TOWARD A TRANSNATIONAL JEWISH HISTORIOGRAPHY

Reflections on a Possible Future Path for the German-Jewish Past

GUY MIRON

In 1983 the historian Jacob Katz organized a conference on the impact of German Jewry. Participants were invited to reflect on the ways in which German-Jewish movements and processes such as Jewish enlightenment, social integration, German acculturation, and the transformation of religious life in Germany influenced other European Jewish communities. The departure point for this discussion was the assumption that German Jews were the forerunners of Jewish modernity and a major source of influence and inspiration to other Jews. However, not all the historians who took part in the conference, some of whom were Katz’s own students, shared this view. Thus, for example, Todd M. Endelman, a historian of the Jews in England, called for a differentiation between English Jewry and the German-Jewish model in his article entitled “The Englishness of Jewish Modernity in England,” suggesting that there are different types of Jewish modernity, not only the one that was shaped by the German model. Endelman’s approach came to dominate the reading of modern Jewish history.

During recent decades social historians have been predominantly preoccupied with the peculiarities of the Jewish communities in various nation states—arguing for a separate English-, French-, Hungarian-, and Russian-Jewish path to modernity. This tendency is also dominant among historians of German Jewry. One might say that German-Jewish history has developed during recent decades into a subdiscipline of German studies and that the vast majority of those dealing with it were trained as German historians and not as historians of Jewish history. This is the situation not only in Germany, Europe, and the United States but also in Israel, where the field of Jewish history is institutionalized as a separate and independent
department of so-called “general” (i.e., non-Jewish) history. As an Israeli historian who was trained in the 1990s in a department for Jewish history and turned to the field of German-Jewish history, I gradually came to realize that almost all the senior scholars as well as my colleagues working in the field came from departments for “general” history and were trained in German history rather than in Jewish history. This fact has implications for their research questions, the historiographical context of their scholarship, and also ultimately for the fruits of their work. Most of them did not interpret German-Jewish history in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as part of wider pan-European Jewish developments, or were even aware of this historiography mainly of Eastern European history. Instead they focused their gaze on interpreting German-Jewish history in the wider context of German and European, non-Jewish, history.

In this short essay I will offer some thoughts on the future of the German-Jewish past. I will discuss the different implications of this conceptualization of German-Jewish history as a subdiscipline of German history and will offer some possible options for framing the German-Jewish past in the coming decades. These reflections will be presented through the prism of my own attempts to deal with German-Jewish history from a context of Jewish history.

THE SPATIAL TURN

The great wealth of scholarship that has been accumulated in the field of German-Jewish history in recent decades evokes questions about where it is heading. Scholars in the field sometimes get the impression that dealing with the German-Jewish past is close to exhaustion—we have now a rich and nuanced historical picture of the political, social, cultural, and religious phenomena that characterized German-speaking Jews from the late eighteenth century until the Holocaust. An international research network is spreading in North America, Israel, Europe, and especially in Germany, where Jewish studies are still generously funded by the state and produce a large number of publications on diverse German-Jewish topics. This ever-growing research corpus, which includes an ever-growing number of case studies and regional projects, is so rich that it is becoming almost impossible to fully grasp and characterize it in its entirety. Undoubtedly, for younger scholars interested in doing research on the German-Jewish past, the challenge of finding a “research gap,” or uncharted territory in German-Jewish historiography, is becoming ever more difficult. But every generation has its own need to reinterpret the past according to changing circumstances and new perspectives—and this is also valid for the German-Jewish past.
I believe that the variety of “turns” discussed during the recent decades in humanities and social sciences may inspire a regeneration of German-Jewish historiography. The enormous corpus of sources and research projects that is available for German-Jewish historians can be used to ask new questions about language (the linguistic turn), culture (the cultural turn), body (the corporal turn), the economy (the economic turn), and so on. For the sake of the discussion here I will explore how the so-called “spatial turn” can inspire new questions and thus enrich our understanding of the German-Jewish past.

The spatial turn is based on the view that space is not simply a given but rather a product of social and mental construction. Its forerunner, Henri Lefebvre, rebuked the view of space as a neutral and empty container. In his seminal book entitled *The Production of Space*, published in 1974, he maintained that the transparency of space is just an illusion that should be replaced by a more subtle approach to space; an approach that will acknowledge “social space” and “mental space” as products of social construction. Since the publication of Lefebvre’s pioneering study, the use of concepts such as “space,” “place,” and “mapping,” which in the past were primarily associated with geography and urban planning, have become dynamic and dominant components in the analysis of social and cultural developments.

The growing influence of the spatial turn can be associated with the accelerating process of globalization. Even if the decline of the nation-state as a worldwide phenomenon is still highly disputed, one cannot deny the fact that since the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, technological, political, and communication transformations have put an end to the era in which the nation-state was the undisputed dominant social, linguistic, and cultural unit. Moving beyond traditional social and historical fixation on the nation-state, scholars have become ever more aware of a variety of social and cultural phenomena that they regard as “transnational.” These new impulses of the conceptualization of space are also referred to as “the transnational turn.”

