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"It's Nothing, It's in the Ghetto"

Reflections on the 80th Anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising[1]

Abstract

In several of his books, Jan T. Gross has been a relentless analyst and critic of post-war Polish antisemitism. As a professor at Princeton University, his books on the pogroms of Jedwabne, Rzeszów, Krakow, and Kielce have triggered lasting debates and had a significant influence on memory culture in Poland. In his piece, Gross analyses memories of Jewish participants and Polish witnesses of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. Specifically, he draws attention to articles from the underground press as well as from memoirs and diaries written by members of these two groups during and after the war.

In Hanna Krall's interview with Marek Edelman, *To Shield the Flame* – a small book that made Edelman famous –, there is a brief passage that you might have missed. She asks him early on in their conversation: "[c]ould one see anything on the Aryan side from behind the wall?" And Edelman replies:

> [y]es. The wall reached only to the first floor. Already from the second floor one could see the OTHER [Edelman's emphasis] street. We saw the merry-go-around, we saw people, we heard music and we were terribly afraid, that this music will drown us, that these people won't be able to see anything; that nobody in the whole world will notice us, or the struggle, or the dead … That this wall is so big, and that nothing, no news, ever, about us will get through …[2]

Edelman needn't have worried. The prolific underground press in German occupied Poland – the great agora, which functioned as a key component of the clandestine movement – immediately started reporting about the Jewish armed resistance in the ghetto. Most of the underground newspapers wrote with sympathy, noting that Jews who barely a few months earlier went to their death "like sheep" finally decided to die with dignity.

The Uprising also drew crowds of onlookers to the ghetto walls to watch the German firing positions set up outside, and a huge conflagration as Germans were burning systematically entire ghetto streets to suppress the insurgency.

Adolf Rudnicki, who was in Warsaw when the uprising started, described – in the first issue of an excellent post-war era political and literary weekly *Kuźnica* – the spectacle of sympathetic onlookers surrounding SS units shooting at the Jews from the Aryan side of the wall. "German artillerymen at Krasińskich and Bonifraterska streets were loading and firing amid an approving crowd. Children patted enemies on the sleeves. Women's eyes followed the audacious runs of SS men up to the walls.

1 This is a slightly edited version of the keynote lecture delivered at the Dubnow Institute in Leipzig on 17 April 2023.

2 Hanna Krall, *Zdążyć przed Panem Bogiem* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1977), 9. Except when indicated, all translations from Polish into English are mine.

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One looked at this in disbelief it hurt too much … The cruel fraternity lasted for one day."[3]

Later, Polish civilians could no longer approach German military positions, as shots had been fired at the SS from the surrounding buildings. Crowds of spectators nevertheless assembled outside the walls for the duration of the fighting, including many a Jew – like Rudnicki himself – "passing" under false identity on the Aryan side. At one point he saw a young woman in the crowd, choking with tears. He tried discreetly to calm her. She was in mortal danger should anyone recognise that she was Jewish, "and in this crowd that surrounded us", he wrote with sadness, "just as in the city at large, we had more enemies than friends".[4]

Another eminent Polish Jewish writer, the poet Mieczysław Jastrun, teaching at the time in the network of underground clandestine Polish schools described in *Odrodzenie* (also a first rate political and cultural journal published in the immediate post-war period) the reactions to the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising among high school students from a lower class neighbourhood in Praga: "they just kept telling each other jokes about what was going on behind the walls", he recalled. In his article "Potęga ciemnoty" ("the power of ignorance" – the article triggered the first wide-ranging post-war debate about Polish antisemitism), Jastrun also described a scene from a different part of town that he had witnessed at the time: "young office girls … poured out on a terrace of one of the largest buildings in Żolibórz neighbourhood to watch from there the conflagration of the ghetto … and called out cheerfully in the spring air, shaking with detonations and reeking of smoke, 'Come, look, how cutlets from Jews are frying'."[5] The formulation about "frying Jews" became a sort of staple phrase overheard by people in Warsaw at the time.

So, the ghetto uprising had been immediately noticed (what else – how could the biggest conflagration in its history be missed in the middle of a large European city?) and indeed drew crowds of onlookers. Truth be told, it provided a sort of mass entertainment for Varsovians during the Easter Week of 1943. Yet Edelman's worry – expressed in a conversation held thirty years after the uprising – was real, although not about the uprising passing unnoticed. It was about something else.

