

# 1. Preservation, expropriation, destruction: the many fates of Vienna's Jewish cemeteries during the Holocaust

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# PRESERVATION, EXPROPRIATION, DESTRUCTION: THE MANY FATES OF VIENNA'S JEWISH CEMETERIES DURING THE HOLOCAUST

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Tim Corbett<sup>1</sup>

Vienna constitutes one of the most important historical centers of Jewish life and culture in Central Europe, a fact that is nowhere documented more profoundly or continuously than in the city's four Jewish cemeteries, which are home to over 100,000 grave memorials. Vienna's Jewish cemeteries have survived the caprices of time and human agency in varying states of disrepair since the early modern era, with individual gravestones reaching back to the High Middle Ages. Consequently, these sites have long attracted the attention of historians and conservationists engaging both with Vienna's Jewish sepulchral culture and the city's cultural topography more broadly. Finally, as Vienna constituted a major battleground in the realization of the Nazis' genocidal cultural policy, the city's cemeteries also played a significant role in the local history of the Holocaust.

This article offers a snapshot of the many fates of Vienna's Jewish cemeteries during the Holocaust, with a particular focus on the diverse array of agents involved in efforts to preserve, expropriate, and/or destroy Vienna's Jewish cemeteries and their material artifacts during this period.<sup>2</sup> The article therefore also elucidates the diverse array of motivations underpinning these actions and the longer-term continuities of the various practices implemented under Nazi rule. The findings are grouped according to four primary spheres of activity:

- 1) The attempts by various Nazi government authorities, from the local to the state level, to expropriate and destroy the cemeteries, in whole or in part, as well as "wild" acts of destruction like grave vandalism.

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1 Independent historian based in Vienna, Austria. The author warmly thanks the translator and Oonagh Hayes for the attention that they have both brought to the final [French] version of this article.

2 The findings presented here are based substantially on the Holocaust-related chapters of my recently published monograph on the history of Vienna's Jewish cemeteries. In this article, I cite specific literature and documents whenever I refer to them directly. However, for the sake of brevity, the footnotes often refer to condensed analyses in the monograph, which was based on a vast trove of materials that could not be reproduced within the frame of an article. Tim Corbett, *Die Grabstätten meiner Väter. Die jüdischen Friedhöfe in Wien* (Vienna: Böhlau, 2021).

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- 2) The preservation of the city's youngest Jewish cemetery by Nazi government authorities, at least in the interim, for the continued burial of the remaining Jewish population, including urns sent from concentration camps, those defined as "non-Aryans" according to the Nuremberg Laws, and Jewish forced laborers who perished in Vienna and its environs towards the end of the war.
- 3) The expropriation and selective preservation of Jewish gravestones and human remains by Nazi scholars for the purposes of "racial research," but also attempts by various actors, including the surviving Jewish population, to salvage and preserve this material heritage.
- 4) The use of the cemeteries by the surviving Jewish population as a place of refuge and survival, but also as a place for community life, including training courses, the cultivation of crops, and leisure activities.

The very diversity of agents involved in these various spheres of activity—including different levels of Nazi governance, the Gestapo and the SS, non-state actors like academic institutions, and of course the surviving Jewish population itself—explains why the history of the cemeteries, even in such a localized context as the city of Vienna, was so complex and heterogeneous.<sup>3</sup> One of the article's major findings is that the violence perpetrated during the Holocaust, especially in the cultural sphere, was not necessarily aimed at the total eradication of all traces of Jewish life; rather, the sweeping annihilation of Jewish people was to be accompanied by a selective preservation of Jewish material culture, including gravestones and human remains from historic cemeteries, for the purposes of Nazi scholarship and propaganda—a paradox that Dirk Rupnow summarized in the maxim "annihilate and remember."<sup>4</sup> Another major finding is the surprising amount of agency practiced by the surviving Jewish population during the Holocaust with regard to the salvation of gravestones and human remains, a prime example of what Doron Rabinovici called "powerless agency."<sup>5</sup>

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3 On Nazi governance in Vienna, see Gerhard Botz, *Nationalsozialismus in Wien. Machtübernahme, Herrschaftssicherung, Radikalisierung 1938/39* (Vienna: Mandelbaum, 2008).

4 Dirk Rupnow, *Vernichten und Erinnern. Spuren nationalsozialistischer Gedächtnispolitik* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2005). See also with specific reference to the fate of Vienna's oldest Jewish cemetery during the Holocaust: Elizabeth Anthony and Dirk Rupnow, "Wien IX, Seegasse 9. Ein österreichisch-jüdischer Geschichtsort," in *Beiträge zur deutschen und jüdischen Geschichte*, ed. Jim Tobias and Peter Zinke, vol. 5 (Nuremberg: Institut für NS-Forschung und jüdische Geschichte des 20. Jahrhunderts, 2010).

5 Doron Rabinovici, *Instanzen der Ohnmacht. Wien 1938–1945, Der Weg Zum Judenrat* (Frankfurt am Main: Jüdischer Verlag, 2000). For a comprehensive overview of the Holocaust in Vienna with a particular focus on Jewish life and agency, see Dieter Hecht, Eleonore Lappin-Eppel and Michaela Raggam-Blesch, *Topographie der Shoah. Gedächtnisorte des zerstörten jüdischen Wien* (Vienna: Mandelbaum, 2015).

In sum, the history of Vienna's Jewish cemeteries constitutes a highly specific case study with many idiosyncrasies, but also offers many points of comparison to sepulchral history, both Jewish and non-Jewish, elsewhere in Europe. My research on these cemeteries' histories, of which this article offers a thematic snapshot in relation to the Holocaust era, demonstrates that in-depth studies of specific cases are first needed before informed comparative studies can be undertaken to elucidate the complexities in even such a specific context as the Holocaust. Even a brief overview of the Viennese case reveals striking differences to the situation, say, in Nazi-occupied Poland, where cemeteries typically experienced a far greater degree of wanton destruction. The typology I offer here should prove useful to discerning some of the continuities and differences in the treatment of Jewish cemeteries during the Holocaust across Europe, in a comparative perspective.

