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Entangled heritage. *Wrocław's German-Jewish and Polish-Jewish history exhibitions, 1920–2010*

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Wrocław has a very rich multicultural history including that of a vibrant and large German-Jewish community until its destruction by the Holocaust (Shoah) and the Second World War. After the end of the war almost the entire population of the former German city was replaced and Wrocław became a part of Poland.[1] Shortly after 1945, the immigration of Polish Jews brought the number in the Lower Silesian capital to almost ten percent of the total population. It was one of the largest Jewish communities in all the Polish regions (see Ziątkowski, 2000; Lenarcik, 2010; Friedla, 2014). Because of hostility from the government and some parts of society, however, this new community left the country in subsequent decades. In most of the old and new territories of the People's Republic of Poland the Jewish heritage was abandoned, declined or forgotten. But a shift took place in the early 1980s. The point of origin was Kraków (Cracow) were Polish-Jewish history was made visible in the reopened exhibitions of the Old Synagogue of Kazimierz (1980) and during the annual Jewish Culture Festival, since 1988 (see Passowicz and Szczygieł, 2005: 9–11; Murzyn-Kupisz, 2009: 372–375). For the first time in many years the Jewish heritage of Poland was presented publicly again. This was the first sign of a new approach to the Jewish heritage by Polish intellectuals and the authorities. Focusing on the situation in Wrocław, which, like Kraków, is a major Polish city, the rediscovery of its Jewish past gets even more complex.[2] As a result of an almost complete change of inhabitants after Second World War the local Jewish heritage inevitably constituted a part of the rejected "foreign" German traces in the city. Revealing the Jewish history of Wrocław meant the discovery of the city's German past – a very influential chapter of the city's development that the communist authorities tried to deny as far as possible (see Thum, 2011: 171–379). But in the 1980s this harsh political attitude towards the Jewish and German past lost its sharpness, when the Old Jewish Cemetery of Wrocław was rescued shortly before its final demolition. A restoration and research project gave insight into the environment and biographies of Wrocław's pre-war Jewish community. A series of history exhibitions during the 1980s and 1990s made this rediscovered chapter publicly visible and reconnected it to the manifestations of Wrocław's bygone Jewish Museum of the 1920s and 1930s. A look at the evolution of the city's Jewish history exhibitions in the 20th century shows astonishing continuities in a place that was shaped by radical changes. This article examines how the museums of German Breslau and Polish Wrocław have dealt with the city's Jewish past over the last century.

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1 As in most cities and villages of the new Western and Northern territories that Poland gained after World War II, almost the entire German population of Wrocław had to leave their hometown. In the 1930s Wrocław had a population of roughly 630,000; less than 2% were Polish. Between 1945 and 1947, more than 200,000 German inhabitants were resettled to the Allied occupation zones in Germany. By 1949, around 250,000 Poles from central Poland and the former Polish eastern provinces had moved into Wrocław. In 1980 the city counted more than 600,000 inhabitants again (see Maciejewska, 2002: 87 and 139).

2 This article is based on a major chapter of my PhD thesis *Breslau/Wrocław Exhibited. German and Polish History Exhibitions 1900–2010*. It will be published in German, a translation into Polish is planned.

The redefinition of German-Jewish heritage in pre-war exhibitions

At the beginning of the 20th century Wrocław (Breslau in German) had the third largest Jewish community in Germany. It was based on an internal cultural division of an acculturated population influenced by the *Haskalah* and a smaller group of so called "eastern Jews".[3] The Jewish middle class, in particular, played a crucial role in local associations and educational and political institutions.[4] With the growing anti-Semitism following the economic crisis after the First World War the situation of the city's middle class became fragile. The feeling of belonging and security eroded. Jewish citizens found themselves confronted with anti-Semitic discrimination and violence (see Rahden, 2000: 317).

