"Hopefully It's Not Too Late By Then"

Episode 17 of Exile with Mandy Patinkin

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SFX: LIVING ROOM AMBIANCE, A BABY COOING, A PHONE RINGS

MANDY PATINKIN: In the living room of Loni and Paul Feitler's apartment, at 444

Central Park West, the phone rings off the hook.

It's April, 1944. Their good friend Robert Bachrach, like the composer Bach] has died

unexpectedly and the news is spreading fast.

They let each questioning call ring. There's no way to tell if the caller is after news, or

gossip, but they'd rather not talk about any of it...

They distract themselves, playing with their granddaughter Cathy. But when their

daughter, Elisabeth, gets home, they can't hide from her questions.

She wants to know: what happened to Robert?

A few weeks ago he was in fine health. And now he's gone. Just a few short years

after he finally escaped from Vienna to join his friends in New York City.

And now she's starting to hear rumors.

Elisabeth is right to suspect something. Eventually Loni gets up to fetch a

handwritten letter. She and Paul have been guarding the secret that Robert hoped to

take to his grave...

Crossfade cue with intro music

MANDY PATINKIN: Welcome to Exile, a podcast from LBI, the Leo Baeck Institute,

New York. I'm Mandy Patinkin.

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When everything is taken away, then what? From LBI's archives, untold stories of Jewish lives in the shadow of fascism.

In this episode, a tale of two men—one who escaped the growing hatred of humanity in Europe, only to see his new life-of welcome in America crumble again... and one who stayed behind to save those who could not save themselves.

BEAT

CATHY GAY: My mother's family was pretty wealthy and very assimilated.

MANDY PATINKIN: Cathy Gay grew up hearing stories from her mother Elisabeth about life in Vienna before the Second World War.

CATHY GAY: They lived on the Schwarzenberg Platz in a big apartment, there were chandeliers, there was gorgeous furniture. It was a place of magnificence. And my mother went to balls, she went to the theater frequently, I know that she went to parties.

MANDY PATINKIN: To support this opulent lifestyle, Paul Feitler, Cathy's grandfather, worked as an importer making sure the coffeehouses of Vienna were well stocked with the best coffee from Colombia.

Cathy's grandmother, Loni, was a woman of society.

CATHY GAY: My grandmother had a salon every Thursday afternoon to which the intelligentsia, the artists, the musicians, the writers came and discussed everything from politics, books, music. to current affairs, whatever was going on and was interesting, at the time.

MANDY PATINKIN: The guest list was a who's who of society in Vienna.

CATHY GAY: I'm sure that Piatigorsky the famous cellist played there. Heinz Rühmann, the actor, was there. I am sure that Leo Hochner came. I would imagine that Robert Bachrach was there.

MANDY PATINKIN: Robert Bachrach and Leo Hochner were dear friends of Loni and Paul... and both were *Wahlonkel* - uncles by choice - to their daughter Elisabeth.

Leo split his time between Budapest, where he worked as an industrial textile designer, and Vienna, where he socialized with his friends.

Like many assimilated Austrian Jews of his generation, he had converted to Christianity, probably for practical reasons.

CATHY GAY: He was artistic, he could make ball gowns, he bred little dogs. dachshunds in particular. And he gave one to my mother. There's no way I can pronounce the whole name of the dog. It has four names.

MANDY PATINKIN: The dog's name was Anna Mirl von Auersberg, but they just called her Mirli.

Leo and Elisabeth trained her to offer Loni's house guests matches for their cigarettes.

Leo and Mirli would accompany the family on summer escapes to their lakehouse.

CATHY GAY: My mother and grandmother and Leo, were sitting around the lake, my grandmother was reading a book, and the book said something about belly dancing. And my mother asked Leo what belly dancing is. And Leo said, well, I can't really explain it to you, but I can show you. And up he stood and started to belly dance.

Cue up/ under/ out

MANDY PATINKIN: An exuberant bachelor, Leo fit right into Loni's Thursday salons.

But to an outsider, Robert Bachrach might have seemed like a peculiar addition to this social set.

CATHY GAY: Robert was a well known urologist in Vienna. He had a widespread, lucrative practice.

MANDY PATINKIN: Robert was a studious doctor, committed to publishing his latest medical research. Perhaps not the type to spontaneously belly dance.

