

Mirosława Lenarcik. *A Community in Transition: Jewish Welfare in Breslau-Wrocław.* Opladen: Barbara Budrich, 2010. 263 pp. \$36.95, paper, ISBN 978-3-86649-262-2.



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For more than fifty years the German city of Breslau has lived as the Polish city of Wrocław. Much of its prewar story remains unexplored. This is especially true of the history of the Jewish community, the complexity of which has been demonstrated in publications by Leszek Ziátkowski (*Dzieje Żydów we Wrocławiu* [The History of Jews in Breslau/Wrocław], 2000) and Maciej Łagiewski (*Wrocławscy Żydzi 1850-1945* [Breslau Jews 1850-1945], 1994), thus far the most comprehensive monographs on the history of Jews in Breslau (Wrocław after 1945), not to mention Till van Rahden's magnificent social and cultural study *Jews and Other Germans: Civil Society, Religious Diversity, and Urban Politics in Breslau, 1860-1925* (2008). Breslau Jews are inscribed in the history of the city as influential merchants, industrialists, cultural activists, writers, artists, and art patrons. This new publication by Mirosława Lenarcik describes the complex structure of Jewish welfare institutions in Breslau, especially in the late eighteenth century, when they were at their peak.

Lenarcik's book is the first detailed and comprehensive history of the activities of social welfare institutions in Breslau/Wrocław, which sometimes functioned within the framework of the Jewish community, sometimes as private foundations, and, later, as independent institutions associated with new social movements such as the League of Jewish Women (Jüdischer Frauenbund). Covering the period from the mid-eighteenth century until the 1960s, the study is a meticulous reconstruction of the function of aid institutions, supplemented with statistical data and charts, and placed in the broader context of both German and Polish social, political, and economic history.

The book features a clear, symmetrical structure. The first two chapters describe the most important events in the Breslau Jewish community, emphasizing the eighteenth century, when the Jewish population of the city began to function at a level similar to other citizens (as the result of the tolerance edict of 1754 and the emancipation edict of 1812). The second chapter is--according to the methodological assumptions of the author--

the story of Jewish social welfare in Germany and Breslau. The axis of the composition of the book is chapter 3, in which the author describes the concept of social welfare in the history of Judaism and describes the most important institutions and centers in the area of Breslau. The fourth and fifth chapters describe the history of Breslau/Wrocław in 1945 and the complicated situation there related to the total exchange of national, cultural, and ethnic populations, the attempts of the government to build new communal structures, as well as the specific activities of Jewish organizations.

In the introduction Lenarcik writes that “Jewish welfare is ... closely related to German culture and social life” (p. 13). Indeed, a particularity of Jewish culture, especially in the modern period, is the blurring of boundaries between what is specifically Jewish, and what is adopted from the general German culture. But Lenarcik goes on to show that despite the many common features and sometimes transcultural nature of social assistance institutions, a tradition of helping the poor and needy was well rooted in Judaism and was expressed in the modern period by the particular flowering of numerous such institutions in the Jewish community, including a Jewish hospital, a shelter for orphans, and educational institutions which enabled access to the professions and social advancement.

The author refers to two Jewish religious obligations, “gemilut hasadim” (engaging in acts of lovingkindness) and “tzedakah” (typically understood as “charity,” but more correctly translated as “justice”). However, reading about Jewish welfare in Breslau gives the impression that these religious obligations were technically turned into secular and universal ethical values. In fact, fulfilling these orders had—apart from a practical—an important social role. It integrated the Jewish community, and especially built a sense of solidarity at a time when religious ties were no longer dominant. This is evidenced by the fact that most of the welfare institutions had a secular character

and that the assistance they provided went beyond the Jewish cultural circle.

From the meticulously gathered rich statistical and historical data emerges a picture of the developmental process of Jewish social welfare organizations of Breslau. It started with the organizations associated with the historic structure of the institutional Jewish community and having their roots in the Jewish religious tradition (as in the case of the *Hevra Kadisha* [Society for the Care and Burial of the Dead], established in 1726); the Jewish hospital founded in 1903 (which in the 1920s became the second most important, after the one in Berlin); then expanded to include private foundations, including those supported by the world-famous Fraenckel brothers (founders of the *Fraenckische Stiftung*, whose support of the Jewish Theological Seminary deserves a separate monograph), and the Schottländer family. The latter supported the Jewish community by providing money for scientific research, construction of a nursing home, and multiple kindergartens. Julius Schottländer contributed to the entire city by expanding the southern district, which became an extension of the axis of the modern city of Breslau at the turn of the century.

