

1 thinking

At no other place or time has one seen a phenomenon so unexpected and so complex: never have so many lives been extinguished in so short a time, and with so lucid a combination of technological ingenuity, fanaticism and cruelty.

—Primo Levi, survivor of Auschwitz, 1988

Three propositions of a survivor:

That hell is a denial of the ordinary; that nothing lasts; that clean white paper waiting under a pen is the gift beyond history and hurt and heaven.

—John Ciardi, American poet, 1959

I had no clarity when I was writing this book, I do not have it today, and I hope that I never will. Clarification would amount to disposal, settlement of the case, which can then be placed in the files of history. My book is meant to aid in preventing precisely this.

—Jean Amery, survivor of Auschwitz, 1977

I am a generation removed from the Holocaust. As an American, I have lived a peaceful life, free from the curse of war and destruction. None of my loved ones were killed in the cataclysm. I, born in the early forties, did not even know of the Holocaust as a child. My knowledge has come vicariously: I listened to survivors; I read memoirs and scholarly studies.

I have also been a tourist of the Holocaust. A half century after the infamy, I have walked in Holocaust places.¹ On those

1. According to historian Michael Marrus, Auschwitz attracts seventy thousand visitors per year, a remarkable number given the location of the camp far from the usual tourist route. These visitors have not left the site untouched. The pile of inmate shoes and the mound of women's hair, are considerably smaller now than they were a few years ago. One presumes that tourists, for whatever reasons, treat these objects as memorabilia (or icons?) and take them home.

grounds, pondering the slaughter, I have felt the strangeness—the other-worldliness—that for me is so essential in approaching the Holocaust.

snapshots

I begin this book with three snapshots from my memory.²

a mountain top

Tourists often include mountain vistas in their itineraries. The Bavarian Alps are spectacular, and it would be hard to find a more beautiful place than the Eagle's Nest. Sitting on a mountaintop, this was Hitler's getaway, similar in function to an American president's Camp David. Here Hitler worked and here Hitler played.³

The day is foggy, drizzly, cold—and stunning. From what looks like the top of the world, life in the valleys below is hidden, then revealed through the gauze of fast-moving clouds. Such grandeur encourages one to meditate: not only about the meaning of the universe, but of the Eagle's Nest just a few decades ago. Hitler had undoubtedly gazed at the same view many times, perhaps musing about the Final Solution, perhaps dreaming of death.

The Bavarian government has converted Hitler's house into a tourist center and restaurant. We have lunch in what was the conference room, our table next to an impressive fireplace, a gift to Hitler from Mussolini. Eva Braun's bedroom is just to our left. We are cold and wet and shivering. The bockwurst, kraut, and beer, followed by hot spiced wine, then cake with

2. I keep a detailed journal when I travel, generally written each morning and evening. The "we" that follows refers to my wife and me.

3. The Eagle's Nest was built in 1937, for Hitler's fiftieth birthday. The approach road, four miles long and only thirteen feet wide, ascends almost 900 feet—a difficult engineering feat in the rugged mountain terrain. Today one must take a bus up a dizzying road. At its end, a luxurious elevator—with green leather and brass mirrors—whisks the visitor up through 330 feet of solid rock to the mountain top. According to some accounts, Hitler rarely used the place, preferring his villa on the lower slopes.

schlag—a good German meal—satisfy us. The fire and wine have warmed our bodies. We understand that we are not supposed to have a good time here. We buy a postcard or two to send home.

a music school

In Munich, one eats weisswurst, prepared fresh every morning, and washes it down with the finest beer in the world. The best place to have this meal is in a beer hall, perhaps one in which the unknown politician Adolf Hitler spoke, for this is the city where the Nazi Party was born.

Munich is a beautiful city—medieval gates, a gothic city hall, and flowers everywhere. Of the many buildings constructed in this city by the Nazis, only two remain. The designs for both were closely supervised by Hitler. In a city of lovely buildings, these were grim, bunkerlike blocks: long, low, square columns, flat; no trees, shrubs, or flowers.

We approach one, the former Nazi Party headquarters.⁴ We look carefully and find neither sign nor plaque to mark the history of the building. Today it is a music academy. From the outside, we hear music and a hauntingly beautiful soprano voice singing a Mozart aria. I am transported into a surreal nightmare or perhaps an Ingmar Bergman movie. I feel like crying, and perhaps also like vomiting. Inside, we find marble floors, a grand stairway, and harsh light. Students walk to and fro, busy with the minutiae of their lives.

The Allies destroyed most of these Nazi buildings. I'm glad they saved this one; for better or worse, we should save and remember, never destroy, our history. But something is very wrong here. The memory has been badly twisted: Sweet music now emanates unknowingly from a place that produced the greatest cacophony. So the music, through no fault of the singer and players, is turned into something ugly.

