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Laura S. Schor, *The Life and Legacy of Baroness Betty de Rothschild*. New York: Peter Lang, 2006. xiii + 190 pp. Notes, illustrations, bibliography, and index. \$68.95 (cl). ISBN: 0-8204-7885-7.

Review by Willa Z. Silverman, The Pennsylvania State University Press.

When in March 1892 Edmond de Goncourt described in his journal the "richesses accaparatrices" of the French Rothschilds, who seemed to possess "tout le beau de la terre qui est encore a vendre," he revealed the mixture of astonishment and scorn many observers of his day had long felt toward this nearly mythical family. From her arrival in Paris in 1824 on the occasion of her marriage to her uncle James until her death in 1886, the matriarch of the French branch was Betty de Rothschild, granddaughter of Mayer Amschel Rothschild, founder in Vienna of the banking dynasty. As Laura S. Schor recounts in this first biography of Baroness Betty de Rothschild, this was a life shaped by the forces of Jewish emancipation, evolving roles for women, the political turmoil of the nineteenth century, and also by the particular codes and traditions of the Rothschild family

Born in 1805 in the Jewish ghetto (Judengasse) of Frankfurt, Betty de Rothschild became a dominant figure of the Parisian elite. She hosted Emperor Napoleon III at her chateau Ferrières, where guests dined on Sevres porcelain painted by Boucher while listening to the Paris Opera choir perform a piece composed by Rossini for the occasion. The opulence that surrounded Betty, however, was matched by her generosity as a modern Jewish female philanthropist. She founded and contributed to many Jewish causes both in France and internationally--orphanages, hospitals, hospices--but most notably those related to Jewish women's vocational education, thus becoming in the view of her contemporaries "the first lady of the Jewish people of our era" (p 119). Believing strongly finally that as an Israelite her Jewish identity was compatible with her adopted French one, she demonstrated her patriotism during the Franco-Prussian War by turning the courtyard of her magnificent hotel in the rue Laffitte into a hospital for French casualties.

Schor's goal in this biography, then, is to answer the question addressed to her when she met Betty's great-grandson Baron Elie de Rothschild: "Why would anyone want to read about Betty? What did she accomplish that might be meaningful for today's readers?" (p xi). Although Betty's prominence as well as Schor's access to an important cache of letters and legal and financial documents in the Rothschild Archive in London (available to scholars only since 1994) seem to augur a life story well worth telling, this slim biography falls short of the mark. It suffers in part from insufficient contextualization that would make Betty's accomplishments appear more "meaningful" to the extent that they resonate with broader themes in nineteenth-century French history, among others the evolution of notions of Jewish female and national identity during this period

For example, Schor correctly notes that Betty's identity "was formed during the struggle for Jewish civil rights" (p 12) not just in Frankfurt, as she states, but also in Paris and indeed elsewhere in nineteenth-century Europe. Betty's life story as a Jew is in part a tale of two cities: one of them her native Frankfurt, where Jews had briefly won citizenship rights during the Napoleonic occupation only to have them revoked in 1814; where well into the nineteenth century even wealthy families such as the Rothschilds normally lived in the Jewish ghetto and were subject to special taxes and restrictions on marriage; and where such conditions had fostered not only sensitivity to the anti-Semitism that forced Betty to leave Frankfurt in 1819 but also in opposition to the situation in 'enlightened' Berlin a sense of community and a strict adherence to traditional religious and cultural practices. In Betty's adopted Paris, by contrast, the remarkable success of a significant minority of newly-enfranchised and increasingly assimilated Jews seemed to offer proof that much of the nineteenth century was indeed a highly advantageous era for French Jewry.

