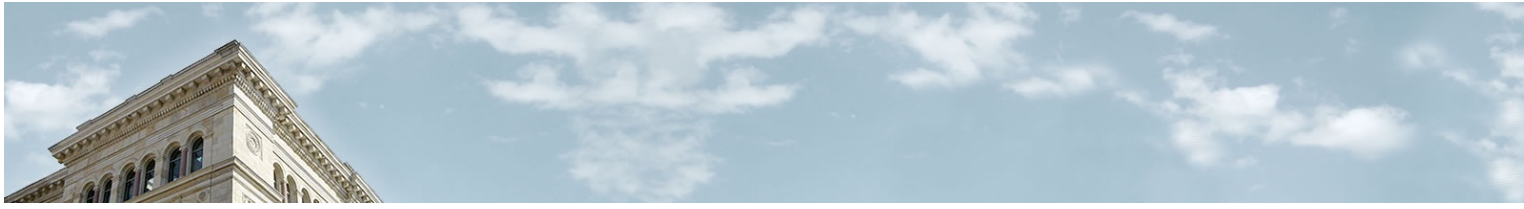


# **Unexpected Neighbors: Jewish and non-Jewish Encounters in Rural Hesse 1945-50**

Anna Junge, M.A., Technical University of Berlin  
[a.junge@campus.tu-berlin.de](mailto:a.junge@campus.tu-berlin.de)

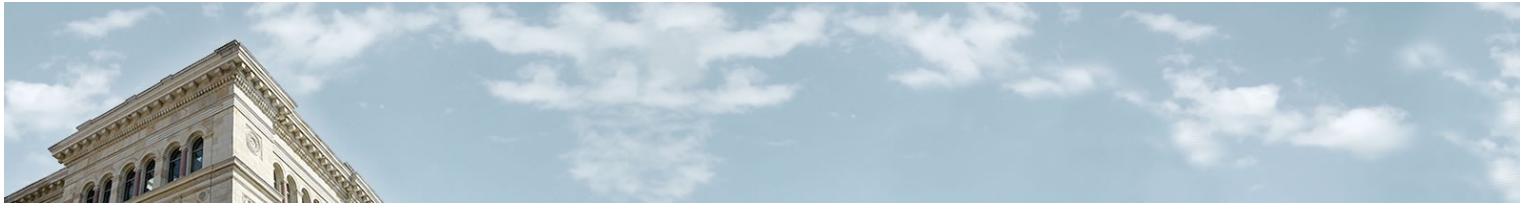
Fondation pour la Mémoire de la Shoah, Scholarship Seminar, 1/2024



„In eternal memory of  
the loved ones  
murdered by the Nazis [...]“.

Memorial from 1947,  
Jewish cemetery in Momberg,  
district of Marburg-Biedenkopf, Hesse.

Photograph: Junge (2018).



## Why rural areas?

- Return of survivors to their villages of origin  
→ everywhere in post-war Germany
- Survivors alone among non-Jews

## Research location

- District of Marburg, Hesse
- 1946: 26 survivors in twelve villages

**The topics of my research** are the social situation and neighborly relations of German Shoah survivors who moved back to their German places of origin in rural areas, after their liberation from concentration camps in 1945. After an introduction and a chapter on the prehistory, my work is divided into three main chapters, corresponding to three main developments within the survivor's relations. I am currently writing the last subchapter of my last chapter. I would like to complete my work by next summer.

**Why studying rural areas?** The vast majority of the few, who survived persecution as Jews and found themselves in Germany in 1945 lived in the city or in a DP camp. This is also true for the most survivors of German origin: Most German-Jewish survivors came from the city and settled there again. However, those who came from the countryside made their way back to their village. The greatest motivation to return was the hope of meeting friends and relatives back home. The place of origin seemed to be the most likely post-war meeting point. And what was the alternative? Many wanted to emigrate, but this was not immediately possible. The fantasy of moving back into their own house was more attractive than living in a refugee camp.

