

The language of the Executioners and the language of the Victims

Interview with Saul Friedländer and Pierre-Emmanuel Dauzat

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As Friedländer notes in “*The Years of Extermination*”, Hitler lost the war against the Allied forces but not the one he unleashed against the Jews. Within a few years, Nazism had succeeded in destroying a civilisation, a heritage, a language. The executioners spoke German but they also invented a whole propaganda lexicon, complete with coded language and circumlocutions designed to conceal the extermination scheme. Conversely, in the face of imminent destruction, the victims accumulated testimonies. Are there such things as languages of life and languages of death? Dialogue between a historian and his translator.

Saul Friedländer is one of the best specialists in Nazism. His book *The Years of Extermination: Nazi Germany and the Jews 1939-1945* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson) has just come out in French. It is the second volume of a study begun in 1997. In *When Memory Comes* (Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 1979), he told of his dislocated childhood, the exile from Prague, the escape to France and, after his parents' deportation, his arrival in Israel, his last port of call.

Pierre-Emmanuel Dauzat has translated the foremost works on Nazism and the Holocaust, including David Boder, Jan Gross, Raul Hilberg, Ian Kershaw and Saul Friedländer. He has also written some ten essays on Christian thought and most recently *Les Sexes du Christ [Christ's Sexes]*, Denoël, 2007.

Mother Tongues

***La Vie des idées:* Saul Friedlander, you were born in Prague in the early thirties. People, in your family felt German and throughout your life you have kept up your familiarity with German. At the same time, you also spoke Czech and you have told how your governess taught you songs. I would like you to tell us about your childhood's languages.**

Saul Friedländer: Those are in fact the languages I know least well. Czech, I understand very well; and when I go to Prague, it comes back to me within two or three days. It was the prime language. The governess sang Czech songs and spoke Czech to me, but I think my parents spoke mostly German to me since we spent a large part of the year in Sudetenland, a German-speaking region. On the whole, Prague Jews spoke German and felt culturally more German than Czech; so I learnt both languages. Of course, when we left for France – escaped if you will – in April 1939, I moved to a completely different cultural realm. My German and Czech languages were phased out over the years; but they come back when I am in contact with people who speak one or the other language. But it is French that became the language of my childhood – if belatedly, say from the age of seven. English came later and Hebrew with my arrival in Israel.

***La Vie des idées:* Pierre-Emmanuel Dauzat, to the best of my knowledge, your mother tongue is French. How and why does one choose to live with and inside other languages?**

Pierre-Emmanuel Dauzat: I think chance has a big part to play here; then, there is the presence of the foreign very early in my family. French as my mother tongue, yes: in fact I should rather say that it was my mother's tongue. I never experienced it as a mother tongue for a whole lot of psychological and familial reasons. As against that, as a child, I gabbled rather than talked and they said that my gibberish was Chinese to them. I was very proud to speak Chinese, which explains why it is one of the languages I never studied and which, to my regret, I cannot read. My maternal grandmother was one of the first French students to be awarded an Oxford English degree and she spoke fluent Spanish, English and German. So I knew

such things existed. In another branch of the family, I had a Jewish uncle, fully assimilated, but who had lived for a long time in the Far East. He spoke Cambodian, Vietnamese and had a gift for languages. This represented for me something wholly miraculous, an extraordinary means of escape. Meanwhile, I have never managed to speak any language at all. I can't string two words together, not even for "bonjour" and "au revoir" in English. I was lucky enough to translate authors whose command of French was excellent. Otherwise, I asked for an interpreter and I always ask for an interpreter when meeting authors I translate. It is a completely different ballgame.

I learnt languages by copying them. I did not think there was anything other than dead languages, so the first languages I learnt were Latin and Greek. I had brothers and sister who read things in Greek and Latin. So I started to translate in order to copy, to appropriate things. I ended up loving French and finally mastering it via foreign languages. As a child, I copied scores of books from my parents' library, first in French then in foreign languages, surreptitiously, because I realised that it amounted to a job. As I did not have a vocation I did not become a copyist. Little by little I became a translator, without realising, feeling slightly guilty about it. It is a rather strange head-shrinker job, because all that is foreign and all that is external is brought down to what we know, whereas the translator's true impetus consists in liking the other and therefore in remaining abroad, never to return.

