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# **On The Discursive Construction Of Jewish “Racialization” And “Race Passing:” Jews As “U-boats” With A Mysterious “Queer Light”**

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## **Abstract**

The Nazi Gestapo referred to Jews in hiding as “U-Boats” to survive under the Third Reich. Like the seagoing vessels, they traveled a fluid sea. Some navigated below the depths, while others floated on the surface in plain view, artfully (and not so artfully) disguised to conceal their actual identities. The article profiles the author’s family, the Mahlers of Antwerp, Belgium, during the Nazi occupation through an investigation of the historical, theoretical, and discursive categories of “race” and “race passing,” specifically as it relates to European-heritage Jewish people.

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*Sometimes I don't know which side of the wall I'm on.*

- Wladylaw Szpilman, *The Pianist*

### Introduction

On a snowy February morning in 2002, as I organized materials for my classes in my university office, I received an email message that would poignantly and profoundly change my life. The message was sent by a man named Charles Mahler from his home in Antwerp, Belgium. He stated that he was undertaking a genealogical study and that his research revealed that I was his cousin on my mother's side. He had been looking for descendants of the Mahlers of Krosno, Poland, and had come across an essay I had written focusing on Wolf and Bascha Mahler of Krosno, my great-grandparents and other family members, most of whom had been tortured and murdered by the Nazis not long after Germany had invaded Poland. Charles informed me that he had survived the German Holocaust along with his sister, parents, and maternal grandparents, but that his father's parents, Jacques and Anja Mahler, and a great many other relatives, had perished following Hitler's invasion and occupation of Belgium. Now as a retired physician and university professor, he desired to connect with *mishpocheh* (family), especially with the descendants of family members who had survived and others who had escaped prior to the terror of those evil times.

I took a few moments to grasp the full weight of what I had just read. Reflections of a time long past swirled within me - images of when I was a small child as I sat upon my grandfather Simon Mahler's knee. Urgently looking down at me, but with deep affection, he said to me in his distinctive Polish accent, "Varn, you are named after my father, Wolf Mahler, who was killed by the Nazis along with most of my thirteen brothers and sisters, aunts, uncles, and cousins." (I learned years later that my great-grandmother, Bascha, had died of a heart attack in 1934.) When I asked why they were killed, he responded, "Because they were Jews." Those words have reverberated in my mind, haunting me ever since.

Now Charles had suddenly entered my life as if a long-missing piece of a jigsaw puzzle had magically surfaced. After a few months of excited and, for me, tear-filled email exchanges to get to know one another, I took the opportunity to travel to Antwerp to meet Charles, his sister Nanette, his ninety-year-old mother Selma, and Charles's wife, daughter, son-in-law, grandson, and granddaughter. Unfortunately his father, George, had died in 1996.

Sitting around a table in Selma's comfortable apartment filled with family pictures and *tsatskes* (knickknacks) reflecting this warm and vital women's remarkable life, she, Nanette, Charles, and I talked well into the late afternoon. They related their incredible story of living in

hiding from August 1942 until the final armistice ending the war in Europe. They recounted the tale of how they had changed their identities from Jewish to Christian, and abandoned Antwerp for what they considered the relative safety of the Belgium countryside. During their plight, they were shepherded by members of the Belgium resistance and by righteous Christians who sheltered them in two farmhouses and a villa as the German Gestapo followed closely at their heels. On a number of occasions, they successfully “passed” as Gentiles (i.e. non-Jewish people) directly under the watchful gaze of unsuspecting Nazis.

The Nazi Gestapo referred to Jews like my cousins as “U-Boats” — a term used to denote Jews in hiding in an attempt to survive under the Third Reich. Like the seagoing vessels, they traveled a fluid sea. Some navigated below the depths, while others floated on the surface in plain view, artfully (and not so artfully) disguised to conceal their actual identities.

What follows is an investigation of the discursive categories of “race” specifically as they relate to Jewish people. When I discuss Jews for the purposes of this investigation, I am *primarily* referring to worldwide Jews of Eastern, Central, or Western European heritage—or Ashkenazim whose primary European language is/was Yiddish. The Sephardim—Jews of Southern European (primarily Portuguese and Spanish), North African, and Middle Eastern heritage whose primary language is/was Ladino (also called Judezmo or Judeo-Spanish)—and the Mizrachim—Jews who lived or are living in Arab countries and Turkey, whose native language is or was Judeo-Arabic—continue to be socially constructed as “persons of color” within the United States. They often do not have the same degree of “White skin privilege” currently accorded to the Ashkenazim; thus, I do not focus on their experiences in this article.

### **The Social Production of “Race”**

Looking back to the historical emergence of the concept of “race,” critical race theorists remind us that this *concept* arose concurrently with the advent of European exploration as a justification and rationale for conquest and domination of the globe beginning in the 15<sup>th</sup> century of the Common Era (CE) and reaching its apex in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century CE (see e.g., Cameron & Wycoff, 1998). Meanwhile, geneticists tell us that there is often more variability *within* a given so-called “race” of humans than between human “races,” and that there are no essential *genetic* markers linked specifically to “race.” They assert, therefore, that “race” is discursively constructed—a historical, “scientific,” and biological myth. Thus, any socially-conceived physical “racial” markers are fictive and are not concordant with what is beyond or below the surface of the body (see e.g., Zuckerman, 1990).

Though biologists and social scientists have proven unequivocally that the *concept* of “race” is socially constructed, however, “the knowledge that race is an ideological, social/material construct does not take away the consequences when one is faced with actual racist incidents or practices” (Sefa Dei, 2000, p. 35). Derman-Sparks and Phillips (1997) define “racism” as “an institutional system of economic, political, social, and cultural relations that ensures that one racial group has and maintains power and privilege over all others in all aspects of life” (p. 2). They discuss the two erroneous hypotheses undergirding biologically-centered racist ideology: “1. Humans are classifiable into discrete, hierarchically ranked biological groups (with Whites at the top)” and “2. Differences among the races reflect the natural and/or ordained order and therefore are eternally fixed” (p. 15). This historical manufacture of “race” has been reified as entrenched *systems* of power and oppression, and individuals and social groups must investigate historical and theoretical perspectives to better undertake effective critiques and concrete actions (*praxis*, Freire, 1970) to rupture dominant hegemonic discourses such as “race.”

### **Jews Interpolated as Racialized “Other”**

#### **Theological Perspectives**

During the Middle Ages, theologians posited what came to be known as “The Great Chain of Being” (Brace, 2005), whereby God created a hierarchy throughout the universe with God sitting atop, followed by humans, other animal forms, plants, and finally, inanimate objects. God was also said to have formed sub-hierarchies within each category. Under the human category, some theologians and scientists theorized that an original pair of humans existed, Adam and Eve, from which all people descended (the “Monogenism Theory”). Scientists, however, hypothesized that the differing peoples throughout the world descended from different “original pairs” (the “Polygenism Theory”).

