

# TELLING HOLOCAUST JOKES ON GERMAN PUBLIC TELEVISION

## THE GERMAN-ISRAELI COMEDIAN SHAHAK SHAPIRA AND HIS SATIRICAL SHOW ON JEWS, ANTISEMITES AND THE REST

Armin Langer

Humboldt University of Berlin/Brandeis University  
[arminlanger@brandeis.edu](mailto:arminlanger@brandeis.edu)

**Abstract:** Since 2015, Israeli-born German artist Shahak Shapira has initiated several satirical campaigns targeting antisemitism and racism in Germany and the country's relation to the Holocaust. These interventions set Shapira's career in motion, and in 2019 he landed a slot on the ZDF public broadcasting channel for the talk show *Shapira Shapira*. The show mocked antisemitism and far-right movements in Germany and reminded the viewers of the country's history with Jews. His jokes about concentration camps and their contemporary perceptions proved to be especially effective. This article shows how Shahak Shapira and his show challenged the official narratives about Jews, antisemitism and the Holocaust. It argues that Shapira's jokes might empower Jews and foster Holocaust awareness among the general public in Germany.

**Keywords:** Germany, Judaism, Israel, antisemitism, satire, public broadcast

### 1 Introduction: Shahak Shapira's *Shapira Shapira*

Shahak Shapira is an Israeli-born German author and comedian. Shapira's television show, entitled *Shapira Shapira*, was broadcast by the German public-service television network Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen [Second German Television, ZDF]. *Shapira Shapira* was a combination of Shapira's stand-up routines, roasts with invited guests, *Saturday Night Live*-style sketches and music video clips. ZDF announced the show as "comedy that has never been seen before in Germany."<sup>1</sup> The show lived for 16 episodes in two seasons; it was on air between April and December 2019. It had approximately 300,000 viewers tuning in weekly and further viewers on the website of ZDF and various social media platforms. Even though ZDF deleted the episodes from its website, the show's YouTube channel is still available at the time of writing this article (April 2021). The dozens of *Shapira Shapira* clips on YouTube each have between 2,700 and 429,000 views.<sup>2</sup>

This article describes how *Shapira Shapira* satirized antisemitism and far-right movements in Germany and reminded the viewers of the Holocaust and memory culture. Probably no other comedian has made so much use of Holocaust comedy on German public television as Shapira did. Thus, I situate Shapira's work within the intersection between trauma, humour and memory. I place Shapira's use of Holocaust humour within the general field of German TV

representations to establish the specificity and importance of his interventions. Furthermore, I argue that humour in the face of trauma can function to produce a sense of cohesion and perhaps pride in the ingroup and, at the same time, have a productive outcome for the outgroup. I suggest that Holocaust comedy can function as a tool of Holocaust education.

## 2 The Televisual Landscape around Holocaust Remembrance

In the aftermath of the Second World War, West German media portrayed the genocide of the Jews within the totality of German war crimes. By de-emphasizing the antisemitic mass murder, the Nazi tyranny was depicted as any other totalitarian regime. The Allies did not force West Germans to work through the past because they needed the country to be a solid and stable bulwark against communism. A preoccupation with the Holocaust would have hindered this desired stability.<sup>3</sup> Early post-war representations of the Holocaust individualized the Jewish experience under the Nazis and removed the victims from the historical fate of an entire people. This approach was also true beyond Germany, as exemplified by the 1959 Hollywood film *The Diary of Anne Frank*, also shown in Germany. The movie downplayed the Jewishness of Frank's family and did not contextualize it within the framework of genocide.<sup>4</sup>

In this period, ZDF showed programs about righteous Germans rescuing Jewish individuals, presented documentary films on German Jewish life and culture in post-war Germany, and expressed sympathy for Israeli politics. ZDF had these programs on its agenda to foster the 'German-Jewish reconciliation.' While some of these documentaries and reports thematized the Holocaust, they never included more than a short reference to it and provided only indirect glimpses of the genocide.<sup>5</sup> In this regard, East German television was not much different. The key difference was, as Lawrence Baron pointed out, that East German productions emphasized the German communist resistance to Nazism. In contrast, West German ones glorified the diplomats, civil servants and clergymen who defended their "Christian and nationalistic values" against Hitler.<sup>6</sup>

Holocaust representation on German television did not have its breakthrough before screening the 1978 NBC miniseries *Holocaust*. The series was "unashamedly didactic,"<sup>7</sup> using an assimilated German Jewish family to present the persecution of the Jews from the 1935 Nuremberg Laws to the end of the war. Critics both in the United States and West Germany accused the series of trivializing the Shoah. Yet, no other report or program about the Holocaust had reached so many Germans before as this Hollywood series did. Viewership was estimated at up to 20 million people, approximately 50 percent of West Germany's adult population. It punctured the national culture of silence and triggered a debate on Holocaust remembrance amongst the general public for the first time since the Second World War.<sup>8</sup>