Returning to the countryside is the story of just a few survivors in Germany: hundreds, perhaps a thousand? But it is also the story of hundreds (or a thousand?) of German towns and their *non-Jewish* populations. How widespread the phenomenon was, you can imagine, when you visit Jewish cemeteries in the countryside today. Here, traces of a post-war period can be found: Sometimes burials took place after 1945. Or there are memorial stones for the murdered, which survivors as returnees had erected.

**In the cities in 1945**, survivors organized with each other, Jewish communities were founded. But even for the city and the DP camp, Atina Grossmann emphasizes that Jews and non-Jews soon lived in (and I quote) "entangled histories and complicated encounters". Logically, this was all the more true in *rural* areas. In the countryside, the returnees were the only survivors per village. They lived alone among non-Jews, and close dependencies developed.

**The location of my research is 12 villages in the district of Marburg**, in northern Hesse. In 1946, a total of 26 people lived here who had been persecuted as German Jews. Almost all of them were already former residents, almost all had been deported in 1941/42 and suffered years of forced labor. Three people had survived locally in marriages with non-Jews, three people survived underground starting in Berlin, and one person returned from British exile. My research is micro-history, based on a wide box of sources: private letters, interviews I conducted with Jews and non-Jews, documents from German courts and authorities, correspondence from Jewish organizations, from the US military and village associations.

One third of the survivors, especially the youngest, emigrated as quickly as possible - from 1946 to relatives in the USA. A second wave of emigration took place in the early 1950s, after restitution proceedings had been completed. Around a third of the Jewish population from 1945 remained in the Marburg area in the long term.

**My research showed**, that post-war relations between Jews and non-Jews in the village were characterized by three central developments: Firstly, by the great hardship in which survivors found themselves at the very beginning. Secondly, the possibility to negotiate the local past in court. Thirdly, the willingness of survivors to adapt to the ruling expectations and circumstances. Only this third aspect outlasted the post-war period in the long term.

**After their return**, survivors were initially left with nothing and were dependent on help. But very few people actually offered them help. And these were the very same people who had already stood behind them years before. These neighbors took them in, into their homes for the first weeks or months, cooked for them and cared for them.

**Most of the returnees** (or their relatives) from the village (unlike in the city) had owned land. Their houses were now inhabited, furniture was auctioned off and spread throughout the village. Neighbors used the property as their own and did not return it voluntarily. The US military ordered the German mayors to clear single rooms in the houses. Weeks after their return, the survivors then moved back into their former houses, which they now had to share. Their housemates, living wall to wall, could be the buyers they had chosen themselves in the 1930s, but also active National Socialists. Furniture and clothes were also being confiscated from neighbors: Sometimes the buyers of the auctions were known. Then the own belongings were confiscated. Otherwise, items from National Socialists were confiscated. Their great hardship brought the survivors into conflict with their neighbors. In order to avoid conflict, some survivors refrained from confiscating. Instead, they applied for welfare aid, that is, money from the state to *buy* used items from neighbors willing to sell. The state benefits that were granted here were not social benefits but were recorded by the authorities as a credit, as an early payment on compensation claims and later also counted as such.

**In the post-war period in Germany**, there was not only silence about National Socialist violence. Both, in the denazification trials from 1946 and in the trials for restitution of properties from 1947, survivors and their neighbors met in court and discussed the past. For the denazification all former NSDAP members in the Western part of Germany had criminal proceedings before new courts, the so-called *Spruchkammern*. The ones accused to be activists were tried orally, in public, in local schools and restaurants. The village watched the trials and witnesses were called to testify.

