



THE *Judaic Studies Review*

**An Undergraduate
Journal in Topics
Across the Field**

AT THE COLLEGE OF WILLIAM & MARY

THE FIRST ISSUE!

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Co-Edited By:

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NOTE FROM THE EDITORS

Welcome to the 1st issue of *The Judaic Studies Review: An Undergraduate Journal in Topics Across the Field*. Despite the challenges of the pandemic, Judaic Studies returned to campus with a bang! Not only did we host many marvelous and dynamic speakers, students produced superb writing and are engaged in important research projects.

We are excited to launch this journal as a forum in which we can appreciate the work of leading contemporary scholars and undergraduate scholars alike and celebrate William & Mary as an environment in which Judaic Studies thrives.

In this issue you will find student reviews of lectures by Professors Ithamar Gruenwald, Sarah Cramsey, and Martin Kavka by Jordan Leder, Samantha Gutcho and Abby Comey and student essays by David Solinsky, Will Hamlett, Megan O'Connor and Mary Kardos.

There is more on the way next semester when Judaic Studies hosts leading Jewish Musicologist Edwin Seroussi, the Israel Prize Laureate in musicology and hosts two major symposia on "Jewish Life in 21st century America: A Reassessment" and "Judaism and The Museum of the Bible".

We hope you enjoy the issue!

Dr. Randi Rashkover
Nathan and Sofia Gumenick Chair in Judaic Studies
Director of Judaic Studies

Jack Boyd
W&M '24

VISITING LECTURES

Dr. Al Baumgarten

Professor Emeritus of Jewish History at Bar Ilan University

Presented "The Intersection of Greco-Roman and Ancient Jewish Histories: How You Get There Matters!" to Professor Daise's RELG 315/CLCV 321 course, "Judaism Before the Rabbis".

Kamal Hachkar

Filmmaker

·Visited Professor Glasser's ANTH 331/AMES 390 class, "Culture and Society in the Modern Middle East and North Africa" to discuss his documentary *Tinghir-Jerusalem*.

Elissa Altman

James Beard Award-Winning Author

·Visited Professor Kirsh's RELG 150 Class "Writing the Self." Her recent works include: *Motherland*, *Treyf*, and *Poor Man's Feast: A Love Story of Comfort, Desire, and the Art of Cooking*.

Professor Martin Kavka

Chair of Religion at Florida State University

·Presented an inspired lecture to the public in November at the invitation of Professor Rashkover. His talk: "Identity Politics and Suffering: Post-Holocaust Judaism and the Contemporary Moment."

Dr. Ithamar Gruenwald

Professor Emeritus in Hebrew Culture Studies at Tel Aviv University

·Joined us from Israel to dissect "Rituals and Religion" through social-ethnographic, anthropologic, and comparative religious lenses.

Professor Sarah Cramsey

Assistant Professor, Faculty of Humanities at the University of Leiden

Virtually joined us from the Netherlands to talk with students from Professor Kirsh's course: RELG 311 "Modern European Jewish History." Professor Cramsey's latest book is *Uncertain Citizenship: Jewish Belonging and the "Ethnic Revolution" in Poland and Czechoslovakia, 1936-1946*.

REVIEW: "Rituals and Religion"

by JORDAN LEDEN

OCTOBER 7th, 2021: Professor Gruenwald's lecture, titled "Ritual & Religion," analyzes how ritual observance in Christianity and Judaism differ, but offer relatively similar functions. Gruenwald primarily discusses ritual in the context of the Christian faith, most likely because it serves as the most popular religion in the world. Gruenwald's observation of Christian ritual practices, compared with larger themes of Jewish ritual tradition, allow listeners to understand how rituals' function enables organized religion to maintain relevance up to the modern day.

In the Christian tradition, "obedience to faith," as Gruenwald puts it, is exemplified largely through faith in the spirit of Christ and through few ritual acts, such as communion and baptism, while the Jewish tradition requires its followers to study and practice the extensive laws of the Torah. Gruenwald cites Galatians 1:12 ("I did not receive [the gospel] from any man, nor was I taught [the gospel]; rather, I received [the gospel] by revelation from Jesus Christ") as a definitive statement of how Christianity's approach to ritual observance differs from Judaism's and aids itself in gaining popularity. Because Christianity, according to Paul, does not require immense learned ritual observance, as Judaism does, it finds itself easier to adopt; faith alone serves as the dominant factor in worshipping the Christian faith and, therefore, proves itself to be more resilient in the modern day. While the materiality of ritual acts, such as communion and baptism, tie Christians to Christianity, the convenience of faith in Christ being at the forefront of observing Christianity make the religion largely accessible and, ultimately, maintain its popularity up to the modern day.

Gruenwald further elaborates on the payoffs between ritual observance and faith by contrasting Christian ritual practices with the ones of Jewish tradition. Judaism is characterized by particular rituals, such as observance of the laws of the Torah and circumcision, that constitute a Jew as a Jew. Furthermore, Jewish tradition has laws and rituals that pertain to everyday activities, naturally weaving Judaism into the lives of its followers. The practice of defined ritual in Judaism enables the tradition to maintain relevance in the modern day, but, ultimately, Christianity's heavy emphasis on faith, a trait that Judaism does not have, allows the religion - and the bureaucratic structures that accompany it - to be observed en masse.

REVIEW: Professor Sarah Cramsey

by ABBY COMEY

NOVEMBER 30th, 2021: It's fitting that Dr. Sarah Cramsey delivered her lecture to RELG 311 via Zoom. As she explained the nuanced lived realities of caretakers during and after the Holocaust, each box on the screen provided a glimpse into domestic life, with sounds of Thanksgiving preparations and glimpses of family members wandering through backgrounds. In recent years, scholars have viewed the Shoah more and more through the lens of family. Dr. Cramsey, however, is specifically concerned with caretakers. Her research highlights the mothers, fathers, doctors, friends, and strangers who worked together to nurture young children during a period of upheaval and uncertainty. She narrows in on Polish Jewry in the Soviet Union, a group that experienced a significant wartime and post-war baby boom. Studying these expanding young families allows us to see the experiences of these refugees with the same subtlety that we view our own lives. Dr. Cramsey explores questions about pregnancy, diapers, and circumcision that appear mundane but infuse history with humanity.

There is little archival evidence of the invisible world of caretaking. Instead, refugees pass stories down from generation to generation. This is why testimonies are so invaluable to Dr. Cramsey's research. To prepare for her lecture, students watched the testimony of Rachel Koplowitz, a Holocaust survivor born in Poland in 1915. When Koplowitz became pregnant with her first son in 1943, she thought she had a stomach tumor inside her, not a child. Koplowitz goes on to detail the trials of giving birth, breastfeeding, and caring for a baby while searching for a home. This testimony is just one example of the challenges of parenting in the 1940s in central eastern Europe. Dr. Cramsey's work urges us to analyze the Holocaust in the context of these complex caretaking networks.

Dr. Cramsey graduated from William & Mary with a BA in History and Religious Studies in 2004. Currently, she is an assistant professor at Leiden University in the Netherlands. Her book *Uprooting the Diaspora: Jewish Belonging and the Ethnic Revolution in Poland and Czechoslovakia, 1936-1946* is coming soon from Indiana University Press.

REVIEW: "Identity Politics and Suffering: Post-Holocaust Judaism and the Contemporary Moment"

by SAMANTHA GUTCHO

NOVEMBER 11th, 2021: Dr. Martin Kavka came to William and Mary to discuss the work of the twentieth-century Jewish philosopher Emil Fackenheim and the implications of his work for our contemporary moment. Dr. Kavka provided a framework for understanding Fackenheim's idea of the commanding voice of Auschwitz which is fundamental to post-Holocaust Jewish studies. In Fackenheim's key work *God's Presence in History*, he states:

"Any Jew, then or now, making normalcy his supreme goal should have been, and still should be, in flight from this singled-out condition in total disarray. In fact, however, secularist no less than religious Jew have responded with a reaffirmation of their Jewish existence such as no social scientist would have predicted even if the Holocaust had never occurred . . . The times, however, are not normal times. A Jew at Auschwitz was not a specimen of the class "victim of prejudice" or even "victim of genocide." He was singled out by a demonic power which sought his death absolutely, i.e., as an end in itself. For a Jew today merely to affirm his Jewish existence is to accept his singled-out condition; it is to oppose the demons of Auschwitz: and it is to oppose them in the only way in which they can be opposed-with an absolute opposition." (Fackenheim 81).

