Jewish and Non-Jewish Spaces in the Urban Context

edited by
Alina Gromova
Felix Heinert
Sebastian Voigt

Contents

'Jewish Quarter' and 'Kosher Light'
On the 'Migrantisation' of Jewish Urban Space

Wolfgang Kaschuba

The following fact appears before us today with shocking clarity: around eighty years ago, the synagogues in Germany and Berlin were burning. In this memorial year of 2015, numerous events, projects, and exhibitions are invoking these events and the subsequent Holocaust – a tribute that is almost taken for granted in a German capital that has consciously placed Holocaust memorialization at its historical and physical center as a visible testament to German guilt, thereby inscribing an unforgettable symbolic reminder of that guilt into German collective memory.

The purpose of these events is to draw attention to the dramatic, self-inflicted loss this city suffered during its years of barbarism: the loss of its humanity, as testified to by the loss of its Jewish citizens and their Berliner history and culture. For pre-1933 Berlin had been shaped by Jewish traditions and the Jewish investment in German culture to a degree that few other European capitals can match.

Only if this memory is kept alive; only if it remains visible behind the 'dark' wall in the history of Germany and Berlin, will the city's newly-won 'bright' side – its image as an open and culturally tolerant metropolis – be truly experienced and confirmed in the present. Indeed, tolerance, as is known, can only be nourished on thoughtfulness, never on forgetfulness. This was and remains the promise of Germany after the Second World War.

This Berlin culture of memory seems to have seen to it that nothing be forgotten. The city landscape is pervaded by memorials and museums, memorial plaques and 'stumbling stones' that recall Jewish life and the Holocaust, lending the cityscape a thick, stony, commemorational texture. Countless publications and city-tours present Jewish quarters, communities, and individuals

to locals and tourists alike as spaces and contours of a shared history. This special historicity of city culture and discourse is proudly presented to Jewish visitors from the Unites States or Israel as proof of that, thanks to Berlin's new cultural diversity and appeal, this responsibility will never be neglected – for the sake of the city's past as well as present Jewish life.

Yet at second glance, it is also clear that precisely in this memorial year – seventy years after the end of World War II and the Holocaust – a caesura in memory politics is looming over Germany as well. This is particularly evident in cities like Berlin. Commemorations of the Holocaust rarely include witnesses, survivors, or members of the generation of the perpetrators, while the 'second generation' – which although born after the war, is nevertheless bound up in the same volume of collective memory – has long since lost its sway over the social discourse on German history.

At the same time, the binding force and influence of the 'German' memory-*topos*, which lies socio-biographically so far in the past, is clearly losing its grip on the younger generation. Unlike their parents, young adults today must 'immigrate' into this memorial landscape; that is, they must consciously choose to associate themselves with a historical space which, however, they no longer necessarily need to feel born into.

Many make this choice reluctantly, or not at all. Many were not even born in German territorial space, let alone under the shadow of its history; in order to be able to read and respect the past inscriptions of others, they first had to enroll themselves into a new society and city landscape – thereby breaking, generationally and socially, the strict 'morality' of collective memory in Germany, whose motto had been, 'Never forget'. Above all, with Germany having become a society of immigrants, the old notion of a German ethnic binding force must necessarily fade away in proportion to that society's desire to avoid describing either itself or others in such ethnic, and therefore excluding, terms.

The creeping loss of memory surrounding the Holocaust is thus to some extent a cultural paradox of almost insoluble inner contradictions. If the notion of 'belonging' is no longer categorically and ethnically determined, becoming an open principle of social and national self-association, then the notion of 'collective memory' must also be further trans-nationalized and de-ethicized. Memory itself, by the same token, can no longer be 'social-morally' predetermined; as a result, the Holocaust loses its axiomatic moral effect. Whether or not some kind of 'ethical exception clause' can be formulated for it remains doubtful, at least in terms of the politics of memory.

Culturalization of the City Landscape

If we leave aside politically correct theory and examine instead the current urban practices in the Berlin cityscape, we will see that remembrance in 2015 indeed takes place within multiple, new cultural situations and social constellations of 'collective remembrance', which offer fewer common historical and moral denominators and seem to be drifting further and further apart. In retrospect, it can be said that after the gradual, hesitant recognition, during the 1950s, that Jewish life was attempting to re-establish itself in Germany; after the Holocaust was definitely incorporated into the German collective consciousness in the 1970s and 1980s; and after the 1990s, when Jewish history and life were finally declared a 'national heritage', the entire issue is still part of a general historical-cultural consciousness in Germany – a consciousness which, however, has long ceased to encompass everything and to apply to everyone. Rather, it has since become part of a confused situation in which collective memory becomes dramatically altered. Standard knowledge from high-school history class mixes with new images from TV-documentaries; motifs from fantasy films merge with information from websites, and religious myths melt together with common knowledge instilled by middle-class education.

This information, already largely detached from any concrete historical and intellectual context, becomes increasingly fragmented and variable; its information content is snapshot-like, fleeting and meant to shock and dazzle. This change has affected not only 'historically detached' youth cultures or 'historically amnesiac' rural communities, but has long ago reached groups at the center of educated middle-class society. Even among the middle-class, which at one time had been seen as enlightened, new and old forms of antisemitism, Islamophobia and other forms of xenophobia have long since resurfaced – as is shown by the Swiss referendum on banning minarets, the German debate over the headscarf, and the Danish discourses on immigration.

Another result of this shift has been the loss of the epistemic orders and hierarchies of our 'common sense'. Consequently, in the present, postmodern confusion of this new 'cultural memory', old Orientalist, antisemitic stereotypes stand side by side – often seemingly naturally – with trendy clichés about organic kosher food culture or the polyglot Jewish culture scene in Berlin. The historical roots, as well as the cultural meaning, of terms and images have become lost in an 'image reservoir' of fleeting motifs and photo-snippets that overlaps almost seamlessly with the digital space of the Internet, which absorbs millions of new images on a daily basis, without positioning

them within a context of knowledge or memory, and thereby depriving them of 'meaning'.

In this way, our frameworks of collective and cultural memory tend to expand within these digital movements and frequently disappear within them. This development also resonates with changes occurring in our daily lives, in which physical and material space is encompassing ever new horizons as a result of its digital expansion and reinterpretation. The mass and force of global developments overwhelm us with their digitally manufactured simultaneity. Organization and navigation have become increasingly difficult: today, many young city dwellers can hardly read standard city maps anymore, having become prisoners of the urban navigation systems of their smartphone applications with their set direction commands. As a result, they can be said to be living, both cartographically and in terms of their everyday lives, in an urban 'tunnel system' – a metaphor that perfectly illustrates the present-day *condition urbaine*.

Yet it is common knowledge – in fact, a sort of open trade secret – that, since the deep urban crisis in the 1960s and 1970s, as cities threatened to collapse under the weight of production, traffic, pollution, and crime, there has been a constant promotion of the 'culturalization' of the city landscape. Culture – that is, a systematic arrangement of urban spaces and lifestyles that generate new appeal and cohesion – seemed capable of rescuing the cities, of keeping people in them. And it worked – surprisingly quickly and surprisingly well. It seems that since the 'museumization', 'festivalization' and 'eventization' of city culture that began in the mid-seventies – in other words, since museums and city history, music and literary festivals, theatre and art events, and penthouses in trendy neighborhoods have given inner-city areas a new structure and appeal – the 'exoticization' of urban culture has become the agenda. Things that are foreign, as well as those that are rendered foreign, seem to confirm to us that the 'world *in situ*' has now arrived in our big cities, which almost automatically gives rise to diversity and creativity, urbanity and metropolitan culture.

Today, the branding of big cities thus takes place largely via the staging and fitting out of the city landscape as a cultural 'theme park' in which 'self' and 'foreign' find themselves in constant contact and exchange. What is actually 'foreign' and 'one's own' is, however, negotiated anew in each case, based on a number of factors ranging from social to generational, ethnic to religious, and ethical to gender-related. Definite and unilateral self-associations to either high or low, global or local, Arab or 'German', mainstream or

avant-garde culture have therefore become largely obsolete. For with or without Confucius, the way is always the goal: the discursive and symbolic battle over meanings and interpretations of cultural practices in the urban space *is* the metropolitan, since culture can constantly re-invent itself in this way. And the metropolis aspires to be just such a 'laboratory' – one that facilitates and accommodates such experiments.

The Jewish Topos: The Old and New Exotic?

In this laboratory, almost everything is remixed and relabeled – that which is considered historically stable as well as taboo subjects such as the relationship between Jewish culture and urban society. At the onset of modernity, the image of the Jew stood, first and foremost, for the alien and sinister other. It signified an ethnic and religious minority that embodied the Eastern and the Semitic, and which was, consequently, socially segregated and culturally ex-territorialized in municipal 'Jewish quarters'. Then, with the advent of the European enlightenment, another image emerged alongside this one: that of a secular and bourgeois intellectual Jewry, which – although denied complete national integration on racist grounds – nonetheless became an undisputedly important bearer and shaper of urban enlightenment and intellectuality. This new image also provided key impetuses for the evolution of the urban avant-garde and Bohemia, whose members knew how to appreciate the sharp 'secular' intellectualism of their Jewish associates.

After the Holocaust, Germans had difficulty dealing with images of their Jewish 'neighbors' for several reasons: first, because hardly any of them remained; second, because one now had to be on guard against false habits and verbal expressions; and third, because of the Germans' evident irritation at the existence of 'new' German and Israeli Jews. The incident in which high-level German politicians congratulated Ignaz Bubis, the Chairman of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, on the speech given by 'his' head of state during Israeli President Ezer Weizman's visit to Germany in 1996 is a bitter illustration of such recent German-Jewish misunderstandings. In any case, one imagines Jewish life in Germany as urban only in those social spaces that had traditionally developed in a heterogeneous, anonymous and open manner.

This painstakingly re-established relationship between Jewish and urban cultures now seems to be drastically changing once again, as it is placed – within the scope of urban strategies of 'exoticization' – into spatial, commemorative, religious or imaginary frames. Jewish traditions and symbols can then

be variously reinterpreted as urban life-styles or life-styles per se, depending on where the emphasis is placed – whether on the Holocaust or on religion, music or culinary culture; as a result, they become variants of ethnic-urban diversity. The context for this process of reinterpretation is created by cultural and imaginative upgrading processes which develop 'cultural diversity' further as urban capital, with the aim of staging it anew and capitalizing on it. In so doing, they attribute particular importance to 'ethnic' traditions and styles, spaces and themes. For 'ethnic' denotes something that is culturally different, alien, and therefore – above all in contemporary urban readings – 'exotic'; and vice-versa: 'Exoticization' in urban space inevitably implies making something 'other' and 'foreign' – since the foreign alone awakens curiosity and promises authenticity.

Urban diversity thus comes to be conceived above all as a diversity of style and value that makes the Jewish topos appear 'stylish' – or to be more precise, makes it into a 'Jewish style'. The urban contexts make this cultural transformation easy, as the Jewish topos, in its various manifestations, has proven to be highly compatible with urban musical and culinary culture, as well as with discourses on value and style. Depending on the tone in question, it then 'decorates' each cityscape, from New York to Odessa, with variants of Jewish/Yiddish urban symbols and lifestyles.

These developments are clearly reflected in the cultural advertisements published in Berlin's program magazines and on the city's Internet sites, such as those announcing the 'Yiddish Swing Orchestra' or 'The Kosher Red Hots' who promise 'Klezmer Dance Music from Eastern Europe' and 'Spanish-flavoured Love Songs of the Sephardim'.[1] 'Jewish theatre' and 'Jewish art' happily invoke the notion of a symbolic capital of Jewish-cosmopolitan culture, while the classified ads for 'kosher lamps', 'kosher clocks', or 'kosher wine' serve a double need: they satisfy everyday demands relating to the management of the familiar and communal forms of Sabbath rest, as well as those of a life-style market in which 'things Jewish' have become accessories of creative interior design. In addition, Berlin offers special 'Old Jewish Quarter Walking Tours' that cater to specific historical and touristic demands.

Much of this resembles what is happening in other large cities that serve as role models – for example, London, where 'Jewish London' is promoted as a cultural product incorporating tradition, life-style, and events, much in the same vein as the Notting Hill 'Caribbean Festival' or 'Indian Area'. Paris even

1 Cf. http://www.kosherredhots.com (accessed 23.02.2015).

offers 'kosher' Chinese restaurants in the 'Pletzl'[2]; and in Cracow, the newly fashionable 'Kazimierz Jewish Town' markets itself, on its Internet site, as the 'equivalent of Soho, the Quartier Latin, and Greenwich Village' – and all this without a present-day Jewish population.[3] Commerce and capital too have long since become a part of this imaginative Jewish 'branding'. In the words of a young Jewish visitor, discussing a friend's experience in Berlin: "It is really hard for Georg to go to a Jewish disco. You have to look perfect there. If you wear a Gucci skirt, you can't wear a Chanel top with it. Otherwise it doesn't match, and you'll be told: that just doesn't work."[4]

It is significant that Jews themselves frequently experience this process of gradual re-contextualization and transformation of Jewish culture today as problematic. Indeed, they often feel irritated and instrumentalized:

Meshugge parties are often attended by Israelis and interested non-Jews. There is lots of House music, mixed with Israeli music. Members of the Jewish community and their friends, on the other hand, tend to attend Sababba parties. Sababba is more mainstream; the music is more popular and occasionally includes Israeli Evergreens [...]. For the Israelis living here, it is sort of like us going into a club and hearing Udo Jürgens & Co.[5]

Being style-conscious is everything, also as a performative display – one of the reasons why the American-initiated Heeb movement, which aims to extricate Jewish culture from its victim status, developed its multi-dimensional experimental forms, which now resonate in numerous cities, including Berlin. Consequently, Jews themselves can also experiment with the possibilities – including the financial ones – of self-exoticization and self-ethnicization, in what can be described as a passage from the passive into the active mode, lending the Jewish topos new cultural leeway on the urban playing field. At the same time, this is, especially in Germany, a risky game, since through this stylization, the Jewish topos as a global-ethnic phenomenon loses its particular affiliation with the backdrop of German history. Here, certain historical-political and moral discourses in the 'German context' – that is, in the surrounding society – tend to disintegrate. If the 'particular Jewish topos' becomes a 'general ethnic topos', then the cautionary shadow of Holocaust commemoration grows ever weaker.

2 Cf. http://www.phylliscooks.com (accessed 23.02.2015).
3 Cf. http://www.krakow-info.com (accessed 23.02.2015).
4 Alina Gromova: Generation 'koscher light'. Urbane Räume und Praxen junger russischsprachiger Juden in Berlin, Bielefeld: Transcript 2013, p. 102.
5 Ibid., pp. 210–211.

In terms of its effects, therefore, this involvement of the Jewish *topos* in the process of urban gentrification is highly ambivalent. On the one hand, a sort of cultural valorization may emerge through exoticization. On the other hand, the symbolic 'expatriation' of Jewish culture from its developed German context leads to discrimination.

'Demystifying Label Terms: Kosher'

An interesting illustration of the stylistic appropriation of the Jewish *topos* is offered by contemporary culinary culture. The internet magazine *Bob's Red Mill*, in its advertisement for a 'kosher product line' entitled 'Demystifying Label Terms: Kosher', declares with superb candor:

> Today, these foods represent far more than adherence to religious laws: "kosher" means that the facility and the sources of the ingredients used meet strict quality and cleanliness standards. Muslims, vegans and those with severe dairy allergies can look to the kosher symbols as a way to navigate the label.[6]

With the symbolic asset of religious certification, kosher food is marketed to other religions, alternative palates as well as fashionable dining cultures that value pork-free, vegan, or organic food. This also applies to kosher wine, fish and much more, which are presented as especially healthy: "kosher" is "naturally – the healthier way of life."[7] According to another publication, Jewish cuisine also fosters communication by "breaking barriers and promoting dialogue."[8] Through a clever trick, the promised de-mystification of Jewish culture serves as a pretext for its re-mystification and branding. To go by these ads, then, 'Jewish food culture' lends itself, in a very specific way, to a process of urban ennoblement.

In any case, it can be generally said that today, we are experiencing a process of an ever-increasing 'moralization' of our life-styles – at least as regards those sections of the middle class that reject incessant consumption on political and/or ethical grounds. Here, considerations of the relations between global power and capital play as much a role as do ecological and organic production criteria or notions of 'Fair Trade' and global natural resources, or commons. Economy and consumption are also to be re-imagined and redefined in political and cultural categories. In this context, 'kosher' appears as a moral label as well, combining a politically correct historical attitude with the

6 http://www.bobsredmill.com (accessed 25.02.2015).
7 Ibid.
8 http://www.funkproductions.tv (accessed 25.02.2015).

dietary and environmental standards of contemporary food culture — contributing to an ennobled moral stance that is a clear point-scorer in life-style debates and cooking shows: the 'kosher-burger' from the 'Jewish snack-bar' is now more 'correct' and chic than the veggie-burger from McDonalds — especially in organic-fixated Germany and 'green' Berlin.

By way of illustration, consider the following dialogue between a young Jewish man in Berlin and his female friend. Young man: "My kitchen is kosher. I separate milk from meat." Friend: "Really? And do you also have two fridges?" "No, I can't afford that. I also only have one dish cloth. But I think that you should at least do what you can, otherwise the tradition gets completely lost." "I bet you are doing this to impress girls. They get impressed when you say you keep a kosher kitchen." This little exchange demonstrates how all the factors discussed above in theory play out practically, in real-life: the exoticization and ethnicization, the marketing and life-styling of the 'kosher light' brand, and the transferring of all of these 'identity effects' onto the actor. These are indeed 'market features' in action...

Déjà-vu: Jewish Culture as 'Immigrant' Culture?

Nowadays, we are so used to the whiff of the exotic and authentic that almost everything that originates elsewhere is imbued with this scent, and becomes interesting for our urban cultural palate. The alternative milieus outdo each other in elevating and gentrifying this migrant character, which fosters the city's cultural diversity. All these reasons have led to the beginning of a conscious or unconscious 'migrantization' of the Jewish *topos*, in clubs, shops, pubs and at urban events — irrespective of whether the supposed "foreignness" attached to things Jewish is valued or rejected. In either case, the effect is the same: 'exoticization'. Similar tendencies are also discernible within certain Jewish urban discourses, where clear distinctions are drawn between 'classic' Berlin Jewry and 'foreign' – Russian or Middle Eastern – Jewish styles.

Two forms of 'migrantization' are entangled here: that imposed from within, and that from without. These effects are magnified by the fact that many antisemitic attacks — both severe and less severe — on supposed Jewish residents or tourists no longer originate uniquely in the 'German' milieu, but increasingly in the immigrant groups within German society. As a young Jewish man said of his experiences in certain districts of Berlin, where it is advisable to avoid wearing visible signs of Jewishness: "That antisemitism among

9 Gromova: *Generation 'kosher light'*, p.244.

Arab youth is increasing, and that 'Jew' has become a curse-word in German schools, is another story [...]. This is on my mind. I don't want it."[10] These are just a few observations and reflections on how Jewish culture, collective memory, and city culture now seen to be tending towards a new confusion – and not only in Berlin. In the case of Berlin, and by extension, of Germany, the assessment that Holocaust memory maintains a clear place within the moral dictates of collective memory remains valid. This memory, however, has been losing its hold on and relevance for the younger and less 'German' generations of Germans, while at the same time, there appears to be a process of active re-contextualization and de-contextualization of the relevant memorial motifs – as when things Jewish are increasingly placed into everyday contexts such as local urban or architectural history, music or culinary culture. This may further encourage cultural linkage and trends toward normalization with regard to the politics of memory. Yet it also poses an inherent danger: that of the loss of the specificity of a unique cultural relationship – in the German-Jewish case, one that had been defined exclusively through the Holocaust and its memory.

This bond disintegrates the moment the debates between the *Diary of Anne Frank* and the historians cease to be accessible – whether associatively or in the sense of memory politics – to new groups and generations in Germany, and when, instead, Jewish culture becomes labeled in terms of Jewish quarters, Klezmer music and kosher-burgers, and incorporated into 'trendy' urban assemblages of 'ethnic' and 'migrant' event culture. Here, the *kippa* and kosher food contribute, much like the Muslim mosque or head-scarf, the Croatian grill-restaurant or Caribbean music, to the scenery of an urban ethnic 'interior decor'. In so doing, they generate 'ethnic' culture and traditions – whether actual or supposed – as a special symbolic asset which, much like art, promises 'authenticity' and which can now be produced, consumed and 'accumulated' at will in the form of practices, knowledge, objects, and style. This in turn means that the city-marketing that had been formerly achieved 'using' the Jewish *topos*, is now clearly tending toward the branding of Jewish objects or practices themselves – toward the promotion of what might be referred to as a historically unique 'kosher migrant culture'.

To what extent this rather ambivalent urban 'culturalization' of the Jewish *topos* will prove to be a helpful – or rather, a dangerous – 'normalization' of the relationship between urban culture and Jewish culture, remains to be seen. This will be among the more intriguing existential questions for history, society, and city politics in Europe in the coming years.

10 Gromova: *Generation 'koscher light'*, p. 233.