

### **Jewish History and Culture in the Early Modern World: New Perspectives in Research, Exhibitions and Digitization**

**Veranstalter:** Simon Dubnow Institute for Jewish History and Culture at Leipzig University; in cooperation with the Leibniz Institute for the History and Culture of Eastern Europe (GWZO)

**Datum, Ort:** 19.06.2017–20.06.2017, Leipzig

**Bericht von:** Johannes Czakai, Selma Stern Center for Jewish Studies Berlin-Brandenburg (ZJS)

The workshop „Jewish History and Culture in the Early Modern World: New Perspectives in Research, Exhibitions and Digitization“ aimed to bring together historians, museologists, and collaborators on digital humanities projects and to facilitate an exchange on new research perspectives, new exhibition concepts, as well as new approaches from the field of eHumanities. As the organizers Jörg Deventer and Jürgen Heyde explained in their introduction, the planning of the workshop proceeded on the basis of three observations: 1) Following the digital turn, web-based approaches have also gained increasing significance in research on the early modern period, allowing scholars all over the world to access digital archives. However, opportunities in early modern research within Jewish Studies remain scarce. For example, from among the sixty projects listed on the portal Ruach Digitalit<sup>1</sup>, which went online in 2014 to promote the digital humanities in Israel, only one is explicitly dedicated to Jewish history in the early modern period, namely the „Pinkassim Project“.<sup>2</sup> What further trends are discernible here? 2) Increased interest in Jewish history and culture has led to new forms of visualization and the dissemination of knowledge. How do large museums dedicated to Jewish history such as POLIN in Warsaw and the Jewish Museum in Berlin deal with the early modern era in their exhibitions? 3) Much research over the past years and decades has been reevaluating and correcting the hitherto rather negative perception of Jewish pre-modernity and casting it rather as an era of transition and rupture in its own right.<sup>3</sup> Current research approaches dealing

for example with questions of everyday lived realities, mobility, and religious fluidity have been casting new light on hitherto unknown or neglected sources.

In the opening lecture, LUKAS CLEMENS and JÖRG MÜLLER (Trier) presented the edition project „Medieval Ashkenaz: Corpus der Quellen zur Geschichte der Juden im spätmittelalterlichen Reich“, which is based at the Arye Maimon Institut für Geschichte der Juden in Trier.<sup>4</sup> This ambitious project has since 2006 been collecting all written sources on Jewish history in the Holy Roman Empire in the period from 1273 to 1519. This project is not aiming at a printed version, but rather to edit the sources with the help of the database software FuD, which was developed from 2004 onwards especially for the needs of this project, and which has since been made available to other users. The database currently comprises 3,908 entries based on 8,500 sources, every dataset being augmented with a column for annotations or links to other projects such as the EPIDAT database.

Next up, LUCIA RASPE (Frankfurt am Main/Berlin) reported on the reconceptualization of the permanent exhibition of the Jewish Museum in Berlin which will be opened in the coming years. The new concept on the early modern aspect of the exhibition is being exemplified through the theme of Jewish print. The central focus is on the life and work of the printer Hayyim Shohor, illuminating the influence of print culture on the Jewish world. Shohor exemplifies the geographic as well as cultural mobility of early modern Jews in Ashkenaz and cultural exchange with Christian printers. In order not to limit the visualization only to his title pages, the exhibition will be augmented with archival sources on Shohor's life.

HANNA ZAREMSKA (Warsaw) presented an alternative for potential museum concepts on the basis of the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw, opened in 2014, explaining the design of the con-

<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.thedigin.org/en/> (07.11.2017).

<sup>2</sup> See <http://web.nli.org.il/sites/NLI/English/collections/jewish-collection/pinkassim/Pages/default.aspx> (07.11.2017).

<sup>3</sup> See, inter alia, David B. Ruderman, *Early Modern Jewry: A New Cultural History*, Princeton, NJ 2010.

<sup>4</sup> See <http://www.medieval-ashkenaz.org/> (07.11.2017).

---

tent and methodology of the first part of the permanent exhibition, „First Encounters (960–1500)“. Due to the lack of contemporary artifacts, this part of the exhibition deals predominantly with large-format reproductions, models, animations, interactive objects, and installations, with sources always reproduced in their original languages. This exhibition functions primarily as a low-threshold, multimedia experience and less as a presentation of ostensible authenticity.

