

REWRITING HISTORY: HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS IN THE JIM CROW SOUTH AND  
CIVIL RIGHTS ERA, 1945-PRESENT

Hannah Herzog

A thesis submitted to the faculty of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial  
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the Folklore Program,  
Department of American Studies

Chapel Hill  
2018

Approved by:

Marcie C. Ferris

Gabrielle Berlinger

Charles Price

© 2018  
Hannah Herzog  
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

## **ABSTRACT**

**HANNAH HERZOG: Rewriting History: Holocaust Survivors in the Jim Crow South and Civil Rights Era, 1945-Present.**

(Under the direction of Marcie Cohen Ferris)

Although there is a large body of research on the Holocaust and World War II, the impact of the Nazi regime on southern Jewish life has been deeply understudied. This thesis will explore how Holocaust survivors living in Birmingham, Alabama; Atlanta, Georgia; and Charleston, South Carolina, negotiated the racial landscape of the American South between the late 1940s and 1960s. It will examine how survivors living in these three southern states experienced white nationalism and performed and received their ethnic identity in this racially divisive time in the South. This paper will interpret how survivors' experiences with politics, gender, anti-Semitism, racism, and racial violence in the South converged with their traumas and memories of the Holocaust. Drawing from ethnographic research, archival materials, and theoretical work in folklore, Holocaust studies, and southern studies, this thesis adds to our understanding of the diversity of the South that existed in the mid-twentieth century.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many people helped me in the process of this thesis, whether by sharing their experiences in an oral history interview, providing leads for archival resources, editing proposals and drafts, or listening to me talk about the project. I appreciate the support I received, and I am grateful for the encouragement and flexibility that my professors provided, especially Marcie Cohen Ferris, who contributed steady mentorship and consistent support.

I would also like to acknowledge all of the Holocaust survivors who agreed to speak with me throughout the last year. I am appreciative of their time and patience during this project. Although he is not featured in this thesis, I would like to thank Mr. George Abraham, who was the first survivor I had the honor of meeting, in 2015. Listening to his testimony during my undergraduate career launched passion for and pursuit of research on Holocaust studies and Jewish identity in the United States.

I would also like to thank the staff at the Breman Jewish Heritage Museum in Atlanta, Georgia, the Birmingham Holocaust Education Center in Birmingham, Alabama, and the Jewish Heritage Collection at the College of Charleston, South Carolina. I am especially grateful for the enthusiastic support and assistance that Melissa Young, the archivist at BHEC, provided.

Finally, I would like to thank my family. Thanks to my late grandfather Herzog, who taught me how to write. Thanks to my father, who has reminded me to never stop fighting for what I believe in. Lastly, thanks to my mother, both for reading my writing throughout the years and for teaching me the importance of not only succeeding in the world but also doing *good*.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction .....	1
Chapter One: Max Steinmetz—Transforming from a Bystander into a Political Actor in Birmingham, Alabama. ....	11
Chapter Two: Hershel Greenblat—The Resistance in Atlanta, Georgia .....	21
Chapter Three: Ruth Scheuer Siegler—Family Heirlooms—Birmingham, Alabama ....	31
Chapter Four: Robert May—Personal Agency and Resistance in the Workplace in Birmingham, Alabama. ....	43
Chapter Five: Joe Engel—Self-Transformation and the Power of Community Support in Charleston, South Carolina. ....	50
Conclusion. ....	59
Bibliography .....	64

## **Introduction**

After being displaced from my home, an orphanage, and then a foster home within the first two years of life, my birth story turned from trauma to triumph and love when my American family adopted me from Romania in 1996. Seventeen years later, I was instinctually drawn to explore my birth roots and home country's culture. As an undergraduate in college, I enrolled in a Jewish American literature course where I felt connected to novels on Jewish culture and tradition. One year after college and a semester into my graduate program, where I was continuing my study of Jewish identity and culture, I found my birth family through a Romanian adoptee organization. Besides finding their whereabouts in Romania, I also learned that my birth mother, Domnica Cramer, is German and that her mother grew up in a German Jewish home.

I begin on this personal note because it is through my newly discovered Eastern European family, my Jewish heritage, and the trauma of my own displacement that I feel a visceral connection to those who suffered in the Holocaust. My personal links to these narratives was responsible for the topic of this thesis, which explores the intersection of the Holocaust and its aftermath and the southern Jewish experience in the United States.

### Fieldwork, Methodology, and Research Goals

In the summer of 2017, I traveled across the American South to conduct archival research in three states in the Deep South and interview fifteen Holocaust survivors who moved to the region between 1945 and 1960. In downtown Birmingham, I lingered on the corner of Sixth

Street in the precise spot that one survivor stood as he helplessly watched the Ku Klux Klan chase down a black man in 1953. Tuning out the chatter of the crickets on this June night, I listened for the sounds of hatred and fear that once permeated that space. Atlanta was full of the smell of the baked goods that seemed to await me at each of my interviewees' kitchen tables. And, as I walked up and down King Street in downtown Charleston, I tried to retrace the first steps one survivor took when he arrived at his new, unfamiliar home.

As I travelled throughout these states, the presence of Confederate flags reminded me of the contemporary rise of 'alt-right' and white nationalist movements across America. Currently, anti-Semitism is on the rise and it is yoked with white supremacy, anti-feminism, and homophobia. In 2015, Dylann Roof walked into a Bible study a few days before Father's Day, and murdered nine innocent people, including the pastor of historic Emmanuel AME church, in Charleston, South Carolina. Likewise, white nationalist participants in August 2017, "Unite the Rally," came to Charlottesville, Virginia to protest the removal of a statue of confederate General Robert E. Lee. These protestors perceived two crucial enemies of their cause: blacks and Jews. With the presidential election of Donald Trump in 2016, and now one year into the current administration, no one can deny the frightening sanctioning of racist and ethnocentric voices in America today. The voices of Holocaust survivors in this work testify to the traumatic events that will occur if we, as a nation, do not combat bigotry and intolerance with vigilance and resistance.

In each city, I spent two or three full days researching and collecting documentary information at the Birmingham Holocaust Education Center, the Breman Jewish Heritage Museum in Atlanta, and the Jewish Heritage Collection at the College of Charleston. I chose to focus on these three cities for the following reasons: Holocaust survivors' settlement in the South was largely determined by the location of family networks and community support, as well as the

presence of a Jewish community. These networks and communities were present in Charleston, Birmingham, and Atlanta. With the help of the local Jewish federations in all three cities, I contacted Holocaust survivors. After spending daytime hours in the archives, I conducted interviews with them in the evening. I also interviewed survivors and their children in North Carolina, though this group of survivors originally lived in the Northeast and had only been in the South for the last few years.

In the archives, I found a great deal of material about southern Jewish communities and their native—born in the South—Jewish citizens responses to racial tension and Holocaust survivors. But, I did not find documents that examined Holocaust survivors’ new life in the South, nor anything that illuminated their feelings about black-white relations. With archivists’ assistance, I located oral histories from the 1980s onward that primarily focused on survivors’ experiences in the Holocaust. To prepare for my interviews with survivors, I studied this material to learn more about their Holocaust narratives.

The survivors I spoke with were pleasantly surprised, if somewhat unprepared, when they learned that our interviews would focus on their post-war and post-Holocaust lives in the American South. Although there is a large body of research on the Holocaust and World War II, the impact of the Nazi regime on southern Jewish life in the U.S. has been deeply understudied, if not entirely neglected. At the “Bystanders and Complicity in Nazi Germany and the Jim Crow South” symposium held at the University of Alabama at Birmingham in February 2017, I encountered important scholarship that examines Nazi Germany and intersections with the American South between 1940 and 1965. Historians such as Robert Ehrenreich, Ari Joskowicz, and Willa Johnson have approached these two subjects by studying archival documents such as newspapers and police reports. Although their work is critical scholarship, there has been little to



no emphasis on the narratives of survivors who lived through these events. Their voices offer powerful reflections about this history and personal experiences. Likewise, while many scholars in southern Jewish studies and southern studies have examined how white southerners and African-Americans experienced and participated in segregation, desegregation, and the civil rights movement, there is little research that interrogates the role of Holocaust survivors in this crucible. Moreover, besides historian Gabrielle Edgcomb's documentary and subsequent book *From Swastika to Jim Crow* (2000), I found no research that specifically documents the relationships between Holocaust survivors and native Jewish southerners, white gentiles, and African-Americans in the South.

This thesis is positioned at the intersection of the following fields: pre-Civil Rights movement, the study of the Jewish South, southern studies, folklore, Holocaust studies, memory studies, and works on Jewish identity. My work is bounded by central texts such as Barbara Myerhoff's *Number Our Days* (1978), Maurice Halbwachs' *On Collective Memory* (1992), Henry Glassie's "Material Culture" in *Material Culture* (1999), Deborah Kapchan's "Performance" in *Eight Words for the Study of Expressive Culture* (2006), and Susan Glisson's "Telling the Truth: How Breaking Silence Brought Redemption to One Mississippi Town" (2008).

This account includes three ethnographies of survivors who moved to Birmingham, Atlanta, and Charleston. These survivors' experiences vary widely: three of them experienced European concentration camps, another lost family treasures during Kristallnacht, and yet another spent his adolescent years hiding in the Ukraine. Using folkloric methods and themes such as performance, material objects and how they signify meaning, and tradition, this project interprets how Holocaust survivors negotiated the racial landscape of the American South between the late 1940s and the early 1960s. Additionally, it examines how Holocaust survivors'

experiences with southern politics, gender, racism, and anti-Semitism converged with their traumas and memories of the Holocaust. From a folkloric perspective, this thesis interprets how these Holocaust survivors ultimately adapted and made meaningful lives in the South in a range of experiences. Before shifting our focus to the Holocaust survivors and their narratives in the South, this work will provide a socio-historical context of the racial and ethnic politics existing in early twentieth century U.S. Next, I will describe the racial and political landscapes that the Holocaust survivors found when they arrived in their new southern homes.

### Jim Crow, the Eugenics Movement, and the Johnson-Reed Act

In the first half of the twentieth century, the modernizing New South and its white southerners attempted to restrict the terms of citizenship of middle-class black southerners and other minority groups within the region to maintain white supremacy. White southerners sustained their political control through violent acts of racial terrorism including lynching, by attempts to control historic memory through the erection of monuments to memorialize a mythic Old South, and the institutionalization of segregation via thousands of “Jim Crow” laws that established separate, but unequal, spaces for southern blacks.

The state and local laws codifying segregation spread quickly throughout the southern U.S. in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. These statutes—the “Jim Crow” laws—formally segregated African-Americans from whites in public institutions such as schools and universities, social events, hospitals, prisons, and work. If rules were broken, white supremacist groups like the Ku Klux Klan used violence to keep blacks “in their places.”<sup>1</sup> These laws existed

---

<sup>1</sup> This information was found from the following digital site: <http://www.crf-usa.org/black-history-month/a-brief-history-of-jim-crow>. The Ku Klux Klan (KKK or Klan) was believed to be founded in 1866 and continues to exist in the U.S. The KKK has consisted of racist white people who hope to promote white supremacy.

well into the mid 1960s, and effectively continue in many places through voter suppression and other expressions of systemic racism.

The Eugenics movement took root in the U.S. at least two decades before Hitler came to power in Germany and lasted until the 1970s. Its goal was to preserve and improve “dominant” racial groups—specifically white, Anglo-Saxon Protestants—by promoting selective breeding. People with mental illnesses, disabilities, criminal convictions, and non-white ancestry were classified as “genetically inferior.” Adopted by more than 30 states, these policies resulted in the forced sterilization of over 64,000 Americans.<sup>2</sup>

Where eugenics and Jim Crow laws defined and regulated the position of undesirable non-white classes, the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924 sought to limit their growth by restricting migration into the U.S. Through a national origins quota, only two percent of the total number of people for each nationality in the U.S. were allowed to enter the country per year. The purpose of the law was to curb the influx of immigrants—particularly from southern and eastern Europe—arriving in the U.S. By accomplishing this, however, the Johnson-Reed Act kept the U.S. from providing sanctuary to thousands of people who died in Europe during WWII. As it relates to the survivors I interviewed, this law resulted in delays anywhere from three to ten years before being “accepted” into the U.S. The Hart-Cellar Immigration Act abolished and replaced this policy in 1952.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> This information can be found from the following digital sites: <https://cla.umn.edu/ihr/news-events/other/eugenics-race-immigration-restriction> and <http://www.uvm.edu/~lkaelber/eugenics/SC/SCold.html>.

<sup>3</sup> This historical information was gathered from the following digital site: <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1921-1936/immigration-act>.

## Birmingham, Atlanta, and Charleston

Throughout the twentieth century, anti-Semitism and anti-black racism coexisted in different degrees of intensity in Birmingham, Atlanta, and Charleston. Birmingham was a fertile ground for several racist extremist groups; according to statistics found in the Breman Jewish Heritage Museum's archives, in 1965 Alabama was home to approximately 11,000 Ku Klux Klan members, the largest population of all American states.

Caption 1<sup>4</sup>

	United Klans (Chapters)	National Knights (Synods)
ALABAMA	11,000	600
ARKANSAS	800	
FLORIDA	1,500	800
GEORGIA	7,000	7,500
LOUISIANA	1,200	
MISSISSIPPI	3,500	
NORTH CAROLINA	10,000	
SOUTH CAROLINA	2,000	500
TENNESSEE	2,000	300
TEXAS	600	
VIRGINIA	400	
<b>NON-SOUTH</b>		
OHIO	400	300
DELAWARE	200	
	40,600	10,000
OTHER REPORTED KLAN STRENGTH (SCATTERED) -- WASHINGTON (100) -- FLORIDA (50) -- MILITANT SKOUTS, Independent		

Like southern blacks, Jews in Birmingham were excluded from joining social clubs who limited their membership to white Christian elites, and were restricted from living in certain parts of the city. Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, Birmingham had three Jewish communities organized by their affiliation with the Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox movements. Mild animosity between German Jews and East European Jews influenced these divisions. Their unfavorable feelings toward one another were often because the former group was known for being more assimilated to American life than the latter, as well as intra-group class and ethnic tensions.

