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Sally Debra Charnow, *Edmond Fleg and Jewish minority culture in twentieth-century France*. New York: Routledge, 2021. 250 pp. 15 B/W illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$160.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9-78-0367186142; \$48.95 U.S. (eb). ISBN 9-78-0429197208.

Review by Noémie Duhaut, University of Pennsylvania.

I must confess that, before opening Sally Charnow's biography of Edmond Fleg (1874–1963), I knew next to nothing about her protagonist. His name rang a bell, as it would with anyone familiar with the Jewish associational landscape in France. Opened shortly after Fleg's death, the *Centre Fleg* in the *quartier latin* has been catering to the needs of Jewish students in the capital as a place for Jewish studies and socialising for over five decades. Located in a back street next to the *grande synagogue*, the *Centre Fleg* of Marseille has offered a whole gamut of cultural activities for both Jews and non-Jews for even longer.

And yet, although I walked past both centres, Edmond Fleg did not pick my historian's curiosity, regrettably so. Fleg was a prolific writer fluent in a variety of styles. He penned operas, plays, poetry, novels, and countless essays. His oeuvre was rewarded with the highest official honours in France, translated into several languages and reviewed internationally. Charnow's protagonist did not content himself with the comfort of ivory towers. Fleg was active in Jewish-Christian dialogue as a cofounder of the *Amitié Judéo-Chrétienne de France* and sat on the governing board of some of the most important Franco-Jewish organisations at the time, such as the philanthropic *Alliance Israélite Universelle* and the scouting movement the *Eclaireurs Israélites de France*. The latter allowed him to build bridges with Jewish immigrants from eastern Europe—an attitude that was rare enough to be worthy of note.

As Charnow makes clear from the beginning (and to my relief: after all, my ignorance seems to be the norm), Fleg's understanding of French Jewish identity lost its centrality in the years following the Second World War, when a new generation of intellectuals such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Memmi, Robert Misrahi, and Alain Finkielkraut became more interested in the antisemitic gaze than Jewish self-understanding—i.e. with externally-ascribed rather than internal meaning. If Emmanuel Levinas later made the pendulum swing back and acknowledged his intellectual debt to Edmond Fleg, he also dethroned his predecessor in the pantheons of French Jewish thinkers. Sally Charnow's aim with this biography is to render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's. As she argues in the conclusion to her introduction, "Fleg's work, both literary and organizational, created a foundation for a new kind of cultural Jewish identity that took root after World War II" (p. 11). Her biography is chiefly interested in Edmond Fleg's intellectual output and in how Fleg conceptualised French-Jewish identity throughout his life, in

particular through ecumenical dialogue and, later, Zionism. The six main chapters offer a close reading of Fleg's key works for each period of his life in chronological order.

The first chapter introduces the tensions that underpinned Fleg's entire life. While it is entitled "French and Jewish: Creating the Self," it could have easily been subtitled "the Sufferings of the Young Fleg." Charnow depicts a tormented character torn between different paths. Fleg was the scion of a well-to-do Swiss Jewish family of Alsatian origins, but chose France and the financially unrewarding life of a writer. He seems not to have ever gotten over his decision not to go against his family's wishes and marry his Protestant childhood love but made up for it by engaging in ecumenical dialogue. The Dreyfus Affair was a catalyst for his political engagement (a belated one given that his personal diary initially remained quiet about the affair), yet Fleg remained friends with an *anti-dreyfusard*. He rejected the synagogue-based religious practice of his parents, which he felt was dispassionate and unspiritual, and found himself drawn to an unlikely array of mentors—from the French Jewish philosopher Henri Bergson, whose anti-dualism inspired Fleg, to Catholic thinkers such as the socialist Charles Péguy or the reformer Jacques Maritain. Like the rest of the biography, this chapter presents Frenchness and Jewishness as two discrete poles that Fleg needed to reconcile and syncretise. For Charnow, Fleg was doubtlessly struggling with his sense of belonging. Whether this was indeed central to Fleg's thought or stems from his biographer's reading of it remains, however, a moot point. Charnow relies on scholarship on the Franco-Jewish experience that sees assimilation as the erasure of particularism rather than on newer literature providing a more nuanced understanding of processes of integration and acculturation.

