

Interview With Professor David Bankier

Institute of Contemporary Jewry, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

December 17, 1997, Yad Vashem, Jerusalem

Interviewers: Amos Goldberg and Adi Gordon

Why the Germans?

Q- Was it chance that the Holocaust was perpetrated by the Germans, or was it connected to something more essential to Germany?

B- A country should be judged not only by what it does, but also by what it tolerates. This, I think, Kurt Tucholsky wrote to Zweig after the promulgation of the Nuremberg Laws. The specific conditions in Germany were such that, on the one hand, there was a very radical brand of antisemitism – people who were devoted to an antisemitic ideology and wanted to carry it out – and, on the other hand, a society that was extremely conducive to this sort of antisemitic activities.

Until about 1938, the German population also reaped the benefits of antisemitic measures, such as the Aryanization policy – the expropriation of Jewish property – or the removal of Jews from certain professions. After 1938, when it became a murderous policy, German society opted for acquiescence and silence. I don't know whether this could have occurred in other democratic societies – the coexistence of fanatic, radical antisemitism of one segment of the population with the acquiescence of the majority.

Q- Is it connected to German tradition?

B- I don't know if it has to do with a specific German tradition, but it is definitely related to the fact that this murderous brand of antisemitism probably existed more in Germany than in other western European countries. I am not saying, though, that the entire German society was antisemitic. Large segments of German society were "conventional antisemites," if you want to

put it this way. But there was a group of people who were much more than "conventional antisemites": They were interested in eliminating the Jews, perhaps deporting them from Europe, or sending them away to some island in the Pacific. Some even used the term "exterminating the Jews".

In the Weimar Republic in the 1920s, these kinds of radical antisemitic ideas were widespread among people who would later become members of the German elite – mainly students of law and medicine. This is what counts historically, that the elite appropriated these ideas and eventually tried to implement them.

Q- Why, in other places, did no such process develop?

B- This is very difficult to establish. Perhaps the attempt of German Jewry to integrate into German society and the way they did it, played a role: German Jews, more than Jews in other western European communities, tried to integrate into the surrounding society. Perhaps it also has to do with some structural processes of German history, different from those in England or in France. In France there was also radical antisemitism, but half the population tried to maintain the principles of the French Revolution: liberty, equality and fraternity. So, the policy of dissimilating Jews on the social level as well was not as harsh as it was in Germany.

Q- Can one speak of a particularly murderous German antisemitism?

B- I don't believe that there was an exterminationist antisemitism in Germany different from that in Austria, Russia, Rumania or Hungary. In all these countries, there was a certain percentage of the population dedicated to the removal of Jews from society, even in a murderous way. I must emphasize that this was a small proportion of the population (which I cannot quantify). Even in polls conducted after the war in places such as Austria, Germany, and Argentina on attitudes toward the Jews after the war, one finds a small percentage of people – I'd say between 5 and 10 percent – who had very

radical antisemitic attitudes. Given the proper conditions, and under certain historical circumstances, probably up to 10 percent of the population would have tried to execute this ideology. These were people obsessed with the Jews. It has to do with the culture of the western world, and the function the Jews fulfill in the mythology of people. A larger percentage consisted of those who endorsed classical, conventional antisemitism, that is, prejudice against the Jews, but no more than that.

Why the Jews?

Q- Why the Jews and not others?

B- Again, it was not merely a coincidence. Throughout the history of western civilization Jews had fulfilled this function of being the "anti-something" – anti-Christ, anti-culture, or anti-nation. In this sense, antisemitism was a transformation of the anti-Judaism that had previously existed. The Jews were seen as the embodiment of everything that is evil and that people abhorred and opposed.

Where modernity was concerned, the Jews were seen as the incarnation of modernity; if it was universalism, the Jews were seen as the incarnation of universalism. They were seen as the epitome of the devil, a demonic force. This is definitely rooted in the perception of the Jew in western civilization. This sort of antisemitism is not found in Africa, China, or Japan, or in places where Jews did not fulfill any function in popular mythology.

