was anything but the core of German history studies in the 1980s. When one studied modern Germany at Oxford, where I wrote my D.Phil. dissertation, or for that matter at Tel Aviv University, where I completed my bachelor's degree, history and the Holocaust were separated from

each other just as "General" History and Jewish History were housed in different departments. And World War II, if it was not left entirely in the hands of military historians, was studied as far apart as imaginable from the genocide of the Jews, just as the SS and the Wehrmacht were presumed to have come from two different planets.

Indeed, even the argument I made in my dissertation and first two monographs, namely that German soldiers were motivated in large part by a version of Nazi ideology that made them not only fight fanatically but also act with murderous brutality against their so-called Judeo-Bolshevik enemies, was not especially welcomed by German or military historians at the time. This has changed since, and such terms as "the barbarization of warfare" and "Hitler's army" have come into common use in the intervening two decades, even if they are not always attributed to their author. But while academe has gradually accepted the notion of the German army's deep ideological and political complicity in Nazi crimes, resistance to the implications of this insight, that is, the fact that individual soldiers were also complicit, and that such complicity also meant involvement in the Holocaust, has remained strong, as was clearly seen in the uproar against the exhibition on the crimes of the Wehrmacht in 1999. Popular military historians of World War II still dislike this notion – see, for instance, the bestselling books by Antony Beevor and Max Hastings. It takes the glory and the "pity" out of the war, it makes for a bad story where one side is too disproportionately evil than the other, and it deprives the end of the much-needed tragedy, since we can no longer pity the defeated enemy but, in fact, rejoice that it is finally smitten. And Germans, to be sure, still find it difficult to accept that not just those very distant relatives who might have served in the SS and Gestapo were involved in crimes, but also possibly their closer kin, until recently considered proud Wehrmacht soldiers who fought bravely for the country even as the Nazis were committing crimes behind their backs, and then fell heroically or survived wretchedly as victims of Hitler's idiotic policies.

In 1979, as I was studying German at the Goethe Institute in Murnau, Bavaria, I befriended my German teacher, Herr Hülsen, who had fought and lost a leg on the Eastern Front as a member of the 18th Panzer Division, a formation I subsequently researched and wrote on. My teacher, of course,

never spoke about war crimes, and the German-language textbook we used, in the few passages it had on the war, carried a photo of bombed out Cologne and a single line about the fact that Jews had been persecuted by the Nazi regime. A couple of years later, as a student at Oxford, I read Martin Broszat's book, *The Hitler State*, which was then seen as a crucial functionalist interpretation of the workings of the Third Reich. Only years later, when I reexamined it, I realized that the entire book contained merely one paragraph on the Holocaust. I also realized that the many books on World War II I had read as a teenager said virtually nothing about the genocide of the Jews, and that such terms as extermination, Holocaust, Shoah and mass murder featured nowhere in their indices (Jews were occasionally mentioned, in a fleeting manner, as was the case, to cite a cinematic classic wrongly thought to have dealt with the Shoah, also in Alain Resnais' *Night and Fog*).

Nowadays I am sometimes introduced to audiences as someone who wrote the first book on the involvement of the Wehrmacht in the Holocaust. I wish that were true. My first two books were indeed about German army crimes; but the Holocaust featured only marginally there. I was a product of my *Zeitgeist*, even if my own experience and interests did lead me to see the German military in a more critical manner than most scholars, and to delve lower to the actual combat troops unlike my predecessors who remained interested in the higher echelons' complicity with the regime. And even after writing these two books I could not quite bring myself to study the Holocaust, to "make a career" out of it. Instead, I returned to the context of the event, not always admitting to myself the context of which event I was seeking. Hence I wrote two more books, which sought to explicate the links between the two world wars, the first two industrial and total armed conflicts in history, the manner in which they were represented at the time and subsequently, and the evolution of an ideology and a practice of mass extermination of entire populations. I could not help but see the similarities between the discourse that preceded and evolved during World War I on "human material" and "battles of annihilation," the dehumanization of peoples and the landscapes of total devastation created by the might of mechanized destruction, and the evolution of the concept of extermination camps, militarily organized and

bureaucratically rationalized, landscapes of hell conjured out of the notion of creating a better world cleansed of all that had kept it from the ideals sought by those makers of death.

Only while writing these essays and books did I gradually return to the question that had intrigued me from the very beginning; but now I approached it from a rather different perspective. What had initially triggered this renewed quest was my impression that an assumption was being made, especially but not exclusively among German scholars and students of Nazism and the Holocaust, that the perpetrators had so dehumanized their victims that they simply had no human relations with them, and therefore that their motivation in committing murder was entirely divorced from the subjects of their violence. In that sense, anger, rage, hatred, indeed, anything that smacked of ideological motivation or a personal urge to kill those they were killing, was missing. This of course neatly combined with the German criminal code as it was applied during the postwar trials of former Nazis in the Federal Republic of Germany, according to which only base motives could bring an indictment for murder. Base motives meant that the murderer was either driven by individual sadistic or sexual desires or by an ideology such as antisemitism. Not surprisingly, all defendants denied any personal malice or pleasure, or any antisemitic motivation. Moreover, a view was formed in Germany that the killers were either abnormal – that is, moved by base motives – or mere accomplices – that is, men who killed because of the circumstances they were in without any individual desire to commit a crime. The fact that, as I believed, many of the killers were quite normal, and within the context of that normality really wanted to kill the people they were killing and were glad to be doing so (even if at times they were disgusted by the physical aspects of it), was entirely shoved aside.

In trying to figure out how to research this question of perpetrator motivation, it occurred to me that the best way to do so would be to observe how matters evolved at a single site where interaction between killers and victims was more prolonged and where one could collect evidence about the people involved and how they saw each other. Here a personal element suddenly entered my thinking. If I were to choose a town in which the Nazis eventually wiped out the population, why not choose

a town about which I knew very little but should have known much more, namely my mother's hometown of Buczacz in Eastern Galicia, then in eastern Poland, now in western Ukraine?

This decision had various consequences. One result was that I not only learnt about the intimacy of murder in towns such as Buczacz, but also discovered the complex interaction between the Jewish victims, their gentile neighbors (Poles and Ukrainians in the case of Eastern Galicia), and the Germans, as well as the links between the violence during the German occupation and that during the Soviet occupations that preceded and followed it. I uncovered a region in which violence and brutality were so commonplace and ubiquitous that they became part of the daily routine at least in 1941–44. I also discovered that everyone was involved in the violence and that no one could claim the status of bystander; and that in many cases the roles of victim and perpetrator were reversed more than once; that rescuers at one point were denouncers at another; and that memories and testimonies about these events were a remarkably rich source of information almost entirely untapped by historians. I also found that this history had more or less vanished from the local scene in which these events occurred and had been given short shrift by most historians, and that the few historians who had written on it employed a highly one-sided perspective and therefore produced what one must call limited, if not skewed, accounts.

This in turn led me to understand that if one wishes to reconstruct the history of the Holocaust in these regions, where vast numbers of people were butchered in public open-air mass executions watched by the rest of the inhabitants – large numbers of whom benefitted materially from the genocide – one cannot begin at the moment of the killing but must go back in time in order to understand the complex web of interethnic and interreligious relations in these borderland regions of Europe. Much of the Holocaust, as well as other cases of mass violence such as ethnic cleansing, deportations, political murder and so forth, happened in the vast borderland of Europe stretching from the Baltic to the Balkans, in multiethnic villages, towns and cities, which have since been cleansed more or less completely of that diversity of ethnicity and religion. This is a story that has hardly ever been told. If it is to be told, it cannot be

reconstructed only from the highly biased German documentation of these events, or on the basis of accounts by any single ethnic group that lived there at the time. Rather, it can only approximate some historical objectivity by combining all these subjective points of view into a single narrative. And, because of the nature of the event, much of this has to be done on the basis of testimonies, which tell us about occurrences we would otherwise never know had occurred, and which provide us with a personal perspective entirely missing from the official documentation.

Moreover, we must know more about the people we write about before they began killing and dying; we must reconstruct their shared lives and try to understand what it was that triggered the bloodshed. That is, we need to look for motivation as part of the historical context, in the culture, norms, traditions and beliefs, as well as ideologies, of the individuals involved. To be sure, the Holocaust, even in such remote towns as Buczacz, is also a German story. The Germans came, saw, and murdered. But the locals did much of the killing, as well as much of the identifying, denouncing, and rescuing. And this too is part of the story.

This does not mean that the time for grand narratives of the Holocaust is over. But it does mean, to my mind, that it is time for us to provide space for the realities of genocide as they played themselves out on the ground in the areas in which most Jews lived and were killed. And it is time that we do that also through their own voices and not only through the eyes of the perpetrators. The details are terrifying, and the historian, when reading hundreds of testimonies of despair and loss, of betrayal and murder, but also of rescue and altruism, is often so shaken by the nature of the material that he or she may find it impossible to continue, or to make any sense of the event, let alone to write any coherent account. Yet I believe that we do not have the right to ignore this raw material of the event, which was written and told by men and women who hoped beyond hope that their story and the story of their community would one day be told and not forever be erased and forgotten. This is the task I have set myself in writing the story of the life and death of Buczacz.

Further reading

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- Roni Stauber, *The Holocaust in Israeli Public Debate in the 1950s: Ideology and Memory* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2007).
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Some Remarks on the Holocaust by a Marginal Historian Shimon Redlich

In the spring of 2008, following my remarks critical of President Peres' speech at the Treblinka Memorial, a colleague, a Professor of History at Haifa University, wrote in the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz*: “Until recently I thought that Prof. Shimon Redlich had been content with his dubious defense of the Ukrainians. Surprisingly, he is spreading now his protective wings over the Poles as well.”

What I had stated in respect to Peres' speech was that he, and, implicitly, Jews in general, weren't doing any favor for the Poles by not blaming them for perpetrating the Holocaust. The quite personal, emotional and sarcastic note of my Haifa colleague succinctly portrayed prevailing Israeli and Jewish attitudes in respect to Polish and Ukrainian responsibilities for the Holocaust. What is surprising and unnerving at the same time is that the blame of the principal initiators and perpetrators, the Germans, has been somewhat blurred in time in the Israeli/Jewish perception, and that accusatory feelings are being directed increasingly toward evil deeds of close neighbors, particularly Poles and Ukrainians. What I've been attempting for years was not to whitewash Polish and Ukrainian antisemitic behavior and acts of violence and terror against Jews during and after the Holocaust. My only aim has been to correct the perspective.

In spite of and perhaps because of being a Holocaust survivor, I didn't conduct research on Holocaust-related issues for years. Most of my work on the Second World War dealt with Jews in the non-occupied parts of the Soviet Union. It was only in the 1980s that I started to consider my personal past within the wider historical context. A mental, emotional and

physical process of returning to the past lasted for more than a decade. Its final result was my book *Together and Apart in Brzezany: Poles, Jews and Ukrainians, 1919–1945*, a quite unusual combination of autobiography within a wider historical context.

My Brzezany project has been based on two distinct concepts from its very start. The Holocaust wouldn't be the sole and dominant theme in my research and writing. It would be preceded by a description of the relatively good interwar years. I believe that in order to maintain some sort of balance between evil and good, normal and abnormal, one should not concentrate exclusively on hatred, destruction and trauma. Moreover, my book wouldn't focus exclusively upon the story of the Jews. It would attempt to deal equally with the fates of Poles and Ukrainians in Brzezany. By intensively using oral history, that is, numerous interviews with Poles, Jews and Ukrainians who had once lived in Brzezany, as well as more conventional sources, I tried to present not only facts and events. It was highly significant for me to point out the manner in which each group remembered the past. I tried, as much as I could, not only to sense and understand my fellow Jews, but to put on a Polish and a Ukrainian hat as well. It hasn't been easy, at times, but it was a stimulating and rewarding experience.

My approach to Polish-Jewish-Ukrainian relations has been clearly expressed in the title of my Brzezany book. Poles, Jews and Ukrainians lived in the pre-World War II Polish *Kresy*, or Eastern Galicia, together, since they were part of a shared geopolitical and economic entity. They lived within a common official culture, with its images and symbols, predominantly Polish. The local educated elites of all three ethnic and religious groups attended the local high school, the Brzezany Gymnasium. At the same time, however, they also lived apart, in the sense of religion, ethnic identity and national identification. Under relatively normal conditions their togetherness was more pronounced. At times of growing tensions, war and foreign occupation, apartness, distance and outright hostility among the three ethnic groups became more pronounced.

Unequal social and cultural distances among Poles, Jews and Ukrainians during peacetime affected their behavior in extreme situations. Jews in Eastern Galicia were closer to Poles than to Ukrainians. Minorities

tend, usually, to identify with the ruling majority, rather than with other minorities, especially with those who are lower on the economic, social and cultural ladder. Daily contacts of Jews with Gentiles, their neighbors in Galician cities and towns, where the majority consisted of Poles and Jews, were more intense than in the villages, where Ukrainians prevailed and the Jewish population was minimal. This pre-World War II background explains why more Poles than Ukrainians tended to save Jews during the Holocaust. Jews usually didn't have Ukrainian friends. A Ukrainian interviewee confided in me: "I was thinking why Ukrainian people didn't save more Jews. Jews didn't fraternize with Ukrainians before the war, so when bad times set in there was nobody to turn to."

Efforts should be made to mellow and possibly eliminate generalizations in the mutual perceptions and images, such as, in the Jewish and Israeli cases, "Poles are antisemites" or "Ukrainians are murderers"; or in the Polish and Ukrainian cases, "Jews were exploiters" and "Jews were Bolsheviks." There is also a need for more detailed local studies of the relations and behavior of various ethnic groups in times of conflict and violence. For example, in northeast Poland some Poles tended to terrorize and murder Jews, as in the case of Jedwabne. In Eastern Galicia, anti-Jewish pogroms were conducted by Ukrainians, never by Poles. There is always a need to examine not only the narrow bilateral relations between non-Jewish populations and Jews. One should take into account the general prevailing situations and conditions. The onset of the two major totalitarian regimes, Stalin's Russia and Hitler's Germany, resulted in a general brutalization of everyday life. These new circumstances brought out the worst in human behavior. Thus, in post-World War II Poland there was general violence for some time, as a result of instability and the enforcement of the new pro-Soviet Communist regime. These were also times of robbery and murder.

Quite often in research, but even more so in the media and in public debates, stereotyped images and attitudes prevail. Memories of the past are usually separate. Each side tends to remember its own suffering and victimization. One victim can hardly accept and understand other victims. There is hardly any compassion among them. This is particularly true of the old generations, those who lived through hardships, tragedies and loss. Younger generations on all sides are more open to mutual understanding.

My belief is that in spite of past conflicts and victimization it is possible to build bridges of understanding and even of compassion among groups who for years have considered themselves enemies.

As for research of the past and historical writing, it is common knowledge that each nation has been writing its own history, underscoring its own suffering and heroism and discounting those of the others. It is of paramount importance, in my opinion, that historians and others should attempt to cross over mental and psychological barriers. This could be done by personal and group encounters, by international conferences, by mutual visits of scholars and educators.

A paramount role is to be played by educational processes and by actual encounters among the second, third and future generations of the various ethnic groups. Textbooks as well as other modern and technology-oriented means of instruction should be created and used. One such example is the School of Holocaust Studies at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, which regularly conducts seminars and workshops for non-Jewish participants. The question in this particular case is whether the instruction and discussion of related issues is mostly Jewish-oriented and whether attempts are also being made to examine non-Jewish realities and approaches as well.

In my opinion, at least until recently there was not sufficient attention paid to the “bright” sides of the Holocaust, that is, humane behavior toward Jews in times of danger and murder. Of course, the case of Oskar Schindler, based on Steven Spielberg’s popular film, could serve as an example. But there were others as well, like the late Irena Sendlerowa, whose case has been, luckily, promoted lately, mainly in Poland. The case of Irena Sendlerowa is hardly known in contemporary Israel. Much should be done to promote her story in Israeli schools and media.

Then there is the case of another savior of Jews during the Holocaust, namely, the late Metropolitan Andrei Sheptytsky, head of the Uniate Church in Eastern Galicia. For years, Yad Vashem has been discussing requests and appeals by Jews saved by Sheptytsky. Still, Sheptytsky’s connections with the Germans and other accusations have prevented a positive decision. My contention for years has been that Sheptytsky’s words and deeds were not perceived and understood correctly within the historical circumstances of the Second World War and the Holocaust.

Israelis/Jews, and perhaps Poles as well, are incapable of accepting Ukrainian suffering and victimhood. Metropolitan Sheptytsky was actually torn between his hopes for Ukrainian statehood and independence and his humane attitudes toward his fellow men, whether Ukrainian, Polish or Jewish. The question of granting Sheptytsky the title of Righteous Gentile is still pending.

Besides publishing my book on Brzezany in Hebrew, Polish and Ukrainian, in order to bring its message to all three relevant societies, I’ve attempted, with the help of some Jews, Poles and Ukrainians, to bridge the gap in the narrow local sense of that town, Berezhany, in western Ukraine. A conference on “Berezhany in the Memory of Poles, Jews and Ukrainians” took place there on June 12, 2007, the 64th anniversary of the liquidation of the Brzezany Ghetto. The conference was preceded by a public march in the footsteps of the last Brzezany Jews to the killing site at the local Jewish cemetery. Jews, Ukrainians and Poles marched together to commemorate the last Brzezany victims of the Holocaust. Professor Omer Bartov, in his book *Erased: Vanishing Traces of Jewish Galicia in Present-Day Ukraine*, has rightfully shown how the memory of the Jews of Eastern Galicia had been nearly erased in the places where they lived for centuries. My modest attempt in Berezhany, and the public interest it evoked there, indicate that it is perhaps possible to start discussing a common past.

In her recently published study on *Biography and Memory*, the Polish sociologist Dr. Kaja Kaźmierska of Lodz University remarked that the path I’ve taken in the reworking of my past, in both a biographical and professional sense, is rather unusual. She pointed out my marginality in respect to prevailing Israeli/Jewish attitudes and perceptions. At the same time, however, this very marginality stimulates my position as an intermediary among different and conflicting groups and societies. I do believe that such intermediary work is significant and important for a better future.

The Challenge of Studying the Shoah as Jewish History: Some Personal Reflections

Dan Michman

I was born in June 1947 in Amsterdam, the Netherlands – that is, a little more than two years after the end of World War II – to two Dutch Jewish Holocaust survivors. Though my parents, who had married in September 1940, three months after the German invasion and occupation of the Netherlands, had survived the Holocaust, the majority of our relatives had been murdered. My older brother, Awraham, born in the summer of 1941, had been hidden for three years by a gentile family, and returned home after the liberation with very ambivalent feelings toward my parents, who – in his eyes as a child – had “abandoned” him. My parents also took in two of my cousins, a boy and his sister (Bram and Tsipora), children of my father’s sister (Leni) who had been murdered together with her husband. And then there was Nickie, a boy of almost exactly the same age as my brother, who had been given to my parents by his ill mother when they were deported together from Amsterdam to the Westerbork transit concentration camp (*Judendurchgangslager*) in 1943; since then he had been taken care of by my parents until the liberation, and after the war he was put by the Dutch authorities in an orphanage close to our home, visiting and staying with us almost every day. In 1957 the family moved to Israel, after my father, who had finished his doctoral thesis in Dutch Jewish history, had been asked by Prof. Benzion Dinur, a leading historian who chaired Yad Vashem during its first years, to serve as Director General of Yad Vashem (1957–60).¹ Thus, I definitely grew up in an environment in which the impact and memory of the Shoah on daily life was all around.

¹ On the story of my parents, see: Fré Melkman-de Paauw, *Hoe het verder gaat weet niemand. Na oorlogse brieven unopit Amsterdam naar Palestina* (Amsterdam: Contact, 2002).

Yet I cannot say that this context was depressing. My parents had taken up life again, and their move to Israel was part of their will to rebuild their lives and shape a hopeful future – for themselves and for fellow Jews as well. While my mother invested her energy in navigating the family through the daily turbulence of life, my father, after leaving Yad Vashem in 1960 and being appointed director of the cultural department of the Ministry of Education and Culture, initiated a series of institutions to promote the cultural life of the young state: “Art for the People,” the Instruction Center for Public Libraries, the Institute for the Translation of Hebrew Literature, and many more. Next to that he continued to deal with Holocaust research, putting an emphasis on the Holocaust in the Netherlands. The question that bothered him personally and intellectually most was this: how come such a high percentage of Dutch Jewry – 75% (about 104,000 souls) – had been murdered, much more than that of Belgium or France, not to speak of Denmark. In spite of maintaining very good relations with many Dutch gentiles – historians and laymen alike – he felt that Dutch society had been responsible at least in part for this result, meaning that it had betrayed its Jewish fellow citizens; and this in a country where Jews had been granted legal emancipation already in September 1796, and in which there had been no pogroms or blood libels, no violent antisemitism. I would say that both my parents, but especially my father, did not feel personal resentment towards the Dutch or even the Germans; but they did feel intellectual pain and they felt hurt as conscious Jews. Historical research on the Holocaust proper and into the developments that had led to it was for him a “must,” in the same way the historian Hans Günther Adler wrote in 1974 about his own effort to describe and analyze the Theresienstadt ghetto in which he had been incarcerated: “[*es war*] *aus der Not entstanden... , Selbsterlebtes in Abstraktion von meinem eigenen Schicksal und in größere Zusammenhänge eingeordnet so zu gestalten, daß ich selbst weiterleben konnte*” (it stemmed from the dire need to situate what I had gone through in an abstraction of my own fate and in broader contexts in such a way that I would be able to continue living).²

² Hans Günther Adler, *Der Verwaltete Mensch. Studien zur Deportation der Juden aus Deutschland* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1974), “Vorwort.”

Did the background of my parental home drive me to Holocaust studies? I would not say so, definitely not in a direct way. My early interest was in ancient Israel: the language and history of biblical times. Already in high school I participated in archeological excavations, and when I started my higher education at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem my focus was on Hebrew linguistics and ancient Jewish history. In my graduate studies I made the shift to modern Jewish history, but was still interested in Dutch Jewry of the 19th and the beginning of 20th centuries. However, my doctoral thesis, dealing with the German Jewish refugees in the Netherlands of the 1930s, brought me in touch with the fringes of the Shoah. This became the basis for Bar-Ilan University to invite me in 1976 to teach the topic of the Holocaust. Although a first academic course on the Holocaust had been taught at the Hebrew University in 1958–59 (by Shaul Esh), Bar-Ilan University was the first university in the world to establish a chair in Holocaust studies in 1959. The incumbent of that chair, Professor Meir (Marc) Dworzecki, had died in 1974, and the university was looking for a young scholar to occupy the vacant position and invest it with an academic approach fitting in with the new methodologies emerging in the historical discipline. Being the proper applicant in the eyes of the university, I was thus drawn into Holocaust studies, in spite of the fact that I had not really followed an academic path leading into this field. To this should be added that Holocaust studies at Bar-Ilan University were (and are) part of the Department of Jewish History, which – as at all Israeli universities and following the pattern set by the Hebrew University – is a department separate from the so-called Department of General History. This department introduced a unique obligatory requirement for all its students: to attend the introductory course on the Holocaust. As such, teaching of this topic demanded an emphasis on the *Jewish* aspects of the Holocaust, that is, Jewish life and behavior during the Holocaust and the broader contexts of modern Jewish history.

The 1970s were a boom period for universities in Israel, and there was a surge of interest in the Shoah both in Israel (especially after the Yom Kippur War of 1973) and abroad (in the U.S. with the shift from the melting pot ethos to the multicultural one, and in Western Europe after the 1968 student revolts); the number of interested students grew

enormously, and the younger generation started to question the former generation's past behavior, especially vis-à-vis Nazism. This coincided with the opening of many archives in Europe thirty years after the event, and with the rise of the social sciences in scholarly discourse.³ Thus, entering this field as a scholar and university professor in these days was challenging: What new questions could be asked? What in the Holocaust was relevant for contemporary audiences? How to cope with the sensitive controversies that had been raging through the Jewish postwar world on the one hand, and, on the other hand, with the sometimes too-distanced approaches to perpetrator and bystander history, which had helped to shield the collective memories of postwar societies from the enormity of it, blocking it from consciousness.

In the postwar period some scholars and artists have argued, often under the impact of survivors, that a "real" understanding of the Holocaust is impossible.⁴ This stance – Yehiel Dinur alias K. Tzetnik coined the term "a different planet" for Auschwitz (implying the Holocaust in general) – did to a certain extent hamper research for a while, at least in certain directions. However, this approach has been declining and even fading away since the 1970s, not least because survivors themselves came forward in growing numbers and told their stories both orally and in print, inviting broader audiences to share their experience. Moreover, survivors themselves wanted to better understand what happened, and started to attend scholarly study days, conferences, academic courses, etc. Among

my most fervent students in classes on the Holocaust in the beginning of the 1980s were Holocaust survivors, who could attend university classes due to the Brookdale Academic Studies for Retired People program, which was introduced at my university at that time. Similarly, in the United States a group of Holocaust survivors established the Holocaust Educational Foundation, which set as its goal to promote the teaching of Holocaust studies at American universities and colleges.

Not that Holocaust research had waited until this moment. Important research started already during the Holocaust itself (the most well-known enterprise being the *Oyneg shabbes* archive, headed and led by historian Emmanuel Ringelblum in the Warsaw ghetto, which not only collected documentation but also carried out research), and burst out among survivors from the very first moments after liberation. Historian Philip Friedman initiated such research already in August 1944 in liberated Lwów, and he was joined by many others in the following period. In other places throughout and outside Europe too (Budapest, Amsterdam, Paris, New York, Milan, Berlin, Buenos Aires) people started to study and document, and Holocaust study centers were established.⁵ This research, carried out by survivors, was part of the process of "working-through," of coming to terms with the past – as was so well explained in the above quote from Hans Günther Adler. However, in spite of this so important effort done by survivors in the immediate postwar period, it dwindled in the 1950s, when many emigrated to other places and invested most of their efforts in rebuilding their lives. Thus, illumination of the Jewish angle of the Holocaust lost most of its impetus during the 1950s. With the (re)establishment of Yad Vashem in 1953, an effort was made in Israel to take up this thread, but it took off only slowly and with many difficulties.⁶

3 On these issues, see: Dan Michman, *Holocaust Historiography: A Jewish Perspective. Conceptualizations, Terminology, Approaches and Fundamental Issues* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2003); Boaz Cohen, "Holocaust Research in Israel, 1945–1980: Trends, Characteristics, Developments," Ph.D. dissertation (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University, 2004), 293–346 (Hebrew).

4 In fact, already during the Holocaust itself some expressed such views. Upon receiving information on the systematic mass murder of his fellow Jews in August 1943, the Polish-Jewish poet Yitzhak Katzenelson, then incarcerated in the Vittel camp in France, wrote that he would "spit in the face" of anybody who would (in the future) try to explain what had happened in logical historical terms; see: his "Pinkas Vittel," in: idem, *Ktavim Acharonim 5700–5704* [Last Writings 1940–1944] (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1969), 461 (Hebrew).

5 On all these efforts, see: Dan Michman and David Bankier, eds., *Holocaust Historiography in Context: The Emergence of Approaches and Research Centers* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, forthcoming).

6 Boaz Cohen, "Holocaust Research in Israel," in: Arielle Rein and Georges Bensoussan, eds., *L'historiographie israélienne de la Shoah, 1942–2007* (special issue, *Revue d'histoire de la Shoah* 188, Janvier/Juin 2008).

Another path of Holocaust research, focusing on the perpetrators, developed parallel to this research from 1945 on. It based itself almost entirely on German documentation and dealt almost exclusively with the perpetrators. It emerged from the enormous amount of German documentation available almost immediately after the downfall of Nazi Germany, and from the trials of war criminals which took place in the ensuing years, first and foremost the major war criminal trials at Nuremberg (1945–46). The judicial path needed organized documentation – so a host of people were appointed to make a first classification and description of the most important documents found in Nazi Germany’s institutions; and it needed historians to sort, select and tell the narratives of what had happened. The narratives told in the trials and in the first comprehensive studies of the Holocaust (by Léon Poliakov, Gerald Reitlinger and Raul Hilberg in the 1950s) were the result of this material. In West Germany – after its establishment in 1949 and as part of its own *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (coming to terms with the past), partially imposed by the Western allies – important research on Nazism, the Third Reich and the Holocaust developed; the Institut für Zeitgeschichte (Institute for Contemporary History), established in 1952 in Munich, was an important center of this research endeavor. All this research had the advantage of being financially supported by state institutions and backed by a solid tradition of German academic historical studies. It grew immensely from the 1950s on, and became perceived as *the* main path of Holocaust research. It thus entirely overshadowed the products and achievements of early Jewish research. And so the focus on “perpetrator history,” which is undoubtedly central to an understanding of the whole event itself, not only became dominant but also actually excluded the “Jewish” side of the story.⁷

As I said, when I entered the field of Holocaust studies at the end of the 1970s, interest in the topic was growing immensely, and academic opportunities opened. I was part of a somewhat larger group of second-

generation Holocaust scholars in Israel; some were born in Israel, others had emigrated to Israel from a variety of countries. This blend of people preserved something precious which had characterized the first generation too: a broad knowledge of European languages. This knowledge is a basic condition for the ability to write multifaceted studies on the Holocaust in general, and on Jewish communities in particular, because next to understanding German policies (through German documentation and research) one has to understand the local context (through the local non-Jewish society or societies, their documentation and the post-war research), not to speak of the varieties of Jewish life (which includes the Jewish languages). So what could we contribute? Many of us wrote studies on Jewish institutions, daily life, rescue, resistance, etc., in a broad variety of countries in Europe, and published them in the local languages, in this way participating in the discourse on World War II and the Holocaust in those countries, and – through this – drawing attention to Jewish source material in general and to the Jewish aspect of the local picture – and the uniqueness of the Jewish fate – in particular.

In this period, perpetrator studies were at the peak of the intentionalist/functionalist controversy (mostly fought in Germany, but also having participants outside it). The functionalist approach gained the upper hand and became dominant. Indeed, functionalism contributed immensely to a better and deeper understanding of the functioning of the Third Reich, by getting beyond ideology and the top echelon of Third Reich functionaries. From the point of view of research on Jewish aspects of the Holocaust, it was important to have these findings integrated into the picture – because many of the studies that dealt with internal Jewish life had actually incorporated intentionalist assumptions and assessed Jewish behavior accordingly. This was true for the understanding of the sensitive issue of the Jewish Councils (*Judenräte*) and their policies vis-à-vis the authorities, as well as such issues as the reactions and policies of German Jews during the first years of the Nazi regime, and rescue activities during the entire period. I think that in the past twenty-five years this integrative effort has yielded considerable achievements, which indeed allow a much better understanding and bring us beyond the black-and-white judgements that dominated for a long time. Yet much of the fruit

⁷ For a penetrating examination of this attitude in West German historiography, see: Nicolas Berg, *Der Holocaust und die westdeutschen Historiker. Erforschung und Erinnerung* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2003).

of these achievements has yet to find its way into more popular literature, including schoolbooks.

Towards the end of the 1980s a younger generation of German scholars felt that the intentionalism/functionalism debate had led the quest for understanding the Third Reich into a deadlock. They started to look at society at large, that is, examining social and professional groups outside the top leaders and the bureaucracy, and broadening the chronological spectrum through *long durée* biographies (which included pre-1933 education and activities and post-1945 careers). Their question was, how did German society allow the murderous action to evolve at all, and how did it participate, because it had become clear that the scope of the murder campaign and its success within a very short time could not have been achieved simply by normal top-down and even highly efficient bureaucratic means. The new impetus was encouraged by the opening of vast amounts of new documentary material resulting from the downfall of the communist bloc. But many of these researchers, now interested in the personal and social “face” of the perpetrators and not merely in their functioning, also became more interested in the possible contribution of Jewish sources and their perspective. Some studied Hebrew and Yiddish, and many more accessed Jewish sources with the help of translators. Although still interested mainly in the history of perpetration, perpetrator history and Jewish history came closer. This rapprochement was partially also the result of intensified academic contacts established through international conferences and fellowships; the Yad Vashem International Institute for Holocaust Research, established in 1992, played an important role in that. A major result of this research development – the inclusion of Jewish perspectives in perpetrator history – is, for instance, the mega-project of sixteen volumes of documentation on the Holocaust prepared and published by the German Federal Archive, the Munich Institute for Contemporary History and Freiburg University.⁸

8 Götz Aly, Wolf Gruner, Susanne Heim, Ulrich Herbert, Hans-Dieter Kreikamp, Horst Möller, Dieter Pohl and Hartmut Weber, Hrsg., *Die Verfolgung und Ermordung der europäischen Juden durch das nationalsozialistische Deutschland 1933–1945*,

Another path, for which I have made a plea,⁹ is to look upon Jewish behavior and life during the Holocaust not just from the angle of “reaction” to perpetration in generalizing about “the Jews,” but from the angle of modern Jewish history, which points to the varieties of Jewish society and identity, and which consequently explains the many different reactions of Jews throughout Nazi-affected Europe and North Africa. This approach also contributes to an understanding of the course of Jewish history in general: the Holocaust was an ultimate moment of crisis, and thus a laboratory for examination of long-term developments such as emancipation, integration, religious beliefs, community structures, etc. This line still has a long way to go; David Engel of New York University has recently shown that many historians of modern Jewish history shy away from dealing with the Holocaust, as they (wrongly) feel that the Holocaust was a historical detour and that it therefore should be “expelled” from the spectrum when dealing with pre-Holocaust Jewish history.¹⁰

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So where are we today? Much has still to be done, both by historians of Jewish history and by those who deal with perpetrator or national or local history, but there have been many achievements. Two historians of the first generation have contributed comprehensive histories combining and

Herausgegeben im Auftrag des Bundesarchivs, des Instituts für Zeitgeschichte und des Lehrstuhls für Neuere und Neueste Geschichte an der Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg (München: R. Oldenbourg Verlag). Hitherto only volume 1, prepared by Wolf Gruner and encompassing the years 1933–37, has been published (2008).

9 Michman, *Holocaust Historiography*, 59–88.

10 David Engel, *On Studying Jewish History in Light of the Holocaust*, Occasional Papers, (Washington, D.C.: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum/Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies, 2003). I have also shown that many historians who tried to write a comprehensive view of modern Jewish history have had difficulties in integrating the Holocaust into their narratives; see: “La Shoah dans la trame générale d’histoire d’Israël à l’époque contemporaine: approches et dilemmes des principaux historiens,” in: Arielle Rein and Georges Bensoussan, eds., *L’historiographie israélienne de la Shoah, 1942–2007* (special issue, *Revue d’histoire de la Shoah* 188, Janvier/Juin 2008), 117–136.

incorporating many findings in the different spheres of research: Leni Yahil and Saul Friedlander.¹¹ The multifaceted picture that emerges from their narratives equips the reader with historical sensitivity. For instance, not only is perpetration explained, but its results and effects are interwoven with it, thus making them better understood from a human point of view. Just recently, two young Dutch historians finished a comparative analysis of the Holocaust in the Netherlands, Belgium and France, for the first time integrating the Jews as full protagonists in an explanatory model of the enormous differences in the death toll of those countries.¹² Their results are much more convincing than any preceding study.

As the Holocaust has become accepted as a major crisis of European history and of Western civilization, more and more scholars are drawn to the task of historically understanding the social, political, and mental developments that led to it, and its results. They are all trying to add something to what can be achieved by human “understanding” of a human deed, and the Holocaust was a deed of Man. But such research should not duplicate itself; nor should it restrict itself to a certain aspect of the story. Integration of the Jewish aspect is necessary, and I see it as one of my tasks in research to promote this.

11 Leni Yahil, *The Holocaust. The Fate of European Jewry 1932–1945* (New York: Macmillan, 1990) – an updated German edition was published in 1998; Saul Friedlander, *Nazi Germany and the Jews, 1933–1939: The Years of Persecution* (London: Widenfeld and Nicolson, 1997); idem, *Nazi Germany and the Jews, 1939–1945: The Years of Extermination* (New York: Harper Collins, 2007).

12 Pim Griffioen and Ron Zeller, “Vergelijking van Jodenvervolging in Frankrijk, België en Nederland, 1940–1945: Overeenkomsten, verschillen, oorzaken,” Ph.d. thesis, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam 2008.

Reflections on the Holocaust from a Psychiatric Perspective

Maria Orwid, Krzysztof Szwejca

The Holocaust is a huge topic, and it can be discussed from many different perspectives. Milchman and Rosenberg, two American philosophers, believe that the uniqueness of the Holocaust does not depend on the scale or the thoroughness of the slaughter, nor on its industrial methods, but on its constituting a “transformational event.”¹ It called into question the 18th-century Enlightenment project of the triumph of reason and rationality, an optimistic construct which assumed that the history of humanity is a history of progress, with more and more new scientific achievements, the wresting of nature’s secrets, the advance of societies and human relations. After the Holocaust we know that “progress” is not a given and is not eternal; it is only a possibility, like the possibility of unimaginable genocide.

Philosophers and cultural anthropologists look at the Holocaust not only as a historical event later called a crime of genocide, but as an ontological tragedy. The placing of an entire people outside the bounds of all human rights, all the norms of history and civilization, had and continues to have enormous philosophical, ethical and theological connotations. It opens the question of the existence or nonexistence of God, or of His silence during that period. In short, it produces a new consciousness and a completely new understanding of the world and human existence. Interestingly, although more than sixty years have passed since the end of

1 Alan Milchman and Alan Rosenberg, *Eksperymenty w myśleniu o Holokauście: Auschwitz, nowoczesność i filozofia* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar, 2003).

that “phenomenon,” the subject has not faded. On the contrary, interest in it is growing, and in ever broader circles in the humanities, philosophy, and the public arena.

Two questions remain relevant. The first is very simple: How could *it* have happened? The second: How can one live after *it*? There is no answer, and since *it* cannot be explained, nothing can be explained and understood. These questions inform modernity for us in a fundamental way. From them sprang existentialism and postmodernism, existential doubt, the suspension of axioms, and the end of the “great ideas.” The continuing relevance of these two questions testifies to the transforming power of the event behind them.

The question is still open as to whether the Holocaust is only a break, a rift in a basically good Western civilization (*Zivilisationsbruch*). One can thus analyze the political, historical, sociological or psychological factors that supported the growth of fascism, Nazism or Stalinism, and can optimistically surmise that in time everything returned to normality and that civilization demonstrated its vitality. Perhaps, though, it is as the postmodern philosophers and sociologists declare, that what we saw was not the breakdown of civilization but rather the fulfillment of something inherent in contemporary civilization. Perhaps in this marvelous Western culture there is such a particle, such a potential, such an attitude, which degrades, objectifies and ultimately exterminates the Other? The Holocaust would thus not be an accident, a singular extreme event, but something that can always happen. The postmodern sensibility, more than modernist optimism, sensitizes us to the traps of modern civilization, placing particular stress on the danger of objectifying the human person.

As early as 1968, Antoni Kępiński wrote this about the danger: “For the SS doctor, the Jews he selected were repulsive or at best were complete blanks to him, because he was raised in that spirit, inculcated with that idea. He did not see them as people; they did not interest him unless as an object of so-called scientific research or of plunder; it certainly never entered his mind to approach them, exchange a few words, find out about their experiences ... The ever-quicker transformation of the natural world into a technological one, which we are witnessing in our

century, encourages a technical view of the other person; that is, we see the human qualities in him ever more feebly, and more and more clearly see the attributes associated with the efficient functioning of the technosocial machine. Such a view is perhaps one of the greatest dangers of modern civilization.”² Almost twenty years later the distinguished postmodernist Zygmunt Bauman described the causes of the Holocaust and the threat of its repetition in similar terms.³

It is not surprising that Kępiński identified the situation so quickly. For one thing, he was a psychiatrist of this times, in fact beyond his times,⁴ but for another, for us psychiatrists this subject matter is not abstract and distant. Indeed, psychiatry, including that most respectable field of academic psychiatry, has blood on its hands. For many years before the extermination of mental patients in Nazi Germany, the eminent clinician and university teacher Emil Kraepelin wrote: “Every madman presents a constant threat to his surroundings and especially to himself ... crimes of passion, arson, somewhat less often assaults, thefts and fraud are committed by maniacs ... A small number of these incurables are fated for a quick death. The great majority continue to live out their lives, for years burdening their families and the state more and more, the consequences of which have a profound effect on community life.”⁵

Psychiatry quickly absorbed the notion of “life unworthy of living,” and German psychiatrists placed their authority behind a program of killing mentally ill and mentally disabled people. They made selections; the extermination of psychiatric hospital patients supplied models employed in the organization of the Holocaust.

