

## An Interview With Prof. Shulamit Volkov

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### Why the Germans?

Q- I'd like to begin with the most general of questions, and perhaps the most disturbing of questions: Why was the Holocaust perpetrated by the Germans?

V- In practice, this is the only question; this brings together the entire complex of questions related to the Holocaust. First of all, "Why the Jews?" This is perhaps a somewhat easier question. The Jews have played the symbolic role of "the other" in European culture for hundreds of years. Since they had been the target of hatred and resentment for so long, it was almost inevitable that in any situation of crisis they would become the focus of all unease, of all searches for a way to relieve tension.

"Why the Germans?" is a much more difficult question. The Germans definitely did not appear to be the natural perpetrators of something like the Holocaust. There is a story from the late 19th century, in which a group of social scientists were discussing the possibility of some action being taken against the Jews in the following century. The answer to this hypothesis was that one might expect anything from the French. So it was obviously not the Germans, if anybody, who were expected to carry out any such deed. Nevertheless, when one looks at short-term history – from the early 20th century through the First World War, and the series of crises during the Weimar Republic – one can see how German society was undergoing moral collapse over a relatively short period. And with nothing to fall back on, with no democratic tradition, the collapse of institutions and of all moral certitude, this situation could have led – and eventually did lead – to what happened during the Holocaust.

Q- Does this mean that it is not connected to German history, culture, nature, or tradition?

V- I do not think there is an absolute answer to such a question. Of course, there is something in German tradition, such as the stress on the need to obey, to abide by the rules of the establishment, and so on. There are countries such as England and the United States where this tradition is not as strong.

On the whole, though, I tend not to adopt a very long-term view for the explanation of the Holocaust. Otherwise, you begin to create a teleological view of history, i.e., one that must end in a certain way. Such a view makes all of German history appear as a one-way street of sorts, bound to end in catastrophe. I think that this is a misrepresentation of what happened in Germany.

If we take a slightly retrospective look, there were danger signs in Germany in the 19th century, and there were signs of healthy development. In the Weimar Republic, you can see both developing in parallel lines, and it was not at all clear which side was going to win. My feeling, especially over the past few years, is that all the explanations that go far back to early modern history – to Luther, for instance – miss the point. Its easier to think that this was a long-term development that had to end where it finally did than that a society – any society – might come to such total moral collapse under particular stresses and pressures if only a few preconditions apply. So, on the whole, I tend to see it as a short-term affair rather than a very long one.

We might, for instance, start with World War I. The process of barbarization during this war was enormously powerful. We know that people went to war in August 1914 with the idea that by Christmas – i.e., by the end of December that same year – the war would be over. There was no expectation of a cataclysmic event. But the war turned out to be more than four years of constant, desperate fighting that left German society bereft of any faith in any

government – with a cynical atmosphere, and a sense of having been betrayed and deceived.

The Weimar Republic began in this manner. It began badly, with bloodshed and internal revolution, as well as with great fear of the Russian revolution, and therefore with violent attacks against the extreme left in Germany, such as the killing of Rosa Luxembourg and Karl Liebknecht in early January 1919. From the outset, the republic faced a fierce struggle to stand on its feet.

Then came the era of the reparations demanded by the outside, and incredible inflation at home. We should be aware of the fact that an entire class of people lost all they had. It was not just a few people who suffered, but an entire stratum – those whom one actually would expect to be the principal supporters of a republican regime. The entire lower-middle class lost practically all they had. Anyone who had money in the bank lost it. Only people who owned real estate could eventually recover from this shock.

So you have a complete loss of faith in any leadership, not only political, but also economic, by the mid 20s – 1923, 1924. Then there were a few years of relative stability, and it looked as if perhaps something constructive would nevertheless emerge from the chaos. But then came 1929, before any real stability could take hold. One was simply thrown from one catastrophe to the next, and by the beginning of the 30s the feeling was one of hopelessness, cynicism and paranoia; all these combined.

