

Jaclyn Granick, *International Jewish Humanitarianism in the Age of the Great War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), pp. 418.

by Ilse Josepha Lazaroms

Note: This essay is based on a commentary I gave at the presentation of Jaclyn Granick's book at Central European University's Jewish Studies Program (online) on May 4, 2021.

I would like to begin my commentary by noting that this book and the story of its origins are a testament to the magic of the archives. Jaclyn Granick and I met at the Center for Jewish History in New York in 2015, in the infamously chilled reading room that many of us know intimately or have at least visited, and so I am familiar with the archives Granick uses in her research, the collections she spent time with. I even know some of the exact same documents; I too have poured time, attention, and indeed tears (more about that later) over the records and correspondence of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee—the Joint or JDC—in my case, documents about the JDC's actions on the ground in Hungary. What amazes me each time is how the archives yield something different for each of us; we enter the quiet space of the archive with our own lenses, questions both private and scholarly, and we emerge with a story that is as much a record of the past as it is a result of our individual encounters with the material at hand. Granick's book dazzles in its scope, through the thousands of documents that passed through her hands—not just in New York but in archives across the United States, Geneva, and Israel—and in the care and comprehensiveness that characterize her scholarship. Her book is an affirmation of the potentialities of historical research for each of us entering an archive, enthralled as we remain by the magic that happens there.

Let me continue with sharing my impressions about the *kind of research* Granick did in this book, the *kind of story* it tells. What characterizes the American Jewish humanitarian presence in Europe, Russia, and Palestine in the period of the Great War and its aftermath—the three “theatres of relief,” as Granick calls them—is the fact that these American Jewish humanitarians inhabited an “ambiguous middle ground.” They did so literally, as the geographical areas of their relief efforts kept expanding and changing, and they did so intellectually and politically, as they were

forced to grapple with their own position as Jewish humanitarians, with internal strife, and with the relations they forged with local communities, other non-Jewish relief organizations, and the United States government. On the one hand, as American humanitarians, their relief efforts were embedded in a bold vision of progressive philanthropy, while on the other hand, as Jews, they were constantly guarding their “lowered visibility” and vulnerability as Jews, lest their efforts be seen in an antisemitic light—and obstructed by it. Secondly, there was a moral quandary that characterized international Jewish humanitarianism during this time: the desire to pull out of the affected regions as soon as possible after rehabilitating Jewish life in local communities, as well as the moral duty to keep caring for Jews in need—a situation that extended well beyond the immediate postwar years. There was an ethical component to caring for Jews *as Jews*, and this prevented the JDC from pulling out as quickly as they had hoped. As Granick cites, President Hoover admitted to the fact that Americans have an “instinctive desire for separatism from European entanglements” (p. 73), a comment that made me smile, as my own experiences as a European in the United States tell me that this is still the case. However, as Jewish humanitarians, this disentanglement from overseas Jewish affairs was not at all easy, and at times, it was simply impossible.

What emerges from Granick’s encounter with her sources is, I think, a study in transitoriness. A humanitarian relief project that was intended as a temporary measure turned into something resembling permanence. The plight of displaced, ill, hungry, or impoverished Jews and orphaned Jewish children only worsened during the postwar years. How, then, as a historian or as a scholar of Jewish history, do you give narrative shape to a constantly changing reality on the ground, a transitory and shifting history? How do you navigate the space between a disjointed past and the desire to tell a coherent story?

These questions remind me of something Libby Garland, author of *After They Closed the Gates: Jewish Illegal Immigration to the United States, 1921-1965* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), once said at a talk at the Center for Jewish History: that Jewish communities are and always have been complex. “Jews,” Garland remarked, “may be connected in some ways, but they are also divided by geography, language, organizational affiliation, national origin—and those divides matter. Again, I think this is one of the reasons Jewish history is so

rich in helping us pick apart the complexities of our modern world.” At no point has this mosaic of complex relations, loyalties and identities shone more dramatically, and brightly, than in the historical moment Granick investigates in her book.

One of the ways in which Granick approaches the transitoriness of her sources, and of her story at large, is the fact that she closely follows her relief workers in their difficult and sometimes unlikely choices, decisions, and paths *as they make them*. Instead of imposing a preexisting structure onto the sources, Granick follows her protagonists, the JDC leadership, and the on the ground relief workers as they move from city to city, locality to community, continuously expanding their own scope of vision—as such expanding the scope of her book. Not only this: the particular and sometimes unexpected paths that Jewish humanitarianism takes in these years is *mirrored in the structure* of Granick’s chapters. In other words, the sources guide the narrative form of the book, and this, I think, is where some of the brilliance of the book lies. By following her sources so closely, and by allowing for the ambiguity that this entails both for the Jewish relief workers themselves, and for Granick, studying these materials, a different picture emerges: the almost tangible contours of a lost historical time that sizzles with humanity and human complexity. Now, this is of course not to say that following the sources is all that Granick does in this book, or that this is an easy thing to do. Granick navigates her material by theme—there are chapters on money, illness & health, poverty, hunger, refugees, and children—and in organizing her material this way, she humanizes the institutional efforts of Jewish humanitarian organizations, and places them in dialogue with larger issues at stake in Jewish history and in the context of human rights in history (the book is published in the Cambridge University Press series “Human Rights in History”).

