



Book review

Jacques Ehrenfreund, *Mémoire juive et nationalité allemande: Les juifs berlinois à la Belle Époque*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2000, 285 pp.

One of the most intriguing developments in Jewish historical research over the past two decades has been the “historiographical turn.” Since the appearance of Yosef Yerushalmi’s classic *Zakhor* in 1982, students of the Jewish past have devoted increasing attention to the lives, methods, and ideologies of their predecessors. While a good deal of this scrutiny has been aimed at ancient and medieval Jewish historical thought, it is probably the case that the largest percentage of scholarship has been devoted to the modern age, and particularly to modern Germany. It was in Germany, after all, that the enterprise known as *Wissenschaft des Judentums* first took rise, introducing a new critical perspective on classical Judaism.

As scholars go about studying the birth and development of this historical sensibility, we must wonder what fuels their inquiry. What does the study of Jewish historiography illuminate? In the first instance, the study of one’s predecessors, as Herbert Butterfield observed in *Man on His Past*, is important in helping us understand where we, as historians, are situated on the historiographical map. If important for Butterfield, the impulse of historians to situate themselves may be even more compelling today. For willingly or not, we are products of a postmodern age. As such, we are informed by an ethos of self-reflection and meditation on our own interpretive practices.

But beyond the invitation to introspection, the study of Jewish historiography illuminates the life and thinking of those who created it. Authors of historical chronicles or monographs invariably reflect a wide array of personal, ideological, communal, and broader social sensibilities. Curiously, in the field of Jewish history, the study of these sensibilities – and our predecessors – had often been regarded as something of a luxury, a task better left to the twilight of one’s career. But this bias against historiographical study has dissolved in recent decades. Along with Yerushalmi’s *Zakhor*, the steady labors of

Michael A. Meyer, and Ismar Schorsch, have cleared a path for younger scholars like David Biale, Shmuel Feiner, Susannah Heschel, Christhard Hoffman, Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin, and Christian Wiese to take the historiographical turn.

For the most part, this younger generation of scholars has explored the way in which the historiographical text functions as a mirror of identity for authors ranging from the Prague Maskil, Peter Beer, to the great Reform scholar, Abraham Geiger, to the Jerusalem scholars, Yitzhak Baer and Gershom Scholem. Often enough, this work infers a link between these figures' vision of the Jewish past and a wider generational mindset; that is, by virtue of their rootedness in a specific context, they are assumed to represent the sentiments of a broad swath of their contemporaries. And yet, the presumed identity between the views of elite, arcane, and often iconoclastic scholars and those of a broader public – a presumption I have often made in my own work – warrants much more careful scrutiny. It is not self-evident that elite intellectuals unwaveringly mirror or, for that matter, mold popular mores. In this regard, we have much to learn about the link between the historicist orientation of practitioners of *Wissenschaft des Judentums* and the extent of historical-mindedness of the broader German Jewish public. For inspiration, we might well look to Carl Schorske's *Thinking with History* (1998), a work that explores the inscribing of historicist norms into a wide cultural arena beyond the scholarly in nineteenth-century Europe.

It is the distinct merit of Jacques Ehrenfreund's *Mémoire juive et nationalité allemande* that this lacuna is now being filled. Ehrenfreund's impressive and important book advances the study of Jewish historiography from its emphasis on elite representations of the past to a more full-bodied appreciation of popular thinking about the historical past. His method of a "socio-cultural history," inspired by Roger Chartier, takes as its subject the relationship between thinking and collective identity among German Jews. Unlike previous scholars, Ehrenfreund does not pursue a biography-driven intellectual history that highlights the achievements of a well-known pantheon of scholarly luminaries. For example, Heinrich Graetz, arguably the greatest of nineteenth-century Jewish historians in Germany, receives relatively scant attention here. Likewise, the familiar figures of Zunz, Jost, Geiger, and Frankel are not dealt with in any detail. Rather, Ehrenfreund is interested in tracing the paths of two distinct socio-culture phenomena – the ongoing *em-bourgeoisement* of German Jewry and the popularization of historical knowledge about the Jewish past – as they intersect in a specific place

and time, Berlin in the last quarter of the nineteenth century through the First World War.

It is at these coordinates that historical scholarship reached a high water mark of professionalization among Jews. But at the same time, interest in the historical past extended beyond the exclusive community of scholars to a much wider public, as history assumed a broader social function in the life of the Berlin Jewish community. That is, history became an important tool both in shoring up a sense of Jewish group identity and in defending the legitimacy of Jewish existence on German soil. To illustrate this dual role, Ehrenfreund looks less to the writings of celebrated individuals than to the work of organizations and learned societies whose journals and records he excavates, including the Historische Commission für die Geschichte der Juden in Deutschland and the Vereine für jüdische Geschichte und Literatur.

Armed with a mix of theoretical sophistication and textured knowledge of German-Jewish history, Ehrenfreund constantly pushes to reify abstractions. Thus, he moves beyond the suggestive, but skeletal portrait of a German-Jewish *Bildungsbürgertum* offered by George Mosse to provide a thick social and demographic description of Berlin Jewry. In the same vein, he seeks to trace the contours of a Jewish collective memory that is less "a metaphor than a concrete social reality" (p. 57). The social reality of German-Jewish collective memory was determined not only by organizations that disseminated historical knowledge, but by efforts to create a Jewish museum in Berlin, as well as celebrations devoted to the Jewish past (e.g., of Moses Mendelssohn's birthplace or the anniversary of Prussian Jewry's emancipation). There was in the proposed museological temple (established after WWI) and the commemorations an underlying ritual thrust that reflected history's quasi-sacred role within German intellectual culture of the nineteenth century. At the same time, these acts symbolized the ongoing process of acculturation, as the Jewish minority (a key concept in Ehrenfreund's lexicon) embraced cultural norms from the majority culture.

