

Introduction

Deeds and Words

THE JEWISH TEENAGERS who spent the summer of 1956 at the Reform movement's Camp Institute in Oconomowoc, Wisconsin, edited a literary magazine, a repository of their fond memories of a summer well spent. They could not possibly have known, as they cobbled together *All Eyes Are on the . . . Literary Magazine*—made up of mimeographed short stories, poems, humorous vignettes of camp life, mixed in with some serious pieces which speculated on the religious and cultural programs that they had just experienced—that, a half-century later, their camp yearbook would be used to show how American Jews went about the process, text by text, artifact by artifact, and act by act, of creating a communal culture that hallowed the memory of the six million Jews who perished in Europe during the Holocaust. Neither could they imagine that their deeds and words would play a role in undermining a widely accepted paradigm about post-World War II American Jews and the Holocaust, one which asserted that, on the whole, they remained silent about that catastrophe which had so recently befallen their people.

But their naive and youthful words show how profoundly the destruction of one-third of the Jewish people at the hands of the Germans infused the rhetoric and action of the Jews of America who, despite their distance in space and time from the tragedy, lived in its shadow. One camper, Sharon Feinman, said it most clearly as she focused in her piece on the summer's theme, "Naaseh v'nishma" [we will do and we will hear], the words drawn from Exodus, declaimed by the Israelites at Mt. Sinai as they accepted the Ten Commandments. In summarizing what she learned during those weeks away from home, she demonstrated how American Jews in the post-World War II period engaged with the horrendous events that had recently engulfed their people in Europe. Her brief essay's determined prose reflected the widespread concern of the Jews of the United States with the Holocaust, with their insistence that it be remembered and their understanding that it affected their lives.

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“Everywhere,” she wrote, wherever “Jews wandered, they established centers of learning in which the deed and word were enshrined in the life of the people. The waves of persecution beat against us but our spirit remained unbroken.” That summer at Camp Institute, the teenagers contemplated the long chain of Jewish history and pondered “how today in the twentieth century, our people still affirm *Naaseh v’nishma*.” During “the dark reign of terror when Hitler and the Nazis ruled Germany and plunged the world into a catastrophic war, when the people who called themselves the ‘master race’ murdered six million Jews,” they had perpetrated “the worst slaughter in the history of mankind.” The Reform youngsters had learned, however, that even amid this horror, “the light of ‘*Naaseh v’nishma*’ burned mightily. As the world watched, a miracle came to pass. Out of the bitter struggle, and against overwhelming odds, the nation of Israel was born.”¹

These words of a Jewish high school student encapsulated much about how American Jews after the war integrated the Holocaust into their communal lives. Jewish youngsters attending left-wing Zionist camps in California, Workmen’s Circle Yiddish schools in the Bronx, or Orthodox Jewish day schools in Brooklyn would have recognized themselves in Feinman’s essay. They would have articulated her feelings somewhat differently, each reflecting sentiments particular to their ideas as to the meaning of Jewish culture, but they would have, as she did, see this as a tragedy of “our people.” So, too, would the adults who attended religious services, went to lectures in Jewish community centers, read the Jewish press, and participated in the public life of postwar American Jewry.

Metaphorically along with Sharon Feinman, America’s Jews participated in building a culture that gave the Holocaust a prominent place. When they gathered in their myriad Jewish spaces and when they faced the larger American public, they invoked the all-too-horrendous devastation that had taken place in Europe. These American Jewish women and men, adults and young people, posed the catastrophic event in both deeply Jewish and broadly universal terms. Feinman’s essay—just like the books and articles, sermons and literary works, liturgies and letters to public officials written by so many of the adults who ran Jewish institutions, staffed the organizations, officiated at synagogues, and published Jewish newspapers and magazines—blended a deeply felt anguish over this very particular Jewish tragedy with concerns for humanity writ large.

In the years following the end of World War II, that global conflagration which witnessed the destruction of one-third of the Jewish people,

American Jews, like the campers and staff at Camp Institute, found numerous times and places to publicly express their anguish over this horrendous reality. They devoted much of their communal rhetoric and institutional history to contemplating its effect on their lives and thinking about how it might shape them in the years to come. In the decade and a half following the war until the early 1960s, culminating in the capture, trial, and arrest of Adolf Eichmann, the gruesome details of the mass murder of so many Europeans infused every sector of American Jewry.

