We Lost Our Home, We Lost Our Childhood

A Journey Back To The Mosel River Valley

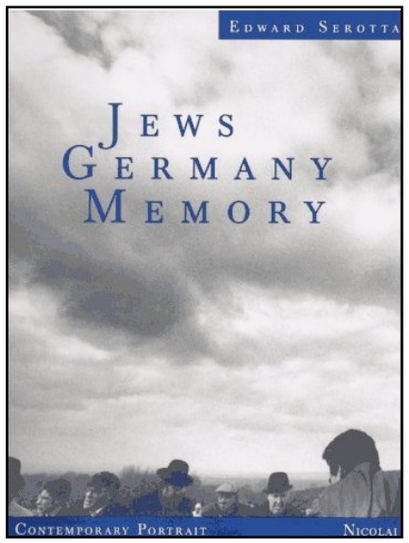
By Edward Serotta

We Lost Our Home; We Lost Our Childhood

Seven Jews, seven stories and a return to Germany

by Edward Serotta

Introduction



This interactive book is an excerpt from *Jews, Germany, Memory: A Contemporary Portrait,* a book published in 1996 by Nicolai Verlag in Berlin and Distributed Art Publishers in New York. That book, comprised of photographs and stories, was my personal exploration of the complex relationship between Jews and Germany; Germans and Jews; Israelis and Germans; Jewish Germans; and non-Jewish Germans.

Between 1988 and 1996, while working on other projects, I visited old age homes for German Jews in Jerusalem and their social clubs in Tel Aviv; I sat on sofas in apartments near Be

lsize Square Synagogue in London and on the patios of suburban homes in the San Fernando Valley. I also visited houses, schools, government buildings, former concentration camps, and Jewish community offices throughout Germany.

In 1995 in New York, I spent an afternoon in the soon-to-close offices of Aufbau, the German language newspaper founded by German Jews who fled the country in the 1930s (the publication, in a different guise, has been resurrected).

I even accompanied a group of young Germans as they traveled to Poland to clean up a Jewish cemetery, much to the surprise, and bemusement, of the last elderly Jews still living there. Those gnarled old Jews, all in their mid-eighties, had been born in the Austro-Hungarian Empire and tried to regale the young Germans with stories that sounded as if they came from Joseph Roth, the writer of bittersweet Habsburg nostalgia. The Germans, all of whom had Nazis for parents or grandparents, wanted to talk about the Third Reich. For an entire evening, the two groups spoke past each other—the young Germans didn't quite understand what the Jews were referring to. The old Jews had had quite enough of the Third Reich, thank you.

For this interactive book, I chose my book's final chapter, *We Lost Our Home; We Lost Our Childhood*, because it summarizes what this book was all about: *Jews, Germany, Memory* was not about history; it was about what history did to the people I photographed and interviewed.

About this project

I took the photographs and wrote the text in 1996. My editor for the original book was Deborah Unger Wise. I thank the Haus der Geschichte in Bonn, the postwar German history museum, for its support in curating an exhibition based on the photographs in the book.

This interactive book was programmed and designed by Alex C. Savits, an intern at Centropa (the Vienna-based Jewish historical institute I direct). I'd also like to thank other Centropa colleagues: the sound recording was engineered by Wolfgang Els; our designer Marie Schmid was a great help to Alex; and Roman Domnich, Fabian Ruehle and Ouriel Morgensztern also helped with ideas, comments and suggestions.

I would very much appreciate any feedback readers of this interactive book might care to share with me. My email address is serotta@centropa.org, and I thank you for reading it.

CHAPTER 1

Breakfast with memories at Haus Waldfrieden

If you travel to western Palatinate in Germany's Rhineland, to the steep river valleys where the temperatures are mild and vineyards string the hills with green lace, you will find three prim wine villages nestled together along the Mosel River: Alf, Bullay and Zell. Here white-washed houses crowned with black slate roofs cluster around cobbled squares. Wine cellars serve hearty regional fare and the loudest sounds on autumn afternoons are those of bottles uncorking and glasses clinking.

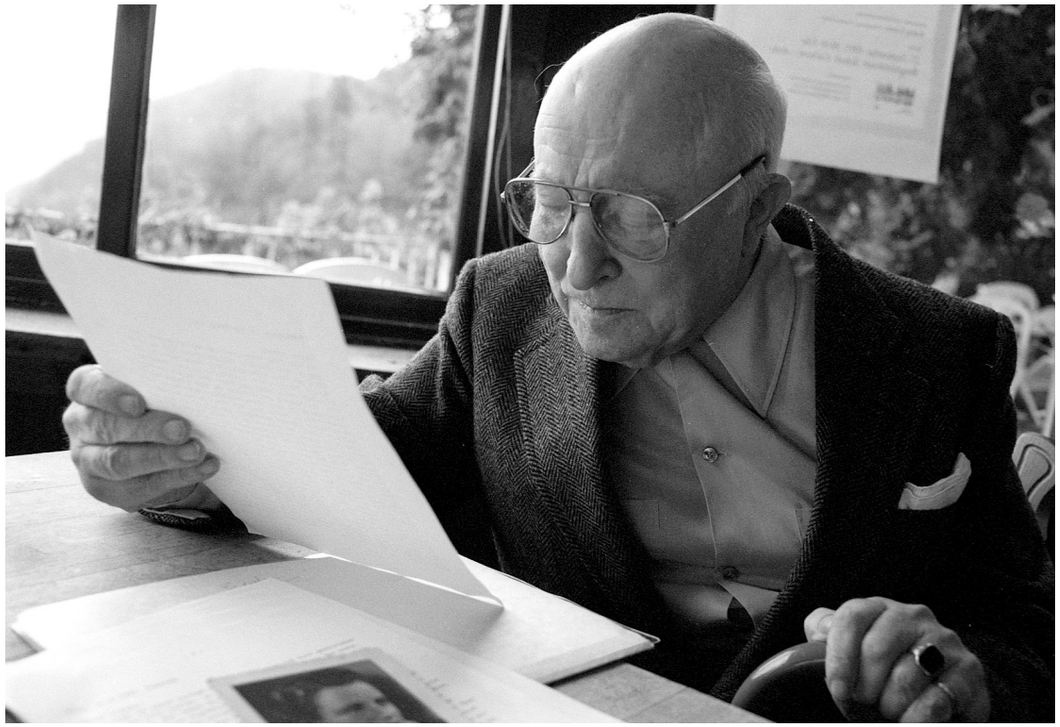

Walter Kahn
Angelika Schleindel
Ernst Kahn
Thea Kahn
Fritz Bender
Erna Dorn
Gerda Gardner

Erna Dorn (born Kaufmann) and her cousin Gerda Gardner (also born Kaufmann) came from one of those villages: Alf. Walter Kahn and his brother Ernst grew up just across the river in Bullay, and downstream, in Zell, Fritz Bender and his sister Marta were born. Lee Kahn's family (the Adlers) also came from Zell but moved to Cologne just before Lee was born. I met these seven people in September 1995. What made them different from other Moselaners was that sixty years before we met, they were hounded out of their schools and jobs and chased out of the country. They left behind family members who were shipped away by neighbors and killed -- in Germany's name. After the war, none of these seven came home to live. They settled in Canada, Israel and the United States. Now these former citizens of Alf, Bullay and Zell were returning as officially invited guests.

During their week along the Mosel, most of the group stayed in Haus Waldfrieden, a whimsical old pension built on a vine-covered hill overlooking a bend in the river. It was owned by Dr. Ulrich Stein, a forty-ish biologist turned vintner. Ulli, as his guests affectionately called him, woke early each morning, and after laying out breakfast, donned his knee-high rubber boots, and waded out into his beloved vineyards. Walter Kahn, eighty-five years old, sipped his coffee and watched him from the terrace.

Haus Waldfrieden

View from Haus Waldfrieden



Walter having breakfast at Haus Waldfrieden

Walter and I would meet over breakfast, and as the sun burnt off the morning fog, as black and white barges made their way along the Mosel toward Koblenz, Walter would reminisce. His brother Ernst often joined us, and together, they pieced together their family history, a history that had began along the Mosel when Napoleon ruled it and ended one hundred-thirty years later just before Hitler invaded France.

