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A Cache of Family Letters and the Historiography of the Holocaust: Interpretive Reflections¹

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ABSTRACT

Scholars of the Holocaust have long recognized that ordinary people's accounts, by definition subjective and individual, can deepen our understanding of the experience and impact of the genocide. The distinctive value of personal letters, however, particularly collections of sustained correspondence among multiple writers, has not yet been fully appreciated or explored in Holocaust historiography. Over the past decade or so, more and more collections of personal correspondence relating to the Holocaust have been unearthed. Their distinctive form and burgeoning numbers stimulate questions about their potential historical significance and how, in both practical and analytical terms, they might most fruitfully be approached. Building on my longstanding work with the family letters of Rudolf Schwab, a German-Jewish refugee who eventually ended up in South Africa, I reflect in this essay on a series of methodological questions surrounding the use of such private collections in Holocaust historiography. How might they differ, as sources, from the many testimonies, diaries, and other ego-documents with which Holocaust historians already work? Are they simply another addition to this already vast archive? To what extent might they enrich, complicate, or even disrupt our prevailing understandings? What new perspectives might they offer scholars about the Holocaust, the experiences of refugees, and beyond?

KEYWORDS

Holocaust; historiography; letters; ego-documents; refugees

Introduction

I first learned about Rudolf Schwab in 2009. An email arrived from Ricci Lyons, a friend of a friend with whom I had recently crossed paths. My name had come up in connection with a large wooden trunk of letters her brother had found in their parents' Johannesburg garage. At the time I was in the initial stages of a research project on Holocaust memorialization in South Africa, and I was working with the curatorial team at the new Johannesburg Holocaust and Genocide Centre, where Ricci's family had turned for guidance.

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¹This essay builds on my book *From Things Lost: Forgotten Letters and the Legacy of the Holocaust* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2017), reflecting on methodological issues that arose during my work with Rudolf Schwab's extensive personal correspondence. I am grateful to Wayne State University Press for permission to cite selected passages and letters from the book.

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Given my work, they wondered whether I might advise them on what to do with the materials they had discovered.

The trunk in question was one of the few surviving relics of a fire that many years earlier had consumed the Schwab family home. Inside the trunk, the family had found thousands of letters, neatly wrapped in paper and string – some typed and some handwritten, holiday postcards and New Year’s greetings, yellowing Red Cross messages, official documents and aerogrammes – mostly in German, but with a sizeable portion in English and some in French. The person who had assembled the trunk’s contents had obviously placed some value on them: He had kept not only letters from far-flung provenances, but also carbon copies of his own responses, preserving a largely complete correspondence spanning almost four decades and five continents.

The trunk belonged to Ricci’s grandfather, Rudolf, a descendant of a prominent Jewish family that had lived in Hanau, Germany since the 1600s. Rudolf fled Germany in May 1933, just months after Hitler’s accession to power, escaping first to Antwerp, then to Brussels, and then to Holland. By early 1936, he decided to head for South Africa, one of the few places still relatively open to Jews. Soon after his arrival at the port of Cape Town, he moved to Johannesburg, where he gradually built a new life for himself.

This was not the first time I had been approached by families who had discovered large caches of personal letters. In this case, however, my interest was piqued. To begin with, the scope of the source was remarkable. Consisting of over 4,000 written pages, it was the largest collection of letters relating to the Holocaust I had encountered (most publications of Holocaust-era letters draw on much smaller source bases).² The fact that both sides of the correspondence were preserved made it unusually rich and substantial. Even at a glance, it was clear that the letter-writers were unusually perceptive and articulate observers. In addition, since few victims of Nazism ended up in South Africa and even fewer recorded their stories, the letters potentially filled an important gap. There was certainly enough here to warrant further investigation.

Personal accounts of the Holocaust

Scholars of the Holocaust have long recognized that ordinary people’s accounts, by definition subjective and individual, can significantly deepen our understanding of the experience and impact of the genocide. The earliest Yiddish historians of the catastrophe emphasized the centrality of personal accounts to a Jewish history of the Holocaust, and pioneered the collection of testimonies.³ Despite some initial suspicion of the unreliability of testimony, for several decades now victims’ accounts have played a prominent role in the historiographic endeavor, and the question of how best to integrate them into the historical account is one with which our subject has long grappled. In addition, tens of

²See, for example, Rebecca L. Boehling and Uta Larkey, *Life and Loss in the Shadow of the Holocaust: A Jewish Family’s Untold Story* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Oliver Doetzer, “Aus Menschen werden Briefe”: *Die Korrespondenz einer jüdischen Familie zwischen Verfolgung und Emigration 1933–1947* (Köln: Böhlau, 2002); Christopher R. Browning, Richard S. Hollander, and Nechama Tec (eds.), *Every Day Lasts a Year: A Jewish Family’s Correspondence from Poland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

³Mark L. Smith, *The Yiddish Historians and the Struggle for a Jewish History of the Holocaust* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2019).

thousands of witness testimonies have been amassed in the form of oral history interviews, memoirs, and others.⁴

Over the past decade or so, however, growing numbers of private collections like the one I stumbled across in Johannesburg are being unearthed. It is perhaps no surprise that, as ever more victims near the end of their lives, they – or perhaps, more often, their families – approach with renewed interest those inevitable accumulated artifacts of a life: the letters, photographs, documents, and legal papers, stored in shoeboxes in the attic, or drawers in the study, or large wooden trunks in the garage. Some of these troves are modest in size; others preserve detailed records spanning continents and epochs.

With the burgeoning presence of such collections, new questions are surfacing about their potential historical significance, and how, in both practical and analytical terms, they might most fruitfully be approached. Building on my longstanding work with the Schwab family's letters, I reflect in this essay on some methodological questions surrounding their use in Holocaust historiography. To begin with, how might such sources differ from the many testimonies, diaries, and other ego-documents with which Holocaust historians already work? Are they simply another addition to this already vast archive? To what extent might they enrich, complicate, or even disrupt our prevailing understandings? What new perspectives might they offer the historian regarding the Holocaust, the experiences of refugees, and beyond? I explore a handful of examples relating to the Nazi period as well as its aftermath, and in the conclusion mention several additional themes that emerged from my work on this single collection. My choice of specific illustrative examples is less significant than the overriding argument they are intended to establish, namely the wide-ranging interpretive possibilities of personal correspondences as source material for approaching the Holocaust through a wider historical lens. Rather than offering a definitive or comprehensive methodological strategy, which would be impossible for such an inherently individuated and idiosyncratic group of sources, my intention here is, first, to highlight their rich potential in the hope of stimulating further research; and second, to progress the exploration of interpretive approaches that might usefully inform work on other collections as well.