But, he too, was a dear friend to Loni and Paul. Around them, he could relax and be himself.

CATHY GAY: My grandmother must have been very progressive because she knew that Robert was gay.

MANDY PATINKIN: At the time in Austria, homosexual acts were illegal and punishable by imprisonment of up to five years.

LAURIE MORHOEFER: But on top of the possible criminal proceedings, there was an enormous stigma attached to having a same sex relationship. You would lose your job. Your family might turn against you, your friends, your reputation would be destroyed.

MANDY PATINKIN: Laurie Marhoefer is an historian of queer and trans people in Nazi Germany. He explains that in spite of these dangers, if you ran with the right crowd, being gay in Vienna in the 1930s could also be very exciting.

LAURIE MORHOEFER: Like other major European cities, Vienna had a queer scene, from at least the late 19th century, bars that had reputations, people were cruising in the park, but everything was undercover.

MANDY PATINKIN: But after the Nazis gained power in Germany, word of their persecution of queer people began to spread across the border to Austria.

LAURIE MORHOEFER: Berlin was probably the most open city in the world for queer people. There were bars in Berlin that were advertising openly. There were gay, lesbian, and transgender magazines and when the Nazis took power in 1933, they closed all that down and revised Germany's criminal

law about homosexuality and then they sent the police after queer communities. It's a real change from a very open society to a very conservative society. The Nazi crackdown was something that people in Vienna would have known about and, and been concerned about.

CUE

MANDY PATINKIN: Fear was starting to spread through all kinds of "undesirable" communities. What might happen if the Nazis gained power in Austria?

But in spite of being Jewish, Elisabeth and Paul didn't think there was much to worry about.

CATHY GAY: My mother told me that, neither she nor her father believed that the Third Reich could ever really come to be. This is the land of Goethe, the land of Mozart. This could never happen. My grandmother, Loni, on the other hand, saw the future.

MANDY PATINKIN: Loni was vigilant about keeping the family's options open for a potential emigration... and she was right to be worried.

One day, Loni's daughter Elisabeth was accosted by a classmate.

ELISABETH GAY: Ich hatte eine Mitschülerin, die eines Tages auf mich zukam, ein Mädchen, das Reichel, Susi Reichel geheißen hat, und sagt, ich werde dich umbringen. Und ich sag, sag einmal, bist du verrückt? Ich kenn dich kaum. Sagt sie, nein, aber du bist Jüdin, du...[FADES UNDER]

ELISABETH GAY: I had a classmate who came up to me one day, a girl whose name was Susi Reichel, and said, I'm going to kill you. And I say, tell me, are you crazy? I hardly know you. She says, no, but you're Jewish, you have to be killed.

CUE

MANDY PATINKIN: Then, on March 13th 1938, the Nazis annexed Austria. Fortunately, Leo was already working in Budapest.

That evening, Loni, Paul and Elisabeth tried to escape as well.

CATHY GAY: they attempted to flee by train to Budapest to get to Leo. They were unsuccessful. They were turned back.

MANDY PATINKIN: Life got difficult, fast.

Robert's medical patients began to fall off the radar, either fleeing or keeping to themselves. Loni's salons came to an end.

But as Elisabeth explains, Paul's links to Colombia through his coffee business came in handy.

ELISABETH GAY: Ich habe immer ein Kolumbianisches Abzeichen getragen. Wenn einer von den Deutschen mit mir geredet hat, habe ich ihm Spanisch geantwortet. Er hat mich nicht verstanden und hat gesagt, verzeih, ich wollte dich nicht belästigen...[FADES UNDER]

ELISABETH GAY: I always wore a Colombian badge. When one of the Germans talked to me, I answered him in Spanish. He didn't understand me and said, sorry, I didn't mean to bother you.

MANDY PATINKIN: Eventually, Loni got word that someone was forging papers to reach Switzerland. They were expensive but she handed over the cash immediately for her, Paul and Elisabeth. No price was too high if it might save their lives.

But then... nothing. As days, then weeks, passed, they began to worry.

Until... one evening two months later, Elisabeth got a phone call from the forger's wife when she was home alone.

