

An Interview With Prof. Yisrael Gutman

Yad Vashem Chief Historian

October 28, 1998, Yad Vashem Jerusalem

Interviewer: Amos Goldberg

The Goldhagen debate and the role of antisemitism in understanding the Holocaust

Q- First, a question about Goldhagen's book. His basic claim, of course, is that German culture and history have had a very strong genocidal antisemitic element since the end of the nineteenth century -- an element that merely grew and found expression in the Holocaust. Later on, Goldhagen argues that almost the entire German people were willing and, perhaps, eager participants in carrying out the Final Solution.

This book set off a tremendous controversy and seems to have reconfigured the coalitions of historiography. Can you explain why this of all books has caused so much disputation in Germany, the United States, and even Israel, and can you explain its ultimate contribution to consciousness and research of the Holocaust?

G- This book is so important not only because of its contents -- although some of the contents and findings are definitely important -- but rather, and mainly, in its assessment of the events at that time and the role of the individual German in them.

The book has affected the development of Holocaust research. It forced the historiographical discourse to revise several of its major conceptions. It has also had a very strong effect on many readers. It was greeted with tremendous interest and made a powerful emotional impact that disturbed many people and offended many researchers.

The book has also prompted several of the most prominent scholars to change some of their long-held opinions -- a fact of which we were not always aware. Goldhagen is largely responsible for returning the preoccupation with antisemitism to the center of the debate.

In regard to antisemitism, I shall make some very general remarks. Antisemitism has basic recurrent elements and residues that came together to form a stereotype of the Jew. From the standpoint of the Christian religion, the Jew was perceived as one who repudiates the truth and, for this reason, a person who wallows in sin. This sin set off some very negative phenomena in the psychic, spiritual world and every-day behavior of the Jew.

In medieval Europe, it was conventional wisdom to regard the Jew as an alien who could not integrate with others. Even when medieval Europe was divided into sharply separated societies and classes, the Jews were separated in a different way. The Jews were not only a class at that time; they were also regarded as an alien element within the social framework of the Middle Ages. Later on, certain economic tendencies were attributed to the Jews -- as if they had a predisposition to deal in improper and questionable financial affairs. For this reason, they were regarded as the promoters of aggressive capitalism or of financial dealings that had nothing to do with production and development and that included nothing but extreme exploitation of individuals and workers.

I would say that these general characteristics were typical of antisemitism throughout Europe, although they were applied with different nuances and emphases in different countries and at different times. They were the fundamentals of the attitude toward the Jews, the Jews place in the psychic world of the European individual, and their role in European culture altogether. Of course, not everyone shared this perception, and one should always cautious not to generalize. However, these outlines were definitely very dominant, recurrent, and influential.

In the nineteenth century, especially at its end and especially in Germany, a development of sorts took place in this context -- a leap onto a new path -- and relations between Jews and non-Jews changed in a very fundamental way. Two factors led to this change. The first was racial antisemitism. Until then, a Jew could change his status vis-a-vis the Christian environment. He could assimilate and integrate into general society on the condition that, by means of education and a change in image, he abandon his faith, habits, and traits. People thought of integration as a process that depends on the Jews willingness to abandon their way of life, their cultural world, their tradition, and their heritage.

Racial and biological antisemitism declared Jewish integration impossible, because the negative or destructive traits of the Jew were now perceived as part of his genetic makeup. At the most, a Jew could adopt the outer behavior of a human being. As Hitler used to say, all the Jews had adopted was the language. In other words, Jews cannot change because their negative essence is anchored in the physical, biological domain; all they have adopted are outer instrumental trappings. Therefore, the problem in racial antisemitism was not how to change the Jews -- after all, they cannot change! -- but how to protect non-Jewish society against the penetration of these negative Jewish traits. The Jew became a menace. He was even more menacing if he assimilated. Then, if he was an author, educator, or a scientist, he had even more ability to influence and penetrate general society in all respects. In other words, the essential "problem" is not the authentic Jew who remains faithful to his forebears teachings and traditions. The dangerous Jew is actually the new Jew, who has abandoned the Jewish way of life and made his way into general society.

The second development began in the last few decades of the nineteenth century: Jews immersed themselves in political life and in shaping modern society and the modern individual. Indeed, several of the greatest social reformers and sources of influence on the image of modern society were Jews. When all is said and done, Marx was Jewish, Freud was Jewish, and

Bergson was Jewish. They were born Jewish. Let us bear in mind that this period -- the late nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century - - was heavily ideological. It carried the burden of searching for a secular answer to basic existential questions. In fact, the people whose names I mentioned tried to answer the most basic and penetrating human questions. Their answers were not part of the traditional religious faith, of course. Instead, they belonged to general human thought and the socio-political struggle of human beings. They dealt not only in national questions but also in universal ones.

This gave rise to the perception that the Jew, as someone very intensively involved in political and ideational affairs, in class struggles, and in educating individuals as political creatures, is a menace.

There is also an interesting argument that is not altogether groundless (it has been expressed by several people, including Jews such as Hannah Arendt), in which the Jewish intelligentsia, the great Jewish press, and Jewish thinkers and creative artists tend to deal not with the national fabric but with pan-human and universal questions. In other words, the Jewish mind is more attracted to the issues that concerned the Biblical prophets, issues that must respond to the most central and inclusive questions. The antisemites considered this tendency a repudiation of the specific and national plane.

At first glance, there was evidence for this. When you consider the socialist movements in Europe and the revolutions after World War I in the Soviet Union (Russia), Hungary, and Germany, you discover a large number of Jews who until then had rarely held ranking political status. Suddenly you found Jews at the forefront of movements and in central positions in the new tapestry that was evolving in various countries. This is what lent antisemitism its tremendous power. Obviously its influence varied among different countries and different people, but I would say that it made very deep inroads throughout Europe after World War I.

I think this was the most antisemitic period ever. The Jew was accused not of being this or that kind of person but of playing one role or another in general society or general political life. Therefore, he was no longer considered merely an inferior person or someone who deserves inferior status and inferior rights, a person who should have no influence and involvement in the structure of society. Instead, he has become a menace, a cause of ferment and disruption, a destroyer of sound order.

Q- In Germany above all?

G -It was especially consequential in Germany. Truth to tell, racism did not begin in Germany. It actually began in France, with Gobineau. However, the influence of Gobineau's theories came into being more in Germany than in France. France does have antisemitism, but it has been largely economic and cultural. In these fields, Jews are regarded as separatist players who erect barriers and stir up unrest.

In Germany, by contrast, antisemitism was political and ideological, i.e., it regarded the Jews as representing a separate political line. Richard Wagner, for example, said that he never liked Jews and was always disgusted by them, for which reason he sometimes accused himself of not being a tolerant and understanding person. But after he realized, he said, that this disgust concerned the psychic world and basic traits of the Jew, he understood that the separation and contrast are substantial and permanent. Houston Stewart Chamberlain (admittedly an Englishman, but one who "Germanized" himself) argued -- as did Hitler in his wake -- that the struggle between the Jewish spirit and the so-called Aryan spirit is a continual one, an unbroken thread that runs along the entire historical path of religion, society, and civilization. In this sense, of course, antisemitism had a special German fundamental. Even though I would not say that it existed only in Germany, it was extreme in Germany.

However, we must realize that the German antisemitic fundamental was not extreme in terms of daily relations between Jews and non-Jews in the street. In daily life, antisemitism was much more discernible in Poland or Russia, and certainly in Romania. In those countries, it was vociferous and brutal. In Germany, in contrast, it took on an ideological complexion. Antisemitism became a curative thing or, to use Uriel Tals term, a “civic religion.” This is why the notion that the human being and humankind cannot be healed without the expulsion of the Jews solidified in Germany.

