 gender, memory and judaism


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The essays selected for this small volume were drawn from two sources. Some were initially presented at the Fourth Bet Debora Conference titled “Diversities”, which took place in Budapest in late August 2006. The conference itself, sponsored by the Eszter Táska Foundation drew its participants — “female rabbis, cantors, academics and activists” (7) — from Europe, Israel and North America. The conference presenters addressed “issues with relevance to female identity, Jewish identity, and life as Jewish women” (8). The rest of the essays and articles were previously part of a catalogue for an exhibition entitled The Jewish Woman (Hungarian Jewish Museum and Archives, 2002). Zsuzsanna Toronyi was curator for this exhibition, which presented the portraits and biographies of Jewish women who lived and worked at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The editors “were keen on incorporating some aspects of the 2002 exhibition into the programme of the 2006 conference” (9), hence the inclusion of several of those articles into this volume. Gender, Memory, and Judaism underscores for the reader how closely intertwined are memory and history. The essays illustrate quite vividly how even the public activities of Jewish women were able to be erased from communal memory. The stories collected within these pages introduces today’s female Jewish activist (especially in Hungary and Central Europe) to the “role of Jewish women as pioneers of modern charitable work and as activists in women’s movements and feminist organizations” (137). The reader is also given a glimpse of life as it was for Jewish women who lived in Hungary and Germany prior to the two world wars, during the Communist period, and today.

The volume contains fifteen essays, ranging from a two-page portrait of “Jelena Kon” by Edit Jankov that describes how Jelena Kon created a charitable organization in 1925 that saw to the medical and nutritional needs of the poor citizens of Novi Sad— Jewish and non-Jewish (104), to a twenty-one-page discussion of the Hungarian artist Ilka Gedő. All the papers address the female experience; several however relate rather tenuously to the Jewish aspect of these women’s lives.

The “Introduction,” written by Zsuzsanna Toronyi and Judit Gazsi, describes how the conference validated the work of the Eszter Táska Foundation. The authors note that Hungary’s Jewish and non-Jewish communities have “been characterised by diversity” (9) so that the title of the conference, “Diversities,” was very fitting.

The collection is divided into three sections: Part One is titled “Traditions—Now”; Part Two: “Gender and Religion”, and Part Three: “Gendered Remembering”. The bulk of the papers are in the third section and of the nine papers in this section, five were originally written, as noted previously, for the 2002 exhibit.

Part One: “Traditions—Now” contains three papers. Each of the papers in this section provides...
an historical context for the contemporary concerns raised. The first essay, by Alice Shalvi, was also the opening address of the conference. Titled “Remembering the Past, Living the Present, Planning the Future”, it outlines several of the issues addressed by the conference presenters: restoring to memory the forgotten heroines; valuing Jewish culture, strengthening links between Israel and the Diaspora, learning Hebrew, and empowering Jewish women to pursue social justice and sustain dialogue. The second paper, by Lara Dämmig, “Voluntary Work and Jewish Renewal: Observations on the Situation in Germany” provides the historical background to the issues facing activist women in German Jewish communities today. The last paper in this section “Esther and her Bag,” by Andrea Pető, focuses on the Hungarian Jewish feminist association, so named “to do justice to all the ‘Esthers’ who have ever lived (47), that sponsored the conference. In this essay, Andrea Pető demonstrates how the political shifts affected Hungarian women generally. She notes that prior to 1989, “state-ist feminism” enabled “full female employment and free abortion rights” (36). This did not translate into “feminist consciousness” (36), so that the political changes that occurred in 1989 resulted in a decrease in the participation of women in the “public arena” and a return to “vociferous support” of women’s traditional roles in the family by “the Catholic and Protestant churches and the Jewish religious communities” (37). In response to the lack of an effective women’s movement in Hungary, Esther’s Bag Workshop formed, “to organise events that ... would contribute to a reinterpretation of Jewish tradition from a woman’s perspective” (38). Pető notes that with the success of Esther’s Bag “there were inevitable changes leading to a crisis of identity” (41). The issues she outlined are recognisable to those involved in the transition from small volunteer group to a grant-seeking institution: questions of administrative responsibility, and changes in the leadership while trying to maintain the ‘uniqueness’ of the original group. Part Two: “Gender and Religion” also contains three papers, and this section to some extent looks at the place of Judaism (as a religion) within women’s lives. Although the first paper is more cultural than religious, exploring the use of language as a “keeper” of memory. This paper, “The Meaning of Israel in Yiddish Poetry by Esther Jonas-Martin, discusses two Yiddish poems about Jerusalem by two female poets, Rachel Korn, who eventually moved from Lvov (1948) to Montreal, Canada, and Kadye Molodovsky, who lived in New York except for a brief sojourn (1948-1952) in Tel Aviv. The second paper, “Transforming Traditions: Halakhah, Women, and Kriat ha-Torah” by Valérie Rhein, examines the rabbinic whys and wherefores of women and aliyyot. Using rabbinic commentary, she demonstrates that while it is permissible for women to read Torah and receive aliyyot, this ‘permission’ has not been enacted (72). The third paper by Chia Longman, “Life Stories of the Personal, Professional and Political: Orthodox Jewish Women Negotiating Work and Home” is fascinating. She presents the reader with the stories of four Orthodox women, professionally trained and university-educated, who live in Antwerp, Belgium. Longman is curious as to the “kinds of ‘agency’” available to women who live within an Orthodox religious framework, and also participate (professionally) in secular society (78). None of the women seem to consider their negotiation of religious life and a career as unusual, as one woman, Rivka, claimed “there was no choice” when discussing her efforts to create and run a school for children with learning problems, and achieve a higher degree (80). What was most interesting was that the daughters of these women had been encouraged to move to Israel where

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they could both maintain a religious lifestyle and receive an education, something that would have been very difficult (as exemplified by their mothers’ lives) if they had stayed in Antwerp. Part Three “Gendered Remembering” contains nine essays and as mentioned earlier, five of the essays originally appeared in the catalogue created for the exhibit The Jewish Woman. The essays are excellent illustrations of the tenuous connection between memory, Judaism, and the lives of Jewish women, some more so that others. I’ve selected three papers to illustrate the range of papers in this collection.

In their introduction, Toronyi and Gazsi note that Shulamit Reinharz’s paper on Manya Shohat helped “her resolve her own debilitating identity crisis” (11). Reinharz’s essay is very informative about Manya, but is not informative about Shulamit Reinharz. I am left wondering if something is missing from the paper. The paper, which is quite short (3 pages) describes how Dr. Reinharz came upon Manya Shohat, and her “obsession” with bringing Manya into history (121). While the “articles, chapters, and public talks” about Manya Shohat might be viewed as a shift in Reinharz’s research interests, there is no personal revelation as to how her research influenced her own identity as a Jewish woman.

The paper by Julia Richers, “Johanna Bischitz, Katelin Gerő, and Budapest’s Jewish Women’s Association (1866-1943)” informs the reader about the situation for Hungarian Jewish women in the late nineteenth century. The situation was so horrific that the Rabbi Meisel, the chief rabbi of Pest (1859-1867) recognized “that the discrimination of women had become a fundamental problem” and for this reason gave his full support to the formation of a Jewish Women’s Association (125). The Jewish Women’s Association was officially founded in 1866, and Johanna Bischitz “from 1873, until her death in 1898, presided over the association” (126). Shortly before her death, “early in 1898, she offered Katelin Gerő the directorship of the orphanage — unfortunately there is no indication that Johanna knew she was dying when she offered the position to Katelin(128). The Jewish Women’s Association ran a school, an orphanage and a kosher soup kitchen. The hot meals “were available to ‘all the hungry, regardless of their religion’” and a third of those eating in the kosher kitchen were Christian (131). Richers notes that despite their coming from assimilated middle and upper middle class families, the founders and activists involved in the Jewish Women’s Association “created an infrastructure that enabled Jewesses and Jews to carry on their daily religious lives in the Hungarian capital” (134).

The third article and one of the longest, (21 pages) is by István Hajdu, titled “The Work of Ilka Gedő (1921-1985)”. The artist is from an assimilated Jewish family, and her parents are described in great detail. The artist sketched from her very early years and every effort was made by her parents to encourage the talent of their only child. Hajdu skilfully traces the interactions between Ilka Gedő’s life and her art. Even as the war is drawing closer, she is engaged with her art. The Gedő family “was forcefully relocated to the ghetto” where they survived the war (154). Hajdu notes that Ilka drew constantly, even in the ghetto, and that her works created in the ghetto were no different from those created outside the ghetto (155). Hajdu asks the question “But why should these works have been any different”(155)? The works were not different and one could speculate that her work as an artist was unconnected to the fact that she happened to be Jewish by birth. It is inconceivable that one’s art could not be affected by living in a ghetto and yet hers
was unaffected; her family remained intact; and life resumed after the war. Her issues as an artist centred on her gender and the difficulties of being a woman artist.

The last article in the volume, by Eszter Andor and Dőra Sárdi, is titled “Centropa and Women’s Stories” and contains family pictures with brief comments on the pictures. The Centropa project “preserves Jewish history” through oral history. By using the family photos of an interviewee, in this case, elderly Jews living in East Central Europe, stories have been shared, not just of the interviewee, but also of those in the pictures who are no longer living. In this way, the Centropa project has been able to “build a .... database on twentieth century Jewish life in East Central Europe” (215).

This volume is an excellent resource to raise the awareness of feminist Jewish scholars in North America as to the situation that exists for feminist Jewish activists in Central Europe. Often, North American feminist Jewish publications seem to define what is “normative” in feminist Jewish experience. The collection represents feminist Judaism from a European perspective, a point of view that is rarely visible.