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BOOKSHELF

History's Eternal Flâneurs

The author's love affair with the city is tinged with tragedy, How could it not be? Berlin evinces at every turn the horrors of 1933-45. Willard Spiegelman reviews "Berlin for Jews" by Leonard Barkan.

By **WILLARD SPIEGELMAN**

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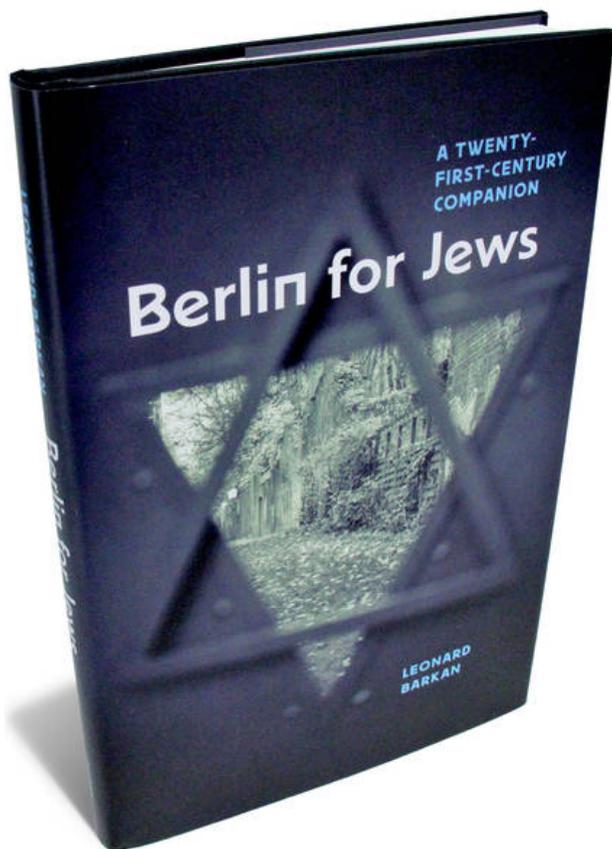
Theodor Adorno famously asked whether there could be poetry after Auschwitz. Here are a couple of comparable questions: After 1945, can there be a "Berlin for Jews"? Can a Jew be a Germanophile? In his learned, deeply personal, culturally astute and thoroughly unclassifiable book, Leonard Barkan tackles these questions and others that many Jews of a certain age, education and temperament have also pondered.

Mr. Barkan is a thoroughgoing secular Ashkenazi Jew. He is an avid consumer of gefilte fish and pastrami but also of fine German wines and white asparagus, a German favorite. Neither the shul, nor the Talmud, nor Zionism has ever attracted him. Like many humanists, he exchanged the traditional parsing of biblical texts for the study of classical ones, as well as Renaissance literature and art. But he also fell in love with the German language and later with unified, post-Wall Berlin itself.

"Berlin for Jews" is a memoir, a love song, an eccentric travel guide ("take this bus . . . go to this corner"), and a "Who's Who" of famous and obscure Jewish Berliners. It devotes two chapters to places—a cemetery and a residential district—and three to representative figures from the Enlightenment through World War II: the writer and *salonnière* Rahel Varnhagen; the businessman and philanthropist James Simon; and the philosopher Walter Benjamin. For this trio, the central questions concern assimilation and alienation, belonging and estrangement. The Jews in Mr. Barkan's book are cultured, well-heeled and well-educated, at the upper reaches of the social ladder. The Jews for whom he intends the book are cultured, educated, assimilated Americans who feel both the burden of the past and nostalgia for high Germanic culture.

