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Susan L. Einbinder, *No Place of Rest: Jewish Literature, Expulsion, and the Memory of Medieval France*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009. 267 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$55.00. U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-8122-4115-0.

Review by Matilda Tomaryn Bruckner, Boston College.

Following in the wake of her masterful study, *Beautiful Death: Jewish Poetry and Martyrdom from Medieval France* (2002), Susan Einbinder has once again situated her work at the intersection of disciplines. But this time the intricacies of the detective work her elusive topic required have carried her much farther afield, not only to the criss-crossing borders of history and literature but into the multiple domains of manuscripts and printing, demographics, regimen and pharmacology, “astronomical texts, theological texts, medical texts, and papal documents” (p. 162), from thirteenth- and fourteenth-century expulsions to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century copies of liturgical hymns recording their traces, from France and Spain, Gascony, Catalonia and the Comtat Venaissin, to Italy, Salonika, and North Africa. This is a delicate work of reconstructing the voices of medieval French Jews from the Midi to rediscover the specificity of a “Frenchness” that continues to speak through the experiences and views of Provençal Jewry long after successive expulsions have dispersed them around the Mediterranean basin.

At the center of Einbinder’s study is the 1306 expulsion of Jews from France. As she explains in the introduction, *No Place of Rest* attempts to chronicle not the event itself, whose history has been investigated most recently by William C. Jordan, but rather the ways it has been recorded, remembered, forgotten and reshaped by the exiles and their descendants. That record is a slim one and by no means does it yield a single, continuous story: its “fragmentary, indeed kaleidoscopic” (p. 4) pictures of fourteenth-century Jewry emerge here and there in a series of texts scattered in time and space, as repeated expulsions force individuals and communities to move on, regroup, recollect and renew their memories in the common waters of Jewish history, just as rocks tossed in a lake send out ever-widening circles of ripples whose form and shape retain even as they refract the original gesture. As Einbinder becomes their historian and translator, she too must undergo changes that mirror the movement of her subjects: “Over the process of research and writing, this book gradually evolved from a search for the core experience of 1306 as it was commemorated by survivors to embrace the wider sweep of the century and its cycles of expulsion and trauma. The ... chapters trace the arc of a century of dislocation and hence collective memory in a near-continuous process of reconstitution and collapse. ... each of these journeys takes us beyond the terminus point of 1394 to explore the fate of these fourteenth-century texts and the past that they sought to preserve or suppress in later times” (p. 4). People but also their written traces, the tangible but often opaque verbal remnants left behind, constitute the shifting objects of reconstruction in this work of historiography, to be sure, but also of imagination.

Einbinder’s performance as a historian—both demonstrated in what she accomplishes here, as well as pondered and analyzed in the reflections on writing history that accompany the report of her findings—offers a model at once modest and bold. She is honest in identifying the limits of what she knows, what one can know from the extant historical record; fearless in allowing the humanity she shares with her subjects to infuse repeated efforts to understand through “sidewise reading” (p. 10) what lies behind, between and beyond the lines inscribed on parchment or reprinted in books; subtle in teasing out

literary analyses that recognize the traditions, possibilities, and constraints of a wide variety of genres included in her corpus of texts; insightful in making the connections between those disparate texts and their multiple contexts. In the introduction, Einbinder identifies her own models among historians who have worked with collective memory and identity—Benedict Anderson, Dipesh Chakrabarti, Hayden White, Stephen Greenblatt, Thomas Burman, Gabrielle Spiegel, Steven Justice, Andrew Taylor, Ross Brann, and William Granara (pp. 4-5)—and finds inspiration in new fields like diaspora studies and in the more modern avatars of Jewish studies, whose “methodological insights and approaches” (p. 5) can benefit medieval Jewish studies in general, as well as her particular investigation of the strategic uses of an extremely malleable past reworked in writing. The same experiences of expulsion are lived differently by rationalists and traditionalists among her chosen witnesses; their writings make Einbinder’s book a testimony not only to “human memory and forgetting but also ... [to] human faith in the apparent face of divine disaffection” (p. 12).

