

THE FIFTIETH ANNIVERSARY OF THE JEWISH  
HISTORICAL INSTITUTE

On January 21, 1997, a conference took place, devoted to the 50th anniversary of the activity of the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw. The purpose of the conference was to present the scholarly achievements of the Institute and its rich archival, library and museum collections. All the pronouncements were prepared by the J.H.I. employees or persons closely collaborating with this Institute.

The conference was opened by the Institute's director, Feliks Ty ch, who discussed the most essential problems of the Institute's work in the past and at present. He also presented the main tasks and purposes of the Institute, and the needs for research into the history of Polish Jews in the context of the history of Poland.

The reports delivered during the conference can be divided into three thematic blocks. The first part of the session was devoted to the history and achievements of the J.H.I. and also other Jewish cultural–scientific institutions that preceded it. Michał F r i e d m a n, the president of the J.H.I. Association presented a review of the Institute's activity over the 50 years of its existence. Jerzy T o m a s z e w s k i discussed the position of the J.H.I. among other institutions preoccupied with the studies of the history and culture of the Jewish population in the Polish lands, as well as among other historical institutes. Dr. Rafat Ż e b r o w s k i spoke about the scientific traditions of the Jewish milieu in 19th c. Warsaw. Marian F u k s acquainted the audience with the activity of the Institute for Judaistic Research active in the inter-war period. Mauryey H o r n presented the scientific achievements of the J.H.I. over the fifty years of its work. The history of its seat was discussed by Eleonora B e r g m a n.

The Jewish Historical Institute was created in 1947, however its origin goes back to the end of the 19th c. when in 1881 a library was opened, attached to the Great Synagogue in Tlomackie street, and soon after a Historical Committee was established, which collected archival materials (especially community books — *pinkasim*), and also initiated research. In 1910 endeavours were made to erect a separate library building. This action was continued after World War I by the outstanding historian and assyriologist Mojżesz Schorr, who also performed the function of the Great Synagogue rabbi. In 1936 the Central Judaistic Library was opened, whose building also housed the Institute of Judaistic Scholarship, which combined educational and scholarly purposes and educated both rabbis and teachers of religion. In the new building were also collected works of art executed by Jewish artists. Closely co-operating with the Institute were such outstanding historians as: Majer Bałaban, Ignacy Schiper, Arie Tartakower, Abraham Weiss and Mojżesz Schorr. During World War II the building of the Library and Institute housed Jewish mutual aid societies, it was the place of work of the famous group *Oneg Szbat*, directed by Emanuel Ringblum, preoccupied with the documentation of the life and annihilation of the Polish ghettos.

After World War II institutions were called into being with the purpose of collecting materials and accounts concerning the Holocaust — this was the Jewish Historical Committee and later the Central Jewish Historical Committee. An archive, a library and a museum were attached to it to create a hinterland for research. In 1947 the Central Jewish Historical Committee was transformed into the Jewish Historical Institute in Poland, with its seat in the restored building of the prewar Central Judaistic Library and Institute of Judaistic Scholarship. In the same year 1947, a historical journal, "Bleter far Geschichte" started to be published in

yiddish, and since 1949 the "Biuletyn Informacyjny Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego" (The Information Bulletin of the Jewish Historical Institute) has been published in Polish.

In 1950, following the nationalization of the Jewish scholarly and cultural institutions such as the provincial Historical Committees, the Jewish Society for the Promotion of Fine Arts, and the Central Jewish Library, their collections were transferred to the Jewish Historical Institute. In this way the present structure of the Institute was created: its research department, museum, archives and library enlarged by the monuments' documentation department in 1991.

The research carried out by the J.H.I. after the war concerned mainly the fortunes of Jews during the Holocaust. The political atmosphere of the 1950s had a large influence on the content of the publications and studies issued at that time. In view of such a situation even more appreciation is due to the book and articles of such authors as Artur Eisenbach, Tatiana Berenstein and Adam Rutkowski, embracing the problems of the 19th and 20th c., which retain their topicality to this day.