How did Betty reconcile the religious conservatism of her girlhood with the imperative to assimilate tacitly required by both her adopted country and the Parisian elite she had entered with her marriage to her banker husband James? Unsurprisingly she had "not been taught how to merge the two [French and Jewish identities]" (p 88), but what kinds of compromises did she make between them and how did both social class and gender additionally shape the strategies Betty adopted? We learn for example that in a nod to the conventions of her complex social milieu blending the *grande bourgeoisie* and the old and new aristocracies of the nineteenth century, in addition to members of the culturally distinct Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jewish communities, lobster and other non-kosher food was served at Rothschild dinners attended by Balzac and Liszt by Charles Garnier and Princesse Mathilde. Perhaps Betty deemed this an acceptable compensatory strategy for social insertion on a par with her husband's amassing a vast art collection, dressing as Louis XIII, for a costume ball, or hiring Careme as his chef

On other points of religious observance and cultural solidarity, however, Betty proved more intransigent: major Jewish holidays were celebrated *en famille* although the family did adopt the habit of giving New Year's *etrennes*, and the Rothschild practice of endogamy was respected with the threat of disinheritance for those marrying outside the faith. And in contrast to other of her coreligionists in her circle who either abandoned religious practice (the composer Giacomo Meyerbeer) or witnessed the conversion of their immediate family (French Minister of Justice Adolphe Cremieux), Betty did not convert

Betty's self-identification as a Jew finally was evident in her many philanthropic contributions to world Jewry, notably in Rome and Palestine reflecting the belief she espoused in an 1849 letter that "[e]verywhere emancipation has brought down the chains of the Middle Ages and has given back to these pariahs of fanaticism and intolerance the rights of humanity and equality" (p 87). Such a practice of philanthropy in the interest of Jewish regeneration was in keeping with the generosity initiated by her grandfather (and father-in-law) Mayer Amschel, founder in Frankfurt of Philanthropin, originally a trade school for underprivileged Jews. Yet at the same time Betty and James's evident concern with the welfare of Jewish communities both within France and outside of it contrasts with the discretion exhibited by certain other Jews in France who were perhaps fearful that such evident indications of their cosmopolitanism would attract criticism (or worse) and doubts regarding their loyalty to France. Indeed, even such Rothschild family intimates as Chopin ridiculed Jews outside their presence; if Chopin could socialize with Betty and James, Schor asserts, it was only by "seeing them as aristocrats and secondarily as Jews" (p 44).

How did such diffuse yet widespread antipathy toward Jews on the part even of those close to the Rothschild family influence Betty's own self-representation as a Jew. To what extent did she attempt to counter the range of problematic images of Jewish women, whether exotic beauties, downtrodden victims, or recalcitrant converts popularized in contemporary works such as Eugenie Foa's *La Juive* (1835) and Fromental Halevy's opera also titled *La Juive* (1835). Betty's pride in her Jewish heritage appears evident from this biography, but how did she solidify this identity: by publicly modeling herself on the virtuous Jewish women to whom she was often compared, among them Moses's sister Miriam and the heroic Queen Esther. Perhaps Betty understood that while her identity as an Israelite eliminated certain possibilities for her, it enabled others, namely concerning the traditional Jewish practice of tzedakah or charity raised to a grand scale by her very public philanthropy. A closer and more subtle reading of some of the long excerpts from Betty's interesting letters selected by Schor might well have revealed more about the attempts made by Betty (like those of her frequent guest the actress Rachel and later by Sarah Bernhardt) to fashion her identity by both conforming to and reworking conventions of Jewishness

A similarly textured analysis might also have provided further insight into how not only Jews but also women in France both obeyed and flouted prevailing conventions in this case concerning gender, thus "performing" their femininity in ways that have been explored interestingly by an increasing number of contemporary historians of nineteenth-century France. Providing layettes for the babies of indigent Jewish

