

## **What Don't We Know?**

### **Unanswered Questions from the Holocaust**

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#### **Apparent Puzzles**

On August 1, 1941, the commanders of the various German murder units operating in the Pripet Marshes (today's northern Ukraine and southern Belarus) received an order from SS leader Heinrich Himmler that from now on they were to select a small number of young, able-bodied Jewish men in each community for temporary forced labor, and the rest – the women, children, elderly, and ill – they were to drive into the swamps. The implication was clear – the Jews were to sink into the soft swamp floor and drown. Something about this order caused the commanders to hesitate momentarily and request clarification. The clarification arrived and they proceeded to carry out the order. However, the swamp floor was not so soft, and the Jews did not sink in. Nor was the water very deep; the adults were able to lift the small children in their arms, and the Jews did not drown. The killers then found themselves shooting a disorderly mass of people in the swamp rather than neat rows of people on the edge of a pit. After several attempts at this method they returned to their previous method of murder.

What about this order caused these men who had by then murdered many thousands of people to hesitate? It seems that there were two related factors – a change in orders and the very nature of the order. This order was part of a shift from selective killing of Jews in the USSR to total murder of entire communities, leaving only a select few alive temporarily. Total murder, together with the specific instruction to kill the weak, women and children, gave these seasoned murderers pause.

Almost a year later, in the wee hours of July 13, 1942, the 500 men of Reserve Police Battalion 101 were awakened in their barracks in Biłgoraj, Poland, and told to board their transport vehicles with their combat gear. Most of the men were in their 30s and 40s, married with children, and had seen little police action during the war. The unit was from Hamburg, an area previously known for its socialism, not its Nazism. When they reached their destination, Józefów, the men disembarked, stood in a semi-circle in the town market square, and their commander, Major Wilhelm Trapp, explained their mission. Of the approximately 1,800 Jews in the town, 300 able-bodied young men would be selected and transported to labor camps, and Battalion 101 would shoot the remaining 1,500 in the nearby woods. Trapp asked the battalion physician to explain how to kill a human being. The physician affixed its bayonet to a rifle, traced a prone figure with arms and legs spread in the ground, and told the men to stand between the victim's legs, aiming through the bayonet at the nape of the neck. With tears in his eyes and choking voice, Trapp told the men to think of their families being bombed by the Allies back home, all because of the Jews. But he added that he understood that this job might be too difficult for some of them, and therefore, anyone who felt unable to carry out the task should step forward and Trapp would give him a different assignment. Of 500 men, 12 stepped forward. During their months in Poland, the battalion engaged in the direct murder or deportation to death of some 83,000 Jews. Trapp's offer stood, and the number of those asking not to kill remained constant.

How do we explain the striking contrast between these stories? Why did the seasoned murderers hesitate briefly when told to kill women and children, yet the raw, untested and less ideological reservists showed little hesitation? These stories point to one of the central questions from the Holocaust. What motivated the murderers in the field?

Similarly, long-standing questions trouble us regarding Jews' reactions to the murder. We know from West German trial records that police and SS men in the deportation of the

Jews of Lublin to Belzec in March and April 1942 found after they returned to the deportation operation on March 31 following a two-day logistical pause that “all the Jews had gone into hiding.” We know from Jewish records that some Jews had managed to get scraps of information through various channels. We also know that the deportation operation was extremely brutal and murderous. While some 30,000 Jews were deported to Belzec and murdered there immediately upon arrival during the four-week operation, an additional 2,000 were shot in the streets. The combination of the horror of the deportation operation, the memories of the brutal forced-labor camps at Belzec in 1940, and the bits of information that some had obtained led the Jews to hide, and years later the Germans remembered this because their job had become much more difficult.

Several months later, when the deportations began from Warsaw to Treblinka on July 22, 1942, some of the remaining Jews in the remnant ghetto in Lublin stood in line at the Judenrat office in order to telephone their loved ones in Warsaw. As the survivor Ida Glickstein recalled, the young man ahead of her in line pleaded with his brother in Warsaw to hide their mother, but the brother assured him that their mother was safe because he was a policeman and she had work papers. Many Warsaw Jews tried to hide during the two-month deportation operation, but the operation seemed to progress much like the earlier Lublin operation prior to March 31.

These two stories point to fundamental questions regarding the connection between information and victim behavior. By the time the deportations had begun in Warsaw, much information and many rumors about mass murder elsewhere had reached the ghetto. What is the connection, if any, between information and behavior? Did information have an impact on Jewish reactions to the Holocaust?

