

Shattered Spaces. Encountering Jewish Ruins in Postwar Germany and Poland

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In "Shattered Spaces. Encountering Jewish Ruins in Postwar Germany and Poland" Michael Meng looks at two cases of remembering, preserving and reconstructing the Jewish past from 1945 to 2010. In his presentation of a "shifting history of Jewish sites" (p. 10), the author analyses five cities: Essen, Berlin (East and West), Potsdam, Wrocław and Warsaw. While the Polish and German capitals were chosen as the largest Jewish cultural centres before the war, the three other cities "provide different glimpses into the postwar history of Jewish sites" (p. 10). Five chapters of the book present dichotomies and similarities between his case studies breaking with the common assumptions of the good West (preserving Jewish places) and bad East (destroying and erasing them). Though governed by different principles and ideas, Germany and Poland engaged in similar activities towards postwar Jewish ruins creating "a parallel history across a diverse region" (p. xii).

Chapter one ("Confronting the Spoils of Genocide") presents an interesting introduction to the subject of Jewish spaces directly after the war. In the Federal Republic of Germany, discussions between federal governments and the Jewish Restitution Successor Organisation (JRSO) created the core element of succession and restitution issues. Although officially accepted as the legal successor of Jewish communities in 1954, the JRSO faced a number of difficulties ranging from unwilling local leaders to German anti-restitution organisations. As the example of Essen shows, in many cases small Jewish communities had no interest in the restored property. On the other side of the Iron Curtain, anti-Zionist ideology that started to develop in the Soviet Block in the late 1940s made a serious impact on German Democratic Republic's policies. While the leading party SED officially denied any prejudice against Jews, it practically perceived them as "the carriers of bourgeois culture, cosmopolitanism, capitalism, and American imperialism" (p. 44). The situation in Poland was far more complicated. After the wave of anti-Semitism that swept through the country in the years following the war, Polish Jews diverted their attention from the issue of restitution. As a result of the subsequent emigration from Poland, no more than 100,000 remaining Jews "lacked political allies willing to press for their needs" (p. 49).

On the following pages ("Clearing Jewish Rubble") Meng observes that both Berlin (East and West) and Warsaw became stages of a "ruinous dialectic" (p. 63) of urban renewal. With both cities in ruins after the war, urban planners were given a free hand in creating modernist (in the West) or socialist realist (in the East) metropolises. The most visible example was that of Muranów, former Warsaw Jewish district and a place where the Warsaw Ghetto had been created during the war. The new communist government of Poland was strongly devoted to the reconstruction of the city's historic centre (destroyed during the Warsaw Uprising) while it "marginalized the

ghetto space" (p. 74). Soon the area was turned into a large residential district and, despite the initial plans, few signs of its former Jewish character were preserved (among them the 1948 Warsaw Ghetto Memorial). At the same time the reconstruction of divided Berlin was guided by different principles with the Cold War shaping the urban landscapes of both parts of the city. On both sides, however, many Jewish places remained neglected by the officials and even by Jews themselves. It can be explained by several factors, including small numbers of Jews in postwar Germany and the differences between pre- and postwar Jewish communities.

To this point Meng was primarily concerned with the fate of Jewish spaces in the two capitals, but chapter three ("Erasing the Jewish Past") finally gives us more information about three other case studies. In Essen the large synagogue that survived the war was purposefully left outside the town's centre and a small local Jewish community expressed no interest in making any use of it. After the city officially purchased the building, the synagogue was transformed into the House of Industrial Design. In Wrocław, due to its long history of Austrian, Prussian and German rule, the search for city's Polishness dominated all urban reconstruction initiatives. Jewish sites were ignored and neglected in the similar way as in Warsaw. Events were no different in Potsdam, where the local synagogue was not perceived "as a valuable ruin of the past that had to be preserved" (p. 152). Selectiveness of historical preservation of buildings may appear striking (particularly in Wrocław, where "traces of Polishness could be found almost in any building if historic preservationists wanted to restore it", p. 136), but neither Germans, nor Poles considered Jewish ruins as a part of their history, at least not until the 1970s. Despite the individual character of all three case studies, Meng finds a similar disregard of Jewish space.

In "Restoring Jewish Ruins" Meng links the previous examples of Polish and German capitals with the smaller cities, describing the sudden emergence of devotion to restore Jewish ruins in the 1970s and 1980s. Once again the Cold War differences "did not produce a clearly divided pattern" (p. 157). In Poland and East Germany the Jewish Question and the issue of Jewish property became part of a wider problem of post-1968 politics, used by the governments and opposition alike. It was a real paradox that, following the anti-Zionist campaign of 1968 in Poland and the introduction of martial law in 1981, Polish leaders did everything to improve their image among international Jewish circles. It included a series of widely promoted (and criticised by the opposition) celebrations of the anniversaries of the Ghetto Uprising and a quick restoration of the Nożyk Synagogue in the center of Warsaw. Such gestures of good will were, however, limited to the capital while Wrocław's abandoned synagogue was still in ruins by 1989. Driven by similar priorities, East Germany announced the restoration of the Berlin New Synagogue. While the issue of Jewish sites in the East was closely linked with contemporary politics, in West Germany it remained a more local problem that never rose to such national and international prominence. Meng explains these efforts as longing "for a multiethnic past that [Poles and Germans] believed Jewish sites reflected" (p. 209), but there were also wider political and ideological issues at stake in Poland and East Germany.

After confronting, clearing, erasing and restoring, the last chapter analyses the post-1989 reconstruction of Jewish spaces, criticised as something that turned Europe "into a continent of virtual, reconstructed Jewish spaces without any 'real' Jews" (p. 213). However, in the similar fashion as Erica Lehrer's representation of the living Jewish space in Cracow's Kazimierz (See a review [here](#)), Meng agrees that these spaces are imbued "with new meanings and uses" (p. 214). It is, therefore, not a simplistic restoration of pre-Holocaust reality, but a

reconstruction that makes contemporary Poland and Germany more democratic and cosmopolitan places. Meng notes that the concepts of Polish and German nations are becoming modified and today "it is trendy to be Jewish in Berlin" (p. 224), in the similar way as Jewish heritage in Kazimierz keeps attracting non-Jewish Poles. Similarities between Meng's and Lehrer studies go beyond that and I believe that both books can and perhaps should be read together, as two interesting works devoted to local (Lehrer) and more European (Meng) aspects of postwar and contemporary Jewish spaces.



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