THE DEPICTION OF AUSCHWITZ IN SWIZERLAND

Dr. Phil Daniel Gerson was born 1963 in Zürich, Switzerland. He studied history and German studies at Basel University from 1982 to 1989. From 1990 to 1991, he was editor at the Basel "Juice Rundschau" (Jewish Review). From 1991-1995, he was a fellowship holder at the Centre for studies on Anti-Semitism of the TU Berlin and he did his PhD. under Prof. Dr. Wolfgang Benz. From 1996 to 2007, Daniel Gerson was research assistant at the Documentation Centre for Contemporary History at the "Archiv für Zeitgeschichte at ETH Zurich. Since 2007, he has been leading the project "How Jewish life in Switzerland is changing." This is a project in the course of the national research program 58 with the title "religious communities, state and society" at Basel University. In Cooperation with Jaques Picard Schweizer he represents the Academic Working Group of the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research (ITF). He is also board member of the Swiss Society for Judaist Research (Schweizerischen Gesellschaft für Judaistische Forschung (SGJF).

ABSTRACT

The Holocaust has either been a source for strong controversies or suppression in Switzerland. In terms of patterns of remembrance, views have ranged from anti-Semitic intolerance from authorities to victim solidarity from civil society. It has only been deemed acceptable to discuss this topic in light of Swiss history in recent years. The testimony of Holocaust Survivors in Switzerland has played a crucial role (particularly that of the contemporary witnesses and "Gymnasiasten, or college graduates, on Holocaust Remembrance Day on the 27th of January) in sensitizing the younger Swiss generation to the atrocities of this genocide."

1. INTRODUCTION

Relating "Auschwitz" to Swiss history caused a huge controversial discussion in the 1990s. When Jean-Pascal Delamuraz, a Memeber of Parliament, stated that "Auschwitz is not in Switzerland", it provoked the prominent Germanist and literature critic Adolf Muschg to do a counterstatement with the title "if Auschwitz is in Switzerland." [1]

In this context, the following essay describes the significance of Holocaust Survivors in Switzerland in order to broader the perception of genocide as a part of a general history which includes Switzerland. In the introduction, I will outline the historic connection of Switzerland to the Holocaust (Anti-Semitism of authorities, refugee policy and collaboration with the Third Reich regime), as well as explain how Switzerland in the post-war era dealt with these complex entanglements in politics and society. The second section will reveal the presence of Holocaust Survivors in Switzerland and their manifestation, such as compensation claims, autobiographies, media presence/coverage, public appearance and will outline the perception of survivors in Swiss society. In this context, I will discuss the paradigmatic relevance of testimony as a basis for diverse perceptions of Switzerland as a country with a complex and often controversial culture of remembrance. It is these multifaceted people who can pass on important experiences about racism, anti-Semitism and their consequences, especially to younger generations of this country.

2. SWITZERLAND AND THE HOLOCAUST

Though Switzerland was never under direct control of the Third Reich, the country was confronted in many ways with the consequences of National Socialist anti-Semitism and Hitler's policy of extermination. When Hitler was appointed to *Reichskanzler* in spring 1933, thousands of German Jews fled to Switzerland. This lasted till 1945 when still 30,000 Jewish refugees were situated on Swiss soil.

The refugee policy of Switzerland turned out to be the most controversial issue of Swiss politics from the Nazi period until today. The fact that several thousand Jews could

"Though Switzerland was never under direct control of the Third Reich, the country was confronted in many ways with the consequences of National Socialist anti-Semitism and Hitler's policy of extermination. When Hitler was appointed to *Reichskanzler* in spring 1933, thousands of German Jews fled to Switzerland. This lasted till 1945 when still 30,000 Jewish refugees were situated on Swiss soil.

