Community, Memory, and Shifting Jewish Identities in Germany Since 1989: The Case of Munich

Robert Leventhal, College of William and Mary

The influx of Jewish émigrés from the Former Soviet Union (FSU) since 1990 has altered the shape of Jewish life in Germany, and profoundly influenced the 105 Jewish communities of the Federal Republic. Between 1990 and 2005, the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) had admitted 219,604 Jewish émigrés from the FSU, and could boast that it has the “fastest-growing Jewish population in the world.” The restriction of the flow of Jewish émigrés from the FSU in 2005 as a direct result of new German immigration laws radically changed this situation. The intense immigration of Jews from the former Soviet States between 1990 and 2005 followed by a rather abrupt reversal in immigration policy reshaped the sense of Jewish community, memory, and identity in Germany. These shifts have placed pressure on both German–Jewish relations and relations within the Jewish communities. Certain basic assumptions concerning German–Jewish relations have been called into question on an unprecedented scale: the overwhelmingly positive view of Germany as an immigration destination for Jews; what it means to be Jewish in Germany; the very idea of a singular unitary Jewish community (Einheitsgemeinde) under the umbrella of the Zentralrat der Juden in Deutschland (Central Council of Jews in Germany) in post-Wall Germany; and, perhaps most significantly, the absolute, and hitherto unquestioned centrality of the Nazi Judeocide for the self-understanding of German Jews. Recent developments threaten both the unity of the Jewish communities themselves as well as the tremendous gains made in the ongoing, genuine public discussion of and confrontation with the Nazi past since the 1980s.

In this article, I suggest the sociocultural construction of a new Jewish identity or culture within the Jewish community in Germany and what might be referred to as a post-Holocaust sense of community, memory, and cultural identity within the Russian Jewish community, one that finds a powerful resonance in contemporary German culture more generally. The Jewish Museum of Munich, which was founded to be a museum of Jewish life in Munich and specifically not a Holocaust museum, is an example of precisely this sense of post-Holocaust identity formation and memory. The museum to be built...
in Munich—the case in point. The simultaneous emergence of a new Russian Jewish émigré majority culture within the Jewish minority of Germany, and what I refer to as a “post-Holocaust sensibility,” coincides with a broader marginalization and fragmentation of Jewish identity in Germany despite the growth in sheer numbers over the past two decades.

The approximately 10,000 Jews of Munich serve as both an exemplary model and as a demonstrative case-study of shifting Jewish identities in contemporary Germany. Like other Russian Jewish émigrés within Germany, they have their own complex histories and collective memories forged by years of repression and persecution under Stalinism and post-Soviet discrimination. In Munich, these émigrés have the additional task of becoming part of a Jewish community that has been especially challenged by historical precedents and recent developments within the community itself. Munich is a city of particularly conflicted postwar memory. Russian Jewish émigrés comprise approximately 75% of the Jewish population of Munich, and their integration into German society and the existing Jewish community is decisive if the Jewish community is to survive and grow. The official, stated intention at the outset of the programs enacted in 1991—the HuntHAG (humanitärer Hilfsaktionen aufgenommene Flüchtlinge or Refugees Accepted as part of a Humanitarian Aid Program) and the so-called kontingenzflichlingsgesetz (Quota Refugees Act), which first made possible the mass immigration of Jews from the FSU into Germany—was ostensibly to rescue the Russian Jews from an oppressive situation, but the subtext was clearly to strengthen Germany’s diminishing Jewish community of 28,000.

This study was conducted in the spring of 2007 with the assistance of advanced undergraduates fluent in German in the German Studies Program at the College of William and Mary as well as various members of the Jewish community very close to the situation: Rabbi Steven Langnas, Professor Michael Brenner, Rabbi Tom Kucera, Lauren Rid, and David Rees. A heavily modified version of the protocol developed by Julius Schoeps and his team in 1999, approved by the Human Subjects Committee at William and Mary, was employed. Seventeen full protocols were collected, plus approximately eight additional hours of taped interviews with the Russian Jewish émigrés themselves and leading members of the community. These protocols and interviews were conducted in German, with someone fluent in both Russian and German present to assist in the event of any difficulty in communication. The study sought to connect two aspects of the emergence of new forms of Jewishness in Germany that are normally not thought of and articulated together: sociocultural shifts of population and the institutional, physical construction of public spaces, one religious (the Ohel Jacob Synagogue), the other secular (The Jewish Museum). The interviews and protocol used in the study were directed at ascertaining the attitudes, feelings, and the various senses of members of the contemporary Jewish community in Munich, specifically regarding the views of the Russian Jewish émigrés concerning the new Jewish center at Sankt-Jakobs-Platz. What is their “lived experience” of this new space? Will it make a difference in their lives, in their relation to Judaism, to the Jewish community, and to German society itself? To what extent do they feel included or excluded? How do they experience their relation to the Alteingesessenen, the German Jews? What is their evaluation of the “health” or “strength” of the community? How do they view the new immigration laws? What is their sense of belonging and commitment? How do they feel about German citizenship? What is their sense of the prospects for the future of Jews and Jewish life in Germany? What are the hopes and challenges of integration, and what does “integration” mean to them?

Contemporary work on cultural spaces, memorials and monuments, collective memory, and historical narratives has informed this analysis of the creation of the new Jewish space in Munich at Sankt-Jakobs-Platz. As a preview to the main argument of the paper, there is a powerful disparity between external, public, “official” representations of Munich’s Jewish community by the city of Munich, the IKG (Israelitische Kultusgemeinde München und Oberbayern) or Jewish Community of Munich and Upper Bavaria, and the Jewish center on the one hand, met with a growing sense of despondency, alienation, and abandonment among the Russian Jewish émigrés on the other. Russian Jewish émigrés do not share the self-understanding of the German Jews based on the Holocaust, and are reluctant to align themselves with the predominantly negative German–Jewish assessment of Germany and sense of victimhood characteristic of the German–Jewish establishment. Unlike the impoverished Ostjuden who came to Germany at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, contemporary Russian Jewish émigrés tend to be highly trained and educated, but often unable to pursue their professions in Germany, either because of economic market conditions or licensure and certification issues. They have therefore remained quite dependent on the IKG despite the fact that integration services, assistance, and programs have diminished. Skeptical of public displays and representations because of their own history under Stalinism and post-Soviet society, Russian Jewish émigrés remain critically distant from the German sense of a bourgeoing Jewish culture in Germany. Finally, as a direct consequence of the new immigration law of 2005, which make it extremely difficult for any of the approximately one million remaining Jews from the FSU to immigrate to Germany, hope and optimism for a genuine revitalization of Jewish life in Germany have evaporated.

The situation of Russian Jewish émigrés in the FRG has deteriorated in the last few years. The new immigration law makes strict, near-impossible conditions for a successful application for immigration into Germany. The possibility of admitting more Russian Jewish émigrés is now directly linked to the ability and willingness of the individual Länder or state to support the Jewish Gemeinde in their efforts. This becomes highly problematic in the current global economic crisis. Two decisive indicators tell a rather bleak story: First, for the year 2005, while many Russian Jews continued to try to gain entry into Germany, no applications (Anträge), were accepted or processed by the German government: “The German Embassies and Consulates in the countries of the former Soviet Union, after the expiration of the ‘Contingent Refugee Law’ on December 31, 2004, did not accept any further emigration applications.” More importantly, as of January 1, 2006, a year after the new law went into effect, there was still no budget...
for subsidizing the enormous cost of Jewish immigration and for funding the integration efforts of the Jewish communities—the federal account for integration was declared “empty.” While it would be too strong to assert that the era of mass Jewish emigration from the FSU to the Federal Republic is effectively over, it is clear that there will be few “reinforcements.” A slight increase in applications and acceptances over the last three years has countered a suspicion that Russian Jewish migration had ceased altogether. However, in 2007, only 2,502 Russian Jews were admitted into Germany, compared to 11,208 in 2004 before the expiration of the Contingent Refugee Law.

The current essay consists of six sections: The first provides the general context of the reappearance of Jews in the Federal Republic after 1990 and how this was perceived by observers and critics of German–Jewish relations and Jews in Germany; the second focuses on recent research on Russian Jewish émigrés; section three offers a brief history of the Jewish communities of Munich, their conflicts and struggles since the end of the nineteenth century; section four begins to map out the diffusion of Jewish identity, the differences within the community, and what was at stake for the Russian Jewish émigrés in the construction of the new Jewish center at Sankt-Jakobs-Platz; section five reads the actualization of the new Jewish space in Munich and its reception against the public representations and projections of the city and the IKG as the beginning of a fundamentally new sense of Jewish community which no longer relies on the Holocaust as its historic-cultural justification and contests the unity and the hegemony of the IKG and the Zentralrat der Juden in Deutschland. The final section contains tentative conclusions and a prospective sense of Jewish life in Munich as the aging Russian Jewish émigré population struggles with isolation, unemployment, and a lack of funding for integration services, and the younger generation increasingly sets its eyes on other countries such as the United Kingdom and United States.