Faced with the paucity of expression given to the 1306 expulsion in traditional commemorative genres (e.g. liturgical poetry of the sort found in Reuben b. Isaac’s penitential hymns, treated in chapter three), Einbinder was forced to rephrase the questions motivating her project (p. 10) and look in “eccentric” places (p. 7) for their answers. This in turn further occasioned the necessity to “tramp[le] modern disciplinary boundaries” (p. 162) in order to penetrate the world of medieval rabbis and physicians, wide-ranging in their interests and preoccupations. Hence the need, too, to remember the marginal role of their writings in the context of busy lives. The poems, prose narratives, and lyric laments, considered here were sometimes made for popular use (e.g., Reuben’s hymns and Crescas Caslari’s vernacular *Esther* examined in chapter four), but also include works composed for an intellectual elite of philosophers and physicians (e.g., Isaac HaGorni’s poems, Yedaiah Bedersi’s and Joseph b. Sheshet Latimi’s pantograms). Einbinder’s mental gymnastics and detective skills not only allow her to follow the many twists and turns of her texts across time and geography; they facilitate the readers’ own initiation into known and little known places of “Frenchness” in exile, whose paths criss-cross important controversies of thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Jewry (the heated debates of traditionalists and rationalists triggered by Maimonides and “Greek science”), as well as more obscure and forgotten nooks settled by exiles like those from Trévoux on the border between France and Savoy who moved to the Piedmontese region of northern Italy.

Einbinder’s short but densely-packed book includes six chapters and an epilogue. Chapter one, “Isaac b. Abraham HaGorni: The Myth, the Man, and the Manuscript,” debunks the legend of HaGorni as a disreputable Jewish troubadour (based on earlier scholars’ Victorian, Romantic, and religious preconceptions) to show how his writings, viewed in their historical and material settings, reveal a temperamental man who may have been without power, riches, or home, but who was still “a mainstream member of an intellectual elite” (p. 33), a poet immersed in the (not unrelated) worlds of science and poetry, exchanging charges and insults that play off shared cultural stereotypes with fellow poets Abraham Bedersi and Isaiah ibn Devash. In chapter two, “Form and History: Hebrew Pantograms and the Expulsion of 1306,” Einbinder unexpectedly finds historical links in a set of poems where every word begins with or contains the same letter (pantogram is a term she borrows from Paul Zumthor’s study of sixteenth-century French poets known as the “grands rhétoriciens”). Though apparently far removed from the personal emotions of expulsion and exile, poets like Yedaiah Bedersi and Latimi nevertheless embody in the formal constraints of their alliterative poems what can happen when a philosopher’s claim to “master destiny” is shaken by catastrophic events that reveal a sense of collective guilt and the failures of Jewish communities to help their “brothers” in foreign lands (p. 60). Paradoxically, this small group of esoteric poems was quite popular with subsequent readers but “[t]heir success came at the expense of their meaning” (p. 58), as allegorical embedding and formal pyrotechnics obscured their hidden commemorative impulse. The detailed examples treated in this chapter lead Einbinder to larger reflections on “the disciplinary barrier between ‘history’ and ‘poetry’ and the animadversion of historians to ‘history’ packaged in anything but prose” (p. 59)—from which historians as well as literary scholars (like myself) can take important lessons. Indeed, the epilogue

returns urgently to this issue: historians “who seek history in literature must first learn to read it as literature, or they will miss its meaning and distort or dismiss its claims” (p. 161). Einbinder wisely adds that we should all be attentive to the shifting concept of what constitutes literature, its beauty as well as its value.

Chapter three, “God’s Forgotten Sheep: Liturgical Memory and Expulsion,” studies the liturgical hymns of an otherwise unknown poet of Montpellier, Reuben b. Isaac, and traces their trajectory to the papal states of the Comtat Venaissin and then into Algiers, in order to answer a series of questions that move from what we can reconstruct about the delayed expulsion from Montpellier to what the “liturgical traditions received by Algerian and Comtat Jews tell us about the reconstitution of expulsion memories for later use” (p. 65). (Maps would have been useful to follow the dispersions north and south.) As Einbinder explains how Reuben’s lyrics “reinforce the affective bonds that keep a community intact” (p. 63), she also tells the story of material supports, whether for Jewish identity (in the clothing worn by exiles as an idealized memory of “home”) or for Jewish writing in manuscripts and printed books (e.g., HUC MS 396, now in the collection of Hebrew Union College where Einbinder teaches, which contains the oldest extant copy for one of Reuben’s poems; eighteenth-century printings made in Amsterdam that retain the liturgical traditions of Carpentras and Avignon Jews). Einbinder speaks of liturgy as creating “a special space, in which the seamless fluctuation of mythic and historical time and events could mediate some of the stresses of a world that was learning to oppose secular and sacred in harsher ways” (p. 83). We may wonder how seamless such fluctuations may be, but this passage is a good example of how she pushes to the limits of her material in trying to imagine the life behind the texts, while at the same time recognizing how much the sights and smells of that human experience still escape us. Her goal to remember the past “contained” in these texts is not unlike the goals her exiles and their descendants shared to remake the past and reuse it for the present.