The following analysis focuses on Vienna's four Jewish cemeteries: the cemetery in the Seegasse in Vienna's ninth district, in use from the late sixteenth century until 1784; the cemetery in Währing, Vienna's eighteenth district, in use from 1784 until 1879; the older Jewish section of Vienna's Central Cemetery, known colloquially as "Tor I" (due to its location at the "first gate"), in use from 1879 until 1942 (with sporadic burials still occurring today); and the younger Jewish section of the Central Cemetery, known colloquially as "Tor IV," in continuous use since 1917. One of the most important agents in the modern history of Vienna's Jewish cemeteries is the Israelitische Kultusgemeinde or IKG, a unitary Jewish community organization grounded in Austrian law. From November 1942 until the end of the war, it was replaced by a "Council of Elders," but for simplicity's sake I here refer to the Jewish representative body throughout the years in question as the IKG.

### Expropriation and destruction

As Andreas Wirsching demonstrated, the fact that so many Jewish cemeteries survived the Holocaust in the territory of the Third Reich—over 1,000 in Germany and almost 70 in Austria—and that they evidently suffered such variable fates is explained by the absence of a coordinated policy in the Nazi state concerning what should be done with these sites.<sup>6</sup>

6 Andreas Wirsching, "Jüdische Friedhöfe in Deutschland 1933–1957," *Vierteljahreshefte für Zeitgeschichte*, 50, no. 1 (2002). See also Corbett, *Die Grabstätten meiner Väter*, pp. 523–39.

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No state-level discussions on this question took place until 1940 at the earliest, with individual policies emerging rather on the local level and thus reflecting from the outset a great divergence in motivations and practices. Significantly, local laws concerning the liquidation of burial sites continued to be respected both in Germany and, later, in Austria after the Nazis came to power there in 1933 and 1938, respectively. Following hygienic protocol, these stipulated that burial grounds could not be reused for a period of between ten and forty years after the most recent burial, explaining why older cemeteries were often more readily targeted for destruction than younger burial sites.

Following the mass emigration of Jews from the Third Reich, and in conjunction with the mass deportations of the remaining Jewish population beginning in 1942, a plan was eventually hatched on the state level whereby local municipalities should “buy” the orphaned cemeteries in their jurisdiction and repurpose them, which would in theory have led to their total destruction. In practice, this plan often failed because many municipalities were unwilling to pay for the gravestones remaining in the cemeteries, which many regarded as worthless. Such conflicts of interest between local and state-level decision makers and the failure until 1945 to implement a coordinated policy explains the strange paradox that so many Jewish cemeteries in the territory of the Third Reich survived the Holocaust more or less intact, while the Jewish communities themselves were destroyed.

In the early years of Nazi rule, the greatest attack perpetrated against Jewish cemeteries took the form of vandalism. There are no published statistics documenting vandalism in Austria's Jewish cemeteries during the Holocaust. However, contemporary documents offer sporadic insights into the scale of such “wild” acts of destruction; for example, in the late summer of 1940, when over 1,300 gravestones were thrown over in the cemetery at Tor I.<sup>7</sup> By a “wild” act, I am referring to uncoordinated acts of spontaneous public violence as became widespread in Vienna during the pogrom-like conditions that erupted immediately following the Anschluss in March 1938. This vandalism took on a more coordinated character during the November pogroms later that year, when the monumental funerary halls at both Tor I and Tor IV were set ablaze by uniformed SS units, part of

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7 See e.g. *Aktennotiz*, 17 September 1940, Archiv der Israelitischen Kultusgemeinde Wien (AIKGW), A/VIE/IKG/II/FH/2, cited in United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM), Archive of the Jewish Community Vienna – Vienna Component Collection, Call Number RG-17.007M (AJCV-VCC).

the general excoriation of visibly “Jewish” landmarks in the cityscape that primarily targeted synagogues.

A state-wide decree requiring municipal governments to “buy” the Jewish cemeteries in their jurisdiction would not be issued by the Deutscher Gemeindetag, the umbrella organization of German municipalities, until March 1942.<sup>8</sup> However, the IKG in Vienna was already ordered by the municipal government to compile a statistical overview of the cemeteries in its remit in late 1939, a notably early step towards the formulation of a coordinated policy of expropriation and liquidation in the city.<sup>9</sup> Significantly, the earliest correspondence regarding the “Aryanization” of Vienna’s Jewish cemeteries also addressed the “utilization” of their gravestones, which were seen to hold primarily a financial but potentially also a “conservationist” value.<sup>10</sup> This latter aspect of the local initiatives that unfolded in Vienna was to have major ramifications for the later treatment of Jewish grave memorials. By the end of the war, three of the city’s four Jewish cemeteries had been expropriated, one of which was almost completely destroyed.

The cemetery in the Seegasse was subject to bitter institutional quarrels in the early 1940s regarding the seizure of the land and the question of what should be done with the remaining gravestones. Ultimately, the grounds passed into SS jurisdiction along with the adjacent Jewish retirement home once the last remaining residents had been deported, and thus the cemetery was to be liquidated entirely. However, a few hundred gravestones, around a quarter of the memorials in the cemetery, were saved in a remarkable operation by a group of surviving community members, who received permission from the Gestapo to transfer the stones to the cemetery at Tor IV, where they were buried to protect them from the elements. These would not be rediscovered until the 1980s and have since undergone a protracted restoration process, which is still ongoing today.<sup>11</sup> The Seegasse was thus the only cemetery that was effectively obliterated from the cityscape, leaving an empty “garden,” as it was called in contemporary documents, behind the expropriated retirement home.<sup>12</sup>

8 *Ausschnitt aus den Mitteilungen des Deutschen Gemeindetages, 16.3.1942–18. Verträge über den Erwerb jüdischer Friedhöfe*, Bundesarchiv (BArch), R36/2101.

9 [Untitled], 23 November 1939, AIKGW, A/VIE/IKG/I-II/FH/1/1.