Their exclusion had consequences for the definition of Jewish identity. Since the late 19th century Jewish historiography and collections of *Judaica* (Jewish ritual and cultural items) had won significance in a modern Jewish identity discourse. After the opening of the Jewish Museum in Vienna in 1895 a growing number of collections were opened to the public. In his 1929 study, the Polish-Jewish historian Majer Bałaban (1877–1942) highlighted *Judaica* collections in Paris, London, Vienna, Berlin, Frankfurt/Main and Prague. A second wave started in the late 1920s, when increasingly independent Jewish museums were established (see Bałaban, 1929: 20). In 1928 the Synagogue Community of Breslau founded a "Jewish Museum Society". Presumably because of the new political atmosphere the Jewish cultural elite recognized that there was a need for an inbound movement of affirmative Jewish identity and outward bound public relations by collecting and exhibiting Jewish achievements in arts and culture as an integral part of the Christian-Jewish regional history. In order to reach a broad public a first temporary exhibition was planned in one of the city's major museums. The director of the Castle Museum (now called *Pałac Królewski*), Erwin Hintze (1876–1931), and the chairman of the Jewish Museum Society, Max Silberberg (1878–1942), organized the most significant temporary exhibition of Jewish culture and history in the Weimar Republic. The exhibition *Jewry in the History of Silesia, 1050–1850* was presented in Breslau's Silesian Museum for Artistic Crafts and Antiquities in the spring of 1929 (see Hintze, 1929; Deneke, 1989: 78–88; Hoppe, 2002: 269–281; Rauschenberger, 2002: 190–204; Stolarska-Fronia, 2008: 277–293; Stolarska-Fronia, 2009: 141–156; Ascher Barnstone, 2013: 459–478). About 13,000 visitors saw the exhibition, with collections from Breslau, Berlin and Vienna. The annual report of the Museum Society claims that those visitors were not only of Jewish background but were a mixed audience, typical of a public museum (see 1. Jahresbericht, 1929: 7).

More than 500 exhibits from the fields of cultural history and artistic crafts were put on display. The objects ranged from gravestones, pictures

3 In 1871 the census estimated a Jewish population of up to 6.7 percent; in 1925 it estimated it to be 4.2 percent of the total population (see Lenarcik, 2010: 34).

4 The Jewish middle class belonged to every part of the mainly Protestant and Catholic civic society and confidently manifested its interests in various associations. The high level of social integration with the non-Jewish society is described very well by Till van Rahden in his book *Jews and other Germans* (see Rahden, 2000: 19 and 326).

and documents on people and events to showcases with various ceremonial objects. A large private loan came from Max Pinkus (1857–1934), a renowned collector of *Judaica* and *Silesica* objects.[5] The central point of the exhibition was a reerected *Bimah* (a podium for Torah reading) from the former Synagogue of Zülz in Upper Silesia (now Biała Prudnicka). The synagogue was closed in 1914 because the community had disappeared. References to Jewish history in Silesia were contained in historic documents relating to Jewish real estate from the Middle Ages and one pertaining to the Prussian Equality Act from the early 19th century. Several maps served to explain the development of Jewish settlements in Silesia. A portrait of Duke Henry IV of Silesia (*Henryk* IV *Probus*), 13th century, recalled his protection of the Jews against anti-Semitic attacks and a memorial cross for the Franciscan Johann Capistrano pointed to the public burning of Jews on Solny Square in 1493.

After the exhibition was closed the society put its collection on display in the rooms of the Castle Museum, although it was not a part of the official tour. The society continued to administer the collection while the public museum[6] was responsible for its maintenance. The society conducted scientific research and was in contact with other Jewish museums. Together with the Jewish Museum in Berlin the society from Breslau supported the historian Majer Bałaban in founding a Jewish Museum in the Polish city of Lviv (Lwów), which opened in 1934 (see Bałaban, 1929; Goldstein and Dresdner, 1935; Kohlbauer-Fritz, 1994/95: 142; Hoppe, 2002: 275).

