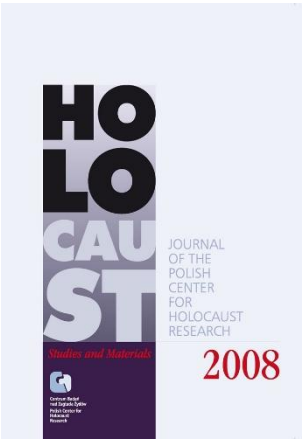


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Understanding the Holocaust. A Task for Generations

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The Holocaust destroyed virtually the entire Jewish community in Poland. Zusman Segałowicz, the pre-war chairman of the Jewish Union of Writers and Journalists of 13 Tłomackie Street, Warsaw, managed to leave Warsaw in 1939 and via Vilna, Kaunas, Bulgaria, Turkey, and Syria reached Palestine, where, under the beating Tel-Aviv sun, he pondered on the burning ruins of the ghetto. His memoirs, published in 1946 in Argentina (the author died in New York in 1949), contain the following passage: *I pass conflagration sites. I dig in the ashes. For the time being, these are the ashes of 13 Tłomackie St. All that is left of the entire Jewish world in Poland is a cemetery. Sometimes our pain leads us to divide this great cemetery into individual, smaller cemeteries: the cemetery of the Hassidic world, the cemetery of Jewish workers, merchants, entrepreneurs and industrialists, the cemetery of Jewish children who were to be our future. Finally, our thoughts run toward the cemetery of the Jewish spirit: the theatre, music, art, journalism and literature. We cannot depart from any of these cemeteries, but, at the same time, we should not come too close, for it could drag one into its endless abyss. What are we to do then? Shout? The dead won't hear us, and the world of the living is more dead than the world of the dead.*

The Holocaust happened on our soil, in full view of Polish society, and it is an integral part – whether one wants it or not – of Polish history. For the Poles, the experience of the Holocaust remains a unique event and carries extraordinary responsibilities. Nevertheless, in terms of social awareness, the Shoah seems to belong to Jewish rather than to Polish history. Even today many Poles feel ill at ease, threatened or outright disappointed by the Jewish perceptions of the Holocaust and oftentimes the Jews are seen as rivals in the martyrology competition. Despite the recent historical research and public debates, culminating with the discussion around the Jedwabne crime, Polish society largely ignores the issues related to the Holocaust. Still too many myths and lies find their way to the public sphere and enter public circulation. This state of affairs is related, to a certain extent, to the sad legacy of decades of censorship and neglect under the communist rule. We believe that this should change. This is why we shall link research with educational activities in order to foster the knowledge of issues related to the Holocaust.

Are there any other so universal Polish experiences as the Holocaust, asks Jan Gross in *Upiorna dekada (The Ghastly Decade)* (1998), adding that the Holocaust reveals "something like the heart of darkness" in our collective experience. How-

ever, this truth finds its way to collective consciousness only with great difficulty. There are many reasons.

The Holocaust turned the Jewish world to ashes, but the remains of this world were also disappearing after the war. This kind of "Holocaust after the Holocaust", besides a series of immediate post-war pogroms in Poland and the fatalities, consisted in the communist government imposing step-by-step restrictions on the reviving social and cultural life of Polish Jews during 1944–1950 until the final liquidation of political parties, social organizations, co-operatives and Jewish newspapers. The last straw was a series of emigration waves. If we assume that in mid-1946 around 200,000 Jews (including 130,000 arrivals from the Soviet Union) were living within the pre-1939 borders of Poland, then the 63,000 who left Poland only in the first two months after the Kielce pogrom of July 1946 is an enormous figure. On the whole, during 1945–1947 around 160,000 emigrated from Poland, which was the first and the largest wave of emigration. The second wave, during 1955–1960 comprised over 55,000 Jews. The third emigration wave came after March 1968, with around 13,000 people who emigrated (with one-way only passports) between 1968 and 1971.

The Holocaust experience was frequently subject to manipulation, before it could finally be profoundly and freely experienced and thought out. There were different ways to shun its acceptance, tame it or exploit it for political or ideological purposes. In communist Poland, with its censorship and information monopoly, the Holocaust fell victim to a "nationalized" remembrance and the Party's version of history. On the other hand, the conservative wing of Polish Catholicism, deaf to ecclesiastical reform following the Second Vatican Council, maintained anti-Jewish prejudice among the faithful, or, at best, did nothing to combat it. Yet, certain milieus of Catholic intelligentsia played a paramount role in initiating reflection on the Holocaust and the cultural heritage of Polish Jews, as well as Polish-Jewish coexistence.

