

An Interview With Prof. James E. Young

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May 24, 1998, Yad Vashem, Jerusalem

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The Centrality of the Shoah

Q: How did the Shoah become so central in the conscience, in the memory, in the politics, in the discourse of Western civilization? Someone has calculated that more than 100 million people have died in political aggressions throughout this century. Why did this genocide gain such a centrality?

Y: First, the Shoah, that is the genocide of Jews, was recorded and documented extensively, unlike many other genocides. Jewish tradition is a written tradition, a literary tradition; the victims were very, very careful to leave behind as much paperwork, as much documentation, as possible. The Shoah entered narrative almost as it was unfolding. The Germans also did their part to make it a very well-documented genocide. The historical documentation was so complete that it couldn't avoid becoming a very material genocide; there were all kinds of evidence and proof.

Beyond that, it was instrumentalized almost immediately by various governments for all kinds of reasons. It was universalized, it was meant to become a lesson for all of humanity in many spheres. There was already an element, especially in Christian Western culture, of the Jew as a primary victim. This Christian culture was already in some ways martyrological and was all too receptive, I'm afraid, to a Jewish genocide — not because they really wanted it or liked it, but because they already had a vocabulary for talking about a Jewish genocide, already had a place for the massacre of Jews. Saul Friedlander has made clear that he regards Nazi antisemitism as a kind of redemptive antisemitism: It was believed that, in some ways, Christian Europe would be redeemed by this terrible Jewish genocide.

With the return to Israel after the war, the U.N. became an international platform for the first time. One of its initial tasks was to create a Jewish state, a home for the refugees. In this regard, the fathers of Zionism, the founders of the state, were quite clear in using the Shoah to generate sympathy in the U.N. for a state. They didn't have to apologize for doing it; it was clear that a state had been necessary, especially before the war. Now it was maybe too late, but it was better to have a state than not. So the Holocaust became part of the U.N. consciousness from the very beginning. The founding of the state is actually the founding of a kind of postwar consciousness in the U.N. For all these reasons, the Shoah simultaneously entered European, American, and international discourse at several levels.

Q: Over the last 10-15 years in Israel, as well as in the United States and in Europe, it appears that the Shoah has become very dominant, not only in politics, but also in philosophy, in culture, and in literature — and not only for the Jews.

Y: Yes, it has become the extreme example by which to measure various theories of culture — philosophical ones, religious ones; its become the example of radical evil for theologians; it has become the example of a radical breach of history, which historiography is now called upon to somehow mend or represent. And apropos literature and the arts, it has become a challenge for artists to somehow represent what is regarded as the unrepresentable. It's also true that the Holocaust has actually occasioned no new forms of art. In some ways, the Great War (WWI), which kicked off the modern era, was also regarded as unrepresentable, and yet it generated a whole genre of anti-representational art, anti-figurative art, and even abstract art. And it's probably no coincidence that abstraction actually really took hold after WWII as well.

I worry, though, that the Holocaust will become the only thing that a new generation (of American Jews and non-Jews), begins to know about Jewish history, and this is a problem. In the last 15 years or so, in America and

around the world, there has been a boom in Holocaust memorials and museums. Much of this is due to the survivors passing on, and wanting to leave some trace of their experience behind — some place where their children, and their children’s children, can commemorate and learn about the Holocaust. This is quite normal and quite healthy. But when it becomes all that a people knows about its past, and begins to displace, say, 1,000 years of Jewish life in Europe, or another 3,000 years of Jewish history altogether, it becomes a very unhealthy prison — by which we know our past and our identity only through suffering and victimization.

This creates what I’ve called in America a “culture of competing catastrophes,” in which every nation, every ethnic group, every minority, identifies as a people only in relationship to a vicariously remembered destruction. As the center of identity — be it African-American, Native-American, or Jewish-American — it plants the seed for a certain kind of limited and, I’m afraid, stultified identity; it plants the seed for a people that can’t grow beyond knowing itself only as a possibly victimized people.

It’s normal for the Holocaust to be remembered the way it is now by so many, but the potential exists for its being, in some ways, over-remembered or over-centralized as part of Jewish identity. Worse than this, if its the only thing that non-Jewish Americans know about Jewish history, then basically the Nazis will have won part of their war: They’ve left behind only a remnant of Jewish history by which 1,000 years of Jewish life in Europe will be remembered – and that would be a great shame.

Q: As you mentioned, many of the ethnic groups that form the American nation experienced long years of suffering. Can you then clarify why it was the Holocaust that became so central (and not only in America) when there were so many atrocities in Europe and in America? You hinted at the relationship between the Christian world and the Jewish world that made it such a metaphor. Why, towards the end of the 20th century, did this specific event — or non-event — become so central in Western civilization, become the

metaphor for catastrophe? In this regard, there are those who even claim that postmodernism emerged from this catastrophe.

