

Yehuda Bauer Shaped My Career and Changed My Life and the Lives and Careers of So Many Others

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I begin with the personal.

Yehuda Bauer changed my life.

In 1985, my book *Beyond Belief: The American Press and the Coming of the Holocaust* had recently been published. I was deciding on the topic of my next book when a conference took me to Israel. I saw Yehuda at the conference, and, after we chatted for a bit, he asked me to come and visit him at his Hebrew University office on Mount Scopus. I readily agreed. As a young scholar in the field, the chance to spend time with him, particularly when he was not being “accosted” by numerous scholars at a conference, was too precious to pass up. When I arrived, Yehuda was in his office, and he had been joined by Professor Israel Gutman. The two men, both giants in their fields, were the lynchpins of the recently established Hebrew University’s Vidal Sassoon Center for the Study of Antisemitism. As soon as I entered, I sensed that this was not a purely social visit. They clearly had an agenda.

After discussing my book, they asked about my next project. I sketched out my interest in tracking the growing field of Holocaust remembrance, particularly in the United States. They listened carefully. Interest in the topic of the Holocaust was growing, and I was anxious to track how it had been “remembered” in the then four decades since it ended. What “lesson” did communal leaders—religious and secular—want to impart in their emphasis on remembering and educating about this genocide?

When I finished, Yehuda agreed that this was an important question, but then he added: “We have another idea for you. You should study and write about Holocaust denial.” I was gobsmacked and proceeded to tell them so. I had always treated Holocaust deniers as akin to flat-earth theorists. One might study *why* people fell for their inventions

and lies when there was so much evidence to the contrary, but it did not seem to make sense to study *them* and their theories. In fact, there was a danger in studying them seriously. Doing so could serve to depict them as a legitimate “other side,” worthy of weighty inquiry, rather than as a group of charlatans.

There were many topics to be studied about this massive genocide. But to study deniers? They were liars, falsifiers, and fabulists. Why pay them close attention? Why devote scholarly effort to this topic? Did that not afford them a measure of respectability that they certainly did not deserve?

I reminded Yehuda that, several years earlier, when he visited the University of Washington, where I was then teaching, he brought with him from a visit to South Africa a few pamphlets that advocated the notion that the Holocaust was a Jewish invention. This was the first time he had encountered this effort. I examined them and, after being initially shocked by the magnitude of this falsification, began to laugh dismissively: “Who could possibly believe any of this?” This was not, I went on, even junk history. It was just plain junk. He acknowledged that at one point he might have had the same reaction. Now, however, he saw things differently. The deniers seemed to be gaining traction. Who were these people? What motivated them? Whom were they attracting? Professor Gutman agreed: “We think you should study it.”

Had anyone else other than these two giants in the nascent field of Holocaust studies said this to me, I might have brushed it off. But coming from them, I could not. I rather reluctantly agreed to take a detour from my other work and spend a bit of time looking at deniers. I anticipated that it would be a two-to-three-year effort, certainly no more than that.

Once I immersed myself in the topic, however, I became more intrigued. How, I began to wonder, were they managing to convince people that there was anything valid in this absurd myth? After all, the Holocaust had the dubious distinction of being the best-documented genocide in the world. The Germans and their allies had left us mountains of sources. There were deportation lists, architectural and engineering plans for gas chambers, memos listing the capacity (and kill) rate of gas chambers, and so much more. There were witnesses to the killing process. More importantly there were six million people who had disappeared.

For deniers to be right, who would have to be wrong? Certainly these reams of documents. But there was more than documentation.

There were survivors, and some of them had worked in the gas chambers. There were people who had lived adjacent to shooting sites and death camps. They had witnessed the shootings and, in the case of the camps, watched the trains enter filled with people and leave empty. There were the liberators. And above all there were the perpetrators themselves. Germans and Germany had attested to this killing. Why would Germany have accepted this burden of enduring guilt if it had not committed this horrific crime?

