

UNITED STATES
HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM

CENTER FOR ADVANCED HOLOCAUST STUDIES

**Uncovering Certain Mischievous Questions
About the Holocaust**

Berel Lang

WASHINGTON, D.C.

**Uncovering Certain Mischievous Questions
About the Holocaust**

Berel Lang

INA LEVINE SCHOLAR-IN-RESIDENCE ANNUAL LECTURE
12 MARCH 2002

The assertions, opinions, and conclusions in this occasional paper are those of the author. They do not necessarily reflect those of the United States Holocaust Memorial Council or of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

Second printing, January 2005

Copyright © 2002 by Berel Lang,
assigned to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

The Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies annually appoints a distinguished specialist in Holocaust studies to pursue independent research and writing, to present lectures at universities throughout the United States, and to serve as a resource for the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, the Center, government personnel, educators, students, and the public. The Ina Levine Scholar-in-Residence Award has been endowed by William S. Levine of Phoenix, Arizona, in memory of his wife, Ina.

Certain questions frequently asked about the Holocaust have been, are—quite simply—mischievous. I mean by this that at the same time these questions ask or inquire, they also mislead, distort, cause trouble—and this in a setting that is, we all know, already deeply troubled. And troubling. The mischief caused in this way can hardly be undone only by a heightened awareness of the fact or of how it is caused—but I hope by such means to advance that undoing. I propose, then, to identify the most notable of these mischievous questions, to show how they are harmful—and then also to suggest how that harm can be avoided. For the questions themselves, almost despite themselves, are capable of rehabilitation—and that, too, I attempt. Thus, the same questions may be preserved, asked and even answered—but without their mischief. It is not their fault, at least not entirely their fault, that they have been misused.

The account given here is less concerned with the motives or intentions behind the questions than with their consequences—specifically with the way they coerce or slant the responses to them. For against the background of the Holocaust, a background where even slight missteps in understanding loom large, the effects of mischievous questions about that event—not outright falsifications, but subtler, more angular shifts—take on larger proportions. The “manifest” content of these questions appears innocent—so much so that the mischief “latent” in them often passes unnoticed; at

times it has even been praised as honest or courageous. Much of the trouble that these questions cause, in other words, is hidden behind a mask of commonplace. It is not that the questions are simply “rhetorical,” assertions in disguise. They do pose authentic queries and so also warrant answers—but what is authentic in them will remain concealed or distorted until what is not authentic in them is diagnosed.

I know that I should by this point have named the guilty questions, but my delay in doing this reflects their own indirection—the covert way in which they attempt to shape responses to them. For the questions in effect tie the hands of the audience whom they address; more basically, they tie their own hands, prejudicing the line of inquiry so that the responses to them mirror the questions themselves. Thus, the questions falsify the representations of the Holocaust, representations for which they claim accuracy and fairness. Admittedly, it might be objected that no questions are entirely innocent: all questions, after all, originate in specific contexts, are driven by partial concerns—and always they lean toward answers from one direction or other. But the mischievous questions criticized here are so slanted in their usual appearances that it is their prejudice, not any substantive issues they raise, that warrant our first attention.

But how, it might be asked, can questions be mischievous? After all, they inquire rather than assert, allowing some freedom of response—at times, the freedom not to respond at all. But we know, too, that questions can be “loaded”—and this quite precisely describes the questions criticized here; their air of innocence only adds to the harm they cause, which follows from a three-step progression. First, the questions draw on an accepted basis in fact that then provides a cover after the questions leave that starting point behind—which they quickly do. Second, the questions are posed apart from any comparative historical context—falsely implying that such a context would make no difference. In this way, what first seems a historical question becomes instead a-historical. Third, the ‘implied author’ of the question, the voice asking the question, assumes for himself a privileged position in respect to the people to whom the questions refer, at the same time offering the same privilege (something like a bribe) to the question’s reader or audience. In this last respect, then, the questions reach beyond the Holocaust as a past event and into our own present: now. For not only do they pronounce a moral judgment on actions taken (or avoided) during the Holocaust, but the person asking the questions implies that he himself would have acted more commendably than did the people who were in the Holocaust. And understandable as

this projection backward may be, it adds self-righteousness to an already severe moral judgment— proportionately adding also to its mischief.

What, then, are these mysterious questions? Not mysterious at all, I should claim, but all too familiar. So familiar, in fact, that their usual appearances rely entirely on pronouns, with no need, evidently, to name specific names or referents. Thus, the best known and also, in my view, the most mischievous of these questions (#1): “*Why didn’t they resist?*”¹ There will be immediate recognition that the “they” in this question designates the Holocaust victims. The question thus sets out from the generally accepted fact that they, the victims—principally, the Jews of Europe—went from life to death largely, mainly, without open or physical resistance. And so, the question seems to follow of “Why? Why, with the cruel and certain fate awaiting them, didn’t they resist?”—with all of that question’s harsh but unstated implications. For what the question itself clearly suggests—in effect, asserts—is that the victims could have resisted when they did not; that had they resisted, they might not have become victims—or if they had, they might at least have helped others. At the very least, even if these other possibilities were not realized, they would have won respect for themselves by the act of resistance. But none of this, or very little of it, happened.

