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Redefining the Agency of Jewish Communities Through Ghetto Humor

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Abstract

While the Holocaust is remembered by historians and victims as a time of suffering and genocide, Jewish ghetto survivors recall numerous occasions in which humor was used to combat the oppression of Nazi authorities. Although many historians emphasized the physical hardships and tragic conditions faced by Jewish victims of the Holocaust, the existence of jokes throughout Eastern European ghettos articulated the legitimacy of humor within the greater context and discussion of coping, resistance, and unification for the preservation of Jewish life and identity in the post-war period. Rather than depicting Jews as solely victims, humor returns agency to the Jews who lived in ghettos by highlighting the complexity of their reality without overgeneralizing their experiences.

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Reclaiming the Agency of Jewish Communities Through Ghetto Humor

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Abstract:

While the Holocaust is remembered by historians and victims as a time of suffering and genocide, Jewish ghetto survivors recall numerous occasions in which humor was used to combat the oppression of Nazi authorities. Although many historians emphasized the physical hardships and tragic conditions faced by Jewish victims of the Holocaust, the existence of jokes throughout Eastern European ghettos articulated the legitimacy of humor within the greater context and discussion of coping, resistance, and unification for the preservation of Jewish life and identity in the post-war period. Rather than depicting Jews as solely victims, humor returns agency to the Jews who lived in ghettos by highlighting the complexity of their reality without overgeneralizing their experiences.

"God forbid that the war last as long as the Jews are able to endure it."

Rabbi Shimon Huberband remembered the spread of this Yiddish joke over the course of his time living in the Warsaw Ghetto.[1] The joke emphasizes the lasting impact of World War II and the ability of Jews to survive regardless of its length. Additionally, it sparks the question: Where does humor have a place, if any, within the discussion of the Holocaust? When naming tragic historical events, which are contested subjects in the sphere of comedic entertainment, the Holocaust and Adolf Hitler's Final Solution are frequently at the top of the list. Among many reasons, the proximity of the Holocaust to the present day, as well as respect for remaining survivors places the Holocaust as a taboo topic within the sphere of comedians. Popular culture depictions of Hitler's Germany and the lives of European Jews over the course of the mid-twentieth century make sure to include the suffering and hardships experienced before, during, and following World War II. Many Jewish families worked, starved, and eventually died in ghettos or concentration and extermination camps. However, despite the harsh realities of the Nazi takeover and regime, some Jews found relief through the presence of humor.

While not every ghetto organized formal entertainment, many Jews preserved their identity and communities through *Flusterwitze* or "whispered jokes," poems, and satiric comments in order to overcome daily strife.[2] Although many historians have emphasized the physical hardships and tragic conditions faced by Jewish victims of the Holocaust, the existence of jokes throughout Eastern European ghettos exemplified the legitimacy of humor within the greater context and discussion of coping, resistance, and unification for the preservation of

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[1] Ruth R. Wisse, *No Joke: Making Jewish Humor* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), quoted in David Roskies, forward to *Voices from the Warsaw Ghetto* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019), 12.; Huberband served alongside Emmanuel Ringelblum to record the history and experience of Jews living in the Warsaw Ghetto.

[2] Lynn Rapaport, "Laughter and Heartache: The Functions of Humor in Holocaust Tragedy," in *Gray Zones: Ambiguity and Compromise in the Holocaust and Its Aftermath*, Jonathan Petropoulos and John K. Roth eds. (Oxford, New York: Berghahn Books, 2012), 255.

Jewish life and identity in the post-war period. Rather than depicting Jews as solely victims, humor returns agency to Jews living in ghettos by highlighting the complexity of their reality without overgeneralizing their experiences.

Historians debate the role of humor in the scholarly discussion and assessment of the tragedies that occurred during the Holocaust. Following the immediate aftermath of liberation, many argued that humor had no place in academic research due to its perceived insensitivity towards the victims. An early Holocaust historian, Terrence Des Pres, author of the 1975 text *The Survivor—An Anatomy of Life in the Death Camp*, emphasized this perspective, noting that "The Holocaust shall be approached as a solemn event, with a seriousness admitting no response that might obscure its enormity or dishonor its dead."[3] Des Pres argued that humor was present in Holocaust history but was absent from the post-Holocaust generation and the research about it as a result of etiquette and sensitivity.[4] While Des Pres acknowledged why humor had previously been untouched, he encouraged later generations to contextualize the importance of Jewish humor during the Holocaust.

Taking Des Pres' advice, later scholarship directed the discussion of humor towards serving as a mechanism of agency for oppressed populations, specifically Jewish communities within ghettos and concentration camps. Lucy Dawidowicz's 1986 book *The War Against the Jews* did precisely this. Written a decade after Des Pres first opened the doors to academic discussion surrounding humor during the Holocaust, Dawidowicz articulated the role of ghetto humor as a coping mechanism.[5] While Dawidowicz's research provided background on the

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[3] Terrence Des Pres, *The Survivor—The Anatomy of Life in the Death Camp* (Oxford University Press: January 1976), quoted in Steve Lipman, *Laughter in Hell: The Use of Humor During the Holocaust* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson Inc., 1991), 7.

[4] Steve Lipman, "Humor, Faith, and the Holocaust**,"** *Laughter in Hell: The Use of Humor During the Holocaust* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson Inc., 1991), 7.

[5] Lucy Dawidowicz, "Death and Life in the East European Ghettos," in *The War Against the Jews* (New York: Bantam Books, 1986), 218-219.

significance of the Jewish community throughout life in the ghettos, Steve Lipman expanded upon Dawidowicz's discussion in 1991 with the release of *Laughter in Hell: The Use of Humor During the Holocaust.* Lipman emphasized that "By appreciating the humor from the period we are not laughing at the victims or their suffering; we are simply recognizing that laughter was a part of their lives, a part nurtured by their suffering."[6] Arguing that humor played a crucial role in the survival of Holocaust victims, Lipman broke down his discussion into subpoints such as humor's presence as a coping mechanism, psychological weapon, and social bond. Overall, *Laughter in Hell* acknowledged the difference between modern-Holocaust humor, which is generally in poor taste, and the authentic experience of the Jewish community.

Louis Kaplan, however, provided a contradictory analysis of the role of humor in Nazi Germany, specifically as it pertained to the Jewish population within concentration camps and ghettos. Kaplan's 2020 book *At Wit's End: The Deadly Discourse of the Jewish Joke* argued that instead of positively impacting Jews in ghettos, the creation and use of Jewish self-mocking jokes during the Holocaust provided ammunition for Nazi propaganda.[7] Kaplan pulled from examples of classic Jewish-style jokes, which were then used by the Nazis to perpetuate antisemitic stereotypes. As a result, self-deprecating Jewish jokes "served as a crucial means by which to demonstrate that the Nazi's condemnation of the Jews was completely justified and that they were only reiterating the negative things that the Jews were saying about themselves already."[8] Kaplan's argument was a sharp contrast to Lipman's optimistic approach to the Jewish joke. Instead of supporting Kaplan's theory that Jewish humor re-affirmed the antisemitic beliefs of the time, the majority of historians support the notion of humor during the Holocaust

[6] Lipman, "Humor, Faith, and the Holocaust," 8.
[7] Louis Kaplan, "Of Jokes and Propaganda: The Mobilization of the Jewish Joke in the Nazi Era," in *At Wit's End, The Deadly Discourse of the Jewish Joke* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020), 153.
[8] Kaplan, "Of Jokes and Propaganda," 153.

positively impacting Jewish ghettos through providing a dual reality for hope of survival while simultaneously acknowledging their tragic experience.

