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## WROCLAW JEWISH STUDIES AFTER THE WORLD WAR II

### WROCLAWSKA JUDAISTYKA PO II WOJNIE ŚWIATOWEJ

**ABSTRACT:** The article traces the development of academic Jewish studies in Wrocław from their modest beginnings after the Holocaust, through a renaissance of academic interests in the 1980s, and culminating in the creation of the Department of Jewish Studies at the University of Wrocław. As we demonstrate, the main areas of scholarly interest among the faculty members of the Department are the history of Hasidism, modern Yiddish culture, and the socio-political history of Polish Jews in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which, as we argue, closely correspond with major methodological and cultural developments in global humanities.

**KEYWORDS:** history of science, history of universities, Silesia, Jews, Wrocław

The tradition of academic Jewish studies in Wrocław dates back to the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century and to the establishment of the Jewish Theological Seminary, the preeminent centre for Jewish studies in 19<sup>th</sup>- and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Europe. Wrocław (then Breslau) was home to the most important Jewish scholarly periodical of the time (*Monatsschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums*), and of the founding fathers of modern Jewish studies: Zacharias Frankel (1801–1875), Heinrich Graetz (1817–1891) and Abraham Geiger (1810–1874). Prominent Jewish studies scholars studied in Wrocław, most notably Wilhelm Bacher (1850–1913), Herman Cohen (1842–1918), Moritz Güdemann (1835–1918), Marcus Brann (1845–1920), Max

Grunwald (1871–1951), and David Kaufmann (1852–1899). At the same time, Oriental studies, mainly Semitic and Hebrew studies, were developed at the University, largely in collaboration with the lecturers and students of the Seminary. Jewish studies thrived also outside these strictly academic institutions, namely at the Jewish Museum and in the major archival and documentary project run by the Jewish Community.<sup>1</sup> The entire body of accomplishments created through the enormous efforts of several generations of scholars was destroyed during the years of Nazi persecution, and the World War II and the Holocaust brought it to its final end.

### Post-war beginnings

In 1945, the Jewish Theological Seminary no longer existed, and its rich library had been looted and dispersed throughout Germany, Poland, the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, Switzerland, and the United States. The dilapidated Seminary building stood abandoned until the 1970s, when it was demolished due to its poor condition. Neither the University of Wrocław, which did not re-establish Semitic or Hebrew Studies after the war, nor any other institution in the city was able to continue the pre-war traditions of Wrocław's Jewish studies. Few people from the pre-war Jewish community remained in Wrocław, while new residents often viewed German Jews and their heritage (perceived within the culture of Nazi Germany) with hostility. However, the archives of the Wrocław Jewish community survived miraculously intact, stored during the war in the new Jewish cemetery outside the city. The researcher and archivist of the pre-war Jewish community, Bernhard Brilling (1906–1987), who survived concentration camp in 1938 and emigrated to Palestine a year later, was brought to Wrocław to assess and inventory this collection.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, quickly and in a manner typical of the new Communist state, the collection was centralised and transferred to Warsaw, where it has been kept to this day in the archives of the Jewish Historical Institute. This, of course, raises the question of who is or should be the heir to this heritage, both material and spiritual, of the Jewish community in Breslau/Wrocław and Silesia, and whether

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<sup>1</sup> The history of Jewish studies in Wrocław has not yet been thoroughly researched. To date, the most comprehensive study concerns the history of the Jewish Theological Seminary; see: *Das Breslauer Seminar. Jüdisch-Theologisches Seminar (Fraenckelscher Stiftung) in Breslau 1854–1938. Gedächtnisschrift*, ed. Guido Kisch, Tübingen 1963.

<sup>2</sup> Bernhard Brilling, *Archiwum gminy żydowskiej we Wrocławiu*, “Biuletyn Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego”, 1950, pp. 15–17.

it should continue to be housed at a state institution in Warsaw, where few people come to study its Silesian collections.

The resulting situation also demonstrates the problem of discontinuity in academic Jewish studies in post-war Wrocław. The city, deprived of its pre-war archival collections, major libraries and above all its pre-Holocaust Jewish scholarship, could hardly continue this academic tradition. Indeed, for many decades in Wrocław, as in the rest of communist Poland, Jewish studies subsisted on the margins of state-funded academia. State-funded Holocaust research was conducted mostly in Warsaw and was discontinued relatively early. The intensive but short-lived Jewish settlement in Lower Silesia between 1946 and 1950 did not have any significant impact on scholarship, although many journals and other publications from that period provide valuable information today, not only about the erstwhile Jewish community. The Jewish Scholars' Circle, which was active in Wrocław between 1946 and 1950, was more of a confraternity than an academic association.

Notably, however, despite the lack of statutory institutions dedicated to academic Jewish studies and distinct academic centres, there were researchers who investigated various aspects of Jewish history and culture. In 1960, Szyja Bronsztejn (1923–1995) defended his excellent doctoral dissertation on the historical demography of Jews in interwar Poland. In the years that followed, he was virtually the only researcher at the University of Wrocław to conduct more or less systematic Jewish studies of nationwide significance.<sup>3</sup> Other publications of Wrocław-based scholars appeared only occasionally: Jerzy Falenciak's study on the Wrocław Bible,<sup>4</sup> or Arnold Goldsztejn and Samuel Bat's works on post-Holocaust Jewish settlement in Lower Silesia.<sup>5</sup> Still, none of these made a clear mark on the development of Jewish studies, even on the local Wrocław scale.

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<sup>3</sup> Szyja Bronsztejn, *Ludność żydowska w Polsce w okresie międzywojennym. Studium statystyczne*, Wrocław 1963; *idem*, *Z dziejów ludności żydowskiej na Dolnym Śląsku po II wojnie światowej*, Wrocław 1993. See Ewa Mika, *Bibliografia prac prof. dr. hab. Szyi Bronsztejna za lata 1957–1995*, [in:] *Studia historyczno-demograficzne*, ed. Tadeusz Jurek, Krystyn Matwijowski, Wrocław 1996, pp. 15–22.

<sup>4</sup> Jerzy Falenciak, *Hebrew Bible from the 13<sup>th</sup> Century in the Manuscripts of the University Library in Wrocław*, Wrocław 1986.

