A TOTEM AND A TABOO

Germans and Jews Re-enacting Aspects of the Holocaust

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Abstract

This article discusses two academic events devoted to Holocaust studies in which participants became unconsciously involved in re-enacting the behaviour respectively of Holocaust perpetrators, and of victims turning aggressively on each other in a manner reminiscent of ghetto life. In one conference an out-group was created and silenced, while in another an individual became the object of projected guilt and was victimized. These projections were mediated by implied competition between film, sculpture and literature as the medium best suited to Holocaust memorialization. A description of each event is followed by analyses of the dynamics involved, with the support of psychoanalytic literature. Factors which led to the author’s twenty-year delay in publishing the article, which was drafted in 1995, are also examined psychologically.

Prologue

When this article was written in 1995, shortly after the events it describes, I felt it should remain unpublished. It discusses sensitive emotional issues that arose in academic contexts, and I argued that some of the people involved might have felt it inappropriate to disclose non-academic aspects of their work. But while much has changed in the intervening years, the tendency for the unconscious to play a role when least expected has not. It therefore seems reasonable belatedly to make public this study of what can happen when unexamined emotions dominate group dynamics, and of how psychological methodologies can help disentangle such misunderstood tensions. It also illustrates how focusing on apparently incidental and easily ignored aspects of otherwise academically successful conferences can contribute to an understanding of their subjects.

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The fiftieth anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz gave rise to a number of commemorative gatherings in 1995. Some of these attracted considerable media attention, seeming to offer tools for interpreting events that, even many humanitarian atrocities later, seem to defy comprehension. Various encounters around that time gave specialists the opportunity to apply scientific methods of inquiry to the Holocaust and its causes, or to seek some understanding of its residual impact on the groups affected by it. For historians a major problem is how to present events that have no evident anterior models or correlatives; for educators it is how to render the events credible without betraying their historicity.

Two such conferences demonstrated the difficulties attendant on any attempt to discuss in detail a subject so prone to misunderstanding and emotional avoidance as the Holocaust, and this article examines the projections that seem almost inevitably to contaminate such work, making it difficult for participants and others to see beyond stereotypes, to perceive feelings with accuracy and to prevent themselves from behaving in apparently unpredictably inappropriate ways. The first to be discussed involved primarily non-Jewish German historians; the second included mainly Jewish British psychotherapists and academics, nearly all of them children of Holocaust survivors.

**Kraków**

The week-long conference held on 10–14 July 1995 in Kraków under the title ‘Representations of Auschwitz’ was designed to investigate the difficulties of thinking about the Holocaust, and the programme included a visit to Auschwitz, the first such for most of the participants. Its main emphasis was historiographic, although other approaches were employed, including the museological, pictorial and cinematographic. Lecturers and discussants occasionally employed Freudian terminology, but did so eclectically and without wider reference to post-Freudian psychoanalysis, or even to Freudian theory as a whole.

The conference was planned by a British Jewish academic and the proceedings were in English, and the present writer, who is also British and Jewish, belonged to a small non-German contingent of about ten Polish and British historians who were present as participants. The gathering was nominally designed to examine the problem of representing Auschwitz, and included, besides a wide range of papers, two actual representations that form the focus of the analysis here: the first was an exhibition of graphic, photographic and sculptural work, and the second a film.

The keynote lecture cited Freud in a way that has wider implications for Holocaust studies. It concluded with quotations from Freud’s ‘Mourning
and Melancholia’ introduced to support the view that the memory of the Holocaust should not be resolved by mourning, but should remain ‘an illness, a mental disorder that we may never cease to suffer from’, in order to guard against future genocide. It was argued that certain literary works and public monuments have the power to reflect the uncompleted nature of the experience and are therefore able to represent the inner wound with which Europeans must learn to live. However, this view fails to take account of Freud’s remarks three years later in ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’ on the danger of failing to work through experiences: ‘the patient is obliged to repeat the repressed material as a contemporary experience instead of . . . remembering it as something belonging to the past’. By ‘working through’ Freud clearly did not mean getting rid of or forgetting the experience, but, on the contrary, making it more fully conscious, so that it does not remain a repressed and unthought experience prone to re-enactment later in life. It is precisely because the Holocaust was felt by many survivors and perpetrators to be inexpressible that it is transmitted to their children in an emotionally undigested and indigestible form. This failure to understand leads to the urge to repeat and re-enact that seems to have been active in the conference setting.

The exhibition was a prestigious element of the conference, and continued for some time after it in a separate building. It was linked to the publication of a volume of essays and pictures entitled *Representations of Auschwitz*, edited by Yasmin Doosry. The process of gathering and hanging the exhibits was described during the first day of the conference: it blended documentation and image, and juxtaposed recent photography with drawings by camp inmates. In many cases the exhibits were arranged in groups or series, suggesting a coherence that was difficult to identify. In fact they had been hung according to visual associations that were not explained in the captions. Items in which the sun or a heap of wood appeared might find themselves juxtaposed even though they were otherwise dissimilar. In order to understand this exhibition, therefore, one had to employ a kind of ‘reading’ associated with puzzle solving. This detached the viewer from the emotional value of many of the images and subverted their affective power, diverting from the reality of what was depicted and dulling their impact. Although the exhibition remained rather confusing and random until the principles on which it had been arranged were explained, none of these problems could be raised in the context of the opening ceremony. Individuals mentioned them to each other, but there was no public airing of views.

