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Jewish Historical Commissions in Europe, 1943-1953

“Collect and Record! Help to write the History of the Latest Destruction!”

This dissertation is a comparative study of Jewish historical commissions established by Holocaust survivors in the closing phase of the Second World War and in its immediate aftermath for the purpose of systematically documenting the destruction of European Jews.

The earliest and most important Jewish historical commissions were: the “Center for Contemporary Jewish Documentation” (Centre de Documentation Juive Contemporaine) founded in France in 1943; the “Central Jewish Historical Commission” (Centralna Zydowska Komisja Historyczna) set up in Poland in 1944; the Jewish historical commissions established in Germany in 1945 and 1947; and those founded in Austria in 1946. On a smaller scale, Jewish historical commissions and documentation centers also crystallized in Great Britain, Sweden, Switzerland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Rumania, Bulgaria, Italy and in the Soviet Union. These initiatives were short-lived, however, and by the early 1950s, most Jewish historical commissions had either disbanded and handed over their material to what would become Yad Vashem, or they had established themselves as permanent research institutions. Notwithstanding their ephemeral nature, they left an indispensable legacy of Holocaust testimonies, collections of Nazi documents, and empirical data on the survivor generation. Moreover, as the first systematic research on the destruction of European Jews ever undertaken, these Jewish historical commissions laid the basis for the major Holocaust research institutions in Europe and Israel.

This study concentrates on the Jewish historical commissions in France, Poland, Germany and Austria in the years 1943-1953, from the establishment of the first Jewish historical commission in the French underground to the year when Yad Vashem was

officially founded. It uncovers the individual stories of the commissions in these countries: the respective conditions leading to the foundation of these institutions; the people involved; their motivation to engage in the painstaking documentation of the recent tragedy; the research methods applied; and the research and publications produced.

Moreover, this dissertation analyzes the work of these commissions within the context of other documentation projects undertaken by Jews in response to the experience of collective suffering in the twentieth century prior to the Holocaust. By means of this comparative framework, this dissertation shows that the avalanche of historiographical activity that was unleashed immediately after the Second World War in the form of Jewish historical commissions was in fact the result of a certain tradition, or genre, of history writing as a response to catastrophe that had begun to crystallize among European Jews under the impact of several catastrophic incidents prior to the Nazi annihilation of European Jewry. Yet only with the Holocaust did it gain full momentum. Those who had survived this tragedy engaged in historical documentation because they believed that documenting the destruction would best serve their psychological, political, and material needs. Narrating the tragedy would not only enable the survivors to work through their traumatic experiences and assure that a full account of events was passed on for posterity, but the accumulation of historical evidence would also play a pivotal role in the prosecution of perpetrators, in claims for restitution, and in the fight for Jewish rights. Moreover, the data collected would constitute the basis for future historical research.

The source material this study is based on includes archival documents produced by these commissions at the time, i.e., correspondence, minutes, research guidelines, personal papers of the main actors, compilations of historical data, and publications by the commissions. An important source on the impact of the commissions' work and its reception by the larger Jewish and non-Jewish environment are archival documents by contemporaries not affiliated with the commissions, i.e., records by Jewish relief organizations, Jewish communities, non-Jewish research institutions and the contemporary Jewish press.

This study seeks to make a contribution to several larger fields: Firstly, by telling the story of the Jewish historical commissions in four European countries, it can add a missing piece to the literature on survivor communities in post-war Europe. Moreover, by analyzing what survivors actually wrote about the destruction in the early post-war years, it challenges the argument that survivors remained silent about their past until the 1960s. While those speaking up and recording their past might not have constituted

the majority of survivors, and their historical record may have been selective, subjective, and highly emotional, the survivors were not silent about their past; on the contrary, they believed that historical documentation was imperative.

Secondly, through the comparison of commissions in different countries, this study seeks to show how the survivors created the historical narrative of the destruction through their research and writing in the immediate post-war years and how conditions in the commission's respective countries shaped this narrative. Moreover, it shows how this narrative and its commemoration functioned as the basis for Jewish community rebuilding in the immediate postwar years.

Thirdly, this dissertation aims to contribute to the history of Jewish historiography: Unlike scholars who have read historical texts produced by Jews in response to catastrophic events as pieces of Jewish literature, this study understands these texts and the social networks out of which they emerged, as a historical phenomenon which even generated a specific genre of history writing and introduced a new kind of institution—the Holocaust archive—to Jewish social, cultural, and political life.

Fourthly, this study aims to reexamine the relation of history and memory: While many studies have dealt with Holocaust commemoration and its historical representation in present-day society and have argued for a radical dichotomy between history and memory, this study focuses on how survivors commemorated and represented the Holocaust in its immediate aftermath and what role historical documentation played for these survivors and their commemoration of the past.