After 1989, in democratic Poland, it became possible to hold an open public debate, where all the participants openly articulate their points. The time of systemic transformation brought re-evaluation and reconstruction of the traditional canon; both processes consisted in re-claiming those areas that had previously been controlled by the communist state, and in restoration of memory. In this context, Holocaust remembrance was also revised and became one of the factors that determined the new approach to national identity in democratic Poland.

*

In the grim years after martial law, fascination with Jewish culture and history took on a new dimension and even became fashionable among the intelligentsia. Since the 1980s, the history of Polish Jews and its most tragic period, the German genocide, has become an object of substantial interest among Polish historians. Every year new texts on the Holocaust are published, both translations of foreign publications as well as more and more books and articles by Polish authors. Numerous conferences are held, frequently organized in cooperation with Polish and for-

eign academic institutions, dealing with the Holocaust itself or the war and occupation, with the Holocaust being of paramount significance. It turns out that contacts between Polish and foreign historians (German, American and, primarily, Israeli) come down to an exchange of professional opinion, without prejudice or ideological bias. Even though the common perspective to parenthesize the political context is still, for various reasons, rather emotive (see the discussion on the murder in Jedwabne that spawned a torrential flow of emotion and fears, which paralyzed the cognitive process, or the categorical demands that the government carry out a historical policy), it appears that the doctrine of subordinating scientific research to current policy is becoming a thing of the past.

The abnormal situation of the People's Republic of Poland era, an unfavourable political climate, the existence of censorship, lack of working contacts with Western historians, discontinuity in domestic Holocaust research following the events of 1968 and the subsequent years – all this resulted in stagnation and marginalization of Polish research into the fate of the Jews during World War II. For the same reason, except for a small group of experts, Poland was not familiar with the fundamental discussion on the origins and the execution of the "final solution". During this very period, foreign research, both into the perpetrators and the victims, became more profound and more intense in sociological and historical terms. Polish historians concentrate on the category of *bystanders*, which resists unambiguous description. As our experience of the days of communist Poland and the debate on Jedwabne demonstrate, this is a highly complex and sensitive matter, which is also inadequately recognized, thus leading to reluctant and grudging acceptance.

Nevertheless, in the last several years, we have seen a change in the approach to Holocaust issues and the inextricably related Polish–Jewish issues. Attempts to change the research paradigm is caused not only by overcoming various kinds of restrictions and dependencies, but primarily it has been brought about by the appearance of long-ignored sources, which raise new questions and call for a new type of narration. Equally important is the emergence of a young generation of researchers (students, post-graduates and junior scholars) from various institutions, taught by the middle and older generations of scholars. There is hope for a more profound academic debate on the extermination of the Jews and Polish–Jewish relations, but, first and foremost – to go beyond the traditional and increasingly unproductive polemic between the critical and the apologetic approach.

The Polish Centre for Holocaust Research

The Centre was established on 2 July 2003, as a section of the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Sciences. It is the first and so far the only research institution in Poland dealing exclusively with Holocaust studies. This is the fundamental difference between the Centre and the above institutions.

Let us take a closer look at the Centre's institutional character, a necessary consideration in my view. The Centre is a unit within the structure of the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Sciences, with the same legal

status as the other departments. But it is, in the first place, a "corporation of scholars", who share common research interests, cognitive passion, and – last but not least – are friends. At present it has 10 members, with only two in full-time employment: Professor Barbara Engelking, head of the Centre, and Dariusz Libionka, Ph.D., editor-in-chief of the Centre's annual publication *Holocaust Studies and Materials*. The others are employed elsewhere, but are involved in the Centre's grant projects. Thus Jacek Leociak, Ph.D., works for the Institute of Literary Research of the Polish Academy of Sciences, head of the Holocaust Literature Research Unit; Assistant Professor Małgorzata Melchior works for the Institute of Applied Social Sciences of Warsaw University; Assistant Professor Andrzej Żbikowski is deputy director of the Jewish Historical Institute, Warsaw, where Marta Janczewska, M.A., and Monika Polit, M.A., are employed; Jakub Petelewicz, M.A., is preparing his Ph.D. thesis and teaches at Warsaw University as well as serving as an academic secretary of the Centre; Alina Skibińska, M.A., heads the Polish representation at the United Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, D.C.; Professor Jan Grabowski is dean of the Department of History, Ottawa University, Canada.

