

Bystander, Rescuer or Perpetrators? The Neutral Countries and the Shoah

Veranstalter: Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies, University of Minnesota; History Unit of the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs of Switzerland; Mémorial de la Shoah, Paris; Topography of Terror Foundation, Berlin; Living History Forum, Stockholm; Memoshoa/Association for the Education and Remembrance of the Holocaust, Lisbon; Tarih Vakfı/History Foundation, Istanbul

Datum, Ort: 24.11.2014–26.11.2014, Madrid

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In his preface to his autobiographical book, „The Holocaust is over, We must Rise from Its Ashes“, Avraham Burg, former speaker of the Knesset, writes that the first reactions to his book ranged from loving and accepting to ‘angry, assailing and aggressive’. One reaction from an elderly Israeli man was especially telling, he recounts:

„Burg, I am very angry with you!“ [the elderly Israeli man tells him] „Why?“ I asked. „Because of what you wrote.“ „And what did I write?“ „You wrote against the Holocaust!“ „And you?“ I wondered aloud, „Would you write in support of the Holocaust?“ Our exchange ended in silence.¹

This short anecdote tells it all. It speaks about memory, trauma, and history; it talks of historical investigation, of inter-generational conflicts and coming to terms with the past. The exchange between the elderly gentleman and Avraham Burg ended in silence. For me, as a scholar working on the concept of historical silence, this is the point when all of it made sense. Silence is not when all conversation stops. It is when we cannot find the right vocabulary or words to describe what we wanted to say; it is when we have too many or too few stories to make sense of it all; it is when we start remembering.

Among all the questions coming to us from the past, many will never be answered. Many stories of victimhood will never be told; many rescuers never mentioned, many perpetrators never called to justice.

At the international colloquium „Bystander, Rescuer or Perpetrators? The Neutral Countries and the Shoah“, a major attempt was made to tell these forgotten stories and to compare the stories we found; to identify the rescuers, bystanders and perpetrators; to call into question public debates and historical myths; and finally to present and find ways to overcome the challenges of Holocaust remembrance and education. As its title suggests, this was done with a focus on the neutral countries – among them Turkey, Sweden, Portugal, Spain, Switzerland and Argentina.

In the three-day colloquium, hosted by Centro Sefardo more than 30 scholars and experts from (or writing on) these countries came together and discussed these issues in a comparative framework. The common consensus was – as Chaim Weitzman already predicted at the Evian Conference in 1938 – that the neutral countries could be divided into two groups: those that expelled their refugees and those that refused to let them in. This, so SUSANNE HEIM (München) argued in her keynote lecture, brought about „a radical change in the international order“ in terms of immigration laws and minority protection. By excluding the Jews from the German *Volksgemeinschaft*, Nazi Germany not only forced the other states to accept its redefinition of citizenship defining Jews as inferior and having fewer rights, but also to eventually adopt authoritarian policies concerning the incoming Jewish refugees themselves.

The first three panels set the historical stage for vibrant and passionate discussions throughout the remaining time of the colloquium. These panels discussed policies towards Jewish Refugees before WWII (1933-1939) and during WWII (1939-1945) in countries such as Switzerland, Sweden, Turkey, Portugal and Spain, and reactions to the German ultimatum on the repatriation of Jews. Main pillars for these discussions were the self-perceptions of these countries (did they perceive themselves as transit countries or host countries?), the legal frameworks of existing or later-implemented immigration laws (were immigration laws newly implemented

¹ Avraham Burg, *The Holocaust Is Over; We Must Rise From Its Ashes*, New York 2008, xiii.

in these countries upon the arrival of the Jewish refugees? How did existing laws change over time?), and the survival chances of incoming Jewish refugees (in terms of employment and social acceptance into existing communities).

From the presentation of SALOMÉ LIENERT (Basel) and RUTH FIVAZ-SILBERMANN (Geneva) we learned, for example, that Switzerland was following a strict *Abwehrpolitik* towards its Jewish refugees in the 1930s that refugees were not allowed to work or travel within Switzerland and that local Jewish communities were asked to sustain the arriving Jews. In Sweden, on the other hand, Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany were welcomed as long as they could prove that they had Swedish relatives, but it was still very difficult for them to obtain work permits, particularly because local labour associations feared competition. Nevertheless, so PONTUS RUDBERG (Upsalla) pointed out, local Jewish initiatives were successful in implementing an agricultural and educational program for Jewish youth, and lobbied for more flexible immigration laws in Sweden and the rest of Europe.

Turkey, often portrayed as a safe haven for Jewish refugees, followed a somewhat contradictory policy towards its Jewish refugees. While Jewish professors and experts were invited and immediately furnished with five-year contracts to work at Turkey's new secular universities or to help with Turkey's first economic plan, CORRY GUTTSTADT (Jerusalem) argued, Turkish Jews in Europe were writing appeals to be repatriated to Turkey (and thus be saved from a future in Nazi concentration camps) to little or no avail.

