

An Interview With Professor Michael Marrus

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Was German Jewry Blind to its Fate?

Q- The first question concerns the German Jews and the Holocaust. Some people claim that they were too assimilated to grasp the roots of what was going on, and to understand that something had changed. Once Hitler came to power, they did not have the means or a way of reacting.

A- There are numerous assumptions and accusations about German Jews and their incapacity to understand the implications of the Hitler regime and the Nazi persecution of the Jews. I don't really accept these: that they were unable to understand the nature of the regime; that they failed to appreciate the strength of the anti-Jewish persecutions; that they were somehow blinded by their attachment to Germany, and unable to see what was in store.

No one could foresee what lay ahead. The conservative German politicians around Hitler believed that his regime would be a momentary episode, and that they could control him. Throughout Europe, none of the most experienced politicians and statesmen, or the most sensitized journalists, appreciated the direction the Nazi regime would take 76 that it would consolidate itself, and would strengthen Germany to the point of it being able to launch a world war.

Jews, of course, were divided. There were those who instantly sensed what lay ahead, but they were in the minority. Most German Jews reacted as did other Germans, by thinking that this was a momentary phenomenon, merely one episode in a turbulent decade. Little by little, as things worsened, their continual assumption was, generally speaking, that this was it: It wouldn't, and couldn't, get any worse. But, obviously, it did.

Q- What made them feel this way — that it would stop there and wouldn't get worse? Why didn't they understand that?

A- People react as do because of their experience. And the experience of the German Jews was the same as that of the Germans in general: Extremism was always a threat, but no one thought that this regime — headed by a political outsider, a kind of vulgar rabble-rouser — would become the center of gravity. This was, of course, part of the danger of modern politics. Very few people, except committed Nazis, believed that this regime could transform German society, and more importantly, could threaten to transform all of Europe, to create a kind of Nazi Utopia, via a world war. This was beyond the imagination of virtually every onlooker — not just the Jews, but even the most experienced politicians, businesspeople, statesmen, and journalists .

If one looks back to 1933, no one believed that this regime would have this capacity. It's wrong to blame German Jews, and to focus on them as being singularly blind to the future. Perhaps a few of the most politically mobilized people appreciated this.

To us, the persecution seemingly appears concentrated. If we look back to 1933, we can see that it took time — 1933, 1934, 1935. In 1935, there were still Jews who had positions of standing, who owned property, and who had something to lose in German society. It was very difficult for people to imagine that their world would be transformed overnight.

Jewish Resistance

Q- In what sense of the word can we talk about Jewish resistance, and what kind of resistance?

A- Apropos resistance, it depends on how one defines this. There is a spectrum of Jewish responses to the Holocaust, ranging from the most passive collapse before Nazi power, to armed resistance. The whole

challenge is to find where specific Jewish communities, Jewish groups, Jewish individuals, placed themselves along this continuum.

The resistance of ordinary civilians very frequently occurred under conditions not only of isolation, and where there were no weapons or resources for resistance, but also under circumstances in which they were systematically starved and brutalized — in which case, resistance was nearly impossible. But we are talking about the persecution and suppression of hundreds of thousands, even millions, of people across an entire continent. There were some situations in which the Jews were indeed able to gather their resources and to assemble the necessary means to resist.

I want to stress one thing about resistance, which it shares with all kinds of opposition, including conventional military opposition. It took time — to assemble resources, to organize the leadership, to plan, to discern the right moment to attack, and to gather information. And time was invariably what the Jews lacked. The Nazi apparatus came down very hard on the Jewish communities. In quick succession they were uprooted, moved from place to place, ghettoized, deported. In only a few, rare circumstances did the Jews have the time — and were able to survive long enough — to assemble the means by which to resist. Some examples are, obviously, in the Warsaw Ghetto; or sometimes in the forests of Belorussia; in Western Europe; or here and there in France, but these are exceptional episodes of a more conventional kind of resistance.