<sup>5</sup> Arnold Goldsztejn, *Ludność żydowska na Dolnym Śląsku w latach 1945–1948* (doctoral dissertation defended at the University of Wrocław), Wrocław 1969; *idem*, *Produktywizacja ludności żydowskiej na Dolnym Śląsku w latach 1945–1948*, [in:] *Z dziejów ludności żydowskiej na Śląsku*, ed. Krystyn Matwijowski, Wrocław 1991, pp. 121–135; Samuel Bat, *Ludność żydowska na Dolnym Śląsku*, "Rocznik Wrocławski", 5 (1961), pp. 141–163.

The situation began to change only in the 1980s. New interests emerged outside the formal academic institutions as a result of the general opposition to the Communist regime and state-dominated culture. This socio-cultural opposition led to the development of interest in subjects that had been discriminated against by the Communist authorities, including minority cultures. Following the state-sponsored anti-semitic campaign of 1968, the topics of Jews and Judaism were among the least favoured areas for research, which in the 1980s was in and of itself a sufficient reason for increased interest in these subjects. An additional factor making Jewish studies more attractive was the tangible presence and visibility of the Jewish past in the cultural landscape.<sup>6</sup> In Wrocław, these cultural artefacts included two cemeteries and a synagogue. Biographical interest in famous Wrocław personalities, such as Abraham Geiger and Ferdinand Lassalle, prompted many to explore the German Jewish past of the city and region. In particular, two conferences in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and the academic publications which followed, opened a new chapter in the study of Wrocław's Jewish past. Finally, the revival of Jewish life in Wrocław bolstered Jewish research and sparked various forms of cooperation between the organised Jewish community and scholars of Jewish history and culture.

The revival of Jewish studies at the University of Wrocław is, therefore, a relatively recent phenomenon, as it dates back only to the 1980s. It was developed to some extent independently in three research groups of historians of law, literary scholars and modern historians. Legal historians in Wrocław, above all the co-editors of the annual *Studia nad faszyzmem i zbrodniami hitlerowskimi* (Studies on Fascism and Nazi Crimes), Karol Jonca (1930–2008), Franciszek Połomski (1934–2019), and Alfred Konieczny (1934–2023) relaunched – after four decades of neglect – studies about the extermination of Jews in Silesia. Their works are still among the best studies of the regional history of the Holocaust.<sup>7</sup> Soon afterwards, Wrocław

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<sup>6</sup> On the surge of interest in Jewish topics see recent studies by Geneviève Zubrzycki, *Resurrecting the Jew: Nationalism, Philosemitism, and Poland's Jewish Revival*, Princeton 2022; *eadem*, *The Politics of Jewish Absence in Contemporary Poland*, "Journal of Contemporary History" 52 (2017), 2, pp. 250–277. For a general overview of Jewish studies in post-Holocaust Poland, see *Studia żydowskie w Polsce – przeszłość, stan obecny, perspektywy*, ed. Stefan Gąsiorowski, Kraków 2014, pp. 139–291.

<sup>7</sup> See e.g., Franciszek Połomski, *Prawo własności a tzw. ostateczne rozwiązanie kwestii żydowskiej w Niemczech hitlerowskich*, Wrocław 1991, Karol Jonca, "Noc kryształowa" i casus Herschela Grynszpana, Wrocław 1992; *idem*, *Zagłada niemieckich Żydów na Górnym Śląsku (1933–1945)*, "Śląski Kwartalnik Historyczny Sobótka", 46 (1991), 2, pp. 219–249; Alfred Konieczny, *Tormersdorf, Grüssau, Riebnig. Obozy przejściowe dla Żydów Dolnego Śląska z lat 1941–1943*, Wrocław 1997.

historians Krystyn Matwijowski (1936–2017), and later Leszek Ziątkowski, Mateusz Goliński and others, published a series of works on Jews in Silesia and Poland in medieval and modern times. In addition, Bożena Szaynok examined the Kielce pogrom of 1946, the post-war Jewish settlement in Lower Silesia, and Polish-Israeli relations until 1967.<sup>8</sup> The literary scholar Krzysztof Migoń (b. 1940) conducted equally interesting research in modern Silesian oriental studies, including Semitic and Hebrew philology and the history of Hebrew printing, while Mieczysław Inglot (1931–2019) studied Jewish subjects in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Polish literature.<sup>9</sup>

### Woronczak

However, most most significant for the further development of Wrocław Jewish studies were the scholarly activities of the eminent Wrocław philologist, Jerzy Woronczak (1923–2003).<sup>10</sup> His interest in Jewish culture – including his knowledge of Hebrew and Yiddish – dated back to the pre-war period. Yet, for years, Jewish studies remained a minor sub-current of his research activities, resurfacing occasionally in his work on Jan Kochanowski's *David's Psalter* or his studies in Christian liturgy. The turning point came in the 1980s with the more general resurgence of Jewish studies nationwide. Woronczak not only contributed to this phenomenon but also gave it – and not only in Wrocław – a characteristic philological and editorial bent. At that time, material heritage was among the most popular research interest as objects of material culture were the easiest-to-find traces of the past Jewish culture and, at the same time, were significant memorial sites of an annihilated civilization. Woronczak

<sup>8</sup> See: *Z dziejów ludności żydowskiej na Śląsku*, ed. Krystyn Matwijowski, Wrocław 1991; *Z historii ludności żydowskiej w Polsce i na Śląsku*, ed. Krystyn Matwijowski, Wrocław 1994; Leszek Ziątkowski, *Ludność żydowska we Wrocławiu w latach 1812–1914*, Wrocław 1998; *idem*, *Między niemożliwym a koniecznym. Reformy państwa pruskiego w końcu XVIII i na początku XIX wieku a proces równouprawnienia Żydów ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem sytuacji na Śląsku*, Wrocław 2007; Mateusz Goliński, *Wrocławskie spisy zastawów, długów i mienia żydowskiego z 1453 roku. Studium z historii kredytu i kultury materialnej*, Wrocław 2006; Bożena Szaynok, *Pogrom Żydów w Kielcach. 4 VII 1946 r.*, Warszawa 1992; *eadem*, *Osadnictwo żydowskie na Dolnym Śląsku 1945–1950*, Wrocław 2000; *eadem*, *Z historią i Moskwą w tle. Polska a Izrael 1944–1968*, Wrocław 2007.

