

**Jeffrey S. Gurock, ed. *Conversations with Colleagues: On Becoming an American Jewish Historian.* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2018), 272 pp., ISBN: 978-1618118561.**

As suggested by its title, this book is not a scholarly publication per se. Rather, it is a collection of first-person accounts written by sixteen leading scholars – nine women and seven men – in the field of American Jewish history. The texts, which are anywhere between 10 and 20 pages long, appear in alphabetical order according to authors' last names and include the contributors' personal reflections on their professional journeys to date. The book was edited by historian Jeffrey Gurock, whose eloquent introduction sets the book's informal, collegial, and empathetic tone.

The texts – as can be expected – are all well written, insightful, and weave together stories and anecdotes without becoming boring, even for those who might be less familiar with the people and academic institutions mentioned. While all accounts naturally follow a chronological timeline, each author chose a somewhat different period in their lives as the 'starting point' of their journey. Of special interest are the stories that begin with the authors' early childhood, illuminating how 'raw memory' – family stories and orally transmitted recollections – can trigger an ongoing, life-long interest in the past.

The book's main merit emerges from the collective story it tells – the legitimization, growth and professionalization of the academic study of American Jewish history as a positive, coming-of-age story. With that, the mere existence of such a book is a confirmation of the field's maturity. Many of the authors confess to the accidental nature of the choice to dedicate their academic careers to American Jewish history and emphasize their sense of gratification in being able to shape the contours of a burgeoning research area. The texts also paint a picture of a highly supportive scholarly community – a message further underlined by the book's cover image: a stack of the authors' books, spines and titles facing the camera, conveying a sense of an interconnected, joint effort.

Another interesting theme is the authors' ongoing need to maneuver between conflicting professional loyalties and choices. Some of these may seem obvious: for example, the tension between the 'American' and 'Jewish' elements of the field, or the need to overcome filiopietistic urges in order to produce mature, lasting historiographical scholarship. Other tensions are more implied: winning the interest of prospective students from within the broader domain of 'Jewish studies' (with all the high drama that other areas of Jewish Studies – whether religious or historical – can offer its students) or the sometimes-awkward campus encounters with Jewish ac-

ademics from other research areas who do not share the authors' commitment and curiosity towards their American Jewish identity.

I found two texts particularly thought provoking. In his essay, Eli Lederhendler shares his perspective about teaching and researching American Jewish history in Israel. The (seemingly) growing gap between the two centres of Jewish post-war life is receiving increasing attention in public discourse and it is interesting to read Lederhendler's insights from that perspective. The second is Jonathan Sarna's text. Although Sarna does not elaborate on his early interest in Canadian Jewish history, he refers to an historiographical point that, as an archivist, I find extremely compelling – how can we identify and extract sources which pertain to Jews, but are “buried in general sources” (p.166)? Working at a Canadian government archive, I can testify that this is a question worth exploring. Can new digital tools be developed to help identify, index and provide access to such records? And if so, how do we define what sort of records should be looked for from the millions of records that federal, provincial (or state), and local governments are producing?

*Conversations with Colleagues* was also a direct inspiration for the *Canadian Jewish Studies* ‘Reflections’ section, which aims to create a somewhat similar collection of texts by scholars of Canadian Jewry. Thinking of the Canadian reflections, and especially on the one written by Pierre Anctil, reminded me what is missing from this volume – accounts written by academics who do not identify as Jewish or even ones who were born or educated outside of the US yet contributed to the field of American Jewish History. This could be accidental but could also potentially mirror the different historiographical interests and discourses across the border with regards to questions of cultural minorities and their place in the public sphere. In any case, it seems worth noting that “outsider” scholars often greatly enrich and can offer crucial insights to any sociological/historical field of study.

What is the scholarly value of this book? Other than painting an interesting, intimate story of an academic field, it might be best to think of it as a primary source, a report or a testimony written and collected during a specific point in time in the life of one of the great Jewish diasporas. It is a report about the completion of a generational task and an attestation that the vision of the founding fathers of American Jewish history – Jacob Rader Marcus, Salo Baron, Moshe Davis – regarding the need of American Jewry to rise up to its newfound place in the Jewish world was internalized and acted upon by their students. Looking back at their own careers, these students showcase how they successfully built a scholarly eco-system – both institutional and historiographical – in support of American Jewish life.

But while the efforts to grow the field of American Jewish history can undoubtedly be crowned as a success, this is not to say the future looks any less challenging. In-

deed, one of the core driving forces of Jewish history is the existential fear for Jewish continuity (as captured by Sarna's scrapped title for his book on American Judaism – *The Ever-Dying People*, p. 173). Interestingly enough, at this point in time it is also the other element of the field – history – which faces some existential questions of its own. How will historiography, one of the prime products of the 'Gutenberg galaxy,' survive the ongoing onslaught of instant information bites that shape an endless-present and non-textual-oriented public sphere? It will be interesting to hear what future readers of this book will have to say about it in a generation or two, not to mention finding out what forms will future interactions with the past by the next generations of American (and Canadian) Jews will look like.

**Amir Lavie**

Archives of Ontario

Book Review Editor, Canadian Jewish Studies/ Etudes juives canadiennes