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Opening Remarks: The Discovery of the Holocaust

THE HOLOCAUST IS A FUNDAMENTAL EVENT IN HISTORY—NOT ONLY because one-third of the Jewish people in the world died in the space of four years, not only because of the manner in which they were killed, but because, in the last analysis, it is inexplicable. All our assumptions about the world and its progress prior to the years when this event burst forth have been upset. The certainties of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century vanished in its face. What we once understood, we no longer comprehend.

It happened unexpectedly, in the middle of our century in the middle of civilized Europe.

Least of all did the victims, already marked with yellow stars and concentrated in their ghettos, fathom what was about to happen to them. Regardless of what they heard, notwithstanding insistent rumors, few of them could grasp that the evidence pointed to the abyss. There were at least three ghettos in Poland—Lodz, Bilgoraj, and Bialystok—to which the Germans shipped the clothing of gassed Jews for cleaning and for sorting—clothing still filled with identity cards, passports, and religious objects that no religious Jew tosses away. Despite these bureaucratic errors, it was hard for the ghetto dwellers to grasp the reality, stranger and more fierce than anything ever imagined, that had descended upon them.

The disbelief extended to the Jewish organizations that watched the process from the outside. With a budget of less than \$1,000 a month, the World Jewish Congress maintained an office in Geneva for the purpose of acquiring information about the happenings in Europe. All that this very small staff could do was

to pass on the most important published data and some of the reports and rumors that filtered across the Swiss frontier, always with the caution that there was not enough money to put everything into telegrams.

There were at least, so we are told by the research of Laqueur and Breitman and others, three German emissaries who crossed into Switzerland in the summer of 1942—Ernst Lemmer, Arthur Sommer, and Eduard Schulte. The third of them, by roundabout ways, got the message across. It had to come from Germany! It had to come from a German to be believed. And even then, it was subject to endless checking, for it was, in the words of an American consul in Switzerland, “Fantastic!”

Again and again, the information was confirmed but not fully comprehended. We now know and can fairly accurately calculate that by the end of 1942, the most lethal year in Jewish history, four million Jews were killed. The Jewish organizations in Washington, meeting with President Roosevelt in December 1942 and still at that moment reluctant to believe the full truth, presented the number two million. About a year later, a report came from the Polish underground in Auschwitz, delivered at considerable risk by a Polish courier to London, detailing the events at the camp itself, complete with names and numbers. It was disseminated to our Intelligence in the War Department, where it was filed away, to the War Crimes Commission, where it was filed away, to the Office of Strategic Services, where the great historian who was in charge of its intelligence and research branch, William Langer, also filed it away. Thereafter came that famous aerial photography that David Wyman wrote about, when first a South African aircraft and then repeated reconnaissance missions of Allied Mediterranean Command took pictures, in clear skies from the height of 29,000 feet, of Auschwitz itself. No one looked for the gas chambers in the left-hand corner of those photographs.

Not until 1945 was the reality visualized. It took the ground forces of the allied armies that liberated the camps to see the Holocaust, to smell it: American troops who captured Dachau, Mauthausen, Buchenwald; British troops who found the emaciated bodies of Bergen-Belsen; and two divisions of the Red Army, the 100th and the 101st Ukrainian divisions, that captured Auschwitz in January 1945. Vassily Petrenko was a lieutenant colonel, a com-

mander of one of the battalions in the 100th division. He tells us that Soviet commanders had been warned to expect concentration camps on the path of their advance, but: "Nothing prepared them for gas chambers. Nothing."

Immediately after the war, this reality had to be incorporated into policy, into memory. But what happened? In the Nürnberg trials, where the indictments were drawn up and the offenses defined, killing *allied citizens* was a war crime—people of Norwegian nationality, of French nationality, Belgian, Dutch or Polish nationality. Some of them just happened to have been Jews. Those of German or Hungarian nationality were counted as victims only if they were killed on the soil of an allied country. The controlling criterion was nationality or the place of the crime. And so, even at Nürnberg only the perpetrator was identified, but the identity of the victims was half forgotten.