Employing any fair definition of resistance, it also occurred when people, using the meager resources at their disposal, decided to thwart the Nazi intentions by any number of means, for example, forging documents, or gathering groups together for short periods of time and hiding them wherever possible. In a sense, resistance can even include trying to communicate with the outside world. Think of an organization like Oneg Shabbat in the Warsaw Ghetto, where people tried to gather information about the conditions of Jews under Nazi persecution and smuggle it to the outside. When such information

was actually successfully smuggled to the West, to London, and they heard in Warsaw that news about their circumstances had been broadcast over the BBC, Emanuel Ringelblum wrote in his diary, in 1942: “We have struck a blow, we struck a great blow against Nazi Germany.” In his view, this was resistance.

Now, of course, more than half a century later, we know, truthfully speaking, that a blow was not struck against Nazi Germany; it easily survived this dissemination of information, because it was not utilized to relieve the circumstances of the Jews. Nevertheless, from the standpoint of those who risked their lives (and you must remember that they did), to get this information out of Warsaw was a form of resistance to which they dedicated themselves. So, I do not exclude this kind of activity from any definition of resistance.

Resistance is such a broadly gauged phenomenon; it involves all kinds of activities. One of the things that any study of the Holocaust requires of us, is to look at the intentions of those who engaged with their oppressors. We must not limit our thinking — as we are tempted to do — merely to conventional armed opposition.

Q- Would you consider the organizing of a concert in the ghetto to be a kind of resistance, or just a neutral response; or even something that blinded the Jews, who tried to normalize what could not be normalized, and then could not react properly?

A- An extraordinary phenomenon of the Holocaust is that under conditions of the most unbelievable deprivation, Jews gathered their resources in emotional, as well as in material, terms. Part of their emotional resources included a flowering of cultural activity, for example, the establishment of libraries, with a special celebration in the Lodz Ghetto, if I recall correctly, for the loaning of the 10,000th book.

In Theresienstadt, for example, there were musical productions, and an operetta was staged. Should one assess this kind of cultural activity held under conditions of extreme deprivation? I don't know if this was resistance or not (and I'm not concerned with defining it). They could either sink under the weight of oppression and deprivation, become demoralized and lose all sense of hope, or they could respond otherwise — by asserting not only their individuality, but their collective identities, by reaching out to something beyond themselves.

It is not for us to judge. I don't want to say that the Jews ought to have done one thing and not another. But we observe it, are in awe of it, are moved by it. Whether, in the end, we accord it the label of resistance or not, matters much less than, dare I say, standing in awe of people's capacity to assert a commitment to life and to something greater than themselves. When, insofar as most of us could imagine, we would simply have sunk under the weight of what they were experiencing.

Distress and Despair

Q- If one reads the diaries of people like Chaim Kaplan, Emanuel Ringelblum and Calel Perechodnik, one gets the impression of a lot of despair, which is not stressed enough in Holocaust research and memory. We get the image that, even though they lived under horrible conditions, they still somehow managed to survive, to have a cultural life, and even to flourish.

A- There may be an illusion here, because, after all, we are reading the works of those who were able to garner enough strength and resources to put something on paper. Most people did not put anything on paper, and many did sink. Let us not forget this, as we stand in respect and awe of those who were able, even momentarily, to rise above terrible conditions and deprivation and to leave us some expression of creativity. Many simply sank into despair, passivity, and oblivion in the end, and perished — died of starvation, without, for example, having these kinds of creative moments or interludes.

If we read these diaries attentively — say, from Kaplan to Perechodnik — there is quite a range of expression and of reaction. I am impressed by this range and by the way in which people were sometimes able to find moments to think of something other than the horrors that they saw all around them. But this was not a fair selection of the entire gamut of the Jewish experience, because many were not able to express themselves at all.

Q- How would you define the social relationships in the ghettos (both large and small), taking into consideration the extreme tension between the poor and the so-called rich, the neglect of the deportees crowded into the ghettos. Yet on the other hand, the opposite existed, in the form of “self-help” groups, mass kitchens, and other such frameworks.

A- It is very important that we not romanticize the circumstances of the Jews in the ghettos. It's a challenge for those of us who studied the Holocaust more generally. It is vital to acknowledge that there was extraordinary diversity and a range of activity. One must appreciate that not only was there solidarity, collective aspiration and communal activity, but there were also divisions.