The Fall of the Wall and its Aftermath: A “Reemergence” of Jewish Culture in Germany?

“We have never had a chance in Germany, the Germany after the Wall,” Sander Gilman wrote in 1996, “come to acknowledge their simultaneous visibility and invisibility, their sense of belonging and their sense of difference.”19 In Gilman’s view, Jews from the FSU were viewed as a potentially desirable minority by the German political elite and by the Left. These highly-educated Russian Jews were labeled “assimilable [because] they looked like Germans and could easily learn the German language.”20 In contrast to émigrés and German minority citizens of color and of non-European appearance—Turks, Arabs, Africans, and Asians—Jews from the FSU did not have to deal with stark difference of skin color or facial characteristics. They did, however, have to deal with being treated as subaltern in a double sense, first vis-à-vis German culture in general, and second with regard to the German Jews or Alteingesessenen. According to a study conducted by the Solomon Ludwig Steinheim Institute in Duisburg in 1993, 40% of Russian Jewish émigrés had experienced some form of explicit discrimination; 29% stated that they had lost German friends when they revealed they were Jewish; and 90% felt at risk of anti-Semitic rhetoric or actual violence.21 With the series of events from 1992 to 1995—specifically the racial and ethnic attacks in Solingen, Mön, Rostock, and Hoyerswerda—the issues of German xenophobia, racism, and anti-Semitism were placed center stage once again as the now-united Germany had to deal with the reality of a sharp increase in violent anti-Semitic activity. A new generation of Jews was beginning to articulate itself in the arts and in intellectual circles, writing and making films about being Jewish in the new Germany, but the complexity of the Gemeinde themselves—particularly the parallel existence of different Jewish communities—demanded a more multifaceted representation of what being Jewish in Germany actually meant.22 Gilman viewed the development as positive: “We have never had a chance in recent times to examine the reconstruction of a Diaspora Jewish Community under such circumstances. The Post-Shoa image of a Germany without Jews has passed. We are now at a point of observing how a Jewish community in all its complexity and with a unique history reemerges from oblivion.”23 The phrase “diaspora within the diaspora” was intended to grasp the multiplicity and complexity of Jewish life in Germany.

A sociologically-based view was presented by Y. Michal Bodemann, who asked what a reemergence of Jewish culture, what a Jewish “renascence” in Germany would really mean, and whether or not “the new influx of Jews from the former Soviet Union [would] lead to a new flourishing of Jewish life in Germany.”24 Bodemann named three conditions that would be necessary for such a rebirth or reemergence of Jewish culture in Germany: first, there would have to be a repository of common cultural practices and memories; secondly, there would have to be a network of relatively independent and cohesive economic and social networks (similar to what the Turks have achieved in Germany—a relatively autonomous matrix of social, economic, and cultural groups, organizations, businesses, and communities); and third, a critical mass of actual individuals participating in this new culture.

Old conflicts between the German Jews and Eastern European Jews—a constant flashpoint in the postwar era, especially in Munich—have now been rekindled as a direct result of the arrival of the Russian Jews. The Jews from the FSU had originally developed a very positive, patriotic, idealized relationship with Munich, the IKG, Bavaria, and Germany; this has changed radically since the policy shift of 2005 and 2006, the simultaneous reduction of services and budgets for integration, and the construction of the new Jewish center at Sankt-Jakobs-Platz. In 1994, Bodemann could still make the claim, “with the transformation we are witnessing, specific Jewish forms of ideological labor—Jews as the sculptors of Jewish and German memory and as the litmus test for German democracy—may well be soon a thing of the past, and there are signs suggesting that the old German Jewish ‘patriotic’ tradition, which had been silenced for 40 years, is beginning to rise again.”25 At that time, there was a pronounced feeling of optimism and a hopefulness concerning the reemergence of Jewish culture, even though, simultaneously, fears concerning the well-being of the
Jews in Germany abounded due to attacks on foreigners. In the increasingly affirmative, even “patriotic” relation Bodemann refers to, Russian Jews idealized Germany. Now, a radically different set of issues, mostly regarding integration, assimilation, employment, an aging population of Russian Jewish émigrés, and the financial well-being of the Jewish communities themselves began to shape discourse relating to Judaism and Jewish culture.

By 2000, German culture had changed radically with regard to things Jewish. Being Jewish became fashionable and Jewish “culture” became de rigueur for the German educated elite. However, many critics simultaneously noted a patronizing view of the well-intentioned German majority. Esther Dischereit argues that many Germans adopted a new sense of self-pity in relation to Auschwitz and the Holocaust: it had been essentially their loss—the scientists, musicians, painters, writers, critics, and intellectuals who had left Germany prior to the Judeocide or had died in the camps had resulted in an impoverished German culture.26 Wolfgang Benz remarked that the turn after 2000 can be seen as a shift towards salon-acceptable anti-Semitism.27 Negative sentiments concerning the spending of federal and state monies, the round-the-clock protection of Jewish sites, and the necessity to commemorate November 9 (whose many feel, are not exercising their right—indeed, some would argue, their sacred obligation—of aliya.28 As a “transgression” against this “norm,” it might seem reasonable to assume that the Russian Jewish émigrés do not feel any particular bond to Judaism. This is, however, not the case. For the most part, they do feel Jewish, but they are, in most instances, at least at the time of their immigration, orthodox non-observant or non-practicing Jews—or they wish to be affiliated with an orthodox community, but they do not regularly attend services, even though beginning with perestroika, Jewish organizations were established in the FSU ostensibly with the express purpose of promoting Jewish life.29 Schütze maintained that approximately 80% of those interviewed claimed they did not know of the significance of the “taboo” of Jews returning to the “land of the perpetrators,” and would not have changed their mind about their immigration destination even if they had known the depth of the perceived injunction against migrating to Germany, especially on the part of Israeli Jews.30 After arrival in Germany they are “educated” about the Shoah and its significance for German Jewry and Judaism. The murder of the Jews between 1941 and 1945 had not been denied in the Soviet Union, but it had also not been an active part of public discourse. When it was taught, fascism as a crisis of capitalism occluded the specifically anti-Semitic character of Nazism. The Russian Jewish émigrés therefore not only had a fundamentally different “knowledge” of the Holocaust, but they also appropriated whatever knowledge and understanding they did possess in a totally different way than their German, Israeli, and American counterparts. In several of the interviews, Russian Jewish émigrés claim to have known about the Holocaust, but not to have taken it so “personally.” They did not see it as crucial to their worldview or belief system, certainly not part of their self-identity as Jews. What becomes clear from Schütze’s study is that knowledge concerning the events of the past took on a totally new meaning upon migration to Germany. The interviewees also registered the understanding that they had been accepted into Germany precisely because of the Judeocide, specifically as a compensatory act (Wiedergutmachung) on the part of the Federal Republic.

Pivotal in Schütze’s study are the reasons given for the emigration to Germany as opposed to Israel or the United States. Only twelve of the forty-six viewed this as a “conscious,” deliberate decision, of which six claimed that the decision was made based on economic or work-related concerns.31 All of the others indicated that theirs was not a conscious decision, but more or less chance or contingency (Zufall). “It wasn’t really a decision...more by chance...I don’t know,” or “actually, that I came to Germany was more by chance.”32 Schütze makes a convincing case that the claim of chance or contingency reconciles the person with their conscience about having immigrated to the land of the perpetrator. For Schütze, the rhetoric of “chance” and “contingency” represents an unconscious defense against taking responsibility for the act. It is an enactment of non-agency.33 This is corroborated by the fact that many younger émigrés claimed that they came to Germany because of parents or relatives. When posed the specific question of “why not Israel?” the results were equally revealing. Many cited economic reasons for not choosing Israel, others claimed that Israel was not “European” enough, that it was too “dirty,” or that the climate was too hot and dry.34 Cultural differences and the anxiety that they would be regarded as outsiders, as

From the Ground Up: The Stories of the Russian Jewish Émigrés in their own Voices

In 1995 and 1996, Yvonne Schütze interviewed forty-six Russian Jewish émigrés between the ages of eighteen and twenty-three who had been living in Berlin for an average of five years. Schütze noted the strong taboo particularly prevalent among the Jews of Israel against those Jews who migrate to Germany who, many feel, are not exercising their right—indeed, some would argue, their sacred
“Russians” in Israel, were the central reasons cited for not migrating to Israel.39 Remarkably, very few of the respondents mentioned either political instability in the Middle East or Israel’s compulsory military service. Indeed, one of the weaknesses of the interviews is that this issue doesn’t seem to have been addressed with the respondents. The fact that many Russian Jewish émigrés have families and children would seem to suggest that such questions concerning Israel’s difficult situation and tumultuous history, and the possibility of conscription into the military would have to be significant, consciously or unconsciously. Israel was consistently viewed as the place of “last resort,” that is, in the event of increasing anti-Semitism, attacks against Jews and Jewish institutions in Germany, they could always go to Israel. Schütze was able to conclude that the norm to exercise aliyah is not recognized by the Russian Jewish émigrés; that they first have a real confrontation with the significance of the Judeocide upon their arrival and during their stay in Germany; that many view immigration to Germany as the result of chance or contingency and not a conscious, deliberate decision; and finally that Germany is chosen because of its “European” character and the projection that they would be in Israel. Strong economic, social, cultural, and political incentives existed for the Russian Jewish émigrés to choose Germany over Israel and the United States: not merely the already existing network of Jewish communities, but a “European” milieu, strong, well-funded integration services, excellent universities, other Russian Jewish émigrés, and, perhaps most importantly, a relatively stable economy that was able to offer a politically and socially secure environment in which to raise a family. This combination of conditions, as well as their status as “quota refugees” (Kontingentflüchtlinge) not merely with a right to unlimited stay, but permission to work, access to social services, integration subsidies, and the possibility of becoming a German citizen after seven years presented powerful incentives with prospects of hope and opportunity.