Goldhagen’s mistake, as you noted before, lies in the sweeping nature of his argument, the way he treats this as a characteristic of all Germans. He does not argue that this matter found very radical and dangerous expression as it subsequently transpired in developments in Germany. Instead, he regards it as a general characteristic of the German nation, or at least one may infer this. Afterwards, he denied it.

Another problem with Goldhagen’s book is the conclusion its readers may draw: that Goldhagen considers it a deterministic process. In other words, he argues that this development could only have led to the Holocaust, or to murder, or to an attempt to obliterate the Jews physically -- that it was a process of prolonged escalation that could only have led to an aspiration or conception that regarded the banishment of the Jews, in one way or another, as the solution. I am not so convinced of this. I do not regard this as typical of all Germans. I do not consider it a development that could have led to no other outcome. Certainly, however, these elements spoke to a certain segment of Germans and were realized more acutely, harshly, and dangerously in Germany than elsewhere.

Of course, one may ask how the world could have remained silent in view of the Nazi racism and the Nuremberg Laws, for example. Not only did it keep its silence, but governments in Europe -- England, Poland, Italy, and other countries -- were willing to maintain diplomatic relations with Germany and even enter into various alliances with it. How did they fail to see that this

element [racist antisemitism] had the potential to evolve into a dangerous process that would threaten the entire world? The reason is that while Nazi racism was based on a universal and comprehensive gradation and hierarchy, in the interwar period it was directed almost exclusively against the Jews. Somewhere in their consciousness, or in their view of things, they could accept it because it was a Jewish issue. Remember that this was a time of ideological confrontation -- a time of Communism and Bolshevism, political parties that preached revolution, and stiff competition for control of people, natural resources, territories, and political life. Thus we say that antisemitism is an illness that afflicts nations or peoples and claims the Jew as its victim.

We should keep another matter in mind: the uniqueness of Jewish history, the Jews spiritual and religious baggage, and their belief in messianism -- a redemption that will again give them a role as part of a covenant with Providence. These were highly provocative matters that created grave tension. It is a fact that the Jews maintained a community of their own that, in many regards, was separate from other groups and peoples. However, this separate nature should not have caused such hostile forces against the Jews to emerge, gain strength, and become predominant. It is a fact that they did not exist and never took on such a form, such a weightiness, and such a structure in pluralistic societies such as the United States.

Q- Let us go back to Goldhagen. Which of the matters you have mentioned did he bring back to the historical debate?

G- Look, the trend in Holocaust research moved toward disregard of these elements, i.e., antisemitism and its influence on the Germans and the [other] European peoples. It disregarded the way the ideology influenced the individual and actually nullified ethical and religious human norms. Holocaust research leaned more and more toward the “normalization” or “banalization” of the Holocaust. In other words, it tended to regard the Holocaust as a product of certain circumstances or of modern society and its political and economic tensions. It saw it as something that had happened and would not happen

again, an event that is neither unique nor exceptional. It might admit that the Holocaust was unprecedented in its mass nature, its magnitude, and its concentration in time, but in every other sense it was like the murder of the Armenians and the Gypsies, and like similar accounts in the annals of other minorities. They regarded it more as a matter of an uncontrolled eruption.

However, when we examine what happened in the Holocaust, when we observe the importance of the ideology, when we consider the efforts Germany was willing to expend to persecute and capture every last Jew, and when we contemplate the diplomatic effort they invested, the organized network they set up throughout occupied Europe, and the vast importance Hitler and the Nazi leaders attributed to this matter in their thinking and their understanding of the development of the war -- then we understand how decisive the ideological antisemitic element was.

Furthermore, as a matter of fact, at a certain stage, the murderous aspects of the Germans racism began to fixate not only on the Jews but on the Slavs, for example. Consider the Germans attitude toward Soviet prisoners of war -- how many millions of them were murdered -- and the overwhelming difference between this attitude and their treatment of British, French, and American POWs. Observe also the Nazis attitude toward the Polish national intelligentsia.

In the inter-war period, these peoples – such as the Poles, for instance – gave less thought to the possibility that the Nazi racism also threatened them as an ideology and that eventually they might have to pay for this unbottled genie. They believed that this violent, benighted force was aimed at the Jews only. Deep down, many of them (maybe more, maybe less) approved of it in a way or, even if they did not justify it, did not totally reject it. Many felt it was not totally unjustified. Then, during the Holocaust, something very important happened: this incarnation of antisemitism attained a magnitude that threatened all of humanity, the foundations of civilization and life. Goldhagen

has brought the debate back to this path ,from which people had tended to flee until then.

Trends in Holocaust research

Q- Perhaps this is really an opportunity to ask you to review, from your vantage point after some thirty years of research, how you regard the development of Holocaust research .

G- Research is a laboratory of sorts, and laboratories, of course, turn out things from which people eventually benefit. Modern technologies were created in the laboratory, and only in the laboratory are diseases that destroy people overcome. However, when the process is over the laboratory is relegated to the sidelines and somewhat forgotten, and humankind lays claim to the results only. The same thing happens in research. The results of research seep out in various ways -- education, books, culture and the like -- and as these circles expand, they reach many people.

Several very important things have happened in Holocaust research. The first attempts to understand and describe the Holocaust comprehensively and conclusively were made by Gerald Reitlinger, Raul Hilberg, and Leon Poliakov. Each of them, especially Reitlinger and Hilberg, based himself on German documentation above all. Jewish documentation was either absent or the fringes of research. The resulting picture was flawed if not distorted, because the Jews who populated it were merely tokens, passive or mute objects, in the historical progression. The victim hardly existed. In fact, the Jews were nothing but material -- the debris of history. Historiography did not address the Jews as a living world of feelings and actions that exerted an influence of some kind or as a player that, at this specific time, attempted to fight for certain principles to the limits of its ability.

When you asked them why they did this, the answer was that the Jews had no documentation; that the survivor's testimonies were not valuable and had nothing new or additional to say; and that the Jews were the passive objects

of developments in a society and that they did not have their own history. [They considered [the Jews behavior evidence that they were not a living people equipped with the cultural and developmental ability to take action in response to historical tests.

A simple example of this is Raul Hilbergs book, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, published in 1961. He begins the book very well. He said, "I am not discussing the Jews; I am discussing the extermination machine." He accomplished something important, monumental. In fact, he proved that [the Nazis] had a consistent plan that ballooned into a military operation of sorts, carried out alongside the war from beginning to end. He proved that a consistent process had occurred, something that encompassed all of Europe, equipped with a bureaucratic mechanism.

However, this was not enough for Hilberg. He said he would not discuss the Jews. (In fact, he had no grasp of Jewish affairs.) He did not study the Jewish history of the period. He was not familiar with the Jewish documentation and took no interest in it. Just the same, he brought charges against the Judenraete and the masses of Jews who helped the Nazis, or who were psychologically willing to surrender and inclined to accept matters without any resistance whatsoever.

In fact, he regarded the Jews in some way as an element that took part in its own destruction. Although he did not say this in so many words, it is implicit in his remarks -- in absolute contrast to what really happened! At the time, the world did not protest against this attitude. On the contrary, various countries embraced it rather strongly. Hannah Arendt made similar allegations, arguing that had there no been Judenraete, there might have been 50,000 victims but not millions. In other words, it is the Jews fault that millions of victims were murdered. No one was outraged upon hearing this, except for a few lonely researchers. I was one of them; I was outraged by it from the first moment, and I spoke about it repeatedly.

Today, I believe we have proved the opposite. When I say “we,” I do not mean Israeli researchers only -- or others, such as Isaiah Trunk in the United States and, to a certain extent, Lucy Dawidowicz, etc. In the main, however, this enterprise was carried out in Israel.

