VERSIONS OF HOLOCAUST

THEODORE ZIOLKOWSKI

When John Paul II made his pilgrimage to Auschwitz on June 7, 1979, and prayed for peace before several hundred thousand spectators, the event was reported on the front pages of newspapers around the world. A few months earlier Jimmy Carter had appointed a Commission on the Holocaust, one of whose first acts was to proclaim a national week of commemoration on the thirty-fourth anniversary of the liberation of Dachau. But if mankind is finally beginning to acknowledge the fact, if not the dimensions and full implications, of the mass murders in the Nazi concentration camps, it is owing less to the publicity value of presidents and popes than to the power of television. Gerald Green's "Holocaust," which reached an estimated 120 million viewers in this country and 41 percent of the TV audience in Germany, prompted a barrage of phone calls from shocked viewers, follow-up talk shows, editorial comment in the newspapers, and endless discussion in the schools. Even language has been affected: unpronounceable Polish place-names and sinister German acronyms crop up regularly in English while "der Holocaust" has been naturalized in German.

Yehuda Bauer, *The Holocaust in Historical Perspective*. University of Washington Press, 1978. 192 pages. $8.95; Bruno Bettelheim, *Surviving and Other Essays*. Knopf, 1979. xii + 432 pages. $15; *The Warsaw Diary of Adam Czerniakow*, edited by Raul Hilberg, Stanislaw Staron, and Josef Kermisz; translated by Stanislaw Staron et al. Stein and Day, 1979. xii + 420 pages. $16.95; Alexander Donat, *The Holocaust Kingdom: A Memoir*. Holocaust Library, 1978. 362 pages. $4.95 pb; Leslie Epstein, *King of the Jews*. Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, 1979. 350 pages. $10.95; Martin Gilbert, *The Holocaust*. Hill and Wang, 1979. v + 59 pages. $8.95, $3.45 pb; Luba Krugman Gurdus, *The Death Train*. Holocaust Library, 1978. xiv + 164 pages. $10; Philip P. Hallie, *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed*. Harper & Row, 1979. 304 pages. $12.95; Janusz Korczak, *Ghetto Diary*. Holocaust Library, 1978. 192 pages. $8.95; Lawrence L. Langer, *The Age of Atrocity: Death in Modern Literature*. Beacon Press, 1978. xvi + 256 pages. $12.95, $5.95 pb; Isabella Leitner, *Fragments of Isabella: A Memoir of Auschwitz*, edited by Irving A. Leitner. Crowell, 1978. 112 pages. $7.95; Anna Pawelczynska, *Values and Violence in Auschwitz: A Sociological Analysis*, translated by Catherine S. Leach. University of California Press, 1979. xxxii + 170 pages. $11.95; Léon Poliakov, *Harvest of Hate: The Nazi Program for the Destruction of the Jews of Europe*, revised edition with foreword by Reinhold Niebuhr. Holocaust Library, 1979. xiv + 350 pages. $4.95 pb; *Confronting the Holocaust: The Impact of Elie Wiesel*, edited by Alvin H. Rosenfeld and Irving Greenberg. Indiana University Press, 1979. xvi + 240 pages. $12.95; Leon Wieliczker Wells, *The Death Brigade*. Holocaust Library, 1978. 308 pages. $4.95 pb.

Of course Green's dramatization did not "discover" the Holocaust. The atrocities in the death camps have been exhaustively documented in scores of books and essays for some forty years. But most of that literature, largely ignored at the time of publication and soon out of print, was known only to a few specialists. Thanks to "Holocaust" the public consciousness has been aroused. Inevitably there have been trivializations, such as the personal ad in a recent issue of the *New York Review of Books* from a "humanist idealist" seeking a companion with whom to work out a "new praxis of life in remembrance of the Holocaust and of the sixties." Nor have the media been slow to exploit success. In the aftermath of "Holocaust" American viewers were able to watch the Israelis searching for Josef Mengele on one channel while they tracked down Adolf Eichmann on another. A German newspaper enticed subscribers for its serialized novel with the ad: "Where Holocaust ends, Exodus begins." Yet the core of genuine interest aroused by "Holocaust" has prompted serious publishers to reissue standard works on the subject and to promote new ones. A group of prominent survivors, including Alexander Donat, Leon W. Wells, and Elie Wiesel, has even established a special Holocaust Library, published by Schocken.

