

An Interview With Prof. Daniel Goldhagen

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Why the Germans? Why the Jews?

Q- The first question has two aspects: Why was it in Germany that the Holocaust took place; and why were the Jews the victims?

G- For genocide to happen, two factors are necessary, both of which have always been present. The first is a great hatred among the populace, from whom a group of perpetrators can be found; the second is a political structure that has the means to enact a program of persecution, violence, and extermination.

Great hatreds — no matter how great they are — at most produce episodic violence on their own: pogroms, riots, etc., but they do not produce sustained and systematic killing, unless the hatreds are mobilized, organized (by a state), and channeled in a genocidal direction .

Though there was antisemitism in many countries of Europe — and antisemitism was the prime mover in the Germans who killed Jews — only in Germany was there a genocidal state, a Nazi state; and only in Germany did these two factors come together. That is why the Holocaust emanated from Germany and not from some other European country.

I have no doubt that if a Nazi-like state had come to power in some other countries, particularly in Eastern Europe, and had decided upon a program of extermination, in all likelihood they would have found many, many people willing to undertake, or to aid them in, carrying out the program. But the historical fact is that only in Germany did these two factors came together.

Q- How come the Jews? Why was it they who became the victims?

G- The antisemitism in Germany was extremely virulent. It held that Jews were racially different from Germans; that their differences were considered to reside in their biology (and, therefore, the nature of Jews could not be changed); and that Jews were evil, extremely powerful, and responsible for much of the harm that had befallen Germany. This antisemitism led many people to conclude that Jews had to be eliminated somehow from German society. This view had long been developing in Germany, and was already firmly entrenched in the nineteenth century. So that is where the hatred came from. This hatred, of course, was a legacy of medieval Christian antisemitism, which was a pan-European phenomenon. It then became modernized in Germany in the nineteenth century as the country entered the modern era.

The Nazi party and Hitler came to power because of a variety of circumstances, none of which was inevitable: their defeat in the First World War; the problems of the Weimar Republic; the severe depression that hit Germany; the unstable political situation; the desire of the Germans to reclaim what they considered to be their rightful place in Europe; and the great hatred of Jews that existed in Germany. With all these factors prevailing, the Nazi party held a tremendous appeal for the populace.

Hitler was finally appointed as chancellor in 1933 as a result of this crisis. The antisemitism had always been there, but the Nazis rise to power was due to the contingent existence of various unforeseeable historical circumstances. Had there not been a depression, Hitler in all likelihood would never have come to power, and there would not have been a Holocaust. But, again, those factors enabled him to come to power and once he did, he drew on the antisemitism that was prevalent among so many Germans, which allowed him to pursue his program: firstly, violent persecution, and then extermination.

Q- At what stage in German history did the Germans antisemitism become

unique? Can you stress the uniqueness of the German establishment?

G- Antisemitism is a complex phenomenon; it has many different components. Also, the various antisemitisms that exist in any society are not exactly the same. There are different people who believe different things about Jews.

One of the things that we must do when discussing and analyzing antisemitism is to focus on the content of what people believe. What exactly do the people who hate Jews believe about them? Do they simply think they are clannish and stingy, or do they think that they are a cosmic evil, responsible for many of the ills of the world and bent upon harming other people?

If you focus on the content of the main strand of German antisemitism (there were minor strands that were different from this), you see that it was racial in its foundation; that is, the source of the Jews alleged perniciousness was considered to be derived from their race. This differentiated German antisemitism from, say, most of the antisemitism in Eastern Europe, which was religious-based and which held that the source of the Jews alleged perniciousness was their religion.

Q- Are you talking about the foundations of this antisemitism, or about the Nazi antisemitism?

G- In Germany, this understanding of the source of the Jews perniciousness had certainly developed by the latter half of the nineteenth century. In fact, the Nazis were simply drawing on long-existing, powerful notions about Jews that prevailed in German society.

German antisemitism — again, already in the nineteenth century — and certainly this is also true of Nazi antisemitism, held Jews to be not just an evil people but a cosmic-like evil. German antisemites claimed that the “Jewish

problem” touched the entire world, and believed that there could not be peace on earth until the so-called Jewish problem was somehow solved. This, again, made it somewhat qualitatively different from the dominant trends of antisemitism in other countries.

