

HOW I CAME TO THE STUDY OF GENOCIDE

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Kurt Jonassohn, September 1998.

I was born in 1920 in Cologne, Germany. I recall how, in that environment, I acquired a rather skeptical attitude quite early in life, although I do not recall the actual years when it happened. A number of events helped to form this attitude. When, as a child, I was taken to the zoo, the occasion became memorable not only because of the large number of interesting and exotic animals featured there, but also because of the prominently displayed extended African family, complete with straw huts and outside cooking fire. When, somewhat later, we visited the natural history museum, which was located inside the old Roman city wall, I was particularly impressed by the section on the human races. These were vividly illustrated by pictures and wax figures, accompanied by explanatory texts. That occasion has remained in my memory because the featured races included, in addition to such traditional categories as Black, Red, White, and Yellow races, also Aryans, Jews and Communists.

This is not to suggest that I was precocious enough to be analytical about these experiences. However, the very fact that I so clearly remember these events seems to prove that I was aware of a certain incongruity. Much later, when occasions arose to talk about these memories with colleagues interested in the Nazi period, they did not seem surprised; instead, without the least embarrassment, they doubted my veracity. Since then I have found evidence to support the accuracy of my memories; but I have also found evidence that people of my generation, who must have had similar experiences, have repressed such memories that testify to an earlier world view. That type of repression seems to occur equally among members of the perpetrator nation and among their former victims. There is a topic here for focused inquiry and I should be pleased to hear from interested researchers. However, in the present context these memories are only relevant because they seem to presage some of my future interests.

Early in 1939 I left for England on a one-year apprenticeship visa while my brother was able to go on Youth Aliyah to what was then Palestine. We all knew that shortly there would be a war and therefore the one-year limitation on my visa seemed entirely irrelevant. In spite of our concerted efforts, my parents, as well as several other relatives, were not as fortunate. A couple of years later they were deported to Lodz and then to Auschwitz.

The English people I met in London were very hospitable, but they perplexed me. They had never heard of Czechoslovakia before Hitler invaded it. They also re-named me "Robert" because they claimed to find "Kurt" unpronounceable. I suspected this to be a polite subterfuge to get me to drop my rather Germanic sounding first name. However, what impressed me most on my explorations of Central London was the casually cosmopolitan atmosphere; people from all parts of the world could be seen wearing their native costumes in public and none of the Londoners stopped to stare at them. This did not change even with the advent of the war.

In due course, the threat of invasion and the shortage of food caused the government to intern everybody born in an Axis country and to ship them off to Australia and Canada. Since this happened at the height of the U-boat war, not all of them survived the dangerous crossing. I arrived safely in Canada where, after a couple of years in internment camps, I was offered the choice of returning to England or staying in Canada. Obviously, I chose the latter option and settled in Montreal where a new experience awaited me. During a couple of social evenings my new friends asked me about Germany. While they were too polite to say so, it became obvious from their facial expressions that they did not believe a word I said. It was not a question of their being in sympathy with Hitler, but rather that my replies did not fit in with their notion of Germany as a Western, civilized and cultured society. After a couple of these puzzling experiences I evaded questions by saying that I preferred not to talk about it. For some strange reason people found that answer more acceptable.

Eventually I became a sociologist and realized that I was a perfect case of the sociological stranger (à la Georg Simmel) who does not belong to any group and is not at home anywhere. This role, and an understanding of it, gave me the tools so essential to developing a sociological perspective on society as well as an insight into my own career. My thinking was most strongly influenced by my teacher Everett Hughes at the University of Chicago. He recommended that to do good sociology one must learn to look for what is not there, and to compare phenomena that on the surface appear to have nothing in common. These two precepts have guided my thinking and research ever since. They have also led me repeatedly into unorthodox directions of research that only the security provided by a tenured faculty position allowed me to pursue.

At this point I shall fast-forward to the late seventies. During a sabbatical year I spent some weeks travelling around Europe on a Eurailpass in order to interview people in connection with a project totally unrelated to my future interests in the study of genocide. To save time between interviews, I did most of the travelling at night. Since I rarely had more than one interview in any one location, the great amount of travelling provided much time for reading and meditating. Although my schedule included only one interview in West Germany and another one in East Germany, I had to cross Germany several times due to its central location between Poland and France or between Norway and Switzerland. It was during these periods of extended rail travel that the phenomenon of genocide began to occupy a good part of my thinking. Frankly, I have no idea why. It just seemed to surface of its own volition, unless the frequent contact with things German contributed to this preoccupation.

