

THOMAS E. CASTALDI lives in Fort Wayne, Indiana, where he is Allen County Historian. He is the author of three books about the Wabash & Erie Canal, the host of northeast Indiana public radio's "On the Heritage Trail,"

a historian for the Wabash & Erie Canal Interpretative Center at Delphi, Indiana, and the moderator of the Wabash & Erie Canal Towpath Trail project.



Jewish Communities on the Ohio River A History

By Amy Hill Shevitz

(Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2007. Pp. xi, 266. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$50.00.)

Amy Hill Shevitz takes as her subject Jewish life in twenty-four towns lying along the Ohio River between Pittsburgh and Cairo, Illinois, including Madison, Evansville, and Mount Vernon in Indiana. Quintessentially urban people, Jewish immigrants and their descendants tended to make their new American homes in large cities. Accordingly, both scholarly and popular interpretations of the Jewish experience are conditioned by its predominantly urban character. Until recently, Jewish communities outside of large population centers attracted little scholarly concern. Except for Cincinnati, Louisville, Pittsburgh, Evansville, and Wheeling, the communities in Shevitz's study were small to midsized towns that presented unique challenges to their Jewish citizenry. Lee Shai Weisbach addressed these issues in his definitive *Jewish Life in Small-Town America* (2005), published shortly before Shevitz completed her manuscript. Shevitz's book thus plows through some freshly cul-

tivated territory. Still, the reader interested particularly in Jewish life in any of these twenty-four Ohio River communities will find informative accounts of local history, lay and religious personalities, economic strategies, religious observance, communal organizations, anti-Semitism, and the social and economic linkages between the communities.

Ten relatively brief chapters discuss the evolution and decline of Jewish life along the Ohio River from the earliest settlement of German and Alsatian Jews in the nineteenth century to the present. The post-World War II period, Shevitz contends, set in motion irreversible social and economic changes to which Jews outside of metropolitan centers could not adapt in the long term. Outmigration from town to city, declining Jewish birth rates, a corresponding atrophy in synagogue membership in small and midsized towns, the changing farm economy, and the inability of merchants and commercial establish-

ments (the economic core of Jewish life in the twenty-four towns) to compete with national retail chains doomed the Jewish future in communities of modest size.

Shevitz argues that her twenty-four communities constitute a distinct region where the germination of middle-class American values and emergent pluralism dovetailed with the values and aspirations of the first German-Jewish settlers. Jewish newcomers in the region set their course on fitting into their communities by participating in civic life and earning the respect of their non-Jewish neighbors. Shevitz suggests that Judaism was thus transformed into an American religion. Yet these and other features are not unique to the region, as they were reproduced across the United States wherever Jewish settlements emerged. German Jews, emancipated from European ghetto life by political changes in the German states and embracing the liberalizing trends of Reform Judaism, realized their goal of incorporation into the social and economic life of the new country. Eastern European Jews, arriving later in the nineteenth century, also managed, though less smoothly, the adjustment process both within and beyond the locales the author examines.

Commendably, Shevitz observes that anti-black violence was a much more powerful force than anti-Semitism, even with the deepening vilification of Jews in the 1920s and 1930s. She cites Evansville, Indiana, and Cairo, Illinois, in particular as places where racism against African Americans “diverted much attention from the Jews” (p. 168). One could easily extend these examples. Of the 1893 dedication of Temple Israel’s new building on the main street of Paducah, Kentucky, Shevitz writes that it “announced the Jews’ central place in Paducah’s life” (p. 121). In that year, as well as in 1892, two black men were lynched in Paducah, and two more suffered the same fate in 1916. These atrocities remind us that narratives of immigrant success, such as those Shevitz effectively documents, co-existed with a grim history of anti-black brutality and the gross inequities of a racial caste system that also flourished in the Ohio Valley.

JACK GLAZIER, professor of anthropology at Oberlin College, Ohio, is currently completing a book on African American life and race relations in Hopkinsville, Kentucky.

