Laughing Together: Comedic Theatre as a Mechanism of Survival during the Holocaust

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Laughing Together: 
Comedic Theatre as a Mechanism of Survival during the Holocaust

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Theatre Pedagogy at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by
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“Against the assault of laughter, nothing can stand.”
-Mark Twain, “The Chronicles of Young Satan”
Introduction

The very mention of the word “Holocaust” instantly brings to mind series of sinister images: camps, surrounded by miles of jagged barbed wire, packed with emaciated Jews in striped threadbare uniforms. Instinctively, the mind manifests images of cruelty and suffering: fearful Jews running for safety as fusillades of Nazi gunfire saturate the air. Whatever pictures one associates with this dark time in history, it is safe to presume they are representative of a heavy sadness. A quick internet search of school children’s Holocaust-themed art projects delivers row upon row of morose renderings: legions of gray, skeletal figures bowing their heads in defeat. This association is innate. The notion of pairing cheerful colors or joyful imagery with such calamitous atrocities seems inhumane, disrespectful to those who suffered at the hands of the Nazis.

And yet, there was laughter—joyful, liberated laughter from those who suffered the most. The Jews of Hitler’s Europe did not surrender their spirit. They used humor to help ease their burdens, a method made most effective when the humor could be shared. In the communal setting of the theatre, comedic performances were an exceptionally popular form of entertainment. These opportunities to laugh together united the Jews in the release and acknowledgement of their shared anxieties, anxieties over what had already befallen their people, and the unknown future that loomed before them.

In the months leading up to the death of President Paul von Hindenburg on August 2, 1934, and Adolph Hitler subsequently declaring himself Germany’s Führer, the Jews of Europe began to feel the severe yoke of oppression, slowly increasing in restrictiveness, one new
regulation at a time. As the new dictator charged forward with the nation’s Nazification, Hitler took aim at the Jews, blaming them for the all the troubles that had befallen his motherland and labeling them as a polluted race of vermin, parasites he intended to expunge. Though the Jews found themselves in increasingly dire circumstances, punctuated most significantly by the threat of the Third Reich’s unknown long-term intentions for their people, they refused to allow themselves to be dehumanized. Perhaps because of their race’s extensive history of overcoming oppression, the Jews of Europe were an astoundingly resilient group. Having lost the physical means necessary to combat the Nazi party, many Jews armed themselves with a powerful weapon—one that could only be taken away with their consent: humor.

Throughout the entirety of the Holocaust, even in the later days when the truth of Hitler’s extermination camps began to reach the Jews, many found strength in comedy. Persecution was certainly not a new concept to the Jews, and neither was the decision to laugh in response. Ever since their perilous exile from Babylon, followed by two thousand years of suffering as the Jews existed without a nation of their own, they have utilized humor and joviality to help cope with their afflictions. Many classic jokes from centuries ago still resonate as significant examples of the Jews’ unshakeable humor. In a speech about humor’s valued role in Jewish culture, Rabbi Joseph Telushkin repeated a joke frequently told by Jews in the nineteenth century. This popular joke is indicative of this instinct to respond through humor, as opposed to aggression, when faced with adversity:

“A Jew is challenged to a duel. He is forced to accept. He says, “But if I’m late, start without me!”"
The impulse to combat misfortune with humor was largely present as Hitler began his quest to expunge the race, initiating the Second World War. Together, the Jewish people made fun of the Nazis and often poked fun at their own misfortunes.

Fearful of the strength found in the collective atmosphere of comedic theatre, Hitler was quick to ban all jokes about himself and his regime. Immediately after taking office as chancellor in 1933, he ensured that all political jokes “were considered a direct attack on the government, and violators were subject to harassment, arrest, imprisonment, or death” (Lipman 25). German law was changed to clearly state that any joke uttered at the expense of the Führer would be deemed an act of treason—an act which was punishable by death. The Nazis went to great lengths to enforce this radical ruling. Multiple people “were even put on trial for naming dogs and horses ‘Adolf’” (Morreal). The brevity with which Hitler implemented censorship over comedy illuminates his deep-rooted fear of being ridiculed: the Achilles’ heel of the man who saw himself as the world’s supreme dictator. Laughing both at the Führer and despite the sufferings he imposed upon them gave the Jews both an upper hand and a positive outlook, empowering them as a people of hope and spirit. In the presence of their laughter, Germany’s dictator could be whittled down to nothing more than the butt of a joke.

Diaries, testimonies, and official documents attest to the fact that the persecuted Jews of Nazi-occupied Europe wanted not only to laugh, but to laugh alongside fellow members of the tribe in the shared experience of theatrical performance. These performances, “requiring at [their] most basic level nothing but performers and spectators, took place during the Holocaust even under the most extreme conditions of deprivation” (Peschel 145). Comedic theatre was in high demand, and many performers put their lives in jeopardy for the chance to satirize the Nazi agenda and bring laughter to their fellow Jews. The comedic theatre performances of the
Holocaust took many forms: cabaret revues, puppet shows, vaudeville routines, and even performances of classic comedies by laudable playwrights such as Shakespeare and Molière. For both the performers and the observers, the decision to choose laughing over grieving was a meaningful one. As Steve Lipman asserts in his book *Laughter in Hell*, “Wit produced on the precipice of hell was not frivolity, but psychological necessity” (8).
Chapter One: The Role of Comedic Theatre in the Holocaust

The Cabaret of Life

It was the Jews of Germany who felt the initial tremors of Hitler’s Final Solution. Long before he began his campaign of terror, Jewish artists had established a dominant presence in Germany’s cultural scene; Jewish actors, musicians, and writers were highly regarded as some of society’s most influential figures. Fearing the power of artistic expression and the influence Jewish artists could have on the minds of Germany’s Gentile population, one of Hitler’s first concerns was establishing control over all Jewish artistic activities. As early as 1933, Hitler had begun using his influence to ensure that Jewish artists were stringently censored, passing a Civil Service Law ordering all non-Aryans serving in the government to be let go. This made it easy for the Third Reich to dismiss all Jewish artists employed by cultural institutions run by the government. Jewish civic leaders responded to these prompt firings by proposing the establishment of the Jüdischer Kulturbund, the Jewish Cultural Federation.

The Third Reich quickly embraced the initiative, seeing their allowance of the organization as a way to strengthen their grasp of control over Jewish artistic performance. In addition, the Nazis believed the Kulturbund would “provide grist for the German propaganda effort abroad, which needed ammunition to counter allegations about mistreatment of Jews” (Steinweis 20). The first Kulturbund was implemented in Berlin in the spring of 1933. Reich Minister of Propaganda Joseph Goebbels, appointed Nazi official Hans Hinkel as supervisor of this new organization; all theatre scripts were to be submitted to Hinkel for approval prior to any
performance. Even under Hinkel’s suspicious watch, Jews seized the opportunity to creatively express, though clandestinely, their response to the growing influence of the Führer. So long as criticisms were subtle, they could often evade censorship. Initially, one of the primary ambitions of the Berlin Kulturbund was to use theatrical performances to help sustain the Jews’ cultural identity. Plays written by Jews, about Jews, were frequently selected with the intention of teaching audiences about Jewish traditions and promoting a sense of cultural pride. Despite the noble intentions of these artistic selections, the majority of Berlin’s Jews were more concerned with entertainment than receiving lessons in Jewish history. As members of the Kulturbund strove to ensure Jewish works were performed, the masses clearly were not as worried about this: “…the so-called Jewish events were… poorly attended. And audiences ostensibly remained largely unconcerned with plays featuring biblical themes or about Jewish life in Eastern Europe… In fact, the most successful play of the Berlin 1936-37 season was A Midsummer Night’s Dream” (Rovit 34).

Considering the grim predicament for Germany’s Jews during this time, it may seem perplexing that cabaret, a form of entertainment known for its music, comedy, and relaxed setting, was beginning to emerge as a prominent fixture in the Jews’ new, constrained cultural lives. However, this unique medium provided much more than a few laughs over cigarettes and drinks. The popular theatre tradition of cabaret was becoming a mouthpiece through which Hitler’s critics, both Jewish and Gentile, delivered their commentary. As the Nazis began gaining more and more influence, many cabaret routines addressed the potential dangers. Under the guise of “comedy,” performers had more leeway to speak openly. Some entertainers’ commentary was more brazen than others’. In Munich, cabaret performer Weiss Ferdl frequently performed a daring routine during which he would show the audience large pictures of
Hitler, Goering, and other notorious leaders of the Reich. He would pantomime studying them and ponder aloud, “Now should I hang them, or line them up against the wall?” Werner Finck, a Jewish caberettist often commented of the stupidity of the Nazis, who were frequently shutting down and reopening his cabaret. Whenever members of the Gestapo attended his shows, he would look to them and ask, “Am I speaking too fast for you?” (Morreall). Not surprisingly, the Nazis’ censorship efforts took particularly pointed aim at the increasingly critical content being performed on the cabaret scene. In response, numerous cabarets began performing a well-known skit in which comedians would walk onto the stage wearing gags over their mouths. After a moment or two, the performer would exit and the master of ceremonies would quip, “Now that the political portion of the show is over, we’ll begin the entertainment!” (Morreall).

It was in November of 1934 that the first official “Jewish only” cabaret performances debuted on the Kulturbund stage. Most initial varieties of Kulturbund cabaret shied away from the political commentary the Jews had grown to expect from those types of shows. Instead, most were “based on the famous Russian cabaret of émigrés” which included stock characters such as “the laughing rabbi, [and] the little Jew with his little fiddle” (Kühn 42). While some Jews coveted the rare opportunity to laugh and enjoy lighthearted amusements, others found comedic pursuits troubling. With mounting National Socialist measures, acts of anti-Semitism were growing increasingly more common and violent. It’s hardly surprising that cabaret’s entrance into the Berlin Kulturbund’s repertoire was a rocky one. In an era dominated by confusion and fear, the expectations of Jewish audiences were mottled. Many theatre patrons found the cabarets’ emphases on comedy to be disorienting when life outside of the theatre was so ominous. Others were disenchanted with the lower quality of entertainment compared to pre-Hitler cabarets. For them, the Kulturbund’s limited resources were simply a sad reminder of
their waning comfort. As professional caberettist Erich Lowinsky joked to his Jewish audience in 1937, “…a cabaret of only Jewish artists with works by Jews for Jews is by far no Jewish cabaret” (41). Numerous Jewish newspapers even encouraged cabaret performers to use their platform as means to challenge the injustices being committed instead of supplying audiences with frivolous gags and witticisms.

