

Marion Kaplan. *Geschichte des jüdischen Alltags in Deutschland: Vom 17. Jahrhundert bis 1945.* München: C.H. Beck Verlag, 2003. 638 S. EUR 39.90 (broschiert), ISBN 978-3-406-50205-7.



Reviewed by Ronald Schechter (Department of History, The College of William and Mary)

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According to Yosef Yerushalmi, Salo Baron used to tell his students that an urgent priority for Jewish history was to find out “what was happening between the pogroms.”[1] So much work had focused on the tragedies of the Jewish experience, and Baron, who had long decried the “lachrymose” mode of Jewish historiography, sought to normalize Jewish history, to pay attention to aspects of Jewish life other than the effects of anti-Semitism.[2] This was easier said than done. The ideology of Zionism, widely shared by Jewish historians within Israel and without, had a vested interest in stressing the suffering of the Jews in the Diaspora (and by implication the need for a Jewish state in which Jews would presumably be happy and safe). And even historians with a more critical view of Zionism could not simply ignore the discrimination, hostility, and violence that Jews endured repeatedly in history. Above all, the Shoah stood as a massive indictment of any optimistic view of Jewish history. For historians of German Jewry especially, it was virtually impossible to conceive of their subject without thinking of this horrific event. By viewing the Holocaust as the culmination or *telos* of Jewish history in Germany, however, historians risked ignoring the rich tapestry of Jewish life as it existed for centuries prior to the rise of National Socialism. What were the Jews doing “between the pogroms” of the seventeenth century and the ultimate pogrom perpetrated by the Nazis? Where

did they live and under what conditions? What were their occupations? When did they marry and how many children did they have? Where did they meet to eat and drink? What types of associations did they form? How did they relate to their neighbors, both Jewish and non-Jewish? Surprisingly few answers have been available to these basic questions of *Alltagsgeschichte*, a subfield of history that has otherwise enjoyed a brilliant career in Germany.[3]

Thanks to this superb new book by Marion Kaplan, Robert Liberles, Steven Lowenstein and Trude Maurer, we have answers to these and many other questions. In her introduction, Kaplan modestly proclaims that the volume is “not a summary, but rather a preface and an impetus to scholarly work on a history of everyday life that has yet to be written” (p. 16). An impetus this book will surely be, but it is more than that. It is a thoroughly researched, elegantly written and powerfully argued book that fills a large gap in Jewish historiography. The authors have skillfully synthesized numerous studies of local communities and specialized topics, but they have necessarily conducted a great deal of original research as well. The result is a reliable narrative of German-Jewish history that will be the standard work on the subject for years to come.

In his treatment of German Jewry from the beginning

of the Thirty Years' War to 1780, Robert Liberles offers significant surprises. For example, he finds that Jews did not marry young and live in extended families, contrary to conventional accounts. Rather German Jews during the early modern period tended to marry in their mid-twenties and lived in nuclear families of four to five members per household. How happy were these families? Liberles acknowledges that domestic "peace and heartfelt affection" are difficult to document (p. 39). Troubled relationships were more likely to leave a record, as desperate family members, often abused wives, enlisted the aid of rabbis, courts, or relatives. Thus one finds "cases of serious family quarrels, infidelity, physical abuse and even rare cases of infanticide" (p. 38). This evidence provides a sobering corrective to nostalgic accounts of traditional Jewish life—the happy home as a bulwark against a hostile society is the corollary to the lachrymose account of Jewish-Gentile relations—though one should hardly be surprised to find Jews subject to the same emotional or moral weaknesses as their Gentile neighbors. With respect to their economic function, Liberles presents a largely familiar picture. Excluded from landowning and most crafts (though the author surprisingly finds Jewish brewers in Berlin!), Jews frequently peddled used goods (especially clothing), dealt in livestock, engaged in money lending, or traded in new products such as coffee, tea, spices and sugar, which were not subject to guild monopolies. Others performed functions within the Jewish communities themselves, serving as rabbis, cantors, teachers, kosher butchers, etc. Those who could or would not operate within the law turned to crime, and Liberles writes of Jewish gangsters who had no scruples about robbing, swindling, or counterfeiting, but insisted that their fellow criminals keep strictly kosher. He questions the prevalent historiographical claim that Jews were less likely than Gentiles to commit crimes, citing statistics from seventeenth-century Frankfurt according to which 1 in 90 Jews was found guilty of crime, whereas the rate among Gentiles was 1 in 140, though he acknowledges that the justice system may have been biased against the Jews. Perhaps most surprising in Liberles's section is his contention that Jews were not as isolated from Gentile society as previously believed. With respect to living conditions, Liberles revises the standard image of the Jew as urban ghetto-dweller. The Frankfurt Ghetto, so famously described by Goethe, Boerne, and others, was the exception rather than the rule. Most Jews lived in small towns and villages, and though they did tend to concentrate in disproportionately Jewish quarters, this was more often the result of their own choice than the force of the law. Moreover, even in Jewish quarters, Liberles reports, Jews

and non-Jews often occupied the same building. Jews and Gentiles regularly drank together in pubs and rabbis repeatedly complained of Jews frequenting Christian-owned taverns (some taverns were operated by Jews) on the Sabbath.

