

Holocaust and Parallax

Gabriel Mayer M.D.

MA Holocaust Studies

MA Israel Studies

ABSTRACT

Our objective is to demonstrate the shifting nature of Holocaust cultural memory and the attendant historiography as it accelerates in the chronotope of present and future history. This is the manifestation of a parallax effect exacerbated and complicated by polity, transnational viewpoints on genocide, and the convenient utilization of a "unique event" as code language in real-time global politics and the necessities of economic value. What suffers is a myriad of cultural expressions ranging from literature to art and museology to heritage landscapes. This work leads into an expose to show how state actors transpose them into malevolent political tools and steal good-intentioned academic progress.

HOW AND WHEN

We can begin with the recent past.

Let's analyze the Fifth World Holocaust Forum. The event took place at Yad Vashem on 23 January 2020 to mark the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. The problem was that inadvertently, Yad Vashem was lured into a false narrative that much favored Russia and Vladimir Putin's narratives. Within a few days, Yad Vashem was struck by a hailstorm of criticism. It became necessary for two leading historians, Yehuda Bauer and Havi Dreyfuss to publish an apology in the Jerusalem Post, a month later.¹ Such attempts to "weaponize history" are becoming ever so common, as evidenced by the increasingly alarming trajectory of antisemitism and antizionism.²

This was an epicenter of tomfoolery, engineered by transnational powers. Most of the Eastern European countries, Poland, Hungary, Ukraine, to name a few had slowly eroded this unique event.³ They eroded the real narrative to a point where they were as much the victims as were the Jews. The main suspect was Vladimir Putin, driven by his ambitions of restoring the greatness of the demolished Soviet Union, by utilizing his KGB learned skills.

Objections to these affairs were widespread. On March 16 the Jerusalem Post featured an Op-Ed by Stephen Smith, who heads the USC Shoah Foundation Institute, imploring Amazon to cancel the

¹ (Harkov, 2020, Feb 18)

² (Rossoliński-Liebe, 2012)

³ (Bteman, 2020)

second season of a new series called “Hunters” because it propagated a completely false and often antisemitic narrative that included Jews gassing Nazis.⁴

What Happened?

Just as the 21st Century commenced, the discipline of History was broadsided by a resurgence of post-modernistic influences. The entanglement of historical fact within the scope of literature was clearly pointed out during a period from 1980 until approximately the late nineties.⁵ While Hayden White’s initial ventures in taking on the Holocaust may have been too much for historians, John Tosh was able to steer the discussion toward a palatable and mainstream direction.⁶ That was in 2002 and by 2019 Tosh came to grapple with the very issues addressed by this article as far as the absolute necessity of facts.⁷ As recently stated by Barbara Streisand, “Facts Matter.”⁸

Whence History?

Most pertinent to our discussion is to establish an agreed-upon set of facts that are conveyed and preserved by Holocaust Historiography. This specific element of Judaic Studies is barely decades old, and was already ripe for hijacking even in the beginning. In the late 1940s, accusations arose and a struggle, as unbelievable as it seems, ensued as to whether survivor historians could be relied upon. Of course, this was refuted by overwhelming facts and very clearly laid out by Dan Michman with a book, Holocaust Historiography and Jewish perspectives.⁹

While the notion of Judaic Studies commenced developing during the 19th Century, both in England,¹⁰ Colonial England-largely through philanthropy;¹¹ and in Germany, a mixed combination of German History with Jews, was intermingled; and within decades segued to film.¹² However it remained to the 20th Century to solidify a discipline, and this was largely to the credit of one man: Salo Wittmayer Baron whose ascendancy to become the first-ever endowed chair of Jewish Studies at Columbia University¹³ signified the birth of a new discipline.¹⁴ Baron presented a unique viewpoint on Jewish History, which, while sanctified in US Academia, would arouse controversy elsewhere, known as the Lachrymose¹⁵ viewpoint of Judaism.

Shoa!

Tragically, within a decade of this pinnacle of the aforementioned academic successes, the Churban struck the Jewish people! It is not for us, perhaps for no one, to write or tell about this horror. But if

⁴ (LIPSHSHIZ/JTA, 2020, March 16)

⁵ (White, 1990)

⁶ (Tosh, 2002)

⁷ (Tosh, 2019)

⁸ (Streisand, 2017 Sept.)