However, we should not overemphasize the difference between antisemitism in Germany and in other parts of Europe, where it was also extremely intense. There was great hatred against Jews, particularly in Eastern Europe, but also among certain segments of the French population, and in Europe in general. So, in analyzing German antisemitism, what we should look at are both the similarities and the differences, and eventually a complex portrait will emerge.

Q- What role did the Christian European image of the Jew play as the background to the Holocaust?

G- The principle source of antisemitism in the western world has been Christianity; medieval Christian Europe was axiomatically antisemitic. By 1500, Jews had been expelled from most western countries at one point or another. It was believed that Jews were Christ-killers, that they were in league with the devil, and that they had done great harm to Christian society.

So, this was the principle source of antisemitism until the twentieth century. Without Christian antisemitism, it is hard to imagine that modern German antisemitism (or, more broadly, modern European antisemitism) would have ever existed in the form that it did, or would ever have developed the virulence, and even the murderousness, that it did.

If you want to understand the Holocaust you have to go back to the Christian roots of antisemitism. But at the same time, Christian antisemitism was fundamentally different in quality from the modern, racial antisemitism found in Germany. Even though there were attacks on Jews during the Middle Ages, and the Christian world sometimes treated Jews with extreme brutality and degradation, Christian Europe did not try to exterminate the Jewish people. It

took this modern racial view – that Jews were biologically evil – to lead to this murderers solution to the so-called Jewish problem.

German Public Opinion

Q- What was the German public opinion regarding the anti-Jewish Nazi policy in its various stages?

G- The Nazi anti-Jewish policy found a great deal of support among the German people. In fact, the persecutions of the 1930s, which were extremely radical, were participated in, and supported by, millions of Germans, and were known to everybody. Jews were systematically removed from one profession after the other, excluded from the political or, rather, cultural, social, and economic life of the country, stripped of their citizenship by the Nuremberg Laws, forbidden to marry non-Jews or to have extramarital relations with them, and subjected not only to the most intensive campaign of verbal violence in western history but also to episodic physical attacks. The best-known example of this, and of the greatest magnitude, was Kristallnacht in November 1938.

All this was known to the Germans; nobody could say he or she did not know about it. And yet we find that there was very little objection, very little principle dissent expressed against it — and a great deal of approval and participation. The minimal dissent that existed against the persecution of the Jews in the 1930s stood side by side with a great deal of dissent that the Germans expressed regarding many other policies of the regime. This simply shows that Germans evaluated the acts of the regime according to their own values; they often found the regimes policies (cultural, religious, or economic) to be wanting. They voiced their opposition and sometimes even protested. But rarely, if ever, on behalf of Jews.

So this shows that Germans had positions, had views, and the question is this: Why didn't they protest? Why did they indicate dissent against so many

policies, but not against one policy — the persecution of the Jews. To ask the question is to answer it: Most Germans (not all, but most) simply did not disapprove.

Q- They stayed the same to the very end?

G- From what we know of the Germans knowledge of the persecution (that is, of the extermination of the Jews in the 1940s, beginning in the summer of 1941), we can say that a very large number, even millions, knew. That is, they did not know that there was a formal program of total extermination — that, most people did not know — but they did know that their countrymen were slaughtering Jews systematically, en masse. Again, there was very little opposition and dissent expressed against this.

Q- The question is basically this: Did they continue to support it even when the Nazis began with the extermination policy?

G- Yes. The evidence strongly suggests that the eliminationist program of the Nazi regime — that Jewish power somehow had to be eliminated totally from German society — was an aspect of the Nazi policy that continued to find broad support among the German people throughout the Nazi regime.

Q- Does this mean that they supported it, or were indifferent?

G- The concept of indifference is often used to describe the German people's attitudes towards the anti-Jewish policy, the persecution of Jews. I find that this concept has very little analytical power and little use. Indifference means that one has no attitude whatsoever about what is being done. It is simply not believable that people don't have attitudes about whether it is right or not for their neighbors to be deported from their homes, for human beings to be shot en masse, to kill children. It is impossible for people to have no view on this.

So, the question is, What views did Germans have about the various stages of the persecution to the extent that they knew what was being done at different times? There is very little evidence to suggest that Germans disapproved of the various stages of the program of extermination, and so they could not have been indifferent. They did not disapprove, and there is a great deal of evidence that there was widespread approval for the fundamental eliminationist project, which did not waiver, even during the years of the extermination.