Another thing that stood out to me in Granick’s approach to her sources—a method that “unsettles” as much as it affirms, as she herself says—is the way she deals with the uncomfortable connotations or antisemitic tropes her subject touches upon. The moment you start talking about Jews and money, for instance, or Jews and illness, or Jews and immigration, an entire array of antisemitic ghosts appears that threatens to overtake, or limit, the analysis. There is always the fear that by dealing with these “couplings” so directly, you might inadvertently contribute to a perpetuation of these antisemitic tropes. However, Granick

confronts the issue directly by stating that: “Though my narrative starts to rub up against antisemitic tropes regarding Jews and money, Jews as an international cabal, Jews holding multiple loyalties, and Jews as rootless cosmopolitans, it of course shows them to be just that: antisemitic tropes. If the prototype for studying Jews and humanitarianism has been that of refugees (acted on) and advocates (acting on from afar), I am pushing well past that dichotomy to demonstrate the real experience of Jewish aid delivery and humanitarian-victim relations. My refusal to universalize this story beyond comparison and context is a crucial feature.” (p. 24) By stating this, Granick diffuses the potential threat that these antisemitic tropes contain, and in doing so, a space opens for her to do the rigorous and attentive scholarship she set out to do.

Of course, what is so fascinating—and so telling of Jewish history in general—is that while in the book itself, antisemitic tropes or ghosts have no place, these tropes were constantly on the minds of the JDC leadership and the Jewish relief workers on the ground: they took the utmost care not to invite, or incite, any potential overlap between their relief work as Jews, for Jews, and the antisemitic stereotypes circulating and ready to sprout up at any moment everywhere they went. As Granick says, antisemitism is nowhere and everywhere in the book—a subject she said she might explore in a separate essay.

I will conclude my commentary with two quandaries, invitations for further exploration and research inspired by Granick’s scholarship. One has to do with gender and the role of women in Jewish humanitarianism. In the book, the JDC—as the connective thread among the various organizations—emerges as a rational, liberal, benevolent, American, and very *male* organization. On a photograph of the JDC leadership from 1918, only two women are present at the crowded table. When we think about humanitarianism, we might think about the care tasks it involves, about charity or the “selfless” act of helping others, and we might associate these activities with what has been traditionally thought of as “women’s work.” But there is a striking absence of women in the JDC. The main areas of relief work in which Jewish women were active were fundraising on the American side, campaigning for the financial adoption of Jewish children, and the export of American nursing practices to the three theaters of relief, including the export of actual Jewish nurses. Also, there was a strong ideological overlap between women, children, the future of the Jewish people, and Zionism—something that played

out mainly in Palestine. Now, as Granick makes clear, there is a distinction between charity, which was often done locally, by local Jewish women, and humanitarianism as an international, institutionalized project. Indeed, she states, “gender-aware relief was never institutionalized” (p. 79). Of course, the period of the Great War was also the time of the suffragette movement, or the “first feminist wave,” as it has come to be known, and women, including Jewish women, were active in this movement in the United States and Europe and beyond. Often, Jewish women were involved in both projects at once: feminism and humanitarianism. I am thinking of Rosika Schwimmer in Hungary, for instance, who led the suffragist movement from her home in Budapest and was deeply involved with overseeing relief work for Jewish women and children (and who, sadly, ended up poor and exiled in the United States). I am wondering whether the relative absence of women in Jewish humanitarianism is mainly an American story, in other words, a result of the specific composition and power play at work in American Jewish communities? Were Jewish women more involved in other places during this same time? With other sources, for instance—such a letters or diaries or other non-institutional sources—in other archives, would another story about the involvement of Jewish women with humanitarianism emerge? Based on the work Granick did in her book, I am curious what the contours of such a story would look like—a thread to be picked up by other scholars in her wake.

My second quandary has to do with the lost world Granick conjures up in her book—and the connections between that world and our own. The day that Granick’s book was presented was May 4, which, in the Netherlands (where I am based), is the Day of Remembrance of the dead of the Second World War. It has become a highly politicized event, with commemorations on Dam Square and in virtual rooms across the country, including those of our Jewish communities. These days, questions about who gets to speak about the past and whose stories get a stage and a microphone, are omnipresent. It once again emphasizes the importance of reassembling lost worlds and collecting the lost voices they contained, not just for what they meant in their own time, but for what they can mean in ours. Granick calls the period of the Great War and its aftermath “the Holocaust before the Holocaust”: a time of great Jewish suffering, as well as great Jewish resilience in the face of this suffering. During these years, from 1914 until 1929, when the book ends (but not the story), the project of international Jewish

humanitarianism became a “non-state, welfare-state-like mosaic of Jewish organizations,” a truly diasporic constellation that shimmered for a while, “then it was gone” (p. 300). What Granick is grappling with in this book is a world that has been destroyed. She recalls—and here I come back to the tears—weeping in the archives over the immensity of this lost world. Over its expansiveness, and the vast human efforts, losses, and gains that went into this project. I imagine that many of us have known moments of weeping in the archives, of being confronted with human lives and ideas that speak so vividly about ourselves and the worlds we inhabit that we are moved beyond words.

Something unbearably sad came full circle during Granick’s work on this project, namely, the fact that the antisemitic trope of Jews and immigration—more precisely, the idea that Jews fuel and fund illegal immigration into the United States, thereby undermining white ethnic Americanness—made a violent reentry into public life during the mass shooting of Jews in the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh in October 2018. As Jews and Jewish historians, these antisemitic ghosts between past and present are never far away. Granick’s book is a keen reminder of the hope that went into the project of Jewish humanitarianism during the Great War, and while reading it I pondered the question of the lasting impact of this lost world. What parts of this world still exist? What hopes, values or dreams can we carry with us into a future that surely needs them?

Spending time with Granick’s Jewish humanitarians, on the ground in Europe and in their offices in the US, has been a thrilling adventure, one that leaves me grateful for the work they did *and* for the journey that Granick undertook, tracing their every move across the continents, all bundled into this beautiful book, a meticulous, essential, and gorgeous cartography of Jewish humanitarianism at the time of the Great War.

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