The deniers had an answer for that conundrum. It came right out of the playbook of the antisemites. In fact, without the millennia of antisemitic charges that preceded it, it, too, might not have gained any traction. According to deniers the ever-powerful conspiratorial Jews had forced the Germans to do so. They had spread the story of the mass killings and had given the Germans an ultimatum. If you wish to be readmitted to the family of civilized nations, you will accept responsibility for this crime, even though you are innocent. The Germans, recognizing the immense power of the Jews, knew they had no alternative and acquiesced.

But what, one might ask, did the Jews have to gain from perpetrating this myth? How, one might ask a denier, would spreading this lie benefit the Jews? The deniers were ready with an easy answer. They contended that the Jews had benefited mightily from spreading this lie. They had convinced the world to establish the State of Israel.¹ The other benefit to the Jews from this falsified story of the Holocaust was reparations. Germany had committed billions of dollars to survivors, Israel, and Jewish institutions. The myth of the Holocaust, deniers posited, constituted blackmail on a grand scale.

The deniers' entire explanation—ever-powerful Jews forcing Germany to admit to a crime that it did not commit in order for Jews to get a state and money—fit quite neatly into the parameters of the template of antisemitic charges. At the root of virtually all antisemitism was the myth that from the time the Jews betrayed Jesus (himself a Jew), Jews had continued conspiring, at the expense of others, to advance themselves. This advancement always involved some form of financial gain for Jews irrespective of how it harmed other groups.

1 The establishment of the State of Israel is based on a far more complex set of circumstances than the Holocaust alone, but many people see one as leading to the other.

As I honed my approach to Holocaust denial, I was in continuous touch with Yehuda Bauer. We discussed these ideas and agreed that Holocaust denial was naught but another form of antisemitism. It played, diabolically and cleverly so, on traditional antisemitic tropes. We agreed as well that one of the reasons it gained traction was because it relied on these traditional tropes. Since antisemitism's roots were so deeply embedded in Western society and culture, even people who did not consider themselves antisemites found this explanation to make sense. Society had taught them that Jews were obsessed with money; they were close-knit, conspiratorial, and possessed of influence that weighed well above their numbers in society.

My work on Holocaust denial, thanks to Yehuda Bauer's urgings, shaped much of my scholarly career. But he changed my life in yet another, more profound way. When I finished the manuscript on Holocaust denial, I sent it to him for his comments. He read it over and suggested a few changes. He did have one recommendation. I had not focused very much on someone who was proving to be a rising voice among the deniers—David Irving. Of course he was right. Irving, a writer of history, had always toyed with the far right. He was clearly enamored of both Adolf Hitler and Nazi Germany.

Irving was important because he brought to the field a degree of putative respectability that it otherwise did not have. Most deniers were known for one thing and one thing only—being deniers. But Irving had a reputation as a writer and researcher who was able to access documents that others did not have. Many historians questioned his credibility, but there were those who relied on his work. When one looked at them as a body, a distinct theme emerged. The Nazis were not as bad as people think. The Allies were not so great. They both committed wrongs. Of course there was one wrong—genocide—committed by the Nazis that could not be “matched” by wrongs committed by the Allies. The only way to resolve that conundrum was to deny it.

Irving was obsessed with Hitler as a great leader. Early in his career Irving told the *Daily Mail* he considered Hitler's mountain-top retreat Berchtesgaden a “shrine.”² Before becoming an outright denier, he tried to minimize Hitler's impact and deflect responsibility from him. In

2 “Can This Man Tell the Truth about Goebbels?: David Irving,” *Independent*, July 4, 1992, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/can-this-man-tell-the-truth-about-goebbels-david-irving-1531354.html> (accessed April 6, 2015).