2 As quoted in: Antoni Kępiński, “Rampa: psychopatologia decyzji,” in: Antoni Kępiński, *Rytm życia* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1994), 83–84.

3 Zbigniew Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1989).

4 Maria Orwid, “Antoni Kępiński – w trzydziestolecie śmierci,” *Psychiatria Polska* 3 (2002), 365–371.

5 As quoted in: Roland Jaccard, *Szalenstwo* (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Siedmioróg, 1993), 51.

Psychiatry is a field particularly sensitive to human rights, the rule of law, and respect for the Other.⁶ Inherent in this discipline is the threat of removal of legal competence, instrumentalization, repression and exclusion; what did occur can recur at any time or place. In the 1970s the Soviet Union was notorious for its abuse of psychiatry; psychiatry is also used to combat political opponents in modern China; and it is used as a tool of repression against people who think unconventionally, ethnic minorities, poor people, women and old people.

Psychiatry very quickly became intrigued with the mechanisms of villainy, thus the question: How could it have happened? The old “classical” psychiatry proved surprisingly helpless in this regard. The villains were researched: in 1951, Stanisław Batawia wrote of Auschwitz camp commandant Rudolf Hoess that he was “neither an abnormal individual of the morally insane type, nor an affectless psychopath, nor a person who showed any criminal or sadistic tendencies.”⁷ Hannah Arendt, on the other hand, described the forensic psychological examination of Holocaust architect Adolf Eichmann: “Half a dozen psychiatrists certified him as ‘normal’ – ‘More normal, at any rate, than I am after having examined him,’ one of them was said to have exclaimed.”⁸ The traditional instruments of psychiatry and psychology explained nothing.

But some have been able to see these behaviors in a broader than nosological, psychopathological perspective. As early as 1962 (a year before Hannah Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem*), Professor Kępiński published (with M. Orwid) an article, “Z psychopatologii ‘nadmudzi’” (“From the psychopathology of *Übermenschen*”), in which he proposed that “the human typology be broadened to include the robot type, the person whose life depends on blind obedience, precise execution of commands,

[who is] absolutely trusting in authority, completely devoid of a sense of humor ... it should be added that this type of person tends to compensate his perhaps-unconscious sense of inferiority with the desire to ruthlessly subjugate other people to himself. Let us hope that this type of robot/superman perished with the German Nazis.”⁹

Those mature words which the Psychiatry Clinic in Cracow formulated in the 1960s were the result of conceptual, intellectual work, but also an outcome of meetings with ex-prisoners of Auschwitz. Nothing was the same after these meetings. In 1959, at the inspiration of Dr. Stanisław Kłodziński (who had been a prisoner of Auschwitz for five years), a team of young psychiatrists – the late Roman Leśniak, Maria Orwid, the late Adam Szymusik and the late Aleksander Teutsch, headed by Antoni Kępiński – carried out a research project exploring the aftermath of being in the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp.¹⁰ This team attempted to determine what traces in the psyche, life and somatic state of former prisoners were left by the camp experience. This resulted in very detailed descriptions of such phenomena as the psychopathological symptoms presented by former prisoners, ways of surviving during imprisonment in the camp, personality changes after the traumas experienced, and strategies of adjustment to life after the camp. The Chair of Psychiatry in Cracow already had a long history of research on trauma, begun by its founder Professor Jan Piltz, who was an expert on war trauma in the Austrian army during World War I.¹¹ If earlier it had been generally assumed

6 Maria Orwid, “Dekalog psychiatry” (afterword), in: Antoni Kępiński, *Poznanie chorego* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2002).

7 As quoted in: Antoni Kępiński, “Rampa: psychopatologia decyzji,” in: Antoni Kępiński, *Rytm życia* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1994) 59.

8 Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem. A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Viking Press, 1963), 34.

9 As quoted in: Antoni Kępiński and Maria Orwid, “Z psychopatologii ‘nadmudzi,’” in: Antoni Kępiński, *Rytm życia* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1994), 78.

10 For example, see: Roman Leśniak, “Poobozowe zmiany osobowości u byłych więźniów obozu koncentracyjnego Oświęcim-Brzezinka,” *Przegląd Lekarski* 1 (1965), 29–30; Maria Orwid, “Uwagi o przystosowaniu do życia poobozowego u byłych więźniów obozu koncentracyjnego w Oświęcimiu,” *Przegląd Lekarski* 1 (1962), 94–97; Maria Orwid, “Socjopsychiatryczne następstwa pobytu w obozie koncentracyjnym w Oświęcimiu,” *Przegląd Lekarski* 1 (1964), 17–22; Adam Szymusik, “Astenia poobozowa u byłych więźniów obozu koncentracyjnego w Oświęcimiu,” *idem.*, 23–29.

11 Jan Piltz, *Przyczynki do nauki o tzw. nerwicach wojennych i ich leczeniu na podstawie własnych spostrzeżeń* (Kraków: Drukarnia CK UJ, 1917).

that the after-effects of trauma were transient and limited in time, then in the 1960s we realized that trauma could still affect a person's life many years after the war. This truth was slow to penetrate the public mind. It took almost two decades, to 1980, for the psychiatric establishment to include post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in its classification as a set of symptoms causally related to the experience of a traumatic situation, that is, a situation whose magnitude exceeds "normal" human experience.

Research on Holocaust trauma stimulated further investigations, with the very large involvement of the feminist movement, and drew attention to a broad arena of suffering.¹² The ubiquity of trauma became clear, and sexual abuse, incest, violence against women, children and old people, ethnic persecution, racism, and the fate of sexual minorities began to be confronted. Gradually the so-called discourse of progress gave way to a discourse of trauma.

At the same time, however, psychiatry, which had initiated this search, began a dangerous trend toward an exclusively biological, reductionist view of trauma. It less often explores the existential dimension of life after trauma, the sense of loneliness, the domain of exclusion, the loss of basic trust in the world. It more often focuses on the "clinical" effects of trauma, on improving the tools for assessing PTSD. This aspect is indeed important, if only for judging eligibility for disability benefits; in almost all legal systems a PTSD diagnosis enables the government to arrange compensation and different kinds of medical help. There is a cruel paradox in this. A victim already marked by trauma (as a Jew, for example) must accept possibly being labelled mentally disabled in order to receive financial compensation.

Purely scientific research is done in the Department of Psychiatry in Cracow, but assessments for disability benefits are also made, and this work has included the members of successive groups of traumatized

subjects.¹³ In the 1960s, Dominik and Teutsch were already working with the children of Auschwitz survivors. Later subjects of interest were Siberian exiles and people persecuted by the Stalinist regime in the Soviet Union and Poland (Rutkowski), Roma (Orwid and the team), victims of violence in the family, and sexually abused children. Usually the victim could take advantage of therapeutic support, as could Holocaust survivors and their children, that is, the second generation; after 1989 we conducted interviews with the latter under the auspices of the Judaica Foundation, headed by the late Professor Józef Gierowski.¹⁴ In 1997 we launched an out-patient therapeutic program for Holocaust survivors, and a year later for the second generation. Of course, all these activities could be fully realized only after the political transformation, in a free Poland.

But it was not until the 1980s, after a gap of many years, that the Holocaust began to be talked about; awareness of what happened became ever more painful, troublesome – and vital.¹⁵ It began to be understood that surviving total mass slaughter means more and elicits different emotions than surviving a natural catastrophe or even war, the front line of battle, or a P.O.W. camp. The uniqueness of the Holocaust experience translates to survivors' attitudes to themselves, to their thinking about the world. What does it mean to survive? It means that I am in a singular situation. I made it through, but others did not; others did not survive. Guilt is latent

¹² For example, see: Maria Orwid, "Europa po Auschwitz – uwagi psychiatry," in: J. (?) Bomba, ed., *Miłość-Hesed* (Kraków: Znak, 1995) 99–108.

¹³ For example, see: E. Leśniak, Roman Leśniak, Maria Orwid, Zdzisław Ryn and Adam Szymusik, "Problematyka medyczna i psychospołeczna obozów koncentracyjnych w badaniach Kliniki Psychiatrycznej," in: *Wojna i okupacja a medycyna* (Kraków: AM i PTL, 1986), 37–41.

¹⁴ Maria Orwid, Ewa Domagalska-Kurdziel, Kazimierz Pietruszewski, Ewa Czaplak, Ryszard Izdebski and Maria Kamińska, "Psychospołeczne następstwa Holocaustu w pierwszym i drugim pokoleniu ofiar Holocaustu," *Dialog* 2 (1993), 95–112; Maria Orwid, Ewa Domagalska-Kurdziel and Kazimierz Pietruszewski, "Psychospołeczne następstwa Holocaustu u osób ocalałych i żyjących w Polsce," *Psychiatria Polska* 1 (1994), 91–112; Maria Orwid, Ewa Domagalska-Kurdziel and Kazimierz Pietruszewski, "Psychospołeczne następstwa Holocaustu w drugim pokoleniu ofiar Holocaustu ocalałych w Polsce," *idem.*, 113–130.

¹⁵ Maria Orwid, Łukasz Biedka, Ewa Domagalska-Kurdziel, Maria Kamińska and Krzysztof Szwejca, "Problemy tożsamości u dzieci osób ocalałych z Holocaustu, czyli II pokolenia," *Dialog* 11 (2002), 136–141.

in the very word “survivor” and in how the fact of survival is experienced. Not only the sense of guilt diagnosed by psychiatrists or psychotherapists, but also guilt in an existential sense. Someone is alive who basically should not be alive, when everyone else died. Alive for no known reason: for what was it deserved? And all around is a total vacuum; Jewish survivors lost their whole world – the people, the homes, the culture. The survivor not only is alive while others died. He is alive because he made an effort to survive, he played an active part in the fact of his survival. Of course, accident played the decisive role, but this population is very clearly characterized by an active stance toward life, heroic effort to survive. The exceptions are people who during the Holocaust were tiny children rescued without their active participation or awareness.

Survivors feel themselves to be victims and at the same time strong people who did something to save themselves, and this produces a powerful tension in them: What is the attitude to take toward the past, toward the world and toward one’s life? If a person experiences himself as a victim, he is in a losing position in every way. If he experiences himself as the co-author of his life, he has a completely different perspective. In survivors these two states are in total disharmony and are not fixed; the proportions between them change dynamically in the course of life.

Memory is a separate problem. Memory is the condition of our personal continuity and is needed for the construction of identity, but memory of the Holocaust is threatening, damaging, destructive. It is a memory of unbearable things that bring misery and torment. Survivors need memory and fear it. The memory of trauma is an unwanted memory, unsupported by a narrative, expelled, encysted, haunting, not integrated with everyday life and experience. Processed in this way, the concealed, cut-off memory wreaks damage; it breeds psychopathological symptoms and loneliness.¹⁶

¹⁶ Maria Orwid, Łukasz Biedka, Ewa Domagalska-Kurdziel, Maria Kamińska and Krzysztof Szwejca, “Importance of groups in psychotherapy of Holocaust children and in the second generation of Holocaust survivors,” *Dynamische Psychiatrie* 1 (2001), 346–356.

The struggle with memory is accompanied by a refusal to tell their stories. Right after the first postwar attempts to tell, survivors fell silent, not only in Poland but in the United States, Israel and everywhere. They kept quiet about their suffering in public and in their own homes. This phenomenon is interpreted in different ways. Survivors attempted to flee from the enormous pain by not remembering and not talking. They were ashamed of being alive and had no words to describe their experience. But they also had no empathic listeners. No one wanted to listen to them because what they might say could exceed their sensitivity threshold, could put the whole rest of the world in an ambivalent situation. It could also hurt those dear to them. They wanted to shield their families and the children from their experiences. The children were supposed to be free of trauma. But in this they did not succeed.

The trauma passed to the next generation. The mechanism of its transmission is best explained by Boszormenyi-Nagy’s intergenerational theory.¹⁷ Its author stresses that a person’s development is influenced by the conscious and unconscious transmission of the values, life styles and ways of thinking of previous generations, and that we endeavor to be loyal to that material acting on us. Thus the culture of previous generations becomes the building blocks of our identity. It works the same way with trauma; the most important events in the life of parents, events that formed or transformed them, cannot fail to be openly or cryptically passed to the children. The post-traumatic vision of the world, the attitude to others, the interpersonal relations, the attitude to family and children, the problem of personal freedom in the family and separation – all significantly shape the identity and development of the children of survivors, that is, the second generation. In particular, the atmosphere of secrecy and taboo in which these children lived encouraged the development of fearful attitudes, uncertainty, and an unclear self-concept.

One cannot describe the problems of the second generation in isolation from the survivors themselves. This has its basis in theory, accord-

¹⁷ Iwan Boszormenyi-Nagy and Geraldine Spark, *Invisible Loyalties* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973).

ing to which the person is shaped in relationships with his primary relations. For survivors their children had dual significance. They were not only children but also a symbol of victory over the enormity of death; they had to compensate their parents' losses, to reconstruct the murdered family, to restore joy and good fortune. The survivors' expectations and dreams, the mandate they placed upon the children, were enormous. They had or have their own image of how these children should be, what they should do in life, how they have to behave. Often these plans are hard to fulfill. They form an accumulation of expectations, instructions and transgenerational messages that is not met in any untreated population. We find a similar situation only in groups of psychotic patients, who are equally subject to frustration and equally risk failing to fulfill their parents' expectations of them.

Intimacy with parents who survived the Holocaust exposes the children to participation in their emotional life – their fears, incapacities, idiosyncracies, and at the same time their silence. The children make guesses but are not bold enough to ask, or else they react with anxiety symptoms, because there is no intrafamilial dialogue about the most important matters.¹⁸

Children of people who experienced the Holocaust have great difficulty separating from their parents. This difficulty is not only the result of being annexed by parents attempting, through their offspring, to reconstruct the meaning of life and the continuity of the generations.¹⁹ The children's relation to the parents is also a peculiar one. The children quickly become the parents of their parents. They feel responsible and make an effort to take care of the survivors.

18 Maria Orwid, Ewa Domagalska-Kurdziel, Kazimierz Pietruszewski, Ewa Czaplak, Ryszard Izdebski and Maria Kamińska, "Psychosocial Effects of the Holocaust on Survivors and the Second Generation in Poland: Preliminary Report," in: John Lemberger, ed., *A Global Perspective on Working with Holocaust Survivors and the Second Generation* (Jerusalem: JDC, 1995), 205–242.

19 Maria Orwid, Ewa Domagalska-Kurdziel, Maria Kamińska, Krzysztof Szwajca, Katarzyna Prot and Łukasz Biedka, "Między katastrofą i optymizmem," *Dialog* 9 (2000), 121–132.

In their search for a place in the world, Holocaust survivors' children born after the war have fewer choices than their parents. In their memories and in constructing themselves, the latter could invoke the prewar world. Their children have no such possibility. Their lot is the world of the Holocaust, from which they cannot really leave and can only try to escape, generally without success. They live in the post-Holocaust world and have no other. This has to have consequences for the shaping of identity as a major determinant, and this despite the significant changes which for years we have been noting in the construction of their identities.

Formerly, a person's identity was considered to be a fact conferred by biology, history, and the family. Today, postmodern thought has exposed the plurality of the world; it gives a person the opportunity to identify with a number of different models, the possibility of choosing identities. This is called the identity project. The second generation has been confronted with a particular choice of identities, since in the Polish population these generally are children of mixed marriages. In this situation one of the most interesting questions is this: What makes children of the second and third generations choose a Jewish identity? What forms the identity? Is it the language I speak, is it who my parents are, is it which one of them is more important? We thought that the answers to these questions could be found with the aid of the family paradigm, that the choice of identity would be more influenced by the more attractive, more prominent of the two parents. It turned out, however, that the identity was formed more by the experience that carried the greater load of trauma – loyalty to suffering.²⁰ The process of constructing identity was thus simultaneously a battle with secrecy, with pain, with knowledge of a torment to which there could be no adequate response. It seems to us that the choice of a Jewish identity by the second and third generations is also associated with a sense of guilt. The children would like to do something to reduce the parents' suffering, the pain of their loss, the evil they experienced in the past as

20 Maria Orwid, Ewa Domagalska-Kurdziel, Maria Kamińska, Krzysztof Szwajca and Katarzyna Prot, "Holocaust w piśmiennictwie polskim," in: Adam Bilikiewicz and Janusz Rybakowski, eds., *Psychiatria w Polsce* (Gdańsk: Via Medica, 2002), 83–110.

children. This is impossible, of course, but through the choice of a Jewish identity, through a special connection to the parent who experienced the Holocaust, the children of survivors create a very special relationship with their parents. Often it is so strong that it prevents them from forming other significant contacts: in particular, long-term deep emotional relationships with partners.²¹ Now these “children” are forty-plus years old on average, they have started families, have made a place for themselves somehow, and have their own children – the third generation.

We are not doing studies of the third generation, but what we hear from people we work with in therapy suggests that a momentous change has taken place. The grandchildren are asking questions, they want to know, often they are empathic listeners, and survivors who shielded their own children from their narratives have at last decided that they can tell the grandchildren. What it boils down to is that nothing better than unlocking taboo subjects has been invented; the instrument to prevent trauma from being passed on is truth – people talking to each other.

Lastly, the problem of the witnesses. At the time, the witnesses did nothing or very little. They knew about the Holocaust, and were present during it. Now they are silent and seem not to remember. It is difficult to understand that amnesia without the use of psychiatric language, the terminology of psychoanalysis, notions such as collective displacement, defense against trauma, denial, avoidance. Witness trauma applies perhaps most of all to German society, though it must be remembered that the Holocaust was carried out mainly in Poland, close by, over the next hill, on the streets of Polish towns, in nearby forests.

The construction of the identity of the second generation of Germans has become an important problem, as dramatic as that of the experiences of the second generation of Holocaust survivors; the burden of account-settling and ambivalence about the past is monumental. The crimes which they discovered their fathers and grandfathers committed rob these “late-born” ones of the basic sense of intergenerational transmission, destroy

it and break it off, disturbing the process of identity formation. It was not until the generation of 1968, on the wave of the counterculture, in a period in which the received reality was being reassessed, that the German taboo of silence and secrecy about Nazi crimes was broken. These people did a huge amount of work on their nation’s past, to mention only Heinrich Boell (*The Clown*) or Siegfried Lenz (*The German Lesson*). That generation, particularly the German intellectuals who uncovered their history and searched for their place in the democratic reality of postwar Europe, deserves enormous respect.

If the structure of contemporary civilization contains the possibility of a repetition of the kind of relations between people that led to the Holocaust, one can also cherish the hope that the values of our civilization that are defended by respect for the human being and the dignity of the person will triumph, and that it will not happen.

²¹ Krzysztof Szwejca, “Problemy tożsamości u dzieci ofiar Holocaustu.” *Znak* 1/584 (2004). 49–62.

Auschwitz: Whose History, Whose Memory?

Jonathan Webber

I

The past is a foreign country. People who have not been there, people who did not live through terrible times, cannot say what it was really like. Certainly there are no simple rules of translation to take us directly into a comprehension of that other world. So how does a university educator like myself, a Jew born after the Second World War and raised in England – a country which mercifully never knew a German occupation – teach students about the Holocaust or get seriously to grips with the fundamental issues raised by the very existence of Auschwitz? I have been working with this subject for twenty years and am still perplexed by the enormity of the challenge. Part of the reason for this is that many students simply find themselves numbed by the realities of the subject, and rely instead on popular stereotypes, mythologisations of the Holocaust which provide simplified explanations to help them make sense of it. The common reliance on unproblematised, partisan narratives about the Holocaust, often commonly understood as if they were universally valid truths, is probably the most difficult issue for an educator to deal with. Students tend to arrive with their stereotypes deeply embedded in their cultural baggage and may not even perceive the need to recognise, at the start of their journey into the Holocaust past, that they are entering an exceptionally strange foreign country inhabited also by people other than themselves.

I began my work on Auschwitz in 1988 with an anthropological research project on the city of Oświęcim, in cooperation with the Institute of Sociology of the Jagiellonian University in Kraków. Our idea was

to interview local people about their memories of the neighbouring Auschwitz camp. Although more than forty years had elapsed since the end of the war, nobody, it seemed, had ever thought of doing this before. Of course we had come much too late, although it rapidly became clear that the memory that we could locate consisted of narratives quite different from what could be found in the official histories, and particularly in those embodied in the Auschwitz State Museum, which were largely directed by state interests emanating from Warsaw.¹ Politicians, both Polish and foreign, would come to lay wreaths at official remembrance ceremonies and deliver formulaic speeches expressing the ongoing shock at the colossal crimes perpetrated in this place; but counter-narratives, of whatever kind, were not encouraged, to say the least. It was an interesting time to be doing fieldwork – the conflict over the Carmelite convent was at its height, with no appropriate, broadly based forum available for dialogue with regard to the worldwide Jewish protests over the perceived dejudaisation of the site. During the summer of 1989, immediately after the new democratic government had taken power, I wrote to the Polish Prime Minister suggesting the need for such a forum – arguing that Auschwitz was such a complex place that it demanded the establishment of a genuinely international and interfaith body where a plurality of voices could be heard. And thus the International Auschwitz Council was born. I have been a member of this Council uninterruptedly since that time, and can say that it has indeed lived up to that mandate.

Over a number of years I gave lectures at the university in Kraków, for students both Polish and foreign, and in that context took my students on extended field trips, usually for a fortnight at a time. The student groups were deliberately constructed as multicultural, consisting of German and Polish students, as well as Jews (usually from the UK). The Jewish students were at first shocked at the very thought of spending an extended

period at Holocaust sites in the company of young Germans and Poles; but I wanted to enable all the students precisely to articulate their respective stereotypes to each other and then learn to transcend them. It was hard for everyone, including me, but well worth the effort. The Holocaust was “accessed” in two quite different modes: through the encounter with the small market towns and villages where Jews had lived before the war, often as a high percentage of the local population, but where little except devastated synagogues and ruined cemeteries were now to be seen; and secondly through the encounter with the murder sites – not only the sites of the main death camps but also the mass graves in the forests and open countryside. For the death camps, I would take the students first to Bełżec, where nothing at all of the original camp has survived – no barbed wire, no watchtowers, no barracks, no entry gate. After many hours of travel from our base in Kraków, all that awaited us in that remote spot was essentially an empty field (admittedly with a simple monument, which was all that there was at that time before the new memorial and museum were erected in 2004). We would sit in that empty field, empty both of buildings and of visitors, and ponder the nothingness of the place and discuss the one published account of the camp (that of Rudolf Reder). The Jewish, German, and Polish students slowly learned how to listen to each other and how to see what the others were seeing. It was a strong way to prepare for the subsequent, highly disorienting encounter with the sheer physicality of Auschwitz, including its vast visitor numbers (then 500,000 per year but which have more recently climbed to more than one million per year).² Nothing can really prepare the student for Auschwitz. We held several classes on the grass outside the entry gate, thinking out how to make sense of what lay within.

¹ For some interesting research findings emerging from that project, see: Andrzej K. Paluch, “Konzentrationslager Auschwitz: The View from Outside,” in: Andrzej K. Paluch, ed., *The Jews in Poland* (Cracow: Jagiellonian University Research Centre on Jewish History and Culture in Poland, 1992), vol. 1, 327–339.

² The numbers continue to rise. According to the Museum’s recent annual reports, about 1.2 million visitors to the Auschwitz Museum (well over double the figure of ten years earlier) were reported for 2007, an increase from about 1 million in 2006.

II

There can never be a single history of Auschwitz, nor can the remembrance of Auschwitz ever be a unified phenomenon. Just as there was a “mosaic of victims,” so too there is a “mosaic of memories.” Jews represented more than 90% of the victims, at somewhere around one million men, women, and children; but there were substantial numbers of other groups of victims. The 10% of non-Jews murdered at Auschwitz includes about 75,000 ethnic Poles, about 20,000 Sinti and Roma, as well as 15,000 Soviet prisoners of war and smaller groups of other categories of victims.³ It was very common during the Second World War that places of mass murder were used by the Germans for different groups of victims (Sinti and Roma were often taken to Jewish cemeteries to be shot), and Auschwitz was no exception. In historical terms, the result is that the places of mass murder witnessed complex sequences of events and may often carry a number of quite different meanings. Auschwitz is an exceptionally complex case, especially since it has come to symbolise the collective horrors of the Holocaust of the Jews as well as the suffering of other groups with whom Jews do not necessarily feel any close sense of identification. The fact that members of all these groups were murdered in the same place does not in itself provide them with a sense of shared destiny; on the contrary, each group tends to see its experience as unique to itself and to its own history. It is obvious that Jews, Poles, Germans, Russians, and Sinti and Roma will contextualise Auschwitz differently, in terms of the positioning of Auschwitz within their own ethnic and national histories; they will all therefore have different stereotypes, different contours of memory and of remembrance rituals which relate to their own long-term ethnic and national experiences and also to their respective cultural differences in which they go about making sense of the past more generally.

³ For a detailed study of the figures, prepared by the (then) head of the Auschwitz Museum’s Historical Research Department, see: Franciszek Piper, “Estimating the Number of Deportees to and Victims of the Auschwitz-Birkenau Camp,” *Yad Vashem Studies*, vol. 21 (1991), 49–103.

At Auschwitz itself, which since 1947 has been a Polish state museum, these differences have for a long time been institutionalised – through the emphasis, during communist times, on national exhibitions, of which there are about a dozen, each of them clearly presenting a different museological perspective on the importance of Auschwitz in their own particular national circumstances during the Second World War. Through these national exhibitions, which also include a Jewish exhibition and more recently a Sinti and Roma exhibition, we have slowly got used to the idea that there can indeed be a specifically Hungarian narrative of Auschwitz, a specifically Dutch narrative, an Italian narrative, a French narrative, and so on. These narratives do not necessarily begin with Hitler’s rise to power or with the history of medieval antisemitism, nor do they necessarily end with the moment of the liberation of Auschwitz on 27 January 1945; they are all structured quite differently, telling quite different stories and displaying quite different photographs. Certainly a visitor could come out of any one of these exhibitions without having learnt very much at all about what Auschwitz meant to other populations – whether these other populations are Jews in other countries or other victim groups altogether.

It is as if the horrific scale of what happened in Auschwitz has been cut up into smaller pieces of more manageable proportions, although that was perhaps far from the intention of the Auschwitz Museum in arranging things the way they have. But I suspect that even if there were political reasons why museums in communist states in Central and Eastern Europe deliberately played down Jewish victimhood and instead substituted fascist crimes against specific “nations,” often representing these by using different languages on the main monument (as was done in Auschwitz-Birkenau, for example), nevertheless many Western European countries were also rather slow in developing a universalist perspective on the events at Auschwitz. We are only just beginning to get a sense of that today, although many of the new Holocaust museums that have opened up, such as in Budapest, still continue to place the major emphasis on the local national disaster – partly of course because the full truth of what happened in such countries has never been properly told, and this, therefore, is an urgent priority.

So in whose history should Auschwitz properly be located? Whose memory does it belong to? To whom does Auschwitz morally belong? Whose financial responsibility is it to ensure that there is a proper memorial at Auschwitz?

There are no straightforward answers to any of these questions – or, to put that another way, it's probably the questions themselves that are important rather than the answers. The history and memory of Auschwitz clearly belongs to many different ethnic, national, and political groups, and it does so unevenly, without symmetry. Even leaving aside the issue of the very different numbers involved, the significance of Auschwitz in Polish history is clearly not symmetrical to its significance in Jewish history. Whereas Auschwitz in Polish national history belongs to the suffering of Poles during the German occupation of their country, Auschwitz in Jewish history relates (among other things) to the fragility of Jewish life in the diaspora, and for many Jews it is to be taken in context also with the salvation that arose immediately afterwards, namely the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948.

But these are very broad brushstrokes. The truth is that one has to go much more deeply into the whole question of the construction of memory, both personal memory and collective memory, and ask about the reliability and the authenticity of the political construction of collective memory. A self-consciously Zionist approach to the collective Jewish memory of the Holocaust tends to emphasise the ancient ethnic and religious hatreds, that is, to locate the Holocaust in the context of a long history of European antisemitism, pogroms, and anti-Jewish violence. Other models are also possible and can be found in some of the personal memoirs of survivors – those, for example, that would stress warm memories of a prewar world where the Jews lived perfectly happily in their diaspora environments, or at least in a situation of relatively peaceful coexistence; but then “politics” came from the outside (for example, Nazi propaganda about Jewish Bolshevism), all was changed, and their neighbours turned against them. These two models are of course extreme positions, but it is reasonably clear from survivor accounts (and from the comments of my students) that Jews do collectively hold in their heads more than one broad narrative of what happened. Like any minority group, diaspora Jews possess multiple

identities in terms of their sense of belonging also to the majority societies in which they live. Indeed in the last two or three generations prior to the Holocaust, when Jews had begun to obtain their political emancipation, they had spent a considerable amount of cultural energy, in every country across Europe, in working out the details of their social and cultural positioning as Hungarians or as Poles or Czechoslovaks. They did not all agree how this should be done. On the contrary, there were fierce controversies. Many Jews opted for assimilation, some even for total assimilation, others for socialism or Zionism, while yet others were content with their traditional Orthodoxy and had little interest in doing anything particularly new in cultural terms vis-à-vis their national environment. It was in the midst of all these Jewish controversies that suddenly there came the Holocaust. The Nazis were not in the slightest interested in those things that had previously mattered to Jews – all Jews, without exception, were to be deported and murdered. They all met each other, as one people, in the gas chambers of Auschwitz. But in terms of internal Jewish history, there is no one “Jewish memory of the Holocaust” as regards its relationship with what had gone before. It is important to stress this point. Of course these very specific cultural and ideological Jewish positions and internal Jewish histories do *coexist with* the overwhelming single reality of the Holocaust, when entire communities were deported together out of their home towns and villages, regardless of their internal differentiation by social class or sociopolitical ideology. The whole point of the Nazi onslaught was to divide people into predetermined ethnic or racial categories; and if we were to reproduce that today all that we would be left with is a memory system that indeed would presuppose one Jewish memory, one Polish memory, and so on. But in fact there are multiple Jewish histories, as well as multiple Jewish memories. This is also because after the Holocaust, whilst most survivors chose to make new lives for themselves by emigrating to Israel (or, as in the case of Poland in 1968, were forced to emigrate), Jews did reconstitute their communities, all over Europe – and, once again, they had to reinvent themselves in terms of their personal and collective relationship with that terrible past. In many cases they went back to the old prewar models and began the debate all over again about how far they could feel Polish (for example) and think

of themselves as Polish;⁴ but this time most of them had the added bitterness of reflecting on the very little support their communities had received during the war from their former friends and neighbours.

So indeed there are many different national and ethnic histories and memories of Auschwitz, but the more politicised memories coexist with personal memories which often do not find formal or institutionalised expression. There are, in other words, different approaches *within* these groups. There is nothing fundamentally problematic in the fact that one can find contradictions and paradoxes when surveying the range of histories and memories of Auschwitz. Genocide is a world that is turned upside down, where ordinary peacetime morality, or normal boundaries between social groups, no longer have durable significance. Shared victimhood at Auschwitz could of course bring about new social solidarities between people who might otherwise have had little in common with each other, but equally well those social solidarities hardly rested on secure foundations and, as many survivors have reported, could vanish without even a moment's notice. Primo Levi's famous description of what he called the "Gray Zone," of prisoners at Auschwitz who were simultaneously victims as well as being collaborators with the perpetrators, should constantly remind us of the great difficulties in finding a suitable way of telling the story of what happened in Auschwitz.⁵ Auschwitz was a fundamentally subversive reality, and to try to convey that history in smooth documentary style, with neat, coherent, and conceptually unproblematised descriptions, cannot really do justice to the enormity of this place. Auschwitz is not to be explained according to the usual conventions of understanding the past.

4 For example, see: Stanisław Krajewski, *Poland and the Jews: Reflections of a Polish Jew* (Kraków: Austeria, 2005).

5 Immediately after the war the Central Jewish Historical Commission in Poland cooperated with the Polish judiciary in collecting material on Jews who were suspected of collaboration with the Germans in the murder and mistreatment of their fellow Jews in the ghettos and camps; between 1944 and 1956 about 50 Jews stood trial on such charges in the Polish state courts, of whom 30 were convicted. See: Gabriel N. Finder and Alexander V. Prusin, "Jewish Collaborators on Trial in Poland, 1944–1956," *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry*, vol. 20 (2008), 122–148.

We have to avoid over-domesticating our comprehension of the genocidal violence. If, as it is said by so many nowadays, the reality of Auschwitz should change the way we think about the world, we have not really begun to make sense of it unless we learn how to reassess how we retell the story of the tragedy.

To take one well-known example: Jews are often anxious to declare that Auschwitz was a specifically *Jewish* catastrophe, but also expect that the world in general should remember and commemorate it just because of its *universal* significance. How can they say both things at once? Was the Holocaust an event in Jewish history, or was it an event in German or Polish or European history? The short answer, of course, is that it is in fact all these things taken together. I don't think we should be troubled by the lack of intellectual coherence here; on the contrary, the fact that there are such multiple elements in the Auschwitz memory is a useful pointer to the subversive nature of the Holocaust, even if these elements seem paradoxical, contradictory, or mutually exclusive. Do we say, for example, that the Jews who were murdered at Auschwitz were *martyrs*, and do we need to have commemorative rituals suitable for remembering their martyrdom – or do we say that none of them were martyrs since they were not murdered for their beliefs or their faith but rather because of some pseudoscientific theory of race coupled with a belief held by the perpetrators that the Jews were a genuine enemy of the German people? Maybe we could say that *some* of them were indeed martyrs and were proud of their identity as religious Jews – but then do we extend the category to all the Jewish victims and perceive them all as honorary martyrs? What about the young children who were murdered? How far it is necessary, or even appropriate, to make an internal differentiation among the Jewish victims?

The religious dimension here needs some further comment. One of today's current preoccupations about religion is the concern that religious fanaticism is a major source of interethnic and international conflict, as we have seen in Bosnia and also in the Middle East. On the other hand, as has been argued by senior scholars, it was precisely because of the secularisation of modern society, and the collapse of the family and ecclesiastical authority, that the Holocaust was possible in the first place.

Even if it is true that the Church did preach and practise anti-Judaism and antisemitism, it never embarked on genocide as such. What made the Holocaust possible, in this view, was precisely the modernist antireligious notion of bureaucracy, the capacity to treat human beings as impersonal numbers, as cogs in a machinery of bureaucracy or industrial production rather than as images of God. The significance of Auschwitz is thus not only about the past but rather about the present and indeed the future – the ongoing capacity of modern man to commit genocide.

The argument does have some merit in it but is probably an exaggeration, and there are numerous counter-arguments (notably the capacity of religion, in certain contexts, to endorse violence). On the other hand, it does raise the question of whether religion should play a more proactive role nowadays in Holocaust memorialisation, especially in those areas in which religion obviously has well-developed expertise, most notably in providing rituals that mourn human suffering and loss and also in promoting healing, promoting the *universalist, spiritual* aspects of peace and reconciliation between human beings, and the spiritual and moral repair of the world, which Holocaust remembrance certainly needs to address. After all, the challenge of the Auschwitz memory today is surely to find ways of extending a sense of the universe of moral obligation in which all the suffering, of all those involved, would find itself represented. The challenge is to transcend one's own personal or ethnic horizon and to develop a sense of double vision – to be faithful to the history and memory of one's own group but also, at the same time, to see beyond it. Even if the duty is always first to remember those who were nearest and dearest, and to make proper memorialisation for the fellow citizens who suffered and died in every country where this happened, it would not be good history or good ethics to understand what happened as if it affected only the Jews of Poland or the Sinti and Roma of Hungary. Auschwitz was a transnational reality, directed from Germany and undertaken in the context of a total European war. And, by the same token, the Holocaust can only be grasped in the context of those many other populations – Poles, Gypsies, gays, the disabled, and many others – who were turned into victims. This is why the Auschwitz memory needs to address so many issues at once – both the local and the universal; both the specific and the more general; both one's

neighbour and those who are far away; both the names of the particular individuals who are known to have perished, and also an understanding of the wider historical processes which brought about the catastrophe; both knowing the empirical facts of the deliberate, systematic, and planned rationality of the mass murder, and also making sense, in the perspective of the victims, of the fundamental incomprehensibility and meaninglessness of Auschwitz and the entire genocidal enterprise.

The Auschwitz memorial site is thus in this sense a very strange place – and, in terms of its mission, rightly so. The most powerful stimulus for Holocaust remembrance, trying to make sense of the traumatic past, is surely to visit the scene of the crime, the place where the traumatic events occurred. One might have thought that religion would be ideally suited to convey a sense of the overpowering mystery of Auschwitz, or the moral and ethical dilemmas of all the categories of population caught up in the events – perpetrators, bystanders, victims, and rescuers – as well as the dilemmas of present-day remembrancers. But what actually happened is nothing less than astonishing. Far from promoting universalism, religion became overstimulated by memories and found itself politicised over the question of moral ownership. Jews and Christians got into serious conflict there in the 1980s and 1990s over the presence of a Carmelite convent and then over a series of crosses that had been planted in the fields of ashes in Birkenau. The solution that was negotiated between the rabbis and the bishops was to withdraw from Auschwitz, to remove all religious symbols from the site altogether. It is as if the only spiritual way to contemplate Auschwitz is from a distance.

The present-day encounter with Auschwitz as a museum is indeed difficult, as my students recognised. Educating the living about the Holocaust is not necessarily compatible with what is needed for remembrance of the dead. Martin Gilbert describes in one of his books how he took a group of his students to visit Holocaust sites in Europe, and when they got to Auschwitz they found it hard to concentrate when they were inside the museum's indoor exhibitions since the place was crowded with so many visitors. There was simply too much noise, with too many people moving about with their guides. Sir Martin says that he and his group much preferred the silence and wide open spaces of Auschwitz-Birkenau,

which is such a vast place that it is possible to meditate and wander for hours, often without meeting anyone at all.⁶ It is an important point: at a memorial site, remembrance (usually in an *outdoor* setting) and education (in the sense of museum exhibits and information panels usually in an *indoor* setting) are in practice hard to combine at the same place.

Still, the Auschwitz Museum, for its part, can do its work without interference from the religious establishment and indeed devote itself to more secularist histories and memories – and, once again, full of tensions and paradoxes. Its main mission today is (and probably always has been) education, rather than remembrance narrowly defined (though there is some of that there as well). Going round Birkenau today, what you will find next to the ruins of the gas chambers is a series of plaques giving detailed historical information and historical photographs – in order to educate the visitors. More modestly, round the back, you will find a group of plain gravestones in black granite – in a symbolic attempt to identify this place also as a cemetery. Personally I would much prefer to see at least part of Auschwitz much more developed as a cemetery, but it has to be said that there is at least some gesture in that direction. The exhibitions that you will find in the museum are, similarly, of two types – the main exhibition, with *generalised* historical coverage of what happened, as well as that series of national exhibitions (which together are three or four times larger than the main exhibition). These two types of exhibition coexist at Auschwitz – one of more universal character, the other of very decidedly particularist character.

