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Migrant Visions –

The Scheunenviertel and Boyle Heights, Los Angeles

When the twenty-year-old Abraham Joshua Heschel moved to Berlin in 1927 to study at the university, his biographers note:

»For the first time he entered a non-Jewish world, having left Hasidic Warsaw [...] and secular Vilna. [...] Yet he did not maintain his ancestral pattern by renting rooms in the city's predominantly East European Jewish section, known as the Scheunenviertel. This area of East Berlin, not far from the university and near the Alexanderplatz, was populated by Jewish immigrants who maintained the dress and customs of their shtetls. [...] at first, Heschel worshipped at a synagogue of Talmud learning recommended by his family, the Hevra Shaas of Rabbi Hayim Moses Feldmann-Postman, located on Grenadier Strasse in the Scheunenviertel. There Heschel prayed wearing a *gartel* (ritual belt) favored by Hasidim. Heschel also worshipped a few blocks away at the Hasidic shtiebl of Boyan.«¹

For a budding East European Jewish intellectual, Berlin offered an astounding array of Jewish and non-Jewish spaces. Heschel took courses at the University of Berlin (on religious and non-religious subjects), studied at the liberal *Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums*, maintained ties with the orthodox Rabbinerseminar, and participated in many cultural activities. In this quick portrait, the Scheunenviertel is presented as an enclave of East European traditional Jewish life, in some sense a separate space from the rest of the city, that Heschel can visit but that will not directly shape his life in Berlin. But what sort of community was the Scheunenviertel for those migrants who settled there, and especially for those who came to Berlin out of economic necessity or to flee violence and political oppression? How did they experience their neighborhood, and perceive the urban space of Berlin?

What makes the Scheunenviertel, both then and now, such a rich topic for investigation is this intermixing of spaces: a neighborhood bearing the signs of a traditional Jewish community in Poland or Galicia, but in the heart of the

1 Edward K. Kaplan and Samuel H. Dresner, *Abraham Joshua Heschel: Prophetic Witness*, New Haven 1998, p. 101.

modern metropolis of Berlin. A newly arrived Jew from the east would find much that was familiar on Grenadierstrasse: signs in Hebrew letters, Yiddish conversation on a street filled with carts and horses, men with long beards dressed in kaftans, even the typical smells of Jewish food. But the evidence of being in Berlin would be impossible to miss: the physical spaces of the built environment, with their cramped living spaces, often in cellars and attics; Bülowplatz (today Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz) and the *Volksbühne* a block away, with the Communist party headquarters across the street from it; tram lines nearby; and many prostitutes on certain streets, attracting Berliners from other neighborhoods.

The Scheunenviertel was also an »ephemeral environment,« a geographical and temporal transition between east and west, and past and future.² East European Jewish immigrants were unsure whether they would stay in Berlin, move further west, return east, or even go to Palestine. Many did not have proper papers for staying and working in Berlin, nor the means to get to America. Rather than an almost timeless slice of East European life transported to the heart of Berlin, the Scheunenviertel was a precarious space where many inhabitants faced not only discrimination but deportation. From Prussia alone, about four thousand Jewish migrants were transferred back to Eastern Europe between 1922 and 1932.³ The Scheunenviertel was also geographically an »artificial« space in Berlin: a remnant of an earlier stage of the city. By the 1920s the days of the Scheunenviertel were numbered, regardless of who would gain power. Parts of the neighborhood had been razed in urban redevelopment projects in the first decade of the twentieth century, and the area, with its narrow streets and high concentration of residential and commercial spaces, was a throwback to a pre-cosmopolitan mode of urban organization.⁴ Ironically, a

- 2 See the Call for Papers for the conference: http://jewish-studies.org/imgs/uploads/World%20Wide/Call_for_papers_Charlottengrad-Scheunenviertel_.pdf.
- 3 Michael Brenner, *The Renaissance of Jewish Culture in Weimar Germany*, New Haven 1996, p. 201. He is citing Trude Maurer's *Ostjuden in Deutschland 1918-1933*, Hamburg 1986, p. 398. She states that there were a *minimum* of 3,900 Ostjuden who were deported, but probably more, as she is using the lists of names and nationalities to identify the Jews among the deportees.
- 4 Redevelopment began in 1902, in the »worst« parts of the Scheunenviertel, and some sections were torn down in 1906-1907. Further redevelopment was halted due to lack of funds. For a detailed description and short history of the buildings, inhabitants, and living conditions of the Scheunenviertel in 1925, see »Die Grundstücks- und Wohnungsaufnahme sowie die Volks-, Berufs- und Betriebszählung in Berlin im Jahre 1925: Die Siedlungs-, Wohnungs- und Bevölkerungsverhältnisse in der Dragoner-, Grenadier-, Linien-, Rücker- und Mulackstrasse,« *Mitteilungen des Statistischen Amtes der Stadt Berlin*, Heft 5, März 1929.

place seemingly rooted in tradition, pre-modern social relations, and organic aspects of urban life is, in the modern metropolis, the most »artificial« of spaces.

