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(eds.)

Jews and Non-Jews: Memories
and Interactions from the
Perspective of Cultural Studies

**Warsaw Studies in Jewish History
and Memory**

Introduction

It goes without saying that the perceptions of Jews, their culture and religion have played an important role in developing norms and standards of social life in Western nations. Since ancient times, the experience of Jewry has been marked by what in Hebrew is called *galut*, “exile”, the deliberate choice or, more often, repeated necessity to function as a community outside its home in the Land of Israel. The Jews gradually evolved to create a form of communal existence in the Diaspora – the nation without its own state managed to preserve its language, customs and ethnic identity within foreign, sometimes unfavorable or even hostile, contexts. Refusing to perceive their homelessness and displacement as a curse, the diasporic Jews adopted a strategy of controlled assimilation into the cultures that they chose or were forced to live in, without renouncing their ethnic separateness. The gift to reconcile the need of *fitting in* and *remaining outside* has become an almost stereotypical characteristic of Jews ever since. Throughout centuries the attitude to the “Jew” – simultaneously one of *us* and one of *them* – has become an index of tolerance in Western societies.

Within autonomous states, Jewish communities would often organize their own administrative units (e.g. *kehillahs* in Central and Eastern Europe), and they often resided together in parts of towns or cities. Despite their relative (because restricted) autonomy as well as their manifested difference, Jews were still part of local societies and, by their presence, would make significant contributions to local and national host cultures. However, otherness – intriguing as it is – provokes mistrust, aversion and, often, open hostility. The history of publicly (and religiously) sanctioned purgative attacks and spontaneous violent riots aimed at massacre or persecution of Jewish minorities spans almost two thousand years, and roughly overlaps with the history of the Diaspora.

Our ambition in the present book is to add new studies of memories and interactions between Jews and non-Jews to the already broad field of historical and cultural research. By gathering in one volume the results of work by scholars from several countries (Poland, the United States, Israel, Austria and Ireland) we also wish to demonstrate that Jewish Studies is a field of research both for Jewish and non-Jewish scholars (European ones, in particular). As Jeffrey Shandler¹,

1 Interview with Jeffrey Shandler by Roberta Newman. “Key Word ‘Shtetl’: Interview with Jeffrey Shandler”. Posted 14 Feb. 2014. Web. 14 Mar. 2014.

speaking of the growth of scholarship by non-Jews in Eastern Europe, observes: “When you look at what Jewish Studies looks like in Europe, the involvement of people who aren’t Jews plays a much larger role than it does in North America, where it’s not *only* Jews, of course, but the majority of Jewish Studies scholars *are* Jews. In Europe, it doesn’t play out that way.” Most of the contributors to this volume are non-Jewish who consider Jewish culture part of their heritage.

As the topics of the articles cover various disciplines (history, sociology, psychology, literary and language studies), the volume offers a true plurality of voices as well as interdisciplinary perspectives to bring some new light to the issues under consideration. The contributors, representing different national and academic backgrounds, go beyond historical, political, geographical divides to offer reflections that finally bring together apparently quite disparate problems, and thus contribute to contemporary criticism and research in the field of Jewish Studies. In terms of its formal structure, the volume is organized thematically, though not divided in separate parts. This has been done on the assumption that the collection constitutes a monograph, the uniformity of which is underpinned by its subject matter, i.e. the complex and historically conditioned relations between Jews and other ethnic groups or nations.

The diversity of places under discussion in this book aptly reflects the range of Jewish quests for a safe place to live – from Kiev and Vienna to Ireland to Springfield, Missouri and Sosúa in the Dominican Republic. While *Victoria Khliterer* writes about “Kiev Jews in the Early Twentieth Century: National Identity and Culture”, *Klaus Hödl* presents Vienna Jews in the same period, focusing on “Viennese Culture in 1900: Bridging the Divide”. *Natalie Wynn* discusses the relationship of Jews with Irish culture and politics in the article “Ireland’s Jewish Identity Crisis”. *Mara W. Cohen Ioannides*, in her text “The Community Memory of Springfield, Missouri Suppresses the City’s Jewish Past,” draws our attention not only to how Jews settled down in Springfield, but also to how their presence is described in collective memory. *Anna Maria Karczewska*’s article “Jew-minicanos and the Sosúa Settlement” takes the reader to a relatively little-known episode in pre-Holocaust rescue of European Jews who were invited to the Dominican Republic in 1940, and thus were able to escape the tragic plight of their European compatriots (though, eventually, they failed to establish a permanent Jewish-Dominican settlement).

