

Mariam Nourmand & 'Americanization' of the Holocaust







Berliner Beiträge zur Amerikanistik

*'Americanization'
of the
Holocaust*

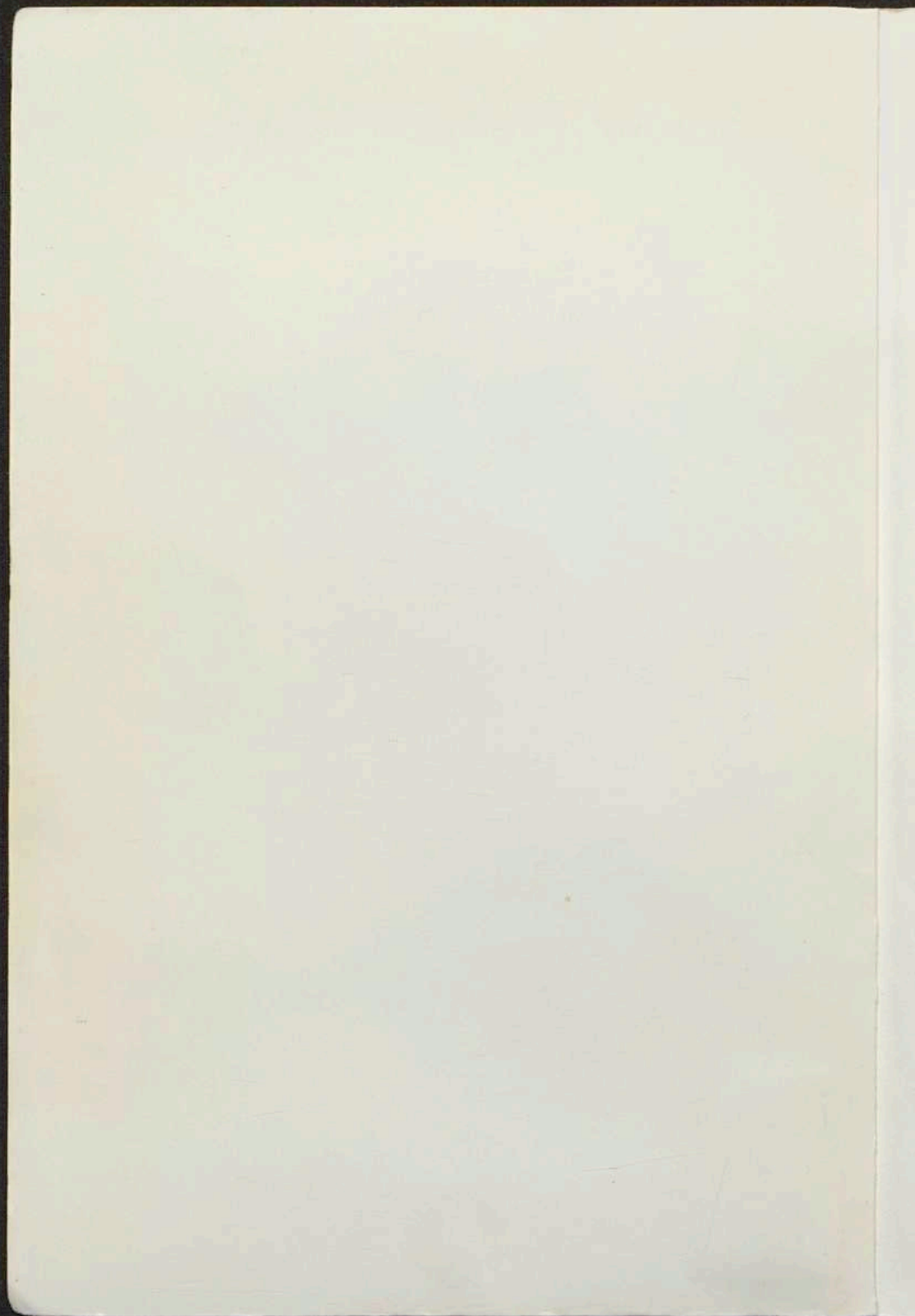
Mariam Niroumand

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Herausgegeben von

Winfried Fluck Heinz Ickstadt

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Introduction

After a period of silence that lasted almost two decades, the number of poems, books, films, historiographies -- and memorials of the Holocaust has skyrocketed. Each one adds to the contextualization of an event that seems to recede in time the more we try to grasp it. With the growing need for remembrance -- incited both by the role of memory in Jewish tradition as well as by the fact that the survivors pass away and revisionism rears its head -- our inability to actually remember becomes ever more obvious. The impasse results from the fact that historiography and memory are intertwined with the meaning an event would yield. Faced with an attempt at complete annihilation that is counterrational, a breach of civilization, traditional approaches to historiography are at a loss.

The problem is doubled for Jews whose very existence as a people is based on the injunction to remember. Each Pessach Seder contains the ritualized question of what the Exodus *means* to each individual participant; but what is the *meaning* of millions being torn from their lives, and sent to their deaths by the millions?

The problem is multiplied for American Jews who -- in their majority -- are removed from tradition and thus do not have the option of simply "reaching backwards over the abyss" to Biblical narrations of catastrophes that would be followed by redemption. How can the Holocaust be prevented from becoming a negative "substitute religion?"

American Jews are also faced with the demand of demonstrating the universality of what they encountered to their fellow non-Jewish Americans, especially to other minorities who have also suffered victimization (sometimes at the hands of Americans), while at the same time maintaining the particularity of their experience, even if vicarious.

While these are urgent questions that will be touched upon in this thesis, I have tried to concentrate on the interpretations represented in

some of the Holocaust memorials and especially in the two major museums that opened this year in Los Angeles and Washington, D.C..

To do justice to the efforts undertaken in these institutions, it seemed necessary to understand the meaning of memory in the Jewish tradition, and the transformations that this tradition underwent during emancipation in Europe and immigration to America. Remembrance was a Biblical injunction aimed at revealing God's actions in history. It was not historiography in the sense of a scholarly discipline or a method of examining causal relationships between past events, but aimed at the meaning revealed by the interaction between God and his chosen people. Historiography in the academic sense was a phenomenon of assimilation, a substitute for the religious observance that had to be disposed of if the Jews wanted to be citizens of enlightened Western nations (and not become a nation among the nations). Modern Jewish thinkers such as Walter Benjamin, Gershom Scholem or Immanuel Levinas in turn tried to explore a "counter-history" that could yield utopian as well as redemptive elements. Working along the ruptures rather than within continuities is what unites them with postmodern thinkers such as Derrida or Jabés who are, in turn, adopted by American academics who try to reconnect to a Jewish tradition of looking at history without giving up on secularity. The first chapter will be devoted to this topic.

The second chapter is an attempt to outline the reactions to the Holocaust first when it was still a rumor, and later as it became a certainty, and still later when it became an (ever present) past. After a period of silence, public remembrance of the Holocaust became a vibrant and difficult debate: The controversy on Hannah Arendt's observations during the Eichmann trial bore a striking resemblance to the current debates on what some call the "instrumentalization of the Holocaust." A whole panoply of Holocaust iconography was developed in the course of the ensuing years -- all within the aforementioned context of universality versus particularism. All the while American Jewish identity became increasingly tied to the "Holocaust-issues" of passivity, suffering, exile and self-assertion -- a process described in the third chapter.

The fourth chapter finally deals with what Michael Berenbaum, program director of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, has termed the "Americanization of the Holocaust." How are the narratives of survivors and their children (who are the architects of these new institutions) woven into the fabric of American national myths and values?

It is not the goal of this thesis to devalue the attempts at "silencing the silence" that are made in these new American narratives, but to examine these narratives closely while still making the silence that emanates from the Holocaust audible.

I. Concepts of Remembrance in Jewish History

I.1. Zakhor: The Biblical Injunction to Remember

Probably the most influential recent work on memorial traditions in Judaism was Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi's "Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory"¹. Yerushalmi, a professor of Jewish history, Culture and Society, and the director of the Center for Israel and Jewish Studies at Columbia University, was a student of the first Jewish scholar to hold an academic chair of Jewish history, Salo Wittmeyer Baron. This may account for the highly self-reflexive style of the book: Yerushalmi not only examines the extent to which Judaism has been shaped by the biblical command to remember, but also the role of the Jewish historian himself.

Ancient Israel was the only people to which the injunction to remember became a religious imperative. While the Greeks explored their past in search of moral examples or political insights, and never gave historiography a place in their religion or philosophy, the Jews assigned a decisive religious significance to history. "Remember the days of old, consider the years of ages past" (Deut. 32:7). "Remember what Amalek did to you" (Deut. 25:17). And, insistently: "Remember that you were a slave in Egypt...". These biblical injunctions, repeated annually or even weekly, were part of the covenant confirmed at Sinai, whose biblical records are nothing but a history of the relation between God and his chosen people.

Biblical faith holds that God is revealed in human history. This belief came about not through philosophical speculation, but a new and revolutionary understanding of God. The encounter between man and the divine no longer centered around nature and the cosmos but around human history. Writes Yerushalmi:

With the departure of Adam and Eve from Eden, history begins, historical time becomes real, and the way back is closed forever. ...Thrust reluctantly into history, man in Hebrew thought comes to affirm his historical existence despite the suffering it entails, and gradually, ploddingly, he dis-

¹ Yosef Haim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982)

covers that God reveals himself in the course of it. Rituals and festivals in ancient Israel are themselves no longer primarily repetitions of mythic archetypes meant to annihilate historical time. Where they evoke the past, it is not primeval but the historical past, in which the great and critical moments of Israel's history were fulfilled. Far from attempting a flight from history, biblical religion allows itself to be saturated by it and is inconceivable apart from it.²

Paradoxically, however, ancient Judaism was not interested primarily in historiography in the sense of an exploration of the past as an end in itself. The biblical appeals to remember do not aim at a clarification of historical facts. Highly selective, they are interested only in God's acts of intervention in history, and man's response to them. "If Herodotus was the father of history, the fathers of *meaning* in history were the Jews."³ Memory transmitted through ritual and recital evokes repetitively past events that, historically speaking, can only happen once -- there will only be one crossing of the Red Sea, one revelation at Sinai, one Exodus, one sojourn in the wilderness. Yet they are remembered over and over again, during the great pilgrimage festivals of the year, especially Passover and Tabernacles, year in, year out. Yerushalmi argues that "meaning in history, memory of the past, and the writing of history are by no means to be equated."⁴

While they were still linked in the Bible, they split in postbiblical Judaism. In rabbinic literature, in Talmud and Midrash (the main body of written and oral interpretations), the precreational world is explored, Near eastern ancient monsters and ghosts are described, and biblical time spans are expanded and collapsed, seemingly arbitrarily.

The interpretations suggest that the rabbis searched for a "subterranean", hidden history that ran beneath that of the world, which would reveal the *purpose* of visible history. There rarely seems to have been an urge to record present day history, not even when catastrophes occurred like the Crusades or the Black Plague. A tendency

2 Yerushalmi 10-11

3 Yerushalmi 8

4 Yerushalmi 14

of great importance that persisted through modern religious responses to the Holocaust was the subsuming of major new events under familiar archetypes, and a general hostility towards novelty in history. The Canadian historian David Roskies points out that the destruction of the Second Temple was related by Rabbis to that of the First, the pogroms in Russia of the nineteenth century to persecution of Amalek or Haman to the Chmielnitzki pogroms in Poland or later in Russia - and all of them to the Holocaust. To Roskies, "memory is an aggressive act"⁵ - a kind of "pattern or grid, a context through which to filter responses to individual and collective crisis."⁶ The rationale behind this patterning is, obviously, that it is easier to grasp a catastrophe by comparison and explanation than in its uniqueness. Present day catastrophes like the expulsion from Spain in 1492 were not recorded historiographically, but tied, as Yerushalmi explains, to the Fall of man: "Persecution and suffering are, after all, the result of the condition of being in exile, and exile itself is the bitter fruit of ancient sins".⁷

Other contemporary critics have argued that this view of Jewish history as a chain of catastrophes is somewhat "ahistorical", the aforementioned historian Salo W. Baron has even called it "lacrymose", because it makes " Jewish history a vale of tears."⁸ Others, most of all the German philosopher Franz Rosenzweig, felt that it was precisely the "standing outside of history" that enabled the Jews to develop an ethics of their own. Shaped by the experience of the First World War and by an anti-Hegelian attitude that would not accept the identification of history with reason, Rosenzweig developed

5 David G. Roskies, *Against the Apocalypse: Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1984), 10

6 Susan Handelman, *Fragments of Redemption: Jewish Thought and Literary Theory in Benjamin, Scholem and Levinas*, (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1993), 150

7 Yerushalmi 36

8 Salo W. Baron, *History and Jewish Historians*, (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1964)

a schema of the wandering Jew who already partakes of eternity by living enclosed within Jewish peoplehood and ritual observance of the law in the ever returning circles of the annual liturgy.

Jewish feeling takes only this world for unfinished, while it takes for finished and unalterable the law that it presumes to impose on this world so that it might be transformed into the world to come. Even if the law appears in the highly modern garb of some contemporary Utopianism the law then stands in sharp contrast to the Christian lack of law which can and wants to be taken by surprise, which still distinguishes the Christian-turned-politician from the Jew-turned-Utopian and which endows the latter with the greater power to shake up, the former with the greater readiness to attain. The Jew always thinks that what counts is only to turn his legal doctrine this way and that; sooner or later it will turn out to have 'everything in it.'⁹

Of course Rosenzweig was attacked especially by all advocates of Jewish political activism, especially by Zionists -- if the Law has "everything in it", why fight for a Jewish state? Zionist Kabbala-Scholar Gerschom Scholem also attacked Rosenzweig for taming the anarchic potential of Jewish messianism, making it politically impotent while adhering to a conservative traditional obedience of the law. The notion of Jewish passivity became of painful urgency during and after the Holocaust. In a recent issue of *Tikkun* magazine Berkeley historian David Biale described the "myth of Jewish powerlessness and passivity"¹⁰ as ultimately leading to unreflected eruptions of Zionist violence (he cites the case of the Lebanon war).

In hindsight, however, this reduction to an "appeal for passivity" seems too restricted a view of Rosenberg's ideas. Being "beyond" history also meant beyond its brutality, its wars and its ethics. Defying secular history especially in times when teleological propaganda is strong can become a daring act of resistance: reading the Torah in a concentration camp was not only often a highly dangerous endeavour,

9 Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, 2nd ed., Trans. William Hallo, 1930, (New York: Holt Rinehart), 406

10 David Biale, "Power, Passivity and the Legacy of the Holocaust," *Tikkun*, 2,1, 70

it also demonstrated Jewish continuity in the face of the adverse temporality of a Third Reich that aspired to last forever.

In the next chapter I will specifically discuss the responses to the Holocaust in light of these differing approaches to Jewish history. One needs first to understand, however, why exactly memory is such a crucial issue in Judaism.

The central formula for the kind of remembrance at hand was proclaimed by the Ba'al Schem Tov, a Chassidic rabbi of the seventeenth century: "Forgetting will only prolong the exile. *Memory is the secret of redemption.*" Countless volumes have been written on these two sentences, and many Holocaust memorial bear them as their graven motto.

Yerushalmi has shown that remembrance does not mean historiography, and especially not the linear Hegelian version of history. What then is the redemptive quality of memory? How can it be obtained?

1.2. Modern Approaches to Historiography

In a groundbreaking comparative study of modern Jewish thought philologist Susan Handelman examines the relations between traditional Jewish messianism, Gershom Scholem's Zionism, Walter Benjamin's dialectical materialism and Immanuel Levinas' philosophical ethics that pertain to much of what is at stake in commemoration of the Holocaust. Her work also opens a perspective on possible alternatives to the existing Holocaust iconography. Interestingly, this perspective seems to open at the intersections of modern Jewish thought with postmodern, deconstructionist and New Historicist demands.

All of them oppose the Hegelian identification of reason with history, the "violence of identity" or the oppression of the particular by the subsuming whole. Levinas, Rosenzweig, Benjamin and Scholem share an idea of "messianic knowledge" which each confronted with particular strains of modern secular thought -- Marxism, nationalism, modernism, philology, structuralism, idealism.

