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Some Reflections About an Integrated History of the Holocaust

The need for an integrated history of the Holocaust first became clear to me during the debates of the mid and late 1980s, and particularly as a result of the confrontation with Martin Broszat, at the time the director of the Institute of Contemporary History in Munich, regarding his 1985 “plea for the historicization of National Socialism.” One of Broszat’s arguments was directed against the traditional representation of the Third Reich as a simplistic, black-and-white rendition that had to give way to various shades of gray. Broszat’s barely hidden subtext, which emerged during our exchange of letters at the end of 1987, contended that the Jewish survivors’ perception of this past, as well as that of their descendants, albeit ~~aworthy~~ worthy of respect, nonetheless represented a “mythical memory” that set a “coarsening obstacle on the path of a rational German historiography.”

This view perpetuated the intellectual segregation of the history of the Jews during the Nazi epoch and left it, at best, to Jewish historians. My own work, begun in 1990, was meant to show that no distinction was warranted between historians of various backgrounds in their professional approach to this subject, that all historians dealing with this theme had to be aware of their unavoidably subjective approach, and that all could muster enough self-critical

insight to restrain this subjectivity. What mattered most to me in my own project was the inclusion of the Jewish dimension, along all others, within an integrated historical narrative. There is more, however, to this concept of integrated history.

First, the history of these events cannot be limited to German decisions and measures only; it has to include the initiative and reactions of authorities, institutions, and of the most diverse social groups throughout the occupied and satellite countries of German-controlled Europe. Second, at each stage, Jewish perceptions and reactions, collective or individual, cannot and should not be considered as a separate domain within any general historical rendition, as they impacted, in various degrees, upon all other elements of this history; finally, a simultaneous representation of the events - at all levels and in all different places - enhances the perception of the magnitude, the complexity, and the interrelatedness of the multiple components of this history. Let me very briefly address each of these points.

We do not need to belabor the fact that the history of the extermination of the Jews of Europe cannot stop at the borders of the Reich, nor be limited to German decisions and measures only. One aspect of the German and European scene, marginalized at times, demands, however, to be stressed: the awareness among European elites and populations of what these anti-Jewish measures and policies meant. Nowadays we know that a considerable amount of information about the extermination was available throughout Europe, and this from a rather early stage on. The Polish underground referred to the mass murder as soon as

it started; the Swiss Federal authorities, including the police, explicitly evoked the consequences of the hermetic closing of borders for Jews, in mid-summer 1942. In Germany itself, as I try to show in my work, the fate of the Jews was quite openly discussed at various levels of the population.

Let us turn to the Jewish dimension of this history. When referred to at all within the essentially non-Jewish centered historiography, evocation of the Jewish aspect deals mainly with institutional-collective Jewish behavior, i.e., with the decisions of Jewish-leadership groups, the Jewish Councils, or some of the best known Jewish attempts at resistance (the uprising of the Warsaw ghetto, for example). But, in fact, the main contribution of the study of the Jewish dimension to historical knowledge applies to a much more fundamental point. In contradistinction to vast segments of surrounding society, the victims did not know what was ultimately in store for them. In Germany and in the West, the information available to the Jews had somehow not been pieced together; in the East, the Jewish populations in their immense majority refused to believe what they saw. This in turn decisively contributed to the smoothness of the extermination process and to the so called passivity of the victims. Expecting terrible hardship and even widespread deaths is one thing, expecting immediate murder, quite another.

The Jewish dimension of this history has also to be perceived from a totally different angle, that of individual behavior. From the very outset, any steps taken by individual Jews or by small groups in order to hamper the Nazi effort

(bribing officials, policemen or denunciators, paying families in order to hide children or adults, fleeing to woods or mountains, disappearing into small villages or into large cities, converting, joining resistance movements, stealing food, anything that came to mind and led to survival) all represented obstacles, be they minimal, on the Nazi path. It is also – possibly mainly - at this micro-level that Jewish interaction with the forces acting in the implementation of the AFinal Solution@ needs to be studied further and integrated into the wider domains of this history.

The history of the destruction of European Jewry at the level of individuals can be reconstructed from the perspective of the victims on the basis of post-war depositions, interviews and memoirs, but mainly owing to the unusually large number of diaries (and letters) written during the events and recovered over the following decades. These diaries and letters were written by Jews of all countries, all walks of life, all age groups, either living under direct German domination or within the wider sphere of persecution. Of course, the diaries have to be used with the same critical attention as any other document. Yet, as a source for the history of Jewish life during the years of persecution and extermination, they remain crucial and irreplaceable.

Thousands of witnesses confided their observations to the secrecy of their private writings. Major events and much of daily incidents, attitudes and reactions of the surrounding world - which these chroniclers recorded - merged into an increasingly comprehensive, albeit at times contradictory, picture. Diaries and letters describe in great detail the initiatives and daily brutality of the perpetrators,

the reactions of populations, the life and destruction of their own communities, but they also record their own everyday world, that of despair, rumors, illusions and hope, in constant succession, mostly to the end.

