

## Book Review

***German City, Jewish Memory: The Story of Worms.* By Nils Roemer. Waltham and Hannover, MA: Brandeis University Press and University Press of New England. 2010. x + 316 pp. £35.00 (paperback).**

Since the birth of modern scholarship on Jewish history, histories of individual Jewish communities have been one of its mainstays and chief preoccupations. *German City, Jewish Memory* is the latest successful attempt to take this old genre in new directions. Offering a broad sweep through the history of Jews in Worms from the high middle ages until today, this study combines an ambitious chronological scale with a disciplined pursuit of a single methodological approach. Nils Roemer innovatively writes the history of a city's Jewish minority by looking primarily at the stories this community told about itself and others told about it. He successfully demonstrates the long continuities of memory production by and about Jews without sacrificing detail and context for his larger narrative.

The work's first chapters establish the role not just of Worms as a location for Jewish life since the middle ages but of Jewish localism. Roemer argues that the devastation of the Jewish community by crusaders and other burghers in 1097 paradoxically made Worms more important to them. The place where their martyrs died bound the remaining members of the community and their ancestors to the city. Even the lack of graves for many who had been killed made the local more relevant, since the community created other forms of commemorating them, including chronicles, laments and a new feast day on the Jewish calendar. This strengthening of particularly regional and urban traditions also shaped various attempts at boundary making. The genealogies of local rabbis, for example, helped the Rhineland community in its competition with French Jewish scholars, the Tosafists. In other cases, the local memories of Jewish martyrdom at the hands of Christians and their commemoration helped strengthen the boundaries between Jews and Christians.

The attachment to a particular city could, however, also engender similar experiences across boundaries. Crucially, one of the greatest ruptures in the history of Mainz Jewry—described in the second chapter of Roemer's book—was shared between Jews and Christians. When French troops forced out the city's inhabitants and set it on fire in 1689 in the course of conflicts between France and the Holy Roman Empire, both Jews and Christians experienced the destruction of many of their sacred and commemorative sites. The willingness of the community to view itself as exiled and the immediate attempts to rebuild what had been destroyed indicate how strong a sense of Jewish Worms had developed. It also created a memory of shared experiences that could be invoked later to prove to those sceptical about Jewish integration that Jewish and Christian inhabitants of Mainz had similar traumas.

While the first chapters deal mostly with the memory of local Jews in Worms, the third chapter introduces a major theme that continues to reverberate throughout the rest of the book: the role of outside visitors in the perception of the city's Jewish spaces. Over the next six chapters, Roemer traces the rise of new forms of travel from Orthodox visitors' voyages to the graves of Jewish luminaries to modern-day heritage tourism and the organized trips that seek to foster Jewish-Christian reconciliation. New ways to document space and to frame important sights emerged as early as the Enlightenment with the Grand Tour of Europe. A more sustained interest was, however, only the result of the discovery of the Rhineland and Worms as an iconic German landscape with the rise of Romantic nationalism. Jewish historians and local activists could promote Jewish Worms as part of this larger nationalist imaginary but also knew that Jewish history was effectively marginalized in attempts to envision an authentic German landscape. The familiar paradigm of an interrelated local and national memory, elaborated by Celia Applegate and Alan Confino among others, thus had its

own Jewish variety: the medieval Jewish sites of Worms added to the city's appeal as a tourist destination but were also part of a more defensive, apologetic argument about the long settlement of Jews in Germany and their place in the unifying nation.

After tracing the destruction of the Jewish community of Worms under Nazism and the survival of some of the city's Jewish inhabitants in emigration, the book concludes with an analysis of developments since the 1960s. Roemer continues to emphasize the multiplicity of meanings that individuals found in the reconstructed and preserved monuments of Worms. He notes the discomfort of many Jews who fled Worms during the Nazi era and of many other Jewish visitors as they faced those parts of Worm's legacy that the city and the state restored after near complete destruction. The city was without Jews for decades after 1945, and the rebuilt and mostly empty synagogue of 1961 could be understood as a sign of reconciliation but also meant that the heritage of the murdered Jews of Worms could once again become a tourist attraction. It is to Roemer's credit that he manages both to give room to the critiques of these monuments—especially by Jewish visitors and former inhabitants—and to reject any attempt cynically to describe them as part of a German public relations strategy. He does this in part by painstakingly tracing the diversity of experiences that visitors have in the city, including Orthodox Jews travelling to the graves of famous rabbis, American soldiers in a nearby army base using the synagogue for Bar Mitzvahs and survivors of the prewar Jewish community and their families touring the city with often ambivalent feelings. While it does at times feel that Roemer is offering too many examples and details of such private encounters to the reader, they do serve to prove his larger point about the variety of visitors' interpretations and experiences.

As a thoughtful intervention into the politics of memory in Germany and an innovative experiment in the construction of a community history out of its memory, this book will be of interest to scholars of both Jewish and German history. It will also speak to all those with a broader interest in the study of memory politics and heritage tourism.

doi: 10.1093/gerhis/ghr120

Ari Joskowicz  
*Vanderbilt University*