11. Deborah Lipstadt, *Denying the Holocaust*

Yaffa Eliach, *There Once Was a World: A 900-Year Chronicle of the Shtetl of Eishyshok*

Deborah Lipstadt, *Denying the Holocaust*, New York: Free Press, 1993

Dr. Deborah Lipstadt (1947–) is Dorot Professor of Modern Jewish History at Emory University.

Irving is one of the most dangerous spokespersons for Holocaust denial. Familiar with historical evidence, he bends it until it conforms with his ideological leanings and political agenda. A man who is convinced that Britain's great decline was accelerated by its decision to go to war with Germany, he is facile at taking accurate information and shaping it to confirm his conclusions. A review of his recent book, *Churchill's War*, which appeared in *New York Review of Books*, accurately analyzed his practice of applying a double standard to evidence. He demands "absolute documentary proof" when it comes to proving the Germans guilty, but he relies on highly circumstantial evidence to condemn the Allies. This is an accurate description not only of Irving's tactics, but those of deniers in general. (181)

Others have argued that the best tactic is just to ignore the deniers because what they crave is publicity, and attacks on them will provide it. I have encountered this view repeatedly while writing this book. I have been asked if I am giving them what they want and enhancing their credibility by deigning to respond to them. Deny them what they so desperately desire and need, and, critics claim, they will wither on the vine. It is true that publicity is what the deniers need to survive, hence their media-sensitive tactics—such as ads in college papers, challenges to debate "exterminationists," pseudoscientific reports, and truth tours of death-camp sites. I once was an ardent advocate of ignoring them. In fact, when I first began this book I was beset by the fear that I would inadvertently enhance their credibility by responding to their fantasies. But having immersed myself in their activities for too long a time, I am now convinced that ignoring them is no longer an option. The time

to hope that of their own accord they will blow away like dust is gone. Too many of my students have come to me and asked, "How do we know there were really gas chambers?" "Was the *Diary of Anne Frank* a hoax?" "Are there actual documents attesting to a Nazi plan to annihilate the Jews?" Some of these students are aware that their questions have been informed by deniers. Others are not; they just know that they have heard these charges and are troubled by them.

Not ignoring the deniers does not mean engaging them in discussion or debate. In fact, it means *not* doing that. We cannot debate them for two reasons, one strategic and the other tactical. As we have repeatedly seen, the deniers long to be considered the "other" side. Engaging them in discussion makes them exactly that. Second, they are contemptuous of the very tools that shape any honest debate: truth and reason. Debating them would be like trying to nail a glob of jelly to the wall.

Though we cannot directly engage them, there is something we can do. Those who care not just about Jewish history or the history of the Holocaust but about truth in all its forms, must function as canaries in the mine once did, to guard against the spread of noxious fumes. We must vigilantly stand watch against an increasingly nimble enemy. But unlike the canary, we must not sit silently by waiting to expire so that others will be warned of the danger. When we witness assaults on the truth, our response must be strong, thought neither polemical nor emotional. We must educate the broader public and academe about this threat and its historical and ideological roots. We must expose these people for what they are.

The effort will not be pleasant. Those who take on this task sometimes feel—as I often did in the course of writing this work—as if they are being forced to prove what they know to be fact. Those of us who make scholarship our vocation and avocation dream of spending our time charting new paths, opening new vistas, and offering new perspectives on some aspect of the truth. We seek to discover, not to defend. We did not train in our respective fields in order to stand like watchmen and women on the Rhine. Yet this is what we must do. We do so in order to expose falsehood and hate. We will remain ever vigilant so that the most precious tools of our trade and society—truth and reason—can prevail. The still, small voices of millions cry out from the ground demanding that we do no less. (221–222)

Yaffa Eliach, *There Once Was a World: A 900-Year Chronicle of the Shtetl of Eishyshok*, Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1998

Dr. Yaffa Eliach (1935–2016) was a Holocaust survivor and Professor of History and Literature in the Department of Judaic Studies at Brooklyn College.

