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Doron Rabinovici, Eichmann's Jews: The Jewish Administration of Holocaust Vienna, 1938-1945

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Doron Rabinovici,
EICHMANN'S JEWS:
THE JEWISH ADMINISTRATION OF HOLOCAUST VIENNA, 1938-1945,
Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011, 260 pages.

The role of the *Judenräte* [Jewish councils] in the German-occupied lands of World War II remains one of the most difficult, that is, sensitive, complicated and controversial, issues in the historiography of the Holocaust. The responses and the decisions taken by the members of these councils have been morally examined and historically investigated in an enormous literature. Doron Rabinovici's book describes in detail the Viennese "model" and discusses in depth the challenges faced by the functionaries and employees of the Jewish community authorities in Vienna during the war.

Public discussion among the Jews on the responsibility of the "Jewish leaders" began immediately after the end of the war. In some cases survivors or whole communities initiated legal proceedings against some of them. On the other hand, since the 1960s historical debate has been dominated by the critiques of the historian Raul Hilberg and the philosopher Hannah Arendt.¹ Hilberg saw in the *Judenräte* a form of leadership that was a continuation of

the traditional leadership that existed before the war; thus the community leaders were trapped and without realizing it were turned into a "tool" of the German machinery of destruction, because they faced the new situation with a frame of mind that had been shaped by the experience of 2000 years of persecution. Arendt's radical view, which became famous with her report on Adolf Eichmann's trial, was a severe critique of the Jewish "leadership"; she accused the Jewish functionaries, almost without exception, of cooperating in one way or another, for one reason or another, with the Nazis in a way almost equivalent to treason. Both Hilberg and Arendt faulted in considering *Judenräte* as *the* "Jewish leadership", because, as Dan Michman has convincingly argued, since the eve of the Nazi period one can speak only of *many* Jewish leaderships, of *many* different cases, of *many* Jewish religious, social and political groups.²

Doron Rabinovici, positioning himself in this debate, goes one step further

¹ R. Hilberg, *The Destruction of European Jews*, Chicago 1961; H. Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, New York 1963.

² Dan Michman, "Jewish Leadership in Extremis", in *The Historiography of the Holocaust*, ed. D. Stone, London 2004, pp. 319-340; cf. also Y. Gutman and C. J. Haft (eds), *Patterns of Jewish Leadership in Nazi Europe, 1933-1945*, Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1979.

than Michman and makes his claim quite clear in his study: Vienna's Jewish authorities, the *Israelitische Kultusgemeinde*, should not be seen as an "autonomous leadership" but as an "authority without power" (p. 161) at the mercy of the perpetrators. The members of the *Kultusgemeinde* were victims forced by a totalitarian regime to sacrifice themselves by being incorporated in the machinery of destruction. Rabinovici's position is crucial both morally and epistemologically, because, by adopting it, he avoids criticism from a historically secured position which, among other things, risks confusing victims and their persecutors. His investigation starts from a shocking observation: the constant fear of death and the will to survive were frequently ignored in the after-war judgment of Jewish SS accomplices. Their social responsibility, Rabinovici reminds us, could well have been at the root of their decision to collaborate (a hope of being able to negotiate with the SS and to rescue Jews). As a result, victims were sentenced more severely after 1945 than their tormentors, thus remaining victims. Under the Nazis the victims were forbidden to live. After the liberation they had to justify their survival (p. 10). In this sense, Rabinovici's study could be inscribed in the historiographical tradition of Philip Friedman, Isaiah Trunk or Aaron Weiss, all historians who have taken into consideration the internal community conflicts coupled with the pressure from the Germans, the many tasks and duties of the functionaries, and the balancing act they had to perform between carrying out German orders, meeting Jewish needs, and trying to preserve the existence of the community

in spite of persecution.³

Rabinovici initially situates the *Kultusgemeinde* in the context of pre-war Vienna. The National Socialist policy towards the Jews in Vienna was not imported from without. Either because of anti-Semitic indulgence or because of tacit concern, the victims were deprived of any support. Viennese Jews lived in an ambience of exclusion from professions or economy and of unrestrained violence against them. During the Austrofascist period, the Jewish community of Vienna had to cooperate already with an authoritarian state as a means of protecting its interests. Long before the Anschluss, Austria had ceased to be a democratic society. When the Nazis came to power, they discovered a Jewish institution that was already well practised in submitting to state authority in order to survive.

