Towards a Common Trauma?
Asymmetric Memories towards Jewish Life and Death in Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe

Those of you who participated in yesterday workshop on remembering and forgetting ethnic cleansing in Europe might have noticed that my address to some extent overlaps with a yesterday presentation on memory politics in Chisinau. Trying to avoid this, I decided to change the focus of my address and raise slightly different questions to the same material. These questions I also raise in my PhD research, that I have recently started in Management and of Cultural Heritage field, my reflections to the topic are quite recent and based on references to secondary literature, as well as on my own experience as Chisinau city dweller, rather than on primary research, so far.

Yesterday in his keynote address, prof. Leggewie placed the Holocaust in the center of the scheme for common European transnational memory that he offered (the center of 7 circles). It reflects a very important characteristic of the Trauma discourse in general and Shoah in particular – as comprehensive experience, remembrance of which may erase the national boundaries within European area.

After 1950s the phenomenon of institutionalization of Holocaust commemoration in Europe took place, resulting in establishment of multiple memorial sites (which include memorials, monuments, actual sites of elimination, plaques) and museums devoted to the memory of sufferings and death of Jewish people. It must be noticed, that although the Trauma discourse remains to be a common, cohesive memorial direction to commemorate Jewish history, today in some places, for instance, Prague (I refer to Jewish quarter) and to less extent Budapest or Bratislava, rich pages of Jewish history in the region are turned into a profitable source for tourism attraction, being an important part of tourism industry in those cities, again, I mainly refer to Prague.

Taking this into account, if one compares current representation and perception of memory connected to both peaceful and traumatic pages of Jewish life in Eastern Europe, he/she will notice that it is also the discourse of Trauma that remains to be the leading “trend” in commemoration practices about Jewish past in the region. At the same time, one must indicate the local phenomenon of patent demolition of material traces of Jewish presence in the region, when only ruins or even nothing remained. This phenomenon evinces in the number of deserted and neglected cemeteries, former cultic buildings (synagogues, yeshivas) and other constructions (Jewish gymnasiums, hospitals, private houses, etc.). There are complex historical, political and economic reasons why this heritage is currently occupying submarginal status in the region. These include swift reduction of Jewish population in the region throughout the 20th cent. (as the result of totalitarian rule: Nazi occupation and the Holocaust, Soviet policies, post-Soviet Jewish emigration) and current preoccupation with previously suppressed nationalist narrative in the selected countries, although Belarus represents separate phenomenon. My main argument is that in order to contribute restoration of monumental sites listed above, the symbolic and material Jewish heritage must be properly included into the post-Soviet Eastern European context, which is usually characterized by the political and economic instability, upsurge of various (sometimes competing) nationalist discourses, intensification of conflicts over symbolic and historical issues and at the same time increasing penetration and influence of various international organizations.
In my study, I refer to the discourse of Trauma as a common address in European memory about Jewish past to be rather ambiguous concept when we talk about the practices of preservation of actual sites connected to Jewish life in Eastern European region. The overly strong focus on the Trauma discourse narrows the possibilities for the preservation and management of the rich Jewish material heritage. The emphasis on the Holocaust frequently leaves many buildings and monuments from earlier epoch with little attention. In some cases the Holocaust commemoration is also an escape route for local, authorities from the international pressure. As the result, they limit themselves to the participation in the openings of the Holocaust monuments and disregard any other instances of Jewish heritage. Saying this, I do not want to deny or diminish the importance of the Trauma discourse in the Jewish and universal history and memory. I just want to emphasize that the preoccupation with the Holocaust at the expense and neglect of other traces of Jewish history often leads to the vanishing of the latter. Thus, the focus on commemorative events devoted to the memory of Jewish death in the region contributes to lamentable consequences in terms of lack of attention paid to constructions connected to Jewish life.

I plan to exemplify these phenomena by the instance of several post-Soviet cities with diverse historical and cultural legacies, where Jewish population constituted about 40% of townspeople before 1940s: Minsk in Belarus, Odessa, Chernivtsi, Lviv in Ukraine, and Chisinau in Republic of Moldova. This historical legacy made these cities well-known for their Jewish monumental heritage, large part of which is currently lying in ruins. The study refers to further theoretical issues within memory studies that also will be discussed, for instance, to the possibility to overcome the national-focus paradigm in memory studies and at the same time remain sensitive to local peculiarities. I will also question to what extent management and tourism industry together with deliberate attempts to construct national-oriented memory in the region influence the choice of buildings to be restored and to be left ruined. Places include former synagogues, extant cemeteries, and Holocaust-related sites, such as places of execution, mass graves, and post-Second World War commemorative monuments. Often, the location of these sites is known only to a few elderly residents, who either personally remember the events, or who heard of them in the post-war period.

