

JUDITH TYDOR BAUMEL and TOVA COHEN, eds. *Gender, Place, and Memory in the Modern Jewish Experience: Re-Placing Ourselves*. Parkes-Wiener Series on Jewish Studies. London and Portland, Oregon: Vallentine Mitchell Publishers, 2003. Pp. xxii + 297.

Gender, Place, and Memory in the Modern Jewish Experience: Re-Placing Ourselves is an unusual collection that brings together a wide range of scholars from Israel, Europe, and the United States with a focus on historical memory from a variety of perspectives—sociological, historical, literary, artistic, and architectural. Like many anthologies especially on gender, this volume also grows out of a conference, in this case, an interdisciplinary gathering at Bar-Ilan University in January 2001. As the editors tell us in their introduction, it was the conference and its focus on the interplay between gender, place, and memory that inspired this publication. “Different memories of different places and different gendered experiences provide the backdrop to understand the variation of Jewish life and identity. These places and experiences shade Jewish memories in a myriad of shades, forming the rainbow of colors of which modern Jewish life is composed” (p. xix). This alluring statement frames our understanding of the conference and its mandate, although it is unfortunate that the editors never make clear the specific relationship between these goals and the volume before us. Regretfully, they never flesh out how differences of place, memory, and gender come together and are in conversation within modern Jewish life. In other words, we never learn about the conversations, the discussion within and between sessions and papers that took place at Bar-Ilan and might have helped readers who were not there understand how these fascinating essays are in conversation with each other. Instead, the editors have chosen more or less to allow the essays and the three sections of the volume to speak for themselves. Given this, they begin their introduction by describing the complexities of modern identity in general and modern Jewish identity formation in particular. As they explain, for Jews not only are there issues of “who we are, where we come from and how we remember our past” but also questions about “choice” (p. xix). As they explain, “In certain cases, being Jewish is still a pivotal part of a person’s self-definition. For others, it is but one of a

number of factors which the personal whole is now composed” (p. xix). They conclude this discussion by explaining that for still other modern Jews, Jewishness is but a nostalgic recollection with little bearing on one’s future. Unfortunately, they never return to any of these issues to help explain their choice of essays and their ordering.

In many ways these brief statements are all that readers get from the editors about the logic of the volume, especially the ways that the three sections work together to get at these larger thematic issues. Instead we are told the following: “Given the importance of place and history in this collection, the articles in this book are divided according to three geographical/historical coordinates. The first Europe prior to and during the Second World War, the second is the United States, and the third is, the Zionist movement, the Yishuv and the State of Israel” (pp. xix–xx). There is in the editors’ own words little clarity about the relationships among and between these categories or why it is that the United States is presented so vaguely with no clear reference to specific geographical locations or for that matter the historical moments covered. In part this is what is most frustrating about this collection. The editors have brought together a terrific range of essays by distinguished scholars but offer readers no clear indication about how a reader might draw links between these various sections. The fact that the sections culminate with “the State of Israel” itself suggests a kind of teleological reading, especially given that the final essay returns to most of the terms of the book’s title, “Time, Place, Gender and Memory: From the Perspective of an Israeli Psychologist.”¹ Although the author of this essay locates herself up front in her subtitle, the placement of her essay at the end of the volume suggests a kind of answer to all the questions about identity posed by the editors in their introduction, questions they had seemed to have wanted to leave open. In other words, the very framing of the volume, culminating with the state of Israel and a psychological account of precisely the issues at hand, closes down the open-endedness and the differences among and between, much less within, the modern Jewish experiences described throughout the book. Or put otherwise, the wonderful title of the book and especially its subtitle “Re-Placing Ourselves” remain elusive. Readers are given no critical tools, no insights or strategies for appreciating how the text as a whole encourages a reading of self and identity other-

1. Here I am reminded of the cautionary note struck by the feminist literary theorist Nancy K. Miller in her essay “Dreaming, Dancing, and the Changing Locations of Feminist Criticism, 1988,” where she explicitly raises concerns about giving the last word on Jewish identity to an Israeli psychologist. Nancy K. Miller, *Getting Personal* (New York, 1991), 97.

wise. Given this, although I agree with Paula Hyman in her foreword when she says that there are some wonderfully nuanced essays in this collection that advance Jewish feminist scholarship in specific fields, especially Holocaust studies, I am not convinced that the volume as a whole can be said to do such work.

