BREAKING THE SILENCE: THE BEGINNING OF HOLOCAUST EDUCATION IN AMERICA*

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At first there was silence. The overwhelming realization of the evil of which the perpetrators were capable, the total numbness of the victims and the absolute shame of the bystanders all combined to erect a wall of silence around the tragic event. Except for a few lone poets and novelists such as Nellie Sachs, Abba Kovner, and Elie Wiesel, in the two decades following liberation very little was written and less was said about the Holocaust. The slaughter of 6,000,000 Jews in the heart of Christendom and the death of 5,000,000 others in concentration camps was seldom mentioned in the synagogues or the churches. The majority of Jewish communal leaders felt the Holocaust theme highlighted a negative experience that had befallen their people. Christian leaders did not touch it in the churches or seminaries, and the denominational and ecumenical synods and assemblies continued conventional attitudes and statements through the 1950’s. During this time, the majority of American people were comfortable with the silence.

This essay will discuss the major events responsible for awakening the public conscience, the dialectic process through which American society was able to break through the wall of silence, beginning with the signal events that took place in the years 1958–61. Change began with a formative conference in Germany that brought the Jewish issue into the center of German and American academic and religious debate and effectively prepared the way for new approaches.

The three major developmental phases will be identified—two of which will be examined in this summary essay, which is part of a larger work tracing the history of Holocaust education in North America in 1958–95. It includes the first university-based philosophical, theological, and ideological work. Among the beacon events within the second phase was the establishing of the Annual Scholars’ Conference on the Holocaust and the Church Struggle by Franklin H. Littell upon his arriving in the Temple University Department of Religion (TUDOR) in 1969. His co-founder was Hubert G. Locke of Wayne State University in Detroit. Both were Christian clergy. The third phase (not discussed further here) was the formal establishment of America’s first interfaith Holocaust Center: The National Institute on the Holocaust, later called the Anne Frank Institute, now the Philadelphia Center on the Holocaust, Genocide, and Human Rights.¹ This was followed by the growth of numerous other centers and programs throughout the United States.²

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¹In chronology, the Institute was in the U.S. second only to the Brooklyn Holocaust Studies Center, founded six weeks previously at the Jacob Braverman High School (Orthodox Jewish) by Dr. Jaffa Eliach, a professor in the City University of New York-Brooklyn College, and herself a survivor.

²See Franklin H. Littell, “Holocaust Education after 40 Years in the Wilderness,” an address to the 15th Anniversary Dinner of the Annual Scholars’ Conference, March 10, 1985; mimeographed
The records indicate that, in the pioneering formative years of Holocaust education in America, it was the gentile, and specifically Christian, influence that took the American leadership initiative, rather than the survivors or the Jewish communal organizations. The healthiest survivors used all of their psychic energy to get on with the task of living. When World War II ended in 1945 and the concentration camps were liberated, those who survived attempted as quickly as possible to move beyond the horrors they had experienced and get on with rebuilding their lives. The survivors' second life had to be rebuilt from the ground up. A study conducted by Peretz Lavie claims that those survivors who attained the best mental health and recreated the most successful and productive lives learned to suppress in their dreams virtually all memories of the Nazi persecution during World War II.

Beginning in the late 1970's, the survivors and their organizations were to begin to give significant leadership to such Holocaust education enterprises as the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and in local centers. In Detroit, Orlando, Miami, Skokie, and San Francisco they gave the primary impetus to founding museums and teaching centers.

With the passing of time, it became apparent that the story had to be told for the benefit of future generations, for those yet unborn. The silence had to be broken. As Emil Fackenheim reminded us, Jews are forbidden to grant posthumous victories to Hitler. The silence, the numbness, and the period of healing are often related to the scriptural time span following massive events in the lives of individuals and people: forty years in the wilderness. It took an entire generation of healing before survivors and liberators and rescuers could begin to speak of what they had seen and lived through.

The revoking of this silence in American society can best be described and understood through a dialectic process. The first phase of the dialectic was the university-based philosophical, theological and ideological work. The second phase was the establishing of the Annual Scholars' Conference on the Church Struggle and the Holocaust and the subsequent community action that began in Greater Philadelphia, ultimately creating a national model.

Among many factors and forces, four major events within Phase One can be identified as the precipitating factors that changed the thinking of those who were the early leaders in Holocaust education in the United States. These events found echoes around the world, especially in West Germany, Israel, and America. They
gave a fresh philosophical, theological, and ideological base for new approaches in Christian/Jewish cooperation.