Such personal chronicles, such individual Jewish voices, are the most immediate testimonies about aspects of ongoing events usually not recorded in other sources. Like flashes that illuminate parts of a landscape, they confirm intuitions, they warn us against easy generalizations, they tear through the smugness of scholarly detachment. Mostly, they just repeat the known but express it with unmatched forcefulness. Thus, reminiscing about the murder of some 12,000 Jews in Stanislawow on October 12, 1941, a young female diarist, Elsa Binder, brought up the fate of her two friends, Tamarczyk and Esterka: All hope, Elsa wrote, that death was kind to Tamarczyk and took her right away. And that she didn't have to suffer like her companion Esterka who was seen being strangled.

Finally, the very fact of a simultaneous representation adds an essential dimension to the historical perception of the Holocaust; it need not be solely transnational. It can apply to several categories of events usually not linked in traditional historiography yet occurring at the same time in the same country and having a major impact by dint of their simultaneity. Thus, in late December 1941, the decision to exterminate all the Jews of Europe was most probably taken. At the same time, the main representative institution of the German Evangelical Church, the Church Chancellery, responding to a violently anti-Semitic stance taken by a number of local churches adhering to the German-Christian line,

issued a statement of its own denying any solidarity with converted Jews. This was made brutally clear in a circular letter published on December 23 by the Chancellery's deputy director, Günther Fürle: "The breakthrough of racial consciousness in our people, intensified by the experience of the war and the corresponding measures taken by the political leadership, has brought about the elimination of the Jews from the community of us Germans. This is an incontestable fact which the German Evangelical Churches, which serve the one Eternal Gospel within the German people and live within the legal domain of this people as corporations under public law, cannot heedlessly ignore. Therefore, in agreement with the Spiritual Council of the German Evangelical Church, we request the highest authorities to take suitable measures so that baptized non-Aryans remain separate from the ecclesiastical life of the German congregations. The baptized non-Aryans will have to find the ways and means to create their own facilities to serve their particular worship and pastoral needs. We will make every effort to help obtain permission for such facilities from the responsible authorities.

Nobody was fooled by the last sentence of the Chancellery's statement. The Confessing Church protested but its protest was that of a minority and did not call for any countermeasures. A few weeks earlier, several Catholic bishops, led by Bishop Preysing of Berlin, circulated a text meant to express support for converted German Jews sent to the "East." The majority of the Bishops=

Conference, led by Cardinal Bertram, rejected any such motion, even in its most timid phrasing. Of course, neither Protestants nor Catholics addressed the fate of the non-converted Jews. In other words, as the deportation from Germany started and, mainly, as the first extermination sites were activated or built, Hitler and his acolytes could rely on the passivity of the only counter-force that had once challenged the regime about its criminal policies.

The simultaneity of the decision to murder all the Jews of Europe and the declared non-intervention of the Christian Churches regarding converted Jews sets the early phase of the *Final Solution* in its wider German context. The same context takes on an additional tragically-ironic meaning as, at the very same time, in the last days of 1941, in the Reich and all over occupied Europe, Jews were celebrating their oncoming liberation in view of the Soviet successes in front of Moscow. Only in Vilna and somewhat later in Warsaw did a tiny group become aware that the overall extermination was just starting.

The promoters of the historicization agenda stressed quite correctly that Nazi crimes had been, out of necessity, set at center stage in the history of the Third Reich for the needs of the postwar trials. Later, according to the same argument, the centrality of the criminal dimension and the black-and-white representation became imperative for a historiography aimed at educating the nation (*eine volkspädagogische Geschitsschreibung*). Thus, according to the same view, the time had come to perceive the criminal policies of the regime

within a much wider and differentiated context and, in any case, a context not necessarily centered on the Jewish issue. The persecution and extermination of the Jews of Europe became but a secondary aspect of policies pursued towards entirely different goals. These goals included, for example, the creation of a new economic and demographic equilibrium in occupied Europe by way of murdering surplus populations; ethnic reshuffling and decimation of Eastern populations to facilitate German colonization, or, most recently, the systematic plunder of the Jews of Europe in order to allow the waging of the war without putting too heavy a material burden on German society or, more precisely, on the economic and social aims of Hitler's *Volksstaat*. Several of these interpretations, and particularly the last one, found a major echo in Germany.

Such an approach, cannot, however, answer some fundamental questions: Why did Hitler decide to exterminate the Jews after robbing them of all of their assets? Why did the Nazi leader personally decide, in the Fall of 1943, to forge ahead with the deportation of the Jews of Denmark and those of Rome, notwithstanding the serious risks involved (the possibility of unrest in Denmark and that of the Pope's public protest) and the non-existent benefits of both operations? Why did Himmler reject the Wehrmacht's repeated requests to keep specialized Jewish workers from extermination?