**JEWISH PLACE AND EUROPEAN SPACE**

Jewish history offers a great and, at times, a unique setting for reevaluating a variety of topics in modern European history using the insights of the spatial turn. Based on the theories of Henri Lefebvre, Edward W. Soja, David Harvey, Karl Schlögel, and others, the meaning of “place,” and “space” in Jewish history should be reexamined. For example, the complex relations between notions such as “homeland,” “exile,” and “diaspora” can be used for analyzing the “mental maps” through which Jews navigated the challenges of integration, inclusion, and exclusion in European societies during the age of emancipation.
In recent years a number of publications have benefited from this new research orientation. The volume *Jewish Topographies*, which was published in 2008, was devoted, according to its editors, to following Lefebvre and Soja in developing spatialization of the Jewish historical experience and mapping Jewish daily life. Living in the margins as a minority without a sovereign territorial base throughout, Jews developed a variety of minority spatialization strategies. Two more recent volumes offer a great variety of case studies, exemplifying the potential of the spatial perspectives for modern German-Jewish history. Still, it seems that with the impact of the spatial turn a new transnational Jewish historiography is only now beginning to materialize.

What can be the influence of this new spatial orientation on the transnational thought in Jewish history and how can it inspire the future of German-Jewish historiography? The dominant attitude of European-Jewish historiography, as presented by Jonathan Frankel in the early 1990s, was based on a clear spatial view. Seeking to break free from the bipolar and dichotomous distinction between assimilation (associated with modern Western and Central European Jewries) and Jewish nationalism (associated with modern East European Jewries), Jewish historiography tended to focus on European nation states, concentrating on the topics of civil emancipation, social integration, and acculturation. As a result, Jewish historiography produced a conspicuously large number of monographs and articles on the history of European Jews as a component in their nation-state.

In the mid-1990s Shulamit Volkov reproached the inclination to view the history of European Jews solely from the perspective of the history of the nation-state within which they resided. Volkov did not underestimate the importance of the nation-state—after all, this was also the main thrust of her own work on German Jewry. Still, she emphasized the need to redress this approach by studying the history of European Jewries beyond the ethnocentric boundaries of the nation-state.

A more recent challenge to approaches to Jewish history through the lens of nation-states was raised in Moshe Rosman’s article “Jewish History across Borders.” Coming from a predominantly North American school of social historians, Rosman asserted that many Jewish historians produced a great variety of “narrowly focused monographs” based on an impressive command of European languages and local historiography. Still, their exclusive focus on the national political borders, he added, might blind scholars and prevent them from recognizing and analyzing wider phenomena. Influenced by the theoretical framework of the spatial turn, Rosman asked historians to pose new questions that would go beyond the nation-states and develop a new transnational approach to Jewish history. He also pointed to a variety of topics such as Jewish enlightenment, history of the Hasidic movement, and international Jewish solidarity—which in his opinion require a new spatial conceptualization.


TOWARD A COMPARATIVE APPROACH TO THE GERMAN-JEWISH PAST

Such calls for a paradigm change in Jewish history have already shown preliminary results, but it is too early to evaluate whether they will lead to a fundamental transformation in the spatial perspective of modern Jewish historiography. It is perhaps more important for us to explore how the spatial turn will affect German-Jewish historiography.

Jacob Katz’s initial view concerning the domination of the German-Jewish model of modernization as the direct source of influence on other Jewish communities is not necessarily valid. Decades of research have shown how the unique circumstances of various Jewish communities were part of unique developments of Jewish history in each national context. However, this preoccupation with the nation-state led to a growing detachment between historians working on Jewish communities in different countries. In the German-Jewish context this meant that accounts of German Jews became part of German historiography—a development that denied the rich research fruits of German-Jewish historians to a wider community of students of the Jewish experience.

The rich corpus of research dealing with German Jews can, and should, in my view, serve as the basis for a comparative study of modernization processes of Jewish communities in Europe. In so doing German-Jewish historiography will present an important contribution to the development of a nuanced narrative of a more integrative Jewish history. I will demonstrate this by using two case studies: Hungary and Iraq.

The comparison between German Jewry and Hungarian Jewry is useful for various reasons. The significance of the German-Jewish experience to our understanding of the European discourse on Jewish emancipation and the question of assimilation is undeniable. As an integral part of the Habsburg Empire, models of modernization that took shape in Germany reached Hungary, mainly through Vienna and Prague. The German-Jewish press also played a key role in Hungarian-Jewish polemics. For modern Hungarian Jews, German Jewry served as a “reference group” or even as a role model. On the other hand, for conservative Hungarian Jews, from whose midst modern Orthodoxy and Ultra Orthodoxy would later emerge, German Jewry served as a negative model, the source of all evil—Jewish assimilation.

