



THE JACOB RADER MARCUS CENTER OF THE
AMERICAN JEWISH ARCHIVES

Preserving American Jewish History

MS-603: Rabbi Marc H. Tanenbaum Collection, 1945-1992.

Series E: General Alphabetical Files. 1960-1992

Box 86, Folder 15, NBC "Holocaust" - Israel, 1979.



ISRAEL

In Israel, the nation which to a large extent came into being as a consequence of the holocaust, the controversy over the television series began well before Holocaust was broadcast.

Many in Israel feared that a showing of Holocaust ^would prompt a national trauma, through the painful personal memories it would call up in a large segment of the population. The debate reached all levels of society, including the Knesset (Israeli Parliament), where a nationally publicized discussion on the show took place.

The series was screened privately for a group of survivors and for government officials in an attempt to gauge what the national reaction might be like. ~~But~~ Ultimately, the decision was made to show the series; Israeli Broadcasting Company (IBC) official Moshe Amirav explained ^{the real value of the series is the education} that "It's painful anytime you open a wound, but we've decided that the educational value of such a film merits its showing." Publicity chairman for IBC Arnon Zuckerman stated that the "film is very important for the younger generation in Israel, which is not very aware, and for the other half of our population who did not come from Europe."

According to a preliminary survey by the Israel Institute for Applied Social Research and Communications of Hebrew University, 1.5 million of the 3.5 million Israelis watched the first installment of Holocaust on September 11, 1978. Other sources reported that two-thirds of Israel's adult population viewed the initial segment.

Not wishing to intensify the horror of the drama, IBC did not plan the broadcast for successive nights. ^{However,} ~~But the~~ national attention ^{which was focused on the horror} ~~paid to the horrors~~ of the Nazi era was diminished by the unpre-

cedented Camp David Peace Accords which were announced between the second and third segments, and the final two episodes, in fact, were postponed while the nation ~~debated the peace accords and~~ turned its attention to the future, *to discussion of the peace accords and the future.*

The Israeli public is comprised of a multitude of groups from different parts of the Mediterranean area as well as ^{an estimated} ~~some~~ 400,000 survivors of the holocaust. Israel's uniqueness as the Jewish state, and as the place of refuge for so many holocaust survivors in a relatively small population, made a major public response to the series all but inevitable.

All facets of the Israeli media made extensive preparations for the airing. Four-page supplements were printed in leading newspapers which functioned as guides and which differentiated between the factual and fictional material and characters in the film.

The Israeli Education Ministry prepared a background booklet for schools with an extensive explanation of the Nazi rise to power. Guidelines to aid teachers in conducting classroom discussion as well as the recommendation that children under 10 or 12 years old not be allowed to view the film were ^{also distributed} ~~given out~~ to teachers. The Ministry's booklet stressed that the series was not a "detailed historical documentary" and contained a bibliography for those who wanted to study the era further. One survey of students showed that two out of three school aged Israelis were interested in learning more ^{about the} ~~of the~~ holocaust *and Nazi Germany*.

Sensitive to the possible emotional effects of the series, IBC made available a team of psychologists on a call-in basis. ^{Hillel Klein,} (One noted psychologist/advised people before the broadcast not to view it alone.) Yet only five calls came in to the team.

And when IBC broadcast a series of question and answer sessions on the holocaust with experts and historians such as Professor Yehuda Bauer and Dr. Israel Guttman, the program only received 54 calls. Two thirds were from native Israelis or those with European backgrounds, and one-third were from African or Asian born members of the population. Only one quarter of the calls were from Israelis under twenty years old.

But ~~the~~ Israeli reaction appeared in other ^{many} areas, and was quite strong, and largely favorable--if not always to the series itself, than at least to its being broadcast. ^{upon}

A 'man-on-the-street' survey reported in the Baltimore Sun found that 16 of 25 questioned saw the first segment, and all 16 had favorable responses to the series. Two of those who did not watch reported it was because they did not wish to recall personal tragedies and horrors.

The Israeli press response was strong and divided over the quality of the series, but largely unanimous on the value of its showing.