The initially confusing array of publications pertaining more or less generally to the Holocaust can be conveniently grouped in three large categories: the analysts, the witnesses, and the exegetes. One of the finest introductions to the history of the Nazi persecution of the Jews is still Léon Poliakov's *Harvest of Hate* (*Bréviaire de la haine*, 1951), first published in English in 1954 and now available in a revised and expanded edition. Poliakov, who teaches history at the Sorbonne, provides a solidly documented account that begins with an analysis of Nazi anti-Semitism and then moves stage by gruesome stage—persecution, ghettos, deportations, death camps, Jewish resistance—down to a concluding reflection on attitudes and reactions toward genocide among Germans, Jews, and non-German Christians. Totally eschewing rhetorical pathos, Poliakov relies predominantly on statistics and quotations from Nazi documents to trace the appalling history of the "final solution." (It was Poliakov who first calculated with statistical accuracy the number of Jewish victims at six million.) While many specialized studies have dealt more exhaustively with particular aspects of Poliakov's book, no work has replaced it as a general introduction to the subject.

An instructive complement to Poliakov's survey is afforded by Anna Pawelczynska's sociological analysis, *Values and Violence in Auschwitz*. In contrast to Poliakov, who is concerned with the entire history of Nazi persecution, Pawelczynska limits her study to the main extermination camp, which John Paul II called "this Golgotha of the

modern world." In contrast to the French chronicler of anti-Semitism, the Polish survivor of two years in Auschwitz reminds us that over a third of the four million victims murdered there were Gentiles. In contrast to the historian who focuses on Nazi attitudes toward the Jews, the sociologist is interested in the interaction within the camp between the victims and the oppressors. And in contrast to the early researcher who relied mainly on documents from Nazi archives and records of the Nuremberg Tribunal, the more recent scholar has made exhaustive use of the scores of firsthand accounts published during the thirty years before she wrote her book. The resulting study of an inhuman institution is chilling in its objectivity and detachment. Regarding the concentration camp as "a unique social experiment carried out on human beings," Pawelczynska analyzes the entire range of "negative stimuli" that the Nazis applied to their victims. The chapter "Living Space" moves from statistics on the prisoners at Auschwitz to precise specifications (with maps and diagrams) of the physical space that constituted their "home." She discusses the "psychological relativity of numbers" in a realm where the yellow triangle was simply one on an elaborate scale of humiliating designations. Her sobering conclusion is that "conditions of extremity compel one to choose what is most important" and that normal value systems are therefore relatively useless in understanding the moral attitudes of prisoners in the concentration camps. Pawelczynska's achievement is to have recognized that Auschwitz, far from being merely a more efficient version of the traditional prison or place of execution, can best be grasped as a new form of human society altogether.

A grim companion-piece to these two analyses is Martin Gilbert's slim volume illustrating the destruction of Jewish life in Europe during the Nazi era. The skillful juxtaposition of maps and photographs, of the general and the specific, the abstract and the concrete, constitutes the visual equivalent of that "alliance of the Chronicler with Job" recommended as the most suitable way of approaching the Holocaust by Yehuda Bauer, head of the Institute of Contemporary Jewry at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and author of many books on recent Jewish history. Bauer's *The Holocaust in Historical Perspective*, unlike the studies by Poliakov and Pawelczynska, is not a monograph but a collection of four loosely related essays. Arguing that "mystification" often obscures what really happened to the Jews under the Nazis, Bauer urges a "return to the actual reality and concreteness of the Holocaust." Possibly the most brilliant and certainly the most controversial of his essays is the chapter "Against Mystification: The Holocaust as a Historical Phenomenon," which exposes three types of confusion. The first stems from the use of the term *Holocaust* itself, which has been current in English to designate the extermination of

