

Seventh International Conference on Holocaust Education

Shoah Education and Remembrance

“Reflections About Text and Context”

Prof. Yehuda Bauer, Academic Advisor, Yad Vashem

I want to talk about what I call text and context. Now, what do I mean by text regarding the Holocaust? I mean the core of the Holocaust. What is the core of the Holocaust? It's the period from 1933 to 1950. 1950 because that is the time that, more or less, the survivors in the Displaced Persons Camps in central Europe found their new homes whether in this country or in the West or wherever. So it's that span of seventeen years. The core is Nazi antisemitism, the Nazi party, the persecution of the Jews in Germany against the background of Nazi policies. It's the world war. It's the camps, the ghettos, the concentration camps, the death camps, the hiding, the resistance, the attempts at rescue, the policies of the great powers regarding what was happening in Europe at the time, it's the relationships generally between Jews and non-Jews in Europe at the time. It's the immediate post war period of the Displaced Persons Camps, and the dispersal of the displaced persons at the end to wherever they went afterwards. That's the core. That's the core which includes the immediate context of course, because you can't separate these things from each other in a sort of watertight compartmentalized way. The context, refers to what happened beforehand and afterward.

So you deal with human rights, you deal vertically with the history, the history of the Jewish people, the history of antisemitism, the history of the relationship between Jews and non-Jews throughout the last few hundred years at least. You deal with the history of Europe, history of Germany within Europe. You deal with the history of the world. Those are vertical things. You deal with horizontal things, global things. You deal with the whole world in fact because Jews went to the Philippines, Jews went to Indonesia, Jews went to Shanghai obviously, all of you know about that. They went to India, to Afghanistan, North Africa, South Africa, Central Africa, the whole world is involved in this. So this is the general context; General contexts are other genocides. The Holocaust was obviously a genocide, so [I mean] the comparisons with other genocides. You deal with the post-war effects of the genocide until today, with this particular. . of this particular genocide. You deal with the extremity of the genocide, the "lessons" if you like, from that because I do not believe that there are any "lessons" alternatively, you adapt the "lessons" from what you know.

So these are some of the general contexts, and there is a tendency, not only amongst educators, but amongst the general public and politicians and so on, to mix these things up, to talk about the wider context without knowing the text. You deal with human rights, as though that is essentially the way in which you approach the Holocaust, but that's a mistake, because, yes, human rights were denied to Jews in Germany and afterwards everywhere else, so there is a connection obviously, but it didn't have

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to be. If, as was perfectly possible, the Holocaust would not have happened, not because of the beautiful eyes of the Jews, but because of the interest of the European powers, that could have stopped Hitler in his tracks, in 1936, when Nazi Germany occupied the Rheinland. In 1938, when they annexed Austria, and following the Munich agreement, when they annexed parts of Czechoslovakia, and then destroyed that country altogether, they could have been stopped, not because of any humanitarian considerations, but because Britain and France, at that time, it was in their interest to stop Hitler. They didn't do it. They paid very heavily for it. So did the Soviets. In June 1939, there were negotiations going on in Leningrad, today Saint Petersburg, between an Anglo-French mission that tried to see whether there could be an alliance between the West and the Soviets, in order to stop Nazi Germany. They could have done it. They negotiated with Voroshilov – not exactly an Einstein, but he was a representative of Stalin. He asked the British what can you contribute? The British representative said 'two divisions', and later on some more, which was the truth- they didn't have anything. The French said we will stand behind the Maginot Line. The Soviets realized that they wanted to get the Nazis to attack the Soviet Union so they said no and made a pact with Hitler instead. They could have stopped him. Had that been so what would we have said today, we would have said there was a denial of human rights to Jews in Germany? It didn't lead to anything more than the expulsion of the Jews of Germany from Germany. There is no necessary connection there.

Now, you must too deal with human rights after you deal with the text, then you can say yes in actual fact the denial of human rights chronologically speaking and content wise, was one of the things that clearly led to the Holocaust. But it didn't have to be like that.

So let me deal with some of the core then, some of the text and let me start with something that very few people deal with. Why did World War II break out? Now, there is any number of books dealing with Danzig and the corridor, and the attack on Poland, and the diplomatic things there, and the military preparations, and the economic situation, we know all that. That is not an explanation why the war broke out. Somebody wanted it to break out. And that somebody obviously was Nazi Germany. Nobody else wanted a war.

