SYDNEY JEWISH MUSEUM
WHERE HISTORY HAS A VOICE

MUSINGS

SJM Journal Vol. 4, No. 1.

ISSN 2982-2815

Musings: Sydney Jewish Museum Journal
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SYDNEY JEWISH MUSEUM

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Cover Photo Source:
Olga Horak (1926–2024), Figurative, 1970s,
oil on canvas, 65 x 51 cm, private collection.
Photo Jana Vytrhlik.

About SJM's Musings

Musings: SJM Journal is a cross-disciplinary, scholarly and educational publication that promotes research into all topics relevant to the Sydney Jewish Museum's exhibitions, collection and programming. These include the Holocaust, Human Rights, Jewish culture as well as Holocaust memorialisation, Civics and Citizenship education and Museum Studies. It publishes articles on these subjects both to increase knowledge of these topics, and to improve and share expertise in educating about these difficult pasts.

All submitted articles undergo rigorous peer review, based on initial editor screening and anonymised refereeing by at least two external scholars.

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Letter from the Editors

In this volume of *Musings* we bring our readers a range of fascinating articles on various aspects of Jewish studies and reviews of three recent books by Australian authors. Returning to the journal's original purview to explore questions relevant to the focus of the Sydney Jewish Museum (Holocaust history, Jewish culture and Human Rights), the articles included in this volume consider issues pertinent to both the Sydney Jewish Museum as an institution and the wider Sydney Jewish community.

We open with an article by Alexandra A. Morehead, a PhD candidate at Brown University (Rhode Island) who served as the SJM's Severyn and Frieda Pejsachowicz Memorial Research Fellow in 2024. In her article, Morehead explores an ecological approach to Holocaust museology, using the SJM's existing Holocaust exhibition and archival collection as a case study.

In 2024, the SJM and broader Sydney community lost one of its founders and longtime volunteers, Olga Horak OAM. While Olga is remembered by the thousands who passed through the museum's doors as a Holocaust survivor who dedicated her life to sharing her experiences in hopes of contributing to a better world, she is less well known as a prolific artist. Jana Vytrhlik offers a tribute to Olga's oeuvre through an in-depth exploration of her work, its visual and cultural significance, as well as its varied influences.

For many members of our community who came to Australia – whether survivors of the Holocaust, refugees from North Africa and the Middle East, or migrants from the former USSR – the acceptance as they experienced as Jews in this multicultural society affirmed the title of "Lucky Country". However, in the two and a half years since 7 October 2023, Australian Jewry, like its counterparts across the world, has experienced an exponential rise in antisemitism. Ron Spielman, Lynette Chazan, Paul Foulkes, George Halasz, Ilana Nayman and Garry Walter address this concerning trend and its manifestations from a psychiatric perspective. While the authors do not offer answers or solutions, their perspective "has the capacity to usefully inform debate and discussion about the issue."

This issue also includes reviews of recent books in Jewish and Holocaust studies by Australian authors. Kip Green reviews Jana Vytrhlik's *Treasures of Old Sydney: The Story of a Visual Heritage* (2024, winner of the 2025 Leslie and Sophie Caplan Prize for Jewish Non-Fiction). Lynne Swarts reviews *Ruptured: Jewish Women in Australia Reflect on Life Post-October 7* (2025), an anthology edited by Lee Koffman and Tamar Paluch. Concluding this issue is Erin O'Brien's review of Graham Blewitt and Mark Aarons anthology *Nazis in Australia: The Special Investigations Unit, 1897–1994* (2025).

Finally, as we publish a new volume of *Musings* we bid farewell to the journal's founder and co-editor, Professor Avril Alba. We thank Professor Alba for her tireless efforts and dedication to *Musings* over the years and introduce Dr Michael Abrahams-Sprod (Chair of Hebrew and Jewish Studies, University of Sydney) in her stead. We look forward to a fruitful co-editorship and the journal continuing to go from strength to strength.

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Where Memory Takes Root: Ecology and the Material Conditions of Holocaust History at the Sydney Jewish Museum

Alexandra A. Morehead

Abstract

This article advances an ecological approach to Holocaust museology, arguing that environmental processes condition how evidence forms and becomes knowable prior to historical interpretation. Ecology, as the term operates here, refers to an epistemological framework that attends to the relational and material conditioning through which traces of violence acquire legibility across successive environments. Drawing on the Sydney Jewish Museum as its primary case study, the article traces a specific strand of this inquiry through forensic artifacts recovered from Ukrainian mass graves by the Australian War Crimes Commission whose condition reflects decades of humidity, sedimentation, and biological decay. The article argues that at the Sydney Jewish Museum, curatorial conservation and educational practice already function as ecological practices in this precise sense, maintaining the material conditions of historical understanding through deliberate mediation and institutional interdependence. By extending the insights of environmental history, this reframing offers Holocaust museology a methodological vocabulary for analysing the relationship between environmental conditioning and the formation of historical knowledge in the museum setting.

Key words

Environmental history; Holocaust studies; Museum studies; Memory studies; Material culture; Forensic evidence; Ecology of violence; Sydney Jewish Museum

Introduction

They could feel the heat even under the canopy of pines outside Serniki.[1] It was the summer of 1990, and the Australian team worked in air thick with dust and mosquitoes, their clothes damp as they traced trenches through sandy soil. At the edge of the clearing, Professor Richard Wright crouched over a shallow trench, reading the earth for signs of disturbance. Ancient bands of orange iron ran in clean lines, but here the striations blurred into a sandy smear. This was not natural weathering. Soil composition allowed forensic inference: something had shifted the earth. He signaled to press on. Shovels and backhoes moved in, and on 27 June 1990, the first bodies surfaced two meters down: skeletons in boots, hair still plaited, the bloom of a tiny blue button caught in the sand.[2]

The grave stretched forty meters, a deliberate rectangle sloping at careful angles. A ramp wide enough to drive people down into the pit had been cut into the eastern wall, just as the witness had claimed.[3] As the pit widened, the design of the grave revealed itself. In one section the victims lay in ordered rows, shot methodically in the back of the head. At the southern end of the grave, skeletons twisted together in disorder, with some skulls crushed by rifle butts.[4] The dead testified to the rhythm of the killing as beginning with grim precision and ending in a hurried slaughter. The artificial leg of a man remembered locally as Yankel Kaz surfaced where it had been discarded.[5] What memory alone had preserved, the soil confirmed.

Forty-eight years earlier, in the autumn of 1942, the Jews of Serniki were marched from the ghetto to this forest clearing.[6] The ground was soft, not yet frozen, easy to dig and easier to fill. Mothers clutching children, the elderly and infirm were herded down the ramp to lie prone, where they were shot or beaten before the earth closed over them. More than five hundred people were killed in a single day.[7] For decades, the forest kept silent until the exhumation in the heat of summer gave material form to what memory alone had carried—an atrocity written into soil and bone.

1. I would like to thank the education and curatorial teams at the Sydney Jewish Museum for their generous support of this research. I owe special thanks to Dr Jonathan Kaplan for supervising my fellowship and for his incisive guidance throughout this project; to Emeritus Professor Konrad Kwiet for granting me access to his personal archive on the forests and the Final Solution and for sharing his invaluable expertise on the Australian war crimes investigations; to Professor Avril Alba, whose research on Holocaust museology and the Sydney Jewish Museum deeply inspired this article; and to Roslyn Sugarman and the curatorial team for facilitating access to collection materials during the museum's renovation. I am equally grateful to Sandy Hollis and the education department for their insight into the museum's pedagogical work, and to Greta Goldberg and her family for sponsoring my 2024 fellowship at the Sydney Jewish Museum.

2. David Bevan, *A Case to Answer: The Story of Australia's First European War Crimes Prosecution* (Melbourne: Macmillan, 1994), 81; see also Richard Wright, "Where Are the Bodies? In the Ground," *The Public Historian* 32, no. 1 (Winter 2010): 98-99; Peggy O'Donnell, "'Gateway to Hell': A Nazi Mass Grave, Forensic Scientists, and an Australian War Crimes Trial," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 32, no. 3 (Winter 2018): 369–70.

3. Bevan, *A Case to Answer*, 98; Wright, "Where Are the Bodies?", 98-99; O'Donnell, "'Gateway to Hell'," 370.

4. Bevan, *A Case to Answer*, 87; Wright, "Where Are the Bodies?", 99; O'Donnell, "'Gateway to Hell'," 371.

5. Bevan, *A Case to Answer*, 85.

6. O'Donnell, "'Gateway to Hell'," 362, 365-66.

7. Bevan, *A Case to Answer*, 87.

As Professor Wright later observed, "We found these claims about the Serniki grave to be materialised in the soil."[8] The ramp, the orderly rows of bodies, the fractured skulls, the artificial leg: each detail preserved in testimony was corroborated by the ground itself. Yet the meaning of this recovery exceeded its evidentiary function. The Serniki excavation unfolded within a distinctly Australian framework of justice and memory.[9] The Special Investigations Unit (SIU), established in 1987 after public outcry that Nazi collaborators had settled in Australia, had tasked Wright, a Sydney-based archaeologist, with verifying whether the bodies alleged by witnesses truly lay beneath the pine forest. The exhumation, conducted jointly with Soviet scientists in the summer of 1990, was the first forensic mission by any Western war-crimes unit to recover Holocaust-era remains.[10] What emerged from the sand outside Serniki thus bridged continents and institutions: European atrocity and Australian accountability. The objects they retrieved entered a chain of custody that would end not only in legal archives but in the vitrines of the Sydney Jewish Museum (SJM).

What this scene makes visible is that before historical interpretation begins, environmental conditions have already shaped what evidence survives and how it appears. Evidence does not arrive intact from the past. Rather, it bears the mark of soil chemistry, burial depth, seasonal exposure, and concealment. Knowledge of the Holocaust is therefore formed through material mediation before it is ever narrated or theorised. In the context of the SIU investigation, the soil at Serniki was not backdrop but a condition shaping what evidence could be recovered; its texture, composition, and corrosion patterns enabled investigators to reconstruct the sequence of killing, and its stratigraphy preserved testimony beyond words. At the same time, while such environmental factors greatly impact the chances of survival and death during genocide, they do not act with intention. Instead, features such as soil composition and climate structure the field within which human action and later interpretation occur. To trace how Holocaust memory moves from landscape to archive to

8. Wright, "Where Are the Bodies?", 99.
9. David Fraser, *Daviborshch's Cart: Narrating the Holocaust in Australian War Crimes Trials* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2011), see esp. chapters 2, 3, and 8.
10. O'Donnell, "'Gateway to Hell'," 362, 368-69.

gallery therefore requires attending to these environmental mediations through which violence becomes knowable.

This journey from ground to courtroom to museum traces the arc of an ecological approach to Holocaust museology, one that attends to how environmental processes condition the formation and legibility of historical evidence. The Holocaust museum-archive is therefore not a transparent repository of the past but the product of material mediations that precede and shape interpretation. Violence, concealment, preservation, excavation, conservation, and display are not separate stages but successive movements in which material traces are altered and stabilised. Each environment conditions what survives and how it becomes legible as evidence. During the Holocaust, human actors made decisions, enacted violence upon others, and bore responsibility. Yet environmental processes shaped the conditions within which those actions unfolded and the form in which they are later known. When objects they left behind enter the museum, they enter another environment that continues this mediation. Architectural space, conservation practices, and display framing structure the conditions under which material trace becomes public knowledge. Clarifying what this ecological framework entails requires positioning it within the broader theoretical conversation from which it partially draws.

Contemporary theoretical scholarship has emphasised the relational entanglement of humans, objects, and environments in the production of meaning.[11] Building on that insight, this article directs attention toward the question of how the material conditions that enable such encounters are themselves historically formed. Environmental processes condition the survival and legibility of material traces before any act of interpretation begins, and museums function as institutions that sustain and mediate these conditions across time. In the context of genocide, attending to such conditioning clarifies how material circumstances structured the field of violence and shaped the form in which it is later known. An ecology of the Holocaust, in this sense, names the historically specific mediation through which material traces become evidence

11. Actor-Network Theory, most closely associated with Bruno Latour and Michel Callon, proposes that humans and non-human entities participate symmetrically in networks of action, encouraging analysts to suspend hierarchical distinctions between persons and objects for methodological purposes. This approach has productively illuminated the relational character of technological systems, network infrastructures, and material culture. While this article shares ANT's attention to relational mediation, it directs that attention toward the formation of historical evidence rather than towards a theory of distributed agency in the Holocaust museum environment. Its concern lies not in attributing agency to objects but in tracing how material conditions shape what becomes legible as historical knowledge. In the context of genocide, ontological flattening carries particular risks. The Holocaust depended upon the systematic dehumanisation of Jews and the bureaucratic reduction of persons to disposable matter. Analytical symmetry between humans and objects, even when deployed heuristically, can obscure the moral asymmetry that remains central to historical interpretation. For historians and historically-minded museum practitioners, an approach grounded in evidentiary formation preserves the moral hierarchy while still attending to material mediation. By focusing on how environmental processes condition concealment, preservation, excavation, conservation, and display, the analysis clarifies the material infrastructure through which violence becomes archive and archive becomes memory. Ecology here, therefore, functions as a historically specific account of epistemic mediation rather than as a general ontology of distributed action.

and evidence becomes knowledge. Within this chain, the museum constitutes another environment in which an object's material condition and interpretive frame are altered. It is epistemic in this sense, structuring the conditions under which traces are encountered, stabilised, and interpreted as history. Just as soil chemistry and forest cover shaped concealment and preservation in the landscape, the museum's material and spatial arrangements shape how those traces become legible within public memory. This analysis does not presume to determine how individual visitors interpret these encounters. Rather, it examines how material and spatial conditions in the museum structure the field within which interpretation becomes possible. The museum does not act with intention but provides the conditions within which human judgment unfolds.

To understand this mediation requires following material traces across the environments through which their meaning shifts. The narrative movement of this article follows the environments through which material traces acquire historical meaning. While historians routinely trace the movement of texts and legal categories across contexts, here, the object of tracing is material *trace* itself. The analysis begins in the landscape, where concealment, decay, and preservation condition what historical evidence of atrocity survives. It then turns to forensic and juridical settings, where these material traces are stabilised as evidence. Finally, it examines the museum, where those traces are recontextualised within architectural and interpretive space. At each stage, environmental conditions alter the form in which the past appears. Throughout, human actors interpret, testify, and bear responsibility, while environmental processes shape the material field within which those interpretations become possible. In tracing this passage across environments, the article demonstrates how Holocaust memory is not transmitted intact but emerges through successive acts of material mediation. In order to understand what an ecological approach to Holocaust museology makes possible, it is first necessary to examine how the field has addressed the

relationship between material evidence and the conditions that form it.

Changing Landscapes of Holocaust Studies

From the outset, the narration of Holocaust history has been shaped by questions of scope and voice. Raul Hilberg's *The Destruction of the European Jews* (1961) offered the field its first comprehensive framework, tracing the bureaucratic "destruction process" through the categories of perpetrators, victims, and bystanders.[12] The power of Hilberg's work lay in its precision: the extermination of European Jewry was examined not through intent but through structure, in the slow accretion of administrative steps that made genocide possible. Yet in that precision, lived experience often receded. Survivors were present, but their voices were not yet the organising principle of historical understanding.[13] The bureaucratic paper trail that anchored Hilberg's narrative also defined how museums first visualised the Holocaust as a system of documents rather than a world of matter.[14] Exhibitions displayed decrees, deportation orders, and maps to render the scale of the Final Solution. Though unacknowledged, the landscape was already inscribed in this historiography not merely as backdrop, but as the terrain across which destruction moved, was administered, and was made possible.

By the 1980s, Saul Friedländer urged historians toward what he called an "integrated history," one that preserved the chronology of Hilberg's destruction process but synchronised it with the immediacy of personal voice.[15] The shift was more than methodological—placing the survivor at the moral core of Holocaust historiography. Where Hilberg anchored the Holocaust in bureaucratic documentation, Friedländer rendered it legible through the texture of lived experience. Testimony did not replace documentation but instead reoriented historical attention toward the lived environments in which policy was experienced. At the same time, the Holocaust museum became the space in which that integration took material form.

12. Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, rev. ed. (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1985), 8.
13. Saul Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews, Volume 1: The Years of Persecution, 1933–1939* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), 22-28.
14. Avril Alba, *The Holocaust Memorial Museum: Sites of Conscience and Curatorial Practice* (London: Routledge, 2015).
15. Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews*, 22-28.

The SJM, founded in 1992 by Holocaust survivors, is a remarkable architectural expression of this historiographical turn. Where scholars sought to integrate documentation with testimony, curators and educators attempted to bring together memory and material presence. As Avril Alba has shown, the SJM's permanent exhibition was conceived within an intentionalist frame but articulated in a particularist register.[16] Their 1986 proposal envisioned the space as "a tribute to survivors, perpetuating the truth through their eyes and their words."[17] The museum's first curator, Sylvia Rosenblum, conceived of the space as fulfilling the Jewish injunction to remember, or *zachor*, and adopted the survivor perspective of the Holocaust as the final and ultimate expression of European antisemitism.[18] While informational panels and showcases offered historical scaffolding, they were designed primarily as a backdrop against which survivors narrated their own stories. The chosen site, Darlinghurst's 1923 Maccabean Hall, deeply reflected this ethos. The building, originally erected as a Jewish war memorial, links local and global histories as a monument to one generation of loss, became a vessel for another's experience.[19] Its architecture is the physical manifestation of *zachor*: the central staircase, whose ascending angles form a *Magen David*, embodies the integration of structure and spirit. In doing so, it spatially embodies a logic of interdependence between structure, memory, and material presence. The survivor's voice, the artifact salvaged from Europe, and the Australian architecture that enclosed them operate in relation, each conditioning how the others are encountered and understood. Light, temperature, and sound were carefully modulated to preserve fragile artifacts and to frame the atmosphere in which testimony was delivered. Testimony does not exist apart from the material conditions that sustain and transmit it. In circulating through the artifacts and atmosphere that preserve, amplify, and translate it, testimony reaches audiences in forms that ground its claims in physical presence. In other words, the museum does not simply narrate survivor history but structures the conditions under which voice and object are encountered together.

16. Avril Alba, "Australian Holocaust Museums: From Particular to Universal," *Journal of Museum Education* 49, no. 1 (2024): 14-18; Avril Alba, "Transmitting the Survivor's Voice: Redeveloping the Sydney Jewish Museum," *Dapim: Studies on the Holocaust* 30, no. 3 (2016): 16.
17. *A Proposal for the Establishment of a Jewish Holocaust Museum in Sydney*, 1986, 2. Sydney Jewish Museum Institutional Archives.
18. Sylvia Rosenblum, "Are Museums the Best Place for the Memorialization of the Holocaust?," quoted in Alba, "Australian Holocaust Museums," 16; Alba, "Transmitting the Survivor's Voice," 16.
19. Avril Alba, "Integrity and Relevance: The Sydney Jewish Museum at 25," in *Integrity and Relevance: The Sydney Jewish Museum at 25* (Sydney: Sydney Jewish Museum, 2017), 109-111; Alba, "Transmitting the Survivor's Voice," 14-18.

The timing of the SJM's founding situated it within a shifting legal and environmental context. In 1986, the Australian government established the SIU to pursue alleged Nazi war criminals living in the country.[20] This arm of the Australian War Crimes Commission brought the search for justice, and for physical evidence of atrocity, into public life. Its field missions to Serniki, Ustinovka, and Gnivan in Ukraine connected moral responsibility to landscape. When the objects recovered in those excavations, including bullet cartridges, bottle fragments, and dentures, arrived in Sydney, they entered a new interpretive environment. Their transposition from field to museum marked a change in the conditions under which they could signify. What had functioned as juridical proof in one environment became pedagogical matter in another. The objects did not change in substance, rather, the environment through which they moved altered their meaning.

The Australian context shaped this translation in crucial ways. The SJM arose in a multicultural society negotiating its own reckonings with exclusion and migration.[21] Survivor memory took root in a civic environment concerned with justice and belonging. This civic environment, shaped by a national forensic project and an immigrant community asserting visibility, imbued the museum with a distinctive tone that was pragmatic, affective, and self-consciously material all at once.[22] Its leadership was not abstractly adopting new theories of memory, but instead were responding to the moral and environmental realities around them. The museum thus became the site where intellectual developments in Holocaust interpretation took material form within a specific civic and climatic setting.

From its inception, then, the SJM reflected many of the questions that would later be articulated through environmental approaches. It made visible how historical understanding depends on the conditions that sustain it, such as how the soil of a Ukrainian forest could become the pedagogical substrate of a Sydney gallery, and how legal inquiry could crystallise into curatorial ethics. The museum's architecture, collection, and community together demonstrate that the Holocaust cannot be separated from

20. Fraser, *Daviborshch's Cart*, 60-61.
21. Alba, "Integrity and Relevance."
22. Alba, "Transmitting the Survivor's Voice," 244–45.

the material and social worlds that continue to hold its traces.

It is this proposition that recent scholarship has begun to articulate more explicitly.[23] Emerging in the 1970s, environmental history called attention to soils, forests, waters, and climates as conditions shaping human history.[24] Its premise was not to diminish human agency but to situate human action within material conditions that make it possible. Rather than displacing human agency, such approaches clarify the material field within which human action unfolds. In the context of the Holocaust, this perspective clarifies not only how violence unfolded in particular terrains, but how those terrains conditioned what could later be recovered, preserved, and known. The SJM's foundation, grounded in both forensic and museological translation, anticipated this intellectual development by treating landscape not as backdrop but as evidentiary substrate.

Only recently did Holocaust studies begin to put this principle into practice. Over the past two decades, Holocaust studies has expanded its analytical vocabulary through multiple methodological approaches. Memory studies, particularly in the work of James Young and Marianne Hirsch, shifted attention from event to transmission, asking how photographs, memoirs, and rituals mediated memory across generations.[25] Cultural and gender histories shifted the focus to everyday life and embodied experience, emphasising women's roles in caregiving and hiding, and the corporeal realities of hunger, illness, and sexual violence. The material turn drew attention to the objects and images through which the Holocaust is remembered, including clothing, household goods, and the haunting iconography of camp photography. Each approach complicated the traditional triad of perpetrator, victim, and bystander, pressing the field toward a more textured account of human experience. Collectively, they reoriented attention toward the concreteness of history as carriers of human experience. While these approaches foreground materiality and space, they have rarely examined how those environments shape

23. The "environmental question" in Holocaust studies has only recently gained traction and remains contested, particularly over how to recognise the agency of landscapes and nonhuman actors without obscuring human intent. Scholars such as Tim Cole and Jessica Rapson have examined forests, soil, and decay as active memorial agents, while cautioning against aestheticising nature or diffusing moral responsibility (Tim Cole 2014, 666–67; Rapson 2015, 31–33). Omer Bartov has similarly warned that ecological framings risk distorting the Holocaust's fundamentally human authorship (Bartov 2020, 423–25). *The Journal of Genocide Research*'s 2020 special issue on the environmental history of the Holocaust sought to identify a method through interdisciplinary approaches to this question while insisting that Holocaust studies must not abandon its moral core (Małczyński et al. 2020, 183–85).

24. William Cronon, "A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative," *Journal of American History* 78, no. 4 (1992): 1347–76.