---

<sup>4</sup> This image was found in the Breman Jewish Heritage Museum's Archives, July 25, 2017.

Throughout the 1950s and beyond, Atlanta's Jewish community still remembered the horrific lynching of Leo Frank in 1915. Leo Frank, whose ancestors came from Germany, was an American Jew who was murdered on August 16, 1915, after having been wrongfully accused of the sexual assault and murder of a white, thirteen-year-old girl, Mary Phagan, who was employed in the Frank family's pencil factory. The Leo Frank incident reminded Jewish Atlantans that "they remained subject to heightened scrutiny and some Atlanta Jews avoided calling attention to the case for decades."<sup>5</sup> In northern Atlanta, the KKK burned crosses at their sacred meeting spot, Stone Mountain.<sup>6</sup> It is here and in other rural areas of Atlanta, mostly to the north of the city, that anti-Semitism was most destructive. In south Atlanta, where there was a larger Jewish population, anti-Semitism was less frequently experienced. Similar to Jews in Birmingham, German Jews and East European Jews in Atlanta remained mostly separate throughout the 1950s.

Charleston's anti-Semitism was perhaps the least virulent of the three cities. After WWII, Jewish citizens shared in Charleston's industrial growth and prosperity. The Jews of Charleston were "acculturated and well-received by the general community in all aspects of life" according to a Charleston newspaper report that was published in 1963.<sup>7</sup> By 1965, South Carolina's KKK membership was approximately 2,000, the lowest of the three states emphasized in this thesis. Although Charleston was home to three Jewish congregations—Conservative, Reform, and

---

<sup>5</sup> 33. Josh Parshall, *Yiddish Politics in Southern States: The Southern District of the Arbeter Ring, 1908-1949* (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2017).

<sup>6</sup> Lighting ceremonies involved KKK members lighting and burning a cross.

<sup>7</sup> This information was found in archives located at the College of Charleston's Jewish Heritage Collection.

Orthodox—by 1947, these groups interacted with one another and were identified as a unified Jewish community.

### The Path Ahead

Chapter One examines a specific story shared by Holocaust survivor, Max Steinmetz. Born in Romania in 1925, Steinmetz was the only member of his family to survive the Holocaust. After surviving a Nazi concentration camp, he immigrated to the U.S. in 1948 and settled in Birmingham in 1955. In this chapter, I identify a set of linked emotional and social self-transformations that Steinmetz experienced, each motivated by interactions Steinmetz shared with influential people in his life. This chapter highlights his transformation from a non-speaker to a speaker with a political message.

Chapter Two analyzes the specific historical and cultural factors that motivated Holocaust survivors such as Ukrainian-born, Hershel Greenblat to actively fight against Atlanta's Jim Crow laws. After the war, in 1950, Greenblat and his family moved to south Atlanta.

Chapter Three approaches Ruth Siegler's experiences in Birmingham through the lens of material culture—the history and philosophy of objects.<sup>8</sup> By analyzing her family's pre-Holocaust heirlooms, we can better interpret the survivor's experience of survival, activism, resilience, and healing, which occurred in a domestic space and within the racial landscapes of the American South. Originally from Germany, Siegler moved to Birmingham in 1960.

Chapter Four interprets the various ways Robert May combated inequality in his profession through Aimee Meredith Cox's theory of "shapeshifting," a process in which

---

<sup>8</sup> 8. Bernard L. Herman, "On Southern Things" in *Southern Cultures* vol. 3 (University of North Carolina: Center for the Study of the American South, fall 2017).

marginalized individuals use creative expression to challenge and unsettle systemic oppression.

Born in Germany, May moved to Birmingham in 1953.

Lastly, like the first chapter's treatment of Steinmetz' experience, Chapter five traces Engel's self-transformation by examining three important experiences that took place in his Charleston home. Originally from Poland, Engel and his two siblings were also alone among their family members as Holocaust survivors. Engel moved to Charleston in 1949.

## **Chapter One: Max Steinmetz—Transforming from a Bystander into a Political Actor in Birmingham, Alabama**

In the years immediately after World War II, Holocaust testimonials made scarcely any appearance in American public discourse. American historians Hasia Diner and Peter Novick disagree about when narratives of the Holocaust surfaced in the United States and how early survivors began to talk about their experiences in public settings. Diner suggests that survivors began talking as early as 1949, but Novick argues that it was not until the 1990s that such narratives entered the public discourse.<sup>9</sup> Clearly, however, the big opening came in the 1980s when Holocaust survivors used their personal experiences to combat Holocaust deniers who began to publicly challenge the scope of the atrocities that took place in Nazi Europe. Based on interviews that I conducted with survivors such as Max Steinmetz, who moved to the American South in the early 1950s, these survivors were a part of the 1980s wave, but because they lived in

---

<sup>9</sup> Peter Novick's *The Holocaust in American Life* (1999) argues that Holocaust memory in the U.S. was primarily shaped by changing factors in the society's cultural, social, and political environments. Novick claims that before the 1960s, the Holocaust made scarcely any appearance in American public discourse. Instead, it spread in American society throughout the 1990s because of recent political events in the U.S. He also suggests that the Holocaust remained a predominantly negative subject throughout the 1950s. In contrast, Hasia Diner's, *We Remember with Reverence and Love* (2009), argues against Novick and other scholars who claim that American Jews remained "silent" in the immediate years after World War II. Diner describes how American Jews dealt with the past, present, and future when it came to shaping Holocaust memorial culture and that participating in Holocaust remembrance became a mark of pride for American Jewry.



a racially oppressive region whose violence was grievously reminiscent of what they had fled, there was yet another layer of motivation for them to speak up.

Max Steinmetz was born on January 20, 1925, in Târgu Lăpuș, Romania. Between 1942 and 1945, between the ages of seventeen and twenty, Steinmetz was held in German captivity in at least five ghettos or camps. In 1943, Steinmetz and his family were forced into cattle cars for a three-day, four-night rail journey to Auschwitz. Upon arriving, Steinmetz and his brother, Henry, were selected for labor while their parents and six-year-old sister were sent to the gas chamber.<sup>10</sup> The brothers remained together until February 4, 1945, when Henry died from starvation. At six-foot-one and weighing only eighty pounds, Steinmetz escaped a death march that April and found refuge with a family living in a nearby farmhouse.<sup>11</sup> After liberation on May 2, 1945, Steinmetz was hospitalized and checked into a Displaced Persons Camp in Austria until he emigrated to the United States in 1948.<sup>12</sup> After brief stays in New York, Colorado, and New Mexico, Steinmetz moved to Birmingham, Alabama in 1955 and married in 1962. Steinmetz and his wife have lived there ever since with their three children and six grandchildren.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> Gas chambers were found in Nazi concentration and death camps. These were large rooms that were used to kill thousands of the camps' prisoners.

<sup>11</sup> As Soviet troops approached, SS units began the final evacuation of prisoners. These forced evacuations were called "death marches," which often ended in hundreds and thousands of deaths.

<sup>12</sup> A Displaced Persons camp (DP) is a temporary facility for displaced persons and the term is mainly used for camps established after World War II, primarily for refugees from Eastern Europe and for the former inmates of Nazi German concentration camps.

<sup>13</sup> Biographical information on Steinmetz was found in the archives at Birmingham's Holocaust Education Center, June 28-30, 2017. For more information, visit <https://bheinfo.org/survivors/steinmetz-max/>.

Just as was the case for many Holocaust survivors, Steinmetz spent many years healing from his traumatic experiences. Steinmetz said that he did not talk about his Holocaust memories with family or close friends for more than thirty years. In time, the support of his loving family and his community helped Steinmetz speak, and he transformed into an inspiring testimonial speaker. In our interview, Steinmetz crafted an effective, compact and moving story that illuminated several critical ‘moments’ motivated by interactions with other people. In this chapter, I will analyze Steinmetz’s influential story and identify five linked transformations derived from meaningful conversations in his life. In doing so, we will see how Steinmetz changed from a circumspect individual into a man with a political message. Steinmetz’s transformation from a traumatized survivor into a political actor was common among my interviewees, and similar themes will be explored in their narratives, too.

#### Transcribed Story No. 1:

Hannah Herzog: Did people know that you were a Holocaust survivor?

Max Steinmetz: After a certain length of time, yes.<sup>14</sup> Prior to that? No. I never told anybody. I never discussed my problem. Not only I, none of us did this. Any Holocaust survivor you talk to will tell you the same thing. We just did not discuss it, it hurt too much. We were in a lot of pain for so many years. It just hurt too much. I lost my whole family...my parents, brother, my six-year-old sister. What do you say when you lose your six-year-old sister in a gas chamber? Because she was Jewish. Hitler felt threatened by a six-year-old child.

I started talking about it one day with my oldest daughter. She went to Israel, studied at American High School of Israel offered for Jewish children in America. There, she learned about survivors and heard about their experiences in the Holocaust. After this trip, she asked, ‘Why don’t you talk about your experiences? You never told me where you were. You are going to *have* to talk about it.’ I said, ‘I guess you’re right.’

In the meantime, I had a call from the Holocaust Museum in D.C. They called me—my name is registered there. And they asked me to go to Selma, Alabama. To a high school. And speak to them about the Holocaust. I said, ‘What?’ They said, ‘You need to go.’ I said, ‘I’ve never done that before’ and they said, ‘No but you’ve got enough to tell them. *Tell* them what happened to you. So, I said ‘Ok.’ We went to George C. Wallace Community College. That was probably thirty-five or forty years ago. It was a school, mostly black and mostly boys. I spoke to them and that was my beginning. And since then I have been going around talking to schools, colleges, churches, organizations, temples, and so on.

HH: How did it feel to speak about it?

---

<sup>14</sup> “A certain length of time” refers to approximately thirty-five to forty years.

MS: It was difficult. But once I got into it—once I saw how they accepted it—once I saw how they asked for more—I realized that it is very important for me to talk about it. Immediately I asked them to write me letters and tell me, ‘What do you hear me say? What difference did my speech make in your life? What did my speech mean to you?’ As of today, I probably have 400 letters. Telling me what my speech meant to them, how it changed their life and that they were inspired...and that encouraged me. That was a wake-up call. And so, I keep on doing it. As long as my health holds out, and as long as my wife is able to drive me—because she drives me to all of these places—I will keep doing it. Because it needs to be told. Especially these youngsters—they need to learn— because it can happen any place, anywhere. Originally, when it happened, I remember, I suggested that we leave. My parents said, ‘It won’t happen here.’ I was seventeen years old and I said, ‘Why not?’ And they said, ‘Because the non-Jewish people won’t let it.’ My parents were totally wrong. Nobody, *nobody* lifted a finger. When the Germans invaded, nobody said a word. Today you realize that it *can* happen. And, trust me, it can happen right here in this country. I am not suggesting that it will happen. Hitler was elected in a democratic way. He was running on a democratic ticket. He promised to be as open and free as anyone else. Within a couple of years, he completely changed.

In this particular story, there are five events that contributed to Steinmetz’s transformation. I will refer to these five events as “break points.” The first of these occurred when his oldest daughter, Lisa, returned from Israel. Eighteen years old at the time, Lisa realized that her father had a story to tell after she heard other survivors give their testimonies in Israel. As Steinmetz explained in another part of our interview, Lisa learned from other survivors that talking helped them heal emotionally. When Steinmetz’s daughter told him he was “going to *have* to talk about it” she redefined her father’s untold, painful stories by introducing a therapeutic model. Lisa’s role as the encourager served as one of these break points that contributed to Steinmetz’s transformation.

Steinmetz’s story finds parallels in the life of Bessie Eldreth (1913-2016), a North Carolinian who experienced a personal transformation later in life, after her children were grown and her emotionally-abusive husband had died. Like Steinmetz, at the age of seventy, Eldreth transformed “from a silent girl...to a quietly determined woman who [stood] up for herself and others” as described by folklorist Patricia Sawin, who examined Eldreth’s life narratives.<sup>15</sup> Sawin

---

<sup>15</sup> 69. Patricia Sawin, “I Said, ‘Don’t you do it’: Tracing Development as an Empowered Speaker through Reported Speech in Narrative.” In *Listening for a Life: A Dialogic Ethnography of Bessie Eldreth Through Her Songs and Stories* (Utah: Utah State University Press, 2004)

describes Eldreth's transformation from passivity and silence to a woman who spoke at crucial moments and criticized people who mistreated her. While Sawin and other scholars have studied narratives of people who experienced social and emotional transformations *over time*, Steinmetz's story is notable because of how extreme his transformation was; he went from being a non-speaker to an absolutely determined, resolute public speaker.

The second break point occurred when Steinmetz received a phone call from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. This phone call was a transformative moment because it launched Steinmetz's public speaking journey by providing a platform to tell his story. Like Steinmetz's daughter, museum officials commanded Steinmetz by explaining "you *need* to go...*tell* them what happened to you."<sup>16</sup> The museum's persistence gave Steinmetz the encouragement and confidence he needed to share in public what he had previously only shared privately with family members. This break point is very similar to a moment Sawin described as transformative for Eldreth: As sympathetic listeners encouraged Eldreth to take a particular stance, they enabled Eldreth to recall a situation that she was initially reluctant to discuss. Sawin found that another scholar's "supportive questioning had encouraged Eldreth to share stories with [that scholar] that she had not previously felt comfortable sharing with [Sawin]."<sup>17</sup>

Likewise, in her recent scholarship, Southern Studies scholar Susan Glisson examines the importance of a supportive community in helping people with traumatic experiences share their stories. Glisson's work considers how personal narratives helped bring communities out of silence. When black and white Mississippians gathered in 2003 to share their difficult memories

---

<sup>16</sup> Max Steinmetz, personal communication, August 1, 2017.

