

Abigail Dombrowski

07.02.2025

FURSCA End of Summer Report

My FURSCA project this summer focused on the Jewish Community of Wrocław, Poland, then Breslau, Germany— its history, its remembrance, and its digital preservation. Now, Wrocław's Jewish community simply doesn't exist in the way it did before WWII. While once, the city of Breslau had the third largest Jewish population in Germany, the community was utterly destroyed during the Holocaust and left barren during the period of Soviet rule following. In the last 30 years, however, there have been preservation and revitalization efforts such as the renovation of the White Stork Synagogue from the 1990s until 2010. My FURSCA project was inspired by these movements, as well as my time spent working in a Jewish Cemetery in Wrocław in 2024.

Through the Holocaust Studies Service Learning Program, I traveled to Wrocław, learned a lot about the Holocaust and about the Jewish community in Germany prior to the Holocaust, and had the opportunity to work in a Jewish cemetery for a week: uncovering graves, clearing paths, and making the cemetery more accessible for the caretaker. With our group of about 20, we uncovered and brought to light, again, over 100 graves in our short time there. I was really interested in learning more about these people, and making these people even more known to the world, as many of them, as I would find through my project, don't have relatives to remember them.

Thus, my FURSCA project came to be. I had several ideas for how to conduct and what to research for my project, so it became a combination of all of them. My first goal was to upload

burial information, including plot numbers, transcriptions, and pictures of graves to findagrave.com in order to contribute to the global movement towards digital preservation for historic materials, as well as allow any known descendants to reconnect with their ancestors.

My second goal for this project was to learn as much as possible about the Breslau Jewish Community and about the people we uncovered in the cemetery. Following this, my final goal was to create datasets, maps, and charts illustrating some information about the Jewish Community in Breslau as a way to present my research and in preparation for my Senior Honors Thesis.

Over the course of this summer, I was able to complete each of these goals. The first few days of the program were spent uploading all of this information to findagrave.com. While I wasn't expecting anything to come of it immediately, and my decision to spend time doing this was purely for ease of others, about 4 weeks into the project, I got a private message from someone whose ancestor was one of the people we uncovered in the cemetery, Cäcilie Klein. This was a really unique experience: I got to ask about his family's history and their lineage, and I found out that he was actually traveling to Wrocław this summer to look for his ancestors. Thus, I was able to be helpful to him on his journey. Even if nothing else in my project had turned out well, I would've been happy if this is all I got out of it. History research is often complicated, as it doesn't normally seem immediately useful to anyone, but I had the really unique experience of watching it pay off immediately.

I spent a lot of the summer using genealogical research sites to record basic information about every person uncovered in the cemetery. This information ranged from peoples birth dates, death dates, where they'd lived, their occupations, their family trees, and any other information I could find using publicly available documents. For the most part, I was successful. While I had

initially hoped to search for anything more personal, like letters, diary entries, etc, that mission would have required me to go to Breslau and/or Jerusalem– neither of which would have been feasible. Despite that, I was able to get a large amount of information from what was available and created eight biographies that delve further into those people’s lives. On top of the research that I did for everyone, these eight people, a mix of people from the cemetery and their descendants, received separate biographies I wrote for them. Each is about a paragraph in length, and aims to tell a chronological story of a person or their family.

Along with the biographies, I created four maps. As a dual history and math major, I was really wanting to bring some of my analytical mind to my FURSCA project. I decided that maps would be the best way, because they’re able to track information in a not purely quantitative way, so I learned how to use GIS software and created several maps analyzing location data collected from all of these people. Map 1 depicts the origin towns of those we uncovered in the cemetery and map 2 shows the death locations of descendants of those who we uncovered. I created a few more maps specifically drawing out the journeys and life migrations of those who I wrote biographies about, but they didn’t work well to include as visuals in this paper.

