

“From Cradle to Grave”: The Jacob Jacobson Story

Episode 20 of *Exile* with Mandy Patinkin

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MANDY PATINKIN: November 10th, 1938. The morning after Kristallnacht, dawn breaks over Berlin. A man rushes through streets strewn with broken glass and bricks. Jewish-owned shops have been looted and destroyed by the Nazi party’s paramilitary wing. Last night’s pogrom is the surest sign yet that Berlin is no longer safe for Jews. And across Germany and Austria, more than thirty thousand men have been rounded up. *This* man has been spared. For now. But that doesn’t mean he hasn’t been impacted.

Earlier in the evening, he received a call from his secretary to say that the synagogue beside his office, in the heart of Berlin’s Jewish district, is on fire. She told him how Nazi Stormtroopers burst in and destroyed the sacred scrolls kept inside. He is terrified his building will soon burn down.

This man is Jacob Jacobson. And that building is home to Germany’s largest collection of documents detailing the country’s rich Jewish history. Birth, death, and marriage certificates, as well as unique religious documents, dating back hundreds of years. Fearful that these precious artifacts could be lost forever, Jacobson pounds on the building door, demanding to be let in. His pleas are ignored.

Mindful of the mass arrests, he flees to spend the night in hiding. Fortunately, his fears are never realized. The building and its unique contents have been spared. But only to be later used for the most devastating of purposes.

THEME MUSIC

MANDY PATINKIN: Welcome to Exile, a podcast from LBI, the Leo Baeck Institute, New York. I'm Mandy Patinkin. When everything is taken away, then what? From LBI's archives, untold stories of Jewish lives in the shadow of fascism.

Today, the story of a man whose mission to document the history of German Jews was corrupted to destroy the very people whose memory he was working to preserve.

THEME MUSIC

MANDY PATINKIN: There's an idea in Judaism that says you don't really die until your name disappears. For Jacob Jacobson, this was more than just a saying. It was a driving force. Born in 1888 in the town of Schrimm, Jacobson grew up in a middle class, well-educated family.

JENNIFER HEROLD: His father was originally from Hamburg, the cradle of Reform Judaism in the early 19th century. His maternal grandfather was also a Reform Rabbi. So, he didn't grow up Orthodox, but he grew up with a strong Jewish identity, I would say, and an awareness of his Jewishness.

MANDY PATINKIN: Historian Jennifer Herold, an ELES research fellow who is writing her PhD on Jacobson, says there was another, equally important side to him.

JENNIFER HEROLD: Jacobson saw himself as a German citizen. And so there were two hearts beating in his chest. His father was a rabbi on the one side. On the other side, he was a German citizen and this is what he gave to his children.

MANDY PATINKIN: Jacobson developed an interest in history, and learned Hebrew. After university, he took a job as an assistant at a small archive in Berlin, called the Gesamtarchiv—the "Complete Archives of the German Jews".

JASON LUSTIG: The Gesamtarchiv was established in the early 20th century in Berlin with the aim to gather together the archival materials of German Jewish communities throughout all of what was then Imperial Germany.

MANDY PATINKIN: Jason Lustig is an expert in the history of 20th century Jewish archival practices. The founders of this archive hoped to set an example for other Jewish communities across Europe.

JASON LUSTIG: People who were involved in the early years, on the one hand, wanted to kind of prove that Jews have been in Germany for a long time, but more specifically, they wanted to lay out a concept of German Jewishness that is deeply connected to one another.

MANDY PATINKIN: When the archive's director, Eugen Täubler, moved on to other projects after World War I, Jacobson's familiarity with the materials and deep historical knowledge made him the obvious successor. In 1920, the same year he took over the archive, he married his wife, Henriette, and a year later, she gave birth to their son, Marcus. Everything seemed to be going his way. But his work was not without its challenges. The organization was woefully underfunded. Hyperinflation had left the coffers bare. And not all German Jews shared the vision of this ambitious project. Some were suspicious of the plan to centralize the files, arguing they should be stored in the regions they represented.

