

Jeanne E. Abrams, *Jewish Women Pioneering the Frontier Trail: A History in the American West* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), viii + 279 pp.

Jeanne E. Abrams's *Jewish Women Pioneering the Frontier Trail* is a welcome addition to the bookshelves of students and scholars in the fields with which she is clearly engaged: American Jewish, American religious, ethnic, and immigration history, and of course, women's history and history of the American West.

The arc of Abrams's story, from the middle of the nineteenth century to the first decades of the twentieth, maps Jewish women's westward migration, where they established civic and religious institutions, stabilized and built religious community life, and ultimately expanded the possibilities for women's work by entering the professions and pushing political boundaries. Her narrative of upward mobility, enfranchisement, class, and cultural integration pins the crown of Jewish women's achievement on politics—the book's final chapter—affirming Earl Pomeroy's observation that “where immigrants established themselves economically, they also established themselves politically” (5).

At its heart the book pairs two themes: pioneering and nurturance. The pioneering theme is manifested by the book's focus on opening opportunities. The words “first,” “role,” and “achievement” appear dozens of times. In this way the book is compensatory and, as accomplishment history, it is more celebratory than critical in tone. The theme of nurturance is driven home by the way in which women practiced a politics of “maternalism,” taking advantage of the expectation that they nurture to expand possibilities for themselves and to cultivate Jewish communal and American civic institutions (social work, health, charitable organizations, etc.). Abrams's West is a West freer of social constraint than its Eastern or Southern counterparts; her West is nurturing soil.

That *Jewish Women Pioneering* is organized in conventional categories—immigration, community life, religion, work, and politics—is both a strength and a weakness. This scheme gives the book great utility, for no other volume synthesizes as much valuable material on Jewish women in western America. However, it also keeps the subjects from coming to life. Yet what it lacks in lifeblood, flair, and controversy (not a single chapter is organized around a problem or paradox), it makes up for in resourcefulness. The author's breadth of research and detail, from both ordinary and exemplary Jewish women's lives, is impressive.

Readers seeking detail or analysis on domestic life, subjectivity, affect, or moral complexity will be disappointed in this book. Likewise, there is little cultural history here—no readings of plays or novels, poetry, dance, or films that engage, reflect, or shape ideas about what a Jewish (or Western) woman was or ought to have been. Abrams minimizes the extent to which Western

Jewish women disagreed with one another, despite her own hints at significant disagreement over important issues such as suffrage, the pace and nature of religious reform, and even federal voting. She similarly sidelines conflict; from her reading, there appears to be very little tension whatsoever between Western American Jewish women with women of different ethnic or religious persuasion, or with men Jewish or otherwise.

But her chapter on westward migration adds rich texture to the immigrant experience, and her discussions of Jewish women's philanthropy, administration, business, education, social life, and political reform, are upstanding. Abrams likewise excels in her accounts of religious observance and community building, where women became the "primary communicators of Jewish identity, ethnicity, community, and spirituality," combining "traditional Jewish" and American Victorian bourgeois ideal for the upwardly mobile (94).

Ultimately, Abrams achieves her own central goal: "to bring balance to the larger picture of American Jewish women's experience [by] examining local and regional stories with their special circumstances and patterns within a comparative national framework" (4).

---

*David S. Koffman is a doctoral candidate at NYU's Department of History and the Skirball Department of Hebrew and Judaic Studies. His research explores encounters between Jews and Native Americans. He is an educational consultant for the Network for the Teaching of Jewish History and a Wexner Graduate Fellow.*

Jocelyn Cohen and Daniel Soyer, trans. & eds., *My Future Is In America: Autobiographies of Eastern European Jewish Immigrants* (New York: New York University Press in conjunction with the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, 2006), 368 pp.

As the twenty-two-year old Aaron Domnitz arrived in Ellis Island from his native Byelorussia in 1906, he noted that the immigration officials were laughing at him. But they soon let him in and years later Domnitz recounted his first impression of America: "People are good-natured here and they were joking. I liked the reception" (139). Bertha (Bruckhe) Fox, who came to America in 1922, summarized her twenty-odd years in the country by writing, "And what did I find in America? A great deal: material contentment, free schooling, free lectures in all languages, and, above all, calm. Calm" (204–205).

In May 1942 the Yiddish Scientific Institute (Known by its Yiddish acronym YIVO) held among Jewish immigrants an autobiographical writing contest, whose theme was "Why I left Europe and what I have accomplished in America." Domnitz and Fox were among more than two hundred Jewish immigrants—housewives, shopkeepers, blue-collar workers, communal activists, and writers—who sent their life stories in response. The autobiographical accounts came from across the United States and Canada, as well as a few from Argentina, Cuba, and Mexico. The vast majority of the participants were

between the ages of fifty-one and seventy, hailing from all over eastern Europe as well as from Germany and Palestine. Ninety percent of the autobiographies were written in Yiddish, with the rest in English, German, and Hebrew.

Historians Jocelyn Cohen and Daniel Soyer have meticulously edited and translated from Yiddish the autobiographies of five women and four men (among them Ben Reisman, who won the first prize in the contest) and added a succinct introduction, notes, and a useful glossary. Since such an anthology can present only a fraction of the more than two hundred manuscripts, Cohen and Soyer mention three main criteria for selection: first, they have chosen the autobiographies that make “good stories.” Second, the manuscripts had to touch on the larger events, changes, and dislocations that engulfed the Jewish society in eastern Europe and America, like the breakdown of traditional Jewish communities, the rise of Jewish nationalism and socialism, the advent of pogroms, and deepening acculturation, to name but a few. Third, the editors have selected a reasonably representative sample of the general immigrant population in terms of gender, age, place of origin, class, political and religious orientation, and time of migration. In fact, two of the autobiographers in this collection, Chaim and Minnie Kusnetz, were a married couple; thus their accounts offer an unusual opportunity to look at gender relations from the angles of both husband and wife.

As Cohen and Soyer rightly remind us, the more famous published Jewish memoirists, like Mary Antin (*The Promised Land*, 1912) and Rose Cohen (*Out of the Shadow*, 1918), arrived in the country as children and wrote primarily for a gentile, English-speaking audience. By contrast, the YIVO autobiographers wrote in Yiddish for a Yiddish-speaking audience and therefore were richer in detail and nuance. Furthermore, most of the YIVO contestants came to America as adults, and their experiences differed from those of younger, more assimilated memoirists such as Antin and Cohen.

That the YIVO autobiographers wrote to a Yiddish-speaking audience contributes much to this anthology’s richness in anecdotes and folklore. The stories of these nine immigrants convey the experiences of many more: the effect of eastern Europe’s economic dislocations, the pattern of chain migration, and the amazement when confronted with America’s strange ways. When Chaim Kusnetz came to America in 1923, he was astonished to see how a storekeeper left the newspapers unguarded on a stand outside, while the customers left a few pennies on the stand, took a paper and left. Kusnetz concluded that “America is not only a blessed land, but also a land of pure saints” (262). A different common theme was World War II and the destruction of European Jewry, which loomed over most of the autobiographies: the Warsaw-born Minnie Goldstein advised “every Jew” to read Adolph Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* “to see what that mad dog is barking at the Jews” (33), while the ritual slaughterer, Shmuel Krone, ended his account with “May Hitler be erased from the world” (122).

