

Transforming Berlin's Urban Space. East European Jewish Migrants in Charlottengrad and the Scheunenviertel, 1918-1939

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Between 1880 and 1930 Berlin was a central point of transit for most of the Jewish and non-Jewish migrants from Eastern Europe on their way westwards. While before 1918 Berlin had been in the main a city through which these migrants passed, staying for a short time before moving on to another destination or returning to their former countries, the metropolis of the Weimar Republic became a not always voluntary home for about 300.000 East European refugees – among them several ten thousands of Jewish origin – in the 1920s, when the United States and other countries restricted their migration policy. Although we already know much about East European migration at that time, above all about migration policy, the perception of East European Jews by German and German-Jewish society, the activities of Jewish and non-Jewish Russian intellectuals, the experiences of the Jewish migrants themselves have not yet been a focus of research. The conference, organized by the international research project „Charlottengrad and the Scheunenviertel. East European Jewish Migrants in Berlin during the 1920/30s“ and the Jewish Museum Berlin, thus examined the various experiences of migration and its spatial dimensions. Bringing together scholars from various countries, the participants of the conference asked how the migrants perceived, made use of and (re)imagined Berlin's urban space. In what ways did their experiences help to develop a highly creative urban culture and what impact did life in a big city have on their own orientations and values?

In his sophisticated keynote lecture DAN DINER (Hebrew University

Jerusalem/Simon-Dubnow-Institut Leipzig) characterized the period between 1918 and 1938 as a „short Jewish axial time“. The increasing national homogenization in Eastern Europe and the fragility of the international security system contributed to an „existential constellation“ which forced a rethinking of Jewish existence in the Diaspora by outstanding Jewish intellectuals such as Hannah Arendt and Raphael Lemkin. The Jewish experience of the loss of legal protection between the World Wars furthered national orientations and became universal in a negative sense.

In her introduction VERENA DOHRN (Freie Universität Berlin) asked why Berlin became an important centre of migration, albeit an ephemeral one. She ascertained an ambiguous „openness“ that distinguished the capital of Weimar Republic from other centres of migration. While the weak economic situation after the Great War had forced German society to accept migrants and made it easier for them to start a new existence, this openness became restricted under the growing influence of nationalist groups.

In the first panel on „topographies“ ANNE-CHRISTIN SAß (Freie Universität Berlin) dealt with the highly stereotyped Scheunenviertel in Weimar Berlin. Reconstructing the topographical structure of its different social networks and the various perceptions of the quarter by East European Jewish migrants, she represented the Scheunenviertel as a transnational social space which offered a wide range of new orientations as well as the possibility of maintaining traditional attitudes. She also described the multiple ways in which the migrants interacted with their German-Jewish and non-Jewish environment, thus debunking the cliché of an East European Jewish *shtetl*. GENNADY ESTRAIKH (New York University) pointed out that although a significant group of East European Jewish journalists found a temporary home in Berlin, the Yiddish press in comparison with New York or Paris lacked „well-organized civic organizations of Yiddish-speakers.“ SHACHAR PINSKER (University of Michigan, Ann Arbor) analyzed the impact of the coffeehouses on the activities of Jewish artists and intellectuals. Pinsker described the cafés as „com-

municative spaces“ which not only helped to bridge linguistic and cultural differences, but also played a significant role in the creation of Hebrew and Yiddish modernism.

The papers of the following panel concentrated on the literary and intellectual reflections of the urban space by East European Jewish writers. While MIKHAIL KRUTIKOV (University of Michigan, Ann Arbor) studied the „afterlives of Weimar Berlin“ in the texts of several Yiddish writers and highlighted their different ideological points of view after the decline of Yiddish culture in Berlin, MARC CAPLAN (Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore) offered a close reading of Dovid Bergelson’s *Boarding House Stories* from the 1920s. KARIN NEUBURGER (Hebrew University, Jerusalem) examined the „artificial and real spaces“ in the life and work of the Hebrew author Micha Yosef Berdyczewski. In their convincing argumentations Neuburger and Caplan shared to some extent the idea that the respective authors were closely bound to German urban culture not despite, but because of their position at its margins.