25. James E. Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993); Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

the evidentiary forms through which the Holocaust is later reconstructed and taught.

Museums translated these scholarly developments into curatorial practice. Exhibitions began to place testimony at the centre, echoing the imperatives of memory studies. They incorporated gendered perspectives and embodied narratives, attuned to everyday life as well as to death. They reimagined objects not as illustrative props but as material anchors of testimony, as shoes, letters, and photographs carried the traces of lived experience. They experimented with immersive installations and spatial reconstructions that allowed visitors to apprehend the geography of genocide.[26] At the SJM, these currents produced layered exhibitions that remained survivor-centred but drew on multimedia, architecture, and artifact to deepen the encounter. Yet even as curators wove together voice and material presence, the epistemic implications of this mediation, that is, how environments condition what can be known, remained largely implicit.

Academic historians, by contrast, have hesitated to follow where practice leads. Survivor testimonies often describe the environment as decisive, such as how hunger was worsened by harsh winters or how sheltering in the forest saved lives. Yet these dynamics, while vividly present in memory, have not been fully conceptualised as historical forces. Environmental approaches to Holocaust history face a persistent ethical tension. To describe snow as "betraying" fugitives or forests as "harbouring" escapees risks anthropomorphising nature in ways that blur moral accountability.[27] However, a small body of scholarship has begun to navigate this tension. Tim Cole's studies of forested landscapes, Jessica Rapson's analyses of commemorative ecologies, and Ewa Domańska's notion of ecological witness each expand the frame, though attempts to formalise an environmental approach have revealed dangers of conceptual drift. As Omer Bartov has cautioned, the Holocaust was a profoundly human crime.[28] Any framework that obscures that fact risks distortion. For this reason, many historians have preferred to leave environmental dynamics implicit rather than risk misattribut-

26. Avril Alba, *The Holocaust Memorial Museum: Sacred Secular Space* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Alberto Giordano, Anne Knowles, and Tim Cole, "Geographies of the Holocaust," in *Geographies of the Holocaust* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014).

27. On the broader historiographical debate surrounding environmental approaches to Holocaust history, see footnote 23.

28. Omer Bartov, "What Is the Environmental History of the Holocaust?," *Journal of Genocide Research* 24, no. 3 (2022): 419–28, https://doi.org/10.1080/14623528.2021.1924587.

ion. The task, therefore, is not to assign agency to landscape, but to clarify how material conditions structure the field within which human action unfolds and how its traces endure.

While scholarship may deliberate over definitional boundaries, museums must make interpretive decisions in practice. A corroded cartridge, a soil-stained button, or a shard of an oxidised green bottle, recovered from a mass grave and displayed in a case at the SJM, cannot remain inert. They must be explained for audiences who have never seen the pit from which they were taken. The very act of exhibition compels narration. That narration makes visible what historical writing often leaves implicit: that testimony and artifact are always encountered through the environments that carry them forward. In the investigation, a witness stood in a forest clearing, spoke before investigators in a courtroom, and finally saw the culmination of that process represented within a gallery. At each stage, the surrounding conditions altered what could be preserved, seen, and understood. It is in this chain of translation from ground to courtroom to museum that the ecological dimensions of Holocaust history become unavoidable. To recognise this is not to assign agency to landscape, but to acknowledge that material conditions structure the field within which action occurred and within which its traces endure. Where scholarship hesitates, museums must translate. It is in this pedagogical practice, already embedded in the survivor-authored DNA of institutions like the SJM, that an ecology of the Holocaust as an account of how environments and human lives were bound together in destruction and survival can most fully be articulated.

The SJM's display of the Australian War Crimes Commission materials exemplifies this. The objects are not illustrative props but forensic fragments, material witnesses that draw together human suffering and environmental trace. Their placement in the museum forces audiences to confront the Holocaust not only as a human act but as one inscribed in landscape. This, in effect, is the ecological method already practiced by museums: an ethics of interpr-

etation that keeps the human at the centre while acknowledging the material systems that register and sustain memory.

The challenge, then, is not whether the environment matters but how to narrate it responsibly. Museums may offer a path forward. Such narration must preserve the primacy of human voice while situating that voice within lived environments. Because artifacts cannot remain inert, curators must weave them into stories that preserve the moral centrality of testimony while situating that testimony in lived environments. Educators may align the evidentiary with the affective, helping visitors “hear” the victim's voice without losing moral clarity. A cartridge is understood through the witness who heard it fired. A green bottle fragment through accounts of drink distributed to executioners. Dentures and hair through testimony describing shallow graves where bodies were left to decay. These are ecological stories, but they are told through testimony and pedagogy rather than abstract theorisation. In this way, museums demonstrate how an environmental history of the Holocaust can be written in narrative form as an ecology that acknowledges the entanglement of people, places, and conditions without ever displacing the human core of the crime. To name these curatorial translations as ecological is not to introduce theory from above, but to clarify the structure already at work by holding matter, voice, and landscape in deliberate relation. The SJM offers an unusually precise instance of this structure, having assembled its core collection from the same forensic investigations in which environmental conditions first shaped what could be recovered and known.

The Sydney Jewish Museum as Environmental Archive

The SJM is built around a central staircase, its ascending angles forming a *Magen David* that rises through the building's core. At each level, visitors pause before corners where fragments of the Holocaust are anchored in glass. In one of the quietest corners, until the current renovations began, stood a vitrine titled *Unearthing the Evidence*. Within lay objects recovered from mass graves in Ukraine:

eight corroded cartridge casings, a jagged green bottle fragment, a set of dentures with a fractured plate and a dislodged tooth, a blue button, a necklace, a watch threaded on a length of cord, a small bundle of hair.[29] Each artifact bears the imprint of its environment. Their present condition is not incidental but the product of soil chemistry, moisture, mineral content, and time. The cartridges, their surfaces eaten away by rust, registered the chemistry of the soil that had both concealed and preserved them. Their oxidation traces the dampness of the ravine while their warped edges recalled the mechanical regularity of the killing that placed them there. The bottle fragment points not only to the intimate violence of execution but also to the rituals of environment and body that accompanied it: drink dulling human conscience, the shattering of glass against forest ground. The dentures, the tooth still clinging to its broken plate, are unmistakably human, shaped by decades of burial and exposure. Even the button and necklace, fragments of daily dress, carry the uneven patina of decomposition, their materials responding differently to moisture, mineral, and time. The case thus functions not merely as display but as a preservation of environmental process, holding within glass the material consequences of landscape. No sound accompanies the display except the steady hum of the air-handling system that keeps the air dry enough to arrest further corrosion. It makes visible another layer of mediation: the museum must now create an artificial climate to stabilise the traces left by the original one. The vitrine preserves not only artifacts but the environmental conditions that shaped them, rendering the museum a secondary archive of landscape.

Together, these fragments demonstrate how destruction and its afterlife are conditioned by environment. The *Unearthing the Evidence* showcase thus offered more than an arrangement of artifacts, presenting a material record of how atrocity is inscribed simultaneously in bodies and landscapes. The vitrine, then, operates as an environmental archive. It preserves not only objects, but also the processes that altered them, stabilising corrosion, decay, and mineral trace as historical evidence. In the still

29. Sydney Jewish Museum, Unearthing the Evidence, exhibition description (archival copy, 2023); see also Graham Blewitt, "The Serniki Mass Grave," Graham T. Blewitt: Nazi War Crimes Investigations in Australia, accessed October 2025, https://grahamtblewitt.com/the-serniki-mass-grave/.

air of that corner, testimony, material trace, and environmental process are held in deliberate relation. The case teaches, through its very arrangement, that to recover the past is to attend not only to what was done but to the earth that bears its imprint, and to recognise that memory depends on the physical conditions that allow material evidence to endure.

"Unearthing the Evidence" and the Pedagogy of Display

The *Unearthing the Evidence* showcase began far from the quiet climate of the SJM. Its artifacts were first retrieved from the ground by the Australian SIU, whose missions to Serniki, Ustinovka, and Gnivan between 1990 and 1992 were part of an ambitious, belated effort to locate and prosecute suspected Nazi war criminals living in Australia.[30] The SIU's 1990 excavation at Serniki marked a turning point in the practice of Holocaust investigation. It was the first time a Western government undertook the forensic recovery of human remains from a wartime mass grave for the purposes of legal prosecution.[31] These were not excavations so much as they were acts of forensic witnessing, in which archaeology, jurisprudence, and moral repair converged. The site, located on the edge of the village and long since overgrown with pine, required investigators to locate traces that had been absorbed into the natural world. Beneath the forest floor, they uncovered the remains of more than five hundred victims, predominantly women and children, together with cartridge casings, fragments of clothing, dentures, jewellery, and shards of glass.[32] The exhumation confirmed the sequence of events known from testimony: that Serniki's Jewish population had been assembled, marched to the outskirts, and executed in groups. On the surface, this was a triumph of forensic method as evidence had systematically been gathered that corroborated historical testimony. Yet the deeper the investigators dug, the more they confronted the limitations of the very procedures they relied on. The grave was not a static archive of crime, but an environment shaped by ongoing material processes. Cartridges oxidised

30. Fraser, *Daviborshch's Cart*; See also Blewitt, "The Serniki Mass Grave."
31. O'Donnell, "'A Gateway to Hell'," 363-65.
32. O'Donnell, "'A Gateway to Hell'," 362-363; Wright, "Where are the Bodies?" 99.

differently depending on acidity. Hair survived only where moisture was low. Bones in clay dissolved faster than those in sand. Soil chemistry, water saturation, and mineral composition thus conditioned both the survival and the legibility of evidence. The altered condition of the remains shaped not only what investigators could recover, but how that recovery would later enter legal and historical interpretation. Tree roots and soil formations had entwined with the remains, creating a stratigraphy that reflected both atrocity and aftermath. The site was both a record of historical violence and a record of environmental change.[33] The violence was human, environmental processes reshaped its material residue.

The exhumation exposed the limits of what might be called forensic positivism: the belief that material traces can yield unambiguous proof if examined with sufficient rigor.[34] The investigators' procedures, including gridding the site, photographing each layer, carefully sealing and labelling samples in sterile bags, aimed to impose order on instability.[35] However, the boundaries between evidence and environment could not be disentangled without distortion. A cartridge embedded in clay was not the same artifact as one resting in dry soil, as it had aged differently and therefore accrued a different meaning.[36] The condition of the site complicated the binaries that legal proceedings depend upon: human versus nonhuman, animate versus inanimate, subject versus context. The epistemic difficulty facing the SIU was not procedural but rooted in the nature of the evidence itself. In other words, the problem lay not in method but in the material form through which the past endured. The mass grave exposed a tension between juridical requirements for stability and the material instability of environmental trace. In the courtroom, evidence must remain stable long enough to sustain judgment. In the earth, evidence continues to transform. The crime was human in origin, but the instability arose from the material conditions in which its traces endured. Legal judgment depends upon fixed categories of proof, yet environmental alteration ensures that evidence remains materially dynamic. The landscape preserves traces over a

33. O'Donnell, "'A Gateway to Hell'," 362-63.
34. Wright, "Where are the Bodies?" 97-99.
35. O'Donnell, "'A Gateway to Hell'," 369-72.
36. Bevan, *A Case to Answer*, 81.

temporality that legal procedure cannot easily accommodate. Environmental processes continue to reshape material evidence long after the act of violence itself.

When the SIU's findings returned to Sydney, their evidentiary function was effectively complete.[37] No convictions would follow as the demands of the courtroom could not be met by the material logic of the earth. Yet in that outcome, another form of interpretation became possible. When the artifacts were transferred to the custody of the newly founded Holocaust museum in Sydney, their moral and historical significance was reinterpreted. The shift from legal evidence to curatorial object marked a change in evidentiary framework. In the courtroom, the cartridge or denture derived significance from its capacity to prove a particular event. In the museum, their significance resided in relation and resonance. The corrosion that complicated legal reliability became, in the museum, evidence of prolonged environmental exposure. The stains, fractures, and mineral growths that complicated identification now testified to time's endurance. What had complicated their authority in law, in effect became central to their interpretive value in the museum.[38] Their altered surfaces reflected decades of burial, moisture, and mineral transfer, making environmental process itself part of the historical record. Their fragility required a different mode of interpretation, one attentive to environmental conditioning rather than juridical stability.

The museum's curators understood this transformation instinctively. They inherited from the investigators not only the objects but the ethic of care that had governed their recovery. None of the artifacts were polished or restored.[39] They were preserved under carefully regulated environmental conditions, making conservation itself a form of acknowledgment. The objects had ceased to function as instruments of proof and had entered a new interpretive framework of remembrance. In this context, interpretation depended on attentiveness to material condition rather than restoration to ideal form. To preserve was to listen, to maintain equilibrium between exposure and protection.

37. Blewitt, "The Serniki Mass Grave."; See also Fraser, *Daviborshch's Cart*, 242-62.

38. This shift in authority reflects a broader argument within museum studies that objects do not possess fixed evidentiary meaning but acquire interpretive force within the institutional frameworks in which they are situated. Eilean Hooper-Greenhill has argued that objects are "polysemic" and "mute," their meanings constructed through the discursive and spatial regimes that frame them. Displayed objects, she writes, are "made meaningful according to the interpretive frameworks within which they are placed," (8) and "things mean differently in different contextual settings" (15). Susan A. Crane similarly contends that museums do not simply transmit stable historical truth but mediate memory through processes of selection, distortion, and narrative framing, such that material fragments acquire meaning through interpretive transformation rather than evidentiary fixity. Within this theoretical tradition, the instability that undermines juridical proof can become the very condition of museological significance. Thus, once they arrived at the SJM, the objects' altered surfaces were not treated as evidentiary deficiencies but were preserved and displayed as material witnesses to environmental process, thereby reconfiguring what had once limited their legal utility into a different form of historical authority. Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture* (London: Routledge, 2000); Susan A. Crane, "Memory, Distortion, and History in the Museum," *History and Theory* 36, no. 4 (1997): 44–63, https://doi.org/10.1111/0018-2656.00030.

39. Roslyn Sugarman, Head Curator, Sydney Jewish Museum, discussion with the author regarding the Unearthing the Evidence display, Sydney, September 2024.

Conservation thus becomes part of the evidentiary chain, shaping how artifacts endure and how they can be understood. What passed from the field to the gallery, then, was not merely evidence but the ethos that ethical responsibility includes the care of material traces through which human history is known. In the quiet of the *Unearthing the Evidence* case, this principle found its fullest expression. The museum did not resolve the contradictions that had confounded the courtroom but rather held them in view as part of the museum's interpretive practice.[40]

The physical arrangement of the display translated the grammar of excavation into curatorial form. In the field, investigators documented the precise position of each find, including its depth, its orientation, the material surrounding it. In the museum, this spatial relationship was re-presented through the vitrine's composition. The cartridges lay in a neat line at the base, their horizontal order evoking both the trench and the firing squad. Above them, the bottle fragment and watch are placed slightly higher, evocative of the mid-layer where soil met air. Diagonally placed are the dentures and the blue button, suggesting the temporal sequence of burial and exposure. The result was a vertical cross-section of the grave, or a curatorial stratigraphy that made visible how violence entered and was preserved within layered environments. In this way, the museum functions as an environmental archive because it preserves not only objects but the spatial logic through which those objects were recovered. The gallery staged the grave as an object of interpretation rather than excavation, its glass walls and lighting isolating the artifacts so that environmental trace could be examined without disturbance.[41]

The museum's ecological work, then, operates across interconnected environments rather than discrete institutional stages. Field, courtroom, gallery, and archive each alter the conditions under which material evidence is encountered and understood. The same ethos of care that guided the investigators in Serniki reappears in the museum's practices of display and storage. Whether under

40. Alba, *The Holocaust Memorial Museum*.
41. *Unearthing the Evidence*, Sydney Jewish Museum, Sydney, (temporarily deinstalled for renovations, 2024).

the lights of the museum floor or in the measured darkness of the storeroom, their preservation requires controlled environmental conditions that stabilise the traces left by earlier exposure and concealment. To tend to them is to acknowledge that revelation and reticence both shape how visitors encounter and interpret human remains and artifacts. This layered ecology extends the museum's founding logic by embedding testimony within systems of environmental control that preserve material trace, into the very infrastructure of preservation itself. In this way, the archive makes visible the museum's environmental method: preservation itself becomes part of how Holocaust history is stabilised and known.

Invisible Ecologies: The Acorn in the Archive

If *Unearthing the Evidence* demonstrates how the museum's curators transformed the residues of the earth into an act of public pedagogy, the museum's archive preserves another, less visible form of ecological mediation. Not every artifact can be placed on public display. Some, by their material nature or their interpretive ambiguity, remain in storage, awaiting future interpretive contexts in which their significance may be reconsidered. These unseen materials may appear secondary to the museum's mission but are surprisingly integral to it. Their preservation depends upon controlled environmental conditions that prevent further decay and maintain evidentiary integrity. The museum's archival practice makes visible the understanding that knowledge is not limited to what is exhibited but depends upon what is preserved and stabilised for future study. One such artifact, drawn from the same fieldwork that produced the Unearthing display, lies within the museum's holdings from the 1992 excavation at Gnivan, Ukraine: a forensic photograph documenting an acorn found among human remains in the soil.[42]

The image is precise and austere: a cluster of human ribs, brittle and grey against the soil, and, nestled among them, the cup of an acorn about a centimetre across.[43] The seed had detached but lay nearby, dislodged yet unmistakably

42. Sydney Jewish Museum, Photographs: Acorn and Acorn Cup among Human Remains, Gnivan, Ukraine, photographed by Sergeant Steve Horne, July 1991, accession nos. M1996/032:141, M1996/032:143, and M1996/033:011, Sydney Jewish Museum Collection, Sydney.
43. SJM, M1996/033:011.

linked. Investigators recorded the detail with the same diligence applied to cartridges, textiles, and dentures. Its provenance was logged as an oak, genus *Quercus robur*, common to the mixed forests of Podolia. Its state of maturity was also noted, as the acorn had ripened in the late summer of 1942. That botanical detail helped establish the massacre's chronology within the late summer of 1942. The vegetation suggested a mast year, a rare surge in the oak's reproductive cycle that followed several years of scarcity. During mast years, acorns accumulate in large quantities, a seasonal pattern that coincided with the period of mass killings in the region. The seasonal cycle of oak reproduction coincided with the systematic destruction of Jewish communities in Podolia. As the landscape was in bloom, the human world was collapsing. The acorn's presence situates the killings within ongoing ecological cycles that continued according to biological rhythms. These ecological rhythms intersected with human violence but operated according to different temporal scales.

Gnivan lies nearly two hundred kilometres south of Serniki, in a zone where oak and beech forest give way to agricultural clearings and loess-rich soil. Where Serniki's grave was veiled beneath a postwar pine plantation, Gnivan's grave lay within an open agricultural landscape.[44] When the SIU began work there in May 1992, the contrast was striking. The excavation team faced neither dense roots nor waterlogged clay, but compact loam patterned by leaves and limestone fragments. The grave held 102 victims, their positions largely undisturbed after nearly fifty years. Stratigraphic layers were clearly visible, alternating bands of brown soil and pale ash. These soil conditions produced unusually clear stratigraphic visibility: where Serniki's postwar forest altered and obscured material traces, Gnivan's open conditions preserved stratigraphic relationships with comparatively little disruption. Among the skeletal remains, the investigators found cartridge cases, wire, dentures, jewellery, and the single acorn, logged beside the individual marked No. 00050. Its inclusion in the record followed standard evidentiary procedure, yet it expanded the range of materials considered probative. The

44. Blewitt, "The Serniki Mass Grave."

acorn demonstrated that environmental data could corroborate testimonial and forensic evidence, linking seasonal rhythms to the temporal coordinates of atrocity. Oak reproductive cycles provided chronological markers that investigators could use to situate the killings within seasonal time.[45]

When the materials from Gnivan were transferred to Sydney, the acorn entered a new institutional and environmental context of preservation.[46] No longer functioning as a datum within a criminal investigation, it was catalogued and preserved within the museum's archival system, where environmental controls regulate temperature, humidity, and light exposure. Unlike the objects displayed in *Unearthing the Evidence*, it was never mounted for exhibition. Its organic fragility made long-term exposure impossible, and its evidentiary significance is not immediately legible without contextual explanation. Yet in its invisibility the acorn illustrates another dimension of the museum's institutional work: the quiet work of stewardship that sustains meaning beyond display. The SJM has long understood itself as an institution of transmission, designed to communicate history through voice, presence, and encounter.[47] Testimony sits at its centre with survivors narrating their stories in the first person, and the museum's architecture organised around that oral core. The acorn extends that conception of transmission by demonstrating that material conditions also shape how testimony is preserved and interpreted.

This expansion situates the museum's human-centred pedagogy within the material conditions that sustain it. The acorn's transfer from field to archive demonstrates how evidentiary material is recontextualised within educational frameworks. In the courtroom, the acorn would have served as botanical proof, a temporal marker confirming the month of death. In the museum, its evidentiary function shifts from forensic proof to contextual interpretation. The museum's collections therefore include materials altered by environmental processes that condition how human actions are later documented. To bring such materials into curatorial care is to acknowledge that the physical world

46. Blewitt, "The Serniki Mass Grave."
47. Alba, "Transmitting the Survivor's Voice."

retains traces that historians and curators interpret as evidence. The acorn's presence within the archive thus shows how soil chemistry, vegetation, and climate shape the preservation of material trace, and how the museum's work extends this preservation into institutional space.

So, too, the acorn's archival preservation exemplifies the SJM's ethos of attentiveness. Organic matter continues to deteriorate unless stabilised through controlled environmental conditions. The museum's conservators have chosen not to mount or restore it, stabilising it within controlled temperature and humidity to slow further deterioration. This decision reflects an institutional ethic of conservation. Its condition demonstrates that preservation sometimes requires limiting display in order to maintain evidentiary integrity. If the *Unearthing the Evidence* showcase represents the museum's public exhibition practices, the acorn belongs to its archival preservation practices. Together, they form a single interpretive continuum where exhibition depends on archival preservation, and preservation depends on interpretive frameworks that render material trace meaningful. Each depends on the other for the museum's overall function.

In its current state, unseen by visitors and consulted only occasionally by scholars, the acorn illustrates the museum's potential to expand its interpretive framework. It demonstrates how the museum's established logic of transmission can incorporate environmental conditioning as part of historical interpretation. The survivor's voice remains the museum's moral centre, while the material conditions that preserved that testimony form part of its historical context. Integrating such perspectives would not alter the museum's human core but would enrich it, situating individual experience within the environmental and material systems that shaped how it was recorded and preserved. The acorn is an example of evidentiary material whose significance emerges through careful historical analysis, waiting for curatorial and scholarly attention to bring its meanings to light. Within this interpretive framework, it links ecological temporality to the museum's ongoing work of historical and moral education.

Towards an Ecology of the Holocaust

The SJM has long framed moral knowledge as emerging through encounters between testimony, object, and audience.[48] An ecological framework extends this institutional logic by making explicit the material conditions that structure those encounters. To adopt an ecological approach may involve reframing the museum's mission not as the preservation of static artifacts but as the maintenance of interdependent historical relations between human experience and the environments that shaped it, as well as between the material conditions of destruction and of remembrance. It involves recognising that genocide unfolded within specific physical environments that shaped both destruction and preservation. In this sense, ecology is not an interpretive supplement but a next possible phase in the museum's moral pedagogy that situates moral education within the material conditions that sustain historical evidence. In doing so, the museum shifts from implicit environmental awareness to an explicit methodological stance.

