

THEME

MARK OPPENHEIMER (VO): Hi! If you listen to *Exile*, LBI's other podcast on this feed, you're used to having your podcast narrated by a voice you might recognize from Broadway, or from *Homeland* or *The Princess Bride*. And now you're wondering, who's this guy? This guy who's not Mandy Patinkin? Well, you're right. I'm not Mandy Patinkin. But, it's great to meet you! I'm Mark Oppenheimer. I'm the director of open learning at American Jewish University, and I've spent my career writing about Jewish history. So welcome to *LBI Presents*, a new podcast from the Leo Baeck Institute, New York.

On this series, we peek into LBI's vast archive with the help of key experts—academics, artists, writers—to learn about the lives of German Jews throughout history. Beyond the stories you already know. Today, we're kicking it all off with an episode we call “the archives of love.”

THEME OUT

MUSIC CUE

MARK OPPENHEIMER (VO): If you listened to *Exile*, you might remember the love story of Kurt and Helen Kleinmann. Here's a refresher: In 1938, Kurt Kleinmann, a 28-year-old Austrian Jew, writes letters to random Americans with the last name Kleinman. He hopes one of them will claim to be his cousin and help him get a visa to the United States. And he gets a response from a 25-year-old New Yorker named Helen Kleinman. No relation.

SFX: WRITING & TYPING

MARK OPPENHEIMER (VO): They begin a daily correspondence. The letters start off practical. But over time, they become more intimate. And after many months, Kurt writes this to Helen: “My darling...Far from you, I have fallen in love with you. I would be happy if I could take your hands in my hands and then I would relate my sorrows, cares, and last but not least, our plans for the future.”

SFX & MUSIC OUT

THEME

MARK OPPENHEIMER (VO): When we talk about the Holocaust, we often focus on the physical: where Jews were or were not allowed, how little there was to eat, how they were murdered. But what about their emotional lives? -Of course there was grief and fear. But people are not made of only grief and fear. What about...love?

CHRISTIAN BAILEY: Finding a partner, finding a partner that you chose and that who chose you, is the way in which you tell a story about yourself.

MARK OPPENHEIMER (VO): Christian Bailey teaches at Purchase College in New York. And he's the author of *German Jews in Love*. Through memoirs, letters, and other documents, his book chronicles the move from arranged marriages to love marriages, as well as the persistence of romance, even under fascism.

CHRISTIAN BAILEY: I went to all kinds of archives all over the world in Israel, Austria, Germany, North America. But ultimately it was the LBI collection that saved me. I mean, that was the big thing that during COVID, because the LBI have digitized so many of their records, it was possible for me to sit in the car while my son was at preschool and read documents that the LBI had made available to everyone. So it's wonderful.

MARK OPPENHEIMER (VO): And what Christian found were people who continued to have rich and complicated love lives—and sex lives—even as the world around them descended into chaos.

THEME OUT

MARK OPPENHEIMER: Okay. Christian, let's talk about the idea of romantic love and marriage and how it changed for German Jews in the prior century. How was it that romantic love had changed from, say, 1830 to 1930 in Germany?

CHRISTIAN BAILEY: Well, I mean, it's...the trajectory is very hard to kind of chart. I mean, this is a literary story. There's a story of German romanticism and of how the love marriage replaces the arranged marriage as an ideal. And I think, whenever you try and find some sort of origin for that, somebody will go back, you know, 100 years or 150 years and say no, no, no, this is already, you know, common currency way before that. I do think that by the end of the 19th century, the love marriage was an important ideal. Partially, this has to do with legal changes, with legislative changes. Jews and Christians could marry for the first time in the 1870s. And I think it's a lot to do, I mean, what I try and argue in the book is that this is a time of incredible transition and change for German Jewish communities. It's a time of extremely rapid urbanization, of young German Jews getting a new kind of education. And in many ways, what was familiar has gone. The young Jewish Germans are living in unfamiliar cities, often going to school with unfamiliar people. And so in some sense, how do you know who you are? And finding a partner, finding a partner that you chose and who chose you is the way in which you tell a story about yourself. You say, oh, I found out who I am. I found out something about my tastes, about how other people see me, how I'm perceived by the outside world. And I think there's a set of social and cultural trends in play at the end of the 19th century between, I guess, 1870 and 1914 that give the love marriage this kind of new social valence, new cultural valence.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: And I love how you point out that these are stories that we tell ourselves. That they had to be created and then they have to be told and retold. And one of the ways that we do that is through letters where we're writing down a story both for ourselves and for the partner or hoped for partner, whom we're writing to. I've been through my own grandfather's love letters to my grandmother, which were so interesting because they were written in the late 1920s. They both lived in Philadelphia and they were writing to each other across town every day because, of course, telephones were very rare and you didn't necessarily have a private line and so you still wrote to each other. What was it like diving into people's diaries and in particular love letters from this era? Let's say

the 1920s and 1930s. What kind of narratives were they constructing? What kind of stories were they telling themselves and each other about romantic love?

CHRISTIAN BAILEY: Yeah, that's interesting. I mean, I think one of the frustrations with letters often is that, as you say, well, what I found is that couples often wrote to each other when they couldn't be together. And then when they were together, the record goes silent, right? They don't need to write letters to each other. So often you have these couples that are engaged and they're promising each other all kinds of things, and then they get together, have a wonderful weekend or whatever of choreographed, yeah, you know, events and togetherness. And you don't find out what happened, really. What I found in the late 19th century was, there was a lot of promising that went on. You can see in some sense the modulation of relationships as you move from arranged to love marriages that particularly male suitors made all kinds of promises about the wonderful life that lay ahead for the couple. Whereas in the 1920s, it tends to be people who already know each other and they kind of check in with each other. They seek a kind of reassurance, self-affirmation. They kind of...the letters are much more about these, this is the way I see the world, here's what I'm going through in my life. What do you make of this? Do you see it the same way? You know, let's compare notes. And so that kind of companionship is a little different from the more...on the whole, the more formulaic exchanges you see in the 19th century. And that's an overgeneralization, but it tells you something, I think.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: So they're writing letters, they're corresponding, they're courting each other, and ultimately they are moving toward marriage. Interesting fact from your research, more people were getting married, more German Jews were getting married, in 1938 when the horrors of national socialism, of Nazism were so apparent and a lived reality every day, than in 1933, when people were a lot more hopeful that maybe this was just a passing phase and Hitler was just coming to power. And they went to great lengths. I mean, they would commit crimes. They would create subterfuges. They really wanted to get married. Can you talk a little bit about this kind of determination and why? Why was there more of it, perhaps, in the late '30s than in the early '30s?

CHRISTIAN BAILEY: Yeah, it's very interesting. I was struck in the book. I displayed some photos of wedding menus and wedding programs and they're so lovingly put together. You know, it really matters exactly what food is served, what kind of music is played at which moments. And you think, you know why do they care about this stuff so much? What could they be thinking? Other stories of, you know, couples that were living in very straightened circumstances. You know, one of the, maybe the husband is having to go and do forced labor on the wedding day, or there's even a couple that try and get married on the way, in fact do get married on the way to Auschwitz. And you think, you know, why did this matter so much to these people? You know, I think one thing that's very important for couples who've had so much of the familiar taken away from them is, marriage is still something that reminds them of a previous kind of existence. It allows them to, in some sense, feel like they have some little slice of normality. These are individuals who've lost so much of, you know, they don't have career prospects anymore. They don't have the kind of shot at a great education that their parents' generation probably did. They can't gain recognition and standing in the German society in the way a previous generation could. Marriage, in some ways, is still an affirmation that you are somebody, that somebody cares for you, that maybe you can create your own interior world within which there's still some tenderness and you're made to feel valuable. And so I think what I found actually...fantasizing, living in a kind of as-if world is actually an incredibly important psychological survival tool and marriage fits into that, really. Yeah, I don't want that to sound like there wasn't something

real about these marriages, but they were also kind of... They were particularly important because they were a contrast to the kind of incredibly grim realities of the outside world.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: It makes me think about all the evidence that enslaved Black Americans got married in slavery. It makes me think about the, what you write about, the baby booms in the displaced persons camps, people trying to reestablish normalcy, you know, return to the script.

CHRISTIAN BAILEY: Yeah, but the baby booms, I think that's really important. Again, doing something, having a new family to look after. You just have to focus on that. It creates new psychological content for you. You know, you're dealing with new stuff. It kind of pushes out all the other stuff, right? And then you can feel those positive feelings because you're, you know, it's connected to daily practices.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: What are some of like the best stories of the lengths people would go to to get married?

CHRISTIAN BAILEY: I mean, so Beate Meyer, a very fine historian of the Holocaust whose work mostly features stories from Hamburg. She has a couple of examples of. This is really mixed couples. So she writes a book about the children of mixed marriages and so after 1935, as most people will know, after the Nuremberg laws, mixed marriages are illegal and they have very, very grave consequences for mixed couples. But this couple goes to England and gets married. They stay 21 days or whatever the minimum kind of period was to get married. Come back to Germany, hoping their marriage certificate will be kind of retroactively recognized by the German authorities. It isn't. But there are also stories, you know, even in the war years, in 1943, of mixed couples who take advantage of the fact that cities are all bombed out. And in these evacuation areas, it's kind of just a sort of bureaucratic mix up. And they can hand in false papers or not give details of their genetic heritage. And they can hope that these sort of makeshift authorities will grant them a marriage. It's amazing, right? And you think why? You know, this is something that could have fatal consequences. But I think it tells us something about the limits of Nazism, the fact that, you know, in the area of ethics, ethical norms, the Nazis didn't completely replace pre-existing moral codes. They were not completely successful in replacing, say, Jewish or Christian ethical codes with this new kind of racial ideology.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: It wasn't just marriages, right? I mean, sexual exploration was galloping apace in the 20th century. Seems to be far more experimentation. Not just because time was going on and mores were liberalizing, at least until the Nazis came to power. But of course, also urbanization, people with more freedom, people with more income, more women in the workplace. Were unmarried German Jews having more sex? What did it all look like for them? For German Jews in, say, 1900 until fascism?

CHRISTIAN BAILEY: Yes, I think we probably can say that there's definitely more premarital, intimate relationships taking place. So I think it is pretty clear that new kinds of experimental relationships are being entered into. And I mean, one of the things that was very difficult to make sense of was after 1933, there were still some examples of unconventional sexual relationships. I mean, I can think of some court cases and Gestapo records that talk about kind of group sex experiences, and the authorities can't figure out what's going on. And I'm still not sure. There's all kinds of difficult sort of power dynamics because of racial differences and gender differences and so on. But I did start to wonder whether there was some kind of, even a kind of alternative emotional community forming. I mean, there was, some of these kind of group sex configurations, were kind of meeting

regularly for six months or a year and I wonder was this kind of just a hangover from the Weimar era or were they in some sense kind of trusting each other, building some sort of alternative form of community in private? Being intimate in a way that, you know, this kind of heavily choreographed public life on the outside wouldn't allow? I don't know. I mean, there's a great possibly embellished memoir by a guy called Gad Beck. He's a young gay Jew from Berlin. His mother was actually ethnically German, non-Jewish. Father was Jewish. And he has these kind of wild, riotous accounts of the kind of joyous promiscuity that he practiced. I mean, initially it was such a kind of refreshing, surprising read for me because this is somebody who still had enough kind of trust in strangers to want to get together with them. And that was kind of remarkable. There are other examples similar to that, but that's probably the most striking one.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: Mhm. And going back to what you mentioned before about mixed couples...when people entered into these romantic matches, these love matches in spite of or in defiance of the Nuremberg laws. Do we have a sense of how successfully this worked to preserve people's sense of self? Or were these more acts of desperation?

CHRISTIAN BAILEY: There's a bit of everything, really. There's sort of a story that speaks to all of those conditions. Let's see. I mean, so there are examples. There's a very good book by a guy called Evan Burr Bucky, who looks at Nazi Austria. And he looks at particularly divorce court cases and how the surrounding antisemitism of the society finds its way into the marriages. So the couples who are suffering as a result of persecution and so on, how they kind of domesticate the anti-Semitism around. And so they start to blame each other and a husband will talk about his wife's characteristically Jewish tongue as a reason why, you know, they can't get along. Or, you know, neighbors saying that this wife would be shouting at her husband, that he was a Jewish pig. And so they would see this kind of, you know, really unpleasant anti-Semitism finding its way into marriages. Perhaps the more striking trend is, though, how many intermarriages survived. Generally it's gentile or Christian women who are staying with Jewish husbands more than Christian husbands staying with Jewish wives. Even though the better kind of mixed marriage, the privileged mixed marriage, is one where the husband is non-Jewish. We can think about, you know, why that is. Why do these couples stay together? What is it? Is it desperation? Is it strengthening? I mean, obviously, the very famous diaries from Victor Klemperer get at this, right? This is a marriage that survives all kinds of things. So Victor Klemperer, a Jewish man, marries a Protestant woman, and they suffer together, right? He talks about her incredibly, you know, how her nerves are basically completely shot, how she'll kind of just, you know, lose her temper with him over almost nothing. But they are still comforting each other and they're still a kind of lifeline, a kind of life raft to hang onto. When it comes to these couples, what's really interesting is that often daily life was so unpleasant that the person you're with was in such a kind of weakened state, irritable state that actually you had to hang on to something that's in your memory. That you're remembering happier times. You're living again in this kind of world of imagination. That was very interesting for me to think about. How you kind of live in your head. How you create a version of a partner that you no longer see, but somehow that allows you to stay together.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: Are there cases of the Jewish party, male or female, ever saying to their gentile or Christian spouse, just go, save yourself, get away from me? I'm only going to lead to the deaths of both of us.

CHRISTIAN BAILEY: Um. I don't think this is exactly answering your question. But I remember, there was a film director, a Christian film director, married to a German-Jewish wife. And they divorce officially, but they kind of try and live together. And I think I describe

in the book how he has this kind of double existence where on the one hand, he's a sort of minor filmmaker making kind of, you know, run-of-the-mill propaganda for the regime. But he's also this guy that is kind of being hounded by the SS, who don't really kind of believe the divorce is real. And he's kind of, you know, walking round his wife's apartment, making sure at night that she's not being picked up. So there are those kind of, yeah, strategic divorces as well, where one party tries to protect the other or both parties try and figure out a way in which, by not being officially married, they'll come to less harm.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: What about marriages between two Jews who are now living under extraordinary anti-Semitism? Did these marriages fray? Did they become closer? Did they change?

CHRISTIAN BAILEY: A great authority on this, for those who haven't already read the book, Marion Kaplan's *Between Dignity and Despair*, deals with this wonderfully well. And one of the things that was striking is, usually when we think about the changes in gender dynamics within marriages, we're thinking about kind of mature couples. One thing that struck me, actually, I found this interesting story of a young man, Oscar Scherzer, who moved to Austria trying to flee the Nazis. But anyway, the Nazis caught up with him because he was there after the Anschluss, after the annexation. He wanted to walk his girlfriend home one night, to do the kind of typically gallant thing and make sure she got home safely. And he did that. And then as he set off to say goodbye to her, he found that she was back at his side and she wouldn't let him go because she thought, you know what? This is no safer for you than for me. Perhaps you're more likely to get beaten up by Nazi thugs or by the authorities, and they have this kind of standoff. And ultimately, he says, all right, my little bulldog, you always have to have your way. And so she kind of goes and makes sure that he gets home safely. And I think this was a very difficult thing for a young man, right? To not be able to play this kind of this role of the tough guy that could look after, that can kind of, you know, tilt at windmills to prove his love for his partner. So that was one, again, interesting example of how this kind of worked its way all the way through the different generations at different stages in the life course.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: What's German for "little bulldog"?

CHRISTIAN BAILEY: Oh, what would that be? That's a good question.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: A little dog would be like a hundchen or something, like a...

CHRISTIAN BAILEY: Hundchen, that's right. That would be...a bulldog. What is a bulldog? I think he might have just said "kleine bulldog," yeah?

THEME

MARK OPPENHEIMER: You also talk about what you call strategic love, instrumental love, especially by the time we get to the deportations, to the ghettos and then to the camps. These are people who are marrying for survival. How much of that was going on? People who were marrying...I think at one point you talk about younger women who married older men to stay off the transport list, for example.

CHRISTIAN BAILEY: Mm. I mean, the broader point I suppose I'd like to make is that we often like to make a contrast between true, pure love matches and strategic, kind of, self-interested matches, if you like. Right? You know, part of the language around arranged versus love marriages does that, right? It suggests that somehow arranged marriages are

kind of strategic alliances often very much tied to wealth and profession and the love marriage is somehow purer. And I think what I argue throughout the book is it's not that simple, right? That couples, individuals get all kinds of things from one another through marriage. And that, I think, is true at this point, too. So there's no doubt that these are exceptional circumstances that, you know, if you're living in a transit camp or ghetto, like Theresienstadt, sex becomes one thing that's bartered, among others. This is, I'm using a term from a historian Anna Hajkova here, that sex is one commodity among others. But I think what I found and to get to this particular story that's lodged in my memory, this is a woman called Nora Keiser, who is in the Westerbork transit camp in the Netherlands. So she's a Dutch Jewish woman who was in a transit camp expecting to go east to the death camps. And she marries an old timer, a guy called Ernst Blumenthal, who's a German Jew who's been there for a long time. And because he's an old timer, he's kind of at the top of the hierarchy and is in a position to get people's names taken off the weekly lists who gets sent east. So it seems like it's obviously a kind of transactional strategic alliance. She. He proposes to her. She eventually decides to marry him and she survives for a longer time because of this. However, reading the account, what struck me is that it's very hard to separate the strategic from the really profoundly emotional. It's important for Blumenthal to say, you know, it was love at first sight. He wants it to be a traditional love story. She says, it's not just about kind of surviving. It's also that he's a guy who's optimistic. She'd lost a previous fiancée who'd been killed in Mauthausen. She felt like she was missing out on life. This was a guy who also could kind of move her through the life stages. She's, kind of, it might seem now weirdly proud of getting married. She makes sure he asks her parents' permission. When her family moves to the transit camp, she's very kind of proud to introduce a husband and say, you know, look, I'm still moving on and up in life, in some, in some sense, right? There's a real, you know, complicated mix going on in these set of circumstances. But probably there is in all kinds of relationships.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: And I think that one of the things that deepens as two people spend their lives together is that shared experience can make you fall in love more, right? That raising children together and combining your finances toward a common end, you know, that these are things that bring people together. And so what may have started out as one kind of love and you might call it in some cases strategic or opportunistic can take on the texture of the fact that you've been with each other through a lot. And certainly this was an era where people were staying with each other through a lot.

CHRISTIAN BAILEY: Mm hmm. Yeah, I think it's a great point. And I mean, you see that particularly after 1945. I think one woman who's interviewed says that was very important, that she was with a person who understood when she woke up screaming in the night. And she understood when he woke up screaming in the night. I mean, it's an incredible thing to contemplate, right? But couples who've been through that kind of thing, you can see why it would be hard to be with anyone else, right?

MARK OPPENHEIMER: One of the things that's going on in the world of historiography right now is that professional historians are talking as never before about trauma as a category. In fact, people in society are talking about trauma. There's a sense that everyone has their trauma and has to own their trauma and has to know their trauma. And I think one of the assumptions that comes with that is that trauma frequently or always impairs people's ability to thrive or to feel emotions in the richest, fullest sense. But this is a period of tremendous trauma, as we'd see it today. And it sounds as if it didn't necessarily shut down people's ability to love either before or after the war.

CHRISTIAN BAILEY: Yeah, I mean, there are examples of individuals saying that, you know, the worst conditions in the camps, that they remember love as a kind of, as a word, but they don't feel it. You know, they don't worry about their children and they don't worry about a partner in the way they did. I think that, at the most extremes, the worst extremes, these emotions could become, kind of... individuals could become estranged from them. But no, I think that's, the more striking thing is just to what extent love is still a reality, for individuals. It's interesting how much, to what extent individuals can live in an interior world. And there's a lot of that going on before 1945. I think after '45, yeah, again, it's in some ways, it's very different. You're right. So you see, for example, the baby boom among Jewish displaced persons. There's a marriage boom, there's a baby boom. And you wonder what's going on there. There seems to be this new reaffirmation of life. The couples don't really talk about love all that much. The language isn't really one of love, particularly. But clearly individuals seem capable of intimacy again, and they have a kind of self-belief that they can bring up a family. That's really striking. And I think, yeah, in some sense you see signs of what we might identify as thriving among those who, one must assume, suffering the worst kind of trauma. That is a riddle, I think, that still needs to be solved. And I think probably we're still trying to understand how trauma works its way out, works its way through a lifetime, right?

