

Preface

Having written down her personal story of her life in the ghetto and in hiding, Janina thanked me, her husband, for putting up with her protracted absence during the two years of writing, when she dwelled again in that world 'that was not his'. Indeed, I escaped that world of horror and inhumanity when it reached out to the most remote corners of Europe. And like so many of my contemporaries, I never tried to explore it after it vanished from earth, leaving it to linger in the haunted memory and never-healing scars of those whom it bereaved or wounded.

I knew, of course, of the Holocaust. I shared my image of the Holocaust with so many other people of my own and younger generations: a horrible crime, visited by the wicked on the innocent. A world split into mad murderers and helpless victims, with many others helping the victims when they could, but unable to help most of the time. In that world, murderers murdered because they were mad and wicked and obsessed with a mad and wicked idea. Victims went to the slaughter because they were no match to the powerful and heavily armed enemy. The rest of the world could only watch, bewildered and agonized, knowing that only the final victory of the allied armies of the anti-Nazi coalition would bring an end to human suffering. With all this knowledge, my image of the Holocaust was like a picture on the wall: neatly framed, to set the painting apart from the wallpaper and emphasize how different it was from the rest of the furnishings.

Having read Janina's book, I began to think just how much I did not know – or rather, did not think about properly. It dawned on me that I did not really understand what had happened in that 'world which was not mine'. What did happen was far too complicated to be explained in

that simple and intellectually comforting way I naively imagined sufficient. I realized that the Holocaust was not only sinister and horrifying, but also an event not at all easy to comprehend in habitual, 'ordinary' terms. This event had been written down in its own code which had to be broken first to make understanding possible.

I wanted historians and social scientists and psychologists to make sense of it and explain it to me. I explored library shelves that I had never inspected before, and I found these shelves tightly packed, overflowing with meticulous historical studies and profound theological tracts. There were a few sociological studies as well – skilfully researched and poignantly written. The evidence amassed by the historians was overwhelming in volume and content. Their analyses were cogent and profound. They showed beyond reasonable doubt that the Holocaust was a window, rather than a picture on the wall. Looking through that window, one can catch a rare glimpse of many things otherwise invisible. And the things one can see are of the utmost importance not just for the perpetrators, victims and witnesses of the crime, but for all those who are alive today and hope to be alive tomorrow. What I saw through this window I did not find at all pleasing. The more depressing the view, however, the more I was convinced that if one refused to look through the window, it would be at one's peril.

And yet I had not looked through that window before, and in not looking I did not differ from my fellow sociologists. Like most of my colleagues, I assumed that the Holocaust was, at best, something to be illuminated by us social scientists, but certainly not something that can illuminate the objects of our current concerns. I believed (by default rather than by deliberation) that the Holocaust was an interruption in the normal flow of history, a cancerous growth on the body of civilized society, a momentary madness among sanity. Thus I could paint for the use of my students a picture of normal, healthy, sane society, leaving the story of the Holocaust to the professional pathologists.

My complacency, and that of my fellow sociologists, was greatly helped (though not excused) by certain ways in which the memory of the Holocaust had been appropriated and deployed. It had been all-too-often sedimented in the public mind as a tragedy that occurred to the Jews and the Jews alone, and hence, as far as all the others were concerned, called for regret, commiseration, perhaps apology, but not much more than that. Time and again it had been narrated by Jews and non-Jews alike as a collective (and sole) property of the Jews, as something to be left to, or jealously guarded by, those who escaped the

shooting and the gassing, and by the descendants of the shot and the gassed. In the end both views – the 'outside' and the 'inside' – complemented each other. Some self-appointed spokesmen for the dead went as far as warning against thieves who collude to steal the Holocaust from the Jews, 'christianize' it, or just dissolve its uniquely Jewish character in the misery of an indistinct 'humanity'. The Jewish state tried to employ the tragic memories as the certificate of its political legitimacy, a safe-conduct pass for its past and future policies, and above all as the advance payment for the injustices it might itself commit. Each for reasons of its own, such views contributed to the entrenchment of the Holocaust in public consciousness as an exclusively Jewish affair, of little significance to anyone else (including the Jews themselves as human beings) obliged to live in modern times and be members of modern society. Just how much and how perilously the significance of the Holocaust had been reduced to that of a private trauma and grievance of one nation was brought to me recently in a flash, by a learned and thoughtful friend of mine. I complained to him that I had not found in sociology much evidence of universally important conclusions drawn from the Holocaust experience. 'Is it not amazing,' my friend replied, 'considering how many Jewish sociologists there are?'

