

Nils H. Roemer. *German City, Jewish Memory: The Story of Worms*. Waltham, Mass.: Brandeis University Press, 2010. x + 316 pp. \$35.00, paper, ISBN 978-1-58465-922-8.



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There is no lack of local German-Jewish histories. Before 1933 they were typically written by the local rabbi. In the last three or four decades, non-Jewish archivists, teachers, and amateur historians made it their task to record the history of the now-oft extinguished Jewish histories in their places of residence. This book, however, is not just another local history. It is the first account of the *memory* of a particular Jewish community. No other place is better suited for such a study than the community of Worms. Much beyond its local significance, Worms has become the foremost *lieu de memoire* of Ashkenaz. In the words of former Israeli president Chaim Herzog, the city was “a symbol of the great and tragic drama of European Jewish fate as it is symbolic of the remarkable interweaving--for better or worse--of German and Jewish life for a thousand years” (p. 1).

Worms is best known for its medieval past, both in German and Jewish memory: the site of the *Nibelungen* and German emperors was also the place where Rashi studied and where the oldest European synagogue stood until its destruction in

1938. In the modern period Worms became increasingly peripheral. Today Worms is a marginal town of 80,000 inhabitants. Roemer writes about its rich history and its decline, but more than that he traces the recollection and invention of local Jewish traditions. The narratives about the city's mythic Jewish origins, the memory of its rabbi-scholars and martyrs, and the rich folkloristic lore developed by the descendents of Worms Jews serve as an excellent example for the way Jewish identity was shaped in the pre-modern period. It would be wrong to assume one monolithic Ashkenazic or German tradition. The Jews of Frankfurt had a different liturgy from the Jews of Fuerth, the Jews of Franconia differed in their daily practices from the Jews of the Rhineland. While Worms became the symbol of medieval Ashkenaz it also stood for its particular local traditions.

One particularity of Worms's Jewish history is its continuity. Among the cities located in today's Germany, only Worms and Frankfurt can look back on a Jewish history that was not abruptly ended by expulsion in the late Middle Ages or the

early modern period. Worms, the third-largest community after Prague and Frankfurt in the early modern period, retained a distinct Jewish cultural heritage well into the twentieth century.

The recording of Jewish memory started long before modern historiography. As in many other places, the local martyrs, starting with the victims of the first crusade of 1096, were memorized in a *Memorbuch*. On the other side of the memory spectrum, the blind-folded Synagoga at the Worms Cathedral shaped the view many Christian citizens had of their Jewish neighbors. Another memory still visible today is the medieval Jewish cemetery with gravestones of Jewish luminaries, among them the famous thirteenth-century rabbi Meir of Rothenburg, who was captured on his journey to the Holy Land and died in prison after being brutally tortured. His and other graves became sites of early pilgrimages and made Worms an attraction for Jewish travelers already before the age of mass tourism.

During the nineteenth century, novels and short stories popularized the Jewish heritage of Worms. Wilhelm Brandes, the director of the Wolfenbüttel Jewish high school, even published a play called *The Jewess of Worms*, a variation of Franz Grillparzer's famous *The Jewess of Toledo* (1851). What Toledo had become to symbolize for Sephardic Jewry, Worms was now for Ashkenazic Jews. Yiddish writers like Sholem Asch transported this memory to the world of eastern European Jews. Numerous postcards with the Worms synagogue and the chapel named after Rashi were sent to all parts of the Jewish world.

By the early twentieth century the vast majority of German Jews had moved to the major cities. Urban Jews often developed nostalgic feelings for the more traditional rural and small-town communities their ancestors had inhabited. Worms played a significant role in this longing for an authentic Jewish *Heimat*. This corresponded to a larger German way of projecting an ideal "healthy" past. Descendants of the Worms Jewish

community began to idealize their "mother city." Siegfried Oppenheimer's Haggadah, printed in Offenbach in 1927, included the family tradition, according to which the traditional saying "Next year in Jerusalem" was replaced by the sentence, "Next year in Worms-on-the-Rhine, our *Heimat* [homeland]."

The 900<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Worms synagogue in 1934 was still celebrated in a festive atmosphere, with loudspeakers addressing the large number of guests who did not fit into the building. Rabbi Leo Baeck, who came from Berlin to address the assembly, emphasized that German Jews should beware of disunity and thus remain true to "the old spirit of Worms." Four years later the synagogue was set ablaze; in 1942 the last Jews were deported from Worms.

The memory of Worms lived on. In 1950 Hannah Arendt reported from a trip to Germany that Worms had become a "shrine of Jewish pilgrimage" (p. 159). Arendt worked for the Commission on European Jewish Cultural Reconstruction, an organization devoted to saving European Jewish objects and bringing them from places without Jewish life to active Jewish communities and cultural institutions around the world. In Worms, no Jewish community reemerged after the war. Some precious ritual objects from Worms ended up in Jerusalem, others in New York; the community's archives were transferred to Jerusalem. Meanwhile, local officials in Worms began to object to the transfer of objects and archival materials and to utilize the Jewish past of their city for their own purposes. By integrating the medieval Jewish community and eradicating the traces of its modern destruction, Jewish history became once again an integral part of the city's identity and its marketing strategy toward tourists. The best expression of the city administration's strategy of selective memory was its decision to bulldoze the still standing nineteenth-century Levy synagogue while rebuilding the medieval synagogue, which was reconsecrated in 1961. The renovation of the

Judengasse followed in the 1970s. Worms, which had no Jewish presence left, concentrated its Jewish memory now exclusively on the Middle Ages.

Roemer shows how the same city officials, who a few years earlier had stopped promoting Worms's Jewish heritage and concentrated only on its *Nibelungen* past, as early as 1945 were eager to reintegrate the distant Jewish past, while being silent about the immediate one. Only since the 1980s, with the opening of a small Jewish museum and the active role of a new generation, has a more critical view emerged. Roemer's account of the battle over objects and memory after the Holocaust is the best example of such a new and critical school of German-Jewish historiography and has much more than local significance.

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