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### **Lager and Gulag: Incommensurable Experiences?**

The topic of our conference is „Remembrance about Holocaust versus Remembrance about Gulag” and it is the word “versus” that needs to be explained. Why should those two memories compete with each other, dispute or form an alternative? Because in fact they are in conflict and the reason or rather reasons for that require deeper study. This opposition has to be taken into account during discussions like ours.

The above mentioned reasons can be divided into four categories: historical, legal, cultural and political differences. I would like to concentrate on each of those reasons separately and, afterwards, I will try to introduce possible research strategies which are implied by those differences.

The basic contrast between the experience of Holocaust and the experience of Gulag is connected with the fate of Jews. Holocaust was a state-sponsored program of systematic extermination of Jews. There was no such program in Stalin’s Russia. There had been no death camps, camps created exclusively to produce death, in Soviet Russia. Of course, both Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany had built concentration camps: camps in which death was a foreseen and desirable side-effect. The dissemblance is important – prisoners were able to survive a Gulag or a concentration camp. Chances were minor, but it was possible. Several thousand people in the whole world, today maybe already only thousand, are living witnesses that survival has been possible. It was impossible, from the very definition, to survive a death camp. Already immediately after the second world war, there were only a few hundreds of prisoners who survived a death camp; today maybe a few of them still living.

The above described difference is crucial, as one factor which makes Holocaust such an unexampled experience in the history of mankind is the explicit character of the death sentence posed upon Jews. A Jew was sentenced to death no matter where and when he had been born. Those living outside territories controlled by Germans had their sentences postponed until “justice” would reach them and punish for the crime of being a Jew. This situation is historically, morally and politically incomparable to any other event in history. Such experience, such explicit statement, was absent in the Gulags. This divergence has to be remembered.

The second difference lies in the fact that the Gulag created opportunities to escape. One could become a traitor and join the side of the persecutor, for example by joining the Komsomol. There were ways to avoid the worst fate. Pawlik Morozow became a hero of communism, but no David Rapaport could have ever become a hero of Nazism, even if he had tried. There were such stories. Ringelblum mentions in his diaries a nine year-old boy who had lost his mind in the Warsaw Ghetto and started to shout: "I want to eat; I want to kill; I want to live; I want to be a German". Those four categories were connected. Food, life, killing and being a German were inseparable categories which had been denied to this boy. It is imaginable that if there had been German ways for boys like Pawlik Morozow, this Jewish boy would have become one, but there had not. This is another factor of this explicit unexceptionality which differs Holocaust from Soviet Gulags.

Another divergence between the Holocaust and the Gulag experience is the fact that in Soviet Russia Jews were not only among victims but also among persecutors. This fact often hindered research about persecutions in the Soviet Union, as there was no clear cut moral division between persecutors and victims, guaranteed in Nazi Germany by the Nuremberg Laws.

However, the probably most important difference is that Nazism was killed and communism has died out because of old age. This is crucial. Concentration camps and Holocaust appeared in the second phase of Nazism, during the war, and disappeared with the fall of Nazi Germany. Nazism had lasted all in all for about a dozen years. Compared with communism, it would be like communism had ended with Stalin becoming General Secretary of the Communist Party, in 1929. Moreover, the memory of the negative exceptionality and aberration of Nazism has remained vivid. The communist system was aging gradually. The most horrible Gulag experiences ended in the mid 1950s. The same system which had murdered millions of people, let millions of people free; allowed them to go back home; gave them employment and secured pensions. There was no clear-cut division between the homicidal system and its victims. In Soviet Russia victims of the system could become its beneficiaries even if it had been a very poor benefice. After leaving Gulag one had to live in the same world which had confined the person to imprisonment. Because of this, Gulag was perceived as a part of the reality, not as a horrible aberration. It was as in this very sad, Soviet joke: "people can be divided into those who are in imprison, were in prison and will be in prison". Being in a Gulag was part of everyday, banal experience. For all those reasons, Gulag

has been perceived outside Soviet Union as less horrible than German concentration camps, although, existentially, there was not much difference.