In a recent study, Jeffrey M. Peck has identified some interesting areas of conflict and points of contention surrounding Russian Jewish émigrés.40 Using Berlin as a case study, Peck identified the single most important issue facing the Jewish communities of Germany: the integration of Russian Jewish émigrés into their respective communities. The basic conflict of the dominant conservative position in the Zentralrat or Central Council of Jews in Germany is that, on the one hand, Judaism and Jewish are defined rigorously in terms of Halacha (Jewish Law). On the other hand, the rigorous insistence on Jewish Law seems at odds with the multiplicity and diversity of Jews in Germany. In addition, the differences of German Jews and non-German Jews and the struggle of the WUPJ (World Union of Progressive Judaism) for recognition within the Einheitsgemeinde (Unified Jewish Community) continue to divide the Jewish communities of Germany today. Compelling in this regard is the work of Franziska Becker, who was able to show that the Russian Jewish émigrés are required to “take on the ‘victim’ role expected of them, particularly toward the Holocaust…”41 For many it became a constant necessity to prove that they were victims in order to be recognized as Jewish, by Jews as well as other Germans.42 The Russian Jewish émigrés, according to Becker, “had to assume a German-Jewish narrative of Holocaust victimhood and Soviet anti-Semitism that didn’t necessarily belong to them.”43 Peck, unlike Becker, points to the possibility of a new, “European” Jewish identity and, cautiously optimistic, regards the establishment of both real and virtual Jewish communities, cultural spaces, and events as important contributions to a “significant Jewish presence in Europe.”44 However, the creation of “Jewish spaces” alone does not, as we shall see, guarantee the enhancement of Jewish life or Jewish culture. Peck himself seems to enter into some of the conflicted dichotomies he critiques when, for example, he refers to the Russian Jewish émigrés as “guests” vis-à-vis their German Jewish “hosts.” That the Gemeinde is interested in “integrating” the Russian Jewish émigrés into “German-Jewish” life misses the point and begs the question of what integration actually means in this case, what shape the Jewish community of Germany will take and how new Jewish identities are to be included within the Einheitsgemeinde, if this is, indeed, at all possible.44 In fact, the entire issue of “authenticity,” of who actually counts as a Jew, sometimes referred to as Karteileichen, or “data-corpuses,” is very problematic and very much “at stake,” not merely within the community but now with the new regulations regarding application for immigration status in Germany.45 The FRG has in effect sided with the Zentralrat in its contested identification of “Jewish” with the dominant orthodox position of strict adherence to Jewish Law.

Franziska Becker’s study grapples with the depth of conflict and ambivalence evidenced in the Jewish Communities in Germany today. First and foremost, she notes the discrepancy between the “generosity” of the FRG and the simultaneous “braking reaction” obvious in such phrases as “the boat is full.” Secondly, Becker rightly points out the perception of a discrepancy between the identity imperative of a commitment to the Jewish faith and an almost complete lack of such a sensibility on the part of the Russian Jewish émigrés: “The perception of a discrepancy between the identity demands of a Jewish faith and the lacking correspondence on the part of the émigrés leads to conflicts between the established and new members of the community.”46 Third, in many instances, Russian Jewish émigrés continue to be viewed not as Jews, but as Russians; in other words, the process of “othering” occurs not merely within German society at large but within the Jewish communities themselves. Although in the media there is still much talk of a Jewish “renaissance,” in public discourse “the division between ‘Jews’ and ‘Russians’ is beginning to prevail.”47

The Jewish Community of Munich in Historical Perspective: The Origins of Ohel Jakob and the Making of a New Jewish Center

Ma tovu ohalecha Ja‘akov mischkenotecha Israel —Inscription in the Foyer of the Ohel-Jacob-Synagogue, Munich

4. Buch Moses 24, 5

(How beautiful are your tents, Jacob, and your homelands, Israel.)

Many of the current challenges faced by the Jewish community of Munich and the Russian Jewish émigrés in particular can be traced to the political
and sociocultural structures that existed before World War II. After the Jewish Edict of 1813, in which a select group of Jews were granted rights of residence by Elector Max IV, the Israelitische Kultusgemeinde of Munich and Bavaria (IKG) became the legal-political institution responsible for all Jewish citizens of Munich in their relation to the city and the state. Although this move toward religious tolerance of the Jews reflects the major trend of the nineteenth century towards the establishment of basic rights for Jewish people, culminating with full rights of citizenship between 1869 and 1871, the recognition of the IKG had another socio-political function: it provided the city and state government, the police and administrative bodies with a single institution to monitor, study, and provide information concerning the Jewish community of Munich and Bavaria. According to the Edict, all Jews had to register with and be a member of the IKG in order to marry, pursue a livelihood, and claim any rights to property. In this manner, the City Magistrate’s hope was to gradually “integrate” the Jews into German society by a process of increasing conversion to Christianity.

With its newfound state-sanctioned responsibility and power, the IKG immediately set out to establish a physical infrastructure for Jewish existence in the Bavarian capital: the founding of the first Jewish cemetery in the Thalkirchner Strasse, the 1816 Alter Friedhof, and the first synagogue in the Westenrieder Strasse in 1826 were the three most important early Jewish spaces. Continued royal support for emancipation, tolerance, and acceptance was signaled by the presence of King Ludwig I and his wife Therese at the consecration of the first synagogue. The process of liberalization was also accompanied by a basic ideological split between the liberal and the orthodox communities in Munich which emerged in the first half of the nineteenth century and is still palpable today. In 1832, the government had to step in to mediate a compromise between the two factions.

The world economic depression of 1873 and pogroms in Eastern Europe in the late 1880s drove hundreds of thousands of Jews westward. An estimated 4,000 of these Jews came to Munich between 1860 and 1890, putting a strain on the IKG’s welfare infrastructure, limiting the synagogue’s ability to minister to such a large population, and increasing the visibility of the Jewish population, giving rise to renewed anti-Semitism, mostly by city commissioners and government officials. Two Eastern European Jewish organizations, the Agudas Aachim, viewed them as a threat to Jewish assimilation into mainstream German society. Although members of the IKG, these Eastern European Jews were not permitted to vote in the elections of the IKG, so that despite efforts of the Ohel Jacob group and the recently constituted Zionist organization, which sought to enfranchise the newly-arrived Jews from the East, the Ostjuden became effectively isolated within their own community, located principally around the Gärtnerplatz, alienated from both the German orthodox and liberal communities, as well as from German society itself. Two Eastern European Jewish organizations, Linath Hazdekh and Agudas Aachim, emerged to fill the vacuum of leadership in this growing community, and their unification in 1920 would be the beginning of the city’s third major synagogue, at first a prayer room in the Reichenbachstrasse, and then a synagogue founded in 1931. In a display of solidarity, all three Rabbis and representatives from the three groups were present at the inaugural event.

During the Nazi period, the synagogue in the Reichenbachstrasse was spared the arson of Kristallnacht because it was wedged in between other buildings and could not be destroyed without endangering those structures, but it was ravaged internally. It existed as She‘enth Hapleita or the “saved remnant,” the name survivors gave to themselves as they converged on Germany in the aftermath of the Holocaust. The synagogue in the Reichenbachstrasse was reconstructed in 1947 and remained the main synagogue of Munich until the opening of the Ohel Jacob Synagogue on March 22, 2007.

This “pre-history” of Munich’s Jewish community, the conflicts and the trauma experienced both within the community and its institutional spaces as well as the collective memory of the Nazi Judeocide, is a specifically German and two separate services were recommended, both under the administration of the IKG as an Einheitsgemeinde, but in the end, the final vote favored a liberal service, 270 to 199. In 1888, King Ludwig II interceded with the City Magistrate on the Jewish community’s behalf and provided a building site in the Herzog-Max-Strasse at a cost of 348,000 Reichsmark. The new synagogue was consecrated on September 16, 1887 with the flags of Bavaria and the City of Munich, and with the blessing of the Prince Regent, city, and state officials. It became the center for liberal Judaism within the IKG. A promise to bequeath the Westenrieder Synagogue to the orthodox was later recanted, citing maintenance costs, and the orthodox were once again invited to participate in separate services in the new synagogue. In 1892, under the leadership of Rabbi Heinrich Ehrentreu, the orthodox Jewish community of Munich consecrated the Ohel Jacob Synagogue in the Herzog-Rudolf-Strasse, paid for entirely by orthodox members themselves, with both Rabbis in attendance. The Ohel Jacob group won further influence in 1919, when the new constitution of the Gemeinde established proportional voting, thereby giving the orthodox community far greater power.

