

RAUL HILBERG: IN MEMORIAM

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“My father once told me that even before I was born I was sufficiently unruly to cause a serious problem for my mother.”¹

With these words Raul Hilberg opened his 1996 memoir, *The Politics of Memory*. To his immense credit, the great political scientist and historian of the Holocaust, who passed away last August 4th, managed to retain this “unruliness” throughout his long career. His work rarely comforted its audience or hewed to the narratives of his peers. There were no “life-affirming” lessons to be gleaned from his scholarship—to use the cliché that misleadingly graces the back covers of many Holocaust-related works—and he did not make it easy for his readers or fellow scholars to arrive at simplistic answers to the difficult questions raised by the Jewish catastrophe.

Hilberg did not follow the easiest or most predictable path to academe: His mother was one of eighteen siblings, half of whom died in infancy; after migrating with his family from Austria to the United States in 1939, the young Raul worked in Manhattan factories while in high school, and into his first couple of years at Brooklyn College. Conscripted into the United States Army, Hilberg was in an army division that reached Munich, and was quartered in the Nazi party headquarters. Rummaging through papers and books in the building, he realized he had stumbled upon an important archive, including Hitler’s private library. Thus, Hilberg made a discovery that would be the envy of any historian; but then, few of us find ourselves in armies that are occupying major European cultural centers.

This discovery, along with courses on Prussian civil service that he took after resuming his undergraduate education at Brooklyn College, led him to his doctoral dissertation on the Holocaust and its organization, which he pursued at Columbia beginning in 1948. His subsequent research led to a revelation that would serve as the overarching theme of his work: The Nazi genocide was organized and propelled not simply by “evil” men or racial fanatics, but by careerists and bureaucrats who strove to please their superiors and to “do their job.” “When in the early days of 1933 the first civil servant wrote the first definition of a ‘non-Aryan’ into a civil service ordinance, the fate of the

European Jews was sealed," wrote Hilberg.² He was compelled to analyze and expose this milieu and its logic:

These potentates were an unstoppable force. As administrators they would always follow precedent, but if need be they would break new ground, without calling attention to themselves or claiming a patent, trademark, or copyright. The bureaucracy was a hidden world, an overlooked world, and once I was conscious of it I would not be deterred from prying open its shuttered windows and bolted doors.³

In his dissertation and subsequent book, Hilberg documented with pitiless precision how the German bureaucrat "beckoned to his Faustian fate," overcoming all logistical as well as moral obstacles⁴: "In retrospect it may be possible to view the entire design as a mosaic of small pieces, each commonplace and lusterless by itself. Yet this progression of everyday activities . . . embedded in habit, routine, and tradition, were fashioned into a massive destruction process."⁵ Articulating an insight that has broad implications, Hilberg uncovered the potentially deadly logic of bureaucracy and careerism: "More harmless measures were always the prerequisite for later, more harmful ones."⁶

But the fruit of this research—which would be largely responsible for the development of an entire field of study—may never have seen the light of day. Prominent in Hilberg's obituaries was the story, well known by Holocaust scholars, of his long, lonely struggle to find a publisher for his dissertation, which he had expanded to about two thousand pages.⁷ His doctorate advisor, Franz Neumann, famously attempted to dissuade Hilberg from writing on the Holocaust: "It's your funeral" was the response of the eminent German political scientist, who had made his own reputation in the United States only a few years earlier with his brilliant analysis of the Nazi state (*Behemoth: The Structure and Practice of National Socialism*, 1942). Today, when libraries hold many hundreds of titles chronicling the Shoah, it is easy to forget that in the 1950s, Hilberg was indeed "separating [himself] from the mainstream of academic research to tread in territory that had been avoided by the academic world and the public alike."⁸

To no avail, Hilberg submitted his manuscript to multiple publishers over the next several years. After nearly a year and a half to consider the text, the editor for the University of Oklahoma Press informed Hilberg that certain "passages about Martin Luther might offend religious groups," while other presses found equally misguided reasons to reject the book.⁹ But finally, in part because of the support and patronage of "a complete stranger," Frank Petschek—a Czech refugee whose family had been dispossessed under "Aryanization"—Hilberg finally found a publisher: a small, independent press in Chicago, the now defunct Quadrangle Books.¹⁰ *The Destruction of the European Jews* appeared without fanfare in 1961, but within a few years became recognized as a pioneering masterpiece.

