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Germans and Jews and Local Memory, 1975-2000

As is well known, the Nazis destroyed or desecrated synagogues in some 1200 different communities during the November Pogrom of 1938. As is also well known, some four hundred communities came to harbor subcamps of the major concentration camps. Taken together, these communities, close to 1500 (as some communities are in both categories), constitute the starting point for a book-length study of how German hometowns, defined as communities with a population between 2,000 and 100,000 inhabitants, reflected upon, commemorated, and narrated Nazi persecution, particularly of Jews. The study begins with visible reminders of the past, such as the synagogue (or the torn down parts of it or the empty space created by its absence), Jewish cemeteries, and vestiges of the subcamps. It then asks how German towns and small cities dealt with these visible reminders? How did they commemorate these sacred and profane objects, when and with what language, and against what resistance? The study is indebted to a form of serial history, as developed in the *Annales* School, and to digital humanities, especially thematic mapping, and of course to the study of memory and of commemoration. It seeks patterns across time, region, and community size, and tries to discern the actors and agents in the local engagement with the past.

At "Lessons and Legacies" in 2020, if my paper is accepted, I would present on one aspect of this story whose importance I had underestimated, and this is the contribution of Jewish exiles and survivors to the efforts of German towns in the postwar period to face what had happened in their communities in the 1930s and 1940s. What I had assumed to be a national story turns out to be a transnational history in which German Jews, particularly from North America and Israel, returned to their German hometowns, and worked through commemorative practices. This coming together of non-Jewish Germans and German Jewish exiles and survivors occurred in scores of towns and small cities in the 1980s and 1990s, sometimes on Jewish initiative, sometimes by invitation of the town. These meetings were extensively documented in an explosion of local publications, which are housed in the *Germania Judaica* Library in Cologne (a subset of which is organized by community), as well as in that library's voluminous collection of "grey literature." These small books, pamphlets, leaflets, and programs allow us to answer such questions as: Who established contact? Who organized and paid for these visits? When did they occur? What was said? And how were the meetings received? There are a great many studies of memory in the postwar period. They are typically focused on Germany's great metropolitan cities, like Cologne and Munich, or on its major monuments, like the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin. Sometimes they take as their subject intellectual debates, high politics, or organizations and institutions. By contrast, this study seeks to recall a more modest history about ordinary people facing the past in the kinds of towns and cities in which the majority of Germans in the postwar period actually lived.