Spain and Portugal, like Turkey, are remembered in their respective national collective memories as rescuer countries. Undoubtedly, Spain and Portugal played an important role in transiting European Jews; careful historical analysis, however, reveals that there is another, much darker, side to the story. In striking parallel to Turkey, Spain and Portugal were reluctant to save their „own“ national Jews. BERND ROTHER (Berlin) informed us that Spain, for example, repatriated (and thus saved) only 800 out of 3,400 Jews. Portugal, because of its economic, finan-

cial and commercial interdependence (which continued until 1944) was also a very reluctant saviour, as IRENE PIMENTEL (Lisbon) pointed out. We know of only 137 Jews that were living in France at the time of the ultimatum and arrived in Portugal safely. In Turkey, IZZET BAHAR (Pittsburgh) concurred, there was a similar reluctant attitude towards its Jews in Europe with a major difference regarding those who were, and were not, considered Turkish citizens.

The last two panels dealt with (1) the politics of rescue myths, public debates and historical investigations; and (2) the overt challenges of Holocaust remembrance and education in the neutral countries.

In the case of Sweden, so KARIN KVIIST (Upsalla), for example, the rescue myth became the master narrative about Sweden during the Holocaust. This master narrative was only challenged in the 1970s when scholars like Paul Levine, who was also present at the colloquium, started researching the topic in depth and outlined a critical historiography. ANNA MENNY (Hamburg), argued that this gap between collective memory and historiography is also evident in Portugal, where historiography is still lagging behind in rectifying certain myths in the public perception of Salazar, Portugal and the Holocaust.

Sometimes only the active engagement of historians or scholars working on such topics through, for example, the practice of public history, can close the aforementioned gulf between collective memory and historical scholarship. One such example is UKI GOÑI's (Buenos Aires) work in Argentina. His publication of a secret directive of 1938 prohibiting Argentine diplomats from issuing visas to Jews fleeing from Nazi Germany was followed by the first official Argentine government admission of its anti-Semitic immigration policies during and after WWII.

What was missing in this panel was a wider conceptual framework, which could easily have been borrowed from memory studies. In memory studies, conflicting historical narratives or competing memories are mostly dealt with in the field of memory politics. But what lies at the heart of these memory politics? For Maurice Halbwachs, for example, the link between social and collective memory

is very problematic and often entails a negotiation between individual and collective memory practices and politics – sadly, so he argues, this is a battle from which the individual seldom emerges victorious.² It is then exactly this uncomfortable gulf between the individual and the collective, for Paul Ricoeur, that is so apparent in historical schoolbooks and education – and often climaxes in textbook controversies.³ The apparent cues from just a short glance into the field of memory studies are: collective memory is very much tied and connected to national identity and therefore difficult to challenge; history education is where these battles are mostly fought out; and, finally, archives and (and more often nationalist) historiographical traditions are very much the informants of a nation's perception of the past as disseminated by school books. For memory studies, then, history education in schools becomes not only the carrier of certain historical truths but also the possible vehicle for change.

This was also the consensus found in the last panel, which dealt with the challenges of Holocaust education in the neutral countries. In Spain as in Switzerland the long-lasting myths of rescuer countries, as ANNA MENNY (Hamburg) and MONIQUE ECKMANN (Geneva) respectively suggested, have to be dealt with by educators who also have to address the changing perceptions of the past. While this is a difficult task for the educators, and often only possible, as seen from the perspective of Spain, through the creation of non-formal educational initiatives, it is also a rewarding path to take for the sake of a new teaching of history, MARTA SIMÓ (Barcelona) argued. The „ambiguity of the perception of the past“, these „grey zones“, in Monique Eckmann's words, are important learning touchstones for students on their path towards being active and critically-minded citizens of their own countries and of the world. In the case of Turkey, we learned – from the presentation of PINAR DOST-NIYEGO (Istanbul) – that while the Holocaust is taught in schools and non-formal educational programmes, it is done without Turkey „facing its own past“ of discriminating against its own Jews and other minorities, and it is very much also connected to the

state's attitude towards Israel and Zionism.

The colloquium ended with a final round-table discussion, where experts and representatives of individual countries reflected on the state of the art in their countries and how new questions and points were raised through comparison with the other neutral countries. For a successful comparison among the very different countries, BERND ROTHER (Berlin) proposed a series of „state of“ questions. Questions could include: (1) the influence of religion; (2) national sovereignty; (3) perceptions of the probable outcome of the war and shifts in these perceptions; and (4) economic interdependence and strategic considerations.

Except for the above-mentioned keynote lecture by SUSANNE HEIM (München) and the ever-so provocative YEHUDA BAUER (Jerusalem), who urged the colloquium's participants to „cut through the verbage“ and simplify discussions by using and challenging already existing concepts rather than finding new terms and concepts, the colloquium brought no new insights or groundbreaking theories to the table of genocide studies. However, for a first in a planned series of colloquia, this was more than understandable and maybe also for the best. The real merit of the colloquium was bringing together scholars at different stages of their careers, and from previously neglected countries, like Turkey, to engage in an interdisciplinary comparative transnational framework.