An ecological approach begins with the premise that human experience unfolds within and is conditioned by specific physical environments. It asks not only how people acted within a landscape, but how environmental conditions structured the historical possibilities of life and death. To think ecologically is to trace these interdependencies. It requires scholars to consider the Holocaust as both a human and material event, and to see the museum as a site where material evidence and testimony are deliberately held in relation. For the SJM, the ecological approach clarifies a principle that has long governed its practice, even if rarely named, that meaning emerges through reciprocal relation. This principle has long structured the museum's moral and intellectual life. The survivor's story gives the artifact resonance while the artifact anchors the story in the physical world it evokes. Each illuminates the other, establishing a reciprocal relationship that grounds education in material evidence. The museum's educators, curators, and staff maintain these interpretive relations in daily practice, preserving fragile materials while rendering

48. *A Proposal for the Establishment of a Jewish Holocaust Museum in Sydney*, 1986, 2. Sydney Jewish Museum Institutional Archives; Alba, *The Holocaust Memorial Museum*.

them historically intelligible. The result is an institution where preservation and interpretation operate as mutually reinforcing components of historical understanding.

What distinguishes the SJM among Holocaust institutions is how explicitly its interpretive method is shaped by its geographic and civic location.[49] Australia's Jewish community, largely composed of Holocaust survivors and their descendants, made the museum a living extension of its collective biography. Memories formed in Europe were carried into a different physical and civic environment, one marked by distance, refuge, and the moral project of multiculturalism. In this setting, the museum's task was never merely commemorative but integrative: to relocate the history of European catastrophe into Australian public education and civic discourse. That process, at once personal and communal, has given the SJM a pedagogical model grounded in proximity between survivor, artifact, and audience. Its exhibitions do not simply narrate the Holocaust from afar, but they bring into relation different geographies, generations, and evidentiary forms. The forensic artifact from Ukraine and the survivor's voice from Sydney are interpreted within a shared institutional framework that links environmental trace and lived memory. Together they demonstrate how environmental evidence and survivor testimony are stabilised within a single interpretive practice.

Recognising this structure clarifies that the SJM has long operated through an ecological logic, even if not by name. Its epistemology is inherently relational. In other words, its collections, architecture, and community operate together to preserve and generate historical knowledge. These elements function interdependently across preservation, interpretation, and education: the survivors who give testimony, the curators who shape its form, the objects that hold its traces, and the audiences who carry it forward. This framework situates moral witness within the material and communal conditions that sustain it. In its next phase, as the museum reimagines its design and pedagogy, this logic can be made explicit in exhibition design, archival description, and educational programming. Making this

49. Alba, "Transmitting the Survivor's Voice," 244-49.

ecological structure visible would clarify how preservation and pedagogy are already organised around environmental interdependence.

This reframing suggests a methodological shift for Holocaust museology more broadly. Traditional museum methodologies often treat artifact, narrative, architecture, and education as discrete domains rather than systemic relations. An ecological model instead understands these elements as interdependent. Objects function within interpretive frameworks that connect them to testimony, space, and audience. Museum design structures how material evidence and moral interpretation are encountered. Visitors participate in the interpretive process through acts of attention and response. Such a model does not apply ecological metaphor to the museum but clarifies what its best practices already imply. Knowledge in the museum is produced through the coordinated management of space, light, narrative framing, and audience engagement. The museum is sustained through the continual interaction of preservation and interpretation. Its ethical force derives from its ability to preserve material trace while enabling responsible reinterpretation.

For the SJM, adopting this ecological framework would make explicit the material logic already embedded in its practice. The museum's collections and practices demonstrate that remembrance depends on the preservation of physical trace. The *Unearthing the Evidence* display and the acorn preserved in the archive illustrate how environmental processes structure both destruction and its documentation. To integrate these insights at the institutional level would be to redefine the museum's mission as one that integrates environmental awareness into its ethical mandate. It would invite curators, educators, and conservators to see their collective labour as part of a coordinated institutional practice linking conservation, interpretation, and education. By articulating this principle, the museum could offer to the broader field of Holocaust commemoration a clarified methodological framework grounded in its existing practice—the recognition that remembrance itself is an environmentally-

mediated act, sustained by the delicate maintenance of the conditions that allow material evidence to remain legible over time. The SJM's ongoing redesign offers a rare opportunity to make these material and interpretive relations legible within exhibition design and archival presentation by making the relationships between object, voice, and place perceptible as the organising logic of the institution itself. Doing so would not alter its founding principles but clarify their institutional structure. The ecological approach gives form to what the museum has long practiced: that remembrance depends on sustained material conditions.

Tracing the movement of these materials from landscape to archive to gallery clarifies the chain through which environmental conditioning becomes historical knowledge. The museum's collection holds the rare privilege of objects whose journeys can be charted in both forensic and geographic space. The objects from Serniki and the acorn from Gnivan were first extracted from the environments in which they endured the processes of burial, oxidation, and decay before being re-situated in Sydney's institutional and pedagogical sphere. Within the museum, conservation practices, spatial sequencing, and interpretive framing establish the final conditions under which these traces become legible as history. Display labels can integrate the material conditions that shaped each artifact's formation: where it was found, what natural forces preserved or altered it, how environmental processes continue in conservation practices. Such an approach would not aestheticise decay but historicise it, recasting material processes into sources of interpretive depth. In making these transitions visible, the museum completes the environmental mediation through which material trace becomes historical understanding.

The museum's educational programs extend this mediation by structuring how testimony and material trace are encountered together. The SJM's education programs have long derived their meaning from encounters between testimony and listener. Survivor testimony does not merely accompany objects but reinterprets them, restoring human

subjectivity to material remains whose environmental histories have shaped their form. Lessons can extend this mediation by drawing attention to the environments that structured both suffering and survival. Students can consider how forest concealment shaped the narratives of Jewish partisans, how the geography of rural Ukraine conditioned both killing and rescue, and how climate and terrain dictated the logistics of flight and survival. Ideally, they may learn how environmental processes structured concealment and preservation, but they did not ultimately enact violence. Environmental history can be taught alongside testimony, not as parallel content but as interpretive context. The aim would be to frame these conditions as part of historical explanation. In doing so, the museum situates moral witness within the material conditions that made both destruction and survival historically possible.

Conservation extends the chain of environmental conditioning into institutional space. The museum's conservators establish the material conditions under which fragile traces remain legible through regulating light, humidity, and temperature. By doing so, they condition the preservation of material forms through which meaning can later be interpreted. These interventions stabilise the material form through which meaning can be interpreted. Just as soil chemistry and climate shaped preservation in the landscape, museum microclimates now structure the continued survival of evidence. Making conservation processes visible would clarify that remembrance depends on sustained material regulation. In this way, conservation marks the final stage in the environmental mediation through which material trace becomes historical knowledge.

An ecological approach to Holocaust commemoration, therefore, does not describe a worldview of interconnected beings. Rather, it names the historically specific processes through which material conditions shape what survives, how evidence appears, and how knowledge of the Holocaust is formed. The movement traced through this article, from forest floor to excavation site, from courtroom

to museum and archive, demonstrates that Holocaust memory is formed through a sequence of material mediations. The museum constitutes the final environment in this chain, conditioning how material trace becomes legible as public history through conservation, spatial framing, and testimony. To think ecologically about Holocaust remembrance is therefore to historicise the material mediation through which past violence becomes present understanding. It is to shift attention from objects as representations to objects as environmentally conditioned traces whose meanings emerge through movement across environments. The Sydney Jewish Museum's collections enact this mediation daily through the care of material, the preservation of testimony, and the practices of education that sustain remembrance. In this framework, ecology is not an external lens applied to Holocaust history but names the very conditions by which memory takes root.

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Musings: Sydney Jewish Museum Journal
Vol. 4, No. 1.

The Art of Olga Horak OAM (1926–2024): A Retrospective

Jana Vytrhlik

Abstract

This article presents a retrospective reassessment of the art of Olga Horak (1926–2024), whose significant body of paintings and sculptures, created between the 1960s and early 1990s, remained largely unknown until the final months of her life in 2024. Prior to being recognised in Australia as a prominent Holocaust survivor and educator, Horak pursued her private passion for art, developing her skills through formal training in Sydney under painter John Ogburn and sculptor Lyndon Dadswell. Situating her work within the broader context of post-war Australian art, this study examines the influences that shaped her visual language and considers the relationship between artistic practice, memory, and testimony. It also addresses Horak's belated recognition as an artist whose oeuvre merits inclusion within modern Australian art.[1]

Key words

Olga Horak; post-war Australian art; artistic independence; Holocaust memory; émigré artist

Introduction

After surviving Auschwitz, Bergen-Belsen, a death march, and the murder of her parents and sister, eighteen-year-old Olga Rosenberger was liberated in April 1945. She returned to Bratislava, Czechoslovakia, married fellow survivor Jan (John) Horak (1919–2008) in 1947, and emigrated to Sydney in 1949. Soon, the couple established both a lively family and a hectic business life. A decade

1. Grateful acknowledgment is made to the reviewers and the editors of *Musings* for their valuable comments and constructive critique.

later, while operating a successful garment-manufacturing enterprise, Horak resumed an artistic path that first began in her youth but was violently interrupted by war.[2]

In 1960, now a mother of two, and a proprietor of a successful blouse design and manufacturing business Hibodress.[3] Horak enrolled in evening art classes and set up a small basement studio in her Dover Heights home. Painting and sculpture became a renewed artistic passion that she developed over more than two decades. Working independently, and without seeking public judgment or exhibition, Horak produced a substantial body of work characterised by bold colours and intuitive handling of form set in thoughtful and disciplined compositions.

Horak began formal study at the John Ogburn Studio in The Rocks,[4] where she received rigorous training in drawing, composition, and colour. John Ogburn (1925–2010) emphasised disciplined observation, technical skill, and close study of the old masters, while encouraging students to integrate formal principles with personal experience.[5] Working primarily in oils, Horak learnt to structure compositions either from the centre outward or diagonally across the canvas, generating dynamic spatial balance and chromatic intensity. One of her early work, *William Street at Night*, would soon demonstrate Horak's developing ability to observe and transform the subject in front of her. An evening cityscape morphed into a luminous, rhythmically charged scene.[6] Her increasing confidence in handling colour and form was based on her solid technical foundation and a particular sensitivity to tone.

Ogburn himself occupied a distinctive position in the Sydney art world. Neither fully aligned with dominant modernist movements nor isolated from them, he championed a studio-centred model of artistic development grounded in perceptual discipline and intellectual autonomy. His emphasis on craft, structure, and personal visual inquiry provided an environment in which a mature student such as Horak could pursue artistic growth without pressure to conform to prevailing artistic fashions or professional expectations. His studio thus became a formative setting for Horak's emerging artistic independence.[7]

2. Details on Horak's life and early training sourced from published memoirs Olga Horak, *Auschwitz to Australia* (East Roseville: Kangaroo Press, 2000), esp. 93–111, and a series of interviews with Olga Horak, conducted by the author, December 2023–August 2024.
3. A reviewer brought to my attention that the Hibodress premises in Woolloomooloo, once vacated by the Horaks in 1970, became one of Australia's first avant-garde artist-run initiatives called Inhibodress. https://visualarts.net.au/news-opinion/2015/q-mike-parr/
4. One of the earliest art teaching studios in Sydney was established by the Hungarian émigré artist Desiderius Orban (1884–1986) at No. 2 Henrietta Lane, Circular Quay. John Ogburn (1925–2010) studied there from 1948, later assisting with teaching before founding his own art school in The Rocks in the early 1960s. See John Ogburn, "Desiderius Orban," *Art and Australia* 3, no. 1 (June 1965): 22.
5. Mark McGinness, "Portrait of the critic in the artist, John Ogburn, 1925-2010," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 February 2010; John Ogburn, "Prospectus," (c 1960), hand-written one-page manifesto distributed to students enrolled in his Studio in The Rocks. I am indebted to Susie Berk for providing a copy from Olga Horak estate.
6. Interview with Olga Horak, conducted by the author, December 2023; the artist reflected on the influence of John Ogburn's teaching.
7. Ogburn, "Prospectus".

Her sculptural training under Lyndon Dadswell (1908–1986) at East Sydney Technical College further shaped Horak's visual language. Dadswell, a key figure in Australian post-war sculpture and the nation's first official war artist, instilled in his students a commitment to structural clarity, proportion, and "truth to materials", aligning closely with international modernist thought.[8] Under his guidance, Horak approached the human figure not as a point of trauma or testimony but as an expressive exploration of volume, gesture, and material. Her figurative studies – executed in plaster, resin, timber, soapstone, cement, wood, fibreglass, and, in one significant instance, bronze – reflect this disciplined engagement with form.[9]

Dadswell's influence extended beyond the studio. As Head of the Art Department at East Sydney Technical College, he played a formative role in shaping post-war Australian sculpture and was a key advocate for public commissions and civic works. Of coincidental relevance is his monumental sculptural relief of a seven-branched menorah carved into the façade of the building adjacent to the Sydney Jewish Museum on Darlinghurst Road, where Olga Horak later pursued her mission as a dedicated Holocaust history educator. Designed in 1965 in a boldly brutalist style, the work asserts the visual presence and symbolic gravity of one of Judaism's most enduring emblems. Today, as part of the Museum's planned expansion, it also resonates with contemporary conversations about Jewish memory and the built environment.[10]

The Sydney art scene into which Horak entered around 1960 was marked by considerable diversity. Developments of the preceding decades, described as "years of unparalleled intellectual and artistic ferment... characterized by a deep and pervasive concern for realism, the reality of human social and psychological experience..."[11] continued to resonate in the work of artists who favoured figurative painting, often associated with expressionist circles that contested the growing presence of abstraction. At the same time, the Contemporary Art Society advocated for international modernism, while a number of smaller artist-run studios fostered alternative approaches. Migrant

8. Deborah Edwards, "Dadswell, Lyndon Raymond (1908–1986)," *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/dadswell-lyndon-raymond-12389.

9. Olga Horak revealed during an interview in 2024 that only one of her sculptures, *Exodus* (1965), which was selected for a representative exhibition at the National Museum of Australia, Canberra, in 2008, was cast in bronze, a financially ambitious undertaking at the time, but one that signalled the artist's the personal interest in the subject. https://sydneyjewishmuseum.com.au/news/the-art-of-holocaust-survivor-olga-horak/

10. Among the earliest scholars to examine Jewish memorials in depth is James E. Young, who sought both "to reveal the many layers of meaning in these memorials and to examine the processes by which such monuments are understood." See James E. Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), "Preface," x. For further discussion of Jewish memory and its expression in architecture and the built environment, see also Gavriel D. Rosenfeld, *Building After Auschwitz: Jewish Architecture and the Memory of the Holocaust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011).

11. Richard Haese, *Rebels and Precursors: The Revolutionary Years of Australian Art* (Ringwood: Penguin Books, 1988), 1–7.

artists – many of them European – were also increasingly contributing to the city's artistic life, bringing skills, training, and visual languages shaped abroad. For an artist such as Horak, whose early education had been disrupted by war, this environment offered both structure and openness: a place where technical training remained valued, yet personal exploration could unfold without rigid stylistic constraints.[12]

Within this context, Horak's decision to maintain a private, independent practice acquires added significance. She was neither part of a movement nor engaged in the professional exhibition circuit. Instead, she positioned herself at a deliberate remove from the competitive and often factionalised art world of the time. Her independence was not an absence of ambition but a sustained commitment to working on her own terms. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s she continued to develop her visual language while running the family business, maintaining that her work was "not for public eyes".[13] Only her immediate family understood the scale of her production.

Sources and Method

This study draws on several key sources. First, it reflects the author's direct viewing of the works in Horak's family home, and a series of interviews conducted with Horak between December 2023 and August 2024. Second, following Horak's death, a comprehensive online auction catalogue comprising more than two hundred paintings, drawings, and sculptures revealed for the first time the extent and variety of her artistic output.[14]

Next, the author's most extensive encounter with Horak's oeuvre undoubtedly occurred at *In Her Light*, the posthumous exhibition curated by Nina Sanadze at Melbourne's Goldstone Gallery in April 2025 – the first exhibition to assemble her works as a coherent body of art.[15] Finally, the author's research undertaken in the National Art School's archive and collection database, focusing on the 1960s and 1970s, provided contextual insight into Horak's teachers, peers, and the pedagogical environment in which she developed as an artist.[16]

12. For the diversity of the Sydney art scene in the post-war period, including the contribution of immigrant artists, see Haese, Rebels and Precursors, 258–68; Christopher Allen, Art in Australia: From Colonization to Postmodernism (London: Thames & Hudson, 1997), 113–26, 132–37, 154–59; Bernard Smith, Australian Painting 1788–2000 (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2001), esp. 382–405; Sasha Grishin, Australian Art: A History (Melbourne: Miegunyah Press, 2013), 215–45; and Ann Stephen, Andrew McNamara, and Philip Goad (eds.), Modernism & Australia: Documents on Art, Design and Architecture 1917–1967 (Melbourne: Miegunyah Press, 2006), 350–90.

13. Interview with Olga Horak, conducted by the author, December 2023–August 2024.

14. Theodore Bruce Auctioneers, *The Horak House*, auction catalogue, 8 December 2024, Lots 152–241, https://www.theodorebruceauctions.com.au/v1/auction-catalog/the-horak-house-rose-bay-onsite_3TIIG0DXJ4.

15. *Olga Horak: In Her Light*, Exhibition and Catalogue, Goldstone Gallery, April 2025, https://goldstonegallery.com/olga-horak

16. National Art School (NAS), East Sydney Technical College Archives and Art Collection Database (1960s–1980s), accessed in person in September 2025; thanks are extended to Dr Deborah Beck and Sonia Legge for facilitating access. Horak's period of study coincided with that of fellow students, some of whom later became prominent Australian artists and art teachers, including Ann Thomson (born 1933), Una Foster (1912–1996), Guy Warren (1921–2024) and Bruce Goold (1948–2025).

Because many of Horak's works are undated, unsigned, or untitled, a strictly chronological reconstruction is not feasible. This study therefore adopts a visual and comparative approach, grouping selected works according to subject, style, and technique. To contextualise her artistic development, the discussion begins with an overview of Sydney's visual art scene around 1960—the year Horak first enrolled in an evening art class to pursue painting.

Australian Visual Art During the 1960s

The post-war cultural landscape in Australia was transformed by the arrival of European émigrés – Holocaust survivors among them – whose intellectual breadth and artistic training broadened the country's cultural horizons.[17] Within this milieu, Olga Horak, a multilingual and elegant young woman in her late twenties, arrived in Sydney carrying the weight of profound trauma but also the determination characteristic of many post-war migrants' intent on rebuilding their lives. Although her own artistic practice remained private, her re-engagement with art emerged within a rapidly changing environment that increasingly welcomed modernist ideas and international influences.

In the early 1950s, abstract painting in Sydney remained largely geometric, drawing on constructivist principles. Australian artists and audiences were still cautious in their embrace of European modernism. Sculptors, rather than painters, often led early experimentation, exploring new materials and expressive forms. Lyndon Dadswell – already discussed as Horak's teacher – was among the most prominent figures encouraging students to expand beyond academic realism. His emphasis on research, experimentation, and international perspectives resonated strongly in a post-war generation seeking new artistic vocabularies.[18]

A pivotal cultural moment occurred in 1953 with the arrival of *French Painting Today*, an international touring exhibition that brought original works by Braque, Chagall, Derain, Dufy, Ernst, Matisse, Picasso, Rouault, Utrillo, and

17. On the influence of European-trained émigré artists on post-war Australian art education and studio culture, see Bernard Smith, Australian Painting 1788–2000 (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2001), esp. 360–90; Sasha Grishin, *Australian Art: A History* (Melbourne: Miegunyah Press, 2013), 200–30; and Ann Stephen, Andrew McNamara, and Philip Goad (eds.), *Modernism & Australia: Documents on Art, Design and Architecture 1917–1967* (Melbourne: Miegunyah Press, 2006), esp. 300–60. *Migration and Modernism: Émigré Artists in POst-War Australia*, National Gallery of Australia, forthcoming exhibition May 2026, https://nga.gov.au/exhibitions/migration-and-modernism/. For the Sydney teaching context, including the role of émigré artists such as Desiderius Orban and the emphasis on discussion-based studio practice, see John Ogburn, "Desiderius Orban," *Art and Australia* 3, no. 1 (June 1965): 20–23.

18. Bernard Smith, *Australian Painting, 1788–2000* (Oxford University Press, 2001), vi–vii, 333–418, 452–94.

Vlaminck to Australian audiences. It was widely regarded as the most significant post-war exhibition yet seen in the country, offering an unprecedented encounter with the breadth of twentieth-century European modernism. Its impact extended well beyond the gallery through catalogues, reviews, and sustained public debate.[19]

There are no records that would indicate Horak's knowledge of the exhibition. Such cultural events probably contributed to a broader moment of aesthetic curiosity and renewal – conditions that later helped foster the environment in which Horak resumed her artistic development. According to Susie Berk, the artist's daughter, Horak did not visit art exhibitions or art public lectures in Sydney during the period under review. She was, however, an avid reader of art history literature, and her bookshelves contained a range of reference works, monographs, and instructional texts, including the instructive art anatomy manual, *The Human Machine* by George Bridgman, as well as exhibition catalogues on French sculptor Auguste Rodin, Austrian Expressionist painter Egon Schiele, and various Old Masters.[20]

By the 1960s, Australian art had entered a more dynamic phase. At its centre was the East Sydney Technical College – later the National Art School – widely regarded as the heart of post-war art education in Sydney. Located within the former sandstone buildings of the Darlinghurst Gaol, the school became an incubator for modernist ideas, combining traditional disciplinary foundations with growing exposure to international trends. In 1955 it formally became an independent institution, and in the years that followed, an enormous influx of evening students, many of them working adults, reshaped the composition of its classes. Life drawing remained the core of its curriculum, but its teachers were practising artists whose approaches were informed by abstraction, expressionism, and minimalism. Visiting exhibitions, artist talks, and an increasingly international intellectual climate made the school a place of openness and experimentation.[21]

For Jewish émigré artists such as Horak – who had lived through both cultural richness and profound destruction –

19. Smith, *Australian Painting*. For a broad survey of post-war art developments in international art, see H. W. Janson and Anthony F. Janson, *Janson's Basic History of Western Art,* eighth edition (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson 2009), esp. chap. 28, "Postwar to Modern, 1945-1980," 596–614.
20. Interviews with Susie Berk conducted by the author, May–August 2024.
21. Deborah Beck, *National Art School* (2010), https://dictionaryofsydney.org/entry/national_art_school.

the National Art School offered an ideal context in which to pursue or rediscover creative identity. Her drawings from this period, later found in her family home, include life studies, figurative explorations, abstract experiments, and sketches for sculptural forms. Executed with fluency and immediacy, they reveal both the discipline she acquired and the delight she took in the physical act of drawing. They also testify to her strong foundation in observational technique, an element particularly valued within the College's teaching philosophy.