Frank Bösch argued that the show *Holocaust* demonstrated the potential influence that audio-visual forms could have on popular history.<sup>9</sup> Other scholars of modern German history, too, have highlighted the series' impact on German memory culture.<sup>10</sup> In the following years, throughout the 1980s, ZDF produced several documentaries, feature films and series focusing on the Jewish experience. These productions often emphasized Jewish survival of Nazi persecution. In the 1990s, a new wave of German television productions shifted the focus from the victims to the perpetrators. These films inquired into the motives of the Nazi leadership and exposed the German military's involvement in genocide.<sup>11</sup>

Humour has traditionally not been a part of Holocaust memory culture. One of the first mainstream humorous representations of the Shoah was Art Spiegelman's 1986 graphic novel *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*, which depicted Nazis as cats and Jews and mice.<sup>12</sup> Since then, more and more artists have made use of comedic tools in speaking about the Holocaust. In the 1990s, new "Holocaust comedies" were made, such as *Life is Beautiful* (1998), *Jakob*

*the Liar* (1999) or *Train of Life* (1998).<sup>13</sup> Lawrence Baron provides a great analysis of Holocaust-themed feature films using comedy, which rapidly grew in numbers in the 1990s. Baron noted that the majority of filmmakers behind Holocaust comedies were children of survivors.<sup>14</sup> As Lyn Rapaport observes, “humorous portrayals of the Holocaust [...] is becoming a mainstream phenomenon.” However, in Germany, Holocaust humour remained taboo.

Holocaust humour has played a significant role on Israeli television, too. Most of the early Holocaust representations on Israeli television were dramatic. Television interviews, documentaries and movies featured survivors and were shot by descendants of survivors.<sup>15</sup> However, since the 1990s, Israeli popular media has addressed the subject through satire. The popular sketch comedy show *Eretz Nehederet* (in Hebrew: ארץ נהדרת, transl. *A wonderful country*) is an apt example of this tendency. Liat Steir-Livny argued that humorous skits about the Holocaust do not disrespect the memory of the victims and the survivors but, rather, make a vital contribution to Holocaust awareness among the younger generations in Israel.<sup>16</sup> Thus, it should not be a surprise that Germany’s first comedian to make Holocaust jokes on television regularly was the Israeli-born comedian Shahak Shapira.

### 3 Did You Know Auschwitz Has 4.5 Stars on TripAdvisor?

Shahak Shapira (in Hebrew: שחקן שפירא) was born in 1988 in Petah Tikva, Israel and raised in the Israeli settlement of Oranit in the West Bank. Shapira’s maternal grandfather was the only survivor of the Holocaust in his family. His paternal grandfather, Amitzur Shapira, was an Israeli sprinter and a coach, who was murdered by Palestinian terrorists in the Munich massacre at the 1972 Summer Olympics.<sup>17</sup> In 2002, Shapira and his family moved to the small town of Laucha in Saxony-Anhalt, where his mother’s partner lived. Laucha is a stronghold of the far-right Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands [National Democratic Party of Germany, NPD]. The NPD reached 13 percent of the vote in the 2009 local elections here, the highest statewide. Despite his experiences with antisemitism and struggles with the German language, Shapira did not consider returning to Israel and saw his future in Germany. He moved to Berlin to pursue a career as a graphic designer.<sup>18</sup> Since the 2000s, a significant number of Israeli Jews have migrated to Germany. Estimates say that there are between 17,000 and 30,000 Israelis in Berlin alone.<sup>19</sup> The majority of Israelis in Germany were young adults, highly educated, secular and left leaning, which means they would belong to a minority in Israel itself. They define themselves as Ashkenazi and are culturally attracted to Europe and Germany in particular.<sup>20</sup> I view Shapira’s relocation to and identification with Germany within this framework.

On New Year’s Eve 2014, Shapira witnessed a group of young men chanting antisemitic songs on the crowded Berlin subway. After asking them to stop, the group attacked him. Numerous news outlets around Germany and the world covered the incident. The group consisted of people of Arab immigration background. When Shapira saw that the far-right was trying to exploit the incident and paint immigrants as the only source of antisemitism in Germany, he protested against this instrumentalization.<sup>21</sup> Following the media attention after the events, Shapira wrote an autobiographical book about his youth in Israel and Germany, the hostage-taking and murder of his paternal grandfather and the story of his maternal grandfather’s survival through the Holocaust. The book *Das wird man ja wohl noch schreiben dürfen!: Wie ich der deutscheste Jude der Welt wurde* [Tell It Like It Is: How I Became the Most German Jew in the World] was published in 2016 and landed on the Der Spiegel bestseller list.