the Jews only since the late fifties. Bauer objects to two tendencies. Those who use Holocaust loosely as a label for almost any case of racial persecution obscure reality by denying the special circumstances governing the murder of the Jews in Nazi Germany. At the same time, those who insist that the Holocaust was utterly unique mystify the event, and ignore its meaning, by suggesting that it is unrepeatable. Bauer concludes: "We should properly use the term 'Holocaust' to describe the policy of total physical annihilation of a nation or a people. To date, this has happened once, to the Jews under Nazism." The second kind of mystification involves the more or less crude denial of the Holocaust, both by neo-Nazi gutter historians and by more sophisticated revisionists who try to rationalize away the evil of Nazi Germany. Bauer's third mystification falls into two categories: literary allegorization that presents the Holocaust as so unprecedented as to be unearthly, and academic research that neutralizes the violence by turning it into "Holocaustology." Bauer's other essays, while less startling, are soundly based and persuasively argued. "The Holocaust and American Jewry" chronicles the growth of Nazi anti-Semitism and discusses the factors—basically its seeming implausibility—that made it initially so difficult for the American Jewish leadership to believe. "Jew and Gentile" surveys with awesome objectivity the responses to the persecution of the Jews in different European states and the reasons for their varying attitudes. In his account of the perplexing mission of Joel Brand—the Hungarian Jew who arrived in Istanbul in May 1944 with an alleged offer from Adolf Eichmann to release one million Jews in exchange for Western goods—Bauer concludes that Brand was sent by the SS, on Himmler's orders, to prepare the ground for a separately negotiated peace.

Of the twenty-four essays collected in Bruno Bettelheim's *Surviving*, only about half deal with the Holocaust. Many of these, moreover, are not self-generated but are critical responses to books and films by others. Because the essays were written over a period of thirty-five years and because they are often literally "occasional" pieces, they exhibit a certain amount of repetition. But for various reasons—not least his vigorous prose and refreshing common sense—Bettelheim is one of the finest and most incisive authors on the Holocaust. Like Pawelczynska, Bettelheim approaches the concentration camps from the standpoint of personal experience focused through a professional discipline—not sociology in this case but psychoanalysis. Indeed the observations that inform his 1943 essay "Individual and Mass Behavior in Extreme Situations" were made, Bettelheim tells us, in an attempt to preserve his own rationality in the course of his one-year confinement in Dachau and Buchenwald in the face of Nazi efforts to traumatize their prisoners. While the early essays are concerned with

the reactions of the prisoners to their camp experience through adaptation, regression, and schizophrenia, in later essays Bettelheim turns to the various psychological defensive mechanisms that have prevented many Americans from coming to grips with the true significance of the Holocaust. Like Bauer, Bettelheim sees a certain mystification in the use of the very term *Holocaust*. "Using technical or specially created terms instead of words from our common vocabulary is one of the best-known and most widely used distancing devices, separating the intellectual from the emotional experience." Similarly popularization and exploitation have cheapened the Holocaust by treating it simply as material for fiction or scholarly theorizing. In every case these evasive mechanisms preclude the integration of the experience into our personalities in such a manner as to assure a healthy response. It is for these reasons that Bettelheim objected, in widely debated articles, to *The Diary of Anne Frank* and Lina Wertmüller's film *Seven Beauties*. He accounts for the popularity of the book, the play, and the film about Anne Frank on the ground that its conclusion—"In spite of everything, I still believe that people are really good at heart"—while conceding the fact that Auschwitz existed, "encourages us at the same time to ignore any of its implications." To put it more crudely: the sentimentalizing truism of a fifteen-year-old girl prevented an entire postwar generation from confronting frankly the human capacity for evil implicit in the death camps. Bettelheim's *New Yorker* piece on *Seven Beauties* is not so much a review motivated by the film itself as an analysis of the reception with which it was acclaimed in this country. Unlike *The Diary of Anne Frank* Wertmüller's film does not deny the existence of evil. But that evil is rendered meaningless by the banality and, above all, the ludicrous aspect under which it is presented in the film. The comedy of the film, in short, makes atrocity just as palatable as the sentimentalism of Anne Frank's diary. Even the butchers of Auschwitz are good guys at heart, after all—and endearingly funny besides.

