



European Holocaust Research Infrastructure

**Opening lecture at the International EHRI Conference
Holocaust Documentation in Eastern Europe**

19-21 May 2014

New Archival Sources and New Questions in the Historical Research of the Holocaust

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The Holocaust research and Holocaust education, which are both intertwined and joined at the hip, enter a crucial period, marked - on the one hand - by the dwindling numbers of Holocaust survivors and, on the other hand - by the rising tide of “challenges of memory” - which I shall discuss later in some detail.

Traditional challenges to the study of the Shoah were linked to the Holocaust denial. It may today be noted, that Holocaust denial has become - at least in the European and North American context - the reservation of the few closed, and relatively isolated, minds. Deniers, along with those who would depreciate the numbers of the Holocaust victims have also, largely been relegated onto the margins of, if not altogether purged from, the contemporary mainstream scholarship.

Historian Manfred Gerstenfeld added to the other threats to the memory of the Holocaust - the deflection and whitewashing of the Holocaust. These challenges entail admitting that the Holocaust happened while denying the complicity or responsibilities of specific groups or individuals. The Holocaust is then blamed on others. This, to a large extent, concerns those countries where, during the war, Germans were helped, to a various extent, by local citizens in the despoliation, deportation and killing of the Jews. Likewise, one needs to mention Holocaust de-Judaisation, which wishes to minimize the extent the Jewish character of the victims, as well as Holocaust trivialization and, finally, obliterating and obfuscating Holocaust memory.

Despite these challenges and obstacles, from its modest beginnings in the 1960s, the study of Holocaust evolved into a multi-form and thriving, interdisciplinary area of research. We have come a long way since 1968 when historian Christopher Browning, wishing to devote his



attention to the study of the Shoah, has been told by his academic advisor that "This would make a great dissertation, but you know there's no academic future in researching the Holocaust." From the fairly well established trends, such as the *Tätervorschung* and the study of the institutional history and the history of the decision making processes (both of which have been the preferred domain of German scholars), historians turned their attention to the *Opfervorschung*, or the study of the victims. Not surprisingly, in this area Israeli scholars had most to offer and - during the 1970s and 1980s - a significant body of writing has vastly expanded our knowledge of the Holocaust, as seen through the eyes of survivors. Finally, the studies of "bystanding" societies and the "bystanding" phenomenon acquired momentum.

Given the different methods employed and varied primary sources used, one has to ponder whether there are any areas of inquiry and methodological bridges which can allow for these vastly divergent approaches to come together. Indeed, in the light of the trends which matured, and became more pronounced during the last decade, two such areas - to certain extent related and overlapping - can be identified.

First, a significant shift of historical narrative has occurred over the last decade; a shift which - at least in part - is related to the emergence of massive amount of new historical evidence. I refer here to the unprecedented phenomenon of oral evidence, linked to the various oral history projects, spearheaded by the San Diego's Visual History Archive with its 50.000 plus interviews of the survivors of the Holocaust. Scripted along the same lines and user-friendly, the Archive became a powerful research tool, which already began having a significant impact in our area of study. Similar, although less-known and smaller initiatives at gathering oral evidence, can be found in various other locations. In the context of Poland - which is my primary focus today - one can mention the thousands of testimonies gathered by the Museum of the Warsaw Uprising. At the same time, the gradual growth of historians' interest in Jewish oral accounts helped to dust-off and put to good use the early Jewish testimonies from the immediately post-war period: thousands of which have been preserved in Poland (Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw alone holds some 7000 testimonies collected in 1945-47 period and covering mostly the areas of today's Poland, Belorussia, Western Ukraine and, to an extent, the Baltic countries). In addition to the thousands of oral testimonies (which can with justice be called "invented sources"), the students of the Holocaust increasingly turned to somewhat similar, and even more massive, body of evidence contained in the judicial archives of the former Eastern Bloc countries: USSR, Poland, DDR and Ukraine, to name but a few of these better known to the author of this comment. These collections, only recently made available to researchers, now compliment the German and Allied judicial sources, which for decades have contributed to our knowledge of the history of the Shoah. Millions of pages of testimonies, interrogations and depositions from post-war trials, not to mention the accompanying evidence brought up in court, already started to



have (and most likely will continue to have) a growing impact on the field of our interest. Finally, and quite recently, historians of the Holocaust turned their attention to the largely obscure and previously untapped records of local archives. Once again, in the Polish context - but also in the context of recent works of our French colleagues - specialists started to discover wealth of Holocaust-related primary evidence in the records of villages, *gminy* (communes) and smaller municipalities. Similarly, growing attention has been given to the records of the lowest rung of Polish courts, the so-called *sądy grodzkie*, or municipal courts. This, in turn, allowed to bring to light the interaction between Jews and their Christian neighbors and, to a lesser extent - their German masters. What these three types of sources have in common, is their preoccupation, their inherent and inalienable focus on the experience and the motivations of an individual.

All of which tends to underline the importance of the historiographical shift related to the new kinds of sources - namely a visible trend away from institutional history, from the history of decision-making processes, and toward micro-history, toward bottom-up studies, toward the study of the experience of the Holocaust on the most basic, individual, level.

