Learning about the lives of Jewish families before the Holocaust is too often neglected. Carson Phillips introduces us to an unusual teaching opportunity that existed, briefly, in Toronto, Canada, an "experiential memorial" that allowed visitors to glimpse the past "through the presence of one Jewish family's living room, complete with historically accurate furnishings, books, and décor. The result is the vivid experience of witnessing a lost cultural milieu." The exhibit raises essential questions about the nature of memory and of "temporary memorials." Phillips asks, "Is all memory 'a vanishing record,' doomed to 'be buried again'?"

Carson Phillips

Auguststrasse 25, An Experiential Memorial: Teaching About Jewish Family Life in Pre-Holocaust Germany

FIG. 1: Eric Woodley's *Auguststrasse 25* (detail), 2010. Photo: Isaac Applebaum.

Situated in the sanctuary of the Kiever Synagogue, one of Toronto's oldest Orthodox *shuls*, viewers of *Auguststrasse 25,* created by E. C. Woodley (2010), encounter the recreated living room of an unnamed Jewish family of 1928 Berlin. Auguststrasse 25 is an imaginary address, referencing a real street that once ran through Berlin's most dynamic prewar Jewish neighborhood. At first glance, the installation appears simplistic. A closer assessment, however, reveals the thoughtful and sophisticated complexity that engages viewers directly with the concept of the "presence of absence": the world destroyed by the annihilative ideology of National Socialism. In this period re-creation, destruction and loss are not characterized by empty space or a void, an often-used technique in contemporary memorials. Instead, they have been formalized and illuminated through the presence of a family's living room, complete with historically accurate furnishings, books, and décor [Fig. 1]. The result is the vivid experience of witnessing a lost cultural milieu, however brief, within the vibrancy of an Orthodox *shul* that itself was built in 1927.

Each component of the staging has been carefully chosen to reflect the bourgeois lifestyle characteristic of Weimar Berlin's established Jewish families, where middle-class Jews adopted the vision of bourgeois domesticity that conferred upon men the public world of business and politics and upon women the domain of the home (Hyman, 1998, p. 25). The components of *Auguststrasse 25,* representative of this bourgeois lifestyle, offer a variety of valuable entry points for students to engage with the Holocaust. The family's collec-

tion of books, which includes titles by Thomas Mann, Alfred Kubin, Walter Benjamin, and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, speaks of a family fully absorbed in the German cultural traditions. Knowledgeable viewers will recognize that some of these works ended up in the flames of the Nazi-orchestrated book burnings of 1933. *Auguststrasse 25* brilliantly conveys the temporal fragility of Jewish life in Weimar-era Berlin. The viewers' own awareness of the National Socialist period solidifies this poignancy as the presence of absence is tangibly conveyed.

The refined ambience of the family's living room is juxtaposed with the often turbulent atmosphere that characterized Berlin. Bauhaus furniture contributes to the sense of Weimar modernism in homey surroundings. Combined with the more traditional elements of the family's living room, such as the oriental carpet and classical German texts, one envisions an upwardly mobile, middle-class family that honors its Jewish traditions while embracing the German *Bildung* ideal. This is the family hearth, a safe and protected environment removed from the travails of politics and economics. Using the timeline (p. 121), students can discover the multitude of political, economic, and social challenges that persisted outside the walls of *Augustrasse 25*. This correlation between Jewish family life and the everyday political life of the Weimar Republic contributes to a nuanced understanding of the pre-Holocaust Berlin Jewish community.

In creating the distinctive familial and cultural milieu, designer Woodley integrated period sound recordings. These include radio plays and broadcasts that invoke the world outside the family home. Indeed, the presence of the radio reflects the bourgeois nature of the home. Because radios and their fees were not inexpensive, it was usually middle-class families or workers associations (*Arbeiterradiobund*) that owned them during this period. In 1926, there were 1 million radio owners; by 1928, 2 million; by 1930, 3 million (Saldern, 2004, p. 315). Radios became purveyors of culture, entertainment, and information, an integral component of the home. Periodically, visitors to the exhibit can hear a broadcast on the radio of a play or of the musical performances of Hugo Wolf and Gustav Mahler, as well as the musical renderings of an imagined neighbor practicing Schubert or Beethoven on a piano. These combinations of auditory recordings provide a sensorial experience evoking both the high and popular culture of the period.