Despite Kaplan's critical approach to understanding the role Jewish humor played during the height of the Third Reich, the majority of literature on the subject of humor during the Holocaust sides with Lipman to a greater extent. For example, Lynn Rapaport's article "Laughter and Heartache: The Functions of Humor in Holocaust Tragedy," supported the consensus that humor was used as a coping mechanism for victims, as well as provided a subtle form of resistance and a platform for political satire.[9] Rapaport distinguished herself from Lipman in her argument that humor also served a post-war purpose which resonates with modern-day audiences.[10] By focusing on Hitler as a human capable of atrocious acts rather than as an "evil demon," today's historians and audiences can understand the lived experiences of the Jewish community as agents of resistance outside of the victim narrative perpetuated by historians writing during the immediate post-war period.[11] Instead of a subject that should not be discussed for the sake of politeness, Rapaport believed that humor provides a mechanism for a post-Holocaust society to confront social traumas such as the long-term effects of antisemitism and genocide.[12] Rather than leaving humor within the context and time of ghettos and concentration campus, it is important for society to acknowledge the humanity of the Jewish victims alongside the tragedy of their lived experience.

In addition to Rapaport and Lipman's description of the purpose of humor within the ghettos and concentration camps, Whitney Carpenter's analysis of Jewish humor provided a

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[9] Rapaport, "Laughter and Heartache," 253.

[10] Rudolph Herzog's *Dead Funny: Humor in Hitler's Germany* provides additional insight regarding the effects of Jewish ghetto humor on popular culture and modern-day depictions of the Holocaust; Rudolph Herzog, "Laughing at Auschwitz? Humor and National Socialism after World War II," in *Dead Funny: Humor in Hitler's Germany* (Brooklyn, NY: Melville House, 2011), 235.

[11] Herzog, "Laughing at Auschwitz?," 235.

[12] Rapaport, "Laughter and Heartache," 253.

unique interpretation of humor as a way for ghetto inhabitants to associate their ghetto experience with the Jewish faith. Carpenter stated in "Laughter in a Time of Tragedy: Examining Humor During the Holocaust" that "laughter…provided an alternative way of internalizing abnormality, it was a defense mechanism, established a type of revolt, and for many of the prisoners, it provided a link for sustaining their faith tradition."[13] During the Holocaust, many Jews believed that God had abandoned them and left them to die. However, many were able to lean into their faith in order to survive. Within the Torah, there are numerous occasions in which humor was used to support a religious argument or contextualize a historical experience.[14] As a result, humor and religion were closely linked throughout the history of Jewish communities. Carpenter supported this analysis through her argument that Jews clung to humor as a type of secondary religion during the Holocaust, ultimately using it as a mechanism to make sense of their harsh reality. Carpenter provided an important intersection of Jewish culture and religion within the context of humor; however, Rapaport and Lipman's respective arguments included more evidence to support humor's role as primarily a coping mechanism and form of resistance.

While Kaplan and Carpenter advanced Lipman's discussion of the different roles humor played for the Jewish people in concentration camps and ghettos, Chaya Ostrower provided the most comprehensive analysis of Jewish humor within the context of Nazi Germany in the book *It Kept Us Alive: Humor in the Holocaust.* In addition to a thorough analysis of diverse sources, such as diaries and letters, Ostrower conducted fifty-five interviews with Holocaust survivors who were teenagers during their time in either a concentration camp or ghetto throughout

[13] Whitney Carpenter, "Laughter in a Time of Tragedy: Examining Humor During the Holocaust," *Denison Journal of Religion* 9 (2010): 1.

[14] Carpenter provides an example of humor and irony in the Torah when referring to the story of Abraham and Sarah having a child named Isaac which translates to "He who laughs" as noted in Genesis 18; Carpenter, "Laughter in a Time of Tragedy," 9.

Europe.[15] She emphasized the difference between the physical response of laughter compared to the emotional and intellectual understanding of humor. Ostrower defined "Jewish humor," which will be elaborated on later in this paper, and its role in the types of jokes and subjects frequently circulated within the ghettos. The core of her argument was the academic theory that there were five types of humor present in ghettos and concentration camps during the Holocaust. These included aggressive (one sub-type to achieve superiority and the other to express frustration), sexual, social, a defense mechanism (black humor and self-directed humor), and finally intellectual.[16] Furthermore, Ostrower believed there were an additional two sub-sections of humor that were present in the ghettos and concentration camps: scatological humor (related to feces and bodily functions) and humor about food due to the lack of nutrition and reliable resources over the course of the Holocaust.[17] Overall, her argument supported the belief that humor provided relief in the camps and ghettos through the recorded and spoken testimonies of those who experienced them.

Although there is extensive literature surrounding the Holocaust and Hitler's Final Solution, the discussion of humor is frequently mentioned as nothing more than a footnote. This is likely because of the discomfort in acknowledging the fullest extent of the lived experiences within the concentration camps and ghettos of the Third Reich. The Holocaust is not funny, but the existence of humor within ghettos and concentration camps was real. Historians must contextualize the Jewish narrative to understand how individuals survived the harshest conditions while maintaining a sense of humor and, in some cases, responding with laughter

[15] Chaya Ostrower, "Introduction," in *It Kept Us Alive: Humor in the Holocaust* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2014), 21.

[16] Chaya Ostrower, "Humor and Laughter," in *It Kept Us Alive: Humor in the Holocaust* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2014), 40.

[17] Ostrower, "Humor and Laugher," 40.

itself. Without detracting from the physical hardships and existential threat brought upon Jews by the Nazi regime, the existence of jokes and comedy throughout Eastern European ghettos emphasized the importance of humor in the ability to overcome tragedy through coping, resisting, and uniting for the greater preservation of Jewish life and identity both during and after the Second World War.

Due to the extensive literature in regard to Eastern European ghettos, the Warsaw Ghetto is the primary location discussed throughout this paper. While the Theresienstadt Ghetto was prominently known for its presence of art and culture, the firsthand written accounts of humor within the Warsaw Ghetto provide a deeper understanding of the wide array and presence of humor throughout numerous ghettos.[18] A detailed analysis of the Warsaw Ghetto focuses the experience of Jews within the community and the portrayal of humor's unique purposes over the course of the ghettoization of Warsaw. Although the scope of this paper focuses on the Warsaw Ghetto, extraordinary examples of the power of humor displayed in other ghettos and concentration camps are referenced with the intent to build upon the academic discussion.