4. At this site, Hitler and Neville Chamberlain signed the infamous Munich appeasement of 1938 which ceded the Sudetenland (part of the current Czech Republic) to the Nazis.

trees

At Dachau, a concentration camp near Munich, the Germans counted their victims; they carefully registered 31,591 murders.⁵ Today Dachau is a tourist site for the curious. It is also a cemetery, though one without bodies. We walk the grounds of Dachau amidst the ashes. We cross ditches that once carried streams of blood. We stand in a barrack (a reconstruction, to be sure) of suffering. The barracks had stood in neat lines, each with a tree symmetrically placed.

Those trees still bother me. I have always seen beauty in trees, and these at Dachau were quite lovely. Yet for me the trees were obscene: for their roots, which entangled and sucked up the nutrient human ash, are to this day nurtured by ghosts.⁶

Dachau is clean, spotless. A half century ago, it was the same. If there is a symbol for the Holocaust, if any one image can capture both order and chaos, it is this: The Nazis starved their prisoners; they beat them; they degraded them in their own excrement.⁷ But neatness, cleanliness, surrounded the filth, enveloped their deaths.

Not only neatness, but a certain beauty prevails. For the village of Dachau, from which the camp takes its name, is quite lovely.⁸ According to its own brochure, replete with snapshots of the village past and present, "tranquility still graces the town."

5. The first concentration camp built by the Nazis, Dachau was initially used for political prisoners. It was never an extermination camp. Until the last days of the war, relatively few (by concentration camp standards) prisoners died there, though—as we will see in chapter 4—unspeakable things happened at that site. Just before the Russians liberated Auschwitz and other camps in the east, the Nazis force-marched prisoners to Dachau, and there murdered unknown tens of thousands.

6. Birkenau, the killing center at Auschwitz, is named for the trees in that area. The word means "birches" in German.

7. See Terrence Des Pres, *The Survivor: An Anatomy of Life in the Death Camps* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976, p. 53ff). Sometimes emaciated people actually fell to their deaths through the latrine openings.

8. Claude Lanzmann's 1985 film *Shoah* quietly shocks the viewer with pacific scenery; a half century can transmogrify a killing ground into a scenic vista. Visiting Mauthausen, a concentration camp in Austria, I was disturbed and unsettled by the picture-postcard beauty of the site.

Visitors are urged to visit the palace, built in 1715, where “you can rest and feel at home on the terrace with its views of the gardens.” The document also presents the years between 1933 and 1945 as the years of terror, but claims that its citizenry “didn’t know the details of what was going on behind the walls of the camps.” One more note: the brochure claims that in the years between 1573 and 1652, under the rule of Maximilian I, “Dachau experienced its worst time.”⁹

The following snapshots were taken at Auschwitz: a fitting place—an inevitable place, a place that Primo Levi called “a ferocious sociological laboratory”¹⁰—to begin thinking about the Holocaust. I found the snapshots in memoirs written by survivors.¹¹

the bed-making ritual

Making a bed is perhaps a dull detail in the life of an ordinary person. For prisoners in concentration camps, Primo Levi tells us, bed-making was dangerous, a time of dark ritual. The beds (such as they were) were wooden planks; mattresses were thin and filled with wood shavings; pillows were torn and filled with straw; two men slept in each bed. After reveille, all beds had to be made “immediately” and “simultaneously” and “perfectly.”

9. Today Dachau is home to one of the most active artistic communities in Germany, one that has explicitly and purposely explored Holocaust themes. “What the people of Dachau must come to understand,” one artist asserted, “is that this great burden with which they have lived for 50 years can also be seen as a great opportunity.” Quoted in Timothy Ryback, “Between Art and Atrocity,” *Art News*, 92 December, 1993, p. 121. Though I respect the art, I have my doubts about the opportunity.

10. Primo Levi, survivor of Auschwitz, wrote numerous and brilliant works best described as memoirs. This quote is from *Other People’s Trades* (New York: Summit Books, 1989, p. 104), a lovely collection of short essays, which says little directly about the Holocaust. Like all of Levi’s books, one feels richer after the read.

11. For an analysis of survivors’ memoirs, see Mary Lagerwey, *Gold-Encrusted Chaos: An Analysis of Auschwitz Memoirs* (Unpublished dissertation, Kalamazoo, MI: Western Michigan University, 1994). I gratefully acknowledge her help in preparing this section.

"It was therefore necessary for the occupants of the lower bunks to manage as best they could to fix mattress and blanket between the legs of the tenants of the upper levels."

Levi describes the "frantic moments" during *bettenbauen*: "The atmosphere filled with dust to the point of becoming opaque, with . . . curses exchanged in all languages." After this frenzy of activity, "each bed must look like a rectangular parallelepiped with well-smoothed edges, on which was placed the smaller parallelepiped of the pillow."¹²

There were, of course, consequences. Anyone who did not properly make the bed was "punished publicly and savagely." Reflecting on the Holocaust in his later years, Levi was puzzled by this strange activity. But this he knew: For the SS,¹³ the bed-making ritual was a "sacral operation" of "prime and indecipherable" importance.¹⁴ What the Germans wanted, and what they got, was order and control amidst chaos and death.

the orchestra

One image comes close to capturing my noncomprehension, my disbelief: the Auschwitz orchestra. This sounds like an oxymoron, but it is not. At Auschwitz, there was an orchestra (several

12. Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved* (New York: Vintage International Press, 1989), p. 117. Shortly before this book was published, Levi committed suicide.

