

“Doikeyt, Diaspora, Borderlands: Imagining Polish Jewish Territories”

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Preparations for the 3rd Annual International Polish Jewish Studies Workshop

On April 10-12, 2016, the University of Illinois at Chicago’s Program in Polish Jewish Studies will be co-hosting the 3rd Annual International Polish Jewish Studies Workshop, entitled “Doikeyt, Diaspora, Borderlands: Imagining Polish Jewish Territories.” This three-day academic conference and workshop will be devoted to exploring key developments and new directions in the growing field of Polish Jewish studies, with a particular focus on changing scholarly approaches to Polish Jewish territories, both geographical and imaginary. The partner hosts of the workshop are Princeton University, Ohio State University, the Adam Mickiewicz Institute, and the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research.

The workshop will combine scholarly panel discussions with cultural public programming and bring members of the Polish and Jewish diasporas together at

the UIC campus to explore the complex cultural and historical dynamics that link these communities to each other and to their shared heritage.

Panels will explore a variety of key questions. As our use of concepts such as Polin, Yiddishland, the Polish Lithuanian Commonwealth, and borderlands changes, how is that altering how we study and teach the history and cultures of this pluralist and multilingual region, and how is it affecting research agendas, methodologies, and the types of curricula we create? How are postnational and transnational scholarly paradigms influencing our understanding of the cultural spaces we encounter, such as the cosmopolitan café, the Polish interwar political arena, and modernist art movements? The discussion of such questions will deepen the analyses begun in the two previous gatherings of the Polish Jewish Studies Initiative, at Ohio State and

Princeton, on the cultural politics of Polish Jewish discourse and memory within contemporary Poland today.

Building Momentum and International Cooperation

The Polish Jewish Studies Initiative, founded in 2013, is an international and interdisciplinary working group of scholars from the humanities and social sciences involved in research and teaching at the intersection of Polish and Jewish studies. Research and public engagement at this exciting intersection have been growing and changing rapidly. We designed the Polish Jewish Studies Workshop as an annual forum that facilitates conversation and exchange of ideas among the international actors who are involved in the transformation of Polish Jewish narratives but who rarely have the opportunity to share their expertise in one place. The workshop also welcomes the directors

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of engaged philanthropic organizations that are playing a central role in encouraging the reevaluation and transformation of narratives of the Jewish past and present in Poland.

The April 2016 workshop will convene approximately 40 scholars and representatives of cultural institutions from Poland, the United States, Israel, and France for a program of panels, featured keynote lectures, and cultural programming open to the public, including a film showing “Raise the Roof” (The Gwoździec Synagogue Project), an evening musical performance, and an art exhibition on Polish/Jewish Avant-gardes of the interwar period that will be installed at UIC’s Daley Library.

Participants and keynote speakers will include individuals who have pioneered new approaches to understanding Polish and Polish-Jewish space, and

scholars who are offering new paradigms for understanding the emergence and historical trajectories of Polish and Jewish modernities. Among them are POLIN Museum lead historian Dr. Samuel Kassow of Trinity College; Krzysztof Czyżewski, founder and director of the Borderlands Foundation in Sejny; Karolina Szymaniak of the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw and founder of the Yiddish cultural journal *Cwiszn*; Marcin Wodziński, director of Jewish Studies at the University of Wrocław and lead historian of the POLIN Museum; Andrzej Leder, whose recent book, *Przeźniona Rewolucja (Sleeping through the Revolution)*, revises our understanding of Polish modernity; historian Kenneth Moss, director of Jewish Studies at Johns Hopkins University; and Jonathan Brent, director of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Studies in New York.

The opening of the POLIN Museum represents the most visible and striking example of recent changes in terminology and understanding. With the opening of the museum’s Core Exhibition, the term “Polin” has reentered public discourse. It shifts the language that educators, the media, and communities worldwide are using to talk about Poland as a space of both shared and separate cultural histories: Jewish, Polish, Polish-Jewish, and also more broadly pluralist, inclusive of multiple ethnic and linguistic traditions and experiences. Similarly, since the 1989 transition to democracy in Poland and the former Soviet republics, the term “borderlands” (*Pogranicze*) has transformed the way that Polish and Polish-Jewish scholars talk about these same territories. Rather than viewing and teaching from the perspective of the sovereign or the occupied, majority-Catholic nation-state, scholars are increasingly approaching

historically Polish lands as a space of multilingual and multicultural *encounter*, in which each culture has been shaped by and through its constant interaction with other cultures and languages native to the region. At the same time, the concept and uses of “multiculturalism” are put into question, as scholars explore the dynamics of dominance and peripherality in Poland’s pluralistic society.

Indeed, the very concepts of nativeness and otherness, exile and belonging, heritage and responsibility are being reconsidered in an age that emphasizes postnational and transnational models for understanding how societies and cultures develop, as well as how diasporic and émigré communities understand their relations to the lands and territories of their ancestors.

Doikent and Diaspora

Two terms that have historically carried strong emotional resonance within

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Polish Jewish narratives are *doikent* – a Yiddish term meaning “hereness” – and diaspora. How are these terms, together with the concept of the multicultural or pluralist borderland, acquiring new resonance within scholarly and communal discourses, particularly as hybrid postnational or transnational models for the construction of the Jewish, Polish, and Polish Jewish cultural imaginaries?

In a June 2013 speech to the Sejm, then-Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs Radosław Sikorski introduced a new vocabulary, explaining that the term “Polish diaspora”

would now be understood to include not only ethnic Poles living outside the country, but all those living throughout the world whose ancestors once emigrated from historically Polish lands. He welcomed Jews worldwide to consider themselves part of the Polish diaspora, and asked the Polish government to think of them this way as well.

Simultaneously, within American Jewish communities, whose younger generations have for over half a century visited Poland exclusively as a place of Holocaust commemoration, educational heritage programs are now taking shape that understand Poland and former Polish territories as sources of heritage, self-knowledge, inspiration, and living Jewish identity. The language used by such programs draws on and revives the concept of *doikent*, affirming Ashkenazi Jewish culture as native to and inseparable from the European lands in which it developed.

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To examine how these changes are being reflected in the academic world, the 2016 UIC gathering will include a “hands-on” workshop in curriculum development. It will introduce the Polish Jewish Studies digital humanities initiative, geared toward producing curriculum materials and syllabi for online dissemination to educators seeking to bring the study of Polish and Jewish cultures and histories together in the classroom, and to encourage dissertation projects in Polish Jewish studies. Interested participants and institutions will meet following the conference to discuss plans to create a summer graduate institute in Polish Jewish studies curriculum development. ■

Current sponsors of the 2016 workshop include the Adam Mickiewicz Institute, the Stefan & Lucy Hejna Fund at UIC, the Copernicus Program in Polish Studies at the University of Michigan, and the UIC Fund for Polish-Jewish Studies.

The events of the 3rd Annual Polish Jewish Studies Workshop will be held April 10-12, on the campus of the University of Illinois at Chicago, and are open to the public.

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Pale of Settlement, 1835-1917
(Jewish Virtual Library)