

GERMAN CITY, JEWISH MEMORY

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NILS ROEMER

GERMAN CITY, JEWISH MEMORY

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The coexistence of archival collections in Jerusalem, Worms, and New York about Worms underscores the central contentions of this book concerning the dislocated shape of local memory. In addition to the existing archives in the narrow sense, text and images can be found in the library of early modern Jewry, in the reports of travelers, and in Jewish historical texts, travel accounts, city histories, tour guides, and various German, German Jewish, and foreign newspapers and archives.

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GERMAN CITY, JEWISH MEMORY

INTRODUCTION

In 1987, Chaim Herzog became the first Israeli president to tour the Federal Republic; he spent five days there in return for Richard von Weizsäcker's visit to Israel in 1985. Herzog commenced his tour at the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp before arriving in Worms in the company of the West German president. Once there, Herzog prayed in the city's synagogue, stood in front of the graves of Meir of Rothenburg and Alexander von Wimpfen, and recalled Rashi's lasting legacy. For him, the city of Worms, situated along the river Rhine in the Rhineland-Palatinate and otherwise known for the *Nibelungen*, German emperors, and Martin Luther, appeared as "a symbol of the great and tragic drama of European Jewish fate as it is symbolic of the remarkable interweaving—for better or worse—of German and Jewish life for a thousand years."¹

The inclusion of Bergen-Belsen and Worms on Herzog's itinerary paid tribute to the remembrance of destruction, the German Jewish legacy, and Germany's strides toward the mastering of an unmasterable past. The synagogue in which Herzog prayed had been reconstructed and rededicated only in 1961; the nine-hundred-year-old house of worship had been set ablaze on November 9, 1938, and was razed in the years following. At the same time, Herzog's visit retraced the path of generations of pilgrims, rabbis, scholars, poets, and tourists. Throughout the community's history, this assortment of visitors prayed and inspected the graves of rabbinical luminaries and martyrs and visited Worms's famous synagogue and Rashi Chapel.

This book traces the recollection and invention of local Jewish historical traditions in religious commemorations, historical writings, the preservation of historical monuments, museums, and tourism's transformation of "sites" into "sights." My analysis of a multiplicity of participants in the process of remembrance aims to blur the lines between high and low culture and to view the production of culture and identity as the outcome of numerous practices. Instead of privileging, for example, the circle of learned rabbis and scholars over local archivists, novelists, pilgrims, and tourists, I seek to capture the often varied and conflicted but also overlapping voices in which Worms was not only remembered but also experienced. These many custodians of Jewish sites



FIGURE 1. *Map of Germany.*

and artifacts constitute changing communities of memory over the course of a millennium.

Organized in a roughly chronological fashion, this work highlights the trajectory from medieval and early modern rituals of remembrance and inventions of local traditions to modern reconfigurations of the local as sites of memory and its fundamental transformation into destination cul-

tures of remembrance after the Holocaust. Chronicles, inscriptions, histories, liturgies, literatures, anthologies, travel guides, and archives have created a past that has been in turn reinforced by rituals, historical preservation, traveling, and public celebrations. | 3

My focus on a single community allows me to map out the changing sources of memory and practice over a long period of time in a city that became in fact increasingly peripheral to both German and Jewish history. Even during the Middle Ages, the Jewish communities of Speyer and Mainz overshadowed the Jewish community of Worms. Despite this marginality, however, Worms and its heritage remained vital to constructions of Jewish identities. The city and its Jewish population exemplify the importance of smaller regional communities for the larger history of German Jewry, however exceptional Worms's particular history may be.

Despite the radical changes brought about by recurrent expulsion and devastation, Jews' social advancement, the cultural and religious renewal of the modern age, and the community's destruction during the Holocaust, Worms's sites always displayed a remarkable degree of continuity. This significantly contributed to the construction of its distinct urban Jewish cultures, memories, and identities. During the Middle Ages, Worms was considered one of the foremost Jewish communities in Ashkenazic Europe, and it prided itself on its rabbinic leaders and martyrs. The advent of the First Crusade massacres illustrated the precarious status of the Jews and the extent of anti-Jewish hostility and violence. Yet the fate of the community paradoxically bound the surviving members even more to their location as they commemorated their martyrs there.

In the early modern period the third largest Jewish congregation in the Holy Roman Empire resided in Worms (after Prague and Frankfurt). Preservation, restoration, and innovation intermingled in the creation of a distinct local heritage that centered on rabbinical luminaries, religious martyrs, narratives about the community's mythical origin, and alliances to emperors, dukes, and local dignitaries. As the Jews of Worms delineated local Jewish customs and anthologized accounts about their past, they transferred oral traditions, rituals, and practices into books. Placed into circulation, these local traditions were able to cross denominational boundaries and attract pious and curious travelers as well as Christian scholars, historians of the city, and authors of travelogues. With the printing revolution, textual remembrance started to weaken the close relation between religious customs, memory, and place as the production of the local past increasingly occurred both inside and outside the city.

In the nineteenth century, Worms's physical remains, together with its textual traditions, were mobilized to bolster and shape Jewish local cultures. The rediscovery of medieval narratives about persecution and martyrdom, the unearthing of fantastic legends about some of the community's sages, and the preservation of the historical sites provided Worms's Jewish citizens with a powerful means of navigating their way between change and continuity. The local heritage production at the same time fashioned Worms's iconographic status and turned the city into a destination for tourists. By preserving their historical traditions and artifacts, the Jewish community of Worms both asserted and forged a particular local identity and contributed to the authentication of a far more complex construction of German Jewish culture during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Despite the erasure of its community and synagogue, the legacy of Worms's Jews was reactivated in the postwar period as local memory politics commingled and collided with the interests of Jewish survivors, displaced persons, and Jewish members of the U.S. Army, who visited the city to view its remains. With the synagogue destroyed and the survivors scattered around the globe, the restoration of the house of worship in a city without a Jewish community fundamentally reconfigured the marker of destruction and violence under the banner of restoration that initially silenced the memory of the Holocaust. Today, despite the absence of a Jewish community, the recreated past to which Herzog's visit paid homage has influenced Worms's local culture as the city continues to reinvent itself as a popular destination for Jewish and non-Jewish tourists alike.

