

Building from Ashes. Jews in Postwar-Europe 1945-1950

Veranstalter: Jüdisches Museum Frankfurt am Main; Simon-Dubnow-Institut Leipzig; Seminar für Judaistik, Goethe-Universität Frankfurt am Main; Fritz Bauer Institut

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In the immediate postwar years, Europe faced the aftermath of genocide, extreme violence, and mass displacement that had produced millions of refugees, poverty, and hunger. In the midst of this „savage continent“ Jews found themselves in diverse situations, having endured varied wartime experiences. Some had survived the ghettos and concentration camps, some were refugees returning from emigration or a harsh shelter in the Soviet Union, from hiding places or partisan encampments. Others entered Western and Central Europe as part of the Allied Military Forces. In the midst of ruins and destruction, surviving Jews sought to find places that felt secure, whether in their former homelands or under Allied protection. Many became displaced persons who fought for survival and organized their emigration with the help of diverse military and social organizations. At the same time, Jews in postwar Europe were building new communities and attempting to sustain Jewish life and traditions on the continent.

During this conference the novel task was undertaken to broaden the view and put the complex situation of Jews in the years of 1945 to 1950 in a comprehensive European context. Six central topics were chosen to structure the panels and introduce first questions and theses.

1. The Collapse of Nazism and the End of World War II: Displacement and Dilemmas of Emigration and Return. What were the most immediate dilemmas of survivors after the end of the war? What kind of answers did they give to the question: what to do next? Why did they decide to return to their countries or why did they opt for emigration? How did Jews who were part of Allied Mili-

tary Forces view the immediate postwar situation?

2. Rebuilding and Reinforcing Economic Structures: Social Welfare Versus Socio-Economic Autonomy. In what form were Jewish communities rebuilt in postwar Europe? What roles did international and American Jewish aid organizations play in this revival process?

3. Rebuilding the Community: Different Forms of Cultural Revival. How did survivors (re)establish the basic social unit of the family? Which social, religious, political, and cultural traditions were revived, sustained, and reinvented?

4. Holocaust Memory: Jewish Efforts to Document and Testify the Crime of the Century. What kind of institutions and methodologies did postwar Jewish communities establish to document the recent catastrophe? How did they commemorate the Jewish victims of the war?

5. Seeking Justice: War-Crimes Trials, People's Tribunals, Jewish Honor Courts and Actions for Restitution. How did European countries in general and Jewish communities in particular deal with the question of wartime responsibility? What legal and extra-legal methods were employed and what results did they yield in bringing war-time criminals to justice? What measures were taken to provide restitutions for Jews?

6. Imagining and Building the Future: Involvement in the Postwar Administration and the Formation of Different States. In what—both concrete and theoretical—ways did Jews seek to shape the political contours of a post-fascist Europe? What kind of political and ideological movements did they join and why? How and in what contexts did they contribute to the formation of different postwar states throughout Europe?

The conference was opened with a roundtable discussion where participants concentrated on what research remains to be done in the field. G. DANIEL COHEN (Houston) asked the question why the postwar years have been treated as a mere sequel to the Holocaust when most of the literature repeatedly stated Europe's irrelevance during this time. TOBIAS FREIMÜLLER (Frankfurt) argued that, even though we know

more about the postwar years today than about the following decades, most of our knowledge concerns prominent figures and extraordinary events, while we know little about the everyday lives of Jews in this time. Finally, ATINA GROSSMANN (New York) summarized four main questions of postwar Jewish history that require more academic reflection: how does Holocaust history affect our knowledge of postwar history? What do we really mean by „postwar“? What do we really mean by „Europe“? How much revival did actually take place?

The first panel mainly concerned the situation of Jews during the immediate postwar years in Central Europe. KATERINA CAPKOVA (Prague) presented new research showing that Jewish life in the postwar CSSR was much more diverse than expected since new Jewish groups were established in new regions. Whereas NAAMA SERI-LEVI (Jerusalem) described the story of the Polish Jews fleeing from their homeland to the American Occupation Zone in Germany and Austria as „Gypsy nomads“, as they were called in contemporary sources. G. Daniel Cohen on the other hand explored philosophical, theological and political facets of the West European „philosemitic“ discourse after the Holocaust. By giving an outlook above and beyond the immediate postwar years he argued that these iterations of „philosemitism“ in Western Europe from 1945 to 1989 functioned above all as a language and a cultural code allowing its different practitioners to engage in the postwar world.