13. Originally Hitler's elite bodyguards, the SS wore black uniforms, black caps with a death's-head emblem, a ring decorated with a death's-head, and for officers, a dagger bearing the motto: Loyalty is My Honor. Membership was contingent on Aryan appearance; officers and their wives supposedly had to prove their racial purity back to the year 1700. Under the leadership of Heinrich Himmler, who next to Hitler became the most powerful Nazi in Germany (see Richard Breitman, *The Architect of Genocide: Himmler and the Final Solution* [New York: Knopf, 1991]), the SS eventually developed into a large and complex institution. The SS was instrumental in all aspects of the Holocaust: from the creation of ghettos, to mass starvation, to the creation and operation of the death camps. By the end of the war, there were eight hundred thousand men in militarized SS units, known as the Waffen-SS.

14. Levi, *The Drowned and The Saved*, p. 117. I could just as well have chosen the "roll call" ritual, where "the dead and the dying had to show up . . . stretched out on the ground rather than on their feet." Such rituals had become "the very emblem of the Lager [concentration camp]" (p. 115).

orchestras, actually), whose musicians were prisoners. Our knowledge of these orchestras is considerable, for two surviving members, Syzmon Laks (who served as conductor) and Fania Fenelon, wrote their memoirs.¹⁵

For the musicians, the orchestra offered some protection from instant death. The music offered more. "I caressed the piano," Fenelon wrote; "it was my savior, my love, my life." And: "I played and played, oblivious of my surroundings, and totally happy."¹⁶ For Laks, music transcended Auschwitz. As conductor of the men's orchestra, he was distressed by the quality of his music. "I was appalled," he wrote, "by the terrible playing out of tune of some of the wind instruments. The strings could not help, but fortunately the winds were drowned out by the powerful thumping of the bass drum and the simultaneous clashing of the brass cymbals."¹⁷ Fenelon lamented: "Marches were taken in three-time, waltzes in two and four. What a mess." Then she added (curiously!): "I don't know how the SS put up with that din; you'd think they had no ears."¹⁸ What's the world coming to, they seem to be saying, when classical music is played this badly!

Yet there was, most obviously, a darker—much darker—side. The orchestra played for visiting dignitaries and on special occasions. It regularly played for Josef Kramer, commandant at Birkenau. Fenelon recalled one occasion (perhaps I should say nightmare): Kramer, after a long day on the platform "selecting"

15. Syzmon Laks, *Music of Another World* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1989), and Fania Fenelon, *Playing for Time* (New York: Atheneum, 1977). Vanessa Redgrave starred as Fenelon in a television movie based on Fenelon's memoirs.

16. Fenelon, pp. 27, 119.

17. Laks, p. 38.

18. Fenelon, p. 37. She often criticized the SS taste in music, referring to their favorite pieces as "Aryan schmaltz." Fenelon reported that the orchestra members occasionally played a "trick" (at life's risk) on the Nazis by playing the forbidden music of Jewish composers.

Levi remembered the orchestra with some irony: "Auschwitz was the only German place where Jewish musicians could, indeed were compelled, to play Aryan music." With his usual drollery, Levi concluded: "Necessity knows no rules" (*The Drowned and The Saved*, p. 116).

people for the crematoria, relaxed by listening to his orchestra play Mozart. "The commandant closed his eyes," she wrote years later, "letting the music wash over him." Listening to the orchestra, he became "tearful." Yet this Jewish witness saw more, far more, than tears: "Satisfied, he had relieved himself of his 'selection' by listening to music as others might do by masturbating. Relaxed, [he] shook his head and expressed his pleasure: 'How beautiful, how moving!'"¹⁹

On at least one occasion, the orchestra played as people walked to their deaths: "Behind the barbed wire . . . were the deportees. Suddenly, I saw one woman run up to the [electrified fence] and grip the metal. Violently shaken by the current, her body twisted and she hung there, her limbs twisted and she hung there."

"No one moved," Fenelon concluded, but "the music played on."²⁰

The contradictions between the music and the surroundings were apparent to the memoirists: "Could people who love music to this extent, people who cry when they hear it, be at the same time capable of committing so many atrocities on the rest of humanity?"²¹

I listen to Ludwig von Beethoven's Ninth Symphony; its "Ode to Joy," written in 1785 by Friedrich Schiller, says: "All men become brothers under [nature's] wing." I am deeply moved by the power of this music, which is for me a celebration of humanity. Nazis also listened to this German music, with its German poetry, and then participated in mass murder. "Bestiality was at times enforced and refined by individuals educated in the culture of traditional humanism," George Steiner has written. Even more: "Knowledge of Goethe, a delight in the poetry of Rilke, seemed no bar to personal and institutionalized sadism. Literary values and the utmost of hideous inhumanity could coexist in the same community, in the same individual sensibility."²² Note

19. Fenelon, p. 93.

20. Fenelon, p. 192.

21. Laks, p. 70.

22. George Steiner, *Language and Silence* (New York: Atheneum, 1967), p. 61. That I find this image particularly awful probably says something important about me as an educator.