women and closely supervising the education of her five children, for example, were activities in conformity with the gender norms Betty gleaned from such publications as *La Mode* and *Le Journal des Femmes*. Moreover charitable work through organizations such as the Oeuvre de Bon Secours was also an activity deemed appropriate for women but especially for those of the upper classes, both Catholic and Protestant; indeed the *protectrice* of the Société de Charité Maternelle was Betty's close friend Queen Marie-Amelie. What distinguished Betty's involvement in these practices, however, was its increasingly public nature. Her founding in 1843 of the Société des Dames Israelites de France, an organization in existence through the early Third Republic, "had little precedent in the Jewish community" (p 107) as the leadership of such organizations had traditionally belonged to men. Betty directed the work of this society, which provided vocational and moral education, funds for dowries, maternity programs, and other services to Jewish girls in Palestine North Africa and elsewhere. In addition she made substantial monetary contributions in her own name (thus countering the traditionally anonymous Jewish philanthropic practice of tzedakah) in the hope that others would follow her example of providing "preventive charity" (p 112). Her prominent public role in creating "the first modern French Jewish women's organization" (p 117), as evidenced by the great number of individual pleas for funds that Betty received from correspondents in need, underscored the anomalous and bold nature of her leadership activities as a woman again evoking the comparison of Betty to Queen Esther

Yet how was Betty's career as a new type of female public figure in nineteenth-century France inscribed in the broader range of "changes that accompanied the modernization of European society" (p 57). To what extent, for example, did Betty's public and private writings on the regenerative nature of philanthropy draw on or set themselves up as an alternative to the socialist and feminist writings of contemporary Saint-Simonian women such as Suzanne Voilquin. Or to the writings on social Catholicism by another contemporary Felicite Lamennais. Such comparisons might reveal the extent to which Betty's career was indeed exceptional and would situate her work more fully within the broader social and intellectual context of the 1830s and 1840s

Two years after James' death in 1868, when war broke out between Betty's native Germany and her adopted France, she defended the latter ordering that the Rothschild hospital treat French soldiers and helping to pay workers' rent during the difficult winter of 1870. During the Commune she angrily confronted a menacing crowd that recognized her, reminding them that she had three sons in uniform for France (one of whom, Alphonse, was simultaneously negotiating a lower indemnity for France through his position in the Rothschild bank). Her example provides an interesting test case for the limits of national loyalty during the Franco-Prussian War which might have been explored further in this biography. How did Betty view her Frankfurt relatives who remained loyal to Germany during the war (unlike the English Rothschilds who supported France)? Did marriage indeed provide the unproblematic resolution to the rifts between these branches as when in 1877 Betty's son Edmond married his Frankfurt cousin Adelheid? "Though recently on opposing sides of the Franco-Prussian War," Schor notes somewhat elliptically, the two branches "were pleased to reunite the family in this traditional manner" (p 83). How did Betty negotiate this complex set of allegiances to France, Germany, and the Rothschild family? Finally was Betty's devotion to France tempered by the fact that, as is revealed in the final chapter, she was in fact stateless, lacking civil rights in Frankfurt as a Jew and receiving permanent residency status and full civil rights in France only in 1877?

While this biography conveys much intriguing detail about Betty de Rothschild, it is marred by a somewhat lackluster and at times clichéd writing style and by a substantial number of typographical errors that at times burden the reading of it. Moreover, certain of Schor's sources are not handled deftly. Lengthy excerpts from Betty's correspondence, while often quite interesting, are clustered in certain chapters and not in others, and in many cases they clearly merit a more sustained analysis or commentary. Furthermore descriptions of the effects of the Commune from Berthe Morisot's correspondence are interspersed throughout Schor's chapter on "Betty in War and Peace" although it is unclear why the author has chosen this source other than as one eye-witness account among many A more logical intertext which includes

equally vivid entries about *la semaine sanglante* might have been the Goncourts' *Journal*, especially given some of the overlapping milieus of collectors, painters, and Parisian high society frequented by both the Rothschild family and the Goncourt brothers

Schor has done well, however, to feature a description by Theophile Gautier of the striking 1848 portrait of Betty by Ingres. As rendered by Ingres Betty is resplendent in a billowing deep pink satin ball gown and a black velvet headdress topped by a white feather, her right hand loosely holding a closed fan while on her left rests her chin. As if "engaged in a spirited conversation" (p 46), Betty gazes at the viewer with a "flash of intelligence and wit" (p 45)--a "woman of the world that bathes in an atmosphere of gold" (p 45). It is this radiant and captivating woman that one wish had emerged a bit more forcefully from Schor's biography.

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