Introduction

David N. Myers

Jewish History
ISSN 0334-701X

DOI 10.1007/s10835-014-9197-y
Your article is protected by copyright and all rights are held exclusively by Springer Science +Business Media Dordrecht. This e-offprint is for personal use only and shall not be self-archived in electronic repositories. If you wish to self-archive your article, please use the accepted manuscript version for posting on your own website. You may further deposit the accepted manuscript version in any repository, provided it is only made publicly available 12 months after official publication or later and provided acknowledgement is given to the original source of publication and a link is inserted to the published article on Springer's website. The link must be accompanied by the following text: “The final publication is available at link.springer.com”.

Springer
Introduction

DAVID N. MYERS

University of California—Los Angeles, Los Angeles, CA, USA
E-mail: myers@history.ucla.edu

Abstract  With the death of Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi in December 2009, the world of Jewish studies lost one of its most distinguished practitioners. Yerushalmi undertook pathbreaking research in a number of different fields of Jewish history that reflected the breadth of his erudition. This issue of Jewish History explores several key branches of Yerushalmi’s scholarly labor including his study of conversos and his ongoing interest in the “royal alliances” of the Jews. It also explores Yerushalmi’s reputation beyond the United States, focusing in particular on France and Germany, where he achieved wide renown in the 1980s and 1990s.

Keywords  Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi · Marranos · Sigmund Freud · Salo W. Baron · Royal alliance

I

With the death of Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi in December 2009, the world of Jewish studies lost one of its most distinguished practitioners. Yerushalmi possessed a range of talents—vast erudition, a razor-sharp wit, a spellbinding oratorical style, and a lyrical pen—that will likely not be seen again for a long time. Born in 1932 into a household in the Bronx where Yiddish, Hebrew, and, eventually, English were spoken, Yerushalmi headed southward on an educational journey that took him first to the northern tip of Manhattan (a BA at Yeshiva College), then to 122nd and Broadway (rabbinical ordination at the Jewish Theological Seminary), and finally a mere six blocks further south to 116th Street for doctoral studies at Columbia University under the legendary Salo Baron. In pursuing this path, he traversed three distinct cultural ecologies—Orthodoxy, Conservative Judaism, and the secular academy—and in each he encountered teachers and intellectual passions whose impact would remain with him throughout his extraordinary career.¹

¹For a series of recollections of these important periods in his life, see the conversations published in Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi and Sylvie Anne Goldberg, Transmettre l’histoire juive: Entretiens avec Sylvie Anne Goldberg, Itinéraires du savoir (Paris, 2012). This illuminating volume has become the most important biographical source on Yerushalmi’s life and work to date. See also the retrospective accounts by other scholars in Sylvie Anne Goldberg, ed., L’histoire et la mémoire de l’histoire: Hommage à Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi (Paris, 2012). See
After living the first thirty-four years of his life in New York, Yerushalmi took leave of his native city in 1966 when he was appointed an assistant professor at Harvard University, eventually assuming the Jacob E. Safra Chair in Jewish History and Sephardic Civilization there. After fourteen years at Harvard, Yerushalmi decided to return to New York to take up the Salo Wittmayer Baron Chair of Jewish History, Culture, and Society at Columbia. He would remain in that position from 1980 until his retirement in 2008. During his four decades at Harvard and Columbia, Yerushalmi published a relatively small number of books, but each bore the imprint of his distinctive style—dazzling in historical range, gripping in narrative drama, and probing of deep philosophical questions.

His first book, *From Spanish Court to Italian Ghetto: Isaac Cardoso; A Study in Seventeenth-Century Marranism and Jewish Apologetics*, based on his Columbia dissertation, introduced Yerushalmi as a major new voice in the field of early modern Sephardic history with a particular interest in the intellectual, spiritual, and cultural world of the crypto-Jew. Four years later, he produced a beautiful edition of Passover manuals, *Haggadah and History*, which contained his learned commentary on the remarkable diversity, visual and textual, that the Haggadah has displayed over the centuries.

Seven years later, Yerushalmi published his most famous book, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*. This slim volume revealed his mastery of all periods of Jewish history as it traced in sweeping fashion the relationship between history and memory from biblical times to his own era. The final chapter of the book offered up a somewhat melancholic set of reflections on the utility of the modern historian. The impact of the book was powerful. In the field of Jewish studies, it inaugurated a fertile new debate over the relationship between history and memory that continues to this day. Echoes of the book reverberated beyond the field as well, gaining Yerushalmi renown in

---


4 Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, Samuel and Althea Stroum Lectures in Jewish Studies (Seattle, 1982).

the broader academic world in North America, Israel, France, and Germany, among other settings.

