

Feb 6, 2020 Presentation for HSRG at WRC on Holocaust Remembrance Day

Debra Kaufman: Auschwitz and the Professors

In March of 1998 I received a pre-publication copy of *Commentary*, the leading post WW II American magazine on religion, Judaism, politics and culture. You see the cover of that issue on the screen behind me: *Auschwitz and the Professors* and then just beneath that: “Grievous are the offenses committed by the new “Holocaustologists” against the memory of Europe’s murdered Jews” by Gabriel Schoenfeld.¹ I am one of the holocaustologists. Two years earlier I had guest edited and had written an article for *Contemporary Jewry* (leading Journal for social scientists in the field of Jewish Studies) entitled: *Gender, Scholarship the Holocaust*.² In it I berate my discipline for its **sociological silences** when it came to Holocaust scholarship and research. With my pre-publication copy of *Commentary* came a request for my response. After reading Schoenfeld’s rant, I did indeed respond. I wrote: I have not read *Commentary* for at least twenty years and now I remember why.

¹ Gabriel Schoenfeld. “Auschwitz and the Professors”. *Commentary*, (June 1998).

² *Contemporary Jewry*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (January 1996).

1. The professors singled out for denouncement came under a multi-pronged attack: we were careerists using the “murdered European Jews” to further our professional lives; our scholarship was “academicized” (his word not mine) making it irreverent if not irrelevant for Holocaust inquiry; and finally those who chose a feminist and/or gender analysis (the majority of professors under attack) were not only guilty of the two crimes just mentioned, but did not qualify as serious scholars since feminism is no more than an ideology, consciousness raising and propaganda. His words not mine.
2. Schoenfeld’s specious argument, that academicians used the Holocaust to benefit their careers, was perhaps the most mean-spirited of his attacks. Twenty years ago, when this venomous attack was written, both Jewish Studies and Women’s Studies were relegated to the least prestigious areas of every discipline. Those identified as professors in either of those fledging and struggling interdisciplinary programs, especially untenured professors and those trying to become full professors, were especially vulnerable. Schoenfeld was dead wrong.... to identify as a gender or Jewish studies scholar, or worse, **as both**, was **one way to end your career rather than further it.**

3. The “academization of the Holocaust” (Schoenfelds’ second grievous offence) applies to all of the professors equally. The detached, dispassionate and jargon laden environment of the university, thinks Schoenfeld, are at odds with the study of the Holocaust. To quote him, “the very language in which the murder of six million Jews is discussed has become in no way distinguishable from the language of agricultural macroeconomics or the sociology of chimpanzees.”³ And while he has nasty things to say about Daniel Goldhagen (*The Willing Executioners*) and Steven T. Katz (*the Holocaust in Historical Context*) because they had fallen into this academic trap, he grudgingly acknowledges that they are, despite their academic jargon, “serious scholars”. But his good will ends there.
4. Schoenfeld’s most toxic attack is targeted against the majority of professors under scrutiny: women. He equates all women with feminism and all work on gender as part of a feminist agenda. In his words a gender analysis is simply propaganda and consciousness-raising under the guise of scholarship. As with careerism, Schoenfeld’s profound anger is only equaled by his profound ignorance about feminism. For him, women’s liberation on the streets is feminist scholarship in the

³ Gabriel Schoenfeld. “Auschwitz and the Professors”. *Commentary*, (June 1998).

Academy. His assumption is that any focus on women will always demean, devalue or in some way diminish men.

5. While I do not have the time to redress Schoenfeld's misleading, if not false depiction of feminism, I would like to make a few important points from the works of those most abused in his diatribe. For instance, Joan Ringelheim acknowledges how an emphasis on a gender analysis might "appear irrelevant or even irreverent" given that the Jewish genocide targeted every Jew for extermination. But she then reminds us that in her words "...a careful study of National Socialism as theory and practice does not reveal any more gender neutrality than racial neutrality. The Nazi so-called "Final Solution of the Jewish Question," was one of the first times in history that the female population was not treated primarily as "spoils." It was one of the rare historical moments when women and children were consciously and explicitly sentenced to death in at least equal measure with men. Jewish women were connected to the "race struggle" of National Socialism because they carried the next generation of Jews."

