

NEW PERSPECTIVES IN GERMAN-JEWISH STUDIES: TOWARD A DIASPORIC AND GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

Comment on Liliane Weissberg's Lecture, October 16, 2003

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Professor Weissberg's optimistic reading of the future of German Jewish Studies is encouraging. In particular, as a scholar who writes about contemporary Jewish life since 1989, I am pleased that she does not address, to put it bluntly, just a dead people, but rather a vibrant and living community whose numbers have risen dramatically in the last decades. As we know, this surge has been caused, especially since 1989/90, by the fall of the Berlin Wall, the unification of Germany, and the collapse of the Soviet empire. Because of the popularity of Jewish topics today, as Weissberg tells us, the study of the Jews or Jewish subjects has also grown, even before the more recent historical watershed of 1989, both in the fields of *Jüdische Studien* and even *Judaistik*, primarily by non-Jews.

Indeed, academic fields should prosper because of dedication to intellectual substance rather than merely due to heritage, even if these fields in part provide "identity" for non-Jewish Germans or Jews who are searching for meaning in their lives that are necessarily fraught with the vicissitudes of history. In the recent past, especially since 1989, most of the scholarship, on minority literatures in general and on German Jewish literature in particular, has been accomplished by American scholars, largely female, whose work Professor Weissberg mentions. Perhaps worth noting as well is the fact that most of the Directors of the North American DAAD Centers for German and European Studies have been Jewish (and male), as if to attest to a Jewish investment in the institutional study of Germany in this latter case, and in the former case, an American concern with German minorities. Of course, it may come as no surprise to many that American German Studies in general is populated by a large number of Jewish scholars, a situation due, I believe, not only to intellectual, but also to generational and historical factors.

In Germany, of course, most analyses and critiques that have brought the Jewish voice into the public domain are journalistic accounts from German Jewish and almost exclusively male perspectives. Henryk M. Broder, Micha Brumlik, Rafael Seligmann, Michael Wolffsohn, and Richard Chaim Schneider among others are prominent here, as well as figures in the political sphere like the late Ignatz Bubis and now Paul Spiegel, the new President of the Central Council of Jews in Germany. Recently, talk show host and Vice President of the Central Council Michel Friedman's

criminal dealings not only forced his resignation from these high-profile posts, but also drew attention to Jews in Germany in an unfortunate manner. Clearly, Jews are subject to moral failings too, even in Germany! Professor Weissberg has mentioned prominent Jews in academic life who have contributed to a greater positive Jewish discursive presence in German everyday life, scholars like Dan Diner, the Director of the Simon Dubnow Institute at the University of Leipzig, Michael Brenner, who holds the first chair in Jewish history at the University of Munich, or Julius Schoeps, the director of the Moses Mendelssohn Center at the University of Potsdam. Most importantly, Professor Weissberg has established the important parallel between the existence of a Jewish community and the development of a Jewish Studies that makes this group an object of study. I am very pleased when I hear her say, "Indeed, one could describe German-Jewish Studies as Jewish studies par excellence"; however, we may have different points to make.

My satisfaction is not based on mere personal pride that the field I have devoted myself to for so many years plays such a central role in Jewish Studies in general. More importantly, it also signals that the optimistic future that she has mapped out coincides both with the demographics of the Jewish community and the growth in potential for the field. Stating that "to be a German Jew is a learning process, pointing to the future," and that the "shape the Jewish community in Germany will take . . . has become a laboratory experiment of sorts," suggests that studying the new German Jewry today may bring Germany more into focus in Jewish Studies, educating scholars in that broader field about Jewry in the country that is often still thought of as "the land of the murderers." It also has the potential, at least from the perspective I outline here, to bring the new Europe into the fold as well as seeing Israel, in its role as literal or symbolic Jewish home, in a changing relationship to the diaspora. Certainly, as we consider the identity of a future Jewish community in Germany and Europe, a central aspect in Weissberg's presentation, we must also take into account the global shifts affecting Jewish identity. These changes came into focus recently in a set of symposia co-sponsored by the Leo Baeck Institute (LBI), the American Jewish Committee (AJC), and the American Institute for Contemporary German Studies (AICGS), on the topic: What or who is the Jewish voice?¹ The question of who speaks for the Jews foregrounds the relationship of identity to voice and reminds us that these are not always synonymous, since power and authority to speak for a community or a people are not distributed equally among all Jews or the governments and institutions that represent them.