<sup>17</sup> 79. Patricia Sawin, "I Said, 'Don't you do it': Tracing Development as an Empowered Speaker through Reported Speech in Narrative." In *Listening for a Life: A Dialogic Ethnography of Bessie Eldreth Through Her Songs and Stories* (Utah: Utah State University Press, 2004)

of their friends and colleagues who were murdered on June 21, 1964, it caused “relationships to form and deepen [and] made a path to redemption and unity.”<sup>18</sup> In these cases, community support was needed for the individuals (and their communities) to experience a positive and lasting transformation. But unlike Eldreth and the Mississippians, Steinmetz needed more guidance and encouragement to share his story. For Eldreth, the comfortable atmosphere provided by the scholars allowed her to speak. The Mississippians needed to experience the solidarity of community in order to share their grievances. But, because of the magnitude of Steinmetz’s trauma, he needed encouragement that bordered on a *moral demand*.

In this part of Steinmetz’s story, it is important to note that the Holocaust survivor mentioned the full name of the first college where he spoke: “George C. Wallace Community College...it was a school, mostly black and mostly boys.” Besides functioning as an intertextual reference to a story he shared in another part of our conversation, Steinmetz included these details to illuminate the irony that African-American students attended a school named for a white racist known for his devotion to the preservation of segregation in the 1960s. Although Steinmetz visited the school years after the Jim Crow era, he was subtly pointing to the social power still present in Selma, Alabama. Steinmetz was gradually leading the listener to the larger moral imperative of his story.

Although the anecdotes analyzed in folklorist Richard Bauman’s ethnographic work fulfill a different function, they include many ‘punchlines’ that serve as “object[s] of

---

<sup>18</sup> 36. Susan Glisson, “Telling the Truth: How Breaking Silence Brought Redemption to One Mississippi Town.” In *Telling Stories to Change the World: Global Voices on the Power of Narrative to Build Community and Make Social Justice Claims*, ed. Rickie Solinger, Madeline Fox, and Kayhan Irani (Routledge Press, 2008)

interpretation, discussion, [and] evaluation.”<sup>19</sup> In one project, Bauman examines a small corpus of narratives told by a west Texas rancher within an eight year timeframe and identifies repeated phrases in the rancher’s narratives to suggest that such phrases hinted at the larger values and tensions existing in the rancher’s society. Steinmetz and the rancher have similar speaking strategies as they both use indirect language to confront societal tensions. Instead of relying on ‘punchlines,’ Steinmetz used irony and subtle details to convey his message. The larger point of Steinmetz’s story is a meditation on the importance of acting vigilantly in society and accepting everyone regardless of their race, ethnicity, culture, or religion.

The third, two-part break point—Steinmetz’s request for letters from the students he spoke to and his experiences reading them—is a powerful moment in his narrative. Here Steinmetz demonstrated his growing confidence as he asked for his listeners’ honest remarks, and also spoke directly to the students. This is a transformative moment partly because Steinmetz became a speaker, and also sought affirmation regarding his voice. At some point in his testimony, Steinmetz recognized that he would need the students to participate in order to feel empowered to continue sharing his stories. Similarly, in Sawin’s analysis of Eldreth’s self-transformation, Eldreth indirectly communicated a need to feel encouraged and valued. Sawin explains that “the feminist scholars encouraged [Eldreth] to elaborate when she mentioned difficulties with her husband [which then] allowed for further [self]-transformation.”<sup>20</sup> In both Eldreth’s and Steinmetz’s cases, though each speaker’s motivation for transformation was

---

<sup>19</sup> 54. Richard Bauman, “Hell, Yes, But Not That young”: Reported Speech as Comic Corrective.” In *Story, Performance, and Event: Contextual Studies of Oral Narrative* (Cambridge University Press, 1986)

<sup>20</sup> 71. Patricia Sawin, “I Said, ‘Don’t you do it’: Tracing Development as an Empowered Speaker through Reported Speech in Narrative.” In *Listening for a Life: A Dialogic Ethnography of Bessie Eldreth Through her Songs and Stories* (Utah: Utah State University Press, 2004)

internal, both used audience to test whether their stories should be told and if they would be appreciated in public. In Sawin's work, there were multiple moments where Eldreth sensed the sympathetic scholars' support to tell a story that was critical of men. Similarly, with his audience of African-American students, Steinmetz recognized he was speaking to a socially marginalized group that could empathize with his personal experience. In our conversations, Steinmetz understood that I, as a scholar, was interested specifically in hearing about and legitimizing his experiences. The presence of a specific, sensitive audience empowered both Eldreth and Steinmetz to speak.

The students' letters, as the second half of the third break point, provided reassurance that Steinmetz's stories were important and were, collectively, the final factor that led to Steinmetz's transformation from a public speaker to a political actor. The black students' affirmation of Steinmetz's story as inspirational both empowered and motivated him. The students expressed how Steinmetz's story inspired them to persevere in Selma's racially hostile landscape. In turn, their responses helped Steinmetz self-transform to a speaker by helping him realize he had important lessons to teach through his stories. By sharing his experiences, he hoped to end the pattern of hate and mitigate "the chances of another Holocaust."<sup>21</sup> Simultaneously, recalling the Holocaust allowed Steinmetz to honor his parents and embrace his Jewish background.

The conversation between seventeen-year-old Steinmetz and his parents is the fourth break point. Despite living with the pain of losing his family, Steinmetz demonstrated emotional strength and acceptance by admitting his parents' failure in not leaving Romania. As we see in his transcribed narrative, Steinmetz recreated a conversation he shared with his parents shortly before the Holocaust to demonstrate that people like his parents were *too* trusting. This evidence

---

<sup>21</sup> Max Steinmetz, personal communication, August 1, 2017.

strengthened his message—that besides the need to be vigilant about injustice around us, we cannot depend on others or hope that life will ‘return to normal.’ Linguist Deborah Tannin argues that in storytelling and conversation, a speaker often invents words spoken by an “absent party” so that it fits within the purpose of the teller’s story. Tannin’s analysis of the “absent party” within the framework of reported criticism suggests that “absent parties are simply resources for the facework of the immediate context.”<sup>22</sup> By criticizing his parents, Steinmetz helped me grasp the significance of his story, which was to discourage complicity and to encourage activism against oppressive voices.

Furthermore, Steinmetz’s final message of his testimony is the fifth break point because it signifies his transformation from a bystander into a political actor. When he stressed that “it can happen right here in this country...” his speech is not exactly marked, but a first-time listener senses that he has delivered this message before. Two months before our conversation, I witnessed Steinmetz communicate this same message to a group of middle school-aged African-American boys on June 30, 2017. The dynamic of this forty-five-minute testimony involved Steinmetz simply fielding questions with the young men. In contrast, Steinmetz provided detailed stories in our private two-hour interview that occurred on August 1, 2017. Essentially, in his talk on June 30, Steinmetz shared an abbreviated version of our longer conversation. Steinmetz adjusted the length of his narrative while still effectively emphasizing the same point with different listeners. I can testify to this because at both of the speaking events, the survivor ended his remarks with the same message: we cannot forget the Holocaust, and we must not allow a similar tragedy to happen again.

---

<sup>22</sup> 109. Deborah Tannin, “‘Oh Talking Voice that is so Sweet’: Constructing Dialogue in Conversation.” In *Talking Voices: Repetition, Dialogue, and Imagery in Conversational Discourse* (Cambridge University Press, 2007)



Steinmetz's personal narrative contributes to the larger Holocaust story because it emphasizes the need for Holocaust stories to not only be told but *retold* for the sake of Jewish history and memory, as well as for the psychological health of survivors and their families. However, Steinmetz's story and others shared here are also at a distance from the larger Holocaust narrative whose telling was motivated primarily by a desire to silence Holocaust deniers and memorialize the six million that died. Steinmetz and the other survivors profiled here exemplify a third layer of motivation for Holocaust survivors living in the South: a racially hostile environment reminiscent of what they had fled in Europe. Steinmetz's message was not solely about racism experienced by Jews, but about all forms of prejudice and violence suffered by any community. And for the last sixty-two years, Steinmetz's testimony has also become an impassioned voice in the 'long' civil rights movement.

## **Chapter Two: Hershel Greenblat—The Resistance in Atlanta**

Haunted by the genocide that the Nazis had inflicted, many refugees and Holocaust survivors who relocated to the South side-stepped the topic of southern race relations. In her documentary and subsequent book, historian Gabrielle Edgcomb studies the relationship between two disenfranchised groups—Jewish professors who fled Nazi Germany and African-American students—and the special bonds that grew between them. The scholars interviewed by Edgcomb focused on their academic work rather than social activism. Similarly, scholarship written by historian Lawrence Powell highlights the experience of the Skoreckis, a Polish Jewish family who arrived in New Orleans in 1949. Powell found no evidence that the Skoreckis “paid any attention to the moral challenge that racial segregation in [New Orleans] presented.”<sup>23</sup> In some unique cases, however, survivors such as Hershel Greenblat took a keen interest in the South’s racially divisive climate and their responsibility within this landscape given their personal experiences of racism in Europe.

Holocaust survivor Hershel Greenblat was born on April 24, 1941 and spent the first two years of his life hiding in caves and basements with the Resistance in Ukraine. From 1943 until 1950, the Greenblats lived in a displaced persons camp in Austria before emigrating to the United States on November 25, 1950.<sup>24</sup> Nine-year-old Greenblat, his parents, and two sisters

---

<sup>23</sup> 63. Stephen J. Whitfield, “The South in the Shadow of Nazism” (Southern Cultures, 2012).

were sent to live in Atlanta, Georgia, where generations of the Greenblats have resided ever since.

In an interview at his home on July 25, 2017, Greenblat shared several experiences that pointed unequivocally to one theme: race relations in south Atlanta, and more specifically, the family's ongoing attempts to mitigate racial inequality in their daily lives. Organized into three sections, this chapter begins with two transcribed narratives that demonstrate the Greenblat family's efforts to dismantle Atlanta's segregated landscape. Next, I consider specific historical and cultural factors that motivated the Greenblats to resist systems of targeted oppression and racial violence in the Jim Crow South. This chapter ends with a reflection upon the positive consequences of a Jewish refugee family who actively engaged with the racial landscape of their new home.

#### Transcribed Story No. One:

Hannah Herzog: What were your first impressions of Atlanta?

Hershel Greenblat: First impressions. Hmm. My dad bought "Buttermilk Grocery Store" in 1952 and kept it until 1969. The grocery store was right in the middle of a black—a terrible, terrible black ghetto.<sup>25</sup> I mean, the living conditions were no better than what we saw in the DP camps.<sup>26</sup> There was no electricity in any of the homes. It was just dilapidated. Black kids walking around barefoot and hungry. No running water. Anyway, my dad pretty much became part of the community. Our whole family did. He helped—I can't tell you how many times my mother would go downtown and buy shoes for the kids. My father would give food away and give food for credit. My mother would cook chicken soup for the people in the neighborhood when she knew someone was sick. I always spent my weekends helping out and playing with the kids in the neighborhood.

#### Transcribed Story No. Two:

HH: When you got older, did you ever encounter anyone who was racist or prejudiced?

HG: Oh, sure. In '78 and '79—my dad was not alive anymore by this point—I was coach of a little league that my son Jacob played on. Half of the team was black. So, then it came to the point where a lot of the white kids moved out and so we didn't have enough to fill a team. If parents had a problem with it, we told them to leave. So, anyway, when this happened, we decided—I was on the board—why don't we invite some of the black

---

<sup>25</sup> "Black ghetto" Greenblat means that it was an unhealthy, impoverished, dangerous, and violent place for the African-Americans who lived there.

<sup>26</sup> DP refers to displaced person camps.

kids that live in East Lake? East Lake was a terrible black community in the '70s.<sup>27</sup> Anyway, we got together with the clergyman and asked if they would let their kids come to us—it was about a half-an-hour trip—and play football with our kids. They were ten, twelve, thirteen years old. So, we would pick them up for practice every afternoon. And then the first game that we had—there were about nine black kids—none of them showed up. We thought their parents would bring them but they didn't—they didn't have transportation. So, we had to forfeit the first game. After this, my wife Rochelle and I decided every Friday afternoon we would drive out to East Lake and pick up the kids. We would bring them back to our apartment and get them settled in. They slept on our living room floor—we put out the blankets—then on Saturday morning I'd put out a couple of big boxes of Cheerios and milk, they'd eat and we'd go play football. One Friday evening, I told Rochelle, let's surprise these kids and take them out to dinner—it's right across the street from where we live. So, it was me, my sons Jeff and Jacob, and six of these black kids. We walk in and are waiting to be seated and over kinda in the corner there are these two older, ladies—these women said “why would they bring these black kids, they shouldn't be here...” And kept making all these derogatory comments. I got livid. Livid. I walked over to them and said very, very quietly... “ladies, it's okay. They are my children from a previous marriage.” *[In our interview Greenblat makes it clear by his facial expressions that he was being sarcastic.]*

### Historical Motives for Resistance

As we can see from this first transcription, the Greenblats immediately made explicit connections between postwar conditions in Austria and the conditions in south Atlanta's African-American neighborhoods. Once in Atlanta, the family's own experiences with hunger lead them to open a grocery store in south Atlanta and in an area of need.

By the time the war ended, Hershel's parents, Abraham and Manya, had received news that besides their children, no other family members survived the Holocaust. This led to alcoholism for Abraham and lifelong depression for Manya. Despite the survivor's guilt they both lived with, neither allowed it to emotionally cripple them. While studying a community of elderly Jews in Venice, California, anthropologist/filmmaker Barbara Myerhoff examines Holocaust survivors and their tenacious efforts to take advantage of their survivorhood by creating meaningful lives in the U.S.<sup>28</sup> During the war, Abraham and Manya crusaded against the Nazis by living and fighting with the Resistance. After the Holocaust, “survivorhood caused

---

<sup>27</sup> “Terrible black community” Again, by ‘terrible,’ Greenblat is describing the sub-standard and dangerous conditions in which the African-American community was forced to live.