Edelman's comrade in arms and close personal friend, Itzhak Zuckerman ("Antek") expresses the same sentiment in a somewhat different manner: we were persuaded, he writes in his memoirs, and this was a mistaken assumption, that "the moment the world will learn about *what is going on here* [my emphasis], something important will happen. And our second mistake – the faith that our neighbours from across the wall are not aware of *our fate here* [my emphasis], and that when they become aware, the situation will change."[6]

I have emphasised "our fate here" and "what is going on here". We know from their own reminiscences that the organisers of the uprising did not attribute any special significance to their decision to put up armed resistance (persuaded that they will be killed no matter what, they merely chose a culturally prescribed, and acceptable, form of death – that's how they described their course of action). And they certainly did not worry that their "heroism" may go unnoticed. What was on their minds, rather, was the systematic mass murder of Warsaw Jews which began on 22 July 1942. The Ghetto Uprising of 19 April 1943 was but a closing coda of the so-called *Gross-*

3 *Kuźnica*, 1 June, 1945.
4 Adolf Rudnicki, *Żywe i martwe morze* (Warsaw: Czytelnik, 1956), 309.
5 *Odrodzenie*, 17 June 1945.
6 Icchak Cukierman, *Nadmiar pamięci (Siedem owych lat). Wspomnienia 1939–1946* (Warsaw:Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2000), 125.

aktion Warschau (Warsaw Great Action) in which altogether some 400,000 Jews would be killed. And the catastrophe in Warsaw was, in itself, but an episode in the ongoing deliberate mass murder of all the Jews in German-occupied Poland.

This is what they worried about: how to communicate to fellow human beings that a mass murder of an entire people was in progress?

We know about the inability to convey such information – between intelligent and educated people –from, for instance, Jan Karski's conversation with the US Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter. During the war, Isaiah Berlin (incidentally, by Oxford coincidence, also Felix Frankfurter's good friend) –put his social skills and love of conversation at the service of the British Embassy in Washington, where he was tasked with monitoring the views of U.S. politicians and the public opinion in America on all matters pertinent to the British war effort including the issue of Palestine, the future of Jewish state there, and the British mandate. (Isaiah Berlin had a Zionist period in his life, and he was a close confidant of Chaim Weizman, constantly in touch with him). Berlin met everyone worth knowing in New York and Washington and talked with them incessantly about everything – and by his own admission he did not understand what the Holocaust was all about until April 1945, after the camps were liberated in Europe.[7]

In actuality, the most important audience to which the organisers of the Jewish resistance felt they ought to communicate this determination they made about German plans – to murder all the Jews – was not "the world", or some "neighbours across the wall", but their fellow Jews who were still alive. In the struggle for survival during the Holocaust, the most important prerequisite was to be able to recognise the facts, to see with clarity what was going on, and then to absorb this knowledge. Only – how?

What they had to overcome, Zuckerman says, was the powerful force of "illusion", as he put it. "In those days", he writes, "it meant that if something terrible happened in Lublin, people said, well, it did, but it won't happen in Warsaw. When it happened in Warsaw, they said: okay, it happened in Nalewki street, but it won't happen in Gęsia."[8] And so on and so forth.

How do you convince people that, what in the light of their lifetime experience is inconceivable, is in fact actually taking place? No matter how frightening the unfolding events appeared, it still did not make sense to interpret them as part of the deliberate mass murder of an entire nation. One could always come up with some alternative, more plausible, explanation.

Zuckerman came from Vilna, and he tells in his memoir *The Surplus of Memory* that he became aware that the German goal was the total annihilation of the Jews after he learned about the mass killings in Ponary. (Apparently Abba Kovner, who was also at the time in Vilna, drew a similar conclusion from these killings.) That would date his awareness at sometime in late autumn 1941. When he talked to others about his conclusion, people objected. Germans had beef with Communism – was the argument – but when they conquered the area it turned out that the Bolsheviks ran away. Jews sympathised with the communists, and so when the Germans laid their hands on the Jews they killed them in revenge. It is not an overall policy – it is merely circumstantial.

Only when Szlamek (Szlojme Fajner), who worked for a couple of weeks on the burial detail in Chełmno (Kulmhof), managed to escape from the death camp and

7 Michael Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin: A Life* (London: Vintage, 2000), 122.
8 Cukierman, *Nadmiar pamięci (Siedem owych lat)*, 156.

showed up in January 1942 in the Warsaw ghetto, could the argument that Jews had been killed in Ponary for being Communists be rebuffed.[9] After all, Jews murdered in Chełmno could not have been all suspected of special affiliation with communism.