One read of the Holocaust on anniversaries, commemorated in front of mostly Jewish audiences and reported as events in the life of Jewish communities. Universities have launched special courses on the history of the Holocaust, which, however, were taught separately from courses in general history. The Holocaust has been defined by many as a specialist topic in Jewish history. It has attracted its own specialists, the professionals who kept meeting and lecturing to each other at specialist conferences and symposia. However, their impressively productive and crucially important work seldom finds its way back to the mainstream of scholarly discipline and cultural life in general – much like most other specialized interests in our world of specialists and specializations.

When it does find that way at all, more often than not it is allowed on the public stage in a sanitized and hence ultimately demobilizing and comforting form. Pleasantly resonant with public mythology, it can shake the public out of its indifference to human tragedy, but hardly out of its complacency – like the American soap-opera dubbed *Holocaust*, which showed well-bred and well-behaved doctors and their families (just like your Brooklyn neighbours), upright, dignified and morally unscathed, marched to the gas chambers by the revolting Nazi degenerates aided by uncouth and blood-thirsty Slav peasants. David G.

Roskies, an insightful and deeply empathetic student of Jewish reactions to the Apocalypse, has noted the silent yet relentless work of self-censorship – the ‘heads bowed to the ground’ of the ghetto poetry being replaced by the ‘heads lifted in faith’ in the later editions. ‘The more the grey was eliminated,’ Roskies concludes, ‘the more the Holocaust as archetype could take on its specific contours. The Jewish dead were absolutely good, the Nazis and their collaborators were absolutely evil.’¹ Hannah Arendt was shouted down by the chorus of offended feelings when she suggested that the victims of an inhuman regime might have lost some of their humanity on the road to perdition.

The Holocaust was indeed a *Jewish tragedy*. Though Jews were not the only population subjected to a ‘special treatment’ by the Nazi regime (six million Jews were among more than 20 million people annihilated at Hitler’s behest), only the Jews had been marked for total destruction, and allotted no place in the New Order that Hitler intended to install. Even so, the Holocaust was not simply a *Jewish problem*, and not an event in *Jewish history* alone. *The Holocaust was born and executed in our modern rational society, at the high stage of our civilization and at the peak of human cultural achievement, and for this reason it is a problem of that society, civilization and culture.* The self-healing of historical memory which occurs in the consciousness of modern society is for this reason more than a neglect offensive to the victims of the genocide. It is also a sign of dangerous and potentially suicidal blindness.

This self-healing process does not necessarily mean that the Holocaust vanishes from memory altogether. There are many signs to the contrary. Apart from a few revisionist voices denying the reality of the event (which seem, if inadvertently, only to add to the public awareness of the Holocaust through the sensational headlines they provoke), the cruelty of the Holocaust and its impact on the victims (and particularly on survivors) seem to occupy a growing place among public interests. Topics of this kind have become almost obligatory – if on the whole auxiliary – sub-plots in films, TV plays or novels. And yet there is little doubt that the self-healing does take place – through two intertwined processes.

One is the forcing of the Holocaust history into the status of a specialist industry left to its own scientific institutes, foundations and conference circuit. A frequent and well-known effect of the branching-off of scholarly disciplines is that the link of the new specialism with the main area of research becomes tenuous; the mainstream is little affected by the concerns and discoveries of the new specialists, and soon also by

the peculiar language and imagery they develop. More often than not, the branching off means that the scholarly interests delegated to specialist institutions are thereby eliminated from the core canon of the discipline; they are, so to speak, particularized and marginalized, deprived in practice, if not necessarily in theory, of more general significance; thus mainstream scholarship is absolved from further preoccupation with them. And so we see that while the volume, depth and scholarly quality of specialist works in Holocaust history grow at an impressive pace, the amount of space and attention devoted to it in general accounts of modern history does not; if anything, it is easier now to be excused from a substantive analysis of the Holocaust by appending a respectably long list of scholarly references.