Potentially, the Jews in Germany, composed largely of immigrants from the former Soviet Union (primarily from Russia, the Ukraine, and

from the Baltic States), but also from other countries, can be seen as part of the shifting of cultural identities sparked and sustained by the processes we associate with globalization, such as migration, cultural circulation and hybridization. The resulting shifts in discrete disciplinary fields, or “area studies” as they are often known, although not usually associated with Jewish Studies, still provide insight into the transformations that may take place when Jewish Studies or German-Jewish Studies is seen in its globally shifting contexts.

Thus, a new (German) Jewish Studies may also be an example of a potential Diaspora Studies that might enable those of us interested in breaking down traditional disciplinary and national/regional boundaries to create a more interesting intellectual and methodological venue for studying the place of the Jews in a rapidly changing environment. What I am presenting is not meant to be a definitive model. It is rather one way of looking at global processes that create the shifting identities that mark all of us today, especially but not only for those who are recognized diasporic peoples, such as the black Africans, the Chinese, the Armenians, the South Asians, or the Jews. In the words of the brothers Jonathan and Daniel Boyarin, the first an anthropologist of the Jews and the other a radical Talmudic scholar, in their new book *Powers of Diaspora: Two Essays on the Relevance of Jewish Culture*, diaspora is

partaking always of the local, but by definition never confined to it, (and) thus suggests itself as a place where that interaction can be grasped. . . . There may be something to be gained from thinking about diaspora . . . as a positive *resource* in the necessary rethinking of models of polity in the current erosion and questioning of the modern nation-state system and ideal.²

Proceeding from the Boyarins’ positive position on diaspora, one must ask what does Diaspora Studies in general and Jewish Studies or contemporary German-Jewish Studies in particular offer us today, when the latter’s object of study is the third largest and fastest-growing Jewish community in Europe, comprised of over 100,000 members and still expanding?

As we all know, the Jews of Europe and especially of Germany have both a rich and tragic history. We know as well that institutional configurations such as departments, programs, and most importantly, funding do not necessarily coincide with the realities of a re-mapped globe that is then inhabited, however comfortably or uncomfortably, by refugees, exiles, (im)migrants, or even tourists who move now across once static boundaries and borders. We should pay more attention to these “movers” who increasingly make up larger portions of the population and the diasporic zones or regions they create which do not coincide with

the formal borders of nation-states. And we should also address the disciplinary and discursive fields that try to capture a people, especially in this movement.

The Jews in Germany and the traditional object of study of the Leo Baeck Institute are one such example, whose composition has changed. Before 1933, Germany's approximately 500,000 Jews were mostly Germany-identified Jews, and about one quarter foreign Jews (non-German), primarily immigrants from Eastern Europe, the infamous *Ostjuden*. We all know what happened in the twelve years of Nazi rule. Approximately 270,000 Jews left Germany before 1939, more than 165,000 were murdered, about 15,000 survived the camps, and another 2,000 survived underground.³ In 1945, "as many as 100,000 Jewish survivors (the majority not being German) found themselves among the eleven million uprooted and homeless people wandering throughout Germany and central Europe."⁴ Between 1945 and 1950, the number of Jewish DPs was nearly 200,000.⁵ By 1950, there were less than 15,000 Jews left in Germany; 6,000 of these were displaced Jews from Eastern Europe, another 2,000 were from other countries, and the remaining 6,000 were German Jewish returnees.⁶ In the following years until the Berlin Wall came down, there were approximately 25,000 Jews living in West Germany and approximately 500 in East Germany, most of those in (East) Berlin. These numbers include only the registered Jews, and there were certainly hundreds more. These statistics not only document the mobility and omnipresence of the Jews in Germany after the war, but also set the stage for the dramatic changes that would take place after the Wall came down and that would alter the face of Jewish life in Germany. Again, Germany is cast as an immigrant country of *Ostjuden* as far as Jewish life is concerned, even if the official policy of Germany at that time stated categorically that "Deutschland ist kein Einwanderungsland," and Jews from the Soviet Union were legally "Kontingentflüchtlinge" (quota refugees) and not immigrants.