Within this address I would like to stop on one particular case study: the city of Chisinau, capital of the Republic of Moldova, where memory and practices of commemoration devoted to the Jewish past coexist with asymmetric trends of construction of national history and identity. By the end of the 19th century, the Jewish population in the region had reached 230,000 people, about 12 percent of the total population. After about 185,000 Jews were sent in the Transnistria area in concentration camps by 1942, very few left alive and by 1998, the total Jewish population in the country was estimated to be between 35,000 and. About 20,000 Jews are believed to live in the capital city of Chisinau.

According to the survey on Jewish Heritage Sites and Monuments in Moldova made by the United States Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad in collaboration with the Joint Distribution Committee, there are more then 100 sites connected to Jewish history in Moldova. This survey was carried out in 2004 and published in 2010 (it is also available online) in order to identify, document as many Jewish historical and Holocaust-related sites as it was possible within a year. Among those more then 100 sites identified within the survey only 8 were labeled to be in excellent condition – and majority of these sites are newly built monuments that have been built recently (monument to Holocaust Victims, Monument to the victims of Fascism, monuments to prisoners of the Chisinau Ghetto). 26 of sites connected to Jewish heritage in Moldova were labeled to be in good condition, mainly memorial plaques, monuments to Holocaust victims in different towns, random houses, 16 in fair, 14 in poor and 29 in very poor condition, mainly unprotected cemeteries across the whole country (reference). In May 2011, Samuel Gruber, the Commission's research Director, added in his personal blog that

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1 Even if something was/is being built (monuments, other commemoration sites, etc.), usually they are sponsored by Jewish community and/or international funds.
according to the Stephen Roth Institute, several Jewish cemeteries have been desecrated since the period of this survey (reference).

Let us take a look on the sites built to commemorate the memory of Jewish traumatic fate throughout the 20th century.

1) Monument to Chisinau Pogrom Victims

The Chisinau pogroms (more commonly known as the Kishinev pogroms) took place in 1903 and 1905. The victims were buried in the Jewish cemetery, but in 1959, this part of the cemetery was destroyed to make way for a park facing Calea Iesilor Street. On the 90th anniversary of the pogrom, in 1993, the community erected a red granite memorial designed by architect Simeon Shoihet (b. 1931). In 2003, on the 100th anniversary, a gray granite block was added. The inscription reads: “We will bear your memory in pain forever you will always be in our hearts.” This stone memorial is divided into two parts by Magen David (Star of David) The inscription – in Hebrew, Yiddish, Romanian, and Russian – reads: “In memory of the victims of the Kishinev pogrom 1903-1993.”

2) Monument to the victims of Chisinau Ghetto

The Chisinau Ghetto was established in 1941. On April 22, 1993, a monument to those imprisoned there was placed on the border of this ghetto at Jerusalem 3000 Street. The monument, designed by sculptor Naum Epelbaum (b. 1927) and architect Simeon Shoihet (b. 1931), consists of a large bronze standing figure of a praying Jew, with his left hand on his heart and his right hand holding Scripture, symbolizing the suffering of the prisoners. The figure is on a pedestal, and set against a broken red granite wall, at the center of which is a void in the shape of a shattered Magen David (Star of David). Memorial ceremonies are held here on Yom ha-Shoah (Jewish Memorial Day for Holocaust victims) and at other times.
3) *Monument to Nazi Victims*

The monument designed by A. David and F. Naumov was erected in 1991 on the site of mass executions near the stone quarry where Jews were forced to work during Second World War. The monument, set on top of the small grassy mound, displays two extended arms reaching up with the hands breaking the barbed wire and swastika. At first the design appears to be abstract, but as one moves around the monument the arms reveal themselves.

The hierarchy of narratives visible in Chisinau's public space, provides lack of dialog between majority and minority identity construction. It is a particular instance of appropriating multicultural history by politically and demographically dominant majority. Thus the erasing of
memory about Jewish life in Moldova (I refer to buildings in ruins) may be considered as part of identity building through lack of architectural renovations and spatial marking. The situation is seen to be even more complicated if one takes into account the absence of unified and stable concept of Moldovan history, memory and identity. Till today competing pro-Romania, pro-Russian and state-oriented pro-Moldovan narratives represent the complex puzzle of identity search, and in that case Jewish heritage remains to be marginal, which creates a gap and a cultural distance between non-Jewish audience and members of the community.

The issue of financial sourses brought to manage Jewish Cultural Heritage in Moldova also matters a lot. Including the monuments that has been shown, majority of projects to commemorate this heritage are funded by the Jewish community or by funding from abroad. The “management” or non-management of these sites by the Moldovan authorities depends on whether Moldova as a state is ready to integrate these sites into the pantheon of national memory. At the same time it is the Jewish community of the city (also very heterogeneous) is able to provide comprehensive information concerning Jewish traces in the heritage of the city, but not considerable contribution to restore dilapidated buildings. Thereby obvious lack of multicultural, or cosmopolitan approach among the leading trends of perception and representation of the city's public space leads to the absence of bright perspectives for Jewish architectural sites to be restored.

Further reading:


