WOVEN TOGETHER

ARCHITECT-TURNED-HISTORIAN RUTHIE KAPLAN EXPLORES CROSS-CULTURAL CONNECTIONS AND THE GHOSTS OF A VANISHED COMMUNITY

Although it may appear tangled, Ruthie Kaplan's career has followed a natural trajectory. She fell in love with buildings and urban studies at Technion–Israel Institute of Technology, becoming an architect and working in the field for nearly five years. After the birth of her children, Kaplan started toward a design degree, majoring in weaving at Shenkar College. She was drawn to the craft because as a child she had been fascinated by the stories of her grandmother, who came from a family of weavers, and because, like architecture, weaving revolves around structure and planning. But when Kaplan learned more about her family's roots in the textile industry in Lodz — a manufacturing city in central Poland — she shifted focus again.

Supported by an Azrieli Graduate Studies Fellowship, Kaplan returned to Technion for a master's in urban design. Now, coming full circle, she is a PhD candidate in the University of Haifa's Department of Jewish History, where, with another Azrieli Graduate Studies Fellowship, she is exploring how Jews influenced and were influenced by the urban landscape of Lodz between World War I and World War II. Using tax records, an archival address book, memoirs and oral histories, she is both mapping where Jews lived and painting a picture of their daily lives. As a member of the university's eLijah digital humanities lab, she is also digitizing some of these documents so future scholars will have a trail to follow.

As told to Dan Rubinstein
Photographs by Ariel van Straten


ufsstand in Lodz.
Ogrody
Ogrody
Las
Kurkaszka
(Oryginał zachowany w Archiwum akt dawnych m. Łodzi.)

While Kaplan's project will continue into 2024, she has already discovered that perceptions of interwar Lodz do not reflect the full reality: though segregated in some ways, the city's fabric was sewn together by residents with different religious and ethnic backgrounds. "In light of the unstable political contexts, growing waves of refugees and multicultural challenges cities around the world are facing," she writes in a 2021 paper, "the connection of a place to the identity of its residents is currently of more importance than it ever was." Here, in her own words, Kaplan explains her research and personal journey.

After my first year at Shenkar, one of my professors asked me what an architect was doing in a weaving program. I told him that my grandmother came from a family of weavers in Lodz. He said, "You're an architect and you *don't* research Lodz? It's a city that was built around textiles, with factories and palaces built by industrialists." It was also home to the second-largest Jewish population in pre-war Poland after Warsaw. So I found myself researching Jewish spaces in Lodz, both in historical records and in the streets. The majority of the original Jewish district was destroyed during World War II and under communist rule. If urban form expresses the history of living communities, then I am seeking the ghosts of a vanished community.

Look at photographs of two streets in Lodz in the 1930s. One of them, Nowomiejska, is a wide road with electric trams, grand buildings and well-dressed pedestrians. The other is a narrow lane of working-class apartments; it resembles a ghetto or shtetl. Which one do you think is a street where many Jews lived? Both are, although it's reasonable to think of the shtetl-like street as a Jewish sphere where the lower class lived. There were many streets like that in Lodz, but as I dug deeper into tax records and address books from the interwar period, I could see that middle-class Jews lived across the city.

This historical information allowed me to start mapping where their homes were. Using the eLijah lab, we trained a computer to read the data and help with this process. I also wanted, however, to find out how they *felt* about the places they were living, to find out what their lives were like. Reading their memoirs and oral histories allows me to develop an impression of the city at that time. Ultimately, I'd like to layer these two methodologies together to explore my hypothesis that as the area of Jewish middle-class settlement grew, segregation faded.

Being an architect gives me the ability, I think, to see things differently than others. I feel like a detective, searching through all of these different kinds of materials. Connecting dots on a map that shows where people lived with the everyday life stories of individuals, I can reflect and visualize what people would have looked at when crossing the street, even if they felt this information was too banal to record. By looking at architectural plans and maps, I can reconstruct urban characteristics such as the density or socio-economic status of a particular area. My work is not only about the Jewish community but communities in general, how people leave their marks on a city.