Announced in October 1940, the Warsaw Ghetto became the largest ghetto in Eastern Europe, holding approximately 480,000 people by November 1940.[19] As a result, there is a vast array of resources and documentation of humor within the ghetto, both through diaries written during the Holocaust and post-World War II oral histories. Within the ghetto, Jews and other inhabitants were isolated from the rest of Warsaw and lived in cramped conditions under poor circumstances. Chaim A. Kaplan, a survivor of the Warsaw Ghetto, noted in November 1941, "Warsaw is depressed and wrapped in deep mourning. But it is no ceremonial mourning with

[18] Stephen Feinstein, "Art from the Concentration Camps: Gallows Humor and Satirical Wit," *Journal of Jewish Identities* 1, no. 2 (2008): 71.

[19] "Warsaw Ghetto," Yad Vashem, The World Holocaust Remembrance Center, accessed April 18, 2023, https://www.yadvashem.org/holocaust/about/ghettos/warsaw.html#narrative_info.

only the outward trappings, lacking heartfelt grief."[20] The lack of resources resulted in starvation and the spread of disease, especially due to overcrowded conditions, since the ghetto consisted of 2.4% of the city's surface area.[21] Although there were organizations such as the Judenrat that attempted to support the ghetto's inhabitants, many were unsuccessful due to the demands of the Nazi officers. By the time the Nazi regime began deporting Jews to the Treblinka death camp in 1942, Jewish organizations had fallen and "Warsaw Jewry was without communal resources for maintaining or building morale, without communal leadership."[22] As many as six thousand Jews were rounded up by the Jewish police daily in the Warsaw Ghetto, never to see their families again and many to die upon arrival at the death camps.[23] However, for those that remained within the confines of the ghetto, the deportation of their community and trying conditions did not stop their informal displays of humor and entertainment for the purpose of community building, resistance, and coping.

Despite the uncertain conditions faced within the ghetto, many attempted to offset their fear with both physical and psychological escapes. Helene Frankle, a Jewish women who physically escaped the Warsaw Ghetto following the death of her mother, noted the sharp contrast, stating,

> The ghetto was a very strange place in Warsaw. There were nightclubs and theaters. People were dying of hunger in the street but there were restaurants full of food…so there was this contrast—being hungry and going to cabarets and concerts. You could see the best actors, hear the best pianists and singers in the Warsaw ghetto. It was very exciting.[24]

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[20] Chaim A. Kaplan, "Nov. 18, 1941," in *Scroll of Agony: The Warsaw Diary of Chaim A. Kaplan*, trans. Abraham Isaac Katsh (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999), as quoted in *Voices from the Warsaw Ghetto*, ed. David Roskies (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019), 139.

[21] Sam Bankhalter, interview by Sandra Bradley, 26 February 1992, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Collection. https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn505559.

[22] "Warsaw Ghetto"; Lucy Dawidowicz, "Who Shall Live, Who Shall Die," in *The War Against the Jews* (New York: Bantam Books, 1986), 305.

[23] Dawidowicz, "Who Shall Live, Who Shall Die," 305.

[24] Helene Frankle, "Oral History Testimony," in *Voices from the Holocaust*, ed. Sylvia Rothchild (New York: The New American Library Inc., 1981), 231.

This sharp contrast demonstrated both the compartmentalization of tragedy and the acknowledgement of the harsh realities of the ghetto which transferred to the displayed humor within the ghetto. For example, because of the compact spaces and the lack of support, many Jews died from starvation and disease while living in the ghetto. This duality contributed directly to the development of gallows humor and dark humor within the community because, according to Warsaw Ghetto survivor Christina Brandwajn, "The ghetto proved that people have tremendous vitality; only a minute passes between one trauma and the next and they are already laughing.'"[25] In many cases, a strong mentality meant the difference between life and death. Frankle noted the presence of nightclubs and cabarets as a form of entertainment and escape from reality. While it is important to acknowledge the existence of formal venues, such as the five cabarets located within the Warsaw Ghetto, the existence of written and oral jokes passed between ghetto inhabitants demonstrated the day-to-day interactions between Jews regardless of their ability to attend such events. Additionally, the jokes themselves demonstrated the creation of uniquely "Jewish" humor, reflecting Jewish culture, language, and experience within the ghettos.

Before Jewish humor can be explained, it is important to understand humor as an independent concept. In a broader sense, humor within the context of Nazi Germany can be best described as anything that made a Jew in the Warsaw Ghetto smile or laugh over the course of the Holocaust. Sigmund Freud, a Jewish scientist who influenced the field of psychology throughout the early-twentieth century, emphasized that humor can be used to provide relief, since humor is used by the super-ego to pacify the anxious ego.[26] As a result, Freud claimed that

[25] Christina Brandwajn, "The Function of Humor as a Defense Mechanism," interview by Chaya Ostrower in *It Kept Us Alive: Humor in the Holocaust* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2014), 85.

[26] Chaya Ostrower, "Humor and Laughter," in *It Kept Us Alive: Humor in the Holocaust* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2014), 35-36.

only people with healthy minds and strong egos are able to use humor as a coping mechanism.[27] Within the debate of humor's role during the Holocaust, many historians believed that the humor recorded by survivors depicted their strength and determination as strong-minded individuals. This distinct way of thinking may have contributed to their ability to survive through trying times.

While humor may result in laughter, Jewish humor consists of a few key characteristics which stem from a collective past full of "ongoing suffering, rejection and despair."[28] Throughout the history of the Jewish population, there has been an extensive list of oppressive measures taken to displace them from society. Consequently, "It can be imagined that humor helped the Jewish people survive a long series of tragedies through the ages—the Crusades, the Inquisition, the pogroms and expulsions."[29] As previously mentioned, the recurrence of humor within the Jewish faith and religious texts supported the notion of humor providing relief during times of tragedy. Because of the double consciousness of being both an insider and outsider throughout history, many Jews learned to see both how they were being treated and the hypocrisy of such oppression. The historical development of Jewish humor over time provided clear and distinct traits that led to the growth of the classification. Ostrower elaborated on these characteristics, emphasizing the three main qualities:

> A desire to distort the tragic reality, to alter it and make it laughable…the desire to preserve internal cohesiveness, to perceive what is special about 'us' in contrast to what characterizes 'them'…and self-disparaging humor that makes self-criticism possible and enables a man to take a courageous look at his own negative aspects and those of the groups or people with which he identifies.[30]

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[27] Ostrower, "Humor and Laughter," 45.

[28] Ostrower, "Humor and Laughter," 45.

[29] Steve Lipman, "Jewish Humor," in *Laughter in Hell: The Use of Humor During the Holocaust* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson Inc., 1991), 135.

[30] Chaya Ostrower, "Jewish Humor," in *It Kept Us Alive: Humor in the Holocaust* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2014), 47; Ostrower, "Humor and Laughter," 40.