Why did the Nazis want a war? After all, Germany had emerged from the economic crisis. There was practically no unemployment anymore in Germany; the German capitalists were doing very well. We now have plenty of documentation of the great German companies at the time. They did not press the political leadership for a war. They were doing very well without it. The military in Germany was preparing a *putsch* against Hitler in September 1938. The leader of that conspiratory association was no less than the chief of staff of the German army, General Ludwig Beck. Now, I don't know whether this would have succeeded or even broken out. I have no idea, because of course Chamberlain and Daladier went to Munich and the situation "was solved". But it shows you quite clearly that the German army, the leadership of the German army didn't want a war, not because they were pacifists, but because they were afraid they would lose a war.

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So the military didn't, so who wanted a war? So the stupid answer is Hitler. The more intelligent answer is the leadership of the Nazi party in Germany. Why? So the answer is because they wanted *Lebensraum*, living space. Why did they want living space? They had plenty of living space in Germany. The population of Germany then was smaller than the German population today. They were leading Europe industrially. They wanted to control Europe, why did they want to control Europe? What stands behind all this? Is there a smoking gun somewhere? Yes, there is. We have known about it since the Nuremberg trials. It's a memorandum of August 1936. It's in the Nuremberg trials documents where Hitler wrote a very private and secret memorandum – the only one he ever wrote himself, in horrible German, because the man didn't know his own language. He wrote it to Hermann Goering, number two in the hierarchy, and it was obviously not intended for publication or propaganda, because it was a private memo.

Goering was going to be nominated in October 1936, to be the economic czar of Germany preparing a war within the next four years, the four-year plan. It was then reduced to three. Goering had to know what he should do so the boss wrote him a letter, a memorandum. Contrary to what people think, Hitler knew macroeconomics pretty well, and he wrote exactly what Germany needed for a war such as so much steel, so much iron, so much this, so much that, how to get it, where to get it, and so on.

But the first page explains why. Let me quote just one sentence: "Since the beginning" . . . this is Hitler's language, I translated it literally, to let you realize not only Hitler's way of thinking but the peculiar way he used language. "Since the beginning of the French revolution the world has been drifting with increasing speed towards a new conflict whose most extreme solution is named Bolshevism, but whose content and aim is only the removal of those strata of society which gave the leadership up to humanity up to the present and their replacement by international Jewry... A victory of Bolshevism", he says, "over Germany will not lead to the Versailles Treaty but to the final destruction, even the extermination of the German people."

Why do we want a war? Because we have to defeat Bolshevism, because Bolshevism is Jewish, and Bolshevism wants to replace the whole leading strata of humanity by Jews. That's the reason for the war. And then on January 30, 1939, in his famous speech to the Reichstag, which you can see on film, he added I quote: "If the international Jewish financiers, in and outside Europe, should succeed in plunging the nations once more into a world war, then the result will not be the Bolshevization of the earth - and that's the victory of Jewry, but the annihilation of the Jewish race in Europe." [in Hitler's view] Bolshevism and international Jewish financiers are one. And every Jew represents all of them and therefore, the annihilation of the Jewish race is essential. That's the purpose of the war. That's the core of the Holocaust.

... I want to deal with another element of the core, this time with the victims. Now, what is essential here is not just a record of the murder, I mean we all know that, what we need is to realize what the reactions of the victims were. The reactions before they knew what was going to happen, after they knew what was going to happen, and how they reacted while it was happening, and then in

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the immediate aftermath. The decades after that belong to the general context, but the core is what the Jews do. You see, the perception still is within large parts of the international community that Jews were objects of a murder, which is partially true, and partially untrue because Jews were not just objects - they were first and foremost subjects. That's why they became objects. Because they develop a certain type of culture, of civilization, that was attacked for reasons that we don't have time to go into, by something we call very inaccurately antisemitism, which became a central political tool, not only in Europe [but in many places.]