At the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, at Yad Vashem, and in other Israeli universities, a Jewish approach to [Holocaust] research came into being. It proved that there is Jewish documentation, that the Jews were a thinking, understanding society that fought for its existence and sought ways to cope with what was happening in Germany, in Eastern Europe, and in Western Europe. I also think we have had an influence on the historiography of the Holocaust. Even Hilberg in his last books attempted to make amends. He succeeded so well because he is a man who finds it very hard to internalize and confess his mistakes.

Today, historical research that excludes any participant in the historical picture -- Jews, Germans, and other peoples who observed closely or were involved to some extent -- is not full-fledged historical research.

By the way, I do not like the term “bystanders,” because it pertains equally to Chinese who had absolutely nothing to do with the event and to an individual who lived a few kilometers from Treblinka. This is highly misleading, of course. Even among the Poles, not all were “bystanders”; some were active participants and others merely looked on. Therefore, I find the term very incoherent and indefinite.

Now I would like to address myself to developments in German research. From the standpoint of methodology, it is thorough research -- in terms of the German school of history, the resources available, and the tradition of historical endeavor.

German research has definitely made an important contribution. However, it diverted the scholarly effort so that it focused mainly on Germany itself and

with German Jewry. Poland, Hungary, the Baltic countries, and the Soviet Union were colonial zones of sorts, situated behind mountains of darkness. Afterwards, the preoccupation with Hitler began. Did Hitler know or didn't he? Did he give an order or didn't he? And if he gave an order, did he give it orally or in writing? Did they understand him or not? Did he hint at his wishes or did he express them in so many words? Thousands of pages of research have been devoted to these questions, which either lack clear-cut answers or have clear answers that are not given because an effort has been made to evade, twist, and blur them in order to avoid dealing with the other questions.

Another school of research focused intensively on the Nazi bureaucracy. It, too, was accompanied by one of the crudest oversights in research. These scholars (as well as Hannah Arendt) argued that [the Nazis] were armchair murderers, so to speak, and the entire murder operation took place on paper, without an unmediated encounter between murderer and victim. Well, this was stated either in ignorance or in an attempt to repress the truth. The murder operation that began with the Einsatzgruppen and that spanned vast occupied territories in the Soviet Union, Romania, and to an extent Poland, was the face-to-face murder of a million and a half people, maybe more. It was the horrific murder of children, of women, of utterly hopeless people. It was not the dispassionate act of desk-bound clerks. This is what they wished to ignore, and they argue that the murder was perpetrated through anonymous channels -- as if it were virtual, as if it had not been real murder, the most terrible and inhuman imaginable.

Today, a series of attempts to normalize and rationalize the Holocaust is being made -- to position it among events that belong to a sound world order and to fit it into the experiences of other people and peoples.

Take, for example, a man like Hans Mommsen, who was willing to believe that the annihilation of the Jews actually began as a matter of solving local difficulties, fed by local motives and initiatives, or by actions by Party radicals

who allowed local players to “toy” with the Jews so they would not interfere with the far-reaching plans of the German authorities.

Even a man such as Goetz Aly has argued that the Holocaust occurred because economically backward placelike Poland needed human engineering and sweeping economic reforms to prepare for vigorous modern industrial development. The Jews were the prime targets in these matters they were considered unproductive, futile element, and incompatible with these grandiose economic plans.

Or consider perceptions such as those of Zigmund Baumann (himself a Jew who experienced the Holocaust in one way or another, and whose wife was a victim of it). Baumann argued that the modern regime and political authorities has a tendency to impose violent change, to take control of society, to nullify the moral fundamental, and to override any inhibitions that stand in its way. In fact, not only do development and progress not stand in contrast to killing; the opposite is the case. Modern developmental society is the father of this killing and is fully equipped to implement it, having developed the bureaucracy and all the technical and legal resources that make it possible.

Or take, for example, the theories that consider the Holocaust no different from any other genocide and actually treat it as a typical feature of the twentieth century, a general part of the twentieth-century order of regimes, technology, bureaucracy, and the ability to kill.

All of these are attempts to blur the meaning of the Holocaust -- not always in a deliberate attempt to distort matters, but from inability to accommodate oneself to the fact that something that cannot be classified, catalogued, and defined in comprehensible and accepted terms has occurred.

We are in the midst of this. The fact that we are Israeli and Jewish historians does not make it easier because we are regarded as involved players. I do not deny it; our being Jewish and Israeli, or even survivors, has left an imprint on

our perception of history. It could hardly be otherwise. But these are very painful matters. But a similar imprint is a common phenomenon of generations and nations, for Germans and others. In any case, these are the directions in which Holocaust research has headed.

Let us return to our point of departure. Goldhagen did not engage directly in historiography and did not discuss all the research literature. However, I think that by the very fact of his allegations, he has filed an indictment, so to speak, against this historiographic trend and against the path that the modern school of research has chosen. The [modernists] picked up on this very quickly. This is why they are so angry about Goldhagen's perspective -- why they resist and attempt to discredit it.

Goldhagen's study, like Hilberg's, contains elements that should be accepted and are correct. Like any intellectual work, especially one that adopts an inclusive, one-sided, unequivocally judgmental approach, it contains elements that should be rejected. Overall, I think that Goldhagen has challenged the existing school of thought, brought about a rethinking, and led Holocaust research back to where it began - -to the most bewildering, most important focal points. Here is where his merit lies.

The Poles during the Holocaust -- Collaborators?

Indifferent bystanders? Or abettors?

Q- Now I would like to go over to another topic that has engaged you at length and perturbs you greatly -- the attitude of the Poles toward the Jews during the Holocaust.

I will ask the question in the most general way possible. How would you characterize the attitude of the Polish people toward the Holocaust that occurred in its midst, toward the Jews and, foremost, toward Polish Jewry and the European Jewry that was in greater part murdered in Poland? Do the Poles bear a responsibility of sorts for what took place on their soil?

G- Perhaps I should begin with some general remarks. I do not share the notion, which one often hears, that all Poles were always antisemitic, that they “imbibed antisemitism with their mothers milk”, and that antisemitism is a Polish national trait of sorts. It’s not true. The very fact that the Jews spent some eight hundred years in Poland and found a home there -- for better or worse -- disproves this sweeping statement. That Poland was often a bad home for Jews not only reflected the attitude taken toward them. It also reflected the fact that Poland was a very poor country that experienced a great deal of trouble, many wars, repression, and loss of independence. Truth to tell, Poland was certainly very important in certain respects of the development of Polish Jewry, especially in terms of autonomy, maintaining distinctness, and continuity in preserving the Jewish tradition. Generally, it is worth recalling that in the late eighteenth century, 70–80 percent of all Jews in the world descended from Polish Jewry.

I also know that in the Polish literature that I have read -- I have a soft spot for it -- a large number of great authors wrote about Jews as other authors in Europe did not. I think the poet who is considered the greatest national seer of Poland, Adam Mickiewicz, wrote such warm and wonderful things about Jews that according to legend -- maybe its true -- his mother was of Frankist origin, i.e., of Jewish origin. This motif recurs many times in Polish literature.

On the other hand, the most decisive and powerful national current in the formation of modern Polish nationhood -- perhaps it is better to say Polish nationalism -- was the movement known as the Endeks (the self-styled “national-democratic” movement), and it banned Jews from its list. The leaders of the Endek movement believed that something about the Jews was incompatible with the Polish mentality and that the experience in integrating these two elements disserves the Poles and blurs their uniqueness. They believed that a few Jews could assimilate into the Polish nation and that the masses of Jews were a bad influence. Since the Jews had much influence to exert, they were dangerous to the Polish cause.

