

Today's Jewish diaspora communities at once threatened and resilient

Book review by Philip K. Jason, Special to *The Jewish News*

Exile: Portraits of the Jewish Diaspora, by Annika Hernroth-Rothstein. Edited by Tiffany Gabbay. Bombardier Books. 208 pages. Hardcover \$27.00.

Sometimes a relatively compact book has a lot to offer. It's so unusual to find a book whose author has a fascinating and necessary idea about Jewish culture, digs into the topic and comes up with a result that is dazzling in its factual base, its interpretation of gathered evidence and its engaging voice.

Annika Hernroth-Rothstein, a Jewish journalist from Sweden, set herself a challenging mission and the results are illuminating. The stories she tells are at once consoling and a bit frightening as well. Where is the Jewish diaspora today? It's in places you might not expect.

Come with Annika on her magical mystery tour – a tour that took two years.

After an introduction in which she describes the sources of motivation for her project, the author launches her diaspora guide with a study and reminiscence about the Djerba community. Djerba, an island in Tunisia, is a good starting point. She introduces us to guides and community leaders who shape her introduction to this unfamiliar place. She learns about the town of Hara Kbira, almost exclusively Jewish. It has 12 synagogues. As in other Jewish cen-

ters within Muslim countries, these people operate discretely and without calling attention to themselves. The town has a full range of Jewish institutions and outlets. They have struggled against persecution and assimilation, and found a way to survive and flourish. The island is home to 1,500 Jews whose commitment assures, to the extent possible, a future sprung from an impenetrable core. These people know that they must “plant their feet firmly in the past.”

Modern day Uzbekistan is a place where people have lived since the “Old Stone Age.” Annika outlines its remarkable history through the shifting of empires. She reminds us that Uzbeks fought in the Red Army against Nazi Germany and “500,000 of the soldiers were Jewish.” This nation gained independence in 1991. A humorous scene involves what Annika calls an “Uzbek Orthodox flirtation.” She describes the conflict between the Ashkenazi and Bukharian Sephardi communities. Throughout its history, the Jewish Uzbeks have fought against assimilation, and the community has often “teetered on the brink of extinction.” Accusations of dual loyalties posed serious problems. Through all of these, Uzbekistan's Jews have survived. The community continues to maintain its strong presence in “a peaceful, multi-religious melting pot.” These Jewish citizens are at once “equal,” and yet not

“truly free” under the USSR shadow that still darkens today's Russia.

A favorite chapter for many readers is likely to be the one on Morocco. Arriving in fabled Marrakesh the day before Passover, Annika enjoys the synagogue service at Lazama Synagogue, built in 1492 “and now housed inside of a sixteenth century Riad Mellah (ghetto).” She toys with the commonplace, that in Morocco the lives of Muslims and Jews have been intertwined, but she also notes that this is true only in certain restricted areas. Annika moves gracefully from the old, historic places of Jewish community to the more modern ones, noting that Jews had served in important diplomatic positions. Jewish life in Morocco can seem and, perhaps, be one of subservience to the Muslim community. It is a life adaptation that is not uncommon in the diaspora.

She reminds us that tens of thousands of Jews arrived in Israel between 1948 and 1956, shrinking Morocco's Jewish community.

Can you imagine that such a book would contain a healthy section on Siberia? Well it does.

Annika relates the fact that, perhaps not ironically, Siberia means “The End” in the regional dialect of Ostyak. Siberia is immense. But for many Jewish immigrants it offered a new beginning. It is a place rich in natural resources that demand a labor force to take advantage of them. Millions of people have benefited from the Trans-Siberian Railway, including those who helped build this marvel.

Annika finds the towns she visits somehow familiar. It's like a homecoming to this Jew of partial Russian ancestry. It is no surprise to find a Chabad-Lubavitch presence whose

leaders are the “head and heart” of the Irkutsk Jewish community, which is home to at least 5,000 Jews. The synagogue is jammed, assimilation seems under control, and Jewish institutions – educational and otherwise – are active. Strangely, Putin is an ally of Russian Jews, who are deeply patriotic and also open about their Zionism.

This is only one of the many chapters filled with surprises.

Aside from the four chapters skimmed to give a taste of this valuable study, there are additional chapters detailing the past and present communities of Jews in the following places: Cuba, Iran, Finland, Sweden, Palermo, Turkey and Venezuela. Annika's adventurous nature, her passion for Jewish culture and history, and her openness regarding her personal experiences exploring these varied communities is a treasure and a joy.

About the author

Annika Hernroth-Rothstein is a former political advisor for the conservative coalition of Sweden, and now a full-time journalist and author. She contributes to such publications as *The Wall Street Journal*, *Israel Hayom*, *National Review*, *The Washington Examiner* and *The Jerusalem Post*. When she is not writing, she travels the world and is a sought-after public speaker on issues of religious freedom, European politics and the Middle East. For even more about the author, go to annikahernroth.com.

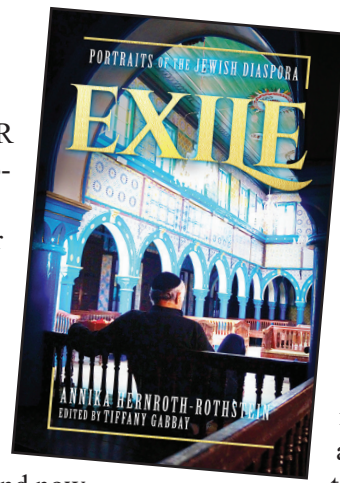
Philip K. Jason is Professor Emeritus of English from the United States Naval Academy. He reviews regularly for Florida Weekly, Washington Independent Review of Books, Southern Literary Review, other publications and the Jewish Book Council. Please visit Phil's website at www.philjason.wordpress.com.




Phil Jason




Annika Hernroth-Rothstein



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