⁹ (Michman, 2003)

¹⁰ (Roth, 1950)

¹¹ (Bentwich, 1942)

¹² (Praver, 2005)

¹³ Columbia University is a private Ivy League research university in New York City. Established in 1754 Columbia University is the oldest institute of education in New York and the 5th oldest institution of higher learning in the United States.

¹⁴ (Gartner, 1989)

¹⁵ (Engel, 2006)

we must use words, then let Primo Levy speak for us: "Perhaps one cannot, what is more, one must not understand what happened, because to understand [the Holocaust] is almost to justify...no normal human being will ever be able to identify with Hitler, Himmler, Goebbels, Eichmann, and endless others. This dismays us, and at the same time gives us a sense of relief, because perhaps it is desirable that their words (and also, unfortunately, their deeds) cannot be comprehensible to us. They are non-human words and deeds, really counter human..."¹⁶

In a similar vein, Elie Wiesel, a Holocaust survivor, and Nobel Peace Prize winner, said about the Holocaust: "The experience lies beyond our reach. Ask any survivor, he will tell you: he who has not lived the event will never know it. And he who went through it will not reveal it, not really, not entirely. Between his memory and its reflection, there is a wall and it cannot be pierced."¹⁷

A junction point formed as the above entered the conversation regarding Holocaust Historiography and it is a point where no such academic discipline existed! Indeed, it was a task for future academicians, to begin the research and recording of the tragic events. On the other hand, many presciently foresaw the need for action. As the Holocaust raged on, several Individuals in Palestine sought as early as 1942, to establish some memorialization efforts, or commemorative venues, for mourning and sanctity of the perishing Jews and communities. Notably, Mordechai Shenhavi, as early as July of 1942 brought forth initial plans that were presented to the Jewish Agency, at which time he formulated the term Yad Vashem for this function.¹⁸

Once the new State of Israel was established in 1948, the government sought guidance from the Ministry of Religion for initiating immediate measures for memorialization. From 1948 to 1964 Dr. Rabbi Zanol Kahana was director-general of the Ministry of Religious Affairs and on behalf of the National Religious Party he capably utilized the *Hatsofeh* (the official daily publication of the party) for spreading ideology as well as news; he was thus seen and regarded as a dynamic leader and public figure. Utilizing Mount Zion and David's tomb as a relevant site, was a direct result of the state's search for commemorative activities.¹⁹ This role would position Zanol to become heavily involved with Holocaust commemoration, and led to functions, which later became part of the Martef Hashoah Museum.²⁰ During this initial period of dependence after the War of 1948, Kibbutz Lohamei Haghetat began implementing its own traditions, as well as the collecting of artifacts and documents; in 1949 this facility would go on to become the Ghetto Fighters' House Museum. This kibbutz, founded by survivors, many of them survivors hailing from the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, initiated efforts by members who sought to memorialize the past with an aggressive heroic agenda. Thus the commemorative functions were laced with heroism and archival documents began to accumulate based on this ethos. But they also had an assortment of items--things, which would, later on, be known as artifacts--in individual possessions. More than likely, it was the first known museal site as they erected a building to house them. Therefore, in a very spontaneous manner, various members brought in memorabilia, ranging from photographs to some objects they were able to hold on to, and these were stored and displayed. Displayed in a shack adjacent to the main

¹⁶ (P. Levy, 1979)

¹⁷ (Wiesel & Heffner, 2009)

¹⁸ (Brog, 2002)

¹⁹ (Evans, 2011)

²⁰ (Cohn, 2015, October 13); (Mayer, 2018)

commemoration facility this was a “temporary improvised exhibition” The building was somewhat remade and in 1951 it was dedicated as the museum building, though for years it was referred to as “The Shack.”²¹



Figure 1: The Shack: this building became known as "The Shack", was dedicated to the documentation and commemoration enterprise inaugurated at Kibbutz Lohamei Haghetat, installed at the Holocaust and Uprising Remembrance Day, 1951. Courtesy of author G. Mayer