The film, unlike the exhibition, was presented in the conference hall itself, making it unlikely that objections would be confined to informal exchanges or be deferentially ignored. It was also the only example of the moving image employed in the conference, although there had been an opportunity to see *Schindler’s List*. The film was the collective work of a group of German
undergraduates (of approximately the third postwar generation) and their
director of studies (of roughly the second generation). It was the latter who
introduced the screening on the second day of the conference by remarking
on the problematical nature of historical representations and of memory in
general. He went on to emphasize that the film was primarily an emotional
and not an academically historical representation.

The relative age of those involved is of central importance in analysing
attitudes to Holocaust material. The German participants in the conference
who were chronologically closest to the Nazi period had been approximately
ten years old when it ended, so had experienced some of its traumas at
first hand and at a young age. These included the arrest, dispossession and
deportation of Jews and dissidents; the promotion of belief in German
omnipotence (crushed in 1945); bombing and the loss of homes; rationing
and hunger; the disappearance of fathers in the fighting; and the deaths of
erlder brothers towards the end of the war when cadets were sent to their
deaths. Young children could have felt that they were regarded as cannon
fodder and thus that they were loved chiefly for their preparedness to die.
Most such experiences remained inaccessible – perhaps because they were
inexpressible – to Germans born during the 1950s. Silence and denial tended
to blanket the Nazi period into the 1970s, when it came increasingly to be
included in educational programmes. The material remains difficult to discuss
even now, not only with Jews and non-Germans, but among Germans of
different generations.

The film was, by contrast, the work of people whose grandparents may have
lived through the Nazi period. It was composed of edited clips from postwar
features, each lasting between three and ten minutes, and linked by theme
and characterization. They delineated a familiar tragedy of deportation, fear,
sadism, self-deception and murder, and movingly expressed these German
students’ search for some form of reconciliation with their grandparents’
generation’s experiences under Hitler. The viewer was disoriented by the
frequent shifts between actors playing similar or complementary roles, by
their different styles of acting and by switches to and from black-and-white
and colour photography.

The film opened and closed with brief scenes, elegiac and stereotypical,
from Jewish ceremonial life emphasizing the unfamiliarity, pathos and
innocence of the victims. The rest of the film was dislocated and disturbing,
tracing the fate of a variety of victims – mainly Jewish, but in one case a
German anti-Nazi – through clips interspersed with glimpses into the mostly
undisrupted daily lives of perpetrators and bystanders. The soundtrack was
also disorienting: although several of the films had been made in English,
French, Czech or Polish, existing German versions had been used, but the
sound quality was often so poor that an accompanying leaflet, printed on
blood-red paper, had been provided with English translations of key phrases. Since most German-speakers had to refer to this crib, they found themselves sharing with non-Germans the confusing effect of the film, and relating to the material in a foreign language.

The screening had a powerful impact not only on the few Jewish viewers present, but on one Polish Holocaust specialist who remarked to the writer of this article that she had found the unfamiliar and vertiginous style overwhelming.

The film’s effectiveness derived in part from its success in fragmenting reality and frustrating one’s expectations: scenes seemed suggestive rather than coherent, for the editors had truncated and cut between narrative sequences, tossing the viewer between hope and despair. In one clip Jews were seen reassuring each other that the Germans recognized their worth, while in another they already knew what awaited them: the film’s enigmatic title – ‘The Showers . . . We Know’ – referred to the half-knowledge concerning the Holocaust among both Jews and Germans. Experienced prisoners exchanged glances while a Nazi was shown welcoming Jews to Auschwitz and recommending them to be tidy, quiet and disciplined, while an officer at Sobibór asserted that ‘we are your benefactors’. Germans too were victims of equivocation: one family scene showed the pain of those unable to support or to oppose the Holocaust they at best only partly understood, in the presence of a relative who was a perpetrator. ‘Why do people not believe that he does what he says?’ a character remarks of Hitler. The problem of understanding the emotional processes involved in carrying out the Holocaust remains a central one today. The film suggested the incoherence and lack of clarity of events for those living at the time of the Holocaust. This confusion was cultivated by the perpetrators who knew that its success depended on keeping as many victims and bystanders as possible in ignorance of its scale.

The students clearly succeeded in communicating a central aspect of the historical events. Their work differed in form from Spielberg’s and featured not the subversion of the Holocaust by a brave German, but its unrelieved success. In this way it provided a confirmation of German implication in Nazi crimes, based on the scrutiny of a variety of attitudes, ranging from full involvement to varying degrees of awareness, self-delusion, guilelessness, acquiescence and passivity. In this respect the film frustrated a growing German interest in claiming resisters to Nazism, and particularly its victims, as cultural precursors. This choice to identify with the victims is a posture to which those whose childhood coincided with the war are arguably entitled; but the fact that in many cases their parents were Nazis makes this route fraught with ambivalence. When the students showed little attachment to this interpretation of events, and delivered a message that focused on connivance, they met with strong resistance. It may be relevant that the location of the
conference in Poland, from where Germans had been repulsed in 1945, made the older generations of Germans feel less guilty at meeting Poles than had they met them in Germany. Guilt at the presence of Jews, however, was mitigated only by the academic nature of the conference.

