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PRIMARY SOURCES

Uncovering History Through Ticket Stubs and Performance Contracts: Temple Israel's Men's Forum of the 1930s

by

Timothy Riggio Quevillon *

One never knows what archival gems they will find in a synagogue library. Found documents can tell the history of a community, a people, and a region in a way that public libraries and university archives cannot. Although numerous synagogues have donated materials to local or national archives, an equal number keep their records and refuse consolidation into larger collections. The archive at Temple Israel in Paducah, Kentucky, is extensive. While some records found their way to the American Jewish Archives in Cincinnati over the years, the vast majority of Paducah's community records remain in the temple library. In 2024, the Riverlands Jewish Archive, a digital archive operating out of Western Kentucky University in Bowling Green, began combing through these extensive temple holdings for the first time, digitizing and cataloguing everything the archivists found. The result was a digitized archival collection of more than ten thousand documents from 1885 through 2015.¹

One of the overlooked gems in this archive is an overstuffed manilla folder labeled "Men's Forum." Containing seventy-four items, the folder holds a wide variety of materials related to a speaker series that ran from 1926 to 1941, initially at the temple and then at Hotel Irvin Cobb. This relatively short-lived program brought speakers from around the world to

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¹ Although catalogued, the most recent ten years are largely withheld from online view. The Riverlands Jewish Archives online catalog can be found at <http://www.riverlandsjewisharchive.org> or <https://riverlandsjewisharchive.catalogaccess.com>. Temple Israel remains open and thriving, and can be reached at templeisraelky.org.

Paducah to present about world affairs on the eve of World War II. However, the archival footprint of the speaker series remains light. Only a handful of booking contracts and ticket stubs have survived to the twenty-first century.² The question then becomes: how does one discover the historical story of an event with so little remaining? The short answer is “more research.” The long answer involves extensive searching for context clues. Knowing the background of the community, the history of the 1930s, and the expertise of the speakers provides a glimpse into what was likely discussed at an event, even if we lack the lecture’s transcript. In other words, by understanding the context clues, we can ascertain the larger histories of an event, the organization fostering it, and the local community.

Jewish Life in Paducah

Paducah’s Jewish history is representative of other communities within the region and across the country. Amy Hill Shevitz identifies twenty-four small Jewish communities along the Ohio River at one time. These stretched as far north as Ambridge and Aliquippa in Pennsylvania and as far west as Cairo in Illinois. Hill draws a sharp distinction between the small river enclaves and the larger cities along the river like Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, and Louisville, which housed more established and extensive Jewish communities. She argues that focusing on the smaller river towns is critical to understanding the American Jewish experience, as they played a pivotal role in Jewish settlement and migration patterns. To her, the life of Jews in small-town America was distinct from life in the large ethnic centers of bigger cities. Given the relative sparseness of Jewish population in these predominantly Protestant communities, small-town Jews adapted and accommodated to American life in ways that were often quite different from their big-city counterparts. For example, she notes that relations with non-Jews were often markedly different for smaller communities because Jews “felt a greater need to present Judaism in terms that non-Jews could understand.”³

² “Men’s Forum Receipts from Hotel Irvin Cobb,” Temple Israel Men’s Forum, box 1, folder 3, Temple Israel (KY) Papers and Records, Riverlands Jewish Archive, Bowling Green, KY (hereafter cited as Temple Israel Papers).

³ Amy Hill Shevitz, *Jewish Communities on the Ohio River: A History* (Lexington, KY, 2007), 1–3.

In the broad scope, Jewish settlement in Paducah echoes larger regional trends. As the American South industrialized and rebuilt during the postbellum decades, new lines of transit increasingly connected inland communities of the hinterland to the large population centers of the coasts. Increased traffic in riverboats and railroads allowed Jews to migrate away from established centers to the smaller towns along the southern frontier. As a result, by 1881, Jews lived in an estimated 522 communities across the South.⁴ This expansion of transit fueled Paducah's growth as Jews farther upriver traveled down the Ohio to settle in the lower Ohio River Valley.⁵

Paducah's Jewish community traces its history to the 1840s, when the first Jewish business owners arrived. However, despite the presence of over twenty Jewish families in 1859, an organized Jewish community failed to form until after the Civil War. In the wake of expulsion by General Grant and their return following the cessation of the war, Paducah's Jews felt compelled to create more tangible benevolent institutions for Jews in western Kentucky. In 1864, they chartered a burial society and in 1868 held High Holiday services for the first time. They met for services for the next three years before amending the charter of the Chevra Yeshurun Burial Society to include a formal congregation. In September 1871, Kehillah Kodesh Bene Yeshurun (Holy Community of the People of Righteousness) opened on Chestnut Street in downtown. Notwithstanding initial debate over religious practice, mixed gendered seating, and head coverings, Paducah's Jews largely adhered to Reform practices and joined the Union of American Hebrew Congregations in 1880.⁶

The first seventy years of organized Jewish life witnessed immense population growth. By 1878, an estimated two hundred Jews lived in Paducah, and by 1937, the figure rose to six hundred, constituting about 1.7 percent of the city's overall population. The relatively robust size of Paducah's Jewish community led to the creation of numerous auxiliary groups attached to the temple. From the temple's conception, a strong

⁴ Shari Rabin, *The Jewish South: An American History* (Princeton, 2025), 127–29.

⁵ A large number of Paducah's earliest Jewish migrants arrived from urban centers in southern Ohio and western Pennsylvania like Cincinnati and Pittsburgh. Isaac W. Bernheim, *History of the Settlement of Jews in Paducah and the Lower Ohio Valley* (Paducah, KY, 1912).

