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Narrating Jewish history in free walking tours - Warsaw as a case study

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Sabine Stach

Nar- rating

Jewish history in free walking tours – *Warsaw* *as a case study*

Introduction: Jewish Heritage Tourism without material heritage?

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Throughout the last decade, Warsaw has increased its attractiveness as a tourist destination in East Central Europe. Although the number of incoming tourists is not as high as in Prague or Cracow, short city trips to the Polish capital are becoming more popular (GUS, 2016: 1).¹ The most visited sights are the Old Town, Łazienki-Park, various royal palaces, the communist “Palace of Culture and Science” and modern museums and educational centers like the Warsaw-Uprising-Museum, the Copernicus-Centre as well as the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews (MSW, 2015: 25ff). The latter was opened in 2014 in Muranów district and has become one of the main promoters of Jewish Culture and History in the city: it organizes various public events but also runs an online multimedia guide to the Polish capital with different virtual tours about “Jewish Warsaw before, during and after the war” (<http://warsze.polin.pl/en/>). Due to its exhibition, its impressive building and above all the symbolic grounds it was erected on, the former ghetto, it is also a prominent stop in most of the (non-virtual) guided tours on Jewish history in town.

Although the last report on incoming tourism in Warsaw 2015 did not rank any further Jewish sites among the greatest attractions, POLIN can be seen as a part of Jewish Heritage Tourism that has spread in Poland and its neighboring countries since the 1990s.² The phenomenon of embedding Jewish Heritage into mass tourism has been explored by various scholars such as Ruth Ellen Gruber. In her analysis of the commodification of “things Jewish” she studied how and why non-Jews embrace and enact Jewish culture in places where Jews are basically absent today.³ She argues that the popular appropriation of the lost Jewish world results in a “virtual Jewishness... a realm, thus, in which Jewish cultural products may take precedence over living Jewish culture” (Gruber, 2002: 27). However, the case of Warsaw is different: unlike other cities with a huge Jewish population in pre-war times, material remnants of their life are rare here. Having been systematically destroyed by Nazi-Germany in 1943/1944, pre-war Warsaw ceased to exist. The remnants of its multifold Jewish life since the 15th century are mostly lost. Jewish heritage here is, to a great deal, virtual heritage.

Virtual or not, “Jewish Warsaw” does definitely play a role in the city’s tourism industry. Guidebooks typically encompass sections about Jewish history and heritage, while, aside from several memorials, they propose visits to the few preserved objects and places in Warsaw such as the Nożyk-synagogue, some houses in Próżna Street, the orphanage of Janusz Korczak, the Jewish cemetery in Wola district or a small backyard remnant of the ghetto wall. Additionally, several operators offer guided tours regarding local Jewish history. In this article, I am focusing on these *Jewish themed guided tours*. I am

1 The average stay of foreign tourists in the region Mazowia (incl. Warsaw) is only 1.7 days (ustat 2016).

2 The report from 2015 names the POLIN museum as one of the Top 10 attractions among foreigners and Poles (MSW, 2015: 25).

3 See also Erica Lehrer’s work on Jewish Heritage Tourism in Poland (Lehrer, 2013). Like Gruber, she is drawing on Diana Pinto’s concept of “Jewish Spaces”.

going to explore one tour format that has recently gained huge popularity not only in Warsaw but in other major European centers: *Free Walking Tours*. Directed toward individual, mainly low-budget travelers, these free walking tours are composed as dense, entertaining introductions to the destinations' pasts. They stand out due to the very fact that potential guests neither have to sign up nor to pay in advance. Instead, interested tourists simply show up at the meeting point advertised via the companies' webpages.

This case study goes back to field research done in spring 2016 in Warsaw. As a participant observer, I joined two tours named "Jewish Warsaw" by two competing providers: the *Free Walking Tour Foundation* and *Orange Umbrella*. Both tours run regularly and follow a fixed itinerary. The history is presented according to a clear storyline that starts with the first Jewish settlement in Poland and ends with remarks on the present-day situation. Cut into single stories, the bygone Jewish presence in the city is narrated in different spots in the urban space. Starting from the assumption that being physically present and moving through the historic spaces is fundamentally different from other forms of popular history consumption, I am interested in the specific impact the medium *guided tour* has on the history presented. A key difference from school lessons, history books, films or museums, is that the educational experience inevitably has to be grasped as a bodily encounter with the urban space. The questions at stake therefore are: How does the guide's presentation direct the tourists' gazes? And how do those gazes correlate with the different materialities on the ground? How does the fact that people move through contemporary Warsaw impact on the narration of Jewish history? In order to consider these issues I will try to take into account not only the semantic but also the material and the performative levels of the presentation, which, according to my hypothesis, are highly interrelated and can at the same time contradict each other.