Chapter four, “A Proper Diet: Medicine and History in Crescas Caslari’s *Esther*,” illustrates the serendipity that favored Einbinder’s search for the past (e.g., accidentally finding Crescas’s text in HUC MS 396 in the final stages of her book) as well as the multiple skills with which she analyzes the individual objects of her study and unfolds their exemplary status for the project as a whole. As she indicates in commenting both on this physician’s use of the Esther story to make specific allusions to contemporary events and on the subsequent loss of reference for understanding them, “it is not just the fate of isolated details but the fate of Crescas’s romance itself that illustrates a recurring theme of this book: the complexity of Jewish identity and memory, built on scaffolding assembled and reassembled over years of dislocation” (p. 85). A modern practitioner able to pursue a successful career in Avignon after his exile from Narbonne, Crescas gives dramatic form to his professional involvement in contemporary medical theories and debates. As reconstructed by Einbinder’s research on the links connecting chickpeas, feasting, and fasting, Crescas’s Hebrew version of *Esther* suggests to what extent the Christian notion of “fast” as abstinence from meat has penetrated the practice of Jews in the Midi—in ironic counterpoint to Christian law aimed at keeping the two communities’ distinct (p. 107). We can recognize here a recurrent theme of Jewish history, oscillating between separation and local acculturation from pressures both internal and external (cf. the debates on “Greek science” mentioned earlier).

Chapter five, “Physicians and Their Daughters: Memory and Medicine during the Plague Years,” also locates us in Avignon where the Jewish physician Jacob b. Salomon the Frenchman laments the death of his daughter during the 1382 plague and at the same time engages in a polemic on the relation between science and faith. In the face of competing views of the plague as divine punishment sent by God or medical phenomenon to be treated according to the laws of natural science, Jacob retains the medical opinions of his French masters. He argues the traditionalist position in his use of Biblical proof texts, even as he movingly represents the last moments of his daughter’s “unnatural death” (p. 133). Maintaining a “tenacious grip on a past marked by ‘Frenchness’” (p. 136) is also the subject of chapter six, “Refrains in Exile: French Jewish Poetry in Northern Italy.” Successive expulsions of 1306 and 1394

turned a small group of Jews from Trévoux into Trabots, as the penitential laments of three generations of their poets, copied and arranged in Parma 1883, demonstrate the ebb and flow of communal memory. In this Italian outpost, “Jewish liturgical traditions preserved elements of French Jewish practice” (p. 137) even into the twentieth-century. These “stubborn traces” (p. 156), maintained only in the Piedmont and the Comtat Venaissin, highlight by contrast the failure of most French exiles, too few, too dispersed, “to sustain a distinct sense of the past”—a failure magnified by later historical forgetting and the reductionist but “convenient binary of ‘Sephardic’ versus ‘Ashkenazic’ trajectories” (p. 157).

Einbinder’s epilogue sums up the record for remembering and forgetting gleaned from her evidence and calls for historians to participate in the “act of salvage” (p. 157) she has so skillfully begun by making visible the “multiplicity of communities distributed about the European and North African Mediterranean” (p. 12), especially “that of Provençal Jewry, which received so many of the French exiles and integrated their stories into their own” (p. 161). Her study strives to account for the ways and whys of forgetting past expulsions, as well as memory’s occasional triumphs in remembering them, in expected and unexpected places. Those triumphs belong not only to Einbinder’s Jewish exiles but to her own exceptional attentiveness in reconstructing their world from scattered bits and pieces left in writing. *No Place of Rest* offers a compelling, always thoughtful and eloquent example for all those who will continue the reconstruction not only of past memory but our own memory of the past.

Matilda Tomaryn Bruckner
Boston College
bruckner@bc.edu

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