

Holocaust Historical Overview

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1 "The Holocaust," which has come to mean the systematic, state-sponsored murder of six million Jews and millions of non-Jews by the Nazis and their collaborators during World War II. The word is Greek in origin, a translation of the Hebrew word *olah* meaning, a burnt offering offered whole unto the Lord. The Nazis called the murder of the Jews, "The Final Solution to the Jewish Problem." It was their way of speaking euphemistically. Defining Jews as a problem or a question demands a solution. The word final was only all too accurate. Their intention was totally to end Jews' history, to eliminate all Jewish blood once and for all.

2 Yiddish-speaking Jews used the word *churban*, destruction, to signify the Holocaust. More recently, the word *Shoah* has been used alone, to signify a whirlwind of destruction. Historian Lucy Dawidowicz called the Holocaust "The War Against the Jews," and perhaps she is right. The planned destruction of an entire people was a war the Nazis came close to winning.

3 The destruction of the Jews was at the center of Nazi ideology, at the center of Hitler's vision, but Jews were not the Nazi's only victims. Nazi racism was directed against a mosaic of victims.

4 Some were targeted for what they did. Trade unionists and political dissidents were sent to concentration camps. Some were victimized for what they refused to do. Jehovah's Witnesses would not swear allegiance to the State, they would not register for the draft. German and after the 1938 annexation of Austria, Austrian male homosexuals were arrested because they would not breed the master race; they were an insult to the Nazi macho image. Permit me not to use the politically correct language of today but the language that was used then to describe the victims.

5 In addition to Jews, the Germans systematically killed three groups. The first, mentally handicapped, physically handicapped or emotionally disturbed Germans were murdered in a so-called "euthanasia" program. They were considered "life unworthy of living." Gas chambers and crematoria were developed to kill these Germans. As many as 200,000 Germans were killed in the euthanasia program.

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6 Roma and Sinti (Gypsies) were also killed. Their fate most closely paralleled the Jews. They died in the gas chambers as families -- men, women, and children. Perhaps as many as 250,000 Gypsies were murdered by the Germans.

7 During the early days of the war against the Soviet Union in 1941, Soviet prisoners of war were put to death mostly by starvation and exposure without shelter. Later, they were allowed to live, to be used in forced labor. But some 3.3 million Soviet POWs died under German rule. Slavic nations, most especially, were decimated.

Why Jews?

8 Antisemitism, the hatred of Jews, has existed throughout history. Jews play a special role in Christianity. Jesus was born a Jew and preached to the Jews, but his followers broke with Judaism and became his followers, Christians, and developed a rival religion. They believed that Christianity had come to fulfill and replace Judaism and did not understand why the Jews remained faithful to their traditions and refused to convert. Religious antisemitism persisted throughout the centuries. The 16th century religious reformer Martin Luther admonished the Jews for not embracing his new religion and called for violence against them. He referred to Jews as venomous.

9 In addition, some interpretations of the Gospel -- which were only changed by the Vatican in the 1960s -- blamed the Jews for the death of Jesus; not only the Jews of those days but all Jews were considered guilty of the murder of Christ. Thus, the early origin of antisemitism is religious.

10 Until the French Revolution of 1789, the status of Jews in Europe was tenuous. Treated as outsiders, they had few civil rights. They were taxed as a community, not as individuals. Exclusion from the larger society reinforced their religious identity and strengthened their communal institutions, which served judicial and quasi-governmental functions. In the French Revolution, with its promise of liberty, equality

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and fraternity, the rights of citizenship were extended to Jews. Still, Jewish freedoms were conditioned on the willingness of Jews to abandon their age-old customs and their communal identity.

11 In the 19th century a new form of antisemitism developed -- political antisemitism. The term "antisemitism" was coined by a German journalist to refer to this type of prejudice. Hatred of the Jews was used for political purposes to elect candidates to office, to oppose policies that would grant minorities including Jews equal rights and greater freedom. One such antisemitic incident divided France. A Jewish Captain on the French General Staff, Alfred Dreyfuss was falsely accused of spying for the enemy. In the streets his opponents chanted "death to the Jews." Even when the fraudulent charges were discovered, there were many who still refused to believe that Dreyfuss was innocent. They refused to accept the Jew as a member of society. But the lesson was clear: Jews were not secure even in the most advanced nation in Europe.