By 1910, a quarter of all of the Jews in Munich were of Eastern European descent, the majority of these Ostjuden from Russia. The educated German Jews of Munich were highly critical of the strange customs, outward appearance, and provincial attitudes of the Ostjuden, viewing them as a threat to Jewish integration and assimilation into mainstream German society. Although members of the IKG, these Eastern European Jews were not permitted to vote in the elections of the IKG, so that despite efforts of the Ohel Jacob group and the newly-arrived Zionist organization, which sought to enfranchise the newly-arrived Jews from the East, the Ostjuden became effectively isolated within their own community, located principally around the Gärtnerplatz, alienated from both the German orthodox and liberal communities, as well as from German society itself. Two Eastern European Jewish organizations, Linath Hazdekh and Agudas Aachim, emerged to fill the vacuum of leadership in this growing community, and their unification in 1920 would be the beginning of the city’s third major synagogue, at first a prayer room in the Reichenbachstrasse, and then a synagogue founded in 1931. In a display of solidarity, all three Rabbis and representatives from the three groups were present at the inaugural event.

During the Nazi period, the synagogue in the Reichenbachstrasse was spared the arson of Kristallnacht because it was wedged in between other buildings and could not be destroyed without endangering those structures, but it was ravaged internally. It existed as She‘enth Hapleita or the “saved remnant,” the name survivors gave to themselves as they converged on Germany in the aftermath of the Holocaust. The synagogue in the Reichenbachstrasse was reconstructed in 1947 and remained the main synagogue of Munich until the opening of the Ohel Jacob Synagogue on March 22, 2007.

This “pre-history” of Munich’s Jewish community, the conflicts and the trauma experienced both within the community and its institutional spaces as well as the collective memory of the Nazi Judeocide, is a specifically German
The Case of Munich

Jewish story. It was meaningful for returning Jewish refugees and for their children after the war, but not for the Russian Jewish émigrés who entered Germany after the fall of the Berlin Wall. It is precisely the absence of this shared sense of collective memory, historical narrative, and communal identity that makes it so difficult for the two groups to pursue common objectives and forge a new sense of community.

Contested Histories and Shifting Jewish Identities: The Case of Munich 1989–2007

The complex relationship between Russian Jewish émigrés of Munich and the IKG, the construction of the Ohel Jacob Synagogue, the Jewish Community Center, and the jüdisches Museum München has yet to be truly explored. The primary interests of this essay are the reception and processing of this new Jewish space by the Russian Jewish émigrés. Such a massive new construction in the heart of Munich at the cost of approximately seventy-one million euros constitutes a significant sociocultural claim and a powerful redesign of the city’s center. Wolfgang Sonne suggests in his “The City and the Act of Rebuilding”:

Should a city or city district be redesigned or newly laid out, a fundamental distinction between two modes of production can be made: either an existing tradition is unquestioningly continued as a matter of course, resulting in the development of repeated types of houses or cities; or else spatially or temporally remote models are introduced which can cause disturbing formal ruptures. Although the continuation of a tradition is generally understood as an expression of memory, this is not necessarily true: this approach does not necessitate remembering things past, since they have been recreated in the present. In contrast, it is reception whether in the form of renaissances or historicisms or even exoticisms, which express an act of remembering: in these schools of thought, things past which had fallen into oblivion for a time are recalled and the attempt is made to realize them again. It is this attitude with its underlying sense of lost immediacy which has been the signum of every permutation of critical modernity in all eras and which frequently prefers to forget ever-present self-evident truths and ties to tradition.

The construction of the new Jewish center at the Sankt-Jakob-Platz constitutes precisely such a multi-determined, problematic, collective, and public-institutional act of Erinnerung (remembrance.) Not merely does the new synagogue invoke the name of the former orthodox synagogue of Munich, it memorializes and documents, in its structure and appearance, the historical struggle of Munich’s Jews from the periphery of the city to the central display and focal point they have, albeit unwittingly, become today. It also recalls and invokes the foundational act of the establishment of the Temple Mount of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple in its very substance and its reference to an ancient fortified religious sanctuary. The new Jewish center at the Sankt-Jakob-Platz and the responses to it also reflect the deep-seated ambivalences and dissonances within Munich’s Jewish community, and can thus be read as a conflicted site of memory. Of particular interest are the disparities or paradoxes between this multi-determined act of remembrance and the actuality of the conflicts within the Jewish community, the disparities between official city-, state-, and community-sponsored memory and remembrance as a form of virtual Jewishness, to cite Ruth Ellen Gruber’s work, and the turbulence, strife, and challenges of the fractured Jewish community as it attempts to navigate the difficult path between this newfound official “recognition” and institutional legitimacy on the one hand, and the stark realities of “integrating” the Russian Jewish émigrés on the other.

In the 1990s and indeed up until about 1998, an explicitly positive sense of a burgeoning Jewish community in Germany predominated. The community was experiencing unprecedented growth and seemingly unlimited prospects for future development and enrichment. As recently as 2006, in fact, Diana Pinto has suggested an expansion of self-generated Jewish spaces:

If we have growing Jewish spaces throughout Europe today, it is because we have a new and growing pluralistic democratic context. Judaism no longer belongs just to the sphere of private life, nor does it owe, as in the past, its external legitimacy to the state. It is slowly but surely conquering its own space inside civil society as the expression of a collectivity. . . .

The skepticism of a “renaissance” of Jewish culture in Germany, already apparent in 1994, has been replaced by another sense of possibility and optimism. This can be documented using the example of Y. Michal Bodemann, who suggested in 1994 that a reemergence of Jewish culture was “doubly improbable in the reemerging Germany,” but came to a much more positive prognosis in 2000 and again in 2006, referring specifically to the growing “proliferation of the Jewish fringe” as a “meeting-ground of Jews and non-Jewish Germans.” Michael Brenner has referred to “non-Jewish Jewish culture,” which bears certain similarities to, but is not identical to, Ruth Ellen Gruber’s thesis of virtual Jewishness.

The data and narratives captured in this study from March and May of 2007 reflect a deep concern, especially on the part of the younger Russian Jewish émigrés between the ages of eighteen and thirty, that a sudden reduction of immigration from the FSU signifies a direct threat to the future of the existing Jewish communities in Germany in general, and Munich in particular. There is a palpable sense of growing isolation, “ghettoization,” disillusionment, even a collective “depression,” all of which exceed the negative diagnosis and prognosis of the 1999 Schoeps study. Many young Jews have either already emigrated again, to Israel, the U.S., or the UK, or are contemplating emigration from Germany following the completion of their studies. This is the most distressing signal for the hopes of a reawakening of Jewish culture and life in Munich.

In addition to the three conditions enumerated by Bodemann, three further conditions would be requisite for such a rebirth or reemergence of Jewish culture in Germany (as distinguished from a “manufactured” or “virtual” culture...
created by outsiders). First would be the commitment of a younger generation and families to a livelihood within Germany, meaning that younger Russian Jewish émigrés who arrived as children and teenagers in the early and mid-1990s and who are now in their late twenties and early thirties make a deliberate decision to remain and forge a future in the FRG, and actively rebuild the sense of community. This need not necessarily occur through membership in the IKG or the Ohel Jacob Synagogue, but might take a variety of other forms, perhaps by also contributing to the life of the community through participation in religious and non-religious events, participating and being active in the newly-established Jewish schools, and working with the community to assist in efforts of integration. However, apart from a handful of summer retreats for youth and families, a scant offering of workshops, and a few training programs by the integration services (Integrationsabteilungen) which are constantly under pressure due to lack of funds, we are not seeing these kinds of community-building and community-strengthening processes and activities. Indeed, we are witnessing just the opposite: a widening of the gap between the factions within the communities, evidenced by the most recent threat of a split of the Jewish Community of Berlin in April and May of 2007, and a deepening of the divide between the community of Russian Jewish émigrés, the German Jews, and German society at large.64

The second, extremely important element of any renewal of authentic (as opposed to “virtual”) Jewish culture would be the reversal of the current disillusionment with the Jewish leadership inside of Germany, and a more “ecumenical,” open, and inclusive approach to the various Jewish communities under the umbrella of the Einheitsgemeinde, which would take into account changing demographics and emerging varieties of Jewishness. Barringer a change in the policy of the Zentralrat, such a transformation is also highly unlikely, as the Zentralrat der Juden in Deutschland is recognized as the official representative body of Jews in Germany (with a small, barely audible voice according to the Union progressiver Juden), and because of a continued insistence on a strict Halachic interpretation of Judaism. Citing these issues and the historical conflicts already present within many Jewish communities, in a 1996 article Bodemann predicted “deepening, quasi-ethnic divisions within German Jewry—especially between, first, the Soviet immigrants; the old Jewry of partly German-Jewish background … and third, the descendants of the former DP’s [“displaced persons” — ed.] and their wider cultural sphere.”65 The third condition is the reemergence of a Jewish culture that makes itself felt beyond the Jewish community and its cultural media.66

