

Beyond the Pale: the Country Houses of the Jewish Elite

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'Jewish' country houses have escaped systematic study because they do not fit existing paradigms of the aristocratic landowner and the metropolitan Jew. Yet country houses owned, renewed and sometimes built by Jews had become a recognisable component of the European landscape by the late 19th and early 20th century. In a world where Jews had historically been debarred from land-ownership and often confined to urban ghettos, the country houses of the Jewish elite had a transgressive quality. These houses were 'beyond the pale' in the sense that they symbolised how far their owners had come from the traditional confines of Jewish society, taking them quite literally into a different geographical, social and cultural orbit. They were also 'beyond the pale' in a second sense - because rich Jews struggled to belong in a social and cultural landscape so powerfully shaped by Christianity, in which the families of the old landed aristocracy still held sway. Paradoxically, however, houses like Waddesdon Manor (Britain), the Château de Nivillers (France), Villa Montesca (Italy) and the Château de Seneffe (Belgium) were nonetheless places in which families like the Rothschilds, the Reinachs, the Franchettis and the Philippons came to feel profoundly 'at home'.

This special issue represents an initial foray into this problematic, heralding the launch of a major collaborative research project, which takes the country houses of the Jewish elite as a starting point for opening up a much broader intellectual agenda at the interface between Jewish history, art history and heritage culture.¹ The project is organised around two major strands - philanthropy and collecting - which will each result in focused publications. It will unite within a single analytical framework all the actors involved in creating, maintaining and decorating the Jewish country house, and situate these properties within bigger narratives about Jewish politics, cultural philanthropy and the national heritage. In this special issue, with articles that range from 18th-century Holland and colonial Curaçao, through Lower Austria to France, Germany, Britain and even the USA, we aim to give a sense of

the chronological and geographical range of Jewish country houses, and to open up key themes.² What, if anything, was distinctively *Jewish* about the country houses of the Jewish elite? How does thinking about these houses help us to understand modern Jewish history differently? What does a focus on specifically Jewish country houses bring to the field of country house studies more generally? Is there anything material, visual or stylistic about these houses that marks them as Jewish?

Our first three articles address core aspects of the history of 'the Jewish country house'. Laura Leibman's comparison of Dutch and Caribbean Jewish houses takes us back to some of the earliest manifestations of that history, reminding us that the first Jewish country houses belonged not to emancipation Europe but to the mercantile world of the western Sephardi diaspora - a point made decades ago by Malcom Brown's pioneering article on Anglo-Jewish country houses from the Resettlement to 1800.³ Lisa Silverman provides an essential analysis of property ownership as a rite of social passage for central European Jews, and the entrenched opposition encountered by those who sought not just land, but membership of the political nation. Meanwhile, Diana Davis, takes a fresh look at much the best-known element of this story through a study that emphasises the importance of Gunnersbury House as an essential prototype for later Rothschild houses.

Two essays by Leora Auslander and Tom Stammers then open up this subject matter in more speculative ways. On the one hand, Auslander asks how such houses operated as Jewish family homes, taking inspiration not just from country house studies but from more conventionally bourgeois Jewish houses. On the other hand, Stammers takes as his starting point Oldway Mansion - a British house whose Jewish links are ambiguous - and works outwards from it to uncover points of connection and analogy with Jewish and non-Jewish networks and residences on both sides of the Channel - and, indeed, the Atlantic. In very different ways, both these essays underscore the liminal quality of 'Jewish' country houses: Auslander by focusing on them as 'spaces of in-between' and Stammers through his exploration of a cosmopolitan and monied social and cultural milieu in which more-or-less Jewish patrons, architects, dealers and craftsmen featured prominently - but by no means exclusively.