Saul Friedländer: I forgot to say that I had learned Latin and Greek, which have vanished. Languages, I think, remain as a substratum; that is to say, there are layers of languages. For instance when I learned Hebrew upon arriving in Israel, at the age of fifteen, Latin and Greek, which had been with me for years, disappeared in the presence of a language that was new to me. But I believe that languages never disappear and that, should the necessity arise, up come languages one thought utterly forgotten.

The Language of Executioners

***La Vie des idées:* Saul Friedländer, you are exceedingly familiar with the language of the executioners since you are a leading authority on Nazism. Reading you – and indeed other historians, it becomes clear that Nazism had**

created a special language. I have in mind Klemperer's book on the "Language of the Third Reich", of course, but I also think of a passage that struck me in your book *When Memory Comes*. You recall that, as a child you were listening to Hitler speaking on the radio with your family, around 1939 and you are struck, almost scared by the repetition of the word "*tausend*" which does come up several times in the speech, and which you describe as the "huffing of a locomotive". Can you tell us what you make of this, your first language: does it frighten you or, conversely, should it be studied in order to be understood?

Saul Friedländer: To this, there is a simple answer: it is the language of the murderers if you want, but there were other people speaking German, there was a German culture. Germany does not boil down to the Third Reich, even though, as was often remarked, the Third Reich did for some words in the German language. For instance, "*Sonderbehandlung*" [in Nazi terms "special treatment", that is extermination, Ed.] is a word that gives pause, that a German somewhat familiar with this issue would no longer use. The same goes for "*Endlösung*" ["final solution" Ed.]. There are not many people who would use these words – before Nazism, before the onset of extermination neutral – in full knowledge. Nazism has truly contaminated the language.

But that's not the whole story. German, as any German Jewish refugee will tell you, was, in essence, Schiller and Goethe's tongue. Thus, I have never had problems with German as such, because I knew that I was using it to write the history of those very events. The language came back pretty readily and I had no qualms about it. The language has a rasping quality that allowed such rhetoric as Hitler's to use turns of phrase French would not accommodate so easily. In September 1938, the aforementioned "*tausend*" was applied to the "thousands" of Germans fleeing Sudetenland for Germany. Frightening it may have been, but it is no reason to forego the use of the word "*tausend*".

Klemperer was first and for a long time alone in analysing the language of the Third Reich, its turns of phrase, its standard words, its particular use of verbs, a whole syntax of its own. Yes indeed, there was a Third Reich language and it is not unusual, when reading more specialised works, to find at the back some sort of glossary

informing the reader of the meaning of all these expressions. It is true that with propaganda – I refer, of course, to Goebbels, but also to organisations like the SS – a language that was their very essence emerged. Goebbels made use of particular terms, which he repeated, as did Hitler of course. Klemperer was keeping track of all this with great precision. In his diary of the war years, he keeps working on language. Immediately after the war he published the LTI [The Language of the Third Reich LTI: *Lingua Tertii Imperii* Victor Klemperer, The Athlone Press. It was published in German in 1947 Ed.]

La Vie des idées: Pierre-Emmanuel Dauzat, I would like to ask you the same question extending it to anti-Semitism. You have translated a History of the “Protocols of the Elder of Zion”, a forgery cooked up in far-right Tsarist circles at the turn of the 20th Century and which claims that a Jewish plot is afoot with the aim of world domination.

Pierre-Emmanuel Dauzat: [...] I would like to return to the LTI because Klemperer undertook this work right from the outset but he was not the only intellectual. If you consider the diaries, Thomas Mann or Adorno’s correspondence, or, even more so, that of musicians, you will see observations on this subject. There is an episode I find truly arresting; it concerns Schoenberg’s Moses and Aaron. He stopped composing it because it used a very simple word, the meaning of which had changed overnight in Germany: that of Führer. The idea of giving Moses a German name that negated everything that was Hebrew, that belonged with the Jewish tradition: that was completely impossible. And so there was this silence and it is true that, as a result of this episode and no doubt influenced by Steiner, I have held on to the idea that there were languages in which some things were better left untold and that there were things that could not be translated. In literature, I think for instance of a novel called Bread for the Dead, which is one of the finest fictional works on the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. The author has Jewish roots, he speaks Yiddish, the novel is written in Polish and he has succeeded in using German in his book in such a way as to be virtually untranslatable.