During the second panel on the rebuilding of social life LAURA HOBSON-FAURE (Paris) provided a pan-European view of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee's (JDC) reconstruction work in the postwar years. The relationship between the JDC as a donor and the local Jewish communities as receivers of aid was not a simple one-way affair. The communities themselves were important actors as well and both sides strongly affirmed the European branch of the Diaspora. KATHARINA FRIEDLA (Jerusalem) and KAMIL KIJEK (WROCLAW) both presented the vast efforts of Jewish survivors in the Soviet Union to settle and create a new life in lower Silesia after the war. For about three

years they established a rich political and cultural life for about three years and tried to pursue a „third way“ between communism and capitalism.

More directly the third panel focused on the rebuilding process of the communities. Whereas EWA KOZMINSKA FREJLAK (Warsaw) presented the main arguments concerning assimilation of the Polish Jewry and whether it actually offered people of Jewish origin some sort of guarantee, TAMAR LEWINSKY (Berlin) gave an overview on the multi-faceted cultural activities in the so called „displaced persons camps“. IRIT CHEN (Jerusalem) dealt in her lecture with the role of the Israeli consulate in Munich regarding the rebuilding of a Jewish community in Germany. She argued that the consulate was involved in the institutional revival of the community out of instrumental motives rather than for the purpose of reestablishing Jewish life in Germany. A story of survival was told by IZABELA DAHL (Örebro) who gave an overview of the Polish Jewish (dis)placement in Sweden and the role of the Swedish Jewish congregation within the process of integration of the Polish newcomers.

„Holocaust Memory“ was the fourth panel's main topic and MANUELA CONSONNI (Jerusalem) argued that the European postwar-democracies were built on the idea of „justice postponed“ for their Jewish citizens. She argued that on an ethnically defined continent, Jews were perceived as ethnically distinct and reminders of the past. NATALIA ALEKSIUN (New York) focused more on the acts of remembrance by juxtaposing early testimonies with later accounts by the same survivors, such as Philip Friedman, and compared their narrations in the context of local interethnic relations. In a similar approach YECHIEL WEIZMAN (Haifa) presented different modes of remembrance and ensuing clashes between the Jewish and the gentile population in Poland. FERENC LACZO (Maastricht) however introduced the most significant Hungarian survivor historians and how they were able to produce such an impressive amount of documentation and research immediately after the war.

The fifth panel concerned the aspects of jurisdiction and justice, for which reason

KATARZYNA PERSON (Warsaw) gave an insight into the inner Jewish system of the so called „honor courts“ that dealt mainly with accusations of collaboration. PHILIPP GRAF (Leipzig) in contrast highlighted the struggles of the Jewish lawyer Leo Zuckermann for the restitution of „aryanized“ property in the Soviet Zone of Occupation (SZO). The panel was concluded by ANNETTE WEINKE (Jena) and her outlook on the direct and indirect contributions of Jewish legal think tanks to the human rights architecture of the postwar years.

The sixth panel again provided a lookout beyond the immediate postwar years with ANNA KOCH (Southampton) discussing Jewish communists' involvement in the creation of a socialist state in East Germany. And even though AVINOAM PATT (West Hartford) could not attend the conference in person, he was able to join in via video conference and closed the final panel with his presentation on the role of the Holocaust survivors during the establishment of the State of Israel.

In their closing remarks ELISABETH GAL-LAS (Leipzig), Atina Grossman (New York) and MIRJAM WENZEL (Frankfurt) brought back the discussion to the original questions of: „what are we talking about when we talk about Jews in postwar Europe?“ and: „why is it important to investigate this subject?“ It was agreed on, that we can find active survivors with strong voices all over Europe but also that this group is much more diverse than commonly expected. Whereas topics like gender and memory need to be discussed further, the notion of migration and the view on Jews in postwar Europe as a chiefly transnational community seems to be the predominant aspect of most of the academic research. Many times during the conference a 'third way' was mentioned when the efforts of Jews in eastern and western spheres were presented. Therefore the antagonisms and paradigms of the Cold War seem to blur at least in the first years after the war. Likewise the silencing of early Jewish initiatives for memory and justice cannot be sufficiently explained by Cold War politics and ideology.

Never again since the immediate postwar years have this many Jews been present in Europe at once. To commemorate and honor

their efforts is a political statement today when the idea of our continent as a place of people of different languages, traditions and religions living side by side in mutual respect and understanding is at stake.

The arguments this conference has produced and the new questions that arose from it will hopefully stimulate discussions outside of the academic world as well. The Jewish Museum Frankfurt wishes to shed light on the postwar years for the broader public by dedicating its first temporary exhibition after its reopening in 2019 to this subject. The exhibits will take museum visitors on a journey of search and discovery throughout a continent which was still completely in the shadow of war, destruction and mass murder, but which already had the contours of a new, postwar order.