Prior to this time, Christian theologians distinguished Jews as different from and inferior to Christians on religious grounds. A number of passages within the Christian Testaments were used to justify the persecution of the Jews. For example, in 1 Thessalonians 2:15-16:

[T]he Jews, who killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets and drove us out, the Jews who are heedless of God’s will and enemies of their fellow man....All this time they have been making up the full measure of their guilt, and now retribution has overtaken the good of all.

In addition, it is written in Matthew 27:24-25 that:

Pilate could see that nothing was being gained, and a riot was starting [among the Jews]; so he took water and washed his hands in full view of the people saying, 'My hands are clean of this man's blood; see to that yourselves,' and with one voice the people cried, 'His blood be on us, and on our children.'

Christian theologians also often equated Jews with the Devil, with such passages as:

- "Jesus said to them, 'If God were your father, you would love me...[but] your father is the devil and you choose to carry out your father's desires'" (John 8:44).
- "The Jews...are Satan's synagogue" (Revelation 2:9).
- "I will make those of Satan's synagogue, who claim to be Jews but are lying frauds, come and fall down at your feet" (Revelation 3:9).

### Scientific Perspectives

Within the newly developing "Polygenism Theory," we begin to witness a "scientific" *and* religious separation of Jews from other groups of humans. This theory asserted that God created multiple original pairs in disparate zones throughout the Earth. These "non-Adamical" humans hold numerous genetic strains reflective of their original pairs (Brace, 2005).

Early polygenists included Isaac De La Peyrere (1594-1676), who was born to a noble family. He wrote the book *Systema Theologica ex Praeadamitarium Hypothesi (A Theological System upon the Presupposition that Men were Born before Adam)*, which proposed that the Jews descended from Adam and Eve while the Gentiles derived from original pairs who had lived *before* Adam. While members of the clergy considered these notions heretical, a number of scientists during the time followed this theoretical formulation (Brace, 2005). Even the great philosopher, Voltaire, argued that "[o]nly the blind could doubt" the original distinction between the human "races" (Voltaire, 1773, I:6 cited in Brace, 2005, p. 40).

Carl Linnaeus (1707-1778), born Carl Linné, Swedish botanist, physician, and zoologist, developed a system of scientific hierarchical classification in his book *Systema Naturae*, in which he subdivided living organisms into Kingdoms, Classes, Orders, Genera (Genus), and Species. Within this Linnaean taxonomy under the label *Homo sapiens* ("Man"), he enumerated five categories based initially on place of origin and later, on skin color: Europeanus, Asiaticus, Americanus, Monstrosus, and Africanus (Brace, 2005). Linnaeus asserted that each category

was ruled by a different bodily fluid (or Humor), represented by Blood (optimistic), Phlegm (sluggish), Cholor (yellow bile meaning prone to anger), and Melancholy (black bile meaning prone to sadness). Linnaeus connected each human category to a respective humor, thereby constructing the Linnaeus Taxonomy of humans in descending order - Europeanus: sanguine (blood), pale, muscular, swift, clever, inventive, governed by laws; Asiaticus: melancholic, yellow, inflexible, severe, avaricious, dark-eyed, governed by opinions; Americanus (indigenous peoples in the Americas): choleric, copper-colored, straightforward, eager, combative, governed by customs; Monstrosus (dwarfs of the Alps, the Patagonian giant, the monorchid Hottentot): agile, fainthearted; and Africanus: phlegmatic, black, slow, relaxed, negligent, governed by impulse. In this random method of categorization, Carl Linnaeus has infamously been given the label as “father of scientific racism.”

Later European scientists separated *Homo sapiens* and added other categories such as Caucasoid – originating from Europe, North Africa, Southwest Asia; Mongoloid – originating from East Asia, Siberia, the Americas; Polynesians; Native Americans; Australoid – indigenous Australians; and Negroid – originating from Central and Southern Africa (Ramon, n.d.). Louis-Antoine Desmoulins (1796-1828), French physiologist and polygenist, further divided humans into 16 subspecies and 25 distinct races in his 1826 book *Histoire Naturelle des Races Humaines (Natural History of the Human Races)*. He rejected the possibility that geographical and climatic differences could produce the biological differences evidenced among humans. Instead, he argued that these distinct “species” and “races” maintain the genetic traits through inheritance, where they have remained “pure and without mixture” since their beginnings (Desmoulins, 1826, cited in Brace, 2005).

Of course, not all scientists during this time followed the polygenist school of thought. Johann Friedrich Blumenbach (1752-1840), a German professor of medicine and a monogenist, believed that the *nisus formativus* (vital forces of nature) caused by differences in climate, nutrition, or style of life across many generations was responsible for the changes in human forms from the beginning to the present. Blumenbach coined the term “Caucasians,” borrowing from Sir John Chardin (1643-1713) who believed that the people of the Republic of Georgia, situated in the Caucasus Mountains, were the most physically beautiful people in the world. Blumenbach argued that Caucasians, or people of European descent, represented the epitome of God’s human creation (Cameron & Wycoff, 1998). He claimed that throughout the ages, changes appeared that he referred to as degenerations from his assumed original Caucasians. The more populations departed from the original Caucasians, the more these populations were “degenerate.” Blumenbach crafted his own human hierarchy: Caucasian (original humans),

Mongolian (East Asia), Ethiopian (African), American (indigenous peoples from the Americas), Malay (Melanesians, South Pacific islanders) (Brace, 2005). Referring to the racialization of Jews, Blumenbach stated:

It is generally known that the Jewish race has been spread for many centuries over all the earth; it has nevertheless maintained its racial traits pure and even typical. This remarkable fact has long been receiving the attention of scientists and physiologists. (Blumenbach, n.d., Retrieved 2/4/12, cited in Fishberg, 1911/2006, p. 9)

Even Charles Darwin, “father of evolution,” contributed to notions of race in his work. In his pioneering book *On the Origin of Species* published in 1859, he posited an evolutionary theory of plant and animal development. Within his larger theory, he held that the physical, mental, and moral characteristics of the human species had evolved gradually over large expanses of time from our ape-like ancestors. Darwin developed the notion of “biological determinism,” positing essentialist or biological bases for human behavior. In addition, Darwin asserted that Jews manifest a “uniform appearance” independent of their geographic locale (Darwin, 1859).

Although Darwin himself did not assert this, some of Darwin’s successors (those of whom were referred to as “Social Darwinists”) hypothesized that Jews were no longer simply a separate religious, ethnic, or political group. Rather, they extended the idea that, like black Africans and other groups (including homosexuals), Jews were throwbacks to earlier stages of religious and human development. They forwarded a so-called “racial” hierarchy placing “Aryans” on the top, black Africans at the lower end, and other “races,” including Jews, at various points in between.