You referred to the sound of the train engine: it has become an almost onomatopoeic language, with its weight in death, its weight in violence but which

remains beyond the pale and cannot contaminate others. And that, to me, is the crux of the matter. As a result, the subjects Friedländer treats get written about. There is an ethics, a deontology; there is a usage that must be painstakingly and mindfully observed. It is a thing that comes naturally to *The Years of Extermination*. There is a book Friedländer does not quote, by Roazen, who worked extensively on the language of testimony. I think he has homed in on something fundamental: when passing to another language, good care must be taken not to pass to another grammar unnecessarily, so as not to trivialize the testimonies and the tenor of the speech. Those are problems any translator will have to address – and even more so in such an undertaking.

In the Company of Murderers

***La Vie des idées:* In your autobiography, Saul Friedländer, there is a passage that struck me very much: you explain that you have at least twice crossed paths with murderers. The first time, in Sweden, you met Wolf a former SS; more significantly in the early 60s, in Northern Germany, you met Grand Admiral Dönitz, the commander in chief of the German Navy who became for a few days, at the very end of the Nazi debacle, leader of the Reich. Can you tell us about this encounter?**

Saul Friedländer: The memory that stays with me remains very strong, in a manner of speaking. It left me completely nonplussed, for a reason I shall leave you to judge. I was writing my doctoral thesis on “The American factor in German strategy prior to US involvement in the war”, that is on the way the Germans, particularly in the army and the navy, envisaged the impact of the United States entry into war as this grew increasingly likely. In the process, I thought I must interview “Grand Admiral” Dönitz, for such was his title under the Third Reich. He had served some time in prison after Nuremberg, he had been sentenced to four years, I think (ten in fact, Ed.) for having had sailors who had surrendered executed. He only served four years because an American admiral turned up to say that the Americans had done the same thing.

So I wrote to Dönitz asking him to give me an interview, I told him the subject I was working on. He said: “Fine, come on such and such a day at such and such time.” My name, Friedländer, can be German or Swiss, so it told him nothing about my identity. I went all the way to where he lived, in Holstein. At six p.m. on the dot, I was on his doorstep: an old gentleman, still very sprightly within reason, opened. I told him straight away in German: “My name gives away nothing of my origins, but I am Jewish, I am an Israeli, so, with your permission, we shall discuss the questions which made my professional visit necessary, and afterwards perhaps you will be kind enough to grant me a few minutes more.” We shall leave aside the professional issue; he incidentally said things that were inexact, but I have a feeling he had no clear memory. I went back over it and checked.

So we arrive at the big question. I said to him: “You are a navy officer, with a code of conduct, some values, you come from a military family. How could you, right until the end, be party to a regime that was criminal?” He said to me: “You probably won’t believe me but I knew nothing of Nazi crimes.” I said: “Come on, that’s unthinkable. You met Hitler himself and all the regime top brass week in week out; don’t come and tell me that....” And he answers “No, that’s how it is, the system was very compartmentalized, everybody kept to their line of work and was so concerned with what they had to do... Which is the reason why I knew nothing. I learned everything when I became the Head of State and found documents that told me everything.” As I repeated the question and he answered more or less in the same way, I took a gamble. If the worst came to the worst, I thought, he would throw me out. I said to him: “Grand Admiral, will you give me your word of honour as a German Grand Admiral that you knew nothing?” He answered in a split second: “I give you my word as a German Grand Admiral that I knew nothing.” Right. I thanked him and went on my way.