Now the basis in fact underlying this first question could not be more concrete or specific—or accurate. The numbers driving it are the most basic numbers of the Holocaust—since it is the number of Jews murdered that is central here—and so the figure generally accepted among historians: between 5,200,000 and 6,000,000. (Such numbers, it is obvious, must be approximate; it is quite improbable that history itself would round off its totals as neatly as historians do, and in the context of writing history on this scale, hundreds or thousands or tens of thousands and even hundreds of thousands do not substantially alter its overall shape). Juxtaposed to that number, furthermore, is the statistical record of Jewish resistance—the instances in which those victims fought openly against the fate of deportation or then against concentration and death that awaited them in the ghettos and camps. And this number, although over time it has been recognized to be larger than had at first been thought, yet remains small compared to the mass number of dead. Partisan groups, yes—in the Baltic states, Poland, Russia and Slovakia—but, in terms of numbers, this only in the thousands, hardly more. The Underground in the ghettos of Poland and Lithuania, yes—but always with the burden of the Nazi threat to destroy the ghettos if opposition came into the open; thus effectual if at all mainly at the end of the ghettos’ existence (as in

Warsaw), by which time fewer able-bodied fighters remained in the ghettos who could resist—thus, at a point when hope was virtually lost. And in the camps themselves—yes, too, but minimally and almost harmlessly (that is, for the Nazis and their collaborators).²

None of these efforts, then, however one honors the courage represented in them, makes much of a dent in the impression of the millions who were killed; the proportion of resisters to victims remains small. And so, on the face of it, it seems reasonable to call attention to the power that the millions might have had if they had joined together in resistance—or even if, singly, they had struck at individual executioners. Why not, after all? In this way, too, the question (and the questioner) link the small proportion of resisters to still another assertion: that if other groups of people had stood in the place of the Jews, they might have reacted differently: more courageously, more strongly, more honorably, not at all like “sheep going to the slaughter,” as that memorable phrase has been applied to a world which its Psalmist-author could not possibly have imagined.

Well, why not resistance? The implied answer to this question, set in the question itself, is that there must have been some fault in the people who became victims in this unusual, and discreditable, way, one that made them react as they did—which was, the question supposes, hardly to react at all. Seen from this perspective, the victims were to some extent—harsh as the verdict sounds—responsible for their own fates: a short step from blameworthy. And the likely “reasons” or “causes” behind that are also often hinted, although usually left deliberately vague. Perhaps as reflecting ideological or cultural infirmity: the “ghetto” mentality, bred of centuries lived in the shadow of the political power of others; perhaps from religious passivity, faith in a God whose intervention was, at least in this instance, vainly awaited. Perhaps, more prosaically, because of a failure in overcoming economic or class liabilities, the social dependencies of the victims having become ingrained or inbred, and in any event leaving them unfit for practical or instrumental action. Each of these possibilities, and various combinations of them, have figured in histories and theories of the Holocaust. Indeed, the specific explanation hardly matters to the person who asks this first question, since it is the *prima facie* evidence (the *supposed* evidence) that speaks here: approximately six million dead without much cost to their attackers or much honor to themselves. To be sure, the victims paid dearly for this supposed incapacity—and so the implied charge of failure is usually left muted, concealed in the question.

Everybody more or less knows ‘Why’ they didn’t resist—and at any rate, the question and its basis in fact are more important than any possible explanation: “they” didn’t resist when they might have and when, for a multitude of reasons ranging from justice to self-respect to revenge and even to the natural instinct for survival, they should have.

On the surface, then, the question “Why didn’t they resist?” seems not unreasonable—harsh, but not unfair. Where, in any event, is the mischief in it? And the answer to that question comes quickly on the heels of a well-hidden premise assumed in the question; namely, the assumption that the Jewish passivity alleged was at once exceptional and remiss—an atypical failing in the reaction of people to threats against their lives. But is the truth of this hidden premise so obvious? Is what it asserts true at all? Does it rest on evidence of how other groups or individuals reacted in similar circumstances? The answer to all these “counter”-questions is, I believe, “No”—with the last of them the most important of all. Because far from supporting the criticism implied in this first question, the comparative evidence argues for a contradictory conclusion. I mean by this, quite simply, that in the context of the systematic brutality of the Nazi regime, resistance on all fronts, in all circumstances—including circumstances much more favorable to resistance than those in which the Jews found themselves—was far from common; it was and would be out of the ordinary, notable just because it was exceptional.

In the considerable body of evidence that supports this claim, one item among many stands out. During the Nazi war against the U.S.S.R., which began in June, 1941, approximately 3,000,000 Soviet prisoners-of-war (out of about 5,000,000 who were taken) are generally held to have died in captivity. These 3,000,000 were members of the Soviet armed forces and had surrendered or been overpowered by the Germans, some of them killed immediately, others placed in “camps”—some of the latter improvised and temporary encirclements, some of them (as the war went on) the concentration and death camps that since have become well known.³ A significant feature of this number, 3,000,000, is the fact that these Soviet prisoners had been fit enough to serve in the armed forces; they also—again unlike most of the murdered Jews—had had military training; approximately two million of the three million, moreover, were taken prisoner in the first year of the German attack—which meant that when captured they would have been relatively fit. Yet the record of resistance among these prisoners, although there is some, is sparse—not notably stronger, in any event, than that of the Jewish captives in ghettos or camps. Should we then infer a collective

