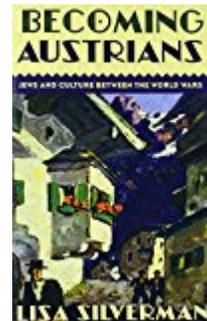




Lisa Silverman. *Becoming Austrians: Jews and Culture between the World Wars*. Oxford University Press, 2012. xi + 334 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-979484-3.



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## To Be Different Is to Be Jewish

Much of the historiography on the Jews of Vienna has focused on the complexities of Jewish identity in this major European metropolis. More specifically, historians have devoted considerable scholarly attention to fleshing out the Jewishness of highly acculturated Jews in the Habsburg capital, placing the putatively disproportionately Jewish fin de siècle cultural movement in a more eclectic and comparative framework, and re-examining the long-standing notion that the Jews of Vienna and other parts of Cisleithania were the most (and, for some historians, the only) *habsburgtreu* subjects in the empire and, after the First World War, the only true Austrians. And all of this scholarship has engaged the extent to which the contours of Jewishness and “Austrianness” were shaped from the 1880s on as a response to anti-semitism.[1]

With *Becoming Austrians* Lisa Silverman builds on, and engages all of, these scholarly currents en route to elucidating and redefining the often muddled boundary between Jewish and non-Jewish in interwar Vienna. To this end, the author deploys a novel definition of Jewishness—Jewish difference—and uses some inventive

tactics to get at the heart of the identity of interwar Viennese Jewry. This conceptualization, the author informs us, “seeks to examine the experiences of Austrian Jews without making Jewish self-identification the ontological foundation of Jewish experiences” (p. 6). The usefulness of this conceptualization lies in that it “foregrounds Jewish difference as one of a number of analytic categories or frameworks, like gender and class, that used each others’ terms in order to articulate their power” (p. 6).

From the outset, the author lays out the book’s ambitious overarching aim, namely, to reconsider the conventional periodization of the history of Vienna and its Jewry. Silverman intends to do so by rehabilitating the interwar years from the diminished status of a mere transitional period between two more dramatic and well-known episodes—the golden age of Habsburg imperialism and the *Anschluss* with Germany in 1938. To this end, she “powerfully calls into question long-standing descriptions of fin-de-siècle Vienna as the example par excellence of Jewish participation in modern urban culture,” and argues instead that “bracketing the years between the World Wars yields some of the strongest ex-

amples of the role of Jewish difference in articulating the terms of culture in Austria” (pp. 4-5).

Silverman posits a novel way of defining Jewishness: to elucidate the contours of this definition, she sets “Jewish difference” in the larger framework of class and gender differences. Having laid out this new conceptualization, the author weaves together several episodes in the life of interwar Vienna that on first glance do not seem to have much bearing on one another: a series of court trials, the absence of Jewish women from a popular interwar novel, the liminal role of Leopoldstadt (the Jewish part of Vienna) in distinguishing between expressions of Jewish identity, and the presence and role of Yiddish in public cultural events such as the Salzburg Festival.

On closer examination, though, a common thread becomes clearer: tacit attitudes toward Jewish difference, which the author lays bare. Beginning with a series of court trials, the author describes the “intersection of [their] performative nature with the coding of Jewish difference” (p. 29). In ordinary parlance, the author notes how the antisemitic outlook of one or more parties involved in the trial was rarely or never the stated motive for going after a Jewish adversary; but it was understood—for the most part, tacitly—by participants, observers, and pretty much everyone in Vienna to be a coded yet powerful undercurrent: an undercurrent that, at the very least, guided the proceedings and the outcome, if it was not quite the determining factor. Unveiling and fleshing out such a coded understanding is no small task. Yet the author succeeds by weaving the slanted contemporary accounts of the trials and the subjective recollections of those who described them years later into a reasonable and plausible reconstruction of these events.

