

Ruth Gay. *Safe Among the Germans: Liberated Jews After World War II.* New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002. xiv + 347 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-300-09271-4.



Reviewed by Aine Zimmerman

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At first glance, Ruth Gay's provocative title seems a paradox: Jews safe among the Germans? Ironically, this was indeed the case immediately following the end of World War II, when survivors gathered in displaced persons camps in Germany, turned away by other Western nations and Palestine. Gay begins her account at this historical moment, tracing the fate of European Jews in the second half of the twentieth century, from survivors in 1945 to Russian immigrants in Berlin in the late 1990s. Gay, a prominent writer of Jewish history and winner of the 1997 National Jewish Book Award, clearly states her intent in writing this book: "This book is quite frankly an attempt to win the attention of a public that had long been either indifferent or hostile to the idea of Jews settling in postwar Germany" (p. xiii). This book should make great strides toward this goal, as Gay's scholarly account is informative and highly readable, although at times uneven.

The book is divided into six chapters, each dealing with a different aspect of the Jewish experience, both pre- and post-war. Although Gay peppers the chapters with Holocaust references and

survivor accounts, the book's title downplays the Holocaust, referring instead to "World War II." She seems intent on portraying the Holocaust as a highly significant event, but not the ultimate rift that rends the fabric of Jewish life in Germany completely. Rather, it is her goal to show that a Jewish community in Germany continues--and even flourishes--after the Holocaust.

The book begins with the chapter "Where they came from", presenting a brief history of European Jews prior to World War II. "They" refers mainly to Eastern European and especially Polish Jews, who Gay views as living in exile, or *galut*, for as long as they had been in Europe, aligning her portrayal with the concept of the "wandering Jew." She gives considerably less attention to the (much more settled) Jews in Germany and Austria, stating only that they were to a large degree assimilated before 1933, and then had to deal with the Nazi regime tearing their comparatively secure lifestyle from them. As she devotes more time to the background and experience of Eastern European Jews, the portrayal of assimilated Western Jews strikes one as skewed: what of the Jew-

ish role and experience in the Enlightenment and "German-Jewish symbiosis" of the nineteenth century? The book initially focuses on the quarter of a million Eastern European Jews in its discussion of the displaced persons camps, then shifts to the German Jews who remained in Germany after the war and rebuilt a Jewish community. As Gay purports to deal with both groups, more background information on the Jewish experience in Germany before the Nazi regime should have been included in order to present a more balanced picture of European Jewry.

Nonetheless, the section on the fate of Eastern European Jews after the war is the most riveting. Rather than focus on the trauma of the aftermath of the Holocaust, Gay paints a portrait of the assembly centers as a flourishing Yiddish-speaking community, with bands, schools and a semblance of normalcy. As she states: "the last flowering, the last living moment of Polish Jewish culture, played itself out in the D.P. camps in Germany ... What emerged spontaneously and powerfully were original music, poetry, theater, and literature" (p. xi). The chapter "Return to the World" convincingly portrays not victims crushed by the Holocaust, but creative, tenacious survivors determined to flourish, even in such an unlikely location. By 1949, however, most Jews in these centers had emigrated to Israel and the United States, and thus ended "this final incandescent moment of Eastern European Jewish life" (p. xii). Yet contrary to popular belief, not all Jews left Germany by 1949. As she explains: "officially most German Jews expressed the wish to leave Germany after the war-and half of the fifteen thousand survivors did so-others knew that they would stay" (p. 125). The latter did so for a variety of reasons: some desired to help rebuild a better Germany, or to regain property and belongings stripped from them under the Nazis, others simply because they did not wish to face the uncertainty of building a life in a new country, or were too old or infirm to make such a change. Gay continues her account with those Jews who decided to remain in Ger-

many, but unfortunately her discussion of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s loses some momentum.

The discussion of Jews in West Germany centers on important leaders, organizations, newspapers and developments in Jewish life, and while clearly well researched, it lacks the liveliness of Gay's accounts of the displaced persons camps. It should also be noted that the discussion centers on (East and West) Berlin, although at the time there is also a considerable community in Frankfurt as well, which could have been a revealing addition to the section on Jewish life in West Germany. Though informative, the depiction of Jewish communities both in West and East Germany are rendered in broad strokes. For the interested reader, books such as Lynn Rapaport's sociological study *Jews in Germany After the Holocaust: Memory, Identity and Jewish-German Relations* and Michael Brenner's *After the Holocaust: Rebuilding Jewish Lives in Post-War Germany* would help to round out this picture further. Continuing the emphasis on Berlin, the final chapter, "New Generations in Germany", rekindles the enthusiasm of the early sections of the book and presents a picture of a flourishing Jewish life in Germany's capital city Berlin. Due in part to a wave of Russian Jewish immigrants, but also to the fall of the Wall, this center of the Jewish community is undergoing significant transformation.

Gay places her discussion of museums, Holocaust memorials, literature and immigration in the larger context of a nation coming to terms with its own multiculturalism, and ends on a decidedly upbeat note: "Bound neither by memories of the Eastern European past nor by those of the German Jews, the new immigrants have the opportunity to create a fresh way of living as Jews in modern times--an original way of being a Jew in Germany" (p. 308). With her book, Gay dispels the assumption that all Jews who survived the war left Germany. She recounts the rebuilding of Jewish life in Germany, as well as presents the numerous difficulties encountered by Jews in

reestablishing their communities and identity. She gives a scholarly, readable overview of a topic recently garnering increased interest, and one that will be relevant to both academics and the wider public. In recounting the struggles of Jews in Germany, a place many still view as the "land of the murderers," Gay creates out of this story a sympathetic, comprehensible and highly informative work.

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