disability also in this second, quite different group? Or should we rather begin to consider more intently the force and designs of the Nazi system—and what the requirements are, humanly, psychologically, for conceiving and initiating acts of resistance. The necessity for this comparative perspective is further underscored by other Nazi atrocities carried out against non-Jewish groups, including both civilian and military victims (albeit on a smaller scale). Recall, for example, the razing of the Czech village, Lidice, and the execution of its male inhabitants, the executions at Oradour in France, the murder of the Italian prisoners-of-war on the Greek island of Kefalonia—all instances of massacre and also without evidence of significant resistance. Most often the victims were killed in cold blood, sometimes with torture, frequently with great humiliation, almost always with the victims conscious beforehand of what was being done to them. And again, with little or no resistance.⁴

On the basis of such evidence, then, if we are to ask fairly, ‘Why didn’t they resist?’—that is, if we are to avoid its mischief—we must expand its reference beyond the Jews alone. For a more responsible phrasing would ask why any of the captive populations under Nazi control and who were victims of persecution and punishment—any or all of these groups—didn’t resist more quickly or actively? And even this question is pertinent only as it also considers what is required to conceive and initiate acts of resistance—avoiding the assumption that lack of resistance by these groups necessarily reflects a common social or cultural defect.⁵ To be sure, the reasons for failing to resist more than they did may have varied among different groups. It might also be objected that because no other group faced genocidal extermination, awareness of that fate should have evoked a stronger response from the Jews than from other groups. This objection might be debated—but well before we come to that is the evidence of the widespread common reaction and its most obvious explanation. The nations occupied and the groups held captive by the Nazis indeed shared something in common: each was confronted with an organized system of command, through the Wehrmacht and the SS—a system that, considering the “practical” difficulties it faced, was quite precise and competent in its planning and organization, and that, most important, observed few limits on the brutality it was prepared to use in implementing those plans.⁶

The degree of control achieved by the Nazis in their campaigns and occupation of conquered countries was, for all its occasional gaps, sustained if not total; this was accomplished by a combination of force and various economic and ideological

pressures, abetted in these by local collaborators acting for their own motives. In this sense, the answer to the question of “Why didn’t they resist?” seems obvious—so obvious that the question becomes mischievous insofar as it implies that the answer is not obvious, that there are reasons, putatively in the victims themselves, for their lack of resistance. It is true that as a group singled out for destruction, the number (and still more, the percentage) of Jews killed by the Nazis was high; it also is probably true that Jewish communal responses to this threat reflected collective dispositions and the tendencies of historical institutions that had evolved among the Jewish communities of Europe (how could it be otherwise?); in this sense, there may indeed have been something typical and symptomatic in the “Jewish” reaction to the menace of the “Final Solution.” But even allowing for such features, the more basic response to the question “Why didn’t they resist?” ought to look not at the Jews but at the Nazis—and how any, and then all, of the other groups they conquered and then ruled and then often also persecuted, reacted. Only so, it seems, would the question “Why didn’t they resist?” be fairly put—and then too, would the answer begin to emerge, but from the direction opposite from the one usually cited. For just as we have to consider the extremity of the measures that the Nazis were prepared to take, we must also consider, also comparatively, the “normal” human response to extreme situations; that is, the common reaction of avoidance or denial—at a further extreme, a sense of fatalism and acceptance. Could the Jews, even in the midst of the Holocaust, have done more than they did to save themselves or others? No doubt. But this by itself hardly distinguishes them from other groups confronted by the Nazi onslaught (Jehovah’s Witnesses are perhaps, as a group, the one exception to this; they, it seems, could not have done more than they did, refusing to compromise even when, unlike the persecuted Jews, they were given an option that would have ensured their survival. But it is also true that they were not automatically condemned to death—and it is also true that they are exceptional.) The reason why there were not more heroes among Nazi victims is undoubtedly the same reason that there are so few heroes ever or anyplace.

Question #2: “*How could they have done what they did?*” The “They” inquired about here differs radically from the “they” of the first question, but its reference seems just as clear and transparent. For when we attempt to understand how the country of Bach and Goethe, of Dürer and Kant, of many of the great universities and great libraries and great cities of the world, how this same people would go on to imagine and operate the death factories—gas chambers and crematoria working in concert—the

disparity commands attention: Is it the same country or culture? Could those responsible for the death factories have human conscience or emotions at all? How could they (or anyone) do what they did? But the mischief in this question is nearly as evident as that in the first one. For behind the large gap it finds between Nazi and Nazi-inspired actions and “normal” evildoing is the implication that the people responsible for this disparity—for its terrible violations of Germany’s cultural heritage and of international moral norms—must also have been extraordinary. In other words, the criminality of the Nazis and their collaborators was so excessive that explanations in terms of “normal” wrongdoing fail. A quite different order of explanation is required—one that speaks of more than human, of demonic evil.⁷