<sup>9</sup> Krzysztof Migoń, *Recepcja książki orientalnej na Śląsku do końca XVIII wieku*, Wrocław 1969; *idem*, *Książka żydowska na Śląsku. Rekonesans badawczy*, “Śląski Kwartalnik Historyczny Sobótka”, 44 (1989), 1, pp. 89–99. Mieczysław Inglot, *Postać Żyda w literaturze polskiej lat 1822–1864*, Wrocław 1999.

<sup>10</sup> See *Od starożytności do współczesności. Język – literatura – kultura. Księga poświęcona pamięci Profesora Jerzego Woronczaka*, ed. Irena Kamińska-Szmał, Wrocław 2004, pp. 57–61.

embraced this trend, participated in numerous documentation projects, and even collected curiosities. He always enjoyed working at cemeteries and appreciated the opportunity this gave him to come into contact with Jewish folk art. However, he also recognised the more general relevance of sepulchral studies and stressed the importance of documentation for further research. He saw a direct connection between his earlier work in Polish studies and the study of Hebrew funerary inscriptions. In his last published text he wrote, as if formulating his scholarly testament: 'As a Polish studies scholar, I have been most of all a researcher and editor of source materials, and in Jewish studies I have been doing something very similar – inventorying tombstones.'<sup>11</sup> For him, documenting of Jewish cemeteries was a continuation of his work as an academic editor of Old Polish sources.

Why did Woronczak abandon Old Polish literature for Jewish tombstones? First, he recognised the urgent need to document Jewish cemeteries, which were increasingly threatened with destruction. He stressed that every tombstone needed to be inventoried, not only the oldest or the most interesting ones, because 'as we are dealing with a dead, a murdered culture, whatever is left is an archaeological artefact'.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, a gravestone not catalogued or poorly documented would become a lost source, as it would quickly become impossible to reconstruct its form and inscription. Documentation should therefore be undertaken as soon and as accurately as possible.

Woronczak's interests were obviously not limited to cataloguing. In his view, this was only the initial stage of scholarly work, whereas source edition was for him merely an introduction to thorough research of the culture in which it originated. Effectively, the space of a necropolis, the tombstones with their ornamentation and symbolism, and above all the epitaphs constituted for him records of more general cultural phenomena, reflecting folk imagery and worldviews, systems of values, and cultural and literary skills of broad social strata, eschatological beliefs and more. This approach turned cemetery research into a multi-faceted sub-field within cultural history and opened new vistas which other sources could have not provided. Certainly, this method was not Woronczak's unique discovery, but his incorporation of it into Jewish epigraphy in Poland overcame the methodological stagnation of Polish Jewish studies, and its impact can be seen in his publications as much as those by his students and the students of his students. Woronczak never published

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<sup>11</sup> Jerzy Woronczak, *Introduction*, [in:] *Jews in Silesia*, ed. Marcin Wodziński, Janusz Spyra, Kraków 2001, p. 12.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*.

his magnum opus, a monograph about the Jewish cemetery in Zülz/Biała near Prudnik. His successors, however, developed new analytical methods, which use cemetery sources for interdisciplinary study of literary, cultural, and social processes, and more recently also for quantitative research.<sup>13</sup>

Last but not least, Woronczak's contribution to the development of Jewish studies in Poland was his work as a teacher and mentor. His seminars generated approximately 20 master's theses and many doctoral dissertations devoted, among others, to Jewish cemeteries, as well as the representations of Jews and Jewish culture in 16<sup>th</sup>-century Polish literature, Hebrew epigraphy in Silesia, and Polish biblical translations in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

### Department of Jewish Studies

The first Centre for Jewish Studies at the post-war University of Wrocław was established in 1993. Ten years later, it was transformed into the Centre for Jewish Culture and Languages, and in 2016 into the Department of Jewish Studies. During this time, this academic unit grew from having one to 13 full-time research and teaching faculty members, became a distinct department within the university and created undergraduate and graduate programmes (in Polish and English). The Department has established a library and moved into its beautiful premises in the former convent and library building on Sand Island in the historic centre of the town and, above all, developed a dense network of academic cooperation in Wrocław, Poland, and worldwide.

Together with these developments came academic achievements.

In the early phase, its focus was on cemetery research. With time, the departmental interests expanded and today cover an entire spectrum of topics, disciplines, and methodologies, from Ladino literature and the culture of Sephardic Jews,<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> See *Studia z dziejów kultury żydowskiej na Śląsku*, Vol. 2: *Cmentarze żydowskie*, ed. Jerzy Woronczak, Wrocław 1995; Marcin Wodziński, *Inskrypcje hebrajskie na Śląsku XIII–XVIII wieku*, Wrocław 1997; *idem*, *Groby cadyków w Polsce. O chasydzkiej literaturze nagrobnej i jej kontekstach*, Wrocław 1998; Agnieszka Jagodzińska, *Pomiędzy. Akulturacja Żydów Warszawy w drugiej połowie XIX wieku*, Wrocław 2008; Agata Rybińska, *Granice integracji. Religijność Żydów wrocławskich w drugiej połowie XIX w. (1854–1890)*, Wrocław 2017.

<sup>14</sup> Agnieszka August-Zarębska, *The Language of Sephardic Jews: History and Main Characteristics*, [in:] *The Balkan Jews and the minority issue in South-Eastern Europe*, ed. Jolanta Sujacka, Warsaw 2020, pp. 181–203; *eadem*, *Contemporary Judeo-Spanish Poetry for Young Readers*, "Children's Literature in Education", 54 (2023), 1, pp. 131–148.



through the history of Jews in Silesia,<sup>15</sup> conversion,<sup>16</sup> gender studies,<sup>17</sup> the study of the Holocaust and remembrance,<sup>18</sup> the culture of contemporary Israel<sup>19</sup> and other issues on the borderline between history, ethnography, literary, and cultural studies.