OLGA SIXTOVÁ (Prague) emphasized the importance of the *Pinkassim* (community protocols and other registers) for the research of Jewish community structures, characterizing them as valuable yet neglected sources. From her corpus of Bohemian *Pinkassim*, she presented two protocol books of the Pinkas Synagogue in Prague which were created in the early seventeenth century and which reflect the diversity of this genre. Although these sources have been used in numerous publications, she argued that their scholarly potential has hardly been realized to date, a circumstance largely due to the lacking linguistic abilities of present-day scholars. Sixtová wishes to awaken their interest through the publication of selected texts and by conducting paleographic seminars.

ANNA MICHAŁOWSKA-MYCIELSKA (Warsaw) examined a different form of *Pinkassim*, those appertaining to the records of the Council (Va'ad) of Lithuanian Jewry and their modes of communication. She is concerned above all with the communication of the Lithuanian Va'ad with local communities and the Council of Four Lands of the Jews in Poland-Lithuania as well as their contact with the Karaites. The registers of the Lithuanian Va'ad, which regulated above all the distribution of taxes, have been published in edited form<sup>5</sup> and demonstrate that Lithuanian Jews saw themselves as a separate group distinct from Polish Jewry.

The next panel introduced the genre of *Memorbücher*, memory books, which recorded the deceased of a community and of which some 150 are still preserved today. DEBRA KAPLAN (Ramat Gan) elucidated three aspects of the *Memorbücher* which could be used among other things as a source for Jewish social history: the changing pattern and

institutionalization of donations and charity, changes in liturgy, and the early modern drive towards written fixation. Kaplan moreover emphasized that the *Memorbücher* remained in use in later eras, fulfilling a liturgical function for example through the recitation of names, through handwritten annotations, or through the threat of being deleted from the books in the case of conversion.

NIMROD ZINGER (Be'er Sheva) works on the hitherto rather unknown topic of Jewish midwives<sup>6</sup> and their rituals, contrasting the two genres of *Pinkassim* and *Memorbücher*. He demonstrated through the *Pinkas* of the community in Offenbach that the midwife Hayel'e was assured a fixed accommodation and a salary which was increased several times, suggesting that the community had a great investment in her presence. The *Memorbuch* by contrast contains numerous necrologies of women who were commercially involved in medicine, illness, and death, which points to an increasing professionalization from the mid-eighteenth century onwards.

CORNELIA AUST (Mainz), whose research project examines the role of Jewish clothing as a „marker of difference“, analyzed clothing decrees in *Takkanot* above all from Poland-Lithuania as well as contributions in Jewish morality plays. She was thereby able to determine that most *Takkanot* were directed towards women and regulated above all the wearing of expensive materials and accessories. However, not only gender but also age, standing, and status within the community were communicated through clothing, allowing for power relationships and demarcations to be visualized. Aust argued in favor of the continuing digitalization of *Takkanot* in order to make this genre accessible to a wider audience and to enable new transcultural approaches.

JURGITA VERBICKIENĖ (Vilnius) spoke about the different ways in which Christian knowledge about Jews was transmitted from a primarily reading to a primarily listening

---

<sup>5</sup>Semen M. Dubnov (ed.), *Pinkas ha-Medinah o pinkas ya'ad ha-kehilot ha-rashiyot be-medinat Liṭa*, 5. Aufl., Berlin 1925.

<sup>6</sup>See Elisheva Carlebach, Community, Authority, and Jewish Midwives in Early Modern Europe, in: *Jewish Social Studies* 20,2 (2014), pp. 5–33.

audience in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. An evaluation of sermons from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries reflects the respective image of Jews that was disseminated by local clergymen within their communities. This knowledge, which often originated from Polish books, was only transmitted to the Lithuanian population through the priests preaching in Lithuanian. This explains why decidedly anti-Jewish works such as that of the Jesuit priest Piotr Skarga were still being reprinted decades later, leading to an increased dissemination of the blood libel from the eighteenth century onwards.

