

Thanks to the Waxman Fund I was able to travel to Vienna over this past summer for my research project. In Vienna, I worked out of a Jewish Historical Institute called “Centropa” where I analyzed 80 interview transcripts from 2002-2006 of elderly Bulgarian Jews who remained in Bulgaria following the Holocaust. Bulgaria’s story during the Holocaust is unique. Of the 50,000 Jews living within proper Bulgaria, none were deported on a mass scale to a Nazi concentration camp. Nonetheless, the Bulgarian government deported 13,000 Jews from the surrounding territories to Nazi death camps, because Bulgaria was an ally of the Nazis. This history is a complex one that is still being pieced together, and I want to contribute to this discussion. Each transcript that I analyzed held an individual’s memories from their whole life. They outlined the significant moments in their lives, their reactions to larger global events, and noted different contexts’ environments. I was so attracted to these interviews, because they provided an individualistic lens into a fascinating string of historical events.

When I arrived in Vienna I grew to realize the difference between history and memory. When I analyzed these interviews, I did so not as much through a historical lens, but through a memory lens. These interviews were individualistic, and their purpose was not to establish a truth about the past, but to reflect through their contemporary lens on the convergence of their intimate lives and the greater history of the time. Furthermore, going through these interviews I specifically realized the importance of collective memory. Being Jewish within Bulgarian society, made them a small minority. Furthermore, nearly all of the Bulgarian Jews left the country by 1950, making those who stayed an even smaller minority. Those people who stayed belong to this tiny minority of Bulgarian individuals, so this group identity influenced each individuals' memory. Memory, while being individualistic in nature, is actually more collective. Groups of individuals who share a common identity inherently remember their own past through this collective lens. Collective Memory, however, is not an original thought. Scores of books have been written on this idea, some of which I have read to broaden my approach. With my project, I am using the existing scholarship on Collective Memory to guide my approach to analyzing these interviews.

My findings revolved around the idea that for the Jews who stayed, their Bulgarian and Communist identity, not as much their Jewish identity, was an extremely strong factor in shaping their memory. Those who stayed in Bulgaria, made the consciously difficult decision to stay when nearly everyone else left. Whether this decision was rooted in their previously strong Bulgarian identity, or later solidified their sense of belonging in Bulgarian society differs on an individual level. Nonetheless, they reflect on these tough times through a strong pro-Bulgarian and Communist perspective. Even if their memory narratives don’t reflect a historical “truth,” they support ideas that certain memories are rooted more in the collective.

I hope to both write a research paper on my findings and work with the Jewish Historical Institute, Centropa, to create educational materials that teach the history of Bulgaria and the Holocaust through the individualistic lens.

I am extremely grateful for the generosity of the Tam Institute of Jewish Studies and the Waxman Fund for this amazing opportunity. Through this opportunity I gained a new perspective on humanity’s connection with the past, which has influenced how I feel about my placement within greater Jewish history. I look forward to continuing my development as a Jewish thinker and am thankful for the Waxman Fund for starting me on this academic track.