⁴Even more important she insists that a gender analysis of

⁴ Joan Ringelheim, "Preface to the Study of Women and the Holocaust ". *Contemporary Jewry*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (January 1996), pp. 1-2.

women and the Holocaust offers analogies to other women, and to other wars and genocides beyond it.

6. Similarly, Dalia Ofer and Lenore Weitzman note that there were systematic gender differences throughout the Holocaust from pre to post WWII. They write: "...it is only by understanding the experiences that were unique to women—as well as those that were relevant to all Jews—that we can provide a complete account of what happened.”⁵ They, too, argue that analogies from women and the Holocaust to other wars/genocides can provide important understanding about women, violence and post war trauma.
7. Interestingly, although I am included among the most villainous of the “holocaustologists”, Schoenfeld never touches the substance of what I wrote. My feminist predilection was to introduce the volume with a consideration of the ethical and moral implications of our work. In the very introduction to the volume I ask our audience to see our work not only as an academic exercise but as a feminist one as well; as work that represents engaged and ethically concerned researchers, not competitively making our points for greater recognition of our academic prowess, but as researchers intent on opening our

⁵ Responses to Auschwitz and the Professors by And Critics in *Commentary*, June 1998.

visions and versions of the Holocaust to include those who have been overlooked, underestimated and basically unseen in most Holocaust accounts. ⁶

8. There is, however, one point on which I do agree with Schoenfeld: feminist academic work is indeed a form of consciousness-raising, not as propaganda as he would have it, but as a challenge to each academic discipline to acknowledge its ethical/moral responsibilities to its topic and consequently to those who are underrepresented in voice and visibility in that scholarship.
9. Schoenfeld's critique, however, is rooted in a much more ideological battle than he lets on: implicit in his attack is his fear that the Holocaust will lose its Jewish particularity; that others, those without the proper respect and reverence will appropriate for their own uses, good or bad, this uniquely Jewish genocide. That the Holocaust will become part of a universal trope, commensurate to every other genocidal act either historical or contemporary, losing its particularity as an unequalled atrocity belonging to the Jewish people. For him, analogies to other atrocities are not appropriate or accurate.

⁶ Debra Renee Kaufman. "Introduction: Gender, Scholarship and the Holocaust", *Contemporary Jewry*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (January 1996), pp. 3-5

10. In my article, I directly confront this most contentious issue in the field of Holocaust scholarship head on. In that piece I include an email exchange between myself and political sociologist, Seymour Martin Lipset.⁷ In this exchange, Lipset explicitly states that my call for more sociological research on the Holocaust makes an erroneous assumption about the role of sociology and the study of the Holocaust. Because the Holocaust is a unique event in history, Lipset argues that it should not be subject to abstract quantitative or theoretical, let alone feminist, sociological models of analysis or universal patterns of behavior and structure. It is a unique event in history---incomparable and incommensurate with any other.
11. Now fast forward some twenty years. On June 24, 2019, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum issued a formal statement that it “unequivocally rejects the efforts to create analogies between the Holocaust and other events, whether historical or contemporary.” The statement came in response to a video posted by Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, the Democratic congresswoman from New York, in which she refers to

⁷ Debra Renee Kaufman. “ The Holocaust and Sociological inquiry: A Feminist Analysis”, *Contemporary Jewry*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (January 1996), pp. 6-17

detention centers for migrants on the US southern border as “concentration camps”.

