

Everyday Approaches to the Persecution of Jews of Greater Germany and the ‚Protectorate‘, 1941-45: Work in Progress

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Bericht von: Anna Hájková, University of Toronto

Almost everyone has an idea of what everyday history is – and yet when we try to pin it down, we invariably find the concept elusive. The workshop „Everyday Approaches to the Persecution of Jews of Greater Germany and the ‚Protectorate‘, 1941-45: Work in Progress“ held in Berlin last November demonstrated how hard to grasp, yet valuable Alltagsgeschichte is as an approach to studying the Holocaust in Central Europe. Following Saul Friedländer’s call for an integrative history, the papers presented addressed everyday dimensions of the Holocaust from a variety of perspectives, including inner-Jewish perspectives following the deportations as well as comparisons from the margins of the Reich and focusing on the interplay of perpetrators and victims. Organized by ANNA HÁJKOVÁ, ANDREA LÖW, and DORIS BERGEN, with the institutional backing of the University of Toronto, Institut für Zeitgeschichte, and the Institute for the History of German Jewry, the workshop was held at the University of Toronto in Berlin between November 18-20, 2010. The workshop was generously supported by Fondation pour la Mémoire de la Shoah, the Gerda Henkel Foundation, Institute for the History of German Jewry, the Axel Springer Foundation, and the Chancellor Rose and Ray Wolfe Chair in Holocaust Studies at the University of Toronto. A volume in German is in preparation. In the following, select papers are discussed.

In the first session, BEATE MEYER (Hamburg) and MAGDA VESELSKÁ (Prague) addressed the Jewish Councils in Germany and the Protectorate. Meyer analyzed the „legalistic“ take of the Reichsvereinigung der deutschen Juden on the deportations: they first agreed to take part to enable more „social“ or-

ganization of the transports, and later, when it became clear that everyone would be deported, the process was too brutal and occurred too quickly to allow any leeway to be negotiated with the Gestapo and other authorities. In her pioneering study of the Czech provincial branches of the Jewish communities, Veselská discussed the contrast between the center and the periphery, with local leaders possessing minimal information and under even more extreme pressure than their Jewish counterparts in Prague. Both papers showed the severely limited space for maneuver the Jewish leaders had, and the impossibility for Jewish leaders to see where the persecution was heading.

MARY FULBROOK and MARK ROSEMAN’s panel concentrated on violence and its perception. Fulbrook (London) examined the wartime career of Udo K., principal civilian administrator in Będzin, a largely Polish- and Yiddish-speaking area that was annexed to the Reich in September 1939. K.’s responsibilities included ghettoization, although he distanced himself from any involvement in the deportations of the local Jewish population that had been facilitated by their concentration in ghettos. Fulbrook introduced the notion of „systemic violence“: the impact of German facilitators on a grassroots level, just below the level of decision-making, and behind the front lines of violence: a functional impact irrespective of personal motives. This notion helps to go beyond what became a somewhat static triad of perpetrators / bystanders / victims. Fulbrook demonstrated how victim testimony tends to prioritize the role of the immediate physical perpetrators of violence, thus disguising the proximity and responsibility of facilitators such as Udo K. Victim testimony was the focus of Mark Roseman (Bloomington), who analyzed German-Jewish perceptions of German perpetrators. He argued that while we (just as some non-German fellow inmates) may assume that victims from a German cultural background had better ways to understand and hence get along with the guards, this special relationship was more important for the victims than for the latter group. Indeed, talking with the „Barbarian from our Kulturkreis“ was a means to ascertain belonging and cultural identity for those

who used to be German citizens and now were reduced to almost nothing.

Anna Hájková and SILVIA GOLDBAUM TARABINI FRACAPANE turned their attention to social life in the Theresienstadt ghetto. Goldbaum Tarabini Fracapane (Paris/Berlin) followed a smaller group of Danish Jews deported there in 1943. Six months later, the Danish Jews started receiving food parcels, which soon became legendary. Fracapane analyzed the double bind of relative luxury and hunger: to the Theresienstadt community, the Danes were „wealthy“. The Danish group was disparate, the distribution of food uneven, and yet the survivors uniformly remembered hunger and suffering – although some had a „lot“, and others „little“. This „embarrassment of riches“ within a ghetto community sheds new insights on perceptions of food in extreme times. Hájková (Toronto) analyzed the elderly German Jews deported to Theresienstadt. Although they represented the oldest and weakest group of the ghetto inmates because they were alone and did not speak Czech, the power language of the ghetto, elderly Germans showed surprising flexibility and tenacity. Their group was in many respects the last chapter of the classic German-Jewish bourgeoisie: while they kept their characteristic mentality, they quickly internalized the new rules of the enforced community. Hájková argued for a need to „read history backward“, in this particular case, incorporating the findings on life after the deportation into how we understand German-Jewish history.