Y: I wonder if it was due to an availability of images. Stalin's purges, and even the massacre and murder of Jews after WWI, and the Yiddish writers, all occurred under a regime that didn't allow this history to become part of an official past. The Cambodian massacres actually occurred in a place where Pol Pot ruled the landscape, ruled the countryside. It was only when the Vietnamese decided to intervene that we, in fact, had some giant record of the Cambodian massacres during the 70s. The rape of Nanking by the Japanese, even before WWII, occurred while the Japanese were still in control of their history. And the Japanese, just as they are very reluctant culturally to acknowledge their heroism, feel likewise about acknowledging their crimes — which is normal. Most cultures do not acknowledge their crimes as part of their reason for being.

But apropos the Holocaust, the victorious Allies could initially point to the genocide of the Jews as a major reason for entering the war — it somehow gave them moral authority — even though we know that, historically, none of the Allies really did enough to stop the Holocaust as it was unfolding. But afterwards, they could point to the Holocaust as the moral reason for entering the war and stopping Hitler. As if it were clear that they were right, and so had no doubts of their moral position.

Nuremberg also represented an opportunity to try the entire German hierarchy and nation. The Holocaust then became the focal point. As I understand it, it was when those films were screened at Nuremberg that it became clear what the fate of the arrested hierarchy would be. Apparently, even they more or less crumbled in the face of that barrage of images. Once these images were made public at Nuremberg, they became an integral part of how the world came to know WWII. There were so many images in WWI, but to know WWII only in the images of perfectly innocent victims then became the metaphor by which all innocence in the war would be known.

That's the irony, in a way, because in Poland afterwards, the images of innocent Poles being killed were often shaped around the images of Jewish genocide. The images of concentration camps, barbed wire, became those by which Poles knew their own persecution. Later on, even the anti-fascist, East-German government would begin to know itself in light of the persecution of Jews. Jews were regarded there first as anti-fascist, and second as Jews.

Again, why these images? In America, perhaps, there might be a cultural component in which images of death become quite commercial. They entered literature, film, art, and photography in a way that was revealing of the terror of the century, and also became something they could sell — too easily, in fact. I don't think we can divorce entertainment value, even perversely, from historical narrative; I'm afraid they got tangled up with each other towards the end of the century. I think all of these often-competing impulses generated the reasons for the Holocaust becoming such a metaphor.

The Americanization of the Shoah

Q: It seems that the Shoah has become interwoven into the American national myth or narrative to such an extent that a national museum has even been established in the middle of the Mall in Washington. This is very surprising, considering that the Shoah took place between Jews and Germans, on European soil, and America actually had little connection with these events. In addition, the Shoah seems to represent exactly the opposite of the optimistic American myth. How did it then come about that it achieved such centrality in the American national consciousness?

Y: The question of the Americanization of the Holocaust is excellent, and goes right to the heart of how the Holocaust entered American culture and history. Until the 60s, in fact, the official American line was that the Holocaust had nothing to do with American history or memory, and therefore was to be excluded from Americas story of itself. I tried to illustrate this in my book, in describing how the Warsaw Ghetto Resistance Organization had proposed

Nathan Rapoport's two monuments to New York City: one to the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising; and the other to Samuel Zygelbojm, the Polish Jewish leader who committed suicide during the war, in London, to draw attention to the plight of his fellow Jews in Poland.

When this was proposed in 1964 to the New York Arts Commission, it was rejected for several reasons: First, they said first it was too unaesthetic, too unappealing, too ugly a thing to put in Riverside Park (the designated site). Second, it was too depressing a subject for a nice American park; they didn't want people having to walk their dogs and to push their children in carriages past this monument to such a sad time. And third, they claimed, this wasn't an American experience or something that could be included as American history — New York's monuments were meant to commemorate only American history. This, of course, came as a shock to the survivors, who were new Americans and who were merely remembering the events in Europe that had driven them to American shores. They had to ask themselves, for the first time: "You mean American history includes only that which begins on American soil, and it cannot include the memory of immigrants, the memory of events that pushed immigrants to American shores?" The implied answer in 1964 was this: "Yes, American history begins here, and you are invited to leave your memories behind as you enter Ellis Island".

This changed with the advent of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington — and changed for very political reasons. It wasn't that America suddenly had become tolerant of immigrant memories, but that Jimmy Carter somehow needed to assuage fears among his Jewish constituency (in the wake of his sale of F-16 fighter planes to Saudi Arabia) that he did, in fact, remember the Jewish past. That he wasn't forgetting about his Jewish constituency, and so would do something as a gesture towards them, and proposed this U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum.

