

Judenrat

Excerpt from interview with Professor Michael Marrus

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Interviewers: Adi Gordon. Amos Morris Reich, Amos Goldberg

Q- Raul Hilberg criticized the Judenrat 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 Judenrat, 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 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 human 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.

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