

Preface

This book is the product of three incidents.

In 1991 I transferred the center of my academic activity from Tel Aviv to New York. Several months later I ran into a former colleague who had made a similar move a year earlier. When I told him I had been invited to occupy a chair in modern Jewish history at New York University, he responded with surprise. “But you don’t do Jewish history!” he exclaimed. “You study the Holocaust.”

His reaction epitomized a phenomenon whose extent and significance I had yet to appreciate—the tendency of historians of the Holocaust on one hand and historians of the Jews, especially of the modern period, on the other to construct their fields as two separate realms, each with its own rules and practices, whose border is not readily crossed. The phenomenon is counterintuitive: at first glance it seems self-evident that the mass murder of European Jews during the 1940s was connected in some way with the history of the Jews in modern times. Indeed, for publishers and booksellers, whose interests intersect closely with those of the academy, the two subjects are commonly treated as overlapping.* Still, my colleague, himself an outstanding historian of

This version of the book has been somewhat pared from the original, mainly in the footnotes. Readers seeking additional supporting or explanatory material should consult the Hebrew.

* Major booksellers routinely shelve books about the Holocaust in the Judaica section, along with volumes of hasidic tales, Chagall paintings, and recipes for gefilte fish. Evidently they presume that readers looking for books of “Jewish” content will find interest in books about how Jews died at Nazi hands. No doubt they also suppose the opposite—that people who read about the Holocaust will

Nazi Germany, had no doubt that the history of the Holocaust and the history of the Jews defined two distinct specialties, and he wondered how someone like me—thoroughly rooted, he thought, in one of them—would suddenly trespass a clearly designated professional boundary.

Needless to say, I saw things differently. My academic training as a historian had given me expertise precisely in the history of the Jews in modern Europe. True, at the time of my encounter with my colleague the greater part of my publications (although by no means all) had focused on the years 1939–1945, but I regarded my occupation with that particular chronological interval largely as an expression of a broad interest in a historical problem of paramount importance for Jews (and other minority populations) over the previous three hundred years: How did the international system that crystallized gradually between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries—that is, the system of territorially contiguous sovereign nation-states whose internal affairs are beyond the control of any overarching power—affect the ways in which Jews pursued their physical safety and material well-being, and their efforts’ relative success or failure, in the various countries in which they lived? My two books about the relations between the Polish government-in-exile and various Jewish organizations and representatives during the Second World War—the initial source, it seems, of my reputation as a scholar of the Holocaust—were informed largely by a desire to examine the political resources that that system placed at the Jews’ disposal

also want to learn about other aspects of Jewish experience. In May 2006, as this text’s final draft was being prepared, the eight best-selling books (and nineteen of the top twenty-five) listed by the American internet retailer Amazon.com under the category “Religion and Spirituality—Judaism—History” concerned the Holocaust. The situation was similar in Germany, where at Amazon.de the top five sellers in the same division dealt with the same subject. Comparison with France was not possible, because there books about the history of the Jews (as opposed to books about the history of the Jewish religion) are grouped together with books about other aspects of the history of particular countries, regions, or periods. American best sellers in this division included Samantha Power’s *A Problem from Hell: America in the Age of Genocide* (in twelfth place) and Iris Chang’s *The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II* (in sixteenth). They joined a long list of works making little mention of Jews that became “Jewish” on the way to the bookstore. For additional examples see Engel, *On Studying Jewish History*, 2.

at the height of its development and the ways in which Jews deployed them at a time of grave collective existential danger. It was obvious to me that such an examination demanded detailed exploration of the many exogenous factors that influenced the situation of the Jews, the extent of their resources, and the use they made of them during the interval in question. As a result I studied the histories of Nazi Jewish policies, Polish-Jewish relations, the Second Polish Republic, the Polish-Soviet conflict, international efforts to protect minorities, and Allied diplomacy during the Second World War. Along the way I took part in discussions of interest primarily to historians of Nazi Germany, Poland, the Soviet Union, the Second World War, European minorities, twentieth-century international relations, and modern genocide, without reference to the specific questions about Jews that initially catalyzed my research. But as far as I was concerned, I was reaching into these other areas, including the Holocaust, mainly in order to help me understand what had happened specifically to *Jews* during the modern era, in much the same way that other participants in the same discussions came to them out of a particular interest in Germans, Poles, Armenians, communists, or liberal internationalists. Acquiring expertise in the history of the Holocaust thus hardly seemed a departure from what I had thought of as my original professional trajectory. Nor did I think that being appointed to a chair in modern Jewish history required me to cease being involved in Holocaust studies. I was changing my geographic center, not my intellectual one.