12 A document was forged by the Russian Secret Police entitled the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, which described a Jewish conspiracy to dominate the world. Despite undeniable proof of its falsehood it was widely believed and circulated throughout Europe.

13 As the 19th century ended, Jewish life was in ferment throughout the East. In Eastern Europe, many Jews lived in shtetls, villages that were predominantly Jewish. They spoke Yiddish, read Yiddish books, both sacred and secular, and attended Yiddish theaters and movies. Many wore traditional black caftans and continued to observe the practices of their grandparents. Jewish religious life in all its forms was fervent. Yet many a young Jew left the Yeshiva to enter a German university, casting aside traditional garb and practice and ardently embracing the teachings of the West. Despite antisemitism and cultural constraints, Germany was the place where Jews were best able to participate in intellectual and cultural life. They assimilated rapidly. Inter-marriage was widespread; so was conversion.

14 Jewish life was caught up in radical change. In 1881 Czar Alexander II was assassinated by revolutionaries. Jews were blamed and an era of promise came to an end in Russia. Pogroms and

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persecutions erupted that set off a massive migration to the West as millions of Jews migrated to the New World. The Jewish population of the United States increased from 250,000 in 1881 to some 4 million in 1919 as waves of immigrants came to escape antisemitism, poverty and despair. The shores of the United States were open to receive those needing a haven, those yearning to be free.

15 At times of economic insecurity or rapid cultural change, at times of defeat or dislocation, Jews were scapegoated, blamed for all that was happening. People could be united by turning against a common enemy.

16 In Germany, in the century preceding the Nazi rise of power, antisemitism was linked to German nationalism and culture. Intellectuals, artists, and composers, such as Richard Wagner believed that Jews were innately incapable of being part of the true German nation. This idea directly impacted on Hitler.

17 Adolph Hitler and his followers built on this long tradition of antisemitism, but transformed it into racial antisemitism. The enemy was Jewish blood, conversion was impossible. Only the complete elimination of Jews would do. A Jew was guilty not because of the religious beliefs he practiced, or the identity he affirmed, but because of blood. And they joined racial antisemitism with an even more lethal brew *redemptive antisemitism*, the elimination of the Jews – not initially but eventually by murder, which they termed extermination – was essential to the national wellbeing of the German people. Jews were regarded as a cancer, a tumor. Invasive surgery was required for the health of the nation.

The Nazi Persecution

18 The Nazis came to power in Germany legally; they were elected to the Reichstag. Adolph Hitler assumed office in 1933 as head of a coalition government with his opponents gambling that once in power he would be forced to the center, to moderate or mute the antisemitic, racist and dictatorial aspects of his platform. He spent the first two years of his regime consolidating power, eliminating political opposition and solidifying his dictatorship.

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19 German law defined the Jews in the Nuremberg legislation of 1935; Jews were identified not by the religion they professed, the values they avowed, the beliefs they practiced, or the identity they affirmed, but biologically, based on the religion of their grandparents. The enemy was all Jews, religious and secular, ardent or assimilationist, Zionists or German nationalists. Since Jewish blood was the target, even those who had converted to Christianity, even those whose parents had been converts, including priests and nuns, ministers and pastors, were defined as Jews.

20 Once established, this definition of Jews was applied in country after country as the Reich expanded its borders and occupied other lands from 1938 onward.

21 Over the next three years, property was confiscated, civil liberties were abridged, then violated, and ultimately cancelled; homes, businesses, possessions, synagogues, public institutions and private property were all taken from the Jews. Jewish students were not allowed to attend schools or universities, They could not sit on park benches or swim in public pools. At first, this discrimination was an effort to force them to emigrate, to make Germany *Judenrein* [free of Jews]; and later confiscation and expropriation of personal property, homes and businesses became an essential part of the "Final Solution."

22 In Germany this policy evolved slowly from 1933-39; the first stage, eliminating Jews from German society and forcing them to leave Germany in acts of "self deportation" reached its crescendo in the November 9-11 pogroms of 1938 known as *Kristallnacht* in which the synagogues of Germany and Austria were burned, Jewish businesses were looted, Jewish homes were invaded and 30,000 Jewish men -- almost all between the ages of 16 and 60 -- were arrested and sent to concentration camps.