12. Writing in the New York Review of Books, Peter Gordon⁸ suggests this might have been a “tempest in a tweet-pot” were it not for the fact that, on July 1, 2019, an international group of scholars published an open letter on The New York Review of Books website expressing their dismay at the Holocaust Memorial Museum’s statement and urging its Director to issue a retraction. Although I was not an original signee, I did sign later, the letter read as following: “The Museum’s decision to completely reject drawing any possible analogies to the Holocaust, or to the events leading up to it, is fundamentally ahistorical... Scholars in the humanities and social sciences rely on careful and responsible analysis, contextualization, comparison, and argumentation to answer questions about the past and the present...The very core of Holocaust education is to alert the public to dangerous developments that facilitate human rights violations and pain and suffering...pointing to similarities across time and space is essential for this task.”
13. In his compelling essay Peter Gordon makes a strong case for analogical reasoning as indispensable to the human

⁸ Peter E. Gordon. “Why Historical Analogy Matters”, New York Review of Books/Daily, January 7, 2020, 7:00 am.

sciences. It should not be dismissed he cautions “even when some comparisons may strike us as politically motivated and illegitimate”. Furthermore, he suggests that the incommensurability thesis—the claim that discrete phenomena are unique in themselves--- and therefore cannot be compared to anything else has political consequences. “ If every crime”, he writes, “ is unique and the moral imagination is forbidden from comparison, then the injunction “Never Again” itself loses its meaning, since nothing can ever happen “again.”

14. Gordon goes on to argue that: “...Once the Holocaust is elevated beyond time as a quasi-eternal standard, **all comparison must appear as sacrilege**”. This, I believe is at the heart of Schoenfelds condemnation of holocaustologists. In effect, we Professors cannot be trusted to tell the Holocaust story; we will use it to boost our careers, we will use language and formulations not capable of and not commensurate with the uniqueness of the Holocaust. Even worse we will pit men and women against one another in the telling of that horrific story. Schoenfeld and Lipset have appointed themselves the gatekeepers for who can and cannot speak/write of the Holocaust.

15. But as scholars, as Gordon points out, we know that “to every singularity, to every unique atrocity, there is at least one common element: it belongs to the common record of human events.” The Holocaust is at once both unique and universal. Good scholarship demands far more than a detailed description of an event in history ... It demands in Gordon’s terms: “... a readiness to draw back from the facts and to reflect on their significance and their interconnection.” Analogy for him is crucial to scholarly inquiry for it “not only transforms our understanding of the present but also of the past.” He continues: “Those who say that we must forgo analogies and remain fixed on the facts alone are not defending history; they are condemning it to helpless silence.”
16. More than twenty years ago I argued the same for “sociological silences”. I am not unsympathetic to Lipset and Shoenfelds’ concerns about the professors and Auschwitz. But my answer to them was at the very heart of my article: a feminist sociological analysis, unlike mainstream sociology, avoids the abstract and irreverent traps often associated with the models and methods of mainstream social science. Comparison and analogy are not equivalent. Looking for universal patterns of behavior and structure does not imply

that each event is commensurate with the other or that each is without its uniqueness.

17. Let me conclude by returning to the place of gender analysis in Holocaust research. In a measured response to Schoenfeld, Sociologist Lenore Weitzman and Historian Dahlia Ofer, authors of *Women in the Holocaust* write: “If scholars do not study the Holocaust, it will be forgotten. And if scholars do not pay attention to the unique testimonies of women survivors, they will be forgotten—or their experiences will be assumed to have been identical to those of men.”⁹ Similarly Joan Ringelheim writes: ...while BOTH Jewish women and men experienced unrelieved suffering during the Holocaust... women carried the extra burdens of sexual victimization, pregnancy, childbirth, rape, abortion, the killing of newborns, and often decisions about separation from children. “ She concludes that by attacking the legitimacy of gender research, Schoenfeld trivializes the human experience of victims in the Holocaust; and disallows for a full account of the Holocaust. We cannot then avoid Ringelheim’s clarifying message: “Jewish women's lives were endangered as Jewish women, as mothers,

⁹ Op. cite. Fn 5

and as caretakers of children.”¹⁰ I will end by paraphrasing the title of our panel: Only she who is forgotten is dead.

¹⁰ Op. cite Fn 4