H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Michael Laurence Miller. *Rabbis and Revolution: The Jews of Moravia in the Age of Emancipation.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011. xv + 464 pp. $60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-7056-9.

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Published on H-Judaic (August, 2012)

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Moravian Jews' Muddled March to Modernity

The history of Moravia, the small ethnic province that today constitutes the easternmost region of the Czech Republic, remains so obscure that it tends at times to be misconstrued even by eminent European historians. Bordered by Poland to the northeast, Hungary to the south, Bohemia to the east, and Austria to the southwest, this modest territory was, until the end of the First World War, ruled by the Habsburgs, making it home to a significant and politically powerful German-speaking minority. Tensions between ethnic Austrian- and Czech- Moravians, a hallmark of the provinceâs history in the modern period, were only resolved politically when Moravia became an integral part of Czechoslovakia in 1918, and then of the Czech Republic in 1993. For much of that history, the regionâs small Jewish minority–whose rich history is the subject of Michael Laurence Miller's superb new book–found itself caught between those tensions, as it navigated the choppy waters of the European Enlightenment and the subsequent era of competing nationalisms.

Moraviaâs Jews, never numbering more than 45,000, are today mostly forgotten, even to scholarly Jewish historiography. This obscurity, while partly the consequence of the very modest size of Moravian Jewry, is mainly the result of being overshadowed by the much larger and more famous Jewish communities of neighboring Bohemia, Poland, and Austria. Treated all too often as a provincial backwater to the renowned Bohemian Jewish community of Prague, Moravian towns with rich and fascinating Jewish histories, such as Boskowitz, Holleschau, Loschitz, Kremsier, Nikolsburg, Prossnitz, and Hotzenplotz (whose memorable, comic-sounding name has led to the widespread misconception that it is a fictional shtetl, such as Boiberik, or Sholem Aleichemâs Kasrilivke) are almost entirely overlooked.

As he boldly announces in the introduction, Millerâs book is intended to correct this neglect. After a critical overview of the major works of Moravian Jewish historiography since the mid-nineteenth century, Miller confidently asserts the superiority of his study: "In the current work I ... view Moravian Jewry as a cohesive whole, the sum of its many complex parts.... [I]n this book I take a comparative approach to Moravian Jewry, examining its distinctiveness to shed light on a range of religious, ideological, political and socioeconomic challenges that transformed Central European Jewry ... during the Age of Emancipation, a period framed by the emancipation of French Jewry in 1790-91 and the subsequent emancipation of Russian Jewry in 1917" (p. 8).

These goals for a single book are nothing if not audacious. Not only does he claim that it will be the definitive history of Moravian Jewry; Miller promises that it will shed light on every imaginable aspect of the Central European Jewish experience in the modern period, from religion to economics.

Happily, however, Miller's work is, for the most part,

equal to his self-confidence, as he has produced a remarkably learned and lucid study that nimbly explicates just about every aspect of Moravian Jewryâs terribly complicated history, tying together many of the loose parts left by earlier historians and providing readers with a wonderfully gratifying understanding of a community unlike any other.

The first chapter deals with the history of Moravian Jewry in the premodern period, and it nicely sets the stage for what is to follow. Miller explains how a series of legislative acts, both rabbinic and imperial, and stretching from the late medieval period through the mid-eighteenth century, gave rise to the unusually organized, indeed regimented, character of Moravian Jewish life. Two salient and unique aspects of the Jewish community in Moravia, significantly distinguishing its historical experience from that of the Jews of neighboring Bohemia, were the oppressive Familiant Laws and the highly structured nature of the small and cohesive Jewish communities that developed in fifty-two Moravian cities and towns. The Familiant Laws, enacted in 1726-27 and not repealed until 1849, coined âPharaonicâ by their Jewish opponents, severely restricted population growth in Moravia by limiting the marriage rights of Jewish males to firstborns. This resulted in the chronically small population in all of Moraviaâs Jewish communities, as it engendered a constant drain of their men to Hungary and, increasingly over the course of the nineteenth century, to nearby Vienna.