This evolving local heritage infused and sustained the sense of a Jewish community beyond its shared religious norms, practices, and ordinances, while memory also in turn reconfigured new communities of remembrance, with both Jews and non-Jews inside and outside the city participating in the acts of preservation and recollection. Embedded in these changing communities, remembrance became a dynamic and fragile endeavor that not only preserved historical reality but also shaped and created it, as historical remnants became invested with new meanings. Some aspects of the community's past fell into oblivion, only to be retrieved at a later stage, while other important artifacts were preserved due to serendipitous findings. What remained from the past was, therefore, neither neutral nor natural. The recording of some events coincided with the silencing of others. Even a building like the synagogue had to be

created and preserved and thus became a conspicuous artifact embodying the ambiguities of remembrance.

Historical preservation and remembrance has attracted considerable scholarly attention, but the existing collaborative and multivolume works on German and French realms of memory operate within the arena of territorial-national or national-cultural concepts. The ambiguity of the central categories of French and German memory spaces is hardly explored, but a national perspective is constantly assumed, which in turn relegates Jewish sites to a few fleeting references. Moreover, in conceiving homogenous national frameworks, these otherwise pathbreaking works fail to consider the local modalities of the production of national heritages.²

Instead of conceiving memory as the result of a culturally cohesive local or national community of remembrance, this book places the investigation of local memory into networks of contacts and exchanges. As Doreen Massey has emphasized, places are not only constructed out of articulations of local social relations; their local distinctiveness is “always already a product of wider contacts; the local is always already a product in part of ‘global’ forces.”³ Situated on the Rhine River, Worms has always inhabited a space that, as the French historian Lucien Febvre argued during the 1920s, brought different cultures into contact and proximity.⁴ To limit remembrance therefore solely to the boundaries of the city, its rabbis, historians, and archivists would have to subscribe to the view that men and women are the makers of their surrounding culture, as Clifford Geertz has argued.⁵ Against the underlying perception of located, coherent cultures, a view that occludes the importance of relations, James Clifford points out that “the old localizing strategies” may obscure as much as they reveal.⁶

Following up on this insight, here I attribute a central role to the encounter and cooperation of locals and visitors in the formation and remembrance of the local Jewish heritage. Whereas on the surface, the Jewish burial ground and the Rashi Chapel in Worms appear to be mere constructions of stone, they derived their particular meaning from textual traditions and public actions in which both locals and visitors participated. Locally produced texts and actions, literary and historical narrations, archives, and a museum, as well as pilgrimage and tourism, all played central roles in forging a local heritage in Worms. Remembrance emerged also as a space of negotiation when Worms rebuilt its destroyed synagogue in the face of, at times, vocal opposition from several

6 | former members of the community who favored maintaining the rubble of the building as a site of memory for the segregation, expulsion, and annihilation of the community. Despite the presence of these competing voices, resistance to traveling to Germany waned and greater numbers of Jewish tourists began to readopt the reconstructed synagogue. It must be noted, however, that these Jewish travelers, as agents of their own agendas, invested the sites with different meanings. Although the rebuilt synagogue and the accompanying exhibition showcase seventeenth-century German Jewish life and culture, for many Jewish visitors, the absence of any current community presents an uncanny reminder of the city's involvement in Nazi atrocities and breaks through the surface in their personal travel accounts. At the same time, the close contacts between former members of the community and city representatives, and those members' donation of treasured artifacts to the archives and the museum, formed a reciprocal relationship. These newly established ties signify more than simple generosity; they are gifts that place an obligation upon the city to preserve them.

The notion of realms of memory as contact zones between otherwise geographically separated people who together invest in and negotiate the evolving meaning of monuments underscores the contested, conflicted, and conflicting nature of these local memory landscapes.⁷ Yet studying the invention of local heritage within a wider context does not diminish the importance of place. The presence of physical markers gives legitimacy and force to local tradition, as Maurice Halbwachs observed in his classical study on collective memory.⁸ The physical perseverance of the synagogue, the burial ground, religious artifacts, and historical documents anchored remembrance and bestowed continuity.

To medieval and early modern Jews, the presence of Jewish martyrs and learned rabbis made the cemetery a holy ground where God would more willingly receive prayers. During the modern period, the historical sites became locations in which observance of religious traditions ceased to exist or at least became radically altered. Yet the preservation and promotion of the city's local heritage constructed and defended Jews' local identity, legitimized change, and asserted their loyalties to their ancestors. In the postwar period, Worms functions as an *Erinnerungsort* (place of memory) for families with a long-standing attachment to a city, its holy sites, and its places of remembrance as well as for other Jews and Christians.⁹

In his groundbreaking work, Pierre Nora sees this transformation as

a shift from “environments of memory” (*milieu de memoire*) to “sites of memory” (*lieu de memoire*).¹⁰ A place of remembrance is hence the place of what has remained of an otherwise absent past. Nora contextualizes the shifting meaning of memory spaces within the paradigm of modernity and thereby overstates the homogeneous and stable nature of pre-modern remembrances, however, as well as the discontinuity and rupture that are implicit in the transition to modernity. In Worms, the traditions that had been associated with the synagogue and the cemetery evolved especially during the early modern period and became profoundly transformed in the course of religious reform during the nineteenth century.

Moreover, local remembrance and the importance of Worms as a destination for Jewish travelers exemplified the extent to which Jewish Diasporas comprised historical sites that conjured images of origin and belonging. As Yosef Yerushalmi has suggested, Jewish life in the Diaspora vacillated between concepts of exile and domicile—that is, an awareness of an unfulfilled state in dispersion and a profound sense of attachment to particular places.¹¹ During the Middle Ages, members of the community and pilgrims regularly visited the Worms graveyard, which had already acquired its religious significance. German Jewish travelers, as well as the famous Polish Jewish author Sholem Asch, sought in Worms lost traditions and the beginnings of Ashkenazic history. During the Weimar Republic, when urbanization had peaked and larger cities like Berlin became associated with rapid change and historical amnesia, small-town communities that prided themselves on their remnants of the past represented themselves as the last vestiges of a vanished world. During these years, Worms’s Jewish past offered reassurance to German Jews, who were becoming infatuated with rural communities and their traditional piety. What had served the community in the formulation of its distinct local heritage now provided Jews in Germany with a long-standing and ennobling ancestry.¹²