The process of thinking has always been a mystery to me. I am not referring to the deliberate thinking about a specific topic, but rather to the unplanned and often serendipitous processes that seem to arise spontaneously when least expected. Neither is it clear to me how such unplanned and unintended thinking coalesces into a plan for deliberate action. In retrospect it also seems curious to me that from the beginning I thought of genocide not only as referring to Nazi Germany but as an event that had occurred repeatedly throughout history. I guess it was thanks to a classical gymnasium education that I knew of several cases long before I started doing that kind of research. Needless to add that being a Jew in a hostile environment contributed to my interest in a comparative perspective.

By the time I had returned home to Montreal I had already made up my mind that I wanted to teach a course on genocide, that being the standard method in academia to free the time required to engage in a new project. I prepared a proposal to be submitted to the various committees that had to approve the introduction of a new course. While my colleagues showed no signs of great enthusiasm, being the most senior member of the department facilitated my proposal's passage. Shortly after my return from these sabbatical travels I met my friend and colleague Frank Chalk from the History Department and, over a cup of coffee, we brought each other up to date on our respective activities and plans for the next year. When I told him of my plan for introducing a course on genocide he immediately asked to team-teach it with me -- which in due course we did, starting in 1980-81. Considering the amount of material that this course would have to cover, we planned it to be a two-semester course. For the next fifteen years this course became a regular offering although originally we had planned to offer it only every other year, partly because we both had teaching obligations in other areas, and partly because we thought the depressing effect of the subject required periodic relief. But the pressure of student demand could not be ignored and so we did not get the anticipated relief, except in the summers and during sabbaticals. In 1996, I finally decided that my decreasing energy levels required some consideration and I stopped teaching altogether. This left Frank Chalk, who is quite a bit younger than I, to carry on and to try recruiting an interested colleague with whom to share this course on genocide.

From the beginning, our course was a great success, partly because we used a somewhat unusual method of team-teaching in that both of us were always present for all lectures and switched back and forth in presenting materials. The other reason the course was successful was that it was the only course where students could explore issues concerning the genocidal events that the news media kept reporting with such depressing regularity. The enrolment was remarkably diverse: while there were always Jewish and Armenian students, these were usually outnumbered by students from many other backgrounds. However, no matter what their background, our students shared our explicit aims: to achieve an understanding of the historical and sociological background of the situations and the processes leading to genocides. Only such understanding can justify the hope that in the future we shall be able to develop methods of prevention or intervention. Since we deliberately kept the course prerequisites flexible, students could come from many different disciplines, and since we always offered it in the evening programme all age groups were represented.

While all this was very stimulating, the actual presentation of the course posed enormous problems. In retrospect the reason was embarrassingly simple: I had justified the introduction of this new course by arguing that our university should be doing something that was becoming commonplace in many other universities. However, upon starting the required research and preparing lectures, it turned out that nobody was offering such a course and that the literature that we had counted on using also did not exist. Yes, there were Holocaust courses and there were even some that included the Armenian genocide; but nobody offered a course on comparative genocide. So, instead of building on the experience of others we found ourselves in the position of being unintentional pioneers. Of course, we used Raphael Lemkin's *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe* (1944) and the text of the United Nations Convention (1946). Leo Kuper's *Genocide: Its Political Use in the Twentieth Century* (1981) also had just appeared, but it dealt only with twentieth century genocides. Thus, preparing the course, instead of building on the work of others, meant labourious but exciting library searches for case material in some pretty obscure sources. What drove us to explore these more obscure sources was the tendency of many of the well-known sources to report events only from an elitist perspective. Thus, they might contain detailed reports of empire building, military campaigns, and great battles without any mention of the victims.

