

Sine Ira et Studio? — Personal Engagement, Historical Distance and the Study of the Holocaust

Veranstalter: Richard Koebner Minerva Center, Hebrew University, Jerusalem; German Historical Institute, Warsaw

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Conceptualized and organized by NOAH BENNINGA (Jerusalem) and KATRIN STOLL (Warsaw), the conference „Sine Ira et Studio? – Personal Engagement, Historical Distance and the Study of the Holocaust“ was a joint project between the Richard Koebner Minerva Center of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and the German Historical Institute in Warsaw. It dealt with the dichotomy between scholarly work and reflective, personal memory and those conflicts in Holocaust research, which OTTO DOV KULKA (Jerusalem) describes in his „Landscapes of the Metropolis of Death“ as „immanent tensions: a confrontation between images of memory and the representation of historical research.“¹ Therefore, the guiding question of the conference was defined by the question-mark behind Tacitus' famous latin dictum, which he had set for his own historiographical work: „Sine Ira et Studio?“ – „Without Anger and Zealousness?“ By means of applying and simultaneously questioning this principle in the context of Holocaust research, Benninga and Stoll invited some of the finest Holocaust scholars in order to interrogate into the possibilities of studying the Holocaust in a detached way. By pointing to the marginalization of personal narratives in recent scholarly debates, the ethicality of objectivity standards was analyzed in this context, with the purpose of finding new ways to lend actuality and urgency to the study of the Holocaust; and with the didactic aim to turn historical knowledge into conscious and conscientious awareness, beyond the confined realm of academic discourse and its „rigorous ‘pure scientific’ writing [...] fraught with tremendous ‘meta-dimensional’ baggage and tensions“², as Kulka put it.

After greetings by REUVEN AMITAI (Jerusalem), the Dean of the Faculty of Humanities at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, MOSHE ZIMMERMANN (Jerusalem) addressed the question: „What Is the Holocaust?“. By defining the Holocaust as an object of research that is not only historical, but whose trends can be distinguished up to the present and into the future, he described the ambivalent social functions of Holocaust memory in Germany and Israel today. As part of German Staatsraison, according to Zimmermann, the Holocaust is used to justify a post-Nazi-German obligation to support Israel, while it is also used to ward off criticism against Germany, with German society still perceiving it as ‘moral-whip’ – a „Moralkeule“ (Martin Walser). In Israel, similarly, the Holocaust became an instrument for creating the “New Israeli” and was used as an ultimate excuse for any kind of politics and against any kind of criticism.

The keynote-lecture was held by KARYN BALL (Edmonton) on the controversy between the German historian Martin Broszat and the Jewish historian Saul Friedländer, entitled “German ‘History’ versus Jewish ‘Memory’?” Ball problematized Broszat’s claim to objectivity and his Pathos of Soberness („heilige Nüchternheit“) in observing its denigrating of the victims’ memories. By distinguishing two kinds of affective tendencies, Ball tried to explain the psychosocial dynamics that had led to the suppression of empathy in German society before and during the Holocaust.

The first panel took stock of Personal Involvement and Contemporary Historical Interpretations of the Holocaust. In asking „What Was the Holocaust?“, DAN MICHELMAN (Jerusalem) gave a short survey over the complicated historical conceptualizations of the Holocaust and the development of its different terminologies such as Endlösung, Shoah and Holocaust. NATALIA ALEKSIUN (Warsaw/New York) gave an overview of the use of Jewish sources in Polish Holocaust research and, while relating her own personal experiences, described a taboo-breaking in re-

¹ Otto Dov Kulka, *Landscapes of the Metropolis of Death*. London 2013. p. xi.