Not that I wasn't aware of an inclination to divide the two fields. On the contrary, I knew that historians of my generation who studied the Holocaust were increasingly being trained in the history of Europe (especially Germany), not of the Jews. Those historians were interested primarily in the people who killed the Jews or assisted the murder campaign. They regarded Jews largely as passive victims; if they assigned them any role in the broad narrative of the Holocaust that emerged from their studies, it was as images in their murderers' minds, not as cognizant or sentient actors struggling to cope with an increasingly desperate situation. I also knew that hardly any of my contemporaries who studied the history of the Jews in modern times assigned the Holocaust a significant place on their intellectual agendas. In 1986 a

former president of the Association for Jewish Studies, the principal learned society of Judaicists in North America, had even complained publicly that there were too few trained historians of the Jews capable of teaching the history of the Holocaust in American universities (Band, "Editorial."). Nevertheless, at the time I thought the situation a temporary coincidence. After all, academic interest in the Holocaust was growing, along with interest among the larger public. I believed that such mounting curiosity would attract historians of the Jews to the subject, just as they and their colleagues from other fields of history are routinely drawn to topics that excite the broader academy and its surrounding society from time to time. Only after encountering my colleague did I understand that the situation was not a passing one, born of momentary circumstance, but the product of a principled position deeply rooted in the professional discourse of Holocaust scholars and historians of the Jews alike.

Since then I have heard that position articulated many times. I doubt, however, that I would have undertaken to think systematically about its foundations or to search for its roots were it not for two additional occurrences. The first took place in 2000, when senior academic officers at New York University asked me to move from the chair in modern Jewish history to a new chair in the history of the Holocaust, to be established in cooperation with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC. University and museum officials agreed that the occupant of the chair should be a historian of the Jews, precisely in order to balance the dominance in Holocaust studies of research about perpetrators and bystanders. At first I hesitated over the implications of what colleagues might (and in some cases did) interpret as a second transgression of a professional boundary, this time in the opposite direction from the first. That prospect compelled me to look carefully at the intellectual grounds for separating the two fields. When I examined the arguments routinely put forth by those who endorsed the separation, I discovered a set of logical fallacies and empirical misconceptions. That finding made me see the proposed move as a chance to open a discussion, in the hope that professional discourse concerning the nexus between the two fields might eventually be placed upon a sounder intellectual footing.

Around the same time my longtime friend and colleague Avraham (Patchi) Shapiro, professor of modern Jewish intellectual history at Tel Aviv University, offered me a platform from which discussion could begin. In one of our conversations he spoke of a new book series he was editing featuring studies of central problems in modern Jewish thought. Agreeing that the Holocaust's imprint upon the ways in which the modern history of the Jews has been narrated and conceptualized is a subject worth investigating, he invited me to write about it for the series. As a result the book was written and initially published in Hebrew (although ultimately not in the series for which it was originally prepared). Also, it was decided that the book should concentrate upon historians of the Jews and their thinking about the Holocaust's place among their professional concerns instead of upon scholars of the Holocaust and their approaches to the history of the Jews. Investigating the interrelations between the two fields from the perspective of Holocaust studies would no doubt add much to the picture presented below. So too would comparing the situation among historians of the Jews with the impact of the Holocaust and the Nazi period in general upon the historiography of Germany, or studying how the Holocaust has influenced representations of the Jewish past in the countries formerly under Nazi occupation. However, practical considerations have made it necessary to limit the scope of what follows to discourse among academic historians of the Jews about the Holocaust's proper role in conceptualizing and representing earlier eras in that history, primarily as that discourse has developed in the two primary centers of Jewish studies following the Second World War—North America and the State of Israel. I am thus deeply grateful to Patchi for the many ways in which he has helped shape this work. Of course he bears no responsibility for anything that I have written. On the other hand, if the book has any merit, much of the credit belongs to him.

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The limits of the book require further emphasis at the outset, so that readers will not misapprehend its intent. To begin with, *this is not a book about the Holocaust or Holocaust studies* strictly speaking. It is concerned instead with the approaches to the Holocaust most commonly

demonstrated by *academic historians of the Jews* whose chief interest lies in *earlier periods of Jewish history* and not in the years of the Holocaust proper. Hence its principal focus is not the many efforts of historians and academicians from other disciplines to explain the Holocaust but the ways in which the growing body of academic research about the Holocaust has (or has not) influenced how historians of the Jews describe and analyze the eras and issues that most interest them. In other words, the book inquires initially after the extent to which historians of the Jews have employed the work of scholars of the Holocaust as a source of data or insights that might inform their own studies. It finds that in practice the historians in question have for the most part *not* regarded Holocaust studies as especially relevant to their concerns. They have adopted this attitude, however, not because they have made a systematic effort to locate such data or insights and come up empty but because they have dismissed a priori any possibility of locating them and thus rejected all efforts to do so out of hand.