In his lecture, Dr. Kavka invited us to examine this quote in order to understand the key element of Fackenheim's post-Holocaust response. At the heart of this quote is the claim that post-Holocaust Jewish communities that affirm their identity qua Jews perform an irrational or imprudent act. Fackenheim believes these identitarian actions to be imprudent insofar as minority populations that proclaim their identitarian difference inevitably make themselves targets of negative popular sentiment. This is surely the case with regard to post-Holocaust Jewish communities given what Fackenheim takes to be the ongoing popular force of anti-semitism. If however Jewish communal expressions of identitarian pride are imprudent, what Fackenheim asks motivates them? Here

REVIEW: "Identity Politics..." cont.

by SAMANTHA GUTCHO

Fackenheim posits his now famous account of the 'Commanding Voice of Auschwitz' or the 614th commandment which commands Jews not to give Hitler a posthumous victory. The Jewish communal choice to affirm Jewish identity in a post-Holocaust world must, Fackenheim argues, be a response to a non-rational and heteronomous commanding voice that obligates them to resist any future attempt to continue Hitler's destructive program against the Jewish people.

Despite his appreciation for the power of Fackenheim's analysis, Dr. Kavka's lecture presented a critical review of Fackenheim's work and its implications in secular society. According to Kavka, Fackenheim is correct to recognize a heteronomous commanding force behind the imprudence of a Jewish identitarian performance. Fackenheim is wrong, Kavka maintained in his refusal to recognize that a similar commanding voice motivates other contemporary minority group performances that in his estimation have been equally targeted and therefore equally vulnerable in these performances such as Act Up and Black Lives Matter. If according to Fackenheim Jewish acts of imprudence are only explainable due to an unknowing supernatural command for resistance, why would it not make sense to apply this same theory to acts of identitarian imprudence by other minority groups? In his lecture, Dr. Kavka presented a famous photo called Taking a Stand in Baton Rouge, which shows Leshia Evans, a black woman participating in BLM protest moments before being arrested by two police officers. He used the photo to demonstrate both the power of her resistance and the risk involved in it.

From here, Dr. Kavka discussed the implications of his reading of Fackenheim and suggested that Fackenheim's failure to appreciate the overlap between post-Holocaust Jewish responses and the resistance of other targeted minority groups like Black Americans and Palestinians neglects a major opportunity for minority groups to achieve a deeper understanding of the risks and power of their parallel resistance movements.

I found Dr. Kavka to be an engaging and insightful lecturer. His openness to critique and support for students' questions demonstrated his love of learning. He made the content of his lecture digestible to the entire audience, not just those who have a deep understanding of Jewish studies. Furthermore, his lecture made a Jewish studies concept applicable to and insightful for any attempt to gain a deeper understanding of modern social movements.

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Essays in Judaic Studies

IS *NIGHT* A JEWISH RESPONSE TO THE HOLOCAUST?

David Solinsky (9)

[OPPOSING VIEWPOINTS]

"GERMAN CHURCHES AND NAZI GERMANY"

Megan O'Connor (11) & Will Hamlett (17)

THE PRESERVATION AND MEMORY OF JEWS IN
SZYDŁOWIEC, POLAND IN A POST-HOLOCAUST WORLD

Mary Kardos (22)

Is *Night* a Jewish response to the Holocaust?

By David Solinsky

Elie Wiesel's powerful *Night* is a Jewish response to the Holocaust, in the manner of the Book of Job, told from the standpoint of a Hungarian Jewish survivor of the Holocaust who is steeped in the Old Testament. (Wiesel, x.)¹ Wiesel's slim volume—and his life's work—seeks to address the central paradox of Jewish existence in the face of the Holocaust: In this world there is a loving God who is all-powerful, yet he allows the most horrible suffering in the world.

Wiesel goes so far as to put God on trial and to demand an account from God. In so doing, Wiesel continues to assert the existence of God; otherwise such a proceeding would be meaningless. Wiesel continues to praise God despite these horrors. Indeed, if *Night* presented a full theological rupture with Judaism, Wiesel would neither wait for an answer from God nor participate in a dialogue.

Wiesel's attempt at direct dialogue with God, echoes the approach of Martin Buber in *I and Thou* which confronts God in dialogue and seeks justice in this theological dialogue.² (Rashkover, Class Outline, October 26, 2021.) In this vein, the praise-giving and arguing with God are the responsibility of the human being as she stands before God. By continuing to pursue redemption, the Jew continues the dialogue with God:

From that day on, I saw him often. He explained to me, with great emphasis, that every question possessed a power that was lost in the answer...Man comes closer to God by the questions he asks Him, he liked to say. Therein lies true dialogue. Man asks God and God replies. But we don't understand his replies. We can't understand them. Because they dwell in the depths of our souls and remain there until we die. The real answers, Eliezer, you will find only within yourself. 'And why do you pray, Moshe?' I asked him.

¹ Wiesel's text reflects his Chasidic upbringing in the Hungarian town of Sighet: "We believed in God, trusted in man, and lived with the illusion that every one of us has been entrusted with a sacred spark from the Shekkinah's flame; that every one of us carries in his eyes and in his soul a reflection of God's image. That was the source if not the cause of all our ordeals." (Wiesel, x-xi, 43.)

² In his work, *Legends of Our Time*, Wiesel expands on this search for justice: "Since the end of the nightmare I search the past, whose prisoner I shall no doubt forever remain. I am afraid, but I still pursue my quest. The further I go, the less I understand. Perhaps there is nothing to understand." (Wiesel, *Legends of Our Time*, 191.) ³ All cites to the Old Testament are to *The Jewish Study Bible*, Second Edition. eds. Adele Berlin, Marc Zvi Brettler. London: Oxford University Press, 1985.

'I pray to the God within me that He will give me the strength to ask Him the right questions.' (Wiesel, 4-5.)

Wiesel's contemplation of the paradox set forth above and the search for justice in dialogue with God lies firmly within the Jewish tradition of the Old Testament. Abraham bargains with God over Sodom and Gomorrah which implicitly suggests that human beings have the power to question God's justice. (Genesis 18: 26-33.)³ The challenge represents not an act of idolatry but shows that human beings have developed into the beings God envisioned when he declared that they were made in his image and is a demonstration of Jews knowing justice. Wiesel directly invokes Job, someone who has hell visited upon him but has continued to maintain his faith in God. (Rashkover, Class Notes, October 26, 2021.) Wiesel wrote: "As for me, I had ceased to pray. I concurred with Job! I was not denying His existence, but I doubted His absolute justice." (Wiesel, 45.) Job also questioned God's justice:

He destroys the blameless and the guilty. When suddenly a scourge brings death, He mocks as the innocent fail. The earth is handed over to the wicked one; He covers the eyes of its judges. If it is not He, then who? (Job 9:22-24.)

While Job was humbled by God's speech, the Holocaust survivor cannot be. Wiesel states that we must save God and that God's presence is our responsibility. In this way Night, like the Book of Job, is a counternarrative to the prophetic narrative in Jeremiah which holds that catastrophe is a result of sin and God will restore us from catastrophe. Night presents an alternative solution that states that unfortunate events happen through no fault of the victims and it is the Jews responsibility to restore themselves. It is not incumbent upon God to restore the Jews, but it is the Jews responsibility to restore God through a perpetuation of justice. (Rashkover, Class Notes, October 26, 2021.)

Opposing
Viewpoints

"GERMAN CHURCHES AND NAZI GERMANY"

One Place, One Time: German Christianity and Naziism

By Megan O'Connor

The role of the Nazi German government in shaping German Protestantism can be seen as straightforward; the German Christian Movement embraced Naziism while, the Confessing Church saw itself as opposed to the German Christian Movement and, in particular, the Nazi party's involvement with that Movement ((Rashkover (discussing *Betrayal*, chap. 3), 09/14/2021.; Rashkover, 09/21/2021). While the existence of the relationship between these two entities is almost entirely rooted in the prominence of the "National Socialist German Workers' Party, now commonly referred to as the Nazis..." their choices during the era of Nazi rule from 1933 to 1945 speak to the choices' uniqueness to the government and time (Bergen, 1).

