

THE INCOMPLETENESS OF A MASTERPIECE

Raul Hilberg and The Destruction of European Jews

BY

GIE VAN DEN BERGHE

Doctor in Ethics

Raul Hilberg, an Austrian Jew (Vienna °1926), emigrated with his family to the United States in 1939. In 1944 he returned, in an American army uniform. After the liberation he took part in one of the Neurenberg trials, as a witness of the U.S. Department of Justice. Twenty-six close relatives (uncles, aunts, nieces) of Hilberg died as a consequence of nazi persecutions¹. This personal background determined the investigations to which Hilberg applied himself from 1948 onwards. In 1955 he defended his doctoral thesis². One year later he began teaching political science at the University of Vermont, and he is still doing this today.

Already in 1961 his epoch-making study *The destruction of European Jews* was published³. What Hilberg modestly describes as 'the first words on a difficult subject' (p. vii), was in fact the first scientific attempt to find out how a highly civilized, 20th century nation succeeded in setting aside all juridical, administrative, psychological and moral obstacles, in order to almost completely destroy a population.

Forty years after the liberation the revised, extensively completed

1. Interview with R. HILBERG in, L. FERRY et S. PASQUIER 'Les fonctionnaires du génocide', in: *L'Express International*, 27.5.1988, pp. 50-58.

2. *Prologue to Annihilation. A Study of Identification, Impoverishment and Isolation of the Jewish Victims of Nazi Policy*. Columbia University, New York.

3. Chicago, 1961, 788 p. in two columns. Repeatedly reprinted.

and 'final' version of this masterpiece was published⁴. Hilberg wanted to conclude nearly forty years of indefatigable work. Fortunately for us, while translating his 'magnum opus' into French he made changes and additions and this time he wisely left out the subtitle.

Determining for the moment of publication of *La destruction des juifs d'Europe*⁵ were probably the impressive appearance of Hilberg in *Shoah*, the 9.5 hours long film of Claude Lanzmann (1985), the revival of the holocaust literature as a consequence of this sensational document and the Barbie trial⁶.

In 1982 a German edition was published⁷ in which many passages of 1961 were omitted, and a lot was added that later appeared in the 'final' version.

The framework and the structure of the book remained unchanged, only the factual material and the examples were completed or corrected. As far as figures are concerned one can best rely on the latest American edition or on the even more up-to-date French translation⁸.

The four editions complete each other. The first book remains important as a study object (shifts in holocaust research) and as a source, since later a rather large number of concrete examples were left out. For example: antisemitic malice in the young German Federal Republic; the concentration of survivors and others concerned in the newly established Israel (one out of seven Israelis came from the camps, one out of three had lost one or more relatives); the attitude of

4. *The destruction of the European Jews. Revised and definitive edition.* New York — London, 1985, 3 vols, 1274 p.

5. Paris, 1988, 1099 p.

6. Initially the 50th anniversary of the November pogrom of 1938 (the Reichskristallnacht) was not taken into account since the French translation was originally planned for 1987 (announced in Gérard Rabinovitch (dir), *5747 Traces*, Paris, 1986; in which the French translation of Hilberg's conclusions appeared before publication).

7. *Die Vernichtung der Europäischen Juden. Die Gesamtgeschichte des holocaust*, Berlin, 1982; 840 p. in two columns.

8. This excellent translation contains very recent information and sources. Where possible source references were adapted to the French editions. Names or facts that are inherent to the French context were explained or added (for one or other reason Barbie was neglected).

that young state towards everything that had anything to do with Germany (no diplomatic representation, no German tourists, a ban on German language and on playing German music...) and the gradual changes in this situation.