As mentioned earlier, Horak studied alongside a generation of post-war students who were reshaping Sydney's artistic culture.[22] Among her cohort were artists such as Klaus Friedeberger, Frank Hinder, Ann Thomson, and others who combined rigorous drawing with experimental approaches to colour and form. Many had been taught by émigré artists who had fled Europe and whose own training reflected Central European, German, or French modernist traditions. Within this collegial environment, students would likely engage in lively dialogue – formal and informal – about materials, composition, and visual expression.[23] Although Horak's practice remained deeply private, her work developed in parallel with this broader redefining of Australian art. She absorbed the visual languages circulating around her and applied them with independence in her home studio.

The wider artistic culture of post-war Australia was significantly enriched by the presence of émigré artists such as Desiderius Orban, Judy Cassab, and Klaus Friedeberger, whose varied practices introduced new modes of expression. Orban's expressionist palette, Cassab's psychologically attuned portraiture, and Friedeberger's abstract compositions expanded the Australian understanding of modernism and encouraged dialogue between local and European traditions. Their influence helped shift Australian painting away from the conservative tendencies and nationalist frameworks that had dominated earlier decades, ushering in greater cosmopolitanism and technical diversity.[24]

Against this background, Horak's independence becomes

22. National Art School (NAS), East Sydney Technical College Archives and Art Collection Database (1960s–1980s).
23. See Smith, *Australian Painting*; Grishin, *Australian Art*, 200–30; and Stephen, McNamara, and Goad (eds.), *Modernism & Australia*.
24. Ian Milliss, *Modernism in Sydney and International Trends* (Penrith Regional Gallery & The Lewers Bequest, 2017), 84–91.

especially striking. While she shared the training, discipline, and curiosity of her peers, she chose not to pursue public exhibition or professional artistic identity. Instead, she cultivated a practice centred on personal exploration, technical engagement, and expressive immediacy. Her work thus occupies a parallel trajectory to the modernisation of Australian art: shaped by its pedagogical structures and cultural shifts, yet developed deliberately outside its institutional frameworks. Her drawings and sculptures from this period reveal an artist deeply embedded within the intellectual and artistic climate of the 1960s, even as she maintained a private sanctuary for her creative life.

Olga Horak's Art Themes

Mother and Child

Among the most persistent and significant motifs in Olga Horak's oeuvre is the image of the mother and child. This subject appears to hold symbolic and deeply personal significance, perhaps evoking lost parents and family. She returned to this motif repeatedly, each time exploring variations of form, gesture, and emotional charge. This return to a central figure reflects the influence of the formalist training she received at East Sydney Technical College, where drawing from life formed the core of the curriculum and abstraction was strongly encouraged as a language of emotional and compositional experimentation.

One of the paintings in this theme group (Fig 1) is strikingly reminiscent of Picasso's Cubist compositions – its contours, curved planes, and centralised spiral form suggesting motherhood, embrace and enclosure. This enveloping composition with rounded limbs and torsos folding into each other remained characteristic of Horak's treatment of the subject in later years as she progressed with her painting and sculpting. These artworks, most likely created in her home studio, show clear stylistic affiliations with European modernism, and as mentioned, particularly with the late Cubist style of Picasso.

Fig. 1

The sculptural relief *Mother Protecting Child* (Fig 2), now in the collection of the Sydney Jewish Museum,[25] demonstrates Horak's ability to translate pictorial ideas into three-dimensional form. Executed in plaster of Paris and coated in fibreglass, the work replaces visual density with a sense of stillness. The two elongated figures are framed by a stylised branch. Their bowed heads suggest quiet reflection or prayer. This almost one-meter-tall relief artwork expresses the artist's personal experience of loss and survival. It was donated by Horak to the Sydney Jewish Museum in memory of her parents and sister, who were murdered in the Holocaust.

Material here is not incidental. Fibreglass – a synthetic, post-war industrial compound – carries associations of modern fabrication and durability, as well as novel possibilities for experimental sculptural creations.[26] Its use by Horak in a memorial context creates tension between the fragility of the subject and the resilience of the material. The embossed copper backing introduces a liturgical undertone, recalling repoussé surfaces of European ecclesiastical artefacts.

The elongated proportions and pierced compositional framing recall British organic abstraction associated with two leading figures of British modernist sculpture, Henry Moore (1898–1986) and Barbara Hepworth (1903–1975), an influence mediated to Horak by her sculptor-teacher Lyndon Dadswell. Yet Moore's monumental works typically explore universal maternity, while Horak's scale remains intimate and personal.

The small wall-mounted relief *Mother and Child* (Fig 3), another piece in the collection of the Sydney Jewish Museum,[27] presents two stylised, gilded figures in quiet, yet expressive contrast. The mother turns away and raises her hand to cover her face, while the child reaches toward her. The work evokes a sorrowful moment of separation – personal and archetypal. Though the child reaches out, the mother withdraws, embodying the unbearable loss Horak herself experienced when her mother died in Bergen-Belsen on the day of liberation. In both theme and material, the piece carries a quiet monumentality. It is both testimon-

Fig. 2

Fig. 3

25. Sydney Jewish Museum Collection Database, M1999/025, https://sjm-web.adlibhosting.com/AIS/Details/museum/4400.
26. Danielle O'Steen, "Eva Hesse and plastic: a study of collaborative fabrication," *Sculpture Journal* 33, no. 4 (2024): 507–23.
27. Sydney Jewish Museum Collection Database, https://sjm-web.adlibhosting.com/AIS/Details/museum/6084.

ial and symbolic, memorialising not only one mother but the irretrievable loss of countless others. In Horak's own words, it symbolised "the exodus of the Jewish people – the going away and not returning."[28]

The largest sculpture in this thematic group, titled *Family* (Fig 4) stood for decades in the front garden of Horak's home. Cast in fibreglass and painted in dark bronze tones, the multi-figure composition consists of four abstracted human forms, their elongated limbs and vertical massing enclosing a shared central space. The aperture carved through the middle of the work invites light, shadow, and interpretation. Its formal vocabulary recalls once more the modernist idiom of Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth, both artists who influenced Horak's sculptor-teacher Lyndon Dadswell and were central to the East Sydney Technical College teaching environment in the 1960s and 70s. Yet Horak's use of these forms is distinct: her *Family* figures cluster, not in embrace, but in a moment of stillness, they appear interdependent, yet emotionally restrained. Their interlinked presence and simultaneous apartness suggest both connection and separation, echoing the experiences of Holocaust survivors rebuilding fractured family lives in Australia.


Fig. 4

These two works mark an apparent evolution in Horak's visual language – from the intimate expression of grief embodied in the mother-and-child pair to a more universal, yet equally poignant, meditation on the fragility of family and memory. In her hands, fibreglass – an industrial, post-war material – became a vessel for layered emotion, transformed through gesture, surface, and spatial modulation.

Parallel to Olga Horak's explorations of the *Mother and Child* theme is a large public sculpture *Earth Mother* (Fig 5) created in the 1950s by her contemporary, Anita Aarons (1912–2000). Commissioned by the City Council and installed in the children's playground near St Mary's Cathedral in Sydney, Aarons' sculpture presents a modernist vision of maternal protection shaped for everyday interaction. Made in reinforced concrete and painted in soft tones of grey and rose, the work's biomorph-


Fig. 5

28. Comment by Olga Horak to the author, early 2015.

ic forms suggest both shelter and intimacy: a reclining and a seated figure arranged in an open, non-literal embrace. Its sensuous curves and hollowed interiors invite children to climb and rest within the sculpture, fusing art, play, and archetype in a way that foreshadows community-based sculpture practices in Australia.[29]

In its form, the *Earth Mother* sculpture suggests the established influence of Henry Moore, whose work both Aarons and Horak would have encountered through the teaching environment at East Sydney Technical College and through exhibitions of the period, though less so for Horak. Moore's modernist abstraction of the reclining figure, his emphasis on negative space, and his sensitivity to human form rendered monumental had wide-ranging impact on post-war sculpture. In Aarons' case, these ideas were translated into a civic idiom; in Horak's, they were internalised and refracted through personal memory and private scale. Both artists, however, engaged in a visual language that was recognisably modernist and materially innovative, turning to synthetic compounds such as fibreglass or concrete, and adapting international aesthetics to local Australian contexts. While one belongs in a room interior, and the other in a public park, both works reflect the art of women artists of the post-war generation.

The City

By late 1960s, after five years of evening art classes under John Ogburn, Olga Horak's artistic style and technique had matured with notable confidence. Her later paintings stand out for their assured compositions, expressive linearity, and a bolder use of colour – often structured through intuitive forms and dynamic spatial arrangements. She daringly experimented with oil on board, frequently applying thick layers of pigment with a palette knife to create textured, impasto surfaces. This gave her work a tactile dimension, where the physicality of paint became inseparable from emotional expression.

Already mentioned, the *William Street at Night* painting (1963), one of Horak's most vibrant and resolved works (Fig 6), reimagines a familiar Sydney streetscape not as a

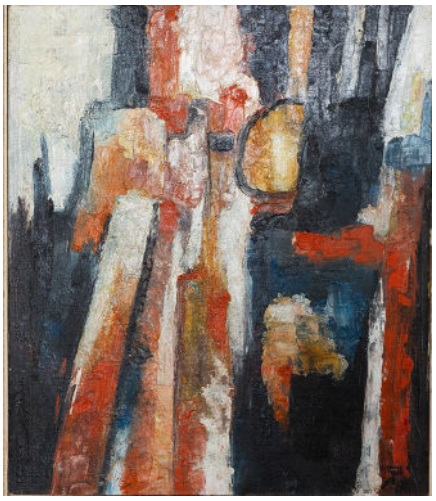

Fig. 6

29. *Earth Mother Play Sculpture*, https://www.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au/sculptures/earth-mother-play-sculpture.

sombre passageway, but as a joyful abstraction of light and energy. The painting pulses with vertical bands of red, orange, black, and white, intersected by glowing circular forms that hint at streetlamps or passing headlights. Dense impasto and scraped textures animate the surface, particularly in the heavy verticals and central sphere. Rather than depicting the city in literal terms, Horak imbues it with an almost musical rhythm – transforming the night, traditionally associated with fear, into a moment of brightness and renewal. In her own words, this painting marked the moment when "a dark night could be colourful and happy," and her expressive palette "blossomed bright again,"[30] suggesting colour as psychological reclamation.

While Olga Horak worked independently and outside formal art exhibitions of the time, her abstract urban works nonetheless resonate with the visual language explored by several of her Australian contemporaries. The energetic verticals and palette-knife textures in *William Street at Night* evoke parallels with the work of John Passmore (1904–1984)[31] and Ralph Balson (1890–1964)[32] two Australian artists, both of whom experimented earlier with expressive abstraction rooted in geometry and material presence. Passmore's gestural surfaces and Balson's structured colour rhythms predate Horak's interest in movement and mood rather than literal place. Her tactile impasto technique also recalls that of Judy Cassab (1920–2015)[33], a fellow Jewish émigré artist and friend, whose palette-knife portraits from the 1960s balance formal construction with emotional depth. There is, too, a certain kinship with the cubist-inflected urban scenes of Hungarian-born Desiderius Orban (1884–1986)[34] whose art, as discussed earlier, shaped Sydney's mid-century modernist sensibility. Yet Horak's cityscapes remain uniquely her own: intimate in scale and emotionally charged. By contrast, the monochromatic *Cityscape* (Fig 7) adopts fractured perspective and angular disjunction. We observe buildings tilt, streets collide, and shadow elongate. In monochromatic greys and angled lines Horak created a fractured perspective of buildings and roads. The composition evokes a sense of disorientation, recalling the

Fig. 7

30. Jana Vytrhlik, "Remembering an Artist: Olga Horak OAM (1926-2024), In Her Light," exhibition catalogue essay, Goldstone Gallery, April 2025.
31. John Passmore, https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/?artist_id=passmore-john.
32. Ralph Balson, https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/artists/balson-ralph/.
33. Judy Cassab, https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/artists/cassab-judy/.
34. John Ogburn, "Desiderius Orban," *Art and Australia* 3, no. 1 (June 1965): 14-23; and Desiderius Orban, https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/64.1972/.

psychological tension of the Norwegian pioneer Expressionist Edvard Munch's urban paintings of the early decades of the 1900s. Here, Horak channels emotion through distortion – eliminating human figures but retaining the weight of presence and absence. The elongated shadows and austere palette suggest an emotional undercurrent of post-war disquiet, a city still shadowed by memory.

Still Life

Among the identifiable works from Olga Horak's art lessons are several still lifes painted during her studies with John Ogburn in the mid-1960s. One of them, *Still Life with Fish* (Fig 8) can be directly compared to Ogburn's painting of the same subject and setting, *Mullet* (Fig 9). Both works were evidently executed in the same studio session, depicting the identical motif: two fish placed diagonally across a crumpled newspaper and a toned cloth, accompanied by pieces of citrus fruit.

Fig. 8

Ogburn's composition is bold and architectonic. The perspective is deliberately flattened, the brushstrokes thick and structural, and the palette dominated by greys, mauves, and earthy greens. The arrangement reflects Ogburn's modernist interest in French painter Cézanne's geometry and spatial rhythm, where every line contributes to a visual architecture of balance and order. Ogburn's emphasis on compositional logic and tonal contrast served as both instruction and challenge to his students.

Horak's *Fish* reveals her effort to be an attentive student while also asserting her artistic independence. Her handling of paint is looser, and her brushwork more responsive to texture and light. The composition retains Ogburn's structural order but is softened by tonal warmth and sensitivity to surface. Pale blue and yellow undertones, together with a gentler rendering of the fish and cloth, introduce a lyrical quality absent from her teacher's more rigid execution. Horak's background is less defined, suggesting a more open space rather than a firm, enclosed composition seen in Ogburn's work.

Fig. 9

During the mid-twentieth century, still life was regarded

as a fundamental discipline in art education across Australian art schools. At East Sydney Technical College, it was grounded in European academic tradition but crosspollinated with modernist sensibility. It formed the basis of both drawing and painting instruction, offering students a means to study proportion, tone, colour harmony, and compositional structure. Under the guidance of practising artists such as John Ogburn and Lyndon Dadswell, students were encouraged to move beyond literal observation and to consider the expressive possibilities of form and surface. Traditional still-life arrangements – fruit, bottles, drapery, and reflective vessels – were used not only to train the eye but also to instil an awareness of rhythm, balance, and spatial tension. The photographic record (Fig 10) from the NAS collection shows this pedagogical environment in practice: modest classroom settings where easels surrounded a central arrangement of objects illuminated by directional light. It is not difficult to imagine Olga Horak, a young woman artist, absorbed in her work on the subject in front of her.

Fig. 10

From Figurative to Form and Colour

Horak's later canvases of the 1970s mark a clear shift towards an emphasis on colour and form. Her figurative works, likely produced during evening classes, are dominated by blue, yellow, and red, and treat colour and form as the primary means of expression. In the painting depicting the concentrated activity of fellow students (Fig 11), Horak reduces the figures to interlocking planes of colour, dissolving bodily form into a unified pictorial surface. In the *Nude* (Fig 12), arcs and flattened planes of vivid colour replace descriptive modelling, as contours give way to pure form and rhythm. While comparisons may be drawn with John Coburn (1925–2006), whose use of pure colour and organic abstraction helped define the Australian modernist style,[35] Horak's approach remains distinct. Her abstractions were not decorative nor theoretical. Her art was based on emotions and the energy of renewal. She boldly experimented with the material qualities of oil paint,

Fig. 11

Fig. 12

employing the palette knife technique in thick layers on both board and canvas (Fig 13). Resulting impasto surfaces feature physical presence of peaks and ridges of the medium. In this context, colour probably served to Horak as a metaphor for her regained vitality reclaimed in her new life in Sydney after previous tragic loss.

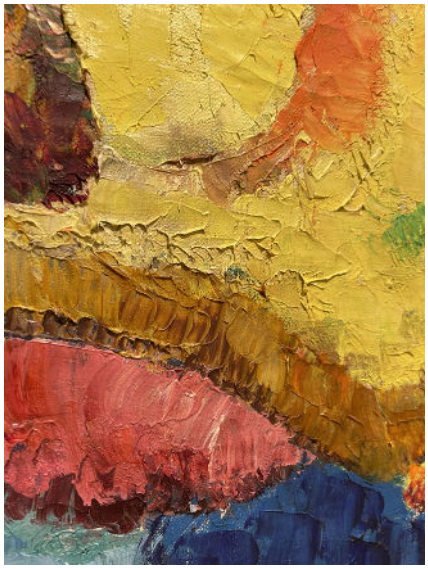

Fig. 13

The Nude

The survey of Olga Horak's art themes concludes with this powerful figurative study (Fig 14). Painted in oil with rapid, confident brushstrokes, the composition captures a semi-reclining female nude, positioned diagonally across a warm, untreated ground. The nude's form is defined not by outline but by dynamic areas of colour – ochres, greens, blacks, and flashes of crimson – applied again with a palette knife and brush, at times verging on impasto.

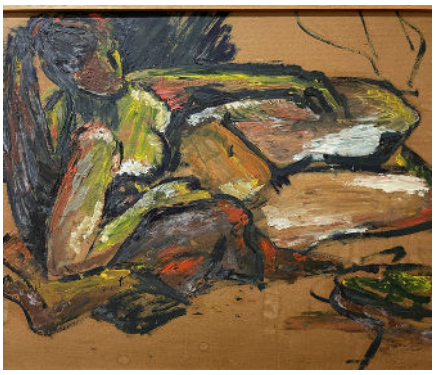

Fig. 14

The painting synthesises Horak's formal trajectory. While the subject matter is classical – a reclining nude, almost odalisque-like in pose – the execution is modernist, revealing Horak's certain awareness of post-war expressionist trends. The brushwork – at times recalling expressionist intensity associated with, for example, Austrian artist Oskar Kokoschka (1886–1980)[36] and his intense portraits and figures. The model is not idealised but observed with empathy and intimacy.

In the context of gendered modernism, where women artists often worked within male-dominated art schools, Horak's confident treatment of the nude demonstrates technical skill and authority. Her work avoids both sentimentality and eroticism, presenting the body as an artistic exploration rather than as a spectacle.

Olga Horak's Art

Olga Horak saw herself as "an amateur who loves colours,"[37] and her artistic achievements remained silent for decades. Despite her profound talent, her artwork stayed largely hidden during her lifetime; as she herself acknowledged, she never felt the ambition to exhibit. What has now emerged from storage and private walls is not a

35. John Coburn is represented in Australian public and private collections, see for example the 1974 portrait of Vaike Liibus https://www.portrait.gov.au/portraits/2015.96/john-coburn.
36. Oskar Kokoschka https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/?artist_id=kokoschka-oskar.
37. Interview with Olga Horak, conducted by the author, December 2023–August 2024.

casual pastime but a long-term project of self-discovery in *paint and clay*.

> Art brought me back to my youth, to the times when I first discovered the joy of creating. I didn't need anybody's opinion then, and I don't need it now. My paintings and sculptures are not for public eyes. They were my diary when the words failed me. Over and over again, my art brought me the happiness that is hard to find in other aspects of one's life.[38]

This testimony underscores the transformative power of her creativity. For Horak, art was not only a rediscovered passion but a process of lifelong restoration, a sustained return to self. What began as modest evening classes in drawing and sculpture became an intense, disciplined practice that articulated survival in visual form. Within the broader landscape of survivor art in the post-war period, such a coherent, privately maintained oeuvre is rare, particularly in the Australian context. As a Jewish émigré, Horak shared certain experiential affinities with Judy Cassab, but unlike Cassab she did not pursue a public exhibiting career or a program of portrait commissions. Her urban abstractions and family sculptures are instead characterised by modest scale and an inward orientation; their address is intimate rather than spectacular. In this, she belongs to a quiet modernism whose strength lies in concentration rather than assertion.

Art, for Horak, was not a career but a return – a return to youth, to colour, to agency, and to the human form. It was, as she described, a diary when words failed. That diary is now opened to scholarly scrutiny. To position Olga Horak convincingly within Australian art history is to recognise both the limits of her public artistic visibility and the distinctiveness of her aesthetic legacy, and to acknowledge that significance can reside in the private studio no less than in the public gallery.

Horak's art does not depict atrocity directly. Instead, it distils trauma into contrasting forms and compositional elements: vertical elongation and central voids; chromatic renewal in urban abstractions and tactile impasto that

36. Oskar Kokoschka https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/?artist_id=kokoschka-oskar.
37. Interview with Olga Horak, conducted by the author, December 2023–August 2024.
38. Interview with Olga Horak, conducted by the author, December 2023–August 2024.

asserts material presence. Her art does not illustrate suffering; it transforms it. Nowhere is this more evident than in her sketches and paintings of the nude male and female body, created during her classes at East Sydney Technical College, where life drawing was taught as essential for understanding proportion, anatomy, and form. For Horak, however, the act of drawing the unclothed human body appears to have carried a more personal charge.

Surviving the horrors marked by the dehumanisation of Nazi persecution, the act of drawing the nude may have carried for Horak a significance that exceeded technical discipline. It could be read as a symbolic reclamation of the human form itself. Her charcoal and pencil sketches reveal a disciplined hand and a measured attention to structure, yet also an unexpected tenderness of line. Unlike the more gestural or exaggerated figure studies produced by some contemporaries, Horak's nudes often appear introspective: their contours softened and enfolded, their postures composed rather than exposed. In several works, the body turns inward, resting or abstracted almost to the point of emblem, suggesting that for Horak the figure was less a subject to be displayed than a locus of quiet meditation on endurance, vulnerability, and renewal.

In the words of Nina Sanadze of the Goldstone Gallery, "Olga's exhibition was wildly successful – visitation, public response, and sales were all remarkable. People were deeply moved and impressed by her work and the story behind it. It remains one of the most colourful, joyful, and memorable shows we've had, running for two months with many guided talks."[39] All proceeds from the exhibition were directed to support the film maker Danny Ben-Moshe's documentary on cancelled Jewish artists in Australia and the recent rise of antisemitism. "I hope this would have made Olga happy—her paintings continue to support causes she dedicated her life to, even after her passing,"[40] Sanadze concluded. The exhibition thus formed a postscript to Horak's life, enabling her work to contribute to contemporary debates on antisemitism, and Holocaust memory.

39. Interview and email correspondence with Nina Sanadze, conducted by the author, April 2025–January 2026.
40. Interview and email correspondence with Nina Sanadze, conducted by the author, April 2025–January 2026.

Conclusion

By bringing Olga Horak's art from private setting into academic discussion, this article examines the significance of her work within Australian art history. Her paintings and sculptures extend the narrative of post-war Australian modernism and deepen our understanding of the visual afterlives of the Holocaust. Horak's art, until recently confined to the home studio, now enters the shared domain of cultural memory and invites further scholarly attention.

Fig. 15

This study also highlights the need for wider research in this area. Perhaps surprisingly, as recently noted by art historian Lynne Swarts, while the collections of the Jewish Museums in Sydney and Melbourne contain both original Holocaust artworks created in concentration camps and works created from memory after the war, scholarly publication on Holocaust representation in Australian art remains limited.[41] Horak's work therefore provides an important point of departure for comparative studies of Holocaust survivors artists in Australia whose contributions have yet to be fully recognised.