The vast repertoire of projects and texts created by postwar American Jews that incorporated the brutal realities of the Holocaust, like the little essay written by Sharon Feinman, on one level ought not to be considered particularly surprising or noteworthy. Since ancient times, human beings have memorialized tragedies and considered themselves obliged to keep alive the memory of their kin and compatriots who suffered at the hands of enemies who had inflicted great harm on them. At all times, in all places, societies and groups have employed the details of the great and painful losses they sustained to justify and shape behaviors and actions.

Memorializing tragedy underlay the Jewish tradition as it came down to the Jews of the United States by the middle of the twentieth century. At the broadest level, the Jewish women and men of America understood their history as a series of catastrophic events. These included the two expulsions from their homeland in 586 B.C.E. and 70 C.E., the Crusades with their bloody extirpations of the Jews of the Rhineland, the expulsion from Spain at the end of the fifteenth century, the vast massacres in Poland in the seventeenth century, the pogroms that commenced in the 1880s in Russia and sent so many of their families to the United States, and the quite recent mass murders that took place during and after World War I. Each of those tragedies entered into their communal lexicon and, by using words and images related to them, American Jewry remembered. The cycle of the Jewish calendar also moved from the recollections of one historic trauma to the next, each resonating with tales of past suffering and with liturgies that admonished Jews to always remember. These holy days include Passover, Purim, Hanukkah, Yom Kippur, and the Ninth of Av, the summer fast day that mourned the destruction of the Temples in Jerusalem first by the Babylonians and then the Romans.

However universal the urge to memorialize communal catastrophes and however deeply Jewish culture embedded such collective remembering, American Jews in the years after World War II, according to most later observers, behaved very differently when it came to the brutal deaths of

the six million Jews. As regards them, a very different story has been told and has become accepted as the truth. The scholarship about postwar American and American Jewish history takes a decidedly unified view, asserting with utter certainty that American Jewry made little of the Holocaust, pushing it to the hidden corners and, indeed, under the rug of their communal lives. Nearly every historian, literary scholar, and cultural critic who has commented on the Jews of America in this era and their relationship to the Holocaust maintains that America's Jews had little interest in thinking about, engaging with, and memorializing the Holocaust.

That the Holocaust meant little to postwar American Jews has become an accepted truth, one holding that, until the 1960s—as a result of either the Eichmann trial early in the decade or the June 1967 Six-Day War in Israel—the story of Europe's destroyed Jews lay hidden through deliberate forgetting. American Jews could not, would not, and did not engage in acts of public mourning. This paradigm of American Jewish history postulates that, in the affluence of the postwar period, with the 1950s its epicenter, American Jews had nothing to gain from invoking the Holocaust. As most scholars and Jewish communal commentators see it, American Jewry suffered from an almost two-decade-long, self-imposed collective amnesia.

Statements as to the invisibility of the Holocaust in postwar American Jewish culture appeared in nearly every book written about that era, making this the dominant motif in the literature. Leon Jick, a scholar of American Jewish history, launched this historical narrative in a 1981 article, declaring that “American Jewry sought to forget” and “collaborated or at least acquiesced in [a] campaign to make the world forget.” According to Jick, one of the first historians to treat postwar American Jewish history, until the 1960s, the Holocaust had been a “barely remembered, rarely mentioned event, of interest only to a limited circle of survivors.”² In 1992, Edward Shapiro asserted in the first full-length scholarly book on postwar American Jewry that, in the 1950s, “there was little public discussion among Jews regarding the fate of European Jewry,” to be then followed by the “unexpected emergence in the 1960s of the Holocaust into the forefront of American Jewish consciousness.”³ Gerald Sorin claimed in a widely used overview of American Jewish history that a “conspiracy of silence” reigned, not to be breached “until the 1970's” when, for the first time, American Jews would become conscious of “its enormity.”⁴ The Holocaust, literary scholar Alan Mintz declared in 2001, “and everything we now associate with it were not welcome guests” to American Jewish cultural life of the postwar period.⁵ And in 2004, in his award-winning book on American

Jewish history, Jonathan Sarna postulated that in the period up to 1967 the Holocaust “incubated” below the surface of American Jewish public life.⁶ Jack Wertheimer, a historian at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, asserted that in the late 1960s, as “the communal agenda shifted . . . from universalistic concerns to a preoccupation with Jewish particularism . . . the trauma of the Holocaust buried in the American Jewish psyche . . . erupted into public consciousness.”⁷

