



Forward

WEEKEND READS

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Opinion

My dad stormed Normandy on D-Day – and relived the fight against Nazis every night

By Beth Harpaz

My father was a paratrooper in World War II, part of the 101st Airborne's famed parachute division. He jumped from the fifth plane out of England a few minutes after midnight on D-Day, June 6, 1944.

He was the son of Russian Jewish immigrants and an eighth grade dropout who worked in the Garment District, and his experiences as a soldier were the most important things that ever happened to him.

He relived those experiences every night at the dinner table. We didn't know the term PTSD when I was a kid, but looking back, it seems to me that he lived every day like it was his last. I guess that was his way of coping with the memories of jumping out of an airplane onto enemy soil, not knowing if he'd live to see another sunrise.

It might sound strange to modern parents who fret about exposing their kids to stories about war and other terrible things, but I loved hearing my father's battle tales. I was in his thrall every night as I pushed my green peas into my mashed potatoes while hearing him describe taking out a nest of German machine guns or hunting down Nazis in the dark.

Dad was a hero, larger than life, and I was intensely proud of him growing up. And while I sometimes had childhood nightmares of Nazis chasing me, I wouldn't have traded those dinnertime stories for anything.

I knew what it was like to kill a Nazi soldier at point-blank range by the time I was in third grade. I knew that my father threw his dog tags away because they listed his religion, and he figured if the Nazis ever got him, they'd "rip his balls off." (I didn't exactly know what that meant, but it didn't sound good.)

And I knew why he'd enlisted in World War II rather than waiting to be drafted. His parents had come to the United States to escape pogroms and poverty. While Dad was an utterly secular Jew, he wanted to help defeat Hitler – both to avenge his people and to thank the country that gave his family refuge.

The D-Day invasion of Normandy was a turning point in the Allied effort to defeat Hitler. After taking part in the liberation of France, Dad and his buddies were deployed to the Netherlands as a part of Operation Market Garden, which was depicted in the film “A Bridge Too Far.”

In December, they holed up in Bastogne, Belgium, for the Battle of the Bulge, where General Anthony McAuliffe famously replied to Nazi demands for a U.S. surrender with one word: “Nuts!” (Dad claimed what the general really said wasn't printable, but he didn't elaborate.)

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As I got older, I didn't always agree with Dad's politics; among other things, he supported the U.S. war in Vietnam. But by way of explanation, he ended every story with the same refrain: “Your country is like your mother. Your mother, right or wrong. Your country, right or wrong.”

For a son of immigrants whose family would likely have been murdered by Cossacks or Nazis had they not gotten on a boat to Ellis Island, it was a sentiment I could understand.

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Culture

She won ‘The Great Australian Bake Off’ – and with all kosher bakes

By Mira Fox

Ella Rossanis had no intention of being on television. She only applied to “The Great Australian Bake Off” after her husband applied to “Survivor” and asked if she would take care of their three children – all under 5 – without him for 12 weeks if he got picked.

“Kind of out of spite for him, I was like ‘Well I’m going to apply to a TV show,’” she told me. In the end, her husband didn’t get cast on “Survivor,” but Rossanis was chosen for “Bake Off.” And then she won.

The 36-year-old’s bakes are creative and playful, often referencing her children – her showstopper bake in the first episode, which she won, featured a pair of bra-clad breasts made of cake that revealed a liquid milky filling when you cut into it; a tiny plastic toddler crawled up the side toward the nipple. Her winning showstopper bake in the season finale was a towering cake princess castle that she made for her daughter, complete with a cookie fountain drizzling caramel and a pumpkin-shaped cake carriage filled with raspberry coulis.

But beyond the creativity, there was something else special about Rossanis’s bakes – they were all kosher. “The Great British Bake Off” has a long history of doing poorly with traditional Jewish foods, but, in the Australian version, Rossanis brought her Judaism to the forefront in many of her bakes, such as a tray of black sesame tahini rugelach and mini babkas.

And while she didn’t discuss keeping kosher on the show, she did speak about the importance of Shabbat dinner in her family during an episode in which she made a za’atar challah. [The judges were so enamored by her bread that one even invited herself over for Shabbat.]

Zooming from Sydney after her kids went to bed, Rossanis told me how she managed baking kosher food on set, how her kids inspire her bakes and how the show changed her life.

This interview has been lightly edited and condensed.

Your bakes are all so neat and professional-looking. How did you get into baking – and how did you get so good?

This show really made me realize what a crazy perfectionist I am – too much, I would say; I spend too long trying to get these perfect lines.

I think I was 10 or 11 or something, and my parents are both doctors, and we always would have Shabbat dinner as a family Friday night. But my mum worked on Friday so she would end up leaving me food in the fridge that I would just pop in the oven.

Over time, it would turn into me preparing the food, and then I'd start experimenting. I think when I was 10, the first thing I made were these little shortbread cookies. From there, I just started adding different things into the shortbread cookies, and then other cookies, and then different cakes. And that's how I grew – every Shabbat I'd try something new and my family would be the guinea pigs and that's how I fell in love with it.

Were you able to observe Shabbat in the hotel you were sequestered in for the show?

