

Jewish Space in Contemporary Poland

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The growing interest in the Jewish past that has been visible in Poland in the last two decades gave rise to a wide range of cultural and commemorative initiatives across the whole country. The collection of essays "Jewish Space in Contemporary Poland" is an academic response to these developments. Edited by Erica Lehrer (author of "Jewish Poland Revisited: Heritage Tourism in Unquiet Places" [link]) and Michael Meng (author of "Shattered Spaces: Encountering Jewish Ruins in Postwar Germany and Poland" [link]), the volume explores the question of how today's Poland responds to its Jewish (and not only Jewish) past. As editors Lehrer and Meng note in their introduction, '*space* as a common analytical category' (p. 3) is the unifying element of the whole volume. As a result, most authors look at different sites of Jewish past (from centres such as Cracow and Warsaw, to less known Szczecin and Lodz, to entirely local examples of Chmielnik and Brzostek), with only a few of them (Tyszka, Cohn and to some extent Kapralski) trying to look at the issue of space from a wider perspective. Since the authors of the thirteen articles collected in this work represent various academic disciplines (from history to anthropology), "Jewish Space" is a truly interdisciplinary study. This diversity, however, is both a strength and weakness of the book.

Although it can be said that the authors generally avoid presenting contemporary Poland and its Jewish spaces as a mass graveyard and a place full of suffering (in the way as it is perceived by many Jewish visitors), the book begins with the unavoidable issue of Holocaust memory in Oświęcim ("Oświęcim/Auschwitz: Archaeology of a Mnemonic Battleground"). It is the only chapter that deals so explicitly with the Shoah, but by looking at the problem from the perspective of space, Geneviève Zubrzycki offers an interesting and enlightening analysis of conflicting (Christian, Polish and Jewish) interpretations of the role of Auschwitz in historical narratives of each of these groups. Moreover, she also includes the 'problem of Oświęcim', a nearby town that throughout the communist period in Poland became also the name used for the Auschwitz camp. In consequence, a stark difference between "Auschwitz" (symbol of Jewish suffering) and "Oświęcim" ("the symbol of Poles' martyrdom during World War II, representing the attempt by Nazis to physically and culturally annihilate the Polish nation", p. 19) had developed.

The article by Stanisław Tyszka ("Restitution of Communal Property and the Preservation of Jewish Heritage in Poland") is one of several examples of a more general approach to the subject of Jewish space. In his study, Tyszka seeks to explain why "restitution had a very limited impact on the preservation of Poland's Jewish material heritage" (p. 47). By looking at legal issues surrounding the problem of restitution of Jewish property in

post-1989 Poland, this article provides the background to better understand many case studies presented in other essays. In another article ("Amnesia, Nostalgia, and Reconstruction: Shifting Modes of Memory in Poland's Jewish Spaces"), Sławomir Kaprański, by referring to several case studies of synagogues in southern Poland, attempts to present different types of relationships between memory, space and identity, offering "a theoretical model that may help to organize and structure the variety of attitudes toward Polish-Jewish memoryscapes" (p. 162).

The majority of essays deal with more specific local examples. Meng ("Muranów as a Ruin: Layered Memories in Postwar Warsaw") and Gebert ("Reading the Palimpsest") discuss Warsaw and its postwar and contemporary Jewish memory, while Lehrer ("Jewish Heritage, Pluralism, and Milieux de Mémoire: The Case of Kraków's Kazimierz") returns to Jewish spaces of Cracow's Kazimierz. In the latter case, however, the research conducted in 1990s and early 2000s appears to be slightly outdated and new approaches to the changing character of Kazimierz would certainly enrich this book. Although the issue of 'Milieux de Mémoire' (environments of memory rather than Nora's realms, or places of memory [1]) appeared in the conclusion of Lehrer's "Jewish Poland Revisited", none of these works convincingly defends the case of Kazimierz as an "environment of memory". The most interesting, however, are chapters analysing less known and less recognised parts of Jewish Poland. Magdalena Waligórska ("Stettin, Szczecin, and the 'Third Space': Urban Nostalgia in the German/Polish/Jewish Borderlands") looks at complexities of the Jewish past in Szczecin where Jewish heritage is "inextricably intertwined with [the city's] German past" (p. 90). The case of the city is particularly difficult also because of the forty years of Communist propaganda that presented the 'Recovered Lands' as historically Polish in an attempt to erase their German roots. It happened with Szczecin/Stettin as well as with Wrocław/Breslau and other towns and cities of Western Poland. In a unique and innovative way Waligórska concentrates on contemporary Polish prose and performance art as means of preserving, spatializing and mapping Jewishness in Szczecin. As the city aspires to recover its multinational past, the article illustrates the recovery of a Jewish and German past that "opens new, complex patterns of urban nostalgia, which not only reinterpret the city as a site of cultural pluralism but also expose hybridity and cultural translation as key modes of coexistence in a multi-ethnic urban context" (p. 95).

The preservation of and interest in Jewish heritage and memory in Poland thrives also outside the major centres. Three essays present interesting insights into these provincial Jewish spaces that "warrant particular attention precisely because of their disproportionately large Jewish populations prior to World War II" (p. 116). For Monika Murzyn-Kupisz ("Rediscovering the Jewish Past in the Polish Provinces: The Socioeconomics of Nostalgia") the example of Chmielnik serves as the opportunity to show how the process of remembering and commemorating the Jewish past becomes a local and regional phenomenon closely associated with the particular social and economic situation of the area. As a local mayor explained, "Jewish heritage in Chmielnik [serves] as both touchstone for local identity building and a vehicle for promoting the town to tourists and potential investors" (p. 127). Jonathan Webber ("A Jew, a Cemetery, and a Polish Village: A Tale of the Restoration of Memory"), the co-author of "Rediscovering Traces of Memory", the album and the main exhibition at the Galicia Jewish Museum in Cracow, takes the local aspect of Jewish heritage a step further and presents a very unique story of its own involvement in what he calls 'the restoration of memory' in the small town of Brzostek in south-eastern Poland. Unlike the case of Chmielnik, the commemorative initiative in Brzostek was led from

outside, namely by Webber himself. The essay, being more a personal story of a several years long project of rediscovery and commemoration rather than a scholarly article, presents many technical details of surprising discoveries, interesting developments (the sudden arrival of a whole pile of Jewish tombstones) and the willingness of local people to almost participate in this effort. Webber's work is particularly enlightening when we take into consideration that none of the other essays in this volume present the processes leading to the commemoration of the Jewish past in such detail.

The diversity and uniqueness of examples presented in "Jewish Space in Contemporary Poland" make this book a significant contribution to Polish-Jewish memory studies. It also shows that there is still a lot to be said on this topic and we can hope for further high quality studies dealing with this subject.

[1] See Nora, P., "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire", in "Representations", no. 26 (Spring, 1989), pp. 7-24.



Zitierweise:

M.A. Milosz K. Cybowski: Rezension zu: Erica Lehrer; Michael Meng: Jewish Space in Contemporary Poland, 2015, in: <https://www.pol-int.org/de/node/2569#r3257>.

<https://www.pol-int.org/de/node/2569?j5Q6rewycZ5HtUDXTWpx7UZE=1&r=3257>