Across the Iron Curtain: Postwar Jewish Displacement, Dispersion, and Contact

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Across the Iron Curtain

Postwar Jewish Displacement, Dispersion, and Contact

Rebekah Klein-Pejšová, History
Library Scholars Grant Presentation, 2017
Across the Iron Curtain

- Project examines the efforts of Jews remaining inside Cold War era Eastern Bloc countries to maintain contact with relatives, friends, and international Jewish organizations outside of it and their implications for Jewish/state relations in the new consolidating global order.

- We live and constitute the meaning of our lives in networks.

- Study organized around points of contact between Jewish survivors in their postwar displacement; within their new global dispersion.
Postwar Europe

The borders were redrawn and the Allied occupation zones defined in the aftermath of the Second World War.

Major Jewish DP Camps and Centers

Locations of the Major Jewish DP Camps and Centers in the “DP Countries”: Germany, Austria, and Italy, by zone of occupation, 1945-1946.

Renewing and sustaining connections with surviving relatives, friends, and international Jewish organizations were important ways Jews sought continuity and reshaped their lives.

Unique external source: relevant materials related to religion, national minorities and ethnic problems, refugees, and escapees held in collections at the Vera and Donald Blinken Open Society Archives (OSA) in Budapest, Hungary.

Official newspapers, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Reports, Samizdat holdings, additional materials on postwar political, social, and economic life in the Eastern Bloc.
Vera & Donald Blinken Open Society Archives

Archival Space

Exhibition Space

Photos by Alžbeta Hajková, graduate student in Philosophy, RA Human Rights Program at Purdue
Sources, Research, Some Results so Far

- Focused in 2016 on HU OSA 300-30 Czechoslovak Unit, HU OSA 205 Records of the Open Media Research Institute (OMRI), and HU OSA 300-40 Hungarian Unit of the OSA in German, Czech, Slovak, Hungarian, and English.

- Studied of the Displaced Person (DP) materials at the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research archives in New York City in 2013 with the support of a previous Library Scholars Grant, and on an October 2015 sabbatical research trip.

- Book chapter: “Across the Iron Curtain – Hungarian Jewish Refugees in Austria, 1945-49: The Letters to Enns,” in *The Holocaust in Hungary: Seventy Years Later*

- Presentations at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, the Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies (ASEEES) convention, the Association for Jewish Studies (AJS) Convention, NEH sponsored 2014 Summer Institute "East Central European Diasporas in America: 20th Century Case Studies."

- Development of the Human Rights Program at Purdue, History of Human Rights course, Refugees and Displacement course, further research in refugee studies.
“Written correspondence and occasional phone calls could hardly bridge the abyss between those who had left and those who were left behind.”

Maroš Borský, private collection

Jewish DPs

Jewish DPs are gathered at the entrance to the office of the camp commander at the Enns displaced persons camp.

Photo #38359, USHMM
Behind the iron curtain, where Communism claims to have rooted out racial prejudice, Jews once again find themselves a discredited and even threatened minority. Not because of anti-Semitism in the old sense, but because Soviet policy now demands that all who have international connections or ties abroad be classed as suspects and unreliable.

Jews Behind the Iron Curtain

[BY A CORRESPONDENT]

Behind the iron curtain, where Communism claims to have rooted out racial prejudice, Jews once more find themselves a discredited and even threatened minority. Not because of anti-Semitism in the old sense, but because Soviet policy now demands that all who have international connections or ties abroad be classed as suspects and unreliable. Where Jews are concerned the stigma of disloyalty is apparently automatic. It expresses itself in forms of discrimination, notably over official appointments, and in smear propaganda linked to attacks on Israel which once more render Jews conspicuous as a racial group. The effect, therefore, particularly on East European peoples, is hardly distinguishable from anti-Semitism. While the cold war lasts Communist policy is not likely to change. In the event of open conflict it is doubtful whether the iron curtain Jews already classed as potential enemy agents, would even have much chance of survival. In the meantime, emigration, their only hope, is becoming daily more difficult. It has never been permitted from the Soviet Union which even in the post-revolutionary period, when the attitude to Jewish aspirations was still tolerant, opposed Zionism in theory and practice; and in the satellites today only a few thousands yearly, mostly the aged, succeed in securing exit permits.

HU-OSA-300-40-1, box 1600, fzs1948-61

“Into a Voluntary Ghetto”

...Dr. Benjamin Eichler, in his address on the 50th anniversary of the founding of the Czechoslovak Republic declared that ‘after liberation in the year 1945, it was again possible for the surviving remnant of the Jewish population to organize themselves into Jewish religious communities...’
Tony Curtis in Budapest, 1988, as honorary head of the Emmanuel Foundation
De”Fiddler-on-the-Roof”ization

How do we write a narrative of postwar Jewish history?

How do we reinsert postwar East Central Europe back into the living narrative of Jewish history?