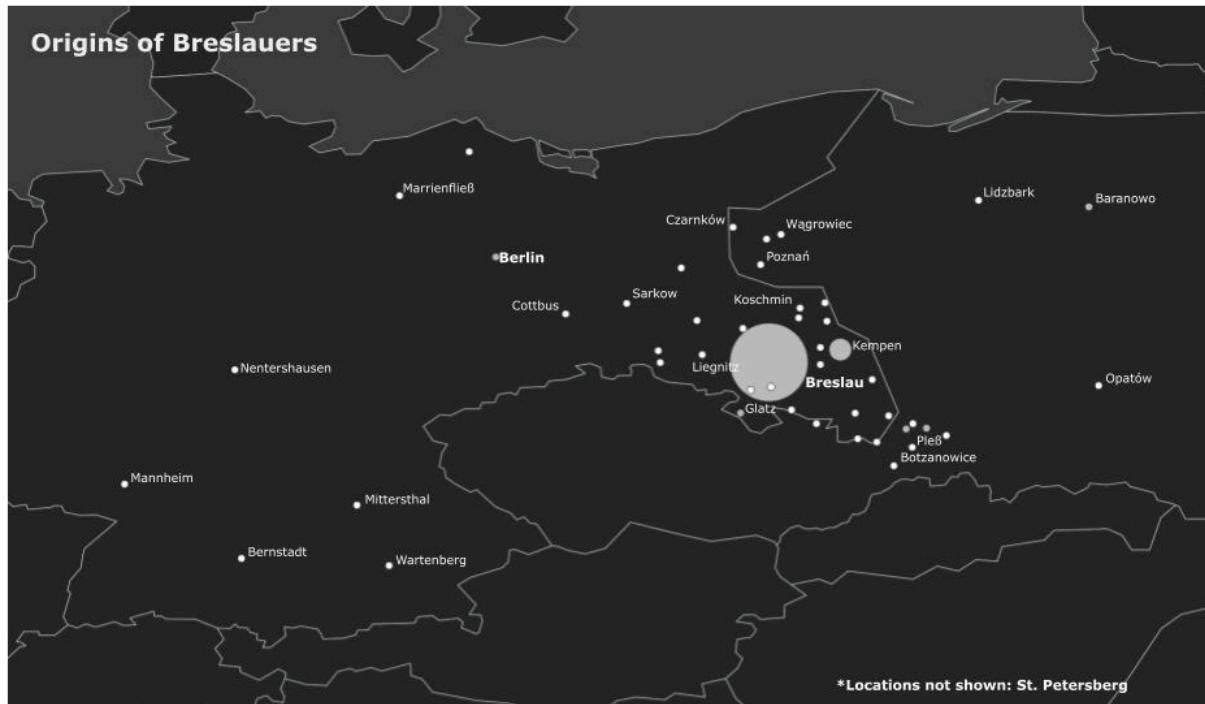
This project was important to me, as it’s (1) personal and (2) allows me to get a head start on some of the research for my senior honors thesis. Many of the skills I learned throughout this research process will be useful to me in the future as well: I hope to work in digital history and would really like to focus on maps. Similarly, many of the research skills I learned will help me in graduate school, which I plan on applying to during this upcoming school year.

This project also illustrates the importance of programs at Albion. This project would not have been possible without the Holocaust Studies Service Learning Project, whose goal is to give students an up close and personal experience learning about the Holocaust and giving back to an

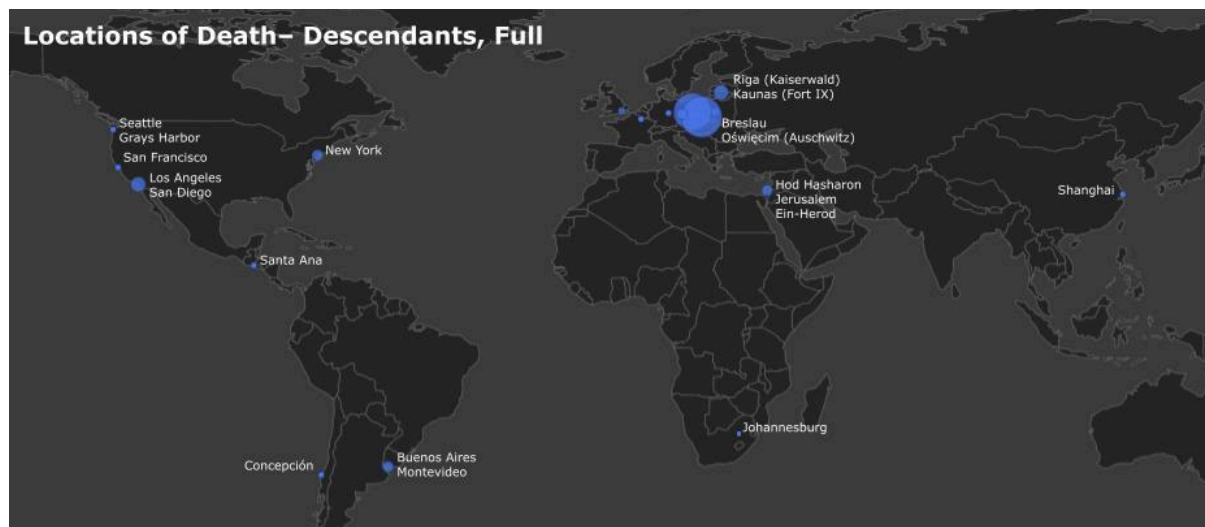
irrecoverable community. Every single dot on the first map I created may only be remembered because of what students and staff at Albion College were able to accomplish in their short time in Wrocław. I'm so fortunate to have gone on this trip and to have later been able to bring to life the work of all of those people.

Going forward, I plan to continue this project as a side quest for my thesis, which will focus on the migration of Jews throughout Silesia (the region where Breslau was) during the years leading up to the Holocaust. I will be presenting my FURSCA research at the Elkin Isaac Student Research Symposium next April, as well.

This project also changed me as a person. I've learned to think about my own life differently: I've lived in the same city in Michigan my whole life, and I've come to realize that it's a blessing to have been able to do that when most people I studied were unable to. I've also come to appreciate the idea of my family more. I have a small one and most are not close to each other, so I never truly understood the importance of knowing and keeping in touch with them. However as I went to do this genealogical work, I learned that people are not just themselves, but a piece of every person that came before them. Thus, I can thank this project for, on top of everything else, reminding me of the importance of my own past and ancestry.



Map 1



Map 2