All of the unique aspects of Jewish humor were present throughout the history of ghetto humor in Warsaw; however, most notable were the distinctions made between Jews and the Nazi authorities. The jokes written and delivered by Jews tended to include references to the Jewish way of life, descriptions of stereotypically Jewish characters, and the use of idioms frequently spoken in a typical Jewish language such as Yiddish.[31] These distinctions played a crucial role in the analysis and contextualization of Jewish humor within the Warsaw Ghetto because the jokes depicted the Jewish experience from a uniquely Jewish perspective. Not only did ghetto humor reflect Jewish life, but it also did so through a distinctly Jewish method. As a result, Jewish survivors told their story through the recollection of jokes and acknowledgement of their larger significance within the development of Jewish comedy in the post-World War II era.

The jokes recorded by Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto depicted the shared experience and community created between Jews during the Holocaust. Despite the "ugliness, tastelessness, and lack of beauty" in their daily lives, many residents developed strong relationships across the ghetto.[32] Separated from the outside world, the Jewish members of the Warsaw Ghetto were isolated from the rest of the city, while simultaneously being unified together under the system of Nazi oppression. As a result, Jewish humor developed to reflect the everyday lives of Warsaw Jews. The Germans permitted the Jews to develop a wide range of cultural activities, such as vocational schools, Hebrew schools, choral groups, and cabarets; therefore, some aspects of ghetto humor were not secretive.[33] The schools in particular "imparted a sense of Jewish identity, and by concentration on Jewish subjects of study, reinforced Jewish solidarity, while

[31] Ostrower, "Jewish Humor," 48-49.

[32] Chaim A. Kaplan, "Nov. 4, 1940," in *Scroll of Agony: The Warsaw Diary of Chaim A. Kaplan*, trans. Abraham Isaac Katsh (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999), 219.

[33] Lipman, "Jewish Humor," 149.

simultaneously encouraging the children to play, dance, and act."[34] Additionally, despite having a curfew within the ghetto, many neighbors within adjoining buildings would spend the evening playing cards, inviting performers into their homes, and entertaining themselves the best that they could.[35] Activities that united the ghetto motivated the community to see a future beyond the Nazi regime. The creation of a universal experience emphasized the importance of building solidarity between Warsaw Jews.

Furthermore, the presence of widespread memories within the ghetto, as presented through oral histories and diaries, promoted the idea of community within the walls of the ghetto. For example, many Warsaw Ghetto survivors recalled the presence of Rubenstein (also spelled, Rubinshteyn), a clown-like figure who frequented the streets of Warsaw.[36] Some Warsaw Jews believed that Rubenstein was crazy, while others believed that he only pretended to be crazy as a survival technique.[37] Overall, many suspected Rubenstein's aim was to keep the people's spirits up by making them laugh, since he would approach German guards and make faces, calling them names and obscenities. Rather than receiving a punishment, the German guards thought this was hilarious and would throw him cigarettes and coins because they could not take him seriously.[38] Rubinstein's humor ranged from criticism of the Nazi authorities to complaining about the terrible conditions many faced in the ghetto. He famously jested, "I had a *groschen* but lost it; I had a *tsveyer* [two-*groschen* piece] but lost it; I had a *drayer* [three-*groschen* piece] but lost it.

[34] Lucy Dawidowicz, "The Alternative Community," in *The War Against the Jews* (New York: Bantam Books, 1986), 254.

[35] Davidowicz, "The Alternative Community," 256-257.

[36] Chaya Ostrower, "The Jesters," in *It Kept Us Alive: Humor in the Holocaust* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2014), 363.; The book *Dolores y Imperio* provides additional information regarding the biography of Rubinstein and his sister, however, the only publications are in Spanish and German which were not accessible for this paper; Kuno Kruse, *Dolores & Imperio: Die Drei Leben Des Sylvin Rubinstein* (Köln: Kiepenheuer u. Witsch, 2000).

[37] Ostrower, "The Jesters," 363.

[38] Ostrower, "The Jesters," 365.

Only the *firer* [four-*groschen* piece] I can't seem to lose."[39] The joke referred to *firer* which was a pun for Führer. The recollection of Rubenstein throughout the ghetto emphasized the interconnected community created through humor, as well as Rubinstein's distinct and important presence for the people of the ghetto. Israel Gutman, a professor who participated in the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, noted, "His popularity was rooted in the need for people to laugh. Even though he was no longer hungry, because everyone gave him something, a bit of food, he remained this way because the role he played, and his image were a source of laughter and amusement."[40] Despite having no obligation to support him, many community members provided him food, an already scarce commodity, in exchange for a laugh. Overall, Rubinstein's presence demonstrated the extent to which relationships built throughout the ghetto resulted in a sense of community.

The existence of supportive relationships within the ghetto served as an example of the agency Warsaw Jews had despite the oppressive control of the Nazi authorities. Many Holocaust survivors exhibited practices of "calculated risk-taking and disobedience" while maintaining pre-war notions of community and human reliance.[41] The reliance on others outside of oneself was frequently determined by factors such as hierarchy in the community, as well as social relationships between ghetto residents. Because of the traditions of Judaism and an emphasis on a shared cultural history, many Jews "[exercised] agency to survive these structural conditions of extremity [and were] influenced by their pre-war exposure to cultural schemas and resources that they were able to transpose to the war-occupation context," the traditional Jewish community as a prime example.[42] Within the ghettos, the formation of community programs, particularly in

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[39] Shimon Huberband, "Ghetto Folklore," trans. David E. Fishman, 1941, in *Voices from the Warsaw Ghetto*, ed. David Roskies (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019), 81.

[40] Ostrower, "The Jesters," 366.

[41] Richard L. Rubenstein and John K. Roth, *Approaches to Auschwitz: The Holocaust and Its Legacy* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1987), as quoted in Ronald T. Berger "Agency, Structure, and Jewish Survival of the Holocaust," *Sociological Quarterly* 36, no. 1 (1995): 17.

[42] Rubenstein and Roth, *Approaches to Auschwitz*, 19.

regard to entertainment and humor, fostered an environment of support for life and optimism. The success of agency for Warsaw Jews was largely based on the accomplishment of community. Simultaneously, the creation of community through humor directly related to the establishment of agency and survival within the ghetto regardless of the scarcity of physical resources.

The bonds of community provided one resource for Warsaw Jews to utilize in order to survive the harsh conditions. Additionally, humor served as a coping mechanism, contributing to the mental strength of Jews living in the ghetto. Based on the data collected through Chaya Ostrower's oral history testimonies from Jews who survived concentration camps and/or ghettos, humor was most frequently recalled as a form of defense mechanism.[43] Humor within the ghetto allowed for a "cryptic redefining of the victim's world," providing Jews the opportunity to reclaim their reality and understand their circumstances.[44] Additionally, "Black Humor" or *Galgenhumor*, also known as "Gallows Humor" best described this type of defense mechanism because of the re-occurring themes of death and suffering included within these types of jokes.[45] For example, "'There were also jokes going around the Warsaw Ghetto between the roundups in which people greeted each other, 'See you later, in a tin can,' hinting at the rumors that the Germans were using Jewish flesh for food….'"[46] Gallows humor allowed Warsaw Jews the ability to describe their circumstances while simultaneously making sense of their tragic fate.