The team of the Polish Centre for Holocaust Research are scholars of the middle and the young generations, who are attempting to work out their own approach to the broadly understood Holocaust issues. One of its chief characteristics is its comprehensive character, as the Centre's activity is not limited to academic research in a narrow sense, but also comprises documentation, educational and publishing endeavours. Together these four areas make up an integral whole. Let me briefly outline the Centre's documentation, educational and editorial activities, and then move on to its methodological profile and research projects.

Documentation

The Centre maintains an Internet page with the Warsaw Ghetto database, with over 50,000 entries (constantly expanded and updated), divided into places, people, events, and sources to do with the Warsaw Ghetto. Currently, thanks to a grant provided by the Fund for Support of Jewish Institutions or Projects outside Norway, the database has been given a new IT architecture and is regularly expanded and translated into English. This is a unique endeavour on such a scale (an extensive database, designed as a "work in progress" to allow for constant expansion and correction. The database offers various (often detailed) information on the life of the Jews behind the walls of the largest ghetto in Nazi-occupied Europe. The "people" entries are the most popular among the web page visitors.

Education

From the outset, the Centre has carried out open seminars, where invited guests deliver their papers on the broadly understood Holocaust issues and its various contexts: philosophical, theological, and psychological. The seminars have a dedicated audience, which can be dramatically expanded by publishing the recordings of the seminars (including the discussion) on the Centre's web page. Several of the Centre's members (Jacek Leociak, Barbara Engelking, Jan Grabowski, and An-

drzej Żbikowski) are individually involved in different educational projects on the Holocaust: at the University of Warsaw, the Jewish Historical Institute, and Ottawa University.

Publishing

The Centre is particularly keen on publishing source material, making every effort – in spite of its limited capability – to make up for what has not been published or requires editorial work.

In the "Monographs" series we are planning to publish classical historical works on the Holocaust which have not yet been translated into Polish, as well as the latest works of the Centre's members and collaborators. This series is intended primarily to make available to the reader those books that have gained a permanent status in Holocaust historiography and cannot be found on the Polish market. The Centre plans to involve publishing projects in its educational endeavours by providing a basic knowledge background for Holocaust researchers and students. So far the Centre has published Raul Hilberg's *Perpetrators, Victims, Bystanders*, translated by Jerzy Giebułtowski, Polish Centre for Holocaust Research – Cyklady Publishers, Warsaw 2007, and Gunnar S. Paulsson's *Secret City. The Hidden Jews of Warsaw, 1940-1945*, translated by Elżbieta Olender-Dmowska, Polish Centre for Holocaust Research – Znak Publishers, Cracow 2007. At present, Raul Hilberg's three-volume *opus magnum*, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, is being translated. In early 2008 the Centre published a fundamental bibliographical compilation by Alina Skibińska's team member, *Sources for Research on the Holocaust in Occupied Polish Areas – Bibliographical Guide* (in Polish). For 2009 we are planning to publish Barbara Engelking's and Dariusz Libionka's *Żydzi w Powstaniu Warszawskim 1944* ["Jews in the Warsaw Uprising 1944"]. Other publishing and translation plans include: Saul Friedlander's *The Years of Extermination. Nazi Germany and the Jews, 1939–1945*; Christopher Browning's *The Origins of the Final Solution : The Evolution of Nazi Jewish Policy September 1939–March 1942*; Raul Hilberg's *The Politics of Memory. A Journey of a Holocaust Historian*; Götz Aly's *Endlösung: Völkerverschiebung und der Mord an den europäischen Juden*; and Jacek Młynarczyk's *Zagłada Żydów w dystrykcie radomskim Generalnego Gubernatorstwa*.