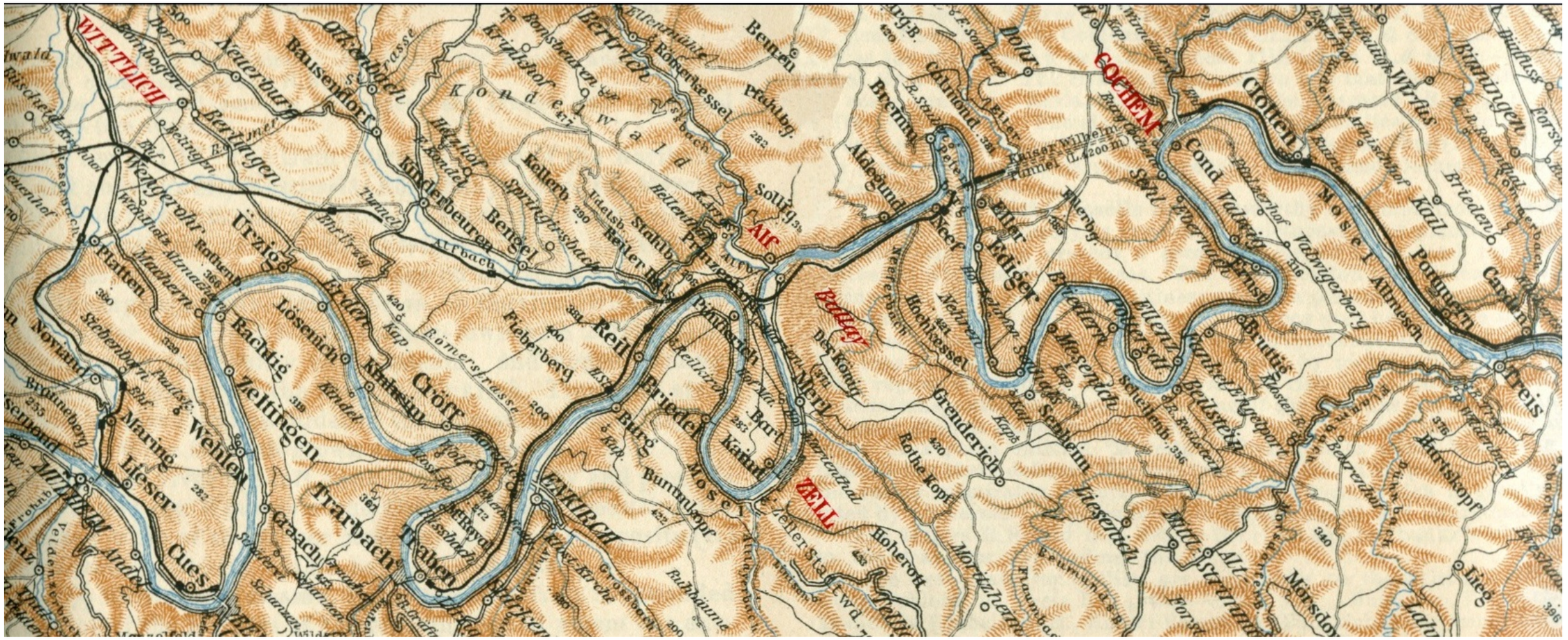
Mosel River Valley view from Haus Waldfrieden

Mosel River Valley

Map of contemporary Germany, with the Mosel River Valley circled in red.

The Mosel region is in the German state of Rheinland-Pfalz (in English, Rhineland-Palatinate)

Maps courtesy of Rheinland-Pfalz



The Mosel River Valley, as seen in the 1903 edition of Baedeker's Rhine. Alf, Bullay and Cochem are in red

CHAPTER 2

The Sondheimers and the Mosel Valley

The only thing Ernst and Walter knew of their great great grandfather Josef Sondheimer was that he arrived in the valley during the early 1800s. He settled in Zell, married Ris Reis and was the first Jew in modern times to be buried in the Jewish cemetery of Bullay, a few kilometers downriver. His grave, worn and barely legible now, reads 1831 and nearly butts up against the picket fence, as if it is trying to peer down to the river below.

When Josef and Ris lived in Zell, there was no synagogue and no organized Jewish community in any of the three villages. But their son Moses (born 1811), who grew up to sell grapes to vintners and traded sometimes in cattle and leather, saw the building of a tiny synagogue in Zell in 1848. By then, some fifty Jews had settled in the valley.

Moses's son Adam was born in the eventful year of 1848. To the west, riots swept another Napoleon to power. There were riots calling for democratic reform in the German states and duchies as well, but they were soon swept aside by the powers of reaction and conservatism.

As Adam grew toward adulthood, a customs union forged closer links between the German states, and when he was seventeen-years-old in 1866, he watched with awe

as Prussia's chancellor Bismarck fought the Austrian Kaiser to establish Berlin's hegemony over Vienna.

Four years later, Adam Sondheimer donned a uniform himself and went to war against France. By the time he returned home--as a sergeant--the German states were united into a single empire, ruled by Prussia's Hohenzollerns and Bismarck himself. Every year after that, a proud and fiercely patriotic Adam Sondheimer, in his neatly-pressed uniform, marched in the annual veterans parade through Zell and Bullay.

When he opened a clothing store in 1873, he placed an ad in the local newspaper stating that "the war veteran Adam Sondheimer welcomes all old and new friends to his haberdashery." He married Babette Thormann a few

Josef Sondheimer's iron cross and photographs

years later. Their daughter Emma was born in 1884. Because the Jewish communities along the Mosel were so small, parties and holiday celebrations were held in central meeting points so young Jews could meet, court and hopefully marry other Jews. In 1905 Julius and Babette sent Emma down river to Bad Betrich for a Purim ball. There she danced with Julius Kahn, who came from a family of cattle dealers in Empken, just over the hill. They fell in love, married soon after, and Julius came to Zell to live with the Sondheimers.

"He was a creative man, my father," Walter said as he watched Ulli clipping away at the vines on the hillside. "He managed to scrape up enough money to build a new house for us in Bullay. He had trained to be a butcher so he built a shop that fronted the street and we lived upstairs. In the courtyard in back, he put up a slaughter house and small baloney factory--kettles, pressure cookers, all that. He and my mother settled down to have children--Hans was born in 1907, I was born in 1910 and Ernst was born three years later."

When Ernst was barely one-year-old, word came to Bullay that the Austrian archduke was shot dead in Sarajevo. Seven weeks later Europe was at war. Adam Sondheimer, who was sixty-six years old then, must have been proud to see that his son-in-law was one of the very first to sign up for the Kaiser's army.

In one of the first offensives on the eastern front, Julius took a bullet in his shoulder. He was awarded an iron cross, second class, and after a few weeks in a field hospital in Riga he was shipped home to recuperate. Ever anxious to return the front, Julius was sent to France to fight in 1915. He was wounded slightly twice more and was awarded an iron cross first class in 1917.

But in September 1918, Emma Kahn received word her husband had been badly wounded and lay in a field hospital in Strasbourg. She left the children with her parents and took the first west-bound train to be with her husband. Doctors provided a furlough and Emma brought Julius home. She began nursing him back to health while his three sons and anxious father-in-law looked on. But as autumn set in, and the first chill winds blew down the Mosel that October, Julius Kahn's lungs congested, pneumonia set in and he died. Adam Sondheimer followed his casket up the hill, past the respectful neighbors who turned out to watch the procession. He buried his son-in-law not far from his own grandfather's grave.

The war ended a few weeks later, the Kaiser abdicated, and on November 9, Germany was declared a democracy. But no one took down the pictures of the Kaiser or Bismarck that Julius had put up just before he went off to war.

Adam Sondheimer sold his store in Zell and began making the daily trek to Bullay to work in Emma's butcher

shop. He bought a horse and wagon and headed up into the Hunsruck each week, going from farm to farm, buying and trading with farmers and bringing down calves and cows.

Adam Sondheimer worried about his family. Germany was hardly the same during those Weimar days of political instability and wild inflation. He felt relieved when General Hindenburg became president of the republic in 1925. To some, perhaps, Hindenburg was an aging relic with an undeserved military reputation, but he represented stability to many Germans, and Adam Sondheimer hung the general's picture in his daughter's home, next to the other portraits. Adam Sondheimer died a few months later at the age of seventy-seven.

Ernst said, "My mother was left running everything herself. You can just imagine what that was like with three boys, but we all pitched in, although she shipped Walter off to high school in Empken, where he stayed with our grandmother. My mother hired local people to work for us, and a cousin came too. We had five or six people working in the shop.

"Back when I was in elementary school, we had a great time. No difference between Jews and non-Jews--not in a small town like this. No one here had money; people had debts and in Bullay, which was a railroad junction, half the town worked for the railroad or the post office.