Here, Stammers breaks with convention in Jewish history by underplaying the distinction between Jews and Christians, much as Leibman and Davis break with convention in 'country house

studies' by including villas within their remit. The archetypal 'country house' is, of course, a great house or mansion at the centre of a landed estate, rooted, permanent and at the heart of the economic and social life of a far-reaching rural community, often with political patronage and clerical livings (and much else) within its gift. By contrast, the villa - as much an idea as an edifice - had its origins in ancient Rome, where it was defined in opposition to the life of the city, regardless of whether it was a rural retreat or a working farm. Yet in 18th and 19th century Europe, the Italian Renaissance transformations of the classical villa inspired a bewildering diversity of palaces, party houses and private retreats close to cities, spa towns and resorts. Indeed, both Davis and Leibman emphasise the extent to which rural retreats were constructed in reference to country power-houses proper, and vice versa, reminding us that houses - just like their owners - need to be situated within a broader social and cultural matrix, one that allows us to go beyond the classic typologies of urban and rural houses. Both Stammers and Auslander bear out these insights. For Oldway too was a villa, even if it played with the memory of no less a château than Versailles, while the enclave of Jewish houses on Schwanenwerderinsel that Auslander describes also fall into that category.

Rejecting rather than adopting excessively rigid distinctions, our authors have chosen instead to follow the peripatetic lives of the Jewish élite into the often multiple *loci* of their rural and semi-rural experience, embracing the fluidity and overlapping terminology used to describe their houses in different cultural contexts: *Buitenplaatsen* and *Landhuizen*, villas and country houses, palaces, castles, Schlösse, and châteaux – many of which retained little, if any, visible evidence of their defensive, castellated origins. Frequently linked to spa, lake, river or seaside locations, and as the 19th century progressed, conveniently reached by train, such properties were often a bridge between 'town' and 'country' houses, between leisure and business hubs, convenient for social intercourse, cultural consumption or medical therapies. Indeed, thinking about Jewish houses may be a particularly effective way of challenging the established opposition between town and country houses, and between villa and country-house living. For as both Diana Davis and Lisa Silverman indicate, even very wealthy Jews like Nathan Mayer Rothschild were hesitant to acquire great landed estates - and, like Israel Hönig von Honigsberg, often encountered difficulties when they did so.

Collectively these articles take us through three successive ages of Jewish country house ownership, which echo three distinct phases in the entry of Jews into European society. From the rise of the 'Port Jews' of north-western Europe and the Atlantic seaboard, through the age of enlightenment, revolution and emancipation in continental Europe, to the birth of a new, partly Jewish 'plutocracy' in the decades before the Great War. These three phases presented Jews with different opportunities to conform to the norms of Christian society (and to distinguish themselves from it) - but the country houses of the Jewish elite also prompted new kinds of antisemitic anxiety and distrust. In continental Europe, the Holocaust brought the Jewish histories of these houses to a tragic and premature end, although in Britain too the Second World War marked a rupture in the history of the country house that only the grandest and most prestigious could withstand.

Jewishness rarely shaped the physical fabric of these houses in an overt way. To be sure, there are exceptions: Doornburgh near Maarssen in the Netherlands, with its Old Testament frescos; East Cliff Lodge in Ramsgate, England, with its synagogue and neo-biblical mausoleum; Villa Keryos on the French Riviera with its *magen david* floor. Yet we should set these examples alongside those of Cyril Grange, who notes the predilection of members of the Parisian Jewish elite for country houses with an ecclesiastical twist.⁴ Consequently our authors propose a variety of complementary ways in which we might seek to answer the central question at the heart of this project, namely: how should we read these properties as Jewish?

For Leibman, the 'Jewishness' of domestic space lies beyond the religion of the owners or the inclusion of ritual objects within the household. Rather, she argues, that these houses reflect and help create Jewish culture's vision of country life. Thus while scholars have long noted the impact of Iberian and Dutch culture on Sephardic literature, material culture and philosophy, this article seeks to extend that idea to the notion of the Jewish pastoral ideal. Leibman concludes that although from the outside, the houses may have looked similar to those of their Protestant and even Ashkenazi neighbours, Dutch Sephardic Jews used and understood their country houses differently. Interestingly, there is very little in this article that addresses the relations between Jewish and non-Jewish country house owners either in the Netherlands or in the Caribbean, although the importance of slave labour for Sephardic Plantation

houses is stressed. Instead, Jewish communal relationships appear paramount, dictating the enclave of rural retreats in Maarssen and eventually the construction of a synagogue there. This set-up contrasts intriguingly with the more scattered pattern Malcolm Brown identified among the Sephardim of 18th-century England, for whom country house ownership served as a point of entry into the British establishment.