In addition to these historical connections, it seems that the extensive amount of historiographical scholarly attention devoted to problems of Jewish modernization and integration into German society and its various implications during recent decades should be able to enrich research into the Hungarian case. German-Jewish historiography has significantly contributed to the elucidation of basic concepts such as “assimilation,” “acculturation,” “dissimilation,” and “cultural code” and has yielded plenty
of empirical studies in social history and Gentile-Jewish relations as well as gender history. The insights gained by this research can and should be implemented in the Hungarian-Jewish case in spite of all the clear differences.16

An especially fruitful product of German-Jewish historiography that can contribute to an innovative interpretation of Hungarian-Jewish history is the concept of co-constitutionality. In his book entitled *Jews and Other Germans*, which dealt with nineteenth-century Breslau, Till van Rahden aspired to transcend the more traditional concepts of “national homogeneity,” which were associated with the interpretation of German-Jewish history in majority-minority terms.17 Instead of viewing the German nation and national identity of the nineteenth century as a “given,” van Rahden saw it as an ongoing process of becoming, in which Jews, like Catholics and Protestants, played an active role. Following van Rahden’s analysis, Steven E. Aschheim suggested the concept of co-constitutionality as a guiding concept for the understanding of the formation of the German national identity and for the interpretation of German-Jewish history.18 In Hungary, much more than in Germany, Jews had a crucial role in the development of the local middle class and of Hungarian liberalism.19 The Jewish presence in bourgeois Budapest was more prominent in relative terms than in Berlin or Breslau. Imported from German-Jewish historiography, “co-constitutionality” can therefore be used as a key concept for a critical analysis of the development of Hungarian liberal nationalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Hungary might be a good case study into the potential use of insights and concepts from German-Jewish historiography, but I believe that such a potential exists also in additional areas of Europe. Jewish integration in imperial Russia was very different and one cannot speak about a process of “co-constitutionality” of Russian nationalism on a large scale. Still, following the research developments in Russian-Jewish history of the last two decades that reveal a variety of social, cultural, and even political fields of integration on smaller scales, I believe that German-Jewish historiography can be an important source of inspiration for Russian-Jewish historiography.20

The challenge of a comparative, transnational, and interrelated modern Jewish history is even more complicated if we wish to apply it also to Jews outside Europe. The question of if and how basic categories used for German and more generally European-Jewish history could apply for Jews living in the new worlds is a matter to be discussed elsewhere. Here I would like to refer briefly to Jews living in Islamic countries.

In 2006 I published an article entitled “Between Berlin and Baghdad,” which called for a development of a new historiography of Iraqi modern Jewry based on methods and insights from European and predominantly German-Jewish history.21 Reflecting on a variety of works on Iraqi Jewish history, I argued that students of Middle Eastern studies and Arabic literature dominate this research rather than scholars trained in Jewish history. Certain works in the field, predominantly Reuven Snir’s 2005 comprehensive
study on *Arabness, Jewishness, Zionism*, clearly point to the need to interpret Iraqi-Jewish history within the wider horizon of Jewish (and specifically German-Jewish) history.\(^{11}\)

In his book, Snir gives a few interesting examples of early twentieth-century Jewish intellectuals from Baghdad whose attitude to the Arabic language and tradition call for comparison with the German-Jewish enlightenment thinkers. A number of these intellectuals took part in the formation (or “invention”) of modern Iraqi nationalism, and their activity can be analyzed with concepts such as “assimilation,” “acculturation,” and perhaps even co-constitutionality. Naturally one should be wary of making simplistic comparisons. But the need to illuminate such developments as a transnational phenomenon seems evident.\(^{11}\)

The literature on German-Jewish identity formation may be helpful to free the Iraqi Jewish historiography from the simplistic Arab-Jewish dichotomy and offer new conceptualizations. This might help to develop more subtle models to interpret the process of Jewish integration and acculturation in Islamic societies.\(^{24}\)

**CONCLUSION**

German-Jewish historiography proffers great potential not only for those with a specific interest in the subject matter, but also for a wider range of scholars. The complex past of Jews in German-speaking lands, from the Enlightenment to the Holocaust and their rich cultural heritage, render the German-Jewish experience a fascinating and relevant case study for any student interested in topics such as identity formation, inclusion versus exclusion, religious transformation, and diversity, to name just a few. Furthermore, the very fact that this field has yielded an enormous body of research literature in recent decades, utilizing innovative approaches and research methods, makes German-Jewish historiography an ideal starting point for a wider discussion of the Jewish experience in modern times.

The influence of the spatial turn as well as the proclivity of scholars from different disciplines and countries to collaborate might enable historians to reevaluate Jewish history across and beyond political borders. German-Jewish historiography should, in my opinion, become more involved in this process and contribute to the development of a more comparative, transnational, and entwined Jewish historical narrative.

**NOTES**


