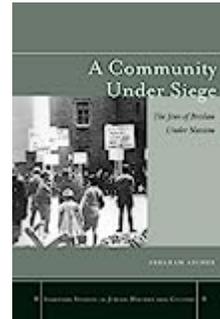


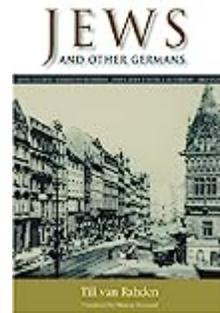
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Abraham Ascher. *A Community under Siege: The Jews of Breslau under Nazism.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007. x + 324 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-5518-4.



Till van Rahden. *Jews and Other Germans: Civil Society, Religious Diversity, and Urban Politics in Breslau, 1860-1925.* Translated by Marcus Brainard. George L. Mosse Series. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008. Tables. 486 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-299-22690-9; \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-299-22694-7.



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The Politics of Multiculturalism in Breslau

In *Jews and Other Germans*, the German historian Till van Rahden offers a masterful study of ethnic politics that asks and answers very specific questions about relationships within a multicultural society, questions that can also help us to think more generally about ethnic relations in other contexts. In *A Community under Siege*, Abraham Ascher, the distinguished historian of Russia and a native of Breslau, chronicles the fate of this same community under Nazi persecution, with a special focus

on the lives of individuals and their families. Often reviewed together, these two books collectively offer a history of the Jewish community in Breslau from 1860 to 1945. While the authors approach their topics from significantly different starting points, each helps readers to understand how a Jewish community in prewar Germany managed to develop and maintain a specifically Jewish existence, in spite of the most difficult political circumstances. Looming over these studies is the same question

that interests so many of us who study German Jewish history: How did an ethnic community so integrated into the life of the majority nation fall victim to that nation in just a few short decades? Neither van Rahden nor Ascher will fully satisfy the reader searching for an answer to that question. Readers will, however, be challenged to think more clearly, and even creatively, about the place of minorities in a multicultural society.

Van Rahden's study examines the occupational profile of Breslau Jews, Jewish associational life, the rate of intermarriage, the politics of the school system, and political antisemitism, including the issue of the naturalization and expulsion of East European Jews. Van Rahden begins his work by showing that a careful study of the occupational profile and income stratification of Breslau Jews reveals that "the majority of Breslau Jews did not belong to the bourgeoisie" (p. 22). Having established the social structure of the community, van Rahden then examines points of interaction among the ethnic populations of Breslau. Throughout his work, he employs the term "situational ethnicity" to describe how ethnicity determined some social interactions but not others (pp. 8-9). In this way, he shows how and when Breslau Jews were Jews and when Jewish identity took less precedence. His use of both quantitative and qualitative sources makes reading this dense study especially rewarding.

While remaining true to the complex context of cultural politics in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Breslau, van Rahden has framed his story of urban politics in language that will make sense to the contemporary reader. For example, contemporary multicultural societies still struggle to answer the questions posed by van Rahden: Should our schools integrate students from different backgrounds, and, if so, how do we achieve this goal? How do we insure that teachers from minority backgrounds are hired and treated fairly? What provisions should be made for the teaching of religion? Most interesting here is van Rahden's detailed exposition of local school politics, especially the fight to establish the Johannes-Gymnasium as an interconfessional school in the 1870s and the struggle to hire Jewish elementary school teachers in the early 1900s. Van Rahden is particularly good at explaining the difference between the Catholic insistence on parity and the Jewish need for equality, though he does not always make explicit the class reasons behind this insistence.

Jews and Other Germans contains nearly as many pages of tables, notes, and bibliography as it does text.

Though these details may tax the less patient reader, van Rahden's work is, in fact, quite exciting. This detail allows us to see how and why opinions of political leaders and their followers, both locally and nationally, have shifted over the decades. Carefully describing conflicts and consequences from the mid-nineteenth century on, van Rahden deftly portrays both the achievements of liberalism and the limits of integration.