In all these thinkers, a kind of messianism exists as the pulling of thought towards its other, toward some interruptive force that can break through the violence and cruelty of immanent history -- a search for some way of being otherwise, whether through political revolution, Zionism, mystical reinterpretation, philosophical critique, or ethics.¹¹

The space beyond history, the "other" of history, is inhabited by the Jew, in Hegelian thought a "negative" otherness. The Jew as other is reintroduced by Edmond Jabés and Jaques Derrida as the "allegory of the wandering 'trace' or tortured exile, or of 'difference and otherness' in general, which then are identified with the condition of writing and signification."¹²

While to Levinas and Rosenzweig it is precisely the Jewish law that sustains the (ethical) otherness of the Jew, for Benjamin, Scholem and later Derrida and Jabés it is the "shattering of the Tablets of Law" that opens a way beyond heteronomy, meaning and philosophy, a way towards "writing outside the text," to the "beyond of history."

Messianism to all of these thinkers is an end of linear history, a rupture, an "opening", open to judgement at any moment, or, as Benjamin put it, each instant becomes "the straight gate through which the Messiah might enter," where "a redeemed mankind receives the fullness of its past..."¹³

Being shaken by the ruptures and shocks of modern life, especially Walter Benjamin felt that memory and hope, one reaching towards a lost Edenic past, the other towards a Messianic future, were the only ways of salvaging the ruins that were piled up constantly in the process of civilization. With Gerschom Scholem he shares the conviction that catastrophe and destruction are as connected to redemption as memory. Benjamin's Angel of History thus has his face turned towards the past.

11 Handelman 338

12 Handelman 340

13 Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*. Ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1969), 254

Where we perceive a chain of events (Hegelian notion, M.N.), he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole all that has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistably propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.¹⁴

As becomes obvious from this often quoted passage, one must not misunderstand "memory" here as a chronicling of past events. Whatever the redemptive qualities hidden in the ruins (Benjamin was not always constant in his hopes that there were any) would have to evolve from a "tiger's leap into the past", sudden collisions, new "constellations", momentary flashes. Geoffrey Hartman perceptively notes that, in Benjamin, "catastrophe, instead of remaining fixed in the past, and hope, instead of being an eschatological or future directed principle, reverse places. Catastrophe becomes proleptic... ..Hope is located mysteriously in the past, a defeated potentiality of retroactive force...."¹⁵ The "unattained and inexpressible" meaning of life" can only be caught in the process of extreme distortion and manipulation (*Entfremdung*) of objects. It is hard to see how Benjamin would bridle his idea of Jewish messianism with his hopes for a materialist revolution. Handelman points to this difficulty when she writes: "...there is a disjunction between the profane and the messianic, or history and redemption, the present and the revolutionary future, the task of world politics," so that his only way out is the concept of "brushing history against the grain", being forced forward by going backwards.(162) The movement might be an eternal one, for not only has the Messiah not yet come, but, as Hermann Cohen concluded, "he will always not yet have come." Obviously a redemption that has to be attained through destruction, a denial of wholeness and anarchic eruptions of time is elusive. The tenuous future of a Utopian idea was formulated by the later Frankfurt School explicitly:

14 Benjamin 257

15 Geoffrey Hartman, *Criticism in the Wilderness: The Study of Literature Today*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980)

The only philosophy which can be responsibly practiced in the face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption. Knowledge has no light but that shed on the world by redemption; all else is reconstruction, mere technique. Perspectives must be fashioned that displace and estrange the world, reveal it to be, with its rifts and crevices, as indignant and distorted as it will appear one day in the messianic light. ...It is the simplest of all things, because the situation calls imperatively for such knowledge...But it is also the utterly impossible thing, because it presupposes a standpoint removed, even though by a hair's breadth, from the scope of existence, whereas we all know that any possible knowledge must not only first be wrestled from what is, if it shall hold good, but is also marked, for this very reason, by the same distortion and indigence which it seeks to escape. ...But beside the demand thus placed on thought, the question of reality or unreality of redemption itself hardly matters.¹⁶

Scholem was as aware of this inherent tension as well as Benjamin, but his conclusions proved to be dramatically different. His model of Jewish history, conceived before the First World War, developed with even greater urgency after the Shoah, is what makes Scholem attractive to contemporary Jewish thinkers such as literary critic Harold Bloom and Berkeley historian David Biale. Biale's *Gershom Scholem: Kabbalah and Counter-History*¹⁷ was inspired by the conviction that "we find in Scholem's historiography a persistent quest for a link between the secular world and its religious past" -- a historiography, in other words, that would speak to assimilated American Jews who feel a lack of spirituality but can not turn to Orthodoxy for compensation.

Scholem developed his "counter-history" against the two mainstream perspectives prevalent in Germany at the turn of the century: The *Wissenschaft des Judentums* whose assimilationist task it was to approach Jewish history as *Geisteswissenschaft*, thus depriving it in Scholem's view of everything explicitly Jewish and vital, in order to prove that the Jews would not form a nation among the aspiring Euro-

16 Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from a Damaged Life*, 1951 (London: Verso, 1971), 247

17 David Biale, *Gershom Scholem: Kabbalah and Counter-History*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1982), 8

pean nations. The second perspective was the nationalist reaction to the first which looked at the social history of Jews as a people. Scholem seeks what Biale calls an "internal" history of the Jews, one that is not turned into apologetics, the "dialectical struggle between rationalism and myth, law and antinomianism -- rather than the influence of external events."¹⁸

To him, the mythical undercurrent of Jewish history is what kept Judaism vital over the centuries. The Kabbalah (meaning "tradition" of Jewish mysticism) was a reaction to and within rabbinic Judaism which threatened to bury God's immanence under a strictly tied system of laws and philosophical references. Where Yerushalmi's remembrance rituals simply recite, the Kabbalists reenact. "The ritual of rabbinical Judaism," Scholem wrote, "makes nothing happen and transforms nothing. Though not devoid of feeling, remembrance lacks the passion of conjuration, and indeed, there is something strangely sober and dry about the rites of remembrance with which the Jew calls to mind his unique historical identity."¹⁹

Jewish history to Scholem moved along in three stages which had to be lived through by every religion. The first is the mythical stage in which there is a felt immediacy of God and his people; the second is the stage of "religion" in which revelation has to be institutionalized because it can no longer be felt directly (in Judaism, this was the stage of rabbinic Judaism). The third stage -- and in this Scholem is truly Hegelian -- is the stage in which man reevaluates lost myth consciously. The turn towards the past for redemption, which we already encountered in Yerushalmi and in Benjamin's "Angel of History" is aimed at unleashing the hidden mythical forces within competing branches of Judaism.²⁰

18 Biale, *Scholem*, 148

19 Gershom Scholem, "Tradition and Symbolism", from *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, (New York: Schocken, 1969), 121

20 These forces, according to Scholem, lead to the heretic movements in the seventeenth century, initiated by the false Messiah Sabbatai Zvi, and in turn promoted, because of their anti-nomianism, the Hassidic movement in Eastern Europe (a pious but non-dogmatic, popular mystical movement, and,

Against the accusation, messianic mysticism lead to passivity -- an issue that is faced by every post-Holocaust historiography -- Scholem argues that especially the Lurianic Kabbalah of the sixteenth century had been a reaction to the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492, which proposed a cosmic myth of exile and redemption that would mirror the actual Jewish experience. It held that devine sparks were scattered throughout the world (in exile, so to speak), and that every generation had to do their share in "restoring" these sparks to a whole.

While he felt that these were "activist" forms of Messianism, he did not think Messianism in general could make up a political agenda because it was either apocalyptic or restaurative, it came with "the end of history" or with the return of the biblical Kingdom of David. Messianism was "a life lived in deferment", in which nothing could actually be accomplished, the "real anti-Existentialist idea."²¹ To him, Messianism eventually did indeed lead to Jewish powerlessness, while Zionism embodied the Jewish determination to step out of *suprahistory* (meaning the apologist historiography of Jews living among Gentiles) and reenter an autonomous *Jewish history* by building a homeland in Palestine. Only the establishment of Jewish autonomy would enable Jews to write their history without "political apologies" or "theological dogmas" -- by which he probably means the entire body of Jewish law and the non-mythical forms of Zionism. Zionism, to Scholem, means "acting within history" as opposed to waiting for it to end.

For both Scholem and Benjamin the moment of assimilation was a crucial step of the Jewish "return into secular history," a step which

paradoxically, to the enlightenment in East and West (because of its anti-nomianism). Scholem, however, is always aware of the danger of antinomianism. Tradition, and Jewish law, should not just be abolished, but reevaluated.

21 Gershom Scholem, "The Messianic Idea in Judaism " from *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality*, (New York: Schocken, 1961) 34, 35

both of them participated in, but which they saw at the same time as pernicious to Jewish survival.

I.3. The Post-Holocaust Dilemma of Jewish Historiography

This is also the time period (late 19th century) in which Yerushalmi locates the beginning of Jewish historiography.

His core argument was, as we saw, that while the biblical command to remember had been a vital imperative to the Jewish people, Jewish *historiography* is a phenomenon as recent as assimilation. Only 19th century *Wissenschaft des Judentums* brought the secularization of Jewish history and the historicising of Judaism.

The modern effort to reconstruct the Jewish past begins at a time that witnesses a sharp break in the continuity of Jewish living and hence also an ever growing decay of Jewish group memory. In this sense, if for no other, history has become what it has never been before -- the faith of fallen Jews. For the first time history, not a sacred text, becomes the arbiter of Judaism. Virtually all nineteenth-century Jewish ideologies, from Reform to Zionism, would feel a need to appeal to history for validation.²²

Thus Jewish historiography has been at odds with Jewish beliefs from its inception. No serious historian within the academic world can maintain the divine providence as the motor of Jewish history, and the related uniqueness of that history.

In the United States Jewish Studies in general developed only after the Second World War. The accounts of Jewish presence within academia vary; while some report that Jews had been enrolled in proportionally high numbers, others argue that they had largely been kept out. Arthur Green, president of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, points out that

the same universities which had worked to exclude Jews only a few decades earlier were and are still vying with one another to offer programs in Jewish Studies. I am not entirely sanguine about the reasons for this sudden love affair with Judaica research. I believe that smart development

22 Yerushalmi 86

officers, at about the time financial crisis due to ringing costs hit the universities, made the judgement that Jews were a population of high income and great willingness to spend large sums for education....This calculation was encouraged both by the growing respectability of ethnic identity in general in the late 60's, and by the wave of philo-Semitism that characterized most thinking Americans, including those who ran departments of religion in the universities, as they began to come to grips with the question of Christian responsibility for the holocaust.²³

Green, like many other American scholars for Jewish studies, feels that the demands posed upon Judaism by the secular university are even more pernicious than those faced by the *Wissenschaft* - scholars of the nineteenth century. While the latter had mainly to sacrifice the concept of the Jews as a nation among the nations, contemporary scholars are forced to question their very belief in God:

Jewish studies in the academic mode deny that the Torah is the revealed word of God. There is no place for religion as a devine rather than a human creation in the general academic community". ...This disbelief, characterizing most of non-Orthodox Jewry and not a few unhappy would-be Orthodox souls since the dawn of modernity, is confirmed by scholarship in countless ways. ...What does a pious Jew do when he learns that the ascent to the mountain peak where the sky opens and the hero is taken into heaven is an old Babylonian tale? ...There may never have been -- in history -- an Abraham, an Isaac, or an event at Mount Moriah, but have we Jews not been witness to a thousand Akedahs (the sacrifice of Issak, M.N.) and more? ...All this is to say that the truth of religion inhabits a universe of discourse entirely different than that of history, and a separation of their claims of entanglement with one another will be ultimately helpful. The great happenings recorded in our Scriptures should in the proper sense be seen as mythical, that is as paradigms to help us encounter, explain, and enrich by archaic association the deepest experiences of which humans are capable...It is in faith, the struggle to realize the devine presence in our lives as individuals and as a Jewish people, not in history, where the core of our Judaism must reside.²⁴

23 Arthur Green, "Jewish Studies and Jewish Faith," *Tikkun*, 1,1, 1986: 85

24 Green 86

Even though more or less unacknowledged, one can read the influence of Gershom Scholem between these lines. The alienation Green describes here gave rise to the myths in Scholem's counter-history. The separation of world or religious history and an autonomous Jewish history that lives at its own pace and with time spans of its own, is clearly an idea derived from Scholem's writings.

Both Yerushalmi and Green hold that to overcome its deadlock Jewish historicism has to serve Jewish memory, and not the other way around. The question Yerushalmi poses at the end of his book, and attempts to answer for himself as a conscious Jewish historian, is *which* past. It is clear to him that modern Jewish historiography can not address itself to those Jews who have "never fallen", as he puts it. Those Jews who still live within the tradition find the work of the historian irrelevant. "They seek, not the historicity of the past, but its eternal contemporaneity. Addressed directly by the text, (i.e. the biblical text, M.N.) the question of how it evolved must seem to them subsidiary, if not meaningless."²⁵

It is most telling that his example for a fallen Jew, then, is a kibbutznik in Israel who is disgusted with Jewish history because to him it incorporates only "our ancestor's shame." The children should be told: "Boys, from the day we were exiled from our land we've been a people without a history. Class dismissed. Go out and play football." In part, Yerushalmi thinks, this attitude is still a result of the way in which 19th century *Wissenschaft* portrayed Jewish history in the diaspora as one of *Leiden und Lernen* (suffering and studying). Contrary to David Biale, however, he does not think one only has to look at Jewish history in the Middle Ages and will find proof that the Jews were actually far from passive -- a belief that furnishes one with some sort of "usable" past that can be found in historiography. More is needed, Yerushalmi feels, and compares the current, post-Holocaust situation with that after the expulsion from Spain.

They, as we saw, ultimately chose myth over history, for reasons that would be futile to question retroactively since its consequences cannot be

undone. Today (after the Holocaust) Jewry lives a bifurcated life. As a result of emancipation in the diaspora and national sovereignty in Israel Jews have fully reentered the mainstream of history, and yet their perception of how they got there and where they are is most often more mythical than real. Myth and memory condition action. There are myths that are life-sustaining and deserve to be reinterpreted at our age....

The burden of building a bridge to his people remains with the historian....The task can no longer be limited to finding continuities in Jewish history, not even 'dialectical' ones. Perhaps the time has come to look more closely at the ruptures, breaches, breaks, to identify them more precisely, to see how Jews endured them....²⁶

It is obvious that the Holocaust represents an ultimate impasse in Jewish historiography, not only because of the enormity of the loss but because of the nature of the crime. It was a crime against humanity and thus has to be placed within world history; but at the same time it was committed against the Jews, aimed not only at the annihilation of the entire people but also at their memory of the event. Not a trace should be left, not even in Jewish memory itself. Whether the history of the Holocaust is written from a "universal" perspective or from a "particularist" Jewish perspective, it is always faced with an epistemological problem: how to wrestle meaning from an event that did not unfold along the lines of rational behaviour, or, as Dan Diner put it:

This notion of understanding as a process in which conclusions are drawn about an internal motive from external manifestations is based on the assumption that the person investigating history proceeds in the same way as one who makes history. ... That covert hypothesis regarding the ultimate rationality of conduct also guides the approach to the ideologically motivated aims of the Nazis themselves. By dint of the fact that they surpass the power of imagination of the rational personality, those aims are consequently classified as 'irrational'. Such label indicates that the historian disqualifies this behavior as basically

incomprehensible -- when judged, of course, in terms of customary and accepted criteria of rationality.²⁷

As will be laid out in the next chapter, Diner suggests that the particularist perspective is the most universalist, because all-encompassing one. Thus, *thinking the Holocaust* has turned Scholem's and Yerushalmi's fear, secular history might devour Jewish remembrance, on its head: It is the perspective of the Jews that is reveals most about the nature of nazism. The Jewish perspective will be more illuminating than any attempt at a "universal history" which is condemned to failure from its inception. There can not be one universal history of perpetrators and victims; if what represents a shrewd career move to a perpetrator means death to a victim (a successful round-up of Jewish villagers, for example) which will be the more encompassing perspective?