Nine years after *Zakhor*, which was based on his Stroum Lectures at the University of Washington, Yerushalmi published his next major book, also based on a series of talks—this time the Franz Rosenzweig Lectures at Yale. *Freud’s Moses: Judaism Terminable and Interminable* represented the summation of Yerushalmi’s careful inquiry and research into a figure of longstanding interest to him, Sigmund Freud, whom he began to study seriously in the company of psychoanalysts upon returning to New York in 1980. The book represented his attempt to complicate the received view of Freud as uninformed about, disinterested in, and even hostile to his Jewish origins. Through dogged research and leaps of creative analysis, Yerushalmi made a compelling case that Freud had not abandoned the Jewish people but in fact felt a strong bond with them, a claim that prompted an altogether new reading of Freud’s controversial *Moses and Monotheism* (1939). *Freud’s Moses* further widened Yerushalmi’s circle of readers and admirers to include, among others, the famous French philosopher Jacques Derrida, whose 1995 book *Mal d’archive* (*Archive Fever*) was stimulated by Yerushalmi’s.

The short book based on a lecture or series of lectures proved to be Yerushalmi’s preferred genre, more congenial to him than the thick monograph typified by *From Spanish Court to Italian Ghetto*. This genre allowed him to blend his considerable skills as both orator and writer, for he often left the published text close to the spoken form in which his lectures were delivered. Toward the end of his career, Yerushalmi published several such lectures as small booklets, including “Servants of Kings and Not Servants of Servants”: *Some Aspects of the Political History of the Jews* (first published in German, followed by editions in English and French) and the bilingual *Israel, der unerwartete Staat* / *Israel, The Unexpected State*. Both of these

---

lectures touched upon an area of recurrent concern beyond his interest in Sephardic history or Jewish historical memory—namely, the political history of the Jews. Following in the path of his teacher Baron, Yerushalmi explored in “Servants of Kings” the centuries-old “royal alliance” of the Jews with monarchical power. While noting that the alliance had a mesmerizing, myth-making effect on Jews, Yerushalmi was intent on arguing against Hannah Arendt’s view that Jews had become so dependent on state power as to be willing participants in their own demise during the Holocaust. He declared that “in the entire historical experience of the Jews there was nothing to prepare them intellectually or psychologically for what befell them between 1940 and 1945.”

That experience had prepared them for discrimination, but not mass destruction. In his subsequent Israel lecture Yerushalmi attempted to assess, through his wide-ranging historical lens, the second major development in twentieth-century Jewish history: the formation of the State of Israel. As in his analysis of the unprecedented nature of the Holocaust in Jewish experience and consciousness, he argued in this lecture that the creation of the Israeli state marked “a major and unanticipated rupture in Jewish history, a revolt against Jewish messianism.” And yet, we can notice different emphases in these two lectures. In the latter Yerushalmi asserted that Jews’ traditional messianic belief had inculcated in them a certain passivity that Zionism consciously rejected, whereas in “Servants of Kings” he insisted that Jews had actually accrued, along with a romanticized view of the king, a solid dose of political wisdom over the course of their long history of alliance with state authority.

The themes of political realism, state power, and the real and mythic features of the royal alliance that preoccupied Yerushalmi in the “Servants of Kings” and Israel lectures also stood at the heart of his decades-old interest in the early modern Spanish Jewish chronicler Solomon Ibn Verga. In the last years of his life, Yerushalmi was at work on a major new translation and historical commentary on Ibn Verga’s classic work of sixteenth-century historical thought, Shevet Yehudah. The subject brought together many of Yerushalmi’s main scholarly interests: Spanish Jewry, the nature of Jewish historical writing, and Jewish political history. The completion of the Ibn Verga edition would have marked the closing of a wide circle of scholarly labor that began at Columbia in the early 1960s. Alas, Yerushalmi died before finishing the work, though the medievalist Jeremy Cohen has picked up the mantle and will publish a completed version of the text in the near future.

