

# Making Memories, Taking Responsibility

*By Carrie Sealine*



*Through her work at the GTU's Center for Jewish Studies—  
and a surprising friendship—Lea Heitfeld is keeping cultural memory alive  
and helping shape a more hopeful future.*

**L**ea Heitfeld has been in the news a lot recently. The granddaughter of Nazis, the 31-year-old MA student at the GTU's Center for Jewish Studies is the unlikely housemate of Ben Stern, a 95-year-old Holocaust survivor. Their unusual friendship has led to interviews with national and international media including the *Washington Post*, *Al Jazeera*, CBS Evening News, and Public Radio International. While the story of her living with Stern is indeed compelling, Heitfeld's decision to pursue a degree in Jewish studies, her work at the GTU, and her plans for life after she graduates in May provide a context for understanding how this extraordinary partnership came to be an ordinary part of her life.

Heitfeld grew up in a Germany that had no Jewish life or culture. "I lived there for 26 years and maybe I knew one person with a Jewish background," she said. "Jewish life and culture were completely foreign to me." She says her father's parents participated actively in the Nazi regime. Yet her own parents broke with that past, seeking to raise awareness of the Holocaust and asking what we can learn from that history.

Younger Germans like Heitfeld, now three and four generations removed from the Holocaust, live

in a different relationship to this history. She says most do not have a personal connection to the events anymore. While some feel a desire to keep the memory of the Holocaust alive, many are less interested in engaging the past.

Heitfeld's work at the Center for Jewish Studies has sought to find ways to encourage constructive engagement with Holocaust history. Her thesis focuses on the construction and dynamics of "cultural memory" in the context of the Holocaust. Drawing on the field of memory studies, Heitfeld analyzes how the Holocaust has been taught in German history textbooks since the 1950s, identifying how this educational material reflects both changing cultural attitudes and different stages of memory. She contends that Holocaust education should provide not only an opportunity for meaningful historical-political engagement but also an opportunity to understand how each new generation plays its own influential role in bearing and transmitting cultural memory. She proposes that by incorporating memory theory into Holocaust education, schools can encourage students to engage history more deeply and to monitor, secure, and shape the ways the Holocaust is commemorated in Germany today.



Heitfeld's journey to pursue a degree in Jewish studies at the GTU began with volunteering in a Jewish retirement home. After moving to the Bay Area from Germany in 2014 with a background in education and social work, Heitfeld sought to supplement her day job as an *au pair* with some volunteer work. Entering the doors of the Reutlinger Community would profoundly change her life. "When I realized it was a Jewish community, I began reflecting on my own responsibility in the chain of cultural transmission of the Holocaust and how to keep the memory alive among youth who have less connection to the past," she said.

Although she knew little about Jewish culture when she started volunteering, she began learning and soon was studying with a rabbi. "I just loved it," she recalls. One of her new friends was the mother of GTU/CJS student Renée Powell, and asked Heitfeld when she was going to get her own degree. It was an overwhelming and intimidating thought for Heitfeld, who wasn't certain she had sufficient background to be successful in such a program. Nevertheless, she entered the MA program at the Center for Jewish Studies in spring 2015, an act she describes as "closing the circle" of her reflection

and engagement with the Holocaust.

Lea is deeply appreciative of the level of community she has experienced among faculty and students at the Center for Jewish Studies. "The level of personal care from professors Naomi Seidman and Deena Aranoff has made the GTU so special for me," she said. "I have always felt well supported and welcomed." She says her time at the GTU has been very different from her university experience in Germany: "For the first time I felt my professors were not working against me. The personal warmth at the CJS has made it the most wonderful learning experience. In Germany, they don't rank the universities like they do here. But I rank the GTU as the best academic experience I've had."

CJS Professor Naomi Seidman was also responsible for connecting Lea Heitfeld with her housemate, Ben Stern. After Stern's wife moved into an assisted living facility, his family was seeking a live-in companion for him. Seidman, who knows the Sterns through her synagogue, immediately thought of Lea. "Naomi wrote to me, saying Ben is 'the coolest, funniest, most handsome old dude I know.'" Lea recalls with a smile. She describes her friendship with Ben as "the rarest of gifts."

Heitfeld plans to use her work on memory theory to develop new curricula for Holocaust centers, museums, and education centers in Holocaust memorials or former concentration camps. She wants to engage people through the power they have to remember. She is sensitive to the fragility of memory and respects the power that people hold to be "alert to monitor cultural memory." Emotional responses of distancing, dissociation, and defense have their roots in the events of the past. Once people are "made aware of the processes of memory," she says, "carriers of cultural memory have the opportunity to act."

*Carrie Sealine completed her MA at the Center for Jewish Studies last fall, and is now a PhD student in the Department of Historical and Cultural Studies of Religion. She is the communications assistant in the GTU's Office of Advancement.*

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