If the Jews were not hermetically sealed off from Gentile society in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the near century spanning 1780 to 1870 saw their increased integration into European society, as Steven Lowenstein skillfully recounts in the book's second section. During this period German states abolished laws that had discriminated against them, and this legal emancipation, combined with the new economic opportunities of the Industrial Revolution, contributed to the embourgeoisement of German Jewry. It is important not to exaggerate the extent of this change in the everyday life of most Jews, however, and Lowenstein's account is replete with descriptions of conditions that appear anything but modern. Thus, for example, we read of impecunious rural teachers who had to interrupt their lessons to slaughter an ox (as they supplemented their meager income by serving as ritual slaughterers) or who moonlighted as gravediggers in order to pay the bills. In other cases emancipation meant the entry of Jews into traditional crafts that had previously excluded them, hence the disproportionately high number of Jewish furriers in Posen. Yet emancipation did bring about significant change. In particular, Lowenstein shows, as the nineteenth century progressed, Jews became increasingly sedentary in their economic activities. Although Jews still traveled more frequently than non-Jews, largely because of the requirements of business, the growth of railroads made the ambulant peddler obsolete. Jewish merchants increasingly sold their goods in permanent shops. As to the everyday domestic life of Jews, emancipation did little to change the institution of arranged marriages or dowries, which were still the norm in 1870, though love sometimes complicated well-formulated plans between fathers. Similarly, religious values changed little. Though emancipation meant that rabbis lost civil power and only retained spiritual authority, making participation in religious life effectively voluntary, German Judaism remained vibrant, according to Lowenstein. Furthermore, Jews practiced in public. New synagogues adorned major streets, and local dignitaries typically came to visit for dedications and other special occasions. Sukkot, or temporary huts constructed for the Feast of Tabernacles, were visible outside Jewish homes. At Passover Jews gave their Gentile friends matzot, the ceremonial unleavened bread eaten on the holiday. Despite occasional anti-

Semitic outbursts, Jewish-Gentile relations were overall amicable during the period 1780-1870.

Marion Kaplan continues the saga with a very solid section on the period of the Empire. While economic depression, nationalist politics, and finally a World War raged in the background, Kaplan relates the details of Jewish everyday life. Kaplan's Jewry is primarily bourgeois and increasingly urban. It is disproportionately represented in secondary and university education, particularly among girls in the gymnasium and women at the university. Jews thrived in the medical and legal professions; in 1887, 34 percent of the medical students in Berlin were Jewish, and in 1907 about half the practicing lawyers in the city were Jews. The modernization of Jewish life entailed a syncretic blending of Jewish tradition on the one hand and Enlightenment and German nationalism on the other. Thus a common Bar Mitzvah gift was a fine edition of Goethe's works, and though historians have seen tensions between Germanness and Jewishness, contemporaries had less trouble reconciling the two identities. (Kaplan notes that Zionism remained weak throughout the imperial period, and Jews were as eager as Gentiles to go to war in 1914.) Jewish-Gentile relations were mostly cordial, indeed friendly enough to offer the prospect of intermarriage—made newly possible in 1875 by imperial legislation on civil marriage—though most close friendships, as revealed by memoirs that Kaplan has carefully mined, appear to have been between Jews. Much of this contact was enshrined in roughly 5000 Jewish organizations. Whether they came together to ensure one another a proper burial, to provide dowries for poor Jewish women, to take nature walks, or for countless other purposes, Jews had a vigorous institutional life. At the same time, they were not isolated, and many Jews were simultaneously involved in Jewish and non-Jewish organizations. (For example, Jews were overrepresented by three times their population in the German Gymnastics Society.) If the Jewish community in Imperial Germany was primarily bourgeois, however, Kaplan reminds us that this was not exclusively the case. A significant minority of *Ostjuden*, seeking refuge from persecution and poverty in the Russian empire, had found little succor in Germany, where they formed a Jewish proletariat of 45,000 to 50,000 (including 4000 coal miners in the Ruhr region) laboring under the harshest conditions.

