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Simultaneous Presence and Absence:
Representation of the Holocaust at the Jewish Museum Munich

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by

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The three buildings at St.-Jakobs-Platz: (L-R) the Ohel Jakob Synagogue, the Jewish Museum Munich, and the Jewish Community Center. Photo taken by the author.

The Jewish Museum Munich’s three-story sandstone building is a commanding presence against the backdrop of the traditional architecture of central Munich. Museum visitors and other passers-by pause at all sides of the building to read quotes from Sharone Lifschitz’s project “Speaking Germany” displayed on the glass exterior of the first floor of the Museum. The open doors and exposed first level make the entrance to the Museum inviting. The lobby of the Museum is an open space with the Museum’s small café and bookstore on either side of the information desk. The airy atmosphere of the Museum changes as visitors travel down concrete steps to the basement level where the permanent exhibition “Voices-Places-Times” is held. At the entrance of the

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1 Completing this thesis would not have been possible without the ongoing support and guidance of my adviser P.J. Brendese and my mentor Ryan Carey, and without the dedication of my committee members Rob Leventhal and Leisa Meyer. Thank you to the Charles Center and Sociology department for their generous funding of my research. Thank you also to my family and closest friends for their unfaltering encouragement.

2 Lifschitz’s project “Speaking Germany” is the winner of an international art competition sponsored by Munich’s public art program for the city’s new Jewish Museum. For more information about the exhibition see Sharone Lifschitz, “Speaking Germany,” www.speaking-germany.de (accessed 7 April 2008).
exhibition room, a guard checks for tickets and opens the heavy door into a dim room. Following the natural path of the exhibit, the visitor encounters its seven segments: Voices, Places, Images, Rituals, Times, Objects, and Comics.

The Images and Places segments work together to form one of the more creative sections of the Museum. The installation is a wall of eighteen photographs (Images) that correspond to eighteen locales on a map (Places) that is on the floor in front of the wall. By placing a marker on its designated spot on the map of Munich, the corresponding photo on the wall becomes illuminated. On the marker is a brief description of the photo and the place it is connected to on the map. The objective of the installation is to pinpoint “the diverse places that have at different times been part of daily Jewish life in the city” which are “barely noticeable in everyday life in Munich today.” Here, the Museum sees itself giving presence to Jewish historical sites in Munich that are otherwise absent or invisible. The interaction between the Images wall and Places map is interesting also because in some cases the visitor imagines a very different context for the photo than the description provided. One example of this is the photo of three young girls looking out the window of a train.

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Looking at this photo at the Jewish Museum, I imagined that these three young girls were leaving on a family vacation. Without any information about the image, I perceived the expressions of their faces as excitement, if not a little nervousness. However, upon reading the description of the photo, I realized I was very wrong. The caption reads:

Aged 14, Beate Siegel (on the right) says goodbye to her family at Munich Central Station at midnight on June 27, 1939. Beate’s uncle, Ernst Waldner, photographed the scene as a memento.

In 1938/39, around ten thousand Jewish children escaped Nazi Germany to Great Britain. The “Kindertransporte” (transports of children) left from Berlin, Munich, and Frankfurt, as well as Vienna and Prague, mostly to Holland, from where the children sailed to Britain. Their parents were not permitted to enter the country.

Beate Siegel found a new home with an English family in London. As late as August 1940, her parents, Dr. Michael Siegel and his wife Mathilde, were able to flee to Peru via the Soviet Union and Japan. After 1945, Beate and her brother made London their home; their parents remained in Peru.  

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The discrepancy between what I imagined to be the context of the photo and the reality is drastic, and the experience of viewing the installation offers us insight not only into the role that Munich’s Central Station has played in the history of Jewish life in Munich, but also into the simultaneous presence and absence of the Holocaust in the permanent exhibit.

“Nazi Germany” and “Kindertransport” are terms included in the caption that allude to the Holocaust. Certainly, the viewer grasps the context within which the description has meaning: Beate Siegel and thousands of other Jewish children were fleeing Germany in the late 1930s to escape Nazi persecution. However, it is critical to note the language that is used in the explanatory caption of this photography. Words such as “Shoah” or “Holocaust,” that have come to define the persecution and murder of millions of Jews at the hands of the Nazis during World War II, are absent here as in most places throughout the exhibit. This photo and its caption are an example of how the Jewish Museum’s permanent exhibition represents the Holocaust.

As in the case of Siegel’s photo the work of contextualization is the burden of the visitor. The Museum focuses on chronology over narrative and lets the objects and images on display speak for themselves. In the photo, the Holocaust is both present—in that it is mentioned in certain terms—and absent—in that the photo is not completely contextualized. Similarly, in the Jewish Museum’s permanent exhibition generally the topic of the Holocaust is simultaneously both present and absent. This thesis examines this ambivalence and the way in which the Holocaust is represented in the Museum’s permanent exhibition.
Before such an analysis can be carried out, it is necessary to first look at the
genral context of Holocaust memory in Germany and the specific conditions of the
emergence of the Jewish Museum Munich. Section I of this thesis will briefly note the
evolution of the politics of memory from the end of World War II until the early-2000s
that helped to shape an atmosphere in Germany such that it was possible for the Jewish
Museum to open in 2007. This discussion will focus specifically on three events of the
late-1970s and 1980s that propelled the German public into an open dialogue about the
Holocaust in a way dramatically different from what had come before. The second
section of this thesis is divided into four subsections about the Jewish Museum Munich.
The first subsection provides a discussion of the local history of the Jewish Museum; the
second examines the role of the state, normalization, and secularization at the Museum;
the third analyzes the representation of the Holocaust in the Museum; and the fourth
section explores the legacy of the Holocaust in the Jewish Community Center’s Tunnel of
Remembrance.
Section I. The Turning Point in Holocaust Memory 1979-1987

The end of World War II left Germany with many struggles ahead, not the least of which was the struggle over the question of how the War would be remembered and memorialized. Studying German memorialization of the Holocaust and World War II from 1945 to the present is critical to understanding the political consequences of memory for Jews who live in Germany today. Though in the first three decades after the War the topic of the Holocaust was considered taboo in the German public, three major events between 1979 and 1987 spurred a rising public consciousness around World War II and the Holocaust: the television miniseries *Holocaust*, Bitburg, and the Controversy of the Historians (the *Historikerstreit*).

