Matt Singer

Assignment: Annotated Bibliography

American Studies 531

Dr. Simon Bronner

June 12, 2011

**HISTORIC B’NAI JACOB SYNAGOGUE, MIDDLETOWN, PA, AND OTHER VERNACULAR GOTHIC REVIVAL SYNAGOGUES©**

**ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Chiat, Marilyn J. 1997. *America’s Religious Architecture: Sacred Places for Every Community*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc. 465 pp.

Marilyn Chiat examines houses of worship throughout the United States, which she divides into nine cultural and geopolitical regions, and discusses the blending of ethnic traditions with local building styles and materials. Some 500 houses of worship are profiled in this book, including three synagogues built—as was B’nai Jacob in Middletown, PA—in a vernacular Gothic Revival style in small towns in the decades before and after the turn of the twentieth century. *America’s Religious Architecture* also includes entries for high-style Gothic Revival synagogues such as Chizuk Amuno Synagogue in Baltimore and Temple Mickve Israel in Savannah, as well as vernacular Gothic Revival churches built for Christian congregations circa 1900 in small, inland communities akin to Middletown. Chiat notes that “Many immigrants…came to view the Gothic Revival religious structures, which were so visible in ports of entry, as being appropriately ‘Christian’ while at the same time typically ‘American’…Even Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe settling in small market towns began to adapt the Gothic style, minus one important element, the steeple” (14). Entries include details regarding the origin, architectural features, and social history of each structure. Chiat explains that the intent of her book is “to pay tribute to historic places of worship located throughout the 50 states and to appraise them for the contribution they make and roles they play within their societies—enhancers of the built environment, cornerstones of many communities, and evidence of this nation’s ethnic and religious diversity” (4).

Gruber, Samuel D. 2003. *American Synagogues: A Century of Architecture and Jewish Community*. New York: Rizzoli. 239 pp.

An especially well-illustrated volume, *American Synagogues* examines twentieth-century American synagogues with a particular focus on high-style structures built by well-known architects including Percival Goodman, Walter Gropius, Philip Johnson, and Frank Lloyd Wright. In this respect, Gruber’s *American Synagogues* might seem to offer little that resonates with the history and architecture of synagogues such as B’nai Jacob. However, Gruber devotes a chapter to older traditions in American synagogue construction, and notes that “Although the traditional Gothic style, so popular in church architecture, was not frequently used for urban synagogues, a vernacular Gothic, practiced by local carpenters and masons, was common for small-town congregations, especially in the West from the 1840s to the 1880s.” More broadly, Gruber places the development and evolution of the American synagogue in the context of changes in the American Jewish community and its organization, and the relationship of that community to American culture and society as a whole. In addition, Gruber posits and provides evidence for the important but easily overlooked truth that synagogue architecture has not only been shaped by Jewish Americans but has helped to create and form the way Jewish Americans perceive themselves and are perceived by others.

*Historic B’nai Jacob Synagogue: One Hundred Year Anniversary Celebration*. 2004. Middletown, PA: B’nai Jacob Synagogue. 145 pp.

Published in conjunction with the centennial of the incorporation of B’nai Jacob in 1904, this volume includes a brief history of the congregation and description of its synagogue, which was built in 1906. Included are contemporary photographs of the synagogue’s interior as well as historic photographs of the congregation’s spiritual leaders, its founders—including one showing the group with an imposing pile of bricks secured from a local brickyard—and a copy of the congregation’s article of incorporation. Most fascinating—albeit occasionally frustrating in their idiosyncratic transcription—are a series of interviews conducted by Gertrude Singer Nitzberg (a descendant of one of the congregation’s founders)—in 1975. These interviews offer a glimpse into the everyday lives and concerns of B’nai Jacob’s founders and the workings and activities of their synagogue. An interview conducted by Larry Kapenstein—now the synagogue’s treasurer and *shamas* (administrator of daily affairs)—in 1998 with Jake Zuck, the son of a B’nai Jacob founder and longtime caretaker of the synagogue, provides great insight into the construction and maintenance of B’nai Jacob, the synagogue’s place in the life of its community, and its evolution from an Orthodox congregation led by trained rabbis to a lay-led organization that is Conservative in its worship style.

Katz, Dovid. *Lithuanian Jewish Culture*. 2004/2010. Vilnius, Lithuania: Vilnius University. 398.