The government had to come up with a very good reason to justify its location on the Mall. It didn't say that this was part of American history, but it did

suggest that the Holocaust would counterpoint all those American ideals that, in fact, Americans had been fighting for during the war. That, by its opposite — that is, by the Holocaust — America would come to know itself that much better. This is actually exactly what happened on the Mall. One exits the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum and sees the Washington Monument on one side, and the Lincoln Memorial on the other. According to this particular formula, one sees all the great examples of American democracy, which will be that much starker, that much stronger to your eyes than they were before you entered.

Q: Does it work?

Y: It does, actually, for many Americans. Of course, the Americans see the Holocaust through the prism of democracy, through America's reasons for being. Americans are very proud that they somehow had anything to do with stopping the Holocaust. We know that the Americans liberated a mere handful of concentration camps — none of the real death camps, which were liberated by the Red Army — but this gave them a pride in being. That by getting to know something that happened in another place, to another people, they come to understand that these kinds of things could supposedly never happen in America. So it's a way for America to teach Americans about what has not happened here.

The great irony, of course, is that America does have some history like this that needs to be remembered — the enslavement of Africans on American soil, and the genocide of Native-Americans. In fact, now that the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum has been built, Native-Americans and African-Americans see very good reason to include museums of their own on the Mall, and that's exactly what will happen.

Q: Do you really think that this will happen?

Y: Yes. In the next few years, there will be a museum to African-American history on the Mall, and a museum to Native-American history just off the Mall — both of them a direct result of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum.

Q: In Toni Morrisons book “Beloved,” she opens with the dedication to 60 million or more Africans who were killed during the long history of slavery in America.

This seems to be an example of what you have called “competing narratives.” Do you think that the memory of the Shoah and the reactions that it evokes in America strengthens the rife ethnic tensions between the various groups?

Y: It was in the 60s that ethnic groups in America began to assert pride in ethnic identity. At the time, this was regarded as a great counterpoint to the American ideal of the melting pot. The melting pot in itself was a kind of myth, but a helpful one — it was a way to assimilate immigrants from many countries into America, so that they could become something called American. As we know, “American” is very much a matter of being ethnic American: Irish-American, Polish-American, German-American, Russian-American, Jewish-American, or African-American.

Among African-Americans, especially, who had been denigrated for so long (and it was such a painful history), there was a point where merely to be Black in America was a huge liability. In fact, until the 60s, there was legislated segregation in the south: Blacks couldn't go to certain places; they couldn't sit in certain sections on the buses; they couldn't attend certain schools or join specific clubs; and there was strict segregation. And to counteract this, there was now an assertion of Black pride — it wasn't bad to be Black, but good; and there was great beauty in being Black, it wasn't an ugly thing anymore. It was crucial for that assertion to be made, so that African-Americans could take the next step, and to throw this in the face of White Americans, who insisted on Black inferiority.

The antisemitism in America in the 60s did not exist in the same way that it did in the 40s, or the 50s, or the 30s. At just about this time, Jewish-Americans were tired of only being assimilated and becoming more WASP-like, and decided that it was actually okay to be Jewish. They actually took their cue from African-Americans. So after Black pride came Jewish pride, followed by a kind of upsurge in Chicano pride and Italian-American pride. The ethnic groups all began to assert their identities as ethnic groups first, and as Americans right alongside, parallel.

This did lead to a culture of “competing catastrophes,” in which one culture, one people, began to measure its suffering against that of another. In America, this is a very risky business in that the Holocaust, as the most recent catastrophe, is foremost in most Americans minds. Many African-Americans then began to resent the fact that, while Americans were busy remembering the mass murder of 6 million Jews, they basically forgot the American murder, or the overall dissolution of some (as they say) 60 million Africans brought here — the millions who died in mid-passage under really, really terrible conditions. And the dozens upon dozens of generations that were completely wiped out of history. Slavery existed for 300 years in America, completely unrecorded. If you add up the number of families, the children who were born into slavery and who died there, who were literally forbidden to tell their stories, forbidden to write — this is a history that has been completely lost. For good reason, African-Americans are resentful of the fact that we are constantly thinking of the Shoah, and never about this great massacre, this great enslavement, of Africans.

We are now at the point, I hope, of reconciling these. The point is not to compare, not to create a hierarchy of victims in America, but to create some bridge where Jewish-Americans can actually reach out and begin to understand African-American history and suffering. And look reciprocally to African-Americans to begin to understand, not as a possible “competing catastrophe,” their own catastrophe even better. This is an ideal; I'm not so sure well actually achieve it, but its better to go down this path of one people

trying to understand its catastrophe in life, and other peoples catastrophes, as opposed to excluding catastrophes from each other. But once you're sucked into creating a whole identity around suffering, you're going to go down this road of “competing catastrophes” — and nothing good will come of it.