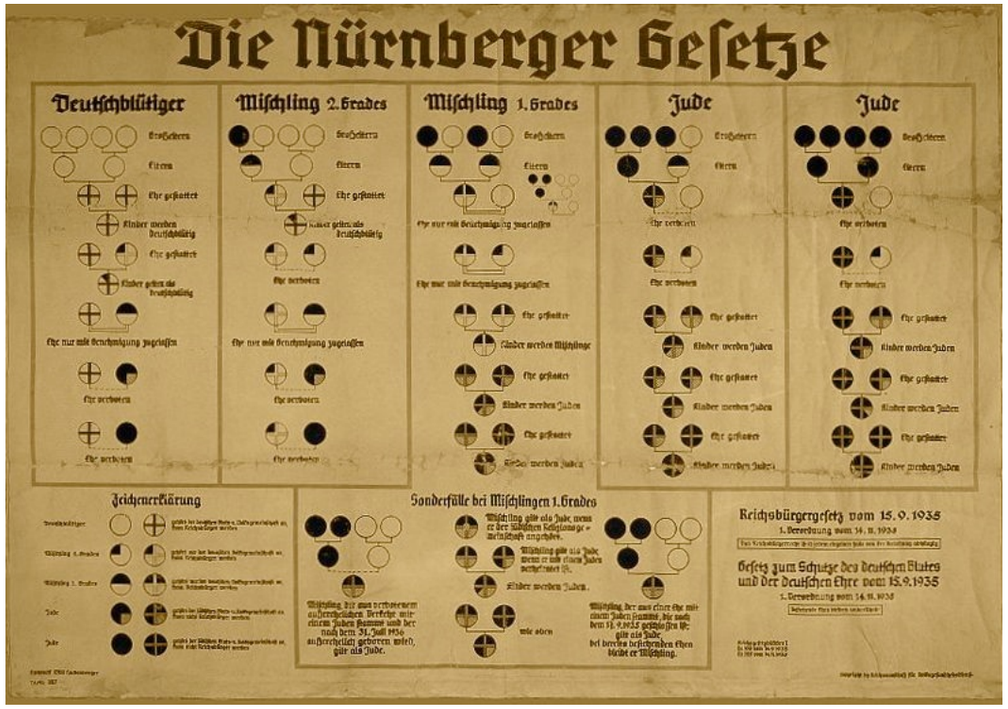
Ernst Kahn

Walter even remembers when they brought electricity to town, just around the First World War."

Walter smiled. Ernst went on. "Whenever there was a new birth in town, my mother would cook the family a big pot of soup and send us over with it. On weekends, we'd go for long hikes and end up right here at Haus Waldfrieden, where we would dance to music we played on a wind-up phonograph. So we could better learn our Jewish studies, we had Der Lehrer, as we all called him, Mr Kornfeld from Budapest. He was even poorer than the rest of us, so he would travel up and down the Mosel, going from one Jewish family to another, staying with each family for a week, teaching the children Hebrew, helping

with their bar mitzvah lessons, and then he'd move on to the next family.

"Our neighbors, the Stadtfelds, were always running in and out of our house, and I was doing the same over at theirs. Matter of fact, while the three sisters there, Erna, Hilde and Eleanor, were good students, Herman, their brother, was much more into sports and working." Ernst leaned over, winked and whispered, "Don't tell the Stadtfelds, but I used to do Herman's homework for him. He never was too good with his studies." Although Ernst was the only Jewish student in school, he said he never noticed the difference. "Look," he said with a sigh. "Nearly all of us got along. Maybe this was unique, maybe not. I only knew that in our town--with a thousand residents and twenty Jews, it wasn't so hard to be nice to your neighbor." All that changed when Ernst finished school and went to work in nearby Wittlich, population 7,000. Here was a city of some two hundred and seventy Jews and a fine, stone synagogue. This was not a hut clinging to the rich family's Schloss like in Zell, but an elegant neo-Romanesque structure where the Jews of Wittlich came wearing top hats and tails on the High Holy Days. Wittlich's main square had several businesses owned by Jews, and both Walter and Ernst worked in Wittlich. They joined Jewish clubs and went to Jewish dances. Walter, who had spent three years in Berlin, had moved to Wittlich a few months before Ernst. He showed his younger brother around, told him of the excitement going on in



Nuremberg law's 'pseudo science' for genetic identification

the awesome German capital and regaled him with Berlin tales--of boating with beautiful girls on the Wannsee, the cabarets and coffee houses and new music. But Walter knew something else. On the streets the Nazis fought Communists in pitched battles and free-for-alls. Brown-shirted thugs roamed the streets. "Not long before I left Berlin, I went to a screening of 'All Quiet on the Western Front.' The film was banned by the government, but the SPD showed it at a private screening. Naturally, it was packed, and on stage, just before the film began, Clara Zetkin, a very important socialist leader then, spoke. What a firebrand she was, and she talked about how a Germany under the Nazis would wreak a war of revenge that

would bring all of Europe down. She spoke so sure and confidently that I was really shaken up. I felt the handwriting on the wall that night. And that was in 1931.On the streets of Wittlich, the number of Nazi thugs grew, and once the federal government passed into the hands of their party, they roamed the streets singing anti-Semitic songs and breaking Jewish store windows. Wittlich Jews spoke among themselves about abandoning the country and the Kahn boys returned home to the relative quiet of Bullay. Hans, the oldest brother, and Walter, left for America in 1935 but Ernst stayed behind with his mother. "We had to stay. Over in Empken, we had my father's mother to look after, and my own mother wasn't going to leave until we had to."

After the National Socialists took power, the laws restricting the rights of Jews tightened, and customers dwindled away.

"We had to let all our butchers go, so the baloney factory had to close. Later we couldn't employ any workers at all, so the shop couldn't really make it." To make ends meet, Ernst started buying up clothing and loading it into his car, taking off each evening to make sales calls on farmers along the Hunsruck.

"Everyone was friendly, I never had problems. And some friends never deserted us--like Paul Kretz. The two of us were always together, you see, going to football matches, playing sports--the best of friends. He never, not ever, stopped coming to our house, and he did it openly because he hated the Nazis.

He deserted from the army in 1945 and lived out in the woods. I was already in America, and I sent him food packages those first few years after the war." Ernst smiled and shook his head. "Knowing Paul, I wasn't a bit surprised he did this." He bit his lip. "He died, though, in 1958, and I never saw him again.

"In 1937 they took all our official papers away, and we couldn't work--period. So I loaded up the baloney equipment into cars and trucks--the kettles, the compressors, all that--and headed out late every evening. Somehow, I managed to sell everything off. I'm sure the chief policeman of Bullay knew all this--Mr Höfer, but he never said

anything. After all, when he moved to Bullay back in the 'twenties, he was here for more than a year before his family joined him, and my mother fed him every night."

While friends were now shying away from Bullay's twenty Jews, a young girl named Marie came every night to help out around the Kahn home. "She was an illegitimate child and everyone in town looked down on her except my mother." Walter said. "She was always nice to Marie, so when so many others turned away from us, Marie would come to us to help clean the house. We didn't even ask her to, but she wanted to help." The Kahns never forgot Marie's kindness.

Jewish businesses were confiscated one by one and even in these villages, old friends turned into Nazis. "Not everyone took it so quietly," Ernst said. "There was a Nazi party meeting one night and two Jewish boys, Alfred Adler and Max Wolf, ran in, smashed up everything and everyone in it, then ran out. It must have been something! But I guess they did it spontaneously because Alfred fled almost immediately for Holland although poor Max stayed behind. He realized, I guess, how tough he had made things on himself. He was frightened, morose, and one night, he slipped into his father's butcher shop in Zell, loaded the rifle his father shot cattle with, and turned it on himself."

One night around 10:00 PM, Ernst and his mother were summoned to the house of Mr Beck, head of the railroad yard in Bullay and the local Nazi big shot. "He lived in a huge house up the hill, and when we arrived, there was coffee and cake for us. This was surprising enough, but Beck said, 'Frau Kahn, it is well known you have been good and kind to everyone here, but the party wants non-Jewish butchers in Bullay and both butcher shops are owned by Jews. I want you to sell your shop to Herr Uwer--Peter Uwer--because this is how things will have to be.'

"Well my mother was just furious and she wasn't about to give up all that she'd worked for. She said she wouldn't even entertain the notion. But Mr Beck said he had even gotten permission to transfer, directly from the Nazi party, 50,000 reichmarcks--not a small sum, I can tell you. But this only made her angrier.

"So he looked at me and shook his head. He showed us a whole batch of papers from the party, how they planned to take all the businesses from all the Jews, and he said, 'Ernst, I want you to talk to your mother. She can sell me the business, or I can take it. But either way, I'm going to get it.' And even though my mother was a very good business woman, she refused to take money from the Nazi party. If they were going to take our property, they weren't going to do it with my mother's help. 'This has nothing to do with money,' she said as we walked down the hill. She stuck to her word, too."Within months, Mr Beck had installed Mr Uwer and the last of the Kahns pre-

pared to leave the Mosel valley. Walter and Hans had American visas arranged for them.

Ernst and his mother went to see Julius Kahn's mother, who would not discuss leaving her home. Ernst went to the bank in Empken and arranged to have his father's military pension sent to her account every month. "That's what kept her alive," he said, his voice cracking, "all the way until they came and shipped her to Auschwitz at ninety-four years old." His mother sold the house--"for a pittance, I can tell you"--to the Stadtfelds. Just before the Kahns caught the afternoon train out of Bullay, they climbed through the vineyards above the Mosel and swung open the gate to the Jewish cemetery. They stood before Josef's grave, then paid their respects before the stones for Moses, Adam and Julius. They turned and left. The date was August 1937. Ernst Kahn was twenty-four years old.