Paradoxically, the modest size of these communities allowed for their distinct cohesiveness and high level of organization. The proliferation of small, but well-organized Jewish communities throughout the cities and towns of Moravia, united by the Vaad ha-Kehillot (an umbrella organization similar to the Polish Council of Four Lands) and under the religious rule of Moravian chief rabbis–the first of whom was Rabbi Judah Loew, or the Maharal, before he became the rabbi of Prague–resulted in a singularly cohesive Jewry. The internal affairs of the Moravian Jewish communities were largely bound by a landmark piece of Jewish legislation, the 311 *Takkanot Medinot Mehrin* (articles of the lands of Moravia) of 1652, whose most lasting legacy was the extensive religious and political powers granted to the chief rabbi.

The absence in Moravia of any single large community analogous to Prague in neighboring Bohemia, whose size and rabbinical authorities dwarfed those of the small Moravian *kehillot*, thus produced a strong sense of autonomy throughout the region's many small communities. This often led these towns' rabbis to chafe at attempts by the office of the chief rabbi, situated in Nikolsburg (Mikulov), to exercise too much control over their local religious affairs. Long-standing feuds between a string of Moravian chief rabbis and Hirsh Fassel, the distinguished, liberal rabbi of Prossnitz, fully and artfully presented by Miller, were but the most notable instances of such tensions.

Given the unusual authority granted Moraviaâs chief rabbis, and the controversies generated by the not always judicious exercise thereof, Miller wisely bases the three chapters following his introductory history on the respective reigns of chief rabbis Mordecai Benet (1789-1829), Nehemias Trebitsch (1832-42), and Samson Raphael Hirsh (1847-51). He describes in detail and deftly analyzes the many religious battles and political intrigues that marked the careers of these leaders, cleverly using them as prisms through which to project a broader, and very vivid, portrait of the many challenges facing Moravian Jewry in the modern period.

Mordecai Benet in many respects established the template for Moravian Orthodoxy, which Miller shows to have adopted a uniquely moderate posture towards the Haskalah, especially when compared to Hungarian Orthodoxy. Although firmly Orthodox, and opposed to any efforts to institute religious reform in the communities under his authority, Benet was impressively flexible on the critical issue of educational reform and generally open to cultural modernization. His long tenure as chief rabbi at a critical historical juncture, as Moravian Jews were first challenged to respond to the challenges of the Enlightenment era, were formative in establishing a temperate version of religious orthodoxy in Moravia, allowing the Haskalah to flourish alongside eminent, and religiously moderate, Orthodox yeshivot. As Miller observes: âThe bunker mentality that came to characterize Hungarian Orthododoxy in the 1820âs and 1830âs was foreign to the yeshivas of Bohemia and Moravia.... There, wrote Isaac Hirsch Weiss, âsecular studies were a daily portion for the Jews, and the rabbis did not open their mouths in dismay.â... Weiss singled out Benet for praise: âof all the rabbis, our great teacher and rabbi Mordecai Benet, rabbi of all Moravia was an eminent grammarian â¦ and philosopher â¦ he knew how to write in German and he possessed prodigious knowledge of several secular sciencesâ (p. 66).

Still, Benet stood his ground against reformers from within the rabbinate under his jurisdiction, and engaged in numerous battles, particularly with the liberal Hirsh

Fassel. Fassel later served as the official rabbi of Prossnitz, from 1836 to 1851, despite consistent opposition to his appointment from Moravia's subsequent chief rabbis. Prossnitz, Moravia's second largest city, famous for its enlightened Jewish scholars, became the unofficial seat of a liberal counter-chief rabbinate throughout the rules of all three of the state-appointed head rabbis portrayed in depth by Miller. While during Benetâs tenure, the issues of contention were mostly concerned with Jewish rituals regarding the Jewish life cycle and the dietary laws–Fasselâs responsa permitting the consumption of legumes on Passover and declaring sturgeon to be kosher year round aroused particularly bitter controversy–during the divisive tenure of Nehemias Trebitsch, a more autocratic and far less conciliatory figure than Benet, the debates with liberal rabbis of several Moravian towns became particularly nasty and personal. This is mainly because Trebitsch insisted on exercising fully his technical legal authority to examine, and approve or veto, the appointments of every rabbi in Moravia, and chose to block any whose piety he suspected. The name Miller gives to this chapter, âNehemia Trebitsch and the Decline of the Moravian Chief Rabbinate,â well describes the devolution of civility between Trebitsch and the rabbis whom he opposed on account of their enlightened, liberal tendencies, most notably in addition to Fassel, Rabbi Abraham Neuda of Loschitz, whom he excommunicated after having failed to strip him of his community's fidelity.