These early edifices and collections are a reminder that the notion of “survivors did not want to talk” is a patently false premise. Many academicians have researched these premises and described initial methods of remembrance at a very local level in America²² and an assortment of similar efforts in Israel, again at local levels through Landsmanshaft,²³ which were widespread countrywide, and in smaller centers of religious kehillah.²⁴ The formation of Yad Vashem and all its functions are rooted in the “Law of Yad Vashem”²⁵ passed in 1953 by the Knesset. Explicitly stated, is the following wording: under Article 2.2 “to collect, examine and publish testimony of the disaster and the heroism it called forth, and to bring home its lesson to the people.” Thus, in theory, the collection of all materials pertinent to the Holocaust was a mandate. Yet, it took some time to determine the exact functions and purpose of Yad Vashem, with much scholarly debate involved.²⁶ While there were some items (artifacts), mostly photographs and documents, which were collected, little conscious effort was made for creating a collection for a proper museum. Primacy was placed in commemoration and research. There was no historical museum built until 1973, and in the words of one author, “The historical museum, with its educational goal, was added almost as an afterthought.”²⁷

²¹ (Azaryahu, 2000)

²² (Diner, 2010)

²³ (Baumel, 2001)

²⁴ (Farbstein, 2007)

²⁵ (Knesset, 1953)

²⁶ (Dinur, 1957)

²⁷ (Rotem, 2013)

What is evident, though only briefly chronicled here, is that the concept of utilizing artifacts and visual displays of history was a differentiation from any existing plans as regards to post Holocaust academic research or any public display. On the other hand, the Holocaust, as a concept, was tremendously influential as far as public sentiment. The May 1948 Declaration of The Establishment of the State of Israel speaks to this quite well.²⁸ It begins by stating that "it is the birthplace of the Jewish People and the origin of the eternal Book of Books--lines 1 through 4--and then asserts a historical justification and perspective. It continues in paragraphs 5-7 addressing the Holocaust as a significant event for Jews and then continues with a call for Jewish populations and settlements, all the while recognizing its non-Jewish populations and neighbors." Thus justifying this singular perspective, it may be added that many historians initially joined the debate regarding Jewish authorship of history especially as regards events particularly affecting Jews such as the Holocaust and none have answered this better than Professor Dan Michman in his book "Holocaust Historiography A Jewish Perspective."²⁹

Again, we may note that in the early 1950's even the study of the Holocaust, what would later develop into Holocaust Historiography, was scantily established and uncertain as to direction. However, diligent research and great integrity yielded volumes of work documenting the Shoah, far beyond what anyone predicted. It is not the intended scope of this work to document what has become a major academic discipline, Holocaust Historiography. Yet we can look at certain milestones to shape the thought. In the 1970s interest in the Holocaust grew intensely as television and cinema brought and presented a popular manner of dispersing the subject matter, which, hitherto, was never recognized. When President Jimmy Carter ordered a commission to investigate the Holocaust, led by Eli Wiesel,³⁰ the outcome was astonishing.

Within a few months, plans were underway to construct the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM). The results were magnificent and also stirred self-examination at Yad Vashem, which would result in the creation of an entirely different enterprise.³¹ Still functioning under the original purposes of the Law of Yad Vashem, passed in 1953, it became obvious that the institution needed to be on par, and even more, with what was happening in Washington D.C.

The opening in 2005 of the "New Yad Vashem" gave the world two academic centers with remarkable resources, unmatched talent, and never-ending research.³² The position of CEO of Yad Vashem became somewhat of a ministerial appointment.³³

Without a doubt, Holocaust Historiography reached new heights in Academia. There was, is, and always will be a pedagogical narrative with uniform standards and respectable, appropriate academic approach.

²⁸ (Council, 1948)

²⁹ (Michman, 2003)

³⁰ (Wiesel, United States Commission on the Holocaust)

³¹ (YadVashem, <http://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/about/>)

³² (Goldman, 2006)

³³ (Yad-Vashem, 1993-Current)

Yet, something rotten was seeping in from the edges of this narrative. It is difficult to point out the exact time and place the stink originated, but a few well-placed examples might make it obvious. In 1961 an event that would rivet the attention of every citizen of Israel, and soon known worldwide was taking place: the trial of Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichmann. It was held in the Jerusalem District Court between April and December of 1961. Televised, it became a focal point of worldwide attention and exposed to many, for the first time, the brutal atrocities, which had taken place during the Holocaust.³⁴ Numerous authors had offered various analyses.³⁵ Among them was the work of Hannah Arendt who was writing on special assignment for the *New Yorker Magazine*.³⁶ Her reporting was riveting to an American audience that had not been familiar with the name and the extent of the murderous acts against some six million Jews. She then wrote a book, published by Viking Press that came out in 1964.³⁷ A brilliant but isolated philosophy student, Arendt throughout her life sought to emulate her mentor, lover, and Nazi Party member, Professor Martin Heidegger. This book, in Israel, produced a howling outrage. While it seemed a pedagogical and objective analysis, her emphasis on the banality of evil cruelly rejected the agency of victims and survivors. The perspective of her discussion, the banality of Eichmann's brutal deeds, placed her depiction of Eichmann to be similar to the banal characters of victims, Jews.³⁸ What was missing is agency!³⁹