A SIGNIFICANT TITLE

Hilberg has never changed the title of his work, and has always refrained from using the now common word 'holocaust'. This latter notion appears only a few times in the text of the most recent American edition. In Hilberg's opinion the destruction of the Jews received a name only twenty years after the facts. This may be true for the U.S. but as far as European and Israeli Jews are concerned this is incorrect. 'Holocaust' can be found in a bibliography of 1960⁹ as a generic and specific term, in titles of the Hebrew and Jiddish works mentioned below as well as in the accompanying text. The 'technical' term was not fixed yet. In the bibliography one also finds terms such as 'the (Jewish) catastrophe', 'extermination', 'Endlösung', 'destruction' and 'churban'. For religious Jews 'churban', which means the destruction of the first and second Temple¹⁰ was very obvious, and in very early sources this term was used to indicate the third destruction. The religious connotations of 'churban' made the term less suitable for Zionists. As a kind of compromise, from 1940 onwards 'Sho'ah' was used, which is also a biblical term but less specific. Between 1957 and 1959 'holocaust' was used in English-speaking circles¹¹. In 1938 A. Brill used the term for the first time to indicate

9. J. ROBINSON, and Ph. FRIEDMAN, *Joint Documentary Projects. Guide to Jewish History under Nazi Impact*, New York, 1960, Yad Washem & YIVO.

10. The first destruction took place in the 6th century B.C., the second in 70 A.D. The Temple was the central sanctuary of Jewish religion and was of great importance for the centralization of this religion. The Wailing-Wall is a remnant of the last destroyed Temple.

11. In English the notion of 'holocaust' has been used for 'complete destruction of a large number of people' (through fire) since the 17th century.

For a more extensive treatment see James E. YOUNG, *Writing and rewriting the Holocaust. Narrative and the consequences of interpretation*, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1988, pp. 85-89.

the persecution of the Jews. In his introduction to an American edition of the basic work of Sigmund Freud (1938) he writes that, now that the nazi holocaust also has Vienna in its grip, Freud and his followers are, unfortunately enough, in the grip of the biggest scourge of civilization (Young, 200).

Hilberg sometimes considers the holocaust from an all too exclusive Jewish-American angle. He uses the so-called lateness with which the holocaust was named as an argument to show that, before the seventies, no attempt was made to commemorate the significance of Auschwitz and Treblinka. In general this allegation is incorrect. According to Hilberg this 'denial of the holocaust' came to an end when Jimmy Carter, pressed by survivors who wanted to keep the memory of the holocaust alive, set up the 'President's Commission on the Holocaust' in 1978. Two years later it became the 'United States Holocaust Memorial Council'. Hilberg was co-member of the commission and is deeply involved in the Memorial Council.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE DESTRUCTION PROCESS

The word 'destruction' from the title comprises more than 'extermination', which is used more frequently in this context. Hilberg uses 'extermination' for the terminal phase of a long-lasting destruction process¹². A process which happened according to a certain scheme; definition, expropriation (goods, profession, rights, gold teeth, hair), concentration (isolation from the rest of the population through segregation laws, ghettos, transit camps) and extermination. Hilberg borrows this scheme from Rudolf Kastner who used it for the first time in September 1945. Kastner, in his function as vice-chairman of a committee for help to refugees founded in 1943 by Hungarian Zionists, had negotiated with Eichmann. According to some people Kastner was responsible for the death of hundreds of thousand Hungarian Jews. In

12. The French edition is introduced by a 'warning by the editor'. It shows that Hilberg has banned the word 'extermination' from his book, which the editor deplors but respects. The subtitle of the German edition shows that the editors have had their own way.

exchange for a safe conduct for a few hundred Jews (among whom his family) he would not have told the others what awaited them, and as a consequence they let themselves be deported without any resistance¹³.

The schematic course of the destruction process does not imply that there existed a previously worked-out plan. Hilberg stresses the fact that the scheme only exists and appears to be obvious in retrospect. In reality everything evolved more gradually. The measures that were taken helped to advance further steps, made them conceivable or possible. Each phase was essential for the next one. This does not mean that the perpetrators did not know the kind of measures that were taken, but it means that they did not know the result of the long-lasting process and that they did not even realize that there was one (for them too the result was too inconceivable). This kind of reasoning is thought of as a deculpabilisation. Maxime Steinberg writes: "History is made by people, but in the "process" (described by Hilberg) they appear as docile instruments of a fatal destiny"¹⁴. In concrete constellations there are usually a number of alternatives conceivable or possible. The choice that is made has a lot to do with the person and the ideology of the one who takes the decisions, and *there* his (or her) political and moral responsibility is situated. The nazis were of course responsible and when closely examining the measures that had already been taken,