The Endeks were headed by Roman Dmowski, one of the most notable antisemites in this decisive period in history. He was active for fifty years. He was born in 1864, exactly one year after the so-called “January Rising” -- the Polish rebellion that elicited a rethinking and re-elaboration of the forms of Polish nationhood -- and he died in 1939, on the verge of World War II. Dmowski had an allure of sorts, a pan-Slavic and anti-German allure, and he considered his attitude toward Jews to be one of the fundamentals of his national conception. His party, composed of the middle class, amassed great power. It considered itself, not without justice, as a source of guidance in the national education of the Poles and a leader in Poland's transition from the traditional feudal estate to the patterns of modern national society.

Dmowski spoke about the destructive Jewish mentality and, at certain stages, lauded European fascism and even Nazism -- even though he and his party were avowedly anti-German for the most part. Nazism had deprived the Jews of their influence on Germany. Hitler, after all, was an Austrian, and for some Poles, the most dangerous Germans were actually the Prussians, not the Austrians. This illustrates the extent to which antisemitism affected their perception.

However, we must consider not only the antisemitism of the leadership but also the way antisemitism developed among the Poles themselves. Several generations earlier -- some time in 1880 or 1881 -- antisemitism in Poland began to acquire a comprehensive nature and a power that rose to a peak in the inter-war period. This antisemitism had two perceptible traits that distinguished it from antisemitism in Germany. First, it was less ideological and, for this reason, less racist but more religious. In other words, religious superstitions and religious segregation were the most important factors in branding the Jews as inferior and different -- Jews eat in a certain way, dress in a certain way, do not maintain hygiene, practice deceit, etc.

The second characteristic is that Poland was a very poor country. It was overpopulated, especially in its rural areas, and there was tremendous

pressure from villagers to push their way into the cities and find jobs and livelihood there. Jews were very visible in the cities; accounted for 10 percent of the population countrywide (as against 1 percent at the most in Germany) and for 30 percent of the population of the large cities. Antisemitic political forces portrayed the Jews as obstacles to the urbanization of these masses and the modern development of Polish industry and the economy. This antisemitism had elements from “real life”. Jacob Leschinsky said somewhere that Polish antisemitism has, among other things, an element of a war for bread. This did not occur in Germany. There was no conflict between Jews and Germans. The Jews were a loyal element that, generally speaking, strived to assimilate and integrate into German society and regarded law and the state as sources of protection and patronage for the Jews. Poland was different; there the Jew felt that the state was looking for ways to discriminate against him. This antisemitism, at its peak and in its most extreme incarnation, set itself the goal of dislodging the Jews from Poland -- by general evacuation or at least by inducing many to leave.

The most extreme Polish nationalist elements wished to rid Poland of Jews altogether. The more moderate stated that a large proportion of the Jews must leave because Poland has too many Jews. After all, no country outside of the Yishuv in Palestine had such a high percentage of Jews. (Of course, one must ask oneself whether one is not entitled to live in a given place by having been settled there for centuries. Is one not part of this soil? Is one not part of life in this country? Is one less entitled than members of the majority? Isn't one fully entitled for reason of being a resident or a citizen?

On the other hand, I think that only an antisemitism that adopted the persona of the Jew as part of a universal political conception that defined the Jew as an impediment to existence, to sound world order -- only this kind of antisemitism could and did lead to physical annihilation. Brutal, crude Polish antisemites were capable of certain things, including violent attacks against Jews, but to the best of my understanding, and in my opinion, they were not capable of moving up to annihilation.

Emmanuel Ringelblum, the great historian of the Holocaust, wrote correctly that the permeation of the Polish people with this inter-war antisemitism influenced Polish-Jewish relations during the war and the Holocaust. It affected the Jews plight during the Holocaust in that the Polish underground did not help the Jews and few Poles tried to rescue Jews amidst the general indifference or hostility. Nevertheless, it is not correct to say that the Poles were partners in the destruction of the Jews. Poland was a totally occupied country -- unlike France and Belgium, and even in contrast to the Netherlands, where the occupation was very strong. The Poles in Poland had no say in determining the nature of the regime and the implementation of its policies. Only the Germans established camps. Indeed, a camp such as Auschwitz was originally built to take action against Poles; only afterwards did it become mostly an instrument of the "final solution."

Q- What you are really saying, then, is that the Polish antisemitism that became so entrenched between the world wars prevented the Poles from helping the Jews at a time when Jews and Poles seemingly had a common enemy. Apart from the moral issue, however, could they offer meaningful assistance or change the course of events?

G- That's a good question. What could they do? The issue is primarily moral but not exclusively so. From 1939 to the spring of 1942, the Jews could be given not only moral support, as you say, but existential assistance as well. Look, hundreds of thousands of people died of hunger, disease, and the sense that they had no friend in the world. They were placed in concentration camps and felt that no voice, no echo was getting through to them. It is a very great thing to offer moral assistance in such a situation. Let us recall what these Jews experienced before they were put to death -- the human suffering inflicted on them at that time in ghettos such as those in Warsaw or Lodz. The Holocaust is not only the killing of Jews, it is the creation of repression, suffering, and humiliation that no modern society in the past few centuries, let alone countries that attained an accepted norm and level of life, has matched .

It is true that the Polish underground issued reports on what was happening to the Jews, but it did not assist the Jews because, in the perception of their political organization, the Jews were considered a strange minority – not Polish citizens and a part of the Polish nation. Thus, if the question is whether the Poles could have provided material assistance, my answer is: not much. However, they could have eased the suffering slightly.

Something else should be kept in mind -- that 4,000 to 4,500 of the Righteous among the Nations were Polish. It was much harder to be such a person in Poland than elsewhere. First, Poland was occupied, terrorized, and repressed. The Polish people suffered grievously during the war. One hears about three million Polish victims during this time -- a fact that should not be forgotten. (To be sure, this bears no resemblance to the Holocaust of the Jews because even three million is hardly 10 percent of the population of Poland. In contrast, 95 percent of Jews on Polish soil were murdered.)

Whenever the Germans discovered these Polish Righteous among the Nations, they killed them and often [murdered] their families as well. This did not happen elsewhere. In other countries, they sometimes sent such people to concentration camps. This placed them in danger but did not consign them to summary death. Additionally, they had to beware of Polish informers. There was an element in Poland -- true, they say it belonged partly to the underworld -- that identified Jews and turned them over to the Germans. The Germans were inept at finding Jews, but the Poles were good at it. The result is a very complex and ambivalent web.

To the best of my understanding, Polish antisemitism even at its most extreme did not lead to the Holocaust. To the expulsion of Jews from Poland, yes -- to the Holocaust, no. Second, the Poles were not collaborators in the sense of bearing responsibility. Of course, there were cases in which Poles killed Jews. But the Poles collectively did not identify [with the annihilation of the Jews], and if they did they neither spoke nor wrote about it. They were not partners in

it. It was not the Poles fault that the camps were built in Poland and the Poles had nothing to do with establishing them.

However, when one speaks of offering the greatest possible moral and material assistance, and afterwards of rescue, [one concludes that] more Jews could have been saved had this rescue been encouraged more vehemently and less belatedly. How many more? That is hard to say. Poland could not have prevented the Holocaust at that time. It could have eased it.

Q- In fact, then, were there only a few manifestations of solidarity?

G- There were some. They should not be ignored. They were few in number.

Q- Didn't an alliance against a common enemy take shape?

G- No, it didn't.