It was not only Nürnberg, it was not only the law, that buried memory. We had no language with which to describe the unprecedented event that had taken place. Look over the early literature, the early correspondence, and the early newspaper accounts and see the descriptions with words like antisemitism, excesses, atrocities. The inadequate terminology appropriate for what happened in the nineteenth century was used for this event. Was there any incorporation into our teaching? Hardly. If there was mention at all of anti-Jewish activities in our textbooks, the epitome was represented as *Kristallnacht*, that is, as the rocks that were thrown into shops in the cities of Germany on November 10, 1938, as if not much happened thereafter.

I well recall a small but telling incident when the *Encyclopedia Americana* prepared its 1968 edition. They wanted a new article on concentration camps, and I said, "Fine, I'll write it for you." And, naturally having looked at the *Britannica*, I had to do better. Apparently I did. They were so pleased as to ask for two small articles also about special topics: Buchenwald was one, Dachau the other. Then I waited, but no request came for Auschwitz. No request came for Treblinka. They didn't exist yet in encyclopedias.

Even when special efforts were made in the world of art to portray what had happened, the Jews were generally left out. For example, in that famous film, "Night and Fog," Jews are not mentioned, though Auschwitz is shown; Jews are never referred to,

even though the camera dwells on a gas chamber to the accompaniment of the love and death music from *Tristan and Isolde*. Or consider the well-known play by Peter Weiss, *Die Ermittlung* (The Investigation): the Auschwitz trial itself put into the form of a drama, yet no mention of the word Jew. Clearly, this was more than forgetting; it was repression.

Note what happened to the works of survivors. You will hear at this conference a very illuminating account of that most famous of all works by a victim who happened not to have survived but who lives in our hearts, Anne Frank. How many copies were printed in the first edition? Or look, if you will, at a book published in the Yiddish language in Argentina, *Und die Welt hot geschwigen* (And the world was silent)—an angry book. Who read it? It was in any case addressed to fellow survivors. A starkly realistic and insightful story, the author pared it down, made it into a poem and called it *Night*. It is Elie Wiesel's cut-down version that you have all read. Later, the Italian publisher Einaudi printed 2,500 copies of Primo Levi's *If This Be a Man*; six hundred were on the remainder list and drowned in the Florentine Flood, as he informs us in a book appropriately called *The Drowned and the Saved*. Even the survivor was told: "Forget it, get on with your life."

Under these conditions, how did we discover the Holocaust? At first, the question obviously raised at Nürnberg was the simple one: "Who were these people who did this?" And the answer was just as simple. For inevitably, that missing person, Adolf Hitler, seemed to be the all-encompassing answer—if need be with the help of the SS, that "Negative Elite," as it was called by Eugen Kogon, a former inmate of Buchenwald. It is to the credit of American prosecutors that they—lawyers that they were, but also historians, like Telford Taylor—dug beneath that superficial analytical framework and sought out for trial physicians, generals, and, yes, members of industry—of Krupp, I. G. Farben, the Dresdner Bank, and Flick—but not, to cite but two examples of men who were in the very midst of the destructive arena, officials of the ordinary street police (the *Ordnungspolizei*) and the railways. It was just not fathomable to assume that men untouched by ideology, who'd never read *Der Stürmer* or *Mein Kampf*, could do such things. But then, as one of Himmler's cousins once told me, *he*

couldn't understand how Himmler did, as he put it, "such things." We went from the top down. We started, not at the bottom, but with Hitler.