Three fields are particularly strongly represented in the Department: Hasidism, Yiddish culture, and the socio-political history of Polish Jews in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Hasidism, a mystical-ecstatic religious movement born in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century in the lands of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, has traditionally been one of the most popular topics in Jewish historiography.<sup>20</sup> Studies on Hasidism existed in Breslau Jewish studies almost since its 19<sup>th</sup>-century beginnings (especially spearheaded by the pioneering studies by Heinrich Graetz),<sup>21</sup> and after the 1990s' revival have become increasingly important. The rekindled interest in Hasidism was also associated with the aforementioned cemetery studies, but it quickly moved beyond this paradigm, with scholars orienting themselves primarily towards investigating the social and political history behind the Hasidic movement. Offering

<sup>15</sup> *Jews in Silesia*, ed. Marcin Wodziński, Janusz Spyra; *Židé ve Slezsku. Studie k dějinám Židů ve Slezsku*, ed. Janusz Spyra, Marcin Wodziński, Český Těšín 2001; Marcin Wodziński, *Bibliographie zur Geschichte der Juden in Schlesien II*, München 2004; *idem*, *Languages of the Jewish Communities in Polish Silesia (1922–1939)*, "Jewish History", 16 (2002), 2, pp. 131–160.

<sup>16</sup> *W poszukiwaniu religii doskonałej? Konwersja a Żydzi*, ed. Agnieszka Jagodzińska, Wrocław 2010; Agnieszka Jagodzińska, *Duszozbawcy? Misje i literatura Londyńskiego Towarzystwa Krzewienia Chrześcijaństwa wśród Żydów 1809–1939*, Kraków 2017.

<sup>17</sup> Agnieszka Jagodzińska, *Does History Have a Sex? On Gender, Sources and Jewish Acculturation in the Kingdom of Poland*, "Gal-Ed", 22, 2010, pp. 67–87; *Nieme dusze? Kobiety w kulturze jidysz*, ed. Joanna Lisek, Wrocław 2009.

<sup>18</sup> Katarzyna Liszka, *Etyka i pamięć o Zagładzie*, Warszawa 2017; Kamil Kijek, *Konieczny kierunek i ślepy zaułek w badaniach nad zagładą Żydów na terenach dawnej Drugiej Rzeczypospolitej*, "Zagłada Żydów", 2019, pp. 735–753.

<sup>19</sup> Jagoda Budzik, *Erec szam. Polska w tekstach izraelskiego trzeciego pokolenia po Zagładzie*, Warszawa 2023; *eadem*, *Stara i nowa przestrzeń alternatywnych rzeczywistości. Syjonizm, postsyjonizm, neosyjonizm*, "Teksty Drugie", 2020, 6, pp. 95–114; *Work in progress. Konfrontacje trzeciego pokolenia po Zagładzie*, ed. Jagoda Budzik, Kraków 2018; *Jak się miewa bestia? Pięć dramatów o trzecim pokoleniu po Zagładzie*, ed. Jagoda Budzik, Kraków 2017; Małgorzata Lipska, *Ziemia, za którą się ginie, na której się żyje, z której mitów się czerpie: trzy perspektywy we współczesnym dramacie hebrajskim*, "Kwartalnik Historii Żydów", 2022, 4 (284), pp. 871–882.

<sup>20</sup> See Moshe Rosman, *Pesak dina shel ha-historiograffa ha-Jisre'elit 'al ha-chasidut*, "Zion", 74 (2009), pp. 141–175. On limitations of the field, see Wojciech Tworek, *The Eastern European Problem of Hasidic Studies*, "Jewish Quarterly Review", 112 (2022), 2, pp. 256–259.

<sup>21</sup> H[einrich] Graetz, *Geschichte der Juden von den ältesten Zeiten bis auf die Gegenwart*, Bd 11: *Geschichte der Juden vom Beginn der Mendelssohn'schen Zeit (1750) bis in die neueste Zeit (1848)*, Leipzig 1870, pp. 102–126.



a new perspective on the broad social context, these studies have profoundly revised the views repeated by historians about the relationship between Hasidim and supporters of the Jewish Enlightenment and the state apparatus. They also introduced sources hitherto unknown or marginalised by researchers, who had tended to focus on the Hebrew-language elite sources produced by Hasidic leaders in the early period of the movement. These were the first Polish studies on Hasidism, which entered the global academic circulation in English translations, and the methodologies and sources they proposed became part of the global scholarly discussion.<sup>22</sup>

These publications, to a significant extent, informed the direction of further Wrocław-based research on Hasidism. Egalitarian perspective, methodological innovation, new types of sources, and internationalisation have been the hallmarks of the Wrocław school of Hasidic studies ever since. Subsequent research has focused on Hasidism as a popular and diverse movement operating in multiple social, political, and cultural contexts. Innovative spatial approaches to the history of Hasidism have provided new understanding of factors shaping not only the geography of the movement but also its social organisation, religious practices, and spirituality. A recent monumental, multi-authored history, as well as a handbook discussing the most important sources and methods of research, have provided more new insights into Hasidism.<sup>23</sup> The research conducted in Wrocław on the Chabad-Lubavitch branch of Hasidism is perhaps the most interesting attempt in contemporary Hasidic studies to address the oldest challenge of this research, namely the dichotomy of intellectual and social history.<sup>24</sup> The new studies, inspired by Ada Rapoport-Albert of University College London, integrate the analysis of mystical concepts within their social context, but also harmoniously integrate these two perspectives with innovative methodological approaches, rooted in the hermeneutic tradition but going beyond it into the fields of economic history or the history of emotions. What Robert Darnton once called the ‘social history of ideas’, i.e. the history of the intersection between ideas and their social duration, is perhaps

<sup>22</sup> See Marcin Wodziński, *Haskalah and Hasidism in the Kingdom of Poland: A History of Conflict*, trans. Sarah Cozens, Oxford–Portland 2005; *idem*, *Hasidism and Politics: The Kingdom of Poland, 1815–1864*, Oxford–Portland 2013.

<sup>23</sup> See Marcin Wodziński, *Hasidism: Key Questions*, Oxford 2018; *idem*, *Historical Atlas of Hasidism*, cartography by Waldemar Spallek, Princeton 2018; David Biale *et al.*, *Hasidism. A New History*, Princeton 2018; *Studying Hasidism: Sources, Methods, Perspectives*, ed. Marcin Wodziński, New Brunswick 2019.

