

Amos Goldberg

Introduction

Holocaust studies appears to be suffering from an anomaly during the last decade. On one hand, literature about the event abounds, whose scope and influence have grown swiftly and consistently; new archives have been made available to scholars and researchers search for new methodologies with which to understand various aspects of the event. On the other hand, it seems that the field has become static in some way, regurgitating more of the same. There is a sense that the broad strokes of understanding the event are already fixed and that all that remains are footnotes, large or small, or debates about local matters. This state of affairs provokes historians to a historiographic reflexivity, turning an analytic, critical, historical and conceptual gaze on their own profession. Historiographic discussion is an area where historians, traditionally, examine their own activity, using the same tools with which they examine the objects of their research. These discussions are admittedly rare in Holocaust studies, perhaps too rare, especially in Israel.

Some very lively historiographical discussions have arisen in the field however. The long standing dispute between intentionalists and functionalists has produced significant achievements. For more than a decade, however, this dispute has been declared to be at an end, with many works of research being published which synthesise the two approaches. Nevertheless, this division is still valid and significant, albeit within far less stringent guidelines and sensibilities than in the past. Thus one may view Saul Friedländer's celebrated two volumes *Nazi Germany and the Jews*¹ which situates a redemptive antisemitism as a central element in the progress of the Final Solution, as having an intentionalist orientation. By contrast, the less celebrated, although equally valuable book by Christopher Browning, *The Origins of the Final Solution* doubtless emerges from a functionalist tradition.² At the same time, one should stress that both works include many insights which emerged from the other side of the historiographic divide.

While the longstanding discussion between intentionalists and functionalists has been conducted in the main between historians; the *historikerstreit* at the end of the 1980's spread far beyond them, particularly in Germany, sending out shockwaves among a broad community of intellectuals

1 Saul Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews* (New York, 1997).

2 Christopher Browning, *The Origins of the Final Solution: The Evolution of Nazi Jewish Policy September 1939–March 1942* (Lincoln, 2004).

and an educated public. This discussion raised questions about the validity of comparisons or historical analogies between the Holocaust and other radical political crimes and between Nazism and other oppressive regimes, in particular the Stalinist dictatorship; questions about the Germans' guilt and historical responsibility and about the uniqueness of the Holocaust set against fears about its banalisation. The greatest historians and thinkers in West Germany were involved in the argument and it touched on the roots of post war German identity and its relation to its past. The dispute even produced a considerable literature outside Germany, although many observers and commentators of the dispute felt that it engendered a lot of heat but shed little light on history, perhaps because of the overly harsh manner in which it was conducted, motivated by internal German political concerns and lines drawn between right and left on the West German political map.

Another storm which spread beyond the community of historians arose in the wake of the publication in 1996 of *Hitler's Willing Executioners* by Daniel Goldhagen.³ The argument was conducted in two parallel channels, the more vocal of which, while attracting most attention, being the less interesting. The first channel of discussion referred to Goldhagen's far reaching claim about the murderous antisemitism with which the entire German people was gripped from the end of the nineteenth century and which was expressed by the enthusiastic participation of German citizens in the national project of destruction of the Jews initiated by the Nazis. This standpoint has been rejected as baseless by almost the entire community of historians, even if there are those who find much of value in some of what Goldhagen said and in his emphasis on antisemitism as a main motivation for the Final Solution. Goldhagen's book provoked another question which was both historical and methodological, however. Drawing on Geertzian anthropological methodology which demands a "thick description" of any given event from many points of view and using many, varied sources, Goldhagen's book depends on many testimonies of victims which are widely quoted. Using these testimonies, he reconstructs a carnivalesque, sadistic aspect of the process of persecution and destruction which exposes a kind of willing, pleasurable participation by many of the murderers and their accomplices which is not necessarily ideological in the narrow sense of the term. In this context Goldhagen received support from such unlikely quarters as Götz Aly, Dominick LaCapra and others.

Other works besides Goldhagen's have provoked specific historiographic discussions, such as Christopher Browning's *Ordinary Men* and Jan Gross' *Neighbors* and *Fear*.⁴ Some specifically historiographic works have been

3 Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York, 1996).