² Kulka, *Landscapes*, p. 82.

gard to Jewish testimonies and sources, in Polish historiography of the past two decades. KOBI KABALEK (Beer Sheva) dealt with the problem of dividing empathy between perpetrators and victim, as well as with the role of personal motivations, ethical considerations, and political orientations in the work of historians dealing with the field of „Germans Helping Jews“. ODED HEILBRONNER (Jerusalem) shared his observations on the increasing marginalization of the Holocaust in works of world history and deduced thereof an increasing popularity of nazi symbols in popular culture, which he identified in his lecture on „The Rise of National Socialism 2000.“ In his paper on „Hayden White and Judith Butler’s readings of Primo Levi, and the Epistemological Retrieval of Anacletic Love“, YASUSHI TANAKA-GUTIEZ (New Haven) vigorously attacked the commodification of memory in Holocaust research and passionately criticized its self-indulging narcissism, while radically arguing for an urgent need to create a sense of physically felt urgency in the writing on Holocaust, both in content and form.

The second panel „Between ‘I’ and ‘We’“ was concerned with studies of a Communally Experienced Past. GERSHON GREENBERG (Washington D.C.) contextualized Moshe Prager’s overlooked piece of Holocaust research „Destruction of Israel in Europe“ in his previous works and in the religiosity of the author (a Gur Hasid) that expressed itself in the religious, meta-historical, and hagiographical components of his historiography. BOAZ COHEN (Akko/ Haifa) examined Meir Dworzecki’s historical research on the Holocaust, placing special emphasis on his idiosyncratic perceptions of this task as a holy mission and a fundamental obligation for those survivors still capable of carrying out research. With regard to Dworzecki’s function as both community leader and physician, COHEN analyzed the term ‘Amidah’ for Jewish Resistance and his perception of the task of the historian as someone to explore, diagnose and heal the ‘pathology of evil’ that had emerged during the Holocaust. ELISABETH GALLAS (Vienna) dealt with the conceptualizations of Holocaust research among Jewish New York in-

tellectuals in the Early Post-War Period, such as Hannah Arendt and Salo Baron, and assessed their contribution to turning the Holocaust into an event and problem of universal significance. KLAUS KEMPTER (Heidelberg) presented Joseph Wulf’s historiographical research, the first independent research on the Holocaust in Germany, and scrutinized Wulf’s distinction between objectivity and neutrality against the background of his personal life.

„Fiction, ‘Faction’, Art: Representing a Really Experienced Past“ was the title of the third panel, which began with a content-analysis of survivor testimonies from Treblinka, a vitally neglected death camp in commemoration, as TOMAS VOJTA (Prague) pointed out. His moving and personal depiction of the camp emphasized its special nature, especially with regard to its high mortality, complete absence of female survivors, and bizarre cabaret shows, which caused laughter even among the Jewish spectators. LUCYNA ALEKSANDROWICZ-PĘDICH (Warsaw) emphasized the significance of artistic representation over Holocaust testimonies and historical accuracy, by comparing an evocation of classmates in two plays by Tadeusz Kantor and Tadeusz Słobodzianek and a biographical evocation of classmates by her husband (Wojciech Pędich) from small towns in Poland before and during the Second World War. JAN KWIATKOWSKI (Poznań) shared reflections on his „cognitive shock“ upon the discovery of his primary school’s past as a forced labor-camp (Steineck) and its role in the shaping of his own personal engagement as a Holocaust scholar. Subsequently, he analyzed and contextualized a narrative record of this camp by Benjamin Jacobs, arguing that personal engagement and historical distance may be complimentary to each other, if, however, operated on different levels of a study.

The fourth panel dealt with „Subject, Object and Historical Distance in Light of the Holocaust“ and was chaired by OTTO DOV KULKA (Jerusalem), whose presence and introductory note highlighted the interrelationship between personal life and academic work, against the backdrop of his recently published „Landscapes of the Metropolis of

Death.” MANUELA CONSONNI (Jerusalem) appropriately addressed the transformations in the perception and conception of death, per se, after the Holocaust and dwelt upon the problems of aestheticization and suitable modes of representation. ALAN ROSEN (Jerusalem) challenged ulterior motives attributed by scholars to David Boder’s study of displaced persons in 1946, arguing against weak psychological explanations and in favor of interpretations, which show respect for the special nature of the subject – here, by shifting attention away from an ego-centered perspective to a time-centered perspective (Jewish calendar) on the subject. TOM LAWSON (Winchester) pointed to many parallels in ideological, economical, and ethical (albeit not causal) relationships between British colonial genocides and the Holocaust, thereby suggesting a mutual benefit for both historical studies in a larger, universal and anthropological context. He also elaborated on the reasons which motivated him to move from Holocaust studies to British colonial genocide studies.