The years 1935–1937 saw a number of anti-Jewish pogroms in Poland, such as the ones in Grodno in 1935, Przytyk and Minsk-Mazowieck in 1936, Czestochowa and Bszesc nad Bugiem in 1937. Zalman Lubetski happened to be in Przytyk in 1936, and heard eyewitness accounts of that pogrom. But when he tried to tell people at home what he had heard, or described his own experiences of anti-Semitism in the army, most of his townsmen turned a deaf ear. Surely nothing like what he was talking about would happen in Eishyshok: The business ties between the Eishyshkian Jews and their Polish neighbors were so strong that the Poles needed the Jews for their livelihood.

Zalman's visit to Eishyshok coincided with an anti-Semitic attack on his relative Israel Yekutiel, who lived in the nearby villiage of Poshitva. Polish thugs beat him with an iron bar, crushing the bones of his skull. Though Dr. Lehr operated on him at the hospital in Eishyshok and was able to save his life, after which he had further surgery in Vilna, he lived in constant pain for his few remaining years. Stull, Eishyshkians reassured themselves that Eishyshok was not Poshitva.

Among the older people, there was considerable annoyance with what they regarded as the alarmism of their sons and daughters. They discounted the similarities the young people pointed out between the Nuremberg Laws in Germany and the various official actions of anti-Semitism in Poland (such as the Janina Prystor bill and the "ghetto benches" that had been introduced into academic institutes). They viewed the rising tide of anti-Semitism in their own country, as in Germany, as nothing more than a passing phase. And some of the young people agreed with them, or at least hoped they were right. Szeina Blacharowicz, writing to her best friend Malka Matikanski in Palestine in October 1936, told her: "At the present no changes have taken place in Eishyshok. It is the same Eishyshok. The only noticeable alteration is anti-Semitism. It has finally reached us, but I hope that we will outlive our enemies." (562–563)

As had happened after the Big Fire of 1895, people who had suffered losses in the various fires of the 1930s took stock of their lives and considered whether

to rebuild or emigrate—but now, due to all the restrictions on emigration, their options were limited. Mordekhai Munesh Kaleko was one of the lucky ones. After his house on Vilna Street burned down, he decided to leave. Shortly after receiving the highly coveted certificates of emigration from their children in 1935, he and his wife Mina made aliyah. For years, Mordekhai had been quoting the dire warnings of his children in Germany and Palestine, and the speeches of Yitzhak Gruenbaum and Vladimir Jabotinsky, who were rivals in many areas but agreed on one thing: the necessity of large-scale Jewish emigration from Poland. Now at last Mordekhai was following his own advice.

The Dubczanski family, who also lost a house to the Vilna Street fire, were less fortunate. Their daughter Vela Portnoy was not able to get them a certificate to join her in Palestine, and their daughter Gale Laufer was unable to get them emigration papers to join her in America. They rebuilt their house on Vilna Street. Leibke Sonenson, whose house had burned in 1936 in a padpalshchiki [Jewish arsonist] fire on Radun Street, also rebuilt. Though his brothers Moshe and Shepske pleaded with him not to do so, quoting Mordekhai Gebirtig's prophetic lines, "It burns, brothers dear, it burns! / Our poor little shtetl is on fire!" Leibke responded, "You may be pleased to raise your children in a rented house, but not me and Geneshe." Soon a beautiful new house was going up on the site of the old one, where Radun Street met the market square. Moshe Sonenson and his family continued to reside in the house he rented from Eliezer Remz. Moshe also took the precaution of converting a substantial portion of his income into gold, always considered a reliable currency in times of trouble. Later he would be burying part of his gold in the ground.