<sup>24</sup> Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern, *Hasidei de’ar’a and Hasidei dekokhvaya’: Two Trends in Modern Jewish Historiography*, “AJS Review”, 32 (2008), 1 pp. 141–167.

the best moniker for the study of the Chabad movement but also for the study of Hasidism in general, in which Wrocław-based scholars play a significant role.<sup>25</sup> Equally innovative is a deep incursion into the study of the history of Hasidism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, i.e. into a period which has been little explored so far, and the introduction of new sources: first, by broadening the spectrum of languages used in the study of Hasidism, but also by introducing radically new types of sources.<sup>26</sup> This is also a more general characteristic of the Wrocław research on Hasidism, which aims not only to build a more complete source base but also to break the repetitive methodological and interpretative patterns resulting from the one-sidedness of the source base.

The Wrocław research on Hasidism has both local and global significance, as it provides an important voice in current scholarly discussions and often sets new directions. Its impact is visible not only in the aforementioned publications, but also in numerous international projects initiated and co-created by the Department's faculty.<sup>27</sup> The Department puts effort into integrating its research with teaching and outreach, which results in innovative BA and MA theses dedicated to unexplored aspects of Hasidic culture, and the participation of our students and alumni in various research projects and cultural activities.

Thanks to the popular rise of interest in Yiddish culture, academic Yiddish studies is experiencing a global renaissance, the effects of which are visible in Poland. Wrocław Jewish studies has a particularly strong position thanks to a series of groundbreaking studies focused on modern Yiddish culture in Eastern Europe, including studies of the Yiddish literary avant-garde and monumental translation documentation projects. The innovative study on Yung Vilne (Young Vilnius) by Joanna Lisek did not only present a comprehensive picture of the literary and graphic output of this important artistic group but also, by juxtaposing literature and visual art with

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<sup>25</sup> Robert Darnton, *In Search of the Enlightenment: Recent Attempts to Create a Social History of Ideas*, "The Journal of Modern History", 43 (1971), 1, pp. 113–132. Practical demonstration of this method: Marcin Wodziński, Wojciech Tworek, *Hasidic Attitudes Towards the Non-Jewish World*, "Jewish Social Studies", 25 (2020), pp. 35–70.

<sup>26</sup> See Wojciech Tworek, *Eternity Now: Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liady and Temporality*, Albany 2019; *idem*, *Mystic, Teacher, Troublemaker: Shimon Engel Horovits of Żelechów and the Challenges of Hasidic Education in Interwar Poland*, "Jewish Quarterly Review", 2020, pp. 313–342.

<sup>27</sup> In addition to the above-mentioned new history of Hasidism, worth mentioning is the ongoing project to compile a digital corpus of Hasidic stories, as well as the two currently developed projects: of an atlas of Hasidic attire and a lexicon of Hasidic leaders. These projects are developed in collaboration with scholars from Israeli universities.

archival materials (including secret reports of the state police), reconstructed a completely unknown social and political ‘collective biography’ of the group.<sup>28</sup>

Similarly, Karolina Szymaniak’s studies of Jewish artistic life in the interwar period, particularly on Polish-Yiddish cultural contacts, have focused on the meeting point of literary and visual arts activities and the progressivist artistic discourse that accompanied them.<sup>29</sup> Studies of women in Yiddish culture and the use of gendered tools of analysis have gained much prominence in recent years, culminating in a monumental anthology and an equally monumental monograph of Yiddish women’s poetry from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>30</sup> It seems that interests in the minority and progressive Yiddish culture on the one hand and the study of Jewish women’s history and gender on the other have common roots in the emancipatory currents in contemporary humanities and complement each other well.

However, equally important for the profile of Wrocław’s Yiddish studies is the long tradition of editorial work. Anthologies of Warsaw’s Yiddish avant-garde, Yiddish women’s poetry, and Yiddish ego-documents turned out to be highly successful, also in terms of wide readership and popular response.<sup>31</sup> The Polish translation of Rachel Auerbach’s writings from the Warsaw Ghetto<sup>32</sup> has been particularly appreciated and awarded, and recently noteworthy are subsequent volumes of the monumental series of translations of the autobiographical literature of Polish Jews (more on this anon).

Wrocław’s Yiddish studies are also firmly rooted in the local context, which has resulted in a doctoral dissertation and a series of popular articles on Jewish theatre and Yiddish culture in Lower Silesia.<sup>33</sup> Scholars of the younger generation are broadening the scope of their interests to include Yiddish-language theatre,

<sup>28</sup> Joanna Lisek, *Jung Wilne. Żydowska grupa artystyczna*, Wrocław 2005.

<sup>29</sup> Karolina Szymaniak, *Settling the Score: Modernist Translingual Practice and the Dynamics of Polish-Yiddish Literary Contacts in the Interwar Period*, [in:] *Yiddish and Modernism*, ed. Marion Aptroot, Amsterdam 2019, pp. 25–50; *Montaże: Debora Vogel i nowa legenda miasta*, ed. Andriy Bojarov, Paweł Polit, Karolina Szymaniak, Łódź 2017.

<sup>30</sup> *Moja dzika koza. Antologia poetek jidysz*, ed. Karolina Szymaniak, Joanna Lisek, Bella Szwarcman-Czarnota, Kraków 2018; Joanna Lisek, *Kol isze: Głos kobiet w poezji jidysz (od XVI do 1939 r.)*, Sejny 2018.

<sup>31</sup> Karolina Szymaniak, *Warszawska awangarda jidysz. Antologia tekstów*, Gdańsk 2006; Joanna Lisek, ‘To Write? What’s This Torture For?’ Bronia Baum’s Manuscripts as Testimony to the Formation of a Writer, Activist, and Journalist, “Jewish History”, 33 (2020), pp. 61–113.

<sup>32</sup> Rachela Auerbach, *Pisma z getta warszawskiego*, ed. Karolina Szymaniak, Warszawa 2015.