There seemed to be less easy mingling between national groups during the coffee break that followed the film; and it was with surprise that those who had found it moving heard a number of Germans at the formal discussion criticize it with unmistakable passion. The film was dismissed for its lack of analytic content, as a mere ‘collage’, and as ‘a derivative pastiche of feature films that are themselves worthless’. One German of the immediate postwar generation condemned it as a representation of the Holocaust that ‘unforgivably caused viewers to lose their critical distance’.

The present writer intervened late in this discussion to suggest that such a ‘collage’ might be regarded as a subversion of the feature-film convention rather than as a homage, and to recall that the students’ director had specifically said that the film was a non-analytic representation, so deserved to be analysed in its own right rather than in terms of the films from which it was derived. These remarks were greeted with sounds of approval by the students, although it was not conventional to make comments while someone else was talking during discussion sessions. These arguments did not lead others to rethink their positions: for its critics the film remained irredeemably bad, and the matter was allowed to drop from later discussions in the conference. Its silencing in this determined and striking manner seemed to me to highlight its potential importance for understanding what had happened in the conference.

The angry accusation that this was a highly emotional piece of work was of course itself an emotional one, but it remained at first unclear why precisely the emotional quality of the film should be found so objectionable. Details of the discussion, however, suggested the direction in which an explanation might be sought. One participant (of the second postwar generation) turned on the students’ director (who, strikingly, did not take part in this discussion) with the charge that, by including in the film a sequence showing an atrocity followed by a smiling SS officer, he had revealed his unconscious sympathy with the perpetrators.

This remark had wider implications than the charge itself (which was clearly absurd). First, the accusation seemed to express the speaker’s own difficulty in establishing an ideological distance from the Nazi perpetrators. Such a distance is so much a part of cinematographic convention that if makers of Holocaust films could not rely on their viewers’ awareness and acceptance of this principle, a significant number of Holocaust films might be misinterpreted as incitements to mass murder. Second, it revealed the fear – generated perhaps by the inclusion of scenes from everyday German life – that non-German viewers might identify every German, and not only those
not in Nazi uniforms, but even those born after the war, as perpetrators or bystanders.

It is probable that no such problem would have arisen had more prominence been given to anti-Nazi Germans; but it was the goal of the filmmakers to examine not the clear-mindedness of Germans during the Holocaust, but their emotional confusion. Moreover it was not the omission of anti-Nazis that became the focus of critical remarks, even if it lay behind them, but some emotional aspect of the film’s message. This message seems to have been that Nazi emotions were recognizably human even if intolerable, and that they affected a majority of Germans at the time. German viewers of the film may therefore have understood it to say the following: the Holocaust had been made possible by the actions or compliance of people such as themselves, individuals with whom one might identify; and the cruelties committed, although barely comprehensible, had become part of the everyday lives of the people depicted. This reminder that the Holocaust did not take place on another planet or in another age was, as will be seen, devastating to some German viewers.

In order to defend themselves against the way the film had touched on a problematical, menacing and – as is suggested in the title of this article – taboo subject for many postwar Germans, the older German viewers repudiated the filmmakers and their film without discussion or analysis. The audience had, to quote one of the film’s most vocal critics, lost its critical distance.

The filmmakers themselves, however, seemed similarly affected by the critical consensus, offering no defence, and allowing the personal attack on their own director of studies to pass unchallenged. Far from rallying to their own defence or to his, they seemed to accept the negative judgement of their work, and were resigned to bearing the blame. After the discussion they could be overheard wondering how they had been so self-deluded as to work for a year on a project they could now see had been misconceived. They not only acquiesced to the criticism, but seemed willing to share in the task of suppressing their message. In this way the guilt and shame of the critics were projected onto the students, who willingly collaborated and felt guilt and shame for having brought their film to the conference.

In the aftermath of this discussion the students informally agreed to take part in a tutorial to discuss what they regarded as their failure. Three of the younger German academics who had not been involved in the denunciation of the film, as well as the present writer, met the students the following evening. The students had asked their director of studies not to attend because some believed him to have been responsible for their embarrassment and they wished to discuss his role. In this way they revealed a desire to pass on at least some of the blame, as it had been passed on to them; but in doing so they chose to forget that he had himself suffered a personal attack and was
therefore as much a victim as they. In the event his exclusion was merely a
gesture, for his involvement in the film barely arose in the discussion. (It is
unclear what he represented that was too indigestible to allow his attendance
and which could not even be discussed, but one is reminded of the desire of
some perpetrators to blame their crimes on those who led them. His exclusion
perhaps enabled the students to project onto him some of the opprobrium
they had attracted, as though they agreed that some sanction should indeed
be imposed for the impression created by the film. Maybe they were also
afraid of seeming to provoke a conflict between representatives of preceding
generations.)