But the issue was never closed. "One cannot conclude that Germans have a unified prescription for dealing with the Jews", the head of the *Judenrat* (Jewish council) from Ostrowiec told Zuckerman:

> One way or another we are still dependent on local authorities. If we manage to have good relations with Germans locally, chances are very good that we will survive the war. Let's take as an example Radom and Kielce. In Radom Jews are getting beaten for not taking off their caps in the street [in front of the Germans], in Kielce it's the other way around. Or take Warsaw: closed ghetto surrounded by a wall and barbed wire, inhabitants exposed to suffering from hunger and typhus. And in Ostrowiec an open Jewish quarter and plenty of food. How can one assume that a single German hand is in charge of, and directing, the entire Jewish fate?[10]

While Jews were trying to figure out what was in store for their community, Polish public opinion took a stand, by and large, that what was happening to the Jews was of little concern to the Poles. And I do not have in mind just the antisemitic segment of Polish society famously characterised by Jan Karski in this passage of his report to the government in London: "[the Jewish] issue creates something like a narrow bridge where Germans meet in **agreement** [emphasis by Karski] with a large part of the Polish society".[11] On the eve of the sixtieth anniversary of the ghetto uprising, shortly after a very intense discussion about Polish-Jewish relations during the war had taken place in Poland in the aftermath of the publication of my book *Neighbors*,[12] an article titled "The Evil Shadow of the Wall" appeared in Poland's main daily newspaper, *Gazeta Wyborcza*. Its author, Halina Bortnowska, a human rights activist and a leading Catholic intellectual associated with the weekly *Tygodnik Powszechny* and the publishing house *Znak* (Sign) –paragons of open-mindedness, ecumenism, and decency – wrote the following:

> I remember two things, not from books or recounted stories, but the way one remembers a recurring bad dream. Spring, sunlight, April clouds, dark, imposing, and swirling black snow is falling, flakes of soot. "It's from the ghetto", says my mother, wiping this black snow from the windowsill, from the face, from the eyes. Of course, one could hear during the day, and especially at night, explosions and distant shooting. It was not very unusual in Warsaw at that time, but it always brought fear. "It's nothing. It's in the ghetto."
>
> "In the ghetto" then meant – not here; not where we are; this fire will not come here; it will not engulf my street, my courtyard … Does anybody but me still remember that we used to say – "it's nothing, it's in the ghetto"? We used to say it to each other just like that, in a tone of comforting explanation, much like soldiers must reassure each other that a particular alarm is for somebody else.
>
> But today I am ashamed of this distance. I see in it the evil shadow of the wall cast over one's soul. It is as if the perpetrators of Warsaw's Holocaust man-

9 Ibid., 117–119.
10 Ibid., 114.
11 Jan Karski, "Zagadnienie żydowskie w Polsce pod okupacjami", *Mówią Wieki* no. 4 (1992): 7.
12 Jan Tomasz Gross, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

> aged to remove the Jews from the realm of human solidarity – and as if they managed to remove us from beyond the range in which we could experience it. What did I feel when the black snow was falling? Nothing. Nothing, really? [*Czy naprawdę nic?*].[13]

Well, there is an indirect answer to the question Bortnowska asked in the conclusion of her article – what was I feeling when the ghetto was burning? – and it comes from Czesław Miłosz. Black petals falling from the sky figured in his poem about the ghetto uprising, "Campo dei Fiori". Nobody could miss them in Warsaw that Easter Week. When Miłosz got to be world famous after receiving the Nobel Prize in Literature, he often gave poetry readings on university campuses in America – his natural audience, as he taught Slavic literatures at Berkeley for a very long time. And, to the best of my knowledge, he never included "Campo dei Fiori" among the poems he read. This was noticeable, in part because it was perhaps his best-known poem. Maybe this irritated him, people speculated, maybe he resented being pigeonholed as the author of this specific verse, while his opus was so immense and varied?

Miłosz, in a manner of speaking, replied to Bortnowska's question in his correspondence with Jerzy Giedroyć, the editor and founder of the emigre monthly and a publishing house called *Kultura* (Culture) – a venerable institution in Poland's postwar history, with which the poet was associated ever since he had fled Poland in 1951.