In retrospect, and in line with early twenty-first-century art historical scholarship, Olga Horak's art – whether depicting still life, the nude, or portraiture – may best be understood as a reinterpretation of historical experience. As pioneered in the Routledge research series on art history, such an approach moves away from a "linear narrative of facts" towards a "dynamic collection of memories … that simultaneously move in multiple directions across time and space."[42] For the viewer, even if not originally intended by the artist, Horak's art thus opens new interpretive possibilities for understanding the meanings of history. This "multi-modal perspective," in turn, advances our perception of "history as a lived and living experience,"[43] perceived through multiple senses.

Olga Horak's art represents a rare genre in post-war Australia and is possibly amongst the first of its kind worldwide. It is the work of a Holocaust survivor committed to preserving the truthful memory of the Shoah victims, while doing so through the joy of artistic creation. Motivated by her genuine love of art and creativity that provided an

41. See Lynne Swarts, "Imaging the Unimaginable: Holocaust Representation in Australian Art, 1937 to the present," in T*he Palgrave Handbook of Australia and the Holocaust*, ed. Avril Alba and Jan Láníček (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming 2026). The forthcoming chapter examines artistic responses to the Holocaust in Australia, including works by Judy Cassab (1920–2015), Walter Preisser (1891–1981), Mirka Mora (1928–2018) and Alan Moore (1914–2015).

42. Dipti Desai, Jessica Hamlin, and Rachel Mattson, *History as Art, Art as History: Contemporary Art and Social Studies Education* (New York and London: Routledge, 2010), 64.

43. Desai et al., *History as Art, Art as History*, 64.

outlet for expressing her trauma and resilience, her art demonstrates how creative practice can serve as a form of long-term restoration. It also invites us to consider memory not only as testimony spoken in the public sphere, but as a visual force sustained over many years within the solitude of the artist's studio.

FIGURE CAPTIONS

Fig 1. Olga Horak (1926–2024), *Mother and Child*, 1960s, oil on canvas paper, 95 x 81 cm, private collection. Photo author.

Fig 2. Olga Horak (1926–2024), *Mother Protecting Child*, 1980s, bas-relief, plaster of Paris, copper-wooden mount, 91 x 28.5 x 2.5 cm, Sydney Jewish Museum, M1999/025. https://sjm-web.adlibhosting.com/AIS/Details/museum/4400

Fig 3. Olga Horak (1926–2024), *Mother and Child*, 1980s, polyester foam, resin-gold patina, marble mount, 18 x 15 x 3 cm, Sydney Jewish Museum, M2010/066. https://sjm-web.adlibhosting.com/AIS/Details/museum/6084

Fig 4. Olga Horak (1926–2024), *The Family*, 1966, cement fibre glass, coated, 163 x 100 cm, private collection. Photo Giselle Haber.

Fig 5. Anita Aarons (1912–2000), *Earth Mother*, 1952, patinated cement, 120 x 168 cm, playground sculpture, Cook + Phillip Park, 4 College Street, Sydney. Photo Mark Pokorny, City of Sydney.

Fig 6. Olga Horak (1926–2024), *William Street at Night*, 1963, oil on canvas paper, 45 x 38 cm, private collection. Photo Giselle Haber.

Fig 7. Olga Horak (1926–2024), *Cityscape*, 1970s, oil on canvas paper, 92 x 81 cm, private collection. Photo author.

Fig 8. Olga Horak (1926–2024), *Still Life with Fish*, 1960s, oil on paper canvas, 90 x 62 cm, private collection. Photo author.

Fig 9. John Ogburn (1925–2010), Mullet on Newspaper, 1960s, oil on canvas, 60 x 70cm, private collection. Photo Maitland Regional Art Gallery (2014) © John Ogburn Estate.

Fig 10. *Still life painting class*, 1960s, National Art School (NAS), East Sydney Technical College Archives and Art Collection Database, Photograph ARS2009.170.

Fig 11. Olga Horak (1926–2024), *Figurative*, 1970s, oil on canvas, 65 x 51 cm, private collection. Photo author.

Fig 12. Olga Horak (1926–2024), *Nude*, 1970s, oil on canvas, 51 x 60 cm, private collection. Photo author.

Fig 13. Olga Horak (1926–2024), Detail of Fig 12. Impasto surface, palette knife technique. Photo author.

Fig 14. Olga Horak (1926–2024), *Nude*, 1962, oil on board, 49 x 69 cm, private collection. Photo author.

Fig 15. Olga Horak (1926–2024) with her sculpture *The Family* (Fig 4) in front of her family house in Sydney in 2023. Photo Robert Brestan. https://hlidacipes.org/sousede-nas-udali-a-dodnes-lide-ziji-s-vecmi-ktere-nam-ukradli-vypravi-olga-horak/

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Musings: Sydney Jewish Museum Journal
Vol. 4, No. 1.

The Roots of Antisemitism: Towards a Psychiatric Understanding of the Phenomenon

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Abstract

Bourgeoning antisemitism since "October 7" has had an enormous impact on Jewish people. This paper aims to explore different facets of antisemitism from a psychiatric perspective with a view to better understand the phenomenon. From 2023 to 2025, the authors – six Australian Jewish psychiatrists – met on several occasions to discuss the psychological underpinnings of antisemitism. The group drew upon its collective experiences and skills in the academic, clinical and psychoanalytic sectors, explored the scholarly literature and generated hypotheses. Among other hypotheses, the authors suggest that in many people the developing infant mind and psychological "defence mechanisms" lead to subsequent ready acceptance of prejudice and misinformation. It may be argued that, at times of civilisational crisis, antisemitism is conveniently constructed by contemporary ideologies to single out Jews and Israel as the embodiment of evil. The authors also speculate that failure to recognise the transmission of cultural trauma may lay the groundwork for antisemitism in some individuals. Finally, a case study illustrates that Stephen Porges' "Science of Safety" may help to address personal trauma that is heavily influenced by antisemitism. Examining antisemitism from a psychiatric perspective has the capacity to usefully inform debate and discussion about the issue.

Key words

Antisemitism; Jew; Jewish; Australia; Holocaust; Israel; October 7; Psychiatry; Psychoanalysis; Understanding

Introduction

Often dubbed "the oldest hatred", antisemitism has existed for millennia. Historically, it found its most cataclysmic expression in the Holocaust, in which over 6 million Jews were murdered. Since 7 October 2023 ("October 7"), the global surge in antisemitism has had a profound impact on Jewish people in all parts of the world, including Australia. In that time, Australia has witnessed the firebombing of a synagogue, swastikas daubed on Jewish-owned homes, cars and schools and on Jewish places of worship, the ransacking of offices where Jews work, Jewish students and professionals being targeted and prevented from continuing their studies and jobs, last-minute cancellations of speaking engagements of visiting Jewish academics on spurious grounds, and other deplorable acts.[1] The terrorist attack at a Hanukkah celebration at Bondi Beach, Sydney, on 14 December 2025, in which 15 people were murdered, marks the most vile and brutal expression of antisemitism in Australia to this point. Australian government responses to bourgeoning antisemitism have been delayed, half-hearted and ineffectual.

There are several ways to try to understand antisemitism, and these include exploring possible psychological and psychiatric mechanisms of the phenomenon. Over a period of eighteen months from 2023-2025, the authors – six Australian Jewish psychiatrists – met on several occasions to discuss antisemitism and its psychological underpinnings. The authors had witnessed, first-hand, the profound impact of antisemitism on Jewish people since October 7 – on patients, psychiatrists, family members and the wider Jewish community. The author group drew upon its collective professional experiences and skills in the academic, clinical and psychoanalytic sectors, as well as personal experiences as members of the Jewish community. Examination of the scholarly literature and generation of hypotheses to understand antisemitism ensued. The literature traversed various schools of psychiatric thought, encompassing "classical" psychoanalytic and "object relations" theories, amongst others, and the work of seminal figures from Sigmund

1. Reuters, "Antisemitic Attacks in Australia: A Timeline of Escalating Events," 21 January 2025. Accessed 4 August 2025, https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/antisemitic-attacks-escalate-australia-2025-01-21/.

Freud onwards, and included a range of texts.[2] It is worth highlighting that the psychiatric literature on antisemitism is voluminous and that we are not attempting to summarise or capture that literature in this article, but to draw on a selection of that literature in responding in particular to the contemporary situation confronting Jews.

As a consequence of the above methodology and our deliberations, four tracts emerged that are the substance of this article. The first pertains to description of a "Seed/Soil" model of antisemitism, which entails examining the development of the infant human mind, mental defence mechanisms against psychological threats and the "group mind". The second tract, drawing upon Wilfred Bion's "Theory of Thinking", suggests that antisemitism is constructed by contemporary ideologies, branding Jews, and now Israel, as exemplars of evil at times of civilizational crisis. The third strand focuses on psychological issues surrounding the transmission of cultural trauma and suggests that failure to recognize such transmission may lay the groundwork for antisemitism in some individuals. Finally, Stephen Porges' "Science of Safety" has the potential to be utilized to address personal trauma that is heavily influenced by antisemitism; this section of the paper employs the first-person voice of one of the authors [GH] to describe his adoption of Porges' theory and other methods in his response to October 7 and its aftermath.

2. Among these texts were Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, vol. 18, "Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego (1921)" (London and Vienna: International Psycho-Analytical Press, 1922); Wilfred R. Bion, "The Psycho-Analytic Study of Thinking," *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 43, no. 4–5 (1962): 306-10; Melanie Klein, *Envy and Gratitude and Other Works, 1946–1963* (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1975); Terry Weill, "Anti-Semitism: Selected Psychodynamic Insights," *American Journal of Psychoanalysis* 41, no. 2 (1981):139–48; Moisés Tractenberg, "Circumcision, Crucifixion and Anti-Semitism—The Antithetical Character of Ideologies and their Symbols which Contain Crossed Lines," *The International Review of Psycho-Analysis* 16, no. 4 (1989): 459–71; Theodore Isaac Rubin, "Anti-Semitism: A Disease of the Mind," *American Journal of Psychoanalysis* 51, no. 1 (1991): 83–86; Mortimer Ostow, *Myth and Madness: The Psychodynamics of Antisemitism* (London: Transaction Pub, 1995); Allan N. Schore, "The Effects of Early Relational Trauma on the Right Brain Development, Affect Regulation, and Infant Mental Health," Infant Mental Health Journal 22, no. 1–2 (2001): 201–69; Robert Young, "What, If Anything, Can Be Done About My Anti-Semitism?" *Free Associations* 10, no. 3 (2003): 360–81; Stephen Frosh, "Freud, Psychoanalysis and Antisemitism," *The Psychoanalytic Review* 91, no. 3 (2004): 309–30; Clyde Friedman, "An Object Relations Approach to Studying Prejudice with Specific Reference to Anti-Semitism: The Long-term Use of a Lethal Apocalyptic Projection," *International Journal of Applied Psychoanalytic Studies* 4, no. 1 (2007): 31–40; Stephen W. Porges, "Polyvagal Theory: A Science of Safety," *Frontiers in Integrative Neuroscience* 16 (2022): 1–15, https://doi.org/10.3389/fnint.2022.871227.

For the purposes of this paper, the definition of antisemitism that we use is that of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance: "Antisemitism is a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of antisemitism are directed toward Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, toward Jewish community institutions, and religious facilities."[3] We acknowledge that definitions of antisemitism are contested by both Jewish and non-Jewish scholars.

The blue and white elephant in the room in any contemporary examination of antisemitism is Israel. Every era has its antisemitism. As Jonathan Sacks opined, over the centuries antisemitism has mutated and has had different legitimizations: "In the Middle Ages, Jews were hated for their religion. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, they were hated because of their race. Today, they are hated because of their nation state, the State of Israel."[4] People nowadays claim to have no problem with Jews, only with Israel. We don't always recognise it, but the elements are the same. Harbourers of antisemitism circa 2026 construct Israel as an exemplar of evil and human rights abuses and themselves as virtuous. In extreme forms, antisemites today intend lethal solutions for Jews; in its polite form, this intent is inadvertent or disavowed. That contemporary antisemitism cannot be separated from politics should not be controversial. Antisemitism has always been organized politically against the Jewish *collective*. Over half the world's 15 million Jews live in Israel; over 80% of Jews feel deeply connected to Israel through history, culture, kin and religion.[5] Key targets of antisemitism today are the Jewish state and those who identify with it. Israel is now viewed as strong enough to hate and small enough to destroy. In view of these considerations, the authors make no apology for references to Israel in this paper.

A short glossary is provided at the end of the article for readers who are less familiar with psychiatric terminology.

3. International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, "Working Definition of Antisemitism 2016." Accessed 24 August 2025, https://holocaustremembrance.com/resources/working-definition-antisemitism.

4. Jonathan Sacks, "The Mutating Virus: Understanding Antisemitism", Keynote address at the conference, *The Future of the Jewish Communities in Europe*, European Parliament, 27 September 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uwN1WuDwIf0.

5. Pew Research Center, "Jewish Americans in 2020: U.S. Jews' connections with and attitudes toward Israel," 2021, https://ww.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/05/11/u-s-jews-connections-with-and-attitudes-toward-israel/.

I. The "Seed/Soil" Model of Antisemitism

Shakespeare's Hamlet states, "There is nothing either good nor bad, but thinking makes it so."[6] This quote is generally taken to mean that "value" is ascribed to any and every experience or object, and that there is no inherent goodness or badness in anything (a Jew, for the purposes of this paper) *until* a thinking human mind (the would-be antisemite) accords it a value.

What is it then, psychologically, that permits the development of manifestly false beliefs about Jews in a given individual human mind as well as in the minds of large groups of humans, and how are such false beliefs ("delusions") maintained in the face of readily available information which could and should discredit them?

The first author [RS] has developed a working aetiological model of antisemitism, which he terms the "Seed/Soil" model. The model, borrowed from Infectious Diseases medicine,[7] uses the notion of contagion and poses the following questions:

- What are the present-time antisemitic "seeds" which implant in an individual's mind?
- What is the nature of the mental "soil" into which the seeds chance to fall, germinate and thrive?

The Seed

The sources of antisemitic prejudices, misinformation and conspiracy theories (i.e. the seed) have changed and/or have been augmented over the centuries. Historically, "religious" antisemitisms, both Christian and Muslim, have been prominent. Major drivers of current antisemitism include political forces and ideology. Contemporary antisemites are found both on "the right" and "the left". Those on the *far* right, the so-called neo-Nazis, are clearly rooted in Hitlerian ideology and White Supremacist thinking, and certainly antisemitism serves their needs to find an object of hatred and contempt.

But what of the far *left* seeds, the espousers of antisemitic tropes and conspiracy theories? Crucially important nowadays is the prevalence and vehemence of antisemitism at universities and within academia.[8] Some of

6. William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act II, Scene 2 (1599).
7. Christopher Kotwicki, "Infectious Disease: Is it the Seed or the Soil?" National University of Health Sciences, 3 April 2017, https://www.nuhs.edu/infectious-disease-is-it-the-seed-or-the-soil/.
8. Australian Government, Inquiry into antisemitism at Australian universities. Parliamentary Joint Committee on Human Rights, accessed 12 February 2026, https://www.aph.gov.au/-/media/Committees/humanrights_ctte/AntisemitismAusUni/Report_-_Inquiry_into_Antisemitism_at_Australian_universities.pdf.

the behaviours that manifest on university campuses and in some lecture theatres are not dissimilar to earlier pogroms, minus actual killings (thus far). While it is easy to recognise the "religious" antisemitisms, there appears to be no such potential theoretical underpinning for the current left-wing ideologues and the stances of modern-day students and some of their teachers. These individuals and groups might be termed "opportunistic" antisemites, in the sense that current-day socio-political circumstances provide the idiosyncratic *meaning* for the receptive "unconscious mind" with which to resonate.

The Soil

Turning now to the "soil", namely the minds of certain individuals and groups, what is it in those minds that enables them to become so open to a noxious seed that serves their psychological needs at any given time in history? Moreover, why are antisemitic tropes and conspiracy theories so readily and uncritically adopted by so many of today's youth? The need for developing adolescents to "resolve" their individual anti-authority issues in order to achieve a genuinely "independent mind" is important here. Failure to achieve this leaves some youths vulnerable to undue influence by perceived "strong leaders" who offer easy answers.

Our understanding of the soil of antisemitism may be fostered by considering theories pertaining to the developing human mind.

Psychoanalytic theory holds that early infant experiences are the root of an infant's developing *Weltanschauung* ("understanding and view of its world"), and the nature of relationships with key caregiver and other figures contribute to the beliefs, attitudes and values of the future individual adult.[9] Moreover, psychanalytic theory emphasises the importance of unconscious meaning attached to early infant experiences.[10] The unconscious mind, according to psychoanalytic theory, is a very dynamic realm of the mind, where beliefs, attitudes and understanding of the relationships between the infant and the people caring for him/her are developed long before anything like conscious awareness develops.[11] None of this early mental life involves

9. Klein, *Envy and Gratitude and Other Works*.
10. Peter Fonagy and Mary Target, "The Rooting of the Mind in the Body: New Links between Attachment Theory and Psychoanalytic Thought," *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* 55, no. 2 (2007): 411–56.
11. John S. Auerbach and Diana Diamond, "Mental Representation in the Thought of Sidney Blatt: Developmental Processes," *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* 65, no. 3 (2017): 509–23.

words. It is made up entirely of *feelings* of what experience is like.

According to the psychoanalytic viewpoint, all beliefs, attitudes and values begin as "inchoate" (undeveloped) feelings which need to have meaning attributed to them in order for the individual to "explain" to themselves by way of their own particular psychological defence mechanisms why they feel as they do.[12] For example, an infant growing up with an anxious mother will constantly have a sense of anxiety reinforced in their developing mind, which could result in a sense of mild fear at best and frank paranoia at worst, and the source of such anxieties will depend on each individual's life experiences. An infant's sense of being intruded into – by either or both parents – will, perhaps, be experienced as a sense of being "colonised".

It warrants emphasis that many kinds of experiences in infancy will feel threatening, but only much later will words be found for such feelings. It is also worth noting that the very earliest inchoate feelings are presumed to be akin to simply feeling "good" or "bad", "pleasant" or "unpleasant". It is only later that feelings like "hate", "love", "bitterness", "resentment", "contempt", "envy", "rivalry" and the like can be experienced and – even later still – given words to differentiate the disparate feelings. Many of the words commonly expressing antisemitic tropes may resonate with some individuals, comfortably "fitting" and explaining to them their unconscious threats. The attitudes of the "opportunistic antisemite" who characteristically attacks Israel (and Jews) as "greedy colonisers" and "powerful oppressors" may be explained by unconscious identification as the attitudes of a helpless child-like victim of more powerful adults, even where there is factual and compelling evidence disproving an Israeli/Jewish "coloniser/oppressor" entity. Relevant to the aetiology of antisemitism and indeed all forms of racism are the mental defence mechanisms of projection and projective identification which facilitate the evacuation of unacceptable aspects of the "self" into "others".

In seeking to further understand the soil of antisemitism, a seminal psychoanalytic work on groups warrants mention.

12. Hansi Kennedy, "The 'Baby at the Breast' Experience: Memory or Fantasy? Some Further Thoughts on Reconstruction," *Bulletin of the Anna Freud Centre* 7, no. 1 (1984): 15–24.

In his book "Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego", Sigmund Freud asserted that individuals' ego function is subsumed by large groups and that an individual may feel, think and behave in ways that they otherwise would not as they abrogate their ego function to the power and influence of the group.[13] The modern-day author who has strongly advanced these ideas is Douglas Murray in "The Madness of Crowds".[14]

The aphorism, "A lie can travel half-way around the world while the truth is putting its boots on", attributed to Mark Twain, is also germane. That saying attests to the potency of the Seed/Soil model and contagion metaphor, especially where "mass psychology" is involved: human minds are vulnerable to being influenced by unconsciously "relevant" issues, and feeling part of a group will heighten the likelihood of adopting, say, the antisemitic tropes or conspiracy theories which are espoused by the large group.

Modern Cognitive Science

In seeking to further understand the soil of antisemitism, the above-mentioned traditional psychoanalytic concepts may be complemented by ideas from modern cognitive science, which has developed the notion of "neural networks".[15] This notion is heavily utilised in computer science wherein multiple "inputs" can be allocated certain "weights" to compute a relevant output and thereby determine a given action. This encompasses the idea that the many billions of neurones (nerve cells) in the brain have myriad connections with one another involving various inputs into the cell body from other cells and outputs onto further neurones.

It is further hypothesised that all experiences from babyhood onward are "experienced" and "recorded" by brain neurones and, over time, contribute to accumulated memory. In the first few years of life, all of this presumably occurs before the achievement of language and the development of human self-awareness. Repeated similar experiences will lead to reinforcing the strength of a given memory, while dissimilar experiences will weaken the strength of a memory.

15. See Edmund Rolls and Alessandro Treves, N*eural Networks and Brain Function* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); and David Cox and Thomas Dean, "Neural Networks and Neuroscience-inspired Computer Vision," *Current Biology* 24, no. 18 (2014): 921–29.

What is suggested here is that modern concepts in cognitive science could account for the development of the content of the psychoanalytic unconscious mind and its dynamic influences on behaviour, including antisemitic behaviour.

Psychoanalytic Parallels with "9/11"

It is worth digressing to mention a paper delivered by the first author several years ago in Adelaide at the Annual Congress of the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists (RANZCP), in which he reflected on his clinical work in the immediate aftermath of the Twin Tower terrorist attack of 11 September 2001.[16] The author recalled being shocked to hear all of his male patients (but none of his female patients) express some degree of pleasure at what had occurred and voice support for the perpetrators. The author has reflected on how the unexpected murderous attack on Israel on October 7 was also met with jubilation by very many in Australia and around the world. He considered that all of his male patients in the immediate aftermath of "9/11", in their responses to that horrendous event, betrayed aspects of their unconscious underlying issues in relationships with their fathers. The idea of feelings of "triumph" over the "oppressive phallic object" expressed by a psychoanalyst might be considered by sceptics as too glib, but coming from all of the male patients in their analytic sessions was rather convincing, to him at least, of the powerful role of established unconscious attitudes. None of the men had expressed any kind of anti-American sentiment prior to 9/11. What was striking to the first author, was that the tragic events of 9/11 "fitted" their already unconscious attitudes and that the "opportunity" for expressing their *Schadenfreude* (pleasure derived from another's misfortune) was enabled through those events, just as the opportunity for antisemitic behaviours – "opportunistic antisemitism" – surfaced after October 7.

II. A Selected War: Bion, Antisemitism and the Moral Gestalt

The Weaponisation of Psychoanalysis

In contrast to the authors' efforts to understand antisemitism

16. Ron Spielman, "Living with the Unconscious in Interesting Times", paper delivered at the Royal Australian and New Zealand Annual Congress, Adelaide, May 2009.

from a psychoanalytic perspective, ultimately with a view to curbing the phenomenon, psychoanalysis has not uncommonly been weaponised to attack Israel and Jews. While the post-WWII literature interrogating National Socialist antisemitism and the psychology of fascism is vast and generally sympathetic to Jews, a recent literature search seems to support the notion that Jews are increasingly viewed through the lens of Israeli politics. An online search of psychoanalytic literature in PEP-Web in February 2025 revealed that Israel had been mentioned over 4,000 times, Palestine over 900 times and Sudan only 150 times.[17] A perusal of some of that literature suggests that a prominent and longstanding psychoanalytic narrative portrays Israelis as Holocaust-traumatised aggressors enacting their unresolved trauma on Palestinians, who are cast as passive victims. In other words, Israel has no real enemy; the enemy is a pathological fantasy.

