
Jeff Daniels
Colby College

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American Holocaust Films:
A Case Study in Jewish American Identity
(1937-1993)

By Jeff Daniels
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Introduction
When examining the image of the Jew in American Holocaust films, one is truly determining how American Jews view themselves. These films' presentation of Jews exposes not only how Jewish Americans wished to see themselves but also how much Gentile Americans wanted to see of Jewish culture. An exploration of America's Holocaust films from the late 1930s to the early 1990s reveals an increasing concentration of Jews as the main victims of the event. The degree to which this specificity is emphasized exhibits how much the American public accepted Jews and their plight. At the same time, the prevalence of Jewishness in Holocaust films reveals the comfort that American Jews feel in publicly expressing their ethnicity. The manner in which this comfort progresses can be determined by analyzing how these films both present the Jew and define what it means to be Jewish.

In order to understand how American Holocaust films reflect Jewish American identity, one must consider such topics as Hollywood's representation of the assimilated Jew in war films just before and during World War II, the universalized Jew of post-war films and why so many Jews supported this loss of Jewish identity, the depiction of the Jews' plight through Americanized terms to make the film more "understandable" to all audiences, the contrasting mythic image of the Israeli in films of the 1960s, counterbalancing the image of the passive Jew, the growing conception of the Holocaust as an integral part of Jewish American identity in the "Culture of Victimization," and finally how these issues evolved and culminated in the Hollywood blockbuster, Schindler's List (1992).
Jewish immigration into the United States took place in three successively larger waves. The first Jews to arrive in America were the Sephardim during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, fleeing persecution from Spain and Portugal. Arriving in small numbers, these Jews were fast to learn the country’s customs and integrated through intermarriage. Next to come were the Ashkenazim of Western Europe during the mid-nineteenth century. Much as the Sephardim before them, these mainly German Jews assimilated well into American culture, quickly rising in economic status. The third wave of immigrants proved to be the most substantial in number, increasing America’s Jewish population of 229,000 in 1877 to 4,228,000 in 1927. These were Jews from Eastern Europe, escaping the Czarist pogroms of Russia and Poland and the poverty of the shtetls or small Jewish villages. To the American Jews already acclimated to city living, however, these immigrants were a source of shame and embarrassment due to their “uncivilized” rural mannerisms. Due to their great numbers these Jews found their place by feeding the necessity for unskilled labor in an expanding industrial economy and eventually filling vacancies in a growing service industry.

Upward mobility seemed inevitable, yet discrimination kept Jews from most high positions. The only industries even remotely open to allowing Jews into executive branches were those so new and inexperienced that they did not have the luxury of being prejudiced when looking for eager workers. One example was the film industry, which came into existence just around the turn of the century, much around the same time Jews in the third wave of immigration were entering in their greatest numbers. The industry was in no position to be picky about those with even the slightest bit of talent or interest

that wished to take part. It is for this reason that Eastern European Jews became the "backbone of film production" in America from its beginnings.2

To meet the demand of large urban audiences, swelling with Eastern European Jewish immigrants, the early film industry featured many productions depicting Jews and Jewish life. However, by the late 1930s, very few Jews were seen in films due to the medium's expanding reach into areas either unfamiliar with or uninterested in Jewish culture. Some production companies were willing to bend over backwards to abide by the interests of an industry growing in size and profit. Removing Jews from productions was a small price to pay to attract the millions of moviegoers in Fascist Europe. This period reveals an industry that cares much more about its economic than its moral standing.

The influence of popular opinion over film lead to the depiction of the Jew or any minority character in stereotypical terms.3 Film historian Ilan Avisar explains how these characters are depicted as either prototypes or archetypes due to their limited depth on the screen, inevitable in the usually quick narrative development of the filmmaking process. If the Jewish character of the film is a prototype, he or she can consist of stereotypical and, thus, potentially derogatory qualities. For example, a Jewish film character is depicted as cheap, large-nosed, and carrying a heavy accent; qualities many would consider offensive. If the character is an archetype, his or her identity becomes universal and loses much of its Jewish dimensions.4 For instance, the Jewish character has a house in the suburbs, a job in the city and enjoys watching baseball; qualities held by most any

2 Ibid. p.3.
4 Ibid.
American. Many pre-war films used this archetypal portrayal of Jews by attaching to them American cultural values containing strong Christian overtones for instance, turning the other cheek. Some Jews were opposed to this characterization while many others enjoyed the way they saw themselves depicted in these films before, during, and directly after World War II.

When mentioning the Christian overtones Hollywood adds to its Holocaust films, these implications should be read as not necessarily holding religious but American cultural meaning. Avisar claims, “Hollywood generally refrains from expressing overtly religious doctrines,” and goes on to explain how it still uses Christian doctrines of sin, punishment, and redemption to draw lessons from Nazi aggression towards Jews. The use of Christian doctrines does not fit a religious purpose in these films. Instead, it has American cultural signification. These films are trying to tell stories that express the country’s most complicated ethical definitions, and expressions of ethics are found in America’s religious roots. To use Christian principles and symbolism in reference to Jewish suffering is to use a language that expresses almost 400 hundred years of American culture built on Protestant ideals. Therefore, the Christianization of Jews in these films really refers to the Americanization of their plight. Americanization will then be used to describe the indoctrination of Jewish ethnicity with American religious and cultural ideology.

The true lesson behind this characterization, however, is Hollywood’s failure to bestow Jews with Jewish characteristics. Telling the story of the Holocaust in Americanized terms denies the relevance of a Jewish description. Without this Jewish portrayal of the event, there is no mention of how Jews dealt with the idea that their
punishment was willed by God for their transgressions, how some as a result lost their faith in God, and how others accepted the fact that they are not in a position to understand their plight. Because an account of the Jews’ persecution under the Nazis in these terms reflect a cultural language too particular for most Americans to relate to, this Jewish understanding of the Holocaust is neglected. America’s depiction of Jews in Christian/American terms and American Jews’ acceptance of this portrayal is a question whose answer is essential to understanding Jewish American identity.

The Jew in war films of the 1940s was very much an archetype in Avisar’s definition. Very little detail was given to minorities in these productions, resulting in the emphasis of their “American” qualities. Showing an assimilated fighting force was seen as a more effective tool in countering the anti-Semitism of Fascist Europe than displaying that anti-Semitism to the American audience. Moreover, presenting the Jew as an American fighting for his country was a culmination of what Jews themselves were trying to achieve after several generations of acclimation to American culture. The average Jew, while concerned about the growing news of atrocities against European Jews, saw this universal view of his people as unprejudiced and progressive.

When pictures of what the Nazis had done to European Jews were seen in newspapers and newsreels, the stereotypical perception of the Jew as perpetual victim and sufferer rather than fighter was confirmed. American Jews had no knowledge of the sporadic Jewish resistance and could not explain what many Americans deemed Jewish passivity. Therefore, they became embarrassed by these stark images of fragility. As film historian Lester Friedman put it, “Everywhere the Jew was perceived as a weakling

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5 Avisar, p.96.
6 Friedman, Lester D. Hollywood’s Image of the Jew
rather than a warrior." This embarrassing image dissuaded many American Jews from identifying publicly with the Jewish victims of the Holocaust. This self-consciousness mixed with the general public's repulsion from survivor pictures explains why the first films to discuss anti-Semitism directly after the war made no mention of the event.

These films embellished the melting pot theory already laid out in recent war films. Though anti-Semitism was certainly prevalent in American society before the war, all racial prejudice became publicly recognized as an evil attributed to Nazis and Fascism and, therefore, un-American. The concept of hating Jews was portrayed by Hollywood as illogical since they could look, act, and think just like any other American. Yet, in these films it is more evident that only the assimilated Jew is praised. American Jews were still not recognized and respected for their differences.

The horrific memories of world war impelled many Americans to look towards building a better future. The result for most was an optimism ignorant of its past, overshadowing constructive analysis of the recent Nazi atrocities. Caught in this fog of seeking a brighter tomorrow, many Americans, Jews included, refused to believe the Holocaust stories of Jewish refugees who felt they should be told. However, it was rare that these stories were brought up since most Holocaust survivors entering America and angry American Jews refrained from voicing their opinions on Germany for fear of being labeled communist. After the war Germany quickly became America's newest ally against the Soviet Union. Therefore, American Jews who fervently urged public recognition of Germany's Nazi past were considered against Germany's attempts to prevent Russia's communist expansion across Europe.


7 Ibid.
By the 1950s many members of the film industry were under suspicion by the government for Communist ties. In order to clear the industry's name and buying into the ignorant optimism of the period, films which attempted to alter the image of Germans by portraying sensitive Nazi characters who went against the ideal of their regime where produced. This restricting fear carried over to the subject of the Holocaust when the first films to touch directly on the subject were made. These films were universalized as general stories of human suffering, glossing over the German and Jewish connection to the event. This better image of Germany's past was created at the cost of ignoring the specifically anti-Semitic goals of the Third Reich that led to a suffering many feel the world had never before seen.

This optimistic ignorance gradually changed in the 1960s as negative news from Germany led many Americans to believe Germans had not come to terms with their Nazi past. Films followed suit by questioning Germans' responsibility for the destruction of six million Jews as well as Americans' disinterest in the subject. In this more socially sensitive environment, American Jews began to feel more comfortable articulating their personal convictions about Germans. Yet, it was not until a few years later that major social changes would valorize the victim in American society and Jews would freely embrace the Holocaust as a symbol of their ethnic identities.

As the 60s rolled on, diverse opinions on such issues as civil rights in the South and Vietnam made America feel like less of a community. As the melting pot theory dissolved, Americans began to accentuate their ethnic individuality. Much like blacks, women, and homosexuals, Jews adopted a victim identity in tune with the glorification of victimhood in the media. Because this form of identity was one which any American Jew
could embody, it became very popular. Filmmakers took advantage of this growing audience and made films more centered on the Jewishness of the Holocaust, for instance *The Pawnbroker* (1965). This film presented a specifically Jewish pain felt under Nazi persecution. Further, its acceptance by a mass audience reveals a country more sensitive to ethnic portrayals of the topic. Yet, the film is also greatly Americanized. Perhaps to attract larger audiences, American Holocaust films still needed to explain their stories in ways with which most Americans could identify. Therefore, considering how little many American Jews know of their ethnicity, it is through this American cultural language of Christian ideals that they may prefer to learn about the Jewishness of the Holocaust.

Other films in the 60s contrasted the Israeli struggle to create their own state in Palestine with the Holocaust. Here, the success of the state of Israel in 1948 offers the consolation for six million Jews murdered a few years before. Strong, healthy, virile Jews are shown in these films, defeating the Arab threat to their survival. The image of the Jew in this film is, then, opposed to that of pictures and footage of the “living corpses” freed from concentration camps. American Jews welcomed these almost mythical images of Jews who provided them with valiant ethnic role models. However, the dramatized potency of these Jewish film characters reflects the start of American Jewry overcompensating for its negative image in response to the still existing stereotypes of the weak, fragile Jew.

By the 1990’s being Jewish was no longer an embarrassment and American Jews felt more confident in their ethnicity. After thirty years of evolution, the Holocaust-based identity grew considerably in popularity as Jews continued to search for definition. This still accepted victim identity explains why many American Jews connected with
*Schindler’s List* (1993). Many of the themes and images concerning Jews and the Holocaust that came out of the 60s and 70s would culminate in this film. This film presents its Holocaust victims with a righteousness that mirrors the mythic heroes of Zionist films of the 60s. Americanized imagery using Christian ideology is also very much a part of this film. This continued lack of more Jewish culture-based depictions of the Holocaust in film seems to be caused by American Jews who are simply unaware of a more personal way to explain their plight.

Before delving into the history of American Holocaust film a few terms and theories on film should be explained. A modern theory of the American cinema suggests that it presents popular views based on prevailing social attitudes.\(^8\) *The Immediate Experience* by Robert Warshow defines this relatively recent view. He claims this critical approach treats films “as indexes to mass psychology or, sometimes, the ‘folk spirit.’” Its primary aim being sociological analysis, this criticism is “concerned with those elements which [are] believed to be affecting or expressing the audience.”\(^9\) In other words, a film can either affect or reflect the social attitudes of its viewer.

The following study is concerned with how the American cinematic approach towards the Holocaust reflects American’s, specifically American Jews’, changing image of Jews over the past sixty years. Given that Hollywood’s films emulate the current attitudes of popular society, a study of its Holocaust films reveals how Jewish Americans have identified themselves with the event. In her article on cinema and Jewish American identity, Sara Horowitz claims,

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\(^8\) Avisar, p.91.

\(^9\) Warshow, Robert. *The Immediate Experience*
Cinematic versions of the Shoah comment not only on the murdered Jews of Europe but also on the ideological climate in which the films themselves are produced, distributed, and reviewed. These films generate...meanings about the nature of evil, anti-Semitism, racism, the Jew, and Jewish destiny. These films, then, teach us as much if not more about the social ideologies of the time in which they were made as they do about the history they attempt to expose.

Viewing how Jews appear in America’s Holocaust films reveals much about how American Jews define their own Judaism. The universalized, Americanized, and victimized Jews seen in these films reveal particular trends in thought about the Jewish image over certain times and by certain groups in America’s history. As Lester Friedman explains, “By examining how Jews were presented in movies, one might learn what some Jews thought about themselves, how the image of Jews in the national consciousness changed over the years, and what Jews were willing to show of themselves to a largely Gentile audience.” It is through these depictions that a better understanding can be made concerning where Jewish identity has come from and where it will go.


Friedman. p.vii.
Early in the twentieth century, films featuring Jewish characters were commonplace as their immigrant tales appealed to city audiences. But as these films began to reach larger audiences throughout the country and abroad, film characters became more non-denominational and Jewish roles became less popular. Wartime gave filmmakers an opportunity to bring back the Jew but in a form which presented them as fully assimilated, leaving little space for ethnic definition. Post-war films continued this colorless, assimilated view of American Jews by showing Jewish characters who adopted a merciful temperament, emulating America's Christian values. This Americanization of the Jewish image in American Holocaust films during the 1940s and 50s would reflect the conflict of American Jews who, in attempting to be accepted into the dominant culture, are forced to conceal those behaviors and beliefs that make them most Jewish.

**Pre-war Hollywood and the Invisible Jew**

The first three decades of American film detail the stories of "pogroms, of immigration, of ghetto living, and of upward mobility" that defined Jews' struggle in the New World.\(^\text{12}\) Many of these films were based on the fiction literature of late-nineteenth century Jews, who wrote about their lives as immigrants or those of their people. Many of these writers were influenced by ingrained American notions of the image of the Jew. This image was set by the Puritans who felt Jews had an "aura of angelic morality" left over from their patriarchal ancestors of the Old Testament.\(^\text{13}\) One of the images this conviction brought about was of the "persecuted sufferer" victimized by the wicked

\(^{12}\) Ibid. p.4.

\(^{13}\) Ibid. p.14.
governments of the Old World and trying desperately to reach New World freedom.\textsuperscript{14}
Films of this time and still today present this view of the suffering Jew whose story of
upward mobility and achieving the "American Dream" are universal or universalized
enough to appeal to other immigrant groups.\textsuperscript{15}

However, with the broadening appeal of the cinema at home and especially
abroad, the film industry focused drastically less on immigrant city audiences and
searched for more sweeping themes. One result of this change was the exemption of
Jewish characters from the screen because of the difficulty of selling them in the now
Fascist countries which made up much of Hollywood's overseas market.\textsuperscript{16} Films were
now made with characters who were as nationless, raceless, and religionless as possible.

