The Missing Voices of the Killers: What Could They Tell Us?

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“If you hate,” says one Jewish witness who survived the Holocaust, “you kill with passion. They killed us without even caring.” Among the hundreds of recorded testimonies in the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies, as far as I know, there are no voices of the killers. We must reconstruct the personalities and motives of the killers from the scant information provided by their surviving victims, from the records of the Nuremberg War Crimes Trials, from transcripts of the Eichmann trial interrogations, from the “autobiography” that Rudolf Hoess, Commandant at Auschwitz, wrote before his execution, from scattered interviews with Auschwitz guards now serving life sentences in Germany, and from secretly filmed interviews with former concentration camp guards and other Nazi officials in Claude Lanzmann’s film Shoah.

But even with this information, what do we have? How far have they led us along the path of understanding how some human beings could have murdered so many millions of others “without even caring”? The truth is that despite all our sources and resources, this question still haunts and perplexes us. It continues to do so because the killers who speak up, grudgingly or boastfully, do not tell us what we want to know. Why should they? They hedge, evade, distort, suffer lapses of memory, engage in self-pity, shift blame, claim ignorance, or simply lie. The lie was normally the first line of defense. I remember attending the trial of SS General Karl Wolff, Himmler’s liaison to Hitler, in Munich in 1964 and hearing the youthful prosecutor ask the elderly Wolff whether he had ever visited the Warsaw ghetto. (One of the charges against Wolff was that he had arranged rail transportation to the ghetto for Jews who were then sent to their death in Treblinka.) Wolff’s prompt reply was “No.” The young attorney then read an entry from a diary kept by a military official on duty in Warsaw, announcing the arrival in the
ghetto of Reichsführer SS Himmler and SS General Karl Wolff, giving specific time and date of arrival. Confronted by this documentary evidence, Wolff searched his memory and admitted that he might have been to the ghetto once. Asked why he hadn’t said so in the first place, Wolff replied: “Ich bin ein alter Mann”—“Your honor, I’m an old man, and I can’t remember everything.” The presiding judge leaned forward, pointed at Wolff, and observed: “Herr Witness, If I had ever visited the Warsaw ghetto, I would never have forgotten it.” The observation was superfluous, since obviously Wolff had not forgotten either, but it underlines the ease with which the accused denied incrimination until confronted with incontrovertible proof.

Perhaps we should not expect otherwise in a court of law. Even when war crimes are the issue, we should expect the accused to maintain his innocence. What then are we to make of the “secret” interview in Shoah which Claude Lanzmann conducted with Franz Suchomel, former Treblinka guard, whom Lanzmann assured (himself lying now) that he would neither record nor videotape his testimony? (He did both with concealed equipment.) Believing that he is engaged in a private conversation, Suchomel says that his first impression of Treblinka was “catastrophic.” They had not been told, he adds, “how and what ... that people were being killed there. They hadn’t told us.” “You didn’t know?” Lanzmann asks. “No!” Suchomel replies. “Incredible!” is Lanzmann’s rejoinder. “But true,” insists Suchomel. “I didn’t want to go.”

The newly arrived camp guards, including Suchomel, are taken on a tour of the camp: “Just as we went by, they were opening the gas-chamber doors, and people fell out like potatoes. Naturally, that horrified and appalled us. We went back and sat down on our suitcases and cried like old women.” For someone appalled by the spectacle of Jews tumbling from the gas chamber like potatoes (a singularly inept image), Suchomel offers some of the most excruciatingly graphic descriptions in the entire film of the killing process and the disposal of bodies. Indeed, he seems to take a bizarre pride in his role as one of the few remaining authorities on the history of the death camp Treblinka. He is almost pedagogical in his vivid description of Treblinka as “a primitive but efficient production line of death.” Somehow, he has detached his own person from the event, and it simply never seems to occur to him that he shares some responsibility and blame for the mass murder he depicts.

Unable to argue that he was never in Treblinka, or that he has forgotten what happened there, Suchomel adopts a strategy common to Eichmann and other functionaries who were directly involved in the killing of Jews. They never view themselves as agents, but only as instruments, obeying orders initiated
elsewhere. Hence Suchomel can even fabricate a strange camaraderie between the
camp guards and the several hundred Jews of the work detail in Treblinka, who were
not sent directly to their death. When the deportations slackened temporarily early in
1943, those Jews stopped believing that they would survive. The guards, says
Suchomel, offered support: “We kept on insisting ‘You’re going to live!’ We almost
believed it ourselves. If you lie enough, you believe your own lies. Yes. But they
replied to me: ‘No, chief, we’re just reprieved corpses.’"

So we are invited to believe in the spectacle of SS men arriving in Treblinka but not
knowing where they are; of SS men seeing their first Jewish corpses and crying like
old women; of SS men bolstering the faltering courage of discouraged Jews, although
their freely-given oath is to support the program to make Germany and Europe free of
Jews. “If you lie enough, you believe your own lies. Yes.”