Throughout the early decades of gathering Holocaust information and rendering it into academic publication, one persistent theme was agreed upon. This is the concept that the Holocaust was such a unique event that it was not possible to compare it to usual historical events. Yehuda Bauer and many other leading scholars drew a line in the sand as regards the uniqueness of the Holocaust.⁴⁰ Nearly all academicians adhered to this core concept. Yet, certain individuals sought to push the envelope, for multiple self-centered reasons, such as fame, or to mark their own unusually clever and special characterizations. Zygmunt Bauman was a British sociologist and a Holocaust survivor, whose research led him to place or explain the Holocaust as a symptom of modernity.⁴¹ While he was the author of elegant works, he too committed the egregious error of depriving the individual of agency. Along with Arendt, he neglected uniqueness and personal agency, in order to commission an elaborate and self-promoting theory.⁴² Various disciplines were vying to presume a unique position in their own venue, thus sidestepping the notion of uniqueness.⁴³

As Holocaust research grew with additional discoveries of archives, archeological evidence of ruin, and survivor testimonies, it became necessary to explore the boundaries of historical memory and to dwell on the issues of memory of individual type and of collective societal variety. Maurice Halbwachs is credited with his works as early as 1923 for launching discussions as regards human

³⁴ (Shandler, 2001)

³⁵ (Lippman, 1982)

³⁶ (Arendt, February 1963)

³⁷ (Arendt, 1964)

³⁸ (Heather & Stolz, 1979)

³⁹ (Berger, 1995)

⁴⁰ (Adams, 2014)

⁴¹ (Bauman, 1989)

⁴² (Waxman, 2009)

⁴³ (Oxaal, 1991)

memory and factual history.⁴⁴ It became clear that testimony, and the archival records shaping history were to be analyzed as to the origins of the actual fact. Jews are very familiar with the notion of Zakhor or to remember.⁴⁵ It became evident that gathering history and establishing historicity depended on multiple factors, most especially those ascribed to memory. Therefore, discourse was necessary regarding individual memory and collective memory.⁴⁶ This was a necessity, but therein lay the possibilities of manipulation. Hayden White pointed out the possibilities of distortion when writing the literature of history.⁴⁷ However, intentionally or not, his contributions as regards the Holocaust, served to raise doubt as much as to contribute to academic knowledge.⁴⁸ While Holocaust historiography was growing, there were ambitious bystanders willing to nibble at its edges. There was a quantum leap when Levy and Sznajder introduced the concept of global memory. It seemed that the Jews were useful tools to promote a variety of war related issues and malevolent agendas. Their works were shredding the notion of “unique” into a globally palatable distribution.⁴⁹ It seemed that, after all, the Holocaust was not a unique Jewish experience but a global phenomena, which might be a great tool for explaining history in general. The notion that the Holocaust was the foundational element of cosmopolitanism became controversial and also destructive toward Holocaust historiography.⁵⁰

Holocaust and Genocide

During the late 1940s, a determined and talented lawyer, Raphael Lemkin, established a remarkable concept. He coined a new term, genocide, to describe mass killings of extraordinary proportions and directed against a certain group of peoples.⁵¹ Unsurprisingly, within a decade, as Holocaust historiography began to take shape, the term genocide was being used as a fitting term describing the Holocaust. The problems with such comparisons were that they transgressed the notion of the Holocaust as a unique event. Looking backward, these two terms, and the resultant conflicts of meaning, were prone to being analyzed.⁵² Inevitably, a group of scholars began sketching a line in the sand.⁵³ There ensued a long term debate.⁵⁴ To clarify the conflict of debates, we can turn to Dirk Moses statement, “This development may not be welcomed by those in Holocaust studies and historiography, because their relationship to genocide studies is complicated by its claim to incorporate the Holocaust into its object of inquiry, whereas the reverse does not hold.”⁵⁵ Genocide Studies attained full academic discipline status with the detailed analysis of the Rwandan 1990’s horrific genocidal killings.⁵⁶ In 2010 the United Nations convened a scholarly workshop to address the educational needs of the terms, Holocaust and genocide. The topic was addressed with the