The Executioners — “Ordinary Men” or “Ordinary Germans ”?

Q- What was it that ultimately motivated the “Final Solution?” I’d like you to focus mainly on those who did the actual execution. Would you consider those killers “ordinary men,” which means that what motivated them would have motivated each and every one of us to act no differently under those circumstances? Or were they “ordinary Germans,” whose behavior was directly connected to their German background?

G- When speaking of what brought about the extermination of the Jews, one has to differentiate between what moved Hitler to make his decisions; what motivated the leadership of the party, of the system, to act as it did; and what brought ordinary Germans to participate in the killing itself.

Hitler, of course, had to take the decision — which he did — in order to exterminate European Jewry. A decision had to be made. In this sense, Hitler fulfilled his long-held dream to eliminate the Jewish people once and for all. He took this decision when it became pragmatic, from his point of view, to begin an extermination assault upon European Jewry. And that was when he began to conquer the Soviet Union, and as a result had most of European Jewry under his control.

The ordinary Germans who participated in the extermination of the Jews were fundamentally motivated, actually, by the same thing that motivated Hitler:

antisemitism, and the view of the rightness of the project to get rid of the Jews — in this case, through an exterminationist project. I do not believe that the people were somehow simply brainwashed, or indoctrinated, or moved to act against their will in killing Jews, in brutalizing them, and in doing all the other things that they did. This indicates that they actually assented to what they were doing.

The fundamental question is this: What caused the German perpetrators to decide to act as they did? In each case, perpetrators decided either to raise their hands and strike the victims, or not to. The brutality that they visited upon their victims was almost always voluntary; it was not ordered from above. I see no way to explain their actions if we hold that they did not approve of what they were doing. If they had not approved of what they were doing, they would not have beaten, they would not have tortured, they would not have brutalized, they would not have mocked or degraded the victims so frequently and in such a widespread way as to make this brutality a constituent feature of the Holocaust.

The only way to understand why the perpetrators inflicted this excess brutality (which was in addition to, or aside from, the killing itself) is to acknowledge that they believed that what they were doing was right, that they hated their victims, and that they did so because they were antisemites. That the perpetrators hated them is, of course, the view of the overall majority of the victims, the survivors who have testified in an almost-singular voice.

So, antisemitism was a prime motivational force for the perpetrators, just as it was for Hitler. Of course, they were acting within institutions of killing. They would not have acted as they did had they not been mobilized into these institutions, or if the program of extermination had not been set in motion by Hitler from above. But, by the same token, if the overwhelming majority of the German people had disapproved of what was being done to the Jews, then, of course, Hitler would never have been able to carry out his program of

extermination — there simply would have been too much resistance to it.

I think that the only way to understand why the perpetrators acted as they did is to understand the political cultures that bred them. This is true not only of the German perpetrators, but also of those in other countries — people who acted in a particular historical context, coming from a particular society as they did, which imbued them with the antisemitic notions that they had about Jews.

For this reason, I think that we have to understand this as a historically specific set of events, which could not have been produced in other historical contexts. That is why I think it's correct to refer to the German perpetrators as ordinary Germans, because they were regular members of the German society of the time. To conceive of them as ordinary men is to wrest them from their historical circumstances, from the culture that bred them, and to imply that all people, of all times — regardless of their own cultural notions, regardless of their own attitudes towards Jews — would have acted in exactly the same way had they, too, been placed in institutions of killing. With the logic of the notion that these were ordinary men, trans-historical beings with no historically specific or cultural properties, it is to imply that you could, for example, parachute back in time the people of today — who obviously have very different views of the world — into those institutions, and the institutions and the people would have acted in exactly the same way.

I find this notion very difficult to accept. There is so much that we know to suggest that this was not the case. Therefore, it seems to me that we should refer to these people with the appropriate historically and contextually accurate description: They were ordinary members of German society at the time. This doesn't mean that Germans today would act in the same way. In fact, I am convinced that Germans today, if they somehow found themselves in those institutions, would not have acted in the same way, because they have very different views of the world today. Antisemitism has declined dramatically in Germany. The principle motivator of the men during the 1940s is no longer present; therefore, there is no reason to believe that Germans

today, or any other people today, would act in this manner.