The importance of domicile, which had led Jews to invest their surroundings with tropes and metaphors from their religious traditions, contradicts a tendency in recent theoretical writing to celebrate the dislocated and disenfranchised members of a diasporic community. To these critics, Jewish history seems to oscillate between land and book.¹³ The German Jewish writer Heinrich Heine’s often-cited proverb about the Bible as “a portable homeland” helped these thinkers to untangle Jewish history from the Zionists’ territorialization of Jewish life.¹⁴ For the literary scholar Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi, its authors’ distance from the sacred

center of Jerusalem irrevocably marks Jewish literature in the Diaspora. Building on George Steiner, who deems texts to be Jews' only "natural" homeland, Ezrahi views homecoming as an illusionary, stifling alternative to the more vibrant and culturally productive life of the Diaspora, in which home becomes an exclusively literary engagement.¹⁵

At issue here is neither the binary view of Jewish history as center and periphery marked by expulsion and homecoming, nor an enchantment with the Diaspora that in effect mimics the Christians' interpretation of Jews' eternal damnation.¹⁶ More central to my argument is that in order to sustain this view of homeless Jews, the crucial role that place played in the formation of Jewish cultures and identities is minimized, or even reduced, to a fleeting illusion.

This view renders remembrance as a disembodied act of recollection. To be sure, in the Jerusalem Talmud, R. Simeon b. Gamliel commented that a memorial should not be erected for righteous persons, as "their words are their memorial."¹⁷ In line with this perspective, nineteenth-century German Jewish historians portrayed written and oral Jewish tradition as territory that Jewish communities inhabited in the Diaspora. Drawing upon the talmudic dictum "fence around the law" (*Pirke Avot* 1.1), the nineteenth-century Jewish historian Heinrich Graetz saw the Talmud itself as transforming every observant Jewish household into an extension of the Holy Land.¹⁸ This claim seems to substantiate a delocalized reading of Jewish remembrance. For this reason, at the beginning of the twentieth century, the Jewish journalist and novelist from Galicia, Karl Emil Franzos, searched almost in vain for monuments to famous German Jews.¹⁹ Their scarcity throughout Germany reflected the traditional Jewish opposition to making images of people, which prompted rabbis still during the nineteenth century to oppose plans to honor famous Jews with a monument.²⁰

However, this opposition did not translate into a disregard for physical structures and religious artifacts. Already during the Middle Ages the cemetery had acquired an important role for the local community and visitors in the commemoration of Jewish martyrs. Pious travelers chiseled their names on the backs of tombstones and the Rashi chair. During the nineteenth century, Jews from various communities donated money for the restoration of gravestones and historical sites, while travelers purchased postcards of those sites. With the experience of the Holocaust and the ensuing scarcity of tangible relics of the Jewish past, the evocative appeal of the sites in Worms as places of remembrance only intensified.



PLACE AND DISPLACEMENT OF MEMORY

The immediate postwar history of occupied Germany has often been described as a “zero hour,” marked as it was by a profound lack of memory and an inability to confront the Nazi crimes. Most Germans saw themselves as victims rather than victimizers, though this view has since been rightly challenged. Their remembrances did not form a coherent whole but instead displayed various inclinations within what Frank Stern has called the historic triangle of occupiers, Germans, and Jews.¹

In the midst of the many destroyed political and physical landscapes, Jews, who had been in hiding, soon resurfaced in several German cities. Others returned; large numbers of Eastern European Jews, in particular, sought safety under the Allied occupation. Approximately 300,000 Jews temporarily resided in Germany before most of them emigrated to America and Israel. They comprised survivors of the Final Solution, a small remnant of German Jews, and over a quarter-million East European Jewish “displaced persons,” or DPs. During the liminal postwar period up until the establishment of the two German states, Germans and Jews were placed “on exhibit” to journalists, delegates, and representatives. Questions about the renewal of Jewish life and the ownership of their former property became enveloped within local and regional German power structures, commanders of the Allied Forces, international Jewish organizations, and representatives of the nascent Jewish state.

In addition, returning to Germany remained anathema to many of those Jews who had managed to flee Nazi Germany. In July 1948, the World Jewish Congress declared at its first postwar assembly in Montreal, Canada, that Jews would never again set foot on the “blood-soaked German soil.”² While a rabbinical ban against living in Germany was never issued, it was widely held that living in Germany was, at best, a

tenuous affair. After a 1946 visit to the country, German Zionist Robert Weltsch observed, “We cannot assume that there are Jews who feel themselves drawn towards Germany . . . Germany is no place for Jews.”³ The first Israeli consul in Munich, Chaim Yahil, declared in the *American-Jewish Frontier* in 1951 that all Jews should in fact leave Germany. Even those who had reestablished Jewish communities felt they were merely part of a “liquidation-community” that lived in a “stopping-place between the camps and the grave,” as Moritz Abusch, an early postwar leader of Jews in Germany, graphically described it.⁴

On the other hand, some Jews both inside and outside of Germany took a keen interest in its postwar status, the reconstitution of its Jewish communities, and the cultural legacy of German Jewry. They came as individuals to revisit their former hometowns; as officials to assess the situation in Germany; as political representatives of various international organizations and institutions; and as tourists. Soon enough, Worms and its renowned Jewish historical sites attracted an intense interest among former members of the community, Jewish chaplains and other Jewish members of the Armed Forces, and many DPs. Mediated through their reports and articles, the desolate state of the destroyed synagogue and the remains of the former archive and museum became known to the wider Jewish public. The presence of these early visitors and returnees began the acts of preservation and rehabilitation that would become instrumental in shaping the remembrance of the Jewish past during a period in which almost nothing was done to remember Nazism and its victims at the former concentration camps in Germany.