When I went to London to work on Navy archives, I visited the Head of the Naval History Department and I told him what had happened two days earlier, during my meeting with Dönitz and that it was almost unthinkable. He came back with something that leaves me deeply perplexed: “You know, since Nuremberg, we are getting to know these people rather well. They re-invent their memory, they re-create their identity, after a fashion. Now when he gives you his word of honour, he is not

lying in his own eyes. He tells you the truth – such as he sees it in 1963. In fact, of course, he was fully aware of what was going on, as were his colleagues. But as far as he is concerned today, he did not lie. There is a difference.” This troubles me, because Dönitz could easily get out of answering me, he could have said: “Look here, young man, I was at Nuremberg, all this has been dealt with. Please leave.” But he answered as he did, and that is rather strange.

La Vie des idées: Pierre-Emmanuel Dauzat, you have translated many books on Nazism, notably Eric Johnson’s book on the Gestapo and the Jews. More importantly still, you translated Ian Kershaw’s monumental biography of Hitler. I would like to ask you about that experience. To put it bluntly, how does it feel to live with Hitler?

Pierre-Emmanuel Dauzat: It is just unbearable: it’s one of the greatest frights in my life. I must say that I did it for a very simple reason, which is that Kershaw aroused my sense of civic duty. He has these few words at the end of his book *Popular Opinion and Political Dissent in the Third Reich. Bavaria, 1933-45*, where he explains that Nazism fed on hatred but that the path that led to it was paved with indifference. I saw that there were a number of civic reactions one should have. To tell you the truth, this is a book I did not want to do alone to begin with. Editorial accidents landed me with it. Later, when I got to know Ian Kershaw, I took comfort from what he told me: that, at times, he was utterly devastated before his work. His wife would come in and get him out to the garden to try and get a bit of fresh air into him. For his part, he had achieved a balance by keeping up his medievalist enquiries, publishing cartularies and such like.

As for myself, faced with that kind of work, I always take refuge in the Church Fathers, in Latin or Greek, whom I love; but in this instance, the experience was dreadful. The photo on the cover, I immediately tore away. I was constantly in anguish because I had to translate each book in one year. So the pace was quite sustained, more than two thousand pages each time; it was just unbearable. I found an outlet to my feelings, a way to keep going by taking it out on the book: I tore the pages off as I went. Never had I so thoroughly grasped the phrase “Let his name be

wiped from the surface of the Earth¹”. In the end all there was left was the translation. I must add that, with Kershaw I have come to understand what writing history means. He has written a truly major book that helps understand, beyond his subject, what a historical riddle, what a figure is, never mind intentionalist, functionalist quarrels or whatever. It remains a trial and I must say that, physically the object still fills me with unease. Measuring up with Kershaw was an extremely satisfying experience. [...] I met a great writer, a great book on a fundamentally loathsome subject that is still the stuff of my nightmares. But, in a way, I can say I had exactly the same experience when working on the definitive edition of Hilberg [The Destruction of European Jews, Ed.]

Of Friedländer’s book, I would say something quite different since it is a book I translated into French by accident: Friedländer’s French is faultless and he could easily have done the job himself. The difference is that Friedländer, in style and subject, has a way of laying to rest, bringing back the voice, restoring the dignity of countless people whose traces had been wiped out by history. Though I was in perpetual mourning as I worked, I also felt intense relief at the fact that an act of piety could still be effected sixty years hence. Whereas I translated Kershaw in anger, nay in hatred – if I am capable of it – when I delved on Friedländer’s work I had but tears to grieve and I finally found great peace.

The Lexicon of Crime

***La Vie des idées:* There is a whole baggage of coded language and euphemisms in Nazi terminology (“resettlement to the East” meaning immediate extermination). When working on Nazism, I guess one faces the absence of language to say the most criminal things. You quote a speech Himmler gave in Posen in 1943, in which he explains that the extermination of the Jews “is a page of glory never mentioned and never to be mentioned”. At the same time, as your book shows, a range of testimonies, quantities of them, have been left by the very perpetrators – privates, auxiliaries, manufacturers, camp guards, etc. So that we have on the one hand a word vacuum and on the other a wealth of testimonies –**

¹ An other translation of this anathema is: “the Lord shall blot out his name from under heaven” (Trans)

as if the Holocaust secret was too great a burden for those who committed the crime. Can you tell us something of this contrast?