The secondary function attributed to the anti-Jewish policies cannot either address apparently marginal yet telling occurrences, such as the Reichsführer SS's personal demand from Finland's Prime Minister to have his country deliver

its 30 to 40 foreign Jews into Germans hands, the deportation of the small and impoverished Sephardic Jewish communities from the Aegean islands in July 1944, or, finally, the roundup and deportation of hundreds of Jewish children from France to Auschwitz, a few days before the liberation of Paris.

The only approach that seems possible in the writing of an integrated history of the Holocaust has to set the Jewish issue at the very center of the regime=s worldview and policies. All in all, Goebbels noted after a long conversation with Hitler at the end of April 1944, Aa long-term policy in this war is only possible if one considers it from the standpoint of the Jewish Question. This crazed obsession was enthusiastically supported and implemented by Hitler=s closest acolytes, by party and state agencies, by officials and technocrats at all levels of the system, and by important segments of the population. The Alogic behind this anti-Jewish passion was constantly spewed by the regime=s propaganda. In fact, propaganda molded an increasingly ominous image of Athe Jew@ as the lethal and relentlessly active enemy of the Reich, intent on its destruction. Thus, within the same hallucinatory logic, at the end of 1941, once the Reich had to fight on both fronts, East and West, without the hope of a rapid victory and with some early intimations of defeat, Hitler opted for immediate extermination. Otherwise, as he saw it, the Jews, like in 1917/1918, would destroy Germany and the new Europe from within. And, after the military situation became ominous, the extermination was accelerated to its utter limits.

An integrated history of the Holocaust, spanning the entire continent, leads in and of itself to comparative queries and, more generally, to connections otherwise but dimly perceived. A prime example could be the glaring lack of an overall Jewish solidarity in the face of catastrophe. The German Jewish leadership attempted to bar endangered Polish Jews from emigrating from the Reich to Palestine, in late 1939 and early 1940, in order to keep all emigration openings for German Jews only; native French Jewish leadership (the *Consistoire*) ceaselessly demanded from the Vichy government a clear-cut distinction between the status and treatment of native Jews and that of foreign ones. The Councils in Poland particularly in Warsaw were allowing a whole array of privileges to members of the local middle class who could afford paying bribes, while the poor, the refugees from the provinces and the mass of those devoid of any influence were increasingly pushed into slave labor, or driven to starvation and death. Once the deportations started, Polish Jews in Lodz. for example. turned against the deportees from the West. In Westerbork, German Jews, the elite of the camp, closely working with the German commandants, protected their own and put Dutch Jews on the departure lists, while, previously, the Dutch Jewish elite had felt secure and was convinced that only refugees (mainly German Jews) would be sent to the local camps, then deported. The hatred of Christian Jews by their Jewish brethren, and vice versa, particularly in the Warsaw ghetto, is notorious.

It should be mentioned, however, that notwithstanding all tensions, widespread welfare efforts, education and cultural activities, were open to all in many Jewish communities. Moreover, a strengthening of bonds appeared within small groups sharing a specific political or religious background. Such was typically the case in political youth groups in the ghettos, among Jewish scouts in France, and, of course, among this or that group of orthodox Jews. In looking at the big picture, we may reach the conclusion that in a majority of cases, specific ethnic-cultural, political or religious bonds shared by any number of sub-groups took precedence over any feeling of shared Jewishness.

A comparative approach may also raise questions that do not allow for any clear answer. Thus, on June 27, 1945, the world renowned Jewish-Austrian chemist, Lise Meitner, who in 1939 had emigrated from Germany to Sweden, wrote to her former colleague and friend, Otto Hahn, who had continued to work in the Reich. After mentioning that he and the scientific community in Germany knew much about the worsening persecution of the Jews, Meitner went on: All of you have worked for Nazi Germany and never tried even passive resistance. Certainly, to assuage your conscience, here and there you helped some person in need of assistance but you allowed the murder of millions of innocent people, and no protest was ever heard. Meitner's *cri de coeur* addressed through Hahn to Germany's most prominent scientists, none of them active party members, none of them involved in criminal activities, could have applied as well to the

entire intellectual and spiritual elite of the Reich (with some exceptions, of course) and to wide segments of the elites in occupied or satellite Europe.

An even more unsettling aspect of the same question arises in regard to the attitude of the Christian churches. In Germany - again with the exception of a few individuals, none of whom belonged to the higher reaches of the Evangelical or Catholic Church - no Protestant bishop or Catholic prelate protested publicly against the extermination of the Jews. When men of good will, such as Bishop Preysing of Berlin or the voice of the Confessing Church, the Württemberg Bishop Theophil Wurm were ordered to stop their attempts at confidential protests, they submitted.

That an important number of personalities belonging to Germany's intellectual or spiritual elites did not take a public stand against the murder of the Jews is easily understood. That not even a few prominent voices were publicly heard is puzzling; that not a single personality of major stature was ready to speak out remains, as some other aspects of this history, a continuous source of disbelief.