To be sure, we gain some valuable descriptive information from Suchomel about a
death camp that no longer exists. But apparently human beings like himself were
transformed into mere cogs in what he calls “the efficient production line of death” at
Treblinka. No shred of introspective self-analysis, of what it means to have been a
living and active participant in the destruction of European Jewry, emerges from his
testimony. The human value of his words is diluted, virtually extinguished, by the
ease with which he adopts a self-exonerating attitude. He simply does not see himself
as a villain.

How else are we to explain the insistence of so many Nazi functionaries after the war,
including Eichmann himself, that they never hated Jews? By dispensing an image of
Jewish inferiority as if they were selling the idea for a new product, the Nazis
predisposed an entire population, as well as the much smaller band of perpetrators, to
an attitude toward the potential victims that was divorced from the usual emotional
sources of virulent hatred. Paradoxical as it may sound, they dispensed what we may
call a dispassionate antisemitism which enabled the individual to achieve a divorce
between demeaning hatred and sheer political hygiene, the practical reality that if a
nation were to be pure, it must be purged of its “diseased” elements.

Dispassionate antisemitism encouraged a healthy schizophrenia, which allowed men
like Suchomel and Eichmann to distinguish untraumatically between their own human
selves and their less-than-human victims. Therefore, when they comment on their
roles during the war, they do not speak of a collapse of their private moral systems.
Asked after the war whether he thought the Jews were guilty of anything, Rudolf
Hoess,
Commandant at Auschwitz, replied that the question was unrealistic: he “had never really wasted much thought on it.” When he finished building the gas chambers and crematoria of Auschwitz, Hoess rejected the carbon monoxide used for killing at Treblinka for the swifter and deadlier insecticide hydrogen cyanide (Zyklon B), and boasted that his installations had a capacity ten times greater than those of Treblinka. Disposing of bodies became for him a problem in “fuel technology.” But the disguised vocabulary for mass murder was not a demonic subterfuge; rather, it represented the smug satisfaction of a man who until his execution in 1947 could not see himself as a monster, but only as a superior methodologist. From the commandant at Auschwitz to the simplest clerk in the railway ministry who arranged timetables for transports, Nazi antisemitism expertly transformed accomplices to mass murder into well-trained methodologists, doing a job as well as they could. And that is how they conveniently perceived themselves.

Because of this, even when we fill in the missing voices of the murderers who do not appear on our videotaped testimonies, we remain perplexed and discontent. They offer us far less than we desire. Their transparent evasions do not compare with the anguished searching of memory we get from authentic survivors of the Holocaust, who confront their own limitations with a courage and honesty that the Suchomels and Eichmanns lack the imagination to understand. When Lanzmann in *Shoah* asks Franz Grassler, deputy to the Nazi commissioner of the Warsaw ghetto during the war, what he remembers of “those days,” he replies like Karl Wolff: “Not much. I recall more clearly my prewar mountaineering trips than the entire war period and those days in Warsaw.” One is left gasping with disbelief at Grassler’s bold-faced insistence that the “German administration was never informed of what would happen to the Jews.” He is the only former Nazi in the film not to insist on an unfilmed interview, or to exact a promise that his name would not be used. He is untroubled and unashamed, has no recriminations, suffers no remorse, and makes perhaps only one unreservedly true statement in his entire conversation with Lanzmann: “Mr. Lanzmann, this is getting us nowhere.” And I am afraid that much the same would have to be said of most of the testimony from the “missing voices” of the perpetrators, were they available to us for study.

We would like to understand better the evil that was Nazism, and the mental process of the men who willingly and eagerly undertook the extermination of European Jewry. But one cannot explore or illuminate the demonic in men who were not demons. We only expose the ordinary. And the efficient. And the indifferent. And the cruel. We expose the effects, which were murderous,
and still wrestle with the “causes,” all of which, no matter how scrupulously scrutinized, continue to seem insufficient. If there is little honor among thieves, there is even less, as a skeptical Claude Lanzmann discovered, among mass murderers—a designation which none of the “missing voices” among the killers has ever accepted for its accuracy. Listening to Franz Suchomel sing the worksong of the doomed Jews in Treblinka—twice!—as if he were chanting some popular boy scout anthem, makes one wonder what kind of human creature we are confronted with. He boasts that not many people know the words to that song anymore, as if his contribution to historical research makes him an invaluable instrument in the efforts to recover the “facts” of that place called Treblinka. Why so few people recall the words today, and his connection to the reason why, never seems to occur to him. Like his superiors in the dock at Nuremberg, after having been stripped of their power, he appears pathetic. All the “missing voices,” deprived of power, speak in evasive whispers, or not at all. For that reason, we applaud all the more the persistence of interviewers and witnesses whose testimonies are recorded in the Fortunoff Video Archives. Their voices break the silence, giving us access to murderous deeds that future generations of students will examine, even though the murderers refuse to do so themselves.