

HOLOCAUST HISTORY / THE JEWS OF AMIENS

# Grove City students translate accounts of French Jews during the Holocaust

Historian David Rosenberg's work has reached the small liberal arts college – and has touched students there.

By **JUSTIN VELLUCCI**

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Marcus Henry, Katelyn Livorse, Dr. Kelsey Madsen, Virginia Williams and Cara Scott (Photo courtesy of Grove City College)

Marcus Henry remembers details vividly from the government documents he translated about the arrest of Jews in 1940s-era France.

Amiens, France: July 18-19, 1942. Two years into the Nazi occupation of the Somme in France's north, police rounded up all of the Jews in Amiens, the region's capital. Two days earlier, police took 13,000 Jews into custody in Paris, sending them to atrocious conditions in an unused sports stadium – the Velodrome d'Hiver – then on to camps at Auschwitz or Sobibor.

Henry, a Grove City College freshman majoring in biology and French, read the bureaucratic account from Amiens: One girl, fleeing the roundup, was almost free. She darted into a neighbor's house and hid. Then, she made a break for the street ...

And was captured by the police.

The detail that upset Henry was the last sentence of the report, simply: "She was wearing a blue dress."

"It's one thing to see it in a history book – but to see someone talking about a friend, a family member or themselves ... it's devastating," said Henry, who grew up in State College, Pennsylvania.

“I wouldn’t say it was an experience as if I had family who went through that,” said Henry, who is Christian. “But, I think looking at it from any perspective — it’s heartbreaking.”

Historian David Rosenberg has been enraptured by the history of Amiens for decades. The Jewish Pittsburgher first visited Amiens — today a city of 120,000 residents, about 90 miles north of Paris — in 1973 while researching his doctoral dissertation for Yale University.

But how and why did a group of undergraduate students from Grove City College, a small Christian liberal arts college an hour’s drive north of Pittsburgh, wind up translating accounts of Jews in an occupied French district during the Holocaust?

That story starts in 2023, when Grove City College Professor Kelsey Madsen was teaching a class, in French, on the history of World War II — and how different angles of memory interpret it.

Madsen took her class on a trip to the Holocaust Center of Pittsburgh — and also to the Bower Hill Community Church in Mt. Lebanon, which was hosting Rosenberg’s Amiens-driven exhibit, “Who Is a Jew?”

“Here was someone else who has done this, to do what is possible to recognize people who were targeted,” Madsen said. “David’s project resonated a lot with what we were doing in class.”

“It’s horrifying,” she added, “what society can become in moments of turmoil and corruption.”

Rosenberg and Madsen struck up a working relationship and, last fall, about a half-dozen of Madsen’s students translated — from French — the accounts from roundups of Jews in Amiens.

The students pored over microfiche and dealt with the linguistic subtleties of bureaucratic language.

The group also dealt with some obscure phrases, Henry said. One word he thought was “salamander” — phonetically, it sounded like “sodemonde” — actually was a type of gas oven popular in the era.

The larger picture, though — the meaning of the project — resonated for Madsen and her volunteers, she said.

“It was sinking in — these were not just words on a page. This was a person’s real experience,” Madsen said. “To have them make that connection with the past and with real people — ‘This isn’t just a story. This is real. This happened’ — I think the project succeeded with that.”

About a half-dozen students are preparing to do a second round of translations this spring, she said.

Rosenberg is modest about involving a new perspective — that of young Christian translators, whose great- or great-great-grandparents lived during World War II — in his work on Amiens.

“I’m just feeling very, very fortunate to have such interested and competent collaborators up there in Kelsey Madsen and her students,” Rosenberg said.

Though Rosenberg has worked on the lives and persecution of Protestants in Amiens in the 16th century, his more-recent work has encompassed the Jewish community there. The core of his historical work revolves around personal identification cards of Amiens’ Jews that Rosenberg found at a French Holocaust museum in 2017, as well as documents from national archives he discovered in 2014.

Rosenberg was gifted with a medal of honor and a key to Amiens from city officials there in 2022.

In addition to staging the Amiens exhibit at Grove City College in April, Rosenberg encourages people to visit [jewsofthesomme.com](https://jewsofthesomme.com).

He also continues to hammer home the themes he’s explored in his work in Amiens.

“It’s important to understand what those battles were about — the stories of great human evil,” he said. “With history, I think I want to show people as people, and people in history. That’s the only way we can create this empathy, a sense of how to connect through history.”

The Rev. Dr. Brian Snyder, whose Mt. Lebanon church hosted Rosenberg’s exhibit last year, said he couldn’t imagine the persecution Jews faced in France during World War II.

He sees Rosenberg’s work as a kind of warning.

“Germany was, technologically, a brilliant society — and it happened there. I find that scary,” Snyder said. “I don’t think I’m at risk of persecution in this country, but many are ... I see this as a cautionary tale. If this could happen in the 1930s, it could happen here today.” **PJC**

*Justin Vellucci is a freelance writer living in Pittsburgh.*