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Review:

Embracing a Western Identity: Jewish Oregonians, 1849–1950, Ellen Eisenberg

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Embracing a Western Identity: Jewish Oregonians, 1849–1950,
Ellen Eisenberg (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 2015),
ISBN 978-0-87071-818-2, pp. 304, \$24.95.

First, a disclaimer: I have co-authored work with Ellen Eisenberg. That said, I have made a strong effort to review this book impartially. As someone who has worked on Western Jewish history for two decades, I am impressed with the fresh and original analysis in this book. Eisenberg has written about regional topics before but her focused work on the state of Oregon has produced much that is new. *Embracing a Western Identity* reexamines and significantly expands on William Toll's classic, *The Making of an Ethnic Middle Class: Portland Jewry Over Four Generations* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1982), and frees Oregon Jewish history from the, at times, congratulatory history of Steven Lowenstein (*The Jews of Oregon, 1850–1950* [Portland: Jewish Historical Society of Oregon, 1987]).

Eisenberg imprints Oregon Jewish history with her own voice. She not only chronicles the history of the era, she also offers a critical analysis of the community's motives and choices. Of particular importance is her discussion of how and why the Oregon Jewish community developed differently from Jewish communities elsewhere in the region and the country more generally. *Embracing a Western Identity* is divided into six thematic, semi-chronological chapters, supported by an introduction, afterword, bibliography and index. Eisenberg makes good use of footnotes, illustrative images with advantageous page placements, excellent choices of extended quotations, and an accessible writing style. The one feature that would have been useful but is missing from the book are maps to help those not familiar with Oregon understand the geographic landscape.

The importance of physical space and cultural landscape is the subject of the Introduction. Eisenberg brings the reader into the book through her personal story. As she explains, “over time, I have become a western historian, as interested in the place and context as in the specific ethnic communities that initially drew my attention.... I aim to understand both the Jewish and the Oregonian aspects of their histories, and to explore the ways in which they complement, contradict, and complicate their stories” (p. 11).

Her first chapter bears the title, “Pioneers and Native Sons”. I would have added “Builders”. In it, Eisenberg emphasizes Jews’ native status and lays out how from the beginning of their settlement in the Oregon Territory in the 1850s and 1860s Oregon Jews encountered a distinct set of obstacles and opportunities. They joined with other settlers in fighting the Indian Wars, which marked them as “authentic Oregonians” (p. 19). This gained them the honour of being listed in the chronicles of the *Oregon Native Son*. Being “authentic Oregonians” would elevate their status for most of the nineteenth century.

Eisenberg notes that Oregon’s first Jewish service took place in Jacksonville in 1856, just seven years after the first service in the Gold Rush port of San Francisco. In 1858, a year before statehood, pioneers founded Temple Beth Israel in Portland. Most Jews arrived speaking English and were already acculturated to the United States, having spent time in San Francisco or elsewhere in the country before their journey to Oregon. San Francisco remained the hub of the region and many Oregon settlers travelled there for merchandise, holidays, and marriage partners. Merchants often combined holiday trips to San Francisco with the restocking of their stores. Housed in brick buildings, these stores became the key linchpins in the towns’ development. Similar to other Western towns, the first physical mark of Jewish community life in Oregon was usually the cemetery. Oregonians observed High Holiday services in Odd Fellow lodges, and local newspapers printed announcements of holiday business closures and the arrival of Passover *matzah*. Portlanders did not build a synagogue until five years after holding their first *minyán*.

Eisenberg’s analysis reveals what made Oregon different from other parts of the country in the nineteenth century. One example is that public figures who were Jewish were ordinarily not identified in newspapers as such (as they were elsewhere with pejorative intent). “Only when public figures who had also been Jewish communal leaders passed away”, she explains, “were their activities within the community lauded in obituaries” (p. 39). Newspapers were more likely to identify Jewish leaders simply as pioneers or native sons. Prejudice was reserved for other minorities including the Chinese and Native Americans. The “pioneering process” made Jews “fellow citizens” (p. 49). This applied to most of the Far West, especially San Francisco.