Instead, according to nearly all scholars then, in the aftermath of World War II, the Jews of the United States rushed to the suburbs, embracing the acceptance being proffered to them by an increasingly tolerant America. In this “golden age,” they had everything to lose by associating themselves publicly with the horrendous event that made them so very different from the other white, middle-class Americans with whom they sought to integrate. In the bland suburban culture that American Jews created, the Holocaust could have no role because it so painfully differentiated them from others, precisely when they sought to highlight sameness.⁸

According to this truth, Jewish communal leaders in the postwar period did not “use” the Holocaust to inspire ordinary Jews to become more religiously or communally committed, to win support for Israel, or to alter the fabric of American life. Such deployments of the Holocaust, scholars both from left and right, from inside and outside the Jewish world, have repeatedly told, only surfaced in the latter part of the 1960s. Before that, American Jews believed they would derive no benefit from articulating their inner communal or external political agendas through the Holocaust.

If, according to this widely accepted view of the past, American Jews did say something about the recent tragedy, they did so obliquely by invoking universal concerns about evil in general, erasing the Jewish element of the tragic story. By stripping the Holocaust of its Jewish core they did not have to claim it as their own, and that suited them just fine. A variety of explanations for the invisibility have flourished. Some writers posed it as American Jewish self-defense. They did not talk about the Holocaust because they feared it would inspire more anti-Jewish activities. Yet another set of scholars, like Edward Alexander, offered that American Jews found themselves “unable to write about it afterwards” because they, “the most powerful, or at any rate, least powerless Jewish community in the world[,] had abnegated responsibility for its helpless brethren during their hour of utmost need.”⁹

Nearly all who have written about this period of time in American Jewish history posited a causal connection between the Cold War and

American Jewry's avoidance of the Holocaust. In the period that witnessed the birth of intense Soviet-American rivalry, when the Federal Republic of Germany became an ally of the United States as a bulwark against the Soviet Union, American Jews refused to draw attention to the misdeeds of their nation's new best friend. The hysteria that reigned over the specter of domestic Communists and their purported infiltration of American institutions further suppressed any thoughts American Jews might have had about keeping alive the memory of what the Germans had done. In the poisonous atmosphere that pervaded America from the late 1940s onward, anti-Communism pushed American Jewry to self-censor and to avoid any kind of heated, passionate ideological rhetoric.¹⁰

To a person, scholars and the larger Jewish public accepted as true the proposition that Israel did much to bring the narrative of the Holocaust into prominence in American Jewish public life. Alvin Rosenfeld, a literary scholar, stated this premise quite succinctly: "For years after the end of World War II, Jews in America were unable or unwilling to face up to the horrors. . . . It was only in the 1960s, beginning with Israel's abduction of Eichmann," that American Jews undertook "an exceptional effort . . . to educate themselves and the public at large about the Nazi crimes." Israel's actions thus jolted the Jews of America into a forced encounter with the subject they had long buried.¹¹

Writers and commentators attributed even greater transformative power to Israel's dramatic—indeed, lightning-speed—victory over the armies of several Arab nations in June 1967, a triumph that followed weeks of grave worry over its very existence. This confluence of events made it possible for American Jews to talk about the Holocaust for the first time. "Israel's vulnerability," opined Stuart Svonkin, "forced American Jews to consider the legacy of the Nazis' war against European Jewry." Israel, with its swift and decisive military action, handed American Jews something Jewish to be proud of, allowing them to revisit the era that had previously brought them shame.¹² With the resolution of that war, American Jews "suddenly" had, according to Seymour Martin Lipset and Earl Rabb, "a searing literature of the Holocaust."¹³ Indeed, Kirsten Fermaglich declared, in the war's wake, "American Jews began more and more to view the Holocaust as a Jewish event, and to emphasize the connections between their own Jewish identities and the Holocaust."¹⁴ "Israel's survival," wrote Michael Morgan, after 1967, "became for many Jews the core, if not the totality of Jewish identity," and with that came "an acknowledgement of the Holocaust, Auschwitz, the memory of catastrophe." It took that war to get

“the American Jewish community” to become “unburdened of its commitment to subordinate, even to *repress*, the death camps.”¹⁵ A consensus reigns that, as a consequence of the war in which Israel, in six short days, went from the brink of destruction to the heights of military prowess, American Jewry became transformed and could then, at last, bring the Holocaust out of the recesses of its cultural shame into its public displays.¹⁶

