

rozhovor

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Interview with Professor Dalia Ofer

My first question begins with a quotation from The Encyclopaedia of Jewish Women which sums up your life in the following way: "Having grown up in the shadow of Holocaust, historian Dalia Ofer chose to study multiple aspects of its events and after effects by researching the social and gendered history of the Holocaust and the linguistic and sociological ramifications of the Holocaust on present-day Israel." There are some points in this summary I find very interesting for a Czech reader. For example: what does it mean to research a gendered history of the Holocaust?

Well, I think that what is a little exaggerated is this "growing up in the shadow of the Holocaust". It sounds nice, however... You know, I grew up in Israel to parents who came from Eastern Europe – my mother is from Latvia, my father from Galicia. They had met in Palestine in the early 1930s, before Israel was established, and we didn't really experience the Holocaust. Some brothers and cousins of each of my parents were already in Palestine. But both families were very large – there were about twenty siblings, many of them were left in Latvia and Poland, and most of them perished, they were murdered by the Nazis and their collaborators. The relatives who survived the Nazi massacre came to Palestine/Israel after the war. A few immigrated illegally and others arrived on the basis of some official arrangements. The meetings with these relatives had a great impact on me, and their stories stayed with me for a long time. However, to claim that I grew up "in the shadow of the Holocaust" is far too dramatic.



Now, why a gendered history? Because our whole life is gendered! I mean that we live in a gendered community. Men and women are different. Not only in terms of sex – female and male, but they have different roles and their socialization takes place in a different way. The attitude of the society towards men and women is different. It's true that we nowadays think of a more egalitarian upbringing of boys and girls – nevertheless, even if I look at my own grandchildren, there is a difference between my female grandchildren and my male grandchildren. One part of has certainly something to do with biology, and today's research tells us that more and more about it, but a lot of it still lies in the socialization. For example: what kind of toys do we give to boys and girls, how is a child identified with mother and father, the types of clothes for boys and girls and the colours that are selected for them to wear, all these have a significant influence on one's identity. Our lives are gendered. Going back to the Holocaust research – why should we talk about “the Jew”, in a general way? The Jew was a concept in the racial theory of the Nazis, but in the real life, there were Jews who were different in terms of language and culture, there were rich Jews and poor Jews, there were educated Jews and the uneducated ones. We relate to such social differences or categories, obviously. However, when we say “gender”, there are some people who feel resentment. They connect it with the political movement of women and many men get scared. So let's calm down, we are not going to promote any political agenda in our research. I certainly agree with the cause of women's rights and I personally promote the feminist ideology and the importance of women in society, but as a historian, I am doing research and think of social classification. The Holocaust was an event in history and it is part of the history of all European nations, and, of course, it is a central event in the history of the Jews. The research of the Holocaust doesn't need any unique research tools, we have to use the same research tools we use for all histories: be it medieval history, Czech history, German history, Arab history, anything. As modern historians, we are open to the use of concepts and methods of other social sciences. We use sophisticated methodologies that we borrow from literary studies and from other disciplines. These are the tools of the historian's craft, we don't have anything else, and we often feel that our interpretation is very limited. We have to admit that we do not know, that we are not satisfied with our explanation or with a reconstruction of the events: OK, we just don't know, we don't understand everything and in the future, other historians may come up with a more comprehensive interpretation.

Would you say that your focus is on the individuals during the Holocaust and on their stories?

No, no, no – I think... first of all, I am historian, I am a researcher, I've been a teacher for a number of years, and one's interests and the focus of one's research change. Many reasons may cause changes in one's research agenda and sometimes things just happen. For example, my approach to the gender issues emerged from a meeting with Professor

