

**Negotiating the Past, Present, and Future: The Luxembourg Jewish
Museum Project as a Process of Contested Memory and Imagined Futures**

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Introduction

In recent decades, Europe has experienced a surge of interest in memory and memory projects (MacDonald 2013). Luxembourg is no exception – over the past several decades, Luxembourg has undergone boom of public memory projects, including those associated with the experiences of Jews in Luxembourg during World War II. These have ranged from the construction of new memorials, lectures, plaques, ceremonies, building preservation, and museum exhibits, to the organization of multiple groups whose primary goal is to remember the Holocaust and World War II at large. Written memory projects, including a series of books, research projects, and local historical society investigations have emerged, all seeking to recuperate and document fading memories, record particular pasts, and take new lenses to historical events. At the same time, within the Jewish community of Luxembourg, there have been mixed feelings and ongoing debates about how the community and its history should be publically represented, by whom, in what settings, with what focus, and to what ends, as well as mixed responses to this memory push by non-Jewish Luxembourgers.

It is in this context that the Jewish museum project recently emerged (though the events that set this project in motion can be traced back further). The museum will be located in one of the two remaining pre-war synagogues north of the Luxembourg city center. From its inception, there have ongoing contestations around the shape and goal of the museum, the objects and images that will be displayed, the stories and histories that will be told, and how the museum will bring together personal or family and collective memories. Based on fieldwork and a series of interviews with those involved in the development of the museum and other Jewish memory projects in Luxembourg, this paper seeks to flesh out some of these debates and explore the contradictions, conflicts, and misunderstandings inherent in memory work.

In particular, we will highlight the ways in which the discourses present in these debates point to concerns over meaning, representation, belonging, and ownership of the past, present, and future of the Luxembourg Jewish community. Concerns around who, of this multilingual multinational, and multid denominational community, will be included, how Jewishness and Jewish history will be represented, and how these choices will position the Jewish community moving forward are ongoing. Following a brief history of both the Jewish community of Luxembourg and the museum project, this paper will explore these concerns and how they are voiced in various discourses. In order to explore the implications of these multi-leveled discourses, this paper will be divided into past, present, and future-focused discourses; however, in practice, these intersect and overlap significantly.

A Very Brief History

Historically, the Jewish community of Luxembourg has been relatively small. Jews could not settle in the area until the ‘Napoleon Laws’ were passed in the early 1800s. Following these laws, which allowed Jews to, among other things, reside in Luxembourg and participate to new degrees in Luxembourgish society, Jewish families slowly began to migrate into the area. These early arrivals were primarily from areas of France, Germany, and Belgium and most, if not all, were Ashkenazi. Many became business owners or industrialists and quickly began to participate fully in all areas of Luxembourgish life – economically, politically, and socially.

Immediately after World War I, a wave of Jewish migrants arrived in Luxembourg from Eastern Europe, where anti-Semitism was pervasive and pogroms had already started. These newcomers were also largely Ashkenazi, but were more likely to come from the shtetl – they looked different, spoke different languages, had different traditions and ways of

dressing. Just as was occurring in the United States around the same time (c.f. Brodtkin 1998), these Yiddish-speaking immigrants from various central and eastern European nations were hyper-visible in Luxembourg, distinct in speech, dress and food, among other things. This hyper-visibility was seen as problematic and potentially disruptive by the local Jewish population, who had, according to one historian of the Jewish community, “done so many efforts to show that they were integrated, that we’re not strangers anymore”. Despite this suspicion, these migrants were, however reluctantly, taken in and given support by the local community and, today, the descendants of some of these migrants are seen as key members of the contemporary Jewish community.

In the years leading up to World War II, it is estimated that there were around 4,000 Jews in Luxembourg (Moyse 2011), around 1,650 of whom were able to flee at the start of the war before deportations to the east began. During the war, in Luxembourg as elsewhere in Europe, most synagogues were destroyed, Jewish ritual and heirloom objects were destroyed or stolen, and the homes and belongings of Jews coopted by German troops and local Luxembourgers alike. By 1945, only two small synagogues remained (mostly) intact and much community infrastructure had fallen apart.

Post-war, the first Jews to return to Luxembourg were mostly those with Luxembourgish citizenship, as the government implemented strict citizenship requirements for return, even for those who had been living in Luxembourg prior to the war. Slowly, however, ‘foreign’ Jews began to return or migrate to Luxembourg, primarily from cities and towns included in what is now called La Grande Région or Greater Region (1). Again, these returnees were largely Ashkenazi and, as before the war, the community pushed for integration and assimilation. Several congregations tried to revive themselves, but by the 1960s, only two remained – one in a town called Esch-sur-Alzette and another in Luxembourg City.

