Is There a New Anti-Semitism?
A Conversation with Raul Hilberg

Q: You have famously argued that there were three solutions to the Jewish problem; conversion, expulsion, and finally extermination. Could you explain what you mean by that?

Raul Hilberg: This is an underlying pattern to which I came to early on in my research. Looking through the sweep of history it is clear that conversion was an object of the Christian world. The expulsions began in the late Middle Ages when it would appear that the Jews were not willing to become Christians. That pattern existed for several hundred years in Europe. You could take it back to Oxford and then go to Spain in 1492 and Portugal a few years later. So we are really talking about the later Middle Ages and the beginning of modern times for the expulsions.

Now, the business of a final solution, that permanent solution, is a Nazi idea. You go back even to the beginnings of the Nazi party and find that they are still thinking in terms of the emigration of the Jews — there was a plan called the Madagascar plan, which was actually a thought in Poland and even in France (Madagascar was a French possession), maybe all of the Jews could be shipped there. So this idea was still floating in the German foreign office and all the way up to Hitler as late as 1940, especially 1940 when France surrendered. However, when the War did not end as the Germans had hoped it would with the West (they were already making preparations to attack the Soviet Union), the serious thought of annihilating the Jews emerged. The earliest indication of this is a meeting Hitler had with a bunch of party members early in February of 1941. He had by then not quite formed the decision, but it was on the way.

Q: Many of the recent anti-Semitic incidents in Europe have led people to talk of a new anti-Semitism. Is this really something we should take seriously or is this simply a continuance of the older anti-Semitism?

Hilberg: It is not even that. It is picking up a few pebbles from the past and throwing them at windows. I am old enough to remember what the effects of an anti-Jewish attitude are. Here, at the University of Vermont it was unthinkable, even in this liberal state, to have a Jew as a dean as late as the seventies, let alone president. In other words, there was still a lot of segregation in the United States. If you go back and you pick up any New York Times in the thirties or even the forties you will see ads for apartments in New York City and the word “restricted”. This is a Jewish owned newspaper and they printed ads barring Jews. And this was an embedded anti-Jewish regime, which the society itself supported and it’s gone. It’s simply gone.

We cannot even talk about restrictions on Jews in the Islamic world because the Jews have left
the Islamic world. They are not there anymore except in Morocco and maybe some tens of thousands still here and there, but that is a remnant of the two hundred thousand that were still there when the state of Israel was created. So the anti-Semitism of the past belongs to the past, and particularly the word “anti-Semitism.” There was an anti-Semitic party in Germany and there was an anti-Semitic party in Austria. The leader of the Hungarian regime, Admiral Horthy, who, when some extreme right wing guys were trying to take over Jewish businesses shouted them down. He said, and I am paraphrasing, “you are not going to take over these businesses because the Jews at least know how to run them and who are you? And don’t you talk to me because I was an anti-Semite before you were born.” Adolf Hitler himself, and nobody reads Mein Kampf, makes a statement that his father would not be an anti-Semite because it would degrade him socially. Nietzsche’s sister married an anti-Semitic leader and he referred in letters to his sister in the whole correspondence “to your anti-Semitic husband.” Now, you can see that anti-Semitism was somewhat correlated with some backward glance. It belongs to the nineteenth century with its other “-isms,” with imperialism, with colonialism, with racism. It sounds bizarre if I tell you that the Nazis did not call themselves anti-Semites. You do not even find the word.

Q: Really?

Hilberg: Yes, there was a sense that Nazism was something new. The anti-Semite had stopped at a certain point; the anti-Semite could talk about eliminating Jews, but did not know how to do it. The anti-Semite did not have the power, the anti-Semite was a propagandist. The Nazis were serious and this was a far different proposition. When you see the actual legislation in Germany, Austria, and elsewhere that states that it is criminal to deny that there was a Holocaust, it is because these governments have to distance themselves from Nazism. Nowadays of course Nazism and anti-Semitism are conflated into one kind of ideology, but it is a different phenomenon. There was an extreme anti-Semitic newspaper in Germany, Der Stürmer, which was published by Julius Streicher. I do not remember now whether it was Höss, the Auschwitz commander, or somebody else who was asked, “Did you read Der Stürmer?” He said, basically, “Look, I’m a lieutenant colonel of the SS, I wouldn’t be caught dead reading Der Stürmer.” It was like reading the lowest of the low gossip rags in the United States. There was an issue of social standing.

Q: What are your thoughts on the rhetorical and symbolic usage of the word “Holocaust”?