But once again: Instances of extraordinary evildoing initiated by individuals or by specific groups surely have occurred historically, and it seems clear that certain individual figures within the Nazi hierarchy ought to be judged in these terms. But the question “How could they have done what they did?” as it encompasses the “Final Solution,” that is, the entire process of genocide, must include not only the echelons of the Nazi hierarchy responsible for making policy, but the larger group of Germans, numbering in the millions, who did not make policy or give orders but who nonetheless contributed to the advance of Nazi plans, who—finally—made the “Final Solution” possible. (We are speaking, after all, of a population of about 70,000,000, with little more than 10% of that populace members of the Nazi Party at its peak).⁸ So there were workers in the industrial factories producing shoes as well as crematoria, railroad workers maintaining the transportation system and schedule, postal and telegraph workers, farmers who earned their livings by provisioning the armed forces, and then too, as we work our way upward, the middle-aged and often apolitical “ordinary men” (as described, for instance, by Christopher Browning in his account of Police Battalion 101) who took part in extraordinary atrocities but whose most notable feature, nonetheless, seems to have been their “ordinariness.”⁹ All of them taxpayers, most with families, few differing in any apparent way from their counterparts elsewhere in Germany or, one might surmise, in other countries. Whatever remains unclear about their motives or characters, these millions of contributors to the “Final Solution” seem indeed “all-too-human,” providing no reason to believe—and much reason to doubt—that the roles they played, which were indisputably crucial to the Nazi project as a whole, differed significantly from what many (not all, but many) people of other

nations, classes, religions, or ideologies, had they been suddenly transported into that same set of circumstances, would have done.

This contention does not in the slightest exonerate the Germans who did make policy or those who, however “ordinary,” directly committed atrocities or those others who did neither but who simply “went along” with these other actions. Nor does it elide the difference between any of these groups and other people, elsewhere, who (as I’ve proposed) might in the same circumstances have acted in the same way—but who were not present and did not. It does mean, however, that the question, “How could they have done what they did?”, implying that what the Germans did individually or as a nation sets them apart from other groups or people by a more than human-sized chasm, is misleading—and more than that, because of the moral stakes at issue, mischievous. It pushes responses to that question in a direction that would let both questioner and respondent off the hooks of history and moral responsibility—on both of which hooks they (and we) should be stuck.

Again, it is the Nazis and their collaborators—corporately, Germany—who did what they did, and who remain responsible. But the reasons and causes for what they did are neither outside history nor outside human nature. Others could have and might have done what they did. And these others include, we might surmise, the person asking the question “How could they have done what they did?” It is, in other words, mistaken—groundless—to assume that a unique disposition or character is required to understand why the Germans, as a group or individually, acted as they did in the context of the Third Reich. *Prima facie*, a much less inflationary, more banal explanation is indicated—one that locates the Germans of the Third Reich in the domain of conventional human nature, impelled by “normal” human features such as (perceived) self-interest, social pressures that readily turn into cruelty, frustration as it turned into anger, economic uncertainty and need, even simple greed or self-indulgence. To find such commonplace motives leading to acts of extraordinary brutality is no doubt unsettling—and it should be. But those ordinary human motives ought to be faced in their own terms, not by evasions that explain the Nazi genocide by a distinctive social (let alone, genetic) trait that sets the Germans essentially apart from other people or groups. This second mischievous question seems finally to suggest that what the Germans did in the Holocaust was due to the fact that they were German. It surely is pertinent to ask about the Germans, as for any group or individual, what accounts for specific decisions or actions. Yet to explain these by positing some

mysterious (and ad hoc) characteristic is as mystifying—and mischievous—as it would be to deny the possibility of any explanation at all. Which is in effect what this question does.

Question #3: “*Why didn’t more people do what they did?*” Once again, there can be little doubt about the reference of the third person pronoun in this question. For among the large group of “bystanders” in the Holocaust, we know that a small number tried to help victims of Nazi persecution—extending themselves to Jewish strangers, many of the Jews alien in language and manner, all of them in peril of death. And the question—again, superficially plausible—asks why, with the plight of these victims often in full view, more bystanders who were under no immediate threat themselves did not offer help: food or money or—on a larger scale—shelter and hiding places. Here again, the person asking the question privileges himself: not only should more people have offered such help, but the questioner (we are to suppose) would have been among them. This insinuation adds weight to the question—since if the questioner is so confident that he would have been among the rescuers, why should there not also have been many others?

This implication is assumed in the designation “Righteous Gentiles” that has been applied to the rescuers—and again, with some warrant. It is the non-Jews as a group who were in a position to extend aid, but who, in much their largest numbers, did not. Why—the question implies—if some of them could be righteous, were not more of them, if not all, also righteous? It is indeed a matter of fact that almost sixty years later, only about 16,000 names appear on the list vetted by Yad Vashem’s special committee—16,000 out of 300,000,000, to give an approximate figure for the non-Jewish population of countries under Nazi control at the peak of their power. And this disproportion appears in this third question as evidence not so much of the heroism of the “Righteous Among the Nations” but as proof of the moral failure of the hundreds of millions of others who were not—but who could and should have been.