Q: So you're not very optimistic?

Y: Not really.

Q: I want to ask one more question about this. You mentioned a contradiction, in which, as the Jewish congregation becomes stronger and stronger, and the ethnic identity becomes stronger and stronger, it uses the Shoah to fundamentally base its identity as a separate ethnic group. On the other hand, it has to be universalized in some way or another for it to be integrated into the American story.

Y: There's an essential tension between asserting the Holocaust as an essentially Jewish catastrophe and suggesting it as a universal model by which we might know the suffering of all people. And America is a universalizing place. For most Americans, the Jewish catastrophe is, in fact, a catastrophe for humanity. It is held up as the great, terrible example of ultimate intolerance and ultimate bigotry — because this means we don't have to hold up the ultimate example of slavery in American history .

So we can hold up the example of what the Germans did to the Jews in Europe 50 years ago, and not have to think about what Americans officially did to Africans here, on American soil, 100 years ago, and for the 200 years before that. But there is a tension between Jewish-Americans wanting to keep it a Jewish catastrophe and yet wanting to introduce it to America, so that Americans will understand it on other than Jewish terms. I suppose, in that tension, Jewish-Americans will never find a resolution.

I just hope that Americans — whether Jewish or non-Jewish — will come to the Holocaust to understand more about European history, about American history and immigrant history, and about Jewish history. If it becomes the only thing Americans know about 1,000 years of Jewish history in Europe, then the Nazis will have had their way. They will have succeeded not just in wiping out nearly 6 million European Jews, but also 1,000 years of memory of European Jewish history. (This was, in fact, part of the Nazi aim.) If they achieve this because Americans are too short-sighted, or because even Jewish-Americans want to know nothing else about their past except this destruction, then we will actually have completed the Nazis job for them.

Holocaust Monuments and Counter-Monuments

Q: Any monument that commemorates the Shoah has an intrinsic paradox. On the one hand, like any other monument, it tries to gain authority over memory, or even to control it; on the other hand, a monument to the Shoah, or one against the Nazis, opposes such an authoritarian way of thinking. In your research, where do you find sensitivity towards this problem?

Y: You are right. There's a post-WWII generation that sees the monument as an essentially totalitarian form of art or architecture. Its a big rock telling people what to think; its a big form that pretends to have a meaning, that sustains itself for eternity, that never changes over time, never evolves — it fixes history, it embalms or somehow stultifies it. And since totalitarian regimes, like the former Soviet Union and Nazi Germany, especially loved monuments, they built whole cultures around monumentality. Which is not to say that American democracy hasn't built a culture around monuments, as Greek democracy did. But once the monument has been used as the Nazis or Stalin did, it becomes a very suspicious form in the eyes of a generation that would like to commemorate the victims of totalitarianism, and are handed the forms of totalitarianism to do it.

For young German artists and architects in particular, there is an essential contradiction here. So they have begun to turn to forms which they believe

challenge the idea of monumentality, and have arrived at something I'd call the "counter-monumental," or the "counter-memorial" — the monument that disappears instead of standing for all time; that is built into the ground instead of above it; and that returns the burden of memory to those who come looking for it.

Q: Is this specific to Shoah memorials and to Germany?

Y: I've found that these memorial forms actually tend to rise in cultures that just are beginning to remember events in their history with which they have a great ambivalent relationship. In America, of course, the greatest counter-memorial would be Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans Memorial. In a city of tall, white, phallic monuments that celebrate democracy, she has designed, if you will, a feminine form — built into the earth, black, a negative form, in which you descend, rather than rise, to remember. This is a place where veterans come to remember their own, on the one hand. Where Americans can begin to remember their own very tortured relationship, both to those boys (59,000 Americans who died in Vietnam) and to the way that they received the veterans when they came back from Vietnam — very poorly. This was a war that America, in effect, lost; that Americans wanted to stop fighting for the last five or six years of its duration; that divided American society, probably irreparably; and that negatively affected the way in which America would fight wars thereafter. Maya Lin, in her genius, has made a form that reflects just this ambivalence, and this is why the monument has been so well embraced by everybody who visits it — both soldiers and the next generation.

The Germans had the same problem: how to reunite Berlin, say, on the bedrock memory of Germany's crimes. How does a nation of former perpetrators mourn its victims? These are two essential paradoxes that can't really be resolved in the monument. One of the results is that they've generated a counter-memorial architecture, a counter-memorial monumental art questions the premise of the monument, and doubts whether the monument could provide stable, eternal answers to memory. This suggests

that maybe Germany's relationship to Holocaust memory is going to be so tortured, isn't it really the relationship of a people that would like this memory to go away?

