Archives, Documentation, and Institutions of Social Memory

Essays from the Sawyer Seminar

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Three Generations after the Fact

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Since 1955, the Leo Baeck Institute (LBI) is the central research institution for the history of German-speaking Jewry. The New York institute (there are affiliated Leo Baeck institutes in Jerusalem and London), with its vast archives, is in the midst of major changes. Its relationship to the public is expanding, with close association to major research and museum facilities in New York, at the Center for Jewish History (CJH), and in Berlin, at the new Jewish Museum (JMB). By becoming part of CJH, the LBI and the German Jewish legacy are recognized and integrated into the American Jewish identity, at the same time when “European Jewry” is emerging as a third force next to Israel and the United States.

The LBI became the central research archives for the history of German-speaking Jewry because at a time when no institution was interested in collecting and preserving these materials, the LBI became the only repository for the documents and personal papers of the refugees from central Europe.

Historical Background

In 1955 a group of leading representatives of German-speaking Jewry in America, Great Britain, and Israel decided to create a research center for the preservation of their own history and culture. German Jewish culture as it had been known was wiped out from continental Europe, and the expectation was that this extermination was final. Ten years after the Holocaust, the founders of the LBI agreed that in order to preserve the memory of this prolific ethnic group it was necessary to create a memorial to its vanished glorious existence. The plan was to collect as much documentation as possible to become a research archive and eventually to write a comprehensive history as the closing statement. It was to be more than merely an archive, however, but also, as the renowned historian George Mosse said, “the calling card of German Jewry.” The survivors would have a safe haven for their papers, their memoirs, and their photos. The institute became—along with others such as Congregation Habonim, founded one year after Kristallnacht, or the newspaper Aufbau, which very quickly became the major voice for the refugees from central Europe—a social institution as well as a scholarly one.

At the time, there was no German Jewish historiography in Germany. One of the first to attempt to introduce German Jewish historiography in postwar Germany was Adolf Leschnitzer, one of the founders of the LBI in New York, who in the 1930s had built a Jewish school system for Jewish students expelled from German schools. Starting in the late 1950s, he held lectures and seminars at the Berlin Free University. The generation of senior historians in Germany, the United States, and Israel teaching and researching German Jewish history almost all went through Professor Leschnitzer’s courses (these historians are about to retire).

For many years, the LBI existed as a singular entity on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, serving as a repository for the documents and a gathering point for members of the generation of refugees from Nazi Germany and widely ignored by the larger Jewish community. The LBI
Library and Archives did what other similar organizations do: acquisition, appraisal, preservation, accessioning, supporting researchers, and large historiographic projects. This took place in the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s, and early 1980s, when very few were actually interested in that history. In the beginning, the LBI was run by the refugees, from the director to the archivists and librarians, the secretaries and the many volunteer helpers, who processed the incoming papers of the famous and many not famous immigrants from central Europe.

The scope of the LBI research horizon is German-speaking Jewry throughout Europe, which stretches from the eastern parts of France to the eastern parts of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire, which is usually considered Yiddish-speaking territory. However, these eastern European lands in Poland and Russia were always territories of mixed ethnicities and languages, and many important writers in Czernowitz (Chernivtsi) published in German and were speaking the language along with Russian, Polish, Ukrainian, and Yiddish. This is where LBI touches on YIVO, which is the equivalent to the LBI for the Yiddish language and which, by the way, was founded in Berlin in 1925, at a time when Berlin was one of the main places in the world for the publication of Yiddish literature along with Warsaw and New York.

During the years since 1953, the LBI has collected a vast body of information and a huge library. Since 1956, the LBI in London has published the Leo Baeck Institute Year Book, which has grown to more than twenty thousand pages in over 750 fifty articles on all conceivable topics in the study of German Jewish history and culture. The first forty volumes of the Year Book are now available on CD-ROM, searchable as a whole for research purposes and usable as a teaching tool. The CD-ROM allows you to print selected passages or articles on specific topics and assemble them in course readers or import and quote in your research. The LBI also has an academic book series, the "wissenschaftliche Schriftenreihe," published with Mohr/Siebeck in Tuebingen, Germany, which has grown to over seventy volumes. Hundreds of books in English, German, and Hebrew are published with the sponsorship of the LBI, and there are thousands of books, dissertations, and articles that are based on the archival holdings of the LBI. In the late 1980s, the catalogs of the LBI Archives were converted from cards and paper to electronic databases, and recently the LBI published its online catalogs on the World Wide Web, accessible through its Web site.

After the end of the cold war, the LBI conducted a survey of Jewish source materials in the archives of the former East Germany. After nearly ten years of work, these inventories have been published in six volumes and are growing. They too will be published electronically. The original mission of the founders to write a comprehensive history of the German Jewish people has so far resulted in the four volumes of German-Jewish History in Modern Times, 1600–1945. A fifth volume is in production, a history of everyday life of German-speaking Jews in central Europe between 1600 and 1945. All of these studies have been done by the LBI with an international team of senior researchers from the United States, Israel, and Germany. The founders of the LBI believed that after the publication of such a well-documented story, the LBI would have served its purpose and could close. This vision of the founders did not hold true. The LBI is moving into a new context, in the United States as well as in Germany, and the materials that no one was interested in fifty years ago are more and more in demand. Collecting and preserving the documentation of German-speaking Jews is a more active enterprise than ever before.