On the end of the abyss, the shtetl continued to go on with its life as normally as possible. In 1934 a fund-raiser for Vaad ha-Yeshivot, the umbrella organization for the yeshivot of Eastern Europe, successfully solicited donations from a number of Eishyshkians, including, of course, the always dedicated Rabbi Szymen Rozowski, who was active as both the local campaign organizer in Eishyshok and as a contributor. By 1939, however, a similar fund-raiser was proving less successful. Thus a 1939 letter to Vaad ha-Yeshivot from Rabbi Zusha Lichtig, the head of Eishyshok's *yeshivah ketanah* [elementary school], regretfully announced: "We have not as yet collected all the pledges. Those who are usually active in community work did not want to be involved with this, and we have had to find new people to do the collecting." Attached to the letter was a list of those who had contributed thus far, mainly bale-batim [heads of households] in their forties or older. The younger people in

the shtetl felt that in such hard times money collected in the shtetl should remain there, since its own yeshivah was underfunded.

The younger people were also continuing to monitor the events of the world with ever-increasing intensity, scanning the headlines for any relevant information they could glean. In a May 26, 1939, letter to his friend Fishke Shlanski (son of Zelig), in New York, Moshe "Deutch" Ginunski (so nicknamed because his father had been a POW in Germany) expressed their hunger for news, and for some understanding of how these global matters would affect them:

> *Dear Fishke,*
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> *The Eishyshkian news you know. All is as usual; here nothing ever changes. In the world things sound bad. Black clouds are gathering, with the latest instance being the quarrel over Danzig. Who knows what tomorrow will bring as a result? Surely we can anticipate some very unpleasant surprises. As for me, not so far in the future my turn as a soldier will come up.*
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> *Dear friend, write to me how in your part of the world they are assessing the situation. Here in the local press there is not a thing about the situation in Poland. We are unable to find out anything about it. This is why I am asking you to write me what the American press is saying about it.*

Moshe would be murdered in Eishyshok, along with his father, on September 25, 1941. (563–565)

COMMENTARY BY YEHUDA KURTZER

The specter of the loss of the memory of the Holocaust, with the passing on of the survivor generation, has loomed over Jewish communal life since the immediate aftermath of the Holocaust. This fear has inspired a remarkable industry of cultural production, the building of memorials, and genres of literature meant to capture the memories of the survivors for the benefit of those without those memories: to enshrine as fact, in monument and on paper, what might otherwise disappear as the vicissitudes of forgotten personal experience.

In the spring of 1993, the American (and American Jewish) commitment to the preservation of Holocaust memory took on new heft with the opening of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., the result of over a decade of intense politicking, fundraising, and no small amount of controversy about the question of how the tragedy would

be commemorated, which other victims would be included, and how the story of the Holocaust could be "justified" as being of enough national concern to the American people to merit such a prominent place in the American preservationist pantheon. In the same year, Deborah Lipstadt's *Denying the Holocaust* was published, and it is easy to connect the two events: in both monumental architecture, and in the production of scholarship, American Jews—leaders and scholars—were crafting the counterclaim to an insurgent culture of Holocaust denial whether in its passive form of forgetting or in the active forms of revisionist and pseudo-history.

Lipstadt's book was the first and most systematic analysis of Holocaust denial (and profile of the most significant Holocaust deniers) at the time that it was published, and in retrospect served as a valuable manual to understand a phenomenon that would only intensify as the internet changed the nature of communications and networking among what had previously been a marginal community of deniers and revisionists. More significant, however, was the book's implicit juxtaposition of the agendas of understanding and documenting Holocaust denial together with mounting a response to it. And in many respects, the legal and political afterlife of the book has become its primary legacy. In the book Lipstadt had identified David Irving as a Holocaust denier and debunked his claims. Irving famously sued Lipstadt in British court for libel, which put the burden on the defense to support the merit of the original claim—in other words, to defend the historicity of the Holocaust. Lipstadt set aside much of her academic work for two decades to the case, in which she—and more importantly, the historical case—were vindicated.