In an interview on his television series (*TV Guide*, April 15, 1978) Gerald Green observed that "the statistics and the bare facts of this crime tend to induce disbelief and indifference." Accordingly he narrowed his focus to a few typical families in order to convey the impact of the Holocaust on individuals. The same impulse toward particularization has produced in almost unsurveyable numbers the books constituting a new genre that Elie Wiesel has labeled "the literature of testimony." It is no belittlement of these works, but an acknowledgment of their most poignant implication, to point out that they amount to embodiments of a single basic archetype. It was the goal of the Nazis—with their variously colored stars and tattooed numbers—to reduce individuality to a common mass before the depersonalized

extermination of the gas chambers. Inevitably, therefore, these accounts resemble one another despite all superficial differences. The authors come from different towns and social backgrounds, and they suffer in different camps. But with a rhythm as ritually steady as Greek tragedy the memoirs begin with a brief recapitulation of prewar happiness, move on to the hardships of ghetto life, culminate in the hell of the camps, and end with the liberation and the attempt to achieve the difficult reintegration into normal postwar society. One of the most powerful memoirs, Alexander Donat's *The Holocaust Kingdom* (first published in 1965), describes the events of the Warsaw ghetto, the author's experiences in Maidanek concentration camp, and his eventual reunion with his wife and son. In Leon W. Wells's *The Death Brigade* (first published in 1963 under the title *The Janowska Road*) the town is Lvov and the camp is Janowska, but the essential pattern—including the eventual move to the United States—remains the same. Individual variations emerge from volume to volume. Luba Gurdus, an artist and art historian, has illustrated her account of the Warsaw ghetto, the deportations, work camps, and Maidanek with sixty-one illustrations moving in their stark simplicity. (Otherwise her intimately personal account is less informative than Donat's politically sophisticated record of essentially the same fate.) Isabella Leitner's "memoir of Auschwitz"—a series of poetic vignettes, of which the earliest were set to music by Elizabeth Swados and performed as "Nightclub Cantata"—portrays the deportation of Hungarian Jews in 1944. Her husband's epilogue describes her hysterical outburst, during a trip to Paris in 1975, when she encountered a group of German tourists of an appropriate age to have been "the typical *'Deutschland über alles'* German, the Nazi murderer."

While the testimonies of the survivors are inevitably colored by reflections on their experiences—reflections sometimes influenced retroactively by the authors' acquaintance with other Holocaust literature and therefore not wholly reliable—the diaries of victims who perished impress us by their immediacy and their unawareness of larger contexts. By an astonishing coincidence the diaries of two central figures from the Warsaw ghetto—men who play an important role in Donat's account—have been preserved: *The Warsaw Diary of Adam Czerniakow*, chairman of the Warsaw *Judenrat* for nearly three years until his suicide on July 23, 1942; and the *Ghetto Diary* of Janusz Korczak (pseudonym for the distinguished Polish Jewish writer and educator Henryk Goldschmidt), who on August 5, 1942, rejecting all offers of rescue, accompanied two hundred Jewish children of his ghetto orphanage to the gas chambers at Treblinka. The two volumes differ as markedly as their authors. An engineer of limited imagination, Czerniakow found himself thrust into a position of authority that ex-

ceeded his capacities. He committed suicide when he could not bring himself to supply Jews for deportation to the death camps; yet he was capable, only a month before the end, of sitting for his own portrait. The diary has been thoroughly edited by a team of three Holocaust scholars, but sometimes the text hardly seems to justify either the elaborate editorial effort or the claim that it is "the most important Jewish record of that time." Although his meticulous notes contain information useful for the historian of the Warsaw ghetto, Czerniakow's perspective was limited, his vision banal, and his jottings often tedious. Korczak, in contrast, was a thinker subtle enough to recognize the tragedy of his situation and a writer perceptive enough to analyze his thoughts and feelings as he herded his wards toward their inevitable fate. Here, in view of the inherently poignant nature of the material, a factual introduction would have been more useful than the prefatory "Prose Poem" by Aaron Zeitlin.