The Eichmann trial in 1962, the Frankfurt Auschwitz trial in 1965, and the play based on that trial, Peter Weiss’ *The Investigation (Die Ermittlung)* in 1965 caused a great deal of publicity, prompted a literary response, and contributed to a public discourse about fascism and Nazism. Likewise, German high schools began including fascism and Nazism in their curriculum as early as the 1960s. However, all of these were mere mentions of fascism and Nazism in Germany and did not specifically address the Judeocide. Not until the 1980s was there a sustained public discourse specifically regarding the Nazi Genocide of the Jews and its place or placement within German history. The televising of the *Holocaust* television series in Germany (1979), Ronald Reagan’s visit to the Bitburg cemetery (1985), and the *Historikerstreit* (1986-1987) separated the nature of national memory of the Holocaust in Germany from what had come before and propelled the topic of the Holocaust to the forefront of public discourse
and consciousness.\footnote{In January 1979 a four-part television miniseries called \textit{Holocaust} was aired in West Germany. The series was meant to portray the horrors of World War II to its audience and was extremely controversial as its critics accused its producers of commercializing the Holocaust. In West Germany, \textit{Holocaust} served an important role in beginning a sustained public discourse on the Nazi Judeocide. Despite its significance, this paper will focus mostly on the influences of Bitburg and the Historikerstreit.} Furthermore, these early moments of national remembrance highlight the problematic and complicated nature of the politics of memory.

For the fortieth anniversary of the end of World War II in 1985, the chancellor of West Germany, Helmut Kohl, invited then United States President Ronald Reagan to visit with him. While the meeting was initially a simple political visit to show friendship between statesmen, the event became controversial when, in addition to the concentration and extermination camp Bergen-Belsen, a stop at the Kolmshohe cemetery in Bitburg, Germany, was added to the itinerary. Along with German service men, forty-nine SS soldiers are buried there.\footnote{William Bole, “Bitburg: The American Scene,” in \textit{Bitburg: In Moral and Political Perspective}, ed. Geoffrey H. Hartman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 66. The \textit{Schutzstaffel}, the “protective squadron,” was the security and paramilitary organization of the National Socialist Party in Germany during World War II, primarily responsible for the mass-murder of the Jews in the East and at the extermination camps.} At the cemetery, President Reagan made a short speech and laid a wreath in commemoration of those buried.\footnote{For more information about President Reagan’s visit to the Bitburg cemetery and the controversy around the visit see Raul Hilberg “Bitburg as Symbol,” in \textit{Bitburg: In Moral and Political Perspective}, ed. Geoffrey H. Hartman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986).}

For President Reagan and Chancellor Kohl to visit the graves of both Holocaust victims and their perpetrators was to conflate the memory of these two groups. German intellectual Jürgen Habermas highlights some concern over the Bitburg event: “the juxtaposition of the mass-grave mounds in the concentration camp and the SS-graves in the memorial cemetery, Bergen-Belsen in the morning and Bitburg in the afternoon, implicitly denied the singularity of Nazi crimes.”\footnote{Jürgen Habermas, “Concerning the Public Use of History,” trans. Jeremy Leaman, in “Special Issue on the Historikerstreit,” \textit{New German Critique}, no. 44 (Spring-Summer 1988): 42.} Joining these two groups presents a
moral and ethical dilemma: What does it say about the institutional memory of the Holocaust if German soldiers and their victims are to be honored together?9

Historian Geoff Eley points to another concern at Bitburg: “Rather than marking the Allies’ victory over Nazism, the commemoration was to stress the Federal Republic’s anti-Communist integration in the western alliance.”10 Visiting Bitburg was meant to symbolically mark Germany’s “return to normalcy.” After forty years Germany had defeated communism, rebuilt its nation, and could metaphorically shake hands again with the United States. By placing the emphasis on Germany’s victory over communism, Bitburg re-assigned the anniversary from the victory over Nazi Germany to celebrating Germany’s re-entry into the western political and economic realm, this time as an ally and as the bulwark against communism. At work here is a moment of redirected memory—away from Allied victory and the Nazi Genocide, and towards German victory over communism.

The Bitburg event presents two major concerns that are important to consider in preparation for examining the politics of memory at the Jewish Museum Munich. The first is the conflation of the memory of German SS soldiers and of Holocaust victims; and the second is the redirected commemoration of the end of World War II as Germany’s victory over communism, instead of the Allies’ victory over Nazi Germany. Framing the commemoration in this way re-writes the Second World War as a fight solely against the

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spread of communism and forgets Nazism and the Final Solution.\textsuperscript{11} Conversation and controversy over the Bitburg event was widespread throughout Germany and the international community. By 1985, the German public dialogue was buzzing with debate about how to remember the period of National Socialism and the Holocaust.

This public discussion peaked during 1986 and 1987 when German newspaper headlines were dominated by the \textit{Historikerstreit} (the “historians’ debate”), which asked “in \textit{which way} is the Nazi period to be processed in public consciousness?”\textsuperscript{12} There were two sides of this debate, a conservative side and a liberal side, which split over how the Holocaust should be remembered in Germany history. German historian Ernst Nolte represented the conservative side of the debate with the perspective that the events of the Nazi period should be reinterpreted “in ways that reduced their singularity and enormity, for instance, by comparing the Final Solution to other mass atrocities of the twentieth century.”\textsuperscript{13} The conservative voice in the \textit{Historikerstreit} wanted to broaden the historical scope of World War II in order to “situate Nazism” in the larger context of total war, genocide of the twentieth century, and the real threat of communism experienced by Germans during the revolution of 1918-1919. This approach is troubling because by viewing the Nazi Genocide as a reaction against and continuation of practices of mass murder prior to it, such as the Stalinist purges of 1937-1939, conservative historians worked to displace responsibility and memory of the event to the past. Furthermore, this

\textsuperscript{11} For another example of redirected national commemoration in Germany, see Sander L. Gilman’s discussion of the rededication of November 9, the anniversary of \textit{Kristallnacht}, as “Reunification Day” after the fall of the Berlin Wall: Sander L. Gilman, “German Reunification and the Jews,” \textit{New German Critique}, no. 52 (Winter 1991): 173-191.

\textsuperscript{12} Habermas, 40.

\textsuperscript{13} Thomas McCarthy, “\textit{Vergangenheitsbewältigung} in the USA: On the Politics of the Memory of Slavery,” \textit{Political Theory} 30, no. 5 (October 2002): 625. For more on the historians’ debate see W. James Booth, “Communities of Memory: On Identity, Memory, and Debt,” \textit{The American Political Science Review} 93, no. 2 (June 1999): 249-263.
relegation of memory to the past removes the burden of Nazism from the identity of contemporary Germany.¹⁴

Political theorist Thomas McCarthy follows this concern when he writes that the conservative historians “were putting revisionist history to public use in the interests of reshaping public memory—and thus German self-understanding—and of relieving public conscience so as to revitalize German patriotism.”¹⁵ If National Socialism and the Holocaust are remembered as simply the next phase in the natural evolution of European history and German identity is alleviated of the burden of the responsibility for the Holocaust then, according to Habermas, “Jewish fellow citizens and certainly the sons, the daughters and the grandchildren of the murdered victims would no longer be able to breathe in our country.”¹⁶ The ability of Jews to resettle and reclaim Germany as their homeland is directly dependent on a public and direct recognition of Germany’s responsibility for the Holocaust.

