The Holocaust

Voices of Scholars

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Cracow 2009

My Way to the Holocaust

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I was born in the United States to parents who had immigrated to the United States during the great wave of immigration that began in 1881 and came to a close in 1920. My mother, who was born in Milnice, Austria, came to America in 1911 when she was less than one year old, and my father, who was born in Ciechanow, Poland, came in 1919 when he was nine years old. Both came with their parents, and for both Americanization was essential to their experience. The children of immigrants, Yiddish was the language of their home, but English was definitively the language of the street. We had family members who died in the Holocaust. More memorable, at least for a young child, were the Holocaust survivors who immigrated to the United States after the war. Among them were my maternal grandfather's younger brother Carl, whom I remember as a broken man, alcoholic, single and lonely. On my father's side were two cousins, both brothers: Samuel, who bore the same name as my paternal grandfather, and Max his younger brother. Both were married to fellow Holocaust survivors. Both were jewelers, essential to their survival in Auschwitz or so I was told. Paul, Samuel and Regina's son, lived with us for a time when his mother was ill. Neither my sister nor I can now remember how long he stayed with us, whether it was a matter of a week or two or a matter of months. Our family was hush about the illness and we were perhaps too young to have much interest.

So while the Holocaust had clearly touched our family, it was quite a distance away. We were far more directly touched by World War II and the almost five-year separation of my parents during my father's years in the army. He regaled us with stories of the war, with characters

such as "Sad Sack" and with the esprit de corps of his soldiers. He also portrayed himself as a proud and defiant Jew in the U.S. Army, where many of his fellow soldiers had never met a Jew and where some were clearly antisemites. Although he did not have many army souvenirs, there was a military knife that he kept at the top of his closet and a beautifully engraved wooden box in which special letters were kept and a portrait of my father in uniform, handsome and slim, never aging, forever young even as he began to age.

I was raised in a home that was nominally Orthodox and went to Zionist Modern Orthodox Day Schools where the language of religious instruction was Hebrew – not English or Yiddish as was more common in those days – and where some but surely not all of my teachers were refugees, the term that was then most commonly used for survivors and that then linked them to the chain of American immigrants. Virtually all my teachers were European-born and European-educated. It was there that they learned Hebrew, probably in Zionist schools as well. American men did not go into religious school teaching in that era. Other opportunities beckoned during the 1950s. Even the rabbinate was not yet considered a prestigious professional career. The joke that many a student remembers hearing about the rabbinate, especially for those of us drawn to religion, is "what type of career is that for a smart Jewish boy." Better choose medicine or law, even accounting. In school in the 1950s we were never taught the Holocaust but heard some words: camps, children, murder, Nazis.

Still, when some of my teachers rolled up their sleeves there were numbers tattooed on their arms, and we did not quite know what they meant. As Orthodox Jews we had been taught that tattoos were forbidden, and surely our pious teachers would not violate the law. We had heard that one teacher had lost a child, but did not consider what that meant. Another teacher had a fist but no fingers, and we stared at this deformity each day whenever he held chalk or whenever he came near us. We did not know – and could not ask – what happened. Surely we wondered. Some of our classmates were children of survivors, most especially in the grades one or two years younger than ours, because many survivors married shortly after their liberation, many brought children into the world a year or two later, and many immigrated to the United States in 1946 and

most especially in 1948 after the new, more open immigration laws were passed. But we never used the words. We were more impressed by their European origins, by their accents and their foreignness, compared to our more Americanized parents. In silence they communicated to us several important lessons that have loomed large in my life. Loss, responsibilities and inadequacy: so much had been lost and we were responsible, not for the loss but to make up for that loss, and we would never be able to make it up. One of my classmates, and a friend during the high school years, was born on September 18, 1945, to Hungarian Jewish parents in Budapest. It was only four decades later that she linked her birthday with the liberation of Budapest, nine months to the day, before her birth.

