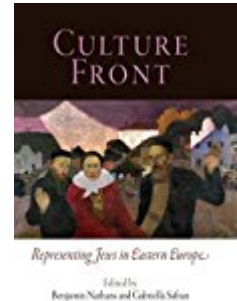


Benjamin Nathans, Gabriella Safran, ed. *Culture Front: Representing Jews in Eastern Europe*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007. viii + 323 pp. \$65.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8122-4055-9.



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This welcome volume is a collection of eleven essays on the representation of Jews in Jewish, and to a lesser extent Polish, culture from the seventeenth century to the present. The volume presents the work of eleven scholars from the United States, Europe, and Israel—work that originated as part of a year-long academic seminar organized by Benjamin Nathans at the University of Pennsylvania from 2002 to 2003. Nathans and coeditor Gabriella Safran outline the aims of the conference and the volume under review in a brief introduction, taking note of the recent growth in the field of Eastern European Jewish history and the new opportunities made possible by recently opened archives. The seminar aimed to address the themes of crisis and catastrophe in Eastern European Jewish history and to explain the emergence of modernism within the Jewish community. The result is an edited collection that contextualizes the production of culture by and for Jews in a variety of circumstances. The contributors, historians and literary scholars, present detailed accounts of specific authors in different

periods, from 1648 to the present. The strength of the book is the breadth of coverage. While felicitously leaving conclusions open to the reader's interpretation, the editors present a chronological overview of the production of Jewish culture in Russia and Poland and allow the reader to view Eastern European Jewish history as the continuing story of a unique people in dialogue and conflict with surrounding cultures.

The editors generally accept Salo Baron's conception of lachrymose history, "the notion that gentile persecution and Jewish suffering have been the shaping forces of Jewish history" (p. 2). Indeed, the results of the seminar confirm the dominance of this paradigm for the contributors included. *Culture Front* is divided into four sections: "Violence and Civility," with essays on 1648 and the late eighteenth century in Poland; "Mirrors of Popular Culture," with contributions on the Yiddish theater, Polish novel, and Polish theater; "Politics and Aesthetics," with studies on the Hebrew writer Yosef Haim Brenner, the Hebrew

poet Haim Nahman Bialik, translation and nationalism, and modern Yiddish poetry; and "Memory Projects," with discussions on the Soviet Jewish writer Meir Viner and the living history museum of the Holocaust survivor and scholar Yaffa Eliach. The contributions to *Culture Front* are quite specialized; this is a volume that will appeal more to scholars and graduate students doing advanced research than to those looking for a synthetic cultural history of the Eastern European Jewish experience. Most essays illustrate how Jews responded to crisis and catastrophe and how they used culture for explicitly Jewish goals. In contrast, the contributions by Marcin Wodziński, Eugenia Prokop-Janiec, and Michael C. Steinlauf address Polish views of Jewish culture and the effects of these views on the Jewish community.

The bookends of the volume are Adam Teller's essay on the effects of the memory of 1648 on Polish Jewish identity and Jeffrey Shandler's contribution on Eliach's planned living history museum. These essays explore how Jews have remembered and memorialized catastrophic events in ways that allow them to make sense of tragedy and to continue on as Jews living in a larger society that has proven overtly hostile. Shandler's insistence that Eliach's plans to recreate a shtetl in Israel has implications for how we remember the Eastern European context of Jewish history recalls Teller's description of the local context in his discussion of *Yavein Metsulah*, one of the most popular chronicles of the 1648 events.

While increased contacts between Jews and Poles led to each culture having significant knowledge of the other, this knowledge stopped well short of mutual understanding. Prokop-Janiec and Steinlauf, in their studies on Jews depicted in Polish novels and the Polish theater, respectively, reveal the limits of this understanding, or, rather, the ignorance of Jewish culture among even sympathetic Poles. In their discussion of the work of such authors as Wincenty Łoś, Marian Gawalewicz, and Gabriela Zapolska, these two au-

thors, in the words of Prokop-Janiec, describe "a hierarchy of values where whatever was Polish was higher, and whatever was Jewish was lower" (p. 109). To this extent, they remind the reader of the Enlightenment rhetoric regarding "civilization" highlighted by Wodziński in his essay on debates of reform in the late eighteenth century. Wodziński's contribution reveals clearly the remarkable gulf between Jewish visions of participation in the larger community and Polish leaders' expectations of Jews to shed Jewish identity.

