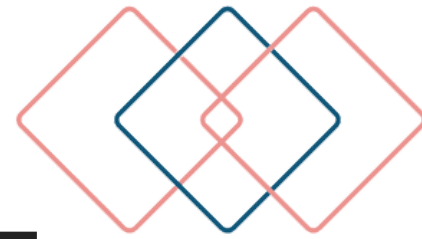


QESHER MAGAZINE



Jerusalem Synagogue in Prague, Czechia

SPECIAL BIRTHDAY EDITION



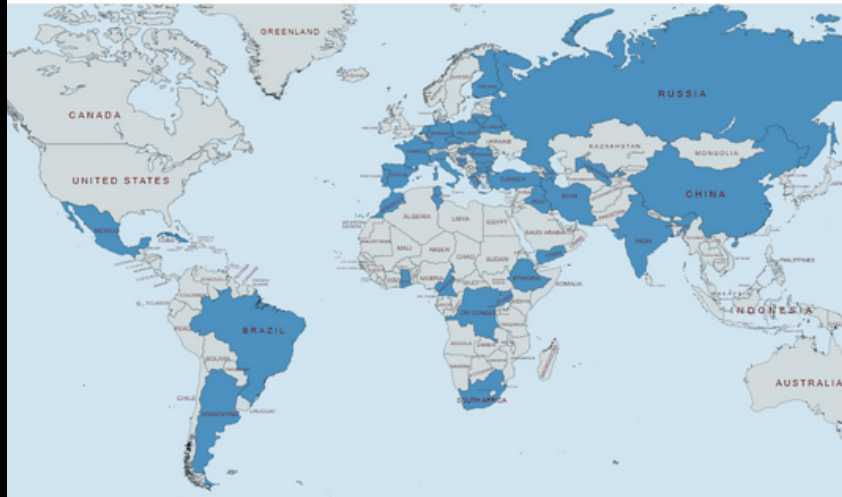
Jewish Quarter of Vilnius, Lithuania

Qesher - Connecting Jewish
Communities Since 2020

JUNE 2021 • ISSUE 1 • BIRTHDAY SPECIAL

1. *Journal of Management Studies*, 1996, 33, 1, 1-14.

In this first issue we are delighted to introduce one of our speakers, one of our participants, and one of the projects you helped us support.

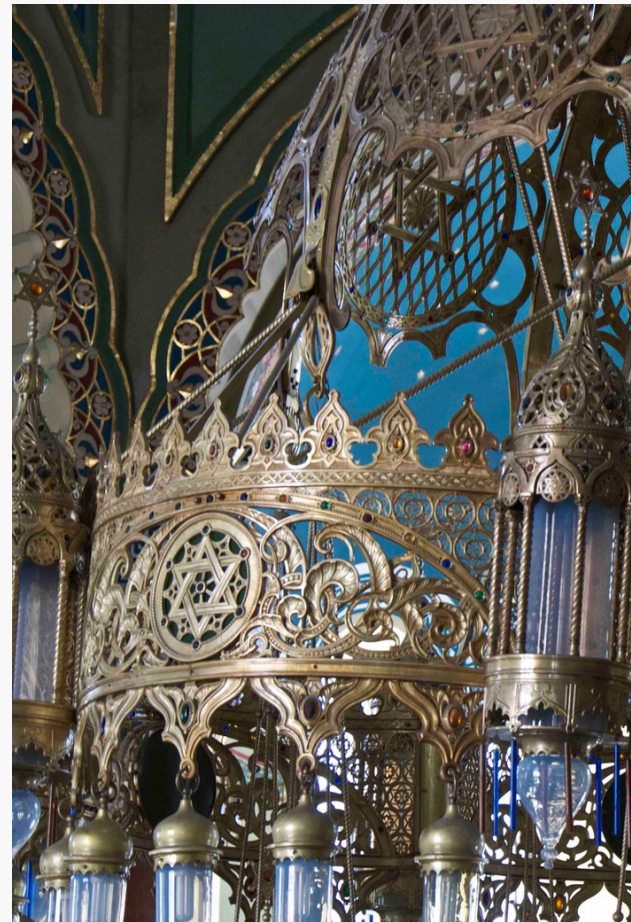


Qesher map - Places we have introduced

GET TO KNOW:

MIRIAM CAMERINI
SPEAKER OF "JEWS OF ITALY",
THEATER DIRECTOR AND
RABBINICAL STUDENT

AMY ARONSON
PARTICIPANT - RESEARCHER OF
"CONVERSOS" AND MORE



Synagogue in Sofia, Bulgaria



THE GENEALOGY DEPARTMENT OF THE JEWISH HISTORICAL INSTITUTE IN WARSAW, POLAND

GET TO KNOW ALEKSANDRA (OLA) SAJDAK, SENIOR RESEARCHER
AT THE GENEALOGY DEPARTMENT OF THE JHI

BY MADISON JACKSON



"When did your family leave Poland?"

"What happened to your family in Poland?"

"Where did your family study?"

"Was your relative married?"

"Was your family rich or poor?"

These are just some of the many questions you might be asked when you meet with a researcher at the Genealogy Department of the Jewish Historical Institute (JHI) in Warsaw, Poland.

The first goal of any Jewish Genealogist is to help you realize you know more about your family than you thought. Aleksandra (Ola) Sajdak, a Senior Researcher at the Genealogy Department of JHI, explained that often people come in for a genealogy

meeting thinking they don't have any information to contribute about their family history. But, after a few good questions, sometimes that reality changes.

"[Our meetings] are a conversation," Sajdak said. "It's a conversation of two worlds, we want to be a bridge between two worlds, a bridge between now and the past."

At times, this involves people accepting facts which are at odds with their knowledge, stereotypes or assumptions.

Established around 1995, the Genealogy Department of the JHI is one of the newest departments at the institute. Each year, the team made up of 4 researchers meets with thousands of families and

individuals, from all over the world. Some are young people who just found out they are Jewish, others are people in their 80's, Holocaust survivors who have returned to Poland to see what happened to their family years ago. Often, intergenerational meetings are scheduled where a Holocaust survivor, their granddaughter, and their daughter, come in to the Genealogy Department together. But no matter who arrives at the department, there is one thing all of these people have in common: they are looking to research their Polish Jewish roots.

"With each family you learn something new and, also, you learn a lot about yourself, a lot about your reactions," Sajdak said. "It is work, but it is also a

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passion, this is the tricky part, it's very hard to stop working and you have to sometimes stop working."

For Sajdak, like most of the genealogists who have worked at the JHI throughout the years, that passion began with her interest in tracing her own family roots. Originally, Sajdak taught herself how to do genealogical research. She explained that while many people think you need special training to become a genealogist, most genealogists don't need to study the topic at a university.

What is important is that you are open minded and willing to gain experience. She added that having some knowledge of other languages, such as being able to read Cyrillic or Hebrew letters, is helpful, and it is also helpful if you are a historian or interested in history so that you can put stories into context.

"Poland is quite big, so it's not possible to know everything about every single town, shtetl, city, etc., you just have to be willing to learn and absorb the knowledge," Sajdak said.

While May to October is the Genealogy Department's busiest season, meeting with many visitors in Warsaw face to face, researchers work with families all year long through email. Unlike a lot of researchers and genealogy companies around the world, the Genealogy Department of the JHI doesn't charge for their services, and instead, rely on donations and funding from the Polish government. The goal is for their genealogical research to be open and accessible for anyone.

Some appointments are scheduled weeks in advance, and others happen when people simply walk through the doors of the JHI and begin asking questions. The meetings vary in length: sometimes people sit for three or five hours, other times they come back every single day for one week, and in other cases people return to the department to learn more after a whole year has passed.

In between meetings, the researchers continue researching the families they have met with, by reading books, scouring online databases, and sending emails. Sajdak loves doing research which involves going to the primary sources. She visits archives and makes queries; an experience which she feels allows for more discovering than is possible online. But her favorite moments?



Aleksandra (Ola) Sajdak, a Senior Researcher at the Genealogy Department of the JHI

They occur with the people. Researchers from the Genealogy Department often meet with groups like Hillel, a Jewish student organization, from all around the United States. During those meetings people ask all kinds of questions which lead to the dialogues that Sajdak most enjoys.

"I also love working with Polish students because it is something completely different," Sajdak said. "It is amazing how each group of young adults can ask completely different questions. As an educator I'm interested in perspectives. What is the perspective of an average student from New York, compared to the perspective of a student from Warsaw?"

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Each time she meets with these students, or Jewish groups from the United States or Israel, there is one question that Sajdak makes sure to ask them.

"Do you know who Emanuel Ringelblum was?"

98 percent of people say they have no idea.

Sajdak sees this as a problem: so many Jews know the names of German Nazi officers, but don't know the name of Emanuel Ringelblum. Ringelblum was the leader of the Oneg Shabbat group, an underground archives created by Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto, to document and preserve reports and testimonies of the experience in the ghetto. Since the JHI's building was within the borders of the Warsaw Ghetto, the Oneg Shabbat meetings took place inside its walls. While Ringelblum did not survive the war, his legacy did: today, the Jewish Historical Institute preserves the Ringelblum Archive and displays its contents in a special museum exhibit.

As tour guides show visitors around Tłomackie Street in Warsaw, a street surrounded by tall buildings everywhere, they might point out the location on the right where the Great Synagogue used to exist, and then nonchalantly mention on the left the location of the modern day Jewish Historical Institute. But there is a lot more to the history of the buildings on that street than is visible to the eye.

"What happened during the war is the greatest tragedy for us," Sajdak said. "But people tend to forget that we are still alive, there is a Jewish community in Warsaw today. We are here. The JHI and this building is a symbol that you cannot destroy Polish Jews. People think Hitler succeeded, but he didn't."

The Genealogy Department is positioned within today's JHI, a building that survived the Holocaust. As a result, everything in the structure of the building, from the floors to the stairs, has a meaning. The floor and walls are the original. The building was built in 1936, only a few years before the start of World War II, so it was very modern and advanced. While much of the building has been renovated, the colors of the building and its core are unchanged.

Before the Holocaust, the building was the headquarters of the Main Judaic Library and the Institute for Judaic Studies. The institute became the first Jewish research and educational center in Europe which took secular studies into account alongside theological studies.

Although the building survived the war, it was damaged during the destruction of the Great Synagogue right next door. To this day you can see traces of the fire on the floor of the JHI's lobby. While some visitors, not knowing the building's history, question why the floor has not been replaced, Sajdak appreciates the opportunity to explain the history to them, sharing why you can't put a new floor to history. The fact that the Jewish Genealogy Department is housed in that very building symbolizes the continuity of Polish Jewry.

"I have worked here for 10 years and still every single day I feel privileged that I can actually research Polish Jews in this particular building," Sajdak said. "I have goosebumps now as I speak. I love this place. I really love this place. This is something more than work. It's a place with a soul, something really, really special."



A plaque in Yiddish, outside the JHI, dedicated to Emanuel Ringelblum

GET TO KNOW MIRIAM CAMERINI

BY MADISON JACKSON

For Miriam Camerini, the pandemic brought an unexpected silver lining--finally, she could devote the necessary attention to studying for her rabbinical degree at Beit Midrash Har'El. A Jerusalem based yeshiva which serves as one of the very first Orthodox rabbinical schools also open to women, Miriam has been registered as a student there for a couple of years. But as a resident of Milan, Italy, she had to travel back and forth from Jerusalem to Milan for months at a time and leave behind lots of work back home. While the school is officially a three year program, she is really in her first year of actually being able to learn.

"Right now it's perfect, because everyone is on Zoom and all classes are online. For me, the longer it stays this way, the better. I can do [the classes] from wherever I am, it's something that gives me a routine."

Miriam's co-ed class consists of 12 people, almost equally distributed between men and women. While most of the men are Israeli, the women originally come from many different places including France, the United States, and of course, Italy. But she is the only student who doesn't currently live in Israel. The students, mostly in their 30's and 40's, are all training to become Orthodox rabbis.

In addition to her schooling, she writes a column for a Catholic magazine. For five years the column was about food and religion and eventually, using the first 45 articles from the column, Miriam published a book on the subject. Since the book came out, the column transitioned to a new focus on women, arts, and religions. She is also working towards

publishing another book, potentially related to the Torah.

Yet, the central component of Miriam's life is theater.

"For me, theater and Judaism have always been connected," she said. "I grew up knowing that I wanted to be a director. My mom has always been part of opera choirs wherever she lived, I got her love for music, and my aunt is a theater director and playwright. It is my aunt who really started the whole interest in Jewish theater in Italy in the late 70's and 80's."

Miriam's passion for connecting theater to "yiddishkeit" led to her majoring in German theater in university, where she wrote a thesis about G. E. Lessing, a German playwright who was friends with Moses Mendelssohn, the man credited with creating the Jewish Enlightenment. Miriam also staged a play during her first year of university: "The Trial of God", by Elie Wiesel.



Miriam Camerini - "Ricette e Precetti"
("Recipes and precepts")

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"I went to interview Elie Wiesel in 2005 to ask him if I could change the end of the play, and he said no," she said, while laughing. "And then I came back and changed it anyway. It was very "chutzpani" of me."

These experiences in university led to her founding Benhashmashot, the first professional Jewish theatre in Italy, based in Milan. The theater has two physical spaces: one, a theater called "Miracles Court," a location which also hosts a cafe and other events. The second location, not yet ready, is a building which once served as a tango school. Today, Miriam lives in part of it, while the basement is in the process of being adapted to what will likely be the smallest theater in Milan. Appreciating the meaning of "chai" (life), the value of 18 in Hebrew letters, Miriam set up 18 seats in this basement theater. Yet, regardless of the existence of these more permanent spaces, she finds it more meaningful to tour with shows and bring her Jewish theater to audiences in a variety of locations.

Most of the theater's performances happen when the company is invited to perform in other Italian cities, usually at different types of festivals. The main language of the productions is Italian, but songs are often in languages such as Hebrew or Yiddish. Currently, the theater has a repertoire of six or seven shows that rotate.

Each show or theater project that Miriam produces always relates back to Judaism in some way. One of her projects, called "Everyone's Shabbat" takes place during a Shabbat meal and helps people to understand what Shabbat is in a very personal way. People gather around tables and actors and musicians take part in theatrical readings, perform music and provide food to the audience.



Miriam Camerini

So, what are her plans once she officially becomes a rabbi?

"I'm not really thinking about this as a professional turn in my life. I don't necessarily view myself as a community rabbi, plus the world is still in the process of getting ready for Orthodox women rabbis, especially in Europe, Let's wait and see.

But this doesn't seem to be something she is worried about. She explained that as someone who does a lot of interfaith work with other religions, she also feels that as a rabbi she will be able to do that work better.

"I really like doing what I do, which is a mixture of theater, writing, teaching, and music, so I'm actually hoping to keep doing the same thing," she explained. "Just with this new hat and more knowledge, and maybe more legitimacy and authority in a good way."

Miriam Camerini - "Shabbat of Everyone"



GET TO KNOW AMY I. ARONSON, PHD

PROFESSOR OF SPANISH AT THE DEPARTMENT OF MODERN AND
CLASSICAL LANGUAGES AT VALDOSTA STATE UNIVERSITY,
GEORGIA.

BY DORA KORANYI & SEBASTIAN MIZRAHI



Amy is a frequent participant in Qesher's talks and we have reached out to her to learn more about some of the unique projects she's been working on.

Qesher - Hi Amy, you mentioned you have been doing academic research in areas that in some religious circles would be considered as provocative.

Amy - Yes, I enjoy participating in the academic discourse and I am passionate about my research. Controversial topics are sometimes the ones that can promote dialogue and, hopefully, understanding.

Q - But before we get to that, tell us a bit about your background and your interest in Jewish culture.

A - I'm from Savannah, Georgia, which has one of the oldest synagogues in the US. (Congregation Mickve Israel organized in 1735 by mostly Sephardic Jewish immigrants of Spanish-Portuguese extraction from London, who arrived in the new colony in 1733.)

As a prominent minority, the Jews of Savannah have traditionally made significant contributions to the greater community. Having been raised in the Orthodox synagogue, after my first trip to Israel, I was "hooked" on my Jewish heritage and history.

I travel a lot, and always seek out the historically Jewish areas of the places I visit. But it's hard to find guides knowledgeable on the Jewish history so I do a lot of my own research in advance.



**Temple Mickve Israel, Savannah, GA -
The only gothic synagogue in North America**

QESHER BIRTHDAY

Q - One of your main areas of research is the story of the "Conversos" or "Crypto-Jews".

A - Yes, I was a graduate student studying in Madrid, Spain, when I first learned about the Spanish Inquisition. In fact, my apartment was very close to the Plaza Mayor, where heretics were punished or burned in the fifteenth-century. After receiving my MA, I went to Israel, where I became interested in Sephardic Jewry. Once in graduate school for the doctorate, I chose to study the "conversos", Jews who had converted to Catholicism, voluntarily or through coercion. Many of them continued practicing Judaism in secret, and their history and literary production has been a primary focus of my academic work.

Q - Why did you get involved specifically in this topic? Do you have Sephardic roots?

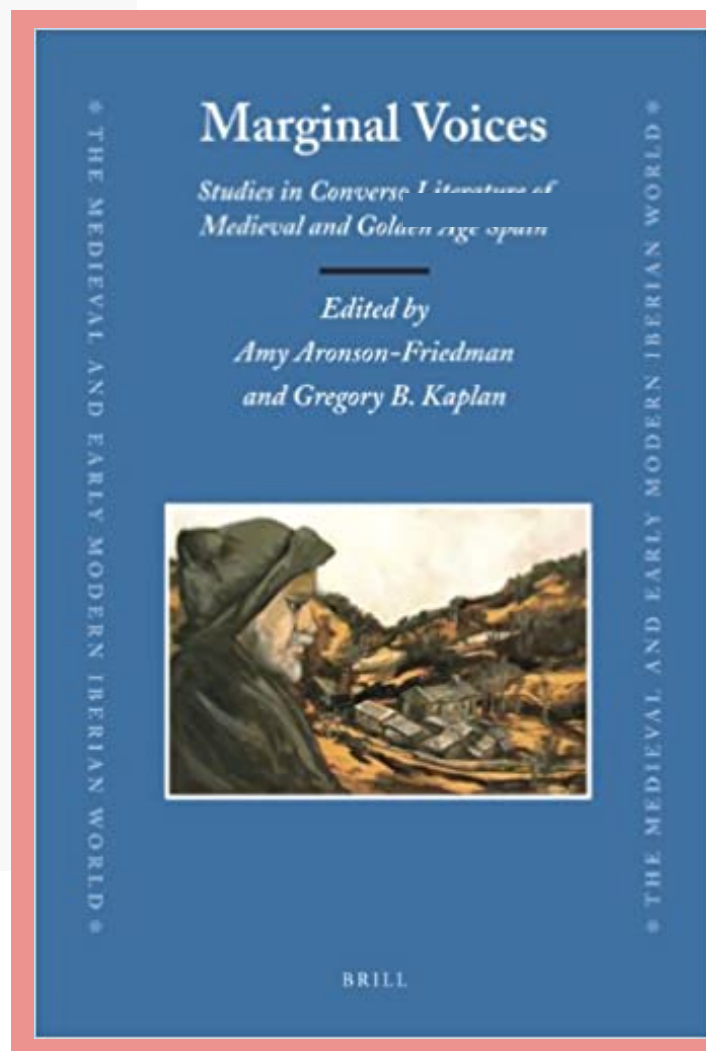
A - No, I'm actually Ashkenazi (at least to my knowledge)! When I had to pick an area for my doctorate I chose Medieval and Golden Age Spanish literature because I wanted to write on a "Jewish" topic.

At that time, I had already lived in both Spain and Israel and knew Spanish, Hebrew and some Arabic. My doctoral mentor was very encouraging and because of my language proficiencies, I was able to read and work with medieval Spanish texts. My dissertation, entitled "Identifying the Converso Voice", examined the topic of Crypto-Judaism in texts composed between 1391-1499, by supposed converted Jews. I demonstrated that, even after they were converted to Catholicism, there remained remnants of their Jewish past and identity. This was a very controversial topic in its day as mainstream medieval Hispanists did not accept this theory.

An academic dialogue ensued and culminated in the publication of "Marginal Voices: Studies in Converso Literature of Medieval and Golden Age Spain", a volume of essays edited by a colleague and me.

Q - During our event about the Jews of Argentina you mentioned that you are also writing a book about Jewish prostitutes in Latin America. What can you tell us about the subject?

A - As I am sure you are aware, the topic of the Jewish prostitutes is one which mainstream Jewish communities would prefer to ignore. This is a part of Jewish history that



Marginal Voices by Amy Aronson and Gregory B. Kaplan

many would like to believe never happened; however, it did, and it is still happening today. In Argentina, there was a woman by the name of Raquel Liberman (a Jewish-Polish immigrant to Argentina victim of human trafficking) who inspired many books about her life. I started to investigate this subject for a conference paper and came upon her name, among some others. The paper was well received, which inspired me to write a book on Jewish prostitution through time and space. The goal of the book project is to examine the phenomenon worldwide. It is a controversial subject, but so were the "conversos" and look at the dialogue that developed from it!

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Q - Can you give us a teaser about what will be covered in your book?

A - While we have historical evidence of Jewish prostitution out of Eastern Europe to the New World (Argentina, Brazil, Mexico), this project will take as a starting point the examination of prostitution during Biblical times and will discuss the history of the patriarchy which set women up for this profession. The project will proceed to examine the lives of specific Jewish women who were either involuntarily sex-trafficked, who resorted to prostitution for their own survival, or who willfully chose it as a profession.

The irony here is that the women from Eastern Europe arriving to Argentina and Brazil were pimped and abused by their own people. In particular there was Zvi Migdal, an organized Jewish crime group founded in Poland and based mainly in Buenos Aires, which trafficked Jewish women for sexual slavery and forced prostitution at the beginning of the XX century.

While these women were victims of the male dominated "system" and were rejected by their co-religionists, they went to establish their own community and support network. They educated their children in Judaism and established their own cemeteries when prohibited from being buried in the Jewish ones. Being marginalised, but at the same time still Jewish and carrying on the traditions and the legacy.

Q - Do you see any connection to what happened in Israel in many instances with women from the Former Soviet Union?

A - Absolutely! When I was in Israel in the late 1980's, I remember the *Aliyah* from the FSU and Eastern Europe and mainstream Israelis pointing the finger at these women. There have always been Jewish prostitutes. It is ironic that while defaming these women for the work that they do, Hasidic males from Israel make a religious pilgrimage to Uman, Ukraine, and many take the opportunity of being away to visit the local, non-Jewish brothels. One cannot notice the hypocrisy that while the Jewish establishment shuns Jewish women for being prostitutes, they still seek out the services of a prostitute.

Q - Did it also happen in the United States? Since the same Russian immigration that was going to Argentina

and later to Israel was also going to the US.

A: Oh yes, I worked with Russian speaking Jewish immigrants teaching them English and helping them to settle. It was happening here too, especially in the larger, metropolitan areas. Actually, it is interesting that while in the States it is not a well-known subject, in Latin America Jews are very much aware of it.

Q - Do you have any other big projects you haven't mentioned?

A: Well, yes, although it is more of an Arab-Muslim topic. A friend of mine is a stamp dealer, and he showed me some stamps from Arab countries from around the 1900s with images of naked women in erotic poses. I could not believe it! I have many of these stamps and started writing a paper about them to present at a future conference. The paper is entitled "Philatelic Females: Unveiling Moslem Women for all the World to See." Talk about controversy! I would like to find an explanation as to why postage stamps would be issued from Islamic countries featuring sexy nudes. I need to do the research so I really cannot hypothesize yet. Stay tuned!



**Stamps from around the early 1900s
that inspired Amy's article:**

**"Philatelic Females: Unveiling Moslem
Women for all the World to See."**

**THANK
YOU FOR
BEING
PART OF
THE
QESHER
FAMILY!**

