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Microcosms of the Holocaust: Exploring New Venues into Small-Scale Research of the Holocaust

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The massive scale of the Nazi-persecution of Jews in Europe, resulting in the death of almost six million people, makes it easy to forget that the Holocaust was also an intimate history, taking place around the corner, in the street, on the hallway. As much as it is a story of industrial killing in Auschwitz, of Nazi racial mania, of the power of the state apparatus and its repressive institutions of police and military, of the fanaticism of ethnonationalism and of institutional collaboration in the occupied countries of Europe, it is the story of more mundane civilians and their agency during genocide, of “ordinary” Jewish-Gentile relations and how they developed under the immense pressure of Nazi-rule.

The current Holocaust scholarship is well aware of this. For some time, Holocaust historiography was perhaps fixed on the discussion of decisions made by Hitler and his entourage to implement the Final Solution plan, on the analysis of the functioning of the Nazi extermination machine: yet since the onset of the new millennium and the so-called “spatial turn” in Holocaust research, close-up portraits of local communities and units are growing in number.¹ Whatever their differences in methods, perspectives and topics, these studies illustrate the impact of local, sometimes even individual circumstances and relations on the genocidal process, as well as the complexity of the *dramatis personae*, which makes a qualification in perpetrators, victims and bystanders often oversimplifying and untenable. In this special issue, we aim to contribute to this recent trend in our scholarship, by exploring new analytical tools from outside the field of Holocaust studies that in our opinion could open new research venues. The focus is on what Patricia

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¹ See for instance, Till van Rhaden, *Juden und anderer Breslauer: Die Beziehungen zwischen Juden, Protestanten und Katholiken in einer deutschen Grossstadt von 1860 bis 1925* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2000); Jan Gross, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Rosa Lehmann, *Symbiosis and Ambivalence: Poles and Jews in a Small Galician Town* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2001); Raz Segal, *Genocide in the Carpathians: War, Social Breakdown and Mass Violence* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016); Omer Bartov, *Anatomy of a Genocide: The Life and Death of a Town Called Buczacz* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018). Sometimes the focus is on just one building block, see for instance Anna Foa, *Portico d'Ottavia 1: Una casa del ghetto nel lungo inverno del '43* (Rome: Laterza, 2014). In some of these studies, new (digital) techniques are used to gain insight in local history, see for instance: Anne Kelly Knowles, Tim Cole, and Alberto Giordano, eds., *Geographies of the Holocaust* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014); Sarah Gensburger and Isabelle Backouche, “Antisemitism and Urban Development in World War II France: The Case of Paris’s Ilot 162,” *Contemporary European History* 23, no. 3 (2014): 381–403.

Justino has coined the “micro-foundations” of conflict: individuals’ behaviour and their relations and interactions.²

Inevitably, our work engages with microhistory. According to its founding father, Carlo Ginzburg, microhistory is “the intensive historical investigation of a relatively well-defined smaller object, most often a single event, or a village community, a group of families, even an individual person.”³ Since Ginzburg uttered these words, in 1980, the concept has been widened and deepened, and differentiated. Some argue that microhistory is about the altering of scale of analysis and about zooming in onto this “well-defined smaller object” which would lead to a picture of the past deviant from more traditional investigations of nations and states: multiplication of scales per se is their goal. For others, it is not the multiplication, but the integration of different levels of analysis that will yield new interpretations of commonly accepted grand narratives.⁴ According to French Holocaust-scholars Claire Zalc and Tal Bruttman, the introduction of microhistory into our field of research could be beneficial, as a shift of the scale of analysis will reveal “the diversity and complexity of the processes by deconstructing an entire monolithic approach without limiting oneself to the borders of a particular locality or group.”⁵ In this special issue we favour a micro-historical approach, understanding it not just as a reduction of scale, but as a construction of an object of investigation that represents a social world in itself: “a microcosm.”⁶