In order to bring out the migrants' perceptions of this urban space, I will present a comparison with another immigrant community of East European Jews: Boyle Heights, which was the center of Jewish migration in Los Angeles in the 1920s and 1930s, and the migrants were overwhelmingly *Ostjuden*. The number of Jews in Boyle Heights and in all of Los Angeles in the 1930s was roughly parallel to the number of *Ostjuden* and to the total Jewish population of Berlin.⁵ Yet whereas Berlin was an intermediate point between east and west, Los Angeles was seen as a last stop. Los Angeles is also often thought as the antithesis, the antithesis to the urban models of New York, Paris, or Berlin—a place where »community« is entirely lacking, and which is defined by its disconnection from the past (as one scholar put it, »How does one write a history of a sand castle?«).⁶ I will use this comparison to analyze which factors were the most important for shaping the spaces and determining the possibilities for the East European Jewish migrant community. For example, did their social networks, communicative spaces, and ideologies suggest a greater orientation towards the past or the future? In what ways was the community »ephemeral« and in a transitional state? What were the possibilities for a hybrid urban culture with residents from different backgrounds?

When people refer to the Scheunenviertel or to Boyle Heights as a »shtetl,« they do not literally suppose that the people living there perceived the urban space just as if it were a small town in East Europe. But old habits and patterns can provide the orientation for navigating the new urban space. Pictures of the Scheunenviertel in the 1920s, and especially of Grenadierstrasse, often depict a vibrant and markedly Jewish street life, with many carts, merchants, and East European-looking Jews filling the street, with no room left for automobiles or

5 Los Angeles, in contrast to Berlin, had less accurate statistics about the Jewish population in the 1920s and 1930s. The number of Jews living in Boyle Heights in the 1930s is cited as anywhere from 35,000 to 80,000. About one-third of Los Angeles Jews lived in Boyle Heights in the 1920/30s (Max Vorspan and Lloyd P. Gartner, *History of the Jews of Los Angeles*, Philadelphia 1970, p. 204; George Sanchez, *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945*, New York 1993, p. 75). See also Wendy Elliott, »The Jews of Boyle Heights, 1900-1950: The Melting Pot of Los Angeles,« *Southern California Quarterly*, 78:1 (1996), pp. 1-10.

6 Steven Zipperstein, Introductory Remarks, Conference on Los Angeles Jews, recorded 1990, audiotape, Tape 1 Side 1, University of California, Los Angeles Archives, Harriet Rochlin Collection of Western Jewish History, 1689, Box 88.

trucks.⁷ Almost every description mentions the many *shtiblakh* (small prayer rooms) and synagogues, and accounts often stress the continued connection to the *shtetl* or place one came from – there are frequent mentions of taking in newcomers from one's town, associating with people from one's region, and even of considering a return »home« to Poland or Russia.⁸ The patterns of life from East Europe continued to organize the spaces and the experiences of the migrants.⁹

Yet in the recent books about the Scheunenviertel where one finds these pictures, the critical essays describe the Scheunenviertel as »Ein Unort«¹⁰ [an un-place or bad place], as a »Transitraum ohne Ausgang«¹¹ and a »Transitraum ins Nirgendwo« [a transit zone without an exit, or leading nowhere].¹² These evocations of a non-place, suggestive even of an airport transit lounge, seem to be the polar opposite of everything associated with the »shtetl« or with an old neighborhood in a city, and evoke instead the »non-places« described by Marc Augé in his book of that name: hyper-modern spaces »which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity.«¹³ Can this be correct, to think of the Scheunenviertel as structured by both pre-modern and hyper-modern relations to space?

These are very insightful descriptions. The Scheunenviertel in the 1920s contained similar forces of uprootedness, transitoriness, and of imagining one's true dwelling as always elsewhere – forces that erode a sense of place and undermine

7 Elke Geisel (ed.), *Im Scheunenviertel: Bilder, Texte und Dokumente*, Berlin 1981; Verein Stiftung Scheunenviertel (ed.), *Das Scheunenviertel: Spuren eines verlorenen Berlins*, Berlin 1994; Horst Helas, *Juden in Berlin-Mitte: Biografien–Orte–Begegnungen*, Berlin 2001.

8 See Martin Beradt's posthumously published novel about life in the Scheunenviertel in the late 1920s: *Die Strasse der kleinen Ewigkeit*, Reinbek bei Hamburg, 2003.

9 Heschel, in a talk about East European Jewish life, states: »Everything in their life is fixed according to a pattern; nothing is left to chance.« The importance of these patterns comes up several times in his talk, given at YIVO in 1945, and these patterns were not lost immediately upon moving to Berlin. Abraham Joshua Heschel, »The Eastern European Era in Jewish History,« in: *East European Jews in Two Worlds: Studies from the YIVO Annual*, ed. Deborah Dash Moore, Evanston, Ill. 1990, p. 5).