To be sure, these narratives reflect, to a certain extent, the history of a self-selected group—those who answered YIVO’s call to write about themselves. Moreover, like other autobiographers and memoirists, many contestants—consciously or unconsciously—gave interpretive twists to their life stories in order to express a larger meaning. Cohen and Soyler mention that the official theme of the contest, which required the contestants to describe what they had “accomplished” in America, probably contributed to some writers’ tendency to characterize themselves as Jewish Horatio Algers: people who pulled themselves up by their bootstraps to achieve economic success and personal improvement. That type of narrative coexisted—uneasily—with the *Bildungsroman*-like socialist autobiography, which was also greatly represented in the contest: a young worker remains unaware of capitalist inequities until she/he encounters socialist ideas or speakers that “convert” him/her to a lifelong commitment to socialism. In addition, the influence of later events on the description of earlier events is quite clear. For example, Zionist writer Rose Schoenfeld recounted that upon arriving in New York from Galicia in 1912, she purportedly told her relatives, “War is in the air. The anti-Semitic Poles are sharpening their teeth to settle with the Jews” (184). One may question Schoenfeld’s wording, and not only due to a lapse of memory: It is much more probable that Polish violence against Jews during and after World War I (not to mention in 1942, as she was writing her autobiography) had modified her version.

The autobiographies that Cohen and Soyler selected are indeed engaging and cover the spectrum of Jewish society. Unquestionably, one could have chosen other manuscripts from the YIVO collection, which reveal much about the immigrants’ first impressions of their new fellow citizens—like that of Sam Carasik, who arrived in Baltimore (in 1906) from his native Bobroysk. Upon seeing a black man for the first time, Carasik said that the man looked like a “polished boot.” Another immigrant, Max Feigan, who worked as a street cleaner, concluded that, “the majority of the Irish Gentiles are big antisemites.”<sup>1</sup> This remark notwithstanding, Cohen and Soyler have skillfully translated and selected a characteristic sample of immigrants. Their commendable work opens a window for English-language readers into the lives of Jewish immigrants. This anthology is a must for both scholars and anyone who is interested not only in Jewish history, but in the history of immigration as well.

---

*Gil Ribak teaches American Jewish history as the Lewin Postdoctoral Fellow at Washington University in St. Louis. His dissertation, written at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, is about the images of gentiles among Jewish immigrants in New York City between 1890 and 1920.*

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Sam Carasik, autobiography #173, *American-Jewish Autobiographies Collection* (YIVO), 64. Max Feigan, autobiography #4, *ibid* (YIVO), 23.

Kirsten Fermaglich, *American Dreams and Nazi Nightmares: Early Holocaust Consciousness and Liberal America, 1957–1965* (Brandeis Series in American Jewish History, Culture, and Life) (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2006), xii + 252 pp.

In this fine work, Kirsten Fermaglich establishes herself in the vanguard of a new approach to critiquing the well-known thesis that Holocaust consciousness in the United States only emerged in the 1970s, when the Jewish community mobilized it for an ostensibly narrow communal agenda. Hasia Diner and Lawrence Baron have conducted important, wide-ranging surveys to show numerous examples of works of history, acts of commemoration, and presentations in the mass media in the two decades after the close of World War II.<sup>1</sup> Fermaglich's method is to mark out a narrower terrain and dig deep. She studies four figures—historian Stanley Elkins, feminist journalist Betty Friedan, experimental psychologist Stanley Milgram, and psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton—to show how the Holocaust already had significant meanings and implications by the mid-1960s.

The author describes how all four individuals used comparisons to Nazi Germany in the service of “universal” understanding and causes. Elkins compared the inmates at concentration camps to slaves, both oppressed and both responding to those extreme environments with similar behaviors. Friedan discerned a cycle of Cold War marginalization of women and women's internalization of these prejudices. She hoped to stop the destructive process, in part by comparing the plight of the suburban housewife to victimization in concentration camps. Milgram saw obedience to authority as a universal behavior, where the particular differences between a Nazi concentration camp and America were of little significance. Lifton looked at survivors of Hiroshima and the concentration camps and discerned behaviors, such as psychic numbing, that are adaptive in those extreme situations but self-destructive if they persist. For Lifton, all Americans were survivors, as all—not just soldiers—suffered from the disastrous American policies in Southeast Asia.

*American Dreams and Nazi Nightmares* is a study of Jewish public intellectuals,<sup>2</sup> and Fermaglich draws on, and contributes to, the three areas implicit in that designation. In terms of intellectual history, Fermaglich isolates the sources of influence on her subjects' thinking, such as the research of Bruno Bettelheim, Kurt Lewin, and others, and shows how the four either applied their own insights to new settings or tried to change the direction of their fields. Fermaglich describes with sensitivity and nuance the Jewish backgrounds of the intellectuals and what might have led them to think about concentration camps. Their backgrounds were varied. Stanley Milgram grew up in a densely Jewish neighborhood in the Bronx, the child of immigrants with family in Europe during World War II; he encountered little antisemitism but experienced as close to home the Nazi assault on European Jewry. Betty Friedan, in contrast,

grew up in Peoria, Illinois, and attended Smith College, both sites with few Jews but no shortage of prejudice and self-hatred.

Fermaglich's discussion of the universal concerns of the four as a Jewish characteristic is an important contribution to our understanding of American Jewish history at the time. She also demonstrates how issues in the public sphere—debates over the America in a post-Cold-War era, America in the age of Vietnam—and the various forms of liberalism affected their research and the universalization of the images of Nazi Germany, which in turn affected, in direct and indirect ways, American public life.

Today, the Holocaust comparisons of these four authors are viewed as insensitive. Betty Friedan herself admitted that she was “ashamed of that analogy....The American suburb was no concentration camp” (58). By effectively using a wide range of contemporary documents, Fermaglich rightly dismisses these *post hoc* accusations and apologies. The authors' letters, personal notes, and drafts of books all attest to why and how these comparisons were important to them at the time. The drafts of Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* and the private musings of Milgram are particularly revealing. Fermaglich also uses contemporary reviews and the public's correspondence with the authors to show the often enthusiastic, rarely negative, reactions to the Holocaust-related analogies and the authors' intellectual and political agenda.

Implicitly and explicitly, we learn from *American Dreams and Nazi Nightmare* that there is room for more important work on the postwar years. Some figures—most notably Bruno Bettelheim—recur but are not completely part of the story. The author summarizes one aspect of her study by saying, “[T]here is more historical work to be done in exploring an early period of ‘Holocaust consciousness’ among Jews at the turn of the 1960s, *and even earlier*” (122–123, my emphasis). Perhaps Fermaglich will herself turn to that subject. It is hard to imagine few, if any, who could do a better job.

---

*Richard Menkis is Associate Professor at the University of British Columbia, cross-appointed to the departments of History and Religious Studies. He is the founding editor of the journal Canadian Jewish Studies, co-editor (with Harold Troper) of the entries on Canada in the second edition of the Encyclopaedia Judaica, and co-editor (with Norman Ravvin) of The Canadian Jewish Studies Reader (2004), which won a Canadian Jewish Book Award. He is currently working on a monograph on the production and circulation of narratives of Canadian Jewish history.*

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Lawrence Baron, “The Holocaust and American Public Memory, 1945–1960,” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, 17, n.1 (2003): 62–88, and Hasia Diner, “Post-World-War II American Jewry and the Confrontation with Catastrophe,” *American Jewish History* 91, nos. 3–4 (2003): 439–467.