Q- In this context, I would like to ask about something you alluded to previously. The Jews were separate even before the Holocaust. Voluntarily they consorted with each other -- in Jewish unions, Jewish political movements, and Jewish communities. Their social complexion was very different, much more urban. They remained socially, religiously, and even ideologically distinct in inter-war Poland. Doesn't this help explain why solidarity did not form during the war?

G- Of course it does. But the real question is different. Let me rephrase this. Look how the Jews lived in Poland and look at what the same Jews accomplished when they emigrated to the United States or Israel. [The difference] points to their potential. At that time, Poland badly needed enterprising people with abilities in economic and scientific development. Had it given Jews this opportunity, it would perhaps have come out ahead.

Thus, the Jews were not rejected only for having a different . On the contrary, in countries that gave Jews full freedom and allowed them to do whatever they wanted -- to organize as Jews or to integrate -- many Jews chose to integrate. A dialectic was definitely at work: Jews did not organize separately just so, especially in the modern era; they also did it because they knew they were not wanted. And the feeling was mutual.

The Judenraete in historical perspective

Q- Prof. Gutman, I would like to change the subject again and ask you about the Judenrat. In the early research, mainly until the late 1960s -- mainly that performed outside of Israel -- and for quite some time in the public consciousness of Israelis and survivors, the Judenraete were perceived negatively. Some argued that they had collaborated with the Nazis; others argued that the Holocaust would not have attained such a magnitude had they not existed. Subsequent research, in the 1970s and afterwards, said that one has to draw distinctions and avoid all-embracing generalization. What is your approach? Can you generalize about the Judenraete and address yourself to extreme cases, such as Lodz or Vilna, where the leadership seemingly not only collaborated but actually adopted the murderers behavioral codes.

G- It is true that there was, and to a large extent still is, an approach that regards the Judenraete as having estranged themselves from the Jewish cause and even as having betrayed it. Some think of them as having helped the Nazis perpetrate the murder, either by participating or by misleading the Jews and entrapping them in the ghettos. The survivors, Jewish and non-Jewish public opinion, and scholars shared this attitude to some extent .

Today, I think we have largely changed our minds. The first response was an emotional reaction of sorts. It was not based on familiarity with the material, it did not consider the options available to the Judenraete, and it did not view the entire process from a historical perspective, or in comparison with similar situations in the occupied countries.

Q- Why?

G- First, the Jews -- survivors and others -- looked for someone to blame. This search involved a measure of self-affliction and self-accusation, along with the feeling that their own weakness and helplessness played a role in the tragedy and the disaster. The accusation was directed at the leadership that rested between the hammer and the anvil, between the Germans and the Jews, and this leadership became the main object of accusation.

Furthermore, the underground members and ghetto fighters who survived the Holocaust continued their reckoning, or dispute, with the Judenraete to some extent. After all, they had confronted the Judenraete vehemently throughout that period, including the last phase of the Final Solution and the murder of European Jewry. After the Holocaust, when they described the war they had conducted and how they coped with their hardships, they blamed the Judenraete for what had happened.

A few scholars, such as Hilberg in the first edition of his book, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, published in 1961, accused the Judenrat of collaborating with the Nazis. In fact, Hilberg regarded the Judenrat and the Jewish leadership as part of the destruction process, as a tool of self-destruction. As I have already mentioned, Hilberg's arguments were not based on familiarity with Jewish documents. He did not probe the attitudes of the Judenraete -- how the Judenrat, in its own way, tried to cope with the reality and the threat under which it worked.

Hannah Arendt did the same thing. In one of the editions of her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, published after the Eichmann trial, she says that were it not for the Judenraete, the Germans might have been able to murder tens of thousands of Jews but not millions. Arendt, too, understood nothing about what had happened in Eastern Europe. She did not examine thoroughly, if at all, how the Jews were persecuted, abducted, and transported, under what circumstances the Jews lived, and where the Judenrat people figured in everything that took place.

Truth to tell, even a few Israeli researchers regarded the issue this way and expressed the same accusations.

Today, I would say that we are much more knowledgeable. We have discovered the primary documentation of the Judenrat. We have documents such as Czerniakow's diary, protocols of the Judenraete in Bialystok and Lublin, primary material from Kovno, and many testimonies about the chairmen of these councils. The picture they give us is much more complex, more diverse, and anything but one-sided.

First, it transpires that until late 1941 -- until the mass killings began -- the Judenrat had been an important player in Jewish centers for quite some time, before ghettoization. and afterwards in the ghettos themselves. The councils strived to meet vital basic needs such as food, housing, jobs, care of the most indigent, and hospitals. They also dealt with matters in which the kehillot had never been involved before the Holocaust, under ordinary conditions, such as waste removal, street sweeping, and internal order police. They did this under the harshest conditions imaginable -- mortality, morbidity, tens of thousands of victims, especially in the large ghettos. Anyone who examines these matters will see that those people were torn in their hearts and minds.

Q- Are you referring to the leading circles?

G- I cannot say this about all of them. But consider a man such Adam Czerniakow, about whom most opinion was negative. If you look at his diary, you discover a man who, literally day and night, was immersed in fierce emotions that clashed ceaselessly. He was torn, alone in the system. The Germans subjected him to humiliation and, at times, beatings; he also faced never-ending pressure and demands within the ghetto. Under conditions of terror, he was the only liaison between the ghettoized Jews and the Germans. He rushed from place to place and begged and pleaded for the people who had vanished, for hungry children -- there were thousands of such people --

and his entreaties were not answered. Under such circumstances, there is always much that one can criticize harshly. He did not generate the greatest possible revenue from the affluent Jews in the Warsaw ghetto; he did not divide the resources in a way that would direct them to the hungriest and most tormented people. But he made efforts to do this, to respond to the gravest kinds of distress.

Q- Some have described him as a drab bureaucrat with limited horizons.

G- His abilities were definitely not equal to the task. However, let me add parenthetically -- I have devoted much time and thought to this matter -- that I also harbored a negative prejudice and much resentment about the Judenraete, including Czerniakow. Suddenly, I discovered that before the war he had come from an assimilated family and had assimilationist views. He was far from the Jews and the Jewish reality and played only a very limited role in internal Jewish public life. In the ghetto, however, step by step, he became a man who shared the lives of these immiserated, afflicted Jews. He grew closer and closer to them. In the end, seeing that all of his efforts were to no avail, he committed suicide as the Germans were about to demand that he turn over Jews.

The problem becomes difficult when one reaches the beginning of the extermination stage. Until then, there was a continual struggle for life. Clearly many would fall victim, but there was still hope that the majority could survive. When the extermination began, much tougher decisions had to be made. This was the watershed.

Several Judenrat chairmen -- especially Rumkowski in Lodz, Merin in Zaglembia, Gens in Vilna, and Barasz in Bialystok -- were enterprising people. One may even call them charismatic. They believed they had room to act independently as leaders. They thought they knew how to bargain with the Germans and could extract more from them than anyone else. They even thought their ability to get along with the Germans might avert disaster.

We must realize that these people did not know the meaning of the Final Solution. To do that, one has to distinguish between the German scheme -- a plan to annihilate European Jewry -- and killing. They did not know the Nazis' overall intention. They knew the Nazis were killing Jews. At first, however, they thought the Nazis were merely killing Jews who had been under Soviet rule because they considered them partners of the Soviet regime and held them responsible for it. Generally, too, there was a war on; there was chaos. In such a situation, people are killed -- foremost Jews.

Afterwards, when the Final Solution began, the Germans applied deception. (Perhaps here and there, quite a few Germans in local apparatuses were truly ignorant.) The Germans seemed to be deporting only Jews who had no utility from their standpoint, those considered freeloaders or unneeded, but working Jews (and their kin) -- those who held industrial jobs and were aiding the German war effort -- would survive. The way the deportations took place seemed to confirm this hypothesis. The policy or perception of these Judenraete was that a terrible disaster was occurring and there was no escaping it, but that some Jews should be sacrificed to save the others. It was unparalleled! Some, such as Barasz or Gens, said they had to make some very tough decisions that would cut into living flesh. "We literally have to pay in blood," they said, "but it is necessary, and we will stand before the court of history".

