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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

JUNE 12, 1942, KHMEL'NIK GHETTO, REICHSKOMMISSARIAT UKRAINE

June 12, 1942 divided twelve-year-old Israel G.'s¹ life into two unequal parts—before and after the day when the young Jews of Khmel'nik were shot during the Children's Aktion. Israel's travails began a year earlier, when Germany invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941. His father was drafted into the Red Army, while Israel, his mother Alexandra, and a younger brother Venyamin, tried to escape to the Soviet hinterland. They reached Kyiv, but needed a special permit to cross the Dnieper River and continue further east. After considerable effort, Alexandra was able to obtain the necessary paperwork—only to have it stolen by another Jewish family fleeing Khmel'nik. She and her children were forced to return to their town, which had since been occupied by the Germans.

Israel's family was better off than most local Jews. His grandfather, David G., was a coppersmith and the Germans needed his labor. The family also had money. Israel G. was named after his great-uncle, Israel Pinchefskey, who had immigrated to the United States before World War I, was drafted when the United States entered the war, and was killed in France. Until the German invasion, Israel Pinchefskey's mother, who remained in Khmel'nik, received a pension from the United States government.

On January 2, 1942 the Nazi authorities forced the Jews of Khmel'nik, about 4,500 people, into a ghetto. Two weeks later, only 1,000 to 1,500 skilled workers and their families were still alive; the rest had been shot by German mobile killing squad Einsatzkommando 5 and its local collaborators. Then, following several uneventful months, the June 12 Aktion came. The Nazis ordered the ghetto inhabitants to the town's main square, in front of the police building, where all of the children and several old people—360 people in total—were rounded up. By that time Israel G. had already seen enough to understand what would follow. "I somehow made a decision to escape no matter what. . . . Not go to the pit, not to undress, not to wait submissively (*pokorno*) to be shot," he recalled. The police building

had large pieces of plywood covering the windows. Israel G. hid behind them and then ran away while seven-year-old Venyamin stayed with the other children. Israel thus became the only survivor of the Children's Aktion, but he never forgave himself for not going with his brother toward certain death. "It is naturally my biggest pain," he admitted in 1995. "Back then, as a child, I didn't understand that, but the older I become the more painful, sharper [the memory] is."

Having lost her younger son and fearing the imminent liquidation of the ghetto, Alexandra G. decided to make another desperate run for her life. With her remaining money she arranged fake IDs in the names of Alexandra and Vasiliï Donets, both ethnic Ukrainians, and fled the ghetto with a non-Jewish guide. They crossed the border into Romanian-occupied Ukraine and snuck into the Zhmerinka ghetto, which was considered relatively safe; at this point the Romanians were confining Jews to ghettos but were not killing them *en masse*. Alas, this sanctuary was short-lived. Alexandra and Israel were expelled by the local Jewish authorities for trying to obtain food outside the ghetto. The Jewish police of the Zhmerinka ghetto knew perfectly well that, if caught, Israel G. and his mother would be shot, but they also feared that the refugees' smuggling of food might endanger the entire community. Israel and Alexandra then moved to Murafa, where after bribing Romanian officials they were allowed to remain until liberation in March 1944.²

The Puzzle

The story of Israel G. and his family is not unusual. Many, if not most, survivors have similar stories to tell. Dates, places, and details vary, but the basic narratives are tragically similar: survivors recount losing family members, underscore their grief and pain, and emphasize luck and outright miracles. The underlying, but rarely explicitly stated theme of these stories is that of *choice*. Even if under impossible constraints, each and every Jewish person had to decide how to react to Nazi persecution. Lawrence Langer famously calls these "choiceless choices," because no matter what the Jews did, death was the most likely outcome—yet choices they were nonetheless.³ Each Jew had to select a survival strategy, or sometimes several. Israel G. and his mother first decided to escape, then they coped for a time with the evolving situation inside Khmel'nik ghetto, and then finally escaped a second time. The Zhmerinka ghetto Jewish police *chose* to collaborate with the Holocaust perpetrators—even though their actions put the lives of Israel and

Alexandra, fellow Jewish victims, in grave danger. There were also those who fought back, weapons in hand. The Khmel'nik ghetto had an underground resistance group that obtained weapons and planned to flee to the forests to join Soviet guerilla units.

Another important, but often overlooked feature of the Holocaust is the community-level variation in victims' behavior. Quite a few people escaped, or tried to escape, the Khmel'nik ghetto, but there were other ghettos from which almost no one fled. The Khmel'nik ghetto had an underground resistance, while most other ghettos did not. The Jewish police in the Zhmerinka ghetto collaborated with the Holocaust perpetrators, whereas the Jewish authorities in the Khmel'nik ghetto are usually not accused of collaboration.

The Jewish experience during the Holocaust is not unique when it comes to variation in victims' behavior. In Rwanda, many Tutsis (and moderate Hutus) tried to escape the genocide, while some did nothing. Some Tutsis even joined the Hutu *Interahamwe* killing squads.⁴ There was organized Tutsi armed resistance in the Bisesero Hills, but not in other areas. In the Ottoman Empire, Armenian reactions to the 1915 genocidal campaign likewise ranged from armed resistance to passivity to collaboration. During the war in Bosnia, numerous Muslims reaped handsome benefits from active collaboration with Serbs.⁵ What explains this variation in behavioral choices and survival strategies?