13. Rudolf Vrba is convinced that the report that he and Fred Wetzler made after their escape from Auschwitz, was handed over to Eichmann by Kastner. Kastner would have sacrificed poor Jews to save a social elite: R. VRBA, *Je me suis évadé d'Auschwitz*, Paris, 1988, pp. 349-352. In the years '54-'57, stirring court-cases were conducted in Israel around Kastner, who had emigrated to Israel after the war. It began with a trial for liable again Malkiel Grunwald, who had accused Kastner of collaborating with the Germans. In the course of these trials Kastner was found guilty of collaboration, but this judgment was revised by the High Court with a small majority. Hilberg mentions that in March 1957 Kastner was murdered in Tel Aviv, but he doesn't mention the court-cases. In Great Britain in 1987 there was a controversy concerning the play *Perdition* written by the revolutionary socialist Jim Allen, which dealt with the Kastner affair. The planned performance was cancelled and the play could only be read when the most offending 'antizionistic' passages were left out. See G. SEIDEL, *The Holocaust Denial*, Leeds, 1986.

14. *Annales. Economies, sociétés, civilisations*, Mai-Juin 1988, pp. 666-669.

some of them should have gained more insight in the escalation. Their responsibility is shown in the fact that the first phases of the destruction process (definition, expropriation, concentration) which in Germany had been established gradually and experimentally, were applied in an accelerated tempo, sometimes (in Poland) very abruptly, even after the result had become clear to everybody.

Hilberg could have dedicated a paragraph to this problem of responsibility and guilt¹⁵. But the accent of his investigation is on causes, not on effects. He looks for answers to 'technical' questions: which were the administrative and psychological determiners which made the destruction of 5 million people possible? Where possible he avoids ethical why-questions. The book does not deal with Jews but with those who destroyed Jews¹⁶.

THE COMMONNESS OF EVIL

The destruction of the Jews was not the work of a few psychopathic or immoral individuals, but of a whole society. The destructive machinery (ministries, the army and the party) all co-operated in an exemplary way. The destructive mechanism consisted of an administrative process carried out by several bureaucratic networks spread over the whole continent. Each deportation required numerous administrative measures. As far as transport was concerned a train, a machinist, guards, supplies, time-schedules, financing (group rates) had to be

15. The explanatory value of simplifying and non-falsifiable schemes of thinking, such as conspiracy theories, explains that these are also found in the best studies! James Young for instance thought that the nazis studied Hebrew culture in order to better understand the 'nature' of the Jews. This allowed them to create a frightening world by means of analogies. Therefore they re-introduced the renaissance ghetto, the medieval yellow star and the Jewish Councils from the 17th century. They took advantage of their victims' 'archetypical' way of thinking, made sure that the Jews interpreted their destiny 'pragmatically', and reacted to it in the same way. (YOUNG, p.94).

16. This concentration on the offenders explains the nowadays strange fact that the linen cover of the first edition was trimmed with a swastika in relief print.

On the grey cover of the new American edition is the black shadow of Europe with a yellow Star of David, the word 'Jude' in it, over the occupied territory.

provided. And even after the deportation a lot had to be arranged: unpaid bills of the deported, juridical foundation of the seizure of their realty (in Warsaw alone no less than 4000 houses), legalisation of the discontinuance of their pensions (already in 1939 the provident minister of postal services proposed to stop giving pensions to Jews because they were going to be expelled or locked up anyway). Ministries, police and other administrative services fought each other for the division of the loot or the costs (for the transport by train).

On each step of the hierarchic ladder civil servants applied normal procedures to an exceptional situation. Martinettism, the need to prove oneself a good nazi, or simply the urge to do a good job, yielded a number of ingenious measures to define the victims, to classify them and eventually to destroy them.

The gradual application of the administrative measures that led to the destruction of the European Jews could be carried out accurately and faultlessly because the nazis could draw from centuries of experience. In an instructive table Hilberg shows how each measure from the antisemitic nazi legislation has its pendant in canon law¹⁷. The 'Endlösung' was a culmination point.

