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Symposium on Abraham Geiger (1810-1874) in Frankfurt am Main



Portrait of Abraham Geiger (1810-1874)

Abraham Geiger, one of the founding fathers of Reform Judaism, belongs to the group of foremost intellectual figures of German Jewry in the 19th century. Born into a traditional family in Frankfurt, Geiger was confronted with the most recent trends of German historiography whilst studying at the Universities of Heidelberg and Bonn. In the 1830s, he began an intense study of Arabic and the Qur'an, winning a prize for his famous essay *Was hat Mohammed aus dem Judenthume aufgenommen?* By demonstrating that large parts of the Qur'an were strongly influenced by rabbinic literature, this book became a first step in Geiger's most important project: Judaism's defence against those who denigrated it as an outmoded, alien phenomenon that deserved no place in modern European culture. Instead, Geiger sought to demonstrate Judaism's crucial influence on Christianity and Islam, claiming that neither movement possessed religious originality, whilst Judaism's continuing religious and cultural role in modern society consisted in preserving the pure and original values of 'ethical monotheism'.

By emphasizing Judaism's world-historical mission and, at the same time, analyzing Jewish tradition with the tools of critical historiography, Geiger challenged both Christian triumphalism and Orthodox traditionalism. As a controversial rabbi in Wiesbaden, Breslau and Berlin and as the founding director of the *Lehranstalt für die Wissenschaft des Judentums in Berlin* (1872), he became a leading voice of Reform Judaism whose relevance for areas such as contemporary Jewish-Christian and Jewish-Muslim understanding has only recently been examined in more detail. To celebrate Geiger's 200th anniversary, the CGJS will co-organize a symposium devoted to his multi-faceted work with the Martin Buber Chair in Jewish Thought and Philosophy at the University of Frankfurt and the Abraham-Geiger-Kolleg in Potsdam (16/17 May 2010 in Frankfurt am Main). This event will inaugurate cooperation with the University of Frankfurt in the field of Jewish intellectual history.

Hannah Arendt's Ambivalent Jewish Identity: Director's Professorial Lecture

In December 2009, two years after his promotion to Professor of Jewish History at the University of Sussex, Christian Wiese delivered his Professorial Lecture entitled: 'No Love for the Jewish People? Hannah Arendt's 'Eichmann in Jerusalem' Revisited'. He took the opportunity to elaborate on the relevance of some of the Centre's research topics – such as antisemitism and xenophobia, genocide, migration, human rights, nationalism, the role of historical memory, the identity of religious and ethnic groups in an increasingly global and secular world – to the teaching and research culture at Sussex.

In a thorough historical rereading of the bitter controversies surrounding Hannah Arendt's reflections on the 'banality of evil' in her report on the Eichmann trial in 1963, Wiese explored the complexities of her Jewish identity. Like so many Jewish émigré intellectuals of German background, she was, although alienated from Jewish faith, strongly shaped by her refugee experience. Her critique of nationalism, including Zionism, emerged from European Jewry's catastrophe in the 1930s and 1940s. It was disturbing, from her point of view, that the Zionists would entrust the future of their national enterprise to a model of chauvinistic nationalism and imperial power at the very moment when imperialism had revealed its horrifyingly brutal potential. Since Jews had been the victims of the nation state system in Europe, she argued, it was incumbent upon them

to reject a political arrangement they knew to be unjust and, when their own turn came to organise an independent political entity, to do it better and establish an alternative social and political order that would both satisfy Jewish national aspirations and promote a peaceful coexistence between Jews and Arabs in Palestine.

Arendt's sense of belonging to the Jewish people as well as her concept of Jewishness in a secular, post-Holocaust world included a universal ethical and political obligation to oppose persecutions, human rights violations and genocide that went beyond ethnic and national boundaries. It was this attitude, Wiese explained, that formed the basis of her harsh criticism of a main element of what she saw as a particularistic Zionist historical narrative: an interpretation of history emphasizing Jewish suffering in Europe caused by a century-old tradition of Jew hatred that eventually culminated in the Jewish catastrophe of the twentieth century. Her own provocative Holocaust narrative, however, including her interpretation of Eichmann's role as well as her highly problematic views on the 'Jewish Councils' in East Europe or the alleged lack of Jewish resistance, betrayed, in the eyes of many of Arendt's contemporaries, no trace of compassion or solidarity with the Jewish people that had recently been subjected to one of the most brutal episodes of genocide in recorded history.

Study Trip to Krakow and Auschwitz

In March 2010, Romy Langeheine, DPhil student at the CGJS, travelled to Krakow together with 20 Sussex history students. After a brief introduction into the vicissitudes of Polish history, the programme commenced with a tour leading from Krakow's main gate Brama Floriańska to the Rynek Główny, the biggest market place in Europe, with its beautifully restored facades, the gothic St. Mary's Church, the town hall tower and the cloth market hall. Students also had the opportunity to visit the Collegium Maius, the oldest building of the Jagiellonian University, the renaissance castle on Wawel Hill and the old Jewish quarter Kazimierz that was originally established by Casimier the Great in 1335. Jews settled there in 1495, after their expulsion from Krakow. Home to 70,000 Jews, seven synagogues, the oldest from the 16th century, and a Jewish cemetery, Kazimierz was destroyed during World War II, neglected during Communist times and only restored since 1989.

