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Sephardim, Ashkenazim and Non-Jewish Peoples: Encounters Across Europe

Abstract

The 9th issue of *Colloquia Humanistica* focuses in its entirety on Jewish/non-Jewish contacts. The papers, presentations of materials, discussions and reviews all share the theme of the entangled history of cohabitation. Still, deconstructed on multiple layers of geography, ethnicity, research domain and methodology, the title's "encounters" make for varied reading.

Keywords: Ashkenazim, Sephardim, diaspora, contacts, Europe.

We present the 9th issue of *Colloquia Humanistica*, whose content is entirely coherent and focused on a single theme: cross-cultural encounters which, whether they occurred as clashes or exchanges, affected everyone involved. Our goal was for all the texts – from the main articles to

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materials, sources, archival research, and even reviews and discussions – to be in line with the issue’s title. Initially, the title’s “encounters” were supposed to apply to Jewish/non-Jewish relations in a specific area, but the present volume, which is a compilation of the perspectives and interests of many different authors, reveals a more multidimensional meaning of the word.

Presenting the variety of Jewish/non-Jewish encounters across Europe (and beyond) is an ambitious and important task. It has become a frequent subject of contemporary studies on the Jewish diaspora, and researchers underline the need for a methodology that is both sensible and prudent. There are several critical aspects of discussing the history of Jews in a non-Jewish context, based on the publications on the matter. In his monograph on the theory of describing Jewish history (as well as identity and culture) in the post-modern epoch, Moshe Rosman gives a lot of thought to the concept of hybridity. Hybridity, which describes cultural, political, economic and other relations, and therefore requires a multidisciplinary approach, can be a useful methodological tool in Jewish studies (Rosman, 2011, p. 131). Jewish studies embracing hybridity reveal interactions of a minority with a majority without neglecting the basics: the cultural core and the Jewish identity (Rosman, 2011, p. 125). According to Rosman, there is often a layer of metahistory added to hybrid descriptions of Jewish history, which thus either portray close relationships with the surroundings (e.g. Jews with Poland during the interwar period) or, conversely, highlight the autonomy of Jewish culture (Zionist narration). However, Rosman notices that hybridity is not the ultimate tool, and warns that it needs to be used with caution. Always placing Jewish history and culture in the context of the big picture can lead to its marginalisation and instrumental treatment, as comparative material or a reference for other studies. Ignoring the context, on the other hand, also seems to be a methodological error. Therefore, finding the golden mean is advised (Rosman, 2011, pp. 131–135).

In a volume on contacts between Jews and Germans in Eastern Europe, Tobias Grill indicates another methodological option: entangled history. It is a perspective which allows for highlighting:

... interactions, dependencies, and interdependencies between specific national, regional, ethnic, social, political or religious entities, but also ... parallels, similarities and differences. An *entangled history* approach particularly encompasses issues of cultural borrowing, transfer or appropriation, such as when one group adopts or imitates certain ideas and cultural practices of another group, and adapts them according to their own specific needs. (Grill, 2018, p. VII–VIII)

A perspective of “transnational, transcultural or entangled relations” in studies on the history of Jews and Germans in Eastern Europe can show

common cultural and social patterns, language roots (in this case Yiddish and German) and a shared status of being “the other” in post-World War I Europe (Grill, 2018, pp. VIII–X).

Some contemporary researchers studying Jewish history and culture take a closer look at the terms “home” and “diaspora”. The authors of a volume presenting research on the culture of Mediterranean Jews point out the incoherence of these terms. For Jews, the term “home” can mean various things (*Eretz Yisrael*, or other countries and regions), and the term “diaspora”, fundamental to Jewish identity, in fact means a multitude of “diasporas”, or Jewish minorities, each with its unique experience – cultural, social, linguistic etc. (Miccoli & Simoni & Foscarini, 2018, pp. X–XIV).

