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Review:

A Networked Community: Jewish Melbourne in the Nineteenth Century

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A Networked Community: Jewish Melbourne in the Nineteenth Century, Sue Silberberg (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2020), ISBN 978-0-52287-633-8, pp. x + 244, AU\$69.99.

Jewish communities have tended to develop a unique identity in terms of their family endogamy and socio-economic profile. This profile has been reinforced by chain migration, family ties, business networks, and urbanization. In her thematic history of Melbourne's Jewish community in the nineteenth century, Sue Silberberg has explored these themes through the lens of space and place. She has sought to provide new insights into Australian Jewish life, adding to the two previous chronological studies of Victorian Jewry by Lazarus Morris Goldman (1954) and Hilary Rubinstein (1986), as well as the histories of individual synagogues and other Jewish institutions in the colony.

Social networking has been a key factor in Jewish business and professional success. In keeping with the book's title, *A Networked Community*, Silberberg provides detailed descriptions of the family and business connections of Melbourne's Jews in the nineteenth century, alas, without ever explaining her concept of networking, or engaging any of the recent theoretical discussions pertaining to the concept. Among the many examples she provides is that of "the unique economic networks of the Caribbean [which] provided a transnational perspective for this community, one forged through its mercantile, familial and education associations" (p. 24). Another example is that of the extended Michaelis/Hallenstein family who originated in Germany.

To my mind, some knowledge of relevant migration trends among Jews more generally would be needed genuinely to make sense of the material Silberberg presents and discusses in her chapters on "Jewish Space and Place", "Jewish Identity in a New Land", and "Family Identity". It therefore seems unhelpful that Silberberg treats these topics first, and only then turns to the issues of "Migration and Connection". Jews have, after all, been a largely urban and transnational people for more than a millennium. As early as the ninth century, the Jewish Radhanites were already engaged in trade between France and China, and the Cairo Genizah has been a rich source for material reflecting Jewish transnational mercantile activities. In the small towns of Eastern Europe that had significant Jewish populations too, Jews were often the middlemen. Silberberg is certainly correct when she states that Jews played an important role in the nineteenth-century

urbanization of large cities such as London, Berlin, Vienna, and New York, but she fails to clarify at the outset that this role, far from being a distinctly new one, in fact reinforced their traditional concentration in urban occupations.

Only in Chapter 5, "Building a City", does Silberberg really touch on this broader historical background. Here, she provides case studies of key business people and a well researched account of key architectural developments in the areas of concentrated Jewish settlement, especially in Carlton, St Kilda, and the suburbs of East Melbourne. Her excellent discussion would have gained additional depth from an engagement of Charles Price's detailed demographic study, *Jewish Settlers in Australia* (1964). Price analysed the development of Carlton as the first, and the move to St Kilda as the second, main area of Jewish settlement. He also discussed the extent to which the geographical concentration in Carlton paralleled developments in London's East End and New York's Lower East Side.

Following the introductory chapter on Jewish space and place, in which Silberberg deals with the broader Jewish historical canvas in Europe, she turns to the issue of Jewish identity, focusing principally on the religious identity of Melbourne's Jews. This unduly narrow vantage fails to do justice to the complexity of Jewish identity. In the section on religious space in Chapter 5, Silberberg then writes that, "As equal citizens in a free society, the Jews of Melbourne have claimed space and equality for their religious requirements", adding that "their public and private dwellings were a public affirmation of the community as sophisticated and educated equals" (p. 165). Jews in the Australian colonies played an active and pronounced role in public life, which Silberberg indeed discusses in this final chapter. Yet this only demonstrates that a broader conceptual framework encompassing more than religion would have been required genuinely to do justice to the identities of Melbourne's Jews.

One of the strengths of the book is its emphasis on Sephardi migration especially from the West Indies, as well as chain migration from Posen (Poznań) in Prussian Poland. Silberberg also provides an innovative discussion of various aspects of family life, drawing on a wide range of scholarly literature as well as primary sources. Despite these strengths, the book suffers from the aforementioned problematic structure and a failure to acknowledge previous scholarship sufficiently. In particular, this concerns Hilary Rubinstein's work and the rich collection of articles in the *Australian Jewish Historical Society Journal*.

Given that the book is not only meant for experts in the field, Silberberg also fails, at important junctures, to provide sufficient context. For example, in her discussion of Australia's federation, she treats the contribution of Emanuel Steinfeld in some detail without even mentioning Isaac Isaacs (who went on to become Attorney General, Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, and the first Australian-born Governor General), although he was by far the most influential Melbourne Jew to play a role in the federation process.

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