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German City, Jewish Memory

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CONCLUSION

This book aims to come to terms with the changing meaning of place, remembrance, and identity over the course of almost a thousand years. Worms was certainly always unique in many ways; the city and its Jewish community thrived on its cultural icons and with little economic power came to possess a formidable cultural capital. Its small and increasingly insignificant regional community featured prominently in debates between Jews and Christians, attempts to fashion and refashion Jewish cultures, and both German and Jewish efforts to confront the legacy of the Holocaust. Indeed, remembrance in Worms not only mattered to its locals but also functioned as a space of negotiation between them and Worms's many visitors.

Today, globalization's international networks of communication and commerce are accused of threatening the very existence of local cultures. Other critics, however, counter that this new media perspective in fact facilitates a reassertion of localism. Far from being symptomatic of an anti-modern backlash, the quest for *Heimat*, for example, appears to be part of the very globalization it might appear to contradict. The virtual reconstruction of the early modern Jewish lane in the Jewish museum in Berlin encourages visitors to follow their inspection of the museum with a visit to Worms. Likewise, the scaled model of Worms's synagogue in the Diaspora Museum in Tel Aviv actually underscores its lasting importance despite its "global" context and aspirations.

Cities, small towns, and villages have always played a formidable role in Jewish history. Local and regional spaces, however, do not always reflect the most stable and hospitable conditions for Jewish life. It was the First Crusade period's experience of destruction, alienation, and (temporary) expulsion that paradoxically bound the reconstituted community of Jews to the physical landscape of Worms, where they remembered their martyrs. The magnitude of the destruction, as well as the elevated self-understanding of the Rhineland community that resulted from it, led the Worms Jews to deviate from standard practice by instituting a new fast day. Building on this model of highly localized forms of remembrance, the community added yet more days of remembrance to their annual cycle in order to recall the destruction of 1349 and 1615.

Alongside these rituals of commemoration emerged narratives about the origin of the community that gave credence to the community's rabbinic leaders and fended off accusations regarding the medieval Jew's responsibility in the death of Jesus. These narratives expressed both the precarious situation and the self-elevation of a community that increasingly saw itself as a small Jerusalem.

Places have historically shaped the self-understanding of Jewish communities and defined their sense of home, belonging, and tradition. Entrenched in their local cultures of remembrance, then, Worms individuals saw their temporary expulsion from the city during the seventeenth century as a state of exile. In the words of one of the congregation's leading rabbis of this period, the community existed insofar as it observed its customs and fast days, regardless of where it was. Even after the Holocaust, many former Worms Jews linked their upbringing and identity to Worms by readily reciting its particular textual traditions.

Remembrance in Worms was shaped and influenced not just by a local context but also by contacts between geographically distant practitioners; these encounters, however, did not render the local obsolete. The German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnis comprehends the advent of modernity as the weakening of the community (*Gemeinde*), marked by its traditional practices and a personal sense of belonging, and the strengthening of a more individualistic, competitive, and impersonal organization of society (*Gesellschaft*). For Tönnis, however, premodern societies based upon local cultures displayed homogeneity and stability.¹ Yet this was not always the case, of course. Against this romantic depiction of the world, even a small town like Worms, located along a commercial artery like the Rhine, would have appeared already during premodern times to be a tenuous place of both dwellers and travelers and not a place marked by a stable network of social relations. Delineating the boundaries of remembrance therefore highlights the extent to which a small community like Worms was plugged into shifting local, regional, national and transnational contexts.

