

---

H-France Review Vol. 21 (December 2021), No. 221

Julien Bouchet, ed., *Présences juives. À Clermont-Ferrand durant l'époque contemporaine (1862-2013)*. Clermont-Ferrand: Presses universitaires Blaise-Pascal, 2020. 162pp. €18.00 (pb). ISBN 9-78-2845169517.

Review by Seth Armus, St. Joseph's College.

The “French-Jewish experience” has been, by any calculation, one of extremes—from the highest levels of success and acceptance to the starkest moments of betrayal and abandonment. The paradox is still with us, and the violent trials of recent years have left some wondering, once again, if there is still a viable future for France’s Jews. Yvan Attal, in his underrated 2016 satire *Ils sont partout* paraphrases Billy Wilder on the subject of Jewish gloominess, “les optimistes ont fini à Auschwitz, les pessimistes à Hollywood.”<sup>[1]</sup> But, in that film’s end, Attal’s character chooses to stay—to remain French and Jewish. This volume, a collection of essays on the diminutive but well-ordered Jewish community of Clermont-Ferrand, is very much part of that story.

For many, Clermont-Ferrand brings to mind Marcel Ophuls’ film *Le chagrin et la pitié* (1969), since that documentary featured the web of resistance and collaboration in this minor Free-Zone city. By 1940, refugees from Occupied France swelled the Jewish population of the town from a hundred to many thousands, placing enormous challenges on its residents. In a city where the Resistance was active, and collaborators plenty, Ophuls’ film broke French taboos. This history of wartime Clermont is also superbly rendered in John Sweets’ *Choices in Vichy France*—a work this present collection generously acknowledges. But this book complements earlier work by bringing us into the daily life that emerges from the meticulous record-keeping of the Clermontois.

By examining a tiny group in the Auvergne these contributors appear to have consciously presented a work of *Annales*-style history. Through a trove of sources, from the poignant to the mundane, we watch how a diverse group of Jews lived in this obscure place, tossed about by outside events. A member of the community actually evokes, in the book’s brief conclusion, Emmanuel Le Roy-Ladurie’s *Montaillou*. He suggests that they too have, in this slim volume, created a sort of microhistory. That goal may be grand, but he’s not wrong—this really is microhistory at its best. What could have been a dry, community-focused story takes on much larger coherence and importance. The document-heavy history these authors piece together turns out to be fascinating.

---

The book is a follow-up to a similar collection published twenty years earlier. That book, *Juifs de Clermont: une histoire fragmentée*, dealt with the town's ancient and medieval history. This volume picks up the story in 1862 with four chapters by four different scholars, each addressing a different epoch of Jewish experience up to today. The date 1862 is not arbitrary—it is when a permanent synagogue was opened on the town's rue de Quatre-Passeports. The present book commemorates the synagogue's recent renovation, and the life of the synagogue features as a major focus of each of the essays.

Clermont is one of the original Jewish communities in France, and the first to be mentioned as such by name in the written record. There is even a story (highly questionable, to say the least) that in the third century a Roman Jewish Governor of Issoire ordered the execution of St. Austremoine (the Auvergne's first martyr). In any event, initial good relations with the Christians seem not to have lasted, and the community fled forced baptism in the sixth century. Jews continued to live in Auvergne, but Jewish presence at Clermont was sporadic until the nineteenth century. All of this was covered in the first volume. These four essays address the synagogue's opening and take us to the present day.

As the first essay (by the collection's editor, Julien Bouchet, covering 1862-1894) reminds us, there are wonderful sources available to researchers, and Bouchet has made excellent use of these to retrace the details of this community in the 1800s. His chapter, which contains a number of excellent photos and copies of documents, begins this micro-history of Jewish life in late Second Empire and early Third Republic France. Of special note is the involvement of French authorities in seeing to the health of this community and the notable lack of antisemitism. Bouchet also shows how thoroughly established the Clermont Jews were in the local bourgeoisie. Although the lives of the less prosperous are harder to recreate, there was enough wealth that the community could be quite self-sufficient and even supported their co-religionists in other parts of France.

The construction of the synagogue, the central event for this chapter, was, in fact, part of the confident revival of Jewish communal life throughout the second half of the nineteenth century—the grand synagogues of Lyon and Sainte-Etienne also date from this era. While the records of the Jewish community and, indeed, the Departmental archives suggest an unusual degree of benevolence, it must be remembered that this was a small group who could scarcely be said to be a presence in the municipality. Their synagogue opened to a city that was not bothered by them, but they could not be mistaken for active participants in Clermont cultural life. But the archives also speak of the absence of antisemitism. This idyll was to come to a thunderous end with the Dreyfus Affair.

