Off the Record

by Mimi Schwartz

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Introduction

We shall not cease from exploration, and at the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.

—T.S. Elliot

The horror of the Holocaust has made it a rich subject for literature and research, spawning volumes of objective fact, as well as personal histories, told from all angles. In “Off the Record,” Mimi Schwartz travels to her father’s hometown of Benheim, Germany, where it is said that even during Hitler’s regime, Germans and Jews lived more peacefully than other places. Also playing important parts in the narrative are Schwartz’s translator, Rolf, a German Holocaust studies student, and Herr Stolle, a longtime resident of Benheim who remembers the Holocaust.

As Schwartz interviews Herr Stolle to learn what life was like for Jews in Benheim during the Holocaust, Rolf continually reminds her not to be naïve. There is some irony in a German telling a Jew not to forget that Germans tell lies, but she feels drawn to and trusting of Herr Stolle, who tends the cemetery of ancestral Jews—though he is not Jewish himself.

Through Schwartz’s dialogue with Herr Stolle, we learn about the pride of German men and women like Herr Stolle over how they treated their Jewish neighbors—as well as their dismay over the millions of deaths. “Off the Record” is ultimately an essay about uncovering the past and discovering that it has multiple interpretations. Schwartz documents what she can and tells us that history is, “always about the person asking, selecting and filtering out ambiguity, so that we have a story that lets us sleep easier at night.”
Off the Record

by Mimi Schwartz

There is a place that existed before you came to it, closed with the secrets and complexities of history; and there is the place you experience in the present.

—Eavan Boland

He stands in front of the Hertz sign at the train station in Stuttgart, Germany, as we had arranged, and I recognize him right away from the picture he sent me. A boyish twenty-five, with blond hair and well-scrubbed cheeks, he is what I imagine as the perfect German poster boy of sixty years ago. Then, he would have been dressed in uniform for the Fatherland. Today he is in jeans and sneakers, carrying a knapsack and a pink print umbrella. Rolf is my translator. He is a graduate student in Holocaust Studies at the University of Mannheim, doing research about how such a thing could have happened in his country. Together we are going to Benheim, where no one speaks English. It’s too small, too isolated, so my crash course from Berlitz won’t get me through interviews with Herr Adolf Stolle—and whomever else he’s arranged for me to meet. Herr Stolle is the retired villager who does research on the Jewish cemetery, the one who sent photos of family gravestones to Jews from my father’s village now living in New York. “A nice Gentile, a good contact!” they all agreed.

Rolf and I are expected this afternoon at two if my phone call last night from Zurich was understood. I had written out pages of possible dialogue before calling and had gotten through my arrival time and that I was bringing a friend (Rolf). I was on a roll, I thought, until Herr Stolle said Erinnerung and kept repeating it as I shuffled through my yellow pad of prepared script, clueless. Erinnerung, Erinnerung. Again and again.

“Ich verstehen nicht, entschuldigen,” I said. I’m sorry, I don’t understand.

“Ich verstehe nicht,” Herr Stolle corrected me in a neutral voice and then dropped the unknown Erinnerung, thank God. He said he looked forward to meeting me, his low, even voice soothing my sense of error. Verstehe. The singular verb form, not plural. I should know that.
After I hung up, I looked up Erinnerung in my dictionary: memory. Of all the words not to understand. For memory is why I have come—to find out if what the Jews of Benheim remember is true: that life was wonderful before Hitler, and that even under the Nazis, before they left, “it was better than most places.” I want to meet whoever is left and decide for myself. Of course I’m biased, having grown up in 1940s New York, where all Germans were called Nazis, not to be trusted, not one. And the old fears linger. But I would be happy to be wrong. In fact, I would love it. Decent people, even in one overlooked Schwarzwald village of twelve hundred, would be very comforting.

“How about you drive?” I say to Rolf, holding out the keys to my rental car. I don’t feel like tackling the Mercedes Benzes and BMWs doing a hundred miles an hour on the Autobahn, and he’s used to that, I figure. He takes the car keys with a big grin, locates our red Volkswagen Beetle, and opens the door for me. What? I hear my father saying from his grave. A German car you are renting? I climb inside anyway.

