

REFLECTING ON THE PAST, ENVISIONING THE FUTURE: NEW PERSPECTIVES IN GERMAN-JEWISH STUDIES

Lecture at the GHI, October 16, 2003. First joint lecture of the GHI and the Leo Baeck Institute, New York. Speaker: Liliane Weissberg (University of Pennsylvania). Commentator: Jeffrey Peck (American Institute for Contemporary German Studies, Washington, D.C.). Introduction: Christoph Mauch (GHI), Carol Kahn Strauss (Leo Baeck Institute). Moderator: Frank Mecklenburg (Leo Baeck Institute).

Through its library and archival collections, its ongoing collection of relevant materials, and its constant effort to facilitate access to its holdings, the Leo Baeck Institute has been promoting the study of German-speaking Jewry for almost fifty years. Only recently however has the field of German-Jewish Studies attained the status of a separate area of scholarship, recognized along with Jewish Studies and German Studies as an independent field of inquiry. The first annual joint lecture of the Leo Baeck Institute, New York, and the German Historical Institute in Washington, D.C., featured Professor Liliane Weissberg, who teaches German and comparative literature at the University of Pennsylvania and who has lectured widely on both sides of the Atlantic. Professor Weissberg began her talk by describing a paradox in the current situation in Germany, where the Jewish community is among the fastest growing in the world and yet Jewish culture is largely upheld and maintained by non-Jews. In a similar fashion, Jewish Studies in Germany is a discipline largely pursued by non-Jewish scholars. And yet, Professor Weissberg suggested, German-Jewish Studies could be described as Jewish Studies par excellence. Over the past several decades, a number of research institutes in the U.S., the U.K., Germany, Austria, and Israel were set up to promote the study of this small but significant group of people, their history, achievements, and influences, which have always seemed disproportionate to their numbers. Professor Liliane Weissberg pointed to Moses Mendelssohn's translation of the Hebrew Bible into German as the initial call for the emancipation of the Jews and the beginning of their becoming a more modern, assimilated people. Giving the study of Judaism and especially Jewish history importance along with the eternal truths of religion would recognize the suffering of Jews throughout history as a common experience of the diaspora. German Jews became a subject of study to the Jews themselves, at least for a time. Heinrich Grätz's eleven volume "History of the Jews," published between 1853 and 1876, and the later works of Simon Dubnow and Salo Baron gave little mention to Jews in Germany. To them, Jewish history remained an undivided field, and

German Jews themselves were not eager to think of themselves in that context, but rather as Germans of Jewish religion. It was only after the Holocaust that German Jewry began to define itself in terms of a separate ethnic group.

When the Leo Baeck Institute was founded in 1955, its purpose was to preserve the legacy of Jewish life particular to the German-speaking lands of Central Europe and to document this heritage, whose people, institutions, and papers were decimated in the Holocaust. Professor Weissberg pointed out that German-Jewish studies was defined as a work of mourning (*Trauerarbeit*)—for instance, in the early works of Hannah Arendt. Yet at the same time, in the United States, German-Jewish Studies became one of the earliest fields of ethnic inquiry along with Latino Studies, African-American Studies, and Asian-American Studies.

Professor Jeffrey Peck pointed out in his subsequent commentary that the newly emerging fields of Diaspora Studies, Post-Colonial Studies, and other multicultural concepts derived from the study of globalization are very applicable to the study of German Jews, especially when looking at the changes since 1989. He agreed with Professor Weissberg's thesis that German-Jewish Studies is Jewish Studies par excellence. In his focus on Diaspora Studies, an even newer field, he provided the audience with a glimpse of how the recent developments of the fast-growing Jewish community in Germany encompass transnational and multi-ethnic issues within the context of an emerging European community where the traditional boundaries of academic disciplines (as well as regional and national territories) are rapidly changing. When looking at German Jewry, he cautioned that one must make careful distinctions between Jews living in Germany before 1933 and Jews in Germany now in terms of both identity and self-definition. Insofar as Jews are being studied in Germany today (mainly by non-Jews), the perception of Jewishness allows also for new insights into German identity and its relationship to minorities in general.

Professor Weissberg pointed out that the post-World War II study of German Jews was begun by scholars such as Selma Stern and Jacob Katz. Only in the 1970s, however, beginning with the study of Jewish women, Jewish workers, the entrance of Jews into the academic professions, and the study of urban life versus small towns and rural life, did German-Jewish Studies emerge as a field that cuts across different countries and different academic disciplines. The study of German-Jewish literature followed and in turn gave impulse to many innovative approaches in history and interdisciplinary fields such as Cultural Studies.

Professor Peck's commentary picked up at the point of cross-disciplinary influence and cross-fertilization of fields of study. His focus on Diaspora Studies suggested questions such as what and who is the

“Jewish voice” and how is identity constructed, especially in light of the fact that Jews in Germany today have different backgrounds and traditions than pre-war German Jewry. German-Jewish Studies, and subsequently Jewish Studies, must look at this international context of Jewish life in Germany and the resultant cultural hybridization that seems to render the often expressed desire for “normalization” pointless. The two speakers provided the notion of a strong impulse for change and reorientation for the field of German-Jewish Studies, which the Leo Baeck Institute began to engage in with its move to the Center for Jewish History in New York and the opening of a branch at the Jewish Museum in Berlin almost fifty years after its founding.

Frank Mecklenburg