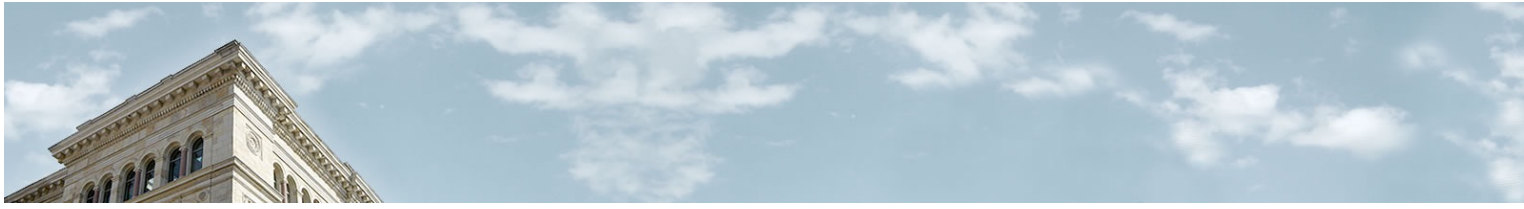
**Later, almost all Germans** were judged to be bystanders or were amnestied. But in 1946, this development was not yet foreseeable. Former party activists feared serious punishment and were looking for good character references from opponents of the regime, preferably from Jews. Both sides assumed that survivors could exert great influence. The accused therefore tried to gain favor with their Jewish neighbors. And survivors accepted these advances. Deals were made. The denazification trials and the ongoing property trials influenced each other: In exchange for a good character reference, properties were exceptionally returned to survivors without protest. In the face of denazification trials, the German population stood together and helped each other. And so, the trials also offered an opportunity to prove oneself to the village. Alone among non-Jews, survivors were interested in peaceful relations. Therefore, in most cases survivors decided to help their neighbors, if they haven't been strong anti-Semites, with a testimony as an exculpatory witness.

**Finally, there was a third development**, and it had the biggest impact on the relationships. That was: the willingness to adapt. Survivors who wanted to remain in their village for the long term made great efforts to be accepted as *ordinary* neighbors. They adapted to the ruling expectations, not only in their working life but also in public and private life. Despite illness and weakness, almost all of them quickly began to work again: for their economic safety, but also to keep busy and *feel* healthy again. Work was seen as a step towards normality, as a bridge to become a member of the community. The men among the survivors, as men, had the opportunity to become involved in community life. It was a win-win situation: All German clubs, for example, were forbidden by the US military. But with a Jew in the front row, an association could quickly obtain its license again. And the survivor, in turn, had the opportunity to gain popularity in the village as a board member. While the men got involved in public life, the women were expected to show restraint. Women among the survivors lived in seclusion, and in poverty. But they formed close friendships with non-Jewish women, especially younger women, who had hardly experienced National Socialism.

**As survivors**, the returnees in the countryside became increasingly invisible. Differences - being Jewish, the experience of persecution - were put aside. They kept silent about the Shoah.

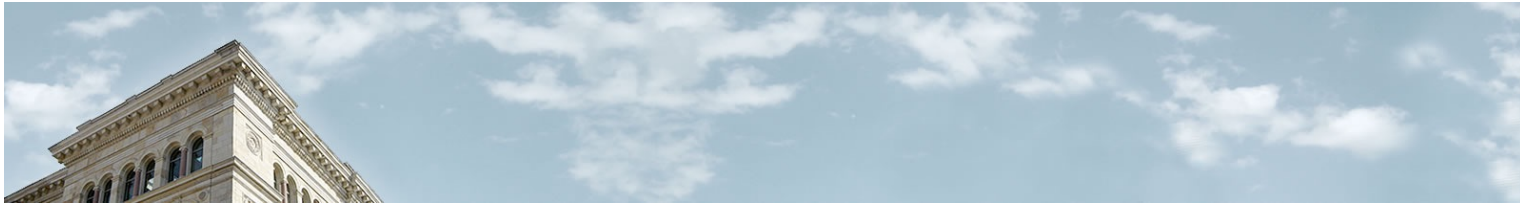
Alone back in the village, survivors were seeking for "normality", and they achieved it, but only after their death. Descendants of survivors still live in rural areas in Germany today. But in their villages, their Jewish family or persecution background has become largely unknown today.





