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Saskia Coenen Snyder, *Building a Public Judaism: Synagogues and Jewish Identity in Nineteenth-Century Europe*. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2013. 360 pp. Illustrations, notes, and index. \$49.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-674-05989-4.

Review by Jeffrey Haus, Kalamazoo College.

Saskia Coenen Snyder, who teaches at the University of South Carolina, has produced an ambitious, significant work of comparative history. In the case of modern European Jewry, as she writes, the comparative method casts light upon “both the complexity and diversity of...local circumstances...as well as the more general patterns that emerged across national borders” (p. 23). Her book provides important insight into the internal workings of four important European Jewish communities, and how those structures worked with civil authorities to produce material symbols of religious and cultural integration. In doing so, it portrays integration as an interactive process of ongoing negotiation based on a variety of factors.

At its root, Coenen Snyder’s study compares synagogue-building in four different European capitals: Berlin, London, Amsterdam, and Paris. Her focus on synagogues draws on numerous strands of Jewish existence, from community leadership to religious attitudes to financial resources and residence patterns. According to her argument, these factors interacted with broader ones in the general community, notably architectural trends and the relationship between Jews and the secular authorities of each country. Her approach thus yields a work of considerable scope involving the internal dynamics of these European Jewish communities and the general setting in which Jews lived.

Coenen Snyder devotes single chapters to each of her four case studies, systematically organizing her exploration of the synagogue-building process. Each chapter begins by outlining the general political, cultural, and economic situation in each city, followed by an overview of Jewish legal and economic status and the details of the design and construction, and the gentile reception of the finished product. In this manner, Coenen Snyder carefully establishes the context in which each city’s synagogue project unfolded, providing interpretations from multiple vantage points.

The first chapter discusses the construction of the Oranienburgerstrasse synagogue in Berlin during the 1860s. Berlin Jewish leaders, she argues, intended the synagogue as “a demand for emancipation rather than its result” (pp. 27-28). Here, Coenen Snyder links the political and economic situation of Berlin Jews and their approach to synagogue construction. The Oranienburgerstrasse synagogue, she argues, was to represent both Jewish aspirations and achievements. For this reason, its designers opted for grandiose décor and intimidating size meant to emphasize Jewish *embourgeoisement* and readiness for emancipation. Debates over certain interior details—such as the inclusion and placement of the synagogue’s organ—illustrated Berlin Jews’ desire to “mediate their identity...as Jews and Germans....[By installing an organ, the] community could demonstrate that it had modernized Judaism....Yet by making the organ invisible to the naked eye...they ensured the visual authority of Jewish features” (pp. 73-74). This magnificently conspicuous building did not, however, bowl over Berlin’s gentiles, and Jewish emancipation had to await the end of the Franco-Prussian War and the creation of the Second Reich.

Chapter two focuses on London, where synagogue-building was overseen by the United Synagogue, the hierarchical establishment of traditional English Judaism. Adhering to the Victorian cultural milieu, Jewish leaders wished to avoid the spotlight and opted to build inconspicuous synagogues as a sign of religious respectability. The United Synagogue also preferred small local synagogues which its leaders believed would encourage attendance by greater numbers of Jews; they also would be less expensive to build, heat, and maintain. This strategy resulted in the wider dispersal of synagogues around London to serve Jews who had moved to different areas of the city. Coenen Snyder concludes that the arrangement reflected the greater demographic diversity of London Jewry and, in turn, greater Jewish acculturation within Great Britain.

Shifting her attention to Amsterdam in chapter three, Coenen Snyder focuses on the connection between synagogue design debates and Amsterdam Jewry's "socioeconomic and political position" (p. 159). Amsterdam had a larger number of poor Jews than the other three cities, meaning that a significant portion of Amsterdam's Jews could not afford to pay membership dues. Jewish life thus revolved more around home ritual than synagogue attendance for much of the nineteenth century. Like London, Amsterdam synagogue life tended to be localized, concentrated in small locales convenient to members and where heating and membership cost less. The synagogue as a central institution became even more marginalized due to the general secularization of Amsterdam society and the orthodox orientation of Dutch Judaism. In other words, fewer Jews frequented synagogues that increasingly failed to reflect their own religious sensibilities. Coenen Snyder argues, however, that Amsterdam's synagogues remained important institutions, as they were a public space where Judaism could show its face.

