

Zitierhinweis

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Jüdische Museen in Ostmitteleuropa: Kontinuitäten – Brüche – Neuanfänge: Prag, Budapest, Bratislava (1993–2012). By Katalin Deme (Veröffentlichungen des Collegium Carolinum; 133.) Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2016. 317 pp.

In her new book, which is based on her PhD thesis (defended at the School of Culture and Society at Aarhus University), Katalin Deme analyzes three Jewish museums in East Central Europe each of which has a different history and different institutional relationship with the state and the local Jewish community. To be more specific, she looks at the Jewish museums in Prague, Budapest (both traditional institutions founded and now run again by the Jewish communities), and Bratislava (an official undertaking of post-socialist Slovakia). Deme is particularly interested in two questions: first, how did these museums respond to the collapse of state socialism in 1989, and how did they use new opportunities to present Jewish history and culture “independently from the normative patterns” of the communist period (p.4)? Second, how did the three museums define their Jewish identity, how did they represent Jewish history within the respective national master narratives, and what concepts of “national loyalty” did they develop in doing so? Both issues converge around the question concerning the processes of questioning and renegotiating Jewish identity from 1989 on (including again, according to Deme, the problem of the national and ethnic belonging of the Jewry) within a context that was marked by the redefinition of an ethnic and national identity of post-socialist societies as a whole. In short, how did the museums try to reconcile the “Jewish” and the “national” master narratives?

Deme’s central questions are highly interesting and promise to yield new insights into the social, political, and national dynamics of the transition era from socialism to post-socialism. Her findings constitute an important contribution not only to the discussion about nationalism and anti-Semitism in East Central Europe, but, as a result of her focus on Jewish actors, also about post-socialist Jewish life.

While focusing on the period from the early 1990s on, Deme devotes considerable space to the description of the history of the Jewish Museums in question, combining an institutional history with an analysis of the museums’ narratives of Jewish history and culture. One could certainly be critical of this choice, as these sections do not present the findings of original research, and at

times one feels lost in the many themes that Deme addresses. Also, it is not clear what Deme understands by “institutional typology” (p.22), which she defines as her objective with regards to the pre-1989 period. Nevertheless, for readers who might be familiar with only one of the cases, this relatively extensive discussion of the historical background can help further a better understanding of the differences and similarities among the three museums.

Deme succeeds in highlighting the continuities and the importance of the past for the situation after 1989 too. This becomes very clear in her discussion of the legacies of the Nazi past, an issue which is important not only for the Jewish Museum in Prague (owing to the richness of its collections partly due to the Nazi project of a Central Jewish Museum), but also for the Jewish Museum in Budapest, which tragically became a very concrete *lieu de mémoire* of the Holocaust and the collections of which grew considerably after 1945, as it took over the collections of local Jewish communities which had dwindled or vanished (or been destroyed) entirely. Deme’s critical analysis of the ways in which the institutions deal with this difficult legacy, i.e. the ways in which they “come to terms” with their own past, is certainly one of the most fascinating parts of the book, and they make it relevant from the perspective of the current policies and future orientations of Jewish Museums in East Central Europe and beyond.

Her last chapter about the future prospects of Jewish museology in the twenty-first century makes it clear, once more, that Deme does not content herself with an analysis of recent developments, but aims rather to contribute to the discussion about the future orientations and identities of Jewish museums in Europe. For instance, she advocates overcoming narrow national narratives through emphasis on international and transnational aspects and the presentation of Judaism not as a stable category, but in its relations and interactions with the non-Jewish environment.

While the Holocaust is integrated quite differently into the museums’ narratives (as an integral part of the Bratislava exhibition but treated separately, in distinct monuments, in Prague and Budapest), there are several similarities when it comes to the question of the inclusion of the Jews in the national master narratives. The three Jewish Museums tell the histories of old-established minorities and stress the belonging of the Jews to the respective national communities. This is symbolized, for instance, in the emphasis placed on the Jewish contributions to the struggle for national independence (the Czech-Jewish movement in the nineteenth century or the Jews fighting in the Slovak

National Uprising in 1944). For the Jewish Museum in Budapest too, Deme demonstrates convincingly how the museum's focus on Jewish life prior to the Holocaust contributes to a reaffirmation of the narrative of a shared Jewish-Hungarian history, a narrative that would become much less coherent if a critical discussion of World War II formed an integral part of the museum's narrative.

Whereas the overall conception and the main questions and results (even in the absence of archival research) are all stimulating, several individual parts are less inspiring. The author's deviations from the main subject and the occasional lack of focus and coherence clearly hamper the reading of the book. Deme's introduction, for instance, in which she aims to discuss concepts and methodological approaches, is not fully convincing. Her understanding of ethnicity and national identity and its opposition to (exclusively) religious Jewishness does not enable her to discuss multiple and shifting identities with adequate subtlety. She fails to include recent discussions about the concept of "loyalty," a term she uses only when it comes to memory cultures in her explanations of the attempts of the curators to embed Jewish historical narratives into national master narratives.

When she recapitulates recent academic approaches to museums, she does not go beyond commonly accepted (at least within cultural studies and new cultural history) propositions to understand museums as arenas, for instance, which reveal less about what happened in the past than they do about how this past is interpreted and used in the present. When, in her discussion of the interactions of visual and textual components in museums, she identifies a "double discursive level" (p.10), she overlooks a third important dimension, namely the materiality of objects and the position of the visitor within the exhibition space. Thus, she also undervalues the importance and performative potential of monuments (the Pinkas Synagogue in Prague or the memorials in the courtyard of the Jewish Museum in Budapest), which she does not treat as equal parts of the museums' narratives because they are non-textual. Furthermore, Deme is interested primarily in the museums' permanent exhibitions, and she devotes less space to an analysis of the roles of the museums in different areas, such as education, cultural activities, public discourse, and historical research. If, then, Deme concludes that the museums are active agents of cultural memory and "disturbing stumbling blocks" for the majority society which compel them to discuss the "suppressed segments of their own totalitarian past" (p.256), this may be true, but it does not follow as a logical conclusion on the basis of her research.

Last but not least, one has to wonder about her conceptualization of 1989 as a clear watershed in the history and culture of East Central Europe and her generalizations concerning the socialist period. Since she is interested in the “new” possibilities that the “post-totalitarian” (p.12) period offer Jewish Museums, her view of the socialist period is altogether negative, stressing the ideological manipulations and political instrumentalizations of the museums, their “totalitarian identification models” (whatever that means; p.122), and the museums’ decades-long “institutional stagnation” (p.50).

These limitations and weaknesses do not minimize the overall importance of Deme’s book, both as a historical analysis of the Jewish Museums in East Central Europe in the transition era and as a critical discussion of their role in the respective societies, the self-perceptions (or identities), and their possible future orientations.

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