Second, consensus is building that the Shoah, although a German- designed, inspired and executed project, has also been - to an extent - an European undertaking. Noted Saul Friedlaender: “This German-centred approach is of course legitimate within its limits, but the history of the Holocaust requires, as mentioned, a much wider range. At each step, in occupied Europe, the execution of German measures depended on the submissiveness of political authorities, the assistance of local police forces or other auxiliaries, and the passivity or support of the populations and mainly of the political and spiritual elites. It also depended on the willingness of the victims to follow orders in the hope of alleviating German strictures and gaining time and somehow escaping the inexorable tightening of the German vise. Thus the history of the Holocaust should be both integrative and an integrated story”. Thinking along the same lines, and writing in a similar vein, Omer Bartov added: “Genocide would have been much harder to accomplish, and its success much less complete, had the Germans not found so many collaborators willing, even eager, to do the killing, the hunting down, the brutalizing, and the plundering. Conversely, hardly any of the handful of Jews who lived to tell the tale would have survived had it not been for those Ukrainians and Poles who gave them food or shelter, even if at times they charged them for the service and not infrequently drove them out or denounced them once the Jews’ resources ran out”.

This “internationalization” of Holocaust historiography dove-tails thus with the growing importance of micro-history as a promising area of on-going and future study of the logic of destruction of the European Jewry. This type of inquiry, although not new, has proven itself particularly promising over the last years. The arrival of micro-history: already heralded by the works of Browning and Friedlander who, although in a very different way, chose to give voice to



individual victims and perpetrators, as well as - especially in the case of Friedlander - to individual bystanders.

Turning to the history of the Shoah in Poland, the place of our gathering, one sees the challenges ahead. Poland, and the Polish society, have become - not by their own design - sole and reluctant custodians of the physical legacy of the Holocaust, marked by the ruins of Auschwitz-Birkenau, the railway tracks of Treblinka, or the gas chambers of Majdanek and Bełżec. At the same time, the history of the Holocaust is - whether one likes it or not - arguably the only universal aspect of Polish history, one which stirs interest and resonates on international scale and one which attracts the attention of researchers and writers world-wide. The “taming” of this subject has been, for quite some time, one of the most important tasks performed by various agencies of the Polish state such as the IPN (Institute of National Remembrance) and its proxies. One of the goals of the so-called “historical policy” was - and is - to place stress on heart-lifting stories such as the sacrifice of Christian Rescuers at the time of the Shoah which would point to the alleged universality of the “helping hand phenomenon” under the occupation.

PHOTO SHOWN IN THE BACKGROUND





This photo was taken last week and depicts the half-demolished former building of the Warsaw IPN headquarters. The fading sign on the crumbling building reads: “Memory.pl [Poland].

The area of the former Warsaw ghetto - is today being rapidly transformed into a battleground of contested memories, where steady march of commemorative plaques, monuments and obelisks glorifying the martyrdom of the Polish nation, is a telling example of the challenges ahead. The immediate vicinity of the *Umschlagplatz*, the very square from which 330,000 Jews of Warsaw have been dragged to the gas chambers of Treblinka, becomes an altar to Polish war-time sacrifice and tragedy. Even the recently-completed Museum of History of Polish Jews (built right in the center of the former Warsaw ghetto, literally on the bones of the victims of the Shoah), is now called “Museum of Life”, and it is being exorcised, on three sides, by monuments devoted to the memory of Poles who saved the Jews. Just next door to the museum, another monument to Poles rescuing Jews is being planned, and a special Vietnam-Memorial-like wall will soon proudly present names of 10,000 righteous Christians who saved the Jews. And in the northern section of the former ghetto, just a few blocks away, a “Park of the Righteous” will open up later this year. All of this without a word being said about the post-war fate of the Righteous, who either had to hide their war-time deeds, or risked ridicule, ostracism and wrath of their neighbors. Finally, to move us closer to the site of our present meeting, it is worth mentioning that in the middle of the notorious Płaszów concentration camp (the death-site of more than 30.000 Jews) a monument has recently been erected. A monument to honour the memory of the fallen Polish “blue” policemen - members of an organization undoubtedly involved in the annihilation of the Polish Jews.

The monuments tell only one part of the story; they are but a small segment of the “corrected” historical narrative. In four polls of public opinion, conducted between 1992 and 2010 by the scholars from the Polish Academy of Sciences, a representative sample of adult Poles has been asked a question which read: “Would you agree that during the war the Jews suffered more than Poles, to the same extent, or less? In 1992, 46% respondents stated that Jews suffered more, while 32% thought that both nations suffered equally and 6% claimed that Polish suffering was greater than that of the Jews. Over time the results evolved: in the last poll (2010) the percentage of Poles who thought that Jews suffered the most dwindled to 28%, while 45% declared that both nations suffered equally and 16% claimed that Poles suffered more during the war than the Jews. In other words, a stunning 61% of Polish respondents are currently convinced that Polish suffering at the time of the Shoah was at least equal, or greater than that of the Jews.

In the light of the struggles of memory , such as the ones described above - and these examples deal only with the immediate geographical area of our present gathering - the need for further research and enhanced education, is undisputable and urgent. Today, when the powerful voice of



Jewish survivors is heard less and less frequently, we have to look for new tools and for new approaches to make certain that our efforts are not in vain. Because writing about the Holocaust carries with it a very particular and - undisputedly - unique kind of responsibility, one which should weigh heavy on one's shoulders.

In lieu of conclusion, I would like to quote Emanuel Ringelblum, the founder of Oneg Shabbat, and our fellow-historian, shortly before his death, in March 1944, wrote: “when *shofer* sits down to transcribing the Torah he has to - according to religious prescriptions - take a ritual bath, cleanse himself of all impurities. This *shofer* takes his pen with trembling heart, knowing that the smallest error in transcription can destroy the whole work”.