<sup>2</sup>Although the order of these words can be disputed, I think it is overall a designation that captures the collective significance of the four more than Fermaglich's “social scientists.”

Zvi Ganin, *An Uneasy Relationship: American Jewish Leadership and Israel, 1948–1957* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2005), xix + 255 pp.

Today, when the United States and Israel are seen as natural allies on the international scene and when many American Jews view the Jewish State as an extension of their own identity, one could easily assume that this state of affairs was true sixty years ago when the State of Israel was established. But as Zvi Ganin reveals in this meticulously researched book, the relationship between American Jews and the Jewish State in the years immediately following Israel's independence was indeed uneasy. *An Uneasy Relationship* focuses on the leaders of American Judaism and their complex attitudes toward Israel. Ganin explores the variety of American Jewish approaches to Zionism and the State of Israel, focusing mainly on the tensions between the vehement anti-Zionism of the American Council for Judaism and the more practical position of the non-Zionist American Jewish Committee. (The American Zionists occupy only a small portion of the book.)

The chief protagonist of *An Uneasy Relationship* is Jacob Blaustein, who headed the American Jewish Committee (AJC) in the critical years after the founding of Israel; it is by analyzing his dealings with the Israeli leadership, especially prime minister David Ben Gurion, that Ganin is able to provide a vivid and intriguing portrayal of the complex issues that American Jews confronted with the establishment of a Jewish State. Ganin contrasts the Israeli (and Ben Gurion's) position that Zionism and support for Israel ultimately meant immigration to Israel and adoption of a pioneering ethos, with the position that Blaustein and a plurality of American Jews championed at the time that called for political and financial support for Israel, while remaining completely loyal to America. In the book's final section, Ganin also explores the important, but ultimately limited, role that Blaustein and other American Jewish leaders played in influencing American foreign policy vis-à-vis Israel during the Truman and Eisenhower administrations.

Ganin's prose is clear and lively; it combines historical analysis with vivid depictions of main players in this historical drama. At times, however, Ganin makes assertions that are at best questionable. For example, in the introduction he describes the birth of Israel in 1948 as a miracle—but today, after two decades of New History of the 1948 War and the Arab-Jewish conflict that preceded it, few scholars, regardless of their ideological or methodological persuasions, would make such a characterization of the events of 1948. Also, several times Ganin refers to Ben Gurion as a radical and militant Zionist. Most people would agree that Ben Gurion was impulsive, abrasive, even vindictive. But calling the man, who was criticized both from the left and from the right for being too pragmatic in his political approach, a radical and a militant requires further clarification, which Ganin, unfortunately, does not provide.

*An Uneasy Relationship* will be especially useful for students of modern American Jewish experience and for those who are interested in the origins of United States-Israeli relations and the role that the American Jewish leadership played in influencing them. The book's focus is rather narrow and does not provide an overview of the scholarship in this field, but it does rely on extensive archival research. Furthermore, Ganin's easy prose makes it highly accessible.

---

*Eran Kaplan teaches Jewish history at the University of Cincinnati. He is the author of The Jewish Radical Right: Revisionist Zionism and its Ideological Legacy (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005).*

**Eric L. Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), xii + 307 pp. Illus.**

The American Jewish historian, Hasia Diner, once discerned that the way in which Jews understood their own racial identity and their placement within the American racial imagination merited intense scholarly research. Historian and Jewish scholar Eric L. Goldstein seeks to address the abyss Diner spoke of by presenting *The Price of Whiteness* not “as a study of how Jews *became* white, but as one that explores how Jews negotiated their place in a complex racial world”(5). To do this, he looks at the span of time from the last quarter of the nineteenth century to the midpoint of the twentieth century. Goldstein's discourse on the emerging racial identities during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in relation to black-Jewish relations and the Jewish struggle over self-definition is at times insightful, perceptive, and astute. The result, drawing on the efforts “of historians working in the field of American Jewish history,” and augmenting the impressive “recent literature on whiteness as a social construction” (4), is an engaging book that examines the meaning of being Jewish in a nation preoccupied with the categories of black and white.

Appraising some distinct characteristics that reflect Jewish identity in America—race and Jewish self-definition, Jewishness between race and religion, confronting Jewish difference, and the transformation of Jewish racial identity—Goldstein addresses his primary arguments: that the history of ethnic groups in America, which function more as an ideology than as a “description of social reality” (3), cannot be reduced to a story of black and white and cannot conceal the central dissension inherent within the mindset of white Americans over race. His well-chosen topics and contentions validate that the arguments were addressed and taken seriously. Goldstein provides a creditable line of reasoning that Jewish attempts to “avoid the tensions between acceptance and group assertion,” along with the struggles of “conflicting impulses for inclusion and distinctiveness” (239), will continue to invoke a provocative exchange of ideas on the meaning of Jewish identity.

Goldstein's narrative begins by establishing the context of social boundaries under which Jews promoted a discourse of racial self-definition. The salient points here are race, gender, and rabbinic influence on the verbal interchange on American Jewish identity, and Goldstein draws a connection among these factors effortlessly. He laments the challenges that Jews faced at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century, namely, "clarifying their attachment to Jewishness in the face of (American) social trends they feared were eroding Jewish cohesiveness" (15). In other words, some Jews, although lethargic in accommodating the Semitic genesis used to identify their group's status, were, nonetheless, aware that race (employed differently by Jewish men and Jewish women) played a primary role in their emotional relationship to Jewish difference. The same could not be said of rabbis. Their roles as intellectuals allowed them to focus on "the emerging program of Reform Judaism." The importance here, of course, was that Reform Judaism marked "universal religious principles," not race, "as the hallmark of Jewish identity" (26).

"Jews and the Black-White Dichotomy," "Acculturated Jews and Whiteness in the North," "Intermarriage and the 'Melting Pot,'" and "Protecting Jews' Legal Claim to Whiteness" are the most intriguing and provocative selections under "Part II: Jews in Black and White, 1896–1918." The appeal of Goldstein's discourse lies in the subtle way in which he explains the nonthreatening, but ambivalent, position Jews presented to the white American social order during the Progressive Era. He uses this subtly to provide a framework for revealing how Jews constructed the idea of identity while simultaneously constructing themselves.

Case in point: During the first decades of the twentieth century, white anxiety over Jewish racial identification led white scholars to equate Jews to African-Americans. This classification, however, proved very disconcerting to acculturated and American-born Jews, who were focused not only on disentangling themselves from the social links to African-Americans but also on constructing a path that would lead to an unqualified connection to white Americans.

Goldstein subsequently notes the conflicting manner in which both upper-class and working-class Jews pursued a similar strategy to speed their social acceptance by emphasizing Jews' whiteness. While examples of Jewish involvement in the American minstrel show tradition and Jewish life in segregated neighborhoods are used to support this contention, he ascertains that the social ideas of intermarriage and Jewish legal status in the United States sparked the most expressive debate within Jewish circles. The particulars of intermarriage exposed "the strong emotional attachment Jews still had to a racial self-understanding" (102), and the rejection of government officials classifying Jews racially as "Hebrews" uncovered "the inability of Jews to reconcile

their unshakable racial self-image with their desire for full acceptance in white American society” (108).

