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Ledger of Death

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SURVEYS

William Keller

LEDGER OF DEATH

I

NO HISTORICAL theory has ever received a more crushing refutation than the nineteenth-century view of continual progress. The widely held pre-1914 conviction that "we are too civilized to fight" was shown to be a fallacy in World War I. But who, in the wildest flights of fancy, could have foretold that this century would see a new age of persecution and massacre, on a scale undreamed of in centuries past, and relying on all the latest techniques of modern "civilization"? Yet such have been the facts: a whole people, the Jews, were regarded by the distorted, worse-than-pagan nationalism of the Nazis as alien, uncooperative, inferior, indeed scarcely human, and were marked down for total liquidation. Demented as such a scheme sounds, it was actually put into operation, and in large part succeeded.

To write the full story of this terrifying nadir in human history would require many volumes, volumes which one day may be written. Nevertheless it is essential for all of us even now to realize at least the actual extent of this persecution. Two studies have appeared in the last three years which make a genuine contribution toward answering this need. The first is an article, "Bilanz der Zerstörung des Judentums," in the German Catholic periodical *Herder-Korrespondenz* (February 1952); the second a volume issued in French in 1951, translated into English and published in America in 1954, *Harvest of Hate* by Léon Poliakov (Syracuse University Press). The former is mainly a statistical study of the destruction of German and European Jewry, while the latter, one of the sources on which the Herder article depends, seeks to outline the whole Nazi program for the annihilation of the Jews.

II

IN 1925 the *Deutsche Statistische Jahrbuch* listed 564,519 Jews of German nationality. By contrast, in East and West Germany together there were in 1952 only 34,000 Jews, including displaced persons. The German Jews in the mid-twenties represented 0.9 per cent of the total population. They were, as their brethren in western Europe and America have always been, a predominantly urban group: some 172,672 lived in Berlin, 29,385 in Frankfort, 23,240 in Breslau, 16,093 in Cologne, and so forth. In the Germany of 1952 there were only 6,702 Jews in Berlin (all sectors), 1,433 in Frankfort, and 700 in Cologne. While approximately 7,600 were still living in camps, the largest number, 19,625, were residing in the American Zone, 5,750 in the British Zone, 570 in the French Zone, and 1,184 in all of East Germany.¹

The following table sets forth vividly the progressive disappearance of German Jewry between Hitler's advent and the end of the war.

<i>Date</i>	<i>Jewish Population</i>
1925 (census)	564,379
Jan. 1933 (estimated)	525,000
June 1933 (census)	499,682
Sept. 1937 (estimated)	450,000
May 17, 1939 (unpublished count)	235,000
Sept. 1, 1939 (estimated)	215,000
Nov. 1, 1940 “	160,000
May 1, 1942 “	80,000
Oct. 1, 1942 “	40-50,000
Sept. 1, 1943 “	20,000
May 8, 1945 “	15,000

Between the lines of these sharply declining figures can be read the whole tragic story of voluntary emigration, quickly followed by compulsory deportation (mainly to Poland), enforced settlement in ghettos, enslavement for industrial use, massacres, and finally the more “refined” liquidation of the death camps. Poliakov relates the entire

1. Unless otherwise noted the statistics are derived from the *Herder-Korrespondenz* article, which provides the most convenient summary in print.

process, step by step, backing up each statement with telling documentation.²

III

FROM Germany let us turn our attention to Europe as a whole. Prior to World War I there were some 10,000,000 Jews in Europe; even as late as 1939 there were still 9,500,000. Yet by 1945 this figure was reduced to 2,750,000. To make this figure more striking, it must be remembered that it includes about 1,500,000 Jews in unoccupied Russia, in Britain, Spain, and Portugal, all of whom were untouched by Hitler's persecution. Voluntary exile accounts for 300,000 at the most.³ The disappearance of the rest can only be attributed to suicide (as when 200 took their own lives in Frankfort on the same day because of impending deportation), starvation,⁴ disease induced by the inhuman conditions of the life imposed, massacre, and systematic annihilation. The total number of victims of the Nazi liquidation program thus comes to roughly 6,000,000. Especially terrible was the fate of the Jewish children, of whom there were 1,800,000 (up to fourteen years of age) in Germany and the occupied countries of eastern Europe. Jacob Lestchinsky, expert on Jewish population figures, concludes that only 280,000 of these escaped death.

