



## FROM THE CHAIR'S DESK

Greetings from Bay State Road! Spring has arrived, bringing along with it the usual battalions of birds, bees, blossoms and...film crews! Dozens of tractor-trailers took over the space outside the History Department last week for the production of "Gilded Lilys," the pilot for a new television costume drama. The series is set in nineteenth century New York, but see if you can glimpses of the Castle (and maybe our building) when it airs on ABC later this year.

### LANDMARKS

This April, the Department launches a new series of public events for alumni, students, faculty, and friends. Commemorating significant anniversaries of key events, "Landmarks" will present interesting new angles on pivotal moments in world history. The series launches this month, when Pulitzer Prize winner Alan Taylor rethinks the War of 1812 after two hundred years.

His public lecture, "[The Civil War of 1812: American Citizens, British Subjects, Irish Rebels & Indian Allies](#)" will take place on Wednesday, April 18, at 7 p.m. in Room 206 of the BU Photonics Center, 8 St. Mary's Street. A reception will follow. Please join us and mark your calendars for October 17, 2012, when a distinguished panel revisits the Cuban Missile Crisis from all sides and March 19, 2013, when David Chappell reconsiders the legacy of Martin Luther King fifty years after the March on Washington.

### THE MYSTERIOUS BOX

*Professor [Brooke Blower](#) unpacks the mystery of the box that occupies the floor of her Bay state road office...*

I suppose I should explain about the giant box that has been sitting on the floor of my office for months. Some of my colleagues—the ones who value proper filing systems and so forth—glance nervously at the cardboard container and its contents, now spilling out in piles onto my desk and the floor. Students, too, eye it with curiosity when they come to see me. They nod in appreciation as I pull out stacks of newspaper clippings and letters, the old-fashioned travel trunks, and the biscuit tin full of film reels stinking of broken-down cellulose acetate. No, I have not been cleaning out my basement. The box contains all the worldly possessions of a man I've never met, Frank J. Cuhel, a character for the book I am writing about Americans abroad during World War II.



Cuhel was a small-town Iowa track star, who won a silver medal at the 1928 Amsterdam Olympics and then moved to Southeast Asia where he worked as a trade representative for Dutch and Chinese firms. When war broke out, he reported over the radio from Jakarta for the Mutual Broadcasting System and only narrowly escaped to Australia when the Japanese invaded. Normally historians travel to their archives. In this case, the archive came to me.

The history I am writing aims to reframe popular understandings of the American World War II experience, extending it back into the decades before the bombing of Pearl Harbor and blurring the boundaries between the "home front" and the "war front."

To do this, I am tracing the back stories of eight Americans who were on board Pan American's boat plane, the Yankee Clipper, when it crashed in Lisbon in February 1943. The plane had a swashbuckling pilot along with a fascinating cast of passengers, including a shrewd diplomat, a Russian refugee turned Broadway star, a Standard Oil executive, and a Spanish shipping agent who was collaborating with the Nazis. I wanted to include Frank among my subjects, because his life, like those of the others, defied that conventional *Saving-Private-Ryan* narrative that Americans have in their heads about how the war was waged. But I thought his story might be beyond the reach of the historian. Frank had died in the crash, and his papers were not held in any public repository. Moreover, because he was a broadcast rather than print journalist, I feared that I would not be able to locate much evidence of his reporting. Nor did Frank have any children who might fill in the missing pieces.

Ten years ago, this story would have ended with an unsuccessful search of the phonebook, but through the internet my research assistant Katie Brownell and I were able to locate his great nephew in Chicago. We inquired with low expectations: did he by chance know anything about the brother of his father's mother? Did he ever. Frank wanted to write a memoir and had saved everything—notes from college, business correspondence in Dutch, transcripts of every broadcast he gave from the Pacific. His family passed his overstuffed travel trunks down through the generations, waiting for someone to tell Frank's story, and they kindly agreed to send their precious cargo to me, bubble-wrapped and neatly packed into that giant cardboard box.