The primary users for this archive are German or central European academics who with increasing interest are recreating a picture of that part of the German population their grandparents' generation had killed off. They are writing about German history, trying to add its absent chapters and thus rewriting and correcting the historiography of their fathers' generation. They are not writing Jewish history but German history. Among them is a group writing specifically about the destroyed Jewish communities in central Europe. These researchers are mostly local historians and lay people, teachers, town archivists, and librarians who went first into their local archives in order to collect and recover information about the local Jewish population that went into exile or was killed. Over the past few decades, mainly since the 1980s, thousands of books have come out serving as monuments to the Jews of their communities. Until now, no survey of these literally thousands of works has been done, and I am sure it would reveal much useful information about the attitudes and aspirations of the post-war generations of Germans trying to regain information about the extinguished parts of their history.

The Jewish side in German Jewish history is mainly written in the countries of exile by the grandchildren of the generation of founders of the LBI. These historians and scholars of cultural studies are the other major user group of the archives of the LBI. The two historiographies exist side by side. There are numerous encounters of the two groups at conferences and through journals and other publications, and yet there is only limited communication,
in part due to language problems. Only in recent years have young German historians started to go abroad and familiarize themselves with the historiography of the English-speaking world. The LBI has been an important destination—often the first opportunity to come into contact with “real” Jews and what is often experienced as the “Jewish” sensibility of New York. German researchers coming to New York are stepping into the territory of the exiles. They feel curious and excited, at the same time ashamed and guilty, and definitely experience something in the course of their research that they would not have experienced at home. This is particularly true with researchers coming from Austria who only recently discovered that their country played a major role in Nazi Germany and was not the “First victim” as had been declared for many years. It has always been the added appeal of the LBI that it provides access to the strange world of New York to these students from central Europe, especially the truly unique experience of an encounter with Jews who can no longer be found at home.

Now, more than fifty years after the Holocaust, Germany is debating how to memorialize the Nazi past and how the new capital Berlin is the place to do it. Berlin has ongoing and seemingly endless discussions over the need, purpose, mission, and costs of the JMB, the Holocaust Memorial, and a memorial to the Gestapo called Topographie des Terrors. But the debate does not preclude the reality that all these institutions will exist and are widely regarded as positive steps. The Leo Baeck Institute is about to open a branch of its archives as a collaborative project together with the Jewish Museum Berlin. Only five years ago, this was an unthinkable, undesirable idea, unwelcome from both sides.

The LBI Archives could also play a role in providing continuity to the new, emerging Jewish community in Berlin. Jewish communities in Germany are the fastest-growing Jewish communities in Europe. The LBI in Berlin project supplies historical background information to the new members of the Jewish community on their “predecessors” and their predecessors’ traditions. Discontinuity is not a choice. The generation of recent immigrants from the former Soviet Union will either disengage from the Jewish community or relate to their own history and the German Jewish past. To connect to a Russian Jewish past is rather unlikely, though not impossible. The future will tell. However, this will lead to a situation of mixed ethnicities within central European Jewry as it existed earlier in the twentieth century. That component, the bridge and interchange between central Europe and western Europe, and eastern Europe, is addressed by a new study institute in Leipzig, the Simon Dubnow Institute for Central European and Eastern European Studies under the leadership of Professor Dan Diner. The new CJH in New York will not only provide the comprehensive European picture but also add the American side of the story by way of the American Jewish Historical Society. This will lead to the study of migration from east to west for which there are many traces in the archives, but due to the cold war and also the division of the Jewish world, this obvious topic was never really studied.

The German Perspective

German society is struggling with historical discontinuity. With the relocation of the capital and the change in government, the emphasis has changed. Cultural issues have moved to the forefront and are being handled by a federal minister of cultural affairs, a function that did not exist in previous governments. The missing German Jews are the symbol for the historical disruption. This reconstruction project for German history uses German Jewish history and the memory of the Nazi past manifested in the assembly of the three institutions in the center of Berlin: the JMB, the Holocaust Memorial, and the Museum of the Gestapo. As much as academic historians have come to a consensus over the meaningfulness of these institutions, it is now German journalists who have entered into the debate. The reason for them picking the JMB is that it is the only finished building at this point. This debate definitely has a new tone compared with only a few years ago. One indication of that is the recently published book *Jewrassic Park* by a cultural correspondent of the Berlin newspaper *Der Tagespiegel*, Thomas Lackmann, who compares the new Berlin museum with a museum planned by Nazi Germany in Prague to show the vanished culture of the Jews. The analogy is, from a crude German point of view, obvious. It is meant to illustrate that this museum is a display of the disappeared Jews. The fact that the analogy indicates a fundamental insensitivity toward the Jewish minority in Germany has not occurred to Lackmann or his book editor.

