

## An Interview With Prof. Saul Friedlaender

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### Why the Germans? Why the Jews?

Q- I'd like to begin with the most general of questions, and perhaps the most disturbing of questions: Why were the parties that were involved in the Holocaust specifically the Jews and the Germans?

F- You're asking the basic question: Why the Germans? Why the Jews? It's a question that has no single answer. You may say that it was the Germans not because they were Germans, but because a certain ideological system came to power in Germany. And one of the major aspects for the leaders – the primary one, actually – was antisemitism. This wasn't necessarily the main aspect for the general German population, but it certainly was for the leadership, and primarily for Adolf Hitler himself. With regard to the question "Why in Germany?" there are several possible answers: there was a background of antisemitism; there was a deep social and political crisis that allowed the Nazi party to come to power; and within Nazi ideology, antisemitism was central to the top ranking leadership. And from that point on, a series of phases led, not directly and not necessarily, to the Holocaust and to the extermination of the Jews.

Now you could ask, "Why the Jews?" I would answer that it was because of the prevailing antisemitic atmosphere in Europe. In this regard, one has to look far back into the past.

We are dealing with the deep roots of Christian and western antisemitism; the move from the religious phase to the modern phase, with a very special brand of antisemitism that I have called "redemptive antisemitism." This is a form of

antisemitism that has an almost “messianic” aspect, which began to appear in the final third of the nineteenth century. It moved from Houston Stewart Chamberlain to figures like Eckhardt, and from there to Hitler himself. Thus, it is more than just Germany; it is that party which plays the crucial role, obviously. And the Jewish side of it is obviously derived, in various ways, from general anti-Jewish attitudes that prevailed in the West.

Q- Is it possible that if an elite of this ilk, laden with a radical antisemitic ideology, would have arisen in another place, something such as the Holocaust could have taken place also elsewhere?

F- Yes, but this is very hypothetical, because this precise meeting of factors was very specifically historically determined. You needed a deep political, social and economic crisis; such a political crisis began with Germany's defeat in the First World War, and continued with the very shaky political structure that was set up with the republic, which never really worked and was rejected. All of these were prerequisites for the growth of the Nazi Party. These were the conditions that allowed it, actually, to come forth. However, for it to become the most important party in Germany, you needed the crisis of 1930, and you also needed a political demagogue like Adolf Hitler – who was an ideologue, on top of that – within that party to make the party in any way successful. One might say that had such a convergence of factors occurred elsewhere, it could possibly have taken place there, too. But it was determined by so many elements that we have to view it as a historical given.

## Murderous German Antisemitism

Q- Was antisemitism in Germany particularly murderous?

F- I assume you're asking whether there was a special brand of antisemitism in Germany that was particularly murderous. If you mean whether Hitler's vision of the Jew implicitly meant the annihilation of the Jews, the answer is yes. But if the question is whether it immediately, from the beginning, meant the physical annihilation of the Jews, I would say that I do not know. One

cannot say what Hitler's deepest fantasies about the Jews were. Certainly Mein Kampf demonstrates an almost murderous obsession from the start. Obviously, however, that does not yet mean a policy. If you are asking whether, in general, German society bore a kind of murderous antisemitism, I would say no. It was possibly more antisemitic than France was at that time, but I wouldn't say that it was radically more so. It was, again, a matter of political circumstances, but it was sufficiently antisemitic to allow a relatively small group – the Party and its leadership – to carry out increasingly radical policies that could be accepted, or at least looked at indifferently, by the population.

### The German People Facing the “Final Solution”

Q- According to what you say, it seems that the “Final Solution” was not a project undertaken by the German nation, but by a small group within it.

F- I wouldn't say a very small group. Were talking about the Party, the radical elements within it, even some sectors of the population – but this central core was not a tiny group. We are speaking of hundreds of thousands of people, if not millions. But it is certain that the murderous antisemitism was, in my opinion, not a national project undertaken by German society.

Q- If this is so, how is it possible to understand the comparative ease with which the murder was carried out?

F- Let us look at the two kinds of perpetrators: the highly ideologized units, such as the SS; and the ordinary Germans. Concerning the former, we know that ideology certainly prodded them onward, or at least made it very easy for them to be killers. Regarding the latter, I would say that there was a mixture of factors: a basic anti-Jewish feeling, which was widespread but not necessarily a major factor; the tendency to obedience; the barbarization resulting from warfare; and the attitudes of the German army, in general, and of the German civilians in the East. One must look also at the way the Wehrmacht in general – not only the special units – treated Russian prisoners, allowing three million

of them to die of hunger. There was a streak of cruelty of sorts that arose in German society, in the German population, regarding many different groups – including the killing of their own people (the mentally ill), as well as the Gypsies. It was a broader phenomenon than can be explained exclusively by antisemitism.