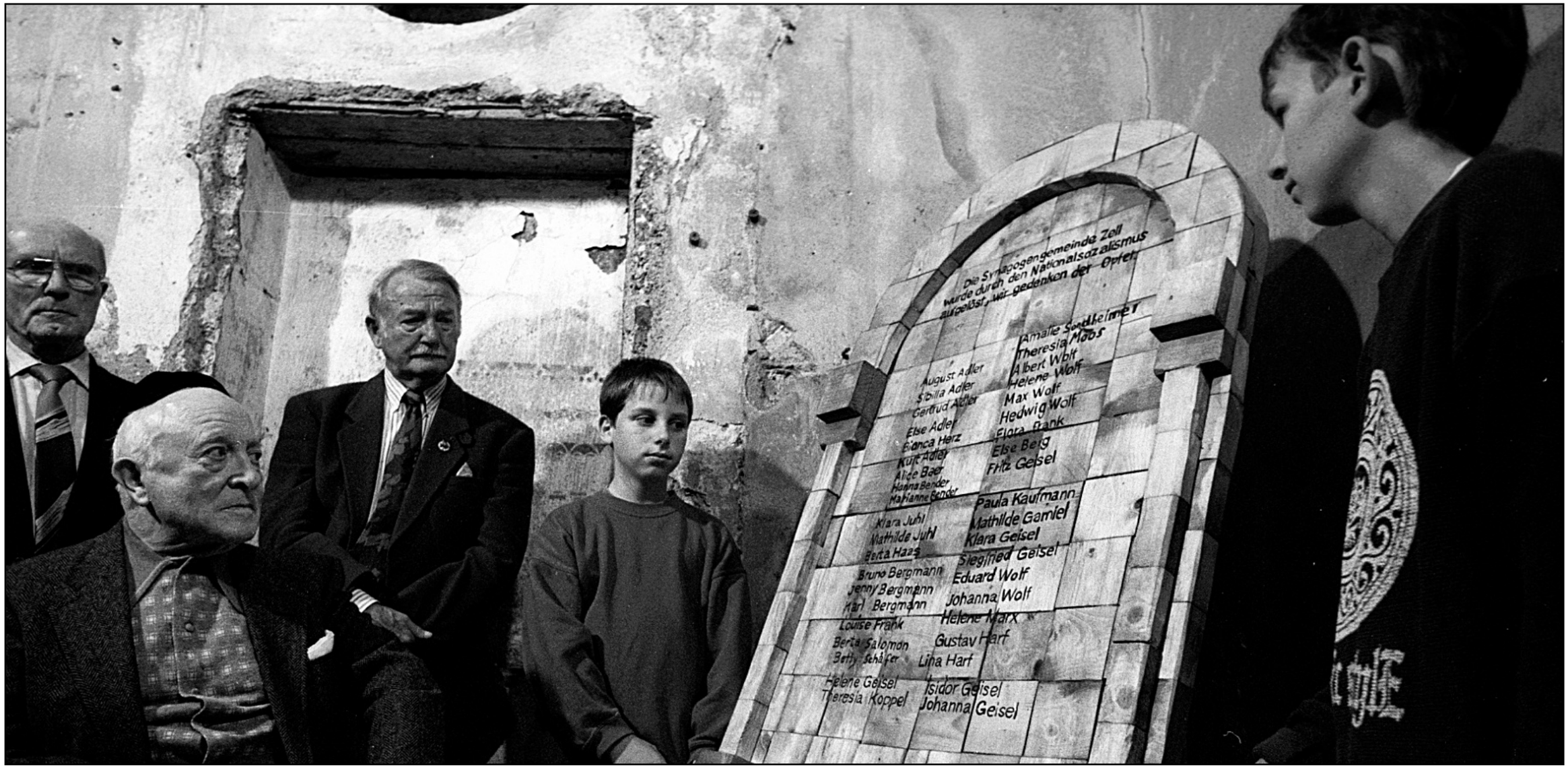
Fifteen months later the synagogues in Wittlich and Zell were ransacked, and those Jews who had not left were desperate enough to try anything to get out. Of the twenty Bullay Jews in 1930, seven were deported, the rest made it to safety. Across the river, ten of Alf's eleven Jews escaped, leaving one behind for neighbors to deport. Of Zell's thirty-two Jews, eighteen left in time. Of those who could not escape, three chose suicide. No Jew returned to live in Bullay, Zell, Alf or Wittlich after the war.

An eighty-three-year old Ernst Kahn stood looking over at the cemetery. He pointed to the town half submerged in trees below. "See that house there, just through the trees? That belonged to the Harfs. Arthur Harf left with my brother Hans. Julius left soon after. They moved to Erie, Pennsylvania. Now their father, Gustav, remarried after their mother died back when the boys were still young. He had the other butcher shop in Bullay and everyone in town loved old man Harf. Of course they deported him and his second wife. Killed." Turning to Walter, Ernst said, "By the way, you know who took the Harfs to the train?"

Walter nodded. "Sure I know. Mr Höfer, the policeman."

"Now if you look down a bit," Ernst went on, "that's where the Salamons, the cattle dealers, Julius and Emma, lived. Their son Oskar moved to Hamburg and he was deported too. He survived, emigrated to Chicago and went into the carpet cleaning business. Alfred and his parents got out in 1938. Moved to Argentina."

CHAPTER 3



The synagogue in Zell

By this time, everyone had filtered downstairs. Breakfast had been served, eaten, taken away. The fog had lifted, insects buzzed, and the snipping of Ulli's shears went on without a pause. Angelika Schleindel walked briskly into the house to fetch Walter, Ernst, Ernst's wife Thea and the rest of the crew, still lingering over coffee.

Old postcard of Zell, Mosel Valley

Angelika, who lived upstairs inn a rambling rooftop atelier in Haus Waldfrieden, was an historian who had almost single-handedly detailed the history of the Jews of Wittlich in a book and exhibition and was now doing the same for the Mosel villages. This official visit was taking place at her instigation, and she had been in contact with Walter and Ernst for years, digging through their vast memories and archives. Angelika was acting as combination hostess, chauffeur and den mother to the group, and she immediately began directing them into waiting cars. They had to hurry to Zell.

In one car, Walter was chatting with Gerda, a widow who lived in New York and had never been back to Germany until this week. She was having a bumpy time remembering things. "Hey Walter," she said, poking his arm, "what's this I hear about us going walking on the Hindenburg? I don't remember walking on any Hindenburg."

Walter laughed and said, "No Gerda, not Hindenburg--the Marienburg, where the old castle was."

Gerda Gardner

Gerda shrugged. "So who can remember? Hindenburg, Marienburg, this place is full of burgs." Turning to me, Gerda said, "You have a car?"

I nodded. "Good," she said, and gave me a couple of pokes in the shoulder. "Then you will take me into Alf. I want to go find my house".

"Erna!" she called. Erna, who was talking to Angelika, turned. *"Yes?"*. "You'll come with me to Alf?" "Sure, Gerda, I'd be glad to. It's what cousins are for."

I asked Gerda how it felt for her to be here. She started to say something, opened her mouth and closed it. Gathering her thoughts, she said, "Oh, I don't know, it's confusing. I haven't spoken a word of German for years, I have my worries about Germans, but now, everyone's so nice to me. Would I come back? No, I don't think so. I mean, who needs all this? Even though everyone in my family made it out of here in 1939, I still don't know. And anyway," she said as we pulled into a parking lot in Zell and she stared at two matronly women standing nearby.

"Are the Germans the same? Or have they ge-changed? I mean changed? I mean, my English and German are getting all mixed up!" - Gerda Gardner

Gerda didn't wait for my answer, but hoisted herself out of the car and headed through the alleyways of Zell, past the ice cream stands, the wine cellars, the souvenir shops, the tourists poking about. The Jewish group had already assembled on the back alley behind the schloss and together, with the mayor, a few local dignitaries and a camera crew, they entered the tiny synagogue. This single visible monument to Zell's Jewish past was in poor condition, a dusty little room closed up and used as a storehouse.

Ceremony at synagogue in Zell

Slowly entering the room on his cane, Walter said without looking around, "You'll notice there's a plaque for Zell Jews killed in the First World War, but that's where history stops." He frowned and searched around for a chair to sit on. "I wrote a letter to the mayor and asked that they turn this place into a museum, a memorial, but he wrote back and said the city council voted it down." He shook his head. "I'm not surprised, but I think in time, the next generation will have the courage to right this wrong. The old ones just don't want to be reminded, that's all."