While the troubled times prohibited some Jews from enjoying the Kulturbund cabaret, others found release and delight in the spectacle. Many audiences enjoyed laughing about the reality of their persecution. A review in the Jüdische Rundschau, the journal of the Zionist Federation in Germany, praised one of these early comedic revues, acknowledging the impact of the show on its audience, saying, “An awakening passed through the whole theatre, and as if touched by some invisible hand, the people stood, clapped, shouted with joy, laughed, and wept… It was blessed to be connected to—no, to be a part of a community—a people” (Kühn 42). Indeed, the Kulturbund was intent on using theatre to provide pleasure and ease, one of the only ways Jewish leaders were able to provide comfort under their Nazis’ ever tightening restrictions.

As the cabarets of Berlin’s Kulturbund grew in popularity, more cabarets began springing up throughout Germany, even in the country’s remote provinces such as Beuthen. Numerous performers from Berlin formed troupes, touring the country with humorous revues. Their intention to provide distraction from fear is palpable in the jocular selection of titles for these shows: “Kunterbunt [Topsy-turvy], Quer Durch Ernst und Scherz [Traversing Seriousness and Jest], [and] Heiterer Abend [Cheerful Evening]” (Kühn 45). While the Jewish audiences came around to the concept of laughing, Jewish periodicals like the C.V.-Zeitung and the Jüdische Liberale Zeitung disapproved of both the Kulturbund’s intention to entertain and of the
audiences’ willingness to be entertained. Reprimanding both parties, these publications insisted that the Kulturbund use their influence to educate Jews, not to divert them from reality. These reprimands made little impact; the masses wanted to laugh.

It wasn’t until the reins of the Kulturbund cabaret were taken over by the capable hands of Max Ehrlich that the Jewish press began getting behind the effort. Ehrlich was “one of Germany’s most beloved comics, masters of ceremony and cabaret stars” (“Prologue”). Instantly, he was warmly received by packed houses of enthusiastic patrons at the Café Léon on the Kurfürstendamm, a bustling centralized avenue in Berlin. His audiences appreciated the bold candidness of his commentary. In one notable opening address, Ehrlich mentioned a letter someone had written: “‘Be really funny. We’ve enough tsoris [worries] at home.’ This, said the director Ehrlich, should be the motto of his cabaret” (Kühn 52). It was with the highly regarded Ehrlich’s entrance into the Kulturbund cabaret that the newspapers finally conceded to the public’s desire to be transported to a light, humorous atmosphere. Dubbed by the press as “Mr. Honest,” Ehrlich stuck to a fairly simple formula for his cabaret, relying on comedic sketches with proven track records of audience approval. It wasn’t long before the Café Léon became too small to accommodate the crowds of Jews eagerly seeking the chance to laugh.

Ehrlich’s allusions to the troubles of the times were kept vague—while most went unnoticed by Hinkel, they were readily received by Ehrlich’s hungry patrons. His success as director of the Kulturbund theatre was largely due to the subtlety of his commentary, which never crossed into the realm of blatant satire. By keeping his criticisms understated, he allowed his cabaret to continue; this caution persisted in Ehrlich’s programs, even after his eventual capture and imprisonment.
Soon after the atrocities committed by the Nazis during the pogrom, “Kristallnacht,” Ehrlich made the difficult decision to leave the Berlin Kulturbund and flee to the Netherlands. The “Night of Broken Glass” had been especially destructive in Berlin, home to one of the “largest Jewish communities in the German Reich” (Holocaust Encyclopedia). Deciding the risks of staying were too great, Ehrlich offered his grateful public two performances of a special farewell comedy show. Both shows quickly sold out and a third showing was added for the night of April 2, 1939. In front of a packed house of adoring fans, Ehrlich made the Berlin Jews laugh for the final time.

Not long after his departure, Ehrlich, along with many of Berlin and Vienna’s foremost caberettists, was rounded up by Nazis and deported to Westerbork, a transit camp established by the Dutch government in October of 1939 to “intern Jewish refugees who had entered the Netherlands illegally” (“Westerbork”). Westerbork fell under the command of SS-Obersturmführer Gemmeker, an SS officer who took great enjoyment in the tradition of cabaret. In this new prison, Ehrlich and numerous members of his former Kulturbund troupe including Willy Rosen, Kurt Gerron, and Camilla Spira, were forced to perform their sketches before a daunting crowd: Gemmeker was often perched in the front row surrounded by a pack of his SS guards. The commander enjoyed the shows; at every review he could be seen “laughing, tapping his foot, and applauding with enthusiasm” (World ORT). Gemmeker’s enthusiasm for the theatre permitted the troupe to produce numerous original shows. Still, the watchful eye of the Third Reich monitored every one of the performers’ gestures and inflections. Despite these rigid conditions, the Westerbork revues—comprised mostly of silly skits, jokes, and musical numbers—enabled many to experience joy, a fleeting but profound escape from their burdens.
Westerbork inhabitant Etty Hillesum documented the popularity of these shows in her diary, describing them as “packed out” (162). She notes that it was mostly the camp’s younger prisoners who coveted the chance to attend comedy shows. Just like the audiences of the Kulturbund theatre, the Jews of Westerbork had conflicting opinions about whether or not it was ethical to laugh in the face of tragedy. Hillesum recalls sitting in Ehrlich’s audience and experiencing this divide, saying, “The response of the audience is mixed. There is great admiration for the work of the cast and people laugh at the jokes and enjoy the words and music of the songs about the camp and the comments of the entertainer, Ehrlich. But the majority of the audience are not at all willing to let themselves go… The older generation keep quiet and cannot relax after all the suffering they have gone through and are still going through daily. Also, in the matter of applause the older generation are restrained, but the younger generation are openhearted and burst out from time to time into rhythmical clapping” (162).

Under the skilled, cautious direction of Ehrlich, the Westerbork cabarets were constructed similarly to those of the Berlin Kulturbund. Political commentary was expressed in muted innuendo, never openly attacking the Nazi regime. Crossing the line would endanger his fellow prisoners and “violate the most fundamental condition for the troupe’s continued existence” (“Theatre of Despair”).

Although many Westerbork Jews may have been hesitant to fully engage in the cabaret’s high spirits, it is noteworthy that the revues were always filled, suggesting that the comic musings of Ehrlich’s troupe were indeed valuable to those who suffered. The power of these sketches spanned far beyond helping to forget their dismal surroundings—they helped overshadow the very resounding presence of death. In Westerbork, the stakes were unfathomably high. Most were already dealing with the loss or the unknown fate of loved ones,
and all prisoners feared discovering their name on the next deportation announcement. Mass deportations to extermination camps were a regular occurrence in Westerbork. At the order of the camp commandant, the Westerbork cabaret was “always performed when the transports headed for the concentration camps—cabaret as a mood drug to quiet candidates for death” (Kühn 55). Even in what audience members suspected would be their final moments, many chose to laugh. In her own recollections, cabaret actress Camilla Spira recalls the powerful responses from the Westerbork crowds. “The people laughed and clapped,” she writes, “It was as if we were in Berlin on the Kurfürstendamm…We were suddenly somewhere else. One can hardly imagine that. The people down in the audience forgot everything during those two hours” (55).

Tragically, even Max Ehrlich, director of the cabaret of life, ultimately perished in the gas chambers of Auschwitz.
Curtain call for Max Ehrlich (center) and his cast of cabaret performers performing Humor und Melody in the Westerbork concentration camp, 1943. Camilla Spira stands to his right. Note the humorous ambience created by the zany cartoon backdrop. This was one of the impressive six original revue shows Ehrlich and his troupe were able to produce during their eighteen months together in Westerbork.

1 Photo Source: Akademie der Künste, Berlin.
Laughing in Warsaw

On October 12, 1939, a sonorous voice echoed through the streets of Warsaw, Poland. The booming exclamation reverberated through a megaphone, its words instantly permeating the lives of all Jews within earshot. The announcement was succinct but ominous: Nazi official Ludwig Fischer had signed a decree establishing a Jewish ghetto in Warsaw. In November, the first barbed-wire fences were unrolled and installed at the entrance of what had been declared the “Jewish District.” Eleven miles of towering brick walls, over nine feet tall, were erected a few months later, barricading the Jewish prisoners from the outside world and all that was familiar to them. This district quickly grew to be the most populous Jewish ghetto in Nazi-occupied Europe, a dismal holding pen in which “almost 400,000 Jewish residents [were] crammed into 1,483 houses” (Engelking and Leociak 40).

The hardships imposed upon these Jews resulted in a collective demand for cultural events and entertainment—diversions from the hellish world they’d been forced to enter. It was here in occupied Poland that the Nazis first implemented a Judenrat: a council of Jews, elected by members of the community, who assisted with the administration of Jewish communities in Nazi occupied Europe. In Warsaw, the Judenrat immediately addressed these requests for cultural events. The first official theatre premiere in the ghetto occurred on December 6, 1940, a performance of In Rejdt [In a Little Circle] at the Eldorado Theatre, a Yiddish theatre located at 1 Dzielna Street. Comedy entered the repertoire just two weeks after the opening, when the Eldorado began hosting lively musical comedy revues to packed houses.
The Warsaw Ghetto, home to Jews desperate for a taste of the lives they had left behind, quickly became home to a thriving theatre scene. The Judenrat became responsible for overseeing all cultural events approved by the Nazis. They supervised the establishment of numerous legitimate theatres, many on Leszno Street, which became commonly referred to as “Little Broadway.” Six privately owned theatres operated in the ghetto, staging a variety of shows. The Nowy Azazel [New Hell] theatre, the only other Yiddish theatre in the ghetto, opened in May of 1941. Like the Eldorado, the Nowy Azazel frequently offered comedic selections, namely musical comedies such as Hertser tsu farkoyfn [Hearts for Sale] in July of 1941 and Dovid’s fidele [David’s Fiddle] in March of 1942 (Gilbert 38). This theatre frequently produced the works of Sholem Aleichem, a beloved Yiddish playwright known for his cheerful characters who maintained the ability to laugh throughout their hardships. Aleichem’s contributions to the morale of the ghetto were widely acknowledged. On October 4, 1941, a meeting was held at the ghetto’s Central Judaic Library to commemorate the 25th anniversary of his death; the event was devotedly called “Let Us Teach People to Laugh” (Engelking and Leociak 598).