The character of mutual relations between Jews and non-Jews can be found in literary texts, coming from both sides. Hence we include a selection of research papers conducted upon literary evidence of Jewish – non-Jewish interactions in literatures as diverse as Polish and South American. *Hanna Komorowska* critically examines some excerpts from Polish literature, focusing

on language peculiarities and misunderstandings that manifest themselves in everyday conversations (“Stereotyping through Silence and Speech. Cross-Cultural Differences in Conversational Styles of Poles and Jews as Presented in Polish Literature”). *Annette Aronowicz* analyses the attitude of the Polish poet, Nobel Prize winner, Czesław Miłosz towards Jews, whom he remembered well from his Wilno (Vilna/Vilnius) days and whom he appreciated for their outstanding contribution to Polish literature (“No Longer Other? Jews in Czesław Miłosz’s Landscape”). The article by *Magdalena Szkwarek*, in turn, takes us across the ocean to South America to show how classic Latin American authors incorporated Jewish themes in their fiction (“Manifestation of Jewishness in Literature of Latin America”). North American Jewish literature is represented in *Dorota Mihułka’s* study of the novels by Allegra Goodman and Pearl Abraham (“Temptations of Non-Jewish Lifestyle in Allegra Goodman’s and Pearl Abraham’s Novels”). In these novels we observe the interactions between traditional Jewish communities and the surrounding non-Jewish American world. *Jacek Partyka* reconsiders the problems of race and religion in one of the first but still controversial Holocaust novels in American literature (“‘False Veins Under the Skin’: Does Edward Lewis Wallant’s *The Pawnbroker* Fail as Holocaust Fiction?”).

In Europe of the 1940s, the Shoah brought the unprecedented annihilation of Jewish population and of their material culture. *Maria Ferenc Piotrowska* reads diary excerpts and memoirs found in the Warsaw ghetto in the article “The Feelings of Survivors of the First Deportations from the Warsaw Ghetto”. Next, *Ewelina Feldman-Kołodziejuk* analyses a 21st century poem by a second-generation artist to demonstrate how the survivor family trauma may turn into a permanent state (“The Mother-Daughter Dyad in Bożena Keff’s *On Mother and the Fatherland*”). The painful process of discovering one’s Jewish identity in post-war Poland is analyzed by *Justyna Sierakowska*. Her “A Quest for Jewish Identity in Contemporary Poland: Agata Tuszyńska’s Family History” examines the history of a well-known Polish journalist who, as an adult, discovers both the Jewishness of her mother and her Polish father’s attitude that verges on anti-Semitism. The book by Tuszyńska – and its reading by Sierakowska – is not only an insight into a personal identity quest but yet another footnote to difficult Polish-Jewish relations in the twentieth century.

There is no doubt whatsoever that literature plays a fundamental role in shaping the mind-sets of whole nations. In her text, *Naama Sheffi* shows that it can also have a political and conciliatory role. “Normalization through Literature: Translations from German into Hebrew during the 1970s” is an apt illustration of how literary translation projects may be beneficial in reviving mutual relations

between Germany and Israel, despite the still painful remembrance of the tragedy caused by Germans during the Holocaust.

The situation in Polish towns that used to be *shtetls* reflects the relations between Jews and their gentile neighbors in their historical and contemporary dimension. This can be observed in the state of Jewish cemeteries in Poland today: the people who buried their dead there are long gone, and the burial sites seem out-of-place in the greatly changed landscape of post-war Poland. In his article “The Sacralization and Secularization of the Jewish Cemeteries in Poland”, *Yechiel Weizman* considers dichotomous attitudes of contemporary Poles towards the material remnants of the pre-Holocaust neighborhood, which, in turn, is reflective of collective memory and present-day awareness of the problem. The significance of the sites which Weizman discusses constitutes part of the public debate between Jews and Poles on their common heritage in Poland.

Understanding the richness and complexity of the subject matter, we remain hopeful that the insight into diverse manifestations of the relations between Jews and non-Jews presented in our volume will become a modest yet important contribution both to Jewish Studies and to the studies of cultural memory.

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