

Holocaust Scholarship

Personal Trajectories and Professional Interpretations

Christopher R. Browning

Susannah Heschel

Michael R. Marrus

Milton Shain



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Holocaust Scholarship

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Christopher R. Browning

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, USA

Susannah Heschel

Dartmouth College, USA

Michael R. Marrus

University of Toronto, Canada

Milton Shain

University of Cape Town, South Africa

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Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	vii
<i>Notes on Contributors</i>	ix
Introduction	1
<i>Christopher R. Browning, Susannah Heschel, Michael R. Marrus and Milton Shain</i>	
1 Autobiography, Experience and the Writing of History	7
<i>Steven E. Aschheim</i>	
2 From Johannesburg to Warsaw: An Ideological Journey	20
<i>Antony Polonsky</i>	
3 The Personal Contexts of a Holocaust Historian: War, Politics, Trials and Professional Rivalry	48
<i>Christopher R. Browning</i>	
4 Autobiographical Reflections on Writing History, the Holocaust and Hairdressing	67
<i>David Cesarani</i>	
5 On the Holocaust and Comparative History	84
<i>Steven T. Katz</i>	
6 Historiosophy as a Response to Catastrophe: Studying Nazi Christians as a Jew	99
<i>Susannah Heschel</i>	
7 Pastors and Professors: Assessing Complicity and Unfolding Complexity	117
<i>Robert P. Ericksen</i>	
8 Protestants, Catholics, Mennonites and Jews: Identities and Institutions in Holocaust Studies	142
<i>Doris L. Bergen</i>	
9 My Wrestling with the Holocaust	157
<i>Karl A. Schleunes</i>	

10	'Lessons' of the Holocaust and the Ceaseless, Discordant Search for Meaning <i>Michael R. Marrus</i>	170
11	Apartheid and the <i>Herrenvolk</i> Idea <i>David Welsh</i>	187
12	Echoes of Nazi Antisemitism in South Africa during the 1930s and 1940s <i>Milton Shain</i>	215
	<i>Index</i>	239

Acknowledgements

Established in 1980 thanks to a gift from the Kaplan Kushlick Foundation in honour of the parents of Mendel and Robert Kaplan, the Isaac and Jessie Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies and Research is an autonomous institute at the University of Cape Town, or UCT as it is known locally and abroad. It is the only centre of its kind in Africa. Committed to the advance of Jewish studies and excellence in Jewish scholarship not only within the University but also across the African continent, and with a special interest in South African Jewry, the Centre has operated for more than two decades under the leadership of Professor Milton Shain, UCT's Isidore and Theresa Cohen Professor of Jewish Civilisation.

One of the most successful activities of the Kaplan Centre has been the visits of distinguished Holocaust specialists who have participated in Professor Shain's regular course on the destruction of European Jewry during the Second World War. Many of these visitors, and some in related fields, joined the conference from which the chapters of this book have come. Preceded by such distinguished lecturers as Sir Martin Gilbert, George Mosse and David Bankier, the visitors have included Victoria Barnett, Yehuda Bauer, David Biale, Christopher R. Browning, David Cesarani, Robert Ericksen, Susannah Heschel, Paula Hyman, Steven Katz, Zeev Mankowitz, Michael R. Marrus, Aubrey Newman, Antony Polonsky, Mark Roseman and Karl Schleunes. Others who joined the events celebrating a milestone for the Centre included Steven Aschheim, Doris Bergen and Sir Richard Evans. To students at UCT, coming from all shades of what Desmond Tutu has called the 'rainbow nation', these visits have provided a remarkable opportunity to engage – often for the first time – with scholarly work on Holocaust themes that echo some of South Africa's experience of racial ideology and oppression. For the visitors, teaching in a Holocaust course at UCT – and visiting South Africa as well – was an experience that enlarged our perspectives on our subject, as we discovered when we compared notes about our experiences.

But there was something more. Virtually all of the veterans of these visits to UCT, as we discovered in reminiscing among ourselves, spoke with great affection of how warmly we were received by Milton himself and his assistant Janine Blumberg. Each of us came to feel a special bond

with the Kaplan Centre, which proved to be a gateway, under Milton's kindly and attentive oversight, not only to his classes and his distinguished home institution, but also to his city and country. To express our appreciation for all that had so graciously been extended to us, and for the opportunity to learn so much about the South African context of the Kaplan Centre, the 'alumni' of Milton's visits and several other colleagues who work in the Holocaust and related fields prevailed upon Milton to bring us all together, both to celebrate his leadership as he retires from the directorship of the Centre and also to thank him for the lasting benefits we all felt we had enjoyed during our visits to UCT. We decided to build a conference, held in August 2012, around the theme of 'Holocaust Scholarship: Personal Trajectories and Professional Interpretations'. And we also agreed that, for both our meeting and for the book of essays that would follow, we would broaden our theme to include 'South African perspectives'. The result is the present volume. It is dedicated to Milton Shain, in honour of his inspired teaching, his scholarly work, his visionary leadership of the Kaplan Centre and perhaps most of all his friendship – blended in service of each of the other achievements.