The Korczak who peers out at us from the frontispiece of *Ghetto Diary* is a haunted man whose anguished eyes have looked into a hopeless future. I. C. Trumpelmann of Leslie Epstein's *King of the Jews*—an ambivalent *Mischling* of savior and dictator—resembles nothing so much as Zero Mostel acting the role of Korczak. As Trumpelmann rides away toward Auschwitz with his orphans, the reader almost expects him to break into a lumbering song-and-dance routine while a fiddler saws away at his violin on the roof of the cattle car. Based more or less explicitly on the careers of Korczak and Czerniakow, Epstein's novel amounts to a tedious travesty of ghetto life and the *Judenrat* during the Holocaust. But reality is constantly allegorized: even the Nazis are never called by name but rather are coyly alluded to as "the Others," "the Warriors," or "the Blond Ones." Lacking the savage bitterness of Tadeusz Borowski's stories, the mad violence of Jerzy Kosinski's novels, or the passionate intensity of Elie Wiesel's memoirs, Epstein's novel represents the fictional counterpart of Green's "Holocaust." The characters are stereotyped, the action is predictable, and—above all—his ghetto is terribly clean, exhibiting none of the filth and stench described by Czerniakow or the searing agony of Korczak's ruminations. While its sterility links it to the TV production, its tendency toward farcification exposes it to the same criticism that Bettelheim leveled at Wertmüller's *Seven Beauties* film: the work's grotesqueries prevent us from taking seriously the Holocaust world that it presents. Adorno believed that there could be "no more poetry after Auschwitz." A farcical novel on the Holocaust transcends even Adorno's gloomy forebodings.

If humor is one mode of exegesis whereby interpreters hold the grim reality of the Holocaust at a safe distance, mythification (related to Bauer's "mystification") provides another equally effective maneuver for achieving that repression that Bettelheim noted among participants at an American conference on the Holocaust. Of the various survivors, none has been a more eloquent witness of the Holocaust than Elie Wiesel, whose writings revolve obsessively around his experience of Auschwitz. *Confronting the Holocaust*, an anthology of essays dedicated to "The Impact of Elie Wiesel," demonstrates how his admirers—including Lawrence L. Langer, Terrence Des Pres, Emil L. Fackenheim, A. Roy Eckardt, and other specialists—unwittingly evade history by mythifying it. The introduction posits the leitmotif repeated in every essay: "The Holocaust is an event of such magnitude that it creates an historical force-field of its own." All the authors share the basic assumption that the Holocaust is, as Langer puts it, "an episode without parallel in history or eschatology." But this curious elitism, which reduces a tragedy of humanity to an episode in Jewish mythology, is as counterproductive as Epstein's comedy. Epstein suggests that if we laugh at it, it will not happen again. Wiesel's exegetes imply that it was so terrible that we are safe from any possible recurrence. The historical event, in short, is lifted out of its causative nexus. Since the authors acknowledge no analogy to the actual event in history, they must restrict themselves to the search for analogies in literature and myth. We hear about "Wiesel's Midrash: The Writings of Elie Wiesel and Their Relationship to Jewish Tradition" and about "The Holocaust Writer and the Lamentation Tradition." We come to appreciate Wiesel as a writer within the Jewish tradition, but we learn nothing about the Holocaust, with the notable exception of L. Eitinger's brief piece "On Being a Psychiatrist and a Survivor." Instead of confronting the Holocaust, these writers, like Plato's artist, actually confront a literary reflection of the Holocaust.

Lawrence Langer, whose earlier book, *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination* (1975), provided a splendid introduction to what he calls "the literature of atrocity," has now published a sequel in which he endeavors to explain the emergence of a new attitude toward death that made "the age of atrocity" possible. Defining atrocity as "death as a sudden and discontinuous experience" that offers no consoling meaning, Langer moves from Hans Castorp's experience of death in Mann's *The Magic Mountain* through the experience of fatal disease in Camus's *The Plague* and Solzhenitsyn's *Cancer Ward* down to the accounts of the death camp in Charlotte Delbo's Auschwitz trilogy. But something is badly wrong with any attempt to explain Auschwitz on the basis of literature! Langer's exposition is based on a fundamental semantic error. "Atrocity"—both etymologically and according to common understanding—designates the character of the *agent* and the spirit in which the act is carried out, not the perception of the suffering object. Auschwitz appalls us not because death there was