Ha'aretz television critic Hedda Rosen regarded the film as a "trivialization of the holocaust that borders at times on profanation," and one survivor, writing in the Jewish Exponent, expressed the sentiment of many survivors when he wrote that Holocaust's sentimentalization and Hollywood superficiality left the series without real impact and "an insult to those who suffered." Yet many, if not the majority, of survivors, reported that they could not watch the series, and a great many expressed the hope that the world as a whole would watch it. The contemporary efforts by neo-Nazis to deny the history of the extermination programs of the Third Reich gave further strength to this hope.

Many who were critical of the film argued that the series did not show enough. Survivors noted that author Gerald Green did not address the problem of starvation which was a constant threat for Nazi victims. A story in the Jerusalem Post pointed out that there appeared to have been little effort to probe the roots of the Nazi final solution. Tuvia Friedman, a survivor and head of the Nazi War Crimes Documentation Bureau in Israel, however, thought very differently, and stated that the first episode was "exceptional, portraying the period very well."

The absence of the Führer himself was the subject of some of the most widely divergent commentary. Gideon Hausner, the chief prosecutor in the Adolf Eichmann trial, took exception to the fact that Hitler's role was minimized in "Holocaust." Hausner also remarked that the film did not depict reality and was "an adapted and sweetened version of the holocaust." But he stated that he "accepts it as an effort to try to bring the story to the multitudes."

The diametrically opposite ^{an} point of view was ^{articulated} ~~aired~~ by Moshe Kohn in a Jerusalem Post ^{story} ~~article~~. He reflected that "the film's producers were on the mark in leaving Hitler and Himmler so far in the background and concentrating on the 'banal' Germans without whose cooperation the holocaust could not have been implemented."

Members of the Kibbutz Lohamey Ghettaot (Ghetto Fighters, which filmed its own documentary on the Nazi era, "The 81st Blow" (on the basis of their experience as survivors of the Warsaw Ghetto) thought the film a failure. Any resemblance between events in the film, they stated publicly, and those of real life, were accidental.

Arabs in Israel and the occupied territory voiced mixed reactions to Holocaust. A street survey questioned 10 Arabs, only 3 of whom had seen the film at all; none of them had seen more than one hour of the broadcast. Yet Ha'aretz reported that thousands of Arabs did see the film. One young Arab compared Israeli behavior toward Palestinians to the Nazi treatment of the Jews. On the other hand, a young academic and supporter of the PLO acknowledged that he had learned something "vital about the way Israelis think. "For the first time, it is real to me," he said, "... and I shudder."

The Mayor of Bethlehem, Elias Freij, told a correspondent that "To say I am shaken would be a wretched and meager understatement. This is a horrible reminder of the deterioration of man, but it is also a lesson for us all, Jews and Arabs, who live in this region..."

Despite the large audience Holocaust engendered and the widespread press comments on the series, Holocaust, once it was shown, received less official attention that might have been anticipated. Many reviewers speculated on this matter. One comment, cited in the Washington Post, contended that the low keyed official response to the series stemmed from the "fear of damaging the image of the Israeli fighter." Perhaps, suggested another, this may explain the continued use of Rudi, the resistance fighter, and sole survivor of the film's central family, in photographs accompanying articles in the Israeli press.

Although some young Israelis, particularly those born in Israel (Sabras), could not understand how Jews could go to their deaths

without fighting, the film actually promoted a fuller understanding of the near powerlessness of the European Jews, and of the resistance they were able to mount. A Jerusalem Post article claimed that the 'sheep to the slaughter' issue has been confronted squarely and that Jews have largely succeeded in refuting the allegation.

The film also effectively warned against too much dependency, an issue which Israelis are continually conscious of, reported the Washington Post. Many Israelis also believed that Holocaust should have succeeded in illustrating to the world why Israel appeared so stubborn in its negotiations with Egyptian President Anwar Sadat.

Amos Elon, the widely respected journalist with Ha'aretz, was encouraged not so much by the series but by Israel's reaction to it. In keeping with other critics, he noted the historical inaccuracies in ^{the film} it, but maintained that the relevance of the series lay not in its quality, but in the fact that "for two hours, two-thirds of the adult population were seeing, and possibly feeling the same thing." The question, Elon thought, that was central to the showing of Holocaust in the Jewish state was "Does this film, with all its shortcomings, encourage memory and prevent forgetfulness?"