Still, we stuck to our original intention of attempting to deal with genocides in all periods of history and all parts of the world. For the first few years our students had to read large numbers of small excerpts from a great variety of sources. But the aim of studying these cases was clear from the beginning: to try to understand the situations and the processes that were likely to eventuate in genocide and to explore possible avenues of prevention and/or intervention in the future. Eventually we pulled some of our materials together in a book that would become the core of the course. It took us longer than anticipated and we

had to omit some of our materials to keep the manuscript to reasonable proportions, but *The History and Sociology of Genocide: Analyses and Case Studies* was finally published by Yale University Press in 1990. The book was well-received and was used by many institutions in the increasing number of courses taking a comparative approach to genocide. It gives us great satisfaction to see that it is still in print and that the publisher still receives requests for permission to reprint excerpts.

Concurrently, we invited specialists to give guest lectures in our course and to meet with interested students and faculty in workshops, as well as individually to discuss relevant issues. Many of these occasions were attended by visitors from other universities within commuting distance. By far the most important of the invited guests was Norman Cohn who came several times from England for extended visits, and who had the greatest influence on our thinking and writing. He chaired many of the informal workshops that we were organizing and he presented a series of public lectures. Many important contributions to our thinking resulted from our informal discussions with him and some of them eventually produced the definition of genocide that is included in our 1990 book:

Genocide is a form of one-sided mass killing in which a state or other authority intends to destroy a group, as that group and membership in it are defined by the perpetrator. (p. 23)

We are still using this definition. It has been criticized by several colleagues: some rejected our definition of a group and some even thought that our emphasis on intent was superfluous. So far, none have argued convincingly enough to give us a reason to modify it.

As a result of these activities we began to feel the need to establish a formal organization that would act as host and that would allow us to be in contact with other organizations. Thus, the Montreal Institute for Genocide Studies came into existence in 1986. One of its first enterprises was to start a series of Occasional Papers that would include our own papers as well as those of interested colleagues. The motivation for the establishment of this series was twofold: on the one hand we wanted to circulate these papers among the quite small number of people who were interested in comparative genocide; on the other hand we wanted to reduce the time that normally elapses before a paper appears in print. At the time, this project required quite an effort in time and money. When we asked our correspondents to give us their Fax number and/or their e-mail address in the hope of saving mailing costs, only a few of them were equipped with either. Since then the rapid spread of new technology has greatly simplified matters. The Institute now has an internet address (www.migs.org) and new papers as well as all other information are instantly available to any interested visitor. It is a telling comment on the pace of technological change that it now is taken for granted by most people that anyone can be reached by Fax or e-mail and that most have access to the internet.

In spite of these advances in faster and cheaper communication the number of scholars interested in genocide is still surprisingly small. The first two meetings of the newly established Association of Genocide Scholars (in 1995 and 1997) attracted forty-odd attendees, not all of whom were actively involved in research and writing. Unfortunately, from my point of view, this slowly expanding field seems to be moving in the wrong direction. Too much attention seems to be paid to definitions, typologies, numbers of victims, and methods of victimization. While all of these concerns have their relevance, too much attention to them detracts from a focus on analyses that might lead to useful conclusions. It seems to me that such useful conclusions require at least two preconditions. The first one requires a much greater attention to the historical antecedents of the genocidal event. The contemporary situations undoubtedly provide a number of clues that should not be ignored; but rarely, if ever, are these sufficient for a successful analysis. The second precondition requires that each case be examined in terms of its own cultural, economic, and social setting in order to elucidate its particularistic features. Unfortunately, these preconditions impose a heavy burden on those of us who are engaged in comparative analysis. Nobody can possibly be conversant with the history, culture, languages, etc. of several cases. One can only rely on the cooperation of experts in the relevant areas. It is this dilemma that makes the comparative study of genocide an interdisciplinary and cooperative project. As a contribution to this approach, I have published (with Karin Solveig Bj-rnson) *Genocide and Gross Human Rights Violations in Comparative Perspective* (Transaction Publishers, 1998) that deals briefly with a large number of cases from all periods of history. However, I believe a major contribution of this volume to be Part II which deals with research methods insofar as they have to be adapted to the special requirements of comparative research on genocide.