Although the 2.6 million Turks are the largest body of immigrants in Germany, the immigration of Jews from the former Soviet Union into Germany has been the most dramatic alteration for Jewish life in Europe since the end of World War II. Since 1989, 120,000 Jews from the former Soviet Union have come to Germany. This rise has increased the number of communities to 89 and spread the Jewish population around Germany to cities such as Recklinghausen in the West or Rostock in the East, whose communities are now comprised nearly wholly of former Soviet Jews. Whereas Jews up until the 1970s and early 1980s were proverbially "sitting on packed suitcases," they now, even with the recent surge in anti-Semitism in the past two years, are planning to stay in Germany, especially younger Jews of what one might call the "third generation." The

integration of these immigrant Jews into German (Jewish) life is difficult, since they require jobs, housing, and language instruction, and many of them are not even Jewish according to Halakhic law, which is matrilinear rather than patrilinear, thus making their participation in religious life nearly impossible. Some even use false papers to emigrate to Germany, which represents more of a beneficial economic haven with its all-encompassing social welfare policies than a secure place to be protected from the infamous Russian anti-Semitism. Such opportunism has created resentment among Jews and Germans alike. However, Russian-Jewish immigrants are often caught in the bind of being Jews in Russia and Russians in Germany. Consequently, the question of belonging and identity remains a central issue, which affects their daily life, the schools their children may attend, the professions they assume, their religious practice, and their relationship to the German and Jewish communities with their mutually intertwined histories. These “new” Jews have become the quintessential hybrid diasporic people in a European environment that has both persecuted them and now in many cases welcomes them as a “litmus test” of democracy and liberalism in a rapidly changing Europe. In the words of Jonathan Boyarin, “Jews are thus examples of different notions of Europe. In addition to specifying Jews as a uniquely and unequivocally demonic force, Hitler made an example of them as well. They were the example of what had to be eliminated in order to produce a New Europe. Anti-fascists and other liberals . . . also take the Jews as exemplary Europeans, those without whom there can be no ‘Europe as such.’ ”⁷

As a new Europe unfolds, Boyarin’s optimism is an appealing vision that underscores what historian Diana Pinto calls a “new European Jewish space.”⁸ The Jews of Europe and especially of Germany then reflect not only the demographic shifts, but also the constantly transforming identities of a continent in transition. A half-century ago, because of war and trauma, Europe was the site of migration and displacement, and then after 1990 it was viewed more optimistically as its eastern half was liberated from Communism and moved toward democratization. However, as if to remind us of its global centrality and its susceptibility to turmoil, Europe has now been thrown again into political confusion. This turn is due on the one hand to the ruptures in the transatlantic alliance caused by Middle East tensions and the war in Iraq, and on the other hand, the accession into the European Union of Eastern European countries with Jewish populations, unresolved histories, and anti-Semitism.

Diaspora studies can be a vehicle for an altered perspective on identity in a globalized world since the field emerges from these real political and social changes and produces a new intellectual and institutional paradigm with which to look at traditional areas, regions, or groups.

