

Jewish Archives, French History

by Pierre Birnbaum

Have France's Jews been excluded from the great national narrative? The fact is, their archives are as rich as they are significant, bearing witness to a very long history. Moreover, they provide a basis for writing the "external" as well as the "internal" history of Jewish communities.

Reviewed: Mathias Dreyfuss, *Aux sources juives de l'histoire de France*, Paris, CNRS Éditions, 2021, 414 pp., €26.

Mathias Dreyfuss' book forms part of a striking revival in the historiography of French Judaism, both within France and abroad, as reflected by the recent publication of several groundbreaking works. His book marks a milestone not only for the scope of its research, but above all for its originality.

Dreyfuss seeks to challenge the widely held view that "French Judaism is largely obscured from the national narrative". Many historians maintain that the Jewish experience has been largely removed from the national narrative, obscured to a greater or lesser extent in textbooks that take little account of its centuries-old presence; its memories are frequently ignored, as are its "places of memory", its emblems, its heroes, its monuments and its streets. In short, they claim that the national myth hardly takes it into account at all.

Archives, memories, graffiti

In order to challenge this interpretation, which he considers dominant, Mathias Dreyfuss sets out to examine archives not as historical sources, but "as objects whose own historicity needs to be studied", drawing inspiration from the contemporary "archival turn". The idea is to "transform archives from sources into subjects".

To this end, his book "retraces the path that led archivists and historians, both Jewish and non-Jewish, to turn Latin, Roman and French sources—be they literary, archaeological or archival—into sources of Jewish history throughout the 19th century", in order to show how "Jewish history was discreetly woven into the fabric of French history", while at the same time searching for Jewish sources at the heart of French history.

To do so, Dreyfuss first looks back at the competition held by the Royal Society of Arts and Sciences at Metz (1785-1787), which asked the question "Are there ways to make the Jews more useful and happier?" He shows how the authors of the various papers used socio-economic and administrative data that were unrelated to the often approximate quotations of Christian Hebraists. These papers, such as Abbé Grégoire's *An Essay on the Physical, Moral, and Political Reformation of the Jews*, drew on socio-demographic data such as the age at which people married, the type of food they ate, etc., all of which were useful sources for understanding the history of the Jews.

Dreyfuss then embarks on a wide-ranging investigation, delving into rarely accessed boxes containing the Trésor des Chartes archives, analyzing in detail their component items spanning the centuries, and looking back at receipts and catalogs relating to the Jews. He examines their classification, their transfer from one place to another, the composition of a thirteenth-century Hebrew-French glossary and its philological study. His research led him to the manuscripts of the National Library of France, the French National Archives, the Departmental Archives of Metz, Avignon, Dijon, Strasbourg and Bordeaux, as well as to notarial archives, in particular accounts books such as those of Héliot de Vesoul, each of which has been described in detail.

His painstaking work traces the dissemination of these archives, their various codes and their different classifications according to a given logic. Even the most informed reader will be astonished to discover the existence of so many documents, and will follow Dreyfuss in his sometimes humorous discoveries, such as the perilous reading of the graffiti in Issoudun's Tour Blanche, and the names and grievances of

Jewish prisoners from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, which Gérard Nahon describes as "the richest source of Hebrew graffiti ever found in France". He also revels in the chance discovery, in 1887, of Asterius' ring dating from late Antiquity, during grading work in Bordeaux.

Moving away from "historiographical ghettoization"

This long journey into the heart of French society explores its every nook and cranny; it reveals the existence of so many archaeological remains, tombs, skulls and skeletons scattered across the country, testifying to the distant roots of the Jewish presence, from Paris to Rouen, from Nancy to Marseille and Châteauroux, from Orange to Montpellier, from Dijon to Béziers.

The author of this compelling journey has reconstructed the history of the interpretation of Hebrew manuscripts dating from the medieval period, their transfer from one place to another, their rediscovery and analysis by learned rabbis, from Derenbourg to Franck and Munk, but also by a number of non-Jewish scholars such as Gustave Saige, Sylvestre de Sacy and Count de Guilhermy, who studied the Hebrew inscriptions in the "Jewish colony" on Rue Pierre-Sarrazin in Paris. Their erudite and innovative work was frequently published in the *Revue des études juives*, from its creation in 1880.