Leaving aside the elite for a moment (which is obvious), I would say there was a group that was not small – I want to be quite clear on that – within the Party, which advanced the entire machine. And then there was this acceptance of it by the ordinary people, on many levels. This was conditioned by the barbarization of the society as the war continued. It served as revenge, in a way, for what was happening at home, like the bombings by the Allies and so on. In addition, the official propaganda made it somehow desirable to be as brutal as possible towards the Jews. One mustn't forget that this propaganda – which became more and more radical and anti-Jewish – went on constantly, in the Wehrmacht and in society in general, so that it seeped in whether one noticed it or not. These people were almost latently ready for the worst.

I'd also like to add something that may be very hypothetical. The Jews were the ultimate victims in such a situation. From the very beginning, they were the poorest of the poor, and the weakest of the weak in the ghettos. This excited a kind of mass sadism. The weaker you are, the more brutal the oppressor will be; this almost makes the killing easier. This does not mean to say that in the beginning the killers had no psychological difficulties, as we know by now from Christopher Browning's, and even Daniel Goldhagen's studies. But the fact is that this was quickly overcome, and I have observed that the element just mentioned is not often raised. I'm not speaking of sadism in a kind of clinical way, but of a cruelty that comes with the weakness of the victim. The Jews, with their appearance, their weakness, and their misery, almost attracted that cruelty. This is an element that must be added to the general picture.

## The Lack of Solidarity

Q- I'd like to return to the 1930s. How can one understand this transition, where Jews, integrated in certain elites – most in the economic and cultural elites – in one fell swoop and with great ease, within a few years are totally excommunicated from German society. They are beaten down, they lack any standing and lack all power, and, according to what you point out in your book, there is almost no display of solidarity.

F- This is true. The Jews, who were seemingly such an integral part of German society, were suddenly – with the accession of the Nazis to power – very quickly expelled from all administrative positions, from the civil service, from cultural life, and so on. We know the various steps, including the biological separation from the Germans; the Nuremberg Laws; the destruction of their economic life; and, finally, the violence and the expulsions. And, of course, the phenomenon of emigration – to the extent that the Jews could leave Germany prior to the outbreak of the war.

I think we have to return constantly to two elements: the Nazis drive, and the indifference, or passivity, of the population. The population accepted what the regime wanted at that point without resistance, for two reasons: people knew that that was what the regime wanted; and, secondly, they knew the Fuehrer wanted it. To go against this policy would have meant refuting the entire national renaissance as well as Hitler's will. Psychologically – leaving aside fear for the moment – it would have been difficult not to go along with the trend. If the Jews fell by the wayside, if they were excluded and expelled, it was just one of those things one had to accept. The Jews were in any case considered “the other.” Because of this basic, constant antisemitism – both among the elite and broader circles within the society – it was fairly easy for most people to accept the Nazi policy. The killers, therefore, consisted of a relatively small group, and its very difficult to know whether it would have been as easy had the population at large known the extent of what was going on.

## German-Jewish Symbiosis

Q- Would you say, therefore, that what has been termed, before and after the Holocaust, the “Jewish-German symbiosis” was a total illusion held by the Jews?

F- This question, as you know, is hotly debated. Symbiosis may be too strong a word, but some kind of relationship did exist. In a large sector of German society, however, there were certainly many spheres of genuine cultural, and even social, contact between Jews and Germans throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, the beginning of the twentieth, and in the Weimar Republic. After all, it was before and during the Weimar Republic that Jewish culture in Germany reached previously unknown heights – unequalled since, in any of the countries where Jews live. Weimar culture was certainly, in part, that of the outsider becoming an insider, and this outsider was largely Jewish. Left-wing Weimar culture was really very much a product of its Jewish writers, journalists, artists, etc. Obviously, in the eyes of the conservatives and the ultra-right, this was one of the reasons for the growing hatred.

Historically, it would be false, I think, to imagine that this cultural presence was imposed upon German society without its acceptance. After all, those professors who were expelled in the thirties were appointed in, say, the twenties or earlier. The academic world had had to accept the Jewish professors before expelling them. The really strange thing was the sudden breakdown of the elite, of the society. Yet it was this self-same elite and society that had clearly co-opted the Jews before dismissing them. So there was a strange historical phenomenon of integration, to a large degree, coupled with a very violent anti-current. When that current came to power, the society, which until then had been very well integrated, abandoned the Jews. It is historically not easy to explain, but this is simply what happened.

Q- Why, then, was there public criticism in Germany against the Euthanasia Program, while there was almost none against the persecution of the Jews?