Increasingly, as the relationship between Israel and “its” diaspora is changing because of religious, political, or social differences, Jewish diaspora existence may well become more independent and self-assured, aside from altering its relationship to Israel. In his book *Home Lands: Portraits of the New Jewish Diaspora*, journalist Larry Tye makes this point persuasively, noting that “the Jewish diaspora is as critical to the survival of Israel as Israel is to the survival of the Jewish people.”⁹ Recent immigration data bear this out as well, with “four times as many Israelis living in America as U.S. Jews in Israel,” as does the ironic fact that “the number of Israelis of German descent applying for German passports has increased dramatically in the two years since the start of the intifada. The German embassy in Tel Aviv is currently issuing some 250 passports a month, more than double the number in the 1990s, and expected to top 3,000 this year, compared to 1751 in 2001.” A lawyer who represents many of these dual citizens claims, “many Israelis regard a German passport as ‘an insurance policy in case times get harder.’ ” In fact, in 2002, more Jews emigrated from the former Soviet Union to Germany than to Israel.¹⁰

The diaspora’s changing relationship toward Israel that Tye chronicles in his study of seven diaspora cities around the world creates more detachment and increased willingness to consider these other Jewish populations as important as Israel. The existence of a Jewish state, while central to world Jewry’s notion of community, may no longer be, according to Tye, where they call home, as even Israelis realize that *aliyah* (the return home) of all diasporic Jews is neither realistic nor efficient. “Home lands,” perhaps purposefully separated in Tye’s title, thus represents the breaking and the questioning of a conflicted term. This is the case both generally for the dispersed diasporic Jews (37 percent live in Israel, 43 percent in the United States), but also specifically for Jews in Germany, who will be defined more heterogeneously as the impact of the Russian Jews in Germany continues to affect how they define their identity. While most feel more at home in their new country than expected, in fact some much more than in Israel, the specifically German notion of *Heimat* (homeland), still inflected with the semantics of racial exclusion, may never take hold. For Jews in Germany, a “homeland” remains perhaps more than for any other diasporic Jewish population an unachievable goal.

Indeed, a Diaspora Studies that takes its cue from the constant flow between “homeland” and domicile and what this relationship means can be extremely productive. However, these studies must go beyond just the study of the results—the status of the people after they have moved—and take into consideration the processes of movement itself: a reflected and examined level of how these transformations of mobility take place and

what they mean for our understanding of developing identities. The potential of these “new” German Jews with a different history and identity than their pre-war predecessors, but with the legitimacy to reconstitute the name with a different meaning, may be a model for Diaspora Studies. The careful distinction made between “German Jews” before 1933, “Jews in Germany” after 1945, and now again “German Jews” reflects an evolution of identity that will have to be addressed. This diasporic process affects both the self-definition of Jews, both indigenous (most of whom are in fact descendants of Eastern European displaced persons) and newly arrived Russians, as well as the German non-Jewish populations’ perceptions of the minorities and themselves. In other words, changing perceptions of Jewishness in Germany create new opportunities for German identities as well.

Diaspora, according to political scientist Itty Abraham, stimulates for the nation-state “a foundational trauma . . . [namely] the desire to identify unambiguously who belongs within the state and who does not.”¹¹ Contributing to a new notion of diaspora, an evolving and dynamic notion of Germanness becomes a product of the Russian Jews, who may want to stay in Germany’s comfortable surroundings, but never quite feel that they are “Germans.” Like the Turks, they remain a hybrid, the constant presence of foreignness. They can reinforce either the integrative, progressive, and above all civic power of a German democracy to accept difference as part of German identity or the conservative retrenchment of ethnic criteria for assimilation articulated in the debate spurred by the CDU on German “*Leitkultur*” (a dominant culture), a notion that seemed to many Jews and Germans too reminiscent of exclusionary policies that eliminate those without the proper pedigree. Assuming Germans choose the former path, the newly evolving German Jews, made up primarily of Russians, but also Israelis, Americans, and others settling in Berlin (the future site of one of the largest Jewish centers in middle Europe) could become an example for a redefined German Jewry and European diaspora.