## Major developments for relationships

1. Existential need of survivors
2. Possibility of negotiating the past in court
3. Willingness of survivors to adapt



## 1. Existential hardship of survivors

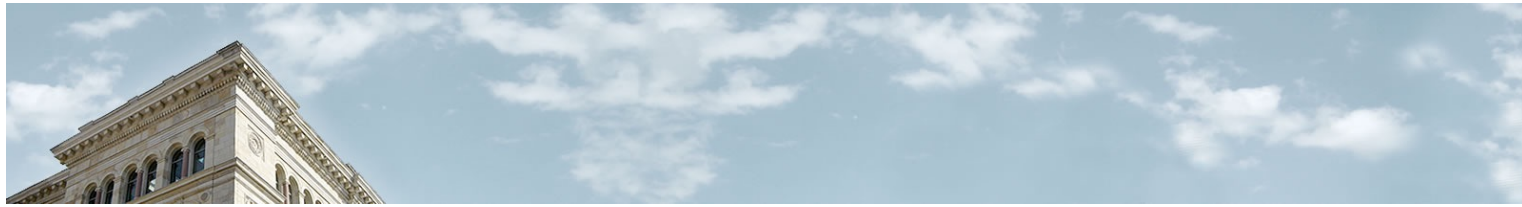
- Support provided by a small number of neighbors
- Immediate neighborly conflicts over property

## 2. In court: *Spruchkammer* proceedings

- Interest of the accused to be in favor of survivors
- Survivors refrain from acting as witnesses for the prosecution

## 3. Adaption: In public life

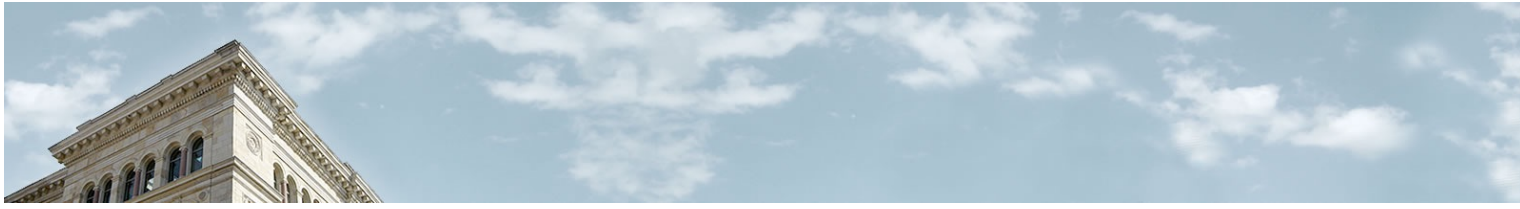
- Involvement of survivors in the public interest
- Villages benefit from Jewish return



„[...] In eternal memory, your nieces, nephew and Bettchen“.

Gravestone from 1954,  
Jewish cemetery in Rauschholzhausen,  
district of Marburg-Biedenkopf, Hesse.

Photograph: Junge (2018).



## Bibliography

**BECKER**, Franziska (1994): Gewalt und Gedächtnis. Göttingen: Schönerbe.

**BRENNER**, Michael (1995): Nach dem Holocaust. München: C. H. Beck.

**DEMANT**, Froukje (2015): Verre buren: Samenleven in de schaduw van de Holocaust, Enschede, NL: Ipskamp Drukkers.

**GEIS**, Jael (2022): Arbeiten nach der Shoah. Baden-Baden: Deutscher Wissenschafts-Verlag.

**GOSCHLER**, Constantin (1992): Wiedergutmachung. München: Oldenbourg.

**GROSSMANN**, Atina (2009): Jews, Germans, and Allies. Princeton/NJ: Princeton University Press.

**GROSSMANN**, Atina/**LEWINSKY**, Tamar (2012): Zwischenstation. In: BRENNER (ed.): Geschichte der Juden in Deutschland. München: C.H. Beck, pp. 67–152.

**ILIEN**, Albert/**JEGGLE**, Utz (1978): Leben auf dem Dorf. Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag.

**JEGGLE**, Utz (1997): Nachrede. Erinnerungen an die Dorfjuden heute. In: RICHARZ/RÜRUP (eds.): Jüdisches Leben auf dem Lande. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, pp. 399–411.

**KRAUSS**, Marita (2006): Zurückbleiben und Abschied. In: GESTRICH/KRAUSS (eds.): Zurückbleiben. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, pp. 27–48.

**LEßAU**, Hanne (2020): Entnazifizierungsgeschichten. Göttingen: Wallstein.

**LILLTEICHER**, Jürgen (2007): Raub, Recht und Restitution. Göttingen: Wallstein.