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Report: "Kissing the Mezuzah: Jews between Public and Private Space", 4th Annual Jewish Studies Graduate Student Association Conference, Indiana University (Bloomington, IN), February 11-12, 2016

At the conference I presented the paper "Redefining Identity: *Landsmanshaftn* in the United States today". Against the historiographical claim that *landsmanshaftn* are only a faded memory, the contemporary reunion of Jewish immigrant association reveals a continuity with the past and its still important role in forging identities. Like their ancestor today's *landslayt* look for fellowship while keeping ties to and memories of an imagined and real homeland. However, the context is different. Digital media and tourism developed stronger connections across distances and cultures. The highly innovated quality of social relations and the physical contact with their hometown confronts the memories and sense of home as imaginary homeland and challenges the Jewish understanding of themselves. I argued that *landsmanshaftn* were no islands in time and space, but rather dynamic and constantly constructed.

Since I started with this project recently, the comments and questions on my paper during the discussion were especially important. Mark Roseman, the chair of the panel, observed that *neo-landsmanshaftn* are de-territorialized in the digital sphere and therefore, create a new kind of virtual diaspora. The bases of Jewish life are transformed, as he said, however, memory can be seen as unifying force between old and new societies. Barbara Mann added that a comparison with *landsmanshaftn* in Israel would open a new window on the question of commemoration and diaspora. In general, the comments helped me to clarify my research question by focusing on the dialectic dimensions of memory and diasporic experience in American Jewry.

Moreover, the keynote and presentations in different panels inspired me to rethink my project in broader terms. Space and place as categories to analyze the memory of a specific hometown offer possibilities to understand change over time within the *landsmanshaftn*. The first panel focused on the exchange between private and public space and the defining force of memory for the Jewish space through cultural practices like food or mourning; practices which played an important role for the immigrants as well. The keynote investigated the problematic dualism of space as transcendent and place as material entity. Mann proposed a dialectical relation between those two categories, exemplified in the Hebrew word *makom*. Therefore, diaspora can include the ideological as well as the existential identification with another place in exile. This approach will help me to explore the question why *landslayt* in the diaspora identify Eastern Europe as their homeland, not the biblical home of Israel.

Furthermore, the conference gave me the possibility to network with international scholars and students in Jewish Studies. Barbara Mann from the Jewish Theological Seminary offered me help during my research stay in New York this summer. Oleksii Chebotarov is working on the migration processes of Russian Jews in late imperial Galicia. He provided me some interesting suggestions for book titles and the location of archival documents on Galician migration. Anya Quilitzsch helped me in my endeavor to learn Yiddish and provided some internet sources and suggestions for different Yiddish seminars in Europe.