Chapter two locates Fleg in the religious, messianic, and spiritual revival that emerged in response to the horrors of the First World War. As Charnow argues, the war not only reinforced French Jews' sense of integration into the fabric of French society and allowed a new Jewish self-confidence in expressing particularism. Ecumenism, first forged in shared experiences and fraternity in the trenches, also gained traction after the war. Catholic and Jewish writers from Fleg's generation saw in it a way to prolong the *union sacrée* after the armistice—a deeply idealistic aim given that the wartime political union had already disintegrated in practice. For Fleg and his intellectual partners in interreligious dialogue, spiritual reconciliation was an attempt to find a solution to prewar hatreds.

Let me pause for a moment and wonder why Fleg fell into oblivion. Is it because his interest in the internal meaning of Judaism, Jewish ethical texts, and French Jewish spirituality and self-understanding was no longer fashionable by the time he died after the Second World War? Levinas's popularity shows this might not be a satisfactory explanation. Or is it because Fleg's understanding of Franco-Jewish identity, "positing Jewish particularism in the context of French republican citizenship" (p. 5), was, after all, not as original as Edmond Fleg claimed? Charnow concedes that the dilemmas felt by Fleg and other intellectuals of the interwar Jewish literary renaissance were not that new. Indeed, the drive to reconcile the universal and the particular and its attendant paradoxes characterised them as much as earlier generations.^[1] It has been a central dimension of Jewish thought and politics throughout the emancipation period—and of the experience of minorities more broadly speaking. Moreover, the radically different landscape of post-1945 France presented a combination of factors that eroded earlier attempts—such as Edmond Fleg's—at reconciling particularism and universalism: an obvious distrust towards prewar discourses of French/Western civilisation in the wake of the Holocaust; the creation of the state of Israel, which opened new avenues to reconfigure French Jewish identities and

relegated non-statist Zionist thought to the background; and the growth of Sephardic Judaism in France from the 1960s onwards.[2]

Chapter three continues the discussion of Jewish ecumenism started in the previous chapter and casts further light onto what was, in my opinion, Edmond Fleg's most original contribution. What was more novel than affirming "Jewish particularism while simultaneously lifting up humanist universal values," or "claiming a sense of Jewish difference while not rejecting the...ideal of Jewish integration and acculturation" (pp. 84-85) was the ecumenism that characterised the *réveil juif* of the interwar period, its aim to align Judaism with Christianity, to craft a modern Jewish assemblage designated to highlight values familiar to Christians and find an imperative common to both religions. Charnow leaves the question of whether Catholic reformers in Fleg's intellectual circles tried to conduct the same type of work with their religion remains largely unanswered. Efforts seemed lopsided to say the least: Jacques Maritain's circle included Jewish converts to Catholicism, while Catholics were merely interested in Judaism. As this chapter shows, Fleg's understanding of antisemitism drove his ecumenism. He focused on religious—here Christian—antisemitism and considered that Christian persecution of Jews stemmed from a misunderstanding of Christian values and beliefs. That Fleg held such views well into the interwar period and did not seem to grasp the racial and political dimensions of antisemitism is remarkable and, I would argue, explains why Fleg's thought failed to have a greater impact in the long run. Be that as it may, the type of Jewish ecumenism that Fleg inaugurated certainly stood in contrast to earlier Jewish anti-Catholic polemics or discourses underscoring Jewish civilisational priority and superiority of Judaism over Christianity. It is, arguably, a lesser-known dimension of French Jewish cultural production in this period.

The following two chapters chart the evolution of Edmond Fleg's thought towards delineating the role of the Jewish people more squarely. His vision became increasingly messianic in the 1930s. Fleg's earlier ecumenism appeared an essentially Franco-French discussion and, as such, unlikely to be an efficient antidote to prewar hatreds: focusing as it did on reconciliation between Jews and Christians, it is hard to imagine how it could lead to reconciliation between different European states. Edmond Fleg grew disillusioned with this ecumenism and began to envisage a universal mission for Judaism. While he had briefly adhered to the ideas of Herzlian Zionism in the late 1890s, by the 1930s, he moved towards non-statist Zionist thinking and diasporic Jewish nationalism—one whose role was to inspire other liberation movements worldwide and to take the lead in creating a peaceful world order.