sudden and discontinuous (so is a car accident!) but because it was executed with such ruthless efficiency by "atrocious" human beings. The diseases that figure in the works by Mann, Camus, and Solzhenitsyn—and in the lesser documents that Langer discusses in his introduction—may be called many things: but they are not "atrocities" any more than, say, the Black Death of 1348 in Boccaccio's *Decameron*. Almost wholly disregarding the extensive secondary works on the subject, Langer adds little to our understanding of the familiar texts. (The notable exception is his discussion of Delbo's trilogy, which seems to be a spin-off from his earlier book.) Above all, his book exemplifies the tendency to avoid the reality of the Holocaust by putting it into a literary tradition.

In addition to alienation through farce and myth there remains a third technique for distancing historical reality—sentimentalization. The diaries of victims and the memoirs of survivors are intensely personal documents that bear the imprint of the author and his experienced suffering. We value them precisely for that reason. But there has recently emerged another subgenre of Holocaust literature: works in which the author, though not himself a survivor, exercises his own emotions by means of the Holocaust. (This aspect is predictably evident in the conversations with sons and daughters of survivors that Helen Epstein recently published under the title *Children of the Holocaust.*) The intrusion of the author's feelings almost ruins the story of the French village of Le Chambon, a Huguenot community which, under the inspired leadership of its pastor André Trocmé, saved thousands of Jews from the Vichy government and their Nazi masters. Philip P. Hallie's account, published under the title *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed,* is overwritten (too long by at least one quarter), pedantic (e.g. in its translation of even the most obvious French phrases), and annoyingly repetitious (how often we must hear about Trocmé's aching back!). Though he claims to be writing history, the author assumes the novelist's omniscience in attributing thoughts to his characters, and regularly reports rumor, gossip, and legend as though they were fact. Above all, Hallie forces his emotions upon us: from the tears he wept when he first stumbled across the story of Le Chambon, to his feelings at meeting many of the villagers, to the embarrassing disclosure of his insights into death following a heart attack while writing the book. For Hallie, in short, the Holocaust provides the occasion for a therapeutic exercise, which enables the writer to contemplate history through a protective shield of tears. It is a tribute to the intrinsic power of the story that it manages to come across and move us despite the author's self-conscious intrusions and ethical agonizing.

Let us not take too much comfort from these evidences—the analyses, the testimonies, the variously motivated exegeses—suggesting that the world finally cares about the atrocities committed by the Nazis. On the very day when the pope preached at Auschwitz—through one of the ironies of which history itself is the greatest master—fifty lots of Nazi memorabilia brought record prices at an auction in New York, including $5000 for a small diary kept by Heinrich Himmler, Hitler's mastermind of the "final solution" for Jews, gypsies, Poles, Russians, and other undesirables. In Germany and in the United States, neo-Nazi organizations still denounce the "six-million lie" and produce "evidence" proving that there never occurred a single death by gassing in the concentration camps, which are depicted as veritable spas for war workers (e.g. *Voice of German Americans* for March 1978). Such reactions—both the idle curiosity of Nazi-freaks and the political lunatic extreme—are predictable. More disturbing are those well-intentioned works that, for one reason or another, distract us from a profound understanding of the Nazi mass murders, which inflicted a permanent scar on the consciousness of mankind, a throbbing reminder of the cruelty of which man is capable and of which we are all the potential victims. As Richard L. Rubenstein has argued in his disturbing book *The Cunning of History* (1975), the methodical extermination carried out in the death camps is in a very real sense an excrescence consistent with Western urban civilization and the modern corporate enterprise. Auschwitz was not simply the scene for a grim drama between Nazis and Jews—though it was certainly that too! The real victim at Auschwitz was mankind itself and the ideal of humanity celebrated in such treasured monuments as *The Magic Flute* or the Ninth Symphony. Until we have learned that awesome lesson and acknowledged the death camps as the secularization of ancient evil, we have not fully understood the meaning of the Holocaust. Until that moment of painful insight, the lives of the eleven million who perished—Jews and non-Jews alike—were truly lost in vain.