But is it so obvious that there should have been more “Righteous Gentiles” than there were? The requirements set for this group in the Yad Vashem register (putting aside for the moment the term’s invidious distinction between Gentiles and non-Gentiles) are explicit and, superficially, simple: they must have risked their lives in order to help Jews threatened by the Nazis, and they must have done this without expectation of compensation or reward. But these requirements are, of course, not simple at all. We know that under Nazi rule, punishment for aiding or concealing Jews

often did not stop with the “offenders” but extended to their families—and so, one must add that those who risked their own lives to save Jews would also have been risking the lives of close relations: spouses, children. And now, turning inward, if we ask ourselves who among our relatives or friends—not strangers, which the Jews often were in the misfortunes of war, but people close to us—if we ask who in this circle of ours we could rely on for such help if the penalty were probable death for the person and possibly also for his family: how large would this number be? To what extent could we honestly include ourselves in this?

We hardly have to take this thought-experiment further to see the hollowness of the third question, with its implication that there should have been more such rescuers; that what they did was to have been expected of them, and thus also of others. By widely accepted moral standards, the rescuers were not simply righteous but heroes; for they acted beyond the call of duty—doing more than they or anyone was obligated to. In none of the principal religious or secular moral codes is there a duty of self-sacrifice, of acting heroically. And the reason for this is clear: heroes, by definition, do more than is obligatory—where most people, most often, are hard put to do even as much as they are ought to. Certainly, we honor acts of self-sacrifice—but that is because such acts are not what is required. (Remember that the acts involved are entirely voluntary; they are not, for example, rejections of a command to kill someone else or to be killed oneself. This rejection, according to many moral codes, would be a moral obligation—but the issue for the “Righteous Gentiles” was quite different, with the decision whether to risk their own lives and those of their family members entirely in their hands.) Again, the issue here is not whether to risk one’s life in order to save someone else’s is praiseworthy, but whether it is obligatory—with the answer to that, by the moral standards generally accepted, “Surely not.” Indeed, a more responsible version of the mischievous question, “Why weren’t there more of them?” might well ask instead “Why were there as many as there were?” The paucity in numbers of the heroic rescuers, furthermore, reflects the broader difficulty of ever finding an adequate explanation for their extraordinary acts of conscience or courage. For me, this difficulty recalls the failure elsewhere of explanations of artistic or scientific genius: their occurrence is too exceptional to fit ordinary categories or perhaps any categories at all. And why, after all, should there not be a place for moral genius as well?

This third mischievous question, furthermore, has the added consequence of drawing attention away from another, and more basic issue than the one to which I’ve

referred. This is the issue of what *could* have been required of Holocaust-bystanders, given that they were not obligated to act heroically. For the focus on extraordinary requirements and responses has the effect of pushing aside more reasonable ones. It seems obvious, for example, that, in the context of the Holocaust, many more bystanders than did so could have acted in ways impeding its process without putting themselves or others in danger—and that such acts, in contrast to more dangerous ones, might indeed be termed obligatory. No German citizens were required to volunteer for the SS or to join the Nazi Party; none was required to smash Jewish shop windows or to take over vacated apartments or to appropriate other abandoned property; nobody was required to replace Jewish professionals or businessmen who had been forced to leave their positions or practices; even soldiers under military command typically were not *required* to participate in atrocities. Had rudimentary moral dictates entailing no dangerous consequences been followed here, the “Final Solution” might not have been avoided, but it would almost certainly have been impeded. And that means that this third question of why there weren’t more rescuers in the Holocaust willing to risk their lives to save others has two harmful consequences: it undervalues the actions of the people who did so, and it achieves this effect by suggesting that they were doing only what they (and everyone else) ought to have done. And at the same time, it ignores obligations reasonably assigned to bystanders who, like most of humankind, were not heroic (and could hardly be blamed for this) but who still had an ordinary and common ideal of humanity to live up to, but who often did not.¹⁰ A mischievous question, indeed.

* * * *

The three questions cited seem to me the most egregious of the questions that, in their usual and familiar form, speak misleadingly about the Holocaust. You may well have noticed that the three correspond, respectively, to the three Holocaust “principals” commonly distinguished in analyses of the Holocaust: victims, perpetrators, bystanders. Clearly, nobody is exempt. To be sure, additional such questions can be readily found. So, for example, the question, “Why didn’t they just leave?”—the “they” here again obviously referring to the Jews who, because they didn’t leave their homes in Europe when they were able to, would soon after that become victims. This question usually points at the German Jews who had immediate experience between 1933 and 1939 of what a Nazi regime would hold for them. In point of fact, there was a substantial exodus of Jews from Germany; ultimately, the percentage of German Jewish survivors

was higher than that of most European countries. Accordingly, this question should be understood as asking “Why didn’t *all* of them leave? Why would anyone stay?”—and in these terms, once again the mischief in the question shows itself, specifically in two assumptions: First, that it should have been obvious to German Jews that the future would be much worse than the past, putting their lives at risk. And second, that they should have been readier than they were to give up their homes and possessions, to leave family, professional positions and community—all this in order to depart for alien lands and an uncertain future. (The question has no point for German Jews after 1941 when emigration was forbidden—but the “Final Solution,” it needs to be recalled, was decided upon and implemented only after that date).