We employ microhistory also, because it offers a gateway to a different dimension of analysis: that of emotions and feelings, perceptions and beliefs. Alon Confino and Dan Stone have both repeatedly plead for the integration of cultural history into Holocaust-scholarship and more awareness for narratives and thoughts, ideas and fantasies of the actors: of both individual Jews and individual Gentiles.⁷ How did they view themselves and others around them? Whom did they consider their peers? How did Nazi-policy affect their feelings and perceptions about themselves and others? Did friendships turn into networks of rescue or, conversely, were pre-war relations an obstacle during the years of persecution? How were these relationships rebuilt after the war? How did violence against Jews transform the way Jews were viewed by non-Jews? The contributions of this special issue include this dimension of analysis and thus concentrate on Gentile-Jewish relations, the fabric of the actors’ social webs, their systems of beliefs and emotions and, more broadly put, on mechanisms of identity formation.

For some of the contributors, sociological work on “neighbourhood effects” has been highly inspiring. In the 1990s Dutch sociologist Abram de Swaan wrote two important studies on the Rwandan genocide.⁸ According to de Swaan, identifications are numerous

² Philip Verwimp, Patricia Justino, and Tilman Brück, “The Analysis of Conflict: A Micro-Level Perspective,” *Journal of Peace Research* 46, no. 3 (2009): 307–14.

³ Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), cited in: Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon and István M. Szigjártó, *What is Microhistory? Theory and Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 4.

⁴ Francesca Trivellato, “Microstoria/Microhistoire/Microhistory,” *French Politics, Culture & Society* 33, no. 1 (2015): 122–34.

⁵ Claire Zalc and Tal Bruttman, eds., *Microhistories of the Shoah* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2017), 4.

⁶ The concept of microcosm has been elaborated by Giovanni Levi as early as the 1980s. Giovanni Levi, *Inheriting Power: The Story of an Exorcist* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

⁷ Dan Stone, “Holocaust Historiography and Cultural History,” *Dapim: Studies on the Shoah* 29 (2009): 52–68; Alon Confino, “Fantasies about the Jews: Cultural Reflections on the Holocaust,” *History & Memory* 17, no. 1 (2005): 296–322; idem, “Forum Cultural History and the Holocaust,” *German History* 31, no. 1: 61–85.

⁸ Abram de Swaan, “Widening Circles of Identification: Emotional Concerns in Sociogenetic Perspective,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 12 (1995): 25–39; idem, “Widening Circles of Disidentification: On the Psycho- and Sociogenesis of the Hatred of

and often multiple: they could be based on kinship (family), proximity (neighbourhood), class, profession, ethnicity or nationality – to mention just a few major “identifiers.” Moreover, they are at once inclusive and exclusive, intensely held and essentially unstable. Integrating sociological theories on group formation with psychogenetic perspectives, de Swaan considers social identification not only as a cognitive process, but also as an emotional process: “perceived similarities and differences provide a basis for affective involvement or detachment.”⁹ Changes in a person’s disposition to be emotionally concerned or affected lead to changes in identification: dis-identification generally occurs when “a face-to-face relationship between two persons was transformed into the concept of a generalized and decontextualized relation between two timeless, irreconcilably hostile categories.”¹⁰

For other contributors, the notion of “emotional community” has been a source of inspiration. With her publications in the early 2000s medievalist Barbara Rosenwein gave a significant impetus to the study of emotions in historical research. In Rosenwein’s definition, “emotional communities” are networks of mental and emotional ties between people.¹¹ Of major interest to her are the normative codes related to the expression of emotions, but the concept could also be employed to indicate the role of emotions as a crucial force in group formation, in affective relations among people, and in the vocabulary which set the dividing line(s) in the social habitat.¹²

Using the work of De Swaan and Rosenwein as important heuristic tools, the special issue contributes to our grasp of processes of individuation and of adhesive and cohesive forces in societies under Nazi-rule. We move beyond the collection of national histories, choosing cities as our spatial scale of analysis. Cities were everywhere: the urbanization of Europe in the nineteenth and early twentieth century created new spaces of dense human interaction all across the continent. In most modern cities, Jews and others lived side by side; at least in some modern cities, Jews constituted a well-integrated part of the city’s population. The urban setting as spatial scale of analysis makes it possible to integrate Western and Eastern European Holocaust scholarship.