Before Hitler assumed power, there were in Germany and the countries later seized or controlled by the Nazis 8,295,000 Jews, of whom—to give a more precise figure—6,093,000 or 73.4 per cent were killed between 1939 and 1945. This is the careful estimate of Lestchinsky. The following table, also his work, demonstrates the dreadful extent of the annihilation of European Jewry.⁵

2. To get some idea of the unbelievable brutality on the one hand and the bottomless suffering on the other which are hidden behind the words "deportation," "ghetto," "enslavement," "death camp," one has to read Poliakov's descriptions, particularly in chapters 4, 6, 7, 8, and 9.

3. Of these 140,000 came to the United States; 65,000 went to Israel; 55,000 to Central and South America; and 30,000 to other European countries. The German Jews, of course, had a five-year head start in the immediate pre-war years.

4. Some 23,000 emaciated bodies were found by the British forces on April 15, 1945, when they liberated the camp of Bergen-Belsen.

5. In the course of this paper, there are three different Jewish population figures given for the Germany of 1939. Even so, they do not necessarily contradict one another, for the first is dated May and the second September (see first tabulation, p. 284), while the third figure (see second tabulation, p. 286) presumably refers to the end of the year.

Country	Former Jewish	Losses	
	Population	No.	%
Poland	3,300,000	2,900,000	87.9
U.S.S.R. (Nazi-occupied)	2,100,000	1,500,000	71.4
Rumania	850,000	425,000	50.0
Hungary	403,000	200,000	49.6
France	300,000	90,000	30.0
Czechoslovakia	315,000	260,000	82.5
Germany (1939)	210,000	170,000 ⁶	81.0
Austria	60,000	40,000	66.7
Lithuania	150,000	135,000	90.0
Latvia	95,000	85,000	89.5
Holland	145,000	105,000	72.4
Belgium	90,000	40,000	44.4
Yugoslavia	75,000	55,000	73.3
Greece	75,000	60,000	80.0
Italy	57,000	15,000	26.3
Bulgaria	50,000	7,000	14.0
Other countries	20,000	6,000	30.0
Total	8,295,000	6,093,000	73.4

IV

THE figure of 6,000,000 has at times been called into question. Yet it is derived from testimony given before the International Tribunal for War Criminals at Nuremberg by leading Nazis concerned in the destruction program. On page 266 of the volume in which the Tribunal substantiates its verdict, there appears this statement: "Adolf Eichmann, to whom Hitler had trusted the program of annihilation, estimated that this policy had caused the deaths of 6,000,000 Jews, of whom 4,000,000 met their deaths in annihilation camps." This figure was confirmed by SS-members Wilhelm Hoettl and Dieter Wisliceny, both of whom took part in the execution of the program.

Another important statistical document is an official government report on what is called the "final solution" of the Jewish question, written at the beginning of 1943 and discovered in the archives of the

6. This figure implies that 40,000 Jews were alive in the Germany of 1945, which does not agree with the figure of 15,000 given in the first tabulation. However, we present the statistics as we find them, for such discrepancies are unavoidable when so many of the population counts had to be but estimates made under difficult circumstances. It must also be borne in mind that the smaller figure is an approximate count of the known survivors while the larger is derived from an estimate of the losses. The figure of 15,000 seems to be the more reliable. See W. Rosenstock, "Hopes and Fears of the German Jews," *The Listener*, Feb. 17, 1955, p. 297.