For me, growing up in the 1950s as a traditional Jew, school and home were two parts of a triangle of influences. The third was the synagogue. Our synagogue was established by German and Belgian refugees who had left Germany before or just after the pogroms of November 1938, known as *Kristallnacht*, or Belgium just before the German invasion on 1940, and who had enough resources and enough initiative to successfully relocate elsewhere. They had established in Queens the communities they had left behind in Antwerp, Brussels or Frankfurt. The melodies we used were the melodies they had used. Services started on time and ended promptly. Things were orderly, decorum was essential. The older generation spoke German among themselves and English to their children. Older children had been born in Europe, and the younger ones, the ones my age, were American-born. My father was one of the few "Americans," seemingly one of the very few whose native languages were Yiddish and English, not German, and one who knew baseball, not soccer. He was also one of the very few veterans whose service in World War II had been an essential part of the Americanization of his generation of immigrant children. There were several survivors in the congregation, most especially in the late 1950s and early 1960s, when Hungarian Jews who had prospered could afford to move into the neighborhood, but the ethos of Kew Gardens was shaped by prewar refugees and not by those who came later.

I also clearly remember when a survivor family moved in next door to my aunt. The parents spoke Yiddish to each other and to their children, and my aunt marveled at the three-year-old who spoke Yiddish fluently,

reminding herself of her own situation four decades earlier. Eli Zborowski was to become a leader in the survivor movement in the United States and head of Yad Vashem's fundraising activities in the United States, but in those days he was a young man working long hours to "make it" in America.

I suspect that little of this would be of any interest had I not ended up spending much of my career studying the Holocaust and constantly being asked: "Are you the child of survivors?"; "How did you get interested in this field?" I was drawn to the unspoken, to what could not be told to an American generation. In a sense my life's work has been to bring to an American audience and to transmit into an American idiom that which could not be shared with me when I was growing up.

We were taught little about the Holocaust; the name was not used, the word was not spoken. I read a little. Only in college did I begin to be touched by the Shoah. I went to Yad Vashem on my first visit to Israel at the age of 16 and was moved by what I saw, seeing the atrocity that had befallen the Jewish people just before I was born. We also dealt with the Holocaust at Jewish camps, which because they were held in the summer used Tisha B'av, the fast day commemorating the destruction of the first and second Temples in Jerusalem in 586 BCE and 70 CE as their major observance, and the Holocaust was more real to that generation than the destruction of Jerusalem, especially when Jerusalem was being restored, renewed, rebuilt.

I read little in the field until college and even then I was more interested in the theological questions than the historical ones. Though I do distinctly remember rising each morning to hear the 6:30 a.m. report on NBC News from Jerusalem on the Eichmann trial, and I was in Israel during that trial and attended one session by closed circuit television. My formal academic pursuit was philosophy and I started reading in theology. Richard Rubenstein's work *After Auschwitz: Radical Theology and the Future of Jewish Thought* was provocative and informative. Rubenstein argued that no contemporary Jewish thought could speak to the Jewish people if it did not deal with the twin revolutions of contemporary Jewish history – Auschwitz, his synonym for the Holocaust, and the rise of the

State of Israel. Something had changed, something so basic and so radical that everything had to be rethought. He was right then. He is right now.

I also remember reading Emil Fackenheim's first statement of the 614th commandment in the 1967 symposium in *Judaism* magazine. I read Elie Wiesel's cogent remarks and I felt that I had to read more of Wiesel.

And then...

The buildup to the Six Day War began, three weeks in which Jews sensed that Jewish life was again at risk, this time in the State of Israel, and the world was once again turning its back. America would not come to Israel's aid. The United Nations troops left. Israel was threatened. "We are going to drive the Jews into the sea." The words made reference to the Mediterranean Sea of Israel's western border, but for Jews these words linked the Holocaust and Israel emotionally, poignantly, powerfully. A central prayer on the High Holidays begins with the words, "On Rosh Hashanah it is written and on Yom Kippur it is sealed: Who shall live and who shall die? Who by fire and who by water?" The two events became linked for my generation, emotionally even if not intellectually.