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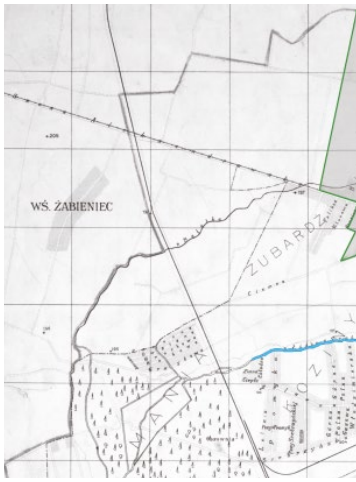
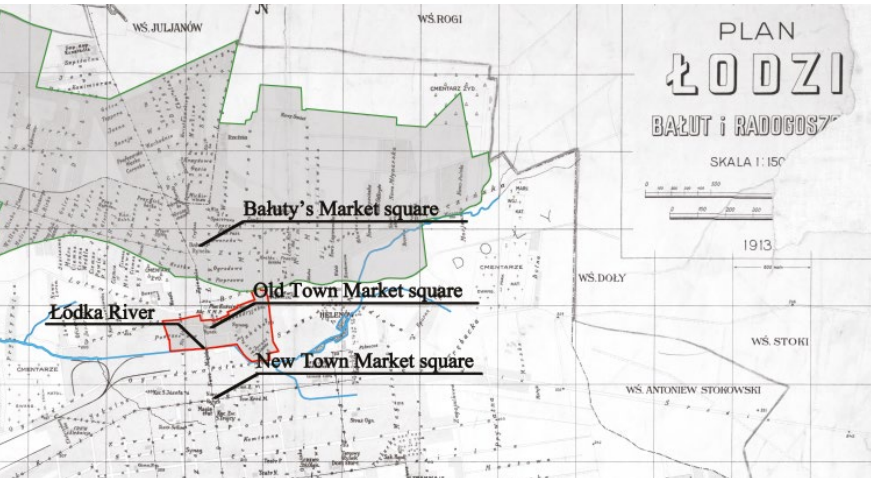
Lodz wasn't a Jewish city, but it was very Jewish. Most people were Polish and many were German, but about a third of the population was Jewish. The Poles could speak Yiddish; the Jews knew how to speak German and Polish. Everything was mixed, and they all knew about one another's cultures. This mix, as well as diversity within the Jewish community, reflects the unique character of the streets of Lodz, which had been ethnically and socioeconomically mixed since the nineteenth century. You don't see synagogues now, but you see buildings that used to belong to Jewish people. They built the city alongside Poles and Germans, and you can see signs of this type of urban landscape in Israel today.

One of the Israelis who planned Tel Aviv came from Lodz, in fact. I'm not saying that Tel Aviv was planned to look like Lodz, but we should remember that a lot of eastern European Jews did not come from shtetls — they came from vibrant cities. Freedom of religious practice alongside economic success offered Jews a sense of belonging in cities. As historian Joachim





Above: a 1913 map of Lodz, including neighbouring Bałuty, where many Jews lived, as well as the initial Jewish district (marked in red). Right top: a group of Hasidic Jews in front of a men's clothing shop in Lodz in 1918. Right middle: an 1823 plan for the fledgling industrial city Lodz, on which Ruthie Kaplan has marked the borders of the proposed Jewish district in red, showing that planners ignored the fact that most Jews lived in the old town. Right bottom: photographed in 1912, some of the houses on commerical Nowomiejska Street date back to around 1820.

Archival maps and photography courtesy: Left: Archiwum Państwowe w Łodzi; right top: Żydowski Instytut Historyczny; right middle and bottom: Archiwum Państwowe w Łodzi

Top: Kaplan in front of her favourite map, which shows the expansion of the initial Jewish district from a single street in 1825 to a few streets in 1841. Above: Lodz's first address book, issued in 1939, is one of the primary sources for Kaplan's research. She uses it to extract spatial data, gleaning information about many aspects of urban life in the city in the late 1930s.