It was amazing because I was the only one who was allowed to come home on weekends because I was breastfeeding. Filming wasn't on the weekends, which was great because in a lot of other shows it is. But we filmed Monday-Thursday so I'd end up going home Friday morning and coming back on Monday.

So weekends were just normal, which was great for being with my family and having Shabbat at home, but not great because everyone else was just practicing the whole weekend and I didn't get to practice and stressed out all weekend.

I saw in the finale that your kids came to watch and were by your side as you put the finishing touches on your showstopper!

Yeah, oh my gosh. They actually don't show you the stress that we were all under. And I was definitely under more stress because my kids kept coming up just wanting to taste things and touch things, and it was so hot and everything was already oozing all over the

place. I was like “I love that you’re here, I haven’t seen you in so long, but please go away!”

Your kids inspired a lot of your bakes, but you also talked on the show about how important it was to get some time away from them to rediscover yourself outside the role of “mum.”

When I found out I got in the show, we basically took a whole weekend of deciding, “Can I do this?” Mostly because I was breastfeeding – like how could I leave my breastfeeding child, and my three tiny children?

What it came down to was that all those reasons why I couldn’t do it were the reasons why I had to do it. Because I have been putting them first from the second they were all born. Which, you know, I chose to be a mum, I love being a mum. But you know, there’s that creative person that was deep in me that I hadn’t realized was being hidden a little bit – more with every child, with more nappies and more laundry and more lunches.

Even just the process of applying for the show, when I was doing the writing – I’m a copywriter and I love the craft of writing – and thinking of all these bakes I could do, was getting me more passionate.

What it came down to – and my husband was pushing this also, more so than I was – is that we want our kids to do awesome stuff. How could we tell them to follow their dreams and take risks and chances if I wasn’t doing that?

But it’s so weird because the whole time, it was this story about “I’m here for me,” but in the end, it’s still all about them. You can’t escape doing everything for your kids – even if it is for you on one level, it’s still all about them.

Have you been able to keep in touch with your creative side since the show ended? I know you’re posting some fun bakes to your Instagram.

Yes, it’s here to stay. In terms of the baking, I’m thinking constantly about what the next thing is I’m going to bake. But it’s more than that – I thought I was just going to be going on this baking show and I’d bake cakes and it would be so much fun and awesome.

It was legitimately life changing in that way in that it showed me that I can do things for myself. There’s the mum me, but there’s also this creative me, and that’s what’s hung around.

I’ve been approached by quite a few brands for partnerships, working together to write

recipes. And I am now writing a column in the Kitchen Confidential section of the newspaper in Sydney.

I also baked my first cake for a paying client the other day, which was great but also made me realize that's not what I want to do. I want to bake creatively – I don't want someone to tell me they have a brief.

“The Great British Bake Off” is not great about Jewish food, so it was really refreshing to see how much traditional Jewish food you made – rugelach, babka, challah.

The only thing I wanted to do that I didn't get to do was hamantaschen; it just didn't fit into the themes of the week. I bake that stuff all the time, I bake challah with my daughter every week. I wanted to bring that side of it to the show.

It's funny because the hosts have been chefs for 40 years and Maggie had never tried challah before, which I thought was crazy. In New York and America, everyone would know what a challah is, but here, less so. They hadn't ever tried any of the Jewish things that I baked. But it was also strategic – they wouldn't know what it was supposed to taste like!

What's the Jewish community like in Australia?

I lived in New York for five years, and I definitely felt like everyone knew Jewish people in New York and it was more mainstream – all the food and the delis, it was just a part of life, something that people who weren't Jewish would go do.

Here, it's not like that – it's not mainstream. It's a much smaller community, everyone knows each other's names, and it's warm like that. But we're less assimilated.

It's especially fun to get to represent Jews on TV with all these foods that are actually unfamiliar to the audience.

Yeah, they've never heard of it before. It was a whole thing backstage like: “How do we pronounce it?” “What's the plural?” They were all practicing saying the “ch.” It was nice to bring all of that to this bunch of real Aussie people.

We obviously eat that stuff all the time, but it was nice for me – I got so close to all these people and to get them all to try it and taste it, it was fun.

I know all your bakes, at least at home, are kosher – did you manage that in the shed as

well?

Yeah, and actually in the shed they were all kosher because we were allowed to specify brands, and I obviously specified all the kosher ones. And because they haven't run the show for a few years, I think three years, they had to buy all new baking equipment and appliances. And they were sponsored by all new sponsors, so there were new fridges, ovens, mixers – so it was properly kosher.

Was that special need for kashrut foreign or odd for any of your fellow participants or producers?

Foreign yes, but they were always very supportive. A lot of the contestants were saying, “No, at home I use this brand of flour.” So it wasn't weird when I said, “Well actually I need to use this.” They didn't seem to care that it was a kashrut thing.

Also, one of the other guys [on the show], Nav, is halal. And everyone knows about halal. So they were fully aware of him and his needs, so I guess it made it easier when I was also jumping in there. There were a few bakes where gelatin was involved with the technicals though. And me and Nav were just looking at each other the whole time like, “What are we doing?”

Yeah, similarly, in previous seasons of the British version, they've had vegans in the show and they still have to cook with butter and eggs for technical challenges. How do you manage when you can't taste what you're making?

