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Commemoration of Jewish Culture, Tradition and Heritage Outside Western Europe: Introduction to the Thematic Section

Abstract

The fourteenth issue of *Colloquia Humanistica* reflects on the evolving role of Jewish heritage in Central and Southeastern Europe, focusing on contemporary forms of commemorating Jewish culture, history, and memory in the region. The articles address two significant research challenges: the dominant position of Holocaust memory in academic and cultural discourse, and the insufficient inclusion of local perspectives. The presented case studies reveal the complex tensions between memory and politics, presence and absence, national and transnational narratives. Jewish heritage is portrayed here as a field of dynamic and ambiguous negotiations, shaped both by institutions and by grassroots initiatives as well as everyday remembrance practices.

Keywords: Jewish heritage, Jewish culture, memory politics, East-Central and Southeastern Europe, commemoration practices.

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In recent decades, Jewish culture and history have been significant subjects in scholarly discussions within the humanities. Disciplines and fields such as cultural history, memory studies, heritage studies, museum studies and cultural anthropology are increasingly engaging with the complex relationships between the past and contemporary commemorative practices. However, considering the rich history of Jewish culture, most existing approaches face two key challenges, which our volume seeks to address.

Firstly, Jewish cultural history and tradition are often overshadowed by the traumatic memory of the Holocaust. Much of the most innovative scholarship and critical perspectives remain closely tied to the Shoah and World War II. As a result, the broader, centuries-long history of Jews in Europe has been frequently underrepresented in academic research and, consequently, inadequately reflected in cultural institutions. Simultaneously, as historian Andrea Pető argues, contemporary transformations in Holocaust remembrance signify a paradigm shift, particularly within what she terms "polypore illiberal states" (Pető, 2021). This shift has profound implications for museums and memorial institutions in various cities worldwide. These changes include the politicization and appropriation of memory spaces, often leading to the marginalization of the memory of the "Other" within dominant narratives of national suffering.

Secondly, many ongoing debates remain anchored in the Western European perspective, which often marginalizes local contexts from other regions (see Małczyński et al., 2020). This overlooks the fact that Jewish culture – shaped by diverse influences over time – should not be viewed as a monolithic entity, but rather as a collection of varied expressions rooted in specific local and regional contexts (Biale, 2002). Consequently, grassroots voices are often underrepresented, despite being deeply grounded in the everyday experiences and remnants of Jewish heritage. This issue of *Colloquia Humanistica* seeks to shift that center of gravity by presenting case studies from East-Central Europe as well as the Balkans.

In the context of the ongoing wars and humanitarian crises in East-Central Europe and in Gaza, reflecting on the fates of heritage after war is particularly urgent. The decline in visitors to Holocaust memorial sites coupled with rising antisemitic incidents compels us to think about the current role and status of Jewish heritage, both pre- and post-World War II, in East-Central Europe and the Balkans. We gratefully received numerous abstracts responding to our call for contributions to this thematic issue.

The case studies gathered in this issue explore the intricate, and sometimes conflicting, ways in which Jewish culture, history, and tradition are

commemorated, represented, and remembered in contemporary East-Central Europe. They highlight the diversity of local and national approaches to Jewish heritage, as well as the wider tensions between memory and politics, absence and presence, silence and revival. Collectively, these contributions provide a multifaceted perspective on the evolving role of Jewish heritage in the region's cultural and historical landscapes.

The first group of articles examines the curation, interpretation and display of Jewish history in museums and heritage institutions. These contributions focus on exhibition narratives, institutional frameworks, and interpretive strategies, providing insight into how Jewish heritage is mediated in different regional and national contexts.

Two of the articles focus on museums in geographically distant, peripheral areas of Poland. Kinga Migalska's contribution, "The Museums in Tykocin and Włodawa as Institutions Shaping the Local Collective Memory of Polish Jews," explores two museums in small towns in eastern Poland. Migalska contrasts the vibrant Jewish communities that thrived in these regions prior to World War II with contemporary institutional efforts to commemorate them. She demonstrates how these museums serve a dual purpose: celebrating intangible aspects of Jewish heritage, such as religious and cultural traditions, while simultaneously safeguarding tangible remnants of the former Jewish presence.

Similarly, though focusing on a different part of the country, Katarzyna Taczyńska's article, "Local vs. National: Commemorative Practices of Jewish Cultural Heritage in Lower and Upper Silesia," investigates how municipal institutions in major cities of the southwestern region of Poland commemorate the Jewish communities that once lived there. Taczyńska addresses how local memory practices relate to, and sometimes diverge from, the national narrative of Jewish history in Poland. A key question arising from both articles concerns the extent to which regional memories of Jewish life and loss are integrated into the broader Polish national memory framework. This question is further explored in the article which addresses the political instrumentalization of Jewish heritage.