Consequently, a new Jewish Studies and even a future German or German-Jewish Studies have in common the global migration of peoples that transcend borders of states and identified regions. While local specificities always intrude in broader global shifts and vice versa, as the Jewish and the German, this struggle between the particular and the universal will continue to characterize global culture and frustrate any global studies that tries to capture these constantly shifting foundational categories of “German” and “Jew” as mutually exclusive. If global studies can create an intellectual and institutional space where the movement of peoples, ideas, and processes can be articulated and examined, it perhaps has a chance to offer a new paradigm that can complement rather than

replace local area studies or a Jewish Studies or German-Jewish Studies that is based on static notions of "Diaspora" and "Homeland." Unseating fixed notions of identity, a global studies based in Diaspora Studies follows the path of the Jews in Germany on their road to becoming a new German Jewry. In constant flux, this trajectory is never normalized and always retains the critical moment of interaction and reflection, as unsettling as it is liberating. This liminal state may be the only constant in the coming years and may prevent the "normalization" of Jewish German life that some hope for, if this version of a desired status quo is defined only in conventional terms.

The historic place of the Jews in Germany and German life, even before the country's first unification, is well documented by Liliane Weissberg and by the work of the Leo Baeck Institute. However, Professor Weissberg and I would agree, I think, that there is much more to how the German Jewish story is to be told and studied, especially since 1989, than was thought in 1945 or even decades later. The last fifteen years have shown that there may indeed be a future for these people and the scholars that continue to study them, not only as *Trauerarbeit* or part of a *Betroffenheitskultur*, or because of philosemitism. By expanding its offices to the Jewish Museum in Berlin, creating an Academic Advisory Council to broaden its purview to post-1945 and contemporary German Jewish life, and last but not least, its collaboration with the German Historical Institute and the American Institute for Contemporary German Studies, the Leo Baeck Institute proves that the premier institution for the study of German Jewry believes in its own future as well. It is actively trying to accommodate itself to changing definitions of and perspectives on German Jews that are affected by the transformations in the world around it as an institution and the subject to which it has been devoted for almost 50 years.

Notes

A more detailed discussion of the subject of this lecture is in my book *New Jews in a New Germany: Post-Holocaust Identities in a Unified Nation*, to be published by Rutgers University Press.

¹ See Jeffrey M. Peck, ed., "The Jewish Voice in Transatlantic Relations," *AICGS German-American Issues* 01 (Washington, D.C.: American Institute for Contemporary German Studies, 2004).

² Jonathan and Daniel Boyarin, *Powers of Diaspora: Two Essays on the Relevance of Jewish Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 5.

³ Wolfgang Benz, "Die Legende von der deutsch-jüdischen Symbiose," *Merkur* 45 (1991): 10, cited in John Borneman and Jeffrey M. Peck, *Sojourners: The Return of German Jews and the Question of Identity* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 4.

⁴ Abraham Peck, "Zero Hour and the Development of Jewish Life in Germany after 1945," in *A Pariah People? Jewish Life in Germany after 1945: A Symposium* (Cincinnati: American Jewish Archives, 1988), 2–11, cited in Borneman and Peck, 4.

⁵ Wolfgang Jacobmeyer, "Jüdische Überlebende als 'Displaced Persons,'" *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 9 (1983), 421–452, cited in Borneman and Peck, 4.

⁶ Chaim Yahil, "Berlin: Contemporary Period," *Encyclopedia Judaica*, Vol. 4 (New York: Macmillan, 1971), cited in Borneman and Peck, 4.

⁷ Jonathan Boyarin, *Thinking in Jewish* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 126.

⁸ See, for example, "The Jewish Challenges in the New Europe," in *Challenging Ethnic Citizenship. German and Israeli Perspectives*, ed. Daniel Levy and Yfaat Weiss (New York: Berghahn Books, 2002), 239–252.

⁹ Larry Tye, *Home Lands: Portraits of the New Jewish Diaspora* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2001), 12.

¹⁰ Internet, Igal Avidan, "Israelis Look to Germany for Refuge," *The Jerusalem Report*, Sept. 9, 2002.

¹¹ Itty Abraham, "International Trends," SSRC India Seminar, August 19, 2003.