

The myth of the first victim: the impact of Austria's official narrative on Jewish identity reconstruction

Anabela Valente Simões
University of Aveiro

1. INTRODUCTION: THE SINGULARITY OF THE HOLOCAUST

In his 1980 essay “Significance of the Holocaust”, Raul Hilberg, known historian and Jewish survivor, asked his readers if we would not be happier if he could demonstrate that all nazi perpetrators were, after all, insane people. This possibility of a false happiness would be, however, immediately after withdrawn, as Hilberg concludes that the events that occurred in Germany from 1933 until 1945, orchestrated and carried out by educated men, go far beyond human understanding; Hilberg continues, arguing that we all must accept the fact that men, in that moment of our history, lost control over social institutions, bureaucratic structures and over technology (qd. in Levi; Rothberg 2003: 82).

In fact, the images that cross our minds every time the word “Auschwitz” is mentioned are images filled with brutality and cruelty, which inevitably lead to feelings perplexity and inability to grasp how in the 20th century such barbarity could actually have happened, particularly in the heart of the civilized western Judaic-Christian society. In effect, the twelve years of nazi dictatorship led to massive physical, psychological and moral devastation and, ultimately, it represents the most violent and hostile action of human kind against itself ever known in the history of the Modern Era. The destruction that the nazi victims were subjected to retains a sense of singularity that no other historical event has had so far and, at the present time, it is still a topic that reaches and moves not only individuals that were directly involved, but also unrelated subjects in general. D.G. Myers conveys a probable explanation for this attitude, considering that

the Holocaust was an enormity unprecedented and perhaps even unique in human history. [...] The enormity lies not in the numbers that were killed, nor in the ‘racial’ identity of the victims, but in the objective of final, total extermination. [...] Because its objectives were finality and totality, the Holocaust stands as a possible challenge to everything in existence (Myers, 1999: 270).

This singularity is also associated with the fact that the Shoah could actually be considered an “autonomous genocide category” (Stone 2004: 46), which distinguishes itself from rudimentary, primitive and traditional genocides, where passion, emotion and thrill apparently move the spirit of the perpetrators. In the case of the nazi genocide violence there was no rage, fury or emotions involved; according to numerous reports, the destruction of human beings occurred as a consequence of a bureaucratic process, in a calm, industrial environment. In the end, death became a stage of an industrial process. Moreover, in his essay “Lanzmann’s Shoah: Here is no why”, historian Domick LaCapra also contributes to the question of the unique character of the Holocaust, suggesting that its singularity is fundamentally due to

the conjunction of a technological framework and all that is associated with it in the Nazi context (including racial ‘science’, eugenics, and medicalization based on purity of blood) with the return of a repressed – seemingly out of place or *unheimlich* – sacrificialism in the attempt to cleanse (or purify) the *Volksgemeinschaft* and fulfill the leader’s will by getting rid of Jews as polluting, dangerous, phobic (or ritually impure) objects (LaCapra, 1997: 268).

On the whole, because of its distinctiveness, probably because it defies the limits of reason, this moment of Germany’s history has become the central event of the last decades and, in the 21st century, it continues to be a persistent study object that moves contemporary thought and motivates countless studies that constantly emerge from the scientific community all over the world. Regardless of the great variety of approaches and the different disciplinary perspectives – namely in areas such as History, Philosophy, Psychology or Literature – the singularity of this event remains undoubtedly undisputed.

2. VERGANGENHEITSBEWÄLTIGUNG IN GERMANY

In Germany the crimes perpetrated during the nazi regime have been precipitating intense public discussions. This process of examining the past started immediately in 1945 with the Nurnberg Trials and carried on in the sixties, firstly, when former SS Lieutenant Colonel Adolf Eichmann was captured and convicted to death in Israel (1961), and shortly after, when the criminals of the most emblematic concentration camp were judged in the Auschwitz Trials (1963-1965). On a more social level, the

broadcasting of Marvin Chomsky's TV-series *The Holocaust* (1979) also played an important role as far as a broader consciousness of this past is concerned.

It is called *Verganheitsbewältigung* this process of confrontation and attempt to integrate and overcome the nation's National-Socialist past, a process that would continue throughout the eighties with the Historians Debate (1986), whose main issue was the singularity, the exceptional character of the Holocaust vs. a demand for its normalization. It restarted in the nineties as a consequence of the controversial book written by the North-American second-generation Jewish historian Daniel Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners* (1996), where it was argued that the Holocaust happened in Germany because Germans are endogenously an anti-Semitic social group, who perceived the massacre of millions as a "national project". While Goldhagen's study found significant acceptance amongst the public in general, the academic community, especially in Germany, considered it a deficient analysis, filled with inaccuracies. Raul Hilberg, for example, considered it lacked factual content and logical rigour and many other scholars criticised its aesthetics of violence, emphatic language and style, its "pornographic" approach and excess of emotional identification through forms of insensitivity, shock and voyeurism.

Two years later, the confrontation with the past was again under the spotlight when prominent German writer Martin Walser affirmed during a public speech that the media had been instrumentalizing Auschwitz and that normalization should be claimed; as a response to those statements, the President of the Jewish Community, Ignatz Bubis, accused Walser of intellectual nationalism and concealed anti-Semitism. Later on, the inauguration of the Berlin Holocaust Memorial, in 2005, was again the motivation for a series of disputes and discussions. It was accused of being the "monumentalization of shame" and even considered an attempt of Germany's self-redemption for the perpetrated crimes. Despite the initial conciliatory intention, this discussion proved in the end that the Holocaust is still a neuralgic spot and that the German national-socialist past is far from being resolved.