Now, the reaction of the Jews was varied. In Germany for instance, during the 1930s there was a tremendous effort by the slowly declining number of the Jewish community in Germany to retrieve their own culture within Germany. There was a flourishing of Jewish culture in Germany in the 1930s (only for Jews because they were not permitted to have any real contact with their non-Jewish neighbors) books, theater, music, history, past history, present situation, in the usual Jewish way; contradictory, mutually opposing, and so on and so forth. But there was a tremendous flowering of this. Then you have within the Holocaust itself, within the murder itself, you have certain places, not everywhere, where you have a flowering of the same kind, and a reaction. There were no arms, there was no possibility of armed resistance, but there were possibilities of unarmed reactions or unarmed resistance. We know all that, but we must emphasize it because it is crucial to the understanding, not only of the Jewish reaction. This is where the specificity of the Jewish experience and the universal experience combined.

How do people react when they are faced with a genocidal situation, with a mass murder situation? The Jewish reaction was - here we use the term unique, and I don't use it anywhere else; the Holocaust was not unique, but here we use the term "unique", because there's no example in history of an unarmed cultural educational civilizational reaction to a mass murder situation to a genocidal situation by the civilians who were affected. And you have that in Warsaw, and you have that in Lodz, you have that in Vilna/Vilnius, you have it in many other places. Not only in Poland, also elsewhere. You have it in Terezin, in the Czech Republic today. You have it in other places the reaction, the moment, the slightest opportunity arose. And yes, there was the opposite reaction too. There was a total collapse of social cohesion. There were places where there was no education, no religious life, no cultural life, no social welfare, no mutual help. I can give you examples, I won't be able to because I don't have the time for it.

So why did it happen in some places and in some places not? My answer is very clear. I don't know. My guess is that there is an element of personal character, of chance, and of luck, and I know that my fellow historians cringe when I use those terms, because that is not a historical explanation. But it is because we are dealing with humans, with people, not with objects floating in the air. Humans have character, and they may have luck and chance and they may use it, and sometimes not. That is a core of the Holocaust, how did the Jews react.

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Another core element is the specificity of the Holocaust, compared with other events of the same kind. Because it is only in the Holocaust that you have elements such as totality, for instance. A plan was developed that said that every single person with three or four Jewish grandparents was to be killed (in Germany, not everyone with two Jewish grandparents, because they were not quite sure how to deal with so-called half-breeds - all who had three or four Jewish grandparents.) People were condemned to die for the crime of having been born. And there is no precedent for that in human history. And this was to happen everywhere in the world. It wasn't planned like that before. The Holocaust was not preplanned.

Until 1941, there existed no plan to murder all the Jews. I can say that with absolute certainty. The plan developed together with the mass murder. By mid-1941 a plan was developing. By the fall of 1941 it was taking shape. In the winter of 1941 it was there.

On the November 28, 1941, Hitler met with the Mufti of Jerusalem Haj Amin al-Huseini, Nazi collaborator, who was in Berlin. Because Mr. Al-Husseini didn't know any German and Mr. Hitler didn't know any Arabic, so there was a translator, and he took notes, so we know exactly what was being said. Al-Husseini expressed his fear that the Jewish people would not be dealt with outside of Europe. And Hitler said in so many words: When we win the war we will turn to all the countries in the world to treat the Jews the way we are treating them here."

When you talk about genocide, you talk about intent. Here you have a document, which shows very clearly what the intent was. It's not the only one, there are several more like that. Now that's unprecedented in human history, a globalized genocide. This is not Rwanda, which was in Rwanda; it's not the Armenians in Ottoman Turkey, which was limited to the ethnic Turkish areas. Armenians in Jerusalem were not touched, because this was not an ethnic Turkish area. You're not dealing here with Darfur, which outside of Darfur there is no Darfur. But outside of Europe there were Jews and it was going to happen everywhere in the world.

And then you have this ideology, which is totally unpragmatic. I mean, the Jews didn't have any territory, they didn't have any army. The first time there was a leadership of German Jewry was eight months after Hitler came to power. There has never been any German Jewry – there were German Jews, but no German Jewry. In Poland, since the 18th century, there had never been any kind of association of Polish Jews that represented all Polish Jews. The Jews were divided, part of them were socialists who opposed Zionism and religion. Parts of them were Zionists who quarreled amongst themselves and part of them were Orthodox who quarreled with everyone else. The first time there was a united Polish-Jewish organization was when a Lodz Jewish industrialist sent a telegram, a cable, to Paris to the Joint Distribution Committee, to say "we managed to establish a committee that represents all Polish Jews in order to deal with social welfare in Poland." The date of that cable was September 3, 1939. There was no Jewish political representation. That came much afterwards. And so you see, what

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they were attacking didn't exist. It was an illusionary ideology, delusionary ideology. They thought that the Jews control the world, Bolsheviks and capitalists. It's the result of certain ideological developments that we call Nazi antisemitism. It's totally unpragmatic.

