Some Thoughts on Pierre Vidal-Naquet's *Assassin's of Memory: Essays on the Denial of the Holocaust*

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My father's cousin Artur died in Queens, New York, in 1978 at the age of 90. He had never married, had no children, and his two sisters, neither of whom had married or had children, had pre-deceased him. Obviously, at age 90, he was survived by no one of the prior generation. Artur died without a will, which meant that under the laws of New York State, his estate of about $120,000 would be divided among his first cousins or their children. On a family tree chart, Artur had 40 cousins and so shortly after Artur's death, my father received a check for about $3000. Twelve years later, long after both my mother and father had died, I received a check for about $1600; Artur's estate was finally closed.

Of the 40 cousins, 15 were murdered in the Holocaust. The Surrogate Court for Queens County wanted proof that those 15 cousins were dead and that their spouses, children and grandchildren, if any, were also dead before releasing the $45,000 that belonged to those 15 cousins to the 25 survivors. How does one prove that a person was murdered at Auschwitz and that that person was not survived by a spouse or child? It takes over ten years; it requires proof of laborious notice efforts at the last place of residence, affidavits from surviving relatives and friends, all circumstantial proof. The most telling evidence is the conclusion to be shown: they are no longer here.

The story of Artur's life is instructive. He played for the local soccer team as a young man and was a local hero, known affectionately as "The Little Robber," presumably for his ability to take the ball from opponents. As a result, when the first series of anti-semitic laws went into effect in Germany Artur felt immune—he was, after all, not a "problem"; to the contrary, he was an example of how successfully Jews could integrate into German society. Artur learned better one day when a group of his former teammates, whom he tried to continue to befriend, took him into a nearby forest and beat him nearly to death.

Stories such as Artur's were a staple of my early childhood. There was the sad saga of my mother's cousin Alice, always referred to as "poor Alice" in light of the harrowing last contact with her. She was dragged away from my parent's house by the Gestapo, screaming and protesting as long as she was conscious, never to be heard from again. There was the story of my mother's uncle, aunt and the aunt's aged mother, deported to the Gurs Concentration Camp in the Pyrenees. The aged woman died on the train, the uncle died of starvation at Gurs and the aunt was taken to Auschwitz where she was murdered. And then stories of some of the 15 cousins whose share of Artur's estate was to find its way into my hands over 45 years after their murders. The Holocaust, therefore, has for me both a personal and an abstract reality. The empty places at the dinner table at family and religious celebrations were a reminder of that reality.

I had occasion just a few years ago to see more graphic evidence of the Holocaust. I was in Bruchsahl, a small town in southwestern Germany where my parents lived and where Artur had starred in soccer 80 years earlier. I went to the cemetery to see my grandfather's

grave. The Jewish section of the cemetery was well kept and it began, in the back, along with the Christian section, with stone markers indicating deaths in the mid-1800s. There were, however, no graves in the Jewish section after the late 1930s, while the Christian section continued to move forward with stone markers as recent as the year of my visit. As an adult, I had gotten used to death and had come to view it as a natural and inevitable part of life. What I was seeing here, however, was not death, but the death of death, which truly meant an end to life. This ghastly finale to millennia-old Jewish life cycles can be found in cemeteries all over Europe.

Denials of the Holocaust are vicious obscenities. They are the last and ultimate destruction of those who were murdered by saying they did not really die and that even their deaths will be as eradicated as their lives were. Denials of the Holocaust are inevitably anti-semitic: if the Holocaust did not happen, then a Jewish conspiracy invented it for other purposes. In short, we have a denial inevitably coupled with the first step of possible recurrence. Herein lies the dilemma. It is a given that the Holocaust occurred and that the 6 million figure generally associated with it is correct. It is also a given that anyone has the right to speak his or her mind on history and that right includes the right to say, as some denying the Holocaust state, that "unfortunately, 200,000 Jews were killed." How is one to respond, if at all? How does one deal with denial?

Pierre Vidal-Naquet's *Assassins of Memory: Essays on Denial of the Holocaust* is helpful in many ways, one of which is his exposure of the techniques of denial. These techniques are both blatant and insidious: according to the deniers, direct testimony by a Jew is either a lie or a fantasy; documents supporting organized mass destruction of Jews are either tampered with or in code; Nazi testimony after the war confirming organized mass destruction was obtained by intimidation and or torture; and a vast pseudotechnical arsenal is used to show that mass gassings were impossible. Other evidence, such as the exploits of the *Einsatzgruppen*, bands of S.S. troopers who followed the German Army in its eastward advance and eliminated Jewish communities through the simple expedient of shooting them (the ravine at Babi Yar, for example), is simply ignored.

Vidal-Naquet observes that a fairly common scenario is for a person to deny that the Holocaust occurred, for that denial to be challenged, and for the challenge to create media interest resulting in a dissemination of the denial that would not have occurred had no one responded to it. While Vidal-Naquet suggests that response is a bad idea because it provides an audience for denial that might otherwise not be there, needless to say, he himself controverts those who deny. If, in that way, he too contributes to the dissemination of their denials, it is also clear that, through the extraordinary depth of his information, he provides a model we might follow. Although he never explicitly develops what he thinks is the appropriate response, from an American perspective, we cannot leave it there. Tempting as it might be to ignore denial and wish that with such avoidance it will go away, there are several reasons this would be a mistake.

First, given the latent anti-semitism that underlies denial, it is foolish to believe that denial left on its own will die a quiet death. Anti-semitism has a life of its own, a life which turns into a pipedream the notion that shunning espousals of denial will lead to their disappearance.

Second, the large percentage of persons on whose ears denial strikes a resonant chord will interpret silence in opposition as further proof of the validity of the unanswered claim. Our objective must be to reduce that large percentage rather than allow it to increase. Silence will not accomplish that objective but simply further establish the presence of such a group in the national consciousness.

Third, while on a particular occasion, taking on a Holocaust denial gives denial a forum it might otherwise not have, over the long run this will not be the case. If those who deny the

Holocaust are effectively challenged, after a while such challenge will not be a newsworthy event but rather old hat.

Our peculiar American perspective demands that we consider confrontational approaches. Indeed, in a legal system not constrained by the First Amendment, certain ideas can be banned: for example, in Germany Holocaust denial is to some extent prohibitted. Our system, however, is irrevocably committed to the idea that the marketplace of ideas will weed out the good from the bad and that no idea can be prohibited because it is wrong, outrageous, or even viciously obscene. Given this commitment to an unconstrained marketplace of ideas, in a context where recent surveys have shown that a large percentage of the American public is either unaware of the Holocaust or believes that its ravages have been exaggerated, how does one respond to denial?

The imperative for a confrontational approach is that the challenge to denial be effective. Vidal-Naquet shows that this can only be done with detailed knowledge of horrendous facts. One must bring more to the debating table than an unshakable belief that 6 million Jews were murdered by the Nazis. One must be prepared to verbally dismember those who say it never happened, as Vidal-Naquet does. Anything less is a mistake and could prove counter-productive. This is not a debate which can be lost.

Perhaps the burden of the debate and even the need for it will be eased by two recent events: the opening of the Holocaust Museum in Washington and the reception given to Spielberg's film "Schindler's List." Part of me wants to think that these dramatic presentations will mute the denials, will significantly diminish the astonishingly large number of Americans who are either ignorant of the Holocaust or those who think its toll is exaggerated. Another part of me, however, thinks that such thinking is not much different than poor old Artur's naive notion that because he was the star of the soccer team he was immune. Artur's mistake is one that cannot be repeated. We have to deal with the pernicious presence of Holocaust denial head-on. The risks of not doing so are simply too great.