In her article "Illiberal Memory Politics and Its Institutions in Hungary: The Case of Holocaust Museums," Borbála Klacsmann analyzes two Holocaust museums established under the auspices of Hungary's Fidesz government: the House of Fates and the House of Jewish Excellences. Her study reveals how these institutions are used to promote an illiberal memory politics that selectively rewrites and reshapes historical narratives to align with the state's ideological goals.

The next article examines a physical site connected to Jewish heritage, focusing on its historical context, preservation efforts, and cultural symbolism. Maria Piekarska-Baronet's article, "Between *Kan* and *Sham*: Commemorative Materiality of the Łopuchowo Forest," offers an anthropological analysis of the Łopuchowo Forest in Poland – the site of the mass execution of Tykocin's Jewish community – through the theoretical lens of a "traumascape." The author provides a compelling examination of how Israeli national memory of the Holocaust actively shapes the memorial landscape of this site. Drawing on extensive fieldwork and interdisciplinary research, the study offers a nuanced understanding of how commemorative practices are influenced by transnational memory politics. Piekarska-Baronet's case study makes a significant contribution to scholarship on Holocaust memory, particularly regarding the interplay between national narratives and local sites of remembrance.

Two articles in this issue address the topic of Jewish literature and memory, exploring the biographies of Jewish women writers: Czesława Rosenblat (1877–1949) and Julia Dickstein-Wieleżyńska (1881–1943). Zuzanna Kołodziejska-Smagała, in her article "One of Many Untold Stories of Jewish Life in Polish Lands Before the Shoah," examines the life and work of Czesława Rosenblat. Through this microhistorical study, Kołodziejska-Smagała does not just reconstruct a compelling, little-known biography and reveal its broader cultural and social implications within both Polish and Jewish spheres at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. The article also raises critical questions about the absence of such biographies in contemporary commemorative practices, thereby prompting reflection on how Jewish identity is currently read and represented in Polish cultural discourse.

In the herstory-based article "Shades of Emancipation: The Missed Opportunities and Difficult Choices of Julia Dickstein-Wieleżyńska," Mariola Dorota Wilczak focuses on the emancipatory dimension of Dickstein-Wieleżyńska's life and work. Wilczak investigates the ideological foundations and selected expressions of Dickstein-Wieleżyńska's commitment to women's empowerment and social reform, illuminating the complex interplay between gender, Jewish identity, and cultural engagement in the early 20th century, including her dedicated support for the Lusatian Serbs as a symbol of solidarity with oppressed minorities. Together, these articles offer valuable insight into underrepresented voices in Jewish literary history and their significance for broader narratives of memory and identity in East-Central Europe.

Several contributions in this issue explore literary texts that engage with memory, yet are rooted in distinct geographical and cultural contexts outside

of Poland. These studies examine how literature – through personal testimony and poetic reflection – becomes a vehicle for negotiating the past in diverse East-Central and Southeastern European settings. Sabina Giergiel, in her article "Serving the Past: The Family Stories of Jasminka Domaš as an Example of Postmemory Narratives," analyzes the edited family accounts compiled by Croatian writer Jasminka Domaš. These narratives come from members of the second and third generations of Holocaust survivors, as well as from those who experienced the Holocaust as children in Croatia. Giergiel explores the formal characteristics and recurring themes present in the collected stories, asking how Croatian Holocaust narratives fit into a broader transnational framework of postmemory storytelling. The article contributes to a growing body of scholarship that seeks to understand how local histories are integrated into global memory discourses and how the transmission of trauma functions in culturally specific ways.

Gordana Todorić, in her article "To Read, to Listen, to Understand, or: How to Recollect Yourself in Text," examines *Nesabrane priče i još nesabranije misli i crtice, a o ∂ecemepцy da se i ne govori* [Uncollected Stories and Even More Uncollected Thoughts and Lines, Not to Mention Decasyllabic Verse, 2022] by Eliezer Papo. Todorić investigates the narrative strategies, perspectives, and thematic concerns that characterize Papo's storytelling. She situates the book within the broader contemporary corpus of Serbian, Yugoslav, and Balkan literature, identifying in it the emergence of new literary trends that blend autobiographical elements with experimental narrative forms. Todorić's study raises questions about the role of memory, multilingualism, and genre-blending in post-Yugoslav Jewish literature, offering valuable insight into the evolving literary landscapes of the region.

The article "Commemorating the Eastern European Jewish Past Through Landscapes: Zuzanna Ginczanka and the Ukrainian Context of 'Little City'" by Khrystyna Semeryn takes the Polish-Jewish poet Zuzanna Ginczanka's concept of "little city" as a point of departure to explore local practices of memory and forgetting in western Ukraine, particularly in Rivne and nearby Ostroh – historically significant Jewish centers in the region of Volyn. Semeryn examines how Ginczanka's poetic evocations of Jewish life and loss intersect with present-day commemorative initiatives. She traces the evolving approaches to local Jewish heritage and considers whether Ginczanka's cultural legacy might serve as a catalyst for greater historical awareness and community engagement. By positioning literary memory alongside spatial and civic practices, the article probes the potential of literature to inspire more inclusive and reflective forms of local memory work.