Three tries to start the engine. “I must tell you I don’t drive so much,” Rolf says as we pull out of the parking lot into Stuttgart traffic. “Only when my grandfather lends me his car.” Hopefully he’s as cautious as he looks, but I know nothing about him. His name came from someone I met at the Holocaust Museum in Washington, a young man working at the Oral History desk. When I mentioned I needed a translator for my trip to my father’s Schwarzwald village, he suggested Rolf. Three e-mails and a phone call to Germany later, it was settled. I would pay Rolf’s expenses, and he, I hoped, would save me from impasses like Erinnerung.

Rolf tells me he only learned about the Holocaust when he was fifteen. “I was shocked!” he says, leaning over the steering wheel like a nearsighted old man. “No one in my family had mentioned a word!” It’s a clear day, and we are in the right lane of the Autobahn, driving slowly, as if in heavy fog. “A group in my town were doing research about the Jews—and I signed up, the youngest by ten years!” He beams. “The others were professors, priests and teachers.” He reaches behind him, groping in his knapsack until he pulls out a thick red book.

“What happened to our Jews is all here,” Rolf says proudly. I leaf through chapters on Jewish customs and community life, on what happened during the boycott of 1933 and on Kristallnacht, which Rolf calls “the pogrom of 1938.” The term “Kristallnacht” should not be used, he says sternly, “because it means only ‘night of broken glass.’ What Germany had when it burned all the synagogues was a pogrom, plain and simple!”

He flips to the Personenregister section (as the car swerves), pointing to thirty-five pages of data about the eighty-eight Jews of his town of five thousand: names, birth dates, addresses, family members and fates of those who died in the camps and those who survived. “I compiled this list,” Rolf says with satisfaction, “and had contact to Jews all over the world.”

We discuss American culture. Rolf loves jazz, hates Big Macs and the disorder of American politics. He asks me about “James Buchanan and this Farrakhan. Are Jews afraid of them?” I say no, of course not, but worry that he knows something I’ve missed. I’m alive, after all, because my father spotted the early danger signs and left Germany, even when many people he knew were nice, like Rolf.

I say we are going to Herr Stolle’s house first and then to interview others he has, I hope, lined up. “But we must go to the Rathaus—to the archives,” Rolf says anxiously. “In the archives you get the real information.”

“What do you mean real? People are real.” I say.
“People’s stories you can’t so well believe, even if they are willing to talk honestly to you. And most are not. You mustn’t be naïve.”

I’ve heard this caveat before from the Holocaust scholars at the college where I teach. When I told them that Jews from Benheim remember it as a better place than most, they say such memories are unreliable. Trust the records instead. How many Jews did these people hide? What is the voting record? What percentage of the village joined the Nazi Party? I didn’t know. All I knew was that my father and the six Benheim Jews I interviewed in New York blamed the German people for Hitler, but not their next-door neighbors. And that intrigued me enough to come.

Rolf tells me how people in his town say they weren’t anti-Semitic before Hitler, yet the mayor led the charge to burn the synagogue during Kristallnacht.

“Well, Benheimers did not take part in Kristallnacht!” I say, for that’s what the Jews told me. It was thugs from Sulz, brought in on trucks. Not our neighbors. I try to sound mild. After all, this is only the first hour of a three-day trip together.

“You must be careful not to be naïve,” he repeats softly.

I try to be amused that this young Protestant German is cautioning me, a middle-aged Jew, about being naïve about the Holocaust. And with such paternalistic certainty! I had expected Germans to tread softly on the past, sidestepping delicate issues. But Rolf sidesteps nothing, ready to lead me in a direct charge into the Third Reich. He tells me, proudly, that his mother’s father was a member of the Confessional Church, the one German religious group to speak out vigorously against Hitler’s racial and anti-Christian teachings. His other grandfather, alas, was an ardent Nazi, one who still hangs the Nazi flag in the upstairs hall. “I pass it every day,” Rolf says bitterly. As a poor graduate student, he has no choice but to live in his grandfather’s house, on the third floor.

“So how do you two get along?” I ask, amazed.

“We don’t talk politics!” he says with a wry smile.