SUSANNE HEIM (Berlin) explored the help that international Jewish organizations provided to Jews in German-occupied Europe. Heim pointed out that these organizations, notably the World Jewish Congress and the Joint, belong as much to the Jewish perspective as those living inside the Nazi German areas, and their actions need to be brought into view. Moreover, thanks to their wide networks and non-bureaucratic forms of communication, Jewish relief organizations were the first to realize that the Germans singled out Jews for genocide. They fought for their support in a nationally Jewish dimension, not differentiating between Jewish Germans, Czechs, or Poles: they considered them as the perpetrators did, namely as Jews.

LISA PESCHEL (Cambridge, Mass.) and DIETER HECHT (Vienna) returned to the micro-level. Peschel examined the meaning of cultural activities undertaken by young Czechoslovak-born Jews in Theresienstadt. Drawing from Judith Herman's concept of trauma, she argued that cabaret performances were a way to overcome the trauma of deportation and ghettoization, and helped to situate the threatening present into the framework of a safe past. This feature was common among the three main cultural and ideological factions of this group: German-speaking Jews, assimilationists, and Zionists. Hecht focused on a small group of friends around the twins Ilse and Kurt Mezei. Raised in a loving bourgeois Viennese Orthodox Jewish family, Ilse and Kurt were among the last Jews remaining in Vienna, because their mother worked for the Jewish Community and hence was not deported. Hecht demonstrated how specific the experience of the Holocaust was for teenagers and young people, examining the patterns of their group mechanisms, gender and sexuality norms, as well as their coming to terms with years of exclusion.

One panel, following another strand of Alltagsgeschichte, addressed liminal cases often neglected in the big picture: the „Geltungsjuden“ and the role of Czech fascists in the exclusion process of Czech Jewry. „Geltungsjuden“ were a threefold category of „Mischlinge“, people of gentile and Jewish parents, when either the offspring was a member of the Jewish community after 1935, or married to a Jew, or when he or she were born out of wedlock after 1935. MARIA VON DER HEYDT (Berlin) analyzed the situation of German „Geltungsjuden“, as they were perceived by the German state and by Jewish organizations (of which they were now enforced members), and how they themselves made sense of the persecution. Unlike „Mischlinge“, „Geltungsjuden“ were supposed to be deported, and if an individual drew unfavorable attention from the authorities, and the gentile parent did not protest, they often were. Von der Heydt demonstrated the inherent disruption of this category that never became salient for its members: being in-between never became a self-identification. Indeed, persecution rarely triggered a sense of Jewishness; it

rather became a categorization that never ceased feeling constructed and which those stamped as „Geltungsjuden“ tried to shed. MI-CHAELA RAGGAM BLESCH (Vienna) followed the fate of young Viennese women of the same categorization. In Vienna, in spite of identical orders the praxis was quite different and only very few of the „Geltungsjuden“ were deported. Raggam-Blesch focused on the impact of the persecution on the domestic front and gender norms: many of these women came from an upper-middle class background, and persecution not only changed their material conditions, but also suddenly made marriage to gentiles impossible. Several of the women became single mothers – thus changing social codes, class identification, and gender norms. BENJAMIN FROMMER (Evanston) examined the role of Czech gentile neighbors in the exclusion process of Czech Jews immediately leading to the deportations. Frommer pointed out the role of the Czech Fascists, who often also worked as informants: denunciations of „Jew-helpers“ in the Fascists’ newspaper quickly discouraged acts of loyalty to the Jews. Jews and their gentile neighbors alike read the Fascist newspaper „Aryan Struggle“ to check that they behave within the allowed margins. An atmosphere of denunciation and mutual control left the formerly assimilated and highly intermarried Czech Jews isolated and easily deportable.

Overall, the workshop demonstrated the centrality of the perspective from below for our understanding of people in the Holocaust. As Susanne Heim noted in the opening evening, we cannot for instance understand the rise of the Nazi movement if we miss the dynamics of rioting groups in the late Weimar republic, placed in the economic and ideological background. The papers at the same time testified to a need to compare the contexts (as with the case of „Geltungsjuden“ in Germany and Austria), as well as a necessity for knowledge of exact structural circumstances. Alltagsgeschichte can be only exercised on vast background of economic and political history – otherwise, we gain a glimpse of a texture we cannot make sense of. Mary Fulbrook, Ben Frommer and others have displayed the historiographical gain with integrating several perspectives: we can follow the direct impact

of perpetrators’ decisions, but also recognize patterns and connections of activities that were not visible before. Yet this integrative take necessitates a perspective from below, it could not be recognized on a macro/meso level.

