# Handle with Care:

## Some Ethical Implications of Interdisciplinary Holocaust Education

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After Treblinka . . . We see differently

Edward Bond, "How We See"

We study the Holocaust because it happened, but not only for that reason. We study and teach about it primarily for ethical reasons that are rooted in deep longing for a safer and more humane world. The British poet Edward Bond had such insights in mind when he wrote the lines "After Treblinka . . . We see differently."[1] Those words come from his poem "How We See". Especially if we modify the title to ask "How do we see?" that theme can help us to think about some ethical implications embedded in and entailed by an interdisciplinary approach to Holocaust education.

My thesis is that *handle with care* is the most basic ethical implication of interdisciplinary Holocaust education. To explain what I mean, I will begin with an episode from the Holocaust's history and with a moment from my own teaching. Then I will consider briefly how five angles of vision amplify what it means to handle the Holocaust with care. These illustrative ways of seeing the Holocaust - many other disciplines could be cited - include history, gender studies, literature and the arts, religious studies, and, finally, ethics itself.

### An Episode

On 4 May 1961, Dr. Aharon Peretz, a survivor of the Kovno ghetto, gave testimony in Jerusalem during the postwar trial of the Holocaust perpetrator Adolf Eichmann. Peretz described how the Germans rounded up Lithuanian Jews, including several thousand children

who were driven to a killing site and then shot to death. He remembered one moment in particular:

> A mother whose three children had been taken away went up to this automobile and shouted at the German, "give me the children", and he said, "You may have one." And she went up into that automobile, and all three children looked at her and stretched out their hands. Of course, all of them wanted to go with their mother, and the mother didn't know which child to select and she went down alone, and she left the car.[2]

No single discipline, and arguably no scholarly or pedagogical perspective imaginable, can fully encompass the Holocaust and its legacy, because that catastrophe included such a vast array of episodes akin to the one that Peretz recalled. Each of those events differed, because men, women, and children perished one by one, just as every killer, bystander, or rescuer was an individual with all the complex relationships and circumstances that such identity includes. Nevertheless, there is much that can be understood about the Holocaust, provided we take the limits of understanding seriously, which involves the recognition that multiple perspectives, ones that skillfully weave different angles of vision together, give us the best chances to learn *about* and also *from* the Holocaust.

**A Moment**

I start my Holocaust courses by asking my students to write some information about themselves. For example, I invite them to share with me what they enjoy doing outside of their academic work. I ask what they hope to be doing in ten or fifteen years. I also inquire about

their major academic interests. In the next class meeting, I offer feedback with some interdisciplinary and ethical points in mind.

This opening allows me to note how healthy and active my students must be, because so many of them enjoy sports, dancing, and working out. There are runners, hikers, campers, and skiers among them, plus swimmers, basketball players, and champions of Ultimate Frisbee. There are also those who love music and who are involved in art, theater, and religious pursuits. I remind my students that Jews who perished in the Holocaust enjoyed such activities too. So did the Holocaust's perpetrators. So did people who stood by or those who risked their lives to rescue others. The Holocaust involved ordinary people who were alike in many ways but also extraordinarily different in many others. How to understand that configuration is a puzzle marked *handle with care*.

When my students indicate what they hope to be doing in ten or fifteen years, their answers are suggestive in multiple ways. Frequent responses identify a professional role of one kind or another. Some want to manage or own a business; some want to practice law or medicine. Others have journalism in mind. Still others envision themselves as artists or teachers. Sometimes the answers are much more vague, "I want to be doing *something I enjoy"*, or they may say, "I'm not sure." Nearly all of the students, however, -indicate that they hope to marry and to become parents. As you can imagine, all of these responses brim with interdisciplinary significance but two aspects are especially noteworthy: First, the Holocaust's victims had similar hopes, but for the most part those hopes were stolen from them. Second, those hopes were taken from people by people who were in every one of the professions that the students mention and more. Those hopes were stolen from people by people who had wives,

husbands, lovers, and children. Many questions trail such relationships. No quick responses to them are likely to be sound.