There seemed no doubt in anybody’s mind that the meeting should be
chaired in a formal fashion: academics and students sat at the same level,
but participants were instructed to speak in turn, and there were no informal
exchanges. The chair and others took detailed notes during the meeting,
lending the event some of the qualities of a disciplinary hearing.

During the meeting the students agreed that they had intended from the
start to produce an emotive film, but that they now regarded themselves as
having been deluded and rightly reprimanded. They did not attempt to argue
that a conference on representations should make it possible to discuss such
representations, whatever their demerits, in a detached manner.

They mentioned that the now-regretted idea of making a collage of
clips had been borrowed from a similar compilation they had been shown
about the First World War. Their adoption of this approach suggests, first,
that for some third-postwar-generation Germans the 1914–18 and 1939–45
wars are similarly remote, and secondly that the students were struggling
against this apparent interchangeability of historical events: they wished to
retrieve the specific nature of the Nazi period of which they had no immediate
knowledge, but which had been part of the experience of people they knew.
Their ignorance had been deepened by the silence of perpetrators and
bystanders over several decades, lending this project some of the character
of an unmasking, specifically a product of their own age group. The students
may have been perceived as reacting to that silence with a mimetic version
of their own: they used no Nazi footage (although it is possible that they
rejected whatever was available on the grounds that it was propaganda) and
made no use of living witnesses. In rejecting Nazism, however, they may have
been seen as preferring foreign perceptions to German ones, even though they
‘Germanized’ these by dubbing.

During this meeting a number of Germans of each postwar generation
thought it relevant to mention the relationship of family members to the Third
Reich, as perpetrators or victims. For such people the film was not about
complete and past events. But little attempt was made to explore the role of
generational differences in the ensuing controversy, or to engage with the
problems it brought into focus. Even after the opposition had declared itself, the students seemed unaware that their ‘crime’ had been to miscalculate the degree and variety of direct and continuing emotional engagement of their elders in the Third Reich. They preferred to agree that their work was ‘bad’. Conceivably their unconscious desire to make emotional contact with their ‘silent’ elders had in part been satisfied: the suppression of feelings described in the film echoed the emotional silence they sought to overcome in their elders, as though acknowledging that their parents had been the victims of their own in turn, making it impossible to accuse them of collaboration.

One student seems to have been aware of the dangerous ground on which they were treading, for she reported her ‘uncomfortable feeling’ about the project from the start. Several members of their working group had dropped out, she said, attributing this to the long viewing sessions of often painful films. Other students preferred to take merely emotional distance from the subject matter: one said his involvement had been ‘solely technical’, although he admitted that the material had been often difficult to watch.

Even one of the academic participants in the tutorial chose to focus on the technical rather than the emotional features of the film, particularly the lack of precise criteria for selecting and juxtaposing clips. But it was equally possible to interpret this in the students’ favour: they had worked imaginatively (arguably more so than the arrangers of the exhibition) by including what one of them described as ‘what seemed inherently right’. Yet even though they had worked impressionistically as ‘artists’, they remained clear that the subject of the film had been ‘what was known, what was not known, and what Germans did not wish to know about what was happening to the Jews’. The film accordingly commented powerfully in several key scenes on the perpetrators’ deception of Jews and Germans, and also on their own self-deception. The tendency of critics to focus on technique could thus be seen as a headlong flight from the film’s implications: in other words, as another self-deception.

The knowledge of ‘what was happening’ was unbearable at the time, and still remains indigestible, but failure to face this material does more than frustrate understanding: it can attack and subvert thought itself. Wilfred Bion comments how such data can ‘destroy the possibility of the patient’s conscious contact either with himself or another as live objects’. The conference lacked the analytic ability to use this understanding and to apply it to the re-enactment that took place.

The tutorial clearly failed to penetrate the deception. It restored the students’ status as a group, but not their confidence in their work, and they still collaborated with those who wished to project onto them the blame for causing the participants in the conference to ‘lose their critical distance’. Far from recognizing the absurdity of this charge, the unanalysed assertion
caused the students to lose their own. They now agreed to conspire in avoiding the emotional immediacy of the Holocaust – which it had been the aim of their film to convey – and to suppress any feeling that their treatment had been improper or unjust. They seemed unaware that they were being caused to act out the role of victims, and were punished for being enemies of the consensus.

Since the projected guilt was not identified at the tutorial, it went on to seek other outlets. The next day a lecturer described the design of a proposed monument to Jewish victims of Nazism in Berlin, on which it was intended to include the names of all six million Jewish victims of Nazism (a naive aim as most of the names are unknown). One German discussant questioned its usefulness: ‘What would it mean in terms of our knowledge of an individual if a name like . . . [and here the speaker mentioned the distinctive first name of one of the Jews at the conference, but hesitated rather than giving the family name] appeared on the monument? It would tell us nothing about the person!’ The naming of a Jew who was present by a German transformed the Jew into a victim of Nazism, and therefore brought the relationship between perpetrators and victims directly into the room.