This multidimensionality of Auschwitz is surely one of its central features, and in that sense it is appropriate that memorialising it should also involve multidimensionality. Certainly, therefore, there is intellectual confusion and museological tension at Auschwitz in terms of histories and memories, but I think we should look at this positively, as a form of *organic* tension. Think of it the other way round: surely we would object if at Auschwitz we were presented with one official history, one set of memories

to take home with us. Far better, isn't it, to have here the entanglement of voices, a series of paradoxes and ambiguities, a sense of perspective that is totally unfinished, a feeling that we must continue to remain challenged by what Auschwitz *was*, and what Auschwitz means for us today. Auschwitz has a commanding voice when it comes to teaching the world about the dangers of genocide. Our responsibility is to use that voice wisely and effectively, so that it will continue to be heard. Completely inclusive styles of Holocaust remembrance are unlikely, by definition, to be perfect, or fully authentic for those within a particular religious, cultural, or national tradition; they are perhaps best to be understood as *platforms* or *opportunities* for those of many different backgrounds and experiences to speak to the world about Auschwitz.

⁶ Martin Gilbert, *Holocaust Journey: Travelling in Search of the Past* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1997), 175.

My Personal and Professional Journey to Holocaust Research

Nechama Tec

From the mid-seventies on, all my research and publications have concentrated on the German annihilation of European Jewry, also known as the Holocaust or Shoah. I belong to the minority of Jews who eluded these murderous assaults. Collectively we are identified as Holocaust survivors. Some Holocaust survivors with ease established links between their personal and professional lives.¹ For me, the transition from my wartime experiences to professional involvement with Holocaust research was neither direct nor smooth. The journey that brought me to my current preoccupation with Holocaust research required a range of adjustments, some personal, some professional.

I was born in Lublin, an ancient city in Poland, which up to 1939 had a Jewish population of 40,000, a third of Lublin's inhabitants. My father owned a candle factory and was a co-owner of a large chemical factory, which automatically placed us in the well-to-do category. My mother came from an Orthodox family and quite naturally established a kosher home. My father, although personally detached from religion, tolerated her traditional outlook on life. A tolerant man, he tried to instill in my sister and me an acceptance of people who differed from us. He argued that being born into a specific family is a historical accident of no consequence. Therefore, we should not judge people by the family they came from, only by the way they behave.

¹ The examples of Israel Gutman, Primo Levi and Elie Wiesel come readily to mind.

When, in 1939, the Germans marched into Lublin, their presence frightened me. Their highly polished boots seemed strangely threatening. Besides, I felt uneasy watching their cold eyes, which seemed to look through us and not at us. It was as if they were forcing us to become invisible.

In quick succession, these occupiers issued orders, most of which were directed at the Jews. Severe punishments awaited those who dared to disobey any of the new rules. One of these new prohibitions forbade school attendance for Jewish children. To me, no school suggested a continuous vacation. My parents, however, quickly destroyed my illusion by hiring a teacher who took over my and my sister's education. Other Jewish parents made similar arrangements.

Clear identification of the Jews was followed by orders forcing them to engage in unpaid, degrading work. With these changes came ruthless confiscations of Jewish property. Next the Jews were transferred to inferior, overcrowded living quarters, some of which were soon transformed into dilapidated, closed ghettos.

Early on, my parents decided that my sister and I should learn as much as possible about the meanings and implications of the German occupation. In the privacy of our home, they explained what our future might mean, reviewing several options of what could possibly happen. Towering over these considerations was an emphasis on the necessity to keep our plans secret. They insisted that our future was uncertain and that much would depend on our ability to keep secrets.

In this connection too, from my father I heard that childhood was a luxury which Jewish children cannot afford. This meant that children had to grow up fast. We did. During one of our sessions, I heard that as a family we would settle in the forbidden Christian world, the so-called "Aryan" side. We were waiting for false documents that would identify us as Polish Catholics. This would require a transfer to Warsaw.

Such plans entailed dangers. The Germans and their collaborators were searching for Jews who lived illegally on the Aryan side. October 15, 1941, the German authorities introduced a law that made all unauthorized moves by Jews into the forbidden Christian world a crime punishable by death. A death sentence also applied to Poles who facilitated an illegal Jewish move and/or stay on the Aryan side. In case of discovery, the illegal

Jews were murdered. Jewish capture involved also the killing of their Polish protectors and the protectors' entire family, including their children.

Our false papers came, in the second part of 1942. At that time we also heard that a place where we could stay would be ready for us. This meant that we had to learn quickly the information about our new identities. Similarly, we had to study the Catholic religion, particularly Catholic prayers and how to behave in church. Later on, separately, in two small groups, we left for Warsaw. The timing of our departures coincided with the official removal of the Jews from Lublin, making the city *Judenrein*, free of Jews.

Jews who wanted to live in the forbidden Christian world had a better chance to pass if they could blend into the Polish population. Those whose looks in no way betrayed their Jewish origin and whose command of the Polish language was good had a better chance of fitting into the Gentile environment. Those who could not easily blend into the Polish population tried to go into hiding. To become invisible, Jews had to know Poles who were willing to hide them in their homes. Few Jews were fortunate enough to find such Polish protectors. Often, when threatened with denunciation, illegal Jews had to switch from passing as Catholics to hiding. For a variety of reasons, Jews who lived illegally on the Aryan side had to constantly change their living quarters. An unknown proportion of Jews on the Aryan side received some aid from Poles. Such aid took a myriad of forms.

In our family, my parents were more vulnerable than my sister and I. Their knowledge of Polish was limited. In their case, a conversation in Polish could easily reveal their Jewishness. While father's blue eyes and light hair offered some protection, my mother's looks hinted at a Jewish background. The safest move for my parents would have been to go into hiding. But to accomplish this, Jews needed Poles who were ready to shelter them. Antisemitism plus the real threat of a death sentence for Polish rescuers and their families made such protectors scarce.

Through friends, we located a family of poor laborers who were ready to share their home with us. These Poles lived in a run-down working-class neighborhood in the city of Kielce; their family consisted of five adults, only some of whom were employed, and two very young children. These Poles knew about the risks involved in the protection of Jews. Poverty had

pushed them to this dangerous step. According to our agreement we had to cover the expenses for feeding the entire household, pay for rent and electricity. This understanding included a promise that at some future time my sister and I could be added to this household. And so, unobserved, my parents joined this Polish family in Kielce. Except for their hosts, no one knew about my parents' presence. After my parents moved, the two families built an ingenious hiding place. It was a semi-cellar, inaccessible to the uninitiated. For almost three years, father and mother never left their apartment.

Only after several months, first my sister and then I joined them. Here, as before, the two of us were to pass for Polish Catholics. The neighbors were told that we were orphaned relatives who came to spend the rest of the war with their aunt, the head of the family, Stefa.

As required by the German authorities, we were officially registered. A young adult, my sister received a job as a cashier in a club for German officers. Her pay was very meager but the job provided daily meals. Besides, her working papers protected her from being sent to Germany as a slave laborer. I was too young for employment and not likely to be shipped to Germany for labor. I had few problems fitting into my surroundings. People did not suspect me of being Jewish. With constant prodding at home, I became used to my role as a Polish Catholic. Indirectly, however, this acceptance exposed me to virulent expressions of antisemitism. I heard antisemitic tirades from the priest during his Sunday sermons. I was also exposed to a barrage of derogatory anti-Jewish stories, which came from my newly acquired Christian "friends." I never reacted to their antisemitic remarks. Any pro-Jewish comments would undermine my credibility as a Polish Catholic. I kept my silence, trying hard not to say what I wanted to say. I deeply resented my silences. Basically my life as a Polish Catholic was filled with many close calls, with painful separations, with bittersweet reunions and tremendous pressures to keep many, many secrets.

From mid 1943 on and beyond, it was clear that the Third Reich was experiencing military losses. More frequently the Germans were confronted by emboldened resistance groups. The authorities reacted to Polish resisters swiftly but unsuccessfully. Our apartment was raided several

times. As the German occupiers were losing ground, their assaults upon the local population became more severe and more frequent. Yet they failed to put a stop to the expanding anti-German opposition.

In 1945 the Red Army conquered our area. Uneasy, our protectors hinted that they did not want their neighbors to know that they had rescued Jews. We left Kielce unobtrusively. When we came to Lublin we heard that out of the 40,000 Jews only 150 returned. Among these returnees there were three intact Jewish families. We were one of them. The Jews we met were glad to see us, offering to lend us money. After a while we reclaimed some of our properties. Quite naturally, without much discussion, we tried to leave our past behind us and concentrated on our future. Concretely, this meant that my sister and I would devote ourselves to catching up with our schooling. With the determination to forget my wartime past. I wanted to forget the person I so desperately tried to become. I wanted to forget the circumstances that forced me to become somebody else. I even wanted to forget the many people who had helped me survive.

And so, I stayed away from anything that had to do with the Holocaust. I did not read about it. I refused to see any wartime movies. I even refused to talk about the war. If occasionally someone asked me about my wartime past, my short, noncommittal answers made it clear to whoever was raising these issues that no information would be forthcoming. Inevitably that person gave up and I was allowed to retreat into my self-imposed silence.

In less time than expected, I passed a series of examinations. I received a special high school diploma, which entitled me to some college credits. I enrolled at Columbia University as a junior, majoring in Sociology. Later I became a doctoral candidate in the Graduate Department of Sociology, also at Columbia University. As a graduate student I had several teaching assistantships. I specialized in quantitative survey research. My doctoral dissertation was based on a national sample from Sweden. It was subsequently published as a book, *Gambling in Sweden*.

Added to my involvement with survey research was an interest in teaching. I conducted a large quantitative survey about adolescent use of illicit drugs. The results of this survey were published as a book, *Grass is*

Green in Suburbia. A series of articles relying on these survey data were also published. These dealt with deviant behavior, family and adolescent life patterns.

But in the mid-seventies my wartime memories began to stir. First, very gently, they demanded attention. Then, more forcefully, they insisted on being heard. When, in the end, they threatened to become a compulsion, I decided to revisit my past and wrote a book of memoirs, *Dry Tears*.² When writing I learned a great deal, not only about myself but also about my family, about the Christians who saved us, even about the perpetrators. But when I was finished I wanted to know more. I wanted to know how it was for other Jews who lived on the Aryan side. What kind of help did they receive? What were their circumstances? Who were their rescuers? For answers to these and many other questions, I turned to the voluminous Holocaust literature. Still, the literature, instead of providing me with overall answers, offered only glimmers about the lives of single individuals, scattered images from different memoirs or diaries. Attempts at general explanations were often inconsistent. Some argued that inevitably those who rescued Jews were lower-class individuals who themselves knew what suffering meant and therefore became involved in Jewish rescue. Others argued that after all the higher classes, particularly the intellectuals, were insightful and had the capacity to understand complex situations, and therefore were more likely to protect Jews.

Disappointed with the existing evidence, eager to know, I embarked on my own research. Relying on my own direct interviews and archival materials, I examined a group of Jews who survived on the Aryan side and a group of Gentiles who protected such Jews. Through the evidence I collected, I tried to test the hypotheses I found in the literature, especially those that were contradictory. For example, when I considered the information concerning a few hundred rescuers, they seemed to be a very heterogeneous group in terms of their class, education, political affiliation, religious involvement, whether they had Jewish friends or not, and whether they were exposed to Jewish culture or not. None of these

features showed a consistently strong association to the rescuing of Jews. Among the rescuers there were religiously devout Catholics and agnostics, higher class and lower class, highly educated and illiterate people. In short, none of the characteristics or variables in terms of which we traditionally group individuals served as predictors of selfless rescue.

Unable to find what I was looking for, I reexamined at closer range the life histories of these altruistic rescuers. Only then did the pieces to the puzzle fall into place. Closely interdependent, these pieces offered an explanation of the factors and conditions associated with altruistic rescue. They also suggested a profile of the selfless rescuer.³ Preliminary findings from this book suggested new issues for Holocaust research. These issues led me to a new research project, which eventually appeared as a book, *In the Lion's Den*.⁴ Gradually I became involved in Holocaust research. Without making a conscious decision, I switched from quantitative survey research to qualitative Holocaust research. When I realized that all my research interests centered on the Holocaust, I never considered returning to quantitative survey research. For over thirty years, all my research and all my publications have concentrated on the intricate relationships between self-preservation, altruism, rescue, resistance, compassion, cooperation, mutual help and survival.

We know, however, that under the German occupation these positive forces were rare. Not only were they rare; they were also overshadowed by the enormity of the German crimes. Even so, the presence of these positive forces was important. My research has consistently shown that the more abused people were, the more they craved for the appearance of these positive forces and reactions. The very presence of these forces indeed improved the quality of their lives which, in turn, could have increased the chances for survival.⁵

3 Nechama Tec, *When Light Pierced the Darkness: Christian Rescue Jews in Nazi-Occupied Poland* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 150–183.

4 Nechama Tec, *In the Lion's Den: The Life of Oswald Rufeisen* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

5 Nechama Tec, *Resilience and Courage: Woman, Man, and the Holocaust* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2003), 119–204, 304–354.

2 Nechama Tec, *Dry Tears* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984).

As I mentioned earlier, my Holocaust research has a great deal of continuity. Findings from a project usually suggest some special unexpected issues for study and often become the basis of a new project. It is as if my work had a mind of its own and I follow its lead. Fascinating, rich and revealing, the Holocaust data are qualitative. Moreover, regardless of what aspects of the Holocaust we want to explore, precise figures are elusive. Also, when collecting data about the Holocaust we often have a hard time employing systematic procedures. The samples we have to use have not been randomly selected. Because of the qualitative nature of Holocaust data, we have an obligation to thoroughly check the evidence before imposing our own views on the material. It follows that for Holocaust research the inductive method, moving from the specific to the general, seems more appropriate. This assumption is closely connected with the fact that Holocaust research does not lend itself to quantitative and statistical analysis. Those who insist on applying quantitative and statistical measures to this kind of data promise something that the data cannot deliver.

The Holocaust, as an area of study, attracts a wide range of disciplines, becoming the meeting ground for historians, psychologists, political scientists, sociologists, architects, theologians, journalists, poets and professionals from many other fields. With this diversity come shared concerns about the use of “proper” research methods. Still, we seem to agree that all collection of data calls for an accommodation between general scientific principles and some concrete ways of gathering information. Similarly, we also tend to agree that it is to our advantage to recognize some of the limitations and compromises we have to make when studying the Holocaust.

Because we come from so many different directions, we view the Holocaust through a variety of lenses. We also bring into this area of study special skills, special professional tools with which we examine that historical period. This diversity in itself broadens our understanding, while opening the door for cooperation and mutual learning. With this variability come also our shared interests. Awareness of our diversity of approaches, our shared interests, and an added willingness to cooperate may lead to a broadening of insights and to greater accumulation of knowledge.

Depending on the specific field we come from, we may have different research goals and employ different methods for reaching these goals. No matter what profession we have and no matter what we are interested in studying, we are all concerned about the use of proper research methods. In short, despite this diversity there is much we agree on.

When we conduct research, we are all concerned with the validity of data. The validity of a particular finding has to do with the extent to which it represents what it is supposed to represent, whether it in fact is the “truth.” With Holocaust data there are some areas where validity appears to be uncertain. Thus, for example, people tend to mix up dates. In addition, with the lapse of time, people may have a hard time reproducing the chronology of events. Some people may have difficulties in identifying dates and in accurately describing historical events. Basic historical dates can be easily checked. Such dates do not require the cooperation of respondents. Difficulties may start when we want to establish the validity of less-known events. When this happens we may and often do find a variety of answers which we translate as disagreements. However, disparate answers may be a reflection of subjective perceptions of facts rather than real distortions. Asking about the same information, the same individual, at different times, can check the validity of this kind of diverse evidence. If the answers are consistent we may assume that they are valid.

Another way in which we can check the validity of data is by independently comparing the information from several sources. In general, the greater the number of sources that offer the same information, the more valid we think the evidence is. If, for example, we have ten different sources and five of them consistently give the same information, but the other five offer varied material, we may assume that the consistently stated evidence is valid. We are, however, not always correct in making this assumption. Finally, when evaluating the validity of data we must also consider who is giving the evidence and what reasons there may be for possible distortions.

Most of us probably agree that all empirical research calls for an accommodation between general scientific principles and the actual gathering of empirical data. We also agree that it is to our advantage to be aware of existing options, the limitations of the data, and special

compromises that might be necessary for the conduct of research. Awareness of the need to accommodate in itself reduces errors.

The Holocaust, perhaps more than most other areas of research, calls for such accommodations. Much of this is due to the inherent quality of the evidence. The procedures we end up using are often the result of balancing out what we initially wanted to do and what was possible. Nevertheless, as an area of study the Holocaust offers many fascinating research opportunities and many challenges.

Because we come from so many different disciplines, the idea of random samples, statistical measures and theoretical generalizations may seem strange to some, to others even distasteful. Similarly, for those of us who are unfamiliar with historical methods of research, such methods may suggest some shortcomings. On the other hand, if we accept the idea that there is some validity to each field, then we can learn and benefit from our professional interactions. As we continue to study the destruction of European Jewry, our professional diversity creates special opportunities for learning. Only by respecting each other's skills can we learn and improve our own research. If we become convinced that through mutual tolerance of our respective disciplines we can enhance our own knowledge, we shall achieve this goal. I believe as W. I. Thomas argued. To paraphrase: if people define situations as real, they are real in their consequences.⁶

⁶ Robert K. Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure* (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1957), 421.

My View Through Their Lens: The Personal and Collective in Writing About the Holocaust

Dalia Ofer

My first memory in relation to World War II is as a three- or four-year-old girl in Jerusalem, and of being irritated by my friend Gili, who rhymed my name, Dalia, with Italia (Italy in Hebrew). One morning I learned that Italy was no longer an ally of Nazi Germany; that day in the yard I responded proudly to my teasing friend: "Italy is no longer with the Nazis." I was relieved; no longer could I be associated with evil.

When I was just a few years older I recall a visit of a beautiful young woman who was unable to speak Hebrew with my sister and me but who conversed freely in Yiddish with my parents. My father explained to us that she was his cousin who had just arrived from Poland, and that he remembered her as a little girl in 1932, before his immigration to Palestine. He also told us that she, together with her older brother and his children, had lived for long months in the forest, when they were fleeing the Nazis.

To a five- or six-year-old, living and hiding in forests sounded like a great, utterly heroic adventure story. Having grown up in the bare, almost treeless mountains surrounding Jerusalem, I thought of the forest in the context of childhood legends such as "Little Red Riding Hood" or "Snow White." Thus, my early childhood images of my survivor relatives, though not fighters or partisans, were of heroes to admire.

In high school in the early 1950s I encountered another story of survival. This was the personal account of my future brother-in-law, David – the story of his family who were deported to Auschwitz from Hungary. This was a narrative of death, loss, and survival that ended in his serving as a soldier in the newly created Israel Defense Forces in the

War of Independence. At the age of 14 I knew only a little more about the history of the Second World War and the fate of the Jews. The subject was not yet included in the history curriculum, which ended with the defeat of Napoleon. Moreover, this was still before the ceremonies commemorating the Holocaust were formalized in law and became routine in the schools. Nevertheless, in the daily life of an ordinary lower middle class high school student, the Holocaust was ever present and referred to quite often in daily conversations in the family or among neighbors, and was also the subtext of many discussions on current events in the youth movement. However, systematic knowledge of the history of the war and the destruction of European Jewry was lacking.

The story of my future brother-in-law, who lost his parents and younger siblings in Auschwitz and reached Palestine with his older brother, who was killed in the War of Independence, was a shock to me. The death of the brother who survived the Holocaust was an enormous tragedy. I kept asking my future brother-in-law about his family's life before the war and how they managed after his father was taken away, never to return. As the family story unfolded in more detail, a sense of helplessness over the death of the brother during the 1948 war increased. I remember thinking to myself that at some point in my adult life I must learn to better understand the survivors. How, after the experience of the Holocaust, were they able to fight in the War of Independence, endure more fatalities, and return to daily life with optimism and creativity like my brother-in-law?

When I recall these experiences of childhood and adolescence, I wonder to what extent they accounted for my academic preferences and my intellectual development. Perhaps I am constructing a narrative to support my field of research? Were the memories and the determination to understand the survivors' return to life a genuine motivation when I decided to concentrate in my graduate studies on the Holocaust period (a goal I set before I began undergraduate studies in history and the Bible)? Moreover, my research topics display a progression from what I would identify as the border of Holocaust events and geography – Istanbul as a center for rescue efforts, and illegal immigration to Palestine – to the core of the tragedy, the life of the Jews in Eastern European ghettos.

My first book, *Escaping the Holocaust*, was a study on illegal immigration to Palestine during World War II.¹ The conclusions reached reflected the dialectic nature of illegal immigration. As a clandestine movement of those who wanted to find their way to Palestine, it had to remain small, disguised, and shared only by select groups prepared to endure the hardships and risks involved. However, its importance lay in the fact that it became a “mass” movement that helped to provide a haven to Jews from all walks of life. Conducted within the framework of the Zionist movement, it was meant to serve major Zionist goals. However, in practice conflicts often arose within the political leadership of the *Yishuv* (Jewish community of Palestine) and the Zionist movement in general.

Another interesting contradiction that characterized illegal immigration was its contribution to the rescue efforts of the *Yishuv* during the last years of the war. Disregarded by *Yishuv* leadership as a central means for Jewish emigration during the first part of the war, it later became a major expression of direct rescue efforts for Jews in occupied Europe. Despite its shortcomings and limited results, illegal immigration enabled the *Yishuv* to initiate rescue schemes for European Jewry as soon as the scope of the murders was realized. It also provided an outlet for the sense of frustration in the face of the Holocaust and the need to take direct action to rescue the tormented Jews.

Israeli society and the memory of the Holocaust, including the absorption of survivors and their role in shaping and formulating the agents of memory, became another major field of my academic efforts.²

1 Dalia Ofer, “Rescue and Aid Operation of the Yishuv Delegation in Istanbul, 1943–1944,” M.A. thesis, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1974 (Hebrew); idem, “Illegal Immigration to Palestine 1939–1942,” Ph.D. thesis, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1982 (Hebrew). My book, *Escaping the Holocaust: Illegal Immigration to the Land of Israel 1939–1944* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), is a revised and expanded version of the dissertation.

2 Dalia Ofer, “Israel,” in: David Wyman, ed., *The World Reacts to the Holocaust* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 839–923; idem, “The Strength of Remembrance: Commemoration of the Holocaust during the First Decade of Israel,” *Jewish Social Studies: History, Culture, and Society* 6, no. 2 (March 2000), 24–55; idem, “History, Memory and Identity: Perception of the Holocaust in Israel,” in: Uzi

I have followed the formulation and development of commemoration within the framework of state decisions, education, literature, cultural activities, and public discourse. In a broad survey on Israel published in *The World Reacts to the Holocaust*, and in a number of articles that followed, I presented my thesis on the ongoing genuine dialogue taking place among Israelis on the Holocaust. This dialogue emerges from an examination and effort to resolve the place of the Holocaust in Israelis' self-understanding and identity. It is expressed in multiple voices, growing broader over the years, and is affected by political, social, and cultural developments in Israel. I took issue with the approach that views most state policy concerning commemoration and many of the activities in the field of education as manipulation of the memory of the Holocaust. I also took issue with the claim that during the 1950s the Holocaust was invisible in the public sphere, confined to private or individual expression by survivors and a few other associates.

It is obvious that no single cause, such as my childhood and adolescent experiences mentioned above, can explain my academic and intellectual development. A few formative experiences, however, could unconsciously become a major motivation.

As a student of history majoring in modern Europe, I was faced with an intellectual challenge: to confront the history of the perpetrators. Moreover, as a teacher and educator in the Hebrew University High School from 1967 to 1984, the issues of perpetrators and victims raised dilemmas that were connected to the daily concerns of Israelis. After graduation from high school, my students served in the IDF and some never returned from the wars of 1973 and 1982–84. Some served in the West Bank and were exposed to the sufferings of the Palestinian population. They wrote me from time to time, or shared their concerns when we met occasionally. Israeli political reality was always in the background when teaching or

studying Jewish history and the Holocaust in the high school. Frequently, discussions about moral issues and contemporary responsibilities raised analogies with previous historical situations, including the Holocaust. These challenged any stereotypical approach; they called for broadened perspectives, and had to be balanced with caution and daring – by historical comparisons and analogies.

I realized that contextualization of historical events was not only an academic objective but also a routine of teaching history. A major challenge was to construct a bridge over which students would be able to cross back from the 1970s and 1980s to the 1930s and 1940s. Such a bridge would enable a genuine understanding of the past and sincere reflection on its meaning. To lead Israeli high school students through Weimar Germany and the Nazi era, and to guide them through the multifaceted life of the Jews in Europe in the interwar period and during the Holocaust, became a sort of exploratory effort: how to portray the historical protagonists without turning them into either monsters or saints, and how to demonstrate the ability and limitations of people to make choices. My goal was to avoid stereotyping and mystification. Teaching the Holocaust continued to be a topic in my academic interests and my teaching in the School of Education of the Hebrew University.³

When I had to decide on the path that my personal research would follow, I integrated the intellectual challenge with my soul and feelings, and turned to the study of Jewish life in the face of Nazi persecution and destruction. In this respect I am a student and disciple of Yisrael Gutman and Yehuda Bauer, who viewed the Jews as the subject of research and not as an object in reconstructing the perpetrators' decision-making process and actions. Description of the lives and survival strategies of Jews was linked to political developments, the progress of the war, and Nazi antisemitic ideology. The "Jerusalem school" of Holocaust research that

Rebhun and Chaim Waxman, eds., *Jews in Israel: Contemporary Social and Cultural Patterns* (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 2004), 394–419; idem, "Fifty Years of Israeli Discourse on the Holocaust: Characteristics and Dilemmas," in: Anita Shapira, ed., *Israeli Identity in Transition* (Westport, CT and London: Praeger, 2004), 137–162.

³ Dalia Ofer, "The Holocaust as a Historical Discipline and Its Educational Significance," *Holocaust and Education: Proceedings of the First International Conference*, (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1999), 77–84; idem, "Holocaust Education between History and Memory," *Jewish Education*, vol. 10 (2004), 87–108.

Gutman and Bauer established did not judge the Jewish response to the Nazi assault by the standard of the end result – life or death – but rather through study and understanding of the activities and intentions of the Jewish population under Nazi rule and their successful or failed attempts to survive and live according to their ideas and ideals.

I was drawn to social history while researching the fate of some 1,200 Jewish immigrants from the Reich who set out on a voyage to Palestine in October 1939 and were stranded in Serbia, unable to reach their destination. They are known as the Kladovo-Sabać Group, and in the spring of 1941 they all fell prey to the German invaders. During the eighteen months they spent in Serbia as refugees they were able to correspond with family, friends, and Jewish organizations, and sound a plea for help. I was able to collect more than 1,200 letters that expressed personal and often intimate information about daily life. These letters revealed a mixture of hope and despair, according to the prospects of accomplishing their journey of immigration. Among many different issues, the letters described openly, and also in the subtext, the tensions within this variegated group of immigrants who had to establish a kind of communal framework under difficult circumstances and uncertainty and had to create order and cooperation in the unsettled conditions of daily life. For months they lived on boats until they were transferred to temporary camps in two different locations in Serbia-Kladovo and Sabać.⁴

The letters – written by men and women, mothers and father, adolescents and children, members of political parties and youth movements – disclosed the efforts and difficulties involved in maintaining the group as a community that shared solidarity and responsibility under the slim opportunities to accomplish their objective of emigration. (With the German invasion of Serbia, emigration became a matter of life and death.)⁵ Thus, daily life became a central theme in my work aimed

at redeeming the concept from banality and connecting it to the major political and local issues. One of my goals was to understand the routine of daily activities in a climate of uncertainty and arbitrary dictates and in the face of the Nazi threat, and to relate it to the concept of normalcy of daily life. I was interested in examining the transitions that the private and the public spheres went through, and what were the imprints on the individual and the collective.

I was also influenced by the general historical debate on writing “microhistory,” the research on local and social history, and the study of the daily life of Germans and occupied populations under the Nazi regime. That discussion introduced the issue of the “normalization” and “banalization” of Nazism and the desire of a number of German historians to relativize the acts and consequences of Nazism.⁶ As to the study of the social history of the Jews during the Holocaust, some questioned the validity of using of the term “social history” when the subject covered a rather short period of time. Others thought that these discussions would distract attention from the major issue of Jewish responses to the Nazi onslaught such as Jewish self-organization, leadership, and resistance. The use of terminology supplied by sociological and social psychological studies of normal societies was far removed from the experiences of Jews in this period, and would only reduce it to banal stories.

However, I thought that research from the perspective of the individual and the “simple man and woman” contributed a new and important dimension for understanding terms used widely in Holocaust research such as resistance, rescue, and survival, and would offer a better understanding of the life of Jews under Nazi rule.

I was searching for a theory that relates to the manner in which a person utilizes daily knowledge, information, and experiences in confronting a major social or personal crisis in his/her life. Such a theory

⁴ Dalia Ofer and Hannah Wiener, *The Dead-End Journey: The Tragic Story of the Kladovo-Sabac Group* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1996).

⁵ Dalia Ofer, “Personal Letters in Research and Education on the Holocaust,” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 4, no. 3 (1989), 341–55.

⁶ Georg G. Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1997), 65–77, 97–117; Deltev J.K. Peukert, *Inside Nazi Germany: Conformity, Opposition and Racism in Everyday Life* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1987), 21–46.

may help in understanding the patterns of thinking that enabled Kladovo refugees or ghetto residents to accommodate themselves to the difficult reality. It might suggest concepts that would clarify the narrative of documentary evidence such as letters, diaries, and memoirs, and would explain how people perceived their existential conditions.⁷ A few ideas were suggested by Peter Berger and Thomas Lackmann in their book *The Social Construction of Reality*,⁸ some of which may be relevant to the conditions of the stranded immigrants or the ghetto population. They maintain that individual and collective past experiences that have become fixed in one's memory act as a guide in harsh circumstances and times of crisis.

My knowledge of everyday life has the quality of an instrument that cuts a path through a forest and, as it does so, projects a narrow cone of light on what lies just ahead and immediately around; on all sides of the path there continues to be darkness. This image pertains even more, of course, to the multiple realities in which everyday life is continually transcended.⁹

By means of this past experience, and by means of standards and hopes for the future, the individual modifies reality into something he can live with day by day. Expressions such as “things like this have already occurred in the past,” or “our history teaches us that a solution appears after a time of crisis,” indicate how people use past experience to give meaning to and rationalize a crisis and raise their hopes. Giving some purpose and sense to daily life is important for the ability of the individual to survive and to contend with crises. In this way the individual forms a vision of the future in which there will be no persecution. This leads to another central principle: to categorize the events as happening “here and now,”¹⁰ thus stressing their temporality – that is, the temporary

nature of the refugee camps or ghetto. The principle of temporality helps to create patterns of accommodation to, and explanations of, the harsh reality, patterns which enable the individual to bear his tribulations. Since life in camps or ghettos was transitory, the purpose of all the activities initiated by the inhabitants and leaders, whether out of necessity or by choice, is to reinforce the sense of its temporary nature and to strengthen the inhabitants' value system which was shaped by past experience. All despite the fact that the individual and the public in the ghetto were well aware of the glaring gap between their present life and the value system upon which they leaned for support. I will not elaborate further on the theory of Berger and Lackmann, but only stress that it greatly assisted my reading of personal contemporary sources in my effort to portray a more comprehensive picture of daily life.

My exposure to gender studies reinforced my efforts to integrate the personal narratives with theoretical conceptualization. My colleague Lenore Weitzman and I attempted to provide a theoretical approach to gender as a factor of analysis in the social and cultural history of the Holocaust. Gender – like class, age, and education – is a social category to be used, and it contributed to arriving at a more comprehensive narrative of the Holocaust. Drawing on Moshe Rosman's approach to Jewish cultural history and Paula Hyman's view of the role of gender in Jewish social history, I found gender to be a crystallizing category in the analysis of continuity and change in the social and political reality of the Jews during the Holocaust.¹¹ In connection with daily life, gender contributed a nuance to its complexity and assisted in revisiting concepts such as resistance, accommodation, denial, and more. It also enabled a methodical examination of the family and its role and transformation in different environments and stages of Nazi policy, and established new perspectives

7 Dalia Ofer, “Everyday Life of Jews under Nazi Occupation: Methodological Issues,” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 9, no. 1 (Spring 1995), 42–69; idem, “Everyday Life in the Ghettos of Transnistria,” *Yad Vashem Studies* 25 (1996), 175–208.

8 Peter Berger and Thomas Lackmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1971).

9 Ibid., 59.

10 Ibid., 54.

11 Moshe Rosman, “A Prolegomenon to Jewish Cultural History,” *Jewish Studies: An Internet Journal (JSIJ)* 1 (2002), 109–127; Paula Hyman, “The Dynamics of Social History,” *Studies on Contemporary Jewry*, vol. X, (2004), 93–111; Jacob Katz, “On Jewish Social History: Epochal and Supra-Epochal Historiography,” *Jewish History*, vol. 7, no. 1 (Spring 1993), 89–97.

to encounter solidarity and rupture in the history of families.¹² In my view, the family was the key to understanding the efforts to endure hardship in the ghetto. In describing the family life of different social groups we have to introduce economic differences, class, gender, education, and transformation of the role of family members in response to the new reality. Ruptures and cohesion of families are central experiences in the interpretation of life in the ghetto.¹³

My current research, “Daily Life in East European Ghettos,” reflects my search for a comprehensive interpretation of daily life in the ghetto. Although it is impossible to describe ghetto life in detail during the different stages of the war, it must be kept in mind that the reality was never stable, that changes occurred suddenly and unexpectedly. Factors that might seem to be insignificant in the overall picture of the Jewish fate during the war, such as the replacement of local authorities or the emergence of a specific need for products or professionals in one location, could have temporarily changed life in a ghetto and could have determined the ability of its population to respond differently to persecution.

All ghettos were imposed communities. They did not emerge from an evolution of social, political, economic, or demographic processes. They were means used by oppressive regimes to cut off the Jews from their natural environment and to isolate them physically, socially and mentally. They operated under the terror and violence of war and occupation.

12 Dalia Ofer and Lenore L. Weizman, eds., *Women in the Holocaust*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 1–18; Dalia Ofer, “Gender Issues in Ghetto Diaries and Interviews: The Case of Warsaw,” *idem*, 143–167; Lenore L. Weizman and Dalia Ofer, “Women in the Holocaust: Theoretical Foundations for a Gendered Analysis of the Holocaust,” in: Marcia Sachs Littell, ed., *Women in the Holocaust: Responses, Insights and Perspectives* (Merion Station, PA: Merion Westfield Press International, 2001), 1–34; *idem*, “Her View through My Lens: Cecilia Slepak Studies Women in Warsaw,” in: Judy Tydor Baumel and Tova Cohen, eds., *Gender, Place and Memory in Modern Jewish Experience* (London and Portland, OR: Vallentine Mitchell, 2003), 29–50.

13 “Cohesion and Rupture: The Jewish Family in East European Ghettos during the Holocaust,” *Studies in Contemporary Jewry* 14 (1998), 143–165.

Ghettos were established throughout Eastern Europe, though everywhere at a different pace and in different forms.¹⁴

Most research to date on the ghettos has centered on two major topics: (a) the ghetto administration and its leadership, that is, the *Judenrat* and its relations with the Nazi authorities and the ghetto population; and (b) Jewish responses to the Nazi assault, which included both spiritual and armed resistance. My challenge was to add the perspective of the daily life of the individual Jew and to better understand how Jews managed to get by and make a living in the dire conditions of the ghetto until they were brutally deported to the death camps. A major concept that I struggle with is normalcy. As I mentioned above, despite the extreme situation in the ghettos, the family existed and strived to function – parents cared for their children’s education; for observant Jews, observing religious commandments was part of the daily struggle; and the need to listen to music or go to the theater did not disappear. All these phenomena are factors of normality; what do they teach us in the ghetto situation?¹⁵ By adding this perspective to the research already carried out, I wish to understand the quest for “normality” evident in the activities shared by the inhabitants, who maintained their hopes for a decent human future.

The social reality in the ghettos constantly challenged the social order and value system of the community. In fact, intentional efforts had to be

14 For an elaborated discussion on the ghetto and an interesting linguistic and comparative approach, see: Dan Michman, “The Jewish Ghetto in the Nazi Era: Origins and Implications” (Hebrew; in preparation). See also: Martin Dean, “The Jewish Councils under German Occupation in Eastern Poland and the Soviet Union” (forthcoming); *idem*, “Ghetto in the Occupied Soviet Union: The Nazi ‘System’,” in *The Holocaust in the Soviet Union: Symposium Presentation* (Washington DC: Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2005), 37–60.

15 Gustavo Corni, *Hitler’s Ghettos: Voices from a Beleaguered Society 1939–1944* (London: Hodder Arnold Publication, 2003); Eric J. Sterling, ed., *Life in the Ghettos during the Holocaust* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2005). This book is a collection of articles introducing different aspects of ghetto life; however, it does not offer a coherent description of social issues of ghetto life. The foreword by John Roth raises a number of the major issues, but they are not followed up in the book.

made to create a sense of belonging to the diverse population that was concentrated in small, medium-sized, and large ghettos. The constant stream of refugees and people who were expelled from their communities by the Germans, often coming from different countries and cultural backgrounds, opened up a vast field for social abuse and corruption. The power system, to which I will refer below, was another factor that encouraged selfishness and disregard of what in regular times would be considered the “public good.” Knowledge and awareness of a value system, despite its inapplicability to ghetto life, led the individual to struggle and adopt in the ghetto the human qualities that had marked his/her life as a free person. In other words, in my work I hope to identify those components of ghetto life that are representative of patterns with which Jews had been familiar, in one form or another, in their personal experience, or which had emerged from Jewish organizational life in the recent or distant past.

I would like to conclude with an issue for which I was unable to provide an adequate solution. How should we define class in the ghetto? Any description of daily life in the ghettos must take into account social stratification. We are unable to consider class according to Marxist terminology, as the Jews were stripped not only of their ownership of the means of production but more or less of all their assets, savings, and economic means. Thus the issue of class struggle in its conventional sense has no bearing. Nevertheless, the move to the ghetto entailed radical changes in the economic situation of people of different professions and vocations. The ghetto, as a coerced society, had to create solidarity and struggle for social justice, which did not necessarily assist its survival. The power structure in the ghetto and the roles of various groups within its center of power were a major determinant of the status of a person and his/her family. This was reflected in the most crucial factor of survival, the accessibility to food or, quite simply, the daily intake of calories.

I thought that the theory of center and periphery developed by Edward Shils could be useful in demonstrating relative access to authority

and power.¹⁶ Though this theory relates to the distribution of political power relative to the proximity to or distance from the center of power, I suggested that it can be used as a social criterion to evaluate the position of the individual vis-à-vis the centers of authority in the ghetto. It illustrates both the connection and the dividing line between the individual and the various centers of power that rendered services such as the provision of employment, food, health services, etc. I believe that such an analysis should be complemented by an examination of the social and economic status of the individual before the war, in this way clearly demonstrating his or her dependence upon the collective in private life.

In sum, my own personal odyssey in pursuing my interest in the Holocaust has come a long way from that engendered by the personal histories of relatives and school friends to my academic efforts to gain a comprehensive understanding of life in the ghetto under horrifying conditions.

¹⁶ Edward Albert Shils, *Center and Periphery: Essays in Macro-Sociology* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1975). I have used this theory in the following article: “Everyday Life in the Ghettos in Transnistria,” *Yad Vashem Studies* 25 (1996), 175–208.

A Witness and His Path to Research

Feliks Tych

I took up research on the Holocaust and its postwar consequences relatively late, no doubt largely because I was beset by my own memories and experiences of those years. Like many other survivors, I needed time to deal with what I had lived through and witnessed, within the cocoon of my privacy.

