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Review:

Reconstructing the Old Country: American Jewry in the Post-Holocaust Decades, ed. Eliyana R. Adler and Sheila E. Jelen
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Reconstructing the Old Country: American Jewry in the Post-Holocaust Decades, ed. Eliyana R. Adler and Sheila E. Jelen (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2017), ISBN 978-0-81434-437-8, pp. 392, \$59.99.

Eliyana Adler and Sheila Jelen announce in the opening sentence of their acknowledgments that this anthology emerged from a stimulating conference on “Absorbing Encounters: American Jewry in the Post-Holocaust Decades”, held at the University of Maryland in 2014. The conference brought together a largely younger cohort of scholars to investigate an expanding arena of research on American Jewish politics and culture in the wake of the Second World War. Discussion ranged from close readings of texts – novels, short stories, children’s literature, memoirs – to innovative explorations of postwar politics. Memorial practices attracted attention, as did English-language publications on Eastern European Jews.

Many of these papers found inspiration in Hasia Diner’s influential book, *We Remember with Reverence and Love: American Jews and the Myth of Silence after the Holocaust, 1945–1962* (2009). By challenging a reigning fiction of postwar American Jewish life, Diner invited reconsideration of a host of previously ignored topics. Articles in this anthology amplify Diner’s contention that American Jews responded immediately to the Holocaust. They continued to grapple with its implications throughout the postwar decades. The anthology begins with a powerful preface by Diner, in which she reflects on her motivations for writing her book. She recalls her own experiences as a girl at the Passover Seder, when her father, before opening the door for Elijah the prophet, would read a special Hebrew prayer, “We Remember with Reverence and Love”, recalling “the six million of our brothers who died at the hands of a tyrant more wicked than” Pharaoh. In writing her book, Diner started with her own experiences, which contradicted “common knowledge”, and then pursued research to discover that such memorial practices were widespread among American Jews.

Yet, edited volumes possess a well-deserved reputation for unevenness of quality, even when they emerge from successful conferences, and this problem also afflicts the current volume. Its unfortunate new title, *Reconstructing the Old Country*, albeit with the same subtitle as the

conference, suggests that the articles will deal with American Jewish versions of Europe. Some pieces do reimagine European Jews, even if they do not reconstruct them. But others do not. Indeed, many of the articles deal with modes of encounter. The actual conference title would have better served this volume. "Absorbing Encounters" fits the editors' introduction, which offers an absorbing analysis of Philip Roth's short story, "Eli, the Fanatic", before summarizing the anthology's structure.

The volume contains three sections. Part one groups five essays under the rubric "Refugees: Commemorating the Past". These articles largely deal with the postwar decade and specific responses of American Jews to the Holocaust. They cover memorial trends, intellectual endeavours, and religious innovations. The second section, "Literature: Inventing a Legacy", also contains five essays. Each of them interprets specific texts: novels, short stories, memoirs, children's books, and anthologies. The third and final section includes four articles on "Politics: Mobilizing for the Future". One of them considers a Canadian Jewish Communist politician, expanding the definition of "American" in the subtitle to "North American".

While this organization makes sense, it also separates articles it would be worth reading in conjunction. For example, Rachel Deblinger's fascinating account of philanthropic campaigns to "save" European Jewish survivors in the immediate aftermath of the war complements and contrasts with Marcus Krah's overview of intellectual trends in those years. Krah writes only of men while Deblinger emphasizes women's voices and activities. Both explore the intersection of prevalent American and more specific Jewish perspectives and the challenge of interpreting European Jews to fit the postwar American world. Krah's decision to ignore *The Jewish Spectator*, edited by a woman, limits his claims regarding the new paradigm of American Jewishness emerging after the war. Deblinger, by contrast, connects the social and physical mobility of American Jews to political dimensions of their philanthropy. She demonstrates how both men and women brought common American and more specific Jewish concerns to their endeavours to rescue and redeem European Jews. Their efforts cemented a conceptual relationship between American and European Jews that endured even after many of the latter had left the Displaced Persons camps for Israel.

The anthology highlights the ways in which American Jews integrated an emergent Jewish transnational consciousness into their American and Jewish identities. These articles suggest that the violence of the Holocaust

spurred American Jews to reflect anew on their relationship to European Jews, those who survived and the millions who did not. This reimagining of American Jewishness in the shadow of the Holocaust encouraged a reconsideration of the recent Jewish American past. Many American Jews eschewed an emphasis on immigrant origins that spurned the “old country”. Rather than seeing themselves as the children or grandchildren of immigrants on the verge of moving to the suburbs and into the middle and upper-middle class, American Jews pictured themselves in relation to those left behind in Europe. Such a narrative repositioned American Jews as integral members of both Jewish and American history. The final article, Rachel Rothstein’s “Haunted by History, Fueled by the Present: American-Jewish Efforts to Halt Poland’s Anti-Zionist Campaign”, brings this process into the late 1960s and reveals both its strengths and limitations.

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