There were class divisions as well as national divisions, which is to say, German Jews packed into ghettos where formerly Polish Jews had been concentrated together. There were the newly uprooted versus the longer-established Jews in these ghettoized environments and in the camps. We shouldn't assume that all of these Jews acted harmoniously together. These were ordinary people without any preparation whatsoever for the catastrophic circumstances they faced. So there were ordinary, petty human jealousies, and hatreds, rivalries and envy, together with the most noble of human aspirations — all mixed in together.

Judenraete

Q- Raul Hilberg criticized the Judenraete for cooperating — at least collaborating, if not cooperating — with the Nazis. What is your opinion of the Jewish leadership during the Holocaust?

A- We should only generalize with a great deal of caution. The leadership of the ghettos, the heads of the Judenraete, were utterly unprepared for the kind of catastrophic circumstances they faced. Remember that these were Jewish organizations established at the behest, and on the demand, of the Nazis who, at gunpoint, required people to assume these positions in most cases. The kind of blackmail that these Jewish leaders faced is something scarcely imaginable today.

These were hardly Jewish leaders acting under conventional circumstances of leadership. If you take a man like Adam Czerniakow, one finds a person of relatively limited horizons. Someone who was used to thinking bureaucratically, and who, I think, was responding in what we would call a normal way, namely, how they could make things a little bit better — how to preserve the meager resources they had, be it medical facilities, food provisions, or sanitary conditions. The normal human response was to try to protect the minimum of conditions for life. Let us remember that the sense that all of this was an exercise doomed to failure – this is our understanding. From where those leaders sat, there was some reason to believe, and to hope, that if they could hang on for a certain period of time, they might be able to deliver alive these small communities at the end of the war. It only became progressively evident to some of them that they were hardly going to be able to save anyone at all.

This consciousness seems to have dawned on different leaders at different moments. Adam Czerniakow, the head of the Judenrat in Warsaw, realized this, of course, in the summer of 1942 — specifically, the demand made on him by the Nazis that he preside over the deportation of Jewish children. It was at that point that Czerniakow snapped and that he poisoned himself. Should he have behaved otherwise? Should he have had a clearer sense beforehand of what lay ahead? Should he have devoted more attention to Jewish resistance? All of these are questions that we ask ourselves about him now, and, to be fair, a handful of Jewish resisters put to him at the time, albeit not directly.

What we do now as historians is try to look back at that situation and imagine what those people experienced then, what they were thinking. In a few remarkable cases you find Jewish leaders — such as Chaim Rumkowski in Lodz — who seem to have been deformed by these catastrophic circumstances into believing that they were there specifically to be the salvation of their communities; that they alone were the instruments by which those Jewish communities were going to be able to survive. They seemed almost intoxicated by this sense of being irreplaceable, by their own capacity to be the saviors of their community, and they became increasingly dictatorial. They confused their own abilities, their own capacities, and their own positions with those of their communities. In the end, they too succumbed and were ultimately murdered by the Nazis.

But let us make an effort and imagine how things looked from their standpoint. It obviously seemed so utterly irrational. Why should the Nazis devote precious energy, in wartime, to the extinction of an entire community, such as the Lodz Ghetto? Why not put the Jews to work? Why not allow them to work to serve the Nazi war machine? Wouldn't this be more reasonable? Wouldn't this make sense? People did not easily assume that this entire murderous apparatus was essentially an irrational fantasy on the part of the Nazis. Their assumption was rather that, if the communities could be productive; if they could be allowed to work for the Nazi war machine; if they could produce to help the Wehrmacht in its struggle against the Red Army, then they could survive. To many Jewish leaders, this seemed to be a rational solution.

Q- But some leaders, such as that of Vilna and Lodz, sent the Jewish policemen to round up the Jews and send them to deportation.

A- As Hannah Arendt wrote, the darkest chapter in the history of the Holocaust is perhaps the involvement of particular Jewish groups and individuals in the destruction process, which of course happened. It was part of the horror of the Nazi machinery of destruction — as Raul Hilberg refers to

it — that not only involved the mobilization of collaborators and perpetrators, but also of elements of the victimized community itself, which is to say that the Jews were enticed into the destructive process.