In a letter written by Miłosz on 1 August 1979 to Giedroyć, we find this one sentence: *"Ja całe życie nie mogę się podźwignąć, bo uczciwy człowiek powinien był pójść do warszawskiego ghetta i tam zginąć"*, meaning "[f]or my entire life I cannot put myself together – because an honest person should have gone to the Warsaw ghetto and died there.[14] No wonder he could not bear to bring up the memory of this catastrophe casually, as it were, during some poetry reading at a campus of an American university.

Of course, the two kinds of "memorialisation"– dismissal, elision, suppression (as per Bortnowska's reminiscence), and the avowed trauma, which these recollections bring up (as per Miłosz's letter) – are not at all contradictory. One need not specialise in psychoanalysis to know that they go hand in hand. The well-known mechanism of suppression of traumatic experiences notwithstanding, I am still flabbergasted at the turning away from the catastrophic mass murder of the Jews, the disinterest, displayed among the Poles. Allow me to bring a personal recollection to sharply delineate the point.

I belong to the generation of '68ers – student protesters whose activities in various countries culminated around 1968. Things, in Poland, blew up in March of that year, but we had already been a precocious and unruly bunch for a couple of years before, while still in high school. In 1962, at the initiative of Adam Michnik (who would later become an internationally recognised figure of Polish politics and intellectual life), we set up a discussion club, as was by then a tradition of Warsaw's intelligentsia (only we were very young – one of the nicknames we got stuck with was "*klub raczkujących rewizjonistów*", the club of "crawling" – in the sense of crawling babies – Marxist revisionists).

We organised meetings and held discussions on a whole variety of subjects – about the Gulag, about Russian dissident poets and their protest songs, about the workers' cooperatives in Yugoslavia, or about the Spanish Civil War, or more esoter-

13 *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 18 April 2003.

14 Jerzy Giedroyć and Czesław Miłosz, *Listy 1973–2000,* ed. Marek Kornat (Warsaw: Czytelnik, 2012), 269. I am grateful to Irena Grudzińska-Gross for drawing my attention to this letter by Miłosz.

ic issues, such as "what is society?"– anything, really, especially when we felt that the government censorship or the silence of our parents' generation kept us from knowing "the truth" about the subject.

In our club, we never held a discussion about the Holocaust.

I do not recall a single important conversation with any of my friends on the subject of the Shoah.

And we were reading and talking history constantly. And most of us were Jewish.

Why – I cannot tell you. I do not understand this, in retrospect. On the face of it – because that was not an interesting subject. Because it seemed so clear-cut and transparent: the Germans have killed the Jews. Period. Nothing, really, to talk about. Nobody seemed to be hiding anything. No censorship, we thought, was imposed by the Communist authorities on how the issue was narrated.

What an astonishing ignorance and naiveté on the part of youth committed to leave no stone unturned in the search of dirty laundry hidden by their parents' generation. And the incriminating evidence of state-sponsored lies concerning the fate of Jews during the war was displayed in plain sight: for example, in the flagship state museum of German atrocities at the Auschwitz concentration camp – in those days still called "Oświęcim" – where all were invited to see a big and elaborate exhibit, without the word "Jew" anywhere to be found.

I do not recall when I read Miłosz's volume *Ocalenie* (Salvation) (though it may have been when I was still in high school, after the authorities dissolved our club) – stunning verses about the war and the fate of Jews. These verses included "Campo dei Fiori", which for educated Poles immortalised the ghetto uprising, freezing the merry-go-around and playful crowds under the ghetto walls in a canonical image of distanced estrangement.

In Rome on the Campo dei Fiori
baskets of olives and lemons,
cobbles spattered with wine
and the wreckage of flowers.
Vendors cover the trestles
with rose-pink fish;
armfuls of dark grapes
heaped on peach-down.

On this same square
they burned Giordano Bruno.
Henchmen kindled the pyre
close-pressed by the mob.

Before the flames had died
the taverns were full again,
baskets of olives and lemons
again on the vendors' shoulders.

I thought of the Campo dei Fiori
in Warsaw by the sky-carousel
one clear spring evening
to the strains of a carnival tune.
The bright melody drowned
the salvos from the ghetto wall,

and couples were flying
high in the cloudless sky.

At times wind from the burning
would drift dark kites along
and riders on the carousel
caught petals in midair.
That same hot wind
blew open the skirts of the girls
and the crowds were laughing
on that beautiful Warsaw Sunday.

