

*Des berges du Rhin aux rives de Mississippi: Histoire et récits de migrants juifs*, reviewed by Helen Y. Herman, *Southern Jewish History*, Volume 14, 2011.

Des berges du Rhin aux rives de Mississippi : Histoire et récits de migrants juifs [From the Banks of the Rhine to the Shores of the Mississippi: History and Narratives of Immigrant Jews]. By Anny Bloch-Raymond. Paris: Michel Houdiard, 2009. 217 pages.

In September 1991 sociologist Anny Bloch-Raymond was in New York City visiting La Société israélite des Français de New York when one of its members showed her a New York Times article entitled "Small Town South Clings to Jewish History." The article noted that Jewish villagers were disappearing but that their cemeteries and synagogues were being preserved. Some German and Alsatian families who had settled in southern villages were named. As a researcher with France's National Center of Scientific Research, and as the author of several works on immigration to the United States, Bloch-Raymond was intrigued. She wanted to learn more about these German and Alsatian Jews, so she contacted the Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience in Jackson, Mississippi, which circulated her request for material. The twenty responses she received led to an exchange of information and to several trips to the United States, starting with a first visit to New Orleans in June 1992. In the course of these visits, Bloch-Raymond visited temples, cemeteries, and archives, and she interviewed numerous descendants of the original immigrants. They sought her help in learning about their family histories; and, in turn, they supplied her with letters, memoirs, and journals. Supplemented by state censuses, French departmental registries, passports, and references to numerous articles and books, *Des berges du Rhin aux rives de Mississippi* constitutes a rich portrait of this immigrant population from its arrival until recent times.

These Jews came from the French and German provinces bordering the Rhine, and they landed in two main waves, from 1830 to 1860 and again from 1880 to 1930. From 1830 to 1914 only about 10,000 Jews came from France and about 200,000 from Germany. Two-thirds of them chose to settle in New York, but about 10 to 12 percent chose the South (mainly Louisiana). Family connections, business prospects, land prices, and language all influenced choices. Most of the newcomers were fairly young and regarded immigration as an adventure. They saw this nation as a place where they could make their fortune and escape the poverty and prejudice they experienced at home.

Most were shopkeepers and artisans with some education. A majority of the new arrivals in the South settled first along the Mississippi and its tributaries. Only a minority of these Jews claimed in the departure registries to be peddlers, but many began their new lives that way. Some sold to the riverboats, others to the plantations along the river and the small settlements in the interior. Gradually, as the immigrants amassed capital, they settled down, opened small stores, and, as they prospered, moved to larger towns. Some of the more successful became factors and brokers, serving as lenders and intermediaries between growers and purchasers, and thus promoted the economic and commercial development of the South.

Bloch-Raymond's main objective is to show how the immigrants and their descendants adapted and how they forged a new life in the South. She examines several aspects of acculturation in cuisine, décor, and language. An especially significant topic is the role of religion in the lives of these families. Dispersed among small communities, Bloch-Raymond's Jews believed that their best chance for acceptance lay in minimizing their differences with their neighbors. Conversion was rare. These families' form of Judaism was largely devoid of ritual and observance and stressed ethics and charity instead, plus engagement in civic and synagogue activities. Coupled with an emphasis on the values they shared with their neighbors, rather than on theological differences, this orientation also served to demonstrate their loyalty to community, region, and country.

Such choices are unsurprising. Having emigrated to escape discrimination, these Jews did not want to replicate the problems that visibility provoked. In both France and Germany, anti-semitism had encouraged Jews to assimilate. Post-revolutionary France granted the Jews citizenship but urged them to practice their religion in private and act like Frenchmen in public. German Jews did not gain full civic equality until 1870, and even then found that citizenship was not enough to breach the barriers to mobility. Some had converted, but many turned to Reform Judaism in the hope that modernizing their faith would facilitate acceptance. Thus it was understandable that the immigrants from Germany would be Jewish in a way congruent with a need to win inclusion. Even if they had wanted to be observant, circumstances made it difficult to keep kosher, and Saturday was the main business day. Bloch-Raymond's interviewees generally felt that social integration was successful and that relations with their neighbors were cordial. Jews were nevertheless excluded from some social clubs and New Orleans Mardi Gras krewes. But interviewees were more likely to mention the Dreyfus affair than the lynching of Leo Frank, a phenomenon consistent with positive feelings about the New World.

Bloch-Raymond's interviewees were more ambivalent about the black-Jewish encounter. The interviewees stressed the respectful treatment given to black customers in their stores as well as the warm personal bonds formed with household servants. The immigrants and their progeny do not appear to have questioned the institutions of slavery or segregation, and they accepted the south-ern way of life. Despite sympathy for the victims of racial supremacy, most of these families stayed silent and neutral during the civil rights battles. Some Jews did not want to imperil their relationships with the white majority; some feared attacks on their homes or businesses from the Ku Klux Klan or the White Citizens Council. One interviewee put it succinctly: "The Jew of the South does not seek to be a martyr but to be accepted" (165).

*Des berges du Rhin aux rives de Mississippi* is to be commended for balancing theoretical discussions of assimilation, acculturation, and ethnicity with personal histories and anecdotes. A few errors should be noted, however. Ex-Klansman David Duke never became governor of Louisiana, though he did get 39 percent of the vote in the 1991 election. The author cites the nonexistent Article 14 of the Constitution as the source of religious freedom. The First Amendment of the Bill of Rights guarantees religious liberty; the Fourteenth Amendment "incorporates" that guarantee and makes it applicable to the states via the due process clause. Finally, as in any research involving interviews with subjects who have not been randomly selected, one has to wonder if these responses are representative of the larger group or reflect only the views of the people willing enough to respond. One might call this the "reunion phenomenon"; those who attend reunions feel positively about their school experience and their subsequent careers and lives. Aside from these minor problems, Bloch-Raymond has performed a worthwhile service in applying sociology to this segment of American Jewry. In presenting her findings in highly accessible French, *Des berges du Rhin aux rives de Mississippi* has also rendered easy the task of translation that this volume merits.

Helen Y. Herman, Brookline, MA

[Return/Home](#)