After the publication of the book, Shapira created a series of artistic political interventions. In 2017, he launched the online project *Yolocaust*. Having noticed numerous instances on social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram of young people posting narcissistic selfies with the Berlin Holocaust Memorial in the background, Shapira decided to point out the disconnect of taking these cheerful pictures in such a sombre setting. The *Yolocaust* site set happy selfies against the background of actual photographic scenes from the concentration camps. The project gained worldwide attention.<sup>22</sup> Shapira’s book and art interventions boosted his career, and in 2019 he received a slot on ZDF for a comedy show. He admitted having ambivalent feelings about German broadcasting: “German news crews aired live the storming of SWAT police into the Olympic compound [during the 1972 Munich massacre].

The terrorists turned on the television to see what's going on and when to kill my granddad and the other hostages." Nonetheless, he accepted the job offer and created the show *Shapira Shapira*.<sup>23</sup>

Shapira's show mocked political actors and groups in Germany and abroad and constantly reminded the viewers of their country's history with Jews. His jokes about concentration camps and their contemporary perceptions proved to be especially effective and also received much attention online:

"Did you know Auschwitz has 4.5 stars on TripAdvisor? I know... 4.5 stars is not bad, right? Look, our McDonald's at Alexanderplatz has only 3 stars. That means, technically, chicken nuggets are worse than the Holocaust. Auschwitz, a concentration camp on Polish soil has 4.5 stars on TripAdvisor. But all the concentration camps on German soil have 5 points. As you can see, franchising leads to quality loss. I was wondering why Auschwitz has half a star less than the other concentration camps. So, I read the reviews. Apparently, Auschwitz had some very unsatisfied customers. For example, this one guy complained that the signs in Auschwitz were only in Polish and English and he wrote, I quote, 'the German is clearly missing here.' That's dark!"



Video 1. Shahak Shapira, "4,5 Sterne für Auschwitz" [4,5 Stars for Auschwitz], YouTube, March 21, 2019.

In another sketch, too, Shapira criticized the bad reviews of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum: "I never thought I would say this but the critique towards Auschwitz is unjustified. This other guy complained that Auschwitz was not disabled-friendly. That is correct. They are just trying to be historically accurate. Did you want them to build a ramp to the gas chamber?"<sup>24</sup> Even when addressing German-Israeli relations, Shapira could not help but make some Holocaust jokes. In a sketch, Shapira responded to learning that Germany supplied Israel with gas masks during the 1990–1991 Gulf War with saying that "I'm sorry, but we Jews needed those masks earlier [...], 1991 is just way too late."

Besides the Holocaust jokes, making fun of Germany's modern far right has been a core part of *Shapira Shapira*. On his show, Shapira told real stories about Neo-Nazis he met while growing up in Laucha. He recalled how some of these Neo-Nazis began to be afraid of his mother, a former Israeli soldier: "When this Neo-Nazi sees my mother on the street, he crosses the street. Have you seen *Inglourious Basterds* [a 2009 Quentin Tarantino film]? You remember Bear Jew [a fictional Jewish Nazi hunter from the film]? That's my mother."<sup>25</sup> *Inglourious Basterds* itself offers humorous representations of the Holocaust; no wonder that the film serves as an inspiration for Shapira.<sup>26</sup>

In another sketch, Shapira portrayed Bernd Ross, a Neo-Nazi version of American painter and television host Bob Ross. Shapira noticed that numerous Neo-Nazis are not capable of painting proper swastikas and in this sketch showed them how to do it: “Now we are going to march our paintbrush from the bottom to the far-right section of our canvas. Don’t be afraid to really invade the space. That’s right, take that little brush all the way to Poland!” After a series of failed attempts to paint a swastika, Shapira’s Bernd Ross character ends up painting an arrow, the symbol of the far-right AfD party [Alternative für Deutschland, transl. Alternative for Germany].<sup>27</sup>

## 4 Potential Benefits of Holocaust Comedy

The relationship between humour and trauma has intrigued theorists for centuries.<sup>28</sup> The effects of humour are particularly challenging to describe in relationship to such atrocities as the Holocaust. Jacqueline Garrick shows how trauma survivors’ sense of humour helps them mitigate the intensity of their traumatic stress reactions. Even though comedy does not minimize the significance of a traumatic event, it helps the survivor to maintain emotional distance from the trauma and see how they can cope and even thrive in their environment. Garrick suggests that humour can be a powerful healing tool in a therapy setting when both the therapist and the client are willing to discuss it openly.<sup>29</sup> Research indicates that laughter has not only psychological benefits but also biological ones. Laughter might not be the ‘best medicine,’ but it boosts immunity, diminishes pain and relieves stress.<sup>30</sup>

