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Ivanic on Greenblatt, 'To Tell Their children: Jewish Communal Memory in Early Modern Prague'

Review published on Thursday, January 26, 2017

Rachel L. Greenblatt. *To Tell Their children: Jewish Communal Memory in Early Modern Prague.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014. 320 pp. $65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-8602-7.

Reviewed by Suzanna Ivanic (University of Cambridge) **Published on** HABSBURG (January, 2017) **Commissioned by** Jonathan Kwan

Gravestones, Hanging Dresses, and Memory in Prague's Early Modern Jewish Community

A large, rectangular piece of material hangs heavily amongst the collections of the Jewish Museum in Prague. At the top of the material is a circle surrounding “three light blue-green carp lying one crossed over the other, outlined in fine silver and set in a bejewelled silk field surrounded by a silver-, gold-, and deep-red-encircled medallion, atop the dedicatory inscription” (p. 29). The Zaks *parokhet* was commissioned and dedicated by Karpel Zaks in 1602, and was used in rotation with other *parokhot* to conceal the Torah in Prague’s New Synagogue (Altneuschul). When it was used, the inscription prominently displayed Karpel Zaks’s name and allowed him to remain present in the world of the living long after his death.

Like the glinting threads that make up the *parokhet*, *To Tell Their Children* weaves the memories and histories of the Jewish community together to create a richly textured account of Jewish communal memory. Individual cases are bound together with the story of the Prague Jewish community, the wider Ashkenazi diaspora, and a “common” history of Jews, so that these perspectives intersperse each other at alternating points. Rachel Greenblatt further grounds the stories in the more familiar and equally rich history of Prague in the seventeenth century. This was an urban center undergoing immense change: it transformed from a multiconfessional city under Rudolf II, who ruled the Habsburg Empire from his seat in Prague from 1583 to 1612, to a “Catholic bastion” by the end of the seventeenth century. This book provides valuable new layers to an account that has so far primarily been heard through Christian voices.

Greenblatt builds on recent work that seeks to show how in this period there was not only an “ahistorical” concern with the “biblical” past, as has been the focus of work by Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, but that collective memory and historical writing in relation to postbiblical Jewish history were intricately interlinked. *To Tell Their Children* seeks to present “a concrete model of premodern Jewish memory in a single locale, showing precisely how memories were shaped and recorded, how ideas took on physical and literary forms” (p. 3).

Central to Greenblatt’s work is the question “what would ... a person do had she never read an autobiography?” (p. 5). This casts memory-making and recording practices in a new light, allowing an exploration of the evolving ways in which memories were put down, even what might be called fashions of commemoration. The six chapters are arranged according to the ways in which memories were recorded. In turn, they focus on architecture and time, cemetery and synagogue,

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autobiographical writing, authorship, historical writing and songs, and print and the vernacular. Greenblatt's ambitious attempt to encompass all these different forms of early modern memory recording (ritual, oral, material, and textual) allows her to uncover the diverse layers of voices from the Jewish community in early modern Prague.

Paying special attention to material-spatial and temporal environments, Greenblatt shows how collective memories were sustained through buildings and liturgical rhythms that literally surrounded the Jewish community in Prague. The blood-spattered walls of the New Synagogue were left unwashed to remind passers-by of the 1389 massacre, and depressions in the roof of the Old Synagogue (Altschul) made by artillery fire during the Swedish siege of Prague in 1648 were left to "preserve as a memory on the sanctuary of the Lord" (p. 16). Meanwhile *seliḥot* (penitentiary prayers and lamentations) were said annually on specified fast days to commemorate major disastrous events in the community.

Individuals also had a wide range of methods for securing memorial through gravestone epitaphs and through the reading of *hazkarot* (memorial prayers prompting regular communal memory of the deaths of specific individuals, couples, or groups) on the Sabbath. *Hazkarot* entries could be purchased directly, or might be written into the book after a gift of a ritual object to the synagogue, and a full cycle was meant to last a year so that prayer was guaranteed to be prompted annually. Individuals who secured self-memorial by commissioning ritual objects for the synagogue further inscribed their presence within the community. Greenblatt notes how the commission of Torah curtains, like the Zaks *parokhet* with the three carps and a *parokhet* commissioned by Reizl bat Moses Plohn and made from one of her dresses, reminded devotees of their patrons.

Greenblatt's analysis shows how individuals embraced and adapted new early modern forms of memory making for remembrance, while also constructing narratives about their own family histories. Individuals might commission *megillah*, which were manuscript scrolls that recorded important "deliverance tales" and were read on celebratory family Purim days. The tale usually related misfortunes that befell the family member (often imprisonment by Christian authorities) and then deliverance, indicating God's ultimate favor bestowed upon the individual. The *megillah* offered an important strategy for shaping family identities, especially for those who might want to set down their own view of events in the face of denunciations from others within the Jewish community.

Throughout, Greenblatt goes beyond recent calls to "historicize memory," attending to the ways in which not only historical and Jewish cultural, but also local contexts shaped the memories of individuals and the community, and the ways in which those memories were recorded, sustained, and forgotten. One example given is how trade in luxurious textiles brought great wealth to the Prague Jewish community and may have encouraged individuals who had benefited from this income to donate a *parokhet* as their gift to the synagogue. Furthermore, the design of Prague *parokhot* often showcased an expensive square of material in the middle of the piece, rather than focusing on elaborate embroidery as is the case in other contemporaneous examples from different localities. This preference for drawing attention to the textile itself suggests a conscious decision to elevate the material used within this ritual object. Greenblatt suggests that this local practice was shaped by the special relationship between the Jewish community and the textile trade passing through Prague. Greenblatt is careful to make it clear that her analysis of the local *parokhet* style is tentative. However, this part of the research is a valuable and original integration of material evidence, and

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shows, first, how important it is to use these objects as historical sources, and, second, how Prague's rich material evidence calls for further research.