Letters as historical sources

Letters pose distinct interpretive challenges for scholars. To be sure, the past two decades have seen a steady growth in scholarship on letter-writing, including on the evolution of epistolary culture especially in Europe and the Americas, approaches to the letter as a social and cultural practice, and analyses of letter-writing conventions and manuals.⁵

⁴There is by now a vast scholarly opus regarding Holocaust testimonies, diaries, and other first-person accounts. See, among many others, Alexandra Garbarini, *Numbered Days: Diaries and the Holocaust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006); Amos Goldberg, *Trauma in First Person: Diary Writing During the Holocaust*, tr. by Shmuel Sermoneta-Gertel and Avner Greenberg (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2017); Lawrence L. Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* (London: Yale University Press, 1991); Zoë Waxman, *Writing the Holocaust: Identity, Testimony, Representation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

⁵See, among others, Eve Tavor Bannet, *Empire of Letters: Letter Manuals and Transatlantic Correspondence, 1680–1820* (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Roger Chartier, Alain Boureau, and Cécile Dauphin, *Correspondence: Models of Letter-Writing from the Middle Ages to the Nineteenth Century*, tr. by Christopher Woodall (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997); Carol Poster and Linda C. Mitchell, (eds.), *Letter-Writing Manuals and Instruction from Antiquity to the Present: Historical and Bibliographic Studies* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina

Historians in particular, including those focused on Jewish history, have chronicled the history of correspondence, and drawn on letters alongside other source materials in constructing their accounts.⁶

Letters have nevertheless proven more challenging than other forms of life writing to integrate into scholarly work as sources worthy of analysis in their own right.⁷ Various reasons have been offered as to why this might be the case. Perhaps it is what one scholar calls the ‘dross rate,’⁸ or what another describes as ‘the flotsam of the individual life.’⁹ Letters are written in the moment, and they are full of vivid as well as trivial details of life as it is being lived, with (usually) no thought of posterity. Their content is highly individuated, at the same time as their ideas are often commonplace and their phrasing formulaic. Given this, notes the historian of immigration David A. Gerber, some scholars ‘[feel] apologetic for their interest in poorly written documents that are often filled with the most mundane details of daily life.’¹⁰

Another reason offered for the relative neglect of letters is their elusiveness as sources. Often only one side of a correspondence survives, or it is unknown whether some letters have been lost or thrown away. Varying levels of literacy and the use of newly adopted languages by immigrants can make it difficult to understand writers’ meanings. We may know little or nothing about those writers and their circumstances. Not everyone writes letters, and not all letters survive, complicating the question of representativeness. There are often gaps and silences: things that can’t be spoken about, or perhaps that don’t need to be spoken about, because correspondents have shared cultural or contextual knowledge. Censorship, or self-censorship, can also be a significant issue.¹¹ ‘Too elusive, too messy, too ordinary, too diverse – whatever it is,’ write the literary scholars Margaretta Jolly and Liz Stanley, ‘letters have neither had as serious an academic treatment, nor as strong a hold on the popular imagination’ as other autobiographical writing.¹² In historical scholarship, they have most often been used to illustrate historical narratives, to support generalizations that have been derived from other data, or ostensibly to speak for themselves in large compilations with little analysis, rather than being examined for their own sakes.¹³

The extant scholarly literature, particularly that relating to correspondence in the context of emigration and immigration, nonetheless provides helpful insights on the

Press, 2007); Alice Nakhimovsky and Roberta Newman, *Dear Mendl, Dear Reyzl: Yiddish Letter Manuals from Russia and America* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2014).

⁶On the limited literature on letters as sources for Jewish history in particular, see Asher Salah, “Correspondence and Letters,” in Dean Phillip Bell, (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Jewish History and Historiography* (Routledge Handbooks Online, 2018); and Elisheva Carlebach, “Letter into Text: Epistolarity, History, Literature,” in Eliyana R. Adler and Sheila E. Jelen, (eds.), *Jewish Literature and History: An Interdisciplinary Conversation* (Bethesda, MD: University Press of Maryland, 2008), pp. 113–34.

⁷David A. Gerber, “The Immigrant Letter between Positivism and Populism: The Uses of Immigrant Personal Correspondence in Twentieth-Century American Scholarship,” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 16, no. 4 (1997): pp. 3–34.

⁸Liz Stanley, “The Epistolarium: On Theorizing Letters and Correspondence,” *Autobiography* 12, no. 3 (2004): here p. 202.

⁹Catherine Hobbs, “Personal Archives: The Character of Personal Archives: Reflections on the Value of Records of Individuals,” *Archivaria* 52 (2001): pp. 126–35, here p. 131.

¹⁰David A. Gerber, “Epistolary Ethics: Personal Correspondence and the Culture of Emigration in the Nineteenth Century,” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 19, no. 4 (2000): pp. 3–23, here p. 4.

¹¹On these issues, see, among others, Gerber, “The Immigrant Letter”; Stanley, “The Epistolarium”; Doetzer, “*Aus Menschen Werden Briefe.*”

¹²Margaretta Jolly and Liz Stanley, “Letters as/Not a Genre,” *Life Writing* 2, no. 2 (2005): pp. 91–118, here p. 92.

¹³Gerber, “The Immigrant Letter”; Margaretta Jolly, “Myths of Unity: Remembering the Second World War through Letters and Their Editing,” in Alex Vernon, (ed.), *Arms and the Self* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2005), pp. 144–70.

potential value of letters as historical sources. Gerber emphasizes the link between writing and self-growth, and suggests that the act of corresponding is a fertile space within which migrants reflect on their developing identity and self-understanding, in dialogue with others. He conceives of correspondence as a performance, a process through which selves are constituted, and suggests that ‘writing, and particularly the solitary activity of writing letters to people thousands of miles and weeks of travel away, is a highly individuating activity that encourages self-analysis and throws the self back on its own psychic resources.’¹⁴ Letters, in other words, can be a significant means through which individuals, particularly those separated from family and homeland, make sense of their shifting circumstances. They do so in conversation with a range of others, constructing multiple ‘selves’ directed at different readers. Moreover, where they engage in sustained exchange with close correspondents over long periods, the historian is afforded an insight into how the process of narrating lives and selves develops over time.