For reasons that were undoubtedly political the collection was removed from the Castle Museum in November 1933 and transferred by the Jewish Museum Society to rooms in the Jewish Orphanage at today's Grabiszyńska Street 61–65, where it was presented as a Jewish Museum for five years. As the historian Abraham Ascher mentioned in his book *A Community under Siege. The Jews of Breslau under Nazism* (2007), the Jewish Museum comprised several rooms and in October and November 1934 showed the first-ever exhibition in Germany of works by exclusively Jewish artists. This temporary exhibition consisted of over a hundred works by more than thirty-six artists and had a large number of visitors (see Ascher, 2007: 92; Stolarska-Fronia, 2008: 288–289; Stolarska-Fronia: 2009, 151–154). The museum served as an internal Jewish refuge after Jewish inhabitants were banned from the public institutions. It was closed down in November 1938. There is no clear evidence as to what happened to the museum's objects after the *Gestapo* confiscated most of them in 1939 (The confiscation was mentioned by Arkwright, 2011: 39). The historian and member of the Museum Society Willy Cohn (1888–1941) wrote in his diary in 1940 that "these exhibits, so far as they have not been confiscated, are now dispersed throughout the world" (Cohn, 1995: 511; see Hoppe, 2002: 269–281). Nothing from the Jewish collections has been transmitted to the museums of Polish Wrocław, but a few objects can be found in the collection of the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw, like a *Parocheth* (a Torah curtain) from Langendorf in Upper Silesia (now Wielowieś).[7]

5 Lists of objects lent by Max Pinkus from Neustadt (Upper Silesia, today Prudnik) are preserved in the National Museum of Wrocław. See *Muzeum Narodowe we Wrocławiu: Schlesisches Museum für Kunstgewerbe und Altertümer*, I/380: 79–85.

6 For documents about the cooperation between the Jewish Museum Society and the museum of the city see *Muzeum Narodowe we Wrocławiu: Schlesisches Museum für Kunstgewerbe und Altertümer,* I/380: 145–152.

7 The *Parocheth* is described in the catalogue of 1929 under number 148 (see Hintze, 1929: 39).

Rediscovering Jewish heritage in the late People's Republic

Until the 1980s, German-Jewish and even Polish-Jewish history was neglected by Wrocław's museums during the decades of the People's Republic. Despite a few art exhibitions the large Polish-Jewish community had no chance to manifest its heritage in the city's public sphere. In 1948 a large propaganda show was supposed to demonstrate the Polish traditions and achievements of the region, but a Jewish exhibition hall at this *Exhibition of the Recovered Territories* was cancelled for political reasons just a few days before the opening (see Szaynok, 1996: 20–22; Tyszkiewicz, 1997: 112–117). The political paradigm of a homogenous nation state banned presentations of Jewish history for decades. But in the 1980s a limited amount of free historical interpretation became possible. The most striking example was the temporary exhibition *The Jews of Wrocław 1850–1945* which opened in the final year of the People's Republic, in March 1989, at the Museum of Architecture. During the brief period it was on show this informative exhibition had a few thousand visitors. The curator, Maciej Łagiewski, the subsequent director of the Wrocław City Museum, dedicated the show to the Jews of Breslau, "of whom there are still tangible traces in the city, at least in the form of family graves" (Łagiewski, 1994: 6) in the Old Jewish Cemetery in Wrocław at Ślężna Street. The show was based on a conservation research project on one of Wrocław's two Jewish cemeteries. While most German-Christian cemeteries had been erased by the 1970s, the attempts to liquidate this German-Jewish cemetery were prevented out of respect for the grave of Ferdinand Lassalle (1825–1864), the founder of the first German Labour Party in 1863, because his legacy was significant for the Socialist International (see Januszewski, 1959/60: 195–205). Reconstruction works on the devastated Old Jewish Cemetery started as early as 1983. Initial results were already presented to the public by the Museum of Architecture in 1984 (see Łagiewski, 1984). The graveyard with its Jewish traces was the first aspect of the city's recent pre-war history to come to public attention again. The Old Cemetery opened as a branch of the museum in 1988 (see Łagiewski, 2004: 5–8). What is significant is that this voluntary process already started in the last years of the People's Republic, although it was in stark contrast to the communists' official master narrative of the "recovered territories as an area that had always been Polish" (Meng, 2011: 133). Presumably as a consequence of political tensions, the government allowed limited space for more independent approaches to history in the 1980s. But only with the political transformation of 1989 did various temporary exhibitions show a different picture of local history and culture in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Significantly, Jewish history became the first chapter of the city's pre-war German history shown without reservation in a city exhibition.