Then you have the leadership of Hitler, who seems to have acutely understood the mood of the country, and to have given answers exactly where it hurt most. Even relatively decent people felt that there were no doubt some unpleasant aspects of his policy, but that they should persevere because there seemed to be rejuvenation at the end of this road. Most people did not expect things to develop the way they did. Finally it all ended in an incredible catastrophe not only for the Jews, but also for the Germans.

This is, of course, just an overview, but I don't think that much more is necessary. You don't need a lot to undermine a social structure. After all, a relatively stable social structure did exist in the Wilhelmanian Reich. The system wasn't much worse than anywhere else. We must remember that at that time democracy was weak everywhere. Even England did not have a truly universal manhood suffrage – not to mention womens suffrage – prior to World War I. The French Republic, as we know, was then also plagued by an incredible number of problems. Looking at the complex of German politics, statehood, and society prior to World War I, Germany did not display any signs of being in crisis or in collapse. It was functioning no worse than any other country.

### From “Latent Antisemitism” to the Final Solution

Q- Where does the ideological dimension enter into your explanation?

V- I don't place much emphasis on ideology, which, in my view, always makes its appearance and plays a role only under specific circumstances. It did have a function, but it was not an independent factor. However, there was also a need to define and elaborate and to explain policy. And it was as such, of course, that ideological elements become necessary in Nazi Germany. After all, people believed in Nazi ideology and in its antisemitic ideology to varying degrees. In the end, both those who were fanatics and those who were relatively immune or apathetic towards it – people along the entire spectrum – eventually participated in the catastrophe and took a more or less active part in carrying out the Holocaust. In addition to the fanatics who were determined to go ahead and do something as radical and as awful at this point, one also needs a general public that is infected by a certain, though not fanatic about it. Saul Friedlander's new book also shows that there was no great fanaticism with regard to antisemitism. There was more compliance and moral apathy, a moral inability to stand up to whatever happened around you.

Q- If you had to say which components ultimately led to the “Final Solution”, would you include the ideological antisemitism as a central factor?

V- Antisemitism was certainly a necessary precondition. The Holocaust would not have happened without antisemitism. But it was by no means a sufficient condition – I think this has to be quite clear. There is a great difference between hating someone, resenting him, not being able to live with him, wanting to see him out of sight or even dead, and the will and power to get on with a project of actually killing every individual belonging to this particular group.

Jews were hated for centuries, but there are only a few incidents in which this hatred actually turned into physical action against them on a grand scale. Eruptions of violence took place here and there, but they were not very common. What persisted was a resentment with which people could usually live. Some of them were willing to forget it with time, others not; but there's a great deal of difference between resentment or even hatred, and murder. This is what needs explaining, because, after all, Jews were hated for generations, so why now?

If you look back to the late 19th century, you'll find that the worst pogroms took place in Czarist Russia. The most severe legal action against Jews took place in France during the Dreyfus Affair. Germany had a latent antisemitic atmosphere, and all layers of society were probably infected by it, but on the surface there was a basic acceptance of the Jews, not rejection. I believe that antisemitism cannot do much more than explain the basic precondition for the Holocaust. Ultimately, however, it does not explain what happened.

Q- What do you mean by “a latent antisemitic atmosphere?”

V- There is a kind of antisemitism – not that one should not take it seriously – that cannot of itself lead to action – certainly not violent action – against Jews. In 19th century European culture, one finds abusive comments about Jews everywhere. If you take, for instance, the socialist camp in the late 19th century, both Jewish and non-Jewish socialists very often spoke derogatorily

about Jews. They did not make a big deal out of it, but they often commented in this vein in their letters and elsewhere. After all, the Social Democratic Party in Germany, from its creation, had an anti-antisemitic tradition, although there was a segment of the party that was more antisemitic than the other. The fact that comments about Jews were common in pre-World War II Germany was nothing unique. It was a common feature of European tradition. But this is not enough of an explanation for the radical hatred that was typical of the Nazi phase. Something happened in-between, and this is perhaps the most difficult thing to explain: What exactly took place so as to a common element of popular culture – not an extremely meaningful one – into an indication for action, into a real ideology, into a scheme that dictated what had to be done. Understanding this sort of transition, I think, is crucial.

