FIFTH JUNIOR SCHOLARS CONFERENCE IN
GERMAN-JEWISH HISTORY
RICH AND POOR, JEWS AND GENTILES:
WEALTH, POVERTY AND CLASS IN THE NINETEENTH
AND TWENTIETH CENTURIES

Conference held at Indiana University, Bloomington, March 30-31, 2017. Co-organized by the German Historical Institute Washington (GHI), the Institute for the History of the German Jews, Hamburg, and Indiana University. Conveners: Miriam Rürup (Institute for the History of the German Jews, Hamburg), Anne Schenderlein (GHI), and Mirjam Zadoff (Indiana University, Bloomington). Participants: Tim Corbett (University of Vienna), Iona Dascultu (USHMM), Moti Gigi (Sapir College), Kristoff Kerl (University of Cologne), Constanze Kolbe (Indiana University, Bloomington), Avigail Oren (Carnegie Mellon University), Hanna Shaul Bar Nissim (Brandeis University), Jakob Stürmann (University of Potsdam), Aaron Welt (NYU), Maja Gildin Zuckerman (University of Southern Denmark & Stanford University).

Whereas the recent economic turn in Jewish history has inspired numerous works on questions such as production, consumption, commerce, and capitalism, social class has received much less attention, whether as an analytical category or as lived reality or self-identification. Scholarly interest in class as a category of analysis in Jewish historiography has seen a recent revival with works exploring Jewish philanthropy in global perspective, Jewish wealth and poverty, but also the role of Jews in shaping leftist movements globally. Jews are seen here as active participants in negotiating class boundaries.

In March 2017, scholars from Germany, the U.S., Israel, and Romania met at Indiana University to explore when, how, and why social inequality, wealth, poverty, and class mattered in Jewish and non-Jewish history of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The workshop participants examined how individuals and communities across different religious orientations as well as national and transnational contexts dealt with social inequality.

In the first panel, Kristoff Kerl in his paper “The Aristocratic and Jew Money-lending Classes: Antisemitism, Class, and Family in Southern Populism” explored how the southern nineteenth-century Populist world view used anti-Semitic notions of a financial conspiracy of “the Rothschilds” and “Shylocks” and gendered perceptions of a crisis
of farmers’ families to make sense of an economic crisis. He argued that Populists constructed “the aristocratic and Jew money-lending classes” as a force undermining the Republican order by a financial conspiracy, and, by extension, by destroying the yeomanry and the “American Home.” Thus, Populist antisemitism was clearly linked to perceptions of a fundamental crisis of the yeoman, the farmer’s home and family, and, by extension, of the societal order of the United States. As such, antisemitism was part and parcel of the Populist world view.

In a paper titled “The Shtarkers of Progressive Era New York: Labor, Crime, and Capitalism in an Era of Mass Migration, 1890-1930” Aaron Welt explored Progressive Era campaigns to end organized crime in the Jewish immigrant sections of New York City during the first two decades of the twentieth century. He showed how the Kehillah-Jewish Community of New York and its Bureau on Social Morals (BOSM) collaborated with the New York Police Department (NYPD) and District Attorney’s office (DA) in an effort to curtail Jewish underground crime. As such, the boundaries of the Kehillah area of influence expanded from mere communal affairs to crime enforcement. Wealthy “uptown Jews” blended strands of older, even feudal pre-migration Jewish politics with the progressivism and modern social scientific standards of contemporary American philanthropies. In an effort to eliminate shtarkers (Yiddish-speaking labor racketeers) they actively collaborated with the NYPD. The Progressive debate ultimately gravitated towards who ought to possess supreme policing and surveillance powers, not whether these were adequate tools to address urban crime in the industrial city — an oversight to which we today, in postindustrial cities of the early twenty-first century, may also have to plead guilty.

Avigail Oren presented “Where Philanthropists Meet the Poor: The Divergence of Class Interests in the Jewish Community Center.” The paper zoomed in on three New York Jewish Community Centers (JCC), arguing that decisions about whom the JCC would serve depended on how (and how much) Jewish philanthropists wanted to spend their wealth. Faced with a challenging social, ethnic, and class environment, the JCC adapted by also serving non-Jewish members, shifting their role from a primarily Jewish institution to one serving broader needs. Private philanthropy paid for Jewish programming for children and families, while the government paid for non-sectarian senior centers and day care classes for the older members and needier families of the community. For the many workers and lay leaders in the JCC movement, this proved an ideal but fraught compromise; they could serve the entire community as long as they retained a majority-Jewish
membership and provided programs that encouraged members’ identification with Judaism, Jewish culture, or the state of Israel.

The second panel focused on “Transnational Networks and Philanthropic Networks.” Jakob Stürmann presented “Multiple Affiliations of Eastern European Jewish Socialists in Exile.” Looking at three biographical case studies, he argues that Jewish socialist intellectuals from eastern Europe, who for more than a decade lived in exile in Berlin after the First World War, adhered to different social and cultural identities. All of them were less integrated into the Yiddish space while they lived in western Europe compared to the time before the First World War. However, due to multilingualism, the eastern European Jewish Socialists acted in Jewish and non-Jewish spaces within the international socialist movement. Stürmann analyzed how the spaces they frequented in exile depended on factors like knowledge of language, self-positioning, political focus, and time period.