⁶ Lee Shai Weissbach, "Stability and Mobility in the Small Jewish Community: Examples from Kentucky History," *American Jewish History* 79 (Spring 1990): 359.

*Temple Israel, Paducah, c. 1930s.
(Courtesy of the Riverlands Jewish
Archive, Western Kentucky Univer-
sity, Bowling Green.)*

sisterhood gathered regularly, providing an outlet for local Jewish women and assistance for the synagogue. Similarly, founded during the 1870s, the Harmony Lodge of B'nai B'rith served as the primary organization for local Jewish men.⁷

As the Jewish population grew, so too did its synagogue. By 1893, with almost one hundred member families, Kehillah Kodesh Bene Yeshurun outgrew its initial edifice and moved into a new, large Moorish-style synagogue at Seventh and Broadway in downtown. Upon moving, the temple adopted a new charter and rechristened itself as Temple Israel. The grandeur of the new edifice matched the community's affluence and place in society. By the 1930s, Rabbi Alexander Feinsilver led weekly services; a robust religious school taught dozens of children each week; and High Holiday services saw the temple packed beyond capacity.⁸

These Jews also engaged heavily in civic activism. For example, Joseph Friedman, a whiskey distiller, built and operated the Palmer

⁷ Ibid., 369–70.

⁸ Lee Shai Weissbach, *The Synagogues of Kentucky: Architecture and History* (Lexington, KY, 2011), 53–92

Hotel and Kentucky Theatre and served as president of the Paducah Commercial Club for several years. Friedman, one of the city's leading philanthropists, built a settlement house to help impoverished residents of the city during the Panic of 1893. Friedman's partners in his whiskey firm, the Keiler family, followed his lead in philanthropy and civic activism. In 1923, John Keiler donated five thousand dollars to build a stadium for Tilghman High School, subsequently named Keiler Field. In 1930, the family donated a large tract of land to the city for a park, also bearing the family name. After the Ohio River flooded over in 1937, local business leader Herbert Wallerstein worked tirelessly to get a floodwall built to keep the city from flooding again. Finally, Govriel Rosenthal, a dry goods seller, helped create Paducah Junior College in 1932 and served seventeen years on the board of trustees, ensuring access to higher education for many across western Kentucky. Looking back at the Jewish community's civic activism, a 1966 article in the *Paducah Sun-Democrat* stated, "their service has been of the utmost character and valour . . . [and Jews] have always been an integral part of the civic and industrial scene here."⁹

*Postcard of the Hotel Irvin Cobb in downtown Paducah.
(Courtesy of the Riverlands Jewish Archive, Western
Kentucky University, Bowling Green.)*

⁹ Ed Kimbrell, "Paducah Jewry: Small in Numbers, They Have Served with Distinction More Than 100 Years," *Paducah Sun-Democrat*, May 22, 1966.

The Temple Israel Men's Forum provides an excellent example of local Jewish civic activism. This speaker series brought some of the biggest names in Western thought to Kentucky. From 1937 through 1940, the Temple booked four to five speakers to lecture at Hotel Irvin Cobb in downtown Paducah. These events were open to the public, and Temple Israel took charge of selling tickets. Since the Jewish community was somewhat small, the majority of attendees were not Jewish, even if many of the forum's topics explicitly related to prewar Jewish issues.

What Specifically Survived?

Through the years, many of the documents related to the Men's Forum have disappeared. While a collection of seventy-four documents may seem robust, the logistical nature of most documents does not, on their surface, suggest great historical insight. Documentation of specific topics, scripts, or presentations no longer remains. Instead, the archival record on the Men's Forum includes a handful of ticket stubs, sales ledgers, booking letters between Bernard Michelson of Temple Israel and the speakers' agents, performance contracts, and logistical receipts and contracts.¹⁰

However, from the archival footprint, some key details about the forum emerge. It ran from at least 1931 through 1941, only to end when the United States entered World War II. Thanks to a lone ticket stub from 1931, we know that the Forum ran from the early 1930s, but no other information remains regarding talks before 1937. Hotel receipts tell us that the temple rented the ballroom of Hotel Irvin Cobb, which was owned by Men's Club member Adolph Weil. Given the large number of receipts from local newspapers and printing companies, we also know that the forum was a highly publicized event that attracted attendees from across western Kentucky and southern Illinois. From speaker schedules, we also know that the forum hosted about three or four speakers per year on a largely bimonthly basis between September and May. These artifacts all point to an event that garnered a lot of interest, attendance, and participation in a relatively sparsely populated region of the country.¹¹

With an archival footprint this small, the question becomes how do we gain historical insight from seemingly innocuous items like a hotel

¹⁰ Temple Israel Men's Forum, box 1, Temple Israel Papers.

¹¹ "Men's Forum Receipts from Hotel Irvin Cobb," Temple Israel Men's Forum, box 1, folder 3, Temple Israel Papers.

*Hotel Irvin Cobb receipt, May 27, 1938.
(Courtesy of the Riverlands Jewish Archive, Western
Kentucky University, Bowling Green.)*

receipt or mailing list? The answer is to treat them as puzzle pieces whose surrounding pieces provide the context and background. We know at least a partial list of the speakers. This information allows us to make educated hypotheses about subjects based on the speakers' background and expertise. We also know when the talks took place. This allows us to examine the broader historical and geopolitical contexts around these talks. We know that the late 1930s were gripped with economic and diplomatic insecurity that would have permeated the consciousness of the general

public. Finally, we know about the events' audiences. Speakers were often hired on the basis of audience interest and engagement. Thus, understanding the worldview of those in attendance offers valuable insight into how a speaker may have catered their talk to meet these interests. Knowing these three elements of the broader context uncovers an incredible amount about the history of Temple Israel's Men's Forum.

Featured Speakers and Topics

Over a little more than three years, the Men's Forum invited roughly a dozen speakers to Paducah. Each speaker brought specific expertise and topics, but largely they fell into one of two camps. The first and more prevalent camp illustrated expertise in foreign affairs and the global crises of the 1930s. Speakers such as Lord Marley, J. B. Matthews, H. V. Kaltenborn, Nicholas Roosevelt, and Pierre van Paassen provided presentations on the existential crises facing European politics leading to World War II. While each possessed particular knowledge, tremendous overlap occurred around fascism and the danger it posed to a democratic West. The second and smaller group of speakers were experts on psychology, religion, and spirituality. These included Henry C. McComas, a psychologist and expert on fraud among mediums, and Henry C. Link, a psychologist who urged a return to religion as a means of solving psychological distress.¹² Although much can be gained from dissecting the themes from McComas and Link, this article focuses solely on the discussion of foreign policy.

Lord Marley – December 2, 1937

The first speaker to come to Paducah for the Men's Forum was Dudley Aman, First Baron Marley, more commonly known as Lord Marley. Marley, who served in the House of Lords, joined the Royal Marine Artillery during World War I and received the Distinguished Service Cross for his service at the Second Battle of Ypres.¹³

Marley's presence in the Riverlands Jewish Archive is one of the most robust of the Men's Forum speakers. The archive contains letters between Bernard Michelson of the Men's Forum and W. Colston Leigh, Inc.,

¹² Henry C. McComas, *Ghosts I Have Talked With* (Baltimore, 1937); Henry C. Link, *The Return to Religion* (New York, 1936).

¹³ Nicole Taylor, "The mystery of Lord Marley: Nicole Taylor on the trail of an English peer in Stalin's Jewish Autonomous Region," *Jewish Quarterly* 52 (Summer 2005): 65–69.

Dudley Aman, First Baron Marley, c. 1930
(Wikimedia Commons.)

Confirmation of Lord Marley's lecture in Paducah, December 2, 1937.
(Courtesy of the Riverlands Jewish Archive, Western Kentucky
University, Bowling Green.)

Marley's booking agent. Cashed checks written from the Men's Forum checkbook for Marley's booking fees and associated publicity survive to the twenty-first century, as do the performance contract and invoices for payment of speaker's fees.¹⁴

By the 1930s, Marley served as a prominent Labour Party member in Parliament. He held numerous positions in British Parliament between 1930 and 1941, including serving as Undersecretary of State for War, vice-president of the Army Council, Chief Labour Whip in the House of Lords, Deputy Speaker of the House of Lords, and Chairman of the Parliamentary Advisory Committee for the aid of Jews in Europe. This last position brought Marley the most notoriety in Jewish communities. In this position he became deeply involved in Jewish affairs in the Soviet Union and Germany. He worked directly with authorities in the Jewish Autonomous Oblast of Birobidzhan in eastern Siberia. Joseph Stalin designated this area as a semiautonomous region for the resettlement of Russian Jews. Marley wrote the English translation of *The Brown Book of Hitler Terror and the Burning of the Reichstag*, a 1933 book that detailed the conditions of German Jews and Hitler's devoutly antisemitic ideologies. Historians widely credit its publication with igniting early interest among American Jews in the conditions in Nazi Germany.¹⁵

By the time Marley arrived in Paducah in December 1937, Nazi persecution of German Jews was in full force. Following the passage of the antisemitic Nuremberg Laws in 1935, a wave of violence against Jews swept across Germany. Not only were Jews losing their jobs and livelihoods, but they also now increasingly faced threats to their lives. This wave of violence ultimately culminated in 1938's violent pogrom *Kristallnacht* and the creation of Jewish ghettos.

J. B. Matthews – February 16, 1939

The first invited speaker of 1939 was American linguist and political activist Joseph Brown "J. B." Matthews. Nothing has survived related to Matthews's booking. The only way one would know from the archival material that the Men's Forum sought him out is his name on the schedule listed on the back of the 1938-39 season tickets. This lack of record likely stems from his last-minute cancellation of his appearance. Days before he

¹⁴ Temple Israel Men's Forum, box 1, folder 6, Temple Israel Papers.

¹⁵ Taylor, "Mystery," 65-69.

was scheduled to speak, Matthews was summoned before the U.S. Senate to testify on communism. Thus, he was replaced by American adventurer Gordon B. Enders. Despite this, I include him here as he was the temple's originally intended speaker, which adds credence to the Forum's motivations in selecting speakers.¹⁶

Matthews was a supporter of the American communist party during the mid-1930s, often referring to himself as a "fellow traveler," an English translation of the Russian word "*poputchik*."¹⁷ He spoke at Madison Square Garden at a communist rally in 1933, served as head of the American League Against War and Fascism, and launched several communist-aligned organizations, including the American Friends of the Chinese People, American Youth Congress, and the National Student League. During the 1930s, he visited the Soviet Union at least five times. However, by 1938, Matthews became disillusioned with the movement, and he came to Paducah during this period of disillusionment. Coming on the heels of

*J. B. Matthews testifying before the
Dies Committee of the U.S. House of
Representatives, August 22, 1938.
(Wikimedia Commons.)*

¹⁶ "Men's Forum 1938-39 Season Ticket," Temple Israel Men's Forum, box 1, folder 2, Temple Israel Papers; "Enders Replaces Matthews as Temple Speaker Thursday," *Paducah Sun Democrat*, February 15, 1939.

¹⁷ *Poputchik*, or "one who travels the same path," is the Russian term for someone who is intellectually sympathetic to the ideology of the Communist Party and cooperates with party politics but is not a formal member.

the publication of his memoir, *Odyssey of a Fellow Traveler*, in which he disavowed communism and attempted to repent for his previous activism, Matthews went on a speaking tour discussing the threats communism posed to the West. He spoke frequently on the crises facing eastern Europe and the nations caught between two aggressive empires in the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany.¹⁸

The context of Soviet relations with Nazi Germany particularly bothered Matthews. Newspaper columnist and radio commentator George Sokolsky said of Matthews: "I have among my friends and acquaintances literally dozens of men and women who during the Hitler-Stalin Alliance were so ashamed of Soviet cynicism that from ardent Communists they became ardent anti-Communists. Such a man was Dr. J. B. Matthews, [who] while never a Communist, was associated with that party as a fellow traveler."¹⁹ For many communists, Stalin's peace with an antagonist Nazi regime proved a bridge too far. Stalin's acquiescence to such a reviled European leader dashed the idealism with which many activists approached communism.

H. V. Kaltenborn – April 25, 1939

American radio news commentator Hans von "H. V." Kaltenborn spoke before the forum in 1939. Kaltenborn worked at CBS and NBC as an on-air anchor for over thirty years. He was best known for his knowledge of foreign affairs and international politics. Throughout the 1930s, he covered the various crises across Europe and East Asia that led to World War II. This gave him unique insight into the state of world affairs on the eve of war.²⁰

A small number of items from H. V. Kaltenborn's talk survive in the archive, primarily scheduling correspondence between him and Bernard Michelson. The archive includes a series of back-and-forth letters between Kaltenborn and Michelson working on the initial scheduling of his talk. Also included in the archive is a series of telegrams exchanged between the two when mechanical issues threatened to derail his travel to Paducah.

¹⁸ J.B. Matthews, *Odyssey of a Fellow Traveler* (New York, 1938).

¹⁹ Victor S. Navasky, *Naming Names* (New York, 1980), 86.

²⁰ James Sylvester Kolb, *H.V. Kaltenborn: An Analysis of His Thought and His Career* (Madison, WI, 1966).

*H.V. Kaltenborn (left)
and Andre Kostelanetz rehearsing
for a presentation at the World's
Fair, New York 1939.
(New York Public Library.)*

Kaltenborn also appears on the 1938–39 season ticket calendar that features J. B. Matthews.²¹

Kaltenborn's expertise of particular interest to Paducah's Jewish community was his experience in Nazi Germany. He first became embroiled in European affairs during the early 1930s when he was one of only three American journalists to interview Adolf Hitler. He later reported extensively on the Spanish Civil War, the Sudetenland crisis of 1938, and multiple Nuremberg rallies.²² By the time he spoke at Temple Israel in 1939, Kaltenborn had won renown as one of the foremost American experts on Nazi Germany. In April 1939, Europe stood on the brink of war. While the Allied powers hoped that concessions on militarization, annexation of Austria, and occupation of the Sudetenland would pacify Germany, in less than six months war broke out between Germany, Italy, Poland, Britain, and France.²³

²¹ Temple Israel Men's Forum, box 1, folder 10, Temple Israel Papers.

²² Christopher Sterling and John Kittross, *Stay Tuned: A History of American Broadcasting* (New York, 2001).

²³ Edward Bliss, Jr., *Now the News: The Story of Broadcast Journalism* (New York, 2010).

Nicholas Roosevelt – May 17, 1939

The month after Kaltenborn's appearance, Nicholas Roosevelt spoke before the Men's Forum. Roosevelt's lecture provides the most surviving materials. The archive holds a series of letters between Michelson of the Men's Forum and W. Colston Leigh, Inc., the booking agents for Roosevelt. These letters discuss terms of scheduling and date conflicts, the final speaker fees, and the availability of publicity materials for the talk. The archive also includes a signed performance contract and an invoice for Roosevelt's speaking fees, subsequently paid by the temple.²⁴

Roosevelt's father, James West Roosevelt, and President Theodore Roosevelt were first cousins, making him also a distant relation of then-President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Nicholas Roosevelt was an American diplomat stationed in Hungary and a member of the Council on Foreign Relations. His expertise and experience culminated in a handful of articles for the journal *Foreign Affairs* during the 1930s. The most notable of these dealt with the financial and political crises in Europe during the 1920s and 1930s. His 1925 article, "The Ruhr Occupation," examined French takeover of key German resource regions like the Ruhr and the danger that continued French pilfering of these resources in the name of reparations posed for diplomatic relations. He argued that continued siphoning of German natural resources would only fuel radicalism and animosity within the German populace.²⁵ He followed this in 1933 with an article entitled "Salvaging the Debts of Eastern Europe," in which he detailed the 650 million dollars in defaulted loan repayments to the United States accrued by eight eastern European nations. He argued that unless the United States absolved these debts, eastern Europe faced imminent financial collapse and risked being swallowed up by an authoritarian force.

By the time Roosevelt visited Paducah in 1939, the fallout from the Great Depression and the untenable debt payments was in full force. Reparations having been long unpopular with the German public, on seizing power in 1933, Adolf Hitler announced Germany would no longer abide

²⁴ Temple Israel Men's Forum, box 1, folder 11, Temple Israel Papers.

²⁵ Nicholas Roosevelt, "The Ruhr Occupation," *Foreign Affairs* 4 (October 1925): 113–22. On Roosevelt's background, see "Biographical History," Nicholas Roosevelt Papers, Syracuse University Libraries Special Collections Research Center, accessed May 20, 2026, https://library.syracuse.edu/digital/guides/r/roosevelt_n.htm.

by the Treaty of Versailles or pay debts and reparations owed. The worst-case scenario put forth by Nicholas Roosevelt earlier in the 1930s now came to fruition in the form of a violent reactionary government in Germany.

Alfred Duff Cooper – February 28, 1940

Alfred Duff “A. D.” Cooper, a British politician and former Secretary of War under Neville Chamberlain’s government, provided the first speech in 1940. The only document remaining about Cooper’s visit in the archive is an invoice from W. Colston Leigh, Inc., requesting payment for Cooper’s speech. Temple Israel paid three hundred dollars to bring Cooper to Paducah in February 1940, a fee of over seven thousand dollars in modern calculations.²⁶

*Alfred Duff Cooper, 1939.
(Wikimedia Commons.)*

Although a member of Parliament for a quarter century, A. D. Cooper is best remembered for his high-profile resignation as First Lord of the Admiralty, or political head of the British Navy, in the wake of the Munich Agreement in 1938. Cooper had long been outspoken in his opposition to Nazism in Germany. During his trip to Germany in 1934, he attended that year’s Nuremberg rally and returned appalled by what he had witnessed. Consequently, he became a vocal critic of the Nazi regime.

²⁶ Temple Israel Men’s Forum, box 1, folder 12, Temple Israel Papers.

*Payment invoice for lecture by Alfred Duff Cooper, February 28, 1940.
(Courtesy of the Riverlands Jewish Archive, Western
Kentucky University, Bowling Green.)*

As Secretary of War, Cooper began pushing for rearmament of the British military in the face of Nazi threats, a position that resulted in Prime Minister Chamberlain urging him to tone down his criticism. As First Lord of the Admiralty, he continually pushed for more spending on the Royal Navy and drew the ire of Chamberlain for being “indiscreet” and a “fire-brand.” By 1938, Cooper outspokenly criticized Chamberlain’s policy of appeasement. When Britain signed on to the Munich Agreement, which forced Czechoslovakia to cede control of the Sudetenland to Germany, Cooper stormed out in disgust and resigned from the cabinet.²⁷

Over the next two years, Cooper vocally criticized Chamberlain, appeasement, and a policy he believed doomed Europe to the death and destruction of the Holocaust. He wrote countless articles for London’s *Evening Standard* newspaper and embarked on a series of speaking engagements across the United States encouraging Americans to pressure

²⁷ John Julius Norwich, ed., *The Duff Cooper Diaries: 1915–1951* (London, 2005).

their government toward joining the war effort. He called for liberal democracies to stand firm against the Nazis and predicted that Winston Churchill would become prime minister, a seemingly eccentric prediction at the time. Cooper spoke before Temple Israel's Men's Forum during this national tour.²⁸

Pierre van Paassen – March 31, 1941

The final known speaker for the Temple Israel Men's Forum was Pierre van Paassen, a journalist and foreign correspondent for numerous newspapers across the United States and Canada. Like J. B. Matthews and A. D. Cooper before him, very little on van Paassen's talk survives. All that exists in the archive is his signed performance contract.²⁹

During the 1930s, van Paassen gained notoriety for his reporting on fascist Italy, the Spanish Civil War, and colonial conflicts across the Middle East and North Africa. An avowed antifascist, he reported on the violent excesses of Europe's fascist governments. This early reporting culminated in his first book, *Nazism: An Assault on Civilization*. An edited volume published in 1934 that contained articles by many of the top experts on Germany, Van Paassen's work was one of the first American books extensively documenting Nazi ideology. The authors stressed that Nazism was not merely a political shift but a systemic assault on human rights, ethics, and democratic institutions. Van Paassen's volume pioneered as one of the first books to warn of the likelihood of a forthcoming Holocaust against European Jews.³⁰ Van Paassen's reports on Europe's fascist parties eventually got him into trouble with the German government. Following Hitler's rise to power, van Paassen was arrested by German authorities and spent ten days in the Dachau concentration camp. Following his release, van Paassen remarked that he was expelled "from Germany by Joseph Goebbels."³¹

By spring 1941, van Paassen toured the United States promoting his book *The Time is Now!* This book, published later that year, forcefully argued for American involvement in World War II to stop the spread of

²⁸ Michael Stenton, *Radio London and Resistance in Occupied Europe: British Political Warfare, 1939–1943* (London, 2000).

²⁹ Temple Israel Men's Forum, box 1, folder 14, Temple Israel Papers.

³⁰ Pierre Van Paassen, ed., *Nazism: An Assault on Civilization* (New York, 1934).

³¹ Pierre Van Paassen, *To Number Our Days* (New York, 1964), i–ii.