The idea that letters can reveal a consistent or ‘true’ self is, of course, too simplistic. Multiple factors will inevitably inform the ways in which selves are experienced and narrated in different contexts at different times. As such, letters should be seen not so much as sources of straightforward evidence as, in the words of the archivist Catherine Hobbs, ‘the site of multiple constructs – of a person ... struggling with ideas ... while simultaneously contradicting, convincing, and contriving’; they provide not so much evidence of a singular self as the ‘moving target of human life being enacted.’¹⁵ Studying letters, in short, enables us to shine the spotlight on how people narrate their lives: in specific social and historical contexts, in relation to one another, across extended times and places.

While Holocaust scholars perhaps need less convincing than most about the value of such ‘ordinary’ documents, the distinctive value of letters and their potential use in Holocaust historiography have not yet been fully appreciated or explored. To be sure, we have seen the publication in recent years of several narrative histories based on letters (some, but by no means all, produced by family members).¹⁶ There have also been various publications of Holocaust victims’ letters in the form of edited primary sources, some containing historical background or annotation,¹⁷ as well as studies that use letters as sources

¹⁴Gerber, “The Immigrant Letter,” p. 24. See also David Gerber, *Authors of Their Lives: The Personal Correspondence of British Immigrants to North America in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: NYU Press, 2006); Niels Peter Stilling, “The Significance of The Private Letter in Immigration History,” *The Bridge* 15, no. 1 (1992): pp. 35–50.

¹⁵Hobbs, “Personal Archives,” p. 132.

¹⁶See, among others, Boehling and Larkey, *Life and Loss*; Martin Doerry, *My Wounded Heart: The Life of Lilli Jahn, 1900–1944* (London: Bloomsbury, 2004); Joachim Schloer, *Escaping Nazi Germany. One Woman’s Emigration from Heilbronn to England* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020); Helen Waldstein Wilkes, *Letters from the Lost: A Memoir of Discovery* (Edmonton, Alberta: Athabasca University Press, 2009).

¹⁷See, for example, Kees W. Bolle, (ed.), *Ben’s Story: Holocaust Letters with Selections from the Dutch Underground Press* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2001); Browning, Hollander, and Tec, *Every Day Lasts a Year; Hertha Feiner, Before Deportation: Letters from a Mother to Her Daughters, January 1939–December 1942*, ed. by Karl Heinz Jahnke, tr. by Margot Bettauer Dembo (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1999); Richard S. Geehr, (ed.), *Letters from the Doomed: Concentration Camp Correspondence 1940–1945* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1991); Anne Joseph, (ed.), *From the Edge of the World: The Jewish Refugee Experience through Letters and Stories* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2003); Gertrud Kolmar, *My Gaze Is Turned Inward: Letters 1934–1943* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2004); Edith Kurzweil, (ed.), *Nazi Laws and Jewish Lives: Letters from Vienna* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2004); Renata Polt, (ed.), *A Thousand Kisses: A Grandmother’s Holocaust Letters* (Tuscaloosa and London: University of Alabama Press, 1999); Milena Roth, *Lifesaving Letters: A Child’s Flight from the Holocaust* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004); H. Pierre Secher, *Left Behind in Nazi Vienna: Letters of a Jewish Family Caught in the Holocaust, 1939–1941* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2004); Krystyna Wituska, *Inside a Gestapo*

for otherwise unobtainable empirical information.¹⁸ Only a handful of studies, notably by German scholars, have taken a more analytical approach, focusing explicitly on methodological issues around letters as historical material, and using letters of Jewish and non-Jewish victims as well as *Feldpostbriefe* to explore questions concerning individual and shared experiences during wartime, the dynamics of censorship, and the impact of propaganda, among other topics.¹⁹ Building on these studies, as well as the broad themes outlined above, I shall now outline some issues specific to the Holocaust period with reference to the Schwab family letters.

Case Study I: Nazi-era correspondence and its insights

In this section, I briefly analyze selected documents from the Schwab family archive in order to draw attention to some key areas of the potential of letters as source material: the value they can offer as contemporary as well as dialogical sources; what they can tell us about underlying processes and interpersonal dynamics across time; and the insight they can provide into how narratives of experience are constructed.

As I began to work through Rudolf's collection in the months following its discovery, I learned that correspondence from Germany had reached him in Johannesburg until well into the war years. In their letters, his relatives – his father Max, mother Martha, younger brother Hans-Ferdinand, grandmother, and various aunts and uncles – chronicled their day-to-day lives under the Nazi regime: working, eating, socializing, going to school, even celebrating Bar Mitzvahs. 'Yesterday was the big day, and he did very well,' wrote Martha Schwab to her son Rudolf in February 1936. 'So life goes on, and the children are growing up.'²⁰ In addition to the family's attempts to maintain a semblance of normality, the letters related the creeping effects of Nazi rule: the emigration of beloved friends, the forced sale of Max's business, the loss of the family home, Max's sudden arrest.

Much of what was contained in the letters was not surprising to me as a historian. There was little new to learn here about the details of Nazi policy, for example, or about the obstacles to Jewish emigration from Germany. At the same time, I was struck by the letters' vivid contemporary perspective. Postwar testimonies are, by definition, retrospective accounts, describing the experiences of those who survived when the outcome of the events is already known. Letters, by contrast, convey the uncertainties and ambiguities of life as it was lived at the time, when the future was unclear. How did the family make sense of what was happening as new laws were passed, as

Prison: The Letters of Krystyna Wituska 1942–1944, tr. by Irene Tomaszewski (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2006).

¹⁸See, for example, Michaela Kipp, "The Holocaust in the Letters of German Soldiers on the Eastern Front (1939–44)," *Journal of Genocide Research* 9, no. 4 (2007): pp. 601–15; Borbála Klacsmann, "Abandoned, Confiscated, and Stolen Property: Jewish–Gentile Relations in Hungary as Reflected in Restitution Letters," *Holocaust Studies* 23, no. 1/2 (2017): pp. 133–48; Leon Saltiel, "Voices from the Ghetto of Thessaloniki: Mother–Son Correspondence as a Source of Jewish Everyday Life under Persecution," *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 17, no. 2 (3 April 2017): pp. 203–222.