Our selection of case-studies involves six cities in Western and Eastern Europe: Amsterdam, Antwerp, Florence, Thessaloniki, Vienna and Warsaw. Differences among these cities and the specific contexts of the Holocaust are obvious. With over 350,000 members (about thirty per cent of the city’s total population), the Jewish community of Warsaw was by far the largest. Most Jews in Warsaw were living in Jewish quarters, were observant and spoke Yiddish. At the same time, Jews were also to be found among the members of the city’s social, political and cultural elites. In Vienna, the Jewish community had grown tremendously in the course of the nineteenth century, despite persistent antisemitism. In the 1930s, the city counted over 176,000 Jews (over nine per cent of the city’s total population). Most Viennese Jews were acculturated and fairly well integrated in Austrian society.

Distant Strangers – Reflections on Rwanda,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 14, no. 2 (1997): 105–22. More recently, on the mentality of “mass murderers,” idem, *The Killing Compartments: The Mentality of Mass Murder* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014).

⁹ De Swaan, “Widening Circles of Identification,” 25.

¹⁰ Ibid., 113.

¹¹ Barbara Rosenwein, “Worrying about Emotions,” *American Historical Review* 107 (2002): 842.

¹² Ibid.

In Florence, Italy, the Jewish community counted in 1938 just over 2,000 members. Of a population of over 300,000, this was less than one per cent. Most of them were well-integrated Jews and some even adhered to fascism: episodes of Antisemitism before 1938 were negligible. Thessaloniki, since 1912 part of Greece, counted some 50,000 Jewish citizens at the moment German troops entered the city in April 1941. This was still a substantial percentage of the city's population – some 25 per cent – but compared to three decades before when more than half of the total population had been Jewish, the city had lost a considerable part of its Jewish life. Since 1912 the Thessaloniki Jews had faced coerced assimilation and time to time antisemitic attacks in words and deeds. In prewar Amsterdam, antisemitic violence had been almost non-existent. In contrast with Thessaloniki, the Jewish population of Amsterdam steadily grew in the first decades of the twentieth century and in the 1930s, the city counted 65,000 Jews, some eight per cent of the entire population. Most of them were highly acculturated and had left the city's Jewish quarter. Many had found employment in the trade and cutting of diamonds. The emergence of diamond business in the Belgian city of Antwerp had also changed Jewish life in this city, but in a very different way. Thousands of Eastern European Jewish immigrants had come to Antwerp and settled down near the central station, the heart of the diamond trade and workshops. With its 35,500 members on the eve of WWII, this Belgian community was almost half the size of the one in Amsterdam.

Nazi-rule was not in each city the same. In Vienna, German troops arrived as early as March 1938, leading immediately to outbursts of anti-Jewish violence. From the early days of the Anschluss, antisemitism was part of Nazi-rule: until the start of mass deportations in 1941, public discrimination, looting and forced emigration were the main ingredients. In Warsaw, having crushed the Polish army, German local officials immediately implemented anti-Jewish laws. Already in 1939 Jews were branded, robbed and subjected to forced labour. In October 1940, they were pushed into the Warsaw ghetto where most of them lived in terrible conditions – until the beginning of deportations to the German killing centres in the summer of 1942. In that same period of time, in Thessaloniki, the first antisemitic measure had been introduced: deportations did not begin until March 1943. In Amsterdam and Antwerp, a slow but steady stream of anti-Jewish laws had isolated and depleted Jews of their wealth since early summer 1940. Large-scale deportations commenced in July 1942. In Florence, Jews had been subjected to Mussolini's racial laws since 1938 but did not face deportation until September 1943.