Dovid Katz’s *Lithuanian Jewish Culture* is the most comprehensive extant exploration of *Litvak* (Lithuanian Jewish) history, religious expression, and intellectual life. Dovid Katz focuses largely on religious, academic, intellectual, and cultural developments among elite Lithuanian Jews. Panevezys, the city whose surrounding region was the point of origin for the members of B’nai Jacob, was a center for Jewish scholarship, in general, and the *Haskalah* (Jewish Enlightenment), specifically. It is difficult to say, however, how much influence the accomplishments and activities of Panevezys’s scholars and thinkers had on those living in neighboring towns such as Pusalotas, Pumpenai, and Naujamiestis. One suspects that, for most residents of these towns, the impact was negligible. Looking beyond the borders of present-day Lithuania, Katz notes that the Litvak cultural sphere extended into what is now Latvia, Belarus, and northern Ukraine (54). Jews in these outlying regions identified as Litvaks even though they lived far from Lithuania proper.

Krinsky, Carol Herselle. *Synagogues of Europe: Architecture, History, Meaning*. 1985/1996. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, Inc. (original 1985 edition published by Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press). 461 pp.

Carol Herselle Krinsky’s book provides a comprehensive overview of synagogue architecture ranging from modest vernacular structures to spectacular, architect-designed, high-style examples in regions ranging from the Iberian Peninsula to Scandinavia, the United Kingdom, Italy, Austria-Hungary and the Balkans, and Eastern Europe and the former U.S.S.R. The book is divided into two parts, the first dealing with the origin and nature of the synagogue. Krinsky compares the synagogue as a form (albeit one that changed dramatically over time and space) to the Temple of Jerusalem and to churches and mosques, discusses the effect of liturgical furnishings on the building's form, and investigates whether there is a Jewish style in architecture, the importance of the designer's religion, the limits that individual “host” societies imposed on Jewish building, and the public and private images presented by the Jewish minority in its religious architecture. The chapter presenting histories and descriptions of the synagogues of Eastern Europe and the former U.S.S.R.—which is most pertinent to the study of B’nai Jacob and synagogues of similar history—includes numerous photographs of the wooden synagogues found in the countryside as well as the masonry synagogues of the larger, more cosmopolitan cities. Architectural drawings make clear key elements of traditional interior compositions such as the Holy Ark placed on the eastern wall of the synagogue and the more centrally placed *bimah* (reader’s platform). These compositions were replicated in synagogues such as B’nai Jacob, which were built by Orthodox Jews who immigrated to the United States from Eastern Europe.

National Register of Historic Places Inventory—Nomination Form [for B’nai Jacob Synagogue, Middletown, PA]. 1985. United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service, National Register of Historic Places Inventory. 1985.

This document includes a description of B’nai Jacob and a statement of its significance; much of these texts has since filtered into the synagogue’s centennial celebration publication and, later, its website. Of particular interest is an addendum submitted in August, 1997, by Bruce Bazelon based on an interview with B’nai Jacob member Betty Orstein in which he learned that “the congregation came from the town of Poucelat [Pusalotas], Kovno, Lithuania,” and that B’nai Jacob was built to resemble the synagogue in Pusalotas [editorial note: the Pusalotas synagogue was a wooden structure that was destroyed by fire in 1913 and replaced with a brick structure, made possible, at least in part, by contributions from the members of B’nai Jacob]. Mr. Bazelon notes that “Virtually the entire Central Pennsylvania Jewish community of the 1880–1900 period came from Kovno [state] in Lithuania,” but that “this is the first time I have heard that the Middletown congregation was from one town.” The addendum concludes with Mr. Bazelon explaining that “Mrs. Orstein’s comment that the congregation in Middletown used to say ‘Poucelat in Middletown’ when referring to the synagogue should be part of its file.”

Raphael, Marc. *The Synagogue in America: A Short History*. New York: New York University Press, 2011. 224 pp.

In contrast to Samuel Gruber’s *American Synagogues: A Century of Architecture and Jewish Community*—which, as its title implies, focuses on modern and contemporary structures—Marc Raphael’s *The Synagogue in America* examines the changing architecture and role of the synagogue in the Jewish-American community over the course of three centuries. Raphael draws from the records of some 125 Jewish congregations. His documentation and analysis encompasses architecture, worship styles across the various American-Jewish movements or “streams,” the role of the rabbi, methods and goals of congregational fundraising, ongoing changes in liturgy, and the impact of feminism.

Weiner, Deborah R. *Coalfield Jews: An Appalachian History*. Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2006. 234 pp.

