

“Beyond the Ivory Tower” AJS 2005

My name is Avinoam Patt and I am the Applied Research Scholar for Jewish Life and Culture at the Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies (CAHS) of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM). In participating in this panel, we were asked to “prepare remarks approximately 10-15 minutes in length that describe your training, your current position, and the path that led you there.” We were also asked to provide “any suggestions (we might have) for the audience as to how they might pursue careers in your field.” So, I will try to do this in the next few minutes, tell you about my job, and hopefully together we can come to some understanding of what it means to be an Applied Research Scholar and what my field actually is or can become. More broadly I hope we can talk about the place of Jewish Studies in the study of the Holocaust, or of the Holocaust in Jewish Studies, and what kind of implications that can have for the development of the field. Finally, I hope that a description of the work that I do at CAHS may suggest a need to challenge our definitions of the “academy,” or more specifically, of the fuzzy boundaries where the academy ends and begins.

Now for some background about myself: I received my BA in Religion, with a concentration in Judaic Studies at Emory University. There

I had three excellent professors: Michael Berger, David Blumenthal, and Deborah Lipstadt, who helped me to realize that it was possible to make a living out of two things I was passionate about – namely Jewish history and teaching. Well, at the time I thought it would be possible to make a living out of this (notwithstanding suggestions by my advisors to the contrary), but maybe that’s part of the reason why we are here.

I went on to apply to graduate schools in Jewish studies and decided to attend New York University. At NYU I received a Joint Ph.D. in European History and Hebrew and Judaic Studies. While the decision to pursue a joint degree certainly added to my workload, I have no regrets, as it gave me a solid grounding in history and exposed me to various other methodologies, relevant subject areas, and modes of thinking that I never would have encountered otherwise. While I was in graduate school, I found work in a number of academic areas and related scholarly projects, including as an instructor and Teaching Assistant at NYU, and on projects like the “Heritage: Civilization and the Jews” DVD-ROM and YIVO’s Educational Program in Yiddish Culture. Under the guidance of David Engel, I wrote my dissertation, “Finding Home and Homeland: Jewish DP Youth and Zionism in the Aftermath of the Holocaust” and obtained my Ph.D. in May 2005. I came to NYU fairly certain that I wanted to write something on the

topic of Zionism and its function in the Diaspora and discovered that the period immediately following Holocaust presented an ideal period to explore the function of Zionism for a group of people who would play a significant role in diplomatic decisions leading to the creation of the state of Israel.

Now as you can tell, the fact that I chose a period in the immediate aftermath of the Holocaust was largely peripheral to my primary interest, that being the appeal of Zionism for Jewish youth living in the Diaspora. So, how, you may ask, did I end up working at the Holocaust Museum?

Like most of you either on the job market or considering your future, I spent Fall 2003 and Spring 2004 obsessively checking the AJS job postings website. Truth be told, as I had not completed my dissertation writing, the odds of a post-doc were slightly more promising than a job, although both would want a Ph.D. in hand. Luckily for me, in the Patt household the job search was a team effort and my wife, perhaps even more zealously than me, spent her days checking other websites for jobs in Jewish studies (not her field of psychology) and chanced upon a position on the Chronicle for Higher Education website, looking for an Applied Research Scholar for Jewish Life and Culture at USHMM. The posting indicated the Center sought someone who was interested in research on Jews in Europe before, during, and after the Holocaust. Now while I was familiar with the museum

and had been there to visit, I knew little of the Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies or the extensive archival holdings at USHMM. Still the job sounded right up my alley and has in fact proven to be more appropriate than I might have imagined.

Well, before I describe some of my tasks as an Applied Research Scholar for Jewish Life and Culture, I must return to the title of this panel, “Beyond the Ivory Tower: Career Opportunities for the Jewish Studies Scholar” – now the title might imply that by stepping outside of the Ivory Tower, the four of us have made a choice to leave the Academy. A subtext of this title perhaps suggests that if the place of your employment does not have either the word University or College somewhere in the title, you have left the domain of serious academic study and embarked on an alternate career path. I’ll tell you a bit about the work I do at the Museum and we can discuss whether these boundaries perhaps need to be expanded or re-defined. My tasks at the Center function on a number of levels:

- 1) JSSI- the Jewish Source Study Initiative- is a broad effort to identify and collect material relevant to Jewish life and culture before, during and after the Holocaust and to foster research and teaching on hitherto understudied aspects of the Holocaust and the Jewish experience;

I will comment more on this below.

As part of this effort, we are creating:

- 2) The Archival source series on Jewish responses entitled *Jewish Responses to Nazi Persecution*. This collection of archival documents will present Jewish reactions to Nazi persecution from 1933-1945. The proposed five-volume series is intended for use by scholars and professors working on the Holocaust to convey the diversity of Jewish responses on an aspect of the Holocaust that, despite the wealth of publications on the subject, has garnered surprisingly little attention.
- 3) The Encyclopedia of Concentration Camps and Ghettos; I contribute to the ghettos volume being edited by my colleague, Martin Dean, by adding the “Jewish perspective” – that is, adding sources like testimonies, yizkor books, diaries, etc. that convey the Jewish experience of life in Nazi ghettos. For those students in the market for potential dissertation topics, this is also an area with tremendous potential for new research on such topics as the role of the Judenrat in ghettos, the organization of resistance and underground activities, education and economy in the ghettos and various other areas- the source material exists but has largely been unexamined.

-Beyond these large projects, the Center is a hub of activity (as my colleague Aleisa Fishman mentioned), fully dedicated to expanding academic research and teaching of the Holocaust; this means that we engage in:

- 4) Campus outreach, visiting underserved colleges and universities; in November (2005) I gave a series of lectures on Jewish life before, during, and after the Holocaust at Southeast Missouri State University in Cape Girardeau, MO and at the University of Memphis. I have also visited college courses in the area (at American University and Georgetown) to experiment with teaching with our archival sources for our source project.
- 5) Seminars, fellows- annually, about thirty fellows come to the Center for varying lengths of time to conduct research using the USHMM's archives and library on topics as diverse as the transmission of Jewish family culture after the Holocaust, Jewish family life in the Lodz ghetto, the Nazi regime's seizure of precious metals, the prosecution of war criminals in post-war Ukraine, or the use of photographic images in memorial books, just to name a few.
- 6) Plan workshops- Over the course of the year, we hold numerous research workshops, conferences, and seminars on new areas of research. Last summer, for example, I helped organize a research

workshop on Jewish Displaced Persons and this coming summer we plan to hold a workshop on Jewish responses to Nazi persecution. As you can tell, the Center is a unique place devoted to furthering research in the field of Holocaust Studies. Most of the fellows who come to do research at the Center would not manage to do research and make contributions to academic study of the Holocaust without the time to do so; thus, I think it is important that we take into account the importance of work performed at foundations, archives, and research institutes to the furthering of academic knowledge when we consider where the “Ivory Tower” begins and ends.

Finally, as goes my work at the Museum- I hope that it will have broader implications for the future relationship between Jewish studies and Holocaust Studies, and more broadly for integrating Jewish Studies and other fields. This is of particular significance when one considers the Holocaust: what is the place of the Holocaust in Jewish Studies? Or for that matter of Jewish Studies in the Holocaust? You might look at the conference schedule and argue that there are plenty of Holocaust Studies’ topics at AJS- but how many Jewish Studies scholars are actually studying the experiences of Jews who lived and died during the Holocaust to gain a better understanding of the modern Jewish experience? How did Jews make

use of the tools at their disposal, both collectively and individually, to confront the Nazi threat? There is much that remains to be learned.

So, I return to my initial question: Where does the Academy end and begin? How can we influence what is studied and the direction that a new or old field may take? How blurry are the boundaries that mark the gates to the Ivory Tower?

I would like to thank the AJS, and Sara Horowitz and Rona Sheramy in particular, for giving me this opportunity and I welcome any questions that you may have.