We also publish a separate series of brief studies, based on previously unavailable sources, dealing with particularly controversial issues. Three books in this series have been published so far [in Polish]: Barbara Engelking's *"Dear Mr Gistapo". Denunciations to the German Authorities in Warsaw and the Warsaw region, 1940-1941* (in Polish), Polish Centre for Holocaust Research – IFiS PAN Publishers, Warsaw 2003; Jan Grabowski's *"I Know This Jew!" Blackmailing Jews in Warsaw, 1939–1943* (in Polish), Polish Centre for Holocaust Research – IFiS PAN Publishers, Warsaw 2004; and Agnieszka Haska's *"I Am a Jew, I Want to Enter." The Hotel Polski in Warsaw, 1943* (in Polish), Polish Centre for Holocaust Research – IFiS PAN Publishers, Warsaw 2006. Andrzej Żbikowski's book on the Polish "Blue" Police is forthcoming.

The "Holocaust Testimonies Library" series will present Holocaust history sources, primarily personal documents (diaries, memoirs, letters, reminiscences, testimonies), either yet unpublished or virtually unavailable. The purpose of this series is to fill the gap in the existing Polish canon of sources and thus create a broader educational basis for Holocaust education centres in Poland. Thus, together with the Jewish Historical Institute, the depository of the Underground Warsaw Ghetto Archive, we are preparing publication of sources from this priceless collection. In early 2009 the Centre will publish, translated from Yiddish by Monika Polit, Perec Opoczyński's *Reportage from the Warsaw Ghetto* and *Memoirs of Szmul Rozensztajn*. We are now working on a selection of other texts, including Janina Dawidowicz's *A Square of Sky. Memoirs of a Wartime Childhood*; a selection of texts published by Teresa Burstin-Berenstein; the diary of Hersz Wasser; a selection of texts by Rachela Auerbach; and others.

Since 2005 we have published *Zagłada Żydów. Studia i materiały* ("Holocaust. Studies and Materials"). As of today, four volumes have been released. Not only is it the first Polish scholarly publication dealing exclusively with Holocaust issues, but also one of the few world-wide, apart from the oldest, *Yad Vashem Studies* (Jerusalem), published since 1957, and *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* (New York), published since 1986. We collaborate with both periodicals. The Centre members publish in *Yad Vashem Studies* (Dariusz Libionka, Alina Skibińska and Jakub Petelewicz), and we also reprint texts previously published in these journals. In 2008 we are publishing this, the first edition of the journal in English.

Interdisciplinary character

The Centre brings together researchers from different humanist disciplines: historians, literary scholars, sociologists and psychologists. Our aim is to carry out interdisciplinary research, combine different methodologies, overcome existing schemata in Holocaust narration, uncover various cognitive perspectives and points of view, and to demonstrate the variety and ambiguity of the historical fabric. The Centre members make use of historical and documentary or sociological and psychological research, and we are also inspired by cultural anthropology and discourse analysis. Seen from this perspective, historical sources will be viewed as documents by some, while others will treat them as records of experience that call for interpretation with tools of poetics or text rhetoric.

The concept of interdisciplinary studies has long been present in humanist thought and does not sound particularly novel in contemporary academic milieu. Our team does not aim to collect various methodological tools and thus manifest our skill in their application or to formulate original methodological conceptions, which question the existing research tradition. As we frequently see, the excess of "methodological form" over "cognitive content" (which is particularly acute in Holocaust studies) leads us to assume a stance of utmost humility toward the subject. What we find absolutely fundamental is the question of the cognitive value of the analytical tools employed. In other words, the reason we introduce interdisciplinary reflection into the Holocaust is to make our investigations as comprehensive as possible,

so as to penetrate the various aspects and dimensions of the Holocaust experience (be it psychological and moral, philosophical and theological, or sociological and political); to penetrate different types of individual and collective memory; finally, to explore various strategies of commemoration and forms of Holocaust presence in public life.

Sources

In Polish archives we can still find plenty of unknown documents, unused testimonies and accounts. Particularly promising archives have been made available by the Institute of National Remembrance. Polish archives are virtually unknown world-wide, whereas Poland lacks the orientation and skills to make use of foreign archives. Therefore the Centre has already begun and plans to develop cooperation with foreign Holocaust research centres. For example, during 2003–2005 the Centre and the Université Paris X and Université Paris I launched the research programme "National Remembrance and the Writing of History in Poland and France", documented in a joint publication in 2006. Previously, such cooperation was difficult as there were no Polish Holocaust research centres.