The anti-Zionistic campaign of 1967–1968 caused the emigration of many outstanding specialists, and the Institute found itself in need of staff. It affected also the collections of the J.H.I. In the 1970s and 1980s the research activity was gradually reconstructed and extended, close co-operation was established with other research centres, above all the Institute of History of the Polish Academy of Sciences. The scope of historical studies conducted by the Institute was expanded.

At present its research embraces a wide area of civilization; cultural, spiritual and historical problems across the centuries, beginning with the Middle Ages up to present times. Side by side with the studies of Polish Jews, research is conducted into the Polish-Jewish relations as well as on the national and cultural identity of the successive generations of Jews and their contribution to the historic achievements of the Polish state. Much attention continues to be devoted especially to the studies of the Holocaust period, and attempts are made present not only the cruelty and the dimensions of the Holocaust but also everyday life in the ghettos, the creative output of writers, artists, scholars and scientists who remained active in the dramatic conditions of the occupation reality. These works also deal with the fortunes of Jews under the Soviet occupation.

The Jewish Historical Institute is not only a scholarly institution conducting research of an historical nature. It also performs the role of an archive, a library and a museum, collecting and preserving the invaluable objects and relics of Jewish culture. The collections of the Institute were presented in papers delivered in the second part of the sessions. Apolonia Umińska characterized the archival materials preserved in the J.H.I. Archives. One of the most valuable files, the so-called Ringelblum Archive was discussed by Ruta Sakońska. The collections of the J.H.I. Museum were discussed by Magdalena Sieramska, while the history and the possessions of the Library were presented by Małgorzata Barcikowska and Magdalena Bendowska. Jan Jagielski discussed the activity and the collections of the Department of Monument Documentation.

The documents, books and museum objects preserved at the J.H.I. constitute the richest collection of Judaic relics in Poland, one of the most valuable in the world. The Archives of the J.H.I. possess 90 files, representing all in all 600 running metres of records, which have been divided into three parts: old records (1672–1939), records of World War II period (1939–1945), and contemporary records (since 1945). Among the oldest archival materials prevail the documents of communities, i.a. Silesian ones. A rich collection is that of the records of Cracow Jews. About 60% of materials are those from the period of World War II, this is the most valuable part of all the possessions of the Archive. Among them priority should be given to the so-called Ringelblum Archive, otherwise called the Archive of the Warsaw ghetto. This file consists of documents, letters, announcements and photographs reflecting the life and the annihilation of the Jewish ghettos in Poland during World War II, collected by a group of Jewish historians and researchers. These materials were found in the ruins of the Warsaw

ghetto. The next, extremely valuable file consists of memoirs written in the ghetto and labour and even extermination camps. It is complemented by accounts and confessions written already after the end of the war, their authors are the Jews who survived. An extremely important group of records consists of documents of the Jewish Councils (*Judenrats*), coming from over a dozen towns, i.a. Cracow, Częstochowa, Lublin. Among them personal records and card-indexes represent an enormous documentary value. The third — contemporary — part represents the activity of Jewish organizations, cultural institutions and mutual aid societies after World War II.

The J.H.I. has in its possession interesting photographic materials which are included in the Archive and the Department of Monument Documentation. These are pictures reflecting the life of the Jewish population in various historic periods and also presenting the relics of the Jewish material culture, both extant and extinct — all in all about 40 000 photographs.

J.H.I. library collections are as rich as its archives. The library numbers about 80 000 volumes. It is divided into four sections. The so-called Latin collection includes about 30 000 publications in European languages, issued after 1801. Among them the Nazi propaganda and anti-Semitic prints constitute a unique item. The Hebrew and Yiddish collection comprises about 30 000 volumes. These are above all religious publications and also editions of classical works of Jewish literature. A valuable collection is represented by periodicals, mainly in Hebrew and Yiddish, from various countries. These are frequently rare prints, sometimes preserved only in one copy, as e.g. *Die Synagoge* (Wurzburg 1837), or *Israelische Annalen* (Frankfurt am Main 1839–1841). The library possesses a full edition of “Warszojer Jidisze Cajtung”, the first periodical of the Warsaw Maskils published in Yiddish in the years 1867–1868, and also “Gazeta Żydowska” (The Jewish Newspaper), an official daily that appeared in the Warsaw ghetto.