Q- How do you explain the leap from one type of antisemitism to another?

V- It is extremely difficult to explain this leap. Perhaps most crucial was the combination of an extreme crisis during the Weimar Republic, with a leadership that was truly fanatic about the Jews. In the beginning, the Nazis probably also did not know exactly what they were going to do. They felt that they had to solve the “Jewish problem”. Friedlaender’s new book clearly shows that it was not clear – even to them – what they were going to do, or how to go about it. One must also remember that the actual killing and extermination began during a situation of what may be considered a “pre-crisis”, but continued in a real crisis during the war. After all, as early as 1942, the German army suffered serious defeats. Its as if one had to wait for a situation of extreme crisis in order to carry out the extreme version of the “Jewish policy”. It did not – and perhaps could not – happen under normal conditions.

I am of the opinion that one has to see the Holocaust in the context of this ongoing crisis that began in the Weimar Republic, together with the leadership of Hitler and a few of his aids. These two elements must be added to the latent antisemitism, which was by no means exterminationist – as Goldhagen

would say – at first. This is true despite the fact that some such plans of extermination were occasionally in the air. But they were never taken up seriously, not even by the government of the Wilhelmanian Reich – by no means a responsible body. It was, after all, this government that started World War I. Even the leadership of Imperial Germany thought that plans to exterminate or de-emancipate the Jews were wild dreams; it did not seem possible.

So you need to have a crisis-situation – a huge crisis, a great collapse of moral fortitude – in which suddenly everything seems possible. Something that previously seemed uncivilized, impossible, not even a parameter to think along, suddenly becomes a reality and a possibility. And if you have the leadership willing to carry it out, you can apparently get anywhere, including to such horrors as the “Final Solution.”

It’s not simply that one needed to lose the war in order to start the Holocaust, nor simply to reach a turning point in the war. First of all, chronologically its not true: The extermination started before the turn of events in the Second World War, so that even on a rather simplistic level, this explanation does not work. But still, I think that in order to keep a project like this going on for so long, the situation of total war was a necessary condition. The barbarization of the soldiers, of everybody at the front, certainly made it easier, perhaps even possible, for the project of exterminating the Jews to be carried out. The fact is, the Nazis waited for a war situation before they began to carry it out. For the actual killing to start, I believe, you needed the added barbarization of total war.

Q- How did it happen that the Jews, seemingly so intertwined in German society, at least in so far as the financial, cultural, and academic elites were concerned, were so easily and quickly thrown out, not only from the elite but also from German society as a whole?



V- This is one of the most painful aspects of the whole story. What must be remembered is this: German society, on the whole, accepted the Jews, and they were, on the whole, integrated into it. Perhaps they didn't always feel comfortable. At times they heard malicious Jewish jokes; on some occasions, there was actual discrimination against them – certainly before the First World War, during the period of the Kaiserreich, but also in the Weimar Republic. The atmosphere was not always friendly, but on the whole, if the Jews were successful, they could hold most posts, including some in the government itself. And, in contrast to the Wilhelmanian Reich, during the Weimar period they could even be part of the highest bureaucracy and enjoy all positions in the academic world.

They truly entered into all aspects of life, with an emphasis on the cultural and scholarly worlds. The Germans had a long experience of living with Jews, and I think here lies one of the greatest tragedies. It was not a society that, throughout time, consistently refused to live with Jews, and finally had the chance to get rid of them completely – to kill them. It was a society that had actually accepted them, willingly or by force of circumstance, and only then decided to throw them out. It was a decision made at a point when other alternatives were clearly still open; it was not a result of simply rolling along some obvious path. How, then, could this have happened? There's nothing more that one can say about it. Obviously, such a development is possible.