Rather than giving a comprehensive analysis of the phenomenon of Jewish themed tours, I will present nothing more than first considerations on the mentioned issues. For that reason, I will in the first part give a short summary of Warsaw's cityscape before, during and after the Second World War. A rough description of the Free Guiding concept and the Walking Tour companies in Warsaw will follow before I briefly introduce the two case studies including their particular itineraries. In the second part of the paper I will then discuss single features and restrictions of the tours which show how history is "negotiated" in these commercially motivated, popular encounters with space. By carving out the interplay between performative and cognitive perspectives, I claim that the main restriction of the tours about Jewish history in Warsaw does not primarily lay in their presentation of a trivialized history but in a more general dilemma caused by the exclusive focus on pre-war heritage as "the authentic". While being provided with a highly emotional story about the town's tragic loss of its Jewish population, the tourists are guided almost invariably to those places *without* material traces of the bygone Jewish presence. Neither historical relics, nor gaps, scars or "voids" in the cityscape help us to physically perceive that loss. Thus, in large parts on the tours, emotional, intellectual, and corporal experiences stand side-by-side unconnected.

On the ground: Warsaw before, during and after the war

Before WWII, nearly 400,000 people, about one-third of Warsaw's population, were Jewish. Although not strictly separated, different districts were mainly inhabited by Jews such as the "Northern District" around Nalewki Street, which was one of the characteristic areas of Jewish settlement. After the German invasion of Poland in September 1939, multifaceted Jewish life was restricted step-by-step. These various anti-Jewish measures were enacted also in Warsaw and in 1940, the German authorities established a ghetto including the Northern District, where the Jews were forced to live in a walled in territory. Due to the resettlement of more and more Jews from other occupied territories, the living conditions in the already overcrowded area went from bad to worse. In July 1942, mass deportations to Treblinka began. The murdering of the Jews in this extermination camp began the downsizing of the ghetto in several waves. In the beginning of 1943, no more than 70,000 (of 500,000 before) people lived inside the ghetto walls. Facing this desperate situation, on April 19th 1943, Jewish combatants started the Ghetto Uprising. After the brutal suppression of this upheaval, during which more than 56,000 people were killed on the spot or deported to one of the death camps, the Germans systematically destroyed the area. Building by building, they blew up the whole ghetto under the command of Jürgen Stroop. Staged as the culmination point of the destruction, the Great Synagogue at Tomackie Street was demolished on May 16th 1943. Only a few single buildings remained, among them a Christian church on Nowolipki Street.

However, it was not only the former ghetto site that was destroyed by the Germans. Almost all the rest of the city, Jewish and non-Jewish property, was demolished in the aftermath of another failed uprising: the Warsaw Uprising in 1944. After 63 days of fighting led by the Polish resistance Home Army, the ss chief Heinrich Himmler proclaimed the total destruction of the city and at the end of WWII, Warsaw lay in ruins. The reconstruction of the Polish capital under Communist rule was accompanied by a huge funding campaign all over the country. Next to prestigious and ideological projects like the re-erection of the old town, the construction of a modern East-West connection ("trasa W-Z") and the "Palace of Culture and Science," it was the housing problem that needed to be solved most urgently. In the 1950s, a new housing district was built on the site of the destroyed ghetto: Muranów.

Built on and partly from the rubble of the ghetto, the architect Bohdan Lachert aesthetically and functionally took inspiration from pre-war modernism while trying to pay contribution to the place's traumatic past. Not only were the houses erected on terraced grounds using the rubble as their foundation, Lachert also planned unplastered façades displaying the origin from the ruins. However, as the doctrine of "sorealism" got put forward, the concept that combined modern housing with memorialization got step-by-step modified and reduced to a minimum. The façades had to be plastered and were decorated; colors, instead of the ruins' grey, were supposed to have a positive effect on the formation of the new socialist personae (Leociak, undated: 4). Apart from the terraced grounds, nearly no visual indication of what had happened in this place is to be found today inside the urban landscape. As in other parts of the city, pre-war Warsaw has nearly completely vanished in its material structure. Not only are the buildings new, but so is the street

geometry; especially in the former Northern District new streets emerged while the old ones have been erased from the map. The Holocaust researchers Barbara Engelking and Jacek Leociak have undertaken a detailed reconstruction of the former structure in their book *The Warsaw Ghetto: A Guide to the Perished City* (Engelking/Leociak, 2009): a careful analysis which obviously forms the basis for most popular and educational projects about the district's history today, among which are the mentioned guided tours. Many of the tours focus especially on what Leociak calls the "post-ghetto-space" ("miejsce-po-getcie")⁴ (Leociak, 2013: 820). The tour guides present Muranów as the "authentic" grounds of the ghetto, while the [g]hetto now only exists under the asphalt of the Muranów streets, under the sidewalks, under the squares in the courtyards, under the school playgrounds, under the kindergarten courtyards, under the terraces of piled-up rubble that are now grown over with grass, under the poplars, limes, and sycamores, which are exceptionally luxuriant in this district. (Leociak, 2013: 836)⁵