Already in middle school I wanted to become a historian, but when I graduated in history from the University of Warsaw in 1951/52, neither in Poland nor in the rest of Europe was academia interested in the Holocaust. For the conventions of academic teaching of the time, the Shoah, like the just-ended Second World War, was not only too fresh but, more importantly, too difficult and troublesome. Several decades were needed before it became one of the principal measures of the twentieth century and its civilization, a reference point for looking at the foundations of human coexistence and at the attempts to destroy them.

With the perspective of time I see that giving this subject a wide berth was more a way of escaping the problem, a conspiracy of silence, than simply a manifestation of academic conservatism. In the case of Poland, as in many other countries, the introduction of Holocaust research and teaching in any form to the university curriculum was blocked not so much by the prevailing political system as by society's lack of readiness to deal with the subject. Behind this was a certain social consensus between the rulers and the majority of the ruled, which was much easier to achieve in this matter than in many others. Such a consensus existed not only among the societies that had been involved to various degrees in the Holocaust as perpetrators, accomplices, or people guilty of failing to act; it also included

states and societies that had no involvement in the Holocaust but had not extended a helping hand in time to the potential victims of the Holocaust, or later to those who were being killed. In countries that had been swept up in the Holocaust, people who had rescued Jews kept silent as well, for other reasons. For the majority of Jewish survivors it remained their private domain for many years, often until their death. All this did not make for an atmosphere encouraging research on the Holocaust or remembrance of it – not as an event, and not as a warning.

When in the early 1950s Yitzhak Schneerson campaigned for the establishment of a Holocaust research center and memorial in Paris, a leading Israeli historian of the day, Professor Benzion Dinur, then Israeli Minister of Education and Culture and later first director of the Yad Vashem Institute founded in 1953, declared that it would be enough for one Shoah memorial institution to be established in the world, and that it should be in Israel.¹ It looked as if only Jews were supposed to remember and reflect on the Holocaust of their people, and only in their state.

Such a stance is not so surprising after the experience of the great abandonment of the murdered Jews during the Holocaust, but, astonishingly, it makes no allowance for the possibility that in time the memory of the Shoah might become of interest to many inhabitants of our planet other than Jews, and not only in the countries that had been gripped by the Holocaust or only brushed by its grave-clothes.

It was to take three postwar decades for the Holocaust to become, in a large part of the world, one of the things by which we judge the twentieth century; on a broader scale in research and education it happened only in the last decade of the twentieth century. The genesis of this radical change of attitude toward Holocaust study and teaching at the turn of the twentieth/twenty-first centuries is most often attributed to generational change. It seems, however, that no less a role was played by growing attention to global threats to civilization looming over the world, a need to

protect the human species that covers not only those playing on the same national team or praying to the same gods.

In Poland the situation differed little in this regard from that prevailing in the countries of Western or Central Europe. Here it came perhaps a little later than there, with one exception: here, earlier than anywhere else in the world, very professional and innovative scientific research on the Holocaust had already been undertaken in 1940–43. It was done by an underground study and documentation team led by the historian Emanuel Ringelblum in the Warsaw ghetto. Importantly, Ringelblum's group made sure to safeguard its documentation and analytical results so that they would pass into the hands of the next generation even though almost all of the authors of this project fell victim to the Holocaust. Their work remained.

Independently, before the Ringelblum Archive was found in the ruins of the Warsaw ghetto and initially without knowledge of its existence, the Central Jewish Historical Commission (CJHC) continued Ringelblum's mission in the new circumstances after the Germans were expelled from eastern Poland. The CJHC was founded in the latter half of 1944 in just-liberated Lublin by a group of Jewish intellectuals who survived the Holocaust, headed by Filip Friedman, a historian of Polish Jewry who had already achieved renown before the war. At their initiative, in 1947 the Commission was transformed into a regular institute for Holocaust research. The Jewish Historical Institute (JHI), for this is what we describe, was the world's first Holocaust research institute. The world knew little of these studies, however, for three reasons: the language barrier; Poland's increasing isolation from the West as a result of the politics of the USSR-dominated East Bloc; and avoidance of the very subject of the Holocaust for decades after the war, on both sides of the Iron Curtain. In part this avoidance was imposed from the top, but it was also very convenient for large if not the largest segments of society, and not only in the communist countries.

As a result of the work of the CJHC and its successor the JHI, publications based on primary research were issued in Poland from 1945 on. This was unthinkable in the other East Bloc countries. These were usually published in very small editions, but they did appear.

¹ See: Yehiam Weitz, "Shaping the Memory of the Holocaust in Israeli Society of the 1950s," in: Yisrael Gutman, ed., *Major Changes Within the Jewish People in the Wake of the Holocaust* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1996), 500.

The CJHC and the JHI were not the only centers for Holocaust research in Poland in the immediate aftermath of the war. The Main Commission for Investigation of German Crimes in Poland (later, after the creation of the German Democratic Republic, called the Main Commission for Investigation of Nazi Crimes in Poland), established by the Polish authorities in March 1945, also addressed the subject. It operated as a special department of the Justice Ministry, and a significant part of its work dealt with the murder of Jews in occupied Poland during the war years, identification of the perpetrators, and bringing them to trial. This institution and its very important publications about the Holocaust, like the works of the CJHC and the JHI, reached a closed circle of interested persons, although the results of its investigations, like the CJHC and JHI publications, were neither proscribed nor inaccessible. The press runs, like the interest in these studies, were small, and behind them there was no significant group of people committed to spreading the knowledge they contained.

Nor was there very broad interest in these publications on the part of Holocaust survivors. They were mainly too busy finding their place among the living. As a result, apart from the CJHC in 1944–47 and the JHI from 1947, the ones more often occupied with the Holocaust were the Polish lawyers engaged in identifying the perpetrators.

Paradoxically, the early 1950s saw fewer publications devoted to the Holocaust than had appeared in 1945/46. There were two reasons for this: the pioneering historiographers of the Holocaust in Poland who were centered around the CJHC had left Poland in 1946/47, and the communist rulers hardened their political line and escalated their interference in the initially fairly independent activity of Jewish institutions. Filip Friedman, initiator and chairman of the CJHC and also the first director of the JHI (1947), had left Poland, as had his colleagues in this effort, such as Nachman Blumental and Michał Borwicz.

From the first postwar years to the 1980s, the work of the JHI, particularly its invaluable work amassing Holocaust-related archives, proceeded outside the mainstream of Polish historiography. This statement also sums up the general situation of Holocaust studies. The harshest blow to JHI Holocaust research was dealt by the rulers of Poland in 1968, when

a brutal antisemitic campaign unleashed by the ruling party and the secret police forced almost all the JHI staff involved in Holocaust research to emigrate. These included Tatiana Berenstein, Adam Rutkowski, Shmuel Krakowski, Danuta Dąbrowska and later also Artur Eisenbach. In two JHI academic journals published since 1950, the Yiddish-language *Bleter far geszichte* and Polish-language *Biuletyn ŻIH*, they had printed many source works and studies on the Holocaust, material which is still of value and deserving of mention. There was no one to replace these scholars. The subject had not yet drawn the attention of Polish historians, except for a very few such as Władysław Bartoszewski or later Teresa Prekerowa.

Twice in the 1980s, members of the Association of the Jewish Historical Institute, the JHI support organization, offered me the directorship of the Institute. I declined both times. The reason for refusal was a simple one: for thirty years I had been engaged mainly in studying the history of social movements at the turn of the nineteenth/twentieth centuries. Jewish people were broadly present in my research, but as an integral part of the scene in the historical times I was studying, which did not extend chronologically beyond the end of the First World War. I did not think that my knowledge of historical research methods and my own experience of Holocaust times gave me sufficient preparation to direct an institution such as the JHI. I was fairly familiar with the literature on the Holocaust, but only what was available in Poland at the time, and I had no personal experience working with the sources on the subject. However, when the Association of the Jewish Historical Institute again offered me the directorship of the JHI in 1995, and did not conceal the fact that the Institute was in deep crisis and that it was a matter of taking steps to save it, I acknowledged that morally I could not walk away from the challenge. I felt that I owed it to the memory of my loved ones who perished in the Holocaust, and in some sense also to myself, to my moral integrity, to my past.

At first I deluded myself that at the JHI I would be able, while making Institute matters the absolute priority, to set aside a little time for the period and the subjects I had been working on for several decades. I had achieved some international renown in that field, and at the moment I was offered the JHI directorship I had several writing projects in advanced

stages, with foreign publishers already committed. They contained many Jewish themes but did not concern the Holocaust; they broke off at 1918/19. But when I learned more about the dramatic circumstances of the Institute and its collections, I determined that I had to concentrate entirely on extricating the Institute from a situation that was difficult in every way – in terms of staffing, finances, and above all programs – the situation into which it had been driven by the winds of history.

It struck me as bizarre that an institute created specifically to study the Holocaust of Polish Jewry, and which had functioned in that form until 1968, more than a quarter century later could not rise up from the blows dealt by the events of that year, and blows dealt by the political line on Jewish matters that prevailed through the next decade and beyond.

Not only had the Institute been almost completely stripped of its Holocaust research specialists, but its priceless archives were in a dreadful condition. They were endangered by the damp, mildewed walls of the building, which had been hastily reconstructed after the war. There was no current inventory of the archive, none of it was computerized, and some very important groups of documents had never been catalogued.

I realized that for an unforeseeable period I had to give up my plans to reconcile work for the Institute with the task of finishing my uncompleted writing projects from my previous area of research, or else renounce the writ demanded by the difficult situation at the JHI. I chose the former. I did not intend to be merely an ambulance driver, nor only a manager. Since I believed that the JHI should return to its original mission, that is, to study the Holocaust and promote knowledge of it, as the core of its profile (while also researching the history of Polish Jewry in earlier periods), it followed logically from that intention that I should throw myself into Holocaust research. And that is what happened.

Unlike my predecessors, I thought it essential to broaden our research on the Holocaust to include its postwar consequences, not limited to the demographic effects of the Nazi plan for the “final solution of the Jewish question.” The consequences extend beyond the people murdered, the ones drained of life by hunger, cold and epidemics in the ghettos and camps, killed on the death marches and by the other methods employed to annihilate the Jews. They also concern those who did not experience

the Holocaust directly but who lived shorter lives as a result of their ordeals in the ghettos, in the camps, or in hiding. The Holocaust also had far-reaching traumatic effects, which often impacted the descendants of survivors. One of them was desertion of Jewishness by a significant percentage of Europe’s Jews who had survived the Holocaust. In some cases it was only a temporary renunciation, but was often permanent. In some sense this phenomenon was part of the balance sheet of the Holocaust for the Jewish population; if only for this reason, it could not escape the attention of historians.

Based on my own experience of the Holocaust period and its aftermath, I believed that its true dimensions would become evident only when viewed in association with its postwar consequences and continuation: the hostile reception of the returning Holocaust survivors by the local population; the refusal to restore their property to them, which led directly to the pauperization of Jewish survivors; the irreparable moral harm done to survivors by post-Holocaust events such as the destruction of Jewish cemeteries and synagogues, which had begun spontaneously during the war; and the “murder” of Yiddish as the everyday language of communication of the majority of Polish Jews. It was almost completely eliminated from the family of living languages in this part of Europe.

It was not only Jews who were affected by the postwar repercussions of the Holocaust. In the first place I would mention the disastrous influence of the Holocaust on not only the wartime but the postwar moral state of the non-Jewish population. That offspring of the Holocaust, when many drew the conclusion that Jews could be murdered with impunity, was a wave of postwar pogroms and individual killings of Jews in Poland, and on a smaller scale in Hungary and Slovakia.

It was and is my opinion that the de facto impunity of the perpetrators, unappreciated for many years, is hugely important in considering the Holocaust and the moral atmosphere of postwar Europe: the perpetrators who planned and directed the machine of murder from behind their desks, who personally murdered by industrial methods on a large scale, or else “only” on a local scale or individually. I have in mind not only the initiators and the main executors of these crimes, but also their helpers among the local populace: the ones who captured ghetto escapees,

denounced Jews in hiding or robbed them of all they had, which usually meant condemning them to death. We all know that only a negligible percentage of the perpetrators in these different categories were punished, and not because they could not be identified or found. We also know the source of that reluctance to convict.

I saw the repetition of the crime of genocide in Europe (the Balkans) a few decades after the Shoah as an event which probably would not have happened if all the identified perpetrators and direct implementers of the Holocaust had been punished as examples and if the world had known of that. This is one of the important points of knowledge about the Shoah, if we accept that in the interest of humanity this knowledge should be an integral part of the modern mind-set that serves to protect the species *homo sapiens*.

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At times I think that there was a certain logic to my revisiting – this time as a researcher – events I had witnessed as a child aware of what was happening, events which later made hunted game of the young boy I was, for I never could nor wanted to rid myself of the memory of those horrible years. They have accompanied me through all of my youth and adult life.

While still a high school student I devoured every publication on the Holocaust. Many survivors fled from such reading matter. I did not condemn them, but neither did I practice that therapy of forgetting. I viewed the memory of what occurred in 1939–45 and immediately after the war as an integral part of the sum of my life experiences and as part of my personality. On the other hand, before 1995 I never attempted to deal with this subject in my research.

The magic of the historic walls of the JHI and above all my daily contact with documents from Holocaust times played a large role in the shift of my interest in the Holocaust from the private sphere to that of research, to a daily occupation, as I took up my duties at the JHI. More importantly, as a historian I felt more needed at this place than in all the other places of my previous professional work as researcher and teacher,

and from the beginning of my work here I saw the revival of this institution as the greatest challenge of my adult life.

What was it about the state of research on the Holocaust and knowledge of it in the Poland of the mid 1990s that struck me most? Above all it was that the research and its dissemination were then, six and more years after Poland's transformation into a democratic state, only slightly less ghettoized than during the *ancien régime*.

For me the crowning proof of this peculiar situation was to be found in school textbooks. They clearly confirmed that knowledge of the abundant Jewish presence in Polish history in the years and centuries before the war, awareness of the reasons why Jews had virtually vanished from the Polish ethnic landscape, were confined to the utter margins of the history curriculum in the majority of schools,² and consequently were beyond the historical awareness of the postwar generations of Poles, that is, the majority of Polish society.

We are speaking of blank pages, gaps in the general historical narrative of a country which before the Holocaust had the world's largest percentage of Jews in its population. Before the German assault on Poland in September 1939, on average every second urbanite was a Jew, and for several centuries the absolute majority of the Jews on the planet lived in this country. I mention these well-known facts only to illustrate the disparity between the principal media of general historical knowledge, that is, history textbooks, regional museums, tourist guides, etc., and the true picture of Polish history. The situation did not begin to improve significantly until the first decade of the twenty-first century, and when it did, it was mainly due not to any "history policy" guided from on high; it happened because the young generations of Poles felt a growing need to learn the historical truth about the past of their country. Including the inconvenient, painful history, history that does not tell fairy tales far from the actual process and likeness of history's unfolding.

2 I say "majority" and not "all" because even earlier I had met many Polish teachers who, at their own initiative and out of concern for the true picture of history, had passed knowledge of the Holocaust on to their students.

This does not mean that the promulgators of historical fiction and myths loaded with anti-Jewish phobia have left the stage of Polish propaganda and the media. The number of adherents and practitioners of historical truth is probably increasing faster, however.

Students' knowledge depends not only on textbooks but also on what teachers say on a given subject, and on whether they say anything at all. The problem is that since the late 1980s only a few teachers of history and Polish literature – outstanding, bold pioneers spreading knowledge about the Jewish historical presence in Poland and about the Holocaust – have on their own introduced Jewish material to their teaching. The general rule has been otherwise: if it appeared at all in classroom lessons, the Holocaust was presented as a sidelight to the story of the period of German occupation and the Second World War. The civilizational aspect of the Holocaust, the postwar exodus of the remnant of Polish Jewry who survived the Holocaust, and the causes of this, generally were not covered in textbooks.

The information about the Holocaust in the textbooks of the first half of the 1990s, that is, when Poland was already a democracy, was sparser than what was in a history textbook (controversial in other respects) written by Żanna Kormanowa, which was in general use from the 1950s up until 1968. If Jews were mentioned in the textbooks, it was in a way that directly or indirectly suggested that they were not part of the Polish national corpus. They were treated as a kind of tenant, while in fact Poland had been their home for centuries. Most textbooks presented the course of the Holocaust as if it had been a type of German-Jewish warfare, not affecting Poles. Considering that it occurred in the country numerically most affected by the German genocide perpetrated on the Jews, and in the country selected by Hitler and his praetorians as the principal site for the execution of Europe's Jews, this cannot be called anything but a historical lie, spread in the simplest and most often employed way: with zones of silence.

Today the main problem with knowledge of the Holocaust is not the state of research but the scope of its dissemination: to make sure, in the interest of our civilization, that it is not niche learning for students of the teaching elite, but a part of general historical awareness. Research

by Polish sociologists shows that the majority of Poles do not know even the approximate number of Polish Jewish citizens before the war, nor the number of Holocaust victims in Poland and in Europe, nor the actual number of ethnic Poles and Polish Jews who died at the hands of the German occupier, nor the proportion between these two groups of victims.³ They do not know how many Jews live in Poland today, and as a rule they give very exaggerated figures, sometimes inflated by several orders of magnitude. Repeated studies show that the respondents' answers are getting closer to reality only very slowly, and ignorance still far outweighs familiarity with the truth. In many cases it is this ignorance, extending to many other areas of reality as well, which breeds hostile attitudes to Jews among their non-Jewish peers.

Historians no longer have problems accessing sources on the Holocaust. After the recent opening of the rich archives of the Red Cross International Search Service, located in the very center of Germany in the scenically located town of Bad Arolsen, the only larger collection not yet opened to Holocaust historians is the Vatican archive. The scale of the crimes is fairly well established, and the execution techniques and sites are known. The fate of the Jews in the ghettos and other places where they were isolated from the majority population before the "final solution of the Jewish question" is known. The sequence and the calendar of the decision-making process regarding the murder of all the Jews of Europe is known.

Recently, 65 years after the events, it has even come to light that a special task force followed the expeditionary force commanded by Field Marshal Erwin Rommel, the Afrika Korps, as it approached the Egyptian border in July 1942. Its task was to organize the slaughter of all the Jews living in Palestine upon its capture by the German army. This enterprise was hindered first by the two famous battles of El Alamein (in July and October/November 1942), the first steps on the road to the defeat of the

³ For example, see: Ireneusz Krzemiński et al., *Czy Polacy są antysemitami. Wyniki badania sondażowego* (Warszawa: Oficyna Naukowa 1997), passim; I. Krzemiński, ed., *Antysemityzm w Polsce i na Ukrainie, Raport z badań* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe SCHOLAR, 2004), passim.

entire German-Italian expeditionary campaign in North Africa. Here I note that by October/November 1942, by the time of El Alamein, the majority of the Polish Jews under German occupation had already been murdered.

There may yet be discoveries of equal importance to come, but generally the history of the Holocaust is already well researched and described.

Of course there is still a wide field for interpretation of the phenomenon known under the name "Holocaust." The problems open to interpretation include the behavior of victims and near-victims in the face of the Holocaust, the array of attitudes and motivations of society during the Holocaust (to which I shall return), and the characteristics and motivations of the perpetrators, both the rank and file and those who conceived, launched and to a large extent completed the genocidal project.

Until the beginning of the twenty-first century, Polish society showed scant interest in the Holocaust. Even the media-hyped controversy about the Auschwitz crosses in the 1990s (which arose mainly from the above-mentioned ignorance of the true proportions of the victims of the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp complex) did not change much. The Jedwabne debate from 2001 to 2002 did publicize the subject of the Holocaust, but the positive lessons of Jedwabne reached only the moral elite of the different generations of Polish society. Among less educated people the Jedwabne debate exacerbated antisemitic attitudes in Poland, as shown by reliable surveys. It was a defensive reaction to an unwanted truth.

This lack of readiness on the part of the majority of the Polish public to accept the truth about the Holocaust and the moral havoc it wrought among broad segments of the Polish people discouraged study of the subject for many years. It dampened the atmosphere for the Polish researchers who nevertheless strove to unearth the truth, however inconvenient. As late as January 2008, prosecutorial proceedings on a charge of insulting the Polish nation were initiated against Jan Tomasz Gross, an investigator of the wave of pogroms and other murderous anti-Jewish acts in Poland immediately after the war, which were above all a consequence of the deeply demoralizing effects on the Polish population of having witnessed the Holocaust and having observed the *de facto*

impunity of those who carried it out. In the end these proceedings against Gross were dropped, but only after pressure from above. The objective of the Cracow prosecution office, inspired by the position taken on Gross's book by the top echelon of the Institute of National Remembrance, was nothing else but an attempt to intimidate a researcher who had found in the wartime and postwar history of Polish society a truth connected directly and indirectly with the Holocaust, which constituted an extension of it on a smaller scale. It is a truth inconvenient from a nationalist point of view. These attempts to intimidate are hindrances placed in the way of further research on the Holocaust and the moral ruin it brought to part of Polish society. We know of cases in which Polish historians working on the different forms of antisemitism in their country shelved the results of their work for many years in order not to turn their colleagues against them. While there is no state censorship today, there is censorship from below, which is far more effective. Censorship of unwanted truths.

On the soil of occupied Poland, Lithuania, Ukraine, Latvia, Estonia and Belarus, in Hungary, and unlike in the countries of Western Europe and in the Third Reich itself, the Holocaust unfolded not only before the eyes of the majority of the native populace but often with their acquiescence or participation. For years to come, the life of researchers searching for the truth will be made difficult by a section of public opinion. I experienced it myself when, a few years ago at a conference in Cracow arranged by the government, I tried to draw attention to certain inconvenient facts related to the need for deeper analysis of the social environment of the Holocaust in occupied Poland. I became the object of vulgar attacks by the Polish nationalist press.

In recent years it has not been only the inconvenient, unwanted truth which has come to the surface. We are learning of more and more cases of Poles who rescued Jews. Until a few years ago there was not much mention of such figures as Irena Sendlerowa or the "Polish Wallenberg" Henryk Ślawiak. Whoever wished to could have found out earlier about their heroic service in rescuing Jews, but the atmosphere was not conducive. Their names have entered the school textbooks only in recent years.

The thousands of rescuers were in no hurry to publicize their contributions. Some kept it to themselves because they saw their deeds as an

obvious moral duty. The majority, however, remained silent because they feared their neighbors' opinions. Has this anything to do with research on the Holocaust and its social (or rather moral) context? Absolutely. For one thing, it enables an assessment of the actual proportion of people who attempted to save Jews versus those who indirectly or directly took part in tracking down Jews. Without the rescuers there is no true history of the Holocaust, just as without the different types of killers' assistants the picture is not complete.

Based on this idea, my first Holocaust research project was on the complex problem of its social context, and more precisely the attitudes of ethnic Poles to the German genocide. Contrary to what might be expected, I decided that the view would be based not on Jewish sources but entirely on Polish testimonies, which historians had not previously used to a sufficient extent. I relied on published and mainly heretofore unpublished wartime memoirs written by ethnic Poles and deposited after the war in the manuscript sections of the National Library, Ossolineum, and other large public and national libraries. In this way I wanted to reconstruct, if not the complete, the nearly complete range of attitudes of Poles toward the Holocaust during the time when that atrocity was being committed: attitudes described by the direct witnesses themselves and never censored by anyone. It would not settle the question of the proportions of attitudes, but it would help bring out their contexts and motivations.

I recognized that referring exclusively to Polish depositions would be seen as more reliable by the non-Jewish audience of this study, and for Jews it would better show the true Polish social setting of the Holocaust, with examples from the array of attitudes and motivations. Simply presenting the many different motivations for helping Jews threatened with death adds much to our view of it. The etiology of indifferent or approving attitudes to the German crime is much simpler, as it comes straight from the classical catalogue of reasons for antisemitism and its different gradations. The point is not only the variety of attitudes, however. Analysis of the Polish testimony tells much about the specific circumstances in which rescue or its opposite took place. What helping Jews meant in practice and what barriers separated it from other forms of resistance became clear only from this context.

I presented the first results of this research at an international conference organized in Warsaw in August 1999 by Yad Vashem, the Jewish Historical Institute, the University of Warsaw and the Hamburg Institute for Social Research on this subject: attitudes by the Holocaust of the majority populations of countries affected to it.⁴ Since that time, other historians have begun to use this set of primary sources. The rich material collected with the help of my wife for a book based on this source awaits preparation of the final version for press.

To sum up my experience in studying the Holocaust and its short-term and long-term consequences, I would say that for a historian, reconstructing the events poses far fewer problems than incorporating that knowledge into the broader historical discourse. The hardest thing, I repeat, is to convey an unwanted truth, and the most dangerous barrier to such truths is not censorship from above – for that is easy to circumvent in today's world – but censorship from below, boycotts, imperviousness to inconvenient truths.

The way that the majority of society – not only our society – perceives history largely resembles the way fans watch the national soccer team. This often impedes popularization of the truth about history, including the truth about how the Holocaust unfolded and what the attitudes of non-Jewish society were. The idea that the truth about history, including the bitter, unwanted truth, and not historical “boosterism,” is what builds a healthy and stable society, has not yet been generally accepted as the *modus operandi* of even all members of the historians' guild. What, then, can we expect of the average readers of their writings, the average listeners to their words?

Despite this, Polish research on the Holocaust and its consequences has developed in recent years on a scale unknown before. The reception of it has not been so encouraging. The market for these worthy publications

⁴ The paper was published in the conference proceedings. See: Feliks Tych, “Witnessing the Holocaust: Polish Diaries, Memoirs and Reminiscences,” in: David Bankier and Israel Gutman, eds., *Nazi Europe and the Final Solution* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2003), 175–198. The Polish version of it is in a collection of my historical sketches: *Długi cień Zagłady* (Warszawa: ŻIH, 1999, 2003).

is quite small for now, except when they are accompanied by a media-fed atmosphere of sensation or by a scandal trumpeted in the name of “defense of the national honor.”

An example of the relation between the quality of research and the breadth of reader interest, which not a straightforward one, is the publishing success of the controversial and academically weak book by Daniel J. Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners. The Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*, which came out in the United States in 1996 and has been translated into many languages including Polish. Another example is Jan Tomasz Gross's book *Fear*, the Polish edition of which came out in 2008. It is based mainly on already published research by Polish historians, but none of the original Polish publications met with the same kind of interest from the media. This was due to hysterical attacks on Gross by the Polish nationalist right and its manifold media outlets. A large “promotional” role was also played by the uproar over his previous book *Neighbors*, about the crime committed by Polish residents of the town of Jedwabne on their Jewish fellow citizens. The research in *Fear* was not faultless, and it added little to the earlier Polish publications. The point, however, is that as a rule only professional historians or others specifically interested in the subject had sought out those earlier works. The atmosphere of scandal around Gross's book, and its essay form, brought it to a larger readership with important information which those readers would not have looked for in the original published sources or monographs.

These examples also demonstrate that the state of research and the state of its dissemination and penetration to the public's historical awareness are two different things. The pathway of this particular subject matter from the archives to the teacher and the classroom should be the object of our special concern. What is at stake is not only the true picture of history but also the fundamental principles of human coexistence, if not protection of the human race itself.

translated from Polish

The Challenges of Holocaust Scholarship A Personal Statement Debórah Dwork

“Write about the difficulties you have faced in your work on the Holocaust,” the invitation to contribute to this volume suggested. The *difficulties*? What, I wondered, about this area of historical inquiry has been *easy*? Yet I found myself pondering the question. What indeed had been the greatest challenges? Were they manifestations of the particular moment in history and in the development of the discipline when I began my work, or are they integral to study of the Holocaust today and into the future?

Tracing the trajectory of my scholarship, I recognized that lack of support in academia for the subfield of Holocaust history had shaped my path. Decisively. Born in 1954, I began university study in 1971, a quarter of a century after war's end. At that time, the Ivy League institution I attended did not offer a course on Holocaust history. As I recall, and from what I can reconstruct from syllabi I kept, none of the many courses I took on modern European history addressed this subject. Not even in a single lecture. And not even when a couple of the professors – as I learned later – were refugees from Nazi Europe.

My alma mater was not unique. Few institutions offered students education about Holocaust history. Nor did that situation change significantly on the undergraduate and, most particularly, graduate level for the next twenty years, as I learned from a Yale undergraduate student of mine in the early 1990s. An outstanding student, trilingual, and the recipient of a Fulbright fellowship, she applied to a number of top-notch history doctoral programs to carry on studies begun with me in Holocaust history. All the graduate program directors responded, explaining that

faculty in their departments could mentor her if she wished to focus on a national history (Nazi Germany or Vichy France, for example), but no one specialized in the history of the Holocaust. The history graduate program director at Johns Hopkins University elaborated the point: not only did his department lack professorial expertise, it also lacked graduate student funding in this area, and she would suffer intellectual isolation, as no other students worked on this subject. Prospects for future generations of trained Holocaust scholars appeared dim indeed. Where were they to be educated? Would they be self-educated, as were those of my generation and the scholars on whose shoulders I stood?

Indeed, through the 1990s there was no formal subfield of Holocaust history akin to labor history or American history or Slavic studies. I myself hold America's first full-time, fully endowed, chaired professorship in Holocaust history, and the Ph.D. program in Holocaust History and Genocide Studies now offered by the Strassler Center is unique. This may be counterintuitive but it is true, and it says nothing about interest in the subject and everything about the structure of university departments. In the Balkanization of knowledge that we call departmental responsibilities, the history of the Holocaust fell in the fissure between European history and Jewish studies.

Why would it be that the history of the Holocaust was not recognized until a very few years ago as a legitimate – let alone significant – area of scholarly research and teaching? The most obvious reason is that the Holocaust is a relatively recent event. Seventy years ago, the Jews of Europe had not yet been murdered. The Holocaust had not begun. And it takes time for current events to move into the realm of history. Then too, European historians and Jewish studies scholars were sincerely baffled as to where study of the Holocaust fits in the university world. European historians simply assumed, without much critical thought – and, I believe, incorrectly – that the history of the Holocaust fell within the domain of Jewish studies; while Jewish studies professors felt – quite rightly, I believe – that the Holocaust, a European phenomenon, properly fell within the realm of European history.

At a certain point, however, the Holocaust was not quite so recent, and the question of domain could have been addressed, and could have

been resolved. It did not happen. It did not happen fifty years ago, or thirty years ago, or even fifteen. An example to illustrate this academic malaise: In the early 1990s, the history department at the University of Pennsylvania concluded a search to fill a position in modern Jewish history, and offered the opportunity to me. With the department unanimous in its support, the dean was delighted and visited me to encourage me to accept. The chair of the Jewish studies program then went to the wall against this appointment. “The history of the Holocaust is not a central concern of modern Jewish history,” he proclaimed. And he went on to insist that if the incumbent of this position were a scholar of the Holocaust, it would give a negative image of Jews to Jewish and non-Jewish students alike. He won that academic dog-fight.

The irony, of course, is that Jewish studies scholars – not antisemites or Holocaust deniers – blocked study of the Holocaust from the academic arena. Yet their argument holds the essence of denial – polite denial, but denial nevertheless. Imagine if the position had been in German history, and had been offered to a scholar of the “Final Solution,” and the Germanists had opposed the appointment because it would give a negative image of Germans to Germans and non-Germans alike! I don't think so.

Perhaps, then, denial stepped forward as the first difficulty I faced in my work on the history of the Holocaust. All manner of denial, institutional and archival. The history of the Holocaust was born into a vacuum of denial. It was denied, ignored, elided, overlooked, disregarded, marginalized. The Nazis themselves – as well as millions of Germans who were not members of the party – were the first Holocaust deniers. They used a language of denial while involved with the actual business of murder. An obvious example: Alerting his audience of SS leaders to the importance of what he was about to say that day in Posen in October 1943, Himmler noted that he wished to address “a really grave matter” which hitherto had been surrounded by a “tactful” silence. “I am referring to the evacuation of the Jews, the annihilation of the Jewish people.... In our history, this is an unwritten and never-to-be-written page of glory.” The Nazis did their best to keep it unwritten, to obfuscate the matter by coding terms of destruction: “resettlement” and “evacuation of the Jews” meant deportation to death camps; “special action,” “special measures”

meant killing; “final solution” meant Judeocide, and “east” or “further east” meant killing centers.

A less known case: The SS at Auschwitz were instructed never to refer directly to gassing or to gas chambers. These words occur only in so-called slips, and there are some forty instances in the correspondence and worksheets preserved in the Auschwitz Building Office archive. The most important of these occurred in a letter the chief architect Karl Bischoff wrote on January 29, 1943, in which he referred to the gas chamber in the basement of crematorium 2 as a *Vergasungskeller*, gassing cellar. One of the architects in the Auschwitz Building Office was brought to trial in Vienna in 1972. Confronted with this letter he remarked, “Bischoff had pointed out to me that the word ‘gassing’ should not appear. It is also possible that once such an order came from higher up. I can’t remember that now.... I am surprised that Bischoff used the word ‘gassing cellar’ himself.”

If words express concepts – and I believe they do – then the absence of words denies the phenomenon. In addition to the obvious psychological effects of perpetrators’ persistent attempts to “white-out” information and knowledge about the murder of the Jews (I knew nothing; I saw nothing; I heard nothing), their recondite written record has posed serious problems for historians. Traditionally, historians have used written documents for their primary evidence in reconstructing and analyzing the past. In the case of the Final Solution, however, the documentary evidence is at best indirect. The Germans’ systematic attempt to avoid direct language was followed by an equally systematic attempt to destroy such documentation as did exist when the regime went up in flames.

This dearth of German documentary evidence has created the red herring search for a written *Führerbefehl*, an order by Hitler himself to annihilate the Jews of Europe. If such an order ever were issued – which I think is absolutely unlikely – it certainly would have been destroyed upon receipt. That would be consistent with the pattern of Nazi written documents. And yet, even though this pattern is obvious and clear, the fact that no *Führerbefehl* has been found has been used by deniers of the Holocaust to substantiate their claims that the Nazi regime did not execute a planned Judeocide. In short, the absence of traditional documentary

evidence has hindered the legitimate historian and – in their own eyes – has strengthened the claims of deniers.

Prosecutors amassed evidence for postwar trials, such as the Nuremberg Trials, but evidence for a trial is not necessarily the documentation needed by historians. In any case, “crimes against humanity” were grounds for prosecution at the Nuremberg Trials, but the Holocaust was not considered separately. In a spectacular display of polite postwar denial, the particular assault Jewish civilians had endured was not on the agenda at Nuremberg. Significantly, the main French witness on the subject of atrocities at Auschwitz was a gentile woman, Marie Claude Vaillant Couturier, who had been a member of the resistance, was arrested in 1942, and deported to Auschwitz in 1943. When the British arrested Rudolf Hoess himself, the *Kommandant* of Auschwitz, the prosecution did not bring him to the stand. Hoess was called as a witness for the *defense* – the defense of Ernst Kaltenbrunner, the person who had taken the place of assassinated Reinhard Heydrich as second-in-command to SS-chief Heinrich Himmler.

One more note about documents. The great majority of Jews were killed behind what became the Iron Curtain. Document collections in the East were inaccessible to the West. They were also inaccessible to East European historians. In Communist Europe, history was written in the service of the Party, and the Holocaust had little place in the story they told about their suffering and their struggle to throw off the yoke of Nazism and Fascism.

Given this situation, it is amazing that Raul Hilberg turned his attention to the Holocaust at all. Yet he did, and he deserves every accolade he ever received. The strength of Hilberg was that, undaunted by the difficulties – or perhaps daunted but still defiant – he carefully and creatively analyzed the documents that were available. These pertained to the history of destruction.

In the late 1950s, Hilberg could not find a publisher for his magisterial work, *The Destruction of the European Jews*. He ultimately paid a part of the publication costs himself, and the first edition of his book saw the light of day in 1960. By that time, Adolf Eichmann had been kidnapped by the Israelis, and was on trial in Jerusalem. The attendant publicity

focused attention on the Holocaust as never before, and foregrounded the question of the psychological motivation of the bureaucratic murderers. This prompted a shift in attention from Hitler to his direct subordinates, which grew into a line of scholarly inquiry including, for example, Christopher Browning's *Ordinary Men*, which highlighted the role of peer pressure, and Susanna Heim and Götz Aly's *Planners of Destruction*, which illuminated the role of careerism.

The Eichmann trial had a second and possibly even more profound effect. For the first time, the largest group of victims, the Jews, was visible and publicly vocal. Survivors of the Holocaust did not fall silent shortly after the war, as is so often claimed. But as the great majority felt that there was no public forum for their voice, they spoke to each other and at *landsmanschaften* meetings. Islands of speech, of articulated memory prevailed, but these islands were not in the public sphere. In the Eichmann case, survivors were very prominent and present.

And who was writing about survivors? Whatever professional problems plagued historians (paucity of documentary evidence) when writing about the Germans and their allies and the murder of the Jews, were exacerbated in the case of the history of the Jews. It took another half decade before books about the Jews began to appear. And then, perhaps because the catastrophe was so overwhelming, and the Europeans who were writing about it were survivors themselves, chronicling their experience of utter devastation and ruin was about the best one could do. The Dutch historian and survivor Jacob Presser, for example, published *Ondergang (The Destruction)* in 1965. For him, the five-year oppression was a storm that had beaten the Jews senselessly, and he told the story of their death. His was the voice of lost neighbors, brothers, sisters, parents. "As I became more involved with the subject," Presser explained, "an understanding grew slowly of a special moral obligation ... to be the voice of those who, fated to an eternal silence, would be heard only here and now, only for this one time. One time more on earth will their lamentation, their accusation resound. Nothing was left of their most pitiful possessions in their last hours, their ashes were scattered in the winds. They had no one in the world other than the historian who could hand down their message."

What Jacob Presser had done for the Dutch Jews, Georges Wellers did for the French Jews with the publication first of a number of articles and then, in 1973, of his book, *L'Etoile Jaune à l'Heure de Vichy*. Serge Klarsfeld followed in 1978 with his monumental registers of convoy lists, with names, dates of birth, and countries of origin.

Works such as these prompted broader perspectives. Each one of these Jewish victims had had neighbors. What had those neighbors done? This very question was asked by young people involved in the 1968 student rebellions across the West, and even into Czechoslovakia and Poland. They were the generation born during or just after the war and they had been raised with stories of the German occupation in which resistance was considered the norm. Current scholarship revealed, however, that very few had been active in the resistance. In the eyes of many young people, the Holocaust represented the failure of bourgeois society, and they focused on the role of non-German populations, of their parents and their peers, in the destruction of the Jews. Collaboration and collusion loomed large as the perspective moved away from the highways of history to the side streets, that is, the streets where people actually lived. It was not history from above, but the story of those below – of ordinary people.

This canvas of complicity brought the role of ordinary people in very local rescue efforts to the fore. In a world in which exceptional evil had become an unexceptional occurrence, and common courtesy had become an uncommon kindness, rescue efforts took on a meaning greater than their proportional effect during the war because of their disproportionate moral significance. The non-Jews as well as Jews (persecuted themselves) who refused to be passive in the face of the evil they witnessed and, at great personal risk, often endangering others, took it upon themselves to rescue Jews they knew and Jews they had never met before illustrated an alternative to complicity. They demonstrated that, even in the hell that was the Holocaust, each human being has the capacity to act humanely.

By the 1980s, the history of the Holocaust was well grounded in the norms and conventions of social history, which validated the pursuit of such research questions. And historians such as I circumvented the limitations of having little direct written documentary evidence in archives, contemporary newspapers, and other public sources (publications and

the like) by turning to other sources: diaries, ghetto chronicles, resistance reports and, most important, oral histories.

