

Judith Szapor, Andrea Pető, Maura Hametz, & Marina Calloni, eds.
***Jewish Intellectual Women in Central Europe 1860-2000 - Twelve Biographical Essays*. New York, NY: Queenston, ON: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2012. 432 pp. illus.**

Reviewed by Ágnes Vashegyi MacDonald, Columbia College, Vancouver, Canada

There seems to be a virtual boom in memoir literature. And everyone, of course, believes that his or her fate, and that of their immediate family members, is especially important and should be commemorated. And this is indeed the case. Since only the total of all these descriptions can confer and approximate the picture of what Jewish life used to be in this part of Europe (Martha Hofmann, "Aus der Mappedeiner Urgrossmutter," in Dieter J. Hecht, "At the Crossroads: Martha Hofmann, A Zionist Pioneer from Austria," [ch. 8 in the reviewed vol.], 263).

This poignant observation in the epigraph by Marta Hofmann from 1967 is most relevant to the contemporary propensity for memoir literature of which *Jewish Intellectual Women in Central Europe 1860-2000*, edited by Judith Szapor, Andrea Pető, Maura Hametz, and Marina Calloni, is an apt example. The volume contains a collection of twelve essays about exceptional Jewish women who had left their mark in culture but most of whom failed to gain recognition. Most of the few who were famous in their time have sunk into oblivion, even in academic circles, although fortunately, many of them, such as Hofmann, wrote memoirs, novelized memoirs, or plays. An earlier example of Jewish women diarists is Glückel von Hameln from the turn of the eighteenth century. The twice-widowed von Hameln's rich documentation of Jewish life from an autobiographical perspective is a momentous text of female voice in Jewish history, and in turn the text of *Memoirs of Glückel von Hameln* serves as an unstated backdrop to Szapor et al.'s book. It is the "paradigmatic characteristics of Eastern and Central European Jewish intellectual women" that earns the attention of the scholars who pay homage to these women's "struggles, losses, and triumphs to posterity" (Szapor et al., 1-2). Breaking down age-old class, racial, ethnic and religious norms and overcoming gender divides against all odds, the women commemorated in this volume fought for their own independence, and, in many cases, for marginalized others, through their writings, teaching and political activism. While most of these women had lived and worked with "secular, not Jewish intent" (Szapor et al., 5), their Jewish heritage and faith remained a grounding influence during several historical turmoils which demanded of them assimilation for survival.

The authors' essays tackle the concept of threefold otherness against which these modern European subjects assert themselves: being a woman, a Jew, and Central European. This



New articles in this journal are licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.



This journal is published by the University Library System of the University of Pittsburgh as part of its D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program and is cosponsored by the University of Pittsburgh Press

tripartite theme, however, is not what makes the authors' efforts successful, since the topics on their own, i.e. gender, race, and geography, along with politics, or culture of Central Europe, have been engaged in numerous publications in academia and beyond. Central Europeanness may provoke more particularity when it is combined with a gender angle, a context which then gains a political allure. Behind women's political activism lies their education, which up until the late 1800s was confined to domestic tutoring and constrained below the university level for those who could even clamour for and afford schooling. It is, therefore, the authors' attention to "intellectual women" that sets the volume apart from other studies on Jewish history. While the editors and contributing authors identify related texts upon which they draw and source their data and ideas from as evidence of similar works, the book is the outcome of a conference entitled, "Jewish intellectual women in Europe: gendering history, politics and culture," held at Central European University in Budapest, in March 2006.

Michael Herzfeld's anthropological approach of "cultural intimacy" grounds the studies methodologically and offers a careful attention to the socio-cultural identities of the subjects' intellectual, artistic, and political achievements. These afford them agency complemented by the categories of class, race, ethnicity, language and age. Furthermore, "cultural intimacy" promotes ways to work through the concept of *hybridity*, even when not manifestly stated, in each case of the featured women's lives. Autobiographies, diary notes, letters, interviews, family heirlooms, newspaper articles, books, archived publications, photographs, and more illuminate the lives of Jewish women predominantly from privileged, upper-class, and bourgeois backgrounds in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, the two world wars, the Holocaust, and the post-war deluge of political and cultural changes. The scholars tell the stories not of passive victims but of active agents' experiences, in chronological order of each woman's life. For this review the life-stories of select Jewish intellectual women will be traced by weaving between years and geographical regions.