From the transfer of power in 1933 onwards, measures were gradually introduced which later made the holocaust possible. Very important for the 'success' of this genocide was that chaotic violence was, as far as possible, kept under control. This was not done in view of the genocide, but because uncertainty and chaos are not beneficial to trade and economy. One was supposed to kill against one's will, because it was ordered, because it was historically necessary, not because one felt like it. The November pogrom of 1938 ('Reichskristallnacht') was in fact the last manifestation of uncontrolled street violence against Jews in nazi-Germany. Members of the SA and SS who had murdered people in the night of 9 to 10 December (at least 36 Jews killed) were acquitted. The four who were accused of rape were thrown out of the party. Burocracy took charge and gradually

17. See also: H. JANSEN, *Christelijke theologie na Auschwitz. 1. Theologische en kerkelijke wortels van het antisemitisme*, 's Gravenhage, 1981.

paved a legal way for genocide. Afterwards this legalisation appeared to be essential for controlling psychological problems amongst the killers.

A WORK OF REFERENCE

It is impossible to do justice to this voluminous work in a review. It is full of figures, social-economic and demographic data on pre-war Jewish communities, it contains a lot of information about the ghettos in Poland, about the political and juridical talks that preceded the Neurenberg trials, about the so-called denazification, about the completion of payments and restitutions to Israel.¹⁸

The register of this inexhaustible basic work — in a sense a reference book — was unfortunately limited to names of ghettos, camps and people. The names of authors of the many works mentioned in the footnotes were not included, and this makes the absence of a bibliography even more regrettable.

VICTIMS: COMPLIANCE AND RESISTANCE

Hilberg stresses the fact that the success of the destruction process also depended on the way in which the victims reacted. Jews, according to Hilberg, hardly ever worked out adapted, combative strategies, but they relied on behavioral patterns which they had developed through the ages. Jews had learned to diminish or neutralize threats by argumentation, to propitiate aggressors by anticipative submission, compliance and co-operation, by working hard and by making themselves indispensable¹⁹. The historical models which had

18. It is little known — Hilberg does not mention it, but this is probably due to his fixation on Jewish-American research — that part of that money was used to finance Jewish holocaust centres, e.g. Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, but also many centres which were set up before or during the war, such as the Wiener Library (London) and the Centre de Documentation Juive Contemporaine (Paris).

19. ... and to think of themselves as indispensable. A mentality illustrated by *Die Stadt ohne Juden*, (The City without Jews) a 'Roman von Uebermorgen', published in 1933 in Vienna, more than a decade before Hitler came to power. The author, Hugo BETTAUER, says that the Jews who were chased from Vienna, should be brought back

allowed diaspora Jews²⁰ to survive centuries of persecution were reactivated against the nazis, this time with catastrophic consequences.

In the preface of the first edition Hilberg points out that Jewish institutions and communities will be looked at through the eyes of the persecutors, as instruments of the destruction process. Attention will be paid to the victims because, and to the extent that, they co-determined the success of their destruction. That they did this was clear both for nazis and for the persecuted, who in reports and diaries expressed their surprise and astonishment about the submissiveness of the victims²¹.

Hilberg's preference of 'destruction' must be connected with this, passiveness and meekness are included in this concept. Lucy Dawidowicz, another authority on the holocaust, stresses totally different things, and this too is clearly illustrated by the title of her work: *The WAR against the Jews* (1975)²².

The major part of the criticism on Hilberg's work can be reduced to misunderstanding his unusual angle of approach. As a reaction to his analysis, many examples were given of Jews who had heroically offered resistance despite the overwhelming preponderance of the enemy²³. Examples which in fact offer no criticism or answer to

because the city couldn't do without them.

20. In the Zionist ideology the holocaust is considered the ultimate consequence of the Jewish weakness and vulnerability in the diaspora. Zionists stress the contrast between passive 'old' Jews and fighting 'new' Jews. (YOUNG, 134, 186).

21. On the Jewish side they often use the biblical metaphor of the helpless sheep who, without protest, were led away to be slaughtered. (see for instance Jesaya, 53:7). A pamphlet dating from the winter of 41-42, written by Jewish members of the resistance, addressed to the people of Vilna, begins with the following words: "Do not let yourselves be led to the slaughtering-table like sheep".

