

Why 1938 Matters Today with Frank Mecklenburg

March 11, 2018 [Jason Lustig](#) [German Jewish History](#), [Jewish History](#), [Projects and Initiatives](#)

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Frank Mecklenburg joins us to talk about the [Leo Baeck Institute's 1938Projekt \(1938 Project\)](#), an exciting initiative to track the experience of German Jews in 1938 on a day-by-day basis. We talk about the project and its objectives, what kind of history it tells us about the transformations over the course of 1938, and about the importance of learning from the past: How we can comprehend daily life under the Nazi regime, how such “normalcy” illustrates how authoritarian regimes consolidate their power and marginalize elements of the population, and how we can identify parallels between the past and today’s international crises of refugees and discrimination against minorities and immigrants. The LBI’s 1938Projekt, by posting one item each day that relates to what happened on the exact day eighty years ago, illustrates the past and also presents a demand for us to think about what’s happening today too.



Check out the 1938 Project:

- [LBI's 1938Projekt \(auch auf Deutsch\)](#)
- [1938Projekt on Twitter](#) and [on Facebook](#)
- [January 1, 1938: Mutual Aid for the Dispossessed — The Jewish Winter Relief Organization](#)

Other historical events, topics, and figures discussed:

- [Chronology of major events in 1938](#)
- [Kindertransport](#)
- [Leo Baeck Institute](#)
 - [LBI Memoir Collection](#)
- [Center for Jewish History](#)
- [Hannah Arendt's notion of the “banality of evil”](#)
 - Also see: [Arendt, Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil](#)
- On the concept of a “lachrymose history” of the Jews, read: [Yitzchak Schwartz, “An Anti-Anti-Lachrymose Approach to Jewish history?”](#) (JHI Blog, Feb. 2017)

Frank Mecklenburg is the director of research and chief archivist of the Leo Baeck Institute in New York. The LBI is a research institute devoted to the study of the history Jews in German speaking lands. Today based at the Center for Jewish History in New York, it holds a

tremendous collection of historical materials and is one of the leading institutes for the study of German Jewish history.

The 1938 project is an exciting initiative the LBI has launched to curate historical materials from their collection, and everyday they are posting one document or item that reflects what happened on the corresponding date in the year 1938. It's a fascinating approach to thinking about and portraying the events and experiences of German Jews throughout that historic year. As we know, 1938 represents a major transformation in the experience of Jews under the Nazis. Since the rise of Hitler in 1933 Jews in Germany had suddenly been persecuted, stripped of their rights as citizens, their businesses and property had been looted and many had fled the country. But daily life still went on. Nevertheless, by the end of that year everything had changed, punctuated by Kristallnacht in November of 1938. If Jews in Germany had once thought that life could continue, now it was apparent that things had completely changed. But of course, not much had actually changed from November 7, 1938, to just a couple days later. The reality just became apparent about what had been happening for so long.

What the LBI is doing with this online exhibition—which, by the way, also has a physical component, in New York and also in Berlin—is remarkable on a few levels. First, it shifts our attention from Kristallnacht to recognize the ways in which things were changing throughout the year. Second, it gets us to look at what the daily life under the Nazis would have actually been like. Third, it helps show us how a totalitarian regime, over the course of five years from 1933 to 1938, had become almost “normal,” so to speak, for people who had gradually become acclimated to things that we recognize, obviously, as far from normal. And fourth, this project tries to get us to put ourselves in the shoes of Jews living through these events without any advance knowledge of what was going to come next—so we can try to understand why Jews didn't just leave, because they had no idea what was over the horizon. Finally, of course, there are unfortunately strong echoes about what happened to the Jews in 1938 and what's happening around us in 2018. By indicating to some extent what the German Jewish refugee experience was like, it helps us to identify parallels in terms of today's refugee and immigrant crises.

The project is, of course, very interesting from a methodological perspective, and also as a project of public history in German-Jewish History. But it's a reminder of the importance of learning from the past, from learning from the history of the Jews in Germany, and there are any number of ways in which the history of this period is important. It's a reminder of how democracy can turn into an authoritarian or totalitarian state, how such a regime consolidates its power and marginalizes certain elements of the population and ultimately the tragic fate that befell the Jews—but which could be any other group in a different situation.

What follows is an edited transcript of the conversation.

Jason Lustig: Do you maybe want to start by telling us a bit about this 1938 project, and what you're aiming to achieve with it?

Frank Mecklenburg: So, it's eighty years from 1938 now. And we wanted to demonstrate how everyday during that year things were changing, and how individuals from the German Jewish

perspective were dealing with a situation that was quickly changing. Usually, people talk about Kristallnacht in November 1938 as the turning point of that year, but in looking at the development of the year throughout on a daily basis it became clear to us that the occupation of Austria in March of 1938 was, in a way, the trigger for everything that followed there after.

And so it was important for us to not just look at the large, global historical events of that year but to really show how people on the ground were experiencing this and the problems with dealing with that daily changing situation. And in a way, we also live in times at which the political and circumstances in many ways are also in many ways very rapidly changing.

The connecting theme for the year 1938 and also now is the refugee crisis. By 1938, in the proceeding five years about a quarter of the Jews in Germany had left. That had a certain normalcy to it, though definitely not normal in comparison to the times before 1933. But over the five years certain things had sort of come in to play. But then comes March 1938 and with the occupation of Austria, suddenly another 200,000 Jews join into Germany and into this refugee crisis, and suddenly it becomes clear that the world is not willing to accept large numbers of Jewish refugees from central Europe. And that triggers all sorts of things and it was our intention to make that sort of more clear in great detail.

JL: You are posting material on a daily basis about experiences of Jews in Germany and Austria to show, in a very interesting way, the daily life of Jews under the Nazi regime and not just Kristallnacht.

FM: Correct. And in showing that, we also show only the “today” of 80 years ago, without showing you what is coming up the next day, or next week, or next month. And in that sense to show preparedness or unpreparedness of people at the time, and in a way sort of reflecting on sort of our own cluelessness about the future.

The starting question, in a way, was: what did people know, what could people know, and what was impossible for people to know? Because often people today say, why did people in 1938 not understand that they had to immigrate? Or, why did they not understand that all protections would fail? And we want to show that people at the time only had the information that they had up to that day, and nothing that comes later.

JL: I think it's easy for us to forget that we have the perspective of hindsight that people didn't have then.

FM: Correct, correct. And what we started out with was to look at the daily reporting of the Jewish Telegraphic Agency (JTA). The JTA was established in the early 1920's, and it's still in existence. The headquarters is located in New York, but correspondents are all over the world. And they were issuing a daily bulletin about the news of the day from a Jewish perspective, and so we had already the great advantage of looking at the daily news reporting from a Jewish perspective. In looking at the daily bulletins of the Jewish Telegraphic agency, we started putting into the archive website the keyword “Germany,” finding everything that was concerning

Germany at the time. But you can also see what is happening, what is being reported, the same day from all over the world.

And so in that sense it was possible to put the situation in Germany in relation to what was happening in the rest of Europe and the U.S. and Latin America, Palestine, and so on. In that sense, what was influencing what was happening in Germany, and of course then comes the beauty of hindsight—that we now have an understanding of how these events, on the margin, had an influence on what was happening in Central Europe.

JL: This is both an online project and also a physical exhibition, right?

FM: Correct. We have on our premises here, at the Leo Baeck Institute at the Center for Jewish History in New York City, an exhibit that covers the entire year. We have twelve panels, one for each month, and we pick three examples of days of that month to give a flavor of the full spectrum that you can then find on the web.

At the same time, we also have a smaller exhibit, a travel exhibit, in Germany, that will go to different places and will also have the same references to the German website. It was important to us to bring this story also to Germany. In Germany itself it's a matter of the national perspective. When the Germans talk about 1938, they talk about Kristallnacht and I think a lot less awareness exists about the March events of Anschluss, the occupation of Austria, and that's always a mental barrier for people to understand that all of this belongs together. And when it comes to the Jewish experience, of course, it is a much more global affair in any case. And so we are also trying to bring that perspective to people in Germany today, so they can understand the larger impact and also how German-Jewish history is part of German history.

JL: I think it's interesting how this is taking place both in the U.S. and also in Germany as an exhibition. Do you maybe want to say a bit about the public response to this project, broadly speaking, and also maybe about what you're trying to accomplish in the U.S. and in Germany in terms of reaching these different audiences?

FM: In Germany, we have had a great response from organizations and institutions that deal with all of these topics on their own terms, linking to the website and also the announcement of the exhibit to their various platforms of news reporting and institutional information for their audiences. What we have not yet done is to have a wide-reaching press release, and in Germany that's sort of the next level. The broad public in Germany is not so aware of the Leo Baeck Institute, so that goes by way of the various organizations, the other research institutions. There's a (German) federal education organization that also distributes information to schools for their curricula. So we also have a small brochure that they're producing on the basis of our calendar, a small brochure for the schools where they are basically trying to bring this into the teaching of history.

In the U.S., the first responses come from the people around the LBI. These are family members, children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren of people who fled from Germany. So we're always

asking the question of how strong the German-Jewish roots are, and these peoples' connection to that history. We are finding a really good response, as people take notice of the calendar and also respond to the announcement that we will have this exhibit. In that sense, we are finding different audiences so far but in the course of the year as it will all work itself up to the start of the dramatic part of the year in March, we will see.

JL: One of the things that's really interesting about this project is the way in which the materials that you're posting on a daily basis are demonstrating not just the dramatic events of 1938 like Kristallnacht or the Anschluss, but also daily life under a monstrous regime. Of course, as you mention, by 1938 many parts of daily life under the Nazis had become "normalized" in one way or another. Why do you think that the daily life under a totalitarian regime might be difficult for people to grasp, and how do you think that the 1938 project can help to mitigate the ways in which people might not necessarily understand or comprehend what it would have been like to actually live under the Nazis?

FM: What we have to keep in mind is that in 1938, we are talking about 5 years of the Nazi regime being in power. As I've said before, about a quarter of the Jews in central Europe and in Germany had already left by that point. So it was clear, especially for young people, there was no future for them. But on the other hand, for people who had been living all their lives in Germany, and especially for those people who had fought in World War I, it was sort of unimaginable that they would be totally cast out, and the line was "Things will change, things will get better, this has already been taking five years, so who knows how much longer this all will last."

And given that over a period of five years, you have trouble in your profession, you lose things, but you're still in your familiar surroundings, and all the repression that happens and limitations that come upon you develop slowly... We should remind people that in the U.S., the depression put very harsh conditions on people. This (in Germany) is, in many ways, a not dissimilar situation, though in Germany it had the racial persecution and political oppression too, which was different. People really sort of lived in a different "normal" situation, but that all changed dramatically in the course of 1938. Therefore, at the end of 1938 the situation looks very different from the beginning.

JL: Right, you know, I found the very first document that was posted in this project, from January 1st, to be very interesting in this way. It is a document from the Jewish winter relief organization, which was established because the Jews were excluded from the German Winterhilfe programs. It marks, on one hand, the segregation and dissimilation of German-Jewish life, but also how German Jews still participated in civic life, in the ways they could. Of course, by the end of the year leading up towards Kristallnacht in 1938, these documents tell us a little bit about the transformation of how Jews in Germany saw themselves, and this shift from the beginning of the year—when maybe people saw the possibility for continued life in limited circumstances—to another moment when it really seemed impossible to go on.

FM: And just to add to this, another news item of January 1, 1938, was that Jews could travel outside of Germany only if they made sure that they would not return. So you could no longer vacation and then come back; the regime would not let you back in. The other thing is that

Kristallnacht is sort of the “dramatic finale” of the year, but on the other hand three weeks after Kristallnacht—and as a consequence of Kristallnacht—comes—the Kindertransport, sending Jewish children up to the age of sixteen to Great Britain. That was definitely not something that, at the beginning of the year, anybody could have imagined. It was a clear sign that any sort of notion of normalcy had disappeared. And it’s also clear that after Kristallnacht, and then sending their children away, people began to have an idea that they may not see their children again.

JL: I think, also, that some of these documents also highlight the refugee experience of Jews from Germany, what it was like to really be forced to leave your home country to try and survive somewhere else.

FM: Yes, and one could say that the overarching theme is the refugee crisis, which in turn is a reference to today also. We have 65 million refugees today in the world. And throughout the year of 1938, major activities were underway to deal with the refugee crisis, and it became very clear that in light of the situation, countries were not willing to take in more Jews. We have to realize that antisemitism in those days was a global affair. And in a way, Germany was setting an “example” of how to deal with the Jews; and that was the argument of the Nazi regime, that “all these efforts are being made, and no other country wants to take these Jews from Germany that we don’t want either, so it’s not your problem but it’s also not our problem.” And so the Jews are stuck in the middle of this, and have no agency or have a great trouble to create agency.

And at the same time, you also find statements like that of Brazil at the time, which had an authoritarian regime, where they were saying, “We are not expelling the German travelers who have come here on tourist visas”—and we’re talking about a thousand people, approximately—because the Brazilian regime said that they didn’t want to be mistaken as having similar policies as the Nazis in Germany. So you get this very broad spectrum of very divergent approaches to all of this, but it’s always under this notion that we are talking about 1938, the war hasn’t started, it’s kind of a refugee crisis. It existed in other countries too at the same time, in Romania there were massive antisemitic incidences where the Romanian government gave contradictory messages but also said, “We have all these Jewish refugees in Romania who came after World War I, and we don’t want them either.” So the crisis in Germany is embedded into a much larger crisis of the Jewish communities and the Jewish people. That is one eye-opening aspect and, again, it lets us reflect on what’s going on today.

JL: I think it’s important that you’re talking about this in terms of a refugee crisis. 1938 feels like it’s a remote part of history from the present, but in reality so many of the issues that we’re talking about here, in terms of a refugee crisis, are more exacerbated today than they were then.

FM: Absolutely. The famous line about what we learn from history... Given the ways in which refugee problems are being handled, it seems that learning from history has not played a big role. And of course there’s the one exception, how Germany has made a sort of bold statement saying, “We are taking in a million refugees from Syria,” it is I think the one reference to 1938 and what the German government did to the Jews and there is one reflection here.

JL: Right. And in Germany, we really see how they have learned from the past. The refugee issue is only one of the ways we can look positively on the steps Germany has taken over the past seventy years or sixty years. But in other countries, it's certainly not the case. I think if we look at the state of Israel, they are looking to deport asylum seekers, it's really quite interesting.

FM: It's definitely striking that problems of eighty years ago, in many ways, show up again. Politics is not an arena in which learning from the consequences of history is really happening, because politicians are trying to save their own positions in the next election or something.

JL: In that light, do you have any hopes that this kind of a project will inform people? Not necessarily to have any political influence, but to help people to put the present into historical context?

FM: That is definitely one of the underlying intentions of this project. And by way of having available the means of social media and the internet, this project has a lot more chances to be distributed on a larger basis. So linking these things and distributing them on various platforms has the chance for a multiplier effect.

JL: It's really interesting, because so many of these very interesting historical materials that you are posting as part of this project, and publicizing and drawing attention to, would otherwise be buried in the archival materials of LBI. Otherwise, most people would not necessarily see some of this material, so you are taking a step to draw attention to some of them.

FM: Yes, and also to show what we have been collecting over time about everyday life and not just the luminaries whose lives aren't representative of the lives of ordinary people. Having collected all these family papers and documents of individuals has enabled us to put this project together as a reflection of how people, on a broad basis, were confronted with these situations.

JL: Right, I think the Leo Baeck Institute Institute is particularly situated for this kind of approach. If you look at the early history of LBI and its initial project, for instance, to gather memoirs of German Jewish survivors and émigrés, from the very beginning the focus was the everyday experience of German Jews.

FM: Absolutely. This falls into this topic too, that of course the German Jews were a varied group of people. You had a large part of the Jewish population living in the big cities, and you also had a very sizable population in smaller towns and villages and the countryside. The experiences that people had were very different from each other. Then, when you see the striking events in Vienna of March 1938, and at the same time you have people who lived in their southern German villages. Until Kristallnacht, their lives may not have changed that much.

JL: I want to come back in a minute to this bigger question of what we learn from the history of German Jews, broadly speaking, and also 1938. But before we get there, I think it's

interesting to think a bit more about this question of daily life. You mentioned how people frequently focus on Kristallnacht as the dramatic climax of German Jewish history, broadly speaking, and especially of the history of organized Jewish life under the Nazi regime. By bringing out these materials that relate to day to day life and individual experiences, do you think that there is something that is particularly surprising or counterintuitive that we are learning by looking at this side of the Jewish experience under the Nazi regime?

FM: First of all, that daily life went on under different premises and under increasingly harsher conditions. But again, people living in that moment did not have the luxury or clarity of hindsight. Some people were sensing more of the looming catastrophe than others, and again people had been living in central European lands for hundreds of years, with ups and downs, and so here was another incident where repression sets in but on the other hand people had been living for a long time and didn't know.

So the circumstances under which people were getting the notion to leave had usually something to do with local or personal circumstances. If you were in a profession where clearly for the time the regime did not allow you to work anymore, it might be different than if you lived on fixed income. As long as that was not jeopardized, there was no reason to fret about this. But that is again something that in 1938 becomes very clear, that the Nazi regime wants to and does dispossess Jews, step by step closing the businesses and people had to register their assets. And so on and so forth.

JL: This is one of those fundamental questions that I get from my students very frequently when we're talking about this history of the experience of Jews in Nazi Germany, which is: Why didn't they just leave, didn't they realize that it was so bad and that this disaster was looming? And I think it's that this day-to-day approach really highlights the fact that people were still surviving in one way or another, even under these kind of challenging conditions.

FM: Correct, and that hardship is sort of built into the Jewish experience anyway. If you encounter a situation that is becoming more difficult, that is a situation that your ancestors have encountered many times over and so, how long to stay or when to leave becomes a very individual decision.

JL: We talked a little bit about how people learn from the past. If anything, what's really interesting to think about is what it would have been like to live in the 1930's without any kind of foresight to know what was going to happen later. This is all to say, if you were living 1936 or early 1938 and you were familiar with Jewish history and you tried to learn from it, and you looked at Nazi Germany and you compared it with other oppressive regimes in Jewish history, you would have thought it was extreme, but not necessarily an anomaly when placed in the context of a longer lachrymose history. You might have even said, "the Jews survived all those things before, we will survive this too." And of course what happened later came as a great shock to many people. So it raises this question about how we can learn from the past.

FM: Yeah, and so what can we learn from history, I mean I think at the moment we look at the situation in the U.S. and we are talking about hundreds of thousands of so called "illegal"

immigrants, people that have been living all of their lives here, have never lived anywhere else and are suddenly being cast out. That's a reflection of another event in 1938, in late October, when 17,000 Polish Jews were kicked out of Germany and Poland said, "They are not Polish citizens." And so they got stuck in a border zone between Germany and Poland and their future was completely uncertain.

If you listen to the reports today, what happens to refugees and undocumented people are being picked up and deported and their lives are sort of being pulled out from under them — I think there are very clear parallels here. And so the question is, where does this lead to, especially when you have to leave the country but you don't really have a country to go to. Being that the country that your ancestors came from is a war zone itself and so you go there and it is not unlikely that you will get killed and then suddenly your livelihood is being uprooted and then with all these crazy situations where part of the family is a legal citizen and then another part of one parent is not and the family is being pulled apart... There's an echo here.

JL: I think there's a really unfortunate echo, when we look at the present moment. One other way we can look at this and think about it, as well, is that so many of the people who are being told that they are not welcome in the U.S. are themselves very patriotic. Many of them have served in the armed forces in one capacity or another. There's a parallel here with the German Jews in a lot of ways, inasmuch as Jews in Germany to a great extent served in the German army in World War I. There was this question about what to do with these Jews who were military veterans and how they fit into the society. In the early 1930's, the earlier period of the Nazi regime, some of these Jewish veterans were given kind of a pass because of their status as a veteran, but by the time you get to 1938 this has changed dramatically.

FM: Yeah, it is in any situation unimaginable that you put your life on the line for the country that you live in and that same country then sort of kills you because you are of a different faith or cast out, as it happened in the 1930's in Germany.

JL: In addition to the refugee crisis, what ways do you think that the history of the German Jews in the 30's and especially 1938 has something to tell us about the present?

FM: I think people just need to learn more about history and understand that the moment that we are living in is, as unique as it may be, how people throughout history have been going through lots of different experiences and so the questions we are asking are not just tied to what happens yesterday but how people have been exposed to situations and dealing with them at the time and can inform our judgment and also the questions that we have about what to do next.

JL: I think something that you mentioned earlier was really important: It's both about learning about the experiences of the past and also how people lived through something that appeared to them more and more "normal" even though, from the perspective of history, this is a great aberration. That for these individuals it all became normalized in one way or another, and it raises the dangers of the normalization of difficult times.

FM: Normalization has something with our daily pursuit of life. For the Austrian Jews, March 12, 1938, was the end of any kind of normalcy. And for Germany in general and for the Jews, Kristallnacht was the end of that. It was clearly the turning point when people understood that the new normal was over, that there was nothing “normal” any longer. And panic set in and people were very clearly seeking their way out.

JL: I think it might be useful to unpack the various meanings of “normal,” inasmuch as what you’re doing in this project is to demonstrate how normal life went on for German Jews, on the one hand, also how the Nazi regime and life underneath it became normalized in one way or another. These are two related but very different things.

FM: Yeah, and it has to do with the pace of life. If you have repression that sets in slowly step by step, after five years your situation has greatly changed. But on the other hand, it took five years to get there. And you’re still there and you still eek out existence, and suddenly you’re kicked out of your apartment and you lose everything. And so it has something to do with the pace of life and also, of course, it has something to do with your environment. How do people relate with you? Old friends, neighbors, the population in general. And that was of course their hindsight. When the Nazis tried to impose these harsh measures on Jews in Germany in April 1933, three months or two months after the Nazi takeover, it so to speak didn’t work. The general population didn’t play along, they didn’t comply. And so over time, the noose was tightened in very tiny increments in a way depending on where you were and under what circumstances, but then if suddenly the dramatic events sort of turn your life upside down, that normalcy is over.

JL: There’s something to be said about the other side of the equation as well. In this 1938 project you are cataloging and demonstrating some of the ways in which Jews experienced this “new normal,” so to speak, that had developed over the course of five years or so. But of course there is also this question of how non-Jewish Germans existed under this new normal, inasmuch as there is this shift—like you mentioned—in 1933 some people stood up for Jews in a number of instances relating to the new Nazi policies, whereas in 1938 and then into the period of the war and the Holocaust it was less so. If you think of Hannah Arendt and some of her theses about the “banality of evil,” or anybody else who follows in that school of thought in explaining how Germans were able to perpetrate the Holocaust, it is not only that they were just following their careerist impulses or the nature of bureaucracy. This is something that takes time to build up as well.

FM: It takes time to build up, but it’s also a matter of how political and social leadership is either stemming against us or is encouraging these things. If suddenly the ordinary citizen gets permission to elbow your way in and also is shown that they belong to a group in the population that is granted all of the advantages and you’re “lucky,” so to speak, that you’re not a part of a group that is claimed to be responsible for the evils of the time, that divides the population. And of course the question is what were the non-Jews thinking about the concentration camps; in the early years they were full of political prisoners who were Jewish and non-Jewish, mostly non-Jewish. But then there’s another aspect to all of this, which is: who is a Jew? Suddenly, lots of people whose grandparents had converted to Christianity, and they had married non-Jews, were considered Jews. A lot of families had Jewish members, and as long as all these are benign,

then things work out. But then if suddenly part of your family becomes the outcast, that puts a wedge into that constellation. And how do people react? Yes, some people are helpful and are doing things that may seem “illegal” to help their fellow citizens, and then other people turn around and join up with the Nazis and take advantage of it. And five years earlier you wouldn’t have known.

JL: It raises this question, in a certain way, of how this kind of approach could be used to understand any number of phenomena, both in the Nazi regime or otherwise. I think historians like to talk about Alltagsgeschichte, they like to think about the history of everyday life, the history of culture and so on and so forth. But we don’t always put it on a timeline in a way that actually illustrates the plodding of time and how things change at a gradual pace.

FM: Yeah, it’s like a civil war situation where you have fighting going on in one street, and three streets over people are sitting in a café reading the newspaper. Everyday life depends on who you are and where you are, and if suddenly your life gets pulled out from under you... The Jews in Germany at this time were turned into people who were no longer entitled to normalcy.

JL: One thing that occurred to me while I was thinking about this project and what it is you were trying to do, is clearly you’re trying to reach a wide public audience in both the U.S. and in Germany and perhaps elsewhere, of people who will learn about this history from the material that you’re posting and hopefully they will share it with others through social media. And this kind of this day in history approach is something that I think a lot of historians dismiss to some extent, inasmuch as it’s kind of arbitrary that this or that particular event happened on this same day of the year in whatever time period of the past. Even an anniversary approach, that this is eighty years since 1938, presents sort of a fortuitous coincidence. You have a nice round number to talk about. But you’re also talking about the ways in which this history is important, and it really matters in terms of illuminating our present moment in certain ways. So let’s say that it was 83 years ago instead of eighty. It’s not so much of a round number, but the events are still just as important. Do you maybe want to say something about what you see is the value of this kind of “this day in history” approach and the ways in which, on the other hand, the events are important regardless of the fact that it had to happen on this day in a particular year in the past.

FM: That is sort of the way we started from with the Jewish Telegraphic Agency. You pick out one event of that day, but you have other events happening at the same time. And when you say the arbitrariness, on the contrary historians are more aware of the arbitrariness of history. We as historians are constructing history by putting in certain lines here and causalities and sort of lines of reasoning that when you get these sort of picks of daily events that seem to come from all ends, I think you need to look at the end of the year and see the totality of all of this and what does that say to us. And that’s why starting at the beginning of the year until the middle of March it’s sort of the usual so to speak and then, suddenly, you have that one breach of the normalcy [i.e. the Anschluss].

JL: You mentioned that looking back from the end of the year it will tell a story. What do you think that is going to be? When we can look through all of these materials that you have been

selecting and curating and writing about through this 1938 project, what is it that you're hoping people will learn through all of this?

FM: I think the main thing is why this year 1938 is so important. To look at is that succession of events that sort of turn your life upside down, where people had no chance to adjust. As soon as you were preparing something, then the next thing comes and then you have to change course again. And of course the stress factor in people's lives is something that is also becoming very clear. The question that arises for me, is how did people manage to get through this. And 1938 was a terrible year but in all the subsequent years, things got worse and worse. What is it that enabled them to cope with all of this? I mean, as North American white people we have been living through seventy years of crises here and there, but no major global catastrophe. We have been very privileged to enjoy this. If you look at that generation, you wonder, how did they manage? It's sort of unimaginable to us that you could possibly go through all of this hardship. But on the other hand people do. So I think it's telling us something about resilience and the way people are able to adjust.

JL: Looking at the history of Jews in 1938, it really illuminates the human experience under an oppressive regime. But I want to ask you about one thing as we conclude, about something that you said towards the beginning of our conversation. You were talking about the way in which the history of the Jews in Germany is a central or crucial component of German history, broadly speaking. And one can talk about the history of Jewish life in 1938 as a crucial moment in time as part of this history which spans hundreds of years. So why do you think that the history of Jewish life matters, if one wants to understand the history of Germany on the one hand, and also why the history of Jewish life in 1938 really matters especially in light of the contemporary political and cultural moment of the present?

FM: In 1938, and in the hundreds of years that preceded it, we find an example of how a minority negotiates life in a country that is not necessarily nice to them. The path of life of Jews in Germany is, of course, leading up to 1942. But in the modern era, a lot of things developed where we can't take the Jews out of German history. German history is sort of unimaginable—in terms of intellectual developments, in terms of industrial developments, in terms of civic developments—and so I think the question, “What does 1938 mean and how was it possible that in Germany these things turned around in that rapid pace,” is kind of a puzzle. And of course it's also very scary to realize that you can have a long, long history in which things developed and stabilized and sort of manifested themselves, and how destructive forces are sort of able to dismantle all of this in a very short time.