Taking up and considering Gruber's notion of "cities without Jews" (Gruber, 2002: 4), Warsaw seems to be a city not necessarily without Jews (like in other central European towns a revival of Jewish life and culture had taken place since the end of the 1970s) (Rothstein, 2015), but a city devoid of almost all visual traces of the Jews and their history. We can neither walk through the houses of the former ghetto, as for example in the city of Łódź, nor can we as tourists have at first glance the Jewish presence as it is possible in Kazimierz in Cracow or Jozefov in Prague. The Holocaust does not take a prominent place in the memorial landscape of Warsaw, either. Instead, the extermination of the Jews is part of an "unrepresented world" (Janicka/Wilczyk, 2013: 93) as Elżbieta Janicka and Wojciech Wilczyk have criticized the post-ghetto space of Muranów. More than in other cities, Warsaw's Jewish heritage, which is increasingly valued and capitalized, shows up as virtual heritage in the public sphere. Commemorative plaques, memorials, street names, and museums rather than actual material relics link the present-day Warsaw to its past. Although Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett in her first attempts to conceptualize heritage has pointed out that "virtuality" makes up one of its central characteristics, the "absence of actualities" (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1995: 375ff) seems especially striking in the "phoenix" city of Warsaw that rose from the ashes of WWII.

Free Walking Tours: a tour guiding concept and two case studies in Warsaw

In 2003, Christopher Sandemann pioneered a concept which is famous all over Europe today. He was the first to come up with the idea of so called "FREE Tours" as "an innovative, gratuity-based model that puts the power back into the hands of the modern-day traveler" (Sandemans New Europe). The basic idea proved to be as successful as it was simple: Local guides offer regular, often daily, tours through their own city in different foreign languages (above all English) without any obligation of booking or paying in advance.

4 Different from me, Emma Harris in her English translation refers to "miejsce-po-getcie" as "the place where the ghetto used to be".

5 English translation by E. Harris quoted from Engelking/Leociak, 2009: 810.

Pointing out entertainment, information and interaction, the tours' target are independent low-budget travelers who want to gain insights into the destination's culture while also getting in touch with co-travelers and "the locals". At the end of each tour, they are asked to tip the guide, if they liked his or her performance.

Copying and partly modifying this concept, various alternative free tour companies have been established in different countries in the last decade. Suspiciously monitored by traditional tour operators, all of them act in a legal (and fiscal) grey zone: Since they do not sell tickets but only collect tips, they claim not to be an actual business. In Poland, the dissemination of the concept was probably further driven by a deregulation of the tour guiding profession since January 1st 2014. In Warsaw, two operators are offering Free Walking Tours: the *FREE Walking Tour Foundation* founded in 2007 and *Orange Umbrella*, operating for five years. While the latter is organizing tours only in Warsaw, the former conducts them in Cracow, Gdańsk, Poznań, Wrocław, Warsaw and Zakopane.

Like Sandemann's original, both operators promise their customers mainly good entertainment. On its webpage, *Orange Umbrella* distances itself from "the usual a-fact-a-date-a-name blahblah". Instead, the company claims: "We focus on stories rather than history and want to surprise you with our style of guiding." The guides, it states, will provide their guests with an "insider's perspective" (Orange Umbrella, 2016). Similar descriptions are to be found on the *FREE Walking Tour Foundation's* website: The guides are said to be "very qualified and passionate people," who are "used to all typ[es] of visitors from all around the world". "[T]o catch their attention" is stated to be "[their] daily routine" (freewalkingtour.com, 2016). However, this focus on entertainment does not mean that the operators do not claim to convey reliable knowledge and important facts about local history and culture. On the contrary, both free tour providers in Warsaw stress the high qualifications of all their tour guides.⁶

Apart from the claim to provide professional "infotainment", there is one more feature that seems to be significant when monitoring the self-presentations via internet as well as during the tours. Both operators point out their democratic ideal: the tours, mainly running in English, are stressed to be open for everyone, to "all travelers [sic], regardless of their budget" (Orange Umbrella, 2016). Neither financial nor educational matters should hinder people to join the tours. Moreover, this concept aims at providing intercultural communication and integration, as *FREE Walking Tour Foundation* names its goals, among which are "[a]ctivities on behalf of European integration and the development of contacts and cooperation between peoples" but also "[p]romotion of Poland abroad" as well as "[d]issemination of knowledge about the Polish national heritage" (freewalkingtour.com, 2016). This combination of national and intercultural matters raises interesting questions when it comes to the presentation of Jewish heritage, of course.

The tours "Jewish Warsaw" by the *FREE Walking Tour Foundation* and by its competitor *Orange Umbrella* resemble each other regarding their itineraries. Both follow a similar route starting from the same spot next to the Sigismund column in front of the Warsaw castle in the Old Town. When I visited them in winter/spring 2016, the tours differed above all in their length and the amount

6 Although not required anymore, the guides usually have a guiding license. That means they have attended formal education courses for tour guides in Warsaw and passed an exam.

of in-depth information.⁷ While the former lasted two hours, the latter was introduced as a two or two-and-a-half hour tour, but lasted three-and-a-half hours in the end. The first one was led by “Bella” and attended by around 35 mainly young people from different European countries and from the us. Several guests had obviously been on the same operator’s “Old Town Tour” and accepted the invitation to join another tour. *Orange Umbrella* seems to be not as well-known and popular. There might be a couple of reasons: first of all, it operates only locally in Warsaw and not in other towns; secondly, the “Jewish Tour” runs only three times a week, while the *FREE Walking Tour Foundation* is able to provide it on a daily basis.⁸ Seven guests and I went on the tour with “Kate”, who turned out to be a guide in the *POLIN* museum as well. Her knowledge of Jewish history was huge; she had even started to learn Hebrew, as she proved several times during the walk. Also, the audience in both tours differed significantly: The small tour gathered six Israelis (five of them were traveling together) and a woman from Malaysia. Encouraged by the small size of the group, the participants freely asked questions and did not want to hurry. Another significant difference: no one introduced himself as Israeli or Jewish in the big group.⁹ Beside myself other Germans took part here.

Being aware of the fundamentally different communicative arrays in both groups (big group, no Israelis vs. small group, mainly Israelis) I assume that several observations can still be taken into account in order to analyze the presentation of Jewish history in guided tours. As both guides had already done the tour many times, the narration was clearly standardized and obviously followed a fixed and proven script.¹⁰ As mentioned before, the scope of both tours is the same. Both start at one of the most famous touristic spots of Warsaw’s old town, the Sigismund column and after a short welcome the groups move some steps aside to gather for the first stop: a little bronze model of the Old Town. Here a rough introduction about the origins of Jewish settlement is given. While the *FREE Walking Tour Foundation* turns to the South after that and leaves the Old Town area, *Orange Umbrella* moves alongside the reconstructed town fortification and includes one stop inside the town walls to show the Szeroki Dunaj Street, where the first Jews had settled. Although located at different places the next stops are dedicated to the “Privilegium de non tolerandis Judaeis,” a law by which the king had prohibited the Jews from living inside the city walls in the 16th century. As in other towns, it was in force until the 18th century and resulted in the settlement of Jews in different places beyond the city walls. After presenting this, both guides lead their groups to former Jewish areas outside of the Old Town. While the *Free Walking Tour* immediately heads to the “Northern District”, established in the 19th century, Kate from *Orange Umbrella* took us to an earlier Jewish district: the area around Freta Street in the so called New Town. After that, we headed for our next regular stop: Krasinski garden, which used to be frequented by

7 I joined the following tours: *FREE Walking Tour Foundation*: “Jewish Warsaw,” 14.02.2016 and *Orange Umbrella*: “Jewish Warsaw,” 14.04.2016. In both cases I was allowed to record the whole tour. Next to the audio-recording and a photo documentation I took field notes while walking with the groups.

8 That’s probably why my first attempt to join the tour ended unsuccessful: Apart from me no one else showed up for it. A couple of days later I was more lucky.

9 Usually the guides ask people where they come from in the beginning of each tour.

10 All guides have to follow a script in the themed tours. The single stops are normally fixed. However, the guides are free to choose in details in order to find their personal style.

Orthodox Jews. Turning south we approached the spot of the former “Great Synagogue”. Here both itineraries meet again.

Entering Muranów district, the former site of the ghetto, the routes are the same from now on: both guides used the benches in front of Muranów Cinema to give longer information. While Bella provided an introduction to the German occupation, the establishment of the ghetto in 1940, the living conditions and its destruction here, Kate broke with the chronological order. Having talked about the ghettoization of the Jews already before (next to Krasinski garden, *vis-à-vis* Muranów), she made the Polish-Jewish relationship after the war a subject here: above all the anti-Jewish campaign of 1968.¹¹ The next stops are located in Nowolipki Street in front of a little memorial plaque dedicated to Janusz Korczak. While Bella concentrated on the emotional story of the pedagogue’s commitment and his death together “with his children” (Jewish Warsaw, 14.2.2016) in Treblinka, Kate stressed the fact that he was not alone in what he did, but joined by (the today far less known) Stefania Wilczyńska (Jewish Warsaw, 14.4.2016). The next stop of both tours is also referring to a single person: Ludwik Zamenhof, creator of Esperanto language, who is made the subject of discussion in front of the recent street art work “Ludwik Zamenhof” in a little passage next to his former place of residence. From here the trail crosses Anielewicz Street. Next to the impressive modern building of the POLIN Museum, various older and newer monuments are mentioned: the first ghetto memorial from 1946, the huge ghetto fighters’ monument by Nathan Rapoport, the “Karski Bench” and a memorial plaque for Irena Sendler. From there the tours continue to their last stops: Miła 18 Memorial, where on May 8th 1943 Mordechaj Anielewicz and his co-fighters from the Jewish Combat Organization committed collective suicide, and the “Umschlagplatz” in Stawki Street. Finally, the trails return to the POLIN Museum, where both try to end on positive notes: The FREE *Walking Tour foundation* finished the narration at the memorial for Willy Brandt’s genuflection in 1970; Kate from *Orange Umbrella* talked about the “revival of the Jewish life in Poland after the fall of the communism” (Jewish Warsaw, 14.4.2016).¹²

By comparison, the tours turn out to be structured in a similar way. Although both guides stress different aspects and vary significantly regarding the depth of their knowledge about Jewish history, they cut the history into stories about individuals, single events or the particularity of single places and give it a mainly chronological order. Historical introductions and factual summaries are reduced to a minimum in order to make the walk as entertaining as possible. They use additional visual material to help people picture pre-war Warsaw. Interestingly, both are focusing on Muranów district, the former ghetto site, to which they are heading more or less directly from the Old Town. Making that choice, the itineraries are not able to include actual material heritage like the Jewish cemetery further in the West, the Nożyk-synagogue nearby Grzybowski Square, the last remnant of the ghetto wall behind a house in Złota Street or the building of Janusz Korczak’s orphanage in Krochmalna Street. For a walking tour of about two hours, these places are simply located too far from the touristic center.

11 This remains one of the very few concrete comments on the Polish-Jewish relationship which go beyond the general acknowledgment of anti-Jewish prejudices since the Middle Ages.

12 In regard to content, the tours end here but both guides offer transfer back to the starting point: the more touristic old town.

Tracing Jewish Warsaw: features and restrictions of the Free Walking Tours

By observing both tours it became obvious that the former ghetto area is gazed upon as something special. While some of the Israeli tourists clearly articulated their feelings of walking on sacred grounds, other visitors came with a certain pre-assumption regarding the atmosphere of Holocaust-related sites, too. "I cannot believe that people want to live here" (Jewish Warsaw, 14.2.2016), one of the travelers commented in regard to the fact that today an ordinary housing district is built on the very spot of the ghetto. This intervention reveals the prominent position of this area as a place of atrocity, different from the rest of the city. And indeed, this is what touristic advertisement and travel literature tell alike. The *FREE Walking Tour Foundation* promotes its offer as follows: "The stories of the Warsaw ghetto and the Uprising there, and of people like Janusz Korczak and Mordechai Anielewicz will leave you trembling" (freewalkingtour.com: Jewish Warsaw). The fact that thousands of Jews hid themselves on the "Aryan" side, that Jews also fought and died in the Warsaw Uprising in 1944 and that Warsaw in its entirety was a scene of crime and destruction remains marginal in both tours.

There are even attempts to fit the former ghetto into the conception of "dark tourism". The website *www.dark-tourism.com* includes the "ghetto trail" into a worldwide list of "dark sites", ranking the former ghetto site four (out of ten) on its "darkometer". The description of what to see reads as follows:

Since the entire Warsaw Ghetto area was razed to the ground by the Nazis after the uprising, next to nothing of the ghetto itself remains to be seen. The area was built up with drab socialist housing estates after the war – planted right on top of the ghetto's rubble, and partly incorporating it (as building material). It's thus very difficult to imagine what the area must have looked like originally. But at least there's now a string of memorial stones (a 'path of remembrance'), mostly put in place from the late 1980s onwards. (dark-tourism.com: Warsaw Ghetto trail)

What makes the destination "dark" according to the author of the website is the fact that the ghetto belonged to "a dark chapter of history," which per se is said to be "simply quite interesting" (dark-tourism.com: What is dark tourism?). This interest is, however, not purely cognitive, but affective and morally inflected as well. In her research on "difficult heritage," Sharon MacDonald has pointed out the notion of "moral witnessing" (MacDonald, 2008: 11), which precedes physical travel to the places where "it" happened. The authenticity¹³ of these destinations, she argues, derives from the bodily encounter with the actual space in which the tourists are not least "performing the fact that [they] have made such an effort" (MacDonald, 2008: 11).

Using this potential to arouse the travelers' interest in and moral attachment to war, violence, and humiliation, the urban grounds of Muranów serve above all as raw material for "interesting stories". Both guides highlighted certain individuals connected to the place thereby keeping the promise to tell

13 Authenticity is understood as both, a constructivist and a material, quality here. While recent tourism research focuses it primarily as a projection deriving from the mind of the tourist, MacDonald highlights the importance of materiality and physical encounters with history in situ.

“stories rather than history.” The biographies of Jan Karski, Janusz Korczak, Ludwik Zamenhof and Mordechaj Anielewicz were used to talk about the local past without giving dry data about WWII. By doing so, exemplary behavior and progressive ideas could be appreciated: we were touched by Korczak’s altruistic and sacrificial help for orphan children, we learned about Karski’s struggle to make public what the world was not willing to take notice of, we were horrified by the heroic fight of Anielewicz, doomed to fail. Besides this, both tours placed special emphasis on the merits of Ludwik Zamenhof. Born in a Jewish Family in Białystok in 1859, he came to Warsaw as a secondary school student. Fluent in Yiddish, Russian, Belorussian, German, Hebrew and Polish and understanding Latin, Greek and French, he invented a new language in order to enable people all over the world to communicate without language boundaries – Esperanto.