When the students list their primary areas of academic interest, the spread is again considerable. Last autumn, psychology was the field most often identified, but history and politics, economics and philosophy, gender studies, religious studies, the arts, biology, and even neuroscience were also represented. The students grasp, sometimes more intuitively than academic specialists, not only that all of these fields can contribute to Holocaust studies, but also that our approaches are likely to be inadequate, or at least less rich than they need to be, if they lack a variety of outlooks. At the same time, the students can see that there is no virtue in an interdisciplinary approach that is superficial, lacking in focus and rigor. To paraphrase comments made recently by the Holocaust historian Christopher Browning, it is not only important to survey the landscape but also to study the twigs and bushes and to do so with the distinctive tools and styles of individual disciplines, blending them where and when one can as best one knows how, a challenging task that should also be marked *handle with care*.[3]

**History: No Closure**

Historical research is the bedrock discipline for study of the Holocaust and for achieving understanding about how and why it happened. Everyone who approaches the Holocaust as a student or teacher owes an immense debt to scholars who do the painstaking work of archival research, where written documents are appropriately the coin of the realm. The Holocaust's documents, of course, come in many shapes and sizes. There are the railroad timetables that Raul Hilberg has shown to be invaluable for grasping how the perpetrators made the Holocaust

happen, but there are also the memoirs of Charlotte Delbo and Primo Levi and the testimonies of *Sonderkommandos* that have been gathered by Gideon Greif.

Much of the Holocaust's documentation has been lost forever. The murdered cannot speak. The Germans destroyed massive amounts of evidence or the war's devastation turned it to rubble. The Visual History of the Shoah Foundation has more than 50,000 survivor testimonies in its holdings, but the Holocaust's perpetrators have said comparatively little about what they did.

Historians study the twigs and bushes and they survey the landscape, but it remains the case that the Holocaust and its legacy are so vast that, at best, there can be only selective historical narratives and analyses about it. Done well, they more or less weave together reliable glimpses, documented perspectives, and focused but not all-embracing slices from a destruction process that swept through a continent from 1933 to 1945. This melancholy work is done not to achieve an unattainable mastery but, as Hilberg says, " lest all be relinquished and forgotten".[4]

Is the Holocaust "historically explicable", to use Yehuda Bauer's phrase?[5] When Bauer defines that term, he suggests that, "the historical craft (history is no science) makes it possible to explain an event in general terms. If the historians are successful, then many, if not most, of its facets can be explained adequately." I do not disagree with such claims, but I think they must be handled with care, for much hinges on the meaning of words such as *general terms* and *adequately* as well as on the meaning of *explanation* itself. To raise questions about such concepts does not lead, at least not necessarily, to what Bauer has called "a post-modernist stance that would deny factual objectivity and deny the possibility, ultimately, of any historical conclusions."[6] What does follow, I believe, is that we scholars and teachers should have the

modesty to realize that historical inquiry about the Holocaust has an open-ended and therefore somewhat inconclusive quality about it.

That claim makes sense for at least two reasons: First, new findings may appear and interpretations will vary (sometimes considerably). Anyone who reads Holocaust historians seriously comes to see that even when basic facts are agreed upon, the historical interpretations do not stay fixed and in one place, nor is it likely that they will do so. Second, history is not all there is. History is part of reality, not the whole of it, and history does not and cannot explain itself. The importance of historical research for grasping how and why the Holocaust happened, and that importance is as huge as the best is historical research is reliable, can also make us aware of something else that is equally significant: *No discipline or combination of them "owns" the Holocaust. If history is the foundation, it is not the whole of Holocaust studies. One of the important, if not entirely intended, contributions that history makes to Holocaust studies is to show that other disciplines are needed but that no one of them or all of them together can achieve finality and closure.*

**Gender Studies: No Simplicity**

The Holocaust took an immense toll on Jewish children. From the Nazi perspective, their die was cast by the faith of their great-grandparents. No mercy could be shown to boys and girls thus targeted; they were the next generation of the racially threatening population that must be eliminated. So, as Isaiah Trunk argued, "Jewish children had to fend for themselves in a world so base no prior experience could have prepared them for it . . . The percentage of Jewish children who survived this German infanticide is the lowest of any age group to have come out of the Holocaust alive."[7] One and half million Jewish children, most of them under the age of

fifteen, lost their lives to the Germans and their collaborators. What about their mothers and grandmothers, their aunts and older sisters? What happened to women during the Holocaust?