Christopher R. Browning
Susannah Heschel
Michael R. Marrus

Notes on Contributors

Steven E. Aschheim is Emeritus Professor of History at the Hebrew University, Jerusalem, where he has taught Cultural and Intellectual History in the Department of History since 1982 and held the Vigevani Chair of European Studies. He also acted as the Director of the Franz Rosenzweig Research Centre for German Literature and Cultural History. He is the author of *Brothers and Strangers: The East European Jew in German and German-Jewish Consciousness, 1800–1923* (1982); *The Nietzsche Legacy in Germany, 1890–1990* (1992), which has been translated into German and Hebrew; *Culture and Catastrophe: German and Jewish Confrontations with National Socialism and Other Crises* (1996); *In Times of Crisis: Essays on European Culture, Germans and Jews* (2001); *Scholem, Arendt, Klemperer: Intimate Chronicles in Turbulent Times* (2001), which has also appeared in Italian; *Beyond the Border: The German-Jewish Legacy Abroad* (2007); and *At the Edges of Liberalism: Junctions of European, German and Jewish History* (2012).

Doris L. Bergen is the Chancellor Rose and Ray Wolfe Professor of Holocaust Studies in the Department of History at the University of Toronto, Canada. She is the author of *Twisted Cross: The German Christian Movement in the Third Reich* (1996), translated into Dutch, and *War and Genocide: A Concise History of the Holocaust* (2003 and 2009), available in Polish translation, and is the editor of *The Sword of the Lord: Military Chaplains from the First to the 21st Centuries* (2004) and *Lessons and Legacies VIII* (2008). A volume co-edited with Andrea Löw and Anna Hájková, *Alltag im Holocaust: Jüdisches Leben im Großdeutschen Reich 1941–45*, appeared in 2013.

Christopher R. Browning is Frank Porter Graham Professor of History Emeritus at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He has focused his research on four aspects of the Holocaust: the functioning and participation of the mid-level bureaucracy, the behaviour and motivation of the low-level perpetrators, the decision-making process and evolution of Nazi Jewish policy; and the experience and post-war testimony of Jewish slave labour. His publications include *The Final Solution*

and the German Foreign Office (1978); *Ordinary Men* (1992); *The Origins of the Final Solution* (2004); and *Remembering Survival: Inside a Nazi Slave Labor Camp* (2010).

David Cesarani is Research Professor in History at Royal Holloway, University of London and Director of the Holocaust Research Centre. He has written several books on the fate of the Jews in the Nazi period and its aftermath, including *Final Solution: The Fate of the Jews 1933–1949* (2015); *Eichmann: His Life and Crimes* (2006 US National Book Award for History); and *Justice Delayed: How Britain Became a Refuge for Nazi War Criminals* (1992). He has also written and edited books on Anglo-Jewish history and exploring the relationship between Britain, British Jews and Zionism, including *Major Farran's Hat: Murder, Scandal and Britain's War against Jewish Terrorism 1945–1947* (2008); *'The Jewish Chronicle' and Anglo-Jewry* (1994); and *The Making of Modern Anglo-Jewry* (1990). In 1998, he published the controversial biography *Arthur Koestler: The Homeless Mind*.

Robert P. Ericksen, Kurt Mayer Chair in Holocaust Studies at Pacific Lutheran University, Tacoma, WA, USA, earned his PhD at the London School of Economics. He is the author or editor of five books, including *Theologians under Hitler: Gerhard Kittel, Paul Althaus and Emanuel Hirsch* (1985), which was made into a documentary film by Vitalvisuals.com in 2005. His *Complicity in the Holocaust: Churches and Universities in Nazi Germany* appeared in February 2012. He has been a fellow of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation and the Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. He is a founding member on the board of editors of *Kirchliche Zeitgeschichte* and he serves as Chair of the Church Relations Committee of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. His next book will be *Christians in Nazi Germany*.

Susannah Heschel holds the Eli Black Professorship in Jewish Studies at Dartmouth College. Her publications include *Abraham Geiger and the Jewish Jesus*, which won a National Jewish Book Award, and *The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany*. She has also edited and co-edited several books, including *On Being a Jewish Feminist: A Reader*; *Redefining First-Century Jewish and Christian Identities: A Festschrift for E.P. Sanders*; *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity: Essays of Abraham Joshua Heschel*; and *Insider/Outsider: American Jews and Multiculturalism*. Together with Robert Ericksen, she has edited *Betrayal*:

German Churches and the Holocaust. Currently she is Guggenheim Fellow and is writing a book on the history of European Jewish scholarship on Islam from the 1830s to the 1930s. For this project, she received a Scholar's Grant in Islamic Studies from the Carnegie Foundation and was given a fellowship in 2011–12 to the Wissenschaftskolleg in Berlin.

Steven T. Katz holds the Slater Chair in Jewish and Holocaust Studies at Boston University and is the former Director of the Elie Wiesel Center for Jewish Studies. He is the Academic Advisor to the Chair of the 31 countries that belong to the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), a member and former co-chair of the Academic Advisory Committee of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, and Chair of the Holocaust Commission of the Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture. A prolific author, he has published numerous works on the Holocaust and Jewish philosophy, including *Post-Holocaust Dialogues* (1983), which won the 1984 Jewish Book Award in Jewish thought; *Historicism, the Holocaust and Zionism* (1993); and *The Holocaust in Historical Context*, Vol. 1 (1994), which was selected as the 'Outstanding Book of 1994 in the Category of Philosophy and Religion' by the American Association of Publishers. He has also edited five important books on comparative mysticism, the prize-winning Vol. 4 of *The Cambridge History of Judaism*, and he founded and continues to edit the journal *Modern Judaism*, now in its thirty-fifth year of publication. He was awarded the University of Tübingen's Lucas Prize for Holocaust Studies in 1999, honorary doctorates by Gratz College (1987) and the University of Warwick, UK (July, 2014), and a Distinguished Achievement Award for Holocaust Studies and Research by the Holocaust Education Foundation at Northwestern University, 2014.

Michael R. Marrus is Chancellor Rose and Ray Wolfe Professor Emeritus of Holocaust Studies and a Senior Fellow of Massey College at the University of Toronto. A fellow of the Royal Society of Canada and a Member of the Order of Canada, he has been a Senior Associate Member of St Antony's College, Oxford, and a visiting professor at UCLA, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and the University of Cape Town. He has written eight books on the Holocaust and related subjects. Among his works are *Vichy France and the Jews* (1981), with Robert O. Paxton; *The Holocaust in History* (1987); *The Unwanted: European Refugees in the Twentieth Century* (1985); and *Some Measure of Justice: the Holocaust Era Restitution Campaign of the 1990s* (2009). His most recent book, just being

completed, is part memoir, part historical analysis and part critique of the discourse on the 'lessons of the Holocaust'.

Antony Polonsky is Albert Abramson Professor of Holocaust Studies at Brandeis University and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and Chief Historian of the Museum of the History of Polish Jews. He is Chair of the editorial board of *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry* and author of such books as *Politics in Independent Poland* (1972); *The Little Dictators* (1975); and *The Great Powers and the Polish Question* (1976). His most recent work is *The Jews in Poland and Russia* (3 vols). He has been awarded the Officer's Cross of the Order of Polonia Restituta, the Officer's Cross of the Order of Independent Lithuania, the Kulczycki Prize for the best work in 2011 in the field of Polish Studies and the Pro Historia Polonorum Prize awarded by the Polish Historical Association for the best book on the history of Poland published in a foreign language between 2007 and 2011.

Karl A. Schleunes, Professor Emeritus from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, began his teaching career in 1965 at the University of Illinois at Chicago as a German historian. His first book, *The Twisted Road to Auschwitz*, was published in 1970. At the time, he knew neither that he was a 'Holocaust historian', nor that he was a 'functionalist'. Out of that innocent beginning, he also came to be a teacher of the Holocaust, teaching a course on that subject for 21 years until his retirement in 2010.

Milton Shain is Isidore and Theresa Cohen Professor of Jewish Civilisation in the Department of Historical Studies at the University of Cape Town, where he is also Director of the Isaac and Jessie Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies and Research. He has written and edited several books on South African Jewish history, South African politics and the history of antisemitism. Among them are *The Roots of Antisemitism in South Africa* (1994) and *The Jews in South Africa. An Illustrated History*, co-authored with Richard Mendelsohn. His most recent book, *Zakor v'Makor: Place and Displacement in Jewish History and Memory*, co-edited with David Cesarani and Tony Kushner, was runner-up in the 'Anthology and Collections' category of the National Jewish Book Award in the US for 2009. In 2014 he was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of South Africa.

David Welsh was born in Cape Town and studied at the Universities of Cape Town and Oxford. He joined the faculty of the University of

Cape Town in 1963 and retired in 1997 as Professor of Southern African Studies in the Political Studies Department. He is currently Professor Extraordinaire in the Department of Political Science at Stellenbosch University. He has published extensively: his books include *The Roots of Segregation* (1971); *South Africa's Options* (with F. van Zyl Slabbert) (1979); *The Rise and Fall of Apartheid* (2009); and *Ending Apartheid* (with J.E. Spence) (2010). His current research is for a book entitled *Afrikaner Politics in the 20th Century*. He has also written over 100 journal articles, chapters and papers, and many newspaper articles.

Introduction

*Christopher R. Browning, Susannah Heschel,
Michael R. Marrus and Milton Shain*

It has become a truism to talk of history as ‘an argument without an end’, a phrase coined by the distinguished Dutch historian Pieter Geyl. By its very nature, history is deeply contested and will always be rewritten as new documents, new questions and new perspectives ensure an ongoing debate. Historical facts too are not self-evident, as was explained the Cambridge historian E.H. Carr nearly 50 years ago, but interact in one way or another with the historian’s life experience. ‘Study the historian before you begin to study the facts’, Carr famously advised.¹ Both Carr’s and Geyl’s observations come to mind in this collection of essays that arises from a conference held in 2012 at the University of Cape Town under the auspices of the Isaac and Jessie Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies and Research. Leading international Holocaust scholars met to reflect upon their personal experiences and professional trajectories over many decades of immersion in the field.

Steven Aschheim and Antony Polonsky in particular affirm Carr’s observations. Both grew up in South Africa and their work reflects in subtle ways an engagement with that society. Aschheim asserts that modern and especially contemporary history ‘will almost inevitably tend to be autobiographical and deal with issues of immediate moral and existential concern’. As the son of German Jewish refugees, he brought an additional dimension to his experience. This shaped his understanding of Israel, a country to which he emigrated after a rich experience in *Habonim*, a South African Zionist youth movement. Early societal experiences, silences in the home, as well as migration all

¹ See E.H. Carr, *What is History?* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), p. 23 (first published by Macmillan in 1961).

2 *Introduction*

impacted on his scholarly sensitivities. A 'post-adolescent awakening to the fact that one's own society was based on an all-encompassing victimization of its non-white inhabitants' is specifically identified by Aschheim as an formative factor in his work. Even his current examination of 'empathy' as a phenomenon and his deep explorations of Central European intellectuals relate in one way or another to his understanding of post-apartheid South Africa.