The refugee policy of Switzerland turned out to be the most controversial issue of Swiss politics from the Nazi period until today. The fact that several thousand Jews could save their lives by fleeing to Switzerland is contradicted by the long suppressed reality which shows that Swiss authorities practised an open anti-Semitism refugee policy."

save their lives by fleeing to Switzerland is contradicted by the long suppressed reality which shows that Swiss authorities practised an open anti-Semitism refugee policy. On Swiss initiative, the infamous "J-Stamp" in passports for German or Austrian Jews was introduced. Jews were also rejected and deported to Nazi occupied areas, and in some cases they were handed over directly to Nazi authorities. Until 1944, racial persecution was not even taken as a reason for valid grant of asylum. These decisions were made by the authorities in full awareness of the increasing homicidal persecution measurements of the Nazis and their Allies.[2] Some single regional authorities did oppose the official policy and used their power or even exceeded their competences to allow refugees in. Also numerous civilians—mainly exponents of protestant church and the political left—supported refugees in many ways and saved many of them. This controversial image of a society, which saved Jews on the one hand and handed them over to their certain death on the other hand, has characterized the discourse about Switzerland and the Holocaust right up to the present.[3]

Up to the late 1980s, this debate tended to have a narrow focus for concerned participants, though debates were intense. This radically changed in the 1990's. The debate about "nachrichtenloses Vermögen" (non-traceable capital) in the context of refugee policy during the Holocaust dominated the media for months. Numerous public discussions in all media - radio, papers and television—arose between 1996 and 2000 because of payment requests by Jewish American Institutions towards Swiss Banks. This strongly changed public awareness about the involvement of Switzerland in the Holocaust. The statements of the beginning of this article where Auschwitz is set in "local" relation to Switzerland, reveal the meaning of this controversy. Holocaust Survivors who either were relatives of killed Jews whose property was still Swiss Bank accounts or survivors who could help to improve the understanding of these negative historic events played an important and eminent role.[4]

3. HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS AND THEIR TESTIMONY IN THE PERCEPTION OF SWISS PEOPLE

Because of their central position in Europe, many testimonies about the extinction policies of the European Jews reached Switzerland directly after the "Endlösung" (Final Solution) decision was made in October 1941. In the summer of 1942, Swiss authorities and agents of Jewish as well as Christian religion communities were informed about this genocide taking place in Europe. Individual eye-witnesses of the genocide in Poland and Hungary arrived in Switzerland by the summer of 1944. Large numbers of Concentration- and Death-Camp survivors were transported from Buchenwald to Switzerland in the spring of 1945. Most of these people were forced to leave the country due to Switzerland's anti-Semitic population policy, which dominated Swiss immigration policy until the 1950s. Nevertheless, a few of these refugees succeeded in establishing themselves in Switzerland. Several hundred Holocaust Survivors arrived with their families in Switzerland as a result of the emigration of Hungarian Jewish refugees in 1956 and 1968. They were then granted them and allowed to settle down in Switzerland for long term.

The presence of contemporary witnesses of the Shoah had almost no impact on public life. There were only a few publications which cited statements of Holocaust Survivors concerning Switzerland. These were studies on Swiss refugee policy during the Second World War, called "Ludwig-Bericht" (Ludwig Report), initiated by the Swiss government in 1956 and the "Bonjour-Bericht" (Bonjour Report) of 1970. There were also a few popular scientific books, like "Das Boot ist voll" (The Boat is Full) by the writer Alfred A. Häsler in 1967. The survivors themselves only recorded their stories if it was for compensation demands. With very few exceptions these stories did not find wide acceptance nor resonance in public life. For example, the fact that Anne Franks father, Otto Frank, lived as a respected citizen in Basel in the after war period until his death in 1980 did not affect the Swiss perception of the Holocaust as a phenomenon which also happened in their very own country.

The survivors themselves barely wanted to appear in public until the 1980s. They were concerned with building up families and careers and had little urge to preserve the memory of the Shoah for the world after the war. Autobiographies of Jewish Holocaust Survivors concerning Switzerland were hardly known. Finally, the TV-series "Holocaust" brought the issue into wider public attention in 1979. Very slowly were the Swiss people sensitized to the issue even if most Swiss people could still not relate genocide directly to their own country. A decisive change did not take place until the middle of the 1990s, when the controversy about "nachrichtenloses Vermögen" (non-traceable capital) and the closely related refugee policy put the Holocaust into context for Switzerland. Descendants of former account holders told their family stories of the Nazi era to the media. Books by Holocaust Survivors living now in Switzerland or who once came as refugees to the country were published.[5] Even the extensive „Bergier" Report on the Swiss role during the second World War took the oral statements of Holocaust Survivors into account.[6] Contemporary witnesses founded the support-group „Kontaktstelle für Überlebende des Holocaust"(contact centre for Holocaust Survivors), which developed soon to an important contact point for authorities and civil society to discuss questions about the Shoah. Almost at the same time "Tamach" (www.tamach.org) emerged to become a psychological information centre for Survivors and their relatives.