<sup>28</sup> Barbara Myerhoff, *Number Our Days* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978).

them to intensify their dedication to social justice.”<sup>29</sup> Although racial oppression and violence were not as extreme as what they had experienced in Europe, Abraham and Manya employed a similar tactic of quiet morality to confront these familiar evils in the American South. Greenblat explained in our interview that “we didn’t go marching down the streets carrying signs, but we were very involved in helping others. My dad gave food away for credit at the store, gave it to the churches.”<sup>30</sup> For the Greenblats, seeing how African-Americans were treated was like viewing a mirror on to their own past. Their sense of responsibility for the welfare of others was the transformation of survival guilt into conscience, another common tactic among those who live despite others’ efforts to destroy them.

Additionally, his father’s values influenced Greenblat to promote social justice. In his scholarship on memory, sociologist Maurice Halbwachs suggests that memories are not “individual images of the past but rather models, examples, and elements of teaching that exist by transmission from one generation to another.”<sup>31</sup> These memories then become refreshed and informed by experiences and recollections that are considered unique to each family unit. Such is true when we consider the second transcribed section. By beginning his narrative with a reminder that *my father was not alive at this point*, Greenblat was not just adding context of time and place. Instead, he was communicating that his father’s teaching and values were reflected in how Greenblat handled (1) the football team incident and (2) the racist white women in the restaurant.

---

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>30</sup> H. Greenblat, personal communication, July 25, 2017.

<sup>31</sup> 59. Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, edited, translated, and with an introduction by Lewis A. Coser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

Greenblat associated his father with his community involvement at other points in our interview, too. He admitted that “after [his] dad passed, [Greenblat] became very, very involved in speaking—not only about the Holocaust and what happened to [his] family but also about Atlanta in the ’50s and ’60s.”<sup>32</sup> After our interview, I watched recordings of Greenblat giving his Holocaust testimony and saw further evidence that Greenblat has used testimonial spaces to keep the memory of his father alive. In each of the three testimonies I watched online, he framed his performances around his father’s lessons and values—to push for social equality and extirpate discrimination.<sup>33</sup> From the years he spent in hiding to the conversations shared in his family’s new, southern home, resistance is forever a part of Hershel Greenblat.

### Cultural Motives for Resistance

Just as memory recovers lost, stolen, and rejected worlds, material objects can be read as repositories and producers of cultural memory.<sup>34</sup> Folklorist Henry Glassie understands material objects as texts, “a set of parts to which meaning is brought by locating them in contexts.”<sup>35</sup> To help understand the crucial role that Atlanta’s cultural climate played in the Greenblats’ expressive activism, we can turn to two material objects that Greenblat shared in our interview. During our three-hour conversation, there were two distinct moments when Greenblat responded

---

<sup>32</sup> H. Greenblat, personal communication, July 25, 2017.

<sup>33</sup> For more information about the three testimonies, refer to <https://www.thebreman.org/Events/Archived-Events/04-17-2016-Bearing-Witness-Hershel-Greenblat>, <http://www.ledger-enquirer.com/news/local/article131891299.html>, and <https://holocaust.georgia.gov/events/2017-10-12/survivors-story-hershel-greenblat>.

<sup>34</sup> 92. Vanessa L. Ochs, “Material Culture: New Rituals and Ritual Objects” (Jewish Publication Society, 2007).

<sup>35</sup> 47. Henry Glassie, “Material Culture,” in *Material Culture* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1999): 41-86.

to my questions by communicating, *I can show you better than I can tell you*. The first time this occurred was when I asked, *what were your initial impressions of the United States?* Without hesitation, Greenblat leaned from his chair, extending his hand, flat in front of mine. In it, he held a stone-colored coin that appeared to be sealed in a glass case.<sup>36</sup>

Caption 2

Caption 3



He gestured for me to take the coin and sat back down. On the outside, the coin seemed easy to decipher: a date—1949—and a profile of Benjamin Franklin on one side, and a bell on the other. But as I quickly learned, the coin held several moral messages that only its owner could translate.

HG: When we came to the United States, we were put on the train in New York for Atlanta, Georgia. It was Thanksgiving morning in 1950 and the conductor told us we had to get off and change trains. He dropped us off at Union Station in Washington D.C. at about three in the morning. Here we are—the five of us—we had no idea where to go or what to do—none of us spoke English. So, this soldier who was on his way home for Thanksgiving—He kept looking at us—*looking* at us. He walked over to us and my father handed him our papers. He finally figured out where we were supposed to go and took us to the train for Atlanta. He put us on the train, gave my sisters and I a tangerine, and took out of his pocket this fifty-cent piece. He gave it to me.

The relationship shared between Greenblat and this object continues to evolve. At the time he received it, the coin became nine-year-old Greenblat's first American belonging. However, its meaning matured just as Greenblat did. Now, this object symbolizes Greenblat's most important values—survival, kindness, and acceptance. The coin tells the story of how the Greenblats made it to Atlanta, and how their survival was aided by the kindness of an American

---

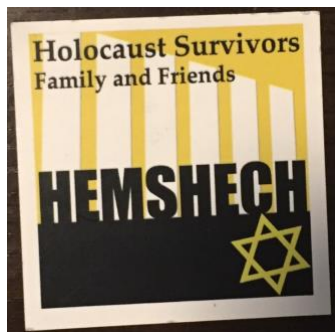
<sup>36</sup> Refer to caption 1 and caption 2.

soldier. The coin also represents the social acceptance that Greenblat and his family felt in their new home. Like a runner passing the baton to a teammate, the soldier passed his kindness onto Greenblat with the gift of the coin. No longer simply a souvenir, this coin continues to function as a moral compass for Greenblat—a constant reminder to treat others with the same kindness that the soldier showed him.

The second object that Greenblat shared is a refrigerator magnet, three-inches square, emblazoned with the words “Hemshech—Holocaust Survivors and Family.”<sup>37</sup> This magnet joined our conversation when I asked, *was your family aware of other Holocaust survivors living in Atlanta?*

HG: Yes, there is a big group of survivors who settled in the Atlanta area. They came about the same time as us. As soon as we came over we were very much involved in the Holocaust community—we all belonged to Hemshech and we were all friends—all the survivors. Then when I got older I got really involved in Hemshech and now I am on the Board.

Caption 4



Eternal-life Hemshech is an organization that educates the people of Georgia about the history of the Holocaust. The organization was created on September 3, 1964, by 100 Holocaust survivors who settled in Atlanta after World War II.<sup>38</sup> To Greenblat, Hemshech translates as

---

<sup>37</sup> Refer to Caption 3.

<sup>38</sup> This information was found during my archival fieldwork at the Breman Jewish Heritage and Holocaust Museum Archive. The source is a letter correspondence between Eternal-life Hemshech and the Atlanta Jewish Community Council.



together. Together, the Greenblat family and other survivor families founded Hemshech as their “personal duty and moral obligation to erect for them[selves] at least a symbolic grave, as well as an honorable tombstone, to pay [their] respect and homage to [their] eternal memory.”<sup>39</sup> By creating a gravesite monument in Greenwood Cemetery, the survivors crafted a meaningful space to grieve their personal losses and recite Kaddish—the Jewish memorial prayer. Since the unveiling of the Holocaust monument on April 25, 1965, the Greenblats and other survivor families raise money and host annual events that feature survivors’ testimonies. Although not publicly formed and recognized until 1964, Atlanta differs from both Charleston and Birmingham because it had a strong Holocaust community as early as 1950. The survivors whom I interviewed in Charleston and Birmingham expressed that they were not in contact with other survivors in their new American homes until after the 1980s.

The opportunity to interact with other Holocaust survivors allowed the Greenblats to assimilate and adapt to their new lives, perhaps more quickly and smoothly than survivors who did not. Particularly for the Greenblats, belonging to a Holocaust community gave them the chance to organically share their Holocaust stories with others who similarly suffered. This healing environment helped the Greenblats feel a strong sense of belonging in their new home. Not unlike the Philadelphia Coalition described in Susan Glisson’s work about the black civil rights activists in Mississippi, it is only after survivors shared their grievances in a communal setting that they collectively decided to build a monument, which “helped [them] reconcile and reclaim [their] painful pasts.”<sup>40</sup>

---

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>40</sup> 36. Susan Glisson, “Telling the Truth: How Breaking Silence Brought Redemption to One Mississippi Town,” in *Telling Stories to Change the World: Global Voices on the Power of*

The Hemshech magnet is a symbolic reminder of who Greenblat is, where he came from, and how he persevered. This material object also speaks to Greenblat's many successes in the Holocaust organization, with the African-American community, and in his own family.

### Reflective Note

By devoting their lives to improving social welfare, the Greenblats slowly worked through their own difficult life experiences. Likewise, because of his parents' guidance, Hershel Greenblat created a meaningful life for his family with his wife, Rochelle. In addition, the Greenblats' moral ideology has led to many other positive experiences. For example, in the African-American community, their ongoing efforts to donate needed supplies and encourage integration has led to meaningful, lifelong relationships to African-American community members. Buttermilk Grocery Store's respected reputation eventually attracted the attention of Dr. Martin Luther King Junior, whose family developed a strong friendship with the Greenblats in the early 1960s. Similarly, the Greenblats' involvement in the Holocaust community also earned them a positive reputation throughout Atlanta's Jewish and non-Jewish communities. Years after high school, when Greenblat became more involved in Hemshech, twenty-eight of his non-Jewish and Jewish classmates surprised Hershel and his wife with the gift of a trip to Israel.<sup>41</sup>

Based on accounts from other survivors I interviewed in Charleston and Birmingham, Greenblat was the most involved in speaking out against racism from the 1950s to the 1970s. At

---

*Narrative to Build Community and Make Social Justice Claims*, ed. Rickie Solinger, Madeline Fox, and Kayhan Irani (Routledge Press, 2008).

<sup>41</sup> Greenblat shared this memorable experience when the recorder was turned off. It was after he communicated to me that he and his wife had always wanted to visit Israel but could not because they did not have the financial funds.

the same time, he is the only survivor I interviewed who did not report encountering anti-Semitism. In his own words, he described Atlanta as “an island surrounded by anti-Semitism.”<sup>42</sup> Ultimately, the family’s lack of experience with anti-Semitism in Atlanta, as well as the family’s involvement in the Holocaust community gave the Greenblats the support and confidence needed in order to not only live and thrive, but to carry out a sacred mission of making the world a more just place.

---

<sup>42</sup> H. Greenblat, personal communication, July 25, 2017.

### **Chapter Three: Ruth Siegler—Family Heirlooms, Birmingham, Alabama**

In the previous chapter, activism and Holocaust remembrance for one survivor meant struggling with race relations and fighting for social equality. However, as we will learn in the next two chapters, activism takes many forms. Additionally, how one survivor memorializes the Holocaust can be significantly different from how another chooses to. For survivors such as Ruth Scheuer Siegler, activism occurred primarily at home and within a domestic space. Moreover, how she remembered and honored the six million lives lost to the Holocaust took a very different and therapeutic form, one that involved less testimonial-giving and more Jewish living.

Ruth Scheuer was born in Sinzenich, Germany on April 22, 1927. The first eleven years of her life were spent in a warm and safe Jewish home with her loving parents, Jakob and Helen, and two older siblings, Ernst and Ilse. On November 9, 1938 (Kristallnacht), the Scheuers' home was ransacked and destroyed.<sup>43</sup> Luckily, the family had already fled to the Netherlands, where they remained "safe" until Hitler invaded in May 1940. This invasion led to Jakob's deportation to a transit camp in Westerbork, the Netherlands. Two years later, Helen and her children voluntarily reported to Westerbork to reunite with Jakob. The years between 1942 and 1945

---

<sup>43</sup> Kristallnacht, also referred to as the "Night of Broken Glass" took place November, 9 to November 10, 1938 and was a pogrom against Jews throughout Nazi Germany. Although it appeared to be unplanned, German propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels and other Nazis carefully organized the pogroms. It resulted with the arrest of about 30,000 Jews and it is estimated that 100 Jewish lives were murdered. This information was found from the following source: <https://www.ushmm.org/outreach/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007697>

changed Ruth's life forever. Within a month of being transferred from Westerbork to Theresienstadt, a concentration camp in Czechoslovakia, Ruth and Ilse were sent to Auschwitz II (Birkenau), an extermination camp.<sup>44</sup> It was in Birkenau that sixteen-year-old Ruth and twenty-year-old Ilse said goodbye to their parents. At the time, Ernst was imprisoned in a German concentration camp, where he died days before liberation. The Scheuer sisters were liberated in Poland in mid-March 1945 and hospitalized for several months before returning to the Netherlands. When they arrived in the Netherlands in 1946, the sisters remembered their father's wish to have them go to America. Within the same year, they emigrated to the United States and were overjoyed to find a suitcase full of their family's most valued possessions waiting for them in Omaha, Nebraska. The family's belongings were sent to Omaha in 1939 and had remained protected by their aunt Frieda Erman. These possessions included family photo albums, jewelry, childhood toys, as well as candlesticks and a prayer book. The sisters brought their family belongings with them to Brooklyn, New York, where they lived with cousins until marrying in 1949. Ilse moved to Birmingham the same year with her husband Rabbi Davin Schoenberger, and in 1960, Ruth and her husband Walter Siegler joined them.

This chapter will focus on Ruth Siegler's gendered experience of survival, testimony, resilience, and healing within the backdrop of the American South. By examining Siegler's family heirlooms, we will uncover how Siegler reclaimed the Jewish life she was torn from. Upholding a domestic quality in nature, these remnants symbolize Siegler's activism—which

---

<sup>44</sup> Westerbork was a transit camp where Jews were sent before being deported to a concentration camp. A Nazi concentration camp refers to a camp in which people were detained or confined, usually under harsh conditions and without regard to legal norms of arrest and imprisonment. This information was gathered from the following source: <https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005263>. Nazi extermination camps were exclusively death factories where mass murder occurred. <https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005145>

occurred primarily within the home. Likewise, the narratives associated with these material objects will help readers understand how Siegler chose to remember her Holocaust experience. These objects include her aunt's ring, a Scheuer family photo album, candlesticks and her mother's prayer book, and a cooking bowl. As we approach these objects, we will focus on the narratives they represent rather than their personal biographies.