For one of the technicals, mine looked the best, perfect lines, everything looked great. But the top layer in this trifle was a jelly that had gelatin in it. And mine set too quickly, so I put it in the microwave or I zhuzhed it, and it worked; it set how I needed it to. But then it was cloudy. And no one else's was cloudy.

I was so disappointed because had I just worked with gelatin before and known how to use it, I would've known not to do that and I would've won that technical! And instead, I ended up coming close to the end.

Well, you won five technicals.

That's true. I guess I can let them have that one.

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Opinion

What would happen if Black Americans received reparations? The Jewish experience provides some answers

By Rob Eshman

Jewish victims of the Holocaust have so far received over \$90 billion in reparations, while African Americans who were enslaved and their descendants received nothing.

You could argue over the exact amount that this country owes descendants of enslaved individuals, but it's become increasingly difficult to argue that it's zero.

Even though slavery ended more than 150 years ago, a milestone we celebrate on Juneteenth, a new report makes the case that the time for reparations is now – and given our own history, we Jews should understand this better than anyone.

On June 1, a California commission tasked with investigating whether the state should offer reparations to Black residents released a detailed report on the lasting effects of slavery and white supremacy, which it called “a persistent badge of slavery.”

Those effects have been part of a national debate for some time, but the recommendations of this task force went further than any other state in detailing both the history and possible remedies. [At a municipal level, in 2021 Evanston, Illinois approved reparations for Black residents.]

The 492-page report examined the history and lasting effects of slavery and discrimination in areas such as housing, public health, education and criminal justice – and that history is damning.

California entered the Union as a free state in 1850, but at the height of the Gold Rush, between 180 and 1,500 enslaved people were trafficked into the state and forced to work

in the mines.

“In order to maintain slavery, government actors adopted white supremacist beliefs and passed laws to create a racial hierarchy and to control both enslaved and free African Americans,” the report states.

The nascent state was also complicit in human trafficking: An 1852 law required Californians to capture those who escaped and return them to their enslavers. In 1874, 22 years before the U.S. Supreme Court’s infamous “separate but equal” decision, California’s high court ruled segregation in the state’s public schools was legal. California did not allow Black men to vote until 1879. The state gave free land to white homesteaders until 1900, then banks redlined Blacks out of suburban neighborhoods, depriving them of opportunity to build wealth as so many Californians have, through real estate.

As a result of these and other discriminatory practices, the commission found the median Black household had a net worth of \$24,100 as of 2019, just 13% of the median \$188,200 net worth of white households.

The nine-person commission said it will release a follow-up report on specific remedies, which made sense: The past is painful, but far less controversial.

It did float some ideas: free tuition for Black students to attend better schools, anti-bias training and recruitment of Black educators and administrators, establishing an office of Freedmen Business Affairs to provide ongoing education related to entrepreneurship and financial literacy, business grants, free legal aid and more low-income housing.

The scope of these ideas reach into every aspect of state law and life, which makes sense, because so has discrimination.

“Without a remedy specifically targeted to dismantle our country’s racist foundations and heal the injuries inflicted by colonial and American governments, the ‘badges and incidents of slavery’ will continue to harm African Americans in almost all aspects of life,” the report says.

At first glance, California is an odd contender for the First State to Face Slavery Award. In 1850, its Black population was small, about 1% of the total. Today, Black people account for just 7% of the state’s population. Perhaps it was the lack of a deeply embedded past connected to slavery that made looking in the mirror possible; the awful truth has been far more awful elsewhere.

It also had to help that California is run by Democrats – a 2021 poll found that two-thirds of Americans and 90% of Republicans oppose reparations. It also has a governor, Gavin Newsom, who tends to go first.

Late last year, Newsom was the first governor to call for a law giving Californians the right to sue purveyors of restricted firearms, based on the Texas “vigilante” law targeting abortion providers and their patients. He broke with his party leaders in 2004 when, as the then-mayor of San Francisco, he issued a license for gay marriage.

The reparations commission received a spate of mostly statewide press coverage when its report came out last week, but could it, like Newsom’s gay marriage leap, nudge the rest of the country along?

The example of Holocaust reparations offers some answers. It took Germany several years to come to grips with the Holocaust and provide reparations. Many Germans didn’t think it was fair to pay for crimes they themselves had not committed. In 1951, just 29% of West Germans supported restitution for Holocaust crimes. By 1956, the German state was supplying 87.5% of Israel’s state revenue. German reparations transformed the country, helped build its railway, electrical grid, mining and ports. Historian Tom Segev credits German reparations to Israel with providing 15% of Israel’s GNP growth and 45,000 jobs over 12 years.

The Holocaust had ended just five years before German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer announced reparations in 1951 – and many of its victims were very much alive. The end of slavery, traditionally celebrated as June 19, 1865, or Juneteenth, happened 157 years ago.

But German reparations and efforts at restitution, not to mention lawsuits over stolen property, have continued to this day. One insight of the task force report is to show how the case for Black reparations, while more challenging because of the passage of time, is at least as strong given slavery’s long repercussions in this state, and this country. To paraphrase William Faulkner, the past isn’t history, it isn’t even past.

California’s report stops short of putting a dollar sign on the pain and suffering, but it makes a strong case that dollars, and much more, must be on the table.