### German Society Facing the Persecution of the Jews and the “German-Jewish Symbiosis”

Q- Was it the society or the regime that threw the Jews out? One has the feeling that there was a lack of opposition to the separation created by the regime.

V- Government policy was extremely important. For example, in the boycott immediately after the Nazi takeover, the authorities attempted to create a commercial boycott of Jewish businesses, but they were not very successful. In other words, when they began to involve the populace in this action, they



met with only very limited success. The most successful effort on their part was the legalization of exclusion – the exclusion of Jews from universities, from government offices, and so on. Apparently, whatever could be done legally had the greatest effect. And the legal measures then had a snowball effect. With time, and with continuous indoctrination, the government managed to keep the population at least apathetic to what happened, if not enthusiastic about it.

In German memoirs of the time one can still read about the Jews suddenly “disappearing”. Well, do you not ask yourself how your friends “disappear”? You would expect normal people to wonder why the Jews disappeared and where they vanished to. There was obviously a great deal of general apathy and willingness to go along. Certainly this has to do with latent antisemitism. If they expel your loved ones, you’d ask where they are, but if they drive away those whom you are also willing to see gone, perhaps you would not ask so many questions. You must remember that it was a totalitarian regime, not a democracy. One needs a certain amount of courage to stand up to something that happens in such a regime. And apparently civil courage is a rare product.

One could ask whether people behaved like this just because they were Germans, viz., Germans tend to behave like this; they don't have a tradition of civil courage. Perhaps. I wonder about this. I'm curious if in other societies people have more courage, and, under the same circumstances, would they have been more courageous. We don't see many signs of great civil courage elsewhere, and I believe there are no grounds to think that it would have been otherwise elsewhere. But, of course, it didn't happen elsewhere, it did happen in Germany.

Q- But the Euthanasia Program, by contrast, did evoke public opposition.

V- There was no opposition to the policy in principle, but to this particular project and to the way in which it was carried out. It was expressed primarily by those who were involved directly, and partly by the church. This was

indeed a case in which, when such a murderous policy was directed against those you love, this made people speak out. But when similar measures were aimed at those whom you did not particularly love, and whom you were not so sorry to see gone, people did not react.

Q- Against the backdrop of everything you've said, was there really a "Jewish-German symbiosis"? Or was it a total illusion?

V- I don't like the term "symbiosis". I find it to be much too strong. I'd say that the Jews never lived in symbiosis with the Germans. They lived with them, in the same society. Very often they only lived side by side with them, and if they had the feeling of full symbiosis, living together in almost biological harmony, then I surmise it was an illusion. Integration never reached such a degree. I'm also not so sure the Jews themselves wanted it to reach such an extent. I think that the great majority of Jews, throughout the 19th century and into the 20th, did not want to lose all identity as Jews. There are, on the margins, always those who are, and were, willing to give up any kind of Jewish identity, but the majority of Jews, in Germany too, did feel that way.

The fact is that the vast majority of German Jews did not convert. And even those who had their children converted, thought that this was not an honorable thing for adults to do, even if it was okay for children. After all, children are not fully aware of the meaning of such an act. So whatever they did, even when they had their children converted, they somehow gave you the message that for whatever reason – be it their wish to keep their tradition and their separate identity, or to keep their honor as individuals – they were not prepared to give up their identity. So this was not a symbiotic relationship with the Germans. They lived their own life in their own way within German society, and this is how they wanted it.

And, of course, even that turned out to be impossible. You could say that perhaps it is never is feasible, but after all there are other experiments. There is a great Jewish community in the United States today. They believe – and

rightly so, it seems to me – that they can live in that country – not “their own”, so to speak, not their own national state – and flourish there, not merely survive. The hope of living together exists today, too, despite the Holocaust and in spite of the existence of a separate Jewish nation-state, which provides another option. In spite of the fact that there is an alternative, living together with non-Jews is still a viable possibility for Jews.

