

About Truth, about Power. Eastern Europe Facing the Shoah - a History of Engagement, 1941-2016

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Bericht von: Łukasz Mieszkowski, Warschau
/ Mainz

In late March 1944, in Markowa, a large, wealthy village in the Polish part of Subcarpathia, German gendarmes killed 16 people – Jews and Poles hiding them in their home, including six children – in a chaotic night-time execution. The reason of the murder, its brutality, death toll and especially the age of some of the victims caused this originally local incident to gain national significance and become a symbol of the sacrifices Poles made saving Jews from the Holocaust.

The tragic case of the Ulma family was quoted by JOACHIM VON PUTTKAMER (Jena) at the opening of the 7th annual conference of the Imre Kertész Kolleg Jena. This was due to the fact that the fate of the people of Markowa, including the victims both Polish and Jewish, the onlookers and the murderers, as well as the history of their commemoration, comprises the motives which became the main theme of the conference, conceptualized by JOCHEN BÖHLER (Jena) and RAPHAEL UTZ (Jena).

Von Puttkamer listed several of those motives, starting with the most obvious ones: the undisputable responsibility of the perpetrators, collaboration and denunciation by the onlookers, and the humanity of those ending up as the victims as well as the people helping them. He also pointed at the lack of prosecution at the time and the lack of knowledge today, as well as the connection between them, as an important aspect of the post-war history of the Holocaust.

However, according to von Puttkamer, what raises the most doubts and gives rise to some uneasiness within the thematic concept of the conference is the very manner of commemoration of the tragedy. The doubts stem from the fact that the narrative of the new museum in Markowa and its exhibition focuses exclusively on the Poles, both the heroes and the victims. Their Jewish neighbours have

been completely forgotten, similarly to the Ukrainian inhabitants of those areas, who are mentioned solely as collaborators. This national prominence clearly aims to counter the narrative of Jedwabne, where Polish inhabitants murdered their Jewish neighbors in the summer of 1941. There clearly is a highly intricate nexus between the events and the commemoration, and this nexus, according to Puttkamer, was the overarching question of the conference.

The conference opened with a key note lecture by SYBILLE STEINBACHER (Frankfurt am Main). In a paper titled „The Shoah, Eastern Europe and the West: History and Impact“, she presented how, in the second half of the 20th century, European countries kept apart by the Iron Curtain had developed their own, often incomplete and sometimes contradictory narratives of the Holocaust and used them as ideological tools in the Cold War. During the ensuing discussion, DARIUSZ STOLA (Warsaw) pointed at a new front in the war of memories which had emerged in former people's democracies, where remembrance of the Holocaust is treated as unneeded competition to commemorating the victims of communist crimes, which is much more attractive from the point of view of current, particularistic politics of memory. Summing up the discussion, von Puttkamer noted that the Cold War continues to impact the perception of the Holocaust, while Böhler pointed at the need to study this event from a supranational perspective.

The ambiguous approaches of leaders, state officials and ordinary citizens to the Holocaust unfolding before their eyes and their involvement in it, both determined by multiple factors, were demonstrated by example of Romania by DIANA DUMITRU (Chisinau/Jena), and it were mainly the contents of her paper that dominated the discussion summing up the first panel titled „Realities“. Based on six events which had taken place in different parts of Romania, Dumitru depicted the development and escalation of violence, which had always involved four sides - Jews as the victims, Romanians and Germans as the perpetrators, and Soviets acting as a specific catalyst despite their physical absence.

The discussion summing up the panel was opened by WŁODZIMIERZ BORODZIEJ (Warsaw), who posed two fundamental, dramatic questions: why no such atrocities had occurred in the surprisingly similar circumstances of World War I, and what had happened to Central European societies over the course of one generation that had made them capable of ultimate cruelty? Suggesting an answer, he cited the argument made by Timothy Snyder in his book *Black Earth* according to which the scale and degree of cruelty of the Holocaust in Central Europe had depended on the extent of functioning (or not functioning) of the state and its structures.

Both Dumitru and TATJANA TÖNSMEYER (Wuppertal) questioned the existence of the state as the main factor preventing communities from turning on their Jewish neighbours. Tönsmeier pointed at the role of intermediary structures – police, gendarmerie and volunteer organisations such as fire brigades and self-defence militias, whose stance had mattered more than a broadly defined „statehood“. According to Dumitru, Snyder's concept places the region's nations beyond any responsibility, both for their own actions and their policy towards Germany and the Soviet Union, positioning them as merely consumers of ideas instead of originators of those ideas, which had been the actual case. The explosive concoction that blew up in the summer and autumn of 1941 had formed much earlier, in pre-war times, from blending economic tensions with the anti-Semitic propaganda accompanying the formation of nation states.