So how do you make a form that reflects this essential ambivalence toward the memory of your own crimes? The result is this generation of the Disappearing Monument in Harburg the invisible monument in Saarbruecken the photo installations of Berlin by the American artist Shimon Attie And perhaps Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum in Berlin will be the longest-lived example of counter-memorial architecture, in which he's designed a museum with voids built into it — six voids built into an architecture to remind everybody who enters that no matter what they see of Jewish history (as exhibited in this museum), its going to be disrupted, interrupted by the memory of the Holocaust. There's no such thing as telling a coherent story of German Jewish life anymore, but you're always going to have to build incoherence and disruption into this narrative. It's ongoing right now, and it's a fascinating form. I've spent a lot of time reflecting on it, and to me it's a very satisfying form.

Q: I recently visited Buchenwald, and I found it disturbing, in a way, to see that the artists or the people working there are more preoccupied with memory and commemoration than with the place itself and its history.

Y: Buchenwald used to be a site during East-German days, where they said it was only about Buchenwald. But even when they said it was only about what happened at Buchenwald, it was also about how the East-German government appropriated the history of Buchenwald for its own political ends. Now that Germany is reunited, Buchenwald is a place that's so self-conscious of its potential for being appropriated for political ends that it neutralizes itself — by calling attention to itself as a memory site, and not as a history site.

We can tell you what happened at Buchenwald by showing you the permanent exhibition of the events here between certain years, and telling you

why, and who did what to whom. But before you begin to remember and to instrumentalize, we want to warn you against that, at the same time. So it's a paralyzing self-consciousness, and maybe, especially at Buchenwald, it might be appropriate. I'm also a little troubled by a place that becomes so self-reflective that both memory and history are paralyzed. But for the time being, I think Buchenwald is going to have to work through this period of reunification. What does it mean now to remember not just what happened there between 1933 and 1945 (Buchenwald, I think, was the second concentration camp established, after Dachau), but what happened there just after the war — what did the Red Army and the Soviets do to former Socialists, even former Nazis, in and around Buchenwald? The history of Buchenwald as a site in Germany will now be told in continuum, and these years will not be isolated years only. And for better or for worse, the memory of this site during the Communist era will now become an object of fascination by the West once it has reunited itself with Buchenwald.

Q: I think that what Adi finds disturbing is that signifiers of memory become imprisoned in themselves and cannot represent or reflect history — which gets forgotten.

Y: I agree with you that it's a matter of memory being so self-conscious that it actually blocks history, or somehow occludes or forgets it. The ideal memorial at Buchenwald might make the continuum between what happened and how it gets remembered very clear; it's an access between history and memory. To make this access as clear as possible might be the museum directors aim. At this point, they're still quite obsessed with the ways that all memorial forms — even the exhibition — block out some history. Any memorial has to forget as much of history as it remembers, and probably forgets much more. I would also be troubled.

I haven't seen the new exhibition of Buchenwald. I know there are all kinds of memorial work, and artists working there to create memorials to the memorials; I understand there's even a memorial to the first memorial built

there by the prisoners at the time, by Horst Hoheisel. This is something we can always raise with them. In this case, there's a very smart director of Buchenwald. It's a very difficult political job, and I think he's trying to establish memory's role in getting back to history. Maybe he has to begin with memory, and eventually will work his way back to the events between 1933-1945.

Q: There's something very optimistic about counter-monuments, for example, the Disappearing Monument in Harburg where people of all opinions – even the most extreme opinion — are invited to express themselves on the monument and to be part of it. The assumption is that the dialogue, which will eventually emerge, will lead to a more humane and more anti-fascist society. But the fear exists of its leading to exactly the opposite.

Y: The fact is that the memorial has gone. And Jochen Gerz, the artist, does, in a way, want to kill the monument. He would like every memorial to return memory to those who come looking for it, which is a very optimistic point of view. But he honestly believes that memory is something that has to go on inside every individual, and can't pretend to go on in stones — in rocks, or even in concentration-camp sites. He would say (and I would agree) that in themselves, these sites are amnesiac. But then, when these sites are wiped out, or when the memorial itself disappears, to what extent is memory actually transferred back to those who come to remember, and to what extent is it blighted, is it blotted out altogether? This question Gerz would sustain, because he believes it's an important one for the next generation. But practically, if we want them to look at the landscape, a landscape of invisible monuments will also be one that demands people who know something. The question is if we will always know enough to bring our memory and history back to these sites. In 50 years, or in 100 years, I think this is doubtful.

Q: Do you see this kind of sensitivity in the United States and in Israel as well? In Boston, for example, you describe – in your book – a very interesting process leading to the erection of the monument.