10 Title of the introduction, by Günter Kunert, to Eike Geisel's book *Im Scheunenviertel*, pp. 7-9.

11 Eike Geisel, in his afterword to Martin Beradt's *Die Strasse der kleinen Ewigkeit*, entitled »Nachruf zu Lebzeiten«, uses this term (p. 355).

12 Michael Bienert uses this term in his excellent introduction to his edited collection of Roth's writings about Berlin: »In Berlin friert man schon bei plus 15 Grad Celsius: Eine Reise durch die 20er Jahre mit Joseph Roth,« in *Joseph Roth in Berlin: Ein Lesebuch für Spaziergänger*, Köln 2003, p. 21.

13 Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, trans. John Howe, London 1995, pp. 77-78.

the possibility of community.¹⁴ Boyle Heights, in contrast, functioned for East European Jewish immigrants in a nearly opposite manner, providing an urban space in which they imagined they could realize their ideas for community and for Jewish life. In Inge Unikower's biographical novel about life in the Scheunenviertel, the character Gershon, after going to a meeting at the *Kulturverein Progress*, asks himself, in response to the vision of a bright socialist future painted by the speaker, »Where on earth is a place for us?«¹⁵ In the Scheunenviertel, the answer to this question is repeatedly »Not here.« I want to suggest that in Boyle Heights the answer would instead usually have been »Here!« What were the differences that made one neighborhood but not the other a *space* for realizing whatever visions of the future the migrants had for themselves and their children? And why in Berlin, which provided so many new connections and possibilities of intellectual community for someone like Heschel, was the urban space of the Scheunenviertel such a poor ground for supporting an immigrant Jewish community?

In Berlin, East European Jews had a lesser legal status than their non-Jewish neighbors. They were not and could not become German citizens, and were sometimes living and working illegally in Germany. Even when not »illegal,« migrant Jews were viewed as »outsiders,« not only elsewhere in Berlin and by anti-Semites, but by their neighbors (the majority of the residents in the Scheunenviertel were not Jewish).¹⁶ Conversely, some German Jews viewed those from the East as embodying the inwardness of the Jewish soul, of having »their real inner home« in Judaism because they could not feel part of the German nor the Polish nation, and as being a counterforce to something coming »from the environment« causing »the progressive deterioration of [one's] Jewish identity« (as Gershom Scholem puts it).¹⁷ Perceived both as outsiders and as possessors of

14 The most frequently cited passages about the Scheunenviertel are probably those by Joseph Roth in the Berlin section of his book *Juden auf Wanderschaft*. Bienert states that Roth's view of the Scheunenviertel changed dramatically from his writings in the early 1920s, to the melancholy descriptions of the 1927 *Juden auf Wanderschaft*, as the conditions for the Jews changed for the worse. Joseph Roth, *Juden auf Wanderschaft*, Munich, 2006; Michael Bienert, *In Berlin friert man*, p. 23.

15 »Wo auf der Erde ist ein Platz für uns?« Inge Unikower, *Suche nach dem gelobten Land*, Berlin 1978, p. 98.

16 An article by Georg Davidsohn about Grenadierstrasse from the *Israelitisches Familienblatt* 12 Sept. 1929, reprinted in *Das Scheunenviertel: Spuren eines verlorenen Berlin* (p. 126), states that about one third of the inhabitants were Jewish, judging from the address book. Michael Bienert uses the same figure, but states the Jewish population would have been a little higher early in the decade.

17 Heschel in the essay mentioned above »The Eastern European Era in Jewish History« repeatedly emphasizes the inwardness of East European Jews, p. 2. The phrase »their real inner home« comes from »Emil Schorsch«, Monika Richarz (ed.), *Jewish Life in Germany:*

an innerness no longer accessible to Germans, the boundaries that separated them from their new environment were doubly reinforced.

None of these factors were present in Boyle Heights. The Jews moving to Boyle Heights faced no threat of expulsion and no legal problems with work permits. This was not the case for their neighbors of Mexican or Japanese descent; in the early 1930s, about 1/3 of the Mexicans – 50,000 – who had been living in Los Angeles returned to Mexico, many of them deported against their will;¹⁸ and in 1942, all the Japanese-Americans were forced from their homes and sent to concentration camps.¹⁹ There were laws preventing Jews from living in many neighborhoods in Los Angeles, and they faced employment discrimination in several industries, but their neighborhood was a haven from such pressures.²⁰ Within Boyle Heights, East European Jews were not at all viewed as outsiders. The population consisted entirely of »minorities.« Jews were the largest group, followed by Mexicans and Japanese, and there were Molokans, Armenians, African-Americans, and many others as well. The immigrants were learning what it was to be »American« *from each other*, not from the Anglo majority of the greater city.²¹ The Jews, who made up perhaps half or more of the population, perceived Boyle Heights *both* as a Jewish *and* as a multiethnic, heterogeneous community.²² The public schools especially, which almost all

Memoirs from Three Centuries, Bloomington 1991, p. 337. Gershom Scholem, *From Berlin to Jerusalem: Memories of My Youth*, New York 1988, p. 25.