In retrospect, of course, the Jews of Germany, and of Eastern Europe too, would indeed have been better off if they had left when they were able to (carrying this frivolous argument to its extreme, they might have been still better off if their ancestors had not settled in Europe in the first place). That it was possible up to a certain date for more of them to leave than did is also true. But the implication of the question as it usually is put is that the decision to leave should have been obvious and easy—and easy because obvious. But the fact is that it was not so obvious—and even when obvious, certainly not easy. To be sure, we know that people faced with adversity often resort to avoidance and self-deception—and when they do this against convincing evidence they may indeed be held accountable. But at least until 1938 the belief that there were limits to the extent of Nazi designs was arguable—and so, too, a ground for expecting something less than the catastrophe that ensued. The mischief here is not especially in the easy wisdom of hindsight but in the distance asserted between the person asking the question and those about whom it is asked—as if to say, once again, that what held the Jews in their places, blocking the obvious step they should have taken, was a group-defect of sorts, a collective illusion of their own making. And that claim seems to have nothing more in the way of evidence for it than circularly, the very fact it purports to explain. To say that people were mistaken on human and understandable grounds is quite different from explaining it by a common collective defect.

Not only the Holocaust itself, moreover, has occasioned mischievous questions of the sort mentioned. The nearly sixty post-Holocaust years have nourished their own varieties. A number of recent books with dramatic titles such as *Selling the Holocaust* and *The Holocaust Industry* purport on the surface to call attention to the exploitation

of the Holocaust, objecting to the use made of that event for political or ideological or commercial purposes.¹¹ Now it might be supposed that charges of such exploitation (and who, after all, would deny its occurrence?) would also acknowledge that notwithstanding such abuse, the core of Holocaust history remains an important matter of historical record and moral conscience, one that warrants continued study as well as commemoration and other forms of representation. In other words, there should be, there could hardly not be, it would be wrong to do without, talk about the Holocaust. But the thrust of this recent genre of post-Holocaust literature suggests that not only have there been excesses in specific representations of the Holocaust, but that the attention given the Holocaust has been excessive as such. In other words, the mischievous question asks: “Why do they talk *so much* about the Holocaust?”—the implication here being that there is too much talk: too many books, too many memorials, too many museums; that other events are no less deserving, that the undue attention paid to the Holocaust diminishes or trivializes other comparable events. Some of these critics then conclude the Holocaust should not be talked about by itself at all. For some of them, in order to right the balance, the Holocaust should be talked about less and less. For all of them, the question they ask of why there is “so much” (that is, too much) talk about the Holocaust assumes for the speaker a privileged role as judge of how much talk about the Holocaust is proper or not. But here too, the question posed undoes itself. No doubt there are various reasons for “so much” talk about the Holocaust—and some of these, no doubt, are bad reasons. But even to consider regulating such talk suggests the waywardness of the question itself: who is in a position to do this, by what standards, and to what purpose? The refrain from a familiar children’s story seems to apply here: there should not be too much such talk, not too little—but just right. But where does that leave us that we have not already been? And why should we accept the question’s premise that there is “too much” talk at all?

A related post-Holocaust question concerns the truth-status of Holocaust historiography. Once again, the question begins with a basis in fact: historical analyses of the Holocaust do disagree on certain important matters of interpretation, including so fundamental a question as its causes. Given disagreements of that magnitude, then, it might seem plausible to hear a question that asks, “Don’t they realize that history is all interpretation, all the way down—from start to finish; that there isn’t any way, at any point, of getting it (that is, history) right?”¹² This question moves quickly from the fact of differences in interpretation (which nobody would deny) to skepticism about the

possibility of true or false historical statements at any level—which is, however, a very different matter. The mischief in this question, although subtler than in the others, in the end requires less elaboration than they do—since it implies that even about the most basic elements of Holocaust history, there is no way of “getting them right.” And to carry this skeptical claim to its logical conclusion would also be to claim that there is no basis for choosing between the assertion that the Holocaust occurred and the assertion that it did not—since, again, if they are equal as hypotheses, neither—by its own terms—would be entitled to claim that it had gotten the history right. (Indeed, the two views could hardly claim that they disagreed—since they would have previously agreed that there is no “thing” or matter of fact about which to disagree). The harm in this conclusion may seem more prospective than actual, since it is the possible future of Holocaust-denial rather than its past or present that is most troubling. But the issue of objectivity in historical judgment is very much a present one. Difficult as it is for us who live in the tradition of liberal political discourse to admit, it simply is not true that there are two sides to every story.

I have spoken of these various questions as mischievous, meaning by this that the answers invited by them misrepresent important facets of the Holocaust. It is not only that the questions cited are “leading” questions, but that the directions in which they “lead” are specious, both from the standpoint of the person asking the question and in the representation conveyed. The questioner himself, moreover, repeatedly privileges himself: the failings noted in the questions do not apply to him. Still more to the point of mischief-making is what the questions do to their subject, with each of them misrepresenting the Holocaust by moving it outside the categories of “normal” history and moral analysis. The effect of this, I hope to have shown, is not only mistaken in fact, but mischievous beyond that, insofar as it locates the Holocaust in an ahistorical vacuum, and then blaming and praising in the wrong order or on the wrong grounds (or both).