The signal events that took place during 1958–61 affected the psyche and conscience of some Americans and were effective in preparing the direction of the new approaches.

I. Phase One

A. Academic Beginnings

The first U.S. graduate seminar on the confrontation of Nazi totalitarianism and religious minorities was initiated by Professor Franklin Littell (1917–2009) at Emory University in 1958–60. He had just returned from nearly a decade of work as an educational officer in the American occupation of postwar Germany. During that period he had built a network of correspondence and personal contacts with communal leaders and academics who were working on the materials of the German Church Struggle and the Holocaust. Very little else regarding the Holocaust was being thought or taught about at this time on American campuses. The first American undergraduate course on the Holocaust was taught by Marie Syrkin at Brandeis University, beginning in 1961.

In 1960, Littell left Emory University, moved to Southern Methodist University, and re-established his graduate seminar there at Perkins Theological Seminary during 1960–62. In 1962 he moved to Chicago Theological Seminary and taught his graduate seminar on the Church Struggle and the Holocaust until 1968, when he moved to TUDOR and offered a graduate seminar on the Church Struggle on the Holocaust. During these beginning years he wrote a mimeographed “Newsletter on the History of the Church Struggle with Nazism” and distributed it widely in Europe and North America. This newsletter reported on publications and other academic affairs not only on the Church Struggle, which was then his major emphasis, but also on Antisemitism, the Nazi assault on the Jewish people, and other aspects of death and life under the Hitler dictatorship.

Notes from an interview with Professor Sirkin in Jerusalem in July, 1982.

There were six numbered issues of the Newsletter (1959–61). Also distributed were a number of mimeographed essays, including Gordon C. Zahn, “The Catholic Press and the National Cause in Nazi Germany” (presented at the 1959 annual meeting of the American Catholic Sociological Society); Franklin H. Littell, “The Current Study of the Church Struggle with Nazism and Its Significance for Church History” (presented at the 1960 spring meeting of the American Society for Church History); Arthur C. Cochrane, “The Theological Significance of the Barmen Declaration, May, 1934” (1960 Presidential address to the American Theological Society); Edward Trainer, “Notes on Vichy France” (an Emory University Graduate Seminar report); Frederick K. Wentz, “Bibliographical Notes on the Church Struggle as Reported in Major Sections of the American Religious Press, 1933 ff.” (from a Yale University dissertation); and a critical review of William L. Shirer's *Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, by George Romoser of Ohio State University.
B. The Tutzing Conference

Before leaving his post as Chief Protestant Religious Officer, Littell organized an international conference through the Franz Lieber Foundation. It took place in Tutzing, Germany, August 17-20, 1959, chaired by Professor Kurt Dietrich Schmidt of Hamburg, chair of the official Protestant Commission on the History of the Church Struggle in the Nazi Period, and called under the sponsorship of the Kommission für die Geschichte des Kirchenkampfes in der Nationalsozialistischen Zeit of the Evangelical Church in Germany. This conference brought together European and American scholars—chiefly those deeply involved in working through the understanding of the conflict of Christianity and Nazism. Among other senior scholars present were Eberhard Bethge of Bonn, Raymond W. Albright of Episcopal Theological Seminary, Littell of Emory, Arthur C. Cochrane of Dubuque Theological Seminary, Jürgen Glenthoej of Denmark, Ernst Wolf of Göttingen, and the three leading archivist-historians of the Kirchenkampf: Kurt Dietrich Schmidt of Hamburg, Wilhelm Niemoeller of Bielefeld, and Günther Harder of Berlin.

Karl Kupisch of Berlin was present and emphasized the special nature of modern ideological dictatorships, while Chester Hunt of Western Michigan University read a paper on “The Life Cycle of Dictatorships.” Especially important, as it developed, was the presence and participation of Alfred Wiener, founder (Amsterdam, 1933) of one of the most substantial archives on the Nazi assault on the Jewish people. The Tutzing Conference in 1959 was a formative conference for the thinking of Littell, Cochrane, and other Christian scholars who were to bring the Jewish issue into the center of American academic and church debate.10