Someone will read as moral
that the people of Rome or Warsaw
haggle, laugh, make love
as they pass by the martyrs' pyres.
Someone else will read
of the passing of things human,
of the oblivion
born before the flames have died.

But that day I thought only
of the loneliness of the dying,
of how, when Giordano
climbed to his burning
he could not find
in any human tongue
words for mankind,
mankind who live on.

Already they were back at their wine
or peddled their white starfish,
baskets of olives and lemons
they had shouldered to the fair,
and he already distanced
as if centuries had passed
while they paused just a moment
for his flying in the fire.

Those dying here, the lonely
forgotten by the world,
our tongue becomes for them
the language of an ancient planet.
Until, when all is legend
and many years have passed,
on a new Campo dei Fiori
rage will kindle at a poet's word.[15]

15 Trans. David Brooks and Louis Iribarne.

I did not understand – until years had passed – that in our oblivion to the subject of the Holocaust, we were not much different from the "laughing crowds" on the carousel next to the ghetto walls.

As to the rage that the poet's words were supposed to kindle, Miłosz's did when it all became legend, but not necessarily in the way he intuited they would. A spirited discussion erupted in Poland's opinion-making newspapers and magazines on the occasion of the sixtieth anniversary of the Ghetto Uprising: was the said merry-go-around, the sky-carousel, *karuzela* in Polish, functional or in disrepair at Easter time in 1943? Or did the poet superimpose the existence of a fairground near the ghetto walls at some previous time and mistakenly described a working carousel during the Ghetto Uprising? Judging by the length and intensity of the arguments by interlocutors, some bearing professorial titles, one might think that quite a chunk of national self-esteem was riding on the state of repair of this piece of fairground equipment.

Miłosz did not make a mistake: various people, independently of the stanza in his poem, noted the existence of the merry-go-around in operation and recorded it in writing. The poet was well familiar with the place, as it lay adjacent to a tramway line which he frequently took across town to visit his then best friend. That was, incidentally, another great Polish writer, Jerzy Andrzejewski, who wrote a canonical prose text in Polish literature about the Ghetto Uprising: the short story *Easter Week*.

This *desinteressement* in the Holocaust, carried over well into the post-war period, was but an illusory suppression of a dormant and deeply troubling issue that after decades unexpectedly burst into public awareness. During the "miraculous year" (*annus mirabilis*) of 1989, when Communism fell in East Central Europe and then the Soviet Union dissolved, local societies regained sovereignty and proceeded to freely organise their politics.[16] Presumably, they also regained their pasts in that historical moment. Subjugated for decades under Communist Party censorship, people (peoples) were now free to study previously inaccessible state archives, files of the secret police, and Communist Party documents in their respective countries. There was – among the intelligentsia in any case – a suspense filled with curiosity, a collective holding of breath as to what new facts about the communist era the perusal of kept-under-lock-and-key archives might yield.

And, if you will … nothing …

It turned out that there were no real skeletons hidden in the closets as far as the period of Communist rule was concerned: no big secrets unearthed; no as-yet unaired misdeeds of the Communists brought to the surface; nothing that would shed radically new light on significant episodes of contemporary history. At most, the opening of secret police archives led to a slew of personal reputations being destroyed when it was revealed that some public figure had not owned up to the fact that they, at some point in the past, were a secret police collaborator – pretty mild stuff, you will agree, as far as a reinterpretation of history is concerned.

Simultaneously, however, it began to surface – this took a few years to bleed into the public domain – that the unfolding secret, and "the difficult past", in Eastern Europe – one that had not been "worked-through" or even narrated in accordance with facts, the still to come East European *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* – was the Second World War and the German occupation of the region. One aspect in particular was blowing up the accepted clichés, which rooted the sense of collective identity of the local people in a narrative about the suffering and persecution experienced at the

16 From this point onwards I am drawing on my earlier published essays including, but not exclusively, the introduction to the 2020 paperback edition of *Neighbors*.

hands of the communists and/or the fascists: the untold story of the complicity of the local population in the extermination of the Jews. This, it turned out, was the real skeleton rattling in the closets of twentieth-century East European societies.

