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As a scholar of Jewish women’s history in Western Europe and the United States, and in the process of assimilation among Jews in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Paula E. Hyman is uniquely poised to write a book that focuses on the intersection of these themes. In her book, *Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History: The Roles and Representation of Women*, Hyman draws heavily from memoirs, autobiographies, newspapers, journals, and archival documents to analyze the process of assimilation as it affected Jewish men – and Jewish women, in particular – during the century spanning from 1850 to 1950. Demographically speaking, Hyman’s focus in this work is somewhat broad, as she attempts to capture the Ashkenazi Jewish experience in countries ranging from Poland and Russia in the East, to England and the United States in the West. Given her own scholarship, which has been oriented primarily toward the aforementioned realms, Hyman’s trope in this work tends to be most strongly placed on the experience of Jews living in countries such as Germany, France, England, and America, than say, on Poland or Russia, per se.¹

Hyman’s comprehensive book is divided into four chapters, entitled: (1) “Paradoxes of Assimilation,” (2) “Seductive Secularization,” (3) “America, Freedom, and Assimilation,” and (4) “The Sexual Politics of Jewish Identity.” The overall message in this concise and well-organized work is that assimilation is a gendered process, which, further influenced by the forces of socioeconomics and the particular social milieu, has affected Jewish men and women differently. In addition, forces such as gender, demographics, socioeconomics, and societal

¹ Within the past decade, Hyman has also expanded her repertoire by editing works pertaining to the experience of Jewish women in and of East European extraction. When she addresses the experiences of east European Jewish women (and their male counterparts) in this book, it is more often through the lens of Americans of East European extraction, i.e., those who had already abandoned countries such as Russia and Poland, most frequently, for the United States.
values have, in turn, influenced the oftentimes-divergent roles carried out historically by Jewish men and women. This is not to speak of the varying identities they forged for themselves, and, which others forged of them – be it within the immediate familial unit, the greater Jewish community, or society as a whole.

In her introduction, Hyman speaks personally about what propelled her to write this long overdue book, which began to percolate when she was a graduate student in the 1970s concentrating on Alsatian village Jews. At that time, the field of women’s history was just beginning to take root, and Hyman was struck by the sheer absence of the female experience in all that she was studying. This led her to realize that by only focusing on urban male elites – intellectuals in particular – historians necessarily miss the greater picture of historical events – in this case, as they affected Jews in the modern period. Moreover, it seemed logical to Hyman that as broad a segment of Jewish society as possible be studied, so as not to formulate generalizations about assimilation. In Hyman’s mind, this meant also incorporating the historical experiences of Jewish women into the assimilation storyline, something that she has attempted to outline in this book.

Since assimilation is indeed at the core of her work, Hyman sets out to explain this term at the very onset, in her opening chapter. According to her, assimilation is both a sociological process, as well as a project. The former includes as its first steps acculturation, whereby a minority – in this case, the Jews – acquires the “basic markers of the larger society.”

This includes such outward features as language, dress, and social mores. The final stage in this “process” is when the minority merges biologically with the majority via intermarriage. Of course, much of this scenario is dependent on how receptive the majority member is to the minority member. The latter definition refers to the desire of Jewish communal leaders – proponents of emancipation – to embrace assimilation because they saw in it a tool with which to

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uproot any last vestiges of social prejudice against Jews. Nonetheless, in contradistinction to the “process” of assimilation, Hyman argues that the “project” never intended to “disappear as a recognizable group into a homogeneous national society.”

In this same chapter, Hyman draws attention to the effects of assimilation, primarily during the 19th century, on Jews in western and central Europe and America, against the backdrop of what she calls the bourgeois “cult of domesticity.” Among middle-class and upwardly mobile Jews in these regions, in keeping with other middle-class women, the idealized role for Jewish women was that of domestication – to be the primary stewards of the home and family. In 1895, one German Jewish newspaper even went so far as to refer to “the Hausfrau” (Ger. homemaker) as “a priestess of the home.” At the same time that these middle-class Jewish women were finding their place within the domestic scene, their male counterparts were becoming increasingly emancipated and finding greater educational and professional opportunities within the broader secular sphere. This, in turn, brought with it increasing exposure to non-Jews, and as a result, a growing distance from Jewish ritual life, i.e. in the form of diminished Sabbath observance and regular synagogue attendance, to name a few examples.