Even though attitudes towards history and rituals of remembrance are different phenomena, they interfere when it comes to interpreting an event, its meaning for a community. The next chapter will deal with some of the responses by American Jews to the catastrophe in Europe, leading up to the present debate on what has been so aptly termed the "Americanization of the Holocaust."

27 Dan Diner, "Historical Understanding and Counterrationality," *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the "Final Solution"* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1992) 129-130

II. Responses to the Holocaust by American Jews

II.1. The Silent Years

For almost two decades after the war, the American Jewish community was not able to address the issue of the Holocaust. The immigrant survivors themselves felt, as many report now, guilty for having been saved. H. Foxman, national director of the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith remembers: "They were embarrassed about the things they had to live through those years. But their isolation, or whatever else they felt, was reinforced by our neighbors. They expected us to look like we had come right out of a camp -- emaciated, wounded. They hinted that they wanted to know what we had gone through, only they didn't really. My parents tried to explain it at first. But they stopped. It simply wasn't worth it."²⁸

Feelings of guilt by the rest of the community for not having done enough to save their European brethren are often mentioned in the debate on Holocaust memorials today.²⁹

Before the war and throughout the situation of Jews in America had remained precarious. Assimilated second generation immigrants who had ascended to government positions under Franklin D. Roosevelt were afraid the wave of immigration including many less assimilated, visibly Orthodox immigrants from Poland would give rise to new anti-Semitism in America. In fact there was an upsurge of anti-Semitism during the Depression which lasted throughout the fifties. At the same time, many American Jews, impressed by the increasing Zionist efforts in Palestine thought it more wise to campaign for a return of the Jews to their biblical homeland rather than advocating a liberation of American laws of immigration. This came to look like a rewarding strategy especially in the spring of 1937, when the British commission under Lord Peel recommended that Palestine be partitioned, and that a Jewish and Arab state be established. In their elec-

²⁸ Judith Miller, *One, by One, by One: Facing the Holocaust* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1990), 221

²⁹ Henryk M. Broder, "Das Shoah-Business", *Der Spiegel* 16/ 1993, 249

tion platform for 1936 election the Democrats demanded that Britain refrain from restricting Jewish immigration to Palestine, but did not demand American support for the persecuted.

Arthur Hertzberg, the outstanding historian of American Jewry, represents a typical attitude towards the assimilationist German Jews who had come in the middle of the nineteenth century (and were, in his opinion, what would be called "Wirtschaftsflüchtlinge" in Germany now), when he writes:

The leaders of the American Jewish Committee kept intervening in private. In the 1930s, that organization still spoke for the 'German Jews,' who believed that Jews should talk in universalist accents about the rights of individuals, and that anti-Semitism, as such, was best not to be mentioned. The leaders of the American Jewish committee were afraid that given a choice between the cause of the European Jews and Nazism, the Jews would not necessarily win in American public opinion. In contrast, the major spokesman of the 'Russian Jews,' Rabbi Stephen S. Wise, insisted on public action.³⁰

One incident might serve as an example of the dichotomy within American Jewry: At the beginning of the war the question arose whether to obey the British boycott of Nazi Europe. It was vehemently opposed by the ultra-Orthodox and by the Socialists -- both predominantly Yiddish speaking, mostly lower class, recent immigrants, and it was largely followed by the Zionists, who did not want to antagonize the British and the upper class "Western" Jews. This incident suggests that the dividing line was one of social standing rather than one of descent. Of course it is also a matter of personal relationships: Most Yiddish speaking immigrants came from Eastern Europe and had family in Poland to fear for.

But even if they had been unified, it is probably safe to say that the Jewish influence in congress still would have been virtually non-existent. The rumors of systematic murder of the Jews began to leak in summer 1942. By midsummer 1943 there could be no doubt, even for the most sceptical advisors of the president that Jews were being killed

30 Arthur Hertzberg, *The Jew in America: Four Centuries of an Uneasy Encounter: A History*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989), 289

by hundreds of thousands, and that half of Polish Jewry had already been wiped out. With mass demonstrations, rallies, campaigns and financial aid Jews tried to stop the destruction, while public opinion still did not believe the accounts of atrocities. Only after the liberation of the camps and the televised documents of what the soldiers found was the questioning silenced.

Paradoxically, however, American Jews also fell silent that very moment. The war effort had given minorities a chance to assimilate and to receive credit in the public image. Films like "The Purple Heart", 1944, by Lewis Milestone, or "Pride of the Marines", 1945, by Delmar Daves show Jews in the military as self-sacrificing "good sports" who renounce parochialism for integration into American gentile culture. The films are set mostly in the pacific because, as Lester D. Friedman points out, "Jewish moguls and filmmakers throughout the decade feared that even hinting at a possible connection between American Jews and those suffering in Europe would lead critics to conclude that Jews were fighting for personal rather than for patriotic reasons."³¹ In the 1950s, the quest for assimilation included renunciation of the getto past as well as that of the Yiddish socialists and communists. The two were almost synonymous when the case of the Rosenbergs went public.

Writes Hertzberg:

Whatever the actual extent of their contributions to Soviet knowledge, the Rosenberg's trial gave the Jewish community the opportunity to prove its patriotism. Near the surface of the trial was a Jewish motif. ...The prosecuting lawyers were all Jews. An unmistakable message was conveyed: the Jewish community was not to be identified with the Rosenbergs. ...The Jews...proved to the country that the political radicals who had once dwelt among them had either converted or that they had been cast out.³²

31 Lester D. Friedman, *The Jewish Image in American Film* (Secaucus, New Jersey: Citadel Press, 1987), 124

32 Hertzberg, 307

II.2. How the Silence Was Ended

This period of silence was first interrupted on a public level when the war criminal Adolf Eichmann was kidnapped in Argentina by the Israeli secret service and brought before an Israeli court in Jerusalem in 1961. William Shawn, then editor of the *New Yorker*, sent Hannah Arendt to report on the trial. The controversy that ensued shed a light on the hardships American Jews had to grapple with when facing the Holocaust. From the outset these had to do with questions of Jewish identity. Although they were even more urgent in the sixties, when the integration and ascent of American Jews in their home society was still precarious, some of the issues touched upon are still vivid and painful to this day, and can be traced in every American Holocaust memorial.

One of Hannah Arendt's first spontaneous observations was, as she wrote in a letter to Karl Jaspers, that Eichmann was "nicht einmal unheimlich",³³ not even uncanny. She elaborated upon this impression to the observation that it did not take personal cruelty or a monstrous evil mind to function within the extermination bureaucracy but only meticulous obedience. Since Eichmann only did what the *raison d'état* of the state he was serving ordered him to do, he could not have any concept of wrong or right. Therefore, taking him to trial for criminal charges (instead of for the supracriminal charge "crime against humanity") was questionable.³⁴ When the attorney, Gideon Hausner, declared that Eichman was not only tried for his crimes against non-Jewish people, "for we are not *völkisch*", Arendt argued that the Israeli laws of immigration were precisely that: Rabbis determined who was a Jew and who was not (only whose mother was Jewish), or that a Jew can not marry a non-Jew (back then Jewish-Arab marriages had to take place outside the country, their children were considered illegitimate). The second subject she touched upon was the conduct of the

33 Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For the Love of the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 453

34 Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, (New York: Viking Press, 1963)

presiding judge, Moshe Landau, who tried to do justice to the crimes Eichmann actually committed, while, in Arendt's opinion, the attorney Gideon Hausner turned the trial into a showcase of revenge for the suffering of the Jews and a legitimation of the young state of Israel before an onlooking international public. Prime Minister Ben Gurion "remains the secret director of this trial". In numerous articles preceding the trial, Ben Gurion had announced: "We want all the nations of the world to know...and to be ashamed." The Jews in Diaspora should be taught to remember that the Jewish people "with its spiritual creations and ethical imperatives had to face a hostile world for four-thousand years," and that the decline of Judaism in the diaspora had finally ended in their marching to their deaths like sheep. Only the establishment of a Jewish state had enabled the Jews to defend themselves and to fight -- in the War of Independence, in the Suez-crisis and the daily occurrences at Israel's troubled borders. A lesson about the Jewish past, Ben Gurion added, should also be learned by young Israelis lest they forget and lose touch with their people's history. Finally, other Nazis could be lured from their hiding places, and the world could see their close relations with Arab leaders.³⁵ By pointing out that these premises did in no way justify a showtrial, Arendt was the first European-American Jew to criticize Israel publicly.

It was also the first time that the subject of the instrumentalization of the Holocaust for Zionist purposes was touched upon. It remains at the center of Jewish criticism of Holocaust memorials to this day.

The third issue Arendt raised was probably the most painful. It estranged Arendt from a couple of her closest friends and even caused the head of the German Judenrat, Siegfried Moses, to declare a war against her. Arendt reflected upon the role of the *Judenräte*, the Jewish leadership institutions established by the Nazis who were forced to cooperate by providing lists for deportations, urge their communities to work and establish police squads to enforce the laws. Arendt argued that, had almost the entire Jewish leadership, from Poland to Holland, France, Scandinavia and the Baltics not meticulously cooperated,

35 Arendt, 35

there would have been chaos and unspeakable suffering, "but the total number of victims could hardly have reached four and a half up to six million people."³⁶ Most of the replies she received were so outrageous that Arendt did not see fit to react to them. Her intention, however, had not been to denigrate Jewish suffering, but to illuminate the extent of the moral breakdown instituted by Nazi occupation.

Thus, Hannah Arendt had touched upon three taboos which Norman Podhoretz aptly summarized in his Commentary- review of her book: "Instead of the vicious Nazi she shows us the 'banal' Nazi; instead of the Jewish martyr she shows us the Jew as the accomplice of evil; and instead of the confrontation of guilt and innocence she shows us the 'collaboration' of perpetrator and victim."³⁷

She had blocked the identification with the victims by showing them as weak and subservient, she had blocked identification with the state of Israel because she denounced its particularist policy and demanded instead, it ought to become a universalist nation among the nations, and she had finally denied the monstrosity of evil, thereby removing it from the religious into the realm of human capacity. The "war" against her waged for three more years.

In hindsight, it is obvious however, that Arendt was one of the three authors to break the spell, to disturb the silence that loomed over the recent past and open the controversy on how to face it.

The second was the psychoanalyst Bruno Bettelheim who had himself been a prisoner of Buchenwald. Describing what he called "Behaviour in Extreme Situations" Bettelheim stated that "In the camps, not the SS but the prisoner was the prisoner's worst enemy. The SS, sure of its superiority, had less to demonstrate and to prove it than the prisoner elite who could never feel secure about it." While all prisoners were reduced to a childlike attitude, the "aristocracy" aspired to imitate the SS. Wearing pieces of disposed SS-uniforms, beating others savagely or killing at random the kapos aspired to become like

36 Arendt, 476

37 Norman Podhoretz, "Hannah Arendt on Eichmann", *Commentary*, September 1963, 201-208

their enemy.³⁸ is obvious that this survivor's account gave even less "material" for a positive identification for American Jews. If Jews were not martyrs but either "sheep" or, if forced, even perpetrators, it was difficult to maintain the age old distinction between Jews and non-Jews that Hannah Arendt had also criticized. Early reviews of Bettelheim's book thus focused on his accounts of atrocities committed by the SS.

His true stance could no longer be ignored, however, when Bettelheim shattered yet another post-Holocaust icon, namely the story of Anne Frank whose diary had been staged on Broadway in the 1950s to enormous success, and had been turned into an equally successful movie by George Steven in 1959. Bettelheim criticized the universal admiration for the Frank's continuing to hold on to their life style and attitudes instead of dispersing, hiding individually and acquiring weapons in order to defend themselves. Bettelheim and others felt -- in the well known resentment of assimilated German Jews) that here was another Jewish victim of the Holocaust turned into a quasi Christian martyr.

In his comparative study on concepts of Jewish identity in twentieth century writing, historian Sander L. Gilman identifies Bettelheim's description of the "docile acceptance of the situation in the camp" as a pattern of Jewish self-hatred -- a reaction to European anti-Semitism that had later been transferred to the American context. The basis of Jewish self-hatred is, according to Gilman, the double-bind situation of outsiders in general: On the one hand there is the assumption that any outsider is welcome into the majority culture if only he abide by its rules. Its rules, however, include the definition of this "Other". The message is, therefore, twofold: Abandon your difference and become like us, but then, the more you become like us, the more we know how powerful we are, and that you are just a weak impostor. Those cast out in this manner tend to internalize the conflict, reacting to the indecipherable contradictory message by blaming themselves:

38 Bruno Bettelheim, *The Informed Heart: Autonomy in a Mass Age* (New York: Thr Free Press of Glencoe, 1960)

something must be wrong with me. Gilman reads Bettelheim and Arendt in this vain:

First, the prisoners are aware of the tenuous nature of their psychological emergency measures; second, they lose libidinal energy in maintaining their fictions; third, they identify with the enemy, which provides them with gratification in being overpowered by the enemy; fourth, they perceive the world as a psychotic delusion that can be maintained only by being passive and avoiding any direct confrontation with reality; fifth, in identifying with the enemy they were able to destroy delusionally their enemy by their own death. This pattern is, of course, the pattern of self-hatred developed within the rhetoric of the psychology of race during the early twentieth century. Self-haters know that their own self-hatred is but a coping device, they focus all their energy in maintaining this device, they identify with the rhetoric of anti-Semitism ...as a means of avoiding any confrontation with the reality of anti-Semitism in the streets, and finally, they so identify with the anti-Semite that they must end in suicide or madness.³⁹

In an attitude schooled by postmodern anti-essentialism Gilman collapses the dichotomy Jew-Gentile by proving that, whatever actual difference there was, sprang from concepts and myths rather than from inherent qualities, or from what he calls "the secret language of the Jew" (the "Other" who can never be fully at home in the majority culture, i.e. language, has to have an idiom of his own. The fact that Jews often spoke Hebrew and the language of their home country contributed to this myth but is not what Gilman means by "hidden" language. The latter is pure myth.) In the process of transition from a society that tried to overcome its fragmentation by holding on to concept of homogeneity, Germany, to a society whose central myth is that of a plurality of identities, America, the concept of "Jew" as a marker of difference lost its strength. Instead, with the establishment of Israel as a state among the states, with Hebrew as the official language of the Jew, a certain universality was emphasized. Gilman sees this universality also as a trope that came with the aftermath of the holocaust.

39 Sander L. Gilman: *Jewish Self-Hatred: Anti-Semitism and the Hidden Language of the Jews* (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986) 306

The inherent meaninglessness of the world of the camps and its babble of tongues had to be given meaning by the poet. The experience of the Holocaust and its statement had to be understood as a universal rather than yet another example of Jewish particularism. The curse that the Jews spoke and thought differently was turned into the claim that the particular fate of the Jew was the ultimate fate of all humanity. The language damaged in the Holocaust was the universal language of humanity, not merely the language of the Jews.⁴⁰

Although Gilman does not make it entirely clear how this universalism had come about (could it be because German was the language of classic Humanism?), he takes it to be the basis of a postwar dilemma for American Jewry. If they did not have a language of their own, but only the destructive language of the perpetrators, then how were they supposed to bear witness? How was one to speak in silence, in muteness, for those who actually were mute? Gilman lists attempts by Cynthia Ozick, Anne Roiphe and others to create a Jewish discourse, to recover the language of pre-Holocaust Jewry. But the obstacles to this endeavour become most obvious in Philip Roth's "Zuckerman Trilogy". Zuckerman, the writer, returns to the city of Prague, not only to capture the perished Yiddishland, but also to experience persecution which would enable him to find a truly Jewish discourse. But in the absence of persecution in contemporary America, the Jewish writer fails to produce the "damaged discourse" of the Jew. Post-Holocaust American Jews still experience a double-bind, but its different from that of their European ancestors who were faced with modern anti-Semitism. The establishment of the state of Israel is, on one hand, a universalization of the Jews as a nation among the nations, on the other hand it "proves" the claim that there is a different language.

