

An Interview with David Silberklang
Rosenthal Visiting Fellow, Spring 2007
November 28, 2007

Question: How did you become interested in the Holocaust?

DS: There were several factors that influenced me in this regard. First, I am sure that the fact that my parents are survivors had an impact, although I certainly did not grow up in a home where the Holocaust cast a shadow over our lives. My father survived by fleeing Poland to the USSR early in the German occupation, together with his parents and siblings. My mother survived the ghetto in her hometown and then in the partisans in today's Belarus (prewar Poland). But I think that the main influence from my parents was that from a very early age, I had a sense that the Holocaust was a major event that still impacted on all of humanity and had yet to be studied or explained completely. I couldn't articulate this as a youngster, but I did have this basic sense of the import of the event.

Another influence was my interest in history from an early age in school. This became a major interest in high school, and the combination of the sense of the Holocaust's importance and my interest in history led to my pursuing deeper study of the event in college, where I wrote several papers relating to the Holocaust, and then in graduate school and professionally.

Reflecting back, I think that my childhood gut sense regarding the subject was very much on the mark.

Question: As a Holocaust educator, what still needs to be taught about the Holocaust? What direction(s) do you see Holocaust education taking in the future? Is this subject gaining ground in the schools or the general public? With leaders such as Saddam Hussein, Pol Pot and others, what lessons do humans have yet to learn about preventing future mass murders that we can learn by studying the Holocaust?

DS: What still needs to be taught? Almost everything. We could say that while we know very much, we actually know very little, as I hope to demonstrate in my talk on February 7 at Case. Perhaps people talk about the subject a great deal, and perhaps we remember and commemorate, but the substance of the subject is not as well known as we might think. We lack books that cover basic subjects. For example, we do not know the stories of most of the ghettos.

In general, teaching the subject needs to happen on two levels, the question of what happened, which is largely a historical question, and the question of what we want to learn from what happened, which is largely an ethical question, perhaps for civics classes. But the Holocaust should not be used simply as a tool to get to the civics part of the subject. You need to be well grounded in what happened in order to be able to phrase the centrally important questions that emerge from the event. We don't need the Holocaust in order to have the tools to teach people that evil is bad. In terms of subject matter, the starting point is history, but history alone is insufficient to explain the event. It is clear that the study of the Holocaust must come from several disciplines in order for us to have a hope of understanding the event well enough to have a hope of preventing a repeat.

The Holocaust is the first case in modern history of an attempt by one people to annihilate totally every single member of another people wherever they may be in the world. The murder knew no borders. In that sense, and in

many ways, the Holocaust is perhaps the most extreme example of absolute evil and of genocide. This is what shakes the foundations of modern civilization to this day.

One of our important challenges is how to teach the subject when there will be no more survivors. That time is not far away, unfortunately. During the last generation or so, we have all learned to appreciate the key role that survivors can play in relating the story and its human side. In many ways, the survivors help to give us an insight into the complexion of the Holocaust. Individualizing, and from there extrapolating to the larger picture, is a method that helps people to understand better this almost unfathomable event. Of course, we have been recording survivor stories on video for years, whether in the Spielberg project that is now based at USC, or at Yad Vashem, or Yale, and elsewhere. And in addition to this we have a number of important diaries written during the Holocaust, many thousands of written survivor testimonies, and by now thousands of survivor memoirs in many languages. Videos and text, however, are not interactive. Educators at Yad Vashem and in other institutions and schools have been developing methods to teach the subject in the post-survivor era that will continue to be engaging and challenging.

Regarding the level of interest in the subject in schools and in the general public, I can only share my impressions regarding North America. It seems to me that Holocaust education has spread very much, and in many schools the teaching is very serious. Holocaust memorial ceremonies are well attended, more than 400 universities and colleges teach the subject, good books and articles on the subject appear every year, and some of them are read by broad audiences. In Israel, we find a similar phenomenon of steadily increasing interest. Many 11th and 12th graders are interested in going to Poland and other countries in order to see the remnants of Jewish life and the scenes of Jewish death. In Europe, too, we have seen increasing interest in the subject in many countries. Sometimes this is connected to ulterior motives, such as acceptance by the West, but in general, it is an increasing genuine interest from which a new generation of scholars and educators is emerging in many countries. Their scholarship and education is one of our insurance policies that the subject and the questions that it raises for all of us will not be forgotten.

Regarding Pol Pot, Saddam Hussein, *etc.*, I would not encourage us to lump them all together. As evil as Saddam was, he did not commit murder on the scale of Pol Pot. But Cambodia, Rwanda, and other places and events, such as Darfur as it is happening before our eyes, and Iran's headlong race towards nuclear weapons, along with a delivery system and openly declared targets, are all indications that the world has not learned enough--and perhaps some people have learned the wrong thing. One implication that many scholars and teachers see in the Holocaust lies in the slow and relatively weak responses of the world to the Holocaust. Have we collectively changed dramatically?