The German word for the decades-long process that Germany undertook to come to terms with what it had done, memorialize it and compensate its victims is *Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung*, or “working off the past.” In California that work has finally begun.

Rob Eshman is Senior Contributing Editor of the Forward.

News

Inside the fierce battle over America's oldest synagogue

By Allison Kaplan Sommer

This article originally appeared on Haaretz, and was reprinted here with permission.

Jewish communities are no strangers to bitter political battles involving their places of worship – hence the famous joke about two Jews and three synagogues.

But few shul feuds have the historic reach and impact of the extended and emotional battle over Rhode Island's Touro Synagogue, the oldest synagogue building in the United States, built in 1763.

Touro's congregation in Newport, Congregation Jeshuat Israel (known as CJI), is being evicted from the place its members have worshipped for over a century by the building's owners: Manhattan's Congregation Shearith Israel, which happens to be the oldest Jewish congregation in the United States, founded in 1654.

Leading the struggle on the two sides are two determined lawyers who see themselves as stewards of Touro's legacy and future, and their counterpart as putting its future in danger.

Louis M. Solomon, president of the board of trustees of Congregation Shearith Israel – New York's storied Spanish and Portuguese synagogue – speaks in soft-spoken yet intense tones in an interview in a conference room in his Manhattan law firm.

He visibly winces at the use of the word “eviction” and has disliked its use since the story broke of the action filed at Rhode Island State District Court by his 450-member synagogue against the 150-member CJI. But as a lawyer, he acknowledges that the facts are difficult to sugarcoat: a landlord, Shearith Israel, told its tenant, Jeshuat Israel, that it no longer wants it on the property and it must “vacate the building.”

“We own Touro Synagogue, they are a holdover lessee – they have no rights to it other

than as a lessee, and they can be asked to leave. And that, in fact, is what's happened," he says.

At the same time, Solomon bends over backward to emphasize that as individuals, "no Jew will be locked out" of the building or forbidden to worship there. "The notion that we are trying to evict Jeshuat Israel congregants or their rabbi is totally untrue," he asserts. "We are evicting the corporate entity of CJI," whose leadership, in his view, has proven to be an unreliable steward of its historic home and refused to cooperate and communicate with the owner of the property, his congregation.

In Rhode Island, Louise Ellen Teitz – co-president of CJI and a law professor at Roger Williams University – scoffs at Solomon's attempt to make a distinction between the "entity" of her congregations and its individuals and rabbi. She believes Solomon's efforts, if successful, will turn Touro into a "museum or a New York annex" – its ties to the local Jewish community weakened and eventually severed.

The two attorneys are unflinching in their polite but relentlessly negative characterizations of one another. Solomon paints CJI as a small, aging and "dying congregation" led by a small group, with Teitz at the helm, that is "bullying" its community into an ongoing refusal to acknowledge the implications of a District Court ruling in 2017.

That ruling established Shearith Israel's ownership of CJI's most precious asset: the synagogue and its contents. The decision clarified CJI's position as a tenant holding a lease that expired in 1913, and has not been renewed since.

Solomon contends that since that ruling, he has done all he could to reach out in good faith to CJI – but has been rebuffed. This, and what he sees as evidence of negligence on the part of the Newport congregation to protect the synagogue and its historic cemetery, is what drove him and his board to file the eviction notice, he says.

He envisions a new congregational entity for the Newport community with a board comprised of current CJI members, but also including representatives of Shearith Israel and other interested parties, to chart a course for Touro's future.

Teitz, for her part, sees Solomon as using Shearith's leverage as landlord to illegitimately interfere in the life of Newport's Jewish community and monetize the historic value of a place he and his congregation have not actively contributed or supported for over a century – a period spanning decades when CJI members, including members of her own family, worked tirelessly to maintain it.

\$7.5 million decorations

The stand-off is the outgrowth of a bitter legal dispute that began a decade ago, when Shearith Israel sought to block the Newport congregation's attempt to sell the synagogue's most valuable ritual objects: 18th-century bell decorations that top the Torah known as rimonim, crafted by a renowned silversmith.

At the time, "we realized that the congregation was getting smaller," Teitz says. "And we also realized we needed to figure out a way to create a permanent endowment – because while our the building is wonderful, what also makes it special is the fact that since the 1880s it has had a local congregation, has been open for worship and continues to be part of the local community and not just a museum."

The future of the congregation, she believed, was more valuable than a second set of decorative bells.

When Shearith Israel learned of the brewing deal to sell the rimonim to Boston's Museum of Fine Arts (where they were already on display) for nearly \$7.5 million, they objected strenuously, sparking the five-year court fight. The matter landed in court, litigating not only ownership of the rimonim but of the entire synagogue and its contents – essentially, Shearith Israel's claim to ownership.

The complex and intertwined relationship between Manhattan's Shearith Israel and Newport's Touro Synagogue, designed by renowned architect Peter Harrison and funded by Newport Jews in 1763, was intertwined from the start. The Sephardi Jewish merchants of the colonial era, who first came to North America in the 1600s, moved between the two cities: the cemeteries in Newport and Manhattan share names like Lopez, Mendes and Rivera.

Touro's importance in U.S. history as a monument to religious freedom is tied to an exchange of letters between the warden of the congregation, Moses Seixas, and George Washington, in which the country's first president vowed that the U.S. government would "give to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance," following a visit to Newport and the synagogue in 1790.