Humour has been identified as an effective tool for oppressed minorities to withstand attacks by their oppressors. In the Jewish context, it constitutes the defence mechanism of an entire people.<sup>31</sup> This genre of humour is often labelled as ‘Galgenhumor’ (gallows humor). Shapira, too, identified his genre as Galgenhumor.<sup>32</sup> These jokes are told by those who are ‘hanged,’ and not by the ‘hangmen.’ Telling jokes is a defence mechanism designed to articulate but also confront real fears.<sup>33</sup> To quote Sigmund Freud, who wrote on this subject in his 1905 book *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, “humour is a means of obtaining pleasure in spite of the distressing affects that interfere with it; it acts as a substitute for the generation of these affects, it puts itself in their place.”<sup>34</sup> Freud associated this form of humour primarily with Jews. Kurt Vonnegut, too, described Galgenhumor as a distinctly central European/Jewish phenomenon:

This is middle European humor, a response to hopeless situations. It’s what a man says faced with a perfectly hopeless situation and he still manages to say something funny. Freud gives examples: A man being led out to be hanged at dawn says, ‘Well, the day is certainly starting well.’ It’s generally called Jewish humor in this country [in the US]. Actually it’s humor from the peasants’ revolt, the forty years’ war, and from the Napoleonic wars. It’s small people being pushed this way and that way, enormous armies and plagues and so forth, and still hanging on in the face of hopelessness. Jewish jokes are middle European jokes and the black humorists are gallows humorists, as they try to be funny in the face of situations which they see as just horrible.<sup>35</sup>

Humour existed in the ghettos and continued to exist in the concentration and death camps. Most notably, the concentration camp of Theresienstadt – a camp with many prominent imprisoned singers, composers, artists – was known for cabaret performances.<sup>36</sup> Lynn Rapaport describes various comedic acts performed in the camps. For these persecuted Jews, *Galgenhumor* was a tool of resistance. After the liberation, humour did not cease to be relevant. As Rapaport observes, many Holocaust memoirs approach the trauma with humour to embody the absurdity of their experiences.<sup>37</sup> Steir-Livny has shown that second and third-generation survivors, too, make use of Holocaust comedy in order to distance themselves from official, formal Holocaust memory culture and find their own way of “working through” the Holocaust.<sup>38</sup> Carol A. Kidron’s anthropological study of children of Holocaust survivors has also shown that humour concerning genocide allows for exploring ambiguities between mainstream commemorative narratives.<sup>39</sup>

Shapira, too, has said that humour helps him cope with trauma. In the aftermath of the October 2019 synagogue shooting in Halle, Saxony-Anhalt, when a far-right extremist murdered two people, Shapira turned to the audience of his show the same evening, saying: “I was putting so much thought whether it’s OK to do a comedy show on this day... No, actually, I was not putting so much thought into this. I am pretty sure that it is OK. [...] Laughter is our tool to deal with this. It’s good that we are here.”<sup>40</sup> Shapira’s use of Galgenhumor as a sort of defence mechanism is also evident in one of his stand-up routines in *Shapira Shapira*, where he remembers his grandfather, the coach murdered by Palestinian terrorists: “He was a coach, could run very fast... but not fast enough.”<sup>41</sup>



Video 2. Shahak Shapira, “Früher war Terror besser” [Terror Used to be Better], YouTube, April 8, 2019.

But defence mechanism is not the only sociological function of Galgenhumor. It also promotes social cohesion for members of the ingroup. Groups under stress may develop a shared sense of humour that Gary Alan Fine describes as “laughter of inclusion.” Fine explains that, “[i]n a spirit of harmony, the group realizes that the fact that they are able to laugh at each other’s foibles indicates that they have a trusting, communal relationship. Likewise, the fact that there is shared laughter is a social marker that indicates that group members share a common perspective.”<sup>42</sup> Humour implies a social relationship, a connection between self and other, between the ingroup and the outgroup(s). Maurice Charney notes how African American comedians often position themselves as an outgroup to white, middle-class society and ridicule the latter group’s societal norms, including racism.<sup>43</sup> Charney illustrates this tendency with reference to stand-up comedian Dave Chappelle, who happens to be Shapira’s “main idol.”<sup>44</sup> Eva van Roekel looks at political humour in Argentina and how people affected by human rights abuses employ comedy in speaking about these experiences.<sup>45</sup> “By making our enemy small, inferior, despicable or comic,” Freud wrote, “we achieve in a roundabout way the enjoyment of overcoming him.”<sup>46</sup> Although such jokes may not end oppression, they are a form of resistance against the dominant group and provide relief from its pressure.

The so-called Jewish humour also serves this purpose. Freud stated that Jewish humour was unique because it is primarily derived from mocking the ingroup rather than the outgroups. However, instead of being merely self-deprecating, Jewish jokes also contain a dialectical element of self-praise, which works in the opposite direction. Freud explained that Jewish joke-makers “know their real faults as well as the connection between them and their good qualities, and the share which the subject has in the person found fault with creates a subjective determinant (usually so hard to arrive at) of the joke-work.”<sup>47</sup> For the same reason, when Shapira claims that his mother is like the

Jew Bear from *Inglourious Basterds* and Laucha's Neo-Nazis are terrified of her, it can be empowering for Jewish audience members to hear about a 'strong' Jewish woman terrifying 'weak' neo-Nazis.