The production of the past would ultimately emerge in a wider, more diverse geographical space than the individual city itself, a space in which Jews and non-Jews, locals and visitors, historians, poets, tourists, and many others would participate. With the spatial and social dissemination of memory, external influences would also come to bear on the work of remembrance within the community. Already the Hebrew chronicles and the insertion of dirges into the liturgy for *Tisha be-Av* ensured the

remembrance of the Worms community outside of the city. The advent of the printing press fundamentally refashioned remembrance, as new means of expressing memory emerged in texts and images. Debates about the veracity of local historical Jewish traditions crossed denominational boundaries and moved from very local contexts into city chronicles, the literature of the Hebraists, and even the early modern travel guides, thus engendering overlapping fields of production and contestation of local memory during this time. Partly inspired by the way the citizenry of Worms had reinvented its past from the fifteenth century onward, these new traditions significantly enlarged the congregation's heritage as well. Isaac Jost, the author of the first comprehensive history of the Jews, wrote an introduction to the first local history of Worms. Notwithstanding his critical attitude toward elements of Worms's Jewish tradition, Leopold Zunz's call upon communities to preserve their tombstones promoted local historical preservation. After the expulsion and destruction of the community during the Nazi era, its former Jews, as well as chaplains, members of the American armed forces, and displaced persons, visited the city as early as 1945. Through these visitors' reports and articles, a wider Jewish public became acquainted with the desolate state of the destroyed synagogue and the remains of the former archive and museum. The presence of these travelers promoted the preservationist work that began at the end of the war and became instrumental in shaping the remembrance of the Jewish past in Worms, which led to the rebuilding of the destroyed synagogue.

Like the city itself, its Jewish community experienced dramatic changes, ruptures, destruction, and rebuilding in the decades after the war, and the continuous push to recall the past should not distract us from the obvious discontinuities. Paradoxically, the trajectory from a culture of remembrance to a space of memory passes through continuities and losses. Worms represents a storehouse from which material can be easily pulled and employed in different contexts, so that the past is always in turn shaped by the present.

Placed at the intersection of local heritage production and the promotion of tourism to the city, Jewish historians during the modern age did not simply study the past but also provided the burgeoning field of tourism with its information, as community officials and scholars assisted in the preservation of historical artifacts. City archivists, who often wrote the most authoritative guides to the city, helped Jewish activities by adding complexity to often overly sanitized stories about what happened.

Interestingly, some channels of remembrance exhibit greater continuity than others, for better or worse, depending upon their relationship to the truth. Tourism, for one, displays an almost uncanny continuity. In his autobiography, the eminent Jewish historian and political scientist Walter Laqueur recalls that when he left Germany in 1938, he brought with him to Palestine Baedeker's guidebook to Germany. When he read an updated version in 1983, he encountered a familiar portrayal of Germany in the opening page. The text had not changed in decades: "The Empire, the Republic, the Hitlers have come and gone . . . but Baedeker still dwells on farmhouse and the old Germanic 'grouped village,' stately castles and the walled towns," Laqueur laconically noted.² Similarly, Worms still boasts today of the *Nibelungen*, its relationship to the German emperors, and Martin Luther alongside the synagogue and the cemetery.

Modern critics castigate nostalgia as a failed and wishful sense of desire, one predicated on an imaginary immediacy of the past that negates historical determinacy. As David Lowenthal noted, nostalgia is "a topic of embarrassment and a term of abuse. Diatribe upon diatribe denounces it as reactionary, repressive, ridiculous."³ These critics trace nostalgia to the advent of modernity, framing it as an anti-modern desire that emerged with the break-up of temporal continuity. Yet the construction of local heritage and invented traditions significantly predates modernity. The local heritage of Worms was as much a product of the Middle Ages and early modern times as it was of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Already at the beginning of the seventeenth century, members of the Jewish community rebuilt the synagogue by consciously preserving existing structures and copying older architectural styles. Even the newly built Rashi chapel was erected in a style reminiscent of the Middle Ages. Critical sensibilities toward the reliability of legendary accounts of the community and the invention of new traditions were also not limited to the modern period.