Just after the sign “Benheim,” we turn off the highway, as instructed, and climb the Osterhaldenweg, a steep switchback road. Below us are the red-tiled roofs of the lower village clustered around the old church, its tower scaffolded. But up here it is suburbia. Number 12, where Herr Stolle said to stop, has a black Mercedes parked in the driveway of a two-story townhouse set into the hillside. Large picture windows, modern balcony, white stone and lush pink flowers are more reminiscent of San Diego or Haifa than of a Schwarzwald village filled with cow dung and chickens in a rutted dirt street. That’s what I remember ever since, in 1953, my parents decided to show thirteen-year-old me the Europe they grew up in. We spent two weeks seeing the Tower of London, the Eiffel Tower, the canals of Holland, and one day visiting my mother’s Stuttgart and my father’s Benheim, two hours apart. By nightfall we were safely in Switzerland, neither parent wanting to sleep in Germany again. The message to me then was “enemy territory,” a feeling I’m still trying to shake.

Herr Stolle is waiting outside, dressed in a navy plaid sweater and gray slacks. He is a handsome man with a barrel chest and salt-and-pepper hair. He looks in his midsixties, but he was in Hitler’s army, so he must be in his midseventies. I also know that he was the postman’s son, that he managed a factory somewhere before retiring back to Benheim and that he doesn’t speak English.

I apologize in German for being late and introduce Rolf, who half bows and expresses great delight to be here. “Your German is excellent,” Herr Stolle says to him.
“Why not? I am German!”

Rolf explains that he is a graduate student in Mannheim (leaves out the Holocaust Studies part), and Herr Stolle nods, inviting us inside. We must meet his wife, have some coffee and cake, and then we will go to the cemetery. Tomorrow we will visit the synagogue and Frau Rieber, the former mayor’s wife, who had foot surgery. “She was born three houses from your father, Arthur,” Herr Stolle says, “but he lived already in Frankfurt. Sol was in Nagold; only Julius was still at home.”

He talks about my father’s family as if it were his. He knows that my father enlisted in World War I at seventeen and later moved to Frankfurt to work and marry. He knows my Uncle Sol joined a leather firm in Nagold, my Aunt Kathie married Max James from Stuttgart and only the youngest brother, Julius, stayed in Benheim—until the whole family left Germany in 1937 and succeeded in the leather business in New York.

Yet no one in my house ever mentioned Herr Stolle or his family. In fact, Benheim Jews rarely mention any Gentiles by name. They are the nice postman, the kind policeman, the decent shoemaker—as if the intimacy of names had been cut like an umbilical cord when the Jews fled the homes that Herr Stolle passes daily.

“Did you know my father well?” I ask, my German loosening up when we use the familiar vocabulary of house and family, the words my grandparents slipped in when my father wasn’t around to say, “We are Americans now. Speak English.”

“Nein,” says Stolle. “Your father was much older. But the family everyone knew. The Loewengarts were well respected.”

Rolf interjects, “What about the Rathaus, the archives? When can we go there?”

Herr Stolle says he must get permission, and people are away. Rolf scowls until Herr Stolle says he’ll see what he can do. I want to take the edge off Rolf’s pushiness, explain about the need to supplement interviews with documented records, blah, blah, but my German is not up for that. I settle for garden talk. “Seine Garten ist sehr schön.” (Your garden is very lovely.) “Ihre Garten ist sehr schön,” Herr Stolle says pleasantly as we walk past blues, purples and whites, all blooming and nameless to me.

Inside is a spacious living room with black leather couch, oriental rugs and TV with VCR tucked into built-in bookcases. This could be New Jersey. I search the walls for clues as to how “safe” these Germans are, people old enough to be the ones my family fled. A large wooden Jesus on the cross hangs above an easy chair. Unnerving. To its right, a wall of photos of wholesome children and grandchildren. Promising. To its left, a large Chagal lithograph of a bride and groom flying above a Polish ghetto. Surprising. And in the window, a stained-glass shield with lions in a garden, dated 1702. Strange. My family’s name means “lion’s garden.”

Frau Stolle comes out of the kitchen, wiping her hands on a bright red-and-yellow apron. She looks like a German Barbara Bush: sturdy, stout and straight-backed, with white hair framing a face that could be nice or not, depending on the smile. She has baked a Linzertorte for us.

