Cover letter – NIAS seminar, 25 February 2021
In a Fragile World: Exilic History among Early Modern Jews

Andrea Schatz

Dear fellow Fellows,

The genre of the 'cover letter', successfully established by many of you over the last months, looks to me, too, like the best way to offer you a quick introduction to my NIAS project. I am writing it with enormous gratitude to NIAS for offering time to think and write as part of a research group, and to you for taking some of this precious time to critically consider what I am trying to do.

Here, I will briefly describe how the project emerged and evolved, before listing a few questions for the seminar. (Some of them I will explain more fully on Thursday!) It would be wonderful for me to be able to hear about the perspectives you bring to these questions and to discuss them with you in this interdisciplinary setting.

If you would like to read more, the attached book chapter offers in its sections 1 and 5 a glimpse of the lively interest in exilic history among Jews in Amsterdam, c. 1650-1743. (The other sections may be too specific, as they were written with the research context of the AHRC-project in mind, of which the volume was an outcome.)

Points of departure

My first book investigated a key project of the early Jewish Enlightenment: the renewal of Hebrew as a (written) language of the Jewish nation in the diaspora. I argued that in the contexts of the European Enlightenment and the emerging secular nation state, Jewish intellectuals embraced the Hebrew language to negotiate and partially resist the political pressure to individualize and privatize Jewish commitments. While writing the book, I found it striking how Hebrew was associated with the European concept of the 'Orient'. Christians considered Hebrew an Oriental language and referred to Jews as an 'Oriental' people, regardless of the fact that Jews had lived in Europe for a millennium. And many Jewish authors (in Prussia, France, and the Habsburg Empire), rather than decidedly rejecting such ideas, took them up to emphasise their connectedness to Jewish communities in Islamic lands, past and present, and to

re-write 'Europe' as a place of multi-religious (Jewish, Christian, Muslim), multi-ethnic and multilingual societies, where they might belong. At the same time, European Jewish authors were not immune to the 'separatist imagination' (Edward Said) inherent in the concept of the 'Orient', and they adopted, at least partially, its dualism of 'Europe' vs. the 'East'. In short, European Jews could be simultaneously sharply critical of and complicit with orientalism as a colonial discourse.

This led me to the question how orientalism as a 'dualistic style of thought' (Said) might have become (partially) acceptable among European Jews. Given that European Jews were committed to diaspora networks, how could they accept orientalist splits and divisions? What were the 'conditions of acceptability' that made this possible? And how did European Jews imagine their (connected?) geographies and histories before 'Europe' and the 'Orient'? The last question became the starting point of my current book project, which then, however, took on a life of its own. In other words, my book project is no longer oriented by these initial questions, but will still, I hope, offer a few answers to them.

The orientation of the book project changed, when I turned to the early modern period with my questions about the historical and geographical imagination in mind, and came across a puzzling phenomenon. The rich material I found showed that early modern European Jews engaged in various interesting ways with their local and global history in Christian and Islamic contexts (as the attached book chapter outlines for Amsterdam). At the same time, their interest in exilic history has remained almost entirely unacknowledged among modern scholars and – with very few exceptions – unexplored. Why?

A first possible answer, which I will discuss in greater detail in the seminar, presented itself when I studied a series of arguments from the 1980s and 1990s, involving Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi's very influential book *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (1982), Amos Funkenstein's parallel and dissenting inquiries in Jewish historical consciousness, and Carlo Ginzburg's reflections in an essay that builds on Funkenstein: 'Distance and Perspective: Two Metaphors' (in *Wooden Eyes*, 1998, English: 2002). Ginzburg argued, in short, that the 'kernel of the current historiographical paradigm is a secularized version of the [Augustinian] model of accommodation' and bears the traces of 'the Christian attitude of superiority towards the Jews', and he adds that this paradigm 'remains – and here I deliberately use an all-embracing term – our own'. In light of Funkenstein's and Ginzburg's work, and taking into consideration also Johannes Fabian's seminal *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (1983) and more recent interventions, e.g. by Stuart Hall, I began to wonder whether early modern Jewish ways of 'doing history' had become unreadable

and unresearchable, because they did not conform to models of progressive history. But what might it mean to write history 'after progress'? Is it even possible? I will return to these questions on Thursday.

