

Introduction

The articles in this special issue of *Studia Judaica* are all based on papers written for the conference “Czech-Jewish and Polish-Jewish Studies: (Dis) Similarities,” held in Prague in October 2014. This event was the result of a conversation Marcin Wodziński and I had about the glaring separation of the historiography on Polish Jews and on Jews of the Bohemian Lands. Not only has there been no close cooperation between scholars and academic institutions, but the interpretations of the region’s Jewish history have also often neglected the interconnectedness of Jewish history across Europe, particularly east-central Europe. As we mentioned in the call for papers, Polish-Jewish and Bohemian/Czech-Jewish histories are often seen as following two different lines of narrative. On the one hand, historians of Bohemian and Moravian Jews tend to focus on the impact of Austrian-Jewish and German-Jewish history and tend to see Bohemian and Moravian Jews as part of west European, or at least central European, Jewry. On the other hand, historians generally associate Polish Jews with the east European Jewish experience. Both of those popular images of Czech-Jewish and Polish-Jewish history are gross oversimplifications, which obscure many shared aspects of Jewish history in these regions.

The five conference panels looked at key topics of Jewish historiography in both regions, which were carefully chosen to cover as much of the chronology and as many of the aspects of the Jewish experience as possible, and also to compare research on these topics in both of the historiographies. The panels were focused on the Jewish experience in early modern societies, Jewish demography and migration, questions of gender and family, new approaches to concepts of modernization and identity, and Jewish experience in postwar societies. Each panel comprised four papers: two overviews of the historiographies on the Jews in each region and two case studies.¹

¹ For more information about the conference, please see <http://www.jewishhistory.usd.cas.cz>. The conference was a joint project of the Institute for Contemporary History at the

Despite the *longue durée* perspective from the early modern period up to present times, and despite the broad regional scope covering Poland, Lithuania, and the Bohemian Lands, the papers had a common denominator: most of the scholars were questioning norms, master narratives, and established interpretations. This common denominator is also clear in the articles in this special issue of *Studia Judaica*. Despite the different time periods and regions, several questions of methods and terms appear in most of them. Rather than refer to those discussions in detail, since the reader will readily find them in the individual articles, I wish to point out here the unique interconnectedness amongst the contributions.

Defining Modernity

The dominant topic of this issue is that of modernity. In her overview article Rachel L. Greenblatt focuses on historiography on the Jews of the Bohemian Lands in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. She refers to this period as “early modern” in reference to a key work by David B. Ruderman, for whom this period is distinct as a result of internal changes in Jewish society, such as mobility, the crisis of rabbinical authority, and the simultaneous growth of oligarchic lay leadership, the “knowledge explosion,” and “mingled identities.” Fully acknowledging the criticism of Ruderman’s work as being overly focused on the Jews of Italy and western Europe, Greenblatt pleads for a more synthetic approach to scholarship about the Jews of the Bohemian Lands which would address those general European-Jewish developments. This would help not only to trace the specifics of local Jewish history, but also to contextualize the local history within the more general European Jewish framework.

Marcin Wodziński scrutinizes the concept of modernity, especially in the context of Polish historiography and the nineteenth century. His article offers an insightful analysis of the different definitions and different uses of concepts of modernity in the historiography of the last thirty years. An important aspect of his categorization of the use of modernity as a tool is the distinction between process-oriented and project-oriented approaches to modernity. One of his conclusions is surprising: the criticism of the progressivist, occidental, and colonial approach in older

modernity definitions led to a situation where the “anti-modernist modernity” of Hasidism has become central in descriptions of Jewish modernity in nineteenth-century Poland.

Ines Koeltzsch approaches the discussions on modernity from a slightly different angle. She emphasizes the shift in the historiography from concepts of modernity, which contrasted modernity with the old, allegedly outdated, traditions and values, to recent studies, which emphasize the parallelism and simultaneity of the old and new traditions and customs. As an example, she mentions Martina Niedhammer’s analysis of the everyday experience of six upper-middle-class Prague Jewish families where old and new strategies of *shtadlanut* are analyzed and where the privileges of nobility go hand in hand with traditional religious customs. This leads Koeltzsch to emphasize the plurality of modernity projects, a view that we find also in Wodziński’s article.