A friend suggested that we rescue the children, bring the Israeli children to America where they would be safe, and I decided that my place was to be in Israel. If the Jewish people were threatened, it was my fight, my responsibility. So instead of college graduation, I attended the rabbinic ordination of a friend and heard a relatively unknown Elie Wiesel give his brilliant speech on the eve of the Six Day War, and left from that ceremony to the airport, en route to Jerusalem. I was in the air when the June war began, and landed in Israel late in time to be in Jerusalem when the city was reunified. I can still hear the words of the announcer, and still see the tears in the eyes of my fellow passengers. That Friday evening I went to Shabbat services and heard the President of Israel, Zalman Shazar, speak. He spoke the words of *Lecha Dodi*: "Put on the clothes of your majesty, O Jerusalem." Never were those words more true; never did they touch my soul more completely. I was a witness to Jewish history; I was at home in Jewish memory; I was embraced by Jewish triumph. However much skepticism – political and religious – has entered my understanding of that

war and its consequences in the past 41 years, that moment is indelible in my soul, and touched it oh so deeply.

I returned to graduate school in philosophy, but my questions were really in religious thought, consumed by the question of God and history, by the presence of evil in history. I started reading Wiesel, the early Wiesel, and found that his work moved me. I was touched by his being at home in Jewish tradition, at one with the memory of God, but also confronting the changed circumstances of the Jewish people and their inability to accept the traditional God of Israel after the Holocaust. Unlike Rubenstein, Wiesel could not reject that God, and unlike others he would not back down and accept God's presence at Auschwitz or God's absence. He faced the void, the shattering.

After not quite succeeding as a philosopher and teaching for a stint, I decided to go back to graduate school and study with the one man who was writing the most radical theology, at one of only two places in the United States that were teaching the Holocaust on a Ph.D. level. I studied with Richard Rubenstein at Florida State University in the deep and newly integrated South, instead of with Franklin Littell at Temple. Since then, Franklin and his wife Marcie have become colleagues and friends, we have reminisced on that decisive choice many times. I made the right choice for me. Rubenstein was a superb mentor, a wonderful teacher. We have remained friends for almost 40 years, friends and family.

I wrote of Elie Wiesel as a religious thinker exploring all of the theological issues central to my own religious struggle. It later became my first book and an avenue into the most unexpected of careers. After graduate school, I was a chaplain and assistant professor at Wesleyan University, where I taught one of the early courses on the Holocaust.

In retrospect it was less my intellectual journey that opened up the opportunities I later had, but the most common response to the Holocaust of my generation: social activism on behalf of the Jewish people, the attempt to contact and ultimately to rescue Soviet Jewry. In the 1960s Arthur Morse published his influential journalistic work, *While Six Million Died*, an indictment of the wartime failures of American Jews, most especially American Jewish leadership, to save European Jews. Products of the American civil rights movement and the anti-war (Vietnam) movement, we vowed not to repeat their mistakes. Two causes took primacy: support for Israel and the efforts on behalf of Soviet Jewry.

In the summer of 1976 I went to the Soviet Union to work with refuseniks, those Jews who had been denied permission to immigrate to Israel – and to encounter a new struggle for Jewish freedom, a dramatic fight against the oppression of Jews. Irving and Blu Greenberg briefed me for my trip. They had just returned, having faced arrest and harassment. We became friends. Greenberg later recruited me to head his then-fledgling organization Zachor: The Holocaust Resource Center, which was part of the National Jewish Conference Center which evolved into the National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership (CLAL). When Wiesel was offered the chairmanship of the President's Commission and Greenberg became its Executive Director, they turned to me to see if I would be willing to go down to Washington and actually run the Commission office, which I did willingly and enthusiastically. Its task was to recommend an appropriate national memorial to the Holocaust, and did recommend to President Carter the creation of a memorial museum to tell the story of the Holocaust, an educational program and foundation to spur the teaching of the Holocaust, a library and archive as well as a scholarly institute to intensify research, and a Committee on Conscience to warn national leaders, the media and the clergy of the threat of genocide and thus inform the world.