JASON LUSTIG: The Jews in Hamburg, for many decades, refused to give their materials to the Gesamtarchiv. And in fact, in the 1930s, they deposited their archival materials in the state archives in Hamburg, even while those archives were controlled by the Nazis.

MANDY PATINKIN: After World War I, most of the Prussian province of Posen, including Jacobson's hometown of Schrimm, had become part of the new Republic of Poland. The German citizens, many of them Jews, decided it was time to leave.

Jacobson felt compelled to preserve the community—*his* community—which might soon cease to exist. He travelled through the region, collecting materials that, as he put it, represented Jewish lives “from cradle to grave”. Despite the obstacles, Jacobson was resolved to safeguard the relics of his heritage. And the Gesamtarchiv was the perfect place to do that.

Barbara Welker is head archivist at the Centrum Judaicum, located in the archive’s former home, Berlin. The imposing red brick building sits in the shadow of the city’s most iconic synagogue, which is topped with an ornate gold dome.

BARBARA WELKER: It must have been at least one big room because, when he started, they had already files from more than 300 Jewish communities in Germany and lots of organizations as well.

MANDY PATINKIN: Though the original archive no longer exists, many files have been carefully preserved. Precious documents that go back hundreds of years.

BARBARA WELKER: And this is a prayer book from Perleberg. That’s really nice. 1867, printed by Poppelauer, which was a very famous publishing house. We know it belonged to the Jewish community in Perleberg, so this makes it special. This is old paper. This is from the early 1900s, so it’s 1827, 1837, 1840. So this is still good paper because it’s made from textiles.

MANDY PATINKIN: There’s also a photo of Jacobson at work, hunched over a trunk full of papers, shelves stuffed with files lining the wall behind him, and bundles of documents piled high on every spare surface. It’s cramped and cluttered, but he’s totally engrossed in his work.

BARBARA WELKER: People describe him as quiet and polite, but he wouldn’t have been an easy person, I can imagine, because he was very meticulous and

working all the time, very committed to the archive, so perhaps not always easy to live with.

MANDY PATINKIN: Jacobson saw the archives as an opportunity to take control of his own history. He spent the early years of his career creating a record of the Jewish people's significant role in German society.

Historian Deborah Hertz researches modern Jewish history at the University of California in San Diego.

DEBORAH HERTZ: He has community notes. He has synagogue memberships. He has a lot of other materials that are totally critical. So this is priceless material. Beyond priceless because German Jewry contributed to German high culture in astonishing ways, but also, is the cradle of modern orthodoxy. It's certainly the cradle of Reform Judaism.

MANDY PATINKIN: In spite of his progress, Jacobson was struggling to convince some communities outside Berlin to share their local archives. However, things changed when the Nazis came to power in 1933. Nazi racial policy dramatically increased the relevance of an archive like the one Jacobson was trying to build. Deborah Hertz explains that when the Nazis started passing antisemitic laws, it created new demand for access to the kinds of documents Jacobson was collecting.

DEBORAH HERTZ: So there's one argument that says that the kind of genealogy that was being done before 1933 was already oriented toward the division of the population into Christians and Jews. But most historians track the race politics of genealogy from a requirement that applicants for civil service positions, or those already holding civil service positions, be Aryans.

MANDY PATINKIN: Suddenly, citizens were searching for their grandparents' birth certificates dating back to the 1800s. They'd visit Lutheran churches, armed with a name and a date of birth, and demand that the pastor dig through their records.

DEBORAH HERTZ: There was only one sort of document that mattered, and that was whether you were a non-Aryan or an Aryan. The total denominator of Germans who needed some kind of racial affidavit to slip into the Aryan category was a million human beings.

MANDY PATINKIN: Then, in 1935, the Nuremberg Race Laws legally formalized the racial divides that were already party policy. But there was an unexpected twist. The Nazis introduced a new category called "Mischling", or "mixed race." Suddenly, the question of who they would label as Jewish became much more difficult to answer.

DEBORAH HERTZ: In 1933, the quarter Jews were called Jews, and in 1935, in the Nuremberg Laws, in a very rare episode where Nazi regulations become less rather than more coercive towards Jews, the quarter Jews are essentially left out of the Jewish category. So the research, which became extremely delicate, was in moving between having two Jewish grandparents and having one.