Years later, we discovered the victims in precisely the same way. The occasion was the Eichmann trial, when a correspondent, borrowed from the discipline of philosophy, was sent by a popular magazine to cover that proceeding and hurriedly wrote a report about it. She found herself in a morass of data and quickly concluded that the Jewish Councils were the undoing, the cause of death, of so many people. Had it not been for the *Judenräte*, for the Jewish Councils, for those people who sat collaborating, or cooperating at least, with their persecutors, well, maybe a million, maybe two million Jews would have died, but certainly not five or six. As late as the 1970s, when Isaiah Trunk's path-breaking book, a heavy, 700-page history of the ghettos of Eastern Europe, was published by Macmillan, it did not receive the title "The Ghettos" but was called instead *Judenrat* (Jewish council). I can appreciate the change of plans because the editor had originally asked me to write that book. Mine was to have been a book about ghettos. Trunk's *is* a book about ghettos. But the publisher could not encompass the thought that here was a description of a ghetto society in all of its complexity.

Have we to this day explored the victims? Look at the analytical literature. There were men and there were women, but were their experiences the same? There were children. How often do we hear about the fate of the Jewish children? How important is precisely the fate of these children, for that is what makes the Holocaust a holocaust! I must confess to you, I did not ask that question of myself until at my university the Pediatrics Department requested from me a lecture about the fate of Jewish children. And I said, "My God, these are doctors. No doubt they want numbers and facts, and they want these on handouts." Quickly I raced to what little material I had. I stared at a report of the Lodz ghetto, a document I'd had for years but which I really had not analyzed with great care. Then I saw something that made me call up the chief of Vital Statistics of the State of Vermont, for I had to ask myself whether something was wrong with me or with the report. I said, "Please tell me, what exactly is an infant mortality rate? How do you define that?" She explained, and I looked at my data

again, realizing that in the Lodz ghetto it *was* more than 1,000 per 1,000. Think about that. It is possible. It is the mathematics of a holocaust.

Or take another subject. We do not talk about it. We do not explore it, although we mention it more and more frequently and it is in the memoirs. Did money help in a moment of crisis? Did the poor die first? Isaiah Trunk speaks of a food pyramid in the ghettos. Have we explored this subject? Have we counted calories? What of mixed marriages and their offspring? Who talks about converts to Christianity? Who in the eyes of the Germans were Jews? Who in the eyes of the Jews were gentiles?

After the focus had been placed on perpetrators and victims, we became aware of the third personality—the bystander. Once again, we started at the top—after all, the playwright Hochhuth informed us that the name of the chief bystander is Pope Pius XII! Who else? Thank goodness the Vatican published some eleven volumes of documents showing what some historians may have known all along—that even the Catholic Church is not monolithic. When Cardinal Secretary of State Maglione discovered in 1943 the existence of Treblinka, the very way in which he words his memorandum reveals the same surprise, the same astonishment, almost the same disbelief that the victims and the American government had exhibited earlier. Those of you who saw the film *Shoah* by Claude Lanzmann probably saw for the first time local bystanders being interviewed. How late we discovered these peasants. Everywhere, we looked, not from the bottom up, but from the top down.

What meaning in this Holocaust? Different meanings, to be sure, for the perpetrators, for the victims, and for the rest of the population of the world. For Germans, I have always felt there is an insurmountable obstacle. After all, the one question one does not ask of a person of a certain age in Germany whose father was an adult in World War II, the one question that is totally taboo, is “What did your father do?” Essentially, the division between the generations, it strikes me, is far greater in Germany than the division now disappearing between West and East Germany, far greater than the superficial ideological division of a cold war, far greater than any other bifurcation. Yes, Germans would love to forget. They do not have psychological independence, as we

learned during the Bitburg crisis, when Chancellor Kohl thought that with one stroke he could end the forty years in the desert by having an American president visit a cemetery. And what happened? "The past returns!" cried the German newspapers, "The past is still here!" So they struggle with that past without letup.