But jokes about antisemitism and the Shoah can offer more than 'just' empowering Jews. They can make the general audience more aware of anti-Jewish feelings and hate crimes and even be an alternative form of Holocaust education. Antisemitism and the relativization of the Holocaust are major challenges in contemporary Germany. The attack on the synagogue in Halle was just a culmination of this hostility, which non-extremist Germans also often share. Germany might have far more Holocaust memorials and Jewish museums than other European countries. Holocaust education may be part of the school curricula and academic centres might be researching the genocide of the Jews. There may be official ceremonies on Holocaust Remembrance Day on January 27 and the Kristallnacht Remembrance Day on November 9. Nevertheless, there is a tendency in Germany to idealize German society's behaviour during the Holocaust and even the perception of Germans as victims. The AfD is a relevant political force in the Bundestag, The even more extreme NPD is still present in the political arena. Members of these parties and other far-right figures distort Holocaust commemoration, for example, by calling the Allied bombing of Germany the Bombenholocaust [Bomb Holocaust], which equates the systematic murder of the Jews with the bombing.<sup>48</sup> According to a 2019 survey by the World Jewish Congress, 41 percent of Germans think Jews talk too much about the Holocaust.<sup>49</sup>

The widely shared belief that German society came to terms with its past is questionable. Susanne Y. Urban points out the deficiencies of classroom education in Germany on the Holocaust. Urban claims that instruction focuses on statistics and that dry descriptions of deportations did not affect the students: "learning facts and statistics was not connected to personal experience and did not lead them to see the Holocaust as part of their own history, identity, and national consciousness."<sup>50</sup> While this might sound odd initially, I suggest that it might exactly be Shapira's Holocaust jokes that 'teach' about the Holocaust and make the predominantly non-Jewish audience face it. Michalinos Zembylas, too, argued that humour could enrich Holocaust education. Such an approach could encourage students to move beyond formal representations of the genocide and to situate it in the realm of human action.<sup>51</sup> Dundes and Hauschild have suggested that

[a]s long as such jokes are told, the evil of Auschwitz will remain in the consciousness of Germans. They may seem a sorry and inadequate memorial for all the poor, wretched souls who perished at Auschwitz, but when one realizes that comedy and tragedy are two sides of the same coin, we can perhaps understand why some contemporary Germans might need to resort to the mechanism of humor, albeit sick humor, to try to come to terms with the unimaginable and unthinkable horrors that did occur at Auschwitz.<sup>52</sup>

By using humour, the satirist attempts to repair society. As Henri Bergson stated in his 1900 essay *Laughter*, the pleasure caused by laughter "is not an unadulterated enjoyment; it is not a pleasure that is exclusively esthetic [...]. It always implies a secret or unconscious intent, if not of each one of us, at all events of society as a whole."<sup>53</sup> Bergson discussed laughter as a social activity with a social meaning. He claimed that comedy highlights the absurd in a social situation and attempts implicitly to influence people to change their attitudes.<sup>54</sup>

Commenting on *Yolocaust*, Shapira explained that he heard "a lot of young people saying that they don't feel guilty and they don't want to feel guilty, and they shouldn't, it's not their fault and it's not their responsibility, but what is their responsibility is what's going on right now in Germany."<sup>55</sup> Shapira launched *Yolocaust* following prominent AfD politician Björn Höcke's speech in which Höcke named the Berlin Holocaust Memorial a "monument of shame."<sup>56</sup> Shapira's show too addressed many Germans' defensive position towards their own history. For instance, in the sketch *Bad Schindler*, Shapira portrayed Oskar Schindler's fictional brother, who only pretended to help Jews to hide from the Nazis and, in the aftermath of the war, denied all responsibility for these Jews' deportation.<sup>57</sup> In the sketch *Back to the Führer*, Shapira travels back in time to kill Hitler but decides to play his role instead and ends up enjoying the Nazi leader's popularity.<sup>58</sup> I argue that such statements do not ridicule the Holocaust or condemn it but express how integral Holocaust memory in Germany is, for Jews and non-Jews alike.

## 5 The End?

In October 2019, the ZDF invited AfD spokesman Jörg Meuthen for an interview about the October 2019 far-right terrorist attack on a synagogue in Halle. The AfD is known for tolerating far-right extremists within the party's own ranks. Many of their representatives have engaged in racist hate speech and antisemitic conspiracy theories: the very ideologies that supported the motivation of the terrorist. For this reason, Meuthen's invitation by ZDF to comment on a far-right terrorist attack was met with criticism from many sides.<sup>59</sup> Shapira was among those who saw the network's decision as problematic and addressed this on his show: In *Shapira Shapira*'s October 14, 2019 episode, Shapira portrayed a journalist called Sandro Lanzberger, a reference to ZDF's own star journalists Markus Lanz and Sandra Maischberger. Shapira as Lanzberger interviews fictional NPD chairperson Franz Ferson, AfD politician Bernd Höcke, and a Ku Klux Klansman named Whity McWhitepride as experts on political correctness. The discussion round ends with McWhitepride shouting "Sieg Heil" and giving viewers the Hitler salute. The German penal code makes the use of this salute illegal in modern Germany, and the use of any phrases associated with the salute is also forbidden. However, usage for art, teaching and science is allowed.<sup>60</sup>



Video 3. Shahak Shapira, "Lanzberger – Der Polittalk / Rassismus" [Lanzberger – The Political Debate / Racism], YouTube, October 14, 2019.

Shapira said that ZDF began exercising more scrutiny of his work after using the Hitler salute to mock the network. A few months later, in February 2020, ZDF cancelled *Shapira Shapira*. According to network officials, the decision had only to do with the show's ratings, which "did not meet expectations." ZDF spokeswoman Cordelia Gramm told the *Jewish Telegraphic Agency* that "the target group's acceptance did not develop as hoped in linear television as well as online."<sup>61</sup> Gramm declined to address whether Shapira's display posed legal issues for the network and did not confirm whether Shapira had faced extra oversight following the October 14 sketch. Shapira was not convinced by the network's explanation and claimed that "the ratings were good, better than expected."<sup>62</sup> In 2018, Shapira gave up his Israeli citizenship and became a German citizen.<sup>63</sup> But after *Shapira Shapira* got cancelled, he announced that he was not sure if he saw his future in Germany.<sup>64</sup>

Even if Shapira might not have another show any time soon on German public television, I believe that his show was a valuable contribution to the country's televisual landscape. Television provides the audience with powerful audio-visual narratives of history and thereby influences the narrative framework from which people draw their historical and social identities.<sup>65</sup> Through stand-up comedy and a late-night TV show, Shapira has satirized Germany's rising far-right movement and German society's ambiguous relationship to the Holocaust. By addressing the intersection of trauma, humour and memory, *Shapira Shapira* was a notable show that, hopefully, will inspire further comedians to follow suit.