*Contract between the Temple Israel Men's Club and Pierre Van Paassen,
March 31, 1941. (Courtesy of the Riverlands Jewish Archive,
Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green.)*

German expansion, most notably, immediately join the United Kingdom on the front lines. Published at a time when many Americans still clung to the idea of neutrality, van Paassen's book caused a tremendous stir.³²

Deducing Themes from the Speaker Lineup

While the performance contracts and ticket stubs fail to offer a direct glimpse into the topics of discussion at each talk, the context as a whole suggests trends. Three important backdrops are important to consider: the expertise of the speakers, American politics during the 1930s, and the priorities and concerns of American Jewish communities in that decade. From the three contexts and the speakers' background and interests, we can surmise the topics and themes of these lectures without having concrete evidence of their content in the form of a transcript.

A common theme becomes clear. Each man was an expert on some aspect of Nazi Germany during the 1930s. Whether it was Matthews becoming disillusioned with communism in the wake of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact or Kaltenborn interviewing Adolf Hitler, the five men who came to Paducah to speak on global affairs all reacted negatively and vociferously to the threat posed by Nazism. This speaks to a pattern of Jewish activism in western Kentucky on the eve of World War II. The public nature of the Men's Forum, the fervent publicity and advertising, and the widespread inclusion of non-Jewish residents in Paducah speaks to Jews' insistence on combatting American isolationist attitudes at a time when mainstream American organizations were not. In this way, the talks became less about publicizing Nazi atrocities and more about compelling the American public to action.

The question of American consciousness of Nazi atrocities is interesting, as scholarship often examines public consciousness after the fact and not beforehand. For example, Kristen Fermaglich's *American Dreams and Nazi Nightmares*, Arlene Stein's *Reluctant Witnesses*, Deborah Lipstadt's *Holocaust: An American Understanding*, and Hasia Diner's *We Remember With Reverence and Love* all examine how evidence from liberation and the testimony of the survivors fueled the rise of Holocaust consciousness in the United States in the decades that followed World War II.³³ Much of the

³² Pierre van Paassen, *The Time is Now!* (New York, 1940).

³³ Kirsten Fermaglich, *American Dreams and Nazi Nightmares: Early Holocaust Consciousness and Liberal America, 1957-1965* (Waltham, MA, 2006); Arlene Stein, *Reluctant Witnesses: Survivors*,

conversation centers around what went wrong and how to avoid such a tragedy in the future.

When examining prewar Jewish responses, early trends in scholarship tended to ask why the American Jewish community at large seemingly failed to pressure the Roosevelt administration to act. Peter Novick went so far as to refer to earlier critiques as a “comfortable morality tale that has passed for history.” In his view, not wanting to be seen as victims or become the targets of antisemitism, American Jews downplayed the urgency of the Holocaust in public life and instead opted for more subtle means of activism.³⁴ Similarly, Felicia Herman suggests that American Jews were hesitant to be seen as exerting influence over American politics out of fear that it would spark charges of Jewish control over key American industries.³⁵

However, labeling the Jewish response as timid in the face of fears of antisemitism is simplistic. American Jews faced an uphill battle in American politics, having only begun to be assimilated into wider American society. Rafael Medoff notes that “President Roosevelt’s private attitudes toward Jews . . . play[ed] a role in shaping policy decisions,” arguing that nothing American Jews could have done would have overwhelmed the president’s latent antisemitism. Medoff further suggests that Roosevelt managed to manipulate leadership of the American Jewish establishment into “keeping quiet” on matters related to the Holocaust.³⁶

Despite this uphill battle, some scholars have noted that while the American Jewish establishment was often stifled, smaller segments of the American Jewish community continued to act. This split is best identified in Efraim Zuroff’s book *The Response of Orthodox Jewry in the United States to the Holocaust*. By focusing on smaller rescue organizations like the Vaad Hatzala, Zuroff notes that smaller and regional organizations often did not face the pressure of widespread antisemitic backlash in the way that

Their Children, and the Rise of Holocaust Consciousness (New York, 2014); Deborah E. Lipstadt, *Holocaust: An American Understanding* (New Brunswick, NJ, 2016); Hasia R. Diner, *We Remember With Reverence and Love: American Jews and the Myth of Silence After the Holocaust, 1945–1962* (New York, 2009).

³⁴ Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (Boston, 2000).

³⁵ Felicia Herman, “Hollywood, Nazism, and the Jews, 1933–41,” *American Jewish History* 89 (March 2001): 61–89.

³⁶ Rafael Medoff, *The Jews Should Keep Quiet: Franklin D. Roosevelt, Rabbi Stephen S. Wise, and the Holocaust* (Philadelphia, 2019), xv–xvi.

large-scale national organizations would have and thus were more likely to have a vibrant response.³⁷

Building on this background, an increasing amount of scholarship examines the growing consciousness among American Jews in the South of the events unfolding across Europe before the war. For example, in his monograph *In the Shadow of Hitler*, Dan Puckett argues that although many Southerners were more concerned with the rising threat posed by Japan in the late-1930s and most newspapers focused their coverage on the Pacific, Alabama's Jewish communities focused on spreading awareness of the horrors facing Europe's Jews in the hopes of preventing escalation and facilitating rescue. Rather than finding a Jewish community that was sheepish toward Holocaust activism, Puckett found a population in Alabama that took charge in activism, recognizing a Protestant and xenophobic antisemitism that was rife across the American South in the prewar years. Puckett argues that this antisemitism was in many ways not altogether different from the racism of rank-and-file Germans during the same period, who perceived a silent Jewish menace based on religious and racial connotations, despite having Jewish neighbors they liked and interacted with regularly. In this case, it is not hard to see why Southern Jews may have increasingly adopted an "it could happen here" mentality.³⁸

Temple Israel fits within this last pattern. By the late 1930s, the Jewish community was well established in Paducah, with Jewish businesses lining downtown streets. During the early twentieth century, at least thirty Jewish businesses operated in the city. Given the small size of the Jewish population, patrons of Jewish stores were overwhelmingly non-Jews, making Jewish shopowners part of many non-Jews' everyday interactions. Beyond this, Jews took an active role in local community affairs. As indicated above, Govriel Rosenthal established the local junior college. He used his personal fortune to fund the school's payroll through its lean early years. Marshall Nemer followed Rosenthal's lead and served on the college's board of trustees for years as well. Other prominent Jews served as lawyers, judges, city officials, and heads of local fraternal organizations.