Hilberg: I resisted the use of the word “Holocaust” to begin with because of its religious underpinnings. In the end, it is like anything that becomes usage; you do not escape from it. But, “Holocaust” becomes problematic in a number of ways, and the one which is least discussed, because it’s politically incorrect to do so, is that everything is becoming a Holocaust. I will give you one example: I was walking in Berlin one day and I see a sign “Holocaust” and saw some street demonstrators with signs reading “Holocaust, Holocaust, Holocaust.” I could not figure out what they were demonstrating about until I saw a cage and realized they were talking about cruelty to animals. The word “genocide” is also being bandied about, and of course the Genocide Convention has a definition which goes beyond what they call a “Holocaust.” So if you kidnap children in order to make them do something that’s genocide, if you use opium that’s genocide, etc. Because it’s an international convention, the Greeks put something in there, the Chinese put
something in there and so on and so forth.

“Holocaust” is a misused word again and again because it means, especially when it is capitalized, the Jewish catastrophe and once you pin it on all sorts of things it loses its effectiveness. There are now books being written that state the Armenians were not really subjected to genocide or the Gypsies were not really subjected to genocide - even though in my opinion both were - but it results in these arguments and it’s an unavoidable situation. As soon as the President’s Commission on the Holocaust was set-up—that’s the same President Carter who is now being called an anti-Semite who created the Commission—everybody showed up: the Armenians, of course, showed up, the Poles showed up, the Ukrainians showed up, the Czechs showed up. There are all of these definitional problems and arguments that emerge when using words like “Holocaust” or “genocide.”

Q: Moving beyond the way these words are symbolically and rhetorically employed, what do you see as the kind of relation of the Holocaust to other historical and current genocides? How can we use the lessons of it to confront the kind of violence and persecution of groups which are occurring today, whether or not sociologically we consider them genocides?

Hilberg: I did not know what to do with Cambodia or other events like that, but Rwanda convinced me. That is why in the third edition of my book I got Rwanda in there. Why I put it there is the answer to your question. In Buchenwald and possibly some other camps as the war ended, the inmates put up big signs that said “never again.” I think it was really the Communists who were behind that, but I am not sure. The signs said “never again” in various languages because there was a Babel of languages in these camps. Millions of people, men, women and children killed only because they were classified as Jews. Now, that should not happen again and that is the responsibility of the world. The result was, in fact, the Genocide Convention. The word genocide was a made up word by Raphael Lemkin, a Jewish lawyer from Poland whose previous speciality was terrorism. When the Holocaust happened he published a book in 1944, Axis Rule in Occupied Europe. In that book he invented the word genocide because he argued that the law has to have that concept as a crime. Of course the United States did not want to sign the Genocide Convention because the State Department and other representatives had their doubts. One major doubt was that if we had a Genocide Convention, then the blacks in this country would challenge all the segregation laws. The Genocide Convention is a treaty, and if it’s a treaty under Article six of the Constitution we cannot sign this convention because it would override our sacred state laws which discriminated against blacks. That was their argument. Eventually that argument collapsed.

What remains today, however, is that the “never again” is implicit. Yet, come Rwanda and President Clinton refused to call it genocide when it really was! We said that we will never tolerate this sort of thing again, but allow half a million people plus to be killed in three or four months in Rwanda. After ten Belgians were killed withdrawals began of the international peacekeeping force. It was the same thing as in Germany, the Hutu decided now we are going to solve the Tutsi problem like the Germans did with the Jews. It is even clear that they decided it months before they started killing because they imported machetes and made preparations like the Germans. So here we were, the whole world, there’s no World War II going on, there is no excuse that we need all the aircraft we have,
so we cannot bomb Auschwitz because we need them on the Western Front, and nothing is done. It’s peace, it’s the nineties, and nothing is done. So much for “never again.” So the problem has obviously not disappeared.

You have to make decisions. When you are sitting in the Defense Department or the State Department in the White House you never can predict exactly what configurations some happening will show you. You have to think it through and these people haven’t got any time to think. They have to do all their thinking before they took office. This is a major problem. Nevertheless, this is the first time in history that we take a sort of global responsibility. I am not saying we are alone, we have our partners doing this and the notion of a global responsibility is really brand new, it is post-World War II.

Q: What are your thoughts on the current debates over how to interpret the Holocaust and its legacy in the work of people like Norman Finkelstein or Daniel Goldhagen?

Hilberg: Well Finkelstein is now maligned all over the place. There were obviously lobbies who tried to dislodge him from his position. Finkelstein is a political scientist. I believe he has a PhD degree from Princeton and, whatever you may think of Princeton, this is a pretty strong preparation to be a professional political scientist. He wrote to me a couple of times. He was the first one to take Goldhagen seriously. He attacked Goldhagen in a very long essay which I could never have written because I would have never had the patience. Goldhagen is part of an academic group that in my kind of research is a disaster...

Q: Why is that?