Other contributors, most notably Kenneth B. Moss in his essay on translation, deparochialization, and nationalism, explicitly address the "rip in the soul" felt by Jews feeling the pull of both Jewish and European identities (p. 222). The late Jonathan Frankel's analysis of the literary career and political choices of Brenner before and after the 1905 revolution reveals Brenner's struggle with an attraction to both Zionism and Marxism, a struggle reflected in his work. Moss's deft explanation of the complex Jewish literary politics after February 1917 reveals a literary community struggling to join the international literary world while developing the Jewish culture to which it belonged. Moss argues, "it is no accident that the most radical advocates of deparochialization numbered among the most fervent monolingualist Hebraists and Yiddishists of their day" (p. 230). Becoming less parochial through the introduction of world literature in Hebrew and Yiddish was not only a way to learn about the outside world, but also a way to revitalize Jewish culture. This tension between one's own community and the outside world, whether defined in terms of national identities or class consciousness, is perhaps best exemplified in the hidden autobiographical writings of the Soviet Jewish writer Viner. In his essay on Viner, Marcus Moseley describes Viner's alternating use of the first and third person and places him within the "Golden Chain" of Yiddish literary tradition.

The examinations of Yiddish and Hebrew literature explore Jewish authors' responses to rapidly changing historical circumstances, including the adaptation to non-Jewish languages and cultures. While Alyssa Quint's analysis of Avrom Goldfaden's work, dramatically portraying the death of Yiddish, reveals perhaps the most pessimistic reading of Jewish culture's encounter with modernity, Hamutal Bar-Yosef's explication of the Russian context of Bialik's work shows how the confrontation of cultures could prove productive. Bar-Yosef convincingly links Bialik with the early Russian Symbolists and offers strong support for his claim that the Russian view of the "people-prophet" influenced him. In her sensitive reading of modern Yiddish poets' retelling of the story of Esther, Kathryn Hellerstein illustrates how Yiddish writers aimed to cope with the "uncertainties and dangers" of the period in which they lived (p. 262). Adapting a canonical tale to modern forms, Moyshe Broderzon, Miriam Ulinover, Roza Yakubovitch, and Itsik Manger made modern art that was less concerned with the traditional story of Esther than the precarious circumstances of Jews in interwar Europe.

Shandler's essay on Eliach's living history museum looks to both the past and ahead to the future, as the museum is not yet completed. Perhaps because of its contemporary focus, this essay is the most provocative in the volume, encouraging us to think more clearly about how and why the experience of Jews in Eastern Europe should be remembered and, indeed, who should be responsible for that memory. Eliach's innovative proposal to build a living history museum raises questions regarding the distribution of culture that go beyond the relatively rarefied sphere of literary works in Hebrew and Yiddish and even the popular novels and theater described elsewhere in this volume. Shandler examines Eliach's work on her native Eishyshok and interrogates her idea of a living history museum, a shtetl museum to be built in Israel. Eliach proposes the recreation and

reenactment of a past remembered only from the vantage point of the Jewish community, reducing the complexity of the multicultural reality of the relationships within the shtetl. Shandler raises perhaps the most important questions regarding the use of history: what is the responsibility of the historian or scholar to educate the public about a community's past and how can that education be done most effectively?

The contributions in *Culture Front* force us to consider how images of Jews and Jewish culture have affected not only the memory of the Jewish experience and private and public conceptions of Jewishness but also the difficult relationships between Jews and non-Jews in Eastern Europe. Within their own disciplinary boundaries, each author investigates the tension between the traditional and the modern, between the religious and the secular, and between the internal world of the community to which one belongs and the external world one enters when leaving home. Describing the development of theater among Jews and Poles, Steinlauf writes that the cultural life of these groups developed separately: "A 'Chinese wall,' it was commonly said, separated the two peoples" (p. 134). While Steinlauf's conclusion is basically sound, it comes at the end of an essay focusing on the presence of Jews in Polish culture.

Like Steinlauf, the contributors to *Culture Front* discuss the breaches in that wall, the various ways in which Eastern European Jews encountered Russians and Poles, from the worst kinds of violence to theater and translation. Further exploration on the reception of culture as well as the cultural and social history of women, children, and Jewish religious groups, for example, may challenge these authors' conclusions, without necessarily upsetting our understanding of the crises and catastrophes that beset the Jewish population in Eastern Europe. The authors offer significant evidence that the challenges of life in Eastern Europe revitalized Jewish culture, enough that the metaphor of the Chinese wall,

though common, should be explored and defined more closely. Whether regarding the distribution of a memorial text or the establishment of a living history museum, the essays underscore the importance of Eastern Europe for the Jewish community and ensure that the region's Jewish history will be remembered and interpreted within its proper geographical context.

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