SECOND JUNIOR SCHOLARS CONFERENCE
IN GERMAN-JEWISH HISTORY

Conference at the GHI Washington, June 14-15, 2011. Co-organized and co-sponsored by the Wissenschaftliche Arbeitsgemeinschaft des Leo Baeck Instituts in Deutschland, the Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, and the GHI. Conveners: Michael Brenner (University of Munich), Jürgen Matthäus (Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies), Miriam Rürup (GHI). Participants: Hannah Ahlheim (University of Göttingen), Caspar Battegay (University of Basel), Adi Gordon (University of Cincinnati), Udi Greenberg (Dartmouth College), Anne-Christin Saß (Free University Berlin), Björn Siegel (Hamburger Institut für die Geschichte der Deutschen Juden), Russell Spinney (University of Maryland, Baltimore), Noah Strote (University of California, Berkeley), Sarah Wobick-Segev (Syracuse University), Leah Wolfson (USHMM Washington), Noam Zadoff (University of Munich).

After a successful conference in 2009, this year’s workshop again brought together a small transatlantic group of recent Ph.D.’s and faculty members in the field of German-Jewish history from North America and Germany to foster a new generation of scholars. Thus, even though the workshop focused on participants’ current projects, the discussions also centered on the future developments to be expected in German-Jewish history in terms of methodology, theories, approaches, research questions, sources, and so on, as well as the research paths to pursue. In other words, the workshop aimed to assess the “state of the art” of German-Jewish history, considering that every new generation of researchers addresses new questions while sometimes taking up “old” topics, material and methods. The participants came primarily from three different academic traditions: those of Israel, Germany, and the United States. But even more importantly, they came from different disciplinary approaches. As all are teaching at either German or North American universities, participants were interested in questions concerning the teaching of German-Jewish history for the future, as well. In this respect, the workshop tied in perfectly with the Silberman Seminar, a two-week intensive course on how to teach Holocaust history in college today that was taking place simultaneously at the USHMM. In order to make an exchange with seminar participants possible, the Junior Scholars Workshop convened the first day at the Center of Advanced Holocaust studies and the second day at the German Historical Institute.
The workshop capitalized on this opportunity to include the Silberman Seminar participants with a special lunch event on the first day, “Intersections and Differences between Jewish Studies and Holocaust Studies in the United States and in Germany”—a round of discussions about the meaning of teaching Jewish history as well as Holocaust history at universities and about where the Holocaust fits into everyone’s research narratives and teaching agendas. After some introductory remarks by the conveners of the Silberman Seminar Doris Bergen and Barry Trachtenberg, Michael Brenner and Jürgen Matthäus addressed changing trends in teaching and researching the Holocaust and how they have shaped the field of Holocaust studies. They observed, and participants in the discussion concurred, that Holocaust Studies and Jewish Studies are surprisingly separate fields that only rarely intertwine.

The five regular panels of the Jewish History Seminar were devoted to twentieth-century German-Jewish history, with a high proportion of biographical approaches, and a preponderance of papers on Weimar or Post-1945 Germany. The first session, “Weimar Economy and the Jews,” discussed two different approaches to the topic. In her talk on “Self-Perceptions and ‘Fremdbilder’: Writing the History of the ‘Jewish Economy’ in Weimar Germany,” Hannah Ahlheim posed the question of how one could define a specifically “Jewish” position within the economy. She not only sketched out the economic stereotypes of Jews in specific terms (for instance, “the materialistic Jewish mind”), but challenged the very idea of writing a separate history of the “Jewish economy” in Weimar Germany: she asked whether one can be written at all without setting “the Jews” apart again. After all, she argued, statistical counting in itself is no more “objective” than other ways of describing groups. She demonstrated this by presenting results different Jewish and non-Jewish actors with completely different motives obtained from manipulating the same numbers to prove both the merits of Jews and to establish their overrepresentation in certain fields. Russell Spinney took a rather different perspective on Weimar German-Jewish society in his paper, “The Fear of Exclusion: Emotional Economies, Emotives and the Response to Anti-Semitism in the Weimar Republic.” Focusing on Weimar Jews’ emotional responses to the ever-present stereotypes and everyday threats of anti-Semitism, he asked whether the rather new field of the history of emotions can contribute to understanding individual and group agency in that era. Although everyday Jewish life was shaped by anti-Semitism and fear, Jews also had to find a way to balance out their social interactions in a kind of economy of emotions.
The second session, “Central European Biographies,” had two papers dealing with the challenges and opportunities that writing German-Jewish biographies generate. Caspar Battegay presented his biographical work on Nathan Birnbaum (1864-1937), an important advocate of many central European Jewish ideas, some of which even conflicted with one another. Looking specifically at the many “Turning Points of Modernity” in Birnbaum’s life, Battegay asked how these made him a modernist figure who, in being modern, could even tell his own life story through them instead of in a linear manner. Adi Gordon’s biographical paper also focused on a person whose life was marked by many permutations. In writing “The Intellectual Biography of Hans Kohn (1891-1971): Extending Central European Jewish History into Cold War America,” Gordon sought to explore not only in the turning points in Kohn’s biography but also the changing approaches to intellectual history that extend the interest in European Jewish history to include contemporary history in general, in this specific case, the history of the Cold War. This theme would be taken up again the next day in the panel, “Jewish Intellectuals and the Rebuilding of Germany.”