Although the project to establish Esperanto failed, this story about a universal, cosmopolitan language appears to play a prominent role in the narration. As quoted earlier, the *FREE Walking Tour Foundation* states “[a]ctivities on behalf of European integration and the development of contacts and cooperation between peoples” as one of its goals. Thus, Ludwik Zamenhof appears as a pioneer of what the tour guides try in their daily practice: to conduct intercultural communication. In her interpretation of Zamenhof’s intentions Bella clearly linked this idea of intercultural dialogue to the topic of the tour: “A lack of communication causes wars” (Jewish Warsaw, 14.2.2016), is how she summarizes his basic idea. Included into the question of how WWII could happen and the Holocaust take place, this universal claim is of course highly ambivalent: it implicitly reduces the reasons for the present-day absence of Jews to a matter of failed communication.¹⁴

Beyond this problematic notion of an all too simplistic explanation, the focus on extraordinary biographies of great men raises questions about more general restrictions of historical narration in guided tours: what role did those play who are *not* mentioned in specific stories? What about women? And even broader: does the framework of heritage tours leave any space to talk about historical agency at all? Having a look at the particular Jewish tours it seems that by pointing out single morally valued deeds, other forms of agency are marginalized or remain beyond narration on the whole. Neither victims, nor bystanders or perpetrators were portrayed in the tours. Even the most obvious agency, the murder of Jews, seems to fade from sight when only the most prominent German perpetrators like Adolf Hitler or Jürgen Stroop were named during the tour. Apart from them, perpetratorship mostly appeared in grammatical passive constructions as the following: “...another 50,000 were sent to Treblinka gas chambers to be killed over there” (Jewish Warsaw, 14.2.2016). Even if an agent does appear (“the Germans,” “the Nazis,” or simply “they,”) single or collective players remained abstract in comparison to the agency of Karski, Korczak and the other heroes.

¹⁴ Moreover, this harmonizing way of presenting can be linked to a general risk of Jewish heritage tourism that is virulent throughout the whole tour: an appropriation of Jewish culture for contemporary needs. Ruth Ellen Gruber has pointed out this problem in her study about virtual Jewishness very frankly: “Honoring lost Jews and their annihilated world”, she writes, “can become a means of demonstrating democratic principles and multicultural ideals, regardless of how other contemporary minorities are treated, be they Turks, Roma, North African, or whatever” (Gruber, 2002: 10). Especially in view of the controversial debates about the Polish-Jewish relationship, the role of Poles in the Holocaust and the most recent politics of history in Poland this warning deserves further consideration.

The narrative strategy to personalize the presentation is not restricted to human beings, however. In their rhetoric, Kate and Bella raised the material remnants of pre-war Warsaw into the status of “witnesses of the history” (Jewish Warsaw, 14.4.2016). Such promises to bring tourists close to “authentic” relics are one of the main promises typically made by guided walking tours. The status of the original, though, is an ambivalent one in the Jewish themed tours. On the one hand, the narrations are based on a clear-cut opposition pre-/postwar. Material relics are perceived as “authentic” if (and only if) they originate from the time *before* (or during) WWII as they can then be regarded as witnesses of Jewish life and suffering. On the other hand, the tours’ main spots deal exactly with the non-existing; the stories are mainly located at symbolic places which lack these kind of material traces.

The tourist gaze, as John Urry has prominently named the consumption of places through specific images (Urry, 1990), was directed towards popular images of pre-war and wartime Warsaw by different means of visualization. In order to localize their stories within the urban landscape, Kate and Bella constantly pointed out small traces such as a maintained gate or old cobblestones. Additionally, they used further visual material to correlate the pre-war imaginary with the contemporary space. They brought pictures and included public maps and memorial plaques into the trail. The photographs of trade and daily life in the former Nalewki Street were introduced as “time machine[s]” by both. However, Bella immediately narrowed down her ambitions and admitted that neither the pictures, nor the remaining tram rails and cobblestones are sufficient to help the imagination. She even explained that if she had a real time machine back to the 1920s “even me, myself, I believe, I wouldn’t recognize the area” (Jewish Warsaw, 14.2.2016) and then announced the next stop dedicated to the “Great Synagogue”. Arriving at the spot, we saw nothing but a modern office building. Bella continued: “I wanted to show what is left of the synagogue ... apparently, it is nothing. I have nothing to show you” and she concludes: “Unfortunately, when we walk around [the] former Jewish district we need to use our imagination a lot” (ibid.).