Y: Yes, this is true. I think that the memorial process in Boston is finally more enlightening, if you will, and more effective as a memory act than the result. The survivors in Boston, and the visitors, are quite happy with the six glass pillars. I think they reflect very well, overall, the work of the architect, Saitowitz. They provide a certain architectural mediation between the glass office buildings on the one side and the old brick colonial buildings on the other. I personally would rather not see something that seems so literally to refer to chimneys or the number 6. But the public is instructed.

In Boston, they've also created a very clear narrative on what happened. The monument is located on the Freedom Trail. So the Boston lesson is this: "Here on the Freedom Trail, remember the consequences of a time when there was no freedom." So, again, it's a way of understanding American history, and understanding what happens when the principles we take for granted in America are absent.

The processes are always more interesting, finally, but communities are not convinced of this. It looks like a lot of dirty laundry getting aired. In Los Angeles, there were bitter fights between the two museums there: the Jewish Community Center (the Federation Museum, that is, the Martyrs Memorial Museum) and the Simon Wiesenthal Center. In San Francisco, the debate over the George Segal Monument was quite bitter. In New York, the debate over the Kahn Memorial, the Rapoport Memorial in 1964, and even the new museum in Battery Park has been quite bitter. Survivors are obviously quite embarrassed that this would become not a point of unification, but of division. And in Denver to this day, the Holocaust they built there, the Babi Yar Memorial, has caused so much bitter divisiveness that the community can't bring itself to go back there at all. So the process, healthy as it might be, if too difficult, can in fact take the place of memory altogether.

Q: I'd like you to reflect on Germany, Israel, and America. Whoever dealt with memory assumes that, apart from its role in perpetuation, it has a role to play

in forgetting. Within the framework of collective memory, what is forgotten in these three countries?

Y: Country by country, it is interesting. If America remembers the Holocaust through an American prism (that is, through the American soldiers liberation of a handful of camps), (Americans, on the whole, tend to forget the ghettoization process, the deportations, even the killing process; the image of the emaciated victims at the end of the war becomes all that they know. This comes to represent the entire Holocaust: The destruction of a culture, of a people, is somehow forgotten and pushed aside. The museum in America [in Washington] does briefly recall both Americas refusal to bomb Auschwitz, and America's quota on Jewish refugees; it does remember, in some ways, Americas limited role in somehow assisting the Germans in this way. But what is mostly forgotten are the 1,000 years of Jewish history, and the destruction process itself.

In Israel, for years, what was forgotten, really, was the martyrdom. This is what is mostly remembered nowadays, and the heroism has been slightly pushed aside. But for years, this was understandable: Those who proposed memorials and memorial days were often members of the former fighting organizations. When they went to remember the Jews of the Galut [literally, the Diaspora], they wanted to remember those who had resisted. I believe that, even in 1951, the first proposed name for Israel's Day of Remembrance was Yom ha-Mered ha-Ghettaot — Day of the Ghettos Uprising. I think it was only Mered (and not Uprisings), but a single uprising for all the ghettos, as if it happened on a single day. Only later was the addition of the Martyrs made, and eventually the day became known as the Day of Remembrance of the Holocaust and Heroism, together.

Only after the Eichmann Trial was the experience of the victims really brought into public consciousness. What is also forgotten in the Israeli narrative is that these events may be so terrible as not to be redeemable, and its understandable that Israel, in establishing itself on the memory of the victims,

suggests itself as a redemption, as a rebirth, of this terrible martyrdom. But it also suggests that in some ways, therefore, the Holocaust has been redeemed, that things have turned out okay, that the Holocaust had almost a “happy ending” because of the founding of the state. The birth of the State of Israel is, on the one hand, related to the Holocaust, but you don't want to make it a “happy ending”.

I would say that the Holocaust is irredeemable. Its easier to say, in establishing the Day of Remembrance of Israel's fallen soldiers [Yom ha-Zikaron] on the 4th of Iyar, the day before Independence Day, that the state is telling the parents of these soldiers, “Look, we put these days together so that you can mourn one moment and celebrate the next, so that you know why your sons have died. They have died so that Israel could be born, so that Israel exists, and as a government, that's really our job, to make that clear”.

But in the case of the Holocaust, do we want to make that link so explicit? It is implied in the narrative between Pessach and Yom ha-Atzmaut: Gods deliverance of the Jews, leading to the Jews deliverance of the Jews in the State of Israel, with Remembrance of Heroism and Martyrdom and the Remembrance of Israel's fallen soldiers, linking them, bound together. What gets forgotten is that there may be no ultimate transcendent meaning out of the Holocaust. It is made meaningful almost automatically in the calendar. But now in Israel, all of these parties are being remembered in very complex ways; I'm not too worried.