This multiplicity of meanings is reflected in the current issue of *Colloquia Humanistica*. As we originally conceived, it presents stories of Jews in Europe. However, depending on the authors’ perspective, Europe is sometimes “home” and sometimes the destination of a “diaspora” (or “diasporas”). Our selection of texts aimed to present various subthemes and methodologies. The aforementioned hybridity and entangled history strongly correspond with the title’s “encounters”. They can be found on a geographical or, more precisely, a transgeographical level. Additionally, since the geography of the group being studied does not coincide with the region’s national boundaries, we also look at it from a transnational perspective (Perry & Vos, 2016). We visit various regions of Europe. They include Poland (see the texts by Joanna Cukras-Stelągowska and Tomasz Kamusella), Germany (Izabela Olszewska writes about the Jewish minority there) and Ukraine (Yurii Kaparulin discusses present-day Kherson and Mykolaiv Oblast). The Balkans, in a broader than just geographical sense, and former Yugoslavia are strongly featured in the issue, with texts by Krinka Vidaković Petrov, Milan Koljanin, Sofija Grandakovska, Eliezer Papo, Miloš M. Damjanović, Ljiljana Dobrovšak and Ivana Žbec Šilj. We leave Europe in two cases: Oro Anahory-Librowicz writes about the culture of the North Moroccan diaspora, and Maria Piekarska about the memory of contemporary Israel. Transgeography is strongly accentuated by Michael Studemund-Halévy, who discusses the life story of a person split between the Balkans (Bulgaria) and Western Europe (France). Also, both books reviewed in this issue are journeys across countries and continents: Alisse Waterstone leads us from Eastern Europe to the Americas (in a book reviewed by Sofija Grandakovska), while Joanna Lisek moves around the map between Eastern Europe and the United States (in a book reviewed by Katarzyna Taczyńska).

The central theme of this issue is Jewish/non-Jewish encounters, and our authors present their various forms and origins. Some of the texts are the result of historical research on the social, political, cultural and

economic background of those encounters. Such historical studies include the texts by Milan Koljanin and Miloš M. Damjanović about the Jewish minority throughout the history of the so-called First Yugoslavia, the latter author focusing on the area of Kosovo and Metohija: the legal situation of Jews in the state, the evolution of religious, political and social life as part of the new multicultural society, the influence of new movements (especially socialism and Zionism) and, finally, the experience of antisemitism. Ljiljana Dobrovšak and Ivana Žebec Šilj take a different approach. They chronicle the history of the Croatian diaspora using the example of an assimilated Jewish family in relation to the metahistory of Zagreb, Croatia, and even Europe at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. Michael Studemund-Halévy uses the in-depth study of an individual (Santo Semo) to illustrate the processes of the Westernisation of a Jewish minority having its roots in traditional Sephardic and Balkan/Oriental cultures.

Interculturality takes central stage in articles that analyse cultural texts. Eliezer Papo analyses one of the translations of *The Zohar* to see how Jewish tradition in Bosnia interfered with Islamic tradition and adopted its patterns, as was the case with homiletics. Oro Anahory-Librowicz has chosen oral tradition (folktales of the Jews of Tetuán) to show Jews' perception of other peoples of Maghreb, shaped by their collective memory and the experience of coexistence with followers of other religions. The Jews/non-Jews dichotomy, "Us vs Them", rather clear in the aforementioned folktales, seems blurred in the German-language Jewish press. Izabela Olszewska shows how Jews who went first through the Haskalah and then through acculturation, expressed their belonging to German culture and German society, yet were aware of having the status of "the other" within it.

Two of the articles discuss Jewish/non-Jewish encounters in the Polish context. Joanna Cukras-Stelągowska offers insights into the "unexpected generation" – the third generation after the Holocaust, raised in mixed families. Her observations focus on this generation's attempts to return to Jewish tradition and life in today's Poland. In the autoethnographic essay closing the issue, Tomasz Kamusella reflects on the presence and/or absence of memory of the Polish Jewish minority.

As its title suggests, the issue features encounters of two Jewish groups: Ashkenazim and Sephardim. Both groups, with their autonomous traditions and cultures, functioned in different spheres of contact and their interactions with the outside world could have separate timelines. The distinction between Ashkenazi and Sephardic experiences was therefore important to some of our authors. The subject of Eliezer Papo's and Sofija Grandakovska's texts is the traditional Balkan (Bosnian and Macedonian) Sephardic minority and how its culture and identity was shaped by Jewish

tradition on the one hand and the centuries-old cohabitation with non-Jews in the Balkans on the other (the Ottoman *millet* system, Islamic tradition). The aforementioned analysis of the oral tradition of Moroccan Jews reveals its characteristics specific for North African Sephardic settlement, but its author also points out common traits with the oral tradition of the Sephardim of the Balkan diaspora. The differences between Ashkenazim and Sephardim make encounters between the two groups an interesting subject. The text about Jews in Kosovo and Metohija shows the meeting of the two diasporas: the established Sephardic settlers with the new wave of Ashkenazi emigrants from other parts of Europe. The Ashkenazi motifs appearing throughout the issue are all linked to acculturation and involvement in life beyond their own Jewish community. This is clearly noticeable in the text about a family of Ashkenazi origin living in Zagreb and the text about *Westjuden* who, on various levels, identified more with their German cohabitants than with orthodox *Ostjuden*.