¹⁹Doetzer, "Aus Menschen Werden Briefe"; Adele Halberstam, "Geliebte Kinder –: Briefe Aus Dem Amsterdamer Exil in Die Neue Welt 1939–1943, ed. by Wilhelm Halberstam, Irmtraud Wojak, and Lore Hepner (Essen: Klartext, 1995); Gerald Lamprecht, *Feldpost Und Kriegserlebnis: Briefe Als Historisch-Biographische Quelle* (Innsbruck: Studien Verlag, 2001); Ina Susanne Lorenz, *Verfolgung Und Gottvertrauen: Briefe Einer Hamburger Jüdisch-Orthodoxen Familie Im "Dritten Reich"* (Hamburg: Dölling und Galitz, 1998).

²⁰Yad Vashem Archives (YVA) File Number 1589: Collection of Rudolf Erwin Alexander Schwab (hereafter Schwab Collection), doc. no. 582.

international opinion shifted, as life around them disintegrated? What did they talk and think about as the months rolled on?

Of course, there are various sources that offer contemporary glimpses into the lived experiences of Nazism's victims without the perspective of hindsight, including diaries, chronicles, and songs (the subject of my earlier research).²¹ Among these sources, letters are distinctive as acts of exchange, unfolding in dialogue with one another, often across extended periods of time. The recounting of personal news – how people have kept busy, who they have spoken to, what they are reading – is more often their focus than the unfolding events, even while the latter are their inescapable backdrop. Letters thus offer a different kind of insight into the experiences of individuals and families living through the Holocaust over long periods of reflection and discussion.

In the case of the Schwab family's correspondence, the conversations that unfold following Rudolf's departure from Germany reveal less about the political context than they do about some of its less immediately observable effects: the decision-making dynamics behind emigration, the fracturing of German-Jewish loyalties, the pressure on family relationships, and the construction of new identities in exile. Over the course of several years, it becomes evident that Rudolf's decision to leave was spurred not only, or perhaps not even primarily, by external events, but also – and maybe more so – by a difficult relationship with his father, a staunchly patriotic war veteran and observant German Jew. Max Schwab's letters to his 25-year-old son in Johannesburg revealed his frustration at the weakening of his fatherly authority, mixed in with the residue of earlier arguments and resentments. In late 1936, a few months after Rudolf's arrival in South Africa, Max wrote:

A long time ago I sent you a letter ... with, among other things, an identity card for you confirming that you're the son of the Chairman of the [Veterans' association] in Hanau, and a request from the head office in Berlin to the South African Jewish Ex-Service League [*sic*] in Johannesburg requesting that you be given advice and support. Why haven't you mentioned this in your letters? We don't even know where you're living or what you're living on! This can't be the point of emigration, surely – breaking off with and tearing up a perfectly good citizenship and then ending up with nothing? Don't you agree? Finding a new existence for yourself cannot be done easily or quickly, that's obvious, but with your knowledge and adaptability it will all soon work out, don't worry.²²

How could Rudolf so easily discard not only his own 'perfectly good citizenship,' but also, Max implied, his family's esteemed history in Germany? How was it possible that he was willing to 'break off' from that cherished identity and replace it with 'nothing'? Extending across several years, the ongoing correspondence between father and son exposes tensions and rifts that had clearly developed long before the external political crisis, but were nonetheless newly inflamed by it: Rudolf's minimal communication with his parents, his reluctance to accept their advice, his gradual drift away from Jewish observance. Max regularly wrote to Rudolf about the importance of living by 'decent' religious values, encouraging his wayward son to embrace the Jewish community in Johannesburg, which would act as a source of support and comfort:

²¹Shirli Gilbert, *Music in the Holocaust: Confronting Life in the Nazi Ghettos and Camps* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Shirli Gilbert, "Buried Monuments: Yiddish Songs and Holocaust Memory," *History Workshop Journal* 66 (2008): pp. 107–28.

²²Schwab Collection, doc. nos. 771, 620.

Now, listen to your father once and for all and make a positive commitment to religious Judaism, otherwise you'll lose contact with precisely those members of the faith who can support and be useful to you, those who can act in your interest. If not, you'll very much regret it one day; I just hope it won't be too late by then. No-one is exactly falling over themselves to embrace us at the moment and there will be dozens of disappointments on the way; that's why our faith in God will help us and give us courage to persevere in all our work and at all times.²³

Most of Max's letters to Rudolf expressed a similarly fragile mix of advice, anger, longing, and recriminations, tempered with intermittent words of reassurance for a son he also obviously missed. As conditions in Nazi Germany worsened, and tens of thousands of Jews began to consider emigration, Max angrily rebuked Rudolf for filling his younger brother's head with ideas about leaving. Hans-Ferdinand still needed his parents during his early teenage years, Max wrote, and he was a good distraction for them in these difficult times:

Do one thing for me please and stop writing to your mother and Hans about emigration and the like. Things are bad enough for me – and those things you said about me and the sacrifice of Isaac, they were a poor comparison.²⁴

Family loyalties and affections are not so easily severed, however, and for all his youthful attempts to distance himself from his father both physically and in his worldview, the new identity that Rudolf gradually fashioned for himself in his South African exile reflected ideas about citizenship and social responsibility that clearly had their roots in his family's German-Jewish past. In letters to new friends, old relatives, financial agents, and German bureaucrats, Rudolf frequently recalled his father's contributions to German society. In seeking to become South African, he instinctively chose as his model the ways in which his father had been German: articulate in the language, passionate about the landscape, and active in public life. Though he rejected his German past in many deliberate ways – shunning fellow refugees, speaking only English to his son, declaring his contempt for the country at every opportunity – three decades of letters reveal Rudolf crafting a new South African identity rooted in his father's German-Jewish values, principles, and legacy.

The letters also expose the growing strain on Rudolf's parents' relationship, particularly as in 1937 Martha began pursuing options for emigration without Max's approval. Women were often the first to recognize the severity of the Nazi threat, because their everyday contact with neighbors, teachers, and shopkeepers made them more keenly aware of the extent to which ordinary citizens were willing to participate in the 'social death' of the Jews.²⁵ During the November pogroms (*Kristallnacht*) of 1938, the Schwab home was plundered and a neighbor reported that the 50-year-old Martha had been 'severely ill-treated,' suggesting sexual assault.²⁶ Forty Jewish men from Hanau, among them 60-year-old Max and his younger brother Alex, were deported to Buchenwald. For thousands of Jewish men deported to camps after *Kristallnacht*, valid emigration papers were the only means of securing freedom. Martha must have provided

²³Schwab Collection, doc. no. 768.

²⁴Schwab Collection, doc. no. 775, 779.