Gilman actually thinks that some of the American Jewish anti-Zionism is one of the recent forms of Jewish self-hatred. The danger of Gilman's position is obviously that there can hardly be any intra-Jewish criticism that would not be accused of being a product of vibrant self-hatred. It would be interesting, for example, to hear Gilman comment on the Jewish charges against the Holocaust museums

as instrumentalizing the Holocaust for Zionist purposes. It is one of the central problems of his approach that he limits his discussion of responses to the Holocaust to literary and artistic expressions instead of examining what is most visible and accessible: The discourse of public memorialization.

The decisive end to the silence, however, which effected not only the intellectual fringes of the Jewish community, but its mainstream, was Israel's Six-Day-War in 1967. None of the anti-Zionism that Gilman describes as such a prominent feature among American Jews was palpable in those days. Michael Nutkiewicz, the head of the Los Angeles Martyrs Memorial and Museum of the Holocaust, remembered in an interview with New York Times correspondent Judith Miller: "All of a sudden the Jewish community had understood that the Israelis might be defeated by the Arabs, that there might be a second Holocaust for the Jews. The fears for Jewish collective safety pushed all the Holocaust buttons."⁴¹ As intense as the prospect of defeat created fear and despair, the stunning victory Israel won over its Arab enemies strengthened the self image and the standing of the American Jewish community. "Jewish men began sporting yarmulkes and Gold stars of David. Six-Day War jokes spread through the country. Synagogue membership soared. Jews suddenly began seeing themselves as the decendants of biblical cowboys -- Jewish Clint Eastwoods."⁴² This assertion in turn probably made it easier to finally confront the Holocaust, while at the same time acknowledging growing Jewish power at home.

This developement coincided with a growing consciousness of ethnicity, of cultural diversity, of reaching back towards one's origins. Movies like "Funny Girl" (1968) -- the saga of a klutzy New York dancer-turned-pygmalion, or "The Fixer" (1968), the adaptation of a Bernard Malamud novel dealing with pogroms and persecution in Zarist Russia, replete with *Shetl*-life and Old World romance, would not have been conceivable in the anxious climate of the fifties, let

41 Miller, 222

42 Miller, 223

alone an outrageous comedy like Mel Brook's "The Producers" (1968) in which a musical "Springtime for Hitler" is staged for failure by two Schlemiels who underestimated the anxiety of their New York Jewish audience.

Those were the elements that constituted the secular response to the destruction of the European Jews, and that paved the way for the enormous output of Holocaust literature, films, poems, readings, commemorations and museums, to Holocaust studies and Holocaust pilgrimage. But what of the theological implications?

II.3. Religious Responses

While Anne Frank provided a victim's persona for popular culture, while Hannah Arendt and Bruno Bettelheim touched upon matters of Jewish resistance embedded into the larger issue of Jewish particularity or Otherness, while Jewish ethnicity became "filmable", the novels of Elie Wiesel introduced the problem of a religious response to the Holocaust. The question, whether Jewish religion can withstand the onslaught is of relevance not only to observant Jews or theologians. At a time when Jewish communities note a growing need for spirituality among their secular members, it will be crucial to what extent and in which way the commemoration of the holocaust absorbs whatever Jewish activities there are.

Wiesel, who was born 1928 to a deeply religious family in Sighet, Rumania, and deported to Auschwitz in 1944. His book *Night*, (1960) originally written in Yiddish and translated into eighteen languages, tells the story of a pious, studied boy whose faith is shattered by what he experiences in the camps. In a characteristic passage the themes of the covenant, of Job and the Akedah, the sacrifice of Isaac are alluded to:

Blessed art Thou, Eternal, Master of the Universe, Who chose us from among the races to be tortured day and night, to see our fathers, our moth-

ers, our brothers, end in the crematory. Praised be Thy Holy Name, Thou Who hast chosen us to be butchered on Thine altar?⁴³

This small passage contains in a nutshell what was to become the dominant trend within the public commemoration of the Holocaust and what has found its epitome in most of the museums discussed here: the narrativization of the Holocaust. Wiesel lifts the lone, unidentified, hollow-eyed camp inmate from anonymity and gives him faces of biblical forebears and with them, a meaning to the unintelligible, a "story" that is known to every Jewish child. Job was a righteous man who was deprived of everything; his possessions, his loved ones and his health. While his wife suggests that he "curse God and die", his friends interpret that he is being punished for his sins. Job rejects both, and lives in the contradiction: His suffering was not justified by God, he was not consoled by his grandeur, but the contact with God is restored in the whirlwind. Only the sense of presence gives him the strength to sustain this contradiction.

Abraham is willing to sacrifice his son Isaac, and his willingness is rewarded. Auschwitz is also compared to the captivity in Egypt -- which was "resolved" by the Exodus; or to the Flood -- "resolved" by the arch: catastrophe is answered with redemption. The central question for all Jewish Holocaust theology is, obviously, whether there was any redemption after the Holocaust, or whether to even speak of redemption is to denigrate the loss. It seems to be a majority consensus among American Jewish theologians now that the state of Israel is such a redemption: "If the experience of Auschwitz," comments Rabbi Irving Greenberg, "symbolizes that we are cut off from God and hope, and that the covenant may be destroyed, then the experience of Jerusalem symbolizes that God's promises are faithful and His people live on."⁴⁴ The intricate relationship between the state of Israel and the Holocaust is illustrated in the architecture of every

43 Elie Wiesel, *Night*. Trans. Stella Rodway (New York: Penguin Books, 1960) 78

44 Irving Greenberg, "Clouds of Smoke, Pillar of Fire," ed. John K. Roth, Michael Berenbaum, *Holocaust: Religious and Philosophical Implications* (New York: Paragon House, 1989) 323

Holocaust Memorial in Israel -- and strongly criticized by leftist Jewish papers in America and Israel (see chapter 3).

One of the first theological reactions was Richard Rubenstein's *After Auschwitz: Radical Theology and Contemporary Judaism*, which was published in 1966 and caused an outrage quite similar to that which had followed Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem*.⁴⁵ Michael Berenbaum, the current director of programs of the United States Memorial Museum of the Holocaust, remembers:

There were a few breaches in the wall of silence, but not many. Some testimony had been given by survivors, a few works of literature had been written, such as Elie Wiesel's memoir *Night*, and an occasional work of scholarship, such as Raul Hilberg's classic *The Destruction of European Jews*. ...Meanwhile, suburban religious life continued to grow at a record pace. Seemingly, nothing earth-shattering had happened-- either at Auschwitz or in Jerusalem -- that could challenge religious belief. The silence was broken by *After Auschwitz*. This book was accorded a significant gentile audience since Rubenstein was considered to be the Jewish participant in the then-fashionable death-of-God debate. ...Even if the messenger was denied hearing by his own people, his message had to be pondered.⁴⁶

Rubenstein's book was the outcome of a visit to Germany in 1961, in the course of which he met with Heinrich Grüber, then Dean of the Evangelical church of east and West Berlin. Grüber looked at the Holocaust from a Biblical perspective: In the past, Jews had been under Nebuchadnezzar's tyranny, and Hitler was just another Nebuchadnezzar. When Grüber contended that the Germans after the war were just as severely smitten as the Jews, if not worse, by their separation, Rubenstein reached "a theological point of no return." "If," he wrote, "I believed in God as the omnipotent author of the historical drama and Israel as his chosen people, I had to accept Dean Grüber's conclusion that it was God's will that Hitler committed six million

45 Richard Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz: Radical Theology and Contemporary Judaism* (New York: Macmillan, 1966)

46 John K. Roth, Michael Berenbaum, *Holocaust: Religious and Philosophical Implications* (New York: Paragon House, 1989) 275

Jews to slaughter. I could not possibly believe in such a God nor could I believe in Israel as the chosen people of God *after Auschwitz*."⁴⁷

Here we return to the theme described in the last chapter: The Jewish God makes his presence felt in history, in the history of his people. God's acts of intervention in history, and man's response to them, is what is remembered in the succession of the liturgical year. Rubenstein's reasoning was bitterly simple: Where there is no more people of the covenant -- there is no more covenant. In a recent response to an article in the American Jewish magazine *Tikkun*, in which the Israeli historian Adi Ophir had argued against the "Sanctification of the Holocaust", Rubenstein added to his former position in hindsight:

Throughout its history, the Jewish community has sought to conceive of its overwhelmingly important historical experiences in terms of the covenant with the God of Sinai. By doing so, it has saved itself from the ultimate threat to its long-term viability, the loss of all conviction of the meaningfulness and purposefulness of Jewish life. Put differently, had it not so interpreted its historical experiences, the community would have been afflicted with the threat of *anomy*, the nightmare of meaninglessness which assuredly would have precluded all hope of communal survival.

A generation ago this writer sadly concluded that the Jewish community's traditional mode of constructing a meaningful cosmos could only retain its credibility if the Holocaust were interpreted as God's chastisement of a sinful Israel. Since such a view entails seeing Hitler as the latter-day Nebuchadnezzar and the death camps as God's method of punishment, ideas this writer regarded as beyond obscenity, he had no choice but to conclude that the Jewish community was faced with a theological crisis of unparalleled dimensions. ...If the Holocaust is to be interpreted mythologically or theologically: *The Holocaust must be seen as the true and final revelation of the Divine as Absolute Evil*.⁴⁸

Meanwhile it is commonplace even in European feuilletons to know of the danger of replacing Jewish tradition, faith and practice with a sole focus on the Holocaust, but in 1966 Rubenstein was publicly compared to Hitler and called an anti-Semite for this position. But

47 Rubenstein 25

48 Richard Rubenstein, "In Response to Professor Ophir" *Tikkun* 2, 1 (1989) 67

apart from the slander, there was also a serious theological reply to Rubenstein, an answer welcomed by many who felt in need of a religious answer.

Emil L. Fackenheim, a German-Jewish philosopher and a contemporary of Franz Rosenzweig, had originally thought that nothing between the revelation of Mount Sinai and the Messianic redemption could seriously challenge Jewish faith. Like Rosenzweig, Fackenheim believed in an insulated Jewish history that ran its course beyond secular history. After having been imprisoned in Sachsenhausen, Fackenheim realized that he could no longer claim the separateness. He was the first to address the profound crisis in Jewish faith, and tried to found his theological assumption of what he called the "commanding voice of Auschwitz" on a paradox: In the two root experiences of the Jewish people, the Exodus and Sinai there was a dual divine presence. In Exodus, it was God's saving presence, on Sinai Israel heard God's presence proclaim the Ten Commandments. This commanding voice, Fackenheim claimed, was heard again in Auschwitz. The "614th command" was: "the authentic Jew of today is forbidden to hand Hitler yet another, posthumous victory."⁴⁹ This victory is related to the modern crisis of Judaism: The fact that the American Jew is "universalist" insofar as he has achieved equal status in society; at the same time, he is faced with the resurrection of Jewish particularism with the birth of the state of Israel. Secondly, most American Jews are secular, even the Orthodox in America are, to some extent, but they have to rely on religious tradition to safeguard a Jewish future. Thirdly, and that is, to Fackenheim the most important of "symptoms", American as well as Israeli Jews feel at home in the modern world, and yet they are "but twenty-five years removed from a catastrophe unequalled in all of Jewish history -- a catastrophe which is distinctly modern in nature."⁵⁰

49 Emil L. Fackenheim, "The 614th Commandment", from "Jewish Values in the Post-Holocaust Future: A Symposium," *Judaism* 16 (Summer 1967)

50 Fackenheim 45

Fackenheim, clearly influenced by Sartre's essay on the "Jewish Question",⁵¹ holds that American Jews must resist the lure of universalism that is displayed by gentile liberals, and instead find their way back to Jewish tradition and unity. He makes a point of particularly denouncing "academically inspired atheism and agnosticism" as being best only for those Jews who want to be "man-in-general."⁵² Universalism is also criticized from another perspective formulated by Rabbi Irving Green: It was the blind belief in the universal value system that proved to be disastrous to the victims, because it "disarmed them."⁵³

The only concession to universalism that Fackenheim grants is that "Jewish endurance in the midst of catastrophe helped transform the world." The biblical "suffering servant" - an image used by Greenberg for the Jewish victims -- is not smitten for his sins (eighty percent of the world's rabbis, and ninety percent of all full-time Torah students) -- but for the sins of all men.⁵⁴ It is striking how Fackenheim's and Greenburg's position not only echoes Scholem's and Rosenzweig's, but how it's reverberations still permeate the debate surrounding the Holocaust reception today.

51 "L'authenticité juive consiste à se choisir comme juif, c'est à dire à réaliser sa condition juive. Le Juif authentique abandonne le mythe de l'homme universel: il se connaît et se veut dans l'histoire comme creature historique et damnée; il a cessé de fuir et d'avoir honte de siens."

Jean-Paul Sartre, *Réflexions sur la question Juive* (Paris: Gallimard, 1960) 169

52 Fackenheim 49

53 Green 312

54 Fackenheim 51

III. The "Americanization" of the Holocaust

III.1. A Substitute Religion?

Critics of the centrality of the Holocaust in Jewish life today fear that the central message is, as one visitor to the museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles put it: "We have to be Jewish, because we were killed in Auschwitz."

The last major cultural event before Holocaust remembrance finally became part of Jewish day life in America was the television series "Holocaust"(1978), the saga of the German Jewish family Weiss, an assimilated doctor's family who perishes in the Holocaust except for the youngest (and most handsomely-American looking) son who moves -- of course -- to Palestine. He was also the only member of the family who ever engaged in acts of resistance, thus being what Raul Hilberg called "the ghetto fighter as the first Israeli" (see my interview with Hilberg in the appendix). Those who have to go into the gas chamber go with dignity and the explicit conviction that, indeed, they are dying for others.

One of the harshest criticisms of the series came from New Yorker culture critic Philip Lopate:

In so many books and movies about the Holocaust, I sense that I am being asked to feel a particular pathos in the rounding up of gentle, scholarly, middle-class, civilized people and packing them into cattle cars, as though the liquidation of illiterate peasants would not be so poignant. The now-familiar newsreel shot of Asian populations fleeing a slaughter with their meager possessions in handcarts still reads to us as a catastrophe involving "masses," while the images of Jews lined up in their fedoras and overcoats tug at our hearts precisely because we see the line as composed of individuals. ...⁵⁵

Even though this polemic comes across with the inappropriate brutality of a provocative slashing-out, it delineates the drift of the narration that was being made out of the Holocaust in films and series

55 Philip Lopate, "Resisting the Holocaust", *Testimony: Contemporary Jewish Writers Make the Holocaust Personal* (New York: Times Books, 1989)

such as "Holocaust:" The most noble of people are being sacrificed on the altar of the world for the sins of modernity, for the decadence of post-religious life, for the fall of the cities. The Christian metaphoric of this is obvious. The Holocaust was the crucifixion of the Jews. There are many indications of the "christianization" of the subject in American popular culture, not only the expressions on memorial sculptures, or the fact that Meryl Streep, of all people, gets to play the two most prominent roles in Holocaust television: she is the main character in Alan Pakula's *Sophie's Choice* (1982), the story of a Catholic martyr from Poland, a camp survivor who "drowns in Jewish New York"; and Inga Weiss, the gentile wife faithful to her Jewish husband in Gerald Green's NBC-drama *Holocaust* (1978). The most striking part in this public mythology is the almost total absence of any Eastern European Jews and Jewish life, although they obviously were the vast majority of victims. It seems that, with everything explicitly Jewish being removed from Holocaust iconography, it is easier for the American public, the majority being Christian, to identify. Or is it identification? In terms of cinematic dramaturgy, it probably is, but in terms of the underlying implications, the message is a different one. If the Jews died for everybody's sins, if they are indeed the chosen people, they stand out among American minorities. They are receive special protection -- and this reasoning is, unfortunately, what governs many Congressional debates on support for Israel. The anger aroused by this form of public orchestration has also lead to unfocussed criticism on part of the leftist critics. Again Philip Lopate was in the first front line:

I cannot help but see this extermination pride as another variant of the Covenant: This time the Chosen people have been chosen for extraordinary suffering. As such, the Holocaust seems simply another opportunity for Jewish chauvinism. ...There are ...reasons why Jews might be loath to surrender the role of the chief victim. It affords us an edge, a sort of privileged nation status in the moral honor roll, such as the Native American Indians have enjoyed for some time. Following Hitler's defeat, Jews had a short grace period in world opinion, pitied as they were and valued as an endangered species. Given the world's tendency to distort and demonize Jews in the past, it would almost seem as though there were no

middle ground: either continue to fight for persecuted, good-victim status or else watch the pendulum swing the opposite way, to where we would be regarded as exceptionally wicked. But in my opinion, there must be a middle ground worth fighting for.⁵⁶

While Lopate's outburst is directed towards a more universalist look at history -- with all the respective implications for American foreign and internal politics -- *Tikkun* editor Adi Ophir stresses in his criticism of the "memory industry" that he fears the Holocaust could become the core of modern Jewish identity. He cites a passover seder in Texas in which the participants recounted their trips to memorial sites in Eastern Europe as one would a pilgrimage, remembers a quiz for Jewish children on Jewish resistance in the Holocaust and delineates a tendency towards the "sanctification of the Holocaust"⁵⁷. An almost religious consciousness was being built around it, a religion for secularists whose revelation is that of "Absolute Evil." Ophir even feels that there are Commandments to this new religion: One referring to the uniqueness of the Holocaust (a subject related to Lopate's point), which reads "Thou shalt have no other Holocaust;" the second relating to the "high-brow"- demand on Holocaust art to be as abstract as possible: "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image or likeness."