This particular understanding of the history of postwar America and its Jews has been cast so widely through the literature and the public discourse as to constitute an accepted truth and has been picked up by scholars writing on a variety of topics. In her ethnographic study of the graduates of Newark’s predominantly Jewish Weequahic High School class of 1958, anthropologist Sherry Ortner took as a given the “fact” that the Holocaust had had no impact on these young people; as she wrote, “it seems to be the case that many parents did not talk about the Holocaust.” While Ortner admitted that she had no “detailed data on this point,” she still felt empowered to explain this silence by claiming that “many Jewish parents were trying to protect their children from this awful knowledge” and allow them to be “normal” and “just like everybody else.”¹⁷ Edward Linenthal, a cultural historian specializing in the history of public memorials, declared that in the postwar period “the Holocaust lived . . . in the subterranean anxieties.” American Jews rendered it “virtually invisible.”¹⁸ In a cultural history of postwar popular culture, Judith Smith affirmed that “most mainstream Jewish organizations eschewed public discussion of anti-Semitism, Nazism, or . . . the death camps, because it seemed dangerous to call attention to Jewish victimization.”¹⁹ Sociologist Nathan Glazer suggested that “the generation that experienced the Holocaust, either as victims or as bystanders who did not or could not do enough, wishes to forget it.”²⁰ Tim Cole stressed that “it was not until the early 1960s that anything like widespread awareness of the ‘Holocaust’ began to emerge.”²¹ Even reference works, supposedly committed to presenting stripped-down facts, and not venturing into analysis, have built this history into their authoritative entries. A reference guide on the 1960s pointed out to its users that “perhaps it was the Six Day War or perhaps it was only that time had begun to make it possible to confront the past, but at the end of the 1960s the Holocaust became a subject for examination,” particularly within “American Jewish culture.”²² In the entry on “The Jews” for Scribner’s *Encyclopedia of American Cultural and Intellectual History*, Stephen Whitfield posited that, “beginning in the 1960s, American Jews stared into the abyss of the Holocaust and discerned meaning from that

catastrophe” and began to “memorialize the two out of three European Jews whom the Nazis murdered.”²³

Of the individuals who have disseminated this version of the past, none has equaled Peter Novick and Norman Finkelstein in terms of making it central to their arguments and in the amount of attention and publicity that their works garnered. None has asserted more vigorously the thesis of postwar American Jewish Holocaust avoidance. Finkelstein and Novick, like the American Jewish historians whose work they drew on, contended that American Jews, the leaders and the led, eschewed any kind of confrontation with the Holocaust. Novick’s *The Holocaust in American Life*, published in 1999, and Finkelstein’s *The Holocaust Industry*, in 2000, painted such a portrait of American Jewry in the postwar years. Too shallow, too compromising, too obsequious, and too eager to curry favor in the great age of anti-Communism to call attention to themselves as people with an agenda different from others, American Jews turned away from the Holocaust and embarked on the good life of suburbia and the 1950s. Even if the Holocaust mattered to them, they effectively silenced any Holocaust talk when facing the public.

The many public discussions that followed in reaction to these two books focused almost exclusively on their negative evaluations of late-twentieth-century American Jewish uses of the Holocaust. Both authors, harsh critics of American Jewry from the left, expressed contempt for contemporary commemorations and invocations of the Holocaust, lambasting the American Jewish community and its leaders for exploiting the Holocaust to a point of making it an obsession, a substitute for anything meaningful. The two contended that invocations of the Holocaust at the end of the twentieth century had little to do with the victims but everything to do with what they saw as the nefarious politics of contemporary American Jewry, particularly its uncritical advocacy of Israel, a state they believed did not deserve American support.²⁴ These works stimulated heated discussions, in print, at scholarly conferences, and in Jewish communal settings.

Yet none of the participants in the many debates surrounding these books interrogated the validity of their historical assertions, accepting as accurate the statements about postwar American Jews and the Holocaust. After all, that element of Novick’s and Finkelstein’s arguments seemed just right, dovetailing with the positions articulated by scholars and commentators from within the Jewish world. Novick’s and Finkelstein’s contentions about the postwar era fit perfectly with the communal myth.²⁵

But, to put it quite bluntly, all who have participated in this discussion,

from whatever political position, have erred grievously. They have built their arguments on a thin base of evidence, gleaned from few or no sources. Their descriptions hardly reflected the breadth and complexity of postwar American Jewry. Offering sweeping and highly judgmental generalizations about a complicated and divided group of people from a limited number of documents, they created this widely believed but deeply flawed truth. The paradigm of an amnesiac American Jewry during the postwar era had been built on slipshod scholarship that put ideology over evidence.