They destroyed the ghetto of Lodz, in Spring 1944, despite the fact that the local Nazis, for their own reasons, wanted the ghetto to continue to exist, and the German army, the *Wehrmacht*, wanted it to continue to exist, because they were getting certain things from there which were quite safe, because the Allied bombers never attacked Lodz. But in the spring of 1944, there was a direct intervention of Himmler [that] no economic consideration should be of any value and the Jews have to disappear. (*Sollen verschwinden*)... And then part of them were deported to Chelmno, where are no survivors, and then later, on the rest were deported to Auschwitz. Is that pragmatic? Is that cost effective? Is that in the German economic, military, whatever, interest? No. It's the only genocide in history that was based on absolutely unpragmatic, – anti-pragmatic principles. That is the core of the Holocaust.

Let me deal with a third core aspect. It's the neutrals and the Allies, and their relation to what was happening. A large number of my colleagues, especially in America, accused the Roosevelt administration for not having done a thing to rescue European Jewry. When exactly should the Americans have done that? Before the war? But nobody knew that there would be a Holocaust. They could have accepted more refugees from Germany. Do you really think that the United States had an obligation to rescue people from some kind of a disaster anywhere in the world? Is that realistic? And when the war broke out America was outside of the war. It was joined in to the war, so to speak, after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. If the Japanese had not attacked, the Americans would have remained neutral. It wasn't America that declared war on Germany. Had Germany not declared war on America, the Americans would have remained neutral. And once they were forced into the war, at the end of 1941, how could they have rescued European Jewry? There was not a single American or British soldier, on the European continent. [It] was happening in Eastern Europe, and the Soviets were fleeing, were running away because they were completely defeated at the beginning of the German invasion. They were fighting for their lives, and they didn't care about Jews anyway.

So how exactly do you think that the Anglo-American coalition could have rescued the Jews of Europe during the Holocaust? They could have done more, sure. They could have rescued thousands, maybe tens of thousands. The British closed Palestine. The British refused the entry of Jewish refugees from the Iberian Peninsula to Britain during the war. The Americans had their quotas, very, very limited, few hundreds here, few hundreds there, during the war. They could have done more. In fact they decided not to do more. But to rescue the Jews of Europe, they could not have done.

Could they have bombed Auschwitz? Could they have bombed Treblinka, Chelmno, Sobibor, Belzec? Could they have done that? The answer is no. They couldn't, not until the spring of 1944. ...The Anglo-American Lancaster bombers could not have reached Poland except for one time. They could have reached Eastern Poland and returned to England, but they could not do that without any fighter

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escort. There were no fighters, airplanes or fighters that could accompany bombers that far. So they would have been completely alone. They would have been shot down like flying ducks. There was no way that the Anglo-American air force could have reached Poland before the spring of 1944. Why could they reach it then? Because the Allies occupied the airfields of Foggio, in Central Italy, in November 1943. It took them about three months, because, of course, the Germans completely destroyed them, in order to rebuild them, and then they could have bombed Poland.

But by early 1944, Treblinka was no longer in operation, Sobibor was no longer in operation, Belzec was no longer in operation and Chelmno was in operation for a short period of time to destroy the Jews of Lodz, in June 1944. There was only Auschwitz-Birkenau. They got the information about Auschwitz-Birkenau, the detailed information, in June 1944 when the reports of together four, Jewish escapees from Auschwitz reached the West. There were also reports by the Polish underground, by the Delegatura in Poland. A book that was published in Oswiecim, in the museum of Auschwitz-Birkenau, in 1968 under the communists, reported the exact report that was sent to London from Poland and they included the destruction of the Jews in Auschwitz. And the Polish government-in-exile did inform the West.

