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Book Review of, Embracing a Western Identity: Jewish Oregonians, 1849 - 1950 by Ellen Eisenberg

Natan M. Meir
Portland State University

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EMBRACING A WESTERN IDENTITY: JEWISH OREGONIANS, 1849–1950

by Ellen Eisenberg

Oregon State University Press, Corvallis, 2015.
Photographs, illustrations, tables, notes, bibliography,
index. 304 pages. \$24.95, paper.

Ellen Eisenberg's *Embracing a Western Identity* is a gift not only to historians of American Jewry, Oregon and the Pacific Northwest, and the American West but also to all scholars of local history and minority communities. In its thoughtful, elegant approach, Eisenberg's book is a model of how to write local history — and I write “local” advisedly, since this is really a study of the Portland Jewish community. Eschewing the strictly chronological narrative to which many similar works adhere, Eisenberg guides readers through a century of Jewish life in Oregon by way of five discrete themes — Jews as Oregon pioneers and founders, migration patterns and ethnic composition, the question of a Jewish political sensibility, the trajectory of Zionism in Portland, and the issue of race — as well as one central institution in Portland Jewish life: Neighborhood House. Throughout, she demonstrates a mastery of the relevant scholarship in Portland and Oregon history as well as American Jewish history. Eisenberg draws the requisite lines between Oregon Jewry and patterns in western and U.S. Jewish history that it exemplifies. But she is more intent on showing readers where those lines diverged: where the story of Oregon's Jews — which, after about 1900, is to say Portland's Jews — is not what we might expect it to be.

The book's initial chapter explores the early days of the Jewish presence in Oregon, which Eisenberg explains left a lasting impression in collective memory of Jews as “pioneers and native sons [and] fostered acceptance and paved the way for civic and political leadership” (p. 49). In her sweeping tour de force of a second chapter, Eisenberg analyzes the idiosyncratic migration patterns characteristic of western

Jewish communities that are at variance with patterns in eastern states, which have come to stand in for all of American Jewry. Drawing on a wide array of sources, including a careful and insightful evaluation of oral histories of Portland Jewish women, Eisenberg's analysis, a consummate example of immigrant history, paints a messier — and more accurate — picture of the ethnic and religious makeup of Portland Jewry than we have seen before. The complexities include the fact that a good number of Jewish migrants to Portland hailed from the German-ruled Polish province of Posen, which enabled them to serve as a bridge between the founding German-Jewish immigrants and the later wave of immigrants from the Russian Empire and Romania. Eisenberg effectively identifies the roles played by religious sensibilities, class identity, and ethno-geographic background in the sometimes-complex Jewish institutional landscape of early-twentieth century Portland. Among other important factors, she points to the functions of self-selection in migration — only those with “a relatively modernist outlook” would choose Portland over more traditional communities — and of many immigrants' previous adaptation to modernity in the cities of the southern Pale of Settlement (p. 72).

Eisenberg's chapter on Neighborhood House, a settlement house created in the early twentieth century by acculturated Jewish women to help immigrants adjust to their new lives, explores the original goals of the institution and how they changed over time in dynamic response to the changing self-image of each of the two groups and their mutual relationship. In contrast to the collective memory expressed in oral histories that document South Portland as a Jewish enclave, Eisenberg reminds us that South Portland was a diverse place and that Neighborhood House accordingly served an increasingly diverse constituency. In chapter 4, Eisenberg charts Jewish political sensibilities in Portland, arguing that while at times Portland's immigrant Jewish community made political choices similar to those of its non-Jewish socio-

economic peer groups — and distant from the establishment politics of elite Jewish politicians — at important junctures patricians and immigrants drew together in what might be called a progressive Jewish politics. As the chapter 5 title suggests, “A Western Exception” documents why, unlike other western cities such as San Francisco, a strong anti-Zionist movement never emerged in Portland. Eisenberg points to the crucial role of Rabbi Stephen Wise, who served in Portland only briefly but left a deep imprint on communal sensibilities. The final chapter of the book explores Portland Jews’ relationship to the city’s racial minorities — Nikkei and African-Americans — arguing that “although Jewish Oregonians had a history of expressing support for civil rights in the abstract, negotiating local issues . . . continued to present challenges” (p. 215).

Eisenberg’s vibrant prose draws in readers, and her authorial voice is not only persuasive but also evinces sympathy to her subjects.

NATAN M. MEIR

Portland State University

THE JEWISH OREGON STORY, 1950–2010

by Ellen Eisenberg

Oregon State University Press, Corvallis, 2016.
Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. 336 pages.
\$24.95, paper.

This detailed study of Jewish life and activities in Oregon focuses primarily on their experiences as an ethnic community in Portland where the vast majority of Jews in the state reside. The narrative takes the Jewish story from that of a small, fairly isolated group to its present position as an active and recognized force in Oregon society. Ellen Eisenberg traces how the community developed its local history and identity as a self-conscious social group in Portland. She gives particular attention to how women shifted their personal identities and actions from domestic to public spheres. Then she uses Jewish women’s ties to the non-sectarian League of Women Voters

to demonstrate their shift to embracing the changes in the roles of middle-class American women during the past six decades.

In Portland, the analysis posits two broad themes as changing the local social situation. First, it shows how the rising Black Power movement and calls for Black Nationalism pushed Jews and other liberals away from the broad national civil rights movement in the late 1960s. At the same time, but not necessarily related to that shift, an increase in young, college-educated Jews moved into the Pacific Northwest. This brought more secular people into the community, and by 2000, only one third of the Jews claimed to have any religious affiliation while nearly half of the community reported having only a cultural ethnic identity. This influx of outsiders nudged the staid, established ethnic leaders to shift their goals and tactics gradually in order to incorporate the newcomers.

These two trends occurred while urban renewal destroyed most of the historic South Portland Jewish neighborhood. This forced the residents of that area to move into two other parts of the city, as they resettled in communities on the southwest and northwest sides of the city. As the renewal razed the long-established neighborhood, its citizens worked to gather and memorialize its history through reminiscences and interviews with long-time residents. The author uses much of this material to show how physical disruption of the traditional ethnic neighborhood and the increasing social changes brought a new acceptance of Jews in Portland. The author describes one phase in the story as looking outward and joining local reforms such as school desegregation, civic work with the League of Women Voters, and membership in formerly exclusively non-Jewish clubs.

Eisenberg then demonstrates that the 1967 Six Day War abruptly ended this move toward community involvement as the Israeli victory brought a wave of ethnic pride. The narrative notes that this event “came to represent a watershed in American Jewish history; in its wake Israel came to occupy the center of what it meant to be an American Jew” (p. 170). This brought a renewed interest in international ethnic matters, particularly the treatment of Soviet Jewry and