Other participants in the discussion backed and developed this view. Both Stola and von Puttkamer suggested that the mass killings which had begun in the summer of 1941 should be considered the climactic, although not final stage of a process crystalizing the final form of criminal occupation regimes. The encouragement to radicalise persecution may have come from the top, from German authority officials and their local collaborators, but to a rather significant extent it also originated at the bottom, among city dwellers and village folk sensing this consent and encouragement. Both agreed that the key factor had been the so-called double occupation, first Soviet and

later German, and the related incredible rise of violence targeting not merely Jews. In this way, they at least partly accommodated the theses of Snyder.

The next panel, titled „Reactions“, was opened by CHRISTOPH DIECKMANN (Berne). In the first words of his passionately delivered presentation titled „Jewish–non-Jewish Relations and the Shoah“, he stressed that one of the most shocking reactions to the outbreak of genocide had been its escalation. Dieckmann backed his argument with figures: while in June 1941 the death toll of mass killings approximated 200,000, a year later it exceeded 3 million and in May 1945 it reached 9 million. In view of the fact that nearly one third of the victims had been Soviet POWs, Dieckmann posed the question how studies of the genocidal policies of Germany could combine the Holocaust with the victimhood of other ethnic groups. Consequently, he discussed the situation of Germans and other European nations, and their approach to the crime they had initiated, participated in and witnessed, addressing its dynamics and constant evolution resulting from a number of complicated, intertwining factors.

In turn, ANDREA LÖW (Munich) focused on the perspective of the victims in an attempt to establish to what extent the inhabitants of the ghettos of occupied Europe had come to realise the scale of danger they were in, when they had grasped the scope of the Shoah and how they had tried to cope with this new, horrifying situation. Both the speaker and the debaters commenting on her presentation emphasised the total irreconcilability of the undertaken defensive measures and strategies with the scale of the unfolding phenomenon. This was manifested also in the helplessness of language used by the victims, who referred to the first mass executions by firing squad of entire communities as 'pogroms' – a term dating back to the 19th century. The most straightforward explanation was offered by LUTZ NIETHAMMER (Jena): the Holocaust victims had not been a target of terror understood – also by contemporary researchers of this phenomenon – as a tool of governance, but of a surgical operation aimed at physical elimination of an entire demographic group. If this difference is difficult to grasp for 21st

century scientists, how could it have been grasped by the participants in those events?

Dieckmann moved – literally – across a map of states and societies, while Löw focused on cities and communities. By contrast, NATALIA ALEKSIUN (New York) concentrated on an individual experience which at the same time is the most obvious one, especially from the contemporary perspective, the attempt at saving oneself. The very title of her presentation, „Limited Agency. On Surviving the Holocaust in Eastern Europe“, defined the scale of the phenomenon. Effective survival strategies, especially the capacity to create a social network which enabled securing documents, livelihoods, a roof over one's head and a most primitive hideout in an unknown and often hostile environment, emerged very rarely and were very conditional and fragile. As established by researchers, some 30,000-60,000 people, i.e. 1-2% of Poland's pre-war Jewish community, survived the war hiding among the local population during occupation, and the story of each of them is an intimate tale of profound dependencies and powerlessness. Aleksion thus expanded the list of the aforementioned proposals made by other participants in the conference by calling for inclusion of elements of gender studies, and even stories of emotions and dreams, in studies of the Holocaust.

The organisers of the conference arranged the panels and the sequence of presentations thematically as well as chronologically. This made the whole event not just logical and consistent, but also dynamic, which is rather uncommon for scientific conferences. The topics raised by the previous speakers in their presentations and the questions posed in the ensuing discussions were answered and expanded in the following contributions.