This happened in part through trickery (the Jews did not always know that they were doing this) and partly through bribery and threats (people were told that they could save themselves and perhaps also their families). Ordinary cowardice, and the belief on the part of some of the people that they were saving themselves, also came into play. This almost always proved to be an illusion; they did not save themselves.

Looking back, what can one say? Did everyone behave heroically? Of course not. Did some people behave as now we hope that we would not have behaved? Of course, this is true as well. It was part of a vast European enterprise, in which the Jews were, for the most part, utterly helpless.

As a historian spanning this whole process, seeing the Jewish police and the Kapos in the camps, the Jews behaved no differently from other communities where you find this massive victimization. I don't think that there is anything unusual about this process. This is what happens when civilian communities are victimized in this particular way: You find a range of reactions and experiences.

The Reaction of Western European Jews

Q- I want to ask you about the Jewish reaction. Was there a difference between the Eastern European reaction and that of the Western Central Europeans? And if so, how do you, in the final analysis, understand this difference in light of the Nazi occupation in the East and in the West?

A- Concerning the victimization across Europe, there is an appreciable difference between East and West. In the East, the arrival of the German troops and police was invariably accompanied by massacres, by the rounding-up of entire communities, by the herding of people into ghettos. There was

killing, and often in the most horrible way — entire communities, and not just selected victims. There was, of course, a massive assault in 1939, but in 1941 the level of massacre was simply unprecedented and unbelievable.

Circumstances were very different in the West. When one thinks of Holland, Belgium, and France; when one thinks of what happened to Italian Jews, there one found a process of incremental assault (if I can put it this way), whereby persecution began in a legal fashion. There was a series of legal restrictions of sorts, which gradually intensified. Jewish property was taken away, followed by more restrictions. At any point along the way, however, it was very difficult for the Jews in Western Europe to understand where all of this was heading.

Even when rumors began to circulate about the terrible events in the East, people tended to think of this as something that would only happen to others, perhaps to Jews in Eastern Europe, but not to them. Or, that would happen to German Jews, or to foreign Jews. This was an important distinction, between native citizens and refugees, which operated in most West European countries. Refugees would perhaps be sent back to the places of origin, but let us remember there were often divisions (and they were sometimes bitter) between, say, native French Jews and foreign Jews — the former often assuming that the persecution was due to the arrival of the latter. Of course, the persecution did not stop at foreign Jews, but extended to native French Jews as well. And likewise with the deportations.

The dawning of a consciousness of where it was all heading was a slow process, and it varied by individual. You had a leader in France like Raymond Raoul Lambert as head of the UGIF, the officially approved organization for French Jews — the Judenrat, so to speak, although one hesitates to use that term — who did not really believe that all of this would end up with the deportation of native Jews from France to the gas chambers in the East.

Again, this was a consciousness that only dawned slowly on some. Even people who were deported in 1943 and 1944 very often had no clear sense of what was meant by deportation. They knew they were going to the East, and would be put to work under conditions of forced labor. The common assumption was that it would be very hard, but that they would survive. The Jews in Eastern Europe, seeing death and destruction all around them, and the murderous impact of Nazism, had a very different experience, and so drew different conclusions from it.

Q- A summarizing question: In evaluating the range of responses, did the Jews react differently from other communities victimized by the Nazis?

A- This is a very difficult question to answer, because of the differences in the kinds of victimization usually observed. Jews were singled out in a way that was unique across occupied Europe. There are cases in which entire communities of civilians were massacred. Remember that these in the end amounted to many hundreds of thousands, that is, inclusive of men, women, and children — everyone massacred. But, after all, this occurred regularly to Jews in Eastern Europe, and not to communities of other nationalities.

The circumstances of the Jews usually differed from those of non-Jews. I don't see any outstanding characteristics of a Jewish response, and my sense is that Jews responded as civilians usually respond — by merely using the resources at their disposal and trying to do what they could.

The European “Bystanders”

Q- I'd like to move on now to another topic. In what way, in what measure, would you say that the European nations helped the Nazis perpetrate the Holocaust, or in what sense did they prevent it or try to help the Jews? Can you build some kind of socio-cultural model to explain, for example, why the Jews in Denmark were saved, while most of the Dutch Jews were murdered?