In its publications our Centre uses sources that have been unknown for many years. To give three examples: Jan Grabowski's book on blackmailers (*szmalcownicy*) in occupied Warsaw is based on rather unexpected sources for this research area. Nevertheless, files of German "special courts" in occupied Warsaw (Sondergericht Warschau) proved to be surprisingly useful in an analysis of cases of blackmail (*szmalcownictwo*) as they contain ample documentation of criminal cases against blackmailers of Jews. Such cases were tried by German courts on four grounds: if the blackmailers had illegally claimed to be Gestapo functionaries; blackmail of Poles wrongly accused of Jewish origin; suspicion of corruption of German officials; and sometimes (i.e. in the early days of the occupation) when the Jews themselves reported cases of blackmail. Barbara Engelking, in her book on denunciations, makes use of the collection "Der Kommandeur der Sicherheitspolizei und des SD für den Distrikt Warschau" in the archives of the Institute of National Remembrance, virtually unused by historians of the German occupation. Alina Skibińska and other team members make extensive use of the so-called "August Decree", i.e. the first act of criminal law passed by the communist Polish Committee of National Liberation of Lublin on 31 August 1944, which specified punishment for war crimes, the crime of collaboration, crimes against humanity and crimes against peace. The August Decree post-war trial files are kept in the archives of the Institute of National Remembrance. This collection is known to historians, but virtually unused for research of Polish-Jewish relations during the war (an entire spectrum of negative acts committed against Jews by Poles, including blackmail, robberies and killing).

The Centre' members also try to reinterpret sources already functioning in the academic milieus. These are primarily personal documents, autobiographical notes (diaries, memoirs, testimonies), from the Underground Warsaw Ghetto Archives (Ringelblum Archive) and other source collections of the Jewish Historical Institute, Yad Vashem, and in private collections. Some have already been published,

while most remain to be published. When we analyze the sources, not only do we treat them as sources of factual information, but we also treat them as records of Holocaust experience, which can be revealed and interpreted (Jacek Leociak and Andrzej Żbikowski).

New research areas

The Centre aims to carry out open and free research of the particularly "hot" areas of Polish-Jewish relations, neglected for non-substantial reasons (ideological pressure or blockade during the communist era and historical policy after 1989). These are no doubt the issues of the broadly understood collaboration, both Polish and Jewish (see *Zagłada Żydów* [Holocaust Studies and Materials] No. 2 (2006), published by the Centre, dealing with these issues), the problem of blackmailers (*szmalcownicy*) and denunciators (Jan Grabowski's and Barbara Engelking's books), and the Polish "Blue" Police in the context of the Holocaust (Andrzej Żbikowski's book, forthcoming). Among thematic areas either completely unexplored or explored inadequately, there is the question of Polish-Jewish relations in the provinces, outside the big cities, in the small ghettos (the volume of studies *The Provinces, Night. The Life and Extermination of the Jews in the Warsaw District*), and in rural areas (current grant project).

The Centre's researchers pay particular attention to everyday life during the Holocaust, to various survival strategies, local differences, the details and the concrete, which often elude comprehensive and synthetic historical study. We greatly appreciate the sphere of emotion and spiritual values. The researchers attempt to find, in the available sources, traces of suffering, loneliness, hopelessness, fear, desire for revenge, bouts of hatred, moral injury and spiritual degradation, religious experience, acts of heroism, brotherhood, and love.

Research projects

The Centre is involved in a few research projects. One, prepared within the framework of a three-year grant, was recently completed by publication of a collective volume: *The Provinces, Night. The Life and Extermination of the Jews in the Warsaw District*, Barbara Engelking, Jacek Leociak, Dariusz Libionka, eds., Warsaw 2007. The second project, also a three-year grant project, began in early 2007.

The provinces

Polish historical literature on the German occupation features a rather one-dimensional picture of the provinces. For a number of years it chiefly focused on the martyrdom of the Polish population, social resistance and – primarily – on the functioning of armed underground formations. In the days of the People's Republic of Poland, researchers concentrated on armed communist formations, and after 1989, on the Home Army. Monographs and studies as well as publications on the independence-oriented regional and communist underground do mention the presence of Jews (both those published before 1989 and after), but do so rather briefly, and,

furthermore, selectively. The authors usually mentioned the basic facts and a handful of details concerning aid to the Jews. On the other hand, Jewish historiography, quite naturally, focused on the fate of the victims: the extermination and resistance, and – significantly – presented Polish-Jewish relations more grimly. In a certain approximation, we have been dealing with two parallel narrations: the history of the Poles, resisting the occupier's terror and offering help to the Jews, and on the other hand, the history of the Jews, suffering and slaughtered on a mass scale in a hostile or indifferent environment.

