

LAURA HOBSON FAURE: A JEWISH MARSHALL PLAN

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Joshua Holo: Welcome to the College Commons podcast and our acclaimed author series. A partnership between HUC Connect, the online learning platform of the Hebrew Union College and the Jewish Book Council, featuring conversations with authors recognized by the National Jewish Book Awards. My name is Joshua Holo, your host. Welcome to this episode of the College Commons podcast and our conversation with historian Laura Hobson Faure.

JH: Laura Hobson Faure is a professor at the Pantheon-Sorbonne University-Paris 1, where she holds the chair of Modern Jewish History and is a member of the Center for Social History. She is the author of A "Jewish Marshall Plan". The American Jewish Presence in post-Holocaust France, which was published by Indiana University Press in 2022, and the winner of that year's National Jewish Book Award for writing based on archival material. Laura Hobson Faure, thank you for joining us on the College Commons podcast.

Laura Hobson Faure: Thank you, Joshua.

JH: Today, France houses the third largest Jewish population in the world after the US and Israel. But one of the things you point out in the book is that even directly after the Holocaust, France emerged from the ashes with a large Jewish population relative to the rest of Western Europe. So before we launch into the story of the so-called Jewish Marshall Plan, what set the conditions for French Jewry at the dawn of the second half of the 20th century?

LHF: That's an excellent question, and it helps us talk about the specificity of France. In the aftermath of the Holocaust, what we see is a huge amount of displacement of the Jewish populations. And because France had ports going towards, at that point was, mandatory Palestine and also to the Americas in the plural. France was seen as a place where Jews could live a happy life in political security. And as a result, France had a growing population, relatively open borders before World War II and in the aftermath of World War II, due to its ports going both to mandatory Palestine but also to the Americas, Jews who survived the Holocaust and who were looking for family members were drawn to France. They were drawn to France as a place to wait for visas to figure out what the next step might be.

LHF: And they were also drawn to France due to its relative political stability. So France has always been a major place for Jewish migrations, and part of this is linked to the fact that France had borders with two neutral countries, Switzerland and Spain. But also due to the fact that Jewish organizations were able to go underground during World War II, and also to the fact that that rescue was possible in France in large part due to the solidarity, the local population in some respects, but also due to the fact that the Nazis had a major manpower issue in France. They didn't have, according to their point of view, enough people on the ground to persecute Jews. And as a result, we have a situation where rescue was perhaps more possible in France than in other places in occupied Europe.

LHF: And so in the aftermath of the war, we have a situation where there are approximately 180,000 to 200,000 Jews living in France, and that made France the largest Jewish population in Western continental Europe. And then in addition to those numbers, we have people who start trickling in from Eastern Europe, especially after the violent aftermath of the war, where you have Jews who, for example, had been within the Soviet Union, who were returning home to Poland and being met with violence.

LHF: And so the summer of 1946 was extremely violent for Polish Jews, and that led to massive migrations towards the West, including France. And so France was able to regain the number of Jews living in France. By around 1950, the number was the same as the pre-war period, about 330 to 350,000 but with a very different population. So it's really Jewish migrations and the distinct combination of historical factors that made France a place where one could have hope in the aftermath of the Holocaust.

JH: And also a place where it made sense for philanthropic efforts to focus because of leverage, that there was a population of critical mass of people that would benefit from major allocations of resources, it sounds like.

LHF: Absolutely. Because France is seen as a place where one could rebuild European Jewish life. It really is a major place in postwar Jewish Europe. And as a result, American Jewish organizations that were highly active in Europe since World War I and even during World War II, and I'm talking specifically about the Joint Distribution Committee, the JDC, it actually was re-establishing its Parisian offices, because that the European headquarters was in Berlin until 1933 and then in 1933 was moved to Paris. So what we see in this aftermath of the Holocaust is a return of organizations that had already been active in interwar France.

JH: So let's move to the immediate postwar period, which is the focus of your book. And remind people about the Marshall Plan. If you would, give us the elevator speech for the Marshall Plan.