The Russian Jewish émigrés interviewed for this study in March and May of 2007 were all members of the IKG, and had all received some state- or community-sponsored integration and language training in the FRG. Almost all agreed that the integration and language training was insufficient in length and frequency, and qualitatively poor; most of those interviewed evaluated their present language skills as either “insufficient” (unzureichend) or “inadequate” (mangelhaft). The language courses offered until 2001 by the Office of Employment and Jobs (Arbeitsamt) are now taught by the Continuing Education School (Volkshochschule) in an agreement with the city and the IKG. Emigrés from the FSU are eligible to receive 600 hours of linguistic training over a six-month period. Our respondents considered this to be inadequate for achievement of real proficiency in German and successful “linguistic” integration into German society via the work-market. The thirty-hour Integrationskurs, which teach the workings of federal, state, and local agencies and government as well as German society, were also viewed by the Russian Jewish émigrés as inadequate in light of the actual challenges and difficulties they have experienced.67 The Russian Jewish émigrés also expressed a desire to take a more active part in German society and cultural events, but conveyed that their language proficiency was the primary barrier. When asked to evaluate the helpfulness (Hilfsbereitschaft) of the Jewish Community and its internal organizations such as the Integrationsabteilung, an overwhelming majority of respondents found the Gemeinde to be “bureaucratic, rejecting, or confusing” (bürokratisch, abweisend, or verwirrend); not one respondent of the protocol gave the IKG the high mark of “very helpful” (sehr hilfsbereit). Almost everyone we interviewed, however, said that membership in the IKG was “necessary” or “absolutely necessary.” The Russian Jewish émigrés still feel a strong dependency on the IKG while expressing frustration regarding its social services and integration assistance.68 While the majority of respondents viewed their immigration to Germany as a mostly positive experience, they simultaneously stated that Russian Jews should now either remain in their homeland, or, alternately, view information about immigration to Germany being disseminated by the media “critically” before deciding to emigrate. Of decisive importance was the sense of the relationship between the German Jews (Altteingesessenen) and the Russian Jewish émigrés: almost all of our respondents stated that the relationship between the two groups is either “not very good” (nicht besonders gut) or simply “bad” (schlecht). Significantly, not a single respondent characterized this relationship as “excellent” (ausgezeichnet), “very good” (sehr gut), or even “good” (gut). The vast majority of respondents answered our question regarding their sense of representation and power within the Jewish Community—a question designed to judge their basic feelings of belonging, empowerment, and importance within the community—by claiming that they were either represented “too little” (zu wenig vertreten) or “far too little” (viel zu wenig vertreten) within the Gemeinde. In the 105 official Jewish Communities of Germany, very few Russian Jews hold key leadership posts, despite the fact that these Jews constitute the overwhelming majority in most of these communities.69 According to the vast majority of our respondents, the situation of Russian Jewish émigrés in Germany had deteriorated, for many substantially or drastically, over the last several years; most of those who participated in the protocol stated that the situation of the Russian Jewish émigrés had “worsened” (verschlechtert) or had “worsened considerably” (stark verschlechtert). Not one of the respondents stated that the situation of the Russian Jews had improved, let alone improved substantially. Although Russian Jewish émigrés may apply for German citizenship after seven years of residency, this was not viewed as particularly useful or desirable. Signifi-
stantly, Russian Jewish émigrés did not see the acquisition of German citizenship as a vehicle to a greater sense of belonging or to enhanced possibilities of social integration. German citizenship is simply not important to them. While the vast majority of the respondents wrote and declared that the construction of the Ohel Jacob Synagogue and the Jewish Community Center at the Sankt-Jakobs-Platz in Munich was “important, very important, or extremely important” (wichtig, sehr wichtig or äusserst wichtig), most of those who replied also said that they go to the synagogue on an average of once or twice a year. One might say that the construction of the synagogue and the Jewish center has a strong public and representative value for these émigrés, but little or no real subjective or personal value; they view the Jewish center as being important for the Jewish community in Munich as a whole, but feel very little personal connection to it. Many respondents were also highly critical of how the Sankt-Jakobs-Platz project came about, specifically its architectural design. Finally, many of the older respondents thought that the new immigration law with its far stricter requirements was a positive development, and yet, paradoxically, many respondents, particularly those over forty-five, stated that the policy shift would have little or no effect on them. The distinction here seems to be a generational one: the older Russian Jewish émigrés in particular did not seem concerned that there will be no “reinforcements” (the terms used are Nachwuchs or Nachkommenschaft)—a new generation or wave of Russian Jewish émigrés—while members of the younger generation aged eighteen to thirty seemed quite concerned about the future of Jewish life and culture in Germany precisely because of the new immigration rules and requirements.

Institutionalizing Jewish Spaces

Construction of institutionalized Jewish cultural spaces in Germany is an ambivalent undertaking under any circumstances, but it is particularly fraught with difficulty in Munich, the historical epicenter of Nazism. As James Young has argued broadly, the “more memory is externalized in monuments, the less it is experienced internally,” or, to put it somewhat differently, the labor of working-through is displaced from the observing individual to the external object. Referring to the rapid emergence of Jewish monuments and museums in the 1990s, Sabine Ofte has similarly suggested the ultimate absurdity, “that the remains of the history of a people that hardly ever enjoyed a secure place, sheltered against persecution and assault, are now housed in the protected rooms of museums.” Focused analysis of the spaces themselves can often expose latent conflicts, deflections, and displacements.

Entrance to the Ohel Jacob Synagogue is through the “tunnel of remembrance” (Gang der Erinnerung), where the names of the approximately 4,300 Jews of Munich murdered between 1933 and 1945 are displayed on a backlit wall, some more visible than others, a chiaroscuro of shadow and light reflecting the uncertainty and fragility of naming and representation. Moving through the tunnel one has the sense of being on a tour, an awkward sense of a required act of memory we are obliged to fulfill before we are allowed to ascend once again to the foyer of the Ohel Jacob itself and into the light of its vaulted, transparent ceiling. With its stark, limestone exterior and massive bronze doors bearing the Hebrew letters for Ohel Jacob, literally meaning “Jacob’s Tent,” punctuated by slivered windows and a glass top, it evokes Jerusalem as well as a fortress impervious to external assault. The stark contrast between the impenetrable walls and the openness of the glass superstructure show the ambivalence of Jewish life here, at once guarded and vigilant, yet transparent, open, and hopeful. In the underground structure, it is not a matter of the Jewish religion, but of collective memory construction, what Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi has termed “vehicles of memory.”

The precondition for access to the Ohel Jacob Synagogue is memory. The medium is the “tunnel,” but the message is: Without the memory of what has happened here, without marking the Shoah as the irrevocable historical basis for anything Jewish in Germany, no entrance into the religious space is possible. The relationship between Judaism and the memory of the Shoah is already pre-scribed into the very path one must take to enter the Ohel Jacob Synagogue.

The decision to locate the new community center and synagogue at the Jakobsplatz was essentially a political decision made by the city of Munich in conjunction with the IKG. In exchange for the Sankt-Jakobs-Platz, the IKG agreed to forgo its rights to the land where the old main synagogue in the Herzog-Max-Strasse had stood, which had been kept as a memorial out of respect for the Jewish community. It was bought by the department store chain Karstadt, which opened its doors on the site in 2003. Now, only a stone monument stands to represent the site of the liberal Hauptsynagoge of Munich.

The opening of the Ohel Jacob Synagogue on November 9, 2006 to commemorate the sixty-eighth anniversary of Kristallnacht produced a flurry of
public relations, but perhaps none so revealing as a stylized image depicting the new synagogue, in particular, its stunning glass roof, with the Frauenkirche visible in the background. As an act of contrived memory-construction, this was an attempt to connect the new synagogue with the old liberal Hauptsynagoge in the Herzog-Max-Strasse, with the great German Jewish liberal tradition. The image called up an actual historical image, extremely popular in both painting and photography from 1889 until the destruction of the Hauptsynagoge in 1938, of the once-united Munich skyline in which both structures, Christian and Jewish, existed in an ecumenical imaginary. Such images were ubiquitous in the popular press and in tourism brochures and postcards, presenting Munich as a cosmopolitan city in which the old and the new, Christianity and Judaism existed side-by-side; the conciliatory iconography evokes a sense of equality, reciprocity, and harmony between the two traditions, and clearly foregrounds the liberal main synagogue, and by referencing, the Jewish community itself, as an important part of the city’s history.