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[43] Chaya Ostrower, "Statistical Summary of Statements and Episodes of Humor," in *It Kept Us Alive: Humor in the Holocaust* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2014), 167; The oral histories were conducted throughout numerous ghettos; however, the testimonies included in this paper are all recorded by Warsaw Ghetto survivors.

[44] Lipman, "Humor, Faith, and the Holocaust," 10.

[45] Chaya Ostrower, "The Function of Humor As a Defense Mechanism," in *It Kept Us Alive: Humor in the Holocaust* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2014), 88.

[46] Rachel Auerback, *In the Streets of Warsaw 1939–1943* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1954), quoted in Chaya Ostrower, *It Kept Us Alive: Humor in the Holocaust* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2014), 88.

Additionally, gallows humor demonstrated the Jewish ability to flip tragedy into comedy for the sake of criticizing the enemy. Another joke displayed the dark humor, stating,

> In the sewers two friends meet.
> 'Have you heard the one about…It goes like this:
>
> It was the end. Only two Jews were left,
> Ropes around their necks, waiting to be hanged.
> 'Cheer up, it could be worse.
> 'Listen, they've been saying that since
> The ghetto walls began to rise.'
>
> 'I know, but haven't you thought
> Why they're hanging us; why we're not shot?
> They haven't any ammunition left, you see;
> The joke's on us, even when we die.'[47]

By emphasizing the characteristics of death and suffering, gallows humor created a necessary mode of defense for many Warsaw Jews. Consequently, their remembrance of such jokes contributed to the development and record of the complicated Jewish ghetto experience during the Holocaust. Even popular culture depictions of the Holocaust respect this fragility of Jewish agency through humor, traditionally arguing that "only Holocaust victims, and not those from later generations, were allowed to engage in this genre of gallows humor."[48]

Within the context of the greater Jewish experience, humor was frequently used, outside of specifically gallows humor, as a defense mechanism. As previously stated, a recurring characteristic of Jewish humor is the use of self-deprecation within the content of the jokes. Sigmund Freud noted that, "The occurrence of self-criticism as a determinant may explain how it is that a number of the best jokes have grown up on the soil of Jewish popular life. I do not know

[47] Jenny Robertson, *Ghetto: Poems of the Warsaw Ghetto 1939-43* (Oxford: Lion Publishing Corporation, 1989), as quoted in Steve Lipman, *Laughter in Hell: The Use of Humor During the Holocaust* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson Inc., 1991), 162.

[48] Herzog, "Laughing at Auschwitz?," 231.

whether there are many other instances of people making fun of its own character to such a degree."[49] While traditional Jewish humor included tropes such as the matchmaker, *schlimazel*, and *schlemiel*, war-time humor included jokes surrounding the conditions and political sentiments of the Warsaw Jews.[50] Compared to the early-twentieth century, war-time jokes frequently emphasized the Jew as the "other" within German society. For example, a Warsaw joke stated, "'Nalewski Street looks like Hollywood nowadays…Wherever you go you see a star.'"[51] The star referred to the Star of David, which all Jews in the ghetto were forced to wear on their armband to identify themselves. Although some Jews attempted to disguise their identity to avoid persecution, the awareness of dissimilarity with others, as depicted in Jewish humor from the period, emphasized the acknowledgement of difference as a form of coping throughout the ghetto. Compared to previous mechanisms of shielding Jewish identity, some Warsaw Jews embraced their Jewishness through humor as a self-identifying defense mechanism.

The use of humor as a defense mechanism demonstrated the agency of Warsaw Jews because of their ability to combat physical hardship with mental responses. During the stressful day-to-day situations presented throughout the ghetto, Jews were forced to respond quickly and thoughtfully about the consequences of their actions. Some psychologists claimed that through adapting and coping with such stressful situations, Jews were able to "[attempt] to manipulate the stress to achieve some degree of control over 'those small segments of reality that could be

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[49] Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and the Relation to the Unconscious* (Alcester, UK: Read Books Ltd., 2013), as quoted in Louis Kaplan, *At Wit's End, The Deadly Discourse of the Jewish Joke* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020), 154.

[50] A *schlimazel* is often considered someone who is at the wrong place at the wrong time, while the *schlemiel* is known for making a situation worse despite their attempts to help; Jennifer Caplan, "The Nebbish in Pop Culture or, How the Underdog Can Win," *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 16, no. 1 (2016): 2-3.; Classic examples of stereotypical Jewish humor based off of these concepts are in Sholom Aleichem's *Tevye the Dairyman: and The Railroad Stories*; Sholom Aleichem, *Tevye the Dairyman: and The Railroad Stories* (New York: Schocken Books, 1996).

[51] Emmanuel Ringelblum, *Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto: The Journal of Emmanuel Ringelblum* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1958), as quoted in Steve Lipman, *Laughter in Hell: The Use of Humor During the Holocaust* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson Inc., 1991), 147.

managed…[and contained] possibilities for action.'"[52] Through the evaluation of available options, which were frequently presented in the ironic and satirical jokes spread within the ghetto walls, many Jews found the additional mental strength necessary to overcome the physical oppression imposed by the Nazi regime.

The unity and defensive measures taken by Warsaw Jews, as depicted through humor, reflected the cultural emphasis of making light out of the darkest realities. Additionally, the Jewish desire to live and pass on traditions to the next generation served as a form of resistance and comfort for many Jews living within the Warsaw Ghetto. While *Flusterwitze* or "whispered jokes" provided support for adults and teenagers, children, on the other hand, found an escape through physical play.[53] For example, many children continued to interact with each other around the ghetto in order to preserve their innocence, as well as escape the harsh realities of the Nazi regime.[54] This provided agency for Jewish people living within ghettos because they were able to combat the Nazi depiction of them as weak or lesser through establishing continuity with the pre-war environment of their children. Jewish children would play games in concentration camps and ghettos such as "Gas Chamber" and "Gestapo Agent," which mocked the Nazi regime and authorities.[55] Additionally, children would play "Burial," lying down and playing dead while others rolled them into shallow "graves" in order to imitate mass burials.[56] Although the children may not have known that this was a form of active resistance and a coping mechanism to combat their situation, the games themselves represented an understanding of their realities within the

[52] Patricia Benner, Ethel Roskies, and Richard S. Lazarus, "Stress and Coping Under Extreme Conditions," in *Survivors, Victims, and Perpetrators*, ed. Joel E. Dimsdale (New York: Hemisphere, 1980), as quoted in Ronald T. Berger, "Agency, Structure, and Jewish Survival of the Holocaust," *Sociological Quarterly* 36, no. 1 (1995): 17-18.

[53] Rapaport, "Laughter and Heartache," 255.

[54] Rapaport, "Laughter and Heartache," 255.; There is evidence that playgrounds existed within the ghettos, allowing the children to escape from reality.