The discussion kept returning to the familiar factors of gender, generation, class and culture. Class remains very much alive, indeed, it is an obvious concept that sheds light on what the persecuted were experiencing, and how society’s structure changed in the course of events. Gender and culture were topics particularly heatedly discussed: while some participants argued for a more static understanding, other saw these categories as situational, in flux, to be understood on the backdrop of contrasts and other factors. Persecuted Jews found themselves in new situations and surroundings, being confronted with different cultures, which triggered new gender and cultural norms; yet people still reflected on the „old“ and „new“. Indeed, as several participants remarked, gender is not that simple.

„Alltagsgeschichte ist ein Bericht von unterwegs“, commented this report writer; a certain precision that economic or political history offer will never be possible. Luckily, Alltagsgeschichte can more than make up for it in vitality and focus on matters that fascinate.

Conference overview:

Public Panel Discussion: What can Everyday History Teach Us About the Holocaust?

Marion Kaplan, Beate Meyer, Doris Bergen (participants), Y. Michal Bodemann (Moderation)

Jewish Councils:

Beate Meyer (Institute for the History of German Jewry, Hamburg), The Reich’s Association of Jews, It’s Local Branches and the Deportations

Magda Veselská (Jewish Museum Prague), *Der Alltag der Jüdischen Provinzgemeinden im Protektorat Böhmen und Mähren*

Andrea Löw comment

Going into Hiding:

Beate Kosmala (German Resistance Memorial Center, Berlin), *Überlebensstrategie Flucht in den Untergrund: Entscheidungsfindung und*

Erfahrungen jüdischer Frauen in Berlin

Richard Lutjens (Northwestern University, Evanston, Ill.), *Daily Life in Hiding in Nazi Berlin, 1941 – 1945*

Stefanie Schüler Springorum comment

Violence and Perception of Violence:

Mary Fulbrook (UCL, London), *Systemic Violence and the Persecution of the Jews of Będzin*

Mark Roseman (Indiana University, Bloomington), *The Barbarians from our „Kulturkreis“: German-Jewish Perceptions of Nazi Perpetrators*

Peter Schöttler comment

Enforced Living Together:

Anna Hájková (University of Toronto, Toronto), *Generation versus Ethnicity: The Old Among the German Jewish Group in Theresienstadt*

Silvia Goldbaum Tarabini Fracapane (Zentrum für Antisemitismusforschung, Berlin) *„We learned what it meant to be hungry“: Everyday life of the Danish Jews in Theresienstadt*

Christoph Dieckmann Comment

Outskirts of the Reich:

Susanne Heim (Edition Judenverfolgung 1933-1945): *Reaktionen internationaler jüdischer Hilfsorganisationen auf die Situation der deutschen Juden*

Maura Hametz (Old Dominion University, Norfolk, Va.), *Expanding Beyond the Protectorate: Jews and the Experience of Persecution in the Adriatic Littoral*

Doris Bergen comment

Youth, Sports, Culture:

Dieter Hecht (Austrian Academy of Sciences, Vienna), *Daily Life of Jewish Youth in Vienna, 1941-1945*

Lisa Peschel (Centre for Jewish Studies, Harvard University), *Against a Uniform Definition of Jewishness: Theatrical Performance by Czech and Austrian Jews in Theresienstadt*

Imke Hansen comment

‘Geltungsjuden’ and Inter marriage:

Maria von der Heydt (Heinichen, Laudien & Nottbeck, Berlin), *„Geltungsjuden“: Self-defined and Imposed Jewishness in Germany 1941 to 1945*

Michaela Raggam-Blesch (Austrian Academy of Sciences, Vienna), *„Mit Angst wachte man auf, mit Angst ging man zu Bett...“ („You woke up afraid, and afraid you went to bed...“) Women of Jewish Descent Surviving the NS-regime in Vienna*

Benjamin Frommer (Northwestern University, Evanston, Ill.), *How Czech Fascists, Prague Bureaucrats and Local Police Helped Build the Nazi ‘Ghetto without Walls’*

Nancy Wingfield comment

Concluding Discussion

Doris Bergen, Anna Hájková, Andrea Löw (participants), Mark Roseman (moderation)

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