10 *An alle Herren Landeshauptmänner und an die staatliche Verwaltung des Reichsgaues Wien (Referat I/6)*, 12 February 1940, Dokumentationsarchiv des österreichischen Widerstands (DÖW), 12.775.

11 Corbett, *Die Grabstätten meiner Väter*, pp. 539–58. On the cemetery’s postwar history, see pp. 904–16.

12 See e.g. *Abschrift, an die Abteilung I/6, im Auftrag: Dr. Körber*, 3 June 1941, Wiener Stadt- und Landesarchiv (WStLA), A3 (1. Reihe) – Transaktionen: Schachtel 148: Tr9 betreffend Jüdischen Friedhof in Wien 9, Seegasse 9, Alsergrund, E2 894.

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The cemetery in Währing presents an especially complicated case with regard to expropriation and destruction.<sup>13</sup> The first officially mandated destruction targeting Vienna's Jewish cemeteries occurred here in the summer of 1941, when the city government expropriated the south-eastern corner of the cemetery and excavated the site for the construction of an air raid shelter, which was never completed. In the process, some 2,000 graves were destroyed. In another remarkable instance of resistance, some surviving community members received permission from the Gestapo to salvage human remains from the excavated debris. This gruesome operation stretched over several weeks, with the remains being reburied in a mass grave at Tor IV, Section 22.<sup>14</sup>

The remaining gravestones in Währing, numbering around 8,000, became a sticking point in the ensuing discussions over the forced sale of the cemetery.<sup>15</sup> Notably, it was the IKG who tried to persuade the city government to buy the old gravestones since, as its president Josef Löwenherz summarized in mid-1941, the IKG possessed "neither the means nor the apparatus to reuse this gravestone material." The city government, however, was "in a position to use these gravestones according to their true value," for example, to use "the nobler stones for future high-rise buildings" and "the less valuable stones for road construction." In other words, the IKG themselves proposed that the city use the gravestones for such profane purposes, if only as a means to generate some extra capital to alleviate the desperate need of the surviving community members. All the IKG asked in return was that its members be given the opportunity to have their deceased relatives exhumed and removed at their own cost, an opportunity that, given the drastically deteriorating circumstances of the time, only a very few were in a position to make use of. Löwenherz concluded that the acquisition of the gravestones by the city would expedite the liquidation of the old cemetery and thus contribute to the "general solution of the Viennese Jewish problem."<sup>16</sup>

Währing was eventually sold to the city, along with the cemetery at Tor I, in February 1942. Währing would become the focus of further desecrations perpetrated by Nazi anthropologists in subsequent months. Tor I, on the other hand, as a site of much younger provenance, was regarded as

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13 Corbett, *Die Grabstätten meiner Väter*, pp. 559–75.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 595–97.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 532–35.

16 *An die Gemeindeverwaltung des Reichsgaues Wien*, 30 May 1941, AIKGW, A/VI/IKG/I-III/LG/diverse Adressen/Österreich/2/4, cited in USHMM, AJCV-VCC.

anthropologically worthless and was thus slated for total liquidation and absorption into the general part of the Central Cemetery. This would have meant the complete annihilation of this burial site. However, in accordance with the ten-year prohibition on rededicating cemeteries following the last burial, the cemetery could not be liquidated until 1953.<sup>17</sup> Thus, Tor I survived the Holocaust only by historical accident. The surviving community members were given two months to exhume relatives and/or remove their gravestones from the expropriated cemeteries, after which all the material on the site—gravestones as well as human remains—became the property of the City of Vienna. The community never saw any of the proceeds from the sales, which were paid into a “liquidation account” and subsequently used to expand the Theresienstadt ghetto.<sup>18</sup>

From the spring of 1942, only Tor IV remained as an active Jewish burial ground, though the municipal government tried repeatedly to expropriate this cemetery in whole or in part, too. When the city tried to annex the hitherto unused north-western portion of the cemetery to the adjacent Protestant cemetery in March 1942, the IKG’s cemetery office, in another small act of resistance, quickly buried a number of recently deceased members on this site along with a number of urns returned from concentration camps, thus rendering the land untouchable for a period of ten years according to the city’s own burial regulations.<sup>19</sup> The IKG’s cemetery office also resisted the attempts to expropriate metal parts from its cemeteries from 1942 onwards, intended for the production of munitions, by pointing to a shortage of manpower needed to execute the order.<sup>20</sup> While many gravesites were visibly stripped of metal parts, such as memorial ornaments and gated enclosures of family plots, large amounts of metal remained in the cemeteries, such as, most visibly, the great copper dome of the desecrated funerary hall at Tor IV.<sup>21</sup>

While the great destruction suffered by the older cemeteries in the Seegasse and Währing were thus wrought directly by local institutions and agents, the younger cemeteries at Tor I and Tor IV survived largely unscathed until the end of the war, when they suffered extensive damage

17 *Verhandlungsschrift*, 25 March 1942, AIKGW, A/VIE/IKG/I-III/LG/diverse Adressen/Österreich/2/4, cited in USHMM, AJCV-VCC.

18 Helga Embacher, *Restitutionsverhandlungen mit Österreich aus der Sicht jüdischer Organisationen und der Israelitischen Kultusgemeinde* (Vienna: Oldenbourg, 2003), p. 276.

19 Israelitische Kultusgemeinde Wien, ed., *Die Tätigkeit der Israelitischen Kultusgemeinde Wien 1960 bis 1964* (Vienna: Israelitische Kultusgemeinde Wien, 1964), p. 170.

20 *An die Zentralstelle für jüdische Auswanderung*, 23 November 1942, AIKGW, A/VIE/IKG/I-III/LG/diverse Adressen/Österreich/2/5, cited in USHMM, AJCV-VCC.

