A Note from the Director

Dear Friends and Colleagues,

The 2019–2020 academic year started on a sad note. This past September, Professor Emeritus David Goodblatt passed away, due to injuries sustained in a traffic accident. He is deeply missed by his colleagues and former students. We dedicate this issue of the newsletter to remembering David’s contributions to the field and to UC San Diego. We want to thank those community members who have sent gifts to the program in David Goodblatt’s memory. The program has elected to put these gifts directly toward a student scholarship in David’s honor: the David Goodblatt Travel Scholarship will award Jewish Studies students with funding to study outside California, including abroad. May David Goodblatt’s memory be a blessing, and may his scholarly legacy inspire generations to come.

This year, our students have several new curricular offerings to choose from. Our Hebrew language lecturer, Alana Schuster, is offering a new advanced Hebrew language practicum, one that exposes students to literature and film in the original language. Professor Mira Balberg is teaching new courses in Ancient Jewish History, and Jay Rothman, a visiting professor with the Murray Galinson San Diego-Israel Initiative, offered a course on “The Politics of Peace” in the fall. This spring, I will be teaching a freshman seminar devoted to the work of the late novelist Herman Wouk. Thanks to a partnership with the Price Family Foundation, we will be marking the anniversary of Wouk’s passing with a public lecture on Wouk’s World War II novels by Professor Leah Garrett in May. Among our other long-anticipated upcoming events is a visit from Anna Shternshis and Psoy Korolenko (pictured above), who will be presenting their Grammy-nominated project Yiddish Glory as part of the Holocaust Living History Workshop on April 15, 2020.

I want to thank the colleagues, staff, students, and community supporters who have helped our program to thrive. The Institute for Arts and Humanities, which houses the program, has been a wonderful partner for us. Our past Jewish Studies coordinator, Andrianna Martinez, moved on to a new position this year and I want to thank Jose Ibarra, who has stepped in to advise our students, and Ana Marie Buenviaje, who has been our events coordinator this fall. Finally, I would like to thank our Community Council officers. Rabbi Philip Graubart, our past Jewish Studies Community Council President, has helped us to reinvigorate the relationship between the program and the community. It gives me enormous pleasure to welcome Emily Einhorn as our new Community Council President.

Sincerely,

AMELIA GLASER
Associate Professor of Russian and Comparative Literature
Unfortunately, I did not have the opportunity to meet David Goodblatt in person. He passed away long ago, but I joined the department of history at UC San Diego and our paths did not cross prior to that. Nevertheless, I consider Goodblatt to be one of my greatest teachers, despite the fact that I have learned only from his writings and not from him directly. More than any other scholar, Goodblatt taught me the craft of being a historian of ancient Judaism, and particularly of what we call “the rabbinic period” (approximately 70–600 CE).

To briefly explain why writing the history of Jews and Judaism in antiquity is quite a tall order, I should note that as of the last quarter of the first century CE until well into the early Middle Ages, we have practically no documents that provide us with reliable information about the social, political, or religious lives of Jews of the time. Either Jews who lived in this period had no interest in recording the histories of their communities or, if there was such an interest and documentation existed, texts did not survive.

From the entirety of the second to the seventh centuries CE, we have only one significant (in fact, enormous) corpus of texts to speak of: the rabbinic corpus, which includes the Mishnah, the Midrashim, and most famously the two Talmuds—the short Palestinian Talmud and the much longer Babylonian Talmud. Now, rabbinic texts tell many stories about events that historians must develop sophisticated, cautious, and critical ways to use rabbinic texts in order to glean historical information. This historian was David Goodblatt and the approach that he presented revolutionized my intellectual world. It would not be an exaggeration to say that it was thanks to him that I began to question some of the dogmas and incontestable truths that I was taught by my rather traditional professors, and thanks to him that I started charting out my own path as a scholar. The first book by Goodblatt that I read was entitled Rabbinic Instruction in Sasanian Babylonia, which was based on his doctoral dissertation. The book’s point of departure was simple yet very audacious: Goodblatt noted that what scholars presumed to know about the rabbinic institutions in Babylonia in the third through sixth centuries derived almost exclusively from much later texts, dating mostly to the tenth and eleventh centuries, and that scholars took for granted that the authors of those late texts had absolutely reliable knowledge of things that happened 700 years before they were born. Goodblatt then asked: what if we try to reconstruct the history of rabbinic institutions in Babylonia without those very late texts, which in all likelihood project their own ideas about Jewish learning onto the past? How can we gather valid information about the worlds and lives of Babylonian rabbis without unquestioningly accepting everything we read as fact?