In “Confronting Jewish Difference,” Goldstein chronicles the perplexing position Jews and white Americans found themselves in when America’s racial discourse during the interwar years situated Jews as a “problem” in American society. Jews struggled with their placement in American society because they were unable to construct a “distinctive identity in a society organized around the categories,” once again, “of black and white” (190). Despite the incredible levels of advancement Jews attained, white Americans were perplexed by the Jewish race because they were “unable to place Jews beyond the pale of whiteness or fully embrace them as undifferentiated whites” (125).

Throughout the remainder of the book, Goldstein provides an informative examination of how Jews asserted their whiteness within the context of racial liberalism and ethnic and religious definitions of Jewishness—although neither resolved Jews’ uncomfortable association with America’s racial culture. As such, the reader is left with an awkward realization that “Jewish acceptance into mainstream American society” during the first half of the twentieth-century “could only be achieved through the dissolution of the dominant culture of which Jews have long strived to be a part” (239).

*The Price of Whiteness*—an improvement over Karen Brodtkin’s *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says about Race In America* (1999) and a satisfying complement to David R. Roediger’s work, especially *Working Toward Whiteness* (2006)—is directed generally to the academic, scholarly, and intellectual audience.<sup>1</sup> The book is technically solid, with insightful writing and organization. Focusing on two arguments, Goldstein nicely balances more general social and political polemics with well-timed accounts from members of the Jewish intellectual community. My minor objection is that the book could have benefited from more comparative analysis on black and Jewish relations and connection to the national and even global Jewish scene, which is to say that perhaps *The Price of Whiteness* is even more relevant than Goldstein is willing to claim. This is a highly readable, well-researched, and equitable examination of one of the most interesting topics in American Jewish history and a book worthy of consideration for course adoption in this field.

---

*Glen Anthony Harris is Associate Professor of History at the University of North Carolina Wilmington. His dissertation, “Intellectual Struggles Between Blacks and Jews From the 1940s Through the 1960s: A Prelude to the Ocean Hill-Brownsville Conflict,” examines the roles black and Jewish intellectuals played in the characterization of black-Jewish relations vis-à-vis the 1968 school conflict. Dr. Harris is currently revising his dissertation for publication.*

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Karen Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says About Race in America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998); David R. Roediger, *Working Toward Whiteness: How America's Immigrants Became White: The Strange Journey From Ellis Island to the Suburbs* (New York: Basic Books, 2006).

Michael J. Kurtz, *America and the Return of Nazi Contraband: The Recovery of Europe's Cultural Treasures* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 278 pp. Illus.

Although it is marketed as a new work, the volume reviewed here is essentially an updated and revised edition of Kurtz's 1985 publication *Nazi Contraband: American Policy on the Return of European Cultural Treasures, 1945–1955* (Garland, 1985). That being said, Kurtz skillfully fleshes out certain material and provides more detail than in his previous publication. Moreover, he offers a lengthier, but still not exhaustive, bibliography, and more illustrations.

Kurtz states in this introduction that after the 1985 book he thought the issue of Holocaust-era reparations and restitution was somewhat settled. Only with the renewed interest and activity during the last decade did he consider producing this volume so as to provide “a framework in which to understand and evaluate actions that may, or may not, occur” (x). Furthermore, in his last chapter, Kurtz bemoans the recent lull in Holocaust restitution activity. Although not explicitly stated, perhaps Kurtz feels that the new publication will help usher in a revival of sorts. His two concluding sentences highlight his role as activist: “Though it will never be possible to return every item stolen or rectify every evil that was perpetrated, good will come from the effort to try. Each item restituted or historical wrong faced is an act of remembrance that will, hopefully, help prevent another Holocaust” (237). More important, he calls upon America to once more provide the leadership that it did during the immediate postwar years and in the 1990s.

This work, like Kurtz's earlier one, primarily aims to demonstrate the important role the United States played in mobilizing recovery, restoration, and restitution activities after World War II. Thus, he spends the first two-thirds of the book highlighting the efforts of key individuals, including Generals John Hilldring and Lucius D. Clay, members of the Roberts Commission and, most important, officers of the Monuments, Fine Arts, and Archives department (MFAA), who labored in often harrowing conditions to ensure that cultural property was preserved and ultimately returned to its rightful owners. It was the U.S. government that took the first step in dealing with the delicate and problematic issues such as the return of heirless Jewish cultural property. The Soviets, as Kurtz rightly points out, did nothing, and the British and French efforts, “lagged further behind [the Americans] and were limited at best” (162).

Perhaps such a statement would stand on more solid footing, though, had he provided more context. Surprisingly, he does not mention the formation of the Jewish Trust Corporation (JTC) in the British Zone in 1948 and the French branch in 1951 to deal with Jewish property located in their respective zones.

However, Kurtz does a fine job at discussing the general European context of restitution and cultural reconstruction—showing not only how delicate and provocative such issues were on an international level but also how long a history they had, reaching as far back as before the turn of the century. While other current publications deal with the restitution of looted art objects, none do so from the vantage point of the American military government, and it is this more than anything else that makes Kurtz's volume such a contribution to the field. One of his major achievements is in showing how the cultural policy of the American government, both in Washington and in Germany, was often more nuanced and dictated by outside international forces and circumstances unique to its zone in Germany. Cultural issues were, at times, of peripheral interest in a postwar arena where the onset of the Cold War was a pressing concern.

As assistant archivist for Records Services in Washington, DC, Kurtz has the enviable position of having the records of the American military government close at hand, and he has made very good use of them. Additionally, he has been directly involved in a number of Holocaust-related issues in recent years (most notably as chair of the Nazi War Criminal Records Interagency Working Group [IWG]). It is no surprise, then, that he speaks with much authority on American efforts in the last decade involving restitution. In discussion of these latest activities, he emphasizes the efforts of significant players such as Edgar Bronfman and Israel Singer, formerly of the World Jewish Congress, and most notably of Stuart Eizenstat, former Under Secretary of State for Economic, Business, and Agricultural Affairs during the Clinton administration. It was Eizenstat who led the way in the 1990s in investigating the looting of Holocaust-era assets. In fact, Kurtz goes as far as to nominate Eizenstat to resume leadership in this field and urges museum groups, Jewish organizations, international councils, and governments to address a number of needs that he deems urgent, such as calling for archives in all countries to be opened and made available to researchers (236–237). A tall order to fill, but one that Kurtz, judging by this book, truly believes should be on the world's agenda.

*America and the Return of Nazi Contraband* adds much to Kurtz's earlier volume. For example, his discussion of Jewish Cultural Reconstruction (JCR, Inc.) was pioneering when it first appeared in 1985. He elaborated on it further in an article for the *Cardozo Law Review* in 1998. In this current volume, he synthesizes the valuable efforts of JCR, Inc. with the work that Jewish groups such as the World Jewish Congress have done in the last decade in relation to Holocaust reparations. Such a synthesis ties in quite succinctly to his view on the current state of affairs. This book comes at a time of renewed interest in

the field, and it is to both Kurtz's and Cambridge University Press's credit that they have made the work available to a much wider audience.