Polonsky too drew lessons from his early experiences in apartheid South Africa. Having grown up as a privileged white in comfortable surroundings, he turned to Marxism and what he understood as its 'iron laws of history' to critique his environment, only to become disillusioned soon after embarking on postgraduate studies in London and living in Poland. Polonsky illustrates vividly the ongoing encounter of the historian with the present and how this informs his scholarship. A leading historian of Polish Jewry, Polonsky is at the cutting edge of debates on the nature of pre- and post-communist Polish society (including Polish-Jewish relations) and a deeply contested historiography. In a sophisticated and measured way, he introduces these highly charged issues, informed by his own contributions and engagement, not untouched by his South African roots, including his knowledge of Zionism, the significant involvement of Jews in the South African Communist Party, and the Holocaust.

For David Cesarani, it was a sense of silence around the Holocaust, coupled with the place of minorities in British society and the national historical narrative, that drove him intellectually. 'My starting point was always my sense of being an alien in England, and resentment that a chapter of my life story was deemed so irrelevant to society as a whole as to be made invisible.' He charts the almost accidental process by which he became a 'Holocaust historian' and his involvement in a sequence of controversies around the Nazi past that rumbled through the 1980s and 1990s. Subsequently, he has played a major role in articulating and defining its themes for the British public. Yet he acknowledges unease about the appropriation of the Holocaust for political ends.

Susannah Heschel's early life experiences obviously fashioned her intellectual curiosity. The daughter of the famed Abraham Joshua Heschel, an émigré German Jewish theologian to the US who bridged colour and religious divides – she was exasperated at the way in which important Christian scholars 'had misshaped our readings of history with biased categories and inappropriate questions'. As a graduate student, she was driven – and still remains determined – to explore the ways in which Christianity has distorted itself as well as Judaism for political

ends. She questions, for example, reasons for Christian theologians failing to support the Jews in Nazi Germany and asks why some collaborated in their persecution. In German archives she discovered evidence of a church-financed antisemitic propaganda institute that created a dejudaised New Testament and hymnal, as well as theological writings synthesizing Nazi antisemitism and Christianity. Such efforts, she argues, made Nazi actions against the Jews plausible and even acceptable to many Christians. Heschel's work is concerned with the ways in which religions define themselves through their views of other religious traditions, and she seeks positive models of inter-religious affirmations.

These issues similarly loom large in the work of Robert Ericksen, who for decades has immersed himself in German theology during the Nazi period and more recently has focused on the complicity of university professors as well as Church leaders under Nazism and their manifold compromises with the regime. Driven by a deep sense of ethics, he shows how the past has often been rewritten to suit the present and remains sceptical, if not disbelieving, of attempts to whitewash collaboration. Acknowledging the complexity of moral choices, Ericksen nevertheless concludes that 'pastors and professors inhaled the tainted air of Nazi Germany and that most of them stayed loyal to that regime'.

Of Mennonite background, Doris L. Bergen too engages with theological issues as part of her work in the field. While denying the direct impact of this tradition in her work, she nevertheless acknowledges that it has affected 'what I think about'. Important meetings with particular individuals ultimately led her into the field and encouraged the work on which she has embarked. Her intellectual odyssey reminds us of the role the institutionalisation of particular fields of knowledge can play. Among the many factors influencing her career was the 'growth of public interest in the Holocaust'.

This burgeoning public interest is apparent in the contributions of Christopher R. Browning, Karl Schleunes and Steven Katz. When Browning began an MA programme in modern European history, the field of Holocaust Studies did not exist. Over the next three decades, he not only contributed significantly to this field, but also established himself as a leader in it. One of the elements of this work, he notes, is that in it one's identity as a non-German or a non-Jew is simply irrelevant. In a deeply reflective way, Browning traces the byways through which he came to study the Holocaust. Initially focused on the Nazi decision-making process and the origins of the Final Solution, he has subsequently undertaken groundbreaking work on the behaviour of 'ordinary men' during the war. In his case the present also impacted on his thinking about

the past and the direction of his research. Particularly interesting are his observations on the historian's craft arising from his numerous and daunting engagements as an expert witness in Holocaust denial trials, most notably the case of David Irving versus Penguin Books.

Karl Schleunes too took up a Holocaust dissertation topic before the Holocaust had become a recognized independent field of study. His is a bird's eye view of developments over the decades, including the evolution of major debates in which he has played a seminal part. Indeed, the book he published in 1970, *The Twisted Road to Auschwitz*, was definitive in the field and remains a major work to this day. While Schleunes reminds us of the unfolding functionalist/intentionalist debate as it was at the time he began his work, he also discusses the *Historikerstreit* of the 1980s. Today he is concerned with other important questions – those that cut to the 'ontological bone', as he puts it. The Christian legacy looms large, but Schleunes is careful to analyse a range of thinking on the subject in his quest to understand the enormity of the Holocaust.

Steven Katz, a philosopher of religion, has asked similar questions, although his work has widened into examining comparatively the phenomena of genocide and mass death. Having studied with the legendary Salo Baron in the US, Katz pursued a philosophical training at Cambridge under A.J. Ayer and completed a doctorate on Martin Buber and his particular brand of mysticism. He later moved into Holocaust and comparative genocide studies following an invitation to present a lecture in the Liss Lecture Series at the University of Notre Dame. As a subject, he chose to challenge Elie Wiesel's contention that the Holocaust was unique; however, he swiftly altered his views and is now one of the main proponents of the 'uniqueness' of the Holocaust as the archetypal genocide. Thus began a now decades-old project on the Holocaust in comparative historical context. Katz's philosophical approach underpins all his work and the precise logic he brings to bear on it. In his case, Carr's dictum could well have been altered to emphasizing the importance of studying the training of the historian before the history.