In panel five „The Event and its Emplotment”, HAYDEN WHITE (Santa Cruz) shared reflections on his comparative study of Primo Levi’s „If This Is a Man” and Otto Dov Kulka’s „Landscapes of the Metropolis of Death.” He argued against an inherent and fundamental dichotomy between ‘literature’ and ‘history’ and ‘fiction’ and ‘fact’, as well as against the claim that literature necessarily leads to a kind of aestheticization, which would automatically diminish the value of historical testimonies of the Holocaust. According to White, these misconceptions result – among other things – from a priority given to conceptual over figurative language and content over form, thereby entailing a one-sided interpretation that have become traits of a doubtful etiquette and convention in the representatives of Holocaust research. White argued for a need to move „into a new dimension.” PAWEŁ WOLSKI (Szczecin) further emphasized the literary aspects in Holocaust research and suggested an autobiographical reading of any literary work. To his mind, emphasis on bodily involvement distinguishes Holocaust literature and Holocaust literature studies from other

literature and literature studies. In elaborating on the locus of body, Wolski defined the limits of narrative possibilities at the margins of both the physical body and the canonical corpus of literature. AMOS GOLDBERG (Jerusalem) pointed to an imminent urgency for Israeli Holocaust studies in his paper on „The Ethics of Testimony”. With terms chosen for their strong political reverberations, Goldberg advocated a more inclusive consideration of testimonies, in order to integrate Palestinian voices in an „emphatic unsettlement”, however, without drawing a causal and narrative connection between the Holocaust and the Naqba, but instead by expanding the categories of space and discourse.

In the sixth and last panel, KATRIN STOLL (Warsaw) and NOAH BENNINGA (Jerusalem) probed with inquisitive questions into a „new dimension” of Holocaust research that Hayden White had mentioned. Stoll subjected Friedländer and the notions of history and historical distance to her criticism, claiming that history can also be written in the immediacy of an event and that, therefore, the subjective truth of witnesses and observer-participants must be accepted as authentic historiographical sources. Benninga reevaluated The Paradox of Historical Distance: Between Disavowal and Conscious-Engagement on the basis of an analytical division between causal and representational relationships, arguing for a more complementary and integral awareness with regard to both. These inquiries could also serve as a starting point for any future conference.

All presentations were met with thought-provoking questions on behalf of the audience that discussed the presented topics in lively debates and with often strong personal, as well as emotional commitment. Although the conference had originated in historical research, it repeatedly crossed the borders towards literary disciplines. Any future conference originating in literary research would be encouraged to develop towards historical disciplines as well. This conference had exemplified that any treatment of the research topic Holocaust needs not to be confined to disciplinary limitations and that an understanding of the phenomena and of its context can only benefit from comparisons with other events in

world-history. Many penetrating and unsettling questions were raised and the degrees of discussion and encouraging responses by members of the audience and the participants proved once more the relevance of the subject dealt with, today. A remarkable intensity of personal involvement and reflexivity lent authenticity to each subject presented and discussed. Perplexities increased during the conference, which highlighted the limits both of existing terminology and rational awareness. An especially stringent need for furthering the tools of analysis is to be satisfied by turning towards therapeutical psychology, gender research and towards the body as a performative and performed text; also both in the fictional and scientific metaphorical corpi of both kinds of literature, whose academic disciplines depend upon the development of a more intensive inter-disciplinary cooperation. Any further conference is well advised to commence where this one had found its ruptured closure: by trying to approach this subject also *via negativa*, i.e. in regard to what the Holocaust was and is – not. Thus, in remarking upon Adorno, any *Schlußstrich* can only underline the relevance of Holocaust studies for present research and society.