Constanze Kolbe’s paper, “Corfiote Jewish Merchants and Transnational Philanthropic Networks,” explored how Corfiote Jewish merchants established a transnational philanthropic network during the nineteenth century. Examining the ways in which individual merchant benefactors built on established business ties to create philanthropic ties to their island of origin, this paper looks beyond institutions such as the Alliance Israelite Universelle or well-known western philanthropists such as Moses Montefiore. The paper argues that by looking at these merchant philanthropic ties (that operated outside the Alliance and the other institutions) we see that they had nothing inherently “Jewish” about them, but they resembled the Greek Orthodox and Armenian diaspora’s philanthropic networks. The merchant philanthropists did not just support Jewish institutions, nor were they addressing Jewish issues. Rather they were tied to locality, in this case, to the support of the Corfiote Jewish and non-Jewish community. As such they resembled other merchant diaspora networks that also lacked a national center such as the Armenians or the Orthodox Greek, which during the nineteenth century were still living primarily in Ottoman territories.

The third panel examined “Philanthropy and National Culture.” Hanna Shaul Bar Nissim’s paper, “The Philanthropy of the Jewish Federations: Democratization and Communal Participation,” explored the changes in organized Jewish philanthropy and its implications for democratization and diversification of communal philanthropic behavior and civic engagement. Looking at the United Jewish Federation of New York, the largest local philanthropy in the world, Nissim
shows how over a period of one hundred years the organization integrated new Jewish subgroups into its array of activities — individuals and communities enjoying the services funded by the Federation, and eventually donors for potential leadership. Some of these new groups included Sephardic Jews, Russian-speaking Jews, modern Orthodox, Israelis, and more recently LGBTQ and interfaith families.

The paper presented by Maja Gildin Zuckerman, “Giving and Receiving: Zionist Relief Work and Class Assertions,” looked at western Zionist relief work towards eastern Jews and the ways in which this work consolidated class differences and barriers between Jews. Rather than following the Zionists’ own self-described image of an egalitarian effort to bring eastern European Jews out of their misery, Maja suggests analyzing Zionist relief work through the actual dynamics and practices that played out between givers and recipients. Looking at Danish Zionist relief work prior to World War One, Maja shows that Zionist relief work, on the one hand, aspired to bring together Jews as a united and solidary people that stood up for each other as equals, and, on the other hand, imposed norms, values, and expectations that emphatically distinguished the immigrants from the “native” and “sedentary” Jews.

In her keynote lecture, “Imagining Remigration & Return: Translating Experience and Utopia into Film in Postwar Germany,” Miriam Rürup showed how statelessness was part and parcel of the post-1945 cultural and movie scene. The talk dealt with the ways in which statelessness was reflected on the screen and how the personal experiences of migration, persecution, and remigration of those writing plays and acting on screen were translated into the fictional world.

The last panel, “Space and Segregation,” brought together three scholars to look at the ways in which space and segregation interacted. In “The Establishment of the Cinémathèque in Sderot: Class, Space and Ethnicity,” Moti Gigi examined power and economic relations in Israel between the residents of Sderot and those of the Sha’ar Hanegev’s Regional Council from 1950 to 2012. The paper analyzed the conflicts between the development towns and the kibbutzim in Sderot. While the development towns were mainly inhabited by Mizrahi Jews of modest socioeconomic backgrounds, the kibbutzim were populated by the Ashkenazi elites. The opening of the Cinémathèque in Sderot was meant to bring both groups together. Moti asks how the historic power relations between Sderot and Sha’ar Hanegev were shaped and shows that the historical changes that
occurred in the social, political, and economic spheres as well as in social identities provide some answers.

Iona Dascultu presented a paper titled “Social Dynamics in the Shargorod Ghetto during the Holocaust,” in which she addressed the issue of agency of Holocaust victims. She focused on the city of Shargorod, which was occupied by the Germans in 1941 and annexed by Romania later in the same year. Both local and foreign Jews were kept in the Shargorod ghetto. Dascultu argues that the presence of the local, Suceava Jews in the ghetto impacted the lives of all the inhabitants. Without the money of the Suceava community, the opening of several relief institutions existent in the ghetto would have been delayed, resulting in a higher mortality rate. Also, the tactics engaged by an experienced leader in the ghetto improved living conditions. Even though some of the deported Jews reported experiencing minor tensions with the local Jews, both groups worked on their issues and eventually helped each other to adjust to the new reality: surviving in a ghetto.

The last paper, by Tim Corbett, entitled “Religious Culture, Social Standing, and Reflections of Belonging in Nineteenth-Century Viennese Sepulchral Epigraphy,” examined the Jewish sepulchral epigraphy of various Jewish cemeteries in Vienna. Tim suggests that the sepulchral culture in Vienna’s Jewish cemeteries evinced parallels with contemporaneous Christian sepulchral culture in that city, especially amongst the burgeoning middle and upper middle classes of the nineteenth century. Corbett offered a comparative analysis of the sepulchral discourses to be found on grave-memorials in surviving Jewish and Christian cemeteries in Vienna, and of how Christian and Jewish identities were constructed in accordance with — or in competition to — concurrent developments in class, social standing, and various other facets of belonging in nineteenth-century imperial Viennese society.

Altogether, the papers showed that Jews were central to shaping philanthropic, political, and social processes. Jews did not merely “enter” the middle classes, as the historiography has shown, but they were crucial in shaping these classes. Furthermore, various papers have noted the contingency of space and place and the intersectionality of the resultant identities. Touching upon “space” ranging from Israel, to Romania, the Mediterranean, the U.S., and eastern Europe, this conference shed light on some new, innovative historical research that grapples with these themes.

Constanze Kolbe (Indiana University, Bloomington)