---

10Yerushalmi, Israel, der unerwartete Staat, 8.
INTRODUCTION

II

For all the pleasure that he derived from his books and the impact they had on the field of Jewish history, Yosef Yerushalmi often said that his proudest and most enduring achievement as a scholar was raising up a generation of students, many of whom came to assume positions of prominence in the international guild of Jewish historians. Five of the contributors to this issue of *Jewish History* were PhD students of Yosef Yerushalmi; the sixth never formally studied with him but was extremely close to him, especially when he began to make regular visits to Paris in the mid-1980s.

For many of his students, the encounter with Yosef Yerushalmi was life-altering. Studying Jewish history with him opened eyes in the most far-reaching ways, transforming the palette with which his students worked from black and white to an explosive range of colors. Concomitantly, Jewish history became a practice of the highest academic, intellectual, and cultural sophistication, an intellectually rich, cosmopolitan undertaking that was far from the provincial status to which many outside of the field had consigned it. As exciting as it was, it could also be terrifying to work with Yerushalmi, for he did not suffer fools gladly.

I had the privilege of having an ongoing conversation with Yosef Yerushalmi from the first days of my graduate training at Columbia in the fall of 1985. It was actually less of a conversation and more of a monologue, akin to the “Monologue with Freud” in which he daringly engaged in *Freud’s Moses*. I would sit in his office in Fayerweather Hall, peering at him through the thick clouds of smoke from his endless stream of cigarettes. He would hold forth for what seemed to be hours on end, serving up a dizzying cornucopia of ideas, anecdotes, and instructions in his distinctive accent (born less of the Bronx than of a British tutor who taught him English there as a young boy). I, for my part, sat in a state of total enchantment over his conversational virtuosity, too frightened to utter more than a few words at a time lest my ignorance be fully exposed.

Over time, our conversations gained a bit more mutuality, until the summer of 2000. Then, in a most beautiful if haunted setting—a glorious castle in southern Germany built by a one-time Nazi sympathizer—I gave a conference paper about Yerushalmi’s work that attempted to situate him and his interest in Jewish memory in what I saw as a new moment of scholarly and intellectual self-reflection. I suggested that this moment bore the traces of a

---

certain post-Shoah malaise, as well as of a certain postmodern proclivity for authorial reflexivity. As Michael Brenner notes in his essay in this volume, Yerushalmi did not know how to respond to my paper—in fact, he was agitated by it for weeks—since he recognized no part of himself in my reading. But respond he did, and it was not a gentle response. What I had imagined to be a tribute to the power of his work, he understood as an act of patricide. Thereafter, we fell into a chasm of silence that lasted years.

In what was a stroke of great good fortune in my life, Professor Yerushalmi and I managed to reconcile and resume our conversation several years before his death. I mention this episode not in order to rehash the arguments nor to seek vindication after the fact; rather, I recall it with the aim of highlighting an important quality in Yosef Yerushalmi. He took ideas very seriously. It is certainly the case that he could be thin-skinned in the face of perceived criticism, but au cœur he felt the need to respond as he did in Germany because he believed there were high stakes associated with the ideas being discussed. Similar to another distinguished attendee at the conference, Carlo Ginzburg, Yerushalmi was unsettled by the advent of postmodernism in intellectual life, sensing that it threatened the epistemological foundations of much humanistic scholarship, including history. Indeed, he maintained that we as historians must utilize all our skills—plumbing the depths of archives, making a cogent argument, writing lucid prose, and, as he regularly encouraged, refining our olfactory sense to sniff out connections—in order to reconstruct the past. He was not willing to surrender the historian’s quest for objectivity, but neither did he believe that we could or should surrender our empathic connection to actors and texts from the past. Finding the proper balance was the ongoing challenge of a good historian.

It is not just that Yerushalmi took ideas seriously; he took the ideas of his students seriously. I discovered this in rather painful fashion in our exchange in Germany, when he chose not to pull his punches but to respond directly and forcefully. In more normal and benign settings, he would discuss and make reference to the work of his students with pride and genuine respect. Conversely, for his students, Yosef Yerushalmi remained the arbiter of scholarly excellence and the ideal conversation partner. No one could match the sweep or depth of his knowledge of Jewish history, or the grace and sophistication of his thought. We all continue to appeal to his high standards and carry on our own monologues with Yerushalmi.


14 Yerushalmi discusses the attempt to strike this balance, drawing on the work of historian Thomas Haskell, in Yerushalmi and Goldberg, Transmettre l’histoire juive, 188.
INTRODUCTION

This issue of *Jewish History* is devoted to the scholarly legacy of Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi. It arose out of a panel at the annual meeting of the Association for Jewish Studies in Boston in December 2010 organized by former students to honor the memory of their teacher. Three of the contributors to this issue presented their essays at the panel (Dubin, Brenner, and Efron); one had planned to but could not (Rustow); and one has been added to the current forum (Goldberg). The idea of the panel organizers was to honor the memory of Yosef Yerushalmi by acknowledging the importance of his work in different fields of study, as well as in a variety of geographic locales. As we have noted, Yerushalmi ranged widely in his research, fertilizing a number of distinct fields of study. And, as we shall see, his influence extended well beyond the United States, leaving noticeable traces in France and Germany.

The essays collected here are not mere hagiographic tributes to Yosef Yerushalmi, but rather probing engagements with important aspects of his work. The forum opens with Marina Rustow’s essay devoted to Yerushalmi’s core scholarly interest in Spanish Jewish history. Her “Yerushalmi and the Conversos” begins by placing Yerushalmi in a broader historiographical context (including the work of Carl Gebhardt, António José Saraiva, and Israël Salvator Révah) out of which he developed his own imperative to study Jewish history “from within.” Far from prompting an insular retreat from the wider world in which Jews lived, this imperative impelled Yerushalmi to penetrate the depths of thought and emotion of the actors whom he studied, as in the case of two Spanish New Christian brothers, Abraham (né Miguel) Cardoso, who became a prophet spreading the gospel of Sabbatianism, and Isaac (né Fernando) Cardoso, who became a leading defender of the Jews after leaving Iberia and Christianity for Italy and who was the main protagonist of Yerushalmi’s *From Spanish Court to Italian Ghetto*. The theme of forced conversion and the nature of the crypto-Jewish experience offer Rustow an opportunity to peer deeply into Yerushalmi’s historiographical method. His position, she proposes, is akin to that of Carlo Ginzburg—a “neopositivist” resistance to postmodern skepticism about authorial intent and a concomitant willingness to listen to the voices of historical sources with a mix of humane empathy and contextual nuance.

Lois Dubin analyzes Yerushalmi’s approach to Jewish political history in “Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, the Royal Alliance, and Jewish Political Theory.” Dubin recalls the keen interest of Yerushalmi’s teacher, Salo Baron, in the royal alliances of the Jews. She observes the way in which Yerushalmi built on the scholarly insights of Baron by exploring not only the mechanics and political effects of these alliances but also the manner in which Jews crafted mythic images of benign monarchs, at times in the face of clear countervailing evidence. Dubin then juxtaposes Yerushalmi’s historically textured view
of the royal alliance to that of Hannah Arendt in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and *Eichmann in Jerusalem*.\(^\text{15}\) She notes that Yerushalmi eschewed the sharply negative judgment that Arendt famously issued in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* against Jewish leaders for their dependence and passivity during the Holocaust. Rather than seeing them as heirs of a long and ignoble history of Jewish subservience, Yerushalmi suggested that Jews possessed a rich and complex political history of their own. Dubin proceeds to argue that Yerushalmi’s sense that Jews were “historical and political actors” lent him a measure of hope in the Jewish future precisely because he recognized that Jews could—and did—escape the clutches of an unrelentingly lachrymose history. In holding out this hope, she maintains in conclusion, Yerushalmi actually blurred “the boundaries between collective memory and critical historiography” that seemed, on first appearance, to be starkly demarcated in *Zakhor*.