Steiner's phrases: "seemed no bar" and "coexist." Later in this book I will look for a deeper connection between high culture and mass murder.

a newborn

Auschwitz was first and foremost a place of death. You knew that you had adjusted, explained memoirist Sara Nomberg-Przytyk, when you routinely and mindlessly stepped over dead bodies. "I got used to it. . . . I could look at the dead with indifference. When a corpse was lying across my path I did not go around it any more, I simply stepped over it."²³

Imagine a birth at Auschwitz: improbable, seemingly impossible, surely remarkable, in this place of death. Now imagine the real life (and death) problems that result from this birth. For Josef Mengele²⁴ routinely killed not only the newborn, but also the mother. The newborn had no chance of survival. To save the mother's life, the women at Auschwitz routinely killed the infant before it took its first breath.

Nomberg-Przytyk, a Jew who worked in the Auschwitz hospital clinic, described the usual procedure: "It's very simple. We give the baby an injection. After that, the baby dies. The mother is told that the baby was born dead. After that, the baby is thrown on a pile of corpses, and in that manner we save the mother."

Nonetheless, one pregnant woman who knew the procedure protested the fate awaiting her baby: "What? A dead baby? I

23. Sara Nomberg-Przytyk, *Auschwitz: True Tales from a Grotesque Land* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), p. 115.

24. Physician and SS captain, Mengele was in charge of "selections", the sorting of Jews as they were dumped off the trains, he sent all elderly and infirm, and all visibly pregnant women and children, to instant death—some two hundred thousand to four hundred thousand people in all. As one memoirist recalled: "He stood there like a charming, dapper dancing master directing a polonaise. Left and right and right and left his hands pointed with casual movements. He radiated an air of lightness and gracefulness . . . a master at his profession, a devil who took pleasure in his work (quoted in Gerald Astor, *The Last Nazi* [New York: Donald I. Fine, 1985], p. 2). I will discuss Mengele's medical experiments in chapter 4.

want to have a live baby. I am sure that when Mengele sees it he will let me raise it in the camp. It is going to be a beauty because my husband was very handsome. I want to have it in the infirmary."²⁵

She bore her baby. With great pride, love and tenderness, she nursed him. Three days later, Mengele selected mother and child for death: "She went naked, and in her arms she held the baby. She held it up high as though she wanted to show them what a beautiful and healthy son she had." For it was not the fate of her baby that the new mother protested, but reality itself.²⁶

In any album, each picture shows time stopped. The viewer can stare and ponder and reflect: that is the power of a picture. Yet the viewer is limited to the single perspective presented. One cannot start time, let alone control it. One is not permitted to turn the faces, ask for a smile, or stop an oncoming bullet.

My own pictures, in my mind at least, are in color; the memoirists' snapshots, black-and-white on the page, are not.²⁷ Perhaps that is fitting, for the dominant color in black-and-white pictures is gray. For gray—the color of prison drab, but also of ambiguity—seems to capture some essence of the discussion to follow.

25. Nomberg-Przytyk, pp. 69–71. Memoirist Isabella Leitner offered this poetic eulogy for an infant: "And so, dear baby, you are on your way to heaven to meet a recent arrival who is blowing a loving kiss to you through the smoke, a dear friend, your maker—your father" (*Fragments of Isabella* [New York: Crowell, 1978], p. 32). Leitner bore a son shortly after liberation. She revisited Auschwitz and rejoiced: "I stood in front of the crematorium, and now there is another heart beating within that very body that was condemned to ashes" (p. 96). For an analysis of Leitner, see my article (with Mary Lagerwey, Todd Clason, Jill Green, and Tricia Meade), "From Auschwitz to Americana: Texts of the Holocaust," *Sociological Focus* 25 (1992): 179–202.

26. In another protest against reality, some women on the trains hid their infants in suitcases, hoping against hope that their babies might survive. Nomberg-Przytyk reported: "Imagine. I unpack a valise, and find a dead girl in it. She must have been about two years old. The mothers hid the children in the hope that once they got them into the camp they and the children would remain together" (p.76).

27. *Night and Fog*, the superb 1955 French film of the concentration camps, was produced in black-and-white. Recently, however, it has been "colorized"! One can only hope that this new, high-technology version—somehow aesthetically obscene—does not replace the classic version.

Each of my snapshots is peaceful, at least on the surface; memoirists' pictures inevitably (and appropriately) show violence.