Betrayal describes the German Christian Movement as somewhat of "a welcome compromise for Germans who embraced the new Nazi ideology yet were unwilling to abandon completely their Christian heritage" (*Betrayal*, 65). The Movement started what *Betrayal* refers

to as “the Institute,” which aimed to “identify Christianity with National Socialist antisemitism...” (*Betrayal*, 68.; *Betrayal*, 69). When examining “the Godesberg Declaration...” —which was “to [be] implement[ed]... by establishing an Institute for the Study and Eradication of Jewish Influence on the Church Life of the German Volk”—the Germany-specific foundation of the entity is apparent: “It stated that National Socialism carried forward the work of Martin Luther and would lead the German people to a true understanding of Christian faith” (*Betrayal*, 71). The Declaration went on to say, “Christianity is the unbridgeable religious opposition to Judaism” (“The Godesberg Declaration...” qtd. in *Betrayal*, 71). With the basis of this German Christian Movement-founded entity forged at the intersection of “National Socialism...” and religious tension, the Movement’s ideas (as expressed through “the Institute”) cannot be separated from its relationship with the German government (*Betrayal*, 71.; *Betrayal*, 68). Outside of this entity, the Movement made policy decisions that paralleled the timeline of the German government’s antisemitic actions (*Betrayal*, 50-53). Parallels also manifested in the actions of the Movement’s organization, which drew connections between Martin Luther’s teachings and both the government and *Kristallnacht*, which was “the attack on Jews in Germany and Austria...” that was seemingly supported by elements of the “Nazi...” bureaucracy (*Betrayal*, 71; Bergen, 84-85). Thus, the Movement’s general efforts to align itself (from policy-focused and chronology-focused perspectives) with the actions of the German government demonstrates the Movement’s clear, unmasked efforts to root its complicity with the Nazis in a desire to align its actions with those of the German government (see: *Betrayal*, 65.;

see: *Betrayal*, 68.; see: *Betrayal*, 69.; see: *Betrayal*, 71.; see: “The Godesberg Declaration...” qtd. in *Betrayal*, 71.; see: *Betrayal*, 50-53).

When it came to its theology, the German Christian Movement itself seemed to flip elements of Christianity on their heads. It took a broad approach to practicing anti-Semitism; its aforementioned “‘Institute’” “eliminated Hebrew words, references to the Old Testament, and any links between Jesus and Judaism” from items it released (*Betrayal*, 68.; *Betrayal*, 73). While “[t]he Institute’s publications were not the first efforts to produce deJudaized Christian liturgical materials...,” the Institute’s aforementioned foundation in the Movement’s affinity for the German government makes these items inseparable from the Movement’s Nazi ties (see: *Betrayal*, 69.; see: *Betrayal*, 71). A further point of contention has to do with Jesus himself; the German Christian Movement argued that Jesus was an Aryan who also wanted to achieve the goal “of the Nazi regime” (Rashkover, 09/21/2021). Specifically, “Grundmann, the academic director of the Institute...” seems to have argued the following: “Of Galilean, not Judean, origin, Jesus was ‘with the greatest probability’ a member of one of the foreign peoples living in northern Palestine since the Assyrian conquest in the eighth century B.C.E., most likely an Aryan” (*Betrayal*, 72.; *Betrayal*, 77.; Grundmann [qtd. in *Betrayal*], 77). Given that, in the 1800s, there was redirected energy towards Jesus’ Jewish status, the German Christian Movement’s attempt to squash any discussion of the matter demonstrates the Movement’s attempt to veer away from Judaism (Rashkover, 09/21/2021). Further, based on the Nazi-aligned mission of “‘the Institute,’” its actions (or rather, its leader’s actions) cannot be seen as unrelated to the German government (*Betrayal*, 71.; *Betrayal*, 68.; *Betrayal*, 72.; *Betrayal*, 77). Though

Movement members attempted “to justify the introduction of racial distinction into the church,” including in a publication, its engagement with the German government and its apparatus’ approach to Christian teachings demonstrate an undeniable ideological link between the German Christian Movement and German government that cannot be explained away by the traditions of Christianity (*Betrayal*, 48-49.; see: *Betrayal*, 71).

According to *Betrayal*, “the Confessing Church represented an alliance between elements of the ‘destroyed’ churches whose administrations and synods the German Christians now controlled... and the ‘intact’ Lutheran churches of Hannover, Bavaria, and Württemberg...” (*Betrayal*, 96-97). The relationship between the Confessing Church and the German government is defined by the theological understanding the Church had of its role in relation to the government. During “the defining moment of the Confessing Church...,” the Barmen Declaration was composed which “defined clear boundaries between church and state, which the state could not cross.” (*Betrayal*, 97). This element of the Confessing Church’s ideas is a key reflection of the beliefs of one section of its membership: “For Lutherans... Luther’s teaching on the two kingdoms, spiritual and secular, and two regiments, church and state, obliged the state to preserve public space for the church to accomplish its mission. The church, for its part, was obligated to maintain neutrality in political matters” (*Betrayal*, 93). Thus, it is clear that the structure and history of the Confessing Church are rooted in a separation from secular leadership (see: *Betrayal*, 97.; see: *Betrayal*, 93). Further evidence that the Confessing Church’s actions were politics-based is seen in the controversy surrounding “[t]he Aryan Paragraph of the April 1933 Reich Civil Service Law that resulted in the dismissal of Jews from the bureaucracy, the

SA-initiated boycott of Jewish businesses, and the suppression of the left, which Evangelical Church leaders saw as harboring an ‘excessive’ number of Jews....” (*Betrayal*, 99). The enthusiasm among “the German Christians...” for the implementation of rule within their religious communities contributed greatly to “the formation of a coherent Protestant opposition to German Christians...” (*Betrayal*, 101). Thus, in the approach to dealing with the Aryan paragraph, there is an extent to which the Confessing Church’s action—or inaction—is most straightforwardly understood as balancing religious and political dynamics in a way unique to Germany (see: *Betrayal*, 96-97.; see: *Betrayal*, 97.; see: *Betrayal*, 93.; see: *Betrayal*, 99.; see: *Betrayal*, 101).

The beliefs of the Confessing Church helped to inform its inaction regarding Jewish people: “The Confessing Church fused Christian anti-Judaism and the arrogance of supersessionism with a cultural antisemitism.... To be sure, the Confessing Church was ‘only’ guilty of silence, of limiting its resistance so as to preclude a forthright strategy against the Nazi regime’s racism” (*Betrayal*, 106). Additionally, one Judaism-based issue the Confessing Church faced was also a response to the German government’s actions. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, one of “the leaders of the Confessing Church...,” was particularly upset because the German government’s actions would limit the Church’s ability to proselytize to Jewish people (Rashkover (discussing Bonhoeffer, 274), 09/23/2021). While Bonhoeffer himself roots his thoughts about Jewish people in the ideas that are tied to Christianity—such as “his supercessionism [sic]...” and the notion that Jesus was Jewish—the whole of the Confessing Church itself was not founded on the notion of a shared theology, as highlighted in the fact that “the Barmen Declaration did not achieve

confessional status because the doctrinal differences among the member churches prevented a unified understanding of the sacraments” (quote from my notes from Rashkover (discussing Bonhoeffer, 375-376), 09/23/2021.; Rashkover (discussing *Betrayal*, 125-126), 09/23/2021.; *Betrayal*, 97; for more on the Confessing Church and “the sacraments” (*Betrayal*, 104), see: *Betrayal*, 104). So, the Confessing Church’s founding and even Bonhoeffer’s anger towards the government speaks to the Church’s fundamental focus on self-preservation and self-perpetuation within its environment (*Betrayal*, 97.; Rashkover (discussing Bonhoeffer, 374), 09/23/2021).