The presence of comedy in the offerings of so many of the ghetto theatres illuminates the synonymy existent between laughter and the culture of the Jewish people. The scores of advertisements for the comedic theatre performances seem to suggest that the Warsaw Ghetto’s legitimate theatre scene was largely intended “to help restore a sense of familiarity” (Gilbert 38). Attending these shows gave one the sense of stepping back into the comforts of home and tradition.
Entrance to the Eldorado, spring 1941. Posters advertise the Yiddish comedy Rywkele dem Rebns (The Rabbi’s Little Rebecca) by Z. Kalmanowicz. Next to the theatre door is a display of the performers’ headshots, indicative of the efforts to make ghetto theatres appear similar to the professional theatres the ghetto’s inhabitants knew prior to the occupation. The figure in the center of the photograph appears to be a Jewish policeman, identifiable by the uniform and white armband (which would have displayed the Star of David). This officer may have been overseeing the activity at the theatre door, as the Nazis frequently posted armed policemen at the entrances of the theatres: a threatening reminder to prisoners that artistic expressions were being monitored.

While the commanding SS officers permitted various theatrical performances, largely to help divert the minds of the Jews from their desperate circumstances, members of the Judenrat found themselves in a predicament, faced with swelling requests for comedies, particularly those

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2 Photo Source: Yad Vashem Photo Archive.
that addressed the severe regulations enforced on the ghetto’s inhabitants. Council members “had to confront the question of where to draw the line – to try and comply with German demands no matter how unreasonable... whilst retaining the confidence of the wider Jewish population” (Raglund and Webb).

One means to help satisfy the significant demand for amusement came early in 1940, when the Nazis permitted the opening of a café with floor show entertainment. The immediate financial success of this endeavor promoted the establishment of many other cafés, “which were for the most part operated by members of the Judenrat and Germans who used their influence to secure the license” (Fass 98). The floor show café business boomed so greatly that similar coffeehouses began springing up on nearly every street of the ghetto—often, these were merely makeshift operations set up in people’s homes. The ghetto’s inhabitants kept these businesses alive, eagerly paying for the chance to laugh and be entertained.

The Warsaw Ghetto’s pool of talented actors and singers wasn’t vast enough to meet the needs of the public. Eventually, the growing demand for performers forced café owners to hire amateur performers with minimal ability. With the waning talent of the ghetto’s entertainment options, it wasn’t long before the quality of the material also lost its respectability. Soon, “the café acquired an atmosphere of vulgarity and triteness.” While some patrons were put off by the uncensored lack of decorum, it must also be said that one of the café’s greatest attributes was this very lack of censorship. “Many of the cafés and nightclubs were the only places where there could be satirical expression of the conditions of ghetto life because they were not subject to Judenrat censorship” (Fass 102).
Many Jews, desperate to experience laughter and free expression, took advantage of this lack of censorship, taking part in clandestine cabarets that pushed the boundaries of satire. Understandably, these brazen performances were often staged in discreet locations such as attics and basements. These evening amusements were also restricted by the Nazis’ strict lights-out policy, asserting that all ghetto residents were “obliged to block out their windows from 5:50 PM to 7:00 AM” (Engelking and Leociak 42). Under these restrictions, all evening entertainment had to be performed in dim, muted light provided by candles and kerosene lanterns. The following is a revealing description of the painstaking efforts exerted to pull off one of these undercover nightclubs, as told by Jonas Turkow, who had directed the Yiddish theatre of Kraków prior to the occupation:

“The performances were held in an attic, where a stage was set up with a curtain. Pillows and table cloths were used as decorations with kerosene lamps for lighting [...] In order to get to the house where the theatre performed you had to pass through many side streets and rubble of destroyed houses. In order to let the public know the place of the performance, guides would be stationed in many corners to direct the people” (qtd. in Fass 98-99). This particular troupe, established early in 1940, frequently placed lookouts in strategic locales to ensure no German intruders infringed on the free expression of the cabaret.

Ghetto resident Ya’akov Tselemensky describes his own experience as an audience member in one of these revues, noting the diverting effect of the show:

“Gas lamps were burning in every corner of the crowded cabaret…M.Z., the renowned Polish actor, played the role of a comic character, eliciting lots of laughter. Afterwards, a singer, U.G., sang old Polish hits and romantic songs… Within the walls of the cabaret one could not
sense the tragedy taking place a few yards away. The audience ate, drank, and laughed as if it had no worries” (qtd. in Fass 101).

Against the dim, poorly lit backdrop of makeshift performance spaces, these illegal comedic revues offered many prisoners the only light and enjoyment they experienced in the ghetto.

In both the theatres and cafés of the Warsaw Ghetto, the Third Reich’s censorship was very inconsistent. While the constant presence of armed guards at the doors of the ghetto theatres has been thoroughly documented, it seems minimal enforcement was actually put into action beyond the theatres’ thresholds. “In theory all plays were submitted to censorship, but in practice circumvention was commonplace. The theatres had almost complete freedom…” (Fass 107). Seizing the opportunity made available by this absence of authority, many daring comedy acts containing “witty and ironical commentaries on the realities of the situation in the ghetto” were frequently performed on the stage of the Famina on Leszno Street and also by an innovative company of writers and performers who created a satirical Polish-language cabaret dubbed *Live News I*” (Engelking and Leociak 591).

*Live News* was conceptualized by an educated faction of seasoned entertainers including satirist Władysław Szlengel, author and composer Pola Braunówna, singer Jósef Lipski, poet Leonid Fokszanński, and theatre director Andrzej Włast. The writers performed their clever revue at the stylish Szutka café, covering various sections of the typical newspaper with hilarious parodies in the forms of sports reports, theatre reviews, headline news, and spoof advertisements. It differed from other cabaret efforts in both its quality and in its widespread, public popularity. Audiences couldn’t get enough of the act. Along with its high caliber of talent, *Live News’*
popularity stemmed largely from the daring nature of its commentary. The show, of which several versions were written, included “intelligent, sharp satire on the situation in the ghetto, relationships within the Judenrat, bribery, allusions to the situation outside the ghetto” as well as songs that addressed current issues, with the charismatic and articulate Szlengel in the role of master of ceremonies (Engelking and Leociak 588).

*Live News* provided laughter to those unwilling to partake in the vulgar entertainment that had become commonplace on the café scene. A glowing review was published in the Gazeta Żydowska, an official periodical of the ghetto, on March 13, 1942, describing the cabaret as “a very clever literary and artistic show that was absolutely different from the hackney (trashy) revue programs” (Engelking and Leociak 590). The cabaret was widely popular and each show had numerous repeat performances. The daring nature of its candid observations resonated with the houses of oppressed spectators, while the comedic structure of *Live News* insinuated that even the most burdensome issues of the time, those worthy of “front page” status, were conquerable. When the Jews came together in laughter, even the most troubling concern could be transformed, demoted to a mere punch line.

Despite the general appreciation of *Live News*, many members of the Judenrat, though sympathetic to the needs of their fellow Jews, disapproved of such blatant refusal to follow protocol. Some “believed that underground activities in the ghetto would endanger the entire community and hasten its liquidation” (Raglund and Web). In the end, it was not underground comedy, but an unfavourable inspection by Heinsrich Himmler, Chief of German Police in the Reich Ministry of the Interior, that accelerated deportations from the ghetto.³ Władysław

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³ In January of 1943, Himmler ordered 8,000 Jews to be evacuated from the Warsaw Ghetto after an inspection. Outraged, the Warsaw Jews implemented the first organized armed resistance.
Szlengel, master of ceremonies for the influential *Live News*, met the same tragic fate of Max Ehrlich, master of the Kulturbund cabaret. Szlengel was killed by the Nazis while bravely participating in the ghetto uprising in 1943.

*Photograph of Władysław Szlengel. The writing is a dedication to a friend of the poet, dated November 9, 1939.*

While the adult residents of the Warsaw ghetto sought comedic refuge in the cafés and theatres, the ghetto’s children were provided with their own opportunities to laugh. Life in the ghetto meant hardship and strife; the notion of a carefree childhood was a thing of the past despite the great efforts made by organizations such as CENTOS, Centralne Towarzyswo

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*Photo Source: Ada Holtzman Homepage.*
Opieki nad Sierotami [Headquarters of the Society for the Care of Orphans], to provide children in need with food, shelter, and opportunities for fun. Ghetto life was particularly hard on the young. Children “constituted the majority of beggars,” namely because parents used them to solicit sympathy from passersby (Glibert 32). Children were often forced to participate in efforts to combat the widespread shortage of food. When provisions ran out, small children were enlisted for the dangerous task of sneaking to the other side of the wall to retrieve food. Because of their minute stature, kids stood a better chance of making it over and back without drawing attention. Many children left the pleasures of childhood behind at a very young age, faced with starvation, destitution, and often the weighty burden of having to supply food for their hungry families.

Thrust into unfathomable adversity, the children of the Warsaw Ghetto needed laughter more than ever before. In response to this need, CENTOS employed a committee to organize entertainment for both Polish and Yiddish-speaking youths. Great care was taken to ensure these offerings “would be of the highest artistic standard, bringing the children in the nightmare reality of the ghetto a little laughter and light relief” (Engelking and Leociak 328). Puppet shows were one of the most common forms of comedic theatre for the children of the ghetto. Klima Fuwerk, who served on the Committee for Children’s Entertainments, helped construct impressive puppets for these performances. She organized courses in puppet making so the ghetto community could contribute to the children’s merriment. The Polish Puppet Theatre even pitched in to the effort, donating “a large set of puppets” (328). Helena Merenholc, another worker with CENTOS, recalled seeing a cart which traveled the streets of the ghetto, bringing puppet performances to crowds of children.
Additional comedy acts were performed on the teeming streets of the ghetto in the form of street performers. The most famous *lest*, Yiddish for “street performer,” was unquestionably a man named Rubinsztajn, who inmates hailed as the “jester of the ghetto.” Rubinsztajn was known for running through the streets, often near the theatres on Leszno, laughing wildly and accosting pedestrians with an arsenal of amusing maxims. Common sayings he was known for shouting include “‘Hand over your coupon’ (ration card; in other words, die) and “ale głajch’—everyone’s equal (in the face of death)” (Engelking and Leociak 592). The impact of his quips and unwavering smile is evident through the frequent allusions to Rubinsztajn in ghetto songs, poems, and cabaret routines. Often, he was invited to perform comedy routines for affluent ghetto residents as they dined, as sort of a crude dinner theatre. He is mentioned in the majority of diaries kept by Warsaw’s Jews, further illustrating the impression his humor made on those he encountered.
Rubinsztajn performing his comedy before a sizeable crowd on the streets of the Warsaw Ghetto.

The children surrounding the popular clown display wide smiles, fully engaged in the delight of his humorous antics.

