

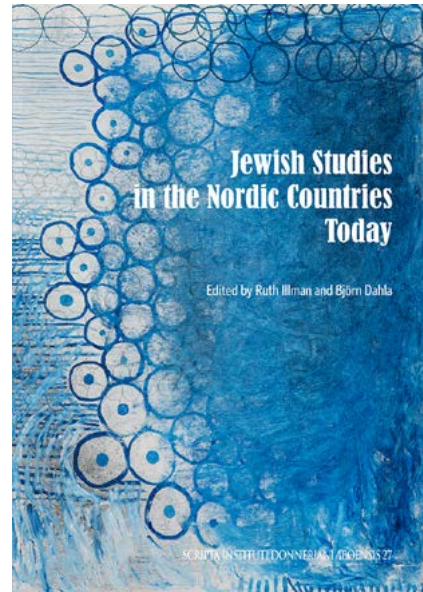
Putting the Nordic into Nordic Jewish Studies

Jewish Studies in the Nordic Countries Today, edited by Ruth Illman and Björn Dahla (Åbo, Donner Institute for Research in Religious and Cultural History, 2016)

The practice of Jewish Studies in the Nordic countries is one that is intensely conscious of its own marginality. Similarly, the practice of Jewish identity in the Nordic countries is a practice that is intensely aware of the marginal status of Jews in these countries. Nonetheless, despite – or, perhaps, because of – this marginality, Nordic Jewish life and Nordic Jewish Studies remain vital and committed to using their marginality as a vantage point from which to understand not just Jewishness as a whole, but also the wider Nordic context.

These are the conclusions that struck me on reading *Jewish Studies in the Nordic Countries Today*, a collection of essays stemming from a symposium held at the Donner Institute in Turku (Åbo) in March 2015. Not all the chapters are written by Nordic scholars, and not all of them address the Nordic context directly, but the consistently high quality of the contributions is eloquent testimony to the possibilities afforded for Jewish Studies in this context.

The subjects covered in the collection are disparate, reflecting the breadth and vagueness of the discipline of Jewish Studies. While not all the contributions relate to others in the book, there are nonetheless some notable common themes. It is particularly striking that the



first three chapters, by Cecilia Wassen, Karin Hedner Zetterholm and Antti Laato, all deal with the complex relationship between Judaism and early Christianity. While the boundary between early Christianity and Judaism has been closely interrogated in much contemporary scholarship, this terrain seems particularly suited to the Nordic context, in which ‘thinking Jewish’ inevitably means thinking about margins. Similarly, Riika Tuori’s chapter on the binding of Isaac in early-modern Polish-Lithuanian Karaite poetry also engages with a form of (now) marginal Jewishness that also destabilises essentialist ideas of what Judaism is and was.

Inevitably, it is the historical chapters that engage most directly with the Nordic context and that confront questions of marginality most explicitly. Vibeke Kieding Banik’s

chapter on interwar Norwegian Jewry shows how difficult it was for this small community to find some kind of equilibrium between Norwegian and Jewish identity. Banik attests to the intense awareness that Norwegian Jews had of their marginality to both Norway itself and to the wider Jewish world. Laura Ekholm and Simo Muir's chapter on Finland during that same period also shows how another marginal Jewish community dealt creatively with the challenges of the pressure to change names during a period of nationalist Fennicisation. But it would be wrong to suggest that Jews in the Nordic countries were simply vulnerable subjects of wider social trends. Sofie Lene Bak's groundbreaking study of the process of repatriation and restitution of Danish Jews after the Second World War makes the striking claim that it was this process that helped to pave the way for the post-war growth of the Danish welfare state. One of the points to take away from Christhard Hoffmann's valuable overview of the historiography of Jewish immigration in the Scandinavian countries is that a scholarly engagement with Scandinavian Jewish history – variable as it has been – is not of merely parochial, Jewish, interest, but has direct relevance to wider questions of how these countries have dealt with immigration and the emerging diversity that this process has brought with it.

Jewish Studies in the Nordic Countries Today also contains a number of chapters that do not reflect a particularly Nordic context. They attest to the ability of Nordic Jewish Studies to contribute to the 'mainstream' preoccupations of Jewish Studies. Claudia Welz's contribution on 'trauma, memory and testimony' in the accounts of Holocaust survivors offers some useful insights in an area of intense scholarly interest. Jan Schwarz's study of post-war Yiddish writing offers a revisionist challenge to histories that have

underestimated the vitality of what he calls a 'Yiddish transnational network'.

To play a full part in the global Jewish Studies conversation, Nordic Jewish Studies needs to be able to respond to Jewish developments that may only be minimally present in the Nordic countries themselves. Two chapters, by Mia Andersén-Löf and Ben Kasstan, deal with Haredi Judaism; while this has a very limited presence in the Nordic countries, its rapid growth and concomitant growing significance in the wider Jewish world makes its study vitally important. Ruth Illman's study of the use of *niggunim* in the British progressive Jewish community also captures an emerging global Jewish trend towards more 'spiritual' forms of worship that does not always pertain to the Nordic countries.

Jewish Studies in the Nordic Countries Today is, despite its disparate themes, a collection which showcases high-quality scholarship and is, as such, testimony to the vitality of Nordic Jewish Studies. Nonetheless, this remains a small field, whose infrastructure is highly variable within the Nordic countries and between them. In her concluding chapter to the book, Natalie Lantz, a doctoral student at Uppsala University, offers an honest assessment of the disciplinary limitations of Jewish Studies in Sweden. Her own educational pathway has required her to stitch together a curriculum from various institutions and faculties; Jewish Studies is all too often an appendage to other disciplines. While her call to increase coordination efforts is a sensible one, it is hard to draw any conclusion but that Jewish Studies in small countries with small Jewish populations is always going to have to work very hard to establish itself as a coherent field of study.

As a kind of showcase for Nordic Jewish Studies, this volume does show what can be achieved when the disparate voices of those studying Jews and Judaism in the Nordic

countries are brought together. While this kind of scholarship is likely to remain fairly marginal in these countries, there is every reason to conclude that Nordic scholars of Jews, Judaism and Jewishness can produce work that is world-class long into the future. ■

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Ben Gidley) *Turbulent Times: The British Jewish Community Today* (2010).