Rather than viewing the Holocaust as the result of larger European development, Habermas and other liberal thinkers sought to underscore the specific German responsibility for the Holocaust within the context of German history and the necessity of an ongoing analysis of the conditions and causes of Nazism and fascism. Within the debate, liberals saw the conservative theory that the Holocaust came about as a result of tendencies and events within European history since the nineteenth century as a disavowal and silencing of the past. According to Habermas, German identity is inextricably interwoven with the history of the Holocaust. In other words, to be German

¹⁴ Nolte and others were concerned that the scope of the Holocaust was too much for the collective identity and responsibility of the Germans. According to McCarthy, “many Germans felt in the mid-1980s that forty years of dealing with the Nazi past was enough and that it was time for Germany to move on” (626).
¹⁵ McCarthy, 625.
¹⁶ Habermas, 44.
is to understand the “co-responsibility” for the genocide that is transferred through the generations. If this “legacy” of responsibility were denied, Habermas argues that Jews will not be able to live in Germany. This trepidation that later generations of Jews will not be able to exist in Germany if the Holocaust is not remembered as a decisive part of German history is reminiscent of cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard’s warning that “forgetting the extermination is part of the extermination itself.” What does it mean to deny the Holocaust as a significant historical event in German history? This question resonates with the problematic representation of the Holocaust at the Jewish Museum Munich.

The liberal argument of the Historikerstreit emphasizes that history and public memory of that history are not passive, but come about through deliberate choices and have practical political consequences that strongly effect individuals. The emergence of a public discourse on Nazism in the 1980s through the Holocaust television series, Bitburg, and the Historikerstreit not only made the Nazi Genocide an ongoing topic of discussion, but these events also created the cultural and political context for the formation, planning, and design of “museum culture” around World War II history and the Holocaust in the 1990s and the early years of the present century. A few of the most well-known museums and memorials built during these years are Berlin’s Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe (1989-2005), Düsseldorf Memorial Museum (1985-1987),

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18 Habermas, 44.
20 McCarthy’s work highlights the contemporary issues of xenophobia and immigration politics that arose in the 1990s, in which, he writes, the “return of the repressed past was unmistakable” (630).
and Jewish Museum in Frankfurt (1988).\textsuperscript{21} These Jewish memorial sites and museums are the physical results of the sustained public discourse on the Holocaust that took place in the 1980s. As was the case with the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, these sites were often developed and built over many years by an international board of artists, directors, and scholars.\textsuperscript{22} The sites are heavily trafficked by tourists and locals alike.

These museums and memorial sites are examples of how the State—cities, municipalities, regions, lands, and the federal government—institutionally remembers the Judeocide. However, these institutions come out of a problematic history of the politics of Holocaust memory in Germany: at Bitburg, Nazis and Jews were made to have a shared victimhood, and throughout the \textit{Historikerstreit} were attempts to undermine the singularity of the Holocaust. This discussion revealed the legacy of World War II to be an “un-mastered past” that continues to intrude upon all attempts to “clear” the past towards what could only be a “forced reconciliation.” Jewish museum sites in Germany reflect this tension and are conflicted and contested spaces struggling with the past.\textsuperscript{23}

The emergence of this Jewish museum culture reveals a trend towards a marginalization of the Holocaust. The \textit{Holocaust} television series, Bitburg, the \textit{Historikerstreit}, and finally the manifestation of museum culture over the past three decades have brought us to the point today when the Holocaust no longer maintains the cultural focal position it did in the late-1980s and 1990s. Instead, today, museums on Jewish life in Germany (such as the focus of my study, the Jewish Museum Munich) are

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\textsuperscript{22} For more information on the development of the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe see James E. Young’s “Germany’s Holocaust Memorial Problem-and Mine.” \textit{The Public Historian} 24, no. 4 (Autumn 2002): 65-80.
\end{flushleft}
de-centering the Holocaust and are moving towards a more general version of the Jewish past in Germany that often includes exhibitions and installations that seek to capture the diversity of everyday Jewish life in Germany. In some cases these efforts result in a curious “philo-Semitism,” what historian Ruth Ellen Gruber defines as “an idealization of Jews, sometimes linked to guilt or uneasiness about the Holocaust, sometimes linked to a fascination with what is perceived as an almost familiar exotica.” Keeping Habermas’ plea to remember the Holocaust in mind, the emergence of this trend away from Holocaust remembrance in Jewish museum culture is alarming because it leads to the denial of the significance of the Holocaust in modern Jewish history.

This history of Jewish museum culture gives context to the memorial landscape into which the Jewish Museum Munich was built from 2003-2006 and opened in March 2007. The creation of this Museum, as well as its predecessors across Germany, is the physical byproduct of the 1980s discourse on the Holocaust. However, despite the Museum being opened many decades later, it does not provide resolution to the questions raised in the Historikerstreit debate and, in a similar fashion as other Holocaust memorial sites across Europe, it proves to be a conflicted and contested space.

The next section of this thesis explores the permanent exhibition at the Jewish Museum and raises questions about the representation of the Holocaust there. I argue that though the Museum emphasizes its commitment to telling a more complex and inclusive story about the history of Jews and Jewish life in Munich, its narrative style and a city mandate restricting the Museum’s scope eliminate space for the Museum to explore and explain the significance of the Holocaust in this history.

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Section II. Problematic Representation: Presence and Absence at the Jewish Museum Munich

1. The Building of the Jewish Museum Munich

The Jewish Museum Munich is an institution with a multifaceted identity, a diverse audience, and a complicated relationship with its neighbors. The complexities surrounding the Museum’s location, mission statement, and permanent exhibit reflect its nuanced existence. How the Holocaust is portrayed at the Museum, in the midst of all of these other factors, makes the Museum an important object in the study of the politics of memory.

Though construction for the Jewish Museum began in 2003, it is arguable that planning for a Jewish Museum in Munich began many decades ago in 1928 when, according the Museum’s website, the first conversations about building a Jewish museum in Munich were held.\(^2^5\) However, the project did not get off the ground in the 1920s and although it was revived in the 1960s by Hans Lamm, the former president of Munich’s Jewish Community, the Museum project was not fully mobilized until it was taken up by Richard Grimm, a private gallery owner, who began a small Jewish Museum in the 1980s. The popularity of Grimm’s Museum was a clear signal that the growing collection would need a much bigger space. Due to financial problems, the “Grimm Collection” was taken over by the Jewish community in the 1990s and finally, in 2003 “the opportunity for creating a Jewish Museum as a municipal project finally presented itself when the Jewish community decided to build its new main synagogue and

community center at St.-Jakobs-Platz.” The much-anticipated Jewish Museum Munich opened on March 22, 2007, making it one of three buildings at St.-Jakobs-Platz near the main plaza in Munich.