An Alternative View: Wilfred Bion

Seeking an alternative view, the second author [LC] turned to the psychoanalysts who wrote during and following WWII. After witnessing a fellow soldier's chest blown open in WWI, Wilfred Bion, a British psychoanalyst, spent his life trying to make sense of psychic catastrophe through clinical work, writings and literature. His model of "containment", originally drawn from military terminology, describes the process by which overwhelming mental states can be made bearable through relational holding and thought.[18]

In his "Theory of Thinking", Bion proposed that an idea is a group of intuitively selected facts grouped together to make sense of raw experience.[19] Ideas can also be deployed to defend against experience that threatens to shatter a sense of self and being. Elaborated further, an ideology may be viewed as a group of selected ideas stitched together to alleviate anxiety and produce a sense of coherence that comes to characterize a culture's values.

Bion described the "overvalued idea" as the spurious integration of facts, under the pressure of an urgent need for resolution of anxiety. This can be clearly seen in consp-

17. PEP-Web, Psychoanalytic Electronic Publishing. Search data February 2025. https://pep-web.org. PEP-Web (Psychoanalytic Electronic Publishing) is a digital archive of psychoanalytic journals, texts and videos that includes over 144,000 articles from the last 150 years.
18. Wilfred R. Bion, *War Memoirs 1917–1919*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2015).
19. Bion, "The Psycho-Analytic Study of Thinking."

iracy theories: "I am anxious, disconsolate, aggrieved; there must be a reason for it – the reason is the Jews." A further devolution produces delusional thinking, where all possibility of insight is lost.

The more self-idealising the ideology, the more externally demonising it is. In other words, the whiter the right-wing antisemite believes himself to be, the more universally humanitarian the left-wing, and the more obedient to Allah's wishes the Islamist, the more malign becomes the Other, in this case the Jew.

A Selected War

Why this war? This has become a *selected* war. Israel has always received extraordinary coverage—more than Africa, India or China. The UN Human Rights Council reserves a standing agenda item for it.[20] Media outlets, NGOs, academic institutions and cultural bodies cite and recycle each other's statistics, terminology and framing. As a result, other global catastrophes are neglected.

In Bion's view, uncertainty becomes increasingly intolerable under the pressure of annihilatory anxiety. The fanatical ideologue replaces thinking with omniscience, complexity with dogma. Curiosity is sacrificed because one already knows. When ideas – apartheid, disproportionality, indigeneity, white supremacy, colonialism – become slogans, moral absolutism follows. Suppression of curiosity means that enquiry, concern and problem-solving are impeded, so that questions about the consequence of ideas like "From the River to the Sea", for example, are never seriously pursued. Any aspect of reality that conflicts with and therefore threatens the worldview is rejected. Responsibility for consequences and outcome cannot be entertained. Intellectual paralysis forecloses empathy, inquiry and dialogue. In addition, language becomes instrumentalised. Language is used to demoralise and shame rather than to communicate and seek truth. Words like "Zionist" and "genocide", for instance, have been stripped of their original meanings that were intrinsic to Jewish identity, politicised and employed against Jews. Their incessant repetition enhances the apparent facsimile

20. UN Human Rights Council, Agenda Item 7, 2025. https://unwatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/UN-Watch-Item-7-Report-2025_WEB.pdf.

of "truth". Such use of language displays an indifference to facts, meaning and history, a use described by Bion as "perverse, cruel, and sterile".[21] A Bionian perspective would suggest that in a state of psychic *health*, by contrast, thinking and the associated language closely resemble reality.

Projection and Disavowal

Ideologies provide rationalisations for projection and disavowal, the primary processes by which racism works.

When elements of psychic reality cannot be tolerated, they must be projected, by which Bion meant unconsciously evacuated and mysteriously discovered in others. Common projections assumed in progressive ideology's construction of Israel are:

- *You* are brutal; *I* am kind.
- *You* are vengeful; *I* am peace-loving.
- *You* are bloodthirsty; *I* am humanitarian.
- *You* are guilty of colonialism and racism; *I* honour indigenous peoples.
- *You* are paranoid: *I* am not living in a dangerous world.
- *Your* power is malign: *I* am not inadequate and alienated.
- *It is not me who is bad, but you.*

This process produces scapegoats, those who momentarily absorb a society's disavowed shame and rage. Thus, Israel becomes the repository of all projected evil. No achievement is viewed as benign: scientific innovation is greed; military success is deliberate "baby-killing"; community is cabal. Every virtue is inverted. Zionism, once a liberation movement, is recoded as original sin. Errors and flaws are exaggerated and used to justify condemnation and erasure. Narratives of Jewish vulnerability are framed as manipulative. Suffering is denied or treated as deserved. This is not critique, but delegitimisation and erasure.

Roger Money-Kyrle, a British psychoanalyst and anthropologist, identified what he called "scotomism," the refusal to acknowledge the implacability of one's enemies that prevented Britain from preparing for war in the 1930s.[22]

21. Wilfred R. Bion, "Attacks on Linking," *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 40, no. 4 (1959): 308–15.
22. Roger Money-Kyrle, "Politics from the Point of View of Psycho-Analysis," *The Collected Papers of Roger Money-Kyrle* 48 (1978): 366–75.

In his critique of the pursuit of appeasement with Hitler, Money-Kyrle pointed out that pacifism may be due to excessive guilt or fear that limits the capacity to fight.

Ernest Jones, a British psychoanalyst who played a key role in evacuating Jewish psychoanalysts from Nazi Europe, described Hitler's "most valuable secret weapon" as "Quislingism", named after Vidkun Quisling, a Norwegian politician and Nazi collaborator.[23] The varieties of Quislingism are eerily familiar: the "cynic" who believes all things are equal and there is nothing to fight for; the "escapist" who believes that war can be avoided; and the "rationaliser" who believes aggression is justified because of historical grievance.

During WWII, Bion described the "war of nerves" directed at civilians, intended to produce surrender by inducing despair. (It might be contended that nowadays these civilians, on the front line of the "information war", are not only Israelis but also diasporic Zionist Jews.) If a civilian becomes crippled by despair, he is a psychological casualty. If he changes sides, this is a double success. Psychological warfare has always occurred in parallel with the physical; the arrival of social media has only multiplied the former's influence. The effort to make Israel a pariah state and therefore cause it to collapse is a part of the war effort. Thus, while the suffering in Gaza in the most recent war is indeed confronting, a deluge of graphic images, particularly of injured children, has provoked vicarious trauma in many,[24] hatred for "genocidal perpetrators" and reduced capacity to reflect on the October 7 trigger for suffering or the stakes for Israel in a just war. Empathy for suffering is a vector by which good people are made to turn against Israel. Parlous, too, for Israel and world Jewry is "narcissistic projection" or "mirror bias", in this case meaning the presumption that individuals from non-Western cultures share one's own values, goals, and desires. This is a form of narcissistic identification that defends against the recognition of danger. The history and aspirations of those from other cultures are either denied or ignored. In the Middle East and beyond, this failing may have tragic consequences, and possibly contributed to

23. Ernest Jones, "The Psychology of Quislingism," *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 22 (1941): 1–6.
24. Salma Abdalla et al., "Media Exposure and the Risk of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder Following a Mass Traumatic Event: An In-Silico Experiment," *Frontiers in Psychiatry* 12 (2021): 674263.

October 7 and the torrent of antisemitism that followed.

III. Antisemitism and the Denial of Cultural Trauma

One of the frequent tasks of a psychiatrist is to explore the sources and manifestations of trauma. The task is usually undertaken for individual patients but can be applied to bigger groups. Cultural theory and cultural trauma perspectives examine attitudes and impacts on a systemic level of large populations rather than within individual people. In groundbreaking work, Jeffrey Alexander defined cultural trauma as "members of a collectivity … subjected to a horrendous event that has left indelible marks on collective consciousness ... changing future identity in fundamental, irrevocable ways".[25] The third author [PF] of our paper postulates that ignoring the cultural trauma context of the actions of the State of Israel and the Jewish people, when a cultural trauma context is accepted for other groups, is a modern form of antisemitism.

According to a cultural trauma perspective, feared obliteration as a cultural entity has been an overriding concern for the Jewish people since the days of the Babylonian exodus in the Bronze Age. The subsequent obliteration of the Kingdom of Judea in Roman times in turn led to the Jewish diaspora. The existential threat of a destruction of the Jewish homeland has become intertwined with the fate of the Jewish people as a whole and increasing identification of Jews with Israel.

In keeping with a cultural viewpoint, the actions of Jews, Jewish organisations and the State of Israel, including the invasion of Gaza following the October 7 massacres, must be viewed through a lens of past trauma, which highlights a need for security for the Jewish people over centuries and millennia. Processing of fear is seen differently through a lens of cultural trauma. The experience of the Holocaust and other past traumas reduces the variety of responses to external events and threats. The central concern becomes survival of the general Jewish community. An example occurred only a few years after the Holocaust, following the establishment of the State of Israel. The concerted attack by the five surrounding Arab countries reinforced the notion

25. Jeffrey C. Alexander et al., *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2013).

of external enemies whose only uniting feature was the wish for the genocide of the Jewish people. The continued lack of recognition of Israel by Middle Eastern countries further promulgates the fear of annihilation and obliteration.

As psychiatrists, we can examine the specific stages and elements of cultural trauma. For most peoples and nations impacted by trauma, there is a pre-trauma state, which is usually idealised and where there is a sense of security and stability. Conflicts both within a nation and with external others are often minimised or denied in that period. Once the actual threat to life recedes, the post-trauma state is variable in nature and may or may not be overcome. Usually there is a sense of a lack of recognition by the offending government and lack of any desire for reparation.

The difference for the Jewish people is that repeated trauma over centuries means that there is no post-trauma state, rather an "anticipatory" state for the next trauma event, whether it be, for example, pogroms or another Holocaust. A further difference for Jews in relation to cultural trauma is that the development of a scapegoated identity is used not just by the perpetrating nation, but also by others with no link to the original trauma. An example of this is the adoption of antisemitic tropes from Imperial Russia by several Arab organisations in the Middle East. "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion", originally a Tsarist propaganda tool, was taken up by non-Christian entities to justify their own antisemitic acts.[26]

Appropriation of the Holocaust

Since the 1960s there has been a marked change in the preferred qualities of identification for the trauma experienced by various cultural groups. Up until the 1960s, it was seen as beneficial to identify with a strong, powerful imago, but since then there has been a tendency for groups perceived as oppressed to identify with the role of "victim".[27] Countries or groups, such as Israel and the Jews, that others saw as powerful, were identified with the role of "perpetrator", often in "genocidal" actions. These powerful groups were then assigned by the media the role

26. Carmen Matussek, "Fertile Ground for a Poisonous Weed: The Protocols of the Elders of Zion in Arab World," *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs* 7, no. 3(2013): 71–78.
27. Joel Best, "Victimisation and the Victim Industry," *Society* 34, no. 4 (1997): 9–17.

of the Nazi, commonly expressed through the use of swastikas. In the latter part of the 20th century, this powerful group had especially been the USA (hence the concept of "Amerika") but also included other Western countries that had been on the Allied side in World War II. It was noticeable that Russia, previously an Allied state, indicated that Ukraine was akin to the Nazi regime in order to justify the Russian aggression and attempted invasion. This led to a disowning of aggression, an assertion of Russia's right of self-defence and a refusal to recognise the concerns of the Other.

In relation to the situation for Jews, the denial of their history of cultural trauma – not denied for other cultural groups – constitutes a modern form of antisemitism. The inversion of thought in the latest conflict has it that Israelis are Nazi genocidal perpetrators who have to be destroyed, and Gazans are victims who must be saved at all costs. The Holocaust is cast as malignly transformative for the Jewish people, leading Jews to be perceived as more powerful and having a state that is identified with Nazi Germany. Since the National Socialist regime had openly declared a wish to kill all the Jews of Europe, this latest articulation of antisemitism could not be more perverse. In portraying Jews as powerful figures, Jewish fears of obliteration and extermination are negated. This essentially invalidates the notion of cultural trauma for the Jewish people.

Disowning of Aggression

Groups that identify with being victims can be seen to compete with other victimised groups, especially if one of the groups is seen as having a degree of culpability for the sense of victimhood. De Guissme and Licata[28] discuss a competition of collective victimhood recognition. A need for trauma to be recognised (e.g. for the Palestinian people) can lead to group values that disown a group's own level of aggression and project it onto others (e.g. onto Israel and the Jews). This act removes any acknowledgement of the Other's trauma and identifies the second group with earlier perpetrators, such as Nazi Germany. In this way, the cultur-

28. Laura De Guissme and Laurent Licata, "Competition Over Collective Victimhood Recognition," *European Journal of Social Psychology* 47, no. 2 (2017): 148–66.

al trauma of two peoples becomes wiped out, leaving the polarised view that there can only be one victim and one perpetrator.

The removal, then, of any context and past history of threatened obliteration, together with identification of Jews with their past Nazi murderers, becomes retraumatising for Jews, both as a cultural group and as individuals. These factors, compounded by daily threats to Israel and Jews and images of graphic violence, lead to responses of numbness, bewilderment and denial, classical post-trauma states. In turn, these responses seem to provoke even greater attacks upon Jews, described as "proof" of the inhumanity of Jews, and justifies a need for there to be a destruction of the State of Israel. The failure to consider the effects of cultural trauma is also demonstrated by the perceived need for a nation to adhere to unrealistic standards of behaviour, for example that a Jewish state should act ethically at all times in order to justify its right to exist.

Jews as a group, who were portrayed as having committed sinful, horrible acts (in the past, the murder of Christ), are now seen as involved in the genocide of the Palestinian people and are then scapegoated. Jews are used as a political football between the forces of both the right and left in Australia and elsewhere, as used to be done in Eastern Europe. It was noted there that Jews were under the protection of the aristocracy, but when convenient the protection of Jewish communities was dropped, leading to pogroms, originally out of anger and resentment against the elites, but the Jews became the scapegoats. Currently the scapegoating seems to be by developing countries, resentful of prior colonialisation by Western countries, choosing to identify Jewish communities and the State of Israel with powerful colonialists rather than as refugees from persecution and genocide.

It warrants emphasising that the nature and intensity of the graphic violence perpetrated on October 7, the sheer bestiality of the attacks on vulnerable babies, women and the aged, an outpouring of visceral hatred and obliteration

of any vestiges of humanity, appear in their character like a direct replay of the pogroms and Nazi atrocities of the past. It is as if the past has been disinterred, almost intact, allowing us to view the past in the present. The Shock of the Old, rather than the New. This includes the way in which other groups would then blame Jews for the Jews' fate, so that Jews were the perpetrators, and the aggressors were helpless to prevent their own actions, a natural response to massive provocation. In the current day, aggressors include parties such as Iran, its proxy armies and Western left-wing groups who are intent on destroying the State of Israel and the diaspora of Jewish supporters and who use the Gazan war as proof of the wickedness of "Zionists" and the need for Jews' obliteration.

The above discussion raises the question of what has to be obliterated. It has been conceptualised that vulnerability and dependency must be utterly destroyed so that a concept of a purified society, a "one-ness", can then exist. This has been described by Brunning and Khaleelee[29] in their discussion of the social dynamics of Thanatos and also by Twemlow,[30] who emphasises the group apocalyptic fantasy of purification. According to this perspective, a Jewish State and all its inhabitants must then be wiped out, as should anyone who does not agree wholeheartedly with the viewpoint, a totalitarian mindset. This destructive process is facilitated by emphasising the powerfulness of the Jews, and negating the inherent vulnerability of a small nation and its people.

The effect of being the receptacle of such anti-Israel and antisemitic forces is to induce a state of paralysis, which includes the trauma response mentioned above. The sense of numbness also has an effect of preventing any realistic evaluation of war-related actions on civilian populations. A state of psychic bombardment of Jews over the centuries seems to then have a parallel in the destruction of the infrastructure in Gaza.

IV. Son of Alice: A Case Study of Generational Trauma, Renewal and Jewish Identity after October 7

29. Halina Brunning and Olga Khaleelee, "Danse Macabre: How Eros and Thanatos Run the World," *Organisational and Social Dynamics* 15, no. 2 (2015): 320–39.
30. Stuart Twemlow, "The Relevance of Psychoanalysis to an Understanding of Terrorism," *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 86, no. 4 (2005): 957–62.

"In the aftermath of October 7, the rupture to my sense of safety was instant and profound. For decades, my identity as the only child of Alice, a Holocaust survivor, was balanced precariously between inherited vigilance and my professional persona as a psychiatrist. But in the following days, the media images combined with witnessing public antisemitic protests shattered my carefully crafted illusion of safety.

Recent studies by Bankier-Karp and Graham[31] and Shklarski et al.[32] show the surge in antisemitism and mental health crises affecting Jews worldwide and that those who, like me, carry direct Holocaust familial trauma, are especially vulnerable. Yet my experience of terror seemed to go beyond reported research statistics. Initially, I was surprised by the intensity of my symptoms, which included muscular tension, a struggle to regulate my irritability, breakdown in long-standing friendships and need for medication to control recurrent insomnia and nightmares, to name a few of the symptoms.

Some months later, I began to differentiate triggered historical reactions from current existential threats, between grief for my murdered grandparents, uncle and aunt, and the murdered victims of October 7. I realised that some symptom clusters, like heart racing, shallow and shortened breathing, a mind hijacked by lingering images of nightmares that intrude upon the day, ticked some diagnostic boxes of Complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (C-PTSD).[33] Daily exposure to news reports reactivated primal survival instincts.

Henceforward I tell the story of how I integrated personal narrative with contemporary trauma theory, proposing that Jewish offspring of Holocaust survivors occupy a unique space. At the heart of my case study lies a triangulated inquiry: journaling reflections of lived experiences, somatic (bodily) data, and embodied witnessing. I came to recognise how my vulnerability after October 7 and exposure to growing antisemitism overlapped with my life-long filial responsibilities.

31. Adina L. Bankier-Karp and David Graham, "Surrounded by Darkness, Enfolded in Light: Factors Influencing the Mental Health of Australian Jews in the October 7 Aftermath," *Contemporary Jewry* 44, no. 4 (2024): 903–35.
32. Liat Shklarski et al., "Jewish Mental Health Professionals after October 7," J*ournal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment* (2025): 1–13.
33. Vittorio Lingiardi and Nancy McWilliams, eds., *Psychodynamic Diagnostic Manual: PDM-2* (New York: Guilford Press, 2017).

Methodology

I employed triangulation as a research method to ensure rigor across personal, somatic, and intersubjective domains between October 7 and August 2025. Several techniques were used.

Daily Journalling: Indexed emotions, cognitive and physiological data generated over a dozen journal volumes. This included mental and physical states of stress, panic, flashbacks, analysis of dreams and nightmares, and moments of felt safety.

Professional Dialogues: In tandem with journalling, I was a member of a group of Jewish psychiatrist colleagues (the authors of this paper) who held regular Zoom meetings and other discussions in preparation for a symposium on antisemitism at the RANZCP Annual Congress in May 2025. Debriefings with trusted colleagues offered external perspectives for further insights.

Poetry as Data: Poems such as "Heart to Heart"[34] were written in immediate response to my emotional states and captured embodied states beyond language.

Somatic Awareness: I monitored my heart rate, blood pressure, pulse, breathing patterns and bodily tensions using Polyvagal-informed, guided "self-scanning".

Filmed Interview: I edited segments from a five-hour filmed dialogue, as interviewer and interviewee, with Gary Sokolov and Stephen Bennett (producer), featured in *The Tattooist's Son: Journey to Auschwitz*.[35]

Analytic Approach: I identified recurring themes of fear, hyper-vigilance, depersonalisation as "rupture" of identity, and moments of embodied safety. Coding was refined through discussions with colleagues.

Bias Management: Recognising my dual role as researcher and subject, I maintained an awareness of potential biases and objectivity with regular work-in-progress presentations to colleagues, peer group and a writing group.

Personal Reckoning and Poetry

Poetry provided a medium to express my shock and terror immediately after October 7. Three days after the horror, I

34. George Halasz, "Heart to Heart," *Australian Jewish News*, 3 November 2023, 20.
35. *The Tattooist's Son: Journey to Auschwitz*, directed by Stephen Bennett, Stan Original Production, 2025, https://www.stan.com.au/watch/the-tattooists-son-journey-to-auschwitz-2025.

spoke with my 96-year-old mother about the attacks and shared the poem in a search for a way to become aware of the dark knowledge of what it takes to survive.

I write, poetry for peace
A crowd celebrates,
'gas the Jews'.

poetry for peace
I never met my aunt Zsuzsi
killed in a room filled with gas.
She, the Jew. Aged 8.
Auschwitz, 1944
poetry for peace
I never met my grandmother, Esther
killed in a room filled with gas.
She, the Jew.
Auschwitz, 1944

poetry for peace
This day after, I wonder
would the crowd kill me, George?
how would killing me become a poem

poetry for peace
George, the Jew, son of Alice.
Melbourne, 2023[36]

In sharing these verses with my mother, she responded with visible vulnerability: "From the heart, to the heart. It went from your heart into my heart, immediately."

Her words, a testament to her empathy, revealed how our unspoken pact of silence in survival, the chilling grief of isolation, momentarily dissolved in shared grief. I reflect often on that threshold moment where our frozen isolation melted.

Embodied Disruption: Panic as Threshold of Trauma Transmission

In the days after reading the poem aloud, I experienced overwhelming panic as images of my mother's experiences

36. Police video analysis found no evidence of "gas the Jews" being chanted at the Sydney Opera House protest, offering instead "Where are the Jews?", despite witness statements. A modified version of my poem was published a few weeks after October 7. See Halasz, "Heart to Heart."

from her video testimony of Auschwitz[37] intruded into my mind. This panic was more than an idiosyncratic symptom. It was a reenactment of what Felsen and Frumer[38] described as the "reawakening of old terror" in children of survivors when facing antisemitic threats. The October 7 attacks did not just reignite trauma. They tore open the hidden ruptures and inherited vigilance structuring my life. I witnessed a similar process emerge during my lengthy interview with Gary Sokolov, also an only son of Holocaust survivors, as his late-life eruptions of grief mirrored my own.

Porges' Polyvagal "Science of Safety" Theory[39] helped me to understand how Gary and I mirrored bodily states. Porges' theory maps how the body's nervous system navigates safety and threat through distinct vagal states; "vagal" refers to the vagus nerve, the nerve which helps control how the body reacts to feelings of stress or safety. "Dorsal vagal collapse" marks a retreat into numbness or immobilisation when danger overwhelms, a shutting down of presence. In contrast, "ventral vagal presence" signals a return to calm connection where trust, attunement, and moments of relationship repair unfold.