Each year, Jeshuat Israel holds a public reading of the letter on the anniversary of Washington's visit, and the spot in the sanctuary where he sat holds a place of honor.

The synagogue's decline began after the American Revolution and the War of 1812 took a

toll on Newport's standing as a shipping center.

Members of the community left the area for more thriving trading centers and, beginning in the 1820s, Touro Synagogue was abandoned as a synagogue without Jews. It remained so for 60 years: the building was closed and its ritual objects given for safekeeping to Shearith Israel.

The synagogue is named for two Touro brothers, Judah and Abraham – Newport natives who created an ongoing trust under the care of the local government to pay for the upkeep of the building, its cemetery and a bequest for a community rabbi to serve the future “Hebrew society of Newport” when such a society returned.

The Torah and ritual objects were given to Shearith Israel for safekeeping and the New York congregation was officially deemed steward of the property, which is the basis of the court ruling.

The current fight between Shearith Israel and Jeshuat Israel echoes a similar battle that broke out when Jews returned to Newport at the end of the 19th century. Ashkenazi Jews of German descent and then a wave of Eastern European Jews repopulated the city beginning in the 1880s, and demanded the trustees at Shearith Israel open the gates. Even back then, local Jews wanted control over their congregational life and building, and the Shearith Israel landlords took their stewardship role seriously and imposed limitations.

The friction climaxed when local Jews broke into the building, holding a famous sit-in in 1902, and the two sides fought the first court battle over control of the synagogue.

The matter was negotiated out of court and settled in 1903 with a symbolic lease in which the newly established congregation of Jeshuat Israel would pay the building's trustees at Shearith Israel a symbolic dollar each year, and committed to various conditions – including the employment of an Orthodox rabbi who would conduct services in a traditional Sephardi tradition.

That lease was extended for another five years in 1908. But it was never formally extended after it lapsed in 1913, though the Newporters continued to pay their yearly dollar rent.

Over the decades, Jeshuat Israel saw the building as its pride and responsibility. Teitz says her grandmother moved to Newport in 1902 and grew up in the synagogue, and her father was the president as she was growing up. None of the 20th- and 21st-century maintenance work or improvements sparked any involvement or financial support from

Shearith Israel, she notes.

In fact, when a major multimillion dollar restoration effort was undertaken in the early 2000s, “not only wouldn’t they help, they wouldn’t even let us use their mailing list to solicit their members individually,” Teitz charges. “They were never willing to help. We have always taken care of everything.”

Seasonal attraction

Help did come from donors like philanthropist John Loeb, who donated millions to buy an adjacent plot of land and set up a visitor center with a small museum as a base for tours of the synagogue and educational programs centered around the ideals of religious liberty. Jeshuat Israel’s struggle to survive as an active Orthodox congregation meeting the terms of the lease was palpable on a Shabbat morning in May.

As services began at 8:45 A.M., only a handful of worshippers were on hand. Slowly, people straggled in over the next half hour until a minyan, the minimum number of men needed for Orthodox worship, had arrived.

The small group included local congregants, but without a healthy injection of visiting tourists – who had registered in advance on the synagogue’s website – a minyan would have been much harder to achieve. A popular summer destination, the synagogue fills in the summer months and empties as the weather cools.

As the group waited for a minyan, Rabbi Marc Mandel, a soft-spoken New Yorker, deftly kept the congregation occupied by connecting them with Jewish geography: who knows who, who went to camp with whom, who had attended friends’ weddings and bar mitzvahs in Los Angeles, Cape Town and Ra’anana.

Finally, a minyan achieved, he launched into prayer. Neither Teitz nor the majority of her fellow congregants at Jeshuat Israel are practicing Orthodox Jews. However, respect for tradition and keeping to the terms of the 1903 lease and the Touro bequest have kept the congregation Orthodox – including gender separation, making it extremely challenging to recruit younger members of the Jewish community – though Teitz says with pride that their Hebrew school currently has 15 children enrolled.

With its location in the pricey historic neighborhood of Newport, a practicing Orthodox Jew who has to walk to synagogue would have to be extremely wealthy to afford local housing. The Jews who move to the area in Rhode Island bristle at the idea of gender-separated

seating, and the fact that the non-Jewish spouses of worshippers cannot be members.

Both Solomon and Teitz claim that in 2019, after the U.S. Supreme Court upheld Shearith Israel's ownership rights by refusing to take the case, they intended to move beyond their bitter legal battle and work together to find a way forward.

But Solomon says he was quickly dissatisfied: a request for the synagogue's inventory was repeatedly rebuffed by Teitz, he alleges. "There was no transparency" regarding the congregation's finances vis-à-vis the building. Moreover, he adds, he was hit with a request of "between \$2 million to \$5 million" for unspecified renovations.

Teitz counters that she was unhappy with the fact Solomon and Shearith appeared to have no intention of drafting a new long-term lease that would give Jeshuat Israel a formal right to remain in the building.

"They weren't and aren't willing to give us a long-term lease," she says. "They want us to be a holdover tenant indefinitely."

This tenuous status cuts the congregation off at the knees, she argues, and even raising money for minor repairs is difficult at the moment.

