

Jewish Heritage in the Wider European Context

by Diana Pinto

Before addressing the issue of the future of Jewish heritage in Europe, allow me to begin with two personal anecdotes. Literally twenty years ago, in the spring of 1984, I accompanied my husband on a semi-official visit to Prague. A guide was imposed on me, ostensibly to show me the beautiful, but at the time sad and grey, city. His real task, however, was to ensure that I make no contacts with dissidents. When I told him I wanted to see the Jewish quarter in Prague, he demurred. It was 'impossible': the buildings were all undergoing restoration. As a 'gesture' he took me in front of a closed metal door in what was a desolate neighborhood, and through a keyhole, I was able to catch a quick glimpse of the venerable cemetery.

Two decades later, another Jewish cemetery: the bucolic marvel in Ferrara, Italy. The guide this time was the non-Jewish director of the (non-Jewish) Jewish Museum of Bologna; and the occasion, the annual conference of the European Association of Jewish Museums. As we walked through the beautiful lawn, on our way to see the tomb of Giorgio Bassani (of the *Garden of the Finzi-Contini* fame), the director turned to me and in a tone of barely contained impatience, referred to the fact that, despite its seeming green emptiness, the cemetery was 'full' (of old unmarked graves). The director then added, with a touch of rage, that his region, Emilia-Romagna was getting ready to rent a

helicopter equipped with special infrared cameras, in order to photograph the entire cemetery. The purpose of this ultra-modern mission: to ascertain where there were still empty spots for future use with no traces of previous burial. It was clear that in the director's mind, the initiative did not come from Ferrara's tiny Jewish community, but rather from the increasingly intransigent and powerful ultra-orthodox Jewish world 'lobby'. A lobby that was indifferent to the 'exorbitant' cost (in his words) of such an infrared survey, and even more to the budgetary constraints and social needs of an Italian region.

1984 Prague and today's Ferrara obviously constitute extreme examples. Jewish heritage literally as a 'peep show' in the hands of hostile external powers in the former case. Jewish heritage and life as privileged objects to be contemplated through the infrared lens of benign civil powers in the latter. If I evoke them it is not just to underscore the tremendous evolution of Jewish heritage in the last two decades across Europe. But rather to raise a set of disturbing issues with respect to what all of this Jewish 'heritage business' implies for the future. For if we have known the Scylla of repression, we must also beware of the Charybdis of over-privilege, and its inevitable long term counter-effects in future-oriented European democracies. In terms of Jewish life in Europe, the imperatives of 'Jewish heritage' will have to be reconciled with other imperatives, perhaps even for the benefit of those Jews living in Europe.

Where does Jewish heritage stand in Europe today?

I do not mean to refer here to its material state of conservation or to its institutional status. Rather I seek to understand the role it can play, might play, or might

not play in the future. There are many ways of perceiving Jewish heritage in Europe today, and they are based on widely divergent assumptions.

First, in Europe, Jewish heritage is about the future far more than about the past. The preservation of Jewish material culture reflects Europe's new growing openness to its multiple identities, including hopefully the Jewish one. It does not reflect its past record vis a vis the Jews as a living entity.

Second, the two central poles of current Jewish life, America and Israel, have latched onto the notion of 'Jewish heritage' as a way of having 'roots', in the American sense, as opposed to the roots in an Israeli/biblical sense. These 'roots' however are most often evoked in a very special context. They exist for a Jewish story lived elsewhere, and they are about Jewish dignity amidst suffering and victimhood. Europe's Jews instead are the only ones still living amidst the 'heritage'. They are on the cutting edge of this heritage both in terms of its past and of its future amidst the non-Jews.

Third, for European societies in which this Jewish heritage sits, there is the danger that the stones, synagogues, and cemeteries of the past might come to incarnate a noble and pure 'European Jewry' destroyed in the Holocaust. A Jewry now replaced by foreign 'others' (and their local agents), bent above all on underscoring Jewish separateness. 'Others' who can, in our current exacerbated political climate, be perceived as cultural perpetrators and colonizers of other people's heritages, particularly in 'Palestine' but also in Europe itself when it comes to the touchy topic of restitution of buildings that today play a useful role in the public domain. In other words, Europe would become in this view the repository of a pure, untainted, because powerless (and spent) Jewish past heritage, cut off from a living Jewish people.