This auditory dimension not only contributes to the aural authenticity of the recreation but also provides a setting and opportunity for response for the one living component of the memorial—a young Jewish woman in her twenties. The actress animating the character has named her Lottie and was inspired by the memoirs and letters of young Jewish women of the period. Lottie does not interact with visitors nor does she perform. Rather, viewers are given the opportunity to witness, watch, and discover for themselves the day in the life of one member of a Jewish family in pre-Holocaust Berlin. As such, the exhibit becomes a hybrid space enveloping the inanimate past with the imagined living past, presented within the context of a vibrant Orthodox synagogue.

Indeed, this theatrical aspect, the presence of one unnamed family member of Auguststrasse *25,* provides a humanistic and fluid aspect and is integral to the overall functioning and success of this experiential memorial. Seeing the actress–resident interact with her surroundings, reading, listening to the radio, or writing a letter, reminds us of the both the normalcy and the uniqueness of the period [Fig. 2]. This human dimension reinforces the understanding that history is more than a series of dramatic events or actions; it is how men, women, children, and families lived in and responded to their environment. It provides a context and an example of "history from below" as visitors imagine how one family, unnamed, yet typical of the established Berlin Jewish community of the era, experienced daily life.

The unique location of this memorial, the Kiever *shul,* is in itself an important element of the exhibit. The *shul* is located in the Kensington Market district of Toronto, a region founded primarily by Eastern European Jewish immigrants in the early 20th century. During the 1920s and 1930s, it was home to approximately 60,000 Jews and boasted more than 30 synagogues. Prosperity gradually caused a decline in the Jewish population in this area, and the Kensington Market demographics have shifted with subsequent waves of immigrants to the city. Additionally, the *shul* is situated close to Augusta Street, connecting the Berlin Jewish address to a local one. Viewers are again reminded of the interconnectedness of events, history, locale, and the Diaspora communities.

With sophisticated simplicity, the visual, auditory, and performance components of *Auguststrasse 25* create a fluid moment in time. Although the installation is temporary, the permanence comes from the numerous teachable moments it provides educators. The photographs offer a look at the books and furnishings that have come to characterize Jewish families in pre-Holocaust Berlin. The auditory recordings provide interdisciplinary entry points into the cultural influences of the period. We learn more about the societal roles Jewish families adopted during this period and how they would be forever altered by the Holocaust.

TEACHING ACTIVITIES

Auguststrasse 25 is not a permanent exhibition. Mona Filip (2010), the curator of the Koffler Gallery installation, writes that when the memorial exhibit is closed, it will remain "only a vanishing record in the minds of those who have seen it. Far from being set in stone, it is an image as transient as a photograph fading in time. Gradually, the memory will be buried again."

FIG. 2: Eric Woodley's *Auguststrasse 25* (detail), 2010. Photo: Isaac Applebaum.

Questions for discussion may include:

- What, then, is the point of such projects?
- Is a temporary memorial a contradiction?
- Does the function of a short-term installation cease at its close?
- Are we, as visitors to many such exhibitions, obligated to share what we have seen with those for whom it is no longer available?
- Is all memory "a vanishing record," doomed to "be buried again"?
- If so, what does this say about our obligation and ability to keep the memory of the Holocaust and its victims alive?
- In what ways do memorials differ from memoirs?

Memoir, which lasts longer, can also provide insight into Jewish life in Weimar- and Nazi-era Berlin. Sebastian Haffner, born in 1907, began to write his personal memoir, *Defying Hitler,* in 1939, in London, England. He had immigrated there in 1938, disillusioned with the changes he witnessed in Germany. Excerpts from Haffner's published work (2002) provide students with a unique perspective on life during this turbulent period:

> Berlin became quite an international city. Admittedly, the sinister Nazi types already lurked in the wings, as "we" could not fail to notice with deep disgust. They spoke of "Eastern vermin" with murder in their eyes and sneeringly of "Americanization." Whereas "we," a segment of the younger generation difficult to define but instantly and mutually recognizable, were not only friendly toward foreigners, but enthusiastic about them. (pp. 78–79)

Haffner's description is a stark contrast to the seeming security portrayed by *Auguststrasse 25*. Using the timeline, have students examine the dates of the activities of the National Socialist party and consider the following questions.