Five years after the publication of *Denying the Holocaust*, Yaffa Eliach published *There Once Was a World*, what was to become the popular master-work connected to the ongoing archival work of the Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies at the museum. (The more comprehensive magisterial *Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos* continues to be produced, and already offers an indispensable resource to researchers and scholars.) Eliach's work chronicled the destroyed shtetl of Eishyshok over a 900-year period, and was twinned to "The Tower of Life"—a vertical spiral of 1,500 photographs of Eishyshok residents at the Museum. Together, the projects blur the line between the rigor of historical scholarship—which includes documenting what happened, and what was lost—and the memory-preservation culture that drives the building of museums and the affective, experiential elements of how memory is formed through image and pilgrimage.

Eliach's work also constitutes a late re-awakening of the genre of *yizker bikher* that had prevailed in earlier decades of Holocaust memory but since

become dormant. The *yizker bikher* were independently produced, highly idiosyncratic collections of stories, maps, names, and remembered histories of shtetls and Jewish communities that were compiled by small groups of survivors in the first two decades after the war, and were usually published in small numbers for the survivors themselves. They defy classification in a single genre, though they share certain qualities of lyricism and urgency in trying to codify the fleeting memories of people in something firm that would endure past the time of their own infirmities. Eliach's book is, in essence, a *yizker bukh*—the story of a particular set of families in a particular place, organized towards memory more than rigid history—but its heft, its depth, and most importantly, its accessibility, makes it a *yizker bukh* that could transcend the idiosyncrasies that made the previous generations of such books inaccessible to the children and grandchildren of those that had produced them, and now leave them lining the shelves of used bookstores in Israel.

Both Lipstadt and Eliach's contributions to the literature of Jewish memory, however, surface a paradox inherent in Holocaust preservation. Memory, and especially Jewish memory, thrives in mimesis and in narrative transmission, which are vulnerable to the passage of time and to "mistakes" but are secure in the ways that they connect catalytic events to a transformed consciousness. Acts of codification, meanwhile, which attempt to preserve the authentic history of what happened, makes the official record of the events more secure, but it also inadvertently shifts the theater in which the legitimacy of memory is adjudicated from the consciousness to the public record. This, in turn, invites their litigation: sometimes by charlatans in court, like the Holocaust deniers whom Lipstadt indicts; and sometimes simply by the difficulty of trying to obligate people to take possession of a story that is meant to be their own, but is actually a piece of the past that does not correlate to their own lived experience. Commanding stories have moral meanings, and their facts are flexible; canonized history may be more accurate, but it can be depersonalized. Paradoxically, the activities that respond to the fear of the loss of the past create new risks.

Lipstadt and Eliach and their work is the generation-long bridge between those who remember the Shoah and those that are bidden to become the custodians of memory with no personal access to the stories except that which they have received. And Lipstadt and Eliach constitute bookends of sorts to the normative framework of the inheritance of memory as has shaped American Jewish memorial culture: between efforts to preserve the richness and complexity of what was lost, as Eliach tries to do; and the necessity to stave off the nitpickers and naysayers of the historical record, at which Lipstadt proves to be so adept.

But these are primary documents about memory themselves, and the lingering images from Lipstadt and Eliach's contributions make their own claim on the immutability of memory. Lipstadt's work transformed her life from scholar to dramatis personae in the preservation of the story of the Holocaust, yielding her subsequent book about the libel trial to which she was subjected in which she triumphantly—and tragically—proved the truth of the Holocaust in a British court. This first serious book on Holocaust denial bred her second, a personal chronicle of Holocaust denial that was also meant as cautionary tale, and then a feature film of the whole experience which enshrines the act of trying to preserve the past as a usable story for generations who would follow. And Eliach's book ends not with the usual catalog of catastrophe that ends most such *yizker bikher*, the tragic teleology that leaves its inheritors burdened with figuring out the future, but with the striking image of her survivor father dancing with Eliach's daughter—his granddaughter—at her wedding. The survivors—and their memories, and their future—endure in the lives of the custodians of memory.