A- First, considering the panorama of states in Europe occupied by Nazi Germany and the fate of the Jews there, there was an extraordinary variation. In some instances, Jews were saved — in a minority of cases, by the collective exertions of large numbers of people. The most obvious examples are Denmark and Italy, and in a sense, the local Jews in Bulgaria (though one must not forget that the Jews of Macedonia were deported with the agreement of the Bulgarians). Then there are other instances in which collaborationist regimes independently launched their own anti-Jewish persecution, with a great deal of energy and without any prompting by the Germans to launch these homemade persecutions.

How can one distinguish between one set of circumstances and another? How can one explain what happened? In each case, the explanation lies in the local environment, in the specific mix of national traditions, and also in the particular circumstances of occupation. Take Denmark, for example: In 1940, it surrendered practically without firing a shot. For three years, the Danes lived under a kind of German occupation and were extraordinarily privileged. Denmark was the “marble protectorate” of the Third Reich, and the Danes were allowed not only their own civil service, but also their own government.

Suddenly, in 1943, Nazi Germany cracked down on Denmark and not only launched a program for the deportation of Danish Jews, but the government clamped down on the entire society. The entire occupation regime was transformed. There were also deep divisions in the occupation hierarchy, so information was leaked to the wider Danish community, and so on. Particular circumstances were created under which the Danish resistance was able to smuggle Jews to safety in nearby Sweden. Geographic circumstances also come into play here: the fact that the Jews were concentrated in Copenhagen; that there was only a small, narrow body of water across which Jews could proceed to Sweden, a neutral country that was then prepared to welcome a few thousand Jews.

There were particular circumstances in place there, which were not to be found in other countries — circumstances that were created historically, and not only by national traditions. These national traditions, these liberal aspirations, are important, but they were only able to come into play historically because certain conditions were right.

Each European country was like a kaleidoscope: turn the instrument and a different configuration suddenly appeared before you. In the case of Italy, there was a different set of circumstances. By 1942, it was war-weary, a country in which the population had never gotten along with Nazi Germany; had never shared the German aspirations for racial superiority, celebrating the tall, blond, blue-eyed Aryan. How could Italians identify with that? You find a division that existed as part of the basic interaction between Germans and Italians. I accept that there were certain national traditions that came into play, a kind of Italian civility that some writers have identified. This was not the only thing that impacted on the situation; you had a particular set of conditions that was very important.

Q- How do you view the motivation to cooperate or not in helping the Jews? What motivated institutions or individuals to cooperate with the Nazis, specifically concerning the whole “Jewish Question?”

A- Throughout Europe, the motivation of the leaders of collaborationist governments, as well as institutions within those governments, varied enormously. In France, there were national motivations and aspirations. The French antisemites, who had their own anti-Jewish agenda, were simultaneously anti-German, and wanted nothing more than to get the Germans out of the country, to reunify France, and to restore French national independence.

These leaders had their own anti-Jewish objective — it didn't extend to murder, but, in practical terms, involved the limitation and marginalization of Jewish communities — which involved the important distinction often made in

occupied Europe between Jews who were French citizens and Jews who were foreigners. So these nationalist leaders launched their own forms of persecution, which, it so turned out, ultimately assisted the Nazis in their European-wide objectives concerning the Jews. The rounding-up and murder of Jews wherever they could be found was purely a Nazi aspiration.

In practical terms, you find across Europe various kinds of collaborationist leaders who ultimately assisted that process, that European wide process, because they had their own particular agendas that operated on a much more limited scale. Operated on the national scale.

It is critical, in contemplating the Holocaust, to remember that there were variations, distinctions, and differences among these leaders. Many of them stopped at various points along the way, because, nationalist and antisemite and limited though they were, they nevertheless drew the line at murder .

Take the case of the nationalist leader General Francisco Franco, who was not a collaborator but was neutral, and who had his own objectives, as far as a fascist Spain was concerned. For a long period, he banked on a German victory: He assumed that the Germans would dominate a Europe in which the English would ultimately be defeated, in which the Communists would be held at bay. As far as he was concerned, all of this was wonderful.

