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Book Reviews

On the Eve: The Jews of Europe before the Second World War.

By *Bernard Wasserstein*.

New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012. Pp. xxii+552. \$32.50.

Upon the death of the historian Chimen Abramsky (in March 2010), his colleagues recalled that during his student days at Jerusalem's Hebrew University in 1939, Abramsky was jumped and thrashed within an inch of his life by Isaac Yezemitsky, better known as Yitzhak Shamir. Shamir specialized in meting out punishment for the right-wing Irgun; later he followed his compatriot Menahem Begin into office as prime minister of Israel. Abramsky, born in Minsk, was the bookish son of an eminent Orthodox rabbinic scholar and an outspoken leftist—hence a juicy target for Shamir. In contrast to this bloody encounter, middle-class Jewry between the wars usually is depicted as debating political opinions, not inflicting them. But such an episode is rendered comprehensible against the backdrop of Bernard Wasserstein's *On the Eve: The Jews of Europe before the Second World War*. One of the most eloquent, vivid, and nuanced scholarly studies of the Jews ever to appear, it also is intended as a popular history. Without gratuitously magnifying warts on the European Jewish countenance, Wasserstein's perspective is refreshingly nonapologetic while remaining sympathetic to his subject.

On the Eve is both a broad survey and a sophisticated analysis of the precarious state of Continental European Jewry on the brink of the Second World War. Wasserstein succeeds magnificently in narrating an inclusive sweep of diverse strands of modern Jewry that should be appreciated by scholars and nonspecialists alike. His vision not only encompasses the vast political and religious spectrums, from extreme right to left and from ultra-Orthodox to classical Reform, but also is keen to distinguish between the experiences of men and women, youth and the aged, and disparate socioeconomic reaches. Wasserstein is among a small cohort of authors to integrate into a grand narrative the lives of those who are typically unseen, such as the mentally ill, the deaf, hardened criminals, and men who preferred Friday-night boxing to attending shul. It is difficult to discern any Jewish critical mass for which particular interests or characteristics were not articulated, that is, left unrepresented. Typical biases and blind spots have been avoided, as women, the working classes, the (nonexpressly Jewish) press, Judeo-Spanish and Judeo-Greek speakers, avowed secularists, and even "Anti-Jewish Jews" (211–18) are each given their due.

Although Wasserstein makes a case for patterns and similarities in different settings, this might be the most colorful tapestry of Jewish history ever woven into a unified whole. Even those who are widely read in Jewish studies will find noteworthy persons, books, and even movements that were previously unknown to them. Wasserstein has not peered under rocks for oddities; rather, he shows persons and groups in relation to each other, as Jews often sought to define and fashion themselves according to the kind of Jews and Judaism they rejected or from which they sought to keep some distance. One of the many strengths of his survey is an erudite but lucid discussion of the Jews' "linguistic matrix" and its swift evolution in the years between the wars. "Polish Jewry," for instance, "in the early twentieth century lived in a trilingual environment in which

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Polish, Yiddish, and Hebrew were all known to some degree by most Jews, for whom each language served a specific function" (226). Although "in the interwar period, Yiddish was endowed for the first time with a kind of academic status" (227), Polish was increasingly the peoples' choice, and Russian and German were still revered by many as the bearers of high culture.

Readers unfamiliar with Wasserstein's earlier work may be puzzled by a repeated refrain: "The demographic trajectory was grim and, with declining fertility, large-scale emigration, increasing outmarriage, and widespread apostasy, foreshadowed extinction" (434). The author underscores his controversial argument from *Vanishing Diaspora* (Cambridge, MA, 1996) that European Jewry was well on the road to disappearing even if the Holocaust had not occurred. This counterfactual adds little to our understanding of interwar European Jewry. The July 28–August 3, 2012, issue of the *Economist* features "a 12-page special report on Judaism and the Jews" that is animated in part by the robust state of Jewry in Central Europe. Wasserstein, despite his tremendous skill at historical reconstruction, underestimates the propensity of Jews to uproot and re-create themselves—as those from the former Soviet Union and Israel have repopulated the European centers from which Jews were expelled and murdered. Continuity with earlier Jewish communities has indeed been vanquished but not always Jewish existence, per se. The author might have devoted more energy, instead, to the question of what Jews actually did, day to day, to earn their livelihoods. For instance, a discussion of Jews and textiles, to match his superb insights on Jews and the press, would have been welcome. Perhaps, though, this is too vexing a problem given Wasserstein's wide purview.

Scholars need not be perturbed but students and nonacademic readers might be unsettled by Wasserstein's penchant for acerbity. We learn, for instance, that "Giorgio Morpurgo, an officer in the Italian military forces engaged in support of Franco in Spain," decided to kill himself upon learning that the newly imposed racial laws would strip him of his commission. He "discarded his cover and went towards enemy positions, walking slowly and ignoring the calls to halt coming from the other side; though wounded, he continued to advance until he was shot through the heart" (386). Descendants of the Morpurgos in Britain, who formerly denied being Jewish, now acknowledge their legacy as an aristocratic Jewish clan from Trieste. The next chapter, in which Wasserstein explains that "in the late summer of 1939 far more Jews were being held in camps outside the Third Reich than within it, most of them in countries that were subsequently to wage war against Germany" (387), is entitled "Camping." With or without tongue in cheek, Wasserstein brilliantly serves the cause of capturing "the realities of life in Europe" for the Jews "in the years leading up to 1939, when the Jews stood, as we now know, at the edge of an abyss" (xxi).

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Deep History: The Architecture of Past and Present. Edited by *Andrew Shryock* and *Daniel Lord Smail*. An Ahmanson Foundation Book in the Humanities. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011. Pp. xviii+342. \$52.95 (cloth); \$24.95 (paper).

This book is about what the authors call "Deep History," the very long period of human history before extant written records. It is not clear to me who coined the term "Deep History," but the Harvard history professor Daniel Smail is surely a major proponent of