MANDY PATINKIN: As Germans hurriedly traced their family trees, Jacobson's little archive became busier and busier. A government office set up to coordinate these categorization efforts slowly but surely began to exert its influence. Originally a small branch of the Nazi party, the Reich Kinship Office was now an arm of the state with a big job to do. While the Nazis made it clear they wanted to be rid of the Jews, they were also experts at using Jewish resources to their advantage. Jacobson was no exception.

DEBORAH HERTZ: He was crucial. And the fact that he was the sole employee of the Gesamtarchiv is illustrative of that. There was an organization of professional genealogists, and I'm sure they had a subsection of Jewish genealogists, and the Reichsippenamnt probably could have coerced or hired one of those. But would they have the depth of information? Would they have had the

names of the Jewish archivists in every little town? No. So Jacobson was a treasure for them, for sure.

MANDY PATINKIN: Some days, Jacobson received as many as one hundred visitors, often waiting for hours, and begging him to find proof of Aryan heritage. Perhaps a grandparent converted to Protestantism? Or their mother had had an affair with a non-Jew?

DEBORAH HERTZ: The most common way was to show that my real father was an Aryan. And we have quite a huge literature on this phenomenon of either false constructions of adultery or true revelations of adultery in which the biological fathers were claimed to be Aryans and therefore the Jewishness would disappear.

MANDY PATINKIN: With the stakes so high for so many desperate people, and the Nazis watching his every move, Jacobson had to tread carefully. He later described this dilemma in his memoirs.

JACOB JACOBSON: It was much more dangerous for me when people were sent to prove their ancestry. And this happened when the church registers failed and demanded that I suppress questionable entries or tear out the relevant pages. I could never be sure whether those who asked me to play this dangerous game were informers. I certainly don't need to emphasize how difficult it was for me to give information that would harm the person coming to see me. Wherever there was an opportunity to maintain a doubt, I willingly offered my hand.

DEBORAH HERTZ: Until, say, 1940, his goals and the Reichsippenamt goals are overlapping. There's no rational reason that he would say, I'm not having any part of this. It's conceivable to us looking back on it to say, wait a minute, you're serving a system of classification, which is going to have catastrophic implications. But no one knows that.

MANDY PATINKIN: In early November 1938, the murder of a Nazi embassy official in Paris became the catalyst for a night of extraordinary violence. Jacobson could not have known that the very same Nazi leaders who sanctioned the destruction of synagogues on Kristallnacht also issued strict instructions to protect the archives within them. Years later, as he wrestled with his conscience over his involvement in the machinery of Nazi persecution, Jacobson also understood that resisting would have made little difference to the fate of his people.

JACOB JACOBSON: The question arises, and unfortunately it has been raised only in a purely theoretical form, whether it would have been better if the Reich representation and the Jewish community had refused any involvement in organizing the deportations. Of course, it would have been better if they had been in a position to do so; but were they in that kind of a position?

MANDY PATINKIN: Despite having become a pawn in a far bigger game, Jacobson stayed loyal to the archive's original aims. Ever the civil servant, he kept his head down. Historian Deborah Hertz says that this naïveté—or perhaps, intentional ignorance—makes him a complex character to understand.

DEBORAH HERTZ: Let's think of Jacobson at a desk. Let's think that he has these old metal file cabinets and wooden file cabinets in a big room in the Gesamtarchiv. Let's say that he wakes up in the morning and he says, okay, today I'm doing Berlin citizenship records for the year 1820. So he's opening his file drawers and he's taking out this file or that file or he's writing to someone in Frankfurt saying, do you have Amalia Bayer's citizenship papers? It's infinitely...I would say tedious, he would say meticulous. But the implications of his research, the functions of his research, the sponsors of his research, the consequences of his research are evolving in an absolutely horrific way.

MANDY PATINKIN: As time went on, it was becoming clear to Jacobson that his work with the Nazis was beginning to result in horrible consequences.

