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Review:

Tales of Three Cities: Urban Jewish Cultures in London, Berlin, and Paris (1880–1940), Tobias Metzler

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*Tales of Three Cities: Urban Jewish Cultures in London, Berlin, and Paris (1880–1940)*, Tobias Metzler (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2014), ISBN 978-3-447-10147-9, pp. 412, €84.

*Jewish Immigrants in London, 1880–1939*, Susan L. Tananbaum (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2014), ISBN 978-1-848-93442-9, pp. 288, £95.

In 1903, the German sociologist, Georg Simmel, characterized the city as an alienating environment – strikingly different from the village or the town – in which the individual struggles “in the face of overwhelming social forces, of historical heritage, of external culture”. Simmel’s proposition that every street crossing creates an intensified tempo of “economic, occupational and social life” becomes particularly relevant in the context of the two books reviewed here. In both instances – the books cover an almost identical period of time that straddles the first major influx from Eastern Europe in the 1880s to the start of the Second World War – the modern city features as an entity that shapes Jewish urban life. In other words, it is not only the experience of the individual moving to the city that undergoes dramatic change; the urbanization of Jewish community life also results in an intensification of social, cultural, and political relations both within the community and in its outside contacts.

The inherently urban character of modern Jewish history is a well rehearsed idea. As Metzler – in his *Tales of Three Cities*, focusing on London, Berlin and Paris – indicates, Jewish urbanity contains two tensions: the pressures of the urban environment on maintaining a specifically Jewish life, and the way in which Jewish cultural life is transformed when situated in the city, whether as a result of interaction with wider society or as a result of seclusion from that society. Metzler describes how by the turn of the twentieth century urbanization was seen as leading principally to a loss of community and increased individualization, characteristic especially of Weimar Berlin. Yet he emphasizes that this shift to individualism coexisted with an ongoing sense of “collective, mutual responsibility” (p. 176) and shows how Jewish community life continued to thrive in London, Berlin, and Paris. These cities formed the backdrop to, if not in fact a catalyst for, the burgeoning of a new kind of Jewish urbanity. In London,

the move away from religious life led to the creation of a new “secular cultural expression” of Jewishness in the form of Yiddish theatre and music halls. In Berlin, as Metzler shows, not only did Weimar high culture take shape hand-in-hand with Jewish acculturation, but a distinctively Jewish culture also arose from encounters with non-Jewish life. This newly conceived urban Jewish culture resulted from the rapid growth of the city, the influx of Eastern European Jews (with their own specific culture) and industrialization. These developments led to the emergence of Berlin as a centre of Jewish printing and writing, and made its Jewish culture much more multifaceted than has previously been understood.

Importantly, Metzler has the city playing an active role in its own right, rather than a simple backdrop to human activity. For example, the social diversity of nineteenth-century London provided the context for the formation of a particular pattern of settlement in the city’s East End, a district of the city that had by that time been an immigrant quarter for well over two centuries. Arguably, the densification of Jewish settlement in the city led to an increasingly intensified pattern of interactions between and across groups, both Jewish and non-Jewish.

The encounters between different Jewish groups were not wholly benign. To be sure, as both authors demonstrate, by providing both the institutions and the ongoing support for the alleviation of poverty and its consequences (such as ill health), Jewish communal activities were transformational. Yet invariably there were also clashes between East and West; between a desire to anglicize and acculturate the Jewish poor so as to integrate them into wider society (and avoid their being a social burden), and the wishes and needs of the individuals involved to maintain their culture of old.

Tananbaum focuses on the local sphere of London life. Unusually for this well rehearsed topic, she provides a fresh perspective on the story of the various communal institutions which sought to “improve” the lives of the Jewish poor in London, covering, variously, public health, communal networks, education – both secular and religious – clubs and settlement houses, and so on. Metzler points to the role that the actual physical landscape played in conflicts within the community. He charts the clash between two synagogue groups, *Machzike Hadath* and the United Synagogue, as it featured on billboards, shop windows, and around the streets of East London. The spilling out of these internal conflicts into the public sphere of the city in the form of wall posters and shop signs created “visible markers” of Jewish territory. Later in the book, he demonstrates

how Yiddish language signs in Paris similarly created a “graphic landscape both peculiar and mysterious” (p. 279).

The role of space, both physical and imaginary, is indeed a common thread in both books, though to a greater degree in Metzler’s than in Tananbaum’s account. The supposedly sealed-off London “ghetto” is an obvious case in point. Tananbaum makes it very clear that for the West End, whether Jewish or non-Jewish, going beyond the Aldgate pump was, to be sure, often presented as an “exotic, oriental adventure” (p. 11). Yet the Jewish East End was also a place to be visited by the well-meaning middle classes (both Jewish and non-Jewish) to set up charities and improve the lives of the poor. Similarly, Metzler shows how the *Ostjuden* living in the Berlin “ghetto” were much more connected to the surrounding district than perceptions of the time would have it. Indeed, many Jewish institutions run by “Westjuden” were eventually located in the heart of the “ghetto”, even though they continued to serve the wider community. The situation in Paris was more porous still. There was a strong gravitational centre around the Marais district where a large concentration of cultural institutions, situated on or around the Rue de Rosier, formed a central point of reference for both the material and spatial needs of Paris Jewry. Over time, it became linked transpatially to the many Jewish people living in other districts across the city. Importantly, Metzler shows how Paris became more than a physical sanctuary for refugee Jews from across Eastern and Central Europe. In the course of the 1930s it also gained symbolic power as a locus for new Jewish life.

Tananbaum is more conventional than Metzler in her use of historical narrative. This is not meant as criticism (though her use of sub-headings does somewhat impede the narrative flow). Thanks to the deployment of textual sources – rather than, say, testimonials like those that featured prominently in Jerry White’s *Rothschild Buildings: Life in an East-End Tenement Block, 1887–1920* (1980, reissued in 2003), which covers a similar period – the key communal structures, particularly the charities, that provided an essential safety net for the waves of migrants throughout the period in question, are documented in great detail. Of particular interest is the role that women played in the economy. Here Tananbaum builds on Rickie Burman’s work (including “The Jewish Woman as Breadwinner”, published in *Oral History* in 1982) to analyse statistics on labour activity, providing important detail on how skills, training, and education for that labour were obtained throughout the studied period. Tananbaum points

to the importance of working outside the home for the Anglicization of young women before marriage.

Metzler's more theoretical commentary on, for example, the nature of "Jewish urban space", constitutes a highly refreshing perspective on conventional Jewish histories. His exposition on the nature of refuge and the role of the city as sanctuary for the refugee was for me a highlight of the book. Where the books hold common ground is in their deliberations over how the established community related to the newcomers, how they integrated with them, and how, particularly in the latter part of the period prior to the Second World War, the acculturation of London's Jewry became an increasingly central plank of communal activity that was accelerated by the move out of the original place of settlement. Thus both Metzler and Tananbaum have made important new contributions to scholarship on modern European Jewish history.

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