This plurality of approaches to modern projects, which has much in common with Gershon Hundert’s assumption that modernity should describe a period rather than being a value-laden project, is closely connected with questions of acculturation, integration, and assimilation. As I seek to explain in my article, the concept of linear integration and assimilation was already heavily criticized in connection with writing on Jewish history from the nineteenth century to the interwar period. Interestingly, this term and the concept it denotes is still overrepresented in the historiography on the Jews of postwar Poland and Czechoslovakia, and it is often argued that assimilation somehow belongs to modernity or is even its precondition. One of the consequences of those theories has been the marginalization of religious Jews and their role in the postwar Jewish communities.

Flexible and Plural Identities

Not surprisingly, all the authors of the articles in this issue argue for flexibility and plurality in thinking about Jewish personal and group identities. With Ruderman’s definition of the early modern period in mind (especially the *conversos* on the Iberian Peninsula), the term “mingled identities” could describe one of the key features of the last five centuries of Jewish history, though one could also reasonably ask whether the situation before then was really so different. Were the earlier borders between the Jews, Christians, and Muslims so clear? Not only was Jewish

society never unified and homogeneous (as we know from the unique volume *Cultures of the Jews* edited by David Biale), but also the interconnectedness of the social spheres of Jews and non-Jews was always complex and situational.

This leads us to another common denominator in this issue: the call for contextualization of Jews' everyday experience with non-Jews. Greenblatt points to David Frick's excellent analysis of residential patterns in seventeenth-century Wilno, and she emphasizes the need for trans-religious social and historical research. Niedhammer also hopes for more work that would analyze the differences in the Jewish and the non-Jewish *Lebenswelten*, and in her article she makes several suggestions towards this aim, based on the different legal positions and experiences of Jewish and non-Jewish women.

Tsippi Kauffman, like Ines Koeltzsch, reminds us that all identity matters are constructed. She aims to demonstrate that point with her thought-provoking analysis of the role and position of Temerl Sonnenberg-Bergson, a person who did not fit into the established categories of male and female, and was thus not only perceived as a hermaphrodite, but also managed to question the otherwise strictly male definition of what a Hasid was.

Migration and Periphery

Migration studies have played a unique role in questioning the national master narrative, because they challenge the core idea of the allegedly stable, continuous settlement of a dominant nation (whatever one understands under this term). Historians now admit, much more often than before, that migration (or lack of it) influenced the history of the Jews of a region, but they still resist fully acknowledging the scope of migration and its tremendous impact on Jewish and non-Jewish history.

One of the results of this situation is the marginalization of the geographical periphery. For several reasons migration affected border regions in particular, especially because of frequent redrawing of borders. In many cases the religious traditions, social stratification, and linguistic knowledge of Jewish migrants were different from those of the Jews in the center. This is why they often preferred to stay on the geographic periphery where they could more easily establish their own religious and social networks. It is also why, as I argue for the situation in postwar Poland

and Czechoslovakia, research on the Jews of the periphery is especially important: it often challenges the established image of local Jewish history based on the experience of Jews in the center. As Niedhammer persuasively argues, scholars' neglect of Jewish communities on the periphery is understandable partly because of the linguistic challenge, since those Jews often spoke languages other than those spoken in the capitals, and partly because it is more difficult to find material about them. Greenblatt, Niedhammer, and Koeltzsch, who look here at the historiography on Bohemian Jews, are all concerned with the lack of research on Jews, not only in the border regions, but also in the countryside, that is, basically all Jews outside Prague. Here again, the historiography on Jews in the Bohemian Lands is falling behind the research on Jews in the Polish lands.

Apart from pointing out its artificiality, the distinction between the allegedly east European Jewish society in the Polish lands and the allegedly west (or at least central) European Jewish society in the Bohemian Lands was not made in the discussions at the Prague conference. As the conference papers and the articles in this issue seek to demonstrate, a much more productive basis of dialogue between scholars of Bohemian and Polish Jewish history lies in discussing key terms and concepts of European Jewish history, which helps us to identify both the many shared and the many distinct aspects of Jewish experience in the different parts of east-central Europe.

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