

Jewish Textual Architectures

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

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The imagery Jewish topography of a central German city

SOURCE DESCRIPTION

In his novel "A tog in Regensburg", first published in 1933 by Malino Verlag in New York, the Yiddish-language writer Joseph Opatoshu describes a wedding between a Jewish woman from Regensburg and a Jewish man from Worms in Regensburg. The story is set in 1519, which in real history is the year of the expulsion of the Jews from Regensburg. This is also addressed in the course of the story, but the text begins with Schames Jekil, the synagogue servant, who, full of anticipation for the wedding and in expectation of the guests, tells his son Berl about the wedding plans. In the first few pages, Opatoshu has Jekil look back on his Jewish Regensburg and his seventy years of life in this city. In addition to the residents of the Jewish quarter, he also thinks of its buildings, such as the yeshiva, the talmud school. The section chosen here, pp. 12–15, ends with a description of the synagogue in the midday sun, behind which the spires of St. Emmeram's Church can be seen. As the plot unfolds, the guests from Worms, jugglers, and beggars arrive in the city and the first celebrations begin, with the Yiddish songs of the various groups, including the jugglers and Talmud students, playing a prominent role. The arrival of Jossilman Rosheim, the legal representative of the Jewish communities in the Holy Roman Empire at that time, is accompanied by news of the imminent expulsion of the Jews from Regensburg.

This article refers to the new edition of the first German translation entitled "Ein Tag in Regensburg" [A Day in Regensburg] from 2009, which was published in 2019 by the Regensburg publishing house Friedrich Pustet on the occasion of the opening of the new synagoge in Regensburg.

The Synagogue and the Yeshiva

In this first chapter, the synagogue servant Jekil finds himself in the medieval synagogue in Regensburg. The prayer room and the vestibule of the synagogue are described, triggering a flood of memories in the seventy-year-old man. Although this is a fictional description, it is based on a real medieval synagogue that existed until 1519. Its origins cannot be dated with certainty, but a new synagogue building was mentioned as early as 1227 in correspondence between the abbot of St. Emmeram's Abbey and the papal curia. Fragments of architectural sculpture found in the building also support the dating to the years between 1210 and 1220. Before that, there had been an earlier Romanesque synagogue, which most likely existed since the late 11th century. Both buildings were located on what is now Neupfarrplatz, where a closed Jewish quarter developed in the late 13th century. The location of the second synagogue can now be traced through Dani Karavan's artwork, a floor relief of the floor plan, which was inaugurated in 2005.

In addition to the historic synagogue, other public buildings such as a Talmud school, a hospital, and a wedding hall were located on this site. The yeshiva is also referred to in this chapter, as Jekil can hear the voices of the Talmud students from the synagogue courtyard. This yeshiva was one of the most important schools in central Germany in the Middle Ages, not least because of its geographical location. Regensburg played an important role as a link between the Rhineland SchUM cities and the Slavic Kehillahs in what is now Czech Republic and Poland. This is also reflected in the personalities who taught at the yeshiva. Particularly noteworthy is Jehuda he-Chassid, who wrote, among other things, the *Sefer Chassidim*, the Book of the Pious, in which he deals with rules for dealing with Christian contemporaries. Like the synagogue, the yeshiva existed until February 1519. Unlike the synagogue, nothing of it can be seen in Regensburg's cityscape today.

The expulsion of the medieval community

Unlike in other central German cities, the Jewish community in Regensburg was spared expulsion for a long time. However, this did not mean that the Jewish population was an integrated part of the city community and not exposed to hostility. The fact that Regensburg also had a closed quarter guarded by gates suggests that anti-Judaism was also present here. Especially after accusations of ritual murder were made by the Bishop of Regensburg in 1476, the situation for Regensburg's Jews worsened. In addition to imposed fines and inflammatory sermons, there is also evidence of further social exclusion, such as a collective refusal by Regensburg bakers to sell bread to Jews. Even a treaty concluded in 1500 between the Jewish congregation and the city, which stipulated punishment for insults and attacks against Jews, could not improve the situation of the Jewish population in the long term. After the city had repeatedly requested Emperor Maximilian I. to expel the Jews and he had rejected the request, the city implemented the immediate expulsion of the Jewish congregation after his death in January 1519. One month later, 500 Jews were forced to flee Regensburg, and the Jewish quarter, including the synagogue and yeshiva, was destroyed. Six hundred years of Jewish life thus came to a violent end.

Apart from the synagogue memorial, places of Jewish life in the Middle Ages are almost invisible in Regensburg. During excavations at Neupfarrplatz between 1995 and 1998, the ground plans of parts of the former Jewish quarter were uncovered and can now be viewed as part of the "document Neupfarrplatz" exhibition during guided tours. Despite persecution during the Nazi era, however, modern Jewish spaces have survived and are maintained by the Jewish congregation, which has been growing again since the 1990s. It now comprises more than 1,000 believers, largely due to Jewish migration from the former Soviet Union. Topographically, the Jewish cemeteries on Schillerstraße and at the Dreifaltigkeitsfriedhof, as well as the new synagogue am Brixener Hof, which was inaugurated in 2019, bear witness to an active community. In the absence of a sufficient culture of remembrance in Regensburg, this community had to fight long and hard for a dignified approach to the city's Nazi history. For example, it was not until 2013 that members of the Jewish congregation were invited to a memorial service in the old town hall on the anniversary of the 1938 pogrom night. With the new synagogue, hope for a better perception of Regensburg's Jewish history is also returning.