To conclude, it is clear that the actions of both the German Christian Movement and the Confessing Church were greatly impacted by each entity’s view of and ties to the German government. The German Christian Movement’s actions mirrored those of the government and, with “the Institute...,” the Movement worked to connect the government’s ideas with those of its religion (*Betrayal*, 50-53.; *Betrayal*, 68.; *Betrayal*, 69). On the other hand, the Confessing Church pushed back against the government, as exemplified in the fact that the Barmen Declaration addressed the government’s ties with religious institutions, (*Betrayal*, 97). While the Confessing Church’s own beliefs did contribute to actions taken against Jewish people, the Church’s actions reflect a much deeper focus on Germany itself: “the various wings of the Confessing movement directed their attention to threats they believed had a direct impact on the social and cultural relevance of the church” (*Betrayal*, 109.; *Betrayal*, 105).

A Different Take

By Will Hamlett

The Holocaust was a man made horror on such a large scale that it required the complicity of German society as a whole in the mass killings of European Jews. The violent expression of anti-Judaism that was present within the execution of the Holocaust drew from the religious traditions of Christian Germans. However, the anti-Judaism present in the German Church is not endemic only to German theologians and Christians. It draws upon long-standing and integral traditions within the Christian Canon and Christian theological tradition that are, at their core, anti-Jewish. The book *Betrayal*, by Robert P. Ericksen and Susannah Heschel, explores the relationship between the German Church and the Holocaust carried out by the Nazi regime, and posits that the anti-Judaism present within the members and the theology of the German Church implicates it within the Holocaust. However, the anti-Judaism present in the German Church during the Holocaust drew its theological basis from the concept of supercessionism, which therefore implicates the whole Christian Tradition.

To first understand the way in which the Church is implicated in the actions of the German Church, one must understand supersessionism. Supersessionism is the belief that God's Covenant is fulfilled through Jesus Christ, and witnessing to Jesus is the basis for being God's people. Therefore those who witness to Christ have become the new Israel, and the Jewish people are no longer His people. One can see Supersessionist beliefs most clearly in Paul's Epistles. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians provides a distinction between law and faith, or a distinction between the Jewish concept of Covenantal law versus the Christian concept of faith in Jesus Christ. Paul posits that those who are blessed by God are those who have faith (Christians),

since Abraham was blessed because of faith in God. (Galatians 3:6-9) Those who rely on law alone (Jews), are “slaves” to the law and are not beloved by God. (Galatians 4:23-26) The only way to be free according to Paul is through witnessing Christ, and not executing the law.

Therefore, Christians have become the Children of God and Jews have been sent out from His house. It is critical to understand the concept of supersessionism because it is within this concept that the German Church found its justification for the persecution of the Jews under the Nazi regime.

The German Christian Movement was the Nazi Regime’s most vocal and adamant supporters in the German Church. They were a Protestant group of theologians, clergy, and lay people who “believed National Socialism and Christianity to be mutually reinforcing... they aimed to purge Christianity of everything they deemed Jewish...” (Betrayal, 40) German Christians theologians provided theological justifications for the Nazi destruction of Jewish life and their clergy espoused antisemitic attacks from the pulpits. (Betrayal, 41) One of the core theological beliefs of the German Christians was that the historical Jesus was an Aryan who’s mission while on Earth was to combat and destroy Judaism and establish a spiritual paradise for the Aryan race. (Betrayal, 73, 77) This core idea of the theological wing of the German Christian movement is the radical fulfillment of supersessionist theology. Not only has Jesus superseded the Covenant of Zion, he has also been sent out to destroy it and the people it was promised to. One can see the influence of Paul within this theology, particularly within the German Christian Movement goal to deJudaize the Christian Bible. The belief that “rather than being bound by the Old Testament’s laws and commandments, which represent a Jewish outlook, Christians are to

follow Jesus' example and make moral decisions by listening to the religiosity of their hearts..." (Betrayal, 76) This belief is essentially what Paul wrote of his Epistle to the Galatians. The irony within this is that some German Christians wanted to remove Paul from the Canon because of his Jewishness, even though their theology owed its foundation to him. (Betrayal, 44) The voraciousness with which German Christians supported the persecution of and ultimately the genocide of Jews is at its core caused by supersessionism. Supersessionism gave the foundation for the belief that Jews have been abandoned by God and are therefore the enemy.

Even within the largest Christian group in Germany to oppose the German Christians (the Confessing Church), one can find supersessionist beliefs. The basis of the Confessing Church's opposition to the German Christians and certain policies of the Nazi regime was their objections to idolatrous beliefs. The German Christians wanted to apply the Nazi's Aryan Paragraph to the German Protestant churches and removed converted clergy and laypeople from congregations. (Betrayal, 90) The Confessing Church professed that "We reject the false doctrine, as though the church could and would have to acknowledge as a source of its proclamation, apart from and besides this one Word of God, still other events and powers, figures and truths, as God's revelation." (Barmen Declaration, 8.12) They opposed the state control seen in the German Christian movement and sought to state that their intention to submit to the Nazi regime on theological matters (i.e. who belonged within the Church) as idolatrous. However, they do not oppose this out of concern for the Jews of Germany. (Betrayal, 99) They do this out of a concern for Church power. While the foundational element of the Confessing Church is not implicit in its anti-Judaism as the German Christian movement is, the absence of a concerted effort to oppose

antisemitism is just as dangerous. Nowhere within the Barmen Declaration (the founding document of the Confessing Church), does the movement oppose the mistreatment and persecution of Jews. This Israel Forgetfulness, or lack of concern for Jewish lives and beliefs, is exemplary of supersessionism. The Jewish people have been superseded by the new people of God, Christians, according to those with supersessionist beliefs. Therefore the plight of the Jewish people is not a theological dilemma for the Confessing Church, rather a political one. (Betrayal, 108) The failure to openly oppose the persecution of Jews at the hand of the Nazi regime is the damaging outcome of the Confessing Church's supersessionism.

The most famous and outspoken Christian theological opponent to the Nazi regime, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, even held explicitly supersessionist beliefs. Bonhoeffer's three stages of resistance against the Nazis all contain supersessionist beliefs and elements. Within the "Obedience" stage of his resistance, Bonhoeffer objects to the State control over the Church in the case of the Aryan Paragraph, and he objects to the prevention of the Christian mission towards the Jews through their legal persecution. (Betrayal, 117) His primary concern during this stage is the ability for Christians to convert Jews and the rights of converted Jews. This is exemplary of his supersessionist beliefs because he does not view Jews who are religiously Jews as worthy of consideration. During his "Co-suffering" phase of resistance he calls upon Christians to be charitable and compassionate towards Jews, however he does not advocate for outright political resistance towards the regime. (Betrayal, 122) He repeats the claim that Jews shall suffer for their refusal to witness the Gospel, which is supersessionist because this belief is predicated on the assumption that God's covenantal relationship with the Jewish people is

nullified by Jesus being the Christ Messiah. In the final stage of Bonhoeffer's resistance to the Nazi regime he calls upon Christians to openly oppose the Nazi regime's treatment of the Jews. However, he still echoes supersessionist beliefs. He claims that since "Jesus was a Jew", Christians should resist on behalf of the Jewish people. (Betrayal, 125) However, this is supersessionist because at the core of the statement is still the belief that Christ is the new Covenant, and therefore Christians must care for those who are like him. Jews should be cared for because Jesus was one, but not because they are human. The only part of Judaism that matters is its connection to Jesus.

The assumption that the German Church's anti-Judaism is endemic to German culture cannot be true under the concept of supersessionism. If Christian theologians argue that the new covenant with Jesus Christ is the only true way to live with God, then they must implicitly believe that the Jewish people have been abandoned by Him. The unprecedented evil of the Holocaust and the implications that it raises of Christian culpability must be addressed by Christians if they can continue as a theologically strong tradition. This must start with the concept of supersessionism because it is what underlines the entirety of Christian anti-Judaism.