## Notes

- 1 Theresa Hein, "Nicht lustig [Not funny]," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, April 10, 2019, <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/medien/shahak-shapira-shapira-shapira-comedy-1.4404329>
- 2 YouTube channel Shapira Shapira, [https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCHtPL6HO2Fz0hZ\\_DCeAySfg](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCHtPL6HO2Fz0hZ_DCeAySfg)
- 3 David Bathrick, "Cinematic Americanization of the Holocaust in Germany: Whose Memory Is It?," in *Americanization and Anti-Americanism: The German Encounter with American Culture after 1945*, ed. Alexander Stephan (New York: Berghahn Books, 2007), 141-145.
- 4 Lawrence Baron, "The First Wave of American 'Holocaust' Films, 1945-1959," *The American Historical Review* 1115, no. 1 (2010): 109-110; Bathrick, "Cinematic Americanization of the Holocaust in Germany," 136-141.
- 5 Wulf Kansteiner, "Entertaining Catastrophe: The Reinvention of the Holocaust in the Television of the Federal Republic of Germany," *New German Critique*, no. 90 (2003): 139-144.
- 6 Lawrence Baron, *Projecting the Holocaust into the Present: The Changing Focus of Contemporary Holocaust Cinema* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2005), 75.
- 7 Barry Langford, "Holocaust Film," in *The Edinburgh Companion to Twentieth-Century British and American War Literature*, eds. Adam Piette and Mark Rawlinson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press), 140.
- 8 Langford, "Holocaust Film," 139-140.
- 9 Frank Bösch, "Moving History: Film and the Nazi Past in Germany since the Late 1970s," in *Historiographies in the 19th and 20th Centuries: Cultural Meanings, Social Practices*, ed. Sylvia Paletschek (New York: Berghahn Books, 2011), 105-112.
- 10 Anton Kaes, "1979 The American television series Holocaust is shown in West Germany," in *Yale Companion to Jewish Writing and Thought in German Culture, 1096-1996*, eds. Sander L. Gilman and Jack Zipes (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 783-789; Sandra Schulz, "Film und Fernsehen als Medien der gesellschaftlichen Vergegenwärtigung des Holocaust: Die deutsche Erstausstrahlung der US-amerikanischen Fernsehserie Holocaust im Jahre 1979" [Film and TV as media of the social visualization of the Holocaust: The first broadcasting of the American TV show Holocaust in 1979], *Historical Social Research / Historische Sozialforschung* 32, no. 1 (2007): 189-248; Jürgen Wilke, "Die Fernsehserie 'Holocaust' als Medienereignis" [The TV show 'Holocaust' as a media happening], *Historical Social Research / Historische Sozialforschung* 30, no. 4 (2005): 9-17; Siegfried Zielinski, "History as Entertainment and Provocation: The TV Series 'Holocaust' in West Germany," *New German Critique*, no. 19 (1980): 81-96.
- 11 Kansteiner, "Entertaining Catastrophe," 145, 156.
- 12 Liat Steir-Livny, "Holocaust Humor, Satire, and Parody on Israeli Television," *Jewish Film & New Media* 3, no. 2 (2015): 193-219
- 13 Millicent Marcus, "Me lo dici babbo che gioco è?": The Serious Humor of "La vita è bella," *Italica* 77, no. 2 (2000): 153-170; Lynn Rapaport, "Laughter and Heartache: The Functions of Humor in Holocaust Tragedy," in *Gray Zones: Ambiguity and Compromise in the Holocaust and its Aftermath*, eds. Jonathan Petropoulos and John K. Roth (New York: Berghahn Books, 2012), 263.
- 14 Baron, *Projecting the Holocaust*, 136, 139.
- 15 Dalia Ofer, "The Past That Does Not Pass: Israelis and Holocaust Memory," *Israel Studies* 14, no. 1 (2009): 1-35.
- 16 Steir-Livny, "Holocaust Humor," 197.
- 17 "Shahak Shapira will seine Psychotherapie in TV-Show zeigen" [Shahak Shapira Wants to Present His Therapeutic Session on TV], *Hamburger Abendblatt*, April 8, 2019, <https://www.abendblatt.de/vermischtes/article216860951/Shahak-Shapira-will-seine-Psychotherapie-in-TV-Show-zeigen.html>
- 18 Cnaan Liphshiz, "His comedy mocks Germany's history with Jews. After his TV show was canceled, he's thinking about leaving the country," *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, March 11, 2020, <https://www.jta.org/2020/03/11/global/his-comedy-mocked-germanys-history-with-jews-after-his-tv-show-was-canceled-hes-thinking-about-leaving-the-country>
- 19 Dani Kranz, *Israelis in Berlin: Wie viele sind es und was zieht sie nach Berlin?* [Israelis in Berlin: How many are there and what attracts them to Berlin?] (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2015), 8.
- 20 Dani Kranz, "Forget Israel—The Future is in Berlin! Local Jews, Russian Immigrants, and Israeli Jews in Berlin and across Germany," *Shofar* 34, no. 4 (2016): 14-17.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Anna Sauerbrey, "Populism, History, and Identity in German Politics and Foreign Policy," *German Marshall Fund of the United States*, no. 2 (2017): 3.
- 23 Liphshiz, "His comedy mocks Germany's history."
- 24 Shahak Shapira, "Auschwitz is on Yelp," YouTube, July 16, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jH2S98LX1WQ>
- 25 "Shahak Shapiras Geschichten die echt sind: Meine Mutter & Neo-Nazis" [Shahak Shapira's Stories which are True: My Mother & Neo-Nazis], YouTube, May 31, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D3RHaAAVB4o>
- 26 Susan Rubin Suleiman, "The Stakes in Holocaust Representation: On Tarantino's *Inglourious Basterds*," *The Romanic Revue* 105, no. 1-2 (2014): 69-86.