Although many Holocaust memoirs written by women have existed for a long time, questions specifically about women, or about gender differences in any respect, got relatively little attention in Holocaust scholarship until the 1990s. In the most basic way, of course, the Holocaust's killing drew no distinctions among Jews: Hitler and his followers intended oblivion for them all; every man, woman, and child. Nevertheless, as pioneering efforts by scholars such as Elizabeth Baer, Myrna Goldenberg, Marion Kaplan, Dalia Ofer, Joan Ringelheim, Carol Rittner, Rochelle Saidel, Lenore Weitzman, and others have shown, the hell was the same for Jewish women and men during the Holocaust, but the horrors were frequently different.

Women's experiences during the Holocaust varied immensely. While German women, for instance, were expected to bear children for the Third Reich, Jewish women had to be prevented from becoming mothers. The Nazis invested considerable time and energy to find the most effective ways to sterilize them, but the "Final Solution" for this problem was death. Of course, if they were healthy and neither too old nor too young, Jewish women could be used before they were used up or killed. At Auschwitz, for example, some were selected for slave labor; at Ravensbrück, a concentration camp established especially for women, others became objects for the "scientific" experiments that were intended to advance Nazi programs of racial hygiene and purity.

Women could be found among other victim groups during the Holocaust: Roma and Sinti, political prisoners, Jehovah's Witnesses, and the so-called *a-socials*, to name a few. In addition, women were among the neighbors who stood by while Jews were rounded up and

deported all over Europe.  They were among those who rescued Jews as well.  Women could be found in virtually every intersection and intricacy of the Holocaust's web.  Such facts make analysis and understanding of the Holocaust far more complex than was the case before attention to gender differences staked an appropriate claim in Holocaust studies.  It does not follow, of course, that the perspectives of gender studies automatically produce good scholarship and sound teaching about the Holocaust.  Here, too, *handle with care* is an ethical implication that deserves attention, even as gender studies puts forth a fundamental ethical insight of its own, namely, that *study of the Holocaust takes away the comfort of simplicity*.

**Literature and the Arts: No Feelings = No Understanding**

The Germans sent Primo Levi to Auschwitz from his native Italy in late February 1944. He called his deportation "a journey towards nothingness."[8]  Eight months later, Levi knew that autumn's receding light and retreating warmth meant that the devastation of another Auschwitz winter was at hand.  "From October to April," he understood, "seven out of ten of us will die. Whoever does not die will suffer minute by minute, all day, every day."[9]  *Winter*, insisted Levi, was not the right word for that dreadful season.  Nor could *hunger* and *pain* capture the realities of Auschwitz.

If the Holocaust did not last long enough to produce in full the "new, harsh language" to which Levi thought it would give birth, that event continues to leave survivors, historians, philosophers, theologians, novelists, and poets groping for words.[10]  Related experiences confront film--makers, musicians, and artists who try to use their gifts to ensure that the Holocaust will not be forgotten. Out of those struggles have come remarkable and instructive responses to the Holocaust.

The philosopher Theodor Adorno argued that it would be barbaric to write poetry after the Holocaust. His claim rightly condemns artistic and literary responses that ignore or trivialize the Holocaust, but Adorno's judgment should not be applied to all the literature and art that the Holocaust has evoked. Adorno himself knew as much, for his dialectical thinking challenged his own attack on post-Holocaust poetry. "Perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream," he wrote, "hence it may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz you could know longer write poems."[11]

Not only have artistic and literary responses done much to keep memory of the Holocaust alive, but also the most powerful and authentic expressions of that kind help to drive home a deepened sense of the losses that the Holocaust produced, the warnings that reverberate from them, and the questions that remain. Just as no one history book can fully contain the Holocaust, let alone completely explain it, no film, musical score, painting, memoir, essay, novel, or poem can provide access to more than a sliver of that disaster. Yet when such contributions are well done, memory can be sharpened, feeling sensitized, understanding increased, and memorialization enhanced in ways that we can ill afford to be without. One could sum up these points by underlining another ethical implication embedded in and entailed by interdisciplinary Holocaust education: *Take away the feelings that the best Holocaust-related art and literature evoke, and our understanding of the Holocaust will be diminished, if it can be said to exist at all.*

**Religious Studies:**

**Understanding Must Cope with the Depths of the Holocaust's Roots and Implications**

As Mel Gibson's excruciatingly bloody scourging of Jesus reaches its climax in his controversial blockbuster *The Passion of the Christ*, one of Pontius Pilate's lieutenants intervenes

and chastises the Roman soldiers for excessive brutality. "You weren't supposed to beat him to death!" he exclaims. That moment was only one of many that jarred me when I saw Mel Gibson's film two days after it opened in the United States on 25 February 2004. Given the scourging that Gibson created, the judgment of Pilate's lieutenant seemed ludicrous and incredible. After such a beating, scarcely anyone could have remained alive, as Jesus had to be for his crucifixion to follow. Of course, a caveat in that judgment is needed, and this point is no doubt one that Gibson wanted to make: namely, Jesus was not "anyone"; he was the incarnation of God and thus able to take any abuse that human beings could devise and still triumph over it.