Q- Does Christianity or Christian tradition play any role in this matter?

B- Christianity has a very ambivalent attitude toward the Jews. On the one hand, it has all the myths of deicide – the Jews crucified Jesus, and so on. On the other hand, Christianity served as an obstacle to the extermination of the Jews, because (for its own reasons and its own needs) it forbade it. In Christianity, the Jews fulfill a very important role in the theology of salvation.

As long as Christianity was a dominant force in western civilization and ruled the minds of people, the physical existence of the Jews was assured – paradoxical as that may seem. There were pogroms in the Middle Ages, but never a Holocaust. The latter would never have been advocated by the elite of the Christian world, or by the popes. The Holocaust could only happen following the decline of Christianity, when the stumbling block that forbade the extermination of the Jews no longer existed, and other forces came to the fore. In this sense, all modern ideologies replaced the Christian religion; and Nazism is one of them.

German-Jewish Symbiosis

Q- Was the "German-Jewish symbiosis," as some later called it, a total illusion?

B- It never really existed. This was a love affair that only one partner was interested in and believed in. I don't think that the German partner in this German-Jewish symbiosis believed that there was such a union; it was definitely not interested in such a symbiosis. This was a delusion of the German Jews.

Q- Did this self-delusion blind the German Jews from seeing the prevailing reality?

B- To a certain extent, this self-delusion dazzled and blinded a small group. The majority of the Jews realized, very early on, that their dreams of integrating into German society were dashed, and that there was no way of achieving them after 1933. Small segments of German-Jewish society still maintained these dreams, but the numbers were so small that they didn't really count. The mainstream realized very early on – about two years after Hitler assumed power – that the 1,000-year history of Jews in Germany was over.

Q- So why didn't they emigrate?

B- First of all, there was the legal problem of obtaining a visa, and finding a haven that would take them in; this was followed by having to solve the economic problems of emigration. Given that one had to pay an exit tax, convert the mark, which was worthless, into hard currency – dollars or sterling – and deal with other technical problems, it was not easy. This dissuaded many of the Jews from leaving.

You also have to consider that, in the first few years of this regime, people could not foresee that it would become murderous. It was a type of fascist regime, and many of the Jews believed that some sort of arrangement, some accommodation, could be found. Many thought that with people like Goebbels or Streicher, nothing could be achieved, but there were other figures in Hitler's coalition with whom an arrangement could be reached to let the Jews stay in Germany – not along the terms of the old emancipation, but along those of a new emancipation. They actually called it the "zweite Emanzipation" [the "second emancipation"], whereby Jews would integrate into German society not as individuals, but as a group. German society would become a corporative state in which the Jews would have a place, like a corporation in the Middle Ages.

But again, all these illusions, so to speak, disappeared in 1938, when it became blatantly clear that there was no way they could remain there. In fact, when you look at the demographic composition of those Jews who remained in Germany after 1938, most of them were old, and there was no way for them to get a visa. The cost was outrageous: If you wanted to go to Haiti, you had to pay \$5,000. The Jews had no money at all at that time, due to the policy of Aryanization. So the answer to why they didn't leave is simple: There was nowhere to go; no one wanted them.

Hitler's Rise to Power - a Historical Coincidence?

Q- I want to return to Hitler's rise to power. Was this due to a local fusion of political intrigues and a constellation of circumstances in the thirties, or is it

connected to more long-standing and essential historical German processes stemming from World War I?

B- The concrete circumstances were that when Hitler took power, a deal was made between the radical right (Hitler and the Nazis) and the conservative right (Franz von Papen, Paul von Hindenburg, and others). The conservatives believed that Hitler would do something that they would not dare to do, or did not want to do – to openly destroy democracy – and later on, they would take over.

This did not come to be. What did eventually happen was that Hitler got rid of all those national conservatives who had helped him come to power. It was a simple constellation of forces that was a result of the situation in Germany in 1930-32, the last years of the Weimar Republic, and not really something that had to do with the German tradition of authoritarianism that goes back to Luther. I don't believe in these theories; they don't make any sense. They were developed by Robert Vansittart, by Edmond Vermeil and other historians, but they are groundless and without any validity.