The danger, to Ophir, of this sanctification is twofold. It blurs the humanness of the Holocaust, "because it erases degrees and continuums and puts in their place an infinite distance between one type of atrocity and all other types of human atrocities; because it encourages the memory as an excuse for one more nation-unifying ritual and not as a tool for historical understanding (with this Ophir refers particularly to the Israeli situation); because it makes it difficult to understand the Holocaust as a product of a human, material and ideological system; because it directs us almost exclusively to the past, to the immortalization of that which is beyond change, instead of pointing primarily to the future, to the prevention of a holocaust -- like

⁵⁶ Lopate 300

⁵⁷ Adi Ophir, "On Sanctifying the Holocaust: An Anti-Theological Treatise," *Tikkun* 2, 1, 61

the one which was, or another, more horrible -- which is more possible today than ever before but is still in the realm of that which is crooked and can be made straight."⁵⁸

Ophir goes on to suggest that further research on the Holocaust follow two lines of thought: the "Jewish", the particular line, and the "Universal" line. A question concerning the "Jewish" aspects of the Holocaust would be, for example, to ask what made it possible that the Jew became the object of an excluding discourse. The "Universal" question would be to examine how the structures and power arrangements, and the eroticism of those structures (here we can hear Foucaultian historiography at work) that made the discourse possible came into being. Another "Jewish" question would be to look at what distinguishes Naziism and the Holocaust, what were the factors of this unique combination; while the "Universal" aspect of this would be to ask how these factors appear in less extreme conditions. "The reconstructive question presents the Holocaust, whether consciously or unconsciously, as a transcendent event which lies beyond the limits of human reach, an event whose horrors we, as humans, will never be able to come close to repeating. The deconstructive question, on the other hand, returns to the horror of its humanness and points out the possibilities and their degrees and continuity."⁵⁹ Ophir wants the Holocaust to be recognized as a *possibility whose place is in the present*.

III.2. Uniqueness or Universality ?

The shortcomings of this position -- a position which is held by what seems to be a considerable number of leftist Jews -- are that it concludes from the public orchestration of the Holocaust to a theoretical approach to it: If the supposed uniqueness of the Holocaust serves as a means to a political ends of the Jewish American establishment then the assumption of uniqueness has to be given up theoretically. Consequently, this position arrives at the same "relativism" that

58 Ophir 63

59 Ophir 64

marked the German "Historian's Debate", and in which genocide resembles genocide to the extent that Nazism was only a copy of (Russian) precedents.

The problem is that the Holocaust is not open to narrativization or historiography in the traditional sense which is aimed at understanding the rationality behind the actions of participants. It is the first event in history where -- as was concluded at the end of the last chapter -- it is no longer possible to force the perspective of one group in a concept with the perspective of the other. It is necessary, to borrow Dan Diner's phrase, first to *think* Auschwitz before writing about it historically. With this, Diner does not suggest to simply assume the irrationality of annihilation and stop short at that. At the same time it is obviously impossible to take the stand of the perpetrators and call even the measures that lead up to the extermination "rational". Diner suggests instead to use the perspective of the victims as an epistemological approach:

...Both the rational content and the historical comprehensibility of the mass extermination can be determined and judged utilizing a particularistic tool: the perception and form of behaviour of the victims. To that extent, the existentially sharpened perspective of the victims assumes something like the importance of a practical epistemological vantage, a kind of observation point for reconstructing historians in their effort to arrive at an understanding of events. It is hypothesized that such a vantage can enable us adequately to characterize the National Socialist system confronting its victims as being neither rational, nor irrational, but rather *countrational*.⁶⁰

To orient historiography along the lines of the victim's perspective does not mean to write "subjectively" or emphatical. In contrast to the perspective of the perpetrators, which always entails only a minor subdivision of the whole process, the victims experienced the NS regime at its most *extreme*. It is the most *encompassing* perspective, it

60 Dan Diner, "Historical Understanding and

Counterrationality", *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the "Final Solution"*, ed. Saul Friedlander (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard, 1992), 133

accounts for the *totality* of the event. Diner demonstrates his point on the example of the "Judenräte", the Jewish Councils established by the Nazis in the Polish and Soviet ghettos. The *Judenräte* assumed that by providing the Nazis with labor they would grant their survival and their material reproduction, that they would "rationalize" the Nazis, which meant to render the arbitrariness of Nazi behaviour calculable, and finally to postpone the death verdict. "The rational anticipatory supposition operative here can be summed up as follows: it was to the obvious benefit of the Nazis -- indeed, in their own best interest, at least in the light of the war effort -- to give priority to the exploitation of Jewish labor power over the ideologically motivated death verdict. Such priority would be based, it was reasoned, on considerations of advantage for the Nazis and their own self-preservation."⁶¹ The way labor was organized lead the *Judenräte* to believe not only in "rescue through labor", but also in a relationship based on economic principles. Only those informations which would pertain to the assumed rationality behind this relationship were adhered to; only assumptions which could be followed by action were followed. Thus, when skilled Jewish workers from Czestochowa learned about the deportation of equally skilled workers from Warsaw they did not draw any conclusions concerning their own fate. They simply concluded, Diner points out, from the means (skilled labor) to the ends (the production of value) and failed to realize that their work was not supposed to take on any systemic meaning for the Nazis, because their final aim was annihilation. All the strategies -- and this is the core of what Diner has called "Zivilisationsbruch" -- that were once rational and directed at survival lead into self-destruction: The selections by the *Judenräte*, the labor kept up for psychological reasons, everything that was dictated by reason was turned into its contrary. Diner reveals himself as a true follower of the Frankfurt School when he writes:

Such a reversal, because it became a reality is not only a part of Jewish experience but can be regarded as the practical negation of the basic assumptions of the civilizing power of rational judgement as such. Seen in this analytical light, the mass extermination is not 'irrational'; rather, because of

the negation of rational judgement, it is imbued with a decidedly *counter-rational* meaning perceived via the corresponding perspective of the victims. That perspective was experienced existentially by the *Judenräte*, and can be cognitively comprehended by others; it therefore is in keeping with universally valid forms of thought and action.⁶²

Here is, in a nutshell, a possible answer to Lopate and Ophir, but also to those who deny the comprehensibility of the Holocaust because of its uniqueness. Diner concedes the uniqueness of the event and also that it finally constitutes "a black box" to understanding, especially if such understanding follows "intentionalist" principles. The latter would have to attempt to derive the destruction of the Jews from traditional anti-Semitism, when it obviously lead far beyond its scope.

It can be "understood" only if its basic nature as anti-rational, that is not accessible to understanding, is grasped. In this respect, the Jewish perspective, the particularist perspective is the universal one. Interpretations like Ophir's, that relate the Holocaust to destructive potential in the present might be useful for the present, but can never serve to illuminate the past. Whatever historiography on the Holocaust there is oscillates therefore, according to Diner, between aporia and apologetics: It either focuses on the perpetrators' limited perspective, and ends up trivializing the overall destruction, or it examines the victim's options, and ends up with the rupture of all civilized ways of thinking -- the only possible conclusion to arrive at.

62 Diner 140

IV. The Textualization of the Holocaust

IV.1. National Narratives

Today, almost every major American city has at least one, if not several memorials to the Holocaust. From North Dakota, with its five hundred Jews, to New York, with a Jewish population of almost three million, commemoration projects are either in design or in existence. A fifty-six-page directory of Holocaust institutions in the United States published in 1987 by the United States Holocaust Memorial Council listed ninety-eight American institutions -- nineteen museums, forty-eight resource centers, thirty-four archival facilities, twelve memorials, twenty-six research institutes, and five libraries. This does not include the countless study groups, survivor's organizations or exchange groups such as the German-Jewish-Dialogue in Los Angeles.

Being so far removed from the actual "topography of terror", memorials in America must, according to Holocaust scholar James E. Young,

gesture abstractly to a past removed in both time and space. If memorials in Germany and Poland composed of camp ruins invite visitors to mistake themselves for the events they represent, those in America inevitably call attention to the great distance between themselves and destruction. The meaning in American memorials is not always 'self-evident' as that suggested in the camps, places of deportation, or destroyed synagogues. In this sense, American memorials seem not to be anchored in history so much as in the ideals that generated them in the first place.⁶³

Although Young himself, being among the most prominent and erudite American critics of Holocaust memorial culture, has proved in his most recent book, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning*, that in fact the meanings generated by memorial sites anywhere in the world are all but "self-evident," his observation is accurate. While the sites of former Concentration camps in Poland are

63 James E. Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 284

an almost "natural" environment to memorials (since they are also cemeteries), and while memorials in Israel are an equally obvious part of the remembrance of a people for its lost ones, American memorials have to find their place in the civic culture of an ethnically heterogeneous nation.

The notion that memorials can be read and "deconstructed" like texts is relatively new and was pioneered by Young. At this point, no other writer has seen and interpreted as many Holocaust memorials throughout the world as Young has. Therefore, his approach will be introduced here at some length.

In his first book, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust*,⁶⁴ Young examined diaries, poems, novels and films. His whole work rests on the premise that neither fictional nor documentary testimonies on the Holocaust point to anything but themselves -- no work of art does -- and that, therefore, we should not search for "facts" or historical accuracy, but for the hermeneutics of the texts, for metaphors, archetypes and rhetorical strategies. To declare Holocaust literature, films etc. not a *terra incognita*, but a critic's "business as usual" is the genuin scandalon of Youngs work.

Although surrounded by interdictions like Adorno's later revised scepticism concerning the writing of poetry after Auschwitz, Young holds that the artistic production relating to the Holocaust has not generated any new artistic techniques. Whatever discontinuities, ruptures and elliptic circumventions are built into the texts have their predecessors in "Ulysses", "Man without Qualities" or "Remembrance of Things Past". If this is the case, why bother examining Holocaust testimony aesthetically? Because writing and rewriting the Holocaust, Young argues, entails practical consequences; metaphors guide action. The Jews themselves were metaphors for their perpetrators; not political enemies, not enemies in the war, no Jehova's Witnesses, but metaphors for the Other, and not only that: "Jews are no metaphors -- not for poets, not for novelists, not for

64 James E. Young, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust: Narrative and the Consequences of Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988)

theologians, not for murderers, and never for antisemites,' Cynthia Ozick wrote in 'A Liberals's Auschwitz.' But in fact, Jews are metaphors -- for poets, novelists, theologians, too often for murderers and antisemites, and most often for themselves as Jews."⁶⁵

Although Young's central aim is to treat all testimonies equally, his strongest criticism is reserved for those which do not acknowledge their constructedness, their artificiality, their metaphorical transience. This applies particularly to the memorials presenting themselves as eternal truths cast in stone or bronze.

They suggest themselves as indigenous, even geological outcroppings in a national landscape; in time, such idealized memory grows as natural to the eye as the landscape in which it stands. Indeed, for memory to do otherwise would be to undermine the very foundations of national legitimacy, of the state's seemingly natural right to exist.⁶⁶

It seems the criticism Young got for discrediting what he called "the documentary impulse" in *Writing* has led him now to emphasize that he does not distinguish between "high and low", i.e. between figuratively or abstract. The criticism was that he had doomed to failure what was not even aimed at "realism-for-its-own-sake", but what followed the Talmudic obligation to *testify so that justice might be done*. This ethical imperative is now what Young places at the heart of the irreferentiality of modern memorial art:

The fundamental dilemma facing contemporary monument makers is thus twosided and recalls that facing prospective witnesses in any medium: first, how does one refer to events in a medium doomed to refer only to itself? And second, if the aim is to remember -- that is, to refer to -- a specific person, defeat, or victory, how can it be done abstractly? For many who survived solely to testify to the Holocaust, memory and testimony are one: witness for the survivors entails the most literal transmission possible of what they saw and experienced. ... But as historians and literary critics have come to accept the impulse in writers to testify in narrative, even as they look beyond witness to the kind of knowledge created in such writing, so might critical viewers of Holocaust memorials accept the parallel

65 Young, *Writing* 84

66 Young, *Texture* 11

impulse in Holocaust memorial makers to testify through literal figuration -- before turning to the ways that public memory is organized in such figures.⁶⁷

The latter is, in fact, Young's main interest. The public readings of memorial art -- often quiet independent of the intentions of either artist or state -- and the consequences in people's lives are the subject of *The Texture of Memory*. Such a consequence, for example, is entailed if the new Holocaust Museum in Los Angeles manages to get its message across that "Jews have to be more Jewish" because of what happened, and non-Jews would think and behave differently in relation to their Jewish neighbors (donations to Israel would be one example, sparing Jewish stores in the riots would be another).

Young has concentrated on those monuments commissioned by the state. He has found that German monuments, for example, tend to recall the Jews by their absence while figuratively representing German victims who were killed for political or religiously motivated resistance. This has to do not only with the difficulties of grief for somebody who was never loved in the first place⁶⁸, but also with the yearning for a teleological interpretation: The concentration camp site in Neuengamme bears the social democratic injunction of a "Lernort Demokratie" -- thus the twelve years of Nazism are reduced to the labour pains of the Federal Republic.

In Poland, which had been almost devoid of Jews after the war, and especially after the pogroms by Poles in Kielce and other places when the Germans were long gone, countless memorials in former death camps and throughout the country "commemorate the whole of

67 Young, *Texture* 11

68 Micha Brumlik has pointed out that the famous dictum of Alexander and Margarethe Mitscherlich of the inability of the Germans to mourn did not refer to the Jews -- because you can only feel grief for the loss of an object that was loved -- but to Hitler, whom they were never allowed to express their grief for.

Micha Brumlik, "Trauerrituale und politische Kultur nach der Shoah in der Bundesrepublik", *Holocaust: Die Grenzen des Verstehens. Eine Debatte über die Besetzung der Geschichte* ed. Hanno Loewy (Reinbeck bei Hamburg: Rowohlt Taschenbuch, 1992) 191-212

Polish destruction through the figure of its murdered Jewish part."⁶⁹ Jews and Poles, Young observed, entered a grotesque competition for the victim status with the Poles considering themselves the "Christ among the nations."

A millenium of Jewish civilization is remembered only by the remnants of its destruction. Jewish children are likely to learn their Hebrew from tombstones, and spent their active Jewish life preserving what is left of the community that was destroyed. A so called "March of the Living" leads Jewish youth groups from all over the world from camp to camp, entailing nervous breakdowns and nightmares, but ending unerringly with a vow to Israel.

Because the memorials on former concentration camp sites were conceptualized by former political Polish prisoners it is their version of events that is illustrated, for example, in Auschwitz were a dedication reads "to the martyrdom of the Polish and other nations". Meanwhile, however, things have changed, and Jewish memorials are erected everywhere; be it for reasons of historical accuracy or touristic enterprises geared towards American Jews.