At least four Holocaust-related realizations follow from the description I have offered. They can help us to see how the study of religion is crucial for interdisciplinary Holocaust education. First, few events, if any, in human history have had more volatile consequences and potent implications than the Roman execution by crucifixion of a then-relatively-obscure Jewish teacher from Galilee. To employ one of several shorthand equations, which I use to put key issues in bold relief: *No crucifixion of Jesus = No Western Civilization as we know it*.

Second, the reason that equation holds is that the crucifixion of Jesus has always played a decisive part in the Christian tradition's understanding of God, the world, and the meaning of our individual lives. These connections are so strong that we may confidently assert another equation: *No crucifixion of Jesus = No Christianity*. Absent Christianity, Western Civilization and indeed the world as we know it would be inconceivable.

Taking the New Testament gospels as the historically accurate source, Mel Gibson's film arrived amidst claims that it truthfully portrayed what really happened during the last twelve hours of Jesus' earthly life. However, as many have already pointed out, Gibson's film is

authentic neither as history nor as a representation of the gospels, at least as far as the details are concerned. To one watching the film, checking the New Testament texts, and tracking Gibson's use of sources, it is apparent that *The Passion of the Christ* is a highly idiosyncratic interpretation of events whose reality remains elusive. Thus, a third key point emerges: Beyond the barest of outlines, no one today can be very confident that they know precisely what happened in Jerusalem during the last twelve hours of Jesus' life. That Jesus was crucified is not in question, but precisely how and why the crucifixion took place is profoundly contested. Hence, another equation holds: *No crucifixion of Jesus = No Christian-Jewish rivalry*.

Fourth, the Christian-Jewish rivalry had such catastrophic implications that, particularly after the Holocaust, we Christians should be especially careful about how the crucifixion of Jesus- is interpreted and portrayed. Nazi Germany's attempt to destroy the Jewish people would have been virtually inconceivable without Christianity's (my tradition's) negative depictions of Jews. That conjunction creates a shameful burden that should shake Christianity to its core. The shame, in turn, should lead not only to repentance about the Christian tradition's long-standing and only very recently reformed stance toward Jews but also to fundamental rethinking about what it should and should not mean to be a Christian after Auschwitz. Among the many shortcomings of Gibson's film, therefore, I believe that none is more egregious than its insensitivity about the Holocaust, its failure to acknowledge the equation: *No crucifixion of Jesus = No Holocaust*.

Less than a month after I saw *The Passion of the Christ*, I was teaching my students on an academic travel program in Poland and the Czech Republic. For several days, we worked at the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum. Walking through the Auschwitz gate inscribed with the

mocking motto *Arbeit Macht Frei*, standing before the crematoria ruins at Birkenau, I thought about the crucifixion of Jesus and about Gibson's interpretation of it. As a Christian, I felt shame and anger--shame for Christianity's complicity in the Holocaust and anger about Mel Gibson's negative portrayals of Jews, which were set forth as if the Holocaust never happened. No post-Holocaust portrayal of the crucifixion can be trustworthy if it fails to link the crucifixion to that twentieth-century catastrophe. Gibson's film forged no links of that kind, but interdisciplinary Holocaust education must not shy away from the resulting ethical challenge, which demands savvy in the area of religious studies. *Among the many contributions that the discipline of religious studies can make--perhaps as no other--is to explore the depths of the Holocaust's roots and implications. Such inquiry goes to the heart of what it means to be human*. "*Handle with care" should be its hallmark too.*