Q- Did the extent of the integration of the Jews in Germany prevent them from seeing where things were leading, and from fleeing?

V- It's a very arrogant notion to think that the Jews of Germany, even in the 30s, were in some respect blind and didn't see what was happening. In fact, nobody knew what lay ahead. If we agree that even the Nazis weren't sure of their own plans concerning the Jews, it is impossible to demand of those who had lived for so long in that country, and were so deeply involved in it, to predict that something as unthinkable as the Holocaust would occur. Nobody expected it: not even the Zionists, nor even someone like Gershom Scholem, who argued in his biography that he had read the antisemitic literature and knew what to expect, realized what was in store. His correspondence with Walter Benjamin during the 1930s, for example, shows no urgency. If he knew what was going to happen, he would certainly have shown more urgency in calling on his friend to come to Jerusalem and join him. But there was time; it could all be postponed.

People thought that here was another wave; that one could somehow ride out and safely reach the other side. They did not expect such a catastrophe, and they couldn't have expected it. Surely the fact that they were, indeed, so deeply involved in the life of this society made them even more confident that this would be only a passing wave. After all, Jews had gone through various phases of antisemitism, sometimes more, sometimes less severe. One could think that this was just another upsurge. It turned out to be something else; a qualitatively different kind of event, and, in some paradoxical way, their previous experience now made it impossible for them to see it clearly.

## Jews in Nazi Germany – A Jewish Renaissance or a Fool’s Paradise?

Q- Concerning the life of the Jews in Germany in the 30s – called by some a Jewish renaissance and by others a fools paradise – what would you call the rejuvenation of Jewish action, within the restricted meaning of the word “Jewish?”

V- The talk about a renaissance in Jewish life does not usually apply to the 30s, but to the 20s, to the years of the Weimar Republic. Nobody really views what happened in the 30s as any kind of renaissance. By then, Jewish life was a desperate effort to keep oneself above the bare minimum of existence, and to give it a minimum of cultural content. I believe it was quite a heroic effort, though looking at it from our point of view, it does seem less heroic and more pathetic. Still, we must remember that, at the time, it was not pathetic, but truly heroic to try and keep a human face under the circumstances. It often meant persevering and holding on to what one could still maintain of both German and Jewish culture.

From our perspective, it looks pitiful. They staged “Nathan the Wise”; they were so proud of their symphony orchestra, and so on. But all of that must have cost them a great deal of effort. They were trying to keep their heads above water. You could see it going on even in Theresienstadt, and in the cultural activity that took place there. This, in my opinion, is wonderful evidence of humanity: that even under such circumstances, people were capable of enjoying culture and of making an effort to preserve their humanity in such a way. If the uniqueness of humankind is the ability to give cultural expression to oneself, then they were human to the very end. I believe that that should be appreciated, and not looked down upon from above.

## German Society, Hitler and the “Final Solution”

Q- Was the “Final Solution” ultimately a project undertaken by German nation as a whole? – that is, did everyone know and were there many participants, either directly or indirectly?

V- In some way, I would say that it’s a case of collective responsibility, but not necessarily because everyone participated in it. Where my opinion differs from that of Goldhagen is not in the question of responsibility, but concerning his description of the Germans as a single group of active, radical antisemites, marching on happily, finally about to do what they had always wanted to do: to kill the Jews. I think this was not the case. There was a minority of radicals who willingly and happily, so to speak, joined in the project of killing as many Jews as possible. But there was a majority of people who didn't care, who were not interested, who chose not to see what they didn't want to see – as people do everywhere – people who chose not to know, and who participated if necessary, but by no means with any kind of glee or enthusiasm.

Now, finally, when it comes to the question of responsibility, perhaps it doesn't matter so much. And this question, I believe, is even more essential for me than it is for Goldhagen, because, after all, my belief is that they had a choice. I believe that the situation in which they lived, and the tradition they had developed, created a choice for them in the matter of how, or whether, to live with the Jews, and – facing such a choice – they chose the path of extermination. This is what makes it so awful. Goldhagen does not seem to see that such a choice ever existed. He describes a development that was almost inevitable: that one was simply led to this situation by a tradition, beginning with what one heard at home, in school, in ones surrounding environment, etc. Germans, according to Goldhagen, were in fact antisemitic, whether they wanted to be or not. I don't agree that this was the case.