Lenore Weizmann who is now a friend and a colleague of mine. She came to Israel on a research grant as a sociologist. She was doing feminist research on the United States society and she got involved in gender issues during the Holocaust. She was interested in Jews who were passing as non-Jews, and was intrigued to see the gender differences. I was drawn to the subject through her questions and we started a project together. And then, you know, one thing leads to another. In this project, for example, my interest was to listen to the voices of the people. So I was looking for letters from that time, for journals of women or girls. I realized that while we have many present-day writings on the Holocaust by men, more of the memoirs from the early period after the war were written by women! Why was this, I thought, and it increased my interest to understand how were men and women experiencing the life under the Nazi oppression, what were the means what of expressing one's experience, and so on. So the individual stories or individual voices are important because I think people are important, every history is a history of people. However, you cannot stay with these as a historian. As a historian, you try to reach generalizations, so I take what I am able to utilize from anthropology, particularly from Clifford Geertz's “thick interpretation”. I am looking for the impact of the individual stories on the efforts to reconstruct the more general story, the narrative of the whole society. I think that one who wants to understand human reactions, and in my case it is the reaction of the Jews, the victims, during the Holocaust, one cannot use a mostly quantitative methodology. So I am using a lot of qualitative methodologies that were developed in the narrative analysis in anthropology, and I tried to incorporate them into the historical reconstruction of the Jewish society in East European ghettos, which is my main interest. So the individual is the starting point and an important one, it really draws my interest; however, this is only the starting point. The aim is to understand the society via the individuals and not to neglect other structural factors...

You were talking about some of the authors that influenced you. Who do you think, of people whom you met or read, has influenced your work most?

Well, you know, when you reach the PhD stage, you are already influenced by a large number of your teachers. I mean you don't start with a PhD. You have a bachelor degree, and then you have a master's degree, and you write seminar papers for different professors... For my first degree at the Hebrew university, I studied general history, and for the first few years I couldn't even decide if I wanted to do a major in medieval history or if I wanted to concentrate on the modern period. So I concentrated on both and wrote a lot of seminar papers that dealt with the English peasants on the one hand and then with the Enlightenment, emancipation and Germany and the Weimar Republic on the other hand. There were two very important historians who had great impact on my way of thinking: the late Professor Jacob Talmon who wrote on totalitarianism and on the democratic totalitarianism. The other expert who was very important in the formation of my thinking as a historian and of my analysis was the late Professor Yehoshua Arieli

who worked on the U.S. frontier, on the people who dared to try and do things differently, on the meaning of democracy. I remember his classes where we were reading different texts as extremely important.

In terms of Jewish history, again, there is a great number of historians who influenced my work. One is the late Professor Haim Hillel Ben-Sasson whose research was focused on the Jewish medieval period. Our seminar on the medieval Jewish society in Spain, for example, in particular on the Islamic period, which was entitled "The Golden Age of the Jewish History in Spain", was very, very influential. As far as modern Jewish history is concerned, it was the late Professor Shmuel Ettinger who came from a Communist background and was active as a young man in Palestine. He wrote extensively about modern Jewish history and suggested the model of the centrifugal and centripetal forces that shaped it. He was one of the historians who dared to offer a universal model for the understanding of anti-Semitism. So I was already quite matured when I started to focus on the Holocaust period. And I certainly should not forget Professor Yehuda Bauer who was my mentor and with whom I also wrote my Master's and PhD dissertation.

However, I must say that when I started to work on my PhD and to attend the graduate seminars, many Holocaust survivors were participating in the same classes. These were Holocaust survivors who had been unable to go to the university before and only started their studies later on. Among these participants was, for example, Professor Yisrael Gutman who finally turned out to be a colleague and a dear friend of mine. There was Shalom Cholawski who passed away a short time ago and who wrote a lot about Belarus and contributed significantly to the history of the Jews during the Holocaust in Belarus. And there were many more.

I was sitting with them in seminars and heard their comments. As a young student in my twenties, a born Israeli trying to understand the richness of Eastern Europe I endeavoured to get a feel of the environment, of the physical landscape they were describing and deliberating. At that point I had never been to Eastern Europe – Israelis couldn't travel to Eastern Europe after the war of 1967 because of political reasons. Therefore it was quite a challenge to try to capture some of what the Jews must have experienced in that landscape while escaping or hiding, to imagine the smells and colours of small villages or larger towns. All this was foreign for me. And the knowledge of these unusual students and their familiarity with the geography was immensely inspiring; all those small and large places from Prague and Sudetenland to Warsaw and to Bucharest were like their playground. Their familiarity with Eastern and Central Europe was like my own relationship with Israel, and on top of this was their knowledge of the languages. Each of them knew the native language of their country of origin, German, many of them knew French (this depended on the place where they grew up), and all knew Yiddish and Hebrew. Russian, Polish, Slovak, Czech, Romanian, Bulgarian – these were languages that those people mastered. And I had to struggle with every single foreign language I studied. They also learned English that was obligatory at the Hebrew University. It was an amazing

experience to realize how much effort does it take to be able to understand these faraway countries and the destroyed communities. To put it in the language that we use as teachers: how long is the bridge that we have to cross from where we are, or from where I was, to the place that I wanted to research?