[55] Lipman, "Humor, Faith, and the Holocaust," 14.

[56] Lipman, "Humor, Faith, and the Holocaust," 14.

ghettos. Making the most out of the grim situations reenforced the desire to live and continue Jewish culture into the next generation; therefore, "each lecture, performance, or religious rite was happening in the present, and so long as there was a present, it forged a living, defiant link to the past and expressed the hope of a collective future."[57] Overall, the desire for a future and the continuance of Jewish culture served as one form of resistance particularly within the confines of the Warsaw Ghetto.

In addition to Nazi resistance as depicted through the play of children, humor demonstrated the resistance of many adult ghetto inhabitants. Within the ghetto, humor was used as a weapon against the Nazi authorities in greater frequency than physical weapons themselves. Because many did not have access to physical means of resistance, "[h]umor illustrated the victims' capabilities for free thought, and to an oppressor, what could be more terrifying? It meant that their oppression was not succeeding in dehumanizing their victim."[58] Although the officers could force the Jews to participate in manual labor, starve, and suffer, they could not dampen the Jewish spirit. As a result, many Jews turned to humor as a form of subtle resistance and strategy against the Nazi authorities. On the one hand, Jews used spoken jokes to outwit the oppressive nature of life within the ghetto. For example, a Warsaw Ghetto joke stated,

> A teacher asks his pupil, 'Tell me, Moyshe, what would you like to be if you were Hitler's son'
> 'An orphan,' the pupil answers.[59]

The joke emphasized that the Jew retelling the joke would rather have Hitler dead than be his child. Compared to the Nazi view of the Aryan 'superior race,' the mindset of the Jew telling the

[57] Roskies, "Introduction," 22-23.
[58] Carpenter, "Laughter in a Time of Tragedy," 7.
[59] Huberband, "Ghetto Folklore," 77.

joke demonstrated that they would rather suffer in isolation than be related to Hitler by blood.[60] Furthermore, outside of shared jokes between ghetto residents, the existence of humor within the ghetto provided some Jews the opportunity to strategize their way out of suffering. For instance, some Jews in the Westbrook camp auditioned and worked in the cabarets in order to avoid deportation, a subtle resistance to Nazi attempts of Jewish extermination.[61]

The mentality of resistance demonstrated the Jewish desire to outwit the Nazi officials and regime. Again, the distribution of the jokes paired alongside the recurring themes of opposition demonstrated the agency of many Jews within the Warsaw Ghetto. Instead of viewing Jewish survivors as solely victims, humor provided a way to preserve Jewish culture and fight against the oppression of the Nazi officers. Throughout both the oral history testimonies and recorded accounts of ghetto experiences, humor and religion were consistently ranked as the top forms of nonmilitary resistance.[62] As a result, many Jews combined their faith with humor to create a secondary form of religion, specifically an outlet to assess the religious irony of their situation. For example, one Warsaw joke stated, "The Jews worshipped other gods and were therefore granted a ghetto."[63] Emphasizing the "other," the primary joke of the statement was that "Gods" *geter* and "ghetto" *geta* sound almost identical in Warsaw Yiddish; therefore, the joke was a play on words.[64] The pun displayed the wit of the Jewish people who understood the relationship between their faith and oppression. Additionally, another joke mentioned that "The Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto said their troubles stemmed from disobedience of the '11th

[60] This is particularly ironic due to the theory that Hitler was one-eighth Jewish, as discussed in Ron Rosenbaum's *Explaining Hitler;* Ron Rosenbaum, *Explaining Hitler: The Search for the Origins of His Evil*, rev. ed. (Boston, MA: Da Capo Press, 2014).

[61] Rapaport, "Laughter and Heartache," 257.

[62] Ostrower, "Introduction," 10.

[63] Huberband, "Ghetto Folklore," 80.

[64] Huberband, "Ghetto Folklore," 80.

Commandment: Thou shalt choose for thyselves the proper grandparents."[65] Through reference to the Ten Commandments and acknowledgement that "their troubles" were caused by factors outside of their control, the Jewish joke again served to emphasize the irony and hypocrisy of the Nazi logic.

While religion was a primary lens through which Jews resisted Nazi oppression within the Warsaw Ghetto, Jewish humor for the most part reflected no yearning for revenge. Instead, the jokes were presented with the understanding that retribution was in God's hand.[66] Even before the jokes circulated throughout the ghetto, the Jewish people had a longstanding history of relating humor with religion, especially in times of tragedy. The Torah depicted the value of Judaism, which was rooted in optimism.[67] At the same time, many Jews within the ghettos and concentration camps lost their faith in God due to the trying circumstances of Nazi oppression. Many times, "victims of the Holocaust's oppression also felt that God had turned Her/His back on them."[68] The joke "'God forbid that the war last as long as the Jews are able to endure it,'" served as a prime example of the cynical response with which some Warsaw Jews responded to the Nazi regime.[69] The recurrence of the joke emphasized a tension between a consistent Jewish culture of overcoming oppression and the harsh realities many faced. Overall, the persistent theme of survival within the Jewish tradition was represented through humor in both positive acknowledgements and sarcastic critiques of Judaism.

Within the context of the Jewish experience, religion and culture played a significant role surrounding the discussion of Jewish agency during the Holocaust. The cultural and religious

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[65] Lipman, "Jewish Humor," 169.

[66] Steve Lipman, "The Flavor of Humor: Anti-Nazi, Pro-Victim," *Laughter in Hell: The Use of Humor During the Holocaust* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson Inc., 1991), 191.

[67] Carpenter, "Laughter in a Time of Tragedy," 11; Lucy Dawidowicz, "Jewish Behavior in Crisis and Extremity," in *The War Against The Jews* (New York: Bantam Books, 1986), 342.

[68] Carpenter, "Laughter in a Time of Tragedy," 11.

[69] Roskies, "Introduction," 12.

upbringing of a Jewish individual and their community resulted in the "structurally formed capacity for agency" of many Jews.[70] Because the Jewish community had experienced an extensive history of oppression, humor was embedded into the culture from the years dating back to before the Torah over 3,500 years ago. For example, the Book of Jonah, which is the last biblical reading on Yom Kippur, includes Jonah sleeping during a storm, asking his sailors to throw him overboard to appease God, and Jonah eventually being eaten by a "great fish."[71] Jonah was punished for not initially following God's will to prophesize to the Ninevites. By the end of the story, Jonah is forgiven and pronounced a Prophet to save Nineveh.[72] Despite the seemingly unrealistic situations Jonah finds himself in, many Jews resonated with Jonah because of his experience questioning his faith in God. This served as one example of the narratives which "encourage believers to relate Biblical characters to their own lives."[73] In times of tragedy, many questioned their belief in a higher power; however, because of the ability of Jews to relate to the stories and their humor, many resonated with the Torah and used such humor to refocus their connection with God. Overall, the shared social norms and community-oriented religious faith emphasized the necessity of humor for survival.