The errors of these historians served as the initial point of departure for this book, one that offers a very different history of American Jews in the postwar world. How could silence in actuality have dominated the American Jewish scene? What do the documents in the massive archives and mammoth array of books and periodicals on the library shelves have to say about when, where, and how American Jewry, reflecting its many inner divisions, talked about the Holocaust? What words did they articulate, and what deeds did they undertake in the name of Europe's murdered Jews? How did they define appropriate ways to memorialize the tragedy of the six million?

The sources, scattered across the United States and Israel, offered a set of answers that stand in stark contrast to nearly everything that has been written heretofore.²⁶ In this book, *We Remember with Reverence and Love*, I take my cues from the young camper in 1956 and the thousands—millions, actually—of American Jews, who wrote or read, scripted or watched, performed or participated in the postwar Jewish public sphere, arguing that they wove the catastrophe deeply into the basic fabric of community life and that they considered what they said and did as monuments to Europe's destroyed Jewish world. How they spoke and how they proceeded on their memorial efforts has a history worth telling, and it has to be the correct history.

But I go beyond merely taking to task those historians, literary critics, popular writers, and communal notables who have insisted on portraying a silent and purposely forgetful American Jewry, which in the years from 1945 through 1962 tried to blot out the memory of the six million. I explore here the ways in which a group of women and men, the Jews of the United States, went about the process of shaping, from the ground up, a memorial culture.

Holocaust commemorations of the postwar era reflected a set of on-the-ground realities that deeply influenced how American Jews constructed their commemorative culture. They had no obvious precedent to

guide them as they took first steps toward creating new ceremonies, writing new liturgies, setting aside days of mourning, and orchestrating pageants that confronted the horrendous story of death and destruction, mass murders, gassings, and cremations of millions of Jews. Almost nothing of this sort existed in the general culture that American Jews could adapt for their own uses to mark their catastrophe. They could not look around and see other ethnic communities presenting themselves to the larger society through the narrative of a devastating tragedy, particularly one perpetrated on foreign shores. No minority group in America had yet created a museum, erected a massive monument on public space, organized university courses, or held an annual and highly visible lachrymose commemoration open to all, which focused on the painful events in their pasts. American Jews had to embark on this on their own and with no domestic partners or models.

They also had no recent Jewish examples on which to rely, as they, step by step, experimented with language and genre to figure out which formulations worked best. Centuries had passed since the Jewish prayer book had incorporated the motifs of other cycles of sufferings, other holocausts, with the Crusades providing the last time this had been done. When American Jews in the years following *the* Holocaust, rabbis and religious leaders alike, discussed how to allow for liturgical innovations in memory of the Hitler Holocaust, they reflected that reality. No one could tell them where and how to open the seemingly sealed canon and interject the recent tragedy.

Talk of the tragic fate of the six million cut across the otherwise firm lines of Reform, Orthodox, Reconstructionist, and Conservative Judaism. Despite fundamental differences about Judaism as a religious system, all made space for the Holocaust in their synagogues, seminaries, and publications. They did so differently, but they nonetheless did so. American Jews disagreed profoundly about Jewish culture and Judaism, and they also sparred among themselves as to what they ought to do as Jews and as Americans as a result of the Holocaust. But they agreed that it had permanently changed them and their worlds. In these years, the details of what had happened and what it meant to American Jews served as a basis for much that took place under the rubric of organized Jewish life.

American Zionists of every variant employed the Holocaust in their organizational works, as did the organizations that made up the building blocks of the American Jewish associational edifice, including the B'nai B'rith, the Jewish War Veterans, the Jewish Labor Committee, the American

Jewish Congress, the National Council of Jewish Women, Hadassah, Pioneer Women, and the American Jewish Committee, not to mention the youth movements, culture clubs, and Jewish community centers. Whether they expressed themselves in English, Yiddish, or Hebrew, they recalled the six million and contemplated the aftermath of the slaughter in ways that fit their identities. Whether in print or in oratory, they incorporated the catastrophe into the fabric of their public lives. American Jews who defined themselves on the political left, as well as those who participated in the Jewish defense, communal, and social service agencies on the local and national levels, all constructed a repertoire of words and deeds that took as their inspiration the calamity of the six million.

