

INTERVIEW WITH TONY PLATT

“**Bloodlines** is a masterful work of non-fiction that has plots and subplots, brilliant detective work, and serious learning. Everything is examined with scholarly precision, everything is told insightfully, boldly, truthfully. The result is intellectual history at its best -- and like so many who start off on a journey of discovery, Platt learns that the external journey is also a journey within.”

Michael Berenbaum

(Former Director of the U. S. Holocaust Memorial Museum’s Research Institute and President of the Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation.)

Bloodlines: Recovering Hitler’s Nuremberg Laws, From Patton’s Trophy to Public Memorial (Paradigm 2005), a new book by distinguished author Tony Platt, was generated by the controversy surrounding the public exhibition in 1999 of a rare, original copy of Hitler’s 1935 Nuremberg Laws (including the notorious Blood Law), which had been secretly kept in the vault of the Huntington Library in southern California for fifty-five years. In this far-ranging book that covers five countries during the twentieth century and mixes a detective story with history, cultural critique, and memoir, Platt and co-researcher Cecilia O’Leary explore a range of interrelated issues: war-time looting, remembrance of the holocaust, German and American eugenics, Jewish identity, and the public responsibilities of museums and cultural centers.

We asked Tony Platt some questions about the book.

Q: How did you get to write **Bloodlines**?

We fell into it, serendipitously. Cecilia O’Leary and I were lucky to be awarded fellowships to study 19th century California history at the prestigious Huntington Library near Pasadena during the summer of 1999. While we were there, Huntington officials held a press conference at which they announced their ownership of an original copy of the Nuremberg Laws. Press and television covered the story around the world. It was as though somebody had discovered an original copy of the Constitution, but with the symbolism of horror attached to it. The story we heard – that General Patton

had donated the Laws in 1945 – caught our attention. We decided to do our own research on how Patton got the Laws, who owned them, why they had remained hidden from history for fifty-four years.

Q: So **Bloodlines** was originally motivated by an accident of timing. Was there a connection between your intended research project and your compulsion to pursue the trail of the Nuremberg Laws?

Yes, we were studying California's origins stories – the myths and stories that became embedded in the state's official history, especially how California's long history of violence, racial strife, and bloodshed has been ignored and minimized. It wasn't a stretch to explore how and why a prominent library for so long didn't think that Hitler's Blood Law was worth displaying to the public.

Q: **Bloodlines**, though systematically researched and thoroughly documented, is by no means a typically academic book. What are your thoughts about the style in which you write history?

Until I wrote this book, I kept my academic and creative writing completely separate. In 1997, during a visit to England, a family friend gave me a copy of W.G. Sebald's **The Emigrants**. That changed the way that I now think about writing history. In 2001, I gave a short piece of writing to Sebald. He read it and encouraged me to keep going. It eventually became **Bloodlines**. As I worked on this book, the characters themselves led me in new unpredictable directions. The style in which I write draws upon historical analysis, storytelling, and memoir. I hope that this creative process, as well as the narrative will engage readers.

Q: The narratives developed in **Bloodlines** intersect at various moments with your own personal history. How did this happen?

It happened by accident. I have written extensively about racism, but never about anti-Semitism. I have always accepted my Jewish roots, but I have never seriously explored issues in Jewish identity, including my own. It became apparent early in the research for this book that my own past influenced how I researched the topic. When I discovered that two of the main characters in the book – Martin Dannenberg and Frank Perls – are also Jewish, I eventually decided to make my own history a subject of the book, to interweave my journey with theirs.

Q: A central and compelling aspect of the book is the opportunity you had to interview Martin Dannenberg, one of the men who actually retrieved the Nuremberg Laws in 1945. Do you think that it's important to have an historical witness in a book like this?

Without Martin Dannenberg there is no book. I had a feeling in my gut that the Huntington-Patton version of how the 1935 Nuremberg Laws ended up in California was not true. And even after we tracked down Dannenberg, we were unsure what a man in his 80s could tell us about events over half a century earlier. But Dannenberg had a crystal clear memory, as well as documents, and photographs that confirmed his story. Then, as historians like to say, we had a plausible counter-narrative.

Q: It also turns out that Frank Perls, the second man who retrieved the Nuremberg Laws, was an interesting person in his own right, with an impressive social and cultural pedigree. How relevant is his narrative to the story you want to tell?

Frank Perls is important in two ways. First, the documents he left behind after his death in the 1970s confirmed and elaborated upon Dannenberg's story. With Perls' account, we had extensive proof of what happened in Germany in 1945. Secondly, Frank came from an important German-Jewish, artistic family who lived in Berlin until the 1930s. The experiences of the Perls family enabled us to explore through first-hand accounts what it was like to live in Nazi Germany and to be victimized by the Nuremberg Laws.

Q: **Bloodlines** makes connections between Nazi Germany and California. Why is this important?

We discovered that many of the ideas promoted by "racial scientists" in Germany in the 1930s – belief in separate superior and inferior races, a desire to maintain Aryan purity, fear of racial contamination, and so on – were echoed in the work of American eugenicists. Some leading figures in California admired Nazi racial policies and vice versa. It was a relationship of mutual admiration. The horrors of racism happened here as well as there.

Q: General George S. Patton, Jr. looms large in **Bloodlines**. Of course, much has already been written and said about him. Do you have any insights into his role in history?

It's possible that more has been written and said about Patton than any other historical figure in the United States in the 20th century. He is the stuff of myth and legends. He's important to our story because his family was deeply interconnected with California history and the Huntington Library. We focus on his racist views and anti-Semitism, as well as his looting of the Nuremberg Laws. We take issue with historians who interpret Patton's anti-Semitic ranting in 1945 as the result of wartime stress. He was a racist ideologue all his life.

Q: Has the experience of working on and writing about this story made any difference to how you think of your relationship to Jewish history and other topics in the book?

Writing this book has been a fascinating and personally engaging project, as well as an intellectual experience. I have come to more deeply understand what Sebald calls "the invisible connections that determine our lives."

Q: Did you ever meet any resistance – at the Huntington Library or anywhere else – to the research that you did for this book?

In the same way that we all resist explorations of the past that might destabilize our present, so we met some resistance to our research. Some officials at the Huntington and at my own university (which honored a leading rightwing eugenicist in the 1950s and 1960s) were not pleased to have their origins stories unearthed. But we received a great deal of enthusiastic support from curators, librarians, and colleagues.

Q: Finally, what do you hope might emerge from the book, other than getting readers to join you on our journey from past to present?

I hope that **Bloodlines** will encourage people to see the connections between Nazism, anti-Semitism, and racism – to understand how deeply embedded these processes are in modern society, over here as well as over there. I also hope that the book will encourage debates about how we should represent history's sorrows in our museums and cultural centers. It is disturbing, I admit, to excavate the settled past. But it is more disturbing to leave the past comfortably shrouded in amnesia.

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