²⁵See Marion A. Kaplan, *Between Dignity and Despair: Jewish Life in Nazi Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); Hester Vaizey, *Surviving Hitler's War: Family Life in Germany, 1939–48* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

²⁶Schwab Collection, doc. no. 3435.

these, for Max was released a few weeks later, although emigration was not seriously on his agenda. Upon his return from Buchenwald, he set about putting the family home back in order, repairing key items of furniture and purchasing new ones. Despite another violent attack a few days after the outbreak of war in September 1939, when a witness again strongly implied that Martha had been raped, Max persistently refused to consider emigration.

In popular perception, the loving Jewish family has long been idealized as a bulwark in the face of persecution, and this is a theme that is foregrounded in many victims' narratives.²⁷ While this was probably the case for some, the Schwab family's story suggests that there were other more uneven and ambivalent experiences. The dialogues that unfold in the family's correspondence during the second half of the 1930s, against the backdrop of the deteriorating political situation, make visible the gradual process of breakdown, offering a vantage point from which to understand the extraordinary pressure placed on relationships by the weight of the Nazi onslaught.

Over the course of these years, Rudolf's letters became less and less frequent. As Max and Martha's predicament steadily worsened, Max felt abandoned. After the outbreak of war, his short Red Cross postcards voiced an increasingly potent mix of desperation and resentment. Responding to Rudolf's jubilant news of his engagement in Johannesburg, Max wrote on June 19, 1940: 'We were very happy to hear your good news, but ask with urgency that you work as hard as possible to secure an emigration permit for us. Things must move – now!'²⁸ On September 30, 1941, he wrote: 'Dear Rudi, Nathan in New York turned us down after all. Will our eldest son continue to neglect his filial duty? Is Johannesburg possible? New address. Greetings.'²⁹

Years later, in a compensation claim, Rudolf provided a summary of the persecution he had suffered at the hands of the Nazis. When he had left Germany in May 1933, he explained, he had done so 'hurriedly, because I had been warned by a friend, Herr Kipfer, who was a Party official, that I was going to be arrested.'³⁰ David A. Gerber suggests that, for historians looking to understand would-be emigrants' decision-making processes, correspondence can reveal some of the 'less-recognized and not otherwise easily accessible dimensions of the motivation to emigrate.' On this point, he surmises that troubled family relationships may be 'the major undiscovered dimension of immigration history.'³¹ In Rudolf's case, the 'push' factor for leaving Nazi Germany seems to be unwittingly exposed in this account of arrest, which is not referenced elsewhere in the letters and has no realistic explanation. The story was almost certainly fabricated: perhaps because it made for a more convincing claim, or, more probably, because it was a more palatable explanation for why Rudolf left his family, given what happened afterwards.

This brief analysis of the Schwab family's Nazi-era correspondence demonstrates the potential to access, through letters, individual and interpersonal dynamics less likely to surface in non-dialogical sources. Observing sustained conversation between the relatives

²⁷Elizabeth Heinemann, "Inheriting Estrangement: The Private Papers of a Contentious Family" (paper presented at "Making the Private Public: Refugee Correspondence and Academic Writing," Wiener Holocaust Library, London, June 5, 2015); Kaplan, *Between Dignity and Despair*. On the non-Jewish family, see Vaizey, *Surviving Hitler's War*.

²⁸Schwab Collection, doc. no. 699.

²⁹Schwab Collection, doc. no. 728.

³⁰Schwab Collection, doc. no. 3468.

³¹Gerber, "Epistolary Ethics," pp. 17–18.

across several years, we witness incremental shifts in their attitudes and in the relationships between them, informed, but not determined, by the circumstances. It is worth emphasizing that, as historical sources, letters do not stand on their own; additional material is often necessary to help the historian contextualize and make sense of them. Taken alongside these materials, however, letters offer the historian an insight into deep-seated drives, desires, and connections that might otherwise remain opaque.

Problems of privacy, historical value, and periodization

While letters can offer the historian distinctive perspectives, they also pose their share of challenges. Those victims of the Shoah who wrote testimonies and memoirs made conscious decisions to share their stories, and it was they who determined what remained private. By contrast, most letters were never intended for anyone other than their readers. Some have been placed in formal repositories – Rudolf’s correspondence was archived and fully digitized by Yad Vashem, the World Holocaust Remembrance Center located in Jerusalem, Israel – but most remain in the private realm, in the hands of family members or friends. Writing to a friend in 1959, Rudolf claimed that ‘it’s only by chance that I still have all this old junk in my possession; I wanted to burn it all but haven’t gotten around to it yet.’³² He was a private man, and his letters contain much personal material.³³

On one level, the question that arises here is a simple ethical one. Who decides whether, and how, such materials are brought into the public domain? How should the individual right to privacy be balanced against the collective interest of history? The answers to such questions must inevitably be determined on an individual basis and, as with all sources, archivists and historians should approach these materials with empathy as well as rigor.³⁴

Deeper questions also arise concerning how we distinguish between the personal and the historically valuable. By being placed into the archive, Rudolf was transformed from someone unexceptional (in historical terms) to someone historically significant, not because of specific deeds or achievements, but rather due to the cataclysmic events through which he lived for a period of time.³⁵ He likely did not see the Holocaust as *the* defining feature of his life, which was for more than three decades consumed by his struggles as an immigrant, South African politics, and the trials of private enterprise. His experience of Nazism certainly determined the Schwab family’s choice of archive,

³²Schwab Collection, doc. no. 3542.

³³Biographers regularly encounter issues around privacy, though their subjects are more likely to be prominent individuals who have made significant contributions to history; their work thus raises related but distinct questions. For an entertaining discussion, see Jill Lepore, “Historians Who Love Too Much: Reflections on Microhistory and Biography,” *The Journal of American History* 88, no. 1 (2001): pp. 129–44.

³⁴On related questions, see Margaretta Jolly, “On Burning, Saving and Stealing Letters,” *New Formations* 67 (2009): pp. 25–34; Karin Koehler and Kathryn A. McDonald-Miranda, (eds.), *Private and Public Voices: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Letters and Letter Writing* (Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2015); Esther Saraga, “Personal Letters – To Keep: Managing the Emotions of Forced Migration,” *Jewish Culture and History* 15, no. 1–2 (2014): pp. 27–42.