Q- How does your approach differ from that of Hans Mommsen, who claims that the “Final Solution” was the result of a constant escalation stemming from the perpetual search for solutions which, perpetually failed to solve the problems?

V- Yes, I think that Mommsen takes this thesis to the extreme, and its time we found the middle ground. In history, it can be useful to take extreme views, but not always to hold on to them forever. It was helpful to show that there was also a functional aspect to Nazi policy, i.e., that there were concrete problems that the Nazis were trying to solve, and as the war went on, it became more and more difficult to solve them. And so they hit upon the solution of physically getting rid of the Jews, the “final solution”. When they saw that it “worked”, so to speak, that they could actually do it, and that there were ways of carrying it out in a rather simple and practical manner, they did not hesitate.

I believe that this takes the matter to much too great an extreme, and after having argued this for some 20 years, its time to begin to find some middle ground. In Friedlander’s book, for example, I think there is such a possible middle ground. It is quite obvious that, to a degree, the Nazis were looking for solutions and didn’t know how to handle the problem. But it’s also true that they couldn’t stand the Jews, and had a prior tendency to come up with violent and radical solutions. So when problems mounted, they didn’t suggest, say, drafting them into the army, but proposed gathering them all together in camps and killing them.

I think that the controversy [between functionalists and intentionalists] has played a role. Clearly, neither of the two extreme positions is completely correct. The question now is to find not simply the middle path, but the correct path – the correct balance between the two outlooks. One must try to see both the latent and the radical antisemitism that existed, on the one hand, and the need to find practical solutions for the problems that were created on the other hand.

Q- What was Hitler's role in the development of the “Final Solution”?

V- I consider Hitler to have played a very important role, although, admittedly, I didn't always hold this view. At some point in the history of historiography, it



became fashionable, to claim that individuals do not have much effect on history. But in light of what happened in Germany, one cannot uphold this position. Hitler had an enormous effect: a) he had an intuitive ability to say and do the things that somehow corresponded to what the society in which he lived wanted him to say and do; and, b) he managed to receive such an unbelievable response from them over a long stretch of time, not at one point only. Thus, his role was of utmost importance. He is just as important as all the other preconditions we talked about earlier. Without Hitler, it would not have happened.

Q- Is this just in the realm of a precondition, or did he continually push the idea of the “Final Solution?”

V- Clearly, as I said before, he had an ongoing influence on the run of events. But human agency can be only a part of the story. Its not enough to push: You have to have people who are willing to be pushed, to have them in a situation in which they are ready to cooperate in such a project. Hitler, with all his power, could not manipulate the sub-structure of German society beyond a certain degree. So I wouldn't say that he was the only important factor, but his role was of great significance, and I have a feeling that this will again be stressed in the historiography in coming years. If you take a relatively short-term view, as I do; if you don't think you have to begin with Luther – then a greater prominence is given to the actual actors on the immediate stage, and they also share a greater degree of responsibility. If you go too far back, each particular figure loses importance along this lengthy route. But if you take 30, 40 years, then the main figures that stand out play a greater role, and you have to give them greater weight in explaining what happened.

Q- Was it just he who created the prevailing ambience or, in the final analysis, he who actively pushed it all the time?

V- Hitler played a very active role; nobody moved without him along the road of defining and redefining the Jewish “Final Solution”. It could not have



happened without his particular leadership. As I have said, he could not shape the particular circumstances; he was manipulating them. And as always, with leaders of stature, of capacity, he too was able to manipulate them vigorously, and to use them to his ends.

In the long run, however, his power of manipulation was limited. He got himself into an impossible situation. It was inevitable, perhaps, but it all happened under his leadership. We can thus see both his capacity and his limitations.