In Germany, there's a real threat that the Holocaust, once commemorated on a national level, will in some ways be laid to rest. I fear that, in Germany's National Memorial process, the governments main reason for creating a National Memorial to Europe's murdered Jews in Berlin is to put a great gravestone over the 20th century — so that Germany can move on to the 21st century unencumbered by its terrible past. If that were the truth, I'd rather not see a single memorial. And being involved with it now, actually, I have lots of questions to ask of the government in the process.

The Germans also tend to forget, in their memory of the Holocaust, just how Jewish was Germany, and German culture, before the war. With the advent of the Jewish Museum, this will now be returned to them. But in remembering the Holocaust only, they do tend to forget the great contributions, and that German culture essentially has Jewish components that have been completely wiped out.

Q: What about the Poles?

Y: They are still coming to terms with things. The question of Poland is probably more complicated than anywhere else. Poland has always seen itself, in Polish terms, as the “Christ among the nations,” and no matter what happens in Europe, it gets hit from all sides, from all directions; it is always squeezed. The Poles see themselves as the great martyred nation in Europe, and for good reason. And being part of a Catholic culture, they have a very good vocabulary for talking about themselves as the “Calvary of European culture.” When you take the ultimate martyr — even in Christian eyes — the Jewish people (which also obviously sees itself as the martyr of all the nations in Europe), and you put them together, they do tend to be “competing narratives”.

Until recently, not too many Poles actually knew the Jewish narrative of the Shoah there. They were told by the government what had happened to Poles in places like Auschwitz, Chelmno, Belzec — but that people died there as Poles and as Jews. But as Poles, they remembered them as Poles. Only recently has the Jewish story of the Holocaust entered Polish consciousness, and its being done very deliberately. Polish guides and historians are going to Israel, to America, to learn the Jewish story.

Conversely, we as Jews need to learn the Polish story, so that when we go back to places like Auschwitz, we don't transform the guides there into SS operatives. The Poles are not our captors, they're not keeping us there now,

but are trying to tell us the story. But I sometimes see Jewish tourist groups from America and from Israel going to Poland and venting great resentment against the Polish guides there. Somehow, in their minds, these camps are in Poland because the Poles established them, or because of Polish antisemitism, and not because the Germans put them there near large Jewish population concentrations. So these stories need to be told.

Actually, as much gets forgotten among Jewish tourists at Auschwitz as among Polish tourists. We somehow have to tell these stories on parallel tracks — so that we can understand the role Auschwitz plays in Polish consciousness, and the Poles can understand just what role the Jewish population of prewar Poland (10 or 11 percent) played in Polish culture, a figure which greatly surprises many Poles.

Remembering and Forgetting

Q: I have a general question now: In your first book, “Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust,” you claim that every testimony or narrative on the Shoah, in the final analysis, is a “detached floating sign,” which cannot directly reflect the writer and the reality in which he writes. Don't you think that such a kind of postmodern discourse that assumes, in one way or another, potent relativism, has the danger of trivializing or relativizing and even heading towards denial of the Holocaust?

Y: There's critique, a great backlash (and, in some cases, a deserved backlash) against postmodern jargon in particular. I tried not to burden that book with too much jargon, but to look at the ways in which the diarists in the ghetto, for exam, wrote their diaries: The event, their pen, their hand, the paper, were all connected at that moment. They, above all, were acutely aware of the painful realization that as soon as those pages left their hands, they could be used and abused by whoever got hold of them.

Elie Wiesel has said that one of his reasons for wanting to remain silent was his fear that whatever he wrote in the beginning would somehow come to take the place of the events, would displace reality. People would no longer think about the reality, but about only his books. And even worse, since no language would be adequate for the task, anything he said about the events would, in some ways, domesticate them, make them comprehensible, make them coherent in ways that they just weren't at the time. And that this would be misleading, as all literature or narrative is in some ways misleading. We can say that without saying, therefore, its irrelevant. We have to say that these things happened, and this is how we understand them now. We need to remember that interpretation doesn't just relativize events, but interpretations of the events of the Holocaust lead us now to respond to the world in very particular ways — just as interpretations of events, as they unfolded, led the victims to respond to their circumstances very, very specifically.

A diarist who wrote about events on a certain day often responded to events the next day in light of how he had understood and written about them the day before. There's a great agency in writing; it is not a relativizing activity, but one by which we come to understand the world around us. We don't want to make the object of study writing only, but we constantly have to look at the ways the diaries relayed events as they unfolded to understand the events themselves, even as we understand that we will never, thank God, know events directly. This is our great luxury, 50 years later, and we don't want to come to these for hard fact and reality only.