³⁵See a helpful discussion in Leora Auslander, “Archiving a Life: Post-Shoah Paradoxes of Memory Legacies,” in Alf Lütke and Sebastian Jobs, (eds.), *Unsettling History: Archiving and Narrating in Historiography* (Frankfurt: Campus, 2010), pp. 127–46; Julia Creet, “The Archive as Temporary Abode,” in Julia Creet and Andreas Kitzmann, (eds.), *Memory and Migration: Multidisciplinary Approaches to Memory Studies* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), pp. 280–98; Atina Grossmann, “Versions of Home: German Jewish Refugee Papers Out of the Closet and Into the Archives,” *New German Critique* 90 (2003).

and framed my own initial engagement with his letters, but it is only one part, albeit an important one, of his historical trajectory.

Many letter collections similarly categorized as ‘Holocaust-related’ begin before the Nazi period – in the case of large family collections, sometimes decades or even centuries before – and continue for many years after. We refer to them as ‘archives’ or ‘collections,’ for want of better terms, but these words impose a structure and unity that many do not possess. Letters are written one at a time, by multiple correspondents over long periods, and the letter-writer may never see the whole, or even the part that is archived.³⁶ Again, there are no generic solutions to these issues. Rather, it is crucial that historians and archivists approach their work with an awareness of their mediating role. Through their interventions, they help decide not only which lives will be known by successive generations, but also what parts of those lives, and why.³⁷

Rudolf’s correspondence does not fit neatly into the category of ‘Holocaust-related’ in temporal, geographic, or thematic terms. The letters span the five continents across which the family was scattered, and almost four decades between Rudolf’s departure for South Africa and his death in 1971. While it is possible simply to zoom in on the Nazi-related segments, to do so is to miss crucial links and continuities between events in Nazi Europe and the larger dynamics and processes – individual, communal, religious, historical, national – of Jewish as well as wider life. Even *were* one to be interested only in Jewish experiences of Nazism, as Leora Auslander has powerfully argued,

... one will never understand a Holocaust diary, letter, or drawing, one will never understand a postwar restitution or reparations claim, novel, memoir, or interview, if one has not learned what it meant – in all of its immense complexities – to be a European Jew before the war and, for those who survived, in postwar Europe.³⁸

Put more affirmatively, letters offer the historian a stimulus – far more so than testimonies, memoirs, or diaries – to widen the historical lens and consider the Holocaust against a larger temporal and geographic backdrop, in which readers’ expectations are more likely to be disrupted, and accepted periodizations might not neatly fit.

Case Study II: Looking beyond the Holocaust

Such a widened perspective offers, in the case of the Schwab family’s correspondence, a longer-term perspective on the impact of the genocide in the decades afterwards, across a transnational and multigenerational landscape. Letters are, in some ways, the quintessential transnational text: By their very nature they trace networks and connections, constructing meaning not in one particular place, but rather precisely in the movement between places. As the editors of an important volume on migrant letters put it: ‘Conceived transnationally, the letter becomes a unique social space that exists neither in the homeland nor the land of resettlement, but [rather] in a third place that is, in effect, in both simultaneously.’³⁹

³⁶Jolly and Stanley, “Letters,” p. 108.

³⁷Auslander, “Archiving a Life,” p. 131. For an excellent discussion of related issues, see also Hannah Holtschneider, “Narrating the Archive? Family Collections, the Archive, and the Historian,” *Shofar* 37, no. 3 (2019): pp. 331–60.

³⁸Auslander, “Archiving a Life,” p. 146.

³⁹‘Introduction’ in Bruce S. Elliot, David A. Gerber, and Suzanne M. Sinke, (eds.), *Letters Across Borders: The Epistolary Practices of International Migrants* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 12.

Migrants participate in two societies at once, balancing new lives and identities in the lands of resettlement ‘with the cultural habits and understandings and familial loyalties that lead them back, mentally, emotionally, and physically, to their homelands.’⁴⁰ Refugees in particular participate in their new countries while maintaining strong connections with their homeland, alongside transnational connections with others in the refugee diaspora. (Diaspora here is defined in terms of consciousness and identification, more than simply the physical act of dispersion.)⁴¹

The Schwab letters mirror the dispersal of European Jewry by the Nazi catastrophe. In the years and decades following the war, the letters of the surviving Schwab relatives crisscrossed the globe, from Europe to China, Latin America to Canada, and South Africa to the United States. Rudolf arrived in Cape Town in 1936. His uncle Alex, Max’s brother, a decorated war veteran and businessman, endured ten destitute years in Shanghai before ending up in a studio apartment in St. Paul, Minnesota, where he earned a living as a janitor. Max and Alex’s sister Rosa wound up in France, where, despite support from the local Protestant community, she deteriorated into decrepitude and insanity. His beloved cousin Reny made it to São Paulo. His cousin Armand eventually surfaced in Montreal, where he had been unexpectedly deported following several months in a British transit camp. The conversations that unfolded in their letters consisted mostly of unremarkable details about work and home, and the humdrum of daily life: They wrote about the struggle to adapt to new cultures and climates, to make ends meet, to learn new languages, to find jobs and friends.

The Schwab letters are quite unexceptional in this regard. Many correspondences of Jewish families from this period reveal a similar scattering across continents, and a similar predictability of content. What the distinctive nature of their correspondence helps to reveal, more interestingly, is the ongoing process whereby family members forged new identities in the decades following the war, not only *in* new places, but also in the fragile connections *between* them. As their letters traveled back and forth, the relatives began to construct new stories about their lives, and, through that process, to reestablish the foundations of their existence. The gradual unfolding of this process over long periods of time – in this case, 26 years following the end of the war – can tell us much about the impact of the Holocaust, certainly, but it illuminates many other dynamic forces as well: the recalibration of German-Jewish loyalties in the aftermath of persecution and genocide; the renegotiation of ties of family and friendship; and the reconstruction of social, cultural, national, religious, and political identities in new homelands.

The family members themselves often reflected on their dispersal and its significance. ‘It is rather strange,’ Rudolf wrote to Alex in English in February 1951,

how we, the same as so many people, have been scattered over the whole face of the Earth. You in [the] USA, Armand in Canada, Reny in Brasil, Rosa & Siegfried in France and I [*sic*] in SA. Actually, the strange part about it is that we accept this as something so perfectly natural, and (at least I) hardly ever think about it. I presume it is the same with you. It is

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 11.