During my lengthy dialogue with Gary, my autonomic nervous system oscillated from "dorsal vagal collapse", reflecting helplessness encoded in our shared familial survival narrative, to "ventral vagal presence". Gary and I managed to co-create a relational field of rupture and repair. What I have called a "perfect storm" of the psyche[40] emerged here as a conceptual threshold: I call this moment the "threshold of trauma transmission", where trauma could either transmit or transform between us.

Triangulating Memory and Data: Toward Authenticity

In the 24 months since October 7, I have relied on triangulation as both research method and survival strategy. As noted above, the discipline of daily journalling, the filmed dialogue with Gary Sokolov, and strong engagement with the preparation, presentation and debrief after our RANZCP Symposium on antisemitism, deepened my research, to recognise threshold moments of "reset"

37. USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Foundation, Alice Halasz. Interview 40521. Testimony. Survivors of the Shoah, Melbourne, 1998.
38. Irit Felsen and Judith Frumer, "The Day the Word Changed: Children of Holocaust Survivors Respond to October 7," *Kesher* 1, no. 1 (2024): 24–27.
39. Porges, "Polyvagal Theory: A Science of Safety."
40. George Halasz, "From Embodied Witness to Self Regulation: A Single Case-Study of Holocaust Trauma Transmission and Filial Obligation," *Kesher Journal* 2 (2026): 9–15.

between my dorsal-to-ventral vagal tone. My reset marked the moment when my nervous system shifted from collapse to connection. The move was from numb disconnection (dorsal) to grounded presence (ventral), where safety, self-awareness and relational openness are restored.

This research enabled me to see links between lived panic triggered by the events after October 7 and personal grief after my mother's death merge with collective trauma, triggering acute dissociation, ruptures, and emotional fragmentation. The research itself, activating social connections, became a survival strategy through what I called my "perfect storm", and I asked myself: "Who was I beyond the echo of Alice's suffering? What did my body's symptoms signal through overwhelming panic, dissociation, and oscillation between emotional numbing and outbursts? How could I make sense of it all?".[41] The result was both terrifying and liberating: I could no longer hide behind a professional persona.

Right-Brain Relational Rupture and Repair

Schore's robust evidence on early relationship trauma and "right-brain" attachment[42] provided a compelling foundation to clarify how traumatic reactivations may reflect disturbed unconscious mood regulation. Adapting the triangulation method, based on fragments of developmental history such as my delayed development in speech, I intuited early disruptions of attachment to others. These early attachment patterns, according to Schore, shape right brain systems responsible for mood regulation and may predispose to later developmental impairments. As one example, at the age of seventeen I experienced an episode of clinical anxiety and depression, interrupting my identity integration and at the same time triggering my choice of a profession.

After October 7, a series of rage reactions, nightmares, lingering images disrupting my concentration and inability to rest, linked with deeper, pre-existing impairments. These "ruptures" of self-regulation and self-care, after being dormant through decades of attunement with my mother's fears, finally surfaced. The emergence of my disrupted early care patterns aligned with recent mother-infant research.

41. Halasz, "From Embodied Witness to Self Regulation."
42. Schore, "The Effects of Early Relational Trauma on the Right Brain Development, Affect Regulation, and Infant Mental Health."; Allan N. Schore, "Right Brain-to-Right Brain Psychotherapy: Scientific Advances," *Annals of General Psychiatry* 21, no. 1 (2022): 46; Allan N. Schore, *The Right Brain and the Origin of Human Nature* (New York W.W. Norton & Co., 2025).

In my own life, I have come to recognise how the patterns, described by Beebe[43] and Lyons-Ruth,[44] have provided a living "proof of concept". As an infant, and in later childhood, I became acutely sensitive to shifts in my mother's emotional tone, hyper-vigilant to her facial expressions, silences and moods.[45] I was never quite sure what version of my mother I would encounter. Her responses, despite her deep love, left me feeling uncertain and emotionally exposed. Those early years of uncertainty shaped me into someone who, even today, scans every interaction for hidden cues of distress, suffering or rejection. I can find myself over-analysing silence, reading too much into a pause or a sigh. I can trace my lifelong relational hyper-vigilance back to my infancy, woven into my nervous system by the very dynamics Beebe and Lyons-Ruth so carefully described.

Embodied Safety as Prerequisite for Integration

Only by experiencing moments of embodied "safety" could I begin integrating my ruptured states. My therapy team (psychologist, physiotherapist and others) helped re-establish social engagement through Schore's right-brain channels of attuned communication: gentle tone (prosody), regulating eye contact with facial expressions of vitality, and controlled breathing practices all resonated with Porges' polyvagal-informed interventions.[46] Polyvagal-informed interventions (such as breathwork, grounding,

43. Beatrice Beebe et al., *Forms of Intersubjectivity in Infant Research and Adult Treatment* (New York: Other Press, 2005); Beatrice Beebe et al., "Urgent Engagement in 9/11 Pregnant Widows and Their Infants: Transmission of Trauma," *Infancy* 25, no. 2 (2020): 1–25.

44. Karlen Lyons-Ruth et al., "Maternal Disrupted Affective Communication, Maternal Frightened or Frightening Behaviour, and Disorganized Infant Attachment Strategies," in *Atypical Patterns of Infant Attachment: Theory, Research and Current Directions*, ed. J. Vondra and D. Barnett (Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development 64, 1990), 67–96; Karlen Lyons-Ruth et al., "From Infant Attachment Disorganization to Adult Dissociation: Relational Adaptation or Traumatic Experiences?" *Psychiatric Clinics of North America* 29, no. 1 (2006): 63–86.

45. George Halasz, "Memories of Silence: Trauma Transmission in Holocaust-Survivor Families and the Exiled Self," in *Remembering for the Future: The Holocaust in an Age of Genocide*, ed. Edward Roth and Jonathan K. Maxwell (London: Palgrave, 2001), 117–26; George Halasz, "Can Trauma Be Transmitted Across the Generations?" in *The Legacy of the Holocaust: Children and the Holocaust*, ed. Zygmunt Mazur et al. (Cracow: Jagiellonian University, 2002), 210–23; George Halasz, "Psychological Witnessing of My Mother's Holocaust Testimony," in *The Power of Witnessing: Reflections, Reverberations, and Traces of the Holocaust*, ed. Nancy R. Goodman and Marilyn B. Meyers (New York: Routledge, 2012), 145–57; George Halasz, "Introduction: Massive Trauma: Attachment Ruptured, Attachment Repaired," in *The Wounds of History: Repair and Resilience in the Trans-Generational Transmission of Trauma*, ed. Jill Salberg and Sue Grand (New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2017), 9–17.

46. Porges, "Polyvagal Theory."

rhythmic movement, safe touch, and co-regulating presence) each supported my nervous system's return to safety by fostering a shift from dorsal collapse to ventral vagal engagement. Yet even these micro-moments of safety felt unstable; news of renewed attacks on Jews worldwide easily reignited my episodes of panic.

Cox and colleagues[47] and Gordon et al.[48] document how Jewish professionals report re-traumatisation in workplaces that deny antisemitism. Like their participants, I found it impossible to feel safe in professional spaces that minimised or rationalised antisemitic violence.

The Ethical Imperative of Witnessing

Mucci[49] updated and refined the literature on "the power of witnessing"[50] in psychotherapy as "embodied witnessing". Further, she argued for its ethical stance in trauma treatment, where the therapist's attuned presence allows dissociated parts of the self to surface for repair. For me, witnessing my recurrent phases of panic and terror, without turning away, became an act of self-respect. Sharing it publicly, through poetry, presentations, teaching and supervision, the 2025 RANZCP Symposium and this case study, transformed moments of private panic into communal testimony.

The Paradox of Panic: From Pathology to Portal

My panic attacks, once seen solely as pathology, as derivative of early privation, became portals to self-knowledge. Reframed through the "science of safety", they revealed my nervous system's fidelity to inherited survival codes. This paradox, panic as both pathology and potential, echoes Kabbalistic teachings that encountering darkness can reveal hidden sparks of wisdom.[51] Like the red heifer paradox in Torah, which purifies the impure while contaminating the pure,[52] my confrontation with panic threatened to overwhelm but ultimately clarified what mattered most: reclaiming identity through conscious choice.

47. Carole Cox et al., "Antisemitism: Social Work's Silence Is Deafening," *Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Social Work* 44, no. 1 (2025): 3–16.
48. Michael Gordon et al., "Antisemitism in Medicine: An International Perspectiv," *Rambam Maimonides Medical Journal* 16, no. 1 (2025): e0004.
49. Clara Mucci, "Traumatization Through Human Agency: 'Embodied Witnessing' Is Essential in the Treatment of Survivors," *The American Journal of Psychoanalysis* 79 (2019): 540–54.
50. Nancy R. Goodman and Marilyn B. Meyers, eds., T*he Power of Witnessing: Reflections, Reverberations, and Traces of the Holocaust* (New York: Routledge, 2012).
51. Chaim Miller, *The Torah: The Five Books of Moses* (New York: Lifestyle Books, 2011).
52. Numbers 19:1-22.

Emergence of a Robust Jewish Identity

Paradoxically, October 7 forced me to revisit and reclaim my Jewish identity, not as scripted "inherited fear" but as a conscious embrace of history and moral responsibility.

As Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks taught, Jewish identity can transform trauma into ethical resilience if held with honesty and love.[53] This emergent identity required releasing black-and-white thinking of "safe versus unsafe" or "pathology versus health", terms in which I had defined my childhood and mother-infant relations. Suppressing or intellectualising my fears[54] had only perpetuated isolation.

I found my spiritual inquiry, especially through Kabbalah, deepened my understanding of the paradox of panic. Like the wisdom of mystical teaching, that one must "descend in order to ascend", I found a parallel in the principle "regression in the service of the ego" (the process of adopting a more primitive way of thinking to achieve a positive outcome). Thus framed, my panic reflected a descent into ancestral pain that, with support, enabled a return to life with greater clarity.

Clinical Implications

Shklarski and colleagues[55] and Cox et al.[56] stress the urgent need for trauma-informed workplaces that acknowledge antisemitism's psychological toll. My experience supports training therapists and supervisors to recognise hypo-arousal, foster co-regulation, and integrate Polyvagal-informed cues of safety,[57] Schore's relational trauma insights, and Mucci's embodied witnessing. Without these types of intervention, in the context of rising antisemitism, Jewish professionals remain at risk of burnout, compassion fatigue, moral injury and re-traumatisation, leading to disengagement.

From Co-Researcher to Self-Author

Clearly, the findings about one Ashkenazi Jewish child of a Holocaust survivor are not generalizable across all Jewish or minority populations. Nevertheless, despite its limitations, this case study demonstrates that integrating personal narrative with contemporary trauma theory and

53. Sacks, "The Mutating Virus."
54. George Halasz, "Is 'new' anti-Semitism really 'new'?" *Psychotherapy and Politics International* 4, no. 2 (2006): 101–09.
55. Liat Shklarski et al., "Jewish Mental Health Professionals after October 7."
56. Carole Cox et al., "Antisemitism."
57. Porges, "Polyvagal Theory: A Science of Safety."

practice can illuminate how inherited terror persists within Jewish professionals' identities. By transforming private panic into communal testimony, I aim to inspire open dialogue on antisemitism's psychological impact and the necessity of embodied witnessing as an ethical imperative.

October 7 unmasked a generational terror long hidden beneath my filial loyalty. What I had misnamed as devotion, I came to understand as a complex entanglement, a trauma-bond transmitted and forged in the crucible of survival. My identity as co-researcher with my mother had, for decades, shielded me from confronting the deeper undercurrents of inherited fear, obligation and emotional over-exposure. In addition, it had tethered my subjectivity to hers, as though to sever that bond would betray not only her suffering but also our shared covenant.

The words of my mother, "From the heart, to the heart", a simple phrase, offered more than comfort. That phrase became a compass. But only after her death, and in the wake of the cultural rupture of October 7, could I fully appreciate and receive it. In that shared moment of embodied witnessing, her words echoing as my body tensed in fear, I felt the transmission shift. The "heart" of which she spoke was not only hers, but mine too. Now, as I honour that moment, I allow myself to grieve, not only for her, but also for the part of me that had been waiting to speak in my own voice.

That moment was the turning point. No longer was I merely the son of Alice, or the keeper of her trauma. I began to author a new narrative, to integrate our past, rather than to be imprisoned by it. The work of mourning, embodied witnessing, writing, all this is my new beginning, no longer co-researcher, but a self-author.

My work-in-progress reaffirms that for Jewish clinicians carrying the legacy of Holocaust trauma, authentic identity repair requires relational contexts of embodied safety. As antisemitism resurges in the wake of October 7, these insights hold urgent implications: therapists, supervisors, and professional organisations should recognise the psychological toll of antisemitic threats, provide trauma-informed support, and cultivate testimonial spaces where all Jews can speak without fear of dismissal or denial."

Conclusion

Deeply moved by the murderous terrorist rampage in Southern Israel on October 7 and the subsequent vilification and attacking of the worldwide Jewish community, including the deadly Bondi terrorist attack in Sydney on 14 December 2025, we have sought to bring to the attention of Musings readers various facets of antisemitism from a psychiatric perspective. We trust that our paper adds meaningfully to the vast literature on antisemitism, which includes key works[58] that focus on the history and broad dimensions of antisemitism, as well as contributions[59] that address psychological aspects of the phenomenon.

Whilst it is hoped that the hypotheses and models for antisemitism that we have proposed, such as the "Seed/Soil" and "Disavowal of Cultural Trauma" models, have validity, these models do not necessarily lead to potential remedial programs. People expressing antisemitic beliefs, attitudes and behaviours are hardly likely to voluntarily grace a therapy couch. Nevertheless, people and institutions seeking to develop policies and programs to counteract present-day antisemitism could benefit from understanding the influence of the processes described in this paper in the generation of antisemitism in individuals and groups.

Just as there is no remedial program that automatically springs from the aetiological models we have suggested, there is also no "quick fix" as far as recipients of antisemitism are concerned. The described experience of one of the authors to address antisemitism demonstrates the complexity of the task, how antisemitism is woven into the fabric of one's life and the lives of other generations of one's family, and the range of tools that may be necessary to address the relevant issues.

Finally, this paper is not to deny the suffering of non-Jewish people, including Gazan civilians[60] and others in conflict zones, nor the authors' wish for a more peaceful world devoid of all forms of racism and discrimination. However, antisemitism has grown and is now of such magnitude that it necessitates scholarly attention in its own

58. For example, Robert S. Wistrich, *A Lethal Obsession: Antisemitism from Antiquity to the Global Jihad* (New York: Random House, 2010); Deborah E. Lipstadt, *Antisemitism: Here and Now* (New York: Schocken Books, 2019); Alex Ryvchin, *The 7 Deadly Myths: Antisemitism from the Time of Christ to Kanye West* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2023).

59. For example, Ostow, *Myth and Madness*; Frosh, "Freud, Psychoanalysis and Antisemitism"; Avner Falk, *Antisemitism: A History and Psychoanalysis of Contemporary Hatred* (Westport, CT. Praeger, 2008).

60. Arash Javanbakht, "Gaza's Hidden Crisis: Adults, Children, and Generations of Psychological Torment to Come," *European Journal of Psychotraumatology* 15, no. 1 (2024): 2416824.

right. Rabbi Sacks reminds us that openly confronting antisemitism strengthens Jewish dignity and the universal moral order.[61] We suggest that, in parallel, psychological and other factors that may underpin antisemitism warrant thorough, ongoing examination.

GLOSSARY

Attachment: The emotional bond we form with others, especially early caregivers, which shapes how we connect in relationships throughout life.

Complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (C-PTSD): A severe response to repeated or long-term trauma, often in relationships, causing emotional distress, difficulty trusting others, and a damaged sense of self.

Containment: A psychological process in which one person (typically a caregiver, therapist, or analyst) receives and processes the intense emotional experiences or projections of another person (typically an infant or patient) and then returns them in a more manageable, digestible form.

Cultural trauma: An event of horrendous proportions affecting members of a collectivity that has left indelible marks on collective consciousness and has changed the members' future identity in fundamental, irrevocable ways.

Defence mechanisms: Mental process initiated unconsciously to avoid experiencing anxiety, depression or any kind of threat to one's mental coherence. Such defences are intended to avoid descent into disintegrated states of mind.

Delusions: False beliefs or judgements about external reality that are held despite incontrovertible evidence to the contrary, occurring especially in mental conditions. The belief is not ordinarily accepted by other members of the person's culture or subculture (e.g. it is not an article of religious faith).

61. Sacks, "The Mutating Virus."

Depersonalisation: The unsettling feeling of being detached from one's own body or thoughts, like watching oneself from the outside, or a sense of feeling unreal.

Disavowal: A defense mechanism in which a person simultaneously acknowledges a reality and yet refuses to accept its emotional significance or implications.

Dissociation: A mental disconnection from thoughts, feelings, sensations or surroundings, as the mind struggles to cope with overwhelming stress or trauma.

Ego: One of three separate "areas" of mental function outlined by Sigmund Freud (the other areas being the Id and Superego). The Ego seeks to mediate between the demands of "reality" and the "biological instincts" (the Id) and the "higher" demands of the Superego – the internalised familial and cultural "standards of behaviour" expected of the individual.

Imago: An unconscious mental image, often distorted, of a person formed in childhood and that acts as a template to influence relationships with others.

Narcissistic projection: A defence mechanism in which a person attributes their own thoughts, feelings or traits to others, particularly when the difference of the other threatens their core sense of identity.

Overvalued idea: A rigid, emotionally charged belief or preoccupation that takes on an outsized importance in a person's mental life, limiting their capacity for thinking, growth and integration of experience.

Polyvagal: A descriptor of how a person's autonomic nervous system manages feelings of safety, connection or threat by shifting between calming and survival states.

Projection: A mental defence mechanism whereby unacceptable aspects of the inner world are "expelled"

(projected) into the external world and attributed to others and thus disowned by the individual.

Projective identification: A special form of the defence mechanism of projection, whereby there remains a connection and control of the "expelled mental content" in the other into whom it has been projected. Projective Identification is an important aspect of all human relationships, but in its most extreme forms contributes to significant behavioural and relationship problems.

Science of Safety: A term describing how sensing safety, especially in relationships, helps us to stay calm, connected and able to think clearly.

Self: "The self" refers to an individual's conscious and unconscious experience of being a unique individual (comprising their attributes, beliefs, values and identity), which develops from infancy and continues through childhood and adolescence via interactions with their carers and all others whom they encounter in the course of their life.

Self-scanning: A technique used in some forms of treatment when a person is invited to check their own body or emotions for signs of stress, danger, internal conflict or sense of safety.

Unconscious identification: A psychological process whereby an individual's sense of self or personality is unconsciously influenced by others with whom they experience a connection and wish to be like. Such identifications may be either constructive (identifying with positive attributes) or destructive (identifying with negative attributes).

Vagal: Pertaining to the vagus nerve, the nerve which helps control how the body reacts to stress or feelings of safety, for example by changing the heart rate.

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Paul Foulkes is a psychiatrist and psychoanalytic psychotherapist in private practice. He has been a Past Chair of the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists (RANZCP) Binational Faculty of Psychotherapy and Past President of the Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy Association of Australasia (PPAA). He has had a professional interest in Ethics in Psychotherapy, has been past Chair of the PPAA Ethics Committee, and has presented papers and published internationally in this area. He teaches and supervises at Royal Melbourne Hospital, and in Psychotherapy training courses, and is on the Editorial Board of the *Australasian Journal of Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy*.

George Halasz is a consultant child and adolescent psychiatrist and Adjunct Senior Lecturer at the School of Psychology and Psychiatry, Faculty of Medicine, Nursing and Health Sciences, Monash University. He has been a member of the Editorial Board of the *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry* (1992–2005) and Editorial Committee of *Australasian Psychiatry* (2005–2024), and consultant to the Psychodynamic Diagnostic Manual (PDM)–2 (2017). Publication areas include child psychotherapy and ethics, ADHD, psychotherapy and spirituality, and the generational transmission of trauma. He has lectured in the UK, Israel, Poland, Hong Kong, US, New Zealand and Australia.

Ilana Nayman is a general psychiatrist and psychotherapist, now retired from private practice. She currently works in medicolegal psychiatry for Medical Panels to which she was appointed in 2021, as well as the Mental Health Tribunal to which she was appointed in 2013. She was appointed to the RANZCP Racism Awareness Steering Group in June 2024. Dr Nayman was Chair of the Victorian Faculty of Psychotherapy from 2009 to 2014 and was Conference Convenor for the Faculty of Psychotherapy from 2012 to 2018.

Garry Walter AM is a child, adolescent and adult psychiatrist. He served as Director of Thomas Walker Hospital ("Rivendell"), Clinical Director of Northern Sydney Local Health District Child and Youth Mental Health Services and Professor of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, University of Sydney. He was also Foundation Medical Director of the Doctors' Health Advisory Service (NSW/ACT). He was Editor of *Australasian Psychiatry* from 2001–2013, and Visiting Professorial Fellow, Sydney Jewish Museum from 2015–2022. He has published almost 400 papers, Major research interests are mood disorders, physical treatments in psychiatry, genocide and severe trauma, psychiatric stigma, and publishing processes and ethics. He conducts a private psychiatry practice in Sydney.

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Vol. 4, No. 1.

Review of Jana Vytrhlik, *Treasures of Old Jewish Sydney: The story of a visual heritage* (Sydney: Longueville Media, 2024)

Kip Green

Dr Jana Vytrhlik is the curator of the Great Synagogue's AM Rosenblum Museum. Her childhood in Prague established her interest in European Judaica, and she learned about Jewish history from the neglected synagogues, cemeteries and objects of Judaica that the murdered Jews of Europe had left behind. Vytrhlik holds a double PhD. The first is in Jewish ritual objects from a Moravian town called Boskovice. The second, attained at the University of Sydney, combines art history and Jewish studies. This personal and academic background provides Vytrhlik with the necessary tools to recognise and assess important items from Sydney's Jewish artistic history, which is what she has done with this beautiful collection: *Treasures of Old Jewish Sydney: The Story of a Visual Heritage*.

In this stunningly photographed tome, Vytrhlik combines research of objects, archives, art history, local history and architecture to build a rich picture of Jewish Sydney in the past. Her research spanned museums, galleries, libraries and private collections, and stretched from Sydney to Amsterdam and London. The result is a comprehensive representation of Jewish life since the establishment of Sydney as a colony. In his admiring foreword, Rabbi Benjamin J. Elton, Chief Minister of the Great Synagogue, calls the book an "outstanding contribution to the study of the material culture of early Sydney Jewry".[1]

Treasures of Old Jewish Sydney showcases objects of Judaica, furniture, stained glass windows, portraiture and architecture. There are ceremonial ornaments, embroidered textiles, illuminated folia and colonial portraits. All are stunningly photographed and presented in generous

1. Benjamin J. Elton, "Foreword," in Jana Vytrhlik, *Treasures of Old Jewish Sydney: The Story of a Visual Heritage* (Sydney: Longueville Media, 2024), ix.

coloured plates. Vytrhlik has written engaging essays to accompany the objects, revealing their context and history, and linking them to early Australia.