MARK OPPENHEIMER: Did romantic love play some role after the war in people rebuilding their lives? Can we tell from letters or diaries or reminiscences later on that there were people who re-invested in old notions, pre-war notions of romance?

CHRISTIAN BAILEY: Yes and no. So in some ways you get a kind of very romanticist language among, I would say, German Jews after 1945. Here, I should say, of course, when you talk about the German Jewish community after the war, after the Shoah, it's a very small community. But it's actually two communities. So you have German Jewish survivors, many of whom had been in mixed marriages. And then you have Eastern European Jews who've often come...they wanted to go back home, receive a far-from-warm welcome, and ended up in displaced persons camps, and some of them stayed in the Federal Republic. So I think, in some sense, there's an idea that kind of love is, you know, completely incalculable. And this is a response to the reality that the Jewish community is so small, that the chances are, you will end up marrying a non-Jew. So in some sense, there's a kind of a reflex to go back to kind of 19th century romanticist ideas. You know, love knows its own rules and nothing you can do about it. But actually, what I found is that it was very difficult to find a satisfying romantic script. And this, in some ways is one of the kind of, sort of, pivotal ironies of the book that I argue at the start of the 20th century, most German Jews are still marrying other German Jews, but they tell a kind of romanticist story about this. That they are absolutely free. Like, these are love marriages. They could marry anybody they wanted to. And in some ways, this is a kind of a...it serves a kind of compensatory function for, if actually, public life is difficult and maybe assimilation is not easy. But still, actually, the idea that they can love freely makes them feel just like any other German. Interestingly, after 1945, that's no longer a kind of romantic ideal. The romantic ideal is a different one. That's one of building a marriage that more firmly embeds you in a more self assertive Jewish community. And this is a Jewish community that ideally exists outside of Germany. This is one that exists in the United States or in Israel. And so this is a real challenge actually, for individuals. How do you kind of tell a story about falling in love with the wrong person? Because that's kind of what you're doing, I guess, if you stay in Germany and enter into a mixed marriage after 1945.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: Of all the things we discuss when we talk about the Holocaust, love is not, I think, high on the list. How does studying romantic love help us understand this moment in history?

CHRISTIAN BAILEY: You know, I think the value of this kind of study, with regard to the Holocaust, I think we have a hard time understanding that individuals remain three dimensional through all of this. You know, sometimes we think about the political as all encompassing. You know, we imagine that there's this tyrannical regime that suffocates people on a daily basis and that individuals are kind of forced into a position of either pure victimhood or of kind of resistance. And that's not a completely wrong perspective, but it doesn't kind of always get us to the texture of daily life. That individuals, you know, still do a variety of different things. They have a variety of different commitments and interests. And, you know, yeah, I think focusing on people's private lives, focusing on their intimate life, just shows you some of that kind of texture and how richly textured people's lives still were during this era.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: Christian Bailey, author of the very authoritatively named *German Jews in Love*. Thanks for being with LBI Presents.

CHRISTIAN BAILEY: Pleasure talking to you.

THEME

MARK OPPENHEIMER (VO): That was Christian Bailey. I'm Mark Oppenheimer. And this is LBI Presents. Till next time.

PRODUCER: For more information and to visit LBI's digitized archive, go to lbi.org. On the next episode of *LBI Presents: As 1930s Europe becomes increasingly hostile to Jews*, many scramble to find a way out. But where do they end up, and why?

HASIA DINER: People talk about going to one embassy, waiting in line. Okay, it's not successful. The next day, they go to the next embassy and it's almost like they are kind of embassy hoppers.

PRODUCER: Where to from here? Coming up on LBI Presents.

LBI Presents is a production of the Leo Baeck Institute, New York and Antica Productions. It's hosted by Mark Oppenheimer. Our executive producers are Laura Regehr, Stuart Coxe, and Bernie Blum. Our senior producer is Debbie Pacheco. Our associate producer is Emily Morantz. Our intern is Maizie Solomon. Our associate sound editor is Cameron McIver. Sound design and audio mix by Philip Wilson.