More positively, what I have been arguing for is that reflection about the Holocaust, whatever direction it takes, requires recognition that the distance between us now, looking back at that event, and those who sixty years ago were caught up in it, is a human-sized distance. That it is not at all beyond the reach of human possibility in our own world and—more to the immediate point—in us. If any single lesson can be drawn from the Holocaust, surely it is that if such an event happened once, it can happen twice. But to say this, and to mean it, is also to understand that questions we ask about

the Holocaust will be falsified if we treat them impersonally, as though the enormity of that event, insulated by the sixty years since, places its motives and causes as well as its consequences beyond our own capacity and surroundings. The evidence—historical, moral—argues strongly against that belief. Are there then any questions about the Holocaust that are not, or cannot be mischievous? At this point, the only answer I can think of to that question is “Probably not—except, of course, for that one....”

Notes

1. This question has had more than only “popular” currency. Two important (albeit quite different) scholarly formulations of it appear in Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1985), and *The Politics of Memory: The Journey of a Holocaust Historian* (Chicago: Ivan Dee, 1996) and Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Viking, 1963).
2. For summaries and analyses of Jewish resistance, see, e.g., Reuben Ainsztein, *Jewish Resistance in Nazi-Occupied Eastern Europe* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), Yitzhak Arad, *Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka: The Operation Reinhard Death Camps* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), Yehuda Bauer, *A History of the Holocaust* (New York: Franklin Watts, 1982); Dov Levin, *Fighting Back: Lithuanian Jewry’s Armed Resistance to the Nazis, 1941–1945* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1985), Leni Yahil, *The Holocaust: The Fate of European Jewry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).
3. For a concise account (and other references) to the status of Soviet prisoners of war, see the entry “Soviet Prisoners of War” by Christian Streit, in *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust* (New York: Macmillan, 1990), pp. 1192–95.
4. On these three massacres (respectively), see Vojtech Mastny, *The Czechs under Nazi Rule: The Failure of National Resistance, 1939–1942* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971), H. R. Kedward, *Occupied France: Collaboration and Resistance, 1940–1944* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985), Mark Mazower, *Inside Hitler’s Greece: The Experience of Occupation, 1941–44* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).
5. On the claim of such a “defect,” see Nechama Tec, “Jewish Resistance: Facts, Omissions, and Distortions” (Washington, DC: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 1997).
6. For a sampling of accounts of resistance to Nazi occupiers by other groups, see, e.g., Stanislaw Okecki, ed., *Polish Resistance Movements in Poland and Abroad, 1939–1945* (Warsaw: PWN, 1987); Jürgen Schmäddeke and Peter Steinbach, eds., *Der Widerstand gegen den Nationalsozialismus* (München: Piper, 1985); Maria de Blasio Wilhelm, *The Other Italy: Italian Resistance in World War II* (New York: Norton, 1988).
7. Such explanations become even more mischievous when they are presented as historically or empirically grounded. A notable recent example of this is the concept of “eliminationist antisemitism” proposed by Daniel Goldhagen as a tenet held and acted on in common by Germans during the Nazi period. Cf. Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler’s Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York: Knopf, 1996).

8. On Nazi Party membership figures, see Michael Kater, *The Nazi Party: A Social Profile of Members and Leaders, 1919–1945* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983).

9. Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992). Admittedly, the sample on which Browning bases his analysis and conclusions is small and in certain respects atypical—but it is just by the accumulation of such samples that any conclusions at all about this matter can be reached, and there do not seem to be contradictory accounts.

10. For elaboration on this point, see Berel Lang, *The Future of the Holocaust: Between History and Memory* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), Ch. 8.

11. Tim Cole, *Selling the Holocaust: From Auschwitz to Schindler, How History Is Bought, Packaged, and Sold* (New York: Routledge, 1999) and Norman Finkelstein, *The Holocaust Industry: Reflections on the Exploitation of Jewish Suffering* (New York: Verso, 2000). A more sophisticated version of the same line of argument (and open to the same objections) appears in Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999).

12. See, for three examples of this formulation (out of many possible ones), the essays by Hans Kellner, Wulf Kansteiner, and Robert Braun in *History and Theory* 33 (1994), pp. 127–97; also a response to them in Berel Lang, *Holocaust Representation: Art within the Limits of History and Ethics* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), Ch. 5.

BEREL LANG, Professor of Humanities at Trinity College, Hartford, Connecticut, is the 2001–2002 Ina Levine Scholar-in-Residence at the Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. A renowned philosopher, Professor Lang is the author of important Holocaust-related works, including *Act and Idea in the Nazi Genocide* (1990); *Heidegger's Silence* (1996); *The Future of the Holocaust: Between History and Memory* (1999); *Holocaust Representation: Art within the Limits of History and Ethics* (2000); and *Race and Racism in Theory and Practice* (2000). Professor Lang received his B.A. from Yale University and his Ph.D. from Columbia University.