There are those who say this Germany of 1933, 1938, and 1945 was ruled by a government of usurpers. "We can show you the statistics; we have investigated the elections of 1932. We have counted the votes." Political scientists, represented by Bracher and his school, make this argument. "Nazism was an aberration!" Well, listen to the paper of Christopher Browning about one ordinary battalion of police in one town on one day and ask yourself the question again, "Who did these things?" Another German argument says, "All right, something was drastically wrong, something happened to us; we don't know what. But clearly a break occurred in history. Maybe it happened to all of us. But you cannot compare the Germany of the Nazi years with that prior to 1933 or after 1945." "Oh, no," says another school, "there is continuity. It is the same Germany." Continuity theory was already espoused by Thomas Mann in a lecture in the Library of Congress in April 1945. He spoke with pain, for he was a passionate romantic, but he had to admit that, whereas classicism was healthy, German romanticism was enduringly sick. Finally, there are those political scientists around Nolte who say, "All right now, you want continuity, you want to talk about us Germans as a self-perpetuating culture, but let us look at other nations. Who invented the concentration camp? The British in South Africa, the Spaniards in Cuba—not we. Who has the patent on the bullet into the back of the neck? The Soviet NKVD—not we. Who, for that matter, designed gas chambers first? Why, you Americans—not we." And they go on and on. This is called relativization. If all things are relative, one need not worry so much. But whom do they fool? Not even themselves.

For the Jews, the impact is incalculable. In Professor Vital's chapter, you will notice that the author speaks of the literal amputation of one-third of the Jewish people. Can such a people, any people, stay the same after such an event? Can it define itself the way it did before? Will not a thousand years pass before somehow this experience becomes "history" for the Jews? Only three years

almost to the day after the end of the Holocaust, Israel was established as an independent state. What a connection. Look at the topography of Jerusalem and the three hills that were pointed out to me. On one are buried those who were killed, mostly in 1948, without whom the state would not have been possible. On another is the transplanted grave of Herzl, without whom the state would not have been conceivable. And, on the adjacent third hill, stands the remembrance authority of Yad Vashem commemorating the Holocaust, without which the state would not have been necessary. One cannot remove this event from the Jewish psyche in a thousand years.

But the Holocaust came to the bystanders, too. Here in the United States, something happened. We now can almost pinpoint when. It was roughly 1978. Naturally such developments don't really have a precise date on which they begin. And yet, here was a television play that the author, Gerald Green, could not have sold to any network five or ten years earlier. Here was a nationalization of the Holocaust by an Executive Order establishing a President's Commission on the Holocaust. Here, at that late date, was the establishment of the Office of Special Investigations, to look for perpetrators on our soil. Here, we see the multiplication of books about the Holocaust, of courses about the Holocaust, of curricula about the Holocaust, and, yes, of conferences about the Holocaust.

How well aware I am of this transformation. I have taught at my university for thirty-four years, and I kept my research a private endeavor long after its first publication. Not until a colleague of mine in the Department of English, of all places, came to my office one day and said, "Let us teach a course on the Holocaust together," did I decide to do it. But I said, "Let us make it one of those topics courses and not give it a permanent number. We'll teach it once, we'll teach it twice, then we'll see." After two years and after three, we realized this is a topic that will not go away. After his retirement, I thought "maybe now the enrollment will drop." But it has not. Nor is this phenomenon confined to the University of Vermont. Moravian College offers a Holocaust course; Moorhead, Minnesota, had a conference on the Holocaust; the University of Hawaii has a regular seminar on the subject. The subject has spread throughout the land. Twenty-year-old men and

women come into my office to inquire about the course, and they say, "I've been interested in the Holocaust for a long time." We have some affluent students, and it turns out that when they graduated from high school, their parents gave them a trip to Europe. These are not, by the way, Jewish students in the majority at all. And where did they go on this sightseeing trip? Why, to Dachau and to Mauthausen.

Something in our youth demands knowledge of what happened. We have not created that interest. We have not agitated at all to make it happen. History created this interest—this search for moral certainty, this quest for a definition of evil, this preoccupation with the ultimate truths of the behavior of men toward other men. That is what they want to know.

The Holocaust is the same; it cannot change. But the world in which we live, whether we welcome or do not welcome the development that is before us, changes the meaning of the Holocaust as time passes before our eyes.