Q- Is it not connected to World War I?

B- It had to do with the crises of Weimar and, to a certain extent, with the results of the First World War. The Weimar Republic was not liked by most of the Germans, and definitely not by the German elite; very few people were sorry that it collapsed. The army did not like Weimar, neither did the judiciary or the bureaucracy, and certainly not the students. The latter became Nazis very early on, in the early twenties, when the Nazi movement won the elections among the students.

Was the Weimar Republic Idealized?

Q- Are there any contemporary scholars who would claim something different concerning Weimar?

B- To a large extent Weimar was idealized by the many refugees from Nazi Germany who recollected how beautiful life had been there. Those Jews who fled the Third Reich and found refuge in Israel, America, or England remembered what they had liked about Weimar: the satirical cabarets, the sexual fever, etc. But most of the German population hated that. Peter Gay wrote about this in his a book "Weimar Culture - the Outsider as Insider". I think, however, that Jews never became insiders, even though they pretended to be, or thought they were.

People never asked what the religious persuasion of Socialist A. was, or of what origin was Communist B., or whether he had Catholic or Protestant roots – but everybody knew that Paul Hertz and Friedrich Stampfer were of Jewish origin. The Jewish lineage of prominent people was always emphasized, not only by the Nazis, but also by people in ones own party. This is another indication that the Jews were not insiders; when one is an insider, people don't ask where you came from, or what your religion is.

There is no comparison between the circulation of a left-wing publication like "Weltbuehne" and that of right-wing publications. "Weltbuehne" was read by only a few thousand, whereas the right-wing publications were read by hundreds of thousands. So you cannot always project the reality of these intellectual Jews in their milieu and say that all Germans were the same. Germans hated the fact that the Jews were involved in cabarets and in satires of German culture. The basis of this distortion about Weimar is that the Jews admired it and felt nostalgia, but most people did not.

Who Initiated the "Final Solution"?

Q- I'd like to move on to another topic. I want to ask about the "Final Solution." Was it formulated and stipulated from above, or was it ultimately the initiative of local ranks?

B- I think the policy toward the "Final Solution" was an interaction of both. There were impulses coming from the elite – from Hitler and Himmler and the

top party bureaucrats – to find a radical solution to the "Jewish question" by means of physical extermination. I have no doubt that in the years 1940-41, this sort of idea was circulating among the self-same elite, although it was not formulated in writing.

On the other hand, already existing were the circumstances and the contingencies: the overcrowding of the ghettos, the realities that grew with the starvation of the Jews in the ghettos. The Jews – as perceived in the mythomania of the Nazis – were always a danger. And since the army could not leave with its troops while their backs were to the Jews, they concentrated them.

So there were concrete problems with what was considered a hostile population – it had to be removed. Eventually, by 1941-42, these two factors converged – the impulses emanating from the leadership of the Reich towards the physical extermination, and the concrete problems confronted at the local level. This, I think, was how the "Final Solution" was born.

Q- To what extent was Hitler's role decisive in these processes?

B- Hitler's function was unequivocal here. Without him, there wouldn't have been a "Final Solution" of this ilk, and the Jews would perhaps have been deported from Germany. Had someone like Goering become the leader of Germany, he would have been satisfied with such an action – and no more. I think that trying to solve the problem of the territorial concentration of Jews via methods such as the Nisko Plan or the Madagascar Plan – which were failures – would have succeeded with any Nazi leader other than Hitler.

Speaking not only of the Nazis but of Hitler, it was absolutely obvious to him that no Jew could live in Europe. He would have accepted a deportation of Jews to Siberia or beyond the Arctic circle, which again means a "Final Solution." So in this sense, Hitler's role was decisive.

Q- Did he himself initiate or request investigating other methods?

