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Sarah Wobick-Segev, *Homes Away from Home: Jewish Belonging in Twentieth-Century Paris, Berlin, and St. Petersburg*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018. xi + 295 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$65.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-15-036-0514-5.

Review by Saskia Coenen Snyder, University of South Carolina.

In his seminal theoretical treatise, *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture*, critical theorist Lindsay Jones argued for the need to relate aesthetics with religious rituals and human experiences in order to produce interpretation. Sacred buildings, he maintained, remain silent without proper contextualization and a sensitivity to place and space. From Jones' perspective, the meaning of religious structures—or any built structure for that matter—was “not a condition or quality of the thing itself, [but] arose from situations,” generating interpretations that were inherently fluid, situational, and transient in nature as historical contexts continually change.[1] A triangular framework consisting of the structure in question, human actors who use and surround it, and the context in which their interaction occurs form the basis of understanding architecture. While Sarah Wobick-Segev's important book, *Homes Away from Home*, is not an architectural analysis, its methodology is firmly rooted in the spatial turn, acknowledging that urban landscapes were not blank canvases on which Jewish histories passively unfolded, but actively shaped and transformed them. As European cities modernized, giving rise to new spaces for bourgeois sociability, consumption, and leisure, Jewish communities enthusiastically partook in these developments, redefining in the process what it meant to be Jewish. To many urban Jews in western, central, and eastern Europe alike, the movement toward modernization did not lead to a diminished sense of Jewish solidarity and belonging; instead they both thrived in new settings.

Wobick-Segev examines three urban scenes in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, namely Paris, Berlin, and St. Petersburg. Many middle-class Jews living in these bustling cities gained access to public spaces previously closed to them. At a time when Jewish communities became more individualized and voluntary, Jews flocked to new sites of sociability, creating bonds, friendships, and a sense of Jewish companionship in venues independent from the official religious community. “[G]athering as Jews in a remarkably different set of spaces from those frequented by previous generations” (p. 175), states Wobick-Segev, allowed for the refashioning of Jewish life and the expression of a distinctly modern Jewish identity, one based on personal prerogative and individual choice.

Coffee houses and cafés, for example, became popular places for Jewish writers, intellectuals, artists, and immigrants alike. For the price of a cup of coffee, cafés offered warmth and shelter, as well as access to social networks. Reminiscent of Shachar Pinsker's *A Rich Brew: How Cafés*

*Created Modern Jewish Culture*, Wobick-Segev highlights the centrality of these urban sites to Jews of various backgrounds, including Hebrew literati and Zionists, bourgeois socialites, and East European Jewish immigrants, who gathered in cafés to discuss politics, find camaraderie, and build community. The author alludes to well-known figures such as Hirsch Hildesheimer, the editor of the pro-Zionist, Orthodox newspaper *Jüdische Presse*, who was a regular in Berlin's Café Bauer, located on the corner of Friedrichstrasse and Unter den Linden. Hildesheimer, surrounded by the sizeable collection of journals and newspapers for which Café Bauer was known, drafted daily columns at "his" table on the second floor, his daily presence welcoming friends and acquaintances in conversation and debate.

Charitable balls and musical concerts offered similar opportunities for Jews to socialize beyond the boundaries of religious institutions. Often held at reputable hotels, balls and dances functioned not merely as a fashionable means of fundraising and entertainment, but also as places to meet future marriage partners. As arranged marriages fell out of favor among modern Jews, balls offered opportunities for romance and the expression of individual autonomy, challenging Jewish marital traditions and expectations. Interestingly, these patterns of leisure revealed high levels of bourgeois acculturation and an embrace of prevailing trends, yet also exposed their limitations: Jews created their *own* charitable balls to maintain separate ethnic and religious identities. Full integration appeared neither to have been fully obtainable nor desired. Indeed, maintains Wobick-Segev, while Jewish religious leaders may have expressed discomfort over such practices as mixed-gender dancing, many ultimately viewed charitable balls as necessary efforts to maintain the social order in the Jewish community and to support endogamy among younger generations. That these spaces remained largely segregated signals the limits of integration and acceptance of Jews in European society.

Summer camps and youth clubs served the same purpose. Anxious about the future of Judaism, community organizers promoted summer camps and youth movements to instill a sense of belonging among Jewish children and teenagers. Akin to non-Jewish vacation camps, Jewish organizers took city kids to the countryside and created "homes away from home," imbued with culturally relevant content. Children learned about religious holidays, history, and folklore. They sang Yiddish songs, all intended to foster a Jewish identity that would cultivate permanent bonds.