### **What Don't We Know?**

Before discussing what we don't yet know about the Holocaust, we should remind ourselves that we know a great deal. There has been much good research and many good articles and books on many aspects of the Holocaust. This research in many disciplines has provided us with historical information as well as insights into perpetrators' motivations; Nazi decision-making towards the "Final Solution"; Jewish responses to the Holocaust, including *amidah*, undergrounds, attempts at armed resistance, the Jewish councils (*Judenräte*), and more; and *some* Jewish communities. Two recent major encyclopedias of the ghettos that can help us begin to learn about the fates of many communities, particularly in Eastern Europe – *The Yad Vashem Encyclopedia of the Ghettos in the Holocaust* (2009); and *The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos, 1933 – 1945, Volume II, Ghettos in German-Occupied Eastern Europe* (2012).

So, what don't we know? We can point to a number of major studies still to be done. For example, there is no overview of the Holocaust in Poland. Whereas there are many books and article about aspects of the Holocaust in Poland, the comprehensive study that could try to tie the story together, lay out the central subjects, and serve as a basis for future research has yet to be written. Various aspects of the Holocaust in Poland have merited only limited research to date. There is as yet no book on the *Generalgouvernement*, or on Western Galicia, or on the Jews of Eastern Galicia. There are two overviews on the Holocaust in the USSR (Yitzhak Arad and Ilya Altman) but almost innumerable questions and regions not yet researched. There is no overview of the Holocaust in Greece, and only one attempt at an overview of Jewish forced labor across all areas of Nazi control (Wolf Gruner). The attitudes of local Polish people to the persecution and murder of their neighbors has merited more detailed, fine research in the last few years, an outgrowth of the heated debate set off by Jan Tomasz Gross's book *Neighbors* (2000), but most of Poland has not yet been researched on this question, and it would still be difficult to say definitively whether the murder in Jedwabne represented the rule, or the

exception. Similarly, we do not yet have sufficient research on collaboration with the Nazis among local populations, or an overall picture and comparative analysis of this phenomenon.

The majority of the Jewish communities affected by the Holocaust have not yet been researched, nor do we know the value or whereabouts of Jewish property and belongings stolen or looted. The identities of the large majority of the perpetrators remain unknown, and the identities of more than 1,500,000 Jews killed in the Holocaust are still unknown, and many of these will never be known.

Our understanding of the Jewish experience in the Holocaust is based on the diaries and letters of the dead and the accounts of the survivors. But what about those who were killed? What did they think during their last moments before death? What did they feel inside the gas chambers?

If one of the goals of studying the Holocaust is to learn, collectively, how to prevent such things from recurring, then we need to ask ourselves if nearly 70 years after the end of World War II we are on the way to learning to recognize warning signs and to engage in prevention. Have we learned how to create a world where societies have developed internal checks against such things?

### **Sources, Subjects, and Lingering Questions**

Since around 1990, numerous archives have been opened to researchers. These archives are in the former Soviet Union, other post-communist countries, the International Tracing Service in Arolsen (Germany), France, Switzerland, and other places. Parallel to the gradual opening of these archives, scholars have blazed new research trails. We now have a much better picture of the roles of technocrats, local and regional officials, and others in the Holocaust; we have advanced in research into the economic aspects of the Holocaust; we know more about various localities and regions; research into Soviet reactions to the

Holocaust has begun; and many other new avenues of research have developed. The sheer volume of documentation that is available to the researcher has increased manifold, and with modern technology, this documentation is becoming increasingly accessible from computers around the world. Of course, we must wonder how a researcher will deal with a deluge of millions of accessible pages on a given topic. Still, major questions abide, while others have yet to be addressed.

In October 1992 Yad Vashem sent one of its senior scholars, the late Dr. Shmuel Spector, to Moscow to take a first look at a new archive that was being opened to Western scholars – OSOBI. I was among the many young researchers lined up outside his office to discuss their particular subjects with him and to ask him to check if there is relevant material there that would require them to travel to Moscow. When Spector returned, I went to see him, and in response to my question regarding material on my topic he laughed. He described being met at the airport and driven to a five-story building. He imagined that the archive was within those five stories, but as it turned out, the archive was in the many stories below ground. He had found 27 kilometers of shelving, tens of millions of pages of documents, some of which were relevant to the Holocaust and some not. Every page was professionally preserved. He then went on to explain that this was but one of numerous archives of this size scattered across the former USSR, and he concluded: “If all the researchers working on this subject live to be 120 and work six days a week, twelve hours a day, it will take us 100 years just to turn the pages.” Since then many more archives have become accessible; hundreds of millions of pages of documentation await the examination of scholars. By Shmuel Spector’s estimate we have some 78 years to go before we will have turned those pages. What don’t we know? Quite a lot apparently.