Bella’s verbalization “I have nothing to show you” draws attention to the basic paradox of the tours: we kept seeing things while at the same time our gazes were constantly directed to the invisible. Not the tangible but the virtual heritage was commented because only the lost material was attributed as “authentic” throughout the presentations. What was missing in both tours were commentaries to those postwar materializations of Polish-Jewish history we actually *did* see. Why is the Muranów district shaped like it is? How was it intended to look like by the architect Bohdan Lachert? How did people react to the memorials erected soon after the War? Who was the initiator of the later monument at the “Umschlagplatz”? Have there been plans to reconstruct the Great Synagogue?¹⁵ And finally: what about the remnants of Jewish life that *are* maintained but of less symbolic importance like, for example, the synagogue’s library? Instead of using it as a starting point of narration, the fact that the library building next to the spot of the former synagogue survived the war was added rather incidental at the very end of

15 Bella indeed commented on the debate about rebuilding the synagogue. However, she mainly used it to tell the story about the “fate of the rabbis” – an urban legend to explain the very long construction process of the office building erected in the very spot of the synagogue. As she told me after the tour, Kate refuses to tell this story because of its anti-Semitic notion.

the story.¹⁶ This is quite surprising as people kept asking about the pre-war remnants. However, the newly renovated building obviously did not fit the popular image of “pastness” (Holtorf, 2013: 432). In comparison to the outrageous story of the symbolic destruction, the material originality paled and became insignificant here.

One object that turned out to be particularly important in order to highlight the “original grounds” of destruction is the former ghetto wall. Although none of the very few original relics were physically incorporated into the trail, the participants assumed them everywhere: during both tours people kept asking if red brick walls alongside the trail stem back from that specific wall. As the travelers started to take photos of a wall fragment in a backyard at the former “Umschlagplatz” both guides had to intervene and explain that it was *not* a ghetto wall remnant. The given information about its origin were different, however: Bella confirmed that the wall behind “Umschlagplatz” is at least an “original wall ... from WWII times” (Jewish Warsaw, 14.2.2016), while Kate denied even that fact (Jewish Warsaw, 14.4.2016).

This gaze, which I call the “ghetto wall gaze”, was not directed to material wall remnants only. Instead, all evidence for the boundary’s existence and its accurate position was valued as an encounter with the authentic. Thus, the course of the wall served as a common theme throughout the tours. On the one hand, the notion of sacred grounds, articulated especially by the Israeli tourists, increased the importance given to the boundaries of the ghetto. On the other hand, the ghetto wall gaze was amplified by the careful memorialization of the wall in the city: between 2008 and 2010, 22 Ghetto boundary markers had been installed along the borders of the Jewish quarter. Additionally, a boundary line marks the maximum perimeter of the ghetto area.¹⁷ *Orange Umbrella’s* presentation by Kate was dedicated to the localization of the ghetto wall in particular, although these attempts proved unsuccessful. Several times, the group in front of the boundary markers got involved in long discussions about who is now “in” and who is “out” the actual ghetto site. Obviously, neither the guide’s explanation nor the boundary line on the pavement was sufficient to clarify the situation. Finally, the confusion culminated in Kate’s attempt to include the wider urban environment into the clarification: “Can you see this fence? ...that building from the communist period was in the ghetto.” (Jewish Warsaw, 14.4.2016).

Reflecting on the performative superiority of the ghetto wall, another restriction of the guided tours becomes apparent. By permanently evoking the boundaries of the ghetto, the group’s encounter with urban space implicitly confirms and passes on the image of a hermetically isolated ghetto. However, this idea of a clear spatial separation between Jewish and Non-Jewish Poles is not accurate. Neither had the Warsaw ghetto wall been an obstacle for smuggling or other transfer to and from the “Aryan side,” nor did it hide the Holocaust from Polish eyes. By blinding out or at least neglecting the manifold interactions between “in” and “out,” between Polish and Jewish inhabitants of Warsaw in general, the guides’ proclaimed aim not to reduce Jewish history

16 It houses the Jewish Historical Institute today. In the FREE Walking Tour’s presentation, it is wrongly referred to as a former Jewish school.

17 In 2011, the installation “Footbridge of Memory” by Tomasz Lec was erected, which commemorates the bridge on Chłodna street which from January to August 1942 connected the so called “small” and the “big ghetto”. As the walking distance would be too far, it is not part of the tours.

to death and suffering is undermined by the ghetto (wall) gaze. Jewish and Polish history remain detached from each other.

Conclusion

Telling history in guided city tours means negotiating history with the audiences on the ground (Macdonald, 2009: 146ff.). The narration does not only have to be anchored in the specific urban space, it also has to meet the tourists' expectations, pre-assumptions, and images in order to be perceived as "authentic" and appreciated as a worthwhile experience. The travelers want to learn something new but not like in school;¹⁸ they want to be emotionally attracted. It is certainly not by chance that most guided tours follow a clear story line and last about 90–120 minutes like a TV movie.¹⁹ Even though touching a sensitive topic like the (absence of) Jewish life in Warsaw, the commercial guiding of international groups must be entertaining and simplistic. Regarding the free walking tours "Jewish Warsaw" considered here, this includes a universalistic way of narrating in order not to offend anyone, above all the tourists from Germany: the perpetrator nation. Thus, it becomes clear why tour guides avoid to speak of "the Germans," when they explain what happened during WWII.²⁰ Instead, "Nazi-Germany," "the Nazis" or grammatical passive constructions are used to prevent naming any involved actor. Generally, the focus rather is on single heroes who represent the extraordinary. In order to present a fascinating storyline and anchor it at places within walking distance, the most popular material objects of pre-war Jewish Warsaw (like the functioning Nożyk synagogue) are absent in the tours.