"In what way did the world outside the walls exist for the Jews? Did it embody hope?", Anka Grupińska asked Marek Edelman in a conversation held sometime in the 1980s. "It was an enemy", Edelman replied. "Because an enemy is not only the one who is killing you, but also the one who is oblivious to your fate … Not to help, or to kill, amounts to the same thing."[17]

Edelman – as those who knew him would readily, I think, acknowledge – did not shy away from controversial statements. And he could be rather coarse and direct in response to questions. But, while this might have sounded tough and "typical Edelman", at the time that he gave the answer – in light of what we know today as a result of two decades of amazing writings by the so-called New Polish School of Holocaust Research – his statement is very much on the ball. Only, it leaves out the most important part of the story. By merely speaking about oblivion regarding the German persecution of the Jews, it does not even attempt to spell out what the surrounding population *did* to their Jewish fellow-citizens.

I am hovering continuously over the phrase "it's nothing, it's in the ghetto" to make us reflect on the attitudes, perceptions, and, last but not least, behaviour of the non-Jews confronted with the mass murder of the Jews during the Shoah. And for historians of the Holocaust in whose profession the term "bystanders" has such a purchase, the findings of the New Polish School of Holocaust Research call for another look at our subject matter.

It may seem hardly conceivable nowadays – when books about various aspects of the Holocaust are published in abundance – that the mass murder of European Jews was in post-war decades a subject initially shunned by scholars. The reasons for it undoubtedly had to do with the difficulty of contemplating the enormity of the crimes committed, but also, I suspect, with the reluctance to confront different shades of complicity in Nazi-engineered evil by peoples and institutions in German occupied Europe. In his magisterial study, with elegant restraint, Saul Friedlander put it thus:

> [n]ot one social group, not one religious community, not one scholarly institution or professional association in Germany and throughout Europe declared its solidarity with the Jews (some of the Christian churches declared that converted Jews were part of the flock, up to a point); to the contrary, many social constituencies, many power groups were directly involved in the expropriation of the Jews and eager, be it out of greed, for their wholesale disappearance. Thus *Nazi and related anti-Jewish policies could unfold to their most extreme levels without the interference of any major countervailing interests* [author's emphasis]).[18]

"[F]or much of the war," another eminent historian of this period has written, "Europeans fell into line and contributed what [the Germans] demanded anyway. After 1945, this was conveniently forgotten."[19] I am quoting from Mark Mazower's *Hitler's Empire: How the Nazis Ruled Europe*.

This, I presume, must have initially had a chilling effect on academic engagement with the Shoah, and it took a noticeable time before the extermination of the Jews

17 Anka Grupińska, *Po kole. Rozmowy z żydowskimi żołnierzami* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Alfa, 1991), 22.

18 Saul Friedlander, *The Years of Extermination: Nazi Germany and the Jews, 1939–1945* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2007), xxi.

19 Mark Mazower, *Hitler's Empire: How the Nazis Ruled Europe* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2008), 6 and ff.

emerged as a widely pursued subject of scholarly research. When Raul Hilberg decided to write his doctoral dissertation at Columbia University in New York in the 1950s – it would become the founding classic in Holocaust studies, *The Destruction of the European Jews* – his academic advisor, Franz Neumann (like Hilberg an exiled Austrian Jew and an early student of Nazi totalitarianism), warned him that with such a topic for a Ph.D. thesis he stood little chance of getting a university appointment. Against the considerable scepticism of fellow academics – Hannah Arendt for instance, in a rare lapse of judgment, advised Princeton University Press to turn it down – Hilberg's book finally came out in 1961 with a small publisher, Quadrangle Books, thanks to a private benefactor's subsidy.

Once academic research on the destruction of European Jewry was set in motion, the subject was framed as a confrontation between Jews and Germans. To be sure, the German-organised mechanisms and apparatus of destruction was the kernel of the mass-killing process. But it was also becoming clear to scholars that the local context mattered. Jews lived for centuries enmeshed in European societies, and they had to be extricated therefrom in order to be put or sent to death. Clearly, to conceptualise the intricacy of the process, a third term – encompassing the role of other actors in addition to Jews and Germans – was needed to move the discussion forward.

It was once again Hilberg who came up with a felicitous suggestion. In 1992, he published *Perpetrators, Victims, Bystanders: The Jewish Catastrophe, 1933–1945,* and while the book's content did not generate overwhelming interest, the title of the book, indeed one word from the title, made a phenomenal career. "Bystanders" became a staple of Holocaust historiography's vocabulary, filling the need for the "third term", as it were.