THE PRESERVATION AND MEMORY OF JEWS IN SZYDŁOWIEC, POLAND IN A POST- HOLOCAUST WORLD

Mary Kardos
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Tucked within the southern Masovian Voivodeship, hidden beneath layers of time and repression, the town of Szydłowiec, Poland encompasses centuries of stories of a once lively Jewish community, existence, and persistence. The cobbled streets, unkempt Jewish cemetery, and altered road signs all bear the weight of the Jewish individuals who once walked those same streets and admired that same landscape, long before the Nazis dominated Poland in 1939 and initiated the systemic genocide known as the Holocaust. Following the events of the Holocaust, these stories of Jewish strength and presence were hidden, lost, buried, and translocated across the entire globe. While some Jewish individuals did return to or stay in Poland after the war, not many returned to Szydłowiec. The decades of shame and gaping absence of Szydłowiecian Jews, a group which, if still existed, might have held the town accountable, allowed the rich history and memory of the Jewish community to fall between the cracks – not quite forgotten but repressed. In a town where most Jews never returned after the war, who and what is left to preserve their memory? In Szydłowiec, as time elapses, slowly but surely, many Holocaust

survivors, schools, and academic scholars have begun telling these lost stories: but in an area where most Jewish bodies and voices did not return, will that ever be enough to fill the gap?

In the mid-sixteenth century, a small Jewish presence began to grow and prosper in Szydłowiec, and by the nineteenth century, the Jewish community became not only a majority of the town's population but also an important fabric of everyday life. Records demonstrate as few as 270 Jews living in Szydłowiec in 1716, but that number steadily increased, despite the many roadblocks Jewish individuals faced when trying to settle.³ For example, at this time, primarily Catholic practices and individuals dominated this area of Poland. In 1788, the town owner, Dominik Radziwiłł, prohibited Jews from buying houses and land in the Catholic Market Square, which consisted of the largest land area in Szydłowiec.⁴ However, Jewish communities were not deterred and exiled for long, as by 1862, Jewish residents made up 73.6% (2,961 inhabitants) of the Szydłowiec population and grew to about 76% (5,501 inhabitants) by 1921.⁵ In 1939, on the brink of World War II, reports indicate about 7,000 Jews resided in Szydłowiec.⁶

As the majority, Jews established a lively and reputable presence in all spheres of Szydłowiecian life. Pre-World War II, the Jews of Szydłowiec engaged in a variety of different occupations as leather tanners, shoe manufacturers, traders, and workers in several quarries and large businesses that supplied the stone markets of Poland and Russia.⁷ Most Jewish families of

³ "History," Szydłowiec, Virtual Shtetl, accessed March 11, 2021, <https://sztetl.org.pl/en/towns/s/612-szydlowiec/99-history/138128-history-of-community>.

⁴ Virtual Shtetl, "History."

⁵ Virtual Shtetl, "History."

⁶ Virtual Shtetl, "History."

⁷ "The History of the Szydłowiec Community Before the Holocaust," Yad Vashem, accessed April 1, 2021, <https://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/valley/szydlowiec/before20century.asp>

this area were not wealthy, though, and it was only until the late 1700s when Jews finally acquired the financial and legal means to purchase property and build a synagogue in the town.⁸

During the 1800s, Szydlowiec became a significant Hasidic center, and a consistent focus on religion was of great importance to the town's inhabitants. There was a variety of religious opinions and political leanings present throughout the town's Jewish inhabitants. For a period, most of the Jewish representatives on the City Council were Zionists, yet almost all political parties and organizations were present in some form throughout the town.⁹ There were three Polish primary schools in the area surrounding the town that most young children attended. In addition, the surrounding area contained a Hebrew school established by Poalei Zion, a Bais Yaakov School for girls, a small school belonging to the Yavne network, and numerous yeshivas, all which Szydlowiecian Jewish schoolchildren heavily attended.¹⁰

The cultural and social spheres of Szydlowiec were equally as diverse and lively for Jewish inhabitants. In 1910, Jewish Socialists began to spread activity flyers and pamphlets through the underground, giving rise to the first Jewish library in Szydlowiec.¹¹ This library attracted many young Jews in the town, and they created a "Kulturverein" ("Culture Club") where "local Jewish youth gathered to hear literary lectures and public debates on various social issues."¹² Large quantities of these reading materials were frequently and widely circulated, and in most Jewish households, results of this lively Jewish press and literature could be found

⁸ Virtual Shtetl, "History."

⁹ Yad Vashem, "The History of the Szydlowiec Community Before the Holocaust."

¹⁰ Yad Vashem, "The History of the Szydlowiec Community Before the Holocaust."

¹¹ Yad Vashem, "The History of the Szydlowiec Community Before the Holocaust."

¹² Yad Vashem, "The History of the Szydlowiec Community Before the Holocaust."

scattered about on every surface.¹³ One young Jew growing up in Szydłowiec remembers noticing “all different newspapers for religious parties which contained religious propaganda from Bundists, Zionists, and others” littered around his house.¹⁴

When Szydłowiec Holocaust survivors are questioned about relations between Jews and non-Jews before the war, many individuals remark that they ‘do not remember’ any blatant acts of anti-Semitism. While worldwide trends suggest anti-Semitism never dissipates during this time, many survivors find comparing rude remarks or “smaller” acts of prejudice challenging, considering the atrocities and tragedies perpetrated during the Holocaust. This hindsight may alter survivors’ perception of the discrimination they faced in the years before the war. When asked about his experience with anti-Semitism growing up in the 1920s, Szydłowiecian Holocaust survivor Isaiah Henig straightforwardly states “I never experienced anti-Semitism growing up. I never had the chance because I lived in a Jewish society my entire life,” which alludes to his relationships with his Jewish next-door neighbors and business partners.¹⁵ Henig goes on to relay that he did have “a lot” of non-Jewish friends, and the religious separation between Christians and Jews felt less like an “enemies” relationship and more just “a separate tribe feeling.”¹⁶ While anti-Semitism did very much exist, the non-Jewish families seemed to accept the Jewish families, mainly because of their vast contributions to the financial and social wellbeing of the town. In one account, after a rumor of an upcoming pogrom, “the Jews – with

¹³ Isaiah Henig, “Oral History Interview with Isaiah Henig,” interview by Esther Finder, *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*, November 22, 1996, video, <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn507552>.

¹⁴ Henig, interview.

¹⁵ Henig, interview.

¹⁶ Henig, interview.

the help of some friendly non-Jewish neighbors – went to the outskirts of town that day and taught their uninvited ‘guests’ a lesson,” which reveals just one piece of a commonly reported ‘sense of collective togetherness’ many Jews felt they experienced in the town.¹⁷ After all, Jews were there to stay: “gravestones in Szydłowiec testified to a Jewish presence there going back at least 400 years,” as Motl Eisenberg notes, and “life in the town flowed smoothly, with no upheavals, and it never occurred to anyone that this would ever change.”¹⁸

However, closer to the rise of Adolf Hitler and Germany’s invasion of Poland, all of this *did* change. On the 9th of September 1939, Germans invaded and dominated Szydłowiec, and on the 23rd of September, on Yom Kippur, the town’s main synagogue was burned to the ground.¹⁹ Within weeks, once the newly-formed Judenrat refused to raise an already high monetary tax for Jews, 23 of the town’s most prominent Jews were imprisoned and publicly murdered in the Jewish cemetery.²⁰ The Secretary of the Judenrat, Avraham Finkler, was the only member to survive, and he later testified that he regularly sent money to “the regional governor’s mistress, who repeatedly intervened on behalf of the Jews of Szydłowiec” from being sent to ghettos or forced labor camps.²¹ Isaac Milstein, one of just hundreds saved by these interventional actions, wrote of his bewilderment – “all other groups [were] being led to work, except for the men of Szydłowiec” – which later morphed into a feeling of “joy which is difficult to describe...we

¹⁷ Moshe Yehiel Schwartzfuter, “Of Times Gone By,” in *Szydłowiec Memorial Book*, ed. Berl Kagan, trans. Max Rosenfeld (New York: Shidlowtzer Benevolent Association, 1989), 45.

¹⁸ Motl Eisenberg, “Szydłowiec in Peaceful Times,” in *Szydłowiec Memorial Book*, ed. Berl Kagan, trans. Max Rosenfeld (New York: Shidlowtzer Benevolent Association, 1989), 37.

¹⁹ “The Szydłowiec Community During the Holocaust,” Yad Vashem, accessed April 4, 2021, https://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/valley/szydlowiec/german_occupation.asp.

²⁰ Yad Vashem, “The Szydłowiec Community During the Holocaust.”