21 Corbett, *Die Grabstätten meiner Väter*, op. cit., p. 538–39.

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during the Allied bombing campaigns, including the destruction of around 2,250 graves. There is also evidence of fighting in the cemetery itself during the advance of the Red Army in April 1945. These destructions at the end of the war, which left the entire Central Cemetery in a visible state of dereliction, would serve in postwar Austrian historiography, partly into the present day, as a subterfuge by which the destruction of the Jewish cemeteries could be misrepresented as a result of Allied assaults on the city, while the destructions wrought by local Austrian Nazis were obscured or not mentioned at all.<sup>22</sup>

### Preservation for continued burial

As long as Jews remained in Vienna, at least one Jewish cemetery was still needed to bury the dead of the surviving community, which after 1942 was made up mostly of “privileged” individuals (for example those married to “Aryans”) and, later, forced laborers. In the wake of the Anschluss, the number of burials actually increased due to violent deaths and a spike in suicides, the latter numbering 428 in 1938, in contrast to only 98 in the year before.<sup>23</sup> Altogether about 1,200 Jews are estimated to have committed suicide in Vienna during the Nazi era.<sup>24</sup>

Due to the disproportionate number of elderly persons among those left behind in Vienna following the mass emigrations, and the deteriorating living conditions endured by the surviving community, there was an excess mortality over the following years that impacted the running of the cemetery at Tor IV, including a spike of burials towards the end of the war following the arrival of around 6,000 Jewish forced laborers from Hungary.<sup>25</sup> The cemetery office thus constituted one of the three major departments of the IKG during the Nazi era, alongside the welfare and emigration departments.<sup>26</sup> One of the many visible vestiges of the hardships of these years are the rows of unmarked graves created in close chronological succession in the younger sections of the cemetery at Tor IV, many of which received headstones only decades later, following charitable initiatives by the Viennese Chevra

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22 *Ibid.*, p. 580, 928–47.

23 Hecht et al., *Topographie der Shoah*, p. 29.

24 George Berkley, *Vienna and its Jews: The Tragedy of Success, 1880s–1980s* (Cambridge, MA: Abt, 1988), p. 265.

25 Hecht et al., *Topographie der Shoah*, p. 514.

26 Corbett, *Die Grabstätten meiner Väter*, op. cit., p. 592–617.

Kadisha.<sup>27</sup> Survivor accounts reveal that even the funerals during these years were targeted by the Nazi authorities to round up wanted individuals and deport them to camps.<sup>28</sup>

One of the most conspicuous burial practices during the Nazi era relates to the urns that were sent to Jewish communities from concentration camps containing the ashes of murdered inmates. This policy would change only in November 1942 with the Aktion 1005 following the shift towards outright extermination.<sup>29</sup> Altogether 1,136 urns were sent to the IKG in Vienna from the camps at Sachsenhausen, Dachau, Ravensbrück, Buchenwald, and Auschwitz, most of which—966 in all, almost 85%—came from Buchenwald.<sup>30</sup> Some of these urns also came from “lunatic asylums,” as they were called in the documentation, which mostly contained the ashes of those murdered during the T4 operation.<sup>31</sup> The sheer number of urn burials before 1942 demonstrates the brutality of Nazi persecution even at this early stage. In 1939, for example, urns made up 17% of burials at Tor IV, where special diminutive graves were created to accommodate the urns.<sup>32</sup> Altogether, the remains of about 1.7% of the Austrian victims of the Holocaust were sent back to Vienna in urns, a “service” for which the IKG was even billed. Remarkably, these 1,136 urns included the remains of only 20 women, revealing the peculiar gender dynamic of this earlier stage of persecution, before mass extermination began.<sup>33</sup> It is questionable, however, whether these urns even contained the ashes of the specific individuals in question, given the irreverent treatment of corpses in the concentration camps.

The fear that this flood of urns instilled in Vienna’s Jews is documented in survivor accounts.<sup>34</sup> This practice, which affected Jewish communities across Nazi-ruled Europe in these years, also exacerbated previous controversies surrounding cremation within Jewish sepulchral culture.<sup>35</sup> An interesting detail in the Viennese context is that, as late as 1940, the IKG

27 *Ibid.*, p. 598, 746–50.

28 See e.g. Edith Lewin, *From Vienna to New York 1938–1943*, undated, Leo Baeck Institute, New York (LBI), ME 824, p. 3.

29 Rupnow, *Vernichten und Erinnern*, pp. 56–57.

30 *An das Friedhofsamt der Israelitischen Kultusgemeinde*, 10 August 1951, AIKGW, A/VIE/IKG/III/FH/108/8. The delivery notices for each individual urn are filed in AIKGW, A/VIE/IKG/II/FH/1/1.

31 See the delivery notices filed in AIKGW, A/VIE/IKG/II/FH/4/2.

32 *Aktennotiz*, 28 November 1940, AIKGW, A/VIE/IKG/II/FH/2, cited in USHMM, AJCV-VCC.

33 Herbert Exenberger, *Gleich dem kleinen Häuflein der Makkabäer. Die jüdische Gemeinde in Simmering 1848 bis 1945* (Vienna: Mandelbaum, 2009), p. 301.

34 See e.g. Harvey Fireside, *Delusions and Denials: Viennese Life under the Nazis*, 2004, LBI, ME 1486, p. 54–55.

35 See e.g. Menahem Mendel Kirschbaum, “On the Status of Deceased Jewish Prisoners’ Ashes Returned by the Nazi Government to the Bereaved Families (After Kristallnacht, 1938) [1939]”, in *Rabbinic Responsa of the Holocaust Era*, ed. Robert Kirschner (New York: Schocken, 1985), pp. 55–56.

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was still allowing the burial of cremated remains in its cemetery, a practice that had already been established in the interwar period and would only become tabooed after the end of the war, when the true extent of the Holocaust became known.<sup>36</sup>

The persecution not only of Jews but of people defined as such by the Nuremberg Laws would eventually also be extended into the realm of death and burial. Thus, in December 1940, the municipal cemetery office cancelled all its contracts regarding the upkeep of graves of people defined as "Jews" in municipal cemeteries, notably over a year before this policy was adopted state-wide by the Deutsche Gemeindetag.<sup>37</sup> A curious anomaly in this context is the survival of so many graves of Jewish-born notables in Vienna's municipal cemeteries, including those of Theodor Herzl in the Döbling municipal cemetery and Gustav Mahler in the Grinzing municipal cemetery (Herzl's remains were moved to Jerusalem in 1949).