Michael Marrus' contribution specifically reflects on the search for meaning in the Holocaust. Not for him the 'lessons of the Holocaust', commonly asserted as if these were a universally agreed-upon set of principles. In a brutally honest exposition, he argues that despite the exponential growth in the field of Holocaust Studies and its sophisticated levels of scholarship, it is hazardous to draw specific lessons. Such injunctions, he argues, are all over the map and should not depend upon the Holocaust as a source of authority. Ultimately, he writes, the

historian's task is to explain. In this, we have to be 'as faithful as we can to the events and circumstances of the Holocaust themselves, and to derive from them as deep and sophisticated and independent-minded understanding of these events as we can manage'. The Holocaust has become history and this will ensure it being remembered, he concludes.

* * *

Meeting in South Africa provided a special ambience as the country had emerged only two decades earlier from a race-based system – often compared to Hitler's racial state – defined by the United Nations as a crime against humanity. Apartheid was a universal term of opprobrium and it is not by chance that scholars have identified commonalities between Nazi ideology and apartheid's impulses.² But as David Welsh, a prominent liberal in the fight against apartheid, argues: 'South Africans could learn little from Nazi Germany about racism and racial discrimination.' Apartheid was rather a refinement of earlier colonialism and segregation, and not a product of Nazi ideology. This is not to say that Welsh fails to acknowledge the South African Radical Right of the 1930s and 1940s; these devotees of Hitler would have established a fascist state if given a chance. But the etiology of apartheid and Nazism were far apart. Nevertheless, as Milton Shain illustrates, Radical Right movements in South Africa did indeed echo their European fascist and Nazi mentors. Louis Weichardt, the leader of the Greyshirts, stands out in this regard. Had groups like the Greyshirts – or the *Ossewa-Brandwag* (Ox Wagon Sentinel) and the *Nuwe Orde* (New Order) – come to power, there would have been no place for Jews in South Africa.

Despite these differences, the Holocaust did impact on South African consciousness and on the ways in which South Africans engaged with their past.³ As early as 1945, blacks appropriated the Holocaust in

² See, for example, William Henry Vatcher, *White Laager: The Rise of Afrikaner Nationalism* (New York and London: Frederick Praeger, 1965); Brian Bunting, *The Rise of the South African Reich* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969); and Patrick J. Furlong, *Between Crown and Swastika: The Impact of the Radical Right on the Afrikaner Nationalist Movement in the Fascist Era* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1991).

³ See Shirli Gilbert, 'Jews and the Racial State. Legacies of the Holocaust in Apartheid South Africa, 1945–60', *Jewish Social Studies*, 16(3) (2010), 32–64; and Milton Shain and Andrew Lamprecht, 'A Past that Must Not Go Away: Holocaust Denial in Apartheid and Post-Apartheid South Africa' in John K. Roth and Elizabeth Maxwell (eds), *Remembering the Future: The Holocaust in the Age of Genocide*, vol. 1 (London: Palgrave), 2001, pp. 858–69.

their struggle for human rights. In that year the Non-European Unity Movement drew up a document informing the United Nations of the similarities between South African race laws and Nazism and employed this critique in its efforts to gain support.⁴ Similarities abounded, especially as 'Grand Apartheid' unfolded under the National Party which came to power in 1948. Although the trajectories of the Nazi state and apartheid South Africa were different, the abiding focus on race in the two societies cannot be minimized. Just over four decades after the advent of apartheid, a 'negotiated revolution' was initiated following the release from prison of Nelson Mandela and the normalization of South African society and politics.⁵ In 1996 a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was established as a means of healing the past. In a transition in which there was no victor and no vanquished, it was agreed that there would be no need for Nuremberg-like trials. Instead, a TRC was established to elicit a full disclosure of apartheid crimes. Nuremberg-like trials were ruled out.

The massive corpus of scholarly engagement with the Holocaust – with reverberations across the globe – has ensured that its study today is paradigmatic for scholars seeking to explore genocide and mass death, as well as questions surrounding perpetrators, bystanders and victims. The historiography of the Holocaust is lively, with debates and controversies, new archival discoveries and the application of methods drawn from a wide range of disciplines. Study of the Holocaust has stimulated scholars to examine other contexts of prejudice, genocide, trauma and reparation, and their work, in turn, broadens the significance of the Jewish experience. The field has widened greatly, fashioning a new generation of scholars shaped by new circumstances and perspectives. It continues to be a debate without an end.

⁴ See Milton Shain, 'South Africa' in David Wyman (ed.), *The World Reacts to the Holocaust*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), pp. 680–81.

⁵ See Heribert Adam and Kogila Moodley, *The Negotiated Revolution. Society and Politics in Post-Apartheid South Africa* (Cape Town: Jonathan Ball Publishers, 1993).

1

Autobiography, Experience and the Writing of History

Steven E. Aschheim

I suppose I should begin with a caveat. This volume is about ‘Holocaust Scholarship’, but I am not strictly speaking a Holocaust scholar. My field is much more concentrated on European – especially German and Jewish – cultural and intellectual history. Still, in many explicit but also subtly implicit ways, the *Shoah* has impinged deeply both on my ‘personal trajectory and professional interpretations’ – just as its ideological exploitation has increasingly become a source of disturbance and, at times, even anger. But this will become clearer only in terms of relating the larger story and context of the link between biography and work.