We are talking, for instance, about the Warsaw and the Lodź ghettos and from our position, it seems that they were quite similar. However, these two ghettos were extremely different from each other. And when you consider the smaller places, or second-size ghettos, some of which were open and others were sealed by a wall, you realize how multifaceted the reality was. I was overwhelmed by this fact and attracted to it in a way that is hard to explain. I knew that I was going to go through a great adventure in order to learn. I would like to mention one saying of Yehuda Bauer, who was, as I've already mentioned, my professor and mentor. I admired him immensely – his openness, his capacity to let his students do things and enjoy the success and his ability to give the credit to other people. He told us once that we should read one testimony every week, "so that you will not think in abstractions, such as killing, hunger, etc, and forget the people, the suffering Jews." For me, this is a guideline and I quoted it many, many times to my students and demanded them to do the same. I see this as an extremely important guideline.

What is then Yehuda Bauer's approach to the study of the Holocaust which could be named as the Jerusalem school: first, the Jewish people were not a mere object of history, as you might infer from the way Raoul Hilberg, for example, explained the Holocaust. We should study them as subjects of historical activities. Hilberg's book *The Destruction of European Jews*, which was published in 1959, is a classic. He centred on the German perpetrators and their collaborators and handled the Jews as the objects of the final solution. He attempted to interpret the process of destruction through the process of bureaucracy.

But for Bauer and for what we now call "the Jerusalem school", the Jews were the subject of history and the subject of the historical research, although their actions could not really change the proceeding of the final solution. They were able to struggle for their survival; they were able to manoeuvre with the Nazi orders. However, when the SS made the decision to dismantle a ghetto, the deportation of the Jews to the death camps was unavoidable. And such a huge number of communities vanished! However, you don't write the history from the end, from the destruction: a historian have to walk in the footsteps of the historical protagonist. One should follow the events in detail in order to learn what had happened, how were the Jews living and dying, and what could have been considered normal in these abnormal times. How were mothers, fathers and children endeavouring to protect their families? What might have forced families to disband and the young people to run away to the forests and find shelter, or join the partisans? Looking at the history from this perspective presents the Jews not as an object of Nazi murders, but as the subject of historical research. Of course, the Nazi ideology,

policy and the regime of Nazi occupation are major players in the historical description. Nonetheless, the Jews, with their different capacities, are as important as those factors for our understanding of the destruction, its different stages and the totality of cruelty and inhumanity that was exerted on the Jews.

This historical approach of the Jerusalem school meant a complete turn in the research of the Holocaust. Another historian and also a friend of mine who had a key influence on my work is Professor Yisrael Gutman. Gutman, who is a survivor from the Warsaw ghetto and from a number of concentration camps, went to the university in a later stage of his life and became one of the most prominent historians of the Holocaust. I was fortunate in being his colleague and friend and he had a great impact on my personal and professional growth.

When talking about influences of different historians on my work, we must remember that in the academia, you are part of a community of scholars that includes not only your colleagues, but also your students, in particular the advanced PhD students. There is the ongoing dialogue with other scholars from your own field and from other disciplines in the world. For the academia, the globalization of the intellectual life started much earlier than the economic globalization we know today.

I would also like to mention Raul Hilberg whom I had met before I did my PhD and had long talks with him that proved to be extremely important. There were also other American and German historians who came very often to Israel and we conducted seminars and informal talks of the give-and-take kind: these intellectual relationships were forming in an ongoing process along with my professional development, and my research interests were also taking shape in several directions.

What was your first personal encounter with the Holocaust? When I say the Holocaust, what is the first image from your childhood that pops out in your mind?

