

Germans or Jews? German-Speaking Jews in Post-War Europe: An Introduction

BY KATEŘINA ČAPKOVÁ AND DAVID RECHTER

Historians have devoted increasing attention in the past decade to the aftermath of the Shoah, focusing in particular on the Displaced Persons (DP) camps in the American, British, and French occupation zones of Germany and Austria.¹ A number of important studies have brought the crucial topic of migration to the fore, examining the flight of Jewish DPs and their frustration at being denied entry to their chosen destinations—mostly to Palestine, but also to the United States and elsewhere. For the most part these studies deal with Yiddish-speaking eastern European (primarily Polish) Jews who saw no future in a Europe awash with antisemitism; the overwhelming majority dreamt of joining the ranks of the Jewish state-in-the-making in Palestine. In this reading the DP camps constitute an important part both of European and Israeli history, and slot comfortably into Zionist and cold war narratives on Europe—and especially on eastern Europe—that rejected any future for Jews in post-war Europe and instead valorized Palestine as the appropriate national project.

The following articles complicate this perspective in a number of ways. Appearing in this and the next volume of the *Year Book*, they are drawn from a workshop on ‘Germans or Jews? German-Speaking Jews in Post-War Central Europe’ organized by the Leo Baeck Institute in London in cooperation with the Leo Baeck Institute in New York and the Institute of Contemporary History (Czech Academy of Sciences), and held at the Center for Jewish History in New York in the summer of 2017. Many German-speaking Jews experienced discrimination and feared violence in the post-war months and years not because

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¹ See especially Avinoam J. Patt, *Finding Home and Homeland: Jewish Youth and Zionism in the Aftermath of the Holocaust*, Detroit 2009; Margarete Meyers Feinstein, *Holocaust Survivors in Postwar Germany, 1945–1957*, Cambridge–New York 2010; Adam R. Seipp, *Strangers in the Wild Place: Refugees, Americans, and a German Town, 1945–1952*, Bloomington, IN 2013; Angelika Königseder, Juliane Wetzel, *Lebensmut im Wartesaal. Die jüdischen DPs (Displaced Persons) im Nachkriegsdeutschland*, Frankfurt a.M. 2004; Michelle Lynn Sutherland, ‘Law, Order, and the Jewish Displaced Persons in the American Zone of Occupied Germany, 1945–1951’, unpublished doctoral thesis, Brandeis University, 2013; Danielle Spera, Werner Hanak-Lettner (eds), *Displaced in Österreich / Displaced in Austria. Jüdische Flüchtlinge seit 1945 / Jewish Refugees since 1945*, Innsbruck–Vienna–Bolzano 2017.

they were Jewish, but rather because they were German. Some became Zionists after the war, but this did not necessarily entail a loss of emotional ties to German culture and language. Moreover, even though many eventually settled in the United States and Israel, a considerable number opted to remain in Europe. Some even settled in Germany and endeavoured to re-establish Jewish communities in the face of stinging criticism from the new centres of the Jewish world in Israel and the United States. Three central themes emerge from the complex story recounted at the workshop and in the articles.

LEGAL STATUS

In the early post-war years, German-speaking Jews outside Germany were routinely perceived as Germans. As a consequence, they were confronted with legal obstacles when attempting to regain citizenship, and were subjected to the anti-German policies adopted in some European states. This is as true for German Jews west of the Iron Curtain (in Belgium and Holland, for example²) as it was for those in the Soviet sphere, such as in Lower Silesia and Pomerania, territories in eastern Germany that became Polish after the war. As Katharina Friedla argues, Soviet soldiers and the new Polish administration regularly treated German-speaking Jews in Lower Silesia as Germans. To add insult to injury, they often found themselves ostracized by the newly established Polish-Jewish institutions. Only in 1947, by which time hundreds of German-speaking Jews had already departed, did the District Committee of Jews in Wrocław press for the granting of citizenship to the remaining German Jews.

An even greater number of German-speaking Jews experienced similar insecurity in post-war Czechoslovakia. The Košice programme of the first provisional government applied the principle of collective guilt in order to deprive all Germans and Hungarians of Czechoslovak citizenship. While definitions of who was German or Hungarian varied regionally and over time, the most important criterion was the nationality an individual had claimed in the census of 1930. Approximately three thousand German-speaking Jews (or, more precisely, people who were discriminated against on racial grounds during the war) were compelled to re-apply for Czechoslovak citizenship, and their attempts to obtain the formal—and favourable—status of ‘anti-fascist’ was often refused, despite their experience of concentration or labour camps. Without the protection of anti-fascist status and without Czechoslovak citizenship, hundreds of these Jews were treated as Germans, exposing them on occasion to forced labour and expulsion. The irony of the discrimination against German-speaking Jews in Czechoslovakia lay also in the fact that the Czechoslovak government based most of its anti-German policies on the anti-Jewish policy of the Nazis in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia.

² David Fraser and Frank Caestecker, ‘Jews or Germans? Nationality Legislation and the Restoration of Liberal Democracy in Europe after the Holocaust’, in *Law and History Review*, 31, no. 2 (2013), pp. 391–422.

The low food rations for Germans after the war, for example, were exactly the same as the food rations for Jews during the war.³

Margarete Feinstein reminds us that the legal dimension is important also for understanding the situation of German Jews from the Reich. Soon after Hitler's accession to power in 1933, the citizenship of so-called 'undesirable' naturalized Germans was revoked, at a stroke rendering stateless thousands of eastern European (mostly Polish) Jews, many of whom had lived in Germany for generations. Subsequently, the Eleventh Decree of the Reich Citizenship Law of 1941, according to which any German Jew who crossed the German border became stateless, was applied to all deported Jews.⁴ Feinstein shows that many Jews lived in a kind of legal limbo into the post-war period, a result of general chaos and inconsistent approaches to the issue from the administrations in the different occupation zones.

GERMAN HERITAGE AND CULTURE

In 1945 the long-standing central role of German-speaking Jewry within European and world Jewry was at an end. German-speaking Jews were confronted with harsh criticism of their cultural and linguistic choices; in response, some felt the need to redefine their identity and looked for ways to orient themselves in an uncomfortable new social and political reality.

In their articles, Gaëlle Fisher and Natalia Aleksion (the latter's to be published next year) explore this process of redefinition in the formerly Habsburg territories of Romanian Bukovina and Polish Galicia. Aleksion argues that Galician Jews used German as one of several languages, alongside Polish and Yiddish. That dozens of Galician Jews in post-war Poland submitted testimony about their pre-war lives and wartime experiences in German, rather than Polish or Yiddish, indicates a lasting attachment to a 'German' heritage. For the most part, however, Galician Jews associated this German heritage with the 'good old days' of life under Habsburg rule. Many of them had studied in Vienna and had been recruited to the Austrian military. Aleksion points also to generational differences: younger Holocaust survivors clearly preferred to use Polish. Generational differences were evident in other regions too. Among German-speaking Jews in Czechoslovakia, for example, the younger generation was more likely to be bilingual (German and Czech), which increased both their chances of staying in post-war Czechoslovakia and their desire to do so. The older generation, in contrast, was more likely to be restricted to German. Due to age and often to poor health, their prospects of

³ Kateřina Čapková, 'Germans or Jews? German-Speaking Jews in Poland and Czechoslovakia after World War II', in *Kwartalnik Historii Żydów / Jewish History Quarterly*, no. 2 (246) (2013), pp. 348–62; Kateřina Čapková, 'Between Expulsion and Rescue: The Transports for German-Speaking Jews of Czechoslovakia in 1946', forthcoming in *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, spring 2018.

⁴ See also Miriam Rürup, 'The Citizen and Its Other: Zionist and Israeli Responses to Statelessness', in *LBI Year Book*, vol. 59 (2014), pp. 37–52.

learning Czech and starting a new career were minimal, and most therefore wished to leave Czechoslovakia for Germany.⁵ Generational conflict is similarly obvious among German-Jewish families from Lower Silesia, as we see in the memoirs of Karla Wolff of Wrocław, a figure discussed by Katharina Friedla. Karla, who became a Zionist after the war and emigrated at the first opportunity to Palestine with a group of young friends, notes with disdain in her memoirs that her father not only chose to settle in Germany but also retained his admiration for Schiller and Goethe.⁶

The dilemmas that were a corollary of a German cultural heritage played a role also in the fraught relationships between German Jews and eastern European Jews, who were by and large Yiddish speakers. A case in point was Wrocław, where the thorny issue of leadership, and of ownership of communal property, contributed to tensions between German Jews and Polish Jewish migrants to Lower Silesia. We can observe a similar clash of traditions and languages in the Czechoslovakian borderlands (the former Sudetenland). Following the Soviet Union's annexation of Subcarpathian Ruthenia in 1945, thousands of Carpathian Jews settled in the former Sudetenland, as opportunities for accommodation and employment opened up due to the expulsion of Germans. What had been largely liberal German communities were transformed in this way by the influx of Hasidic Jews, a change that some local German-speaking Jews found unsettling.

Margarete Feinstein addresses the ambivalent and uneasy relationship between eastern European and German Jews in the context of the DP camps, where questions of identity and belonging were acute. Reciprocal prejudices abounded: eastern European DPs, for example, were critical of the story recounted in the DP film *Lang ist der Weg*, in which a Polish-Jewish survivor marries a German-Jewish survivor. A German-speaker, they felt, could not truly belong to the DP community. Ruth Kluger, on the other hand, a Viennese Jew who had escaped from a death march and had settled in Regensburg, identified more with non-Jewish Germans at university in the late 1940s than with other Jewish students who spoke a Yiddish-inflected German. Feinstein further points to the way in which theatre performances in the Deggendorf DP camp, populated predominantly by German and Austrian Jews, stimulated discussions of Austrian, northern German, or Prussian 'patriotism' rather than a more generic German variant.

In her contribution (to be published next year), Andrea Sinn extends the analysis into the early 1950s, when thousands of eastern European Jews left the DP camps to settle in the newly established Jewish communities of post-war Germany, leading once more to tensions between eastern European and German Jews. As Sinn shows, German Jews wished to retain their dominant communal role in spite of the fact that the eastern Europeans—in Bavaria, for example—were in the

⁵ Čapková, 'Between Expulsion and Rescue'; see also Franz J. Jürgens (ed.), *Wir waren ja eigentlich Deutsche! Juden berichten von Emigration und Rückkehr*, Berlin 1997.

⁶ Karla Wolff, *Ich blieb zurück. Die Überlebensgeschichte der Töchter einer christlichen Mutter und eines jüdischen Vaters im Nazideutschland und ihr Neuanfang in Israel*, Heppenheim 1990, p. 27.

majority. Sinn's account also brings in a broader context, demonstrating that international Zionist and American Jewish criticism of any re-establishment of Jewish institutional infrastructure in Germany made local cooperation between eastern European and German Jews a necessity. Only decades later, once these institutions were well established, did these earlier conflicts re-emerge.

CONTINUITY OR DISRUPTION?

Crucial to research on German-speaking Jews in post-war central Europe are questions of continuity and rupture. What did it mean to be a German-speaking Jew in post-war Europe in the light of the Holocaust? What adjustments were necessary or possible? The articles in this section reveal that German-speaking Jews, particularly those outside Germany, were often treated almost as criminals and faced invidious and unenviable choices: which social, emotional, and cultural ties should they retain, and which should they dissolve? Where should they, and where could they, build their new life? Outside Germany, remaining in their country of birth might require linguistic adaptation, along with transformed social networks and new, unfamiliar professions.

In Germany, too, there were no easy choices; here, in a land of former Nazis, survivors from eastern Europe and from Germany needed to cooperate in order to re-establish Jewish communities in unimaginably difficult circumstances. German Jews in Germany were therefore confronted with a two-fold problem. First and foremost, they needed to decide whether it was possible or tolerable to live among people who had been imbued with, and corrupted by, Nazism. Once they had taken that decision, they faced a familiar problem, that of the *Ostjuden*. Now, as before the war, German Jews positioned themselves as the guardians of continuity, of German-Jewish culture and heritage, in the face of eastern European Jewish immigration. This time, however, the relative balance of power had shifted; German Jews were no longer in the ascendancy. While this shift intensified the internecine conflicts, it also mandated cooperation. A similar dynamic, in even more acute form, was at work in the 1990s and the first decade of this century, as Russian Jewish immigrants from the post-Soviet republics far outnumbered local German Jews, including those who had come as immigrants in the early post-war years.

We can observe this interplay of continuity and rupture also in the larger domain of international politics. In the wake of the Shoah, the Yishuv and the State of Israel became, along with American Jewry, the unchallenged power centres of the Jewish world. Support for the re-establishment of Jewish life in Germany and eastern Europe was vanishingly small, and Israelis, Zionists, and American Jews often expressed their disapproval of Jews who insisted on retaining links or loyalty to a sense of German identity. Nonetheless, educated and bourgeois German Jews were not only the Allies' preferred partners as Jewish representatives in Germany

(as Sinn shows), but—as Feinstein points out—they were also regarded by the Allies as more credible witnesses in post-war Nazi trials.

It would be misleading to argue that the situation of German-speaking Jews in the post-war years was somehow more ‘complex’ than prior to the war. But after the devastation of the war and the Shoah, their assumption of a German identity took on a particular hue and was freighted with far-reaching and unavoidable implications. They were forced into often painful reconsiderations of their social and cultural ties in a Europe now obsessed with ethnic categorization. In contrast, then, to studies that have concentrated on Zionist work in the DP camps and on Bricha (the organized flight of survivors to Palestine), the articles here on the experience of German-speaking Jews in post-war central Europe tell a rather different story, emphasizing instead the insoluble ambiguities and dilemmas of overlapping communities of solidarity.