22. With *Zweierlei Untergang. Die Zerschlagung des Deutschen Reiches und das Ende des europäischen Judentums* (1986) the German historian Andreas HILLGRUBER evokes apologetic and revisionistic connotations.

23. A number of studies on Jewish resistance came about, often relying on eyewitness-accounts. Yuri SUHL, (ed.), *They fought back. The story of the Jewish resistance in Nazi Europe*, New York, 1967 and Reuben AINSTEIN, *Jewish resistance in Nazi-occupied Eastern Europe*, London, 1974, explicitly opposed themselves against Hilberg's assertions. Other important examples are: Isaiah TRUNK, *Jewish responses to Nazi persecution*, New York, 1979 and Hermann LANGBEIN, *Nicht wie die Schafe*

Hilberg but illustrate a view which he had excluded in order to define his subject²⁴.

Dawidowicz talks about Jewish-American scientists who join in the discussion on the role of the Jews in the holocaust, without being familiar with Jewish history, Jewish traditional life and culture, and without having any idea of historiography. (op.cit., p. 132 and 178). She treats Hilberg and Bruno Bettelheim alike, and that is, to say the least, careless. Bettelheim's *The informed heart*²⁵ is not a scientific study, but a very personal psycho-analytical interpretation of camp behaviour, based on far-going extrapolations of personal experiences (in 1938-39 Bettelheim was in Dachau and Buchenwald for one year). Bettelheim disapproves of the behaviour of most prisoners (and not only of that of Jews, as Dawidowicz writes) because it is heteronomous, because they have uncritically adapted their standards to the world of the camp. And the behaviour of these 'failing' prisoners he turns against 'modern man' to warn him of what awaits him in case of a far-going loss of autonomy²⁶.

Hilberg's judgment is severe but he does not condemn. He makes

zur Schlachtabank, Frankfurt, 1981.

24. The recent publication of the French edition caused a new wave of criticism (see also above, footnote 15). In an otherwise praising review in *Le Monde Diplomatique* (August 1982) the reviewer takes it ill of Hilberg that he, from his easy chair, reproaches victims to have submitted themselves so easily. Hilberg's approach worries Alain FINKIELKRAUT as *Eichmann in Jerusalem* by Hannah ARENDT had done before (New York, 1965). Finkelkraut does not offer arguments, but rather talks about a 'typical American attitude: they have not experienced it themselves, but they moralize and think they can rate others' (in, *Arguments*, RTBF 3, 26.2.1989), a conversation on the occasion of Finkelkraut's new book, *La mémoire vaine. Du crime contre l'humanité*. In the French edition, the idea that Hilberg was reproaching people was strengthened because 'compliance' was translated as 'soumission' (submission).

25. Recently translated into Dutch with the title *Het verlichte hart*, Amsterdam, Contact, 1988. First translation: *Massificatie en zelfbehoud*, Utrecht-Antwerpen, Aula, 1965.

26. The success of Bettelheim's didactic argumentation must be sought in the attractiveness of simplifying covering explanations for exceptionally complex phenomena. In *The informed Heart* everything is explained via theories of conspiracy and psychological concepts such as 'regression' and 'identification with the executioner'.

it clear that the victims had no chance whatsoever. He discusses the few Jewish rebellions with a kind of surprise, after having shown how hopeless any resistance had to be and actually was. This is illustrated by the very low number of dead and wounded counted on the German side during these upheavals²⁷.

Hilberg suggests various other possible and probable explanations: the paralyzing effect of terror, the gradualness and unpredictability of the destruction process, the expectation that everything would calm down... He also stresses the passive role of the onlookers, the third party involved in the destruction process. The European Jews were abandoned and betrayed by the allied forces on a massive scale. The Jewish community outside Europe has certainly not done everything possible, many Jews were already gazing at the long-awaited Israel²⁸.

From a tactical point of view Hilberg would undoubtedly have done wise to add some statistical data on the camp and resistance behaviour of non-Jews²⁹. He could have stressed the unimaginability of the holocaust and the involuntary 'co-operation' to their own destruction. And he could have omitted some strong and provocative examples. The fact that he has not done this, says a lot about the unbelieving pain of a strongly involved author who is looking in vain for satisfactory explanations.