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5 Photo Source: The Jewish Chronicle Online.
A Fortress of Laughter

In the beautiful Bohemian country northwest of Prague lies the small, picturesque town of Terezín. The town rests in the jutting shadows of a grand military fortress, constructed in the 18th century. As the Nazis marched westward, eventually occupying the lands of the Czechs, this majestic fortress was transformed into one of Hitler’s concentration camps. Terezín (or Theresienstadt) was established as a transit camp, a prison where Jews were held as they awaited deportation. The ultimate destination of these deportees, unbeknownst to Terezín’s Jews, was eastward, where the gas chambers of Auschwitz awaited their arrival. Because the camp was labeled a transit camp, many believed Terezín to be a more peaceful and human environment than the other Nazi death camps; however, this impression was exceedingly deceptive. Even as they anxiously awaited the day their own names might appear on a deportation order, the prisoners were subjected to forced labor amid terrible conditions including overcrowding, minimal food, and rampant illness. While the camp housed no gas chambers to accommodate mass executions, “exhaustion, starvation, disease, and the whip did the job quite well. And overcrowding: a population density about fifty times as great as Berlin’s before the war” (Kramer 180). Of Terezín’s nearly 140,000 prisoners, approximately 33,000 perished in the camp itself. Yet, despite their grave plight, the Jews of Terezín created an abundance of original art, music, and theatre.

Terezín was unique in both its makeup and its function. The Nazis deceitfully used the camp as a tool of propaganda, representing it not as a concentration camp, but as a gift from Hitler to the Jews of Western Europe. In 1944, Germany’s Ministry of Propaganda produced a
deceptive film entitled *The Führer Gives a City to the Jews*, which they used to demonstrate that the Jews were being well-treated. The only benefit of being used as a pawn was that the SS commanders at Terezín were more lenient in that they permitted cultural and artistic events. Like many of the confined Jewish populations in Nazi-occupied Europe, Terezín was given a Judenrat to help administer these events. Eventually this “model ghetto” even received the addition of what was called the Freizeitgestaltung (Administration of Free Time Activities), created “as an ‘autonomous’ cultural department of the Jewish self-governing body, which promoted and enabled both private and public cultural life” (Kisiedu). Terezin’s cultural productivity accelerated upon the founding of this council; significant allowances were made, including an end to the ban on musical instruments.

*Photo Source: Yad Vashem Photo Archive.*

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6 Photo Source: Yad Vashem Photo Archive.
The population of Terezín also made the camp unique. Among its prisoners was a significantly high concentration of Western Europe’s most celebrated Jewish artists, writers, composers, and actors. This abundance of creative minds, combined with the Nazis’ comparatively moderate restrictions on performance, resulted in a wide array of performances. Here too, within the impenetrable fortress walls, comedic theatre was an artistic medium frequently utilized to help alleviate the prisoners’ suffering.

It was Terezín’s abundant population of Czech Jews who initiated the camp’s theatre activity. The SS “did encourage artistic productions of an amazing variety—from cabaret entertainment to puppet shows to classical theatre, including plays by Shakespeare, Shaw, and Molnár” (Kramer 181). One of the most popular performances at Terezín was a production of The Bartered Bride, a comic opera by Czech composer Bedřich Smetana, which premiered on November 28, 1942. The show was selected to commemorate the first anniversary of the camp and it was warmly received by enthusiastic audiences. Another comic opera which premiered that month was Zdenĕk Jelinek’s Falle [Trap]. This production, “written and directed in the manner of commedia dell’arte—found great favor with the audience” (Weiner 225). The enthusiasm of the audience at Falle’s premiere is especially noteworthy as Herr Poljak, a ruthless camp official with a reputation for brutal violence, was in attendance. Instead of interfering with the actors’ efforts, Poljak “watched the play with great interest and left silently when it was over” (225). For the duration of that one comedy, the malevolent commander sat alongside his prisoners, enjoying the entertainment.

For many in Terezín, the joy of experiencing these organized comedies was one of the only sources of relief from the stifling grip of their trials. Those attending the shows sought refuge from the stress of labor, starvation, and the persistent threat of deportation. Amid such
apprehension, performers’ jokes were often met with thunderous claps and energetic laughter, the tension of their circumstances serving like a springboard for their eager laughs. Zdenka Ehrlich-Fantlová, who participated in camp cabarets, experienced this frenzied atmosphere at the comedy revues: the tumultuous meeting of fear and elation. Ehrlich-Fantlová was set to perform in the premiere of a new cabaret by acclaimed playwright Josef Lustig. The content of the show was to be allegorical, a tribute to the radical Liberated Theatre in Prague. In between scenes, Lustig and another actor, Jiří Spitz would come out dressed as clowns, and “deliver a topically colored commentary from in front of the curtain… The audience cheered wildly at every satirical scene or remark,” she recalls (Ehrlich-Fantlová 234).

Considering the tense environment of the camp, the role Lustig asked Ehrlich-Fantlová to play was a precarious one. She was to play the part of a young girl, seated in the audience, who the clowns invite up on stage after she bursts into tears upon learning that the Prince will have to join a transport to the east. She recalls the way the tension in the room served the comedy inherent in her role’s function, particularly on the show’s opening night:

“When my cue came, I began quietly sobbing and everyone around me tried to shut me up. ‘Sh-h-h!’ ‘Don’t interrupt!’ ‘For Chris’ sake be quiet!’ But I went on realistically howling and desperately waiting for the clowns to rescue me by saying, ‘Hang on! What’s that young lady crying about?’ and fetching me up on the stage. Whereupon the audience would sigh with relief and realize it was all part of the action.

However, nothing of this kind happened. The clowns had decided to build up the tension. But meanwhile, the fire attendant in the doorway took action. With one leap he rushed up and started dragging me out as a disruptive element. Not to spoil the play I went on crying while hissing at him between my teeth, ‘I’m part of the play!’
That didn’t impress him at all. ‘Oh yes? Just come along quietly!’

At that moment a voice came from the stage, ‘Hang on! Why’s that young lady crying?’

The fireman was impervious. His job was to keep law and order, and I was already halfway to the door. There was great commotion among the spectators, who were not sure what was going on. At the very last moment one of the clowns jumped down and hauled me back, to the audience’s great relief. And mine.

It wasn’t an easy role. Something different happened every night. At the second performance, things went quite differently. On the given cue I started sobbing, and then crying loudly. Across the gangway an elderly man was sitting with a case on his lap. Evidently a doctor. He jumped up, opened his instruments, and was on the point of giving me a sedative injection for my hysteria. Just in time, the actors onstage saw what was happening and came to my rescue” (234-235).

This intense jolt from horror to hilarity experienced by the show’s early audiences was a hot topic in Terezín. Word of Ehrlich-Fantlová’s act spread quickly and throngs of prisoners gathered at the cabaret, eager to laugh and be a part of this incendiary put-on.

Terezín became home to a vast array of cabaret revues. The minimal provisions needed to stage these types of performances, paired with the demand for comedic diversion, made this form of entertainment popular in the camps. One highly popular ensemble, directed by a woman named Trude Popper, was primarily comprised of young girls from Pürglitz, a province just west of Prague. These girls performed imaginative comedic sketches. This group “presented guest performances in all of the barracks” (Weiner 218). Another notable cabaret was created by Karel Švenk, a seasoned actor and director known for his Chaplinesque comedy routines as well as his
fervent leftist political views. His witty satire was immensely popular; many of his shows were performed dozens of times. His daring content and talent for comedy drew big crowds. Švenk’s captivating combination of parody, jokes, and improvisation “attracted hundreds of people to the attic, where Švenk’s cabaret was performed. When watching [Švenk’s] cabaret, people forgot, albeit for a short moment, the surrounding reality — deaths, hunger, deportations ‘to the East’” (Makarova).

Švenk’s satirical comedy briefly eluded the censorship efforts of the Nazis. Though his mockery of Hitler’s regime was largely concealed in metaphor and innuendo, “its effect on the audience was like dynamite” (Ehrlich-Fantlová 237). One of his most crowd-pleasing satires was a comedy dubbed The Last Cyclist, a piece about a crazed dictator who chooses to blame the problems of his kingdom on a completely random group: cyclists. This concept was based on a popular joke that circulated after the First World War:

“An anti-Semite claimed that Jews had caused the war; the reply was: Yes, the Jews and the bicyclists. Why the bicyclists? asks the one. Why the Jews? asks the other” (Arendt 4).

The Last Cyclist enjoyed its run until a performance was attended by a group of SS officers who, upon seeing the blatant, biting satire, immediately shut it down.

Švenk was perhaps best known for a song he penned for the finale of one of his early comedy revues, a tune simply named the “Terezín March.” The catchy song captured the good humor of his work and the hopeful spirit of the Terezín Jews. It was a proclamation of the Jews’ determination to laugh despite their grave situation:

“Where there’s a will there’s always a way
so hand in hand we start
whatever the trials of the day
there’s laughter in our heart

day after day we go on our way

from one place to another

we’re only allowed 30 words to a letter

but hey, tomorrow life starts again

and that’s a day nearer to when we can pack

and leave for home with a bag on our back

where there’s a will there’s always a way

so hold hands now, hold them fast

and over the ghetto’s ruins we

shall laugh aloud at last” (Ehrlich-Fantlová, 236).

Rich in heart, the “Terezín March” evolved into much more than a simple comedy finale. The piece was adopted as an anthem for the camp’s prisoners who believed the upbeat lyrics captured the essence of their troubles. Trapped between the high walls of the fortress, the Jews established their own defense by embracing the humor Švenk sang about, bravely choosing laughter in place of defeat.
Comedy of the Conquered

The occurrence of Jews partaking in comedic theatre events was widespread during the Holocaust. In the majority of camps and ghettos there are records of prisoners coming together for the creation and enjoyment of humorous performance. Jews of every age, every nationality, and in every region of the Third Reich’s occupied territory experienced the desire to laugh.

In the Vilna Ghetto, where forced labor, starvation, deportations and street executions were part of everyday living, the prisoners came together in the pursuit of entertainment. Many concerts and plays were offered, and many original cabaret revues were created. The Vilna Jews strove to create new comedies, creating art in the middle of death and suffering. These new works are particularly notable because of the efforts by some, namely ghetto librarian and Bundist activist Hermann Kruk, who initially opposed all theatrical endeavors. Kruk famously displayed posters throughout the ghetto declaring, “In a graveyard you do not do theatre!” Despite the oppositional efforts, the theatres of the Vilna Ghetto were always full, and tickets remained a coveted commodity.

