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Rebecca Kobrin. *Jewish Bialystok and Its Diaspora.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010. xiv + 361 pp. $65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-35442-6; $24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-253-22176-6.

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Jewish History and the Transnational Challenge

In the past few years we have witnessed what has been dubbed a âtransnational turnâ in the humanities. As is so often the case, enthusiasm for a new trend is not always matched by methodological rigor in practice and the label risks becoming empty.[1] If anything, Jewish history is an obvious field wherein to apply a transnational approach in a meaningful way. After all, Jewish histories everywhere have been shaped to a greater or lesser extent by migration from Eastern Europe. Such studies have been scarce in recent years, however, and for that reason Rebecca Kobrinâs new book is a highly welcome and important contribution.[2] The title of this book indicates one of its central arguments: the diaspora, or more accurately diasporas, should in the first place be understood not in relation to the mythic Jewish homeland but, in order to truly grasp the Jewish migration experience, as dispersal from the lived diasporic homelands. Using Bialystok as a case study, Kobrin thus aims to analyze East European Jewish migration in its global context, claiming it was the *lived diasporic* homeland and Jewish migrantsâ regional attachments that decisively shaped their diasporic identities, as they forged a web of links and new cross-global solidarities, while reshaping that homeland in turn by dint of their support activities and continuing attachments.

The book traces Jewish Bialystok and its diaspora from the late nineteenth century to the post-Holocaust era. Kobrin starts out with an often overlooked dimension of the Jewish migration experience to America, namely, internal migration within the Russian Empire to its larger cities that often preceded overseas migration. By 1897, 75 percent of Bialystokâs population of sixty-three thousand consisted of Jews, predominantly internal economic migrants. Their experiences in Bialystok were formative as they participated in a rapidly industrializing and modernizing urban environment, in which traditional authority (both that of the kehilla and the czarist regime) was challenged by new welfare organizations as well as political movements, such as the *Bund.* As Kobrin argues, this urban experience created a strong and lasting regional attachment. For economic reasons, but also as a result of the 1906 pogrom and the destruction wrought upon the city by World War I, many Jews from Bialystok decided to migrate to other places, creating a multitude of welfare organizations and landsmanshaftn as they spread out over the world. They also founded four Bialystok centers (in New York City, Buenos Aires, Tel Aviv, and Melbourne) whose history and activities Kobrin describes in more detail. As she illustrates, each of these centers carried on the legacy of Bialystok in a different way and assigned a different meaning to what it meant to be a Bialystoker due to the diverse âevolving needs of it constituentsâ as well as fundamentally different local contexts (p. 72).

While illuminating different migration trajectories, these case studies are somewhat problematic to com-

pare as they relate to migration experiences from various periods and involve numerous push factors: late nineteenth-century migrants to New York obviously related differently to Bialystok than late 1920s migrants to Australia, as was true for economic migrants versus convinced Zionists. Clearly, difference can be presumed from the outset and will also be found. The juxtaposition of these cases thus prompts the classic discussion in comparative studies about the advantages or disadvantages of choosing similar or dissimilar case studies. One wonders if a comparison between Bialystoker organizations in New York and Chicago, for instance, might not have been more fruitful to analyze the divergent ways of continuing Bialystokâs legacy, especially since Kobrin indicates some intriguing differences there.

Though proclaiming to take a global perspective, most of the book focuses on the Bialystok Center in New York, founded in 1919 and headed for almost fifty years by its initiator, David Sohn. Under Sohnâs direction, the center developed from an organization specifically dedicated to providing aid to Bialystok and its Jewish migrants to a general Jewish communal welfare organization. Particularly illuminating is the way in which Kobrin analyzes how the centerâs support in the wake of WWI transformed Jewish social life in Bilaystok and helped to professionalize many of its welfare organizations in the interwar period while also funding most of its Yiddish press. The effects of philanthropy in the âOld Worldâ are also contrasted to the transformation of the nature of philanthropy in the âNew Worldâ in which charity, public recognition, and social status became ever more intertwined. Crucially Kobrin shows how maintaining philanthropic links with the former home simultaneously furthered the acculturation of Jewish migrants in the United States.