Q- Did they believe they could save the working segment at the expense of the others?

G- At first they thought they would save the majority. They thought all they had to do was increase the percent of workers and productive Jews, and they believed their actions could assist in increasing the numbers of survivors.

Q- In other words, they applied a pragmatic logic.

G- It was definitely a pragmatic way of thinking. In other words, they resigned themselves to reality and said that by participating in it they could protect people of value in Jewish society. "We can save families who could not be saved in any other way," they thought. "Perhaps this will lighten the severity of the blow." And they worked to bring that about.

Q- But this forced them to decide who would be given a job or a work permit in the ghetto, and who would be placed aboard the trains and deported.

G- It wasn't so simple. Take, for example, what happened in the Vilna ghetto. Gens and the Jewish police were sent to the town of Oszmiana to perform a seleksia among the Jews. And they did it. When they returned to the Vilna ghetto, they found it in a state of agitation; the underground denounced them as collaborators. Gens gathered a small group of people, including public figures, and spoke with them.

The minutes of this meeting have survived. Gens explained what he did, why he did it, and how he had managed to save lives. One of the most prominent people in the Vilna ghetto -- a director of YIVO in Vilna, a renaissance man, a great expert in Yiddish culture and Jewish culture generally, a man widely admired for his morals -- Selik Kalmanowitz -- wrote in his diary that he agreed with Gens. The underground members who had criticized him were young people who could not fully fathom the terror.

Parenthetically, I would like to add that Abba Kovner, one of the underground leaders -- one of those young people to whom Kalmanowitz spoke so harshly, even contemptuously -- edited and published Kalmanowitz's diary after the war. He had known Kalmanowitz and, at a certain stage, had the strength to admit that his view, which reflected part of the Jewish world at that time -- that belonged to the process occurring in Jewish society -- was not devoid of legitimacy.

Q- If so, where would you draw the line beyond which [the leaders behavior] was no longer legitimate?

G- I am not a judge. It is hard for me to say what should have been done. In some situations, one has a range of rationales within which each individual has his own justice, which contains points that may verge on absolute justice. But matters were not so black-and-white.

Q- Even the extreme cases that you mentioned, such as Gens in Vilna and Rumkowski in Lodz ?

G- It has to do with the fact that the Jews had no way out. [These leaders] were wrong. However, the difference is that they were wrong in their assessment. They did not understand the Germans true intentions. It was in fact a horrifically incredible scheme; after all, the entire phenomenon of Nazi Germany is so difficult to understand. Had it been easier to understand, the Munich agreement would not have been signed. The European states would not have attempted to appease Hitler and would not have believed that they could find a middle ground with him and solve problems at the international level in exchange for concessions and an appeasement policy.

Q- Are you saying that they made a mistake but did not commit a moral failure?

G- I would not say that they did not commit a moral failure. I do not know if human beings are morally entitled to do what they did. I do not know, but I cannot judge. Consigning Jews to death is a terrible thing, certainly contrary to and prohibited by Jewish religious law and human ethics. On the other hand, were religious law and human ethics created for situations such as a Holocaust? Could individuals during the Holocaust with answers and counsel?

I wish to add another important point; again I will give an example:

In Lodz, more than 60,000 Jews remained alive until August 1944 -- shortly before the city was liberated. This is to a great extent the result of Rumkowski's policy. Now, it is hard to say that all 60,000–70,000 of these Jews would have survived if the Soviets had advanced more quickly. The Germans had already proved their ability to murder tens of thousands of Jews within a few days. It is a fact, however, that some of these Jews were sent to Auschwitz and other places later than otherwise, in August 1944. The Germans stopped gassing Jews four months after that, and some of these Jews survived. They made up part of the *sheerit ha-pleta*, the core group of Jewish survivors that played an important historical role after the war. Thus, however disgusting Rumkowski's personal behavior often was, after the fact, when we consider it, there is much to say for his policy.

Zionism and Jewish identity after the war

Q- With your permission, let us discuss the meaning of the Holocaust after the war. I would like to explore the relationship between Zionism and the Holocaust in several contexts: Does the Holocaust teach a Zionist lesson? Does it show that Zionism is correct? Is it at all proper to draw a connection between Zionism and the establishment of Israel and the Holocaust? Does the Zionist perception use the Holocaust excessively and perhaps even manipulatively, as some have argued?

G- I would differentiate between the period immediately after the war and the present time. There is certainly a relationship between the Holocaust and the profound political, military, and psychological process -- transformation -- that swept the Jews after World War II. It could not be otherwise. Ultimately, the Holocaust was the destruction of European Jewry. This is tantamount to the destruction of Jewry at that time, since much of American Jewry and the Yishuv in Palestine was of Polish and Eastern European origin. Thus, American Jewry and the Yishuv belong to the very flesh of these Jews -- nationally, in terms of Jewish consciousness and identity, and simply, in family terms. Therefore, one cannot say that the Holocaust had no effect. It affected the Jews of the Yishuv, as Haim Guri wrote. Guri described how this tragedy,

for young people born in Israel, became a motive in the struggle and war for Israel's independence. American Jews, too, who largely kept silent during the Nazi era and World War II lest they aggravate American antisemitism, suddenly became agents of struggle after the Holocaust. The Holocaust created a massive fault.

Another subject is the meaning of the Holocaust for the survivors. For them, Zionism meant something very simple -- the feeling that Jews should never rely solely on others tolerance and good will and should never be powerless in confronting danger. This feeling became a primary element in the consciousness of these Jews. I know them. I was one of them and worked among them for two years. In very simple and elementary terms, their Zionism -- or the lesson they learned from this period -- was in essence the feeling of the overwhelming majority that they could not resume their pre-Holocaust lives and that they have to rehabilitate their lives among Jews and have the strength and the right to defend themselves.

Not to mention what happened in Poland. After the war, as 250,000 out of 3.3 million Jews returned, a wave of murderous pogroms began, of which that in Kielce is the most famous. It is true that Jews were not the only targets of this violence; it was also in the midst of a civil war that was sweeping Poland at the time. But Jews were among the targets. These Jews reached the conclusion that neither world civilization nor the individual, especially in Europe and especially in Poland, has conscience or responsibility after what happened to the Jews. This had an effect.

Another important factor in the initial period was identification with Zionism. All of these Jews regarded resistance and warfare as models. The agent of this warfare was the Zionist movement, particularly the Zionist youth movements. This effect was very powerful. In the DP camps, for example, in the lists for the Zionist Congress after World War II, the left-wing Zionist movements depicted fighters such as Yitzhak Zuckerman. Zivia Lubetkin, and Chaïke Grossman as exemplars. They attracted many votes because the core group

of survivors considered these people the embodiment of an alternative perception of action during the Holocaust. The ghetto uprising and the partisan warfare, with which the fighters were identified, gave them a sense a sense of self-worth.

In this context, I had an argument with a friend of mine, who claimed that had the core group of survivors been allowed to emigrate to the United States immediately after the war, many would have gone and two-thirds would not have settled in Israel. It is hard to say “What if...”, but equally I could say that had the clandestine immigrants not been barred from Palestine, banished to Cyprus, and forced to sit there for years in camps -- waiting their turn to be shipped to Palestine in the illegal immigration movement, after everything they had experienced -- and had they been able to go to Palestine right away, perhaps more than two-thirds would have come. After all, they had the run of Europe -- the borders were fluid; one could infiltrate almost any anywhere -- but they did not stay there.