Because of these complex and often incompatible motives, it is important to ask ourselves a series of questions, linked to the following query

European Jewish heritage: for whom and what for?

- 1) Jewish heritage can be turned into a living motor for a European pluralist future, with living Jews in it—in other words, transformed into a living piece of a new European kaleidoscope. But then one must ask whether such an ideal is possible and whether it is relevant for those non-Jews involved in Jewish heritage? Or are they simply performing their job (which they can then leave for other preoccupations)? Or paying lip service to a moral duty that can also shrink with time? Equally important is to ask whether such a pluralist ideal is of interest to the wider Jewish world. Do non-European Jews really care whether the Star of David sits comfortably in the midst of the manifold heritages of twelve-starred Europe?
- 2) Jewish heritage can also be turned into an integrating mechanism for Europe's own Jews today, since in many countries they are not the direct descendants of those whose heritage is being celebrated (e.g., Ukrainian Jews in Germany; Libyan Jews in Italy; Moroccan Jews in Alsace, Polish Jews in the U.K., Russian Jews in Lithuania, etc.). Conversely, in Eastern Europe where the Jews present are direct descendants, does this renewed interest in Jewish heritage strengthen or instead weaken the Jewish bonds with the wider fabric of civil society? What will be stressed in both cases, the continuity or the rupture? The difference or the

- belonging? These are crucial presuppositions in understanding how Jews will interact with the non-Jewish heritage environment.
- 3) Jewish heritage can also be used as the ultimate proof that Jews have belonged on the continent for millennia. So as to stress that they are not recent arrivals, a separate ethnic group hosted in the land of others and with no real connections to their national cultures. And above all, not be confused with the continent's new 'others', be they Arab, Filipino, or African. In this sense 'Jewish heritage' would constitute a pedigree.
 - 4) Conversely, one can consider Jewish heritage as a precursor. In this case, the co-handling of Jewish heritage by Jews and non-Jews together can become a model for the celebration of other heritages, including that of Christians in our increasingly lay societies, but above all as a precursor preparing the road for the future inevitable celebration of Europe's 'Muslim heritage'. In this reading, heritage would be an important vector for the integration of ethnic or religious groups into the realm of pluralist universalism.
 - 5) To these categories must be added perhaps the most powerful force of all: Jewish heritage for a Jewish world that lives elsewhere and with its own agendas. In this category there are two increasingly important subsets. The first is made up of people with an internal religious commitment, a commitment that lifts the heritage out of the confines of time and place, to attain a greater internal Jewish religious significance. This is particularly true for the ultra-orthodox in Eastern Europe today who embark on pilgrimages and who seek to rehabilitate yeshivot and synagogues. How such international religious Jewish forces interact with the

non-Jews will have a major impact on how these countries, often with heavy anti-Semitic pasts, come to interact with all living Jews. Witness the Ferrara helicopter story.

The second subset has to do with Israeli actors who seek to bring the Jewish heritage 'home' to Israel. In the decades following World War II, many communities spontaneously donated objects or even the contents of entire buildings to Israel, either for use there (such as the synagogue of Conegliano Veneto) or for exhibition in Israeli museums. Nowadays this is no longer the case, both because national authorities have understood the importance of their Jewish patrimony and because even the smallest Jewish communities want to keep it. Furthermore, this patrimony is often a prized value in the creation of centres for intercultural, reconciliation, or tolerance dialogues, where there are no Jews left. The fate of the Bruno Schultz frescoes that were illegally whisked off to Israel from the Ukraine with great international condemnation (of which more later) offers the best proof of this tension.

These heritage problems well transcend the usual realm of art and history. They are becoming burning political questions often pitting European civil societies (and the Jews within them) and their states against Israel's understanding of itself as the key repository of the Jewish patrimony. Hence the need to address a series of issues that can be called:

Questions for a Troubled Age

- 1) Does Europe's interest in Jewish heritage protect a living Jewish entity, open the road to a greater understanding of the Jewish people, perhaps even of Israel? Or does it instead create a moat between Europe's 'own' 'good old dead Jews' and 'those other Jews out there'?
- 2) Is current Jewish life in Europe sufficiently strong, in symbolic terms if not numerically, to turn "Jewish heritage" into a living and stimulating part of Europe's own living cultures? Or are the Jews of Europe guardians of an entertainment tourist park for the benefit of world Jewry, which is only marginally interested in how these 'guardians' interact within their own agoras?
- 3) Is the guarantee of universal values and pluralist democracy as crucial in the realm of Jewish heritage as for instance in the case of reform Jewry, which would not be tolerated inside orthodoxy, were it not for its belonging in the wider civil society? Is the lay Jewish heritage best defended by the states in which it is found as opposed to the Jewish world and Israel? Will these states also guarantee with respect to their own non-Jewish populations that the Jews were anchored and valuable presences as opposed to mere sojourners in their midst? Does Jewish heritage provide something that was often absent in the European past, a Jewish existential legitimacy?
- 4) How can one explain the complexity of Jewish identity beyond its residual stones and other material symbols? The subtle nuances of architectural symbioses and object design can go either way: toward the Jewish 'essence' or toward their wider cultural belonging. Literature and texts can make the difference in interpretation. We must bear in mind that today non-Jews may out of respect

stress the Jewish 'difference' and that this stress should not be confused with the anti-Semitism of old. Perhaps it is up to the Jews themselves to stress their wider 'belonging', for they can do so without being accused of 'cultural imperialism'.

But do Europe's Jews still want to stress such a belonging?

- 5) Are Jewish and non-Jewish priorities the same in terms of heritage? Or are we running the danger of having the latter sacralize the past while shunning the present and having instead the former stress Jewish uniqueness in an increasingly defensive mode linked to a changed political climate, with its attendant 'Jewishness for Jews' attitude? And do both attitudes converge for different reasons on the same outcome: Jewish heritage devoid of any 'lessons' or interfaces with other groups or cultures?

Finally, let me end with a few heritage challenges for a living Jewish future in Europe drawn from a few examples culled from the world of cemeteries, museums, synagogues, art, and finally literature.

Cemeteries

I mentioned Prague and Ferrara in the beginning. But there are other cemeteries which exude a far more complex renewed Jewish heritage and even 'life'. Two come to mind from France and for different reasons. Southwestern France was the land where some Jews of the Portuguese nation settled in the 17th century, thus becoming peripheral presences in the grand France Louis XIV was consolidating. Today these cemeteries have come back to life through the combined interest of two non-heirs of this dual

patrimony: the Basque villages of a Basque 'nation' that often defies the French State and the North African Jews who have taken up the community legacy of the Portuguese nation. Is this recycled heritage taking on its own pluralist life and value or is it simply, some would say, in the 'wrong' hands? Advocates of a pluralist Europe would argue the former. Jewish purists might argue the latter. Similarly in Paris's Montparnasse cemetery, Jewish life has triumphed over tragic Jewish death. This is so paradoxically because the French government does not allow for confessional cemeteries (except for Alsace and Lorraine). The French republican law is based on the old Christian one of not having permanent graves. After a set number of years, French graves remain in the family only as long as they are tended and heirs show up. As a consequence, all the heirless graves of those victims of the Holocaust have been 'relinquished' since no one claims them. They have now been turned over for new burials. As a result, North African Jewish tombstones have sprouted pragmatically in the midst of the old *israélite* cemeteries. A new Jewish heritage is thus growing in the very heart of Paris. Such a republican perverse effect can only shock religious Jews who must make do with French law. But is this re-using of cemeteries so unrelated to what happened in the distant past, particularly in the Jewish cemetery of Prague, with its many layers of burial, before it became a static revered icon?

Synagogues

Toledo. In 2001, participants to the General Assembly of the European Council of Jewish Communities were welcomed by the Cardinal of Toledo in the former synagogue of Santa Maria La Blanca, transformed into a church not in 1492, but far earlier in 1411

when a priest rushed into it with a cross and claimed it for the Church. Nearly six hundred years later, Jews sat once more under its roof, as a virtual congregation. The cardinal was ostensibly nervous. What if we had staged a sit in and reclaimed it for the Jewish people? Or more prosaically, could a small Jewish community reconstituted in the future in Toledo reclaim it? Along with the other synagogue now a museum belonging to the city? Heritage is not only about a dead past. It can have unexpected living consequences and not just in Eastern Europe today.

