
FESTIVAL

Jewish Heritage in Jewish and non-Jewish Discourse: Issues and Possibilities

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Despite conventional wisdom, the beauty or unique material form of the object or site doesn't make it heritage, what makes it heritage is present-day cultural processes and activities that communities undertake at and around them [3]. What is also important is that heritage can't stand aside, it should be included into the community and be a part of it. As Smith states, heritage is not a stable thing or list of objects; it undergoes changes and the list of heritage objects is a result of choices.

Quite often there are two sides of heritage defined by actors and their agenda. One side of heritage is about the promotion of a consensus version of the past by state-sanctioned cultural institutions and elites to regulate cultural and social tensions in the present, for example heritage preservation institutes and museums. From the other side, heritage may be a resource that challenges and redefines received values and identities by a range of subaltern groups, as ethical and religious communities [3].

Since the end of WWII Jewish heritage is a questionable issue and often a conflict term for different groups of interest that perceive it differently, attribute different meanings and values, imagine different usage and future for it.

Decision of what is considered heritage and what is not is a result of selection as well as negotiations between the groups of interest, Jewish and non-Jewish. In the last decades both discourses started to interact with each other changing the status of objects, projects and traditions. In the article, I would like to explore how Jewish heritage is reconstructed in Jewish and non-Jewish discourse and how it influences its perception.

Cover of the 2024 FestivALT

Яўрэйская спадчына ў яўрэйскім і не-яўрэйскім дыскурсах: праблемы і магчымасці

Артыкул дактаранткі ўніверсітэта Віядрына Рэнаты Ганінец даследуе складаны характар яўрэйскай спадчыны, якая вызначаецца не прыгажосцю або старажытнасцю матэрыяльных збудаванняў, а сучаснай культурнай дзейнасцю і інтэрпрэтацыямі. У артыкуле разглядаецца, як гэта спадчына, моцна пацярпелая ад Халакосту, сёння імкліва трансфармуецца, ператвараецца ў турыстычныя аб'екты, набывае новыя значэнні, такія як «дысанантная спадчына» ці «спадчына без нашчадкаў». Артыкул падкрэслівае дваісты вынік перафарматавання яўрэйскай спадчыны: хоць яна і стала інструментам для прасоўвання талерантнасці і барацьбы з антысемітызмам, неабачлівая праца з ёй прыводзіць да страты нематэрыяльных аспектаў яўрэйскай культуры.

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Features of Jewish heritage

Traditional perception of heritage tends to emphasize its material component, what is considered heritage must meet certain criteria – old, grand, monumental, aesthetically pleasant. Attributes that don't really correspond with the Jewish heritage, as long as during the Holocaust it was one of the targets for destruction, heritage lost its beauty and integrity.

Jewish heritage also lost its meaning, traditions and functions – destruction turned synagogues, museums, whole Jewish districts into ruins or completely erased them from the surface. Years after so called Jewish heritage acquired new meanings, among them – dissonant heritage, as something that hurts and resonates, for which different memories and even conflicting opinions exist, heritage of trauma and atrocities. In addition, where is a threat of local residents being found involved in the killing and destruction, making this heritage even more alienated, contested and unsettled. Heritage that is not accepted by the local community. All new meanings were unpleasant: a heritage that is traditionally a source of pride is, in the case of Jewish heritage after the Holocaust, something that wishes to be forgotten.

The Holocaust devastated Jewish communities and transformed their heritage into a “heritage without heirs”, as those who once preserved it were decimated. Post-war, Jewish populations often consisted of newcomers disconnected from local traditions. The Holocaust, post-WWII resettlement, emigration, and economic hardship left communities too weakened to protect their cultural heritage.

Jewish heritage, both tangible and intangible, was targeted for erasure. Though remnants remain in cityscapes, unresolved issues linger around ruins, empty spaces, and appropriated buildings. Since WWII, debates about its future have continued. Jewish heritage is often seen as the “Other’s”, with surrounding communities failing to recognize it as their own and shifting responsibility to the few remaining Jewish communities, which lack the authority to address these complexities.

