

Beyond the Pletzl: Jewish urban histories in interwar France

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In the 1930s, Walter Benjamin described Paris as ‘the capital of the nineteenth century’, the hub of cultural transformations precipitated by the rise of industrial capitalism.¹ For good reasons, Jewish historians have followed suit in identifying Paris as the focal point for studies of political, social, cultural, demographic and economic change in France during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Moreover, native French Jewish religious and cultural administrative structures, implemented during Napoleon I’s reign and further entrenched by reforms in the Third Republic, are centred in Paris. These conditions have rendered an abundance of source material documenting the rest of the country from the centre, a phenomenon that places even more weight on the capital as a locus for national processes that occur in its image.

Studies of French Jewry also tend to identify Paris as *the* centre of Jewish life in France. The capital city is home to the largest Jewish population in France. Parisian Jewish communities are among the nations’ most diverse; Paris has, and continues to receive, the majority of Jewish migration from Europe, the Middle East and North Africa. During the first half of the twentieth century, successive waves of immigration infused new life into the Parisian Jewish population, as thousands of Jews fleeing antisemitic regimes and declining Jewish life in eastern and central Europe made their way to France’s capital seeking asylum, freedom from persecution and new economic opportunity. As one important consequence, Jewish labour politics and activism over the course of the industrial period have also played out on the Parisian stage. Given these major historical narratives, it is no wonder that French Jewish history has largely come to be a Parisian history that furthermore confines immigrants to historic Jewish quarters of the city and separates them from French Jews with boundaries that are not only cultural, linguistic and political – but spatial, as well.

However, if the urban history of the United States is ‘a tale of many cities’, and urban historical practice is ‘a tale of many historians’,² France is no less

¹ W. Benjamin, ‘Paris: capital of the nineteenth century’ (1935), and *idem*, ‘Paris: the capital of the nineteenth century’ (1939), both published in *idem*, *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA, 1999).

² B.M. Stave, ‘Urban history: a tale of many cities’, *OAH Magazine*, 2 (1986), 32–7.

a colourful and hexagon-shaped patchwork quilt of stories, sources and peoples. Recent research on French cities outside of the capital, especially in the interwar period, offers new insight into the ways that unique urban economic and social landscapes shape individual and community experiences and policy. Mary Dewhurst Lewis' work on migrants in Lyon and Marseille and Clifford Rosenberg's study of foreigners in Paris, for example, not only provide essential lenses on local milieus, but also shed much-needed light on the intricacies of the 'bigger' national picture and the complexities of state-level operations.³ These rich perspectives provide necessary texture to the monolithic nature of national meta-narratives of French Jewry in the years before the outbreak of World War II.

These meta-narratives of French Jewish history have been largely inflected by trends in European and global Jewish history. Looking through the retrospective lenses of both genocide and national rebirth, Jewish historical scholarship in the immediate post-war decades tended to emphasize themes such as the persistence of antisemitism, the toll of assimilation, as well as the alleged failure of the assimilatory project. Beginning in 1970s, by contrast, there was a large-scale reversal of these historiographical trends, as historians started to re-evaluate pre-Holocaust diaspora communities on their own terms. A central aspect of this reassessment, which was also informed by the advent of cultural history and the linguistic turn, was an insistence on analysing the Jewish experience within the specific national, historical and temporal contexts in which it had unfolded. For historians focusing on France, this has meant exploring the myriad ways in which French Jews – the first emancipated Jews of Europe – sought to mesh their French and Jewish identities in order to fit a changed social and political landscape. As scholarship in French Jewish history published over the last three decades has clearly illustrated, on the whole French Jews made considerable efforts to preserve Jewish particularism even as they secularized and took full advantage of the social, economic and political offerings that French citizenship had offered them. Nadia Malinovich's book, *French and Jewish*, is exemplary of this historiographical trend.⁴ Malinovich documents the 'Jewish revival' of the 1920s, which was characterized by an explosion of Jewish associational life, literary production and press organs, all of which were accompanied by a new willingness to discuss the meaning of Jewish identity itself in the public sphere. Importantly, however, French Jews' bold assertion of their Jewish particularism during this decade went hand in hand with a continuing commitment to French universalism and attachment to the nation of their birth or adoption. As the three articles that comprise

³ M. Dewhurst Lewis, *The Boundaries of the Republic: Migrant Rights and the Limits of Universalism in France, 1918–1940* (Stanford, 2007); C. Rosenberg, *Policing Paris: The Origins of Modern Immigration Control between the Wars* (Ithaca, 2006).