One issue became divisive in the work of the Commission, and that was the inclusion of non-Jewish victims in the national memorial to the Holocaust. No one would tell him *how* to include non-Jewish victims of Nazism in the memorial, but he had no choice but to include them. I drafted a memo which suggested that the inclusion of non-Jews was necessary in order to document the uniqueness of the Holocaust and the nature of the "Final Solution to the Jewish Problem." Simply put, one could not understand the evolution of industrialized killing by gas without understanding the T-4 program which gassed Germans who were deemed "life unworthy of living" and a drain on the resources of the country. One could not understand the concentration camp system

without seeing the Nazi persecution of political dissidents, clergy, trade unionists and social democrats. One could not perceive the involuntary nature of Jewish victimization without understanding the persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses, who could be released from concentration camps if they renounced their faith, and one could not comprehend the "Final Solution" without understanding Nazi policies toward the Roma and Sinti, who were not central to Nazi ideology, or towards Poles who were to be made subservient but not annihilated.

Wiesel feared that the formulation of the Holocaust which included non-Jews as victims of the Holocaust – not of Nazism – would soon dejudaize the Holocaust and would undermine his own efforts to speak of the centrality of the Holocaust and of its most essential Jewish character. Until then, Wiesel had spoken only as a Jew and had not been an easy denizen of both the Jewish and the American worlds. He had not yet become a universal spokesman on behalf of humanity even though he easily bridged the universal and the particular, moving from the Jewish experience to be inclusive of others. I believe that I soon coined the term "Americanization of the Holocaust": the partial translation, to use Michael Rosenak's terms, of the Holocaust event into an American idiom. It was meant to be in dialogue with, in tension with, the American narrative that was found in the Museum and the monuments of the National Mall. Again and again I invoked the Psalmist: "By the rivers of Babylon we sat and we wept as we remembered Zion." The place from which you remember an event shapes how your remember it.

My views had not changed, but I was recruited to defend the Jewishness of the project, to ensure that Jewish memory was protected. No longer an agent of assimilation, I was not the defender and advocate of Judaization. In the interim I wrote *After Tragedy and Triumphs: Essays on Jewish Thought and the American Experience*, which charted the role that the Museum should play, the commemorative and public functions of Holocaust memory, and the role of the Holocaust in Jewish history and Jewish consciousness, issues that have remained central to my thought, my work and my creative endeavors. I also had the opportunity to edit the proceedings on the conference that the United States Holocaust Memorial Council hosted after Wiesel's departure in "The Other Victims:

Non-Jews Persecuted and Murdered by the Nazis." That work was published as *A Mosaic of Victims*, as I thought it best not to set the lines of division as Jews and non-Jews, which is how we Jews often experienced division, but as a mosaic, understanding the variety and the diversity of Nazi racial policies and its central focus on the Jews. The distinction is subtle but quite important.

For six amazing years I had the opportunity to work on the creation of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's permanent exhibition, which also included three films, ten five-minute films on American responses to the Holocaust, and some seventy audiovisual programs, as well as its interactive learning center. I worked both as a public historian and as a scholar doing interpretive popular work and also scholarly volumes. This double focus has remained a constant interest for almost three decades.