Turning to Hugo Bettauer’s popular novel, *Die Stadt ohne Juden* (City without Jews, 1924), and its cinematic incarnation, the author probes the blurred boundary between Jewishness and non-Jewishness through a gendered analysis of this gray area. More specifically, she notes the virtual absence of Jewish women in this novel—with the exception of one atypical female character. Silverman sees this lacuna as both microcosm and symbol of what she terms “the anxieties of Jewish men about a Jewish woman who reverses the terms of the Jewish man’s fantasy by achieving success both in business as well as in her amorous pursuit of Christian” (p. 68).

Silverman is not the first to consider questions of identity and assimilation from a gendered perspective. But she is one of the first to consider the distinct experi-

ences of men and women from the perspective of highly acculturated male Jewish intellectuals like Bettauer living amidst the confusion and flux of Vienna in 1922. Like their male counterparts, Jewish women were confronted by a series of ambiguities in interwar Vienna, but a different set of ambiguities that added up to an alternate construction of Jewish difference: “Regardless of their degree of Jewish self-identification, Jewish publishers and filmmakers often supported Jewish women, they also circumscribed the content and scope of their work. These limitations make it clear that we must rely on different, more interpretive, methodological approaches in order to illuminate how Jewishness functioned in these women’s loves and works, since their texts, performances, and other forms of culture they created often reflected Jewish ‘absence’ only implicitly” (pp. 101-102). Jewish women, in other words, experienced anxiety just like men, but for different reasons.

Having distinguished between the ways that Jewish men and women experienced Jewish difference, the author adds a spatial dimension by apposing Jews who lived in Leopoldstadt with those who lived elsewhere in Vienna—a useful twist on the well-trodden narrative of Jews trading the familiarity and security of the old neighborhood for the uncertainty and excitement of a new one. The author explores the “physical spaces and the metaphorical codings of their city” (p. 105). The various attitudes toward the old neighborhood that the author documents among acculturated Jewish intellectuals resonates more deeply as an odd combination of nostalgia toward, and disinterest in, the life and culture these Jews have left, both physically and spatially in their relocation away from Leopoldstadt. It also resonates spiritually and culturally in their move away from the culture and heritage of their parents.

Here the author finds a novel alternative to the predictable and prosaic ambivalent lament for the lost world of prewar Jewishness and Habsburgness. Instead, she notes how these Jews found ways to merge a new sense of Jewishness with a newfound sense of Austrian identity—a crucial element of understanding the Jewish experience in interwar east-central Europe on its own terms and not as foreshadow or afterthought. This is especially evident in the continued presence of Yiddish theater in Vienna and even at the Salzburg Festival.

If there is a downside to this engaging book—and there is not very much of one—it is the periodic overreliance on theoretical terminology that clogs what is otherwise an fluid narrative with illuminating examples.

Whatever sophistication is added by such terminology is superfluous given the sophistication of the analysis and the originality of the argument and sources. (“Performative nature of Antisemitism” is an engaging term. When the reader encounters it on virtually every page, though, it begins to lose some of its allure).

In addition, as if often the case with studies from the realm of cultural and intellectual history, the subjects of this study are a handful of atypical Jewish intellectuals who are nowhere near representative of Vienna Jewry as a whole. This is not *Alltagsgeschichte* by any stretch of the imagination, but rather an exploration of the mentalities of Vienna’s Jewish intelligentsia. As such, what it reveals about Vienna and Austrian Jewry is limited. Still, as with other cultural histories, the author has raised questions that social and political historians can bring to bear in future studies of the Jews of Vienna which take a more grassroots approach.

More importantly, beyond delivering what was promised at the outset, the questions that this book raises and, to some extent, addresses, will be of use not only to historians of Vienna and its Jews, but to any scholar trying to make sense of urban Jewish life in the twentieth century, particularly in the turbulent aftermath of the First World War.

#### Note

[1]. See, for example, Marsha L. Rozenblit, *The Jews of Vienna, 1867-1914: Assimilation and Identity* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1984); Rozenblit, *Reconstructing a National Identity: The Jews of Habsburg Austria during World War I* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Steven Beller, *Vienna and the Jews, 1867-1938: A Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); and David Rechter, *The Jews of Vienna and the First World War* (Oxford: Littman Library, 2008).

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