The book's first two chapters open with essays situated specifically in the Hungarian context. Judith Szapor recounts the life of Cecil Wohl Pollacsek (1861-1939), who hosted one of the most popular literary salons in Budapest with her husband, Mihály Pollacsek, in their luxurious apartment on Andrassy Boulevard. The essay complements Szapor's previous study on Cecile Wohl Pollacsek and her book on Wohl Pollacsek's daughter, Laura Polányi Sticker. A long way away from Vilna/Vilnius, Russia where she was born to a family of rabbinical traditions, Wohl Pollacsek created a quintessentially intellectual life-world that nurtured not only her six children, among them Michael and Karl Polányi as they had become known in the international academic scene, but also gave provenance to artists, writers and philosophers of her time, including the sociologist Oszkár Jászi and the philosopher Georg Lukács and their young protégés who knitted close friendship and camaraderie. While Wohl Pollacsek never learnt Hungarian, her breadth of knowledge of the classical and contemporary artistic and philosophical currents of that country and of Europe was exemplified in her German-language publications. As Szapor declares, "she was the embodiment of the cultured, cosmopolitan world of bourgeois Jewish Central Europe, a world that did not survive her" (54). However, the salon of "Cecile Mama" had become an "urban legend" as a site of erudite inspiration (55). A contemporary of Wohl Pollacsek was Juliane Déry (née Deutsch) (1864-1899), who was born in Baja, Hungary and moved to Vienna with her family when she was nine. Déry was raised as a Catholic and later

in life changed her name to further hide her Jewishness, leading to an identity crisis and eventual suicide, which Agatha Schwartz locates in the condition of "hybridity" (64). Déry aspired to become a writer after completing her teacher training education. Moving between Budapest, Munich, Cobourg and Paris, where she came under the sway of Émile Zola, Déry developed her voice for writing novellas and plays with the mentorship of Karl Emil Franzos. Her works, including *Es fiel ein Reif*, *Die selige Insel: ein Idyll* and "Todesritt," often reveal an exploration of women's sexuality and are influenced by naturalism. It is not clear from Schwartz's article whether Déry's works are available in English or in Hungarian translation.

Chapters Six and Nine similarly engage the life-stories of Jewish women in relation to Hungary. Daniel A. Lowy and Maria Roth write about the Transylvanian born musicologist, Júlia Szegő (née Jolán Davidovits) (1893?-1987). Szegő's upbringing in a liberal and assimilated Jewish family encouraged her to pursue a life in the arts. Nonetheless, only after the birth of her two sons was she able to attend the Music Academy in Budapest. Szegő's musical endeavours took her to concert halls across Europe and gained her the friendship and collaboration of Béla Bartók and Zoltán Kodály. As Lowy and Roth explain, "discovering, collecting, and preserving the musical folklore of Transylvania fit into the pattern of wide moral and financial support of Bartók's creative work extended by progressive Jews" (212). Szegő's dedication to music is also exemplified through her breadth of writings - albeit under three pseudonyms - including her biographies: *Bartók Béla, a népdalkutató* and *A két Mozart hétköznapjai: élettörténet, dokumentumokkal*. Anna Borgos looks at the life of the Jewish-Hungarian psychotherapist and poet, Edith Gyömrői (née Gelb) (1896-1987). Gyömrői's middle-class family upbringing initially afforded her a post-secondary education in applied arts at a time when the cultural milieu enabled women to abandon their traditional roles as wives and mothers. Subsequently, Gyömrői became part of the artistic and intellectual groups of Budapest whose members frequented Cecile Mama's salon. The obvious link between her and Wohl Pollacsek's circle is missed in the volume, though it is made by Borgos. The greatest influence in Gyömrői's life came from her uncle, the psychoanalyst István Hollós. Gyömrői underwent psychoanalysis in Berlin where in the mid-1920s she also studied under Otto Fenichel. As a member of the Hungarian Psychoanalytical Society, she began her own consultations and treated the poet Attila József in the mid-1930s. Escaping the horrors of WWII, Gyömrői found safe haven in Ceylon with her third husband. An immersion in Buddhism complemented her intellectual work. In the late 1960s she came in contact with the Hungarian literary historian Erzsébet Vezér whose tireless efforts, explains Borgos, enabled Gyömrői's recognition in Hungary once again, along with her writings, although many of them were under her different married names.

Michaela Raggam-Blesch, in Chapter Three, introduces the reader to the life of Elise Richter (1865-1942), the first female university lecturer in Romance Philology in Austria and Germany. Elise and her sister Helene were both educated through private studies, and Elise Richter was thirty-two when she finally gained admittance to the University of Vienna. Raggam-Blesch provides a helpful overview of the obstacles women faced in gaining admission to university, upheld by leading figures in the social sciences from Otto Weninger to Paul Moebius. Women's intellectual ambitions were considered an anomaly since traditionally it was their physical appearance that was to be cultivated. Richter's memoirs reveal a condescension about her mother's evaluation of her as "lacking beauty": "My mother always said: 'You are not pretty,

therefore you ought to be kind and charming” (100). Raggam-Blesch provides ample descriptions of Richter’s inward and outward features, and suggests that she was steeped in ambivalence about her femininity and her Jewish descent. This ambivalence forged spite in her, multiplied with an insatiable appetite for knowledge. At last, she received her habilitation at the University of Vienna, although she never collected salary and probably was employed primarily because of the influence of her mentor, Meyer Lübke, the great Romance Philologist.

