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Lia Brozgal and Sarah Abrevaya Stein eds., *Ninette of Sin Street, a novella by Vitalis Danon*, translated by Jane Kuntz. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017. 144 pp. Introduction, appendix, notes. \$24.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN: 9781503601567, (pb). ISBN: 9781503602137, Amazon kindle, Barnes and Noble Nook, Ebooks.com, Google Play.

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Ninette of Sin Street, a novella by Vitalis Danon provides Anglophone readers with a rare window into Jewish life in interwar Tunisia. It also gives an excellent overview of the influence and legacy of the Alliance Israélite Universelle (AIU), a French-based institution that offered a European-style education to Jewish children across the Mediterranean basin in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The novella itself, which is one of the first works of Tunisian fiction in French, was first published as *Ninette de la rue du Péché, une nouvelle populiste* in Tunis in 1938. It is reproduced here in a very fine English translation, flanked by a historical introduction and an appendix containing other non-fiction writing by Danon describing Jewish life in Tunisia over the course of the fifty-odd years that he lived in that country.

Brozgal and Stein's introduction does an excellent job of introducing the reader to both Vitalis Danon and the history of the AIU, rightly inserting both of them into the liminal and in-between spaces that Jews so often occupied in the colonial world. Danon was a product of the AIU's school system, and he spent his entire career in service to the organization. His own life story is intimately tied to the story of the AIU, which had a profound impact on Jewish life throughout North Africa and the Middle East. In 1862, the AIU established its first school in Tétouan, Morocco, and by the eve of World War I, 43,000 children and adolescents were attending one of the 183 schools that the organization had set up in North Africa, the Middle East, and the Ottoman Empire. For the founders of the AIU, educating Jewish children around the world was the most effective way to fulfill their stated mission of "working everywhere for the emancipation and the moral progress of the Jews" and "lending effective support to those who suffered because of being Jews."^[1] Confident in their status as fully emancipated citizens of a modern, Western European country, the AIU's founders wanted to share this bounty with their "less fortunate" brethren the world over.^[2] Danon himself was a beneficiary of the AIU's civilizing mission. Born in Edirne (Adrianople) in the Ottoman Empire in 1897, he began his education in a traditional Jewish school providing only a religious education. At the age of eleven, he had the opportunity to enter an AIU school, and—as was often the case for top students—was then offered a place at the AIU's teacher training college in Paris. Danon never lived in Edirne again. Rather, after completing his education in Paris, he spent the next fifty years in the service of the AIU in Tunisia, the majority of the time as a school director in Sfax.^[3]

Most Middle Eastern and North African Jews remained physically in their home countries after receiving an AIU education. As was the case for Danon, however, that education sent them on an intellectual and cultural path that distanced them from their societies of origin. That distancing

separated them not only from their own past, but also from the majority Arab-Muslim communities, whose members did not, for the most part, have the same educational opportunities. Indeed, Danon's novella centers on that uniquely Jewish opportunity that the AIU offered to indigenous Jewish communities of North Africa and the Middle East during the colonial era. Narrated entirely in the voice of its title character, Danon's story is an eighty-page monologue recounting Ninette's visits with the director of the AIU school in Sfax that her young son attends. The director does not actually speak—his existence is rather implied, as Ninette's reflections are posited as responses to his questions. In the opening chapter, Ninette convinces the director to educate her illegitimate son, despite her disgraced position as an unwed single mother and scrubwoman in the city's red-light district. Over the course of the subsequent chapters, spread out over a six-year period, the director becomes Ninette's confidant, as she tells him the story of her life and the circumstances that led her to the unfortunate position in which she finds herself.

Danon's story has folkloric and didactic purposes, providing the reader with a panorama of Jewish characters through which we learn of the poverty and depravity rampant in the *Hara* (the Jewish ghetto of Tunis), but also of the resilience and solidarity of its residents. A host of unsavory men pave the way to Ninette's misery. An uncle deflowers and abandons her at thirteen, the deceptively elegant "Choua" employs her as a sometime maid, sometime prostitute in his brothel, and her subsequent employer seduces and impregnates her, leaves town, and refuses to recognize his son. Danon portrays traditional Tunisian-Jewish religious culture negatively, in the form of a Rabbi from the conservative community of Djerba, whose "clientele" of "beggars, old folks, the paralyzed, the drunk, the blind" (p. 36) are placated in their suffering by promises of the bounty awaiting them in heaven. The story also familiarizes us with Ninette's hard-working, wise grandmother, the virtuous and kind Rachel—the "Madonna of the flea-bitten masses" (p. 49) who runs a hotel-restaurant for Jews and takes in the outcast Ninette—as well as, of course, the kindly school director, who provides Ninette and her son with a path to "civilization" through the AIU. Importantly, however, as Brozgal and Stein rightly argue, Danon's gaze on colonial Tunisia is not that of the European orientalist, but rather that of a "participant observer" (p. 18), who documents the community while being fully immersed in it. As they point out, Danon's heroine is a woman with depth of character and psychological complexity and, as such, a remarkable protagonist to find in early Judeo-Tunisian literature. Danon gives Ninette both physical and narrative agency, portraying a woman who does not let herself be victim of her circumstances, but rather actively seeks to overcome her suffering, improve her lot, and provide a better future for herself and her son.

The appendix to the book contains a sampling of Danon's non-fiction writings, spanning from his arrival in Sfax in 1919 until 1963, shortly after he retired. In an early letter to the President of the AIU, Danon provides a vivid description of Sfax that highlights his in-between status in the colonial scheme of things. The letter, Brozgal and Stein note, "might be read as a classic Orientalist tract, were it not for the complexity of [Danon's] own identity and origins: as a fellow Mediterranean Jew, he was a product and a protégé of the very civilizing mission he would offer his students" (p. 87). We also find two lengthy travelogues (one also in the form of a letter to the AIU President) detailing Danon's observations of the isolated Jewish communities of Djerba and Gabes. Here Danon is not a participant observer, but rather describes people whom he finds both exotic and archaic, living without the benefits of the AIU's civilizing mission and the advantages that the modern world has to offer. The last letter, a reflection on his fifty-odd year career with the AIU, reflects on the "miraculous accomplishments" of the organization and thanks its President for recommending him for the National Order of the Legion of Honor (p. 121). While the letter, as Brozgal and Stein note, also alludes to both the inadequate funding of the schools as well as Danon's own meager salary and retirement, it is first and foremost an homage to the organization to which he offered not only his career but his life's work, and of which he is immensely proud.

Brozgal and Stein describe *Ninette of Sin Street* as Danon's most successful literary venture, and the accomplishment for which he is best known. Unfortunately, the volume does not include any discussion

of the book's critical reception when it was first published in Tunis in 1938. It would have been interesting to know the extent to which the book was reviewed in both the general and Jewish French press in France and Tunisia, and to track how Ninette's story, and Danon himself, were read by different actors of the day. This is, however, but a minor criticism of a book will prove a valuable resource to both historians and literary scholars interested in Jewish life in the Maghreb in the age of colonialism.

NOTES

[1] Paula Hyman, *The Jews of Modern France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), p. 78.

[2] Hyman, p. 78.

[3] Danon's break with the land of his birth was a product of both historical circumstances and AIU policy. His sojourn in Paris coincided with the First World War and the transfer of Erdirne to Greece, generally judged to be inhospitable for Jews, made returning their undesirable. In any case, however, it was AIU policy to assign graduates of the Ecole normale Israélite to schools other than where they were from.

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