Saul Friedländer: This question has remained unanswered. On the one hand the Nazis used the codes you have mentioned, on the other hand, they used it in such a way that it could be understood. [...] When the SS statistician draws up his report on the number of murdered Jews, he produces a six pages long report for Hitler. In this version, he mentions “*Sonderbehandlung*”. Himmler’s principal private secretary sends the text back to Korherr (Eichman had been instructed to surrender all documentation to Korherr because Eichman’s office had made a very poor job of the statistical data) saying: “It is impossible to use such terms in a document to be submitted to the Führer. Find a circumlocution, say ‘Jews transported via camps in the East’, etc...” – and so it was done. Next Himmler returns the report with a note: “Seen by the Führer. To be destroyed”. You have got to wonder why this type of encoding, twice over, is necessary in a document to be handed in to the man who was undoubtedly the best informed of what was going on.

I think the Nazis had History and the future in mind. The name of the Führer was not to be associated to mass extermination, however “glorious” the page may be, because, in the future, ordinary folks would not understand it, would not have the right grasp of those things. Even stranger: Hitler himself, in 1942, even as the “final solution” – yet another code name – is fully set into motion, uses six or seven times the same terms in public speeches at the Reichstag etc.... It is broadcasted throughout the world: “I have often been a prophet. When I declared that the result of a war would not be the extermination of the European races, but the extermination of Jewry in Europe, the Jews in Germany laughed at my prophecies. I do not know whether they are still laughing today, or whether they have been cured of laughter. But take my word for it: they will stop laughing everywhere.” It is clear; so much so that German newspapers print sentences like “the Führer speaks of exterminating the Jews”. In provincial sheets, under Hitler’s speech, there are subtitles like “Jews to be exterminated” or “threatened with extinction”. Hitler himself uses a circumlocution but it could easily be understood by anybody who cared to. The Nazis used a code to somehow protect themselves, but they were well aware that their code would be fully

understood. This is psychology, collective psychology even: you hide your crime but you show it at the same time.

Pierre-Emmanuel Dauzat: You incidentally quote a news report published in the *Völkischer Beobachter* which gives an account of the massacres while saying “they say, they say” and which in fact gives details of all the massacres in all ways and in their full horror – so that the reader could be in no doubt whatsoever. And what is more this is the regime’s official organ. That’s what strikes you: all is said and, at the same time, the regime pretends it is saying nothing. One memorable aspect of the book is in soldiers’ correspondence. You can see that, all told, people were quite adept at telling and that between them, they said these things perfectly well.”

Saul Friedländer: The soldiers did not beat around the bush. They were very pleased to tell what they had to tell. One of them says: “If you don’t believe me, when I am on leave, I shall bring pictures, and then you will believe me.”

Pierre-Emmanuel Dauzat: One is faced with this contradictory picture where the regime uses a range of masks, circumlocutions, a number of ploys but in reality the population understands full well. It is particularly noticeable at places of execution. Someone mentions cars queuing to see the hanging bodies, take pictures etc... On these matters, there are enough documents to compile books; it’s just astounding. The language of crime is at the same time the language spoken everyday. The notion of a split, according to which there would have been a hermetic initiatory language and an everyday language, is not without danger, because it is also a construct developed in Germany after the war to accredit the notion that nobody knew.

The Language of the Victims

***La Vie des idées:* Saul Friedländer, you are familiar with Yiddish, the language of Central and Eastern European Jews, which was almost completely eradicated by the Nazis. Is Yiddish a dead language for you or, on the contrary are you still viscerally attached to it?**

Saul Friedländer: You endow me with a linguistic proficiency I do not possess: I never learnt Yiddish. Words like “*nebich*” or “*schnorer*” were frequently used in everyday speech by Central European Jews whose language was actually German. People might say “ah, he is a *nebich*”, for somebody down on their luck, or a “*schnorer*” for somebody who is a bit of a scrounger in the context of small Central European Jewish localities. I can read Yiddish, not because my family spoke it but because I read Hebrew and I know German. It is slow work but I can readily make sense of a newspaper article in Yiddish.