I have rarely been to a conference, or colloquium, where the audience was more engaged and involved in the discussions and academic debates than in Madrid. This speaks for the clarity and engaging manner in which the presentations were held and also for the importance and relevance of the topics presented. Many questions and discussions naturally revolved around anti-Semitic policies during the Holocaust and how they translated into our present; and remain there, sometimes hidden, sometimes not so hidden, as the case of Turkey very recently has shown and BÜLENT BILMEZ (Istanbul) reminded us. Still, 'the ivory tower' of academia – the drift be-

² Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, Chicago 1992.

³ Paul Ricoeur, „Memory, History and Forgetting,“ in: *Representations*, no 26 (1989): 7-24.

tween scholarship and reality – was too visible to ignore on another topic. It is hard to understand how when talking about the Jewish refugee crisis none of the speakers drew a parallel with what is happening in our world today.

Immortalized as a rupture in the continuum of not only Jewish but also world history and exalted to exemplary singularity, Holocaust memory, today more than ever, serves as a backdrop to and lesson for all aspects of life. This, however, has not made writing and teaching about the Holocaust any easier; many would say it has made it even harder. A burning question for today is whether teaching and writing about the Holocaust really makes the world a better place. ‘Never again’ is being mocked on a daily basis, and I believe that we need to be acutely aware of this – especially as educators.

Conference Overview:

Welcome and Opening

Andrew Burns (UK Envoy for Post-Holocaust Issues, International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, IHRA)

Keynote lecture

Susanne Heim (Institut für Zeitgeschichte, München), The Questions of the Jewish Refugees

Panel 1: Policies towards Jewish Refugees before the War (1933–1939)

Introduction and chair: Jacobo Israel, writer and author

Avraham Milgram (Yad Vashem, Jerusalem), Portugal

Salomé Lienert (University of Basel), Switzerland

Pontus Rudberg (Hugo Valentin Centre, Uppsala University), Sweden

Corry Guttstadt (Yad Vashem, Jerusalem), Turkey

Panel 2: Policies towards Jewish Refugees during the War (1939–1945)

Introduction and chair: Haim Avni (Hebrew University, Jerusalem)

Ruth Fivaz-Silbermann (Université de Genève), Switzerland

Claudia Ninhos (Universidade Nova de Lisboa), Portugal

Josep Calvet (Universidad de Lleida), Spain

Panel 3: Reactions to the German Ultimatum on the Repatriation of Jews

Chair: Thomas Lutz (Topographie of Terror Foundation, Berlin)

Introduction:

Corry Guttstadt (Yad Vashem, Jerusalem), Origins of the German Ultimatum in 1942–1943 to Repatriate Jews with Neutral Citizenship

Irene Pimentel (Universidade Nova de Lisboa), Portugal

Izzet Bahar (University of Pittsburgh), Turkey

Bernd Rother (Willy Brandt Foundation), Spain

Rebecca Erbelding (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington), The approach of the War Refugee Board to the neutral countries regarding the saving of Hungarian Jews

Chair: Esther Mucznik (Mémoshóá, Lisbon)

Panel 4: Rescue Myth, Public Debates, Historical Investigations

Chair: Eva Fried (Living History Forum, Sweden)

Introduction:

Alejandro Baer (Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies, University of Minnesota), The Politics of Rescue Myths. Lessons from Spain.

Esra Özyürek (Institute for Turkish Studies, London School of Economics), Turkey

Karin Kvist (Hugo Valentin Centre, Uppsala University), Sweden

Anna Menny (Institut für die Geschichte der Deutschen Juden, Hamburg), Spain

Uki Goñi (Buenos Aires), Argentine

Closing Remarks:

François Wisard (History Unit, Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, Switzerland), The Swiss „Independent Commission of Experts“ (1996–2002)

Public evening lecture

Yehuda Bauer (International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance), Was Rescue a Realistic Possibility During the Holocaust?

Panel 5: The Challenges of Holocaust Remembrance and Education in Neutral Countries

Chair: François Wisard (History Unit, Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, Switzerland)

Anna Menny (Institut für die Geschichte der Deutschen Juden, Hamburg)

Monique Eckmann (University of Applied Sciences, Geneva)

Pınar Dost-Niyego (Atlantic Council Turkey Office)

Marta Simó (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona)

Final Round Table Discussion: Current Debate and Research Perspectives on Neutral Countries during the Holocaust

Chair: Bülent Bilmez / Tarih Vakfı (History Foundation, Istanbul) / Bernd Rother (Willy Brandt Foundation)

Paul Levine (Hugo Valentin Centre, Uppsala University), Discussion on further research desiderata and possible projects with representatives of the participating organizations.

Closing remarks: Yehuda Bauer (International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance)

Tagungsbericht *Bystander, Rescuer or Perpetrators? The Neutral Countries and the Shoah*. 24.11.2014–26.11.2014, Madrid, in: H-Soz-Kult 12.02.2015.