The Museum and its two neighbors, the Jewish Community Center (Jüdisches Zentrum Jakobsplatz) and the Ohel Jakob Synagogue stand as a unit. At first glance the three buildings appear to be all part of the same institution, particularly because they were built by the same architect, in the same style, and of the same building stone. However, the critical difference that separates the Museum from the other two buildings is that the Jewish Community Center and the Synagogue are under the auspices of the Israelitische Kultusgemeinde München und Oberbayern (IKG), the official government sponsored Jewish community of Munich and Upper Bavaria, and the Jewish Museum Munich is a part of the city municipalities of Munich. The official planning document for the Museum, called Konzept für ein Jüdisches Museum in München (Concept for a Jewish Museum in Munich), outlines the specific guidelines the Museum should follow. For instance, the Jewish Museum would be constructed in combination with the building of the Jewish community center and the synagogue, but at the same time it must be autonomous and clearly distinguished as a municipal Museum. Thus the Museum is a government-sanctioned secular institution that focuses on, profits from, and is physically

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27 In Germany, and some other European countries, a citizen has the option of registering as member of a certain religious community and then pays a “religious tax.” In return, these communities receive support from the government.
28 Konzept für ein Jüdisches Museum in München. White paper produced by the Kulturausschusses (the Cultural Board of the City of Munich) (Munich, 15 February 2001).
adjacent to, the religious Jewish community of Munich.\textsuperscript{30} It exists on the boundary of private and religious structures that, taken together, form the new Jewish Center of Munich.

The Jewish Museum Munich is the only building in St.-Jakobs-Platz that is accessible and open to the public. Except for \textit{Shabbat} and holiday services, the public can only access the Ohel Jakob Synagogue from the Community Center and through an underground tunnel; the Synagogue’s outer doors are locked. Entering the Synagogue and the Community Center, which one can do with an appointment and after showing identification at the door, requires passing through a metal detector.\textsuperscript{31} In contrast, the Jewish Museum’s glass façade and open doors are welcoming and easily accessible to its visitors. In this way, the Museum acts as a symbolic door into the Jewish community. Jews, though, do not open the Museum’s literal and symbolic “doors.” Rather, visitors are received by a museum that is nominally a Jewish place, but is actually not run by Jews.

According to the Museum’s director Bernhard Purin, there is only one Jewish person currently on the executive board of the Museum, who serves as an academic advisor.\textsuperscript{32} Normally, the religious and ethnic identity of those individuals designing and directing a museum would not be important. However, considering that the stated mission of the Jewish Museum, according to its planning document, is to exhibit a

\textsuperscript{30} I am referring to the \textit{Israelitische Kultusgemeinde für München und Oberbayern} (IKG) and the Ohel Jakob congregation when I mention the “Jewish community of Munich.” This is the community that is recognized and supported by the German government. I want to note that as well as Ohel Jakob, an Orthodox congregation, Munich is also home to Beth Shalom, a liberal congregation. Furthermore, the Jewish community in Munich is certainly not limited to those Jews who belong to congregations.

\textsuperscript{31} It is my experience that most Jewish sites in Germany, and in many other European countries, are under 24-hour security and surveillance and require passing through a metal detector upon entering.

\textsuperscript{32} According to Michael Brenner, there were a handful of Jewish people who served on the General and Academic advisory boards prior to Purin becoming the director of the Museum.
diversity of insights into the history of Jews in the city, it is reasonable to expect there to be a majority of Jewish voices—whether that voice be culturally, ethnically, or religiously Jewish—on the advisory board of the Museum.\textsuperscript{33} The appropriation of the Jewish Museum project by the City of Munich and the decision to build the Museum independently of the Jewish Community has led to many conflicts that will be discussed later in this thesis.

The information that visitors receive at the Museum is likely to be the only information that they receive about the history of Jews and Jewish life in Munich at St.-Jakobs-Platz, in part because of the Museum’s physical openness in contrast to the synagogue and the community center being somewhat inaccessible to outsiders.\textsuperscript{34}

Keeping in mind that the Museum acts as a symbolic door into the Jewish community, how the Museum presents the Jewish past, therefore, has critical implications for both the Museum’s visitors and the present Jewish community itself.\textsuperscript{35} Being a public museum and funded by the city, the state naturally plays a large role in the Jewish Museum. A specific mandate regarding the representation of the Holocaust at the Jewish Museum raises further questions about the intersections of local government and public memory of the Holocaust at the Museum.

\textsuperscript{33} Konzept, 4. “3.3 Vorstellung des Konzeptentwurfs ‘Jüdisches Museum:’ Das Zukünftige Jüdische Museum der Stadt München soll einen abwechslungsreichen Einblick in verschiedene Episoden der Geschichte der Juden in dieser Stadt geben und zeigen, wie eng jüdische Geschichte mit der Entwicklung der Münchner Geschichte verbunden war und ist, dass aber auch eine eigene religiöse Kultur herausgebildet worden ist. Das Jüdische Museum soll Forum der Auseinandersetzung mit jüdischer Geschichte, Kultur und Kunst sein. Sowohl jüdische wie auch nicht-jüdische Besucherinnen und Besucher müssen angesprochen werden.”—“The future Jewish Museum of the City of Munich will be to give a diversity of insights into several episodes of the history of the Jews in the city, and to show how closely Jewish history is and was linked to the history of Munich, but also to retain the development of religious culture. The Jewish Museum will be a forum of discussion for Jewish history, culture, and art. Jewish as well as non-Jewish visitors should feel able to relate.” My translation.

\textsuperscript{34} Another reason why it is important to look critically at the information presented at the Jewish Museum is because it is an education facility and regularly receives school groups visiting the Museum to learn about Jews and Jewish life.

\textsuperscript{35} I will say more about these implications later in this thesis.
2. The Role of the State, Normalization, and Secularization

Three unique features of the Jewish Museum affect the Museum’s overall narrative and the role that the Holocaust plays at the Museum: the role of the City of Munich, normalization of the story of the Holocaust, and secularization of the Jewish Museum. First, a city mandate affects the Museum’s representation of the past by denying the Holocaust a central role in the Museum. As a city- and state-funded, owned, and operated space, the Jewish Museum is a secular institution. According to the Jewish Museum’s mission statement, “Its goal is to provide a forum for open discussion and to introduce the tremendous breadth of Jewish history, art, and culture including present day Jewish life. While the museum examines the Shoah’s devastating impact on all levels of Jewish life, it resists giving the Holocaust alone pride of place.”

Purin, who studied Jewish history and museum studies and worked at the Jewish museums in Vienna and Nuremberg before becoming the director of the Jewish Museum Munich in 2003, echoes this emphasis on telling a complex story of Jewish life: “Our aim is to tell more about how Jews lived and live in Germany and not how they suffered and were murdered.” Michael Brenner, Professor of Modern Jewish History and Culture at the University of Munich, explained the Museum’s objective similarly. In Germany, everybody knows about the Holocaust in Jewish history, but not everyone knows about Jewish culture, so the Museum is “counter-balancing this one-sided view of Jewish history.”

