

**Joel Gereboff and Jonathan L. Friedmann, eds., *Jewish Historical Societies: Navigating the Professional–Amateur Divide* (Texas Tech University Press, 2023), 288 pp., ISBN: 1682831817.**

There is no shortage of literature dedicated to Jewish memory and its transmission via texts and the annual holiday and liturgy cycles. Somewhat less common are deep dives into more tangible memory agents such as libraries, museums, archives, journals, or, as is the case in this volume, historical societies. We can therefore greet this edited collection of case studies as a welcome and distinctive addition to the Jewish memory bookshelf.

The book begins with an introductory chapter that provides a concise overview of the topic of Jewish–American historical societies and positions the “professional–amateur divide” as the main analytical tool for its discussion. For the authors, this divide is manifested in the potential tensions between the “amateur” desire to celebrate the community’s past as a way to support members sense of belonging and pride and between “professional” disengaged academic research committed to problematizing and criticizing historical knowledge (and resulting in scholarship which is of no or little interest to lay people). This divide, and the tensions it creates, are applied to both the choice of organizational priorities and commitments by the historical societies as well as to the individual academic historians who serve as members and leaders of these historical societies.

The chapters following the introduction showcase seven different US–based Jewish historical societies, covering the country from east to west and from north to south. All featured organizations operate under a local or regional mandate; none of the case studies focus on a national organization (although a good part of the introduction is dedicated to the American Jewish Historical Society) or on an organization that is dedicated to a non–US based historical event or topic. Thankfully, the authors do not employ academic jargon in presenting these case studies, and the chapters read quite fluently. However, average readers might be less attentive to the details pertaining to specific activities of each featured historical society, unless they are invested and knowledgeable of the specific community the chapter describes.

The case studies reveal both the similarities and the many differences in organizational mandates, operational goals, and day–to–day activities. Most, if not all, historical societies featured in the book share the desire to highlight Jewish contributions to the region in which they operate, to gather evidence of “early” Jewish existence in the region, and to promote a positive image of the local Jewish community. However, differences in demographic and social circumstances mean that the methods and activities chosen to achieve these goals differ greatly between organizations. The

title “historical society” therefore proves to be an umbrella term for many forms and types of activities that are conducted with different budgets, towards different-sized communities, and with various degrees of cooperative efforts within the wider ecosystems of local Jewish and non-Jewish memory activities. Overall, perhaps the most impressive aspect about the historical societies presented in this book is their flexibility and ability to adjust their activities to answer changing needs and interests of community members and, as a result, their ongoing usefulness as public memory tools.

Reading the case studies, the reader notices that the amateur–professional divide is not the only tension making an appearance in the pages of the book. Jewish historical societies also need to navigate tensions between local or regional rooted experiences and the much broader Jewish religious and transnational identity frameworks such as Holocaust memory or attitudes towards Israel as a (secondary? potential?) home. Although clearly not in scope for this book, such a framework could prove useful in further analysis of changing mandates, projects, and publications of local grassroots historical societies.

Canadian readers might try to compare these American case studies to the ways in which similar efforts manifested themselves in Canada. In doing so, they will notice many similarities in the models of growth and types of activities. One interesting observation is that the book seems to support the generation lag theory so prominent in Canadian Jewish studies. Most of the historical societies mentioned in the book were established during the 1950s while in Canada most community institutional memory agents were developed during the 1970s.

Few would disagree with the claim that knowledge of the past is fundamental for a community’s future. Historical societies and other community-driven memory agents are ever useful tools in advancing such knowledge. Their strengths lie in their organizational flexibility and in not being bound by academic publishing as the only venue of disseminating scholarship. Circling back to the “amateur–professional divide,” it seems that especially in today’s decentralized public and media ecosystems, historical societies have a place to grow and reinvent their roles and commitments. In any case, the book offers a worthy study of an interesting and important phenomenon in Jewish public life, and for those who read it, could inspire thinking about new ways in which history could be produced and shared in years to come.

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