23 The process of eliminating the Jews from society, which had taken years in Germany, took only months in Austria after its incorporation into the Reich in March 1938, and oftentimes only weeks in territories to be later occupied due to German expansionism.

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24 David Marwell, the director of New York's Museum of Jewish Heritage, has said that just because Jews were simply overpowered, did not mean that they were passive. Jews responded to the Nazi onslaught by trying to emigrate. There were hurdles to overcome, but they were persistent. More than one in two left Germany and Austria before the onset of war. They trained themselves in mobile professions. They became electricians and plumbers, agricultural workers and nurses rather than lawyers and writers. Musicians and architects "spoke" a universal language. Jews turned inward, turning toward Jewish history and Jewish spirituality to face the onslaught.

25 Within a month of the beginning of World War II, in September 1939, more than two million Jews came under German domination as the Germans conquered Poland. Forced emigration of a population so vast became an ever more distant fantasy. Shortly afterwards the first systematic killings began, not of Jews but of the mentally retarded and physically disabled Germans. Hitler personally ordered "that patients considered incurable according to the best available human judgment of their state of health, can be granted a mercy killing." With two years, six killing centers were established with gas chambers and crematoria. The physicians who began their service at these centers would later be moved to the death camps. During the German occupation, tens of thousands of Poles, including priests, the intelligentsia, and opponents of Nazism, were murdered.

Ghettoization and War:

26 Jews in German-occupied Poland were forced to live together in confined areas, ghettos in the East; and with the German invasion of Western Europe in 1940, transit camps were established in the West. To the killers, these were temporary measures, pending a determination of some final policy. The victims thought that the ghettos would endure. They were wrong.

27 Just as German policy toward Jews did not remain static so too German control of Europe evolved. In his 1925 book, *Mein Kampf* [My struggle] Hitler articulated a vision of German expansionism, German "living space." Once in power, his vision became state policy. The German Reich increased in size by

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incorporating former territories; in 1938 Austria, and the Sudetenland and then from the fall of 1939 onward expansion by war. Poland fell in September; Western Europe, Holland, France, Belgium, Luxembourg, Denmark and other countries in the spring and summer of 1940 and the Balkans and the Soviet Union in 1941. With each expansion the number of Jews under German control increased and immediately anti-Jewish policies were imposed.

28 Emigration was not possible. There were too many Jews and they were unwanted everywhere. Allied countries refused to receive large numbers of Jews even in peacetime. This position was confirmed at the 1938 conference in Evian; reaffirmed at the Bermuda Conference of 1943. The Germans believed Allied reluctance to receive immigrants as tacit consent. They were confident that the Allies were equally reticent to implement rescue.

Implementing The Final Solution: *Einsatzgruppen*

29 Sometime in the winter of 1940-41 a policy decision was made and crowned with a proper name "The Final Solution to the Jewish Problem." The "solution" envisioned was all too final, the murder of all Jews under German domination -- men, women and children. Those who acted on this policy were certain that they were implementing the Fuhrer's [Adolph Hitler's] will.

30 With the invasion of the Soviet Union in June of 1941, the slaughter began by mobile killing units, *Einsatzgruppen*, that accompanying advancing German forces. They entered town after town, village after village, hamlets and even large cities, rounded up the Jews, Gypsies and Soviet Commissars and shot them one by one, bullet by bullet, person after person. This process continued as the army advanced to the East and when the military situation stabilized the killing units returned to finish off what had been left undone. Once again, they were to return in 1943, this time to dig up the bodies and burn them to wipe out all evidence of their crime.

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31 Killing was difficult, even for the killers. They killers drank heavily. Alcohol somehow made the work more bearable. They spoke in euphemisms -- of special actions, special treatment, executive measures, cleansing, resettlements, liquidation, finishing off, "appropriate" treatment.

32 The killers themselves were marked. If post-war testimony is to be believed, one of the key SS officers told Heinrich Himmler, the leader of the SS "Look at the eyes of the men in this kommando, how deeply shaken they are...These men are finished for the rest of their lives. What kind of followers are we training here? Either neurotics or savages."

