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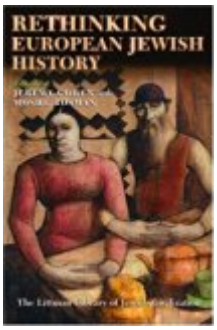

Jeremy Cohen, Moshe Rosman, eds.. *Rethinking European Jewish History.* Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2009. viii + 261 pp. $49.50, cloth, ISBN 978-1-904113-56-0.

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Originally a *yeshuvnik* (village Jew) from Byelorussia, the young Yiddish poet Yoysef Rolnik was on his way to America (1899) when he arrived in the port city of Libau (today Latvia's Liepāja). Upon arrival, Rolnik stopped and stared at the window of a local bookstore, which displayed German books. Years later he recalled, "I felt that I am almost in Germany, in Europe."[1]

Rolnik's excitement illustrates some of the complexities facing any attempt to define the contours and scope of European Jewish history, a topic that underlies many of the studies in ***Rethinking European Jewish History***. Most scholars in this collection of eleven essays (the product of a conference held at Tel Aviv University in 2005) challenge an array of conceptual, chronological, and geographical entities that have long strewn Jewish historiography, such as antisemitism, assimilation, modernization, and narrowly conceived political borders. One of the main difficulties that has bedeviled Jewish historians in recent decades has been the tension between their reluctance to employ monolithic categories, like "the Jews" or "the Jewish mind," on the one hand, and on the other hand, the concern, as mentioned by coeditor Jeremy Cohen, that in decrying essentialism, we might do away "with whatever Jewish factor gives coherence" to the field we study (p. 3). That dilemma pervades most of this volume's essays and it will probably continue to inform future debates.

The book is divided into four parts. The first is dedicated to methodological and terminological questions: in the opening contribution, coeditor Moshe Rosman emphasizes that not only periodization but also "Jewish historical geography" warrants reexamination. Whereas earlier historians, like Heinrich Graetz and Simon Dubnow, saw Jewish history unfolding on a "world-wide stage," historians in the 1970s and 1980s went to the other extreme, overstressing political borders and studying "distinctive, separate Jewish communities" (p. 22). Rosman tries to strike a balance between those two approaches: when looking at early modern figures, like Yosel of Rosheim, Glikl of Hameln, or Jacob Emden, one can see how they

conducted business, sought education, or lobbied government officials across political borders. He argues that they "acted as 'citizens' of a Jewish 'country,' called Ashkenaz, with its own language, Yiddish, its own laws and customs" (p. 24). Balanced and insightful as it is, Rosman's analysis does not refer to how political borders had the effect of shaping intra-Jewish relationships: Did Jews in Poland and the German lands view each other as different due to, say, clothing, local customs, Yiddish dialects, or certain manners? In other words, how did political or ethnic borders lead in turn to the emergence of intra-Jewish cultural differences? By the nineteenth century, those dissimilarities were clear enough: in the wake of the Franco-Prussian War (1870), for example, Alsatian Jews in Los Angeles broke away from a local benevolent society made up mainly of Jews from Prussian Poland and formed their own French benevolent society.[2] It is quite plausible that the early modern period witnessed other divisions among Ashkenazi Jews that corresponded to political/ethnic borders.

Also in this part are Paula Hyman's review of Jewish historiography's treatment of gender, and Maud Mandel's piece, in which she argues that both the negative and positive assessments of assimilation have conceptualized it "as a one-way process in which Jews absorb, reject or transform a static majority culture" (p. 74). Mandel suggests a shift from examining how Jews changed due to their inclusion into non-Jewish society to a focus on how Jews shaped the majority culture. While Mandel revisits assimilation, David Engel's "Away from a Definition of Antisemitism" criticizes historians' usage of this ubiquitous term by dealing with its anachronism and the common reversal of cause and effect. Whereas initially (circa 1880) antisemitism had been seen as the product of actions taken by "antisemites" in Germany, Jewish observers and later scholars began viewing the actions of antisemites "as the product of an abstract, disembodied 'antisemitism'" that existed long beforehand (p. 45). Engel concludes that there is no necessary relation between the different expressions of anti-Jewish hatred (whether violent attacks, social discrimination, derogatory depictions, demands for legal restrictions, or privately harbored revulsion against Jews) across time and space, and "none has ever been demonstrated" (p. 53). While Engel's criticism of the often unreflective manner in which scholars apply the appellation "antisemitism" is much to the point, one is left wondering what Engel's verdict would be had scholars substituted antisemitism with the traditional term (which he mentions) of ***sinat yisra'el*** (Jew hatred). Moreover, even if there were no direct relation between the various manifestations of anti-Jewish animosity across time and space, were they not all aimed at Jews, after all? The pitfalls of essentialism notwithstanding, one does not have to use the term popularized by Wilhelm Marr in the 1880s to recognize the common object of hatred in those disparate phenomena.

The book's second part revolves around the transition from the Middle Ages to modernity. Miriam Bodian comments that "remarkably, no major monograph has yet been written with an explicit focus on the Reformation and the Jews" and offers guidelines for future research (p. 114). David B. Ruderman locates five factors that enable the description of the early modern period as a meaningful chronological unit for Jewish history: first, mobility, social mixing, and hybridity; second, communal cohesion accompanied by the growing laicization of communal authority; third, the "knowledge explosion" (which he sees as the most important), and especially the impact of the printed book; fourth, the threat of heretical religious fervor (Sabbateanism); and finally, "the blurring of religious identities," or "mingled identities," like those of Conversos, Christian Hebraists, and Sabbateans (pp. 109-110).

The book's most intriguing piece, which defies the identification of modernity with central and western European Jewries, is Gershon David Hun-

dert's "Re(de)fining Modernity in Jewish History." Rejecting the "Germanocentric paradigm of modernity in Jewish history," he suggests looking at the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, since the bulk of world Jewry in the eighteenth century lived there (p. 134). Hundert criticizes historians who view modernity as "a train that progressively moved across Europe from west to east" (p. 144). Furthermore, Jews in central and western Europe "exchanged their values for those of the dominant culture in the hope of acceptance," but that exchange involved "varying degrees of self-rejection and was, at times, traumatic" (p. 142). Though recent historiography "uses terms like negotiation and hybridity rather than exchange,... when a brick and an egg collide it does not matter which was moving, the result is the same" (p. 142). Most important, in what may seem a comeback of the national school in Jewish history (albeit in its diasporic version), Hundert asserts that Polish Jews' large numbers, continued attitude of superiority over their Christian neighbors, crucial economic role, and the absence of a "beckoning bourgeoisie" created their positive self-evaluation as Jews. That evaluation is perhaps "the most important ingredient in modern Jewish history," as "the vast majority of eastern European Jews and their descendants carried this core" of a "sense of chosenness in them" (pp. 134, 145). In comparison with much of the contemporary "anti-essentialist" historiography, which often cannot see the forest for the trees, Hundert's piece brings us back to the fundamental questions and interpretations of modern Jewish history.

The third part looks at Spanish Jewry in the century prior to their expulsion (1492). David Nirenberg explores how the religious identity of both Jews and Christians evolved in the generations following the massacres and mass conversions of 1391. The appearance of large numbers of Conversos complicated the traditional boundaries between the communities and brought about an anti-Converso backlash among "old" Christians. Ram Ben Shalom also concentrates on the triangular relationship between Jews, Christians, and Conversos, concluding that the rise of a Converso community encouraged among Jews a more pluralistic perspective on Christianity, which allowed accepting the Converso community "as an integral part of the collective Jewish identity" (p. 198).

The last part reverses the east-to-west narrative of modern Jewish history by analyzing movement and influence in the opposite direction. Daniel Soyer applies a transnational lens in his penetrating study of the mutual influence between American and Eastern European Jewries in the 1920s and 1930s. Hundreds of delegates from ***landsmanshaftn*** (hometown associations) and the Joint Distribution Committee visited Eastern Europe (1919-21) in an effort to help Jewish communities, whose situation had sharply worsened during World War I and especially during the ensuing Russian Civil War and the Soviet-Polish war. Soyer maintains that the focus of American immigration history on Americanization has obscured the ways in which Jewish immigrants in America continued to be involved in their former homelands: through philanthropy, travel, business ventures, and communication. At the same time, Soyer's nuanced analysis demonstrates how the reencounter with one's hometown strengthened American Jews' sense of being distinctly American: he depicts an American Jew visiting his hometown, who felt the city seemed like "a prison" (pp. 212-213). The last section of the book also features Judah M. Cohen's study of the performance of Jewish music in Europe by contemporary American-Jewish artists. Cohen is interested in the way American Jewish performers, who are trained in "heritage music," came to Europe as the "guardians" of Jewish musical forms (p. 244).

The concentration of most authors on periodization, semantics, boundaries, and borders might ensure that the book's readership would be mainly limited to academicians. Still, with all the emphasis given to those topics, it is interesting that no contributor sought to investigate what the

term “Europe” meant to Jews at different junctures. Rolnik had not left his home country (tsarist Russia) when he felt almost “in Europe.” What were the Jewish conceptualizations of the continent in which they had lived for so many centuries? Once the home of more than 80 percent of the world’s Jewish population (the late nineteenth century), Europe counted for less than 12 percent by 2006.[3] As the historiographical divergence about the course and meaning of European Jewish history is bound to continue, many of the studies in this volume will surely serve as points of departure for future research.

Notes

[1]. Yoysef Rolnik, *Zikhroynes* (New York: With the help of the David Ignatoff Fund, 1954), 109.

[2]. Norton B. Stern, “When The Franco-Prussian War Came to Los Angeles,” *Western States Jewish Historical Quarterly* 10 (1977): 68-73.

[3]. The 2006 date is taken from Sergio DellaPergola, “World Jewish Population, 2006,” *American Jewish Year Book* (2006), 573.