"We wanted to raise \$90,000, just to do some painting and minor work," she recounts. "And people said, 'Wait a minute, if [Shearith Israel] owns the building, why should we pay for this? In the past, we knew Shearith's claim – but we stepped up and always took care of it and paid for things. The difference was that we never expected there was any chance we wouldn't be there long-term. It's hard to ask people to give money when we can be turned out tomorrow.'"

For Solomon, the last straw came in the spring of 2021 when he learned that a gravestone for John Loeb, the multimillionaire businessman who had underwritten the visitor center – and was still alive – had been installed in the historic cemetery that predates the synagogue, in clear contravention of Jewish tradition.

When he called Teitz, alarmed, she said she had been unaware the stone had been put in the cemetery, he recounts. The agreement to allow Loeb to be buried there had taken place in the 1990s and Teitz had green-lighted preparatory work in terms of measuring and ensuring the space where Loeb would be buried was appropriate. She said that as soon as she was made aware that a gravestone had been lowered by crane into the graveyard, she immediately asked that it be removed.

Solomon did not believe Teitz had been unaware that the stone was being installed. For him, it showed the existing CJI leadership could not be trusted with Touro's legacy.

Teitz recognized the gravestone episode as a misstep and apologized for it, but charges that it was being used as a "pretense" by Solomon for the eviction procedure.

"It was basically a subterfuge for getting what he really wanted," she says.

'Maybe I'll be called a traitor'

Solomon says his plan is to populate Touro with a new congregation, which would include and embrace CJI's current members – but with a board that would include Shearith Israel members.

He believes Touro could thrive and become a desirable destination for visitors around the world, particularly if Shearith Israel deploys its "rock star" rabbi, Meir Soloveichik, to Newport on a regular basis.

"There is no reason in the nice months between May and October that this place shouldn't be full of scholars and students. Why are they not going there? Why are we not charging for it? Why? Why is this congregation claiming to have financial problems when you have a gem of a synagogue. ... There was no reason they ever needed to sell precious ritual objects to be able to support themselves," he claims.

Teitz says Solomon is sorely mistaken if he thinks he can evict her congregation "as an entity" from its building but then retain the individuals. If the congregation isn't welcome in the synagogue, their rabbi will hold services in the annex it owns.

"We strongly believe we need to remain two separate congregations," she says. Giving Shearith members seats on her board is something she might consider if a formal lease was on the table, but without one it is out of the question.

Alongside Solomon's tough action in court, he also launched a charm offensive, inviting congregation members to New York last month – eight of them responded, including Teitz's co-president, Paul Tobak.

Tobak is less emphatic than his fellow leader. He sees how his congregation is aging and what Solomon is offering, and it doesn't look so bad to him. "They're talking about holding world-class events, lectures and doing things that would draw people to us and that we

don't have the staff to organize. You have to be hard-pressed not to see the benefits of what they are offering. Maybe I'll be called a traitor for saying this, but the members of Shearith couldn't have been nicer and more respectful."

While he is not happy about the court decision, Tobak says he prefers to look at the glass half-full. "Why wouldn't we be enthusiastic about [Shearith Israel]? They have resources that we don't. We're struggling with our costs – particularly in this time when every synagogue needs security."

Ultimately, Tobak foresees more days in court ahead. The next hearing on the eviction case, which the Newport congregation has moved to block, is at the end of June. "Only if a formal mediation is successful or if the courts clarify the landlord-tenant relationship – maybe [then] we can rebuild trust with each other," he says. "But I do think it's important that the courts have their say, because I think there's confusion by some people as to exactly what this landlord-tenant relationship means. It needs to be clarified."

Despite his belief that Solomon is "sincere" in saying he would be welcome to continue to pray in the synagogue where his children were bar mitzvahed if the eviction of CJI plays out, Tobak knows where his loyalties lie.

"I know where my commitment is. I'm co-president of Congregation Jeshuat Israel, not of Touro Synagogue. If our congregants and our rabbi move across the street or anywhere else, that's where I'll be too."

Culture

A new book explains Pope Pius XII's silence during the Shoah – but does not excuse it

By PJ Grisar

One day in late October 1941, Pope Pius XII received chilling news. A bishop in Slovakia wrote to say that the country's Jews "are simply being shot ... systematically murdered, without distinction of sex or age."

We can get a sense of how Pius reacted to this report, the first credible account of Nazi mass murder to reach him; that same day, in addition to blessing 80 Nazi soldiers, the pope sat for a sculptor. Both the pope's sculptor and the head of the household reported his agitation, while a reference photo of the pontiff, holding his spectacles and staring straight at the camera, betrays a beleaguered intensity.

You can find the picture in David Kertzer's new book, "The Pope at War: The Secret History of Pius XII, Mussolini and Hitler" – and while it may be worth a thousand words, the pope's evident distress was not enough to break his policy of silence.

"We have accounts of where priests are coming and telling him about the Jewish babies being murdered and tears come to his eyes," said Kertzer, also the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of "The Pope and Mussolini," about Pius XII's predecessor Pius XI. "At some human level, obviously, he's affected by this, but also he's obviously defensive about the fact that he isn't denouncing it."