C. An Event Awakening the Public Conscience

Another important event that gave shape to Phase One occurred on May 23, 1960: Adolf Otto Eichmann was captured in Argentina and handed over to the Israeli judiciary for prosecution.11 The Eichmann case aroused intense interest all over the world.12 Gideon Hausner, who had been the young Attorney General of Israel for only two weeks when Eichmann was captured, prosecuted him for crimes against humanity, specifically against the Jewish people. In order to determine the specific charges to be brought against Eichmann, Hausner went through the ordeal of preparing the testimony from witnesses who had been trying for nearly twenty years to forget what they were now suddenly asked to remember. The trial had a marked effect on the public psyche in Israel and around the world, creating a heightened awareness and sensitivity also among those who were to be responsible for the founding of the Holocaust education movement in America.13

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10Both also served as Associate Editors of J.E.S. for many years.
11Eichmann was the man whose scheme of the “final solution” for the Jews was responsible for the murder of approximately 3,000 persons, although when he testified in the glass box in the Jerusalem Court of Justice he claimed that he was only “a cog in the wheel,” a soldier obeying orders. This line of defense had been rejected by the courts in Nuremberg, and it was rejected in Jerusalem.
D. The Impact of Two Classics

The English edition of Elie Wiesel's acclaimed book *Night* was published in the U.S. in 1960.\(^\text{13}\) This autobiographical account of the Holocaust is undoubtedly one of the most influential publications about the Holocaust. Complementing this literary work was Raul Hilberg's scholarly work, *The Destruction of the European Jews*.\(^\text{14}\) This landmark work meticulously documents every aspect of the mass murder of 6,000,000 Jews. Hilberg (1926–2007) was at that time a political scientist at the University of Vermont.

It took another decade-and-a-half for the massive tragedy known as the Holocaust to be internalized to the extent that teachers could teach about it and religious leaders could begin to confront its implications. The Wiesel and Hilberg publications attracted substantial new constituencies among communal groups and on campuses.

II. Phase Two: Bringing the Students of the Church Struggle and the Holocaust Together

The events of Phase One paved the way for Littell and Locke to organize in 1969–70 the first Scholars' conference in America on the Third Reich and its assault on Christianity and Judaism. Phase Two of the dialectic was initiated when the first conference was conducted at Wayne State University in 1970, under the auspices of the Grosberg Religious Center. The keynote speech was given by Elie Wiesel.

During the 1960's, except for the comparatively few reached by the early Littell newsletter, Jewish and Christian scholars generally worked in ignorance of each other. Important research centers such as Yad Vashem and the YIVO\(^\text{15}\) carried on their work. Books began to be published on the various aspects of the Jewish experience under Nazism (chiefly repression, emigration, and liquidation) and the Christian experience (chiefly internal ecclesiastical conflicts, with a minority of confessors and martyrs). By the end of the 1960's, however, there were enough scholars concerned with the total picture to bring the two foci together. The International Conference on the Church Struggle and the Holocaust was held in Detroit under the patronage of Michigan Governor Mennen Williams and President William Rea Keast of Wayne State University. Papers were read and discussed by well-known Christian, Jewish, and gentile scholars, including Richard L. Rubenstein, Henry Friedlander, John S. Conway, Gordon C. Zahn, Niemoeller, Bethge,


\(^\text{15}\)YIVO (Yidisher Visenshaftikher Institut) Institute for Jewish Research is the principal world organization conducting research in Yiddish. Founded in Berlin in 1925, it is located in New York, where it houses more than a 250,000 volumes of Judaica and more than 2,000,000 archival items.
This occasion was the first time that the Jewish and Christian experiences under Nazism were brought together in a single forum, and for several years it was the only educational forum on either topic of its kind in North America.

This first International Conference also set forth some groundrules that served as precedents for all subsequent nonsectarian work on the Holocaust. By basic groundrules, the first Scholars' Conference and all those subsequently held have been interfaith, international, and interdisciplinary. It was also understood from the start that, although the highest standards of scholarly research and writing should be maintained, participation by communal and community educators would be encouraged.

The participants came from Germany, Israel, Canada, and the U.S. Leading scholars in the field met to consider for the first time the historical, theological, and political implications, using the vernaculars of the several university departments. The papers opened up issues that had never before been considered in such a setting. Especially important, it opened the discussion on what has been called the most serious confrontation in the history of Christianity—the encounter of Nazi idolatry, totalitarianism, and genocide with Christian thinking and action.

