

## **Nooit Meer Auschwitz Lezing - 2004 Raul Hilberg**

### **LAUDATIO**

Professor Raul Hilberg,  
Your Excellencies,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

As the most senior member of the jury, as its president, it is my privilege to inform you about the new award and about the work of Professor Raul Hilberg, the first recipient.

The new award, that has been named the Annetje Fels-Kupferschmidt Award, carries this name because Mrs. Fels, the honorary president of the Dutch Auschwitz Committee who sadly passed away in 2002 (?), was instrumental in giving the victims of the Nazi persecution a voice in Dutch internal politics. This event happened more or less unexpectedly in the beginning of the seventies, in the context of the parliamentary debates concerning the release of four prime National Socialist perpetrators of the Dutch Shoah from their prison in the city of Breda.

These televised debates had a profound effect on Dutch public opinion and on Dutch political life, which in its pervasiveness in The Netherlands, perhaps, can only be compared with the trial against Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem in 1961, or with the publication of *Ashes in the Wind* by the Dutch scholar Jacques Presser in 1965.

Largely thanks to Mrs. Fels, in the beginning of the seventies an awareness rapidly grew that the Holocaust was unprecedented, in the scale of the killing as well as in the consequences of the persecution for its survivors. It was the voice of Annetje Fels that convinced the most important representatives of Dutch public life that the wounds which had been inflicted on the survivors would never heal, and that these wounds had been inflicted on the body and the mind of the Dutch society and politics as a whole.

The consensus that the victims of the Nazi persecution, therefore, are to be treated with special forms of social and political respect, thankfully, still exists in this country. The highly distinguished Committee of representatives of all walks of Dutch public life, which supports this award, reflects this consensus.

We are very proud that Professor Hilberg has graciously accepted this award. As he wrote to the jury, he did so without hesitation.

Professor Hilberg was previously awarded with the Great Order of Merit, the *Grosses Verdienstkreuz*, of the Federal German Republic, and with the *Geschwister-Scholl-Preis*. Prof. Dr. Dr. honoris causa Raul Hilberg has also received an honorary doctorate of the University of Vienna. We believe that this is the first occasion that Prof. Hilberg is honoured by representatives of a non-German speaking country.

We know for a fact that Prof. Hilberg has chosen to accept this award, because the decision to give it to him was taken unanimously. In a division-ridden country like The Netherlands, as you very well know, this is highly exceptional.

The political scientist Raul Hilberg is, as the German historian Hans Mommsen has aptly put it, the nestor of the history of the Holocaust.

His book "*The Destruction of European Jewry*", his dissertation that was first published in 1961, is the work of a *grand maitre*, although written by a young scholar in his middle thirties. In this synthesis Hilberg has set the record straight on the basis of many years of research of the prime source material on and by the perpetrators. This, needless to say, is not merely a scholarly matter. The strivings of the so-called revisionists, who in

fact are negationists, of those who deny the dimension of the Holocaust, indicate how important it is, that the facts are made known.

Perhaps Hilberg's greatest achievement was that he historically proved that the Holocaust was not the work of a small and criminal clique of prominent National Socialists politicians and fanatical Waffen-SS-camp guards, but that perpetratorship and co-responsibility were general German and even European phenomena.

Raul Hilberg was born in Vienna on June, 2nd, 1926. The family he grew up in emigrated via Cuba to the United States in 1939. He fought as an American soldier, and took part in the defeat of Nazi Germany. As a young scholar working on his dissertation of over a thousand pages on the Destruction of the European Jews, Hilberg devoted his life to the study of a topic, which at the time by no means was considered as a promising path for a young academic. In the beginning of the fifties very many of the survivors, a large number of American-Jewish organizations and the international republic of researchers suppressed the memory of the Holocaust. The German scholars either ignored the Holocaust or stressed the limited number of actual perpetrators.

While working on his book, Hilberg had to take low-paying academic teaching jobs as far away as Puerto Rico to earn this upkeep. In 1955, after the only senior academic who had fostered his career, Franz Neumann, had died Hilberg handed in one-fifth of his manuscript at Columbia University. It immediately, as Hilberg has written in his memoirs, won an award for the best Ph.D. in the Humanities. Nevertheless, Columbia University Press and Harvard University Press refused to print his book, because the Israeli institute Yad Vashem criticised the author for his treatment of the Jewish resistance and Hannah Arendt, who as a world-famous essayist on the Shoah was highly indebted to Hilberg, advised against publication as well.

Hilberg's pathbreaking study focusses on the Nazi perpetrators. He carefully distinguishes between the different phases of persecution – definition, expropriation, concentration and finally the actual killing and traced these different phases in the history of the territories ruled or dominated by Nazi Germany.

In doing so, in shifting the focus from the camps to the societies ruled by Nazi Germany and thus to the social preconditions of the deportations, Hilberg made abundantly clear that the history of the Holocaust was not only a part of the history of the Third Reich but a part of European history as a whole. Hilberg pointed to the co-responsibility of non-German collaborators. He also pointed to the reproachable silence of the governments of the neutral states, of the Vatican and of Jewish organizations, while six million Jews were slaughtered.

As a political scientist and a student of Franz Neumann, Hilberg explained how the bureaucracy of the different Berlin departments and special organizations, of the German Army, of German big business and the National Socialist Party cooperated in anti-Jewish policies on the basis of an Anti-Semitic consensus and, as he later put it, in a 'collective motivation' to persecute and to kill. A 'machinery of destruction' came into existence, which with a dynamic of its own worked towards the physical destruction of the Jews. This machinery was in no way different from German society at large, albeit in a wholly unprecedented role. The perpetrators were not demons. The German perpetrator was not an extraordinary or atypical German man or woman.

Naturally, there also was criticism. There always is. Hilberg did not focus on the memoirs of the survivors, but on the documents drawn up by the perpetrators. His characterization of many Jewish Councils as co-agents in the machinery of destruction, especially in their opposition to Jewish resistance, has been considered as harsh. In later editions of his great book Hilberg modified his critique of the Councils. Dutch colleagues as Dr. Loe de Jong, however, tended to agree with Hilberg in this case as well.

Although many hundreds of scholarly works on the Holocaust have been published since Hilberg's opus magnum, it still is regarded by experts as the best single contribution to the field by far. On behalf of the jury, I would therefore like to thank Professor Hilberg for his acceptance of this belated recognition his life-long achievements as a political scientist who did more than can be expected from a scholar to raise the awareness of the general public of the Holocaust.