- 18 George Sanchez, *Becoming Mexican American*, pp. 123, 224-25.
- 19 Until the 1990s, the term »internment camps« was more commonly used to describe the places where the Japanese Americans were sent to in 1942. They were officially called »relocation centers.« The scholarly consensus has changed during the last fifteen years. The book *Los Angeles's Boyle Heights*, published by the Japanese American National Museum in 2005 and adapted from their exhibition in 2002, uses the term »concentration camps,« and I have followed their usage (pp. 70, 72).
- 20 Housing covenants, prohibiting property owners to sell to specific groups such as African Americans, Asians, Latinos, and Jews, were legally enforceable until 1948, when the Supreme Court ruled against them. Mike Davis discusses employment discrimination in his essay »Sunshine in the Open Shop: Ford and Darwin in 1920s Los Angeles,« in Tom Sitton and William Deverell (ed.), *Metropolis in the Making: Los Angeles in the 1920s*, Berkeley 2001, pp. 96-122.
- 21 George Sanchez, Boyle Heights, Conference on Los Angeles Jews, recorded 1990, audiotape, Tape 3 Side 1, University of California, Los Angeles Archives, Harriet Rochlin Collection of Western Jewish History, 1689, Box 88.
- 22 People whom I interviewed would talk at one moment about how Jewish the neighborhood was, and at another moment they would describe its multicultural character and talk about their positive interactions with people of other ethnic groups. No one seemed to see a contradiction between these two descriptions. Similar dual characterizations can be found in the 1996 documentary film made by the Jewish Historical Society about Boyle Heights, *Meet Me at Brooklyn and Soto*, and in Wendy Elliott's *The Jews of Boyle Heights, 1900-1950: The Melting Pot of Los Angeles*.

children attended, provided a common culture.²³ Attending the University of California at Berkeley or Caltech—then as now among the world's leading universities—was a real possibility for many Jewish students, both men and women.

The physical spaces in these two places were also quite different. Boyle Heights was on the other side of the Los Angeles River from downtown Los Angeles. While many residents took a streetcar or drove to other parts of LA for work, most of their activities (shopping; cultural, social, and political life; education) took place within the boundaries of the community. They lived in homes, rather than tenements. Some Jews owned their homes, and some had gardens for raising flowers or food. Almost everyone could feel part of the dream of living in the sunshine of Los Angeles (and could take the streetcar to the beach, an hour away), despite the difficulties of making a living during the Depression.²⁴ While the living spaces were quite small, there was not a desire to quickly move to a »better« neighborhood. The Scheunenviertel was porously open to urban, cosmopolitan Berlin. Yet it was not a »desirable« place to live, and residents often said they lived »near Alex« (Alexanderplatz was nearby) rather than in the Scheunenviertel.²⁵ A survey of the living spaces of the Scheunenviertel in 1925 describes the squalid condition of many of the dwellings, with little light or fresh air, toilets mainly in the stairwells, sometimes neither gas or electric lighting, and very few trees, strips of grass, or gardens.²⁶ Paradoxically, the Jews in the Scheunenviertel were both more in contact with and less at home in the most urban spaces of the city than were those in Boyle Heights.

The starkest difference is that for the Jews in Boyle Heights, their community and Los Angeles was the horizon for establishing their new life and building their future. They thought they could realize their dreams *in* Los Angeles. Perhaps even more striking, the Jews in Boyle Heights dreamed *of* Los Angeles. Their visions—whether of a socialist future, or of *yidishkayt*, or merely of a fu-

23 There was only one high school for Boyle Heights (Roosevelt High), and the Jewish and Japanese students were the leaders of the student government and the school newspaper. There was some separation between ethnic groups in the school, as Mexican students were mostly on a »vocational« track, whereas Jewish students were mostly on pre-university track.

24 Some Jews first moved to Los Angeles for health reasons, such as to recover from tuberculosis.

25 Morris Gruenberg begins his memoir of growing up in the Scheunenviertel in the 1920s and '30s, »Though rarely so called by its inhabitants, who rather preferred to describe the location of their residence as being »near the Alex,« to avoid the stigma connected with the notorious area, it was indeed within the Berliner *Scheunenviertel* where I lived,« (Berlin N-54, Maitland, Florida 2000, p. 15).

26 Mitteilungen des Statistischen Amtes der Stadt Berlin, März 1929, Heft 5, p. 3.

ture of nearly unlimited opportunities for their children – shared quintessential elements of the Los Angeles imagined by most of its residents (and the city was composed almost entirely of recent immigrants to California). Their imagined identity was expansive – based more on ideas to be realized than on connections to the places and traditions from where they came in Eastern Europe – and it was not in conflict with the spaces in which they lived.

A poem published in Yiddish in 1925 by Joseph Kutzenogy expresses the tensions between old and new worlds, between east (Russia and New York) and west, upon moving to Los Angeles.