### The Ring <sup>45</sup>

Rings often symbolize commitment, love, and a new beginning. Besides these universally understood meanings, Siegler's ring is emblematic of her "rebirth." Not a rebirth in the religious sense of the word, but in the shape-shifting transformation that refugees and immigrants undergo upon their arrival in the United States.<sup>46</sup> The ring was a gift from Ruth's Aunt Martha Daniel, who survived the Holocaust and reunited with the Scheuer sisters in the Netherlands. Before exploring this "rebirth" at greater length, we must understand the final moments of Siegler's experience in Europe.

Ruth Siegler: When we were liberated, I was a month from turning seventeen and weighed eighty pounds. I was very ill. We were so ill that they put us in a hospital. I had typhoid fever, typhus, lice, and an infection that was caused from an SS woman beating me in the camp. I was in the hospital in Putzig, Poland from March until August of 1945. We were so sick that they wouldn't let anybody—we were quarantined. After we were released, they sent us to the Netherlands. We had to be interned in Maastricht, the Netherlands until we were released by doctors. It was a special home.<sup>47</sup>

Our subsequent conversation focused on Siegler's life in America. In this part of the interview, the words she spoke and her tone of voice indicated one primary aspiration: moving

---

<sup>45</sup> In an effort to keep her aunt's ring private, Ruth asked that I did not share a photo of the ring.

<sup>46</sup> Monique Truong, *Southern, Reborn*. "Gravy" podcast through the Southern Foodways Alliance (Spring 2016).

<sup>47</sup> 'Special home' refers to a psychiatric institution that helped in the Scheuer sisters' rehabilitation process. Information about the home was not provided in our interview.

forward with her life. In the same year she married Walter, Ruth Scheuer Siegler began sharing her Holocaust experience in a public setting.

RS: The first time I *really* talked was in 1949 after I got married. It was in a small town in Missouri. I talked at the men's club that my husband belonged to. My husband came home and told me they didn't even know what a Jew was or what the Holocaust was. They couldn't believe it. So many do not think it ever happened but we've got proof—lots of proof that it did. So, I started speaking. I had to let them know, right?

In her recent work, historian Hasia Diner analyzes the evolving process of how American Jews single-handedly created a Holocaust memorial culture in the United States. Many of the activities emphasized in Diner's work focus on fundraising, giving public testimonials, and writing about the Holocaust. For Siegler, however, memorializing consisted of different behaviors. Holocaust remembrance began as soon as Siegler arrived in America—a personal decision that honored her father's wishes. Additionally, after arriving in America, Siegler constantly asked herself, *what would mother and father think [and] what would they want?* Raised in an Orthodox Jewish home, Siegler knew how important it was to her family that she marry a Jewish man. Besides honoring her parents and religion, marrying Walter was a crucial step in rebuilding her own Jewish life in a new country.

Siegler's ring also speaks to her commitment to educating American society about the Holocaust. Unlike survivors like Max Steinmetz and in contrast to what Diner argues, giving her testimony in public was neither “a mark of pride” nor did it motivate her to live a “richer, more Jewish life.”<sup>48</sup> Instead, each time she shared her traumatic past, she went without sleep that night. Despite these emotional challenges, Siegler viewed her testimony as a “responsibility—to pick

---

<sup>48</sup> 178 and 350. Hasia Diner, *We Remember with Reverence and Love: American Jews and the Myth of Silence after the Holocaust, 1945-1962* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

up the pieces of Jewish life that had been left in shambles [by] Nazism, the war, the slaughter of six million, and the destruction of their communities.”<sup>49</sup>

Taking the shape of a circle, a ring is often a symbol of endless and eternal devotion. The ring is a symbol of Siegler’s new beginning—new life. Furthermore, it represents her loyalty to Judaism and family, the family she lost and the new family she created in America.

### Family Photo Album

Caption 5<sup>50</sup>



Caption 6<sup>51</sup>



RS: I had a wonderful life. I was very spoiled. I had lots of toys and I was very close to my father. My mother dressed us nicely, we went on vacations, we had a car for us. We went on excursions, had education. We had a lot of fun. We were all just really close. Family was everything. Our life was very good before. I had everything I wanted until Hitler came in.

Ruth’s family photo album that survived the war symbolizes the survival of the Scheuer family lineage and history. The photo album points to Siegler’s most important priority in her new life: raising and caring for her family. Shortly after marrying, Mrs. Siegler gave birth to three children: Steven Jay, born September 20, 1952; Annette Elaine, born August 14, 1954; and Daniel Ernst, born December 5, 1960.<sup>52</sup> Just as before the Holocaust, “the centrality of family

---

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 142.

<sup>50</sup> Standing photo: Ilse Scheuer at age 12; Ruth Scheuer at age 8; Ernst Scheuer at age 13. Sitting photo: Ernst Scheuer at age 7; Ilse Scheuer at age 6; Ruth Scheuer at age 2.

<sup>51</sup> Photo of Helen and Jakob before the war.

<sup>52</sup> Mrs. Siegler named her last child in memory of her deceased mother and brother.



[remained] at the core of [Siegler's] Jewish identity" in her southern home.<sup>53</sup> Instead of joining organizations in the Jewish community or Birmingham's civil rights community, Siegler focused on building her family life. Raising her children meant being in charge of all the domestic duties, such as cooking and cleaning, but it also included spending quality time with her children.

RS: We had visited Alabama pretty frequently before moving there.<sup>54</sup> When we were in Missouri, we didn't have any black people—not where we lived. So, when I came here to Alabama, I had an eye opener because visiting the zoo—taking the kids to the zoo—I still remember the two fountains—in Birmingham. There was a little lake behind it that was only for colored—black people—colored at the time. It was very disturbing because...how could that happen at this day and age? Another time, I took the children downtown and—driving on the bus—I didn't realize it but there were empty seats in the back—and in the front, everything was taken...So, I innocently took my kids and went to the back...and they looked at me funny. I didn't realize it then but it was separated. Segregated. That was before 1960 when I was just visiting because my sister and her husband were [already] here.

When she misunderstood the segregated rules of bus travel in the early 1960s, Siegler was mostly concerned for her children's safety. After this experience, she made an effort to always sit in the "appropriate" seats because she did not want to cause any trouble that could harm her children. Similarly, although Siegler continued to give her testimony after her children were born, she deliberately chose to withhold her experience in the Holocaust from her children. By hiding this part of her identity, she believed her children could "grow up and live as normal of a life as possible," a privilege that was taken from Siegler.<sup>55</sup> By preserving her family album, Siegler attempted to preserve and honor the memory of her European family, and also protect what little remained of the Scheuer family. The family photographs also guided and inspired Siegler as she created a new life.

---

<sup>53</sup> 5. Jenna Weissman Joselit, *The Wonders of America: Reinventing Jewish Culture 1880-1950* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1994).

<sup>54</sup> Siegler is referring to her husband Walter, and two children Steven and Annette.

<sup>55</sup> Ruth Siegler, personal communication, January 3, 2018.

## Candlesticks and her Mother's Prayer Book

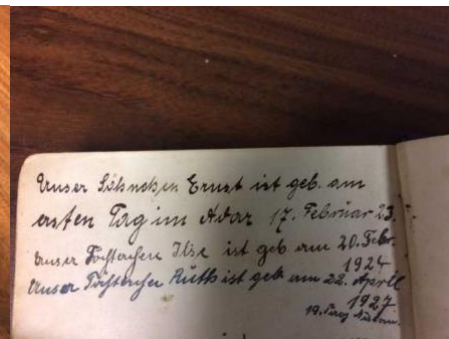
Caption 7<sup>56</sup>



Caption 8<sup>57</sup>



Caption 9<sup>58</sup>



Before the Holocaust, observance of the Sabbath was one of the many Jewish traditions the Scheuer family enjoyed.<sup>59</sup> When “tensions were high in [the family’s] village because of anti-Semitism, the family’s Shabbat dinner brought feelings of safety and togetherness.”<sup>60</sup> The prayer book belonged to Ruth’s mother and the candlesticks came from Ruth’s father. These two objects, which were present at her family’s weekly Shabbat in Germany, remind Siegler of some of the most comforting moments she shared with her family. At the same time, the material “objects help [her] reconstruct the last memory” she had of her father.<sup>61</sup>

---

<sup>56</sup> Image of her aunt’s candlesticks.

<sup>57</sup> Helen’s prayer book. Ruth believes that the prayer book was specially made for her mother and given to her mother by her father, either for an engagement present or a wedding present.

<sup>58</sup> The last page of Helen’s prayer book. Her mother wrote the birth dates of her children.

<sup>59</sup> Shabbat is the Jewish Sabbath. It begins at sundown every Friday night and is characterized by traditional food preparation and eating customs, prayers over wine in ceremonial cups, and families gathering at a specially set table to maintain intimate and meaningful family traditions.

<sup>60</sup> *Darkness into Life* Exhibit, archives found in the Birmingham Holocaust Education Center (June 28, 2017).

<sup>61</sup> 38. Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, edited, translated, and with an introduction by Lewis A. Coser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

RS: We were brought up very religiously. My father took me to temple on Friday nights. I still feel him holding my hand. He would recite Kiddush prayer from my mother's prayer book—"Blessed is the Lord our God, king of the universe, for creating the fruit of the vine.' Then he would circle the table, laying his hands on each of our foreheads and blessed us. It was such a gentle, loving gesture. The last time he did this was in Birkenau when we said goodbye to father. We were in the same compound—a mound of dirt—he said, 'if someone survives, you and Ilse will get out.' And, so, he blessed us right there—and that's when he told us goodbye.

During our conversations, Siegler emphasized that the only reason she survived the Holocaust was because she had her prayers. Food studies scholar Amy Trubek argues that material objects can connect an individual to their family history and cultural roots. Trubek suggests that "having objects that can be associated with a person's history with a certain place is essential."<sup>62</sup> When Siegler reunited with her family's candlesticks and prayer book, the objects validated her values and invoked their centrality—keeping faith had kept her alive.<sup>63</sup> The objects also reminded Siegler of her father's last wishes, which ultimately led her to permanently reside in the United States.

In her new home, Siegler continued to use the candlesticks and prayer book for weekly Shabbats. Incorporating these heirlooms in her family's Jewish holidays became its own tradition, a blend of Siegler's personal history and American Jewish experience. Each time Siegler used the candlesticks and prayer book, she memorialized her childhood and the Jewish life she had with her parents. At the same time, by only using these objects for specific cultural occasions, Siegler enhanced the value of these objects; when the candlesticks and prayer book made an appearance, those present knew it was for a sacred event.

Thus, by carefully choosing when to use these cherished items, Siegler was engaging in what folklorists understand as "performance." Folklorist Deborah Kapchan characterizes

---

<sup>62</sup> 261. Amy Trubek, "Place Matters" in *The Taste of Culture: Experiencing Food and Drink* (Berg Publishers, 2005): 260-271.

<sup>63</sup> 25. Barbara Myerhoff, *Number Our Days* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978).

performance as: 1) Performance is public, 2) Performance is set apart from practice, 3) Performance is participative, and 4) Performance is transformative. Siegler's audience included her husband, children, God, and the family she tragically lost in Europe. Unlike an everyday kosher meal shared by the family, Shabbat and other holiday meals were "framed as something different" when her parents' possessions joined the table. When these valuables were present, Siegler performed an act of memorialization. These performances invited conversational participation—the children would ask their mother, "Why do these only come out for specific occasions?" These questions led to deeper conversations about the Scheuer family and its background. Furthermore, Siegler's performances were transformative because "like a metaphor, [they] moved [their] participants to another social or affective state."<sup>64</sup> For Siegler, this affective state developed into feeling a sense of peace, belonging, and appreciation. For her children, it helped them begin to unravel and understand their mother's earlier life, as well as their family's deep history.

---

<sup>64</sup> 130. Deborah Kapchan, "Performance" in *Eight Words for the Study of Expressive Culture*, Ed. Burt Feintuch 121-145 (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006).

## Cooking Bowl

### Caption 10<sup>65</sup>



RS: My most prized possession in Birkenau was the bowl I was issued upon entering the camp. Every prisoner was given a bowl, one bowl. They gave you the bowl for a nightly portion of soup...if you were lucky, you found a potato in it. It was so important to survival that you kept it with you at all times. If you lost it, or it was stolen, you were not given another. When we were liberated, I was so sick that I couldn't keep track of it. The one in the photo isn't the original, but it is similar.

Although it is not a family heirloom nor is it the original artifact, the image of Siegler and this bowl symbolize the poignancy of food-related experiences in her American life. For American Jewish Foodways scholar Marcie Cohen Ferris, food “allows an emotional world [to come] into view—a place of color, imagined tastes, interaction, and memory.”<sup>66</sup> Ferris argues that the history of the American South can be studied through the lens of food. Such is true when

---

<sup>65</sup> This photo was found in the archives at Birmingham's Holocaust Education Center. The photo is of Ruth Siegler at about age 75. The bowl in this photo represents the one she was given in Birkenau. Siegler chose to photograph this bowl because it reminded her of the one she used in the camp.

<sup>66</sup> Vii. Marcie Cohen Ferris, “Preface” in *The Edible South: The Power of Food and the Making of an American Region* (The University of North Carolina Press, 2016).

it comes to studying Siegler's family history. Before the war, Siegler did not know how to cook, yet she had strong memories of her beloved mother's matzo ball soup and kugel.<sup>67</sup> When she moved in with her cousins in Brooklyn, Siegler learned to prepare both dishes which reminded her of life before the Holocaust. For Siegler, preparing and eating foods her mother made brought to life sweet memories of family—her cousins, aunts, uncles, and grandparents. Certain dishes also provided Siegler with a “greater clarity and depth to her traumatic past.”<sup>68</sup> This clarity motivated her to ensure her family would never experience hunger as she had during the Holocaust. Novelist Jonathan Safran Foer recalls growing up with his grandmother who survived the Holocaust and the crucial meaning of food in an identity traumatized by malnourishment. Like Siegler, “food for [Foer's grandmother] is not just *food*. It is terror, dignity, gratitude, vengeance, joy, humiliation, religion, history and, of course, love.”<sup>69</sup> Both women fed their children with the mentality that “no foods are bad for you. Sugars are great. Fats are tremendous. The fatter a child is, the fitter it is.”<sup>70</sup>

RS: My kids were a heavy set—I fed them a lot. Food is important in our family.

