

## **Shattered Spaces. Encountering Jewish ruins in postwar Germany and Poland**

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Memory studies often fall into the trap of judgmental narrative about regrettable suppression and successful recollection of the past, especially if it concerns the commemoration of the Holocaust. Michael Meng's book represents an excellent example of challenging such a handicap by approaching the shared Polish-German-Jewish past and present from an angle of urban and cultural history. And much more: it delivers an original and fresh look at cultural phenomena of the post-catastrophic Europe with their own historical dynamics going beyond the Cold War and East-West divisions.

The author offers what he calls, "a shifting analytical gaze" (p.12) at sacred Jewish sites in five war-damaged cities of Berlin, Warsaw, Essen, Potsdam and Wrocław. These well-selected cases uncover seven decades of encounters with Jewish ruins in both Germanys and Poland from 1945 until the present, during which time the neglected rubble transformed into sites of frantic commemoration of the Jewish past. While Meng is precise in dissecting main differences between the two Germanys and Poland, for instance the scale of their involvement in the politics of mass annihilation during World War Two, – he draws his conclusions from commonalities: the experiences with living and dead Jewish neighbors shared by many Germans and Poles. Among these commonalities, prewar normalization of ethnic hatred towards Jews, fear and ambivalence towards the remnants of the Holocaust and later on, initiatives (both in the West and East) to refashion their own identity as cosmopolitan and philosemitic, have been enlisted as the most important.

The transnational perspective leads the author to an argument that in West Germany, the GDR and Poland the reconfiguration of dominant memories and the first attempts to preserve neglected Jewish sites as valuable ruins came about at the same time, in the late 1970s. According to Meng, the shift resulted mainly from the parallel processes of transnationalization of Jewish sites in these countries. In the late seventies and eighties the hitherto dilapidated synagogues and cemeteries became spaces of interaction between international Jewish tourists rediscovering their East Central European roots, local civic movements and party-state officials – with the exception of West Germany – who found themselves more and more vulnerable vis-à-vis international public opinion. The historical simultaneity of this shift across the Iron Curtain represents one of the most

revealing points of the book that confirms, in tune with the recent works by Timothy Snyder and Alexander Prusin[1], the innovative potential of a transnational approach for the historical exploration of Central and Eastern Europe.

"What should be done to all these Jewish ruins?" was a question posed by different postwar interest groups Meng traces on the solid basis of vast archival sources concerning mainly the local conflicts over synagogues and other religious Jewish sites. In Essen, the "Shopping City" of West Germany, the synagogue served as a House of Industrial Design displaying icons of the Wirtschaftswunder such as vacuum-cleaners and kitchen equipment until it became an exhibit space commemorating the "Resistance and Persecution" of the German citizens under the Nazi regime. In East Berlin, the synagogue in the Oranienburger Street stood in a bombed-out shape until the mid-1980s, while in West Berlin, many Jewish ruins were razed to the ground in the zeal of erasing everything that did not fit into urban modernism. In Warsaw, the Jewish district and nearly eighty Jewish religious sites were turned into a desert of rubble during the Nazi occupation. The early postwar idea of building a red-brick housing project within the former ghetto area that would symbolically recall the blood of Holocaust victims was relinquished. Instead, the plans of historical reconstruction of the heroic "martyrs city" crystallized as preservation of the exclusively Polish historical heritage and construction of the future-oriented socialist modernity.

In the chapter on selective historic preservation Meng explains in great detail why German and Polish city officials, urban planners and preservationists "saw no reason to include the Jewish past in their postwar futures" (p. 152). Meng privileges the psychological and cultural factors that would explain this. Surely, the modernist paradigm in architecture and urban planning contributed to a continuous decay (Poland, GDR) or disappearance (West Germany) of urban spaces as landscapes of Jewish ruins. But it was first and foremost the "aversion to encounter the traumas of the past", the author claims, that shaped social and cultural norms of ethnic homogeneity, the urban decision-makers had interiorized and then implemented in urban planning.

The author is at his best when discussing the emergence of "redemptive cosmopolitanism", defined here as a socially and politically constructed desire to embrace the Jewish heritage as part of a democratic and pluralistic nation-state. The new gaze at urban spaces that developed in both Germanys and Poland in the last thirty-five years, refashioned Jewish sites into the forums of multiethnic understanding, civic dialogue and cosmopolitan self-presentation of nation-states. Meng sees redemptive cosmopolitanism as highly problematic, especially in the case of (West) German memory culture.

An author of a photo book about the appropriation and transformation of the material shtetl Jewish culture in the postwar Polish provinces repeated after Ernest Gombrich that "there is no innocent eye"[2]. Meng applies this observation both to the postwar German and Polish politics of space towards the Jewish sites and the recent decades of their commemoration. Nowadays, he claims, it is not so much an encounter with the "really existing" ethnic and cultural difference at stake. Rather the redemptive cosmopolitanism displays German and Polish pretension to appear tolerant and emphatic, while it remains deeply selective and exclusive towards non-Jewish ethnic groups.

Understandably, Meng's book remains selective in its focus on the post-Holocaust cityscapes. By so doing, it downplays some important differences between two Germanys and Poland that could be explored further. One of them is a sheer number and cultural specificity of the prewar Jewry in each country, which had an important impact on the post-1945 life of the allegedly "empty" Jewish ruins. For instance, in the early postwar Poland, hundreds of towns formerly dominated by the Jewish dwellers, were immediately repopulated and reused in myriad ways. The question of whether and how the socially constructed sense of "emptiness" resurfaced or not in former Jewish shtetls, remains open. Another difference is a continuous presence of competing victimhoods and memories that Meng mentions, but leaves aside in his narrative. Close to Michael Rothbergs' concept of multidirectional memory[3], he privileges moments of synergy over a more conventional competition of memories; the latter still firmly embedded in the Polish urban spaces[4].

Still, all the criticism notwithstanding, encountering Jewish ruins with Michael Meng is a uniquely valuable experience of insightful and inspiring research.

Notes:

[1] Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands. Europe between Hitler and Stalin*, New York 2010; Alexander V. Prusin, *Lands Between: Conflict in the East European Borderlands, 1872–1992*, Oxford 2010.

[2] Wojciech Wilczyk, *There's no such thing as an innocent eye*, Łódź 2009 [in Polish and English].

[3] Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional memory. Remembering the Holocaust in the age of decolonization*, Stanford 2009.

[4] See the recent account on competing politics of space in contemporary Warsaw: Elżbieta Janicka, *Festung Warschau. Raport z oblężonego miasta*, Warszawa 2011.

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