B- Yes, as long as there was a possibility of reaching a peace agreement with the British, he endorsed or backed alternative solutions, mainly in the form of emigration. But it became clear, in 1941, that such an agreement would not be reached and that the British would not surrender; that the Americans would enter the war; and that there would be a war against the Russians. It would be a global war. And in such a war, from Hitler's point of view, there was no room for concessions on the "Jewish question." When he realized there was going to be a global war (and not just against France and Britain), the idea of a "Final Solution" crystallized.

Prior to that, Hitler had certainly toyed for years with the idea that the Jews had to disappear from Europe, but he had no clear plans or blueprint. Only when it became apparent that a global war was taking place, was he determined that the Jews had to disappear from the face of the earth.

The Bureaucrats and the "Final Solution"

Q- As for the bureaucrats who planned and carried out the "Final Solution" – what motivated them?

B- These were not merely bureaucrats who wanted to do a good job and get promoted. There were definitely elements of careerism and of solemnness in the execution of a job, but this could not be done without ideological fanaticism. There are limits to promoting one's career. Being ambitious at the expense of the lives of innocent people – of women and children – in no way justifies such behavior. It could perhaps be rationalized if one were to kill able-bodied men who could bear weapons and are considered potential partisans, but absolutely not when it means killing a child or an infant.

These ideological fanatics already existed as students in the Weimar Republic in the 1920s. If one got a job in the Einsatzgruppen, or as did Dr. Werner Best in the Gestapo, or as a doctor in a camp, or employment in the Euthanasia

Program, one simply executed what one believed; these were not merely bureaucrats.

Hitler's Willing Executioners

Q- What about the rank-and-file soldiers who actually did the shooting ?

B- They were trash of the sort that could be found anywhere; one didn't have to be German. The proportion of those who did the indiscriminate shooting in the East was 10:1 – for every 10 Ukrainians or Lithuanians, there was one German shooting Jews.

Q- Did the self-same murderers come from the lower stratum of society ?

B- Not necessarily. I don't know if anyone has conducted a sociological study of the executioners. We don't know much about, say, the Latvians who killed Jews: Were they radical students who went from place to place and shot the Jews, or are we talking about the riffraff of Latvian society? It is difficult to say without a study on this.

The German commanders, however, were not riffraff. Studies have been done on the composition of the leaders of the Einsatzkommandos and the Einsatzgruppen. These people grew up as German radicals, nationalists, and fanatic antisemites. Already in the 1920s ideas of physically eliminating the Jews from Europe had been developed. So when these people had an Einsatzgruppe under their command, they executed what they believed in.

Q- What was the public opinion in Germany during the various stages of the extermination of the Jews and the "Final Solution"?

B- In the first few years, as long as the payoff was worth it, the German population willingly collaborated with antisemitic policy. This is clear apropos the removal of Jews from the professions. When people knew, by 1933, that a

law banning Jews from being civil servants meant there would be enough openings for Germans, they collaborated.

There was definitely popular support for the racial legislation of 1935, because it installed law and order and it pacified the street. All the social turbulence – the demonstrations against the Jews, and the accusations of racial defilement – destabilized society. This was apart from the ideological element of the Jews finally being separated from the German nation. The fact that the Jews were never integrated was now formally established: The Jews do not belong; they belong to some sort of national minority, some ethnic racial minority, living in Germany. This is undoubtedly also the reason why the antisemitic policy of the Nazis and even the Aryanization in 1937-38 were supported.

The Nazis were very shrewd. They knew how to integrate the population into this criminal policy. For example, they allowed Jewish-owned property to be taken not only by the state, but mainly by individuals who also wanted to enjoy the antisemitic policy. If the Jews were forced to sell their property for a ridiculous sum, there would be enough people in the population ready to participate in this scheme. As long as the population had something to gain from the antisemitic policy, I definitely believe that most of them cooperated willfully in the elimination of Jews from the civil service and from the economy.

The problem started with the extermination of the Jews. I'm not sure whether the majority of the German population endorsed this policy. I would say that they did not, although it is certainly true that they were acquiescent, that they kept silent, and that they did not do anything about it.

Q- So why did they keep silent?

