FOURTH JUNIOR SCHOLARS CONFERENCE IN GERMAN-JEWISH HISTORY: “HERITAGE” IN THE STUDY OF JEWISH AND OTHER (DIASPORA) CULTURES – THE SEARCH FOR ROOTS AS A RECURRING THEME OF NINETEENTH- AND TWENTIETH-CENTURY HISTORY

Conference at the Institut für die Geschichte der deutschen Juden in Hamburg, co-sponsored by the German Historical Institute Washington, the Institut für die Geschichte der deutschen Juden, Hamburg, the Wissenschaftliche Arbeitsgemeinschaft des Leo Baeck Instituts, the Robert A. and Sandra S. Borns Jewish Studies Program, Indiana University, and the Alvin H. Rosenfeld Chair in Jewish Studies at Indiana University, Bloomington. Conveners: Miriam Rürup (Institut für die Geschichte der deutschen Juden, Hamburg), Anne Schenderlein (GHI), Mirjam Zadoff (Indiana University). Participants: Andreas Brämer (Institut für die Geschichte der deutschen Juden, Hamburg), Julia Carls (University of Erfurt), Tzafrir Fainholtz (Interdisciplinary Center, Herzliya), Gaëlle Fisher (University College, London), Sheer Ganor (University of California, Berkeley), Markus Krah (University of Potsdam), Julia Lange (University of Hamburg), Anna Menny (Institut für die Geschichte der deutschen Juden, Hamburg), Martina Niedhammer (Collegium Carolinum, München), Anya Quilitzsch (University of Indiana, Bloomington), Yehuda Sharim (Rice University, Houston), Björn Siegel (Institut für die Geschichte der deutschen Juden, Hamburg), Kim Wünschmann (Martin Buber Society of Fellows, Hebrew University of Jerusalem).

Focusing on the themes of heritage and diaspora, this conference explored the role and value of heritage to communities, in particular those affected by migration, persecution, and forced exile. Conference participants questioned when and why heritage is important to a community and examined the role that diaspora, migration, persecution, and forced exile played in a community’s focus on heritage. Participants also considered the effect of Zionism and the creation of the state of Israel on Jewish identity and the construction and interpretation of heritage. Even though the organizers had encouraged participation from historians working on other ethnic, religious, and cultural groups, all the papers presented had Jewish heritage as a central theme, but some also discussed crossovers and links with other cultural groups. In her welcoming remarks, Miriam Rürup, director of the Institut für die Geschichte der deutschen Juden in Hamburg, pointed out that the Institute’s history itself is
connected to discussions of Jewish heritage and the legitimacy of Jewish life in the diaspora after 1948, particularly Jewish life in postwar Germany. When Israeli institutions announced their claim on all Jewish heritage, including remnants of Jewish community archives, a dispute erupted over the rich collection of archival materials that documented 400 years of German-Jewish history in Hamburg. Eventually, an agreement was reached, and in the process the Hamburg Institute was established.

The first panel, chaired by Mirjam Zadoff, dealt with identity and heritage construction in the diaspora, in both intellectual discourse and social practice. In the first paper, Julia Carls discussed concepts of diaspora and heritage amongst Orthodox German Jews in the early twentieth century. The term “diaspora” held different meanings for Orthodox and Reform Jews: traditionally it referred to living in exile — which would end with a return to Zion (the land of Israel) only when the Messiah returned as the leader of the Jewish people. However, Reform Judaism challenged this central concept. Using pamphlets and illustrations of the period, Carls showed that the term galut (diaspora) gradually took on a more positive meaning and became aligned with the idea of inherited tradition. The debate within Orthodoxy at the turn of the century aimed at finding terms to speak about “diaspora” without its negative connotations. Modern Orthodoxy thus came up with a differentiation between galut as the negative situation that needed to be overcome and “diaspora” as an acceptable term to describe the situation of European Jewry that was not place-bound but rather connected to the past through a common heritage. This discourse was also a consequence of the emerging intellectual contacts between Eastern and Western Jews.