Another process is the already-noted sanitation of the Holocaust imagery sedimented in popular consciousness. Public information about the Holocaust has been all-too-often associated with commemorative ceremonies and the solemn homilies such ceremonies attract and legitimize. Occasions of this kind, however important in other respects, offer little room for the depth analysis of the Holocaust experience – and particularly of its more unsightly and disturbing aspects. Less still of this already limited analysis finds its way into public consciousness, served by the non-specialist and generally accessible information media.

When the public is called to think of the most awesome of questions – ‘How was such a horror possible? How could it happen in the heart of the most civilized part of the world?’ – its tranquility and balance of mind are seldom disturbed. Discussion of guilt masquerades as the analysis of causes; the roots of the horror, we are told, must be sought and will be found in Hitler’s obsession, the obsequiousness of his henchmen, the cruelty of his followers and the moral corruption sown by his ideas; perhaps, if we search a little further, they may also be found in certain peculiar convolutions of German history, or in the particular moral indifference of ordinary Germans – an attitude only to be expected in view of their overt or latent antisemitism. What follows in most cases the call ‘to try to understand how such things were possible’ is a litany of revelations about the odious state called the Third Reich, and about Nazi bestiality or other aspects of ‘the German malady’ which, as we believe and are encouraged to go on believing, point to something ‘that runs against the planet’s grain’.² It is said as well that only once we are fully aware of the bestialities of Nazism and their causes ‘will it ever be possible, if not to heal, at least to cauterize the wound which Nazism has made in Western civilization’.³ One of the possible interpretations (not

necessarily intended by the authors) of these and similar views, is that once the moral and material responsibility of Germany, Germans and the Nazis is established, the search for the causes will be completed. Like the Holocaust itself, its causes were enclosed in a confined space and a limited (now, fortunately, finished) time.

Yet the exercise in focusing on the *Germanness* of the crime as on that aspect in which the explanation of the crime must lie is simultaneously an exercise in exonerating everyone else, and particularly *everything* else. The implication that the perpetrators of the Holocaust were a wound or a malady of our civilization – rather than its horrifying, yet legitimate product – results not only in the moral comfort of self-exculpation, but also in the dire threat of moral and political disarmament. It all happened 'out there' – in another time, another country. The more 'they' are to blame, the more the rest of 'us' are safe, and the less we have to do to defend this safety. Once the allocation of guilt is implied to be equivalent to the location of causes, the innocence and sanity of the way of life of which we are so proud need not be cast in doubt.

The overall effect is, paradoxically, pulling the sting out of the Holocaust memory. The message which the Holocaust contains about the way we live today – about the quality of the institutions on which we rely for our safety, about the validity of the criteria with which we measure the propriety of our own conduct and of the patterns of interaction we accept and consider normal – is silenced, not listened to, and remains undelivered. If unravelled by the specialists and discussed inside the conference circuit, it is hardly ever heard elsewhere, and remains a mystery for all the outsiders. It has not entered as yet (at any rate not in a serious way) contemporary consciousness. Worse still, it has not as yet affected contemporary practice.

This study is intended as a small and modest contribution to what seems to be, in the circumstances, a long-overdue task of a formidable cultural and political importance; the task of bringing the sociological, psychological and political lessons of the Holocaust episode to bear on the self-awareness and practice of the institutions and the members of contemporary society. This study does not offer any new account of Holocaust history; in this respect, it relies entirely on the astounding achievement of recent specialist research, which I did my best to ransack and to which my debt is boundless. Instead, this study focuses on such revisions in various quite central areas of the social sciences (and possibly also social practices) as have been made necessary in view of the processes, trends and hidden potentials revealed in the course of the