Chapter four discusses the construction of a central synagogue on the rue de la Victoire in Paris. This project involved extensive negotiations between the Jewish religious administration (the Consistory) and several different levels of the French bureaucracy, as well as a protracted construction process that dragged on from 1862-1876. During this period, French Jews became frustrated by their lack of control over Jewish affairs, even as they enjoyed equal legal status and membership in an official state religion. In Paris, much of that control rested in the hands of its Prefect, Baron Hausmann, who had been charged by Napoleon III with the reconstruction of the French capital. The Consistory thus had to navigate both Hausmann's central planning and the broader aesthetic movements of the period. The resulting building incorporated both Romanesque and Moorish features in its interior, while fitting into the general cityscape of the 9th *arrondissement* where it stills stands today. The rue de la Victoire synagogue, she concludes, embodied the dual demands of integration and distinctiveness that characterized Jewish identity formation in France.

Coenen Snyder brings together a large body of material including government documents, periodicals, and architectural plans in four languages. This extensive research enables her to draw a detailed and informative picture of public works projects in each city, and how synagogue architecture revealed attitudes towards minorities, religion, and aesthetics. In outlining the rationale for design decisions taken by the United Synagogue in London, for example, Coenen Snyder persuasively argues that synagogue design reflected a developing sense of integrated Judaism. The Jewish authorities opted for less distinctive exteriors while emphasizing traditional Jewish interior features, showing congregants "that orthodoxy and bourgeois refinement were not incompatible" (p. 119).

Although the argument details the practical forces of the building process, it also underplays the importance of financial power in determining the course of action. The United Synagogue, for example contributed one-third of the cost of synagogue construction projects. Given that the congregations tended to be small and localized in specific neighborhoods, this sum represented a significant (and likely, vital) portion of the overall cost. Consequently, the United Synagogue's financial clout enabled it to influence designs toward the low-key uniformity it sought. Coenen Snyder argues that the United

Synagogue chose to place synagogues “wherever they were most needed” (p. 119); yet the United Synagogue retained the power of defining that need due to its financial involvement. One incident of conflict in London, which the book discusses at length, shows that the United Synagogue’s opinion did not reflect that of the entirety of London Jewry. In Paris, a similar dynamic existed, except that the French government possessed both political and financial control. Parisian Jews therefore had to adjust their plans according to Baron Hausmann’s initial vision for the city. In Berlin and Amsterdam, financial means or the lack thereof played a central role in determining the direction of synagogue construction. This financial thread runs throughout the book, and one wishes the conclusion would explore it more directly.

To its credit, the book does engage the significance of religious edifices in the modern European city, largely casting them as symbols of affluence and integration. The Oranienburgerstrasse synagogue in Berlin staked out a specifically Jewish space within the Prussian capital and offered a particular image of an enlightened, modern, bourgeois Judaism. Yet, synagogues and other houses of worship also serve socioeconomic purposes internal to their own religious communities. Locations and styles can attract or repel certain groups, thereby influencing group cohesion and interactions with fellow citizens. Coenen Snyder analyzes this issue most successfully in the London and Amsterdam chapters. The chapter on Paris also discusses the reservations of the French Empress Eugénie towards encouraging contact between Jews and Catholics, which contributed to the location of the synagogue on the narrow side-street of the rue de la Victoire rather than on the grander boulevard de Chateaudun. Again, one wishes that the conclusion tied these factors together more specifically.

These minor criticisms, however, should not detract from the overall achievement of Coenen Snyder’s study. Her work represents a significant and valuable contribution to the study of religious material culture. It also demonstrates the particularities of the Jewish situation in different countries. Ultimately, as she correctly concludes, the process of building a synagogue teaches us more about the European Jewish situation—and about the places in which Jews lived—than do the finished buildings themselves.

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