In the tiny synagogue, the seven Jews and their families reminisced. Fritz Bender and his sister Marta, together with their own children, spoke quietly among themselves. Lee and her two sons read the names off the plaque. Gerda pointed up to the tiny balcony. "Hey, that's where we used to have sit, the girls and our mothers. But just look at this place! It looks terrible!"

Synagogue in Zell

As her eyes swept the crowd she squinted and said, "You know, the people around here, they broke everything in the synagogue on Kristallnacht. We were still living in Alf, just across the river. Well we never came back here after that. We were afraid."

The television camera crept around like a giant plastic bird, dipping its snout into the old Jews' faces. The TV light burned brightly as two school children unveiled a

Thea Kahn

wooden plaque with the names of those killed during the Holocaust. At this, Walter smiled.

Later that day there was a meeting at the town hall. Politicians and clergymen made speeches. Afterwards, bottles of locally grown wine were given out along with coffee table books about Zell. Ernst's wife Thea (born Ladenburger in a small town in the Black Forest) smiled.

"I'll tell you the truth. It's easy to be a Jew in Germany for a week. Longer than that, well, it's not for me." - Thea Kahn

Gerda Gardner with her former neighbors

During the week of their visit, the Alf, Zell and Bullay Jews went to see their old homes, looked up records and spoke with school children. I accompanied them to one high school down river in Cochem, but we stopped, as promised, in Alf, so Gerda could look around. Not quite as picture-perfect as Zell, it was every bit as tidy. Gerda made her way straight down a narrow lane toward her old house, steaming ahead of Erna and me. Just before reaching the house, an elderly couple stepped out into the street and nearly bumped into her.

The man spotted Gerda and turned to his wife and said, "Ah, here's Gerda Kaufmann. How are you Gerda?" And he said it as if she had simply been out of town for the weekend. This made Gerda cackle and the three of them smiled. "Well I'm just fine. But who are you?" She squinted at them as if narrowing her vision would melt the wrinkles from their faces, the years from her memory.

While the three old neighbors caught up, Erna said, "Our family came from Alf, too. But my father bought a small store in Bad Bertrich when I was young, so we moved. It's not far from here, just a nice summer resort town with baths and springs. It wasn't very fancy, not on the lines of the great spas then like Marienbad or Karlsbad. It was more middle class--nice, sure--but most patients came on their insurance bills. My father died in 1919 during the influenza epidemic, so my mother and two brothers had to run our small dry goods store. We were the only Jewish family in town and we learned our Hebrew and everything Jewish from Der Lehrer, poor Mr Kornfeld. I think he taught Gerda, too."

By then Gerda's old neighbors had moved on and she turned to face her old home. It had been prettified and replastered and double-pane swing-out windows had been installed. Window boxes crowded with geraniums decorated each window.

Wittlich Mayor Helmut Hagadorn in front of the town's synagogue

"My, my," Gerda said leaning back to take it all in. "They've certainly done a better job than we did with it!" She turned to us. "You know, if my older brother hadn't secretly sent all our money out of the country before Kristallnacht, my mother would have refused to leave. I mean that and she even said so."

She turned back to the house and shook her head. "And if she wouldn't have gone, I wouldn't have gone and I wouldn't be here now for my nice visit." She looked at us and raised her eyebrows. The sound of a motor scooter on another alleyway echoed through the village.

CHAPTER 4

Back to school

The village of Cochem is even prettier than Zell and is so overwhelmed with tourists that cars aren't allowed in the summer months to climb the zig-zag alleys that wind between the half-timbered houses. The high school is wedged in a leafy ravine above the town and while Erna and Gerda went to speak to one class, Lee Adler and her two sons went off to another. Walter and Ernst would speak to the entire school a little later.

Gerda kept mumbling as she walked the halls, "What am I supposed to say to these kids? What can I say? Here we are, the Jews? The Jews are here?" Erna said nothing. She looked nervous. Angelika delivered them into a classroom of seventeen-year-olds.

I counted twenty students, half boys, half girls. The one boy with a pony tail wore Doc Martens. All the rest had shorter hair and sported Reeboks and Nikes. All twenty wore jeans and sweat shirts, some with hoods.

Gerda and Erna began haltingly, and told of their lives, that they were born in Alf, that they had felt part of the society for years, and suddenly, they were cast out by their friends--just, as a matter of fact, when they were the ages of the young people in this room.

"Well how did that make you feel? I mean, did you feel German or Jewish?" one girl asked, emphasizing the or.

Erna looked surprised. "We--we were German. German, of course. Our family had been here for hundreds and hundreds of years. Jewish was our religion, that's all, but we were very, very German."

"And you were integrated into everyday society, just like everyone else, no different?" the same girl asked again.

"No different than anyone. We were not religious Jews. We didn't wear black like the Hasidic Jews do or maybe like you've seen in Fiddler on the Roof. Most Jews in Germany were completely integrated like that. We didn't dress or look different than anyone else."

High school in Martin-von-Cochem-gymnasium

"Then how---?" the girl asked again, but out of frustration, she couldn't finish the sentence, couldn't figure the whole thing out, and she raised her hands, dropped them, then blew away a strand of hair from her face.

Erna went on. "Suddenly, we couldn't go to the movies." She paused, and sat for a moment as if she were allowing all the injustices to pile up inside her. "We could not go to school, the theater, the parks. We couldn't have a radio. Had to shop at certain times. Couldn't use public transport. One rule after the other. And I was the only Jewish

girl in our town, so believe me, I was about---" she sighed. "I was about as lonely as you could get."

"But in America, there are also Nazis!" said one boy.

The teacher frowned. Erna smiled indulgently. Gerda narrowed her eyes. "I don't think I'd want to compare," she said flatly. "Get your history straight." Yet she said it without rancor.

The questions came rapidly. How does it feel to return? Difficult, but in some ways, it still feels like home. Do you have any German friends? In America, many of our friends are other German Jews. Do you hate Germany? "Hate?" repeated Erna. She considered for a moment.

"No, I don't hate Germany. But my mother was killed by Germans."

At the end of their talk, Erna and Gerda went down the stairs surrounded by girls from the class. At the bottom of the steps they halted and kept on talking for another five minutes. When they scampered off, Erna came up to me beaming. "Oh they are really such nice girls! So poised and intelligent. Now I'm reminded of going to school and how much I loved it," then, lowering her voice, "before they threw me out, of course. And friends! They have so many friends." Erna watched them congregating and chatting away in the courtyard. "I was so alone when I was their age, so alone." Gerda, who had been listening to

Lee Adler addressing a school class in Cochem

Erna as she watched the kids outside, said, almost absently, "We lost our our home. We lost our childhood."

All the students gathered in a large room where Walter and Ernst were sitting. Erna and Gerda, Lee and her sons, joined them. Reinhold Schommers, principal of the school and the prime mover in bringing the elderly Jews to his students, stood between the two and spoke with passion and energy of the importance of this visit and the unique chance it was for the students of Cochem to talk with those who had lived through so much--so much history, so much tragedy.

If the words sounded boilerplate, they were not. Schommers was deadly serious about engaging his students in historical and political dialogue. Indeed, the Cochem high school was a hotbed of humanitarian aid for Bosnia, and these students raised funds, gathered clothes and food and shipped it to refugee camps throughout ex-Yugoslavia.

The elderly Jews addressed the fresh-faced youths. Ernst Kahn was particularly gentle when he spoke of the past. He said he didn't blame his friends and neighbors for what happened as they had no choice but to avoid their Jewish friends. The pressure was too great during the Third Reich and Ernst clearly differentiated between his neighbors and Nazis. "People had to go along or lose

their jobs," he explained. Erna spoke of how lonely she felt, how her friends turned on her. Lee spoke of her aunt Elsa, who cared for her every day while her parents went out to try and scrape together enough income to feed the family, and how Elsa was deported to Minsk and starved to death there.

What the elderly Jews tried to get across was that this scenic river valley had been as much a part of their lives as it was for these kids now. Again and again, posed in different ways, the students asked, Do you hate Germans? Is it hard for you to be here? Can you forgive Germany? Is America better for you now than Germany was before the Nazis? And to Walter, one student asked, "But what was it like for you, a German, to be in America during the Second World War, when the Americans were fighting the Germans?"

"We weren't Americans, that's for sure," he replied. "But we were no longer Germans either, and most people understood that. You see, it was hard for Americans back then, for everyone--after all, this was still the Depression and so many people were out of work and had very little to share. But I have to say that from the time we arrived, America was ready to help us start over. It's kind of a philosophy there. They don't care what you've lost, what you've left behind even if we did, or maybe what I left behind--" and he suddenly starting crying. Covering his eyes with hand, he said, "what I left behind, here--" The room was still. Outside, birds chirped, trees rustled in the breeze.