The final group of articles brings together diverse reflections on contemporary strategies for engaging with Jewish history and culture through education, visual media, and curatorial practice. The contributions explore how innovative methodologies and artistic representations can offer new insights into the preservation, interpretation, and transmission of Jewish heritage across various cultural and geographical contexts.

In her article "Intergenerational Dialogue Across Technological and Educational Spaces in Learning About Jewish History and Culture," Dragana Stojanović analyzes two case studies from Serbia: the *Midrasha* project and *The Interactive Tour of Jewish Belgrade*. She explores the potential of combining contemporary digital tools with non-formal educational models to foster intergenerational and intra-community dialogue. The article offers a valuable perspective on Jewish education in settings where Jewish communities are small, diverse in age, and necessarily open to collaboration with broader local audiences. Stojanović's work highlights the role of the third sector and out-of-school educational initiatives in addressing current challenges and limitations in heritage education.

Katarina Lazić, in her contribution "The Power of Fiction: Holocaust Denial in Film," critically examines three international films: *Life Is Beautiful* by Roberto Benigni, *The Zookeeper's Wife* by Niki Caro, and *Inglourious Basterds* by Quentin Tarantino. She explores the ways in which these films engage with Holocaust history through fictionalized, stylized, or controversial narrative techniques. Lazić asks whether such portrayals constitute a form of Holocaust denial or rather demonstrate alternative, idiosyncratic approaches to Holocaust representation. While the films are global in origin, the article's methodological lens – focused on visual culture, cinematic language, and historical framing – aligns closely with this issue's broader interest in how Jewish heritage is mediated, appropriated, or challenged across cultural and disciplinary boundaries.

Although formally placed in the *Discussion. Presentations. Book Reviews* section, the final contribution thematically complements this group. In her review of the exhibition *(post)JEWISH… Shtetl Opatów Through the Eyes of Mayer Kirshenblatt* at the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews, Monika Stobiecka reflects on the challenges of representing the invisible material heritage of Jews in contemporary East-Central Europe. Drawing on the framework of critical heritage studies, she interprets the exhibition – built around Kirshenblatt's paintings and curatorial research conducted in present-day Opatów – as an attempt to engage with the fragile, often decaying traces of prewar Jewish life. Stobiecka argues that such curatorial practices

underscore the urgency of recognizing and preserving Jewish material heritage in its anti-monumental, frequently marginalized form.

The contributions gathered in this issue collectively offer a nuanced, multi-perspective engagement with Jewish culture, history, and heritage in East-Central and Southeastern Europe. Across diverse case studies, methodologies, and disciplinary approaches, several recurring themes emerge – chief among them, the tension between the visibility and invisibility of Jewish heritage, the role of institutions in shaping public memory, and the competition between local, national, and transnational narratives of the past. Jewish heritage as presented in this issue is not a static object of remembrance but a dynamic and contested field of cultural, political, and social negotiation. The articles demonstrate that heritage can be a site of absence as much as presence, a space of institutional mediation, artistic intervention, or personal activism. The notion of memory is expanded beyond the Holocaust paradigm, allowing space for alternative and complementary narratives – of life, creativity, coexistence, and everyday Jewish experience. Thus, this issue may serve as an invitation to further reflection on the complexities of commemorating Jewish pasts.

We extend our deep appreciation to all the contributors and reviewers, whose insight, engagement, and generosity made this issue possible.

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Upamiętnianie kultury, tradycji i dziedzictwa żydowskiego poza Europą Zachodnią. Wprowadzenie do sekcji tematycznej

Czternasty numer „Colloquia Humanistica" podejmuje refleksję nad zmieniającą się rolą dziedzictwa żydowskiego w Europie Środkowej i Południowo-Wschodniej, koncentrując się na współczesnych formach upamiętniania kultury, historii i pamięci żydowskiej w tym regionie. Artykuły odnoszą się do dwóch istotnych wyzwań badawczych: dominującej pozycji pamięci o Zagładzie w dyskursie akademickim i kulturowym oraz niedostatecznego uwzględnienia lokalnych perspektyw. Przedstawione studia przypadków ukazują złożone napięcia między pamięcią a polityką, obecnością a nieobecnością, narracjami narodowymi i ponadnarodowymi. Dziedzictwo żydowskie ukazane jest tu jako pole dynamicznych i niejednoznacznych negocjacji, kształtowane zarówno przez instytucje, jak i oddolne inicjatywy oraz codzienne praktyki pamięci.

Słowa kluczowe: dziedzictwo żydowskie, kultura żydowska, polityki pamięci, Europa Środkowa i Południowo-Wschodnia, praktyki upamiętniania.

Note

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