\textit{Three Comrades} (1937), a film about three German World War I veterans living through
the rise of the Nazi regime, illustrates Hollywood's attempt to appease both sides of the
Atlantic. Here, scenes of a poor Jew claiming his love for Germany and a rich Jew
refraining from cheating three young Gentiles were cut to focus away from the film's
political intentions and more towards its love story.\textsuperscript{17} The film industry was intent on
making their characters as ethnically and politically bland as possible to appease the
foreign market. In one of Hollywood's less admirable attempts to compromise, Louis B.
Mayer, co-head of MGM studios, is said to have invited a representative from the Nazi
government to suggest any objections to the film before its opening in order to assure the
film's success abroad.\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid. p. 15.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid. p. 20-21.
\textsuperscript{16} Friedman. p. 84.
\textsuperscript{17} Avisar. p. 93.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.
This all changed when Warner Brothers chief salesperson in Germany was executed for not saluting Hitler. The company’s newfound animosity towards Nazis resulted in an approval for the production of *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* (1939), this country’s first anti-Nazi film. Warner Brothers became the first production company to defy Hollywood’s foreign market concerns. *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* is about an FBI investigation of Nazi organizations in the US. Yet, while this film centers on Nazis as the enemy, the word “Jew” is never mentioned. Nazis are not even portrayed as anti-Semitic. Even after foreign audiences were dismissed, Jews were still not welcome characters on the American screen. This conspicuous absence reflects the political atmosphere of the day, which focused on the Nazi atrocities as un-American instead of specifically against the Jews.

When the Warners opened the floodgates, MGM followed soon after with their production of *The Mortal Storm* (1940). The story emulates the intentions of the Russian film, *Professor Mamlock* (1938) made a few years before whose American release deserves explanation. Though American films shied away from showing the victimization of anyone in Nazi Germany in 1938, let alone Jews, Russian films were bolder and found an audience in the United States. Russia was on bad terms with Germany at this time and produced *Professor Mamlock* to raise awareness of the brutalities of the Nazi regime. This film tells the story of a German-Jewish medical scientist and war hero who is condemned and eventually killed because of his non-Aryanism. A *New York Times* film review of the period claims the film “says nothing new about Nazi persecution of the Jews in Germany; but that it says anything at all...

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19 Friedman, p.82.
should be news to the American filmgoer.” The article then comments on American filmmakers’ fear of touching the subject due to loss of foreign markets. It goes on to mention the film’s treatment of the persecution of Jews and Communists in the same light to fulfill Russia’s propagandistic intentions. The reviewer sees this strategy as narrowing this situation to a political drama instead of recognizing its religious, racial and economic implications. He then condemns this simplification by claiming the Russian producers have wasted an opportunity which “has been denied the other filmmakers of the world.”

A later review continues, “We should like to be in Hollywood when it is shown there. So many producers will be tingling vicariously as the picture makes its thrusts.” Most importantly it reveals Hollywood’s eagerness to tell “one of the most dramatic and tragic stories of contemporary history.” This film is, therefore, important in pointing out the economic pressures that kept Hollywood, however eager, from focusing at all on Jews in order to appease a worldwide audience.

_The Mortal Storm_ reflects how Hollywood was slow to release itself from these economic pressures. This film tells the story of Professor Roth, a non-Aryan who teaches scientific theories contradictory to Nazi beliefs. It is, therefore, basically similar to _Professor Mamlock_ yet, the major differences between the two expose Hollywood’s failure to recognize Germany’s assault against the Jews. While _Professor Mamlock_ contains a scene where the professor is carried through the streets with “Jude” painted across his chest, Roth is condemned for standing by his idea of scientific truth. These

21 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
24 Avisar. p.96.
theories are claimed to originate from scientists such as Heine and Einstein, yet their Jewishness is not revealed to be the reason for why they are taboo. For example, one scene shows Nazi youth throwing these scientists’ books into a bonfire while defaming their false theories, not their Jewish ethnicity.\textsuperscript{25} This shows Americans a view of Germany that is against scientific truth instead of revealing its anti-Semitic intentions.

Though the book of this film marks the Professor and his daughter as Jewish and half-Jewish respectively, the film follows in line with \textit{Confessions of a Nazi Spy} by not mentioning either character’s ethnicity. This brings more attention to the blatant Christian symbolism in one particular scene at the end of the film. When the daughter lies dying, her lover comforts her by mentioning the pealing of church bells from across the border. Avisar claims this “indicates where [the daughter’s] soul will find eternal rest.”\textsuperscript{26} In another scene, Professor Roth delivers a speech after his imprisonment advocating love rather than resistance. These appeals to the church and Christian doctrine can be seen as an obtrusive “call to Christendom, offering salvation to the Jewish victims of the Nazis by Christianizing them.”\textsuperscript{27} One explanation for showing Jews in Christian terms is that it would ensure their sympathetic following by the 40 million, mostly Christian American moviegoers of the time.\textsuperscript{28} Others saw both the Christianization of Jewish characters or lack of recognition of their ethnicity in film as an effective way of informing Americans of Nazi atrocities, without making them seem too politically centered around Jews.

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid. p.97.
When world war once again engulfed Europe, one main Jewish fear was that the prominence of Jewish persecution in Eastern Europe, giving reason for why America should enter into combat, would attest Hitler's claims that the Jews were to be blamed for the war. This anxiety, combined with the general view among American Jews that their interests to aid their brothers abroad conflicted with national interests, led many of them to not openly criticize America's official war policy. Even those Jews who expressed a criticism for the country's lack of focus on saving European Jewry proved too discordant to unite effectively. 29

One example of this failure of pro-Jewish aid groups to combine strength is the lack of support by the established American Jewish leadership for the *We Will Never Die* pageant. This pageant began as a presentation in Madison Square Garden to call for action against the killing of Jews and commemorate those already murdered in German occupied Europe. A belief at this time that American Jews were pushing the country towards war to save their kin in Europe was common to American pre-war isolationist thinking. 30 Therefore, because of the pageant's sponsorship by the radical Committee for a Jewish Army, the American Jewish Congress and other Jewish organizations put a halt to the pageant's touring of other major U.S. cities due to political differences. 31 This disagreement, deprived many Americans from being educated on Germany's pogrom against the Jews, could perhaps be due to the American Jewish Committee's (AJC) following a more acquiescent response to the government's war policy. Also, the AJC, the country's most received Jewish voice, may have desired less focus on the Jewish

29 Ibid. p.99-100.
30 Novick. p.28.
31 Ibid. p.100-1.
specificity of defeating Nazi forces. In other words, the AJC must have recognized the lack of popularity a war premise such as saving the Jews would receive in a largely unsympathetic America. It should be no surprise that Hollywood, keeping the public’s perspective in mind, found little reason to concentrate heavily on the Nazi oppression of Jews in its films.

One notable exception to this standpoint was Chaplin’s *The Great Dictator* (1940). In this comedy, Chaplin plays both a Fascist dictator and a persecuted, sympathy evoking Jewish barber. His co-ownership of United Artists allowed him to escape the politics of other studios. But what lets Chaplin get away with putting Fascist anti-Semitism in the center of this film is the fact that he is not Jewish. As a Gentile, Chaplin was able to make a film about Jewish persecution without being accused of propagandizing Jewish issues. Nevertheless, the film was heavily criticized in America for its strong negative depictions of the Nazi regime and banned almost everywhere internationally. The reaction to *The Great Dictator* illustrates to Hollywood why they should not to focus on the victimization of Jews in Nazi Germany.33

*Jews and War in a “Cinema of Assimilation”*

When the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor on December 7th, 1941, America declared war on Japan and its allies, including Germany. Considering Japan as the main cause of U.S. involvement in the war, most Americans were more concerned over the Pacific conflict than what was going on in Europe. When attention focused more on Europe, wartime propagandists found it difficult to find an equivalent to “Remember

Pearl Harbor" to shift American animosity against Hitler. Hollywood had to find a trait for American audiences that would make it easy to hate Fascist Europe.

After news of Jewish victimization came late in 1942, concentration camps became the most recognizable symbol of the Nazi regime. This could be due to a common view of the war as based on "actively contending forces: the dramatically satisfying victim of Nazism was the heroic and principled oppositionist." From the information America had received, the Jewish victim was in contrast to this image, widely seen as passive and lacking inspirational quality. *None Shall Escape* (1944), one of the only Hollywood depictions of specifically Jewish victimhood during the war, attempted to rewrite this ill-favored perception. Here, a final scene shows a rabbi urging his people to revolt in order to take their "place along with all other oppressed peoples." This rebellion ends with their death and the killing of a few SS officers beneath a cruciform signpost. Here, in an attempt to universalize Jewish victimhood for an American audience, the Jewish uniqueness of the Holocaust is de-emphasized by using Christian symbolism.

Universalized films such as this paralleled America's wartime propaganda machine by presenting the Nazis as the enemy of "free men everywhere" in order to solidify the ambiguous war goals between the United States and Germany. By showing the Nazis as a universal enemy, producers felt war films would appeal to a larger audience. The image of the Nazi victim, therefore, had to be broadened rather than narrowed strictly to Jews.

However, the U.S. government, well aware of the large number of Jews in Hollywood, feared that the film industry would attempt to focus war goals on saving Jewish victims of Nazi atrocities. This concern led Washington to issue a *Government Information Manual for the Motion Pictures* in 1942. This document claimed, “There are still groups in this country who are thinking only in terms of their particular group. Some citizens have not been aware of the fact that this is a people’s war, not a group war.” Hollywood producers were already in this mindset. In 1943, when responding to a suggestion that a film be made depicting Hitler’s treatment of the Jews, studio heads felt it would be better to offer a film “covering various groups that have been subject to the Nazi treatment [which] of course would take in the Jews.” These mainly Jewish producers kept loyal to their people by recognizing their victimization, yet were well aware that their films would sell better by referring also to the Protestant and Catholic casualties of Nazism, government pressure or not. What these studio heads represent is a common opinion among most Jewish Americans that diluting Jewish victimhood helped both to combat the notion that the war was fought primarily for Jews and, more importantly, to widen support for the anti-Nazi cause. Slightly similar sentiments would be reflected by Steven Spielberg forty years later in his attempt to tell his Holocaust stories to the largest possible audience with *Schindler’s List* (1992).

What resulted from this attempt to receive the most diverse attendance were films depicting Jews as Christ figures. These characters act either as more identifiable to the vastly Christian American audience or as examples by which the main character learns the true meaning of being Christian. *Once Upon a Honeymoon* (1942), starring Ginger

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36 Avisar. p.92.
37 Novick. p.28.
Rogers (O’Hara) and Cary Grant (O’Toole), is a film about an investigative reporter on the trail of Hitler’s fingerman. O’Hara is a “social climbing adventuress” who finds her humanity after helping her Jewish maid escape arrest. Later, both O’Hara and O’Toole are mistaken for Jews and put into a detention center with other Jews bound for concentration camps. O’Hara remarks, “We’re really in a mess,” to which O’Toole replies, “Now, O’Hara, what about these people?” This film supports the theory that Jews are shown as the “carriers of the ideal” for the Christian character. In other words, both characters gain a stricter sense of morals after learning of the Jews’ treatment in Germany. In O’Hara’s case, her personal growth is redemption in the Christian sense, as she eschews material possessions in favor of more humanitarian acts. The Puritan view of the Jew as the holder of “angelic morality” still lingered in their depictions three hundred years later. The suffering Jew is, then, the lesson learned by both characters who leave the story better Christians but really better Americans.

*Address Unknown* (1944), taken from a story in Reader’s Digest, among other things deals with the consequences of a Jewish American stage actress’s ignorance of Nazi censorship. In one scene, just before opening night of the play, a German censor takes out lines such as “the meek shall inherit the earth,” a recognizable line from the New Testament that perhaps is too close a reference to Jews in the American writer’s view of the Nazi’s mind. However, as the scene opens with the Jewish actress praying alongside a group of nuns with a background set of a cathedral, she says the line and the play is halted as shouts of “Jude” echo from the crowd. Though the main character’s

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38 Ibid. p.28-9.
39 Erens. p.166.
40 Insdorf. p.182.
Jewish ethnicity is verified, the Christian symbolism of the stage set acts to universalize the Nazi's repressive policies.

One of the more blatant attempts to Christianize the Jews of Nazi Germany is *The Seventh Cross* (1944). Here, seven men, one of whom is Jewish, escape from a Nazi concentration camp. Six, among them the Jew, are caught and are punished by crucifixion. While both this film and *Address Unknown* seek to recognize the Nazi persecution of Catholics and other non-Jews, the effect is an obscuration of the theme of Jewish victimization.

*Tomorrow the World,* made in 1944, is more aware of Nazi persecution of Jews and suggests the manner in which they should confront their hatred for Nazis after the war. Here a Jewish woman suffers the extreme hatred of her fiancé's nephew, recently brought to America from Nazi Germany. The film shows her turning the other cheek in the face of the child's extreme intolerance. In other words, her display of acceptance and forgiveness makes her "a model of Christian behavior." This was Hollywood's recommendation as "the proper path toward ultimate reconciliation with the Germans, even for the people most threatened by them." This film furthers the imposition of Christian ideals on Jews in order to present them as displaying the integrity all Americans should possess, again another depiction of Jews as "carriers of the ideal."

To understand how Jews responded to the portrayal of the Jewish American soldier in film, it is important to look at depictions of European Jews in the media. In

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43 Avisar. p.97.
44 Friedman. p.107.
May of 1942 two Jewish members of the Polish National Council in London received a transmission from the Jewish Labor Bund in Poland tracing the murderous path the Nazis had taken across their country. The information gave detailed descriptions of how the Nazis were killing Polish Jews and estimated the death toll to be around 700,000. In an effort to pressure both Britain and the United States to retaliate, these men immediately wired the BBC. U.S. papers were soon to publish information from the report yet gave little attention to the story: the New York Times devoted two inches while the Boston Globe relegated the story to page 12. This failure to publicize such massive stories extensively may have been due to the unreliability of underground sources. Editors from other papers may also have used the de-emphasis of these reports by the Jewish run New York Times as an indicator to whether the issue was at all important. Further, the idea that Germany was exterminating its Jews still seemed sensational at this time. That they were putting them to work in these concentration camps seemed more plausible.

Still, the American public had heard enough to understand Nazi Europe was not the place to be if you were Jewish. A poll taken in January 1943 showed 47% of Americans to believe reports of the killing of over two million Jews. What this information maintained in the average American was the stereotypical view of the Jew as the perpetual victim in world history. The perception of cowardly European Jews preferring to be murdered rather than defend themselves was an embarrassment to American Jews, lacking the information to explain this passivity. It is no wonder that the Jewish soldier in war films, presenting the Jew as fighter rather than sufferer, was

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46 Ibid. p.323.
widely accepted by American Jews no matter how blandly his ethnicity was portrayed. Usually the Jewish soldier was a kid from New York, not particularly smart, and always cracking jokes. Anti-Semitism within fighting units was not touched by any war film of the period. Due to Hollywood's need to show the country's "united racial front against a common enemy," the combat unit was intended to portray assimilated minorities in American society. Producers had no reason to reveal the inherent anti-Semitism among US forces and every reason to emphasize the Jews' assimilation into the country's culture.

Films such as *Bataan* (1943), *Air Force* (1943), and *Pride of the Marines* (1945) featured soldiers of varying ethnic backgrounds, yet showed little connection to their culture or religion. Friedman explains, a simple role call in the average American war film reveals the country's focus on a racially assimilated army fighting a common enemy. He points out that *Bataan* features soldiers named Dane, Ramirez, Matowski, Todd, and Feingold. Ethnicity in these films is "superficially defined almost entirely by food preferences, attitudes, and gestures." Religious convictions of Jews are not discussed, and everyone appears basically similar. The spirit of democracy that spread over the country during World War II influenced Hollywood to add this "melting pot mentality" to its films. The war film stands as an example of the accentuation of "Americanness" not Jewishness in a "cinema of assimilation."