**Ethics: We Must Try to Heal Wounded Words**

I have argued that we study the Holocaust because it happened, but not only for that reason. We study and teach about it primarily for ethical reasons that are rooted in deep longing for a safer and more humane world. It should not be assumed, however, that ethics came through the Holocaust unscathed. On the contrary, the Holocaust deeply wounded ethics by showing how ethical teachings could be overridden, rendered dysfunctional, or even subverted to serve the interests of genocide. Sarah Kofman sensed dilemmas of this kind. A child-survivor of the Holocaust who went on to become a leading French philosopher before she took her own life in 1995, she wrote a brief Holocaust reflection called *Smothered Words*. How is it possible to speak, she wonders, "when you feel . . . a strange *double bind*: an infinite claim to speak, *a duty to speak infinitely*, imposing itself with irrepressible force, and at the same time, an almost

physical impossibility to speak, a *choking* feeling?"[12]

Holocaust studies can and should make one feel an obligation to make ethics stronger and less subject to overriding, dysfunctionality, or subversion. Yet such work can produce a choking feeling, a sense that too much harm has been done for a good recovery to be made, a suspicion that ethics may be so wounded as to be overwhelmed by the challenges it faces. The bind is double, for the sense of ethical responsibility, real though it is, remains hopelessly optimistic and naive unless it grapples with the despair that encounters with the Holocaust are bound to produce. To be touched by that despair, however, scarcely encourages one to believe that ethical responsibilities will be accepted and met. Caught between the post-Holocaust need to speak for ethics, on the one hand, and the feeling that the key elements of ethics—words, arguments, appeals to reason, persuasion through the example of moral action—may be inadequate, on the other, the question persists: What can and should be made of ethics after Auschwitz?

In a post-Holocaust setting, Kofman spoke of what she called "the possibility of a new ethics."[13] If there is to be such an ethics, a moral spirit and religious commitment that have the courage to persist *in spite of* humankind's self-inflicted desolation are essential. Such an ethics will have to draw on every resource it can find: appeals to human rights, calls for renewed religious sensitivity, respect and honor for people who save lives and resist tyranny, and attention to the Holocaust's warnings, to name only a few. Those efforts will need to be accompanied by awareness that nothing human, natural, or divine guarantees respect for those values, but nothing is more important than our commitment to defend them, for they remain as fundamental as they are fragile, as precious as they are endangered.

## A Postscript

"There now, it's finished: there's no more to be done," wrote Primo Levi in a poem called "The Work," which concludes with the question, "What to do now?"[14] As these reflections on some ethical implications of interdisciplinary Holocaust education draw to a close, they also suggest that after Treblinka we must see differently and that much still remains to be done in Holocaust studies.

We need penetrating historical research that encourages study of the twigs and bushes as well as the landscape of which they are a part but also a style of historical research that discourages misleading quests for closure and finality. We need gender analysis that alerts us to the Holocaust's complexity. We need art and literature to sensitize the feelings without which Holocaust understanding is impoverished. We need sound religious studies to plumb the depths of the Holocaust's roots and implications. We need determination to heal and restore ethics, which the Holocaust left so badly wounded.

In short, as we continue to develop interdisciplinary Holocaust education, which is the only education that can begin to do justice to the awesome event it approaches, we need to remember to handle it all with care.

Notes

1. Edward Bond, "How We See," in Hilda Schiff, ed., *Holocaust Poetry* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), 156.

2. Peretz's testimony is quoted in Dan Cohn-Sherbok, ed., *Holocaust Theology: A Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 35.

3. See Christopher R. Browning, *Collected Memories: Holocaust History and Postwar Testimony* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), x. Browning quotes the late George Mosse, who once said, "Those of us who survey the broad landscape still love the twigs and bushes."

4. Raul Hilberg, *Sources of Holocaust Research: An Analysis* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2001), 204.

5. See, for example, Bauer's letter to the editor in *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 18 (Spring 2004): 182-83 and also his book *Rethinking the Holocaust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).

6. I quote from Bauer's letter to the editor, *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, 183.

7. Isaiah Trunk, *Jewish Responses to Nazi Persecution: Collective and Individual Behavior in Extremis*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel and Gabriel Trunk (New York: Stein & Day, 1979), 70-1.

8. Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz: The Nazi Assault on Humanity*, trans. Stuart Woolf (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 17.

9. Ibid., 123.

10. For the phrase quoted from Levi, see ibid., 123.

11. Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B Ashton (New York: Seabury Press, 1973), 362.

12. Sarah Kofman, *Smothered Words*, trans. Madeleine Dobie (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1998), 39.

13. Ibid., 78.

14. Primo Levi, *Collected Poems*, trans. Ruth Feldman and Brian Swann (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), 56.