Judit Gadzi, Andrea Petö and Zsuzsanna Toronyi, (eds.): *Gender, Memory, and Judaism*

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1 Although research on Jewish women in Europe has grown quickly in the last two decades, both theoretical and geographical lacunae remain. Apart from the recent memoir collection *Hungarian Jewish Women Remember the Holocaust*[1], Hungary remains one of these geographic gaps in English-language scholarship. The road to such scholarship has proven a difficult one for several reasons. First because of an academic stumbling block: according to editor Andrea Peto, "gender studies are unknown in Hungary" (43). Second has been a reticence of non-Jewish feminists to engage seriously with committed Jewish women. Furthermore, since 1989 major religious institutions, both Jewish and Christian, have emerged from Hungary's Communist years with traditionally minded rather than forward-looking attitudes toward women and gender roles. Despite these academic and political challenges, in 2006 a group of academics and activists organized a conference to consider the lives of Jewish women in historical perspective. The conference provided the genesis for the edited volume under review, entitled Gender, Memory, and Judaism, a text which both addresses and at times is subject to the aforementioned scholarly limitations.

2 "Diversities," the title of the conference from which the articles were developed, also serves as the paradigmatic descriptor for the book itself. The editors divide the volume into three sections: "Traditions—Now," "Gender and Religion," and "Gendered Remembering," although the subjects, methodologies, and tone suggest that most of these diverse essays could be placed in any one of these broadly-named sections. Across the sections, however, the essays are tied together by their use of history, historical remembering, or historically located interpretation of art to foreground Jewish women. Although the volume suggests the conference organizers chose the name "Diversities" because of Hungary's location at the crossroads of East and West, the book embodies diversity in much more complex and thought-provoking ways.

3 Like Jewish feminism itself, *Gender, Memory, and Judaism* relies on a combination of images, stories, biographies, and art to do its work. The authors are academics and activists, old and young, secular and religiously observant, and from countries throughout the west. They rely on poetry, photographs, text, and oral histories to represent the lives of Jewish

[1] Rosen, Ilana. *Hungarian Jewish Women Remember the Holocaust: An Anthology of Life Histories*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2004.

women and their experiences. Such an eclectic group of sources cannot present a unified picture, but herein lies the volume's greatest strength: it never allows the reader to create a simple, single-perspective image of Jewish women or feminism. Each essay challenges any stable or generalizing representation by considering the world from the position of a Jewish woman, historically or fictionally rendered.

4 The authors' contributions map a creatively diachronic world: one where history exists as both past and present. The history and memory of Jewish women from the past two centuries shape the lives of the contributors as well as their scholarship and art. Alice Shalvi's introduction to the collection epitomizes this connection between memory and the present. She humorously speculates on the reason for the invitation to introduce the conference and volume: "perhaps because I am among the oldest participants in terms of age, or perhaps because, as Andrea Peto assured me, I am a kind of living embodiment of the overall theme of continuity" (18). The volume suggests a stronger possibility: Shalvi is at once a historical actor and a contemporary force, her presence a kind of simultaneous past and present.

5 Shulamit Reinhartz's essay on biography and biographers recalls this theme. Her brief but poignant reflection "Finding My/Our History: The Case of Manya Wilbushewitz Shohat" demonstrates not only how her feminism has informed her scholarship, but also how her research has enriched her feminism. Reinhartz discusses how Shohat's work as an early kibbutz leader in Israel reinforced her commitment to "feminist distrust" in the reading of canonical histories. For Reinhartz, however, the captivating figure of Shohat could not be contained by the past: "I have her framed photo on my desk," she explains. Together Shalvi, Reinhartz, and many of the other contributors exemplify how history and memory play integral roles in modern feminist movements and scholarship.

6 Works such as Iris Parush's *Reading Jewish Women: Marginality and Modernization in Nineteenth-Century Eastern European Jewish Society*,[2] which suggests the sometimes paradoxical ways Jewish women's reading practices at once isolated and connected them with respect to European societies, and Paula Hyman's *Gender and Assimilation in Modern Judaism: Roles and Representation of Women*,[3] which demonstrates how differences in geography meant significant differences in Jewish women's relationships with non-Jewish society, capture the wide variety of sometimes contradictory ways in which Jewish women have encountered modernity. Thus a volume such as *Gender, Memory, and Judaism* that

[2]Parush, Iris. *Reading Jewish Women: Marginality and Modernization in Nineteenth-Century Eastern European Jewish Society*. Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press, published by University Press of New England, 2004.

[3] Hyman, Paula. *Gender and Assimilation in Modern Judaism: Roles and Representation of Women.* Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995.

preserves or creates tensions among its essays mirrors its complex and often conflicted subject. But this volume's unevenness—in terms of article length, tone, clarity of translation, and academic contribution—also becomes its most significant liability. The essays vary widely with respect to the amount of original research and the strength of their interpretations of that research. While many of the authors provide close reading and insightful analysis, others simply recount historical or biographical events without discussion of their meaning in context or importance for other scholarship. The articles also assume widely varying degrees of familiarity with Judaism, gender theory, and Hungarian history. For this reason, although the volume offers some excellent confrontations with issues of Jewish women and history, nonspecialists may have difficulty understanding the relationships among these issues.

7 Another concern lies in the volume's conflation of the concept "gender" with the concept "women." Although this does not detract from the information contained in the volume itself, the repetition of the equation "gender = women" can be used to perpetuate the stereotype that only women have gender or that only women should concern themselves with understanding how sexual difference is constructed. Although the authors and editors of the volume certainly do not espouse such a view, the work could nevertheless suggest to a reader without a background in gender studies that gender is an academic topic—or that feminism is a movement—that is solely for and about women.

8 Despite the liabilities of the volume's uncompromising commitment to diversity and its theoretical language, the editors have created a highly provocative and challenging work. Its diverse authorship and media offer a model for all scholarship that seeks an element of activism.