In Europe, by the late 19<sup>th</sup> century CE, Judaism had come to be viewed by the scientific community as a distinct “racial” type with essential immutable biological characteristics – a trend that increased markedly into the early 20<sup>th</sup> century CE. Jews were increasingly interpolated as members of a “mixed race” (a so-called “mongrel” or “bastard race”), a people who had crossed racial barriers by interbreeding with black Africans during the Jewish Diaspora. Many thought that if Jews were evil, then this evilness was genetic and could not be purged or cured. Therefore, converting Jews to Christianity, as once believed by many Christian leaders, could no longer be a solution to “the Jewish question.”

In 1853, the French diplomat and essayist Joseph-Arthur de Gobineau (1816-1882) published his theories of a supposed “Aryan” race. He referred to “an original tribe” who resided

in the Himalayas, asserting this location was the cradle of the Caucasian race. Jews, he stressed, were not members of that tribe. According to de Gobineau: “[T]he...French, German, and Polish Jews – they all look alike. I have had the opportunity of examining closely one of the last kind. His features and profile clearly betrayed his origin. His eyes especially were unforgettable” (de Gobineau, 1853/1967, p. 122, cited in Gilman, 1991, p. 69). Similarly, another French writer, Ernest Renan (1882/1996), stated that the Jewish or “Semitic” mind is superficial, while that of the “Aryan” is natural and wise. Later these theories would be expanded to represent Jews as a subhuman species and as a symptom of racial impurity and decay.

The British psychologist, Francis Galton – a cousin of Charles Darwin – founded the Eugenics Movement. In fact, Galton coined the term “eugenics” in 1883 from the Greek word meaning “well born.” Eugenicians attempted to improve qualities of “race” by controlling human breeding. In his books, Galton (1869; 1883) argued that genetic predisposition determined human behavior. He claimed that the purpose of eugenics was to promote “judicious mating in order to give the more suitable races or strains of blood a better chance of prevailing speedily over the less suitable” (Galton, 1883, p. 25).

Galton proposed that the so-called “elites” of the British Isles were the most intelligent of all the peoples throughout the planet, while “[t]he average intellectual standard of the Negro race is some two grades below our own [Anglo-Saxons]. The Australian type is at least one grade below the African Negro” (1883, p. 25). He also felt that “[t]he Jews are specialized for a parasitical existence upon other nations” (Galton, 1904, cited in Pearson, 1911/2011, p. 209). Galton asserted that Jews comprised a lower racial form, and that they could be easily recognizable by their physiognomy. He particularly talked about a supposed cold and calculating “Jewish gaze”:

Who has not heard people characterize such and such a man or woman they see in the streets as Jewish without in the least knowing anything about them? The street Arab who calls out “Jew” as some child hurries on to school is unconsciously giving the best and most disinterested proof that there is a reality in the Jewish expression. (Galton, 1904, cited in Salaman, 1912, p. 190)

Galton’s work heavily impacted the development of mandatory sterilization laws on people considered “less suitable” (the so-called “feebleminded,” those “prone to criminality,” and the “mentally insane”) in the U.S. and Germany.

Some, including anthropologist Richard Andree, viewed the way Jews spoke as proof of their racial otherness: “The so-called Jewish accent (*mauschein*) is a Jewish race trait, as

ineradicable in them as the Jewish type itself . . . This is very decidedly a race trait, since it is found among the Jews of all countries” (Andree, 1881, cited in Fishberg, 1911/2006, p. 77). Andree even warned of the existence of “the eternal Hebrew”:

No other race but the Jews can be traced with such certainty backward for thousands of years, and no other race displays such a constancy of form, none resisted to such an extent the effects of time, as the Jews. Even when he adopts the language, dress, habits, and customs of the people among whom he lives, he still remains everywhere the same. All he adopts is but a cloak, under which the eternal Hebrew survives; he is the same in his facial features, in the structure of his body, his temperament, his character. (Andree, 1881, pp. 24-25, cited in Gilman, 1993, p. 26)

This supposed “racialization” of the Jews was codified in the U.S.-American writer’s, Madison Grant (1865-1937), influential book, *The Passing of the Great Race* (1916), in which he argued that Europeans comprised four distinct races. Atop Grant’s racial hierarchy were the “Nordics” of northwestern Europe, whom he considered natural rulers and administrators who accounted for England’s “extraordinary ability to govern justly and firmly the lower races” (Grant, 1916, p. 207). The Nordics were what the Nazi regime termed the “Master Race,” a branch of which was the “Aryan race.” The Aryan race was the ideal, “pure,” and “original” racial stock and was called “Proto-Aryans” during the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (Widney, 1907). After the Nordics, next down the racial line fell the “Alpines,” whom Grant referred to as “always and everywhere a race of peasants” with a tendency toward “democracy” although submissive to authority (p. 227). These were followed by the “Mediterraneans” of Southern and Eastern Europe, inferior to both the Nordics and the Alpines in “bodily stamina” but superior in “the field of art.” Also, Grant considered the Mediterraneans as superior to the Alpines in “intellectual attainments,” but far behind the Nordics “in literature and in scientific research and discovery” (p. 229). On the bottom of this hierarchy, he placed the most inferior of all the European so-called races: the Jews. Referring specifically to the Polish Jew, Grant asserted that “...the Polish Jews, whose dwarf stature, peculiar mentality and ruthless concentration on self-interest...” (p. 16), present themselves in “swarms” (p. 63).

Analogous to the notion in the United States that “one drop” of “Black African” blood makes a person Black, according to Grant (1916):

The result of the mixture of two races, in the long run, gives us a race reverting to the more ancient generalization and lower type. The cross between a white man and an Indian is an Indian, the cross between a white man and a Negro is a Negro, the cross between a white man and a Hindu is a Hindu, and the cross between any of the three European races and a Jew is a Jew (p. 18).

Then former President Teddy Roosevelt said that Grant's book "...is the work of an American scholar and gentleman; and all Americans should be sincerely grateful to you for writing it" (Roosevelt, 1917, p. 33c). Grant's book was translated into German and provided added justification to Adolph Hitler in the writing of *Mein Kampf* (Brace, 2005). Hitler even wrote to Grant and referred to Grant's book as his "Bible" (Kühl, 1994, p. 85).

### **Immigration and "Race"**

Madison Grant's work had a further chilling effect on the climate surrounding Jews, impacting immigration legislation of 1924 in the United States. The Johnson-Reed Immigration Act (a.k.a. "National Origins Quota Act" or "National Quota Act"), in addition to previous statutes (e.g. 1882 statute against the Chinese, 1908 statute against the Japanese), restricted immigration from Eastern Europe and further limited immigration from Africa and Asia. The act also specifically curbed immigration of the so-called "Hebrew race." On the other hand, the act permitted large numbers of immigrants from England, Ireland, and Germany.

At the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century CE, Russia partitioned Poland, a territory with hundreds of thousands of Jews in residence. Jews were often forced to convert to Christianity, and young Jewish males were taken from their families for compulsory military service for a term of twenty-five years. Meanwhile, in Russia and its territories, in 1881 and subsequent years, *pogroms* (violent government-condoned attacks) terrorized and killed a number of Jews. In 1891, all Jews were expelled from Moscow. Many of the survivors of the repressive measures fled Russia between 1880 and 1920. Some immigrated to Palestine, while others went to Western Europe or to the United States. One-third of Eastern European Jews (about two million people) immigrated to the United States, where many ended up in the lower East Side of New York City. Countless individuals lived in incredible poverty. Many of the U.S. residents at the time saw them as the "scum of Europe" and as dirty, atheistic Communists.