It is also because of her traumatic experience of hunger that Siegler *never* wasted food, and discouraged her children from doing the same. Similar to the way Greenblat's parents taught him to stand up for discriminated groups, one of the most important lessons Siegler stressed was

---

<sup>67</sup> Kugel is a baked pudding or casserole that is most commonly made from potato or egg noodles. It is a traditional Ashkenazi Jewish dish, often served on Shabbat.

<sup>68</sup> 270. Amy Trubek, “Place Matters” in *The Taste of Culture: Experiencing Food and Drink* (Berg Publishers, 2005): 260-271.

<sup>69</sup> Jonathan Safran Foer, “Against Meat” (New York Times, October 7, 2009). Available online: <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/11/magazine/11foer-t.html>

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., Jonathan Safran Foer.

to take only what one could eat. For Siegler, wasting food communicated disregard and disrespect to the millions of people—including her parents—who died from starvation. In Siegler's life, food signifies multiple emotions. While a kugel evokes happy memories in Siegler's mind, it also provokes painful memories of loss and sadness. When I asked Siegler how she approaches food and these mixed feelings, her response echoed her earlier reflections about these objects.

RS: Well, you have choices in life. You can be bitter...or you can focus on the good. Smile, and choose to move forward. That's what life is all about, you know?

Siegler's ability to persevere and survive was buoyed by her hope to someday build a new family and life. In this chapter, Siegler's voice testifies to her experience of survival, resilience, and healing within the racial landscapes of the American South. Her voice speaks to the ways she chose to express her Jewish identity within the domestic space of her home. It is within this space that she engaged in her own form of activism. She looked towards the future and vigilantly focused on what was necessary to protect her American family, as well as her own dream. By living a *normal* life, Siegler prevented Hitler and his followers from defeating her own spirit, and destroying her family's honored memory.

## **Chapter Four: Robert May—Personal Agency and Resistance in the Workplace in Birmingham, Alabama**

On the night of November 9, 1938, Jewish lives in Germany shattered like the many windows of synagogues, homes, and Jewish-owned businesses. People on the streets heard screams echoing from Jewish homes. Those who escaped ran through the streets, hoping that the darkness of night would veil their identities. On this night a young, terrified, Jewish boy stood below a flickering light fixture on an abandoned street in Frankfurt and looked at his reflection in a piece of broken glass. He thought to himself, “broken glass, broken spirits...no place is safe.”<sup>71</sup> This boy’s name was Robert May.

Robert May was born on February 17, 1926, in Camberg, Germany, thirty miles north of Frankfurt. His parents were Hermann May and Flora Turkheimer. After Hitler took power in 1933, anti-Semitism spread quickly and fear filled the family’s daily life. Although Robert’s father fought for Germany in World War I, Hermann’s dry goods store was quickly boycotted because of his Jewish identity. Likewise, May’s oldest brother, Paul, was expelled from medical school in Frankfurt. After being shunned, tormented, and isolated by Hitler Youth, seven-year-old May was sent to live in Frankfurt with his Aunt Emma. Five years later, hours before Kristallnacht, a neighbor warned May and his aunt to leave their apartment as quickly as

---

<sup>71</sup> This information was found at the Birmingham Holocaust Education Center, in a special exhibit titled “Darkness into Life.” June 29, 2017.



possible. After spending the night on the streets, they learned their synagogue and home had been vandalized and destroyed.

Reuniting two days before the war started, the family departed for London, never to return to Germany.<sup>72</sup> In August 1940, amid U-boat attacks, the Mays' boarded a ship that took them to Havana, Cuba, and then New Orleans, Louisiana. Upon landing in Havana, passengers were placed in prison camps by Cuban military in an extortion attempt.<sup>73</sup> The family was finally released and arrived in New Orleans on September 9, 1940. In the United States, May continued his education, becoming a medical doctor at age twenty-two. In 1953 he married his wife, Anita, and they moved to Birmingham, Alabama where May practiced obstetrics and gynecology for nearly fifty years.

In New Orleans, May said he was not exposed to racism or anti-Semitism. In Birmingham, however, he found a different situation. May's experiences in Birmingham similarly reflect the anti-Semitism that other survivors encountered here. In this chapter, I examine Birmingham's "climate of fear" by studying May's recollections of anti-Semitic abuse. I also identify how May's medical career helped him persevere in Birmingham, as well as how the theory of "shapeshifting" reveals how May quietly combated oppression in his personal life. Ultimately, May transformed his workplace into a space of activism. The chapter ends with a new perspective about the Jim Crow South, in which May communicates the advantages of being an immigrant and choosing the American South as his new home.

---

<sup>72</sup> Aunt Emma stayed in Germany and perished in Auschwitz.

<sup>73</sup> This information was found in archives located at Birmingham's Holocaust Education Center on June, 28, 2017.

## Experiences with anti-Semitism

Robert May: Fear. We lived in fear. The Jews in Birmingham had an anti-Semitism in Birmingham. It was rampant. In the medical community—in order to become staff members in some of the hospitals—there was real discrimination. To become—to be eligible to join surgical and medical societies—the Jews were essentially black-balled. There is a whole city in Birmingham where no houses could be sold to Jews. Two years after I came to Birmingham, I was ready to buy a house in Crest Line in Mountain Brook. Two blocks from where I live today. My wife was shown a house. When they found out we were Jewish, we were told the house could only be sold to Anglo-Saxons. So, this was 1955. There was a bomb placed in one of the temples that did not explode. Anti-Semitism in Birmingham was rampant. I knew people in the KKK and did not cross them. I stayed away from them. In 1960—this is 1967 or '68—I am moving into my present house with my wife, right? This house is located maybe two blocks from where my wife was refused a house because of anti-Semitic laws. I came home one night and there was a huge swastika on my wall and on my window. So, did I feel anti-Semitism in Birmingham? Absolutely.

## Shapeshifting as a Tool

Influenced by his oldest brother, Paul's expulsion from medical school in Germany,

Robert May not only acquired a medical degree but accomplished this achievement at a very young age.

RM: It was a little unusual going to medical school at age eighteen. Even more strange becoming a doctor by the time I was twenty-two. Just, because, I was so young."

Indeed, May "recovered" a piece of his brother's life by taking back what was stolen from

Paul.<sup>74</sup> In our interview, May said he had done so in a way his father would consider acceptable.

RM: When I was about seven years old I was chased by Hitler Youth. They threw stones at me and they called me a 'dirty Jew.' I called them a 'dirty Nazi.' I went home and told my father about it. My father told me, 'Don't you call them dirty Nazis. Regardless of what they say to you, you never fight back. You make them feel like they are winning.'

In Birmingham's virulent climate of white supremacy, May responded to anti-Semitism with silence instead of retaliation. By allowing the enemy to have the "last" word, May explained in our interview that he was actually in control because he decided how these conversations ended.

---

<sup>74</sup> Coined by anthropologist Aimee Meredith Cox, the notion of "shapeshifting" was developed during an eight-year ethnographic project she conducted in Detroit, Michigan. Cox used this theory to better understand how individuals positioned on the losing end of power experience and confront social citizenship in the United States.

In this way, May embraced a shapeshifting behavior because he “shifted an encounter [which then] left a positive impression” in his life.<sup>75</sup> For May, success was his brother Paul patting him on the back and saying, “*Good boy.*” According to anthropologist Aimee Meredith Cox, a shapeshifter is “someone who recovers something in their life that they profoundly need.”<sup>76</sup> Moreover, a shapeshifter participates in methods for protecting and improving their lives and this allows one to reconstruct descriptive narratives that are meant to discriminate them.<sup>77</sup>

In time, May’s career evolved into more than an enacted performance of justice for his wronged brother. It became a central aspect of May’s identity. His success as a doctor led to his recruitment by nearby colleges and universities.

RM: I was active in teaching medicine at colleges and universities. I was an associate professor at the University of Alabama at Birmingham’s medical school.

Medicine became a way for May to “give back” to the Birmingham community. Additionally, his reputation as a successful doctor earned him social acceptance in his southern home. In the same way that “art became the way [refugee scholars] could speak” in Gabrielle Edgcomb’s documentary, May’s success in the medical field provided him a safe space where he could express himself.<sup>78</sup> May felt the most “American” when he was practicing and teaching medicine—a space in which he was perceived and accepted as a respected physician. Despite the anti-Semitism he faced when he moved to Birmingham, May said that as soon as he arrived in

---

<sup>75</sup> 5. Aimee Meredith Cox, *Shapeshifters: Black Girls and the Choreography of Citizenship* (Duke University, 2015).

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 234.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>78</sup> Lore Rasmussen, refugee scholar in documentary by Gabrielle Edgcomb, *From Swastika to Jim Crow* (Cinema Guild, 2000).

the United States, he felt a sense of belonging. May attributes this to resuming his education as soon as he started life in New Orleans. School is where he found his purpose. Adding to this, the university was a space where he could learn as much as he desired, something “no one could take away from [him].”<sup>79</sup>

### Progressive Thinking in the Workplace

RM: The old dictum of the Jewish mind is, if you scratch deep enough under everybody’s skin, it’s a matter of how deep you scratch before you come to anti-Semitism. That’s an old Jewish idea. If you scratch deep enough, it’s in everyone.

HH: How was it to feel this anti-Semitism in Birmingham after having dealt with it in Germany? Did you have fears again?

RM: The old Jews were right. It’s present today. You don’t have to go back too far. The basic feeling of anti-Semitism is...present everywhere. It’s how deeply it’s repressed.

May understands his experiences with oppression and discrimination as the result of deeply rooted prejudices in society. He associates his individual suffering with historical events where Jews were targeted. In addition to the lessons taught by his father, May’s existential perspective that prejudice was inevitable and omnipresent influenced his belief that addressing it through traditional political means was unrealistic. Although May explicitly stated that he “was not socially or politically active in any way,” May actively engaged in racially progressive behavior as soon as he arrived in the South.<sup>80</sup>

Beginning in New Orleans, May unknowingly became a social activist simply through his kindness to an African-American neighbor. While exchanging a simple smile is not perhaps the same as actively participating in demonstrations, in an oblivious, yet shapeshifting way, May “confronted, challenged, inverted, and unsettled systemic oppression.”<sup>81</sup> His activist behavior

---

<sup>79</sup> Robert May, personal communication, August 1, 2017.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., August 1, 2017.

<sup>81</sup> 7. Aimee Meredith Cox, *Shapeshifters: Black Girls and the Choreography of Citizenship* (Duke University, 2015).

became more public in his position as a doctor in Birmingham. More aware of the racism in his community by this time, May agreed to work in a medical clinic that accepted both African-American and white patients. Unlike the conditions he described in other Birmingham hospitals, where African-Americans were treated in sub-standard basements and attics, May provided all of his patients—white and black—with the same quality care.

RM: I had a relationship with black patients that was no different from white. That doesn't mean I had them over for dinner. But I didn't have the same feelings that locals had towards the black. I had a patient-doctor relationship with black and white patients that was proper but went no further than a patient-doctor relationship.

Furthermore, May's empathy toward African-Americans continued to surface in our interview when he recalled his memory of the 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church Bombing. White racial terrorists attacked the African-American 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church in Birmingham on Sunday, September 15, 1963. The bombing killed four innocent, African-American children.

RM: My [medical] partner wanted me to go with him to this funeral. Talking about it at home...we had three small children. My wife said, 'Please don't go' and I didn't go with him.

When he first learned about the bombing, May was angry and upset. He referred to the perpetrators of the incident as “white supremacists” and “white terrorists.” During our interview, he confessed his regret for not attending the funeral for the victims of the bombing. After sharing this, May requested that we change the subject. While fear kept May from participating in public displays of solidarity with the civil rights movement, he immediately began to show solidarity in the one space—his practice—he *could* control.

### A New Perspective on the South

At the end of my interviews with the Holocaust survivors for this work, I asked each individual the same question: *In your opinion, how has living in the American South positively or negatively impacted your Jewish identity?* May was the last survivor I presented this question to, and his response differed dramatically from the others.

RM: I don't think my life would have been any different had I lived in the North or East. I believe my life was pre-determined because of my background. I think coming to the South facilitated it, in that opportunities in the South was greater than in the North. The influx of immigrants in the Northeast was so great that that they had a tendency to stick together—the immigrants. And, therefore, they were less integrated than we were in the South. I think immigrating into the southern United States, it was such a rarity that I was accepted, immigrated immediately. I had no opportunity to speak German other than to my mother and father. To my brothers, I spoke English. And everywhere else I spoke English. So, I was immigrated into the community faster coming to the South.

This viewpoint shapeshifted our interview. By ending on this note, May positively distorted the experiences of marginalization he experienced in the South by focusing on the advantages life in the South provided. More importantly, this part of the interview demonstrates how May shapeshifted his life experiences. May reconfigured the Jim Crow South by repurposing its resistance to racial and ethnic 'outsiders' as an asset to his success.

May literally escaped the consequences of Nazi oppression in Germany by leaving his home on Kristallnacht. But in Birmingham, he had the opportunity to fight a related, similar evil by choosing to stay. He stayed in a home that was vandalized and he stayed in a city that disdained the demands of the civil rights movement. During this challenging time, work gave May a personal, safe space in which he could counter Birmingham's evils. More than fifty years later, memories of family and love have replaced the memories of the swastika that once stained the exterior of May's home, soothing the sharp sting of anti-Semitism in one survivor's life.

## **Chapter Five: Joe Engel— Self-Transformation and the Power of Community Support in Charleston, South Carolina**

Holocaust survivors arrived in the United States having survived the rigor of the ghettos, the horrors of the concentration camps, and the agony of the death marches. Unlike their Jewish predecessors to the U.S., who fled Nazism between the 1930s and 1940s, these people were often the only survivors among their entire families. They had been victims of and witnesses to inconceivable crimes. Although as a collective they adjusted to American life with an impressive resiliency, many survivors dealt with failure and alienation without any close family members to lend them guidance and emotional support. Nevertheless, Holocaust survivors such as Joe Engel were vigilant and the support of communities they encountered was critical in creating new, meaningful lives in America.

