

Title: Forgotten Legacies for Present Day Audiences: Circus Jews Under National Socialism (hybrid talk / creation exploration)

by Stav Meishar (in collaboration with [Diverging Fates](#))

Abstract

The community of itinerant entertainers formed a world of their own, with its own rules and traditions. They protected each other, which was vital when traveling between tightly knit, sedentary communities. They were foreign intruders whose “unearthly” talents were sometimes perceived as disturbing or dangerous [...] and they were often the object of harassment and persecution. Many gypsies and Jews joined their ranks and created their own performance dynasties.

(Jando, Dominique, Daniel Noel, Granfield Linda, and Dahlinger, Fred. *The Circus: 1870-1950*. USA: Taschen, 2010; p. 72)

Before the rise of the National Socialist party, Germany had a few Jewish circus dynasties including the Lorch, Strassburger and Blumenfeld families. Like all Jews under Nazi rule, they were forced to close or otherwise sell their businesses to their gentile colleagues before eventually being deported to various camps. Very few survived (Otte 2006). Of those few survivors, the story of Irene, Gerda, Alice and Hans Danner of the Lorch family stands out as an inspiring tale of courage and support: they were sheltered by the gentile Althoff Circus from 1941 through the end of the war (Prior 1999), and their saviors were awarded the honor of Righteous Among the Nations from the Yad Vashem Museum for saving their lives.

The history of Jewish-German circus families is that of a minority within a minority: even within a community of “others” such as the circus, Jewish artists presented a different circle of “otherness”, one which nearly cost them their lives. How can their stories be harnessed to educate and enlighten modern audiences on issues of tolerance, diversity and social activism?

This presentation will be a hybrid of a research-based talk and a short performance. It will explore the lives of these families and discuss the emergence of Holocaust Drama, highlighting the impact of staging survivor stories as means to preserve the past and inform the future. The performance part will focus on the Lorch family's rescue, presenting a segment of a multidisciplinary work-in-progress inspired by their time at the Althoff Circus.

References:

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