Most – approximately 65 percent – of those Jewish workers who emigrated between the years 1880 and 1920 were classified as "skilled," a much higher proportion than other groups of immigrants during that time. Jews and other newly-arriving European "ethnic" groups were, in

Brodkin's (1998) terms, "temporarily darkened" (i.e. their ethnoracial assignment was that of "non-White"), and as a result, Jews were effectively frozen out of many of the craft industries, particularly the building trades. However, Jews were able to enter the garment industry in large numbers due to its expansion and need for workers. They would also eventually enter, and for a time dominate, the newly-developing motion picture industry, where a handful of Eastern European Jewish refugees fleeing their pogrom-ridden homelands transformed a technology once considered to be a novelty and curiosity at best into the world's most powerfully influential form of mass media.

The mass migration of Jews and other groups from around the world resulted in an enormous influx of diverse populations into the United States. These newly arriving immigrants brought with them an exciting and creative energy that had the potential of reinvigorating the country. Yet, many U.S. residents regarded this period of immigration as a period of "racial" instability and volatility. Thus, during the 1920s, a series of Jim Crow segregation laws were passed and rigidly enforced because, as Lewis and Ardizzone (2001) contend, "Racially ambiguous Americans complicated and potentially threatened the logic of Jim Crow and the definition of race that underlay it" (p. 109).

The National Origins Act of 1924 established quota percentages based on the census population in 1890. The number of immigrants to be admitted annually was limited to 2 percent of the foreign-born individuals of each nationality living in the U.S. in 1890. The act extended immigration rights almost exclusively to northwestern Europeans to "protect our values . . . [as] a Western Christian civilization" (Feagin, 1997, p. 35). The act functioned to prevent Catholics, Jews, and other non-Protestant groups from settling in the United States. According to Jewish historian Sander Gilman (1991), Jews were not considered as White during this period of U.S. history, but rather they were often seen as being Asian or "Mongoloid" and were considered primitive and tribal. Gilman found that Jews were interpolated as the "white Negroes" by prevailing dominant discourses in European society, where "[i]n the eyes of the non-Jew who defined them in Western [European] society the Jews became the blacks" (Gilman, 1991, cited in Thandeka, 1999, p. 37). Thandeka (1999) added that "the male Jew and the male African were conceived of as equivalent threats to the white race" (p. 37). Thus, the 1924 immigration act was enacted to limit immigration of "undesirables," and specifically, further limit a potential influx of an "Asiatic element" seemingly embodied by Jews.

Although, in actuality, Jews are members of every so-called "race," the supposed "racial" characteristics of Jews were thought to be evident in their physiognomy. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century CE, the popular image of the "Jewish type," portrayed invariably as the Jewish male,

“consisted of a hooked nose, curling nasal folds (*ali nasi*), thick prominent lips, receding forehead and chin, large ears, curly black hair, dark skin, stooped shoulders, [weak flat feet, deflated rump,] and piercing, cunning eyes” (Isaac, 1940, cited in Gilman, 1993, p. 18). In addition, the gaze of the Jew was said to be pathological, searing, cunning, cold, and piercing (Gilman, 1991). Meanwhile, phrenologist practitioners of the Eugenics Movement, who attempted to correlate skull size and shape with mental abilities and character, held that a specific section of the “Jewish” or “Hebrew” brain was “abnormally” developed, causing Jews to be highly interested in money (Gilman, 1991).

### **Abject Bodies**

In many Western societies, bodies of non-European heritage are regarded as abject bodies – bodies that, to use Judith Butler’s (1993) phraseology, do not matter, or, at least, do not matter as much as “White” bodies. Butler reminds us that the term “abjection” is taken from the Latin, *ab-jicere*, meaning to cast off, away, or out. On a social level, abjection designates a degraded, stigmatized, or cast out status. In psychoanalytic parlance, this is the notion of *Verwerfung* (foreclosure). Among materially abject bodies are racially marked bodies, homosexual bodies, bodies with disabilities, and others.

Butler (1990) states that “we regularly punish those who fail to do their gender right” (p. 140), and similarly punish those who fail to do their “race” right. *Doing* one’s “race” right often depends on *doing* one’s socioeconomic class right. The regulatory regimes of “race” and class are inimically connected, and these connections are discursively maintained.

As we know, the Nazis used contrived “racial” arguments as a philosophical cornerstone for justification of their persecutions of Jews, most people of color, and people with disabilities, all of whom they considered descendants from inferior “racial stands.” Nazi leaders whipped up public sentiments against the Jews, whom they referred to as Germany’s “internal enemies” who were responsible for Germany’s defeat in World War I. The Nazi campaign of so-called moral, racial, and sexual purity led to an intense and violent campaign against Jews and other groups, including homosexuals, physicians who performed abortions, women’s rights activists, sexuality educators, Communists, Socialists, and others.

Nazi leadership argued vehemently that Jews polluted the “Aryan race.” They forced Jews to wear the yellow Star of David as a signifying marker, since to the Nazis, yellow represented “race pollution.” Hitler himself disputed the claim that Judaism was simply a religion, but condemned “...this first and greatest lie, that the Jews are not a race but a religion.

The Jew has always been a people with a definite racial characteristic and never a religion” (Hitler, 1943, pp. 306-307).

This sentiment extended far beyond the borders of the Third Reich. For example, in 1939, the United States Congress refused to pass the Wagner-Rogers Bill, which, if enacted, would have permitted entry to the United States of 20,000 children from Eastern Europe over existing quotas. Laura Delano Houghteling, cousin of Franklin Delano Roosevelt and wife of the U.S. Commissioner of Immigration, sternly warned, “20,000 charming children would all too soon, grow into 20,000 ugly adults” (Houghteling, cited in Kraut, 1995, p. 256, as well as in “America and the Holocaust” for “The American Experience,” WNYC-TV, April 7, 1994.).

The Nazis murdered an estimated six million Jews, equaling two-thirds of European Jewry and one-third of the entire global Jewish population. According to Brodtkin (1998), the changes in Jewish ethnoracial assignments over the past one hundred years in the United States have certainly affected the ways in which Jews of different generations growing up in different eras construct their ethnoracial identities. Brodtkin asserts, “Those changes give us a kind of double vision that comes from racial middleness: of an experience of marginality *vis-à-vis* whiteness, and an experience of whiteness and belonging *vis-à-vis* blackness” (pp. 1-2).