The Point of No Return

Q- Raul Hilberg, in his 1985 edition of *The Destruction of European Jews*, said that when the first Jewish law was propounded, the fate of European Jewry had already been sealed. Eberhard Jaeckel, in his early writings, said that the seed of the Holocaust had already been planted by the 1920s. Where is the point of no return from which you can draw a direct link to the Holocaust?

G- This is a very complex issue and hard to treat in a quick answer. Hitler was bent upon a radical elimination of the Jews from the time he became active in politics. From the moment he took power, he instituted and began to pursue (with the help of many other people) a radical eliminationist program. This was one of his central political goals. As long as the Nazis were in power, it was a goal that they would pursue in one form or another.

The extermination of the Jews, however, was not a foregone conclusion. Certain developments had to occur, and opportunities had to exist, for Hitler to carry out such a program. For example, he could not have undertaken a European-wide program of extermination until he had conquered the European continent. And had Hitler somehow not been defeated, or for one reason or another had not embarked as he did upon this conquest, or somehow had been deposed, then the extermination of the Jews would not have occurred.

In this sense, it was not inevitable or preordained. However, it was not an accident, not some kind of chance development, precisely because Hitler was

bent upon a radical elimination solution – in the form of extermination – which ultimately for him was more satisfying. So the moment that the appropriate opportunity (from his pragmatic point of view) occurred, he opted for the extermination, for a so-called Final Solution to the “Jewish problem”.

Q- According to what you say, the question arises of why the Nazi regime encouraged Jews to emigrate from Germany during the thirties, and prohibited emigration only in 1941?

G- During the 1930s, when the extermination of Jews was not practical (because Hitler did not see a German solution to the “Jewish problem” as being an adequate solution), it made no sense, from his standpoint, to begin to exterminate the Jews of Germany. The Jews in other parts of Europe, and the world for that matter, would still exist, and this would only bring further enmity and hatred upon Germany and make its situation more difficult.

Also, in the 1930s Hitler and Germany (which was re-arming) were in a weakened position. Hitler therefore had to wait until Germany was stronger and had more of the Jews of Europe under his control for an exterminationist solution to even make sense, that is, to be practical. So the question became what to do until such an opportunity presented itself. It is because he believed that the Jews were such a deleterious force within Germany, that he wanted them to leave Germany and to insulate the German people from what he considered the evil influence of Jews.

That is why, in the 1930s, the regime pursued what was, at that point, the most radical and practical elimination solution: to get the Jews to leave Germany. However, once a more radical solution became practical to Hitler — when he conquered the European continent — he then opted for this more radical solution: the extermination of the Jews.

Bureaucrats and Bureaucratic Mechanism

Q- Raul Hilberg described the bureaucratic, exterminationist mechanism as one that had its own momentum, that couldn't be stopped. Do you agree with this?

G- Concerning bureaucracy, for the regime to implement its persecution of the Jews in whatever form — first in the thirties, and then with extermination in the forties — it had, of course, to rely upon various state institutions to carry it out. Bureaucratic institutions were important in executing policy, as they are for all policies. However, I don't think that one can view the bureaucracy as pushing this forward on its own in some kind of autonomous, automatic way.

It is very difficult to move large institutions in a specific direction against the will of the people therein. Anyone who has worked in an institution of any size knows how difficult it is to move institutions. So, the question is: where did this energy come from to pursue the persecution and the extermination of the Jews?

What is striking about the program of extermination is that it was a continent-wide program that had little precedent and that required improvisation and initiative all along the way. Yet it was implemented with incredible smoothness and with very few difficulties. Why were these people pursuing the death of the Jews with such zeal and such energy? It was not merely because they were bureaucrats and institutions — bureaucrats often sabotaged policies, often dragged their feet, but they did not do so with regard to the extermination of the Jews.

In general, we need to pay more attention to the human beings and the decisions that they made (decisions typically based upon their own understanding of the rightness of their policies), and focus less on abstract institutions or structures like the SS, the Nazi party, the terror apparatuses, or the bureaucracy. All these institutions had to be peopled. These abstractions remove us from the human beings on whom we have to focus if we want to

understand why people acted as they did.