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48 Friedman. p.108.
49 Erens. p.171.
50 Friedman. p.95.
51 Ibid.
52 Ibid. p.96.
53 Ibid.
54 Ibid. p.90.
Post-war Understandings of Anti-Semitism

In August 1944, the Red Army allowed members of the American press to inspect the recently captured Majdanek death camp. After viewing gas chambers, crematoria, and mounds of ashes, one reporter claimed, "I am now prepared to believe any story of German atrocities, no matter how savage, cruel and depraved." Suddenly newspapers and magazines ran stories of Nazi persecution on their front pages for over a month. Survivors were described by witnesses as "hardly human: some had lost their minds, some looked idiotically ahead." A two week presentation of stills and footage of the camps from the United States Army Signal Corps and the British army ran in newsreels in theaters across America. One New York City theater chain reported a 25% increase in audience attendance. Many other theaters such as Radio City Music Hall refused to show them due to their graphic nature.

It should be no surprise that shortly after the end of World War II Hollywood, in its efforts to appeal to the largest denomination, chose not to focus on the realities of war. There was a general fear that audiences would be repulsed by the horrific images of recent memory. Films such as Crossfire (1947) and Gentleman's Agreement (1947) worked well to reflect on the lessons of the Holocaust without taking the subject on directly. These films focused on anti-Semitism in America and in the process presented an image of the socially acceptable yet identity-deprived American Jew.

Wyman, p.324.
Ibid. p.148.
Avisar. p.106.
The general trend among these films is the notion that anti-Semitism in this country, while seemingly harmless, is reminiscent of Nazism and is, therefore, un-American. Though the treatment of Jews by the Nazis is not mentioned in either film, it is suggested that defeating Fascism in Europe is equivalent to fighting bigotry and discrimination at home.\(^{59}\) However, members of the AJC felt raising the issue of anti-Semitism would only exacerbate the issue.\(^{60}\) Their opinions are best expressed by a conference called by the studio head of Warner Brothers to discourage the production of Crossfire: “For Chrissake, why make that picture? We’re getting along all right. Why raise the whole subject?”\(^{61}\) This dialogue reveals the thought process of some American Jews who saw the Nazis defeated, Jewish prisoners freed, and figured “why not leave well enough alone.”

Still, production went ahead. Crossfire is a murder melodrama where police investigate the killing of a Jew by a racist demobilized soldier. The murder victim, Samuels, is illustrated as the stereotypical middle-aged, balding, short, and unathletic Jew. A review of the film in Commentary magazine adds, “He is, come alive, a composite of many of the anti-Semitic stereotypes of the Jew—soft-handed, flashily dressed, suave, artistic, intellectual, moralizing, comfortably berthed in a cushy bachelor apartment during the war, with a bosomy Gentile mistress, self-assured, pushing in where he is not wanted.”\(^{62}\) This image leads the killer to believe Samuels never served in the army. Later a close-up of a document shows him to have been discharged from the army.

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\(^{60}\) Erens, p.178.
\(^{61}\) Friedman, p.125.
after being injured in Okinawa in 1945. Evidently, the director intended to show that while Jews may appear different from other Americans they are no better or worse.63

This film was not well accepted, however, as its stereotypical depictions of Samuels upset many Jews with voices loud enough to be heard. As a result, a committee was created by the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council called The Motion Picture Project with hopes to prevent the derogatory representation of Jews on the screen.64 Though Crossfire attempted to color the Jew more ethnically than previous films, American Jews had spoken and were not at all grateful.

Considered a more successful film and a better depiction of anti-Semitism in America, Gentleman’s Agreement claims that Jews are no worse than other Americans because they are no different. In this film, Gregory Peck plays Phil Green-Skylar, a writer for a liberal journal in New York who decides to “be Jewish” for six months in order to write an article about anti-Semitism from the inside-out. In his encounters with other Jews, Green learns about the Jewish response to America’s not so latent anti-Semitism. One Jewish character sees Green’s idea as faulty, claiming, “Let it alone. It will only stir it up more. You can’t write it out of existence.” The gravity of what the film reveals about anti-Semitism acts to debunk this theory. This character’s unattractive opinions, added to the original script, were most likely a response to the AJC’s pressure to halt the production.

Another character that Green encounters, Professor Lieberman, represents the Jewish intellectual who brands his ethnicity as empty without a religious backing. He claims,

63 Ibid.
64 Erens, p.187.
I have no religion, so I am not Jewish by religion... I am not Jewish by race, since there's no such thing as a Jewish type... I remain a Jew because the world makes it an advantage not to be one. So, for many of us it becomes a matter of pride to call ourselves Jews.

From this character, the film's most intellectual Jew, there is no real reason to maintain a Jewish identity. He is saying, those who claim they are Jewish yet are not religious are actually exhibiting a peevishness over a world that will not accept them. To be Jewish and proud was to be simply stubborn. Therefore, without religious piety, one's Jewish ethnicity is only claimed out of spite for anti-Semitism or immaturity.

Probably the most meaningful Jewish character in the film is Dave Goldman, played by John Garfield, a returning GI and Green's childhood friend. Always shown in full uniform, Dave represents Hollywood's attempt to discard the image of the weakened, "cowardly" Jews of Europe. He acts to counter the perceived passivity of European Jewry by actively fighting for social justice. For instance, in one scene Dave encounters a drunk who voices his dislike of army officers, especially if "Yids." Dave becomes enraged and lashes out on the bigoted drunk. Garfield's character acts to present the Jew as having proven himself in battle and no longer needing to fear rejection in his country. But most importantly, Dave is emblematic of the insecurity American Jews possessed in distancing themselves from their brethren in Nazi Europe by emphasizing the strong image of the Jewish American soldier. This image would become a theme that would show up in many later films where the fight for the state of Israel is the ultimate assault on notions of Jewish passivity.

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65 Friedman, p.128.
66 Horowitz, p.152.
67 Ibid.
The most telling depiction of the film’s image of the American Jew, assimilated to the point where he has no distinguishing characteristics, is Green. One example of this display of uniformity between Jews and Gentiles is the moment he decides to become Jewish:

I’ll be Jewish. All I’ve got to do is say it...(Peck looks in mirror.) Hmm. Dark hair, dark eyes, just like Dave. No accent, no mannerisms, neither has Dave. I’ll just call myself Phil Green, skip the Skylar...It’s a cinch.

The absence of any discernible features to identify a Jew is this film’s point: a Jew in America is “as American as the next guy.” This thought is taken to the next level of not only external but internal similarity when Green attempts to put himself in the mind of his Jewish friend:

Can I think my way into Dave’s mind? He’s the kind of fellow I’d be if I were a Jew, isn’t he? We grew up together. We lived in the same kind of homes....Whatever Dave feels now...would be the feelings of Dave not only as a Jew but the way I feel, as a man, as an American, as a citizen.

What the film succeeds in proving is that Jews look, act, and think just as all Americans and, hence, are not to be feared. However, as Patricia Erens states,

The film is so anxious to prove how much Jews are like everyone else, that no time is allowed for the ways in which they might be different in terms of history, religious practice, and ethnic characteristics. The film does not propose pluralism, a society in which everyone is entitled to equal treatment despite his differences, but rather speaks for assimilation in which everyone will be the same.

In addition the definition of the Jew is not too far away from that given by Professor Lieberman. For both Green and Lieberman the only true distinction between Jews and Gentiles is anti-Semitism. Therefore, without anti-Semitism there is no Jewish

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58 All quotations are taken from the aforementioned film.
69 Ibid. p.151.
70 Ibid. p.152.
71 Erens. p.177.
identity. Jewishness, in turn, becomes devoid of meaning; "being Jewish is a moral posture, whether assumed by a Jew like [the intellectual] or a Gentile like Green."  
Further, this anti-Semitism is driven home to the audience effectively by a main character who in the end remains a Gentile. We are not offended by how bigotry affects Jews but by how such beliefs could be brought on a Christian American who evokes such reverence in the chances he takes. The film, then, fails by shifting the focus of persecution to the personality of Green, not the people whom he attempts to emulate.  
The misstatement of this film is expressed by a stagehand who approached the screenwriter in gratitude for teaching him a strong moral lesson: "Henceforth, I'm always going to be good to Jewish people because you never can tell when they will turn out to be Gentiles."  
Contemporary American Jews, however, were not as critical of this film as are modern film analysts and historians. Many agreed with its stance on religion as the main, if not only, characteristic which made one Jewish. Gentleman's Agreement came out during a time of lessening anti-Semitism, easing the movement of Jews out of urban centers and into the suburbs. Arthur Goren adds, "For the majority of Jews, the creation of an amiable and lenient communal order, religious by definition, went hand in hand with the suburban ethos."  
This communal order of suburban Jews left behind that of the urban neighborhoods, which naturally accommodated abundant ethnic coloration due to their high Jewish population. Yet, for the suburban Jew, living among Americans of

72 Florowitz, p. 151.  
73 Friedman, p. 129.  
differing cultural backgrounds, there was lack of a center in which they could express their Jewishness. As a result of living in a more variegated community, the synagogue, "now including educational and recreational facilities, became the primary guardian of ethnic identity and continuity." The secular ideologies bred in a Jewish urban lifestyle were now absorbed by these synagogues. The popularity of this trend is seen in the over six hundred new synagogues and temples constructed in America's suburbs between the years 1945 and 1955.

In a study of how American Jews defined themselves in the post-war era, the vast majority claimed religion was at the core of their identity. Yet, strangely these same Jews admitted having apathy towards religious practice. One explanation for this label preference would be the fact that, at this time in America, self-segregation was only defined along religious lines. This was an era when President Eisenhower declared, "Our government makes no sense unless it is founded in a deeply felt religious faith—and I don't care what it is." Protestantism, Catholicism, and Judaism were the "religions of democracy" which were necessary for an "American Way of Life." "The retention of group identification is seen as both necessary and desirable for spiritual self-preservation and self-fulfillment, as well as a source of national enrichment," says Harvard historian Oscar Handlin in his essay on American ethnic groups. He continues, "The perpetuation of group loyalties is, from this point of view, consonant with the American pattern, neither impeding integration nor endangering national unity." This emphasis on

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76 Ibid.
77 Ibid.
78 Ibid.
79 Ibid. p.193.
80 Ibid. p.208.
81 Ibid. p.193.
82 Ibid. p.207.
religion and patriotism may have been due to the anti-religious philosophy of Communism, which post-war America was intent on supplanting. But what Handlin’s essay truly reveals is American Jews’ need for ethnic identity without separating themselves from their national identity. All of this considered, Jews seemingly had no other choice but to label their Jewish identity in terms of religion, however reverent they were in practice. This constriction of cultural expressivity reflects the attempts of American Jews to conform to an American society which had little interest in its minorities’ ethnic heritage.

**Ignorant Optimism in the 1950s**

Another issue *Gentleman’s Agreement* raises among contemporary critics is its absence of any mention of the Holocaust. To the filmgoer of today, a film about anti-Semitism in America coming out directly after WWII should certainly be expected to contain some focus on the recent atrocities against Jews in Germany. Yet, as opposed to today, the Holocaust was not a popular subject in the 1950s. After the event’s one month run in the media immediately after the war in Europe, few newspaper articles discussed the treatment of Jews in concentration camps, and there were virtually no courses on the topic in American classrooms. When survivors were allowed entrance into the country in the late 1940s and 50s, they were often diverted from discussing their experiences and were told Americans were just not interested. For American Jews in particular, the Holocaust was not yet a major force in the construction of Jewish identity. A symposium

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82 Ibid. p.193-4.
sponsored by *Commentary* magazine in 1961 on "Jewishness and Younger Intellectuals" found "only two of thirty-one participants cited the Holocaust as having had a significant impact on their lives."\(^8\)

One explanation for this lack of interest is the country was not yet prepared to face the issue. Post-war America up until the early 1960s was a time of extremely optimistic attitudes. Most Americans after the war were eager to build a better life and leave the past with disregard.\(^6\) What this optimism fostered was an incredulity which separated Americans, including American Jews, from Holocaust survivors. Some Nazi victims who felt the world had much to learn from their experiences usually encountered a disbelieving audience. One survivor was complimented on her creative imagination after describing concentration camp selections and gas chambers to her American-born Jewish neighbor in Brooklyn.\(^7\) When Holocaust commemorations were held they generally attracted only survivors; non-survivors who attended felt as if they "were crashing a funeral."\(^8\) Deborah Lipstadt sums this all up when she states, "It did not seem to be an appropriate time to focus on a painful past, particularly a past which seemed to be of no direct concern to this country."\(^8\)

One film that exemplifies this ignorant optimism is *The Diary of Anne Frank* (1959). As Lawrence Langer claims, Hollywood's rewritten version of the diary had "Americanized" the story in order to avoid upsetting the audiences' "emotional or

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\(^8\) Ibid.  
\(^6\) Ibid. p.196.  
\(^6\) Ibid. p.197.  
\(^6\) Ibid. p.197.  
\(^7\) Peck, Abraham J. "'Our Eyes have Seen Eternity': Memory and Self-Identity Among the She'erith Hapletah." *Modern Judaism*, No.17.1 (1997) p.58.  
\(^8\) Lipstadt, p.195.  
\(^8\) Ibid. p.197.
psychological equilibrium."90 At the end of the film, as the Gestapo break into the 
Frank's hideaway, Otto Frank, Anne's father, remarks "For two years we've lived in fear; 
from now on we'll live in hope." Lipstadt comments that this statement "was an ironic, if 
not absurd, way to end the production given that, except for Frank himself, none of the 
others lived on at all, in fear or in hope."91 Essentially this film focuses away from the 
horrors of anti-Semitism at its genocidal extreme by presenting the main message of the 
Holocaust to be an Americanized one of faith in the ultimate goodness of humanity.92

The efforts in this film to take the pain out of the Holocaust were made, then, at 
the cost of de-emphasizing the Jewish or rather anti-Jewish association with Fascist 
Germany. Much of Anne's diary was de-Judaized by the removal of her references to her 
and her family's Jewish identity.93 The film certainly declares the Franks as Jewish as 
they are shown celebrating Passover. Yet sections that were cut refer to her sister's 
Zionist intentions of moving to Israel after the war while her brother wanted to live his 
postwar life without any reference to his Jewishness.94 Here are two very strong 
sentiments exposing either hatred for a society which will not accept Jews, or for a 
religion which denies one from being accepted in society. In another part of the diary 
Anne writes,

Who has made us Jews different from all other people? Who has allowed 
us to suffer so terribly up till now? It is God who has made us who we 
are, but it will be God, too, who will raise us up again.95

90 Lawrence Langer, "The Americanization of the Holocaust on Stage and Screen," in From 
Hester Street to Hollywood: The Jewish American Stage and Screen, ed. Sarah Blacher Cohen. 
91 Lipstadt. p. 197.
92 Ibid.
93 Ibid.
94 Avisar. p. 122.
95 Anne Frank, The Diary, p.228. quoted in Avisar. p.122.
The original diary tells a story of Nazi persecution stemming from a specific hate of European Jewry and how Jews coped in such an intense environment. The fact that this film fails to present the family's plight as inherently Jewish reveals how a focus on Americanization stunts any expression of the Holocaust in its Jewish ethnical context.