CATHY GAY: And the wife said, "come running, don't waste a second, come to the house immediately". My mother wrote a note to her parents saying where she had gone, running out into the street, which was exceedingly dangerous. Got to the home of the forger, and went in and found the place in total disarray. The wife of the forger, trembling like crazy, and the woman told her that the Nazis had come and taken away her husband and destroyed the apartment. Pulled everything down, taken whatever they could. But, the visas that were for my mother, grandmother, and grandfather were hidden. And they did not get those. The woman said, "grab them, run, get out of here". And that's what my mother did.

MANDY PATINKIN: The next day, Elisabeth, Loni and Paul got on a train to Switzerland. With Leo already gone as well, Robert Bachrach was left behind.

BEAT

MANDY PATINKIN: We can only imagine the fear and isolation Robert must have felt at this time as a gay, Jewish man living under Nazi occupation.

In April 1939, 11 months after they had escaped Vienna, Loni, Paul and Elisabeth sailed on to the United States.

But Robert remained in Vienna. Leaving was becoming harder by the day.

Ever the professional, he kept his head down, working. As long as people were sick, he would continue to treat them. But even this was getting harder.

CATHY GAY: As the Nazis came more and more into power, he was only allowed to treat non-Aryans. And as a result, his practice became smaller and smaller.

MANDY PATINKIN: In October 1938, Robert lamented his situation in a letter to Loni and Paul.

ROBERT BACHRACH: According to the latest decisions, I am among those doctors who have been approved to treat non-Aryan patients; whether I can be congratulated on this remains to be seen, but in any case at least I am not condemned to twiddle my thumbs and would otherwise have been forced to accelerate my emigration plans, which is almost impossible today.

MANDY PATINKIN: Robert knew he needed to plan an escape, and quickly.

More and more gay men were being brought up on charges under sodomy laws, and sent to prison for engaging in consensual relationships.

LAURIE MORHOEFER: Queer Jewish people that I have seen in the archive are much more sensitive to the idea that they need to leave the country as fast as they possibly can. And the queer Jewish people were right. They did need to leave the country as fast as they possibly could. And the people who did were much more likely to survive.

CUE

MANDY PATINKIN: On July 6, 1939, Robert managed to get papers that would allow him to escape. He followed in the footsteps of his friends to Switzerland and then traveled to England.

After a wait of a year or so, he boarded the SS Northern Prince bound for New York where Loni, Paul, Elisabeth and countless other immigrants were waiting for him.

When Robert stepped off of the boat, he stepped into a new life. America: the land of the free, chock-full of opportunity for talented emigres.

CATHY GAY: Robert Bachrach, when he arrived in New York, he stayed initially with my grandparents at Riverside Drive where many, many Austrian and German Holocaust refugees settled.

MANDY PATINKIN: He started to rebuild his life from the ground up. He opened a practice on Madison Avenue, and once again began making good money.

And he remained close friends with the Feitlers, even after moving to his own apartment. When Elisabeth gave birth to Cathy in 1943, Robert was smitten.

CATHY GAY: He was very close to my grandparents and to my mother. And the story goes that he also loved me. For a refugee who had resettled under very difficult circumstances, I believe he lived a good life for a certain amount of time.

MANDY PATINKIN: But things didn't stay good forever. Because Nazi Germany was not the only place in the world where being gay could be dangerous.

LAURIE MORHOEFER: It's a matter of degrees of violence, but it's not a real difference in approach.

MANDY PATINKIN: Same sex relationships between men were illegal in every American state.

LAURIE MORHOEFER: Those laws were enforced by the police and being arrested or being outed in another way meant losing your job, your family, your career, your reputation. People were in great pains to keep their gay life separate from the rest of their life and to keep it private.

MANDY PATINKIN: And, just like Nazi Germany, the United States had a strong infrastructure for enforcing these laws...

LAURIE MORHOEFER: Entrapping people in public restrooms was a way that the police in Germany went after people and they did that in the US too. Police officers would go into public restrooms and hang around and maybe even seem like they were flirting and available and then if you made a pass at them they would arrest you.

MANDY PATINKIN: On a cold February afternoon in 1944, Robert walked into an NYPD trap.

On his way into a subway station on Lexington Avenue, he stopped to use the restroom, where another man caught his attention.

He was standing at a urinal. Robert approached to use the one next to him.

SFX: Typing, transitioning into Subway bathroom ambiance, drips, trains rattling by.