F- In the beginning, as you know, there was silence. It's true that most people did not know what was happening. However, the leaders of the churches soon knew, but they began to react only when the population did. The fact is that the Germans reacted to the killing of Germans, of their own people, whether mentally ill or not, but not to the murder of Jews when the rumors became more persistent. We know that the elites of both the Catholic and the Protestant church discussed the possibility of responding to the extermination of the Jews as well, but decided not to speak out. They assumed that if they did so, the Party and Hitler would react violently. This was a set policy, a core policy, and on this issue there would be a direct confrontation. And the Church did not want to confront the Party on an issue related to non-Germans, non-Christians. It defended its own, right from the start, and this certainly remained true after the beginning of the war.

Q- This means that they looked upon the Jews as “non-Germans”.

F- Yes, the Jews, as non-Christians, were certainly considered to be “other.” The Church defended converted Jews. In the infamous telegram sent by Cardinal Bertram, the head of the Bishops conference in Germany, to Interior Minister Frik – in 1944, I think – he wrote that they had heard that the German authorities were planning to deport converted Mischlinge [“hybrids,” part-Jews] to the East, and that their fate would equal that of the Jews. This means that, in the name of the Church, the bishops protested against the deportation of Christian Mischlinge. They more or less said that they knew what the fate of the Jews was, and decried that the same was being done to converted Jews. They implicitly accepted the fate of the Jews, but they disagreed with the same treatment of converted Jews. The Church defended the Christians.

Q- There are those who claim that the fact that Judaism in Germany was so intertwined and assimilated, blinded Jews and didn't permit them to understand where things were heading, and thus prevented them from responding correctly.

F- The fact that the Jews were so assimilated into German society certainly contributed to their lack of understanding of what was going on, for obviously logical reasons. They couldn't fathom that a society in which they were so well integrated – lets always look at this side of things – was suddenly abandoning them. They were as taken aback as we are today. They couldn't believe what they were seeing and, therefore, didn't absorb it for quite a while. One could not foresee, in 1933, or 34 or 35 or 36 or 37, or even in 1938, what lay ahead. Except the violence – yes, that was visible. They knew they were being pushed back into the ghetto. But this was accepted by many German Jews as a difficult period that they would somehow get through, because their economic basis still partially existed, remember, until 1938. And they believed that since they had their own cultural institutions, etc., they were simply embarking on a new Jewish life within that ghetto. The idea was that they could possibly survive it, as they had done in the past. And nobody could predict something that, indeed, the Nazis at that time hadn't yet planned – extermination.

### The Centrality of the Holocaust in Contemporary Western Culture

Q- Why, in the past twenty years, has the Holocaust gained such a presence in Western consciousness, both in Europe and, even more so, in the USA?

F- This is a fact that, since the mid-1970s, cannot be denied. As time goes by, the Shoah, instead of being less and less present in the memory of people who were born mostly after the war, is becoming more and more present. This applies not only to Jewish communities or Israel, nor only to Germans (and even there it would be strange), but to much wider social and cultural contexts: such as the United States and England, and currently France, not to speak of Switzerland for specific reasons. It's becoming a central issue that was not present in the sixties or, and definitely not in the immediate postwar period, which was characterized by silence on this topic.

Now the question is why, and its very difficult to find a single factor. I can think of a series of factors, one of them certainly being the passage of time. I mean,

say, for example, you're looking at a large mountain; if you stand too close to it, you cannot see its enormity - the metaphor is the same for trauma or a cultural breakdown. For those who were very closely connected, who belonged to the generation that was somehow involved in it – I'm talking about society in general, not about the victims – they had extraordinary difficulty in accepting what happened. But as time goes by, the distance allows them to see more clearly the dimensions of what happened. This also makes it easier, let's say, in Germany. This is true for the Germans, and also for Europeans in general. The French are currently grappling with the problem of their collaboration with the Nazis during the deportation of the Jews. It will most likely be the generation of the grandchildren who will be able to face this with enough courage. This was possible neither for the direct perpetrators and collaborators, nor for their children.

This is one explanation, but not the only one. I think that here, several factors have to be taken into account. In this century, there have been mass exterminations that were probably even larger numerically than the extermination of the Jews by the Nazis. One example of this would be the purges and murders perpetrated by Stalin in the Soviet Union. In the minds of people in the Western world today, and over the past decades, what gives such specificity to the Nazi exterminations, mainly the Shoah – the extermination of the Jews – is the fact that, strange as it may seem, it happened in Germany. The question that probably bothers people is how, in such a highly “civilized” society, such a regime could lead society without any opposition to this most extreme level of criminality. The fact that this happened in Germany, the land of Goethe, within German culture, and so on and so forth, is in itself one of the explanations of why people were so aghast. It seems to say something about the fragility of culture.