The next panel was devoted to the negotiations between various political ideas. With reference to the making of *Di algemeyne entsiklopedye* by Jewish intellectuals of different nationalist and socialist orientations, BARRY TRACHTENBERG (University at Albany) emphasised that Berlin was not only a „meeting place“ between Eastern and Western Jewry and Hebrew and Yiddish cultures, but also between „once-warring“ Jewish political ideologies. TAMARA OR (Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München) shed new light on the Hebrew movement in Berlin. Or explained convincingly that the encounter between East European and German Zionists led to a new concept of a Hebrew Diaspora, which was advanced mainly by Simon Ravidovitz and his circles. Together with the support of many non-intellectuals who were attracted by these ideas they established Berlin as the capital of the Hebrew movement for a short time at the end of the 1920s. Or also underscored the importance of these almost forgotten ideas in contemporary post-Zionist discourse.

The following session dealt with the problem of identifications in exile. While AL-

BERT I. BAUMGARTEN (Bar-Ilan University, Ramat Gan) reconstructed the „Russian identity“ of the head of the Patriotic Union of Russian Jews Abroad, Joseph Bikerman, MARKUS WOLF (Europa-Universität Viadrina, Frankfurt/Oder) attempted to reinterpret the activities of the Union as a contribution to the fight against anti-Semitism. Both papers provoked a controversial discussion where some scholars demanded a greater regard for the contemporary contexts of Russian and German conservative political thought.

The transfer of ideas of social welfare and knowledge was the topic of the next panel. ALEXANDER IVANOV (European University of St. Petersburg) described the activities of the Berlin branch of the world ORT Union. While ORT primarily supported Jewish artisans and farmers in Eastern Europe, due to intensive contacts with German-Jewish society, it became a notable institution for the professional training of German Jews at the beginning of the 1930s. ALEXANDRA POLYAN (Moscow State University) analyzed the agenda of the Union of Russian Jews in Germany. She pointed out that the Union did not merely seek to provide practical help for migrants in Berlin, but also had political goals such as for instance the promotion of a positive image of Jewish migrants among the German public. ARNDT ENGELHARDT (Simon-Dubnow-Institut, Leipzig) discussed the contribution of East European Jewish scholars to the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* published by the Eschkol-Verlag in Berlin. In spite of lingering differences in the political thoughts between East and West European Jewish scholars, the encyclopaedia fulfilled its aim of establishing a transnational network of scholars to reconstruct a „national collective sense of belonging“.

OLAF TERPITZ (Simon-Dubnow-Institut, Leipzig) investigated the cultural production of Russian-Jewish migrants and their extensive translation processes in the linguistic quadrangle of Russian, Yiddish, Hebrew and German. Terpitz focused on the mediation of Russian literature and argued that the „imperial“ and „cosmopolitan“ traits that Russian culture had acquired in the second half of the 19th century blossomed even further in this translation process. In her paper on *The Nar-*

rator that Walks by Himself BRITTA KORKOWSKY (Georg-August-Universität Göttingen) offered a close reading of Viktor B. Sklovskij's epistolary novel *ZOO or Letters not about Love* and questioned the role of Kipling's freedom-loving cat which the narrator introduced in one of the letters to his beloved. While the narrator feels imprisoned in Berlin and longs for a return to Russia, his beloved Alya appropriates the urban space enthusiastically and becomes, in Korkowsky's convincing interpretation, the one who walks by herself.

In the panel on „transformations“ RACHEL SEELIG (University of Chicago) discussed the work of the Yiddish poet Moishe Kulbak during his Berlin years – „the loneliest and the most prolific of his career“. Through the example of Kulbak, Seelig showed that Yiddish modernist literature flourished because of the status of Berlin as a „centre of periphery“. As a „transitional space“, Berlin allowed the Yiddish poets to rethink their cultural identities as Europeans and Jews, and to create new perspectives on homeland at a time of rampant nationalisms. ANAT FEINBERG (Hochschule für jüdische Studien, Heidelberg) presented the family story of Feiweil Grüngard, a Lithuanian Zionist, who migrated via Stockholm to the German capital. He founded a salon which became a „genuine cultural space“ in Jewish Berlin of the 1920s.

The final panel considered Berlin's East European Jewish migration in its broader contexts. In his instructive paper, TOBIAS BRINKMANN (University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia) explored the different functions of Berlin as transit city before and after 1918. He also discussed the two explanations of Jewish migration as either 'extraordinary', or as an 'integral part' of global migration movements in 19th and 20th century, as offered by the social scientists Mark Wischnitzer and Eugene Kulischer based on their own experience as migrants. Following Hannah Arendt, Brinkmann suggested rather a viewpoint in-between: The Jewish migration can serve as a paradigm for the general history of migration along the vanishing points of escape, statelessness, expulsion and genocide. In his paper on „migrant visions“, JEFFREY WALLEN (Hampshire College, Amherst) compared the

different meanings of the Scheunenviertel in Berlin and Boyle Heights in Los Angeles to East European Jewish migrants. While the Scheunenviertel was both an „ephemeral environment“ and an „intermediate point between East and West“ for the migrants, Boyle Heights were perceived as the „last stop“ on the migration corridor. Wallen also contrasted the different meanings of these quarters within the urban structures of both cities.