Today, there are around 1,200 Jews in Luxembourg and it is estimated that about 650 of them are actively involved in official community life. The congregations of both active synagogues have changed dramatically in recent years. Luxembourg City has seen a growing number of Sephardi members, most of whom moved to Luxembourg from France and have family backgrounds in North Africa. In fact, the two most recent rabbis have been Sephardi and the synagogue now holds separate Sephardi and Ashkenazi services for high holidays. Esch-sur-Alzette, on the other hand, made the decision in 2010 to become a liberal congregation and today includes a significant number of migrants from the United States, South Africa, Israel, Russia, France, and Germany.

The Origins of the Museum

As these congregations grew and changed, the two synagogues that had survived the war remained inactive as Jewish spaces and were sometimes used for other purposes. The synagogue in the town of Ettelbruck, for example, has alternately served as a warehouse for a carpet emporium, the home of a local football club, and, most recently, the meeting house of a Portuguese Catholic youth group. However, from 1997 to 2002, two non-Jewish historians became interested in the town’s old synagogue and Jewish cemetery and the congregation that used to be associated with these. They performed some extensive archival work and published a series of articles about the pre-war community of Ettelbruck in the local newspaper, *De Reider*. At some point in this process, though we have not been able to ascertain the precise series of events, this research drew the attention of and facilitated contact between Ettelbruck’s local historical society and the existing Jewish community, in particular, several individuals who are recognized within the community as keepers of its memory. Initially, the local historical society organized lectures in the old synagogue building and

offering tours of the old Jewish cemetery and other key sites around Ettelbruck. Surprised by the number of people who participated in these events, it seems that these historians reached out to the Jewish community, who soon after began discussions about what exactly should be done with this building.

Even in these initial conversations, there was disagreement about what to do. Led by several community representatives already involved in various historical projects, several ostensibly open meetings were held to seek the opinions of their fellow community members. And while many agreed early on that the building should be made into some kind of memorial or museum, there were debates about the exact shape and focus of that memory site.

Some members involved in these early discussions felt that it was enough for the community to reclaim the building and prevent it from being used for alternative purposes. Some felt that the space should hold a permanent exhibition about the Shoah; others argued that non-Jewish Europeans have “had it up to here about the Shoah” and would, therefore, be unlikely to visit, and the local government might be unlikely to support, such an exhibit. Some felt that it should be a museum of Ettelbruck’s Jewish history but others felt that, if this were to be the only Jewish museum in Luxembourg, it should encompass the Luxembourgish community at large. Still others were concerned that, as museums are quite static and Ettelbruck quite far from the city center, a traditional museum in this space would be unlikely to attract many visitors and that something else must therefore be done to make this space sufficiently appealing. Some, who felt that the community would likely be unable to obtain enough objects to fill the space, agreed that a traditional museum would not be feasible.

According to some of those involved in these initial discussions, over time it became obvious that only a few community historians would take charge of this project and the number of participants dwindled; some felt pushed out, others felt that their ideas were not being heard and would not be heard and so chose to leave. It is worth noting, too, that though those involved felt that these first meetings had been open to all, after speaking to many community members, it seems clear that a large swatch of the community was entirely unaware of these proceedings. Today, even those who participated in those early talks are ‘out of the loop’, uninformed of the goings-on around the old synagogue and museum project.

Instead, those few community memory keepers, in conjunction with two local Ettelbruck historians, led the charge. Seeking funding and government support, this group began by speaking to the local Ettelbruck government and taking some of its members, along with several Luxembourg ministry members, on tours of the area and of a nearby Jewish museum in Nancy to show them what could be done with the space. Next, they coordinated with the Consistoire Israélite de Luxembourg, the administrative body of the Jewish community, who technically owned the structure at the time, to sell the building to the commune of Ettelbruck for a “symbolic euro” on the condition that the commune turn it into some kind of educational center. Recently, they have taken steps to turn their working group into an official ASBL, which will allow them certain benefits and rights. At the moment, they are awaiting news on further funding, object donations, and other logistical issues.

Whose Past?

The creation of this museum, as of any museum, is inherently a project of contested definitions, representations, and claims to ownership and truth. In deciding who and what to include and how to represent these, the curators are not only deciding what is worthy of preservation and display, but they are also constructing a particular historical narrative for the Jewish community of Luxembourg. Though of course the Luxembourg Jewish museum is still the process of development and is likely some years away from completion, much can

already be said about the implications of the approach taken thus far, the discourses circulating, and the narratives emerging in this process.