---

*Dana Herman is a doctoral candidate in modern Jewish history at McGill University, Montreal. She is writing her dissertation on Jewish Cultural Reconstruction, Inc. She currently serves as interim managing editor of The American Jewish Archives Journal.*

**Michael M. Lorge and Gary P. Zola, eds., *A Place of Our Own: The Rise of Reform Jewish Camping* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2006), 336 pp., illus.**

"Camp is magic." So writes Michael Zeldin in his analysis of informal education in Jewish summer camps, and, after reading Michael M. Lorge and Gary P. Zola's edited volume on Reform Jewish camping, this does not seem far from the truth. These seven chapters remind religious scholars of the significance of camps as sites for cultivating religious identity during the past century.

It is this rich history of Jewish camping that is the book's greatest surprise. Although focused on Reform Jewish camping, chapters by the editors and Jonathan Sarna explain the connections among the histories of Jewish camping (in all denominations) and American camping, as well as European Jewish youth movements. The Progressive era impulse toward social betterment found a natural target for its goals in the back-to-nature milieu of summer camps, and early twentieth century Jewish summer camp leaders were similarly inspired to inculcate a pioneering spirit in their charges—all the more so as they sought to combat antisemitic stereotypes of Jews as weak, urban denizens. Sarna notes that in the first few decades of Jewish camping, it was not uncommon for the broadening of Reform campers' horizons to be accompanied by a narrowing of the focus on religion: "Judaism was reduced to a whisper" as Reform camps promoted a universalistic spirituality. This changed in the 1940s—what Sarna identifies as the "crucial decade in Jewish camping"—when the trend of philanthropic and community-based camps was replaced by educational and religiously oriented camps. Perhaps this is where we find that the "magic" truly begins.

Benedict Anderson did not have Jewish summer camp in mind when he wrote about "imagined communities," but his insights into how "belongingness" influences members' perceptions of their communities are connected to the subject at hand, especially in the postwar period when Reform Judaism focused intensely on Jewish peoplehood and culture. Many of the chapters in *A Place of Our Own* begin with personal reminiscences of Reform summer camp and the manifold ways it created Jewish identities through ritual, tradition, and even the creation of a camp language. One such anecdote recalls how camp was the setting for a rare sight in a postwar Reform upbringing: an Israeli flag. Sue Ellen Lorge Schwartz notes, "We did not see the Israeli flag that often when we were growing up.... It was simply one more way that camp made us ask in a personal way, 'What does it mean to be a Jew living in America?'"

Reform camps were also exceptional within their denomination when it came to Hebrew. “The Best Kept Secret” is what Hillel Gamoran calls the Reform *Chalutzim* program, one of the most successful and enduring Hebrew-language camping programs in America. Creativity in prayer and song is the better-known attribute of Reform camps. Chapters by Donald Splansky and Judah Cohen on these topics demonstrate that the now-mainstream Debbie Friedman style of worship in synagogues had its origin in Reform camps.

Indeed, creativity may be the main theme in this history of Reform Jewish camping. This volume is a valuable addition to the study of American Judaism, and it promises to renew scholars’ interest in Jewish camping.

---

*Rachel Gordan is a doctoral candidate in American religious history at Harvard University. She is working on a dissertation on post-World War II American Judaism.*

**Tony Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts: Yiddish Socialists in New York* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), viii + 335 pp.**

*A Fire in Their Hearts* is an exciting book. Michels’s provocative claim that the ideology, form, and even language of the Jewish labor movement spread from west to east, from New World to Old World, breaks new ground in our understanding of modern Jewish history. He challenges the romantic notion of turn-of-the-century immigrant Jews arriving in the United States as fully developed radicals and focuses on poor, working-class Jews without assuming that socialism was only a temporary stop on the path toward upward mobility and middle-class values. Rooted deeply in a wide range of Yiddish sources, *A Fire in Their Hearts* explores a number of understudied issues, including the relationship between German American socialists and Russian Jewish intellectuals; radical leaders’ conscious decision to shape Yiddish into both the language and the culture of socialism in America; and the tensions between Jewish and socialist identities. For those who need one, the book makes a strong case for the critical importance of American Jewish history: The radical Jewish movements so central to the narrative of modern Jewish history are literally impossible to understand without the American Jewish experience.

In Michels’s capable hands a unique cast of characters comes to life. The spotlight he turns on familiar figures such as Abraham Cahan and Chaim Zhitlovsky reveals them in new ways. Arguments over the kind of Yiddish necessary to arouse a population that was not as literate as generally assumed take on a new meaning in the context of leaders who hoped that creating a particularist Yiddish culture would lead working-class Jews toward a more universalist labor movement and leftist political stance. Michels carefully leads the reader through the welter of Yiddish newspapers, lectures, public forums, and schools. These institutions appeared in other centers of Jewish life but nowhere to the same extent as in New York, unique in its masses of Jewish immigrants, numbers of

manufacturing jobs, multilingual labor movement, intense class conflict, and uncontested leadership of a radical elite.

Though *A Fire in Their Hearts* deserves all the praise it has received, there are a few lacunae in its sharp analysis and impressive research. One is the lack of attention to gender, all the more surprising given that, as Michels points out, labor and women's historians are among the few who have devoted scholarly attention to the Jewish labor movement since the 1970s. Michels mentions women from time to time, noting that Yiddish periodicals covered "women's issues" such as suffrage, but as political actors for whom gender was an additional complicating factor, women are strangely absent here. In addition, Michels seems to operate with a rather narrow definition of "radicalism" as confined to either labor activism or possibly party politics. Jewish working-class communities embraced a broad array of activist causes, from support for birth control to opposition to anti-immigration laws to Zionism. To overlook the whole spectrum of radicalism is to undercut the rich political and cultural life that the book so convincingly argues shaped several generations. The omissions also beg the question of how and why American Jews who achieved varying levels of economic success often retained radical beliefs and behaviors that did not always match their class status. Still, *A Fire in Their Hearts* is a dazzling achievement overall, one that paves the way for many avenues of inquiry into American Jewish life.

---

*Melissa R. Klapper is Associate Professor of History at Rowan University, where she teaches courses on American, Jewish, and women's history. She is the author of Jewish Girls Coming of Age in America, 1860–1920 (New York: New York University Press, 2005) and Small Strangers: The Experiences of Immigrant Children in the United States, 1880–1925 (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2007). Her current work on American Jewish women's pre-World War II activism in the suffrage, birth control, and peace movements has been awarded numerous fellowships and grants, including a Lowenstein-Weiner Fellowship from the American Jewish Archives.*

**Ira Robinson, *Rabbis & Their Community: Studies in the Eastern European Orthodox Rabbinate in Montreal, 1896–1930* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2007), 166 pp.**

Between 1900 and 1940, Canada's Jewish population increased from 16,000 to almost 170,000, due largely to eastern European immigration. Most of these immigrants were working class, Yiddish speaking, and traditional in their religious observance. While Canadian Jewry included visible radical elements that were drawn to the left-wing and nascent Zionist movements, a significant segment was Jews who strove to adhere to traditional Judaism. This segment has largely fallen below the radars of scholarly as well as popular discourse. As one of the few studies of the early immigrant Orthodox rabbinate in North America, *Rabbis & Their Community* focuses on the Jewish community in Montreal,

Canada's largest Jewish center, in the decades before World War II. The work's close studies of interconnected key figures from the city's Yiddish-speaking Orthodox milieu, the network of lasting institutions that they built, and the challenges they faced offer new insight into the Canadian Jewish experience as well as the wider immigrant experience. In the process, the book calls into question the widely held assumption that this immigration was characterized predominately by a movement away from tradition.