His answer was that it did, that "the public meaning of the experience..." is that ^{Holocaust} ~~it~~ forces remembrance upon us and prevents oblivion."

*1st draft
Israeli reaction*

Israeli reaction to "Holocaust" must be understood in light of the unique political situation of the country. Israel, in some measure came into existence as a result of the Nazi atrocities. The special composition of the population is another significant factor in any analysis of Israeli reaction to the film. The Israeli public is comprised of a multitude of groups from different parts of the Mediterranean as well as 400,000 survivors of the holocaust. The fact that the population is largely Jewish and that such a large sector can relate to the period in a personal way accounts for the extreme sensitivity in Israel to materials on the Nazi era and the extermination of European Jewry.

The controversy whether or not to air "Holocaust" was given great consideration because of the potential national trauma. The debate reached all levels of Israeli society and became the subject of national discussion in the Knesset (Israeli Parliament). The series was screened privately for a group of survivors as well as for government officials. The ultimate decision to show the film to Israeli audiences was based on its educative merit. Moshe Amirav, an official, summarized the reasoning of the Israeli Broadcasting Company (IBC) and the Knesset, "It's painful anytime you open a wound, but we've decided that the educational value of such a film merits its showing." Publicity chairman for IBC, Arnon Zuckerman, stated that the "film is very important for the younger generation in Israel, which is not very aware, and for the other half of our population who did not come from Europe."

According to a preliminary survey by the Israel Institute for Applied Social Research and Communications of Hebrew University, 1.5 million of the 3.5 million Israelis viewed the first installment of "Holocaust" on September 11, 1978. Other sources report that 2/3 of Israel's adult population viewed the initial segment. Not wishing to intensify the horror of the drama, IBC did not plan the broadcast for successive night. The attention focused on "Holocaust" was

was diminished even further by current events. The unprecedented Camp David Peace Accords which were announced between the second and third segments also caused the remaining two segments to be post-poned.

All facets of Israeli media made extensive preparations for the airing. Four page supplements were printed in leading newspapers which functioned as guides and differentiated between the factual and fictional material and characters in the film.

Sensitive to the possible emotional effects of the series, Israeli Broadcasting Company officials made available a team of psychologists on a call-in basis during the airing. The psychologists received only five calls. Israeli psychologist, Hillel Klein advised that people should refrain from viewing the series alone.

Israeli educational television conducted a series of question and answer sessions. The sessions featured interviews with historians and experts on the holocaust including Professor Yehuda Bauer and Dr. Israel Guttman. The program received a total of 54 calls; only 1/4 of the questions came from viewers under twenty years old. Two-thirds of the call-ins came from native Israelis or those with European backgrounds, and 1/3 came from the African or Asian-born sector of the population.

The Israeli Education Ministry prepared a background booklet for schools with an all inclusive explanation of the advent of Nazism. The booklet also refers to recent statements by Austrian Chancellor Bruno Kriesky. There are guidelines to aid teachers in conducting classroom discussion as well as the recommendation that children under 10 or 12 years old not be allowed to view the film. The Education Ministry's booklet stresses that "Holocaust" is not a "detailed historical documentary" and contains an appended bibliography for those who seek further factual information. One source reports that a survey of students showed 2 out of 3 school age Israelis are interested in learning more.

A "man-on-the-street" survey reported in the Baltimore Sun noted that 16 of 25 questioned saw the first segment; and all 16 gave the series a favorable rating. Two of the 9 who did not watch "Holocaust" did not wish to recall their personal horrors.

The yardstick for measuring reaction to "Holocaust" is distinguished from that in any other country, but ^{it} is clearly not possible to simplify. Yitzhak Livni, director of the television service, admits that although it resembles soap opera and perhaps lacked artistic value the film was shown "because it is a serious work in television terms". In a Jewish Exponent article one survivor expressed the sentiments of many others contending that the sentimentalization and Hollywood superficiality had no real impact and that the program is "an insult to those who suffered." Television critic for Ha'aretz, Hedda Bosen regards the film as a "trivialization of the holocaust that borders at times on profanation." Yet, many, if not the majority of survivors, believed that although they could not watch the film themselves, the world should watch the series especially in light of the denial by neo-Nazi groups and other fascists that the extermination of Jews under the Third Reich never occurred.