Q- In other words, the Holocaust gave the survivors a very strong Zionist consciousness.

G- When we say “Zionism,” we are referring to an ideology. In the context of the survivors, I do not know if one can speak of a sophisticated ideology that attempts to solve historical problems and stems from a complex, inclusive worldview. Instead, their Zionism was a response to their human experience.

Q- Was Zionism willing to listen to them?

G- That is another question. I do not know if we will go into it. Zionism was willing to do one thing, one tremendous thing. Even if the Zionist emissaries described the survivors as human material that had suffered too severely ever to become healthy, positive, and able to sustain a sound society again, even if they often considered the survivors a burden, no one argued against admitting

them all to Palestine on that account. Everyone said that the survivors belonged with the Zionists in Palestine.

Q- But it is sometimes alleged, by Aharon Appelfeld, for example, that the survivor was not given an opportunity to work through his experiences, to tell his story.

G- It is true, and I think it was a big mistake. But who was prepared to deal with this back then? And where else was the survivor given this opportunity? In the United States? For American Jews, these “newcomers,” who arrived decades after the most recent large-scale immigration, were considered “survivors” for decades. There are no such people in Israel. In Israel, there are Jews who were partners in the formative stage of the establishment of the state. In America, by contrast, even if survivors did well, they are still called “survivors.” It is true that the veteran Jews of Palestine, and to a certain extent good pioneering elements treated [the survivors] with condescension and insensitivity. It was their inner conviction that they should create a new Jew and that this should be done by coercion. They did not understand the fire that raged in these people’s souls.

It was not intentional, but it happened. Israel was a very ideological place at that time. Zionism developed at a time of powerful ideologies that imposed themselves on the wishes and the development of individuals. [The Zionists] wanted to impose their aspirations, wishes, ideology, and plans on this individual, and demanded that he give up his personal domain and inclinations and to fit into the framework.

Q- You said at first that we should draw a distinction between the lesson immediately learned by the survivors and the historical lesson.

G- There is a problem today, and I am very sensitive to it. The Holocaust should guide us in many matters. It should guide us by showing us how to value the fact that the Jews have a state. It should guide us as human beings

in rejecting racism and in avoiding humiliation and brutalization of others, coercing of minorities, and so on. However, some consider the Holocaust a secret weapon to brandish in political negotiations and an accusation against the entire world.

Today the Holocaust is starting to look like a tool of sorts that gives us a preferred status and lets us demand and obtain things that others, who did not experience the Holocaust, cannot obtain. Matters are not as unequivocal as that, to be sure, but there is such a trend.

Q- Do you consider it cynical?

G- I don't know; it's very hard to say. What troubles me most, however, is that sometimes nothing else remains. Then it is cynical. Perhaps it is better defined as hollow. It is not the whole truth.

Q- I want to bring this point into sharper focus. Do you see anything illegitimate about the way Israel or Jewish organizations sometimes use the Holocaust in political and economic contexts?

G- No. I do not consider it illegitimate.

Q- However, you would not want this to be all that remains, and you prefer that it not be the focal point.

G- The problem is larger, of course. The problem is how to identify patterns of remembrance that will ensure the lasting consciousness of this event. The Jewish tradition has preserved the memory of the destruction of the Temple for all of posterity. The Jews of Spain bequeathed remembrance of the expulsion of Spanish Jewry to all of world Jewry. It is impossible to revert to that kind of commemoration. We are living in a different society; we are part of the global village. Our culture and media are different, we have ideas that are

shared by all of humankind. This is a good thing. We have to find the right way to express these matters.

For this reason, I oppose any method that turns the Holocaust into a manipulative or pragmatic device that exists only to help us attain advantages. I also oppose those who think [the Holocaust] should be forgotten so we may become full-fledged world citizens. The distance between the two requires a great deal of thought.

Q- Would you say that Zionism is a necessary or self-evident conclusion after the Holocaust? Does the Holocaust vindicate Zionism in the court of history?

G- In the modern Jewish world -- since the Emancipation -- there have been several major currents. One current, which made significant inroads in Germany of all places, favored integration and even a certain degree of assimilation. It advocated the integration of Jewish life into national life in German or among other countries and people. They expected the Jews, after the revision and adjustment of their religion, to be considered a religious group similar to others such as the Catholics and the Lutherans. They would be Germans of the Mosaic faith.

Another widely held view was the Marxist one, which considered the whole question of anti-Jewish discrimination and antisemitism an artificial by-product of the so-called class conflict. According to this conception, all clashes and conflicts in human society are rooted in the existence of a class society. If we eliminate the division of people into the part who own all means of production and wealth and the oppressed and exploited [masses], antisemitism will vanish, too. This powerful current admitted that the French Revolution had introduced formal human equality but asserted that it had left the class contrasts in place. These contrasts still divide people, and antisemitism is part of it. When the class distinction is totally eliminated, the Jewish problem will be solved as well.

There was another current among the Jews. An example is Isaac Bashevis Singer's father (whom Singer describes in a wonderful book, *In My Father's Court*), who was a rabbinical judge in Warsaw, on Krochmalna Street, a street of Jewish poverty. The man did not want to be a rabbinical judge recognized by the Polish authorities, because that would require him to learn Polish. Make no mistake -- he was able to learn anything, but he did not wish to. He considered it an act of alienation on the part of a Jew who lived in a world of faith and commandments of his religion and heritage. He believed it the Jews' duty to live the fullest possible Jewish life and to wait for Redemption.

Then there was Zionism, rooted in the feeling that the constellation of European nationalism has no room for Jews. This was Hertzl's conception. He had nothing against European nationalism -- he believed in civilization -- but he believed that it reserved no place for the Jews, that every [Jewish] attempt to integrate into European nationalism would fail, and that the Jews were threatened by such a reality.

Today we know -- no sophistry can help in this matter -- that even Zionism did not and could not realize that a Holocaust was about to occur. However, it came closer [than the other currents] to understanding the threat that the Jews faced. That is a great accomplishment.

Q- In other words, in retrospect as a historian, you say Zionism was a movement that knew best how to analyze the Jewish reality correctly. Even after the Holocaust, however, the Jewish people continued to pursue assimilative patterns.

G- I would dare say that there can be no authentic Jewish religious faith today. Absolute faith belongs to the past. But what of it? So the Jew will be an American or a Canadian? After all, what are Canadians, what are Americans? They came from England, Sweden, Germany, the Slavic countries -- not to speak of Africa as slaves -- and from Puerto Rico and South America. No one

denies that they are Americans; no one denies that a power such as the United States is not a people in the sense of being an ethnic unit. So the Jews will be part of that. For me, however, Jews and Jewish existence represent a value that is dear to me as a human being, not to mention at the national level and, I think, in terms of human society at large.

I have another point to add; again I will give you an example. While in Poland not long ago, I was invited to dinner with a writer of Jewish origin, and another family was there. The man in this family was a Jewish academician. We spoke about many matters, including their families. Their families have been acquainted for many, many years. Both are Jewish families; both have long been integrated into Polish life. The hosts have a daughter abroad who married a non-Jew. The second family has a son; he is also abroad and he also married a non-Jew. At a certain moment, the man said how sad it was that our two children had not married each other. They spoke in a human fashion, the way people speak. I thought to myself (as they did not) that the Jews also in our times really do seem to have a mentality of their own, and it cannot be helped. It isn't a racial thing; it's a matter of certain traits, certain tendencies, a certain culture, a way of thinking and behaving that create a sense of nearness. There is something special about Jews, as there is about other peoples. I do not say it is better or worse, but a partnership of sorts has come about. Such a thing is not easily relinquished, either individually or collectively.