*Rabbis & their Community* examines the significant population of Orthodox Jews who were engaged in a struggle to establish Jewish authority in the New World. This struggle expressed itself in published writings, the “kosher meat wars” of the 1920s, and the Jewish Community Council of Montreal (Va'ad ha-Ir). Robinson presents the lives and ventures of rabbis vying for leadership in Montreal's emerging Orthodox community—Rabbi Hirsh Cohen, his rival for the chief rabbinate Rabbi Simon Glazer, and Glazer's successor Rabbi Yudel Rosenberg—as well as that of community activist Hirsch Wolofsky, editor of Montreal's community-wide Yiddish daily *Keneder Adler* (*Canadian Jewish Eagle*). Robinson's easy, conversational style, contextualization, and glossary render the world of Yiddish-speaking Orthodox Judaism accessible to a general readership.

This work contributes to righting a longstanding imbalance in the historical scholarship of North American immigrant communities and its emphasis on processes of transformation and change rather than resistance and maintenance of Jewish tradition. For example, Wolofsky's memoirs that address the immigrant experience in Montreal have been translated into both English and French and received wide attention, while his collections of Torah homilies have been neglected. This disparity is due partly to the particular skill set required: knowledge of Yiddish and rabbinic Hebrew-Aramaic, as well as history and a vast body of rabbinic literature. It is also due to a bias among historians to chronicle the Jews who understood themselves as “making history” rather than those attempting to transfer a centuries-old tradition of Judaism to the New World.

Robinson's extensive research into the Orthodox component of eastern European Canadian Jewish immigration has gone against the grain of Canadian Jewish Studies, whose focus has been on the more secular expressions of Jewish immigration, such as the left wing and labour movements, Zionism, and Yiddish culture. His research provides a more complete picture of the Montreal Jewish immigrant experience and brings to the fore figures and institutions that have been marginalized and neglected in both the scholarship and historical memory. This slim volume leaves the reader anticipating Robinson's forthcoming biography on Rabbi Yudel Rosenberg, the research for which marked the genesis of this book.

---

*Rebecca Margolis is Assistant Professor in the Vered Jewish Canadian Studies Program at the University of Ottawa. Her research focuses on Yiddish culture in Montreal.*

Robert N. Rosen, *Saving the Jews: Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Holocaust* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2006), xxxiv + 654 pp. Illus.

About four and a half decades ago, as a master's student at Columbia University, I was a party to a conversation between two Jewish colleagues. One told of his mother's spending an hour on the phone with a relative, bemoaning the loss of numerous family members during World War II to the Nazi extermination program. He was, he said, sick and tired of hearing about it. It was over. Nothing could be done about it. His friend agreed. I must admit the attitude seemed to make sense to me also. During the conversation, the word "Holocaust" was never spoken. It was not yet in common use as a proper noun that described Nazi anti-Jewish genocide exclusively—never, never to refer to any other human disaster.

My friends, secular-minded and upwardly mobile, could plausibly anticipate a secure and satisfying career in American higher education. Antisemitism was at most a social phenomenon, never openly practiced in New York and relatively inconsequential nationally. (I had grown up in what many New Yorkers considered darkest rural mid-America without ever encountering significant anti-Jewish feeling.)

A conversation deploring an obsession with the Holocaust is much less likely today—despite the fact that the event is far more distant than in the early 1960s, despite the even greater security and prominence of Jews in American life. Just why that is may be a bit murky, but we all know of forces that surely had much to do with it—the Six Day and Yom Kippur wars, the Arab oil embargo of 1973–1974, Palestinian terrorism, the militant Islamic revival.

The term "Holocaust" emerged out of this maelstrom, along with a sense that it could happen again, this time in the Middle East, perhaps the day after tomorrow. One byproduct was a major Holocaust museum in Washington, D.C. (Why Washington? Why not Berlin?) By then, a large body of literature had emerged. Some writers saw the Holocaust as primarily an expression of a widely felt antisemitism still widespread today. Others regarded it as modern history's example of industrialized mass murder at its worst, with universal implications in a nuclear world.

Robert N. Rosen's *Saving the Jews* engages with the first approach. It responds to a number of writers who blame Franklin D. Roosevelt and a small number of aides for not taking actions that could have prevented or at least mitigated the horror that swept out of Germany and across Europe during World War II. Rosen—a Charleston, South Carolina attorney and amateur historian—is specific about his targets. They include Arthur Morse (*While Six Million Died*), Herbert Druks (*The Failure to Rescue*), Monty Penkower (*The Jews Were Expendable*), William Rubenstein (*The Myth of Rescue*), Saul Friedman (*No Haven for the Oppressed*), Henry Feingold (*Bearing Witness, The Politics of Rescue*), and David Wyman (*Paper Walls: America and the Refugee*

*Crisis, 1938–1941; The Abandonment of the Jews; A Race Against Death*). He is also blunt in his assessment of them as wishful thinkers and distorters of the historical record.

This group consists mostly of scholars with far more impressive historical credentials than the author's Harvard master of arts degree, but Rosen's work comes with endorsements from academic superstars who have written on Roosevelt and/or World War II—James MacGregor Burns, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., and Gerhard Weinberg. (Noted Harvard law professor and controversialist Alan Dershowitz weighs in with an approving afterward.) In fact, this book is an adequate piece of historical scholarship, although its strength lies more in its measured assessment of its antagonists than in original research.

Over the years, these antagonists have developed a multicount indictment of the Roosevelt administration, and Roosevelt himself, as callously indifferent to the fate of European Jewry. The charge has come close to being incorporated into the conventional narrative of official U.S. reactions to Nazi Germany during the 1930s and American prosecution of World War II. Rosen, displaying all the instincts of an attorney representing a client charged with numerous felonies, responds to every count, one by one. A vigorous advocate, he has no interest in a plea bargain. In general, he argues that Roosevelt was intensely concerned with the persecution of the Jews but was constrained by law or public opinion, at times misled by antisemitic subordinates, and rendered helpless by the exigencies of global war. Moreover, he was considerably more effective than his critics understand. The specific counts and Rosen's defense follow:

1. *Roosevelt failed to secure changes to (or circumvent) restrictive immigration quotas.* The law was the law. Public opinion during the Great Depression was strongly opposed to increased immigration of any sort. However, most German immigration to the United States after the Nazis came to power was Jewish; after the *Anschluss* of 1938, the Austrian quota was added to that of Germany. The immigration quota for the two countries was second only to that of Great Britain. In all, Rosen asserts, the United States accepted about 200,000 of the 300,000 refugees who managed to get out of Germany before the start of war in Europe, 1 September 1939. After that date, immigration to the United States (technically neutral until December 1941) was sharply restricted in the interests of national security.

