

Hillel Kook

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It has almost become an axiom in our understanding of reactions and responses to the Holocaust that the unprecedented nature of the murder of the Jews by the Nazis and their cohorts made it extremely difficult for people to grasp what was happening. This is true for Jews on the spot, in areas under Nazi domination, for Jews outside of Nazi Europe and for people the world over.

My friend and colleague at Yad Vashem David Silberklang in his dissertation about the Holocaust in the Lublin district of Poland, demonstrates how difficult it was for Jews to understand the meaning of deportations to the death camps, when they began at the end of 1941. One of the points that inhibited understanding that murder was afoot was that Jews in Poland had been deported, or moved around a great deal by the Nazis before the advent of the Final Solution. They had been moved from town to town and had been sent to labor camps. Both bode ill for the Jews, and many suffered and even died as a result of these moves, but the moves themselves were not indicative of mass systematic murder. Indeed they began before there was such a policy and most of the deportees returned home, albeit broken, but alive. So when mass systematic murder began, being deported was seen as “bad” but not necessarily deadly in the way it proved to be.

In the framework of the Hungarian armed forces, Hungarian Jewish forced laborers were sent to the Eastern Front during the period of the mass systematic murder of the Jews of the former Soviet Union. Some of them arrived in localities where they were told the Jews had recently been murdered. Others actually saw sites of mass burial, still heaving with warm blood, and some were witnesses to the murder of small groups or individual Jews. In several testimonies here at Yad Vashem, the laborers point out another factor that inhibited them from realizing that something much wider was happening. The labor men told of their feeling that the murders they encountered were a local byproduct of the war. They were not indicative, they thought, of something happening on a wider scale. So some of the men, when they came back to Hungary before the Nazi occupation in 1944, didn't even talk with their families and

friends about the killings, thinking the murder in the Soviet Union had no bearing on Jews in Hungary at the time.

For people outside of Europe, taking the fragments of news that were reaching them, creating a broader picture of events and interpreting its meaning, was not a simple matter. One of Hillel Kook's adversaries at the time, Nahum Goldman, articulated this many years later in an interview for the documentary based on Martin Gilbert's book, *Auschwitz and the Allies*. He said the failure of American Jewish leadership was one of imagination. How could people raised on humanism believe that Hitler had created a world worse than Dante's hell, he asked? Another adversary of Kook's, Justice Felix Frankfurter, when told by the Polish courier Jan Karski of the murder, responded by saying: "Sir I cannot believe you. It is not that I don't believe you, but I am unable to do so."

Hillel Kook, somehow, did understand earlier than others that the Nazis were engaged in an unprecedented campaign of murder. He understood that if action were not taken immediately to rescue Jews – it would simply be too late. He thus used innovative methods to galvanize others to come to grips with the murder and engage in mass rescue activities.

Much of the entrenched Jewish leadership in the United States did not like Kook and his methods. So it is not surprising that in the historiography of the Holocaust, Kook is sometimes portrayed as, shall we say, controversial. David Wyman and others have written about this controversy and its political context. Politics aside, it is clear to all who grapple with the Holocaust, that the activities of Hillel Kook and his colleagues are central to any study of the reactions and responses of American Jewry to the murder of their European brethren.

I am pleased to Yad Vashem at this event marking Hillel Kook and his activities. And on my behalf and on behalf of Yad Vashem wish you a successful evening.