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Not Quite the Mayflower Generation - But Close

Histoire des Americains juifs [A history of American Jewry], by Françoise S. Ouzan, Brussels: Andre Versailles, 2008, 262 pp. [French]

Reviewed by Michelle Mazel

Françoise Ouzan is an associate professor (*maître de conference*) at the University of Reims. She is currently an affiliated scholar at the Goldstein-Goren Diaspora Research Center of Tel Aviv University and an associate researcher at the French Research Center in [Jerusalem](#). For many years she has been studying the history of Jews in America. In 1995 she published *Les Juifs dont l'Amerique ne voulait pas* (Those Jews America did not want).[1] She went on to develop that theme in "Anti-Semitism in the U.S. at the End of the War and in Its Aftermath: Attitudes toward Displaced Persons." In this article she has some harsh words: "In 1939, two-thirds of Americans expressed their opposition to special quotas for Jewish children, despite their awareness that they would be doomed to severe persecution." [2] In 2007 she wrote a far more positive essay on contemporary Jewish identity in the United States.[3] The recently published *A history of American Jewry* is her most ambitious work to date. It is a two-pronged attempt: on the one hand, it intends to present in an orderly manner how Jews came to America and settled there. On the other, it attempts to explain what made American Jewry a success and what are the problems it is facing today, from assimilation to mixed marriages, the growing strength of Orthodox Jewry, the challenge of Zionism, and the existence of Israel. In an interview she gave to a leading French Jewish organization, Ouzan explained that *A history of American Jewry* is an attempt to decrypt the complex connection between "the reality of the Jewish presence in the United States and its representations, sometimes malevolent and often mythical." [4]

In her meticulously researched book she follows the changing fortunes of the newcomers. The first Jews landed on the shores of Manhattan more than 350 years ago in 1654, a mere thirty-four years after the arrival of the Pilgrim Fathers and well before the many other ethnic groups which coalesced to make present-day America. American Jewry started out with a very small group of Marranos (Sephardic Jews forcibly converted to Christianity but who continued to keep their faith in secret) who came to the New World to escape persecution and practice Judaism openly. They were not welcomed with open arms, but managed to endure and thrive, albeit in small numbers.

The German Jews came next, driven out in the early nineteenth century from countries such as the Kingdom of Bavaria by discriminatory taxation and other measures. It was not until the end of the century that pogroms and persecutions would drive roughly two million Russian, Rumanian, and Polish Jews to the shores of the U.S. The Jews in America never grew to really significant numbers - at the very most 5 percent of the population between the two World Wars. Today they number just over five million, representing little more than 2 percent of the population. And yet their impact on all fields of life has been enormous. According to Ouzan, one third of all American Nobel prize winners up to 1989 were Jews. Likewise, in the 1998 edition of *Who's Who in America*, Jews were heavily over-represented in the medical sciences by a margin of 308 percent; in the field of dentistry by 299 percent; in mathematics by 283 percent; in legal professions by 263 percent; in non-medical sciences by 231 percent; in contemporary literature by 108 percent; and lastly in arts and music by 89 percent (101).

It has not been easy. Jews did not leave all their demons behind in the old continent. They had to fight

religious and social anti-Semitism and claw their way up rung by rung. They had to face open or de facto discrimination, such as the quotas put in place by prestigious universities which included Columbia, Harvard, and all major medical schools. According to Ouzan, the quota system disappeared only in the 1960s. America has its very own brand of blood libel, with the lynching of Leo Frank, a Jew falsely accused of "despoiling" and murdering a young white girl. In the 1920s Henry Ford, one of the most powerful men in America, repeatedly attacked an "international Jewish conspiracy against Christian America" in his paper *The Dearborn Independent*. Anti-Jewish bias slammed the doors in the face of desperate Jewish immigrants as the Second World War loomed and kept them firmly closed when Jewish "displaced persons" were seeking a country of refuge after the war.

Fascinating though the history of one ethnic minority's successful integration may be, the book's main interest lies in its second part: it is devoted to an analysis of what contributed to this success and, based on a comparison between Jewish and American cultures, a prognosis of the future of the Jews in America. For Ouzan, the way the Jews, a minority group, have managed to become integrated without losing their identity is nothing short of remarkable. In fact, she wrote in an essay on contemporary Jewish identity in the U.S. that the literal translation of the title of her book, "A history of Americans who are Jewish," is intended to show that the American component of that identity is now stronger than the Jewish component. Ouzan, who is French, also makes the very interesting comment that American Jews enjoy a legitimate collective existence in the United States, which is a federation of states, while in a European country such as France, with its strong centralist traditions, this principle of communal organization is castigated as constituting a communitarian regression. At the same time, while the "obligation" to remember the Holocaust is perceived as a cumbersome duty in France, through the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum the history of the Holocaust has been freely woven into the universal values of America (234). The book ends on a fairly ominous note. Anti-Semitism is again raising its head: In a survey carried out in 2003 more than 17 percent of the population - between thirty and forty million Americans - held negative views about the Jews, Jewish power, and specifically "Jewish Wall Street." Furthermore, anti-Semitic incidents on campuses are on the rise, often under the guise of anti-Zionism. This reviewer is very much afraid that "Jewish Wall Street" will lead to even greater Jew-bashing in the coming year.

Histoire des Américains juifs is altogether a book worthy of note.

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Notes

[1]. Brussels: Editions Complexe, 1995.

[2]. The article can be found at www.tau.ac.il/antisemitism/asw/2003-4/ouzan.htm.

[3]. "De l'identité juive contemporaine aux États-Unis " *Bulletin du Centre de recherche français de Jérusalem*, 18 (2007).

[4]. "Américains juifs ou Juifs américains," interview with Marc Knobel, on the website of the Crif, Conseil Représentatif des Institutions Juives de France, <http://www.crif.org.s/>

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