The author also highlights the essential contribution of the work of Abraham Cahen and Isidore Loeb (who condemned the "colossal falsification of Jewish history"), as well as Moïse Schwab, Moïse Ginsburger and Maurice Liber, and leading contemporary historians specializing in paleography and epigraphy, from Gérard Nahon to Colette Sirat, who have succeeded in lifting Jewish archaeology out of its "historiographical ghettoization".

In so doing, Mathias Dreyfuss tackles an essential question that we would like to address using Moses Ginsburger's quotation concerning Roger Clément's book on the Jews of Metz. Ginsburger considers this classic book to be "the external history of the Jewish community of Metz", and adds: "To fully study the history of the Jews of Metz, one would also have to study the inner history" of the Jews of Metz, based, for example, on the *Memorbücher*, memory books listing famous dead people and martyrs murdered since the Crusades, or through the *Pinkassim* archives of Jewish

communities that record their religious, economic, cultural and family activities, and their relations with the non-Jewish world.

This quotation is particularly relevant, as it places an "external" history—focused on society and on the role of the State, the administration and prominent figures, often recounted by non-Jewish scholars—in opposition to an "internal" history, based on Jewish sources, whether or not they were written in Hebrew.

Dreyfuss highlights the fragility of these internal archives, which are often poorly copied, and adds that the French Revolution dissolved the religious guilds, meaning that the *Pinkassim*, of which few pages remain, were abandoned. Apart from the example of Bordeaux, where these records have been preserved, the virtual absence of Alsatian community registers hinders the project of an "internal" history, particularly since the civil status reform of September 1792 led to an often radical change in patronymics and first names.

A "vengeful" historian?

The distinction between "internal" and "external" history is of particular relevance in the context of French exceptionalism and the construction of a centralized nation-state. This logic could have been given greater prominence in this book, even if it somewhat contradicts the starting hypothesis, since, from absolute monarchy to the revolutionary state (or the republican state), state centralization in France has, in the name of universalism, and to a greater extent than in other states more concerned with maintaining linguistic or religious particularities, eliminated all institutional forms of cultural specificity, in the name of "strong" citizenship.

From the French Revolution onwards, it seems to me that the question is framed in very different terms, at the expense of internal sources which are more difficult to access. Dreyfuss demonstrates his awareness of this homogenizing logic, but it would appear to have more serious consequences in contemporary times, which explain, perhaps more than he realizes, the very limited Jewish role in mainstream historiography, as well as the frequent refusal to give legitimacy to the Jewish dimension of the French nation.

The thesis defense of Robert Anchel, a former student of the *École des Chartes*, is a case in point. Anchel, whose work Dreyfuss refers to, presented a doctoral thesis

in 1928 entitled "Napoleon and the Jews. An Essay on the Relations between the French State and the Jewish Faith from 1800 to 1813".

In his unpublished thesis report, Albert Mathiez, the great historian of the French Revolution and supervisor of Anchel's thesis, defended the Emperor then ended his vociferous criticism of a work that was nonetheless innovative and based on previously unseen archives, by stating: "Mr Anchel undoubtedly has an excuse. He belongs to the race of the persecuted. He thought he was not only their historian, but also their avenger", thereby abruptly dismissing research which, for the first time, addressed the specifically Jewish dimension of the Napoleonic era—a dimension which, even today, is often neglected and misunderstood.

Other events in recent history also reflect a persistent relative silence, from the Dreyfus affair (first brought to our attention by Stephen Wilson) to Vichy, a period on which, apart from the work of Georges Wellers undertaken from outside the university, we had to wait for the works of Robert Paxton to grasp the truly anti-Semitic scale of the "dark years", which continued to be ignored by the first major university symposium organized on the subject in 1972.

Today, the history of the contemporary Jewish period is advancing by leaps and bounds—even if, little by little, as a result of administrative centralization, external sources are dwindling, while the internal traces of French Jewish history are slowly disappearing.

First published in laviedesidees.fr, February 16, 2023. Translated by Susannah Dale, with the support of Cairn.info. Published in booksandideas.net, October 10, 2024.