

University of Massachusetts Amherst

From the Selected Works of Jonathan Skolnik

2014

Jewish Pasts, German Fictions: History, Memory, and Minority Culture in Germany, 1824-1955

Jonathan Skolnik



Available at: https://works.bepress.com/jonathan_skolnik/1/

with more than one genre, it plays an important role in Kożuchowski's overall argument, illustrating what he refers to somewhat elliptically in his conclusion as the process of "osmosis" (188), by which distinct genres of writing on the Monarchy influenced one another. The accusation seems to be that scholarly authors uncritically *absorbed* popular discourses. For instance, historians "simply adjusted" their descriptions of Franz Josef "to his popular image" (162).

Kożuchowski writes in the tradition of Claudio Magris, whose classic 1963 study of the Habsburg Myth, *Il mito asburgico nella letteratura austriaca moderna*, has never been translated into English. Yet, *The Afterlife of Austria-Hungary* stands on its own as a diagnosis of the distorting effects of memory on the study of this multinational empire. The style is lively and breezy, as if trying to emulate the feuilletonists of late imperial Austria. Occasionally, Kożuchowski goes for the bon mot instead of careful analysis, and his editor failed to catch some odd errors—for instance, when Franz Grillparzer's phrase "Vorwärts! ist ungarisch und böhmisch" is misattributed and misspelled, then mistranslated as "Czechish-Hungarish" (43). This is nonetheless a substantial and provocative book that could be used profitably in undergraduate and graduate courses.

DEBORAH R. COEN

BARNARD COLLEGE, COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

doi:10.1017/S0008938915000461

Jewish Pasts, German Fictions: History, Memory, and Minority Culture in Germany, 1824–1955. By Jonathan Skolnik. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014. Pp. ix + 260. Cloth \$65.00. ISBN 978-0804786072.

Moritz Oppenheim's 1864 painting *Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy Plays for Goethe* graces the cover of Jonathan Skolnik's *Jewish Pasts, German Fictions*. In the painting, Moses Mendelssohn's grandson, a Christian convert, sits at a piano, leaning toward Goethe and looking at him intently while playing. Mendelssohn-Bartholdy's gaze goes unacknowledged by the giant of the German Enlightenment, who has his back to the pianist and stares off into space. This piece neatly illustrates one major theme of the book: the German-Jewish dialogue with German high culture from the Enlightenment onward, and German Jews' insistence on their immersion in, and their shared ownership of, the German cultural landscape. But the painting is problematic as a frontispiece because it indicates little about Skolnik's primary topic: the conscious construction of a German-Jewish minority culture in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, one that sought to preserve a distinctive Jewish identity that complemented, rather than conflicted with, the majority culture and the ongoing process of Jewish integration.

In *Jewish Pasts, German Fictions*, Skolnik rejects the outdated assimilationist paradigm of German-Jewish history that Oppenheim's painting seems to encapsulate. Instead, he explores the creation of a minority culture through an analysis of German-Jewish historical fiction written in the German language, dating from before emancipation to the immediate aftermath of the Holocaust. Skolnik argues that German-Jewish authors from Berthold Auerbach and Heinrich Heine through Ernst Sommer purposefully constructed a minority memory of Jewish history, notably by using images and settings from the Sephardic past and early modern Spain, while often drawing upon the products of German high culture as points of reference and inspiration. They used their fiction as a way to grapple with contemporary issues regarding Jewish integration. These included justifying Jewish acculturation to nineteenth-century middle-class German ways, maintaining a Jewish identity in the face of this acculturation and accompanying

secularization, and, later, countering Nazi claims that German-Jewish cultural integration was a “tasteless ... artificial ... masquerade” (149). The example of Sephardic religious rationalism and the successes and failures of Jewish integration in early modern Spain served in German-Jewish historical fiction by turns as models, foils, or warnings for the contemporary age. Skolnik argues that the widespread use of Sephardic themes and images—and the repeated appearance of certain historical individuals in German-Jewish novels, such as Don Isaac Abravanel, a financier to Spanish monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella—created a specifically Jewish historical memory that was, nevertheless, open to various interpretations.

The notion that nineteenth-century German Jews identified with Sephardic religious rationalism in their quest for emancipation and integration is not new. Others have also noted that German-Jewish novelists gravitated to Sephardic themes and settings. What Skolnik contributes is an in-depth examination of the role played by the “Sephardic mystique” (17) in German-Jewish “dissimilation” (4) at different historical junctures up to, through, and immediately after the Nazi era. He also discusses the multifarious use to which German-Jewish authors put that mystique in their fiction, marshalling the past, yet also problematizing it, to address various concerns about the present day. For example, as an extension of Zionist reactions to rising antisemitism in the early twentieth century, Skolnik points out that Else Lasker-Schüler fused the figure of the Sephardic Jew with that of the Hasidic mystic in *Der Wunderrabbiner von Barcelona* (1921). This was an affirmation of Eastern European Jewish identity at odds with the doctrine of Sephardic supremacy that had informed earlier German-Jewish historical fiction.

Equally interesting is Skolnik’s demonstration of how the emergent Jewish minority culture related to the dominant middle-class German one. The relationship was supportive, not subversive, since German-Jewish authors sought to illustrate the compatibility of Judaism with the German Enlightenment, even as they worried about and attempted to counter the culturally corrosive effects of integration. This feature suggests that the German-Jewish minority culture was fundamentally different from its counterparts in colonial or postcolonial settings, where minority literature was characterized above all by its opposition to master narratives.

It is not entirely clear why Skolnik privileges some works as contributing to the process of dissimilation while quickly discarding others, or why he limits himself to those with Sephardic themes. The ghetto fiction of popular authors like Karl Emil Franzos and Joseph Roth, whose depictions of Eastern European Jewish life were perceived as authoritative by many readers, arguably did as much to create a minority consciousness as the historical fiction of Phöbus Philippson or Markus Lehmann. Indeed, Skolnik makes the surprising admission that he found “not a single reference” to many of the novelists he examines “amid the detailed recollections of reading habits” (95) in Monika Richarz’s edited three-volume collection of German-Jewish memoirs, *Jüdisches Leben in Deutschland* (1976). Perhaps the minority culture Skolnik describes was a minority culture in a double sense: the culture of a minority within German Jewry, which was itself a minority. If that is the case, it is likely, then, that it did not constitute a larger collective consciousness. Even so, Skolnik has written an outstanding book that substantially contributes to our understanding of German-Jewish history, literature, and identity formation in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. His work is a must-read for anyone interested in German-Jewish historical memory and self-perception.

CHRISTIAN S. DAVIS

JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

doi:10.1017/S0008938915000473