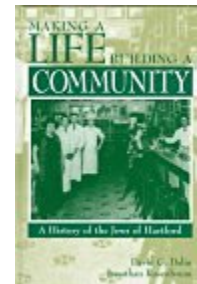


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

David G. Dalin, Jonathan Rosenbaum. *Making a Life, Building a Community: A History of the Jews of Hartford*. New York: Holmes & Meier, 1997. x + 330 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8419-1374-5.

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The Jews of Hartford

The “New Social History” of the 1960s and 1970s produced numerous studies of local ethnic communities, typically focusing on questions of social mobility and cultural retention. These studies greatly enriched our understanding of the lives of ordinary Americans, helped to strengthen a multi-cultural perspective on the American urban past, and added new sophistication to the study of local history. Despite the abundance of such work covering cities throughout the United States, a number of significant local ethnic communities remain unstudied by professional historians. In *Making a Life, Building a Community*, David Dalin and Jonathan Rosenbaum, professors at the University of Hartford, seek to fill one such gap. Their carefully-documented, clearly-written study provides valuable information about the institutional history of Hartford’s Jewish community, and is a useful reference for anyone studying this medium-sized New England city. Nevertheless, the book contains no major insights that will startle historians of American ethnicity, and its nearly relentless focus on institutional history makes it unlikely to engage readers without a strong prior interest in the subject.

The authors promise in their introduction to supplement their use of written source material with oral history interviews in order to present a fuller account of the experience of ordinary Hartford Jews. However, the chapters that follow give only cursory attention to the texture of everyday life. Furthermore, the book seems to have little in common with the “new social history” approach of studying a community from the bottom up;

instead, it bears a striking resemblance to what the authors implicitly criticize as “the traditional, or, as some might claim, ‘elitist’ approach to the Jewish past, with its exclusive reliance upon...traditional sources of historical data.”

Throughout the book, Dalin and Rosenbaum emphasize local institution-building within a national and international Jewish context. They provide historical sketches of local synagogues, charities, political organizations and social and cultural clubs, as well as biographical sketches of community leaders. Their chapters are organized around a broader interpretive framework of Jewish history. The early chapters touch on such issues as Jewish participation in Columbus’s voyage, Hartford Jews’ participation in the Civil War, Jewish suffering in Czarist Russia, and the development of Reform and Conservative Judaism. Two of the later chapters focus on Hartford Jews’ response to Zionism and the Holocaust. The chapter on Zionism is one of the strongest in the book, combining necessary information about the larger context, extensive detail about local activities, and an argument that the Zionist movement in Hartford differed significantly from movements in other cities. The authors show that, unlike in other cities where Jews divided over the issue, leaders of Hartford’s congregations united behind the cause of the Jewish state.

These are certainly important issues, but the emphasis on them seems disproportionate in what is supposed to be a community study. The authors pay limited at-

tention to the local context, and create the impression that Hartford's Jewish history is primarily a reflection of national or international trends, with some minor local nuances. One trend that receives surprisingly little attention is the suburbanization of Hartford's Jews. The authors acknowledge on page 243 that "By the end of its first century and a half, the Jewish community of Hartford had effectively ceased to live in the city that had given it identity." The massive exodus of Jews from Hartford's North End in the 1950s and 1960s might seem to be a subject worth exploring in depth, as it clearly produced important changes in the daily lives of local Jews. However, the authors dispense with it in a few brief passages, preferring to devote most of their time to the individual histories of the Jewish synagogues and organizations that arose in the suburbs.

Dalin and Rosenbaum have produced an important addition to the limited historiography of Hartford, a detailed and scrupulously documented work which far surpasses the previous study (Morris Silverman's, *Hartford Jews, 1659-1970*, Hartford: Connecticut Historical Society, 1970). Their book will be of particular interest to people who are involved in the Greater Hartford Jewish community. Readers can turn to *Making a Life, Building a Community* for some skillfully researched information on how Hartford's Jews built a community, but will find disappointingly little on how they made a life.

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