JACOB JACOBSON: The harsh hand of the deportation forces ruthlessly broke into the ranks of my employees and helpers. Some bore their fate with the serenity of an unbroken religious man, others rebelled against their fate in a way that put compassion to the ultimate test. However, we didn't quite realize how fast the wheel was rolling towards the abyss.

MANDY PATINKIN: In 1938, after Kristallnacht, Jacobson's wife and son applied for emigration to England. Their visas were granted—but the Nazis forced Jacobson to stay behind. Meanwhile, two members of the Gestapo were installed in his office. The Kinship Research Office moved its operation into the room next door. But in reality, the Gestapo had completely subsumed the archive. Some people may have felt threatened. But Jacobson's relationship with his Nazi captors was surprisingly cordial. And, in return for his help, they were lenient. He was able to travel when others were banned. They even tried to get him an exemption from wearing the yellow Jewish star of David, but he refused the offer in solidarity with his fellow Jews.

JACOB JACOBSON: Wherever possible, the men of the Reichssippenamt were helpful to me and transferred this attitude to all the employees of the archive. And when my last relatives were deported from Hamburg I was given a fake order for the Altona City Archives, to give me the opportunity to say goodbye to my family, who unfortunately, all perished.

MANDY PATINKIN: The result of this fragile relationship was that he felt able to push the boundaries, even take small risks—like asking for his staff to be exempt from deportation. But when he did try to help, he sometimes paid a heavy price. When a colleague was arrested, Jacobson used his contacts to have him released. But then, the Nazis told him to dismiss his secretary. By 1943, continued deportations meant there were fewer and fewer Jews left in Berlin. In May of that year, Jacobson's time was finally up.

JACOB JACOBSON: We had just prepared our supper when there was a loud knock at the door. I sensed at once: Gestapo. And I was right. Two Gestapo

officers entered and gave us twenty minutes to pack a few essentials. Linen, clothing, food. Although I was not in my own home, I was also taken.

MANDY PATINKIN: Jacobson and a group of other detainees were driven in trucks to the collection center, giving them a taste of what was to come.

JACOB JACOBSON: Friends greeted each other in silence, almost comforted by the thought that they all shared the same fate; but in reality, they did not, for one side was destined for the East and the other for Theresienstadt. Those who received a T-registration breathed a sigh of relief, for although not many details were known about Theresienstadt, and the rumors about the conditions there were contradictory, one thing seemed certain: that it was much better there than in the East.

MANDY PATINKIN: One week later, Jacobson was herded onto a train headed for Theresienstadt, in German-occupied Czechoslovakia. He clutched several battered suitcases full of papers he'd saved from his top floor office, determined to keep his life's work from being erased.

In 1943, Theresienstadt was home to nearly 44,000 Jews. This was the Nazi's so-called 'model ghetto.' Many of the residents were over 65. Amongst them were those who had been awarded the Iron Cross in World War I, as well as a number of so-called 'Prominente'—high profile Jews, the type of people the Nazis thought could still be useful to them. That included Jacobson, who still found life in the ghetto difficult to bear.

JACOB JACOBSON: What I encountered in the spring of 1943 were completely inadequate accommodations and living conditions. And very soon became accustomed to the fact that death was reaping its daily harvest in the barracks, houses, and homes.

MANDY PATINKIN: But as historian Jason Lustig explains, the hardship of this period was mitigated by Jacobson's preferred method of distraction: his work.

JASON LUSTIG: The Nazis still needed him in order to continue to transcribe and translate documents for them. And so, Jacobson is able to go through the materials and select records and collections. And he's actually afforded his own room. A typewriter, a secretary to kind of continue this research, as it were, in Theresienstadt.

MANDY PATINKIN: This was how Jacobson spent his days for two long years. When Theresienstadt was liberated in May of 1945, Jacobson met the news with a mixture of elation and, remarkably, sorrow.

JACOB JACOBSON: The yellow star disappeared, making way for the colors of the various nations, except for Germany, of course. I still remember very clearly that I watched it all with a certain regret; for it dawned on me how quickly many of the inmates would forget that they had come to Theresienstadt and other camps as Jews.