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37 Bernhard Purin, interview by author, Munich, Germany, 28 December 2007.
In its attempt to impart the history of Jews and Jewish life in Munich, the Jewish Museum marginalizes the Holocaust and focuses on other narratives instead. Although the concept of a Jewish museum that is not focused solely and exclusively on the Holocaust is reasonable, all of the ways in which the Jewish Museum Munich displaces or actively removes the Holocaust from its narrative merely underscore the impossibility of separating the Holocaust from any portrayal of modern Jewish history. The Jewish Museum’s attempt to detach the Nazi Judeocide from the narrative of Jews and Jewish life in Munich raises, and ventures to answer, the question: What is Jewish history without the Holocaust?

Beyond Purin’s desire to tell a different story of the Jewish past at his Museum, there is another reason for the decision to keep the Holocaust out of the center of the Jewish Museum. In February 2001, the Cultural Board of the City of Munich held a conference concerning the development of the Jewish Museum that resulted in the Konzept planning document that includes the line item “Das Jüdisches Museum wird kein Holocaust-Museum werden”—“The Jewish Museum should not become a Holocaust Museum.”39 This mandate had a direct affect upon how the Museum understood its mission and how the Museum would represent the Holocaust in its permanent exhibit. In and of itself, there is nothing troubling about the city’s decision; however, it is important to note how the mandate influences the Museum’s representation of the history of Jews and Jewish life in Munich, particularly in regard to the Holocaust.

The mandate was not unexpected. According to Brenner, who served as a member of the academic and general advisory boards of the Jewish Museum, it was the feeling all along that the Jewish Museum Munich would not be a Holocaust museum.

39 Konzept, 2.
especially because of future plans to build a “Museum of Munich’s Nazi Past” and Dachau concentration camp only a few kilometers away, easily accessible from Munich via public transportation, and well-known as a Holocaust memorial site.\textsuperscript{40} Even if the mandate was not a surprise to those involved in the development of the Museum, the official statement had powerful implications for the Museum. First of all, the mandate is evidence of the city authorizing how to represent its own past. Secondly, the Museum interprets the mandate as absolving it of the obligation to discuss the Holocaust. Finally, it affects the representation of the past by shaping the story of Jewish history in Munich while disavowing its own role in the shaping.

It should be stated that the absence of the Holocaust at the Museum is particularly ironic considering the history of Munich as the birthplace of National Socialism and the hub of Nazi activity in the 1920s and early-1930s. The Museum’s mission statement outlined in the Konzept document states that the Museum seeks to tell the history of Jewish life and how closely linked this history is with the history of Munich.\textsuperscript{41} Though the Museum abides by the mandate not to be a Holocaust museum, the absence of a discussion of the significance of Munich in the emergence of the Holocaust shows that it has not upheld its mission to tell the interconnected histories of both Jewish life in Munich and of the city itself. This inconsistency sheds light both on the difficult task that the Konzept document has presented for the Museum and the Museum’s inability to respond to the many demands of its mission. Nevertheless, the complexity of this mission statement does not excuse the powerful implications of the mandate in the role of the Holocaust in the Museum.

\textsuperscript{40} Michael Brenner, interview by author, Washington, D.C., 5 March 2008.
\textsuperscript{41} Konzept, 4.
Any mandate by a State-agency regulating how its history must be represented deserves critical analysis. Applying Baudrillard’s cautions against forgetting to the Jewish Museum, we can identify two mechanisms of institutional forgetting in the Jewish Museum: a denial of a complex history and a denial of the Jewish community’s voice. The former is due to the city’s mandate and the latter is due to the process of secularization at the Museum. A second effect of the mandate of Munich’s Cultural Board is that it alleviated the Jewish Museum of the responsibility of discussing the Holocaust. It should also be stated that at the Jewish Museum, the direction that the Museum should not become a Holocaust museum has been carried out completely, leaving no room for any middle ground. In other words, the Museum might have included a small display specifically about the Judeocide, but not made it the topic of the entire permanent exhibition, and it still would have been safely within the mandate of the city. However, the Jewish Museum Munich does not employ any compromise, but instead it altogether avoids discussing the Holocaust as its own topic. The mandate not only denies the Holocaust significance, but it also makes the Holocaust the unsaid, which structures that which is said.

The second feature of the Museum that helps to lighten the burden of remembering the Holocaust is the Museum’s building itself and the Museum’s concept of normalizing. According to Purin, the Munich Museum is the only Jewish museum in Germany, with the exception of the Jewish Museum in Berlin, which is in a new building—a building “without the weight of the Holocaust.” This fact, coupled with the city mandate, allows the Museum to focus on other aspects of Jewish life and “[makes] it

42 Bernhard Purin, interview by author, Munich, Germany, 28 December 2007.
easier for visitors to see that [the Museum] is telling a more normal story,” says Purin.\(^43\) The word “normal” to describe the narrative told at the Museum is nuanced and provocative. On the one hand, “normal” implies that the Museum is telling the “everyday” story of Jews in Munich’s history. On the other hand, “normal” means that the story told at the Jewish Museum is specifically not the story of Jewish suffering that is commonly told at some Jewish museums and Holocaust museums. Regardless, the result is a reduction of the Holocaust to a mere afterthought, which, according to Purin, is exactly the idea of the Jewish Museum.\(^44\)

According to Purin, the Holocaust is present at the Museum “not in the first level, [but it is] a little bit behind…[you] always think of it, but it is not the central aspect.”\(^45\) From the Museum’s perspective, these efforts to keep the Holocaust from the center of the conversation are logical because the Museum is neither a Holocaust museum nor a Holocaust memorial site. In other words: Holocaust commemorative sites do not deserve to be built just anywhere and not every site that explores and examines Jewish history needs to be a commemorative site. Purin’s endeavor to tell a more complex and inclusive story of the history of Jews and Jewish life in Munich at the Museum beyond the story of the Holocaust is praiseworthy. However, the outcome is a representation of the Holocaust to and from the margins of the Jewish Museum and a narrative that does not allow for Museum visitors to understand the significance of the Holocaust in the history of Jews and Jewish life in Munich beyond the years it was occurring. The question lurking here is: What does it mean to construct a museum without the weight of the past?

\(^{43}\) Ibid.


\(^{45}\) Bernhard Purin, interview by author, Munich, Germany, 28 December 2007.
Pushing the heaviest moments of history from the central discussion at museums, spaces dedicated to the exploration of the past, seems contradictory.