THROUGH THE EYES OF THE VICTIMS

Looking through the eyes of the victims, Hilberg obviously prefers using nazi sources. Originally he based himself uniquely on the files of the Neurenberg trials and other archive material. Now he uses

27. Hilberg bases himself on contemporary nazi sources, his critics (Dawidowicz, Suhl) on eyewitness-reports. For the revolt of the Warsaw ghetto this results in respectively 16 dead and 85 wounded nazis vs. 360 dead and 1000 wounded nazis.

28. Even the liberation of surviving Jews was largely a by-product of victory. Everyone knows by now that the allied forces never agreed to the many pleas to bomb the railway to Auschwitz and the gassing installations of Birkenau. Less known is the fact that the Russian commander who liberated the abandoned — the ill — prisoners, found the camp on his way by *coincidence*.

29. As Robinson Jacobs does in 'The behaviour of the victims. Who is competent to judge this behavior?', *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 1972, VIII, pp. 890-916.

sources of a very differing nature. Telegrams, bills, notes, nazi ordinances, magazines, newspapers, new court documents, released files.

Hilberg prefers using sources which were not created as such, and tries to avoid using ego-documents; an attitude which is widely spread. He only uses ego-documents when no other material is available. He usually puts events reported by eyewitnesses in the conditional tense. It is obvious that he regrets having to resort to eyewitness reports.

This recoils itself upon the chapter on the 'killing centres'. It contains a lot of information which cannot be found in ego-documents of prisoners. Few prisoners knew for instance of the clearing after the liquidation of a transport, ghetto or camp³⁰.

But many sources on extermination camps were destroyed, and on some aspects there have never been any nazi sources (there is still more than enough material never to doubt the existence of destruction camps or mass gassings)³¹. Hilberg had to turn to eyewitnesses. Because he has always avoided using the sources created by them, he had no relevant criteria to separate chaff from wheat, and he cannot interpret and analyze these more subjective sources more or less correctly.

From Hilberg's choice of ego-documents it becomes clear that he has been led by rather irrelevant criteria, e.g. the profession of the eyewitnesses (with Hilberg almost only doctors and university graduates), and the availability of the reports. As far as ego-documents are concerned, he almost only uses what was available in English.

In this chapter on the killing centers, the otherwise very accurate and conscientious Hilberg uses the ego-material in a remarkably inaccurate and uncritical way. Of the many thousand eyewitness

30. On Himmler's orders the ghetto of Warsaw had to be pulled down after the rebellion, each underground hiding place had to be filled up and where the ghetto had been a large park would be laid out. 2500 KZ prisoners and one thousand Polish labourers worked at the clearing for more than a year (e.g. over 2,000,000 m³ of rubble from the walls). In July 1944 the work was stopped. Price: 150 million Reichsmark.

31. For an analysis and refutation of the "no-holocaust" arguments, see my *De uitbuiting van de Holocaust* (Exploiting the Holocaust), Antwerpen, Houtekiet, 1990.

reports on nazi camps he has only used about ten. He considers events sufficiently proved if one eyewitness mentioned them. He generalizes on the basis of one eyewitness report and even omits the conditional tense here. He is astonishingly ill informed about the consulted eyewitnesses and their writings. He also makes a number of capital errors. He bases himself on declarations and constructions of victims to reconstruct the motives of their persecutors. He relies on a few psychoanalytically inspired interpretations by the survivor E.A. Cohen in *Het Duitse concentratiekamp* (The German Concentration Camp) (Amsterdam, 1952), a book that was almost immediately translated into English. Later, Cohen expressed his doubts about these interpretations, but the book in which he did this (*De negentien treinen naar Sobibor*, The nineteen trains to Sobibor, Amsterdam — Brussel, 1979) was not consulted by Hilberg, probably because it was not translated into English.

Unfortunately this unjudicious use of ego-documents makes the chapter on extermination camps less convincing than the rest of the book. But this is not only the author's fault. Up to now, hardly any scientific research has been carried out into ego-documents in general or nazi camps in particular. There have been some literary studies, but no attempts have been made to draw up a methodology, a classification system or schemes for interpretation and analysis. And those are indispensable to reconstruct the experienced reality, through the various ways in which the victims have observed and interpreted it.

