

“Very much more still needs to be done.”

Holocaust Studies: Aspects of research and actual tendencies.

An Interview with Yehuda Bauer by Michael Wildt

In April 2009 the Strassler Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies (Clark University, Worcester, MA) organized the International Graduate Students' Conference for Holocaust and Genocide Studies¹. Yehuda Bauer (YB) was the Keynote speaker. Due to this occasion Michael Wildt (MW) conducted an interview with Bauer for the editors office.

MW: Recently there has been much research on the Holocaust in the East. Patrick Desbois' book titled "Shoa par balles" has become a bestseller in France? Do you think that there is a shift in the research focus from Auschwitz to the mass murder in the Nazi occupied areas in Eastern Europe?

YB: It is quite true to say that much more research has been done in recent years on the genocide of the Jews in Eastern Europe – basically Poland, the occupied areas of the Soviet Union (including the now independent Baltic States), and Transnistria. It is therefore also true to say that attention has, to some extent, shifted from Auschwitz to those areas. It should be stated, however, that within that framework, the motivations and actions of the perpetrators had already been researched, to a very considerable degree, especially, but not exclusively, by German historians. Christian Gerlach has analyzed German occupation policies in Belorussia, Dieter Pohl and Thomas Sandkühler have done parallel work, though with slightly different perspectives, on Eastern Galicia. Christoph Dieckman has done work on Lithuania, and so on. Others, such as Wendy Lower and Karel C. Berkhoff, both now in the USA, have dealt with aspects of the Holocaust in the Ukraine. Patrick Desbois' book on the mass annihilation by shooting, also chiefly in the Ukraine, joins these efforts whose general theme is to investigate what the Germans and their collaborators did to the Jews, in the context of German occupation policies. This is undoubtedly a theme of central importance; but the other aspects are no less important, chiefly the story of the Jews – who they were, how they lived, how they reacted, what they did before they realized that the intention was to murder them, and what they did after that realization. Christopher Browning's work on the Lithuanian township of Marcinkance combines the two perspectives, as does his work, now being published, on Starachowice, a

labor camp in Poland – but there his emphasis is already less on the perpetrators and more on the victims. Monographs have been produced, mostly in Israel, on the ghettos and Jewish communities in Bialystok (Sara Bender), Grodno (Tikva Fatal), Lodz (Michal Unger), now also on Radom and Kielce (also Sara Bender), and similar works, but unfortunately these and other books, written in Hebrew, have taken and will take time to be translated. Similarly, Havi Ben Sasson-Dreyfus has written on Jewish attitudes towards Poles during the Holocaust, and a fair number of articles and chapters have been produced on different aspects of Jewish reactions in Eastern Europe in a number of historical journals, mostly by younger historians making their way into the academic world. Polish historians such as Jacek Leociak, Dariusz Libionka, Jan Grabowski [in Canada], Barbara Engelkind, and others, have done a great deal of work on such issues, as has Jan T. Gross, though his emphasis is not the Holocaust as such. My own book on the small Jewish townships in Western Belarus and Western Ukraine is coming out in November, 2009. Similar analyses have been done and are being done for Hungary and Romania. Lithuanian academics such as Liudas Truska and others have been doing important work on other local topics, and on the mass participation of Lithuanians in the murder of Jews. Parallel efforts are being pursued by Latvian historians such as Aivars Stranga. Other efforts are in the works: more monographs on places, and sociological and psychological analyses of Jewish societies in those areas where murder took place. Questions about unarmed and armed resistance have resurfaced, no longer limited to the large Polish ghettos. First beginnings can be registered for dealing with Jewish partisans in Soviet areas, and in Poland, and one should especially note Nechama Tec's book on the Bielski partisans, and her biography of that unusual figure of Oswald Rufeisen, a West Polish member of a Zionist youth movement, who tried to rescue a Jewish community in Belarus (Mir) and, having himself been rescued by nuns, then converted to Catholicism. More biographies have also been produced, but again, much of this is in Hebrew (such as Bella Guterman's recent biography of Zivia Lubetkin, one of the central figures in the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, which is about to be published soon). Very much more still needs to be done.