Lastly, secularization at the Jewish Museum Munich works to deny a Jewish voice at the Museum. The process of secularization is directly due to the fact that the Jewish Museum is city-owned and operated and is independent of Munich’s Jewish Community. The absence of a Jewish voice at the Museum is similar to the concern raised by historian Ruth Ellen Gruber in her argument that the recent “Jewish phenomenon”—that is, the near obsession of non-Jewish Europeans with Jewish culture—results in the commodification and exploitation of “Things Jewish in Europe.”

Specifically, Gruber points to the popularization of Jewish exhibitions, *klezmer* music, and Jewish style cafés as examples of the “Jewish phenomenon” at work. A key component of Gruber’s argument is that at these instances of highly visible and popular Jewish culture the “organizers, audiences, performers, participants, and consumers are, to a great extent, Gentiles.” A few pieces of evidence allow one to view the Jewish Museum Munich as an example of this European craze over Judaica by non-Jews.

First, the sheer popularity of the Museum implicates it in Gruber’s “Jewish phenomenon.” Approximately 90,000 people visited the Museum in its first year, the majority of whom are not Jewish. The majority of the staff workers at the Museum and members of the boards of the Museum are non-Jews. These two facts indicate that the Museum is a site of what Gruber calls “virtual Jewishness,” that is “Jewish culture from

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47 Ibid., 5-6.
48 Ibid., 8.
an outside perspective, alongside or often in the absence of local Jewish populations."\(^{50}\)

Because Jews lack any substantial voice in the management of the Jewish Museum, it can be seen as an instance of “virtual Jewishness.” Without pushing Gruber’s points too far, it is important to note here two issues that arose out of a conflict of interests between the Jewish Museum and the neighboring Jewish community of Munich. Those issues were the Jewish Museum’s non-kosher café and their operating hours on Saturday.

That the café is non-kosher and the Jewish Museum is open on Shabbat are in direct violation of Halacha, or Jewish law, which are followed by some members of the Munich Jewish community and the Ohel Jakob congregation. While the Museum, as a secular, municipal institution has no reason to consider not selling tickets on Saturdays or adhering to kosher dietary laws in its café, representatives of the Jewish community argue differently. As a museum focused on Jewish life and adjacent to the Jewish community, religious leader of the Ohel Jakob Synagogue Rabbi Steven Langnas saw it fitting for the Jewish Museum Munich to follow these two guidelines. As a member of the Board of the Museum during its development, Langnas specifically made these requests of the Museum. Considering that the Museum discusses Jewish themes, traditions, and history as its main subject, at least in its facility as an educational institution, the Museum understands the importance of Shabbat and of keeping kosher for observant Jews. It is critical to remember that these conflicts over the non-kosher café and the Museum being open on Shabbat are a function of secularization.

That the Jewish Museum did not respond to Langnas’ requests is an indication that the Museum’s primary audience is not the Orthodox Jewish community. Brenner brings up an important point on this subject, which is that when presented with the idea

\(^{50}\) Gruber, 11.
of closing on Saturdays, the Jewish Museum researched other Jewish museums’ policies on the matter and found that most Jewish museums, at least in Europe, are open on Saturdays.\textsuperscript{51} That the Jewish Museum Munich does not, and that other Jewish museums across Europe generally do not, accommodate Orthodox Jewish communities, at least not in the way of closing on \textit{Shabbat}, is support for Gruber’s argument that these Jewish museums are not designed for Jews, but rather for Gentiles interested in “Things Jewish.” These two decisions have resulted in tension between the Jewish community and the Museum.

The Jewish Museum had no obligation to revise its operating hours or to modify its café, however doing so would have been a sign of respect for and solidarity with, not only the Jewish community they work with, but also the Jewish religion and customs they put on display.\textsuperscript{52} For Gruber, the decision is telling of the power that the Museum holds and raises political concerns regarding the commodification and exploitation of Jewish culture. According to Gruber, Jewish tourist sites have the authority to define what is “Jewish” and, “in setting these parameters, they can exoticize Jews and the Jewish world or delineate them as forming part of the national or local whole; they can represent Jews and their traditions as a living part of today’s society, or they can consign them to a bygone era.”\textsuperscript{53} To say that the representation of Jewishness at these sites determines whether Jews and Jewish life are included in contemporary society or relegated to the past is to recognize the significant power that the Jewish Museum Munich has over the city’s Jewish past and current Jewish community.

\textsuperscript{51} Michael Brenner, interview by author, Washington, D.C., 5 March 2008.
\textsuperscript{52} This is also the opinion of Steven Langnas in an informal interview with the author.
\textsuperscript{53} Gruber, 126.
To bring this argument back to its original point, that the Jewish Museum denies a Jewish voice, raises concerns for Munich’s Jewish community regarding the political consequences of their representation in the Museum. For Langnas and the Jewish community as a whole, at stake in the Museum’s presentation of Jewish life in Munich is further tokenism and of being made into relics of the past, rather than being celebrated as a living, breathing, and growing community. These three defining features of the Jewish Museum Munich—the city mandate, its mission to create a “more normal story,” and the role of secularization—prescribe the Museum’s denial of the significance of the Holocaust and of a Jewish voice. In order to assess how these conceptual aspects of the Museum play out for the visitor, we must turn to an examination of various displays in the permanent exhibit.

3. The Holocaust in the Permanent Exhibition

One of the central ironies of the Jewish Museum Munich is the arguably a-historic nature of the Museum’s exhibitions. Though the Museum purportedly seeks to tell the history of Jews and Jewish life in Munich, the result is very different. At issue here is not only the Museum space, but also the nature of history and how it is presented. Historians Thomas Andrews and Flannery Burke identify five elements of historical thinking which “stand at the heart of the questions historians seeks to answer, the arguments [they] make, and the debates in which [they] engage.”\(^{54}\) These are the “five C’s of historical thinking”: change over time, causality, context, complexity, and contingency.\(^{55}\)

Examining four different segments of the Museum’s permanent exhibition, with an eye

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\(^{55}\) Andrews and Burke.
towards the representation of the Holocaust, we see that the “five C’s” are largely absent.\(^5^6\)

The first portion of the exhibition the visitor sees when entering the permanent exhibit is Voices, an installation on Jewish migration to Munich. Leaning against a wall from which audio clips are played, visitors listen to different “arrival stories” of München Jews. Computer screens hanging from the ceiling match the story to a name and brief description, for example: “Paula Frankel-Zaltzman, freed from Auschwitz, came to Munich as DP after the war.”\(^5^7\) In this story, migration is presented as the focal point, while casual factors and contingent elements are all but ignored. While the Museum hopes that the mention of Frankel-Zaltzman’s liberation from Auschwitz will be enough to explain her migration, it omits her having been a prisoner there and is a radical de-contextualization that flattens the narrative so much that we understand only Frankel-Zaltzman’s arrival in Munich, as if that were the beginning of her story. Absent from the installation is the contingent element that her migration to Munich as a Displaced Person was a direct consequence of the Nazi Judeocide.