This work challenges the notion that Judaism is a religion that rejects art. Vytrhlik cites the Bible's Second Commandment, which prohibits the making of graven images, as the source of this idea. She notes the centuries-old debate about how this commandment should be interpreted, and argues that it led to a conception of Jews as people of the book, rather than people of artistic creation. However, twenty-first century academia has recognised the fallacy in that assumption. Recent scholars, including Vytrhlik, are investigating Jewish visual culture and exposing a long, rich artistic history. From medieval illustrated Hebrew manuscripts, to the decoration of the Great Synagogue in Sydney, Jews have been creating works of visual culture for centuries.

The artefacts in the body of the book are divided into six sections. The first is a short essay called 'Setting the Scene', which establishes the book's intent to "illustrate the variety of Judaica styles and forms across many iterations…".[2] The following sections address Synagogue Architecture, Jewish Art, Traditional Piety, and Synagogue Ritual Objects.

In the chapter entitled "Synagogue Architecture", Vytrhlik uncovers the origins and design of the Bridge Street Synagogue (est. 1837), and the Egyptian-influenced York Street Synagogue (est. 1844). Early drawings and photographs provide visual evidence to support her historical notes. Vytrhlik then turns to the Great Synagogue in Elizabeth Street, detailing how the cornerstone was laid on the anniversary of the colony in 1875, and how a ladies' committee held a six-day "Fancy Fair" in Martin Place to fund its construction. An interesting inclusion here is an open-view model of the Great Synagogue, which the author rightly states has "universal magnetic power".[3]

The following chapters highlight art and ritual objects, including silver rimmonim. Rimmonim are ornamental finials that are used in Torah decoration. One pair adorns the covers of *Treasures of Old Jewish Sydney*, and Vytrhlik

2. Jana Vytrhlik, *Treasures of Old Jewish Sydney: The Story of a Visual Heritage* (Sydney: Longueville Media, 2024), 49. Henceforth only page numebrs will be listed.
3. 78.

explains that the mystery surrounding their provenance was the inspiration for her to write the book. She ultimately traced them from their creation in Amsterdam in the late eighteenth-century, to their purchase by the Sydney Synagogue community in 1839.

Other items of particular beauty include etrog containers in silver and wood,[4] and two colourful Mizrahs (Figs. 110 and 111.) The latter are tablets traditionally hung in homes to indicate the proper direction of prayer, and the two examples included here contrast a central European folk Judaica style with an Ashkenazi-style creation that is probably from Australia or England. A number of intricately decorated "illuminated addresses" or folios are presented in whole and in detail. These are both beautiful works of art, and revealing historical documents, the texts of which provide detailed information for geneologists and historians. One example commemorates the retirement of George Myers as President of the Great Synagogue in February 1879. Another shows appreciation to the recipient, Aaron Blashki, for his service to the Sydney Jewish Aid Society, and celebrates his overseas travel. A third was presented to Louis Phillips, Esq, JP, in appreciation of his service to the Great Synagogue, and on the occasion of his travel to Europe. All include explosions of colour where painted native Australian flora adorns the text. Golden wattle and vermillion kangaroo's paw add a distinctly Australian flavour to the artefacts, as do the paintings of Sydney harbour included in two of the three examples. The history and illustrations of these artefacts reveal the relationship between Jews, their community, and Australia.

The final chapter of Treasures of Old Jewish Sydney is entitled "Those who Inspired". It looks at six of the early Jews of Sydney, and by focussing on objects they owned or created, it reveals both the human and artistic foundations of the city's Jewish community. Notably, Vytrhlik spotlights "Adler's Kiddush Cup", a finely smithed gold presentation cup, made only two years after the discovery of gold in Australia. The cup is decorated with traditional imagery such as biblical symbols, laurels and oak leaf wreaths, with a very Australian addition: on the abse of the cup stand a pair of kangaroos and an emu. The piece was presented to

4. 167ff.

the Chief Rabbi of the British Empire, Dr Nathan Marcus Adler, as a gift from the Jews of Victoria. It was intended for use within the Sabbath prayer rituals. This piece is one of the earliest extant ecclesiastical artefacts made from Australian gold.

The only female highlighted in this chapter is Esther Abrahams, who was sentenced to transportation in 1786. While travelling to the colony aboard the First Fleet, Esther met and romanced the Marine Officer in charge, Lieutenant George Johnston. They later married, and Abrahams reinvented herself as a respectable wife and mother. The book includes two portraits of Esther, and a well-executed watercolour of her daughter Julia. In the latter, Julia stands in the grounds of the family's Annandale estate, the light and the plants speaking eloquently of Australian conditions.

When Vytrhlik examines the life of Aaron Alexander Levi, she includes an excellent section on yadayim, or torah pointers. This might have sat well in the chapter on "Synagogue Ritual Objects", but Vytrhlik chose to include it here instead, as one example was created by the contemporary artist Zac Levi in honour of Aaron Alexander, who was his great-great-great-grandfather. The younger Levi's work is seen elsewhere in the book; he has used architectural drawings and modern technology to create renderings of the York Street Synagogue. (Figs. 24 and 25.) The renderings are impressive, although it is not possible to appreciate them fully through the static representations here.

With Treasures of Old Jewish Sydney, Vytrhlik has created an engaging book of cross-disciplinary appeal. The crisply photographed objects alone will reward those whose interest is aesthetic. And Vytrhlik's well-researched essays add considerable depth for those exploring the history of Jewish Sydney and its artistic heritage. Vytrhlik has constructed a worthy tribute to the religious, cultural, communal and artistic heritage of Jewish Sydney.

Author Biography

Dr Kip Green is a historian and educator at the Sydney Jewish Museum, working in the field of Holocaust studies. Dr Green has presented at Australian and international conferences on the topic of theatre performances as a tool for recovery in Displaced Persons camps after World War Two.

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Vol. 4, No. 1.

Review of Lee Kofman and Tamar Paluch, eds, *Ruptured: Jewish Women In Australia Reflect on Life Post-October 7* (Melbourne: Lamm Jewish Library of Australia, 2025)[1]

Lynne Michelle Swarts

Ruptured is a timely and powerful anthology that explores the fractured experiences of 36 Jewish women in Australia in the aftermath of the October 7 2023 Hamas attacks and the ensuing war in Gaza. The title is luminous and haunting in its simplicity.

Each voice grapples with the shock-waves of recent events, which – as editors Lee Kofman and Tamar Paluch note – cast a shadow "laced with the unmistakable imprint of intergenerational trauma".

This book is not just a chronicle of pain and upheaval, but a testament to the strength and resilience each woman demonstrates in the struggle to maintain their sense of identity and belonging in contemporary Australia.

In Australia, where Jews have largely felt an integral part of society, antisemitism has increased three-fold since October 7. One in five Australians now hold antisemitic attitudes, the editors report, the highest rate across Anglosphere nations.

Ruptured draws on a tapestry of perspectives, its reflections both deeply personal and urgently communal. Its voices cross generations, incorporating migrants from the former Soviet Union and Israel, queer women, women of mixed heritage, second-generation Holocaust survivors and women, like me, descended from families who have lived in Australia for generations.

Everything Changed

Contributors include journalists such as former Age writer Julie Szego, Rachelle Unreich, who wrote about her

1. This review was originally published in *The Conversation* on Thursday 14 July, 2025. The author thanks *The Conversation*. This article has been edited since. Note that it was written and published in August 2025 before the Bondi Beach massacre on 14 December.

mother's experience surviving the Holocaust in a 2023 book and Sunday Life columnist Kerri Sackville.

There's legal academic Kim Rubinstein and political scientist Kylie Moore-Gilbert, a specialist in the Middle East and a former political prisoner in Iran. There's also a rabbi, cookbook authors, psychotherapists, educators, musician Deborah Conway and artists like Nina Sanadze.

"The effect of October 7 seems to have been felt by every Jew," writes lawyer Melinda Jones.

Kofman's essay, Writing in a Time of War, grasps that seriousness. She recounts how her life changed when Israel was invaded, and the destruction in Gaza began: "Then everything – everything – in my partly uncluttered, mostly fulfilling life changed … And I could no longer write." It wasn't Hamas' barbarism or Palestinian suffering that silenced her – she always hoped that her writing could bring light to a darkened world. What broke her was "the outbreak of antisemitism from Australia's hyper-educated, progressive elites, including many writers […] whose books fill the shelves of my study". She adds, "it was a mindf…k to realise that people who live and breathe words […] could be so selective about suffering."

Psychiatrist and psychotherapist Lynette Chazan echoes this existential dread: "Our existence" as Jews "is again up for grabs". Like a modern prophet, she asks: Is Israel's destruction dressed up in human rights, "the world's clandestine fetish?"

While the war is undeniably catastrophic for innocent Palestinians in Gaza, Kofman argues that in Australia, empathy for Jews has evaporated under the guise of anti-Israel sentiment. Her peers on the left she writes, were more focused on the demonisation of Israel and "Zionists" – meaning Jews who affirm Israel's right to exist. Meaning nearly 80% of Australian Jews according to conservative estimates.

"A double life"

This anthology sensitively covers recurring themes, include silencing, alienation, shock, horror, racism and vile anti-Jewish visceral hatred. Every author writes of living what

grief and trauma counsellor Irena Zilberman calls “a double life”.

Scrolling through social media on October 7 and 8, finding out terrible truths. The near naked and dead body of 23-year-old German-Israeli citizen Shani Louk, taken from the Nova music festival, on the back of a pick-up truck. The silence from those on the left who usually championed minorities, who continue to speak of October 7 as “resistance.” The silence from feminists and the UN Women’s organisation who said nothing on the rape and torture of Jewish women by Hamas. Julie Szego and Deborah Conway describe their disbelief on October 9, when chants at a rally in front of the Sydney Opera House, included “Where’s the Jews” and “f…k the Jews.”

Bodycam videos of mutilated, raped, dismembered and burnt bodies from the Nova music festival continue to surface. Interior architect and writer Kate Lewis writes of Eshkol, a small town near the Gaza Strip, where parts of her Australian family live. Its residents, like those in the nearby kibbutzim, were ravaged by “unthinkable inhumanity, ripped apart and butchered”. Burnt alive.

Zilberman finds out her uncle and aunt were killed at Ofakim, near Gaza. She describes her loneliness when she continues to see friends for whom these atrocities have little impact. Similar isolation and despair are felt by many of these writers when close, non-Jewish friends say little … or nothing. Szego notes, “First there is silence,” from those once considered friends and then “silence from comrades and ‘good’ people”.

Authors write of their efforts to learn as much as possible on Israel. Psychoanalyst, art psychotherapist and artist Julia Meyerowitz-Katz eloquently calls this moment “Against Silence”. Simonne Whine, founder of grassroots activist Jewish identity movement J-United, writes “it’s part of my increasing commitment to actively combat hatred”, to try to “make some sense of it all”. She continues, “my bedside table became a battleground of sticky notes and highlighted passages […] The more I read the more I understood none of this was new.”

These women read the same books that I did: Israeli producer Noa Tishby's *Israel: A Simple Guide to the Most Misunderstood Country on Earth* and ex–Palestinian militant Mossab Hasan Yousef's *Son of Hamas*.

Or they listened to former US Defense department official, columnist and writer Dan Senor's podcast, *Call Me Back* and the podcast by Israeli philosopher journalist Yossi Klein Halevi, produced by Shalom Hartman Institute. Or they discovered leading Israeli journalist Nadav Eyal, the chairman for the Israeli Movement for Freedom of Information, on Senor's podcast.

We are all forced to consider our resilience as Jews in the face of persistent, intense hatred. It feels reminiscent of the dangers faced in 1930s Germany, where Jewish shops were vandalised and antisemitic signs paraded through the streets. Actor Dena Amy Kaplan observes: "we, as Jews, are stronger and closer than ever." Writer, director and musician Galit Klas agonises, "Who will hide my daughter?"

Julie Szego reflects on the disbelief felt by many Australian Jews when reading an open letter in *Overland* published "barely a fortnight after the attacks, barely a week after the Israeli ground invasion of Gaza […] condemning 'war crimes committed by Israel in its ongoing genocide against the Palestinian people'."

Similar petitions and open letters have appeared across social media and in publications like the *Sydney Review of Books*. According to Szego, the petitioners overlook several critical issues. She writes that they don't mention hostages, they ignore or "contextualise" the events of October 7, nor do they acknowledge Hamas' use of human shields. Nor, she writes, do they mention Iran, a key supporter of Hamas. Surprisingly, the signatories represent notable individuals from literature, arts, academia and human rights groups.

High school teacher Siana Einfeld speculates, after documenting the hate in her northern Melbourne suburb, on whether her city is safe for Jews anymore, when antisemitic slogans, boycotting of Jewish businesses and artists, and even violence towards Jews and Jewish sites

has become the new normal.

Writer and corporate communications consultant Jessica Bowker mentions the silver lining of increased resilience and compassion since October 7. She has sought out Jewish friends and "those who empathise the positives of October 7" – becoming, in the words of Deborah Conway and New York Times foreign policy journalist Bret Stephens, "more Jewy". Is the challenge, as Rabbi Jacqueline Ninio teaches, to hold onto hope?

Who should read this book?

This anthology comes just weeks after Australia's antisemitism special envoy Jillian Segal's plan to combat antisemitism. Its well-timed arrival prompts me to ask: who should read this book?

Anyone interested in the way Jewish women feel right now, in our "lucky" country where recent public discussions have frequently omitted Jewish voices, leaving many feeling invisible or misunderstood. I think it should be read by women – including academics, creatives and the literary left who should know better – who deny Jewish agency, who think they know more clearly than the contributors to this anthology what it is to be "othered". I'm not holding my breath.

For Jews this anthology functions in three ways: it makes us understand that we are not alone in our fear and angst; that fighting back in any way we know how helps with our distress, anger and alienation; and that there are surprising commonalities in the diversity of women's experiences post October 7. Are there equivalent books written anywhere else in the world? I don't think so. As Einfeld puts it, she lives in a place where she still believes "co-existence [with fellow non-Jewish Australians] is possible".

This book is a major contribution to that aspiration.

Author Biography

Dr Lynne Michelle Swarts is a Senior Academic Tutor, St Andrew's College, and Sessional Academic, Discipline of Hebrew, Biblical and Jewish Studies, University of Sydney.

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Vol. 4, No. 1.

Review of Graham Blewitt & Mark Aarons, eds, *Nazis in Australia: The Special Investigations Unit, 1987–1994* (Melbourne: Black Inc., 2025)

Erin O'Brien

For the past thirty years, Australian efforts to prosecute Nazi war criminals in Adelaide have faded into obscurity. *Nazis in Australia* is a long-awaited volume which delves into not only Australia's history as a "safe haven" for Nazi war criminals, but also the lengthy process of investigating suspects, as well as the country's attempt to bring its own citizens, who were accused of committing atrocities in Nazi-occupied Europe, to justice.

It provides compelling insight into a chapter of Australia's legal history which is all too often relegated to dusty archives and forgotten scrapbooks of newspaper clippings. It is the culmination of a hugely diverse range of perspectives and decades of work. It brings into the open the whole history of the Special Investigations Unit (SIU) and the trials, from the challenges of "exhuming death in the woods" of rural Ukraine to the vicissitudes of language which exist in courtroom interpretations. It is an immensely important book and provides many "missing pieces" of this history which have not surfaced until now. It succeeds at documenting these perspectives in one volume as a "memorial" to the work of the SIU and seals its legacy for posterity.

While *Nazis in Australia* generally shifts between multiple perspectives and recollections logically, the structure of the book is unusual. Rather than being structured in the usual style of an anthology, this volume attempts to interweave various perspectives into one continuous linear narrative. Perhaps this is due to the mammoth undertaking of the SIU, and it is an attempt to make a dense chapter in Australian legal history more readable. However, it achieves the opposite. What is supposed to read as a

smooth transition from one account to another is sometimes jarring rather than conversational. Organising this book into the usual style of an anthology rather than "dissecting" contributions and interspersing them throughout the volume would have remedied this issue. As a result, one who already possesses some prior knowledge about the SIU, and the trials, will be well served.

Of particular note are the personal reflections of Graham Blewitt, who at the time of the trials, had the foresight to record his reflections, feelings and inner thought processes as the trials unfolded. Without having the opportunity to make his feelings known at the time, this act of preservation by Blewitt has endowed the history of the trials with integrity and a great deal of personal insight.[1] Blewitt's accounts gives one the impression of proximity to the events. This granular perspective on a singular moment in Australian legal history illuminates the unprecedented nature of the proceedings, which marked the first and only occasion on which Australia sought to prosecute its own citizens for murder under the War Crimes Amendment Act. The reader is positioned as a close-hand observer to the legal, ethical, and emotional pressures that shaped the trials. By granting access to Blewitt's deliberations and responses as the cases unfolded, the book offers a rare insight into the lived experience of prosecuting historical war crimes within a domestic legal framework. This immediacy and level of detail will be of particular value to scholars of law and legal history, while also rendering the significance of the trials accessible to a wider Australian readership concerned with questions of justice, accountability and national memory.

Another notable contribution comes from Konrad Kwiet, who served as an expert witness in the Polyukhovich case. Kwiet speaks to the unique tensions between the fields of history and the law, and articulates the many frustrations that he experienced as a historian navigating the courtroom.[2] Where one may assume a fundamental compatibility between historical inquiry and legal process, particularly in their shared ideal and commitment to establishing "truth", Kwiet instead exposes a far more com-

1. Graham Blewitt & Mark Aarons, eds, Nazis in Australia: The Special Investigations Unit, 1987–1994 (Melbourne: Black Inc., 2025), 105. Henceforth only page numbers will be listed.
2. 149–50.

plicated relationship. Kwiet reveals the ways in which legal procedure can constrain historical nuance, and how historical methods may be at odds with the context of a judge and jury and how this is a significant hurdle in prosecuting historic war crimes.[3]

Ludmilla Stern's contributions on issues surrounding translations in the Polyukhovich trial is also a fascinating insight into the inner workings of this case and represents one of the chief reasons for Polyukhovich's acquittal. Stern brings together, for the first time in this format, a range of linguistic, procedural, and interpretive challenges that shaped how testimony was received and understood in the courtroom. By foregrounding the mediating role of translation, her chapter exposes a critical but previously underexamined dimension of the trial, one that undoubtedly affected the evaluation of evidence and witness credibility. As a result, Stern's analysis functions as a missing piece within the broader scholarly discussion, and when read alongside the other contributions in the volume, allows for a more coherent and comprehensive understanding of the factors that led to Polyukhovich's acquittal.

Despite being a book which deals with a very specific issue, that is, prosecuting Nazi war criminals and collaborators in Australia, *Nazis in Australia* tells a larger tale. It raises questions about complicity, societal responsibility, and human nature. All of these subjects are frequently explored to great effect in texts pertaining to the Holocaust. What sets this volume apart, is that rather than discussing these topics in relation to "innocent bystanders" or challenging the notion of choice, this book brings to light an important question which for many Australians may hit close to home. What responsibilities do we as a nation have towards victims of the Holocaust? Towards whom is empathy extended? In the case of the Adelaide war crimes trials, it seems that empathy and compassion were given far more freely to the elderly accused with whom the Australian public identified, rather than the roughly 850 victims whose remains lay in a Ukrainian mass grave.

The Adelaide jury members struggled to relate to events in German-occupied Ukraine decades earlier to the respe-

3. 150.

ctful, aging man sitting before them. The media's image of Nazis, "animated by murderous fervour"[4] clashed with the elderly, polite defendants whose ordinary postwar lives made their involvement in such horror seem implausible. A media narrative which tended to be hostile towards the SIU, often considering it to be a "waste of money"[5] reinforced this perception.

More broadly, the theme of public ambivalence and sympathy towards the accused perpetrators is a spectre which haunts the SIU. In *Nazis in Australia*, this resistance manifests across multiple institutional and professional contexts, from the reluctance of ASIO to meaningfully assist SIU investigations through the extensive redaction of documents,[6] to a judiciary that at times appeared sceptical of the prosecutions themselves. This is exemplified by Justice Brian Cox's conduct during the Polyukhovich trial, including his dismissal of substantial portions of Konrad Kwiet's evidence and his interventions that seem to have had the effect of favouring the defence.[7] At a more informal level, the purpose of the SIU's work was repeatedly questioned of those directly involved. Robert Greenwood, the unit's first director, carried a photograph of a mass grave in his wallet, which he would produce when asked why such investigations were necessary, a gesture that underscores how frequently the legitimacy of the unit's work was challenged.[8] Indeed, it was widespread lack of support for the trials and the work of the SIU at both a public and governmental level which led to the eventual close of the SIU in 1992. This was devastating timing for those involved. At the time of the unit's closure, Karlis Ozols' investigation had nearly reached completion.

Ozols, a Latvian SS commander who had a prolific chess career both in Europe in the 1930s and then later in Australia for which he was well known within Australia's chess community, was being held responsible for roughly 30,000 deaths. Some of those involved suggest that of all of the accused, Ozols represented the strongest case for the prosecution.[9] This, along with other so-called "forgotten" cases of Latvia, depicts one of the most memorable aspects of this book. Some of Australia's most serious

4. 250.
5. 110.
6. 215.
7. 250.
8. 77.
9. 77.

alleged war criminals, like Ozols, did not face trial. This is the first time that their stories have been recorded and published in such detail.

An example of this is seen in the story of Argods Fricsons, who allegedly killed thousands in Liepāja. Both he and Ozols lived out their lives, under the rule of law in Australia, and died as free men. The contrast between some 300 members of the Latvian SS Legion who lie side by side in an ornate graveyard in a Melbourne cemetery, as compared to their many victims lost to time and buried unceremoniously in Eastern European mass graves, is stirring and demands our attention as readers, and as Australians.[10]

Nazis in Australia seems to burst out of a long-held silence, revealing truths pertaining to the judiciary, and shortsighted politics which contributed to the disbanding of the unit. Despite the attempted prosecution of Nazi war crimes in Australia being widely regarded as a failure amongst the general public, *Nazis in Australia* provides new insights into the work of the SIU. Rather than a failed attempt at delivering justice, this book instead reveals a team of dedicated and passionate professionals ranging from lawyers to translators, and historians to analysts whose tenacity and dedication have shaped not only Australia's legal history, but also the prosecution of war crimes internationally.[11] It is worth noting that the Polyukhovich case is the first example of the exhumation of a mass grave being used to retrieve evidence which would then be used to prosecute accused genocidal killers. Indeed, many of the SIU participants went on to use their experiences in other legal contexts, including in the International Criminal Tribunal of the former Yugoslavia. This legacy is something which should be acknowledged with pride amongst Australians. As Michael Wolf notes in one of the book's closing chapters, "society must define morally and legally unacceptable conduct. Society falls apart without shared definitions of right and wrong".[12] This book seals the legacy of the SIU as an important attempt at contributing to such a society.

10. 110.
11. 280.
12. 269.

Author Biography
Erin O'Brien is an educator at the Sydney Jewish Museum and a PhD candidate at the University of Sydney. Her work focuses on Holocaust education, with a particular emphasis on object-based learning and its efficacy within museum contexts. Erin is the recipient of the Postgraduate Research Scholarship in Holocaust Museum Education, supporting her doctoral research into Holocaust museum pedagogy. She has developed and delivered educational programs and lectures on the Nazi War Crimes Trials held in Adelaide in the 1990s, as well as on the work of the Special Investigations Unit.

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