Finally, each snapshot—mine and the memoirists'—involves a profound contradiction of what we call progress or civilization. For amidst the massacre, there are—against all odds—the appurtenances of a modern world: a well-made bed, a symphony orchestra, the care of one human for another. Mountain views are still beautiful; sunflowers still blossom.²⁸ Perhaps we begin to grasp that to struggle with the Holocaust is to wrestle with the meaning of our own lives and times.

gray

I am compelled to write about violence. For when all is said and done, after all the recollection and all the intellectualization, the Holocaust was—and will always be—unspeakable, horrific violence.

Here is a 1942 entry from the diary of SS Sergeant Felix Landau: "We order the prisoners to dig their graves. Only two of them are crying, the others show courage. What can they be thinking? . . . I don't feel the slightest stir of pity. That's how it is, and has got to be. . . . The shooting goes on. Two heads have been shot off. Nearly all fall into the grave unconscious only to suffer a long while. The last group have to throw the corpses into the grave."²⁹ From the warmth of our homes, our loved ones nearby, these few lines challenge nothing less than our conventional view of what it means to be human.

Let us examine another diarist, Dr. Johann Kremer, a German physician at Auschwitz. At his trial after the war, he

28. Here I use Simon Wiesenthal's image, sunflowers blooming next to the gas chambers, from his fascinating 1970 book, *The Sunflower* (New York: Schochen Books, 1976).

29. This quotation and the one that follows are from Martin Gilbert, *The Holocaust: A History of the Jews of Europe During the Second World War* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1985), pp. 171, 472–73. This book is an invaluable historical account of the Holocaust, focusing almost entirely on firsthand accounts of suffering during those tragic times.

explained that in 1943: "I had been for an extensive period of time interested in investigating the changes developing in the human organism as a result of starvation. . . . The patient was put on the dissecting table while still alive. I then approached the table and put several questions to the man as to such details which pertained to my research. . . . When I had collected my information the orderly approached the patient and killed him with an injection. . . . I myself never made lethal injections." Kremer faithfully recorded in his diary: "First frost this night, afternoon sunny and warm. Fresh material of spleen, liver and pancreas taken from abnormal individual." Kremer's juxtaposition of the cool weather and the still-warm body parts chills me to the bone.

What are we to think? Landau was, after all, a member of the dreaded SS. It is perhaps easy to dismiss him as a barbarian. But Kremer? His "scientific" murder in cold blood is more difficult to explain. How are we to judge these human beings?

Primo Levi spent his life pondering such issues. Most of us think of concentration camps in simple terms, of evil as opposed to good. But for Levi, beaten and starved at Auschwitz, nothing involving human beings was simple. He wrote about a "gray zone" within a concentration camp. It was, he says, "an incredibly complicated internal structure which contains within itself enough to confuse our need to judge."³⁰

I think of the entire Holocaust as a gray zone. The more I think about the Nazi genocide of the Jews, the more confused is my *need to judge*. But I live now near the turn of the twenty-first century, in America, not in the middle of the twentieth, in Europe. What might the Holocaust mean for me? The more I think about the general phenomena of racism, of obedience, of the alienation of modern life, of the hurt of history (to use Fredric Jameson's fine phrase), the more is my *ability to judge* confused.

I want to challenge the ways in which we typically think about the Holocaust: them versus us; then versus now; there ver-

30. Levi, *The Drowned and The Saved*, p. 42.

sus here. In considering the Holocaust, I hope to travel across time and place, and bridge those dichotomous, oppositional categories. Farthest from my intent is to blame any lineage of people. Hannah Arendt, the great German Jewish philosopher, caught the spirit of this argument. To friends who reported that Nazism made them ashamed to be Germans, she retorted: "I am ashamed of being human."³¹

Sad to say, genocide is a part (perhaps closer to the center than we would care to admit) of Western history. In this book, I focus on one particular genocide, the best documented of all. Jews left a remarkable and unprecedented record of their suffering: from ghetto diaries³² found after the war, to memoirs and poetry written by survivors. Their compulsion to write was extraordinary. As poet Abraham Sutzkever wrote of the Vilna Ghetto:

Once hidden in a cellar
Beside a corpse laid out like a sheet of paper
Illuminated by phosphorous snow from the ceiling—
I wrote a poem with a piece of coal
On the paper body of my neighbor.³³

Wondrous poetry notwithstanding, it is primarily from historical scholarship, a process which continues with great activity to

31. Quoted in Margaret Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 20. Arendt was educated in Germany where she studied with Karl Jaspers and Martin Heidegger. She escaped Germany with the onset of Nazism. For a fascinating biography, see Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982).

In addition to her profoundly original work on the Holocaust, Arendt wrote as an academic philosopher. Unfortunately, her writings are mostly ignored by social scientists. I will return to Arendt's work in some detail in chapters 2 and 4.