The most valuable part of the library consists of its special collections, made up of 1 130 manuscripts and 2 400 old prints. Among them are religious writings, commentaries on the Bible and the Talmud, rabbinical disputes, cabbalistic, medical and historical works. The oldest relic is a North-African manuscript, dating back to the turn of the 10th c.

The J.H.I. Museum contains one of the richest collections of Judaic objects in Poland. It gathers the objects of sacred and profane art and also objects commemorating the tragedy of Polish Jews during World War II. The collection of paintings is made up of the work of the most outstanding Jewish artists: i.a. Maurycy and Leopold Gottliebs, Eliaszk Kanarek, Roman Kramsztyk, Maurycy Trębacz and Artur Markiewicz. They are complemented by the works of outstanding sculptors, i.a. Konstanty Laszczka, Henryk Kuna, Alina Szapocznikow. The J.H.I. museum possesses also an interesting collection of objects of cult, among others an unique collection of tapestry, numbering about 100 items. The museum collections are displayed at two permanent exhibitions. The first one is devoted to the history of Warsaw Jews during World War II, the other is a gallery of painting and sculpture.

The reports delivered in the third part of the conference showed some additional functions performed by the Institute, and also by the institutions closely connected and permanently collaborating with it. Helena Datner, Paweł Fijałkowski and Bożena Umńska discussed the educational activity of the J.H.I., whose purpose is to disseminate the knowledge of the history and culture of the Polish Jews. For over five years the Institute has been conducting courses for teachers. About 300 people have taken part in them so far. The classes include lectures and exercises that could provide a model for school lessons. A series of book publications containing the basic sources for the history of Polish Jews has been compiled for the needs of teachers. The J.H.I. also co-organizes a competition for masters' and doctoral theses devoted to the Jewish subjects as well as a knowledge of the culture and history of Polish Jews competition destined for secondary school pupils.

In the activity of the J.H.I. an extremely responsible role is played by the Section of Yad Vashem Badges Documentation, whose work was discussed by Janina Sacharewicz.

This section was called into being in 1979 on the strength of an agreement with the Yad Vashem Institute of Memory in Jerusalem. Its task is to collect information concerning the assistance given to the Jews during Holocaust, including the documentation necessary for drafting motions for the bestowal of the Righteous Among the Nations of the World medals, granted by Israel. Up to now this distinction has been accorded to about 4 700 Poles, which makes up almost 35% of all those decorated.

Since 1995 the J.H.I. has been realizing the Project of Genealogical Research, initiated and financed by the Ronald Lauder Foundation. The basic purpose of this programme, discussed by Yale Reiser, is to help Jews all over the world to discover their Polish roots. As a result of the searches some families could be reunited, whose members now live in various corners of the world. The addressees of this project are also people who survived the Holocaust as children, under changed first names and surnames, with Polish families, and now would like to learn the fortune of the biological parents and to know their real names. Although over 50 years elapsed since the end of the war, many people continue to look for their nearest and dearest, and want to learn the truth of their origin and recover their identity.

The last report presented at the conference was devoted to the plans and the action taken which should effect in the creation of the Museum of the History of Polish Jews, discussed by Grażyna Pałak. This museum should become a place where a possibility of learning the history of Polish Jews will be presented to the Jews from all the world over, and especially to young people as well as Poles who have a poor and insufficient knowledge of Jewish achievements, culture and tradition. The creation of such a museum will make possible a better display of the collections now stored at the J.H.I.

The conference was accompanied by a small exhibition showing the particular stages in the history of the Institute as well as of its predecessors, the Central Judaistic Library and the Institute for Judaistic Research.

All the reports delivered at the conference, making up a sort of booklet informing us about the Jewish Historical Institute and its activity, will be published in Polish and English.

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