And yet, herein lies the rub to Ehrenfreund's intriguing story. As German Jews increasingly spoke in the regnant idiom of history, they faced an unnerving dissonance. History, in its classic nineteenth-century garb, was the story of the nation. But the Jews did not possess a nation in the sense that the Germans or French did. The intoxicating victory in the Franco-Prussian War, followed by unification in 1871, only accentuated the primacy of the German nation as source of allegiance and narrative inspiration – for Gentile and Jew alike. Ehrenfreund points to the "impossible nationalization" of Jewish historical memory. German

Jews were forced to integrate "the Jewish past ... into the past of Germany (because) Jewish history as national history ceased with the Exile" (p. 169). Significantly, this widespread perception that Jews had no national history of their own did not mean that the Jews had no history. Rather, the history they cherished was largely a story of integration. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, this story assumed a decided territorial turn, but with a curious Jewish twist. German Jews began to write about and study local history – the history of local Jewish communities in Germany – as a means "of inserting themselves into space" (p. 164). Ironically, local history of this variety has been revived in contemporary Germany over the past quarter century or so, as non-Jewish scholars again seek to "insert" Jews back into the local landscapes from which they were so definitively removed.

Did these locales provide German Jews with mnemonic markers that compensated for their lack of territorial autonomy? Not fully, Ehrenfreund suggests. The attempted "territorialization" of the Jewish past could hardly conceal the absence of a Jewish nation. Nor could the plans for a Jewish museum or the commemorative rituals that surfaced in the last decades of the nineteenth century.

Was then German Jewry possessed of "une mémoire sans lieux?" (p. 198). Ehrenfreund's terse interrogative captures the complex and incomplete status of the turn to the past in late nineteenth-century German-Jewish culture. Of course, such a query could easily end up answered in a sweeping Zionist teleology, in which the only meaningful *lieux de mémoire* for modern Jews were those created in Erets Yisrael. Notwithstanding the temptation, Ehrenfreund does not lead us in that direction. Rather, he probes the nuances and tensions of an historical experience that is neither wholly lachrymose nor triumphalist. It is less the experience of a nation *manqué* than of a minority group struggling to preserve its corporate identity and yet belong to the broader social mainstream. Ehrenfreund's important contribution is to make effective use of history and recourse to the past as a telling gauge of this struggle.

As noted, the author's "socio-cultural" perspective opens up new vistas in the study of modern Jewish historical thinking and writing. His careful study of organizations like the Historische Commission and the Gesamtarchiv der deutschen Juden, or of the key journal *Allgemeine Zeitung des Judentums*, reveals the extent to which the currents of historicization and acculturation overlapped. One's appetite is whetted for more, for a broader discussion à la Schorske of other cultural forms – painting, literature, architecture, music, theater, and so forth – in which

the distinctive historicist sensibility of German Jewry was inscribed. Ehrenfreund's subtitle, "Les juifs berlinois à la Belle Époque," beckons alluringly to this kind of cultural history. That he chooses to focus on organizations, cultural institutions, and journals is understandable, since these bodies have not yet been closely studied (with the work of Jacob Borut an important exception). But clearly an enlarged scope, one that takes stock of the wider Jewish culture of history, remains a desideratum.

This is less a criticism or quibble than a hopeful expectation. Where one might challenge Ehrenfreund a bit is in his dating. He makes a strong claim that 1871 marks the birth not only of the Second Reich, but of a popular Jewish historical consciousness in Germany. As he well knows, both fervent German nationalism and mobilized historical scholarship began well before this date. And what of Jewish historical scholarship? It seems entirely reasonable to concur with Leon Wieseltier's judgment from 1981 that *Wissenschaft des Judentums* was "born not as *Geschichte*, but as *Wissenschaft*; under the aegis of philology, not history." But if the founders of *Wissenschaft des Judentums* were more philologists than historians, did it take another half-century for the discipline of history to assume its place as the "queen of sciences" among Jewish intellectuals? Here the focus on institutions rather than individuals – and on Berlin to the exclusion of other sites – may not have served Ehrenfreund so well. Already in 1846, Heinrich Graetz made a clear and compelling case for historicism in "Die Konstruktion der jüdischen Geschichte," arguing that "the totality of Judaism is discernible only in its history." Five years later, his senior colleague, Zacharias Frankel, inaugurated the first issue of the *Monatsschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums* – a journal in which history now assumed pride of place. Two years after that, Graetz published the first installment of his multi-volume *Geschichte der Juden*. And in the following year, the Jüdisch-Theologisches Seminar opened in Breslau, where the underemployed Graetz was able to find a stable job, even one in which he could teach Jewish history.

This dense series of developments points to an earlier *terminus a quo* for modern Jewish historiography (as distinct from scholarship). But such a claim hardly undermines the achievement of Jacques Ehrenfreund in *Mémoire juive et nationalité allemande*. After all, it is the later dissemination of historical knowledge from arcane to popular venues that stands at the center of this meticulous, elegant, and well-crafted book – and that adds so much to our understanding of German Jewry and its "impossible nationalization." With this study, Ehrenfre-

und announces himself not only as an expert in the crowded field of scholars now investigating the history of Jewish historiography, but as an important new voice in explicating the modern Jewish experience at large.

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