Once constructed as the “Other” in European society, Jews and “Jewishness” – while certainly not fully embraced by the ruling elite as “one of their own” – became a sort of “middle” status, “standing somewhere between the dominant position of the White majority and the marginal position of People of Color” (Biale, Galchinsky, & Heschel, 1998, p. 5). And this change in Jewish ethnoracial construction has occurred only within the last 60 or so years. For Adams and Bracey (2000), Jews may constitute “a race-bending ‘white’ category of people who are still considered by some to be ‘not quite white’” (p. B10), or as I call it, “off-white” (Blumenfeld, 2010). Jews in many nations of the world can be considered “bicultural” due to their past vantage points existing simultaneously from the margins as well as toward the center.

Lewis Browne, a Jewish author, published an essay in the January 29 issue of American Magazine in 1929, responding to his Gentile friend’s question concerning the appearance of Jewish peculiarity, strangeness, and difference – not simply difference from White Gentiles, but the incredible variability between Jews within the American Jewish community. Asking “Why are Jews like that?,” his friend clarified that “I wasn’t thinking of their language or their beards. Those things, I realize, are superficial” (p. 7). In addition, he was not referring to their manners, but rather, what baffled his friend was “their manner.” His friend wrote,

There was queer light in their eyes, and a sort of tenseness in their bodies; that was what made me put my question to you. For you, too, show those characteristics to a degree . . . You are all somehow different from the rest of us. And I'd like to know why. (Browne, 1929, p. 7-8)

Possibly, if this does exist, it is because Jews as a community carry with them an "oppression mentality," an "enemy memory" (Steele, 1990, cited in Berman, 1994), or a "siege mentality" (Hertzberg, 1979, cited in Feagin and Feagin, 1993, p. 167). This is their intense awareness that anti-Jewish oppression can surface again at any time, regardless of how "good" conditions for Jews appear at any given historical moment. As Fein (1988) writes,

What is the first lesson a Jew learns? That people want to kill Jews . . . To be a Jew in America, or anywhere, today is to carry with you the consciousness of limitless savagery. It is to carry that consciousness with you not as an abstraction, but as a reality; not, G\*d help us all, only as memory, but also as possibility. (pp. 59-60)

As African American identity is interpolated as immutable, Jewish identity, on the other hand, is often seen for its mutability – its Chameleon-like properties. Jewish identity not only confounds the racial binary frame, but also confuses the outside/inside binary as well. In terms of the parodic of passing:

If African Americans passing for white ultimately demonstrated that black identity was an interiorized, immutable entity, present no matter how light one's skin, i.e. it is the possibility of passing that will locate race "deep down inside," the status of the Jewish interior was far less certain and solid. (Itzkovitz, 1999, p. 48, fn. 28)

Anxieties over Jewish performativity result from fears of Jews as being shape-shifters with strange chameleonic "Jewish blood," which, according to Itzkovitz (1999), implied "both the fluid instability of Jewish identity and the embodied stability of Jewish racial distinctiveness" (p. 42). Jewish social and identity fluidity – this apparent slipperiness and elusiveness of supposed Jewish difference – raised anxiety and fear in the public mind that behind the Jewish performance, no actual difference existed. According to Itzkovitz (1999),

The secrets imagined behind the eyes of the Jew . . . that so-called Jewish inscrutability informed catalyzed notions of hidden Jewish sexual and economic practice in turn

helped to define (and trouble) the boundaries of normative white, American heterosexual masculinity. (p. 60)

He also states,

Jews were both white and racially other, American and foreign, deviant and normative, vulgar and highly cultivated, and seemed to have an uncomfortably unstable relation to gendered difference – all of which made them seem at once inside and inescapably outside the normative white American culture. (p. 41)

### **The Mahlers of Antwerp and “Race Passing”**

Hitler’s goal was to maintain a pure so-called Nordic or Aryan race, and thereby make Germany the preeminent power in the world. Aryans were told that it was their duty to fulfill their proper roles for the “new Germany.” Aryan women were expected to breed blond-haired, blue-eyed children for the “Reich.” For them, abortion and birth control were forbidden. On the other hand, the Reich encouraged non-Aryan women to abort rather than produce “inferior” and polluted children. The Nazi campaign of moral, racial, and sexual purity led to an intense and violent campaign against Jews and other groups. Eventually, the Nazis rounded up millions of Jews and forced them to leave their homes and live in segregated, walled ghettos – the largest being in Warsaw, Poland. They were later transported to Nazi concentration camps where prisoners suffered unspeakable horrors.

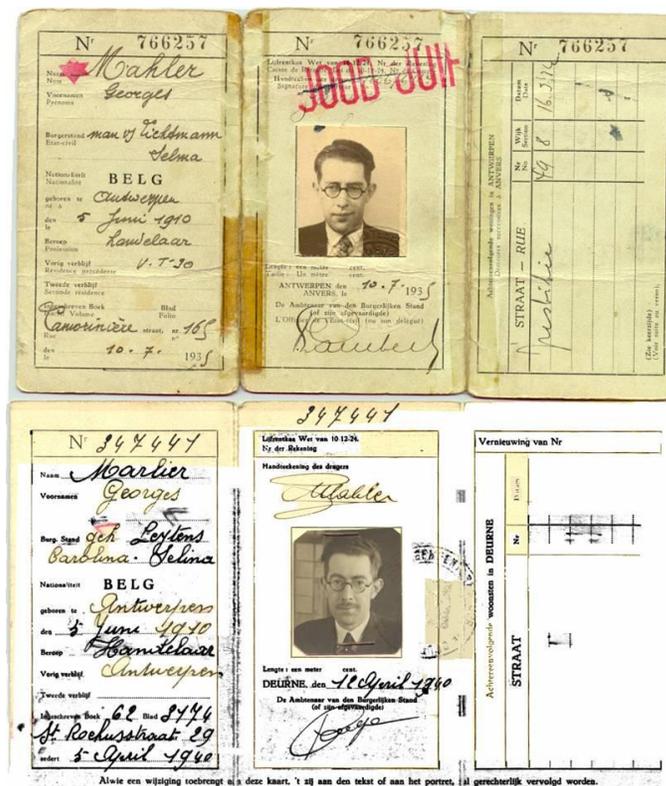


Lilian and Armand Bushel (Georges Mahler’s sister’s children) wearing yellow stars and walking in the Antwerp ghetto during the Nazi occupation. Nazis eventually transported their family to the Auschwitz concentration camp, where they murdered them.

Beginning in 1941, the Germans instituted and enforced the first of a series of anti-Jewish laws in Belgium. Jews had to register in each town with local officials. They were forbidden to own businesses or practice in the professions. Beginning at the age of six, all Jews

were compelled to affix to their outer clothing a yellow Star of David with the word “Juiif” (Jew) that was easily recognizable at a distance. They were routinely forced into labor camps. Some were eventually released; others were not.

