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The Jewish community in Breslau and in Wrocław:

Jewish – German and Jewish – Polish worlds in Breslau (1918-1945) and in Wrocław (1945-1968)

Breslau/Wrocław is located in the area where German, Czech, and Polish cultures have been interacting for centuries. The city changed its political and cultural affiliations many times, so at different times it was governed by Polish, Czech, Austrian, and Prussian administrators. In other words, the history of Breslau/Wrocław epitomises the whole scope of experiences related to the political and social formation of Central Europe. Inhabited mostly by Protestants and Catholics, Breslau was the home to the third largest Jewish community in the German Empire.

Throughout decades, Breslau was one of most important Jewish centres. Its history stretched back to the 12th century. Local Jews became strongly assimilated in the Modern Times. Therefore, around the year 1812, after receiving the same rights as other inhabitants, members of the Jewish community in Breslau became more and more inclined to consider themselves as Germans, and they did not want to isolate from the rest of society. However, the same time another fraction built their own, rather hermetic and separate world stressing their individual features. Therefore, the history of Breslau is a perfect field to research the development and the evolution of different models of Jewish communities in Germany.

The history of Breslau/Wrocław mirrors all the catastrophes of the 20th century: racist based nationalism, the mass murder of Jews, the nonsense of war, flight, expulsion, displacement and other results of totalitarianisms. Before the beginning of the Second World War, Breslau, along with the whole region of the Lower Silesia, fervently

supported National Socialism. During the war, the city has been declared a fortress – ‘Festung Breslau’ –and was almost completely destroyed. Before the fortress surrendered in the spring 1945, the Jewish inhabitants had been deported and killed. Only a few of the Breslau Jews survived the Holocaust. The third largest Jewish community of Germany ceased to exist. The centuries of cultural, economical, political and scientific traditions of the Breslau Jews were gone.

This project is intended as a global description of the history of Jewish communities in Breslau and Wrocław of the 20th century. The time span subject to the investigation stretches from the end of the First World War, through the times of the Weimar Republic, National Socialism, the Holocaust, and reaches the moment when Polish Jews began to form their community in post-war Wrocław. After the World War Two, the Polish Jews who survived the Holocaust in territories that were incorporated by the USSR were resettled in the region of Lower Silesia and in Wrocław especially. As soon as 1946, Wrocław was inhabited by over 16.000 Polish Jews, while in the whole region of the Lower Silesia the Jewish community was approximately 90.000. The authorities were even considering the establishment of the Jewish Autonomy in this region. What deserves a particular attention is the return of a group of German Jews of Breslau to post-war Polish Wrocław. Due to their initiative the Jewish Community was reactivated and gathered German and Polish Jews on equal terms. However, as the result of political pressure of Polish authorities, the German Jews of Breslau were forced to leave their home town. It is also significant that the number of Polish Jews in post-war Wrocław was constantly decreasing. This situation was caused by successive waves of emigration, and ultimately, as the result of the March 1968 events when the discrimination of the Jewish population led to a massive emigration, the Jewish Community in Wrocław stopped to exist for a couple of decades and now after a recent revival it has 290 members.

The analysis of the collective Jewish memory of Breslau/Wrocław seems to be the logical conclusion to this research; however, some might ask whether such a memory really exists. The further questions are related to the idea of the consciousness, tradition and cultural heritage of Breslau/Wrocław that are present in collective memories of the modern Germans and Poles, and if it is possible that in this particular case we are dealing with the culture of memories, or else, if a cultural memory Breslau and Wrocław exists.