Through careful, attentive, and very lucidly explained analysis, Goodblatt demonstrated what critical rabbinic history, as opposed to credulous rabbinic history, actually looks like and what its benefits are.

Specifically, in this book Goodblatt proved—in my view highly convincingly—that contrary to the common view that the rabbis of Babylonia established “academies” (yeshivot) that were similar to medieval or modern universities already in the third century, evidence shows that at least until the sixth century rabbinic learning took place in intimate study-circles that were centered around one individual teacher.

David Goodblatt was not the first scholar who advised historians to be careful and critical in their work with rabbinic texts. His PhD mentor at Brown University, Jacob Neusner, certainly preceded him in that. But there were two main differences between Neusner and Goodblatt. First, Neusner effectively ignored or dismissed the work of anyone who did not agree with him, whereas Goodblatt always engaged, respectfully and richly, the works of other scholars even when he disagreed with them vehemently. Second and more important, Neusner’s approach bordered on nihilism, as he argued that it was practically impossible to use rabbinic texts as historical sources for any intent or purpose, whereas Goodblatt showed constructive and positive ways in which rabbinic texts can be used, with the appropriate reservations and qualifications, for historical work. Moreover, Goodblatt later extended his historical methods beyond the confines of rabbinic texts and wrote several excellent and highly compelling pieces on Second Temple Judaism. Through his careful modes of analysis, that prioritize cautious reading of the evidence from the time in question rather than much later accounts whose authors are invested in painting the past in their own colors, he was able to dispel some of the most prevalent misperceptions in the study of Jewish history. In my own work as a cultural historian of rabbinic Judaism, I take a path somewhat different from Goodblatt’s. Whereas he wanted to peel off layers of rabbinic imagination and invention from the documents in order to get at the core of the historical facts, I am interested primarily in the rabbinic imagination and invention as such, and I try to reconstruct a history of the rabbinic world not through “fast” but through fiction. But I could never have developed this interest—and I would have never been able to articulate it and pursue it with integrity—if the works of David Goodblatt had not taught me how to approach rabbinic texts with an eye for complexity, detail, and nuance. I will always be grateful to him for that.
February 13, 2020
Eugene M. Aurutin, “Blood Libel in a Russian Town: The Velizh Affair”

February 18, 2020
Sarah Brunin Benor, “Tradition and Creativity in Jewish Names Around the World”

February 19, 2020
 Amit Pinchesvky, “Transmitted Wounds: Media and the Mediation of Trauma”

March 10, 2020
Katzin Lecture

April 15, 2020
Anna Shramolof and Puzy Korolenko, “Yiddish Glory: The Lost Songs of World War II”

April 26–27, 2020
Crima Conference
“Crimo in the Jewish Imagination: A Geography on the Outside”

May 6, 2020

May 14, 2020
Elgar Kedot, author of Fly Already
Co-sponsored with the Murray Galinson San Diego-Israel Initiative.

May 18, 2020
Leah Garrett, “Herman Wouk Memorial Lecture”

June 3, 2020
Gabriella Y. Karin, “Trauma, Memory, and the Art of Survival”

2020 EVENTS AND LECTURES
Lecture By Devin Naar: “Jews, Greeks, And The American Racial Imagination”

The Jewish Studies Program commenced its 2019–2020 series of events with a captivating talk by Devin Naar, the Isaac Alhadeff Professor in Sephardic Studies and associate professor of history at the University of Washington in Seattle. During his visit to UC San Diego, Naar shared his work on the dispersal of Sephardic Jews from the dissolving Ottoman Empire and postdocs to discuss their work on topics such as radicalism and urban renewal, and segregation policies. These practices, formulated and tested out in Germany during the 1930s, preceded more systematic measures of spatial cleansing in German-occupied Europe during World War II and the Holocaust. She is currently revising the manuscript for publication as a book.

What do representations of Mediterranean immigrants in America tell us about the transformation of racial hierarchies and boundaries of whiteness over the course of the twentieth century? And how did the efforts to fit into paradigms of “whiteness” shape the relationship between Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jews in the United States? In his talk, Naar introduced some of the sources through which he attempts to answer these troubling—and unfortunately, still timely—questions.

Who pursue a broad spectrum of historical and interdisciplinary research. Schenderlein organized and co-convened a number of German history conferences at the GHI, the latest on the topic of sovereignty. With her background in German Jewish history, she took over organizing the GHI’s Junior Scholars Conference in Jewish History, a biannual workshop style conference co-organized with institutions such as the Leo Baeck Institute and the Institute of the History of German Jews in Hamburg. This workshop brings together advanced doctoral students and postdocs to discuss their work on topics such as radicalism and urban renewal, and segregation policies. These practices, formulated and tested out in Germany during the 1930s, preceded more systematic measures of spatial cleansing in German-occupied Europe during World War II and the Holocaust. She is currently revising the manuscript for publication as a book.