The biographies of Italian Jewish women by Marian Calloni and Maura Hametz in Chapters Four and Eleven respectively reveal a special attachment to Italy that creates grounding characteristics to such women as Ameila Rosselli (1870-1954) and Alma Morpurgo (1901-2002). The playwright, Rosselli came from the Venetian Moravia family whose ancestors were among the most patriotic Italians for hundreds of years. As Calloni elucidates, Rosselli’s writings thus were coupled with political activism: “Jewish? Yes: but we were first of all Italians. I was born and grew up in a profoundly Italian and liberal environment, so that I kept in my home only the basic essence of my religion,” Rosselli confesses in her *Memorie* (141). She was also a journalist and an active member of women’s associations by the time she went into voluntary exile to escape fascism, a period during which she re-evaluated her views on Zionism. Her main literary works include *Anima. Drama in tre atti, Illusione. Commedia in tre atti*, and *Gente oscura*, produced in the early part of her life. Contrary to Rosselli, Alma Morpurgo began writing at age 89 and subsequently published four more works all centering on the pre-World War I Habsburg Monarchy with a nostalgic tone in the manner of guidebooks for younger generations. Hametz attentively illuminates how Murpurgo herself and her works are styled in the cosmopolitan world, and describes Morpurgo in “interstices” (350) with reference to her Italianness, Jewishness, and bourgeoisie, coupled with a throwback Monarchical worldview. Morpurgo’s own “confused descriptions of associations with Judaism, Zionism in an Italian nationalist climate” (Hametz 361) were exacerbated in her “‘lack of luck’ in matters of love” (364).

In Chapter Five, we learn about the best-known Jewish woman in the Russian revolutionary movement, Esther Frumkin (née Malka Lifschitz) (1880-1943). Rochelle Goldberg Ruthchild exuberantly details how, at the teacher training institute in St. Petersburg, Frumkin secretly read Marxist texts and soon became an active communist. She advocated a separate working-class Jewish society, and in Minsk she affiliated with the socialist Jewish Bund. Furthermore, she considered Yiddish literacy important whereby women could teach their children. Promoting Yiddish as the “language of the Jewish proletariat in Eastern Europe,” Goldberg Ruthchild explains, would be a “vehicle for the Jewish revolution in that area” (187), because Frumkin saw its potential in preserving “class solidarity” (189). Since Yiddish was the *mame loshn*, mother’s and woman’s language, albeit totally oral, Frumkin wanted it elevated to an official language in Russia, where women did not know Hebrew, and in turn be able to record Jewish traditions in Yiddish. Frumkin’s efforts were crushed by Stalin’s government and she was sentenced to the Gulag.

The last chapter of the volume, by Claudia Prestel, illustrates the life of Regina Jonas (1902-1944), the first woman rabbi in Germany. Jonas was a feminist who “demonstrated a profound knowledge of the Talmud” (387); however, feminism for her was based on an idealized bourgeois worldview where women’s most important function in life was as “wives and mothers” (392). Prestel suggests that Jonas, too, Like Elise Richter, was an unattractive woman.

Jonas had felt that women rabbis should stay unmarried but changed her mind when she became involved with Rabbi Josef Norden, an older widower in Hamburg. While Jonas was openly expressing her interest to marry, Norden declined to continue their liaison. Jonas was caught between her professional views and private life experience of a failed relationship, but eventually she overcame her challenges by promoting the importance of women in Judaism and ultimately professed the necessity of shifting social contexts that foster gender equality. Like Frumkin in Russia, Jonas too, fell victim of the tyrannical era, and perished in Auschwitz. Complementary to Prestel's article, the Hungarian documentary director Diana Groó's 2012 film also examines Jonas's life.

In the Introduction of *Jewish Intellectual Women* the editors propose their volume as a "preliminary investigation into the lives and accomplishments of lesser known Central European Jewish intellectual women born prior to the First World War" (1). The proposal for preliminary investigation ought to be taken as a gesture that has become standard for positioning a topic among books of similar discourses. The scholars' task of deciding on which Central European Jewish woman's life stories to write must have been difficult. The fact that most of the women featured in the book came from privileged backgrounds that endowed them with opportunities to study, travel and develop their interest would need to be further scrutinized with the acknowledgment of tautology. Most of the essays include a curriculum vitae format for their subject's biography, enriched with character descriptions, and on a few occasions they offer further detail about relevant family members or friends. The editors explain that a "systematic literary analysis of the women's works....are left to future scholars" (22), whereby they invite potential critical examinations of the featured women's works, which will complement the essays and make them more organic. The photographs of some of the women in the appendix are a helpful touch. *Jewish Intellectual Women in Central Europe 1860-2000. Twelve Biographical Essays* is a meaningful collection which makes an important contribution to Jewish women's history.