B- First of all, it was not taking place in Germany, but in the East.

Q- But they knew!

B- I would say that by 1943, most of the German population knew that the Jews were being exterminated in the East. They knew neither about the methods of killing, nor the numbers, but they knew that the SS was involved in the process of extermination. The Germans did not know how many Jews were being killed. They bandied about figures – say 300,000 – but they didn't, or couldn't, know. They couldn't have been privy to the method of killing: to know this, one had to be a member of the killing team. To be aware of the numbers, you had to be Dr. Richard Korherr, the SS statistician who compiled the numbers. An individual just knew that unspeakable atrocities were being committed against the Jews of the East; and that they were being gassed and shot.

Q- How can one be sure that they indeed knew?

B- I think enough research has been done; my own research was also in this field. If you check the files of the Secret Service regarding public attitudes during the years of the war, or if you read Allied reports of the debriefing of those who left Germany, it is clear that the German population knew what was going on.

I'll give you just one example. When someone from a neutral country (Bolivia, Argentina, or Turkey, for example) left Germany and reached a neutral country, and was interviewed by British or American intelligence, they were asked all sorts of questions – about the morale in Germany, about supplies, and also about the "Jewish question".

When it came to the "Jewish question," these foreigners (who had been living in Germany for whatever reason, be they doctors or engineers), said: "Well, everybody knows that the Jews are being exterminated in the East." So you can assume that if a foreigner in Berlin knew – someone who was not part of the society, someone to whom people would not confide this sort of taboo secret – then the ordinary German, who had relatives fighting in the East and

who had more interest in getting information on what was going on there, definitely knew.

Q- Why did they keep silent?

B- One couldn't have expected them to behave otherwise. They said that the extermination was taking place not in Germany, but in the East; it was not happening to Germans, but to Jews, to an outside group.

There was, however, a popular reaction against the Euthanasia Program, which is also understandable. First, because it was taking place against Germans. Second, the people who were sent to be gassed in the euthanasia installations were mentally or physically handicapped, or carried hereditary diseases. Thus every single individual was potentially a candidate to be murdered in the euthanasia program. It could have affected anyone. If you crossed the street and got run over by a car, and as a result you became a vegetable, you would be a candidate for euthanasia. A pregnant women could not know whether her child would be healthy or not. If, for example, she gave birth to a baby with Downs syndrome, that child became a candidate for euthanasia. Similarly with elderly parents: if they were to suffer from Alzheimers, they would become potential victims. Euthanasia could affect anyone. However, one would never become a Jew, so, if you would never become a Jew, it would not concern you. You would say, "Well, the Nazis have an obsession; I am not fully for it, but I will not risk my neck to do something against it".

Q- If so, then you concur with Daniel Goldhagens basic understanding that all those who murdered knew exactly what they were involved in?

B- I definitely do not agree with Christopher Browning that peer pressure motivated these people; there's a limit to this. I certainly agree with Daniel Goldhagen that people were aware of what they were doing and actually, to a certain extent, wanted to do it. They knew it was a dirty job that they would

have preferred giving to somebody else, but in executing it, they somehow "sacrificed themselves" for the nation, for its ideals, and for its future. I do not agree, however, that that was the mentality of 60 million Germans - this, I think, is nonsense.

Q- Is it connected to the fact that the Nazis changed their method of murder from shooting to gassing?

B- The change was to make it technically sophisticated, instead of having units to seek out the Jews and kill them, they had Jews coming to a killing center, which had been established specifically for their execution. It also had to do with the psychological effect of the killing, because, as I said, there were fanatics who wanted to do it. But they also realized that it was a dirty job and that they needed to get drunk to overcome the nightmares they suffered as a result of what they were doing.

It was not the situation of an executioner in Sing-Sing, whose job was merely to pull a lever to electrocute a condemned criminal. It was not a case of a person delegating responsibility to somebody else. Here, it was a daily job of killing children and women. There's no way of rationalizing it, despite the indoctrination that this was being done for the sake of the nation, for the future of ones children. It became a permanent job and not a one-day event like the My Lai massacre in Vietnam, so lots of vodka was needed for the soldiers. In order to overcome this, to neutralize the scruples and the possible pangs of conscience, and to separate the victim from the perpetrator, the method of gassing made it more sophisticated.