3. AUSTRIA: THE MYTH OF THE FIRST VICTIM

Before the *Anschluß* in 1938, approximately 200,000 Jews lived in Vienna which, after Warsaw and Budapest, was the European city with the largest Jewish community. About 120,000 Jews managed to escape before the beginning of deportations and

estimates point at 65,000 exterminated Jews (Adunka, 1997: 205). Most of the Jews who live in Austria today are postwar emigrants from Eastern Europe and their descendants. After the end of the war Jews from Hungary, Poland, Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union joined the 10,000 Austrian Jew survivors. This migrant mass either set off to Vienna to find a way out to Israel or the USA, or tried to escape from religious repression and precarious life conditions caused by the communist regime during the Cold War. There were very few Jews who, having left Austria before the annexation to the German *Reich* or the *Reichskristallnacht* (November 9, 1938), decided to return to Vienna after the end of the war (Bunzl, 2000: 153).

The Holocaust, more than any other historical or cultural factor, seems to be the pivotal moment in post-war Jewish identity. According to Matt Bunzl, “it became the central aspect in Jewish self-perception” (Bunzl, 2000: 156), and not only for Israelis of Jewish confession, but also for many other members of the Jewish Diaspora who continue to review themselves in the suffering of the Holocaust victims and keep on preserving the memory of all who perished. It has been like this in Germany and also in the United States, where a quite significant Jewish community has settled. This Diaspora feels integrated in a global community of victims and assumes the “cult of the victim” as a unifying attitude, which bonds them around a common historical event and provides them with the sense of belonging to a group that share a marking collective memory.

The Austrian reality, nonetheless, assumes specific characteristics which produced a different pattern as far as the Jewish identity self-reconstruction is concerned. In opposition to Germany, where the discussion about the crimes perpetrated during the twelve years of nazi dictatorship started immediately in 1945 with the Nurnberg Trials, in Austria the National-Socialist past was handled as taboo and, therefore, kept in silence. In fact, Austria suppressed this episode from its historical conscience for a long period of time and kept the collaboration with the nazi regime under the false myth that Austrians were also victims:

Unlike Germany’s near obsession with its Nazi past, Austria’s relationship to its wartime history has remained decorously submerged, politely out of sight. Indeed, the post war identity of Austria had been based upon the self-serving myth that the country was Hitler’s first victim. (Young, 1999: 7)

The reality is that after the constitution of the Second Republic, on April 27, 1945 – at the same time as Germany was being held responsible for crimes of genocide –, Austria

assumed a completely different position and constructed a collective identity based on the idea of being the primary victim of the nazis. And, in point of fact, this was actually an attribute formally stated in the Moscow Declaration of November 1, 1943 that considered Austria the first free country to be stricken by Adolf Hitler's hegemonic policy when it was annexed in March 1938. The denial of guilt and the myth of the victim proved to be quite convenient, both for the elite and the majority of the population as well. In fact, Austrian intellectuals seem to have not scrutinized the facts of the past, but rather denied any connection with the perpetrated crimes, either personalizing historical responsibility in the figure of Adolf Hitler, or generally transferring sole responsibility to the Germans.

This perception, this imagined national narrative would last several decades. The failed process of the Austrian *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* would finally start in 1986 when an unexpected revelation generated a major political scandal and led to an in-depth reflection about Austria's co-participation in the nazi crimes: the crystallized official narrative that Austria was Hitler's first victim started to be questioned as a consequence of the so-called "Waldheim affair". During his election campaign¹, Kurt Waldheim, Austrian president from 1986 to 1992, had to face massive accusations related to his participation in the nazi regime as an SS-officer. Waldheim then claimed he had only "fulfilled his duty".

The *Lebenslüge* (lie of a life), i.e., the seven years of active collaboration with Hitler's regime had been, therefore, concealed, recharacterized and transformed into a national myth. As historian Günter Bischof affirms, the founding fathers of Austria's Second Republic "invented" another version of history (qtd. in Knight, 2001: 130). Esmeraldina Martins considers as well that the years that followed the *Anschluß* were fictionalized, rather than faced and accepted as a real and factual stage of Austria's history, in the sense that the nation banned from its consciousness the national-socialist years through psychological, political and discursive means (Martins, 2005: 283).

¹ Of particular relevance is the circumstance that 1986 campaign was also accompanied by increasing right-wing populism, represented by ÖFP's leader Jörg Haider (Austrian Freedom Party), whose explicit racist and anti-Semitic ideas clearly demonstrate that, despite the Holocaust, it was (still) possible to exhort such ideas in the Austrian political field.

On the whole, it took more than four decades to the political, juridical and public recognition of Austrian Jews as Holocaust victims; forty years after the first legal actions against nazi criminals and the payment of compensations to the victims residing in Germany. This change in the perception of history had a double effect: on the one hand, the consolidated image of the victim that Austrians had of themselves was substituted by the image of the aggressor, particularly an aggressor that concealed its accountability; on the other hand, the Austrian Jewish community had, at last, the right to their role as *unique* victims and to the opportunity to affirmatively redefine their identity as members of a global community of victims.

After the 1986 events, and after the revelation of names of former nazis (in some cases, Government members) by Simon Wiesenthal, Austria was forced to cleanse the image of the nation. For example, compensations were paid to the victims and the construction of the Jewish Museum, in 1993, was financed by the Austrian state. The official historical narrative has been corrected, schoolbooks have been recomposed, and National-Socialism is now officially part of the Austrian history and collective memory.

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