The second point is related to the nature of the event and, again, this is an extreme that I do not believe can be said about Stalinism or Stalinist exterminations, or others. The Nazis decided that such and such a group, the Jews in this case, would no longer be allowed to live on the face of the earth

anymore. Hannah Arendt used this argument, saying to Eichmann at the end, “You didn't want to share the world with us, so why should we share the world with you,” or something like that, “therefore you have to die.” She certainly detected a crucial point. The Nazis (with Eichmann here being symbolic of them, representing them in a way) were intent not only on killing the Jews there and then, but on never allowing them to live on earth again. Which means them, their children, and their grandchildren; Himmler said it quite clearly in his speech to the SS generals. But even beyond this – the elimination was not limited to the people themselves, but was to include anything that touched them or that they had touched. Its a sort of total eradication of a section of the human species. This is the ultimate in criminality, which I don't think any other regime has achieved to date. Of all the other mass killings for political or ideological reasons, none had this almost meta-historical intention – that never again will you, or your descendants, be allowed to live on earth.

Q- Is there a connection between the fact that Germany was the spearhead of Western culture and the fact that the Holocaust took place in Germany?

F- I don't think so, but any interpretation is possible here. If you see the Nazi phenomenon as a kind of breakdown and perversion of modernity, then you could say that in Germany, one of the most modern countries in the world, this perversion occurred because of political circumstances. As I do not view Nazism in this way, but as something that has much deeper roots, I think that the modernity argument is very superficial. I claim that it didn't happen because of German culture, but because of the specific political elements that came to the fore in Germany in the twenties and thirties which, notwithstanding its immensely high cultural level, brought German society to such extremes. The tragedy here – in terms of contemporary culture – is the apparent ease with which cultures break down. It is not culture which is the cause or major factor in the events, but the force that is unable to withstand such kinds of phenomena.

## Postmodern Discourse and the Holocaust

Q- Did the Holocaust influence culture and discourse? Are postmodernism and similar approaches that incorporate acute relativism a result of Auschwitz?

F- I don't think that postmodernism as such is a direct offshoot of Auschwitz. It is, rather, the result of a failure of modernity at some stage, or of the limits of modernity in many fields. Certainly, however, within the context of postmodernism, Auschwitz has become a focal element. Moreover, it has somehow become emblematic. Look, for example, how somebody like Jean Francois Lyotard uses it to exemplify the breakdown of rationalist discourse; to show, in addition, that there are events at the extreme which cannot be directly grasped by a scientific, rationalist mind, and that we don't yet have adequate language for such events. This is precisely what postmodernism says about many phenomena. It is difficult to comprehend this indecisiveness, this inability to stabilize events and to find the direct reference. There are only signs that indicate truth, which in itself cannot be grasped - in the sense of the magnitude of the events. All that is part of the postmodernist imagination. Thus, Auschwitz has become, in postmodern philosophy, the emblematic event for that which somehow cannot be grasped, and, indeed, for the total disarray of the modern world.

Q- In the foreword to your new book (Nazi Germany and the Jews), you write that the Holocaust takes to the extreme old questions concerning the writing of history. That it's a test case that is difficult for historical writing and cultural discourse to confront. What do you mean by this?

F- I considered the Shoah a kind of radical departure from known paradigms of human behavior, because of the elements mentioned previously. It is not something that enters easily into a set of continuities. If one believes that modernity led to Auschwitz, then there is a kind of continuity – modernity and its breakdown, or whatever – leading to Auschwitz. But if one sees no

connection, if one thinks that this association is such a generalization that it really means nothing, then there is the problem of where to locate these events. These events took place over a very short time; they had no direct impact on the war or even on the postwar world in the sense of changing the political, social and economic frameworks. In historical terms, they were “non-events” and, therefore, for two decades or more, people did not relate to them, but simply forgot that they happened.

What you have here is a problem of where to place these immense occurrences within the context of Western European history. With time, we see them growing in magnitude. How do you place this gigantic criminality, and this mostly passive participation by Western society, within that society, within that culture? There is a difficulty here in terms of tradition, and in terms of grasping the events as such in traditional categories, or conveying them, or representing them. My point is not that these are not historical events – obviously this is part of our twentieth-century history, or modern history, and we have to deal with it as with any other set of events in modern history. But we have the problem of finding the correct historical language and interpretations. Racism is not enough of a context; neither is traditional antisemitism, nor is nationalism. We have a difficulty with conceptualization and with representation in terms of historical language.

Thank you very much.

**Source: The Multimedia CD ‘Eclipse Of Humanity’, Yad Vashem, Jerusalem 2000.**