Despite the rate at which their fellow prisoners were being murdered, the Jews of Dachau took part in small, organized cabarets. The concentration camp, where over 41,000 were killed, hosted many clandestine performances. The risk taken by those involved with the shows was great; their “discovery would have so infuriated the SS…that torture and death would have followed automatically” (Daniel 151). Comedic recitations criticizing the Nazis and making fun of particular camp personnel provided a means to laugh and express themselves. As Dachau was the first concentration camp Hitler ordered opened in Germany, a scornful political tone was
common among cabaret performances there. One renowned parody written by Rudolf Kalmar featured a ridiculous character named Count Adolar, who was a faintly disguised Hitler. Although vulnerable to detection, the ruse fooled the Nazis and the play ran for six weeks during the summer of 1943. Kalmar’s satirical comedy offered the Jews of Dachau a sense of empowerment. SS guards were even invited to the show and welcomed as guests of honor with the best seats in the house, literally giving them front row seats to the prisoners’ sly rebellion (Morreall).

Prisoners in the female camp Birkenau organized frequent comedic entertainment, with humorous impersonations of the SS camp guards being the most in-demand amusement (Goldfarb 118). While it’s easy to imagine the ferocious officers of the Reich dominating an all female unit, the daring nature of these women’s comedic exploits illustrates a collective spirit of strength and defiance. Comedic sketches and recitations were even performed secretly in the barracks of Auschwitz, the most horrific of all the Nazi extermination camps. There, many of these hilarious presentations were held in Women’s Block 10, where the sinister view from the barred windows included swelling smoke from the stack of the camp’s crematoria. Even with their peers and loved ones being incinerated, reduced to ash just a few yards away, many Jews of Auschwitz went on laughing.

Comedy had become something new in this unstable and unjust world; under the Nazi regime, it could no longer be regarded as mere entertainment devoid of significant meaning. In the shadow of death, comedic theatre held a vital role: “The joke as a drug; satire and irony as harbingers of hope; the punch line as a weapon of resistance; fun as distraction; and laughter to document the will to survive—right there in places where laughter sticks in one’s throat” (Kühn 44). The choice to come together as a people united in strife, using comedic theatre as a means
to rise above their given circumstances was a choice to fight back. When laughing together, they united in an effort to combat the enemy. Laughing together, the Jews became an indomitable army of hope and spirit.
In the context of suffering, it is easy to think of laughter as a form of drug: a means through which temporary ease can be obtained. Drugs offer an “out” from anguish and the chance to escape to sensations of solace and elation. These positive sensations, while pleasurable, are inevitably fleeting; the user will eventually ease back into the reality or condition they chose to leave. In this sense, laughter seems comparative to the instinctive, universal act of scratching Chickenpox. For a moment, the pain ceases and a wave of relief overwhelms the body; within seconds, the pain returns. If one views laughter in this same context, as nothing more than a quick moment of pleasure, then the great lengths taken by millions of Jews in producing comedic theatre will not make sense. Why would so many risk so much and work so hard for what equated to a few passing moments of ease? Why would so many Jews risk their own well-being and dedicate hours to comedic performance after spending hours in arduous forced labor? Why would this commitment to comedy be so widespread among all of Europe’s imprisoned Jews? The answer to these questions is uncomplicated. The Jewish victims of the Holocaust relied on the experience of coming together in laughter because the restorative benefits were far from fleeting.

The simple act of laughing offers a person both physiological and psychological benefits. This consequence informed the way ancient civilizations healed their sick and continues to inform the healing strategies implemented by contemporary doctors and psychologists. In ancient Greece, a common step in a patient’s healing process was a visit to the “home of
comedians.” Laughter’s healing power has been harnessed by civilizations in all regions of the world. In their own healing processes, the Ojibwa, an American Indian tribe, utilized clown-doctors to perform for the ailing (Klein 17). Physical healing was invaluable to the persecuted Jews. The SS were ordered to dispose of the sickly, and those who began the years of suffering in good health quickly found themselves in a world where disease and starvation were commonplace. By engaging in laughter, the body can experience a physical release from its ailments because of the direct correlation between one’s body and their mind. Reverend Dr. Michael Beckwith explains, “…when a person has manifested a disease in their body temple or has some kind of discomfort in their life, through the power of right thinking, can it be turned around? The answer is absolutely yes” (The Secret).

Choosing to laugh, understandably a reluctant response for many Jews considering the tragedy surrounding them, was a choice to improve one’s well-being, to do something positive for themselves. In a world where even the bare essentials required for survival were denied them, the vitality of this choice cannot be overstated. Utilizing the healing properties of laughter is often referred to as a “self healing” tactic. The choice to laugh and fill one’s mind with positive thoughts transforms the way one feels, which benefits one’s health and well-being. Recent breast cancer survivor Cathy Goodman attests to this psycho-physical connection, explaining that a key component of her own healing process was comedic performance. “One of the things I did to heal myself was to watch very funny movies. That’s all we would do was just laugh, laugh, laugh,” she says. “We couldn’t afford to put any stress in my life because we knew stress was one of the worst things you can do while you’re trying to heal yourself” (The Secret). This frequent exposure to comedy helped Goodman battle Cancer—and win. Within three months of her diagnosis, Goodman’s Cancer was gone. Her healing included no radiation or
chemotherapy; she had relied solely on the power of positive thought and made laughing an essential part of her daily routine.

Equally significant to laughter’s inherent physiological benefits is the dramatic impact it can have on one’s psyche. The act of laughter is, at its most elemental level, a release. When laughing, one experiences a hefty expulsion of air and sound as the body involuntarily convulses. This release is not merely a physical action; its effects are profound enough to influence one’s mental state. Clearly, anyone experiencing persecution is likely to experience the desire to change their bleak outlook. When considering the extent of the Jews’ suffering, it becomes difficult to imagine why any person would not pursue the opportunity to make this change.

Comedic theatre, a form of entertainment requiring minimal resources, allowed them to rise above their circumstances by laughing about those predicaments which plagued them. By putting troubling predicaments into a positive context, the Jews could change the way they felt about those issues. Overwhelming fear and sadness, when constantly addressed through humor, inevitably evolve into new, less severe, emotions. Many of today’s most popular comedians come from deeply troubled upbringings. They turned to comedy for its psychological functions. For them, humor was a method for coping with the darkness of their circumstances. Examples of this trend are abundant: “Totie Field’s mother died when she was five, David Steinberg’s brother was shot in the war, Jackie Gleason’s father deserted him, Joe E. Brown left his family, W.C. Fields ran away from home because his father was going to kill him, Dudley Moore was born with a clubfoot, Art Buchwald’s mother died when he was very young, and Carol Burnett’s parents were both alcoholics who constantly fought with each other” (Klein 5-6). Harpo Marx, best known for portraying a loveable ragamuffin mute was viciously bullied throughout his childhood, causing him to drop out of school in second grade. He and his brothers, one of the
most beloved comedy troupes of all time, grew up in poverty. Often, they didn’t have enough food to feed the numerous members of the Marx family. The destitution they faced did not diminish their spirit; it served as the kindling which fueled the Marx brothers’ establishment of their renowned comedic empire.

By addressing the reality of the Holocaust through the lens of comedy, the horrors were transformed into quips, something to be enjoyed. If the Jews chose to see the SS only as brutal killing machines, they would have been overwhelmed with a constant fear of dying. If, instead, they frequently laughed about the stupidity of the regime, this fear would likely wane and become a less debilitating emotion.

Because of both the mental and physical benefits inherent in the act of laughing, humor played a significant role throughout the Holocaust. Jokes, Hitler’s most dreaded contraband, were eagerly shared and consumed in every camp and ghetto. The Jews’ constant sharing of jokes has been widely documented. These jokes commonly illustrated a shared disdain for Hitler and his minions: “There are two kinds of Aryans: non-aryans and barb-aryans.” One popular joke conveys the unison of the Jews’ abhorrence for the Führer:

“As Hitler’s armies faced more and more setbacks, he asked his astrologer, ‘Am I going to lose the war?’

‘Yes,’ the astrologer said.

‘Then, am I going to die?’ Hitler asked.

‘Yes.’

‘When am I going to die?’

‘On a Jewish holiday.’
‘But on what holiday?’

‘Any day you die will be a Jewish holiday” (Morreall).

The psychological benefits of laughter multiplied when the Jews were able to laugh together, an opportunity offered in the communal medium of theatre. By coming together to laugh about their shared misery, the persecuted instantly became the empowered. This is due what John Morreall refers to as the “cohesive function” of humor in the Holocaust: the function of uniting all Jews by drawing a razor-sharp line “between an in-group and an out-group. Here the out-group, the target of the joking, was the Nazis and their collaborators” (Morreall). Creating new comedic theatre to satirize the hated out-group served as a particularly fierce weapon. As Jewish comedian David Schneider explains, “It’s a way of attacking terrible things that you’re powerless over. In that moment that you laugh with other people, you have the power back, just in that moment.” This power is exactly what Hitler feared, and what led to his decision to outlaw all jokes made at his expense. People who are able to laugh about their setbacks feel empowered. When laughing with others who share their struggles, they are no longer merely a strengthened individual, but a strengthened force.

While this “cohesive function” of laughter is beneficial to any victimized people, it was particularly meaningful to the Jewish people. For thousands of years, the Jewish culture has been associated with an unceasing desire to laugh and make light of troubling circumstances. The Jews are known for encouraging the employment of humor during painful times. In the Jewish tradition, people are taught to understand that life is difficult, “but it is also to be enjoyed; times may be bad, but that does not mean we must have a bad time. If we are to see good times…we must survive the bad” (Klein 166). This tradition of humor is a pillar of the Jewish
identity. As the Nazis strove to diminish Jewish culture, propagating the idea that the Jews were little more than mere vermin, the Jews sought opportunities to use humor as an effort to sustain their identity as a people and preserve their rich history. When the Nazis forbade jokes about the Führer, taking the risk of making a forbidden joke held more weight than a simple chance of giving Hitler the middle finger. Using humor to express one’s disdain was a rare opportunity to participate in Jewish culture.