American Jews also performed their Jewishness by sending their children to some kind of Jewish school, contributing money to a Jewish philanthropy, or subscribing to a Jewish newspaper or magazine. The years after World War II indeed represented the high-water mark for synagogue membership and Jewish supplementary school enrollment and summer camp attendance. Never before in American Jewish history had such a large percentage joined congregations and exposed their children to some kind of Jewish education. And in those places, the tragic story of European Jewry under the heel of German Nazism reverberated deeply.

American Jews told and retold details of the catastrophe in multiple forms. Over and over, men and women asserted the necessity of revisiting it in their institutions and organs of public opinion, in all its horrors. By virtue of belonging to the people who had been targeted for extinction and as the victims' kin, both literal and metaphoric, they considered it their duty to recite the story of the six million.

Some attempted to construct grand narratives, describing the chronology of events that culminated in the massive slaughter. Most relied on particular aspects of destruction, referring, where they considered it fitting, to "Auschwitz," "Treblinka," and "Maidanek" and to the heroes of the Warsaw Ghetto, the partisans who had fled to fight in the forests, among others. Some believed that telling of the life and liquidation of the Jews in a specific town or city, particularly the one they or their parents had come from, amounted to narrating the tragedy as a whole. Regardless of the sweep, they joined in creating a memorial culture.

By putting words on paper, conveying emotions, facts, and ideas through oratory and sermons, crafting liturgies for synagogues and homes, they constructed a vast unorganized spontaneous project that sought to keep alive the image of Europe's murdered Jews. Some American Jews,

on their own or under the auspices of Jewish institutions, chiseled references to the tragedy onto cemetery markers and emblazoned them onto the plaques that adorned the walls of Jewish communal buildings. Others turned to music, composing, recording, and performing what would emerge as a familiar repertoire of works that stood for the Holocaust. Those able to create dances, dramas, pageants, poems, scholarly works, and graphic images that took as their subject something about the Jews who had perished. An even larger number consumed these creations, making the catastrophe organic to American Jewish public culture of the postwar period. This creative output recalled the painful loss.

What American Jews created in the name of the six million slaughtered Jews of Europe functioned on three interconnected levels. They fashioned memorials of words, images, and music to keep alive the memory of the Jews who had perished. By setting aside time to recall the massive number who had endured such brutal deaths, so recently, American Jews believed that they fulfilled a deep—indeed, sacred—obligation. They likewise invoked those deaths and the destruction of European Jewish communal life as a rhetorical weapon in a series of campaigns to affect American politics, to aid survivors, and to hold the guilty accountable for their crimes. American Jewry also had its collective eye trained on the future as it turned to the tragic fate of the Jews under the yoke of Nazi rule and conquest to try to bring about what they considered a better future, be it in matters of American domestic and foreign policy or in their efforts to strengthen Jewish life and culture. Past, present, and future converged in the projects undertaken by American Jewry as it referred to and considered the horrendous events that had engulfed their co-religionists.

The women and men whose words and actions constituted postwar American Jewish public culture and whose deeds and words serve as the subject of this book did not consistently use the word “memorial” to describe their commemorative projects. But in all the places and times where and when they wove the details of what happened to Europe’s Jews into their public works and as they contemplated what that destruction meant to them, to the Jewish people, and to the world as a whole, in the past, the present, and the future, they functioned as memorial builders. That word “memorial” need not have been present in every text, on every page, in every pageant, concert, speech, or artifact, for them to have created a memorial repertoire that put in the foreground the six million murdered Jews of Europe. They justified their political, communal, and philanthropic works as a way to recall the six million, and they fashioned their memorials in

light of their concerns for contemporary realities and for the future. This organic blending of pure and simple memorializing and acting in the present in light of the memory of the catastrophe constituted a deep and powerful element in postwar American Jewish public life.

Debates over how to memorialize the Holocaust reflected the inner cleavages and the pluralistic nature of American Jewry. Jewish life got lived out in thousands of local American communities, each made up of multiple institutions, divided by ideology, function, class, language, and length of time in the United States. No national bodies directed “the group,” and the utter disorganization of the American Jewish polity, its unwillingness to follow directions from any central agency, provided one of the leitmotifs of American Jewish history. Each organization and institution, each local community, did what it wanted and what its constituents deemed appropriate.

In that anarchic environment, no one opposed recalling the victims of the Holocaust, aiding survivors, and pointing out the evils of the perpetrators. No one disagreed with the basic premise that Jewish communal institutions, schools for young children through the seminaries which trained rabbis, the Jewish press, and the multiplicity of organizations philanthropic, cultural, political, and religious all had a share in remembering the six million and in using their memory to shape the postwar world. They did not converge on a single right way to do it, and, indeed, they bickered among themselves about this very issue. But since they had no authority to tell them how to do so and no central body to coordinate, each did it as it saw fit. They argued as to how, but not if, the slaughter of Europe’s Jews ought to be part of their public culture.