<sup>33</sup> See Anna Kałużna, *Teatr żydowski na Dolnym Śląsku w latach 1945–1968*, Wrocław 2015.

press, popular literature, and topics at the intersection of literature and material culture. Yiddish culture invariably remains one of the main topics of interest among students, and many BA and MA theses written in the Department address this area, from 17<sup>th</sup>-century women's religious songs to 20<sup>th</sup>-century Yiddish modernism. Many theses combine different aspects of Departmental research and teaching, analysing, for example, Hasidic cultural production in Yiddish.

Wrocław-based Yiddish studies scholars are also involved in national and international professional initiatives, teaching Yiddish language and culture at summer schools in Poland, Ukraine, France, and the UK, or participating in the Polish Association for Yiddish Studies.

The development of research in the cultural and political history focusing mainly on the Polish lands in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries is equally impressive. It includes important publications on integration and acculturation, the socialisation of Jewish youth, and political and cultural processes in the Jewish community after World War II. Common to this group of scholars and their research interests is strong grounding in social theory and an interdisciplinary view of the historical process (with the most evident influence of sociological methods and literary studies), as well as an exceptionally broad comparative perspective (not reduced to merely simple historical parallels, but rather to horizontal and vertical, diachronic and synchronic *histoire croisée*). For example, the groundbreaking study of integration processes among Warsaw's Jewish intelligentsia in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century departed from textual analysis of worldview declarations by the leaders of this milieu. Instead, Agnieszka Jagodzińska focused on linguistic, onomastic, and clothing practices as factual and empirical rather than declarative manifestations of acculturation processes. In so doing, she was able to capture the actual hybridity of the social and cultural position of this community, suspended between Polishness and Jewishness, between the declarative layer and their social practices, between the aspiration to build a new collective identity and the identity instability inseparably associated with it.<sup>34</sup>

In a sense, a continuation of these analyses of 19<sup>th</sup>-century acculturation processes is the study of the socialisation of Jewish youth in interwar Poland, which presents a fascinating case of acculturation without integration. Using a rich and diversified body of historical sources (mainly ego-documents, but also school records, periodicals, and other items), Kamil Kijek shows that the success of the state

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<sup>34</sup> See Jagodzińska, *Pomiędzy*.

acculturation project paradoxically led to a deep radicalisation of Jewish youth, when confronted with the limits of social integration and growing antisemitism. The result was radical modernism as an ideology shared by the entire interwar generation, from ultra-Orthodox Hasidic youth and Zionist-Revisionist circles to Jewish Communists, anarchists, and others.<sup>35</sup> New studies of this trend also explore, among other things, the emergence of consumer culture in the Eastern European Jewish community, the transnationality of processes in that community after the World War II or the relationship between the worldview transformations of the interwar period and attitudes during the Holocaust and after 1945.<sup>36</sup>

Jewish Studies conducted in Wrocław, both within these three particularly strongly represented areas and in other fields, share common preferences for multilingual sources, openness to new methodologies, and far-reaching internationalisation. Although most of the Department's staff are graduates of Polish universities, their work differs from the directions dominating in Polish Jewish studies, namely from the concentration of research into the Holocaust and the history of local Jewish communities. This does not mean these two topics are absent in Wrocław, but that Wrocław's Holocaust research, contrary to the dominant tendency in Poland, does not focus on the years of the war and occupation, but treats the topic from a broader historical, philosophical or literary perspective. The anti-Jewish violence of the 1940s is investigated from the perspective of long-term political and social processes.<sup>37</sup> The experience of the Holocaust is included in a broader ethical reflection on memory and remembrance or in reflections on the literary processing of trauma in the works of Israeli authors.<sup>38</sup> Finally, the local and regional historiography, developed in the early days of the Wrocław centre, particularly stressing Lower Silesian Jewish material culture, has been almost entirely supplanted by research

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<sup>35</sup> Kamil Kijek, *Dzieci modernizmu. Świadomość, kultura i socjalizacja polityczna młodzieży żydowskiej w II Rzeczypospolitej*, Wrocław 2017.

<sup>36</sup> *Jewish Lives under Communism. New Perspectives*, ed. Kateřina Čapková, Kamil Kijek, New Brunswick 2022; Kamil Kijek, *The Road to Przytyk. Agitation and the Sociotechnique of Violence in the Kielce region, 1931–1936*, "Gal-Ed" (forthcoming); *idem*, *Only Ashes? Jewish Visitors to the New Poland in 1946 and the Future of Polish Jewry*, "Journal of Modern European History", 20, (2022), 1, pp. 111–26; Agnieszka Jagodzińska, *How to Create a Hebrew Reader? Olam Katan (1901–1904) and the Young Hebrew Reading Public*, "Children's Literature in Education", 2022, pp. 1–16.

<sup>37</sup> See Kamil Kijek, *On the Pitfalls of Operationalization and Scholarly Hubris in the Study of Anti-Jewish Pogroms in Eastern Poland Prior to the Holocaust*, "Journal of Genocide Research", 22, (2020), 2, pp. 301–307.

<sup>38</sup> See Liszka, *Etyka i pamięć*; Budzik, *Work in Progress*; *eadem*, *Jak się miewa bestia?*

of a trans-regional character, and the current micro-historical research projects are developed in a broader, transnational context of modern Jewish history.<sup>39</sup>

### What next?

As with all of the global humanities, Jewish studies in Poland and worldwide are in crisis. One problem is the general decline in interest in humanistic studies, combined in Poland with a long process of depreciating them in the public discourse and media. An additional factor is the gradual, more general decline in historical thinking, and, consequently, also in the interest in history. Combined with this is an obsessive use of Polish contemporary history in political discourse and in primitive ‘historical politics’. The direct results of these factors include a sharp decline in the study of history before 1918, marginalisation of universal history, ethnocentrism, and methodological backwardness.<sup>40</sup> These general tendencies certainly do not foster harmonious development of Polish Jewish Studies. However, if the doctoral dissertations written in Wrocław are a reliable indicator of future trends, it seems that the negative tendencies for historical thinking to disappear have less impact here than elsewhere: most of the dissertations written in the Department of Jewish Studies concern history before 1918,<sup>41</sup> and their sources and methods give hope for significant, or even groundbreaking work.