Wobick-Segev challenges the easy binaries of East vs West, of East European vs. Western and Central European Jewish history, so often presented as stark opposites in existing historical literature. By examining the similarities and differences between urban Jewish life in St. Petersburg, Berlin, and Paris, the author endeavors to present a more nuanced view. For example, the popularity of Bundism among working-class Jews in early twentieth-century Paris, typically associated with East European Jewish politics, as well as the liberal, integrationist convictions expressed by Jewish socialites in St. Petersburg point to multifaceted expressions of Jewish belonging in the public sphere. It is precisely these new sites of sociability that permitted a diversity of Jewish allegiances that crossed geo-political boundaries.

When the consolidation of the Soviet system in the 1920s caused many such consumer-based sites to be shut down, curbing public expressions of religious and ethnic distinctiveness, Jews living in St. Petersburg/Leningrad "were left with few actual outlets in which to build, express, and promote Jewishness and Judaism" (p. 177). Having limited access to cultural activities, social programs, education and religious practices eroded private and public ties to Judaism. "The

lesson of Leningrad,” concludes Wobick-Segev, “is quite simple. Persecution does not create community and belonging but has the power to extinguish the flame of faith and community” (p. 177). It is in societies where individualism, choice, and acculturation were encouraged—developments so often regarded as threatening by the religious establishment—that expressions of Jewishness thrived. Secularism and acculturation, then, did not weaken communal bonds but redefined them. One does wonder, however, how this lesson translates to a time and place where repression and persecution *did* lead to greater ethnic solidarity. Under the Nazi regime, German Jews returned to and significantly expanded organizational networks, re-affirming attachments to sustain them economically, culturally, and emotionally. Perhaps the lesson is not that simple after all?

One of the author’s main objectives is to offer a more positive account of Jewish life in the modern era. She laments the tendency among scholars towards crafting lachrymose narratives of Jewish history, placing disproportionate emphases on repression, oppression, and suffering. Reducing the story of Jewish communities in the Diaspora to one of survival alone, she asserts, does an injustice to a history that is infinitely richer and more complex. *Homes Away from Home*, however, does not always succeed in offering a strong counter narrative; at times it perpetuates the very tendency it aims to defy. Much of what drove Jewish sociability in the public sphere in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, according to Wobick-Segev, originated from “existential questions raised in Jewish communities” (p. 175) about the future of Judaism and Jewish life. She places much emphasis on profound anxieties and concerns among Jewish leadership, on fears of losing Jewish bonds in an age of individualism and secularization. While this is undoubtedly a central factor, it also feeds into the narrative of constant apprehension and distress among Jews, of crises that caused deep angst about the demise of Jewish group cohesion. But it is equally true that young urbanites took full advantage of the new types of sociability available to them just because they could—they thoroughly enjoyed, as did non-Jews, café culture, balls, summer camps, and youth clubs. In other words, Jewish sociability was as much shaped by the need for Jewish continuation in secular settings as by delight and leisure opportunities that nineteenth and twentieth-century European consumer culture offered, independent from angst. Push and pull factors worked in tandem, yet the former received decidedly more attention in this study.

An additional liability concerns the author’s geographic and demographic choices. Taking one city to represent a whole region risks generalizations. Paris, for one, is not Western Europe. The profile of the Amsterdam Jewish community, for example, one of the largest Jewish communities in Western Europe around the turn of the century, differed significantly from that of Paris. The majority were factory workers who enjoyed limited access to the kinds of bourgeois leisure spaces available to their co-religionists in Paris and Berlin. In Amsterdam, many Jews gravitated instead toward locations with deep ties to labor, such as the monumental *Algemeene Nederlandse Diamantbewerkerbond* (General Diamond Workers’ Union or ANDB) building that housed a library with daily newspapers, hosted lectures, and offered solidarity to its thousands of Jewish and non-Jewish members—a sense of belonging not to an exclusively Jewish community but rather to a successful, multi-ethnic labor union that consciously and deliberately downplayed any references to Jewish distinctiveness. What Wobick-Segev’s study reveals (but understates) is that place still mattered, that each city had unique urban signatures that allowed Jews to express allegiances in myriad ways, to Jewish, non-Jewish, and shared communities.

Despite these imperfections, the book is a pleasure to read. Engaging and well-written, *Homes Away from Home* draws from a wide array of archival source materials in different languages,

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shedding light on urban Jews forging modern identities and sensibilities. It is a welcome addition to the fields of Jewish Studies, urban and spatial history.

#### NOTES

[1] Lindsay Jones, *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture: Experience, Interpretation, Comparison. Volume 1: Monumental Occasions. Reflections on the Eventfulness of Religious Architecture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 29.

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