33 The German killers did not operate alone. The *Wehrmact*, the German Army also participated. Local gendarmerie, native antisemites and even neighbors who had previously worked with their local Jews participated in the killing. One of the most painful documents of the Holocaust is to read of a German complaint against the venomous cruelty of the Romanian army who tortured the Jews before killing them. And in recent years, a Roman Catholic Priest, Father Patrick Desbois, has been interviewing older inhabitants, eyewitnesses to the killing and unearthing the mass graves. He has made some important forensic discoveries. The SS and the Wehrmact used different bullets than the local police or the native citizens so Fr. Desbois could identify who performed the killing. He has also discovered bodies without bullets and thus the stories of fathers and mothers who took a bullet for their child and threw them into the mass graves in the hopes that they would survive. He has also found keys, which indicates that when the victims left home that morning, they full expected to return to their homes again. We all carry keys; they represent security and safety.

34 To deal with this type of killing, a more impersonal method of killing was sought. If the killers could no longer be brought to the victims in order to slaughter them face to face, the victims must be brought to the killers and disposed of in a way that kept the victims at a distance. Thus a second form of killing was developed: the death camp, where the victims were gassed, and the bodies were then burned.

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From *Einsatzgruppen* to Death Camps:

35 Railroads were *the* essential link to the killing process. And deportation transformed the ghetto into a transit camp, a way station to contain the captive population until the killing centers were developed and opened for business. Deportation meant the loss of home, the collapse of families, the beginning of a journey to death. Deportation also meant that there was no tomorrow, no hope. It was then -- and only then -- that several ghettos, Warsaw, Vilna, Bialystok and many others, rose in revolt.

36 The time table was swift. The policy was announced in January 1942 at Wannsee Conference where 15 men -- seven of whom held doctorates from German universities -- gathered to learn of the "Final Solution." They spoke of killing 11 million Jews in Europe assuming that they would conquer Great Britain and all of the Soviet Union. After this meeting three death camps that were under development since November 1941 -- months prior to the conference -- came on line in the winter and the spring, by the summer of 1942 deportations to death had begun; by 1943 most of the Jews to be killed in the Holocaust were already dead.

37 At the time of the Wannsee Conference between 75-80% of the Jews who were to be murdered in the Holocaust were still alive. By the spring on 1943 four of five of the Jews were dead.

38 Three camps were reserved exclusively for killing Jews; Sobibor, Treblinka and Belzec. Auschwitz and Majdanek served three functions; killing centers, slave labor camps, concentration camps. At Auschwitz, the largest and most lethal of the camps, Some 1.25 million people were murdered there, mostly Jews. Twenty thousand Roma and Sinti (Gypsies) were killed as well as tens of thousands of Poles and Soviet prisoners of war. A German map of 1945 lists 3,000 camps, but there may have been more. Recent United States Holocaust Memorial Museum research indicate that there may have been some 42,000 [forty two thousand) camps of varying types. These other camps were not solely dedicated to killing though conditions were so harsh, slave labor so intense, food so scarce that hundreds of thousands of inmates died or were killed.

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39 Nazi doctors, such as Josef Mengele, MD, Ph.D who was both a physician and a researcher stationed at Auschwitz, performed medical experiments on the inmates. They were forcibly sterilized or frozen. Tests were painful, exhausting, and traumatic for the frightened and hungry children who made up the bulk of Mengele's subjects. When the research was completed some subjects were killed by phenol injections and their organs were autopsied and analyzed. Scientifically interesting anatomical specimens were preserved and shipped out to the Institute in Berlin- Dahlem for further research.

40 Upon arrival, Jews were separated in a process known as "selektion" when an SS physician would divide the young and the able bodied from other prisoners. Those chosen to die would be sent directly the gas chambers. Their personal possessions were confiscated, and hair shorn; as many as two thousand would be sent into the sealed gas chambers at one time. SS personal would pour two canisters of Zyklon B down an opening and within 20-30 minutes the new arrivals would be dead. Their bodies would then be sent to the crematoria where gold teeth were removed, and private parts examined before cremation. Sometimes when the crematoria could not handle the volume of killings, bodies would be burned in open fields.

41 The able bodied who passed the first selektion would then be processed. They too would be shaven, their personal possessions confiscated, a number and was tattooed on their forearm, they would be referred to by number not by name. They were forced to work for long hours, under harsh conditions. Prisoners were neither adequately fed nor kept warm. They too, faced periodic selektion. Only the few able to withstand these horrible conditions could survive. Weakened or sick prisoners were sent back to Birkenau and gassed.