But the idea of sending Jews from Spain, Jews who had entered Spain illegally, to Eastern Europe to murder them, did not, however, sit well with Franco. This was not something consistent with Spanish aspirations.

Another example is Admiral Miklos Horthy, the regent of Hungary, the Hungarian head of state. He, as well as people in his entourage, was perfectly happy to see the Jews of Hungary marginalized, robbed of their possessions, concentrated in particular locations, and mobilized for forced labor. But the idea of sending Hungarian Jews out of Hungary to be murdered was not something that accorded well with Hungarian national aspirations. The regime, antisemitic as it was, was not prepared to contemplate this.

As a result, from 1940 through 1943, and even into 1944, the Hungarian regime did not assist in the process of the “Final Solution” by allowing Hungarian Jews to be deported. Only with the collapse of the Horthy regime, and the occupation of Hungary in the spring of 1944, was the “Final Solution” launched there.

So it was too with Antonescu in Romania, as well as throughout Europe. This was certainly the case with Pierre Laval in France. These leaders were not murderers, committed as they were to antisemitic persecution, to Aryanization, to ridding the country of an unwanted Jewish population. The process of mass murder in Europe was a Nazi project, idea, and inspiration.

The idea that the whole of Europe could be transformed according to a particular Nazi blueprint was a nationalist, socialist project that had its own history, mainspring, and dynamic. What was so extraordinary about the Holocaust was that this Nazi program operated with the assistance and collaboration of all kinds of elements in Europe. Seeing the coordination of these instruments of government and leadership is essentially the history of the Holocaust itself, and explains how the Nazis were able to do it.

Looking back, as historians must, I guess one is “impressed” with the limited means that Nazi Germany had at its disposal. By using those means alone, the destruction could never have reached the degree or level that it did. The Nazis needed help everywhere — albeit sometimes more, and sometimes less. The history of the Holocaust is that of the process by which the Nazis secured this aid: sometimes by trickery; sometimes by enticement; or the brutalization of local populations; or, the encouragement afforded to specific, collaborationist elements.

The Vatican and the Pope

Q- What about the Pope: Was he always silent?

A- The first thing to remember about the Vatican is that it was neutral. The Vatican's view when war broke out in 1939 was that it was a catastrophe for Europe. War involved a threat to the Catholic Church, due simply to the destruction that would be unleashed.

Remember that when the war broke out, the Soviet Union was in alliance with Nazi Germany. The Vatican wondered if the Soviet Union, the center of godless atheism, would dominate all of Europe, or if the Western democracies (which, in turn, were considered places in which the hold of the Catholic Church was weakening dramatically) would triumph.

Wherever the Vatican looked, it saw an alternative that seemed worse. It made an effort to try to prevent the conflict from spreading, to use its influence to bring the war to an end, and to try to survive as best it could. Remember that this Vatican was in the center of fascist Italy, that it was situated in Rome itself, the capital of Italy. When the war broke out, the Vatican was immediately cut off and isolated from the outside.

The Vatican reacted to the persecution of the Jews as merely one episode of the horrors of war. It had no special affection for the Jews, and was certainly not disposed to risk itself for them. By the way, when the war broke out, and when the Germans attacked Poland, there were Polish clerics who pleaded with the Vatican to protest the Nazi attack on the Polish church. Remember, that in 1939, it seemed dramatic. Yes, the Jews were being victimized, but much more important to the Vatican was the victimization of the Polish church; and again it did not protest.

Similarly, the Vatican did not protest when some of its vital commitments, some of its positions, much of the nucleus of Catholic theology were being trampled upon. It didn't condemn the Euthanasia Program, although it did encourage protests by local clerics under certain circumstances. Again, the Vatican was neutral.

As the war progressed, there was a flow of information. There is no doubt in my mind that the Vatican had full knowledge of what was happening to the Jews in Eastern Europe. But this knowledge was not utilized as a springboard for action. The flow of information built up in 1942, and in the second half of that year, there was an intensification of appeals to the Vatican by the diplomatic corps, specifically to intervene on behalf of the persecuted European Jews and to denounce the murderous assault on them. Of course, the Vatican reacted in the most bureaucratic and dilatory fashion. It issued a statement in its Christmas message of 1942, in language encrusted with statements that, to us, obscured any clear message. Although, in fairness, this was the way the Vatican tended to speak about virtually every issue it addressed.