For example, one of the biggest issues to date has been collecting objects and deciding which to display and how. While there are plans to include various digital displays, it seems that this museum will be organized in significant part around objects donated by individuals and families and a few that have been preserved by the synagogues. A good deal of importance, in other words, has been placed on organizing memory and representations of the past around material culture and making the museum space “a repository[y] of cultural capital” (Feldman & Peleikis 2014:44). The community historians leading this project have made it clear that they are seeking specific kinds of objects – there has been an explicit call for materials whose origins can be traced to Luxembourg and the Greater Region, especially the Lorraine area of France, as community historians feel these regions “have more or less the same culture”. As one community historian pointedly explained, this will not be a space for “all Jewish culture”, certainly not those who had a “different culture”, such as the Polish and other ‘foreign’ Jews who arrived in Luxembourg in the interwar period. In making this distinction and including only those objects that are from and/or whose style is identifiable as unique to the Greater Region, the experiences, practices, motivations for migration of the ‘foreign’ Jews of Luxembourg are purposefully excluded from the historical narrative. These migrants are instead figured as outsiders whose lives lay beyond the bounds of the historical and ‘cultural’ community.

It seems, too, that the call for objects, as well as information about the museum in general has been largely limited to a particular circle of older community members and the people that they identify as representatives of the historical Luxembourgish Jewish community, such as, for example, the son of the last Ashkenazi rabbi in Luxembourg City. In choosing who to request objects from, who to include in the development of this project, its leaders are, in a sense, determining who represents the community and its history, whose family stories and objects are representative of and authentic to the Luxembourgish community, and outlining the shape of the Luxembourgish Jewish community and what life looked like for that community.

Even historical differences within the Luxembourgish community seem to be ignored. In none of our interviews or interactions with the community historians organizing this project was there any mention of differences in practice, attitude, or beliefs that may have existed and how those might be represented. For instance, it is not clear whether the exhibition will include anything about Samuel Hirsch, chief Rabbi of Luxembourg in the early 1840s. A well-known rabbi at the time, he advocated a radically liberal form of Judaism, which later became known as German Reform Judaism. He was apparently a contentious figure in the community and eventually left Luxembourg for the United States in the mid-1860s. Given that there has been no mention thus far of these kinds of sectarian disputes or differences in practice or belief, it seems unlikely that they will be foregrounded, if included at all, in the museum displays. In this way, religious differences (and the people whose lives they impacted) are being erased in favor of presenting the Jewish community as historically uniform.

As Meskell (2012:1) argues, the past is always “contested, conflictual, and multiply constituted” and, as such, all heritage work is a process of claim-making, in which variously invested individuals, groups, and institutions work to lend authority to their claims, their narratives, representations, and definitions of the past. In this case, as the curators identify their desired sources for objects, photographs, and stories and determine which objects from those sources they will include in the exhibits, they are constructing a particular narrative about the historical Jewish community of Luxembourg. By drawing on multiple discourses and sources of authority, they are working to construct that narrative as ‘the’ past. Perhaps

inevitably, this narrative of the past includes certain people and excludes others and tells a specific story about what it has meant to be Jewish in Luxembourg.

Whose Present?

At the same time, there are some interesting links being made to the contemporary Jewish community of Luxembourg in these discourses around representations of the past. The congregation of Luxembourg City is increasingly Sephardi; though there are no official statistics, several community representatives have estimated that the congregation is now as much as 50% Sephardi (2). However, as one community historian indicated, the museum will focus on the past, to which these relative newcomers do not belong, and that this period in Luxembourgish Jewish life is too recent to be represented in the museum. On the other hand, this same community historian, as well as several others, have expressed a sense these Sephardim should be concerned about the past of the local community, particularly the events of the Holocaust, based on their shared Jewishness.

While the community has historically been largely, if not entirely, Ashkenazi, beginning around the 1980s, there has been a major influx of Sephardi French Jews whose parents or grandparents migrated from North Africa. This has had a significant impact on the community; for example, the past two rabbis in the Luxembourg City synagogue have been Sephardi and several years ago it was decided that there would be separate services offered for Ashkenazim and Sephardim on the high holidays. Some have found these changes troubling – there is a sense that the Sephardim are ‘taking over’, that they have their own traditions and ‘culture’, that they are more observant and therefore more present in the synagogue, and that they “have a different history”. It is this last point that has been brought up in the context of the museum project. As several community historians have pointed out, these Sephardi newcomers have origins in North Africa and therefore do not share in the local Luxembourgish Jewish history, particularly in the history around the Holocaust. The history presented in this museum, therefore, is not understood to include or connect to them. And when asked if they would be referenced at all in the museum, more than one curator argued that this group’s arrival was too recent and therefore should not be included.