Well, my first encounter was very personal. Shortly after the end of the war, I was very, very young then, during the holiday of Sukkoth, a cousin of my father came to visit us. She was a survivor from Poland and had immigrated to Palestine before the State was established. As she could not get a certificate to enter Palestine legally (this was under the British Mandate that limited the number of Jews who could immigrate to Palestine rather strictly), she entered the country in a semi-legal way, through a fictitious marriage with a Jew from Palestine that eventually turned out to be a real marriage. In my eyes, she was the most beautiful young woman, as I now recall her to my memory. She spoke Yiddish which I did not understand and which seemed to me to be a secret language of our parents. She told us her personal story of the war years. She escaped from the ghetto to a forest with her older brother who had already had a family. After a certain period of time in the forest, they were unable to hold on, they returned to the ghetto (to Bochnia) and then they were sent to a forced-labour camp... I certainly didn't understand her story at that time. However, I saw this young, beautiful woman, I heard her stories, without having

any clue of the actual reality and the forest in my imagination echoed childhood stories, such as "The Little Red Riding Hood". When I was growing up in Israel, we had very few trees and the mountains of the country were more or less bare. Therefore a forest was something very romantic. The story of my father's cousin, my aunt, was in my eyes a heroic story, not a story of victimization. I must admit that when I grew up and heard the expression that the Jews in the ghettos "went like sheep to the slaughter", it was an alien perception I did not quite understand. I was suspicious and did not trust that expression, and yet this was a consensus of the time.

...it's the phrase that people "went like sheep to the slaughter"? As far as I remember, Abba Kovner is considered to be its author, isn't he...?

Yes, he is mostly known in relation to this phrase. However, it was also coined by others in a slightly different way. It was used by the members of the "underground" resistance in Krakow, and other people also used it in a slightly different way. He did not mean it as a condemnation of the people, but he wanted to encourage them to resist the Nazis. You know, the origin of the phrase is in the Bible, in the book of Isaiah (see: Iz 53,7), but its meaning is not exactly the same.

And did the people who came from Europe talk about their experience? Did all the people talk?

I can't say all the people: I can only say that the research proves that people were talking about it and that it was a discussed topic. I can give you an example from my own memory and my own family. One of my father's cousins came for a visit with three children: the oldest daughter who was one year older than my older sister, a boy who was one or two years older than I was, and with whom I became very, very friendly, and the younger girl. This younger girl was actually the daughter of a sister of my aunt that had been murdered and she was adopted by her aunt and uncle... They were all together in the forest. I will not go into details, but the story of the murder of the girl's biological mother was not a secret at all. Everything that happened to them was told and retold. And I also remember another family of our relatives who came with their two younger daughters, a little younger than I was – beautiful girls with blue eyes and blond hair, I don't know why blue eyes and blond hair are always considered very beautiful, but it's also like this in Israel. And they were telling their story. So yes, we heard many stories of what happened to the family members in Europe. As a child, I used to ask my father about his life in Sanok and my mother had to tell me about Latvia, but theirs were not "Holocaust stories". But, you know, when you are a child, even if you hear Holocaust stories, you don't have the context and you don't understand the environment exactly. In front of you, you see people that look like all ordinary people around you, who immigrated a number of years after the tragic event and they are full of energy and have a great will to reconstruct their lives and bring up their children. When we heard the stories of our cousins, they sounded to us as quite heroic stories.

Of course, they had their pains, but they had families and they worked very hard to support them. These were very difficult times in Israel, also for the veterans like my family. We were not poor, we belonged to a lower middle class, but to support the family, to provide your children with education, which was not free at that point, required a great effort. I remember people who worked hard, managed and often even did well. They were telling their stories about the life in Israel and in the diaspora before the Holocaust and after it, mostly during family gatherings, more or less in a positive atmosphere. They were very positive people and also optimistic in many respects. These are my personal memories of a child and of a teenager who grew up with in one family with these people. As an adult and a historian, I could certainly give many others insights, but you asked me about my personal experience of such a one who was born and grew up in Israel. These are my memories and my perspective from that period.

There are historians or authors, for instance Tom Segev and others, who say that the period of the 1950s – the early period of the State of Israel – was like a period of silence or suppression of the Holocaust memory. What do you think about this?