This is where Saul Friedlanders new work is so brilliant, when he asks: "What role does memory play for the historian? What role does the memory of the survivor play in telling Holocaust history?" Historians were the first to dismiss the memory of survivors as unreliable, claiming that they always got the names, the dates, the places, the chronology, and the sequence wrong. And that for real history, we have to go back to the documents, to the artifacts.

But in ignoring the survivor's voice, and the survivor's memory of events, historians often ignore why survivors responded as they did. To me, this removes a chunk of actual history. Part of the history of the Holocaust is, in fact, how people understood it at the moment — even when they misunderstood it. Even if they read events inaccurately, this conditioned them and led them to respond, and that is also a part of history. So I wouldn't want to divorce the event of the hour from the writing afterwards, and I actually don't see the writing as a self-contained system of signs. I see it as all we have, going back to reality. That part of the reality of the Holocaust is the things that came out of it — the diaries, the memoirs, and even the fiction and novels. It's our job as critically minded historians to distinguish very carefully between the forms, between the ways that a diary organizes memory in one way, and then more in another way, and film or photograph in yet a different way.

Have We Learned Anything?

Q: I have a “pedagogic” question: What moral lessons should be drawn from the Holocaust in the American context? The Holocaust, as much as it is a lesson for humanity, also causes divisions and competition between ethnic groups. To what ends do we remember the Holocaust? And personally, why do you teach it and write about it?

Y: I would hate to teach only to draw certain moral lessons from it. There are general lessons: What happens when we stand by and allow one group to do something to another group because it doesn't seem to involve us at the time. But these lessons are facile, because things haven't changed very much. The Holocaust has not really taught the world to get active. In fact, it has taught us to be slightly suspicious of memory for its own sake.

When Elie Wiesel was giving a speech at the dedication of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, he stopped in mid-sentence, turned to President Clinton,

and said: “But, Mr. President, I have to tell you that I can’t sleep at night for what my eyes have seen in Bosnia-Herzegovina). This was in April 1993, when the genocide of Bosnian Moslems was going on at full tilt). “And we must do something to stop this genocide, Mr. President.” And then he continued.

The camera then focused on President Clinton, who was quite moved by this appeal. During his election campaign, in fact, he had promised to do something about the genocide of Bosnian Moslems. In my mind I heard him say — and it was a terrible epiphany, it didn’t really happen — “But, Elie, I am doing something about the Bosnian Moslems; I’m here with you remembering the Holocaust.” At which point I just had this panic that we now really have it backwards: Instead of actually doing something about contemporary persecution, we were only remembering the past, which became a substitute of sorts for action.

This is a lesson to learn about what we do with the Holocaust. If it becomes self-involved, if it only becomes a matter of breast-beating, of commemorating only for itself, this is not why we have rituals for commemorating our lost, loved ones — and that’s normal. We do this because we have always maintained the memory of loved ones. But if that then becomes a substitute for rearing families, for having children, and for making a better life around us, it becomes a problem. I think the same can happen with Holocaust commemoration. It’s one lesson, a small one, but it’s something to keep in mind.

When students enroll now, I actually often ask them why they want to participate in my class on the Holocaust, and for 15 weeks read these diaries and memoirs, and talk about the history, think about the history. They all have different reasons: The Jewish students have motives to do with family and identity; with understanding Jewish history, and their place in European history; with why they’re now in America, while some of their family is in Israel.

The non-Jewish students represent a strange mix: They are usually interested in understanding the worst thing that human beings can do to others. So they've automatically universalized it. They know it's specifically a Jewish catastrophe, but they've had to remove it from an exclusive sphere and put it into the world. And then I ask them, "Well, why do you want to know what the worst thing is that human beings can do to others?" Their answer, often, is that because most art, literature, music, is about beauty, is only about the wonderful things human beings do. It's an illusion — and this is quite a savvy generation — to think that history is only full of humankind's accomplishments; this is also a kind of accomplishment. If we forget it, we're afraid that it might happen again. They are not concerned with it happening again to Jews, but with it's happening again to anybody.

Does that mean they will actually step in to prevent it from happening to Bosnians, or to Cambodians, or to the Vietnamese? I'm afraid it may not. In fact, it becomes only a spectacle of suffering for them. This question is still open. If it doesn't move us to act really concretely and politically; to bomb the Serbs in the act of killing Bosnian Moslems; to save the Vietnamese boat people; to intervene in Cambodia's problems, or in Rwanda's own internal mass murders — then, I'm afraid, it becomes a self-contained memory. It becomes a form not of remembering, but of forgetting. But it's very, very easy to say that we should be acting, and a very different thing to do, politically. We mustn't ignore the political realities on the ground as well.

Q: Thank you very much.

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