However, in contrast to their brothers and husbands, Jewish women in this same milieu did not generally assimilate at the same rate or to the same degree – namely, because their contact with non-Jews was not nearly so great, and because they tended to remain closer to the traditional culture of their childhood, than did Jewish men. Furthermore, in the 19th century, and even into the beginning of the 20th century, it was not yet widely deemed appropriate for Jewish women of this socioeconomic background to do serious work outside of the home, or to attend university. Indeed, Hyman cites from several autobiographies and memoirs to demonstrate the growing dichotomy that developed between the two genders living within a single household.

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3 Ibid., 17.
4 Ibid., 16.
5 Ibid., 28.
6 Ibid., 19.
One such memorable account comes from a German Jewish woman born in 1862, who recounted quite ironically, how her mother would fast and pray on Yom Kippur, while her father found it “easier to fast after a hearty breakfast.”

According to the dictates of bourgeois culture, the modern man was deemed too busy with worldly matters to assume responsibility for imparting “traditional morality” – i.e., elements of religious observance – to the next generation. Concurrently, women were viewed as being inherently more spiritual, and therefore more was expected of them in this domain. By extension, middle-class Jewish women in western societies and in America, in particular, began to apply their religious responsibilities beyond the strictly home environment. By the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, they expanded into the synagogue and Jewish communal realm, establishing charitable and social welfare organizations, which were dedicated to aiding the Jewish indigent and providing Jewish education.

Yet with this outward shift and the fact that assimilation was beginning to pick up steam toward the close of the 19th century, it was ironically Jewish women – and not the more assimilated Jewish men – who were blamed for the overall “decline in Jewish knowledge and religious practice,” particularly by agents of the Jewish press and communal leaders.

Hyman contrasts the assimilatory process of the West with that of the East, as it manifested itself in the lives of now oft-forgotten women such as Puah Rakowski (b. 1865, Bialystok), a rarity among Jewish women of this era, for the sheer fact that she wrote an

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7 Ibid., 22.

8 One such example from the American Jewish front is the National Council of Jewish Women, which took root at the World’s Fair of 1893. Already by 1920, the organization had a membership of approximately 50,000, and it sought to carry out social welfare work and educational programs. One of its major goals was to assist needy East European Jewish immigrants and to combat the involvement of Jews in the international traffic of prostitution. For further information, see: Ibid., 38.

9 Ibid., 49.

10 This included such notable figures as the German-born, American Reform rabbi and theologian, Kaufmann Kohler. See: Ibid., 46.
autobiographical account of her life. In Eastern Europe, where the pace of assimilation did not move as rapidly even by the 19th century and early 20th century as it did in Europe’s more western regions and in America, the so-called bourgeois cult of domesticity did not reign supreme. In the far poorer and more religiously traditional Eastern Europe, the same distinct boundary lines were not drawn between the private and public spheres in the way that they were in the case of more westernized Jews. Thus, Jewish women participated actively in the public sphere, especially economically. Ironically, this also meant that Jewish women in Eastern Europe – more so than their male counterparts – had greater exposure to the secular and non-Jewish arena, and by extension, to the assimilation process. This phenomenon stood in stark contrast to the contemporaneous status quo of middle-class western Jewry.

By early 20th century, there was likewise, a growing educational dichotomy between Jewish boys and girls in Eastern Europe. Hyman makes the case that the very same families that would send their sons to private Jewish educational establishments would not invest this same level of concern in their daughters’ educational instruction. Often, these girls would be sent to public primary schools, in which they were exposed to secular culture. At best, families with greater means might provide for a tutor (or melamed) to see that their daughters learned the basics of Yiddish and Hebrew, so as to be able to follow along in the siddur. However, in

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11 Hyman makes ample reference to the exceptional character of Puah Rakowski (1865-1955) in Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History. Indeed, she later edited Rakowski’s (also known as Rakowska) autobiography, entitled in its English translation, My Life as a Radical Jewish Woman: Memoirs of a Zionist Feminist in Poland. Incidentally, this dearth of first-person accounts is one of the historian’s challenges that Hyman reiterates on more than one occasion, insofar as assembling an historical picture of daily Jewish life – particularly for women – who lived in what was then the Russian Pale of Settlement (also frequently referred to as “Russian Poland”).

12 Ibid., 66-67.

13 Jewish women were frequently the purveyors of various types of goods in the local marketplace, oftentimes, while their husbands were busy immersing themselves in religious studies and/or the daily prayers. Thus, Jewish women in Eastern Europe were frequently the breadwinners of their families – as much, if not more so – than their husbands.