In other words, through these discourses these keepers of community memory are making particular claims to the ownership of the past, as well as the bounds of inclusion in the community today. By arguing that the 1980s is too recent to be considered history, they are creating a boundary line in time that works to exclude the Sephardim by figuring them as still newcomers, as having no claims to any part of the community’s history. Further, by choosing not to display these people, objects, and stories in the museum, the curators are excluding them from the community of today, leaving the unsaid implication that the community today is reflected by the historical community. As Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998:81) argues, there is a “constitutive power [in] display” – in choosing particular people, objects, and stories that will be displayed in the museum (and which will not), these curators are making the community and making claims about who owns the past of that community.

On the other hand, many of these same community historians connect the French Sephardi Jews to local community history through very particular discourses. They are making these connections in two ways. The first is through an anticipatory or possibility-based discourse that either imagines a theoretical past in which the Sephardim had been present during the Holocaust or references the potential for similar events to occur in the future and assumes that the Sephardim would have been or would be equally affected. For example, as one community historian argued, the Sephardim should be interested in this history because “if it would happen again, sefarade would also be concerned”. In other words, this discourse calls upon the potential for a shared experience – whether in the past had the Sephardim been

present in Luxembourg during the Holocaust or in the future were a similar series of events to occur – to explain why the Sephardim should care about the local history and should support plans for ongoing memorial projects, though it does not locate them within the bounds of the community, past or present.

The second way community historians connect this group of French Sephardi migrants to the community is by discursively constructing the events of the Holocaust as part of a collective history belonging to all Jews and referencing an overarching shared Jewishness amongst Ashkenazim and Sephardim. As this same community historian went on to explain, “they think it’s not part of their history, but I tell them it’s part of all of our history”. This discourse constructs a shared memory, a shared history that is understood to be shared by the Jewish world at large, including the French Sephardim. And at the same time, figuring this as a key point of shared history validates its inclusion in the museum – it is at once part of local Jewish history and Jewish history at large in a way that other events and experiences, such as those of French Sephardi migrants, are not.

It is important to note that, of course, these feelings do not represent those of the entire Jewish community of Luxembourg. However, they are reflected in the discourses of those currently leading the museum project. These curators have the power to determine who and what is included and represented in the exhibits and these ideas will likely impact how they make those decisions – as Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998:78) argues, all museum exhibitions are “also exhibits of those who make them”, revealing the underlying assumptions, ideologies, and narratives held by those constructing the exhibition.

Whose Future?

Finally, the debates around the planned focus and purpose of the museum point to negotiations about the future of the Luxembourgish Jewish community, its future position in Luxembourg, and its relations with non-Jewish Luxembourgish society. One area of debate seems to be especially important here: the debate around how to represent the Holocaust and how much space in the museum to devote to this period in history. The points that have emerged in this debate have implications about the goal of the museum, whether it should be strictly a space of memory and commemoration or, as those involved often referred to the museum, an “educational and pedagogical center” focused on educating for the future, the assumed and desired audience for the museum, and the future position of the Jewish community of Luxembourg at large.

In the early discussions of the museum project, there were those who felt that the museum should focus on, if not be solely concerned with, the Jewish experience during the Holocaust. They envisioned the museum as first and foremost a project against forgetting. This included two local non-Jewish historians involved in the project – they saw the old synagogue as the perfect place “to keep the memory of the community...pour suspendre la mémoire” (3). The focus for this group is very much on memory and commemoration and, in a sense, figures the Jewish community as a community of the past, defined largely by the Holocaust and demanding recognition of that distinction.

Others felt that the Holocaust must be addressed, but that it should not be the focus of the museum. They argued that if the museum was going to represent Jewish history and enable visitors to “understand exactly from the start Jewish life and culture”, the Holocaust must inevitably be included, but that it should not be presented as the defining feature of Jewish history. There seemed to be two lines of reasoning behind this side of the debate – first, that people may not be interested in a museum that is only about the Holocaust, and second, that there are plenty of other memorials focused on the Holocaust and that this museum could therefore offer something different, a place for visitors to learn about “[le]

judaïsme luxembourgeois, mais également Rhénan et Moselle" (4). These arguments seemed to focus on Jewishness as a cultural and historical group, one with its own ancestry, traditions, rituals, foods, and so on – a sort of general model that could be applied to any cultural group in Luxembourg or elsewhere. By figuring Jewishness as a cultural group, this approach both marks Jews as different and, at the same time, provides recognized, ‘safe’ model for talking about difference – culture as a fixed and bounded object that a group ‘has’ and can easily display.