It was tacitly acknowledged in this way that the conference was capable of becoming the locus of affects related to successors of perpetrators and victims of the Holocaust. But although Germans perceived no threat in confusing modern Jews with victims, there was an emotional danger in recognizing their own closeness to the perpetrators. The knowability of Jews was of no concern to the makers of the film, as could be seen from its folkloric prologue and epilogue, and the symbolic nature of Jewish suffering. But it had powerfully challenged the ‘otherness’ of Nazis, and had insistently addressed their familiarity. It was precisely this that made the film intolerably painful to some Germans.

Over the following days, opportunities arose to discuss with individuals the possibility that the students had in fact inspired a re-enactment of relations between Jews and anti-Nazis on the one hand, and Nazis on the other. According to this reading of events, the students, who had not been conditioned like those older than themselves to avoid the more equivocal implications of the Holocaust, had found themselves designated a subculture in the setting of the conference, to the extent that their work and supervisor were excluded from consideration and condemned in a way that was not seen at any other point in the event. It seems likely that the students’ access to painful emotions had aligned them, at least in the view of older Germans, with the Nazis’ victims – Jews and anti-Nazis. As the youngest participants in the conference, it was easy to cast them in the role of victims, prompting others at the conference to exclude them likewise, ensuring that they came to represent shadowy, split-off German/Jews. In this way participants re-enacted
an intolerable aspect of twentieth-century German history: the disappearance of German Jewry/anti-Nazi opposition.

Every means to undermine their work was deployed. Precisely because they were born after the war and had been brought up to regard the period as one that was concluded – like the First World War – the filmmakers felt free to investigate its emotional implications. The students’ ‘crime’ had been to return the question of humanity and emotional responsibility to the immediate agenda, in the face of those who wished to shift the focus away from Nazi (and therefore, at one remove, their own) responsibility, and to emphasize their status as victims. Like many other marginalized minorities the students chose to accept the charge and to promise to conform. They were anyway inclined to respect the views of those in positions of authority, and perhaps feared that assertiveness was not worth the risk in the real world of the university, on which their academic futures depended. It was not clear to them that the unease they had aroused derived from the inability of others to separate emotionally from the perpetrators. Neither did they identify how, due to this inability, aspects of totalitarian behaviour were being re-enacted.

Some confirmation of this analysis came on the last evening. A German born after the war was outlining an idea concerning victim–perpetrator relations and made a remark that suggested that in her view postwar Germans and Jews remain in a sense perpetrators and victims. When the present writer pointed out that younger members of neither group had been alive during the war (‘you were not there; neither was I’) the German broke off the spirited academic exchange, sighed and said in German – although the discussion had so far been in English – ‘So ’n Mist’ (What a mess!).

London

The second case to be discussed took place in the context of a one-day conference held on Sunday 18 June 1995, at City of London School, for the children and grandchildren of Holocaust survivors, the second such conference in Britain. It was run largely by Jewish psychotherapists, some of whom had close survivor links, and was designed to examine the long-term impact of the Holocaust on families. The setting inspired emotional openness, trust and sympathy: lectures in the morning and afternoon described in particular the inability of many survivors to describe wartime experiences to their children, and the effect of this secrecy on the children’s own parenting skills. Workshops were held after each lecture.

The sentiment of solidarity did not exclude an awareness of the specific needs of different groups: it was accepted that the children of concentration-camp
prisoners or of members of *Kindertransporte* might wish to establish separate working parties in which to explore their experiences more fully.

The solidarity during the conference contrasted, however, with feelings at the feedback meeting of organizers and presenters some days later. Workshop leaders were now informed how the day before the conference a bookseller who had agreed to set up a stall had begun to lay out books, most of which had been recommended by workshop leaders. Then, on the day of the conference itself, a sculptor arrived with several large pieces that he had transported at his own expense, claiming to have been promised the very location now occupied by the bookseller. The bookseller, claiming also to have obtained permission from an organizer and having the advantage of prior possession, declined to vacate it. As no organizer was present to mediate, the sculptor left angrily with his sculptures, feeling betrayed and shunned, as he later wrote to the organizers.

By the time of the feedback meeting the misunderstanding had acquired wider implications: instead of being treated merely as a regrettable administrative error, positions had been taken up, although without, it seemed, their being fully understood. First, it was assumed for unexplained reasons that the role of the sculptor had primacy over that of the bookseller. Secondly, it was insisted that the bookseller should have known this. Thirdly, it was agreed by most of those present that the bookseller had contravened what was referred to in the organizers’ letter to him as ‘the spirit of the conference’. The present writer suggested that there was in fact little difficulty in understanding the bookseller’s reluctance to leave the patch: he believed it was his and had already spent time setting up his stall. But no attempt was made to examine the issues involved, and it was even suggested that the bookseller should be urged to compensate the sculptor for the cost of transporting his works.