Opatoshu and his Regensburg

Joseph Opatoshu was born in Mława, Poland, in 1886 and emigrated to New York in 1907. As a Yiddish-

speaking writer, he mainly wrote prose pieces in Yiddish. He was also a writer for several Yiddish-language newspapers, including the New York daily *Der Tog* and the Warsaw-based *Moment*. His membership in the YIVO Institute and the Yiddish P.E.N-Club also demonstrates that his life was entirely devoted to Yiddish-language literature. Not least because of this, he was well connected in Yiddish-speaking society, and numerous letters exchanged by Opatoshu with Marc Chagall, among others, with whom he had a deep friendship and who also painted the cover of the original edition of *A tog in Regensburg*, have been preserved. These are now kept at the YIVO Institute. Opatoshu died in New York on Yom Kippur in 1954.

Opatoshu's decision to choose Regensburg as the setting for his narrative is obvious in view of the history of the Jewish community there. The connection to real-life figures, such as Jehuda he-Chassid, whose teachings are explicitly mentioned in the text, also enabled Opatoshu to provide a comprehensive description of a late medieval Jewish congregation. Although the wedding festivities make up the bulk of this text, there are references to expulsion and suffering towards the end. This break in Opatoshu's narrative is mainly due to the political situation in the early 1930s, when conditions for European Jews deteriorated sharply. While the manuscript for *A tog in Regensburg* from 1930, ends before the arrival of Jossilman Rosheim and the message of expulsion, Opatoshu added these elements to the work in the version published in 1933. It is undisputed that developments in the German Reich and the rise of the National Socialists had a major influence on this. However, there are no references in the sources to the exact motives for modifying the text.

Opatoshu was by no means concerned with providing a historically accurate account of historical events, as can be seen from the many anachronisms in the text alone. [1] Instead, Opatoshu wanted to supplement the historiography of Jewish historians, including Heinrich Graetz and Simon Dubnow, with literary fiction. [2] For him, this focused too much on the historical suffering and martyrdom of the Jewish people and neglected life away from persecution. In *A tog in Regensburg*, the heterogeneous wedding party is a symbol of the diversity of Jewish life and activity. The religious Talmud students, the guests from all over Europe, and the secular, bawdy jugglers each offer new facets of Jewish life and heritage in the late Middle Ages.

Opatoshu and the Jiddischkeit

One aspect that is not apparent from the available English translation is Opatoshu's use of Yiddish. While he uses the Western Yiddish dialect in *A tog in Regensburg*, his entire oeuvre is characterized by a conscious stylistic diversity. For him, Yiddish culture is not something static, as Yiddish scholar Armin Eideherr notes. Instead, it is something “that must prove itself in the respective context, adapt, if not partially reinvent itself.” [3] This is evident in the reflection of the diaspora in the Yiddish language. Examples include the influences of Slavic and German language on Yiddish and the resulting bridging function of the language, which made communication between the individual diaspora communities possible in the first place.

Reception of Opatoshu and his work

Although Opatoshu's work contributed to the visibility of the historic Jewish community, *A tog in Regensburg* was not given the attention it deserved in Regensburg for a long time. It was only after the text was translated into German in 2009 and the exhibition “A Day in Jewish Regensburg with Joseph

Opatoshu and Marc Chagall" followed that greater focus was placed on Opatoshu's spatial representation. Ten years later, at the opening of the new synagogue, the work received renewed attention, partly due to its reissue in the same year. In the foreword to the edition, Ilse Danzinger, chairwoman of the Jewish congregation, writes: "Today, 500 years after this description, the dark shadows [of the Nazi era] have disappeared from the city. A new synagogue has been built, which shines into the city with its brightness both inside and out. [...] The new edition of Joseph Opatoshu's "A Day in Regensburg" thus takes on a very special significance, 500 years after the expulsion of the Jews from Regensburg." [4] The text is mentioned here to underscore the continuity of Jewish life and the survival of Jewish tradition.

Conclusion

The text *A tog in Regensburg* is a panorama of Jewish life in a medieval city, written from the perspective of a Yiddish-speaking author of the early 20th century. Both specific places as material heritage and language, rites, and customs as intangible cultural heritage are addressed in the text. The focus is not on a single aspect, such as expulsion. Instead, Opatoshu presents a panopticon of Jewish life based primarily on the Yiddish-speaking tradition. From wedding customs to songs to literature, the richness of this tradition is on display. At the same time, he reimagines a Jewish space in Regensburg that was lost after 1519. Even though his description does not attempt to reflect historical truth, reading the book brings to mind the former Jewish presence in the city. Regensburg is representative of a number of other central German cities whose Jewish material and immaterial heritage was destroyed, yet it occupies a special position due to its connecting role and the long existence of Jewish life.

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Notes

[1] For example, a bookseller sells printed works in Yiddish to the wedding party, although the existence of such works is not documented until 1526.

[2] A statement by Opatoshu on this can be found in Gruschka, p. 114.

[3] Eidherr, p. 339.

[4] Opatoshu, S. 7.

About the Author

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