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Mark K. Bauman, *Editor*

Rachel Heimovics Braun, *Managing Editor*

Dana M. Greene, *Book Review Editor*

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Book Review

Jewish 'Junior League': The Rise and Demise of the Fort Worth Council of Jewish Women. Hollace Ava Weiner. College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2008, 188 pages.

Research scholars in the field of women's studies have been debating the differences between women's and feminist organizations for at least the last two decades. There is little consensus regarding how to view women's activities that do not necessarily follow a feminist agenda. Some suggest that any women's organizing is a form of women's empowerment, while others see these efforts as instruments of women's cooptation into traditional roles without transformative impact. In her recent book, Hollace Ava Weiner offers some contribution to the debate by examining the emergence, activities, and eventual disbanding of one non-feminist women's organization—the chapter of the National Council of Jewish Women in Fort Worth, Texas (NCJW-FWT). The book provides a sympathetic description of how this organization formed as a means for the high-society, affluent Jewish women to assist their local community. The NCJW-FWT maintained the traditional gender separation significant to religious communities, which served to further define women's volunteerism as an extension of their caretaking responsibilities. Since such organizations have been a critical element of American democracy's emphasis on grass-roots community involvement, it is interesting to read how this played out in the case of Jewish women living in largely non-Jewish areas. As the book skillfully demonstrates, this organization dealt with the Jewish identity question by choosing open and quite strict secularism. The book also allows readers to understand how women involved in the NCJW-FWT gained confidence and skills to become business leaders and political figures outside of the Jewish community. The

book, thus, demonstrates that civic organizations, such as the NCJW-FWT, that were initially focused on assisting others eventually helped their members, too.

Weiner's book is honest about the variety of contradictions that characterized this organization, such as its cool attitude toward recent Jewish immigrants, its inability to respond to the arriving Holocaust survivors, its elitism, and its dislike for the working class women. The NCJW-FWT was an organization that recruited mainly upper middle-class women, and followed their vision of public service. The organization had difficulty responding to the changing political and social scene and was thus clearly unable to adapt to the growth of identity politics in the 1960s. Consequently, the NCJW-FWT lost relevance in the eyes of the young Jewish women of the baby-boomer generation. The volunteer work of the affluent women of NCJW-FWT had limited appeal among younger women of recent generations, most of whom worked outside the home and were more interested in dealing with their own issues than helping those less fortunate. As Weiner demonstrates, the NCJW-FWT had enough ability for self-reflection to understand that its time had passed and to end its functioning, actually to everyone's surprise.

Weiner presents an accessible and well-written public history of one organization in one city. Without a doubt, the book is well done. Weiner's writing is emphatic, yet objective; it is carefully researched, yet does not overwhelm readers with details. The author has a definite passion for the subject of Jewish history and enthusiasm for the local level women's organizing. She also has a solid grasp of the recent literature on women's activism and the history of the women's movement in this country. Weiner introduces references to the authorities in the field, such as William Chafe and Sara Evans, without imposing overly complex theoretical discussions that might be otherwise distracting to the reader.

At the same time, the book lacks depth, and is limited in scope. Moreover, it still gives off a sense of a well-written and nicely revised master's thesis (which it was originally). As a result, the readers are left with a feeling that they have heard a tiny part of a larger story, both in terms of women's activism and the

Jewish experience in the South. The author is aware of this problem and continuously tries to use NCJW-FWT as an example of larger trends in women's activism and Jewish history in this country. But the problem of having such a limited subject for a book cannot be avoided. So many themes could have been explored in greater depth—such as the complex relationship with the civil rights movement and African Americans in general, dilemmas of secularization versus Jewish religious revival and ethnic separatism, and the internal hierarchies within the organization and the Jewish society. These complex issues receive only fleeting attention in Weiner's book—more as footnotes to the story of one Jewish women's organization.

Nevertheless, the book gives a good, although neither particularly deep nor resonant, insight into Jewish women's experiences in Texas. I would recommend it to anyone interested in the history of Jewish life and the South.

Ieva Zake

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