The Jewish community of Worms had been destroyed. Its survivors were scattered across several continents, and its synagogue, many of its historical documents, and its torah scrolls torched (fig. 31). Only the ritual bath, a few remnants of the museum collection, and the cemetery had made it through relatively unscathed. Despite the prompt reconstitution of Jewish communities in Berlin, Munich, and Cologne, no such congregation reorganized in Worms. Already having confronted the difficult task of coming to terms with their new lives in Israel, South America, the United States, and the United Kingdom, most of the more than five hundred surviving former Worms Jews never did resettle there.⁵ Still, many contacted the city or even visited it at some point. Spurred on by family memories and recollections of the venerable community, these survivors all attempted in their own ways to reconnect with the city that had forcefully expelled them only a few years before. They corresponded among



FIGURE 31. *Photo of the destroyed synagogue (1945). Stadtarchiv Worms, Germany*

themselves as well, creating yet other Worms-centered networks of communication. These contacts built upon the “emergency committee” that had been established in the late 1930s in the United States by Rabbi Helmut Frank in Philadelphia and Elke Spies in New York to stay abreast of the situation of those who were still in Worms or had been transferred to the camps.⁶

As these former members exchanged information and mourned the destruction of their community, they seldom expressed an interest in returning there. While their *Heimat* appeared lost to them, its memory was not. In 1946, Hannah Arendt evoked this feeling in a poem in which she converted Rilke’s famous lines, “Lucky he who has a home,” into “Lucky is he who has no home; he sees it still in his dreams.”⁷ The often-disturbing memory of the former hometown emerged at the intersection of place and displacement, as Maurice Halbwachs observed in his studies of collective memory. Memories, he noted, “are attached to a place, coalesce, divide, become attached to one another, or scatter, as the case may be.”⁸ The breaking up of the various local and national communities of remembrance that had shaped the representation of Worms throughout the ages refashioned its sites of interest and import in various ways.

Rather than simply representing the past by acting as depositories of historical memory, these sites became reinvested with multiple meanings in the postwar period. Memory now operated as a process of representing and integrating the past into different contexts.

As the past held sway over the German Jewish survivors, the act of remembering Worms was both haunting recollection and programmatic obligation. To Erich Guggenheim, for example, whose family had resided in Worms since 1550 but fled to Brazil in 1934, Worms never stopped appearing in his dreams as “what it cannot not be in reality: My home/land (*Heimat*).”⁹ For Henry Huttenbach, writing many years later, the Jews of Worms had managed to maintain their sense of community. “Little Jerusalem dispersed,” as he called the survivors, “had not lost [its] sense of a common heritage.” Jewish Worms, while destroyed, “continues to enrich Jewish life through its dispersed exiles and their children.”¹⁰

In March 1945, former Worms resident Max Guggenheim, Erich’s uncle, who had arrived in Buenos Aires in 1939, published an article in a Jewish periodical in Chile informing his readers that the French army had reached Worms. During World War II, the Rhineland had been heavily bombed by the Allies, and Worms, like many other German cities, was left cratered and rutted. Without specific details about the destruction, Guggenheim was left to quote Jacob Rust’s seventeenth-century poem about the devastation inflicted upon the city by French troops in 1689: “Courage is sinking indeed with sorrow, / Because Worms is done, the worthy city . . . What was standing for a thousand years, / Is destroyed in a day.”¹¹

Guggenheim’s juxtaposition of the French impact upon Worms in the seventeenth century and the Allies’ part in its havoc during World War II underscores the relevance of history to his ongoing experience of dislocation. His choice of comparison would have been very meaningful to those who were intimately familiar with Worms’s history. Still, he preferred not to characterize the city solely as a victim of Allied air raids, whatever the larger tenor of the times, and recalled the destruction and dispersion of the Jewish community: “*Heimat* and existence have been taken from us—and alas how many had their lives taken.”¹²

Guggenheim cited the same line in a short autobiographical account in which he described his last trip to the partially destroyed synagogue in 1938 before his emigration to Chile. Guggenheim had recovered the old metal key from the *Aron Kodesh* and bequeathed it to the Bezalel National Museum in Jerusalem after the war, with the provision that it

would be returned to Worms once a Jewish community had reestablished itself there.¹³ The defeat in the surrender of the key to Jerusalem is belied by the hope in the renewal of Jewish life in Worms. Concurrent with the key's transfer, Michael Oppenheim in 1945 discovered the goblets of Worms's burial society and arranged for their shipment to the Jewish Museum in New York. In a letter to Oppenheim, Stephen Kayser of the Jewish Museum welcomed the arrival of the goblets, which, he wrote, enriched the collection of mostly newer objects. Such additions were all the more important insofar as the museum had, in the course of the Holocaust, acquired a new meaning as a "monument for the remembrance of the Jews of Europe," Kayser explained.¹⁴ The fate of the key and the goblets also indicates the ongoing scattering of Worms memorabilia around the globe in the immediate postwar years.

The foundation of German Jewish organizations around the world further cemented the dislocation of memory from the country itself. The Council of Jews from Germany, which had been set up toward the end of World War II by organizations of German Jews in Israel, England, and America, initially diverged with regard to its views on Germany. Hans Reichmann, representing the London Council of Jews from Germany, believed that the 1952 Luxemburg Reparation Treaty with the Federal Republic could allow Germany to become part of the council's cultural work. He proposed, among other things, the establishment of a Jewish museum in one of the old Jewish settlements like Mainz, Worms, Cologne, or Frankfurt. Reichmann, however, faced formidable opposition in the person of Siegfried Moses of the *Irgun Olei Merkas Europa* in Israel, who called on Jews to suspend all work in Germany and ridiculed Reichmann's proposal as a perpetuation of fantasies about a German Jewish symbiosis. By the end of 1955, the council had established the Leo Baeck Institute and its branches in Jerusalem, London, and New York as an institution outside of Germany that would be devoted to the task of keeping the memory of the German Jewish past alive.¹⁵

Despite the fundamental geographic shift of the centers of German Jewish life, Worms attracted the attention of many Jews in the immediate postwar period. In her programmatic 1955 survey of German Jewish and American Jewish history, the German Jewish historian Selma Stern, then residing in Cincinnati, testified to the importance of Worms. Comparing the historical consciousness of German and American Jews during the modern era, she reminded her English readers, "There was no chapel here where Rashi had taught, no memory book that told of sufferings and

persecution.” For her, German Jews’ “sharing in a common past in common traditions in turn produced a strong historical consciousness.”¹⁶

