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## Jewish Life and Shoah in Central-Eastern Europe

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**Yiftach Ashkenazy** from Yad Vashem gave a lecture/conference where he schematically analysed Shoah raising a set of relevant questions. Were there clear-cut stages and patterns that anticipated and led to Shoah? Which were these stages? Can the Holocaust be seen as the “paradigmatic genocide”, i.e. do other genocides share some of Shoah’s aspects without, however, reaching its scope and scale? The lecture was structured around a comparison between Shoah and the genocide in Rwanda which took place in 1994. Ashkenazy pinpoints several progressive stages of Shoah, some of which also apply to Rwanda. The first one of these is classification, i.e. the creation of rigid groups along the lines of race and/or religion. The next step is symbolisation, i.e. the naming of the group to which a recognizable symbol is attached (e.g. the star of David).

Another fundamental and common feature of both genocides is dehumanization: the “others” are depicted as non human (often as insects, both in the Jews and Hutu/Tutzi cases). These foretold features imply a certain organization: political, economic, military and other means are to a certain extent voluntarily and rationally employed for the realization of the genocide. Ashkenazy then continues with polarization, i.e. the clear-cut separation amongst groups, the fixed distinction between “us” and “them” that anticipates identification, the visible separation happening through segregation (e.g. ghettos) and the creation of death lists. All the previous stages finally lead to extermination: the actual killing of a certain group, of the dangerous, dehumanized “other”.

The last stage is denial: a series of actions is carried out to cover, reduce and hide the evidence of the genocide. Bodies might be burnt, survivors intimidated together with the denial that the genocide actually ever took place. Finally, the lecturer discussed the reactions of the world community to both genocides depicting them as insufficient: if in 1939 even the USA refused to welcome a cruise ship with 937 Jews on board, in 1994 all major international organizations refused to commit themselves to stop the killings.

In such a difficult context, where states seem too entangled in diplomatic games, what is our responsibility as citizens? We strive, during peace time, for the creation of a social *milieu* where, through attentive social debate, tolerance becomes a pillar of our relationship with others.

Raimondo Lanza  
*MA candidate at MIREES Interdisciplinary Research and Studies on Eastern Europe  
University of Bologna – Forlì campus*