In the inner discussions of the boards of their organizations, on school committees, in the sermons from their pulpits and the columns of their periodicals, in their radio broadcasts and television programs, American Jews experimented with various ideas as to the best, most appropriate, and most effective means by which to weave the Holocaust into their lives.

The words and deeds that constituted their memorial project can only be understood within the context of who they were and where they found themselves, as Jews and as Americans. As shareholders in the largest, wealthiest, most unfettered, most politically robust, and most institutionally elaborate Jewish community in the world, organized American Jewry undertook a set of monumental tasks that followed in the wake of the cataclysm. They, and pretty much they alone, raised the money to succor the survivors, starting immediately with the end of the war. They collected

funds in the millions to support the liberated Jews in Europe's Displaced Persons camps, those who after 1948 went to Israel, as well as those who immigrated to the United States and those remaining in Europe. Only American Jewry had the resources to support the remnants of European Jewry, and, in the years that the survivors needed assistance, vast sums flowed for these projects. The fundraising juggernaut of American Jewry in the name of the remnant of Europe's Jews, who had outlived the Nazis' slaughter, went hand in hand with remembering, as each appeal for money relied on a rhetorical strategy that told and retold the Holocaust story.

The realities of postwar America also left their mark on how American Jews began the process of memorializing the Holocaust. America of the postwar era would wait for over a decade before the passage of any federal civil rights legislation, and the relatively weak one of 1957 had been the first since Reconstruction. Jews functioned in an environment in which private employers could, and did, refuse to hire Jewish applicants, where realtors could discriminate against Jewish families without fearing legal penalties, and in which private institutions of higher education made no efforts to hide their quotas against Jewish students and rarely hired Jewish faculty. This America admitted immigrants on the basis of national origins, unabashedly preferring white, northern and western Europeans.

The Jews who in the two decades after World War II sought to commemorate the lives and deaths of the six million did so in an America agitated at all levels of public life by an anti-Communist crusade. Some anti-Communists, in their broadsides and speeches, declared that "Jewish" and "Communist" could rightly be considered synonyms. Pamphleteers and orators claimed that the nation needed to protect itself against a Jewish threat to its coherence and viability as a Christian, white bastion.²⁷

Postwar conditions exacted a price on all Americans of immigrant origins and their children, who felt compelled to use the public sphere to prove how American they had become and how little their ethnic cultures distinguished them from the national mainstream. In the postwar period, no university offered ethnic studies courses, let alone housed departments dedicated to studying the experiences of particular groups. American education idealized a common culture to which its component parts accommodated and submerged differences.

The liberalism of this America asserted that "Americans all" (the title of one book) should think of themselves as "brothers under the skin" (yet another publication) who, despite being religiously divided into "Catholic, Protestant, Jew" (a third book), had much in common. What differ-

entiated them mattered less than what they shared. The postwar period, in which Jews accounted for about 4 percent of the American population, feared ideologies, particularly from the left, stressing compromise and consensus.

Throughout the period under consideration here, liberalism dominated American Jewish public life. With the exception of the dwindling Jewish far left, Jews subscribed to a political vision that stressed a belief in progress and a commitment to western values, to America, and to the idea that people of good will could together eradicate prejudice and foster a common culture that tolerated difference.

American Jewry's rhetoric and action took as its point of reference the catastrophe of the six million Jews who perished in Europe to reflect these realities. Comfortable in America, but not overly so, American Jews enjoyed the gradual erosion of some, but not all, the barriers that limited their access to American life. They fretted over the places where obstacles remained firmly fixed, yet they carved out political positions that made them different from other white, middle-class Americans, but did so in ways that reflected the powerful influence of the dominant culture. Their engagements with the Holocaust took their shape from those realities.

In the years from the cessation of World War II until the middle of the 1960s, these Jewish and American conditions influenced the ways in which American Jews played with words, phrases, genre, themes, and practices to contemplate the Holocaust and to discuss it among themselves and with their American neighbors. Their massive corpus of rhetoric and action fell into two types.