The third and final panel of the first day, “Jewish Societies in Movement,” turned to the vital factor of migration in Jewish history. Anne-Christin Saß addressed “‘Der historisher moment’: Familiar Challenges and New Developments in the Encounters between Eastern European and German Jews in Weimar Berlin.” As her title already suggested, her interest lay not so much in the well-researched differences between the archetypical “Eastern” and “Western” Jew, but more in the unusual encounters and cooperative endeavors between those groups to overcome their traditional juxtaposition. Björn Siegel also focused on a location of transit, as Berlin was in Saß’s case, picking “Ships, Shipping Companies and the Jewish Emigration to Palestine in the 1920s and 1930s” as his site of analysis. Shipping companies and societal situations on the ships themselves shed new light on Jewish emigration and maybe even provide insight into preliminary Zionist state-building because people stuck on a long voyage together would fuse into a rudimentary society while still on board. The ship is thus far more than a metaphor for the transitional situation of Jews, Siegel maintained, as it also comprises an economic, ideological, and political place imbued with the emigrants’ hopes and fears.

The second day began at the German Historical Institute with a panel on “Belonging and Distancing,” which highlighted emotions
as an important factor in German-Jewish history. Sarah Wobick’s talk, “German-Jewish Belonging: Community, Space and Faith from 1850-1950,” focused on how, in both the secular and religious realms of this period, gathering places that enhanced feelings of Jewishness and ties between Jews shaped a Jewish communal sense of belonging more than geopolitical conceptions of space. She discussed how scholarship of Jewish life generally overemphasizes the secular characteristics of German Jews at the expense of religious ones. Noam Zadoff continued this panel with a biography that asked more general questions about German-Jewish historiography. In his paper, “Towards a History of Emotions: Gershom Scholem and Post-Holocaust Germany,” he especially concentrated on the notion of “turning points” again, as Caspar Battegay had discussed the day before, by illuminating the difficulties Jewish emigrants faced when they returned to Germany after the Holocaust. Key issues included the emigrants’ emotional bonds to Germany and German intellectuals, as well as the emotional burden of returning to the land of the perpetrators. Seemingly “extraterritorial spaces,” such as Monte Verità, eased the transition from being an emigré to being a German intellectual, he noted.

The final panel, “Jewish Intellectuals and the Rebuilding of Germany,” returned to the question of Jews in postwar/Cold War Germany and beyond. In his paper, “Christians, Jews, and the Intellectual Foundations of the Federal Republic,” Noah Strote highlighted individuals who had achieved intellectual leadership in the Weimar Republic, fled National Socialism, and returned to Germany after 1945 in order to help rebuild a democratic society. He drew especially upon the political metaphor of the “Judaic spirit,” chronicling its development from an anti-Semitic reflex to a component of “philo-Semitism” and even “Judeo-Christianity” in the new postwar vocabulary. Udi Greenberg’s paper, “German Jews and the Cold War: The Case of Ernst Fraenkel and the ‘Global New Deal’,” then examined the Jewish roots of the transformation of the Social Democratic Party in the postwar decades. Whereas it had been a class-based party in the 1950s, it then became a pluralist party integrated into the anti-Marxism of the West with some intellectual origins in Socialist discussions of the Weimar era involving famous Jewish intellectuals such as Ernst Fraenkel, Greenberg maintained. These experiences not only made German-Jewish emigrants advocates of U.S. Cold War policies but also now reveal them to have been key actors in shaping U.S. diplomacy.
In the concluding joint discussion on major changes in the field of German-Jewish history, it was obvious from both the research presented during the workshop and from the discussions that non-territorial spaces such as Scholem’s Monte Verità meeting and the emigrants’ ship are recurring motifs in the writing of Jewish history. Secondly, it was clear that biographies have gained new importance in writing the history of Jewish life. Strikingly enough, these biographical approaches do not present linear success stories but rather use biographies as vehicles for showing the many turning points of Jewish history and its transnational character while still focusing on continuities rather than breaks. This leads to the third major observation: the era of National Socialism is not necessarily and not automatically seen as a fundamental break that prompts historians to either write “pre-1933” or “post-1945” Jewish history; rather, the trend now is to focus on Jewish history in the longue durée. A last remark, though, has to follow up on this reasonable and comprehensible approach: the history of National Socialism still stands surprisingly apart from Jewish history, and the history of the Holocaust even more so. Jewish Studies and Holocaust Studies thus are not only separate fields in academic teaching—as was discussed during the lunch roundtable with the Silberman-Seminar—but remain separate in research and scholarship, as well.

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