The social and cultural context of these houses is very different from later 19th-century France and Germany, yet there are points of contact between Leibman's approach and that taken by Leora Auslander. The nineteenth-century country house was, she argues, not simply a status symbol that allowed Jews to emulate non-Jews, but rather a properly *Jewish form*, emblemizing a Jewish mode of negotiating life as a diasporic, simultaneously highly-privileged and powerful, but also marginalized and threatened, minority. The presence of such properties in major works of modern European literature - from the house of Charles Swann in Proust's Combray through the château of Albert Cohen's *Solal* to Giorgio Bassani's *Garden of the Finzi Contini* - tends to confirm their importance as a specifically Jewish *lieu de mémoire*, one that resonated particularly with Jewish and partly Jewish authors in works that engage profoundly with the modern Jewish condition.

Both Silverman and Davis suggest that the explanation for this resonance lies in the social status of their owners. As Silverman shows, Israel Honig von Hönigsberg's decision to purchase in 1789 the feudal estate of Velm in Lower Austria - a part of the Habsburg empire in which almost all forms of Jewish residence were forbidden - was a defiant challenge to the norms of *ancien régime* society. He refused either to convert or to engage in the kind of subterfuge commonly associated with Jewish property ownership in countries where this was nominally forbidden. Yet he clearly attached enormous importance to owning a feudal estate, even if he never actually lived there: this former monastery became a Jewish country house but never a Jewish country home. Even this, it seems, was enough to render it 'beyond the pale' for the Lower Austrian nobility. Here, the contrast with his near-contemporary Nathan Mayer Rothschild is striking. Nathan chose to avoid provocative display in his quest for social acceptance, but Gunnersbury itself was very much a beloved family home, even if it was

also a house whose architecture, interior decoration and social use were shaped by the family's position as British Jews, which changed over time, as well as their desire to create a pastoral idyll.

There was nothing overtly Jewish about this house and yet, as Davis argues, many of the choices made in its arrangement and use were determined by the Rothschilds' desire to be accepted as Jews and equals. It serves, among other things, as a case study that substantiates Auslander's broader argument about the episodic place of Jewishness in such households, a phenomenon she understands through analogy with the concept of the *Eruv*. Auslander argues that even secular Judaism has domestic incarnations, and the Rothschilds bear out her observations: ready to say Shabbat prayers during the visit of a devout relative, and inclined to spend the High Holy Days at Gunnersbury precisely because this facilitated lax observance. Above all, perhaps, in the wedding of Leonora and Alphonse de Rothschild at Gunnersbury - which was widely covered in the British press and attended by the great and good of Victorian high society - we see how a single space within the home, in this case the Pink Saloon, could be simultaneously anchored in Jewish, class and local identities, and how unhelpful it is to seek to read the Jewishness of domestic space in absolute terms, because spaces like the Pink Saloon and houses like Gunnersbury were, as Auslander argues, never purely one thing or another.

This emphasis on homemaking is largely absent from Stammers' piece, which focuses instead on broader processes of house building and taste making. This final article makes the case for taking 'an elastic approach' to studying the Jewish country house, one that is attentive to the places where Jewish and non-Jewish contacts, networks and ambitions intersect. Yet although Stammers seeks to move beyond a narrowly biographical approach to Jewishness, his claim that Jewish patrons and intermediaries played a key role in the dissemination of 'old French' styles, evacuating them of their reactionary nostalgia, diluting their narrow civic meanings and asserting their value as an ideal of civilised living points precisely to the ways in which the presence of Jews within this new social elite symbolised a break with the *ancien régime* past.

All these articles read the Jewishness of country houses differently, and yet there are key areas of common ground. First, with the exception of Silverman, all emphasise that Jews were not a people apart, but rather enmeshed within a broad milieu, whose aesthetic preferences paralleled and

sometimes reproduced that of non-Jewish social groups. Stammers makes this point most clearly, but it is equally present in Leibman's notion of a 'Rhizone' or enmeshed roots system, in which Dutch, Iberian, and Hebraic elements intertwined, in Davis' emphasis on the English and Jewish contexts of Gunnersbury, and in Auslander's idea that such properties were Jewish without being saturated with Jewishness, because they were simultaneously of their place - local, regional and national.