For centuries, and perhaps millennia, humor has played a fundamental role on the culture of the Jewish people. Many attribute the continual choice to satirize their circumstances to the Jews’ long history of oppression. “I think the Holocaust was just the latest and worst example of that oppression,” says Schneider. “But we were already trained to be funny by oppression that leaves you powerless…” Under such oppression, laughter is the only power. Many date the emergence of “Jewish humor” back to the mid 1600’s when “nearly 100,000 Jews were slaughtered throughout Ukraine by Bohdan Chmielnicki and his roving band of Cossacks…arguably the worst pogrom in history” (Fishkoff). During this time, the badkhn, “a kind of cruel court jester in East European Jewish life,” was a staple in the community. The badkhn were commonly hired to perform at weddings and lively holiday celebrations. These badkhn provided grotesque, distasteful, and often offensive humor; on a wedding day, it was not uncommon for the badkhn to viciously insult the wedding guests, calling them cheap or incompetent. The badkhn were well-known for even going after the bride herself, calling her ugly and pointing out any unappealing aspects of her appearance. Sometimes, the badkhn would be accompanied by a band of musicians, whom he would also abuse. “During the wedding dancing, for example, the badkhn might turn to [this] orchestra and say, ‘You musicians play really badly—I mean, well’” (Baumgarten). Despite the offense the badkhn joyfully inflicted, or
likely *because* of it, they were frequently hired to enhance momentous events with the entertainment provided by their mocking affronts. Some large Jewish communities employed official badkhn who held permanent office. In other towns, badkhn were likened to penniless drunks who turned up when celebrations arose. Whether celebrated or despised, the presence of the badkhn in Jewish Communities and Hasidic sects was continual.

*In this postcard from 1905, a badkhn is depicted insulting a bride at her wedding ceremony causing her, along with the majority of her female guests, to cry.*

After the horrors of the Chmielnicki massacres, which were then followed by a widespread famine, comedy was deemed inappropriate by a council of Jewish elders who resolved to ban all displays of merriment. Fearing their people were being punished by God, the Jews were ordered to uphold a more serious and pious attitude. Deciding that the badkhn were more foul than funny, they were exempted from the sanction. Thus, the biting abuse of the
badkhn was the only permitted form of humor. Before the massacres, the badkhn was arguably the most despised entertainer in Jewish societies; “now he was the sole survivor” (Fishkoff).

As the Jews’ only source of humor, the impact of the badkhn was great. Many theorize that the archetypal dry, biting wit of the Jewish people stems from the badkhns’ distinctively boorish use of humor. Mel Gordon, a professor of Theatre Arts at the University of California, Berkley, explains that the badkhn’s influence marks the beginning of a distinctively Jewish humor, explaining, “Jewish humor used to be the same as that of the host country… Now it began to deviate from mainstream European humor. It became more aggressive, meaner. All of Jewish humor changed” (Fishkoff).

The presence of drunken, insulting badkhns within Jewish societies is documented well into the twentieth century. This continuance speaks volumes about the influence of their particular brand of humor. This “badkhn tone,” paired with a relentless spirit, are two of the most distinguishing characteristics of what has been dubbed “Jewish humor.” “It’s that same self-deprecating tone that characterizes the Yiddish-inflected Jewish jokes of the 20th century,” explains Gordon, “Who is the surly Jewish deli waiter of Henny Youngman fame if not a badkhn, making wisecracks at the customer’s expense” (Fishkoff).

The sharp badkhn bite is present in the majority of original comedic theatre created by the Jews of the Holocaust. Cabarets, by far the most popular medium of entertainment, were coveted for both their biting satires of Hitler and their self-deprecating jokes about the Jews’ own miserable state of affairs. Utilizing humor, and particularly the badkhn humor so fundamental to their culture, Jews refused to be stripped of their identity. Even when forced to wear camp uniforms, to shave their heads, and to be branded with numbers like herds of domesticated cattle, even when Nazi propaganda films proclaimed the Jewish people to be nothing more than
parasites, the Jews proudly upheld their treasured tradition of humor. Choosing to participate in the collective enjoyment of biting comedy prevented the Nazis from dehumanizing the Jews and stripping away their cultural identity. Together, laughing, the Holocaust Jews kept the tradition of their people alive.
Chapter Three: Should Laughter Still Sound?

What the many diaries, testimonies, and newspaper reviews tell us about the role of comedic theatre during the Holocaust is that it was not a simple one. While few would argue the many assets to be gained by using humor to cope with despair, it has been well documented that doing so didn’t always feel right to those being persecuted. Whether it felt frivolous or even improper amid such turmoil, many Jews were hesitant to participate in willingly laughing about or in spite of their dark realities. With this understanding of the Jews’ complex relationship with humor during the Holocaust, it is certainly no surprise that the issue has grown more convoluted over the years since the Nazis were finally defeated. Contemporary performers, Jews and Gentiles alike, still grapple with the taboo associated with linking laughter to what is arguably the darkest time in modern history.

Nowadays, there are reasons to feel troubled by this pairing. While many Holocaust victims were simply not in the frame of mind to laugh, demoralized by loss and uncertainty, their outlook no longer factors into whether or not modern audiences are comfortable participating in Holocaust humor. Besides the obvious taboo, and the fear of acting disrespectfully to the memories of those who suffered, contemporary audiences often feel too far removed from the events to assume any ownership of them, as they may feel they are not entitled to laugh at them. It’s natural that from the perspective of our comfortable lives, we may feel too privileged to have a laugh at the expense of those who weren’t so lucky. It is common for modern day audiences to experience considerable aversion to very notion of laughing at the misfortunes of the Jewish
people. And yet, comedy about the Holocaust is becoming increasingly more common as the temporal gap widens.

Laughing at the Holocaust will never be an accepted form of humor; however, it seems unwarranted to assume that nearly any humor made about the tragedy, even that which pays no disrespect to the victims, should be met with hesitation and even disapproval. This is undoubtedly due to the sheer magnitude of the Holocaust’s calamities. The slaughter of 6 million European Jews, and nearly as many Gentiles, seems too profound ever to laugh about. We now know so much about the struggles of these victims and the hardships they faced, the loss of life that surrounded them and the starvation, violence, and uncertainty that plagued their daily fight for survival. Knowing the darkness of their troubles, how could it ever possibly feel “ok” to make light of it all?

The same question could easily have been asked, and was frequently asked, of those who were there. It’s almost inconceivable to think of laughing after being issued a death sentence and yet, through bravery and good spirit, the laughter was loud and widespread. Because Jews decided to turn to humor as a valuable tool in times of distress, we can honor them by continuing to utilize it today. The sticky aspects of the issue arise with respect to the great care we must take while doing so. Just like the Jews had to carefully construct their comedies for Nazi censorship, contemporary comics must be sure never to cross the line and disrespect the plight of the Jews. One distasteful remark could cause an audience to abandon a performer. Using humor to reference the Holocaust is a task requiring great care and sensitivity. By carefully considering one’s approach, a Holocaust joke can evoke sincere laughter from even the most skeptical of audiences. With careful consideration of one’s tone, target, and intention, modern audiences,
just like the hesitant Jews attending comedies in the ghettos and camps, can become comfortable taking part in Holocaust humor.

Taking on this weighty endeavor is a task requiring careful consideration. Referencing the Holocaust poses a distinct threat to comics, the threat of insinuating that they believe the Holocaust to be, in itself, somehow funny. The logic here is simple: “jokes are funny, a comedian’s job is to make jokes about funny things, so clearly, the things a comedian makes jokes about must be funny things” (Pobjie). Because of this stigma, many Holocaust jokes are met with the same critical rebuttal: “The Holocaust isn’t funny.” This statement is certainly true—it is the same instinctive response shared by the general population who strive to stand up for what is right. However, refusing to laugh at Holocaust jokes because the Holocaust itself is not funny defies the very idea of comedy. Most of today’s most popular television comedies are based on topics that, by nature, are actually far from funny. The hit television show *The Office* is based on the everyday happenings at a paper company. There is nothing funny about a paper company in itself—it is the content and style of the jokes that bring humor to the scenario. The winner of the Academy Award for Best Picture in 1977 was *Annie Hall*, a film about the ups and downs of a man and a woman who both have acute neuroses. Both of these well received comedies “are funny because of the way serious subjects are treated, not because they avoided serious subjects entirely” (Pobjie). The task of a comedian is arguably to make subjects funny, not to address only those issues that are humorous on their own. If that were the case, comedians would be superfluous. This consideration must be understood if the general public is to remain open to the concept of Holocaust comedy. Most will instinctively cling to their preconceived notion that blurring the lines of comedy is a despicable endeavour.
At the 2012 CASA Latin American Theatre Festival, an innovative performance ensemble based out of Rio de Janeiro, Troupp pas D’argent, performed a bold piece of theatre that dared to blur that line. Their hour long show, entitled Holoclownsto, features six ragamuffin clowns—unlikely characters in a story about the Holocaust. Their story is told entirely through movement and occasional gibberish, the lack of spoken word adding to an aesthetic of artistry and playfulness. Holoclownsto opens with outrageous spectacles of play as the men joke with one another in good-natured camaraderie. Suddenly, the mood of innocence and fun is broken when the clowns are abruptly rounded up and herded onto a train car. After an arduous journey, the men find themselves at a concentration camp where they are subjected to brutal beatings from Nazi guards and forced to witness the shooting death of one of their own. In the end, the remaining clowns are led into the sinister caverns of the camp’s gas chamber where they are murdered.

In an article written for the Jewish Chronicle Online, Dan Goldman, who serves as Artistic Director of the CASA Festival, disclosed that scores of festival goers, upon hearing that a Holocaust comedy was being featured, responded negatively to the news. Goldman describes this repeated response, saying, “…whenever I tell people we are presenting a clown show about the Holocaust, I tend to get one of two reactions. The first is confused nervous laughter followed by a pause and possibly the expectation (or hope) that I will say that I am only joking. The second is confused anger that manifests itself in a barrage of questions or, worse, a sad shake of the head” (Goldman). It is certainly noteworthy that disapproval was the most recurrent gut reaction. Few festival goers expressed any sort of enthusiasm for the idea of a Holocaust comedy. Instead, those who weren’t overtly offended by the notion seemed uncertain how to
respond and even uncertain of how they felt about the concept. This collective response begs the question: **Why** do we inherently shy away from laughing about tragic events?

