

The Holocaust as World History

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Almost 70 years after the defeat of Nazi Germany, the Holocaust has become a subject of keen interest all over the world. This interest is particularly evident in Canada right now, because for 2013 Canada chairs the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance. The IHRA's annual meeting includes a scholarly conference, to be held at the University of Toronto in October 2013, a joint effort by the Centre for Jewish Studies, Wolfe Chair of Holocaust Studies, and the Government of Canada. We are still putting together the program, but our call for papers yielded a whopping 250 proposals from 24 countries: among them the U.S., Israel, Germany, and Poland, but also Ireland, India, Argentina, Nigeria, and Australia.

It was not always this way. The career of eminent Holocaust scholar Raul Hilberg (1926-2007) illustrates the change. "We have studied the Holocaust when it was out of the limelight and when it was in the limelight," Hilberg once said. Mostly it was out. Hilberg, a refugee from Vienna, spent 1939 in Cuba before being allowed to enter the United States. He returned to Europe as an American soldier, which entitled him to support for his studies through the GI Bill. After a series of temporary teaching gigs, he landed a position in Puerto Rico, but in none of those jobs did he teach courses on the Holocaust, even though his Columbia University dissertation, published in 1961 as *The Destruction of the European Jews*, is widely considered the foundational work on the subject. Only in the late 1970s, decades after he took up a position in Political Science at the University of Vermont, did Hilberg begin to offer a class on the Holocaust. He supervised no doctoral dissertations, because his department did not have a PhD program. So although his personal trajectory, like the Holocaust itself, was international, his work on the subject, at least until the 1990s, had limited reach.

The explosion of interest in the Holocaust is exciting, but it also raises questions. Why are so many people drawn to this subject now? Many historians credit the opening of archives after the collapse of Communism, but the availability of sources does not necessarily inspire research. Is the growth of the field market driven, a product of the funding that since the 1990s has become available for scholars, filmmakers, and educators through the Claims Conference, Yad Vashem, the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, the IHRA, and other agencies? Or is it because of the attention and moral high ground one can command by working on or merely invoking a subject that many people deem the epitome of evil? Might some fascination with the Holocaust stem from the persistence of old myths about Jewish power?

Perhaps there is some truth to each of these explanations. Spotlights attract talent, but they also draw moths. Still, conceptualizing—imagining, investigating, and narrating—the Holocaust on the world stage promises valuable insights. Allow me to consider four themes: languages, connections, ambiguity, and loss.

"The Holocaust," Hilberg said in an interview shortly before he died, "is not a subject for amateurs. It is for people who know languages, who know history, who know political science, who know economics, etc. At the root they must be well trained."¹ The first scholars of the Shoah, who started their work even before the war ended, fit this description. Survivors—and in some cases victims—themselves, like most of the Jews of Eastern Europe, were multilingual. Emanuel Ringelblum, Rachel Auerbach, Philip Friedman, Léon Poliakov, and their counterparts knew Yiddish, Polish, German, Hebrew, and in many cases Russian, French, and more—in short, they could access sources, oral and written, in the major languages in which the Holocaust occurred.

Few scholars in subsequent generations have comparable skills. Precisely North America and Israel, key sites of Holocaust Studies, are becoming increasingly monolingual. Indeed, according to Dan Michman, head of the International Institute for Holocaust Research at Yad Vashem, the triumph of modern Hebrew has had unforeseen consequences for research on the Shoah. The field needs scholars from—and in—Lithuania, Ukraine, Belarus, Croatia, Romania, Hungary, and the other sites of destruction of Jewish lives and communities during World War II. Their contributions have already made possible exploration of topics—notably local involvement in expropriation, killing, and rescue—that have long remained obscure.

The expansion of Holocaust Studies beyond Europe—and the knowledge of languages and societies that comes with it—allows still other questions to be asked (and sometimes answered). As Anna Shternshis reminds us, more than one million Jews survived the war in Soviet Central Asia and Siberia.² Sources in Russian and Yiddish have been key to examining their experiences. What might scholars working in Central Asian languages bring to this research? And what might Chinese and Japanese sources reveal about the confluence of factors that allowed 18,000 European Jews to survive the war in Shanghai? Could experts on India in the decade before independence shed light on something I have heard about anecdotally: an initiative (formal? informal?) that got at least a handful of Jewish medical students out of Europe and into South Asia to work as physicians?

1 "Is There a New Anti-Semitism? A Conversation with Raul Hilberg," *Logos* 6, no. 1–2 (2007), http://www.logosjournal.com/issue_6.1-2/hilberg.htm.

2 Anna Shternshis, "On a Journey from Soviet Citizen to Jewish Refugee: Jewish Perceptions of 1941 in the Soviet Union," address at the CJS Annual Graduate Student Conference, Toronto, 22 April 2013.

Experts on the world beyond Europe can elucidate connections that European specialists are unlikely or unable to see. Perhaps one example will suffice. Holocaust educators invariably present the Evian Conference of 1938 as a turning point when “the West,” in particular the United States and Canada, refused to admit Jewish refugees. To highlight this failure, it is often pointed out that at Evian, “only the Dominican Republic” agreed to open its doors to Jewish refugees. Melanie Newton, a historian of the Caribbean, first alerted me to the back-story. In October 1937, under orders from President Rafael Trujillo, Dominican soldiers massacred some 20,000 Haitians inside the Dominican Republic. Although motives for the killings and for the subsequent invitation to Jewish refugees continue to be debated, it seems evident that these developments were connected. Perhaps both were part of an effort to “whiten” the population, or the generous refugee policy may have been a form of damage control, in the wake of an international investigation whose outcome remained under negotiation. As Marion Kaplan has shown, for approximately 800 Jews, being able to enter the Dominican Republic made the difference between life and death.³ Still, viewing that haven in its context of extreme violence is essential to comprehend the complex, brutal world in which the Holocaust took place.