Joe Engel's story began in Zakroczym, Poland, a town of roughly 10,000 about twenty miles from the Polish capital of Warsaw.<sup>82</sup> Born on October 9, 1930, to Moishe and Esther Engel, he and his eight siblings lived a comfortable, if not luxurious, life before the German army transformed their hometown into a ghetto in 1939. Shortly after, Engel's parents were included in the first group deported to German concentration camps; nine-year-old Engel never saw them again. Most of his siblings soon followed their parents and perished in the camps.

---

<sup>82</sup> This biographical information was found in the archives at the College of Charleston's Jewish Heritage Collection. For more information, refer to [http://holocaustarchives.cofc.edu/panels/engel/photo\\_12.html](http://holocaustarchives.cofc.edu/panels/engel/photo_12.html)

Engel, with his brother and sister, arrived in Birkenau in 1942. Between 1942 and 1945, Engel saw people take their own lives on electric fences. He slept in the barracks with young men castrated by the Nazis. Engel experienced daily beatings by SS guards. In January of 1945, Engel escaped from a cattle train and buried himself beneath snow to hide from the Nazis. After returning to Poland, he learned his sister Irene and brother Ben were the only members of his family to survive. Through a refugee agency, Engel contacted his American-born Aunt Bessie in the United States, who provided an affidavit allowing the siblings to immigrate. Irene moved to New York in 1947, Ben joined her in 1948, and Joe moved to Charleston, South Carolina on March 13, 1949, to live with his aunt.



Caption 11<sup>83</sup>

---

<sup>83</sup> Joe Engel's family. This picture was taken in 1938 in a garden in Joe's hometown of Zakroczym, Poland just before his Aunt Ruth Kadish left for the United States. First row, left to right: Joe Engel; Joe's two nephews (names unknown, both were Rosa Berstein's sons); Pesach Engel (Joe's youngest brother); Fay Kadish (Joe's first cousin); Joe's nephew (name unknown, son of Raffi Engel); Esther Engel (Joe's mother, nee Zylberstein); Chava Engel (Joe's sister-in-law, Raffi's wife). Second row, left to right: Hinda Engel (Joe's sister); Abraham Berstein (Joe's



Although Engel arrived in the United States grateful to be alive, once there, he experienced a “new war” characterized by loneliness, constant flashbacks to his Holocaust memories, and a diminishing faith in God. These inner demons provoked Engel to go to New York, where he lived one day at a time. After his Aunt Bessie travelled to New York to bring him “home,” Engel transformed into a tenacious, unbreakable man who found his religious faith again. As with Max Steinmetz, the following traces Engel’s self-transformation in his new southern home.

Engel’s transformation can be most aptly understood through anthropologist Janneli Miller’s concept of “turnings,” which Miller classifies as important moments in life, “critical junctures in which an individual takes on a new set of roles, enters into new relations with new people, and acquires a new self-concept.”<sup>84</sup> Though his framework bears some similarity to the analysis used to interpret Steinmetz’s “break points,” Miller describes turnings as being monumental shifts in an individual’s circumstances or outlook, whereas break points tended to be the occurrence and result of interactions among individuals. In comparison to Steinmetz’s organized narrative, the pieces of Engel’s narrative were fragmented throughout our conversation.

Engel’s first turning can be divided into two parts, (1) when he encountered an anti-Semitic stranger and (2) when he persevered at an undesirable job. Starting with the anti-Semitic

---

brother-in-law); Rosa Berstein (Joe’s sister); unknown (Raffi’s baby boy); Moishe Engel (Joe’s father); Ben Engel (Joe’s brother); Aunt Ruth Kadish; Raffi Engel (Joe’s brother); Irene Engel (Joe’s sister). Survivors of the war: Joe Engel, Ben Engel, Irene Engel, Aunt Ruth Kadish, and Fay Kadish. Everyone else in this photograph perished during the war. Photo approved by the College of Charleston’s Jewish Heritage Collection Archives.

<sup>84</sup> 109. Janneli Miller, “I Have a Frog in my Stomach: Mythology and Truth in Life History” (Routledge Press, 1996). Miller uses this theory to understand how women of color interpret race and gender and how this influences their self-perceptions within the context of their own culture.

experience, Engel explained that this incident occurred within days of returning to Charleston from New York.

JE: When I came back to Charleston and was peddlin' in the '50s I had some fellas who recognized my accent and told me 'well, Hitler shoulda kill you all Jews.' It was at a bar. After he said that, I walked away. If you didn't walk away, there would be a fight. No use in fighting, you can't convince a man like that. Their mind is messed up. It happened a couple more times in the '50s. The best thing for me was to leave them alone and go out.

Had this incident occurred when Engel first arrived in America and was particularly fragile, he might have left Charleston. However, by this time, Engel was emotionally stronger. In New York he had participated in 'talk therapy' with other Holocaust survivors. Engel explained:

JE: In New York, we got together with other survivors every Sunday and would tell stories about what each other went through. This was 1951. It was in HIAS, the charitable organization who was taking care of survivors in New York.<sup>85</sup>

After feeling alienated and victimized when he first arrived to Charleston, finding a community of other survivors reassured Engel that there were others who suffered—and survived—similar traumas. Just as “the variety of voices laid the ground for breaking silences” in Susan Glisson’s piece on black civil rights activists in Mississippi, the Holocaust stories shared in the HIAS group helped Engel begin his healing process.<sup>86</sup> From these stories, Engel said he and the others learned that “underneath the silence, there were others who were waiting for someone to speak

---

<sup>85</sup> ‘Talk therapy’ refers to a range of treatments that involves discussing mental or emotional issues with a mental health practitioner, such as a psychiatrist or psychologist.

“HIAS” is an abbreviation for Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society. Founded in 1881, this nonprofit organization provides humanitarian aid and assistance to refugees.

<sup>86</sup> 34. Susan Glisson, “Telling the Truth: How Breaking Silence Brought Redemption to One Mississippi Town,” in *Telling Stories to Change the World: Global Voices on the Power of Narrative to Build Community and Make Social Justice Claims*, ed. Rickie Solinger, Madeline Fox, and Kayhan Irani (Routledge, 2008).

up, to tell their story, and condemn the deaths.”<sup>87</sup> In essence, HIAS taught Engel he was not alone. After the healing power of his therapeutic ‘talk’ sessions, Engel returned to Charleston.

The second half of this turning occurred at work and at about the same time that Engel crossed paths with the anti-Semite in the Charleston bar. At this point, Engel was working solely to get by:

JE: So, when I came back here, I was a peddler. You know what a peddler is? I sold sheets, underwear.... supplies. I peddled and I didn’t like it. I sold for five cents and they were supposed to pay every week. Sometimes when I come to collect, the kids would come out and say ‘momma says she’s not home.’

Asked how he dealt with these situations, Engel said that all he could do was “keep workin’ and hope they would pay [him] back.”<sup>88</sup> This mindset represented a second change from his attitude when he first arrived in Charleston. In the past, if he did not like a job, Engel said, he would simply leave. Engel frequently jumped from one menial job to the next while living in New York. However, his discussions with the HIAS group in New York also made Engel realize the support he had, as well as that of his beloved relative in Charleston. Despite his flight to New York, his Aunt Bessie would not give up. She gave Engel a place to stay and a sense of stability. Engel began to persevere despite his difficult circumstances. He increasingly focused on his relationships and learned to be patient with the aspects of life he could not control. In his own words, he “learned to dance to what the music played.”<sup>89</sup>

The second turning in the development of Engel’s southern identity occurred in 1955, when Leon and Zipora Zucker helped Engel’s open a dry-cleaning business in Charleston. Known for their philanthropic work throughout South Carolina, the couple were Holocaust

---

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>88</sup> Joe Engel, personal communication, July 20, 2017.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., Joe Engel.

survivors who moved to Charleston from Israel in 1952. The Zuckers' generosity helped Engel acclimate to his southern home. He felt he belonged in Charleston. With the Zuckers' financial support, Engel opened "Glamour Cleaners" on King Street in downtown Charleston.

JE: My sister's husband was a seamster. So, they came down and opened this dry-cleaner store with me in 1955. Like a CPA. I tell the kids, 'A CPA.'<sup>90</sup> And later I tell them, 'Cleaning, Pressing, and Alteration.' Just like everything else in the old days, it didn't go well in the South. So, they eventually moved back to New York, and I stayed in Charleston. I said, 'I'm not going. I've survived Auschwitz and Birkenau—I am past the bad days. I think things have to get better.' And after a couple of years, things got better.

Engel's new Charleston business revealed his persistence, but it was also a platform to express his opinions about southern race relations.

JE: When I opened my place in the '50s, I opened it in an African-American area. Most of my customers were African-American. And most of my employees was African-American. In the larger community, it was wrong—a misjudgment—what the South did to African-Americans. I know because I was discriminated for being a Jew. So, I knew the feeling.

During a time of heightened racism in the civil rights era South, Engel's business model transformed into a performance with a message.<sup>91</sup> Through his store, Engel used his personal narrative as a communicative device; it was a means of resistance—of fighting back. As he promoted racial integration in his business, Engel became "oppression's greatest enemy [by establishing] an organized, empowered, and enlightened citizenry to topple discrimination and to build a beloved community."<sup>92</sup> No longer identifying himself as a victim, the store symbolized Engel's survival, redemption, and his new role as a southerner and Charlestonian.

---

<sup>90</sup> By "CPA" Engel was referring to the "cleaning, pressing, and alteration" he did at Glamour Cleaners.

<sup>91</sup> 29. First offered by folklorist Richard Bauman in *Verbal Arts as Performance* (1977), performance is a "situated behavior, situated within and rendered meaningful within reference to relevant contexts." In this work, Bauman elaborates on the usefulness of understanding folklore as a form of communication rather than materials for folklorists to study.

<sup>92</sup> 38. Susan Glisson, "Telling the Truth: How Breaking Silence Brought Redemption to One Mississippi Town," in *Telling Stories to Change the World: Global Voices on the Power of Narrative to Build Community and Make Social Justice Claims*, ed. Rickie Solinger, Madeline Fox, and Kayhan Irani (Routledge Press, 2008).

A third turning occurred in the late 1980s when Engel met a fellow Holocaust survivor, Pincus Kolender. Engel met Kolender when he attended services at Brith Shalom Beth Israel's Orthodox Synagogue, several years after he opened Glamour Cleaners. In time, Kolender persuaded Engel to join him in sharing their Holocaust narratives at the College of Charleston in 1999. Like Steinmetz, Engel needed guidance and encouragement before he could give his testimony. Once he started speaking, the impact was similar to when Engel spoke up at the HIAS talk sessions. Both events made Engel feel validated and heard. In time, Engel recognized his responsibility to share his testimony with the public, especially when he began to speak to young people.

JE: At one of the grade schools, the teacher gave me a nametag that said 'Joe Engel, Holocaust Survivor.' This gave me an idea. I would wear the nametag everywhere. I always wear it—every day. I want people to know. You'd be surprised by how many people stop by, want to shake my hand, young people. And they ask me questions.

Caption 12 <sup>93</sup>



By wearing the nametag, Engel participated in what Richard Bauman describes as “optional performances,”—“spontaneous, unscheduled performances in everyday life.”<sup>94</sup> Whether it instigates a handshake or a deeper conversation, the nametag continues to invite

---

<sup>93</sup> This photo was taken in Engel's home and during our interview on July 20, 2017.

<sup>94</sup> 28. Richard Bauman, *Verbal Art as Performance* (Prospect Heights: Waveland Press, Inc., 1977).

spontaneous conversations about Engel's Holocaust experiences. Engel incorporated the Holocaust survivor 'tag' into his daily life.

People continue to be drawn to Engel's powerful nametag. Indeed, when Engel and I ate dinner together after our interview, at least seven people approached him. After each exchange, Engel leaned across the table and assured me that this was *good*. Through his interactions and conversations with people who approach him, Engel communicates several encoded messages: (1) The Holocaust happened, (2) I am a Holocaust survivor, (3) We cannot forget the millions of murdered human beings whose lives were lost in the Holocaust, (4) We must treat people justly to prevent a similar tragedy from occurring in the future.

Once Kolender convinced Engel to speak in public, his Holocaust narrative became an integral part of his identity. When I met him inside the lobby of his apartment building, I noticed Engel's nametag. Even before hearing him speak, Engel had already left a powerful impression on me. In her recent work, Holocaust historian Annette Wieviorka discusses how Holocaust narratives express the discourse valued by society at the moment the witness tells their story. Wieviorka identifies three successive phases, the second of which define the survivor as a social figure. Wearing his nametag and telling his story at organized events has allowed Engel to acquire a "socially recognized identity as *survivor*, which [has given] rise to a new function: the bearer of history."<sup>95</sup> When Holocaust deniers have challenged the existence of the Holocaust, Engel deters their accusations with his physical presence. In essence, his physical presence and willingness to daily bear the weight of this history is Engel's embodied evidence that the

---

<sup>95</sup> 88. Annette Wieviorka, *The Era of Witness*, trans. Jared Stark (New York: Cornell University Press, 2006).

Holocaust did happen. By wearing the nametag in public, Engel continues to teach the public about the Holocaust.

JE: Once I started talking, I realized it was important. I want the new generation to know about it. Kids need to learn it so it doesn't happen again. Things like that should never happen again. To any religion, to any color. Because we all got children we care about. That's why I had to open up.

When Engel first arrived in Charleston, his traumatic Holocaust experiences controlled thoughts and decisions. Engel dealt with uncomfortable circumstances by simply leaving them. Engel's self-transformation depended heavily on the persistence of his aunt and the support provided by the Jewish community of Charleston. It was because of these support systems that Engel reclaimed his identity in society, returned to his faith by joining a synagogue, and lived a meaningful life.