Another local aspect that permeates the examples is the proximity of the Jewish community to Christian life in the city. Greenblatt highlights how Jewish men and women's lives intersected and interacted with the Christian community and Habsburg rulers in Prague. Greenblatt not only discusses the well-known case of Simon Abeles, but also brings to the Anglophone audience the Jewish perspectives of the Battle of the White Mountain in 1620 and of the Swedish attack at the end of the Thirty Years' War in 1648. The Swedish attack gives rise to a case that cuts across communal and individual memorial. Yiddish historical songs were often written and printed to spread news from Jewish communities throughout Ashkenaz. The *Shvedish lid* printed in Prague in 1649 described an exploding canon ball that landed in the Jewish quarter and claimed the lives of nine people. It identifies Heni ben Judah Leib Gedalyes, "a bridegroom" who, in the aftermath, had "the appearance of a king / His brains spread out on the ground" (p. 155). Greenblatt has traced Heni's grave in the cemetery to a location that would have been the only place accessible during the Swedish siege, and also finds the *hazkarah* entry that would have been read annually in the synagogue, which identifies him as a "martyr." These Jewish memories of major historical events bring new perspectives to light, and challenge us to think about how the "multiplicity of memory," or more specifically, multivoiced memory, might be integrated within our still Christian-dominated understandings of the history of early modern Europe.

Greenblatt's examples are so fruitful that they have implications far beyond the aims of her book. Relating to the history of emotions and kinship, Greenblatt does not miss the opportunity to provide us with impressive close readings of the sources. In chapter 2 gravestone epitaphs are analyzed. The seemingly formulaic is illuminated by Greenblatt's analysis of the specific individual choices of biblical phrases for loved sons, husbands, or wives. Other written accounts provide insight into the emotional and psychological states of grieving parents. In particular, we read of Beila Perlhefter's immense sadness at the loss of her seven children: "I endure their deaths daily, and suffer pain" (p. 113), and "Sadness has overtaken me so I cannot tell up from down" (p. 114). Beila eloquently states in this autobiographical extract that she and her husband have not suffered this misfortune as God's punishment for her husband's Sabbatean beliefs, but that such misfortunes can happen to anyone. Setting this statement in writing was an important act of negotiating her standing within the community, while also commemorating her individual children. Furthermore, the practice of writing emerges as a strategy deployed by early modern Jewish men and women to cope with grief and loss. In the introduction to another printed Yiddish historical song an anonymous woman writes of dealing with sadness over the death of her only daughter, Hannah: "Now dear God has opened my eyes / To write to you of the bitter misery / But this caused me to deal with great suffering" (p. 184).

Following this detailed exploration of individual and communal memories, Greenblatt ends with an assessment of the success of early modern memory practices in Prague's Jewish community. Although attempts were made to enshrine memory in textual, ritual, and material forms that would survive changes in the community, generational change was often too overpowering a force and led to fading memories. In 1801 a new *hazkarat neshamot* for the Pinkas Synagogue was begun. Its introductory text explains that the previous manuscript simply contained too many lengthy *hazkarot* to be said on each Sabbath and so the entries in this manuscript were shortened and divided according to week. Greenblatt identifies this as a return to the type of succinct memorial that similarly characterized the

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medieval period. Thus, the period from the late sixteenth century to the late eighteenth century is found to be an age of particularly lengthy, public, and ritual forms of memorial. Using Jan Assmann's concepts of "communicative" and "cultural" memory, Greenblatt analyzes the intentions, successes, and failures of various methods of memory making in Prague. By applying the theory to concrete examples in Prague, Greenblatt convincingly argues that these were not mutually exclusive types of memory, but that men and women negotiated a relationship between the two. Often the strategies for recording memories attempted to turn individual or momentary memories into communal and eternal ones. The most successful methods were to materialize memory in gifts of ritual objects, in gravestones, or by printing commemorative texts in prayer books for regular use. Thus, Greenblatt shows how memories could be communicated across generations in a tangible and material way.

To Tell Their Children makes the Jewish story of Prague accessible for an Anglophone audience through its comprehensive compilation of dispersed secondary literature primarily from Czech and German scholarship, and the valuable publication of numerous extracts from the still little known Prague sources. However, this book is much more than a synthesis. It weaves together the multiple memories from Prague's early modern Jewish community in a way that illuminates the connections between individual and communal, and biblical and historical pasts. Moreover, it successfully brings the Jewish story into contact with stories of early modern Prague told from outside the boundaries of the Jewish Quarter. Greenblatt's work is a rich contribution to the study of early modern Jewish memory and shows how Prague is an ideal case study for reintegrating Jewish and Christian experiences of the early modern period in the Habsburg lands.

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Citation: Suzanna Ivanic. Review of Greenblatt, Rachel L., *To Tell Their children: Jewish Communal Memory in Early Modern Prague*. HABSBURG, H-Net Reviews. January, 2017. **URL:** http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=47897

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