Third Reich. Veiled as it is in obscure official terminology, it estimates the decrease in the European Jewish population from 1937 through 1942 at 4,500,000. This figure did not include some areas and of course only went up to the end of 1942. From this document together with other government reports (for instance, the record of the sending of more than 400,000 Hungarian Jews to Auschwitz in the spring of 1944), the total of approximately 6,000,000 is reached.⁷

Such is the naked statistical record of the Nazis' effort to rid Germany and all Europe of the Jewish people. Insane and inhuman as their attempt was, it almost completely succeeded—indeed, if the Nazis had not been defeated, European Jewry would surely have been utterly wiped out. Is this madness not the bankruptcy of man's belief that he can propel himself along a path of progress, that he can do without God? Is it not the horrid consequence of our modern assumptions that truth is a variable and justice an expedient? Is it not the logical but grim conclusion of the notion that moral restraint harms the individual and the nation? Is it not the bitter epilogue of the slogan that man is nothing but an animal? Piety, indeed justice, toward the dead demand that we ask these questions. But they demand more. This may have been in the mind of the people of Aschaffenburg in Bavaria when, after the war, they transformed the lot where once the synagogue stood into a little park, setting in the midst of the green a tombstone. Engraved on it are these words: "Here stood the synagogue of the Jewish Community, which, on November 9, 1938, was destroyed by criminal hands." Above this legend, in bolder letters, are two lines by the German poet Friedrich Hölderlin:

*Alas, the dead will not return to us
Unless our love recalls them.*

V

WHOLESALE slaughter is something that cannot simply be "forgotten." It demands an answer in the moral realm. Such an answer has been given in a noble and commanding voice by Monsignor Romano

7. It is not surprising that, with the destruction of many records by the Nazis and by war, the estimate of the number of Jewish victims is set by some few at 5,000,000 and by others at as high as 7,000,000. Poliakov (pp. 191-203) furnishes further appalling figures on those annihilated in various death camps, for instance, 2,000,000 (or more) at Auschwitz, 700,000 at Treblinka, 300,000 at Chelmo, 600,000 at Belzec, etc. Between 1,500,000 and 2,000,000 were massacred in occupied Russia in the 1941-42 period (see p. 138).

Guardini. "Responsibility" was the title of a lecture he delivered, in the spring of 1952 to the students at the University of Munich, on the moral issue forced on them by the murder of 6,000,000 Jews.⁸ What are the facts? he asked. In violation of their rights as citizens of Germany, or in violation of international law—not to speak of the most elementary rules of right and wrong—innocent millions were dishonored, robbed, ill-treated, and killed. And all this was done not out of passion or pressure; rather was it the result of a theory and a well-contrived plan. True, he said, many Germans knew little or nothing of what was taking place, at least at the time when there was even a slight possibility of altering events; and doubtless, not a few condemned the wrongs they knew of and tried to help the victims. Still, what took place took place within the jurisdiction of the German state and within the life of the German people.

If we were to submit these events to the judgment of the great human tradition, Guardini continued, what would the great men of the past say? They would look at us aghast. Where was conscience in those days, where honor? they would demand. What was it really that happened, and how could it have happened? They themselves might answer that here something had emerged from the dark caves within man: the barbarian, the animal; that, with the powers of chaos still so fearfully strong, their own work of ennobling man is unfinished. A Dante, however, might be so shaken as to lament that a generation which could do such things, after millennia of struggle for the good and noble life, is past saving. But others might take a different view. A Pascal, a Goethe, a Jacob Burckhardt, would sense that what happened in Germany between 1933 and 1945 was in no way like a primitive tribe's lust for destruction, in no way like the devastation of Europe by the Huns. On the contrary, man's lowest instincts combined with the scientific and the technical to produce something that had never existed before: the union of inhumanity and the machine.

Here is the frightful new thing of our age: the State, hitherto curbed by a conscious or unconscious reverence for man or for a sovereignty transcending itself, invades the realm of the inalienable: man's right to exist. To the "invader," man is no longer a person; he is a thing,

8. *Verantwortung* (Munich: Kösel-Verlag, 1952); English trans. by Stanley Godman, "The Jewish Problem: Reflexions on Responsibility," *Dublin Review*, CCXXVII, 459 (First Quarter 1953), pp. 1-14.

a mere object to be dealt with, whose only worth is his usefulness. He has no claim to any right, to honor, convictions, freedom, or life. He can be eliminated just because he went to the wrong school. Truth and justice, a pledge, a claim, conscience and conviction, are not merely violated but done away with as a matter of principle. Unfortunately, there have always been injustice, oppression, brutality, but they were carried out, somehow or other, within the acknowledged norm of the human. For the totalitarian state there is no such norm, no boundaries. It operates in a sphere beyond good and evil, and this is more terrible than evil itself.