The uncritically accepted consensus among the organizers appeared to be based not on the personality of the bookseller, who was praised for his initiative and concern and happened himself to be a second-generation survivor, but on the mode of his involvement in the conference. He was there, it seems to have been felt, not as a participant, organizer or contributor, but for profit. The view that he alone of those involved in the conference was motivated solely by financial gain might account for the suggestion that he compensate the sculptor financially. It was because the sculptor was felt not to be motivated in this way that the bookseller could be assumed to have had fewer rights.

It is true that the sculptor was promoting his own work while the bookseller was purveying that of others, but it nonetheless seemed clear to the present writer that their difference in status was not so clear-cut. The bookseller had invested a substantial sum in his stock and had transported and set it up without being certain of making a profit, so could perhaps be regarded as having made a larger investment than many others. Furthermore, even if it could be proved that he regarded the conference as an exercise in self-promotion or as a means
of gauging the market in Second Generation studies, he could still be regarded as a valued contributor to the conference: he had been invited to provide a service and had gone out of his way to obtain bibliographical material for workshop leaders. No evidence was available for the sculptor’s indifference to anything he might gain from his own presence.

This attack on the bookseller appeared to be more than a ploy for covering up an embarrassing administrative blunder. Precisely what was at stake was hinted at by the words ‘the spirit of the conference’, although it was unclear what this ‘spirit’ might be, who was competent to define it and in what way it had been contravened.

The Problem of Survival

The only characteristic that singled out the bookseller, although this view was not made explicit, seems to have been the assumption that he did not share in the collectivity of suffering offered by the conference. On the contrary, he was there apparently only in order to sell books. However, even if he had been motivated only by gain, he would not have been alone: many of those participating in the conference stood to benefit financially in some way from their involvement, even though they were volunteering their time for the event. Psychotherapists and other specialists could win public recognition and gain valuable experience by being there. The fact that this aspect of the bookseller’s involvement was not mentioned is a strong reason for asking whether the organizers’ conflict was not only with the bookseller and his motives but with their own, however legitimate they might be. It seems that the fear that the organizers’ involvement might have been construed as self-seeking was so problematical and potentially shameful that they felt the need to deny and justify it. The bookseller was the tool of their denial and the chosen bearer of their guilt.

The bookseller was perhaps also being blamed for his survival in the confrontation with the sculptor, and the sculptor’s ‘defeat’ and departure. Such a disappearance has wider implications in the context of a conference devoted to survival in the Holocaust and its aftermath. The conference focused specifically on the experience of the children of survivors, and they brought their childlikeness to the gathering. Indeed, the impact on the conference organizers resembles an aspect of the behaviour of children in the Holocaust. Children in concentration camps would develop tight groups ‘which substituted for the family. . . . They were loyal to their teams as gangs are but they could be cruel and deadly to a boy who stole bread from a friend, cheated in the marble game or broke the code of the community in another way’.\(^\text{5}\) Such exclusions had the dual function of protecting the group from the pursuit of selfish ends and reinforcing the group’s boundaries; and attacking fellow victims had the added benefit of giving expression to desires for revenge that
it would be fatally dangerous to express to the perpetrators themselves. There seems in practice to have been no taboo against attacking one’s fellows: Judith Kestenberg describes how ‘identification with the aggressors as a means of survival was not uncommon’, and how ‘those . . . who attached themselves to Kapos . . . were . . . cruel to the less privileged children and treated Jewish adults with contempt’.6

Among adult survivors also, guilt focuses on individuals whose self-interest enabled them to survive despite the circumstances, or even apparently because of the circumstances: those with financial or material resources they neglected to share, or who collaborated with the enemy in some way. They are excluded because they challenge the sentiment of solidarity which underpins all survivor groups and conferences such as this.

Aspects of the debate on such marginal behaviour have been summarized in an article by Frank Fox in which the usual condemnation of Chaim Rumkowski, the leader of the Lodz ghetto, for collaboration is qualified.7 Fox quotes Primo Levi’s view that ‘the harsher the oppression, the more widespread among the oppressed is the willingness . . . to collaborate’,8 and also Henry Rubin’s statement that Rumkowski’s approach was finally justified because it proved successful in delaying the destruction of the ghetto. Rubin even argues that Rumkowski’s behaviour has an historical model: the first-century Rabbi Johanan ben Zakkai, rather than fight the Roman occupiers, asked them for permission to establish an academy. This centre of learning set the mould for Jewish communal existence ever after. As Fox comments, ‘this, rather than suicide pacts or symbolic armed struggle[,] was the key to survival’, adding that the ‘cherished notions of defiance and self-sacrifice’ attributed to all Jews in the Holocaust are designed to ensure that the Nazis are guilty and all Jews innocent.9

In fact, however, some Jews did not conform to this ideal and were effectively ‘bought’ by bribes of food or money, or persuaded by the promise of privileges to betray and use others. The betrayal of the group brought them only temporary security, however, for once their usefulness was exhausted most were murdered. The Nazis believed that ghettos could be more efficiently run by Jews than by German administrators, at least in the earlier stages of liquidation, but had no reason to protect those prepared to ‘sell’ Jews once their task was complete.