Holocaust. *The purpose of the various investigations of the present study is not to add to specialist knowledge and to enrich certain marginal preoccupations of social scientists, but to open up the findings of the specialists to the general use of social science, to interpret them in a way that shows their relevance to the main themes of sociological inquiry, to feed them back into the mainstream of our discipline, and thus to lift them up from their present marginal status into the central area of social theory and sociological practice.*

Chapter 1 is a general survey of sociological responses (or, rather, of the glaring paucity of such responses) to certain theoretically crucial and practically vital issues raised by Holocaust studies. Some of these issues are then analysed separately and more fully in subsequent chapters. And so in chapters 2 and 3 are explored the tensions emanated by the boundary-drawing tendencies under the new conditions of modernization, the breakdown of the traditional order, the entrenchment of modern national states, the connections between certain attributes of modern civilization (the role of scientific rhetoric in the legitimization of social-engineering ambitions being most prominent among them), the emergence of the racist form of communal antagonism, and the association between racism and genocidal projects. Having thus proposed that the Holocaust was a characteristically modern phenomenon that cannot be understood out of the context of cultural tendencies and technical achievements of modernity, in chapter 4, I attempt to confront the problem of the truly dialectical combination of uniqueness and normality in the status occupied by the Holocaust among other modern phenomena; I suggest in the conclusion that *the Holocaust was an outcome of a unique encounter between factors by themselves quite ordinary and common; and that the possibility of such an encounter could be blamed to a very large extent on the emancipation of the political state, with its monopoly of means of violence and its audacious engineering ambitions, from social control – following the step-by-step dismantling of all non-political power resources and institutions of social self-management.*

Chapter 5 undertakes the unrewarding and painful task of analysing one of those things that we 'prefer to leave unspoken'⁴ with particular zeal; the modern mechanisms that allow for the co-operation of victims in their own victimization and those which, contrary to the vaunted dignifying and moralizing effects of the civilizing process, condition a progressively dehumanizing impact of coercive authority. One of the 'modern connections' of the Holocaust, its intimate link with the pattern

of authority developed to perfection in modern bureaucracy, is the subject of chapter 6 – an extended commentary to the crucial socio-psychological experiments conducted by Milgram and Zimbardo. Chapter 7, serving as the theoretical synthesis and conclusion, surveys the present status of morality in the dominant versions of social theory and argues in favour of its radical revision – which would focus on the revealed capacity of social manipulation of social (physical and spiritual) distance.

Diversity of their topics notwithstanding, I hope that all the chapters point in the same direction and reinforce one central message. *They are all arguments in favour of assimilating the lessons of the Holocaust in the mainstream of our theory of modernity and of the civilizing process and its effects.* They all proceed from the conviction that the experience of the Holocaust contains crucial information about the society of which we are members.

The Holocaust was a unique encounter between the old tensions which modernity ignored, slighted or failed to resolve – and the powerful instruments of rational and effective action that modern development itself brought into being. Even if their encounter was unique and called for a rare combination of circumstances, the factors that came together in that encounter were, and are still, ubiquitous and 'normal'. Not enough has been done after the Holocaust to fathom the awesome potential of these factors and less still to paralyse their potentially gruesome effects. I believe that much more can be done – and certainly should be done – in both respects.

While writing this book, I greatly benefited from the criticism and advice of Bryan Cheyette, Shmuel Eisenstadt, Ferenc Fehér, Agnes Heller, Lukasz Hirszowicz and Victor Zaslavsky. I hope they will find in these pages more than a marginal evidence of their ideas and inspiration. I owe a particular debt to Anthony Giddens for the attentive reading of the successive versions of the book, thoughtful criticism and most valuable advice. To David Roberts goes my gratitude for all his editorial care and patience.

Note to the reader

The paperback edition contains a new appendix, entitled 'Social Manipulation of Morality: Moralizing Actors, Adiaphorizing Action'. This is the text of the speech given by the author when *Modernity and the Holocaust* was awarded the European Amalfi Prize for Sociology and Social Theory in 1989.

Sociology/Jewish Studies

Modernity and the Holocaust

Zygmunt Bauman

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