2. *Roosevelt failed dreadfully by failing to admit into the United States the nine hundred Jewish refugees on the St. Louis after Cuba turned away most for invalid visas in June, 1939.* The immigration laws made no provision for special cases. The Roosevelt administration facilitated arrangements by which the passengers were divided among Britain, France, the Netherlands, and Belgium. None had to return to Germany. It was impossible to predict that some would later fall into German custody and become Holocaust victims.

3. *Roosevelt failed to denounce the Holocaust.* The “Final Solution” was not settled German policy until early 1942 and not evident to the outside world for some time thereafter. Still, at the end of 1942, Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin signed an allied statement condemning the mass slaughter of the Jews. It was “front-page news in the *New York Times* and throughout the world” (452). Other declarations attacking Nazi genocidal activities followed, including a presidential denunciation in 1944 of “one of the blackest crimes of all history . . . the wholesale systematic murder of the Jews of Europe” (455). However, words could not deter the Nazis and may even have provoked them to redouble their efforts.

4. *Once the war was on, Roosevelt failed to implement a plan of rescue—specifically, the U.S.-British Bermuda Conference (June 1943) on refugees failed to develop one.* Given the military situation at the time, no rescue plan was feasible. That does not mean that the United States had no interest in one.

5. *The creation of the War Refugee Board in January 1944 was simply window dressing.* The board, funded jointly by Jewish organizations and government appropriations, had no spectacular public successes, but, working in the shadows, it enabled the escape of numerous Eastern European Jews to Turkey and other neutral destinations. It funded, for example, the work of Raoul Wallenberg in Hungary. Even one of Roosevelt’s critics, Haskel Lookstein, concedes that it saved the lives of 200,000 Jews but faults him for not creating it two years earlier and saving perhaps tenfold that number (465–466).

6. *The United States wrongly refrained from bombing Auschwitz.* The window of opportunity to do so was short—fewer than six months in late 1944—and even then, Auschwitz was on the outer fringe of American bomber range. The United States would have had to forego other targets of greater military importance. Little could have been achieved by making the attempt, other than surely killing some Jews.

Most of Rosen’s points stand up pretty well. Specialists argue about just how many refugee Jews managed to get to the United States before the start of war in Europe. (Rosen’s critics claim that “only” 100,000, not twice that figure, made it.) Whatever the case, presidential fiat could not simply suspend immigration laws. One may well feel, however, that Roosevelt could have found ways to bend regulations enough to take in the desperate *St. Louis* passengers. It is worth remembering that those German and Austrian Jews who were the object of persecution before 1 September 1939 could get out of Germany and find refuge somewhere. Of course, not all did so; giving up everything, even in dire circumstances, for an uncertain future in a foreign country was not an easy choice. No one, as Rosen reminds us, could predict that even the *Kristallnacht* Germany of late 1938 would metastasize into the Final Solution Germany of 1942.

From the beginning of his first administration to the end of his fourth, Franklin Roosevelt was more open to Jews than any other American president. This was evidenced in his appointments of Supreme Court justices, influential policy makers, and close advisers. Two months before his death, he met with the king of Saudi Arabia to plead the case for a Jewish homeland in Palestine. But once Hitler's armies had overrun most of Europe, it is hard to see what any American president could have done for the Jews other than to defeat Hitler and put an end to Nazism. Roosevelt pursued this objective single-mindedly and with enormous success through the greatest war in history. He did so with venomous antisemites at home as well as in Germany, arguing (falsely, of course) that he was doing it all simply in the interest of the Jews. If at times he muted his concerns, there was a reason.

The charge that Roosevelt failed to stop the Holocaust seems akin to criticizing a police officer who has gunned down a homicidal maniac for not preventing the crimes in the first place. The passion with which it often is expressed is no doubt heavily motivated by an elemental anger that such a thing could be perpetrated in a civilized world. Yet in truth, the Holocaust was only the most immense of many genocidal campaigns in history; the phenomenon of evil in human nature has found many targets.

The Holocaust's lasting impact is understandable and perhaps inevitable. One might regret all the same that so accomplished a people seem to have made it the touchstone of their contemporary identity. If one consults the website of the David Wyman Institute for Holocaust Studies (<http://www.wymaninstitute.org/>), one finds an organization obsessed not simply with the Holocaust but with a sense that a virulent antisemitism lurks around every corner of American life. The site also contains a press release signed by fifty-five scholars of varying degrees of prominence, characterizing Robert Rosen as a "divorce attorney,"<sup>1</sup> accusing him of making "false allegations against reputable historians," misrepresenting "key historical facts," and engaging in plagiarism. Strong, passionate stuff. Is it just the result of a historical argument about what might have been done during World War II? Or does it reflect a wider rift within the Jewish community?

Rosen dedicates his work to his father and father-in-law, citing their service in the U.S. armed forces during World War II. In case anyone misses the point, he is very explicit in his sense that they were Americans first, Jews second, and that the war was at least as much about protecting the United States as saving the Jews. He is especially contemptuous of the Irgun leader Peter Bergson and his Orthodox Eastern European followers. The Wyman Institute seems to see America as a dangerous place, one in which not even a Roosevelt can be counted on for succor. Its website complains that Rosen maligns the Bergson group. Such attitudes, I suspect, reflect a larger argument between secular/Reform and Orthodox Jews about the nature and purpose of Zionism: Is Israel to be defended

as a representation of the liberal and democratic ideals of the Enlightenment or as destiny's homeland for a chosen people?

On these issues, Rosen speaks clearly. On the debate about Roosevelt and the Holocaust, which serves as a proxy for the larger questions, he seems to me to display more perspective than his critics. World War II was not just about saving the Jews. It was about saving humanity.

---

*Alonzo L. Hamby is Distinguished Professor of History at Ohio University. His latest book is For the Survival of Democracy: Franklin Roosevelt and the World Crisis of the 1930s (New York: Free Press, 2004).*

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>For what it is worth, Rosen represents his practice as consisting of “Family Law; Civil Litigation; Commercial Litigation; Administrative Law; Zoning Law; Government.” <http://www.rosen-law-firm.com/jsp2652083.jsp>

Shuly Rubin Schwartz, *The Rabbi's Wife: The Rebbetzin in American Jewish Life* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2006), 312 pp. Illus.

Through Shuly Rubin Schwartz's *The Rabbi's Wife: The Rebbetzin in American Jewish Life*, we learn not only of the multifaceted roles of rabbis' wives over the past century, but also of the changing landscape of American Judaism. By serving their communities, rabbis' wives played an instrumental though unpaid role in the functioning of the synagogue and in Jewish communal life generally—a role often carried out today by a sizeable staff. Thus Schwartz contends throughout that the “American rabbinate was—for most of the twentieth century—a two-person career” (5). In many cases, rabbis' wives also helped in the transmission of Jewish practice and ritual through their writing and formal or informal teaching. They also established synagogue sisterhoods and founded the American Jewish denominational women's organizations. Schwartz characterizes them as outstanding women, often before and then throughout marriage, who held a uniquely powerful yet unthreatening position in the leadership of American Judaism.