The second paper, delivered by Markus Krah, examined the reappearance of the Ostjude (East European Jew) as a model of authenticity in North America in the second half of the twentieth century. He argued that Jewish intellectuals such as Norman Mailer, influenced by the writings of Martin Buber, tried to re-appropriate the idea of the Hasidic Jew as part of their own identity. Mailer noted that upon reading Buber’s Tales of the Hasidim, he felt “the intoxication of a historic past,” which caused him to embrace being Jewish for the first time. It was especially Jewish intellectuals who were not part of an organized Jewish community who found Hasidism particularly appealing. Markus argued that this fascination with Hasidism was partly a reaction to the Holocaust and the loss of European Jewish life and to Israel’s denial of members of the American and European
Jewish diaspora as being “real Jews.” Here, evoking an East European “heritage” served the present need of the felt loss of community. In the panel’s third paper, Martina Niedhammer focused on the way proponents of Occitan (Provencal vernacular) and Yiddish used references to a culturally idealized past in order to support their linguistic and political goals. She noted comparisons between the cultural aims of a local Provencal museum in the 1920s and those of the Vilna YIVO Institute founded in Berlin in 1925. Both dealt with the preservation of local traditions and customs and the use of heritage in order to foster an awakening of linguistic, cultural and sometimes national consciousness.

The second panel, chaired by Andreas Brämer, examined contested heritage and representation in Israel/Palestine. Tzafrir Fainholtz’s paper focused on the “Israel in Palestine” pavilion at the Paris International Exhibition of 1937. The pavilion was a hybrid of European modernist and Palestinian Arab architecture and symbolized the complex question of Jewish national identity in inter-war Palestine. Prior to the formation of the Jewish state, the Yishuv was trying to promote itself by participation in international exhibitions, and photographs within the 1937 pavilion depicting Jews working the land also served as a vehicle for Zionist propaganda. In contrast to the tendency of most scholars who link architecture in the Yishuv to European modernism, and to Bauhaus in particular, Fainholtz discussed the views of German-Jewish architects Julius Posener and Harry Rosenthal, who both escaped to Palestine in the 1930s and espoused the idea of a “Jewish” architecture which should reference vernacular architectural styles. In the panel’s second paper, Yehuda Sharim discussed the present-day position in Israel of “Oriental-Mizrahi Jews.” Looking at representations of Mizrahi Jews in Israeli popular culture, Sharim explored the larger story of Oriental heritage and the particular role of memory and emotion in it. Sharim argued that popular representations of Mizrahim as they occur, for instance, in Reality-TV formats, replicate difference and affirm the existence of “Mizrahi borders,” demarcating Mizrahi Jews as an “other” in a dominant Ashkenazi culture.