*Coalfield Jews* explores two historic events that took place between 1880 and 1920—the coal-boom that transformed central Appalachia and the migration of some 2.5 million Jews from Eastern Europe to the United States. In *Coalfield Jews*, Weiner focuses on communities in southern West Virginia, eastern Kentucky, and southwestern Virginia. Like their co-religionists in Middletown, PA, and other inland areas, Jewish immigrants to the coalfields found success as retailers and established numerous small but flourishing Jewish communities. Weiner’s explores the settlement patterns of Jews in the coal regions of Appalachia, how they made their place within a surprisingly receptive dominant culture, interacted with their non-Jewish neighbors, and maintained a strong Jewish identity deep in the heart of a region with few Jews. *Coalfield Jews* includes personal statements culled from oral histories and archival sources. Based on her research, Weiner makes a number of assertions about the Jews of the Appalachian coal region that are pertinent to the study of B’nai Jacob and synagogues built and sustained in similar circumstances: that Jews who settled in the small towns of the coal region were more likely to come from rural areas in Eastern European; were more likely to have arrived in the United States before 1900; were more likely to have a background in petty trade; and that “almost half of those whose origins were identified hailed from two places: Lithuania and Hungary. These immigrants also arrived in the coalfields earliest, accounting for more than half of those who came before 1900. Three factors contribute to their predominance: the overrepresentation of Lithuanians and Hungarians in the early stages of Jewish migration from Eastern Europe, the tendency of early Jewish immigrants to move away from U.S. port cities more readily than later immigrants, and the impact of chain migration” (15). While Hungarian Jews were not part of the demographic make-up of the Jewish community of Middletown, the balance of Weiner’s statements correspond directly to the European background and American experience of Middletown’s Jews. Weiner later states that “Like the German Jews before them, Eastern Europeans who journeyed beyond major cities often started as peddlers and then opened retail establishments. Their economic profile more closely resembled their German Jewish predecessors than their big city relatives” (18). This information is relevant to the study of vernacular Gothic Revival synagogues as research conducted to date indicates that German Jews in outlying areas also built small houses of worship in the Gothic Revival style.

Weissbach, Lee Shai. *Jewish Life in Small-Town America: A History*. 2005. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press. 435 pp.

Although published scholarship devoted to American Jewish history is vast and multifaceted, Lee Shai Weissbach’s volume is the only existing comprehensive portrait of small-town Jewish life in America. Weisbach examines some 490 communities ranging in size from 100 to 1000 Jews in a timeframe beginning in the mid-nineteenth century and ending with World War II. Included in Weissbach’s study are statistics for Middletown, the Jewish community of which peaked in 1927 with 100 individuals (346); nearby Harrisburg had just 900 Jews as late as 1907 (354). Weissbach argues that that smaller Jewish communities were not simply miniature versions of those in larger towns and cities but were instead alternative kinds of communities in many respects. In regard to synagogues, Weissbach notes that “While other American Jewish congregations were building elaborate Moorish houses of worship, others, though perhaps no less confident of their place in the local environment, were choosing to build synagogues that more nearly resembled the churches of their Christian neighbors” (181). She continues by noting that “Gothic architecture, with its characteristic pointed arches, was too much associated with the medieval Catholic Church to become tremendously popular with Jewish congregations, but some Jewish groups that wished to have their houses of worship fit seamlessly with the local ecclesiastical building stock used elements of this style, nonetheless.”

Zelinsky, Wilbur. 1977. “The Pennsylvania Town: An Overdue Geographical Account.” *Geographical Review* 67: pp. 127–147.

Middletown fits many–to-most of Wilbur Zelinsky’s parameters and characteristics for the “Pennsylvania town”: it was established before 1870 and its center is dense, with buildings—often clad in red brick—of residential and commercial use sitting “cheek by jowl” in close proximity to the sidewalk and street (pp. 131–132). Zelinsky shares an observation that could be otherwise overlooked or dismissed when considering B’nai Jacob. He notes that “Within the [Pennsylvania] towns, an appreciable percentage of the brick structures are painted periodically, presumably to help protect the surface, a rather uncommon practice outside this study area. Occasionally, white, yellow, or other paints are applied, but in most instances a rather bright brick-red pigment is used, thus reinforcing the general rufosity of the typical Pennsylvania Town” (133).

Zimiles, Murray. *Gilded Lions and Jeweled Horses: The Synagogue to the Carousel, Jewish Carving Traditions*. 2007. Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press in association with the American Folk Art Museum, New York. 171 pp.

Murray Zimiles traces the work of Jewish woodcarvers—skilled in creating the elaborately crafted arks and bimahs found in the carved and painted interiors of Eastern European synagogues—who immigrated to the United States in the late nineteenth century. Many of these immigrant woodcarvers applied their talents to carving carousel horses, thus the title of the exhibition and its catalogue. Dr. Vivian Mann of the Jewish Museum and the Jewish Theological Seminary, both in New York, contributes an essay devoted to the development and characteristics of the Eastern European synagogue (pp. 1–13). Included are historic photos showing the interiors—featuring the Holy Ark (the cabinet in which the Torah is stored)—of Eastern European synagogues; the majority of the synagogues depicted fall within the Litvak cultural sphere. Pages 113 to 135 are devoted to large, full-color illustrations of the sculptural group that typically sits atop the Holy Ark: the Decalogue flanked by two rampant lions.

© Matthew F. Singer