You know, I wrote about this quite extensively. Professor Anita Shapira, who is a very important historian of Zionism and Israel, differentiated between the personal and the collective memory. She claimed that people talked frequently about the Holocaust in the private sphere, but less in the public sphere. However, when you follow the public debates of the time, you learn that the Holocaust was visible in legislation, in the commemorations, in the trials with capos or with people who collaborated in the Kastner Affair. It was very much in the air. Yes, it is true that in 1950's, Israel was a society that, in every respect, lived in state of trauma. It was the loss of the families during the Holocaust coupled with the trauma of the loss of sons, daughters, brothers, sisters and parents in the War of Independence. In the War of Independence, 6 000 people died and over 20 000 more were injured. I personally, a nine-year-old at that time, knew that the son of the headmaster of my elementary school and the son of the janitor of the school were both killed in one battle. When I look around my childhood neighbourhood, there were many families that lost their children, or even brothers or fathers. So it was really a traumatized society with a strong sense that these are the great days of miracles. Thanks to the massive immigration that followed in three years, the size of the Israeli population doubled, which did not make life easier. If we compare the great immigration to Israel during the first three years, in 1948–1951, to the immigration to any other country, we never find such a high immigration ratio, never ever! If you think of immigration to the United States or to Argentina in the early 20th century, you have massive immigration waves but never the ratio of the new immigrants to the veteran population as in Israel.

You must also think of the places these people were coming from: there were the Holocaust survivors, about 350 000 of them, and a slightly larger number of Jews that came from Islamic countries with a different culture. It was a multifaceted society

with a lot of problems – no housing, no work, no food, and there was the threatening rhetoric of the Arab states, talking about the second round, namely about another war against Israel. So there was the fear of another war which actually and unfortunately happened in 1956. And once we think of the Arab population – of the Palestinians of Israel – they are also a traumatized society, they were left there, a small minority, while the majority had either escaped or had been deported. So you have a country that was really crammed with very dramatic events and it was necessary to recover from them somehow. At the same time, Israel had to display great energy which was necessary to create a viable economy, to build houses, to expand the school system. One of the first laws was the law about compulsory education, to provide eight years of free education. Just to implement such a law, to fetch the teachers, to have the buildings for schools constructed, to write the textbooks – it was an unimaginable task. Going back to the issue of the Holocaust – yes, it was there, but it occupied a smaller space because other things were occupying the large space.

Today, in the Western societies in general and especially in Israel, the Holocaust captures a sizeable part of the intellectual discourse. The survivors who were pre-occupied with reconstructing their lives can now, after fifty or sixty years, pause and reflect. They were immensely successful and did extremely well. Their second and third generation, the children and grandchildren of the survivors, are among the elites of Israel – in the academia, in industry, in the arts – you find them everywhere. So they can reflect now with security. However, despite the knowledge that we now have about the Holocaust, we are still left with many questions, we cannot understand everything. We may have the details of the story, but to grasp the fact that a third of your people was destructed... that was, in some respect, inconceivable. So there is a paradox: although we know more and we understand more, there is one major, essential gap that you can't catch. How was that possible? You know, I remember that when I was doing my first steps in the research, I was walking in a neighbourhood in Tel Aviv, in Ramat Aviv, which was at the time a rather new neighbourhood with many young people, many young children and playgrounds. I was out there with my little kids on the playground. I hear all the hassle and the noises... and suddenly I thought: "Wow, this was Jewish Warsaw!" Much larger, with all this hassle, the little ones and grown-ups... and now, they're not there any more! They were deported and killed. Is it possible? To take all these people and kill them, it's inconceivable. There is something basic, something essential that a normal, logical, rational mind is unable to grasp. Getting back to your question in relation to Tom Segev: when you find it difficult to accept this painful past, and you know that the main guilt lies with the Germans, the occupation and anti-Semitism, you must still ask why people didn't do more to rescue and to save the Jews, and whether the rescue efforts were serious and central enough. So apart from the Nazis and their collaborators, the Ukraine and Lithuania, what were the Jews in the free world, in Palestine, for example, doing? And Tom Segev decided to blame, to look for the guilty, and I think this is one of the greatest mistake of

Tom Segev, who otherwise deserves a lot of credit for bringing the issue of the Holocaust memory to the public awareness. He was the first one who really started to discuss the problem of how do we remember the Holocaust intellectually. It was his topic and I think that he deserves the credit for it. However, he did not show the openness and true effort required in order to integrate the whole historical complexity.