Before I do so, however, a word of apology and potential exculpation is necessary. Upon telling friends and colleagues the title and subject of this volume – on the link between the personal and the professional – most have looked aghast. ‘How egoistic, self-important, can one get?’ they ask disdainfully. They do have a point; there is a clear and present solipsistic danger in such a self-centred presentation. I hope though that ‘there is an important difference between a serious and conscious engagement in one’s own experience, and an interest in oneself as an engrossing phenomenon’.¹ But, I am, in any case, convinced that the vocation of history is always an engaged, even an ethical, pursuit and activity. To be sure, one must exercise the critical (and, perhaps more importantly, the self-critical) faculty at all times and relate as scrupulously as possible to the evidence and documents. But the old-fashioned positivist ‘objectivity’ is a chimera; rather, what is required

¹ This is Robert Fothergill’s distinction. See his *Private Chronicles: A Study of English Diaries* (Oxford University Press, 1974), pp. 76–77.

is a form of 'Passionate Detachment'.² This is so because modern, and especially contemporary, history will almost inevitably tend to be autobiographical and deal with issues of immediate moral and existential concern.

This is a rather pretentious claim, so let me invoke the authority of those wiser than me to support it. The formidable Lionel Trilling declared that 'the more a writer takes pain with his work to remove from it the personal and subjective, the more . . . he will express his true unconscious'.³ And as Martin Jay persuasively argues:

However much we may disavow our own voice in the construction of allegedly impersonal, objective narratives, it returns to haunt our texts. Whom we choose to study, what stories we decide to tell, and the modes of emplotment, analysis and judgment we apply to them are determined at least in part by psychological prejudices that we only dimly perceive, if at all. Despite all of our efforts to bracket current prejudices and allow the past to reveal itself to us, we cannot entirely escape the effect of our identifications, idealizations and demonizations. Indeed, it is precisely because we can become so invested in figures, movements and events in the past that they invite our interest in the first place; the exigency to remember someone else's things past can only come from somewhere deep within ourselves.⁴

In the same sense, I have no doubt that my life experiences are inextricably intertwined with my scholarly career and that my 'personal trajectories and professional interpretations' are deeply linked. It is as a South African-born historian, child of German-Jewish refugees, deeply – if osmotically – affected by the gross inhumanity of the Holocaust, and as a citizen of Israel, beset by the seemingly intractable, dehumanizing Israeli–Palestinian conflict that my work and sensibilities have been shaped.

² This is the way Ze'ev Mankowitz described the work of George Mosse, but it is surely far more generally applicable. See his 'George Mosse and Jewish History' in *George Mosse: On the Occasion of His Retirement. 17.6.1985* (The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1986), p. xxiv.

³ Quoted in Edward Mendelsohn, 'The Demonic Trilling', *New York Review of Books*, 7 June 2012, p. 58.

⁴ See Martin Jay, 'Force Fields: The Ungrateful Dead', *Salmagundi*, 123 (Summer 1999), 28.

Let us begin then with childhood.⁵ It was my parents' German accent, at once comfortingly familiar yet clearly foreign, which first alerted me to the 'alienness' of my background. I suppose it was this that in intuitive fashion first sensitized me to the complicated dynamics, the plight, pains, rewards and occasional narcissism of 'outsiderdom'. Certainly in the modern period, it is never easy to fix its always fluid boundaries.⁶ As my brother-in-law once said to me: 'Steven, as an outsider, what do you think of the human race?' This sense of partial marginality no doubt helped to provide the first necessary key to the historian's vocation: a certain critical perspective upon one's own situation.

It was also tied to a burgeoning consciousness of Jewishness and, I think, to a later, more mature interest in the always complex deployments of selfhood and interconnections of Jews within Western culture. In all my writings I have been less interested in Judaism than in Jewishness as a psychological, sociological and, especially, intellectual predicament.⁷ Jews in the modern period have constantly had to navigate the tensions between formal 'respectability' and unguarded intimacy, conformity and difference, expressiveness and restraint, outsiderdom and the mainstream.⁸ The post-emancipation boundary situation of Jews thus generated a modicum of friction, confusion and anxiety, at times even murderousness, but also produced new alliances, some astonishingly creative intellectual and cultural projects and novel

⁵ The following account borrows from the essay 'Excursus: Growing up German Jewish in South Africa' that appeared in my *In Times of Crisis: Essays on European Culture, Germans, and Jews* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001), pp. 59–63. A slightly different version was published under the title 'The German-Jewish Legacy beyond America' in *American Jewish Archives* (November 1988).

⁶ See my 'Reflections on Insiders and Outsiders: A General Introduction' in Richard I. Cohen, Jonathan Frankel and Stefani Hoffman (eds), *Insiders and Outsiders: Dilemmas of East European Jewry* (Oxford: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2010).

⁷ This applies to all my works listed in this chapter. For another relevant two that here go unmentioned, see *Scholem, Arendt, Klemperer: Intimate Chronicles in Turbulent Times* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001) and the edited collection *Hannah Arendt in Jerusalem* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

⁸ On these tensions, see 'Reflections on Theatricality, Identity and the Modern Jewish Experience' and 'Between Rights, Respectability, and Resistance: Reframing the German-Jewish Experience' in my *At the Edges of Liberalism: Junctions of European, German, and Jewish History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

fusions and formations of identity. Working out these contours remains a major professional – and existential – concern.