To obliterate every human claim, and to combine this obliteration with all the devices of modern management and engineering—this is the new factor in history, a danger more threatening, more destructive, than atom bombs and bacterial warfare, Romano Guardini declared. Today all problems, be they economic, social, technical, or cultural, have become too vast for individuals to solve. On the other hand, it has become increasingly easy to control, to “manipulate,” men and things. The immense growth of communications gives ready opportunity for the exploitation of the individual by governments, and everywhere the power of publicity invades private life. More and more, religion tends to retire from public consciousness to the “inner world.” From all this springs the idea of a State entirely free to mold the whole of life, and no country is immune from this danger. For what happened between 1933 and 1945 in Germany was not a purely German evil and catastrophe; not only has it its counterparts in Russia and China, it threatens all nations.

VI

BUT let us concentrate on our own country, Guardini urged the students of Munich. Only one word can describe what was done to the Jews: criminal. In their systematic extermination, not only was every law broken, but law, right as such, was abolished, for right is absolute: it exists for every person or not at all. By degrading the Jews, an entire section of the nation, to a mere object, and as if this were not enough, to an object of deliberate extermination, the State declared: Right does not count, it is in no way the State's concern; no matter what wrong the State commits, it remains a State and can commit the same wrong

again, as often as it pleases, to any group it chooses to label "undesirable." Here then is the pattern of the new political attitude, a symbol of the evil of this hour.

The fiendishness of the things that happened is shown by the attitude the German people have taken toward them since the end of the war. It is deeply disquieting, Guardini remarked, to see how little these events engage the minds of the people, how little they have realized what really took place. It is as if the conscience of the community is completely at a loss before such enormities, which sit like a mute, stubborn, and dangerous rock in the soul of the people. But we must not go on being at a loss; we must ask: What was the nature of the evil committed? And how can we stop it from working on like a poison and infecting the future?

These questions must be faced, Guardini stressed, not because of any "collective guilt." There is no such thing. Never can a man be guilty of another man's crime, unless, of course, he cooperates in it or fails to do what he can and should to prevent it. There is no "collective guilt," but there is collective honor, the solidarity of the individual with his people and of all individuals with one another. If a member of my family commits some wrong, I may say, I am not guilty; but I may not say, It is no concern of mine. For I am part and parcel of my family, and its honor is, within certain limits, my honor. Similarly, each one of us must accept a share of responsibility for the wrong done by our people, since this wrong touches each one's honor and demands of him that things be put right. This is our duty, because injustice must not be left standing; it must be dealt with till nothing of it remains, and this for two reasons. First, it violates the sovereignty of the good, and it is man's nobility to know of this and bear its burden. Second, injustice is real; if not conquered, it continues to work in the ideas begotten by it and in the people formed by them. Hence to act as if nothing had happened will never help us; ignoring evil is like ignoring a diseased gland in the body or a trauma in the subconscious. Truly, if a wrong done by the body politic is not realized, condemned, and in some way atoned for, it will return; it will become a pattern; it will destroy the body politic.

All in all, to be human is to be answerable, to bear responsibility. Therefore we must be aware of the monstrous wrong that was done; we must denounce it and try to make amends—those who deny or

belittle it but show how deep the hurt has festered. What was done to the Jews is crime and warning; crime, which requires cleansing, and a warning, which requires that we take heed. It is the first instance in the western world of the frightful possibilities that hang over future history. We must not let it grow into the shape and pattern of things to come. We must not forget, Romano Guardini repeatedly urged his hearers, that history is not an inevitable process; it is entrusted to the freedom of man.