This Americanizing cinematic approach towards the Holocaust only indicates Hollywood's purpose of finding the most common denominator of its audience in order to attract the largest viewership and hence the largest profit. This goal is not achieved by portraying the Holocaust as a specifically Jewish event. One way of reaching this desired effect is to eliminate all reference to the Jewish identity of Nazi victims or have the Jewish character proclaim that all types of people suffer. Thus we see Anne's line above changed in the film to: "We are not the only people that've had to suffer. There've always been people that've had to...sometimes one race...sometimes another." When Vice President Mondale spoke similarly in 1979 by recognizing "the unanswered cries of the eleven million" victims of the Holocaust, noted Shoah speaker Elie Wiesel was immediately offended. He claimed that not focusing specifically on the six million Jewish victims of Nazi atrocity was to "dilute or deny" the Nazi's genocidal intentions against the Jews in an attempt at "misguided universalization." Yet during the release of Anne Frank, the Jewish Film Advisory Committee commended the screenwriters of the film for expanding the "universal" meaning of the play.

What could explain these disparate views on universalization of the Holocaust? Both seem to share a desire to memorialize the Holocaust. The difference between Jews

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96 Avisar. p.131.
97 Anne Frank, The Diary, p.228. quoted in Avisar. p.122.
of the late 1950s to those in the 1970s was a stronger desire of the former to “distance themselves from the murdered Jews of Europe, from the grotesque corpses of documentary newsreels and from the influx of postwar refugees.”100 As Horowitz points out, “This universalizing reflects a reluctance among American Jews to call attention to themselves as different;”101 not appearing different, as we have learned, was exactly the Jews’ intention in 1950s America.

A study in 1963 found that New York’s minorities, to assure their ethnic survival, put more emphasis on the collective interest of assimilation into American culture than on their group’s select customs.102 Considering this, Gentleman’s Agreement must have been largely popular among American Jews with its “as American as the next guy” message. Many Jews felt acculturation, or “the absorption of the dominant culture without the concomitant loss of ethnic specificity,”103 was the best way their group could endure within a larger community. However, given societal pressures, this acculturation was centered more on absorbing American culture than some Jews would have liked.

An example is found in the plans made by the committee for the three hundredth anniversary of the establishment of the first permanent Jewish community in North America. Committee members jumped at the occasion to pay homage to the “American heritage of religious and civil liberty” and Jews’ part “in building the American democratic civilization that we have today.”104 Members also felt this celebration would demonstrate to the world “the strength of the American people’s commitment to the

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100 Horowitz. p.153.
101 Ibid.
102 Goren. p.208.
103 Erens. p.10.
principles of democracy in our struggle against communism and other totalitarianisms of our day.\textsuperscript{105} Some would discredit this event after its commencement, claiming it focused more on national concerns than the preservation of Jews’ ethnic culture. Horace Kallen pointed out that the tercentenary’s emblem was a perfect example of its assimilationist intentions. Not a word of Hebrew was on it and at its top was a five-pointed American star, not the six-pointed Star of David. Kallen preached a pluralistic American culture where each religious or racial group expressed its culture as part of a larger diversified, communal American culture.\textsuperscript{106} To Kallen, Jewish \textit{acculturation} was more an unhealthy and truly undemocratic \textit{assimilation} for the average American Jew of the 1950s.

\textbf{Communist Concerns and Anti-Semitic Anxiety}

Yet the average American Jew at this time was not like Horace Kallen. This Jew saw \textit{Gentleman’s Agreement} director Elia Kazan get involved in McCarthy’s Un-American Activities trials with \textit{Crossfire}’s director Edward Dmytryk, who served six months in jail for suspected communist ties.\textsuperscript{107} For Hollywood, this meant no films about anti-Semitism for a while. For American Jews, many now had to avoid the growing anti-Semitism depicting them as communist conspirators.\textsuperscript{108} This fear was exacerbated by the conviction and execution of the Rosenbergs in 1953 for divulging nuclear missile secrets to the Russians.\textsuperscript{109} Rosenberg supporters protested their prosecution as a conspiracy

\textsuperscript{105} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{107} Avisar. p.109.
\textsuperscript{109} Goren. p.201.
against the Jews.\footnote{Lipstadt. p.201.} In an effort to counter these allegations and differentiate the Rosenbergs from the American Jewish community, the AJC created a committee to provoke the Jewish public into expelling Jewish “communist-front” organizations.\footnote{Goren. p.201.} Jewish groups actively opposing American leniency toward Germany in the war trial process now had to clarify their noninvolvement in the communist attempt to prevent the establishment of a West German state.\footnote{Lipstadt. p.202.} In such an environment, American Jews of the 1950s were too busy advertising their recognition of American culture and values to assert their differences.

In addition, with Russia and communism quickly becoming America’s next enemy, Germany became the country’s newest ally to protect Western Europe and the US from a Soviet advance. To the dismay of Jews who felt Germany had not yet come to terms with its Nazi past, the U.S. government gave little attention to the country’s wrongdoings in an effort to build up a positive image for Americans. As Lipstadt puts it, “American Jews often found themselves marching to the beat of a different drummer when it came to post-war attitudes toward Germany.”\footnote{Ibid. p.198-99.} America’s softer look at Germany is displayed in films such as \textit{The Desert Fox} (1951) coming out of Hollywood in the 1950s that showed Nazis as sympathetic characters.\footnote{Ibid. p.198-99.}

One film that displays not only a more sensitive look at Nazis but a view of American Jews’ animosity towards them as unfavorable is \textit{The Young Lions} (1958). In this film about life during WWII for a Nazi and two Americans, one of which is Jewish, Marlon Brando plays Christian, an Austrian ski instructor who lightly associates himself
with the dogma of the Nazi party. He is presented as a compassionate figure; when in Nazi occupied Paris, he convinces a French girl, biased against Nazis, to fall in love with him. At the end of the film, he is disillusioned with the Nazis’ war effort after witnessing his country’s destruction. When entering a concentration camp in search of food, Christian encounters the camp’s director who complains to him about his job: “A concentration camp is not a picnic. Believe me, with all the gas chambers, doctors with all their experiments...I had an extermination quota of 1,500 people a day, Jews, Poles, Russians, political prisoners, and I had only 216 men to do it.” Christian is shown to be completely disgusted and leaves without a word after taking only a few bites of bread.

This film shows a view of Germans as not only gentle and humane but as having fully confronted and rejected the realities of the Holocaust. It is no wonder the audience sympathizes with Christian when he is shot at the end by the two American characters after he destroys his gun in a pacifistic rage. That one of these soldiers is Jewish may reflect the message the U.S. government was pushing on the Jewish community: to forgive and forget. In the words of General Clay, director of civilian affairs in American occupied Germany, to America’s Jews, “You folks in the [Jewish] leadership have got a responsibility; if you ever want to build a base for revived intellectual and emotional and economic health, you have got to forget what happened.” American Jews who had lost their families in the concentration camps of Fascist Europe now felt obligated to conceal their true feelings towards Nazi war criminals in public for fear of being labeled politically incorrect. This situation acts as an example of how America’s social and

114 Ibid. p.200.
115 Avisar. p.115.
116 Shafir, American Jews and Germany quoted in Lipstadt. p.201.
political pressure and general insensitivity kept American Jews from comfortably expressing their individual identities.

**Conclusion**

Much as the "turn the other cheek" philosophy suggested in *Tomorrow the World*, *The Young Lions* reflects America's political intentions of keeping Germany's image clean. The film also reinforces the cultural message of not "holding a grudge" towards your aggressor which was displayed as a required attitude to be a true American. As is shown from the 1930s on, American Jews were living with their identities emptied of color, an optimism ignorant of their plight, opinions that labeled them communist conspirators, and an overwhelming desire to be accepted into mainstream society. This was an environment that kept them from freely expressing the intricacies of their customs and moral standpoints in public. Depictions of Jews and their Nazi persecution in films of the 1960s on would prove drastically different from past representations. It would again be a change not only in viewership, but in what Americans wanted to see that would bring about more complete and sensitive cinematic images of Jews, especially American Jews, in the context of the Holocaust.
Redefining Jewish Identity: Changing Social Attitudes and the Emergence of the Powerful Jew (1960-1976)
The 1960s in America marked a time of comparative change from the 50s in how American Jews felt about themselves and their image. As social attitudes focused more on the victimization of war than on building an optimistic future after it, more Americans felt inclined to take a second look at Nazi atrocities during the Second World War. Jews now felt more inclined to publicly voice opinions on Germany that they were before forced to keep to themselves. This more culturally sensitive environment in America allowed the production of films which examined Germany’s ability to come to terms with its Holocaust past, called attention to the Jewish specificity of the event, and glorified the image of the Jew fighting for a Jewish state in Palestine. These films would work to build a greater understanding among all Americans of the Jews’ plight in Nazi Germany, while providing American Jews with heroes in which they could find pride in their ethnic identities.

Germany on Trial

During the late 1950s, news of anti-Semitic vandalism in West Germany and former Nazi officials holding high posts in the West German government was more pronounced. Suddenly, Jews were not the only Americans doubting that Germans had completely digested their past.\(^{117}\) Tensions began to build in certain American circles, prompting writers such as William L. Shirer to show Nazism as the inevitable outcome of Germany’s history in his *Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* (successfully published after

\(^{117}\) Lipstadt, p.204.
two failed attempts in 1954 and 55).\textsuperscript{118} This was the atmosphere in which the Adolph Eichmann trial was held, followed with much American interest.

The Eichmann trial was the result of the Israeli capture of this Nazi war criminal while he was hiding in South America in May 1960. The trial was broadcast in full on American television and by its end had attracted 87% of the nation’s attention.\textsuperscript{119} Yet opinion polls conducted shortly after the trial revealed little sustained interest in the Holocaust among Americans, particularly Jews.\textsuperscript{120} Jewish periodicals during the trial are colored with articles about its connections with the Holocaust; yet in following years no memorials were built, and no courses on the subject sprang up in university or high school classrooms.\textsuperscript{121} This short-lived interest in the Holocaust among Jews and other Americans only exposes a country still intent on glossing over Germany’s past in order to maintain good political relations. The media, while broadly publicizing the story, never connected the trial and its lessons concerning the Nazi’s genocidal intentions to present-day West Germany as Shirer had. Hearst’s papers warned against their American readers’ “falsely associat[ing] the great majority of contemporary Germans with Nazi barbarities.”\textsuperscript{122} Concentrating on the Holocaust was considered a ploy by the Left wing to build a “smokescreen to hide the terrors of the Soviet enemy.”\textsuperscript{123} For Jews and all Americans, to recall the memory of Nazi Germany was deemed a means of avoiding the more “important” issue of the Russian communist threat.

\textsuperscript{118} Ibid. p.203.
\textsuperscript{119} Ibid. p.205.
\textsuperscript{120} Ibid. p.206.
\textsuperscript{121} Ibid. p.207.
\textsuperscript{122} \textit{Eichmann Case in the American Press} (pamphlet), quoted in Lipstadt. p.204.
This general attitude reveals how controversial *Judgment at Nuremberg* (1961) must have been for its time. This film details the conviction of four Nazi judges during the Nuremberg war crime trials in 1948 and has an all-star cast including Judy Garland, Marlene Dietrich, and Spencer Tracy as United States Army Judge Dan Haywood. The film certainly shows the audience a lighthearted traditional side of Germany before the war as the American government would want. Yet it does an even better job showing a country that is still not divorced from its past. This slant is presented from the beginning as Judge Haywood takes a leisurely walk through war-torn Nuremberg. After a few jovial experiences Haywood passes by the main square where Hitler held his rallies. A close-up of a terrace is mixed with the dramatic sounds of Hitler's speech as shouts of 'Zieg Hiel' are in the background. This shot is followed by a concerned look on Haywood's face showing an America that sees a German past so horrific its echoes can still be heard.

The sympathetic character of Ernst Janning, the Nazi Minister of Justice played by Burt Lancaster, is shown as the German who makes efforts to confront his country's history. When the four Nazi judges sit down to dinner they question whether six million Jews could have been exterminated. After one concentration camp commandant tells them how the camps worked and convinces them it could happen, Janning maintains a sullen face. Later in the film Janning declares he was aware if not of millions at least of hundreds that were sent to their deaths. "Does that make us any less guilty," he continues, showing in both scenes a German from the Nazi era who sees the wrong in his country's intentions. Janning's understanding, however, will soon be proven to be unjustified.
Another strong point this film effectively gets across is the U.S. government's desire to keep relations with Germany good in order to assure their help in preventing communist Russia's European expansion. This point is made most clearly with a General's suggestion to the prosecuting attorney when discussing the Russian attempt to force allied forces out of Berlin:

If Berlin goes, Germany goes and then Europe. We need the help of the German people. And you don't get the help of the German people by sentencing their leaders to stiff prison sentences.

Earlier in the film one of the Nazi judges reads about this situation in a newspaper and tellingly claims, "They cannot call us criminals and at the same time ask us to help them." This is the dilemma of the film which Judge Haywood needs to decide: should he stand by his morals and convict the Nazi war criminals strictly or be more politically minded and lenient? This predicament reveals how America dealt with the memory of Nazi Germany throughout the late 1940s and 50s. While the country kept Germany's image spotless to ensure good political relations, the cost was denying the Nazis were criminals and, therefore, demeaning the fact that they incarcerated two-thirds of Europe's Jews.

_Nuremberg_ also criticizes the optimistic ignorance of Americans after the war about Nazi war atrocities. This intention is seen when Judge Haywood asks a reporter:

- "Are you going to do a story on those trials?"
- "At the moment I couldn't give a story away on the Nuremberg Trials."

The reporter responds.
- "But the war's only been over two years," says Haywood.
- "That's right," replies the reporter knowingly.

For the reporter there is no longer an American market for news on the inhumanity of Nazi Germany. This apathy comes as a surprise to the Judge and the audience; both
cannot understand it after learning of the disturbing treatment of various witnesses by laws which the accused judges put into action. This film is, then, putting America on trial by questioning why they would suddenly lose interest in a subject of such moral importance.

The most important proclamation of this film is its condemnation of seemingly well intentioned Germans. The sympathetic character of Madame Bertholt, the widowed wife of an executed Nazi high official played by Marlene Dietrich, maintains a friendly relationship with Haywood throughout the film. One scene reveals a belief that makes Haywood question her ethics. Here, the judge is distraught after watching footage of concentration camps and raises the subject with Bertholt at a nightclub. Bertholt equates Haywood’s hate of the SS officers who killed the Jewish inmates with the American prosecutors who executed her husband and claims it is unhealthy to dwell on the subject. “We have to forget if we are to go on living,” Bertholt asserts. This line is followed by Germans pounding their beer steins while singing a joyous song, completely countering the perturbed expression on Judge Haywood’s face. This scene exposes a Germany that has not fully fathomed its recent history. The synchronous singing at each table signifies a Germany joined in an optimism as ignorant as that of the American public condemned earlier by the reporter. In both cases, each country is looking to forget about the past in hopes of building a better future and as a result leaves the lesson of the Holocaust unlearned and obliged to be repeated. Haywood does not accept this poor excuse to forgo the past, as is represented by the crosscutting of the pounding German beer steins with that of his gavel in the courtroom.
The moment which clinches the unfavorable look at Germans’ inability to confront the events of the Holocaust is when Judge Haywood visits Janning in his cell where he and the other Nazi judges were sentenced to life. Janning pleads for the respect of Haywood by alleging, “Those millions of people. I never knew it would come to that. You must believe it. You must believe it.” Haywood responds, “Herr Janning, it came to that the first time you sentenced a man to death you knew to be innocent.” The most sympathetic German in the entire film who before owned up to his guilt receives no sympathy from the American judge who knows better. As Haywood leaves the military jail a caption appears reading: “The Nuremberg Trials held in the American Zone ended July 14th, 1949. There were 99 defendants sentenced to prison terms. Not one is still serving his sentence.” Symbolically, these guilty defendants represent all German people, released from blame by ignorance on their and America’s part. The audience is left with a deep sense that all Germans have not effectively comprehended their Nazi memories no matter how respectable that German happened to be. In the context of this film’s relation to Jewish identity, it did not heavily address the Holocaust as a specifically Jewish event. However, it helped to create a milieu conducive to allowing Jews to share their “suspicious” feelings towards Germany with a more sensitive and responsive country.