- *Auguststrasse 25* demonstrates the role that radio had in conveying culture and information to the Germans. How did the National Socialists harness the influence of radio to convey their propaganda? Consult the Web site www.ushmm.org and its current exhibition "State of Deception—The Power of Nazi Propaganda" for further information.
- While radios were utilized to convey Nazi propaganda effectively to the masses, they were also one of the first items confiscated from Jewish homes. How did the removal of radios contribute to the social and informational isolation of Jews within Germany?
- An excerpt from the memoir *A Drastic Turn of Destiny* by Fred (Manfred) Mann (2009), describes Mann's family's first encounter with the National Socialists:

> I was only 6 years old ... on January 30, 1933 ... the infamous day that Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg, president of Germany, appointed Adolf Hitler chancellor. A few days later my father received news that the *Sturmabteilung,* the SA Brown Shirts, were looking for him. One of his old school friends, who had been very active in the Nazi party since the late 1920s ... telephoned my father to tell him that his name was prominently featured on the pickup list for a manual labor assignment. He was to ... carry coal from the basement to the top floor of the building [of the Brownshirts]. They were going to teach this chauffeur-driven, fur-coated Jew a lesson. ... My father immediately drove ... to Berlin, where he stayed until his old schoolmate could get the order rescinded. (pp. 1–2)

- Why do you think that during the early period of National Socialism, some Jews were able to receive assistance from colleagues who were connected to the National Socialist party?
- What was the purpose of the National Socialist actions to humiliate Germany's Jewish citizens?
- What is your response to the fact that Mann's father maintained a friendship with a former schoolmate active in the National Socialist party?

TIMELINE OF EVENTS IN WEIMAR GERMANY

For a more detailed account of events during this period, refer to www.ushmm.org/propaganda/timeline/1918-1932 and www.colby.edu/personal/r/rmscheck/GermanyD4.html.

1924

- Trial of Adolf Hitler takes place from February–April 1924. Hitler receives a five-year prison term, of which he serves one year. In prison, Hitler writes the first volume of his autobiography/political program, *Mein Kampf* (My Struggle).

1925

- Hitler is released early from the prison and reorganizes and expands his party. In all elections until 1929, however, the NSDAP remains a splinter party.

1926

- Germany enters League of Nations.

1927

- Unemployment rises but reaches no dramatic levels. A quiet year in Weimar politics.
- Goebbels founds *Der Angriff* (The Attack), the Berlin newspaper for the dissemination of Nazi propaganda.

1928

- Germany participates in summer Olympics in Amsterdam, Netherlands, and places second in overall medal standings.
- Bauhaus enjoys international reputation for innovation and design.
- Reichstag elections in May 1928 seem to confirm the trend toward stability and democratic government. National Socialist German Workers Party (NSDAP) has 12 seats in the Reichstag, having received less than 3% of the vote.
- On December 10, 1928, Goebbels attacks Jews in an article in *Der Angriff.*

1929

- The crash of the New York Stock Exchange in October 1929 leads to a worldwide depression with dramatic effects on Germany. Unemployment rises sharply by the end of the year and reaches unprecedented heights in the following years.

1929–1930

- Beginning of the breakdown of the Weimar Republic.

1931

- Adolf Hitler leads an SA unit in a Nazi Party parade in Weimar, 1931.

1932

- Unemployment reaches 5 million.
- In July, the Nazi Party wins 230 seats in German parliamentary elections, becoming the largest party represented.
- By August 1932, the Nazi Party has more than 1 million members.

1933

- Hitler named Chancellor of the Weimar Republic, at the head of a coalition government of "National Renewal." The Nazis and the German Nationalist People's Party *(Deutschnationale Volkspartei;* DNVP) are members of the coalition.
- February 27, 1933: The *Reichstag* building (German parliament) is set on fire.
- March 13, 1933: Creation of Reich Ministry for Popular Enlightenment and Propaganda under Joseph Goebbels.
- May 10, 1933: Public book burnings organized by Goebbels.
- June 7, 1933: New regulations give major tax advantages to films exemplifying the Nazi spirit.
- July 14, 1933: Germany declared a one-party state under Nazi rule; Weimar Republic is shattered. ■

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