The ambivalence of Rumkowski’s reputation illustrates how hard it is to reconcile group interest with the concern for self-preservation that must have inspired all survivors of the Holocaust; for although most victims were chosen because of the group to which they belonged, survival was achieved by individuals engaged in a fight for life.

This similarity between the will to survive and selfish indifference to the plight of others tends to haunt survivors. Fox outlines one survivor’s classification of guilt:
At the top of the list she placed those fellow Jews who were Gestapo agents. Their guilt, she said, was even greater than that of the Germans. Then she listed members of the Judenrat and the Jewish police, followed by the collaborators in the workshops. At the bottom of the list were those who survived, including herself, since they remained alive at the expense of others who perished. After all they were all supposed to die: it was just a matter of German priorities.10

All survivors – and their children – share in the guilt of survival.

The conference was to this extent a scene of commonality more in a rhetorical sense than in reality. It seemed that some participants were trying to preserve the ‘spirit of the conference’ from contamination by individualism and self-interest by denying their own (perfectly natural) self-interest and projecting it onto others. The victim of this projection was selected – albeit unconsciously – on the basis of his having openly declared a private interest. In such a context the bookseller’s behaviour – attuned to everyday behaviour rather than to the conference – took on other connotations, and the sculptor’s departure started to look like his metaphorical murder. Many others at the conference had agendas that were no less personal, but, because of his symbolic status, the bookseller became involved in a re-enactment of one of the most unapproachable themes in Holocaust studies: the difficulty of reconciling survival with solidarity. The bookseller provided a mirror for the survivor-guilt of other participants. His survival outside the community led him to being treated as an outsider.

According to this interpretation the conference reproduced an aspect not only of Jewish behaviour during the Holocaust, but of Jewish feelings in its aftermath. This has been described among survivors and their families by Ruth Barnett in the context of Kindertransport reunions. ‘Something of the tension and chaos there would have been at an arrival platform or hostel’ seemed to characterize their openings.11 She goes on to observe and discuss the theme of Holocaust re-enactment in other details of such meetings. In the present case, however, the urge to re-enact was encountered in the children of survivors rather than in the survivors themselves, demonstrating how re-enactments may be performed by proxy if they are not fully understood by those originally involved. As has been remarked by Ilany Kogan (quoted by Alejandro Tamez Morales): ‘survivors’ children tend to repeat their suffering, living out the themes that their parents have suppressed from their past in immediate transferential relationships’.12

The Medium for Mourning

A second theme touched on by the phrase ‘spirit of the conference’ lies in the contrast between the mediums that are represented by the sculptor and the bookseller. The central theme of the conference was remembering and
mourning the Holocaust, and since in many cases the parents of those taking part had been left so damaged that they were incapable of describing their experiences, the event was in part devoted to the problem of overcoming silence and relating to uninformative parents. Judith Kestenberg has remarked on the number of child survivors who became teachers, while participants in the conference exemplified how many of their children in the second generation became involved in the caring professions and the arts, lending the aborted involvement of a sculptor in the conference an added significance. Sculpture may provide durable monuments to suffering, encapsulating and organizing complex feelings and providing foci for the exploration of experiences that cannot otherwise be expressed. But although such static, mute forms may contain the survivors’ pain and evoke undefined emotions in the viewer, they are by their nature lacking in eloquence. Books function in what appears, at least superficially, to be a different way. They elaborate on concepts, articulate feelings and suggest a commitment to precise definition and to the mutuality of many authorial voices. The preference for the contribution of the sculptor over that of the bookseller may therefore have been associated with the guilt of avoiding a dynamic and developing response to suffering and of opting for a monumental one. But the choice was neither easy nor unambiguous, especially as the sculptor was expressing his own inner life, while the bookseller was merely providing access to those of others.

The inarticulacy of monuments may also contribute to their power, of course, allowing emotions to emerge more intensely than they might in response to words; as discussed above, the absence of clear instructions on how to ‘read’ the exhibition in Kraków added to its unpredictability of effect. But although the lack of verbal expression might make it easier to avoid engaging with the emotions behind the work, it is impossible to judge whether sculpture or literature is more ‘static’ or ‘open’ as a medium. What is most important is the apparent decision of the London conference to prefer the sculptor. One can only speculate as to what would have happened had the sculptor remained and the bookseller left.

**Conclusions**

The cases described here illustrate how conferences can become the stage for re-enacting aspects of Holocaust behaviour by the heirs of ‘perpetrators’ and of ‘victims’. In each case the behaviour arose in connection with areas that inspire continuing guilt and shame: in the case of Germans, the taboo activity was discussing the suppression of humane feelings that made the Holocaust possible, while for Jews it was a totem of belief that all Jews shared equally in
the suffering. For Jews and Germans alike there may be a taboo on recognizing certain emotional commonalities between victims and perpetrators, although this statement that does not begin to express the layered emotions involved, and their unexamined nature ensures that they remain unresolved.