The Scholars' Conference on the Church Struggle and the Holocaust became an annual event having several different sponsors and rotating location around the country in its now forty-four-year history. At first it was sponsored by the Charles Grosberg Center of Wayne State University, then by the National Conference of Christians and Jews in New York City. Later, it came under the co-sponsorship of the Anne Frank Institute, the United States Holocaust Memorial Council, the Bonhoeffer Society, the National Association of Holocaust Educators and the William O. Douglas Institute. In 1989 it became a separate corporation with its own staff, budget, and office.

Before Locke left Wayne State for a deanship at the University of Omaha, five numbers of a newly established "Newsletter on the Church Struggle and the Holocaust" were edited by Littell and issued under the auspices of the Institute for the Study of Religion and Social Conflict (now the William O. Douglas Institute, University of Washington). The growing number of correspondents registered indicates how the interfaith work on Third Reich policy toward the Jewish people and the churches was expanding in academic circles.

The influence of the 1959 Tutzing Conference was to continue to motivate the creation of other study and work groups related to the problem of the Church Struggle and the Jewish People. After the Tutzing Conference, Littell was instrumental in starting two other public organizations at the same time as the

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16Rubenstein is a rabbi and professor of religion at Florida State University and author of After Auschwitz (1967). Friedlander, himself a survivor, was professor of Jewish History and Thought at City University of NY, Brooklyn Campus; he died in 2012. John S. Conway, Professor Emeritus of History at the University of British Columbia, authored The Nazi Persecution of the Churches (1968). Niemoeller (d. 1983), brother of the famous Pastor Martin Niemoeller, was a Protestant clergyperson and a historian of the Church Struggle. Bethge (d. 2000) is best known as the biographer of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and editor of his works. Cochrane (d. 2002) was Professor of Theology at University of Dubuque, IA, and author of The Churches' Confession under Hitler (1962). Zahn (d. 2007) was Professor of Sociology at the University of Massachusetts and author of German Catholics and Hitler's Wars (1962).
Scholars' Conference. One was known as Christians Concerned for Israel (now the National Christian Leadership Conference for Israel); the other was a working group known as the Israel Study Group which was initially co-sponsored by the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. and the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, and is now based in Baltimore and called the Christian Study Group on Israel and the Jewish People.

The purpose of these parallel initiatives was to strengthen Christian/Jewish understanding in three sectors: (1) in the academic world, by interfaith, international, and interdisciplinary study of the Nazi assault on the Jews and such Christians who remained Christian; (2) in the political arena, by joint study and support of Israel's survival and well-being; and (3) in the churches, by bringing together regularly ten Protestant and ten Catholic theologians to discuss and publish papers re-working the churches' preaching and teaching about the Jewish people. These included, Markus Barth (d. 1994) of Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, A. Roy Eckardt (d. 1998) of Lehigh University, J. Coert Rylaarsdam (d. 1998) of the University of Chicago Divinity School, George H. Williams (d. 2000) of Harvard Divinity School, George Lindbeck of Yale University, Walter Harrelson (d. 2012) of Vanderbilt University, John M. Oesterreicher (d. 1993) and Edward Flannery (d. 1998) of Seton Hall University, Arlene Swidler (d. 2008) of Philadelphia, Roland de Cornielle of the Anglican Church of Canada, Loretto Sister Anne Patrick Ware (d. 2013), and Littell.

From the beginning, the Scholars' Conference had active participation by Israeli and West German scholars, and the cooperation between meetings soon led to joint research and publications. The result was a strong national and international network. In 1975, with the assistance of Bethge and other German colleagues who had participated in the Annual Scholars' Conference, the first Conference on the Holocaust and the German Church Struggle was held on German soil. Meeting at Haus Rissen in Hamburg, the conference enjoyed the co-sponsorship of the Koordinierungsrat of the German Societies for Christian/Jewish Cooperation and the National Conference of Christians and Jews. Bernhard E. Olsen, author of the classic study *Faith and Prejudice* (1961) and a founding member of the Scholars' Conference, was executive director of the Hamburg conference, while Littell and Claire Huchet Bishop (d. 1993; translator of the works of Jules Isaac) were co-chairpersons.