42 The fate of Jews differed country by country, region by region. What evolved slowly in Germany over twelve years or in Poland over three, took less than three months in Hungary. The Germans invaded Hungary in March 1944. Jews were defined immediately and their property was confiscated, by April they were ghettoized; on May 15, the deportation began and by July 8th 437,402 Jews had been deported to

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primarily to Birkenau, the death camp at the Auschwitz complex on 147 trains. Eight in ten were gassed upon arrival.

World War II and the War Against the Jews:

43 The progress of World War II impacted the Holocaust. With each German advance more Jews came under German domination; impending German losses often intensified the pace of destruction; each area liberated from German control brought relief to its endangered population -- none more endangered than the Jews. And in the final months of the war, as camps in the East were being overrun, the Nazis instituted a series of forced evacuations by foot and by rail, hasty retreats of populations of incarcerated concentration camps. Few if any provisions were provided; the marches took place in the dead of winter. They were known as death marches, the last ditch effort to keep the living witnesses from being captured by the Allies. For the victims, the struggle was no longer against the Nazis, but against death itself as they were forced to draw upon reservoirs of strength, pushed beyond the limits of endurance.

Resistance

44 Jews fought the Nazis in the forests of the Eastern Europe and in the ghettos of German-occupied Poland; they fought as part of the Marquis in France and with Tito in Yugoslavia; they took up arms alone in occupied Poland, and resisted alongside Soviet partisans.

45 Even in the death camps of Birkenau, Treblinka, and Sobibor, Jews resisted with arms; crematoria were blown up, escapes were organized.

46 Armed resistance was not the first response. Jews were more practiced in the art of spiritual resistance, thwarting Nazi intentions by non-violent means, by less than all out confrontation. Courage in the face of death -- and valor -- took many forms.

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47 Jews fought against impossible odds. Unlike classical guerilla fighters, Jews were often immobile. Confined to ghettos, they were captive and vulnerable for retaliation. Antisemitism was widespread, therefore Jewish resistance did not enjoy popular support. The Jewish fighters could not disappear among the Polish population. They were subject to betrayal. The ghettos in which they fought were subject to collective reprisals, collective responsibility. All could be killed for the decisions of a few.

48 Arms were difficult and dangerous to obtain; they had to be purchased and smuggled, pistol by pistol, rifle by rifle. Material assistance was not available from the Allies, the underground armies in German-occupied Poland were reluctant to supply weapons against a common enemy; they did not believe that Jews would fight.

49 Armed resistance was an act of desperation. It erupted when Jews understood Nazi intentions, when hope of survival had been abandoned. The motivation of the fighters was to protect Jewish honor, to avenge Jewish death.

Liberation and Its Aftermath:

50 As the Allied armies swept through Europe in 1944 and 1945, they found 7 to 9 million displaced people living in countries that were not their own. More than 6 million returned to their native lands. But more than 1 million refused repatriation. Victims became displaced persons, stateless, in search of new homes and new lands.

51 For Jews, there was nowhere to go. Their homes had been destroyed, their families murdered and they were unwanted everywhere. The presence of so many Jews on German soil, living among their former killers, pressured world leaders to find a place where the Jews could go. Most wanted to rebuild their lives in an independent Jewish state in Palestine. They demonstrated their determination by trying two types of illegal migration, *Bricha*, the escape from Soviet-held territories to American or British-held territories, and *Aliyah Bet*, efforts to bring displaced person to Palestine in violation of British policy. Only in 1948,

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when the State of Israel was proclaimed and open its shores to receive the Jews, did most find a home, a place to rebuild their lives.

52 In the winter of 1943, Franklin Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, and Josef Stalin, leaders of the United States, Great Britain and the USSR declared their determination to bring the Nazi leaders to justice. Allied outrage at Nazi wartime behavior only intensified after the discovery of killing centers.

53 Just after the war ended, agreement was reached to conduct joint trials. President Truman, who replaced FDR on April 12, 1945, took the unusual step of asking Supreme Court Justice Robert Jackson to lead the American effort. Nuremberg, the site of annual Nazi party pageants was chosen for the trials.