In September 1941, at the same time as the "Jewish star" was introduced to visually stigmatize all those classed as "Jews" according to the Nuremberg Laws, the burial of "non-Aryans" in "Aryan" cemeteries was forbidden throughout the Third Reich. Following generations of conversions and intermarriages, this affected a huge grey area of so-called "Mischlinge" and others who did not count as "pure Aryans," including thousands of people in Vienna alone. The IKG protested at the enforced burial of so-called "irreligious racial Jews" in its cemetery at Tor IV, leading the municipal government to propose that a special section be set aside for this purpose. The IKG's cemetery office reacted with strict rules, such as forbidding Christian ceremonies in their cemetery, though these restrictions were later relaxed once Christians outnumbered Jews in the surviving community of persecutees following the great deportations in late 1942.<sup>38</sup> Altogether 765 "non-Aryans" were buried at Tor IV by April 1945, with over 100 later being exhumed by relatives and reburied in Christian cemeteries. The remaining graves are still recognizable today by the large number of crosses included on the memorials, even though such Christian symbolism had initially also been forbidden by the IKG's cemetery office.<sup>39</sup>

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36 *Tarif für Taxen und Gebühren*, September 1940, AIKGW, A/VIK/II/FH/4/4. On interwar cremations, see Corbett, *Die Grabstätten meiner Väter*, pp. 405–07.

37 *An die Herren Oberbürgermeister der Städte mit mehr als 500,000 Einw.*, 20 February 1942, and *An den Deutschen Gemeindetag*, 18 March 1942, BArch, R36/2101.

38 See e.g. *Dienstordnung für die Durchführung der Beerdigungen glaubensloser Juden*, 2 September 1941, AIKGW, A/VIK/II/PRÄS/1.

39 Corbett, *Die Grabstätten meiner Väter*, pp. 625–33.

The final major group of burials that occurred at Tor IV involved deceased Hungarian forced laborers who had been deported to eastern Austria in the summer of 1944 to plug the prevailing labor shortage.<sup>40</sup> These individuals, who numbered 15,000 in all, about 6,000 of whom were sent to Vienna and its environs, were thus saved from almost certain death in Auschwitz during the Hungarian Holocaust. Yet their mortality rate in Austria was also extremely high, not least of all due to the deplorable living and working conditions they suffered. Altogether 445 Hungarians were buried at Tor IV, most in mass graves, some of whom had been exhumed from the roadside following the death marches at the end of the war. Their graves are conspicuous for the prevalence of Hungarian-language inscriptions on the memorials erected after 1945.<sup>41</sup>

### Selective preservation for scholarly purposes

There is a common assumption in German-language historiography that there was no interest in Jewish cemeteries on the part of non-Jewish scholars before the mid-20th century.<sup>42</sup> This is incorrect, as a large body of scholarship in Vienna, both academic and popular, from the mid-19th century onwards demonstrates, with Vienna's Jewish cemeteries even featuring in influential cemetery literature from Germany before World War I. Amongst both Jews and non-Jews, these cemeteries were often invoked before the Holocaust to underline the longevity of Jewish history in Central Europe, beyond the ruptures of pogroms and displacements that recurred throughout medieval and early modern history. The cemetery in the Seegasse featured especially prominently as a site of both aesthetic and historical import and as part and parcel of Vienna's urban cultural heritage, including, notably, in the works of right-wing non-Jewish scholars before the Nazi era. When placed in a broader chronological context, the engagement by Nazi scholars with Vienna's Jewish sepulchral heritage actually evinces many continuities extending far beyond the years of Nazi rule.<sup>43</sup>

40 Hecht et al., *Topographie der Shoah*, pp. 362–64, 379.

41 Corbett, *Die Grabstätten meiner Väter*, pp. 663–67.

42 See e.g. Reiner Sörries, *Friedhof und Denkmal in Deutschland. Historischer Beitrag und Erbe der jüdischen Kultur*, in *Jüdische Friedhöfe und Bestattungskultur in Europa*, ed. ICOMOS Deutschland und Landesdenkmalamt Berlin (Berlin, 2011), p. 20.

43 Corbett, *Die Grabstätten meiner Väter*, pp. 479–506.

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These continuities become particularly evident in the debates that inflamed in the summer of 1941, when the city school authority attempted to confiscate the Jewish retirement home in the Seegasse and to obliterate the adjacent Jewish cemetery in order to create a garden for tuberculosis-afflicted schoolchildren. However, Viktor Schneider, a bureaucrat in the city department of historical preservation, quickly intervened in this plan on account of the cemetery's "documentary interest [...] from both a historical and cultural standpoint," which he went on to compare to the famous old cemetery in Prague, concluding that the cemetery was in and of itself worthy of being preserved.<sup>44</sup> In an appeal which he directed to the office of the Reichsstatthalter in November 1941, he described the cemetery as "of great significance to the history of the city" due to its old age, but also its "eminent position" from an "art historical" perspective, comparing it once again to the old cemetery in Prague and concluding that this site constituted "a centuries-old open air museum [...] of extraordinary value."<sup>45</sup>

Notably, Schneider was thus following explicitly in the footsteps of half a century or more of cultural and historiographical appraisals of the inherent value of this old cemetery, indeed going on to draw on this body of literature to underline his conviction that the cemetery should be preserved as a cultural landmark.<sup>46</sup> A protracted struggle ensued between various municipal departments over the fate of the old cemetery, with the proponents of liquidation invoking Nazi ideology and anti-Semitic arguments to justify the complete destruction of the cemetery. The municipal government eventually sought the opinion of scholars, including the infamous Nazi anthropologist Viktor Christian of Vienna University. Christian agreed that the cemetery was worth preserving, but not because of any cultural or historical value. Rather, he saw the gravestones and the "skeletal material" potentially still preserved in the ground as valuable material for racial research.<sup>47</sup> This reflected a general drive amongst anthropologists in the Third Reich at this time to obtain not only cultural artifacts but also human remains from their victims across Europe for research purposes, including programs specifically targeting Jewish cemeteries in Nazi-occupied territories.<sup>48</sup>

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44 *An den Reichsstatthalter in Wien*, 25 July 1941, Österreichisches Staatsarchiv / Archiv der Republik (ÖStA/AdR), Reichsstatthalter in Wien, Kt. 300.