The awareness of this crisis also encourages reflection on and the quest for viable solutions. In recent years, Wrocław Jewish studies have turned towards fundamental research and projects of key importance for the entire discipline, sometimes of even monumental scope. An example of both tendencies is the nationwide ministerial-sponsored project, coordinated by the Department, called *Kanon literatury wspomnieniowej Żydów polskich* (The Canon of Memoir Literature of Polish Jews),

<sup>39</sup> See Kamil Kijek, *Reichenbach/Rychbach/Dzierżonów: A Center of Jewish Life in Poland in a Period of Transition, 1945–1950*, [in:] *Our Courage – Jews in Europe 1945–48*, ed. Kata Bohus et al., Boston 2020, pp. 104–117.

<sup>40</sup> On some of these phenomena on a global scale see Jo Guldi, David Armitage, *The History Manifesto*, Cambridge 2014, pp. 81–85; Benjamin M. Schmidt, *The History BA since the Great Recession*, “Perspectives on History”, 56 (2018), 9, online edition; Eric Alterman, *The Decline of Historical Thinking*, “The New Yorker” (February 4, 2019).

<sup>41</sup> For comparison: nationwide, about 70% of doctoral dissertations on Jewish themes relate to the 20<sup>th</sup> century; see Marcin Wodziński, *Prospects for Jewish Studies in Poland: An Update for a New Decade*, [in:] *Studies in Contemporary Jewry*, Vol. 32: *Becoming Post-Communist: Jews and the New Political Cultures of Russia and Eastern Europe*, ed. Eli Lederhendler, Oxford 2023, pp. 66–83.

which resulted in a series of 27 autobiographies of Polish Jews translated from Hebrew, Yiddish, Russian, and German into Polish, and published in critical scholarly editions. The series includes memoiristic literature from the early 17<sup>th</sup> to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century from all areas of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, diverse in terms of language, genre, social status, ideology, and gender of the authors. Thus, the series offers a representative selection of Jewish ego-documents hitherto unknown to Polish readers. The series not only provides new additions to the canon of memoirs written in and about Poland, but above all offers a radically different point of view than the one known from 'classical' memoirs. The account of the anti-Tsarist Uprising of 1831 from the point of view of a Jew (and a Polish patriot) innocently accused of spying for the Russian troops gives a radically different perspective on a historical event researched apparently as thoroughly as possible.<sup>42</sup> Twenty volumes have thus far been published.<sup>43</sup> When completed, this will be one of the largest projects in the Polish humanities of this century.

Several smaller translation and editing projects serve to make literary works and source texts available to the Polish reader. One such project, carried out by a team largely made up of faculty, graduates, and students of the Department, is an anthology of Hasidic stories, forthcoming in the oldest Polish books series *Biblioteka Narodowa*. Other projects include the aforementioned anthologies of Yiddish women's poetry, a forthcoming anthology of short prose forms in Yiddish, translations of the novels of Chava Rosenfarb (an outstanding Yiddish writer from Łódź), and the Makor/Źródła publishing series, which produces editions of source texts fundamental to Jewish history.<sup>44</sup>

Among the important scholarly accomplishments of Wrocław Jewish studies one should also mention research in the field of digital humanities.<sup>45</sup> Apart from the

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<sup>42</sup> See Jaakow Lewin, *Kroniki z dni polskiego buntu, 1830–1831*, ed. Jagoda Budzik, Warszawa 2022.

<sup>43</sup> See <http://zydzi.autobiografia.uni.wroc.pl> (accessed November 7, 2023). An introduction in Joanna Lisek, Agnieszka Jagodzińska, Marcin Wodziński, *Literatura autobiograficzna Żydów polskich*, Wrocław 2024; short summary of the project in: Joanna Lisek, *Żydowskie egodokumenty w serii Żydzi. Polska. Autobiografia*, "Studia Judaica", 2020, 2, pp. 376–379.

<sup>44</sup> See Chava Rosenfarb, *Drzewo życia*, Vol. 1–3, Łódź 2015–2019; *eadem*, *Między miasteczkiem i Łodzią. Opowieść o miłości*, Łódź 2021.

<sup>45</sup> On the digital humanities and its challenges see Guldí, Armitage, *The History Manifesto*, pp. 88–116; On digital humanities in Jewish studies see *Digital Judaism: Jewish Negotiations with Digital Media and Culture*, ed. Heidi A. Campbell, New York 2015; Michelle Chesner, *JS/DH: An Introduction to Jewish Studies / Digital Humanities Resources*, "Judaica Librarianship", 20, (2017), pp. 194–196; *Jewish Studies in the Digital Age*, ed. Gerben Zaagsma *et al.*, Berlin–Oldenbourg 2022.



above-mentioned historical atlas of Hasidism (which made use of GIS tools and created large and innovative databases, the largest of which includes 130,000 contemporary Hasidic families), these studies have resulted in a series of digital projects of international scope. One of them is the Polish component of the European Yerusha project, which aims to create a monumental catalogue of source materials on Jewish history in European archival collections.<sup>46</sup> The Department is also working on an important international project documenting the history of the Jewish book called *Prenumeranten* ('subscribers'). Implemented by the University of Wrocław and the eLijah-Lab at the University of Haifa, the project established a relational database of approximately one million subscribers, 10,000 localities, and many thousands of Jewish books (mostly, but not only, in Hebrew) from the late 18<sup>th</sup> to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, as well as tools for network, spatial, statistical, and other analyses. When the database and portal are completed, it will probably be one of the largest and most important tools for studying the history of the Jewish book and European book history in general. The portal will allow almost unlimited studies of book-distribution and trade routes, reading clusters, the Enlightenment 'republic of letters', mechanisms of knowledge diffusion, and more. Access will exist for rich comparative material on the Jewish book with one easy click.

Recently, new tools of digital humanities have entered the field of Hasidic studies, bringing intriguing perspectives and challenges. Our centre plays a role here, contributing to major international projects. Apart from the aforementioned historical atlas of Hasidism and the index of Jewish book subscribers, where Hasidic books will be an important component of the corpus, new projects include, among other things, a digital corpus of ca. 5,000 Hasidic stories and the project *Mysticism and Modernity: Chabad Lubavitch in Interwar Poland*, part of which involves the creation of a series of interrelated databases on Hasidic Jews in interwar Poland. A digital lexicon of Hasidic leaders and an historical atlas of Hasidic attire are in development, too.<sup>47</sup> Importantly, these new projects aim to aggregate these stand-alone projects into a larger, multi-layered meta-platform with a focus on four areas: 1) integration and digitisation of existing research projects; 2) initiation of new research; 3) development of new search and analysis tools; and 4) better integration of research and teaching practices. The result will be, among other things, a meta-portal allowing for unrestricted advanced data searches of

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<sup>46</sup> See <https://yerusha.eu> (accessed November 7, 2023).