Intangible heritage, such as Jewish jokes and cuisine, is frequently overlooked, not because it’s less important, but because it is less visible and tightly linked to the people who once embodied it. Dominant narratives focus on tangible heritage, while Jewish discourse emphasizes intangible aspects, often neglecting the physical. Despite limited public awareness, Jewish heritage persists and occasionally resurfaces in debates around ownership, responsibility, and authenticity.

Construction of the Jewish space

A new chapter for Jewish heritage began with “Erinnerungspolitik” (memory politics) in the late 1980s, when European countries with rich Jewish histories started to rediscover their Jewish components in the present. Europe, alongside the United States and Israel, was recognized as a key location for a renewed Jewish presence.

International recognition of Jewish heritage began with the inclusion of significant sites on the UNESCO World Heritage list, acknowledging their vulnerability and universal value. This recognition also affirmed that Jewish heritage is an integral part of European history. The process continues today: in 2021, the ShUM Sites of Speyer, Worms, and Mainz were added to the list, followed in 2023 by the medieval Jewish heritage of Erfurt, both in Germany.

Across Europe, new Jewish memorials and museums were established, and Jewish studies programs were introduced at universities, reflecting a significant increase in interest in Jewish topics. Pinto referred to this growing focus as the creation of a “Jewish space” [5].

Key elements of this Jewish space include integrating Holocaust knowledge and remembrance into national histories, as well as promoting positive aspects of Judaism, such as Jewish cultural festivals. Pinto views this development as a positive step toward fostering dialogue between Jews and non-Jews.

However, Pinto's concept overlooks the issue of “agency”. Later, Bodemann highlighted the importance of the “producers” of Jewish space, which he termed the “judaisierendes Mi-

lieu" – a space often shaped by non-Jewish actors [6]. Building on this, Gruber conceptualized the idea of a "Virtual Jewish" space, extending Bodemann's concern that the virtual Jewish world is largely created by "virtual Jews" [6]. This phenomenon can partly be explained by the numerical dominance of non-Jews and the resulting absence of a strong Jewish discourse in heritage preservation.

According to Pinto, the new Jewish space cannot exist without Jews, but it also cannot thrive with only Jews – both groups are essential for meaningful dialogue.

Jewish heritage often sparks debate, as it belongs to one community but exists within the context of another. It is intriguing to observe how both groups perceive this heritage. On the one hand, the growing interest of non-Jews in Jewish culture is a positive outcome of the evolving memory culture, as they begin to recognize it as part of their own history. On the other hand, it is essential to consider the dominant non-Jewish and counter-Jewish narratives.

Critically examining how Jewish space is being (re)created today – filled with new initiatives, meanings, and values – offers insight into how these developments shape Jewish identity and the broader perception of Jews. While making Jewish heritage visible to the general public was a priority a few decades ago, the focus now is on understanding the meanings and values that this heritage conveys.

New meanings for the heritage

Jewish spaces and heritage have long existed as a sort of vacuum, waiting to be filled with new ideas, values, and meanings by various interest groups.

The European Union actively supports projects aimed at preserving and promoting Jewish heritage, aligning with its broader commitment to fostering tolerance and diversity in Europe. Initiatives such as the European Routes of Jewish Heritage, European Days of Jewish Culture, and Judaica Europeana introduce Jewish heritage to wider audiences, promoting inclusivity and cultural understanding.

In response to rising antisemitism, the EU has intensified its focus on safeguarding Jewish heritage. In 2021, the European Commission released the "EU Strategy on Combating Antisemitism and Fostering Jewish Life (2021-2030)", which recognizes Jewish culture as a vital part of Europe's heritage. The strategy emphasizes protecting orphaned Jewish heritage and highlights its role in revitalizing Jewish life in Europe. It also introduced programs encouraging young tourists to visit Jewish heritage sites to deepen their understanding of Europe's cultural diversity.