Los Angeles

Far—

From New York narrow streets, Chicago clouds, Pittsburgh smoke—

Los Angeles!

You'll become drunk by the smell of orange blossoms, dazzled by the
immense mountains, refreshed by the orderly proud palm trees.

Orange blossoms, mountains immense, palms proud—

They came, people.

Tired.

Small, airy, sunny cottages they built themselves. Adorned with greenery,
and strolling calmly, contentedly.

The nights fall—bright-white. Desires forgotten awaken. Perpetual
uneasinesses are revived.

But the streets are still, windows—blind, doors—closed.

And the night is bright.

And the night is white.

Los Angeles

Vayt—

fun Niu York eynge gasn, Shikager volkns, Pitsburger roykh—

Los Angeles!

Verst farshikert fun'm reyekh fun marantsn-bli, farblendt fun di
rizike berg, derfrisht fun di keseyder-shtoltse palmes.

Marantsn-bli, berg rizike, palmes shtoltse—

zaynen gekumen mentshn.

Mide.

Zikh kleyne, luftike, zunike shtiblahk oysgeboyt. Mit grins
baputst un shpatsirn zikh ruik, tsufridn.

Faln tsu di nekht—likhtik-vayse. Vekn farlangen fargesene.

Lebn uf eybike umruikayt.

Zaynen ober di gasn shtil, fentster—blind, tirn—farmakht.
 Un di nakht iz likhtik.
 Un di nakht iz vays.²⁷

The poem has some of the stereotypical images that drew Jews (and others) from the eastern American cities to Los Angeles (orange blossoms, palm trees), but it also describes the »small, airy, sunny cottages« that the immigrants built, and their calm [ruik], contented strolling. »Ruik« contrasts with the »eybike umruikayt« [perpetual uneasinesses] of the Jew, which are revived at night. Yet the night itself is transformed, »bright« and »white.« When I first read the poem, I misread the final »vays« [white] as »vayt« [far], repeating the first word of the poem, which would give it a harsher cast. The trajectory of the poem is not circular – the distance from the east presents a radically new landscape, and new possibilities, even if the people are still only partially transformed.

For the Jews of the Scheunenviertel, becoming part of »Berlin« in any way that was central to the vision of the city as imagined by its other inhabitants was a remote or non-existent possibility. Their dreams certainly overlapped with the dreams of other poor and working class people in Berlin, but their notions of identity were often tightly connected to the places from which they came, and their exclusion, as permanent outsiders, from the imagined future of Berlin worked against every effort to develop a new East European Jewish community in Berlin.

The ways in which the different urban spaces shaped the horizons and experiences of those who lived there, were influenced by the Jewish organizations and institutions in both neighborhoods. One will find, not surprisingly, many similarities between the Scheunenviertel and Boyle Heights in this respect: a wide range of philanthropic, religious, and cultural organizations (and sometimes the same ones – there was a branch of ORT in Los Angeles as well). But the life and the effects of these organizations within each community were often quite different. Here are a few quick contrasts.

In 1916, Siegfried Lehmann established the *Jüdisches Volksheim* in the Scheunenviertel, intending to »create a sense of Gemeinschaft [community] among the East European Jewish youth« (in Michael Brenner's words),²⁸ and also hoping to transform the »'dejudaised bourgeois'« Jews of West Berlin.²⁹ The *Volksheim*

27 Joseph Kutzenogy (Kaitz), *Kveytlakh*, Los Angeles 1925, p. 28. Vorspan and Gartner mention this poem, and provide an incomplete translation (p. 117). The translation here is by Mandy Cohen.

28 Brenner, *The Renaissance*, p. 187.

29 Stephen Aschheim, *Brothers and Strangers: The East European Jew in German and German Jewish Consciousness, 1800-1923*, Madison 1982, p. 195.

was meant to be a space of encounter and mutual transformation between German and Eastern Jews, but mainly with those from the west instructing those from the east.³⁰ It attracted many prominent people: Gustav Landauer, a leading German anarchist, gave the opening speech, and Martin Buber, Samuel Agnon, and Franz Kafka were involved in some degree. Yet the *Volksheim* did little to address the needs of those living in the Scheunenviertel. A few years later many of its functions were taken over by different Jewish welfare agencies;³¹ Lehmann went on to found a youth village and agricultural boarding school in Palestine in 1927; and in 1929 it closed, having failed in the mission of inculcating the youth of the Scheunenviertel with the idea of a socialist, Jewish community.³²

The Soto-Michigan Jewish Community Center (named after the intersection where it was located) in Boyle Heights, built in the mid 1930s, grew out of an early community center first established in the previous decade with funding from the Federation for Jewish Charities.³³ It sponsored a full array of cultural and athletic activities, summer day camps, clubs, and was well known for the leftist politics of its members, who invited many speakers whose political ideology ranged from social democrat to communist.³⁴ Few of the speakers had anywhere near the intellectual prominence of those at the *Jüdisches Volksheim*, and perhaps its most memorable cultural feature was its architecture.³⁵ Memoirs by and interviews with people from Boyle Heights frequently mention the Soto-Michigan JCC, and other community centers and *Folkshule*, founded by socialist labor or Zionist groups, as the center of their activities when growing up. After 1945, when the neighborhood became less Jewish, the Center began to reach out to other ethnic groups, started an annual Friendship Festival,

30 Aschheim writes, »The leaders were young, idealistic, middle-class German Zionists and the students mostly Eastern Jewish children« (p. 194).