It is the language of the victims; it is the language of a world that has indeed been totally destroyed by Nazism. Today, there are attempts to salvage Yiddish. It is taught in the United States, in the universities, there are Yiddish classes and there are even quite a few students wishing to learn it. But this effort is a bit contrived; the language has really become a dead language in the full meaning of the word. People always forget that the Nazis did not only kill millions of people but that they also destroyed a civilisation, a culture and the words that spoke that culture. They plundered all they found in Jewish museums or in archives to bring them together in a given place – which, incidentally, is a further evidence of their madness – to keep something of the people they had destroyed, destroyed with intent, folks, lives, culture. Then, they go and create a museum in Prague to assemble what must be kept together. Go figure the pathological logics behind this system! But Yiddish, as you said and I can only repeat, as a culture, as a way of life, was destroyed by Nazi Germany.

La Vie des idées: Pierre-Emmanuel Dauzat, do you find pleasure in reading or translating Yiddish?

Pierre-Emmanuel Dauzat: Yiddish was a revelation for me. I have migrated from language to language, in pursuit of all sorts of testimonies, literatures, personal obsessions, which enabled me to clear up quite a few things but I must say that Yiddish is a language that embraces them all, which has the whole of European history in its syntax, in its vocabulary. [...] It is very powerful, it has a life of its own and it endures, in spite of everything, in urban literature, including in the United States. There is the case of Bashevis Singer of whom it is said the he received his

Nobel price for two different sums of work, one in Yiddish, the other in English. It is a fact that the two versions of his work are very different and that things that are said in one tongue are not said in the other. In Elie Wiesel's *Night*, the Yiddish version is half again as long, it is much more religious, it gives a lot more hope to its Jewish readership, whereas the version in Romanic languages, in French, in English is more of an indictment.

Something else drove me to Yiddish, something almost inescapable: it is probably the only language I shall ever try to speak, even if I have nobody to speak it with. Although, in Paris – in a move considered somewhat *bobo*², but not exclusively so since it touches all age groups – there are classes in Yiddish, there are important Yiddish salons, there are still some Yiddish reviews and some Yiddish poets. I was deeply affected (since it is my work on testimonies that introduced me to this language) by a book entitled *I did not interview the dead* by David Boder ([see our review in La vie des idées](#)). This Lithuanian psychiatrist had the remarkable idea, after the war, to go and interview people coming out of transit camps and he succeeded in interviewing 350 people who had lived between two and five years in the camps and who, for the first time since their release, had the opportunity to utter something other than words in German or words that were imposed to them. Some fell to recovering their language and to muttering a whole lot of things. The first tapes have been tracked down, they are wire recordings and I was able to listen to most of these testimonies in their original language. At first, they speak German and then surreptitiously, they re-discover their Yiddish and they actually do not say the same things. There is in these recordings a verbal presence and a power that I found astounding.

People at large are mostly unaware of Yiddish literature but there are names (I think of Mendele Moïkher Sforim and many more), which are a pretty good match for great Russian literature, for great German or French literature. They were intellectuals, perfectly *au fait* with all the trends in European literature they are exactly at the same level. There is a fantastic job to be done in the footsteps of Rachel

² *Bourgeois-bohême*: high-achieving professional who combines a wealthy lifestyle with an anti-establishment attitude and a concern for quality of life.

Ertel, Baumgarten, Raczymow and many others. There is an immensely rich treasure to dig out. To come back to Friedländer, he quotes diaries, often written in Yiddish. Among them one author whose name eludes me, unfortunately – I feel very guilty – but who wrote in five, six different languages...

Saul Friedländer: A Łodz teenager but his name is not known.

Pierre-Emmanuel Dauzat: His name is not known, but the way he wrote in Hebrew, in Arabic, in Yiddish, in English is pure wonder. There is in particular this passage so very terrible and cruel, and deeply moving, which he writes in English because he does not want his younger sister to know that he stole her bread. The Yiddish language is indispensable to give back their own language to witnesses and victims. For me a return to Yiddish was mandatory.

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