Nevertheless, modernity did fundamentally alter Jewish life and cultures of remembrance. Religious reform, social advancement, and, above all, civic equality changed things. Though the Enlightenment flourished mainly in Jewish urban centers in northern Germany, the arrival of French troops in the Rhineland overwhelmed existing ways of life there. The Jews' emancipation under French occupation represented a discontinuity with previous forms of Jewish self-government and traditional royal alliance. In response to these changed circumstances, Reform Judaism arose and threatened to unravel the cohesiveness of the Jewish commu-

nity. The revolution of 1848–49 threw the Jews into the turmoil of political conflict as well.

Yet, instead of trying to return to the practices of a distant past, Worms Jews looked ahead, seeing themselves as culturally integrated members of the city, and of German society. Publicizing their local heritage reconfigured the local memory landscape during the *Kaiserreich* as a realm of German *and* Jewish historical memory, while the Romantics' conception of the Rhineland heightened the visibility of Worms in the increasingly competitive market around Germany's travel destinations. The region's reputation as a quintessential German landscape, shaped by sublime nature and covered by picturesque towns with historical castles and churches, in turn aided Jewish efforts to negotiate these contradictory drives both inward and outward. Nostalgic recollection was less an antidote to the cultural and religious transformation of the Jewish community than an integral element of it.

Worms's venerated community therefore also challenged the West's pervasive enchantment with eastern European Jewry during the first decades of the twentieth century. Whereas twentieth-century German Jewish intellectuals deemed eastern European Jewry to represent a more authentic form of Judaism (in turn buttressing their critical distance regarding the politics of modernization and integration), they found in Worms some comfort in the trappings and narratives of its past, and this place therefore remained intimately connected to the modern projects of cultural and religious change. In the nineteenth century, the recovery of local Jewish tradition helped to overcome existing differences by uniting Jews of various religious orientations. The interest in local lore brought pride to the community as a whole and reaffirmed the Jews' faithfulness to their ancestors even as they departed from their traditions and customs. At the end of the nineteenth century, when David Philippon, for example, published with the Jewish Publication Society in America a book entitled *Old Jewries* (1894), he welcomed the disappearance of the physical remnants of ghettos in Europe. To him this underscored the great improvements that had been made during the nineteenth century. Despite his happiness about the disappearing Jewish lanes, however, his text betrayed a profound ambivalence, comprising his conscious distancing of himself from the past as well as his nostalgic adaptation to it.⁴ Arnold Eisen characterizes this eclectic pattern of observance and change as a salient feature of Jews' adjustment to modernity.⁵

With the advent of this modernity, then, newly emerging nation states

brought emancipation to the Jews while striving to eliminate legal, cultural, and political differences. The concept of the citizen established a lasting connection between the individual and the state, and the Jews in Germany sought this status. Yet localism and regionalism did not subside. While German Jews vociferously expressed their German patriotism, they ascribed their notions of home and belonging to individual cities. For critics of Jewish modernity, regionalism became *shibboleth* in their debates as they constructed the local as a powerful and pervasive metaphor against the ubiquitous leveling power of larger urban centers.

The deeply ingrained association of the Rhineland with the idea of Germany allowed the inclusion of Jewish tradition into Worms's heritage to authenticate a far more complex construction of German Jewry during the *Kaiserreich*, when regional and national German and Jewish identities coexisted in a contested social, religious, and political space. In this context, local heritage was at once distinctive *and* representative of larger German and German Jewish heritages. As local heritage became even more popular during the Weimar era for Jewish travelers, Worms was celebrated as essentially German and Jewish and came to represent both a birthplace and a symbol of German Jewry.

Today, Worms once again attracts curious travelers and provides an important place for Jews and others to learn about its storied community, but pain and sadness will always echo in the synagogue and in the minds of its visitors. These visitors' interactions with the monuments, however, will continue to prevent a more sanitized version of memory from emerging. Here nostalgia itself is fraught with ambiguities and reminds us that even the vestiges of Jewish life and cultures in Germany are invariably marked by the experience of the Holocaust. The monuments, as much as they invoke the rich legacy of the community, also speak of escape, destruction, and loss. Their history has not ended. In what ways this legacy will continue to matter, we do not know, but that it will seem certain.