The second chapter, “Go West, Young Mensch: Composition of a Community”, explains distinctive Jewish Oregonian migration patterns, including the entrance of Russians and Sephardim into the community.

Eastern European immigrants arrived later in Oregon than in other parts of the country, not reaching the state until the turn of the twentieth century. Unlike Eastern Europeans in other parts of the country, these migrants did not settle in Oregon's small towns, but clustered in the state's largest city, Portland. The new migrants challenged community cohesion, and interaction between the new immigrants and the pioneers could be fraught with challenges. Eisenberg demonstrates through effective use of story-telling and individual examples how new relationships developed. The elite German congregation, Temple Beth Israel, stressed social cohesion, while organizations such as B'nai B'rith and, later, Hadassah bridged the gap between the groups. This long complex chapter could have benefited from more section headings to direct the reader. An excellent example of a well-placed heading is "Posners: A Bridge Between". It alerts the reader to a seminal feature of the Oregon Jewish community. Ahavai Shalom, the Posner congregation, was often identified as the "Polish shul". In fact, it used *minhag* Ashkenaz, English, and German, and its orderly practices were somewhere between traditional and what would become Reform. Eisenberg concludes that the primary distinctions between congregations in their first decades were place of origin and class.

As Eisenberg shows, the new arrivals actually had much in common with the early Jewish settlers, not least in terms of their occupational profile; most were merchants or traders of one kind or another. Oregon's Jews thus had much in common, regardless of whether they were pioneers, turn of the century Eastern European arrivals, or Sephardim. Many arrived in Portland to be united with family members already in residence or via step migration. Having lived in other parts of the United States, they were acculturated, spoke English and "self-selected" to live far from the large Eastern Jewish communities. These included Russian Jews who were originally from the Southern Pale and came to Oregon from Jewish agricultural colonies in other parts of the United States.

When Sephardim joined the community in the first decades of the twentieth century, Ahavai Shalom, the congregation that had bridged the gap for the Russian Jews, also provided a home for young Sephardim. Eisenberg concludes that "Portland's Jewish community was a product of particular mechanics of migration streams that brought Jews west, merchants that differed from the classic tale of three migrations" (p. 89). Much of this distinction relied on Oregon's Western location and merchant (rather than manufacturing) economy.

Eisenberg devotes the third chapter to a single institution in South Portland, "The Heart of the Community: Neighborhood House". For many years, Neighborhood House served as the contact point for Portland's Jewish elite and immigrant communities. It provided an opportunity for upper-class Jewish women to do sanctioned work outside the home, and offered new immigrants, Eastern European Jews, and multi-ethnic neighbourhood residents, educational, recreational, and social opportunities. Founded by the National Council of Jewish Women, the leaders of Neighborhood House sought to Americanize their city's new residents. Influenced by progressive reformers like Jane Addams, these clubwomen and social workers believed in personal service. Some immigrant women resented the at times superior attitude of the elites, but they welcomed a place where they could feel at home.

For sound reasons, Eisenberg incorporates William Toll's insightful research into her analysis of Portland Jewry. Toll was the first to demonstrate that in the far West, Jewish women held community roles from the pioneer generation. Therefore, the transition from volunteers to professionals was not as profound there as it had been in the East. Neighborhood House also housed other organizations including the Portland Hebrew School. For many years, according to Eisenberg, it became the primary meeting place for the Jewish community. This chapter is highlighted by excellent analysis of oral histories and outstanding images that help push the story forward.

Eisenberg approaches the questions of politics proper in her fourth chapter, "A Jewish Vote? Class, Ethnicity, and Politics". The Jewish elite had long sought and obtained political office in the West. Since the Jewish population was small in Oregon, historians concluded that this success was due to a class vote, not ethnic politics. Eisenberg moves the discussion forward by examining the inter-war years, focusing on the evolving progressive policies of the elite and how these policies gained support in South Portland's working-class community. She demonstrates that religious and ethnic issues frequently inflected local politics. This chapter will be valuable for anyone interested in ethnic studies.