Due to the Swiss membership to the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education Remembrance and Research (ITF), authorities started to address Holocaust witnesses directly. Members of the Swiss ITF delegation visited meetings of the Survivors. Also the courageous engagement of individual Swiss people who saved Jews was reviewed and fully reported.[7] The *Fund for Needy Holocaust-Victims*, brought into being during the debate about Switzerland's role in the Second World War symbolizes the collective responsibility of Switzerland for the surviving victims of the Shoah.

With introducing the official Holocaust Remembrance Day on January 27th 2006, the Holocaust gained symbolic relevance for the pedagogical sector as well. The annual speech of the Swiss Federal President expressed the responsibility of official Switzerland to remember the Holocaust. Today, contemporary witnesses take an important role in the task of ongoing communication about the complex issue of Holocaust in the classroom ("Mittelschulen").

4. CONTEMPORARY WITNESSES AND HOLOCAUST REMEMBRANCE DAY

Until the Holocaust Remembrance Day was introduced on January 27th, the Jewish genocide was either brought up in history class, as well as sometimes in German classes on the basis of literary texts. All in all, the reference to Switzerland remained few. Some very engaged teachers focused on explaining the anti-Semitic character of the Swiss refugee policy. In some cases there were field trips to Concentration Camps in Germany like Dachau (near Munich) or Netzweuler-Struthof (in Elsass). Contact with real witnesses who were possibly neighbours and from the same village as oneself was never seriously considered. On initiative of the European Council the 27th of January, the liberation Day of Auschwitz Concentration Camp, became Holocaust Remembrance Day in all its member countries. This also led to a new cultural understanding about dealing with the remembrance on the Shoah. Numerous pedagogical publications emerged putting the Jewish genocide by the Nazis and their international collaborators into universal and actual interrelation.[8]

Scientists and creative artists noticed the eminent importance to preserve as many memories of contemporary witnesses as possible. In some Swiss provinces (and depending on financial resources) some small and some large video and DVD projects were initiated which recorded life stories of men and women who were prosecuted in the Holocaust. Also, interview collections of Jewish and non-Jewish witnesses were conducted in Switzerland.[9] Parallel developments lead to the result of witnesses having more and more the urge to share their individual history with the world and to preserve their story from oblivion. That is why Holocaust Survivors were willing to cooperate with private and public initiatives that accumulated at Holocaust Remembrance Day. In Switzerland the "staatliches Archiv für Zeitgeschichte/ Dokumentationsstelle Jüdische Zeitgeschichte der ETH Zürich" (National Archive for Contemporary History/ Documentation Centre for Jewish Contemporary History at ETH Zurich) tried together with the contact centre for Holocaust Survivors and the Institute

of Pedagogic at Zurich University to let contemporary witnesses of the Holocaust meet with school classes in the best way possible on January 27th. At the same time, the stories told at the meeting of Survivors and classes were to be recorded on film and tape. Since 2005, men and women repeatedly consented to provide their stories about their life during the Holocaust to the public. For some of them, their appearance in school at Holocaust Remembrance Day was a premier; they never have talked in public before. The audience usually consisted of around 30 "Maturanten" (Swiss college graduates). The teachers prepared them beforehand in class in an intense discussion about Holocaust, so the pupils could come well prepared to the meetings with the Holocaust witnesses. Subsequent to the reports of the witnesses, an interesting discussion almost always followed the interview. This usually included the witnesses' life in relation to specific experiences (anti-Semitism, societal integration, the children's relation to their parents Holocaust history) that the Survivor has learned about in his home-country Switzerland. The presence of radio and TV-stations at many of these meetings of contemporary witnesses and pupils shows the public interest in the stories of Holocaust Survivors. The media coverage also made it possible for a wider audience to remember the genocide to millions of people by simple concrete stories of Swiss citizens. In a few years there won't be any witnesses of that era left to report on their experiences. That is why it was necessary to review these reports in order to make them accessible and useful for pedagogic purposes in long term conditions. With this in mind, the "Patronat des Schweizerischen Israelitischen Gemeindebundes (SIG)" (Swiss Israeli Community) developed a teaching unit professionally designed for Jewish Holocaust Survivors telling their stories about the Holocaust to schools.[10]

By now, every teacher who wants to educate about the Holocaust has access to the pedagogically reviewed resources of these witness interviews which are a very useful and practical teaching method. And with this pool of knowledge the testimony of contemporary witnesses is no longer only accessible to "elite" pupils as it has been before. The project movie is available in the French and German languages with accompanying brochures in both languages. In this way can the material be used in almost all Swiss schools.