⁴¹William Safran, “The Diaspora and the Homeland: Reciprocities, Transformations, and Role Reversals,” in Eliezer Ben-Rafael and Yitzak Sternberg, (eds.), *Transnationalism: Diasporas and the Advent of a New (Dis)Order* (Boston: Brill, 2009), pp. 75–99, here pp. 75–6.

only when now and again, you write in one of your letters about the weather, that I stop and think about it; being in the Southern Hemisphere, it is the middle of summer here, when you are in the depth [*sic.*] of winter.⁴²

The family's physical dispersal was perhaps not so significant to Rudolf because the process of corresponding itself took on the form of a virtual parallel existence in which he preserved a semblance of continuity and belonging. From a distance, Rudolf's young son Norman observed the Sunday morning ritual in which his father withdrew to his writing table, meticulously dressed in jacket and bow tie and gray flannels in the heat of the African Highveld, to undertake the important work of composing his letters. Letters were a means through which Rudolf maintained family ties in the most literal sense: They were the method for conveying news and keeping up to date, for discussing practicalities and legal questions, and for reminiscing about old times. Beyond their content, however, they were also a powerful social activity, keeping the refugees connected to the known and familiar while they slowly adapted their lives to radically changed circumstances.⁴³ The letters themselves also functioned as a form of presence – envelopes to be opened, paper to be held, a relative's familiar handwriting – preserving material bonds between family members separated by distance.⁴⁴ By their very existence, the letters affirmed the refugees' survival, as well as their ongoing attempts to create new lives. Crammed into Rudolf's wooden trunk were four decades of conversations, revealing the gradual rebuilding of selves and connections to a larger whole.

By extending the historical frame beyond 1945, the letters allow us to observe the ongoing effects of the genocide on individuals and groups: the protracted processes of mourning, recalibrating relationships, and rebuilding identities, developing across time in shared conversation. Part of the fabric that bound the surviving relatives together was, paradoxically, absence and loss, and their tireless reminiscing revolved around a dwindling stock of shared memories. For the first few years after the war, they shared and reshared the same scraps of information: who had escaped, who had survived, who hadn't been heard from again. They did not lose hope entirely, but as time went on they despaired of ever seeing parents, grandparents, or siblings again. They did this together, linked by mutual grief, affection, and longing, creating a psychological basis upon which to build new lives.

Paradoxically, too, the relatives preserved bonds to and through Jewishness, even though by the late 1940s most no longer lived as practicing Jews. Like many other families in the Jewish refugee diaspora, they renewed their correspondence and marked the passing of the years according to the rhythms of the festivals. Most of them continued to observe the festive rituals in some form or another, and they often embellished their good wishes in the letters with memories of celebrations together back in Germany. In these unexceptional acts, they affirmed common identities and origins,

⁴²Schwab Collection, doc. no. 1370.

⁴³For a helpful overview, see introduction to David Barton and Nigel Hall, (eds.), *Letter Writing as a Social Practice* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2000).

⁴⁴On letters as material objects, see Leora Auslander, "Beyond Words," *The American Historical Review* 110, no. 4 (2005): pp. 1015–45; David A. Gerber, "Epistolary Masquerades: Acts of Deceiving and Withholding in Immigrant Letters," in Elliot et al., *Letters Across Borders*, pp. 141–57; Esther Jilovsky, "Grandpa's Letters: Encountering Tangible Memories of the Holocaust," in Esther Jilovsky, Jordana Silverstein, and David Slucki, (eds.), *In the Shadows of Memory: The Holocaust and the Third Generation* (London and Portland, OR: Valentine Mitchell, 2015), pp. 135–48.

reenacting who they had been, where they had come from, and what they had always done.

One of the most significant processes revealed through the Schwab family's correspondence is the survivors' renegotiation, in the years following the war, of their relationships to Germany, both past and present. This fraught and painful process unfolds most clearly in the correspondence around restitution and reparations, a decades-long legal battle waged initially by the family with the postwar Allied powers in occupied Germany, and subsequently with the West German state. Prosaic details of compensation claims filled the relatives' correspondence: debates about whether and where to claim; the value of a mahogany sideboard, a Persian rug, or Shabbat candlesticks; the frustration of dealing with obstructive bureaucrats; and the reliability of this or that former acquaintance or neighbor as a witness. When I began working on the Schwab family's story, I expected the reparations claims to be dry documents, full of tedious legalisms and not particularly relevant to my research. As I read them, however, it became clear that they were not only legal claims, but also a medium for memory work, for the relatives to begin expressing what they had lost and to begin mourning it.

None of the relatives believed that much would come of these claims. 'It is a fight which may possibly carry on for another decade or two,' Rudolf wrote to Alex in February 1950. 'Perhaps my grandchildren will one day receive some compensation or other. I have given up hope to ever see a penny of it myself.'⁴⁵ But despite the victims' lack of confidence in the legal process, they fought tenaciously. Rudolf spent countless Sunday mornings before his typewriter parsing legal minutiae, drafting and redrafting claims, and reporting progress to relatives.

Rather than communicate with reparations authorities in sober bureaucratic language, Rudolf became angry and confrontational. The issues he raised lay well beyond the courts' ability to address. In July 1950, he wrote to the authorities in Hesse:

It is a regrettable fact that of my entire family, roughly 25 people in Germany at the outbreak of the war, none are still alive because they were all killed in the camps of the then-German government. This is why the explanation that my loved ones were only a tiny fraction of the millions of people in the territories occupied by Germany during that period who suffered the same fate in unspeakable conditions brings me no comfort, nor does the fact that many millions more lost their lives or were injured in military combat . . . As a former German citizen from a respectable family that resided in Hanau am Main – and nowhere else according to the historical evidence – for approximately 1,600 years, I did not demand from my old friends in Germany, when the war was over, that they provide me with documentary evidence demonstrating beyond all shadow of a doubt that they did not participate in the excesses of the former German government and the organizations associated with it. I did not brush them off with talk of doing something to help them at some point in the distant future; instead, as soon as I was able to, I gave them support by sending food parcels. So, is it now so unreasonable that five years after the war, I expect to have my claims processed somewhat faster than has hitherto been the case? After all, I am not a beggar asking for alms, I am merely making a lawful claim for restitution for an injustice I have suffered.⁴⁶

⁴⁵Schwab Collection, 1280.

⁴⁶Schwab Collection, doc. no. 2906.