Following the First World War, the condition of the Jewish proletariat became less exceptional, as many Jews fell from the bourgeoisie owing to post-war economic collapse. With the overthrow of the fragile Weimar state and the rise of National Socialism, the fall of the Jews

from economic comfort and social respectability continued apace, as the racist regime excluded them from public service, higher education and the liberal professions long before it consigned them to annihilation. Trude Maurer tells this grim story in the fourth and final section of the book. One reads with a sense of dread the increasing restrictions and the gratuitous indignities visited on the Jewish population of Germany: the removal of "Aryan" housekeepers and the exclusion from beaches, restaurants, theaters, parks, and public transportation. The words of a doctor, written in her diary upon the news of the Jews' expulsion from the medical profession in Germany, say more than a thousand statistics: "Ich esse nicht, ich schlafe nicht, ich habe immer das Gefühl von Sterben und Untergang, mir fehlt mein Beruf, daran gehe ich zugrunde" (p. 409). Other Jews watched in dismay as their Gentile friends became increasingly scarce at informal gatherings such as birthday parties. The official anti-Semitism of the Nazi regime ironically strengthened the Jewish community, at least initially, as Jews found solace among their persecuted coreligionists. Synagogue attendance increased, and the stories of Passover and Purim took on new meaning. Religious observance became a form of resistance. After the Kristallnacht pogrom of November 1938, however, many synagogues were destroyed and the possibilities for communal religious experience were accordingly diminished. Of course, more was at stake than the right to recite prayers, and by the end of 1938 German Jews faced tremendously difficult decisions. Emigration, legal or illegal, was fast becoming an impossibility. Those who could or would not leave soon faced deportation to the camps, clandestinity, or suicide.

My only complaint about this outstanding book is that it ends in 1945. That year, together with the few traumatic years preceding it, undeniably marked a break in German-Jewish history, and one might also argue that a 638-page book is already long enough. By concluding in 1945, however, the authors risk giving the impression that the history of the Jews in Germany concluded with the Shoah. With 100,000 members, the Jewish community in Germany today is the third largest in Europe, after France and the United Kingdom. Despite the murderous intentions of the Nazis, German Jewry is far from defunct, and indeed the story of how it has survived and even flourished after the war needs to be integrated into the larger narrative. Nor is the story of post-war German-Jewry a scholarly novelty. In the past decade a number of important books have carried the history of Jews in Germany up to the present day.[4] By missing the opportunity to integrate this work into

their narrative and add original research as well, Kaplan et al. have taken the injunction to describe Jewish life “between the pogroms” too literally. In the process they have undermined what is otherwise a strong argument against lachrymose historiography. Despite this shortcoming, however, *Geschichte des jüdischen Alltags* is an impressive achievement. Its authors have done a great service for both Jewish studies and German studies.

Notes

[1]. Seminar communication at the *École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales*, Paris, May 1991.

[2]. Salo Baron, “Ghetto and Emancipation,” *The Menorah Journal* 14 (1928): pp. 515-26. Hannah Arendt joined Baron in criticizing the “lachrymose” approach to Jewish history” in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (San Diego: Harvest, 1976), p. xii.

[3]. Michael A. Meyer, ed., and Michael Brenner, assistant ed., *German-Jewish History in Modern Times*, 4 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996-97), is the authoritative general history of German Jewry. Its emphasis on political, intellectual, and institutional-social history, however, left plenty of room for research into *Alltagsgeschichte*.

[4]. See, for example: Sander Gilman and Karen Remmler, *Reemerging Jewish Culture in Germany: Life and Literature since 1989* (New York: New York Uni-

versity Press, 1994); Dagmar C. G. Lorenz and Gabriele Weinberger, *Insiders and Outsiders: Jewish and Gentile Culture in Germany and Austria* (Detroit: Wayne State University, 1994); Jeffrey Peck, *Sojourners: The Return of German Jews and the Question of Identity* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995); Y. Michal Boderman, ed., *Jews, Germans, Memory: Reconstruction of Jewish Life in Germany* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996); Michael Brenner, *After the Holocaust: Rebuilding Jewish Lives in Post-War Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997); Lynn Rappaport, *Jews in Germany after the Holocaust: Memory, Identity and German-Jewish Relations* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Richard Chaim Schneider, *Wir sind da! Die Geschichte der Juden in Deutschland von 1945 bis heute* (Berlin: Ullstein, 2000); Leslie Morris and Jack Zipes, ed., *Unlikely History: The Changing German-Jewish Symbiosis, 1945-2000* (New York: Palgrave, 2002). On the importance of the post-war period for German-Jewish studies, see Liliane Weissberg, “Reflecting on the Past, Envisioning the Future: Perspectives for German-Jewish Studies,” and Jeffrey Peck, “New Perspectives in German Jewish Studies: Towards a Diasporic and Global Perspective,” *GHI Bulletin* (forthcoming). For a more complete list of publications on post-war German Jewry, see Noah Isenberg, “Recent Developments in German-Jewish Studies (1980-Present),” *AJS Perspectives: A Newsletter of the Association for Jewish Studies* (Spring/Summer 2004): pp. 6-7.

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