Discussions about history and memory raged for years. How reliable is memory? critics queried. Are survivor testimonies a valid historical source? It depends on the story one wishes to investigate, the history one wishes to write, I responded. Raul Hilberg could not have reconstructed and analyzed the machinery of death from the oral histories of survivors. He needed, and he depended upon, contemporary German documents, gazettes, newspapers, and periodicals. Nechama Tec, by contrast, could not have written *Defiance*, her history of the Bielski partisans – the greatest armed rescue of Jews by Jews – *without* the oral histories of the participants. Partisans and rescuers did *not* keep records or leave documents for us to peruse, but that does not mean that we should not study rescue networks or partisan activities.

My goal has been to understand the history of Europe from 1933 in all its complexity – to get the whole story, so to speak. And the piece about which we know the least is the history of the private realm: the history of clandestine rescue and unarmed resistance, of children and the family, of private relations, of daily collusion and complicity. As a historian, I aim to recognize and understand the significance of – to cite just one snapshot of rescue – a gentile woman pushing a Jewish child in a pram in the midst of the genocide of the Jews. This was the very heart, the stuff and substance of resistance. A woman with a child in a stroller is the most innocuous and ordinary scene imaginable, but that woman with that child at that time was so improbable and so unimaginable that the Germans did not imagine it, and she herself was never stopped when out with the child. Outwardly unremarkable, seemingly normal, this rescuer and many others became resisters: they held fast to an earlier ethic and morality. She did the improbable and unimaginable and it was, she said, not so very difficult: her sons had brown curls, her friend's son had blond curls, the boys blended together. It was, she maintained, the most ordinary thing in the world to have done. But this was a time when what had been unthinkable now occurred every day, and so what had been ordinary was now extraordinary. To take a Jewish friend's child out with one's own children, and conversely, to allow a gentile friend to take out one's

own child – in short, what had been indeed “not so very difficult” – was now a tremendous undertaking.

It is in our recovery, analysis, and understanding of the Jewish mother who gave up her child each day and the gentile friend who took the little boy, that we realize the historical significance of personal resistance to the Third Reich, and that we recognize the fundamental importance of the private realm in history. This poses a problem, however, because it is easier to research and to write about the history of institutions or organizations, even if they were informally established and loosely coordinated, than it is to research and write about the history of private relations.

Like others, I have found that writing such history remains difficult (but not impossible) yet fruitful. The history of private relations holds singular importance to our understanding of the Nazi era. In the Nazi state, no walls, no boundaries, no limits to the public realm obtained. The German bureaucracy and terror apparatus penetrated the private realm in an unprecedented manner. We need only think of the way in which the Nuremberg Laws codified personal as well as professional relations between Jews and gentiles, or the use of children as informants against their own parents, or the indoctrination of young women to encourage them to bear children for the Fatherland, to understand the attack upon the personal by this regime. This besieged private realm emerged as a compelling area of study that posed new and different historical questions.

Unfortunately, it is precisely the history of the private arena which we historians are least trained to research and write, and for which we have the least material. For while we began to ask new questions by the 1980s, traditional archives did not have much of the material we needed for our research, and we had not, as a discipline, developed and accepted conventions for such work. And so new archives were created, and new collections added to established institutions.

This process was not so straightforward as one might think. An archive, in the traditional sense, preserves the records of institutions and the people connected to those establishments. Well-accepted guidelines, standard conventions, determine which documents are to be kept: what will and will not become part of the public domain, and after how many years. My own collection of hundreds of taped oral histories of child

survivors and the adults who helped them, an archive like the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies, established in 1982 and housed in Yale University's Sterling Library, or Steven Spielberg's Shoah Visual History Archive, create as well as preserve a record.

That record pertains to a public event, but the document itself is a personal testimony. It comes from the private domain, from the realm of memory, and here the rules were not well worked out. The essential problem is the relationship between memory and history, how memory informs history, and how history corrects memory. Memory is dynamic, and while history as a discipline also is dynamic, each historical study is static. Memory is the existential substructure, history the conventional superstructure. Our historical work depends on the underpinning of archival documents. But what happens when those archival documents are testimonies or oral histories; when we write history using memory? Could I – could others – write a comprehensive history that conforms to the conventions, rigors, and standards of the discipline based on the particular and existential memories of individuals? Do the living speak for the dead? What do we know about the accuracy and reliability of memory?

As only a third of the Jewish population in Nazi Europe alive at the beginning of the war survived to its conclusion, can their testimonies be considered typical or representative? In traditional archives of written documents, papers are selected for preservation on the basis of certain criteria: they must be typical or representative of, or revelatory about, a public event or person. In other words, a certain professional standard applies, a certain selection has been made. Yet I, as a historian of Jewish youth in and from Nazi Europe, did not discriminate: I recorded the oral history of any European Jew who was sixteen years old or younger when Nazism or antisemitic fascism first affected their lives, and I recorded the histories of gentiles and Jews who helped these young people. However, the very fact that those now-adult children whose histories are recorded survived at all makes them exceptions to the general rule of death. Is it justifiable to use their accounts to speak for the dead also?

The answer is yes. While ultimate survival was an exception, it does not follow that the survivor's life was itself atypical. There is no evidence

to indicate that survival was due to anything more – or less – than luck and fortuitous circumstances. The notion that some “survival strategy” or a special “will to live” conduced to longevity is pernicious nonsense. Such a supposition blames the victims. It suggests failure or stupidity on the part of those murdered. If those who survived did so because they were determined, staunch, and firm in their endeavor, the implication is that those who did not survive were undetermined, weak-willed, and irresolute; in short, inadequate to so great a task. Similarly, the neo-Darwinian proposal that those who survived did so because they employed a strategy to that end suggests that they, the survivors, were clever, fit, and adaptable, while their dead cohorts were foolish, deficient, and incompetent; in a word, inferior.

The purpose of such proposals is to divert attention from the enormity of the crimes committed against the victims to a scrutiny of the ability or inability of those victims to resist the system of murder in which they were trapped. The reason to repudiate them, however, is that they are wrong. There is no evidence to support them. People survived who tried to commit suicide, while others were killed, or died of disease or starvation, who wished desperately to live. Then too, people made choices that happened to work out well for them, whilst others made the very same decisions – and their course ended in death. Perhaps we need to study the historicity of chance. The daily lives of those whose existence ultimately would be extinguished and those who would have the good luck to survive ran parallel courses. The testimonies of survivors are therefore legitimate documents for a history of the victims in general, and not of survivors alone. They may justifiably bear witness for the others – until the last moments of life in the death camps. It is obvious, but bears repeating, that those who experienced Auschwitz in all its horror are dead. The living can tell us nothing about those final 300 meters from the selection point to the gas chambers.

The problems survivors confront when describing their experiences emerged as another issue raised by the use of recorded memories to write history. “If I utter words, they are just words,” one woman exclaimed in despair. “And when I say them, I remember myself there, but we are here.” As many survivors had not articulated their histories before, and

because these experiences were so outside the realm of life as we know it, language, our medium of communication, failed us. How, as one survivor queried, with a mere combination of letters, and then of words, to explain what even the imagination cannot comprehend? For the survivors, their histories were a numinous experience that could not be captured within the conventional rules of discourse. For me, however, the events described were part of history; they are and must be subject to theoretical analysis and logical interpretation.

I found a tension – and sometimes a confusion – between the “objective” historical past (what “really” happened – the sort of facts one expects to find in a traditional archive), the “subjective” psychological experience (what the survivor believes to have occurred – the existential experience captured in the oral account), and those fictional elements which are part of the retelling of any event (the way in which human beings consciously or unconsciously use literary conventions to structure the stories, or histories, they recount). In other words, in memory, historical truth, psychological truth, and narrative truth are not always separate and distinct entities, and it fell to me (as to others working on similar topics) to reach the psychological truth behind the objective falsehood. At the same time, survivors’ oral histories also relate the historical (or objective) “facts” of their lives. Well within the realm of the traditional canon, such information was corroborated as usual: against, for example, the calendar, public record office documents, photographs, or a physical site.

Working with oral histories for many years, I returned repeatedly to the problem of narrative truth. What is remembered? How does anyone reduce her experiences in a historical period that lasted, for that individual, from a few to a dozen years to one or two dozen hours of recorded oral interview, and how is that account structured? And I came to accept that I do not know. I did not know everything that happened to that individual and so I could not identify what was remembered and what forgotten, what told, and what left unsaid. But, aware of the issue, I thought a lot about Hayden White’s idea of explanation by emplotment. Just as a historian structures her account of the past in conventional ways, so do people who recount their personal histories – albeit unconsciously. Recognizing these story forms and realizing that, by employing one or

another of them, the survivor has explained, or given meaning to, her life in a specific way, provides the historian with a tool to investigate that particular oral history.

The relationship between the chaos of memory and the structure of narrative is equally complex. In the preface to his book *Moments of Reprieve* (1981), the writer and survivor Primo Levi addressed the issue of memory – of his own memory. “It has been observed by psychologists that the survivors of traumatic events are divided into two well-defined groups: those who repress their past *en bloc*, and those whose memory of the offense persists, as though carved in stone, prevailing over all previous or subsequent experiences. Now, not by choice but by nature, I belong to the second group. Of my two years of life outside the law I have not forgotten a single thing.” Levi returned to this theme five years later in *The Drowned and the Saved*, and by then he viewed the problem rather differently. “Human memory is a marvelous but fallacious instrument.... The memories which lie within us are not carved in stone; not only do they tend to become erased as the years go by, but often they change, or even grow, by incorporating extraneous features.”

Undoubtedly, Levi was correct. He had begun to forget because bringing his private past into the public realm had robbed him of his own experience: he had given it up, or given it over. And he had begun to forget precisely because he had set himself the task of translating what he had seen and experienced into written words. The process of writing crystallizes and objectifies. It diminishes, or reduces, the entire universe of a moment into one particular rendition of it. To achieve clarity, the minutiae of which memory is composed are lost. The experience is fixed. It is so fixed for the participant that details that do not quite fit the public rendition recede into oblivion. And it is so fixed for the reader that it becomes history. The characters and the events remain as described on the printed page, static and unchanging.

I wrestled with all of these methodological questions in my use of oral histories to explore the history of the private realm. Yet I found my own training the greatest impediment. Historians of my generation learned and used a methodology based upon and grounded in traditional sources. We learned to ask a conventional set of questions about – and of – such

material. We know about provenance, dating, paper, ink, letterheads, and margin notes. And we presume such sources will answer the questions with which the discipline traditionally has concerned itself. But there were different questions to be asked about, and of, oral accounts. Oral histories and testimonies allow me to answer key historical questions that formerly no one had considered. Now we have collections of these documents; they open doors and they also pose problems.

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Looking again at the question of the difficulties I faced in my work on the Holocaust, I see that milestones shine bright. Holocaust history has earned recognition as a subfield of modern history. Doctoral programs and Holocaust history positions in academia ensure the education and training of future generations of scholars and teachers. Holocaust history has grown to include central concerns of social history. Archives of oral testimonies have been collected, and historians have figured out how to use these sources productively and creatively.

I conclude with my continuing struggle to find a robust narrative to communicate my historical analyses of the personal realm and its intersection with the public arena. Until recently, historians have concerned themselves with the public and novelists with the private. The plethora of evidence about public events was subjected to the rigors of historical analysis and a disciplinary convention of restraint in narrative. In literature, by contrast, much is made of little. From a small notice in the newspaper, but using his rich imagination and astonishing narrative skills, Tolstoy created the tale of Anna Karenina. While historical novels (like those by Lion Feuchtwanger) enjoy the advantages and strengths of both history and literature, a history of the private is impoverished indeed. And so those such as I who are interested in this realm have been compelled to reevaluate and reassess the disciplinary conventions of narrative. This does not mean that historians can adopt the imaginative license of the novelist. But in our reconstructions of the personal realm, we have much to learn from the novelist's skill in the construction of a fictional world.

And for the communication, the articulation of our analyses, we can profit from the literary conventions of fiction.

My coauthor Robert Jan van Pelt and I recently wrote a book on refugee Jews, starting our history in 1933 and ending it well after the war, when European Jews (and Jews from Arab lands) were on the move, but by then they were called displaced persons. We gave up on the idea of a "grand narrative" – a comprehensive, single-line story. No one line could capture the scattering, the centrifugal movement away from Europe, the chaos across the globe. Borrowing from literary modes, we developed a new way to narrate the history we sought to tell and to reflect the fracture of individual lives. We hope this will work for our readers. Stay tuned. I will report if the editors of that volume publish a second edition.

Salvage¹

Robert Jan van Pelt

Auschwitz is like some perilous passage between the rocks where the millennial adventure of human thought met with absolute disaster. It went down in darkness, without even a ray of a lighthouse to indicate where it had been.

André Neher, *The Exile of the Word*.

In June 1999 I found myself in Auschwitz in the company of the British barrister Richard Rampton and the American scholar Deborah Lipstadt. Rampton was to defend Lipstadt and her publisher Penguin in the libel suit brought by English author David Irving against them for Lipstadt's portrayal of Irving in her *Denying the Holocaust* (1994). In it, Lipstadt identified Irving as a Holocaust denier and falsifier of history. Inspired by a forensic report on the ruins of the Auschwitz crematoria compiled in 1988 by a certain Fred Leuchter on instructions of well-known Holocaust deniers, Irving had made public statements that Auschwitz was "baloney," a "legend," and "that more people died on the back seat of Edward Kennedy's car in Chappaquiddick than ever died in a gas chamber in Auschwitz." Thus, for Rampton, Auschwitz was to acquire a central role in the court case.²

In early 1998 I had been asked to serve as an expert witness because I had studied the history of the camp, focusing especially on the construction of the crematoria. Unlike Leuchter, I had read widely, and had studied the documentary evidence in the relevant archives. It took me less than

¹ In this essay I use the noun "salvage" to describe what the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines as either "the action of saving a ship or its cargo from wreck, capture, etc." or "a payment or compensation to which those persons are entitled who have by their voluntary efforts saved a ship or its cargo from impending peril or rescued it from actual loss; e.g. from shipwreck or from capture by the enemy (called respectively *civil* and *military* or *hostile* salvage)."

² See: Robert Jan van Pelt, *The Case for Auschwitz: Evidence from the Irving Trial* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2002).

a year to write a 750-page expert report in which I demolished the Leuchter findings and discredited Irving's use of them. Rampton, who was to use my report as the basis of his presentation in court, insisted on seeing the material evidence for himself – the blueprints in the archive and the ruins in the camp itself – and so we found ourselves in Auschwitz.

One evening we escaped the melancholy of the killing fields by sampling the great variety of vodkas on offer in Bar Paco. The alcohol loosened our restraint, and Rampton claimed that he was such a master of cross-examination that he could discover any person's deepest wish in ten questions. "Try me," I told him. Taking up the challenge, he asked, "Is it your deepest desire to be the master of an ocean-going salvage tug?" "How did you know?" I responded, flabbergasted by his absolutely correct insight. "To be a salvor³ is every Dutchman's secret ambition," he replied – and he added, "I used to spend my summers in Holland, sailing. I have shared a lot of jenever with your people, and I got to know the Dutch." Rampton was right: I, like so many of my compatriots, were proud of our century-long monopoly on deep-sea towing and the dangerous trade of marine salvage. It was known as "Holland's glory," and until the mid 1960s Dutch newspapers always provided much space for the exploits of the oceangoing tugboat captains such as Teun Vet and Jan Kalkman.⁴ The long journeys they took to tow dredgers, lighters and floating drydocks around the world had become the stuff of legend, as were the dramatic episodes when they left the safety of the harbor to sail into heavy storms with the aim of saving a ship in distress – and of course earning a hefty salvage. Everybody knew that nothing required more seamanship and courage than dropping a line on a sinking vessel. The myth of "Holland's glory" had been sealed by a book of that title written by Jan de Hartog and published in 1941, during the German occupation.⁵

3 According to the *OED* a salvor is "a person who saves or helps to save vessels or cargo from loss at sea."

4 As a result of radar, GPS, proper charts and better-built ships, sea travel has become so much safer that there is today little need for salvage tugs.

5 Jan de Hartog, *Hollands Glorie: Roman van de Zeesleepvaart* (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 1940); English version published under the title *Captain Jan: A Story of Ocean Tugboats* (London: Cleaver-Hume, 1952).

I had read *Holland's Glory* when I was twelve, and the year thereafter I devoured another book by de Hartog, *The Captain* (1966). The central protagonist is Martinus Harinxma, an inexperienced young mate on a Dutch tugboat who finds himself, after the Dutch capitulation, in England and the master of the world's largest oceangoing salvage tug, the *Isabel Kwel*. The major theme, as the dust jacket of my copy explains, is "the making of a captain, that process by which – in war as in peace – a man is measured by the sea, by ships, by his fellows and himself until it is shown that he has what it takes to stand responsible, after God, for the little world of a ship and the souls it contains."⁶ A *Bildungsroman* – thus, one that was written to inspire young people like myself. Harinxma matures as he commands his tug on the Murmansk convoys that provided a lifeline between North America and Russia. In the ice-cold ocean and under attack by German bombers and U-boats, the *Isabel Kwel* has been assigned to the task of picking up survivors of sunk vessels and, in the odd case that a torpedoed, bombed or strafed ship managed to remain afloat, towing it to a safe harbor – an extremely dangerous task as two ships attached to each other and moving without an escort at two knots per hour are prime targets. The climax of the book is the sinking of the *Isabel Kwel* when, after the dispersal of the convoy, it tries to tow a ship loaded with grain to the Russian port.

I did not join the crew of a salvage tug, nor choose a more conventional career at sea. Instead I became a historian when I realized that I liked *tales* about the sea better than the sea itself. I did study maritime history. Unsatisfied, I moved to architectural history, which led me to study first the history of the Royal Palace in The Hague, and then the symbolic interpretations of the Temple of Jerusalem as an *imago mundi*, an image of the world. My work on the temple covered 2,000 years. It was an epic topic, and when someone asked me if I knew of any other such epic topic within the history of architecture, my answer was short: "the Auschwitz crematoria." And so I set out in 1987 to reconstruct the construction history of the camp and its buildings. But in all of my activity as an

6 Jan de Hartog, *The Captain* (New York: Atheneum, 1966), flap text.

architectural historian, de Hartog's tales of "Holland's glory" remained alive and strangely relevant: I coded my own journey amongst the remains of the past – be it archives, or ruins, or the recorded memories of witnesses – as a kind of salvage operation which did not aim to save a ship with its crew, passengers and cargo, but to recover some factual truth about events that had happened once a long time ago. So I became a salvor of sorts.

Indeed: I believe that the historian who seeks to establish the truth about a historical fact is much more similar to a marine salvor than to a philosopher or a scientist – even if the latter two are also explicitly in search of "truth." A philosophical truth such as Socrates' "It is better to suffer wrong than to do wrong" may be forgotten by one generation, but it is likely that another one will rediscover its essential content, even if it does not know that a certain Socrates formulated it first. And a scientific truth that "the earth moves around the sun" may be challenged, but in the end the possibility of scientific verification remains. But, as Hannah Arendt observed, historical facts are always contingent: things could have turned out differently. Facts are contingent and "therefore possess by themselves no trace of self-evidence or plausibility for the human mind." Historical facts are much more fragile than even the most speculative axioms, discoveries and theories. "Once they are lost, no rational effort will ever bring them back."⁷ A historical fact that is forgotten will most likely be lost forever. And most of the past never made it into history. Of the 100 billion people who have lived on this earth or the many millions of historically important events that happened, how few are those that are remembered?

The concept and urgency of "salvage" shapes my own work as a historian. I always have been aware that historical facts all too easily sink into an ocean of oblivion, and that once they disappear they cannot be recovered. The past, therefore, is a large and destructive ocean of forgetting. The sense of my historical research as a salvage operation reinforced itself when I began to study the Holocaust, initially focusing on the history of Auschwitz. The Germans had worked hard to kill witnesses

and destroy material evidence – both documents and crucial buildings – before they abandoned the camp to the Red Army. And those few who were left to testify did not have the words to do so because, as Elie Wiesel, André Neher and Jean Francois Lyotard have so convincingly argued, Auschwitz also destroyed the language to describe it.⁸

To make matters even more complicated: when I began to work, there were still some remnants of Soviet ideology shaping the historiography of the camp. While the historians of the Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum might have accepted the death toll as 1.1 million people or so, the official Soviet-inspired narrative still mentioned 4 million. And then there was a certain dogmatism amongst Holocaust survivors and even Holocaust historians which stipulated that the crematoria had been designed from the beginning with genocidal intent – a view that saw any challenge that suggested a greater measure of contingency as a surrender to the Holocaust deniers such as Robert Faurisson and Wilhelm Stäglich. At times I was considered with much suspicion, and lectures in which I tried to give a somewhat nuanced representation of the facts often ended with a survivor accusing me of being a "wolf in sheep's clothing." To make me even more suspect, I did read the works of the deniers, and would talk about their speculations when asked. I could not ignore their falsifications: when I set out to study the construction history of Auschwitz, the whole literature on the topic, with the exception of two articles written by the ex-denier Jean-Claude Pressac, had been generated to argue that Auschwitz had not been a death camp equipped with homicidal gas chambers and ovens which had a killing and incineration capacity of 4,500 people per day.⁹ Trying

⁷ Hannah Arendt, "Truth and Politics," in: Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, Jerome Kohn, ed. (London: Penguin, 2006), 227, 247.

⁸ Elie Wiesel, "Why I Write," in: *Confronting the Holocaust: The Impact of Elie Wiesel*, Alvin Rosenfeld and Irving Greenberg, eds. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), 201; André Neher, *The Exile of the Word*, David Maisel, trans. (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1981), 141ff.; Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, Georges Van Den Abbeele, trans. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 56ff.

⁹ Jean-Claude Pressac, "Les 'Krematorien' IV et V de Birkenau et leurs chambres à gaz," in: *Le Monde Juif*, vol. 107 (1982), 91ff.; Jean-Claude Pressac, "Étude et realization des Krematorien IV et V d'Auschwitz-Birkenau," in: Francois Furet, ed., *L'Allemagne nazie et le genocide juif* (Paris: Gallimard and Le Seuil, 1985), 539ff.

to research the history of Auschwitz, I felt I was navigating a treacherous coast, and if I were to avoid running aground, I had better chart the location of eddies, shoals, and rocks.

When I began serious work on Auschwitz, I obtained a newsletter of the Institute of Historical Review, the North American center of Holocaust denial. The rag carried an article entitled “The Holocaust: A Sinking Ship?” It described how the well-known Princeton historian Arno Mayer had stated in a new book that more people had died in Auschwitz as the result of typhus than of poisoned gas.¹⁰ The deniers saw this as confirmation of their own position that *all* deaths in Auschwitz had been due to natural causes. “Is the crew of the good ship *Holocaust* preparing a rush for the lifeboats (and women and children be damned), or are damage control teams working feverishly below decks in an effort to keep the stricken hull afloat? Will the (largely Gentile) suckers for what passed not long ago, even among academics, as ‘the best documented event in history’ stick to their berths in steerage, as the hoax capsizes and begins its last lonely hurdle to the watery graveyard of historical frauds?”¹¹ And if American deniers liked to compare the *MS Holocaust* and/or *Auschwitz* to the British liner *RMS Titanic*, the British denier Irving preferred to invoke the memory of the German battleship *Bismarck*.¹² In the year that I first researched the archives in Auschwitz I also read a speech Irving had given at a conference of deniers. It was entitled “Sink the *Auschwitz*!” (in imitation of Churchill’s order to “Sink the *Bismarck*!”), and in this address Irving identified Auschwitz as the main weapon in “the biggest propaganda offensive that the human race has ever known.” But, like the *IHR Newsletter* a year earlier, he also noted the battleship was in trouble. Quoting newspaper reports that the official death toll of the camp was to be revised from the Soviet figure of 4 to 1.1 million, Irving claimed that the battleship *Auschwitz* was following the course of the *RMS Titanic* amongst the icebergs, and now had begun

to scuttle itself. “To me, Auschwitz is unimportant – I’m happy the ship is scuttling itself. It’s vanishing. It’s going to be left like the battleship *Arizona* at Pearl Harbor – if you ever go to Hawaii and have a look at it – with just its mast sticking out of the water to mark where once a great legend stood. And when people go there a hundred years from now and say: ‘Down there is the most incredible legend that people believed for fifty years: it’s the great battleship *Auschwitz*, it was scuttled by its crew!’ Why don’t we have to believe it? Well, you know about the *Leuchter Report*.”¹³

Having been told that the liner *MS Holocaust* was sinking and that the battleship *Auschwitz* was scuttling itself (I presume following the example of the German pocket battleship *Admiral Graf Spee*), I knew that the salvage metaphor was uncannily appropriate. Inspired by my hero Harinxma, I salvaged some important facts from this contested past. And as I worked, it became clear that the salvage of the historic wreck that is the *MS Holocaust* – a wreck of what Neher called “the millennial adventure of human thought”¹⁴ – was indeed worth the effort. The University of Toronto historian Michael Marrus articulated this when we participated in a conference on the future of the Auschwitz site.¹⁵ “You know, we’re very privileged,” he told me. “We’re pushing back the last great frontier of historical enquiry – or at least the last one I can think of.” While I did not necessarily accept the implication that there would be no great frontier in the future – it reminded me too much of Francis Fukiyama’s neo-Hegelian idea about our age as the end of history – I could not but agree: the study of the Holocaust had become for our generation of historians what the decline and fall of the Roman empire had been for at least one (but the greatest) historian of the Enlightenment, the French revolution for the best practitioners of the emerging historical profession in the nineteenth century, and the origins of the First World War for so many historians

10 Arno Mayer, *Why Did the Heavens Not Darken? The “Final Solution” in History* (New York: Pantheon, 1988), 365.

11 “The Holocaust: A Sinking Ship,” *IHR Newsletter* 66 (May 1989), 2.

12 MS stands for Motor Ship, and RMS stands for Royal Mail Ship.

13 David Irving, “Battleship Auschwitz,” *The Journal of Historical Review* 10 (1990), 500.

14 Neher, *The Exile of the Word*, 143.

15 “International Conference: Should the Ruins be Preserved?,” Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, August 1993.

of the first part of the twentieth century: a task that was truly worthy of the ambition of our discipline. In short, the Holocaust was a great and pregnant topic that might, indeed, produce some great historians.

And so I continued on. The topic, of course, depressed me, but the results compensated more than enough: the completion and publication of a book is always an occasion of satisfaction, even when the book records the history of a death camp.¹⁶ And while I do not want to seem cynical, my findings established my reputation and brought me a tenured position at a good university. But in 1999 I learned that the stakes had increased as a result of my work on Auschwitz. A lousy review or a quick remaindering of my books had ceased to be the worst that could happen to me. In Bar Paco, Rampton not only guessed my innermost desire but also offered a prospect as to what the lawsuit would be like. “It will be war, and not a game,” he counseled. “If we succeed, we might bring about the beginning of the end of Holocaust denial. But if we lose, the deniers will gain at least in the eyes of the uninformed a certain measure of credibility.” And he added, smiling wryly, “of course, if we lose, your reputation will be in tatters.” At the same time threats came in. At night unknown people would call from public telephones and counsel me to withdraw from the case. Denier websites started to be filled with accusations and ridicule. For the first time in my life, I felt compelled to write a will.

When I accepted the invitation to act as an expert witness, write a report and testify in court, I knew that I would face the most difficult examination in my professional life. I was to engage an opponent who would be singularly motivated to discredit me as a historian – not because of malice, but because it was the only way for him to win his case. I was to risk the fruits of twenty-five years of study and work: all of it could be lost if I were to crack on the witness stand. I reread de Hartog’s novel. I recognized Harinxma’s anxiety when he was told that he had to succeed Captain Loppersum, the most famous of all the Dutch salvors, and stepped for the first time on the bridge of the *Isabel Kwel*. It looked awfully

big. “I had never maneuvered anything remotely her size – it was like being promoted without transition from a pick-up truck to a locomotive.”¹⁷ And this ship he was to navigate through the most dangerous waters in the world with a crew who seemed very loyal to the memory of Captain Loppersma, and very suspicious of, if not hostile to, his successor. And I reread also the not-so-happy ending of the book, when Harinxma made indeed a beginner’s mistake, and lost his ship and most of his crew.

As I wrote the report, I felt alone. And I felt lonely when a few weeks before the beginning of the court case I was told that Irving had informed the solicitors of Lipstadt and Penguin that he would cross-examine me “in detail about Zyklon B deliveries and consumption rates for the various camps including Oranienburg, Sachsenhausen, Auschwitz; and that it would be useful if [van Pelt] would bone up on the quantities need to delouse buildings (i.e., how many kilograms per thousand cubic meters) and clothing (i.e., how many grams per outfit).”¹⁸ Having been given a warning, it made sense to “bone up” on Zyklon B use. The result was a surreal, three-week period of detailed investigations and morbid calculations on pocket calculators in which I reconstructed Zyklon B deliveries to Auschwitz, compared it with deliveries to other camps, and established the probable use of that poison – deniers always claim that it was used for delousing purposes *only*. Using all the data available, I concluded that, for example, in 1943 Auschwitz had, after all the delousing of clothing, blankets, barracks and railway carriages had been done, a surplus of Zyklon B of between 3 and 6 times the amount necessary to kill the 250,000 people murdered that year in the camp.¹⁹ So I had demonstrated that in 1943 the genocide of 250,000 people, which had been amply proven as a fact, had also been “possible.” Spiritually it was the first low point of my career.

The second low point occurred a few weeks later, on the witness stand. When Rampton had warned me about the trial, he had not told

16 See: Debórah Dwork and Robert Jan van Pelt, *Auschwitz: 1270 to the Present* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996).

17 De Hartog, *The Captain*, 118.

18 As quoted in: van Pelt, *The Case for Auschwitz*, 426.

19 Ibid., 427ff.

me how lonely is the position of an expert witness. As a historian, one does implicitly take responsibility for the truth. As a witness, one does so explicitly, and publicly. When I had written my articles and books, I knew well that I was under obligation to represent the truth as well as I could. But in the witness box I was under oath, which meant that both I and my testimony were committed to the world, and God. I now took responsibility for the truth of what had happened in Auschwitz, for the truth of the murders in the gas chambers and the incinerations in the ovens. My testimony was intended to enable the court to come to a decision. And no one in the world but I could give this testimony. And I recalled the single tow line that meant in salvage operations the difference between perdition and salvation.

Standing in the witness box, slightly elevated above the court, I felt like the master on the bridge who had to make, all alone, some difficult judgment calls in public. I owed a particular responsibility to the many historians and investigators whose work I had used – including Jan Markiewicz, Franciszek Piper, Jean-Claude Pressac, Jan Sehn, and Georges Wellers. If I went down, I would damage not only my own but also their work. And then I owed something to the survivors. Throughout the days of cross-examination, I tried to show regard for the survivors who were following the trial in the courtroom and through the media. As a scholar on Auschwitz, I owed it to them to show in posture, language and thought a clear rejection of the obscene phantasmagoria of Holocaust denial. Yet, at the same time, I had to be effective as a fighter for the truth. I had to prevail. But Irving had the initiative. He raised the issues he wanted – from how much Zyklon B it takes to kill a person to how much coke to incinerate a corpse, from how long it would take to empty a gas chamber to how long it would take to burn the bodies – and I had little choice but to accept and engage whatever challenge he threw in my direction. There was a contradiction between my desire to honor the survivors and my obligation to defeat Irving.

It happened that one of the books I had taken with me to London was Nicholas Monsarrat's *The Cruel Sea*, the other great novel about the Atlantic convoys which had inspired me as an adolescent. On the eve of

my cross-examination I reread an episode in which a twenty-one-ship convoy heading for Malta was attacked by a pack of U-boats. After six days, fourteen ships had been sunk. Finally, as the fifteenth ship went down, the sonar on the corvette *HMS Compass Rose* picked up an echo of a U-boat. As the ship headed for the target, Captain Ericson noticed that the place where the U-boat lay was alive with forty swimming survivors. Dropping the depth charges would kill these men. The instructions written at Admiralty stipulated that in such a situation one should attack at all costs. After some agonizing, Ericson gives the order to attack the submarine: "and having made this sickening choice he swept in to the attack with a deadened mind, intent only on one kind of kill, pretending there was no other."²⁰

I remembered Ericson's predicament when, on the witness stand, Irving wanted me to do some offensive if not obscene calculation, not much different from those I had done in the privacy of my own study a few weeks earlier. His premise was that the capacity of the elevator connecting the gas chamber to the ovens had been too small to transport the "alleged" number of victims, and that therefore the "alleged" facts were "impossible." Knowing that I would hurt the survivors, I did not want to do these calculations. Yet Ericson's heart-wrenching decision helped me to resolve my own dilemma: having agreed to serve as an expert witness, I would serve the memory of the victims and the dignity of survivors best by making the offensive calculations. It did not go unnoticed. The day after, James Dalrymple described to the readership of *The Independent* the agony of that moment. "Irving demanded that Van Pelt now do the arithmetic of nightmares." Dalrymple noted that I entered into the exercise "reluctantly" and that I seemed less than convincing as an accountant of genocide. Returning that night home in the train, he took out his own pocket calculator and after some calculations concluded: "Thank God, the numbers add up." At that moment Dalrymple fully realized the obscenity of the "strange and flourishing landscape" of Holocaust denial. "It is a place where tiny flaws can be found – and magnified – in large

20 Nicholas Monsarrat, *The Cruel Sea* (New York: Knopf, 1951), 234ff.

structures, where great truths can be tainted and wounded by small discrepancies, where millions of dead people can be turned into a chimera. And where doubt can be planted like seed in the wind, to grow and fester as the screams of history grow fainter with the years.” In short, the trial had led him to a dangerous place “where even reasonable people start to do furtive sums on pocket calculators.”²¹ It was a place I had dwelled in for all too long.

In the end, when I was discharged as a witness I felt that I had done as good a service to the truth as could be done. While in my own estimation I may not have measured up to the seasoned Ericson, I think I had done better than the inexperienced Harinxma – and I sensed it had been good enough to defeat Irving.

A few weeks later, when the trial proceedings had ended and Mr. Justice Charles Gray was writing his judgement, I boarded in Vienna’s South Station the direct overnight train for Cracow, with a scheduled stop in Oświęcim. It was to be my first visit to the camp after my cross-examination. “Walking the killing fields once again, I was once again reminded of the power of the place, and the absurdity of Irving’s arguments,” I wrote a few weeks after the visit. “Everything did fit together: the stories of the eye-witnesses, the documents in the archive, and the place itself. But for all its power, the landscape of Birkenau appeared vulnerable also. Surveying the ruins, I felt a sudden pride for having been allowed to represent the history of that place in the British High Court. It was the pride a captain of an ocean-going tug must feel as his ship approaches the bright yellow line of the Dutch coast, with a priceless salvage in tow.”²²

A few days after this visit I was back in London. On April 11, Mr. Justice Gray pronounced his verdict: the defense had been proven that Irving was, as Lipstadt had alleged, a Holocaust denier and a falsifier of history. The judgement dealt with Auschwitz in great detail. Mr. Justice Gray told the packed court that at the beginning of the trial he had

supposed that the evidence of mass extermination of Jews in the gas chambers at Auschwitz was compelling, but that he had “set aside this preconception when assessing the evidence adduced by the parties in these proceedings.”²³ After going through all the arguments produced by Irving to prove that the “Factory of Death” could not have worked, and my counterarguments that it had worked sufficiently well to murder all those the Germans intended to kill, Mr. Justice Gray stated that, “having considered the various arguments advanced by Irving to assail the effect of the convergent evidence relied on by the Defendants, it is my conclusion that no objective, fair-minded historian would have serious cause to doubt that there were gas chambers at Auschwitz and that they were operated on a substantial scale to kill hundreds of thousands of Jews.”²⁴

I looked up to the gallery, and saw many of the survivors who had attended the trial, and who had looked in horror when Irving raised the issue of the elevator. One of them caught my glance – and winked. It appeared I had reached the safety of the harbor.

But there was to be a sequel. Karl Marx once observed that all world historical events occur the first time as tragedy, and the second as farce. So also this trial. In June 2001 I was back in court, ready to defend a second expert report I had written to defend the historical record on Auschwitz. Irving had appealed the verdict and submitted a long affidavit on Auschwitz written by Holocaust denier Germar Rudolf. I had worked for many months to rebut all of Rudolf’s falsifications. But on June 21, at the beginning of the court proceedings, Irving’s barrister Adrian Davies announced that he would withdraw the Rudolf affidavit. And, as a result, Rampton did not need to submit my own expert report. With no action left, the proceedings were adjourned to the next Tuesday, when the Appeal Court would give its verdict. It was a great anticlimax, which turned into a farce when, a day later – the sixtieth anniversary of the German invasion of the Soviet Union – Irving posted his diary entry for the 21st on his

21 James Dalrymple, “The curse of revisionism,” *The Independent* (January 29, 2000).

22 Van Pelt, *The Case for Auschwitz*, 487.

23 Great Britain, In the High Court of Justice, Queen’s Bench Division, Irving versus Penguin and Lipstadt, daily transcripts, day 33 (Tuesday, 11 April).

24 Ibid., 43.

website. “Adrian gathers up his things and turns around to say to me, ‘So on Tuesday we can at least go down with guns firing like the *Bismarck*.’ ‘Go down?’ He says firmly and knowledgeably, ‘we’re going down.’”²⁵

I had no interest in that salvage, and with satisfaction saw the lie and the libel sink to the bottom.

²⁵ Irving, “Radical’s Diary, June 22, 2001,” as quoted in: van Pelt, *The Case for Auschwitz*, 505.

My Way to the Holocaust

Michael Berenbaum

I was born in the United States to parents who had immigrated to the United States during the great wave of immigration that began in 1881 and came to a close in 1920. My mother, who was born in Milnice, Austria, came to America in 1911 when she was less than one year old, and my father, who was born in Ciechanow, Poland, came in 1919 when he was nine years old. Both came with their parents, and for both Americanization was essential to their experience. The children of immigrants, Yiddish was the language of their home, but English was definitively the language of the street. We had family members who died in the Holocaust. More memorable, at least for a young child, were the Holocaust survivors who immigrated to the United States after the war. Among them were my maternal grandfather’s younger brother Carl, whom I remember as a broken man, alcoholic, single and lonely. On my father’s side were two cousins, both brothers: Samuel, who bore the same name as my paternal grandfather, and Max his younger brother. Both were married to fellow Holocaust survivors. Both were jewelers, essential to their survival in Auschwitz or so I was told. Paul, Samuel and Regina’s son, lived with us for a time when his mother was ill. Neither my sister nor I can now remember how long he stayed with us, whether it was a matter of a week or two or a matter of months. Our family was hush about the illness and we were perhaps too young to have much interest.

So while the Holocaust had clearly touched our family, it was quite a distance away. We were far more directly touched by World War II and the almost five-year separation of my parents during my father’s years in the army. He regaled us with stories of the war, with characters

such as “Sad Sack” and with the esprit de corps of his soldiers. He also portrayed himself as a proud and defiant Jew in the U.S. Army, where many of his fellow soldiers had never met a Jew and where some were clearly antisemites. Although he did not have many army souvenirs, there was a military knife that he kept at the top of his closet and a beautifully engraved wooden box in which special letters were kept and a portrait of my father in uniform, handsome and slim, never aging, forever young even as he began to age.

I was raised in a home that was nominally Orthodox and went to Zionist Modern Orthodox Day Schools where the language of religious instruction was Hebrew – not English or Yiddish as was more common in those days – and where some but surely not all of my teachers were refugees, the term that was then most commonly used for survivors and that then linked them to the chain of American immigrants. Virtually all my teachers were European-born and European-educated. It was there that they learned Hebrew, probably in Zionist schools as well. American men did not go into religious school teaching in that era. Other opportunities beckoned during the 1950s. Even the rabbinate was not yet considered a prestigious professional career. The joke that many a student remembers hearing about the rabbinate, especially for those of us drawn to religion, is “what type of career is that for a smart Jewish boy.” Better choose medicine or law, even accounting. In school in the 1950s we were never taught the Holocaust but heard some words: camps, children, murder, Nazis.