31 Aschheim, p. 197.

32 See Carolin Hilker-Siebenhaar (ed.), *Wegweiser durch das jüdische Berlin*, Berlin 1987, p. 67.

33 Los Angeles' first Jewish community center, the Modern Hebrew School and Social Center, later renamed Soto-Michigan, opened in Boyle Heights in 1924. See Steve Sass, »Remember the Roots of the JCCs,« 18 April 2002, <http://www.jewishjournal.com/community_briefs/article/remember_the_roots_of_the_jccs_20020419>.

34 <http://www.jewishjournal.com/community_briefs/article/boyle_heights_jcc_20060310>.

35 The Center was designed by Raphael Soriano, one of the pioneers of California Modernism. Julius Shulman, the preeminent photographer of California Modernist architecture, who grew up in Boyle Heights, got him the commission. See Aaron Paley, »Playing Jewish Geography with Julius Shulman, 27 June 2008, <<http://www.forward.com/articles/13614>>.

and continued to operate until there were very few young Jews left in the area.³⁶

In one case, there was a visionary but failed attempt to create *Gemeinschaft*; in the other, the creation of an organization that largely succeeded in implementing the ideals of community of its founders, even after the make-up of the local community started to change. Historians of Jews in Los Angeles often emphasize their sense of »rootlessness,«³⁷ but in Boyle Heights this functioned positively, to facilitate forming new connections with others in the community. The majority of Jews who came to Boyle Heights were not religiously observant, and many had been in the United States for perhaps a dozen years before moving to Los Angeles. The authors of *History of the Jews of Los Angeles* write, »Los Angeles Jews from Eastern Europe had made too many stops en route to organize upon a *landslayt* basis. Most congregations were founded, simply enough, by neighborhood« (Boyle Heights was quite a large area – well over 10 square kilometers).³⁸ In interviews, people who grew up there often speak of walking from *shul* to *shul*, visiting friends and relatives, during the High Holidays.³⁹ *Landsmanshaftn* were much less numerous and important in Los Angeles than in cities in the eastern United States, and similarly, one person I interviewed recalled going to Boyle Heights every weekend with his father (born in Lithuania) and going from one *landsmanshaft* to the next, rather than just associating with those people from his father's town.⁴⁰ This *wandering* between places connected to East Europe may be a sign of rootlessness, but it also forged new relations between people with different traditions, patterns, and memories.

In the »ephemeral environment« of the Scheunenviertel, the residents were continually in fear of being uprooted by the authorities, even if the actual number of East European Jews deported from Berlin in the 1920s was not all that high.⁴¹ Police raids, threatened arrest for sheltering illegal immigrants, and the disruption of economic activities that catered to migrants were common. In his

36 George Sanchez, »What's Good for Boyle Heights Is Good for the Jews: Creating Multiracialism on the Eastside during the 1950s,« *American Quarterly* 56.3 (2004): pp. 642-45. Deborah Dash Moore, *To the Golden Cities: Pursuing the American Jewish Dream in Miami and L.A.*, New York 1994, pp. 201, 211.

37 Deborah Dash Moore, *To the Golden Cities*, p. 54.

38 Vorspan and Gartner, p. 164.

39 Pauline Hirsch, Boyle Heights Reunion, recorded 1978, audiotape, University of California, Los Angeles Archives, Harriet Rochlin Collection of Western Jewish History, 1689, Box 87.

40 For the role of the *landsmanshaftn* in New York, see Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers*, New York 1976.

41 See note 3.

memoir about growing up in the Scheunenviertel, Morris Gruenberg describes the »family-type restaurant« that his mother operated a few nights a week in their small two-room apartment, cooking mainly for refugees, and sometimes putting them up for the night as well. After several visits by the authorities looking for illegal immigrants, she was forced to stop cooking for others and had to get a job outside the home in a cigarette factory, leaving her young son home alone during the day. She also had to send to the Jewish Orphanage in Pankow a recently arrived young cousin who had been staying with them, but who did not have papers.⁴² Amidst these pressures, and with the much smaller physical and (often temporal) distance from the east, the continued force of one's roots was much stronger in the Scheunenviertel than in Boyle Heights. But the adherence to the traditions brought with them from the east worked to *fragment* the social and physical space in the Scheunenviertel. Interviews with those who grew up there note little mixing between those who came from different places.⁴³ Max Kahane, who moved to Grenadierstrasse near the end of World War I (and who was born in 1910), discusses the relations between the newly arriving East Jewish migrants from 1919-1923:

Ebensowenig wie es eine rasche Verschmelzung der Ostjuden mit den Deutschen gab, gab es eine solche Annäherung mit den jüdischen Emigranten aus Russisch-Polen (Lodz, Warschau) oder gar aus dem Inneren Russlands. [...] Es gab fast keine gesellschaftlichen Annäherungen.⁴⁴

Elke Geisel notes the tensions between different groups, each with their own prayer rooms almost adjacent to each other on Grenadierstrasse:

Keine Strasse, die so viele Betstuben versammelt wie diese, deren jede einer eigenen mitgebrachten Tradition folgt, sich absetzt gegen die nächstliegende, manchmal in Fehde mit der benachbarten liegt und doch zusammen mit allen anderen eine gedrängte Topographie der religiösen Strömungen des östlichen Judentums ergibt [...] Namen und Orte einer fremden Welt, deren schillernde Vielfalt sich nur dem erschließt, der zu ihr gehört.⁴⁵

42 Morris Gruenberg, Berlin N-54, pp. 35-39.

43 New York also provides an interesting contrast, and a very different case. With its huge Jewish population – two million in the 1920s – the division of Jews into many different groups and organizations did not fragment the spaces of the neighborhoods in at all the same ways.

44 »Erinnerungen an die Grenadierstrasse: Max Kahane in einem Gespräch mit Horst Helas,« in: Das Scheunenviertel, p. 94. See also Sol Landau, Bridging Two Worlds, New York 1968, p. 36.

45 Geisel, p. 18.

The relations between Jews and non-Jews – and in most of the streets of the Scheunenviertel, Christians were in the majority – were of course even less harmonious. Morris Gruenberg recalled, »the attitude of most Christians in our street toward their Jewish neighbors ranged from polite coolness to open hostility,« although they lived under the same poor economic conditions.⁴⁶ Navigating the urban space of Berlin in these circumstances, the city can shrink almost to a few interconnected dots, with everything else hardly registering on the consciousness.

For many in the Scheunenviertel, there was neither the sense of belonging and stability of the shtetl nor the openness, modernity, and interactivity of the metropolis. In his memoir about his father Rabbi Ezekiel Landau, Sol Landau describes the *shrinking* of his father's world, when he moves from the provinces of Czechoslovakia to the Scheunenviertel:

In Czecho-Slovakia his work required constant contact with the non-Jewish world and especially with the official church community. At the same time he had continued to pursue his advanced philosophical studies and his general reading. The daily opportunity to study with the Bezoiner Rov [his father-in-law, Abraham Grynberg] and observe his activities narrowed his world of contact almost exclusively to Jews and directed him to studies in depth in the more limited field of homiletics and responsa.⁴⁷

For women, the spaces could be especially confining and restricted. Some did piecework at home, and the possibilities of movement for women in very religious household (which were a minority of the Jewish households) were quite limited. Mischket Liebermann, ironically, whose father was a very pious rabbi and who moved the family from Galicia to Grenadierstrasse in 1914, got the opportunity to go to public school because of her sex. A neighbor noticed that she was not going to school, complained to the authorities, who threatened her father with fines and imprisonment, and who finally relented and allowed her and her younger sister to go to school. She comments that her father would have gone »to the barricades« to resist sending his sons to a non-Jewish school, but relented »since we were only girls.«⁴⁸

In Boyle Heights, where the orientation was more towards the future, political and Yiddish cultural organizations – and often a fusion of the two – were

46 Morris Gruenberg, Berlin N-54, p. 56.

47 Sol Landau, Bridging Two Worlds, p. 37.

48 Mischket Liebermann, Aus dem Ghetto in die Welt, Berlin 1977, p. 11. She writes further, »Die Frauen kamen aus ihren vier Wänden kaum heraus. Wenn, dann nur, um einzukaufen. Selten gingen sie zu Besuch, in die Synagoge zweimal im Jahr.« There is a lot more to be said about gender and urban space.

the dominant ones. Even when these groups were offshoots of organizations founded in New York or elsewhere – such as the *Arbeiter ring* (Workmen's Circle – a labor and cultural group), *Habonim* (Zionist), or the *International Ladies Garment Workers Union* – their orientation was strongly guided by local visions.⁴⁹ The interests and transformational hopes of these groups were often national and international in scope, but they saw their future in Los Angeles. This was largely the case even for *Habonim*, a Zionist organization whose LA branch was formed in the 1930s when David and Mina Yaroslavsky moved there for health reasons. They also started a second *Folkshule* in the neighborhood (their son is now an elected representative to the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors, representing the Westside of Los Angeles).⁵⁰ Groups with different missions and outlooks sometimes worked together, such as in founding a secular Jewish school (meeting in the afternoons after public school) by the labor Zionist groups *Poale zion* (Hebrew-oriented) and the *Farband* (Yiddish-oriented). The same building, »which came to be known as the *Folks hoyz*,« also contained two very leftist labor unions (carpenters and painters), which conducted all their business in Yiddish into the 1940s, and a social and cultural center that »became a cooperative institution« holding »a variety of events, ranging from Yiddish plays to debates among leading socialists.«⁵¹ The *space* of Boyle Heights encouraged such cooperation.⁵²