Israel is the only other country next to the former GDR which based its very statehood, its legitimization as a state on the Holocaust. The Biblical injunction to remember, as was described in the last chapter, today acquires an additional importance:

Like any state, Israel remembers the past according to its national myths and ideals, its current political needs. Unlike that of any other states, however, Israel's overarching national ideology and religion -- perhaps its greatest 'natural resource' may be memory itself: memory preserved, restored codified. In cultivating a ritually unified remembrance of the past, the state creates a common relationship to it. ... having defined themselves as a people through commemorative recitations of the past, the Jews now depend on memory for their very existence as a nation.⁷⁰

Official memory of the Holocaust had long been torn between the need to remind of the catastrophe that made the Jewish state necessary

69 Young, *Texture* 2

70 Young, *Texture* 211

and the equally strong need to forget Jewish victimization. Religious as well as secular Zionists regarded the Holocaust as the ultimate outcome of life in the Diaspora, of exile, that should best be forgotten; at the same time, it was proof of the Zionist dictum that Jews in exile would always be threatened with this kind of destruction.

So for the early state-builders the question became, in Young's words: "how to negate the Diaspora and put it behind the 'new Jews' of Israel, while basing the need for new Jews in memory of the Shoah? How to remember the Holocaust without allowing it to constitute the center of one's Jewish identity?"⁷¹

The solution, albeit a tenuous one, was to differentiate between the "galut Jew", the Jew in exile, the weak, passive, unhealthy Jew, and the self-confident, fighting Israeli. This dichotomy resulted in a twinning of figures in the memorials: The martyrs are placed next to the heroes, they are remembered for making the heroes necessary, who, in turn founded the state. Again, the theme of catastrophe and redemption is repeated: The fighters redeem the victims, the destruction of European Jewry is redeemed by the new state.

In Israel as well as in the United States it took the camp survivors almost two decades to speak out. By the time they did, Yad Vashem, the central memorial authority in Jerusalem, placed greatest emphasis on the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, on the fighters, and it was difficult to find a place for the majority, those who did not fight. Meanwhile, Yad Vashem tried to solve the eclipse by allowing a greater variety of forms of resistance -- but resistance is still the main theme: "*By standing up under these conditions and refusing to surrender to despair the Jews made possible the continuation of the Jewish people even in the inferno of the Holocaust and thereby helped the creation of the state of Israel.*"⁷²

71 Young, *Texture* 212

72 quoted from "Informational Guidelines to the Commander on Yom Hashoah" (Yom Hashoah is the remembrance day for the Holocaust)



IV. 2. American Memorials

Unlike European memorials *in situ* which present themselves as a presentation of the events they commemorate, and unlike Israeli memorials which somehow wrestle with the connection between the Holocaust as a foundation of the state, American memorials are so far removed from the *topography of terror* that they unavoidably call attention to a spatial and temporal gap.

Therefore, some survivors remember in *landsmanschaften*; greater Los Angeles knows "Lublener Organization", "Nashelsker Society", "Lodzer Organization", "Belgian Jewish Society" or "Wilno Vicinity and Friends". Some are organized along temporal lines, alluding to the disruption of their biographical lines: "Jewish Club of 1933", or "1939 Club".

Every generation has different motives to remember. While the survivors commemorate their families, and while commemoration, especially in the *landsmanschaften* often also entails remembering a lost home, their children often feel the need to perpetuate their parent's plight and to counter revisionists who deny that Auschwitz ever happened.

The first public commemoration of the Holocaust took place at the height of destruction, on 2 December 1942 when the first newspaper reports on the killings had appeared. Some five hundred thousand Jews in New York City stopped work for ten minutes, radio stations observed a two-minute silence before broadcasting memorial services. Public rallies were held at Madison Square Garden in 1943, and in 1944 the largest assembly commemorated the anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising in April 1944.

The plans for the first memorial, to be placed in Riverside Park in New York, were never realized. A stone slab was placed in 1947, with an inscription that read: "This is the site for the American memorial to the Heroes of the Warsaw Ghetto Battle, April-May 1943 and to the six million Jews of Europe martyred in the cause of human liberty." It is interesting to note that the same hierarchy of victims should be established here as it was in Israel years later: First the heroes, then the

victims. In this case, the victims did not die for the cause of establishing the state of Israel, but for the American value of liberty.

Only in 1963, after the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem, and after the period of silence that endured throughout the fifties was broken, did a commission supply a plan for a public monument for Riverside Park. Two designs by Nathan Rapoport, the sculptor who had also created the Warsaw Ghetto monuments in Poland and Israel was submitted to the Arts Commission, which viewed it as "too depressing for the children", and also on the grounds that other "special groups" might want to be similarly represented on public land; and also that "monuments in the park should be limited to events in American history"⁷³ -- the very same debates generated by the plans to situate a Holocaust memorial on Federal land on the Washington Mall.

The question arose what the difference was between "American history" and "American's history"; but it took almost another thirty years for it to be answered the way it is today -- that if America defines itself as an immigrant's country, the immigrant's past is part of America's past.

One example of how this entails another hierarchization -- that among different immigrants' memories -- can be found in Denver, Colorado. In the course of the years, memorials to the Holocaust did spread throughout the country, but first only as plaques on synagogue walls or community buildings, or small memorial gardens in the courtyards of suburban synagogues. Then, quietly, the beginning of memorial commissions set in. Even within the Jewish communities it was always difficult to reach an agreement. Young points out that if memorials were too figurative, religious leaders felt that they were not Jewish enough; if they were too abstract, the survivors criticized that their "all too literal" experiences were not represented.

One day the city council in Denver decided to recall publicly the massacre at Babi Yar and to draw attention to anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union today. When the memorial inscriptions were designed and publicly announced, the local Ukrainian community rose in

73 "City Rejects Park Memorials to Slain Jews," *New York Times* 11 Feb. 1965

protest, because there was no mention of the massacre of Ukrainians that also took place in Babi Yar in 1942. The inscription on the stone gateway to the park reads now: "In Memoriam/ To The Hundred Thousand Victims/ Who Died/ Babi Yar Kiev Ukraine USSR / September 29, 1941- November 6, 1943/ The Majority Jews with Ukrainians/ And Others."

The diversity in interest -- to say the least -- between survivors and American Jews who know the Holocaust only vicariously found an expression in a conflict in Dallas. Michael Jacobs, a survivor, planned to donate a memorial to the Jewish community in Dallas, Texas. He wished for it to have a clear reminiscence of what happened to him as a young child in occupied Poland, and so decided to ship a boxcar from Belgium which had been used to carry Jews to the death camps, from Europe to America. Shortened by one third, the boxcar was used as entrance to the museum in the community building's ground floor as a kind of antechamber, so visitors would get the sense of "having been there."⁷⁴ Young reports that, during the opening, a few of those who really had been there, refused to enter the box at all. That way they protested that they were unable to enter a museum dedicated to their own experience. A solution was found that reminds strangely of the civil rights struggle in reverse: A separate entrance, a secret door for survivors only, was built.

While these examples mainly serve to illustrate some of the problems entailed with erecting memorials to the Holocaust in a country so far removed from the killing fields, others illuminate what the "Americanization of the Holocaust" positively implies. The shared memory of Americans and survivors is, obviously, the "war effort" and the liberation of the camps. Liberty State Park in Jersey City, New Jersey finally did dedicate a sculpture by Nathan Rapoport, which is titled "Liberation", and shows a young GI overlooking the Statue of Liberty, who is carrying an emaciated survivor. Young quotes the gouverneur of New Jersey as saying: "To me, this monument is an affirmation of my American heritage. It causes me to feel deep pride in my American values...This monument says that we, as Americans,

74 Young, *Texture* 298

do not engage in military conflict for the purpose of conquest. Our role in the world is to preserve and promote that precious, precious thing that we consider to be a free democracy....Today, we will remember those who gave their lives for freedom."⁷⁵

An interesting story unfolded along the same lines in Boston, where a survivor decided to thank the Americans who had liberated him from Buchenwald. Having seen "Liberation" in Jersey City, he suggested that Rapoport built a similar one in Boston, but his proposal was met with unexpected resistance by other survivors, who said they had desperately waited for an allied airfighter to bomb their camp, but nobody ever did. When the project almost threatened to die down, a committee was founded which consisted of local Jewish leaders, philanthropists and Academics, which planned to locate whatever memorial were to be built right on the "Freedom Trail", visited by about sixteen million tourists per year. A Holocaust memorial should rise up between Boston Massacresite, Faneuil Hall and Paul Revere House on the way to Bunker Hill Monument. Placing the Holocaust memorial here will mean to include it into the very myth of American national origin, the tale of the American revolutionary struggle for independence, the "Birth of a Nation".

The commission then decided to make the decision process part of the memorial itself in order to serve both memory and education. Should the committee fail to convince the community, the memorial was to remain unbuilt. So the Memorial Committee sponsored a number of public debates, hearing art historians, sculptors of other memorials, urban planners, local politicians and survivors. Of course the problem was that such democratic procedures were not always compatible with fundraising. Reactions within the non-Jewish community were as diverse as expected. Many wondered what exactly the Holocaust had to do with American history, others felt that non-Jewish victims of Nazi persecution should be included. A few also denied that the Holocaust ever happened. So the memorial became what Young called "a fingerprint of society". The memorial which the

75 Young, *Texture* 321

committee finally agreed upon is a design by San Franciscan Stanley Saitowitz that comprises six square glass towers illuminated from below by a black granite pit filled with electrically heated volcanic rocks. Each tower will be named after one of the six death-camps. Visitors will be able to walk through the bases of the towers, with the play of light coming from below iron grates that cover the pits.

A list of principles of the memorial is indicative of the way the "Americanization of the Holocaust" reads the events it pertains to:

This will be a memorial to the Shoah -- the Holocaust --in which the Nazi Third Reich systematically murdered six million Jewish men, women and children....The memorial will be for the six million -- a place to grieve for the victims and to mark the loss of their culture to history.

The Nazis and their collaborators victimized many other groups, murdering countless other people, each of equal worth and importance. Still others, including survivors, those who aided them, and those who liberated them, were caught up in this great tragedy and carry the burden of that memory throughout their lives. In seeking a universal understanding of the Shoah, we acknowledge the place of each experience in the horror of that collective history. To remember this suffering, we acknowledge the place of this suffering in the horror of that collective history. To remember this suffering is to recognize the danger and evil that are present whenever one group persecutes another. The Holocaust was the ultimate act of prejudice -- in this case, anti-Semitism. Wherever prejudice, discrimination and victimization are tolerated, evil like the Shoah can happen again.⁷⁶

This memorial obviously tries to serve several purposes: to maintain the uniqueness of the Holocaust as a Jewish catastrophe, while at the same time acknowledging other people's loss. The common denominator is the warning against the devastating effects of prejudice -- as if the destruction of six million people, whether recognizably or religiously Jewish was anything like simply the epitome of racism. This is what Adi Ophir, who was quoted in the last chapter, calls the "universal question" -- to realize that and how the Shoah can happen again. Thus, Americanizing the Holocaust entails something like "democratizing" remembrance -- a theme that is developed more complexely in the two major Holocaust museums.

76 "The New England Holocaust Memorial Competition Program"(1991), 1

"Americanization" of course, can also mean something like "normalization", an experience illustrated by another of Rapoport's sculptures which was placed in Philadelphia. In the words of Holocaust art historian Sybil Milton:

A typical example (of civic fervor rather than artistic judgement, M.N.) was the 18 foot high bronze sculpture ...in Philadelphia at 16th street and Benjamin Franklin Parkway near City Hall. Designed by Nathan Rapoport, who had previously made the Warsaw Ghetto monument, its motifs included an unconsumed burning bush, Jewish fighters, a dying mother, a child with a Torah scroll, and a blazing menorah. The downtown center-city site, visible daily to thousands of motorists and pedestrians, had little demonstrable resonance, in part a response to the florid and heavy-handed design and in part a reflection of its awkward location on an island on a heavily traveled urban street.⁷⁷

A similar fate was shared by the memorial in Tucson which was built into a free standing wall that opens to a large plaza and a parking lot in front. Visitors now use it as kind of an entryway into a complex of gyms, tennis courts, swimming pools and auditoriums. "The Raoul Wallenberg Tennis Classic?" a commentator asked wearily.⁷⁸

But no other Holocaust institution could be as indicative of the relations between the politics of contemporary Jewish identity and public memory than the Holocaust museums that opened almost simultaneously in Washington and in Los Angeles, with another one still being developed in New York.

IV.3. The Museum Beith Hashoah -- Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles

The famous cynical inside joke "There's no business like Shoah business" found a new meaning with the establishment of a museum that turns the Holocaust into a powerful light-and-sound-show that

⁷⁷ Sybil Milton, *In Fitting Memory: The Art and Politics of Holocaust Memorials* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991) 12

⁷⁸ Leon Wieselthier, "After Memory," *The New Republic*, May 3, 1993, 20

was actually designed by "Disney Imageneering". But the process leading up to this "Jewish tunnel of horror" (Philip Lopate) is almost as revealing as the museum itself.

In the seventies, the Jewish community in Los Angeles was not only the second largest, but also one of the most assimilated in terms of intermarriage rates or synagogue attendence and community affiliation in general. While all the major institutions of Jewish learning are located on the East coast, Jews would often come to Los Angeles "to shake off the ties that would bind them to tradition," Steve Sass, president of the Jewish Historical Society pointed out. Consequently, the number of observant, let alone Orthodox Jews, was small.

About 1977 the community decided to open its own Holocaust museum. It was organized by survivors and survivor's children exclusively, and is now a very small but one of the best Holocaust memorial museums located within the Federation Building -- thereby emphasizing its link to the community and the uniqueness of the Holocaust in Jewish history.

In the same year, 1977, a young orthodox rabbi named Marvin Hier, raised and trained in New York, came from Israel to found his own yeshiva (institution of higher Jewish education) in this assimilated wasteland. Within months, not only had he opened the Yeshiva, but also a Holocaust memorial and museum, called the Simon Wiesenthal Center. Having won Wiesenthal as a patron not only helped Hier's remarkable fund raising activities, but also indicated that this was not to be solely a commemoration of Jewish victimization, but also a signal of Jewish assertiveness -- Wiesenthal is generally admired for his work as the prime Nazi-hunter.

The connection of Jewish learning with the Holocaust is still a sore point within the community. Just when there was an awareness that the Holocaust might take up too much of Jewish identity and activity, the link sat back in. With some 380,000 members, the Simon Wiesenthal Center is the largest Jewish organization in the world. Contributors from Ronald Reaganto Arnold Schwarzenegger confirmed the connection: Holocaust fundraising equals Holocaust

consciousness raising. Samuel Belzberg, one of the center's principal financial backers, commented: "It's a sad fact that Israel and Jewish education and all other familiar buzzwords no longer seem to rally Jews behind the community. The Holocaust, though, works every time."

The museum is divided into the so called "Tolerance Wing" and the "Holocaust Wing." The "Tolerance Wing" houses a multi-mediashow in which visitors can test their attitudes towards minorities -- the big theme is "prejudice". The centerpiece of what looks like a giant flashing video-arcade is a group of six "workstations" that chronicle the 1992 Los Angeles riots. A control panel enables visitors to review the history under titles such as "Acts of Heroism" or "Police Response", which show compilations of TV-footage. One can also call up Korean grocers, African American residents of South Central, politicians, reporters or police officers. Visitors can answer questions after having inserted their personal information (age, ethnicity, residence, but not -- for example-- income); and their answers are successively compared to that of other ethnic or age groups.

A three-tiered time line of the United States diverges from the standard classroom model by including a chart of racial discrimination, while a wall-sized map of "The Other America" lists 250 active hate groups which can be individually researched through a touch-screen monitor. Other issues, such as the de facto segregation of the school system, or present economic inequalities, the *reasons* for the riots, remain untouched. While one is first inclined to be surprised at the willingness to even name other people's plight next to that of the Jews it finally turns out that this is not actually a comparison that is made.