How these developments, very different in each case, affected personal lives and relations is central to each individual contribution. In the first article, Leon Saltiel focuses on the lives and friendship of two respected citizens of Thessaloniki, Yomtov Yacoel and Asher Moisis. They had been classmates, business partners, friends and in the 1930s had grown into prominent Jewish leaders: Moisis as president of the Zionist Federation of Greece and (from 1934 onwards) as head of the Jewish Community of Thessaloniki; Yacoel as the Jewish Community's legal advisor and also as president of *B'nei B'rith*. Moisis had fled a month before the arrival of German troops in the city in 1941, and organized extended networks of help for Jewish escapees from his former hometown. In contrast, Yacoel remained, until April 1943, and shared the fate of most Jews in Thessaloniki, who not only fell victim to German aggression but also to that of a certain group of their gentile fellow-citizens who considered German anti-Jewish policy as a useful vehicle to cut Jews out of the city's landscape.

Valeria Galimi follows the itineraries of a Florentine Jewish family during the period from Fascism to the Holocaust. The article analyses the parallel choices and fate of two Jews, Elio Salmon and Gualtiero Cividalli, married to two sisters and who formed a close-knit family. The racial laws of 1938 imposed by Mussolini's fascism surprised the Jews of Florence, a medium-sized city with a small, but well-integrated Jewish community. This group of Jews, who considered themselves as a part of the Italian national community, were suddenly forced to take on a new – Jewish – identity. The 1938 racial laws caused their trajectories to diverge: Cividalli chose exile for himself and his family and decided to emigrate to Palestine. Elio and his family remained in Florence, passing the Nazi occupation and the RSI in hiding, through dramatic events that led to their survival thanks to his leadership and to the community of friends and acquaintances who offered aid. It was a microcosm in which social networks and friendships intertwined.

Michaela Raggam-Blesch looks at families of "mixed marriages" in Vienna: the *Hahn*, Freiberger and Baader family who, after their forced relocation, were also more or less neighbours in the same urban neighbourhood. Their shared fate, however, did not necessarily lead to special friendships or feelings of connection with other couples in "mixed marriages." Instead, they often were deprived from any sense of belonging. Raggam-Blesch shows that this was not always true for children from these marriages who often managed to form new "emotional communities" of their own – at their work, at the cemetery or in the few other public places outside their parental homes they still were allowed to enter. These new connections helped them to deal with daily discrimination and anti-Jewish persecution and sometimes even made them forget the dire reality.

In Rachel Brenner's article, the focus is mainly on three non-Jewish Poles, Zofia Kossak and Jaroslaw and Anna Iwaszkiewicz, and their reactions to the persecution of Jews in Warsaw. Although they could all three be considered as part of the prewar Polish literate elite, Kossak and the Iwaszkiewicz's had little in common, the first being an exponent of Catholic (antisemitic) conservatism and the couple belonging to the city's mixed circle of liberal intellectuals and writers. Confronted with the massive assault on Jews, they nevertheless grew closer, identifying with the same group of victims of persecution and sharing the same system of beliefs and values, like that of the sanctity of human life. Brenner convincingly argues that the Holocaust made them part of the same emotional community: that of rescuers.

Geraldien von Frijtag Drabbe Künzel discusses three individual trajectories of Jewish citizens of Amsterdam. Investigating the strength of social bonds between Jews and Gentiles and processes of identification and disidentification, her study shows that they perceived themselves as having being part of one prewar urban community, that was essentially mixed and that knew few episodes of antisemitism. Relations with Gentiles in those years were considered good and friendly. The German anti-Jewish policy had enormous impact, but initially, their relations with their Gentile fellow-citizens seemed unaffected. For one of the main actors, this drastically changed once the deportations began and help proved hard to find. In this case and this case alone, the wartime experiences caused feelings of dissociation that could eventually lead to emigration. The stories of all three men produced important counternarratives to that of "double victimhood" in the immediate postwar years. The three men apparently became known for their public engagement and activism.

