

Preserving the humanity of the Holocaust

Pitt archivist helps tell story of French Jews sent to Auschwitz

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By Peter Smith / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

After Nazi Germany conquered France in 1940, it set in motion the bureaucracy of persecution and ultimately state-sponsored murder.

Through the collaborationist French government, it required all Jews to report to local authorities for registration. The registration forms included names, addresses, dates of birth, nation of origin and other details, accompanied by black-and-white photos.

Now, copies of dozens of those same files are on display at Temple Emanuel in Mt. Lebanon, documenting the Jewish population of one French city, Amiens, a majority of whom were eventually sent to their deaths at Auschwitz.

The exhibit aims to reverse the dehumanizing nature of the records by retrieving individual names, photos and biographical details from historical obscurity.

The documents had sat in the national archives of France for decades before David Rosenberg of Mt. Lebanon, a retired University of Pittsburgh archivist, studied them and brought them to the wider attention of residents in Amiens, located in northwestern France.

“This was one of my goals, to make it less a matter of general history and more a concrete expression of what happened to real people, their neighbors and fellow citizens,” Mr. Rosenberg said.

France has long honored the heroism of the French who resisted Nazi rule. But in recent decades it also has confronted the reality that many citizens and officials submitted to German occupation and collaborated in suppressing the Jews.

Mr. Rosenberg said he has worked with town officials, schoolteachers and residents who have

been eager to learn more of their history. Mr. Rosenberg helped them create and dedicate a memorial to Holocaust victims near where a historic synagogue once stood. He has made copies of the historical documents, archived in Paris, more easily accessible for local residents.

High-resolution photographs of the files now line the walls of the exhibit, designed by his daughter, Cincinnati artist Lydia Rosenberg.

Viewers learn stories such as that of Albert and Victoria Behar, whose fabric store was burned in the German invasion and who apparently ran their business out of a truck before they were deported to their deaths in 1944.

And there's the harrowing story of Renee Louria, a young woman who was deported in 1944, gave birth to a son who she said was soon murdered by the Nazis. She survived a brutal ordeal in Auschwitz and other sites, returned to Amiens after liberation and gave a detailed interview to a local journalist who wrote that it was "exceeding in horror, in sadism, all .. that we could imagine."

Mr. Rosenberg, 74, has become such a regular visitor to Amiens that he's viewed as part of the community — the "most Amienois of Americans," a newspaper said.

He's been visiting Amiens since 1974, when he began research for his dissertation as he earned a doctorate in history from Yale University. He studied an earlier persecuted religious minority, the 16th century Protestants known as Huguenots.

The focus of his research was on the kinds of people and occupations that were more likely to become Protestant.

"There's a continuity to why I studied Protestants and why I studied Jews," said Mr. Rosenberg. "I realized I had written a whole study without really writing about what happened to the people. It was on sociological theory, which is fine if you're looking at general causes. But I experienced a frustration," knowing little about the people beyond their signatures and tantalizing references in parish registries.

So even as he embarked on a career as archivist at Pitt, he returned to Amiens whenever he could, researching those individual lives and publishing in scholarly journals.

On one trip in 1995, he went to the local synagogue's Rosh Hashana service, where he noticed a plaque dedicated to the Jewish deportees of Amiens. That planted the idea for research into this topic, which he began in earnest after retiring in 2008.

Later Mr. Rosenberg saw a panel discussion on YouTube about France's archives detailing the confiscation of Jewish property. An archivist described it as "huge, detailed, morally difficult," he recalled.

On a research trip in August 2014, he had a look at those microfilmed archives for himself, focusing on those pertaining to Amiens and environs

"In three days I was amazed at how much I was able to find out, not only about the confiscation of Jewish property and the takeover of Jewish businesses but about other things."

He found a connection between the Amiens experience and that of a notorious episode of French collaboration with the Nazis: the July 1942 roundup in Paris of thousands of Jews who were sent to death camps.

Today, the French hold somber annual commemorations of the Vel d'Hiv roundup, following the tone set in the 1990s by then-President Jacques Chirac, who acknowledged the French role in the atrocity.

"I had attended the one in Amiens for a few years," Mr. Rosenberg said.

But when Mr. Rosenberg found that a similar roundup of foreign-born Jews took place around the same time in Amiens, he let residents know this history involved their town as well, not just Paris.

The town had, in fact, erected a memorial honoring Jews lost in the Holocaust, but it was in an out-of-the-way square and had some of the details wrong. He worked with officials to develop a more prominent and accurate one next to the former synagogue.

He said residents and officials have received the information well.

Florence Politis of Paris said she and her brother have "deep gratitude" to Mr. Rosenberg.

Their mother, Ginette Hirtz Schulhof, was a young woman when she evaded a 1944 roundup of other Jews with a daring rooftop escape along with her brother and sister, Mr. Rosenberg said. Ginette's parents and grandmother and adoptive half-brother were captured, deported to Auschwitz and killed.

Ms. Politis said Mr. Rosenberg "definitely helped people in Amiens understand what happened during the Holocaust," she said via email. He "managed, throughout his many years research, to

dig out letters, photographs and various documents and to convey that precious material to the survivors and/or to their families,” as well as to local archives.

Olivier de Solan, the former director of the archives for the Somme — the regional governing body based in Amiens — said Mr. Rosenberg helped collect these personal artifacts from Amiens’ Jewish families and to add them to the official documents, which are now archived online.

“I enjoyed working with David,” he said via email. “I highly appreciated how he is capable to be a scientific historian gathering material in a systematic and critical way and, in the same time, an enthusiastic project-leader, capable of linking and involving people.”

For his work, Mr. Rosenberg was also honored in 2013 by the French Ministry of Culture and Communications as a Knight of the Order of Arts and Letters. That put him in the company of such Americans as T.S. Eliot, Ray Bradbury, Bob Dylan and Jerry Lewis.

The exhibit will continue through the summer at Temple Emanuel, 1250 Bower Hill Road.
Details: 412-279-7600.

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