

‘I can’t turn away from this’: Archivist’s Holocaust research gaining wider audience

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By Peter Smith / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Six years ago, retired University of Pittsburgh archivist David Rosenberg began delving into a trove of archives in Paris, retrieving from obscurity the devastating fate of one French Jewish community during the Holocaust.

Now, after an exhibit based on his work has been shown in multiple sites around Pittsburgh and in France, he is seeing what he calls the “crowning touch” of his work, with the fruits of his research now more widely available than ever.

Highlights of his discoveries about the Jewish community in Amiens in northern France, which have formed the basis for a series of public exhibits in recent years, are now [online on his webpage](#) — including the haunting yet humanizing photos of Jews who were forced to register with the authorities in Nazi-occupied France in the early stages of their persecution.

And residents of Amiens also now have easier access to the tens of thousands of files that Mr. Rosenberg researched in Paris — but which had only been available in the French capital until he provided digitized versions of them to the local archives in Amiens.

Mr. Rosenberg has been visiting Amiens regularly since 1974, when he began doctoral research into an earlier persecuted religious minority, the 16th century Protestant Huguenots. Over time he became increasingly intrigued by the fate of the city’s Jews, and he pursued the topic in earnest after retiring from Pitt. In 2014, he learned of a trove of documents in the French national archives in Paris, preserving the official records of the Somme — the regional government based in Amiens — under Nazi occupation.

Mr. Rosenberg ultimately discovered more than 30,000 documents on the persecution of Jews in Amiens. He was particularly moved to discover one set of files. These were registration cards with information required by the collaborationist government of all Jews in the region. They included

names, addresses, dates of birth, nation of origin and other details, accompanied by black-and-white photos, about the size of passport photos.

Those images of local Jews, most of whom ultimately were killed in the Holocaust, particularly motivated him to tell their story to a wider audience.

“When I saw the pictures of the people, I thought, I can’t turn away from this,” recalled Mr. Rosenberg, of Mt. Lebanon.

In 2018, he and his daughter, artist Lydia Rosenberg, created an exhibit that included displays of the photos and other identifying details in the registration files of Amiens’ Jews. That exhibit, titled, “Who is a Jew,” was originally held at Temple Emanuel in Mt. Lebanon.

It has since been shown locally at the Holocaust Center of Pittsburgh and Pitt’s Hillman Library.

And the exhibit has also traveled to France. It has been displayed at multiple high schools in the Somme region and the University of Picardy Jules Verne, located in Amiens.

Many of the documents are chilling in their “bureaucratic banality,” Mr. Rosenberg said. The documents were created by French officials carrying out Nazi orders to register the local Jews and confiscate their properties as part of the “Aryanization” of the economy.

Occupation-era newspapers openly advertised the sale of plundered Jewish properties. City officials held meetings to discuss — in cold, business-like fashion — the procedures for pillaging the properties of their Jewish neighbors

“The thing about the Aryanization is, it involved a lot of people to do all these property transactions,” Mr. Rosenberg said.

One such meeting was transcribed in minutes so detailed that, in tandem with the university exhibit in Amiens, a group of drama students took up Mr. Rosenberg’s suggestion to present a dramatized version of it, creating a macabre and entirely historical theater of the absurd.

The documents he researched, though originally created in Amiens, have been stored in Paris for decades, sent there for a post-war process to enable Jewish families to get restitution for their properties, Mr. Rosenberg said.

He was able to get a copy of the microfilmed archives, and later had them digitized. He provided those digitized archives to archives of the Somme. This spring, the archives’ staff completed the

process to make the collection available to visitors on their computers — “bringing it back home” to Amiens, he said.

Also in June, Mr. Rosenberg’s daughter published a digital version of the exhibit “Who is a Jew” on Mr. Rosenberg’s website, JewsoftheSomme.com. Now these images and stories of Amiens’ Jewish residents are widely available.

“I had lots of help and encouragement along the way from friends and colleagues,” Mr. Rosenberg said. “I am feeling very proud and happy to have made a presumably enduring contribution in several different ways to the awareness of the Jewish fate during World War II.”

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