With this in mind, what I want to do in the space remaining is point out some of the highlights, beginning with the strongest section of the book, the first, "Prewar Europe, The Holocaust and the Second World War." This section offers innovative and fascinating historical studies that take gender very seriously both in terms of their content and their methodologies. Gershon Bacon revisits the Yivo archive of autobiographies of Jewish youth written in interwar Poland in order to read for gender. Dalia Ofer constructs a dialogue with the journalist Cecelia Slepak, a chronicler of Jewish women in the Warsaw Ghetto, as a part of the *Oneg Shabbat* Archive. In this essay, Ofer creates a fictional dialogue with Slepak in order to shed light on both her own reading of the archival materials and what she imagines Slepak might have had to say about the women she writes about. Other essays address the forgotten women leaders of *Hasomer Hatzair*, a Zionist youth movement during the war, a look at the family and political backgrounds of various resistance fighters in German-occupied Europe that includes contemporary interviews with some of the survivors, and a provocative essay by the feminist historian Atina Grossman about Jewish DPs in occupied postwar Germany. Grossman's essay not only challenges attempts by contemporary scholars to reread the legacies of these displaced Jews using trauma theory, she offers a fascinating account of their self-perceptions and how revenge was a part of their efforts to reclaim life even as displaced persons. Grossman also includes an argument for reading the Jewish baby boom in these camps as itself an embodiment of both a kind of revenge and an affirmation of Jewish life after the war.

This first part of the book, by far the longest section, concludes with two essays on commemoration. The first of these offers a reassessment of the Holocaust in Finnish memory, the other focuses on Ravensbrueck and the East German use of a female icon, the mother, to remember the legacy of this camp. This final essay addresses how the gendered trope of mother at this memorial was used to erase and efface the legacy of Jewish suffering in this particular camp. Oddly, the section's title does not cover the postwar period clearly described in its final three essays.

Parts 2 and 3 each cover a smattering of topics. They also vary in terms of disciplinary perspectives. Strangely, they do not in any direct way link up to the legacy of the Holocaust as clearly as one might have expected

given the prominence of the Holocaust in this book. In light of this, it might have made more sense to begin part 2 on the United States with Debra Kaufman's fine essay "Post-Holocaust Memory: Some Gendered Reflections." Instead, the two interesting essays that precede Kaufman's and make up the bulk of this brief section feel a bit out of place. Readers have to read closely between the lines of Sylvia Barack Fishman's account of Tillie Olsen's *Tell Me a Riddle* to link this essay to some of the accounts of prewar European Jewish life presented in part 1. And finally, despite the fact that the middle essay focuses on issues of gender in American Zionist organizations, it is not the final essay linking section 2 on the United States with section 3 on Israel.

The final section of the book again offers a hodgepodge of essays, all interesting in and of themselves but again with little to explain their connection to each other. The only essay that seems to make sense in terms of its placement is the final essay, which offers an answer to issues of gender, place, and memory in modern Jewish identity, an Israeli answer.

At a moment when scholars of Jewish studies have been bombarded with an ever-proliferating array of collections on gender, it is most unfortunate that despite the promise of this volume's wonderful title, the expectation of what might have been a new direction in Jewish studies scholarship—the complex nexus of memory, gender, and place—is never met. Nevertheless, I do recommend this book to those engaged in Holocaust studies and interested in what gender analysis can illuminate. And for those intrepid feminist scholars willing to search through these pages, there are other gems to be found.