

PREFACE

Raul Hilberg was the “founding father” of the academic study of the Holocaust in the United States, and he had profound impact on how this topic has been researched and written about throughout the world. Born in Vienna in 1926, he and his family escaped Europe in the spring of 1939 and, after a brief stay in Cuba, reached the United States on 1 September, the very day Hitler invaded Poland and started World War II.

Hilberg joined the US Army at the age of eighteen and served in Europe before returning home to complete his undergraduate studies at Brooklyn College and his Ph.D. at Columbia. In the course of his education, he encountered three influential scholars who left their imprint: Hans Rosenberg, the expert on Prussian bureaucracy; Salo Baron, the doyen of Jewish history; and Franz Neumann, the author of *Behemoth*, a work that focused not on the personality and ideology of Hitler but on the structure and polycratic nature of the Nazi regime.

In 1956, Hilberg obtained a position in the department of Political Science at the University of Vermont, where he taught courses primarily in the area of international relations and American foreign policy. After numerous rejections, his first book *The Destruction of the European Jews* was published in 1961, the same year the Eichmann trial took place in Jerusalem. Hilberg’s major contribution was to portray the Nazi destruction of the European Jews not as a giant pogrom, an orgy of sadism, nor as a descent from civilization into barbarism, but rather as a bureaucratic and administrative process, requiring specialists of all kinds and successfully eliciting participation from virtually every branch of organized German society. Hilberg created an overarching structure for his study through the interplay of two key concepts: a “machinery of destruction” and a “process of destruction.” The machinery comprised the four hierarchical power centers Neumann had identified—the party, civil service, military, and industry. The process consisted of three crucial stages—definition, concentration, and annihila-

tion—with each stage accompanied by commensurate expropriation. In *The Destruction of the European Jews*, Hilberg analyzed how the four hierarchies of the “machinery” carried out the successive stages in the “process” throughout the German empire.

Hilberg’s self-imposed task was to “grasp how this deed was done.” In that pursuit, he turned to a study of what he considered a paradigmatic perpetrator organization—the German railway system or Reichsbahn. Seemingly the most nonpolitical and nonideological of institutions in Nazi Germany, it nonetheless shipped more than half of the victims of the Holocaust to the death camps; quite simply its trains were indispensable to the Final Solution. Working with the most fragmentary documentation, Hilberg revealed how a staff of technocrats facing extreme wartime demands adapted its standard routines to arrange hundreds of one-way charter trains to the death camps, charged per track kilometer at a group rate discount, with children under ten half-price and infants under four generously sent to their deaths cost-free. The German railway men, Hilberg concluded, shipped Jews like cattle but booked them like any other passengers!

Hilberg then directed his attention to an entirely different topic and was singularly responsible for the 1979 publication of the superbly edited English version of *The Warsaw Diary of Adam Czerniakow*. Much already was known about the most notorious and least attractive ghetto leaders, such as the self-important and power-hungry Chaim Rumkowski of Łódź. Through the diary of the head of the Jewish council in Warsaw, English readers now could encounter an entirely different sort of man—a truly tragic figure who rolled his rock of Sisyphus up the hill every day, knowing full well that it would come rolling back down each night. Consumed by a sense of obligation and untouched by megalomania, Czerniakow persevered in his impossible situation until he reached a line he would not cross. When presented with the demand to deport Jewish children, he took poison.

Having devoted much of his scholarly life to analyzing the impersonal structures and processes of the Nazi assault on the European Jews, Hilberg next took another different approach. His book *Perpetrators Victims Bystanders* not only laid out a tripartite scheme and vocabulary of categorization that has left an indelible imprint on the field, but also examined in twenty-four distinct essays, the experience, perspective, and behavior of various subgroups of people within those broad categories, thus proving himself the master of the telling vignette as well as of overarching analytical concepts.

Though he retired from the University of Vermont in 1991, Hilberg was by no means done writing, leaving us with two more very different books: his academic memoirs, *The Politics of Memory: The Journey of a Holocaust*

Historian, and a methodological study, *Sources of Holocaust Research: An Analysis*. Throughout his career he also continued to update *The Destruction of the European Jews*, which appeared in two revised and expanded editions in the United States (1985 and 2003) as well as in numerous foreign translations. He died in 2007 at the age of eighty-one.

Among all of Hilberg's publications, his scholarship on the German Reichsbahn and the Holocaust has been the least accessible to readers of English. For this reason, the other authors of this volume decided to produce a book based upon his two most important articles on this topic. We believe that these articles exemplify in concise form Hilberg's approach to the history and analysis of the Holocaust as well as the craft with which he presented his findings. We hope that by combining a selection of documents and our own historiographical commentaries with these articles—each lightly edited for accuracy and for consistency of spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and use of italics with our contributions—we have provided a book that proves both useful for students, teachers, and researchers and a fitting tribute to a remarkable scholar.

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