Chapter Five, "A Western Exception: Zionism and Anti-Zionism", explores an issue that is both historical and timely. The San Francisco German Jewish elite took an anti-Zionist stance. They viewed the city as their Promised Land and felt little need or desire to endanger the status of their community by exposing themselves to accusations of dual loyalty. While there were Zionists in San Francisco, for the most part, they were

outside the German-Reform elite. Eisenberg's chapter offers an in-depth discussion of how and why Portland developed differently and never supported a strong anti-Zionist movement or attracted an anti-Zionist rabbi. Rabbi Stephen S. Wise had created a strong "Zionist infrastructure" (p. 177) at Temple Beth Israel, the congregation whose membership most closely resembled that of San Francisco's Emanu-El. Furthermore, the Portland Jewish newspaper had a pro-Zionist slant. Eisenberg concludes that the rejection of the San Francisco model in Oregon "demonstrates the significance of demographics and strong leadership in determining a community's response to Zionism" (p. 188). She goes on to suggest that assumptions about the "California model" in general might need to be revisited in light of her findings regarding Portland. A valid point, yet California is not really the right frame of reference here. San Francisco was by no means representative of the state of affairs in California and recent research has demonstrated that San Francisco's anti-Zionism, too, was limited to one highly vocal elite congregation while there was support for Zionism in other sections of the community.

The final chapter, "The Color of the Community", discusses the "interplay between the acceptance of Jews in Oregon and the attitudes of Jewish Oregonians toward other ethnic/racial minority groups, placing these in a broader national context" (p. 190). Here Eisenberg again emphasizes the specific context. Jewish inclusion in the Native Sons and Daughters of Oregon and their history of Indian fighters clearly marked the Jews of Oregon as white citizens. To be sure, they were barred from the "exclusive" Arlington Club but then the German Jews formed a club of their own that, in turn, did not accept Eastern European Jews. The West became a home for diverse groups of Europeans who were all viewed as "white". Jews were accepted as founders and white because of Oregon's racial context. Native Americans and the Chinese were assigned second-class status. Eisenberg engages prior histories of the Jewish community in examining whether Jewish support of the Chinese community was an outcome of Jewish or class identity. Jewish merchants valued civic order and benefited from inexpensive Chinese labour. Like their brethren in San Francisco, Oregon Jews remained conservative Republicans when Jews in the East were embracing the Democratic Party. Support for the Chinese could be understood as a way for Jews to demonstrate that they were civic leaders, working to keep the wheels of business humming in an orderly fashion.

However, by the inter-war years the Jewish community was not as secure in their status as their nineteenth-century predecessors had been. They became more anxious regarding their place in society. As Eisenberg explains, “the sting of prejudice and exclusion heightened their sensitivity to the plight of more disadvantaged groups”, yet the community was also wary of drawing undue attention to itself. In the 1920s, local rabbis did begin to embrace the social justice movement, but they did so on the national level and avoided taking a stance on local issues. In contrast to their peers in San Francisco or Seattle, neither institutionally nor individually did the Jewish community in Oregon or its leaders raise the issue of Japanese internment during the Second World War.

As Eisenberg explains in her “Afterword”, there is a second volume in the making, which will tell the story of Oregon Jewry from the 1950s onwards, as the community lodged itself securely in the middle class, confident in its future, and like most of American Jewry, ready to turn inward and address identity issues. Eisenberg is to be commended for her critical approach to earlier scholarship on Oregon Jewry and her willingness to tackle questionable behaviours as well as laudatory features of the community. My only small complaint would be that as a reader I would like more information on how the smaller communities outside Portland weathered the first half of the twentieth century.

You have to be neither from Oregon nor Jewish to appreciate this helpful addition to Western and American Jewish history, which would be an excellent book to assign a class focusing on either of these fields or on comparative community studies, and should also be of interest to a wider readership.

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