This, of course, was a twofold falsification, aimed at creating what I refer to as an “ecumenical imaginary.” First, the towers of the Frauenkirche are nowhere to be seen from the new Jewish center at the Jakobsplatz. Secondly, the new Ohel Jacob Synagogue recalls in name not the liberal Hauptsynagoge, depicted in the previous representations with the Frauenkirche, but the orthodox Ohel Jacob Synagogue constructed in 1892 that bore the scars of the secession of Munich’s Jews and bears witness to the reconstruction of Jewish religious life, where the Shoah clearly assumes a background role—the Ohel Jacob Synagogue has become the de facto Shoah museum of Munich through the “tunnel of remembrance,” a commemorative space that signals the destruction of the past, while serving both as a memorial and a site of warning or reconciliation. Even the actual location of the new Jewish center bespeaks the disparity between center and periphery that is so central to the history of the Jews in Munich. The Jewish center at the Jakobsplatz is at once central, isolated, and secluded: adjacent to the Stadt museum (Munich City Museum), a cloister and a church, the new Jewish center of Munich is located in a secure cove protected by buildings on all sides, and by federal police, still deemed necessary in light of the actual neo-Nazi conspiracy aimed at bombing the dedication of the site (Grundsteinlegung) on November 9, 2003.

The “tunnel of remembrance” presents itself as an alternative to the traditional monument. Underground and shielded from vandalism, it serves both as a memorial and a site of warning or Mahnmal—no matter what happens above ground, the memory of the Shoah remains just beneath the surface, a reminder of the persistent possibility of another assault against the Jews. Displaying the names of those murdered in the Shoah stands in stark opposition to the cold statistics, the list, or the “register” that often constitutes the core of a commemorative site. Rather than representing the Shoah as an abstract concept or as a sudden eruption of the “event,” the tunnel personalizes the genocide at the very moment it urges the visitor to remember those who perished. However, as a passageway, it is a means to an end, an end which I refer to as the synagogue as monument and museum. This is, in essence, what the Ohel Jacob has become. In lieu of an actual Holocaust museum—the Jewish Museum of Munich explicitly defines itself as an eclectic presentation of everyday Jewish life, where the Shoah clearly assumes a background role—the Ohel Jacob Synagogue has become the de facto Shoah museum of Munich through the “tunnel of remembrance,” a commemorative space that signals the destruction of Munich’s Jews and bears witness to the reconstruction of Jewish religious life reaching back behind all liberal reforms to the Ur-Judaism of old, the conser-
vative orthodoxy of the Zentralrat, and the “authentic” Judaism not yet tainted by the demands and the catastrophe of modernity.29 The Holocaust has gone, quite literally, underground. A displacement of this magnitude is far more than a sign of increasing secularization and historicization; it signals a more general turn away from the Holocaust as the historical anchor and marker of the German Jewish experience, relegating it to simply one more event in a long, highly complex, rich historical constellation.26

Referred to by some of the Russian Jewish members of the Jewish Community as “cold,” like a “bunker” (kalt, bunkerartig), many émigrés view the Jewish center at Sankt-Jakobs-Platz as an “attraction” or showplace; it is indeed both, in the sense that it is a place to see re-emergent Jewish life as well as a place “to be seen.” As a Schauplatz (showplace) it satisfies both connotations of the term: it has placed the Jewish community and the Jews on display, and it presents a stage of self-(re-)presentation. According to one of our respondents, one has the feeling of being placed as an exhibit (zur Schau gestellt); in an aquarium (Aquariumumgefühl). There is a certain dreariness or dismalness (Düsterheit) to the synagoge in its impenetrable (undurchdringlich) walls and doors.27 This respondent articulated the exclusionary character of the architecture, which reflects a sense of alienation and disenfranchisement. The Russian Jewish émigrés we spoke with noted a sense of mourning of the loss of the old synagogue in the Reichenbächstrasse, where there were “many prayers” (viele Gebete drin), a warmth of feeling (Wärme), where families had gathered and bar- and bat-mitzvahs had been celebrated, where the glass barriers had been taken down in a liberalization which, to be sure, angered many orthodox members, but was nonetheless still viewed as a development of the community itself. As one respondent, a twenty-six year old Russian Jewish woman who had arrived in Munich with her family in 1993 and now studies social pedagogy with an emphasis on psychology, stated, “It really is something, that precisely here in Munich, where everything was gassed and burned, right here in the middle of the life of the city, that here something grows; but that it turned out so cold; that I didn’t expect. One feels oneself here simply lost.”28 Her prognosis for the future of Jewish life in Munich was bleak: “One looks beyond the German border; further emigration remains for the younger generation the only way, because there will not be any reinforcements [referring to the new immigration laws.]”29 The respondent brought to language the growing sense of despondency that the flow of new Russian Jewish émigrés has been severely reduced.

To be sure, not everyone sees the synagogue, the Jewish center, the museum and the reemergence of Jewish life in Munich the same way. Olga Albrandt, director of the Office of Integration Services of the Jewish Community Center of the IKG in 2007, stated:

Above all, spatially we are all under one roof. Everything is integrated here. It is much easier for the émigrés. Everything is concentrated … here for the émigrés. It’s all new and they wanted to become acquainted with it. Something larger. Also for the contact to non-Jews. On the “Day of Encounter” there were thousands of people here. One is more likely to enter into a conversation here. In principle, one can simply come on in.30

As for the most significant challenges that face the community, Albrandt remained resolutely positive:

For those who do not find their way into German society via the working place, [we should see to it that] they don’t remain isolated, that they don’t withdraw in a ghetto and remain there. One doesn’t need a German store, for there are enough Russian stores….It is our task that we continue to make overtures again and again and seek to build bridges.31

Extremely realistic about both the prospects for the community itself and the limits of the IKG and the Jewish community center, the director of integration services views her task as one of integration, assistance in emergencies, ongoing counseling, advising, and community-building.

Conclusions and Outlook

The perceptions and senses expressed by the Russian Jewish émigré who is now finishing her studies in Munich, and the director of the Integrationssäbteilung of the Jewish center could not be more disparate, though the two women arrived in Germany at the same time. The differences expressed seem symptomatic of the deep divisions present in the Gemeinde in general. Russian Jewish émigrés do not perceive themselves as active members of the Einheitsgemeinde, yet almost all see membership in the IKG as decisive and very few are associated with the liberal community of Beth Shalom, which creates, as Katja Behrens would say, referring to German-Jewish relations, a “rift.”32 The rift here, however, is one not merely between Germans and Jews, but between German Jews and Russian Jews in Germany, and between the various Jewish communities themselves: orthodox, conservative, and liberal. We have also underlined the discrepancy between the showcase of the new Jewish center in Munich and the actual disillusionment of the Jews of the Gemeinde; the rupture, one might say, between the affluent, seamless, monolithic exterior representation of the Einheitsgemeinde as it is embodied in the Jewish center on Sankt-Jakobs-Platz and the disparate, displaced fragments of Jewish life which fail to coalesce to a unified image; and the rift between the leadership of the IKG and the actual constituents of the Jewish community of Munich. The new Jewish space that occupies Sankt-Jakobs-Platz in Munich exhibits multiple contested senses of memory and community—for example, orthodox and liberal, German Jews and Jews from the FSU, the religious culture of the Ohel Jacob and the secular culture of the museum, the IKG and the city of Munich, old Europe and new Europe—some of which have existed since the nineteenth century, others which underscore the shift in Jewish German identities away from the Shoah and a strong alignment with the German Jewish establishment towards a far more multidimensional and heterogeneous sense of Jewishness not easily grasped within established categories and rubrics. After the rejuvenation of Jewish life in Germany of the last two decades, these tensions have taken on a heightened sense of urgency.
Can we effectively grasp this series of fissures or rifts? We might refer, as some observers already have, to the “diaspora of the diaspora,” or to the proliferation and continuation of galut, or to postmodern dispersion and agonistics between competing and incommensurable narratives and claims of Jewishness. But even these, and postmodern locutions such as the dissemination of a manifold of Jewish identities and therefore of Jewish histories, or this reemerging Jewish life functioning as a “minor culture” in the sense of Deleuze and Guattari commenting on and questioning the majority German culture from within, cannot really do justice to or capture the unique situation. The Jewish community in Munich is, it can be said, in crisis, and could find itself threatened with a formal rupture similar to the split that has occurred in Berlin.

If there is any hope of forging any solidarity, of constructing any collective sense of community from this complex field of difference, and for a reemergence of “authentic” Jewish life and culture in Munich whatsoever (meaning something beyond the state- and city-funded “virtual Jewishnesses” produced and directed by non-Jews), conversations must occur between the German Jews, Jews in and of Germany, and Russian Jewish émigrés, and between the leadership of the IKG and Zentralrat and the actual constituency of Alteingesessenen and Zuwanderer, between the young and old, between the liberal, conservative, and orthodox communities and sub-groups. Up to this point, these conversations, when they have occurred at all, have remained snagged between distinct worlds of memory, different experiences of Germany as a country of immigration, disparate horizons of expectations, incommensurable visions of the future of Jewish life, and radically conflicting senses of identity, of what it means precisely to be “Jewish in the new Germany.”