Films such as *Judgment at Nuremberg*\(^\text{124}\) together with a small circle of writers and critics started to treat the Holocaust more seriously than they had since the end of the war.\(^\text{125}\) When the Holocaust began to emerge as a Jewish issue a few years later, the American Jewish community would have the resources to address the situation

\(^{124}\) And *Exodus*, which will be discussed later.

\(^{125}\) Ibid. p.208.
adequately. The Holocaust was not yet considered part of every American Jew's heritage in the early 1960s. It would take serious changes in social attitudes before the Nazi persecution of European Jewry became part of Jewish American identity. But it was *Judgment at Nuremberg* that captured the growth of a more reflective and morally responsible attitude in this country, allowing American Jews to feel more comfortable in expressing their ethnic authenticity.

**The "Jewish" Holocaust**

The mid-1960s marked a time when Jewish communal leaders began to worry more openly about the diminishing number of American Jews who embraced their Jewish heritage. Assimilation was recognized more as a "silent" or "bloodless" Holocaust of Jewishness than a means to ensure the ethnicity’s survival. For the majority of third and fourth generation immigrants, a Jewish ethnicity had at most a symbolic meaning. Also, in an atmosphere of lessening anti-Semitism, it was considered less cowardly to let one’s Jewish identity fade. But the mid-60s was also a time of "the new ethnicity” and “identity politics.” With images of war victims in Vietnam, the civil rights struggle for African-Americans in the South, and the overt prevalence of homelessness in urban areas, American culture was quickly beginning to give attention to the condition of victimhood. These changes all contributed to what Novick calls a "culture of victimization."

With the rise of radical social attitudes and diverse political opinions in the 1960s, Americans saw their country less as a community and more as an "unmeltable melting pot" of ideas and cultures. Historical criticism spoke less of contributions groups had

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126 Ibid.
made to society and more of what made each group distinctive. Jews, along with African-Americans, homosexuals, and women, formed a group identity based on their shared experience of discrimination from the dominant society. For Jews this "victim identity" was defined in the realization that if not for the immigration of parents or grandparents, they too would have been one of the six million lost Jews of Europe.

However, as Novick explains, it was not the "culture of victimization" that caused Jews to adopt a victim identity based on the Holocaust. Instead the period allowed this type of identity to become dominant. Among Jews with lessening interest in their ethnicity, the event was the most attractive subject that even remotely involved Jewish study. These students, who showed no interest in Jewish history or culture courses, overenrolled in classes on the Holocaust. The high demand for such classes caused the subject to be offered in over seven hundred colleges by 1978. The 1960s and 70s suddenly saw a rapid growth in appeal of Holocaust-related events and institutions to Jews of marginal identity; this interest among Jews was greatly different from those of the early 50s who felt out of place in public events honoring the Holocaust. For many of those who promoted this Holocaust programming, the belief was that knowledge of the event would foster a deeper interest in one’s Jewish heritage and culture.

However much this Holocaust identity contributed to a greater awareness or interest in American Jews’ ethnicity, the subject’s strongest attribute was its all-inclusiveness toward Jews of varying degrees of faith. The concept behind this "victim identity" was that all members of the group were united in a shared victimhood, no matter

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127 Novick. 185-190.
128 Ibid. p.189-90.
129 Ibid.
130 Ibid. p.188.
how well they were treated in the present. This identity was most likely a recent manifestation of the late nineteenth-century need for Jewish immigrants of all backgrounds to feel comforted in a new environment by their common history of centuries of persecution. American Jews during the 60s began to embrace and indeed became proud of their oppressed past. As Jewish secularist Ellen Willis of the Village Voice words it, “The status of Jews as...persecuted outsiders is at the core of what Judaism and Jewishness is all about.”

1965 was, therefore, a good time for a film such as The Pawnbroker to open in theaters. Many of this decade’s filmmakers, noticing the general public’s fascination with their ethnic heritage, saw the opportunity to make films pertaining to special interest groups. In an effort to get more Americans away from the television and into the theaters, some producers made ethnic films that attracted smaller yet sizable minority groups. More ethnically conscious Jews were looking for a film with a deeper look at Jewish identity than Crossfire or Gentleman’s Agreement. Also, with films such as Exodus and Nuremberg coming out only a few years before, the producers of The Pawnbroker hoped to ride the recent wave of interest in “Jewish” cinema.

What separates The Pawnbroker from these earlier films is its more personal view of the Holocaust victim and emphasis on Jewishness as both a recognizable presence in the main character and an important factor in the story. The film displays a small period in the life of Holocaust survivor, now Harlem pawnbroker, Sol Nazerman. This

\[\text{References:}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{131} Ibid.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{132} Ibid. p.189-90.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{133} Erens. p.7.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{134} Willis quoted in Novick. p.191.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{135} Friedman. p.171.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{136} Lefk p.355.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{137} Erens. p.285.}\]
period reveals his disassociated existence from those he works with and recollections of his past that suddenly flood his life. The first flashback we see is of him at a concentration camp watching his brother being mauled by a German shepherd. On his striped uniform, a yellow Star of David is apparent. Soon after, in the present time, a junkie calls Nazerman a “money grabbin’ kike” when he is not given the money he wants for a shoddy radio. These are early and clear clues to the audience that the main character is not only Jewish but that animosity towards him is rooted in that fact.

The film takes the issue of Jewish relevance to the Holocaust one step further by highlighting how this connection makes the event unique when compared to the problems of other troubled peoples. Those who enter Nazerman’s pawnshop are of every race and condition: Black, White, drug addicted, straight, and all in desperate need. Yet none of them seem to fully grasp or be aware at all of his unbearable past. When three young Black and Hispanic kids come in to sell a fenced lawnmower one of them asks, “Where you get those number tattoos, uncle?” Later, Nazerman’s assistant, Jesus, asks the same question: “What is that? Is that a secret society or something... What do I do to join?” These ignorant comments, combined with shots of Nazerman inter-cut with candid shots of Black neighbors who stare indifferently throughout the film, further point out the Harlem community’s dissociation from him and his problems. Though it is important to question the degree to which the Harlem community, which has its own problems, should be aware of the Holocaust, this is not the film’s point. These characters demonstrate their disinterest towards Nazerman’s victimhood in order to represent a collective American public that had been ignorant of the Holocaust in general for the past twenty years.
The uniqueness of Nazerman's trauma is accentuated when a social worker, Ms. Birchfield, attempts to remedy and understand his inability to feel. After Ms. Birchfield asks him why he is so bitter, Nazerman responds,

Bitter? No Ms. Birchfield I am not bitter. No, that passed me by a million years ago. I'm a man of no anger. I have no desire for vengeance for what was done to me. I have escaped from the emotions. I am safe within myself. All I ask and want is peace and quiet.

Aside from a negative critique of showing what happens to the Jew who “turns the other cheek,” this scene shows how Birchfield cannot understand the degree of his pain. When before she confides a story about her loneliness as an overweight teenager, Nazerman answers, “So you have found out the world is unjust and cruel. Well let me tell you something my dear sociologist that there is a world different than yours...Now I ask you a question. What do you know?” “I guess I’m out of my depth,” answers Ms. Birchfield.

Towards the end of the film a desperate Nazerman shares some of his Holocaust stories with Ms. Birchfield, who comes to realize her inadequacy in the situation: “I got chilled listening to you and not being able to do anything for you.” She, then, reaches out her hand to him in a last attempt to connect but his condition is too distinct to be helped by others and he leaves the apartment, sullen and without hope. Nazerman is beyond the help of the social worker because of the horror of the past that not even the audience can fully grasp. Flashbacks give some information of the raping of his wife by SS officers and trampling to death of his son in the cattle cars; but the split-second cuts of scenes from Nazerman’s memory that invade his present are representative of how little the audience will ever truly see and understand of his tormented past.

138 Insdorf, p.33.
In the final scene, when the pawnshop is robbed, Jesus takes a bullet intended for Nazerman. As Nazerman bends down to his assistant whose body goes limp, he presents a face of extreme anguish and lets out a silent cry. Insdorf sees this silent scream as both an “emblem of the Holocaust survivor, the witness of a horror so devastating that it cannot be told” and a “helpless reaction to continued anti-Semitism.” Both explanations fit easily into the film, the first exhibited from preceding scenes discussed above. The film’s concentration on anti-Semitism is mainly focused in one scene in which Nazerman answers Jesus’s question: “How come you people come to business so natural?” Nazerman proceeds to tell a story of thousands of years of Jewish persecution during which his people have had no land, no army, and are forced to make a living by selling for a profit and abstaining from luxuries. After centuries of this lifestyle, Nazerman explains, Jews find they have a mercantile heritage, are accused of having secret resources, and are called usurers and kikes. This scene provides some background for why Nazerman feels he was incarcerated by the Nazis and is still subject to prejudice. Here, the film clearly recognizes the memory and pain of the Holocaust as a strictly Jewish sensibility. *Pawnbroker* editor Ralph Rosenblum claims the suffering in this film is specifically a Jewish suffering which anchors the film in the “particularism” of the Holocaust. Erens agrees, saying, “Absent [Nazerman’s] Jewishness or his life in the Nazi camps there is no story.”

Nazerman’s concentration camp past is unrecognized and misunderstood by the characters in the film and the audience alike. And it is this effort to differentiate him from those around him that works to cite the Holocaust as an exceptional event. The fact

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139 Ibid.
140 Rosenblum, Ralph p.165, quoted in Leff. p.372.
that Nazerman’s Jewishness is affirmed only makes the film’s point stronger; the pain he felt in the Holocaust was unique because anti-Semitism in Germany was unique. The film is, then, very different from past films which universalize the Holocaust by paralleling it with the suffering of others and rejecting its Jewish particularism.

On the other hand, many critics feel that *The Pawnbroker* was compromised to make the film more relevant to the American audience. The producers of this film certainly had doubts about how well its Jewish “particularism” would be accepted by the vastly Gentile public.\(^{142}\) It is difficult for most Americans as well as oppressed minorities with differing social discriminations to connect with the insular plight of a Jewish American Holocaust survivor. Among these minorities are the American-born Jews who do not identify with cynical Jewish refugees.\(^{143}\) Many critics feel the producers acted on this belief and created a film which depicts a suffering that is not Jewish at all but universally human, indeed an archetypal (using Avisar’s definition) Christian suffering. These critics feel *Pawnbroker* denies the Jewish identification of the Holocaust in an effort to give the film a more generally understandable meaning. How this is done in American cinema, as we have seen, is through the addition of Christian symbolism.

For example, when Jesus takes the bullet for Nazerrnan it is painfully obvious that he is a Christ-figure, dying for Nazerman’s sins. After his silent cry, Nazerman goes back into his office and pierces his hand on the spike that holds the shop’s receipts. Many critics analyze this response incorrectly as a stigmata, which is actually a sudden and miraculous blood letting brought on involuntarily. What these critics mean to refer

\(^{141}\) Erens, quoted in Leff p.372-73.
\(^{142}\) Leff. p.372.
to is that the pain of Nazerman, whose last name resonates with Nazerite, is equated with that of his assistant making him a redemptive sufferer in the model of Jesus of Nazareth. In this respect, Nazerman is the suffering servant who is redeemed and blessed with a happier life because he has found God. In fact the book *Theology through Film* mentions *Pawnbroker* as "one of the finest cinematic experiences of transcendence."

The Jewishness of Nazerman is, then, supplanted and Americanized through the Christian ideals of love, grace, and suffering. Horowitz finds that as far as Jewishness weighs in this film, "There is merely the European Jewish past, which burdens the Jew, and the American present, in which Jewishness has little significance in the shared civic arena." She then argues the film suggests dropping the Jewishness of the Holocaust and adopting a more Americanized version through Christian imagery and symbolism. This approach has the intention of making the Holocaust memory more meaningful and "ultimately, redemptive on the American landscape." The Holocaust is, then, reframed in this context as not a Jewish catastrophe but "an emblem of human suffering and human injustice everywhere."

This opinion resonates in film reviews of the time which mention nothing of Jewishness, let alone the word "Jew." A *New York Times* review describes the film as a "drama of discovery for a man to do something for his fellow human sufferers in the

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143 Horowitz. p.154.
144 Ibid.
146 Avisar. p.125.
147 Ibid.
148 Ibid. p.155.
149 Ibid. p.154.
troubled world of today."\textsuperscript{150} A later review calls the film "a powerful and stinging exposition of the need for a man to continue his commitment to society in these days."\textsuperscript{151} The \textit{Christian Century} says the film is "an expression of modern life...it is suffering, sin and total interrelatedness."\textsuperscript{152} These critiques explain the meaning of the film’s last scene, where Nazerman walks off traumatized into the New York City crowd, as a happy ending; finally this Holocaust survivor can feel for another human being. Living the rest of his life by admitting his pain, he is happy to be sad. For contemporary critics, \textit{Pawnbroker} was a film about society, not Jews in particular, overcoming adversity.

Perhaps the addition of Christian imagery towards the end, the most emotionally charged part of the film, gives the majority of audience members symbols with which to identify, allowing them to connect with the rest of the film. In this manner, \textit{Pawnbroker} becomes a universal story of the human finding humanity, explaining why so many critics saw in this film a stark "interrelatedness."

The addition of Christian imagery to \textit{The Pawnbroker} is a feature seen in most of the American Holocaust films studied and to come. Time should, then, be taken at this point to build on an explanation for the use of this symbolism in these films. Avisar claims the Holocaust is Americanized through the use of Christian imagery, which draws optimistic messages on "Providence, the nobility of the human spirit, and belief in progress toward a better future."\textsuperscript{153} He attributes its use to the fact that Americans have for centuries explained the meaning of arduous events in terms of a faith that delivers one

\textsuperscript{153} Avisar. p.131.
from pain. For most Americans this faith just happens to be Christianity. The addition of Christian symbolism is, therefore, not intended to vilify Jews but is simply the habitual expression of a culture which has failed to use its “artistic imagination.” In other words, American filmmakers, many of them Jewish, are not aware that they are choosing a particular cultural language (Christian) over another (Jewish). This fact, then, gives them no reason to discover a more sensitive manner to present a specifically Jewish Holocaust. Avisar feels this lack of recognition of other manners in which to express the Holocaust reflects Hollywood’s “sheer exploitation of the suggestive communicative power of Christian motifs and symbols.” So while these symbols are not intended to malign Jews or Jewishness, they do distort the authenticity of the Holocaust’s historical details while “projecting ideological strains which betray the memory of [its] victims.” Finally, Avisar reveals how changing times and interests in America’s history have not altered the ingrained Christian moral dogma that permeates its cinematic depictions of the Holocaust:

Films made in different decades, using different modes of production, with different cultural codes, and, more specifically, reflecting entirely different attitudes toward the theme of the war and Jews in American society—a propaganda movie from the early forties, an antiwar film from the late fifties, a social drama of the sixties—all share in common the fostering of Christian ideology on the back of the Jews and their tragedy.154

Considering this commentary, one can still not afford to dismiss the attention brought to Judaism and Jewishness found in The Pawnbroker. An equal number of critics see Nazerman’s hand piercing as his life affirming recognition to feel in both senses of the word. Nazerman realizes this recognition through severe physical pain.155 He must overcome his inability to sympathize for a human race which took from him his
family and faith in humanity. This interpretation frames the film once again as the journey of a Jewish Holocaust survivor confronting the horror of a reality where some have dreams of genocide and other characters, such as Jesus, value every life. That the issue of the Holocaust in Pawnbroker could be discussed with a moderate amount of Jewish references unveils what Erens calls a "healthy body politic." American film in the 1960s shows a time when Jews felt "safe from attack and comfortable in their Americanism."¹⁵⁶

It is still important, however, to realize how Americanization of the Jewish screen image through Christian symbolism is very much a part of how Jews freely expressed their identity. Just as the Holocaust stimulates young American-born Jews to further study their Jewish ethnicity, Christian imagery is part of the language which assimilated second and third generation Jews use to build a bridge towards better understanding the otherwise removed life of a Jewish Holocaust survivor. In other words, the only way in which the uniqueness of being Jewish can be explained to Americanized Jews is through Americanized terms, in this case Christian ideology. Yet, such an approach should not be considered the best explanation. Presenting a distinct Jewish identity in the character of Sol Nazerman was a large step forward for American film and American Jews, and many more steps were to come. However, at this time in America's history (and still today as we shall soon discover) it is important to realize that the Americanization of the Jewish image is exceedingly beneficial to all American movie-goers. For, a recognizably Jewish Holocaust pictured in Christian terms reflects how Jewish filmmakers are catering to a

¹⁵⁴ Ibid. p.131-32.
¹⁵⁵ Insdorf. p.33.
¹⁵⁶ Erens. p.286.
more respectful American audience that is searching for explanations to a Jewish culture it increasingly wants to understand.

**Jewish American Insecurities and the Tough Israeli**

What separates *The Pawnbroker* from most American Holocaust films of the 60s is its lack of reference to the state of Israel. This lack is certainly peculiar since the new state is usually figured with the Holocaust to symbolize the birth of a new Jewish people out of the ashes of their oppressed European ancestors. Starting immediately after World War II, Israel became a strong issue for American Jews who felt they had not done enough for their overseas relatives during the war. Now they could save the thousands of refugees by financially and politically pushing their entrance into what would become the first Jewish state in 2000 years. Starting in the 1960s American films tackled this action-packed topic with its strong moral implications. *Exodus* (1960) and *Cast a Giant Shadow* (1966) depict both the Israeli and the American Jew fighting for their land in former Palestine. *Marathon Man* (1976) continues this theme of role reversal from Israel to the United States as an American Jew comes into conflict with an escaped Nazi concentration camp doctor. This “new Jew” of perseverance and vitality acts to counter the supposed passivity of the European Holocaust victims. Images of Jews actively retaliating against oppression were popular among Jewish Americans who found purpose in their involvement in the survival of the young state and an opportunity to refashion their ill-favored image of impotence.

As was mentioned before, news of the severity of the Holocaust made many American Jews, through the support of Jewish charities and synagogues, spring into
action in an attempt to rejuvenate a ravaged Jewish population and culture. The success of the Israeli Army in establishing the state of Israel fostered this growth of Jewish American identity by instilling a sense of pride and security. In this context one can better understand why so many secular American Jews of the late 1940s chose to define their identity in terms of their religion. To be Jewish in the years following the war was to be one of the hundreds of thousands of Jews to raise over $160 million in 1948 towards settling displaced Holocaust survivors in Israel. While support for the new state would diminish after its successful establishment and dwindle until the Six Day War in 1967, American Jewry still gave more to Israel than any other nonlocal cause from the late 40s and into the 80s. As Arthur Goren states, “Support of Israel served as a secular ethnic replacement for, or reinforcement of, religion” for American Jews. This “religious” fervor of the 50s, aimed at helping settle displaced victims of the Holocaust in Israel, gave Jewish Americans a sense of belonging, and acted as a precursor to the “victim identity” that brought Jews together in the mid-60s.

When the establishment of the state of Israel seemed safely in place, American Jews focused their aim on keeping it safe against the totalitarian and formally Soviet-supported Arab states. The safety of Israel, therefore, became a platform for many presidential candidates to come. This political support was extremely beneficial to Jews who feared their dual loyalty to both Israel and the United States would not get most Americans’ approval. Now, being loyal to Israel was being against the encroaching communism of Russia. Comfortable that support for the success of Israel would not spur

157 Ibid. p.6.
159 Ibid. p.188.
160 Goren, quoted in Erens p.6.
anti-Semitic sentiment, American Jews who could not publicly focus on the wrongs of Nazi Germany were at least free to express their feelings on the one subject that made them feel most Jewish: the future of a Jewish state.

Exodus is the first popular American film to pair the Jewish catastrophe of the Holocaust with the Jewish triumph of the birth of Israel. At the start of the film, a young Jewish refugee, Dov, escapes a truck full of others like him; these refugees were refused entrance into British-occupied Palestine and are to be contained in a holding camp in Cyprus until they are sent back to Germany. British soldiers attempt to capture the fleeing Dov as he leaps away from them. He succeeds in beating them down until he finally trips and knocks himself out. We later find out that Dov was a survivor of Auschwitz. This theme of the strong, vigorous Jew reacting against his oppressor, whether British or Nazi, is, then, laid out from the beginning. Later in the film Dov makes it to Palestine and joins the Haganah, a Zionist military organization. Informing the group of his experience with dynamite he breaks down while explaining how he used to blow holes in the ground to bury gassed Jewish camp prisoners. After this humiliating confession he has proved his loyalty to the group and is accepted.

These two scenes directly connect the Holocaust with the future of Israel. Dov represents the oppressed Jewish Holocaust victim who will not go without a fight; and fighting is what he needs to do to secure the Jewish control of Palestine. His Jewishness is defined by his experiences in Auschwitz and his desire to seek revenge on the Nazis by fighting for a land where his people will finally be accepted. The connection between Nazis and those English and Arab forces trying to prevent Jewish control in Palestine is emphasized by racial slurs said by English officers and the Nazi ties an Arab character,
the Grand Mufti. The last scene is, then, positioned so that the acquisition of Palestine through force is a necessary goal in site of the unbearable anguish Jews suffered from the Nazis.

Towards the beginning of this three-hour epic, another type of aggression is defined. This second meaning is given by one of the six hundred Holocaust refugees who freedom fighter Ari Ben-Canaan, played by Paul Newman, ships illegally from Cyprus to Palestine. When the British find the boat and block it from leaving the harbor, Ari offers them the option of going on a hunger strike in protest. After Ari warns them of the danger in this action one old man shouts,

What is so unusual about Jews dying? Is that anything new? I say right here, there is no excuse for us to go on living unless we start fighting right now; so that every Jew on the face of the Earth can begin to start feeling like a human being again. You heard what I said. Fight! Not back! Fight!

The cheers that follow this riveting speech are shared by the American Jews in the audience who are given a reason to be proud of their decimated European brethren. They were not timid sheep who willingly went to their slaughter but fiercely powerful Jews whose power lay in their insurmountable efforts to survive. These two approaches towards fighting, one heavily militant, the other preaching civil disobedience, are shown to work together as the film progresses. When Ari’s uncle, head of the Haganah, dies from bullet wounds after escaping prison, he praises his nephew: “In this fatal optimism you are Haganah, in methodology you are Yagund, but in the heart you are Israel.” Here, Ari represents the fusing of all Jews in Palestine as they must unite to fight Arab forces intent on stopping the statehood of Israel.

Horowitz. p.155.
But this representation was not enough for most American Jews who were still self-conscious in the face of newsreels and pictures of emaciated living skeletons. These particular audience members needed to see a strong physical image and got it in the character of Ari Ben-Canaan. The handsome, chiseled features of Paul Newman help create the robust image of the Israeli Jew that directly contrasts that of the old Jews in this film. As Horowitz explains, “The old Jew destroyed in the Shoah comes to represent a vision of Jewish impotence that American Jews wish to cast off, while the virile Israeli represents the healthy and sexualized body of the American Jew.” This film only broadens this contrast and enhances Jewish Americans' attachment to Newman's character by having him speak English in an American accent while the older Jews speak in a broken German accent. Horowitz goes on to demonstrate how Kitty, the American female lead played by Eva Marie Saint, represents the acceptance of the Jew in mainstream American culture in her attraction towards Ari. Also, Kitty’s love affair with Ari portrays an alluring America that is to be conquered and entered. Exodus is, then, pleasing to the (particularly male) Jewish American viewers’ identities by linking them with the image of the tough Israeli, avenging and redeeming those murdered in the Holocaust while attracting beautiful American women.

The relationship between Ari and Kitty should be further elaborated as it brings up the issue of Jews' acceptance in America. One scene, where Ari explains to Kitty how Jews are different, exemplifies this point. Kitty states,

-“All these differences between people are made up. People are the same no matter what they’re called.”

162 Ibid. p.156.
163 Ibid.
"Don't ever believe it," Ari strikes back, "People *are* different. They have a right to be different, they like to be different. It's no good pretending the differences don't exist. They do. They have to be recognized and respected."

"I recognize them, I respect them," Kitty says discerningly, "Don't you understand that you make me feel like a Presbyterian when you can't for just one minute or two forget that you're a Jew. You're wrong Ari. There are no differences."

As she and Ari kiss they symbolize America's acceptance of Jews as equals while appreciating, as Horowitz calls it, "a particular history that distinguishes and even ennobles them." Exodus's message is more sensible than *Gentleman's Agreement*'s melting pot ideology. This film makes it evident that Jews *are* accepted in America because they are Jews, not just because they are Americans. In addition, the point is made that we are all human. Here, the differences between Jewish and Christian Americans are recognized, yet the message is that this does not prevent their physical or emotional bond.

The sense of pride and security which Israel's inception provides American Jews is clearly evident throughout the film. When Kitty raises concern over the implications of the hunger strike on the children of the ship to Palestine, Ari explains why he must go to extremes:

Don't you get hysterical...you're late, lady you're ten years late. Almost two million Jewish children were butchered like animals because nobody wanted them. No country would have them, not your country or any other country, and no one wants the ones that survived.

Ari's thoughts reflect the fears that many American Jews had over still being in exile in a country that did not show much concern for the millions of Jews slaughtered in Europe. However well they were living in the United States, Jews still felt like outsiders.

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*164 All dialogue is quoted from the aforementioned film.*
The thought of having a place they could go to and be unconditionally accepted instilled a great amount of pride in American Jews. In one scene Ari explains to Kitty his people’s history in the valley where his family now lives:

[That was] 3200 years ago. That’s when the Jews first came to this valley. It wasn’t yesterday or the day before... And this valley became Jewish land once again... I just wanted you to know I’m a Jew. This is my country.

This film shows a Jew being proud of his ethnicity after finally finding a place to settle down. Later, Ari’s father reads off a list of countries from the United Nations that agree with the partitioning of Palestine to create an Israeli state. This scene reveals that the world is finally accepting Jews. But in showing the world’s concession to the inception of Israel after 2000 years, this film symbolically presents an inclusive America that allows full expression of Jewish ethnicity. This same point can be made when considering the connections made between Ari and the Jewish American audience. As both learn in the end, Jews no longer have to consider themselves outsiders.

*Cast a Giant Shadow* goes one step closer to building a rugged image of the American Jew. This film tells the story of a United States colonel who helps the Israeli army successfully establish the Jewish state in 1948. Flashbacks of Colonel David Marcus, played by Kirk Douglas, reveal his eager intentions to ignore the security of his rank and, as he says, start “knocking off a lot of guys who’ve been making soap out of my relatives.” Throughout the film Marcus exposes his military prowess while slowly coming to terms with his Jewish identity.

Early in the film a major from the Jewish underground army attempts to convince the retired colonel to join them in their efforts against the Arabs once the British move...
out of Palestine. When Marcus admits he is through with fighting, the major declares, "But you're a Jew." "I'm an American, major. That's my religion," Marcus juts back, protesting his responsibility to world Jewry. He continues, "Last time I was in temple I was 13 years old. I made a speech and got 42 fountain pens. I don't have to go again, I've got enough fountain pens." Marcus sees Judaism as many American Jews did during the post-war period, full of antiquated customs with little value to his life. The Israeli major then tries to put his situation into terms which an assimilated American Jew would understand:

-"I'm asking you as an American. What is it you say in your schools when you salute your flag? Liberty and justice for all? Is it only for all of you or..."

-"Don't give me a history lesson," quips Marcus.

-“Six million of our people have recently been murdered, Colonel Marcus,” says the major in a last desperate attempt. “Do you want to try for seven?”

We soon find out that Marcus *is* well aware of the Jews’ need for help in a situation in which they are unfairly outnumbered: “They’ve been killed by experts. Someone’s gotta help them fight back,” Marcus says to his disapproving wife. In the beginning of the film an attempt is made to call Marcus’s and the American Jewish audience’s attention to the plight of the Jews during the Holocaust and appeal to their need to finally fight back. This reflection is shown not only to be one’s duty as a Jew but as an American who believes in the canon of democracy. As the film progresses, Marcus will come to see how the fight for a Jewish nation in Palestine should be not out of pity but out of pride.

The director, Otto Preminger, paints throughout this film a mentality of the brave and hardy Israelis whose best weapon is their willingness to fight. “We won’t fight to the
last man, we'll fight to the last woman," says the Israeli major to Colonel Marcus, revealing their enthusiasm for victory and little means with which it can be achieved. Marcus comes to realize both these points when he protests the Israelis' movement through Arab towns in armored vehicles instead of just wiping the entire town out: "At least die standing up." "Sometimes we do," says the major as the armored car stops at another which has been bombed out, showing a dead female Israeli soldier tied to its side with a star of David carved into her abdomen.

Later a new boatload of illegal Jewish immigrants from various concentration camps around Europe comes ashore and is discovered by British authorities. When hundreds of Israelis mix in with the refugees, the British warn them to separate by the count of ten or be fired upon. The scene climaxes as these hundreds of Israelis and Holocaust survivors stand motionless to the full count of the British warning. "They are a stubborn people," the British commander says as he gives up his efforts and lets the Jews free. In the film's culminating scene, in which the Israeli army is about to take an Arab stronghold that prevents their entrance into Jerusalem, Marcus witnesses trucks full of singing Jewish soldiers. "Where do they all come from?" he asks an Israeli general who responds with the names of various Nazi concentration camps. "What are they singing?" "The same song they used to sing on the way to the gas chamber," the general answers, "And as most of our songs it begins, 'Next year in Jerusalem.'" This mixture of "stubborn" passive and active aggression shows a Jew who does die standing. And it is in this willingness to do so that both Marcus and the Jewish American audience learn Jews are now and were always intent on their people's survival. Such depictions raise
healthy questions about what life was really like for Jewish inmates during the Holocaust, and challenge the stereotypes of fragile, sheep-like Jews.

This last scene is also where Marcus gives a more meaningful value to his Jewish identity. After seeing all that these untrained, ill-armed Israelis have accomplished in order to secure a piece of land for themselves, he cannot help but think being Jewish is more than just fountain pens. Marcus admits to Asher, one of the Israeli generals,

> All my life I've been looking for where I belong. Turns out it's been here. I've been so angry at the world ever since I was circumcised without my permission. All of a sudden I find out I'm not so special after all. Everybody around me is in the same boat and nobody's belly aching. Okay, stand up and be counted, the man said; grow up is more like it. I'm not fighting anymore because I'm ashamed of being a Jew. I'm fighting because I'm stiff-necked and proud of it. Next week, Asher, next week in Jerusalem.

Now he understands why a hold on Jerusalem is so important to the Israeli Army; it is what the world has taken from them and what they shall take back, as now they can. Marcus has learned that being Jewish is not a curse but a virtue. He no longer has to overcompensate for his assumed weaknesses and prove to the world that he is stronger than the “corpses” of Dachau and Bergen-Belsen, supposedly unable to defend themselves. He is no longer ashamed of his stereotyped image and stands up for himself as a Jew.