You have also worked on the rescue efforts of the Yishuv in Istanbul and elsewhere. As far as I know, this topic has always been quite controversial in Israel. Have you sometimes felt yourself caught in these bitter disputes?

No. Well, I was one of the first who dealt with it, so I had the privilege of bringing up many new issues. My Master's dissertation was the first one to study rescue efforts of the Yishuv in a larger context, and then my PhD dissertation was on illegal immigration during the Holocaust. These were the first stages of my work. There were other people who were engaged in the subject, such as the well-known historian Dina Porat, and a number of other historians who also worked on these topics, such as Chava Wagman-Eshkoli, Jechiam Weitz, Tuvia Friling, and more. People were willing to learn. There were disagreements and debates which are invited by every historical discussion. This work opened new issues that had to be studied. For example: when we study illegal immigration, the history of each of the communities has to be studied, and also the environment of the community and the policy of each departure point, for example Romania, Bulgaria or Italy.

I learned the importance of the different languages and how important it was to learn about the background of these communities. It was a challenge and a very important contribution to my professional growth. I remember reading, for the first time, the accounts of people who fled from Poland to Slovakia, from Slovakia to Hungary, from Hungary to Romania. They hoped they might be saved and leave Europe. These were extremely moving stories. There were testimonies of people who reached Hungary or Palestine during the war itself. I can still remember, very vividly, a number of these stories and myself trying to capture the human experience and to put it into the larger political and social context, and how painful all these stories were.

There are many impressive works of yours and one of them is an encyclopaedia called A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopaedia of Jewish Women, of which you are a co-editor. And my question is: why Jewish women, and what is its message?

The message is that when you don't look at the history of women, you don't understand history at all. In order to get an interconnected narrative of Jewish history, any Jewish history – Czech, French or British – you need two voices, of men and of women, and usually you have very little sources on women. I mean the research on women in general, not only in terms of Jewish history. Even Marx said that women were not interesting – that they were only marginal and were not a distinct class. The Nazis thought that the place of women was in the Church, in the kitchen and at home.

The two scholars who initiated the idea of the encyclopaedia were Moshe and Alice Shalvi. Alice Shalvi was the professor of English at the Hebrew university and then she established a very elite high school for religious girls. She is the laureate of the Israel Prize and her husband, Moshe Shalvi, was involved in the publishing of encyclopaedias before, like *Judaica* and others. They suggested that I should join them in this project, together with a very important Jewish historian, the late Paula Hyman from Yale University. We had a large academic committee for each period. It was a huge project and as both Paula Hyman and I were historians specialised on modern Jewish history, we needed specialists on different period and different disciplines. It was a great challenge and it required many decisions: who will be let in and who will be left out? Which women? There was the issue of periodization and many other major questions that were extremely interesting. There were ethical questions as well, such as should the women who converted not out of their own will, but because of the social pressure in the 19th century, be part of our list?

You are visiting Pilsen in order to participate in the colloquium on anti-Semitism, therefore my last question is about the subject of anti-Semitism. Why do you think we should study such a subject? Do you think there is something we should probably change in the way we are studying it?

Well, in my lecture here in Pilsen, I am going to explain how difficult it is for Israelis to understand anti-Semitism. For a person like me, who grew up in Israel and never experienced being a minority and never experienced anti-Semitic assaults, anti-Semitism is hard to perceive. From time to time, when one goes abroad, one hears anti-Semitic remarks here and there. One time, when I was in Russia, for example, in Moscow, I was down in the metro and I didn't know from what exit I should go out. I am always confused in directions. So I asked one person for the directions and since he did not understand English, but did know German, I spoke to him in German. He explained the directions to me and asked: "Are you French?" I said: "No, I am Israeli." And he looked at me and he said: "You are Jewish? You don't have a Jewish nose!" You know, I was astounded and I said: "Really? I am very Jewish! Isn't this a Jewish nose?" And I didn't really want to continue the conversation with this guy. So, suddenly I was confronted with an anti-Jewish stereotype. I was really amused in one respect, but also, you know... For more than seven years, I was the head of the Vidal Sassoon International Centre for the Research of Anti-Semitism. It was a challenge, a great challenge. How to research anti-Semitism? How to explain anti-Semitism? My first step was to adopt an interdisciplinary approach. History, psychology, anthropology, literature, sociology – all these fields of knowledge must become part of the interpretation and to assist our understanding of the phenomenon of anti-Semitism. Anti-Semitism is a very specific, unique manifestation of exclusion and hatred which has many layers. But we have to understand it in its specificity and in its more general context. This is what we try to do in the Centre. I think that in many respects, Yehuda Bauer

did the same, but perhaps it became even more interdisciplinary when I came, and many researchers were part of the Centre. I think this is the way to study it. Now, why to study anti-Semitism? Of course, for Jews, there is no question why. I understand that you are asking why to study it in Pilsen or in Prague, in Czechoslovakia or in Europe...

...why, for example, should the Czechs study anti-Semitism?

Well, first of all, because there were many anti-Semites among them. Recently, in a conference in Tel Aviv, I heard a lecture about the attitude of the Czech people towards Jewish survivors who came back to the Czech Republic. In Czechoslovakia, Jews were asked the same question that the Jewish survivors were asked in Poland: "Wow, you were not murdered? You are still alive?" People were afraid that the Jews would ask to get back their homes and businesses that had been already given to others. Anti-Semitism is a disease of the European culture. Basically, it's a problem for all of us, for all societies that want to exclude others from their midst. Today, there are not so many Jews in the Czech Republic, for obvious reasons. However, when you think of Gypsies, of the Roma people in the Czech Republic and in other parts of Europe, we are going through a very similar experience of exclusion. It's the way of thinking that they don't deserve what we deserve, that "only we are the good ones!" In my country, we face similar problems, despite having the painful Jewish experience with exclusion. I think of our attitude towards Arabs, Israeli Arabs. They are citizens of Israel, but many Israelis approach them as "the others". I'm not blind to the political conflict, but still, I am afraid of such approaches. Let me be clear: I can understand the fact and agree with it that a community or a society wants to keep its particular social or cultural way of life. But there should always be respect to the other and in your effort to guard what you want for yourself; you should not degrade the other only because you want to keep the advantage.

I can understand why Europe is so concerned with Muslim immigrants today, or with Africans. I can see the problems in the economy and many other political and cultural issues that make people concerned. I can also appreciate the wish of the Dutch or of the Belgians to keep whatever their national or cultural tradition may be and what they consider to be their national character. However, I think that we really have to work very hard to grant the same respect to the others and to find a way in which different traditions could live together. I am not sure that multiculturalism grants this solution. If I look at the experience of the United Kingdom or France, two countries that handle multiculturalism differently, I am not satisfied, though I am unable to provide a better solution. In the United Kingdom, multiculturalism endorses the hierarchy in the society. If you, as a child of a new immigrant, do not master the language of the country, if you don't have the skills of the major society, if you are unable to find your way in the modern society, you will remain marginal. I think that the study of the case of anti-Semitism can contribute to

our understanding of how the exclusion policy works, and that it is not only morally wrong, but bad for the society in general and that it may lead to its moral collapse. I strongly believe that every European society should feel obliged to study anti-Semitism.

Thank you very much for the interview.

Rozhovor vedl Mgr. Zbyněk Tarant dne 7. 11. 2011 během návštěvy paní prof. Ofer v Plzni. Návštěva paní profesorky, série mimořádných seminářů a Kolokvium o antisemitismu byly konány v rámci projektu IHISTUD. Autor si přeje vyjádřit poděkování Mgr. Veronice Kramářkové a Bc. Petře Johaně Poncarové za pomoc s přepisem a korekturami rozhovoru. Fotografie byly pořízeny ve Smetanově síni Studijní a vědecké knihovny v Plzni. Autor si tímto přeje vyjádřit poděkování této instituci za velmi vstřícné jednání.