The hegemony and conservative power of the IKG and the Zentralrat are increasingly at odds with the actual diasporic and rhizomatic quality of the communities themselves, and not attuned to the actual difficulties and real-life challenges of the Russian Jewish émigrés. The Jewish community of Munich has become mired in internal strife, increasing “ghettoization,” and a heightened sense of alienation and disillusionment. This occurs at precisely the historical moment that has held so much promise for the Jewish community not merely in Munich and within Germany, but in the ongoing quest for European community and identity as a whole. Whether a shift in leadership in the Zentralrat—specifically, whether the replacement of Charlotte Knobloch by Dieter Graumann—can actually reverse this disconcerting trajectory remains to be seen. Graumann speaks eloquently and forcefully the language of a new pluralism of German Judentum, of Jews as a powerful force in the making of modern Germany rather than merely as victims; this has helped to create yet another, more complex sense of Jewish existence in Germany, without the Holocaust as the defining event in German–Jewish relations. He has been able to make significant progress even with conservative forces in easing the 2005 immigration restrictions for Russian Jewish émigrés, and envisions a more inclusive, encompassing sense of Jewishness. It is unclear, however, whether a change of leadership at the top is in itself sufficient. Other positive developments that reveal a more inclusive Jewish pluralism and a weakening of the hegemony of the IKG orthodoxy in Munich include plans for a new synagogue for the Liberale Gemeinde designed by Daniel Libeskind in the Lehel district of the city, and the liberal Jewish community finally achieving full recognition by the Bavarian Ministry for Culture, thereby becoming eligible for state funds it has long been denied.

A cynical interpretation would suggest that after the fall of the Wall, and with the reunification of Germany, Russian Jews simply served an important legitimizing function in the post-Wall reconstruction of memory and the shift toward a post-Shoah sensibility, a new quid pro quo in which the Jewish communities got a much-needed injection of bodies and funds, and a Germany that had putatively overcome its anti-Semitic past received recognition and affirmation as the country with the fastest-growing Jewish population in the world, ready and capable of being a true democratic partner and leader in the European Union. New Jewish spaces such as Sankt-Jakobs-Platz in Munich do not necessarily signal a re-emergence of Jewish culture; in fact, they increasingly enact and reflect the ambivalence and conflict of institutional, public, and municipal attempts to construct a new image and a new narrative of Jews and Jewish life in Germany supposedly “liberated” from the “stigma” of the Holocaust and anti-Semitism. Such spaces also function as “screen-memories,” as Dan Diner has suggested, that elide and conceal the real problems and difficulties, both historical and contemporary, of the Jewish communities in Germany. The Russian Jewish émigrés of Munich have a conflicted relationship to this new Jewish space. Auschwitz no longer functions as the defining event of German–Jewish relations. At the historical moment of the turn away from the Nazi Judeocide as the undisputed ground of German–Jewish historical memory, however, the reconstituted Jewish communities and these new Jewish spaces have opened up possibilities of community, articulation, and critique that would have been unthinkable within the hegemony of the previous paradigm of German–Jewish relations. In this sense, the transformations presented here have already impacted both the Jewish communities of Germany and the ongoing German–Jewish encounter.
Endnotes


4 Thanks to Michael Brenner, Ron Schechter, Y. Michal Bodemann, Sandra Gilman, and Dani Nickerson for their participation. My students at William and Mary, K.C. Tydgat, Sam Thacker, Benjamin Fontana, Daniel Reisch, and Olga Albrandt, Beth Shalom Rabbi Tom Kucera and Lauren Rid. Our subjects were members of the project in Munich for their participation. My students at William and Mary, K.C. Tydgat, Sam Thacker, Benjamin Fontana, and Olivia Lucas, were instrumental in the capture of narratives and contributed greatly to discussions in a seminar I led on the subject during spring of 2004 and a research trip to Munich, March 9-18, 2007; Judith Kessler, “Homo Sovieticus in Disneyland: The Jewish Communities in Germany Today,” in The New German Jewry and the European Context: The Return of the European Jewish Diaspora, ed. Y. Michal Bodemann (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), 141: “The former [German Jewish, RL] community has become a minority all of a sudden, and neither absorb the new majority nor call the shots any longer […] The former majority can at best try to keep part of it autonomy and find a way to develop common interests with the Soviet Jews. So far, neither side has showed any interest in this sort of cooperation.”

5 Berhard Purin, “Building a Jewish Museum in Germany in the Twenty-First Century,” in Re visualizing National History: Museums and National Identities in Europe in the New Millennium, ed. Robin Ostrow (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 153, argues that “Jewish museums in the West should not only be places to remember German-Jewish places where the majority of Jews living in Germany can find their roots, even if these roots are linked not with German-Jewish history, but with Russian Jewish history.” As of this writing, however, very little material concerning Russian Jewish history or the presence of Russian Jews in Germany has found its way into the exhibitions at the Jewish Museum in Munich.

6 The Jewish Museum in Cologne will stress the Jewish history of the city, yet already history is being rewritten to fit a positive image. Emperor Constantine is credited with allowing the Jews to participate in the City Council in an edict of AD 324. However, Constantine merely relieved the Jewish elders from the obligations of the lower classes, and also levied the onerous Curia duties on the Jews, which included the payment of taxes. 


8 Haug and Schimany, “Jüdische Zuwanderer in Deutschland,” 7-40.

9 Article “Jüdische Zuwanderer aus der GUS: Zur Problematik von sozio-kultureller und generationsspezifischer Integration. Eine empirische Studie,” in Ein neues Judentum in Deutschland? Fremd- und Eigenbilder der russisch-jüdischen Einwanderer, ed. Julius Schoeps, Willi Jasper, Bernhard Vogt (Potsdam: Verlag für Berlin-Brandenburg, 1999), as well as in depth interviews with Michael Brenner, Rabbi Steven Langnas, Integration Director Olga Albrandt, Beth Shalom Rabbi Tom Kucera and Lauren Rid. Our subjects were members of the IGK connected with the Ohel-Jacob Choir, their friends and families. The protocol was developed in accordance with the rules of The College of William and Mary’s Human Subjects Committee and was approved in March 2007.

10 Originally developed in early in the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the sense of “lived experience” has become very useful in qualitative human scientific studies. See: Martin Jay, “The LifeWorld and Lived Experience,” in A Companion to Phenomenology and Existentialism, ed. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Mark A. Wrathall (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 91-104.


12 Estimates vary, but it is assumed that somewhere between 400,000 and one million Jews remain in the states of the former Soviet Union, depending on whether one defines “Jewish” in terms of ethnicity or practice.

13 A person must be of Jewish “nationality,” come from at least one Jewish person (mother or father, unlike the Jewish Law to which they are subject by the GERR Level A1 (Gemeinsamen Europäischen Referenzrahmens für Sprachen)—this condition is also obligatory for those members of the family seeking to enter Germany with the appli cant must be able to demonstrate knowledge of the German Language at least at the level of the GERR Level A1 (Gemeinsamen Europäischen Referenzrahmens für Sprachen)—this condition is also obligatory for those members of the family seeking to enter Germany with the appli cant must be able to show that they will be able to support themselves once in the Federal Repub lic; they must demonstrate that they are willing to be a part of and capable of being accepted into a Jewish Community (Gemeinde) by the Zentralstelle für jüdische Einwanderer, or e.V. (ZWEJST); the only exceptions to these conditions are the cases of clearly demonstrable victims of the Nazi persecution itself, in which case the Integrationsprognose by the ZWEJST and the Jewish Language proficiency requirements are dropped.


15 ibid.

16 This seems to be confirmed by the 2008 report of BAMF, which identifies Turkey and Iraq as the two most significant ethnic backgrounds of emigrés and lists 1,046 applications from the Russian Federation but does not mentions Jews from the former Soviet States: http://www.bamf.de/cdn_180/n_442110/SharedDocs/Anlagen/DE/DasBAMF/Publikationen/broschüre-asyl-in-zahlen-2008.html.


Ibid., 212.

Study of the Salomon Ludwig Steinheim Institute, Duisburg, Germany, March 1993.


Y. Michal Bodemann, “A Reemergence of German Jewry?” in Reemerging Jewish Culture in Germany: Life and Literature since 1989, 47-60. The three conditions are listed on page 51.

Ibid., 56.


Wolfgang Bene, “Jewish Existence in Germany from the Perspective of the Non-Jewish Majority,” 110-112.


Ibid., 98–99.


Bauer and Brenner, Jüdisches München, 74.

Ibid., 96–97.

Ibid., 98–99.

Angermair, Beth ha-Knesseth – Ort der Zusammenkunft, 66–69.

In the same year, the IKG reached its highest recorded membership to date with a total of 11,083 members. An unknown number of Jewish non-members also resided in Munich at this time. On this, see Bauer and Brenner, Jüdisches München (2006), Appendix; Angermair, Beth ha-Knesseth – Ort der Zusammenkunft, 176–179.