Q- Weren't there also other attitudes in Germany regarding the policy of the Nazis toward the Jews at that time? Don't you think people like Hjalmar Schacht or Alfred Kube — who did, in one way or another, exhibit a certain opposition towards this policy — were merely the tip of the iceberg?

G- There were some people in Germany, even within the institutions of killing, who dissented from what the regime was doing, or who were not happy with all the ways in which it was being implemented. There were those, for example, who disapproved of the terrible brutality and cruelty of the perpetrators, and would have preferred a more “humane” execution of the Jews.

We find, though, that most of the people — and there weren't that many — who indicated dissent against some aspects of what was being done, were usually not indicating principle dissent against the notion that the Jews should be eliminated, or even killed but they had reservations about particular aspects.

In studying the perpetrators, I am impressed by how much zeal there was among them, and how little reluctance there was. I am also impressed by how much latitude they had in making choices about how to treat their victims, and, indeed, even about whether to participate in the killings. Many of the perpetrators knew that they did not have to kill, because their commanders told them that they didn't have to. (We know this because the perpetrators themselves have told us this in their own postwar testimony.) When commanders made their offers to the men, only a few of them accepted the opportunity to get out of the killing. The others saw that nothing happened to those who opted out; they were not punished but were simply given other duties. And so they knew that they, too, could get out of the killing. But the vast majority of men in those units — where we know the option existed —

essentially chose to kill Jews.

So, in studying the perpetrators, what comes through is their voluntarism, their willfulness, and their assent, along with the misgivings that existed among only a small minority, and sometimes only with particular aspects of the program of killing but not with the program fundamentally in itself.

Try to understand why the perpetrators acted as they did. Many of them knew they did not have to kill — never was a German perpetrator himself ever killed, sent to a concentration camp, jailed, or punished in any serious way, for refusing to kill Jews. We need to focus not merely on the killing, much of which was willful, but also on all the other things that the perpetrators did to the victims. The most principle pattern of action of the perpetrators, aside from the killing, was the immense brutality to which they subjected their victims. The cruelty of the perpetrators was so enormous as to be on a par with the killing itself. We also have to explain the manner in which they implemented their orders, and the zeal and the energy with which they killed. They did not kill, by and large, with reluctance; they were not laggard in carrying out their duties. We have to find an explanation for the celebrations (of which there were many) that took place after killing operations. And why, so frequently on Jewish holidays, did the perpetrators spontaneously “celebrate” the holidays by rounding up or seizing Jews — religious Jews, men with beards, and religious leaders in the community — and then kill them. We have to explain why they took so many photographs of what they were doing. The reason we have so many photographs of the Holocaust is quite simply because the Germans took them, not to indict themselves but to memorialize their deeds.

So we have to make known not just the killing, but all the ways in which the perpetrators treated their victims, focusing, above all else, on the brutality and the cruelty. Only by looking at the full range of their actions, by looking at all the choices they could make and did make – treating the victims as they did, staying within the institutions of killing taking initiative or not taking initiative — can we really come up with an adequate understanding of the perpetrators.

And without that understanding, we cannot have a full and accurate picture of the Holocaust itself.

Changing the Method of Killing

Q- Why was the method of killing changed, generally speaking, from shooting to gassing?

G- In analyses of the Holocaust, too much attention has been devoted to the gas chambers, which were of enormous historical and existential importance since they were of course used. These factories of death are existentially extremely horrifying. But they were not necessary for the Germans to carry out their program of extermination. In fact, the program initially began with the shooting of Jews: approximately 40% of the Jews they killed, they killed by means other than gassing. Had they never developed the gas chambers, they would have continued to kill Jews — by shooting them or by starving them to death. We don't know exactly how many Jews would have died that way, but probably about the same number would have been killed.

We see from other genocides that modern technology, like gas chambers, is not at all central for the slaughter of a huge number of people. In fact, in the recent genocide in Rwanda, there was a far more intensive campaign of killing: the Hutus killed approximately 900,000 Tutsies within three months, mainly by hacking them, by clubbing them to death, using very primitive technology. This supersedes anything that existed during the Holocaust.