Still, when some of my teachers rolled up their sleeves there were numbers tattooed on their arms, and we did not quite know what they meant. As Orthodox Jews we had been taught that tattoos were forbidden, and surely our pious teachers would not violate the law. We had heard that one teacher had lost a child, but did not consider what that meant. Another teacher had a fist but no fingers, and we stared at this deformity each day whenever he held chalk or whenever he came near us. We did not know – and could not ask – what happened. Surely we wondered. Some of our classmates were children of survivors, most especially in the grades one or two years younger than ours, because many survivors married shortly after their liberation, many brought children into the world a year or two later, and many immigrated to the United States in 1946 and

most especially in 1948 after the new, more open immigration laws were passed. But we never used the words. We were more impressed by their European origins, by their accents and their foreignness, compared to our more Americanized parents. In silence they communicated to us several important lessons that have loomed large in my life. Loss, responsibilities and inadequacy: so much had been lost and we were responsible, not for the loss but to make up for that loss, and we would never be able to make it up. One of my classmates, and a friend during the high school years, was born on September 18, 1945, to Hungarian Jewish parents in Budapest. It was only four decades later that she linked her birthday with the liberation of Budapest, nine months to the day, before her birth.

For me, growing up in the 1950s as a traditional Jew, school and home were two parts of a triangle of influences. The third was the synagogue. Our synagogue was established by German and Belgian refugees who had left Germany before or just after the pogroms of November 1938, known as *Kristallnacht*, or Belgium just before the German invasion on 1940, and who had enough resources and enough initiative to successfully relocate elsewhere. They had established in Queens the communities they had left behind in Antwerp, Brussels or Frankfurt. The melodies we used were the melodies they had used. Services started on time and ended promptly. Things were orderly, decorum was essential. The older generation spoke German among themselves and English to their children. Older children had been born in Europe, and the younger ones, the ones my age, were American-born. My father was one of the few “Americans,” seemingly one of the very few whose native languages were Yiddish and English, not German, and one who knew baseball, not soccer. He was also one of the very few veterans whose service in World War II had been an essential part of the Americanization of his generation of immigrant children. There were several survivors in the congregation, most especially in the late 1950s and early 1960s, when Hungarian Jews who had prospered could afford to move into the neighborhood, but the ethos of Kew Gardens was shaped by prewar refugees and not by those who came later.

I also clearly remember when a survivor family moved in next door to my aunt. The parents spoke Yiddish to each other and to their children, and my aunt marveled at the three-year-old who spoke Yiddish fluently,

reminding herself of her own situation four decades earlier. Eli Zborowski was to become a leader in the survivor movement in the United States and head of Yad Vashem's fundraising activities in the United States, but in those days he was a young man working long hours to "make it" in America.

I suspect that little of this would be of any interest had I not ended up spending much of my career studying the Holocaust and constantly being asked: "Are you the child of survivors?"; "How did you get interested in this field?" I was drawn to the unspoken, to what could not be told to an American generation. In a sense my life's work has been to bring to an American audience and to transmit into an American idiom that which could not be shared with me when I was growing up.

We were taught little about the Holocaust; the name was not used, the word was not spoken. I read a little. Only in college did I begin to be touched by the Shoah. I went to Yad Vashem on my first visit to Israel at the age of 16 and was moved by what I saw, seeing the atrocity that had befallen the Jewish people just before I was born. We also dealt with the Holocaust at Jewish camps, which because they were held in the summer used Tisha B'av, the fast day commemorating the destruction of the first and second Temples in Jerusalem in 586 BCE and 70 CE as their major observance, and the Holocaust was more real to that generation than the destruction of Jerusalem, especially when Jerusalem was being restored, renewed, rebuilt.

I read little in the field until college and even then I was more interested in the theological questions than the historical ones. Though I do distinctly remember rising each morning to hear the 6:30 a.m. report on NBC News from Jerusalem on the Eichmann trial, and I was in Israel during that trial and attended one session by closed circuit television. My formal academic pursuit was philosophy and I started reading in theology. Richard Rubenstein's work *After Auschwitz: Radical Theology and the Future of Jewish Thought* was provocative and informative. Rubenstein argued that no contemporary Jewish thought could speak to the Jewish people if it did not deal with the twin revolutions of contemporary Jewish history – Auschwitz, his synonym for the Holocaust, and the rise of the

State of Israel. Something had changed, something so basic and so radical that everything had to be rethought. He was right then. He is right now.

I also remember reading Emil Fackenheim's first statement of the 614th commandment in the 1967 symposium in *Judaism* magazine. I read Elie Wiesel's cogent remarks and I felt that I had to read more of Wiesel.

And then...

The buildup to the Six Day War began, three weeks in which Jews sensed that Jewish life was again at risk, this time in the State of Israel, and the world was once again turning its back. America would not come to Israel's aid. The United Nations troops left. Israel was threatened. "We are going to drive the Jews into the sea." The words made reference to the Mediterranean Sea of Israel's western border, but for Jews these words linked the Holocaust and Israel emotionally, poignantly, powerfully. A central prayer on the High Holidays begins with the words, "On Rosh Hashanah it is written and on Yom Kippur it is sealed: Who shall live and who shall die? Who by fire and who by water?" The two events became linked for my generation, emotionally even if not intellectually.

A friend suggested that we rescue the children, bring the Israeli children to America where they would be safe, and I decided that my place was to be in Israel. If the Jewish people were threatened, it was my fight, my responsibility. So instead of college graduation, I attended the rabbinic ordination of a friend and heard a relatively unknown Elie Wiesel give his brilliant speech on the eve of the Six Day War, and left from that ceremony to the airport, en route to Jerusalem. I was in the air when the June war began, and landed in Israel late in time to be in Jerusalem when the city was reunified. I can still hear the words of the announcer, and still see the tears in the eyes of my fellow passengers. That Friday evening I went to Shabbat services and heard the President of Israel, Zalman Shazar, speak. He spoke the words of *Lecha Dodi*: "Put on the clothes of your majesty, O Jerusalem." Never were those words more true; never did they touch my soul more completely. I was a witness to Jewish history; I was at home in Jewish memory; I was embraced by Jewish triumph. However much skepticism – political and religious – has entered my understanding of that

War and its consequences in the past 41 years, that moment is indelible in my soul, and touched it oh so deeply.

I returned to graduate school in philosophy, but my questions were really in religious thought, consumed by the question of God and history, by the presence of evil in history. I started reading Wiesel, the early Wiesel, and found that his work moved me. I was touched by his being at home in Jewish tradition, at one with the memory of God, but also confronting the changed circumstances of the Jewish people and their inability to accept the traditional God of Israel after the Holocaust. Unlike Rubenstein, Wiesel could not reject that God, and unlike others he would not back down and accept God's presence at Auschwitz or God's absence. He faced the void, the shattering.

After not quite succeeding as a philosopher and teaching for a stint, I decided to go back to graduate school and study with the one man who was writing the most radical theology, at one of only two places in the United States that were teaching the Holocaust on a Ph.D. level. I studied with Richard Rubenstein at Florida State University in the deep and newly integrated South, instead of with Franklin Littell at Temple. Since then, Franklin and his wife Marcie have become colleagues and friends, we have reminisced on that decisive choice many times. I made the right choice for me. Rubenstein was a superb mentor, a wonderful teacher. We have remained friends for almost 40 years, friends and family.

I wrote of Elie Wiesel as a religious thinker exploring all of the theological issues central to my own religious struggle. It later became my first book and an avenue into the most unexpected of careers. After graduate school, I was a chaplain and assistant professor at Wesleyan University, where I taught one of the early courses on the Holocaust.

In retrospect it was less my intellectual journey that opened up the opportunities I later had, but the most common response to the Holocaust of my generation: social activism on behalf of the Jewish people, the attempt to contact and ultimately to rescue Soviet Jewry. In the 1960s Arthur Morse published his influential journalistic work, *While Six Million Died*, an indictment of the wartime failures of American Jews, most especially American Jewish leadership, to save European

Jews. Products of the American civil rights movement and the anti-war (Vietnam) movement, we vowed not to repeat their mistakes. Two causes took primacy: support for Israel and the efforts on behalf of Soviet Jewry.

In the summer of 1976 I went to the Soviet Union to work with refuseniks, those Jews who had been denied permission to immigrate to Israel – and to encounter a new struggle for Jewish freedom, a dramatic fight against the oppression of Jews. Irving and Blu Greenberg briefed me for my trip. They had just returned, having faced arrest and harassment. We became friends. Greenberg later recruited me to head his then-fledgling organization Zachor: The Holocaust Resource Center, which was part of the National Jewish Conference Center which evolved into the National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership (CLAL). When Wiesel was offered the chairmanship of the President's Commission and Greenberg became its Executive Director, they turned to me to see if I would be willing to go down to Washington and actually run the Commission office, which I did willingly and enthusiastically. Its task was to recommend an appropriate national memorial to the Holocaust, and did recommend to President Carter the creation of a memorial museum to tell the story of the Holocaust, an educational program and foundation to spur the teaching of the Holocaust, a library and archive as well as a scholarly institute to intensify research, and a Committee on Conscience to warn national leaders, the media and the clergy of the threat of genocide and thus inform the world.

One issue became divisive in the work of the Commission, and that was the inclusion on non-Jewish victims in the national memorial to the Holocaust. No one would tell him *how* to include non-Jewish victims of Nazism in the memorial, but he had no choice but to include them. I drafted a memo which suggested that the inclusion of non-Jews was necessary in order to document the uniqueness of the Holocaust and the nature of the "Final Solution to the Jewish Problem." Simply put, one could not understand the evolution of industrialized killing by gas without understanding the T-4 program which gassed Germans who were deemed "life unworthy of living" and a drain on the resources of the country. One could not understand the concentration camp system

without seeing the Nazi persecution of political dissidents, clergy, trade unionists and social democrats. One could not perceive the involuntary nature of Jewish victimization without understanding the persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses, who could be released from concentration camps if they renounced their faith, and one could not comprehend the "Final Solution" without understanding Nazi policies toward the Roma and Sinti, who were not central to Nazi ideology, or towards Poles who were to be made subservient but not annihilated.

Wiesel feared that the formulation of the Holocaust which included non-Jews as victims of the Holocaust – not of Nazism – would soon deJudaize the Holocaust and would undermine his own efforts to speak of the centrality of the Holocaust and of its most essential Jewish character. Until then, Wiesel had spoken only as a Jew and had not been an easy denizen of both the Jewish and the American worlds. He had not yet become a universal spokesman on behalf of humanity even though he easily bridged the universal and the particular, moving from the Jewish experience to be inclusive of others. I believe that I soon coined the term "Americanization of the Holocaust": the partial translation, to use Michael Rosenak's terms, of the Holocaust event into an American idiom. It was meant to be in dialogue with, in tension with, the American narrative that was found in the Museum and the monuments of the National Mall. Again and again I invoked the Psalmist: "By the rivers of Babylon we sat and we wept as we remembered Zion." The place from which you remember an event shapes how you remember it.

My views had not changed, but I was recruited to defend the Jewishness of the project, to ensure that Jewish memory was protected. No longer an agent of assimilation, I was not the defender and advocate of Judaization. In the interim I wrote *After Tragedy and Triumphs: Essays on Jewish Thought and the American Experience*, which charted the role that the Museum should play, the commemorative and public functions of Holocaust memory, and the role of the Holocaust in Jewish history and Jewish consciousness, issues that have remained central to my thought, my work and my creative endeavors. I also had the opportunity to edit the proceedings on the conference that the United States Holocaust Memorial Council hosted after Wiesel's departure in "The Other Victims:

Non-Jews Persecuted and Murdered by the Nazis." That work was published as *A Mosaic of Victims*, as I thought it best not to set the lines of division as Jews and non-Jews, which is how we Jews often experienced division, but as a mosaic, understanding the variety and the diversity of Nazi racial policies and its central focus on the Jews. The distinction is subtle but quite important.

For six amazing years I had the opportunity to work on the creation of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's permanent exhibition, which also included three films, ten five-minute films on American responses to the Holocaust, and some seventy audiovisual programs, as well as its interactive learning center. I worked both as a public historian and as a scholar doing interpretive popular work and also scholarly volumes. This double focus has remained a constant interest for almost three decades.

Professionally, I left the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in 1997 and came to head the Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation, which was then taking the testimonies of 52,000 survivors in 32 countries and 57 languages. I helped improve both the interviewing process and also, perhaps more importantly, the archiving of the testimony. I also helped facilitate the notion that the collection should be made available not in its entirety – it may be just too enormous for that – but to interested parties in more condensed holdings. For example, the new Illinois Holocaust Museum in Skokie, which is currently being created, will have all the Midwest testimonies from Illinois and neighboring states. Auschwitz should have all the Auschwitz testimonies, Bergen-Belsen all of the testimonies relating to that camp, and so on. I left the project after we had virtually completed taking all the testimonies, and faced the question as to what next to do. So I reshaped my career, teaching part-time at the American Jewish University where I direct the Sigi Ziering Institute: Exploring the Ethical and Religious Implications of the Holocaust, and also serving as Professor of Jewish Studies. But my major work built off the work that I had previously done. I formed the Berenbaum Group which consults on the conceptual development of historical museums – their story-telling – and on the development of historical films. Among the projects I helped create were the memorial and museum at the Belzec Nazi death camp where 500,000 Jews were killed, the new Illinois Holocaust

Museum in Skokie, and Memoria y Tolerancia in Mexico City. I also consult on diverse projects and exhibitions, and over the past fifteen years in films. I sometimes joke that I have become the *Rav Hamachshir*, the rabbi who says that a product is kosher or not kosher, to those working on Holocaust films, most especially to those serious enough to ask and to seek advice.

I have come to enjoy the challenge of creative projects and of working not only on a blank computer screen but also a blank movie screen and on bare walls. I also enjoy working in from an area I know to an area that I do not know. I learn in the process. Many years ago I was party to a conversation between Richard Rubenstein, then my doctoral supervisor and a prominent journalist. He answered a call, listened to a question and said one word: “enough.” And then said: “fine... three weeks.” I asked him what happened. He was asked to review B.F. Skinner’s *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* and was asked what he knew of Skinner’s work. To which he answered “enough.” Then I asked him the same question and his response was “by the time I review Skinner’s work, I will know enough to write a serious review.” I learned that one can view an assignment as an opportunity to learn and to grow. I have never forgotten the lesson. It is a lesson that I offer to my own students as well.

How Does One Deal with the Holocaust?

I am often asked, how do you deal with the Holocaust. John Roth, my colleague and friend of so many years, once suggested the best answer I know: “handle with care!” One does not touch this material without paying a price, emotionally and spiritually.

Many years ago in analysis, I came to the realization that I compartmentalize much in my life. I could put things in tombs and move on to other items, but the tombs were not sealed; they leaked into other areas of life. One develops a professional desensitization and one has to fight that desensitization time and again, because unless it is fought one cannot anticipate how the readers will respond to a book, the audience to a movie, the visitors to an image in a Museum.

Having been blessed with young children at two different stages in my life – in my late twenties and early thirties, and in my mid and late

fifties – I have been surrounded by life as I grapple with death. It helps. It allows me to touch the most vital life force there is: young children.

My older children were touched by the Holocaust in many ways, positive and negative. My oldest daughter Ilana wrote her college essay on growing up in a home where the garage housed all sorts of sports equipment and Zyklon B. She never went to Poland to visit the death camps with me, despite many offers and opportunities, but she did lead a group of students to Poland when she was a college student. She was the guide, not the pilgrim, and thus shielded just a bit. My son Lev did go with me and stood at Treblinka, and turned to me and said “get me out of here.” We went to the airport and from there to Jerusalem. Arriving at four in the morning, he insisted on visiting the Western Wall.

My wife Melissa tries to shield my still-young children so they hear more about the Shoah in school than at home.

As for me, I had to learn when it was safe to feel, safe not to erect a barrier between me and the material and people that enter my life. Studying the Shoah made me compartmentalize. Living life makes me seek unity and wholeness, and not just fragments.

Challenges Ahead

What lies ahead for the field of Holocaust Studies?

First and foremost, we are at the edge of a great transition. The survivor generation is dying. They are passing from the scene. In the next five years we will only have child survivors of the Holocaust, and within a decade or two at the most, none. We will move from living memory to historical memory. No one knows the implication of this transition. It will certainly shape the nature of support for the field and the pressure to transition from Holocaust-specific studies to genocide-related studies.

No generation has left as deep a historical record to work from. Survivors’ testimonies abound. I suspect that we have in excess of 75,000 such testimonies, and we also have thousands of memoirs in all languages. The challenge will be to comb these massive records. Perhaps they are so massive that no one can get their arms around them.

Some historians are uncomfortable with oral history. They contend the information is unreliable, or at best far less reliable than documentary

evidence or evidence created at the time such as diaries and notes. They are correct but they miss the point. No oral history should be viewed uncritically as historical evidence. It must be evaluated within the context of everything else we know. If some oral histories are self-serving, so too are some documents, speeches, memos and other accounts of the time. Oral histories should be considered alongside other forms of documentation and they should at least be considered by historians, subject to verification and classification. However, even historians who most vociferously object to oral history do rely upon it to provide context and texture. They do interview people who were participants in historical events. They read their memoirs and review court testimony. And the material assembled these oral histories will provide the possibility of a people's history of the Holocaust. It will be of interest to historians, but not to historians alone. Sociologists and psychologists, students of literature and language, filmmakers and documentary makers will find this material of interest. It will provide unequaled visual recollections of the world before the Holocaust, vital information about the transition between the Holocaust and the post-war years, and, of course, vivid recollections of the Holocaust.

Ironically, we will have much less oral history of the perpetrators. I have become increasingly convinced that they too have a human story that must be heard, understood and interpreted: witness the important debate between Christopher Browning and Daniel Goldhagen and the earlier work of Robert Jay Lifton.

The second challenge will be language.

In order to do research in this field one must master languages or else rely upon secondary sources and translations. Central Europeans and Israelis will have an advantage over American scholars because they have mastered at a young age several languages that we Americans must struggle to learn as adults. Émigrés who come to the United States have an easier time with the original languages. Rumanians can handle their native language, German and French with relative ease and thus touch on several different languages at once. Yiddish speakers will be fewer in future generations and that makes the use of Jewish sources more difficult. Hebrew was not a major language during the Shoah.

The late Raul Hilberg once bemoaned the fact that more and more works are built of but a slim foundation of original documentation. He was right, and resources must be devoted in the field to support research on original material. We will need regional studies of areas and times, operations and specific documentation.

Saul Friedlander has shown that a general history of the Holocaust must deal with issues of time – he divided his work into six-month intervals; location – country by country, region by region; participants – perpetrators and victims; and even non-participants – neutrals and bystanders. Only then can we grasp the whole. Susan Zuccotti has shown us how to overcome obstacles such as closed archives. By looking at what was sent to the Vatican and what was received by the Vatican, she could compensate for much that she could not see within the Vatican itself – much but clearly not all.

We will need “archive rats” to go through the material that is opened, to ask new questions and probe new issues, to deal with issues that have not been fully dealt with. I think of Henry Friedlander's work on *The Origins of the Nazi Genocide: From Euthanasia to the Final Solution*, Guenther Lewy's book *The Nazi Persecution of Gypsies*, and Gunter Grau's edited volume *Hidden Holocaust?: Gay and Lesbian Persecution in Germany, 1933–45*, as examples.

None of us can keep up in the field. We are blessed with an abundance of good work and burdened with limitations of time and energy. So we will have many subspecialties emerge and we will know more about less and less about more.

Because the Holocaust deals with ultimate issues, life and death, good and evil, people in the most extreme of conditions, it will continue to be a source of attraction to those who want to confront ultimate issues. It has entered world culture as a defining event of 20th-century humanity and as the negative absolute in a world drawn to all sorts of relativism. I fear not Holocaust denial but its trivialization and vulgarization, not so much from antisemites and those who don't understand its importance, but by those consumed by the Holocaust, consumed and overwhelmed. “Handle with care” is the advice of a sage. It is a rebuke to all of us when we do not.

For those choosing this field of scholarship, the challenges are great, the price to be paid emotionally is steep, but the rewards are also significant because you are grappling with an event of world importance, the paradigmatic manifestation of evil of 20th-century humanity, an event that raises the most serious and complex of issues, one that deals with the intersection of so many fields. It will always be of interest. The more you learn, the more you will sense a need to know more. In retrospect I would choose no other field of inquiry, and the prospect of further research and further creative work ignites the imagination.

Speaking About the Holocaust in Today's Poland

Stanisław Krajewski

It should be easier to speak about the Holocaust in Poland than elsewhere. The Holocaust is not an abstraction and basically no one disbelieves it. It is enough to look around any little town and imagine its history, or to walk up to the Warsaw Ghetto monuments and realize that hundreds of thousands of Jews lived in this neighborhood less than seventy years ago. The Holocaust forms part of not only official history and textbook history, but also family history. Who in Poland has no one in the family who saw one of those blood-curdling moments of the implementation of the “final solution”?

Despite the concreteness of the Holocaust, its physical proximity, speaking about it is not easy in Poland. And that is not because of its gradually increasing distance in time. The difficulty was there from the beginning, or in any case from the beginning there was tension – at least in embryo – between the perspective from the outside and the Polish perspective, and especially between the view of the average Jew outside Poland and the average Pole. This problem relates to the language (What language should be used to speak about the Holocaust?), the results (How should the consequences of the Holocaust be viewed?), the conclusions (What are the lessons of the Holocaust?), and the right to places and names (Who has the right to decide about Holocaust sites? Who is entitled to use the term “Holocaust”?). Without attempting to discuss all these issues in full or to analyze the related literature, here I will give a few examples of the problems, based on situations I have had to deal with.

The Warsaw Ghetto

To speak of history, especially in Poland, is to speak of the heroism of struggle and resistance. Such a manner of speaking has been adopted by Polish Jews as well. That is why the monuments erected in connection with the Holocaust have mainly been monuments commemorating the Uprising. In liberated Warsaw, in the heart of the former ghetto, the first plaque was placed on the second anniversary of the outbreak of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. The inscription reads “In honor of the fallen ghetto heroes.” The word “heroes” refers to the insurgents, and the date confirms this: April 19, 1945. The first monument, erected one year later and extant today, was erected to “Those who fell in an unprecedented heroic struggle....” Natan Rapoport’s famous monument unveiled in 1948 contains this brief dedication: “The Jewish people – to their heroes and martyrs.” Thus they are commemorated and venerated not only as insurgents but also as martyrs. One might think that the martyrs were also those fighters – in the end almost all of them died – but clearly all the victims of the Holocaust are meant here, because, as we know, on the other side of the monument is another sculpture, *Procession*, which shows people – from child to elder – going to their deaths. To death in the gas chamber.

On the monument, which became an icon from the very outset, appeared the fundamental subject which is the essence of the Holocaust, for we remember the Holocaust as an event unprecedented not because of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising and its insurgents – who of course deserve to be remembered and honored – but because of the millions of Jews murdered without a fight. In the Jewish Press Agency bulletin from the unveiling, the monument is described as homage to “the insurgents and the six million Jews.” To the Jews who have gathered annually at the monument on April 19 it has been clear that it was about the Holocaust and not only about the Uprising. But is it equally clear nowadays? For young people and especially the non-Jewish youth who take part in the ceremonies at the monument, is it clear that the back of the monument presents 99% of the history we commemorate? The image of rebellion and combat dominates Rapoport’s monument. He himself understood that it should not be that way, and when he made a replica for Yad Vashem he pressed to have the back of the monument accorded its proper status, and

so the relief sculptures made in the mid 1970s were mounted side by side. At first this met with resistance, however: the wish was to show only the front sculpture, called “Combat”! In Israel, as everywhere else, they don’t quite know how to present the Holocaust.

The image of combat dominates the monument’s appearance and its name as well: The Ghetto Heroes’ Monument. In saying “hero,” do we have in mind someone who went along with his old parents into the transport because he did not want to leave them alone, even though he could have fled and hidden for a while? This is the type of question Marek Edelman posed in a well-known conversation with Hanna Krall. It was no less an act of heroism than it was to do battle with weapon in hand, he said at that time. That lesson, which I learned then and there and will remember as long as I live, seems not to be widely known. Neither in Poland nor anywhere else. As we can see, the insurgents do not even represent all the heroes. But there is still no fitting language for speaking about those other heroes, and this shows how unprecedented that tragedy was. Of course, the insurgents do in a certain sense represent the Jewish people, but their deeds remain an episode in the whole of that chapter of Jewish history. On the monument, though, first the “fighters” appear in the inscription, and only later the “martyrs.” The victims become an appendage of the insurgents, as it were. And how would the monument have looked if there had been no Warsaw Ghetto Uprising? We should, after all, honor the Holocaust victims, Uprising or no Uprising. So we need to try to speak in such a way that the millions of victims who were foreordained to die merely for being Jews are placed at the center. The more time passes from those events, the greater, it seems to me, is the awareness of that challenge among people involved in commemoration.

The next stage in developing the space around the monument was the Memorial Path opened in 1988, which leads from Rapoport’s monument to the monument erected that same year at the Umschlagplatz, from where 300,000 Jews were taken to the Treblinka death camp. Its full name: The Route of Memory of the Martyrdom and Struggle of the Jews. Here the order is now reversed! The name, and the order, finally correspond to the Hebrew name *Shoah u’gevurah*, which also appears on further stone blocks demarcating the route.

In the inscriptions on the successive Warsaw monuments we thus see an evolution: from fighters “heroically struggling” through “fighters and martyrs” to “martyrdom and struggle.” I have to admit, though, that for me April 19 and the few days surrounding it are the Day of Martyrdom, the Day of the Holocaust of the Jews, *Yom ha-shoah* rather than *Yom ha-shoah ve’hagevurah*.

The emphasis on the Uprising, the lack of understanding of the proportion between combat and martyrdom, can lead to embarrassing situations. An example could be the speech of the presenter of the April 2008 ceremonies at the Grand Theatre in Warsaw. The observance had been planned down to the last detail and on a grand scale, with the presidents of Poland and Israel in attendance. It was in honor of – well, whom? Presumably the Holocaust victims. The cantor who appeared afterwards intoned a prayer which mentioned the names of the death camps and other concentration camps, but the young presenter, reading from a carefully prepared text, spoke of “the tens of thousands” of victims of the Uprising. This means that he was referring to the victims of the last period of the ghetto’s existence – from the outbreak of the revolt to the complete destruction of the district. As if it was only about them and not about all the Holocaust victims! Or at least all its Warsaw victims, because the host of the ceremonies was the city. That rhetoric, invoking only the Uprising, gave a severely distorted picture of the tragedy we were supposed to be commemorating. The hundreds of thousands of murdered Jews whose deaths occurred before the launching of the armed struggle were overlooked, deemed unimportant, in a sense condemned to obscurity.

The lack of appropriate language, words that can be used to speak about the Holocaust, also becomes evident when attempts are made to talk about the goal of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. Everyone knows that it was a battle predestined to defeat. Why, then, was it undertaken? The least-fatuous answer was given by Marek Edelman in that interview with Hanna Krall. It was, he said, a choice of how to die. All the Jews were condemned to die anyway, so a hopeless battle could bring only a different kind of death. But even that suggestion of Edelman’s has not been widely accepted. Of course the insurgents who took up the struggle at that time explained it differently. Without presuming to enter into their state of

mind, without trying to describe the powerful emotions that directed them, I only say that they used expressions such as the fight for dignity, honor, “a worthy death” and so on. It is no surprise that they spoke that way, because, as I said, there are no terms adequate to the situation they were in. Yet those same terms were adopted after the war. First they were used by ghetto survivors and other Jews who remained alive after the war. On the 1946 monument it is written that this heroic battle had been fought “for the freedom and dignity of the Jewish people.” To that the phrase “for the freedom of Poland, for the liberation of man” is added. This has an explicitly political resonance, which seems offensive to me when set against the hopeless, desperate battle which had not only no prospect of reaching such a goal but even any chance of saving life. This mention of the “freedom of the nation” seems another example of uttering slogans that are noble but ill-suited to the situation. But the mention of dignity itself raises doubts, for it contains the suggestion that those who were not able, who could not or did not want to take up arms, died without dignity. The inappropriateness of such phrases was evident even then. Maria Hochberg Mariańska wrote, “Whose honor had to be defended? The children, the women, the old people?” If those who took part in the battles use those phrases about dignity and honor, however, we understand that it expresses the kind of argument that some of them may have put to other Jews or to themselves back then. It repels me when similar words fall from the lips of people born after the war. At the beginning of the ceremonies at the Grand Theatre in 2008 the presenter spoke piously of the ghetto fighters’ battle for dignity and honor. To me that was an appallingly false note. It sounded as if we, sitting in safety and with full stomachs, in this elegant and ostentatious theatre, were judging the people of 65 years ago, issuing verdicts: these with honor, those with dishonor, these with dignity, those without dignity. Regardless of the doubtless good will of the organizers, to my mind it was an unintentional cheapening of the memory of the victims.

Auschwitz

There is a similar problem in commemorating the victims of the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp. On the main monument in Birkenau, unveiled in

1967, a rather large inscription was put; because of its location on the most prominent part of the monument, it looks as if it contains the most important message of the place, the place which the whole world acknowledges to be the central point of the Nazi universe of death. Here we have words similar to those we met in Warsaw: it is about the “heroes of Auschwitz who died here fighting against Nazi genocide for the freedom and dignity of man, for peace and the brotherhood of nations.” In the place where a million people were gassed, those are completely inappropriate words. As if those who died here were fighters and not simply innocent victims from mass transports! As if it was about people fighting against genocide, and not simply victims of genocide! As if those victims who had suffered the long journey, usually unaware of their fate, died because they had fought for freedom, and had not been simply trying to survive in the harsh conditions of war and occupation! As if the struggle for peace and brotherhood was the reason for their deaths, and not just because they were Jews! That text about freedom and dignity, brotherhood and peace is absurdly out of place. It slights the gas chamber victims. Again the reason is the same as in the case of the Warsaw monuments: the belief that only the fighters, the victims who fell in battle, the heroes who took up arms, are worth talking about. I do not say that the authors of that inscription were motivated by simple ill will or political considerations. Certainly there are still all kinds of attempts to politicize Auschwitz; that proclamation is not an exception. The text of it becomes not absurd but understandable enough when we see it as homage to the members of the camp resistance, the participants in the *Sonderkommando* revolt, the people who escaped or attempted escape from the camp. I am far from failing to appreciate them. They all deserve to be remembered. But to place them in the foreground is an insult to the rest of the victims, and to their kin. Extending the monument are indeed plaques in many languages with words about the murder of about a million and a half men, women and children, mainly Jews from the different countries of Europe (which is appropriate and in itself indicates great progress as compared with the plaques that were there for decades, which did not at all refer to who the victims were, and instead gave the very exaggerated figure of four million), but the relatively large, elaborate inscription described above,

which apparently is a message to the world, refers only to the “heroes.” The overwhelming majority of the victims disappear from view. How to speak about them, that is, about their fate, is problematic.

More than that, the quoted text in honor of the fighters is part of a larger one that is not only inappropriate but deplorable and highly offensive: those heroes are mentioned as those upon whom the “State Council of the Polish People’s Republic” has conferred the Grunwald Cross First Class. As if that was most important! As if not the victims but the state institution and the name of the decoration deserved full mention. The victims remain completely anonymous, and the glory, not to say the dignity and honor, falls on a defunct institution of a defunct (in that form) state. I and others have been speaking about that for years, but that inscription remains the main message we direct at visitors. A disgrace. The lack of a stronger reaction to it probably should be attributed to the fact that the inscription is only in Polish; few from outside Poland understand what is written there. There may be yet another reason, equally important for Poles and foreigners: no one has a very good idea about how to speak of the Holocaust victims. That is why I think that instead of wrestling with our words the best thing that can be done is to give, for example, a quote from the Bible.

When in the 1960s I went on a school trip to Auschwitz, that is, Oświęcim, as every one called it, we were told about the Polish martyrs, but practically nothing was said about the Jews. The prisoners came from many countries, and the Jews did appear on the list, but in alphabetical order according to the Polish names, that is, at the end of the list: the word for Jews starts with the letter Ż. Today it is completely different, but not so very long ago, during the conflict over the Carmelite convent the mother superior said that since the camp victims came from 28 countries, the Jews were exaggerating their connection with this place. Today it is different, but some Polish peculiarities remain.

Auschwitz is a symbol of the Holocaust. There are good reasons for this. But in Poland it symbolizes something else as well: the suffering of the Poles during the German occupation. There are good reasons for this as well. The following comparison best illustrates this: When outside of Poland someone says he was an Auschwitz prisoner, it is automatically

assumed that he is a Jew. Indeed, the Hungarians, French, Italians and Greeks who were in the camp were Jews. On the other hand, when you meet an Auschwitz ex-prisoner in Poland you should assume that he is not a Jew but rather a Catholic. These former prisoners see Auschwitz as their place. Poles, then, treat Auschwitz as a place to which Poland has a right. Meanwhile, Jews from outside Poland treat Auschwitz as a symbol of the Holocaust and therefore see it as their place, to which they have a particular claim. World opinion, clearly, agrees with the Jews in this regard. The lack of recognition of this in Poland leads to many misunderstandings and controversies. When, for example, presidents and crowned heads came in January 1995 on the fiftieth anniversary of the liberation of the camp, Polish former prisoners clearly were under the impression that the world leaders had come to pay homage to their suffering. For those leaders, however, above all it was about the Holocaust of the Jews. The sad but elementary truth is that concentration camps, places of inhumane slave labor, extermination through hunger and exertion beyond one's strength are not exceptional but a common enough sight in many places on earth and in many ages. If Auschwitz had been "only" that, the anniversary of its liberation would not have gathered umpteen heads of state.

The memory of the Polish Christian prisoners holds a variety of terrible events: the death of friends, selections after which the weak or sick were sent to the crematoria. Death threatened at every moment. The prisoners were menaced and exploited regardless of their origin or faith. Today they ask, "Why single out the Jews? We did the same, starved the same, died the same. There was no difference between us then; why make one now?" The belief that their fates were identical has largely shaped Polish opinion. This is the result of unforgettable incidents, tragic experiences. I am the last one to question the truth of those experiences, but this does not mean that the suggestion of identical fates in the camp is true. The Jewish prisoners were the ones who managed to cheat death on the first day. As a rule they lost many family members that day, frequently their entire immediate family. It was the beginning of a camp Gehenna that cannot be compared with what happened to non-Jewish prisoners. For the "Aryans," Auschwitz was "only" a camp for destructive and death-dealing labor. Their families usually were living in relative freedom somewhere.

They were waiting for them, and sometimes sent in packages. For the Jews, Auschwitz was a death camp, and very often where their families had died. Generally, no one was waiting for them outside the camp, no one was praying for them. In any case they could not receive packages. Even if their later experiences in the camp were similar to those of other prisoners, their lot was not the same.

The road of the Jews to the camp number tattooed on their forearms differed from the road the others took. It meant good luck, avoidance of immediate gassing. To become an Auschwitz number – this is the image of the worst fate of a Pole in occupied Poland. At the same time, for Jews it was terrible but not worse, rather better – yes, better – than the other actually threatening possibilities. For those who were brought in the Jewish transports to Auschwitz, to become a number was a stroke of luck. Lucky ones, because they were Auschwitz prisoners! That is a perspective that hardly gets through to Poles today.

"Holocaust"

In an early phase of my public involvement in Jewish affairs I met a phenomenon I might call "How easy and how nice it is to honor dead Jews." In 1981, taking advantage of the relative liberalization during the period of the first Solidarity movement, a group of friends and I laid a wreath at the Warsaw Ghetto monument as part of the official ceremonies. After the ceremony we lined up with the delegations laying wreaths. After a little while it dawned on us that behind us stood the Grunwald Patriotic Union, an openly antisemitic formation then officially active among Polish communists! That was when I understood that paying homage to dead Jews costs nothing, and can be combined with any attitude to Jews as such, and to still-living Jews in particular. And with any opinion about the results of the Holocaust and its lessons.

Some of the many different results of the Holocaust are hard to talk about in Poland because there are material interests involved in them. Above all this is about changes in ownership: the appropriation of property left behind by deported Jews, and after 1989 the attempts to recover prewar property made by Jewish former owners or their heirs. These are difficult matters, although it should be added that both of these things

are part of a larger problem that concerns not only Jews. Property was appropriated on a large scale in Poland not only as a result of the Holocaust but also because of the shifting of national boundaries, forced migration, and reforms carried out by the communists. This means that the majority of cases involving the restitution or compensation for lost property involve former owners who are not Jews. I can add that, despite the problems, discussion of many difficult issues is more open and further advanced in Poland than in many other countries in this region of Europe. One of the reasons for this is that a wide section of the public was involved in the debate over Jan Tomasz Gross's books *Neighbors* and *Fear*.

When it comes to deeper consideration of the Holocaust – its effects on the vision of the world and civilization, its unprecedentedness, its role as a turning point of history, its links with modernity, its consequences for Christianity and for the nature of Europe – although these issues hold no threats to material interests, Poland has never been an important center for reflection. The physical proximity of the sites of murder and the multitude of direct witnesses should, it would seem, facilitate consideration of the consequences of the Holocaust, but nothing like that has happened. The communist rulers did not make it easy to pursue unorthodox lines of thought, but that is not it. Mental resistance was too strong. There was a sense, I think, that to undertake such reflection would pose a threat to the foundations of one's identity and to Poles' opinion of themselves. Of course, in Poland there is interest in philosophical questions related to the Holocaust, but that is due to the influence of thought coming from the West. Nevertheless, I observe with satisfaction, though with a certain incredulity, that among the young people willing to become deeply involved in these issues are the most talented and the most intellectually astute university students. It seems that in studying the history of the Jews they want to better understand not only the Jews and their fate, but also themselves.

Interest in the deep meaning of the Holocaust is due mainly to the recognition of this subject as an important domain of reflection in the humanities. Around the world, the very word "Holocaust" not only has become widely known but has come to denote something extraordinary, almost sacred, suffering worthy of particular attention and remembrance.

Perhaps it is not surprising that this has led to attempts to become part of this sphere of singular values. In the United States, some members of the Polish-American community have demanded that the term "Holocaust survivors" be applied to Poles or Christians, that is, non-Jews who lived through the dangers of the German occupation of Poland during World War II. They believe – not without reason – that if they are denied that name, their suffering will not be perceived by Americans. However, broadening the idea of the Holocaust to include all suffering at Nazi hands seems completely unjustified. Interestingly, in Poland such proposals are rather not encountered. Of course the term is used metaphorically or else in order to forcefully stress some butchery or persecution, but generally everyone understands that during the war the fate of the Jews was distinctly different and deserves its own term. Moreover, in Poland there is no risk that the suffering of the generality of Poles during the war will be forgotten or unappreciated. There is no need to "ennoble" it through the use of that magical word.