Schlör wrote, "Jews have always been an extraordinary urban people." The history of Jews made them urban, because they weren't allowed to own land, and I think it fits them.

My grandmother was poor. I haven't found anything about her family in the material I have, because most of it is about the middle class. But I found my brother-in-law's grandfather. In an oral testimony, he describes going to a Zionist youth group meeting when he was young. I know his address and know the address where the meeting was. He would have passed two very big and impressive synagogues and Jewish theatres, cafés and shops on his way to the meeting. He was walking in the centre of town, but he was walking in a Jewish place.

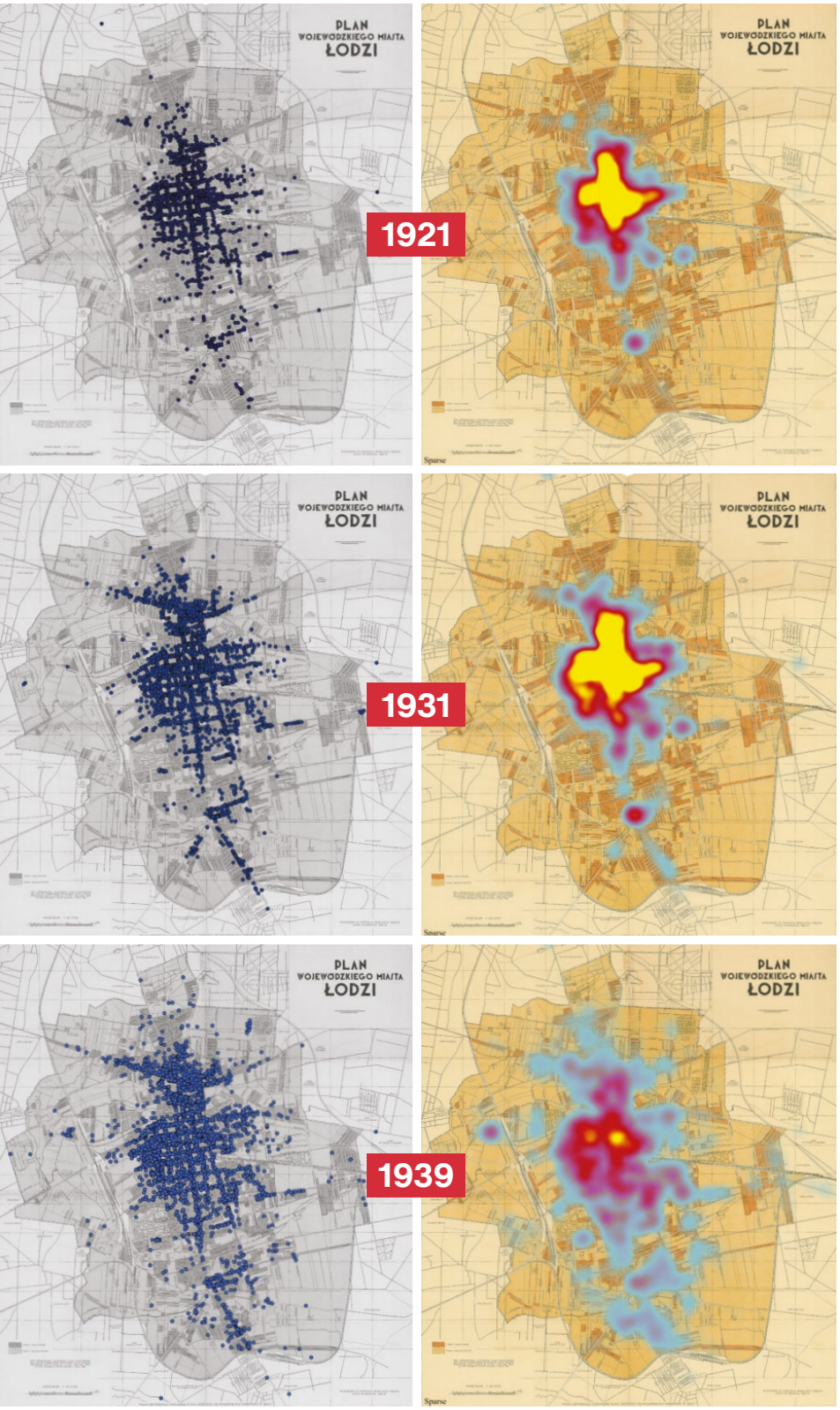
In oral testimonies, people talk about how anti-Semitism grew. There were places or streets where they didn't want to go. A Jewish kid knew he wasn't supposed to go the market. I interviewed a 96-year-old woman, and she told me there were people who hated Jews. But on the other hand, she said, "I was a little bit of a rascal, and on Pesach I used to go to my neighbour's house and eat bread." She tells two different stories. She had friends who were not Jewish, but she has to follow a certain narrative, because that's what we were told. I'm not trying to change the past, but if I can show connections between Jews and non-Jews, I can maybe show that real life did not fit the historical narrative. Everyday life can have a different rhythm in a city.