In recent years, descendants of Polish Jews who were caught up in the Holocaust, or even outsiders, developed a genre of writing that combines a personal quest for family and social traditions, with detailed comparisons of testimonies and even documents. The genre may have been consciously or unconsciously influenced by Alex Haley's "Roots" (the family history of Afro-Americans). Much of this genre may be quite unimportant, but some of these stories, while not historical researches, do contribute substantially to understanding the social and psychological history of Jewish communities in Eastern Europe (e.g. Theo Richmond's book on Konin, Daniel Mendelsohn's "The Lost" on Bolechow – Anatol Reignier published a parallel

book on Bolechow in German – “Damals in Bolechow”, and some others). These accounts contribute, no doubt, to our understanding of the period.

MW: Despite the excellent research on the ghettos in Warsaw and Lodz, we still know little about the Jewish Ghettos during World War II in other parts of Poland, in Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania, Ukraine, Romania. How do you explain this desideratum?

I think it was, in many ways, natural for historians to concentrate, first of all, on the large ghettos – Warsaw, Lodz, Vilno (Vilnius), Kovno (Kaunas), Bialystok, Lwow (Lviv), etc. But as pointed out above, this is being increasingly superseded by monographs dealing with smaller places, in Poland mainly. Communities in Lithuania and Latvia, on the other hand, were, first, destroyed, qua communities, by the Soviet occupation after June, 1940. After the German invasion, the Jewish population was wiped out so quickly, largely by local inhabitants acting in the context of German policies, that no communal life developed that one could deal with. The same applies, to a large extent, to Bessarabia (but not to Bukovina). Jews from these latter regions who survived the massacres of the summer of 1941, were put into ghettos in Transnistria (between the Dniester and the Bug), and quite a lot has been and is being written about the ghettos there (Shargorod, Mogilev, and other places, though no detailed account has been written, until now, about Czernowitz [Cernauti]). Some very major works have been written about Romania (largely by Jean Ancel and Radu Ioanid), but only some of this has been written in English or translated, so far. Pre-war Jewish populations on Soviet territory – there were of course no communities under the Soviets – have not been touched as yet in any detail, but there are promising beginnings. Minsk is an exception – there are important accounts of what happened there, and not only about the German Jews who were transported to that place. I think that we will see not only more work being done on the Jewish population in the Soviet Union generally, but also about Jews in the partisan movement and in the Red Army, and the relations, in various areas of the USSR, with the other national and ethnic groups. First attempts also to look into the fate of the offspring of mixed Jewish-non-Jewish marriages have also been made. The fate of the Jewish refugees in Soviet Central Asia has received quite extensive treatment. The reasons for the lateness of these efforts may lie, in part, in the fact of language barriers, or because of the dearth of historians in Russia who are interested in these topics, or because outside Russia students of history prefer other topics to these very complicated ones. The problem of sources is of course paramount: contemporary

documentation is very scarce – apart from German materials, and these will merely detail the destruction process, not the questions of Jewish-non-Jewish relationships, and the social processes within Jewish society. Post-war testimonies are not in abundance either, because the Soviet Union did not encourage these. Reports of Soviet committees investigating Nazi crimes exist, but do not throw much light on the issues mentioned here.

MW: In former years the focus of the Holocaust research has been on the decision-making process inside the Nazi elite, the history of the “Endlösung”. Since then we recognize a huge effort to examine other NS-perpetrators, including “ordinary men”. But what about the Jewish perspective? Don’t we need an “integrated history”, as Saul Friedländer has demanded it?