³⁷ Efraim Zuroff, *The Response of Orthodox Jewry in The United States to the Holocaust: The Activities of the Vaad ha-Hatzala Rescue Committee, 1939-1945* (Hoboken, NJ, 2000).

³⁸ Dan J. Puckett, *In the Shadow of Hitler: Alabama's Jews, the Second World War, and the Holocaust* (Tuscaloosa, 2014).

The Jewish community was so ingrained that Irvin Cobb wrote of his experience growing up in Paducah: "I was nearly grown and had to go north of the Ohio River before I knew there was such a nasty vicious thing as antisemitism."³⁹ These factors suggest that the Jewish community in Paducah lacked the greater fears of antisemitism that plagued large national organizations. Instead, the members of Temple Israel's Men's Club felt so emboldened by their position in western Kentucky that they actively prioritized anti-Nazi activism through their annual Men's Forum.

Rather than being representative of American Jews' hesitance in the face of rising Nazism, the Men's Forum speaks to a broader pattern of political engagement on the part of American Jews during the 1930s. Matthew Frye Jacobson argues that continued Jewish allegiances to their brethren in Europe created a level of diasporic nationalism that "reinforced the sense of collective national destiny . . . and advanced their arguments for self-determination." This climate of diasporic nationalism shaped Jewish responses to, and often critique of, American foreign policy during the early-twentieth century.⁴⁰ The lineup of speakers at Temple Israel suggests that not only did Paducah's Jews maintain a national attachment to Jews in Europe, but they actively sought an American policy structure that would prioritize stopping the suffering from Nazi persecution.

The timing of the Men's Forum is also critical to understanding its importance in American political activism, as it highlights the ambivalence the men of Temple Israel sought to combat. During the late 1930s, isolationism and neutrality in global affairs dominated American politics. Between 1935 and 1939, Congress passed a series of Neutrality Acts with bipartisan support in the wake of the Nye Committee hearings, which assigned blame for American involvement in World War I and urged measures to avoid American entanglements in further wars. These four acts sought to keep America neutral by prohibiting American industries and organizations from engaging in trade with and/or supporting any "belligerent" nation in a war. Designed to be overarching, they provided

³⁹ Temple Israel, "History," accessed May 20, 2026, <https://templeisraelky.org/history>.

⁴⁰ Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Special Sorrows: The Diasporic Imagination of Irish, Polish, and Jewish Immigrants in the United States* (Berkeley, CA, 2002).

no distinction between aggressor and victim in their treatment of warring nations.⁴¹

The American response to the Holocaust among non-Jews has long been a topic of rich scholarship. Two books published in 1968 set off the modern historiographic interpretation. *While Six Million Died* by Arthur Morse and *Paper Walls* by David S. Wyman criticized the Roosevelt administration for deliberately obstructing opportunities for rescuing Jews from Nazi persecution. Both authors charge that Roosevelt permitted antisemitic State Department officials to further restrict immigration quotas beyond their already meager allowances. Consequently, Jews who should have been allowed to immigrate under existing quotas were denied entry and, in many cases, returned to Germany to face their deaths. Martin Gilbert's *Auschwitz and the Allies* and Monty Penkower's *The Jews Were Expendable*, published in the 1980s, built on this thesis of abandonment. Beyond highlighting how Allied forces refused to respond, they maintained that these were refusals of perfectly feasible measures that could have prevented Jewish deaths. Jeffrey Gurock's anthology *America, American Jews, and the Holocaust* similarly critiques Roosevelt for making political decisions in the face of what was essentially a moral question and not a political one. More recent scholarship has downplayed antisemitism in the State Department in favor of a narrative around alternate priorities by American diplomats. Godfrey Hodgson suggests that diplomats focused on maintaining artistic treasures in cities such as Kyoto and Rothenburg or rescuing prized horses from Austria as a means for preserving world culture during a time of war.⁴² In this view, Allied inaction was not so much willful abandonment as it was neglect.

⁴¹ Robert Dallek, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy, 1932-1945* (New York, 1995); Richard Aregood, Richard Shafer, and Eric Freedman, "American Isolationism and the Political Evolution of Journalist-Turned-US Senator Gerald P. Nye," *Journalism Practice* 9 (2015): 279-94.