54 Three forms of crimes were specified in the indictment:

Crimes against the Peace -- planning, preparation, initiation or waging of a war of aggression;

War Crimes -- violations of laws and customs of war such as the murder, ill-treatment, or deportation of slave labor or for any other purpose of civilian populations...killing of hostages, prisoners of war, plunder of private property, destruction of towns and cities;

Crimes Against Humanity -- murder, extermination, enslavement, deportation...against any civilian population...persecution on political, racial, or religious grounds...whether or not in violation of domestic laws of the country where perpetrated.

55 There were two series of trials at Nuremberg and over the past 68 years the trials of Nazi war criminals have continued because of the uniqueness of this crime. In 1948, the United Nations passed the Genocide Convention, which was designed to overcome the claims of Nuremberg defendants that they had violated no law. The Convention specifically defines the various aspects of Nazi genocide as criminal. It

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prohibits the killing of persons belonging to a group (the final solution); causing grievous bodily or spiritual harm to members of a group; deliberately enforcing upon the group living conditions which could lead to complete or partial extermination (ghettoization and starvation); enforcing measures to prevent births among the group (sterilization); forcibly removing children from the group and transferring them to another group (the "Aryanization" of Polish children). The adoption of the Convention was followed the next day by the adoption of a Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

56 And in the years since as you can read in this majestic work, survivors have borne witness to the events they experienced.

57 The world tried to rebuild the scaffolding of justice by trying a few perpetrators; it tried to learn the lessons of the Holocaust and to outlaw genocide, hoping against hope that naming the crime and outlawing it would somehow end it.

58 As for the Holocaust survivors, who were a small minority of the victims -- many more were murdered than survived -- the question they faced was what to do with the accident of their survival. They too had to rebuild their lives in its aftermath. Over time they came to answer the question: "Why did I survive?" not by a statement about the past but by what they did with their lives in the aftermath.

59 Because they have faced death many will have learned what is most important in life. Life itself, love, family and community, and what Holocaust survivor and Academy Award Winner Gerda Klein called "a boring evening at home." The small things, the simple things we have all taken for granted, cannot be taken for granted but must be treasured and appreciated anew. For Jewish survivors, the survival of the Jewish people has become paramount. The final statement of Jewish history and Jewish memory must be about life and not death, no matter how pervasive that death.

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60 For many survivors, bearing witness conferred a sense of meaning in the aftermath of atrocity. They have told the story of the past, to keep a promise they made to those they left behind. More importantly, in the hope -- however slim -- that it can transform the future.

What of the Role of Holocaust Memory in the Contemporary World?

61 In a world of relativism, it has taken its place as the Absolute. We don't know what is good. We don't know what is bad. But we do know that the Holocaust is evil, absolute evil. It is for that reason why people use the word in the plural as they attempt to call attention to their suffering – the Black Holocaust, the Holocaust of the American Indians, the Holocaust in Kosovo, Rwanda, Bosnia. The Holocaust is the nuclear bomb of moral epithets. It is an event of such magnitude that the more we sense the relativism of values, the more we require the Holocaust as the Foundation for a negative absolute – absolute evil. This may well be the reason why the leaders of European nations have rediscovered the importance of the Holocaust for contemporary moral education. This may also be the reason why it becomes the focal point for Papal visits to Israel, for German society and for American society.

62 It may also be why Holocaust deniers deny an event that all reasons, all standards of rationality demonstrate cannot be denied. It is in this function as negative absolute that the Holocaust may loom largest in the coming years.

63 Consciousness of the Holocaust has moved way beyond the Jewish community: in the past half century the bereaved memories of a parochial community have been transformed into an act of conscience. *Survivors have responded in the most deeply Jewish way of all: remembering suffering and transmitting that memory in order to fortify conscience, to plead for decency, to strengthen values and thus to intensify a commitment to human dignity.* That is how the Biblical Jews taught us to remember that we were slaves in Egypt and that is why the Biblical experience has framed the struggle for freedom ever since.

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64 One cannot undo what has happened. Historians can answer the question *how* only in the most technical sense detailing event after event; theologians, writers, poets and philosophers, psychologists and artists have not answered the question *why*.

65 Yet we can answer the question of what to do with this history. Embrace it, study it, wrestle with it and ultimately transform it into a weapon for the human spirit to enlarge our sense of responsibility, to alleviate human suffering and strengthen our moral resolve.