

*This paper is an re-purposed version of an oral presentation delivered at the FMS Fellow's workshop in January 2024. As participants were given 10 minutes to present their project, the idea behind this presentation was to provide an overview of the thesis by answering three simple and fundamental question: 'What?', 'How?' and 'Why?'. In other words, the goal was to present the main research question of my PhD, the methodology employed to answer it and finally, and this is perhaps the most important one, the relevance of such question in the current historiographical landscape.*

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The Language of Humour in the Holocaust : A New Cultural History of the Warsaw Ghetto

(1939-1943)

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It may appear counter-intuitive to offer a study that places the concepts of genocide, humour and laughter alongside one another. Yet, it is precisely in this seeming paradox that lie fascinating new research terrains, for laughter and humour are complex human emotions, and so was their use in dark periods, such as the Holocaust. At a time when Holocaust scholars strive to uncover the plurality of Jewish experiences of the Holocaust through innovative interdisciplinary approaches, the time is ripe to offer an in-depth study of the significance of a social and psychological phenomenon overlooked in the recent decades of research. Even at the peak of Nazi policies of extermination, the laughter of European Jews as they fell victim to this genocidal enterprise reached as far as the bleak barracks of Auschwitz. To understand the nature and context of this laughter and humour is to capture the various nuances of individual responses to years of persecution and extermination. At a time when scholars are increasingly concerned with the diversity of victims' perspectives, taking into account the impact of factors such as gender, class, religiosity, space, time and age in their analysis, my project offers to throw light on an original prism of historical exploration, namely emotions, and in particular humour and laughter, to analyse the complexity of Jewish experiences of the Holocaust.

With the 1990's and 2000's providing a fertile ground for the emergence of a social and cultural history that further departed from traditional historical approaches by putting the

subjective experiences of ‘ordinary’ individuals at the centre of historical analysis, the most recent decades of Holocaust research have given birth to studies which have increasingly taken issues of class, gender and space into account in their research agendas. This will to uncover the complexity and plurality of Jewish experiences has led Holocaust researchers to increasingly reduce their focal point of analysis, with scholars such as Claire Zalc and Tal Bruttman making a plea for the increased consideration of micro-perspectives in Holocaust studies. These trends showcased an increased desire to understand the Holocaust not in its political unfolding but as it was experienced by its contemporaries. This desire to understand the diversity of Jewish *sensibilités*—in other words, what Jews felt, experienced and understood in the abyss of Europe’s twentieth century history—inevitably echoes with the development of a historical subfield whose importance has yet to be incorporated within Holocaust studies, namely the history of emotions. In a historiographical context favourable to the increased consideration of subjectivities and emotions as subjects of historical analysis, I offer a project that uses humour and laughter as central prisms of historical research. The reason for this choice is twofold. Firstly, because since its association with a historical event as tragic as the Holocaust seem paradoxical and counter-intuitive, the number of significant studies on the subject is very meagre. Secondly, in the vast array of human emotions, humour and laughter occupy a singular place both in sciences and social sciences, for humour implies an understanding of people’s habits and expectations, to understand humour and laughter better is a formidable means to better understand the everyday life of those who experienced the war and its atrocities first-hand. As humour involves a constant interplay between individuals and their socio-political environment, to understand humour is to better understand the wishes, hopes, norms and concerns of their time. A project that focuses on humour and laughter in the everyday life of European Jews will, I hope, uncover paths of understanding thus far relatively unexplored. Despite humour holding a central place in many Jewish individuals’ experiences of persecution,

