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The Conference Polyphonic Jewish Heritage: Negotiations, Constructions, Authorizations

The conference, which explored the polyphony of Jewish cultural heritage through a range of topics, took place between 11 and 13 February 2025 at the Institute for Empirical Cultural Studies in Freiburg. The conference was jointly organized by Markus Tauschek and Laura Marie Steinhaus (Institute for Empirical Cultural Studies, University of Freiburg) as well Ina Henning and Frantz! Blessing (Music Department of the Institute of the Arts, University of Education Schwäbisch Gmünd). This collaboration took place within the framework of the DFG Priority Program *Jewish Cultural Heritage*.

Throughout the conference, past and present were frequently linked, thus providing an opportunity to question the evolution of social categories of difference. A central thread connecting the various talks, presentations, and lectures was the problematization of the one-dimensional conceptions of the category “Jewish”. The speakers attempted to navigate the tension between the need to (re) produce categories for the purpose of examinability and the problems

that “narrow” conceptions of Jewish (heritage) entail. The focus was on highlighting the ambiguities that are often simplified in the examined contexts. The following report outlines the contents of the conference, with reference to the different panels that structured the various presentations.

In the first panel, *Jewish Heritage and Culture of Remembrance*, Meyrav Levy presented her research on how Jewish life and cultural heritage are (re)presented in Bavarian museums. She concluded that the narration of Jewish history is often detached from dominant historical narratives such as the history of cities. Thus, an outsourcing of the representation of “Jewish” often takes place. Moreover, she discovered that “Jewishness” is often conceptualized and portrayed as predominantly religious or focused on persecution. Contemporary Jewish life practices are often overlooked, and everyday life and integration are not represented adequately.

Zuzanna Dziuban and Todd Sekuler examined the concept of *atopic heritage*, based on Roland Barthes’ notion of *atopy*. The speakers de-

scribed the material traces that link the past and present while evoking affects beyond conventional categories. Sekuler analyzed fragmented family films as such heritage; Dziuban focused on Shoah ashes in memorials which raise ethical and religious concerns. Both cases highlight the ambivalent and unsettling materiality of the Shoah as a challenge to established forms of remembrance.

The second panel, *Historical and Comparative Perspectives*, dealt with cultural history and remembrance. With the example of Saxony, Alexander Walther traced the negotiations surrounding the treatment of Jewish heritage in the GDR (German Democratic Republic). Private attempts at commemoration were initially rejected and it was not until 1988—the 50th anniversary of the November pogroms—that commemoration was desired by the state. This cultural-political framework legitimized commemoration. Furthermore, Walther explained the interest in Yiddish culture in the GDR by linking it to socialist ideals.

Julia Roos examined the representation of Jewish history in non-Jewish museums in the FRG (Federal Republic of Germany) between 1960 and 1988. Jewish museums run by Jews were destroyed during the National Socialist regime and afterwards Jewish histories in museums were mostly told by non-Jews. Roos identified varying degrees of involvement by Jewish actors. In most exhibitions, “Jewish” was primarily conceptualized as a religion, neglecting the

self-positioning of the actors. This often led to universalization, raising the need to problematize it.

Michelle Stoffel explored the production of Jewish heritage by Jewish protagonists themselves with the example of Jewish welfare. Jewish association structures in particular have been little researched, especially because many of the people involved were murdered in the Shoah. Stoffel raised the question of the extent to which the Jewish welfare system was also a reaction to social background.

Within the panel *Staging Jewish Heritage/Stage-Managing Jewish Heritage* two historically oriented topics were presented. Olga Radchenko examined how the Jewish heritage of Eastern Galicia was portrayed in German-language travel guides. These guides usually depicted less assimilated Jews or Jewish buildings, though to a lesser extent in relation to other content. In most cases, they reported different ethnic groups coexisting rather than living together as a community, and less assimilated Jews, in particular, were thematized and ethicized.

Mirko Przystawik also dealt with travel literature in the form of travel guides. He observed a development from listing material culture toward focusing on living Jewish culture. These representations also reflected external ascriptions projected onto Jewish culture. Notably, the Jewish community was largely excluded from shaping or contesting these portrayals. Przystawik emphasizes that such depictions are not only marked

by processes of othering, but are also profoundly classist. What might appear to be innocuous travel literature thus emerges as a site of stereotyping, hegemonic knowledge production, and socio-cultural exclusion.

Marc Ryszkowski also adopted a historical focus in the field of “architectural heritage.” He presented the “Moorish synagogue” building type as an element of the production of foreignness. Bavarian Jewish policy decreed that Christian-inspired period styles were prohibited in synagogue construction, and the resulting orientalizing design forms for synagogues marked a demarcation from the majority society. Ryszkowski also identified differing dynamics between Bavaria and Baden. In Baden, he observed self-reinforcing tendencies following the Bavarian example, whereas in Bavaria he noted the powerful position of the Royal Architecture Committee.

The designation of Jewish cultural heritage is a complex and contentious issue. In her keynote address, Dani Kranz critically examined the inherent tendency toward essentialization in such classifications. Referring to a distinctly Jewish cultural heritage necessitates the definition of a homogenized group, raising the fundamental question: What defines Jewish identity? This inquiry becomes increasingly intricate upon closer examination. Should Jewishness be determined by adherence to Halacha, religious faith, or cultural socialization? Kranz contends that the very

framework of cultural heritage risks essentializing—or even biologizing—groups by reducing diverse identities to a fixed set of characteristics.

The academic debate is only one of many indicators of the problematic reduction of Jewish people to their religion. Later in the conference, particular attention was given to the representation of Judaism in educational contexts.