Because no collection of Jewish objects survived the war, Łagiewski's exhibition of 1989 mainly showed archival and contemporary photos of Breslau's Jewish past, with explicit reference to the 1929 exhibition and its objects. He continued the history from the final point of the pre-war exhibition, the year 1850, to the last deportations of Breslau's Jews in 1944/45. It was an intentional act of continuity never seen before in the city's popular culture. Half a century after the destruction caused by the Holocaust, war and border changes, a forgotten chapter was brought back to the public. The poster exhibition about the Jews of Wrocław received broad attention in the

media. It traveled through ten German cities before it was put on display again in 1994 in the Historic Armoury (*Arsenał*) of Wrocław.[8]

Connecting the history of two communities

In 1991 the Historical Museum took over the Jewish Cemetery as a branch of the Architecture Museum. While most Jewish Cemeteries in Poland were given back to today's communities, the Old Jewish Cemetery of Wrocław remained part of the museum (see Jagielski, 1995: 229–232; Tyszka, 2015: 47–48). The Historical Museum has played a key role in presenting the biographies of influential Jewish citizens of Breslau, along with others, in the permanent exhibition of busts of famous "Wrocławians" in the Old City Hall (since 1997). The busts include scientists and Nobel Prize winners like Fritz Haber (1868–1934) and Max Born (1882–1970) as well as the founder of the German Workers Party in 1863, Ferdinand Lassalle (1825–1864) and the Polish-Jewish scientist Ludwik Hirszfeld (1884–1954) (see Łagiewski, 2003). The presentation of post-war Jewish life in Wrocław took place in smaller temporary exhibitions on the history of *Jews in Lower Silesia 1945–1948*[9] and the Jewish Theatre that existed in Wrocław from 1946 until the anti-Jewish campaign of 1968. Once more in the final months of the People's Republic and only 20 years after the sudden end of the theatre a colourful exhibition in the Old City Hall celebrated the Jewish stage. Large format photographs of stage scenes were accompanied by information boards on the history of the Jewish theatre, its performance program, stage settings and actors. [10] This early exhibition was renewed in 2008 on a bigger scale.[11] After the political transformation the extraordinary projects of the late 1980s laid the ground for an intense dialogue with history. In the 1990s German-Jewish and Polish-Jewish heritage became part of the public discourse about Wrocław's past.

A first permanent exhibition on *1000 years of Wrocław* opened 2009 in the Royal Palace, a branch of the City Museum. It has constituted a major step forward in the visualization of a multicultural picture of the city's heritage. The building constitutes a remaining wing of the Palace of the Prussian kings; it housed the Castle Museum from 1926 to 1945 and after the war an Ethnographic and Archaeological museum until 1999/2004. With nearly 3,000 objects in 25 rooms this large exhibition tells Wrocław's history from the Middle Ages to the present (see Łagiewski and Okólska, 2009: 9–17).

Early Jewish history is represented in the second room *Under the rule of the Piasts* with the "oldest Jewish gravestone in Poland" from 1203 and a note that in 1453, after a public burning of Jews on Solny Square, all Jews were expelled from the city, until it was conquered by the Prussians in the 18th century. The Jewish past is most visible in the room *First World War*,

8 The first exhibition catalogue was published in Germany (Łagiewski, 1990). The first catalogue in Poland was published in 1994 for the exhibition's second presentation (Łagiewski, 1994).