Available Occasional Papers

- “Lithuania and the Jews,” CAHS symposium presentations, 2005
- “The Path to Vichy: Antisemitism in France in the 1930s,” by Vicki Caron, 2005
- “Sephardim and the Holocaust,” by Aron Rodrigue, 2005
- “In the Shadow of Birkenau: Ethical Dilemmas during and after the Holocaust,” by John K. Roth, 2005
- “Jewish Children: Between Protectors and Murderers,” by Nechama Tec, 2005
- “Anne Frank and the Future of Holocaust Memory,” by Alvin H. Rosenfeld, 2005
- “Children and the Holocaust,” CAHS symposium presentations, 2004
- “The Holocaust as a Literary Experience,” by Henryk Grynberg, 2004
- “Forced and Slave Labor in Nazi-Dominated Europe,” CAHS symposium presentations, 2004
- “International Law and the Holocaust,” by Thomas Buergenthal, 2004
- “Initiating the Final Solution: The Fateful Months of September-October 1941,” by Christopher Browning, 2003
- “On Studying Jewish History in Light of the Holocaust,” by David Engel, 2003; web version www.ushmm.org/research/center/publications/occasional/engel_02/engel.pdf
- “Past Revisited: Reflections on the Study of the Holocaust and Contemporary Antisemitism,” by Steven J. Zipperstein, 2003; web version www.ushmm.org/research/center/publications/occasional/zipperstein_03/zipperstein.pdf
- “From the Holocaust in Galicia to Contemporary Genocide: Common Ground—Historical Differences,” by Omer Bartov, 2003
- “Confiscation of Jewish Property in Europe, 1933–1945: New Sources and Perspectives,” CAHS symposium proceedings, 2003
- “Roma and Sinti: Under-Studied Victims of Nazism,” CAHS symposium proceedings, 2002
- “Life After the Ashes: The Postwar Pain, and Resilience, of Young Holocaust Survivors,” by Peter Suedfeld, 2002
- “Why Bother About Homosexuals? Homophobia and Sexual Politics in Nazi Germany,” by Geoffrey J. Giles, 2002
- “Uncovering Certain Mischievous Questions About the Holocaust,” by Berel Lang, 2002
- “World War II Leaders and Their Visions for the Future of Palestine,” by Gerhard L. Weinberg, 2002
- “The Conundrum of Complicity: German Professionals and the Final Solution,” by Konrad H. Jarausch, 2002; web version www.ushmm.org/research/center/publications/occasional/conundrum.htm, 2002
- “Policy of Destruction: Nazi Anti-Jewish Policy and the Genesis of the ‘Final Solution,’” by Peter Longerich, 2001
- “Holocaust Writing and Research Since 1945,” by Sir Martin Gilbert, 2001
- “Jewish Artists in New York during the Holocaust Years,” by Matthew Baigell, 2001
- “The Awakening of Memory: Survivor Testimony in the First Years after the Holocaust, and Today,” by Henry Greenspan, 2001
- “Hungary and the Holocaust: Confrontations with the Past,” CAHS symposium proceedings, 2001
- “Facing the Past: Representations of the Holocaust in German Cinema since 1945,” by Frank Stern, 2000
- “Future Challenges to Holocaust Scholarship as an Integrated Part of the Study of Modern Dictatorship,” by Hans Mommsen, 2000
- “Moritz Fröhlich—Morris Gay: A German Refugee in the United States,” by Peter Gay, 1999
- “Jewish Resistance: A Working Bibliography,” by CAHS staff, 1999; third edition 2003; web version www.ushmm.org/research/center/resistance/biblio.htm, 2000, third web edition, 2003
- “Profits and Persecution: German Big Business and the Holocaust,” by Peter Hayes, 1998
- “On the Ambivalence of Being Neutral: Switzerland and Swiss Jewry Facing the Rise and Fall of the Nazi State,” by Jacques Picard, 1998
- “The Holocaust in the Netherlands: A Reevaluation,” a USHMM-RIOD conference summary by Patricia Heberer, 1997

“Jewish Resistance: Facts, Omissions, and Distortions,”
by Nechama Tec, 1997

“Psychological Reverberations of the Holocaust in the
Lives of Child Survivors,” by Robert Krell, 1997

“The First Encounter: Survivors and Americans in the
Late 1940s,” by Arthur Hertzberg, 1996

“The ‘Willing Executioners’/‘Ordinary Men’ Debate,” by
Daniel Goldhagen, Christopher Browning, and Leon
Wieseltier, 1996

“Preserving Living Memory: The Challenge and Power of
Video Testimony,” by Geoffrey H. Hartman, 1995

“Germany’s War for World Conquest and the Extermination
of the Jews,” by Gerhard L. Weinberg, 1995

Single copies of occasional papers may be obtained by addressing a request to the Academic Publications Branch of the Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies. A complete list of the papers is also available on the Museum’s website at www.ushmm.org/research/center.

The Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum promotes the growth of the field of Holocaust studies, including the dissemination of scholarly output in the field. It also strives to facilitate the training of future generations of scholars specializing in the Holocaust.

Under the guidance of the Academic Committee of the United States Holocaust Memorial Council, the Center provides a fertile atmosphere for scholarly discourse and debate through research and publication projects, conferences, fellowship and visiting scholar opportunities, and a network of cooperative programs with universities and other institutions in the United States and abroad.

In furtherance of this program the Center has established a series of working and occasional papers prepared by scholars in history, political science, philosophy, religion, sociology, literature, psychology, and other disciplines. Selected from Center-sponsored lectures and conferences, or the result of other activities related to the Center's mission, these publications are designed to make this research available in a timely fashion to other researchers and to the general public.



CENTER FOR ADVANCED HOLOCAUST STUDIES
100 Raoul Wallenberg Place, SW • Washington, DC 20024-2126 • www.ushmm.org