Although humor presented numerous benefits throughout the Holocaust, it most importantly provided Warsaw Jews agency, an aspect of their experience which was often overlooked. Despite the inability of many Jews to physically resist the Nazi forces, some used humor as a mental strategy to empower themselves and their community to live to see another day. Within the initial post-Holocaust research, there were consistent themes of Jewish victimhood under a negative light. Numerous sources viewed the Jews "as passively accepting

[70] Berger, "Agency, Structure, and Jewish Survival of the Holocaust, 31.
[71] Jonah 1:17, as quoted in Carpenter, "Laughter in a Time of Tragedy," 21.
[72] Jonah 1:17.
[73] Carpenter, "Laughter in a Time of Tragedy," 23.

their fate…going 'like sheep to the slaughter.'"[74] While many survivors attributed their survival to luck, humor demonstrated a clear connection between Jewish thought, actions, and survival. In other words, the diverse and unique use of humor between Jews throughout the Holocaust acknowledged the reality in which Jews took decisive and purposeful actions during occasions in which they were able to do so.[75] Their agency was considered internal, such as a having a will to live and a drive to overcome the conditions of the ghetto; however, humor was crucial to understanding the mental strength of the Warsaw Ghetto inhabitants. Whether humor was used as a subtle form of resistance, relation to a higher power, coping mechanism, or tie to the ghetto community, the presence of the joke assisted many Warsaw Jews in their survival during the height of the Nazi regime.

In addition to the display of agency during the Holocaust and World War II, Jewish humor played an important role in the continuance of Jewish agency in a post-ghetto society. The trauma of the Holocaust did not end when the Allied powers liberated the ghettos and camps. On the contrary, after the liberation of Warsaw in January 1945**,** discussion surfaced regarding the importance of recording history and the memory of Holocaust survivors.[76] Due to the presence of living survivors and subsequent sensitivity surrounding their experience, humor was not typically associated with their past. Many survivors did not record their observation or participation in humor and jokes within concentration camps and ghettos especially since the trauma was so recent. For the few that recorded their experience with humor during their time in either a camp or ghetto, the importance of humor as a coping mechanism and the use of gallows humor

[74] Rubenstein and Roth, *Approaches to Auschwitz,* 16.
[75] Rubenstein and Roth, *Approaches to Auschwitz,* 17.
[76] United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "Warsaw," Holocaust Encyclopedia, last modified February 22, 2023, https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/warsaw, accessed 19 April 2023.

emerged as consistent themes.[77] Within the testimonies that have been recorded through institutions such as the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) in Washington D.C. and historians such as Chaya Ostrower, the recollection of humor as a part of a survivor's experience represented the complexities of remembering the past despite the subsequent taboos associated with relating humor to the Holocaust.[78] Overall, the narratives of survivors surfaced in the aftermath of liberation, thus opening up the discussion of humor to the larger academic debate.

Apart from the representation of humor as depicted by ghetto inhabitants, many Jews both in Europe and the United States used humor as a platform to present their reaction to Nazi Germany and the Holocaust during the Second World War. The expansion of agents in the discussion of Holocaust humor emphasized the transformation of humor from a survival mechanism within the ghettos to a platform of representation via film and literature. During this period Jews such as Jack Benny and the Three Stooges contributed to the conversation about Jewish humor in the context of World War II and the Holocaust. Without all of the context that Warsaw Jews and other victims directly faced, American Jews reacted independently to the news and developments in the European theater. Beginning most notably with The Three Stooges *You Natzy Spy* (1940) and *I'll Never Heil Again* (1941), these two short films emphasized the existence of the Nazi regime in a comedic light even during the war.[79] Additionally, Charlie Chaplain's portrayal of a Jewish barber in *The Great Dictator* (1940) displayed the wit of Jews combating the Nazi oppression, while also providing serious commentary. Finally, Jack Benny

[77] Ostrower, "The Function of Humor As a Defense Mechanism," 90.

[78] David Slucki, Avionam Patt, Gabriel Finder, "Introduction," in *Laughter After: Humor and the Holocaust* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2020), 2.

[79] Sander L. Gilman, "Is Life Beautiful? Can the Shoah Be Funny? Some Thoughts on Recent and Older Films," *Critical Inquiry* 26, no. 2 (2000): 287.

and Carol Lombard's film *To Be or Not To Be* (1942) followed Polish actors who never stopped performing even under the Nazi occupation of Poland.[80] In all of the previous examples, the primary leads were Jewish.[81] Although there was humor that surrounded the rising tensions between the Allied and Axis powers, "the reference for the [films] in the 1940s was anti-Semitism, not the potential or actual destruction of European Jewry."[82] While the ghetto and camp survivors witnessed the trauma firsthand, at the same time Jews in Europe and the United States depicted their response to antisemitism from an outsider perspective. As a result, today's audiences can view the works as pieces of historical context and second-hand accounts of the Jewish experience.

Furthermore, the depiction of humor in relation to the lived experience of Jews within concentration camps and ghettos highlighted the transformation of humor's role in a post-Holocaust society. While time progressed away from the war and its immediate aftermath, the following generation's responsibility to preserve the narrative of agency for Jewish Holocaust victims expanded. As many Holocaust survivors died, their children and grandchildren were tasked with continuing their legacy and sharing their stories. The pressure of continuing the memory of their relatives led to the development of second-generation humor with regard to the Holocaust. The children, therefore,

> have used humour to make sense of and manage the burden of their parents' traumatic past…their laughing at traumatic experience in the attempt to lighten its load—seems in some important ways analogous to contemporary efforts to employ the Holocaust comically.[83]

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[80] Rapaport, "Laughter and Heartache," 261.

[81] Gilman notes, "Chaplin and Benny were Jewish (as were Jerome Lester Horwitz, a.k.a. Curly Howard, Louis Fienberg, a.k.a. Larry Fine, and Moses Horwitz, a.k.a. Moe Howard."; Gilman, "Is Life Beautiful? Can the Shoah Be Funny?," 287.

[82] Gilman, "Is Life Beautiful? Can the Shoah Be Funny?," 287.

[83] Adam Muller and Amy Freir, "Humor, the Holocaust, and the Terror of History," *Americana* 13, no. 1 (2017).

Many children and grandchildren of Holocaust survivors employed humor as a method for coping with the traumatic pasts of their relatives. The jokes created and shared by the second generation demonstrated the importance of continuing the conversation despite the dwindling number of individuals who physically had experienced it. The children and grandchildren's jokes "are testimony to the depth of feeling, of the continuation of trauma and memory, rather than to 'what happened.'"[84] Instead of emphasizing realistic interpretations of ghetto and concentration camp experiences, the jokes told by descendants of Holocaust survivors advanced the uncomfortable reality of antisemitism in a post-Holocaust world.