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Historical memory also resurfaced soon after the war, as the Jews of Worms provided information to various organizations surveying the fate of heirless Jewish property. The debates about this recovered cultural property provided a “touching footnote to the passing of the scepter of Jewish life,” in the words of Robert Liberles.¹⁷ During the war Jewish organizations had considered the future of things like community archives and Judaica collections. Whereas these recovery efforts initially aimed to rebuild Jewish life, they became transformed by both the destruction wrought by the Holocaust and the larger plans for the reconstruction of Jewish cultural strength, especially in America and Israel. In Germany, the debate centered on legal representation for Jewish interests regarding looted property. During a conference held in London in April 1943 under the auspices of the Jewish Historical Society of England, the eminent Anglo-Jewish historian Cecil Roth argued that all heirless cultural property should be placed in the custody of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem.¹⁸ In 1944, the Board of Deputies for British Jews instead called for the establishment of a Jewish trusteeship for each country liberated from Nazi or Axis control. This trusteeship was to represent the restitution or compensation interests of Jews in cases where property owners or heirs could not be located, or a Jewish community could not be restored.¹⁹ Preparing the groundwork for any future claims regarding Worms, the Jewish chaplains who had been in the city in 1945 supplied Roth with a short survey of its existing cultural remnants.²⁰

Similar efforts were put into motion in America already in 1941, when the American Federation of Jews from Central Europe was founded in New York City as the central representative agency of over thirty national and local organizations for victims of National Socialism from that region. The federation drafted lists of Jewish property and requested information, for example, from the former director of the Jewish museum, Isidor Kiefer, about the treasures of the Worms community.²¹ Dovetailing these initiatives, the Conference on Jewish Social Studies in America established the Commission on European Jewish Cultural Reconstruction in the summer of 1944 under the leadership of Jewish historian Salo Baron from Columbia University. Hannah Arendt, the German Jewish philosopher cum historian, led the research performed by this commission in 1944. In conjunction with the first director of the commission, Joshua Starr, she prepared the publication of comprehensive lists of Jew-

ish cultural property. Baron also turned to Isidor Kiefer for information about the belongings of the community.²² The publication of the commission's "Tentative List of Jewish Cultural Treasures in Axis-Occupied Countries" in 1944 duly included Worms's Jewish properties.²³ | 151

In 1947, the Jewish Restitution Commission (JRC) was recognized as an umbrella organization for various Jewish groups devoted to the task of restitution. The JRC collected information on Jewish artifacts and books from their office in Wiesbaden, from which the publicist Ernst G. Loewenthal, who had been active on behalf of the C.V. and the *Reichsvertretung* during the 1930s, corresponded with the city's archivist, Friedrich Illert, between 1949 and 1951.²⁴ To assess the situation on the ground, Professor Arendt, a refugee from Nazi Germany and now a visitor from the United States, traveled in Europe for six months between 1949 and 1950 and directed the operation that recovered about one and a half million volumes of Judaica and pieces of ceremonial art. In the course of her investigations, she went to Worms, where she detailed Illert's ongoing efforts to collect the community's historical documents, and his plans to rebuild the synagogue.²⁵

The JRC's work met with substantial opposition in Germany, where the newly established government either opposed the recovery of former Jewish belongings or had already begun to hand over Jewish property to recently restored Jewish communities. The JRC, as Hannah Arendt observed, had to proceed with negotiations on a community-by-community basis.²⁶ In addition to Bavaria, Worms, at the time still occupied by French forces, was also unwilling to hand over its Jewish archives. Confronted with Illert's resistance to parting with the collection, Arendt asked the archivist instead to microfilm substantial parts of it; she also requested copies of the Worms *Mahzor* upon her return to New York.²⁷

Despite Illert's former interest in the idea of casting the city of the *Nibelungen* as the birthplace of Nazism during the 1930s, he reinvented himself in the postwar years as the cemetery's rescuer who had safeguarded the remains of the synagogue and the archives. Within a carefully cultivated network of city representatives and former Jewish citizens, Illert became the postwar trustee of Jewish interests. He promoted himself (and Worms) through a combination of fact and fiction, making the truth difficult to pinpoint. According to a popular apocryphal account, the *Reichsführer*-SS and chief of the German police, Heinrich Himmler, had inspected the Jewish cemetery during the 1930s. Illert claimed that Himmler had placed the cemetery under his direct protection at that

time, should it ever be endangered.²⁸ Whatever the truth of it, the account quickly spread unquestioned, not least because Illert's role seemed to validate Jewish faith in the miraculous survival of important remnants of their past. Thus a 1956 article in *Newsweek* about the possible reconstruction of the synagogue spurred the German Jewish newspaper in New York, *Aufbau*, to announce that it was only thanks to Illert that several remnants still existed at all.²⁹

The city's renewal of interest in its Jewish treasures did not go unnoticed. The *Poale Zion* newspaper in Germany, which favored the transfer of Jewish artifacts to a central archive in Jerusalem, saw a financial interest in Worms's withholding of them.³⁰ Undaunted, Illert continued to defend the Judaica collection when a former Jewish citizen of Worms, Julius Schack, was authorized by the Hessian interior ministry in May 1948 to transport Jewish documents and a torah scroll from Worms to Israel. Illert successfully discouraged Schack's attempts, both at the time and later on, to have the Judaica moved to Israel.³¹ Likewise, Illert frustrated Franz Landsberger, a professor at the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati and former director of the Jewish museum of Berlin, when, in February 1950, he attempted to acquire parts of Worms's archival collections. When Landsberger requested the loan of Worms's famous *Mahzor*, Illert turned him down, pointing out that the JRC had a copy of the *Mahzor* he could borrow instead. Landsberger reiterated his interest and even offered to purchase certain items from him, but Illert could not be persuaded.³²

By the late 1940s, after having fended off the initial attempts to relocate the archival collection and its cherished manuscripts, Illert began to preserve or collect Worms's extant physical sites, ritual objects, and archives. Motivated primarily by the desire to eradicate evidence of the Nazis' destruction, his efforts likewise buttressed his claim that the markers of Worms's Jewish past, whatever their nature, should remain in Worms. Illert also pointed to the temporary presence of former Jewish citizens, regional and national politicians, Jewish members of the armed forces, and Jewish displaced persons in Worms as his potential audience. Their ongoing visits to the city proved the reverence in which the local sites were held around the world. While these guests at times sought the transfer of some of the community's belongings as well, Illert viewed this as proof instead of their relevance for Worms.