Goldman speaks to the universality of this taboo as he further describes his talks with leery festival goers. “The shake of the head is near impossible to deal with,” he says. “The person’s mind is made up and will not be changed. The barrage of questions, however, is really interesting: how dare they do a clown show about the Holocaust?; is the Holocaust something to laugh about?; what do they know about the Holocaust? Are they even Jewish?” (Goldman). The potency of this taboo can be sensed even from a quick scan of the CASA Festival’s official 2012 program. While some shows were preceded by an informative talk or followed with a question and answer session, *Holoclownsto* was one of the few pieces to be bookended. In the pre-show talk, British comedian David Schneider and Cambridge professor David Lehmann discussed how comedy fits into the context of the Holocaust in terms of performance. The show was also followed by a Q&A session, during which the audience could respond to the show’s performers. This thoughtful surrounding suggests the organizers had developed a bit of a strategy; the festival’s sole Holocaust comedy was not going to be left to stand on its own. With no explanation or setting of tone, *Holoclownsto*’s audiences may have been jolted by the comedic style, detracting from their engagement with the piece. CASA’s organizers seem to have proceeded with caution, treading delicately with the daring piece and ensuring that the audience was entirely aware of the sensitive nature of the theatre experience they were about to behold. Surrounding *Holoclownsto* with insight and commentary brings to mind images of a precious fragile object that needed to be protected during transport to avert disaster.

When speaking with David Schneider about the content of his pre-show talk, he expressed the opinion that it’s acceptable to make jokes about the Holocaust so long as the
performer’s intention and delivery are honorable. “As long as you come from a place of truth, I don’t think it minimizes the suffering of the Holocaust to laugh about it,” Scheider says. Obviously, it’s about who you’re performing to, who is doing the performing, and what the intention is.” While many CASA participants may have been hesitant to approve the comedic style of Holoclorwsto, Troupp pas D’Argent was well received by the packed houses at both of their CASA performances. Based on audience response, it is clear that this successful linking of humor with the Holocaust was due largely in part to the two mechanisms Schneider identified: intention and delivery.

In her review of the play, audience member Tanya Guryel explains, “Without undermining the Holocaust theme, it felt good to laugh at something like this.” Her feedback suggests that “undermining the Holocaust” is a fear audience members likely shared prior to seeing the show (Guryel). She goes on to describe how the careful approach of Troupp pas D’Argent allowed them to effectively meld comedy with tragedy to tell a powerful story. “The sensitivity of the clowns and the interplay between hilarity and fear enabled the performance to transcend into a message of humanity” (Guryel). This careful construction speaks to Troupp’s intention in creating the piece. If a performer’s intent is to isolate the victims of a tragedy and to generate laughter at their expense, their attempts to engage an audience will almost certainly fail. This is because of the collective skepticism Goldman witnessed at CASA, that fearful hesitation to permeate the boundaries separating comedy and tragedy.

One characteristic of Troupp’s careful delivery was their refusal to isolate the victims as “others” whom the audience could not empathize with—to convey them as mere ghosts from a time long ago. Instead, the clowns of Holoclorwsto were created to embody the goodness inherent in mankind and the innocence with which all men are born. Isolating those who suffered
and cracking jokes at their expense only creates a sense of unease. If an audience member finds themself laughing at tragedy, they likely will feel they are acting disrespectfully towards those who suffered. Instead, Holoclownsto uses humor to highlight the vast difference between the innocents who perished in the Holocaust and the evil Nazis who enforced their regime of persecution. “The story we tell isn’t less tragic because we tell it as clowns,” says Holoclownsto director Marcela Rodrigues. She explains that it is the stark contrast “between the innocence of our characters and the terrible nature of what happens to them that makes it a story that cannot be forgotten” (qtd. in Goldman).

Audience member Andres Ordorica confirms the success of their intent, noting in his review of the show, “…these six Brazilian actors brought light to a painful time in our human history through their beautiful movements and tableaus.” Ordorica’s perception of the story as a “human history” instead of merely a Jewish history suggests that even today, humor can be used to unite people in their efforts to cope with the Holocaust, just as it did during the actual event. By contrasting the clowns’ good humor to the evil intentions of the Nazis, Troupp pas D’Argent penetrates mankind’s universal desire to see innocence triumph over evil, and our longing to mourn together when evil prevails. When the audience is reminded that they are linked to those who suffered, that all humans are affected by the loss of innocent life, they are more receptive to the performers’ message. Instead of being insulted by the mere idea of the show’s concept, Ordorica describes how receptive he was to the message of the show, explaining, “Holoclownsto was the kind of show I walked out of feeling truly elated, hurt, confused and mesmerized by.”

Another effective element of Troupp pas D’Argent’s delivery was their decision to never fully enter the genre of comedy. While the show is alive with many undeniably comedic ingredients, everything from clowns to choreographed slapstick routines, the aesthetic of the
show consistently keeps one foot firmly planted in the genre of tragedy. The clown’s striped and checkered ensembles are drab and faded, subtly suggestive of the striped pajamas worn by concentration camp prisoners. Each clown boasts a shockingly red nose, a sharp contrast to the somber colors surrounding them. The stark wooden sets and ominous color scheme suggest that these red nosed players are the symbols of life and vitality in this sinister world of pain and woe, the world of the Nazis. Even the most clownish physical comedy bits are closely monitored by the presence of death. Tanya Guryel recalls the authority of this juxtaposition, citing, “… I was cracking up the whole time. But we never strayed to [sic] far from the reality, laughs became uncomfortable in a game of soldiers lead by a captain whose head was a skull.” Ordorica reiterates the perpetual suggestion of mortality, saying, “There was coldness in the theatre, and it wasn’t just because of the air-conditioning. As the play began the actors looked lost, freezing and hungry.”

Perhaps the tragic ending of Holoclownsto is the most significant indicator that the players never completely passed into the realm of comedy. By having the loveable buffoons executed in a gas chamber, the show sharply diverges from the traditional comedic formula. This choice to conclude with a moment of truth about the tragic fate of millions resonated deeply with audiences. “At the end, when one clown is shot dead and the rest finally surrender to the gas and die, no other conclusion could have better reiterated this message that: We need each other to survive so we can fight, laugh and make up and continue this cycle until we die,” says Guryel. Giving a happy ended to a tragic history would have romanticized and lessened the harsh reality of the anguish and loss suffered by millions. Daniel Goldman sums up his decision to include the piece in the CASA Festival, saying, “Holoclownsto is not disrespectful or distasteful. Troupp Pas D’Argent has simply created a show that continues in the tradition of
Benigni and Primo Levi in holding up a light to the darkness. It is a work of intelligence and compassion that highlights the experiences of all the Nazis’ victims.” *Holoclownsto*, a collectively accepted example of Holocaust comedy, illustrates the fact that using humor to reflect on tragedy *can* be gratifying, so long as it’s handled with care.

The cast of ‘Holoclownsto’ forms a Star of David in front of the cattle car waiting to take them to the concentration camp. Note the intentional burst of joyful color in the clowns’ red noses—a strategic contrast to the gloomy tones of the set and costumes. This contrast suggests the vitality of humor and its ability to combat the dreary world around it.

8 Photo source: trouppasdargent.webnode.com
In an interview with the show’s director and co-author, Marcela Rodrigues, she expresses the care taken to assure the goals of her own Holocaust comedy were met. “At first I was afraid of being misunderstood, but throughout the process I found exactly what I wanted and how I wanted to approach the issue,” she says. “I talked to many Jews who went through all this despair or had their family members killed in World War II. That helped me a lot!” Rodrigues’ efforts speak to the sensitive nature of the piece, and of her determination to successfully honor the Holocaust’s victims. She addresses the careful decision to never fully ascend into the comedy genre, saying, “…we reveal with ingenuity and humor a delicate and strong issue that can not [sic] be forgotten. So despite all the humor and poetry found within the play, what [resonates] is the sensation of loss and nostalgia. The feeling that we lost something along the way...” This message of loss is not overwhelmed by gags and clowning. The clowns, ironically, drive the message home. Seeing innocent clowns fall victim to the Nazis touches audiences in profound ways. Rodrigues explains the reason for this response, noting that clowns represent far more than mere gaiety. In her words, “[A] clown is nothing more than a personification of human tragedies.” In this sense, they represent what constituted the identity of the Jews in Hitler’s Europe. “Nothing can be more genuine than to show this chaos through the eyes of a clown, which is nothing more than anti-hero and villain of society,” Rodrigues says. She notes that her clowns, like the Jews, laugh at their problems and at their lack of control over what is to come. By dealing with their “inability against war” as clowns, Rodrigues articulates, “the silliness, sweetness and innocence of these artists transform the horror of war in a poetic, humorous and sensitive journey into the soul of the human condition.”

An interesting consideration about *Holoc clownsto* is that the show’s cast and creators are all from Brazil. They were touched by the Holocaust in a general sense, through the shared
understanding that all humans can be touched by the suffering of others. It does, however, beg
the question as to whether some performers have more of a right than others to cope with the
Holocaust through humor? Imagine, for instance, that someone has been directly affected by a
specific tragedy. With regard to the Holocaust, does that direct link to the event, that sharing of
the great loss, grant the performer more liberty to express their feelings and ideas? Would an
audience be more willing to accepting Holocaust jokes from someone whose life has been
directly affected by it? This was an interesting question to pose to David Schneider, someone
whose immediate family survived the tragedy, and who is also a professional comedian.
Schneider has done standup comedy about his family’s plight and the Holocaust in general.

As the child of a Holocaust survivor, Schneider’s upbringing was fundamentally
influenced by the Holocaust. “My mum was sort of a lucky survivor, if those exist. She got out
of Vienna in 1938,” he said. “The Nazis had just come in so she did witness a fair amount of
brutality. But she…and her parents, my grandfather was a writer and my grandmother was a
Yiddish actress, managed to get out.” In his childhood home, reminders of the Holocaust were
everywhere. “The only art we had was Holocaust art!” Schneider explained. Even family meals
were held in the presence of a distressing reminder: a sculpture of a young female concentration
camp victim created by a family friend. “That was right on our dinner table as we were
eating…it’s like this bizarre immersion in the Holocaust.” This “immersion,” paired with
Schneider’s successful career in comedy, inevitably led him to touch on the topic in his standup
material. Much like the organizers at the CASA Festival, Schneider approached his 15 minute
Holocaust standup routine with caution, carefully selecting his audience. “I don’t want you to
imagine that I just went to the local comedy club and did it. That would have been bad,” he
explains. “It was a very specific event; it was a Jewish event.”
Like Daniel Goldman, Schneider recalls experiencing hesitation from his audience, saying, “…people were thinking this is a bad idea beforehand. You know, you can’t laugh at it.” However, once he established his intentions, his audience became receptive to the material. Schneider describes the intention behind his Holocaust comedy, saying, “When I do comedy, it tends not to be about myself. The only time I’ve ever really done comedy about myself is this Holocaust 15 minutes. It’s the only time I’ve been absolutely honest and been liberated to be honest… So, it’s very simple. I want to communicate what it is to be the ‘Second Generation.’” Schneider went on to say it’s understandable why people hesitate to participate in Holocaust humor as not all comedians create this bold comedy with honorable intentions. “I’ve been with people that do comedy about the Holocaust and I wouldn’t laugh because I don’t think it’s funny. I don’t think it’s coming from the right place. I think it’s a little bit anti-Semitic or it’s insensitive to the victims,” he revealed. “It’s not that that it’s always funny; you’ve got to laugh at the right things for the right reasons.”