Q- Is there a direct connection between the concentration camps of the 1930s and the extermination camps of the forties?

B- Concerning the personnel and the regulations, it was the same camp. The camp that served in the 1930s for political prisoners later served as a slave-labor and extermination camp. The same people, the same commanders, like

Hoess and others, who received their training in the camps for political prisoners later served in other camps.

But apart from the numbers in places like Majdanek or Auschwitz there was a qualitative difference between the two. One was seen as a camp of detention and "reeducation," whereas the others were slave-labor and extermination centers.

Q- Could one sum up that these two are a development of the first?

B- Yes, definitely. The camps in the forties were a development of the camps in the thirties.

Q- I'd like to return to Hamburg's Battalion 101 of the German Order Police that was researched by Goldhagen and Browning. The battalion was not made up of SS men, and it seems they were not even intrinsic fanatics, yet they murdered. What does this say? Let me try and rephrase the question slightly: You claimed that there was no such thing as a German mentality, and yet these soldiers, who represented a wider stratum of German society, nevertheless murdered?

B- On the one hand, there was a stratum of fanatics who provided an ideological and very sophisticated justification for the murder. This was the level of Otto Ohlendorf, Werner Best, and the people who held high positions in the administration and the bureaucracy of the SS and who also became commanders of the Einsatzgruppen. But this was the intellectual fanatic. On the other hand, was the non-intellectual fanatic, a radical antisemite who believed that the Jews had to be eliminated, but who lacked the sophisticated intellectual rationalization as to why he did it. He served in the police force and knew that he had to execute the Jews because of his racial ideology. For him, the Jews were vermin.

Q- Was this group representative of the German nation?

B- I don't believe that 60 million Germans were dominated by this absurd, murderous idea, although there were segments that did believe in the physical extermination of the Jews.

Q- Doesn't Battalion 101 of the Order Police represent something much wider?

B- No, I don't think the ordinary German in this battalion represents the average German.

Viewing the Victims

Q- Again, I'd like to switch to another issue: How come the Jews in Europe didn't realize that something catastrophic was about to happen to them?

B- One could not forecast anything; people did not have a crystal ball to see what would happen in the future. They could only see the future based on their experience of the past. This was the only perspective they had. Since such a thing had never happened before – definitely not in the recent past (in the eighteenth, nineteenth, or twentieth century), and there hadn't been pogroms in civilized western Europe since the seventeenth century – why should people have imagined such a horrific reality?

Q -In what terms can one talk about the victim during the Holocaust period?

B- What is fascinating about this entire topic is the behavior of the perpetrator. Here you can ask the real questions on how it was humanly possible for a person to carry out these heinous deeds. In the case of the victim, however, I don't see any point in analyzing his behavior, because there were no choices, no alternatives. They were placed in this horrendous situation, with children, old parents and families, and it was like throwing someone in the sea and telling him, "OK, now start swimming." There's no island in the offing, but you swim and try to stay alive.

I think this was the situation of the Jews during the Second World War. The questions of why one didn't do this, or do that, are totally irrelevant. You can ask these sorts of questions about individuals who belonged to youth movements. Youngsters who joined youth movements consciously abandoned their parents. Being involved in clandestine activity, they couldn't work to support them. They knew their parents were condemned to death.

But you cannot ask a question such as "Why didn't you do this, or why didn't you do that?" to the ordinary Jew, who had children and a family to support, and old parents to look after. What did one expect of a victim, of an innocent individual, given the circumstances created by the Nazis?

The question pertains to those who had choices, who had alternatives: the perpetrator and the bystander you could ask questions; but victims didn't have choices.

Q- And the murderers always had the option of choice?