In 2023, the European Parliament's Working Group Against Antisemitism proposed new educational initiatives, including a mandatory curriculum on Jewish heritage and traditions across all levels of education [2].

Historically, Jewish heritage has been underrepresented, both physically and mentally, leading the non-Jewish majority to construct their own interpretations. This often results in the instrumentalization of Jewish heritage, where it is repurposed to address societal issues like combating antisemitism and promoting tolerance. While this approach brings visibility to Jewish heritage, it also has limitations.

The focus tends to be on material aspects – cemeteries, synagogues, and memorials – while often neglecting intangible heritage, which is deeply intertwined with the physical elements. Understanding Jewish culture or the Holocaust requires acknowledging the richness of its non-material heritage.

Moreover, the emphasis on "orphaned" Jewish heritage does not fully reflect reality. While Jewish communities have faced significant challenges, there is still a living, dynamic Jewish culture. Many initiatives, however, remain disconnected from these contemporary communities, reducing their relevance and impact.

This can feel like an attempt to find a one-size-fits-all solution to Jewish heritage, framing it primarily as a tool for combating antisemitism and promoting tolerance. While these are important goals, reducing Jewish heritage to these functions diminishes its broader cultural, historical, and spiritual significance. Memorials, cemeteries, and synagogues hold diverse meanings

and values, and their role should not be limited to a singular narrative.

Defining meaning of the Jewish heritage – Jewish cultural festivals

European cultural capitals, as well as smaller towns with rich Jewish histories, have begun to rediscover and reinvent their Jewish heritage. This process has transformed both the form and content of Jewish heritage, from the revitalization of former Jewish quarters to the introduction of new cultural products focused on Jewish themes.

One of the most prominent cultural initiatives related to Jewish heritage is the rise of Jewish festivals, which began in major European cities in the late 1980s. These festivals highlight Jewish music, art, and culture, once vibrant across Europe before the Holocaust. The Jewish Cultural Festival in Krakow is among the largest and most renowned Jewish festivals in the world. Held annually since 1988 in the historic Jewish district of Kazimierz, the festival spans nine days during the summer and attracts Jewish artists from around the globe. Its primary mission is to educate audiences about Jewish culture, history, and religion – much of which was decimated during the Holocaust. The festival was founded by Janusz Makuch, a non-Jew with a deep passion for Jewish culture.

The festival offers a diverse array of cultural events, including concerts, workshops, excursions, and exhibitions. For a few days, Kazimierz's streets and squares are filled with Jewish culture, drawing large crowds. Despite the festival's popularity and its role in raising awareness, Gantner's analysis highlights how such festivals often construct a specific, limited image of Jewish identity. This constructed image comprises three main elements:

1. The Holocaust: Every Jewish festival commemorates the Holocaust, reflecting the commitment of democratic societies to support minority groups and acknowledge their histories [4].

2. Yiddishkeit: This focuses on Yiddish writers and the Yiddish language – a blend of German, Hebrew, and Slavic elements. The organizer of the Krakow Jewish Festival once remarked that his first deep impression of Jewish culture came from reading Isaac Bashevis Singer's novels [4].

3. "Good Old Times": This component emphasizes the peaceful coexistence of Jewish and non-Jewish communities before the Holocaust, often creating a nostalgic and idealized image of the past while downplaying the historical factors that led to the Holocaust. This can encourage an uncritical view of history and perpetuate certain stereotypes.

Gantner referred to this portrayal as the "Constructed Jew," arguing that it presents a homogeneous and simplified image of Jewish identity, often marginalizing perspectives that fall outside this narrative.

In response to this constructed narrative, a new festival called "FestivALT" was launched in Krakow in 2017. According to co-founder Jason Francisco: "While the goal of the big festival was to celebrate Jewish culture, our goal was to probe Jewish history, memory, and identity in contemporary Poland. While the big festival avoided difficult topics, our festival invited them. While the big festival was overtly Zionist in its political messaging, our festival was decidedly diasporic. While the big festival was conservative in its approach to Jewish culture, our festival was experimental.

