Chapter Five: IBM organizes the Holocaust

Most Holocaust victims never knew what was happening, But one American company did.

When the Nazis identified exactly where Jews lived, even those living Christian lives but with Jewish ancestors in their bloodlines, one company knew. When the Reich persecution machine pinpointed exactly which professors, doctors, art dealers and members of any of a thousand other niches in society were Jews, and then ousted them, one company knew. When the banks seized Jewish savings, corporate stock and property, one company knew. When the Jews were rounded up in Frankfurt, Warsaw, and hundreds of other cities and meticulously squeezed into ghettos or concentration camps, one company knew. When the Nazis burst into a Polish or Hungarian town with all the Jews listed, numbered, and alphabetized, demanding that the named ones present themselves, one company knew. When Jews with skills were suddenly plucked from their enslavement in one part of occupied Europe and transferred to another camp where those skills were needed – and then worked to death, one company knew. When the Jews, catalogued by numbers and scheduled by precise calculations, were herded into trains and metered into death camps, one company knew.

Who knew? Answer: International Business Machines and its president, Thomas J. Watson. IBM organized and essentially co-planned the Holocaust with the Nazis.

HOW DID it work? Long before the information age, going back to the nineteenth century, IBM controlled information technology by virtue of punch card technology. Punch card systems, the forerunners of computers, could capture any type of information in the holes punched into the rows and columns of a specially prepared paper card. When a machine "read" the card, names, addresses, and other personal data were revealed according to the punched holes. Originally designed for censuses as a "people identifier," punch cards were quickly adapted for any number of statistical and informational purposes. By correctly setting up the informational input, punch cards could also reveal any data about trains, warehouse goods, sales, financial transactions, and indeed anything or any process that lent itself to statistics, tabulation, or tracking.

A government census employee named Herman Hollerith invented the punch card system during the 1880s for the US Census Bureau. This system allowed the Bureau to gather vastly more census information than ever before, and assemble the results in weeks and months, not years as previously required. Hollerith then stole the government's technology to found his own company. That company evolved into the international conglomerate known as IBM.

Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, the names IBM and "Hollerith" were synonymous and generic for each other and punch card technology. Hence, IBM tabulators were called "Hollerith machines," IBM punch cards were called "Hollerith cards," and IBM bureaus were commonly referred to as "Hollerith Bureaus." Prior to the advent of Hollerith, the world had never seen such an ability to track and organize its citizens and activities.

IN THE hands of Adolf Hitler, a new era was born. For the first time in history, people were not just numerically counted. A whole constellation of data about the counted individuals, how they interfaced into society, and how society interfaced with them, could be swiftly tabulated, assembled, and analyzed. The Third Reich reacted to its information with lightning speed, and constantly asked for more. Hence, 1933 Berlin saw the dawn of the Information Age, that is, the individualization of statistics.

With IBM as a partner, the Hitler regime was able to substantially automate and accelerate all six phases of the 12-year Holocaust: identification, exclusion, confiscation, ghettoization, deportation, and even extermination. For IBM, Hitler's Reich represented an immense source of profit. Indeed, from the first moments of its strategic relationship with Germany, beginning in 1933, the Reich became IBM's largest overseas customer.

As it did with any other customer, IBM simply asked the Hitler regime what result was wanted. Then company engineers devised custom-tailored punch card systems to deliver the results. IBM billed itself as "The Solutions Company." It was an identity the firm never lost. There was no solution IBM was unwilling to provide.

The first solution the Reich wanted was to quickly identify exactly who was Jewish, exactly where the Jews lived, and exactly which professions they worked in. What's more, among the approximate 600,000 Jews in Germany, the Reich wanted to identify first the so-called "Eastern Jews," that is, the Jews from Eastern Europe. Hitler reviled these Jews the most.

Under the continuous micromanagement of IBM's obsessive president Thomas J. Watson, himself a corporate criminal previously
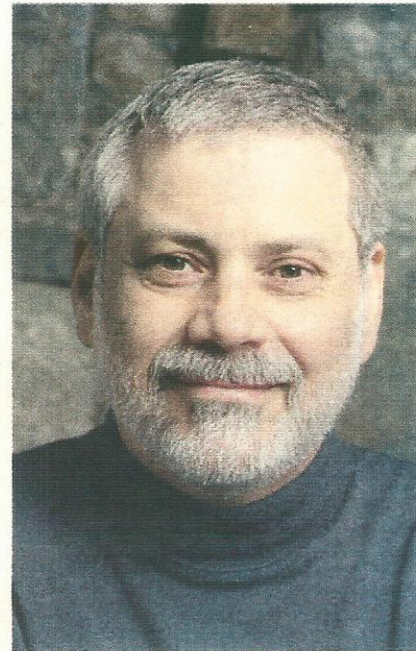
Edwin Black: Now the dots can be connected.

convicted in a massive extortion conspiracy, the company constructed a solution.

IBM IN New York instructed its German subsidiary to design a massive German census, one which the firm would actually execute with its own employees and equipment. Special punch cards were designed by IBM engineers to identify the Jews, their origin, current location, and profession. Working hand-in-hand with the Nazis, a massive, door-to-door national census was undertaken throughout Germany in 1933. The key was not only gathering the information on paper forms with answers to the key questions organized into "fields," but then punching the precise information into the correct location on punch cards especially created for the purpose. This required IBM engineers to design and print millions of compatible punch cards and paper forms, assemble and train an army of secretaries to punch in the data, and deliver large numbers of machines – sorters and tabulators – and ensure that the settings could read the data properly. Finally, IBM had to produce the clear, printed results that the Nazis desired.

By punching religion in one column, nationality in another column, native language in a third column, city in a fourth column and then profession in its own column, at the rate of 24,000 cards per hour, IBM could identify exactly – for example – how many Jews of Polish extraction were engaged in the fur trade in Berlin. Census and endless registration was repeated throughout Nazi-occupied Europe.

Once identified, Jews were subjected to organized expulsion from IBM cross-tabulated directories, asset confiscation from IBM punch-card organized financial institutions, and synchronized transfers into ghettos using IBM cross-matching systems. The trains all ran on IBM punch cards. The Auschwitz tattoo began as an IBM number. IBM even developed a special code for gas chamber murder. Sonderbehandlung, or "Special Treatment," was Code 6.

Excerpted from Edwin Black's Nazi Nexus – America's Corporate Connections to Hitler's Holocaust *(Dialog Press, 2009).*

Women and children held prisoner at the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp.