

## **TRANSFORMING BERLIN'S URBAN SPACE**

Here was held a conference devoting to searching out the significance of Berlin in the shaping of Jewry during and following the shaping of all we know as modern. The cataclysm of World War 1 brought down empires, cut down the lives of millions, and effected a total realignment of the world order. As far as the Jewish populations were concerned, everything was overturned. The great centres of the world no longer functioned as such; the Bolshevik revolution and the results of the cataclysm of war on an unprecedented scale saw to that. The crisis was brought into further relief by the currency collapse in Germany and the instability of the political scene, undermining the effort to introduce democracy into governance.

The recreation of the patterns of life was felt in greater degree on the part of world Jewry. This is what bore the brunt of the enmity and hostility from all sides. The great majority of Jews had hitherto been concentrated in Eastern and Central Europe, and it was precisely from these areas that the Jews fled, searching out new bases for resettlement. Those on the move also had to define the Modern for themselves, and discover appropriate frameworks, both for survival, as well as to flourish in the radically altered world order.

What was the place of Berlin in all this, and how did it work out? This was the theme addressed by the recent international conference, "Transforming Berlin's Urban Space". Many scholars (about 40) engaged in cutting edge research presented papers to an audience, numbering up to 200 attendees, on the economic, political and cultural factors that operated in Berlin during this period. We heard of the factors that placed the city in a unique position, geographically and demographically. Crucially, Berlin acted as a bridge between East (Eastern Europe that is) and West. Communications were highly developed, the economy, despite the deprivations of a catastrophic war, was perhaps the most technically developed in Europe. Education was on a high level, and served as a totemic beacon to those seeking escape, refuge, and advancement.

This background served the topic of transformation. We heard that rather than serving as the ultimate target of ideological settlement for Jews, Berlin served as a locus to gather the forces, and prepare for further movement, either Westwards, towards America, in search of freedom and further economic easing, or Eastwards, in the direction of a Palestine, that was beginning to acquire the form of a potential National Home and a Nation State. This latter, thought the Zionists, would relieve the persistent

curse of homelessness and alienation. Berlin offered all the ingredients, not just of a staging post, but an excellent framework for reconstruction.

Thus, we not only confront transience, but also the lineaments of a specifically endowed identity. Discussion sometimes focused on whether Berlin could be defined as centre for the expression of Jewish culture, in the way of Warsaw or Odessa, or served rather as an enclave. It was also suggested that although, in terms of numbers and object of view, it was not a genuine centre, the city was also more than an enclave, perhaps even the major enclave. So much of what became modern Jewry found its primary expression, both organisationally and culturally, here, in Berlin.

Much of the literature produced by the Jews, both in specifically Jewish languages, Hebrew and Yiddish, as well as in German, expressed this sense of impermanence and transition. But it also possessed its own unique features and genius. Analyses of some of this material also served as the material presented by the conference.

Berlin had dramatic qualities. Immediately following the Great War, the population of the city exploded. It rose from 2 to 4 million within the space of a year or so, from 1920, when the city incorporated outlying suburbs, and also became a growing point of attraction, both for inner immigration as well as for foreigners too. The early 20s saw the rise of very specific and brilliant Jewish literatures. Most of the new Jewish population was Yiddish speaking, but Berlin also served as a haven, in whatever circumstances, for major Hebrew writers, such as Bialik, Agnon and U.Z. Greenberg. Yiddish produced a new modernism, and many of these writers were bilingual in both Jewish languages. They were divided ideologically, between those who saw Yiddish as the ultimate means of verbal expression, and those who saw Hebrew as the necessary instrument of a national revival that had to be embodied in the Palestinian ancient homeland. It was also appreciated by the "Yiddishists" that Germany could never act as a genuine Yiddish base. So advocates and practitioners of both (many of these writers were bilingual in both) saw Berlin as a stepping stone, alluring and powerful indeed, but as a stepping stone nevertheless.

A great deal of the discussion focused too on the material base that was created in Berlin, as well as on new cultural enterprises in the 3 languages, Hebrew, Yiddish and German, such as the production of the Encyclopaedia Judaica, an ambitious but finally aborted enterprise. Both material and cultural expressions of course came to a brutal end with the Nazi ascent to control. We are in fact dealing with a relatively short historical phase of building and creativity, between 1919 and 1933. For foreign

publications, which had so flourished, paradoxically because of the hyper inflation, this phase came to an end earlier, with the stabilisation of the currency, in 1924. Both for the Yiddishists, such as Markish, who saw a future for Yiddish only in the USSR, and for the Hebraists (who also wrote Yiddish), such as Agnon, Bialik and Greenberg, who sought to engage with the Zionist enterprise by emigration, or return, to Palestine, Berlin could not be regarded as a final destination.. A sense of impermanence hovered over the literary production.

Nevertheless, Berlin became the capital of the new German republic, and Germany, as a major geographical and industrial centre, also served as a European centre. The Jews here were not only prominent in the shaping of economic life for the period when all this flourished, but they were also, to a significant degree, themselves shaped by this phase.

One of the most interesting epiphenomena particularly marked in Berlin is the contrast between the new and the old, as well as the cohabitation of the two in a close space. We have the attempted continuation of the patterns of stetl life side by side with the most experimental modernism in architecture, painting and literature. Sub-groups attempted to carve out their own domains, primarily in cafes, particularly popular, as the individual's own living space was usually so cramped and uninviting. So there were attempts to reproduce the old ghetto life, specifically in the old Jewish quarters, side by side with the Expressionism of the post-war epoch, and the demise of the old world. The overall thrust to structure an overall Jewish Berlin space though was doomed, and perceived to be so long before its ultimate passing.

The conference brought an almost wealth of expertise to bear on all that flowed from an intensive investigation of inter war Berlin, its historical backdrop, its dramatic situation, its unrivalled facilities, and in its exposure to the waves of horrendous violence and destructive force, both from within and without.

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