The experience of prisoners of German concentration camps (concentration, not death camps) was very similar to the experience of prisoners of Gulags. Moral condemnation was in the case of Gulags much weaker because Gulags were part of a system which helped to defeat Nazism. Without the Ribentrop-Molotov pact, Hitler would have been not so successful during the first stages of the war, which makes Stalin co-responsible. Yet, there is also no doubt that defeating Hitler without the support of Red Army would have been impossible. Gratefulness, which the Allied forces felt towards the Soviet Army and its leader combined with helplessness towards the fact that Soviet Union had been already occupying half the continent caused that Allies were much more lenient towards Soviet Russia than towards the defeated German Reich.

All those above mentioned differences are crucial while comparing Gulags and Holocaust. Forgetting any of them means that any conclusions from the comparison will be defective.

The next group of reasons which make the comparison of Holocaust and Gulag so difficult are legal reasons. The definition of genocide was created exactly for describing the crimes of Nazis and preventing it from happening again. The definition of genocide includes intentional murdering of ethnical, national or religious groups; political or social groups are not mentioned there. They are not mentioned because the Soviet Union threatened to veto the convention should those two groups be included. Therefore, almost none or none of Stalin's crimes can be sentenced according to the convention. Setting fixed quotas of people to be murdered each month or year, as it was mentioned yesterday by professor Gluza is not genocide, it is crime against humanity. Should ethnical, national or religious reasons have been mentioned, it would be genocide. But such reason will not be found in any Soviet documents. Even if the persecuted group was an ethnical group, as in the case of Poles in the Vilnius region or in the case of Holodomor, even in unofficial documents ethnical reasons combine with political it is not clear which reasons predominate. Even if a case against Russia should be brought into court, it is doubtful whether such suit could be won, even in the case of Katyń. It can of course be claimed that this is grotesque; that the conventions about genocide is constructed in such a way that Stalin's crimes cannot be sentenced and that it should be changed. This claim would, at least theoretically, be justified. The author of the above

mentioned definition, Rafał Lemkin, Polish-Jewish jurist started writing it as an attempt to turn worlds attention to the massacre of Armenians, but he managed to introduce this convention only after another massacre, the largest in worlds history. He wanted to include social and political categories into this convention; he had no doubts that what had happened in Soviet Russia was genocide. Yet political reasons and the wish that the convention would be accepted unanimous, made it possible for the Soviet censors to intervene in the text of the convention. On the other hand it can be stated that the fact of accepting the convention unanimous was more important and that the compromise was rightful. Today it might be possible to change the text of the convention, so that it would include all the definitions hitherto omitted. Yet it is also possible that such changes would be made that would make the conviction of any persecutors impossible. Still, legal reasons are important; genocide is the crime of Nazis and this regime had been sentenced. And it was not only Stalinism that has not been sentenced.

Cultural reasons seem unimportant but they are crucial, as they shape common consciousness. Holocaust became the synonym of absolute crime and it has been, in my opinion, the worst crime in the history of mankind. Holocaust has also another unique trait – it is the only crime that is remembered so, as its victims relate it. No other group of victims has managed to turn their narration to the one, commonly accepted version. Let us take a look on other genocides of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: nobody remembers the Herero people and the doers of the genocide of Armenians are not even acknowledging that genocide took place. The official, compromise version of Turkish policy states that maybe there were more victims on the Armenian side during a war. If one would conduct an interview on the streets and ask whether it was Tutsi that killed Hutu or Hutu who killed Tutsi, nobody would either know or considered it important. Cambodia was most probably not a genocide, as most victims belonged to one social group, not nation. “Luckily” the Red Khmers have murdered also Muslims and it is the murder of Muslims which allowed to accuse some of the leaders of Red Khmers of genocide. General Radko Mladic, responsible for the genocide of Bosnian Muslims is free and has the support of current Serbian authorities. In fact, it is only the Jewish narration about Holocaust that became common. Of course, there are people who deny and criticize it, but the common opinion accepts the story that it has happened and how it has happened. This makes other victims of other crimes envious because they are not able to make their voices heard in the public. Envy is an atrocious feeling, but we all experience it