Illert also began to hope that a future reestablishment of a Jewish community would be possible in Worms, despite the reality of the situation,

and that his work might contribute to it.³³ Certainly there was interest. Looking back at his father's restoration of the synagogue in 1961, Georg Illert, who succeeded Friedrich as the director of the cultural institute of the city of Worms, related that immediately after the American troops' arrival in March 1945, the first Jews came to inquire about the historical monuments. These guests, including former members of the Jewish community, came and went, however, because Worms was no longer the place of living Jews, as one Jewish newspaper contended. Former Jewish burghers of the city wrote Friedrich Illert to inquire about the status of their family tombstones as well.³⁴ Karl Darmstaedter, who was familiar with Worms from a trip during the Weimar Republic era, was keen to find out whether Rothenburg's torah scroll still existed.³⁵

The local newspaper reported on former community members' stopovers in Worms, cultivating a sense of connectedness between the city and its former Jewish citizens. In the early 1950s, Kiefer told those Worms Jews who had fled to Chile about his recent trip to the city, where he met Illert and toured the cemetery and the destroyed synagogue. According to the headline in the local press, Kiefer had remained faithful to his hometown and not severed his ties to the city.³⁶ Further reinforcing the notion of a citizenry beyond the boundaries of the city itself, the *Wormser Zeitung* also was careful to note the eightieth birthday of Alfred Langenbach, then living in London. Langenbach's "move" (*Übersiedlung*) had not severed his ties to his hometown, where he frequently vacationed to meet up with "wartime comrades." This reference was more than misleading; it promoted the essential message that Langenbach, a refugee from Nazi Germany, was a "good friend of his *Heimat* in Worms."³⁷ Features on Jewish Worms that appeared in the journal of Worms's high school and in the local historical association's periodical fulfilled a similar function.³⁸

Among Worms's postwar Jewish visitors, as mentioned previously, were a considerable number of DPs from nearby camps in Bensheim, Lampertheim, and elsewhere. Inspired by the Partisan song written after the Warsaw ghetto uprising in 1943, the *she'erit ha-pletah* (surviving remnant) announced these people's survival to themselves and to the world: "We are here," it stated simply.³⁹ This conflicted combination of triumph and emotional and spiritual despair contributed to the DPs' heightened mobility overall, as Koppel Pinson observed in 1947.⁴⁰ The survivors set up a "Central Historical Committee," created by the Central Committee of Liberated Jews in the United States Zone of Occupation in Germany

in December 1945, to coordinate local efforts to document Jewish life under the Nazis. At the same time, members of the camps chronicled the destruction of German Jewry in their newspapers.⁴¹ Toward this end, inspecting sites of destruction in places like Worms provided the Jewish DPs with firsthand experience of this recent history while making their survival more immediately visible to the German population.

Among those who came to Worms were Orthodox Jews, who most likely traveled from DP camps such as Föhrenwald, Lampertheim, and Bensheim.⁴² These Hasidim made up a small part of the Jewish survivors with temporary homes in the British and, especially, U.S. zones. They were part of a transitory and highly mobile society that nevertheless left its mark upon Germany, and particularly upon Worms.⁴³ Among the Hasidic Worms returnees were students of Rabbi Benzion Halberstadt, who had been killed by the Nazis in 1941.⁴⁴ For example, Lampertheim, situated between Mannheim and Darmstadt, housed over 1,200 DPs at its peak and boasted a significant library, an elementary school, a religious school, and its own newspaper, *Frayhayt*. Its Orthodox DPs were known to cross the Rhine regularly and go to Worms's Jewish lane, where they came upon the Rashi gate, the Levy synagogue, the ritual bath, and "a pile of stones and soil" that represented the destroyed old synagogue but evoked these visitors' memories of a ruined Warsaw. Together, the destruction of the two communities represented the "hurban [destruction] of the entire European Jewry."⁴⁵ Having arrived without a camera, the group made contact with a German photographer, who posed them in front of the damaged but still erect Levy synagogue (fig. 32). Led by a representative of the UNRRA (United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration), the group viewed the city museum, where they inspected remnants of the destroyed synagogue and the archive. With the help of members of the Israel Agency and a rabbi, the group deciphered some of the Hebrew inscriptions before they progressed to the cemetery, where they assembled for another photo at the entrance (fig. 33). News about the Jewish guests traveled fast, and Illert caught up to them at the cemetery as well, equipped with the still existing *Mahzorim*, and told them about how he had saved some materials from destruction.⁴⁶

Other frequent Jewish visitors to Worms included students from the Frankfurt Talmud Torah School, who annually mourned the ruins of the synagogue, and students from the Heidenheim DP camp's Klausenburger Hasidim yeshiva. For these visitors, Worms, with its Jewish cemetery, came to represent the "wailing wall of the twentieth century," one



FIGURE 32.

*Jewish displaced persons
outside of Levy synagogue
(1946). Stadtarchiv
Worms, Germany*



FIGURE 33.

*Jewish displaced persons
outside the cemetery
(1946). Stadtarchiv
Worms, Germany*

German Jewish newspaper noted.⁴⁷ As these Jews wrote about their tours of the city, they helped to familiarize the larger Jewish public with its once famous sites and inscribed the desolation into a narrative of destruction. They also provided Illert, as mentioned above, with more ammunition in his battle over the question of ownership of the Jewish community's belongings. To that end, Illert always tried to make contact with Jewish guests, exchange addresses, and even join in their photographs.⁴⁸

Other Jewish visitors included a Leo Baeck student named Steven Schwarzschild, who went to Berlin in 1948 to temporarily take over the role of community rabbi. For him the experience of Worms was ambivalent at best. Taken around by a city guide, Schwarzschild was offended by the offer of photographs of the destroyed synagogue. He found to his dismay that the museum of Worms had become a "German museum," in which he had to pay admission to acquire a picture of a synagogue that "Germans" had destroyed. By contrast, the cemetery seemed less "tainted"—numerous stones and candles that had been placed on tombstones were comforting signs that other Jews had been there too. He joined many other visitors in celebrating the almost timeless appearance of the cemetery, which seemed to capture the memory of a thousand years as "a beautiful, and, at the same time, defiant picture."⁴⁹

American soldiers also comprised a significant part of these early tourists. When in 1945 Major Max A. Braude, an Orthodox chaplain from Chicago who was stationed at the Seventh American Army Headquarters in Heidelberg, came to Worms, he inquired about the fate of the Jewish archives and was apparently taken to the remains by Illert. The *Aufbau* article that describes his visit also notes that many more of the cherished artifacts had survived than had originally been assumed.⁵⁰ Some of the American Jewish soldiers who came to Worms also conducted religious services in which they used some of the extant religious objects of the former Jewish community. As Illert reported, other visitors soon followed upon the "stream of rabbi tours":⁵¹ they inspected the *Mahzor*, the torched torah scrolls and *Wimpeln*, the privileges from emperors, and the silver ritual objects. They looked at the Rashi chair and asked if they could take a little bit of the stone with them. In the cemetery, they sought out the tombstones of the sainted rabbinical figures Maharam and Maharil. Some of them lit candles and placed written supplications upon the graves. At times, they sang psalms and other parts of the liturgy, both in the cemetery and at the site of the destroyed synagogue.⁵²