POLICE OFFICER: The defendant at the hour about 3:20pm while in the IRT branch of the Lexington Avenue Subway Line, did loiter in the men's toilet therein for a period of about five minutes.

The other man was an undercover police officer.

POLICE OFFICER: The defendant states he is in good health, is mentally alert, and answered all questions readily. Questioned as to habits or other evil tendencies, he admitted to the PO that at times he has uncontrollable homosexual impulses...

He arrested Robert on the spot.

POLICE OFFICER: Something drastic must be done to impress upon him that acts of this type and individuals of his class are a menace to society.

BEAT

MANDY PATINKIN: Robert was mortified. He didn't want anyone to find out what had happened.

Loni and Paul were committed to helping him keep the secret.

CATHY GAY: The story I heard as I was growing up was that he had been in a local gay bar, and he was caught by the police and arrested probably because it sounded less salacious than what really happened.

MANDY PATINKIN: Six weeks later Robert appeared before Judge Ramsgate for sentencing.

CATHY GAY: He was given the option to either pay a fine or spend time in jail.

MANDY PATINKIN: Robert chose to pay the fifty dollar fine - a sum equalling his monthly rent.

But things didn't end there. Slowly, the news began to spread...

Robert was expelled from the New York County Medical Society for "moral turpitude".

Within a few short years Robert had lost his profession twice, in two countries and for two different reasons.

Weeks later, Robert was dead.

We won't ever know what went through his head during his last months, but dated letters discovered with his body in April 1944 suggest he had been planning his death since the entrapment.

SFX: pen on paper, montage effect

ROBERT BACHRACH: This is a farewell letter. It has always been - perhaps in the absence of another - my purpose in life to uphold the name and honor of our family. The fact that I haven't succeeded in doing this in the end, shatters my heart, which was already afflicted with a crack, completely. Farewell and keep the memory of me from earlier times. Robert.

MANDY PATINKIN: And then, of course, there was a letter for Loni and Paul, now preserved in the Gay Family Collection at the LBI Archives.

By the time this letter arrived Robert had overdosed on sleeping powder.

CATHY GAY: It was basically a suicide note. It was written, approximately two months before he killed himself.

ROBERT BACHRACH: My dear Loni! My hour has come, and I wish to appear even less ungrateful to you than to anyone else. For you have shown me such boundless kindness over these past years that I could never thank you enough.

MANDY PATINKIN: It is this letter that Loni reads to Elisabeth now that she has come looking for answers. Baby Cathy sits at their feet, oblivious to the tragedy playing out overhead.

ROBERT BACHRACH: It was only because of you and Paul and Elisabeth's attitude towards me that I was able to get through these last truly difficult years with my head held high. However, you have helped me even more with your deep understanding of my personal worries, and with your never-expressed and yet so clear sympathy for my longing for those who left me here alone.

MANDY PATINKIN: In his final words, Robert revealed an even greater sense of loss and pain he'd carried with him for years... someone he'd left behind and longed for.

ROBERT BACHRACH: If you ever see Leo again in your lifetime, tell him that I thought of him until the last minute of my existence. Robert.

MANDY PATINKIN: Elisabeth is silent, her mind whirring, until she asks: Is Robert talking about Uncle Leo?

Were Uncle Leo and Uncle Robert... in love?

BEAT

MANDY PATINKIN: Remember Leo Hochner, the family friend in Budapest?

Art lover, dog breeder, snappy dresser... charismatic bachelor?

TOM AGOSTON: I would describe him as a renaissance man, He was a very good athlete. His nickname was Tennis. His apartment was full of antiques and paintings. He was a great dancer. Women always wanted to dance with him, and he was a very good cook. He was so well rounded. He was good at so many things. The word that kept coming up was genius.

MANDY PATINKIN: This is Tom Agoston, Leo's great-nephew.

Leo also worked for Tom's father's family at the Kispesti textile factory in Budapest.

TOM AGOSTON: He was such a close member of the management team that he spent every Sunday having lunch with the family. So there was this side of Leo that was conventional. My mother also told me pretty directly that he was homosexual.

MANDY PATINKIN: We don't know many details about Robert and Leo's relationship. Even before the Nazis came to Austria, it was prudent to keep such personal details fairly private.

LAURIE MORHOEFER: One of the tricky things about doing this kind of history is that people who were queer often were hiding that from a lot of the people in their life for their whole life... And if they left a paper trail, they would destroy it.