4 Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York, 1992); Jan T. Gross, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in*

published over the years in the field of Holocaust Studies, including in Israel, for example Dan Michman's book *Holocaust Historiography: A Jewish Perspective*⁵ a collection of essays published by Yad Vashem,⁶ and the recent volume edited by David Bankier and Dan Michman *Holocaust Historiography in Context*.⁷

Perhaps the most influential historiographical work is however *Probing the Limits of Representation* which emerged from a conference organized by Saul Friedländer in 1990.⁸ Friedländer invited well known scholars from the United States and abroad to the conference, historians and non-historians, only a few of whom specialize in study of the Holocaust. The book strays from an orthodox idea of historiographic discussion in that it introduces the linguistic turn, post-structuralism and post-modernism into academic and historical discussion about the Holocaust, making these a major focus of such scholarship. Questions of the validity of distinctions between disciplines, of the use of trauma theory and theoretical discourse in general, in historical research, the centrality of testimony, the ideological biases of representations of the Holocaust and narrative aspects of historical writing were all discussed intensively and with impressive intellectual rigour, for the first time in the context of the Holocaust, so that the book provoked great interest far beyond the field of Holocaust studies.

It is of note that to a great extent, most historiographic discussion has passed by the community of historians and educated public in Israel. While Israeli historians have taken part in these discussions from time to time, their focus has almost always been Europe and the United States, with only a weak resonance in Israel, despite Israeli scholars' significant contribution elsewhere in Holocaust studies. In Europe and the United States also, these historiographical discussions have been severely limited in that they do not, for the most part, strike out new directions of study. Even Friedländer's book which provoked great interest, does not pave a major new path in research of the Nazi period and the Holocaust, but rather remains as a theoretical discussion which is included more often in the curricula of literature and culture studies than history departments. Moreover, historical research inspired by the book has never reached centre stage in the study of Holocaust history.

Jedwabne, Poland (New York, 2002); Jan T. Gross, *Fear: Antisemitism in Poland After Auschwitz* (New York, 2005).

5 Dan Michman, *Holocaust Historiography, A Jewish Perspective: Conceptualizations, Terminology, Approaches and Fundamental Issues* (London, 2003).

6 Yisrael Gutman and Gideon Greif, eds., *The Historiography of the Holocaust Period: Proceedings of the Fifth Yad Vashem International Historical Conference*, Jerusalem, March 1983 (Jerusalem, 1988).

7 David Bankier and Dan Michman, eds., *Holocaust Historiography in Context: Emergence, Challenges, Polemics and Achievements* (New York, 2009).

8 Saul Friedländer, ed., *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the "Final Solution"* (Cambridge, MA, 1992).

Given all of the above, the importance of the historiographical discussion in the current issue of *Dapim* becomes apparent. In his programmatic paper, Dan Stone, of the History Department of Royal Holloway at The University of London, points out the absence of cultural history, one of the most important branches of the discipline today, from Holocaust historical research and argues for the importance and potentially huge contribution which might result from integration of this type of history into the field. He claims that some of the biggest questions might be approached by means of cultural historical research. Stone's main claim is that this kind of history can forge a new path between the two established traditions of intentionalism and functionalism, which have themselves, to a great extent, already been exploited to the full. He argues that cultural history can explain, for example, through close reading of contemporary documents, the irrational, phantasmatic world which fuelled the persecution of the Jews and the Final Solution. He even claims that this fantasy world is in many respects the key to understanding the Holocaust more fully. To examine this claim, he says, one should look again at anti-Semitic ideology, but in order to explain this complex phenomenon, it is insufficient only to draw on the longstanding tradition of hatred of the Jews in Christian Europe. Use must also be made of anthropological and social-psychological tools, for example, which seek to understand the emergence of radical violence in modern societies, of scapegoating, of the fatal work of myths, of the use of symbols such as blood, and of texts and rituals of political violence. Stone therefore situates his complex claim within a broad framework of discussion of the advantages and weaknesses of cultural history in general.

In the discussion following the paper, five prestigious Holocaust historians who also deal in historiography, respond to Stone's challenge. The main question preoccupying all the responders and Stone himself, is of course what in fact "cultural history" is, and what its contribution to Holocaust studies might be? A further question running through the discussion is how to research irrational or incomprehensible aspects of the Holocaust within the framework of a historical discipline? The discussion strays far from this problem, however, raising burning questions which trouble every historian and scholar researching the Holocaust today. Such questions include, for example, to what extent may one borrow tools from literary criticism or anthropology and include them in historical discussion of the Holocaust, or what in fact may be considered "history," who decides this and how and what the appropriate relation is between context and conceptualisation in historical research? How important is self awareness on the part of the historian for her basic assumptions and for the criticism addressed to her from neighbouring disciplines? These and many other questions are discussed in a broad bibliographical context so that the discussion itself constitutes a significant contribution for students, teachers and scholars interested in Holocaust research and teaching.