The practice of using genocide to pursue one's particularistic political goals addressed by Steinbacher was illustrated with the example of trials of Jasenovac concentration camp guards by SABINA FERHADBEGOVIĆ (Jena). The myth of joint fight and suffering of all nations of post-war Yugoslavia was supposed to become the foundation of a united country, with ethnic criteria applied only with regard to the victims, not the perpetrators, if at all. Consequently, the cruel ethnic cleans-

ing carried out by Croatian nationalists during the war was interpreted as an implementation of an „imperialist plan of German fascists“ and their identity disguised with terms such as „sadists“, „enemies of the people“ and above all „Ustashi.“ By the same token, the ethnicity of some victims, especially the Romani and Jews, was blurred by using general terms like „our people“.

One of the most surprising presentations of the conference was undoubtedly delivered by MIRIAM SCHULZ (New York). In her paper titled „The Life and Afterlife of the Vilna Committee“, she presented a discovery which she had come across last year in a London library: the archive of the „Committee to Collect Materials About the Destruction of Polish Jewry 1939“. The archive was put together by a group of Polish-Jewish journalists who in autumn 1939 found themselves in Lithuanian-occupied Vilnius along with over 14,000 other refugees. After arriving in the city, they started collecting and archiving information about the tragic fate suffered by Jewish communities as a consequence of the German invasion. Headed by Noyekh Prilutski, the group amassed nearly 1,000 verified accounts from different parts of Poland, which were later fortuitously saved from the ravages of the war in unknown circumstances.

As stressed by Schulz, the archive built by the Committee is yet another link in the „golden chain“ of the Khurbn-Forschung („Destruction Research“) tradition, i.e. historical documentation which constituted an important formative element of the Jewish national identity, but was first and foremost an answer to the outburst of anti-Jewish violence. The beginnings of Khurbn-Forschung can be dated back to pre-World War I times, with the Vilna Committee archive serving as an introduction to the chapter written during the Holocaust. It was not an accident that Vilna Committee member Yitzhak Gitterman later joined the Oneg Shabbat group and co-built the Underground Archive of the Warsaw Ghetto. At the same time, as pointed out by Dieckmann during the discussion, Prilutski, who had already been collecting information about pogroms in Ukraine during the Russian civil war in the 1920s, was aware of the unprecedented scale of hatred and violence un-

leashed by the Germans in 1939, which substantially complements the conclusions put forward by Löw.

Unlike Schulz, who shed light on the manner of operation and thinking of Jewish intellectuals on the eve of the unfolding catastrophe, Karolina Szymaniak (Warsaw/Wrocław) presented the post-war views of one such intellectual. In her paper titled „The Survey(s) of Jewish Imagery“, Szymaniak focused on Rachel Auerbach, a journalist and writer with a degree in history and psychology who as one of the three surviving members of Oneg Shabbat. Auerbach faced the challenge of representing all those who had died and passing on their experience and feelings in the best and most distinct manner.

Realising the immense difficulty, or even impossibility to express the voice of the Jewish Catastrophe in a post-war reality of almost total annihilation of its natural conveyors – the intellectuals – and of muteness of the bereft survivors, Auerbach advocated using a medium. A Polish artist fitted this role best, she believed. The task was to express in one's native language what could no longer or not yet be expressed in Yiddish. Polish artists were particularly well suited for this task as they shared the suffering endured from German perpetrators with those whom they were supposed to represent. However, for Auerbach the substance of the experience of the victim was no more important than its form. She believed that the best tool for making the Jewish voice heard and creating an image of the Holocaust that would mere rational cognition was art.

The problem of representation was also raised by RAPHAEL UTZ (Jena) in his overview of the strategy of commemoration of one of the mass extermination sites in Eastern Poland. In a paper titled „Sobibór 1950-1980: Between Liability and Opportunity“, he presented how a Polish medium of representation functioned in practice, or rather did not function at all, at least in the years immediately following the Holocaust. The post-war history of the Sobibór forest and the „investments“ conducted there encompasses all the issues discussed at the conference. In the early 1950s, the area was still a crime scene. Upon inspecting it, political representatives