I want to add this: When people think of any other genocide or mass slaughter — be it the genocide of the Tutsies by Hutus in Rwanda, the slaughters in the former Yugoslavia, the genocide in Cambodia, the slaughter of the Armenians by the Turks, or any other that people know of — they automatically, naturally and correctly, assume that the perpetrators believed that what they were doing was right. The only genocide and mass slaughter that I know of where the opposite is claimed — that the perpetrators did not

believe that what they were doing was right — is the Holocaust and the German perpetrators. I find this very curious, because this claim is counter to all our knowledge of other genocides, and also to so much evidence to the contrary about the willfulness of the German perpetrators and their hatred of the victims. Therefore, I think that the German perpetrators of this genocide (and in all likelihood this is true of the perpetrators in other countries who helped them) were like the perpetrators of all other genocides that we know of. They, too, were willing executioners who believed that what they were doing was right, and they believed that because they hated the victims.

So the gas chambers were not necessary to kill Jews in such numbers. The Germans moved from the shooting to the gas chambers because they were looking for a way to remove the killers from doing the dirty work. To whatever degree people believed in it, it was simply an extremely gruesome and detestable duty. The Nazis had begun to experiment with different means of killing already in the fall of 1941, after the systematic shooting of Jews, en masse, in the Soviet Union. (The largest slaughter by shooting was, of course, in Babi Yar, outside of Kiev, where they shot over 33,000 Jews in two days.)

After experimenting with other means of killing, the Germans eventually opted for fixed installations of gassing, because this method achieved two goals: it removed the killer from the victim and created a distance between them; and secondly, since much of the killing was done in places that were out of sight, they could keep the surrounding populace from having direct knowledge of what they were doing. Of course, knowledge of the gas installations was not only extremely widespread in Poland, it was also well known to the German forces in Poland.

The Uniqueness of the Holocaust

Q- This brings us to the uniqueness of the Holocaust.

G- When we compare the Holocaust to other genocides — which, of course,

we should do, because the purpose of comparison is to illuminate those similarities and differences, and also allows us to try to understand the similar or different processes that produced one genocide or another — we find not only similarities between the Holocaust and other genocides, but also differences.

The similarity is that, in each instance, one group of people sets out to slaughter an enormous number of people in another group. There is a common process at work: a state mobilizes people who have preexisting hatreds that remain more or less dormant until mobilized. And when the state mobilizes its hatreds and channels them in a genocidal direction, it turns out to be relatively easy to get the people who harbor these hatreds to carry out the genocidal orders. So, in all instances of genocide you have these two factors: preexisting hatreds in a state, and the enactment by the state of a program of extermination. This is what makes the Holocaust similar to other genocides.

But, in the same way that there are singular features of the Holocaust that differ from other genocides, there are other genocides with singular features that make them different from the Holocaust. The most striking, perhaps salient, feature that differentiates the Holocaust from other genocides is that it is the only instance, at least in modern times, where one group of people has set out to destroy another group of people completely, in toto, without exception — men, women and children. And to do so not just within their own country, but to seek them out across an entire continent. Ultimately, having conquered the world, they would have sought out the Jews across the globe — Jews who lived hundreds, thousands, of miles away, many of whom, in all likelihood, did not even know that Germany existed or knew very little about it .

So what makes the Holocaust unusual and gives it a singular quality is the comprehensiveness of the extermination program — that every Jew had to die; and the continent-wide reach of this program.

A second unusual feature of the Holocaust (although it has certain echoes in some other genocides) is that there was no objective basis for the enmity in

the conflict. What the Germans believed about Jews was really a complete fantasy. Jews harbored no ill will towards Germany. German-Jews were good Germans, they were loyal, they loved their country. And the Jews in other countries had no particular enmity toward Germany; in fact, many of the Eastern European Jews were Germanophiles. The desire to kill Jews was born purely out of a figment of the imagination.

In other genocides, there is typically some kind of objective, real, existing conflict that predates the genocidal onslaught. This does not make those genocides any more or any less justified; the killing is just as reprehensible. But analytically, sociologically, this differentiates the Holocaust from other genocides. There was absolutely no objective basis for the Germans hatred of Jews. This can only be explained by the long tradition of antisemitism that existed in Europe, with all its fantastical, hallucinatory notions about Jews that it imbued modern Germans with.

Q- Do you think the Holocaust is a modern phenomenon?