Among those American soldiers was the former executive secretary of the Centralverein, Bruno Weil, who had emigrated to America in 1935. In 1948, Weil wrote about his inspection of the old Worms cathedral, from which the swastikas had been chiseled off, though remnants of the Hitler eagle were still visible. Attracting considerable attention from the locals, he then made his way to the former synagogue in an American military vehicle. Known to Jews around the world “as a particularly holy place,” the site, Weil believed, could serve as a reminder of Nazi atrocities. Before he departed, Weil took two pieces of the rubble and left wondering whether the synagogue might be rebuilt, either at its original location or in America, where many German Jews had found a new home.⁵³

Jewish members of the American armed forces did not coincidentally stumble over Worms; many came with a sense of purpose, as well as with the newly released version of Marvin Lowenthal’s pre-war Jewish travel guide *A World Passed By*. The National Jewish Welfare Board in the United States, which was also responsible for the recruitment of Jewish chaplains under the leadership of Rabbi Philipp S. Bernstein, had republished it in 1945.⁵⁴ The booklet supplemented the common armed forces resource *A Pocket Guide to Germany* as part of the National Jewish Welfare Board’s program of religious, cultural, and educational services for Jewish servicemen.⁵⁵ Frank Weil, the president of the board, wrote that *A World Passed By* was to be offered to Jewish soldiers “at the cessation of the hostilities on the European front,” and he recommended visiting “some of the places so charmingly described by Marvin Lowenthal.” These places would give readers “much enrichment and enjoyment,” but Weil noted that the traveler “may not be able to see all the places . . . [because] some of them may have been destroyed.”⁵⁶

In his own foreword to the new edition, Marvin Lowenthal announced that the book was essentially unaltered and that the descriptions reflected the status of Jewish historical sites before the war. He did rewrite some sections, however, and left out Spain, Czechoslovakia, and Poland, since members of the American armed forces would not be traveling there. He reminded his readers that every historical relic they would encounter represented a “token of one of the greatest and lengthiest struggles for liberty in the annals of mankind.” This view of historical remnants as reminders of the struggle for liberty established the rationale for the Americans’ interest and protection. Lowenthal made the connection even clearer when he declared that American forces were carrying on this fight for liberty, which would eventually usher in a new period of

freedom for the Jews, Europe, and all of humanity.⁵⁷ In his treatment of Germany, Lowenthal observed that it was “difficult to know if any relics of the sixteenth century of Jewish life in Germany survived; and mention is made of only the outstanding monuments—standing, that is, before Hitler seized power.” The section on Worms remained unchanged.⁵⁸

Responding to the interest in the city’s history, Illert sought to accommodate visitors by publishing a short booklet on Worms and its historical sites in English as early as 1945. In it he reported briefly on the *Judengasse* in the northeastern section of the old town center, mentioned the cemetery in passing, and observed that the synagogue had been destroyed a few years earlier without giving any more information. He was also quick to point out that the Rashi chair, manuscripts, torah scrolls, and communal archive had survived, and that the ritual bath buried under the rubble of the destroyed synagogue would soon be unearthed again as well.⁵⁹ Guidebooks like Illert’s introduced travelers and locals alike to a city that no longer existed, linking the devastated landscape to a past that had vanished. A similar portrayal of Worms came out in 1949 from Andre Soutou, a French author probably stationed in Germany. In this tour guide, rebuilding the city is captured as a process that “heals Worms little by little from its inflicted wounds.”⁶⁰ The guide reprints photos of destroyed buildings and monuments in the context of ongoing rebuilding work, and unlike Illert’s guidebook, Soutou’s travel guide included a picture of the rubble of the razed synagogue. While guides like this charted the destroyed landscape, the visual representation of the demolished synagogue was rather exceptional as it served as a reminder of the destruction of the Jewish community; all of the other guides to the city filled this space instead with photos of the Rashi gate.⁶¹

These tour guides anticipated growing numbers of tourists from the United States in general as the result of the opening of the German Tourist Information Office in 1950 in New York and, soon thereafter, branches in San Francisco, Chicago, and other North American cities as well. The increase in American tourism propelled a similar surge in Jewish traveling overall. This was evident with the publication, beginning in 1954, of an annual Jewish travel guide (in this case by the Anglo-Jewish newspaper *Jewish Chronicle*).⁶² Similarly, a rather exceptional and short-lived German guide appeared that included excerpts of speeches against antisemitism by West German President Theodor Heuss, articles about Jewish institutions and communities, and advertisements from various German companies like Mannesmann and Mercedes.⁶³ Moreover, Ger-

man tourist activities were also being promoted again. Already by 1947, several German tourist offices had opened in occupation zones in Württemberg, the Rhineland, Westphalia, Bavaria, and other regions.⁶⁴

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This confluence of official tourism, political observers, and Jewish pilgrims led Arendt to write in 1950 that Worms had become “a shrine of Jewish pilgrimage,” as several German Jewish and DP newspapers likewise publicized the Jewish sites.⁶⁵ In *La Vie Juif*, the Hungarian banker and Jewish art historian Ernest Namenyi, who had migrated to Paris in 1949, wrote about his trip to the city of Rashi in the Rhineland. Given the absence of Jews in the city, Namenyi observed pilgrims who collected stones in Worms.⁶⁶ In 1953, the American German Jewish *Aufbau* reported that every year, Jews from all over the world went to Worms to commemorate its cultural importance over a span of nine hundred years. Moreover, the newspaper related that in light of the great interest in the city’s Jewish landmarks, a plan to rebuild the destroyed synagogue was slowly starting to take shape. A few years later, the *Herald Tribune* and the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* also framed Worms’s Jewish sites as tourist destinations.⁶⁷