Hilberg's accomplishment was to name the fact, which was generally recognised as pertinent to better understanding the mechanics of the Holocaust, or simply to producing a "full description" of what went on. This in itself was a very important service, which Pierre Nora calls "*mettre le nom sur la chose*" – to put a name on the thing.[20] But I suspect that Hilberg's term was so felicitous not only because it filled a recognised gap in the description of a historical phenomenon, but also because it disarmed the deeply troubling potential that such a full description might carry. The next step – after recognising that, in addition to Jews and Germans, the surrounding local society played a role in the process – was to ask the question: what did the "third element" on the scene of the Holocaust in one's own country entail? What did we do, when confronted with the persecution of the Jews?

The term "bystanders" implied that we did not do much. It merely acknowledged the fact of being there and suggested that this was inconsequential. The bystander's role, after all, is more innocuous than even that of a witness who already, by definition, is not implicated.

Far be it from me to suggest that Hilberg intended to portray non-Jewish neighbours as entirely oblivious to the fate of the Jews. Actually, he had a strangely "activist" understanding of who the "bystanders" were and what they were doing. Suffice it to mention some of the chapter titles from the section on "Bystanders" in his book – "Helpers", "Gainers", "The Jewish Rescuers" – as well as headings like "The Churches" and "Neutral Countries". Quite a mishmash, and a few counter-intuitive choices: one would not think of what Helpers, or Gainers, or Rescuers were doing as emblematic of "standing-by" … But the term was untethered from the use that he had made of it, and its popularity stemmed from its etymology. And we know today that it was bad

20 Pierre Nora, *Une etrange obstination* (Paris: Gallimard, 2022), 211.

history, a misnomer of what had actually happened. So, with time, historians began to question the concept.

What could it mean to be a "bystander" when confronted with the radical violence that Jews were subjected to during the Holocaust, especially in Eastern Europe? Is "standing by" a fitting characterisation of what local people and institutions were mostly doing? Enough has been written about the contributions of the Vichy administration in France to the round-ups and deportations of Jews, or the role of Hungarian gendarmerie in the mass deportation of Hungarian Jews to Auschwitz in the summer of 1944, or about the killings of Jews carried out by auxiliary police formations staffed by locals in the East, to induce a critical evaluation of the concept. Today, in tune with the earlier quoted passage from Friedlander and new monographs compiling supporting evidence, scholars would be inclined to recognise terms such as "implicated subjects", "facilitators", and/or "beneficiaries" as far more apt characterisations of the surrounding population's contribution to the destruction of European Jews.[21] And historians are beginning to view the Shoah in all its complexity as a European phenomenon, with identifiable consequences for the remaining local population as well.

A distinguished psychiatrist and a philosopher of culture (I would also call him a brilliant social historian), Professor Andrzej Leder, wrote in a flagship periodical of the New Polish School of Holocaust Research – in the yearly *Zagłada Żydów* (Holocaust of the Jews) – an important article entitled "Consequences of the Shoah for Polish Social Consciousness and Unconsciousness".

Leder is interested in the impact of the Holocaust as a "widespread and drastic" phenomenon. The melting pot which post-war Polish society represented – following border shifts, population transfers, and massive wartime casualties – brought together people from previously isolated local communities, he writes, with one common shared experience, however – that of the Holocaust.

> Everybody knew what happened then in their vicinity; everybody remembered where they had lived before the Jews got killed and where they lived thereafter; […] the remembrance of violence suffered and inflicted is a crucial element in the structuring of every traditional community.
>
> One often hears arguments that this did not destroy social bonds within the ethnically Polish Catholic society because Jews were considered "strangers" […] but I do not believe this is correct. Drastic, open, and massive violation of rules of social interaction, including the principle "Thou shall not kill", impacts people not only at the level of consciously processed experience, rationalised and categorised according to available narratives and socially accepted myths, such as antisemitism. Scenes of murder, rape, and humiliation pierce into a person's psyche and begin to influence a human being independently of what one thinks about them […] and such transgressions took place wherever the Jews resided, which means across the entire southern, eastern and central Poland […]. The experience of living through such an out of the ordinary "state of emergency" leaves a feeling that it may always return […] and that some day, without prior warning, one's neighbours can proceed to murder or denounce people bringing about their death …[22]

21 I encountered these terms in Mary Fulbrook's excellent monograph *A Small Town near Auschwitz: Ordinary Nazis and the Holocaust* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). See also Michael Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019).