Having pointed out some of the restrictions evolving from these genuine characteristics of the medium guided city tour, I argue that it is not sufficient to call popular cultures of history in tourism "trivial"²¹. A judgment like that on the one hand ignores the great historical knowledge many of the guides possess. On the other hand, it simplifies the complex interplay of semantic, visual and bodily elements of the narration. I focused particularly on the performative impacts of the presentation of "Jewish heritage" in Warsaw: a city without many representations of its rich pre-war Jewish life. Given this particular virtuality of the subject, touristic encounters of "Jewish Warsaw" raise various questions and problems. As Jewish traces are widely absent from the urban space covered by the itineraries of the free walking tours, material prostheses are included into the presentation instead; above all photographs and maps as well as memorials. However, the latter are not treated as autonomous and likewise "authentic" witnesses of Polish-Jewish (post-war) history. Instead, the Karski-Bench, the Monument of the Ghetto Heroes or the memorial at "Umschlagplatz" serve mainly as anchors to give facts about Jan Karski, the Uprising or the logistic infrastructure of the Holocaust.

18 *Orange Umbrella* and the *FREE Walking Tour foundation* alike draw a quite outdated image of how history is taught in school and by traditional tour guides – as a pure collection of historical dates and facts.

19 I am grateful to Valentin Groebner for this hint.

20 Various tour guides I spoke to directed my interest onto this particular point of language sensitivity when talking about WWII.

21 For a critique of the accusation of triviality in Holocaust representations see also Doneson, 1996: 72f.

Similar to one of the basic claims of POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews (and different from the “mission tourism” (Lehrer, 2013: 15ff) conducted for example by Israeli school classes in Poland), the “Jewish Warsaw” tours announce not to focus on the Holocaust only. On the contrary, both tour guides promised to present Jewish life in Warsaw from its beginning. Analyzing both itineraries from a performative perspective, the tours can indeed be interpreted as an attempt of re-enacting local Jewish history in the *longue durée*: Starting in the Old Town where first Jews settled in 1414 the groups moved more or less straightly out of that part of town. This physical motion away from that ancient city core performed the implementation of the “Privilegium de non tolerandis Judaeis” by which the king forbid Jews since the 16th century to settle in this area anymore. After passing through the area of two new settlements beyond the city walls, both tours reached their main attraction Muranów: the spot of the former ghetto. On the whole, the single stops in this primarily residential area followed a basically chronological storyline as well. The tours did not end at “Umschlagplatz”, however. After a dense description of the deportations and the extermination of Warsaw’s Jews, both returned to the spot next to POLIN. Entering the square from the backside of the museum, they arrived at the little memorial dedicated to the Warsaw genuflection by the German chancellor Willy Brandt in 1970, which was appreciated as a gesture of admitting guilt and an official excuse. While the FREE *Walking Tour Foundation’s* presentation ended here, *Orange Umbrella* finished nearby: gazing at the back side façade of the POLIN Museum, the guide added information about the “revival of the Jewish life in Poland after the fall of the communism.” Acknowledging the museum as the most obvious evidence of that, she concluded (in the same place where she had talked about the ghetto uprising and its death toll): “So let’s finish with this positive accent, that, yes, there is a Jewish life in Poland” (*Orange Umbrella*, 14.4.2016).

Whatever one thinks about this attempt to tell Jewish history with a “happy ending,” the final rhetorical appeal was not very convincing in this particular way of presenting “Jewish Warsaw.” Participating in the walking tours I experienced a city with almost no traces of the facts that nearly one-third of Warsaw’s prewar population was Jewish and that most of them have been exterminated. Leociak wrote about the ghetto memory in Muranów’s cityscape: “There is no imprint of those events recorded in the material. In contrary – it is cleaned and filled with something else” (Leociak, 2013: 837)²². All efforts of the guides to help our imagination by photographs, maps and memorials along the trail rather increased than cleared up the confusion about the actual grounds we were walking on. The city we were passing through seemed not to regret its loss. Lively and busy, no silence, no blank space, no “void” represented the absence of former Jewish life on our way. As long as such common Holocaust aesthetics (Weissberg, 2000: 26) are absent from the trail at large, two contradicting narrations seem to clash in the tours: while their educational goal is to transmit the high significance of Jewish heritage for and in the city, its urban materiality and the bodily experience by the tourists themselves tell another story. The more the tour guides struggled to re-enact Jewish life, the more its absence became aware. And this absence, it seems, does not bother Warsaw too much. Instead, it is rather the daily presence of tourist groups in the public sphere of Warsaw that functions as a living archive of the bygone Jewish life.

22 This passage is missing in the (older) English version of the book.

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