the analysis of humour and laughter during the Holocaust was a subject left aside for decades. It was only in the 1990's that the exploration of such a topic was initiated. In this regard, one needs to recognise the compilation made by journalist Steve Lippman who gathered and compiled jokes and anecdotes told by Jews during the Holocaust in a book entitled *Laughter in Hell, Humour during the Holocaust* (1991). While the book did not provide an in-depth analysis or interpretation of the phenomenon, the contribution it has made to an approach to this historical period through the lens of humour is undeniable. Its plethora of jokes and anecdotes heard in Jewish communities throughout the Holocaust offered the prospect of promising new research horizons for Holocaust scholars willing to engage with the subject. In 1997, J. Morreal, gave a conference paper about the teaching of the Holocaust to future generations in which he explored the different functions of humour in Jewish communities during the Holocaust. The paper suggested that, during the Holocaust, humour fulfilled three functions: cohesive, coping and critical. Morreal would present this psychological response as a positive 'defense' mechanism, perhaps over-relying on humour as a tool of moral resistance. Describing the cohesive function of humour, he thus contended that 'the Jews of Europe were the most obvious group in which this humour produced solidarity'. Similarly, Chaya Ostrower, a psychologist from the University of Tel Aviv, wrote a thesis on humour during the Holocaust in which she interviewed 55 Holocaust survivors (31 women, 24 men), asking them specifically to recall and reflect on the place of humour in their experiences of survival. This project gave birth to a book published in 2009, *It Kept Us Alive: Humour During the Holocaust*, which investigates the plurality of functions occupied by humour in the life of those who witnessed, endured and survived the brutality of Nazi genocidal policies. Introducing her work, she stated that 'Humour in the ghettos and camps was the weapon of those who were helpless and could not rebel or resist'. Like anthropologist James C. Scott who saw in small acts of non-compliance such as humour, the 'tenacity of self-preservation', Ostrower also saw humour as the 'weapon of the

weak'. While these accounts offer fascinating insights into the place occupied by humour in Holocaust memory or its psychological functions, their value for analysing the nature of jokes and laughter at the time is more limited. Another limitation lies perhaps in the functional explanation put forward by these scholars and their tendency to focus on the 'content' of jokes at the expense of their 'context'. In this regard, my project intends not to reject the 'weapon' interpretation but rather to move beyond it. To suggest a new metaphor, I would like to put forward an analysis that looks at humour as a language used by Jews who experienced everyday life under occupation to engage and reflect on the tragedy unfolding before them. This work draws inspiration from other scholars such as Jonathan Waterlow, Martina Kessel or Dan Ben Amos who have approached humour critically and contextually. The methodology I am putting forward echoes with Ben Amos' conclusions in his 1971 article entitled 'The Myth of Jewish humour'. There he argued that 'it is necessary not to analyse the jokes in their accumulated form in literary anthologies, abstracted from their contextual setting, but to observe them as they are told during the communicative events of joking within the Jewish community. Furthermore, the view of Jewish society should be changed from an image of a united whole to a realistic picture of a complex and segmented group, which stratified according to social and economic classes and in which individuals identify each other in terms of social roles and subgroup affiliations.'

The originality of my project is therefore plural. The central research questions will expand the scope of previously conducted research by addressing issues that have been overlooked thus far. My doctoral research will therefore not only ask 'What were the functions of humour and laughter deployed by European Jews during the Holocaust?', but also question 'What did humour and laughter mean at the time? How were humour and laughter expressed and understood in a plural European Jewish community?' In turn, this will inevitably involve the consideration of issues of gender, class, religiosity space and time. As researchers who have

worked on the subject have noted, humour was indeed a fundamental coping mechanism to adapt to an environment tainted with increasing tragedies and personal hardships. Did it, however, operate in the same way from one social group to another?

While earlier works on humour during the Holocaust often relied on the use of memoirs, oral testimonies and/or interviews with Holocaust survivors, this PhD primarily uses first-hand accounts of Holocaust victims and uses the vast collection of documents from the Ringelblum Archive written in Polish and Yiddish. Its invaluable collection of diaries, notes, letters and monographs written in the Warsaw Ghetto by a wide range of individuals provides a formidable gateway to understand how residents of the Warsaw ghetto experienced and understood the events happening at the time. I would like to put forward an analysis that looks at humour not only as a weapon but also as a language allowing individuals to reflect and engage with a rapidly changing environment. In particular, I am concerned with investigating the multi-layered nature of Jewish responses to Nazi policies of persecution and extermination rather than showcasing a homogenous and idealised Jewish community.