under particular circumstances. It is also to some extent understandable because if mankind's memory would be just, other crimes were remembered as commonly as holocaust. They are not or they are remembered not strong enough considering the amount of sufferings. This fact is of course not caused by any Jewish conspiracy to promote their suffering, although, according to research, half of European population thinks that Jews are talking too much about Holocaust. As it happens, human memory is unjust. The mayor of Nagasaki has said once that there is only one thing worse than being the first city bombed with a nuclear weapon – it is being the second city bombed. Everybody remembers Hiroshima and only afterwards they add “and of course Nagasaki too”. It is unjust, but that is how human memory works.

However, Jews have paid a certain price for their promotional and mass medial success. It was not only the price of six million [Jews murdered during the war]. Since their narration became universal, it does no longer belong to Jews. Jews have no influence on how it is being used. It is visible for example in popular culture. A dozen years ago picturing Holocaust in a movie would have been preceded with consultations not only with historians but also with Jewish organizations, in order to avoid later criticism. Today it no longer happens; the breakthrough was the movie “Train de Vie”, which was a very good movie, but it ended the custom of consulting pictures about Holocaust with Jews. Holocaust became a literary or movie genre. Therefore, just as nobody discusses Westerns with Native Americans or cowboys, nobody discusses Holocaust with Jews. This is how Jews ceased to be owners of their own story. The victims of Gulag still own their relation. It is important only for them, their families and limited numbers of people interested in this topic. Still, time may come when we, Jews, will start to envy those who are still able to control their own story. Especially as the picture of Holocaust will be changed and disfigured parallel to the decreasing number of eye-witnesses. The changes may not be intentional. All of you have probably seen “The Pianist” by Roman Polański, a movie which has set standards for talking about the experience of Ghetto. The movie is historically true except for one detail – there are no Jews in this movie. It is a movie about Poles who were unlucky to have Jewish background and therefore were forced to live in the Ghetto. Nobody in this movie speaks Yiddish or Hebrew. Only in one scene Hebrew letters can be seen on a wall-poster; one scene shows a funny-looking elderly man in a kippah, who lost his way while crossing the gate of Ghetto. It is a movie about Poles with Jewish background persecuted by Germans. It strengthens the universal significance of the movie, but it has nothing to do with Jews. It is not the director's fault, he

screened exactly the story of Władysław Szpilman, who was a Pole and spoke neither Yiddish nor Hebrew. The movie is very universal, but the price of this universality might be too high.

Finally, I would like to discuss the fourth group of differences – political. Holocaust has been politically used from the beginning. The more the Soviet authorities insisted on severely penalizing Germany for their crimes, the more they at the same time marginalized the information that most Nazi victims in the Soviet Union were Jews. Instead, the victims were described as Soviet citizens. Holocaust was used as a political argument and it was an effective argument because no matter how much falsity, manipulation and hypocrisy there was in the official Soviet discourse, the main thesis – that the crimes had been committed by Germans – was true. I talked to a lady, a Polish-Jewish communist who had spend the second world war in Russia and had come back to Poland as a soldier of the Polish army and remained a communist after the war, how could she, having seen what happened during the war in the Soviet Union, remain a communist. She answered that her regiment had freed the concentration camp in Majdanek and they had reached the camp when the ovens were still hot. The Russian offensive had been so quick that Germans had had no time to destroy the camp. The lady said that it was possible to survive a Gulag, but not to survive Majdanek. And that if there was choice between Majdanek and Gulag, than there is no real choice, especially for a Jew. I think that convincing people in 1945 that liberal democracy, a system which brought Hitler to power, was a better one, would not be successful. This way of using Holocaust, according to which Stalinism seems not as something good, but as something better, gave way for a whole series of ways of using Holocaust. According to research made by one of my students, in all conflicts after the second world war both the sides have been compared to Nazis. And if everybody is a Nazi, then in nobody is and this category and its consequences ceased to be important.