Anne C. Schenderlein

Two weeks after defending her PhD in modern European history in August 2014, Anne Schenderlein moved to Washington, DC to start a one-year fellowship at the German Historical Institute (GHI). The following September, she became a research fellow at the same institution. The GHI is a center for advanced study and serves as a transatlantic bridge connecting scholars from Europe and the Americas. What do representations of Mediterranean immigrants in America tell us about the transformation of racial hierarchies and boundaries of whiteness over the course of the twentieth century? And how did the efforts to fit into paradigms of “whiteness” shape the relationship between Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jews in the United States? In his talk, Naar introduced some of the sources through which he attempts to answer these troubling—and unfortunately, still timely—questions.

Alumni News

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Teresa Walch

Teresa Walch received her PhD in modern European history from UC San Diego in June 2018. Her dissertation, Digenenerate Spaces: The Coordination of Space in Nazi Germany, examined how Nazi officials, bureaucrats, city planners, and ordinary Germans redrew “pure” spaces—cityscapes, neighborhoods, streets, and architecture—to fit their worldviews between 1933 and 1945. Walch argues that Nazism itself should be understood as a spatial project to make Germany “judenrein” (clean of Jews) and shows how antisemitic notions of a Germany “infected” by Jews inspired efforts to cleanse spaces of Jews and Jewish influence, instigating property confiscations, vandalism, urban renewal, and segregation policies. These practices, formulated and tested out in Germany during the 1930s, preceded more systematic measures of spatial cleansing in German-occupied Europe during World War II and the Holocaust. She is currently revising the manuscript for publication as a book.

Walch’s research was supported in many ways by the Jewish Studies Program at UC San Diego. A summer research grant allowed her to travel to Germany in 2013 to conduct dissertation research, and a generous Dietz and Erwin Gumpel Jewish Studies Endowed Fellowship for the 2016–17 academic year provided critical funding during the writing stage of the dissertation. Deborah Hertz’s support for her research and insights greatly strengthened the manuscript. Moreover, serving as a grader for Susanne Hillman’s “Why Hitler? How Auschwitz?” course and attending UC San Diego’s Holocaust Living History Workshop introduced Walch to the USC Shoah Foundation’s Visual History Archive and the power of testimony from Holocaust survivors in teaching and research. Committed to teaching and writing histories that illuminate Jewish experiences of Nazi Germany and the Holocaust, video testimonies now play a central role in her research and teaching. Walch received a grant to spend a month in residence conducting research at the USC Shoah Foundation’s Center for Advanced Genocide Research, and she attended the Free University of Berlin’s 2018 International Summer School of the Digital Interview Collections where she discussed how to utilize Holocaust video testimonies in formal and public education.

Since graduating from UC San Diego in 2018, Walch has been a postdoctoral fellow in Israel—first at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem’s Franz Rosavetzky Minerva Research Center and now at Tel Aviv University’s (TAU) School of Historical Studies. In the past year, she was also a member of an Israeli-German research team that investigated the Therienstadt Ghetto, and she became a certified museum guide at Yad Vashem. In Spring 2020, she will be teaching a course at TAU entitled “Nazism and the City: Space and Ideology in the Third Reich” and will be organizing an international workshop about space in German history.
Spotlight on... Steven Derman

My name is Steven Derman and I am double majoring in political science/international relations and Jewish studies. My academic and research interests are centered with the religion, politics, and conflicts of the state of Israel—both historical and modern. I aspire to continue with graduate studies that will expand my knowledge and understanding of the religious underpinnings of Israel and Palestine, including learning Biblical Hebrew, New Testament/Koine Greek, and the history of Israel prior to 70 CE. Israeli-Jewish culture offers a unique worldview regarding the role of government outlined in its ancient writings that influences and informs modern Israeli politics. I seek to integrate the salient aspects of historical Israeli-Jewish perspectives of government and politics with the current political, economic, and military movements of modern-day Israel. In doing so, I hope to develop a sound thesis that explains and offers legitimate policies on the governance of Israel within the framework of its Judeo-historical foundations.

For more information about how you can make a difference for the Jewish Studies Program and its students, please visit jewishstudies.ucsd.edu/giving or contact Jose Ibarra at (858) 534-4551 or jewishstudies@ucsd.edu.