CHAPTER 5

The memories that haunt them still

There were other visits: to schools, old homes, to fancy restaurants. The old Mosel Jews pulled out whole chapters of their lives and shared them with whoever was sitting next to them. Fritz Bender told me of studying in the university of Darmstadt, how when he would come home during breaks Emma Kahn would feed him in her kitchen in Bullay before he caught the narrow-gauge local train for Zell. Fritz also spoke proudly of his life as a scientist in Canada and how he helped with the war effort in the 1940s. He told me of his escape by boat from Holland in 1940 and rescue at sea by the British and how he was interned for a while as a prisoner of war.

Three pictures of Fritz Bender

Fritz Bender told me of studying in the university of Darmstadt, how when he would come home during breaks Emma Kahn would feed him in her kitchen in Bullay before he caught the narrow-gauge local train for Zell. Fritz also spoke proudly of his life as a scientist in Canada and how he helped with the war effort in the 1940s. He told me of his escape by boat from Holland in 1940 and rescue at sea by the British and how he was interned for a while as a prisoner of war.

But later, Angelika told me a sadder story. Fritz had emigrated in 1933 to Holland with his wife, child and

Erna Dorn pointing to her mother's name on a memorial tablet

mother-in-law. When the Germans invaded in 1940, they were separated. Fritz ended up on a boat, but his wife, hearing that he was dead and watched the Nazis taking Jews away, killed her mother, her child and herself.

While watching the lights of Bullay wink at us one night as we sat in an oak-paneled restaurant, Erna told me how her mother had helped her children get out of Germany, but how when she herself went to get an American visa in Stuttgart, her eyesight was so bad she was turned down.

With Erna now safely abroad, she packed a bag and left her home in Bad Bertrich, bought a ticket on the narrow-gauge railway to Trier, where she rented a room with her sister.

The sisters sat and waited, frightened, for the knock on the door that would take them by another train, this one to Theresienstadt, where both of them starved to death.

It was clear that Erna had never forgiven herself for leaving her mother behind, and at eighty-years old, the memory, and the wound, was still fresh.

In America, Erna married a Jewish refugee from Vienna, "a wonderful dancer," and together, they had one son.

Erna with Hannes Schmit

They had lived in New York, and after her husband died, Erna moved to Ft Lauderdale.

During the entire evening, Erna didn't speak of either her husband or her son. She sipped her wine, she gazed out over the Mosel, and as we left, she peered down river toward Bad Bertrich. The only thing she could think about was her mother.

Two years previously, during an official visit to the town of Wittlich, instigated by its mayor, Helmut Hagedorn, Walter Kahn met a precocious twelve-year old called Hannes Schmit. The two became fast friends (neither Walter, whose wife died a few years ago, nor Ernst ever had children). Walter and Hannes met up again when the group visited Wittlich's synagogue (now a Jewish museum Angelika helped curate). At a dinner in a folksy Wittlich restaurant, Hannes wedged a chair between Walter and some other adults, and sat there, all blue eyes and blond hair, beaming as he drank in the old man and his stories, his hand movements, his passion. Someone asked Walter, "How do you feel?" and Walter replied, "Like eighty-five years old," and Hannes nearly fell off his chair laughing. Walter reached over and rubbed the boy's head. "I just love him," Hannes said to me in a nearly-perfect American accent.

Dinner in a Wittlich restaurant

"Sure, maybe he's really old but he doesn't ever complain about his health or that kinda stuff. He's always so nice and cheerful and he's taken me all over Wittlich and showed me his town--Jewish Wittlich. That's what's im-

portant, you know, to learn about the past and for him to talk to the young people like me. See, Walter says that if you know what happened before, then you can work to make sure it never comes again, right?"

CHAPTER 6

Kaddish

On the final day of the visit, the entire group assembled at the Jewish cemetery of Bullay. The harvest was a week closer and late summer rains kept the grapes growing and greener than ever. Everyone predicted a good harvest.

Residents of Alf, Bullay and Zell at the memorial service in the Bullay

Walter Kahn and Eleanor Stadtfeld

Bullay residents at the memorial service

Ernst Kahn with Marie, the housekeeper who never abandoned the Kahns

Over a hundred people had turned out that cloudy afternoon and a cantor had come down from the Bonn synagogue to lead a Kaddish service, the traditional prayer for the dead. Someone provided yarmulkes for the men to wear.

Making her way gingerly toward Ernst was Marie, the child-out-of wedlock who never abandoned the Kahn family. She walked with a cane, and had for ten years, ever since her stroke. After the war, Marie was not forgotten by the Kahns, and she came to America nearly every holiday and spent it in their homes. "How could we not invite her?" Thea Kahn said. "She was so good to my husband when so few others were."

The Stadtfelds were there. Erna was dressed in white and sported a matching floppy hat. Eleanor in black, wore a prim bonnet. Their brother Hermann had died several years before. Erna sat with Walter and the two busied themselves with stories and memories. School children peered over the picket fence and a young couple, riding through the vineyards on their bicycles, stopped to watch. The cantor said his prayers. Someone added a few words. Afterwards people mingled among the graves.

Erna stood before her father's stone, which she had not visited in six decades.

Erna Dorn placing a stone on her father's grave

Lee Adler in the Jewish cemetary

With her mouth set firm, she went and broke off a small branch and dusted off her father's stone. "My mother doesn't have one," she said quietly.

Lee stood before Max Wolf's tomb. "Terrible about his suicide," she said shaking her head, as if it had just happened.

Angelika helped Walter out of his chair and the two of them made their way slowly over the freshly cut grass to the far end of the cemetery.

There Walter stood before the grave of Josef Sondheimer, then he paid his respects to Moses and Adam and Julius. Angelika helped Walter back up the hill.

I took a final picture and headed out of the cemetery toward the car. Gerda was standing there alone, gazing over the hills, the vineyards, the river.

"So how was it for you Gerda? How was this visit home?" I asked as I laid my camera bag on the back seat of my car.

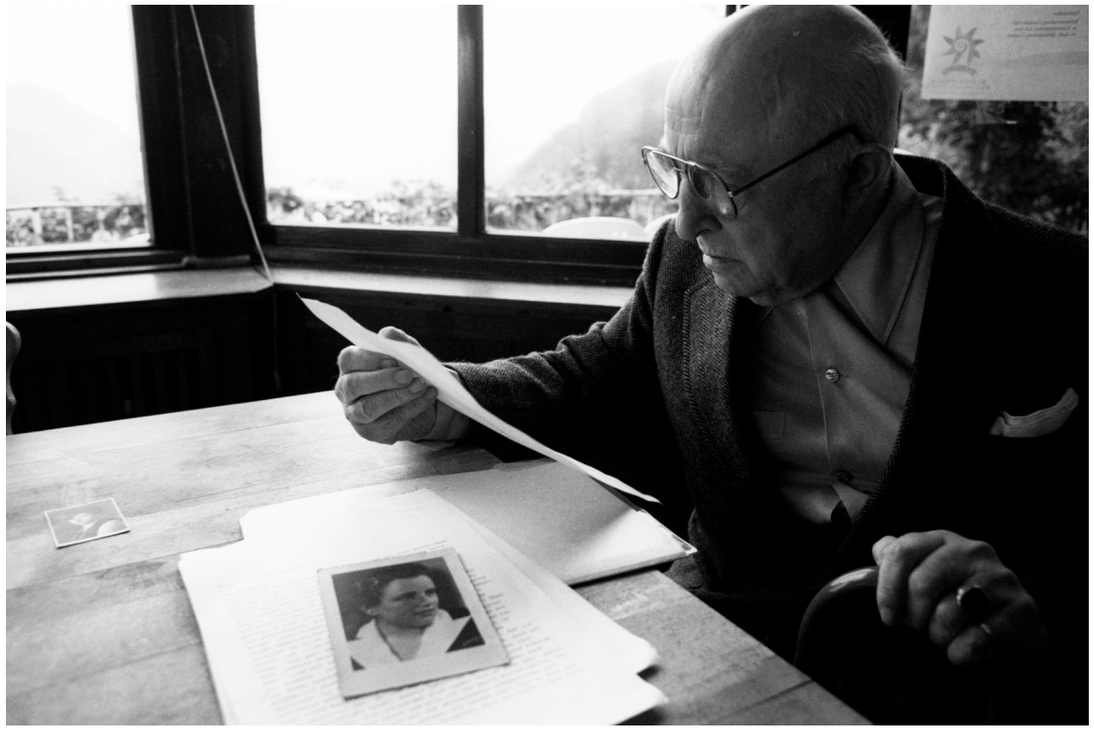
Gerda smiled. "Don't you worry. I'll be back for the harvest." Then she looked away from me and returned to her memories.

