

Jewish Bialystok and Its Diaspora. By Rebecca Kobrin.

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This review by Professor Jonathan Boyarin is forthcoming in the journal, "American Jewish History." Professor Boyarin is the author, most recently, of Mornings at the Stanton Street Shul: A Lower East Side Summer (Fordham University Press, 2011). He teaches at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, where he is the Leonard and Tobee Kaplan Distinguished Professor of Modern Jewish Thought.

Two of the Lower East Side's remaining great Jewish institutions still proudly bear the name of the Polish city of Bialystok: the Bialystoker Center and Old Age Home on East Broadway, and the Bialystoker Synagogue on Willett Street. One of the special pleasures of Rebecca Kobrin's book, for a long-time Lower East Side resident such as myself, is her rich explanation of how the former institution came to be, through the coalescence of over *two dozen* separate mutual welfare organizations, all drawing upon the shared identity of immigrants from Bialystok in and around New York City.

More broadly, Kobrin's book elaborates on the implications (in some ways surprising, and in other ways entirely unsurprising once one has worked through Kobrin's patient and careful account) for the reconceptualization of Jewish and other diasporas represented by the existence of a "Bialystoker Center" across the ocean and thousands of miles from the earthly Bialystok. Her volume either represents (she cites a few studies of other Jewish communities in a similar vein, but it is not clear to me how analogous they really are) or, it seems to me, more likely helps point the way to a welcome sea change in our approach to the study of groups of Jews as they move, disperse and reassemble. It does not assume a static, stagnant or catastrophic situation in the place of origin, nor does it assume that the place of destination automatically becomes the prime determinant of group identity, ambitions and loyalties. Rather, Kobrin deftly creates a complex portrait of economic and geographic mobility within Eastern Europe; of the creation of a power and financial center of Bialystoker Jews in New York, the single major destination of those who left the home city; of the charitable, political and affective ties that bound New York Bialystoker to their regional fellows at home and in various other Bialystoker "colonies," especially Argentina and Australia; of the local social gains that accrued to the philanthropic efforts of Bialystoker elsewhere; and of the political and social differences that marked and sometimes disrupted Bialystoker diasporic solidarity.

Chapter 1 is titled "The Dispersal Within: Bialystok, Jewish Migration, and Urban Life in the Borderlands of Eastern Europe." Drawing on extensive archival research, including lucid presentation of census results, it details the explosive growth of Bialystok in the nineteenth century as a predominantly Jewish city, the "Manchester of Lithuania." This process entailed, among other things, extensive migration to Bialystok from the countryside and older *shtetlekh*, along with extensive entrepreneurship—experiences that twentieth-century publicists of the Bialystoker diaspora drew on (especially in Argentina) to create an image of the Bialystoker Jewish character as uniquely both extremely loyal and pragmatically innovative.

Chapter 2, “Rebuilding Homeland in Promised Lands,” focuses on “the ways in which [Bialystoker and other *landsmanshaftn*, or immigrant mutual aid societies] thrust East European Jews living in the United States, South America, Africa, Australia, and Europe into a transnational sphere in which they debated, conferred, and reimagined what it meant to be a Jew from Eastern Europe” (71). In the case of Bialystok, those reimaginings involved shifts and tensions in primary loyalty, between philanthropy aimed at the Jewish community left behind in old Bialystok, the population of Bialystoker in New York and elsewhere in its diaspora, the larger Jewish émigré community in New York, and eventually Palestine/Israel.

Chapter 3, “‘Buying Bricks for Bialystok:’ Philanthropy and the Bonds of the New Jewish Diaspora,” richly details the way that communal philanthropy developed in tandem with and at the heart of new forms of social solidarity and entertainment. The scale of overseas Bialystoker “remittances” to Poland in the interwar period (Kobrin actually stresses communal philanthropic giving, but private remittances must have made a comparable impact) was such that it caused expressions of resentment in the non-Jewish local Polish press. Kobrin sees a shift from “traditional models of Jewish charity that stressed the importance of anonymity, discretion and secrecy” (161) to the new philanthropy as social performance, but one may question the extent to which those “models” ever represented typical patterns of Jewish charity, in 19th-century Eastern Europe or elsewhere.

A briefer Chapter 4, “Rewriting the Jewish Diaspora,” details several remarkable expressions of longing for Bialystok as a lost homeland, “a bucolic Eden” (181). Such expressions only intensified in the years during and after the Second World War, but they began decades before. Chapter 5, “Shifting Centers, Conflicting Philanthropies: Rebuilding, Resettling, and Remembering Jewish Bialystok in the Post-Holocaust Era,” deftly documents both the failed effort to reconstitute a viable Jewish life in Bialystok after the war, and the relation between patterns of philanthropy aimed at Bialystok and the strained efforts to shift the target of philanthropy to postwar Israel.

Two caveats and a ringing endorsement to conclude this overview of a rich, humane and creative study. First, Kobrin suggests more than once that “[t]hese Jews still saw themselves primarily through the lens of their attachment to and dispersal from Bialystok” (229); but since she has, of course, focused on precisely the records of those attachments (and not of their other attachments), it would be safer to assert that Bialystok remained a major (not necessarily the “primary”) point of identification for these people. Second, Kobrin makes a brief argument that only those who feel “a deep[] sense of alienation” in their new homes, not those who “embrace[] their new situations” (250) should be said to be in diaspora; but it is not clear why subjective “alienation” should be a sine qua non for diaspora status, nor is it clear even from Kobrin’s account that those in the Bialystok diaspora “primarily” felt alienated in their new homes. Finally, Kobrin is absolutely right that “Bialystok’s Jews force us to appreciate the multi-diasporic nature of modern Jewish life” (249); indeed, her entire book attests to diaspora as a strategy of not only survival, but communal regeneration.

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