Ruth Ellen Gruber, Virtually Jewish: Reinventing Jewish Culture in Europe (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002). Gruber defines “virtual Jewishness” in the following way: “State, city, or church-sponsored promotion of Jewish culture or celebrations of Jewish heritage – whether by the opening of a Jewish Museum, the restoration of a synagogue […] can serve as an institutional form of cultural apology, consciously articulated mea culpa aimed at acknowledging, however tardily (and with however much self-serving political calculation) a part of history once deemed lost” (9). We would like to suggest two slight modifications or correctives regarding Gruber’s argument. First, this “virtuality,” the memory production of the new Jewish center, is not merely an invention or imposition of non-Jewish outsiders, – read city, state, federal or church sponsorship – but also of the Jewish community itself, specifically the IKG, in cooperation with those municipal and state institutions and agencies. Secondly, “virtuality” itself is contingent on very real developments, as is evident from the fact that without the Russian Jewish émigrés, the Jewish Center of Munich would never have been built.

Dietz, 1995), 118–119.


42 Ibid., 223; Peck, Being Jewish in the New Germany, 53.

43 Peck, Being Jewish in the New Germany, 59.

44 Ibid., 41.

45 “Referred to as such because they supposedly only exist “on file” or in the Gemeinde’s database. The echo of the Nazi denominations and designations cannot be ignored here. The question what constitutes being Jewish is tricky business in any situation, but in Germany it has the added historical dimension of the Racial Purity Laws of the Third Reich.


47 Ibid., 71. “Im medialen Diskurs setzt sich immer stärker die Spaltung zwischen ‘Juden’ und ‘Russen’ durch.”


49 Ibid., 87–89.


51 Bauer and Brenner, Jüdisches München, 74.

52 Ibid., 96–97.

53 Ibid., 98–99.

54 Angermair, Beth ha-Knesseth – Ort der Zusammenkunft, 66–69.

55 In the same year, the IKG reached its highest recorded membership to date with a total of 11,083 members. An unknown number of Jewish non-members also resided in Munich at this time. On this, see Bauer and Brenner, Jüdisches München (2006), Appendix; Angermair, Beth ha-Knesseth – Ort der Zusammenkunft, 176–179.


58 Ruth Ellen Gruber, Virtually Jewish: Reinventing Jewish Culture in Europe (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002). Gruber defines “virtual Jewishness” in the following way: “State, city, or church-sponsored promotion of Jewish culture or celebrations of Jewish heritage – whether by the opening of a Jewish Museum, the restoration of a synagogue […] can serve as an institutional form of cultural apology, consciously articulated mea culpa aimed at acknowledging, however tardily (and with however much self-serving political calculation) a part of history once deemed lost” (9). We would like to suggest two slight modifications or correctives regarding Gruber’s argument. First, this “virtuality,” the memory production of the new Jewish center, is not merely an invention or imposition of non-Jewish outsiders, – read city, state, federal or church sponsorship – but also of the Jewish community itself, specifically the IKG, in cooperation with those municipal and state institutions and agencies. Secondly, “virtuality” itself is contingent on very real developments, as is evident from the fact that without the Russian Jewish émigrés, the Jewish Center of Munich would never have been built.


In their study, “Jüdische Zuwanderer aus der GUS: Zur Problematik von sozio-kultureller und generationsspezifischer Integration. Eine empirische Studie” Schoeps, Jasper, and Vogt, noted an extremely high rate of unemployment, chronic un- and underemployment, dissatisfaction with work and position when engaged, loss of interest and perspective, an increasingly negative stance towards both the Arbeitsamt (employment offices), the integration departments of the Jewish communities, and German social services, extremely low rate of actual involvement in Jewish religious life, and painfully inadequate language training.


This condition has clearly been met. The recent wave of Jewish literary, musical, theatrical and historical writing and the remembrance of Russian Jewish émigrés upon their arrival in Germany.


See Purin, “Building a Jewish Germany in the Twenty-First Century,” 153, where he explicitly states that the Jewish museums in Germany should stop being sacred places of memory and remembrance and become laboratories where present, past, and future can be discussed among the curators and visitors.” In the founding document for the Jewish Museum, the Kulturrausch of the City of Munich mandated that the Jewish Museum would not be a Holocaust museum for a number of reasons: 1) the presence of an actual Holocaust memorial site at Dachau on the periphery of Munich, and 2) plans for a Museum to document Munich’s Nazi past. See: Kulturnreferat of the City of Munich, Konzept für ein Jüdisches Museum in München, Munich: February 15, 2001.

One might argue similarly that the Jewish museum in Berlin also de-centers the Holocaust by making it merely one axis of three, the others being those of exile and assimilation. In the case of the Berlin museum, however, the axis of murder/genocide takes on a powerful significance conspicuously lacking in the Jewish Museum Munich.

Interview by author with SV on May 15, 2007.

Interview by author with SV on May 15, 2007: “Es ist natürlich schon etwas, dass eben hier in München, wo alles möglich und mitten in Deutschland, in einer Metropole, wo man halt bisher mindestens noch ein bisschen sich wächst, aber dass es so kalt geworden ist, das habe ich nicht erwartet. Man findet sich hier einfach verloren.”

Interview by author with SV on May 15, 2007: “Man sieht über die Grenzen; die Auswander erung bleibt ihnen [das junge Generation, RL] der einzige Weg, da keine neuen jungen Kräfte kommen.”


Katja Behrens, “The Rift and Not the Symbiosis,” in Unlikely History: The Changing German-Jewish Symbiosis, 32–42.

Y. Michal Bodemann, ed., The New German Jewry and the European Context. The Return of the European Jewish Diaspora (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008). We disagree with postmodern glosses such as Jack Zipes, “The Contemporary Fascination for Things Jewish: Toward a Minor Jewish Culture,” in Reemerging Jewish Culture in Germany: Life and Literature since 1989 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 15–45: “what makes Jews in Germany definable as German Jews is their cultivation and use of minor literature and language to distinguish themselves as other than Germans and to express the possibility of other kinds of community” (22). With the notion of a minor literature, Zipes sees the reemerging Jewish cultural life and its role as that of a “lesser” community, that is a community that is less well-integrated into society, but one that rather both subverts and enriches it from within.

schreibung heute. Themen, Positionen, Kontroversen, ed. Michael Brenner and David N. Myers (München: C.H. Beck, 2002), 17–35 and 44–54, respectively. Brenner does away with the grand narrative of Jewish historiography, and, by implication, with the notion of a singular Jewish identity, while Iggers argues against what he views as a relativistic deconstruction of Jewish identity and postmodern proliferations of multiple narratives. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 18–19, where they articulate the three characteristics of “minor” literature: “[…] the deterritorialization of language, the connection of the individual to a political immediacy, and a collective assemblage of enunciation.”


86 Building on the argument by Dan Diner, “Haider und der Schutzreflex Europas,” Die Welt, February 26, 2000, who has argued that the commemoration of the Holocaust is the core of a uniquely European, that is, transnational unifying memory. The consequences of the Holocaust for Europe give this “negative apotheosis” of European History the status of a “founding act,” according to Diner, the imperatives of which constitute “a catalogue of values which are of normative importance for a political Europe.” See also: Aleida Assmann, “Europe: A Community of Memory,” Bulletin of the German Historical Institute 40(2007): 11–25. See Peter Novick’s response to Assmann in the same issue, pages 27–31.


42 Journal of Jewish Identities

**Between the Red and Yellow Stars: Ethnic and Religious Identity of Soviet Jewish World War II Veterans in New York, Toronto, and Berlin**

Anna Shternshis, University of Toronto

A few days after arriving in New York during the spring of 1990, Anatolii S. (born in 1920, Ukraine), put on his jacket, decorated with the numerous military medals that he had earned during his service in the Soviet Army during World War II, and went into a nearby synagogue, hoping to find out about the benefits available to him as a Jewish veteran of the war that “helped to save America from fascism.” He showed his documents to the local clerk, who only gestured for him to put his hat back on and to pray with the prayer book. Unable to open the book correctly, and most importantly, unwilling to pray, Anatolii realized that neither his participation in the war, nor his knowledge of Yiddish, made him a true member of this community. Being accustomed to displays of public respect and economic benefits from his status as a war veteran, Anatolii now had to embrace his new status in a society that did not regard him any differently from any other non-English speaking, elderly Jewish immigrant from Russia.

Anatolii, like the other approximately 26,000 Soviet Jewish veterans who migrated to Germany, Israel, Canada, and the United States in the 1990s, was certainly welcome to attend synagogues and Jewish community centers in his new country, but his understanding of what it meant to be a Jew differed profoundly from the majority of members in these communities. Anatolii and his peers (Soviet veterans) regarded their participation in the war as the most important part of their Jewish identity, and they were often shocked to find out how little the war meant to the Jewish identity of the local populations they encountered. Unsatisfied with the status quo, many Soviet veterans launched their own organizations, where being Jewish and proud of Soviet accomplishments did not seem contradictory. Moreover, the definitions of “Soviet” and “Jewish” shifted, merged, and eventually formed the foundation of a specific culture, with its own leaders, traditions, rituals, and language.

In this article, I look into the modes of survival of Soviet language and ideology among veterans, and analyze what these modes tell us about the patterns of immigrant adaptation. I concentrate on three centers of veterans’