

PRESERVING STORIES / DOCUMENTS REVEAL THE COMPLICITY OF WHAT HAPPENED

# Rediscovering the Jews of Amiens

The exhibit tells the history of anti-Semitism and the Holocaust in France.

By **DAVID RULLO**

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David Rosenberg's exhibit, "Who Is A Jew" (seen here at the Holocaust Center of Pittsburgh) now has a virtual home online. Photo by David Rullo

Yellowed from time, but in otherwise perfect condition, the 43 photo-identification cards that make up the bulk of the exhibit "Rediscovering the Jews of Amiens" tell the story of a group of Jewish men and women doomed to be forgotten if not for the research of South Hills native David Rosenberg.

It's the same story of Jews in countless European cities and small towns the Nazis controlled during World War II. Of the 43 cards, 29 people were arrested, deported and perished, and three died by illness, leaving just 13 who survived the war.

"Rediscovering the Jews of Amiens" is on display now at the Holocaust Center of Pittsburgh and contains the photo identification cards and other documents that Rosenberg, a retired University of Pittsburgh archivist, discovered while doing research in Paris. The exhibit also features artifacts on permanent loan from the Friedman Family that were collected and "tell the history of anti-Semitism and the Holocaust in France," according to Lauren Bairnsfather, director of the Holocaust Center.

Rosenberg's discovery reads like the beginning of a Dan Brown novel.

"I was on sabbatical in 1995, and during that time I went to services at a synagogue in Amiens (the capital of the department of Somme, about 90 miles north of Paris)," Rosenberg said. "I saw a memorial plaque listing the names of

49 people who had been deported from the department of Somme. I didn't take it up at the time but noted there was something there."

After retiring from the University of Pittsburgh, he began going back to Paris to research the Protestants of the area and found a collection of more than 35,000 pages of letters and property dossiers relating to the Jews of Amiens. It would be another three years before he found the pictures in the exhibit. "By that time, I knew a lot about them."

He was also able to contextualize what happened in the area. "The documents tell a lot about the complicity of what happened. These documents tell you, for instance, who bid on Jewish houses. It's not just about the Jews. You can contextualize it a little bit."

One of Rosenberg's main research objectives was to have the citizens of Amiens and Sommes come to terms with the troubling aspect of the area's past. He feels he accomplished that goal when the exhibit opened there at the University of Picardy Library on Jan. 8, 2019. Comments left by attendees attest to the importance of the information on display: "Terrifyingly concrete! It was in my street, my village; it was yesterday ... and at the same time a bit today." The mayor of Amiens wrote, "This period is so far away ... and so near. How is it possible? Why such hatred? We are left with no words."

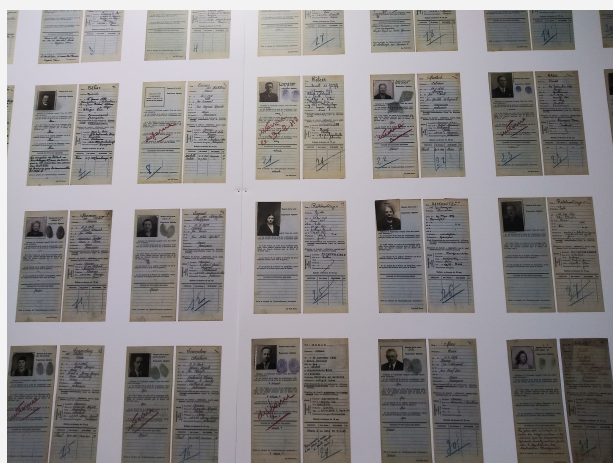


Photo identification cards David Rosenberg discovered while doing research in Paris. (Photo by David Rullo)

Accompanying the photos at the Holocaust Center are letters from and about the Jews living in Amiens. They express the heartbreak and hardship felt as the Nazis attempted to Aryanize the town. (Aryanization was the forced expulsion of Jews from Axis territory and included the transfer of Jewish property to "Aryan" hands.)

Take, for instance, a letter written to a French prefect from a hairdresser asking to be allowed to continue his profession: "A hairdresser's assistant for the past 25 years, I am evidently in contact with the public and consequently I fall within the scope of these prohibitions and will therefore be forced to quit my employment. This is the only trade I know, and my health does not permit me to undertake jobs requiring manual strength — I have stomach ulcers and am under a doctor's care. I have a son

aged 9½ born in France who will require treatment as well."

Or, this letter written to the Somme authorities denouncing a Jewish doctor: "I take the liberty of writing to call your attention to the fact that Doctor Wajnberg, a foreign citizen, is a Jew and that he continues his visits, despite the prohibitions on foreign doctors to practice their profession."

Bairnsfather explained why this type of research completed by Rosenberg is so important: "Without this work, the history of the Holocaust in Amiens would be buried in an archive in Paris. Denial festers when archival materials are made inaccessible. I love that this exhibit thumbs the nose at would-be deniers."

At the heart of Rosenberg's exhibit is the question of identity. The Jews in all of Nazi-occupied Europe were made to register, confront and at times deny their Jewish identity. As a result, most were forced to accept a death sentence in Auschwitz or other death camps. This, said Bairnsfather, is one of the reasons the exhibit is on display.

"It is the practice of the Holocaust Center to preserve stories of individuals because we know that the story of one person is the most direct way to connect with a visitor to the Center, the most powerful way to preserve the memory of the Holocaust," she said. "Rediscovering the Jews of Amiens' restores the stories of a small town's Jewish population. This is directly related to our mission."

Or, as Rosenberg puts it, recalling the words told to him by a friend and survivor from Amiens: “No forgiveness, no forgetfulness.” **PJC**

David Rullo is a local freelance writer.

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