The lack of profound analysis on the provinces resulted in our incomplete knowledge of the extermination of the Jews in Poland, particularly in the context of Polish-Jewish relations. In the early days of the occupation they were of a different character than those in the cities, which had separate "Jewish districts". Thus in the provinces the everyday contacts were closer and the distance between the two communities, despite the occupation laws and intensifying repression, was much smaller. From the contemporary point of view, it seems that – apart from a description of the process of extermination of the Jews – the most important issue for Polish historians is the sphere of Polish-Jewish contacts during the war and the occupation. We need to strive to overcome the division into the "Polish" and the "Jewish" truth as regards the provinces, which are the most visible, and to reconstruct the fact on a broader source basis than has been done so far.

Rural areas

The issue of the attitude of villagers (with all of its variety) to the extermination of local Jewish communities and individual Jews, who (usually for some time) escaped death at the hands of the Germans and sought shelter in the countryside, is completely original. It has not been described at all. There are no – be it Polish or foreign – studies on this subject. Naturally, scattered fragments of information on the subject can be found in different sources, but we do not have a systematic presentation of this issue.

Our project "Rural Population of the General Government vis-à-vis the Holocaust and Hiding Jews, 1942–1945" attempts to fill this gap. We are interested in the post-extermination period, when individual Jewish survivors were seeking refuge in the countryside. We intend to look at it from the Polish and the Jewish point of view. We plan to present the impact of German terror on the situation in rural areas, on the possibilities and readiness to offer help or the causes of failure to do so as well as hostile attitudes towards the Jews. Due to temporal limits and the costs involved, we intend to limit the scope of our research to a few district of the General Government, primarily: Warsaw, Lublin and Radom districts, and then compare them – if possible – with the other districts.

Knowledge of Polish-Jewish relations in rural areas will significantly enhance our understanding of the occupation experience of Poles and of the Holocaust. This research project will allow us to describe mechanisms of solidarity, aid and terror, fear, collaboration and betrayal in local rural communities; such knowledge will also allow for an analysis of the characteristic World War II phenomena of heroism,

indifference and meanness. This project concerns matters yet unexplored and undescribed. Its significance for the development of historical and social sciences, for the knowledge and understanding of totalitarian mechanisms, social phenomena as well as the impact of emotion on human motivations and behaviours, seems hard to overestimate.

Ultimately, the results of these endeavours will be published in a volume of studies: "Polish Rural Areas during the Occupation – a Sociological Approach", "Jews Seeking Help in the Country"; "The Power of the Village over Rural Areas: Local Administration, the 'Blue' Police, German Gendarmerie, Night Guards"; "The Authorities and Milieus of the Polish Underground in Rural Areas, the Partisans"; "Help for the Jews in Rural Areas"; "Polish Peasants in Jewish Eyes"; "Post-War Account Settling in Rural Areas"; "Witnesses Before the Court".

The risk involved in understanding the Holocaust: from the past to the present

The Holocaust comprises far more than a collection of facts concerning the extermination of the Jews during World War II. Historians have already collected an enormous amount of data, and have recognized the importance of sources for the understanding of the Holocaust experience. Questions about the Holocaust are not only historical questions. We ask ourselves these questions and try to understand what the Holocaust experience tells us about ourselves and what kind of challenges it presents for contemporary times. In the final analysis, these efforts to understand entail taking responsibility for the shape of civilization in the 21st century.

In order to do that we need to penetrate beyond the mere fact of the Holocaust, beyond its primary historical context, and confront it not only with the current state of knowledge, but also of consciousness, hopes and threats. Researchers cannot liberate themselves from their own person, from their contemporary roots, and then totally identify with the area of study. Therefore, we have a chance to understand by confirming the horizons of the past and the present, while sense is to be found in their constant inter-penetration. The present is continually shaped by the past, while the past is a source of new meanings for the present. Thus, in such a dynamic manner, which is also directed at the present, do we plan our research. We intend to obtain a description and interpretation of the Holocaust which will also shed some light on our present, because each generation has to re-tell own history.