Millerâs treatment of Samson Raphael Hirschâs brief occupancy of the Moravian chief rabbinate takes up the second half of the book. Beginning with a chapter devoted largely to the controversies leading up to Hirschâs appointment, specifically his theological and political battles with the main contender for the position, Hirsch Fassel–cleverly entitled âLocking Antlersâ in reference to their shared German name, meaning deer–and continuing in the final three chapters of the book, which deal in fascinating detail with Hirschâs crucial role in negotiating Moravian Jewryâs struggle for civil and political equality in the immediate aftermath of the 1848 revolution, this close look at the commonly overlooked early career of the founder of German neo-Orthodoxy will arguably be the bookâs most enduring contribution to Jewish historiography. Overall, Hirsch emerges as a complicated, and not terribly sympathetic, figure. Miller astutely observes that the contention between Fassel and Hirsch was not about âthe modern versus pre-modern,â as had been the case with Fasselâs battles with Trebitsch, but rather âcompeting visions of the modernâ (p. 140). And he ultimately reveals Hirsch's modernity to be almost entirely cosmetic in nature. Miller effectively contrasts the enormous euphoria that greeted Hirsch when he first arrived in Nikolsburg, with the communal despondency that attended his departure to Frankfurt. Not only had he been perceived in quasi-messianic terms by a community demoralized by the years of rabbinic in-fighting during Trebitschâs disastrous tenure; Miller shows how Hirsch himself had viewed his mission in biblical terms, going so far as to compare his mandate to preserve Jewish tradition against the inroads of modernity and religious reform to that of the biblical Elijahâs struggles with ancient Baal worship. In the end, however, Hirsch left Moravia admitting that he did not succeed in achieving his lofty ambitions.

Hirsch and Fassel both left their positions in 1851, initiating the decline of the Nikolsburg chief rabbinate, and a general waning of Moravian Jewry, as the Jews abandoned the small towns that had so uniquely defined them, for Prague, BrÃ¼nn, and Vienna. In his concluding chapter, Miller explores the frustrating struggles of Moravian Jews to attain full equality with their gentile neighbors. In the immediate aftermath of the 1848 uprising, the Jews found themselves caught between competing Czech and Austrian nationalisms, their ambiguous identity preventing them from attaining full acceptance in either group. Ultimately, the Jewsâ historic identification with the German-speaking, imperial minority came back to haunt them, and despite their disproportionate, often heroic participation, in the 1848 uprising in both Bohemia and Moravia, the attainment of full rights did not take place until the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1918.

As Miller is at pains to point out throughout his book, it was the dynamic network of tight-knit â*kehillot Mehrin*â that not only defined Moravian Jewish life, but that lay at the root of almost most all religious and sociopolitical developments in the modern period. The cohesive nature of the fifty-two small Jewish communities across Moravia also were a factor in retarding the Jewsâ political emancipation These communitiesâ intimacy and solidity not only provided Moravian Jewry with their strong sense of cultural identity and uniqueness; the autonomy exercised by their Jewish lay leaders and rabbis were what consistently undermined the power of all of Moraviaâs chief rabbis in the modern era, and what, in the end, prevented Moravian Jews from attaining full autonomy and rights in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. In that sense they were both the source of Moravian Jewryâs greatest strengths, and finally their Achilleâs heel.

And the emptying of those towns of their Jews in the last decades of the nineteenth century marked the end of Moravia as home to their distinct community and culture, so abundantly documented in Millerâs erudite study.

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Citation: Allan Nadler. Review of Miller, Michael Laurence, *Rabbis and Revolution: The Jews of Moravia in the Age of Emancipation*. H-Judaic, H-Net Reviews. August, 2012.

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