Nowomiejska, that urban street I have a picture of, was a very short street: just 33 buildings, mostly tenement houses. They were a figure-eight shape and had four or five storeys, with two inner courtyards, and the apartments were small, just one or two rooms. On this street, there were almost 500 inhabitants; most of the people who lived on the street, according to the names in the address book, were Jewish. There were also 700 businesses registered on this street. Because of economic upheaval in Lodz between the wars, small and medium-sized enterprises were better able to adapt to the conditions than larger operations. Some of the businesses were registered under different titles but belonged to the same owner and were located at the same address. There were 87 kinds of businesses, and most of them were connected to the textile industry: shoemakers, tanners, sweater-makers, stocking-makers, underwear-makers, haberdashery sellers.

All of this means that people must have been working at home, and that there was a mixture of private and public life within the tenement buildings and in the apartments themselves. I tried to find out whether other streets in Lodz were the same, and it turns out there was a correlation between a high rate of working dwellings and a large number of Jewish residents. This is also in the literature: Jews worked at home. They couldn't work in mechanized factories because the factories didn't keep Shabbat. It's called the "Jewish method," having workshops in apartments, and it was exported to New York City and other places.

When I went to Lodz for the first time, I felt at home. I had been researching it for a year or two already, and I knew the city and its stories. I've been there five or six times now. As an architect, when you go to a city that you study, you touch buildings that otherwise only exist in books. I sat in the café of Hotel Grand, a historic hotel on the main street, and worked on my maps. It's different from sitting at home doing that.

Maybe my grandmother was the trigger — maybe that connection somehow makes the city feel like home. Maybe I fell in love with Lodz because it's an industrial city and industrial cities fascinate me. Something drove me there, and I'm glad it did. ▲●■



Comparative maps of three time slots during the interwar period, which Kaplan made by cross-referencing the location of Jewish residents in Lodz's address book with the Jewish community's taxpayer lists. These maps allow her to study the spread of Jewish middle-class settlement and show that the Jewish population not only increased in size but also became more dispersed from the initial core.

From Names to Maps: A Digital Methodology

Ruthie Kaplan's "big data" consists primarily of tax records from the Jewish community in Lodz from 1921 to 1939 and the city's first address book from 1939. These archival repositories provide information mostly about middle- and upper-class Jews because the poor did not pay taxes and were supported by the community's contributions. By transforming digitally scanned documents into readable characters — using both optical character recognition and handwritten text recognition — Kaplan was able to create spreadsheets with tens of thousands of entries. She then had to standardize addresses, since some street names in Lodz have changed up to seven times over the decades. Next, using the desktop geographic information system software ArcGIS Pro, she was able to convert lists of names into maps, allowing her to explore the spatiality of the city's Jewish population. But her work in the eLijah digital humanities lab at the University of Haifa does not end there. Kaplan is also digitizing the Lodz-related scanned autobiographies of youth from the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, which is dedicated to the preservation and study of the history and culture of Eastern European Jewish life worldwide. Ultimately, she would like the handwritten text to be transcribed into digitally readable form, making it easier to search for spatial material and opening up additional avenues of inquiry.