Conference Overview:

Opening:

Reuven Amitai (Dean, Faculty of Humanities): Greetings
Noah Benninga (Jerusalem) / Katrin Scholl (Warsaw): Introduction

Moshe Zimmermann (Jerusalem): What Is the Holocaust?

Keynote Speech: Karyn Ball (Edmonton): German „History“ versus Jewish „Memory“? On Martin Broszat's „Science“ and Saul Friedländer's „Trauma“

Discussion: Chair: Alexandra Klei (Berlin)

Section I: Contemporary Historical Interpretations of the Holocaust and Personal Involvement: Where are we now?

Chair: Katrin Stoll (Warsaw)

Dan Michman (Jerusalem): What Was the Holocaust?

Natalia Aleksion (New York): Historical Ob-

jectivism and Jewish Testimonies – Polish Historiography since „Neighbors“

Kobbi Kabalek (Beer-Sheva): Critical Distance and Emotional Involvement in the Study of Germans Helping Jews

Oded Heilbrunner (Jerusalem): „Just when you thought we were safe“: The Rise of National Socialism 2000

Yasushi Tanaka-Gutiez (New Haven): Beyond Post-Modernism? Hayden White and Judith Butler's readings of Primo Levi, and the Epistemological Retrieval of Analytic Love

Section II: Between „I“ and „We“: Studying a Communally Experienced Past

Chair: Laura Jockusch (Jerusalem)

Gershon Greenberg (Washington D.C.): The Impact of Religion on the Work of Moshe Prager, Early Historian of the Holocaust

Boaz Cohen (Akko/Haifa): Meir (Mark) Dworzecki: Historical Research as the Survivor's Obligation

Elisabeth Gallas (Vienna): Conceptualizing Holocaust Research. Jewish New York Intellectuals in the Early Post-War Period

Klaus Kemper (Heidelberg): „Objective, not Neutral“: Joseph Wulf's Documentary Historical Writing

Section III: Fiction, „Faction“, Art: Representing a Really Experienced Past

Chair: Annika Wienert (Bochum)

Tomas Vojta (Prague): Treblinka Survivors Testimonies. A Content Analysis

Lucyba Aleksandrowicz-Pedich (Warsaw): The Dead Class, Our Class, My Class. Remembering pre-Holocaust Polish and Jewish Shtetl-Communities

Jan Kwiatkowski (Poznań): How Does Memory Become a Memoir? The Case of Benjamin Jacobs

Section IV: Subject, Object and Historical Distance in Light of the Holocaust

Chair: Otto Dov Kulka (Jerusalem)

Manuela Consonni (Jerusalem): Exegesis and

Epistemologies in the History of the Shoah

Alan Rosen (Jerusalem): Boder and the Problem of Subjectivity

Tom Lawson (Winchester): Reading and Writing Colonial Genocide as a Holocaust Historian: A peculiarly British Perspective

Section V: The Event and its Emplotment

Chair: Noah Benninga (Jerusalem)

Hayden White (Santa Cruz): The History-Fiction Divide

Paweł Wolski (Szczecin): Together Apart. Holocaust Literary Studies vs. Other Disciplines

Amos Goldberg (Jerusalem): The Ethics of Testimony: To Expand the Space Available

Section VI: Beyond Historical Distance?

Chair: Hayden White (Santa Cruz)

Katrin Stoll (Warsaw): Transcending the Divide Between History and Memory? Historical Distance, Truth and the Issue of Wartime and Postwar Testimonies

Noah Benninga (Jerusalem): The Paradox of Historical Distance: Between Disavowal and Conscious-Engagement

Tagungsbericht *Sine Ira et Studio? — Personal Engagement, Historical Distance and the Study of the Holocaust*. 25.06.2013–27.06.2013, Jerusalem, in: H-Soz-Kult 23.08.2013.