²¹ Yad Vashem, “The Szydłowiec Community During the Holocaust.”

hugged and kissed [beloved parents and close friends], and together we cried, weeping tears of joy.”²²

Sadly, most Szydłowiec inhabitants were not miraculously saved from ghettoization, as the Szydłowiec Ghetto was established in January 1942 and housed around 10,000 inhabitants, about 40% of them being refugees.²³ Right before its liquidation, Motl Eisenburg, who hid with a non-Jewish family, wrote that the ghetto “has succeeded in stabilizing itself... Polish people enter the ghetto, bringing goods to them... and Polish villagers from surroundings also arrive, offering to hide Jews for a decent price.”²⁴ This stabilization and hope did not last long, as mass deportations and exterminations soon followed. To catch those who had been able to escape the first liquidation, the Germans established a “Restored Ghetto” in two locations in Szydłowiec with even more abysmal health and living conditions than the first town ghetto.²⁵ On January 8, 1943, SS men surrounded and entered the ghetto, began shooting children and hospital patients, and deported Jews to their death at Treblinka.²⁶ This last event effectively decimated most of the remaining Jewish population of Szydłowiec in one fell, tragic swoop.

After the end of World War II, only about 100 Jews out of the peak 10,000 individuals found themselves back in Szydłowiec, many of which had been hidden or were survivors of forced labor camps. This population continued to dwindle, however, due to the sustained and violent anti-Semitism most Jews faced in Szydłowiec after the war. Henig, who had survived a

²² Yad Vashem, “The Szydłowiec Community During the Holocaust.”

²³ Berl Kagan, “Life in Szydłowiec,” in *Szydłowiec Memorial Book*, ed. Berl Kagan, trans. Max Rosenfeld (New York: Shidlowtzer Benevolent Association, 1989), 345-349.

²⁴ Yad Vashem, “The Szydłowiec Community During the Holocaust.”

²⁵ Yad Vashem, “The Szydłowiec Community During the Holocaust.”

²⁶ Kagan, “Life in Szydłowiec,” 347.

work camp, the ghetto, Birkenau, and a grueling death march to Bergen-Belsen, moved to the United States in 1951, noting that “without my family, I had no idea what to do...nothing interested me, and I had no aim in life.”²⁷ After he became a US Citizen, he returned to Szydłowiec only twice, though it took many years, as he “did not want to speak to the [now many] Poles who [now] thought that Jews killed Christ.”²⁸ Anti-Semitism eventually drove out all of the remaining Jews: as of 2016, no known Jewish individuals currently live in the town.²⁹ In the years after the war, the town was then faced with a choice: do they honor the Jews who once lived many generations of their lives in Szydłowiec, or forget they ever existed at all?

Reconstructing the historical events and occurrences of a specific area is one of the first necessary steps to properly memorializing. For Szydłowiec, this endeavor takes some digging; the town, quite intensely, suppressed their Jewish past and history until the latter half of the 1990s. After the war, the town officials changed street names such as “Rabbi St.” or “Synagogue St.” and transformed the smaller, remaining synagogue into a local pub.³⁰ These daily, pulsating reminders of the Holocaust and Jewish presence had been erased and forgotten, and there was a vital necessity to reconstruct and come to terms with the events of World War II in Szydłowiec to begin to honor the memories of those they lost.

²⁷ Henig, interview.

²⁸ Henig, interview.

²⁹ “Szydłowiec,” The Josef and Edith Mincberg Destroyed Communities Interactive Learning Center, accessed May 13, 2021, <https://hnh.mwmdigital.com/community/23/#:~:text=The%20first%20Jewish%20cemetery%20%20lead%20the%20Jewish%20community>.

³⁰ Barbara Törnquist-Plewa, “The Transformational Dynamics of Local Remembrance: The Jewish Past in a Former Shtetl in Poland,” *Memory Studies*, 11, no. 3, (2018): 301-314.

Various diaries and records hold meticulous firsthand accounts of the Holocaust, although, compared to other Polish towns, Szydłowiec contains significantly less of these documents. One unlikely and unique artifact, though, contributes significantly to scholars' current understanding of Jews in Szydłowiec: a German policeman's original photo album. In the 1960s, Yad Vashem received an album containing 105 photographs with handwritten German captions that document the Jewish residents of Szydłowiec during the war, along with other photographs of refugees in the ghetto, deportation, street names, the remaining synagogue, and the Jewish cemetery.³¹ There is little information about the German policeman, the member of the Judenrat who traveled with this anonymous photographer, or the motive behind this album, although the photographs visualize a tragic story of suffering, death, and despair, laced with a remarkable sense of empathy. One might hope this German policeman wished to preserve the memory of humanity, an entire population who would soon be decimated, although no one quite knows for sure. One-of-a-kind artifacts like this one are rare, yet their existence adds incredible nuance to the story of the small town of Szydłowiec.

In this town, two categories of remembrance, both initiatives led by Jewish individuals and those led by non-Jews, function differently. Often, much of Holocaust remembrance falls on the shoulders of the victims, and without a significant Jewish presence, the town struggled for many years not just to discuss the past but also *actively* memorialize it. Understandably and expectedly so, many Holocaust survivors find it incredibly trying and traumatic to retell and

³¹ "After the Holocaust," Yad Vashem, accessed April 4, 2021, https://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/valley/szydlowiec/german_occupation.asp.

relive their experiences during the war, and Szydlowiec Holocaust survivors are no exception. Even so, as most Jews had moved away in the years after the war, there was little collective effort or conversation on Jewish individual's part in organizing any document, exhibit, or event for Holocaust remembrance until many years later.

One concerted effort of Jewish memorialization by Jews, which took decades, was the publication of the *Szydlowiec Memorial Book*, first published in 1974 in Yiddish and 1989 in English.³² The idea first floated around in 1956, although there were not enough Szydlowiec survivors who felt comfortable telling their stories, that is until the Association of Immigrants from Szydlowiec in Israel took steps to implement it many years later.³³ This project was not an easy task, however, as the introduction to the book dually notes:

“It was like crossing the Red Sea to get an article, a reminiscence, a description...we made strenuous efforts to get as much material as possible, so that the life of the Jews of Szydlowiec, in all its shadings, would be reflected in the book. And we accomplished a great deal, collecting more than 200 articles from about 150 people. But because of the indifference or lack of cooperation on the part of some of the landsleit, there were still gaps that we ourselves could not fill.”³⁴

The book contains beautiful and indelible memories of Szydlowiec before the Holocaust, memories of the town as “my shtetl...bordered by fields, meadows, gardens, and woods...until all of this was destroyed,”³⁵ as well as harrowing experiences during the Holocaust, like Elka Silverman-Goldberg's “How We Saved Ourselves from Death,” a heart-wrenching story of

³² The Yizkor Book Committee, “Brief History of the Szydlowiec (Shidlovtse) Yizkor Book.” In *Szydlowiec Memorial Book*, ed. Berl Kagan, trans. Max Rosenfeld (New York: Shidlowtzer Benevolent Association, 1989), 11.

³³ Yitzkor Book Committee, “Brief History of the Szydlowiec Yizkor Book,” 11.

³⁴ Yitzkor Book Committee, “Brief History of the Szydlowiec Yizkor Book,” 12.

³⁵ Yitzkor Goldkorn, “Shidlovtse, My Birthplace.” In *Szydlowiec Memorial Book*, ed. Berl Kagan, trans. Max Rosenfeld (New York: Shidlowtzer Benevolent Association, 1989), 25.

hiding, loss, violence, and strength.³⁶ Interestingly, because the book's readership was originally only a small audience of the survivors and their families with about 1,000 printed copies, the *Szydlowiec Memorial Book* only made it to the town in 2004 when a non-Jewish emigrant from Szydlowiec found dozens of copies in a New York bookshop and sent it back to Poland.³⁷ Following this event, there was an initial push to have the book published in Polish, but immense pushback prevailed: the references to indecent behavior and the denouncement of Poles whose families may still reside in Szydlowiec upset many residents.³⁸ This controversy demonstrates the continued hesitancy in facing a family or town's dark past and involvement in the Holocaust, which is a sustained and difficult hurdle to surpass to truly uphold Jewish memory.