And finally, there were those who felt that the Holocaust must be represented but that it should be drawn upon to educate the public against the dangers of discrimination. For this group, the Holocaust should be addressed primarily as an example to speak to wider issues of discrimination, hatred, and xenophobia, like contemporary discrimination against Muslims in Europe. In this approach, we can see the desire to fit the museum into a developing narrative in Luxembourg of interfaith, intercultural relations – while this would be a museum about Jewish culture and history, it would speak to many overarching and intercultural issues. Further, this group seems to emphasize acts in addition to objects- the museum for them is not only a space for storing memory, but a space “that facilitate[s] social practices” whose goal is active education, rather than passive absorption (Feldman & Peleikis 2014:44). For example, this group seems to wish to focus on young, school-age individuals as a key audience and plans to invite school groups to visit, to attend lectures at the museum, and to engage in other ways that “centre human actors, rather than objects” (Levell 2010:13). Overall, by emphasizing active participation and education ‘for today’, it seems that this group aims to draw on the Holocaust as a way to contribute to a particular vision of a more tolerant future.

And it seems that this last group’s approach is the one that is prevailing. While, of course, it remains to be seen how the museum will ultimately be organized, this rhetoric of making the museum not only a static collection of objects, but an ‘educational and pedagogical center’ continues to be used amongst those still involved in the planning of the museum. These planners also continue to point to the goal of educating school-age children (who they perceive to be unaware of this piece of history) with the specific aim of combatting hatred, racism, and xenophobia today. This aim positions Jews and Jewishness as part of a larger intercultural and interfaith conversation focused on recognizing different cultures and promoting tolerance.

Conclusion

If and when this project comes to fruition, it will be the first and only Jewish museum in Luxembourg and one of the only, if not the only, museum dedicated specifically to a minority group in Luxembourgish history. And so, in one sense, this museum project is poised to offer a sort of ‘cultural alternative’, to provide a view into the collective historical life and trajectory of a minority group that is largely invisible in both prevalent historical narratives and the contemporary public sphere (MacDonald 2013). And, relatedly, should the ‘educational and pedagogical’ approach to the Holocaust and the goals of education for the future prevail, this museum could work, not only to elevate awareness about the contemporary Jewish community in Luxembourg, but also to position the community within broader public conversations around tolerance and intercultural communication in Luxembourg.

Yet in another sense, examining the discourses circulating throughout the planning process, it seems there is a very particular history is being told, and another that is being forgotten. It seems that the museum’s curators intend to draw on specific objects and stories to retell a past that includes certain Jewish communities and excludes others. As Handler (2003:355) argues, “cultural links to the past can exist only in the present and only within

present-day semiotic activities". That is, by choosing which objects to display, which events and people to include in the chronology, which traditions to present and how, the curators of this museum are working to make particular links to the past, particular claims around ownership of and belonging in the past, which seems to have implications for community belonging today.

Of course, we cannot say how the museum will ultimately be organized or what role it will ultimately play in the Luxembourgish Jewish community or Luxembourg at large. However, by examining the discourses present in the planning process, we can see the processes of negotiation around the past, present, and future of Luxembourg's Jewish community that go into the construction of the museum. It will be interesting to continue to trace the development of this museum and to explore how these discourses are (re)created and impact on the museum's final shape.

Notes

1. La Grande Région or Greater Region is a historical area of mobility and exchange that includes Luxembourg, the Lorraine area of France, the Wallonia region of Belgium, and the Saarland in Germany. Today, it is a state-recognized and promoted area for economic collaboration and movement.

2. It is also significant to note that no one we spoke to about the Jewish community of Luxembourg in the context of the museum project mentioned the congregation in Esch-Sur-Alzette. Rather, references to ‘the community’ seemed to largely point to the congregation in the city and/or the official community at large. However, we will not address that in this paper.

3. This speaker regularly switched between English, French, and Luxembourgish. The French portion of this statement, “pour suspendre la mémoire”, can be translated as ‘to suspend the memory’, meaning to hold and/or represent memory.

4. This statement is in French and translates approximately to “Luxembourgish Judaism, but also Rhenish and Moselle”. The speaker is explaining that he wants this museum to be a place for people to learn about Judaism in Luxembourg, as well as in the Rhine and Moselle regions.

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