I worry about betrayal. Should I be eating here at all? Other Benheim Jews and their children have returned to visit the family graves, stop at the synagogue and drive by their old homes. But none have sat at a dining room table admiring a panoramic view of their former village that now has no Jews left, not one.
Herr Stolle points out the remains of the castle of the Johanniter, the order of knights that first invited Jews to settle on their lands in 1645. He points out the synagogue, built in 1857, that became the Protestant church in 1953. The man does love dates. I take out a pocket tape recorder as we sit down, and Frau Stolle looks fearful. “Tell her it’s because my German is so weak,” I instruct Rolf, who goes on with a much longer, convoluted explanation that produces a nod. I click it on.

“Please, a slice of Linzertorte for you,” says Frau Stolle in German, cutting a hefty piece with raspberry jam oozing over a dark wall of cinnamon, flour, cocoa and nuts. The real thing. She puts a slice in front of me and watches my first bite anxiously, like my aunts used to do in Queens. I smile; she beams.

“That’s your father’s house there,” Herr Stolle says, pointing down toward the village center. “I’ve arranged for you to go inside if you like. A blacksmith, Herr Dinkle, bought it in 1935—for a fair price,” he says, as his wife refills my coffee cup. “Your family never asked for more. They were satisfied.” He smiles with satisfaction.

Rolf leans close to tell me, in English, that restitution money to the Jews is still a big sore point in Germany. “If your family had asked for more money after the war, you might not get so much coffee and Linzertorte.” He laughs. I look quickly at the Stolles, who keep eating. I wonder what they really understand.

Two visits later, Herr Stolle will tell me his version of “fair price”: how the Jews wanted to sell their belongings quickly and their neighbors agreed to help, paying what they could. And how after the war, these neighbors were accused of cheating, and what a personal insult that was. “To think we were untrustworthy, only after money!” he will sigh, followed by a na ja. It is his usual expression whenever the Holocaust comes close. “But it was a complicated issue,” he adds. “It was the children of the Jews who mostly filed for more restitution. They were angry. Very understandable. They didn’t know about private deals that their parents made because their parents didn’t survive.” Another na ja! and I believe this sensible man who can see all points of view. But later, at night, the doubts will return.

Herr Stolle pauses to sip coffee, and I ask, “What’s that?” pointing to the white cross on the opposite hill. It sits on a pedestal surrounded by wildflowers.

“Ach, the cross to Santa Maria!” Frau Stolle says, “We are Catholic here, you know.”

“Not so Catholic anymore,” corrects Herr Stolle. “Now we also have the Protestants. They are 20 percent. And the Muslims, 20 percent.” The man also loves percentages. I want to know more about “the Muslims,” but Herr Stolle stands up abruptly. “So,” he says, “please come with me now.”

He leads us into a small, neat room with a giant mural of small black rectangles. They represent all the graves in the Jewish cemetery. “And this is the exact map and tells you the exact size of each tombstone, drawn to scale.” His bookshelves are filled with black ring-binders of data about Jewish tombstones, each with a photograph, family name, first name, father, mother, spouse, where they came from, date of marriage, children, occupation and date of death. Some have German translations of Hebrew inscriptions. It is all so methodical, his record keeping of a thousand dead Jews, mostly from before he was born. And unnerving.

I ask how he became interested in this cemetery project. “It’s not a matter of being interested,” says Herr Stolle sharply. “It has to be done. The stones are eroding, so in a few years no one will know who is buried there. We must preserve local history.” I bristle at his correction. If eroding stones were the only issue, why volunteer to host people like Rolf and me for hours or days? Why field questions that expose
old wounds of guilt and blame about those murdered by his generation? Six million Jews, eleven million dead in all—none with neatly marked graves.

“I hope you are doing more than just photographing gravestones,” says Rolf. “In our book, we include Jewish life and what happened to it, who died in the camps, where the others went. I myself found out that...”

Herr Stolle turns away from him and walks to his desk. “I have this for you,” he says, handing me an eight-by-eleven packet in a plastic cover, number 1401. “Your grandfather and great-grandfather are in it, going back to Rubin Feit Loewengart. He was born in 1794.” Inside are photos of six tombstones, inventory lists from the family house in 1894, fire insurance bills, all in a fine calligraphy of a quill dipped into an inkwell. There is nothing personal here. No diaries, letters or photos that reveal lives lived, but his gift still feels weighty in my palm. “It’s what I found out about your family,” says this old man who was an aerial photographer over France during the war—and what else I don’t know. I feel myself drawn to him.

