

Michael Meng, Erica Lehrer, eds.. *Jewish Space in Contemporary Poland*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015. 312 pp. \$85.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-253-01500-6.

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The already substantial area of research on Jews and Jewish heritage in contemporary Poland has been dominated by discussions on memory and identity. The topic of Poland's Jewish space has drawn the attention of scholars, but now it has finally received its own dedicated collection of readings, edited by an anthropologist, Erica Lehrer, and a historian, Michael Meng. The collection combines reflections on the lived spaces of contemporary Poland and on villages, towns, and cities where Polish Jews lived before the Second World War, as well as ghettos, death camps, and Jewish cemeteries.

It is impossible to exhaust the theme of Jewish spaces in Poland in a single volume, but the twelve chapters in this pioneering and long overdue collection cover significant topical ground and offer theoretical contributions, which—if not revolutionary for the anthropology of space per se—are certainly intellectually evocative in the more specific area of scholarship on memory and cultural heritage. As Lehrer and Meng argue, “spaces” have considerable heuristic potential to “turn memory into a thing one can visit,” when they come to materialize and anchor “manifestations of large, often distant political, legal and economic shifts,” making them tangible enough to be grasped methodologically and analytically (p. 5). This collection, to a considerable degree, builds on

the particular strain of research that examines how Jewish and, to a greater extent, non-Jewish actors, individuals, and institutions are engaged in commemoration of the Polish-Jewish past, renovation of the Jewish material heritage, and (re)production of Jewish music and craft. We are invited to consider the ethical and political implications and potentialities created by these practices, for Poles, Jews, and those who identify as both, and for locals and foreign visitors.

The book begins in a truly Dantean manner: guided by Geneviève Zubrzycki, the reader explores the “ideological configuration and reconfiguration” of the material remains of the Auschwitz concentration camp, where predominantly Jews but also Romani, ethnic Poles, and people of other nationalities were exterminated (p. 16). Zubrzycki argues that while Auschwitz is widely and increasingly recognized by Poles as a camp where predominantly Jews were killed, it still holds a central place as a national symbol of martyrdom rivaled only by Katyń—which speaks of the possibility, at least, of sharing the material symbol of collective suffering without necessarily warranting its ownership on the exclusion of the suffering of others. This raises the question of the extent to which the categories of “Poles” and “Jews” the author employs when describing these radically exclusionary positions reflect the heterogeneity of

attitudes and vehement debates these issues sparked in the Poland of the time. That question aside, this is a valuable contribution to the discussion on politics and practices of commemoration at death camps.

Sociologist Stanisław Kaprański's account of "symbolic exclusion" of Jews from local memories of Polish towns and villages draws our attention to concrete examples of the politics of memory of the Communist era (p. 156). For decades, either Jewish martyrdom was erased from commemoration or Jewish victims were subsumed under the generic category of "Polish victims." "Polish" here is implicitly ethnic Poles; an inclination for such erasures is something Poland's Communist regime and right-wing ethnonationalists had in common. Kaprański's strongest contribution to this volume and debates on Jewish spaces, or, to keep with his terminology, Poland's Jewish "memoryscapes," is his insistence that any conceptualizations that operate with generic categories of "Poles" or "Polish memory" (or, alternatively, of "Jewish memory") should always be approached with caution.

Former sites of Jewish presence can become spaces of memory work and a number of studies in the collection invite us to consider ways in which politics of erasure have been replaced with practices of commemoration, not without its challenges and conflicts. First, Meng offers a fascinating account of the remaking of the Jewish past in stone and brick at the Warsaw district of Muranów, the site of the former Warsaw ghetto. Meng's historical work potentially carries wide reaching implications for anthropologists exploring the nexus of memory and materiality, especially in relation to his assumption that "most Varsovians probably think little of the past that lies around them" in their mundane daily activities (p. 78). Meng's chapter is distinctively historiographical and although he offers measured conceptual framing, drawing primarily on Walter Benjamin, his study evokes more far-reaching the-

oretical implications and should be of wider scholarly interest.

Meng's contribution is followed by Magdalena Waligórska's reflection on how artistic and literary projects of "urban nostalgia" discursively transform the coastal city of Szczecin. Waligórska's contribution extends the book's focus on the dyad of Poles and Jews by putting western Poland's German heritage and past into the frame of Polish-Jewish relations. Drawing on Homi Bhabha, Waligórska argues that in the course of nostalgic memory, which exposes the interstices and overlaps of Polish, Jewish, and German historical presence, Szczecin becomes a "third space," a site of "hybridity and cultural translation," which upsets the myth of the city's past cultural homogeneity, promulgated during the Communist era, even if that myth has largely become a lived reality today (p. 95).

A common feature of Meng's and Waligórska's intellectually evocative reflections on memories, in and of Jewish and non-Jewish space, is that both authors engage with narratives, artistic performances, and architectural projects that are undeniably high-brow and dissident, mapping the progressive and emancipatory possibilities for a remembering that disavows any essentialism of Polish and Jewish "identities," and allows for inclusive projects of commonality. A critically inclined reader may, nonetheless, wonder about the reception by—and the actual impact on—the Polish public of those uplifting endeavors among the residents of localities the authors describe. Such impact, as chapters by Monika Murzyn-Kupisz and Jonathan Webber seem to imply, can be strongest where commemoration projects are collaborative and inclusive across seemingly insurmountable borders. Murzyn-Kupisz and Webber provide valuable insights into endeavors that actively involve descendants of Polish Jews and local non-Jewish actors: authorities of provincial towns and villages and contemporary inhabitants of places like Brzostek, a former shtetl, where lo-

cal, social memories of obliterated Jewish spaces predated public efforts of their commemoration. Particularly interesting in these efforts are practices that produce not only collaborations but also compromises and syncretic forms like a Christian “mass containing the Jewish Kaddish,” where involvement of priests and Catholic practices of venerating the dead enable a “way for local residents to begin dealing with the memory of their prewar Jewish neighbors” (p. 137).

Lehrer draws on her longitudinal research on Kraków’s formerly Jewish district of Kazimierz, arguing that it is no longer a *lieu de memoire*—a material reminder of the nonexistent Polish Jewry in place of actual remembrance, which it has been throughout the Communist era—but has become a *milieu de memoire*, a space of memory work. For both non-Jewish Poles and Jewish visitors from abroad, Kazimierz has become, as she claims, a chance not only to confront their contentious memories but also critically to interrogate essentializing regimes of identity, cultivate alternative modalities of belonging, and seek ways to communicate across divisive traumas and resilient stereotypes.

Winston Chu’s essay further explores the intersection of Polish, Jewish, and German presence in the Polish landscape, but his findings lead to a conclusion different from Waligórska’s. In Łódź, as he compellingly illustrates, the city’s multicultural history is being appropriated and mobilized in construction of nationalist representations of the past, rather than transformed into enmeshed and ambivalent narratives that would correspond to uneasy historical coexistence. Robert Cohn, in turn, invites us to consider the implications of the fact that Poland’s Jewish spaces are represented on photographs and cyberspace repositories. Cohn’s text introduces an apt metaphor to capture the nature of myriad Jewish spaces in contemporary Poland, that of a palimpsest—“a topography of loss” often merely visible under the layer of ruination, deliberate destruction, appropriation,

and adaptation, through which synagogues have become cinemas and cemeteries have become parking places (p. 212). The notion of a palimpsest is also used by Konstanty Gebert, who offers an overview of the multiple transformations of Jewish spaces in Warsaw, and an insight into the political and economic background of how Jewish communal properties were destroyed, seized, changed, and in some instances reclaimed by contemporary Jewish communities. While Gebert aims to identify distinctively Jewish sites in a city shared by “two nations,” the prewar Warsaw may also be seen as Polish and Jewish space at once, a site of both exclusion and extensive intermingling, for as long as that was possible (p. 223).

The chapter by Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett concludes the book with a description of and rationale for the exhibition design of the Warsaw Museum for the History of Polish Jews. She presents the originality of this story-driven museum project and the challenges facing it, in comparison with well-established and recently founded Jewish museums in other countries. In the epilogue, Dina Pinto underscores the wider significance of Poland’s Jewish spaces and argues that they not only embody and promote cultural and religious pluralism in increasingly multicultural Europe, but also serve as “centres of Jewish and non-Jewish interaction” (p. 284).

The chapter that I did not yet mention, by Stanisław Tyszką, comes second in the collection. It is undoubtedly the nadir of this otherwise very accomplished volume. The author aims to introduce the readers into the history of the restitution of Jewish property in Poland after 1989 by rendering a brief historical overview of the legal acts and a presentation of cases of restitution and of renovation projects. Tyszką’s attempt is considerably hindered by numerous opinionated and usually misplaced digressions on the political background of the restitutions process. Whenever Tyszką ventures beyond the raw description of particular legal acts, the reader is enticed to enter

a projection of Polish post-1989 political reality à rebours, apparently sustained by the magic of facts omitted or molded to fit the author's convictions.[1] Tyszka seems to underestimate considerably the role of Jewish institutions, private sponsors, local activists, and nongovernmental organizations in the preservation of Jewish heritage. While he identifies the main actors in the restitution process, his account of its beneficiaries and instigators, and their motivations leaves much to be desired, in terms of both depth and accuracy. In conclusion, we are informed that the involvement of nongovernment organizations in the restoration of Poland's Jewish heritage is driven by the "fashionable policy of promoting 'multiculturalism'" focusing on Jews for the "lack of other significant ethnic and religious minorities" in Poland (p. 66). Germans, Ukrainians, Kashubians, Silesians, Belorussians, and others amounting up to more than a million Polish citizens would probably disagree with, at least, the latter part of such a claim.

Jewish Space in Contemporary Poland, despite this slight mishap, is an impressive collection filling a major gap in Jewish studies. It will certainly be of interest to anthropologists, primarily those sharing topical interest with the contributors or generally interested in the relationship between memory work and material heritage in contentious and politicized contexts. As encompassing and insightful as these fascinating accounts are, they leave much room for further scholarly investigations. Almost completely missing from analysis is what Pinto aptly named "Jewish-Jewish" space—that is, actual Jewish communal places: active synagogues, cultural associations, social clubs, summer camps (p. 282). These comprise a vast terrain of Poland's Jewishness in its own right, the analysis of which could easily fit another book and allow the investigation to venture beyond the gravitational pull of memory as the exclusive terrain of Jewish presence in Poland. Although many of the individual contributors are aware of the myriad Polish-Jewish sub-

jectivities and forms of historical coexistence, I was still left wanting a thorough (or indeed any) historiographical reflection on those spaces of prewar Poland where seemingly stark intra-communal boundaries were situationally suspended or deconstructed, be that the murky terrains of the Polish-Jewish underworld or the milieu of fancy Varsovian cafés. All and all, the collection is an important step toward deeper and clearer understanding of what Poland's Jewish spaces were, are, and may yet become.

Note

[1]. At the very beginning, Tyszka questions the validity of the very term "restitution" due to the lack of the unbroken existence of Jewish institutions in legal terms (which is inevitable considering the Holocaust) and supposedly "little cultural continuity" between the prewar Jewish community and the survivors of the genocide and their descendants. Ironically, the latter claim is contradicted even by other contributions in this very collection (most distinctively in Gebert's chapter), not to mention by historical facts. When trying to explain the political background of the restitution legislation and process, Tyszka claims that "since 1989, such [restitution] legislation has been blocked by former Communists and Poland's liberal and leftist intellectual elite" (p. 46). In fact, the very legal act that enabled restitution of communal Jewish property, and to a large extent the means of existence of Poland's Jewish Religious Communities—completely dispossessed and impoverished after the Communist era—was drafted and passed by the leftist cabinet and a parliamentary majority composed largely of post-Communists (as was another major legal act, passed in 2005, regulating and granting legal rights to ethnic and religious minorities). Speaking of the restitution of private properties, Tyszka claims that "President Alexander Kwaśniewski's veto prevented the [restitution] bill from becoming law" (p. 55). Tyszka fails to mention the widely known detail that completely dismantles his argu-

ment in the context of Jewish spaces: the restitution bill of the ruling right-wing coalition excluded non-Polish citizens from making restitution claims. Effectively then, the bill was tailored to effectively bar the vast majority of legitimate heirs to Jewish property from making successful claims to regain it. These are just several examples to illustrate the issue.

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