For many students, the visit to Auschwitz I and Auschwitz II (Birkenau) will remain an unforgettable experience. Established by the Nazis in 1940 in the village of Oświęcim, the camp (Auschwitz I) was originally used for Polish political prisoners, later for Soviet prisoners of war and prisoners of other nationalities. The symbolic site for the Holocaust, however, is Auschwitz II (Birkenau), established in 1941, where 1.1 million men, women and children, mostly Jews, were murdered. By displaying piles of human hair, children's clothes, shoes, suitcases or false limbs, the impressive exhibition attempts to visualize the individual lives behind the abstract number of victims and the horrific efficiency of the Nazi regime. Upon her return, one student identified how important the visit to Auschwitz had been for her: 'It reminded me how lucky I am to live in a free country, where I do not have to fear for my life because of my religion, the colour of my skin or even my heritage.'

Publications, Conference Papers and News

Andrea Hammel

'Holocaust Autobiographies and Translation', paper given at the Annual Meeting of the Association for German Studies in Great Britain at the University of Reading, 29 March 2010

'Ruth Kluger and Ruth David: Narration and Translation', paper given at the University of Edinburgh, 29 April 2010

In February, Andrea Hammel and Peter Davies from the University of Edinburgh were awarded an AHRC Research Networking grant for a project on 'Holocaust Writing and Translation'. The aim is to organise an international network of scholars and hold four workshops – the second of which will take place in July 2010 at the University of Sussex.

Andrea Hammel has also been awarded a British Academy Small Grant to cover travel in relation to her second project – a book on the history and memory of the Kindertransport to Britain, 1938/39.

Nitzan Lebovic

'The Return of German Philosophy: Biopolitical Film and Protected Democracy' [in Hebrew], in *Teoria u'Vikoret* [Theory and Criticism] 36 (Spring, 2010), pp. 5-27

'The Concept of Life in Political Thought' [in Hebrew], *Maftakh: A Peer Review Lexical Journal of Political Thought* [Hebrew] (Spring, 2010), pp. 30-47

Review Essay: Tyrus Miller (ed.), *Given World and Time: Temporalities in Context* (Budapest: CEU Press, 2008), in *Theory and History* (May, 2010, forthcoming)

'The Ship of Dead: A Comment on a Reading in Sebald' [in Hebrew], in *The Natural History of Destruction: W.G. Sebald: Between Literature and History* (Jerusalem: The Hebrew University Press, 2010), pp. 67-82

Introduction to Vivian Liska, *Agamben's Empty Messianism* [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2009), pp. 7-12

'Benjamins Sumpflogik: Ein Kommentar zu Agambens Kafka-und Benjamin Lektüre', in *Profanes Leben: Walter Benjamins Dialektik der Säkularisierung*, ed. Daniel Weidner (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2010), pp.190-212

Nitzan Lebovic, who has been involved in the Centre's project on the 'Prague Circle' over the past two years, has accepted a chair in Holocaust

Studies at Lehigh University and will move to Pennsylvania in the autumn of 2010.

Leena Petersen

Poetik des Zwischenraumes. Zur sprachlichen Kulturkritik und physiognomischen Historizität am Beispiel von Walter Benjamin und ausgewählten Schriften seiner Zeit (Heidelberg: Winter-Verlag, 2010, forthcoming)

'Transformations of the Utopian: From Jewish Apologetics to Dialectics of the Enlightenment', paper given at the History Work in Progress Seminar, Sussex University, 28 January 2010

'On Dogmatism and Tolerance', paper given within the context of the Lecture Series on 'Toleration of Variety in Judaism' at the Oriental Institute, Oxford University, 26 April 2010

'Transformation of the Utopian and Critical Theory', paper to be given at the 6th Annual Joint Conference of the Society for European Philosophy and the Forum for European Philosophy, Loyola University Chicago, John Felice Rome Center – Rome, Italy, 6-10 July 2010

Edward Timms

'Beyond the Borders: Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht', in *Times Literary Supplement*, 19 March 2010, p. 13

Christian Wiese

Years of Persecution, Years of Extermination: Saul Friedländer and the Future of Holocaust Studies, ed. Christian Wiese and Paul Betts (London: Continuum Press, 2010)

'An "Indelible Stigma": The Churches between Silence, Ideological Involvement, and Political Complicity', in *Years of Persecution, Years of Extermination: Saul Friedländer and the Future of Holocaust Studies*, ed. Christian Wiese and Paul Betts (London: Continuum Press, 2010), pp. 157-192

"Let his Memory be Holy to Us!": Jewish Interpretations of Martin Luther from the Enlightenment to the Holocaust", in *Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook* 54 (2009), pp. 93-126

Steven Beller, *Antisemitismus*, translated by Christian Wiese (Leipzig: Reclam, 2009)

Helmut Walser Smith, *Fluchtpunkt 1941: Kontinuitäten der deutschen Geschichte*, translated by Christian Wiese (Leipzig, Reclam, 2010)

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Publications, Conference Papers and News (continued)

Forthcoming lectures and events

'Judaism's Universal Role in the Modern World: Samuel Hirsch as a Rabbi and Philosopher in Dessau, Luxemburg and Philadelphia', paper given at an international conference on 'The German Rabbinate Abroad: Transferring German-Jewish Modernity into the World?' at the Akademie für Politische Bildung in Tutzing, 18-21 October 2009

'Between Persecution, Toleration and Integration: German-Jewish History in the Long Nineteenth Century', paper given at the German Historical Institute in Warsaw, 27 October 2009

Discounts on publications associated with the Centre

Publications by researchers at the Centre for German-Jewish Studies may be purchased at a discount by Friends of the Centre.

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