



**Lori Gemeiner Bihler.** *Cities of Refuge: German Jews in London and New York, 1935-1945.* Albany: State University of New York Press, 2018. Illustrations. 232 pp. \$85.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4384-6887-7.

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In *Cities of Refuge*, Lori Gemeiner Bihler, a historian trained at the University of Sussex, seeks to answer the fairly straightforward question of why German Jewish refugees had quite distinct experiences in the two largest cities to which they fled—London and New York—in the face of the Nazi menace. The United Kingdom and the United States accepted the largest number of Jews seeking refuge from Adolf Hitler’s regime. Bihler’s investigation is as clearly laid out as her question. She sets out to compare different aspects of the refugees’ lives, including their patterns of arrival and settlement, their interactions with the UK and US governments, and the ways in which they forged new identities, as English and as American.

How, Bihler asks, can we understand the somewhat divergent paths these two refugee populations trod? Why did they not experience their new homes the same way? After all, the Jews who managed to find safety in New York and in London for the most part resembled each other. Largely urban before migration, they all came from the middle class. They had embraced *Bildung* and had sincerely and deeply accepted the values and appearances of bourgeois German life. The refugees, regardless whether they ended up in the United Kingdom or the United States, shared a common experience. As Jews they had endured the recent trauma of losing their rights,

status, livelihoods, and physical safety with the rise of the Third Reich.

Following the lead of students of migration, such as the anthropologist Nancy Foner, Bihler directly poses the analytic problem in comparative terms. Assuming that these women, men, and children shared common origins, how can scholars explain the differences in their migration outcomes? Why did the refugees, coming from the same place, representing the same cultural and economic background, not adjust similarly to these two big, English-speaking, free, modern cities? What were the differences between these two places and how did these distinctions affect the adjustment and settlement of the Jewish refugees from Germany?

With her underlying assumption, Bihler has overlooked a few premigration differences between the London and New York groups, perhaps minor but potentially analytically significant. For one, she gives little attention to the fact that the Breuer Hasidim, who joined the flight to New York from Germany and formed an important enclave in New York’s Washington Heights neighborhood, had no equivalent among those who went to London. The members of the Breuer community like other Orthodox Jews had experienced German life differently than did the majority of German Jewish women and men who had departed

from the meticulous observance of Jewish law and ritual. Second, while Bihler rightly spends much time in various places in the book on the youngsters who went to London through the organized *Kindertransport* program, she does not dwell on the fact that as children they had experienced Germany and emigration quite differently than the largely adult population that went to New York. The *Kindertransport* children had not lived in pre-Hitler Germany, and no doubt had few encounters with freedom and emancipation as Jews. Finally, and it deserves much more analysis here, more of those who came to the United States likely had relatives who had moved in earlier decades. Those with kin in the receiving society knew more about their new home before migration than those who went wherever they could find a place of refuge. That knowledge also had to have influenced how they endured the years, brief as they were, under the Third Reich.

These differences before migration aside, Bihler's book succeeds in showing that whether a German Jewish refugee settled in London or in New York mattered. Looking at work, home furnishings, diet, clothing, name changes, occupations, language acquisition, relations with the state, and patterns of community building, the author found that indeed, despite the marked similarities before emigration, German Jews navigated London and New York in quite different ways. For the most part, the German Jews who found themselves in England integrated somewhat more slowly and developed more haltingly a sense of themselves as English, in contrast to their American counterparts. Yet somewhat paradoxically, they seem to have dropped German foodways, domestic interiors, and clothing styles more rapidly. Less likely to speak German in public than their kin—whether literal or figurative—who went to New York, the German Jews in London took cover more rapidly under the pressure of needing to blend in and worked more assiduously to appear

British. Point by point, Bihler shows how much the two groups diverged from each other.

She does an admirable job of proving, however, that these patterns had little to do with the much-vaunted rhetoric of America as a welcoming nation of immigrants, in contradistinction to the popular understanding of England as a more insular and homogeneous society that had integrated many fewer foreigners over the course of its history. Instead Bihler forces us to think about historical matters. England's proximity to Germany, its entry into the war two years before the United States, the constant bombardment of the island from the German Luftwaffe, and other factors that had nothing to do with national narratives shaped the encounter of German Jews with England in ways utterly different than America, an ocean away from the war. Further influencing the English experiences were sociological and political factors, such as the reality that German Jews arriving in England had no guarantee that they could stay indefinitely and become naturalized, the fact that so many German Jewish women went into domestic service, and the structure that left the children of the *Kindertransport* living not with their own families but in English homes.

It is notable—although Bihler does not deal with this enough—that the Jews who came to New York entered into a city with one of the largest, best funded, and most highly developed Jewish social service networks ever in existence. Those organizations went into high gear to address the needs of the refugees in New York and elsewhere, and indeed the United Jewish Appeal came into existence in 1939 to serve them. Likewise, New York's linguistic and ethnic diversity had no equivalent in the world, and refugees arriving in New York, despite the stingy quotas allotted to them, came into a place where the streets resounded with a cacophony of languages, and buildings, stores, social halls, and religious institutions bore signs in Polish, Italian, Greek, Ukrainian, Yiddish, Spanish, and German. That New York

had functioned for over a century as a German city cannot be discounted but gets no attention here. New York also had been a destination for German Jews since the middle of the nineteenth century, and some of their institutions, such as synagogues and B'nai B'rith lodges, continued to function into the 1930s.

Overall this book is a solid exercise in comparative history. Yet a few problems deserve mention. It is marred by the fact that it relies too heavily on memoirs and autobiographies. Bihler has looked at some archival materials, including some records of organizations and some issues of the publications of the refugees, particularly the *Aufbau*, New York's German-language Jewish newspaper. But she has mined these sources and other possible troves of primary material, particularly government records, less thoroughly and systematically than memoirs and other ego documents. The bulk of those documents represent the sensibilities and recollections of individuals decades later. Bihler offers little on the role of Jewish social service and welfare institutions in New York and London, and the book pays woefully little attention to synagogues and other religious organizations. Her reading of American Jewish history tends to be superficial and she tells little about the ethnic and class compositions of the neighborhoods where German Jews settled.

*Cities of Refuge* not only demonstrates the importance of comparative history but also highlights the need for serious scholarship among American immigration historians and American Jewish historians to study in depth German Jewish refugees. To date, no real history of this community has been written, and while Bihler draws much from the one book on the subject, that of Steven M. Lowenstein published in 1989 (*Frankfurt on the Hudson: The German-Jewish Community of Washington Heights, 1933-1983, Its Structure and Culture*), its limitations should have led other historians to turn to this topic in greater depth and sophistication. It did not do so and Bih-

ler's study here is the poorer for not having had a rich body of secondary scholarship from which to draw.

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