The major portion of the book searches for the roots of that rejection. It locates them first of all in the academic discourse concerning the history of the Jews as it has evolved since the 1920s. As a result, the book rests upon two layers. At its core is an exposition of the development of the historiography of the Jews during the past eight decades in which the attitudes of prominent historians toward the Holocaust offer a new critical lens for rereading familiar texts and reconstructing the history of the Jewish historiographical enterprise. Wrapped around this core, as it were, is an essay urging extended scholarly consideration, such as has yet to take place, of how study of the Holocaust might contribute most productively to the study of the Jewish past. The essay calls for discussion, but it does not suggest what its outcome ought to be. Thus it does not preclude the conclusion that the Holocaust reveals nothing of value about the lives its victims lived before disaster struck. It notes only that at present most leading academic historians of the Jews affirm that conclusion as a matter of faith and have not submitted it to critical scholarly examination. Against such faith the book suggests that only after extended consideration informed by both detailed empirical studies and broad scholarly syntheses of data from the Holocaust period will it be possible to assess intelligently how scholarship on the Holocaust

might contribute to illuminating other eras and themes in the history of the Jews.

Similarly, the book does not pretend to list and describe all possible points of intersection between the Holocaust and Jewish history or to put forth a positive proposal for reformulating the latter in light of the former. Instead it confines itself to demonstrating that various positive proposals for reformulation have been raised over the years, only to be dismissed by most historians of modern Jewry for reasons stemming less from serious intellectual engagement than from a process of historical conditioning that began a decade and a half before the Holocaust itself. The major part of the book traces that process and the imprint it has left on contemporary academic Jewish historiographical practice.

In presenting its argument the book offers critical comment on the writings of several leading historians, including accomplished and valued colleagues from whom I have learned much and whose contributions to the study of Jewish history are inestimable. Let it thus be underscored: the book treats only the work of scholars of the first rank, and whatever dissent it expresses from one or another argument they have raised should be taken only as a sign of the esteem in which I hold them. I can only hope that my colleagues will note the seriousness and respect with which I regard their views and will afford what follows the same consideration.

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Many people have helped me prepare this book, and I note their contributions with gratitude. Gulic Ne'eman Arad, Israel Bartal, Daniel Blatman, Robert Chazan, and Yael Feldman read all or part of the manuscript and offered valuable comments. Paula Hyman, Antony Polonsky, and Steven Zipperstein accepted my invitation to participate in a roundtable discussion of the book's theme when the project was still in its preparatory phase. This event, which took place at the annual meeting of the Association for Jewish Studies in December 2001, contributed much to sharpening my perception of the subject's dimensions. Paul Shapiro encouraged me to begin putting my thoughts into writing, first when he suggested that I lecture on the topic at the Holocaust Museum in Washington, later when he invited me to lead a series of

workshops on the links between the Holocaust and Jewish studies, and finally when he arranged for the museum to cosponsor publication of the original Hebrew edition. At those workshops I was joined by co-leaders Berel Lang and Alvin Rosenfeld, who helped me understand the impact of the Holocaust upon their fields—philosophy and literature. Dan Michman and Boaz Cohen permitted me to examine important pieces they had written prior to publication. Israel Gutman and Guy Miron drew my attention to pertinent sources. Michal Engel helped locate materials for research. Some of these people may contest much of what the book has to say; some may even disavow their contribution altogether. I offer them my apologies in advance. Mentioning their names does not associate them in any way with any of the book's opinions and certainly not with its defects. Responsibility for all that appears below is mine alone.

The book is dedicated to the memory of my teacher Amos Funkenstein, who nearly four decades ago introduced me to most of the writings whose analysis provides the nucleus of the discussion that follows. There is no way to calculate the intellectual, professional, and personal debt I owe him. He has left the corporeal world, but his spirit continues to inspire.

The greatest debt of all I owe my wife, Ronit, for her sacrifice and support throughout the years. It is an obligation that is beyond repayment.

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It has become customary to conclude the preface to a scholarly book with an indication of the place where it was written. The custom presumes that every such book necessarily reflects a geocultural perspective about which readers ought to be informed. Because this book is the product of thinking about boundaries and their transgression, it is perhaps fitting that it was written in more than one location. Most of the first draft was prepared during my tenure as the Louis and Bessie Stein Fellow at the Center for Advanced Judaic Studies of the University of Pennsylvania. Special thanks are due the center's director, David Ruderman, and his staff for the gracious hospitality and outstanding working conditions they provided. Additional pieces were written in Paris, Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, New York, and Washington, DC as well as

during travel between these and other points. Indeed, the Hebrew text of this preface was composed in an airport transit lounge en route between the United States and Israel while I was awaiting a delayed departure. Readers are invited to determine for themselves if those facts are significant in any way.

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