### BERLIN DIARY: BU HISTORY IN THE EUROZONE



*During the 2012 spring semester, four members of the faculty conducted research across the Atlantic. In the latest, update, [Jonathan Zatlin](#) reports from the German capital:*

The last time I lived in Berlin for any length of time, I was somewhat out of step with the city. I was focused on the communist past, which had just come to a crashing halt, while most everyone else was excited about the prospect of returning Berlin to its former splendor as one of Europe's most vibrant cities. Today, I'm happy to report that Berlin has increasingly become the heart of

Europe, while I am in many ways more out of step with present concerns than ever. The city remains divided in many ways, but it has become less provincial yet more charming, less grumpy and yet more bankrupt than ever—"sexy but poor" as the mayor recently put it. If Berlin is working hard to realize that (financially flush) future, my research is more preoccupied with its past.

After having begun my career as a historian by working on the most recent past, my current work has taken me much farther back in time, beginning with Imperial Germany and moving through the Third Reich. And instead of concentrating on the category of class, as befits a book on East Germany, I have become more interested in how racism shapes economic behavior—and in particular the argument that Jews somehow possess an affinity to money.

The notion that Jews confuse spiritual with material values is quite old. With the rise of capitalism in nineteenth-century Germany, however, the accusation took on increasingly menacing overtones. After 1933, the Nazis used allegations of Jewish avarice and exploitative business practices to justify their despoliation of the Jews. In other words, the Nazis committed a bold act of communal theft, all the while blaming their victims for necessitating it.

The highpoint of anti-Semitic hypocrisy was a little known episode in the Holocaust that I have been researching with the help of several colleagues here in Berlin: the so-called "retirement home contracts" (Heimeinkaufsverträge). By 1942, when the German government was organizing the first deportations of German Jews to concentration camps, the Nazis had already confiscated most Jewish people's wealth. Yet some German Jews—mostly the elderly—still had some savings, life insurance policies, or retirement funds. To gain control of these assets, the SS showed up at the houses of elderly Jews—I'm concentrating on those who lived in Berlin.

The SS appealed to both their fear and generosity, saying that their payments would guarantee them room and board at Theresienstadt, a concentration camp in Czechoslovakia that acted as a collection point for deportees on their way to the death camps, and help defray the costs of room and board for those Jews who could not afford it. After "convincing" these elderly people to sign over their possessions, the SS went to the banks, insurance companies, and retirement funds, and, using actuarial tables that claimed the average life expectancy was 85 years, produced the retirement home contracts to obtain the money. Of course, these elderly Jews never received the "room and board" promised them; almost all of them were murdered in Auschwitz.

I suppose you could argue—and I probably will—that the way in which stereotypes shape economic behavior is very much relevant to the German—and for that matter, American—present. Germany is host to millions of Turks and Arabs who are only partially integrated into German society. Even in cosmopolitan Berlin, you can still hear Germans voice their fears about Turks, Arabs, and Afro-Germans in the subway and the market place in objectionable terms. But there are also Turkish moderators on television, Afro-Germans on soccer teams, and baklava in many bakeries. Things have definitely changed in the last 15 years, all for the better.

## KEEP IN TOUCH

Don't forget to visit the [department website](#) and peruse the latest issue of the Department newsletter, The Presence of the Past. It features updates on students, faculty, and alumni as well as timely "feature" stories. Of course, you need not wait through the long intervals between newsletters. If you're a BU History news junkie—and we hope you are—you can subscribe to the Department's RSS feed and get the latest news as it breaks. To sign up, visit, [bu.edu/history/news-events/news/](http://bu.edu/history/news-events/news/).

I suppose it's time for my latest history jokes. Since it's an election year, I'm reminded of the wit and wisdom of Will Rogers, who once remarked, "I belong to no organized political Party. I'm a Democrat." Rogers also famously recalled the story of a mountain lion who, after devouring an entire bull, felt so good he started roaring. He kept it up until a hunter came along and shot him...The moral: When you're full of bull, keep your mouth shut."

I know you can supply better jokes than I can! So please keep in touch! Send stories, jokes, adventures, misadventures, cautionary tales, and any other material to me at [bjschulm@bu.edu](mailto:bjschulm@bu.edu) or just email [history@bu.edu](mailto:history@bu.edu).

All best,  
Bruce

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