Situating the Holocaust in a global frame puts many things into perspective, among them the matter of rescue. Since the 1960s, almost 25,000 Righteous Among the Nations have been recognized at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem. The largest number comes from Poland, with the Netherlands in second place, followed by France, then Ukraine. Smaller numbers, as small as one, come from places far from the killing fields and death camps: Armenia, Brazil, El Salvador, Georgia, Vietnam. Seeing these countries on the list highlights the international reach of the Holocaust. It also points to an escalating trend since the 1990s: the rush to declare rescuers.

By no means is this phenomenon limited to requests for recognition as Righteous Among the Nations. Instead, in Poland, France, Turkey, Albania, Hungary, Slovakia, Italy, Germany, and even Canada one finds initiatives, public and private, to identify and celebrate people who helped Jews. Sometimes these efforts blur into defining any acts of opposition to Nazi German rule as rescue.⁴ With so many rescuers, a cynic might ask, how could there even have been a Holocaust? Acknowledging the international surge of interest in rescue should not detract from individual heroism nor reduce the significance of every Jewish life saved. It should, however, alert us to the ways that concepts of rescue and refuge are ambiguous, not in the sense that they are meaningless, but rather that they bear multiple meanings and as a result are all-too-easily oversimplified and instrumentalized.

Considering the Holocaust on the world stage underscores the ubiquity of loss. Survivors’ accounts reveal how distance brought safety but also terrifying loneliness. On November 3, 1938, Gerhard Maass, a young German Jew, arrived in Canada. Rather than relief, he recalls feeling so frightened by the news from home that he could neither work nor think. His father in Hamburg was arrested during Kristallnacht and sent to a concentration camp, and although Maass’s brother and cousins wrote to him, he could do nothing. In the fall of 1939, shortly after Canada declared war on Germany, he almost lost his foot in an accident at work. An RCMP officer visited him in Montreal’s Jewish General Hospital, but it was no social call. If he tried to send another letter to Germany, the police warned him, he would be deported. Years later, Maass struggles to describe his state of mind at the time: “How to explain? To be a man without a country in a strange country...I was on my own. I was frantic.”⁵

Geographic distance did not alleviate the agony of grief. Anka Voticky, a Czech Jew, survived the war in Shanghai. In September 1945, she and her husband Arnold received a letter from a cousin describing the fate of their extended family. Arnold’s parents and many other relatives had been murdered in Treblinka; altogether 65 members of their family had been killed. For two days after reading the letter, Voticky recalls, her husband sat: “not moving, not speaking, not eating, not drinking, not sleeping.” When he finally spoke it was to express utter isolation:

Tomorrow is Yom Kippur. You can do whatever you want, but I am not fasting. In all my life I never saw my mother in her underwear. The thought that in Treblinka she had to undress in front of everybody and, naked, my parents had to dig their own grave...I no longer believe that there can possibly be a God.⁶

Primo Levi drew attention to another international, even universal, aspect of the Holocaust: shame. He felt it as a victim and saw it in the faces of the Red Army soldiers who liberated him at Auschwitz. It was shame for the world, he explained, the shame

which a just man experiences when confronted by a crime committed by another, and he feels remorse because of its existence, because of its having been irrevocably introduced into the world of existing things, and because his will has proven nonexistent or feeble and was incapable of putting up a good defense.⁷

Perhaps a similar response moved Raul Hilberg to introduce a comparison in the third edition of *The Destruction of the*

3 Marion A. Kaplan, *Dominican Haven: The Jewish Refugee Settlement of Sosua, 1940-1945* (New York: Museum of Jewish Heritage, 2008).

4 See Renée Poznanski, “From Historiography to TV: The Representation of the Resistance in Contemporary France,” presentation at Centre for Jewish Studies, Toronto, 21 March 2013.

5 Gerry (Gerhard) Maass, born 1918, Hamburg; interviewed May 1998, Montreal; Shoah Foundation #40498, accessed U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, D.C.

6 Anka Voticky, *Knocking on Every Door* (Toronto: Azrieli Foundation, 2010), 74f.

7 Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Vintage, 1989), 773.

European Jews. Referring to the genocide in Rwanda in 1994, Hilberg observed: “The disaster of the Tutsi took place in full view of the world...The challenge was posed and not met...History has repeated itself.”⁸

Considering the Holocaust as world history reminds us of its specificity but also its universality. Violence, expulsion, assault on communal and individual lives—these are all-too familiar occurrences in the human past. For about a decade now, the national high school curriculum in South Africa has included a compulsory module on the Holocaust. Only for the topic of apartheid are more hours mandated. How do students respond, I asked a teacher? Learning about the Holocaust meant a lot to them, he said, because they saw that you did not have to be black to be the target of prejudice. That comment is a reminder of the transformative potential of scholarship, with its combination of proximity and distance, empathy and reason.

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8 Raul Hilberg, *Destruction of the European Jews* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 2003), 1296.