In 1942, the Nazi officials ordered my cousin, Georges Mahler, to report to forced labor with a contingent of approximately 100 others. “Thanks to the intervention of Mr. Langerman, an enigmatic figure who seemed to have connections with the *Sicherheitspolizei* in Antwerp, Papa was released at the last moment.<sup>2</sup>” Charles’s grandfathers – Jacques Mahler and Zallel Lichtman – were on opposing sides of the question of whether or not the family should go into hiding. Grandpa Mahler argued against leaving. He took Hitler at his word when he promised Queen Elizabeth of Belgium that he would not deport Belgian Jews. Grandpa Lichtman, though, felt adamant in his conviction that they all must abandon Antwerp for the countryside.



Georges Mahler’s different forms of identification – (top) paperwork identifying him as a Jew (*Jood-Juif*) and in an attempt to pass, his Gentile identity as Georges Marlier (bottom).

Georges and Selma, in their desperate attempts to escape the unspeakable horrors they anticipated at the hands of an invading force, had gone to extraordinary measures to change their identities to “pass” undetected. They contacted a trusted official from the Antwerp suburb of Deurne and paid him 10,000 Belgium francs for new identity cards. The new cards bore the

<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise referenced, direct quotes in this section are drawn from Charles Mahler’s untitled and unpublished memoirs reflecting his experiences during the Nazi occupation of Belgium.

names “Georges Marlier” and “Céline Leytons Marlier,” with their residence on 29 St. Rochusstraat in Deurne, to replace their current cards with the large red “*Jood - Juiif*” stamp emboldened on the surface. Georges and Selma very carefully explained to Charles that for a while, his name would now be “Karel Marlier,” and that they were no longer Jewish, but were now Christians.

Butler (1993) discusses a hegemonic cultural discourse that sets a binary framework of gender and a binary framework of “race” – “White”/“Persons of Color” – that is constituted within a white-supremacist system. This racial binary frame not only demarcates “Whites” from “People of Color,” but in effect differentiates Whites as fully human from those who are less evolved or less-than-human. In this regard, the concept of “race passing” – attempting to be perceived by others as a “race” outside of one’s “assigned race” (in most instances, “passing” as “White”) – is to pass as fully human. Butler argues that there is no “race” or “racial” crossings outside of power.

In their attempts to “pass” as Whites in a white-supremacist society, Georges and Selma had to make the most important and most difficult decision of their lives. Like many other Jewish parents during this time, they had to decide whether to take their children into hiding with them, or whether their children would have a better chance of survival if they could give them over to a Gentile family for safe keeping for the duration of the occupation. Georges and Selma eventually decided on the latter. The Mahler’s sympathetic Christian neighbor, Marie Laener-Van Rillaer, proposed to hide the children in the home of her sister, Clémentine, in the village of Begijnendijk:

Mama had taken Nanette [age two] and me to Begijnendijk . . . Suddenly I understood . . . that I also was going to have to stay there, alone with strangers. And of course, that was out of the question. I hung on to my mother who held my arms, while Marie grabbed my legs, and I fought with all my power. I screamed. I shouted. I went back to Antwerp with my mother.

Georges, Selma, and the Lichtman’s – Grandpa and Grandma Lichtman along with their son Isi – were determined to leave at the next possible opportunity. On August 24, 1942, Georges and Selma carefully detached the yellow star patch from their overcoats. They took their son Charles (“Karel”), who would turn six years old in only two weeks, for what may have appeared to the unsuspecting casual observer as a family outing. This day, however, was unlike any day this family had experienced. Under the watchful gaze of armed German soldiers at the central Antwerp rail station, they traveled to the outskirts of Begijnendijk to a small isolated

farmhouse belonging to Marie Laener-Van Rillaer's friends, farmers Jef and Marie Steurs, and their large family. Thirty minutes later, Selma's parents and brother Isi left Antwerp to find refuge a few kilometers away in Boorschot helped by Jaak Van Der Bergh, a sympathetic shopkeeper from Kloosterstraat in Antwerp. The Steurs, Van Der Bergh, and others like them took enormous risks in assisting and sheltering Jews, risks that would have resulted in incarceration, deportation to concentration camps, and possibly death if they were discovered by the Germany military.

Charles wrote about the Steurs's farmhouse:

The closest neighbor was situated about 800 meters away. Behind the house stretched the swamp, the *Putten*. The only way to get there was on a single sandy path that ended at the fenced-in yard. Strangers coming were visible from a distance, which reduced the risk of surprise from unexpected visits.

The farmhouse was relatively large with a second story attic, which one entered through a trap door in the ceiling. The Mahlers lived in a 3-meter by 4-meter room with a view of the rear courtyard and marsh. Over the window, they carefully placed a blue sheet to avoid detection from the outside. Georges and Selma shut themselves away in their room. Yet, on occasion, Selma would risk detection by placing a scarf over her head to travel incognito to visit Nanette. Charles was permitted to go out of doors to play with the Steurs's children.

Marie and Jef had fifteen children with ten surviving. Charles soon became friends with Paula, the youngest child. Charles recalled,

In the bustle of such a big family, the presence of yet another boy was hardly noticeable, and for this reason, I was permitted to go out and play in the courtyard and the fields. I passed as the grandson of Stanne's [the Steurs's oldest son] godfather (which explained my strange accent – greatly different from the local dialect) who for reasons of health had been placed with the Steurs. The same explanation explained my presence to the village priest, who was surprised about not ever seeing me in school, or worse, at Sunday Mass.

As was the case with most Flemish people, the Steurs were devout Catholics, who instructed young Charles on Catholic rituals and hymns to avoid detection:

. . . [E]ating with [the Steurs], I quickly learned the usual Catholic prayers. I recited the 'Ave,' the 'Pater,' and other '*Wees gegroet*' as if I had never done anything else, and on Ash Wednesday, I wore a small cross on my forehead.

Each week, the village priest visited the farmhouse as part of his parish rounds. On one occasion, he was curious as to why Charles's health seemed not to have improved, asked whether he was contagious, and why he remained at the Steurs's residence. Marie at this point confided that Charles was actually a Jewish boy whom she was sheltering along with his parents, Georges and Selma. The priest praised her for her courage and immediately walked upstairs to meet Charles's parents. While expressing his sincerest sympathies for their plight and that of other Jews in Europe, according to Charles:

. . . [the priest] can't help but ask them if recent events hadn't made them consider converting [to Catholicism] in order to save their souls. Papa replies to him straight out that he has no wish to discuss the subject, and the priest doesn't insist.

In discussing the topic of "race passing," I would like to make a distinction between, on one hand, "passing" by endeavoring to avoid detection and bypass injustice, stigma, harassment, discriminatory actions, or death, while still desiring to maintain some degree of interior identification with the "non-passing" self; and on the other hand, the transitional location of passing in an effort to become the other by relinquishing the past self, the past identification. The Mahlers and Lichtmans fell into the former category. My cousins, in attempting to reinvent themselves and "pass," were interested only in glossing over the exterior façade of surface matter with a Gentile performance, while maintaining a previously formulated interiorized space. Such exterior enactments, however, did not come easily. Georges, for example, without thought, signed his actual name "Georges Mahler," rather than his assumed name on his new identity papers. As Charles later wrote: "Luckily he was never obliged to show it."

