

Jewish Textual Architectures

Jewish Spaces, Places, and Architectures in Literature. Online Anthology

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“Jewish reminiscences that need to be mentioned” - Martin Cohen's “A ramble through the large German congregations of Hamburg“, Israelitisches Familienblatt 32 (1930), No. 47, November 20,1930

SOURCE DESCRIPTION

On November 20,1930, the 25-year-old Martin Cohen (1905-1962), son of a rabbi from a Sephardic family in Altona, published his “Ramble through the large German congregations of Hamburg [Streifzug durch die deutschen Großgemeinden von Hamburg]”. The article appeared in the Israelitisches Familienblatt 32, No. 47 as a report in a series published on the various large congregations in Germany in 1930 and 1931 [1]. The report, printed in three columns and filling just under a page, describes important Jewish buildings and places in the Hanseatic city such as synagogues, prayer rooms, schools, residential homes and lodges in Hamburg's Neustadt district, St. Pauli, the harbor area and the Grindel neighborhood, and discusses their historical and contemporary features. The districts of Altona, Wandsbek and Harburg, which were added under the National Socialists' Greater Hamburg Act of 1937, are not mentioned. The Israelitische Familienblatt was aimed at a Jewish readership, to whom Cohen wanted to convey aspects of Hamburg's Jewish city history with his article.

A Jewish city map

The article, written by Martin Cohen, is dedicated to buildings and places such as synagogues, schools, cemeteries, but also residential foundations and private homes that were important for the Jewish history of Hamburg and contemporary Jewish urban society, and also deals with the respective (historical) peculiarities. The report, which has been made digitally accessible on Compact Memory, was already received by Irmgard Stein in her 1984 publication “Jüdische Baudenkmäler in Hamburg”. Stein takes Cohen's ramble as the starting point for her own research and begins her book with a reprint of the text. The text was published a second time in 2013 in a volume edited by Michael Studemund-Halévy and Anna Menny entitled “Ort und Erinnerung. Ein historischer Streifzug durch das Jüdische Hamburg von 1930”. The editors devote themselves to Hamburg's memorial landscape and document the places mentioned by Cohen with historical and - where available - current photographs. They also trace the history of Cohen's family. According to Studemund-Halévy and Menny, the places described by Cohen are evidence for him of the “high degree of bourgeoisification of the Hamburg Jews [...] and visible proof of their disproportionate share of the urban middle and upper classes [...], but at the same time also evidence of the financial hardships of the Jewish lower class”. [2] According to Irmgard Stein, the report is characterised by Cohen's

“charm and humour” [3] and his description of aspects of urban and congregation history. In this way, “the situation of those years in which Hamburg's Jews occupied an important and unmistakable position in the city republic comes alive” [4]. Cohen's remarks can be read as a self-confident communication of a Jewish cultural heritage and self-assurance to a Jewish readership at a time when society's anti-Semitism had noticeably increased.

For example, Cohen writes about the Grindelviertel, the most important neighborhood for Hamburg's Jews at the time the text was written:

“

The focal point of the new Jewish center is the synagogue of the German-Israelite Congregation on Bornplatz. An imposing building that was built in the synagogue style that was common at the beginning of the century. It is adjoined by the beautiful building of the Talmud-Thora-Realschule, the oldest Jewish secondary school in Germany. The expansion of this institution into an senior secondary school will be completed in a short time. [Mittelpunkt des neuen jüdischen Zentrums ist die Synagoge der Deutsch-Israelitischen Gemeinde am Bornplatz. Ein imposantes Bauwerk, das in dem zu Beginn des Jahrhunderts üblich gewesenen Synagogenbaustile gehalten ist. An sie schließt sich das schöne Gebäude der Talmud-Thora-Realschule, der ältesten jüdischen höheren Lehranstalt Deutschlands. Der Ausbau dieser Anstalt zur Oberrealschule wird in kurzer Zeit beendet sein.]“ (Cohen 1930)

The Jewish buildings and places are not merely listed by Cohen, but situated in their respective places as he walks through the urban space, creating an alternative, Jewish city map, so to speak. Martin Cohen takes the readers of the Israelitischen Familienblatt with him on his expedition: “To get from the main railway station to the old Jewish center, you go through the Mönckebergstraße via Rathausmarkt to Mönkedamm. Even on this route you will find Jewish reminiscences that deserve to be mentioned. [Um vom Hauptbahnhof aus ins alte jüdische Zentrum zu gelangen, geht man durch die Mönckebergstraße über den Rathausmarkt zum Mönkedamm. Schon auf diesem Wege findet man jüdische Reminiszenzen, die der Erwähnung bedürfen].“ (Cohen 1930)

This quote points to two important features of the text: Cohen's focus on the Jewish history of the Hanseatic city and the traversal of the urban space. Further evidence of this is the following quotation:

“On our way to the former Jewish center, we find the Raboisen to the right of Mönckebergstraße, where the Würtzer School for poor Jewish boys was located from 1793 to 1808. It was founded by the Freemasons' Lodge, which imposed on itself the task of providing enlightenment among the Jews. We walk across the Rathausmarkt, past the stock exchange, where, like Heinrich Heine says, “our fathers as honestly as possible traded and walked” and where “Banko's spirit spooked”. Then we come to the Mönkedamm, where wealthy Portuguese Jews owned several houses around 1610. [...] At the beginning of the 17th century the Portuguese lived at Rödingsmarkt, Mühlenbrücke, Bohnenstraße and in front of the Dammtor and Bleichen, but the Jews were restricted from settling in these streets. [Auf unserem Wege in das ehemalige jüdische Zentrum finden wir rechts von der Mönckebergstraße die Raboisen, wo sich von 1793 bis 1808 die Würtzersche Schule für arme jüdische Knaben befunden hat. Eine Gründung der Freimaurer-Loge, die es sich zur Aufgabe gestellt hatte, unter den Juden für Aufklärung zu sorgen. Wir gehen über den Rathausmarkt, an der Börse vorbei, wo, wie Heinrich Heine sagt, „unsere Väter so redlich als möglich gehandelt und gewandelt“ und wo „Bankos Geist seinen Spuk getrieben“. Dann kommen wir zum Mönkedamm, wo um 1610 die reichen portugiesischen Juden mehrere Häuser besaßen. [...] Zu Anfang des

17. Jahrhunderts wohnten die Portugiesen am Rödingsmarkt, Mühlenbrücke, Bohnenstraße und vor dem Dammtor und Bleichen, jedoch wurde den Juden später die Niederlassung in diesen Straßen beschränkt.]“ (Cohen 1930)

Cohen is not only dedicated to Jewish religious or communal buildings, but also to private houses, as the example above shows. His explanations describe the coexistence of non-Jewish and Jewish urban society, the historical requirements and restrictions for the settlement of Jewish people in Hamburg and the various centers of the Jewish population in historical change.

Walking through the city

At the time Cohen's article was written, feuilletonistic descriptions of the (metropolitan) city were very popular. Publications by Walter Benjamin, Erich Kästner, Hans Fallada and Irmgard Keun are prominent examples of the entry of the cultural practice of *flânerie*, walking in the city, into the medium of literature. Franz Hessel's "A Flâneur in Berlin" and Walter Benjamin's review of it in 1929 popularized the *flâneur* in German-speaking countries. The "functional form of the literary *flânerie*" [5] is said to be particularly suitable for "staging historical representations of the big city" and "making urban history narratable" [6]. Cohen can also be read as a "memorizing flâneur" [7] in this way. Through his ramble, Cohen creates a mapping of the urban Jewish heritage, highlighting traditions and ruptures. Other typical impressions of the modern metropolis that a *flâneur* collects and describes *en passant*, as well as the atmospheric nature of the observations, are not mentioned by Cohen. The situation is different in a later example of the treatment of Jewish buildings and places in Hamburg, written by Ruben Malachi. His report "The Synagogues in Hamburg", which was written in the 1950s and published between 1978 and 1980 as a continuation in the "Mitteilungen des Verbandes Ehemaliger Breslauer und Schlesier in Israel", is dedicated to the same buildings and places as Cohen's text - and not just synagogues, as the title might suggest. Unlike Cohen, Maleachi includes many personal memories and anecdotes about attending services and personalities in the Jewish congregation from his youth before the First World War in the [report](#). With the knowledge of the Shoah, Maleachi retrospectively describes "a cross-section of Jewish life in the Hamburg congregation in the [19]20s, i.e. the last decade before the downfall of German Jewry". [8]

“Sparse remnants of the Jewish life that once flourished here [spärliche Reste des einst hier blühenden jüdischen Lebens]” - a contemporary perspective on Jewish cultural heritage

With regard to the question of what contribution Cohen's text makes to the negotiation of Jewish cultural heritage, reference should be made on the one hand to the diversity of the architectural heritage described and the associated social and cultural significance of Hamburg's Jewish urban society, which Cohen's text documents for posterity and today's readers. One example is Hamburg's numerous synagogues and prayer houses, which illustrate the religious and ritual polyphony within the unified Jewish congregation:

“In the Marcusstrasse there is the synagogue of the Portuguese Jewish congregation, built in 1855, which due to its oriental character in style and color blossoms like an oriental plant on occidental soil. Of historical significance is the church of the Israelite Temple Association, built in 1843, the only synagogue in Hamburgs with an organ. The temple is characterised by the men who worked on it, as well as through the movement it evoked, a landmark in the history of modern Judaism. [In der Marcusstraße befindet sich die 1855 errichtete Synagoge der Portugiesisch Jüdischen Gemeinde [i. O. gesperrt], die durch ihren

orientalischen Charakter in Stil und Farben wie eine morgenländische Pflanze auf abendländischem Boden einsam im Verborgenen blüht. Von historischer Bedeutung ist das 1843 errichtete Gotteshaus des Israelitischen Tempelver-bandes [i. O. gesperrt], die einzige Synagoge Hamburgs, in der sich eine Orgel befindet. Der Tempel ist durch die Männer, die an ihm gewirkt, wie durch die Bewegung, die er hervorge-rufen, ein Markstein in der Geschichte des modernen Judentums.]“ (Cohen 1930)

Thanks to these and other descriptions, Cohen's text can today be the starting point for a historical search for traces in the city, which - as in the case of the synagogue in Marcusstraße and the temple in Poolstraße - relocalizes buildings that often no longer exist or can no longer be identified as Jewish, or at least draws attention to the gaps that have arisen in the city's cultural memory. From today's perspective, it is the places of remembrance that Cohen's text makes the urban community aware of again and anchors them in the urban landscape. On the other hand, the article provides interesting insights into a perspective on the historical treatment of Jewish heritage, as the following quote illustrates:

“If we walk through this area[Hamburg Neustadt] now, we find only sparse remnants of the Jewish life that once flourished here. What the fire had spared, was victim of the lack of understanding of the 19th century towards cultural and historical monuments. Above all, the magnificent synagogue of the German Jews in Elbstraße which was built in 1788 by Sonnin, the builder of St Michael's Church. [Gehen wir jetzt durch diese Gegend [Hamburg Neustadt], so finden wir nur noch spärliche Reste des einst hier blühenden jüdischen Lebens. Was der Brand verschont hatte, ist der Verständnislosigkeit des 19. Jahrhunderts gegenüber kulturhistorischen Denkmälern zum Opfer gefallen. Vor allem die herrliche Synagoge [i. O. gesperrt] der deutschen Juden in der Elbstraße [i. O. gesperrt], die 1788 von Sonnin, dem Erbauer der Michaeliskirche, errichtet worden war.]“ (Cohen 1930)

Cohen's critical view of the handling and neglect of the city's Jewish heritage, specifically the synagogue in Elbstraße owned by the German-Israelite Congregation Hamburg, seems almost topical. Cohen's report in the “Israelitisches Familienblatt” was aimed at a Jewish readership that was not familiar with all aspects of the history of the congregation and the city, as this quote and the many other historical references in his article suggest. These illustrate the educational approach of the text, which seemed to be concerned with the self-confident communication of knowledge about Jewish history and the documentation of this heritage for future generations. Even for Cohen, some of the places mentioned were merely places of remembrance, such as “the marvellous synagogue of the German Jews on Elbstraße [die herrliche Synagoge der deutschen Juden in der Elbstraße]”, but they were not to be forgotten.

Conclusion

According to Studemund-Halévy and Menny, the descriptions of Jewish places within a non-Jewish majority society illustrate “a history of precarious coexistence and complex relationships that reflect both (spatial) marginalization and exclusion as well as daily coexistence”. [9] The text's contribution to the negotiation of Jewish cultural heritage lies, on the one hand, in precisely this presentation of a Jewish topography of Hamburg and the complex spatial relationships to the non-Jewish environment and, on the other hand, in the thematization of internal Jewish positions on cultural heritage at the beginning of the 1930s. The text passes on inner-Jewish knowledge about their own history and the city's history to a Jewish readership. The construction and self-perception of Jewish cultural heritage thus comes to the fore as a concern of the text. Against the backdrop of today's urban landscape, the text shows above all how much Jewish cultural heritage has been destroyed or forgotten. Cohen's work can be described as a “stroll in the mind's eye”, which creates places and a historical consciousness in the readers' mind's eye and inscribes them on a mental map.

The places function as projection surfaces and media of memory. Cohen's article offers relevant sources

for today's rambles through the city and, of course, for research and (digital) projects. One digital example is the interactive city map of the IGdJ [at "City map of the IGdJ" link to <https://schluesseldokumente.net/stadtplan/#211>], which can at least be used to highlight gaps in the architectural cultural heritage and provide missing background knowledge.

Selected bibliography

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Notes

- [1] (cf. Studemund-Halévy/Menny 2013, p. 28)
- [2] (Studemund-Halévy/Menny 2013, p. 9)
- [3] (Stein 1984, S. 7)
- [4] (Stein 1984, p. 7)
- [5] (Thiemann 2019, p. 19)
- [6] (Thiemann 2019, p. 20)
- [7] (Severin 1988, S. 4)
- [8] (Maleachi 1978, S. 26)
- [9] (Studemund-Halévy/Menny 2013, S. 10)

About the Author

Sonja Dickow-Rotter is an academic staff member at the IGdJ since 2019 and initially a project staff member of the digital source edition Key Documents of German-Jewish History. In this context, she also conceptualized and implemented online exhibitions as well as other digital formats. Sonja Dickow-Rotter studied literature and cultural anthropology at the University of Hamburg. After receiving her master's degree, she worked as an academic staff member at the Walter A. Berendsohn Research Center for Exile Literature. Sonja Dickow-Rotter wrote her doctoral dissertation on literary configurations of house and home in contemporary Jewish literatures. Her comparative dissertation, which was awarded the University of Hamburg's Joseph Carlebach Prize in 2021, was written at the University of Hamburg and at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Sonja Dickow-Rotter is an alumna of the Ernst Ludwig Ehrlich Scholarship Fund.

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