“Thank you,” I say, as if to a kindly uncle I’ve finally met.

We go in his Mercedes down the hill to the village center and pass two teenagers in leather jackets, smoking. One wears a Grateful Dead T-shirt; another has orange hair and a ring in his ear. Neopunk in Benheim? It seems like an oxymoron. I can hear my father’s outrage in Queens about my wanting to smoke or wear lipstick. “In Benheim, we didn’t do such things!” was a favorite refrain. Well, they do now, Dad.

Herr Stolle slows down at an old stone building. “Here is the Gasthaus Kaiser, owned by the Gideons,” says Herr Stolle. “You have met the daughter in Israel, your Tante Hilde?” I nod. “She is well?” I say yes, fine. “The Kurds and Yugoslavs live here now,” he says as two women in chadors and long peasant dresses push a stroller out the front door. Daimler Benz, it seems, has a plant twenty minutes away; they invited guest workers from Afghanistan, Turkey and Yugoslavia in the ’60s, when German labor was tight. They stayed. In the old Jewish houses. “Our village is quite mixed,” says Herr Stolle, “causing some difficulties.”

“What kind?” I ask, listening carefully. The way he sees Muslims may be how he sees—and saw—the Jews.

“Nothing big. They stay up late, we are in bed by nine. And also there are some garbage problems. Small things.” He nods at the two women, who smile shyly and look away. “They are very conservative—from the countryside, not from the city, like Ankara. Very religious.”

“Just like the Jews!” I say, thinking about how my country-boy father was raised to be more religious than my mother, from Stuttgart.

“Can’t be compared,” Herr Stolle says, insulted. “The Jews of Benheim were old, old neighbors. Can’t be compared.”

“But the Turks are also neighbors,” says Rolf, on the offensive. Herr Stolle’s face reddens, but Rolf presses on: “The Turks live in the Jewish houses, do they not?”
“From our point of view, it is not the same,” Herr Stolle says, recovering his equanimity. “The Turks are strangers here. The Jews lived here for four hundred years.”

Silence. We are calming ourselves down as Herr Stolle drives on. We pass the Volksschule, where he and my father went to school twenty years earlier. “They had the top floor, we had the first two floors. They did not go to school on Saturday, we did.” I hear “we” and “they” as segregation, but both men assure me that this school division was a sign of respect for both religions. I ask Herr Stolle if he had any Jewish friends. “Of course; this is Benheim! Everyone got along,” he says and points to an old linden tree where the boys all played marbles. At the crossroad, there’s a street sign: Judische Strasse (Jewish Street) points right, and Herr Stolle says that the other, the Kirche Strasse (Church Street), goes to the Catholic cemetery. I’m wondering how much of the harmony of this village where “everyone got along” was based on separate classrooms and street signs of clear difference. We turn right.

Halfway up a hill, we stop at an old farmhouse, and Herr Stolle takes a rusted key off a wooden peg. I remember the peg, the low wall beside it, my father taking that key so long ago, and for a moment the two men morph into one, father and stranger from a once-shared world.

We follow the road higher and around the bend, and there it is: the same stone portal set deep into the woods, as if leading to a hidden castle. The old key turns in the lock, and the large iron gate opens effortlessly, as if spirits are waiting. A strange thought for secular me, but this is that kind of spot. The looming trees, the thick bed of leaves, gravestones rising from shadow into shafts of sunlight: all create an eerie calm divorced from the red roofs of the living below us.

“This is special,” Rolf whispers to me, and I nod with the same awe I had at thirteen, as if I were mysteriously rooted to these giant dark green conifers. We follow Herr Stolle through rows of graves, our feet crunching the leaves, and Rolf tells me he’s impressed with how well preserved everything is. Even the oldest gravestones, their names blurred, their edges crumbling, are still standing. “In my town the Jewish cemetery was badly destroyed by vandals,” he calls out to Herr Stolle. “Did you not have that damage in Benheim?”

“A few gravestones,” Herr Stolle says, moving forward. “Some ruffian schoolboys in 1941. But a complaint was filed—by the Jewish schoolteacher—and they were repaired. Nothing else was damaged.”

“An official complaint in 1941 by a Jew?” Rolf asks, incredulous. “In our town, he would have been shot!” This is definitely unusual, Rolf whispers. We must look for this document in the archives, definitely.

Herr Stolle drags away a large branch that has fallen on one grave, grumbling that the city of Lorp, now in charge of the cemetery, is not doing its job. “Here is your grandmother Anna,” he says, pulling a weed near her inscription. “And, next to her, your grandfather Rubin.” I try to conjure up the faces I saw framed in my parents’ room: a beautiful woman of thirty or so with my daughter’s face; a debonair man with a handlebar mustache who didn’t look like he traded horses and cows.

The two men look at me. “Are you planning to put down some stones?” Rolf asks, and Herr Stolle points to some small stones half-covered by leaves. They are waiting for the Jewish ritual of honoring the dead, and I feel like a relic on display, like the Navajos must feel doing a rain dance in Arizona for tourists. I choose four stones and lay them on the smooth granite, wishing the dead peace through remembrance. “It’s how you pay tribute to the dead,” my father said long ago on this spot, looking strangely gaunt.
despite his bulk. “The weight helps the souls rise upward more easily.” He placed his stones. “And if Jews still lived here there would be stones on every grave.” I can still see his lips moving in prayer.

Rolf and Herr Stolle are expecting more of me, the kaddish perhaps. But I don’t know this prayer for the dead well enough and stay silent, looking down, waiting them out.

Herr Stolle heads up another row of graves. “And here is your poor Tante Rosa,” he says, removing a dead yellow wildflower and some small broken branches. He seems full of energy to tidy up these old graves from before the Holocaust. *Those souls are not in these woods*. “She died the day before she had to leave.” I read the inscription: Rosa Sara Loewengart. Born 1875, Died March 4, 1942. “Selbstmord,” Herr Stolle says softly.

“Suicide,” Rolf translates. Then he whispers, in English, that Herr Stolle didn’t use the word “deportation.” He can’t escape, nor can I. I never knew I had an aunt who didn’t get out of Germany. I grew up with stories of escape, about how my father, like Moses, had led everyone to safety in Queens. Thirty-five in all. “Why suicide?” I ask. “Did Tante Rosa know where she was going—and choose that instead?”

The vein on Herr Stolle’s forehead bulges. I’m on turf we’ve both been avoiding: what people did or didn’t know about the Holocaust. “That’s not so clear,” he says quietly. “Many old people didn’t want to leave their homes, even to go to an old-age home, which is what the Nazis told them.”

“But of course they knew more,” says Rolf. “In my town people knew.”

“I was not here, and so am not so sure as you,” says Herr Stolle to this young German born thirty-three years after the deportations. “This is a small village, isolated. People say they didn’t know.”

More silence. We near the gate and stop in front of a large monument erected in 1947: “To those who died during the Nazi persecution—1932–1942,” translates Rolf. The words are as cold as the black granite they are carved into. No names on this memorial, no list of how many Jews died. I think of stories the Jews I met in New York told me: of Ilsa’s mother, who was too old to get a visa; and the fifteen children in Lotte’s class photo who didn’t make it out; and Ilse Gideon, who stayed because of her sick parents; and the Salomons, who couldn’t afford boat tickets. There is no room for stories on this stone, but at least their eighty-seven names could cover its smoothness. “The granite was paid for by Benheimers,” says Herr Stolle. “They bartered food for the stone, since in those days no one had money.” A small gesture, but at least the villagers cared enough to build a memorial despite personal hardships, I think—until Rolf whispers that the villagers might have had no choice but to build that monument. He saw records of state orders to do so. His look says, “naïve.”

Day 2: Rolf is behind the wheel, stopped at a red light on top of a portable stand next to a large sign: Construction. It is the same light that stayed red for fifteen minutes last night on our way to our Bavarian-style lodging at the end of a long dirt road. We are headed back to Herr Stolle’s house, talking about how much English he understands. Hard to tell. And about how much more impressive Herr Stolle is than Rolf expected: “One man working so hard for six years, alone. And he is so much more open than other old-timers I’ve met, especially about Prague.”