When one looks at the statements of the Vatican during the war, these appear to be statements of a neutral power, attempting to preserve its cap to speak for as long as it could, to the various parties. From the Vatican standpoint, the war was not a clear case of good against evil. When the Germans attacked the Soviet Union, this even complicated things as far as the Vatican was concerned. Were Nazi Germany to triumph in Europe, this would not be good news for the Catholic Church; were the Soviet Union to triumph, neither would that be good news. So, to try to preserve as much as it could, the Vatican persisted in its policies of neutrality.

The Jews represented a very small segment of the overall picture, part of which was affected by a long-standing tradition of Catholic anti-Judaism. I wouldn't say antisemitism, because I don't see the Vatican sharing the kind of antisemitic goals, ideologies, and aspirations found in Nazi Germany and other collaborationist societies. A very serious question is if this affected the views of the Pope himself and those close to him. I think there is plenty of evidence that it did, but this was certainly not the only factor at work.

Q- Do you think that, to the Vatican, politics was more important than moral values?

A- I think we fail to understand the Vatican as a state-like institution. Vatican policy was directed toward the principal objectives of maintaining and protecting the resources of the Catholic Church, and its capacity to survive in war-torn Europe.

Remember that the Vatican was in the center of Rome, surrounded by the fascist regime, which was able, at any moment, to shut off the water and electricity and move into the Vatican. This would have meant no more independence of the Catholic Church, no more Catholic Church leadership at all. This was actually contemplated at specific moments by Mussolini's entourage and by Mussolini himself. The Vatican was unsure what effect protest would have — not just against the persecution of Jews, but against various things which it wanted to protest.

Like every neutral body in wartime politics, constant calculations were made about the effect of various activities, and this was the key. The Vatican's objective was to preserve what could be preserved, to protect the higher good, to strengthen the capacity to survive. Looking back now on those decisions taken by various neutrals, and making our calculations based on our vantage point of the 90s, is mistaken. To fully understand their responses, one has to consider how things looked in wartime.

This is not to say that moral considerations, idealistic aspirations, were entirely absent, or should have been. The “should-have-beens,” I leave to the moralists. But I want to underscore that, at the time, the leaders of the day thought that these kinds of moral and idealistic considerations had to be balanced — by the conditions of realpolitik and the wartime conditions so evident to those in authority. Again, the higher good was a preeminent consideration.

One of the interesting things about the policies of the Vatican and other neutrals — such as a state like Switzerland or Sweden, or an institution like

the Red Cross — is how the circumstances changed over the course of the war. In 1939, 1940, especially 1941, it appeared that Nazi Germany had essentially won the war. In France, for example, very few people doubted in the late summer of 1940 that Great Britain would soon be defeated, and that Europe would have to adjust to a new era in which Nazi Germany would perhaps dominate Europe for the next generation.

Then in 1942, things started to change: A crucial turning point at the end of that year was the Battle of Stalingrad, when it appeared that Nazi Germany might not be so invincible after all. This was followed by the Battle of Kursk in the summer of 1943, and the aerial bombardment of Nazi Germany. And then Allied aircraft start to operate relatively freely over occupied Europe, followed by bombs starting to fall on Rome itself. The Vatican started to realize that Allied troops might soon liberate Italy, and that Mussolini might fall — which he did in the summer of 1943.

So when the fortunes of war started to change, so did the policies of neutrals. Different calculations were made, including, of course, vis-à-vis the Jews. Signals were sent; efforts were made; on occasion, resources were devoted to the rescue of Jews. Now, some neutrals move more quickly, others more slowly. Recently, we have been extraordinarily struck by how slow Swiss banks — themselves a kind of neutral agency — were to understand that the fortunes of war had shifted.

The Nuremberg Trials

Q- How do you view the Nuremberg Trials? What was their supposed goal, and their role in history?

