

Web of Community and Memory

The essays in this section contribute to our understanding of Jewish social and cultural life in several times and places. We begin with **Aviva Ben-Ur's** study of the long and fascinating life of Rebecca Phillips (1746-1832), a contribution simultaneously to Jewish social history, women's biography and American history. Drawing on a variety of sources, Ben-Ur makes effective use of indirect as well as direct evidence to recreate the life of a Jewish household in Colonial America. She illuminates the educational, culinary, medical and social dimensions of the period as she traces Phillips, nee Rebecca Machado (the family fled Portuguese persecution in the 1720's), through the richly varied vicissitudes of her life. As carriers of memory and ritual, women such as Rebecca Phillips demonstrated the "personal piety" that defined vital communal services within patriarchal structures. Phillips' life "embodies both the exceptional and the mundane."

Among Phillips' many achievements were the care and supervision of an enormous family, increasingly extensive public service and philanthropy, and exemplary presence within the Jewish and larger communities of New York and Philadelphia. Phillips' energy and devotion led her, to take but one example, to become a founder in 1801, at age 55, of the Female Association for the Relief of Women and Children in Reduced Circumstances. At age 74, having been widowed for seventeen years, she served as First directress of the Female Hebrew Benevolent Society of Philadelphia. Such activities fostered independence and enhanced the self-esteem of women who already showed mastery of the informal aspects of life.

Significantly, although Ben-Ur's is the first biography of this, or any other, American Jewish woman during colonial times, she makes no mention of anti-Semitism after her story moves from Portugal to America.

Emanuel Rubin introduces us to another hitherto uncelebrated Jewish figure, the composer David Nowakowsky (1848-1921), whose polyphonic music for the synagogue succumbed until recently to the violent vicissitudes of history. In a condensed recreation of the history of Odessa, Rubin reflects on the way music is embedded in its society. In a time of "economic opportunity, social freedom, and liberal thought," Jewish musicians could come to play a visible role in Russian music. Nowakowsky became the assistant to "the brilliant chazzan Nissan Blumenthal at the famous Brody Synagogue," and began "weaving themes of traditional chazzanut into his polyphonic compositions, a technique that would become a hallmark of his style."

Odessa suffered greatly during the 1905 and October 1917 revolutions, and Nowakowsky died in poverty in 1921. His daughter smuggled his manuscripts to Berlin in

1924, but the Nazis proscribed him as a composer of “degenerate music,” and his work was literally buried until his great-grandson retrieved it. In 1988, the David Nowakowsky foundation was established in New York, and his work is now being preserved, published and performed.

Rubin concludes with a judicious assessment of Nowakowsky’s creative output, deeming him an important composer of the second rank, “a Salieri, to be sure, but not a Mozart,” but certainly rewarding in his “beautiful melodies, rich harmonies, intense passion, and deep religiosity.”

With **Steven Bowman’s** essay, we turn from the study of individuals in historical cultures to the study of the diverse groups of Jews in the history of Greece. Bowman begins in the present, with the generational tensions within the current miniscule (5500) Greek Jewish community. In a masterly historical summary, Bowman then points back to the richly various Jewish presence prior to WWII, especially in Salonika, where over 55,000 Jews formed a thriving community. In smaller numbers, Jews populated myriad parts of Greek and Ottoman territories and came from Askanazic lands as well as Spain prior to 1492. Bowman observes, for example, that “from the 14th century on Askenazi refugees from Central Europe and through the 19th century floods of Jews from southern Russia, the two major branches of European Jews – Askkenazim and Sephardim – intermingled in the homeland of the Greek-speaking Romaniotes and produced a vibrant renaissance of Jewish creativity that was intimately linked with the fate and fortune of the Ottoman realm that welcomed them.”

Well before the Holocaust, the fortunes of the Greek and Ottoman Jews suffered painful declines, and with the emigrations of the early 20th century the community “lost its most energetic element.” Then, in the astonishingly brief period of a few weeks in 1943, the Nazis annihilated almost all the Jews of Greece and the Bulgarian territories to the north, and half of the few remaining Jews migrated in the decade following WWII. Bowman is forced to conclude that “it has been my task to outline the tremendous changes that have crippled the Greek Jewish community in the twentieth century.”

The commemoration of the catastrophe is the subject of **James Young’s** history of Yom Hashoah. Observing how a time of commemoration confers meaning on past events and links disparate past events by their time of commemoration, Young recounts how the establishment and enactment of Yom Hashoah inscribes the memory of the Holocaust “even as it finally nationalizes and secularizes such memory.” His aim, in part, is “to reinvest this day of remembrance with the memory of its origins, of its own historical past.” To do so, Young reviews the debates and controversies that came to define the date and many of its meanings, such as the felt need to separate the memory of the Holocaust from dates marking former disasters, the need to celebrate Jewish heroism, and the need to link the meaning of the disaster with the establishment of the state. Finally establishing the 27th of

Nissan as the Day of Remembrance of the Holocaust and Heroism in 1959, the law succeeded in “drawing on a potent combination of religious and national mythologies” to link the heroes of the Shoah with the heroes of Israel independence.

Young then goes on to ask vital questions about the actual meaning of Yom Hashoah in performance. “How then is the remembrance day publicly performed? What do people remember in its ceremonies and moments of silence? To what extent do the forms of observance shape remembrance itself?” Using his own participatory experience as one touchstone, he recreates a sense of the forms and varieties of memory brought together in the unifying gestures of observance. There is a paradox in Young’s final plea for the recognition of multiple memories, for it is the very diversity of memory that enables the myth of a common past to achieve its unifying power. “Unlike monuments in the landscape,” he concludes, “in whose rigid forms memory is too often ossified, the remembrance day can reinvigorate itself and the forms it takes every year.”

Textures and Meanings concludes with **Joel Martin Halpern**’s reflections on his career as a Jewish anthropologist. Halpern challenges the taboo, once much more tenacious than it is today, on discussing the inevitable personal interest of the social scientist in his or her material. What Clifford Geertz called “reflexive anthropology” takes the traditions, environment and personality of the anthropologist into account and recognizes “self” and “other” as interactive categories.

Halpern explores dimensions of his professional experience to illustrate these interactions. As a young student in Alaska, he encountered the unacknowledged anti-Semitism of his profession during the 1950’s. In South East Asia he discovered that whereas American and European cultures discriminate practice among monotheisms and even within them, in Asia one can be simultaneously involved in multiple religious systems. In the former Yugoslavia, Halpern learned of lost Jewish life and lives. Through these examples, Halpern reveals “the deep connection between one’s observations and the lenses we develop to view these observations,” which is a fitting reflection on a central feature of this collection of essays as a whole.

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