⁴⁴ (Halbwachs, 1992)

⁴⁵ (Yerushalmi, 1996)

⁴⁶ (Schacter, Eich, & Tulving, 1978)

⁴⁷ (White, 1990)

⁴⁸ (Braun, 1994)

⁴⁹ (D. Levy & Sznajder, 2002)

⁵⁰ (D. Levy & Sznajder, 2002)

⁵¹ (Lemkin, 1946)

⁵² (Lemkin, 2012)

⁵³ (Bergen, 2009)

⁵⁴ (Moses, 2004)

⁵⁵ (Moses, 2011, p. p.2)

⁵⁶ (Lemarchand, 2004)

following statement, "A central concern raised by many educators and students is why teach and learn about the Holocaust when there have been so many other instances of mass suffering of target groups throughout history? Further, why teach and learn about the Holocaust when other crimes against humanity are perpetrated today? A clear and well-informed understanding of the Holocaust, the paradigmatic genocide, may help educators and students understand other genocides, mass atrocities, and human rights violations."⁵⁷ In the end, what mattered most was that these articulations commenced a fuzzy nature regarding Holocaust historiography; a nature that became easy to exploit.⁵⁸ Some very respected scholars performing great research would come along to muddy the waters. Consider Tim Snyder's *Bloodlands*, a book that was praised by a multitude of scholars.⁵⁹ His work argued that the Nazis committed equal numbers of atrocities as much as the Soviets, made little mention of Jews, but instead, it places a wedge into the history of WWII. This wedge is illustrative of works that began diminishing the stature of the Holocaust or to relativize it. By the beginning of the twenty-first Century, various governments and political groups commenced changing the narrative into a fabrication that would equate the Jewish trauma to the trauma of their own citizens. These situations and fabrications accompanying were meant to serve their own interests and if it took usurping the Holocaust narrative, so be it. The world protested to no avail, and this did not go unnoticed by respectable news outlets or serious Holocaust historians.⁶⁰

Discussion:

One can easily observe distortion of genuine Holocaust Historiography as the narratives spin out of control and are being hijacked by self-serving state actors, along with academicians who seek to promote their own distortions. In a recent Jerusalem Post op-ed, Ephraim Zuroff warns of Holocaust denial and Holocaust distortion as the gravest dangers to the true historical narrative of the Shoah.⁶¹ However, there are grave realities that accompany Holocaust distortion and many such doings lead to antisemitism, Jew-hatred and attacks upon Jews, and most significantly, the results as narratives of anti-Zionism and anti-Israel, create the re-emergence of most Jewish tropisms. These are identical to those present in pre-war Germany, or throughout the ages. Therefore, what began as early distortions meant for academic consumption morphed into a nightmare that intruded upon every aspect of Jewish history, along with the resurgence of hateful anti-Semitism.⁶² The virulence of these new viewpoints would form a grave danger to Jews as well as society at large. Is anything reversible? The likelihood of a positive outcome and corrective measures is poor. Consider that Russia's president, Vladimir Putin, and Israel's prime minister, Bibi Netanyahu, have wielded equal doses of Holocaust manipulation for their own gain.⁶³ A glimmer of hope remains in education. Consider the recent brutal murder of George Floyd and the ensuing worldwide demonstrations against racially motivated brutality. This has caused a re-examination of far right-wing ideology and

⁵⁷ (United Nations, 2010)

⁵⁸ (Assmann, 2010)

⁵⁹ (Snyder, 2011)

⁶⁰ (NYT Editorial Board, 2018, June 29)

⁶¹ (Zuroff, 2020 June 18)

⁶² (NYT Editorial Board, 2019)

⁶³ (Avishai, January 2020)

the accompanying hatred and racism against black people and Jews.⁶⁴ A renewed interest in education and very specifically, Holocaust education has sprung up.⁶⁵

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⁶⁴ (Cutler, 2020 June)

⁶⁵ (Eddy, 2020/June)

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