<sup>47</sup> For the former, see <https://tsadikim.uwr.edu.pl> (accessed November 7, 2023).

existing digital databases devoted to Hasidism. In this way, researchers will be provided with a tool that allows them to combine and analyse massive data in a simple, intuitive way in its historical and geographical context.

While building the brand of the Wrocław Department and its position as a distinct school on the global Jewish studies scene, we have focused, among other things, on the development of digital humanities. Digital tools, although present in scholarship for several decades, are only now coming into wider use in Jewish studies, which creates an opportunity for us to assume an important role in this development. However, this strategy may entail certain risks. At present, the strength of our team lies in the diversity of our research and teaching interests. Focusing on one type of research, combined with inevitably limited funding, could lead to the defunding and marginalisation of certain research areas, which are our strength today. This danger stems from the nature of digital humanities and the accompanying infrastructural, methodological, and political problems that its critics have highlighted.<sup>48</sup> Digital projects require long-term planning and extensive funding to ensure that they remain functional and accessible in the face of changing technologies. Effectively, they are much more costly and labour-intensive than other, ‘analogue’ research projects. Nor should these projects lead to the marginalisation and abandonment of teaching other methods. Finally, the digital turn must not exacerbate the precarisation of academia. The success of the Wrocław digital projects would be the sustainability of the Department rather than a one-sided development.

## Beyond research

Research has built its position in Wrocław Jewish studies, but we also see our role – and a chance for the future – in formal and informal education, community building, outreach and, more broadly, in stimulating local and national discussions about Jewish heritage, minority cultures, and inclusive education. To put it in a somewhat clichéd manner, our students are our future, and our teaching aims to prepare them not only for academia but also to face cultural, social, and political challenges beyond a narrow regional or national context. Through the selection of methods, literature, organisation of classes, and assistance with study and research trips, we prepare students to participate in the global community of researchers,

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<sup>48</sup> Richard Grusin, *The Dark Side of Digital Humanities*, “Differences”, 25 (2014), pp. 79–92.

educators, and activists. In short, just as in research, so in teaching, the Department sees itself to be a part of the international academic community engaged in Jewish and minority studies.

Second, as an institution with an already established international reputation, we want to be a consolidating factor for scholars and enthusiasts of Jewish culture. We pursue this goal by expanding the library (which in 2020 added the largest collection in Poland on Jewish mysticism and spirituality) and the archival collections (e.g., relating to the activities of Lower Silesian Jewish organisations). Our students and graduates participate in a number of these projects, which allows them to acquire new skills and, while doing so, contribute to the development of the Department.

Third, our research translates directly into outreach activities in the form of open lectures, festivals, popular publications outside the circle of academic journals and presses, and cooperation with non-academic institutions and individuals. The most prominent example is the participation of the Department in the creation of the permanent exhibition at the POLIN Museum in Warsaw, and the collaboration with the Museum of the City of Łódź, among others, on temporary exhibitions related to Jewish culture. We are particularly proud of our students and graduates, who work in or set up cultural and educational organisations themselves. The Department also organises many public events, although their cyclical nature was severely disrupted by the outbreak of the pandemic in 2020.

## **Conclusion**

Wrocław Jewish studies has travelled a long road since the 1980s and Professor Woronczak's first expeditions into Jewish cemeteries. It is gradually passing from the pioneering phase into the stage of stability. The average age of the team is just over forty, so these researchers are at a relatively early stage in their careers, and they will be setting the direction of the centre's development in the coming decades. Creating a team and providing it with an institutional base, in which it can develop world-class research, is in itself a success. However, while the development of the Wrocław centre took place in an atmosphere of pioneering enthusiasm and – at least until a few years ago – popular interest in Jewish culture, it is entering its mature phase under much more difficult circumstances. The global crisis in the humanities, exacerbated by the pandemic and its aftermath, is already leading to the closure of humanities departments and Jewish cultural research

centres at smaller universities in the United States. In Poland, this crisis was until very recently accelerated by a wave of ethnocentrism and xenophobia, top-down attempts to steer scholarship by hand, and the precariousness of academic work. The future is uncertain. In the current situation, success is no longer about more books and articles in prestigious publishing houses and journals, but about ensuring the continuity of these activities. A particular challenge is to attract students and young researchers, for whom working on short-term contracts is simply unattractive, and who may face difficulties in obtaining state funding for their projects.

Development in three fields – research, education, and outreach – is Wrocław Jewish Studies' response to these challenges. We want to act not only as a research institution but also as a cultural and educational centre. We seek to attract students by offering them the opportunity to work in small groups and to have direct contact with top-class researchers. We are opening studies in English and developing joint research projects with teams from abroad, also in order to be as independent as possible from the local political situation. We hope that we will continue to develop despite the historical turmoil.

## STRESZCZENIE / SUMMARY

Artykuł przedstawia dzieje akademickich studiów judaistycznych we Wrocławiu od skromnych początków, krótko po Holocaust, poprzez renesans zainteresowań badawczych w latach 80. XX w., po współczesne sukcesy naukowe i organizacyjne. Początki tej historii to powołanie, z inicjatywy prof. Jerzego Woronczaka, Pracowni Kultury i Języków Żydów Polskich przy Instytucie Filologii Polskiej Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego w 1993 r. Stopniowo Pracownia przekształciła się w samodzielną Katedrę Judaistyki (od 2016 r.). Autorzy prezentują bogaty dorobek pracowników Katedry, których obszar badań obejmuje historię chasydyzmu, nowoczesną kulturę jidysz oraz społeczne i polityczne dzieje Żydów polskich w XX w. Autorzy ukazują, jak badania pracowników Katedry korespondują ze światowymi nurtami rozwoju metodologicznego i kulturowego nauk humanistycznych.

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