The main body of Stone's discussion, as noted by some of the respondents, deals with attempts to understand the perpetrators. In the wake of his paper, however, the question arises of how relevant his claim is to research of the victims? A detailed answer to this weighty question is beyond the scope of this introduction, but it cannot be passed over altogether. I would therefore like to draw the reader's attention to the thought which has already been given to this question during the Holocaust itself, by Oskar Rosenfeld, one of the contemporary chroniclers of the Lodz Ghetto. The following extract is taken from the entry in his diary in which he explains the importance of the encyclopedia written in the Lodz Ghetto, of which he was one of the editors. The encyclopedia collected and interpreted terminology and idioms from Ghetto life. In his diary, Rosenfeld explains the idea behind this original work:

The change of social intellectual and economic functions brought with it a change in the most commonplace conceptions. Concepts that until then were understood unambiguously everywhere among Europeans underwent a complete transformation. The transformation of forms of living forced the transformation of concepts.⁹

The conceptual and cultural transformation that the Ghetto inhabitants underwent is embodied, according to Rosenfeld, in its language. Thus, for example, the vocabulary of basic human needs like food, expanded dramatically, while "[i]ntellectual needs [were] pressed together in a narrow frame. They require only a few words, concepts or word association."¹⁰ This new, Ghetto language, according to Rosenfeld, was a product of popular culture that developed in the Ghetto and very much like rumours – an analogy Rosenfeld himself makes – had no definite source, spreading with lightning speed among the Ghetto Jews.

A collection of these linguistic and word treasures forms part of the cultural history of the ghetto—asserts Rosenfeld—In a future period, when the ghetto will be researched, such a collection, such an encyclopedia, will add to an understanding where a mere description of the condition is inadequate. The word, the language is the history of mankind . . . the language is a more reliable witness and source of truth than other, material artefacts.¹¹

In this text Rosenfeld talks explicitly about the future cultural history of the Ghetto and there are four assumptions which I share with him in defining this field and which I would like to suggest as guidelines for current cultural

9 Oskar Rosenfeld, *In the Beginning Was the Ghetto: Notebooks from Lodz* (Evanston, IL, 2002) 229.

10 *Ibid.* 230.

11 *Ibid.* 231.

historical research of the Ghetto and perhaps of other Holocaust loci as well. The first relates to the object of research of such a history. Rosenfeld talks here of “transformations” which I think is very much to the point. I believe that cultural historical research should focus on the fundamental transformations that Jews in the ghetto – as a society and as individuals – underwent during the Holocaust. This means that the cultural historical research perspective should not be the reaction or responses of the Jews to the horrors, let alone that of resistance or *amidah*,¹² but rather the transformation of society caused by the Nazi assault.

The second assumption embedded in Rosenfeld’s text is that this transformation takes place on a deep level of fundamental concepts which form the infrastructure of any given culture. These concepts that according to Rosenfeld are taken for granted by modern Europeans, are the context within which one can identify and analyze the cultural transformation of Ghetto society. In current terminology we might speak of “deep categories” of culture that form its “world image” as the cultural historian of the Middle Ages, Aaron J. Gurjewitsch, articulates it,¹³ or of Foucault’s “episteme” or Bourdieu’s “habitus.” All three terms, though very different from one another, have nevertheless one feature in common: they all signify some deep structure that enables culture in the first place. This is where, in my opinion, cultural history of the Jews should focus.

The third of Rosenfeld’s assumptions which I share, is that a major emphasis of such analysis should be language. Language, according to him, is much more forceful in revealing the human condition than any factual evidence or description. I think I do not distance myself very much from Rosenfeld if I expand his notion of language to other symbolic practices – a term of which cultural historians, following Geertz, are very fond, or to be more precise, all the various symbolic aspects of human experience. This means that the focus of such an analysis would not be so much on facts but on the practices and procedures by which Jews produced, or at times failed to produce, meaning. This means that in order to understand the human condition of Jews under the Nazi regime, we should turn to notions developed in history’s two neighbouring disciplines: the language sciences of literature and linguistics, and the science of symbolic practices, particularly anthropology.

The fourth of Rosenfeld’s premises which is very much connected to the third, is that symbolic analysis is much more to the point in understanding the human condition in the ghetto than direct description. I believe this kind of analysis to be relatively rare in current historiography of the Jews during the Holocaust.

These four premises, inherent in Rosenfeld’s statement from the Lodz Ghetto, may in my opinion, constitute the basic guidelines for any cultural

12 See Yehuda Bauer, *Rethinking the Holocaust* (New Haven, 2001).

13 Aaron J. Gurjewitsch, *Das Weltbild des mittelalterlichen Menschen*, (München, 1996).

historical research of the Jews which may be written as a response to the challenge which Stone sets before us in his paper, and which is sharpened by the discussion and responses of the other five scholars.