The occurrence of antisemitic cemetery vandalism in Worms therefore now threatened the refashioning of the city as vital to Jewish memory, the ongoing work of reestablishing contact with its former Jewish citizens, and the rebuilding of the city’s historical sites. Speaking at the 1949 Heidelberg conference, convened to review the situation of Jews in Germany, the U.S. High Commissioner for Germany, John McCloy, characterized Germans’ attitude toward antisemitism as the “touchstone and test of Germany’s progress.”⁶⁸ Reports by the German Jewish historians Eva Reichmann, who resided now in England, and Hannah Arendt despaired of Germany’s high level of anti-Jewish sentiment.⁶⁹ Antisemitism in the form of cemetery vandalism became prevalent enough during the late 1940s to compel the Wiener Library in London to monitor it.⁷⁰ At one point, the *Jewish Chronicle* featured a front-page story about the recent defacement of the graves in the Jewish cemetery in Worms. Confronted with national and international inquiries about the extent of the destruction, Illert nevertheless insisted that the newspaper reports had been exaggerated.⁷¹

The news nevertheless represented more than an embarrassment and threatened to potentially unravel Illert’s ambitions at a time when the city was working hard to restore its former physical appearance after Allied air raids had reduced Worms’s central marketplace to rubble and

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destroyed most of its factories. Like many other German cities, Worms sought to recreate historical continuity by restoring its historic buildings and celebrating its past. In 1948, Cologne celebrated the seven hundredth anniversary of the laying of the foundation stone of its cathedral, and in Frankfurt the Paulskirche was reconstructed to commemorate the centennial of the Frankfurt national assembly.⁷² In Worms, to gain the support of the citizenry, the local government exhibited plans for the reconstruction to take place between 1945 and 1949, whereby a consensus emerged to retain the old urban pattern of the city. During the 1950s, the sense of a recovered city began to take hold.⁷³ As the reconstruction got underway, the churches took priority, as they represented the more striking and visible markers in the city's silhouette. Later editions of Illert's guide, while still noting the destruction, no longer featured pictures of ruins.⁷⁴ Of course, the restoration of these religious sites buttressed the city's symbolic association with a Christian European tradition, for the most part, and city planner Walter Koehler, who had been a member of the NSDAP since 1933, assembled plans that did not include the synagogue.⁷⁵

It was thus left to the archivist Friedrich Illert to collect, preserve, and even restore Jewish historical landmarks. Aided in the coming decades by newly elected Social Democratic mayor Heinrich Völker, who assumed his post in 1948, the rebuilding of the synagogue eventually took place. Under Völker's tenure, the city erected a monument to the victims of fascism, though it displayed the all-too-common problem of neglecting to specifically refer to the mass murder of European Jewry.⁷⁶ Even before Völker, however Illert had the tacit support of the city's officials, and from the beginning, he showed a preference for the preservation of the medieval and early modern heritages. He was not too concerned about the nineteenth-century Levy synagogue, then, which was bulldozed in 1947.⁷⁷

As Illert began his monumental task, several Jewish tourists also expressed their shock about the damage caused by the air raids and wondered about the possibility of restoration.⁷⁸ In response to these inquiries, Illert asked the mayor's office in June 1945 to reinstate the old cemetery attendant and began lobbying already the next year for the reconstruction of the cemetery.⁷⁹ The finance ministry of the city endorsed Illert's requests in 1946 but was forced to conclude that there was simply no money available.⁸⁰ Soon afterward, during a public meeting of the city magistrate in December, a member of the conservative Christian Demo-



FIGURE 34. *Photo of the erected portal (1949). Stadtarchiv Worms, Germany*

cratic party stated that Nazis had demolished several tombstones in the Jewish cemetery, which needed repairing in order to “eradicate a Nazi mark of shame.”⁸¹ The following year, Illert reported to Isidor Kiefer that the restoration of the cemetery had begun; the work would continue into the late 1950s.⁸²

These earlier efforts at restoring the cemetery were pure works of preservation as well as means of restoring access to a vital component of Worms’s tourist market. Thus, an article in the journal of the local historical society joined the travel guides in publicizing the existing cemetery as a tourist site. In addition, Otto Böcher, a student of theology, embarked on his research into the community, its synagogue, and the cemetery in 1955. In 1958, he produced the first guide devoted to all aspects of the old Jewish graveyard; it would be republished in many later editions.⁸³

At the same time, Illert carried on a frequent correspondence with Kiefer, who supported the rebuilding of the synagogue.⁸⁴ In February 1946, Illert reported that he had secured all of the important remnants of the synagogue’s architecture and inscriptions and deposited them in the museum for the future reconstruction of the building.⁸⁵ By the end of

1947, Illert believed that the reasons for the restoration of the synagogue were self-evident, as an act of both reconciliation with Jews and preservation of a historic monument.⁸⁶ Nevertheless, following the opening of the *mikvah* in 1947 and the erection of the northern portal of the synagogue in 1949 (fig. 34), work ceased until 1956, when funds finally became available. At that point, city tour books were taking it upon themselves to inform readers that the re-erected synagogue's portal had given the damaged building a slightly new appearance, which they hoped would usher in the complete rebuilding of the synagogue.⁸⁷

The increasing sense of local expectation regarding the rebuilding of the synagogue resonated with a German political culture that displayed an avowed philosemitism. When the historian Eleonore Sterling, an erstwhile student of Frankfurt school philosopher Max Horkheimer, was asked to write entries on Jews and Judaism for the venerable German encyclopedia *Der Brockhaus*, she was told by the editors to place an image of the Worms and Saarbrücken synagogues alongside her text. She refused, arguing that these illustrations would be tantamount to falsely presenting Germany as again “covered with beautiful new synagogues—as if nothing had happened.” If the *Brockhaus* wanted to showcase Worms's synagogue, then they ought to mention in a caption that the synagogue had been destroyed, Sterling contended in a letter to the German Jewish medievalist Guido Kisch.⁸⁸

This tense exchange over the editorial policies of an institution of German middle-class education highlights the intermingling of the Jews' veneration for the Worms synagogue with an ambivalent German politics of memory. Germans' attempt to master their past, however, would become even more conflicted in the following years, as the city indeed pursued the rebuilding of the synagogue to forge continuity and recreate a sense of normality for itself. Local and national German initiatives collided with the interests of the Jewish survivors, who vigorously debated the plans for the synagogue among themselves and with city authorities. Moreover, the survivors continued to invoke a past that was partly veiled in the official process of rebuilding. Remembrance therefore became a space of fraught negotiations.