In his conclusion DAVID MYERS (University of California, Los Angeles) pointed out that the conference illuminated three clusters of research on the experiences by East European Jewish migrants in Weimar Berlin: cultural creativity, mobility and spatiality. He also encouraged further research on the interaction between East European and German Jews and non-Jews, the comparison between different migration centres at that time and contemporary migration processes, as well as theoretical approaches to space and spatiality.

The conference gave a multifaceted overview of current research projects dealing with the experiences of East European Jewish migrants and their spatial dimensions. The papers will certainly contribute to a more complex picture of the history of East European Jewish migration in Weimar Berlin, beyond the flourishing nostalgia surrounding the Scheunenviertel at present. The conference laid a solid foundation for a publication with selected papers and for an exhibition planned by the Jewish Museum and the research project „Charlottengrad and Scheunenviertel“ (Freie Universität) in Berlin in 2012.

Conference overview:

Dan Diner
The Short Jewish Axial Time: 1918-1938 as an Existential Constellation

Topography
Anne-Christin Saß
The Scheunenviertel: A Transnational Social Space in Weimar Berlin

Gennady Estraiikh
Weimar Berlin as an International Yiddish Press Center

Shachar Pinsker
The Urban Cafés of Berlin as Spaces of He-

brew and Yiddish Modernism

Perceptions

Mikhail Krutikov

Afterlives of Weimar Berlin in Yiddish Literature

Marc Caplan

The Corridors of Berlin: Proximity, Peripherality, and Surveillance in Dovid Bergelson's Boarding House Stories

Karin Neuburger

Artificial and Real Spaces: Micha Yosef Berdyczewski's Life and Work in Berlin

Negotiations

Barry Trachtenberg

Weimar and Yiddish Universalism: the making of Di algemeyne entsiklopedye

Tamara Or

Berlin, Nachstasyl and Capital of Hebrew Diaspora

Identifications

Avidov Lipsker

Berlin: Heterotopia of Hesitation and Decisiveness. The Case of Benjamin Harz

Albert Baumgarten

The Russian Identity of Russian Jews living in a Third Space: Joseph Bikerman and the Patriotic Union of Russian Jews Abroad

Markus Wolf

Russian Jews against Jewish Bolshevism: The Example of the Patriotic Union in 1920s Berlin

Transfers

Alexander Ivanov

Berlin's ORT and German Jewry: Communication, Interaction, Cooperation (1920/30s)

Alexandra Poljan

Productive Help in Russian-Jewish Berlin. The Union of the Russian Jews in Germany: Charity and Politics

Arndt Engelhardt

Disseminating Knowledge: Jewish Intellectuals and the lieu of the Encyclopedia Judaica (1928-1934) in Weimar Berlin

Translations

Olaf Terpitz

Translatio imperii: How Russian Jews negotiated Russia in Berlin

Britta Korkowsky, The Narrator that Walks by Himself: Šklovskij's Narrator, Kipling's Cat and the Paradox of Freedom in „ZOO or Letters not about Love“

Zsuzsa Hetényi

Nomen est ponem? Names and Identity in Emigré Literature

Transformations

Susanne Marten-Finnis

Artist-Animators: Russian Display Culture in 1920s Berlin and the Transformation of Domestic Space in the West

Rachel Seelig

A Yiddish Poet in Berlin: Moishe Kulbak's „Naye lider“ and the Flourishing of Yiddish Poetry in Exile

Anat Feinberg

„Wir laden Sie höflich ein“: The Grüngard Salon and Jewish-Zionist Sociability in Berlin in the 1920s

Transitions

Tobias Brinkmann

Passage City: Berlin as a Focal Point of Jewish (Trans-)Migration after 1918

Gerben Zaagsma

The Place of Berlin in the Transnational Networks of Jewish Migrant Radicals

Jeffrey Wallen

Migrant Visions: The Scheunenviertel and Boyle Heights, Los Angeles

Conclusions

David Myers

Tagungsbericht *Transforming Berlin's Urban Space. East European Jewish Migrants in Charlottengrad and the Scheunenviertel, 1918-1939*. 17.10.2009–19.10.2009, Berlin, in: H-Soz-Kult 09.12.2009.