The book's second chapter by Aline Fryszman (covering 1894-1940) takes us through these less steady waters. The Dreyfus Affair hit hard in Auvergne, and there was, in Clermont too, an explosion of anti-Jewish sentiment. As in the rest of France, antisemitism would now become a constant feature of public life. The lives of Clermont Jews were soon infused with antisemitic propaganda, most especially from the local newspapers. And though Clermont was spared the violence of some other provincial cities, the intensity of anti-Jewish sentiment scared the local Jews and revealed to them a latent culture of antisemitism they had not expected.

Life improved, briefly, in the early twentieth century, as what Pierre Birnbaum called “the antisemitic moment” waned. The newly secularized France reasserted that Jews had, in principle,

the same status as any other community. In addition, the already diverse Clermont Jews (having Sephardic and Ashkenazic families, as well as later arrivals from Alsace) received a number of new immigrants from the collapsing Ottoman Empire, who, quite quickly, became prominent in the community. This diversity would soon be attested to by the names of those who enlisted in 1914—a poignant microcosm of French Jewry.

As with French Jews everywhere, the First World War revealed a contrast. On the one hand, the state now celebrated a “Jewish republicanism” that grew out of the commitment to national unity, but, on the other hand, the “anti-Boche” attitude often carried with it the notion that Jews were “pro-German” in their sympathies. That this slur was launched even against the diverse Jews of Clermont is testimony to its pervasiveness.

The interwar period was dominated by two new developments for the Jews of Clermont. First, the arrival of hundreds of refugees from Germany and the east (some settling, some merely passing through) and, second, the emergence of Zionism as a dominant feature of Jewish life. Although few Clermont Jews left for Palestine, the community became “zionised,” a phenomenon Paula Hyman has noted was general in France. This, again, suggests increased instability in the community, as well as the obvious influence of refugees fleeing persecution. But despite the pressures of immigration, Clermont Jews were, it seems, truly exemplary in the treatment of refugees. Fryszman had the good fortune to personally interview a number of Clermontois who remember these years, and these oral histories add to the richness of the chapter.

The chapter concerning the war (by Jean-Michel Rallières) is dense and well-documented. The story is as tragic and heartrending in Clermont as anywhere else in France: the personal details, the turmoil of families we come to know in the volume, is brutal. But the Auvergne is also famous for the many acts of bravery among the non-Jewish population. Rallières reminds us of the reality of the occupation and deportation, the cruelty and pettiness with which Jews’ lives were deformed and their livelihoods destroyed, while subtly noting that the factors which allowed 75 percent of French Jews to survive were very much featured in Clermont. This tone is foreshadowed in the book’s preface (by Serge Klarsfeld) who, while praising the honest details of Rallières’ account, notes that the relatively small number of Jews arrested there during the Occupation (around 10 percent) might suggest that the Clermontois were less likely than others to turn in their neighbors.

The last chapter has, perhaps, the fewest surprises. Antonin Andriot takes us up the present day. The community, like so many others in France, rebuilt itself in the “silent” postwar period (the fifties and early sixties, mostly, during which discussions of the Shoah and collaboration were rare). As throughout France, the Algerian War hastened the arrival of many (often poorer) Jews from North Africa and solidified the already pro-Israel character of the community. This attitude, sometimes at odds with that of France’s political leaders, has not, however resulted in much emigration to Israel. Even the recent era (which has seen antisemitic violence morph from a heresy within the far-Right to a widespread feature of the Islamist Left) failed to disrupt the community.

Andriot notes that, at the synagogue’s re-opening in 2013, religious and political leaders from the region were all present—ex-President Chirac even wrote a lovely letter apologizing for his absence. This is in stark contrast to the modest unveiling in 1862. The past 150 years have tested the Jews of Clermont but, as I hope I have made clear, their story is a vivid microcosm of French-

---

Jewish life. The features that have dominated Jewish life in France are all present in Clermont-Ferrand. Anyone interested in the history of France's Jews or communal life in the provinces will find something worthwhile in this deceptively modest study.

#### LIST OF ESSAYS

Serge Klarsfeld, Préface

Julien Bouchet, De l'inauguration de la nouvelle synagogue à l'affaire Dreyfus: L'ancrage progressif des Juifs à Clermont (1862-1894)

Aline Fryszman, Les Juifs de Clermont de l'affaire Dreyfus à la Seconde Guerre mondiale: La croissance et l'intégration d'une communauté discrète sur fond d'antisémitisme latent (1894-mai 1940)

Jean-Michel Rallières, Être juif à Clermont-Ferrand de 1940 à 1944

Antonin Andriot, Présences juives à Clermont-Ferrand à l'époque contemporaine

#### NOTES

[1] Yvan Attal, *Ils sont partout* (France: La Petite Reine/Canal+, 2016)

Seth Armus  
St. Joseph's College  
[sarmus@sjcny.edu](mailto:sarmus@sjcny.edu)

Copyright © 2021 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Review* nor republication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on *H-France Review* are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172