

Conference Report

The 2016 conference on Representing Jewish History in European and American Popular Culture, Museums, and Public Spaces took place from May 16-18, in Warsaw, Poland, and was held in English. Co-sponsored by SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities and the German Historical Institute, locations included both sponsoring institutions, as well as POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews. With 48 participants ranging from nine different countries, mostly Poland and Israel, but also including Argentina, Canada, Germany, Ireland, and the United States, a diverse set of themes and topics were presented, with participation ranging from senior scholars to museum curators and organizers to undergraduate students.

Largely, the material presented can be placed into two categories: museum pedagogy and public exhibition space, and representations of Jewish history in popular culture. The former included descriptions and analyses of Jewish history museums, as well as pedagogical programming, at POLIN, the Museum of Tolerance (Los Angeles, CA), the Los Angeles Museum of the Holocaust, the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising daffodil campaign, museums of Wroclaw, the Munich City Museum, and the Jewish Historical Society of Western Canada. Papers investigating representations of Jews in popular culture included mediums such as literature, film, television, theatre, social media, and newspapers.

In an effort to present a comprehensive summary of this conference, I will provide a brief overview of the layout and presentations that occurred over the course of the three-day conference, including some commentary throughout. Larger thematic commentary, however, will be reserved for the end.

For the opening day of the conference, participants convened at POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews to receive a guided tour of the museum. Particular emphasis was given to how material was laid out, as well as how pedagogically the museum presented narratives for different historical periods, often attempting to provide multiple narratives and experiences for a given period. While specific time during the conference was not allotted to continue discussing the POLIN museum, its particular pedagogical layout and impact (although one paper presented discussed the gendering of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising portion of the museum), that collective experience of conference participants laid a groundwork for the duration of the conference.

Conference day two, which took place at SWPS University, opened with a brief statement from Piotr Skurowski, a member of the Scientific Committee of the conference and the dean of the host faculty. Emphasizing the importance of work investigating Jewish history and its representation, Skurowski stated firmly that “there is still so much to be done.” Prior to the commencement of panels, two keynote talks were given. Na’ama Sheffi spoke on “Mephisto in Israel: Art, Politics and Universal Morals,” tracing the chronology of Mephisto’s cultural presence within Israel, from popular novel, to film, to play, and discussing the work’s linkage to Israeli identity and internalized national fears at various historical moments. Jody Myers presented the second keynote talk, on “The Use of Nazi Decrees in Orthodox Jewish Apologetics.” In her paper, Myers discussed the use of a 1933 anti-Semitic decree issued by Hitler regarding “humane” slaughter of animals, which was implemented clearly as an anti-Semitic blockade against traditional Jewish slaughter practices (shekhita). Myers then traced much later usages of this same rhetoric, made by animal rights groups in the early 2000s against “inhumane” slaughter of animals, i.e. kosher slaughter practices, prompting the Orthodox Jewish community to incorporate the Nazi decree to their list of apologetics, circulated amongst their community. Subsequently, the panels for the day’s paper presentations were organized into the following categories: Jewish History in Museums, In the Public Space of Warsaw, Playwriting and

Filmmaking, Ways of Representing Jewish History and Culture, Holocaust and Jewish Culture Education, and Holocaust Memory in Israel. Overlapping with the afternoon panels, a workshop was offered to student scholars on “Documenting Experiences of Grandparents’ Generation.”

The second day’s events were most representative of the internationality of the conference, featuring topics regarding Jewish historical representation in Argentina, Ireland, Israel, Poland, Canada, Germany, and the United States. The day’s offerings, in sum, presented a nice balance between examining museums and public space, sociocultural representations, and pedagogy.

The final day of the conference, which took place at the German Historical Institute, featured a keynote talk by Sara Bender entitled “Jews through Polish eyes – The Image of Jews as reflected in the Diaries written in Hiding by Leib Rochman and Haim Einhorn, 1942-1944.” The paper sessions for that day were as follows: Between Shtetl-World and American Culture, From Polish National and Local Discourse, Film and TV, and The Holocaust and Its Legacy in Popular Culture. Day three ended with a film created by three Israeli students from Sapir College, entitled “Safeguarding of Private Memories.”