Most of our work deliberately occurred in non-art spaces – In the streets and courtyards of Kraków, or in the intimate setting of Michael and Magda's flat, converted into a performance and -gathering space. An important part of our work was to provide a platform for underrepresented voices and perspectives, including feminist, queer, multiracial, internationalist, dissident, and, paradoxically, Jewish voices – given that the big festival is (with admirable sincerity) produced by non-Jewish Poles.

We saw this work as a necessary addition to Kraków's Jewish cultural scene and a complement to the established festival, which did not offer either the artistic forms or the critical approaches in which we were interested" [1].

In essence, "FestivALT" was created by Jewish organizers to broaden the representation of Jewish culture beyond the traditional framework of the Jewish Cultural Festival. By introducing new topics, approaches, and venues, "FestivALT"

Lucky Jew – one of the typical images to be found on the largest Polish online marketplaces Allegro

emphasizes the diversity and complexity of Jewish heritage. Rather than conflicting with the main festival, it complements it, offering visitors a fresh perspective and expanding the boundaries of Krakow's Jewish cultural scene.

"Lucky Jew"

Another example from Krakow is the phenomenon known as the "Lucky Jew" or "Jew with a Coin." This image, typically depicted in paintings or carvings, serves as a talisman or good luck charm in Poland. It portrays a bearded man dressed in pre-WWII Eastern European Jewish attire, counting gold coins. The figure is believed to bring financial prosperity, and these images are commonly given as gifts. Often, instructions accompany the "Lucky Jew," suggesting that the owner should either turn it upside down on Shabbat or place a coin behind the image to attract wealth into the household.

The "Lucky Jew" is a popular item in Poland, frequently displayed on the most prominent streets, in tourist shops, and at open markets. Online marketplaces are also filled with these images. According to surveys conducted in 2017, 50% of respondents were aware of the superstition, and 13% admitted to using it as instructed [8].

Scholars debate the origins of this image. Some trace it back to the 1990s, while others link it to the era of the Polish People's Republic. However, all agree that it was a common item at the Krakow Easter Market. What is striking is that many Poles see nothing problematic in this image. For them, it is a nostalgic and traditional depiction, something familiar and uncritically accepted. In contrast, Jewish tourists – particularly descendants of Polish Jews visiting Krakow, often en route to Auschwitz – view it as offensive. To

them, it perpetuates one of the worst stereotypes of Jews: the wealthy figure controlling the world. The fact that such images are bought and used as good luck charms is difficult for many Jewish visitors to comprehend.

Krakow, like Poland as a whole, has made significant efforts to reclaim and honor its Jewish past. The city has worked to preserve Jewish history and heritage. Yet, this stereotypical image persists in contemporary culture. Although it is not a part of authentic Jewish heritage, it is sold in former Jewish neighborhoods. Many Poles view it as a nostalgic tribute to a lost Jewish community, but there is little consensus on what these objects truly mean for contemporary Polish society or their relationship with past and present Jewish communities.

To better understand this phenomenon, sociological surveys have been conducted, and numerous articles have been written. Canadian social anthropologist Erica Lehrer, herself of Jewish descent, dedicated an exhibition and a book to the subject titled “Lucky Jew: Poland’s Jewish Figurines.”

In 2017, FestivALT tackled the issue creatively. Co-director Michael Rubenfeld and his team launched a satirical and critical project called “Lucky Jew.” In a series of performances, they assumed the roles of “Lucky Jew” vendors, selling items such as magnets, mugs, and puzzles featuring the “Jew with a Coin” image. These performances took place in Kazimierz, the former Jewish district of Krakow. Passersby were invited to purchase the items and engage in conversations about tradition, stereotypes, and the commodification of Jewish culture.

The project attracted significant attention, both in Poland and internationally. Reactions ranged from praise for its brilliance to dismissals as absurd. Ultimately, the performances sparked dialogue, and after a series of roundtable discussions, the city officially recognized the image as antisemitic and recommended that it no longer be sold.

