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Interpreting American Jewish History at Museums and Historic Sites by Avi Y. Decter (review)

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(Review)

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and through documentaries, museum exhibits, audio tours, and other creative applications—the advice and admonitions in this volume will assist projects of any scope and purpose.

Anyone seeking to trace the dramatic evolution and international impact of oral history in our times will find *The Voice of the Past* a most beneficial guide.

Donald A. Ritchie, United States Senate Historian Emeritus

Interpreting American Jewish History at Museums and Historic Sites by Avi Y. Decter. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017. ix + 231 pp.; illustrations, notes, bibliography, index; clothbound, \$80.00; paperbound, \$35.00; eBook, \$33.00.

Attention, public historians: this is a rewarding read. This is especially true if you work or volunteer on museum exhibits, site interpretation, or public programing. First the disclaimer: as a public historian and historian of American Jewish history, I am cited in this work. To the author's credit, so is almost every other American Jewish historian. The footnotes and bibliographies are an important component of this "how-to" book. Avi Decter and his three contributors have produced an engaging volume that is written without jargon and stimulates creativity. Created for public historians by public historians who understand the challenges of public programing, it encourages thought, diversity, and ingenuity.

Part of the *Interpreting History* series published by the American Association for State and Local History, the book's goal is "to provide expert, in-depth guidance in interpretation for history professionals at museums and historic sites" and help them become more inclusive and "expand their interpretation" (frontispiece). Books in the series serve as "quick references to practical considerations, further research, and historical information" (frontispiece). In all these areas the book succeeds.

The book "is designed and organized to help you advance methodically through the subject, moving from the general to the particular" (17). The introduction and "Getting Started" chapters taken together present themes and methodology. Five thematic chapters follow, developing the topics first explored in the introduction: "migration, movement, and social mobility; family and domestic life; community life and communal organizations; cultural expression; and prejudice, discrimination, and tolerance" (17). These chapters orient the reader to the topics with clear narratives, reinforced by scholarly arguments and illustrated with first-person accounts. A case studies chapter follows each thematic chapter. These chapters showcase four projects exhibited by secular local history museums or historic sites. Decter chose the case studies because of their "effective efforts to tackle difficult or little-known subjects" and their relevance to a variety of stakeholders and constituents, not necessarily because they are models (18). None of the case studies come from Jewish institutions. They expand the book's goal of

offering secular professionals “models of research and collaboration that produce compelling interpretations” (53). For example, in chapter 3, “Migration and Mobility,” the Chicago History Museum’s *Shalom Chicago* works well. I attended the exhibit, which engaged the community with family objects and individual stories that illustrated larger themes of immigration, adaption to American life, and Jewish contributions to the city. The chapter’s other case studies include Columbia Jewish Heritage Initiative, which collects community history and organizes tours; 97 Orchard Street: Lower East Side Tenement Museum, which interprets living spaces; and the Autry’s *Jews in the Los Angeles Mosaic*, which stressed community mobility. Although all approach the subject differently, each portrays both the Jewish and the American aspects of immigrant life. The following chapters sustain a similar pattern.

The final two chapters provide additional resources and much food for thought. Chapter 13, “Jewish Organizations as Interpretive Resources,” co-authored by Decter and Grace Cohen Grossman, describes the evolution of Jewish exhibits and museums in the United States from 1876 to today. It culminates with a discussion of resources available at Jewish history organizations and a list of successful interpretive exhibitions organized by American Jewish museums and their accompanied publications. These suggestions, along with the book’s illustrations, footnotes, and bibliographies, demonstrate the support available for those unfamiliar with the subject.

For the public historian familiar with the American Jewish narrative, the final chapter, “Toward Next Practice,” should be read first. It is the most thought provoking and stimulating. Earlier chapters can then be read with these ideas in mind. However, a newcomer to the subject should read the chapters in order. Decter chose to title the chapter “Next” rather than “Best” because of rapid changes in museum methodology. “Next” is presented as “the development of new ways of interpreting our shared histories with new methods and strategies that go beyond our comfort zones” (206). The chapter discusses museum visitors’ demographics and expectations. Describing museums as living in a “beta world,” where there is a need for “adaptive leadership,” the chapter emphasizes diversity in staff, boards, and collaborators, as well as examining current topics such as transnationalism, race, and activism (207).

Decter and his contributors, Joshua J. Furman, Zev Eleff, and Grace Cohen Grossman, accomplished their goal by demonstrating that exhibiting American Jewish history is “no less and no more challenging than tackling the history of any other ethnic, religious, or cultural group” (4). The book is an essential tool for the public historians planning a museum exhibit or interpreting a historic site. Especially valuable are its use of illustrations, references, subtitles, and storytelling techniques. The one change that I would have liked to see would be links to exhibits or exhibit video placed in the case studies themselves, rather than in notes, so that readers could easily view exhibit websites while they read about them. This would have enlarged the visual component of the book. That, however, is a very

minor point. As a westerner, I am especially impressed that the narrative and case studies are selected from throughout the country, both rural and urban areas. In a field that is often New York-centric, the author is regionally inclusive. I wish that I had had this book in hand over a decade ago, when I worked on *Jewish Life in the American West*.

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Narrow but Endlessly Deep: The Struggle for Memorialisation in Chile since the Transition to Democracy by Peter Read and Marivic Wyndham. Acton, ACT: Australian National University Press, 2016. ix + 240 pp.; illustrations, notes, bibliography, glossary; paperbound, US \$36.00, AUD \$41.00; free eBook available at: <https://press.anu.edu.au/publications/narrowendlessly-deep>.

Chile is an important place in the comparative study of public history. Before the seventeen-year dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet (1973–90), it had a strong, centralizing state, a tradition of electoral democracy, and public institutions respected by its citizenry. And, since the dictatorship yielded power in 1990, elected governments have attempted to reconstruct what Pinochet destroyed. Among many measures for transitional justice, Chileans have created significant museums and hundreds of memorials throughout their national territory that make public the “prohibited memory”¹ of Pinochet’s appalling brutality and systematic violation of fundamental human rights.

Narrow but Endlessly Deep makes an original and distinctive contribution to understanding memorialization in Chile as a historical process. Read and Wyndham have examined the ongoing conflicts and evolving character of memorials identified with the dictatorship at seven sites in Santiago, the national capital. They present the perspective of the grassroots activists at these sites, which include several notorious outside Chile: the national soccer stadium where thousands were detained, tortured, and killed following the 1973 military coup and the sinister Villa Grimaldi prison camp then on the outskirts of Santiago.

Read and Wyndham also consider smaller site-specific memorials and the contention over them, which are relatively unknown except to specialists and Chileans themselves. These sites include: the state technical university where folksinger Víctor Jara was held and executed; the mysterious Patio 29 section of the national cemetery where hundreds of the “disappeared” were buried; two urban houses (“Londres 38” and “1367 José Domingo Cañas”) repurposed by the military for

¹ *Chile: La memoria prohibida*, edited by Eugenio Ahumada et al. (Santiago: Pehuen, 1989). In 2003 Chilean television revived the theme of “prohibited memory” on the thirtieth anniversary of the coup that ended Chilean democracy. See Steve J. Stern, *Reckoning with Pinochet* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 283–86.