The graduate seminar on the Holocaust and the Church Struggle that was established at TUDOR in 1969 became part of the permanent program and was taught on a regular cycle until 1986. Another parallel development began at that time in TUDOR through Littell's activities that was to play a major role in providing the first Holocaust education publications and teacher services. He began to collect syllabi from colleagues in other institutions and to extend the correspondence network associated with the Annual Scholars' Conference. The research and material for numerous publications was begun, even though a way to publish and distribute them was a few years away. Other professional groupings

were formed, including a regular section at the annual convention of the American Academy of Religion and a subcommittee of the American Historical Association: the Committee on the History of World War II.

**Conclusion**

The first interfaith Holocaust education teaching curricula and the nation's first interfaith Holocaust center and Ph.D. program were established at TUDOR, beginning in 1970 under Littell's initiative. This also enabled him to create a forefront of community initiatives in 1975. Together with Albert Chernin, then-Director of the local Jewish Community Relations Council of the Jewish Federation and their leaders, the School District of Philadelphia, the Metropolitan Christian Council, the Roman Catholic Archdiocese, the Fellowship Commission, and the presidents of every local college and university, the first Teaching Conference took place, paving the way for the Philadelphia School District to become the first inner-city district in America to teach about the Holocaust. These interfaith models have been emulated nationally and internationally.

There are presently 285 centers in the U.S. and 868 centers in other countries. In the U.S., a decentralized education system has allowed individual states to determine their own Kindergarten–12th grade curriculum in all subject areas. Five states have mandated the teaching of Holocaust and Genocide Studies for K–12. Numerous states have "recommended" the teaching of Holocaust and Genocide Studies, provided it was compatible with the common-core curriculum standards within their state requirements. Several states have established interfaith Holocaust commissions without a mandate. Tennessee is an example where a state commission and no mandate have produced excellent teacher support and training programs. In Florida and New Jersey, both a commission and a mandate exist, complemented by adequate state funding. In states where it is mandated or a commission exists, but adequate funding is lacking, the unified outcome is not as successful. In recent years, Holocaust education in in the U.S. has faced numerous internal challenges. The earliest well-trained, committed Holocaust studies teachers are now retiring. Newly appointed younger teachers are focused on attaining tenure and pleasing school administrators who may not support this subject area, and they are concerned about standardized testing.

Yom Hashoah is now a fixed day on the calendar, falling the fifth day after the eighth day of Passover, the 25th of Nissan. The Carter administration in 1979 encouraged the governor of every American state and the mayor of every major city to declare it a day of official remembrance, and the U.S. Congress signed it into law. Since the Declaration in Sweden in 2000 and the creation of the International Task Force on Holocaust Education, International Holocaust Remembrance Day is now observed annually on January 27th.

The U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum opened in our nation's capital. Monuments, memorials, and Holocaust centers continue to flourish. What we still lack are the endowments to create interfaith chairs of Holocaust studies in the universities. Currently, there are only three in the U.S. (University of California, Yeshiva University, and the Richard Stockton College in Galloway, NJ).
While we currently have hundreds of courses offered at the college and university level, there is a problem. University administrators, attuned to public opinion, find it an attractive solution to place Holocaust studies into “Jewish Studies” programs rather than acknowledge it as an interdisciplinary subject area, because it keeps the subject under control. In the several disciplines, we academics face the same temptation to render antiseptic the story and lessons of the Holocaust: Sociologists are tempted to put the message in the box of “racism”; political scientists, in the box of “war and dictatorship.” Psychologists want to talk about the special cases of survivors and perpetrators, while theologians find the Holocaust a neat illustration of the Problem of Evil: “theodicy.” Sectarians, both Jew and gentile, feel most comfortable regarding it as “a Jewish affair.” Those of us to whom the dialogue with the past is alive are called—especially at Yom Hashoah services, Kristallnacht teaching workshops, and conferences and in journal articles—to avoid premature closure.

As we approach our 44th Annual Scholars’ Conference on the Holocaust and the Churches, the focus for the March, 2014, event is “Remembering for the Future: Armenia, Auschwitz, and Beyond.” Michael Berenbaum’s keynote address focuses on “The Need to Create a Succeeding Generation”—of teachers, academics, Jewish and Christian clergy, and community leaders. We remember the words of conference co-founder, Franklin Littell, often called “The Father of Holocaust Studies in America”: “The Holocaust requires the vigorous attention of the minds and consciences for whom history is not the dead past but, rather, a part of our present awareness and the way we face our future.” That is, if we are to have a future together.