5. CONCLUSION

At the beginning of the 21st century, Switzerland possesses one of the most qualitative, quantitative and pedagogically supervised documentations of Holocaust Survivors life histories due to different factors:

- The wish of the Holocaust Survivors to record their unique life histories according to their wish to give the victims and murdered a lasting testimonial;
- The realisation for today's civil society (schools, universities) that even future generations have to bear a responsibility to deal with difficult aspects of their history;
- The intention of Swiss authorities that modern Switzerland should stand for a country which took responsibility for mistakes in the past and a country which today promotes a pluralist and open society;
- The knowledge that out of the specific bitter Jewish fate during the Holocaust, experiences of universal meaning and consequence emerged.

It might be that the Swiss model of how to deal with Holocaust Survivors proves to be a paradigmatic method for integrating pluralistic and conflictual remembrance cultures.

NOTES

[1] Adolf Muschg, Wenn Auschwitz in der Schweiz liegt, Frankfurt 1997.

[2] See also: Georg Kreis, Die Rückkehr des J-Stempels. Zur Geschichte einer schwierigen Vergangenheitsbewältigung, Zürich 2000, Stefan Mächler, Hilfe und Ohnmacht, Der Schweizerische Israelitische Gemeindebund und die nationalsozialistische Verfolgung 1933-1945, Zürich 2005 und Jacques Picard, Die Schweiz und die Juden 1933-1945, Schweizerischer Antisemitismus, jüdische Abwehr und internationale Migrations- und Flüchtlingspolitik, Zürich 1994.

[3] See also: Stefan Keller, Grüningers Fall. Geschichten von Flucht und Hilfe", Zürich 1993 (French translation: „Délit d'humanité", Lausanne 1994) und Wacker, Jean Claude, Humaner als Bern! Schweizer und Basler Asylpraxis gegenüber den jüdischen Flüchtlingen von 1933-1945 im Vergleich, Basel 1992.

[4] Siehe dazu: Barbara Bonhage, Hans-Peter Lussy u. Marc Perrenoud, Nachrichtenlose Vermögen bei Schweizer Banken: Depots, Konten und Safes von Opfern des nationalsozialistischen Regimes und Restituionsprobleme in der Nachkriegszeit, hrsg. Von der Unabhängigen Expertenkommission Schweiz-Zweiter Weltkrieg, Zürich 2001 und Thomas Maissen, Verweigerte Erinnerung, Nachrichtenlose Vermögen und die Schweizer Weltkriegsdebatte 1989-2004, Zürich 2005.

[5] See also: Raphael Gross, Eva Lezzi und Marc R. Richter, „Eine Welt, die ihre Wirklichkeit verloren hatte..." Jüdische Überlebende des Holocaust in der Schweiz, Zürich 1999 and Max Perkal, Schön war draussen...Aufzeichnungen eines 19jährigen Juden aus dem Jahre 1945, Zürich 1995.

[6] Unabhängige Expertenkommission Schweiz - Zweiter Weltkrieg: Die Schweiz, der Nationalsozialismus und der Zweite Weltkrieg, Zürich 2002.

[7] See also: François Wisard, Les Justes suisses, Des actes de courage méconnus au temps de la Shoah, Genf 2008.

[8] See also: Barbara Bonhage, Peter Gautschi, Jan Hodel, und Gregor Spuhler: Hinschauen und Nachfragen. Die Schweiz und die Zeit des Nationalsozialismus im Licht aktueller Fragen, Zürich 2006, Monique Eckmann und Michèle Fleury, Racisme et citoyenneté: un outil pour la réflexion et l'action, Genève 2005 und Kurt Messmer (Hrsg.). Holocaust-Gedenktag: Erinnern statt vergessen—Handeln statt schweigen, Luzern 2005.

[9] That is when in 1995 the society Memoriav was founded, which detains films about Holocaust and conducts interviews with contemporary witnesses

[10] Schweizerischer Israelitischer Gemeindebund, Eva Pruschy (Hrsg.): ÜberLebenErzählen - Holocaust-Überlebende in der Schweiz/ Survivre et témoigner. Rescapés de la Shoah en Suisse, Zürich 2007.