14 Ibid., 54.
general, their daughters’ formal Jewish education “paled beside their secular studies.”¹⁵ This scenario, as well, contributed to the fact that “a greater proportion of Jewish women in Eastern Europe took the lead in the process of assimilation than in the countries of Western and Central Europe and the United States, although the pace and dimensions of assimilation were less extreme.”¹⁶

According to Hyman, in spite of their gradual steps toward assimilation, Jewish women in late 19th century-early 20th century Eastern Europe were not turned into the scapegoats for the (perhaps inevitable) gravitation toward modernity and slackening of religious observance that was occurring in communities throughout Eastern Europe. Again, the attacks on Jewish women that were generally absent in the East,¹⁷ yet, specifically targeted Jewish women in the West, distinguished the historical changes that were occurring concomitantly in these distinct regions. For one thing, the economic and political problems that plagued East European countries such as Poland following World War I, overshadowed many of the concerns regarding assimilation trends and Jewish women’s roles in that sphere, which might otherwise have been more prominent. Finally, Jewish women in the East did not become the whipping boy that they did in the West, because they were never endowed with the same degree of responsibility toward transmitting “traditional morality” as they were in the West.

In chapter three, Hyman transports the reader westward, along with the major migratory wave of primarily East European Jews, to American shores. Indeed, statistically speaking, nearly 2 million Jews of this region, of whom 43 percent were women, settled in the United States during the period 1880-1914.¹⁸ As with most immigrants, they recognized that coming to the

¹⁵ Ibid., 56.

¹⁶ Ibid., 71.

¹⁷ One of the leading exceptions to the general pattern in Eastern Europe of not “pointing the finger” at Jewish women, was Sarah Schenirer, who, recognizing the growing danger behind Jewish girls’ lack of formal Jewish education, opened the first Beys Yaakov schools in 1918, with the approval of rabbinic authorities. For more information about the Beys Yaakov educational establishment, see: Ibid., 59-60.

¹⁸ Ibid., 93-94.
proverbial goldene medine (Yid. golden land or land of gold) necessitated a certain paradigm shift, namely, accommodating to American conditions, and as a result, assimilating into the greater milieu. In fact, because the East European Jewish immigrants – both men and women – were so busy simply trying to find proper housing and eke out a living to support their families, fear of assimilation was not (yet) one of their major daily concerns. Thus, they generally sent their children to public school, which enabled their sons and daughters to master English and Americanize at a pace that was for them, the older generation, unattainable. However, if there was any traditional instruction to be had, it was more than likely to be found among the immigrants’ sons, rather than their daughters.

Furthermore, as a result of the immigrants’ utilitarian needs of survival, there was a certain degree of equalization between the genders, paralleling to some extent their experience in Eastern Europe. In the new country, as in the old, East European Jewish women of the immigrant generation did not generally become “the focus of communal blame” for any and all agents of assimilation. Alluding to different autobiographical accounts, Hyman also attests that the East European Jewish immigrant women were, in many cases, buffers against assimilation. This may be seen in that they often held fast to their old world traditions and customs while attempting, at the same time, to navigate the intricacies of the new world – i.e., embracing consumer goods and engaging in the types of leisure pastimes that defined the American of their day.

As this particular immigrant Jewish community became increasingly middle-class and Jewish women received their own wages – oftentimes, for work done in garment industry factories – they gained greater independence and were turned on to political matters, namely

19 Ibid., 96.
20 Ibid., 95.
21 Ibid., 97.
22 Some of these more traditional and old world practices, as cited in Hyman’s book, included regularly speaking Yiddish with friends and neighbors, and frequenting the nearby Orthodox synagogue. For further information, see: ibid.

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those revolving around union issues and socialist ideas. Similarly, they began to develop a consciousness that combined social activism “with the responsibilities of motherhood.” Within this context, the issue of raising children with a “strong Jewish consciousness in the American environment” became key for many of these Jewish immigrant women of East European extraction.

Consistent with many first, and particularly, second generation immigrants, it was not uncommon to find ambivalence among younger East European Jewish immigrants, who were struggling to distinguish themselves from their old world parents and their “ethnic-cultural baggage.” This is reflected in the works of several immigrant and second-generation Jewish writers, including the two most prominent Jewish women writers of the immigrant generation, Anzia Yezierska and Mary Antin. In both cases, these women of traditional East European Jewish backgrounds embraced assimilation as an ideal, and with it, the notion of intermarriage, the most extreme act on the assimilation continuum. Yet, notwithstanding the perhaps generally negative views held of the older immigrant generation, the image of the Jewish mother – in contrast to that of the Jewish father – remained ultimately intact. By the 1920s and 1930s, the Jewish mother was depicted most frequently in popular culture, in literature, on the stage, and in film as the “Yiddishe Mamma” stereotype, a so-called domestic goddess who sacrifices for her family, while remaining its emotional center.