9 „*Żydzi na Dolnym Śląsku w latach 1945–1948*", Old City Hall, 1996.

10 The exhibition „*W obiektywie Zdzisława Mozera. Teatr* Żydowski *we Wrocławiu*" presented 238 exhibits and was seen by 5,808 people during the 11 days it was open. The concept papers, drafts of a catalogue and photographs have been preserved in the archive of the City Museum. See *Muzeum Miejskie we Wrocławiu: Muzeum Historyczne we Wrocławiu*, 4/185.

11 A second presentation about the Jewish Theatre was *Teatr Żydowski na Dolnym Śląsku w latach 1946–1968*, Old City Hall, 2008.

Weimar Republic, Jewish Community. A showcase contains exhibits on the Jewish community of Breslau, among other things photographs of Jewish personalities and various religious items like Hanukkah candelabras from the New Synagogue, a loan from today's Jewish community collection. In the next room, *Nazi dictatorship and Second World War*, the discrimination against and destruction of the Jewish community are slightly represented by a picture frame with anti-Jewish propaganda posters, a photo of the "burning dome of the New Synagogue, 1938" and a broken marble board from the White Stork Synagogue. Surprisingly, the final destruction of Breslau's Jewish community is not visible in this show. Blue and white prison clothes with P symbols from the nearby Gross-Rosen Concentration Camp relate only to the Polish victims of Nazi terror, even though the camp had Jewish prisoners too (see Łagiewski and Okólska, 2009: 277–286).[12] Additionally the following two rooms about Polish Wrocław in the People's Republic mention neither the up to 17,000 Polish Jews who settled temporarily in Wrocław between 1945 and 1948 nor the anti-Jewish campaign of 1968, when many Jews left the country. An important chapter of Wrocław's post-war history is missing here.

As historian Sabine Offe mentioned in the examples she gave of exhibitions in Austria and Germany, today's Jewish museums tell us less about past Jewish life than about the presence of the non-Jewish historical culture in Central Europe (Offe, 2000: 44). Where they are not run by a Jewish community, these institutions are mostly places of remembrance, commemorating the murdered and displaced, because they are an expression of a cultural experience and a symbolic practice of interpretation and explanation of the past.

The present Jewish community of Wrocław is the second largest in Poland, but with approximately 300 members (see Friedla, 2014: 426) it is financially incapable of running a Jewish museum. The community continues the tradition of Jewish life in the city by maintaining a Jewish elementary school at Żelazna Street, the second Jewish cemetery of Wrocław at Lotnicza Street and the White Stork Synagogue, which it regained in 1996 in a devastated condition (see Meng, 2011: 239–241). With the support of a foundation by the Norwegian-Jewish artist Bente Kahan the restoration of the White Stork Synagogue was completed in 2010. Since then the first floor of the building has been host to the permanent exhibition *History Reclaimed. Jewish Life in Wrocław and Lower Silesia*[13]. For the first time, the exhibition of the Bente Kahan Foundation and the Jewish Studies Department at the University of Wrocław tells Jewish history from the first settlement in the early Middle Ages until its recent history in a "free and democratic Poland". On 22 panels with coloured pictures and texts, but without objects, *History Reclaimed* focuses equally on the pre-war and the post-war history of Jewish life in Wrocław. The "full-scale anti-semitic campaign" of 1968, "when several thousand Jews left Wrocław and Lower Silesia" is mentioned here on a separate panel. Today the City Museum and the Bente Kahan Foundation continue the presentations on Jewish history and culture, which started in the 1920s with the Jewish-run Jewish Museum Society.

12 The description refers to the exhibition's presentation before it was partially revised in 2016.

13 „*Historia odzyskana. Życie Żydów we Wrocławiu i na Dolnym Śląsku*", since 2010 in the White Stork Synagogue (Fundacja Bente Kahan).