Throughout the Mahler's stay at the Steurs's farmhouse, the village priest came around quite often bringing news updates on the progression of the war as well as reading materials and school books, which Georges used to continue Charles's education while he was no longer attending school. The priest, however, had not given up on "saving" the Mahlers' souls:

For Christmas, he offered my parents a carefully wrapped book. They could only open it after he left, and they will talk about it the next time he comes around. The book is *Ben Hur* by the writer Lewis Aires, and it tells about the conversion of a young Jew during the

time of Jesus. When the priest returns, they chitchat about various and sundry things, but there was not a single word about *Ben Hur!*

Possibly to this priest, Jewish souls could be saved through Christian conversion, but as we know, for the Nazis, the only solution to the “Jewish problem” was the annihilation of the entire Jewish people. To them, Jews were evil, and this evilness was *genetic* and could not be purged or cured. Jews converting to Christianity as believed by many Christian leaders – from Paul, to Thomas Aquinas, to Martin Luther, and into the current era – therefore, could no longer be a solution for the Nazis to “the Jewish question.”

Linda Schlossberg (2001), coeditor of a book on identity passing, reminds us that we commonly denote terms of sight to signify concepts related to understanding, knowledge, and truth. We tend to use what could be considered ableist terms such as “to have vision” or “to be a visionary,” “to be perceptive,” “insightful,” “to have clear vision,” and “to have 20/20 vision or hindsight.” Alternatively, we also use such terminology as “to be shortsighted,” “myopic,” “to have no vision,” “to be blind” or “blind to the truth,” and so on. Schlossberg (2001) asserts that in Western societies, identity is primarily “structured around a logic of visibility” (p. 1). In this regard, on the issue of “passing,” she writes, “Because of this seemingly intimate relationship between the visual and the known, passing becomes a highly charged site for anxieties regarding visibility, invisibility, classification, and social demarcation” (p. 1).

This was certainly the case for Georges and Selma, especially when they heard that their daughter, Nanette, was sick, suffering from a case of impetigo. Stanne Steurs and Selma rode a tandem bicycle to pick up Nanette from her hiding place and transported her to a doctor. Georges and Selma decided that they would take the risk of having Nanette stay with them at the *Putten* until she was well on the mend.

Around this time, the Germans passed measures to requisition livestock from local farms to feed German occupational forces. To get around this order and to retain the meat for themselves, groups of farmers on occasion brought some of their animals to slaughter at the Steurs’s barn, since their barn had one of the only concrete slab floors in the area, while most others had wooden or sod floors. The importance of slab floors is that after slaughter, the floors could be washed of most telltale signs of the slaughtering process, whereas wooden and sod floors absorb and visibly display animal fluids during the slaughtering process. During one of these clandestine events, things went terribly wrong. As Charles described, at approximately 10:00 in the morning, a group of gendarmes stormed the farmhouse:

There are cries, slamming doors, a gun shoots. Most of the peasants manage to escape through the marsh. The butcher, however, has fled to the attic and placed big sacks of flour over the trap door to prevent it being opened. White as a sheet, one of the Steurs's daughters, Margriet, runs into our room and announces that they have been betrayed. Meanwhile, the gendarmes threaten the man who took refuge above to come down or else be shot. He gives himself up. A few minutes later, Margriet comes back, accompanied by a gendarme who looks at us without speaking, and then leaves, taking the girl with him.

The Mahlers expected to be immediately arrested. The gendarmes, however, abandoned the farmhouse around noon, taking with them only the slaughtered animals and a number of the escaped peasants' bicycles. As it turned out, the gendarme who discovered Georges, Selma, Charles, and Nanette was a member of the Belgium resistance movement. The Mahlers eventually learned of his fate:

At the beginning of 1944, he, along with a police officer from Aarschot and a photographer from the same town, were executed by the Germans. It is clear that from the very first glance, this brave man, to whom we owe our lives, had understood our situation but had not revealed it to anyone.

Though not in terms of "race," this gendarme, in another form, was also attempting to "pass" by taking on the persona, the mask, the guise, the exterior surface of a Belgian police officer in league with Nazi invaders. The Steurs family, most certainly, as well as all the "righteous Gentiles" sheltering Jews and other so-called "contagions" – the Nazi term for "race" polluters – were all attempting to pass undetected in a dangerous and tumultuous sea. Most took on this guise knowing full well that any misstep, wrong turn, telltale word or action could send them crashing into the rocks.

For Butler (1993), the performativity of passing has the potential of counteracting the logic of visible markers, of removing corporeality, the phenotypically visible, and essentialist interpolations of "race." As demonstrated by the Mahlers and others, "race passing" has a subversive potential by calling into question the efficacy of the binary frame by exciting racial anxieties concerning the very stability of "Whiteness" and the indefinite boundaries separating "White" from "Black," and of separating "White" from "Persons of Color."

The gendarmes returned to the Steurs's farmhouse every two weeks looking for infractions of the livestock requisition orders. Also, Germans were arresting more able-bodied

Belgium men to be sent to forced labor camps in Germany, and "...Papa felt that it would be too stupid to be discovered as the only man in a house that had already drawn enough attention from the authorities." Georges resolved that it would be safer for the family if he sought shelter elsewhere. With the help of resistance forces, he was offered shelter at the farm of a neighbor whom the resistance was certain was not on the list of those to be taken by the Germans for relocation. Events, however, did not go as planned:

On a cold and rainy May day, German soldiers descended upon that farm and surprised the farmer and a few of the sons of other peasants who had also chosen to hide out there. The men who had been taken by surprise ran through the fields, followed by the soldiers who were firing at them. Papa, buried deeply under bales of straw and hay, hadn't the least idea of what was happening. A soldier climbed into the barn and stuck his bayonet deep into the hay, but fortunately without touching Papa.

Following a number of other incredible confrontations and escapes, the Mahlers determined that they needed to find a safer hideout. Selma brought Nanette back to Clémentine's farmhouse. In the neighboring village of Ramsel, the Wijnants – husband, wife, and three children, distant relatives of the Steurs – agreed to shelter Georges, Selma, and Charles. Charles recalled,

A shaky cart pulled by a draught horse brought us and our meager possessions, in total darkness, to our new residence. I remember the smell of manure on the tarp that covered us during that second trip. The farm was very small. It was so low to the ground that in summer when the wheat was high, you could barely see it. No electricity, no running water, no heat . . . Our minuscule bedroom offered just enough room for a double bed and a small single bed.



The Wijnant Farmhouse – the second farmhouse where the Mahler family was hidden by Belgium resistance members during the Nazi occupation of the Belgium countryside.

The days at the Wijnants passed slowly. Georges continued to tutor Charles, and he also took pleasure in taking small colored pencils and reproducing illustrations of famous “Liebig chromos” paintings. (In the summer of 2002, I saw these beautiful reproductions displayed proudly in their frames at Selma’s apartment in Antwerp.) Selma spent the long hours finding housework chores to perform at the farm. Charles had the opportunity to play with Roger, the Wijnant’s son, and his friends:

In the summer, the boys would bathe nude in the streams. This was prohibited to me because then they could have seen that my circumcised penis was different from the others. The pretense we invoked was a deathly fear of water that relieved me from having to swim or bathe in public. Another diversion, typical of boys our age, was the competitions to see who could pee the farthest. There also my revealing difference kept me from participating.