A specter haunts the book: the specter of the Holocaust. Having hovered over the text and the reader's mind for 171 pages, it makes its appearance only at the end, in an epilogue. Mr. Barkan's love affair with Berlin is tinged with tragedy. And how could it not be? To any sentient visitor, Berlin evinces at every turn the horrors of 1933-45, both implicitly and explicitly, in the form of Peter Eisenman's Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe and Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum. Mr. Barkan admires both, in a qualified way, but urges visitors to make time for "less prominent memorials," like the Stolpersteine (stumbling stones), little brass blocks hammered into sidewalks that commemorate ordinary people with information about deportation and death or, in rare cases, escape and survival.

Earlier, he had taken us to the Schönhauser Allee Jewish burial ground, a landscaped graveyard in the midst of a bustling city, with its "thesaurus of Jewish family names" that counter the anonymity of the Holocaust. Jewish Berliners constructed their funeral monuments in a variety of styles, from the simplest to the most ornate. Their 12-acre



necropolis testifies to the ways in which, from the 18th century through the first third of the 20th, Jews assimilated into a society that had begun to grant them privileges previously denied. The cemetery serves as the symbol of a community of Landsmänner conscious of being apart. Inscriptions in both Hebrew and German testify to double loyalties.

PHOTO: WSJ

BERLIN FOR JEWS

By Leonard Barkan

Chicago, 191 pages, \$27.50

Then we are taken to a place where some of these people lived, the Bayerisches Viertel (Bavarian Quarter) in the Schöneberg district, a kind of theme park built around 1900. Mr. Barkan notes that the quarter's "turrets and mansard roofs" evoke the Bavarian towns that are memorialized in its "expressly minted street names." He's equally illuminating about a literary monument, the 1929-30 "Jewish Address Book for Greater Berlin," which "paints a unique picture of a certain historical moment that was as proud as it was fragile." The "Jewish Address Book" unrolls a dramatis personae of the famous (Erich Fromm, Wilhelm Reich, Kurt Weill, Billy Wilder, Albert Einstein) and the bit players, people like the now forgotten satirical writer Alexander Roda Roda and Ilse Blumenthal-Weiss, a poet and physical therapist who corresponded with Rilke, survived the war and ended up on Long Island.

With his three central figures, Mr. Barkan homes in on the ambiguities of belonging, alienation and merely being tolerated. Rahel Varnhagen (1771-1833) presided over a salon in which very few of her coreligionists made an appearance. Baptized at 43, she provokes an essential question: What did it mean to be a Jew? Mendelssohn and Heine are the musical and literary versions of the same identity problem. These Jews defined European civilization; at the same time they were, as Jews, invisible, although even

baptized members of newly Christianized families (Karl Marx included) were always considered Jews in their neighbors' eyes.

Art collector James Simon (1851-1932) was “the cotton king”—literally a rags-to-riches success story from the classic shmatte trade. He donated his holdings to the major Berlin museums, funded archaeological digs in the Near East and supported Jewish charities at home. But he was also derided by some as a “Kaiserjude”: Kaiser Wilhelm was his admirer. Simon even escorted the monarch to the synagogue, though he seldom entered it on his own.

The most famous of Mr. Barkan's trio, Walter Benjamin, was the most divided. Born to privilege in 1892, and a suicide in 1940 in his attempt to flee the Nazis, Benjamin has become a guru to many academics: He is best known for his musings on the fractured qualities of modernity and urban life. His tragedy was that he was so thoroughly a European that he could never belong in either America or Palestine, as his correspondence with Gershom Scholem shows so vividly. The quintessential flâneur—the strolling observer—Benjamin was always alienated as he wandered, through Berlin as a child and Paris as an adult.

Mr. Barkan asks wistfully whether every flâneur is a Jew (certainly not Baudelaire or Whitman or the great New Yorker writer Joseph Mitchell) and whether every Jew is at heart a flâneur. For Mr. Barkan, Benjamin exemplifies “this remarkable Jewish phenomenon of absorption, assimilation, oblivion, and denial.” He is, we may infer, the author's tragic stand-in.

Mr. Spiegelman's most recent book is “Senior Moments: Looking Back, Looking Ahead.”

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