Hundreds of compensation letters in Rudolf's trunk were suffused with similarly intense emotions. What is striking is how far they went beyond the remit of legal claims. The process of compiling and submitting claims was a forum for victims to vent their rage at Germany for what it had done, and for its continued refusal to recognize their suffering. How else can we explain Rudolf's inclusion of information that was entirely superfluous to the bureaucratic requirements, and that had little power to influence the legal process: the Schwabs' history in Hanau, their esteemed standing, the irredeemable loss that their deaths had caused? While a little extra income wouldn't have hurt, money was a less significant motivating factor for pursuing the claims than the symbolic issues of morality and justice that they were used to articulate. 'I don't see why we should leave those pigs a penny more than is absolutely necessary,' Rudolf wrote in August 1946. Those 'bastards' should not 'get away with their loot.'⁴⁷

In part, of course, the restitution claims and the conversations surrounding them were about the Holocaust and the injustices perpetrated by the Nazis. But they were also, perhaps even more importantly, about the Schwab family's identity as German Jews, past and present. In addition to seeking justice for their murdered relatives, the relatives' restitution letters were about counteracting or refuting the postwar German state's assault on their identity. As he pursued his claims, Rudolf was exasperated by the rampant amnesia he encountered. No one remembered anything about the treatment of the Jews, all records had conveniently been destroyed in bombing raids, and yet the authorities demanded unreasonable proof of property ownership and imposed unworkable deadlines for the submission of claims.⁴⁸ While such policies might have had legal justification, the core injury was the implicit negation of Jews' connection to Germany, when the state itself was responsible for its destruction. Against this background, the letters functioned not so much as a means of conveying information as a counterassault, an assertion of identity and enduring, albeit complex, loyalties.

The struggle for reparations was, paradoxically, one of the most important vehicles through which the refugees refashioned a connection with their German identities and past in the postwar years. On a purely practical level, one of the main reasons for the Schwab relatives continuing to correspond with each other so frequently in the first place was to keep updated on the progress of their claims. Well over half of the letters in Rudolf's trunk were, at least on the face of it, concerned with reparations. On a deeper personal level, the claims became a forum for remembrance: for talking about their family's contributions to communal life, reflecting on their feelings about Germany and their identities as Jews, and recalling the relationships they had nurtured and the homes in which they had lived. As they prepared a compensation claim for their grandmother Johanna Hausmann's home in Worms, Rudolf and his cousin Reny in São Paulo reminisced that it was elegant and beautifully furnished, in keeping with the family's wealth and established status in the city. In a submission to the compensation authority at Wiesbaden in June 1960, Rudolf included a 1933 letter from the local rabbinate confirming that his parents 'were highly respected, and that the Schwab family,

⁴⁷Schwab Collection, doc. no. 894.

⁴⁸Schwab Collection, doc. nos. 2379, 2418, 2430.

which had already lived there for the past three centuries, had always played an important role in the community.⁴⁹ Such ‘evidence’ was unlikely to influence a compensation panel’s deliberations, but that was beside the point. In their debates about how to represent their claims and in the submissions themselves, the victims remembered and mourned what they had lost, from their physical possessions to their sense of rootedness and belonging, and simultaneously constructed a basis from which they could begin to build their identities anew.

What we see here is not simply reminiscences regarding the Holocaust, but rather, perhaps even more powerfully, an ongoing process of integrating the past into the narration of new lives, selves, and communities. The letters offer insight not only into victims’ experiences during the Holocaust or the kinds of compensation they sought, but also their continuing efforts to absorb that past into the complex, multi-layered identities they refashioned for themselves in Johannesburg, Shanghai, São Paulo, and beyond.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have briefly considered a handful of themes that the distinctive nature of correspondence helps to illuminate relating to the Schwab family’s correspondence, among them the dynamics that underlie decisions to emigrate, the impact of political conflict on family relationships, and the ways in which identities and loyalties – individual, familial, and national – are negotiated and refashioned across time and space. As stated at the outset, the specific examples presented are less important than the overarching argument they are used to support regarding the potential of letters as historical source material. Personal correspondences such as these are singular by nature, and do not lend themselves easily to rigid methodologies. I have nonetheless sought, through brief case studies, to suggest broader approaches that might help model work on similar archives, and spur deeper exploratory work among historians seeking to understand the Holocaust in the context of broader and deeper personal and social developments.

The Schwab family’s correspondence sheds light on several additional themes to those I have considered, many of them similarly informed by the Holocaust while also directing our historic gaze alongside and beyond. In 1948, for example, Rudolf received an unexpected letter from a German friend eager to reconnect, but circumspect about what he termed his ‘undemocratic past.’ Karl Kipfer – the ‘Herr Kipfer’ mentioned in Rudolf’s compensation claim – was a much-loved drinking and fencing buddy, as well as a former *Wehrmacht* soldier and Nazi. Following their reconnection, Kipfer devoted the final years of his life to working on the Schwab family’s restitution claims, pursuing them with an energy bordering on fanaticism. The Nazi past was never explicitly confronted, but was as significant a backdrop to Karl and Rudolf’s slowly unfolding conversation as the burgeoning Cold War and the early years of National Party rule and apartheid in South Africa. This unique correspondence yields rich insight into uneven individual processes of working through the past in the context of ongoing social and political change in the present.

⁴⁹Schwab Collection, doc. no. 3625.

Another process made visible across years of letters was Rudolf's gradual transformation from a German Jew into a white South African, fully acclimatized to the mores of racial prejudice, with little recognition of their historical resonances. Here, too, ongoing dialogues offer insight into shifting understandings of racism and antisemitism in the 1950s and '60s, in conversation between Europe, North America, and South Africa, the postwar world's newest racial state.

The linguistic choices made by Rudolf and his correspondents, to mention another example, invite questions about the shifting dynamics of national loyalties, and provide evidence for the relationship between language and new identities in exile.⁵⁰

The question of how we integrate large private correspondences into the writing of Holocaust history remains a complex one. By their very nature, such sources are difficult to categorize. Their import is not confined to studies of the Holocaust, or German Jews, or the refugee diaspora. They are stubbornly individual and idiosyncratic – unavoidably so – and at the same time, they potentially have much wider historical import. As with other historical materials, they are most fruitfully used in parallel with other sources, with attention to the distinctive possibilities as well as limitations of their form. As ever more collections of personal correspondence are discovered – their destinies reliant on the decisions of family members, archivists, and historians – the simple injunction to preserve provides us with only a starting point. Alongside the process of determining appropriate storage places, there are deeper conversations to be had about the purposes for which we preserve these collections, the interpretive approaches we use to draw out their insights, and the productive challenges they might pose to our accepted historical understandings.

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⁵⁰On letters as sources for tracing individuals' shifting usage of language, see Helena Raumolin-Brunberg, "Language Change in Adulthood," *European Journal of English Studies* 9, no. 1 (2005): pp. 37–51.

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