In the panel entitled „Conversion“, MARIA DIEMLING (Canterbury) offered a new approach to the reading of ethnographic reports authored by converts from Judaism to Christianity. To this end, she employed James C. Scott's concept of the hidden transcript, according to which marginalized minorities express forms of resistance in a manner impervious to mainstream society, for example in folk songs, while a less provocative public transcript is maintained towards mainstream society.<sup>7</sup> Early modern converts were regarded among Jewish circles as a threat to the public transcript, as they relayed internal information, in other words the hidden transcript, to a Christian audience. However, the avid publishing activities of many converts were also an important source of income.<sup>8</sup>

JÖRG DEVENTER (Leipzig) examined the conversion practices of Jews in Leipzig in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. By contrast to the focus on „professional converts“<sup>9</sup> to date dominant in scholarship, he concentrated on hitherto unknown examples. On the basis of some twenty case studies, he painted a picture of Jews who found themselves in acute emergency situations before their conversion owing to illness or imprisonment. Although Leipzig was visited by hundreds of Jews during its thrice annual fairs, the trading city was regarded as a place hostile to Jews due to its strict prohibition on settlement. Conversions could thus be interpreted as desperate if also strategically motivated means of liberating oneself from a perilous emergency situation.

JOSHUA TEPLITSKY (Stony Brook, NY) presented another fascinating project from the

digital humanities, namely the project „Footprints“, begun in 2014/2015, which offers a growing database on the circulation of the printed Jewish book.<sup>10</sup> Focusing on the material dimension of books, which function as „archives of their own“, he concentrated on all forms of handwritten annotations such as dedications, commentaries, or censorship, allowing for new insights on themes such as mobility, transregional transfers of knowledge, and gender. Dedications for example elucidate the paths which books have traveled through the course of history and which allow for scattered libraries to be reconstructed.

JÜRGEN HEYDE (Leipzig) examined transregional communication through the emigration of Bohemian Jews to Poland beginning in 1516. He thereby reassessed the dominant narrative of a history of suffering, persecution, and exclusion and the representation of a mass immigration on the basis of the available sources, relying on the digitalized material of the Archiwum Głównie Akt Dawnych (AGAD) in Warsaw. Heyde discovered that communication between the Polish King Zygmunt and the Bohemian Jews was not one-dimensional, with Jews cropping up as agents who turned to the king to negotiate their status and to accept him as their new suzerain.

The workshop offered a balanced insight into the numerous perspectives, methodological approaches, and multifaceted source genres currently coursing through the study of Jewish early modernity. The increased focus towards Eastern and East Central Europe was marked in the topics and among the participants. This is a welcome prioritization since these regions have been treated rather questionably in scholarship to date. Indeed, precisely the engagement with Eastern European sources sheds new light on Jewish early modernity, allowing it to be reevaluated and

<sup>7</sup> See James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance. Hidden Transcripts*, New Haven 1990.

<sup>8</sup> See Yaacov Deutsch, *Judaism in Christian Eyes. Ethnographic Descriptions of Jews and Judaism in Early Modern Europe*, New York 2012.

<sup>9</sup> Ruth von Bernuth, *Zu Gast bei Nikolaus Selnecker. Der jüdische Konvertit Paulus von Prag in Leipzig, in: Jahrbuch des Simon-Dubnow-Instituts/Simon Dubnow Institute Yearbook 13 (2014)*, pp.15–36.

<sup>10</sup> See [https://footprints.ccnmtl.columbia.edu/\(07.11.2017\)](https://footprints.ccnmtl.columbia.edu/(07.11.2017)).