Along with migration, another topic that the Jewish Museum focuses on is that of objects. The *Jüdisches Museum München* catalogue edited by curator Jutta Fleckenstein and director Bernhard Purin introduces the Objects exhibit as follows:

Few objects connected to Munich’s Jewish history and culture survive today. As with many historical collections, that of the Jewish Museum is *fragmentary and governed by coincidence*, but it is also the result of German-Jewish history in the twentieth century. With the destruction of the synagogues in 1938 and the

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\(^{56}\) I am using Andrews’ and Burke’s “five C’s” not as universal criteria for all historical thinking, but rather to raise questions about the historical representation of the Holocaust at the Jewish Museum Munich.

\(^{57}\) “Voices,” Jewish Museum in Munich, text in the installation, January 2008.
persecution and murder of Jewish citizens, Jewish life in the city was obliterated. It is crucial to point out the euphemism that is used in describing the Museum’s historical collection as “fragmentary and governed by coincidence.” Andrews and Burke define causality as “the interpretation of partial primary sources…[that offers] explanations for a single event.” Accounting for the Museum’s sparse collection of objects as “coincidence” omits causality and context from the narrative of the objects and denies the Holocaust the responsibility for the obliteration of Jewish life. Here is an example of how the Holocaust is not given significance at the Museum and is left lurking in the corners rather than being explicitly brought to the forefront.

On the opposite side of the wall holding the Voices installation is the Times portion of the permanent exhibit. Here a timeline marks historical events related to Jewish life in Munich from “the earliest reference to Jews in Munich” in 1229 to the opening of “the Jewish Community’s new main synagogue” on November 9, 2006. By using a timeline to tell the history of Jewish life in Munich, the Museum stresses chronology over historical narrative. For a Museum whose mission statement indicates an eagerness to tell a complex story of Jewish life in Munich, telling that history with a timeline, perhaps the most minimalist of narrative techniques, is inherently contradictory.

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59 Andrews and Burke.
60 Jewish Museum Munich, ed. Jutta Fleckenstein and Bernhard Purin (New York: Prestel, 2007), 40 and 47.
61 Andrews and Burke include “change over time” as one of their “five C’s,” however they see this concept as one part of the historical narrative that is incomplete without the other C’s—context, causality, contingency, and complexity.
For historians, there is a critical difference between chronology and historical narrative.\textsuperscript{62} While the former is a list of dates when events occurred, the latter is the concept of telling a complex story about the past that explores the significance of events. It seems as though the emphasis on chronology has eliminated space for the Museum to explain the significance and meaning of different moments of Jewish life in Munich.

The last segment of the permanent exhibition is Comics, which includes a comic strip by American Jewish cartoonist Jordan B. Gorfinkel called \textit{Everything’s Relative}. According to the Jewish Museum’s catalogue, the comic strip “has appeared in the New York newspaper \textit{Jewish Week} since 1996, and is read all over the world.”\textsuperscript{63} In the comic strip, Zayde, a Holocaust survivor who lived in Munich and is now living in America, is invited to return to Munich for the celebration of the opening of the Jewish Museum Munich. The comic strip tells both the story of Zayde’s experiences during the Holocaust, as well as his journey back to Munich with his grandson Bernie for the opening. During the trip, Bernie explores his own stereotypes of Germans, and also encounters various German stereotypes of Jews. Finally, at the end of the strip he asks his grandfather, “Well Zayde, our trip to Munich is almost over. Is there anything you missed that you’d like to see?”\textsuperscript{64} The last panel of the comic strip shows Zayde and Bernie walking away and his answer: “Yes…My family.”\textsuperscript{65}

As the last segment of the Museum, the comic in general and Zadye’s final words in particular, leave visitors with a slight sting and a reminder that the horrors of the

\textsuperscript{62} For more on the distinctions between chronology and narrative in historical thinking see Hayden White \textit{Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe} (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973).
\textsuperscript{63} \textit{Jewish Museum Munich}, ed. Jutta Fleckenstein and Bernhard Purin (New York: Prestel, 2007), 72.
\textsuperscript{64} Ibid., 77.
\textsuperscript{65} Ibid.
Holocaust are present in Munich’s Jewish history and in the Jewish Museum’s exhibit. To his credit, Gorfinkel does a good job of telling a complex story and including Andrews’ and Burke’s historical concepts. Yet at the same time, it is important to question the use of the comic strip as a historical tool in the Museum.

On the one hand, Brenner argues that the Comics exhibit “is a good idea because it takes away this big burden and you can approach the topic [of the Holocaust] somehow in a language which speaks, especially of course to younger people, but you see it is still serious.”66 Certainly, the comic strip is a creative and effective approach to the topic of the Nazi Judeocide, especially in a community where the facts of the Holocaust are common knowledge. On the other hand, that the narrative of the Holocaust is told most directly in the Comics segment of the exhibit is in common with the Jewish Museum’s method of telling the story of the Judeocide not as its own topic, but obliquely as it is discussed by way of other narratives. The closest that the Jewish Museum comes to telling the narrative of a Holocaust survivor is through a fictional character drawn by an American Jewish cartoonist. This is an example of how the Museum looks everywhere but at itself and in its own community for evidence of the significance of the Holocaust.

The absence of the “five C’s” in these examples highlights how the significance of the Holocaust is downplayed at the Museum. Historians define an event as having significance if it can inform us about the content of a situation. Andrews and Burke imply that significance by examining history through the “five C’s.” For the history of Jews and Jewish life in Munich, at least since the 1930s, the Holocaust has significance, yet the city mandate, the Museum’s method of chronology, and its emphasis on letting objects and images speak for themselves eliminate the possibility of the Holocaust having

any significance anywhere in the Museum’s permanent exhibition. Also, the Museum’s claim to tell a broad and inclusive story of the history of all Jews and Jewish life in Munich results in the Museum not being able to give any single story real substantial significance.

Throughout each of the seven sections of the permanent exhibition, the Holocaust is mentioned by some other name, is hinted at, or is left lurking in the background, but is not explicitly discussed as its own topic. Though the Holocaust does not have to be at the center of all discourse at the Jewish Museum, the result of the mandate and the Museum’s strategy of representing the Holocaust as the unspoken and the unstated is problematic and raises many questions: What does it mean for the city to put a mandate on memory at the Jewish Museum? What does it mean for the Museum not to treat the Nazi Judeocide as a significant historical event, but rather to absorb it into “normal” history? What is the narrative of modern Jewish history without the Holocaust? Understanding the absence of the Holocaust at the Jewish Museum Munich also raises questions as to what other aspects of the history of Jews and Jewish life in Munich might be missing from the Museum’s narrative. However, stepping back for a moment from the Museum’s permanent exhibition we find that the legacy of the Holocaust is not entirely absent from St.-Jakobs-Platz.