Undigested aspects of Holocaust experience re-emerge in particular when intensive group settings make it possible for them to be re-enacted. However, such manifestations do not represent attempts to work through and resolve the only partly understood feelings, but are principally rejections of the mourning process, demonstrating how the failure to come to terms with the past through mourning leads to repetitions of the undigested events, as Freud argued.14 Such repetitions can be acutely dangerous if not identified, as has been argued by Rudolph Binion.15

Those older German conference participants in Kraków who found it too painful to acknowledge their own closeness to the perpetrators succeeded in enlisting younger colleagues into the conspiracy of emotional silence. Although those older Germans could sympathize with the Nazis’ victims – especially folkloric Jews remote from their own experience – they could not bear to acknowledge the emotions of perpetrators who were dangerously close to themselves. The taboo against experiencing the perpetrators’ viewpoint was so strong that methods to prevent it were borrowed from the perpetrators themselves: the dissidents were transformed into an out-group, unified like victims by the pain of both the ‘crime’ and the ‘punishment’. The younger Germans may even have contributed to this victimization, for they desired an emotional link with older Germans whose silence they may have wished to overcome or to punish. They were prepared to undertake this even at the risk of evoking their anger and being criminalized in turn.

A similar process of projection may be seen in the Second Generation conference in London, at which survivor guilt was projected onto an individual who seemed least to share the myth of common suffering. This myth coexists with an often unconscious recognition that survival itself is compromising, although this is not sufficiently strong to prevent participation in such gatherings. The virtually totemic importance of the belief in common suffering appears to justify avoiding the issue of self-interest in the Holocaust. The bookseller’s fitness for the role of representing self-interest was determined not only by his ‘will to survive’, but by the sculptor’s ‘death’, which brought with it the projection of selfishness.

Both conferences also shared a concern to invest feelings in what might be seen as static artistic monuments – an exhibition in the first, and sculpture in the second – that would symbolize and contain the suffering and help the individuals to live without necessarily being fully engaged in troubling feelings. In both events, moreover, the artistic solution was kept at a distance: the exhibition was in a separate building, and the sculptor departed.
The attempt to deny feelings was finally rendered ineffective by re-enactments that demonstrated the dangers of failing to mourn and to work through the implications of trauma. In each case the re-enactment drew on the needs of each group to regard itself as victimized, and led its members to victimize others. In the one, the Jewish conference was led to exclude a colleague in a way that recalled the summary justice of survivor-gangs. In the other, the Germans who disliked the film rejected what they seem to have felt to be its identification of all Germans (including themselves) as perpetrators. (Unlike most previous films on the Holocaust, this film was made by Germans and thus directed at them as Germans, although it is not alone in doing so.)

Both enactments were based on a vain hope for clear distinctions between perpetrators and victims, between wholly ‘good’ and entirely ‘bad’ people. This ethical ‘split’ is an impossible and artificial one, except in the fantasies of children, and, as Freud remarks in *Moses and Monotheism*, traumas of a particular intensity experienced in early childhood that resist understanding lead to repression and to childhood habits of repetition, of a ‘daemonic’ kind, of primary, unprocessed and agonizing material.16 In both conferences, each party to the re-enactments claimed, if only unconsciously, the status of victim, and attempted to project that of perpetrator onto the other. The truth, as one sees, was more complex.

Holocaust conferences can therefore contribute, even in their dysfunctional aspects, to the work of laying the causes and impact of the catastrophe to rest; but this can be achieved only if all aspects are subjected to careful analysis, and if the questions raised are worked through in a dynamic fashion. Neither conference seems to have incorporated follow-up of the kind offered in this article, and it is hoped that its publication may serve a useful function.

**Epilogue**

It remains for me to consider my own role in these conferences, and my motivation in delaying publication for twenty years. I seem to have set out to observe the events as something of an outsider, being a specialist in Jewish thought rather than Holocaust studies and not a member of the Second Generation in conventional terms, although I too was born after the Second World War.

My father was a British rescuer who almost never spoke about his activities, although he was widely acknowledged publicly. One of the only times he did so was when he was asked how many people he had actually saved, the reported numbers varying by thousands. He replied, ‘How many didn’t I save!’.
Was I also involved in a re-enactment? Having hoped to save the ‘victims’ by speaking up for the students in Kraków and the bookseller in London, did I then fall silent as though to represent the unspoken guilt of rescuers who had to live with their failure to do more? Maybe withholding this discussion from publication enacted a need to refrain from ‘profiting’ from the experiences I described, as though I also wished to stay ‘within the spirit’ of the conferences. Perhaps I, like many other relatives of those who lived through the war, was silenced by the difficulty of facing and talking about its unbearable aspects.

Apparently the unspoken guilt not only of perpetrators and survivors, but also of rescuers, continues to be carried unconsciously by their descendants, and needs to be worked through before it can be expressed intelligibly.

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**Notes**

3. Yasmin Doosry, *Representations of Auschwitz: 50 Years of Photographs, Paintings and Graphics*, 1995. Published on the occasion of the exhibition held at the Pałac Sztuki, Kraków, 11 July – 20 August 1995, for the Department of European Studies, Jagiellonian University, Kraków, with the support of the Tempus Project ‘Civil Society and Social Change in Europe after Auschwitz’.
6. Ibid.