This last evolution in Fleg's thought might have emerged, as Charnow suggests, from his interaction with Eastern European Jewish immigrants as part of the French Jewish scouting movement—the focus of the last chapter. The *Eclaireurs Israélites de France* were a medium of integration for Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe and for promoting Zionism and played a key role in the resistance during the war. Given Edmond Fleg's centrality in this movement (and vice versa: the young scouts helped the aging Fleg overcome the death of his two sons early on during the Second World War), one wished that Sally Charnow engaged more with the complexities of this youth movement, both in the interwar period when it was created, and during the Second World War. The Franco-Jewish scouting movement, like non-Jewish ones, focused on reforming the body and engaged with racial thinking in doing so. The *Eclaireurs Israélites'* focus on the body, on creating a so-called new Jew through manual and agricultural labour away from urban centres, was also a specifically Jewish answer to an antisemitic discourse constructing Jews as physically weak or degenerate—a key dimension of Jewish nationalism that Charnow

leaves unexplored in her chapter on Fleg's leadership within the French Jewish scouting movement.^[3]

Charnow's biography prioritises a textual analysis of Fleg's works over contextualising them. Her attempt to include a reception history of Fleg's writings remains unsatisfactory as it is mostly done through quoting a few contemporary reviews, often without explaining to the reader who these critics were, what they stood for, or what movement they belonged to. A particularly infuriating example of this is Israel Zangwill, whose name appears in the biography time and again and who even wrote to Fleg "I don't know whether you are Jewish but in your verses on the universal Temple you have reanimated the great dream of the ghetto. The world really needs your voice, your creative originality" (p. 71). While this biography convincingly traces intellectual genealogies and demonstrates the impact Fleg's writings had on Jewish thought after the Second World War, Charnow leaves the question of readership largely unanswered. One wonders who Fleg's readers were and how influential his ideas were beyond a small Parisian Jewish elite. This book could have benefited from more careful editing. Some passages are repeated verbatim in several places. Moreover, it is regrettable that a work dedicated to a French writer is marred by so many typos in French words.

Such shortcomings notwithstanding, this biography will be of interest to anyone who wishes to delve into the religious dimensions of interwar French thought. Sally Charnow's *Edmond Fleg and Jewish minority culture in twentieth-century France* shows the vitality of religious and interreligious debates in French intellectual circles in this period. This is perhaps the main reason why Edmond Fleg has been forgotten in a country that nowadays styles itself as fiercely secular.

NOTES

[1] There is a growing body of works on this topic. See, for instance, Ari Joskowicz, *The Modernity of Others: Jewish Anti-Catholicism in Germany and France* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014); Lisa Moses Leff, *Sacred Bonds of Solidarity: The Rise of Jewish Internationalism in Nineteenth-Century France* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006); James McAuley, *The House of Fragile Things: Jewish Art Collectors and the Fall of France* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021); Maurice Samuels, *Inventing the Israelite: Jewish Fiction in Nineteenth-Century France* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010); Maurice Samuels, *The Right to Difference: French Universalism and the Jews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016); Ronald Schechter, *Obstinate Hebrews: Representations of Jews in France, 1715-1815* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003).

[2] On this period, see Martine Cohen, *Fin du franco-judaïsme?: quelle place pour les Juifs dans une France multiculturelle?* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2022), published after Sally Charnow's book came out. My thanks to Emmanuel Bloch for our discussions on the topic.

[3] Erin Corber, "Race, the body, and degeneration in the Jewish scouting movement in the interwar years," *Archives Juives* 50, no. 2 (2017): 55-75. Recent works have also used its example to study the processes of cooperation and accommodation between the Vichy regime and Jews in wartime France. See Daniel Lee, *Pétain's Jewish Children: French Jewish Youth and the Vichy Regime, 1940-1942* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

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