Historicizing the conditions under which Jews and their authorities had to live brings up the issue of the birth of the Nazi idea of establishing a

³ P. Friedman, *Roads to Extinction: Essays on the Holocaust*, Philadelphia 1980; I. Trunk, *Judenrat: The Jewish Councils in Eastern Europe under Nazi Occupation*, New York 1972; A. Weiss, "Judenrat", *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust*, ed. I. Gutman, New York 1990. In this same line of research we should mention an important study on Rabbi Zvi Koretz and the *Judenrat* of Thessaloniki. Minna Rozen challenges received wisdom that asserts Koretz's "collaboration" by reconsidering the testimonies and by contextualizing his role in the framework of the community's tensions; cf. M. Rozen, "Jews and Greeks Remember their Past: The Political Career of Tzevi Koretz (1933-1943)", *Jewish Social Studies* 2, 1 (2005), pp. 111-166.

Jewish “leadership” and sheds light on the fact that this was not an inherent imperative of anti-Jewish policies. *Judenräte* emerged only under certain circumstances. We should remember that, although the establishment of *Judenräte* followed the expansion of Nazi Germany, Italy, Croatia, Denmark, and some regions of Poland and of the USSR never saw the emergence of these bodies. Already in 1937 the circles of the Jewish Department of the Security Service of the SS (of which Eichmann was an employee) came up with the idea of *Judenräte* as a means to hasten Jewish emigration. It was only in September 1939, during the first weeks of the occupation of Poland, that Reinhard Heydrich gave in a *Schnellbrief* the order for the formation of *Judenräte*. Before that and after the annexation of Austria (March 1938), Eichmann had been sent to Vienna to reorganize the Jewish community. At that time, 165,000-180,000 Jews were living in Vienna and 15,000 in the rest of Austria. Joseph Löwenherz, a lawyer by profession, was appointed as “Director”, at the head of the decapitated, “reorganized” community. The Vienna *Kultusgemeinde* was to become the prototype for a Jewish administration under Nazi control and a precursor of the later *Judenräte*. The Jewish community made every effort to reinstate the Jewish community authorities, even if they were under the control of the Nazis, as the only means of organizing self help, welfare and flight abroad, specifically emigration to Palestine or to other countries. However, the community was at the mercy of the persecutors.

Eichmann found himself in an opportune moment of his career; far from being a “banal official”, notes Rabinovici, he had enjoyed executive power. The Nazis had a calculated plan, the systematic expulsion of the Jews, and Eichmann worked for it by setting up the Central Office for Jewish Emigration. In some 18 months he would succeed in displacing, by forced emigration and other means, about 150,000 Jews. Löwenherz, as an administrative director, would ensure institutional continuity. The Jewish administration would expedite persecution and communicate the countless discriminating laws to the Jews. Jewish life was controlled by a single administration, in turn controlled by the Gestapo. Löwenherz himself worked under Nazi control, almost totally depending on Eichmann. The powerlessness of the institution was frequently seen as unwillingness to help and indifference. Another tragic figure, Benjamin Murmelstein, was a rabbi, a scholar turned administrator, an intellectual turned bureaucrat and a man of God who became a manager of misery (p. 73). He risked his life to organize emigration, and his work saved the lives of many people between 1938 and 1940. However, his demeanour and his imperiousness brought him into discredit. It is evident that the line between community welfare work and collaboration was becoming very thin.