### The Centrality of the Holocaust in Western Culture

Q- Why has the Holocaust made a turnaround and regained such a strong presence in culture, in history, in philosophy, in newspapers, and in almost all spheres of public and cultural life in the West?

V- First of all, we tend to slightly exaggerate the centrality of the Holocaust in Western culture. I can name a great number of books – histories of the 20th century, or histories of the modern world – in which almost no mention is made of the Holocaust. We have to see it in proportion. From our perspective, and certainly also from that of the Germans, the Holocaust takes on an incredibly important role. It has also played an important role in America in the past twenty years or so, because of various problems concerning the construction of identity in the American Jewish community. But I would say that its exaggerated to think that it plays such a major role everywhere; we, naturally, tend to see it from our perspective.

Now, finally, we all seem to agree that no such radical, inhuman occurrence took place before, and that other such episodes, awful as they were, did not possess some of the characteristics of the Holocaust. In some respects, this attitude reflects a lack of understanding of what humans are capable of. If you think about it – and only very few people do – and if you decide that you want to relate to this problem, then you somehow have to rethink your view of humanity: what it is, what it does and what it can be. Certainly, then, it

becomes an important philosophical, historical, social issue. And it always comes up as a measurement of what other people do, what other nations are capable of. This is important for almost everyone, under certain circumstances

Q- I want to take two elements that you mentioned in your answer: a) what is it about the Holocaust that makes it such a yardstick in history, and b) what do you, yourself, from this perspective, think about tradition and modern history, and about the history of the modern Jew in Europe?

V- It becomes a measurement of evil, so to speak, because it is considered the absolute, extreme manifestation of it in human history. I think that, concerning both the quantity of people killed, and the industrial, modern way in which they were executed – a completely controlled, organized killing process – we have never seen anything of this sort before.

People suffer; they are killed and mutilated, and these things often occur for emotional reasons and in sudden revolutions. This is always awful. But such an organized system of humiliation and extermination, such a prolonged process of dehumanization of the victims is, I think, unprecedented. As the uppermost manifestation of evil, therefore, it remains, to this day, the measurement for all others. It also has, of course, a negative influence, because for some, whatever is not as bad and as awful as the Holocaust becomes somewhat trivial. We should bear in mind that even if a murder is not so absolutely organized or mechanized, it is still a moral devastation, and it is still horrific. People sometimes take refuge in this sort of comparison.

Q- In your opinion, do we need to stress this singularity of the Holocaust?

V- Yes, I think one has to look for the uniqueness of this case, and I have only touched upon it; I have not really attempted to analyze it here. But I also believe that without comparison we cannot see the singularity. We must bring in other cases that are similar to some degree and dissimilar in other ways,

and place them side by side, and look at them simultaneously. We also have to be careful not to monopolize suffering. There are other peoples, other places in which awful things have happened, and sometimes we seem to want to monopolize suffering, to claim that we are the ones who have suffered the most. It may be true, but morally, it is not a very creative and helpful position to take.

Q- I'd like you to relate how, in the light of Auschwitz, you look at the rational tradition that developed in Europe during the hundreds of years that preceded the Holocaust.

V- Our ability to hold on to humanity, despite the Holocaust, should perhaps be the important measure for us. In this respect, what we talked about earlier – people who remained human under the worst conditions – is also some kind of measurement for us. The conclusion from what happened should not be to doubt or even to negate an entire tradition. Even if the rational tradition of the West has something to do with the way things developed; even if this is true, and we can show the Holocaust to be in some way the result of this tradition, I still would not say that this implies we now have to abandon it, negate the tradition of the enlightenment and its rationality, and disregard its positive side. Perhaps the problem is that we don't defend it strongly enough, or perhaps we allow it to slip away too quickly; perhaps we even let its antithesis win the day too often. It's not this tradition that is to blame, but the fact that we have not defended it well enough.

Q- Thank you very much.

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