Conclusion

Wrocław's museums mirror an exceptional process in building up continuity by re-establishing former traditions. Exhibitions are multidimensional products of cultural practices; they are expressions of their producer's historical consciousness and shape the popular culture of cities and countries; so they are mediums for the enduring reinvention of societies by describing their history. But we should keep in mind that the social outreach of history museums is uncertain. A museum never mirrors the views of a society in general, but rather is a set of interpretations by museum producers. Cultural and political elites are the visible supporters of these approaches to history, while the perceptions of local inhabitants can only be inferred from guest books or survey results. That is why it is difficult to measure the outreach of museum presentations on people's historical awareness. In comparison to books, exhibitions have the potential to manifest history visually and to provide a spatial experience. In the reinvention of Wrocław after 1989, museums took an active role as mediums of historical authority, positioning, and understanding. After periods of political control and nationalist selection, the once foreign cultural heritage of Poland's Western and Northern territories has grown to be accepted as a whole.[14]

In summary, it is fair to say that Jewish history exhibitions, in particular, reflect the discontinuity of popular culture in the 20th century. The history presentations stand symbolically for the integration as well as the exclusion of a significant part of Wrocław's population. In 1928 the City Museum supported the community in establishing a Jewish museum, and its product was the large temporary exhibition of 1929 that told the story of entangled Christian-Jewish history. After 1933 the exclusion of Jews from public life was drastic and a separate Jewish museum was opened at Grabiszyńska Street. It existed until the pogrom of 1938 and the destruction of the Jewish community.

On the ruins of German-Jewish Breslau grew Polish-Jewish Wrocław. Significant here is how different aspects and places of German- and Polish-Jewish heritage have been interwoven. After only a few years this large Jewish-Polish community was excluded by the communist nation state. Following a very selective approach to history, Jewish history was banned from the public museums of Wrocław until the 1980s. Here the renovation of the Jewish cemetery was a major step in discovering and exhibiting the Jewish past. It was an expression of re-establishing a crucial chapter of local history beyond national limitations.

Looking at places of Jewish history presentations we can observe further developments on the Old Jewish Cemetery, in the Synagogue and in the Royal Palace Museum that housed Breslau's *Judaica* collection from 1929 to 1933. A new place will open in 2017, the *Op enheim* House at Solny Square. It will be a cultural institute of Polish-German and international exchange and art exhibitions. Its name *Op enheim* is a direct reference to the former owners of the house, the Oppenheim family, a German-Jewish family that had a crucial impact on the development of Breslau (see Höhenleitner, 2016: 89–94).

14 The reinvention of Wrocław after 1945 was without historical precedent, but throughout the 20th century the city reinvented itself more than once. A study of exhibitions as indicators and generators reveals the historical culture of various periods in Breslau/Wrocław (see Kretschmann, 2016: 113–124).

Undoubtedly the heritage of German and Polish Jews is deeply entangled in the capital of Lower Silesia. The strong continuity of places is the most visible proof here. But the interlocking of these two groups becomes questionable when it comes to the individual consciousness of today's community members and citizens. The various exhibitions on biographies and families of Breslau's Jews cannot compensate for the fact that in 1945–1947 a radical break in the city population took place. Mirosława Lenarcik remarks appropriately: "However, one cannot avoid the impression that [...] they [the German Jews] are not anymore part of the city. [...] Simply, there is no emotional relation between these two worlds because the ancestors of the Jews living now in Wrocław came from The Ukraine, Lithuania, and Poland. They can celebrate the achievements of Breslau's Jewish community as part of their Jewishness, but they do not feel attached personally to them" (Lenarcik, 2010: 219). The German-Jews of Breslau are not part of individual and community memories, because the biographical and cultural ties are missing. However, they are a part of the local history manifestations. After 40 years of the absence of any historical references to them, the discovery of the Old Jewish Cementery, followed by exhibitions and books, has put them back on the city's cultural map.

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