Many who were critical of the film argued that the series did not show enough. Survivors noted that author Gerald Green did not address the problem of starvation which was a major threat for Nazi victims. A story in the Jerusalem Post points out that there appears to be little effort to probe the roots of the Nazi extermination. Tuvia Friedman, a survivor and head of the Nazi War Crimes Documentation Bureau in Israel, perceived the film very differently and stated that the first episode was "exceptional, portraying the period very well."

Response on the presence, or rather lack of presence, of Adolf Hitler is the subject of some of the most greatly diverging commentary. Gideon Hausner, the chief prosecutor in the Adolf Eichmann trial took exception to the fact that Hitler's role was minimized in "Holocaust". Hausner also remarked that the film

pared Israeli behavior toward Palestinians to the Nazis' treatment of the Jews. The mayor of Bethlehem, Mr. Elias Freij told a correspondent: "To say that I am shaken would be a wretched and meager understatement. This is a horrible reminder of the deterioration of man, but it is also a lesson for us all, Jews and Arabs, who live in this region...there is no substitute for understanding and communication, for mutual respect and a humane approach...the time has come to find a common language and live in neighborly peace." A young academic and supporter of the PLO acknowledged that he has learned something "vital" about the way Israelis think, "For the first time, it is real to me...and I shudder."

Israel has officially paid less attention to the subject of the holocaust than one might anticipate. Many reviewers speculated on this issue. A comment cited in the Washington Post contends that the Israelis' failure to address the holocaust and its implication stems from the "fear of damaging the image of the Israeli fighter." Perhaps this may explain the continued use of Rudi, the single Weiss survivor in photographs accompanying articles in Israel.

Although some young Israelis, particularly Sabras, could not understand how the Jews could go to their deaths without fighting, the film actually promoted a fuller understanding of the near powerlessness of the Jews. The Jerusalem Post article claims that the "sheep to the slaughter" issue has been confronted squarely and Jews have largely succeeded in refuting the allegation. The film effectively warned against too much dependency, an issue which Israelis are conscious of continually reports the Washington Post. "Holocaust" also illustrated for Jews in Israel and throughout the world why Israel appeared so stubborn during negotiations with President Anwar Sadat of Egypt.

Despite all comments, critical and supportive, the general reaction to "Holocaust" in Israel was favorable. Many young Israelis told the press that they learned more from "Holocaust" than from a hundred history lessons. Amos Elon

does not depict reality and that it is "an adapted and sweetened version of the holocaust," but also stated that he "accepts it as an effort to try to bring the story to the multitudes." Moshe Kohn's views as expressed by him in a Jerusalem Post article are diametrically opposed to Hausner's. He reflects "...the film's producers were on the mark in leaving Hitler and Himmler so far in the background and concentrating on the 'banal' Germans without whose cooperation the holocaust could not have been implemented."

Members of Kibbutz Lohamey Ghettaot (Ghetto Fighters) who survived the Warsaw Ghetto wrote letters stating that any resemblance between events described in the film and real life are accidental. The Kibbutz has filmed its own documentary on the Nazi era "The 81st Blow" which won an Oscar nomination.

Amos Elon, the widely respected Israeli journalist writing in Ha'aretz, is encouraged not so much by the film but by Israel's response to it. In keeping with other critics and journalists Elon notes the historical inaccuracies, but maintains the relevance of the film is not the quality of the program, but the fact that "for two hours, two-thirds of the adult population were seeing, and possibly feeling the same thing." The question, according to Elon, which merits our attention is "Does this film, with all its shortcomings, encourage memory and prevent forgetfulness?" Elon's answer is affirmative.

Elon further notes that because of the format of the film "...the nightmare of the holocaust has been transformed into the real sufferings of a real family." Many Israelis regarded the personalization of the story as particularly beneficial for the young who would more readily identify with the characters than with abstract figures and historical facts and dates.

Arabs in Israel and the occupied territory voiced mixed reaction to "Holocaust." A street-survey questioned 10 Arabs, only 3 of whom had seen the film at all; none of the Arabs questioned had seen more than one-hour of the broadcast. Yet, Ha'aretz reports that thousands of Arabs did see the film. One young Arab com-

concludes that "...the public meaning of the experience..." is that "it forces remembrance upon us and prevents oblivion."