32. In the Warsaw Ghetto, Nazis allowed each Jew only 185 calories per day. Nonetheless members of Oneg Shabbat, the Ghetto Archive, carefully recorded the details of their suffering. Ironically, Germans as well as Jews were careful recorders. For a fascinating collection of photographs of the Warsaw Ghetto, taken by German Army Sergeant Willy Georg, see *In the Warsaw Ghetto* (New York: Aperture Foundation, 1993).

33. Abraham Sutzkever, *Selected Poetry and Prose* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), p. 232.

this day, that we have resurrected this particular infamy in such great detail.

Memories of other genocides are lost. Native Americans had an oral, rather than a written, tradition. When the whites slaughtered them, the stories of these indigenous peoples were destroyed. The same is true for Gypsies: their stories—and therefore a part of their history—perished amidst the Nazi slaughter.

I do not wish to engage in a contest of numbers—to say that one genocide was worse than another: more killed here than there; more infants and children now than then; more tortured there than here. Such discourse is obscene; such method disrespects all victims.

At the outset, I think that there are two reasons, two justifications, for focusing on this particular genocide. First: that it happened at the center of Western civilization was unexpected. This adjective, “unexpected,” would seem to be a strange (and understated) choice of words. But “unexpectedness” goes to the heart of the issue. For me, the Holocaust is the central dilemma of the twentieth century. How could the government of the most scientifically and technologically advanced country in the world—and it was Germany, not America, which held this position—systematically kill five million³⁴ Jews and millions of other innocents? How could average citizens of a modern

34. Of course I am aware that the usual number reported is six million. Through careful historical reconstruction, Raul Hilberg, a noted historian of the Holocaust, concluded that the actual number was closer to 5.1 million. In the controversy which followed, some accused Hilberg of trivializing the Holocaust by diminishing the quantity of suffering, a charge which seems absurd to me.

According to Israel Gutman and Robert Rozett, Appendix 6, *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust* (New York: Macmillan, 1990), an excellent source for all the issues I consider in this book, the Nazis killed an estimated 5,860,000 Jews. Other estimates are slightly higher, depending on evidentiary criteria. The numbers are lower if one insists on forensic evidence, whereas administrative evidence will produce somewhat higher counts. I think that the debate is obscene. Not knowing the total death to the nearest tenth of a million underscores the extent to which individual lives lost all their meaning.

industrial state, many of them highly educated, commit or even be a party to such unspeakable acts? How could the perpetrators of the Holocaust be described as the people of "Poets and Thinkers?"³⁵

Second: Nazi concentration camps were not only horrific; they were absolutely unique in world history. Imagine Auschwitz,³⁶ a concentration camp adjacent to a small town in southern Poland, thirty miles southwest of Kraków. An intricate rail system transported victims from all over Europe to that place; each day thousands of people were turned into ash: gold from teeth for the treasury; women's hair for stuffing pillows.

35. Jean Amery, *At the Mind's Limits* (New York: Schocken Press, 1990) p. xvii. A survivor of Auschwitz, Amery's hundred-page book is extraordinary. Amery never shades or compromises his analysis. He forgets nothing; he forgives no one, himself included. In 1978, he—like so many other survivors—committed suicide.

36. Five decades after the genocide, one can do more than imagine. An intrepid reader, especially one who does not suffer nightmares, might begin by looking at *Auschwitz: A History in Photographs*, edited by Teresa Swiebocka (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), or reading Otto Friedrichs, *The End of the World* (New York: Fromm International Publishing Company, 1986, p. 279–334). For a more scholarly treatment, one could read the various articles in *Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp*, eds. Israel Gutman and Michael Berenbaum (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), especially Robert-Jan Van Pelt, "A Site in Search of a Mission" (pp. 93–157) and Jean-Claude Pressac and Robert-Jan Van Pelt, "The Machinery of Mass Murder at Auschwitz" (pp. 183–245).

Auschwitz is the German name for the town, appropriately so because Auschwitz had long existed as a German border town at the edge of Slavic territories. Between the two world wars, then incorporated into Polish territory, its Polish name was Oświęcim. (Birkenau, the killing center, is also Germanized; its Polish name is Brzezinka.) In 1939 the population of Oświęcim was 12,000, of whom 5,000 were Jews. The Nazis had great ambitions for the city: a massive resettlement of ethnic Germans followed by a model medieval-style farming village—"a paradigm of the settlement in the East," according to SS leader Heinrich Himmler (quoted in Van Pelt, p. 106). To clear the site for ethnic Germans, all Jews and Poles were to be removed from the area. The transmogrification of Auschwitz into a huge death factory was complex and indirect, promoted by the I. G. Farben Company, which in 1941 located on site to take advantage of slave labor.

There is no precedent for the almost endless march of millions of men, women and children into gas chambers. The systemization of this destruction process sets it aside from all else that has happened.³⁷

Auschwitz attained its maximum efficiency in August 1944; in one day of that month—organized and refined as never before—the Nazis “processed” (that is to say, murdered) 24,000 Hungarian Jews in that place. In all, the Nazis murdered some 1.5 million people there.³⁸ Today it is the world’s largest cemetery.

