Erica Lehrer’s "Jewish Poland Revisited. Heritage Tourism in Unquiet Places" is an ethnographical study of contemporary Poland. Or, to put things more accurately, it is a study of contemporary Kazimierz, Cracow’s prewar Jewish district. Unlike other Jewish places across Poland (for example Muranów, Jewish part of Warsaw, destroyed during the war), buildings in Kazimierz survived the war almost intact. However, the majority of its Jewish population perished in the nearby Auschwitz death camp, leaving the district devoid of its rich pre-war Jewish culture. Lehrer’s interest in Kazimierz began in the 1990s, when the area was slowly transforming from the city’s slum (as it had been perceived throughout the communist era) into a trendier and more Jewish place. The post-1989 years saw a rising number of Jewish tourists flocking into the area, as well as the growing interest in Jewish history and culture among non-Jewish Poles. Lehrer’s attempt to analyse both Jewish and Polish sides of the problem can be divided into two parts. The first half (chapters two and three) is concerned with the outsiders’ view of Kazimierz and Poland while the second half (chapters four, five and six) discusses aspects of Polish involvement in the local heritage and tourism.

"Jewish Poland Revisited" is the result of over a decade of intensive ethnological fieldwork that allowed Lehrer to present a very complex picture of contemporary Polish-Jewish relations, with Kazimierz, the most recognised "Jewish space" in contemporary Poland, playing the role of "an open cultural and even political agora" (p. 2). It was there where she met the majority of her interviewees: Jewish tourists and Poles involved in the local heritage activities. In the first part of the book Lehrer concentrates on the formers, dividing them into people who “travel to Poland to confront the Holocaust [and] a growing minority seek[ing] more than an experience of evil” (p. 15). These divisions are clearly encapsulated in the chapters devoted to missions and quests. Mission is “a term used in Jewish communal circles for a range of organised Jewish group travel experiences” (p. 57), but these experiences aim at strengthening perceptions of Poland “not as a Jewish place, but as an anti-Jewish place” (p. 58) and “work against humanistic forms of identification” (p. 61). As the author admits, the expectations of the visitors play a great role in their perceptions of Poland, particularly in terms of existing and alleged Polish anti-Semitism.

These institutionalized missions, offering rather superficial visions of Poland, are contrasted with quests "undertaken out of a sense of lack, in pursuit of what can only be fulfilled through an expedition into the unknown" (p. 93). They have usually an individual character, offering the questers to search for "unfamiliar perspectives and 'others' memories" (p. 96). In case of many children of Holocaust survivors, it is also search
for their lost identity and attempt to “break a traumatized, mythologized, inward-looking relationship to the tragic Jewish past” (p. 116). By breaking with the established narrative of Polish-Jewish relations and looking outside the Holocaust-dominated approach offered by missions, quests offer many visitors more complex visions of Kazimierz’s past and present. It feels, however, that getting a real sense of the quests only by talking with people in Kazimierz did not uncover the whole truth about them. The chapter lacks the real life experience (similar to that presented in the previous part, when Lehrer used to opportunity to take part in one of the missions as a tour guide), something that would make the story of quests and their unique character much more compelling.

After having dealt with the Jewish side of the Kazimierz reality, Lehrer turns to Poles and their involvement in preserving and promoting Jewish history and culture in Cracow. The name she uses for them is “Shabbos goim” (literary non-Jewish people paid for taking care of “practical tasks that Jews are ritually prohibited from doing on the sabbath”, p. 127). For some of these Poles the initial interest in Kazimierz and Jewish culture led to more detailed studies of the subject resulting, in several cases, in taking an academic degrees in Jewish history, learning Hebrew, rediscovering their own Jewish roots and even converting to Judaism. In consequence, their activities help in establishing a “flexible, responsive, and evolving” heritage landscape (p. 132). As the last chapter of the book suggests, Kazimierz serves as a place where “broader conceptions of Polishness are promulgated” (p. 177), particularly through Polish encounters with Jewish history and culture. Instead of being a place where only Jewish ideas of Poland are challenged, the district offers similar opportunity for young Poles to challenge their ideas of Polishness vis-à-vis the Polish-Jewish past. Moreover, the growing popularity of Jewishness and Kazimierz’s multicultural milieu offer other minorities many opportunities to promote their own causes and challenge the typical image of Polishness.

In the light of these “living” examples of Kazimierz as a Jewish space, chapter five is particularly difficult to assess. Devoted to the subject of wooden figurines of Jews sold widely across Cracow, it does not fit into the general narrative presented in other chapters. Although Lehrer makes a real effort to connect this subject with other topics analysed in the book (presenting the way in which they are displayed around Kazimierz and visitors’ reactions to them, ranging from delight to disgust), it remains a non-Cracow story. On the more critical note, it is rather surprising for someone who grew up in Galicia to discover that Lehrer seems unaware of the regional custom to keep a small painting of older Jews near the front door as a token bringing prosperity to the household.

This issue can be linked to a much wider problem of a limited scope of the book. Lehrer appears to be very reluctant to leave safe and familiar environment of Kazimierz and venture outside in search of Jewish heritage. Even when she travels to speak with the creator of the very popular wooden figurines of traditional Jews, or when she joins one of the mission tours, she nevertheless returns to where she started and observes everything from a clearly defined, Polish and very static vantage point. Perhaps most striking is the very fact that in her analysis of Kazimierz, Lehrer completely omits the role and position of the district in the life of Cracow itself. After almost a year living in Cracow, I was often surprised by the fact that many local events taking place in Kazimierz were not advertised anywhere outside it. Lehrer seems to be completely unaware of this exclusiveness. Although the first chapter of her book successfully introduces the history and unique
character of Kazimierz, it is written from an insider’s point of view. Because of Cracow’s position as a hub for all foreign visitors to South-Eastern Poland, the book would benefit from putting Jewish tourism and Kazimierz's Jewish heritage in a slightly wider perspective: if not national, then at least local.

Despite certain limitations, "Jewish Poland Revisited" is an important and insightful study, one that will hopefully lead to a wider range of new works devoted to Polish-Jewish relations and heritage in Cracow and beyond. It is also one of the books that I would gladly see translated into Polish sooner rather than later. Lehrer’s presentation of Kazimierz as a living and thriving Jewish space can be compared with Michael Meng’s "Shattered Spaces (See the review here)", where the author concentrates primarily on the subject of material culture and preservation of Jewish spaces.

Zitierweise:

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