Hilberg seems to have been driven into this practically non-existent field of study by both his abhorrence of Nazism, and his conclusion that previous book-length studies—all two of them—were inadequate. Leon Poliakov's 1954

book offers a far more substantive and creative analysis than suggested by its title—*Harvest of Hate*—but this title alone provoked Hilberg, who knew that the real murderers—the bureaucrats—were not “haters.” And in Hilberg’s view, Gerald Reitlinger’s 1953 *The Final Solution* was also fatally flawed, principally by its “belittling” of the Holocaust, and the extent thereof.¹¹

But how to approach such a provocative and sensitive topic? Claude Lanzmann later remarked to Hilberg that “to portray the Holocaust . . . one has to create a work of art” —an insight that Hilberg had already intuited. “The artist usurps the actuality, substituting a text for a reality that is fading fast. . . . The words, rather than the events themselves, will be remembered,” and “take the place of the past.”¹²

Many commentaries on Hilberg’s work have noted his “dry” style, shorn of the excessive adjectives and emotionalism that have marred more than one book in this field. It seems, however, that this critique is overstated. While Hilberg was modest about his literary skills, *Destruction* is a subtly crafted work, displaying an artistic approach he later described:

The Schubert Quintet in C – a Germanic work – gave me the insight that power is not dependent on simple mass or even loudness, but on escalations and contrasts. Beethoven’s *Appassionata*, that supreme achievement of piano music, which proves that one keyboard can be the equivalent of an orchestra, showed me that I could not shout on a thousand pages, that I had to suppress sonority and reverberations, and that I could loosen my grip only selectively, very selectively.¹³

And while scrupulously avoiding anything maudlin or over-wrought, his work is punctuated by moral indignation—and not the easy sort, aimed simply at Hitler and a few underlings, but an indignation that arises from contemplation of the utter lack of moral courage not only of German officials, but of powerful states and institutions that idly stood by.

Like most people, Hilberg possessed some apparent contradictions: He voted conservative and was a Republican, and his singling out of three women (but no men) for condemnation in his memoir is somewhat suspicious; yet, his instinctual aversion to racism and intolerance was unswerving and even “unruly,” to use his father’s characterization. Upon settling into his job in Burlington, Vermont in 1956, he “rented this place in the middle of the Catholic French-speaking part of town as a gesture of protest, after a faculty wife had warned me that I was looking for accommodations in the ‘wrong’ area of town.”¹⁴ He was also appalled by the depth of racism in his adopted country: “The one sight that remains in my memory as we traversed the South was that of benches marked ‘For Colored.’” Hilberg recalled that he had not been allowed to sit in a park bench marked “for Aryans only” in Vienna, yet was “instantly catapulted” upon his emigration at the age of thirteen, “into a position above many (African) Americans.”¹⁵

Any weaknesses in his oeuvre stem from his almost single-minded focus on the perpetrators and the machinery of death. He was, therefore, not the one to uncover or analyze the complexities of Jewish responses, and he continued

to underestimate Jewish resistance even in the final revision of his magnum opus. Perhaps he over-reacted to such affronts to his sensibilities and intellectual integrity as, for example, the sight of Yad Vashem's letterhead, which proclaimed the parity of disaster and heroism (its full name includes "Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority").¹⁶ Yet, even as a historian of Jewish resistance, I cannot find his near dismissal of Jewish resistance any more problematic than the trend that Hilberg was reacting against: the desire to find something "uplifting" or "comforting" in the disaster, and to contribute to a mythology that "depicted the Exile as weak, feminine, and passive, and the Yishuv as strong, masculine, and active."¹⁷

Late in his life, Hilberg became deeply concerned with the failure of the "international community," to use that intentionally vague term, to learn anything meaningful from the Holocaust. He devoted the last pages of the final (2003) revision of *The Destruction of the European Jews* to the Rwanda genocide:

The disaster of the Tutsi took place in full view of the world. No global crisis overshadowed this event. No lack of aircraft or manpower hampered countervailing action. The challenge was posed and not met. Legal specialists in the Department of State of the United States [i.e., bureaucrats] opposed even the use of the word 'genocide' with reference to Rwanda, lest its utterance be construed as an obligation to do something.

These thoughts on Rwanda were consistent with his concerns over his entire half-century career. Opportunistic functionaries—serving democratic as well as autocratic regimes—enabled genocide, and equally troubling to him was the fact that humanity has cultivated murderous technologies, while failing to cultivate morality and compassion:

Before the advent of the 20th century and its technology, minds bent on destruction could not have come up with the Nazi agenda, even in their wildest dreams. Past administrators simply didn't have the means. They lacked today's communication network, and had no access to automatic weapons or highly toxic poisonous gases. Tomorrow's bureaucrat would not have this problem; he is already better equipped than the German Nazis were. Killing is no longer as difficult as it once was.¹⁸