Yet, this overt message of the Jew who is not ashamed but proud of his ethnicity directly contrasts the covert message of the film. The stiff-necked comment refers to a derogatory remark given to Marcus by a high British official about the Jews’ unwavering aggression in Palestine. At first, the film tries to claim he is proud of his Jewishness and all the stereotypes that come with being a Jew. It appears that Marcus feels he no longer
needs to be fighting in the front lines of danger to prove to everyone that he is not one of
the passive Jews of Nazi Europe. Here, the message of the film is that Jews no longer
have to prove their strength to a prejudiced people.

The completely different message, however, is clearly seen when he and a high-rank-
ing female military officer are driving in the country and start up a conversation
about their personal lives. She reveals that her husband is not the best in bed and
suggests that this is due to his past life in a concentration camp. The Holocaust survivor
is then depicted much as the Jewish stereotypes that resulted: defective and incompetent
as a man. Marcus is married to a Christian woman back home who is pregnant,
signifying his ability to successfully integrate and add to American society. Yet, this
does not keep him from taking the place of the Israeli woman’s husband in bed after his
death. Basically Marcus is shown as the antithesis to the Holocaust victim’s negative
image.

Here, the film vindicates the American Jew even more than was seen in Exodus
by showing him as intensely competent sexually. The Jew in this film still needs to
justify himself to the world by disproving his negative image. Another scene finds
Marcus gearing up for a battle. He offers a suggestion to his men before starting: “Just
remember, the world doesn’t pity the slaughtered. It only respects those who fight.” In
the context of this film, these words can only be translated as meaning no merit can be
given to those slain in the Holocaust; the only way for Jews to gain the world’s respect is
if they fight back. The film ignores an important lesson to be learned in the death of six
million Jews with this perspective. No point is made of the responsibility of those who
could have done something by getting over their prejudices and helping. Instead, the film
reveals that American Jews must still overcompensate strength and ability in order to gain the world’s sympathetic attention.

This image, started by the Israel-focused films of the 60s, would continue throughout the 70s and 80s in various films depicting powerful and aggressive Jews.166 Marathon Man (1976) focuses specifically on Jewish aggression in the face of Nazi oppression. This film begins in the streets of New York with a fight between a wealthy German whose car has stalled and a German Jew in the car in back of him. After the German Jew calls the other a Nazi, the German turns around and calls him “Jude.” Though this word means “Jew” in German, its derogatory connotations enrage the Jewish character in the film, who begins ramming his car into the German’s. The scene builds up to a car chase in which both men are killed after hitting a gasoline truck. This introduction reveals the German’s brother to be the infamous Nazi war criminal, Dr. Szell, who must now come out of hiding in order to retrieve the millions of dollars in diamonds he stole from Jews during the Holocaust.

Dustin Hoffman plays Babe Levine, the brother of a secret agent who is tied in with the activities of the escaped Nazis. Babe is painted as a stereotypical Jew: well-educated, awkward, easily intimidated and uneasy with women.167 When he becomes involved in the plot to retrieve the diamonds, Babe is taken hostage and has his teeth drilled to torture information out of him, a procedure Szell mastered on the Jews at his concentration camp. This connection between Babe and Holocaust victims soon takes on a strong meaning as he escapes in his pajama bottoms, resembling those of a camp inmate, and begins to run for his life. At the film’s end, Babe has made Szell the victim

166 Lepke (1975) and Once Upon a Time in America (1984) are some of the first films to feature Jews as gangsters.
and forces him to swallow the diamonds he stole from the Jews he murdered. When 
Babe throws the rest of the diamonds off of a platform, Szell greedily runs after them and 
inauditently kills himself. The Nazi now embodies the Jewish stereotypes of infamous 
Nazi propaganda films, while the Jew has become strong-willed, athletic and impervious. 
*Marathon Man* is the later manifestation of the pro-Zionist films of the 1960s, yet it 
styless the Holocaust as the background to what is an action thriller instead of focusing on 
the event's tragedy.\textsuperscript{168} In the 1970s, the image of the Jew is still presented as competent 
to an extreme in order to counter assumed stereotypes of the weak and impotent Jew, 
supposedly proven after the Holocaust.

\textbf{Conclusion}

The physically competent image of Babe in *Marathon Man* is not much separated 
from the chauvinistic male image seen in *Exodus* and *Cast a Giant Shadow*. All of these 
films have the intention of bolstering the American Jew's self-image. When *Judgment at 
Nuremberg* began asking questions about what really happened in Germany, Jews felt 
more inclined to stake their claim on the Holocaust. These Jews attempted to expose 
how, during World War II, this part of the world reacted severely negatively to the fact 
that they were not the same as most people. It is with the redefinition of Jewish 
American identity in the 1960s that later films attain the freedom to make up for centuries 
of weak, effeminate depictions of Jews.

There is no wonder, then, that filmmakers have revolved their films around the 
interests of Jews and perhaps many other Americans, who are eager to see a Jewish 

\textsuperscript{167} Ibid. p.349.
image that is diametrically opposed to those of the past. We see this changed portrayal in the stamina and bravery of Babe, Marcus, and Ari, and in a different manner with Nazerman’s strength to start living. The hyper-masculine image of the first three characters is created, however, at the cost of authenticity in the portrayal of the Jewish Holocaust victim. Erens states in reference to Marathon Man, “Despite the inequality of the forces, the Jew, through sheer perseverance, survives.” Omer Bartov disagrees with this depiction of the Jew who survives through skill, perseverance, willpower and determination when positioned in the context of the Holocaust. He claims, “This is troubling because so many of the millions who perished had no less will, no fewer skills, were in no way inferior to the survivors, and yet they drowned.”169 This statement is made in criticism of Spielberg’s version of the Holocaust, Schindler’s List (1993), which, though made a quarter-century later, still melds together many of the themes detailed in the films discussed in this section.

168 Erens. p.347.
Schindler’s List
and Recent Manifestations of the Holocaust-Centered Jewish Identity
A joke in *The Big Book of Jewish Humor* reads: "Two Jews are walking through an anti-Semitic neighborhood one evening when they notice that they are being followed by a pair of hoodlums. 'Sam,' says his friend, "we better get out of here. There are two of them and we're alone.'" This joke recollects a time when anti-Semitism in America provoked a real fear among most of the country's Jews. This joke plays on the stereotype of the weak Jew who cannot defend himself even when the fight is fair. A double meaning can also be seen as these Jews realize they are "alone" in America with no one willing to defend them against racist bigots. But the 1980s and 90s were different times for a new generation of American Jews. Born after the birth of the state of Israel, these young Jews took its existence for granted and did not have the need for the Zionist heroes in films of their parents' era. However, they were not necessarily apathetic to their ethnic heritage. Without reason to be ashamed of their ethnicity, they were more inclined to embrace it.

The Holocaust has increasingly become more of an attractive means by which these Jews could learn about their history and identity. It is in this very open American society that one of Hollywood's most famous directors, Steven Spielberg, was able to make *Schindler's List*, a film well received not only by Jews but by most Americans. This mass approval of the film is significant since no other American Holocaust film has put more emphasis on the event's specificity to Jewish victimization. Yet, with its wide viewership comes the obligation to recognize the impression this film's image of the Jew will make on Americans, Jewish or otherwise. Was this image too belittling? Was it too flattering? An examination of Spielberg's film is needed to answer these questions.
Spielberg’s Image of the Jew

After almost a century of acculturation into American society, Jews seem to have attained the physical expectations, among others, needed for acceptance among peers during adolescence. Jokes featuring fragile Jews such as the one above would not go as well with the Jews of today’s generation. As Historian Charles Silberman declares, without knowing their parent’s fear, young Jews are less prone to take pride in Israel’s military strength and turn Israelis into mythic heroes; “Israel was a fact—a flesh-and-blood state—rather than a symbol or myth.” Also, growing up in a society that is increasingly accepting of Jews, Jewishness poses less of a burden to their identities. As Silberman puts it, “Young Jews wear their Jewishness with ease, whether they practice their religion or not.” Considering today’s comparatively sensitive environment, “the great majority of American Jews, young as well as old, are retaining their Jewish identity.”

Yet, this identity is still very much undefined. The adversity of Jews during and after the Holocaust provides the most engaging examples with which they can derive what it means to be Jewish. Novick admits Jews really do not know who they are and cling to the idea of a unique victim identity because “the uniqueness of the Holocaust is the sole guarantor of their uniqueness.” Perhaps this clinging explains why Jews listed “remembrance of the Holocaust” in the American Jewish Committee’s “1998 Annual

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171 Silberman. p.222.
172 Ibid. p.223.
173 Ibid. p.225.
174 Ibid.
Survey of American Jewish Opinion" as more important to their identity than synagogue attendance, traveling to Israel, or observing Jewish holidays. An indication of the number of Jews adopting Holocaust-based identities is evident in the high demand for books and high turnout for events on the subject, more than any other topic concerning Jewish ethnicity. Further proof can be found in the hundreds of millions of dollars of donations by American Jews spent towards Holocaust-related projects such as the many Holocaust museums in America’s cities, most notably the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. Esther Polen of the Philadelphia Jewish Community Relations Council believes these museums function to “explain our Jewish heritage and our Jewish needs to the Gentile as well as to the Jew.” Novick sums it up by claiming, “When it comes to how American Jews represent themselves to others, there is no question but that the Holocaust is at the center of that representation.”

This concentration on Holocaust identity explains why Schindler’s List is such an important film, not only to Jews but to all Americans. The early 1990s marked a time when the country’s social attitudes were such that a major Hollywood production could be made about the Holocaust, Jews could be featured as presumably its only, and the film could win Best Picture at the Academy Awards. However, Horowitz feels the film’s popularity is truly why it is so important; it “may well be the one vehicle by which many Americans come to learn of the Holocaust.” The average Gentile, who is largely

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175 Novick. p.198.
178 Ibid.
179 Ibid.
removed from Jews and Jewish culture, is susceptible to taking depictions of the Jewish image in this film as fact. Horowitz presents a deeper perception on this issue when claiming that American Jews take these images as a depiction of only European Jews. This sentiment fosters a view of the Jews in this film as “other,” and promotes identification with Schindler, who embodies the more positive image of American cultural values. In other words, stereotypical presentations of Jews in Schindler’s List may reflect how American Jews are embarrassed by still extant negative stereotypes, and in renouncing this image show how they are still attempting to assimilate into the dominant society. Let us examine how this film presents these stereotypes.

The beginning of the film shows Oskar Schindler as nothing more than a handsome con man who takes advantage of a Germany at war and the condition of its Jews by having them work in his factory. As the film progresses he discovers the extent of what is actually happening to European Jewry and transforms into an altruistic liberator. It is difficult for this film’s Jews to look any better in comparison. Horowitz describes the Jews in this film as “short, unattractive, and money-grubbing, contrasting visually with the clean good looks of the tall Schindler.”¹⁸¹ One scene in the beginning of the film shows Schindler walking along a line of Jews filing complaints at the Jewish Council of Krakow. His head and upper body dominate the screen as the tops of the Jews’ heads come to his shoulder. Another scene presents Schindler walking his female laborers into his work camp after saving them from certain death in Auschwitz. This contrast of Schindler with the Jews permeates the film. Bartov explains this dichotomy in image as a trope of Hollywood films to enhance the hero’s image by reducing that of

¹⁸¹ Flanzbaum, p.162.
the other characters, in this case Jews.\textsuperscript{182} He goes on to claim that this cinematic technique portrays Jews as “small, helpless, passive victims, waiting to be either murdered by one Aryan giant or saved by another.”\textsuperscript{183} This assessment draws the image of the small, weak Jew as a product of Hollywood formulas that directors are quick to follow and audiences are quick to accept.

The handsome features of Schindler are also in stark contrast to the appearance of the Jewish victims. One scene shows two Jewish investors, who Schindler hopes will help him buy his factory, haggling over profit. These Jews are presented as “disheveled, large-nosed, and unkempt... contrast[ing] negatively with Schindler’s clean good looks.”\textsuperscript{184} Horowitz parallels their image to that in folk culture: “The long standing stereotype of the Jew in the European imagination as puny, short, pushy, and dirty, physically marks the Jewish male.”\textsuperscript{185} These two old Jews then talk amongst themselves in Yiddish as Schindler and the audience observes them through his rearview mirror. It is only correct that the audience sees what Schindler is seeing, as they identify more with him than the ugly, short Jews who speak in their “secret language.” And it is in this separation of the two Jews with the mirror that an “otherness of the Jew” is emphasized.\textsuperscript{186}

This scene can be further read as reinforcing the stereotype of the money-grubbing Jew. When Schindler offers them a percentage of his factory’s profit they demand more control over the company. Bartov describes these two old Jews as

\textsuperscript{182} Loshitzky. p.48.
\textsuperscript{183} Ibid. p.49.
\textsuperscript{184} Ibid. p.126.
\textsuperscript{185} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{186} Ibid.
“haggling over loss and profit while their brethren are being tormented and starved.” He also cannot keep himself from agreeing with Horowitz’s parallel of the Jews’ depiction in this film to that found in Nazi propaganda. He notes that another scene, which shows Jews dipping their fingers in holy water and then illegally selling goods on the black market, “evokes the anti-Semitic canard of Jews desecrating sacred Christian ritual and space.” This parallel to Nazi propaganda is continued, “As the Jews obtain rare and expensive items, such as silk shirts, chocolate, and hosiery, the film reproduces the anti-Semitic stereotype of the crafty, canny, well connected Jew, as promulgated in the Protocols of the Elders of Zion.” Shots of Jews obtaining these goods hidden in walls and under train tracks also refer to the negative image of the Jew with vast hidden resources as seen in the film Nazi film Jud Süss (Dirty Jew-1940). On top of this view of the Jew as “money changer whose presence defiles sacred space [is] the Jew as money lender, with the troping of the Jew as materialistic and avaricious.” Examples are scenes showing wealthy Jews forced to leave large apartments while wearing mink coats. As the SS liquidate the Kraków ghetto, Jews are shown first taking jewels cleverly hidden in the walls and concealing them in bread for their children to eat before they hide themselves. These scenes seem to point to the overt or secret wealth of Jews that they apparently hold as more important than their own lives, much as the portrayals given in these Nazi films.

Why make such horribly stereotypical and derogatory images of Jews in a film where such depictions might well be the only ones many Gentiles retain? Horowitz makes the point that these negative stereotypes of Jews may show an image American
Jews wish to cast off, in turn fostering the "otherness" of Holocaust Jews. She first explains how a study of negative folk images of Jews in prewar Germany "not only provoked anti-Semitic behavior but also determined the way German Jews constructed their identity and personality." She continues, "In conscious or unconscious opposition to the predominant stereotypes, German Jews repudiated the "bad" image of the Jew by projecting it onto Eastern European Jews." Avoiding this negative stereotype, these German Jews in turn "adopted the values and norms of the dominant culture."190 Horowitz equates this study of German Jews with American Jews. She alleges that they reject the still extant negative Jewish stereotypes in American culture by projecting them onto Holocaust Jews, encouraging a feeling of "otherness." With this understanding, the number of stereotyped images of Holocaust Jews in Schindler's List acts as a "barometer of the pervasiveness of these images today and their assimilation not only into American culture but into the self-image of American Jews."191 The Jewish American identification with Schindler fits well into this theory as he embodies the values and norms of the dominant American culture that they wish to emulate. It is Schindler whom the audience identifies with and whom American Jews wish to model, not the sympathy-evoking Jews. The characteristics of Schindler's American values will be discussed shortly, but we must first take a second look at this film before labeling it as a self-hating, anti-Semitic portrayal of Jews.