As American-Jewish funding helped to rebuild the real Bialystok in interwar Poland, and its Jewish population came under increasing pressure from economic hardship and antisemitic policies, Bialystokers overseas were remaking the cityâs image in a variety of ways. The pages of the New York centerâs *Bialystoker Stimme*, published from 1921 onward, reflected a range of options; from shtetl images (stressing Bialystokâs ânurturing intimacyâ [p.185]) to colonial visions (suggesting the city had not been abandoned by migration but that its reach had actually been expanded) to an increasing emphasis on the special characteristics of Bialystokâs inhabitants (as opposed to the physical city). The *Stimme* thus helped to channel the feelings triggered by dislocation, and Kobrinâs analysis highlights that, far from a linear and relatively uncomplicated process of acculturation, the road to adaptation in new homes was fraught with conflicting feelings of longing for many East European Jews.

Kobrinâs remark that differences over how to project Bialystokâs âlegacy ultimately tore apart the bonds of this transnational Jewish communityâ in the post-Holocaust era is somewhat surprising (p. 208); most of the book illustrates the processes of contestation and variation in defining Bialystokâs legacy in the prewar period as well. Nevertheless, as Kobrin illustrates in her final chapter, the postwar âshift away from viewing Eastern Europe as the quintessential Jewish homeland to Israel was far from simple and straightforwardâ (p. 242). Similarly, attachments to the real Bialystok among its former residents varied as is illustrated by the conflict over a memorial book: while refusing to publish the *yizker bukh* of the Holocaust survivor and famous Yiddish journalist Raphael Rayzner, Sohn opted to publish his own photo album. The affair highlights how in New York Bialystok had to a large extent become a new mythic homeland. Rayzner eventually made his way to Australia and his book was published with help of the Melbourne center.

Kobrinâs wide-ranging analysis draws on a huge and impressive variety of sources and many of the scholarly debates that her work relates to are very well explained and contextualized in the notes. An overall point of criticism is that *Jewish Bialystok and Its Diaspora* at times displays an uneasy balance between social and cultural history. Important empirical data that could help readers to better contextualize her story is hidden in the notes or absent. A bit more information on Bialystoker Jewish migrants and their organizations in comparison to other Jewish migrant groups would have been welcome, for instance. The full scope of the transnational network of Bialystok organizations, and the communicative spaces that were developed through newspapers, such as the *Bialystoker Stimme*, also remains somewhat unclear. This is a pity, since frequent references to the correspondence of Sohn indicate the vastness of the Bialystoker transnational networks. Sometimes Kobrin is also less explicit than one would wish for. Her remark that âregional identity was the cornerstone of Jewish identity in Eastern Europe,â and thus fundamentally shaped Jewish diasporic identities, is found in a note rather than the introduction where one would expect it (p. 302n97).

On balance though, these criticisms should not detract from the overall significance of this book. In discussing the importance and meaning of the lived home-

land for the development of Jewish diasporic identities, *Jewish Bialystok and Its Diaspora* not only rewrites some of the tenets of American-Jewish migration history but also challenges some of the self-perceptions of American Jews today. Crucially, by analyzing the interaction between Bialystok and its Jewish diaspora, it offers a highly convincing argument for the fruitfulness of applying a transnational approach to Jewish history. Finally, Kobrinâs study is a rare contribution to contemporary debates about migration. As she points out on the final page of the book, there are obvious parallels between contemporary migrants, who send money back to their homelands, and the Jewish migrants from Bialystok and their philanthropic activities. Kobrinâs study thus also provides a necessary historical context to debates that are still mostly the domain of sociologists and political scientists.

Notes

[1]. A good introduction for historians is Patricia Clavin, âDefining Transnationalism,â *Contemporary European History* 14, no. 4 (November 15, 2005): 421-439. Among recent important studies are Gunilla Budde, ed., *Transnationale Geschichte: Themen, Tendenzen Und Theorien*, 2nd ed. (GÃ¶ttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2010); Michael G. MÃ¼ller and Cornelius Torp, âConceptualising Transnational Spaces in History,â *European Review of History* 16, no. 5 (2009): 609-617; and Berthold Unfried, JÃ¼rgen Mittag, and Marcel van der Linden, eds., *Transnationale Netzwerke Im 20. Jahrhundert: Historische Erkundungen Zu Ideen Und Praktiken, Individuen Und Organisationen* (Leipzig: AVA, 2008).

[2]. This scarcity might partly be explained by a fear that attention for the transnational dimensions of Jewish history could feed into anxieties about unwillingly abetting antisemitic conspiracy theories. Some recent important studies are Daniel Soyer, âTransnationalism and Mutual Influence: American and East European Jewries in the 1920s and 1930s,â in *Rethinking European Jewish History*, ed. Jeremy Cohen and Murray Jay Rosman (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2009): 201-220; and Lisa Moses Leff, *Sacred Bonds of Solidarity: The Rise of Jewish Internationalism in Nineteenth-Century France* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006).