The most recent history of the term "Holocaust" – its spread, its acquisition of deeper meaning, its misuse, attempts to appropriate it, sometimes with openly anti-Jewish intent – are a fascinating example of the importance of the Jewish fate for world civilization. The most tragic fragment of modern Jewish history received a name that ennoble. That is why the word "Holocaust" has begun to be applied almost as widely as Biblical expressions. With time it may lose its status as a description of something specifically Jewish. In any event it is not used with much enthusiasm in discourse within Jewish circles, nor is it a word rooted in Judaism. Like the word "Bible." Nevertheless, in European languages the term "Holocaust" and not "Shoah" – similarly to "Bible" instead of *Tanach* – expresses a link with transcendence, and thereby with the highest values. This word is the property of all, but we know that it comes from the experience of the Jews. One can say that this is the story of one more – though how inexpressibly bitter – success of the Jews.

translated from Polish

The Holocaust of the German Jews

Moshe Zimmermann

Let me address a very specific aspect of the historiography of the Holocaust: the Holocaust – the Shoah – of the German Jews. Even though the history of the Holocaust is by definition a universal or at least a European history, it has usually been divided by historians into geographically defined segments: the history of the Holocaust in Poland, in France, in Hungary, in North Africa, etc. This approach is only natural because of the various frameworks provided by the political boundaries and the specific regional historical conditions under which the Holocaust took place – not only because the Hungarian Jews had such a different history than the French Jews or because Hungarian society in general was so different from French society, but also because the perpetrators, the Germans, organized and implemented their genocidal policy differently in the different countries. How surprising, therefore, that the specific history of the Holocaust of German Jews – the Jews of the so-called *Altreich* – did not get (at least until the last decade) the amount of attention one might have expected this entity to get. Considering the fact that the German Jews were the most immediate target for Nazi antisemitic policy, their Holocaust or their history during World War II should have become a matter of the utmost historiographic interest.

To start with, the notion of the Holocaust or Shoah itself poses a basic problem: What are the specific elements of the Holocaust as compared to other facets or other periods of murderous antisemitism. Is a clear-cut periodisation possible, separating the Holocaust era from previous or

introductory phases? If one accepts Saul Friedländer's periodisation,¹ the Holocaust was only the third stage within the 1939–1945 period of extermination, starting only in summer 1942. What follows from this periodisation of the history of the Holocaust of the German Jews is indeed its marginalisation: In the summer of 1942 only about 15% of the original Jewish population (which was very small already by the beginning of the War, compared to East European Jewry) still lived (or vegetated) in Germany, and by next spring had nearly disappeared. In order to avoid this marginalisation one must use a more flexible definition of the term Holocaust or else refer to the more general concepts – extermination or persecution.

The history of Nazi persecution of the German Jews *was* indeed a central historiographical topic, but only related to the *prewar* experience.² Since the German Jews were the primary if not the exclusive target of Nazi *Judenpolitik* for 5–6 years following Hitler's rise to power, historians dealt quite extensively with their persecution during this period, especially with the boycott of April 1, 1933, the Nuremberg Laws of September 1935, and the pogrom night in November 1938. A totally different picture emerges when it comes to the Nazi persecution of the German Jews since the so-called *Reichskristallnacht*. The *Anschluss* and the annexation of territories that hitherto belonged to Czechoslovakia, but mainly the occupation of Poland and Western Europe by Nazi Germany from the beginning of the war in September 1939, shifted the interest of both writers and readers of the history of European Jews under Nazi rule away from the German Jews. After all, from now on an ever-growing number of Jews, much larger than the number of the Jews in Germany, came under German rule. Moreover, the *Judenpolitik* initiated in the *new* territories, including ghettoisation and mass murder, seemed much more dramatic than the *Judenpolitik* practiced within the boundaries of *Old* Germany (*Altreich*) at least for the first two years of the war.

1 Saul Friedländer, *The Years of Extermination. Nazi Germany and the Jews 1939-1945* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007).

2 Cf. Karl A. Schleunes, *The Twisted Road to Auschwitz. Nazi Policy Towards German Jews 1933-1939* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1970).

But this marginalised chapter deserves the historian's attention not only because no historiographical vacuum could be tolerated in principle but mainly because this was a special case that allows us on the one hand to follow the longest (and twisted) road to Auschwitz a Jewish community traveled, and on the other hand to deal with a specific development, that of creating and deepening a gap within a society that used to be under a common roof called "German" (*deutsch*). This chapter demonstrates better than any other how the construct of Jews as aliens, as a menace to non-Jews, enables the majority to accept first discrimination against, then the deportation and even the extermination of a minority.

An important aspect that is often overlooked is the problematic concept "German Jews." First of all, this term, which formally refers to the Jews of the German state within its boundaries of 1919–1937, is normally used in a broader sense. Since the boundaries of the German Reich created in 1871 (of which West Prussia was lost to Poland in 1919) and the territories in which German culture and language were predominant did not overlap, Jews were often considered German even if they were not citizens of the Reich. Moreover, Jews who left Germany – either as emigrants (to the U.S.A., to Palestine or elsewhere) or as expellees to Eastern Europe – remained, in their own eyes and in the eyes of the surrounding population, German Jews. It was the Third Reich that contested the adjective "German" when used by its Jews. It was the Third Reich that construed the notion of "Jews in Germany" instead of "German Jews," thus starting a process of separation, discrimination, expulsion and extermination. This way the war of Germans against other Germans was presented as a war of Germans against alleged non-Germans. It is often forgotten who excluded whom, who created the barriers: Even Zionists and Orthodox Jews in Germany considered themselves German, not only the so-called assimilated Jews. All German Jews, including also those whose definition as Jews was based on racist criteria only ("half Jews" or Christians of Jewish origin) were stigmatised by the regime as non-Germans. Within the history of the Nazi era this was a unique development. What renders this development even more absurd is the fact that German Jews were perceived, even during the war, in Lodz and

Minsk as well as in New York or Tel Aviv, simply as Germans, as sheer representatives of Germanness.

The relative lack of interest in the history of the German Jews after 1938 may also be explained by the common attitude towards them and their heritage, especially among Zionists. The German Jews are usually perceived as the most extreme example of assimilation and of the emancipatory solution of the “Jewish problem” that allegedly was doomed to failure. Since the failure seemed so conclusive already when *Kristallnacht* happened, there was no urge to follow the history of the German Jews afterwards, that is, during World War II. Not only interested or politically oriented laymen but also historians considered the bitter end – deportation and extermination – to have been predestined as of November 1938 at the latest. The German Jews – according to the common belief – were on the one hand blinded by the ideas of the Enlightenment from the 18th century on, or on the other hand ignored the eliminatory nature of German antisemitism or even of Nazi *Judenpolitik* before and after 1933.

This attitude also led to a typical misinterpretation created by hindsight – turning the question of why the German Jews did not understand the writing on the wall and did not get out of Germany into a rhetorical one. We, of course, know what happened to the Jews in the German Reich, we know Auschwitz, Treblinka, Babi Yar, etc., and many retrospectively expect the Jews of Europe and especially the German Jews during the 1930s to have had the necessary foresight and to know what we know now. But hindsight is no analytical tool, only an accidental advantage of those who live to know the result of a historical process that might have led to totally different results. It is comparable with the stock exchange: one does not know in advance if the absolute bottom has already been reached, whether it's better to stay in or bail out. Those who lived through the 1930s in Germany (including the non-Jewish majority or even the fanatic Nazis) could not have predicted – even by 1938 – the pending absolute bankruptcy of mankind (*Zivilisationsbruch*). Neither could they guess the exact “point of no return” on the way to social death or to the extermination of the German Jews.

The Zionist deep conviction that Jewish emancipation in Germany was predestined to fail and that the victory of Jewish nationalism was

unavoidable, which is common to most Israelis at least, suffers from the same deficiency that characterised other hindsight approaches – it ignores the alternatives. Zionist historiography must pay attention to the following remark: it is thanks only to the British army that Field Marshal Rommel did not conquer Palestine in 1942. Had Rommel done it, the Palestinian Jews, including about 60,000 who had fled the Third Reich, would have disappeared in extermination camps. Bearing this eventuality in mind, the fact that somebody realistically predicted the fate of the German Jews and left Germany for Palestine cannot be interpreted as a proof of farsightedness.

Not only laymen but also historians used hindsight to explain what happened and thus helped confirm a basic antisemitic belief of Nazi society or of other societies with anti-Jewish prejudices: the Jews should have understood that leaving Germany was *imperative*, not only because they should have known that the Nazis meant business and planned their extermination, but also because they really were alien to German society. This notion is still prevalent among Zionist “*Besserwisser*” as well as among “good Germans.” Let's take the title of John Dippel's book (1996) as an example: *Bound upon a Wheel of Fire: Why So Many German Jews Made the Tragic Decision to Remain in Nazi Germany*, which in German got an even more annoying title: *Die grosse Illusion: Warum deutsche Juden ihre Heimat nicht verlassen wollten* [!].³ This title alludes to an alleged blindness, even stupidity, characterising the German Jews, and at the same time underlines the impression that all alternatives were open to the German Jews, including the free choice of a new haven.

The historian Peter Gay (previously: Peter Froehlich), himself an émigré, recapitulated in his autobiography *My German Question* such irritating questions concerning his father's decision to leave Germany only in 1938: “Why didn't you leave Germany without delay? Was your father unable to leave because he was afraid of earning less abroad?” Peter Gay's answer posed two counter-questions: “Who was ready to receive us

³ John van Houten Dippel, *Bound Upon a Wheel of Fire: Why So Many German Jews Made the Tragic Decision to Remain in Nazi Germany* (New York: Basic Books, 1996).

before it was too late? How was my father expected to live abroad without the knowledge of foreign languages and without the necessary qualifications?”⁴

Jochen Koehler summarised, 35 years after the end of the war, his interviews relating to the generation of the perpetrators in his book *Stories of Survivors* (later he researched the activities of Helmuth von Moltke, one of the heroes of the opposition against Hitler). There he confronted one of his interviewees, Ilse Rewald (born in 1918), who lived in hiding in Berlin from 1943 and survived, with equally arrogant and anachronistic questions: “What role did the Jewish community play? Did it participate in its own extermination? Wasn’t this organisation able to mobilise its members, even to a small extent, against the threat of destruction? The first wave of deportations took place in 1941! The question is, why didn’t they prepare themselves beforehand for some kind, for different kinds of resistance!” The old Berliner survivor answered bluntly: “You consider it in hindsight as our fault, even though we know that we must put a much larger blame on the whole (German) people.” But the interviewer did not let loose: “Who, if not the suffering [Jews] ought to have raised their voices first against the suffering inflicted on them?”⁵

Charlie Chaplin supplied an adequate answer to this very question already back in 1940. In his film *The Great Dictator* the fate of the German Jews became a central topic – an exception to the rule in those days – and the lack of willingness to resist the Regime and its discriminatory laws on their part was directly addressed. But at the crucial moment, when fugitive former “Stormtrupper Commander Schultz” looks among the Jews in the ghetto for a hitman who might assassinate the dictator, Hannah (Paulette Goddard), the film’s heroine, comes up with the right idea: it is not for the Jews to become the frontrunners of the resistance, as their situation is extremely precarious anyway! What was clear to Hannah, that is, to Chaplin by 1940 should have been even clearer to us today. And yet, unfortunately this is not the case, in spite of the abundant evidence provided by modern historical research.

4 Peter Gay, *My German Question. Growing Up in Nazi Berlin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

5 Jochen Köhler, *Klettern in der Großstadt. Geschichten von Überleben zwischen 1933–1945* (Berlin: Das Arsenal, 1981), 78–80.

As we have seen already, this hindsight perspective creates a paradox: The blame for the crimes committed is put on the victims – who allegedly lacked the will to avoid the catastrophe, did not have enough moral courage to fight Hitler’s Gestapo state, or at least did not understand that they were not Germans – not on the perpetrators and their many collaborators and fellow travelers who also had a material interest in the persecution of their Jewish neighbours.

The tactic of putting the blame on the victim is well known. This very tactic was used already by the Nazis against their Jewish victims in real time. Every discriminatory move made by the Nazi regime against the Jews was publicly justified by accusing the Jews. The boycott of April 1933 was thus a retaliatory measure for the “atrocities stories” spread abroad by the German Jews against the new German government. The pogrom of 1938 was provoked by the murder of a German diplomat committed by “the Jews.” It was Chaim Weitzmann, the Zionist leader, who started World War II, and Germany was only reacting to this provocation – this is how Hitler himself explained the causes of war to his audience in 1942.⁶ The confiscation of Jewish property was the answer to the devastation caused by the bombs dropped from the sky on German cities by the relatives of the German Jews. The expulsion of the German Jews from October 1941 on was retaliation for the expulsion of the Volga Germans by the Bolsheviks (a Nazi synonym for Jews) in August 1941, and last but not least, the mass murder of the Jews was an eye-for-an-eye measure after Jews (Bolsheviks) massacred many anti-Bolshevik prisoners before retreating from eastern Poland and Russian territories conquered by the advancing German army from June 22, 1941.

After the war this tactic remained in use. The historian Ernst Nolte took up Hitler’s explanation about the Jews starting the war and related to it more than once.⁷ Carl Vincent Krogmann, who was the Nazi mayor of Hamburg, described in his memoirs, written more than 30 years after

6 Andreas Hillgruber and Henry Picker, eds., *Hitlers Tischgespräche im Führerhauptquartier 1941–1942* (München, 1968) 24.7.1942, 250.

7 Ernst Nolte, *Der Europäische Bürgerkrieg 1917–1945. Nationalsozialismus und Bolschewismus* (Frankfurt a. M.: Propyläen Verlag, 1989).

the end of the war, the circumstances under which the November 1938 pogrom occurred: “Anyway the leadership of the [Nazi] Party and the leadership of the party organisation didn’t have anything to do with it... From the present retrospective one cannot exclude the possibility that people belonging to the opposition (*Widerstand*), or maybe even the Jews themselves had an interest in the burning of the synagogues.”⁸ Adolf Eichmann went so far as to describe (after the war) the German decision to exterminate the Jews as the result of the deliberate Zionist wish to provoke a situation that would convince the world of the need to create a Jewish state.⁹

On a different note, Jews were retrospectively instrumentalised in order to provide an alibi for the perpetrator. A German emeritus professor of law, who published a book about the benevolent attitude of the non-Jewish Germans towards the Jews in 1933–1945, quoted Horst Osterheld (one of Adenauer’s advisers) on the question of knowledge about the Holocaust: “Even Hans Rosenthal, Efraim Kishon and Abba Eban knew nothing at the time about the terrible final solution.”¹⁰ If the victims did not know – how could one expect the collaborators of the perpetrators – soldiers, policemen, bureaucrats, etc. – to have known anything? The logical flaw is exposed not only by the unavoidable answer to this very question, but also by the author’s focus on knowledge of the “final solution” alone, as if the Germans were not acquainted with the preliminary steps leading towards the “final solution,” that is, the systematic crescendo of anti-Jewish measures.

Already the title of the book *Germans and Jews 1933–1945* hints at the problem – the author does not accept the Jews as Germans. And he tried to relativise not only the Germans’ knowledge about what happened but also their responsibility for the crimes. To refute collective guilt he mentioned

8 Carl V. Krogmann, *Es ging um Deutschlands Zukunft 1932–1939* (Leoni am Starnberger See: Durrfel Verlag, 1976), 341.

9 Eichmann concerning Theodore Kaufman’s book published in 1941, quoted in: Wolfgang Benz, “Judenvernichtung als Notwehr? Die Legenden um Theodore N. Kaufman,” *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 29 (1981), 615–629.

10 Konrad Löw, *Das Volk ist ein Trost. Deutsche und Juden 1933–1945 im Urteil der jüdischen Zeitzeugen* (München: Olzog Verlag, 2006), 214.

“(about 150,000) Jewish soldiers (in the German army),¹¹ Jewish informers, Jewish collaborators with the Gestapo (the so-called *Greifer*),” etc., or intentionally quotes Jewish historians when their conclusions fit his aim.¹²

The reproachful attitude towards the German Jews often focuses on their leadership: too much cooperation with the authorities, blind obedience, lack of resistance. Raul Hilberg’s and Hannah Arendt’s criticism of the behavior of the *Judenrate* seemed especially justified in the German case – before the pogrom, after the pogrom, during the first phase of the war, and even moreso after the beginning of the deportations. From one phase to the other the question of collaboration versus resistance appeared to become graver, a cause for ever-growing criticism of the German Jewish leadership. That this kind of criticism was expressed retrospectively, or across a safe geographical distance, doesn’t add to its credibility. It is not for the historian to argue apologetically, but to look for alternatives to already existing interpretations of historical phenomena. This is exactly what I aim at. It was the regime, first and foremost the Gestapo, that made the decisions and imposed the impossible choices on the Jewish leadership. Within their extremely narrow elbow room, the main consideration of the Jewish leaders was to save as many Jews as possible from the worst, or to soften the blows wherever possible. The historical sources provide us with only one clear case in which the German Jewish communal leadership prepared the list of deportees. Indeed, officials of the Jewish communities were used as *Abholer* (people in charge of accompanying deportees from their homes to the deportation camps – *Sammellager*), but how should one relate to the argument of one of the *Abholer*: “The deportees had at least us, not the Gestapo, present, as they had their last meal at home.”

It should not be forgotten that most of those leaders of the German Jews who allegedly were overeager to collaborate with the authorities could have fled Germany easily and freed themselves of the thankless task even as late as 1941. Leo Baeck, Otto Hirsch, Julius Seligsohn and many others went abroad many times, could have stayed there, but duly returned in

11 These are numbers supplied by Bryan M. Rigg, *Hitler’s Jewish Soldiers* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002).

12 Löw, op.cit. 316.

order to carry on with their duties. They returned to their sheep because they felt obliged to help them, not because they were happy to collaborate with the Gestapo. Dr. Joseph Carlebach, the last Rabbi of Hamburg, was already living in Palestine but came back and later was evacuated to Riga, where he was murdered. Not only older men and women, but young ones as well: Dr. Bruno Finkelscherer became the last Rabbi in Munich when he was 34 years old. He was sent in 1943 to Auschwitz, where he died. The list of German Jewish community leaders and officials who remained in Germany out of a sense of responsibility towards their people and were later murdered in the East is a very long one.

Criticism of the lack of the will to resist was directed not only against the leaders but also, as mentioned above, against the rank and file, who allegedly were too obedient or extremely naive. The answer to this charge is twofold. On the one hand, one can prove that quite a number of Jews did participate in resistance activities.¹³ On the other hand, it becomes obvious to the historian, and it was clear already to contemporaries, that Jewish resistance was not only futile but also harmful to the uninvolved Jews. This was demonstrated by the Baum coup. In May 1942, Herbert Baum, a Jew, and his group (mainly communists) planted incendiary bombs in an exhibition called “The Soviet Paradise,” caused some damage to the exhibits and injured a small number of people. The German public was not informed, but 500 Jews were immediately rounded up and later murdered. Rabbi Leo Baeck, the head of the Reichsvereinigung (the central organisation of the Jews in Germany) thereupon made contact with the communist underground in order to avoid such occurrences in the future. The German Jews were kept as hostages in Germany, and the terrorist antisemitic regime never hesitated to use any pretext in order to cruelly “punish” these hostages.

One did not have to go as far as the Baum group did in order to be considered a saboteur. Even minor and trivial deviations from the harsh rules were considered resistance by the regime – when Jews were involved.

¹³ Konrad U. Kwiet and Helmut Eschwege, *Selbstbehauptung und Widerstand. Deutsche Juden im Kampf um Existenz und Menschenwürde 1933–1945* (Hamburg: Christians, 1984).

Let’s take the example of Arnold Reinstein from Würzburg. From 1938 he tried to emigrate but remained unsuccessful. “On the one hand we must leave, on the other hand nobody wants to let us in – this is the way world history presents itself to us,” he wrote to a friend in December 1940. In May 1941 he managed to get the permit to leave via Portugal for America. But instead of arriving in Portugal he arrived in Dachau. Why? Some time before the war the police forbade him to take photos outside his apartment. When he got the news about his permit he wanted to bring his warrantor in the U.S.A. a photo of his birthplace. He went to the small village in which the warrantor’s birthplace stood and took a picture. The alert villagers called the police, and after looking into his file the Gestapo put Reinstein in Dachau, where on November 17, 1941, he committed suicide. This is an excellent demonstration of the limits of Jewish resistance: the absurd rules concerning Jews, the readiness to denounce the “enemies” of the *Volk* so typical of German society, and the strict control by the police.¹⁴

Many observers of the history of the German Jews during the Nazi era retrospectively wonder why there wasn’t a stronger Jewish resistance, or at least a more consistent attempt to leave in the face of the pending catastrophe. But they miss a crucial point: expectations changed over time, based on the information at hand. Not even Hitler himself knew at any given time between 1933 and 1940 what is really going to happen to the German Jews, and one should not ignore the fact that an earlier end to the NS regime was also a realistic alternative to be taken into account by Jews pondering their future. What awaited the German Jews even as late as 1941 was something they assumed but could not be absolutely sure of. How could one know the difference between a hunch and a certainty? The cynical Nazi tactic of blackmail and deception only helped create this uncertainty. It was also pride, age or a defense mechanism activated by the victims that prevented escape or resistance. Retrospectively one might say that the German Jews must have understood already on April

¹⁴ Roland Flade, *Die Würzburger Juden. Ihre Geschichte vom Mittelalter bis zur Gegenwart* (Würzburg: Stürtz, 1996), 341–342.

1, 1933, the day of the boycott, where the road led. But this again is hindsight. After the war a German Jewish woman described her first traumatic experience: “It was the first time a stranger hit me. It was the first time that a stranger touched me. This was the beginning. In Duesseldorf. In Germany.” Until this very moment, in 1941, in a deportation camp in Duesseldorf, this woman did not grasp how far German society went, did not understand that the real beginning had been many years earlier.¹⁵

Current historical research provides us with enough material about the perpetrators and about the many fellow travelers who willingly supported them in the persecution and exploitation of their previous co-citizens. Historical research of the last decade covers many aspects of the history of the German Jews between 1938 and 1945 – Jewish welfare, the detailed story of the deportations, or Jewish informers serving the Gestapo. This literature contains not only new information but also many new insights. Beate Meyer, Wolf Gruner, Frank Bajohr, Abi Barkai, Alexandra Przyrembel, Rivka Elkin or Doris Tausendfreund are some of the authors of this innovative research who should be mentioned. New compilations of archival material, memoirs and oral history add up to an impressive body of documentation. And yet, there is no published synthesis adequate to the topic, no modern monograph dealing with this chapter and concentrating on this segment of Jews under Nazi rule. This is why I decided to write a book devoted to this chapter, to be published towards the end of this year.¹⁶ This monograph aims not only at a synthesis, at closing the gap in historiography, but also at overcoming some commonplaces and biases concerning German Jewish history during World War II.

¹⁵ Hilde Sherman-Zander, in: Andrej Angrick and Peter Klein, *Die »Endlösung« in Riga. Ausbeutung und Vernichtung 1941–1944* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2006), 213.

¹⁶ Moshe Zimmermann, *Deutsche gegen Deutsche. Das Schicksal der Juden 1938–1945* (Berlin: Aufbau Verlag, 2008).

Expulsion, “Ethnic Cleansing,” Genocide

Wolfgang Benz

October 1946 saw the Nuremberg Trials of major war criminals come to an end. Great hopes had been attached to this tribunal. The first goal was to punish those responsible and to atone for beginning the Second World War, for the genocide committed against the European Jews, for the enslavement and extermination of Eastern European peoples, for the genocide committed against the Sinti and Roma, for the annexation and exploitation of countries and resources in the name of Nazi ideology, and for crimes whose label “ethnic cleansing” had at the time not yet been invented, even though a tradition of such crimes already existed in the 20th century. The Nuremberg Tribunal was also intended to establish a new law. That was the second goal. In the name of justice and international peace, the trials were to mark the beginning of a new era of international law and to begin to turn into reality what pacifists had already dreamt of prior to the First World War: namely, jurisdiction by the civilised family of nations, with the intention of having a deterrent, reforming and preventative effect.

The Nazi crimes, state terror like that practised by Hitler’s regime, should nowhere and never be allowed to repeat. That was also the founding idea of the United Nations which originated as an anti-Hitler coalition, as a military alliance, officially created as a world-wide organisation in autumn 1945. The advancement of international law through an international criminal justice system ground to a halt after the Nuremberg Trials, mainly due to the Cold War. However, the political condemnation of genocide was one of the programmatic goals of the United Nations. Soon after the Nuremberg judgments were pronounced in December 1946, the majority

of the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution that denounced genocide as “a crime under international law, contrary to the spirit and aims of the United Nations and condemned by the civilised world.”

Two years later, on 9 December 1948, the resolution became the legally binding Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. The Convention gave a precise and binding definition of genocide as the “intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such.”

A further treaty, the International Pact of Civil and Political Rights, in force since March 1976 through ratification or accession in more than 100 nations – including Yugoslavia, respectively its successor states – guarantees the right to life and to jurisdiction (rule of law), and prohibits torture, arbitrary arrest and collective punishment, even in times of war or in declared states of national emergency. The UN Human Rights Committee monitors the observance of such elementary human rights.

Political and legal consequences have been drawn from the violent disasters of the first half of the 20th century, dressed in the form of international treaties and national laws, and have been made administratively manageable as the responsibility of the relevant organisations, but this has remained without effect for many people. The everyday lives of these people, on the Indian subcontinent, in Palestine, in Cambodia, in the Caucasus, in many countries of Africa, have been impacted by disasters in the form of colonial wars or wars of independence, accompanied by phenomena such as massacres, looting, loss of social status, flight or expulsion, and finally impoverishment. The conventions of international law, the resolutions of the United Nations, the ceremoniously ratified and signed pacts actually have not done anything to change this.

The 20th century has been historically labelled as the century of acts of genocide. The Herero Uprising in German South West Africa, perceived by contemporaries as the rebellion of a colonial people but executed as a campaign of extermination by German troops, marks the beginning of the century. The genocide committed against the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire during the First World War, with 1.5 million victims, bore all the marks of state terror against a minority: the ideologically based intent, systematic implementation, cover-up for reasons of state, and denial

by the successor state to the perpetrating entity for patriotic reasons, all the way through to the present day. The Holocaust was unique because of the absolute ideological purposefulness with which it was pursued, because of the combination of propaganda aimed to create acceptance of genocide and the simultaneous secrecy of the methods, places and people involved in its execution; the murder of six million European Jews was also unparalleled in its dimensions. As the act of a civilised and highly developed nation, the Holocaust became the epitome of crimes against humanity. And so, on the one hand the murder of the Jews has been deprived of comparison, while on the other it set the yardstick for all later genocidal acts.

The transfer of populations, deportation, expulsion, violence against civilians were stigmatised as acts of rule practised by totalitarian systems; by contrast, the transfer and resettlement of Germans from the newly formed countries of Czechoslovakia and Poland, as decided at the Potsdam Conference in 1945, was conceived as a peacemaking measure and was propagated under the illusion that it could be carried out humanely. The expulsion of Germans from eastern Central Europe was also a reflex action to the preceding German occupation; it was to be understood as the end of an epoch of violence and not as the disregard of the human rights of an ethnic group.

The events do not mark a turning point and even less so the end of an era of state terror, violence against minorities and genocide. Fifty years after the end of the Second World War, humanity had not recognisably advanced along the path to peace or, at least, of peaceful conflict resolution. On the contrary. According to Red Cross figures, 56 conflicts involving the use of armed force were being waged worldwide in 1995, with 17 million refugees. In most cases these were national crises whose consequences affected 95% of the civilian population – around 43 million people. What was taking place as civil war or ethnic conflict, as rebellion or as a war of independence in a far-away region, in Africa or somewhere in Central Asia, was viewed from a two-fold remoteness: at a geographical distance and at a cultural distance (in which Europeans traditionally presumed themselves to be at a higher level). This means that the events in Congo, Sudan, in the Orient were noted, but not with interest or empathy,

but rather in much the same way as one learns of the inevitable misfortune of strangers that is of no further concern to oneself. And so the conflicts and acts of violence were deleted *per definitionem* or at least marginalised. The orders of magnitude of the events in which people were driven out of house and home, were tortured or massacred because their religious, ethnic, cultural or social group affiliation happened to give occasion for this, were irrelevant in the perception of those who remained unaffected and far removed.

In Cambodia, the leader of the Khmer Rouge, Pol Pot, came to power in 1975. Politically socialised as a follower of Ho Chi Min in the resistance against French rule in Indochina, Pol Pot attempted to establish a rural system of radical communism. 1975, Year Zero of the new era, saw money abolished, cities dissolved, and the extermination of property owners, intellectuals, strangers and foreigners begin. People perished on the order of between 1.6 and 2.4 million in the death marches which urban populations took to rural collectives, in prisons, in torture centres, through hunger and epidemics, through massacre and murder. There can be no doubt that this was an act of genocide. Pol Pot, responsible for this, was toppled from power in 1979 and lived under house arrest, undisturbed until his death in 1998, without any semblance of a guilty conscience. One year before his death, in 1997, he told an American reporter that he had only defended Cambodia against the aggressor Vietnam, that he saw himself as the liberator of the “People and Race of Cambodia,” that everything that he had done, he had done for his country, and that the murder of hundreds of thousands of people existed only in the propaganda of the Vietnamese.

A pogrom in Colombo in July 1983, in which Tamils were the victims and Singhalese the perpetrators, marks the start of a guerrilla war fought by the Tamil minority of Sri Lanka against the majority made up of Singhalese and Muslims. Government troops responded to this war with similar cruelty and comparable massacres. Four years later, in 1987, the country was practically divided, and at least 50,000 people had been killed. To mention one more example from another region: since the 1980s, the government of Sudan has been waging a clandestine war of extermination against the Nuba ethnic group, against 1.5 million people living in fifty

clans with many languages who are being systematically robbed of their elites and are being left in hunger and impoverishment.

The last major genocide of the 20th century took place under the eyes of the world's public, observed from very close quarters by units wearing the blue helmets of UN soldiers. From April to July 1994, murdering bands acting on behalf of the state slaughtered hundreds of thousands of people in Rwanda, from infants to the aged, because they were members of the Tutsi, a social, not really an ethnic group. The acts had all the marks of genocide as defined in the Convention of 1948 and had already been heralded by massacres carried out in Burundi in the 1960s, 1972, 1988, 1991 and 1993 and massacres carried out in Rwanda in 1959, 1961, 1963/64, 1972/73, 1991 and 1992/93. Internationally trivialised as “tribal feuds,” riots, “spontaneous outbreaks of bottled-up ethnic hatred” or as “uncontrolled murderous frenzies,” an act of genocide occurred over almost 13 long weeks; it had been “the result of a deliberate decision” ... “taken by a modern elite that sought to ensure it maintained power by spreading hate and fear.”¹

The genocidal horrors of the 1990s that broke out in the Balkans when the state of Yugoslavia collapsed in agony and dissolution were given their own new and specific label. The term “ethnic cleansing” was soon being used by everybody, initially in the media, eventually also in academia and research, although it lacked an exact definition. The matter-of-course manner in which the term was adopted and so objectified only irritated a few. The author György Konrád drew attention to this and, at the same time, called to mind how naturally the facts circumscribed by the ominous term had apparently been accepted. “The euphemistic adoption of an obscenely racist word, used without quotation marks, into international language usage marked the ambivalent relationship which those responsible had towards the topic.”²

1 Alison Des Forges, *Kein Zeuge darf überleben. Der Genozid in Ruanda* (Hamburg: Hamburg Edition, 2002), 16.

2 György Konrád, “Mensch und Haus darf man nicht trennen,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* 14.11.1998.

In May 1992, a UN Commission of Experts appointed by the Security Council established that “ethnic cleansing” was to be understood as “a purposeful policy designed by one ethnic or religious group to remove by violent and terror-inspiring means the civilian population of another ethnic or religious group from certain geographic areas ... This purpose appears to be the occupation of territory to the exclusion of the purged group or groups.”³ However, the Committee of Experts made it clear that “ethnic cleansing” is not a synonym for expulsion, but actually extends far beyond that concept. “Ethnic cleansing” includes “mass murder, torture, rape and other forms of sexual assault, severe physical injury to civilians, mistreatment of civilian prisoners and prisoners of war, use of civilians as human shields, destruction of personal, public and cultural property, looting, theft and robbery of personal property, forced expropriation of real property, forceful displacement of civilian populations, and attacks on hospitals, medical personnel and locations marked with the Red Cross/Red Crescent emblem.”⁴

Reports of experience are more concrete than scientific definitions. The description by a Czech of Yugoslavian nationality living in Croatia exceeds the conceptions of “ethnic cleansing” of even the most imaginative people. The witness from Prekopakre in Bosnia told a hearing held in Frankfurt/Main in September 1992 of the fate of a number of Croatian police officers who got caught up in the violence of Serbian combat units: “At the time, 21 Croatian police officers were travelling towards the village in a self-made armoured vehicle to carry out a check. When they got to around half a kilometre from the village they came across a barricade which they pushed to one side with their vehicle. At the very same moment, they came under grenade attack followed by a gun battle. The police officers had only got into the battle line by chance and suddenly found themselves surrounded by 600 Cetniks. After several hours of fighting, 18 police officers were taken prisoner, the others were dead. The 18 prisoners were

tortured to death, horribly. They were stabbed with knives and then with screwdrivers. Their noses, ears and genitalia were cut off. They were tied up with wire and then tormented and abused. And some of them were pushed under the armoured vehicle, were run over and flattened. During this massacre, almost all the population of Kusunje was present, mainly Serbs. They could do with the bound-up officers as they liked. They pissed on them, beat them with everything they had. Although this massacre only affected 18 police officers, there were a total of around 150 prisoners in the villages, Croats, Czechs and Hungarians.”⁵

The origin of the infamous term “ethnic cleansing” can be precisely localised and dated. In May 1992, what has since become known by this term was propagated and practised in the Balkans. Serbs who purged and exterminated Muslims in Bosnia used the term in two ways. Aggressively, it was directed against Muslims and Croats and was an instrument of hegemonic and expansionist endeavour; defensively, the Serbs used the term to draw attention to what Kosovo Albanians had done ten years earlier to Serbs living in Kosovo. Soon the term “ethnic cleansing” was also used when Croats were the perpetrators and Muslims the victims, and then also when Croats and finally Albanians were the objects of Serbian aggression in Kosovo.

The fact that atavistic group violence occasioned by the fall of Yugoslavia broke out and escalated in Europe triggered the dismay and horror that had been lacking in the face of earlier excesses committed in other parts of the world. That the Balkans became the scene of murder on account of ethnic, religious, cultural or social reasons, could, as was the widely held view, be interpreted with the traditions of forming national states as practised since the 19th century on the territory of the Ottoman Empire, with the military conflicts of the 20th century and with the model developed there of exchanging populations between Turkey and Greece in the 1920s all the way through to the Cyprus conflict. But as an

³ “Final Report of the Commission of Experts Established Pursuant to Security Council Resolution 78 (1992),” 27 May 1994.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Eyewitness report, Hearing 20./21. September 1992, in: Tilman Zülch, ed., *Ethnische Säuberung — Völkermord für “Großserbien.” Eine Dokumentation der Gesellschaft für bedrohte Völker* (Hamburg 1993), 63ff.

explanation that does not go far enough. “Ethnic cleansing” differs from genocide through intention and purpose. Genocide aims at the elimination of a group, while “ethnic cleansing” aims at its expulsion from its territory and the eradication of its cultural traces in order to be able to take possession of that area. Admittedly, the respective methods cannot easily be differentiated; rape, torture, murder are found at the end of a scale that begins with exclusion, stigmatisation, theft and robbery of property and the deprivation of rights. To draw up a typology in which it could, for example, be established that rape, during the Nazi genocide of Jews, was frowned on for ideological reasons is hardly satisfying, since this fact can serve just as little as a mitigating circumstance as it can, when committed, serve as a basis for a ranking of genocidal events. It remains to be concluded that the arrival of horror in the awareness and consciousness of Europeans in the 1990s was combined with the realisation that uncontrolled group violence in an extreme barbaric form had returned into the everyday life of regions that had been considered civilised.

What impact did the events have on public opinion? Essentially, we can differentiate between three kinds of reaction. Firstly, explanations were sought which could assist in typologically classifying the events. In his studies on the underlying laws and regularities of massacres, sociologist Wolfgang Sofsky comes to the conclusion that the course which the scenes of violence take resemble each other, regardless of where they specifically take place or of what ideology delivers the triggering motive. While an assassination is characterised by suddenness because the assassin endeavours to reduce the risk by suddenly appearing and quickly disappearing, a massacre is characterised by the time the perpetrators take for their cruelty. That differentiates the violent excesses of the pogrom and the massacre from the excess of mass execution as was practised by German units in the Second World War in the killing trenches of Eastern Europe. The murder of 33,771 Jews on two days, 29 and 30 September 1941, in the Babi Yar ravine near the city outskirts of Kiev, occurred in the anonymity of a calculated rationality in which the victims were hardly viewed as individuals any more and in which the deed was executed practically emotionlessly, much like people working on a conveyor belt.

While the pogrom is the spontaneous or staged raging of the mob (with civilian onlookers joining the mob due to the contagious nature of the events) whose base instincts and emotions were previously stimulated, the massacre is indeed triggered, in much the same way as the pogrom, by an ideological motive – religion, social status, nationality, ethnicity – but is an excessive act that inherently bears its terrible meaning in itself: “The murderous deeds of the Nazis largely operated within the scope of modern efficiency and rationality. In the bloodbath, however, the law on the economy of human action is no longer in force. Less important here is the result, but rather the personal act. The perpetrators do not have to be economical in their use of destructive means. The murderer keeps on striking with the machete until the blade is dull. The rifleman keeps on shooting magazine after magazine. The aim is to riddle the foreign body with a hail of bullets. Because the meaning of this excess is neither victory nor political terror, but rather the deed, the act itself, the blood fest.”⁶

A second form of public examination of the genocidal events of the 1990s existed. The occasionally conflict-laden traditions of the cohabitation of various ethnic groups in the Balkans were referred to as a potential regional explanation for the “ethnic cleansing,” while colonial roots were laid bare as an explanation for the acts of genocide in Africa.

The memory of the Nazi genocide – shortened to the metaphor of Auschwitz – was not, however, only used as an explanatory model, but was also taken as a call for intervention. In the Kosovo conflict, the memory of the Holocaust served to legitimise the NATO bombardment of Serbia. Finally – and this discussion is still in progress – the events have revived memories of the intention that underlay the Nuremberg Trials and have given concrete form to the idea of international jurisdiction to punish crimes committed in contravention of the Convention on Genocide.

6 Wolfgang Sofsky, “Das Gesetz des Gemetzels,” *Die Zeit* 2.4.1998.

Executioners, Victims and Bystanders

Jan Woleński

The distinction between perpetrators, victims and bystanders (passive witnesses) is fundamental for Holocaust research.¹ Identification of victims is the easiest one: almost 6 million Jews.² The criteria of perpetrators are vague to some extent. Of course, the first approximation consists in saying that the “final solution” was executed by Germans. Yet the question is which Germans. One will say that “Germans” should be qualified by “Nazi,” because the *Endlösung* was projected by Hitler and his close collaborators. Surely, the Holocaust could not have happened without the Nazi authorities. On the other hand, atrocities were committed by ordinary Germans.³ Although I do not intend to consider the responsibility of the German nation *in corpore* in this essay, nobody can deny that its situation was exceptional in the perspective of the Holocaust.

The German perpetrators also had people of other nations collaborating with them. Their activities varied considerably from one case to another. Deportations of Jews from the Vichy zone were organized by Petain’s government in full knowledge that thousands of people were going to be killed. The situation was similar in Rumania and Slovakia. The

1 D. Bankier and I. Gutman, eds., *Nazi Europe and the Final Solution*, (Jerusalem: The International Institute for Holocaust Research, 2003), 12 (Preface).