MANDY PATINKIN: But, if you know what to look for, there are certain details that can catch the eye.

Researchers at the LBI have found them listed next to each other as guests at an Austrian Spa resort during the summer of 1934, and a letter to Elisabeth from a friend back in Vienna shares that he bumped into Robert and Leo together at the opera.

And alongside boxes of salami sent to Elisabeth from Budapest, were letters where Leo's concern for Robert's safety is clear.

LEO HOCHNER: July 1939. One is now so absorbed and worn down by daily worries that one loses the energy to imagine the future in the long term....The only bright spot was the day before yesterday when Robert announced that after many nerve-wracking weeks he had finally received his emigrant passport and thus had the opportunity to leave the country in a short time.

MANDY PATINKIN: Leo wrote that he too hoped to be able to leave Hungary for England. But by March 1940 his plans changed.

LEO HOCHNER: The impression you got from Robert's letter that he intends to remain in England permanently is not quite correct. I had intended to divide my time between London and Budapest, and so I have always encouraged Robert to postpone the realization of his overseas plans. However, even if the war were to end soon, I do not consider the situation in Europe to be very promising and it is quite possible that, following this line of thought, I may also turn towards the United States. I hope it won't be too late by then.

MANDY PATINKIN: It was too late.

At Leo's insistence, Robert left for America. But before Leo could follow him, German forces entered Hungary in March 1944, one month before Robert died.

It's possible that with communication cut off, the occupation of Hungary even spurred on Robert's desperate end.

It's possible, too, that the tragic news didn't even reach Leo in Budapest.

A reign of arbitrary terror was unleashed on the Jews of Budapest. Many were violently murdered or tortured. And eventually they ordered any remaining Jews in Budapest into a tiny ghetto unless they had protective papers.

JUDIT BRODY: My father ran out and ran to the Swedish embassy, to get a Swedish passport, which we got. And that's really saved our lives.

MANDY PATINKIN: Judit Brody remembers this harrowing time. Her parents were friends with Leo.

Many Jews searched for hiding places and were aided by Swedish diplomat Raoul Wallenberg who organized false papers and safe houses for them. These actions saved thousands of Jews.

But there was someone else in the city, a local, also intent on saving as many people as he could.

JUDIT BRODY: We knew Leo during the summer of 1944. He had this wonderful apartment. And, you could climb up, and there was a kind of an opening, and he was hiding people up there.

MANDY PATINKIN: The entrance to Leo's secret chamber was hidden by one of his many antiques.

No one would have suspected anything was behind it.

TOM AGOSTON: That apartment was a museum type collection of antiques, artwork, paintings and such.

CATHY GAY: He had a Madonna on his wall that if you took it down, there was a room, and he hid Jews there.

MANDY PATINKIN: Tom and Cathy both grew up hearing stories of Leo's bravery during the siege of Budapest, and the lives that he managed to save.

TOM AGOSTON: He was able to go out in the streets and, and locate food, black market supplies, and brought it back and was able to feed not only himself but these other 15 some people, who were in that apartment, hidden. So they did not starve.

MANDY PATINKIN: And even though Leo couldn't fit Judit's family into his loft, he didn't forget about them.

JUDIT BRODY: We moved into a Swedish protected building. We had to do it just packing a few suitcases so we didn't have much. Leo Hochner, he came and brought us food.

MANDY PATINKIN: Somehow Leo had managed to find Judit's family a bag of almonds and a tub of goose fat.

But that's not all...

CATHY GAY: He also got material in order to make himself a Nazi uniform, which he wore when he drove around Budapest. And people believed him. He pulled it off. I believe that it was quite obvious that he was gay. But I guess he was also very able to hide it. I guess when he put on an SS uniform and pulled his shoulders back, one had no idea.

MANDY PATINKIN: Shockingly, Leo's masquerade wasn't restricted to public outings.

TOM AGOSTON: He had friends who were German soldiers or German officers, and he made it a point to entertain them in his apartment even though he was hiding people who were very much at risk.

BEAT

TOM AGOSTON: My mother also told me the entertaining of German officers may have been also of a sexual nature as part of his ingratiating himself into that social strata with the occupiers.