Zionists had been organizing illegal emigration to Palestine since 1934, and, now that the possibilities had dwindled, they were willing to pay money to get away. Eichmann saw this as a way of financing the expulsion of hundreds

more Jews. The Zionist organizations were forced to cooperate with the Nazis in order to rescue the victims of persecution (p. 56). They were powerless, trapped between the Nazi persecution, the cynical imperial policy of the UK and the indifference of neutral countries. Rabinovici rightly insists: certainly never was there any question of negotiation between equal partners.

The generalized pogrom of November 1938 marked a turning point towards mass murder. The pogrom was not local; the Nazis no longer cared what the international community thought, and Eichmann threatened with other pogroms. From December 1938 to the end of July 1939, about 104,000 Jews had emigrated and among them 41,500 with the assistance of the *Kultusgemeinde*. After this unprecedented exodus, 72,000 Jews still remained in Vienna. When the war started, the international community closed the border and only a few countries remained open. In October 1939 some 3000 Jews were deported to Nisko, an “autonomous Jewish settlement” in the area of Lublin for forced labour. The community was now trying to help the concentration camps’ inmates, while still encouraging aliyah – emigration to the Land of Israel – and emigration elsewhere to others.

On 3 July 1940 Eichmann told the *Judenrat* that a “total solution” would have to be found. “Resettlement” (i.e. deportation) had to be prepared: a precise list of assets, property rights and entitlements was to be delivered to the collection point. The selection of the deportees and the drawing up of lists were carried out in 1941 by the Nazi authorities

themselves. The *Kultusgemeinde* was responsible to notify those selected for deportation. The Jewish functionaries had very little room for manoeuvre, but they thought they could avoid additional hardship. As emigration was still possible, they complied with the order of the Nazi authorities so as to prevent worse. In 1941 more than 6000 Jews were able to escape from the Third Reich in this way. The Jewish administration could ask for people to be removed from the lists and members of the community could be removed as being irreplaceable in Vienna. This was in fact a German method to make easier the blackmailing of the community into cooperating. Rabinovici pronounces a balanced statement: although the Central Office would no doubt have killed all of the Viennese Jews without the Jewish administration, the deportation and extermination would not have gone smoothly without its collaboration (p. 119).

The escalation of events is tragically well known: by May 1941, 10,000 Viennese Jews departed for the General Government. In summer 1942 their destinations were Belzec, Sobibor and Treblinka. In June 1942 the last great wave of deportation was directed to Theresienstadt. By September 1942 the mass deportation of the Jews of Vienna had been completed. The vast majority of the administration employees, around 1100 people along with their families, were deported in the last two transports of 1-2 October 1942. In November 1942 the *Kultusgemeinde* was dissolved and replaced by a Council of Elders of the Jews of Vienna. From March 1943 to October 1944 smaller transports were led to Auschwitz. 600 Jews remained hidden in Vienna.

Doron Rabinovici never loses from his sight a crucial issue: how were the deportations viewed and thought of by the Jews themselves? At the time it appeared inconceivable that cooperation would foster the organization of mass murder. It was unbelievable that the Nazis were interested not in exploiting the Jews but in exterminating them (p. 75). Moreover, given the isolation of Viennese Jews, rumours of systematic extermination appear to have reached them only at the end of 1942.

As to the responsibility of the members of the *Kultusgemeinde*, it becomes evident that whether people understood the situation clearly and without embellishment depended not on their position but their character (p. 153). In one

way or another, the Jewish community had been trapped, and the question remains unanswered: what kind of behaviour by the victims during the Nazi extermination can be regarded as normal, when no alternative for action emerged?

Doron Rabinovici's study is a rich, well-researched and documented book on a complex moral, political and historiographical issue. It contributes to our understanding of the terrible dilemmas faced by people who had to respond to an extreme, unprecedented situation that allowed them a very narrow field for action. Despite the enormous literature, no comprehensive comparative study of *Judenräte* in Europe has been carried out. Rabinovici's book makes the call for such research more urgent.

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