The day’s first event, the keynote paper by Sara Bender, proved to be one of the most provocative and discussion-provoking events of the entire conference. Bender’s paper featured excerpts from diaries of Holocaust survivors who were hidden during the war by rural Poles in the Polish countryside. Unlike other Poles who helped save Jews during the war, however, the names of these protectors were not given to Yad Vashem (The World Holocaust Remembrance Center), and so Bender’s paper took the position of arguing for why this would be the case: in her words, though some Poles protected Jewish lives during the war, they were the extreme anomaly; the overall negative Polish perception of Jews, presented through the survivor’s diaries, is made plain through active Polish participation in wartime Jewish destruction. This paper prompted passionate responses from numerous conference attendees, many of whom felt the broad statements made about Poles during wartime were not warranted by the limited evidence found in diaries and primary source texts being utilized. What this paper does show, however, is the persisting difficulty in addressing, deconstructing, and analyzing wartime actions of Poles, given the type of primary source materials that remain.

Some of the most compelling work during the conference came from scholars working in and looking at Polish efforts to engage and reconcile with Jewish history, particularly in a Polish context, as well as through Jewish-Polish hybrid projects. Papers about this work included Katarzyna Łaziuk’s, “Preserving the Memory of Polish Jews – Practical Ideas” about her own pedagogical work with school students in Poland, and Jacek Konik’s paper, “Jewish history and culture: program for in-service teacher training in Poland,” about his work with the Warsaw Family Alliance organization. Furthermore, several papers offered preliminary glimpses into new initiatives for Polish-Jewish cooperation and co-creation. This included Agnieszka Pindera’s paper about the POLIN Museum’s artistic residency program for bringing in artists working in Jewish subjects to the Warsaw area (“Artistic Residencies at the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews – a case study for a historical museum becoming a centre for creative work”). Additionally, Sabine Stach’s paper, “Tracing Korczak and Karski. . . Narrating Jewish History in Commercial Guided Tours – Warsaw as a Case Study,” about free tours of Warsaw, offered an intriguing look into the more touristic history-related endeavors being pursued by itinerant Polish tour companies throughout Poland.

Additionally, the collective group of international participants offering papers about specific Jewish historical and cultural topics in their home and adoptive countries – including Ireland, Argentina, Austria, the United States, Israel and others – offered a dynamic and multifaceted worldwide snapshot of contemporary scholarly interest in this subject area. While topics focused mostly on Poland and Israel, representation from other countries beautifully offered a sampling of more diverse, and lesser known, topics. This can be said for Natalie Wynn’s paper offering a reassessment of Irish Jewish placement into larger European Jewish history, as well as Perla Sneh’s paper discussing the embodied Jewishness of *pilotes* (cement blockades) in Argentina following the Israeli embassy bombing in 1994.

Taken altogether, the conference offered a far-reaching examination of Jewish cultural representation as seen through American and European cultural lenses, as the conference’s title would suggest. However, certain areas that were emphasized also proved fruitful fodder for evaluation of the current state of Jewish history and cultural representation pedagogy. Specifically, presentations pertaining purely to the Holocaust and Holocaust pedagogy felt somewhat out of place at a conference seeking to investigate Jewish cultural representation as a whole. Though Jewish studies and Holocaust studies in academia are becoming increasingly separate, when mixed together, there is a palpable risk of shortchanging the work being presented in both very distinct fields. Jewish studies cannot be reduced to Holocaust studies, and Holocaust studies is, of course, far more narrowly focused than Jewish Studies broadly, therefore any attempt to conflate the two areas seems inappropriate and increasingly out-of-date. That being said, thoughtful crossover work that bridges Holocaust pedagogy with contemporary actions or larger cultural trends - such as Tanja Schut’s preliminary research on the Warsaw-based Daffodil campaign to commemorate the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, and of course, the movement itself – can create a space for on-going dialogue that might resist disciplinary boundaries. That said, focusing specifically on the Holocaust as historical period of study seems to risk falling short of the overall conference goal of probing representations of Jewish History more broadly. While, the conference description and Call for Papers declared that the Holocaust “continues to be the key historical event drawing attention of scholars, artists, and politicians,” the conference itself brought to the fore the fact that, while the Holocaust might be a lens through which material is viewed, it is not the only part of Jewish history worth discussing, nor is it the only aspect of Jewish history that is being represented contemporarily in popular culture and public space.

In summation, this important compilation of topics within the overall theme of Jewish history and popular representation offers simultaneously a survey of current pedagogical leanings and the burgeoning and strengthening of thematic currents within Jewish studies broadly. Furthermore, the extent of new and on-going projects presented suggests a promising and exciting level of dynamic work being undertaken in the disciplinary field at large, in an abundance of international settings. This 2016 Representing Jewish History in European and American Popular Culture, Museums, and Public Spaces conference can be taken as a representative benchmark for the state of current affairs in this field, and a touchstone for productive new directions.

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