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Review of Leonard Barkan's *Berlin for Jews: A Twenty-First-Century Companion*

Abstract

Berlin for Jews: A Twenty-First-Century Companion seems to be directed at an insider community of Jews who care about Jewish history, especially those considering a trip to Germany. The book's meandering look at Berlin is broader and more nuanced than a travel guide, with close attention to how Jews of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries understood their own relationships to Jewishness. Still, it remains unclear who beyond a small subset of travelers will be interested in Leonard Barkan's writing on Berlin. That the author is not an expert in either German or Jewish Studies has both merits and drawbacks. As a professor of comparative literature, art and archaeology, classics, and English, Barkan has written a type of memoir for a general audience that scholars in German or Jewish Studies might not venture or desire to write. The first two chapters use a cemetery in Prenzlauer Berg and a neighborhood in Schöneberg as windows into specific eras of history. Chapters 3 through 5 present Barkan's own "special Jewish pantheon" of Berlin Jews: salon hostess Rahel Varnhagen, art collector James Simon, and writer Walter Benjamin, whose legacies are intertwined with the history, people, and places of Berlin. Barkan concludes with a brief discussion of Holocaust memorialization and tourism, with a few poignant pages on Jewish daily life in Nazi Germany. One highlight throughout is the book's emphasis on architecture and works of art. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

travel, James Simon, Rahel Varnhagen, Walter Benjamin

Disciplines

German Language and Literature | Jewish Studies

Comments

Review of *Berlin for Jews: A Twenty-First-Century Companion* By Leonard Barkan. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016.

Barkan, Leonard. *Berlin for Jews: A Twenty-First-Century Companion*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016. 191 pp.

Berlin for Jews: A Twenty-First-Century Companion seems to be directed at an insider community of Jews who care about Jewish history, especially those considering a trip to Germany. The book's meandering look at Berlin is broader and more nuanced than a travel guide, with close attention to how Jews of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries understood their own relationships to Jewishness. Still, it remains unclear who beyond a small subset of travelers will be interested in Leonard Barkan's writing on Berlin. That the author is not an expert in either German or Jewish Studies has both merits and drawbacks. As a professor of Comparative Literature, Art and Archaeology, Classics, and English, Barkan has written a type of memoir for a general audience that scholars in German or Jewish Studies might not venture or desire to write. The first two chapters use a cemetery in Prenzlauer Berg and a neighborhood in Schöneberg as windows into specific eras of history. Chapters three to five present Barkan's own "special Jewish pantheon" (153) of Berlin Jews: salon hostess Rahel Varnhagen, art collector James Simon, and writer Walter Benjamin, whose legacies are intertwined with the history, people, and places of Berlin. Barkan concludes with a brief discussion of Holocaust memorialization and tourism, with a few poignant pages on Jewish daily life in Nazi Germany. One highlight throughout is the book's emphasis on architecture and works of art.

Some of the most interesting questions raised by *Berlin for Jews* deal with the absence and presence, hiddenness and visibility, of Jews and Jewishness. As Barkan explains in the prologue, he, like many German Jews, once had a relationship to Jewishness that was complicated by deep ambivalence and a quest for upward mobility. Indeed, this book constitutes a self-proclaimed "therapeutic" quest to parse both personal and broader cultural ambivalence by means of strolls through Berlin, historical anecdotes, and self-critical humor. This takes different forms, for example: examining combinations of German and Hebrew in various gravestones; combing texts for the term "Jew" and its synonyms and euphemisms; marveling over the Jewish Address Books published in Berlin in 1929/30 and 1931, and positing their relevance for understanding minority positions more broadly. Taken together, the book's uneven methods of analysis do not offer a balanced or convincing narrative.

The discussion of places in the first two chapters is surprisingly illuminating and enjoyable. Even someone who is very familiar with Berlin and its Jewish sites will discover new details about individuals and families in the first chapter on the Schönhauser Allee cemetery. Barkan notes, however, that he does not provide a "convenient itinerary" for viewing the various graves discussed; those in search of specific gravesites may want to purchase the cemetery's extensive guide for six euros. (For a more straightforward and comprehensive itinerary of Jewish sites in Berlin, try Bill Rebigier's *Jewish Berlin*, which also covers the Schönhauser Allee cemetery.) Chapter two concentrates on the former residents of the Bayerisches Viertel (Bavarian Quarter), both Jewish and non-Jewish, to postulate a "School of Schöneberg" (69) in the vein of Raphael's Renaissance fresco, *School of Athens*. This chapter in particular calls attention to the fascinating architecture of this neighborhood while drawing on the author's knowledge of classical architecture.

In contrast to the first two geographically oriented chapters, chapters three to five proceed more or less chronologically. The eloquent chapters on Rahel Varnhagen and Walter Benjamin could serve as an engaging introduction to their biographies and writings for anyone with little

knowledge of these relatively well-known figures. The fourth chapter on philanthropic art collector James Simon is the most original and insightful, thanks in part to the author's art historical expertise, and perhaps also because little English-language scholarship exists on Simon. Vivid close readings of portraits and objects from Simon's collection, including the famous Nefertiti bust, make this chapter especially instructive. Here readers have cause to appreciate the book's glossy black-and-white photo gallery supplements.

This is not a proper travel guide, nor is it a conventional academic book. Because of its lack of citations and sparse bibliography, it would not be useful as a resource for research or teaching at the college level. The book's conversational tone is inviting, though at times heavy-handed and unscholarly. While assuming general familiarity with German and Jewish culture, Barkan writes for readers who are hungry for witty quips and gossipy anecdotes. *Berlin for Jews* does not include much direct discussion of the Holocaust, for, as Barkan notes, he "cannot bear to think about any particulars of the six million" (175). One is more likely to get a sense of precisely where in Berlin certain events took place, as in a travel guide, than the reasons why they occurred, which one might find in a history book. (Those in search of more scholarly histories of German Jews might look to the works of Michael Brenner, Michael Meyer, and Marion Kaplan, to name but a few.) Overall, the book offers an entertaining but unsatisfying approach that merely scratches the surface of Berlin's rich Jewish history and culture.

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