Within the generation of Jews living during the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, Jewish comedians transformed American and European stereotypes of Jews in popular culture. Following the liberation of concentration camps and ghettos, society began depicting Jews as victims with emphasis on weak and passive qualities. These depictions both intentionally and unintentionally decreased the agency of Holocaust survivors. Many Jews, particularly those who had survived the Holocaust or fought in World War II, were frustrated with the depictions of Jews as weak and incapable of protecting themselves.[85] As a result of the portrayed weakness of post-WWII Jews, many moved to "embrace hypermasculine or athletic Jewish heroes, whereas others felt more comfortable with an acerbic wit or ironic barb, especially when pointed at antisemites or others seen as obstacles to Jewish success."[86] Comedians and actors such as Lenny Bruce and Woody Allen contributed to this transformation

[84] Jordana Silverstein, "'The Holocaust Was The Worst': Remembering the Holocaust Through Third-Generation Jokes," in *Laughter After: Humor and the Holocaust*, David Slucki, Avinoam Patt, and Gabriel N. Finder, eds. (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2020), 243.

[85] Jennifer Caplan, "Nebbishes, New Jews, and Humor: The Changing Image of American Jewish Masculinity Post-Holocaust," in *Laughter After: Humor and the Holocaust*, David Slucki, Avinoam Patt, and Gabriel N. Finder, eds. (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2020), 135.

[86] Caplan, "Nebbishes, New Jews, and Humor: The Changing Image of American Jewish Masculinity Post-Holocaust," in *Laughter After*, David Slucki, Avinoam Patt, and Gabriel N. Finder, eds. (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2020), 134.

through their strides in depicting Jews not as victims, but as either figures of hypermasculinity or awkward underdogs.[87] Bruce intentionally balanced both identities and "merged the two…[since photographs] appearing in *Stamp Help Out*, the promotional book Bruce distributed at his comedy shows, [showed] his desire to maintain his machismo but also the will to perpetuate the ambiguous sissy-mensch image."[88] Through these forms of film and comedy, Jews were able to reclaim their identity, and consequently, their agency. While these Jews were not Holocaust survivors, many had witnessed the antisemitism of the 1930s through the 1950s. As a result, comedians such as Bruce and Allen served as pioneers for the discussion of humor throughout the late-twentieth century.

The Jewish comedians of the late-twentieth century continued the advancement of Holocaust-related humor by returning agency to the Jewish communities affected by the Nazi regime, as well as by representing the greater Jewish population. Comedians and film directors began the creation and distribution of fictional works which attempted to represent the lived experience of Jews during the Holocaust. Ranging from late-twentieth century films such as Mel Brooks' *The Producers* (1967) to Roberto Benigni's Italian film *Life Is Beautiful* (1998), comedic interpretations of "Nazi-bashing" and depictions of the concentration camp experience contributed to the debate over humor's role today when discussing the Jewish traumas of the Holocaust.[89] Despite attempts to direct agency back to Jews, films such as Quentin Tarantino's

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[87] There are numerous resources which analyze the use of hypermasculinity throughout Lenny Bruce's comedy; David E. Kaufman, "Lenny Bruce," in *Jewhooing the Sixties: American Celebrity and Jewish Identity--Sandy Koufax, Lenny Bruce, Bob Dylan, and Barbra Streisand* (Lebanon, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2012); Additionally, Woody Allen's performance in *Annie Hall* supported the transition of the Jewish character away from weak and passive towards a realistic underdog; *Annie Hall,* directed by Woody Allen (United States: United Artists, 1977).

[88] Peter Scott Lederer, "Comic Chameleon: Lenny Bruce's Stage Personas," *Comedy Studies* 11, no. 2 (2020): 12, https://doi.org/10.1080/2040610X.2020.1729492.

[89] Rapaport, "Laughter and Heartache," 263; Rudolph Herzog, "Laughing at Auschwitz?," 230-231; Gilman, "Is Life Beautiful?," 292; David Slucki, Avinoam Patt, and Gabriel N. Finder, "Introduction: To Tell Jokes After

Inglourious Basterds (2009), which depicted "Jewish vengeance" through black humor, created an inverted narrative due to the reality that revenge against the Nazis was not a typical component of ghetto humor.[90] Furthermore, the inclusion of Holocaust-related humor in television shows such as *Seinfeld* and Larry David's *Curb your Enthusiasm* demonstrated the continuance of such themes well into the twenty-first century.

In addition to the display of agency through jokes created by comedians such as David and Seinfeld, historical fiction films contribute to the discussion of Jewish humor in a post-Holocaust society. For example, the film *Life is Beautiful* "violated the unwritten rule…that only Holocaust victims, and not those from later generations, were allowed to engage in this genre of gallows humor."[91] Despite breaking the "rule," the film further advanced the discussion of Jewish agency within the concentration camps and ghettos. Most importantly, however, the film is about survival. Even though Guido, the father, must die, his son Giosue is able to survive in a post-Nazi German world because of his father's ability to make the oppression and trauma a "game" for his son to compete in for the sake of survival.[92] The hope of survival and drive to see another day resonated with many Jews experiencing the Holocaust through the platform of humor. While movies such as *Life is Beautiful* or jokes in shows like *Curb Your Enthusiasm* pushed the envelope of such norms and taboos, it is important to acknowledge the role humor had within the time and place of the existence of such concentration camps and ghettos. Although the range of humor has evolved, the sustainability of Jewish agency remains. The ability for Jews to tell Holocaust-related jokes allows Jews, in some respect, to get the "last

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Auschwitz is Barbaric, Isn't It?," 6-7; *La Vita È Bella*, directed by Roberto Benigni (United States: Miramax Films, 1997).

[90] Susan R. Sulieman,"The Stakes in Holocaust Representation: On Tarantino's *Inglourious Basterds*," *The Romantic Review* 105 no. 1-2 (2014): 74.

[91] Herzog, "Laughing at Auschwitz?," 231.

[92] Herzog, "Laughing at Auschwitz?," 232.

laugh." Despite the presence of antisemitism in society today, "When we laugh at Hitler, we dismiss the metaphysical, demonic capabilities accorded to him by postwar apologists."[93]

As time moves further away from the atrocities perpetuated under the Nazi regime towards the Jewish population, many wonder if the significance of the Holocaust will continue to hold for future generations. Some still argue that humor has no place in the discussion of the Holocaust, while others see humor as a mechanism through which to continue the memory of those who suffered within the ghettos and concentration camps. While the Warsaw Ghetto was the primary location discussed within the scope of this paper, humor was present in many of the locations used to oppress and eliminate Jews during the domination of the Third Reich. Despite the debate over who can tell Holocaust jokes, there is no doubt that their existence was real. Jokes and the presence of humor assisted many Jews in surviving the harsh conditions of Nazi Germany. While many historians primarily emphasized the physical hardships and tragic conditions faced by Jewish victims of the Holocaust, the existence of jokes throughout Eastern European ghettos exemplified the legitimacy of humor within the greater context and discussion of coping, resistance, and unification for the preservation of Jewish life and identity in the post-war period. Instead of depicting Jews as solely victims of the Holocaust, humor today, as in the past, returns agency to Jews who survived life in the ghettos by highlighting the complexity of their reality without overgeneralizing their experiences.

[93] Herzog, "Laughing at Auschwitz?," 235.

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