FestivALT continued its work on this issue. In 2020, it organized a 73-hour international meeting that culminated in the establishment of a Jewish Heritage Advisory Board in partnership with the Krakow City Council. The board’s primary goal is to address the “Lucky Jew” phenomenon and raise awareness about the complexities of Jewish memory in Krakow.

As a result of persistent advocacy by cultural institutions and Jewish organizations, Krakow city-sponsored businesses were eventually prohibited from selling these figurines. However, while the physical image may have been removed from shop windows, it still exists in the imagination of producers, sellers, and buyers. This underscores the need for continued exploration of the topic and the development of new approaches to address it.

The streets of Kazimierz today are filled with non-authentic recreations of Jewish culture. Many restaurants, cafés, hotels, and tour operators use Jewish symbols and themes as decorative elements to attract customers. In response to this ongoing commodification of Jewishness and Holocaust memory, FestivALT launched “The Lucky Jew Shop” in 2023. In this continuation of the original “Lucky Jew” project, Michael Rubenfeld, reimagined his role. The new shop offers alternative “Jewish” products designed to bring luck, shifting the conversation away from harmful stereotypes toward a more thoughtful engagement with Jewish culture.

The “Lucky Jew” phenomenon illustrates the complexity of remembering and representing the Jewish past and the Holocaust in Eastern Europe. Artistic projects like “Lucky Jew” aim not to outright condemn or ban traditions and beliefs but to critically deconstruct them within a contemporary context. Through such efforts, societies can reflect on whether these symbols still have a place in the present – and, if so, how they should be represented.

Concussions

Jewish heritage underwent a profound transformation in the 20th century – first through destruction, then neglect, and later a revival with new people, agendas, and meanings. The destruction of material heritage and the rupture in generational memory have made Jewish heritage a contested issue, with differing views on its present and future. After the fall of the Berlin Wall

and the rise of new European memory politics, Jewish heritage was integrated into the broader narrative of European culture. However, much of this integration has been shaped by the dominant non-Jewish discourse.

In the early 21st century, Jewish heritage began to serve as a political tool for combating antisemitism, promoting Holocaust education, and fostering tolerance and diversity. Simultaneously, the commercialization of cultural heritage, particularly in Eastern Europe, reshaped former Jewish districts. Revitalization projects restored synagogues, uncovered old inscriptions, and transformed these spaces into tourist attractions, often filled with restaurants, cafés, and souvenir shops. This commercialization raised questions of authenticity, as most businesses were operated by non-Jews with limited understanding of Jewish culture.

Despite these challenges, there is genuine interest in Jewish culture among non-Jews, often driven by Holocaust awareness or cultural Judaism. Jewish cultural festivals, such as the one in Krakow, play a vital role in reviving Jewish life, even if only temporarily. These festivals create a unique atmosphere in former Jewish quarters but often perpetuate stereotypical images of Jewish identity.

Organizations like FestivALT aim to expand these narratives by addressing new topics, involving diverse voices, and exploring alternative approaches. Rather than opposing traditional festivals, they complement them by offering fresh perspectives on Jewish culture and identity.

A notable example is the controversy surrounding the "Lucky Jew" figurines, which some view as offensive while others see as harmless souvenirs. FestivALT's artistic interventions in Krakow's former Jewish quarter sparked conversations with passersby and engaged cultural institutions and city officials. This effort led to a shift in perception, and the figurines were officially recognized as problematic. Although the issue remains unresolved, it opened new channels of communication between Jewish and non-Jewish stakeholders.

Heritage is often perceived as static, but in reality, it is shaped by contemporary needs. Jewish heritage, in particular, is marked by conflicts over destruction, ownership, responsibility, and authenticity. However, dialogue between dominant and counter-discourses, as seen in the collaboration between the Krakow Jewish Cultural Festival and FestivALT, offers a way forward. These initiatives challenge traditional perceptions, broaden the understanding of Jewish heritage, and address issues of commercialization, stereotyping, and political exploitation, ultimately contributing to the development of a more inclusive "Jewish space" in contemporary Europe.

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