Q- What about Zionism?

G- With respect to what I told you before and what I am telling you now, I am not speaking as a historian. This isn't a matter of history. But can you imagine the existence of the Jewish people today without the State of Israel? Of course, there is a stratum of devout Jews who transcend this, but they are a small percent of the Jewish people. For most other Jews, consciously or not, aside from some traditional ties, the two main motives that connect them to

the Jewish roots and nourish their Jewishness are the existence of the State of Israel and the Holocaust.

Q- So, if I understand you correctly, you consider Zionism a solution for the Jewish people in the modern era, irrespective of the Holocaust. In this respect, the Holocaust is “neither here nor there”.

G- I would not express it that way, because today you cannot speak about the Jewish consciousness or identity of an American Jew without taking the Holocaust into account. I am speaking about the present; I do not know what the future holds in store.

Q- But according to what you have said, the State of Israel is important for the Jewish world, Jewish existence, or Jewish identity, irrespective of the Holocaust.

G-It also depends on the Holocaust, because they also perceive the State of Israel as being associated with the Holocaust to some extent. I am not speaking about whether the State of Israel was or was not created because of the Holocaust. That is an important point, but I do not wish to address it. What matters is that World War II ended in 1945 and the state was formed in 1948. In Jewish consciousness in the free countries, and in Zionism, the state was perceived as a response to the Holocaust or at least associated with it. They are inseparable.

Holocaust remembrance in the West -- between coping and trivialization

Q- You spoke about perpetuating Holocaust remembrance among the Jews. Can you explain why it is important for non-Jews to commemorate and concern themselves with the Holocaust?

G- It is important because the Holocaust was also a disaster for non-Jews. People realize that there is a limit to the possibility of being human at home and inhuman elsewhere. As Himmler said, were very decent among each

other, we'd never steal anything, we'll behave fairly and morally. And with respect to the Jews, murder is permissible.

It transpired -- it could not have been otherwise -- that such thinking boomerangs when it is carried to extremes. Thus, its eventual victims were not only Jews. Jews were the first victims, but the real victims were the human being, human society, and society's way of life.

Q- But what about America, which had nothing to do with what happened?

G- Here is an interesting phenomenon to consider: those who learned the lesson of the Holocaust were not the European peoples. The nation that regarded the Holocaust as a lesson for people at large and for humankind was first and foremost America. Not the Jews; in the first place, the Jews were regarded as victims who had been killed, just as a person does not brag about a relative who had experienced or was victimized by such a terrible tragedy. The Jews put the Holocaust on low flame. The Holocaust may have enriched American Jewry in terms of internal organization, their claims on behalf of Jews elsewhere, and their rights, but they used great restraint in speaking about it.

In the United States, however, things like the Diary of Anne Frank and Elie Wiesel's accomplishments have had a great influence. People have become more knowledgeable. Some of this is due to melodramatic films that made a monumental impression. When people discovered these matters, they began to ask themselves basic questions. If a person could do such a thing in a country that had the great philosophers, soul-refining poets, and civilization, then what is really happening? Is it human nature or not? What caused it? These great, all-embracing questions, which pierce the root of matters, were taken up there. Today, as you know, some states in the U.S. have made Holocaust studies compulsory. It is also true that a banalization of the Holocaust has occurred and that the Holocaust is slowly losing its image. Even ordinary crime -- not just homosexuals, not just the condition of the

blacks -- is defined today as a Holocaust. Any injustice is called a Holocaust; the term is becoming increasingly misunderstood.

Just the same, some in the United States are attempting to confront the Holocaust at a profound level. When this sort of confrontation gravitated to Europe, it did so largely from the United States. It is a fact that a national museum of the Holocaust was established in the U.S., not in Europe, and that official Holocaust memorial days were first introduced in the U.S. and not in European countries other than Poland, where the Holocaust occurred.

This lesson -- that such an embodiment of evil endangers the very existence of man, that antisemitism is a distortion of human ethics that ultimately leads to this outcome -- is now firmly entrenched. Take, for example, the document released not long ago by the Vatican, a document that some attempt to wrongly interpret as a political statement. It expresses exactly the same thing. When I read statements by the Pope and other religious thinkers and authors, Catholic and Protestant, I reach a dual conclusion: not only are they troubled by the responsibility of the Church and the faith for what happened in World War II, but something else: they think that a human being who can reach such a state of affairs has already fallen outside the domain of God -- outside the prerogatives that monotheism grants to the human being, outside "in the beginning God created . . .", outside the Ten Commandments, outside the boundary that separates the human from the inhuman. They have also concluded that antisemitism contains a kernel that has poisoned the essence of man as a creature of ethics and conscience. They wish to effect a revision, not only for us but for themselves. We should follow this encounter and notice that we have a common interest in it as Jews and as human beings.

Q- In fact, then, are you arguing that the Jewish-Gentile relationship has been radically transformed since the Holocaust?

G- I will answer you by offering an example. Of course I do not argue that the State of Israel was established because of the Holocaust. That is not only

simplistic; it is also a misunderstanding in regard to the mammoth undertaking of the Zionist movement. However, I definitely think the development of public opinion after the war, which prompted the UN to resolve to establish the State of Israel, is associated with the Holocaust. States people and peoples usually act in the light of interests, not emotions or vacillations about justice and injustice. However, human history evidently has fracture points at which injustice, cruelty, and perhaps other manifestations reach such a critical magnitude that they lead to responses that transcend the mere calculus of interests. I think this is what happened in the context of the Holocaust .

Today, an enormous change is occurring in the churches attitude toward the Jews and antisemitism. What we call antisemitism today bears no resemblance to what happened in inter-war Europe.

Q- Very well. After all, there are almost no Jews in Europe today.

G- That may have nothing to do with it. After all, there is antisemitism in countries that have no Jews, but there is no antisemitism in European countries that have Jews. In France, there are more Jews today than before the war. In Poland, there are none. Antisemitism today cannot possibly be compared to what antisemitism was in Romania, Poland, and even France .

Church leaders and the Pope are saying things today that were never said before. The question they are confronting transcends the Jewish tragedy. The Holocaust was the tip of an iceberg that shed a horrific light on the fate that awaits all of humankind. This is because, when all is said and done, Nazism and World War II, the concentration camps, the murder, and the destruction, afflicted not only the Jews. The racist idea of National Socialism, which in their original thinking pertained only to the Jews, began to threaten all of Europe and all of humankind. One may say that humankind and civilization reached the edge of the abyss and that all of civilization was at risk.

Today, the connection between this matter and antisemitism is understood, because the evil unleashed by antisemitism and its falsehoods released political and social forces that, ultimately, not only harmed the Jews but

threatened the entire world -- culture, human existence, religion, the Divine image of man, the elementary value of human life. This is the basic issue that troubles us without respite. It has made the Holocaust issue so important in a country as far away as the United States, where neither the Jews nor the population at large had anything at all to do with the Holocaust.

However, this awareness has created a trend of trivialization. The fact that the Holocaust has become part of the general human awareness and is treated so extensively -- in the press, in the arts, in literature, in cinema, etc. -- has led to a degree of simplification. Today, in developed countries and especially the United States, every social injustice is placed in the category of a Holocaust. This has created a problem of sorts: a great many people talk about things of which they know little.

Q- Have you seen Benini's film, *Life is Beautiful* ? Does that film fall into this category?

G- No. I think it is a serious work of art. It continually walks the thin line between being ridiculous and penetrating the depths of the human psyche, but it does penetrate the psyche.

Q- Thank you very much .

Taken From The Multimedia CD 'Eclipse Of Humanity', Yad Vashem, 2000.