On the other hand, some of the papers show that common Jewish tradition and experience transcend belonging to the Sephardic or Ashkenazi groups in situations of external interactions and encounters with “the other”. Although raised in Bosnia in a traditional Sephardic family, the protagonist of Krinka Vidaković Petrov’s paper seems to have had her and her relatives’ lives less influenced by their background than by the wheels of metahistory: the Holocaust and its memory, World War II, the proclamation of the so-called Second Yugoslavia and emigration to North America. Those experiences are shared by many families who survived the Shoah, regardless of their Ashkenazi or Sephardic origins. In his essay, Tomasz Kamusella confronts the attitude of Polish people towards Jews – “them”. Maria Piekarska discusses one of the memory strategies in contemporary *Eretz Yisrael* (linking memory of the Holocaust with the Zionist narration of the founding myth of Israel) that reduces the importance of Ashkenazi or Sephardic origins and unites Jews in the commemoration of their shared history.

The studies presented in the issue also include linguistic encounters. They illustrate the multilingualism of both Jewish groups, review their sociolinguistic conditioning and discuss the question of coterritorial languages. A lot of attention is paid to Ladino (Judeo-Spanish) and its functions. Ladino, presented as a language of oral communication and folk tradition (in the text by Oro Anahory-Librowicz), can also be a language of translations: it then becomes the language of high culture and prestige, acts as a sacred language of religion, as in the text by Eliezer Papo, or becomes a tool to introduce foreign culture and literature to the Ottoman Sephardim in the process of their Westernisation, as explained by Marta Kacprzyk. The possible sociolinguistic pattern of the educated classes of the Balkan

Sephardim at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries has been illustrated by Michael Studemund-Halévy. Through the life story of Santo Semo, we can observe phenomena and linguistic processes such as multilingualism, gradual language shift (from maternal Judeo-Spanish to the languages of the Balkan surroundings and then to Western ones, French for example, often due to the education system of the Alliance Israélite Universelle). Joanna Lisek's book reviewed in the issue offers us a chance to look at Yiddish in a different way: not as a traditional *mame-loshn* but as the fully-fledged language of female poets. We also look at the effects of the now-completed shift from Jewish to local languages: among assimilated Ashkenazi communities like those in Croatia or Germany before World War II. The wide spectrum of languages discussed in the issue would not be complete without learning about *Ivrit* in modern-day Israel from Maria Piekarska.

Memory and memory studies play an important role in the issue. The comprehensive range of sources analysed – from archives, to testimonies of survivors in Ukraine, family stories, both in oral transmission and texts of culture, and sites of memory – help better understand the memory of the Shoah. The Jewish collective memory also includes events in the ancient homeland of Zion (see Sofia Grandakovska's text) and the return to it in the 20th century (see Maria Piekarska's text). Jewish literature is another recurring topic in the issue. It provides an opportunity to consider the relationship between gender and textualisation of experience. Gender, as shown in Krinka Vidaković Petrov's paper or the book *Kol isze* reviewed in the issue, can help understand and build one's own cultural identity.

The title's "encounters" are dynamic processes shaping Jewish communities. The ways in which they are captured, using various methodologies and paradigms, reflect the directions, contents and boundaries of Jewish studies as well as the research interests and attitudes of individual researchers. The authors worked with archival sources, testimonies, interviews and texts of culture (original or translated); other objects of their investigation and consideration included sites of memory, landscapes, architecture, and even personal perspectives. The issue presents historical and sociological research, research on culture, literature, collective and transgenerational memory (also combined with gender studies and/or semiotics). Sociolinguistic observations feature next to linguistic images of the world and translation studies. The variety of the volume reflects the wide horizon of interests in the field of Jewish-related research, but also the necessity for multi-layered research practice to build better interpretation models of Jewish culture and history.

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Aszkenazyjczycy, Sefardyjczycy i narody nieżydowskie. Spotkania w Europie

Dziewiąty numer *Colloquia Humanistica* jest w całości poświęcony żydowsko-nieżydowskim kontaktom. Artykuły, prezentacje materiałów, dyskusje i recenzje ilustrują tę uwikłaną historię koegzystencji. Numer jest zróżnicowany, a tytułowe spotkania mają odzwierciedlenie na kilku poziomach: wspomnianych kontaktów żydowsko-nieżydowskich, aszkenazyjsko-sefardyjskich, obszarów badawczych i na poziomie metodologicznym.

Słowa kluczowe: Aszkenazyjczycy, Sefardyjczycy, diaspora, kontakty, Europa.

Note

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