So in the spring of 1944 they could have bombed Auschwitz-Birkenau. Why didn't they bomb it? Because there was a decision in January 1944 by the combined chiefs of staff in Washington not to use military ends for civilian purposes. Auschwitz was a civilian camp, you see, it had no military importance. Monowitz, Auschwitz III, did, so that was bombed in part. And by mistake a few bombs fell in Birkenau. But there was a decision, nothing to do with Jews, no antisemitism there; it was a result of a failed attack of the allies in France, to liberate French resistant fighters in Dieppe. And because of that failure they decided never again to use military means for civilian purposes. And when the demand came to bomb Auschwitz, they said: 'But we have a decision, we can't do it.' There was in fact an American air marshal, air general at the time, Spaatz who on August 2, 1944, told his superiors in Washington 'If you give me the permission, I will bomb Birkenau. He never got it. So there was a possibility very late in the day. Could that have saved the millions of Jews? No. Could it have saved the Jews in the camp in Auschwitz? No, but it would have sent a message - we care. It's a moral issue, not a pragmatic one. And the Allies failed not because of the pragmatic thing. They wouldn't have saved Jews that way. The Germans, even if the crematoria would have been destroyed, which is very unlikely, would have continued murdering Jews. They did in the death marches, immediately following that. No, but it would have sent a moral message - we care for human lives, we care for millions of people. We know now they are being killed because they are Jews. They didn't do that. The failure was marked.

What I want to emphasize is that without the core, without the text, you can't deal with the context. But, yes, you have to deal with the context after you deal with the text. You must. People say the Holocaust is incomparable, it's unique. It is not. If it was unique, if it had been unique, it would mean that it happened only once in history, and then we could forget about it, because if something happened only once it has no meaning for us. But it can be repeated, not exactly, things never are repeated

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exactly, but in a general way yes. So it's not unique, it's unprecedented which means that the Holocaust was a precedent and it is being in different ways, not the same way, it's being followed.

And that's why you are here. Because it is very, very Jewish specific. You can't deal with the context without dealing with the Jewish text. You've got to know something about the Jews. If you deal with the Rwandan genocide you've got to know something about the Hutu and the Tutsi, you know. If you are in Cambodia you have to know the difference between the Khmer and the Cham. And if you deal with the American Indians you've got to know the difference between the Lakota and the Pawnees. You can't do without that. So you have to know something about the Jews. That's very, very specific. And every genocide is specific to the people who suffer. And the fact that it is specific means that it's universal because every genocide is like that. There you have the dialectics of this. So it's unprecedented, and it is a precedent, and we must teach it in both of its aspects, the specificity and the universality, and the specificity and universality are two sides of the same coin.

Now, what are my conclusions? Well, I'm very skeptical about conclusions generally, you know, they are the beginning of some more study. But, I think the conclusions from what I just said, first of all the realization that World War II was conducted by Nazi Germany for mainly ideological reasons, and the Holocaust is the product of ideological reasons, not pragmatic ones. And now it fits, you see, in a horrible way. The Holocaust which is ideologically motivated fitted into the World War II which was ideologically motivated, not like the First World War which was motivated by economic and political and other pragmatic reasons.

Second, and that's included in the first, antisemitism was a basic motivation and that has deep historical roots. Now, the result of World War II was the murder, the dying, of thirty-five million people in Europe alone, without Asia. Thirty-five million, close to six million of whom were Jews, twenty-nine million of whom were non-Jews. The twenty-nine million non-Jews died because of antisemitism.

Third, there are parallels and also very considerable differences related to the most extreme form of genocide. Not because of the number of victims, that was equaled by others, not because of the percentage of the victims from the whole victim community, that is equaled by others too, not because of the suffering of the victims, that is always the same everywhere. There is no difference between Jews and Tutsi and Russians and Germans and whatever; but because of the reasons that I mentioned – the totality, the universality, the ideology and some other points that I didn't have time to deal with. Now, it cannot be done without a comparison between Nazi Germany and the Soviet empire. But that comparison shows not only the parallels, but the major differences between those two totalitarian regimes. The Soviets were not responsible for World War II. It was a brutal dictatorship, a horrible regime, but it was not responsible for mass genocide. It was responsible for some genocidal things, yeah sure. They never planned a major genocide per se. It was horrible enough, and it was allied to

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Nazi Germany for a while, that enabled the Germans to do what they did, but that was not the fault of the Soviets. It was the fault of the three major powers that could have combined and didn't to stop Nazi Germany. A simplistic equation between Nazism and Stalinism is mistaken. The one of the proofs of that is the Holocaust.

And finally, if you want to teach the Holocaust you have to start from the core, from the text before you can approach the context. But you have to do both.

Thank you.

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