A- Remember that the trial of the leading Nazi war criminals at Nuremberg in 1945 was a compromise. It was conducted not only by the Western Allies — Great Britain, France, and the United States — but also by the Soviet Union, which itself partook of criminal activities. The Soviet Union was involved not only in the outbreak of the war itself (attacking Poland some two weeks after

Nazi Germany did), but in the most horrible massacres of German military personnel, as well as of civilians. An example is the massacre of Polish officers at Katyn, where 10,000 or more were killed, not by the Germans, as was charged in the indictment, but by the Soviets themselves.

Take note also that the focus of the indictment was that of charging the leadership of the Third Reich with the planning, the launching, and the waging of aggressive war; and that aggressive war, crimes against peace, and the conspiracy to commit crimes against peace, were the focus of the American trial plan. All of the other crimes committed in the course of the war were considered to have derived from that central and principal crime.

Despite the fact that Nuremberg was not a pure expression of international justice, it was still a remarkable moment in the bringing to bear of an international sense concerning war crimes and crimes against humanity. It set a historical precedent of great value for an understanding of what we're speaking about — the destruction of European Jews.

The annihilation of European Jewry had a very important place at Nuremberg, notwithstanding the assumption of many that it was marginalized. It is true there was no particular count against the accused, no direct focus on what we now call the Holocaust. Nevertheless, evidence about the murder of European Jews was constantly brought forward by an international forum for the world's attention. The number of 6 million killed was first popularized at Nuremberg. Evidence of a well-orchestrated, well-coordinated European-wide program for the murder of European Jews was presented there. Its basic chronology was put in evidence: about Auschwitz, about the way that camp worked, about the most important center for the murder of European Jews, about the ghettos, the deportations, and the slave labor. All these things were presented, accompanied by cinematic evidence. Films were screened on the liberation of the concentration camps in central Europe, which gave some sense of the scale of destruction of human life.

I am convinced that these facts, then, were presented in a way they could not otherwise have been shown. What was underscored was that those horrors were part of the war itself, part of the mainspring of Nazi Germany. In the statements by the American and the British prosecutors, in particular, at the beginning of the trial, the Holocaust was underscored as a central war objective of Nazi Germany, so this was important.

Q- Some people claim that the Nuremberg Trials were a way of closing one chapter, in order to open another for Germany and for Europe. In some way to say that yes, those were the crimes, we dealt with it legally, and now we can move on. As if the legal procedures were aimed at burying the past.

A- If you look back at 1945 and try to understand what was on people's minds at the time, it was not then entirely clear that Nazism had been forever banished. One of the principle objectives of Nuremberg was actually to make sure that Nazism would not be revived in Germany. It would be a mistake to say there was a spirit of complacency. As a matter of fact, those who organized the trial of Nazi leaders at Nuremberg had very much on their minds. The obvious fact that there were hundreds of thousands of people still there in central Europe who had given their loyalties and commitments and their energies to the Third Reich — the challenge at the time was how to deal with that situation, and people faced it very mindful of the mistakes of 1918. There was no trial of the leaders of Imperial Germany in 1918, and the leaders of the various victorious powers were very concerned about establishing a historical moment that would live on, would set an example, would tell the story. In a way, that was their challenge to us as well. If we look back at that time, their impulse was one of publicity: that information had to be allowed to be diffused, collected, presented, and pondered; and that judgments and conclusions had to be drawn from that evidence.

The collection of evidence at Nuremberg was not considered an end in itself; the evidence had to be put to use, to prevent such things from ever happening again. The impulse behind Nuremberg was to disseminate that information to

a world audience, and in many languages. One of the remarkable things about Nuremberg was that, for the first time in an international trial, there were simultaneous translations. But to spread that information is the task that we (those of us who write, and think, and teach about the Holocaust) are still involved in. We believe it critical that that evidence be diffused.

That was the impulse at Nuremberg. I think it was done not badly. It is the documentation of Nuremberg that still forms the core of our understanding of the Holocaust, and was the basis for the great work of Raul Hilberg on the subject. So, Nuremberg was an extremely important moment. Is it the last chapter? Of course not! It is the very first chapter, actually, in contending historically with this subject. But the work still goes on.

Q- Thank you very much.

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