New approaches

In addition, I began to wonder whether there were further – and partially connected – reasons for the assumption that early modern Jews could not and would not engage with history. Early modern European Jews created a widely recognized, cited and circulated, yet also fluid and porous corpus of Jewish historical knowledge, which I call their 'historical library', and its features may not have been what modern historians expected:

- The early modern Jewish 'historical library' relies on the dynamics of reception and transmission and was sustained to a very large extent by the efforts of editors, translators and printers rather than authors of entirely new works. While modern historians were looking for original historical writing, this project proposes to re-focus our questions on the activities of those who edited, translated, paraphrased, supplemented, updated, printed and read historical works. This re-orientation can draw on insights from the flourishing fields of the History of the Book and Reception Studies. The former provides the tools for analysing 'libraries without walls' (Chartier 1994, Bar-Levav 2008) and the creativity involved in book production and dissemination, including the role of paratexts and peritexts (Berger 2013, Sládek 2016). The latter allows to shift the emphasis from innovative rupture to creative reception and transmission, arguing that 'doing history is a type of reception; doing reception is a type of history' (Rood 2013). Here, the scope of what it might mean to engage with history expands and affords conceptual space for the analysis of early modern Jewish modes of 'doing' exilic history and making connections across exilic times and places.
- The early modern Jewish historical library was a library in the vernacular: its works were, with very few exceptions, re-issued in Yiddish versions, and owner inscriptions in the books show that they were used by men and women. The role of Yiddish and a Yiddish-reading public points to the library's 'vernacular' character, inviting an analysis that takes into consideration discussions of early modern 'vernacular histories' and their ambiguous combinations of local and national, communal and state-centred, literary and scientific orientations in other contexts, in particular in India (Chatterjee 2008). The attention to 'vernacular histories' can be developed further through a dialogue with Dipesh Chakrabarty's analysis of complex historical temporalities (Chakrabarty 2000) and Shahzad Bashir's investigations of historical time, literary traditions and sociohistorical contexts in Islamic chronographies (Bashir 2014).

- The early modern Jewish historical library privileged the present moment: Yiddish as a 'language of the present' (Berger 2008) facilitated an orientation towards present concerns, interests and desires, including a fascination with the sensational and ephemeral, that has rarely been captured by modern historians focusing on memory and messianism. While the latter themes did not disappear from the historical library, they did not stand in the way of a present-minded engagement with exilic history that heralded a new sense of complex belonging, invested in both a distant homeland and the present places of the diaspora. Attention to this present-mindedness in a fragile world – before the European Enlightenment and emancipation – invites a new analysis of the interrelation between historical, religious and political commitments among early modern European Jews.

Reviewing these points now, I notice that, as the book manuscript progresses, the focus is clearly on the first and third aspect: I investigate ways of 'doing history' by following the activities of authors, editors, translators and printers, and by tracing the forms, structure and arguments of their books; and I ask how, in 'doing history', Jews related to their present times and places. I also take my findings back to the first question related to Ginzburg: in what sense might these books be attempts at writing history 'after progress'? The second aspect – 'vernacular history' – however, is not pursued systematically – not because it is unimportant, but because it is huge and requires an inter-disciplinary investigation of its own. I hope to start this with colleagues in Yiddish Studies, Jewish History and Islamic History, as soon as my book manuscript is completed.

Questions (some will hopefully become clearer after my seminar presentation):

- What aspects of the book project – questions, aims, arguments – do you find accessible, clear, interesting? And what aspects remain obscure? What should be explained better or differently?
- a) What can this project learn from historians of the book, reception studies, and, more generally, medieval and early modern studies?
  b) Looking at early modern Jewish ways of doing history, what do you find familiar from non-Jewish (early or later modern) contexts? And what looks distinct?
- To analyse how affiliation and disaffiliation with places and times is configured, narrated and imagined through ways of doing history, especially in diaspora contexts, what approaches, concepts and insights do you recommend?
- What does it mean to do history 'after progress'?