“What about Prague?”
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“That he was captured near Prague and then escaped with a friend and made his way back to the American Zone and then to Benheim.”

“I thought he spent the war in France, taking aerial photographs.”

“That was earlier. Later in the war, he was a foot soldier—in the East.”

“But when did Stolle say all this?”

“You were in the bathroom.”

“Oh.” Did Stolle wait till I left the room?

“Today I will find out more!” says Rolf, fired up for battle in the archives. Yet he waits patiently at this interminable red light.

“They don’t need a light here,” I say. “There’s no traffic on this road.”

“They are repairing the bridge.”

“What bridge? There’s ten feet going over a stream and not one car has come the other way.”

“It is the law.”

I tap my fingers. “Come on, let’s just go.”

Rolf looks shocked. “We must obey the law.”

This is Germany’s problem. Anyone sensible, any American, surely would ignore this broken light on an empty dirt road. I put my foot on the imaginary gas pedal just as the light turns green.

Herr Stolle is standing outside when we pull up twenty minutes late. We are going first to the Rathaus (City Hall), he says proudly. He got permission even though it is Sunday. But we should not be optimistic about finding much. “What there is, is not so much. They didn’t save anything about the deportations.” Now he uses the real word.

“Also in my town,” says Rolf, and for a brief moment they are on the same side of experience. As we pile into Herr Stolle’s car, I ask if he has found others willing to tell me their stories. Later, he assures; I will meet them all later.

The Rathaus sits on the curve in the road that divides the upper and lower village, an unassuming stone box, neat and functional. Herr Stolle has the key and leads us into a large, high-ceilinged room where the village council meets. I walk over to a wall of photos. “They are the men who never returned,” says Herr Stolle. He doesn’t say which war. “We lost seventy young men; my brother and two cousins were...”

“You had SS in Benheim!” Rolf says. He is noticing uniforms, while I see only dead German soldiers.

“He was a boy, only seventeen. He knew nothing of what the SS would do,” Herr Stolle says mysteriously, leading us quickly toward the stairs. Rolf whispers, in English, “I counted three SS men. So you see, Mimi,” Rolf says with his most annoying paternalism as we follow Herr Stolle up the stairs, “Benheim also had their ardent Nazis!” “How many joined the Nazi Party in Benheim?” I ask Herr Stolle, trying to sound casual.
“Very few, a few louts. Very few,” he says, continuing upward.

“But there are three SS photos on the wall!” Now I sound like Rolf.

No answer. I should push harder, I know, to find out about the SS and the mysterious boy who may be a brother or cousin. But I am afraid Herr Stolle will clam up, introduce me to no one. So despite Rolf’s urgings last night at dinner—“Mimi, you must be tougher with questions!”—I tell myself I’ll learn more my way, as guest, not inquisitioner.

At the top of the stairs, Herr Stolle takes out a large black key. “So,” he says, breathless, “my room.” His room has a large wooden table, two metal chairs, three windows and six metal bookcases devoted to Jews. Rolf pounces like a lion. Where are the deportation files? Where are denials of passports? Where are the newspapers from 1938 on? Herr Stolle points to a row of fat binders and pulls down a dusty brown book for me. “Here are the records about building of the synagogue in 1850. A list of what each family gave—Pressburger, Weinberger, Loewengart...”

Rolf calls from across the room, “Here’s a newspaper article about the boycott in Lorp in 1933. You should record this on tape!” He begins translating: “The Jewish stores of Lorp shut down today as the citizens obeyed the new decree: it is forbidden to buy from the Jews. A group of schoolchildren, led by their teacher, Herr Shutz, smashed every Jewish store window....”

“But that’s in Lorp, not Benheim!” I say as Herr Stolle begins reading me a tax estimate for my great-grandfather. “He owned two sets of dishes, six chickens, one pearl ring....”

Now Rolf has found the voting record of Benheim. Only 16 percent voted for Hitler in March 1933. “That is very low,” he says enthusiastically. “In my town, 44 percent voted for Hitler. That’s more typical of Germany.” I’m feeling up again. Benheim is looking more special—and with archival proof.