MANDY PATINKIN: Now this might all sound a little far fetched. But as Elisabeth wrote in her memoirs... it's just the kind of guy Leo was... always full of surprises.

He emerged from the siege of Budapest with one more surprise up his sleeve.

JUDIT BRODY: In our building, 1944, there was a couple called Berndorfer.

MANDY PATINKIN: Alfred Berndorfer, a plastic surgeon, hid in Leo's attic during the siege with Vera, his wife.

JUDIT BRODY: But Vera was very friends with Leo. And eventually they got married.

BEAT

MANDY PATINKIN: After the war, when Loni, Paul, and Elisabeth traveled back to Europe, Cathy was able to meet Leo for the first time.

CATHY GAY: I remember him very much as a bon vivant. He had a sort of circle of hair around the outside, and a shiny bald top. He had kind of, uh, kind of a big nose, he had very sparkly eyes. And he was the kind of person that just attracted people to him.

MANDY PATINKIN: Cathy and her family met Leo's new wife Vera as well.

CATHY GAY: She was quite attractive, beautifully dressed, and no one liked her. Not my grandmother, not my mother. I remember very little about her other than she was very haughty, very arrogant.

MANDY PATINKIN: But no one needed to wonder if Leo's relationship with Vera meant that he had forgotten about Robert...

In 1944, just a few months after they married, Vera and Leo had a son.

CATHY GAY: There's a picture of Leo with Vera and Robert Hochner, the son.

MANDY PATINKIN: It seems that Leo had named his son after Robert Bachrach.

TOM AGOSTON: I think Leo was lucky in his ability to survive. Robert was really unlucky. And as an American, I'm kind of horrified to read what happened to him. You know, America was a wonderfully welcoming country and society but despite all the stories of immigrant successes, uh, you don't

hear, but I'm sure many stories exist of, of horror stories and really tragic stories like that befell Robert.

CATHY GAY: My grandmother and my grandfather felt very sorry and very sad about the way he died, that he died. They felt it was totally unjust. I heard about it for many years afterwards. Robert fled Austria, not only because he was a Jew, but because he was a homosexual. And he came to the Democratic Republic of the United States, which labeled homosexuals 'degenerates', and that's why he died. He never gave up on Leo Hochner. One of the awful tragedies of this story is that the end of the war was not that far away and the likelihood that he could have seen Leo again, was not that far away.

MANDY PATINKIN: It's tempting to think that, if Robert had survived, if New York City had been a friendlier place that lived up to its promise, that Leo and Robert might have been reunited after the war.

It's tempting...but we can't know that.

We know that Leo was still trying to join Robert in 1940, but we don't know what was in his heart in 1945, when he had a wife and young child.

We also know that Robert died thinking of Leo.

And we know something else. We know that both of these men had friends who loved them, who remember their kindness and their heroism and told their children and grandchildren about them.

And today we remember them, 80 years later.

THEME MUSIC

PRODUCER: The Elisabeth F. and Joseph Gay Family Collection in the Archives of the Leo Baeck Institute, New York contains correspondence, photographs, and ephemera documenting the lives of the Feitler and Gay families in Austria and New

York. Hidden among these documents are a small handful of letters from Robert Bachrach and Leo Hochner, including Robert's suicide note addressed to Loni Feitler. The entire collection can be viewed at www.lbi.org. Exile is a production of the Leo Baeck Institute, New York and Antica Productions. It's narrated by Mandy Patinkin. This episode was produced by Nadia Medhi. Our executive Producers are Laura Regehr, Rami Tzabar, Stuart Coxe, and Bernie Blum. Our associate producer is Emily Morantz. Research and translation by Isabella Kempf. Voice acting by Isabella Kempf, Rodrigo Fernandez-Stoll, Cyrus Lane, and Manuel Mairhofer. Sound design and audio mix by Philip Wilson. Theme music by Oliver Wickham. Special thanks to Anna Lvovsky, Brian Ferree, Hannes Sulzenbacher, Clarissa Hochner, and Diana Bulman. Thanks also to Victor Sattler, who wrote about Robert and Leo as part of the LBI's literary project, "Stolpertexte", and whose essay lent our episode its title and opening scene. This episode of Exile is made possible in part by a grant from the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany, which is supported by the German Federal Ministry of Finance and the Foundation Remembrance, Responsibility and Future.