

Proposal for a Graduate Student Summer Research Fellowship
The Center for the Study of Religion and Culture

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My summer research will be focused on the role of the Holocaust in the construction of Jewish identity. While I am in Jerusalem for three weeks in May and June, I will accomplish this primarily through interviews with Tova Berlinski, a painter who escaped Poland with her husband in 1938 and has lived since then in Israel.

I met Mrs. Berlinski during the summer of 2004, when I worked at the Auschwitz Jewish Center Museum and Synagogue in Oswiecim, Poland (the town where the Auschwitz concentration camps were located). The oldest of six children of a Hasidic rabbi, Mrs. Berlinski was the only member of her family to survive the Holocaust. Her parents and siblings were killed at Auschwitz, less than one mile from their family home. Mrs. Berlinski travels to Oswiecim as often as possible, and it was during one of those visits that we met and I recorded several hours of conversation for the museum archives.

Although she was raised in a religiously observant household, Mrs. Berlinski was not particularly religious when she left Poland. Today, however, she considers herself to be more religious and more Jewish than she was. "Especially after the Holocaust," she told me, "I am more Jewish, I *have* to be Jewish." In my interviews with Mrs. Berlinski, I will use these statements to launch an exploration of what it means to be "more Jewish," both religiously and culturally. The question of Jewish identity lies at the very intersection between religion and culture. For this reason, this project is of particular relevance to the Center for the Study of Religion and Culture. While she considers herself to be "more Jewish" after the Holocaust, Mrs. Berlinski's Judaism, she says, "is not a religion of institution." Through our interviews, I hope to gain an understanding of how Mrs. Berlinski distinguishes between cultural and religious Jewish identity, and how the Holocaust has affected that distinction.

My dissertation focuses on forgiveness in the aftermath of atrocity. I look specifically at the role of forgiveness in the contexts of victim-offender mediation in the criminal justice system, in the proceedings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in post-apartheid South Africa, and in the construction of Jewish identity after the Holocaust. My conversations with Mrs. Berlinski will contribute a great deal to this third area of dissertation research.

I spoke recently to Mrs. Berlinski by phone, and she confirmed that she is interested in helping me with this project. While I am in Jerusalem, I will record and transcribe many hours of conversation, then use those transcriptions to construct a narrative of the transformation of Mrs. Berlinski's Jewish identity. While the direction of the project will be largely determined by Mrs. Berlinski's reflections, I will focus my questions on what it means for a person to be "more Jewish" after the Holocaust, and the role forgiveness plays in that conception of Jewish identity.

During my time at Vanderbilt I have taken classes in Jewish Studies, the historical and religious implications of the Holocaust, and Jewish and Christian identity construction. Before I was in graduate school, I worked as a feature writer for the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. This combination of academic and professional experience makes me well suited for this project. Upon return from Jerusalem, I will work with Professor Jay Geller on organizing the interview material and further refining the narrative project.