Hyman’s final and most provocative chapter is heavily steeped in human psychology and an exploration of anti-Semitic behavior as exhibited by both Gentiles and Jews alike. She argues that in the late 19th century and early 20th century, in western industrialized societies where

23 Ibid., 110-11.

24 Ibid., 122.

25 Ibid., 125. Yezierska married two Jewish men in rapid succession to one another and divorced both of them, only to later have a romantic liaison with a prominent Gentile professor at Columbia University. Antin married, but later divorced, the son and grandson of two German-born Lutheran ministers.

26 Ibid., 126-27.
Jewish men were able to assimilate more rapidly than their brothers in the East, there developed, ironically, a prevailing anti-Semitic stereotype of the Jewish male. Caricatures depicting male Jews as unmanly, weak, and feminized, abounded. Jewish men, who were eager to climb the ranks professionally and economically, responded to these disparaging and undermining images by displacing them – as well as their general anxieties – onto Jewish women, from whom they wished to individuate themselves: “Jewish men doubtless felt a need to distinguish themselves from women and to eliminate any hint of the feminine in their self-presentation.”\(^\text{27}\) As a result, these upwardly mobile Jewish men who had been made to feel ostracized within greater society began to construct Jewish identities for themselves that included labeling Jewish women the “Other” in Jewish culture.

As Jewish men made their way upwards in society, their distance from traditional Judaism and Jewish textual learning – once a status marker for Jewish men – grew. The responsibility for transmitting Judaism to the next generation was by default handed over to Jewish women. As a byproduct of this status transfer, Jewish men were left to feel ambivalent and resentful of Jewish women and the “further conflation of Jewishness and femaleness.”\(^\text{28}\) Therefore, Hyman argues, there was a virtual backlash on the part of Jewish men to the aforementioned “Yiddishe Mamma” stereotype. Jewish women and particularly, the Jewish mother, became targets for the disparagement of Jewish males, who viewed them as barriers between themselves and Gentile society – most notably, where Gentile women were concerned. In Hyman’s opinion, this trend was perhaps most prevalent in America between 1930 and 1947, a period of much heightened anti-Semitism when Jewish men were struggling to assert themselves in American society.

It is worthy of note that one of the leading channels by which Jewish men combated negative images of Jewish diasporic males was Zionism. Proponents of Zionism such as Max Nordau and Theodor Herzl presented the counterimage of the “New Jew,” who embodied all that

\(^{27}\) Ibid., 153.

\(^{28}\) Ibid., 154.
was lacking in these physically weak and soft males. It was Nordau, for example, who was credited with the term “muskelerzement” (Ger. muscular Judaism), which conveyed the need for Jewish emancipation, not merely limited to the mental dimension, but to the physical one, as well. Although in theory, Zionism, which was steeped in socialist ideology, purported to be a great equalizer between the sexes, in reality, this was often not the case. According to Hyman, it was all too easy to fall back upon “the bourgeois ideal of separate spheres with its assumption of the naturalness of gender divisions.”

In closing, Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History is a valuable book for anyone interested in understanding the processes of assimilation and acculturation at work. This reader found Hyman’s arguments to be generally persuasive, and was especially intrigued by the historical analyses presented in her closing chapter on the ramifications of sexual politics on Jewish identity. The only shortcomings might be in that there was not the same elaboration insofar as Jewish women’s experience in Eastern Europe, as compared to that of Jewish women in the West. In addition, this reader was left wondering about the impact of gender and sexual politics on the post-1950 chapter.

For example, did history repeat itself— in many or most regards— with the arrival in the United States of Jewish survivors of the Holocaust of primarily East and Central European extraction? Or, was there any sort of paradigm shift compared to what had previously taken place in the late 19th century and early 20th century? The same question may also be applied to the more recent wave of Refusenik Jews who immigrated to the United States from the now Former Soviet Union. This does not even begin to touch on the question of gender as it affects assimilation and Jewish identity among Jews who continue to reside in various regions of Europe up until the present today. These were just a few of the questions that struck this reader during her encounter with Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History.

\[29\] Ibid., 146.