My academic training as a sociologist has been crucial in defining my perspective. Therefore, it has been one of my efforts to try, albeit with very little success, to make more sociologists aware of and interested in this area of study. At the above-mentioned meetings of the Association of Genocide Scholars only a minority of the forty-odd attendees were sociologists. I have organized and participated in sessions on genocide at the annual meetings of the Canadian Sociology and Anthropology Association and the American Sociology Association that attracted something less than packed audiences. The program of the 1998 World Congress of the International Sociological Association that was organized into hundreds of sessions and attended by thousands of people listed no sessions on genocide. This is a curious phenomenon, considering that some of us think that sociology is the study of society. Needless to add that I am not alone in attempting to alert our colleagues to this lacuna in our discipline. Perhaps we are just too impatient and should look forward to the time when our message will percolate into

the next generation of scholars. My continued activity in this field may perhaps contribute to that end.

If there has been one aim in my work in this field it has been to find the key to the prevention of future genocides. Although I have thought several times that I was getting close to that key, on further reading and thinking I was always disappointed. It was not only that my ideas changed, but also that they were falsified by events.

One reason why I had to keep revising my ideas is that I kept getting side-tracked by the literature. One such phase was the debate about definitions and typologies. At one extreme was the notion of each victim group that their case was a unique event; at the other extreme was the inclusion of all massacres. I refused to participate in these debates when it became clear to me that they were either treated as ends in themselves, or that they lead to conclusions that I could not accept. So, I have stuck to my original idea that definitions and typologies are tools of research and are good or bad only insofar as they lead, or do not lead, to valid conclusions.

Another way in which the literature sidetracked me is its wide-spread emphasis on the victims. It is hard to ignore that literature, not only because of empathy with their fate, but also because of the urge to assist in alleviating their suffering. It is very easy to imagine that support for NGOs, humanitarian aid organizations, and fund raising drives, will also intervene in or prevent further victimization. Much of that pious hope does not survive a more detached examination of the effects produced by many of these organization. Perhaps some of these findings will lead to more sophisticated methods of alleviating suffering. Another aspect of the emphasis on the victims is the increasing appreciation of their value as reliable witnesses. They are a source of information that is not biased by the interests of the various observers. However, the feature of this literature that I found misleading is that it does not help me to understand the dynamics of the genocidal process. In order to understand that process one needs to study the perpetrators. In that study, a focus on the victims can assist as a source of data, but it is not able to throw light on the genocidal process itself.

As has already happened several times before, I now think that I have finally got a handle on that key to prevention; but that handle is still too tenuous to warrant writing about; it requires quite a bit more reading and thinking. This search for explanation, understanding, and prevention is leading me, as well as other scholars, into areas that did not seem obviously relevant. This search basically involves an exploration of the roles of the poverty and indebtedness of nations, their participation in the arms trade, their exploitation of ethnic and nationalistic ideologies, and their policies with regard to population dynamics. It will also be essential to look at the corollaries of these variables for the individuals who are subject to such economic inequalities and ideological appeals. I know that this sounds very vague and even utopian; but it does seem to me that the key to conflict and violence that can escalate to massacres and genocides is located somewhere in the exploration of these areas.

This approach, and others like it, make it easy to understand why so much of the literature is scattered into several areas. The whole field of genocide studies is barely twenty years old. The original coining of the term and the first book-length treatment, both by Raphael Lemkin, occurred over fifty years ago. It took another thirty years before the scholarly community took up the issues that he had raised. But even now, the number of serious students of comparative genocide remains quite small. The increasing spread of this topic into high school and college teaching leads one to hope that the next generation will provide an additional impetus to such studies.

An Afterthought

I do not expect to produce another book. Shorter papers and op-ed pieces are more to my taste. However, in either case, this may well be the last piece to fall into the hands of editors and publishers. The spread and the acceptance of the internet are providing alternatives that allow authors to avoid the irritations, indignities, and delays imposed by the print media. In addition, the internet allows authors to avoid and evade the hypocrisies associated with the talk about intellectual property, publishers' contracts, copyrights, and royalties. Most of us write with the aim of communicating our ideas, thoughts, research findings, and/or policy recommendations and would prefer to avoid negotiating with the print media in order to find an audience. In any case, there can be no question that the internet is able to provide access to a much larger audience than the traditional methods of publication.

Having got that off my chest, I hope that the next time we meet again it will be at www.migs.org



Montreal Institute For Genocide and Human Rights Studies
Concordia University
1455 De Maisonneuve Blvd. West
Montreal, Quebec, H3G 1M8 Canada
Tel.: (514) 848-2424 ext 5729 or 2404
Fax: (514) 848-4538