I do not want to paint a picture all of harmony, mixing, and cooperation on the one hand and division, exclusion, strife, and fragmentation on the other. The rise of National Socialism in the 1920s and 1930s tends to overwhelm depictions of East European Jewish migrant life in Berlin at the time, and makes Joseph Roth's claim about Hirtenstrasse (in the Scheunenviertel) in 1927 – »So traurig ist keine Strasse der Welt« – seem prescient.⁵³ There were strong political

49 For example, in Los Angeles the majority of the garment workers to be organized were Mexican, and spoke Spanish, and the Jewish union leaders' work required active engagement and cooperation with others having very different world views. For some of the differences between organizing in Los Angeles and New York, see the first five chapters of Rose Pesotta, *Bread Upon the Waters*, New York 1987.

50 Adar Belinkoff, »Habonim and Hashomer Hatzair,« in *Roots-key: Newsletter of the Jewish Genealogical Society of Los Angeles* 23:2-3 (2003), pp. 44-46, contains an informative discussion of the early history of these two Zionist groups in Los Angeles.

51 David P. Shuldner, *Of Moses and Marx: Folk Ideology and Folk History in the Jewish Labor Movement*, Westport, CT 1999, pp. 151-52.

52 Kenneth Burt, discussing »Los Angeles exceptionalism,« writes: »Socialists and Communists in Boyle Heights were more willing to work together than in other cities.« See Kenneth C. Burt, »Yiddish Los Angeles and the Birth of Latino Politics: The Polyglot Ferment of Boyle Heights,« http://www.jewishcurrents.org/2008_may_burt.htm.

53 Joseph Roth, *Juden auf Wanderschaft*, p. 67.

divisions in Boyle Heights (mirroring splits in national groups, such as between the Workmen's Circle and the Communist affiliated International Worker's Order), and one can find many examples of successful cooperation in the Scheunenviertel across sectarian lines. I am not trying to emphasize particular examples of division or cooperation and claim they are representative, so much as to sketch the outlines of the spaces (physical, social, cultural) that helped shape the dynamics and the outcomes of such interactions.

The »melting pot« of Boyle Heights – as it was referred to both then and later – provided spaces for the development if not realization of communal and individual dreams for its largest constituent group, the newly arrived East European Jews. In our current cultural moment, »melting pot« now has negative connotations of forced assimilation, but for those with economic and political power it had differently negative connotations in the 1930s. Boyle Heights was given the lowest possible rating by the Home Owners Loan Corporation (these ratings governed who could receive a mortgage):

This is a »melting pot« area and is literally honeycombed with diverse and subversive racial elements. It is seriously doubted whether there is a single block in the area which does not contain detrimental racial elements and there are very few districts which are not hopelessly heterogeneous.⁵⁴

That which was »hopelessly heterogeneous« for the bankers was largely *hopeful* for those with a vision of a new society.

In Berlin, what is most inspiring and memorable in retrospect are organizational work (largely for Jews elsewhere in Europe), scholarly production, and cultural events. It is unnecessary to list here the full spectrum of these activities, and other essays in this volume will discuss many of them, but just to give two examples related to what I have already discussed: Heschel became a central figure in David Koigen's seminar; and on one night at the *Kulturverein Progress* one could have heard first Else Lasker-Schüler and then Dovid Bergelson reading from their work.⁵⁵ Los Angeles in the 1920s did not offer such intellectual and cultural opportunities. In Boyle Heights, it was not particular achievements nor the work of any particular organizations that stand out.⁵⁶ For a short period (all this would begin to change in the 1940s), the urban space fostered a very

54 See Sanchez, p. 637, and Eric Avila, *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight: Fear and Fantasy in Suburban Los Angeles*, Berkeley 2004, pp. 35-36.

55 Inge Unikower, *Suche nach dem gelobten Land*, pp. 97-98.

56 One person whom I interviewed, who was both a member of Habonim and of the Girl Scouts (a non-Jewish group, which met »in a Christian Center«) when growing up, wrote »It was strange to hear that someone is interested in Boyle Heights, not an exciting or interesting place.«

strong sense of community that made it possible to harmonize very different circles of group identity, without the need to choose between them, or to leave Los Angeles in order to realize dreams of transformation or belonging.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ I would like to thank Aubrey Pomerance and Horst Helas, who helped with research in Berlin, Karen Wilson and Caroline Luce who helped me in Los Angeles, and Mandy Cohen who helped with Yiddish translation.

Transit und Transformation

*Osteuropäisch-jüdische Migranten
in Berlin 1918–1939*

Herausgegeben von
Verena Dohrn und Gertrud Pickhan



WALLSTEIN VERLAG