In a remarkably different study of Jewish Breslau, Ascher has done what we like senior historians to do: he has reflected on his own life using the professional skills and talents he acquired in his field. In doing so, he has shown us how we are never far from our childhood circumstances, though we may have traveled to distant places, both physically and mentally, on often circuitous routes. Born in 1929, Ascher has written something between a memoir and a historian's account of a specific time and place. Ascher's personal involvement in the tragedy of Breslau Jewry provided his motivation to learn more about the story of his hometown. The result of his work is a sobering account of the effects of state persecution on individuals and families. Ascher highlights his own family's history in the first part of the book; he then tells the story of Breslau Jewry throughout the 1930s (when he was just a young boy), concluding with portraits of four individuals and descriptions of their fates during wartime. Ascher ends his account in 1945, without addressing any of the momentous changes of the postwar period or updating his readers on the situation of Jews in Wrocław in the post-Communist period.

As Polish Jews living in Breslau, the Aschers were subject to the expulsion of Polish Jews from Germany in late October 1938. The family managed to avoid this fate by hiding with German Jewish friends. Earlier efforts to secure a visa for the author's father had been successful, and Ascher's father left for the United States in early November 1938, just before Kristallnacht. The author's brother Henry had settled in England and arranged for a wealthy Jewish woman to sign the papers necessary for his mother and brother to enter England. Ascher traveled to England with his ill mother in June 1939 and spent the early war years in England, eventually reuniting with his father in the United States in 1943. Two other siblings had managed to make it to Palestine earlier.

Over half of the Jewish population of Breslau (twenty-three thousand in 1925) emigrated before 1939 (pp. 24, 27). Thus, the story of Ascher's family represents one version of the effects of Nazi persecution. The strength of Ascher's work is his exposition of the effects

of this persecution on individual lives. His first chapter traces the Jewish history of Breslau from the earliest settlement in the twelfth century to the 1930s. Ascher then tells the story of increased persecution from the 1930s on, showing both how Jewish institutions responded and how Jews responded by emigrating, starting as early as 1933. Ascher details how Jewish cultural groups continued their work, how many residents of Breslau continued to shop in Jewish stores, and how physicians and lawyers managed to remain in practice. However, increased economic restrictions (including the April 1938 requirement for Jews with over five thousand marks in assets to inventory their possessions) and then the violence of Kristallnacht encouraged many other Jews to leave Breslau. Ascher's account of the life and career of Stephen Vaughan, the U.S. consul whom his mother bribed in order to obtain his father's visa, reveals the depth of the author's research. Whatever his motivations, Vaughan, who accepted bribes at least in part to assuage a taste for alcohol, helped many in the same position as Ascher's family.

Ascher describes the expulsions of Jews from their apartments from 1939 to 1941, their relocation to other residences in the city, and then the deportations of Breslau Jews first to neighboring camps and finally to Theresienstadt and Auschwitz in 1941. He dates the end of the community as March 5, 1943, after which there were no longer enough Jews in Breslau for organized community life (p. 239). Ascher ends his account of Nazi rule in Bres-

lau with the stories of four individuals who left behind remarkable records of their experiences: Willy Cohn, Siegmund Hadda, Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, and Karla Wolf. These sensitively written sketches illustrate the real effects of the policies implemented by Adolf Hitler after his rise to power.

Unfortunately, Ascher does not dwell on his interest in Russian history or make an effort to explain his attraction to this specific field rather than another. While this may have been simply all that was possible in an American academic environment that offered little opportunity to study Jewish or East European history, this reader would have liked to have heard more about why he made the professional choices that he did and how he later integrated his professional interests with his personal circumstances.

Ascher's account of Jewish Breslau is at once both personal and scholarly, while van Rahden's is focused on specific questions and exhaustively researched. Missing from either of these books is a complete study of Breslau in the 1920s; thus, neither author is able to fully explain how voters in the more liberal Breslau voted in larger numbers for the Nazis in 1933 than those in any other city. While these studies have made accessible significant material about the local Jewish history of Breslau, they also illustrate how much more is to be learned about just one community and encourage the reader to learn more about the fate of postwar Breslau.

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