Question: Describe what the Holocaust Survivors' Memoirs Project Book Series is about--its mission, goals, how one gets published through the project? Do you solicit authors to tell their personal stories or do people send you their works about their personal experiences?

DS: I edit two series at Yad Vashem: the scholarly journal called *Yad Vashem Studies*, and the English-language memoir series about which you asked. *Yad Vashem Studies* has been a leading scholarly journal on the Holocaust for decades, appearing in English and Hebrew editions. It has included many path-breaking articles over the years, by authors from all over the world. Beginning in 2007 we will be publishing two numbers per year; the first one for 2007 will appear in late March and hopefully will be at Case Western shortly afterwards.

The memoir series was created based on a grant by Random House publishers to Elie Wiesel. Wiesel turned to his friend and Holocaust commemoration activist, Menachem Rosensaft, to create a non-profit fund with this money whose goal would be to publish heretofore unpublished survivor memoirs in English. Since the creation of the Holocaust Survivors' Memoirs Project several years ago, approximately 1000 manuscripts have been submitted. This is far beyond what anyone had imagined at the time. Yad Vashem has been a partner in this project for almost two-and-a-half years, and in that time we have published twelve memoirs in seven books, with seven additional memoirs (in six books) slated for publication in the coming fifteen months. In general, we do not solicit authors, although we might if something very important comes to our attention. Still, authors or their families have become aware of our project and have been submitting manuscripts steadily. I estimate that at least 150 manuscripts have been submitted since Yad Vashem joined the project.

Our goal is to publish as much as possible (not everything is publishable, of course) and to make the unpublished manuscripts available to the general public through other means. We want their stories to be told.

Question: What are your plans while in Cleveland?

DS: I have both professional and personal plans. First of all, I am here to teach two courses at Case Western, and I look forward to interacting with the students and with the faculty and staff. I am also planning to complete my revisions of my book, *Gates of Tears*, on the Holocaust in the Lublin District of Poland. This will have me using the Case library extensively and perhaps other libraries in the area, as well as perhaps visiting the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum a couple of times in order to take advantage of their fine archive. I also am scheduled to speak at a few synagogues and at Siegel College, and I imagine that a few more such opportunities will develop. Of course, this is both professional and personal.

On a personal level, I am very interested to get to know Cleveland and all the culture that it has to offer. My family will be visiting for a few weeks in the spring, and we will use that opportunity to see the city and area together and to visit family in other places in the US. My children are keen to see the Rock 'n' Roll Hall of Fame and a Cleveland Cavaliers game, and I am interested in the symphony and the theater, in addition to that. And, of course, I plan to visit my elderly mother in Brooklyn a few times while I am here.

Question: What courses are you going to teach at Case Western Reserve University? Or will you be working on special projects, and if so, what are those?

DS: I will be teaching two courses: "Issues in the Study of the Holocaust", in the Religious Studies and History Departments; and a seminar called "Being Human in the Holocaust", in the SAGES program. The Issues course is a general course on the Holocaust that is anchored in a number of basic historical questions. The seminar will address five basic subjects regarding human behavior in the Holocaust and our attempts to understand them. It will address both research material in history and the social sciences, and material from the Holocaust itself. The vantage point from which the various subjects will be addressed is that the actors in this terrible event were human beings, not monsters from another planet, or, alternatively, purely unblemished heroes. We will look them all straight in the eye as we try to analyze and understand them, even if on some level that might mean looking in the mirror on occasion.

Question: I also learned that you will be participating in the international conference in March and be presenting a paper during it. What is the title of the presentation and what is the paper about and what other activities you will be doing during that event?

DS: I will be speaking at the opening dinner at the 37th Annual Scholars Conference on the Holocaust and the Churches, to be held March 11-13, 2007 at the Cleveland Marriott Downtown at Key Center. I also will chair a Sunday evening session on Holocaust Education. I am very much looking forward to participating in this conference; many good ideas and much good material has emerged from these conferences in the past. I am still working on my conference lecture and will be able to give you more information in a couple of weeks.

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David Silberklang
Free Public Lecture

What Don't We Know? Unanswered Questions from the Holocaust
Wednesday, February 7, 2007, 4:30 p.m. (refreshments at 4:00 p.m.)
1914 Lounge, Thwing Center, 11111 Euclid Avenue, Cleveland

For more information, visit: www.case.edu/artsci/rosenthal, or call 216/368-8961