22 Andrzej Leder, "Konsekwencje doświadczenia Zagłady dla polskiej świadomości (i nieświadomości) społecznej", *Zagłada Żydów. Studia i Materiały* no. 14 (2018): 496–505.

Taking stock of Jewish testimonial writings and a recent crop of historical monographs, a great contemporary Polish novelist, Szczepan Twardoch, wrote in a similar vein:

> I am convinced that one of the foundations of what one may call a shared Polish identity or ethnic consciousness, is the deeply repressed knowledge about all the evil that Poles committed against Jews during the war […] False consciousness leads to suffering. What is repressed will anyway come to the surface sooner or later and reveal the shameful quality of invented heroism and sainthood. Poland suffers from false consciousness …[23]

And it does not help that the ruling Polish regime from 2015 to 2023 was actively engaged in falsification of the Holocaust by promoting a mendacious narrative that Poles, as a rule, extended help to their Jewish neighbours during the war. This was not the case, unfortunately. Those who helped were rare and ostracised and endangered in their own communities.

For most Poles – including superbly educated members of the so-called "liberal" intelligentsia the Holocaust is a chapter of history that affected somebody else, and therefore it is not conceived as a component part of mainstream Polish history. Every five years, the Polish Historical Association organises its largest professional meeting, the General Assembly of Polish Historians (*Powszechny Zjazd Historyków Polskich*), and until its last meetings in 2024 in Białystok, when a separate panel on the subject was held, it had never programmed a full session dedicated to the discussion of the Holocaust.

The Holocaust is understood by the Poles as something that happened to "them", and not to "us".

How could the violent, human-induced, sudden death of three million Polish citizens – and nearly half of them were killed *in situ*, in or close to their places of residence, in full view, and with the occasional participation of fellow citizens … how could such a calamity, extended over roughly three and a half years (long enough to sink into the hearts and minds of assorted "beneficiaries", "facilitators", "implicated subjects", and also, yes, most of the "bystanders") … how could such a calamity be anything but a core event in twentieth-century Polish history? So what that the Jews, before being killed, had been locked up in the ghettos? The majority of those ghettos were easily accessible, open, at most separated from the rest of a town's population with some rickety fence, or a stretch of barbed wire. And even when encircled by a wall – was it not the case, as an important witness of these events, Ludwik Hering, wrote, that:

> *Getto żyło Warszawą – Warszawa żyła gettem. Każdy wiedział o tym, każdy z tego korzystał … Warszawa żyła gettem jeszcze długo po jego śmierci – aż do własnego końca. Getto było sercem Warszawy. W ciągłym pulsowaniu przyjmowało i wydzielało …* (The ghetto lived off Warsaw – Warsaw lived off the ghetto. Everyone knew this, everyone profited from it … Warsaw lived off the ghetto long after its death – until Warsaw's own end. The ghetto was Warsaw's heart. In constant pulsation it received, and it gave out …)[24]

Jews made up one third of prewar Poland's town and city residents. Which is another way of saying that, as a result of the Holocaust, one third of Poland's urban population was wiped out (and because of the unequal territorial distribution of the

23 Szczepan Twardoch, "Co we współczesnej Polsce boli Szczepana Twardocha", a conversation with Aleksandra Pawlicka, *Newsweek*, 30 December 2018.

24 Ludwig Hering, *Ślady* (Warsaw: Czarna Owca, 2011), 37.

Jews, in a myriad of townships in Central and Eastern Poland this meant half or more than half of the population). This mass murder of three million Polish Jews (or Jewish Poles, however you like to put it) provided the rest of Polish society with a springboard to social mobility. It involved the takeover of material property on a gigantic scale and immediate social advancement for hundreds of thousands of Polish families.

From the perspective of a social historian, the conviction that the destruction of Polish Jewry happened to "them" and not to "us" – such an *externalisation of the Holocaust* – requires, as an underpinning, a very peculiar mental framing of historical phenomena. It would be as if the French people espoused a belief – because victims of the "Terror" came predominantly from the aristocracy – that the French Revolution was an episode exclusively pertinent to the history of the French nobility.

Pace – "it's nothing, it's in the ghetto". On the upcoming eightieth anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising – at the time of the Russian war against Ukraine – William Faulkner's dictum that "the past is never dead, it is not even past" acquires special resonance. And if the history of the Holocaust teaches us anything, it is that no ghetto walls, or state boundaries, can insulate fellow Europeans from co-responsibility for the sufferings of a civilian population subjected to murderous violence by armed aggressors.

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