Hilberg: Because [Goldhagen] was totally wrong about everything. Totally wrong. Exceptionally wrong. In other words, this whole fury of his anti-Semitism was, at the root, that it was especially eliminationist anti-Semitism, was totally absurd. He talks about anti-Semitism among Germans, Estonians, Ukrainians, Latvians, and Lithuanians, but where did this unique eliminationist anti-Semitism come from? It is just totally absurd. I mean, totally off the wall, you know, and factually without any basis. Finkelstein took this seriously. I took it less seriously, but I was a latecomer in attacking this Goldhagen fellow.

Now Finkelstein had a second point, which, in my opinion, was one hundred percent correct and that is that the response to the issue of the Swiss banks and German industry, which had coincided during the War, was not only coercive on the part of the Jews who mobilized, but also on the part of all the insurance commissioners, the Senate, the House, and the critical committees. The only thing they could not break through was to the courts, which still have independence. So they lost at court, but they threatened people like Alan Hevesi in New York. They could make threats because Swiss banks wanted to expand here. For Finkelstein, this was naked extortion and I’m not sure who agreed with him except for me and I said so openly. In fact, I said so to the press in maybe seven countries.

The press did not expect my answer. The World Jewish Congress was led by a man who was appeared to be from his own autobiographical statements to be totally, not even average, but like a child almost. What this tycoon, who took over the World Jewish Congress, was saying was
totally preposterous. The claims lawyers, joined by the World Jewish Congress, made an incredible display of totally inappropriate behavior.

Now when he talks about the Arabs, some Jews feel that he is also anti-Zionist, that he is anti-Israel; that he seems to always emphasize the suffering of the Arabs. I do not join him in this particular venture because I have my own view, but you cannot say he is altogether wrong either. Would you like to be an Arab citizen in Israel? Think of the doors that are closed. You may eat better and have a better income than if you lived in a slum in Cairo. The great irony is that the economic condition of Israeli Arabs is considerably better than the proletariat in some other Arab countries, but a person needs something more. A person needs a feeling of dignity. Think of the security check points. It is a life that certainly something ought to be done about it in one way or another. This particular battle cannot be fought forever. It cannot be. The Israelis will tire of it. The Israelis will simply tire of mistrusting people. It is not possible to go on this way forever. Finkelstein has the corner on the germ of correct vision in these matters because he is pretty sharp. More often than not, especially with regard to these other matters like Goldhagen and the Swiss banks he has been right.

Q: One last question, as time goes on in the twenty-first century what direction should research on the Holocaust take now?

Hilberg: Well, if you had asked that question first, it would have needed a half hour. Rightfully so, the research today is oriented towards finding out details and especially what happened at the local level. This research has already started. It is not very well developed in this country, but it is very much in progress in Europe. The principle researchers of the Holocaust today are Germans and Austrians. There are also some French and Italians. There are not many Holocaust researchers worth mentioning in this country.

The second thing that we should and must do is look at those aspects of what happened which are still taboo. What is taboo is the life of a terminal Jewish community in some ghetto and the notion that some people died first, then other people died next, still other people died last, and then, better yet, some of them survived. What accounts for these very discernible developments? Example: the first to die were the poorest of the poor. We have got to face this issue. We have got to realize that it will not do in the academic world to call all of the Jewish dead—as I have heard one Rabbi call them, Kedoshim, which means holy people. This is not my language. We cannot do that. We have to see them as they were and we have not done this. We have had the lectures. This is one aspect in which I do not agree with Elie Wiesel although I have known him for a long time. He says “listen to the survivors and listen even to their children.” I say, yes, we will listen to the survivors. We have listened for quite a long time, but it is not enough. It will not tell us what happened to the people that did not survive. You are not a random sample. This requires a lot of assiduous research through a lot records that have been buried and have not been examined.

The third thing that needs to be done is: you have to identify more clearly who the neighbors of the Jews were. How they were impacted if at all? How their reactions were motivated, be it to join the perpetrator or help the victim or, in most cases, remain neutral. Neutrality does not mean
ignoring something. It means a decision not to do anything. We have to examine that as well. So we have to examine the Holocaust in all ways and it boils down to doing a lot of local research because at the local level are the records that tell us something. For example, if I read in local records that the Byelorussians are not delivering enough grain to the Germans because they secretly steal it to make vodka and in such huge quantities under the German occupation, you would have to begin to ask the question what percentage of that population was perpetually drunk? Now these are very, very important questions and that is the direction the research needs to go in. It is not for amateurs, it is not for untrained people, it is not for philosophers, it is for people who know languages, who know history, who know political science, who know economics, etc. At the root they must be well trained. The Holocaust is not today, as it might have been in the beginning, a subject for the laymen.