B- Of course, the perpetrators always had alternatives. I do not accept the view presented by Hans Mommsen, a formidable historian. I think he is totally wrong that people were not aware, that they were atoms in a totalitarian society. I do not believe this was a historical reality that ever existed. These people had choices, and they decided. They opted for this alternative, because they believed in what they were doing and were ideologically motivated to do it.

European "Bystanders"

Q- How did the Church in Germany and other places react to the Nazis ?

B- The Church behaved as a political institution. It understood that there were issues on which it was worthwhile trying to oppose the Nazis. This was the case with the removal of crucifixes from Catholic schools, and with euthanasia

as well. The Church knew that if it opposed the Nazi policy of removing the crucifixes from the schools, it would have the backing of the Catholic population. People would demonstrate in the streets, as actually happened in 1941, in wartime, against this regulation by the Gestapo. Likewise with the Euthanasia Program: The Church knew very well that if it were to protest on this issue, it would have the support of the German population in its anti-Nazi stand.

When it came to the "Jewish question," however, the Church knew very well it would have no support on that point, and that is why it did not protest. Here the Church acted as politicians, not as theologians. A politician will not engage in an issue that he is bound to lose. So the political calculation was that if they were going to lose this battle against the Nazis on the extermination of the Jews, they would not engage in it to begin with.

This was also the reasoning of other churches, including the Pope himself in Rome. I do not believe that Pope Pious XII was a fanatic antisemite of this sort; he was simply a coward. What was perhaps allowed to the Church on a local level was not permitted to its leader. He could not make political calculations such as, "If I have no popular support on a policy against the Nazis and the Jewish question, I will not engage in it." He was the Vicarius Christi, the representor of Jesus in this world, and as such, should have acted without any political considerations.

Q- Can we create a typology of those nations that saved Jews, and those that didn't? Why, for example, were the Jews saved in Bulgaria, but not in other places?

B- I do not believe in the notion of national characteristics; there is no such thing as the Germans, the Bulgarians, the Italians, and so on. There are individuals, and there are different cultures. The resistance to the extermination policy was not related to a national character, but to the time when this policy was executed. From 1943 onward, anybody could foresee

that the Germans were not going to win the war. People did not know whether the war would end with the total defeat of the Germans, or in a compromise of peace, but in any case it would not be won by Germany.

If the Germans were not going to win, there was no reason to willingly participate in a genocidal policy. Therefore, the Bulgarians decided in 1943 not to participate in such a policy. So also the Hungarians under Horthy, and the Rumanians – all of them "conventional" antisemites. Why would they do something genocidal without any gains? The prospects of a Nazi victory in 1943 were not those of 1941, when it was believed that Germany would win and would establish a European empire in which they would share in the spoils and there would have been some benefits from the policy.

Q- In Italy, for example, it seems that there was aid for the Jews from the first moment?

B- This was not tested in Italy. To begin with, fascism is not Nazism. For as long as Mussolini was in power, until July 1943, he applied antisemitic fascist, not Nazi, policy; and fascist politics did not include extermination. That policy started when the Germans took over in Italy.

All those attempts by the Italians to rescue the Jews in the occupied areas in France, in Yugoslavia, in Greece and in Northern Africa, had to do not with the more humanitarian stand of the Italian fascists, but with their national pride. They knew that, in their territory, the Germans would not tell them what to do. They were going to control the area, not apply a policy they didn't agree with.

The fascists were not humanitarians. They gassed the Ethiopians in the war in the thirties; and the Italians killed tens of thousands of Slovenes and kept them in concentration camps on the Adriatic Sea. Generals Roatta and Graziani, were war criminals. The fact that they were not put on trial after the war is connected to American policy after the Second World War, which was to pardon them because of the Cold War and to keep the government in Italy

stable. But by any criteria for war crimes, all those generals in Italy were also war criminals. They didn't kill Jews, but they did kill others.

So the resistance of the various countries in Europe to the Nazi extermination policy had to do with opportunism and not with any special humanitarian feeling in those countries.

Q- What motivated those who collaborated with the Germans?