Klaus Schilling opened the panel with an innovative approach, presenting his project on Judaism on picture cards designed for classroom use. This visual and tactile teaching aid encourages students to engage with contemporary Jewish life rather than focusing on its historical association with persecution, the Shoah, and guilt. Additionally, the cards create opportunities for identification. For example, the depiction of the Jewish gymnastics and sports club Makkabi highlights the diversity of Jewish life, demonstrating that Jewish identities are not necessarily defined by religious affiliation. Schilling’s approach can be summarized as follows: fostering connections to one’s own experience, rather than reinforcing differences.

In addition to proposing alternative portraits of Judaism in school contexts, current representations were also criticized. In their presentations, Frantz! Blessing and Ina Hennig critically examined the representation of Jewish identity within the school context, with a particular focus on depictions of Judaism in educational

media. Blessing's contribution centered on the visual representation of Jewish identity in school textbooks, employing a methodological approach grounded in image analysis. Her findings reveal a predominantly one-dimensional depiction of Jewish life—particularly through an overemphasis on religious practice within Orthodox frameworks and a marked gender asymmetry in visual representation. This reductive focus not only obscures the internal diversity of Jewish life worlds, but also contributes to the construction of a homogenized and normative image of “being Jewish” that fails to reflect either the historical heterogeneity or the contemporary multiplicity of Jewish identities.

Ina Hennig, by contrast, investigated the field of music education, illustrating in a compelling manner how Jewish themes are frequently rendered invisible or addressed only marginally within music curricula. Her pointed title, *Entthemenisierung wider Willen* (Unintentional Omission), captures the paradoxical dynamic of a pedagogical void: although Jewish culture is historically and musically present, it is rarely explicitly identified or consciously integrated into everyday classroom practice. Both contributions highlight the extent to which discourses on Jewish history and contemporary Jewish life within schools remain shaped by processes of reduction, omission, and stereotyping.

Following an anthropological ap-

proach that foregrounds the dynamic social, political, and media dimensions of cultural heritage, another panel explored the complex, fluid, and contested nature of Jewish cultural heritage. Victoria Hegner presented her current research on the Jewish Renewal movement, which centers on the relationship between humans and nature. She conceptualizes this relationship as a key dimension of religious interpretation and experience. Against the backdrop of ecological crisis and planetary challenges, this relationship gains renewed theological and practical urgency. Within this movement, Judaism is not only interpreted in close connection to nature but is also highly politicized—particularly in relation to environmental ethics, sustainability, and social justice.

Samuel Weigel focused on the production and transmission of knowledge in the context of Jewish heritage. He analyzed how Jewish cultural heritage is constructed, communicated, and transformed both within Jewish communities and through national, supranational, and academic institutions. Particular emphasis was placed on the role of digital media, which—especially during the COVID-19 pandemic—emerged as a central medium for cultural practices and the formation of collective memory.

Laura Marie Steinhaus examined the *Meet a Jew* project, which facilitates encounters between Jewish individuals and pupils. This project

aims to make the plurality of Jewish life visible and to counteract overly one-dimensional, primarily religiously coded perceptions of Jewish identity. Through personal encounters in everyday settings, Jewish life is rendered multifaceted, dynamic, and socially embedded.

The conference concluded with collective reflection on existing research gaps in the field of Jewish heritage—an outlook that not only identified *desiderata* but also opened up new avenues for scholarly inquiry. Laura Brüggemann highlighted the category of Jewish “utility films,” a largely unexplored area whose ostensibly documentary character demands critical examination. Utility films are commonly regarded as an “objective” film genre, primarily designed to convey information, and are therefore frequently utilized in institutions such as museums. Brüggemann emphasized the need to analyze their aesthetic, rhetorical, and communicative strategies as well as their production contexts—particularly in relation to the construction and mediation of Jewish visibility. These films are often not explicitly labelled “heritage” and are therefore often not considered worthy of preservation, making them difficult to access in the context of research.

Judith Müller drew attention to the insufficient scholarly engagement with Jewish literature within German-speaking contexts. She raised questions regarding possible definitions of “Jewish literature” and

emphasized that multilingual connections, in particular, have been insufficiently considered. She addressed the underexplored reception of Hebrew literature by German-speaking Jews in the 1920s and 1930s, calling for a more nuanced investigation into the cultural and linguistic dynamics of this literary exchange.

To conclude, the conference operated within a productive tension: the exploration of “Jewish heritage” necessarily required the application of particular categories of Jewish identity, while simultaneously subjecting those very categories to critique. One of the conference’s objectives was to render visible the processes of stereotyping, reduction, and hegemonization that have historically shaped representations of Jewish culture and continue to do so. The discussions made it clear that Jewish heritage cannot be solely conceptualized in terms of the Shoah, religion, persecution, or guilt; rather, it must be understood in its diversity, immediacy, and cultural vitality. At the same time, the negotiation of cultural heritage brought to the fore a central challenge: What qualifies as Jewish heritage—and who determines what it is? Who claims interpretative authority, and who is thereby legitimized as part of the Jewish community? Moreover, what does it mean to be “Jewish” when this identity is not confined to religious parameters alone?

The conference thus unfolded within an ambivalent field of tension, in which categorical attribu-

tions served as both analytical tools and objects of critical deconstruction. This ambivalence was not resolved, but rather intentionally foregrounded as a core feature of a polyphonic dis-

course—a stance that not only fosters deeper epistemological engagement, but also offers enduring analytical potential for cultural studies beyond the specific focus of Jewish heritage.

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