of Polish Jews reported that it was extremely neglected and covered with human remains, with a stench of decay emanating from mass graves dug open by treasure hunters. They appealed for securing the site, at least in a provisional manner. As foreseen by Auerbach, their voice remained unheard – the community they wanted to commemorate no longer existed. It was only 15 years later that the Polish government decided to build a commemoration site. However, this was a political decision driven by the debate in West-Germany about when the time would come to stop prosecuting Holocaust crimes. The cemetery and the monument erected in 1965 were purely symbolic, and as such, they did not secure the remains of the people exterminated in the Sobibór camp. Instead of commemorating the victims they served as a tool of politics of memory, as proven by the inscriptions on the commemorative plaques, which blurred the Jewish identity of the victims by describing them as one group among „Soviet prisoners of war, Poles, Gypsies“, just like it was done in Jasenovac. Eventually, the survivors and families of the victims, living chiefly in the Netherlands, showed up. The „Jewish voice“ was finally heard in Sobibór and new, often spontaneous forms of commemoration started serving the community, whose central point of reference was nothing more than a clearing in the woods full of mass graves. The nexus mentioned by von Puttkamer was active at every stage of commemoration, determining the forms of commemoration through impact of the related historical events and proving that history and memory of the Holocaust has not ended and simply continues to move on from one stage to another.

The first conclusion summing up the conference was offered by Aleksion, who pointed to the significant broadening of perspectives adopted by contemporary Holocaust researchers, which was visible during the conference in the great diversity of papers. Apart from offering a historical and intellectual perspective, the new integrated, comparative and supranational monograph of the Holocaust (which Aleksion thought was necessary and awaited) should also study its legal, moral, emotional and gender aspects. This method-

ologically radical proposition started a discussion which exposed the main problem troubling the conference participants, namely the contradiction between the purpose of their work and the means used to achieve it.

This contradiction was articulated differently depending on the speaker. NORBERT FREI (Jena) expressed his concern that studies of the Holocaust have reached such a high level of complexity that they can only confuse the average reader. He appealed for returning to big, overall narrations which could interest the public and be considered attractive without giving up on the mission of educating the reader in the historiographic dimension. In turn, HOLLY CASE (Providence) remarked that this generally justifiable approach entailed the risk of flattening the message in an attempt to get it across to the audience, which she described as a „devil's bargain“. Stola also admitted that the highly advanced discussions and disputes among historians do not reach the public opinion. At the same time, however, he stressed that when sailing the high seas of public intellectual life historians should follow certain „rules of engagement“ helping them navigate between the blurred lines separating critical historiography, public education and politics of memory.

The discussion was wrapped up by Niethammer, who argued that a committed, diligent and unbiased historian who serves the truth can affect collective memory, which in turn remains a domain of those at the helm. And when dealing with a matter as sensitive and important as the Holocaust, entering the world of power is not only the historians' task – it is their duty.

Conference Overview:

Welcome & Introduction

Joachim von Puttkamer (Jena)

Key Note

Sybill Steinbacher (Frankfurt): „The Shoah, Eastern Europe and the West: History and Impact“

Panel I: Realities

Comment & Chair: Włodzimierz Borodziej (Warsaw)

Tatjana Tönsmeier (Wuppertal): „German

Occupation Regimes and the Shoah“

Joachim Tauber (Hamburg): „Ghettos, Work, and the Shoah“

Diana Dumitru (Chisinau/Jena): „Six Modes of Violence – Romanian Mass Killings of Jews“

Panel II: Reactions

Comment & Chair: Tatjana Tönsmeier (Wuppertal)

Christoph Dieckmann (Berne): „Jewish – Non-Jewish Relations and the Shoah“

Andrea Löw (Munich): „Grasping the Scope of the Shoah“

Natalia Aleksion (New York): „Limited Agency: Surviving the Shoah in Eastern Europe“

Panel III: Research

Comment & Chair: Paul Hanebrink (New Brunswick)

Miriam Schulz (New York): „The Life and Afterlife of the Vilna Committee: Origins of Ahoah Historiography and Networks of Khurbn-Forshung“

Sabina Ferhadbegović (Jena): „The Jasenovac Trials and the Shoah“

Tarik Cyril Amar (New York): „Socialist and Post-Socialist Debates on the Shoah“

Panel IV: Representations

Comment & Chair: Joachim von Puttkamer (Jena)

Karolina Szymaniak (Warsaw/Wrocław): „‘The Survey of Jewish Imagery.’ Rachel Auerbach, Survivor Testimonies, and the Problem of Representation“

Raphael Utz (Jena): „Between Liability and Opportunity – Sobibór, 1950-1980“

Iwona Guś (Jena): „‘The song will survive...’ Music and Memory of the Shoah in post-war Poland“

Panel V: Reflections

Chair: Michal Kopeček (Prague/ Jena)

Natalia Aleksion (New York), Norbert Frei (Jena), Dariusz Stola (Warsaw), Paul Hanebrink (New Brunswick)

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