45 *An den Reichsstatthalter in Wien als Planungsbehörde*, 27 November 1941, ÖStA/AdR, Reichsstatthalter in Wien, Kt. 300.

46 *Amtsvermerk*, 20 September 1941, ÖStA/AdR, Reichsstatthalter in Wien, Kt. 300.

47 *An die Reichsarbeitsgemeinschaft für Raumforschung*, 18 October 1941, ÖStA/AdR, Reichsstatthalter in Wien, Kt. 300.

48 Wirsching, *Jüdische Friedhöfe*, pp. 22–23.

The debates over the Seegasse cemetery encapsulate the spectrum of initiatives regarding Jewish cemeteries among different agents during Nazi rule, ranging from total preservation as cultural heritage, through selective preservation for the purposes of racial research, to total annihilation and repurposing of the land. Ultimately, none of these plans came to fruition at the Seegasse, since the site was later expropriated by the SS. It is doubtful anyway that human remains would have been found in the soil following centuries of decomposition. As mentioned above, a handful of Jewish community members were given permission in 1943 to remove a few hundred gravestones from the site, which were thus preserved for posterity and today form part of an ongoing attempt to restore the cemetery as a historical landmark. This small act of resistance, at a time when the vast majority of Vienna's remaining Jewish population had already been deported to concentration camps and extermination sites, is a testament to the profound cultural and emotional value of Jewish cemeteries and gravestones.

A remarkable footnote to the history of the Seegasse cemetery is the fate of Viktor Schneider, the city bureaucrat who attempted to save the cemetery as an "extraordinarily valuable" landmark, leading to his denunciation by his colleagues in the municipal government.<sup>49</sup> His punishment appears to have extended only to refusal of the renewal of his membership in the Nazi Party, yet this minor story in the history of Vienna's Jewish cemeteries reveals striking continuities and paradoxes in the long-term reception of Jewish sepulchral heritage, including in this case by a self-affirmed Nazi. Schneider went on to collaborate with the reconstituted IKG in the fall of 1945 to begin restoration works in the city's Jewish cemeteries.<sup>50</sup> When Schneider's Nazi past was investigated by the Vienna People's Court in 1946, the former president of the IKG's cemetery office, Ernst Feldsberg, himself a survivor of Theresienstadt, intervened personally on behalf of Schneider, who was ultimately acquitted of wrongdoing during the Nazi era.<sup>51</sup>

The Nazi anthropologists did, however, get their way at the cemetery in Währing, where the Natural History Museum and the Anthropological Department of Vienna University conducted hundreds of exhumations in

49 *An Herrn Stadtrat Ing. Blaschke*, 21 April 1942, WStLA, M. Abt. 202, A5 – Personalakten 1. Reihe: Dr. Viktor Schneider.

50 Corbett, *Die Grabstätten meiner Väter*, pp. 847–48.

51 *An den Herrn amtsführenden Stadtrat der Verwaltungsgruppe I*, 27 May 1946, WStLA, M. Abt. 202, A5 – Personalakten 1. Reihe: Dr. Viktor Schneider.

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1942 and 1943, following the forced sale of the cemetery to the city.<sup>52</sup> The IKG was nevertheless first given the opportunity to exhume and rebury the remains of select individuals, which it did in the case of altogether 55 predominantly male notables of significance to the social, political, cultural, and economic history of the community and of Viennese society more broadly. These were reburied in two rows at Tor IV, Section 14A.

After the war, the emigrant writer Robert Pick commented on the astounding piety of such initiatives by surviving community members, “at a time when the ashes of literally uncounted Jews were being shoveled out of Hitler’s crematories on a 24-hour schedule—and the handful of Jews left in Vienna could no longer doubt the imminence of their own end.”<sup>53</sup> These same community members were later forced to assist in the exhumations conducted by the “race researchers,” an often traumatic experience, as postwar interviews reveal.<sup>54</sup> The Austrian anthropologists involved not only largely escaped conviction for these crimes after 1945, but were even able to continue their careers as celebrated academics long after the end of Nazi rule.<sup>55</sup>

### Resistance and survival

By the outbreak of war in September 1939, about 125,000 out of the 200,000 Austrians defined as Jews according to the Nuremberg Laws, the majority of whom resided in Vienna, had been forced to emigrate. Those who remained consisted predominantly of the elderly, the underage, the poor, and the sick, and were moreover predominantly female, a consequence of the targeted persecution of Jewish men in the early years of Nazi rule and the disproportionate pressure on younger Jewish men to emigrate.<sup>56</sup> Those left behind would overwhelmingly be deported to concentration camps and extermination sites from 1942 onwards, of whom a large proportion would

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52 Corbett, *Die Grabstätten meiner Väter*, pp. 565–75. See also a report commissioned in the 1990s by the Natural History Museum: Maria Teschler-Nicola and Margit Berner, *Die Anthropologische Abteilung des Naturhistorischen Museums in der NS-Zeit. Berichte und Dokumentationen von Forschungs- und Sammelaktivitäten 1938–1945* (Vienna: Naturhistorisches Museum Wien, 1998), esp. pp. 5, 8.

53 Robert Pick, “The Vienna of the Departed,” *Commentary*, no. 16 (1953): 156.

54 Martha Keil, “... enterdigt aus dem jüdischen Friedhof”. Der jüdische Friedhof in Wien-Währing während des Nationalsozialismus,” in *Studien zur Wiener Geschichte*, ed. Karl Fischer and Christine Giegler vol. 61 (Vienna: Verein für Geschichte der Stadt Wien, 2005), pp. 10, 18.