⁴ Nadia Malinovich, *French and Jewish: Culture and the Politics of Identity in Early Twentieth-Century France* (Oxford, 2008).

this special section demonstrate, many of the creative and innovative ways in which French Jews merged their 'French' and 'Jewish' identities in the 1920s continued on in the 1930s, even as a radically different political landscape necessarily affected the contours of those discourses and cultural manifestations.

This special section makes a significant contribution to the reassessment of Jewish life, politics and culture by intervening with a new set of questions drawn and inspired from urban history and theory. Rather than begin with a framework questioning republican ideology, citizenship and assimilation, these three articles engage in an essential dialogue about the role of space and place in the development of Jewish history in France. These studies, each examining Jewish experiences in urban locales during the 1930s, enrich the developing scholarship on Jews, Frenchmen and foreigners in provincial and Parisian France in the vibrant period between the two world wars. Moreover, they suggest new routes of inquiry for other national histories. Jews, the 'quintessential urban "marginal people"',⁵ are a particularly compelling case-study for alternative histories of France that question the role of community networks, alternate demographics, the built environment and dynamic visions of the city in Jewish social and cultural developments before the outbreak of war with Germany in 1939. These articles suggest the 1930s, which Eugen Weber read as France's political and cultural 'hollow years' and Bernard Wasserstein more recently argued was an era of cultural and communal Jewish decline, require a closer look.⁶ In fact, Jewish life in France was extraordinarily diverse from city to city, region to region; Jews interacted with their non-Jewish neighbours, their cultures, institutions and policies in a variety of ways.

The diversity of urban experiences serves as the point of departure for the following articles. The Merkaz Ha'Noar, Strasbourg's Jewish youth centre, serves as a case-study for Erin Corber's analysis of the uniqueness of Jewish urban life in the provinces on a backdrop of the late interwar period. Using urban and architectural perspectives, Corber explores the way space and place shaped Jewish social, political and cultural encounters. The distinct set of local circumstances in Strasbourg not only paved the way for a unique manifestation of Jewish public life, but also helps explain how and why Jewish young people from the eastern provinces came to play pivotal roles in rescue and resistance movements during World War II.

Meredith Scott-Weaver's case-study on aid networks in Nice and Strasbourg advances discourse on the complexity of French Jewish experiences during the refugee crisis of the 1930s and highlights the city as both location and a conduit for diverse activist strategies. Framing the city as a social space, this contribution reveals the different ways that Jews'

⁵ J. Merriman, *The Margins of City Life: Explorations on the French Urban Frontier, 1815–1851* (New York, 1991), 9.

⁶ E. Weber, *The Hollow Years: France in the 1930s* (New York, 1996); B. Wasserstein, *On the Eve: The Jews of Europe before the Second World War* (New York, 2012).

social and political mobilization engendered local-level aid, rescue and survival networks. The study furthermore underlines how circumstances in French borderlands moulded Jewish notions of advocacy and effective refugee relief.

Nick Underwood's exploration of Paris as a communal and imagined space makes use of a fascinating urban account written by a little-known, yet prolific interwar Yiddish-speaking Jewish immigrant journalist and writer. Underwood's work documents how Yiddish-speaking immigrants from eastern Europe digested and described their new surroundings, effectively transforming this modern urban space – beyond the Pletzl – into an intelligible new 'home'.

Working with unique lenses, locales and questions, these articles take varying approaches to urban historical debates, whether concentrating on physical layout and architecture or social spaces in the city. They unfold case-studies of a very visible, powerful and, over the course of the 1930s, increasingly vulnerable urban community in France. Jewish history, in this respect, can serve to offer new perspectives on the field of urban history, particularly over a period in which the margins and the centre were being redrawn. Finally, in moving beyond traditional historiographies of European assimilation and antisemitism, and in following trends toward understanding French Jewish history on its own terms, these contributions advance our understanding of Jewish public life, an enterprise uniting diverse efforts to seek out homes and build new ones in the midst of rapidly transforming circumstances.