Conference Overview:

Roundtable Discussion

In the Aftermath of Auschwitz and the Second World War: New Perspectives on the Situation of Jews in Europe in the Years 1945-1950

G. Daniel Cohen (Rice University, Houston, TX)

Tobias Freimüller (Fritz Bauer Institute, Frankfurt am Main)

Atina Grossmann (Cooper Union, New York)

Chair: Elisabeth Gallas (Simon-Dubnow-Institute, Leipzig)

Panel 1

The Collapse of Nazism and the End of World War II: Displacement and Dilemmas of Emigration and Return

Kateřina Čapková (Institute of Contemporary History, Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic, Prague): Competing Jewish Narratives: Jewish Migrants in Postwar Czechoslovakia

Naama Seri-Levi (The Hebrew University of Jerusalem): Refugees, Wanderers, Displaced Persons: The Experience of Jewish-Polish Repatriates during and after the War

G. Daniel Cohen (Department of History,

Rice University, Houston, TX): „Philosemitic“ Western Europe? The Jewish Question in the Aftermath of the War, 1945-1967

Chair: Sybille Steinbacher (Fritz Bauer Institute, Frankfurt am Main)

Panel 2

Rebuilding and Reinforcing Economic Structures: Social Welfare versus Socio-Economic Autonomy

Laura Hobson-Faure (Université Sorbonne Nouvelle, Paris): Protecting the European Branch of the Jewish Diaspora: The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee in Europe after the Shoah

Katharina Friedla (Yad Vashem, Jerusalem): Socio-Economic Patterns and Reconfiguration of Jewish Life in Post-War Poland (1945–1949) – Lower Silesia as a Case Study

Kamil Kijek (University of Wrocław): The Jewish experience of Rychbach/Dzierżoniów in the years 1945-1950

Chair: Fritz Backhaus (Jewish Museum Frankfurt am Main)

Panel 3

Rebuilding the Community: Different Forms of Cultural Revival.

Ewa Koźmińska-Frejlik (Jewish Historical Institute, Warsaw): The Assimilation of Polish Jews to Polishness and the Attitude of the Jewish Community in Poland towards assimilation (1945-1950).

Tamar Lewinsky (Jewish Museum Berlin): Galut Germaniyah/Goles Daytshland. Cultural Activities among Jewish Displaced Persons in Occupied Germany

Irit Chen (The Hebrew University of Jerusalem): „Dear Child of Israel“ or a „Cheap Partner“: The Relation of the Israeli Consulate in Munich to the Rebuilding of the Jewish Community in Germany 1948-1953

Izabela Dahl (School of Humanities, Education and Social Sciences, Örebro University): The Complexity of Displacement. Polish Jews in Sweden after World War II

Chair: Atina Grossmann (Cooper Union, New

York)

Panel 4

Holocaust Memory: Jewish efforts to document and testify the crime of the century

Manuela Consonni (The Hebrew University of Jerusalem): Auschwitz and the Lesson of Srebrenica in the Post-Memory Age

Natalia Aleksion (Touro College, New York): Documentation (Self)Censorship and the Early Holocaust Testimonies in Poland

Ferenc Laczó (University of Maastricht): Interpreting Responsibility. On the Incipient Historiography of the Holocaust in Hungary

Yechiel Weizman (Haifa University): Breaching the Silence: Jewish Sites as Reminders of the Holocaust in Communist Poland

Chair: Christian Wiese (Goethe-University, Frankfurt am Main)

Panel 5

Seeking Justice: War-Crimes Trials, People's Tribunals, Jewish Honor Courts and Actions for Restitution

Katarzyna Person (Jewish Historical Institute, Warsaw): Defense Strategies in the Postwar Jewish Honor Courts

Philipp Graf (Simon-Dubnow-Institute, Leipzig): „The Central Secretariat [...] approves the draft bill“ – Restitution in the Soviet Zone of Germany Reconsidered

Annette Weinke (Friedrich-Schiller-University, Jena): At the Intersection of Law, History, and Legal Lobbying: Transatlantic Jewish Legal Think Tanks and Postwar Justice

Chair: Mirjam Wenzel (Jewish Museum Frankfurt am Main)

Panel 6

Imagining and Building the Future: Involvement in the Postwar Administration and the Formation of Different States

Anna Koch (University of Southampton): „The foundation for a new and better Germany:“ Communists of Jewish Origin in the Early German Democratic Republic

Avinoam Patt (University of Hartford, West Hartford, CT): From Destruction to Rebirth: Jewish Displaced Persons and the Creation of the State of Israel

Chair: Kata Bohus (Jewish Museum Frankfurt am Main)

Closing Remarks

Elisabeth Gallas (Simon-Dubnow-Institute, Leipzig)

Atina Grossmann (Cooper Union, New York)

Mirjam Wenzel (Jewish Museum Frankfurt, Frankfurt am Main)

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