Rolf asks to see the complaint filed by the Jewish schoolteacher in 1941, and Herr Stolle disappears into another room. “It must be in the archives in Lorp,” he says, returning a minute later, and Rolf and I look at each other. “This is the only thing I have here.” Herr Stolle hands me a small, stamped piece of paper. “It is a train receipt.” The stamp reads April 21, 1942. “It is for the last Jews sent from Benheim to Stuttgart and then to the East.” I am stunned. Such an innocuous little paper to record so much tragedy and inhumanity. I hold it delicately in my palm. Eighty-seven lives erased by an official stamp indicating bodies paid for, bodies that will end in unmarked graves in Lublin, Riga and Theresienstadt. I turn the receipt over. The paper is still so white.

Before I can ask for a copy, it has disappeared and Rolf is reading a letter from Goering’s office: “Nov. 14, 1938. In order to ensure the necessary unity in handling the Jewish question, which is very important in the economic situation...”

I am being tossed between two generations of Germans searching the past to understand: Herr Stolle, through the comforts of old Jewish records; Rolf, through Nazi documents that prove guilt. I keep listening to what’s in the air, said and unsaid, as if what passes between us, off the record, can tell me once and for all about how good and bad people were—and are. But, of course, Rolf is right. I am naïve. All I can know is the three of us in this room, recasting bits of fact into a narrative we will use “not only for the sake of what was,” as Michael Heller says, but “in order to be.” Because history—on or off the record—is always about the person asking, selecting and filtering out ambiguity, so that we have a story that lets us sleep easier at night.
Herr Stolle interrupts with a lawsuit by the Jew Froehlich against the Jew Gideon, 1875. “You see, this is a big surprise to me!” He sounds so excited. “The Jews fought with each other. I didn’t know that. We thought they always stuck together.” Rolf cuts in with more of Goering’s letter: ...you will have to let me know everything you do about the Jewish question.... It’s signed by Goering,” says Rolf, elated. “So you see this proves...”

The two begin speaking at the same time, loudly. My tape recorder will mix them up, but I do not know which one I should tell to be quiet.

Interpretive Questions

1) Rolf is a German who only learned about the Holocaust at the age of fifteen, even though it is a huge part of his country’s history. Throughout the essay he demonstrates how eager he is to have researched and studied the Jews of his town. How do you think these details help us understand Rolf?

2) Rolf also states that the term “Kristallnacht” should not be used, but instead urges Schwartz to use the word “pogrom.” Look up the word “pogrom” in a dictionary and tell why it is more powerful, and why, coming from a German, it has more significance.

3) Do the discoveries Schwartz makes in this essay give you any reason to believe there were towns where Jews and Germans lived in harmony?

4) Why doesn’t Rolf tell Herr Stolle that he is a Holocaust Studies student? How does this omission affect the interaction between the two?

5) Herr Stolle is friendly, but he hides details, like there being S.S in his town, and he is prejudiced against Muslims. Do this concealment and prejudice affect the reader’s view of him as a reliable source of information about the Holocaust?
6) There is a constant tension between Rolf and Stolle, from the graveyard visit to the library visit. How does their bickering affect Schwartz? Are her feelings changing towards Germans or are her doubts increasing?

7) Rolf repeatedly reminds Schwartz of her naiveté. A significant moment is when she is thinking the monument for the deceased Jews was built out of respect. Rolf points out that it was built by a state order. Do you think it matters that the monument was built by government directive?

8) Does it matter that the Jews fought with each other? Does the revelation of this information make it look like Rolf and Stolle are eager to put blame on Jews?

9) The title of the essay, “Off the Record,” is important to our understanding of what Schwartz learns in the course of her trip. What does Schwartz mean by “off the record”?

**Writing Prompt**

1) Mimi Schwartz traveled halfway around the country to uncover the truth behind her family’s past, but discovering more about your family’s history can begin much closer to home.

   a. Conduct an interview with a family member or friend from an older generation. Whether they grew up in a different town or city or the same one you live in now, ask them to describe what it was like when they were a child: who were their neighbors? What was the downtown like? What did they do for fun? What was going on politically when they were young? Did the political climate affect the way they saw different people in their town?

   b. Once you’ve recorded the information, write an essay in which you reflect on the differences you notice between how your relative described their past and the way you see the world now. Or think about how their version of the past compares to your perception of the way things were.