A significant change in the worldview of the Jewish community resulted from the emergence of women's organizations, especially the League of Jewish Women (*Jüdischer Frauenbund*) in 1904. Lenarcik associates it with increased importance of women's movements in Germany more generally. In the case of Breslau she foregrounds two prominent leaders of the League—Beate Guttman and Paulla Ollendorf. In summarizing their respective biographies, Lenarcik focuses on their motivations and charitable activities. In her interpretation, Ollendorf is presented as a model of a modern woman, who, active in public life, was the first woman elected to a city council in Germany.

The author devotes a separate section to the tragic period of the Third Reich, when Jewish relief organizations, limited in their abilities, had to

work extremely effectively to meet the growing needs of groups and individuals who previously were not within their sphere of responsibilities. They had to deal with problems in obtaining food and heating fuel for the winter, anti-Semitic attacks which also affected children attending non-Jewish schools, as well as helping to organize the administrative apparatus for people who emigrated from Nazi Germany. In this case, the factual report of the author's historical and statistical data is interwoven with the memories of witnesses.

The war was a particularly cruel turning point for Breslau and its Jewish community. In the last two chapters Lenarcik treats the postwar years. The fourth chapter contains a detailed description and analysis of the consequences and the difficulties which accompanied the total replacement of ethnic and national populations in Breslau. Breslau/Wrocław after 1945 was a city of chaos, overwhelmed by a feeling of strangeness and danger as well as manifesting the urgent need to organize social, political, and family life. On this subject, exhaustive analysis of the socio-historical situation in postwar Wrocław has been provided by Gregor Thum in his monumental work *Uprooted: How Breslau Became Wrocław during the Century of Expulsion* (2011 [German, 2003]). Lenarcik likewise attempts to present a synthetic account of the relationship between Germans who remained in Wrocław and new population that came from the Polish territories. But the most significant matter which Lenarcik brings to light, one rarely found in scholarly literature, is the description of the situation of the surviving German Jews in Wrocław. According to data provided by the author, there were approximately six to seven hundred survivors. German-speaking Jews in Wrocław were especially concerning to the Red Army soldiers. They were often treated like other Germans (i.e., as aggressors rather than victims of war), and the new authorities wanted to get rid of them as soon as possible. At the same time, about seven thousand Polish Jews who had survived the Holocaust appeared in

Wrocław. These two groups failed to jointly rebuild the Jewish community and the majority of the remaining German Jews fled the city. The information collected and analysis undertaken by Lenarcik is especially important when considering the current status of the Jewish community in Wrocław as well as the historical consciousness of its current membership. For many years the memories of the German Jewish community in prewar Breslau have been neglected, was along with its rich history of social, scientific, and cultural institutions. It is only recently that, as a result of the efforts of the Bente Kahan Foundation, which in 2010 reopened the beautifully renovated old White Stork Synagogue, the story of the prewar Jewish community has returned to view, and is now being treated as a part of the history of the Jewish presence in Wrocław/Breslau.

Lenarcik discusses the rebirth of Jewish life in Wrocław following the war and the institutions responsible for helping it happen. However, in comparison with the part of the book devoted to the prewar activities, this part is rather poor. She writes that "there is no relationship between the social welfare of the city of Breslau [which was in place before the war] with what was created after the war" (p. 221). In principle, social welfare institutions in Wrocław after 1945 should rather have been the subject of a separate monograph which should properly describe the political and historical context in which Eastern European Holocaust survivors lived. However, it is included in here and the author does not devote nearly enough space to it. Lenarcik is remarkably successful, by focusing on the welfare of Breslau before the war, in creating a complex and coherent image of the welfare system in the Jewish communities in German Breslau. But this book cannot be evaluated only from the "recalling forgotten history" point of view. In fact, it provides significant analysis of the causes and functioning principles of complex communal structures put in place to ensure that the needs of different groups were met, all in the context of the system imposed by the German

state. This completes the image of the prewar community of Breslau as a heterogeneous structure, based on the complementary action of numerous organizations, among which—as is clear from this book—social institutions played a leading role.

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