But let me return to my childhood. The fact of *German* foreignness was especially unforgivable in the years following the Second World War. In primary school, when asked where my parents came from, I murmured 'Australia'. How could a child, even around 1950, acknowledge German origins, admit that in some way *he* had been the mortal enemy? Of course, already at that age, one grasped the difference well enough, but it was well-nigh impossible to articulate that, no, one's parents were not the enemy but the victims (although incidentally they never presented themselves as such – self-pity was entirely absent from their emotional vocabulary) and that defining *them* as archetypal Germans was a kind of indecent irony. At other times, the antisemitic intent was less veiled and the anti-German, anti-Jewish thrust explicitly fused. One day, in the middle of a science class(!), the teacher settled his gaze directly at me and asked why I believed the Second World War had been fought. Without waiting for a reply, he himself provided the enlightening answer: 'Because of the Jews, Aschheim, because of the Jews.'

These kinds of incidents pushed me ever deeper into the Zionist youth movement, which at that time functioned as a kind of all-embracing counter-cultural institution, and which produced a curious combination of ecstatic idealism, deep friendships – that persist to this day – and a certain self-righteous dogmatism. At the same time, it encouraged an increasingly critical stance towards the overall system of racial injustice in South Africa.

Still, the particular German-Jewish background played a major role in the larger sensitizing process and thus in my later vocational choice. In the first place, the imprint, brutality and mystery (which endures until the present) of Nazism and the Holocaust have been with me ever since I can remember. These were topics that were never really analytically confronted at home, but were, nevertheless, somehow omnipresent, palpably transmitted through my parents' occasional comments about Germany and Germans (my father adamantly refused reparation money), their very infrequent, throwaway references to their previous lives in Kassel and Berlin and the move to South Africa, and an unstated (but quite unambivalent) message about the fragility of the Jewish condition. Nevertheless, their overwhelming emotion regarding the country that had given them shelter (and later financial success) was one of gratitude. These factors limited any inclination to generalize from their own experience of racial injustice in Germany and protest

what was happening in South Africa. But unlike my parents, I was not beholden to South Africa as a refugee and I could therefore translate this sense of vulnerability into quite different personal and professional terms.

The personal and the ironic mode characterized the background to my very first work, *Brothers and Strangers*, an examination of the protean, highly charged image that the East European Jew played within modern German and German-Jewish consciousness.⁹ I had always taken my father's 'Germanness' for granted. True, his great warmth and humour seemed to point to the fundamental inaccuracy of the stiff Prussian or 'Yekke' stereotype. It was only years after his death that I discovered he was born an 'Ostjude', a Galizianer who had come to Kassel as a small boy and, like so many others, elegantly combined these two inheritances! It is true that many immigrant parents were loath to talk about their past (and were not sufficiently pressed by their children to do so). Still, the fact that he had chosen never to reveal these origins was made even more poignant by the fact that I learned all this as I was completing my dissertation on the convolutions of, and problematic interdependencies between, Eastern and Western Jewish identity!

The influence of this background of course went beyond this irony. My receptivity to larger issues of German and German-Jewish history clearly springs from these domestic roots. With all their distaste for Germany, my parents carried Europe with them in a way that the Litvak majority of the South African Jewish never did. This cultural inheritance was transmitted to a child and adolescent in a variety of ways. For instance, my father would, effortless and quite unself-consciously, reel off reams of (to me rather incomprehensible, yet strangely attractive) poetry and sayings from the inevitable Goethe and Heine. Our house rang with the songs of Joseph Schmidt, Richard Tauber and Marcel Wittrisch, marvelous tenors whose 78 rpm records we possessed in abundance and which set the foundations, no doubt, for a later enduring passion for German classical music. Clearly, then, the impulse to study the German world and its culture flowed from the dual desire to comprehend (and perhaps commemorate) the lost reality from which my parents came, and at the same time to grasp what had made Nazism, its atrocities and the Holocaust possible.

⁹ See *Brothers and Strangers: The East European Jew in German and German-Jewish Consciousness, 1800–1923* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982).

To a young mind (perhaps even to an ageing one!), part of the fascination of and attraction to German culture lay in its compelling concern with, and combination of, the profound and the demonic. (I only discovered much later Thomas Mann's exploration of the necessary connection between the two in his *Dr. Faustus*). Not yet able to penetrate the esoteric language in which they wrote, to my uninitiated ears names like Kant, Hegel, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche possessed a kind of magic, an alluring and almost evil ring, resonant with the promise of both enlightenment and dark and dangerous brilliance. I tried to deal explicitly with the myriad and ambiguous connections between culture and catastrophe in a 1995 volume of that name, documenting, amongst other things, the manifold novelties of interpretation and philosophical difficulties to which it gave rise as well as the ideological dangers in wait once the Holocaust was unleashed into the political minefield of competitive and reparative victimization.¹⁰ Before that, I sought to wrestle with the manifold adventures of infinitely adaptable Nietzschean impulses as they penetrated virtually every cranny of German political culture.¹¹

There is still another pertinent, related level. It betrays a certain chauvinist parochialism, which I consciously try to resist in my scholarship but which is undoubtedly there. Since my student days I had, quite unconsciously, equated what I most valued in German thought with what I later understood to be a peculiar form of German-Jewish humanism. Even if one had not really read them, the giants who, in my mind at least, I associated with this legacy – Marx, Freud, Einstein and, in a rather different idiom, Franz Kafka – were heroic precisely because they were makers of modern secular thought, universal and radical in their outlook, and yet, in their different ways, quintessentially (or at least socio-psychologically) Jewish, embodiments of an always humanizing and moral impulse. Much the same can be said regarding the galaxy, the almost endless examples of Jewish intellectual and cultural creativity that was released as the ghetto walls fell beginning with the Enlightenment. If we just take the period of the Weimar Republic, astonishingly, we find names that remain iconic to Western intellectual life into the twenty-first century: a by no means exhaustive

¹⁰ See my *Culture and Catastrophe: German and Jewish Confrontations with National Socialism and Other Crises* (New York University Press, 1996).

¹¹ See my *The Nietzsche Legacy in Germany 1890–1990* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

list would include Theodor Adorno, Hannah Arendt, Walter Benjamin, Ernst Cassirer, Gershom Scholem and Leo Strauss.¹²

Similarly, it was also the work of other exiled post-Second World War Central European intellectuals that has acted as magnets, my emulative models: Jean Amery (Hans Meyer), Walter Laqueur, Raul Hilberg, George Steiner, Peter Gay and, of course, my great friend and mentor, George Mosse.¹³ In the post-Holocaust era they were as much the incarnation of that Central European Jewish sensibility as they were chroniclers of its achievements, disaster and disappearance. I suppose that at a certain level, my work (however dwarfed in comparison to these giants) is animated by a desire to preserve this fragile, humanizing sensibility against the manifold totalitarian, racist and illiberal threats besetting it.

Clearly, this sensibility went hand in hand with a post-adolescent awakening to the fact that one's own society was based upon an all-encompassing victimization of its non-white inhabitants. This realization of the plight of the other was to have a later double effect upon both the personal and professional sides. Could it be that behind the decision to become an historian lies not only the drive to critically interrogate one's own narrative, but also a kind of empathetic compulsion to place oneself sympathetically in the position of other selves – what J.M. Coetzee in his novel *Summertime* calls *meegevoel*, feeling with.¹⁴ The autobiographical moment does enter here. For all their radical differences, common to apartheid, the atrocities of Nazi Germany and the Israeli–Palestinian imbroglio, one finds either the incapacity or perhaps more pointedly the structured unwillingness of those in power to place oneself both cognitively and affectively in the position of the subjugated, to recognize their humanity and humiliation. Revealingly, the subject of Hendrik Verwoerd's doctoral dissertation in psychology was on the theme of 'The Blunting of the Emotions'. The political economy of empathy and its organized blunting, the fact that, as Michael Ignatieff perceptively notes, ethics typically follows ethnicity, that empathy typically takes root and is limited to tribal, ethnic or national boundaries¹⁵

¹² I have examined this surprising phenomenon in Chapter 3 of *Beyond the Border: The German-Jewish Legacy Abroad* (Princeton University Press, 2007).

¹³ See *ibid.*, Chapter 2.

¹⁴ J.M. Coetzee, *Summertime* (London: Harvill Secker, 2009), p. 97.

¹⁵ See Michael Ignatieff, 'The Danger of a World without Enemies', *The New Republic*, 224 (2001), 25–44.

has, of late, become my central preoccupation¹⁶ (and looking back, in one way or another, has unconsciously permeated almost all my ventures).

I am fully aware of the hermeneutic difficulties involved in this conceit; there is a huge literature debating the degree to which such an empathic leap is at all possible. I realize too that my stipulative definition of empathy as ‘the cognitive and affective attempt to place oneself in the position of the individual or collective other’ is ethically ambiguous and not necessarily morally obligating. Indeed, torturers have to be empathic if they are to grasp the effect they exert on their victims;¹⁷ surely, if the historian wants to comprehend the psychology and motivations of Nazi perpetrators, Russian rapists or Rwandan killers, this will involve a deliberate act of empathy – entering, so to speak, into their skin and shoes – but hardly one that entails ethical identification. Any political economy of empathy will have to take into account these ambiguities and, as Samuel Moyn has pointed out, will involve a crucial tripartite distinction between empathy ‘as a burgeoning object of historical investigation . . . as a methodological requirement, and as a normative horizon of inquiry’.¹⁸ For all that, it is true that the animating drive is also clearly an ethical one.

I have already referred to my choice of Zionism which seemed to be both a natural and a self-justifying moral one.¹⁹ Let me clear about this. Zionism in South Africa (and clearly not only there) satisfied deep, authentic needs. Especially for youth, it provided a counter-sense of self, it distinguished us from our bourgeois elders, provided a rationalization that the militant anti-apartheid struggle was not our struggle and offered a utopia in which to believe. Zionism was about removing diasporic vulnerability, solving our ‘Jewish Problem’ and thereby becoming ‘normal’. It profoundly changed the psychological grounds on which we stood (a truth that remains to this day). Moreover, as this occasion demands

¹⁶ I am very slowly working my way towards a book-length manuscript. In the meantime see my preliminary essay ‘The Ambiguous Political Economy of Empathy’ in *At the Edges of Liberalism*, pp. 133–42, notes 247–52.

¹⁷ See Lou Agosta, *Empathy in the Context of Philosophy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 14.

¹⁸ See Samuel Moyn, ‘Empathy in History, Emphasizing with Humanity’, *History and Theory*, 45 (October 2006), 397–415. The quote appears on p. 397.

¹⁹ I have developed this theme at greater length in an interview (conducted on 30 December 2007) published in Stephen Hellmann and Lindsay Talmud (eds), *Ideally Speaking: Interviews with South African and Ex-South African Jews* (Douglas: Lexicon Books, 2011), pp. 107–19.