4. The Legacy of the Holocaust in the Tunnel of Remembrance

Just a stone’s throw from the Jewish Museum, next door at the Jewish Community Center, a glaring absence in the Jewish Museum becomes even more apparent. This is the legacy of the Holocaust in Munich embodied in the Tunnel of
Remembrance, an underground walkway that connects the Jewish Community Center to the Ohel Jakob Synagogue.

The Tunnel is a reminder of the significance of the Holocaust in two ways. First, the Tunnel of Remembrance is the only communal Holocaust memorial at St.-Jakobs-Platz. The names of the Jewish men and women from Munich who were murdered or disappeared during the Holocaust are etched into the wall. Some names are prominent and other artistically faded away and the opposite wall displays a large engraved Star of David along with the names of five concentration and extermination camps. The placement of the Holocaust memorial in an underground tunnel is indicative of the second way that the Tunnel of Remembrance is the legacy of the Holocaust.67

The Tunnel functions as an entrance into the Ohel Jakob Synagogue and, according to Brenner, when the Synagogue first opened this was its only entrance. It was designed this way for security reasons and only after the Synagogue had been opened for a few months was the second entrance, on street level and directly into the Synagogue’s lobby, opened. This is the legacy of the Holocaust for Munich’s Jewish community and this is what ought to be explained in the Jewish Museum. That originally the entrance into the Ohel Jakob Synagogue was underground in response to security threats to the Jewish community is a result of the Holocaust and presents the Holocaust as a significant historical event in Munich’s Jewish history.

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67 Another reason for the creation of the Holocaust memorial in the Tunnel of Remembrance is that the Jewish community in Munich rejected Stolpersteine, the memorial project that took place in dozens of cities across Germany in which the names of Holocaust victims were engraved in the street in front of houses where they once lived. This unique Holocaust memorial project caused a big controversy in Munich and was not carried through. However, because the rejection was not of the concept of a Holocaust memorial, but rather specifically of Stolpersteine, construction of the tunnel between the Jewish community center and the synagogue provided a space for a collective Holocaust memorial. (Michael Brenner, interview by author, Washington, D.C., 5 March 2008.)
Conclusion

In the 1980s the Historikerstreit raised and answered questions regarding how the Holocaust would be remembered in German history. Habermas and his contemporaries were thought to have “won” the debate with their argument that, because of the scope of the genocide and of the degree of denial and repression in Germany, the Judeocide must be remembered in its singularity and uniqueness. Today, however, the Jewish Museum Munich does not consider a significant discussion of the Holocaust within the scope of its dialogue. Rather than being marked as an exceptional, highly specialized, and idiosyncratic example of the presentation of Jewish history, as Habermas might have expected, the Jewish Museum Munich has been widely and enthusiastically received as representative of Jewish life in Munich. This discrepancy raises many questions: What does the Museum say about how the politics of memory in Germany have changed in the past two decades? If we view the Jewish Museum Munich as an exemplary case or prototype of the “new” Jewish Museum in Germany, what are the implications for the memory and historical significance of the Holocaust? Does the marginalization performed by the Jewish Museum Munich condemn us to “forget the extermination”? And if so, what might this mean for the growing and established Jewish communities in Germany? Exploring the situation of Germany’s recent Russian-Jewish émigrés reveals that the absence of the Holocaust is not the only absence at the Jewish Museum.

With the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 began an enormous wave of immigration of Jews from the former Soviet Union into Germany. According to German studies scholar Jeffrey Peck, this immigration “saved the Jewish community in Germany from
certain extinction and made it the third largest in Europe." Today these Russian émigrés make up over eighty percent of the Jewish community in Munich, but they are not equally represented in the community. For instance, of the twelve members of the Jewish community board in Munich, only one member is a Russian Jewish émigré. Although the Museum plans to create a temporary exhibition about the Russian Jewish community in the near future, currently the permanent exhibition includes very little on this community. In fact, the permanent exhibit only mentions Munich’s contemporary Jewish community in three places: (1) in a photograph on the Images wall celebrating the opening of the Ohel Jakob Synagogue, (2) on the timeline marking significant dates for the community (1989: opening of Jewish immigration from the former Soviet Union and the opening of Richard Grimm’s private Jewish Museum; 1995: founding of the Liberal Jewish community, Beth Shalom; 2005: reports the population of the Orthodox and Liberal Jewish communities; and 2006: the opening of the Ohel Jakob Synagogue), and (3) in the comic strip. With the exception of two inscriptions on the timeline, every example focuses on the celebration of the opening of the Ohel Jakob Synagogue adjacent to the Museum.


69 Bernhard Purin, interview by author, Munich, Germany, 28 December 2007.

70 Ibid.

71 Jewish Museum Munich, Jutta Fleckenstein and Bernhard Purin (New York: Prestel, 2007), 48-49.
The Jewish Museum’s representation of Munich’s contemporary Jewish community almost entirely in terms of the opening of the Synagogue and without including the legacy of the Holocaust or the story of recent Russian Jewish émigrés is a form of antiquating this community to the past. The obvious presence of Munich’s contemporary Jewish community, yet the absence of any discussion of its complex historical situation, is a function of the Museum’s unsophisticated narrative style and reminds us of the Museum’s representation of the Holocaust. Just as an explicit and historically nuanced discussion of the Holocaust is absent from the permanent exhibit, the Holocaust is present in the subtexts and corners of the Museum, and the representation of the Jewish community in Munich works to simplify and minimize this community. The Museum’s representation is one of disappearing pasts and peoples; is there a relationship between these two absences?

Turning our attention back to the photograph of Beate Siegel leaving from the Munich Central Station on a Kindertransport in 1939, we now see this photo with a very different perspective. The absence of any contextualization is not an isolated instance, but rather part of a larger absence that haunts the Jewish Museum. This thesis has sought to explain the absence of this context, and to provide the context for the photo itself. Siegel’s photo was taken during a war and a genocide that would prove to be so all-encompassing and so complicated that more than six decades after its end, individuals and institutions are still struggling with how to talk about it in public and how to represent it in public museums.

What does the Jewish Museum say about the politics of memory in Germany since the Historikerstreit? The Historikerstreit was a debate about how to situate the
Holocaust in Germany’s history: Should it be viewed in its singularity and as a uniquely horrific event, or as part of the larger history of European atrocities of the twentieth century? The Jewish Museum’s permanent exhibit proves that, today, a new “normalization” is taking place. The Museum does not provide a resolution to the questions raised in the “historians’ debate.” By relegating the Holocaust and the story of Munich’s Russian Jewish émigrés to the margins and not integrating them into the narrative of Jewish life of Munich, the Jewish Museum undermines the need for an ongoing discussion, debate, and dialogue that the Historikerstreit so forcefully advocated.
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