Q: The questions that I have tried to present until now were taken from a certain pre-supposition, which has to be articulated as well as justified. For the issue of history and historicity has not been taken as a philosophical given or axiom in every philosophical stream-of-thought. On the contrary, as we all know, your work as well as several other thinkers who dwell in your own intellectually pluralistic environment, has put forward the signature of the philosopher, his or her proper name, thus creating intentionally both a dated philosophy and a philosophy of the date. How do you reconcile these notions which seem rather contradictory to one another (or perhaps to the very project of philosophizing)? Could one defend such a notion when it seems that once philosophy was actually engaged with its time – during the entre-des-guerres era – it gave support, legitimacy as well as spiritual power, as you yourself put it, to politics? What is the adequate position which philosophy “after Auschwitz” should take towards politics and history?

D: Naturally, we won’t be able in a one-hour televised interview to take into account or to take charge of the full philosophical difficulty of the problems you raise. In answering you I’ll try to bring this back to our present concern, that is Yad Vashem and the Shoah. It is true that I have constantly tried to work on the question of the signature in philosophy, of the signature and of the date. In effect, the classical and dominant gesture of classical philosophers was to present the signature or the date of a philosophical discourse as accidental or empirical, as if philosophical discourse consisted of effacing the signature, the proper name, the date of the philosopher. People like Plato, Kant, Hegel will have done everything so that the systematicity of their discourse would be
able to do without any reference to the proper name of the signatory, to the
date of their production etc. I tried to call this axiomatic into question. I have
done this by reference to many texts by Hegel, Nietzsche, etc.

But to return to the place that concerns us here, each time I wished to bring
back the signature and the date onto the stage, I did so either with regard to
authors who have had a very marked relation to what we are talking about,
that is to say, Nietzsche, for example, and the tradition that leads from
Nietzsche to Nazism (in that little text called Otobiographies, with regard to
Nietzsche's signature, I tried to situate this reflection about the proper name
starting from a reference to Nazism and to what we are talking about now), or
else with regard to Celan, in Shibboleth, where indeed the entire poetics of the
date and of the signature were linked to the history of a Jewish poet, whose
original language had not been German, but who later became one of the
greatest post-war poets in the German language, who lost his entire family in
the camps and in whose work, however one interprets it, the reference to the
Shoah is decisive. There is surely nothing fortuitous about the reflection on
the date and the signature, that have always concerned me, being linked to
the event we're talking about, directly or indirectly. When it occurred to me
too, modestly and in my own way, to re-inscribe autobiographical references
in my philosophical work (which I've been doing increasingly in Glas, in La
Carte postale, in Shibboleth, and also, recently, in Circonfession), naturally
this stemmed from the Jewish question, from the question of circumcision and
of my relation to Judaism and what is happening or has happened to Judaism
in this century. I believe my experience of these problems of the signature and
the date to be inseparable, be it directly or indirectly, from what we're talking
about this morning, that is to say the Holocaust.

Even if, once again, the uniqueness of this reference is a problem for me. It is
at the same time nagging, as is the question of knowing if one should turn
only towards the Holocaust or any holocaust, with all the problems of
metonymy and exemplarity we spoke of at the beginning. In any case, when
one asks oneself what is a date? What is a signature? With the Holocaust we
have, unfortunately, a thought-provoking resource that is inexhaustible. At the same time, because, as to the signature, the Holocaust has often consisted of an attempt to erase the names, to erase the proper names, not only to put [people] to death, but to destroy the archive. And Yad Vashem is primarily the memory of names, which is obviously the most moving and remarkable thing, I’d say even troubling, when one walks into Yad Vashem: the first gesture was to restore, to gather and to keep the names. As if the names were really the very thing that the extermination was aimed at. So, at the same time identity and memory, the possibility of calling. The act of Yad Vashem has consisted of keeping the names and the dates, finally, which are inseperable.

For what is a date? A date is an instant, but it is also a place, it is the irreplaceability of the event. And so, somehow, even though any event, however modest, bears a relation to the name and the date, nevertheless from this point of view Auschwitz is presumably an abysmal experience that the members of my generation, of the generation preceding mine cannot get around. What will it be in the future? I don’t know. Your question about the date, the signature and the generation, lead me to think, with some horror, that perhaps, in two or three generations, all this will have been relativized, if not forgotten, and that the Shoah will find its place as one episode, among so many others, of the murderous violence within humanity: there have been other genocides before or after, the Bible is full of horrifying violence, of nations who destroy one another. So one knows that perhaps, in the future, this will be, if not erased or forgotten, at least classed, relativized by being classed.

When an archive such as Yad Vashem is established and kept up, an act of piety and of memory is performed to prevent this from being erased. But at the same time, which is ambiguous and horrifying, it is the very act of archivizing which contributes somehow to classification, relativization and forgetting. Archivization preserves, but it also begins to forget. And it is possible that one day, and one thinks of this with horror, Yad Vashem will be considered as just another monument. Because it is kept, consigned to the exteriority of
archives, because it is here between walls, everything has been recorded, a CD Rom was made, the names are on plaques, and so because it is kept, well, it may be lost, it may be forgotten. There is always this risk, and that is the ambiguity of the concept of archive, that I've been concerned with elsewhere, one always runs the risk of losing one keeps and of forgetting precisely where memory is objectivized in acts of consignment, in objective places.

It is a horrifying risk, a horrifying risk that was implied in the very act of extermination, where an attempt was made to erase traces and testimonies, to a point that later opened the field for all the revisionists. Or rather, there is an archive that remains, a material archive. Naturally, when I went to Auschwitz, I was like everyone else overwhelmed to see those tons of hair, those tons of shoes, those rooms filled with eye glasses. This is horrifying, it is overwhelming. But, at the same time, since these are only physical records, the revisionists can always say that this was constructed, that proves nothing. What would prove is not physical evidence or archives, it is living testimonies. But by definition, there is no living testimony, either because those who experienced this have disappeared in the crematoria, or because - as these are testimonies which appeal to faith, to belief - it may always be possible that the witnesses lie.

Thus there is always a possibility of either destruction or contestation of the archive and even of testimony. Hence the abyss of problems that keep cropping up with negationism and revisionism. And this is inscribed in the very structure of the extermination.