Review Essay

Surviving and Starting Life Anew:
Consequences of an Exodus

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What the four books discussed here have in common is that each is concerned with the consequences of a particular kind of exodus. Thus, because in 1290 Edward I expelled the Jews from England, the Jewish Naturalization Bill of 1753 became necessary, which—in its turn—set an emancipation process in motion culminating in Baron Lionel de Rothschild’s assumption of his seat in Parliament in 1858, without first being required to swear an oath as a Christian. This development from “ingrained English anti-Semitism” (2) to legal equality is the topic of Sheila A. Spector’s...
The Jews and British Romanticism. For her Random Destinations Lilian R. Furst selected novels and short stories by authors of the English-speaking world, who portray Jewish people leaving Germany or German-occupied territories in order to create a new life for themselves somewhere else. This emphasis on “those who got away” and on how they shaped their lives after the catastrophe might be unusual for texts about the Holocaust, but not for somebody like Furst, whose European Romanticism twenty-five years ago had already centered on self-creation. One author who, after an exodus, assuredly brought a new self-creation to perfection is Aharon Appelfeld. Still a child, he left behind his native Poland and his native Polish language to fashion a new life for himself in Israel after the Second World War. There, he gradually taught himself to write in the evolving modern Hebrew language. His novels, rarely touching the facts of the Holocaust but pondering on its psychological consequences, are the focus of Emily Miller Budick’s perceptive study. Finally, Pascale R. Bos contemplates both exodus and return when she delineates the problems of the (respectively) German- and Austrian-born Jewish emigrée writers Grete Weil and Ruth Klüger, who were trying to discuss the Nazi legacy with a younger generation of Germans in the 1980s and 1990s.

Historically, from the sixteenth century on, British identity tried to consolidate itself around the Anglican Church. Those who failed to conform (e.g., Irish-Catholics and Jews) were repudiated, as Spenser’s The Fairie Queene, for instance, attests. The fact that in the latter case English Jews “resembled” the British more than they did their ethnic or religious counterparts on the Continent was generally ignored. How did it come about, then, that by the later nineteenth century England, while retaining its established Church, granted a credible and reliable religious freedom to its non-Protestant, non-Anglo-Saxon subjects; and how secure did they feel in their freedom? As Sheila A. Spector’s collection of thirteen essays plus an annotated bibliography shows, Jewish and philo-semitic intellectuals at least felt secure enough to participate confidently in the dominant intellectual controversies of the day (e.g., about Bible translations, Hebrew language studies, and the sciences). Their participation does not signify, however, that there was no anti-Semitism in, say, the public press (see Frank Felsenstein on the magazine Punch) or the theater (see Michael Ragussis on stage Jews); but it is an indication that the acceptance of religious non-conformity among both Jews and Christians was growing.