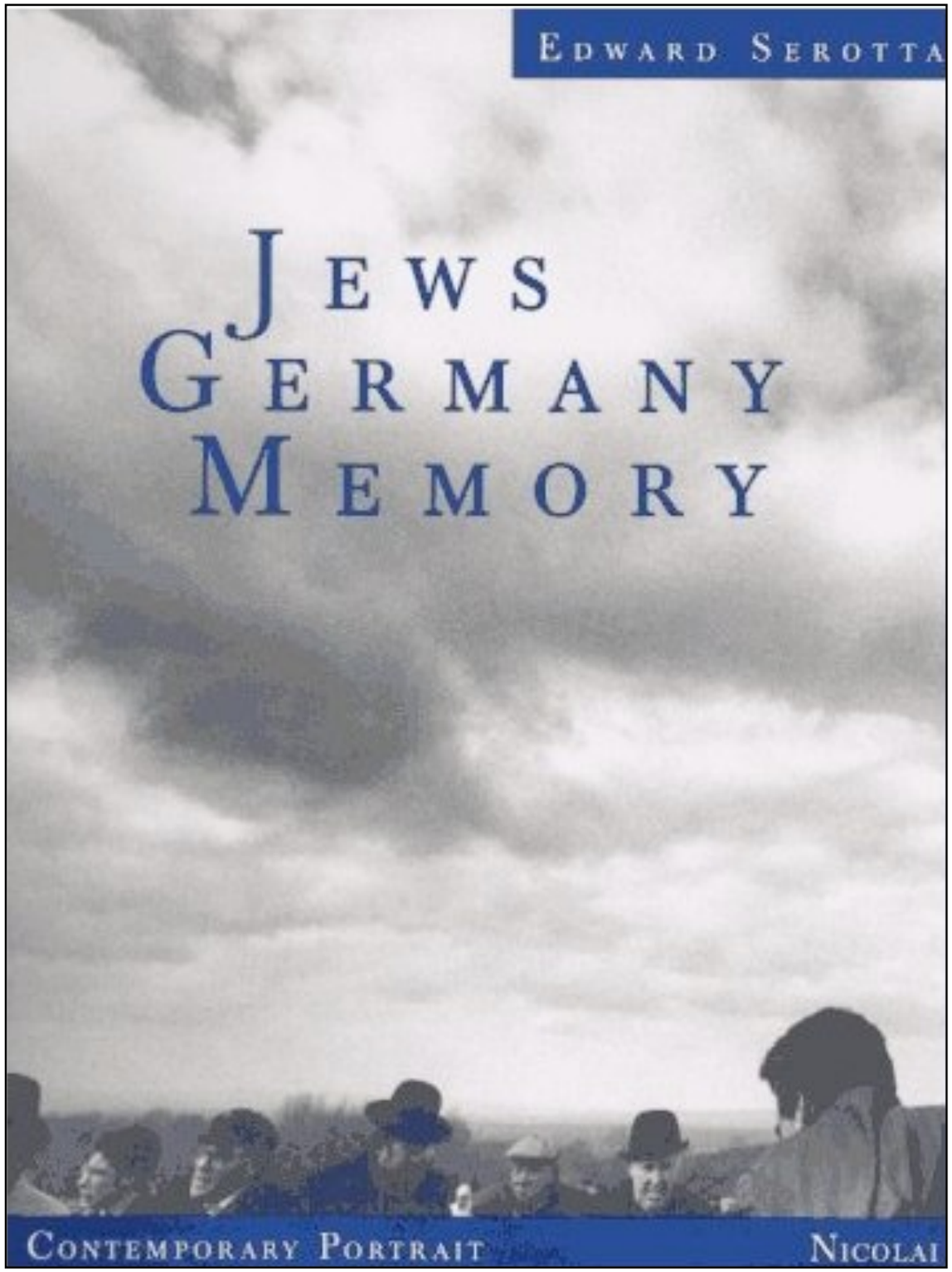
I started up the car and made my way through the poky tourist traffic of Zell, headed over the Hunsrück and picked up the autobahn for Mainz and Frankfurt. I turned north and shot toward Berlin.

I arrived after midnight. A week later, with film developed and contact sheets before me to jog my memory, I began typing out my notes, and I realized then that I had a final chapter for my book. I could not imagine a story that summarized Jews, Germany and memory more than this story.

A few weeks later Angelika sent me a fax from Frankfurt to tell me that Walter Kahn had died in a Florida hospital and his brother Hans had died a week later.

I phoned Ernst Kahn in Boca Raton, Florida to express my condolences and wrote a letter to Hannes Schmit in Wittlich and told him how sorry I was to hear that his friend Walter had died.





About the Author

Edward Serotta, director of Centropa, is an American-born, Vienna-based photographer, filmmaker and writer who has been specializing in Jewish life in Central and Eastern Europe since the mid-1980s.

Between 1991 and 1996 Edward Serotta published a trilogy of books, all combinations of pictures and stories: *Out of the Shadows* (1991), *Survival in Sarajevo* (1994), and *Jews, Germany, Memory* (1996), all of which have been translated into German.

Exhibitions of his photographs from these books have been exhibited in The International Center of Photography in New York, the Corcoran Museum in Washington, DC, the Martin Gropius Bau in Berlin and the Vienna Jewish Museum, among others.

Between 1996 and 1999 Edward Serotta produced four films for ABC News Nightline on Central European Jewry. He has written on Jewish issues in Germany, Hungary, Austria and Bosnia for the Washington Post, the Chicago Tribune, TIME, the Los Angeles Times, the London Independent and Die Zeit, and has contributed an essay on Jewish photography in Eastern Europe to the Oxford University Companion Guide to the Photograph (2006).

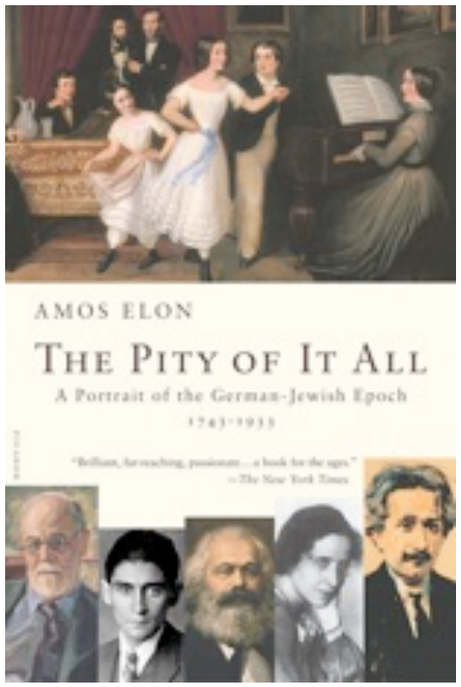
Since 2000, he has directed Centropa, which has been using old family photographs, instead of video, in its interviews with elderly Jews still living in Central and Eastern Europe.

Resource Center

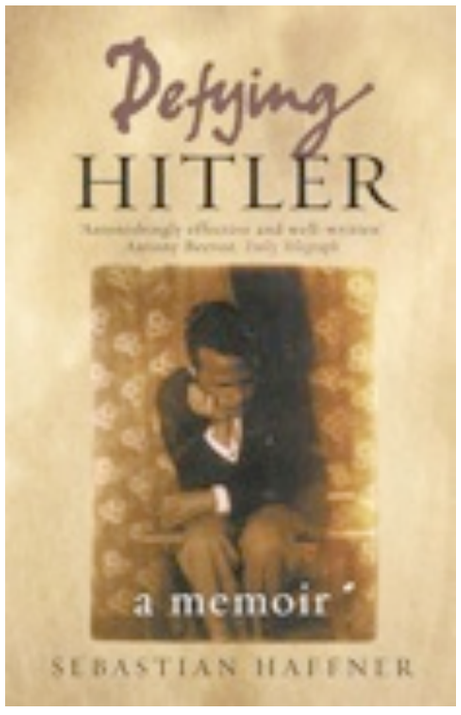
Provided by the educational team at Centropa.org

Suggested for further reading

The Pity of It All by Amos Elon is an excellent introduction in English to German Jewish history. Here is a link to the amazon page to order the book in English,. and this link is for an insightful review of Elon's book in The Guardian. Here is a poignant article about Amos Elon, a Viennese-born, Israeli journalist, written by Tony Judt in 2009, just after Elon died.



Defying Hitler, by Sebastian Haffner
When newspaper writer, editor and historian Sebastian Haffner died in 1999 at the age of 91, his son found a manuscript he had written in 1939, after he had fled Germany for England. Haffner, known for his best selling book, *The Meaning of Hitler* (English title) and other histories of Germany, had never thought to publish this very personal memoir. His son did publish it a few years later, and it soared to the top of the best-seller list, where it remained for 42 weeks.