John Efron’s paper marks a pivot in this issue toward a more geographic focus in Yosef Yerushalmi’s work. The title of his essay, “Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi: Historian of German Jewry,” is intentionally ironic: Yerushalmi never dedicated an entire article, much less a book, to the subject of German Jewry proper. That said, over the course of his career he managed to expand his range of historical expertise from Iberian Jewish history to German Jewry, as adumbrated in his 1982 Leo Baeck Memorial Lecture on Spanish proto-racialism and German antisemitism and reflected more fully in his book on Freud—not to mention the validation issuing from his 1987 election as the international president of the Leo Baeck Institute, the premier institution engaged in research on German Jewry.\(^\text{16}\) In tracing this growing interest, Efron notes an interesting evolution in Yerushalmi’s scholarship on German Jewry. Whereas the Yerushalmi of *Zakhor* treated German Jews, as represented by the founding fathers of *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, in rather monodimensional terms, his portraiture of Freud in *Freud’s Moses* was “richer, more variegated, and altogether livelier”—a function of his expanding grasp of the subtleties of the German-Jewish condition that owed, in no small part, to his studies with a circle of psychoanalysts in New York. Efron identifies a final irony: Yerushalmi, the Eastern European Jew, never wrote about Eastern European Jewry or the Holocaust. These related fields, Efron speculates, were too close to home, too painful for him to address directly. By contrast, the German cultural realm, with all its grandeur and hauntedness, was at once “familiar and rather alien,” proximate enough to occupy his attention but detached enough to merit critical scrutiny.

---


INTRODUCTION

The next article in this issue provides an interesting complement and contrast to Efron’s essay. Michael Brenner’s “Yerushalmi’s Germany” examines his teacher’s complicated history in that country. Brenner, himself a German-born Jew, recalls that when he came to Columbia for graduate studies in 1988, Yerushalmi told him of his reticence to visit Germany. Eventually, Yerushalmi overcame that hesitation and made his way there in the mid-1990s, drawing the attention and making the acquaintance of leading German scholars such as the medievalist Johannes Fried, the musicologist Jens Malte Fischer, and the Egyptologist Jan Assmann. Zakhor had already been published in German translation in 1988, and it was in German that his first collection of essays, Ein Feld in Anatot, appeared in 1993. A number of his most important lectures also appeared in German before they were published in English, including Spinoza und das Überleben des jüdischen Volkes (originally published in Hebrew) and Diener von Königen, which appeared in German ten years prior to its English publication as “Servants of Kings.”17 Brenner observes that Yerushalmi’s book on Freud, not surprisingly, was the most widely known of his works in German—in telling contrast to his major monograph, From Spanish Court to Italian Ghetto, which was never translated. Curiously, his reflections on Israel and Zionism, to which he devoted relatively little time (though one of the main venues was his 2006 lecture Israel, der unerwartete Staat), attracted a disproportionate amount of public attention, assuming a prominent place in posthumous remembrances of Yerushalmi in Germany.

The final essay in the issue shifts the focus to France, where Yerushalmi’s reception came earlier and was more robust than in Germany. Sylvie Anne Goldberg’s “Yerushalmi in a French Key: (French) History and (French) Memory” offers important insight into Yerushalmi as a figure of significance in French intellectual and academic circles. She traces the origins of this role to the translation of Zakhor into French in 1984, the year in which Yerushalmi made a striking appearance at the Colloque des intellectuels juifs de langue française with his lecture “Un champ à Anatot: Vers une histoire de l’espoir

In this period Yerushalmi earned the praise of leading French historians such as Pierre Vidal-Naquet and, several years later, François Furet and Pierre Nora, whose monumental collaborative project *Les lieux de mémoire* coincided in time and theme with Yerushalmi’s *Zakhor*. These French scholars saw Yerushalmi as a major new voice of historiographical sophistication, all the more striking given his vocation as a Jewish historian. Goldberg notes, however, that not all of the initial reaction to Yerushalmi was positive. Some within the Jewish community regarded *Zakhor*, with its self-doubt about the utility of the historian’s vocation, as “dangerous,” particularly in a period in which Holocaust denial (that of Robert Faurisson, for example) was a major concern. Still, Yerushalmi’s fame in France grew, especially after his appearance at another gathering of intellectuals in 1987 at the Royaumont Abbey, where he and others discussed the theme of “Usages de l’oubli.” His captivating performance at this conference further burnished his reputation as a key figure in the pervasive discourse of memory in France. And yet, as in Germany, it was Yerushalmi’s book on Freud that definitively cemented his reputation. Here the responsible party was Jacques Derrida, whose *Mal d’archive* drew new attention to Freud’s *Moses through* its extended, creative, and tortuous gloss. Goldberg concludes her essay by noting that although Yersushalmi’s substantial celebrity in France in the 1980s and 1990s may have faded, his considerable legacy lives on in the large volume of scholarship that he has inspired. Meanwhile, four years after his death, the towering presence of Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi is brought to life in the pages of *Jewish History* through these searching inquiries into his work by five leading scholars and disciples.

---