- 27 “The Joy of Painting Swastikas with Bernd Ross,” YouTube, April 11, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pLwYMecqOxY>
- 28 Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1911); Matthew Bevis, *Comedy: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Noël Carroll, *Humor: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Gregory H. Williams, *Permission to Laugh: Humor and Politics in Contemporary German Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).
- 29 Jacqueline Garrick, “The Humor of Trauma Survivors,” *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma* 12, no. 1-2 (2006): 169-182.
- 30 Rapaport, “Laughter and Heartache,” 265.
- 31 Steir-Livny, “Holocaust Humor,” 203.
- 32 Shahak Shapira, “Die Amerikaner feiern ihre Diversität – und hier wollen alle deutsch sein” [Americans are celebrating their diversity - and here, everyone wants to be German], *Planet Interview*, interview by Kaspar Heinrich, May 8, 2019, <https://www.planet-interview.de/interviews/shahak-shapira/50816/>
- 33 Alan Dundes and Thomas Hauschild, “Auschwitz Jokes,” *Western Folklore* 42, no. 2 (October 1983): 249; Gary Alan Fine, “Sociological Approaches to the Study of Humor,” in *Handbook of Humor Research*, eds. Paul E. McGhee and Jeffrey H. Goldstein (New York: Springer Verlag, 1983), 173.
- 34 Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1963), 228.
- 35 Kurt Vonnegut and William Rodney Allen, *Conversations with Kurt Vonnegut* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi), 56.
- 36 Roy Kift, “Comedy in the Holocaust: the Theresienstadt Cabaret,” *New Theatre Quarterly* 12, no. 48 (1996): 299-308.
- 37 Rapaport, “Laughter and Heartache,” 258-259.
- 38 Steir-Livny, “Holocaust Humor,” 212.
- 39 Carol A. Kidron, “Embracing the lived memory of genocide: Holocaust survivor and descendant renegade memory work at the House of Being,” *American Ethnologist* 37, no. 3 (2010): 443-444.
- 40 Shapira Shapira, “Comedy nach dem Attentat in Halle [Comedy after the attack in Halle],” YouTube, October 10, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EwUZ5UeqDm0>
- 41 Shahak Shapira, “Früher war Terror besser” [Terror used to be better], YouTube, April 8, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=onp2-pSzHJY>
- 42 Fine, “Sociological Approaches,” 173.
- 43 Maurice Charney, ed., *Comedy: A Geographic and Historical Guide*, vol. 1 (Westport, CT and London: Praeger, 2005), 3.
- 44 Shapira, “Die Amerikaner.”
- 45 Eva van Roekel, “Uncomfortable Laughter: Reflections on Violence, Humour and Immorality in Argentina,” *Etnofoor* 28, no. 1 (2016): 55-74.
- 46 Freud, *Jokes*, 103.
- 47 Freud, *Jokes*, 111-112.
- 48 Susanne Y. Urban, “Representations of the Holocaust in Today’s Germany: Between Justification and Empathy,” *Jewish Political Studies Review* 20, no. 1-2 (Spring 2008): 79-90.
- 49 Rebecca Staudenmaier, “One in four Germans hold anti-Semitic beliefs, study finds,” *Deutsche Welle*, <https://www.dw.com/en/one-in-four-germans-hold-anti-semitic-beliefs-study-finds/a-50958589>
- 50 Urban, “Representations,” 82.
- 51 Michalinos Zembylas, “Holocaust Laughter and Edgar Hilsenrath’s *The Nazi and the Barber*: Towards a Critical Pedagogy of Laughter and Humor in Holocaust Education,” *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 37, no. 3 (2018): 301-313.
- 52 Dundes and Hauschild, “Auschwitz Jokes,” 260.
- 53 Bergson, *Laughter*, 135-136.
- 54 Amy Carrell, “Historical views of humor,” in *The Primer of Humor Research*, ed. Victor Raskin (Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, 2008), 305.
- 55 Joel Gunter, “‘Yolocaust’: How Should You Behave at a Holocaust Memorial?,” *BBC News*, January 20, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-38675835>
- 56 Jay Julian Rosellini, *The German New Right: AfD, PEGIDA and the Re-Imagining of National Identity* (London: Hurst & Company), 107.
- 57 Shapira Shapira, “Otto Schindler der Meisterverstecker [Otto Schindler the professional hider],” YouTube, June 2, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zoQw-O-qxX0>
- 58 Shapira Shapira, “Back to the Führer,” YouTube, April 23, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sBLDKmPwGBM>
- 59 Matthias Schwarzer, “Anschlag in Halle: ZDF lädt AfD-Chef Meuthen ein – und wird heftig kritisiert” [Attack in Halle: ZDF invites AfD leader Meuthen], *Redaktionsnetzwerk Deutschland*, October 11, 2019, <https://www.rnd.de/medien/anschlag-in-halle-zdf-ladt-afd-chef-meuthen-ein-und-wird-heftig-kritisiert-PSJISWWIUVB05DE5IK3KVGfHPA.html>
- 60 Strafgesetzbuch (Criminal Code, StGB), Section 86a.
- 61 Liphshiz, “His comedy mocks Germany’s history.”
- 62 Ibid.

- 63 “Shahak Shapiras Geschichten die echt sind: Einbürgerung” [Shahak Shapira's Stories which are True: Nationalization], YouTube, April 30, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9jSJ3MfCj58>
- 64 Lipshshiz, “His comedy mocks Germany’s history.”
- 65 Michael Elm, “The Making of Holocaust Trauma in German Memory Some Reflection about Robert Thalheim’s Film and Along Come Tourists,” in *Being Jewish in 21st-Century Germany*, eds. Haim Fireberg and Olaf Glöckner (Oldenbourg: De Gruyter), 32; Steir-Livny, “Holocaust Humor,” 210-211.

## Biography

Armin Langer is a doctoral candidate in sociology at the Humboldt University of Berlin and visiting research scholar at Brandeis University’s Schusterman Center for Israel Studies in Waltham, Massachusetts. He is a senior rabbinical student at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in Philadelphia and studied Jewish studies and philosophy in Budapest, Jerusalem and Potsdam. He published a monograph, an edited volume and several articles and book chapters on modern and contemporary Jewish identity politics in Germany and the US. Personal website: [arminlanger.net](http://arminlanger.net)