Second, it is clear that these properties were as much about Jewish self-assertion as they were about assimilation. This, as Diana Davis remarks of Gunnersbury, was something the Rothschilds at least never sought – unlike 'social acceptance and identification as British Jews, which they did'. Other Rothschild houses like Waddesdon Manor in Buckinghamshire were emphatically un-English. Yet while the French, German, Italian and English façades of James de Rothschild's château at Ferrières in France can be read as a bold statement of cultural confidence, its amalgamation of different styles appeared to antisemites to be dangerously transgressive. Here, it may be that a serious focus on material culture is particularly helpful in elaborating the ways in which rich Jews and their houses did – and did not – seek to belong.

Third, where country house studies tends to situate such properties with reference to the local, the vernacular and the national, almost all the articles here emphasise the importance of international connections in shaping these houses: Leibman shows how Jewish country houses along the Vecht 'openly merged Hebrew, Iberian and Dutch traditions to create a new cosmopolitan vision of country life'; Davis argues that two intersecting circles of sociability motivated the English Rothschilds, the English aristocratic milieu and their European Rothschild family who were influenced by the material world and social mores of the elites of Paris, Frankfurt, Vienna and Naples; Auslander emphasises the particular density of Jewish super elites' transnational family connections, and the profound familiarity this gave them with country house interior and exterior design practices across Europe; and Stammers explores the dissemination of Old French, a quintessentially 'national' style, on both sides of the Channel, in ways that help to explain the seemingly anomalous qualities of a house like Oldway in Devon.

Here too, it may be that a focus on material culture helps to elucidate the defiantly 'Jewish' qualities of such properties precisely because it underscores their links to this broader European context and their often deliberately cosmopolitan spirit. Thus the national origins of particular styles could be counterbalanced by the international ways in which those styles also functioned. For example, the French style of 'the Louis' discussed by Stammers, at the heart of Rothschild houses such as Waddesdon, is the preeminent international court style and allowed members of a new elite to place themselves in a supra-national community of princes, collectors and connoisseurs, as did traditions of Italian and German Renaissance collecting or the collecting of 'capital' pictures. Indeed, even where Jewish country house owners deliberately embraced a vernacular or national aesthetic, this did not necessarily imply the rejection of their cosmopolitan ideals or, indeed, their Jewish origins. As we seek to interrogate the Jewishness of properties as diverse as the diminutive, Neo-classical Schloss Freienwalde, restored by Walter Rathenau as an *hommage* to the Prussian Enlightenment, or Nymans, the faux-ancient English manor house built for descendants of the German-Jewish Messel family in Sussex, it is important not to consider these properties in isolation. To understand them properly, we need to read them side by side.

It is with this in mind that Oliver Cox concludes our special issue with some reflections on the implications of this project for country house studies. As the initiators of this project we are particularly excited by the way in which a focus on 'Jewish' country houses serves to unlock a conception of the country house rooted not in national characteristics but in pan-European relationships. Over the next four years, we aim not just to illuminate the world of the great Jewish business dynasties, its relationships, its architecture and its things, but also to demonstrate how this international network re-shaped 'Jewish' and 'European' culture. Much has been written about how emancipation changed the Jews, and very little about the impact of emancipation on European culture and society. Yet thinking about the country houses of the Jewish elite allows us to see how very profound that impact was.

Notes

1. 'Jewish' country houses - objects, networks, people, a 4-year project funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC). A core team consisting of Juliet Carey, Silvia Davoli, Jaclyn Granick (Co-I), Abigail Green (PI), Tom Stammers (Co-I) has developed this project over several years.

2. The articles in this special issue emerged from our first Jewish Country House conference held at Oxford and Waddesdon Manor in March 2018 with support from the AHRC, the Jeffrey Fund of Brasenose College, the Paul Mellon Centre for British Art, and the University of Oxford. A more substantive book-length publication focusing on individual case studies is also planned.

3. Brown, "Anglo-Jewish Country Houses", 20-38.

4. Grange, *Une élite Parisienne*, 338-353

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