**Le caractère inachevé d'un chef-d'oeuvre:
Raul Hilberg et *La destruction des Juifs d'Europe***

PAR
GIE VAN DEN BERGHE

Résumé

The Destruction of European Jews reste un ouvrage de référence concernant l'extermination des Juifs par les Nazis. En 1961 ce fut la première tentative de découvrir comment une nation hautement civilisée était arrivée à éliminer toute barrière psychologique et culturelle pour procéder au génocide. Hilberg a toujours revu et corrigé son analyse dans les éditions successives en anglais, allemand et français (1988).

L'extermination des Juifs n'est que la dernière étape d'un processus de destruction de longue durée, qui légalisait progressivement le génocide. Hilberg esquisse le schéma qu'on peut découvrir *a posteriori*. Il souligne qu'il n'y avait pas de plan pré-établi dans les détails, que chaque phase (et la réponse qu'elle provoquait) rendait possible et imaginable la phase suivante. Cette explication fonctionnaliste est plus délicate et moins évidente que l'approche intentionnaliste classique. Beaucoup de lecteurs croient à tort que Hilberg déculpabilise les responsables. On l'a aussi critiqué parce qu'il considère la "solution finale" à travers les yeux des persécuteurs, en prêtant attention aux victimes uniquement dans la mesure où elles ont participé à leur propre destruction. Hilberg ne condamne pas; la passivité des victimes l'agace et il essaie de l'expliquer.

Vu son point de départ, Hilberg se base le plus possible sur des sources nazies. Il évite les documents personnels et ne dispose donc pas de critères nécessaires pour les interpréter exactement. Cela se venge dans sa relation des camps de la mort, pour lesquels il reste peu de sources sinon les rapports de témoins oculaires. Mais Hilberg n'est malheureusement pas seul à agir aussi. Nous manquons toujours de recherches scientifiques et méthodologiques en nombre suffisant à propos des documents personnels et autobiographiques en général, et sur les camps nazis en particulier.

Een onafgewerkt meesterwerk:
Raul Hilberg en *The destruction of the European Jews*

DOOR
GIE VAN DEN BERGHE

Samenvatting

The destruction of the European Jews blijft een referentiewerk voor de jodenuitroeiing door de nazi's. In 1961 was het de eerste poging om erachter te komen hoe een hoogbeschaafde natie erin geslaagd is alle psychologische en culturele barrières uit de weg te ruimen voor het voltrekken van de genocide. Hilberg heeft zijn analyse steeds aangevuld en bijgeschaafd in de opeenvolgende herziene Engelse, Duitse en Franse edities (1988).

De jodenuitroeiing is slechts de laatste fase van een langdurig destructieproces waardoor volkenmoord geleidelijk gelegaliseerd werd. Hilberg schetst het schema dat achteraf ontwaard kan worden. Hij benadrukt dat er geen op voorhand tot in de details uitgewerkt plan was, dat elke fase en de respons erop een volgende fase denkbaar en mogelijk maakte. Deze functionalistische verklaring is moeilijker en minder aantrekkelijk dan de klassieke intentionalistische benadering. Velen menen ten onrechte dat Hilberg de daders deculpabiliseert. Hij werd ook fel bekritiseerd omdat hij de *Endlösung* bekijkt door de ogen van de vervolgers en aan de slachtoffers alleen aandacht besteedt in de mate dat zij aan hun vernietiging hebben meegewerkt. Hilberg veroordeelt nochtans niet, hij ergert zich aan de lijdzaamheid van de slachtoffers en probeert ze te verklaren.

Gezien zijn optiek baseert Hilberg zich zoveel mogelijk op nazibronnen. Hij schuwt ego-documenten en beschikt bijgevolg niet over de nodige criteria om ze oordeelkundig te interpreteren. Dat wreekt zich in zijn relaas over de dodenkampen, waarover weinig andere bronnen dan ooggetuigenverslagen zijn bewaard gebleven. Maar Hilberg staat hierin, jammer genoeg, niet alleen. Er is nog steeds bijzonder weinig

wetenschappelijk methodologisch onderzoek verricht naar ego-documenten in het algemeen en die over de nazi-kampen in het bijzonder.