⁴² Arthur D. Morse, *While Six Million Died: A Chronicle of American Apathy* (Amherst, MA, 1968); David S. Wyman, *Paper Walls: America and the Refugee Crisis, 1938-1941* (Amherst, MA, 1968); Martin Gilbert, *Auschwitz and the Allies: A Devastating Account of How the Allies Responded to the News of Hitler's Mass Murder* (New York, 1981); Monty Noam Penkower, *The Jews Were Expendable: Free World Diplomacy and the Holocaust* (Urbana, IL, 1983); Jeffrey S. Gurock, ed., *America, American Jews, and the Holocaust* (New York, 1997); Godfrey Hodgson, *The Colonel: The Life and Wars of Henry Stimson, 1867-1950* (New York, 1990). See also, Henry L. Feingold, *The Politics of Rescue: The Roosevelt Administration and the Holocaust, 1938-1945*

Many of these national trends existed within local Paducah institutions. This is most identifiable in the pages of the city's largest newspaper, the *Paducah Sun-Democrat*. The paper's arguments around neutrality largely focused on concerns in East Asia. An August 1937 editorial on American neutrality, published months before Lord Marley spoke at the Men's Forum, focused entirely on the ongoing conflict between Japan and China and asked whether America could remain neutral in the face of such hostility. The editorial notes threats to Americans living in China and the chance that the conflict threatened America's west coast. However, no mention of the threats posed by Nazi Germany or Adolf Hitler received coverage. While a single editorial, it represents a larger pattern of reporting in Paducah.⁴³

Between 1933 and the outbreak of World War II in 1939, articles on increasing Japanese militarism filled over five thousand pages of the *Sun-Democrat*, often constituting three or four articles per page. For Paducah's newspaper, the threat posed by Japan to American interests in East Asia was a clear priority. In contrast, only about 2,900 pages of the *Sun-Democrat* had articles on Nazi Germany before the war. More starkly, only 195 articles in total mentioned Nazi persecution of its Jewish population. The *Sun-Democrat* focused clearly on East Asia as the primary threat to Americans.

This highlights a larger trend by American newspapers. Laurel Leff notes in *Buried by the Times* that American newspapers largely followed the lead of the *New York Times* and shelved coverage of Nazi atrocities to the back pages, where they received little fanfare. Papers also typically used more generic terms such as *refugee* or *nationalities* to refer to Jewish victims of Hitler instead of naming them as Jews. Leff argues that this led to an American public woefully uninformed about Nazi persecution and systematic murder of European Jews.⁴⁴

The ticket stubs of the Men's Forum evidence an opposite trend. Although sponsored by Temple Israel, the majority of the attendees were not only not members of the temple, but most were not Jewish. The one

(New Brunswick, NJ, 1970); Saul S. Friedman, *No Haven for the Oppressed: United States Policy toward Jewish Refugees, 1938–1945* (Detroit, 1973); Carlo D'Este, *Patton: A Genius for War* (New York, 1990).

⁴³ "Can We Be Neutral?," *Paducah Sun-Democrat*, August 16, 1937.

⁴⁴ Laurel Leff, *Buried by the Times: The Holocaust and America's Most Important Newspaper* (New York, 2005).

Temple Israel Men's Forum season ticket, 1938–39. (Courtesy of the Riverlands Jewish Archive, Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green.)

year for which we have an authoritative list of attendees, 1938–39, portrays this well. Of the 297 “season tickets” sold for that year’s lecture series, identifiable Jews purchased only forty-two.⁴⁵ Instead, the majority of tickets went to the non-Jewish neighbors, coworkers, and friends of Temple Israel members. This was not an accident, nor was it the happenstance of being a demographic minority. The members of Temple Israel made a concerted effort to recruit the wider public through an extensive advertising campaign in local media in an effort to build public consciousness and indignation.⁴⁶ The goals of the Men’s Forum are further highlighted by the fact that Paducah’s Jews dictated the specific topics discussed in the Men’s Forum lectures. In one of the scheduling letters between Bernard Michelson and William B. Feakins, Inc., the booking agent notes that he did not fill in a topic on the performance contract, as he wanted “suggestions from [Temple Israel] as to the best subject for a

⁴⁵ Based on cross referencing in Temple Israel and B’nai B’rith membership records.

⁴⁶ “Ledger of Season Ticket Sales, 1938–39,” Temple Israel Men’s Forum, box 1, folder 2, Temple Israel Papers; “Promotional Receipts,” Temple Israel Men’s Forum, box 1, folder 4, Temple Israel Papers.

mixed audience.”⁴⁷ Highlighting awareness of Hitler’s antisemitic policies played a central role in the Men’s Forum, bucking the larger trend in Paducah’s public sphere. This all demonstrates that the goals of the forum’s leaders went beyond mere education and instead were focused on provoking public response.

The Men’s Forum proved to be one of Temple Israel’s largest community initiatives in its now 160-year history in Paducah. Bringing in some of the best-known speakers in the world and with two hundred to three hundred in regular attendance, the speaker series demonstrated the demand for knowledge in Paducah, as well as the high level to which Jews were accepted by and part of the wider community. In this way, despite the limited documentation remaining, we can still glean an important history of the prewar Jewish South and of small-town Jewry nationally. The list of speakers and the wider context around their talks demonstrates a community that prioritized awareness for Jews in distress overseas. This is particularly evocative given the contemporary prominence of isolationism and neutrality in the United States. We can discern from these contexts that Paducah’s Jews, as well as many in the wider non-Jewish population, bucked national trends in the late-1930s and prioritized the horrors facing European Jews in American foreign policy concerns. Above all, the history of Temple Israel’s Men’s Forum demonstrates that the Jews of Paducah were cosmopolitans aware and concerned about their brethren in Europe. Their effort to stand out also informed their non-Jewish neighbors with the result that they, too, became more aware and cosmopolitan.

⁴⁷ Temple Israel Men’s Forum, box 1, folder 13, Temple Israel Papers.