Perhaps we should not imagine such pictures, lest nightmares prevail.

approaches

Of all the snapshots in all the albums, which ones should I choose to consider the Holocaust? How do I crop the images? By what method do I adjust the light and shadow? Do I allow or hide the grain? What choices must I make even as I begin the analysis? How should one approach the Holocaust? I know that the answers to these questions reveal more about me—the fanciful photographer—than about the reader.

I want to consider briefly a number of approaches which scholars have used to study the Holocaust. I hope to show that each, within its own limitations, has been part of my education on the subject.

37. Raul Hilberg, “The Bureaucracy of Annihilation.” In *Unanswered Questions*, edited by Francois Furet (New York: Schocken Books, 1989), p. 119.

38. Since most Jews were murdered immediately after they arrived at Auschwitz, the number of victims is unknown. Exactly 404,222 people were registered at Auschwitz with tattoo numbers. Rudolf Höss, commandant at Auschwitz claimed that 2.5 million people were murdered, but he was probably exaggerating. (Such embellishment strains sanity, but so does everything about Auschwitz!) Using forensic evidence, counting only those for whom “traces of established evidence remain” Uwe Dietrich Adam (“The Gas Chambers,” in Furet, pp. 151 and 355, note 108) estimated that the Nazis murdered 1,323,000 Jews and 6,430 Gypsies at Auschwitz. These estimates do not include those who died of starvation, disease and abuse. Only 7,600 lived to see liberation.

victims and perpetrators

There are two types of snapshots which some have studied: those of victims and those of perpetrators.³⁹ From here on, I will have little to say about the victims, Jewish or otherwise. There is an impressive scholarship on victims, particularly the Jewish victims of the Holocaust. Yet it seems to me that in any political interaction between powerful and powerless, one learns more (or at least one learns differently) by studying the former. For it is not slaves⁴⁰ but their masters who design and effect the policies of their captivity and death.

The ultimate perpetrator explanation focuses on one individual: Hitler. The name is all one needs to say, for the word *Hitler* has become an icon of evil.⁴¹ Hitler, according to biographer Joachim Fest, "demonstrated the stupendous power of a solitary person over the historical process. . . . No one else produced, in a solitary course lasting only a few years, such incredible acceleration in the pace of history."⁴² For historian John Lukacs, Hitler was the most significant revolutionary of the twentieth century: "Much of the twentieth century before 1940 led up to Hitler. And so much of the century . . . was a consequence of the Second

39. A third choice of some scholars has been to study bystanders. See, for example, Raul Hilberg, *Perpetrators, Victims, Bystanders: The Jewish Catastrophe 1933–1945*. New York: Harper Collins, 1992.

40. For an argument to the contrary, see Richard Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz*, 2d ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990). Rubenstein, whose work I will consider in some detail in chapter 4, argues that explanations of the Holocaust which depict Jews as completely passive, "as objects of action, rather than parties of conflict" (p. 88), are inadequate. Rubenstein most certainly does not wish to blame the victims. Nonetheless, he maintains, "[t]he Holocaust can be understood with least mystification if we do not ignore the abiding elements of conflict characterizing the relations between Jews and their neighbors throughout the entire period of their domicile in the European-Christian world" (p. 90). Perhaps the point is that Jews were not slaves. Many held important intellectual, cultural, and financial positions. Had they been slaves, no one would have bothered to exterminate them.

41. See Alvin Rosenfeld, *Imagining Hitler* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1985), for a discussion of Hitler's evil in contemporary literature.

42. Joachim Fest, *Hitler* (New York: Harecourt, Brace & Jovanovich, 1974), p. 7. Of all the biographies written of Adolf Hitler, Fest's is perhaps the best.

World War that he alone had begun and that was dominated by his presence."⁴³

I am extremely suspicious of so-called "great man" theories of history.⁴⁴ Such explanations lead us away from understanding, for in focusing on one individual, we focus blame on one person. As Fest maintains, this argument ultimately serves as a "justification felt by millions of one-time followers who can easily see themselves as victims of so much 'greatness.'" The one-man theory of history makes it too easy to put the Holocaust aside as an aberration caused by one demented person. Such an explanation, then, "amounts to a surreptitious maneuver in the course of a broad campaign of exculpation."⁴⁵

My snapshots have revealed details about people and places, but photographic metaphor takes us only so far. For the Holocaust cannot be reduced to individual people or places. To focus on victims or perpetrators is to study individuals, to say (in effect) that the Holocaust might be understood in terms of individual action or choice. Throughout this book, my focus will not be on individual perpetrators, even one as significant as Hitler.

germany

If not Hitler, or a small group of Nazis, we might reasonably focus on the German people as perpetrators of the Holocaust. Some scholars have thus sought to identify unique traits in German culture or history as an explanation of that infamy.⁴⁶

In his 1941 book, *Escape from Freedom*, Erich Fromm argued that Nazism was the ultimate expression of the German authori-

43. John Lukacs, *The End of the Twentieth Century and the End of Progress* (New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1993), pp. 287–88; 9.