MANDY PATINKIN: As inmates were slowly returned to their home countries, Jacobson took his archives on a different journey. He was finally able to travel to England to reunite with his wife and son, safe at last. But life was still hard. Lacking many transferable skills, Jacobson struggled to find permanent work, instead taking on a variety of odd jobs. Finally, in 1957, he ended up at the Leo Baeck Institute in London, putting his experience as an archivist to good use. In letters, he admitted feeling scarred by his experiences.

JACOB JACOBSON: You know how difficult it was for me after my return from Theresienstadt to regain my mental equilibrium and to maintain a fair judgment.

MANDY PATINKIN: But, as time went on, his friends and family also described a man who could be lighthearted and fun, enjoying spending time with his young grandson. From his new home in England, Jacobson corresponded with old friends and former colleagues, even reconnecting with his one-time boss, Eugen Täubler. During the last decade of his life, Jacobson also exchanged letters with a former Nazi named Friedrich

August Knost, who had worked at the Kinship Research Office. Knost asked Jacobson to help him erase his Nazi past. But Jacobson's response was not what one might expect.

JACOB JACOBSON: It was not in your power to change the laws that brought misery and destruction to so many people; but you tried to mitigate the effects wherever you could. The fate for us Jews was inescapable; we had to endure it and accept all the humiliation and injustice it entailed. It took a great deal of fearlessness for civil servants in those days to be kind to the Jews with whom they came into contact in the course of their duties. But that is exactly what you did.

MANDY PATINKIN: Here's historian Jennifer Herold again.

JENNIFER HEROLD: These letters are, from my perspective, they are a little weird, I would say, because if you don't know Jacobson's history, and if you don't know Friedrich August Knost's history. But in all the other letters through these 10 years, you can't see or you couldn't imagine that one of those two was a Jewish person in Germany who had to collaborate with the Nazis to save his life and the life of his family. And the other one was a Nazi.

MANDY PATINKIN: For historian Jason Lustig, the letters also raise the question of if and how we should judge Jacobson himself, while also recognizing the important role he played in German-Jewish history.

JASON LUSTIG: I do think that when you look at Jacobson, on the one hand, he is doing what he can within the constraints of his situation. And to some extent, some can say, oh, he is bringing these historical materials with him to Theresienstadt to continue the practice of, of studying and research and so on and so forth. This is a kind of resistance. Others can say, well, he's continuing to do the bidding of the Nazis at the same time. And that's, I think, part of the reason why Jacobson remains a figure of some dispute.

MANDY PATINKIN: Jacobson died in 1968. Having destroyed his wartime diaries for fear that they may end up in the wrong hands, we're left with only Jacobson's more recent memoirs from which to piece together his thoughts and motivations on the work that he did—leaving historians like Deborah Hertz with unsolved questions.

DEBORAH HERTZ: Who was Jacobson? You know, a collaborator or coerced participant or the secret hero of Jewish scholarship? For Jacobson, genealogy is kind of like an inventory of souls. The names on pieces of paper were souls, and his job was to shepherd them.

MANDY PATINKIN: And perhaps in guarding these records of thousands of fellow Jews, Jacobson was also keeping their memory alive.

DEBORAH HERTZ: They weren't dead to him. They were all living with him. And every time he got to resurrect them, caress them, remember them, you know, get the exact death date, the exact marriage date, he's keeping them alive. And I think it's deeply meaningful.

THEME MUSIC

ANNOUNCER: One of the most extensive collections in the LBI Archives, the Jacob Jacobson collection includes former holdings of the Gesamtarchiv der Deutschen Juden - birth, death, and marriage records, mohel books, and administrative records from Jewish communities across Germany dating back to 1660. The remaining holdings of the Gesamtarchiv are now divided between the Central Archive of the Jewish People in Jerusalem and Centrum Judaicum in Berlin. Most of what we know about Jacobson's experiences at the Gesamtarchiv under the Gestapo and in Theresienstadt come from a fragmentary memoir in German and survivor testimony published in London in 1946, both in the LBI Archives. Explore the collection at lbi.org/jacobson.

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