While it's known that Pius never spoke out against the Nazi persecution of Jews before, during or after World War II, historians like Kertzer have only recently had access to Pius XII's Vatican archive, unsealed in 2020. [A delay in opening papal archives is typical, though researchers had taken a particular interest in the wartime pope.] Drawing from its documents, Kertzer's book details for the first time evidence of secret meetings between the pope and an emissary of Hitler as well as the cleric's refusal to confirm reports of Nazi mass murders to Franklin Roosevelt.

Pius XII, who served as nuncio to Germany and cardinal secretary of state before his ascension, emerges as a circumspect diplomat, eager to appease the Nazis and Mussolini in the hopes of protecting the church and advancing its interests – and ever aware that many avowed Nazis were among his faithful. Pius’ public pronouncements were carefully calibrated to be ambiguous in their praise and criticisms of wartime hostilities. His actions to stop the oppression of Jews were concerned above all with the baptized and those in mixed marriages. In the end, he wanted a role in brokering a peace, largely to curb the spread of communist influence in Europe, which he deemed a larger threat than Nazism.

Kertzer’s book is a captivating account of palace intrigue, packed with cardinals, diplomats, princes and fascist leaders. Kertzer’s revelations can be infuriating, but they help make sense of a papal tenure often excused away by apologists and, until now, not fully understood by scholars. In the final reckoning, the author shows that Pius XII was neither “Hitler’s Pope” nor a moral leader to be admired.

I spoke with Kertzer about the pope’s infamous silence and how he thinks the Vatican will respond to his latest book. The following interview has been edited for length and clarity.

PJ Grisar: A large part of this was informed by what you learned within the Vatican archives – first opened in March 2020, and closed down soon after by the pandemic. What were you eager to see when first you got there?

David Kertzer: I discovered these documents from the middle of December 1943, which showed the actual attitude toward Jews in the Vatican at the time that they were being taken off to Auschwitz. I did find those kind of shocking – particularly the timing. October 16, 1943, was the roundup of the Jews of Rome, where over 1,000 were sent to Auschwitz, essentially to their death, and the pope kept silent. But then six weeks later, November 30, Italy, under the control of the Germans and their puppet Italian Government, sent an order to all the police throughout the country ordering the arrest of all the Jews and sending them to concentration camps, from which they’d be taken to the death camps. This came two weeks after that order – the pope’s main adviser on Jewish affairs said he shouldn’t do anything to protest and gave a raft of antisemitic rationales.

I imagine that the fall of 1943 stuck out in your mind, knowing that these Jews were being kept so close to the Vatican as they awaited deportation.

The Jews of Rome were rounded up and held – literally inside of Vatican City, just outside the walls – for two days. It was quite a long time and the pope knew what their fate would be. The fact that he did not protest – he wasn’t happy, obviously – among other things, it

made him look terrible, and put him in a very awkward position – that was pretty dramatic.

Again and again, we see the pope choosing his words carefully. Some continue to defend him for any number of reasons. What do you have to say to them now?

It's a complex, multivariate kind of issue, there are certainly different perspectives to have, but the notion that the pope didn't issue a protest because he was afraid that it would harm the Jews, this is kind of laughable – that he could get Hitler even angrier at the Jews. Like Hitler didn't already want to eliminate all of the Jews in Europe. There are things that you can say to defend the pope: namely, he saw his main responsibility as protecting the church. That's what he did. And he did a pretty good job of it. But to call him a courageous moral leader, it's hard to stomach people saying that.

You have an excerpt in *The Atlantic* about the pope's secret meetings with a Hitler go-between, Philipp von Hessen. How does that change our understanding of the extent of his collaboration?

That really was the most clamorous findings in the newly opened archives – that the pope was engaged in secret negotiations with Hitler through the Nazi prince who was son-in-law of the Italian king. The Vatican had been able to keep that secret for the past 80 years, till my book. That Hitler kept this a secret from his own ambassador to the Holy See and the pope kept it a secret from many of his closest advisors and the secretary of state, it's kind of amazing. It certainly makes us understand much better the pope's attitudes, at least in the beginning of the war, in the first couple of years – '39 to '41 – while these were taking place. The pope is basically saying, "Look, if you just let up pressure on the church the Catholics will be your most loyal servants in the Third Reich." And saying nothing about why they shouldn't be the most loyal servants of the Nazi regime. It gives a whole new dimension to our understanding.

I was surprised to learn just how much he knew about the Shoah and how many people were appealing to him.

It was already pretty clear that he would have, given an incredible network of bishops and priests throughout occupied Europe, a pretty good idea what was going on. What's most dramatic there, I think, was when President Roosevelt asked him – I think this is the fall of '42 – whether he could help verify the accounts of the the mass murder of Europe's Jews by the Nazis, and they had all this confirmatory evidence. What I did discover in the newly opened archives is, again, his expert on the Jews – who later becomes Cardinal Vicar of Rome – gives him the advice that you shouldn't verify it or provide any confirmation to

Roosevelt because they'll undoubtedly use it for their own propaganda – namely, to discredit the Nazis by showing that they're involved in the mass murder of Jews. It's kind of incredible, too.

He did intercede on behalf of “baptized Jews” – that seemed to be his main concern.