55 Dirk Rupnow, *Judenforschung im Dritten Reich. Wissenschaft zwischen Politik, Propaganda und Ideologie* (Vienna: Nomos, 2011), p. 339.

56 Botz, *Nationalsozialismus in Wien*, pp. 342, 621. See also Elisabeth Malleier, *Jüdische Frauen in Wien 1816–1938* (Vienna: Mandelbaum, 2003), p. 144.

in turn fall victim to the Holocaust, about 65,000 people in total. By the end of 1942, when the great deportations from Vienna had concluded, only about 8,000 “Jews” remained in Vienna, of whom over half were actually Christian, and who were mostly “protected” by their marriage or relation to “Aryans.”<sup>57</sup>

Even though the “Jewish star” was introduced only in September 1941, Vienna’s Jews found themselves quickly and violently excluded from public spaces following the Anschluss. By the summer of 1938, most of the city’s parks and other green spaces had been forbidden to Jews. In this context, the cemetery at Tor IV soon transformed from a site of burial and mourning into a place of refuge, solace, and even leisure, as is documented in a range of sources, including diaries, photographs, and postwar memoirs. This reflects a general trend in the territories under Nazi control, in which green spaces like gardens and cemeteries became vital for both the physical survival and psychological wellbeing of the remaining Jewish populations.<sup>58</sup> Especially following the introduction of the “Jewish star,” the importance of the Jewish cemetery as a place of sanctuary also extended to those “non-Aryan” Christians persecuted as Jews according to the Nuremberg Laws.<sup>59</sup> Vienna’s Jewish cemeteries sometimes served as sanctuaries in a very immediate sense, as people slated for deportation hid in the mausoleums in the relatively secluded older Jewish section at the expansive Central Cemetery on the outskirts of the city. Many persecuted individuals also chose this old cemetery as a place to commit suicide, as reported, amongst others, by Martin Vogel, then a young gravedigger who survived as a “Mischling” in Vienna. In the same interview, Vogel reported burying a time capsule at this cemetery that recorded the liquidation of the Zionist organization Jugendalijah, a copy of which was later sent to Yad Vashem, thus reflecting how the cemetery also became a place of hope and even of small acts of resistance through the documentation of the Jewish community’s destruction during these years.<sup>60</sup>

Such documentation also survives on one of the grave memorials itself, namely the *ohel* of Samuel Frommer at Tor I, the interior of which is covered

57 Michaela Raggam-Blesch, “Survival of a Peculiar Remnant: The Jewish Population of Vienna during the Last Years of the War,” *Dapim: Studies on the Holocaust*, 29, no. 3 (2015): 4.

58 Wolfgang Benz, “Parks und Gärten im Holocaust. Freiräume – Zuflucht – Verbotene Orte – Mordstätten,” in *Gärten und Parks im Leben der jüdischen Bevölkerung nach 1933*, ed. Hubertus Fischer and Joachim Wolschke-Bulmahn (Munich: Meidenbauer, 2008), pp. 71, 78.

59 Hecht et al., *Topographie der Shoah*, pp. 344–45.

60 Corbett, *Die Grabstätten meiner Väter*, pp. 609–12. I thank Michaela Raggam-Blesch for providing me with the transcript of her interview with Vogel from 2012.

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in graffiti dating from the spring of 1938 onwards pleading with God and the deceased rabbi to “pray for us” and “let *peace* come for us Jews soon.” The language and grammar suggests that these pleas were written by non-orthodox youths, who seem to have adapted a recognizably orthodox practice, namely of leaving written pleas at the gravesites of deceased rabbis, as a general “Jewish” practice in order to cope with the profoundly difficult situation they faced. This is a poignant example of a general “orthodoxization” of Jewish practices surrounding the cemetery that could be observed through the Holocaust and beyond.<sup>61</sup>

The cemetery at Tor IV also served as one of several locations for the community’s *Hachsharah* activities, the agricultural training courses with roots in the interwar Zionist movement that were supposed to help with emigration to Palestine.<sup>62</sup> Around 43,000 individuals completed such retraining courses in Vienna by the end of 1940, following which retraining was largely terminated, since emigration was no longer a possibility.<sup>63</sup> Although most of the people left behind in Vienna at this point would not survive the Holocaust, these *Hachsharah* activities reflect a brief interlude characterized by optimism and hope. The unused section in the north-eastern corner of Tor IV set aside for these activities became known as the “graveland” by participants, who wore blue and white uniforms during their courses, the colors of the Zionist movement.<sup>64</sup> One of the main activities was the cultivation of fruit and vegetables, which served to supply the Jewish soup kitchens, hospital, and retirement home.<sup>65</sup>

A photo album dating from 1940 that documents these activities is preserved in the Yad Vashem Archive, though whoever catalogued the album was evidently unaware that these photos were taken at a cemetery.<sup>66</sup> They depict happy youths and young adults busily at work outdoors, in the sunshine, the atmosphere being perfectly captured in the handwritten caption to one photo: “Like the most beautiful summer holiday.” Overall, the album conveys a tone of optimism and hope, framed through a Zionist lens,

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61 *Ibid.*, pp. 612–17. On “orthodoxization,” see pp. 387–438 and 753–812.

62 Malleier, *Jüdische Frauen in Wien*, pp. 248–49, and Eleonore Lappin-Eppel, “Aufbruch der Jugend. Wiener (jüdische) Jugendbewegungen vor dem Ersten Weltkrieg,” in *Weltuntergang. Jüdisches Leben und Sterben im Ersten Weltkrieg*, ed. Marcus Patka (Vienna: Jüdisches Museum Wien, 2014), p. 176.

63 Israelitische Kultusgemeinde Wien, ed., *Twelve Questions about Emigration from Vienna* (Vienna: Israelitische Kultusgemeinde Wien, 1940), unpaginated.

64 Hecht et al., *Topographie der Shoah*, pp. 296, 309, and Herbert Rosenkranz, *Verfolgung und Selbstbehauptung. Die Juden in Österreich 1938–1945* (Vienna: Herold, 1978), p. 272.