Professionally, I left the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in 1997 and came to head the Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation, which was then taking the testimonies of 52,000 survivors in 32 countries and 57 languages. I helped improve both the interviewing process and also, perhaps more importantly, the archiving of the testimony. I also helped facilitate the notion that the collection should be made available not in its entirety – it may be just too enormous for that – but to interested parties in more condensed holdings. For example, the new Illinois Holocaust Museum in Skokie, which is currently being created, will have all the Midwest testimonies from Illinois and neighboring states. Auschwitz should have all the Auschwitz testimonies, Bergen-Belsen all of the testimonies relating to that camp, and so on. I left the project after we had virtually completed taking all the testimonies, and faced the question as to what next to do. So I reshaped my career, teaching part-time at the American Jewish University where I direct the Sigi Ziering Institute: Exploring the Ethical and Religious Implications of the Holocaust, and also serving as Professor of Jewish Studies. But my major work built off the work that I had previously done. I formed the Berenbaum Group which consults on the conceptual development of historical museums – their story-telling – and on the development of historical films. Among the projects I helped create were the memorial and museum at the Belzec Nazi death camp where 500,000 Jews were killed, the new Illinois Holocaust

Museum in Skokie, and Memoria y Tolerancia in Mexico City. I also consult on diverse projects and exhibitions, and over the past fifteen years in films. I sometimes joke that I have become the *Rav Hamachshir*, the rabbi who says that a product is kosher or not kosher, to those working on Holocaust films, most especially to those serious enough to ask and to seek advice.

I have come to enjoy the challenge of creative projects and of working not only on a blank computer screen but also a blank movie screen and on bare walls. I also enjoy working in from an area I know to an area that I do not know. I learn in the process. Many years ago I was party to a conversation between Richard Rubenstein, then my doctoral supervisor and a prominent journalist. He answered a call, listened to a question and said one word: "enough." And then said: "fine... three weeks." I asked him what happened. He was asked to review B.F. Skinner's *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*" and was asked what he knew of Skinner's work. To which he answered "enough." Then I asked him the same question and his response was "by the time I review Skinner's work, I will know enough to write a serious review." I learned that one can view an assignment as an opportunity to learn and to grow. I have never forgotten the lesson. It is a lesson that I offer to my own students as well.

How Does One Deal with the Holocaust?

I am often asked, how do you deal with the Holocaust. John Roth, my colleague and friend of so many years, once suggested the best answer I know: "handle with care!" One does not touch this material without paying a price, emotionally and spiritually.

Many years ago in analysis, I came to the realization that I compartmentalize much in my life. I could put things in tombs and move on to other items, but the tombs were not sealed; they leaked into other areas of life. One develops a professional desensitization and one has to fight that desensitization time and again, because unless it is fought one cannot anticipate how the readers will respond to a book, the audience to a movie, the visitors to an image in a museum.

Having been blessed with young children at two different stages in my life – in my late twenties and early thirties, and in my mid and late

fifties – I have been surrounded by life as I grapple with death. It helps. It allows me to touch the most vital life force there is: young children.

My older children were touched by the Holocaust in many ways, positive and negative. My oldest daughter Ilana wrote her college essay on growing up in a home where the garage housed all sorts of sports equipment and Zyklon B. She never went to Poland to visit the death camps with me, despite many offers and opportunities, but she did lead a group of students to Poland when she was a college student. She was the guide, not the pilgrim, and thus shielded just a bit. My son Lev did go with me and stood at Treblinka, and turned to me and said "get me out of here." We went to the airport and from there to Jerusalem. Arriving at four in the morning, he insisted on visiting the Western Wall.

My wife Melissa tries to shield my still-young children so they hear more about the Shoah in school than at home.

As for me, I had to learn when it was safe to feel, safe not to erect a barrier between me and the material and people that enter my life. Studying the Shoah made me compartmentalize. Living life makes me seek unity and wholeness, and not just fragments.

Challenges Ahead

What lies ahead for the field of Holocaust Studies?

First and foremost, we are at the edge of a great transition. The survivor generation is dying. They are passing from the scene. In the next five years we will only have child survivors of the Holocaust, and within a decade or two at the most, none. We will move from living memory to historical memory. No one knows the implication of this transition. It will certainly shape the nature of support for the field and the pressure to transition from Holocaust-specific studies to genocide-related studies.