The LBI is playing a major role in legitimizing the JMB as the largest museum for Jewish history in Europe. This happens at a time when there is the attempt to create the issue of European Jewry as a third force next to Israel and the United States. In *Jewrassic Park* an attempt is made to redefine German Jewish culture in Germany as an American import that has been watered down Disney style.
Germany's lingering anti-Americanism is a not-so-hidden form of anti-Semitism.

It is interesting to see how the LBI was used for this process of legitimizing the German politics of memory. The former German federal cultural minister, Michael Naumann, now publisher of the German weekly *Die Zeit*, was the major architect of building and consolidating the monuments of German memory in Berlin, taking charge of the situation when the local Berlin government left the decision-making process in chaos. The new capital is to represent memory, shame, and mourning with three major institutions and thus will provide a comprehensive symbolic order for the new capital. The JMB, designed by Daniel Libeskind, a Polish American Jew, is about to open; construction has not yet started on the Holocaust Memorial, with its design by the American architect Peter Eisenman; and the Museum of the Gestapo, designed by a Swiss architect, was stopped after initial construction. To some people, this means the whole setup in the center of Berlin is overdone, that there is too much weight given to the Nazi past, which obviously signals the discomfort that the constant reminder of the past imposes; on the other hand, the function of these symbolic and also real places of memorializing is to demonstrate that the new unified Germany does not want to let any doubts linger that three generations after the fact this history needs to be remembered for what it was.

What is peculiar about the Berlin public discourse concerning the JMB, the Holocaust Memorial, and also the Gestapo museum is that there is much criticism, a lot of reporting, and little defense. There is no exchange on matters, the criticism is carried out by minor journalistic figures, and the tone is one of discontent, complaint, and some cynicism. The refusal to recognize the continuing reality of these institutions has to be seen as a reflex of the political climate in the city of Berlin. And since the current discourse will not change the reality of these institutions, the discourse needs to be regarded as highly symbolic. The fact that LBI is “coming back” to provide the information that is necessary for a comprehensive picture of Germany is still waiting to be recognized for what it is: something deployed opportunistically but not taken seriously. The level of consciousness to do so has not been reached yet.

The peculiar journalistic case of the conservative newspaper *Die Welt* is particularly telling. This flagship paper of the Axel Springer publishing company has become a major, if not the major, voice of criticism of the JMB. For many years, especially while Axel Springer himself was still alive, there was an almost uncritical sup-

port of everything Jewish. Springer died more than a decade ago. Over the past few years, *Die Welt* has published the harshest and also the most destructive pieces that suggest it wants the museum to fail; at the very least the paper does not provide positive ideas about the future of the museum.

The LBI is the reminder that there once was a past in which Germans and Jews did live in one country, and what needs to be conveyed through the JMB in combination with the LBI is that Germany will make another attempt to integrate and tolerate minorities and strangers. At the entrance of the Reichstag, the parliament building, there is a slogan, “To the German people,” which was intended to provoke the imperial powers by playing on the contrast between the undemocratic power of the kaiser versus the parliament of the people. A recently installed artwork situated in one of the courtyards of the Reichstag by the New York–based German artist Hans Haake provides a contrast to this slogan. Haake’s neon sculpture “To the population” plays on the theme of the rights of the Germans versus the rights of everyone living in Germany. Are Jews in Germany accepted as an integral part of the German people? The late leader of the Council of Jews in Germany, Ignatz Bubis, was having second thoughts shortly before his death whether the once optimistic developments would in fact continue to head in the right direction. The recent rise of antiforeigner (including anti-Jewish) violence casts doubt.

A prominent issue in the debate over the LBI coming to Berlin is whether the archives will bring original documents to Berlin or microfilm copies. In fact, researchers increasingly use microfilm because in many cases the fragility of the originals makes them difficult to work with. The point is that the LBI collections will, for the first time, be available in Germany. This is often termed as a “return” to Germany, although the LBI was founded in Jerusalem and never had an institute in Germany. This is a matter of pain and ambivalence for many refugees and their heirs who specifically gave or intended to give their papers to the LBI in New York and who are already confronted with repeated pleas from the local German Jewish museums and memorial sites. If they choose the latter, the great body of German Jewish collective history will become fragmented, even if accessible. At the LBI, the integrity of this story is maintained and becomes a permanent part of the material deposited at the “archive of record.”

At the same time that the German Jewish component is reintegrated into German historiography and becomes the necessary and major symbol of the memory culture, there
is a current redefinition of American Jewish identity that has made space for the German Jewish heritage and that is being preserved in the newly formed CJH as part of the continuum of Jewish culture in the diaspora. Only a few years ago, the notion that the Yekkes and the Ostjuden would come to share a building, a reading room, to organize a joint project also seemed very unlikely.

NOTES

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