Some flowed from distinctly Jewish sources. Passover, Yom Kippur, and the Ninth of Av, among other ritual moments of the Jewish calendar, provided set times to invoke the most recent tragedy. Creators of postwar American Jewish works took advantage of the cycle of the Jewish year to recall the Holocaust. Jewish communal institutions also created and sponsored new texts and practices that provided platforms from which to think about the Holocaust. They produced textbooks for Jewish schools; wrote, published, and read memoirs and imaginative literature by survivors; scripted and performed plays in synagogue basements; delivered and listened to sermons; broadcast dramas on Jewish radio shows; fashioned new liturgical works; and restored and then displayed ritual objects salvaged from the destroyed Jewish communities of Europe. They staged and attended public memorial meetings, with the most common, although not the only ones, being those commemorating the 1943 uprising in the

Warsaw Ghetto and its suppression by the Germans. These performances of the Holocaust did not depend on outside events.

But throughout this period, the world intruded on American Jewry, and these intrusions provided a second force stimulating Holocaust performances. A string of events, both large and small, brought up the European tragedy over and over again, reinforcing the evolving commemorative culture of American Jewry. Among these, but hardly limited to them, were the declaration of Israel's independence; the publication of the diary of a young Jewish girl who perished in Bergen-Belsen, Anne Frank; the mass-market appeal of John Hersey's *The Wall*; the show trials and executions of Jewish political and intellectual figures in Czechoslovakia and then the Soviet Union; the finalization of an agreement with the government of the Federal Republic of Germany through the Conference of Jewish Material Claims Against Germany—the Claims Conference—in the early 1950s; the Sinai campaign of 1956; the Hungarian refugee influx to the United States that same year; the outbreak of swastika daubings and Jewish synagogue desecrations in Germany at the end of 1959; the rise of the American Nazi Party under George Lincoln Rockwell; the apprehension, trial, and subsequent execution of Adolf Eichmann; and the worldwide acclaim of “Babi Yar” by the Soviet poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko. All these allowed American Jews to incorporate new references into their telling of the Holocaust story. These events and numerous others in Germany, Israel, the United States, and around the world handed American Jews new particulars around which to commemorate the Holocaust, new pegs on which to hang the Holocaust narrative.

The American Jews who organized gatherings, reported on them in the Jewish press and in the bulletins, magazines, and newsletters of the Jewish organizations, wrote the books, crafted the sermons, arranged the concerts, gave the speeches, and compiled the songbooks, as well as those who consumed these works, took part in a massive, unorganized, and spontaneous memorial enterprise, which had political, cultural, and communal ends in mind. Their texts, projects, programs, and material objects that referred to the Holocaust, as a totality or to some individual part of it, constituted elements in a memorial repertoire.

They did not have a single idea of what constituted a memorial or a monument. Rather, the Jews of the United States produced commemorative works that fit the time and place in which they found themselves. That fit between postwar American Jews and their Holocaust commemorations serves as the central theme of this book. Here I argue that the ways a group

of people remembers the past do not just happen: that commemorative cultures, like all elements of culture, evolve, change, and develop with shifting contexts. Far more common and analytically more important than hulking stone structures placed on the landscapes, memorials involve the full repertoire of words and actions that a group of people creates to enshrine something of its past and influence its present and future.

Memorial practices get made over time, and no one, scholars or others, ought to anachronistically expect them to be born whole and in final form. Because the memorial works of the postwar period differed from those of later decades does not mean that they did not exist.²⁸ The American Jewish women and men whose words and actions appear in the pages that follow developed their repertoire of remembrance out of a sense of obligation to recall the victims, aid the survivors, confront the guilty, and affect a new set of realities in the United States and around the world. As historical actors they deserve to be heard. While what they did and said changed incrementally and haphazardly, they actually laid the foundation for the better organized, bigger, and more elaborately funded Holocaust projects of the last decades of the twentieth century.

Perhaps the very grandeur and force of the Holocaust projects of the later era dwarfed the earlier, disorganized, scattered, and spontaneous ones. The prominence, mammoth funding, and colossal size of the later Holocaust commemorative projects may have done much to cast those of the postwar period into oblivion. Those later memorials also reflected a society and culture forged by the turmoil of the late 1960s and as such had to take a very different shape than those of the postwar period.

Postwar projects and texts can only be understood in their own terms and not in how they measure up to those of other, different times. The American Jews of the period 1945–1962 had no doubt that their words and actions vis-à-vis the European calamity constituted appropriate ways of remembering the one-third of their people who had been liquidated by the Germans. They did not avoid the tragedy, but, rather, as they could, they made their communities places to enshrine it and act on it.