---

enhanced.<sup>11</sup>

It became especially apparent that research in the field of digital humanities is taking on an ever more important role, and thus it is hoped that such projects will continue to be developed and financed in the future. Databases such as The Pinkassim Project, Medieval Ashkenaz, and Footprints enrich scholarship not only through the material they make available but also through new software developments and the opportunity to network: through their transregional access, they promote a new form of scholarly exchange and cooperation. Most of the participants emphasized how improved digital access to sources that are internationally scattered and otherwise difficult to access has significantly and positively influenced their research projects. The workshop organizers went so far as to interpret this development as a revolution comparable to the grand edition projects of the nineteenth century. In any case, it is undeniable that great advances can be expected from archives and libraries that support future-oriented and user-friendly research methods rather than sealing off their valuable goods from the public. It is precisely through the enhanced access to neglected sources, as this workshop demonstrated, that new research approaches are stimulated, particularly in the fields of cultural, social, and gender history. What also became evident was the enduring necessity of guiding young and future scholars towards a sophisticated engagement with early modern source materials and especially of promoting the relevant competences in language and reading. A positive example of this can be seen in the workshops that have been offered for two years now by the above-mentioned Pinkassim Project. Lacking linguistic skills on all sides are one of the major causes of neglected research in this field. Hebrew and Yiddish sources such as *Takkanot*, *Memorbücher*, and *Pinkassim* are only just beginning to be explored in scholarship, yet it is already evident that one can expect an increased engagement with these inner-Jewish communal sources over the next years.

In this sense, the workshop, which was described by the organizers as a „small step on the way to a continuous dialog,“ engendered

the hope that these welcome developments will endure over the next years, allowing ambitious projects to come to fruition and for new sources to be discovered.

#### **Conference overview:**

Welcome and Introduction

Jörg Deventer & Jürgen Heyde (Leipzig)

Keynote Address: Digital Humanities and Jewish Studies

Chair: Jörg Deventer (Leipzig)

Lukas Clemens & Jörg Müller (Trier): The Corpus of Sources on the History of the Jews in the Medieval Empire

Panel „Visualizing and Exhibiting“

Chair: Yvonne Kleinmann (Halle/Saale)

Lucia Raspe (Frankfurt am Main/Berlin): Exhibiting the Impact of Print at the Jewish Museum Berlin

Hanna Zaremska (Warsaw): A Historian in the Museum: The Medieval Gallery of the Museum of Polish Jews Polin in Warsaw

Panel „Pinkassim. The Value of a Neglected Source“

Chair: Cornelia Aust (Mainz)

Olga Sixtová (Prague): Jewish Self-Government in 17th Century Prague: Insights from the Earliest Synagogue Pinkassim

Anna Michałowska-Mycielska (Warsaw): Communication between Jewish Communities and Regions in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth

Panel „Everyday Life. New Insights from Memor-Books“

Chair: Maria Diemling (Canterbury)

Nimrod Zinger (Be'er Sheva): Birth and Death: Jewish Midwives in the Memorbuch

Debra Kaplan (Ramat Gan): Ritual, Death, and Community: The Example of the Memorbuch

---

<sup>11</sup> See, inter alia, Gershon David Hundert, Language Acquisition as a Criterion of Modernization among East Central European Jews. The Case of Dov Ber Birkenthal of Bolechów, in: Brian M. Smollett / Christian Wiese (eds.), Reappraisals and New Studies of the Modern Jewish Experience. Essays in Honor of Robert M. Seltzer, Leiden 2015, pp. 13–28.

*Panel „Marking Boundaries“*

Chair: Jürgen Heyde (Leipzig)

Cornelia Aust (Mainz): Looking Jewish?  
Dress as a Marker of Difference

Jurgita Verbickienė (Vilnius): Reading and  
Listening: Diffusion of knowledge about Jews  
in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania

*Panel „Conversion“*

Chair: Philipp Lenhard (Munich)

Maria Diemling (Canterbury): Disclosing the  
„Hidden Transcript“: Converts as Mediators  
between Judaism and Christianity

Jörg Deventer (Leipzig): Conversion as a  
Strategy for Survival: Leipzig as a Case Study

*Panel „Trans-regional Communication“*

Chair: Lucia Raspe (Frankfurt am  
Main/Berlin)

Joshua Teplitsky (Stony Brook, N. Y.): Inscrip-  
tions and Epistles: Fragmentary Evidence and  
Book History

Jürgen Heyde (Leipzig): Entangled Commu-  
nication: The Expulsion of the Jews from Bo-  
hemia in 1516

Concluding Discussion

Tagungsbericht *Jewish History and Culture  
in the Early Modern World: New Perspec-  
tives in Research, Exhibitions and Digitization*.  
19.06.2017–20.06.2017, Leipzig, in: H-Soz-Kult  
13.11.2017.