Ralph Rugoff, critic with the *LA Weekly*, argued:

None of the exhibits prompts you to think about the reasons for bigotry, its psychological origins and internal architecture. Nor does the museum include any detailed exploration of racism's long-term consequences, how it perverts the spirit of those oppressed. In *The Drowned and the Saved*, Primo Levi writes that prisoners in Auschwitz were forced to abrase themselves -- to steal, lie and betray -- merely to survive; today we've re-

created this situation for the residents of our inner cities, but the museum never pursues this kind of parallel.⁷⁹

The reason why the American civil rights struggle and the situation of African Americans, Hispanics and others is included in the exhibit in the first place is very simple: About a third of the financial contributions to the Simon Wiesenthal center were given by the City Council, which demands that public museums must be non-sectarian, and must address a general interest.

Therefore, it comes as no surprise that the "Holocaust-Wing" is not only larger, but also much more "obtrusive". Here the visitor can not walk at his own pace, huge doors open and fall shut at invisible electronic signals after each segment of the exhibit. One can only move through these segments in groups of ten to fifteen people. The information delivered can not be questioned as in the "Tolerance-wing", there is no active exchange between objects and visitor.

When the first door preys open, the group is lead from the flickering video arcade into the darkness of pre-War Europe. Europe, the Old World, is portrayed as a dark, almost Gothic, chilling continent. A Berlin cafe is suddenly illuminated by a spotlight, plaster figures of a Jewish and non-Jewish girl, a young Nazi, a communist waiter appear and disappear, with a voice-over letting us in on their conversation, and a narrator telling us about their future. The "Tolerance Wing" also had a "video"- guide, an average American whose face popped up at every intersection; but in the "Holocaust-Wing", the omniscient narrator is invisible -- and all the more powerful and God-like for that. Apropos "narration": Every visitor is given the "passport" of a child that was lost in the Holocaust, which enforces not only the narrativization and personalization, but also the intimidation of the visitor. Although it was clear from the start, that the designers do not think to highly of their audience, with this passport it is even more obvious.

Segmentalized in successive parts, it becomes clear that everything about the Holocaust can be narrated, and thus managed. Critics

79 Ralph Rugoff, "Jump-Cut to Auschwitz", *LA Weekly* 31, February 26, 1993

hold that the whole point of these museums -- beyond all the more up-front political implications -- might be to prove just that: That the Holocaust *can* be told like any other history, even though or because the survivors hardly managed to pass on what they had experienced.

Between segments of the exhibition, we see a scenery with the planners, a researcher, the designer and a historian, who look at a video screen and discuss questions an uninitiated visitor might ask. One is first tempted to think of a Brechtian means of alienation, but

It's not as self-reflexive as it sounds; instead of elucidating the museum's layout or historical approach, these figures simply serve as our bridge into the past, raising -- and answering -- such concerns as how average Germans could have countenanced their government's policies, or why more Jews didn't flee the country.⁸⁰

Another claustrophobically sealed-off room contains nothing but eight large video screens on which swastikas flash off and on to the ear-shattering rhythm of marching boots. One feels oppressed but doesn't necessarily know why; if visitors are really as uninitiated as the designers seem to think they are, it is very questionable what they will actually take from such images that might just as well appear in a Benetton-ad.

Finally, the plastic replica of the gates of Auschwitz flies open. Cobblestones pave the way to a diorama of the camp in a moonlit night, lying there in serene silence, almost sublime, even the four people hanging on the gallows in the left hand corner. The climax of "Beit Hashoah" is without question a bunkerlike room with another six video-screens which has showerheads on the sides and little openings on the ceiling. While munching on cheeseburgers, visitors listen to a woman who watched as her newborn was thrown from a high hospital window into a waiting SS-truck, you see a photograph of a camp inmate lying with his eyes half-closed while a voice-over narrates the story of an escape; a twelve-year-old begging God to send her parents home, and salutary stories by resistance fighters and partisans....Narration upon narration, story upon story -- it is not so

80 Rugoff 32

much the obscenity of it, but the desperate talkativeness that is most revealing.

Stepping out of the gas chamber visitors are welcomed by a living museum guide (often survivors volunteer for the job) who instructs you to insert the "passport" into the computer to learn of the end of "your child's" story -- eighty per cent, of course, end in death.

The very end of the museum's own story is the Global Situation Room, a stark, glass-enclosed office/ exhibit which relays satellite feeds from around the world with the latest news on ethnic cleansing in Bosnia or Neo-Nazi activity in Germany. In fact, through its Nazi-hunting unit it provided a lists to British prime minister Margareth Thatcher of seventeen suspected war criminals believed to be living in the United Kingdom, or another list with alleged war criminals to the Justice Department -- some of whom had already died. Still, according to New York Times correspondent Judith Miller, "the center's charges received wide attention in the press."⁸¹

Gary Rosenblatt, of the *Baltimore Jewish Times*, has criticized the center for installing fear as a negative identity: "I have an eleven-year-old daughter. I want her to have a positive attitude towards Judaism, a spiritual and moral understanding of its values, which, in turn, will make her want to embrace the faith and become part of it. That won't happen if you tell your kids: the point of being Jewish is to make sure that we don't get killed again."⁸²

On one hand, the museums creates a sense of permanent threat -- "There is an antisemite under every rock" while at the same time signaling "Everything is being taken care of." There is no mention, the *LA Weekly* argued, that "one of the Holocaust's enduring 'lessons' is in fact the danger of tolerance. The great majority of Germans were not ardent Nazis, but somehow tolerated Hitler's rise to power and the ensuing enactment of his genocidal policies. ... Today, the list of

81 Miller 239

82 Gary Rosenblatt, *Baltimore Jewish Times*, September 14, 1984, 62

social inequities we tolerate is long and ugly. What we're lacking is not wishy-washy tolerance, but a healthy level of intolerance."⁸³

After the visitor has returned the child's passport and is sent "out into the world" again, he or she leaves with the feeling that an anonymous authority will protect the Jews -- if one has filled in the membership-application for the Simon Wiesenthal Center.

IV.4. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington

The term "Americanization of the Holocaust" was coined by Michael Berenbaum, project director of the largest and most ambitious institution, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., to which it is probably most applicable. Everything about it is imbued with meaning: its inception, the following developmental process, its location, the architecture, its exhibits and their time span, the media, the objects used (and how their were obtained!) and the omissions in between; and finally, of course, the ongoing formation of reactions, the use to which it is put. A work in progress.

The idea was initially promoted by three members of the Carter administration in 1977. The proposals were incited, according to Ellen Goldstein, staff member of the Domestic policy council, not only by the concern for keeping the memory alive when the generation of witnesses and survivors passes away, but also to counter incidents of revisionism. But the proposals remained unanswered until President Carter had publicly endorsed a "homeland" for Palestinians and a major sale of F-15 fighter aircrafts to Saudi Arabia. A couple of months later, Carter announced that he had decided to appoint a commission to discuss the building of a Holocaust memorial.

It did not take long and the most sensitive spot of the project was touched upon, namely just how universal it would be. One of the presidential aides responsible for maintaining interethnic relations argued that both the commission that would decide what kind of

memorial built, nor the council that would supervise the construction should be solely composed of Jews. Representatives of all people who were persecuted by the Nazis should be included, otherwise the project could not hope for congressional backing. Elie Wiesel, whom the President had appointed head of the commission only slowly agreed to include a few "righteous gentiles", Christians who had hid or otherwise helped the Jews. But when the question of including a few Lithuanians came up, according to Judith Miller, one survivor almost lost his countenance because he had seen his brother stomped dead by a Polish guard. The question of universality of the project also affected the decision whether its memorial or its educational qualities would prevail. Once it was decided that a fairly diverse group of Americans would be included in the commission, it also became clear that the final outcome would be a museum, not only a memorial.

Despite the "universal" aspect it was clear from the start for both President Carter and the commission that the museum would be funded by the Jewish community, not with federal support. Immediately the next problem in this vein had to be faced: An Armenian member of the council argued that the Turkish genocide of the Armenians between 1915 and 1923 should be included. At the same time he offered to contribute 1\$ million to the museums still frighteningly low budget. This offer was immediately followed by a visit of the Turkish Ambassador who reminded Eizenstat that the Jews had always been welcome in Turkey, and that, if the Armenian genocide were included, he could no longer guarantee for the safety of Jews in his homecountry.

Equally difficult was the debate over the German chancellor's appeal to include postwar German history, for example the fact that the Federal Republic was donating 100 billion German marks in reparations to Israel? After the resignation of Elie Wiesel, for reasons which cannot be elaborated upon here (among them the fear for the "de-Judaization" of the Holocaust), the council decided not to accept any donations from either Germany or the Soviet Union. Months of negotiating donations and dedications followed, until, finally President Jimmy Carter gave the official American legitimization of the museum in an address at the Capitol Rotunda in April 1979:

Although the Holocaust took place in Europe, the event is of fundamental significance to Americans for three reasons. First, it was American troops who liberated many of the death camps, and who helped to expose the horrible truth of what had been done there. Also, the United States became a homeland for many of those who were able to survive. Secondly, however, we must share the responsibility for not being willing to acknowledge forty years ago that this horrible event was occurring. Finally, because we are humane people, concerned with human rights of all peoples, we feel compelled to study the systematic destruction of the Jews so that we may seek to learn how to prevent such enormities from occurring in the future.⁸⁴

Finally, the past of Americans becomes an *American* past. Would that also be the case if Americans had not had "a stake" in the liberation? Will it be possible for those in whose oppression white Americans had a stake, too? In a ceremony at the museum soil of several concentration camps was mingled with soil from Arlington National Cemetery. "That strange alchemy," Jonathan Rosen argued in the *New York Times*, "recalls *Liberators*, a film that merged the story of African American soldiers fighting racism at home with the plight of Jewish victims of Nazi racism. The desire to yoke the American experience of racism to the Holocaust was so great that the erroneous claim was made that these brave soldiers had liberated concentration camps which many of them had never seen. Perhaps what is most American about the museum is the great optimism behind it, the cheery conviction that even a terrible catastrophe can be put to practical use."⁸⁵

In this context the location of the museum becomes most significant. Immediately adjacent to the Bureau of Printing and Engraving, it is surrounded by the Jefferson Memorial, the Washington Monument, the Smithsonian museums and the National Archive's display of the Constitution and Bill of Rights. "No other institutions on the Mall focus on a single ethnic or religious group," Harvard scholar Howard Husock argued. "Making an exception for an identifiable Jewish

84 From an undated press release of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Council

85 Jonathan Rosen, "The Misguided Holocaust Museum", *New York Times*, April 18, 1993

museum either calls for a similar representation of other groups, with their own histories of suffering, or raises the question of why these groups are not represented. In either case, I am troubled by what the consequences may be for American civil religion, the historically non-denominational set of ideals represented by other monuments on the Mall."⁸⁶

Reacting to this very criticism, Harvey Meyerhoff, one of the chairmen of the council wrote in the *Washington Post*:

Why should a museum devoted to the Holocaust -- an event that took place on European soil and primarily on the body of the Jewish people -- find its home on the Mall? Because the Holocaust represents a loss of innocence for civilization. It is a manifestation of the darker side of human civilization whose accomplishments are celebrated in the nearby Smithsonian Institution. If the Smithsonian represents the accomplishments of civilization, the Holocaust raised fundamental questions about the capacity of individuals and of technology and human genius for evil.⁸⁷

Both arguments, it seems blur the uniqueness of the Holocaust by turning it into a metaphor for either racism in general or the process of civilization run amok. Hannah Arendt had insisted on the distinction between these categories long ago. Had the court that judged Eichmann, she had argued in 1963, recognized that discrimination, expulsion and genocide are not the same, it had become clear immediately that the biggest crime it had to face was the physical extermination of the Jewish people, and that this was *a crime against humanity committed on the Jewish people*, and that only the *choice* of the victims but not the *nature* of the crime could be deduced from the long history of anti-Semitism.⁸⁸ It takes a certain intellectual effort to keep all these levels and distinctions apart, and it is all the more difficult to translate it into a museum that attempts to add a "new clause to the

86 Howard Husock, "Red, White and Jew", *Tikkun* 5,4 July/August, 1990

87 Harvey M Meyerhoff, "Yes, the Holocaust Museum Belongs on the Mall," *Washington Post*, 18 July, 1987

88 Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Viking Press, 1963)

statement of American values "(Husock). It makes a crucial difference whether a people is regarded as enemy or as prey; as competitor for jobs or as something less than vermin; as an inferior race or as something beyond race, the epitome of Otherness. Only from this epistemological venture point can one grasp what the Nazis set out to do, and why it is different from the Turkish quest or a Pol Pot crusade; and that it lacks even the Stalinist ideological background of a "universal ideal":

Nicht als identifizierbare 'Fremde' wurden die Juden zum Objekt der nazistischen Vernichtungspolitik, nicht als fremdes Volk, sondern als das schlechthin 'Andere.' Alle Versuche, Antisemitismus mit Fremdenhaß zu analogisieren, finden in dieser Tatsache ihre Grenze. Der Rassismus, der sich gegen die Juden richtete, war nicht der Haß auf bestimmte Menschen, auf eine erkennbare 'Rasse,' sondern auf die lebendige Infragestellung des Rassebegriffs selbst, als die insbesondere die assimilierten Juden den Nazis erschienen. Die nazistische Phantasie von der Fähigkeit des Juden, in jede 'Maske,' sei es die des Kapitalisten, des Bolschewiken oder selbst des Deutschnationalen zu schlüpfen, verweist auf eine Aggression, die sich nicht nur gegen die Juden sondern schließlich gegen jeden Menschen richten mußte, der in die verschiedenen, durchaus miteinander konkurrierenden Ordnungs-vorstellungen der Nazis nicht passen sollte.⁸⁹

Loewy goes on to suggest that the ultimate impulse of Nazism is self-annihilation:

Der Nationalsozialismus bedeutete, und darin unterschied er sich von allen anderen Diktaturen vor oder nach ihm, vor allem eins: die untrennbare Verknüpfung von Machtsreben und Vernichtungslogik, von Unterwerfung und Apokalypse. 'In der Vernichtung der Juden,' so schreibt Saul Friedlander, 'finden diese beiden widersprüchlichen Grundmomente der nazistischen Phantasie in ganz besonderem Maße ihren Ausdruck und ihre Erfüllung. Denn ist nicht die Tilgung von Schmutz, die Ausmerzung von Bakterien und Infektionsherden eine Rückkehr zur natürlichen Harmonie und Ordnung, ein vollkommenes Reinigungsritual? Und heißt nicht, den Kampf aufzunehmen gegen die Verkörperung des Bösen, gegen das dunkle

89 Hanno Loewy, Gutachten für das Frankfurter Lern- und Dokumentationszentrum des Holocaust, (Frankfurt am Main: Dezernat für Kultur und Freizeit, 1991) 18

Prinzip, das die Menschheit mit der schrecklichsten aller Versklavungen bedroht -- heißt das nicht, sich in die höchste aller Aufgaben zu stürzen, an deren Ende entweder die entgültige Erlösung oder die totale Zerstörung steht? Letztlich zielte die Ausrottung der Juden auf Selbstvernichtung, auf die Negation jedes Menschseins überhaupt.⁹⁰

Any museal narrative that wrestles with the Holocaust has to lead to this irresolvable nothingness. Again, as was postulated by Dan Diner, the counter-rationality of the destruction of the Jews, the utmost extreme of history, cannot be embedded into comparisons or teleological interpretations.

Interestingly, the architecture of the Holocaust Museum in Washington tries to account for this impasse more than the exhibit itself does.

Its exterior merges perfectly into the ensemble of neoclassic columns and temples, blending in with the grey limestone of the Bureau of Engraving. While this exterior resonates with dignity representative of a democratic nation, the interior evokes uncertainty, disruption, brutality. Raw bricks, thick steel, sharp, glistening glass planes and disjunct angles welcome the visitor into the "Hall of Witness." The exhibit winds itself in four floors around this glass-and-steel structure, so from below one can catch the shadowy outlines of visitors crossing over from one wing of the exhibit to the next. But those looking up from the "Hall of Witness" also seem to be observed: Above the roof, Freed, the architect, has erected watchtowers; an overall feeling of being under surveillance is evoked. Freed, a member of I.M. Pei's firm, was a refugee from Nazi-Germany himself. Upon accepting the assignment, Freed went back to Europe, visited several concentration camps and studied their architecture. He was impressed by the modernist simplicity, the prefabricated structures designed to be transformed to Poland easily. He also found brochures in which construction firms expressed their pride in the capacity of their furnace ovens. The message is thus twofold: while the regularity, the angles and the steel structures emphasize the efficacy of industry, the cracks in the wall and the disjunct lines speak of the disruption and

destruction in the victim's lifelines. The grandeur of the building, the intimidation by the watchtowers and the disorientation are somewhat countered by the fact that there is in fact no controlling center; the watchtowers are empty.