East Germany. By a river in one of the small towns in the land of Brandenburg, there is a small church that used to be a synagogue. It was spared destruction of 1938 because it had been sold by the Jewish community in the 1920s. Its architecture is typically synagogal. Should a plaque make reference to its origins? Does the passing of hands of such a building incarnate an economic heritage of sorts, proving by the real estate transaction the economics of Jewish life integrated in the wider society? Does the Jewish 'spirit' of stones outlive their Jewish function, even when the Jews were not dispossessed and the building was saved precisely because it was no longer 'Jewish'?

The major synagogue in Rome is celebrating its centennial this year. The Pope visited it in 1986, thus bringing for the first time the Church inside a consecrated Jewish Space. Should the 'politics' of this particular synagogue, built in a grandiose manner because of united Italy's defiance of the Vatican before the concordat of 1929, be underscored? As well as the fact that Rome's most important mayor at the time was Jewish? And what does such a Jewish heritage at the core of the city's life mean today, after fascism and the Holocaust, for the descendants of the old national Jewish elites who

built it, for the ‘little people’ of the Roman ghetto, and for the new Roman Jews who have come mainly from Libya?

How many pasts can be ascribed to Jewish heritage? And are they cyclical in their relevance? Should it be the responsibility of Jews and non-Jews alike to preserve all of their dimensions?

Works of Art

The tension between Jewish identity and universal values. I have already mentioned the stakes of the Bruno Schultz frescoes that were spirited off illegally from the Ukraine to Israel. In their place of origin, they would have become the central attraction for the house for which they were painted, a house that would have been devoted to intercultural dialogue and the values of tolerance. In Israel, they constitute one more tangible proof, but one that in the process becomes curiously historically abstract, of Jewish suffering during the Holocaust. Period. Without context or nuance.

The tension between universal references and Jewish identity. This tension was particularly evident for instance in a major exhibit of the ‘Ecole de Paris’ held in Paris a few years ago. The vast majority of the painters of this ‘Ecole’ were Jewish and had arrived in Paris originally from Eastern Europe. Yet nowhere was this fact indicated. Except that an extraordinary number of them seem to have had a biologically precocious ‘1944’ as their date of death. Did such painters belong to ‘Jewish heritage’ by their origins and their death? Or was it right not to mention these biographical details in trying to present their work? Do origins constitute an identity? Was their ‘Jewishness’ important, when they themselves might not have underscored it? Is there a middle road between ethnic reductionism and abstract universalism?

Literature

I end with literature, and because we are in Prague, I shall mention the case of Kafka. Does he belong to Jewish heritage? Until quite recently, most Israelis would have said 'no'. Kafka wrote in German and belonged to universal literature, and his books did not convey explicitly any 'positive' Jewish theme.¹ (Israel's openness to Kafka and to Hannah Arendt in the last ten years, by the way, could be used as a sign of Israel's own post-Zionist cultural awakening). After the end of Communism, Kafka was brought back to life in the Czech Republic and became a star reference in the city's refound dignity and glory. He even became an object of pop culture and a steady value in the new T-shirt industry. His birth house was turned into a museum. More recently, I am told, this infatuation is ebbing, as if the Czechs had realized that Kafka's vision of an unseizable and terrifying world was grounded in their own national reality. Nor are the universalists better able to accept him. A French writer who published an essay on Kafka's drawings and notebooks was told recently that the notebooks in which he learned Hebrew diligently at the end of his life were not relevant to the topic. Her chapter on the subject was not included in the book, so she published it separately at her own cost. Edifying reading, since we learn that at the end of his life, Kafka wanted to migrate to Palestine and to open a restaurant there...an ideal which seemed hardly compatible with the eternal 'Kafka' of universal fame.² This acutely 'Jewish' Kafka thus did not enter the public domain, as though he could only be a disturbing presence for all sides.

¹ This comment was made by an Israeli academic during a workshop on 'Jewish culture' at the 'Planning the future of European Jewry' meeting, in Prague in 1995.

² Jacqueline Sudaka-Bénazeraf, *Les cahiers d'hébreu de Franz Kafka*, Retour à la lettre, Paris 2004, p.10.

This Kafka story is emblematic of all of Jewish life across Europe: troublesome in its complexity and multiple belongings, reflecting its own world but viscerally tied to its local roots as well, and in the process illuminating humanity as a whole. This too, ideally, should be the fate of a well-understood future of Jewish heritage in Europe.