What makes *Defying Hitler* (not really an apt title) so fascinating is that we do not see the Nazis from today's vantage point. We don't see Adolf Hitler as a crumpled, hysterical wreck in the bowels of his bunker. We see them and him, in all their strutting boorishness, just at the peak of their powers. Haffner's assessment of the German character rankled more than a few Germans, who insisted that he wrote the book--not in 1939--but shortly before his death, as he surely could not have been so prescient. The original manuscript was then submitted to exhaustive tests, which proves this elegant, short, and very well written and translated memoir was indeed written during the eye of the storm. That is why we would like all our participants to read it. The book really does show how so many people "went along to get along."
Here is a link to the book in English.

As you can imagine, browsing the web for German-Jewish history will lead you to sites that are almost exclusively about the Holocaust. It is not easy to find a single, reputable source on German Jewish history, yet we've found one that's very helpful. This online brochure, German Jewish History in Modern Times, 1600 - 1945, was produced by the Leo Baeck Institute of New York, and it is a summary of a massive four volume study on German Jewry.
We would also suggest you to watch these important films, which can be found on various internet sources.

Here are links to English language news sites on Germany

Deutsche Welle is a German-based news service.

Der Spiegel is one of Germany's most respected newsweeklies, and it has an excellent English language site.

More information on Rheinland Pfalz

Suggested Viewing

PRE-WAR GERMANY: WEIMAR CULTURE
One of the greatest films from pre-World War II Germany: Fritz Lang's masterpiece, *M*, starring Peter Lorre as a child murderer. The sets are remarkable--many of them shout Bauhaus--the cinematography is excellent. It is also one of the first films to deal with obsessions and compulsions. Because the Berlin police harass the entire criminal community of the city, it is the thieves, beggars and swindlers who hunt down the killer--and then try him. During his trial, Lorre screams, "You know why you do what you do. I don't know why I do these things.".

Movie clip from "M" directed by Fritz Lang

SECOND WORLD WAR, HOLOCAUST

Conspiracy is a well made and riveting 90 minute film about the infamous Wannsee Conference. It was produced by HBO and BBC. Directed by Frank Pierson, *Conspiracy* stars Kenneth Branagh, Stanley Tucci and Colin Firth.

It is based on, but does not exactly follow, the protocols from that meeting, which were discovered at war's end.

There's a reason for this: Adolf Eichmann had the conversations transcribed, and then rewrote them so that there would be no mention of mass murder--only "evacuation" and other such words. We know this from the exchange Eichmann had with the Israeli prosecutor Gideon Hausner.

Trailer from *Conspiracy*, directed by Frank Pierson

The Nazis: A Warning from History is arguably the finest documentary series on the Second World War ever produced. Written and produced by Laurence Rees by BBC and A&E, this six part series can be watched, one 48 episode at a time, on youtube. Note that there is a coding in each chapter, ep1 for episide one, ep2, etc. Here is a link on YouTube for episode 1.

Here is a chilling statistic. During the four decades of the GDR a country of 17 million, there were approximately 90,000 full time staff for the Stasi and 174,000 paid informers. During the twelve years of the Third Reich, with some 80 million inhabitants (including Austria and the Bohemian protectorate), there were only 30,000 paid informers. Why so few? Because, as Professor Robert Gellately points out in his searing study, *The Gestapo and German Society,* they weren't needed. So many people proved to be so willing to inform on their neighbors--free of charge--that looking for paid informers was practically redundant.

POSTWAR, CONTEMPORARY

We recommend *Goodbye Lenin,* directed by Wolfgang Becker and released in 2003. It is a tragicomedy of sorts, and without spoiling the fun, we can tell you this. It is in 1989 and the Berlin Wall still stands. Christiane is a hard line believer in the one party state. At a rally, she sees her son Alex protesting against the regime, has a massive heart attack and wakes up eight months later. By this time, the GDR is rapidly collapsing; re-unification is on its way. But the doctors tell Alex that any tiny shock will kill his mother. So Alex takes her back to their little East German style apartment, and with the help of his friends, virtually re-creates the GDR by producing fake news casts on the television, going through rubbish bins to find old GDR packages and bottles so he can clean them up and stuff them with foods she will be familiar with. Goodbye Lenin won the grand prize at the Berlin Film Festival in 2003 and became one of the country's biggest hits.

Goodbye Lenin, directed by Wolfgang Becker

Further suggested reading and viewing

Holocaust-related

The Holocaust, by Wolfgang Benz

Perhaps the best short study of the Holocaust we have come across. Concise and to the point. By one of Germany's leading scholars.

Bloodlands, by Timothy Snyder

Snyder is one of the most important historians working today and this new study is based on years of archival research in Poland, Russia, Lithuania, Germany and Ukraine. This book details how both Stalin and Hitler treated the lands between them--the Baltics, Poland and Ukraine, and how many people they shot, starved and gassed. A very powerful historical study. It is, in fact, one of the most important books written on the Holocaust in the past decade.

All or Nothing by Jonathan Steinberg

A portrait that compares German with Italian troops in five common war zones, most of them in the Balkans. The summary at the end is devastating. A very important book.

The Gestapo and German Society by Robert Gellately

Only two cities did not have their SS records destroyed, and Gellately explores the relationship between the unpaid informers and the SS. Not a pretty conclusion.

Ordinary Men, by Christopher Browning.

Truly a landmark study. This short book details how a group of reservists from Hamburg, many of which had exhibited no hardline Nazi tendencies, turned themselves into brutal murderers. There are very difficult chapters to read regarding atrocities, but these are what Browning uses to set up his conclusion.

Highly recommended: click here to read the transcript of a discussion between Daniel Goldhagen (Hitler's Willing Executioners) and Christopher Browning.

Second World War

Armageddon by Max Hastings

An excellent account of the war from the Allied side from the fall of Paris in August 1944 until the fall of Berlin in May 1945.

The Fall of Berlin by Antony Beevor, which is a companion piece to his Stalingrad. He and Hastings are among the our favorite military historians.

Jews and Germans

Dreams and Delusions by Fritz Stern.

Some excellent essays here. Stern's masterwork is *Gold and Iron,* the story of Bismarck and his Jewish banker, Gerson von Bleichröder.

The German Jewish Dialogue, edited by Ritchie Robertson.

A compendium of essays, articles, fiction on this always troubled relationship.

My German Question by Peter Gay

This is quite a good memoir of growing up Jewish in Germany while his *Freud, Jews and other Germans* contains some very prescient essays.

Books by Gershom Sholem

Nearly everything he wrote is worth reading; his letters are insightful and sharp. He never bought into the German-Jewish symbiosis and there are three essays in *Jews and Judaism in Crisis* that bristle with anger.

The Poet Dying: Heine's last years in Paris by Ernst Pawel.

A fine and very brief assessment of one of Germany's greatest poets. Written while Pawel himself lay dying.

Contemporary Fiction

Heroes Like Us by Thomas Brussig

A very funny novel by a highly successful young East Berlin novelist. He knows why the Berlin Wall came down.

The Invention of Currywurst by Uwe Timm

A well-crafted story of hiding out in Hamburg during the Allied bombing.

33 Moments of Happiness by Ingo Schulz.

Clever short pieces by a young German novelist. Extremely well received.

The Reader by Bernhard Schlink

This was met with much success in the US and in Germany. Serious literary reviewers ripped it apart as a thinly veiled attempt to paper over the sins of the past. We did not see that.

Jacob the Liar by Jurek Becker.

A genuinely moving novel of a young man in a concentration camp. By one of Germany's few important Jewish novelists who died much too young.

The Emigrants by WG Sebald's

This had hit the literary world by storm. A strange collection of stories and old postcards and pictures. Haunting, powerful.

Measuring the World by Daniel Kehlmann.

The hottest young German novelist going. His books are well translated and this is his tour de force.

Memoirs and reportage

The Author of Himself by Marcel Reich Ranicki.

The 'pope of German literature' for 20 years was a Jew who was on TV each week and had millions of viewers, who loved listening to him savage novels and novelists with gleeful abandon. This is his quite well written memoirs of growing up in Berlin and Warsaw. The postwar chapters will not interest you much unless you happen to love German newspaper politics.

What I saw by Joseph Roth:

Reports from Berlin, 1920-1933. For those of us who love Roth, here is a collection of his newspaper pieces. Still brilliant.

Films to rent

Holocaust/war-related

Underground—Hitler's last days.

The Counterfitters. Won the Academy Award for best foreign film.

Contempory

Wings of Desire

Wim Wenders' great, simply unmissable film.

The Lives of Others

Huge success and an Academy Award winner. The story of a Stasi spy who gets involved in the life of the man he is secretly recording.

The Miracle of Bern

A nice little film of postwar Germany and the soccer game of the century, a returning POW father and his son.

Headlong

Very well made modern film of troubled youth.

One, Two, Three

Do please rent it: Billy Wilder's dated but still wonderful cold war comedy. Jimmy Cagney's last starring role.

Run Lola Run

Germany's runaway international hit of a robbery gone wrong and told by three different people involved. Some have called it an extended music video but we at Centropa enjoyed it immensely.

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First interactive book Edition
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