With the intimidation by the building, the "selection" at the entrance, the ride up in an elevator that resembles a gas chamber or a cattle car, and with the "passport" the visitor is again induced to identify with the victims. This time, it is not a child's passport as in the "Museum of Tolerance," but that of a "twin": Visitors type their age, gender, and profession into a computer which in turn prints out for them a passport of somebody with roughly the same data who was caught in the Holocaust.

For those who wish to commemorate, Freed built a "Hall of Remembrance", a hexagonal, neoclassic limestone chamber that is seventy feet high. The dome of the hall is open to skylight. Stone steps serve as seats that surround an eternal flame, a setting reminiscent of an amphitheater. It is remarkable that the architect would return to this style when it comes to contemplation; as if he wished to resolve the tension, after all, that he built up so effectively in serene calm and dignity. Again the maddening senselessness of dying at Auschwitz is drowned in consolation.

The exhibit starts in the elevator with an almost dramatical exposition, a video of the liberation, shot by one Colonel George Stevens. The voice-over relates to the visitors that they are going to see documents on an event which was unprecedented in history. This exposition seems to create a narrative suspense, as if the ending of the *story* that will be told was somehow open. (Actually there had been discussions among council members whether to give the museum a "happy ending.")

Stepping out of the elevator one is bluntly confronted with the most drastic of all liberation films and photographs shot by an American in color. One sees both the shock of the liberators and the gratitude and relief felt by survivors, some of which will become Americans later on. "With a little chronological slippage, in fact," James E. Young commented, "it could be said that as potetial Ameri-

cans, many of the victims in these films were already somehow American. Indeed, many became American solely on the strength of their experiences as Holocaust victims: for them, the Holocaust was the beginning of their becoming American, making the Holocaust an essentially American experience."⁹¹ Only after this shock of initiation, passport in hand, are visitors led into the galleries in which, behind glass, the first steps toward the destruction are outlined: the book burning, the Nuremberg laws, a Hollerath machine, successive anti-semitic laws.

One section of the exhibit, maybe its most brilliant, deals with the way Americans (including the Jews) reacted to the rumors and later the news on camps in Europe. There is an American living room typical of the period, replete with newspapers, radios and a couch. Next door a bigger screen shows newsreels of the time, tapes in booths relate how the American Jewish Council or the Orthodox community reacted, what the Polish exile government did and why Roosevelt would not do more to help the Jews. In this room, debate among visitors is most vivid, comparisons to the situation in Bosnia are made; it is the only "interactive" section of the museum.

A large section of the museum is devoted to the world that was lost: a Torah arc that was stabbed with knives and scratched and scarred, a well protected Torah scroll, photographs and paintings from a *shtetl*, Ejszyszki, in Poland. Jews had lived for for ninehundred years, before the entire community was wiped out within two days. It is conspicuous that especially the religious and the rural, picturesque scenes of Jewish life would be exhibited, not so much the urban, political aspects of Jewish life. This section is also what differentiates the Washington museum from its counterparts in Israel: While they depict diaspora life as decayed and decrepit, hardly worth saving, the Washington museum tries to make visitors appreciate the cultural loss especially of the *Yiddishlands* in Eastern Europe (Freud's Vienna and Kafka's Prague are -- although obviously much closer to contemporary American thought and culture -- much less visible). The point has been picked up in Israel immediatley. While for years Yad

91 Young, *Texture* 345

Vashem, Israel's national memorial in Jerusalem, was accepted by American Jews as *the* memorial authority, the proliferation of Holocaust institutions in the United States makes it clear that there is, indeed, a specifically Jewish American experience and a memory that deserves to be publicized.

"The Jerusalem Report" picked up on the issue immediatly:

The museum symbolizes not only American Jews' self confidence as Americans, but also as Jews: American Jewry is implicitly declaring its independence from Israeli hegemony on Holocaust commemoration. Yad Vashem's leadership is understandably wary. Until now, Yad Vashem has been the undisputed world center for Holocaust education, hosting groups of Jewish and non-Jewish teachers for summer seminars. Now director Arad worries that American educators will stop coming to Jerusalem and look instead to Washington.... And he warns of competition over Nazi-era archives and artefacts between Yad Vashem ... and better funded foreign museums like Washington's.⁹²

Indeed the hunt for original objects has taken on ghostly dimensions, comparable to that for Christian relics. Thousands of dollars have been paid to ship human hair, shoes, suitcases, camp uniforms and even whole barracks from Poland to the United States. With three museums competing for what the Polish government is having difficulties preserving, one can well imagine the successive deconstruction of the original sites in favour of "real life" ensembles in America. One incident clearly points in this direction: Aquisitors for the museum in Washington arranged with the city government of Sobibor to have the gate of the former concentration camp shipped over. Without knowledge of the local (Jewish) museum's administration the gate was dismantled at night. When the administration complained, the city government contended that the Americans had promised to substitute the gate with a plastic replica.

The seemingly uncritical usage of original objects contributed to the fact that the section devoted to life in the ghettos, the first killings by "Einsatzgruppen", and the camps are conceptually the weakest part

92 Yossi Klein Halevi, "Who Owns the Memory," *The Jerusalem Report*, February 25, 1993

of the museum. While walking on original cobblestones from the Warsaw ghetto one looks at a baby carriage, a sewing machine, a policeman's bicycle and other artefacts. Because these objects are not specifically generated by the Holocaust, they seem to represent the desperate need to reach back over the abyss and the disruption of time to the normalcy of life before. While written texts or schemes acknowledge their distance from the past, the suitcases look as if somebody had just dropped them -- the time barrier is lifted, a sense of presence generated. While the first museums in Europe, designed by survivors, served the purpose of repairing the broken continuity and to document an experience immediately, objects in American museums are not only far from the actual event, but also from the purposes and needs of survivors. Hanno Loewy thinks that the way objects are dealt with in Washington is indicative of a generational shift:

Der Besucher soll sich in den Ensembles der 'Originale' bewegen. Die Objekte gewinnen im Zusammenhang dieser Inszenierung, die auf die Aura des Authentischen als überraschenden, ja überwältigenden Effekt setzt, eine ganz andere narrative Qualität als in den beiläufigen, oft hilflos anmutenden und um so verstörenderen Präsentationen in den ersten, nach der Befreiung entstandenen Museen durch die Überlebenden selbst. Diese hatten versucht, die Gegenstände wie selbstverständliche Beweismittel ihrer eigenen Geschichte zu präsentieren, einer Geschichte, deren Sinn *außerhalb* der Lager fundiert war.

Doch nun ist eine zweite Generation, so scheint es (neben dem schlechten amerikanischen Gewissen), die treibende Kraft der Museumsgründung. Es ist dies eine zweite Generation von Überlebenden, die oftmals weder über den Sinn noch über den 'Glauben' verfügten, der es ihnen ermöglichte, ihre Geschichte selbst zu erzählen, die keine Kämpfer, Helden, Märtyrer waren. Das Geheimnis ihrer Existenz und damit der paradoxe Sinn ihrer Kinder liegt *in* den Lagern, nicht *außerhalb* von ihnen.⁹³

To recreate this reality *within* the camps as virtually as possible a whole section of the museum is surrounded by original barracks from Birkenau, gas canisters of Zyklon B, an original cattle car that took

93 Hanno Loewy, "Erinnerungen an Sichtbares und Unsichtbares," Reinhard Matz, ed. *Die unsichtbaren Lager. Das Verschwinden der Vergangenheit im Gedenken* (Reinbeck bei Hamburg: Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verlag, 1993) 23

Jews to Treblinka, and finally, a scale plaster modell of the "Crematorium II", one of the four killing installations inside Auschwitz/Birkenau by Mieczyslaw Stobiersky. In five sections the successive process from rounding up, undressing, being herded into the underground gas chamber, the gassing, the removal of gold teeth and fillings and the burning of corpses is "staged". The most unbelievable event in human civilization is framed in five images, almost like a comic, a puppet theater, telling its story over and over again, emphasizing everytime that it *can be told*. (The subtitle of the catalogue even reads "The History of the Holocaust as Told in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum").⁹⁴ The impulse is understandable enough: If it is true that, as Hanno Loewy assumes, most of those camp survivors who went to live in the United States did not have any political or religious orientation that provided them with a meaning of life that lay *outside* of the camps, their biographies remain disrupted by a black hole, so to speak. It is quite possible that one task the museums have to fulfill is to cover this hole, as Loewy suggests:

Die amerikanischen Museen, welchen politischen Kontexten und Interessen sie auch immer entwachsen sind, stellen in vielerlei Hinsicht den Versuch dieser zweiten Generation dar, den Leiden der verstümmten Überlebenden, die ihre Eltern waren, eine Sprache, eine narrative Kontinuität zu verleihen, sich selbst damit eine Geschichte zu geben. Und sei es um den Preis, die Authentizität der Objekte zum Fetisch werden zu lassen und den Riß in der zeit, das lange Schweigen selbst 'zum Schweigen' zu bringen.⁹⁵

After the death camp exhibits the museum returns to the liberation motif, to resistance, to the "righteous gentiles"; Raoul Wallenberg, the diplomat who saved thousands of Jews in Budapest and the French Village Le Chambon where Jewish children were hidden throughout the occupation.

94 Michael Berenbaum, *The World Must Know: The History of the Holocaust as Told in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1993)

95 Loewy, "Erinnerung" 23

The museum concludes with the exodus of Jews from Europe, the Displaced Persons Camps and the arrival (sometimes illegal) in Israel and in the New World. Although the most important trials against criminals are listed, there is no comment on the reverberations of the Holocaust in later years, neither in terms of the survivors' lives, nor in terms of theory, historiography or culture; not to mention the controversies that were generated by Hannah Arendt's, Raul Hilberg's or Bruno Bettelheim's work. The reason might be that such controversies are still too painful to be included in an exhibit for the whole nation; it might also be that the sense of unity and identification created by the passports and by having been chased into cattle cars with other visitors should not be disturbed. Jonathan Rosen, one of the most ardent critics of the museum, described its epilogue with the example of the passports:

The term "identity card" is disturbing for it is a false identity with which the visitor is encouraged to identify. If there is a problematic peace to the museum it seems to me to be this invitation to imagine oneself into the Holocaust. It may, to be sure, bring home the horror of the Holocaust but it may also foster a feeling of vicarious suffering not necessarily appropriate to historical awareness. The irony is that many Jews during the Holocaust scrambled to acquire false papers in order to survive the war -- perhaps of non-Jews. There is a reverse principle at work here, as if everyone were expected to enter the museum an American and leave, in some fashion, a Jew.⁹⁶

96 Jonathan Rosen, "America's Holocaust," *Forward*, 12 April, 1991.

V. Conclusion

No other event in Western history urges so much remembrance as the Holocaust, while at the same time denying it: Those who actually went to its very core cannot testify, and those who came close to it will soon be passed away. Soon all we will be left with is an ever growing number of poems, films, oral testimonies, plays, historiographies, biographies, files, photographs and artefacts; remnants of lives lived and objects testifying the process of destruction.

Every single one of them will be contextualized somehow: in a private album of family photographs, stored away in archives, placed in city centers, arranged to a "storyline" in museums, woven into myths of national origin.

But while each individual spectator will make his or her own reading of them, while there is a universal adaptability of the Holocaust as text, this work dealt with the particular meaning it has to American Jews who have to come to terms with several dilemmata: First, with the Jewish tradition of remembrance as well as with the fact that -- at least for the secular majority -- these traditions could not stand the onslaught: while the traditional injunction to remember was related to redemption ("Forgetting only prolongs the exile. Remembrance is the secret of redemption."), it has become clear, especially for survivors and their children, that there is no redemption this time, the Holocaust cannot be tied to the long list of Jewish catastrophes because it attempted to wipe out not only the entire people, but their memory as well.

Die Vernichtungspolitik richtete sich durchaus bewußt gegen diejenigen, die dem christlichen Abendland als die Inkarnation der Erinnerung an die unterträgliche Geworfenheit des Menschen in die Geschichte erscheinen mußten. Dies findet in der Schöpfungsgeschichte, der Vertreibung aus dem Paradies, einen symbolischen Ausdruck....Die jüdische Form historischer Erinnerung ist weder auf eine, im heutigen Sinn historiographische Akribie geschichtlicher Ereignisse und Entwicklungen bezogen. Anstatt jedoch auf vorgeschichtliche, mythische Archetypen und deren ewige Wiederkehr als Naturzwang zurückzugreifen, erinnert die jüdische Tradition in ihren bildhaften Szenen gleichsam die Geschichte der Geschichte selbst, die Geschichte der menschlichen Freiheit als Katastrophe und Rettung

zugleich. Emmanuel Levinas sieht eben in jener 'furchtbaren Unabhängigkeit'..., die den Menschen an jedem Punkt der Geschichte gleich nah oder gleich weit von Gott sieht, den Kern des jüdischen 'partikularistischen Universalismus'.⁹⁷

Attempts to somehow wrestle redemptive elements from remembering the Holocaust abound within the Jewish community (as well as outside of it): The establishment and flourishing of the state of Israel is seen by many as such an incident of redemption, be they religious, or Zionist, or secular. For a people to which memory is structurally constitutive, the attempt is as essential as its failure is inevitable.

While this holds true for all Jews, American Jews have to face additional dilemmata: On one hand, American academics are heirs to the German tradition of Jewish historiography -- according to Yersuhalmi the "faith of fallen (i.e. assimilated) Jews" -- on the other they expect this historiography to provide them with a "usable past". For no other period this seems more urgent than for the disruption that was the Holocaust, and for none it is more difficult, if not impossible.

Secondly, to American Jews the Holocaust often was what "made them Americans." To prove that the experience of Americans is an American experience and therefore part of American history, they have to prove the universality of the Holocaust while at the same time maintaining the particularity of the Jewish loss.

In settling for the liberation and the enforcement of the values of the American "civil religion" as the common denominator, the builders of the new Holocaust memorials and museums have covered the rupture but not healed it.

The danger that Jewish identity remains tied to the Holocaust, that a century-old tradition should only be remembered by its destruction for Jews and non-Jews alike, cannot be banned by simply inserting a section on *Shtetl*-life into all the horror. The envisioned New York "Living Memorial to the Holocaust" which plans to make the

97 Hanno Loewy, "Einleitung des Herausgebers," *Holocaust: Die Grenzen des Verstehens. Eine Debatte über die Besetzung der Geschichte* (Reinbeck bei Hamburg: Rowohlt Taschenbuch, 1992) 12

Holocaust but one part of a storyline that encompasses the beginnings of Jewish history up through the postwar period up to present times seems to provide an alternative (even though by now too many of the donors have contributed to existing institutions). It is still questionable whether the history of the controversial responses to the Holocaust will also be included, from Hannah Arendt's writings to Art Spiegelman's comic strips.

A museum that would acknowledge the ruptures and creases, that would avoid the narrativization and especially the irresponsible exploitation of remnants by turning them into relics (while dismantling the actual places) has yet to be developed. Strategies are already being worked out: Under the premise of "interactivity" a committee in Frankfurt is working on an exhibit that would introduce the "choiceless choices" of the victims as the most advanced epistemological vantage point from which to look at the Holocaust. This approach combines the acknowledgement of both uniqueness and universality: The particular perspective of the most radically persecuted victims gives the most encompassing view of a society turned into a killing machine.

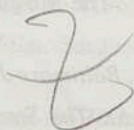
This technique would offer a more cognitive approach rather than a solely emotional one that most often falls prey to the need for consolation. Whatever ritualistic or religious needs there are -- obviously legitimate -- should probably not be addressed to a public institution that wishes to educate.

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