Although, a few individuals do interact and engage with their town's past: one history student from Szydlowiec used the memorial book to write a master's thesis (in Polish) called *Szydlowiec Jews During German Occupation 1939-1943* in 2010.³⁹ While the student's decision did cause some dispute, one single copy of their thesis resides in the local library, which allows for the open possibility of others engaging with this material. Nevertheless, the *Szydlowiec Memorial Book* is the longest and most detailed depiction of firsthand accounts from a variety of Jews from Szydlowiec and serves as an important document in furthering the preservation of their memory.

³⁶ Elka Silverman-Goldberg, "How We Saved Ourselves from Death." In *Szydlowiec Memorial Book*, ed. Berl Kagan, trans. Max Rosenfeld (New York: Shidlowtzer Benevolent Association, 1989), 287-292.

³⁷ Törnquist-Plewa, "The Transformational Dynamics of Local Remembrance," 304.

³⁸ Törnquist-Plewa, "The Transformational Dynamics of Local Remembrance," 304.

³⁹ Törnquist-Plewa, "The Transformational Dynamics of Local Remembrance," 304.

With great difficulty and sometimes reservation, many Jewish individuals have come forward to tell their stories and testimonies for the public, most notably through Yad Vashem or the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Other survivors, such as Mayer Kirshenblatt, a Holocaust survivor from Szydlowiec, have preserved Jewish memory through art. As a young child during the war, Kirshenblatt recalls a letter his father received, which graphically outlined the methods by which the Nazis murdered his father's family; recollecting that letter, he writes "the Germans took the whole family out to a nearby field. They lashed my grandmother to a tree and, before her very eyes, they shot her entire family. That is how my father's family was exterminated."⁴⁰ After retirement, Kirshenblatt suffered from serious depression, and his wife and daughter begged him to "paint his memories." His pointed response portrays the difficulty in capturing the nuanced and complex memories of Jewish life during the Holocaust: he first resisted, questioning "how do you paint a memory?" yet, when at 73, he finally picked up the paintbrush, he remarked, "how satisfying, particularly at my age to have found my calling."⁴¹

His collection of paintings is now part of a collection and book called "Paint What You Remember." One of his most moving works, "Slaughter of the Innocents I: Execution at Szydlowiec, 1942" (1997), grounds itself in the letter outlining his grandparents' death, which took place in his hometown of Szydlowiec.⁴² Unlike most other art pieces that are reflective of the Holocaust, Kirshenblatt's art is especially colorful and expressionist. Particularly, this

⁴⁰ Mayer Kirshenblatt, "Paint What You Remember: The Memories of Mayer Kirshenblatt," *The Museum of Family History*, accessed April 5, 2021, <http://www.museumoffamilyhistory.com/ce/kirshenblatt/kirshenblatt-slaughter.htm>.

⁴¹ Louise Steinman, "Colors of Memory," review of *They Call Me Mayer July: Painted Memories of a Jewish Childhood Before the Holocaust*, by Mayer Kirshenblatt and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett. *Los Angeles Times*, September 16, 2007.

⁴² Kirshenblatt, "Paint What You Remember: The Memories of Mayer Kirshenblatt."

painting portrays a line of Jewish individuals, all in colorful outfits, linking arms, hugging, and even one man with a raised fist as if as a sign of resistance, despite the viciousness of the SS officers' pointed guns and the grandmother physically tied to a tree in the background. The background of a beautiful night sky of pinks and navies deeply contrasts with the bright green grass beneath their feet. His use of color creates a painting that depicts both despair and trauma *and* Jewish strength and resilience in the face of violence. Kirshenblatt's choice to turn to art as a permanent intervention in the discourse of memory demonstrates the unreachable and deep gap of memory and memorialization that Kirshenblatt hopes to fill: "we know a lot about the cataclysm that ended a way of life. But what did that life smell and taste like? We've all seen black and white movies of the Holocaust. Who ever imagined prewar Poland in lemon yellow, cyan red, cobalt blue, pale lavender?"⁴³ While many paintings are specific to his family's hometown of Szydłowiec, the museum that "houses" his paintings are virtual and accessible to any individual, which "strives to keep the memories of our ancestors fresh in our minds."⁴⁴

Despite some early engagements from Jewish individuals surrounding Holocaust memory in Szydłowiec, the now mainly non-Jewish, Catholic town had suppressed the broadcast of this history until at least the 1990s. Before then, the calendar of official commemorations in the town did not include any commemoration of the Jews who were killed in the Holocaust or include any public information about Jewish life or the Holocaust on any plaques or monuments. Although, there was an early exception to the town's lack of memorialization: in 1967, the Polish district's

⁴³ Steinman, "Colors of Memory."

⁴⁴ "About the Museum," Museum of Family History, accessed May 13, 2021, <http://www.museumoffamilyhistory.com/atm.htm>.

Communist party commissioned a monument dedicated to the “Polish citizens of Jewish origins from Szydłowiec and its surroundings” who were murdered during World War II, but the monument was never rallied around as a site of memory and eventually decayed and disappeared as time went on.⁴⁵ The quick descension of this singular monument perfectly epitomizes the trend of local memory in Szydłowiec for many more years to come: as scholar Barbara Törnquist-Plewa underscores, it was as if “the killing of three-quarters of the town’s population was presented as if it did not impinge upon the life of the remaining inhabitants” at all.⁴⁶

While most of the content on the current Szydłowiec tourism website still contains mostly Catholic landmarks and sites, one section now contains Jewish history and landmarks in the town. Before discussing meaningful spots, the tourism website recognizes the loss of Jewish life and events of the Holocaust specifically related to the town: “Before the Second World War, the Jewish community in Szydłowiec formed the majority of the town’s population. On 23 September 1942, the German occupiers sent approximately 10,000 Szydłowiec Jews to the extermination camp at Treblinka, and a further 5,000 people were sent there on 13 January 1943.”⁴⁷ This recognition exhibits much-needed progress, as this type of acknowledgement or recommendation of Jewish sites on the tourism website was entirely absent before the 1990s. Markedly, it is an improvement to now see this recognition not only openly displayed and visible to Szydłowiec inhabitants but also to help frame future tourists’ visits. In this vein, the website also now suggests visitors see the Jewish House of Prayer at Garbarska Street No. 3, which was

⁴⁵ Törnquist-Plewa, “The Transformational Dynamics of Local Remembrance,” 306.

⁴⁶ Törnquist-Plewa, “The Transformational Dynamics of Local Remembrance,” 303.

⁴⁷ “Tourism,” Szydłowiec, Powiat Zydłowiecki W Województwie Mazowieckim,” accessed April 16, 2021, <http://szydlowiecpowiat.pl/cms/19118/tourism>.

the synagogue-turned pub-turned synagogue (which only became a historical monument in 2011), and the famous Jewish Cemetery on Wschodnia Street.⁴⁸

Although it did take many decades for Jewish memory to truly resurface in Szydłowiec, some memorials and traces of Jewish life were already hidden within the landscape and location of the town, such as the Jewish cemetery. Despite it being one of the “most beautiful” Jewish cemeteries in Poland, the Szydłowiec Jewish Cemetery was absent from the town’s historical monument list until the 1980s.⁴⁹ Many Jewish individuals who believed they might have family members buried there felt betrayed as the town turned a blind eye to the sanctity and importance of this cemetery: in 1983, one man, Michael Pomeranz, often “thought of how in a period of forty years, virtually no one had come to lie a rock down on the headstone of a loved one,” which led him to return to the cemetery three years later and spend days searching for his grandfather’s headstone, where he placed a rock, lit a candle, and prayed.⁵⁰ Even after the cemetery was “officially recognized,” the town did not deliberate its own role in memorialization until outside groups directly highlighted the lack of Jewish remembrance in Szydłowiec. Occasionally, a Jewish-American Ambassador or renowned composer would visit the town, which would spark conversations about what (little) remains of the Jewish history without the Jews themselves, but it was an action by the Foundation for the Preservation of Jewish Heritage in Poland that truly sparked a town- and national-wide debate over Jewish memorialization in Szydłowiec.

⁴⁸ “Tourism,” Szydłowiec, Powiat Zydłowiecki W Województwie Mazowieckim,”

⁴⁹ Yad Vashem, “After the Holocaust.”