Genocide and mass killings involve numerous people, usually divisible into three main groups: perpetrators, bystanders, and victims.⁶ In recent decades substantial attention has been devoted to studying the behavior of the perpetrators of violence in genocides and mass killings,⁷ civil wars, and uprisings.⁸ At the same time, the literature on collective violence has almost completely overlooked another crucial group of actors: *the victims*. Because collective violence is a dynamic and relational process, its trajectories and outcomes cannot be fully understood if focus is placed solely on perpetrators.⁹ Civilians, when targeted by mass violence, also have choices to make and strategies to adopt. Being targeted by mass violence does not deprive one of agency. Victims of all ages, genders, and walks of life—whether they are Jews, Tutsis, or Armenians—are ordinary people who are forced to act in the face of extraordinary dangers. The analysis of victims' behavior cannot explain why genocides happen, but it can help us to better understand how they happen and what their outcomes are. This book asks the question: *What explains the different patterns of behavior adopted by civilians targeted by mass violence?* To answer this question, I analyze Jewish behavior during the Holocaust at the individual and community levels.

The Strategies

An analysis of Jewish behavior should begin by outlining the strategies that the Jewish victims of the Holocaust had to choose from. I propose a new typology of the strategies in which the Jews could and did engage during the Holocaust: (1) cooperation and collaboration; (2) coping and compliance; (3) evasion; and (4) resistance.

Cooperation and *collaboration* mean working with the enemy by either participating in or facilitating the persecution. The key distinction between the two is the intended goal of the actions taken. Those who merely cooperated with the Nazis wanted to preserve the community and its members; those who collaborated knowingly acted to the detriment of the community's or individual Jews' survival. Cooperation is open and visible, while collaboration can be either public, as in the case of corrupt and self-serving Judenrat chairs, or private, as in the actions of paid Nazi informants.

Coping means confronting the danger and trying to survive while staying put, without (1) leaving one's community or country; (2) engaging in cooperation or collaboration with or; (3) resistance to the perpetrators. An extreme version of coping is *compliance*, which means faithfully obeying the rules that the authorities prescribe and taking no active steps to change one's situation.

Evasion is an attempt to escape persecution by fleeing; leaving the community, emigrating, or assuming a false identity.

Finally, *resistance* is involvement in organized activity that is aimed at physically or materially harming the perpetrators.

It is important to emphasize that this typology makes no normative claims regarding the choices that victims make. There is no moral scale on which I evaluate each type of behavior. Instead, I argue that individual Jews acted as they did for a reason, and that an analytical approach to these reasons is of vital importance for understanding the Holocaust.

My typology builds on but differs from existing work. Raul Hilberg, one of the founders of Holocaust research, suggested the following list of Jews' reactions to Nazi genocide: resistance, alleviation, evasion, paralysis, and compliance.¹⁰ However, Hilberg does not explain *why* people adopted particular behaviors. Furthermore, whereas Hilberg claimed that paralysis and compliance were the most common responses, recent scholarship has shown that other strategies were much more widespread than was previously assumed,¹¹ and that apparent compliance and paralysis in fact involved numerous additional actions.¹² Hilberg's typology also does not

account for the available, though politically and morally controversial, option of collaboration with the Nazis.

Another perspective on victims' behavior was suggested by the historian Yehuda Bauer, who argued that victims' reactions were determined by a combination of the attitude of the local population to the genocide, the nature of the occupying regime, and the traditions of victims' communal leadership.¹³ This framework cannot explain the variation in individual victims' behavior. Finally, several psychologists, sociologists, and scholars of literature discuss victims' behavior and stress the importance of norms and social bonds.¹⁴ These studies, however, focus overwhelmingly on concentration camp inmates and are strongly influenced by this very specific setting. Only a minority of Jewish victims actually experienced *life* in the camps—the vast majority were either killed near their hometowns, or sent to the gas chambers immediately upon arrival at a camp. Furthermore, these scholars do not try to classify the different types of behavior encountered, nor do they address the motivations behind each behavioral strategy. Their focus is almost exclusively on coping. The same is also true for the vast literature in the field of psychology on behavior under conditions of stress and violence.¹⁵

In political science, the most famous typology of individual behavior is Albert Hirschman's "Exit, Voice, and Loyalty" framework.¹⁶ Analytically, "exit" is similar to evasion, while resistance is a clear instance of "voice." But there is no distinct place for collaboration, coping, and compliance in Hirschman's analysis.¹⁷ My framework is more expansive and better fits the empirical realities of the Holocaust. In recent years, social scientists have also started paying increased attention to how civilians survive under conditions of violence. This research on "civilian self-protection" (CSP) is promising, but it is still in its infancy; the typologies of behavior suggested by CSP scholars are still too crude to capture the differences between various strategies, nor do they try to explain why people choose specific courses of action.¹⁸

The Argument: Who Did What, Where, and Why

This book focuses on two distinct but closely related questions: what made individual Jews choose particular behavioral strategies, and why does the distribution of these strategies vary across localities? My analysis is based on the underlying assumption that genocide is not a one-time event but a complicated social and political process that unfolds over time. During its course,

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