One scene in the middle of Schindler's List features a child running away from the SS as they round up all the children of the camp in trucks to be slaughtered. He runs

189 Ibid.
190 Ibid. p.138.
into one of the barracks and looks under the floor boards, in furnaces, and finally in a latrine to find them all full of other children who yell at him, claiming there is no room. Looking at this scene with the perspective of the critics above, this child could be depicting the rat stereotype found in so many Nazi propaganda films; he scurries into various holes and under floors until he finds the perfect hiding place in the worst of filth and disease among other self-seeking rats. But this assessment is certainly not accurate.

The child in this scene represents the innocence of European Jewry, dehumanized by the Nazis to the point where pride is completely stripped as one’s goal is only to survive. It is as if Spielberg is trying to say, “Look at how horrible life must have been under the Nazis for Jews to have acted in this way.” Spielberg is cleverly working with stereotypical images of Jews in the beginning of the film, and then asking his audience to reassess these images in the context of Nazi persecution. Also, he is trying to show Jews who know the value of their lives and, in an effort to actively defy the Nazis, will defend it with all their strength, dexterity, and determination. Unfortunately this particular scene’s convincing and chilling presentation of the decay of the Jew by the Nazis is rarely duplicated as well in other similar scenes throughout the film. For, it is only in this scene that Spielberg’s overall sympathizing message, meant to refute the stereotyped Jewish image, is most visible. Spielberg does not try hard enough to convey this message throughout the entire film. Critics such as those above are, then, apt to come to the conclusion that these scenes depict a stereotyped image of the Jew instead of recognizing his degeneration under Nazi oppression.

Under this new view, the Jews in the church are not defiling the sacred space of a church but are conducting business in the only place where they will not be suspected and

191 Ibid.
arrested. More emphasis is put on the fact that the wealthy Jews, packaging up their lavish apartment, are packing more family pictures than silver. Jewelry cleverly hidden in walls are understood to be the only possessions the Nazis have yet to take away from them. With this perception it is more apparent how the seemingly shady actions of this film's Jews are a direct result of the increasingly strict policies of the Nazis, which would eventually culminate in their extermination.

But he has not made his message this clear, and without a strong explanation behind them, negative images of Jews may be in the back of the mind of many filmgoers as they leave the theater. This is not to say people in the audience do not sympathize with the Jews at the end of this film. It is simply a lack of background information of laws which kept Jews from conducting business that prevented the audience from fully understanding the ironic meaning behind Jews selling good in a church. Or a lack in other scenes of emotional power equal to the image of the boy, chin-deep in human waste, that pushes the audience to better understand the Jews’ seemingly questionable actions. The film is well made and evokes much sympathy from the audience. Yet, it is soft in certain areas which act only to weaken Spielberg's clever attempt at manipulation of Jewish stereotypes, confusing both audience members and critics.

Another weak area in this film is its presentation of the powerful Jew, comparable to the overly bolstered image of the Israeli Jew in films of the 1960s. Spielberg is considered by many to be the most popular director in Hollywood, and should be recognized for his ability to read the social attitudes of Americans. Growing up as an American Jew, he must have been influenced or at the very least familiar with the mythicized Israeli heroes in films such as Exodus and Cast a Giant Shadow. His efforts
must have been no less forceful in attempting to prove the strength of Jews to stay alive, if not as overtly as in these pro-Zionist films.

Spielberg portrayed this virility not in physical strength but in the skill and perseverance of many of the characters whose lives were saved by Schindler. The main and strongest Jewish character in *Schindler’s List*, Itzhak Stern. At first he appears timid and fragile, not joining in on Schindler’s offer for a drink. As the story progresses, Stern proves himself to be a powerful figure, taking advantage of Schindler’s benevolent ignorance by hiring physically incompetent workers. Here, following in Spielberg’s theme of disproving negative Jewish portrayals, Stern’s intelligence works to save hundreds of Jews instead of make him and Schindler wealthier. The lesson learned in the example of Stern is that he survived because he was smarter than average and looked out for others who may not have fared well alone.

Many other characters contain these same rare and altruistic qualities: one boy is smart enough to claim while in a lineup of accused chicken stealers that the guilty man was already shot by the SS officer; a young man attempts to survive the liquidation of the ghettos by throwing baggage out of the road to avoid the suspicion of passing SS troops; and a small boy is willing to wait in human waste while the other children are collected for extermination. But are these the definitive Jewish survivors of the Holocaust? Is it these qualities that separated survivors from the millions killed?

As mentioned before in Bartov’s essay, those Jews who died “had no less will, no fewer skills…and yet they drowned.”\(^{192}\) He continues, “The idea of salvation through personal gifts has no place in the Holocaust,” because “individual will and skills rarely
played an important role and chance was paramount.” The fact that Spielberg will not recognize the randomness that best explains whether Jews lived or died, as well as the deep anti-Semitism that explains the severe treatment of Jews by the Nazis, reveals his efforts to appease Americans still searching for and answer to the question “why were Jews passive during the Holocaust?” By making his Jewish characters seem like the pinnacle of righteousness, Spielberg mythicizes Jews much as did the Zionist films of the 60s. Holocaust Jews need to be the best of the best in order to explain why they survived, and more importantly to deny their sheep-like slaughter to questioning Americans.

Spielberg is afraid to show that many Jews did die seemingly like sheep, some actually wanting to die in the face of such deranging and dehumanizing treatment by the Nazis. He is the American Jew still overcompensating for his people’s negative image in order to prove their competence to himself and the rest of a perplexed society. While American Jews today may feel more comfortable in a country which is increasingly considerate of the plight of others, it is important to realize that Jews continue to be defensive of themselves and their image. In this case, depicting Jewish survivors as the best humanity has to offer is done at the cost of disrespecting the six million who died through no fault of their own.

**Spielberg's Christian Audience**

Another reason why Spielberg’s message of understanding the Jews’ plight is difficult to recognize is the fact that Jews are not the main characters in this film. Oskar Schindler takes center stage here, making the horror of the Holocaust somewhat of an

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193 Ibid.
intense and engaging background. Because Schindler receives the spotlight, attention is focused on the lessons he learns and transformations he makes throughout the film. The major message of the film, then, revolves around his revived Christian faith, allowing him to be a Christ-like “savior” to the Jews as he is described in film reviews in *The Record, The Boston Globe, and The New York Times.* As a result, the large degree of Jewish iconography that preaches Jewish specificity to the Holocaust is in the shadow of Schindler’s Christian “awakening.” Some critics are led to believe the film truly shows Jews “whose victimization serves as the arena for Oskar Schindler’s spiritual transformation.” Under this guise it can be implied that Judaism only survives in this film because Schindler has become a “good Christian.”

The film begins with the lighting of Sabbath candles as a rabbi makes a blessing over wine. A close-up of a candle is shown, slowly burning down until it extinguishes into smoke. This opening suggests to the audience that this is a film about Jews and the Jewish religion. The extinguished candle represents the extermination of European Jewry as the smoke signifies the burning of Jews in the crematoria. But these ritual acts and objects are given no depth, nor is there any explanation of the spiritual crisis the Holocaust created between Jews and their God. Instead, “the film turns out to be about Christianity, transforming Schindler into...one of the Christ-like saviors that populate Spielberg’s films.” Just as Ginger Rogers’s character in *Once Upon a Honeymoon* becomes more morally correct and less materialistic, Schindler gradually saves more and more Jews at the cost of all his profits and earthly possessions as the film progresses. Again, Jews are seen as the “carriers of the ideal” who, through the lesson of

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their pain, foster a humanitarian spirit in corrupt Christians. Schindler’s rebirth as a Christian is seen in the second church scene as he makes the Sign of the Cross and sits beside his wife saying, “No doorman or maitre’d will ever mistake you,” renewing the sacraments of his marriage.197 Entering a monogamous relationship, he is no longer the womanizer he was made out to be in the beginning of the film. A better Christian, Schindler is now more fit to save the lives of others instead of selfishly abiding by his insatiable desires.

Further, Horowitz points out that “Schindler’s spiritual awakening enables him not only to save the lives of Jews but apparently to save them spiritually as well.”198 When in his factory, Schindler asks one of his rabbi workers, “What day is this? Friday?... You should be preparing for the Sabbath.” When the Sabbath candles are lit and Jewish services resume as they did in the beginning of the film, European Jewry is restored by the faithful Christian. With this interpretation, the Jew only becomes a Jew when the Christian becomes a Christian.199 In other words, Judaism is “redeemed through Christianity.”200 In the context of American Jewry, this point can be extended when considering the Jewish American audience’s identification with Schindler, who represents the best qualities of a “God fearing” Christian American. A message can easily be seen where Jewish life in America is ultimately redeemed through the emulation of a successful Christian.201 This scene, then, exemplifies how Schindler’s Christian awakening overshadows the Jewishness of the film to the point where Judaism becomes a

196 Ibid. p.125.
197 Ibid. p.132
198 Ibid.
199 Ibid. p.133.
200 Ibid.
201 Ibid. p.135.
side issue in its reliance on the “stronger” religion. Schindler does become a Christ-like savior in this light as he saves “his” Jews—whom he calls “my people”—physically and redeems them spiritually.  

Why would a film made by a Jew about the Holocaust have such a strong Christian humanitarian message? To answer this question it is necessary to reflect on the discussion on Christian symbolism in *The Pawnbroker*. *Schindler’s List* shows the same compromising approach as was seen in *The Pawnbroker* by adding a Christian tint. Schindler’s altruism, generosity, and overall growth as a Christian enables the audience to better understand the extent of Jewish persecution in the Holocaust. The point is made that Jewish suffering is so severe that it puts a corrupt man into the realm of saints. Spielberg, in this sense, resembles his African character in *Amistad* (1997) who demonstrates his people’s suffering through what he can extract from Biblical pictures of Jesus’s persecution. Spielberg, much as the African, interprets what America has taught him about Christianity and uses this language to explain to Americans his people’s tormented past.

Spielberg in this example truly represents what American Jews have learned about America’s Christian ideals after almost 400 years of acculturation. Jewish Americans are still as, if not more, familiar with these ideals than they were when *Pawnbroker* came out. They are, therefore, very receptive to understanding Jewish pain through the vehicle of a Christian Schindler. Christian values are very much ingrained in American values and are part of the language by which American films express and explain their lessons of pain and suffering.

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202 Ibid. p.124.
By adding this Americanized tint to *Schindler's List* Spielberg’s reveals his desire to reach the largest audience possible to tell his story and teach his lesson. In 1992, after the debut of *Schindler’s List*, a book called *Jagendorf’s Foundry* was published detailing the memoirs of a Jewish man with a story very similar to that of Schindler’s. Jagendorf is an engineer who hides his Jewish identity, renovates a foundry, and keeps thousands of Jews from certain death by having them work for him. Considering how Spielberg made his film, if he were given the choice to produce a film out of either novel, *Schindler’s List* would still be the film for which he would be accepting the Academy Award. For in choosing the other novel, with its mainly Jewish references, Spielberg may not have reached as many Americans, who would know less about Jews as a result. This compromise by Spielberg of Jewish specificity, much as was done in many war films, must be considered a smart move. Not only was it the best way to inform all Americans, both Jewish and Christian, of the horrors of Nazi anti-Semitism, it may have been one of the only ways they would have listened.

**Conclusion**

*Schindler’s List* does not turn its Jews into Christian martyrs, as did most of the films discussed between 1938 and 1958. The film should be recognized for effectively focusing on the Jewish particularity of the Holocaust, more so than any other American film on the subject. It certainly stands as a marker of the greater comfort that American Jews feel in expressing their heritage and identities. However, the film should also be recognized for its shortcomings. *Schindler’s List* relates to Zionist films of the 1960s when presenting Jews with incredible abilities that allowed them to survive; and it
contains the same preference of explaining the Jewishness of the Holocaust through a Christian vehicle as does *The Pawnbroker*. As American society becomes more sensitive to understanding the Holocaust in the Jews' own language, films on the subject will change drastically. Hopefully, these future films will no longer need to overcompensate for the Jew's weak image or explain it in the iconography of other religions.
Conclusion
American Jews are almost at a point where they feel completely comfortable in sharing with the rest of America their painful experiences or meaningful connections with the Holocaust. For some reasons or others they have put the Holocaust at the forefront of their ethnic heritage and identity as Jews. This intense interest in the subject by Jewish Americans as well as Gentiles is reflected in the recent notoriety and popularity of films like as *Schindler's List* such as *Apt Pupil* (1998), *Jacob the Liar* (1999), and foreign films such as *Life is Beautiful* (1998). However, when viewing what these films say about the Holocaust’s meaning to Jews, the degree to which this meaning is beneficial to Jewish American identity comes into question.

When war films of the 1940s began to put visibly Jewish characters back on film screens, American Jews could not be more pleased. These Jews were shown as not only fighting for their country but as regular Americans, though with slightly different characteristics. Films made soon after, such as *Gentleman's Agreement* would define the Jew as similar in appearance and even in thought to all other Americans. Jewish Americans were generally proud of this depiction as they felt they were being publicly recognized and accepted into American society. In view of the lack of understanding of Jewishness found in these portrayals, it becomes evident that Jews were less concerned with Americans fully understanding them than in being acknowledged as part of mainstream culture.

During the 1950s, because of their feelings on Germany, Jews were not thought to be in this mainstream. Many were afraid of being labeled communist; but in this fear of appearing un-American lies the strong aspiration to be more American. As a result,
animosity towards the Nazis' treatment of Jews during WWII was not displayed, at least publicly. The topic of how commonly the Holocaust was discussed in the private households of American Jews during the 50s is certainly one worth further research. But it is evident enough that Jews felt a great deal of restraint in expressing the particularities of their ethnicity at this time. They were simply happy enough to be recognized for what made them American instead of being recognized for their differences.

This contentedness in remaining silent in public would last only so long before social attitudes changed. Eventually Jews would feel more at ease in discussing the Nazi past. What was before a very private issue among Jews was accepted enough by society to become public. More films were produced deliberating on the Jews' search for a homeland in a world that would not welcome them; more were made revealing the intense struggle of life during and after the Holocaust. Subjects that Jews discussed only in their homes in the 1950s were now discussed by all Americans after leaving movie theaters in the 1960s. Jewish Americans were now willing to share their memories and bitterness because there were enough people who were willing to listen.

Today American Jews are prouder and more open in vocalizing their Holocaust-centered identities. The level of ethnic sensitivity in America is such that a major Hollywood production can be successfully distributed, depicting Jews as the only victims of Nazi persecution. Yet, this story does still need to be told through the American language of Christian values and symbolism. Americanizing through the addition of Christian ethics and meanings have enhanced many of these films' messages to both Christian and Jewish audiences. However, this incorporation only reflects the attitudes of a national culture that has yet to become fully sensitive to its myriad ethnicities. Film
language consists of what Americans want to hear, and most Americans would rather not hear a Jewish understanding of what Jews went through during the Holocaust. When Americans become more willing and interested to learn this Jewish language of the Holocaust, American Jews will no longer feel restrained in their self-expression.

Jews are not completely in an environment where they can fully expose their Jewishness to the rest of the nation. America’s current interest in the Holocaust film proves this event to be most popular and, therefore, successful means by which Jews can explain themselves to other Americans. The subject is so striking and moving that it becomes the most eye-catching method in which Jews can reveal their ethnic heritage onto Gentiles and Jews alike. American Jews focus so much on the Holocaust to explain their Jewishness that the meaning of being Jewish is trapped in this single, tragic event. This intense focus uncovers a limited interest among Gentiles and Jews in discovering the expansive identity of Jewish culture. There seems little desire to explore the thousands of years of history, culture, and tradition that were destroyed by the Nazi regime. In the future perhaps, Holocaust films will show not just the understanding the world has gained but the culture it almost lost. Whether or not this time comes, the full meaning of Jewishness on screen will never be viewed unless all of America is willing to watch.
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