Along with his respectable intentions, Schneider’s routine was well received because he clearly defined himself as the target of his quips. Instead of taking aim at those who suffered, his punch lines tended to zero in on his own shortcomings and idiosyncrasies. “I made sure it was very much about me,” he said. “[If] it exposes my inadequacies, my problems, then I think it’s ok to do jokes about the Holocaust.” An example of Schneider poking fun at himself through Holocaust comedy is a bit he performed in which he showed a pair of his pajamas to the audience. He recalled, “I had my favorite pair of pajamas with me, which I’d only realized preparing these for this 15 minutes, that they are blue and white striped pajamas. They are Auschwitz pajamas.” The bit got a big laugh from the crowd, not because they found the topic of Auschwitz to be funny, but because Schneider’s taste in pajamas clearly illustrated the
influence his childhood “immersion” into the Holocaust has had on his psyche, even decades later as an adult.

Another story Schneider has shared with audiences is an experience he had dealing with a group of Holocaust survivors. “Once before I went on[stage], I got a little note that said ‘We are a coach load of survivors from Auschwitz. Can you say hello to us during the gig?’” he recalled. “What am I meant to do? Am I to go up there and say ‘Hello! Anyone here from Auschwitz? My kind of town!’” Again, while Auschwitz serves as part of the joke’s content, the aim of the joke is Schneider himself, and the awkward dilemma he found himself facing. He references an episode of the comedy series Curb Your Enthusiasm which is driven by Holocaust related humor. In it, a dinner party is held with a survivor of the Holocaust, Solly, in attendance. He has mistakenly been told that another “survivor” will be attending the dinner, and he is eager to make his acquaintance. What he doesn’t understand is that the other “survivor” is actually a contestant from the reality show, Survivor. The two men end up in a heated argument over whose circumstances were worse:

SOLLY: “I was in a concentration camp! You never even suffered one minute in your life compared to what I been through!”

COLBY: “Look, I’m sayin’ we spent 42 days trying to survive. We had very little rations, no snacks…”

SOLLY: “Snacks?! What are you talking ‘snacks’? We didn’t eat sometimes for a week, for a month!”

COLBY: “I couldn’t even work out when I was over there--they certainly didn’t have a gym! I mean, I wore my sneakers out and the next thing you know, I’ve got a pair of flip-flops!”
SOLLY: “Flip-flops?!”

Schneider points out that the reason people feel free to laugh at this particular bit is, again, because of the target. Here, the target of joke is the jaded nature of contemporary Western mentality. “It’s brilliant because it cuts the taboo of ‘You must never laugh at the Holocaust’” he says. “Its target is correct, which is the fiber of how we think we’re suffering now and it is just absolute genius… The target is us” (Schneider).

Another comic to tackle the taboo of Holocaust humor is American television personality and stand-up comedienne Joan Rivers. Rivers has been known to address the taboo subject of tragedy regularly in her stand-up material. Jokes about everything from the 2008 murder of Florida toddler Caylee Anthony to the debilitating handicaps of Helen Keller have been included, always unapologetically, as part of her routines. The enormity of Rivers’ success speaks to her ability to get audiences to laugh and enjoy comedy about these tragic events. However, a recent joke about the Holocaust resulted in a great deal of criticism of Rivers, and even speculation about the quality of her moral character.

The joke was part of a post-award show fashion review after the 2013 Academy Awards. Rivers served on the fashion panel for the E! Network’s highly popular show, Fashion Police. When Rivers’ was shown a picture of German-born supermodel Heidi Klum arriving at the Oscars in a gown with a low plunging neckline, Rivers exclaimed, “The last time a German looked this hot was when they were pushing Jews into the ovens!” Immediately, viewers began expressing their disapproval. The backlash grew, and eventually a statement was released by the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) who described Rivers’ quip as being “vulgar and offensive”
President of the ADL Abraham Foxman even suggested Rivers should have been more sensitive to the topic because she is a Jew herself.

The ADL did not stand alone in their unfavorable opinions about the joke. Hordes of outraged individuals posted scathing comments below nearly every news story about the incident posted on the internet. One readers’ post read “so sad, that a comedian of her quallity [sic] should stoop so low.i [sic] used to love her houmor [sic] , i don't think ill [sic] ever see her in the same light again” (Wood). Another appalled reader responded, “KILLING PEOPLE IS FUNNY? GET THEE TO A PSYCHIATRIST. !!!![sic]” (Leslie). On a story posted to CNN.COM, an argument between two readers was quite revealing about the polarized divide in opinion over the joke. When a reader who thought the joke was funny called an angry reader “hypersensitive,” the offended reader sarcastically responded, “Yes, recognizing that almost 6 million Jewish people were killed because of their faith is being hypersensitive” (Heather B.).

The intensity of the disapproval for Rivers’ one-liner exemplifies the conflict created when a comedian does not carefully consider their target, audience, and intention when making jokes about tragedy. By making the joke on a highly popular television show, she made absolutely no discrimination about who she wanted in her audience. She made the joke for everyone to hear. Who was Rivers’ target? Some say it was a joke at the Jews’ expense, while others say she was indicating that all Germans should be considered Nazis (as Heidi Klum is clearly not an anti-Semite). Either way, the majority of viewers felt Rivers targeted an innocent group of people and dealt with the tragedy of the Holocaust in a callous, inappropriate manner. Her muddling of the joke’s target and audience led many to feel that it wasn’t ok for them to take part in the joke. In fact, her co-hosts of Fashion Police were publically condemned for doing just that. Abraham Foxman slammed Rivers’ co-hosts for their lack of response to the offense,
noting, “Making it worse, not one of her co-hosts made any effort to respond or to condemn this hideous statement, leaving it hanging out there and giving it added legitimacy through their silence.”

Rivers’ response to her audience’s offense was simply to shrug it off and defend her humor. In an interview on Showbiz Tonight, she argued that the validity of her joke can be found in both her constructive intention and her ownership in the topic. With respect to her intention, Rivers explained, “This is the way I remind people about the Holocaust. I do it through humor… Your generation doesn’t even know what I’m talking about. By my doing a joke, it gets them talking and thinking” (“Joan Rivers not apologizing for Holocaust joke”). She also insists that being someone directly affected by the Holocaust gives her more of a right to make jokes on the topic. Her late husband lost most of his relatives in Auschwitz, leading Rivers to respond, “Why don’t you worry about the anti-Semites and not pick someone who doesn’t have a single living relative?”

Most would likely agree that Rivers, one who suffered loss at the hands of the Nazis, has more of a right to joke about the events than others who are further removed. And yet, the massive amount of protests against her commentary suggests that this may not always be so. Perhaps most audiences see the Holocaust as a loss for all humanity, and not only those whose blood lines run directly into the mountain of corpses. Such an atrocity leaves scars on the collective history of mankind, its horrors so great that few have been untouched by the echoes of savagery and loss. Just as the Holocaust Jews came together as a united force through their use of humor, perhaps humor, even today, has the ability to unite all of mankind in their remembrance of the tragedy.
It can hardly be surprising that contemporary jokes about the Holocaust bring divided, heated responses when even the crowds of Jews who sat before the earliest Kulturbund stages had conflicting opinions about the role amusement should play amid dire circumstances. Just like the older Jewish prisoners who felt conflicted about laughing at the comedic exploits of Max Ehrlich and his talented troupe, our contemporary instinct, as individuals far removed from the event, is to shy away from laughing about a tragedy that brought so much suffering and death. Yet, Joan Rivers reiterates the same message expressed by Ehrlich and the thousands of Jews who insisted on using what was left of their depleted energy to create comedy: the message that laughter is vital in the darkest of times. There is healing and power to be found in laughter, an idea Rivers synthesizes with succinct, pointed wisdom in the conclusion of her television interview, asserting, “[If] you laugh, you can deal with it. Done” (Rivers).


Kühn, Volker. “‘We’ve Enough Tsoris’: Laughter at the Edge of the Abyss.” *Theatrical


Schneider, David. Personal Interview. 11 February 2013.


The Secret. Dir. Sean Byrne and Drew Heriot. TS Production LLC, 2006. DVD.


Weiner, Erich. “Freizeitgestaltung in Theresienstadt.” Theatrical Performance during the


Vita

Though a native Minnesotan, Robin Jedlicka Knepp spent most of her childhood in Georgia, where she began acting when she was 14 years old. In addition to performing in numerous productions throughout the state, Robin was selected to participate in the highly selective Georgia Governor’s Honors Program for Theatre Studies. At 18, Robin was accepted into the American Academy of Dramatic Arts in New York City. There, she studied acting, voice and speech, and singing. Robin also worked in the Academy’s costume shop. Upon finishing her first year of study, Robin was invited back to complete the Academy’s second, final year of training, an honor extended only to the most promising performers. Intent on continuing her education, Robin began pursuing a Bachelor of Arts in English, with a concentration in Writing, at Berry College in Rome, Georgia. In 2006, Robin graduated with her BA. Over the next several years, Robin taught English and Reading in both St. Cloud, Florida and Valdosta, Georgia. She also achieved a lifelong goal of working as a television news reporter, beginning her career as an intern and field producer at WESH 2 News in Orlando, Florida, and then serving as a one-man-band reporter for WALB News 10, an NBC affiliate in Southwest Georgia. There, Robin’s work was frequently featured on NBC stations throughout the state of Georgia. Her journalistic work has also aired on CNN’s Headline News. During her years as a teacher and reporter, Robin continued her acting career, appearing in numerous short films.

In 2010, Robin and her husband Scott relocated to Virginia, where Robin taught English in Albemarle County. Deciding to combine her love of teaching with her passion for theatre, she completed her Master of Fine Arts in Theatre Pedagogy at Virginia Commonwealth University.
in May of 2013. While at VCU, Robin taught several courses as an adjunct professor including Introduction to Theatre, Acting I, and Effective Speech. She also helped pilot Dynamic Presentations, an innovative course for VCU’s Business majors, and taught workshops at both the Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival and the Southeastern Theatre Conference. Robin currently teaches theatre and speech courses around Richmond, Virginia, and continues expanding her research on the profound impact of comedic theatre during the tragic events of the Holocaust.