65 *Gemüseanbau Neufriedhof*, Central Archives for the History of the Jewish People, AU/1490.

66 *Wien, Austria, An album prepared by the Jewish community in Wien in November 1940 and dedicated to Hachshara, vocational training*, Yad Vashem Archive, FA70/0.

as in an accompanying poem that concludes: “For through work the path leads upwards.” This could be read as a reference to *aliyah* or emigration to Palestine, the word literally meaning “ascent,” but in the aftermath of the Holocaust it is reminiscent rather of the cynical slogan of the concentration camps: “Arbeit macht frei.” Although the retraining courses were discontinued in early 1941, once emigration effectively ceased and the great deportations were about to commence, the “graveland” continued to be used by the surviving community until the end of the war to produce food, a portion of which was sent to the Theresienstadt ghetto to aid the inmates there.<sup>67</sup>

As mentioned above, the cemetery office constituted one of three main areas of activity for the IKG during the Nazi era. Thus, employment in the cemetery office was highly desirable for the surviving community members, not because the positions were well paid (many in fact worked for free), but because official employment could protect one from deportation, at least temporarily. Some of the employees were even assigned living quarters in the administrative offices at Tor IV.<sup>68</sup> Employment in the cemetery office peaked in 1940 at 83 individuals, though a handful of these were “Aryans.”<sup>69</sup> How life-saving this employment could be is evident in the dismissal, on Benjamin Marmelstein’s initiative, of nine employees in November 1940 as a cost-saving measure: I was able to positively identify five of these individuals as falling victim to deportation and murder in the immediate aftermath, with two others possibly also among the victims.<sup>70</sup>

Among the most detailed sources documenting a “protected” life in the employ of the IKG, including much time spent at the cemetery, are the diaries of the twins Kurt and Ilse Mezei, who were born in 1924.<sup>71</sup> Their mother, Margarete, who had already worked for the IKG before the Anschluss, managed to save her children from deportation by securing them work with the community organization.<sup>72</sup> This represented a certain form of privilege, though ultimately neither twin would survive the war. Their diaries reveal how the days at Tor IV in the summer months were a time of normalcy and escape from the everyday experience of persecution, allowing especially

67 Hecht et al., *Topographie der Shoah*, pp. 309, 478.

68 Corbett, *Die Grabstätten meiner Väter*, pp. 601–03, 638–39.

69 *Verzeichnis der am 4. Tor, Neuer Friedhof, beschäftigten Arbeiter*, undated [1940], AIKGW, A/VIE/IKG/II/PERS/6, cited in USHMM, AJCV-VCC.

70 *Aktennotiz*, 27 November 1940, AIKGW, A/VIE/IKG/II/PERS/6, cited in USHMM, AJCV-VCC.

71 *Tagebuch von Kurt Mezei*, Jüdisches Museum Wien (JMWW), 4465, and *Tagebuch von Ilze Mezei*, DÖW, 22.176/15A.

72 Hecht et al., *Topographie der Shoah*, pp. 299, 459.

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the younger survivors to enter into friendships, romances, and conflicts as would be expected of any ordinary group of teenagers. Characteristically, the word “boring” appears often in Kurt’s diaries.<sup>73</sup> Kurt also took many photographs of life in Vienna during the Holocaust, including at the cemetery, which are preserved in various archives.<sup>74</sup>

There were also darker sides to employment at the cemetery, however. For example, Kurt was recruited by Ernst Feldsberg, the director of the cemetery office, to assist in horrendous jobs like unloading the body parts salvaged from the excavated portion of the Währing cemetery in 1941 and burying the corpses of recent suicides. He was only a teenager at the time. The unknown fate of deported family members and friends also weighed heavily on Kurt, as did the suicides of some of those slated for deportation. Kurt and Ilse survived all the way to the end of the war, when Ilse was killed during an air raid on 12 March. On 12 April, just days before the conquest of Vienna by the Red Army, Kurt was murdered by a roaming SS unit. The twins’ fate is characteristic of many who were spared deportation but still did not survive the Holocaust.

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Vienna’s Jewish cemeteries emerged from the Holocaust in varying states of neglect, ruination, or destruction, and would henceforth form the focus of protracted restitution conflicts with the City of Vienna, which for decades rejected any culpability for the actions of its Nazi-era government. Not until 1955 did the IKG wrest back ownership of the Jewish cemeteries, and restoration efforts are still going on today, over seven decades after the end of Nazi rule.<sup>75</sup> In fact, the desecrations by the municipal government continued after the war, especially at the cemetery in Währing, where a municipal apartment block was constructed on the desecrated south-eastern portion in 1959, which was later perversely named after the famous Jewish Austrian writer Arthur Schnitzler. Währing remains one of the most contested sites of Jewish memory in Vienna to this day.

The history I have briefly sketched here involved an array of agents whose activities impacted Vienna’s Jewish cemeteries during the Holocaust,

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73 Corbett, *Die Grabstätten meiner Väter*, pp. 639–56. See also Raggam-Blesch, “Survival of a Peculiar Remnant,” 11.

74 See e.g. JMW, 20740, 23612–267 through 23612–269, and 10008–1 through 10008–5.

75 Corbett, *Die Grabstätten meiner Väter*, pp. 823–977.

revealing a broad spectrum of motives that ranged from attempts to preserve the cemeteries and their artifacts in whole or in part through to attempts to annihilate them entirely. Meanwhile, the actions of the remaining Jewish population reveal that this is not only a history of Nazi perpetration, but also a Jewish history of survival and resistance. Unfortunately, I did not have the space here to explore further inner-Jewish dimensions of the Holocaust-era history of the cemeteries, such as the engagements with Jewish cemeteries, both as actual sites or as abstractions, in memoirs, literature, and poetry during and after the Holocaust, or the role of Vienna's Jewish cemeteries as profound if also contested sites for the construction of memory of the Holocaust and of Jewish history in Vienna more broadly after 1945. Yet the broad typology of agents, motives, and activities that I have sketched here will lend itself to future comparative analyses of the fates suffered by Jewish cemeteries in other contexts during the Holocaust.