YB: I believe that the methodology employed by Saul Friedländer in his two masterly volumes dealing with the whole of the Nazi period is indeed the right way to go. He does not try to detail what we already know, not only of the perpetrators but also, for instance, of the organizational history of German Jewry. He concentrates on the large picture, on the main social and political trends, and combines the history of perpetrators – not only Germans, but other Europeans as well – victims, and bystanders. The Jewish perspective is of course crucial within this framework, and Friedländer uses a large number of Jewish testimonies, as well as documentary material, to show the range of Jewish reactions to the developing genocidal threat. But the overall presentation is not the only way. Research today is dealing with the problems of mass participation in the mass murders and the private and collective reaction of victims and bystanders to it. Friedländer’s methodology of a combination of ‘bottom up’ with ‘top down’ seems to me to be preferable to others, and that would include dealing with the perpetrators as well as victims. But that is not enough, I believe. I would favor a ‘globalization’ of the history of the Holocaust (not only of the Holocaust), in the sense of its contextualization, both vertically and horizontally. Vertically – by dealing with the historical background of Jewish-non-Jewish interaction over long historical periods, the history of Europe, not just Germany; Jewish history (that would entail, i.a., escaping from the [wrong] perception that the history of the Jews is the history of anti-semitism), and the context of genocide, historically and topically. Horizontally – the global context, because the Holocaust had an impact and was impacted upon in different parts of the world (e.g. the story of Jewish refugees from Central Europe in the

Philippines, in the Belgian Congo, in Australia and Chile, etc.). World politics of the twentieth century are relevant to any discussion of the Holocaust.

MW: What do you think about the uniqueness of the Holocaust? Isn't it necessary to compare the destruction of the European Jews with other genocides of the Twentieth Century?

It is absolutely crucial to compare the Holocaust with other genocides. After all, one cannot argue that there is anything unprecedented about the Holocaust unless one compares it with other events of a similar, though not necessarily exactly similar, nature. I have long since abandoned the term "uniqueness" ("Singularität"), because that would mean that it cannot be repeated, or else that it is an event of some transcendental nature. But if, as I believe, the Holocaust was done neither by a God nor a Satan, but by humans, for human reasons, then it can, like any other human action, be repeated, though never in exactly the same way. It was therefore not singular, or unique, but unprecedented, i.e. it contained elements that had never been in evidence before. Conversely, in all other genocides there were no elements that one cannot find in yet other genocides (including the Holocaust). Thus, the current genocide in Darfur contains elements such as special armed groups that commit it (the "Janjaweed"), in tandem with regular armed forces; its motivation is, basically, a fight over scarce resources, and the demand for sharing of newly available resources, in this case, oil. These and other elements of the Darfur genocide can be found in other genocides as well. But the aim, organized by a modern state, at total, complete, and universal murder of every single member of the targeted group – the Jews – has no precedent. Nor is there a precedent for a vast genocide committed in the midst – and not on the margins, as with the genocide of North American Indians, for instance – of a highly developed, modern society. Nor is there a precedent for the kind of non-pragmatic, purely illusionary, ideology that threw all economic and political considerations into the wind, that was the hallmark of Nazism. But if, as I believe, the Holocaust was an unprecedented genocide, that can be repeated (it was a precedent) in some similar form, then the study of other genocides becomes a must. More than that: the historian then becomes, willy-nilly, an actor on the educational-political scene in the struggle for the prevention of similar events.

MW: Remembering the Holocaust has become a worldwide affair. Even the UN has declared the day of the liberation of Auschwitz, January 27th, as „International Day of Commemoration in Memory of the Victims of the Holocaust“. Isn't this globalization of memory perhaps a paradoxical problem, because it could mean the de-historizing of the Shoah?

YB: I do not think that establishing a culture of memory for the Holocaust necessarily leads to de-historization. The commemoration of the Bastille Day in France, or the celebration of July 4 in the USA, have not led to any such result. Of course, the moment one turns the memory of the Holocaust into a public event with a strong liturgical element, and accompanies that with expressions of that memory in various art forms, one inevitably runs the danger of falsification, trivialization, and kitsch. But that is true of all memory, and in effect of all history. When an event, or a series of events in a given time-frame becomes so central, or in our case so traumatic, that its non-remembrance becomes impossible, then the best one can do is to demystify it as much as possible, and energetically reject the many attempts to de-historicize it.

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¹ Look at <http://www.clarku.edu/departments/holocaust/chgsconference/Graduate/welcome.html> [2.10.2009].