44. For background on this concept, see Jacob Burckhardt, *Force and Freedom: Reflections on History* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1943), p. 313ff.

45. Fest, p. 6.

46. We do not typically ask: Why Austria? Yet many top Nazis were Austrian, and at every level, Austrians participated in the Holocaust. Historians, perhaps seeing Austria as an unwilling ally of Germany, have been kinder in their evaluation of that country. In retrospect, correctly or not, Austrian history is far less tainted than is German history by the Holocaust.

tarian personality. This personality defect resulted from child-rearing practices which were reinforced by a rigorous and strict educational system. At the root of authoritarianism was a psychically degraded personality, usually characterized as sadomasochistic. Authoritarianism was thus a psychic defensive mechanism, a method of "escaping" from freedom.

I find this type of explanation generally unhelpful.⁴⁷ I am not convinced that the German personality and German child rearing—to cite two common explanations of the Holocaust—are particularly authoritarian, especially in comparison to other modern societies.⁴⁸

To focus on the "Germanness" of the crime is far too narrow. In the words of Zygmunt Bauman, such an effort is "an exercise in exonerating everyone else, and particularly *everything else*." Rather than closing the subject within a particular place (Germany) and time (say, 1932–1945), we need to open the Holocaust dialogue. The Holocaust, Bauman continues, should serve as "a window, rather than a picture on the wall. Looking through that window, one can catch a glimpse of many things otherwise invisible."⁴⁹

anti-semitism

Hitler and other Nazis made the most virulent anti-Semitic statements. Listen to a passage in *Mein Kampf* written in 1925, seven

47. To accept the thesis, we must assume that German children were reared (more or less) similarly. I would ask: Did variance in child rearing predict eventual adherence to Nazism? Even more: What historical and social conditions led to such authoritarianism? Perhaps most importantly, we would need to demonstrate that *only* in Nazi Germany were such child-rearing patterns extant.

48. Others sought to vindicate the greatness of German culture from the presumably temporary blight of Nazism. In 1930, Sigmund Freud maintained: "A nation that produced Goethe could not possibly go to the bad." Ernst Cassirer, German Jewish philosopher and author of *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, developed this exculpation to its extreme. Shortly before his death in 1945, in the United States, he claimed: "This Hitler is an error of history. He does not belong in German History at all. And therefore he will perish" (quoted in Frederic Grunfeld, *Prophets Without Honor* [New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1979], pp. 61, 17).

49. Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), p. viii. I will elaborate Bauman's analysis in chapter 4.

years before Hitler seized power: "The black-haired Jewish youth lies in wait for hours on end, satanically glaring at and spying on the unsuspecting girl whom he plans to seduce, adulterating her blood and removing her from the bosom of her own people." And, perhaps more ominously: "If at the beginning of [World War I] and during the war, twelve or fifteen thousand of these Hebraic corruptors of the nation had been subjected to poison gas . . . then the sacrifice at the front would not have been in vain."⁵⁰

No doubt: Hitler had dreams of blood. No doubt: Hitler was virulently anti-Semitic. But Hitler's anti-Semitism was not only heavy-fisted, it was also subtle and complex. In a letter written in 1919, *before* he joined the Nazi Party,⁵¹ Hitler made an important analytic distinction between "emotional" and "rational" anti-Semitism: "Anti-Semitism on purely emotional grounds will find its ultimate expression in the form of pogroms. Anti-Semitism of reason, however, must lead to a systematic and legal struggle."

Hitler understood that random, unplanned, and uncoordinated attacks against Jews were not only troublesome, but exceedingly inefficient. It was his genius (dare I use the word?) to see that the world accepted discriminatory laws and statutes more readily than it acquiesced to sporadic violence. "The only way to deal with the [Jewish] problem," Hitler said in 1939, "is that of legislative action."⁵² Emotional anti-Semitism might be used to incite crowds, and Hitler was not above that practice. But only rational anti-Semitism could be used to achieve practical goals.

Most contemporary historians de-emphasize emotional anti-Semitism—a popular explanation a few decades ago—as *the* cause of the Holocaust. Even rational anti-Semitism (I use Hitler's terminology to avoid confusion) is problematic as a primary and indepen-

50. Quoted in Gilbert, p. 27.

51. The "German Workers' Party," one of many insignificant, right-wing political parties active in the years after World War I, was founded in 1919 by Anton Drexler. In 1920, under Hitler's influence, the Party changed its name to Socialist German Workers' Party. For a history, see Charles Flood, *Hitler: The Path to Power* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989).

52. Quoted in Leni Yahil, *The Holocaust: The Fate of European Jewry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 70, from a speech made to celebrate the Nuremberg laws of blood and honor which I discuss in chapter 3.