No generation has left as deep a historical record to work from. Survivors' testimonies abound. I suspect that we have in excess of 75,000 such testimonies, and we also have thousands of memoirs in all languages. The challenge will be to comb these massive records. Perhaps they are so massive that no one can get their arms around them.

Some historians are uncomfortable with oral history. They contend the information is unreliable, or at best far less reliable than documentary

evidence or evidence created at the time such as diaries and notes. They are correct but they miss the point. No oral history should be viewed uncritically as historical evidence. It must be evaluated within the context of everything else we know. If some oral histories are self-serving, so too are some documents, speeches, memos and other accounts of the time. Oral histories should be considered alongside other forms of documentation and they should at least be considered by historians, subject to verification and classification. However, even historians who most vociferously object to oral history do rely upon it to provide context and texture. They do interview people who were participants in historical events. They read their memoirs and review court testimony. And the material assembled in these oral histories will provide the possibility of a people's history of the Holocaust. It will be of interest to historians, but not to historians alone. Sociologists and psychologists, students of literature and language, filmmakers and documentary makers will find this material of interest. It will provide unequaled visual recollections of the world before the Holocaust, vital information about the transition between the Holocaust and the post-war years, and, of course, vivid recollections of the Holocaust.

Ironically, we will have much less oral history of the perpetrators. I have become increasingly convinced that they too have a human story that must be heard, understood and interpreted: witness the important debate between Christopher Browning and Daniel Goldhagen and the earlier work of Robert Jay Lifton.

The second challenge will be language.

In order to do research in this field one must master languages or else rely upon secondary sources and translations. Central Europeans and Israelis will have an advantage over American scholars because they have mastered at a young age several languages that we Americans must struggle to learn as adults. Émigrés who come to the United States have an easier time with the original languages. Rumanians can handle their native language, German and French with relative ease and thus touch on several different languages at once. Yiddish speakers will be fewer in future generations and that makes the use of Jewish sources more difficult. Hebrew was not a major language during the Shoah.

The late Raul Hilberg once bemoaned the fact that more and more works are built of but a slim foundation of original documentation. He was right, and resources must be devoted in the field to support research on original material. We will need regional studies of areas and times, operations and specific documentation.

Saul Friedlander has shown that a general history of the Holocaust must deal with issues of time – he divided his work into six-month intervals; location – country by country, region by region; participants – perpetrators and victims; and even non-participants – neutrals and bystanders. Only then can we grasp the whole. Susan Zuccotti has shown us how to overcome obstacles such as closed archives. By looking at what was sent to the Vatican and what was received by the Vatican, she could compensate for much that she could not see within the Vatican itself – much but clearly not all.

We will need "archive rats" to go through the material that is opened, to ask new questions and probe new issues, to deal with issues that have not been fully dealt with. I think of Henry Friedlander's work on *The Origins of the Nazi Genocide: From Euthanasia to the Final Solution*, Guenther Lewy's book *The Nazi Persecution of Gypsies*, and Gunter Grau's edited volume *Hidden Holocaust?: Gay and Lesbian Persecution in Germany, 1933–45*, as examples.

None of us can keep up in the field. We are blessed with an abundance of good work and burdened with limitations of time and energy. So we will have many subspecialties emerge and we will know more about less and less about more.

Because the Holocaust deals with ultimate issues, life and death, good and evil, people in the most extreme of conditions, it will continue to be a source of attraction to those who want to confront ultimate issues. It has entered world culture as a defining event of 20th-century humanity and as the negative absolute in a world drawn to all sorts of relativism. I fear not Holocaust denial but its trivialization and vulgarization, not so much from antisemites and those who don't understand its importance, but by those consumed by the Holocaust, consumed and overwhelmed. "Handle with care" is the advice of a sage. It is a rebuke to all of us when we do not.