Hilberg had no patience for the political manipulation of Holocaust, or for the reduction of its presumed "lessons" to a few slogans, such as that hollow utterance that is heard on various anniversaries and memorial occasions: *nie wieder* (never again). To the contrary, he concluded his final revision of *The Destruction of the European Jews* with the bitter retort: "History had repeated itself."¹⁹ Nor did Hilberg countenance a memory of the Holocaust that limits, rather than broadens, our compassion for victims of injustice and genocide. " 'Holocaust' is a misused word" when referring exclusively to "the Jewish catastrophe.... There are now books being written that state the Armenians were not really subjected to genocide or the Gypsies were not really subjected to genocide—even though in my opinion both were—but it results in these arguments and it's an unavoidable situation."²⁰

Fittingly, in a tribute to his old colleague and sometime adversary, Yehuda Bauer wrote, "To my claim that he dealt with the 'how' of the Holocaust rather than the 'why,' he would respond—both to me and to others—that he did not ask the big questions for fear that the answers would be too little."²¹ He should not have worried.



Raul Hilberg passed away on August 4, 2007. Hilberg served as professor of political science at the University of Vermont from 1956 to 1991, and as professor emeritus until his death.

His major works were: *The Destruction of the Jews* (1961, Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1961; second edition published by New York: Holmes & Meier, 1985; third edition by New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003); editor, *Documents of Destruction: Germany and Jewry, 1933-1945* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1971); editor, *The Warsaw Diary of Adam Czerniakow: Prelude to Doom* (New York: Stein and Day, 1979); *Perpetrators Victims Bystanders: The Jewish Catastrophe, 1933-1945* (New York: Aaron Asher Books, 1992); *The Politics of Memory: The Journey of a Holocaust Historian* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1996); and *Sources of Holocaust Research: An Analysis* (Chicago: I.R. Dee, 2001).

Endnotes

- 1 Raul Hilberg, *The Politics of Memory: The Journey of a Holocaust Historian* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee), 21.
- 2 Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, 3rd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 1118.
- 3 Hilberg, *Politics of Memory*, 58.
- 4 Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1961), 639, quoted in Christopher Browning, *The Origins of the Final Solution: The Evolution of Nazi Jewish Policy, September 1939-March 1942* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 11.
- 5 Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, 3rd ed., 1060.
- 6 Hilberg, *Politics of Memory*, 64.
- 7 See also Götz Aly, "Geschichte reicht in die Gegenwart Ein Gespräch mit dem Historiker Raul Hilberg," in *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 10 December 2002. <http://www.nzz.ch/nachrichten/startseite/article8kag6_1.445521.html> (17 January 2008)
- 8 Hilberg, *Politics of Memory*, 66.
- 9 Hilberg, *Politics of Memory*, 116.
- 10 Hilberg, *Politics of Memory*, 107-109. Quadrangle was bought by *The New York Times* in 1969.
- 11 Hilberg, *Politics of Memory*, 70-71.
- 12 Hilberg, *Politics of Memory*, 83.
- 13 Hilberg, *Politics of Memory*, 85.
- 14 Hilberg, *Politics of Memory*, 102.
- 15 Hilberg, *Politics of Memory*, 47-48.
- 16 Hilberg, *Politics of Memory*, 111. Hilberg was quoting the Israeli historian Tom Segev.
- 17 Hilberg, *Politics of Memory*, 134-35.
- 18 Gustav Siebt, "Holocaust-Forscher Hilberg ist tot: 'Töten ist nicht mehr so schwer wie früher,'" *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 7 August 2007. <<http://www.sueddeutsche.de/ra4m1/kultur/artikel/159/126959/>> (12 January 2008)
- 19 Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, 3rd ed., 1296. He spoke similarly about Rwanda in an interview conducted a few months before his death: "So here we were, the whole world, there's no World War II going on, there is no excuse that we need all the aircraft we have, so we cannot bomb Auschwitz because we need them on the Western Front, and nothing is done. It's peace, it's the nineties, and nothing is done. So much for 'never again.'" Raul Hilberg, "Is There a New Anti-Semitism? A Conversation with Raul Hilberg," *Logosonline* 6: 1-2 (Winter/Spring 2007). <http://www.logosjournal.com/issue_6.1-2/hilberg.htm> (15 January 2008)
- 20 Raul Hilberg, "Is There a New Anti-Semitism? A Conversation with Raul Hilberg," *Logosonline* 6: 1-2 (Winter/Spring 2007). <http://www.logosjournal.com/issue_6.1-2/hilberg.htm> (15 January 2008)
- 21 Yehuda Bauer, "A human being without fault," *Ha'aretz*, 2 October 2007. <<http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/907398.html>> (12 January 2008)