G- The story of humanity, of human history, can be told in a variety of ways. It can be told as a tale of progress, of technological development, of the growth of freedom, of the development of civilization and culture. It can also be told as a series of horrors. Most human societies, historically, have known the abomination of slavery. Killing people en masse, one group against another, is a relatively common occurrence. In most of the events in history where people have committed deeds that we consider to be great horrors — like slavery, genocide, mass slaughter — they have done so because they believe things about the victim groups that led them to the conclusion that it was right and necessary to kill, brutalize, or enslave the other peoples.

In this sense, the Holocaust is very much like many other historical horrors. The German perpetrators, as well as those in other countries, also believed that what they were doing was right and necessary. In this sense, the Holocaust was a very human event, brought about for many of the same

reasons. Still, it had its own particular features that led human beings historically to do these kinds of things. Perpetrating evil is a very common deed in human history. It is carried out by ordinary people, but is typically done because of the beliefs they have about the world.

The Holocaust as a Historical Turning Point

Q- Was the Holocaust a cultural turning point in western civilization?

G- The Holocaust has led many people to rethink fundamental notions they have about the world. It has had a profound impact on theology – Jewish theology and Christian theology; and in the Christian world it has led to extensive questioning of aspects of the Christian tradition that have helped to promote antisemitism. It has led philosophers, social theorists and other thinkers to rethink fundamental aspects of social organization, of the relationships between leaders and followers, the nature of authority, the nature of prejudice, and many other spheres and facets of our lives that are critical for our understanding of the world.

The Holocaust for many is quintessential, representing the greatest evil in human history. It is conceptualized as such, and is seen by many to be the most catastrophic event of the twentieth century, even of the modern era. So, of course, it has had a profound influence on the way intellectuals (and also many non-intellectuals) think about the world. Unfortunately however, even today it has not affected our political leaders, who seem to act not very differently when faced with genocidal onslaughts. The rest of the world did not do very much, did not do enough, to try to prevent (and then to intervene and to stop) the persecution and the extermination of the Jews. In many genocides and mass slaughters that have occurred since the Second World War, we find that the rest of the world has more or less stood by as it did then.

The nation-state is an egoistic entity; its leaders don't seem to lift a hand when people in other countries get killed. So, in this sense, not much learning

has occurred – or, at least, whatever learning has occurred has not been translated into political action of the kind that is necessary to prevent or to stop genocides from occurring.

There are, however, people who are sensitive and aware of the need to act politically — both in trying to prevent genocides from occurring and stop them when they occur — and others who work and agitate in order to try bring about appropriate political action. But, until now, they have not been entirely effective in swaying the political leaders of the world.

There is no doubt, therefore, that the Holocaust has led to a reconsideration of so many fundamental issues, on the part of so many people. There can also be no doubt that it has not led to a fundamental reorientation of the nature of politics as it is practiced around the world, though it has had some effect there. In this sense, certainly not enough has been learnt from the Holocaust, least of all the most fundamental things.

Q- From a Jewish point of view, the Shoah was certainly a demographic turning point, but in other spheres of Jewish history, did anything fundamental change afterwards — in American Jewry, in Zionism, and in the relationship between Jews and non-Jews?

G- Antisemitism has declined markedly in the western world, in the Christian world, since the Holocaust. And the obvious reason is because so many Christians saw the horrors and began to understand how antisemitism produced them. This is true for the Christian churches, the Catholic churches and the Protestant churches and their hierarchies. – And it is true not only for the official churches but also for lay people. There has been a fundamental rethinking of this enmity towards Jews with a concomitant decline in antisemitism, no place more than in Germany itself, where there has been not only a profound decline in antisemitism, but also a transformation. There are few in Germany today (even those who have an antipathy towards Jews) who believe that Jews are essentially devils in human form – that kind of Nazi-like

view that existed in Germany long before the Nazis came to power.

A learning has occurred as a consequence of the Holocaust, which makes the situation of Jews in the western world more secure than it has ever been. Today, Jews face less prejudice than they may have ever faced historically in those countries and their position is far more secure and far less threatened. Jews themselves feel far more secure and far less hated than did their fathers, their parents and their grandparents, and certainly their more-distant ancestors.

Q- Thank you very much.

Source: The Multimedia CD 'Eclipse Of Humanity', Yad Vashem, Jerusalem 2000.