Even before we get the Holocaust, we have the racial laws in Italy. The racial laws come into play in 1938. The pope and the church never complained about them, except that they're applied to baptized Jews. When Mussolini falls, the pope sends his representative to the new minister of internal affairs in charge of police. He says “don't get rid of racial laws, they're generally a good thing – but we've been arguing for five years that baptized Jews should be excluded from them and now's the time to do something about it.” That doesn't mean that the pope wanted to see Jews massacred; he certainly didn't.

This also becomes clear with the newly opened archives: On October 16, about 1,260 Jews were rounded up. But, two days later, just a little over 1,000 are on the train. What happened to the other 250? Well, there'd been a furious process in the previous 48 hours going on to verify the baptismal status of Jews and to identify Jewish men who married Christian women with the understanding that their children would be raised as Catholics. This is something else I think that's pretty new in my book. The received wisdom is that for the Nazis, it didn't matter whether you were baptized or not – that it was racial and you were a Jew by race. That may be true elsewhere, but certainly not in Italy, where the Nazis wanted to keep on the good side of the pope. Doing that did release all these baptized Jews, plus it basically meant throughout this period that the church is involved in the Nazi selection of who would live and who would die depending on whether they could come up with baptismal certificates for people.

Was there anything that you found admirable in his response?

There was a lot of humanitarian, Red Cross sort of work done through the Vatican during the war – but it was designed not to risk any negative blowback. Throughout the war, the Vatican maintained good relations with the Nazi government. And this is especially important to the pope during the nine months of German military occupation of Rome in '43, '44. Which coincided with the roundup of the Jews in Rome, too. This is another reason why he didn't speak out.

You've written about Pius' predecessor, and the book begins with a dramatic moment for him. He was poised to condemn racism, Nazism, and antisemitism but died just before. How might that have changed things had he been able to hang on longer?

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There are kind of two parts here in terms of what impact a papal denunciation could have had: one is in Italy, and one is in Germany, just to simplify. The fact is, in terms of Italy, the war's gonna begin – it's generally dated to the invasion of Poland, September 1, 1939. Italy doesn't immediately join the war. It's not at all clear it will join the war. And the Italians had no love for the Germans. They fought in a war against them not long ago. The whole notion of Aryan supremacy wasn't gonna go down that well with most Italians. And the idea of dying for Hitler made no sense. So Mussolini faced a big challenge of how to get the Italians behind him, and if the pope had denounced and said “No good Catholic could participate in this evil war” – that would have been a huge blow for Mussolini's ability to join the war. So there, I think, the pope could have had a huge impact.

What impact would it have had on Hitler and the war? Particularly after Austria and the Sudetenland are gobbled up, about half the Third Reich's population was Catholic. If he had excommunicated Hitler and the other Catholics in leadership there and said, “What they're trying to do is evil” and so forth, it would have had an impact. Whether it would have stopped things, that may be too much to expect.

And that that applies to either Pius XI or Pius XII speaking out.

Pius XI was not poised to excommunicate Mussolini, and his text was probably not as thoroughgoing a denunciation as we would like. But he at least, in the months before his death, was ensuring that the Vatican newspaper regularly published denunciations of the Nazi government for persecution of the church. And the day that [Pius XII, Eugenio] Pacelli becomes pope he puts an end to that. There's a pretty strong dividing line there.

What do you anticipate the Vatican response to this book will be?

I'm not encouraged by the fact that the first thing I published out of these newly open archives, was that piece in *The Atlantic* in August 2020, and one week after that appeared, the Vatican newspaper, *L'Osservatore Romano*, published a full-page denunciation of the piece and of me. The Roman Catholic Church in Germany and France, elsewhere, have begun to come to terms with their problematic history during World War II, and in some cases issue apologies, but the Vatican has never done that. One might have hoped that with the opening the archives and with Pope Francis' papacy calling for more opening up to the real world and getting out of their silo that there might be willingness to more seriously address this history. If that response to the first piece I published is any indication, I'm not expecting a lot of praise coming out of the Vatican for this book. I hope I'm wrong, obviously – maybe I'm wrong. We'll see. The Italian edition came out last week, so perhaps we'll see something in the Catholic press in Italy pretty soon.

You end the book speaking about the immediate revisionism in Italy after the war. Has that culture shifted?

What's remarkable to me – I just spent the last three months in Italy – is how little that has changed. It's not just the Vatican, it's part of a larger refusal to confront the history of World War II by Italy – rewriting the history so Italians actually fought for the Allies, they weren't one of the main Axis powers fighting for Hitler's victory. Still today in Italy you get this sensation that this is how people regard their past. The book talks about the fact that the entire organized church in Italy was, from the day that Mussolini announces he's joining Hitler in the war, calling on all good Catholics as part of their religious responsibility to do their part in the Axis war. The church has never confronted any responsibility for the action they took in this. It's part of a much bigger set of issues, moral and political and historical.

The book mainly covers the war years, but during Pius' tenure there were the ratlines – escape routes for the Nazis facilitated by some members of the Catholic clergy. I don't know how involved he was with all of that or if he knew what was going on.

Gerald Steinacher has written a good book, "Nazis on the Run," which gets at Vatican involvement. I don't think the pope was directly involved in it, but what the pope was involved in – this is something I'm now looking at – is having the Vatican testify on behalf of a number of Nazis who were on trial in Nuremberg for war crimes. Anyway, that's another story.

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