## Conclusion

The chorus of voices presented here provide a new layer of detail to twentieth-century southern Jewish history, southern studies, and Holocaust studies because they testify to the powerful presence and experience of Holocaust survivors in the Jim Crow and civil rights era South. This account documents and analyzes the relationships and experiences that Holocaust survivors-turned-Jewish southerners shared with their new Jewish communities, white gentiles, and African-Americans in cities across the South. These voices also point to the need for future research and discovery on the intersection of the southern Jewish experience in the United States with Nazi Germany, the Holocaust and its aftermath.

This work expands current scholarship about the intra-ethnic tensions in the Jewish South—specifically between German Jewish communities and East European Jewish—by adding the voices and experiences of Holocaust survivors in the South. Historians of American Jewish culture have long noted the conflicted relationships between German Jewish communities and East European Jewish communities during and following the late nineteenth century period of mass immigration. Many established German Jews feared that an influx of unassimilated “East European Jewish immigrants would draw unwanted attention” to their identities in an era of growing xenophobia and racism.<sup>96</sup> Robert May, Ruth Siegler, Max Steinmetz, and Hershel

---

<sup>96</sup> 188. Josh Parshall, *Yiddish Politics in Southern States: The Southern District of the Arbeter Ring, 1908-1949* (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2017).



Greenblat communicated in our private interviews that they noticed this animosity particularly in Birmingham and Atlanta. But, when these survivors entered their new, southern homes, the two divided communities of Jewish people came together to provide support and relief for the survivor. Although their arrivals might not have completely erased these tensions, the survivors' presence fostered new opportunities for these divided Jewish networks to integrate. With the arrival of Holocaust survivors in the South, southern Jews experienced a shared threat to Jewish identity, which motivated the separate Jewish communities to unite and better protect their shared ethnic identity.

Additionally, many scholars in southern Jewish studies and southern studies have examined the complex and contested relationships between southern Jews and African-Americans in the early to mid-twentieth century South. The narratives in this thesis introduce a new actor in Jim Crow South and civil rights era South: the Holocaust survivor. Alongside other activists—both in and outside the Jewish community—Holocaust survivors contributed to the dismantling of Jim Crow discrimination in the South. These survivors offer reflections on how they escaped persecution in Europe only to experience a different form of anti-Semitism and white nationalism. Robert May, whose home in Germany was destroyed, had his home vandalized in Birmingham. Similarly, Joe Engel encountered American anti-Semitism shortly after moving to Charleston. In response to these experiences, the survivors became activists in their own right. Both May and Engel used their work spaces as refuges that rejected white supremacy and promoted racial integration. Max Steinmetz used his Holocaust narrative as a way of confronting prejudices in society and advocating for racial justice and equality. Ruth Siegler's Holocaust testimony communicated her resilience and resistance in the South's racially divisive landscape. And perhaps most publicly, Hershel Greenblat's story motivated him to

actively speak out against racism. Although these survivors did not participate in more traditionally recognizable methods of protest, their daily acts of rebellion were an active form of resistance against a regime of racial hostility frighteningly familiar to what they had known in Europe in the 1940s.

That being said, Holocaust historians such as Christopher Browning and Annette Wieviorka have expressed concerns when it comes to determining the factual accuracy of Holocaust testimonials. Holocaust scholars have been hesitant to rely on testimony because of the multiplicity of contradictions that exist in a given narrative. Doubtful of their historical value, Wieviorka suggests that “testimonies share the repercussions of an event and this informs [listeners] about the power of that event but does not account for what the event was.”<sup>97</sup>

Although trauma affects how we remember events, solely acquiring facts is not the primary goal of the folkloric approach I bring to bear in this case. My methodology prioritizes learning who the survivors were and are today—, and how they adapted and made meaningful lives after the horrors of the Holocaust. For Ruth Siegler, reclaiming aspects of her pre-Holocaust life helped her heal and create new meaning in her southern home. At the same time, embracing a lifestyle that reflected her pre-war life allowed her to memorialize and honor the family she lost.

Additionally, besides the narratives emphasized in this account, all fifteen of the oral histories I conducted and recorded offer researchers the opportunity to ask crucial new questions. Unlike the hundreds of oral history recordings I studied in the three archives I visited, these interviews document the unexplored territory of survivors’ post-war lives in the American South.

---

<sup>97</sup> 149. Annette Wieviorka, *The Era of Witness*, trans. Jared Stark (New York: Cornell University Press, 2006).

While this thesis invites new ways of analyzing Holocaust narratives, additional research beyond the scope of this study is still needed. If this project were to be expanded, I would conduct more interviews with Holocaust survivors, native-born southern Jews, and African-Americans who lived in the region in the 1940s to the 1960s. More archival research on southern Jews, Holocaust survivor resettlement, and African-American encounters with these communities is needed. Additional archives to examine include the Institute for Human Rights in Birmingham, Alabama, the American Jewish Archives in Ohio, and Yale's Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies. Lastly, it would be exciting to develop comparative studies which consider parallel phenomena in the Midwest, Northeast, and other regions in the United States.

Today, we must pay attention to the rise of racist voices in America, couched in the rhetoric and violent demonstrations of white nationalists and their alleged 'patriotism.' Charlottesville awakened liberals and progressive whites from their political slumber. Our nation has not moved past racism. Recently, the former secretary of state, Madeleine Albright, warned Americans not to let fascism go "unnoticed until it is too late."<sup>98</sup> As a folklorist, the privilege of working with these extraordinary people—survivors of the Holocaust who created meaningful lives after trauma—has shown me how lessons of the past can shed light on what is happening in our own time,—*if* we pay attention. Narratives such as those in this work remind us to be vigilant about intolerance. Today, as a new generation of white supremacists violently express their racism, we can no longer believe a "post-racial" time exists.

---

<sup>98</sup> Terry Gross, "Madeline Albright Warns: Don't Let Fascism Go 'Unnoticed Until It's Too Late,'" National Public Radio, April 3, 2018.

Working with these survivors has allowed me to recognize my own responsibility—to not only be awake, but prepared to act. There are no innocent bystanders where racism is concerned. Bystanders stand by; we cannot afford to “stand by.”<sup>99</sup> We cannot allow bigotry to go unchallenged—even in “polite” company. We must initiate conversations about race. Furthermore, we must teach our country’s history in its entirety—both its proudest moments and darkest crimes.

---

<sup>99</sup> 14. Beverly Eileen Mitchell, “White Supremacy and Anti-Semitism: Sibling Threats” (paper presented at the Bystanders and Complicity in Nazi Germany and the Jim Crow South conference, Birmingham, Alabama, February 22-23, 2018).

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

### Archival Collections

#### Atlanta, Georgia

William Breman Jewish Heritage Museum, Cuba Family Archives  
Atlanta Jewish Federation Records  
The Georgia Farm School Records  
The Taylor Oral History Collection

#### Birmingham, Alabama

Birmingham Holocaust Education Center, Holocaust Archives  
*Darkness into Life: Holocaust Survivors in Birmingham* Exhibit  
Holocaust Oral History Archives  
Transcribed Holocaust Memoirs  
Birmingham Jewish Federation Records

#### Charleston, South Carolina

Jewish Heritage Collection Archives at Addlestone Library, College of Charleston  
Holocaust Memorial Quilt  
Holocaust Oral History Archives  
Charleston Jewish Federation Records

#### Washington, D.C.

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum: Jack, Joseph, and Morton Mandel Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies  
*Experiencing History: Holocaust Survivors in Context* Digital Collection

Bauman, Mark. *Dixie Diaspora: An Anthology of Southern Jewish History*. Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 2006.

Bauman, Richard. "Hell, Yes, But Not That Young": Reported Speech as Comic Corrective," *Story, Performance, and Event: Contextual Studies of Oral Narrative*. Cambridge University Press, 1986.

Bauman, Richard. *Verbal Arts as Performance*. Illinois: Waveland Press, 1977.

Berlinger, Gabrielle. *Framing Sukkot: Tradition and Transformation in Jewish Vernacular Architecture*. Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2017.

Browning, Christopher. *Remembering Survival: Inside a Nazi Slave-Labor Camp*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010.

Cox, Aimee Meredith. *Shapeshifters: Black Girls and the Choreography of Citizenship*. North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2015.

- Diner, Hasia R. *We Remember with Reverence and Love: American Jews and the Myth of Silence After the Holocaust, 1945-1962*. New York: New York University Press, 2009.
- Edgcomb, Gabrielle Simon. *FROM SWATSTIKA TO JIM CROW: Refugee Scholars at Black Colleges*. Cinema Guild, 2000.
- Ehrenreich, Robert. *Rethinking the Bystander in the Perpetrator-Bystander-Victim Constellation*. Presentation given at the “Bystanders and Complicity in Nazi Germany and the Jim Crow South” Symposium. February 22, 2018.
- Engel, Joe. In-Person and Digital Interviews. Charleston, South Carolina, July 20, 2017 and January 3, 2018.
- Evans, Eli N. *The Provincials: A Personal History of Jews in the South*. North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005.
- Ferris, Marcie Cohen and Mark I. Greenberg, general eds. *Jewish Roots in Southern Soil: A New History*. New England: University Press of New England, 2006.
- Ferris, Marcie Cohen. *Matzo Ball Gumbo: Culinary Tales of the Jewish South*. North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005.
- Ferris, Marcie Cohen. “Preface,” *The Edible South: The Power of Food and the Making of an American Region*. North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 2016.
- Foer, Jonathan Safran. “Against Meat.” *New York Times*. October 7, 2009. Available online: <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/11/magazine/11foer-t.html>.
- Glassie, Henry. “Tradition.” *The Journal of American Folklore* 108 (1995): 395-412.
- Glisson, Susan. “Telling the Truth: How Breaking Silence Brought Redemption to one Mississippi Town,” *Telling Stories to Change the World: Global Voices on the Power of Narrative to build Community and make Social Justice Claims*. Edited by Rickie Solinger, Madeline Fox, and Kayhan Irani. Routledge Press, 2008.
- Greenblat, Hershel. In-Person Interview. Atlanta, Georgia, July 25, 2017.
- Halbwachs, Maurice. *On Collective Memory*. Edited and translated by Lewis A. Coser. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.
- Herman, Bernard. “On Southern Things,” *Southern Cultures* vol. 3. North Carolina: University of North Carolina: Center for the Study of the American South, Fall 2017.
- Johnson, Willa. *Education Roundtable: Teaching Nazi Germany and the Jim Crow South*. Presentation given at “Bystanders and Complicity in Nazi Germany and the Jim Crow South” Symposium. February 22, 2018.

- Johnson, Willa. "From My Place: Teaching the Holocaust and Judaism at the University of Mississippi Fifty-Three Years after James Meredith." John Wiley and Sons Ltd, 2016.
- Joselit, Jenna Weissman. "The Wonders of America: Reinventing Jewish Culture 1880-1950." New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1994.
- Joskowicz, Ari. *Memory, Testimony, and Justice: Roma and Jews Since 1945*. Presentation given at "Bystanders and Complicity in Nazi Germany and the Jim Crow South" Symposium. February 22, 2018.
- Kapchan, Deborah. "Performance," *Eight Words for the Study of Expressive Culture*, Edited by Burt Feintuch. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003: 121-145.
- Landsberger, Henry A. and Christopher E. Schweitzer, eds. *THEY FLED HITLER'S GERMANY AND FOUND REFUGE IN NORTH CAROLINA*. North Carolina: Old South Books, 1996.
- Maynes, Mary, J.J. Pierce, and Barbara Laslett. *Telling Stories: The Use of Personal Narratives in the Social Sciences and History*. New York: Cornell University Press, 2008.
- May, Robert. In-Person Interview. Birmingham, Alabama, August 1, 2017.
- Miller, Janneli. "I Have a Frog in my Stomach: Mythology and Truth in Life History." Routledge Press, 1996.
- Mitchell, Beverly. "White Supremacy and Anti-Semitism: Sibling Threats." Paper presented at the Bystanders and Complicity in Nazi Germany and the Jim Crow South conference, Birmingham, Alabama, February 22-23, 2018.
- Myerhoff, Barbara. *Number our Days*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978.
- Novick, Peter. *The Holocaust in American Life*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1999.
- Ochs, Vanessa L. "Material Culture: New Rituals and Ritual Objects." Jewish Publication Society, 2007.
- Parshall, Josh. *Yiddish Politics in Southern States: The Southern District of the Arbeter Ring, 1908-1949*. Dissertation completed at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2017.
- Puckett, Dan. *In the Shadow of Hitler: Alabama's Jews, the Second World War, and the Holocaust*. Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2014.
- Price, Charles. *A New Generation of Southerners: Youth Organizing in the South*. Funder's Collaborative on Youth Organizing, 2004.

- Rogoff, Leonard. *A History of Temple E Manu-El: An Extended Family*. North Carolina: Jewish Heritage Foundation of North Carolina, 2007.
- Rogoff, Leonard. *Down Home: Jewish Life in North Carolina*. North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010.
- Rogoff, Leonard. *Gertrude Weil: Jewish Progressive in the New South*. North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 2017.
- Rogoff, Leonard. *Homelands: Southern-Jewish Identity in Durham and Chapel Hill, North Carolina*. Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 2001.
- Sawin, Patricia. “‘I said, don’t you do it:’ Tracing Transformation and Development as an Empowered Speaker through Reported Speech in Narrative,” *Listening for a Life: A Dialogic Ethnography of Bessie Eldreth Through Her Songs and Stories*. Utah: Utah State University Press, 2004.
- Siegler, Ruth. In-Person and Digital Interviews. Birmingham, Alabama, August 22, 2017, November 30, 2017, January 3, 2018, and January 15, 2018.
- Steinmetz, Max. In-Person Interview. Birmingham, Alabama, August 1, 2017.
- Tannin, Deborah. “‘Oh Talking Voice that is so Sweet’: Constructing Dialogue in Conversation,” *Talking Voices: Repetition, Dialogue, and Imagery in Conversational Discourse*. Cambridge University press, 2007.
- Trubek, Amy. “Place Matters,” *The Taste of Culture: Experiencing Food and Drink*. Berg Publishers, 2005.
- Whitfield, Stephen J. “The South in the Shadow of Nazism.” *Southern Cultures*, 2012.