B- The collaboration involved a wide spectrum of motivations. Some people were really motivated by careerism, and some identified with Nazi ideology. They simply were Nazis of French extraction, of Belgian extraction, of Norwegian extraction or whatever, but who believed in the Nazi ideology.

Q- Was there more collaboration with the Nazis in eastern Europe than in western Europe?

B- Yes, definitely. There was much more collaboration in the East, but this also had to do with the fact that these countries were under Bolshevik occupation, and the mythomania about the Jews identified with Bolshevism. Some of them regarded the Germans as liberators and not as occupiers: to the Lithuanians and the Ukrainians, the Germans were liberators; to a Frenchman, they were occupiers. So a different reality in the East motivated these people to collaborate with the Germans.

Q- Does the fact that the "Final Solution" took place in the East say anything about the nations of Eastern Europe?

B- No, it has to do with the concentration of Jews. Had there been a larger concentration of Jews in the Balkans, the extermination would have taken place there. Since most of the Jews were in Poland and Russia, the main killing centers were in those areas.

The (Non)-Bombing of Auschwitz

Q- I want to move on to a different subject. Why wasn't Auschwitz bombed?

B- The bombing of Auschwitz is a very controversial issue. Until David Wyman investigated this topic there was the conception that it could not be done. Studying the files of the American Air-Force, he showed that technically it could have been done; he passed a harsh judgment that it could have been executed technically, but the Americans did not want to do it.

New research has investigated not only whether Auschwitz could have been bombed from the point of view of the range of the planes, but also the accuracy of bombing in the Second World War; whether it could have been carried out from a military viewpoint, and not merely from a political one.

Differing views exist. There are those who say that it was not viable, that the accuracy was at best 50 percent in target bombing, and that carpet bombing was ineffective in dealing with a concentration camp. For sure, when the Allies wanted to do something in the Second World War, they invested time, money, and training. An example is the British decision to destroy the dams in Germany: They spent six months training their pilots, their dam-bombers, and finding a way of doing it – till they did it.

The same thing applied when they wanted to get rid of the "Tirpitz," a ship in one of the fjords in Norway that was holding up the convoys. The convoys from America could not reach Russia with supplies, because the "Tirpitz" was constantly ambushing them. The moment the British decided that this was a target that had to be bombed, they went to work. They dismantled the bombers, the Lancasters, and filled them to the brim with just fuel and bombs. They sent the bombers and finished off that ship.

But the question of the concentration camps was not considered on a par with either the "Tirpitz," or the dams of the Ruhr area; it was a very minor issue for the Americans and the British at the time.

Q- Why?

B- It was a humanitarian issue, and not a military one. In wartime, humanitarian issues don't count, unless someone applies some political pressure. At that time, the Jews had no government-in-exile in London, as did the Poles, the Dutch, the Belgians, and others. The Jews were simply a small minority without any political power; they could not simply ring up Churchill or Roosevelt and apply pressure to solve their particular problems.

Q- I have three questions within this context: What were the reactions around the world to the Nazi steps before the extermination of the Jews? When did the extermination of the Jews become known? And what were the reactions to this knowledge?

B- The antisemitic policy and the extermination policy were never issues for the Allies, and they played an absolutely marginal role in their anti-Nazi policy during the Second World War. The Allies behaved accordingly: Since it was a marginal issue, they invested no effort at all in dealing with it. The magnitude and the significance of what we today call the Holocaust was not realized at the time.

Q- Would you consider this a moral distortion?

B- I don't know if people who behave in this way are morally twisted. I think that this is how people behave. Look at the tragedies of other nations: Even today, look at the reaction of the British, as they continue selling arms to Indonesia which carried out a genocidal policy in East Timor. Or take Saddam Hussein: Before he got involved with the Americans and was attacked, he gassed the Kurds, and no one cared. Only when Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait, did America speak out about the gassing of the Kurds because of the U.S. interest in Kuwaiti oil. I don't know if this has to do with a moral twist, or

with Realpolitik, with how people behave in this world when it comes to politics

Q- Thank you very much.

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