While staying at the Wijnant’s, the local grocer, Jaak, told the Mahlers that Georges’s parents, Jacques and Anja, along with his sister, Ella, and her two children, had been arrested and transferred to Malines. From that initial point of learning about the arrest, up to the present time, and after years of attempts to gather information regarding their whereabouts, no trace of them has been found. Charles and his parents had good reason to conclude that the Nazis murdered them at an undisclosed location.

Pressure also mounted for Charles and his parents. A neighbor of the Wijnant’s told Louis Wijnant that the local people knew that he was sheltering Jews, and “that he did not hold a grudge against him, but that one wrong word could cause them some problems.” Upon hearing this news, the Mahlers were understandably upset and concerned that their presence would come to the attention of the Germans. They decided, therefore, to relocate to another hiding place.

Louis Wijnant traveled on bicycle to retrieve Nanette from Clémentine’s farmhouse. Stanne Vermunicht, the grocer in a suburb of Aarschot and a member of the resistance, provided the Mahlers a new shelter located near his own house. Called the Zonneke villa, the house was located on an isolated acre and a half piece of land. Jef Filé, a factory worker, and a woman named Marie, who had left her husband for Jef, were living at the villa at the time.

Selma’s parents, the Lichtmans, and brother Isi were also compelled to change locations several times, and were now sheltered in the nearby village of Boosichot. Since the Zonneke villa had ample room, the three Lichtmans joined the Mahlers under one roof. Charles took on

the guise of Marie's young cousin, and his parents permitted him again to play with the local boys out of doors. On one occasion, he and Grandpa Lichtman had a close call with death:

Villa or not, the facilities [outhouse] was located outside the living quarters, and one had to walk through the courtyard to reach them. Early one afternoon, grandpa was using the facilities and I was playing near the trees, when I found myself nose to nose with a German soldier in camouflage, his face painted green and brown, his helmet covered with leaves, and holding his rifle. I had never seen such an outfit before, so I immediately inquired and discreetly went to warn my grandfather not to leave his not-too strategic position. To our great relief, the soldier, joined by a few comrades, was participating in an exercise and was not at all interested in our presence. In the time it took them to smoke a cigarette, they were gone.

Soon after the Mahlers and Lichtmans moved to the villa, the Germans announced that a new battalion of the "Das Reich" division would be arriving, and they ordered local residents to provide lodging for the soldiers. Charles stated that "this brigade 'distinguished' itself particularly in Russia, where it was responsible for purifying the area of Jews and Communists." Fortunately, the Zonneke was considered by the Germans as too remote and isolated to house members of the battalion.

Though grocer Stanne Vermunicht was forced to accept a soldier to live at his home, he continued his resistance activities. Fearing it too risky now for him to travel to see the Mahlers and Lichtmans at the villa, he invited Georges and Selma to come to his house on an evening when he was certain the German soldier staying in his home would be on guard duty for at least twelve hours. Though reluctant to accept the grocer's kind offer, they accepted the invitation. As night fell, Georges donned a cap and Selma covered her head and face with a scarf on their way to the Vermunicht home. Unfortunately for them, the German officer had forgotten that he was to be on duty that evening, and entered the house with Georges and Selma in full view:

He enters, and stands at attention and offers a vigorous 'Heil Hitler.' Stanne has no choice; so to avoid suspicion, he invites him to sit with them. He introduces my parents as friends from a neighboring village who had come to get provisions. The *Feldwebel* leans his machine gun against the wall and sits down. My parents, who speak German impeccably, pretend not to understand a word and the grocer translates freely both their questions and the *Boche's* answers. When Mama asks him how much longer the war will last . . . he replies that it will soon be over because the next June, Germany will

invade England (it was January 7, 1944). Then drawing a cross over his machine gun with his finger . . . he tells with pride and many details the number of Jews and Communists he killed. At the end of another hour of this almost surrealistic dialogue, my parents take . . . [to] the road back to the Zonneke . . . This unreal meeting of two fleeing Jews and a Nazi of the worst sort, drinking coffee together as the *Boche* told of the atrocities he and his men committed, could have been thought up by a Hollywood producer with an unbridled imagination.

Fortunate for all but the Germans, this soldier's visions of the future did not come to pass. On June 6 of that year, the Allies invaded the Normandy coast in France and swept onto the continent of Europe. By the beginning of September, the Germans began their retreat from Belgium, and on September 4, the first British troops entered the area. Charles recalled,

Like magic, Belgian flags appeared on balconies and in windows. A delirious crowd was hurrying along the street to applaud them and threw flowers at them. Nanette and I accompanied our parents in order to take part in the long-awaited moment. The soldiers on their tanks were laughing and making the famous "V" sign with their fingers. They were throwing us chewing gum and chocolate bars. Unknown luxury.

The Mahlers and Lichtmans surfaced from this sea of horror, and traveled back to Antwerp to rebuild their lives. Twenty-five year old Isi Lichtman joined the American army. Being fluent in four languages – French, Flemish, English, and German – he was given the position of military interpreter. At the end of the war, Isi served as a translator at the Nuremberg trials in 1947, and one year later, he too returned to Antwerp.

A little boy and six members of his family successfully navigated their U-boat through an expansive and treacherous sea. My cousins were not "outed." They did not experience a corporeal death. However, some loss comes with "passing" (Gates, 1989), where there is some form of psychic or spiritual death. For many survivors of the German Holocaust, those who "passed" as well as those captured and tortured in the camps retained their Jewish faith and identity. Others did not. During our conversation in Antwerp, Selma told me they no longer know whether God exists. And Nanette stated that her friend Livia, a survivor of the camps, asked her, "How can one believe anymore after what happened?"



Charles, Selma, & Nanette, Antwerp 2002

Charles eventually became a renowned physician *and* university professor in Antwerp. During our conversation together in the summer of 2002, Charles (then age 65) talked about the guilt that he and other survivors often feel, a guilt that has propelled them to achieve (or overachieve) to justify their escape and survival. He told me, “It was very funny to feel guilty that you were alive. I had that very strongly, and I wouldn’t know from where this bizarre kind of feelings [comes] . . .<sup>3</sup>”

The light that I saw shining in the eyes of my cousins Selma, Nanette, and Charles on that bright sunlit day as we sat together in Antwerp was the beaming light of pride in the next generation that they brought into this world, a pride they take in their children and their children’s children. It is the light of hope that their kin will contribute to a world in which the full meaning of “never again” becomes ultimately and completely realized.

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<sup>3</sup> Charles Mahler from transcripts of an interview by Warren J. Blumenfeld, Antwerp, Belgium, July 17, 2002.

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