Finally, Veerle Vanden Daelen analyses the tight community of a neighbourhood: two Jewish families and their non-Jewish neighbours in the so-called “Yidishe gas” in Antwerp. In her study the issue of help and rescue is the centrepiece and Vanden Daelen demonstrates that proximity was not always a precondition for acts of solidarity and help. Moreover, she argues that in the cases of these families, help was sometimes rather ambiguous. In one of the researched cases, a neighbour hid the daughter from the police, yet – by his presence – “assisted” in hunting down two other children and appropriated belongings of the family without their consent.

As all the contributions show, the Holocaust had a profound impact on relations between Jews and their non-Jewish fellow-citizens, but in none of the studied cases was the dissociation complete. Despite ceaseless antisemitic propaganda, the circles of disidentification did not stretch to all facets of society and touch everyone: in the case of Kossak, for example, the circles of identification broadened to include the Jews, the old stereotypical archenemy of Polish Catholic conservatism. As far as the Jewish individuals in the case studies are concerned, the Holocaust questioned the prewar sense of belonging and essence of their being at large. Complex identities were suddenly forcefully reduced to one – i.e.: Jewish – whereas fixed and firm ties to fellow-citizens were often broken. The new situation, in which they were targets of marginalization and persecution and often dependent on the mercy and help of their non-Jewish fellows, profoundly complicated their relations to the latter. Establishing new identities and communities, during and after the war, was in none of the studied cases painless.

Our scope has been limited to six cities: expansion to other cities across the map of Europe would probably lead to a more integrative and pixelated image of the impact of the Holocaust on European society. Furthermore, the observations of the individual contributors invite additional research into some specific areas: into the effect of the Holocaust on matters of identity; into the genuineness of Jewish-Gentile friendships during the interwar period and their strength during the war; into the establishment and dissolution (or not) of networks of rescue; and into the paradigm of “endogenous” antisemitism before the war. Finally, the employment of analytical tools from outside the Holocaust scholarship in our microhistorical case studies could be an incentive to other Holocaust scholars – to embrace cross-disciplinary approaches and to strengthen the rooting of Holocaust studies in the academia.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on Contributors

Geraldien von Frijtag Drabbe Künzel is a Dutch historian and holds a tenured position as assistant professor of political history at Utrecht University (Netherlands). Before that, she was a research fellow at the NIOD Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies in Amsterdam. She has published widely on World War II, the Holocaust and Dutch reactions to Nazi occupation policy. Her latest book, *Hitler's Brudervolk* (2015/2017), examines the Dutch participation in the Germanization of the occupied East. She has received various research fellowships, including being a Senior Research Fellow at the Yad Vashem International Institute for Holocaust Research (Jerusalem) and the 2017–18 Fellow in Residence of the USC Shoah Foundation Center for Advanced Genocide Research (Los Angeles). She is currently working on a microhistory of the Dutch town Hilversum under Nazi rule.

Valeria Galimi is Researcher at the University of Florence (Italy) where she teaches Contemporary History. She is a *Chercheure associée permanente* at the Institut d'histoire du temps présent di Paris (UMR CNRS-Université de Paris VIII). She has been a fellow at the International Institute for Holocaust Research, Israel (2010–11); the Vidal Sassoon International Center for the Study of Antisemitism, Israel (2013) and the European University Institute (2014). She has been visiting professor at the Ecole Normale Supérieure (Paris) and at the Université Paris VIII. She has research experience in several areas of contemporary history, in particular the history of European antisemitism and the Second World War and the Holocaust in Italy. Her publications include: *L'antisemitismo in azione. Pratiche antiebraiche nella Francia degli anni Trenta* [Antisemitism in Action. Anti-Jewish practices in France during the 1930s] (2006, 2nd ed., in print); *Sotto gli occhi di tutti. La società italiana e le persecuzioni contro gli ebrei* [Under Everybody's Eyes. Italian Society and Persecutions against the Jews] (2018).