The third panel, chaired by Björn Siegel, focused on post-war Eastern Europe. Gaëlle Fisher discussed Bukovina’s contested heritage after the Second World War. Bukovina was the easternmost province of the Austrian part of the Habsburg Empire until 1918 when it was annexed by Romania; the north of the region later became part of
the Soviet Union as a result of the Second World War. Fisher's paper focused on ethnic Germans and Jews — just two of the minorities in this ethnically diverse region — for whom life in the Bukovina came to a violent end during the war. Jews fled Nazi persecution or were deported and murdered, whereas ethnic Germans became subject to Nazi resettlement programs or forced migration at the end of the war. In the aftermath, the Bukovina came to represent a lost homeland for many of these Germans and Jews, which they commemorated in homeland societies in West Germany and Israel. Fisher showed that, while these societies did not associate with each other, their memory work was initially remarkably similar in that it depicted the Bukovina as an idealized Heimat (home), rather than the place of a violent past. She argued that this only changed after 1989, when Jews began traveling to the Bukovina, and stories of the destruction of Jewish communities came to dominate the wider discourse on the region. Many ethnic Germans, meanwhile, felt left out as a result of these depictions of the Bukovina as a predominantly Jewish space. Fisher's paper illustrated the importance of a physical place as a point of reference for identifying oneself. Here, the loss of the physical home prompted the construction of a heritage discourse that became an important means of creating belonging in the new country. As the actual space had ceased to exist, different, sometimes clashing, versions of mythical locations were created. Thus, in the postwar era, Bukovina has become a site of memory, nostalgia and imagination rather than a precise geographical location. Anya Quilitzsch's paper focused on oral history interviews with Jewish Holocaust survivors who returned to live in Soviet Transcarpathia (contemporary southwestern Ukraine) after World War Two. The interviews examine the transmission and continued practice of Jewish tradition such as the baking of matzah, keeping of kashrut, and the celebration of Passover and Purim. With these interviews, Quilitzsch demonstrated that traditional Jewish life did continue in postwar Eastern Europe, offering a corrective to the predominant view that the Holocaust and the exodus of surviving Jews from the region in the late 1940s had ended it. She argued that the second postwar generation had in fact very similar experiences as prewar generations and showed how Jews in Transcarpathia had developed a distinct Soviet and Jewish identity, one expression of which was to speak Russian in public and Yiddish at home. In contrast to Bukovinan Jews and Germans then, who celebrate their heritage generally through images and stories, here, heritage is largely practiced in everyday life.
The final panel, chaired by Anna Menny, dealt with “Politics of Memory, Politics of History.” Sheer Ganor examined how the process of seeking reparation for persecution and losses — Wiedergutmachung (restitution or compensation) — enabled victims of Nazism to narrate their histories and begin a dialogue with the Federal Republic of Germany. Reparation procedures sometimes enabled claimants to reconnect with long-lost relatives, leading to both shared as well as contested memory. Claimants were able to form networks that strengthened their arguments for reparation and challenged attempts at counter-claims. In this way, Ganor argued, Wiedergutmachung and the bureaucracy surrounding it provided a cohesive framework through which a German Jewish community could resurface. Kim Wünschmann’s paper examined post-war research into the history of West German towns, carried out by both Jewish and non-Jewish lay historians outside the academic establishment (Heimatforschung). The term Heimat denotes the special relationship between a human being and a certain spatial unit, but can also denote an attempt to recreate a lost world. Wünschmann analyzed this concept through examples of post-war research in the rural regions of the state of Hesse. She focused particularly on the work of the Jewish re-migrant Paul Arnsberg, who in the late 1950s returned to the place where his ancestors were born to write a book that challenged more prevalent accounts denying the area’s Jewish history. The final paper of the conference was presented by Julia Lange and explored the relationship between the politics of memory of German-American organizations and the post-war American Holocaust discourse. She argued that in the first decades after the war, German-American organizations such as the Steuben Society of America avoided references to the Holocaust, ignoring, for example, specific events such as the Eichmann trial. A turning point in German-American identity politics was, according to Lange, the airing of the television series “Holocaust” in 1978, which brought the topic to the attention of millions of Americans. Fearing an anti-German backlash, German-American societies then began acting in the defensive, in the course relativizing or even denying the Holocaust. It is only more recently and, as Lange argued, as a consequence of the Americanization of the Holocaust, that German-American organizations were able to redefine their collective identity in more positive and inclusive terms: in 2010, for example, the Steuben Parade included a banner featuring German-Jewish American Pride.

In the closing session, participants shared their observations on the presentations and reflected on some of the central questions of the
workshop regarding the role and value of heritage to communities. The papers showed that individuals and groups evoked the concept of heritage frequently when they felt their viability or stability threatened. Emphasizing a common heritage served as one way to create internal unity and cohesion as well as to demarcate a group as distinct to the outside. It became evident that the question of who has the power and authority to define which elements of heritage are “worth” preserving and to decide who can legitimately claim a heritage is closely intertwined with heritage itself. In this way, heritage generates conflict, and several papers gave examples of attempts at selective heritage constructions and the policing of heritage. A central issue in the discussion evolved around the importance of place — real or imagined — as a reference point for the construction of heritage. One participant noted that it is less the place itself that is significant in heritage creation but rather the experience and emotion that people connect with a place. The connection between heritage and notions of tradition, memory, and emotion is an aspect that warrants further study, particularly from a more theoretical perspective. The presentations and subsequent lively discussions not only demonstrated the importance of heritage within different Jewish communities but also how fruitful studying heritage can be for understanding community and identity construction more generally.

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