⁵⁰ Michael Pomeranz. “A Journey Without an End.” In *Szydłowiec Memorial Book*, edited by Berl Kagan, trans. Max Rosenfeld New York: Shidlowtzer Benevolent Association, 1989, 337-344.

In 2005, the Jewish Cemetery had been littered and disregarded for years: food wrappers and other garbage were littered amongst *matzevot*, and weeds and grass had overgrown almost the entire piece of land. In 2006, a group of young people organized by the Foundation for the Preservation of Jewish Heritage in Poland visited Szydłowiec unannounced and cleaned the entire cemetery.⁵¹ Now being judged on the world stage, the locals felt incredibly embarrassed by this event and have taken over care of the cemetery ever since. By 2010, the Foundation for Documentation of Jewish Cemeteries (FDJC) had photographed and transcribed gravestones in this Szydłowiec cemetery, along with 80 others in Poland.⁵² Additionally, in 2012, Jewish Heritage Europe announced that, in cooperation with the Szydłowiec Shtetl Center and Virtual Shtetl, volunteers were being sought “for a project to digitally document the important Jewish cemetery in Szydłowiec, Poland,” calling this project “Memory in Stone.”⁵³ Because of these projects, families have been able to virtually view or travel to Szydłowiec to visit their ancestor’s graves – something that was nearly impossible before. Since 2005, the cemetery has been upkeep and tended to as a historical monument and site, and many of these ongoing and finished projects represent the beginning of Szydłowiec’s attempt to document the humanity, life, and vitality the world lost to the mass murder of Szydłowiec Jews during the Holocaust.

Beginning in the 2010s, local officials also made strides to increase the visibility of Jewish history and the massive number of lives lost at the hands of the Nazis through

⁵¹ Törnquist-Plewa, “The Transformational Dynamics of Local Remembrance,” 305.

⁵² “The Foundation for Documentation of Jewish Cemeteries,” Jewish Records Indexing, accessed May 13, 2021, <https://jri-poland.org/foundation-for-documentation-jewish-cemeteries.htm>.

⁵³ “Poland – Szydłowiec Cemetery Documentation Project to Begin,” Jewish Heritage Group, accessed May 13, 2021, <https://jewish-heritage-europe.eu/2012/04/04/poland-szydlowiec-cemetery-documentation-project-to-begin/>.

commemorative plaques. In 2013, The Israel-Poland Friendship Society in Tel-Aviv sent an official letter to the town to request a Jewish monument. They suggested the town officials put up a commemorative plaque on the wall of the secondary school built (during the Communist era) on the grounds of the now-destroyed main synagogue.⁵⁴ This possibility created momentous conflicts between the school and many involved families, but after multiple appeals, these parties later compromised for a memorializing plaque on the playground of the school. On October 29, 2014, in the presence of the city council, Jewish organizations, religious representatives, a few school classes, and local activists, a commemorative plaque was unveiled which informs visitors in English, Polish, and Hebrew that over 21,000 Jews were “imprisoned in the local ghetto and murdered by German perpetrators of genocide.”⁵⁵ Every April 19, Holocaust Remembrance Day in Poland, schoolchildren lay flowers at this plaque as a way of honoring the thousands of Szydlowiecian Jews killed during the Holocaust.

Since 2006, the town of Szydlowiec has made considerably increased efforts in preserving the Jewish lives lost to the Holocaust specifically through schools. In 2009, one local school took part in a photography project called “School Diary – A Story from Szydlowiec,” based on an existing school diary from a Jewish class in Szydlowiec from 1937-1938 which elevated discussions about the Szydlowiec Jewish community before the Holocaust.⁵⁶ Local schoolchildren also regularly take part in a “Day of Jewish Culture – Mazel Tov,” which was first organized by a local cultural center in 2006.⁵⁷ These events are not always financially hosted

⁵⁴ Törnquist-Plewa, “The Transformational Dynamics of Local Remembrance,” 307.

⁵⁵ Törnquist-Plewa, “The Transformational Dynamics of Local Remembrance,” 308.

⁵⁶ Törnquist-Plewa, “The Transformational Dynamics of Local Remembrance,” 305.

⁵⁷ Törnquist-Plewa, “The Transformational Dynamics of Local Remembrance,” 305.

by the town itself, rather a number of Jewish or Polish-Jewish foundations have provided financial support for this commemoration, including the Nissenbaum Foundation, Taube Foundation, and Shalom Foundation.⁵⁸ While it is notable that the town is beginning to take part in various commemorative practices targeted towards younger generations, their reliance on Jewish actors to follow through with these events demonstrates the enormous, remaining dependence on a Jewish presence, or the victims of this perpetrated violence, for remembrance practices. This distinction is particularly notable in a town like Szydłowiec, which currently has little to no Jewish population, where the memorialization of Jewish lives and the Holocaust still often depends on outside Jewish sources to initiate memory practices.

Schoolchildren of Szydłowiec also learn and discover more about Jewish history and the Holocaust through a program called “Preserving Memory, History and Culture of the Two Nations,” which emerged out of a 2002 agreement between Poland and Israel.⁵⁹ This voluntary program consists of Israeli and Polish students taking trips to death camps to commemorate those who were murdered, as well as walking together to visit Jewish sites in the local town. Two secondary schools in Szydłowiec have hosted classes from Israel and participated in this program for several years. After taking part in more conventional lessons and lectures about the Holocaust in the classroom, both groups of students visit the cemetery, plaque, and former synagogue in the town to lay flowers and even participate in Kaddish prayer.⁶⁰ Szydłowiec’s new focus on

⁵⁸ Törnquist-Plewa, “The Transformational Dynamics of Local Remembrance,” 305.

⁵⁹ “Project Entitled ‘Preserving the Memory. History and Culture of Two Nations,’” *Forum for Dialogue, Leaders for Dialogue*, accessed April 23, 2021, <http://dialog.org.pl/liderzy-dialogu/en/entitled-preserving-the-memory-history-and-culture-of-two-nations/>.

⁶⁰ Törnquist-Plewa, “The Transformational Dynamics of Local Remembrance,” 306.

integrating Holocaust history and memory into school curriculums exemplifies a rather new desire for true, continued remembering, as after Holocaust survivors are no longer here to tell their stories, it will be the young generation – these schoolchildren – who will hopefully push forth the Jewish legacy.

Michael Pomeranz, who found great closure in visiting his grandfather's burial place in the Szydlowiec Jewish cemetery, expressed a saddening sense of wonder about communal loss:

“As I walked about [the cemetery], young children did so as well, taking a short cut home from school. Some walked straight through and still others were curious at my presence and loitered nearby or hid behind headstones peeking out from time to time to see what this man with a yarmulke was doing. I wondered – what did they know of where they lived?” He continues with his desired yet unspoken question towards the children: “*What is it like here without Jews?*”⁶¹

Remarkably, it took the town of Szydlowiec many years to answer that very same question, and the work is still unfinished. “It can be clearly stated that the process of rediscovering the town's Jewish past has taken root in the local community,” Törnquist-Plewa concludes, and this transformation towards honoring local memory, and although forcibly pushed by outside Jewish organizations or even just the passing of time, it is nevertheless present.⁶² While “we cannot ever bridge the experiential chasm that separates us, living our normal lives, from the people who had normality ripped from them forever,” nor can we ever “imagine what it would feel like to be branded an outcast by the nation that one called one's own,” the town of Szydlowiec has only recently come to realize that there is value in the *attempt*.⁶³ This constant reminder, that the town

⁶¹ Michael Pomeranz “A Journey Without an End,” 337-38.

⁶² Törnquist-Plewa, “The Transformational Dynamics of Local Remembrance,” 311.

⁶³ Diane Kunz, “Remembering the Unexplainable: The Holocaust, Memory, and Public Policy,” *World Policy Journal* 14, no. 4, (1997): 52.

landscape, demographics, and vitality completely shifted in a matter of six years during World War II, may continue to be partnered with guilt and shame, or solemnity and melancholy, but the Jewish community left a now-recognized, indelible mark on the town of Szydłowiec that now has physical permanence in local memory. While the Szydłowiec Jewish community may not exist in the same form as it did in 1939, the air that moves between the newly maintained cemetery, the newly minted commemorative plaques, and the same cobbled roads and synagogue now, and forever will contain the memory of those lost Szydłowiec souls.