his first edition of *Hitler's War*, he argued that Hitler did not order the Holocaust. Himmler did. He based his argument on one sentence in a note Himmler made of a conversation he had with Hitler. The note referred to one trainload of Jews coming from Berlin who were not to be destroyed. It did not refer to stopping the entire killing enterprise. But that did not prevent Irving from making that contention.³ In that same edition of *Hitler's War*, he claimed that *The Diary of Anne Frank* was a fake.⁴ When he spoke at the conference of the Institute for Historical Review, then the leading disseminator of denial information, he told his audience that "the Jews had no greater friend in the Third Reich than Adolf Hitler."⁵ Eventually he became a full-fledged denier and gave testimony in Canada at the Zündel trial (1988), where he told the court that the Holocaust and the gas chambers were a myth.⁶

Though my manuscript was close to being concluded, I found Yehuda's suggestion to be valid, and I wove in several additional paragraphs about Irving. Those paragraphs would, of course, precipitate Irving's libel lawsuit against me. When the case was heard in court in 2000, our expert witnesses constituted a "dream team" of historians, including Christopher R. Browning, Richard Evans, Robert Jan Van Pelt, Peter Longerich, and Hajo Funke. They demonstrated that each of Irving's claims about the Holocaust was based on a misreading, mistranslation, or outright lie about what the document actually said.⁷ When I told Yehuda about our decision to call historians, rather than survivors, he understood the importance of this move. We wanted to demonstrate that David Irving did not deserve to call himself a historian and that the history of the Holocaust was documented beyond an iota of a doubt.

- 3 David Irving vs. Penguin Books Limited and Deborah Lipstadt, "Day 3 Transcript: Holocaust Denial on Trial," p. 15, <https://www.hdot.org/day03/> (accessed April 6, 2015).
- 4 Deborah Lipstadt, *Denying the Holocaust: The Growing Assault on Truth and Memory* (New York: The Free Press, 1992), p. 29.
- 5 Johann Hari, "David Irving: 'Hitler Appointed Me His Biographer,'" *The Independent*, January 15, 2009, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/profiles/david-irving-hitler-appointed-me-his-biographer-1366464.html> (accessed April 6, 2015).
- 6 Jason Tinger, "Holocaust Denial and Holocaust Memory: The Case of Ernst Zündel," *Genocide Studies International*, 10:2 (2016), pp. 210–229.
- 7 For the witnesses' expert reports and testimony, see "Holocaust Denial on Trial," www.hdot.org (accessed on April 6, 2015).

The judge, in his over 300-page judgment, decimated Irving's claims, wrote

that Irving has for his own ideological reasons persistently and deliberately misrepresented and manipulated historical evidence; that for the same reasons he has portrayed Hitler in an unwarrantedly favorable light, principally in relation to his attitude towards and responsibility for the treatment of the Jews; that he is an active Holocaust denier; that he is antisemitic and racist and that he associates with right wing extremists who promote neo-Nazism.⁸

I immediately called Yehuda to share with him the results.

So much of my subsequent career emanated from that long drawn-out affair.

I was not alone in having a portion of my career shaped by Yehuda Bauer. He was generous with his time and support of emerging scholars. Scholars and students in the field would seek him out for guidance. He was exceptionally willing to share his expertise and his intellect. He felt that encouraging students to explore new fields was part of his mandate. Scholars sometimes consider their own work to take precedence over everything else. Yehuda devoted much of his energies not only to his own work but to building a new generation of scholars.

Yehuda's role in my life and in the lives of so many other scholars extended far beyond commenting on our work. He served as a role model of the public intellectual. While he could have secluded himself in the ivory tower of academia and the archives, he chose to do otherwise. He went out into the "marketplace." He did not shun the non-specialists. He brought his wisdom to the non-academic world, particularly—though not only—to the Jewish world. He never compromised his scholarship in so doing.

He left us a memory and a legacy. Both are blessings of innumerable proportions.

8 Irving vs. Penguin, "Trial Judgment: Mr Justice Gray," Part XIII, par. 165 (2000), <https://www.hdot.org/judge/#> (accessed April 6, 2025).