This role remained largely unexamined until *The Rabbi's Wife*. While this book presents a nearly definitive analysis of the changing role and the “evolving consciousness” (6) of these women, by examining the discourse surrounding the rabbi's wife, Schwartz also offers a new perspective from which to view American Jewish history. Additionally, turning our attention to rabbis' wives further allows us to recognize “the centrality of women to American religious history” (5). In the case of American Judaism, Schwartz argues rebbetzins “accelerate[d] the expansion of American Jewish synagogue life” (217), though the presumably central role of mass immigration remains overlooked in this study. A more transnational approach would have added contextual insight to

*The Rabbi's Wife*, for the position itself is of course centuries old. However, we nevertheless learn how these women played key roles in the unique development of American Jewish religious and social life, even, and perhaps unlike their male counterparts, sharing cross-denominational commonalities. Using multiple textual and oral sources, Schwartz accurately presents these women as figures of agency, and in many cases, leaders in their own right. Although all of the women under examination forged their careers through their own efforts and formidable skills, marriage ironically and perhaps inadvertently constituted their steppingstone to leadership.

Schwartz begins in the 1890s with the major expansion of American Judaism and the pioneering careers of Carrie Simon, Mathilde Schechter, and Rebecca Goldstein—wives of Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox renowned rabbis, respectively. These women each founded their denomination's national women's organization while also aiding their husbands—even enabling aspects of their multiple and demanding positions as clergymen and communal leaders. The three women also actively participated in social aid and philanthropic endeavors and promoted observance of Jewish ritual. These trailblazers thereby “established the infrastructure for women's religious leadership in the United States” and “embodied for twentieth-century American women a prototype of the American rabbi's wife” (28). Simon, Schechter, and Goldstein maximized their potential by operating within prevailing gender paradigms, even as they began to blur distinctions between public and private realms and carve the way for future generations.

While rebbetzins up to the 1920s “saw themselves working as their husbands' helpmates,” by the 1930s and 1940s “maverick rebbetzins” emerged and “stretched the boundaries of the role in a more public direction” (87), particularly as the millions of children of east European Jewish immigrants came of age, a critical historical aspect curiously missing from this otherwise erudite analysis. Schwartz highlights outstanding examples such as Mignon Rubenovitz, a Columbia-educated rabbi's wife and “prolific” writer on Jewish custom and ceremony (96), and Rebecca Brickner, also a well-educated woman highly active in Hadassah who lectured the congregation on Jewish history and Zionism and was known to lead services in her husband's absence. Yet as we learn about these outstanding women, one wonders how representative they are, particularly when Schwartz states numerous times that these women “exemplified” the role of the rabbi's wife in the mid-twentieth century (126). What of the experiences of the majority of rabbis' wives—perhaps not all such outstanding leaders or visionaries—in the first half of the twentieth century?

Only in the postwar era do we come to a broader assessment of the ambivalence attached to the role, perhaps the result of more readily available source material and living subjects. “Rebbetzins also became more visible as a group during this time” (128), even with formalized training for rabbis' wives.

Discourse surrounding their role in the Jewish community exploded with the mushrooming of American Jewry in this period. Contradictory messages idealizing domesticity yet promoting individual achievement only increased with time, causing generational rifts by the 1970s. While some rabbis' wives took advantage of the increasing mobility and carried their work further into the public realm—even within Orthodoxy, as the examples of Blu Greenberg and Esther Jungreis demonstrate—feminists criticized the position of the rabbi's wife, deeming it exploitative (although rabbis' wives are far from the only women in Jewish history to have labored in public or private realms without pay).

With career options now wide open and the rabbinate not operating under a “two for the price of one” scenario, most rabbis' wives have officially disengaged from synagogue life, particularly with the professionalization of the jobs they were once expected to fulfill (167). However, Orthodoxy remains the minority exception, where the *rebbetzin* role still thrives today, particularly among the outreach-oriented Lubavitcher Hasidim (215). Within the Reform and Conservative movements, however, recent years have increasingly witnessed a new outgrowth of the earlier leadership in the form of female ordination—and the consequent arrival of a comparatively new phenomenon in Jewish history: rabbis' *husbands*.

---

*Lara Rabinovitch is a joint doctoral candidate at NYU's Department of History and the Skirball Department of Hebrew and Judaic Studies, where she specializes in modern Jewish history and food. Her work has been featured in Prooftexts: A Journal of Jewish Literary History, and Gastronomica: The Journal of Food and Culture. She is also Managing Editor of Cuizine: The Journal of Canadian Food Cultures / Revue des cultures culinaires au Canada.*

Cornelia Wilhelm, *Deutsche Juden in Amerika: Bürgerliches Selbstbewusstsein und jüdische Identität in den Orden B'nai B'rith und Treue Schwestern, 1843-1914* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2007), 372 pp.

For the first time since the publication of Deborah Dash Moore's 1981 study, a historian has provided us with a thorough analysis of the origins and the influence of the first nation-wide Jewish organization in the United States, the Independent Order of B'nai B'rith. Wilhelm enhances our understanding of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Jewish associational life by combining the history of the B'nai B'rith with that of its female counterpart, the Independent Order of True Sisters.

Drawing from a large variety of printed and archival sources, Wilhelm presents us with a meticulously researched history of both orders. She has reconstructed their early days from memoirs, correspondences, and the press, and clearly lays out changes in ritual and structure over time, including conflicts over the B'nai B'rith's democratization and gradual elimination of some early rites. Wilhelm points out the well-known influence of Gentile fraternal

orders, yet questions the view that Jews founded their own orders merely as a reaction to anti-Jewish prejudice in the latter. Moreover, she highlights the B'nai B'rith's inspiration by a German association, the *Lichtfreunde*, a so far little explored connection.

As Wilhelm emphasizes, both orders tried to provide their members with a modern, civic identity that allowed them to express themselves as American citizens *and* as Jews. At times, though, their desire to be more than mutual-aid or charitable organizations was at odds with their wish to avoid the pitfalls of religious commitment. Leaning heavily towards Reform Judaism, the B'nai B'rith's self-understanding as an alternative to congregational life was in constant tension with its distinctly religious elements. Steering clear from official affiliation with any branch of Judaism, the order strove to unify Jews in a way religion could not, but was initially troubled by opposition of its Western District Grand Lodges against domination by the East. This opposition, reflecting the friction between radical and moderate Reform, was further complicated by infighting within the Western lodges. In contrast, the organizational life of the more selective and much less numerous True Sisters was quite harmonious.

Another source of problems arose from the tension between the B'nai B'rith's universalist ideals and the retention of its Jewish character. The admission of Gentiles, though allowed in principle, conflicted with the order's wish to maintain its Jewish identity in order to fulfill its "mission," though what exactly that mission was remained a matter of dispute. In the mid-1870s, the claim to represent American Jewry became more elusive with the establishment of rival fraternal and national organizations and the increasing internationalization of the order, and was sabotaged by its insistence on secrecy, suspicious in the eyes of many non-members. However, despite the permanent conflicts between its leaders, the order's ideals were successfully translated into educational and philanthropic institutions on the local level. These, according to the author, fostered American Jews' pride in a common, public, and modern identity, which was *the* lasting contribution of the B'nai B'rith and the True Sisters.

Wilhelm's book will be indispensable for scholars of Jewish-American organizations and of 19<sup>th</sup>-century American Jewish history. It is also of great relevance to students of general American associational life.

---

*Sonja L. Mekel is a doctoral student at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. Her dissertation analyzes the relationship between Germans and German Jews in Chicago and Milwaukee in the 19th century.*