2 One could add to the victims those persons killed for helping Jews.

3 See: C. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1993); D. Goldhagen, *Hitler’s Willing Executioners. Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York: Knopf, 1996).

significant participation of Lithuanians and Ukrainians in the German anti-Jewish policy had no official patronage from their governments, but can be explained by the very strong rightist and nationalistic movements in these countries. Leaders of such organizations in Lithuania and Ukraine associated the political future of their countries with a German military victory. However, there was no automatic relation between being an official ally of Germany and the policy toward Jews. Mussolini and Horthy, political and military allies of Hitler, successfully rejected Hitler's claims to execute the *Endlösung* in their countries. The massacre of Jews in Italy and Hungary took place after Germany took control in both territories. Bulgaria, another supporter of Germany, saved all its own Jews, but sacrificed those living in regions annexed to it in 1941. Finland did the same, but without making any compromise. The situation differed in the various German-occupied countries. Occupied Denmark helped almost all the Jews escape (only 80 persons were killed), but Belgium and the Netherlands lost 25,000 and 106,000 of their Jewish citizens, respectively.⁴ These data show that the Germans' collaborators varied from official authorities (e.g., France, Slovakia) and politically oriented people (e.g., Lithuania, Ukraine) to private persons (e.g., Belgium, Netherlands). The scale of collaboration also varied. The Vichy government offered logistics, Lithuanian policemen actively participated in atrocities, but individual citizens could denounce Jews. One might be inclined to distinguish them as killers and merely accomplices (e.g., guarding victims), but I omit this subtlety. Perhaps the essential point is that deliberate or intentional acts against Jews are a necessary condition of real collaboration with the perpetrators. For this reason we can skip the problem of whether *Juden-raten*, Jewish police in the ghettos or *Sonderkommandos* in the death camps should be included with the accomplices.

⁴ Numbers are approximate. General and comparative surveys of the situation in various parts of Europe are given in many sources. See the reference in note 1 and, for example: D. Hilberg, *The Destruction of European Jews* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1985); C. Rittner, S. Smith and I. Stenfeldt, eds., *The Holocaust and the Christian World. Reflections on the Past, Challenges for the Future* (London: Kuperard, 2000); M. Gilbert, *Never Again. A History of the Holocaust* (New York: Harper Collins, 2000).

The category of bystanders is the most difficult to define. Here is a characteristic introduction to the problem:

Do we refer only to those who can be considered passive onlookers to the fate of the Jews during the years of the Holocaust, or also to institutions, government, legal and illegal organizations that were active in the occupied countries? Should we incorporate in this category only people who witnessed the antisemitic persecution, the deportation and execution in Nazi Europe, or citizens in the entire world? Do the bystanders include only people who were conscious of the fact that all Jews were sentenced to death, or also who did not know the fate of the Jews of the war?⁵

This quotation shows that the distinction between bystanders and accomplices, and between the latter and perpetrators, is somehow vague and depends on some conceptual assumptions. Clearly, although such assumptions are and must be conventional to some degree, they should be grounded in objective facts. This is particularly important because qualifying people as perpetrators of crimes, assistants in wrongful acts, or bystanders, leads to serious moral judgments. The issue of bystanders is important for Holocaust research in light of the frequent opinion that the passivity of the majority of people directly or indirectly confronted with the *Endlösung* was an essential condition for the activities of the perpetrators. It is often said that Germans could not execute the mass murder of Jews if the people who remained passive witnesses had acted against it. The most radical view is that the very high number of bystanders became the *conditio qua non* for the success of the German project. I do not agree with this opinion and consider it the result of a misunderstanding of the nature of mass behavior.

The attitude of bystanders toward the *Endlösung* can be considered from two vantage points. First, one can ask what ordinary or average people knew about the atrocities, how they evaluated this tragedy, and whether they were ready to help the victims; this is the subjective domain. Second, we can also focus on actions intended to help Jews, not necessarily

⁵ D. Bankier and I. Gutman, *op.cit.*, 12.

effective ones; this is the objective domain. Although Western governments possessed reliable information about the mass murder of Jews by Germans, common knowledge was much vaguer. Contrary to earlier opinions (including my own), the situation in Poland was perhaps different, because most Poles knew that Jews were being exterminated.⁶ Moreover, this knowledge became more and more accessible. Hence, we can conclude that many Poles had some subjective opinion about German atrocities. These attitudes were not uniform. Some approved of German policy: “Hitler is solving the Jewish problem instead of us and for us.” Other felt empathy for the Jews; still others were completely indifferent. Such statements must be approached very carefully. It is difficult, perhaps even impossible, to estimate even approximately the proportions of people taking particular standpoints. We do not have much data to allow us to follow the changes and dynamics of attitudes, although it is claimed that sympathy for the Jews and condemnation of the Germans increased in the course of time. The examples of Zofia Kossak-Szczucka, Jan Dobraczyński or Jan Mosdorf, openly antisemitic before 1939, clearly document changes. Yet all statements about attitudes and their dynamics are based on indirect evidence. I note this problem because many studies on the Holocaust conflate subjective feelings with objective patterns of behavior.

This cognitive situation has an important effect. We cannot even establish how attitudes toward the Holocaust determined a readiness for helping Jews. The following example might help. The title “Righteous among the Nations” was given (as of January 1, 2008) to 22,211 persons, including 6,066 Poles, 4,639 Dutch and 1,476 Belgians. The Jewish populations (in 1939) numbered 3,225,000 in Poland, 140,000 in the Netherlands and 50,000 in Belgium. The Holocaust took three million Jewish victims from Poland, 106,000 Dutch Jews, and 25,000 Jewish citizens of Belgium. This means that 7% of the Polish Jews, 34% of the Dutch Jews and 50% of the Belgian Jews survived. But the number 225,000 does not portray the situation in Poland adequately, because most

Polish Jews who survived the Holocaust escaped to the Soviet Union. In fact, the number of Jews who survived in Poland is estimated at between 40,000 and 60,000. Now, it would be erroneous to draw any conclusions from these calculations. For example, Poland was a fairly antisemitic country before 1939, but this observation does not explain why “only” 7% of the Polish Jews survived but as many as 50% of the Belgian Jews did. The more than 20% share of Poles in the total number of Righteous among the Nations does not mean that Poles saved a comparable percentage of Jewish people. Even assuming that the Dutch effectively aided in saving about 30% of their own Jews and the Belgians helped in saving 50% of their Jewish compatriots, these data have no connection with the number of Righteous coming from those two countries. A similar assumption concerning Poles and Dutch would seem to justify the view that the corresponding proportion of trees in Yad Vashem (6,066:4,863) approximately fits the actual proportion of people saved (50,000:36,000) by citizens of both countries. Yet another calculation is that Polish rescuers outnumbered Dutch ones by 20%. Still another way of putting it is that the Poles saved 1.5% of the Jews living in Poland, but the Dutch succeeded in helping 30% of the Dutch Jews.

Such arguments as outlined in the last paragraph are plainly absurd. The error is this: the trees in Yad Vashem do not represent nations, for example the Poles, the Dutch or the Belgians, but concrete individuals and their attitudes. For example, the Germans, of the nation of the perpetrators, have 455 Righteous and are tenth on the list. When the Knesset introduced this title, its intention was not to honor nations, but to do justice to individuals and their courage, empathy and sacrifice. Clearly, nations are entitled to feel proud of their Righteous, but their number says nothing about the scope of mass aid to persecuted Jews. We can also look at the other side. In many Jewish memoirs we find very strong accusations directed at people who did not help victims of the *Endlösung*. However, it was always the case that a concrete person closed the door, refused to offer food, or demanded a lot of money for helping. Abraham Bomba, a miserable barber from Częstochowa (see Lanzmann’s *Shoah*), who cut the hair of his wife and sister in the corridor of the gas chamber in Treblinka and knew that they would be killed the next moment, interpreted some gestures of Polish

⁶ Poland also had its own accomplices in the Holocaust. For example, the massacre in Jedwabne in 1941 was executed by local Poles.

peasants as signs of gladness that Jews were being exterminated. However, these people explained to Lanzmann that by making signs at their throats they had meant to warn the Jews that were going to their deaths. It is normal for the later judgments of Jews rescued from the Holocaust to be marked by their previous traumatic experiences. I do not deny that the Righteous as well as the rescuers and their testimonies are an integral and important part of history, but their fates cannot be generalized.

However, I am not entirely skeptical about the usefulness of a more rigorous analysis of the Holocaust with respect to perpetrators, bystanders and collaborators. I will examine this question in the case of Poland. We have at least eight circumstances (two of them were mentioned above) which made the situation of Poland and Poles exceptional and not comparable with any other country. Hence these considerations do not necessarily apply to other regions of the world. The circumstances are, first, that Poland had the most Jewish citizens of any country in the world. Second, the number of victims was enormous; to repeat, more than 90% of the Polish Jews were killed by Germans. Third, Polish territory was chosen by the Nazis as the arena of the Holocaust. Fourth, the German occupation of Poland was the longest, and was exceptionally brutal. Fifth, the Nazis viewed the Poles as slaves and even candidates for extermination in the future; thus, no other population was confronted with German atrocities so directly as the Poles were. Sixth, due to the number of Jews in Poland, Polish-Jewish relations were more intense than in other countries. Seventh, although these relations were fairly good in the past, Polish antisemitism was strong in the 20th century. Eighth, Poles knew better about German atrocities than people living elsewhere; consequently, Poles were confronted with the Holocaust on a scale unknown to other nations. These facts had to influence Polish attitudes toward the Jews in 1939–45, particularly with respect to the question of acting against the Holocaust.

I begin with some estimates.⁷ According to Prekier, the total population of Poles, which should be taken as the point of reference in considering the relation of Poles to Jews in 1939–45, can be taken as 14 million.

7 See: T. Prekier, “Sprawiedliwi i ‘bierni,’” *Tygodnik Powszechny* 13 (1987).

As noted earlier, 40,000–60,000 of the Jews survived. The number of Jews who went into hiding is estimated at 60,000–120,000. If we assume, as Prekier does, that two or three persons were involved in helping one Jew, we can conclude that Poles helping Jews constituted 1.1–2.5% of the whole population. I will follow this line of reasoning, but with some changes. It seems that Prekier gave too large a total. Poland's population in 1939 was 36 million, including 12 million people of national minorities. The number of Poles is thus 24 million. Part of this group was outside the territory of the Holocaust, due to changes of borders, emigration and deportations. Prekier estimates this group at four million, leaving 20 million. However, the number of people who really were confronted with the Holocaust was smaller, because we have to take into account age, state of health, etc. Let us assume that 10 million Poles were capable of deliberately reacting to German atrocities, and that this number can be considered relevant to the problem of helping Jews. This is a very large population, relatively uniform and subject to statistical regularities. The application of statistics to this case can be justified by the typical grounds advanced by statisticians: (a) a general lack of precise information; (b) the uncertainty about the magnitude of error of the measurement data that are available; (c) the lack of technical means to obtain supplementary information; and (d) the impossibility of performing additional relevant measurements. We can even say that Holocaust research provides a case well illustrating those four conditions. We do have some data, however: estimates of the number of Jews who survived, the number of Jewish people who went into hiding, and the number of people involved in helping victims. As we will see, there is also some evidence enabling an estimate of the number of people acting against Jews. Let me add that my main focus concerns methodological issues. Hence, if it is objected that my estimate of the Polish population actually confronted with the Holocaust is too low, I reply that this has no special relevance to the reasoning, because the same lines of argument apply if we assume that the studied population numbers 12 million.

I regard the statistical data as objective. I do not deny the value of diaries, memoirs, written or spoken testimony, etc., but I consider them auxiliary because usually they report individual facts, exceptional cases

or local circumstances. What can we conclude from the initial statistical data? Can we estimate how many people helped Jews, how many acted against them as perpetrators or deliberate accomplices and how many people were bystanders? The simplest hypothesis assumes that the investigated attribute (the type of actual, not merely subjective, reaction to German atrocities) follows a Gaussian curve displaying a so-called normal distribution. This means that we have 7 million bystanders (70% of the global population), 1.5 million collaborators (15% of the global population) and 1.5 million helpers (15% of the global population). Graphically, this curve is bell-shaped, with symmetrical extremes. The scope of what makes a collaborator or helper is not easy to delimit (see above), but we can consider them broadly. Helpers include people who offered hiding places, provided documents and food, etc. Killers, denouncers, “schmaltzovnick” (i.e., people who hunted Jews and blackmailed them), etc., are counted as collaborators. In general, people who did something penalized under Nazi law, which prohibited helping Jews, can be considered helpers. On the other hand, collaborators acted in a way approved and even prized by the Germans. The issue is controversial, however: there is a problem with people who declined to help Jews but did not do anything positively harmful to the victims. I will return to this question, which is fundamental to a moral evaluation of those who were confronted with the Holocaust.

The picture outlined here, that is, the view that the distribution of concrete acts follows a normal curve, must be modified, however. This is due to the impact of many additional circumstances (see above). Actions to help Jews were limited by, for example, the fear of danger to oneself or by the callousness induced by the horrors of war, but collaboration with Germans could be motivated by hopes of profit, although, as we know, helping Jews was not always free of self-interest either. On the other hand, we should take into account that ordinary people are not ready to participate in crimes, particularly collaboration with the hated enemy. Polish underground authorities condemned German atrocities and punished collaboration. Finally, various subjective motives could influence the situation. Most extant sources support the opinion that collaborators were not influenced by antisemitism (of course, this does not mean that it was not a factor in individual cases). On the other side, that is, helpers,

people were motivated by religion, love affairs, friendship or sympathy. These observations suggest that the Gaussian curve should be narrowed or even skewed: the area of bystanders increases, but the extreme regions decrease.

Assume that we cut the extremes to 50% their value, but symmetry remains. This gives 750,000 collaborators, the same number of helpers, and 8.5 million bystanders. We should justify this cutting and explain why symmetry is preserved. Some hint can be derived from the number of Poles who participated in the anti-German conspiracy. Usually the number of people active in various underground networks is estimated at 600,000. It is unlikely that more than this were involved in helping Jews. Using Prekier’s estimate (see above) of how many had to be engaged in helping a single Jew, we obtain a minimum 120,000 and maximum 360,000 helpers. If we use another coefficient also used in estimations, 4–6 helpers, we have a minimum 360,000 and maximum 720,000 persons helping Jews. Since extreme values are less probable than moderate ones, the following result is perhaps sound: assuming that 60,000–120,000 Jews went into hiding and required help from 4–6 persons, the number of helpers falls in the interval 270,000–360,000, that is, about 2.5% of the global population. The issue of collaborators is more difficult because we have no data. One student investigated this question in Cracow and estimated the percentage of collaborators at 2–3% of the city population. If we take this picture as realistic, we have good reason to accept the symmetry of our curve, even narrower than the initial one. Even if we adopt reasons for shifting the extremes, that is, increasing those regions, we always obtain millions of bystanders and a few hundred thousand collaborators and helpers. This picture remains adequate even if our curve will be skewed, although it is difficult to estimate even approximate values.

The outlined picture raises some questions. Were the numbers of collaborators and helpers large or small? Well, the absolute values of, let’s say, 360,000 for both extremes, are impressive. On the other hand, any statistical distribution of collaborators, helpers and bystanders shows that the extreme regions remain within statistical normalcy. The same applies to the group of bystanders, counted in the millions. This is the proper key to evaluating statements like “unfortunately there were collaborators” or

“fortunately there were helpers.” The words “unfortunately” and “fortunately” have no real significance for our question, because they express moral qualifications. Although it inspires pessimism that collaborators were active, and inspires optimism that helpers appeared, it would be difficult to expect something different. The conclusion is quite similar in the case of an asymmetric distribution or other values of the extremes. Even the initial hypothesis (a perfect normal distribution) suggests seven million bystanders.

As I already noted, the issue of bystanders is of special importance. To repeat once again, the passivity of the majorities in particular nations is regarded as having been very helpful for the success of the German plan of the *Endlösung*. In other words, it is assumed that there was a correlation between the increase of bystanders and the decrease of helpers. Thus, the number of surviving Jews was too low because too many people were merely bystanders. Obviously, it is *a priori* certain that more Jews could have been saved, although all estimations of that type are invalid because based on counterfactual premises. Similarly, the number of bystanders could have been fewer in other circumstances, although statistics do not help in calculating how many. However, we should avoid conflating the moral and descriptive tasks. Descriptively speaking, fewer bystanders might result not only from an increase of helpers but also an increase of collaborators. Clearly there is a hidden premise in the treatment of bystanders, namely that passivity is morally unacceptable in the face of atrocities. Thus, refraining from helping is as wrong as positive collaboration. This was explicitly said by Zofia Kossak-Szczucka in her famous proclamation of “Żegota” that who refrains, concedes. This provides an answer to the question of whether bystanders are more like collaborators than like helpers.

Yet statistics add something important here. The prevalence of bystanders seems a natural fact. This justifies the thesis that Poles as the nation confronted the Holocaust in a normal way, which is consistent with statistical regularities. Every saved life is priceless, and he who saves a single life saves the whole world (this is the beautiful motto of the Righteous). Jewish lives could be saved by particular people: Poles, Jews or even Germans, but not by bystanders. The reason is very simple.

Bystander is a statistical category. Germans intuitively knew that and did not worry about the relation of Poles or other nations to the *Endlösung*. The material of the Wannsee Conference does not contain any discussion of such a question. One should very carefully separate individual behavior and mass behavior (I deliberately do not use the term “collective behavior,” because it suggests that we are dealing with directed or negotiated courses of action). This is particularly important when people begin to discuss the problem of guilt and responsibility. Passive statistical bystanders are not guilty or responsible, because they exist by virtue of natural facts. Guilt, responsibility or merit always concern a particular human being, because he or she helped, turned away, or denounced. One should not argue that a statistical bystander is responsible for declining to give help, because, using a legal analogy, the duty to act applies to someone who has a peculiar obligation to act. Paradoxically, we can say without falling into an inconsistency that every person who encountered a Jew was obliged by moral standards to help him or her, and yet maintain that this observation does not apply to a statistical bystander. The former can be predicated only about a concrete individual in a definite situation and having to decide whether a particular Jew could come inside and on which conditions, or quickly go to the nearest police station with a denunciation. The distinction explains several other things: first, why the trees at Yad Vashem honor individuals, not groups; second, why nations can be proud of their Righteous but be ashamed of perpetrators or collaborators; third, why we should not equate the passivity of bystanders and the passivity of governments, churches and armies.

In his famous essay “The Poor Poles Look at the Ghetto” published in 1987, Jan Błoński distinguished participation from complicity. He maintained that one can be an accomplice without participation. Consequently, Poles were accomplices of the Holocaust although they did not participate in the tragedy of the Jews. They were accomplices because they did not resist to a sufficient degree. Based on the reasons given above, I do not agree with Błoński, because I am inclined to think that guilt always leads to responsibility. Hence, it is impossible to be an accomplice without sharing the responsibility. Yet these categories are meaningfully applicable to individuals only. If one wants to speak about

the guilt, complicity or responsibility of nations, an additional explanation is required. For my part, I have no proposal in this respect. Finally, in order to avoid any misunderstanding of my arguments, I would like to stress that I am very far from justifying the Poles or anybody else. That the world was mostly silent in the face of the Holocaust should constantly challenge our moral sensibility.



Questions in the Polish Landscape

Eleonora Bergman

Why continue a line of research that is so disturbing and leaves so many questions unanswered? The question contains a partial answer: since the subject disturbs us, it must be pursued. Here, then, is an attempt at an answer, one which contains many questions.

To grasp the dimensions of the Holocaust on every scale and in every aspect: in the experiences of individual people, families, communities large and small; to know what made the Shoah, what actions, what people, what laws, what organizations. We already know a great deal about this, but gaps remain for certain regions, places and periods. Testimony given immediately after the Second World War cannot be treated in the same way as that written fifty years later, which has been filtered through reading and through fading or selective memory.

To know the context in which it transpired: who was indifferent, who helped the Germans and who the Jews, and especially why he did so. If he helped the Germans, what kind of person was he? How did he reconcile it with his Catholic upbringing? What did Jews do to him that he would hand them over to die? Did he absorb the German propaganda, or was that unneeded in his case? If he helped Jews, was it because he knew them, or because he was a good Catholic? Was it for money, and if so, did he take more than was due him for food? Was it because he was in the resistance? How did he treat the Jews he helped?

To discover what Jews did to elude the Shoah, to delay that moment, or to oppose it. What forms did resistance to the Germans take? After all, we know that people were not awaiting death passively and idly; they tried

to survive, they procured food, clothing, shelter. Of course there were those, probably the majority, who were driven to a state in which they could no longer do anything... Every new account, every diary, every court record introduces new elements. By learning more and more, gradually we can disclose fragments of the whole extraordinarily complex picture.

To find out how they attempted to pass on the knowledge of what happened to them. We know more and more of the Ringelblum Archive, we have documents from the Vilna ghetto, newspapers, diaries, but we do not yet know all the materials that were left in attics, drawers and hiding places.

To see how the Germans were drawn, little by little, into the machine of the Shoah. Could it happen only to the Germans? How many of them were Hitler's zealous executioners? How did they deal with it, and how have they dealt with it since the end of the Second World War?

We need the kind of research whose findings, contained in, for example, the books of Christopher Browning or Goetz Aly, permit increasingly better answers to what, who, how, where and when. I do not think that any research will completely answer why, and for this reason the title of Piotr Trojański's and Robert Szuchta's book *Holocaust – zrozumieć dlaczego* ("The Holocaust – Understanding Why") promises too much; in my opinion it promises the impossible.

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More than sixty years after the liberation of Auschwitz, are we still intellectually and emotionally baffled by the genocide committed by the Nazis? So long as we have not lost our sensitivity, we will feel perplexed by each new thing we learn about the genocide committed against the Jews and about the other genocides committed in the following sixty years. No doubt this interferes with the conduct of research, but it is a matter of maintaining academic discipline. That can be done even in the most difficult circumstances, as Ringelblum's project showed, and is all the more possible today. Bafflement, that is, the ability to find something perplexing, is needed as a control factor. I think that this bafflement is not something that should be overcome.

Finally a reflection, or perhaps a warning. Not long ago I looked through an exhibition catalogue from an Israeli museum. I do not recall the name of the museum or the author of the photograph, only the caption: "Polish Landscape." It was a picture of the inside of a barrack in Auschwitz, taken, I think, in 2007. Question: What knowledge did the photographer have at his disposal? Did he even want to have any other knowledge, or did his emotions, the emotions he deliberately cultivated, not permit that?

translated from Polish

Lift Your Eyes and Look at the Sky

Elie Wiesel

Lift your eyes and look at the sky: it is a cemetery, an invisible cemetery, the largest in history.

If the universe of suffering and death has a capital, it is here that one can enter its gates.

Look, and look around you, and you wonder: how could entire communities, multitudes of human beings – men, women and children, all descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – have been brought here in sealed, stifling cattle cars, from all the corners of occupied Europe, to suffer and to vanish in such a small place, ten thousand during one long night?

Close your eyes and listen, just listen: somehow the prayers of the old and the laments of the young, as they were walking to their death, are still hovering in the air, waiting to be received by the celestial tribunal. Can you imagine what went on inside? No, do not even try. Mothers holding their children, fathers whispering to them not to cry.

Here the person was never alone – and, at the same time, alone, implacably, always – surrounded by the dead...

Here we did not live with and alongside the dead – we lived inside death.... Here we learned that if one can live one life, here there were a thousand and one ways of dying.

Did my eyes see the ditches with Jewish babies thrown into the flames? At times I began doubting my own perception. I was wrong to doubt. Read Telford Taylor's conclusions. Jewish babies *were* thrown into the flames alive. That night I was here, awakened to a demented reality, witnessing what no human being should ever be condemned to see: the ultimate cruelty of man, the total disgrace of creation, the limitless outrage of the human condition. It was here that evil minds shamed Creation and its Creator. Here, for the first time in history, Jews recited the kaddish for themselves.

Here we dwelled in the absolute: the absolute hatred of the killer, the absolute suffering of the victim – but also absolute kindness: a fugitive smile from an emaciated friend, a handshake, a piece of bread from the starving father to his forlorn son meant more than all the riches on earth.... Fulfilling the wish of a resigned fellow inmate to say kaddish for him.... A promise to remember a name, a date, a face. Those who used their talent to dehumanize the victim, failed; the victim, in most cases, remained human, and even brought his or her humanity to its very limits. It is the killer who betrayed his humanity.

Auschwitz did not come down ready-made from heaven. It was imagined by men, conceived by men, constructed and ordered by men who usurped His name and His function in deciding who shall live and who shall die.

At times, then and later, some of us asked: where was He when His children underwent unspeakable agony and death? I do not possess an answer to this unavoidable question. If there is one, I find it unacceptable.

But in spite of what we have seen and heard in this place of misfortune and malediction, hope must remain part of our humanity. Despair is neither option nor alternative. Granted, in this place there are enough reasons to give up on the human condition, but we must cling to it. There are many reasons to renounce faith, but we must preserve it. If not for our sake, then for the sake of our children.

About the Authors

Omer Bartov – John P. Birkelund Distinguished Professor of European History at Brown University. Former research fellow at Harvard, Princeton and the Berlin American Academy, and recipient of NEH and Guggenheim fellowships. Member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. His books include *The Eastern Front, 1941-45* (1985), *Hitler's Army* (1991), *Murder in Our Midst* (1996), *Mirrors of Destruction* (2000), *Germany's War and the Holocaust* (2003), *The "Jew" in Cinema* (2005), and *Erased* (2007). Currently writing on interethnic relations in Eastern Galicia.

Yehuda Bauer – Historian. Professor at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Former director of the Yad Vashem International Institute for Holocaust Research. Academic advisor to the International Task Force on Holocaust Education, Commemoration and Research. Awarded the Israel Prize for his contribution to research. Author of dozens of books on antisemitism and the Holocaust, including *Rethinking the Holocaust*, *A History of the Holocaust*, *The Impact of the Holocaust*, *Jews for Sale?: Nazi-Jewish Negotiations*, *The Impact of the Holocaust*. Founder and Editor of the *Journal for Holocaust and Genocide Studies* and the *Encyclopaedia of the Holocaust*.

Wolfgang Benz – Professor at the Berlin Technical University and Head of the Center for Research on Antisemitism. Previously, staff member of the Institut für Zeitgeschichte, Munich. Visiting professor in Australia and Mexico. Chairman of Gesellschaft für Exilforschung.

Co-founder and co-editor of *Dachauer Hefte*. Editor of several series. Co-editor of *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft*. Recipient of the Geschwister-Scholl-Preis (1992). His many publications on 20th-century German history include *Die Juden in Deutschland 1933-1945. Leben unter nationalsozialistischer Herrschaft* (1988), *Dimension des Völkermords. Die Zahl der jüdischen Opfer des Nationalsozialismus* (1991, ed.), *Deutscher Widerstand 1933-1945* (1994), *Deutschland 1945-1949* (1998), *The Holocaust* (1999), *Das Dritte Reich* (2000) and *A Concise History of the Third Reich* (2006).

Michael Berenbaum – Writer and Holocaust documentary film producer. Professor at the University of Judaism in Los Angeles. Co-ordinator of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. Former chairman of the Shoah Visual History Foundation. Author, co-author and editor of many books and articles. Books include *The Holocaust: Religious and Philosophical Implications*, *The Holocaust and History: The Known, the Unknown, the Disputed and the Reexamined* and *The Bombing of Auschwitz: Should the Allies Have Attempted It?*

Eleonora Bergman – Architect; documenter and researcher of synagogues of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Director of the Jewish Historical Institute, and formerly Deputy Director. Consultant for the Auschwitz-Birkenau Site Management Plan. Recipient of fellowships from ICCROM (Rome 1982) and the Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture (New York 1993/94, 1996/97). Author and co-author of historical monographs on Polish towns and guidelines for their maintenance. Co-author of *Survey of Historic Jewish Monuments in Poland* (1994) and *Extant Synagogues in Poland. Catalog* (1996). Author of dozens of articles published in Poland and abroad.

Debórah Dwork – Rose Professor of Holocaust History and Director of the Strassler Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies at Clark University. Recipient of Guggenheim, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars and American Council of Learned Societies

fellowships. Her award-winning books include *Children With A Star*, *The Terezin Album of Marianka Zadikow* and *Voices and Views: A History of the Holocaust*. Co-author (with Robert Jan van Pelt) of *Auschwitz, Holocaust: A History* and *Flight from the Reich*.

Ian Kershaw – Professor of Modern History at Sheffield University. Previously, Lecturer in Medieval History, then in Modern History at Manchester University, and Professor of Modern History at Nottingham University. Consultant for television documentary series in Germany and Britain, including the BBC prize-winning series *The Nazis: A Warning from History* and *Auschwitz: the Nazis and the Final Solution*. Recipient of honorary doctorates from the Universities of Manchester, Stirling and Belfast, and honorary Fellow of Merton College, Oxford. Fellow of the British Academy, Royal Historical Society, Alexander von Humboldt-Stiftung and Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin. Recipient of the Bundesverdienstkreuz (1994) and a knighthood (2002). His published works, including his two-volume biography of Hitler, have been awarded the Wolfson Literary Prize (2000), the British Academy Prize (2001) and others.

Stanisław Krajewski – Professor at the University of Warsaw, Institute of Philosophy. Co-founder and Co-Chair of the Polish Council of Christians and Jews, and co-founder of the Jewish Forum. Polish consultant to the American Jewish Committee. Member of the exhibition planning team of the Museum of the History of Polish Jews, Warsaw. Former member of the board of the Association of Jewish Communities in Poland, and member of the International Council of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum. Author of works on logic, including *Twierdzenie Gödla i jego interpretacje filozoficzne: od mechanicyzmu do postmodernizmu* and on Judaism, Jewish history, Christian-Jewish dialogue: *“Żydzi, judaizm, Polska”, 54 komentarze do Tory dla nawet najmniej religijnych spośród nas, Poland and the Jews. Reflections of a Polish Polish Jew, Tajemnica Izraela a tajemnica Kościoła* and others.

Zdzisław Mach – Professor of sociology, social anthropology and European studies. Director of the Centre for European Studies of the Jagiellonian University since 1993, and earlier Dean of its Faculty of Philosophy. Permanent visiting professor at Central European University, Warsaw. Was on the team of consultants to Poland's Chief Negotiator for EU Membership. Author or co-author of books including *Kultura i osobowość w antropologii amerykańskiej*, *Symbols, Conflict and Identity*, *Niechciane miasta: migracja i tożsamość społeczna*, *Eastern European Societies at the Threshold of Change*, and more than a hundred scholarly papers.

Charles S. Maier – Leverett Saltonstall Professor of History at Harvard University, teaching modern European and international history. Previously, taught at the Ecole des Hautes en Sciences Sociales, Paris. Former Guggenheim Fellow and Humboldt Prize Scholar in Berlin. Besides many articles and chapters in edited collections, his books include *Recasting Bourgeois Europe* (1975), *In Search of Stability: Explorations in Modern Political Economy* (1987), *The Unmasterable Past: History, Holocaust and German National Identity* (1988), *Dissolution: The Crisis of Communism and the End of East Germany* (1997) and *Among Empires: American Ascendancy and its Predecessors* (2008).

Michael R. Marrus – Chancellor Rose and Ray Wolfe Professor Emeritus of Holocaust Studies at the University of Toronto. Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada. Member of the Order of Canada. Author of several prize-winning books, including *Vichy France and the Jews* (with Robert Paxton), *The Unwanted: European Refugees in the Twentieth Century*, *The Holocaust in History* and *The Nuremberg War Crimes Trial, 1945–46*. Currently completing a book on the Holocaust restitution campaign of the 1990s, entitled *Some Measure of Justice*.

Dan Michman – Professor of Modern Jewish History and Chair of the Arnold and Leona Finkler Institute of Holocaust Research at Bar-

Ilan University, Ramat-Gan; Chief Historian at the Yad Vashem International Institute of Holocaust Research. Previously, taught at the University of Amsterdam and was Visiting Professor at the University of Toronto. His many publications deal with modern Jewish history and the history of Dutch Jewry in general, but focusing mostly on the Holocaust. His recent books include *Holocaust Historiography: A Jewish Perspective. Conceptualizations, Terminology, Approaches and Fundamental Issues* (2003) and *The Jewish Ghettos in the Holocaust: Why and How Did They Emerge?* (2008, in Hebrew; forthcoming in English and German).

Dalia Ofer – Emeritus Max and Rita Haber Professor of Holocaust and East European Studies, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Previously, Head of the Avraham Harman Institute of Contemporary Jewry, Head of the Vidal Sassoon International Research Center for the Study of Antisemitism, Representative of the Hebrew University at Yad Vashem Research Center and Directory, Head of the History Committee of the Israeli Ministry of Education, Visiting Scholar at Brandeis University, Visiting Professor at the University of Maryland and Yale University, Visiting Scholar of the Rockefeller Foundation, and Charles H. Revson Foundation Fellow for Archival Research CHAS-USHMM. Her books, some of which have received awards, include *Escaping the Holocaust: Illegal Immigration to the Land of Israel* (1990), *Women in the Holocaust* (co-editor with Lenore J. Weitzman, 1993) and *Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia* (co-editor with Paula Hyman, 2007), and she has published many scholarly articles.

Maria Orwid – Psychiatrist, psychotherapist. Was Professor and Head of the Department of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, Collegium Medicum, Jagiellonian University in Cracow; later was employed there to provide guidance for postgraduate training in psychiatry and psychotherapy. Founded that department, the first of its kind in Poland, in 1978. Was member of the Association of Ex-Prisoners of Auschwitz and the Association of Children of the Holocaust in Poland

(1991). Co-founder of the World Association of Dynamic Psychiatry and the International Family Therapy Association. Honorary President of the Polish-Israeli Mental Health Association. Recipient of the Gold Medal of the German Academy for Psychoanalysis (2005) and the Cross of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany (2007). Author of about 150 publications and presentations on posttraumatic psychopathology and psychotherapy, family therapy, adolescent psychiatry and psychotherapy, and training of psychiatrists and psychotherapists.

John T. Pawlikowski – Priest. Professor of Social Ethics and Director of Catholic-Jewish Studies at Catholic Theological Union. President Emeritus and Member of the Executive Board of the International Council of Christians and Jews. Author of many books on theology and Christian-Jewish dialogue, including *The Challenge of the Holocaust for Christian Theology* and *Christ in the Light of the Christian-Jewish Dialogue*. Co-editor (with Judith Banki) of *Ethics in the Shadow of the Holocaust*.

Shimon Redlich – Professor Emeritus of History, Ben-Gurion University. Previously, Director of the Rabb Center for Holocaust Studies, Ben-Gurion University. His books and articles address Soviet Jewry, Polish-Jewish and Ukrainian-Jewish relations. His most recent book is *Together and Apart in Brzezany: Poles, Jews and Ukrainians, 1919-1945* (2002). Currently completing a research project entitled “Life in Transit: Jews in Lodz, 1945–1950.”

John K. Roth – Edward J. Sexton Professor Emeritus of Philosophy and Founding Director of the Center for the Study of the Holocaust, Genocide, and Human Rights at Claremont McKenna College. Previously, served on the United States Holocaust Memorial Council. Member of the editorial board of *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*. He has published hundreds of articles and reviews and has authored, co-authored, or edited more than forty books, including *Genocide*

and *Human Rights: A Philosophical Guide*, *Gray Zones: Ambiguity and Compromise in the Holocaust and Its Aftermath*, and *Ethics During and After the Holocaust: In the Shadow of Birkenau*.

Krzysztof Szajca – Psychiatrist, psychotherapist. Staff member of the Child and Adolescent Psychiatry Clinic, Collegium Medicum, Jagiellonian University in Cracow. He is a member of a team providing therapy to children of the Holocaust and the second generation. His work focuses on intergenerational transmission of trauma, family therapy, and adolescent, intercultural and environmental psychiatry. Co-founder of several institutions for child and youth psychiatry.

Nechama Tec – Professor Emerita of Sociology at the University of Connecticut, Stamford. Member of the Academic Advisory Committee of the Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., and also the USHMM Council. During the German occupation she spent three years under an assumed Christian identity. Recipient of several honorary degrees. Author of many books including *When Light Pierced the Darkness: Christian Rescue of Jews in Nazi-Occupied Poland*, *In the Lion's Den: The Life of Oswald Rufeisen*, *Defiance: The Bielski Partisans*, *Resilience and Courage: Women, Men, and the Holocaust*, and the memoir *Dry Tears: The Story of a Lost Childhood*.

Feliks Tych – Professor of History. Director of the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw in 1995-2006. Currently head of an interdisciplinary project of several universities under the auspices of the Jewish Historical Institute: *The Aftermath of the Holocaust*. Academic editor of the *Ringelblum Archives* series. Member of the Editorial Committee of *Polski Słownik Biograficzny*. Author many publications on the Holocaust, including *Długi cień Zagłady*. Academic editor and co-author of *Pamięć – Historia Żydów polskich przed, w czasie i po Zagładzie* and *Facing the Nazi Genocide: Non-Jews and Jews in Europe*. Co-editor of *Kinder über den Holocaust*.

Frühe Zeugnisse 1944–1948. Author of many papers on the Holocaust published in compilations in Poland and abroad.

Robert Jan van Pelt – Cultural historian. University Professor and Professor of Architecture at the University of Waterloo, Canada. Served as an expert witness in the Lipstadt-Irving trial. Has contributed to and appeared in many TV documentaries, and in Errol Morris's film *Mr. Death: The Rise and Fall of Fred A. Leuchter Jr.* Recipient of many academic awards including a Guggenheim Fellowship. Has published eight books on architectural theory, the history of ideas, Auschwitz, Holocaust history, and Holocaust denial. Presently preparing the English-language edition of David Koker's wartime diary written in the concentration camp at Vught.

Jonathan Webber – Social anthropologist. Holds the UNESCO Chair in Jewish and Interfaith Studies at the University of Birmingham. Earlier, taught at Oxford University for many years. Vice Chairman of the Institute for Polish-Jewish Studies. Member of the International Auschwitz Council. His studies focus on the modern Jewish world and Holocaust memory. Recipient of the Gold Cross of Merit from the President of Poland for services to Polish-Jewish relations. Editor of *Jewish Identities in the New Europe*. Co-author of *Auschwitz: A History in Photographs* (with Connie Wilsack) and *Photographing Traces of Memory: A Contemporary View of the Jewish Past in Polish Galicia* (with Chris Schwarz).

Elie Wiesel – Writer and journalist. Professor at Boston University. Former prisoner of the Auschwitz and Buchenwald camps. Former Chairman of the American Presidential Commission on the Holocaust (later the United States Holocaust Memorial Council). Initiator of the establishment of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. His writing and work are devoted to reminding the world of the Holocaust of the Jews. Nobel Peace Prize laureate. Recipient of the U.S. Congressional Gold Medal. Author of more than 40 books, novels, plays, essays and Hasidic tales. His books

include *Night*, *The Beggar of Jerusalem*, *The Testament*, *L'oublié*, *Dawn and Day*.

Jan Woleński – Professor of Philosophy at the Jagiellonian University. Vice-President of B'nai B'rit Polin (Poland). Previously taught philosophy and legal theory at the Faculty of Law of Jagiellonian University, and taught at the Technical University of Wrocław. Former President of the European Society of Analytic Philosophy. He specializes in epistemology, history of logic and philosophical logic. His 20 books include *Logic and Philosophy in the Lvov-Warsaw School* (1989), *Essays in the History of Logic and Logical Philosophy* (1999) and *Because He Admitted to Being a Jew* (2007). He has written 500 papers and edited 22 collections.

Moshe Zimmermann – Professor of German History and Director of the Richard-Koebner-Center for German History at the Hebrew University, Jerusalem. Visiting Professor in Heidelberg, Mainz, Princeton, Köln, Halle, München, Saarbrücken and Göttingen. Recipient of the Humboldt-Forschungspreis (1993), the Jacob- und Wilhelm-Grimm-Preis of the DAAD (1997), the Dr. Lukas Preis of the University of Tübingen (2002) and the Lessing-Preis of the Lessing Akademie Wolfenbüttel (2006). His publications include *Wilhelm Marr – The Patriarch of Antisemitism* (1986), *Die deutschen Juden 1914–1945* (1997), *Deutsch-Jüdisch* (2000), *German Past – Israeli memory* (2002, in Hebrew), *Deutsch-jüdische Vergangenheit: Judenfeindschaft als Herausforderung* (2005) and *Deutsche gegen Deutsche. Das Schicksal der Juden im 2. Weltkrieg* (2008).