[laughter]

LHF: Okay, so the title is really a metaphor. The "Jewish Marshall Plan" actually has only tangential connections to the larger Marshall Plan. But first, let's talk about that larger Marshall Plan. It was a US foreign policy established in 1948 and for a period of four years, there was extensive aid sent by the American government to countries throughout, what we then called,

the Western block, meaning the western part of Europe. And that American funding was giving extensive aid also with the fear that if that aid was not provided, those countries would fall to communism. In postwar France, there's a great deal of support for the Communist Party, and the Communist Party is extremely aware of the fact this American Aid is being given with strings attached. And as a result, there's a great deal of opposition in larger French society to this American aid. And that is why the term a "Jewish Marshall Plan" is actually quite appropriate, because contrary to what we could imagine, we could imagine that Jews are helping Jews in the aftermath of the Holocaust, and that this is a seamless process and that this is a natural process, and this is what American Jews want to do.

LHF: And that is very true, American Jews had been waiting to help and actively trying to stop the Holocaust, stop the genocide, even though we didn't have those words at the time to describe what was going on. We didn't have the concept of the Holocaust, and we didn't have the concept of genocide until the very end of World War II. But while the Jewish population in the United States was extremely active in trying to help Jews in Europe, their aid was sometimes perceived as intrusive and sometimes not unwelcome, but misunderstood in that French Jews who had been working throughout World War II to save Jews and to save themselves and to save their families, were suddenly being told by their American funders, "We really don't think that you're politically neutral, and so you need to do a training to learn how to give aid in a politically neutral fashion." And so there's a great deal of tension in terms of the reception of this aid, and that tension is also something that is very central to my book. I think it's really interesting to look at how the Jewish world in the plurality of what diaspora meant at that time, how was this aid being perceived and given and received? And French Jews are not passive at all in that process.

JH: So it leads nicely into my next question, which you really bring out in the texture of your book, quite compellingly, and I'd like to examine it with you. On the one hand, you describe a Jewish version of the Marshall Plan, very movingly as a particularly poignant example of how philanthropy bridges populations by creating a symbiotic relationship. And this description implies, profound mutuality. On the other hand, you describe a certain inevitable, a symmetry of sensibility. The French seemed to struggle with the imposition on their dignity, and at the same time seemed to expect or even demand American Jewish aid. While on the other hand, the American Jews were moved more or less by a traditional Jewish solidarity and noblesse oblige to offer very practical help. So I'm wondering if you can give us a couple telling examples of these dynamics, and the tensions that they seem to represent.

LHF: That's a great question. I would say that first we need to kind of unpack the term "French Jews", because it would be a horrible thing to leave the listeners of this podcast with the idea that French Jews were, in fact, all French and had French nationality and maybe a shared background. The French Jewish population at this time was extremely diverse, especially because of the migrations that I talked about earlier. And so we're talking primarily about, but not exclusively, an Ashkenazi population. There are Sephardic populations in France, that were there, because of the French colonial empire already before the decolonization of that empire in the aftermath of World War II. So we have Jews from North Africa living in metropolitan France,

but we also have Jews coming from the Eastern Mediterranean, Greece, the Ottoman Empire. And so those Jews are also living in France and suffered immensely during the Holocaust.

LHF: So we have this classic dichotomy between Sephardic Jews and Ashkenazi Jews. But then we have a population that's also quite divided in terms of linguistics. We have a Yiddish-speaking population in postwar Paris, that is growing due to the migrations coming from Eastern Europe. And we have class tensions and political tensions between those who were raised French with a kind of a vision of Jewish identity as a religious identity. And then you have those who are coming at this from a diaspora nationalist perspective, that feel like they belong to the Jewish people, and that Jewish peoplehood implies an ethnic identity. And so you have these tensions going throughout French Jewish life in the interwar period during the war. There is some form of unity, but that unity is very tenuous and due to these extreme persecutions that Jews are going through.

LHF: And in the postwar period, those political tensions continue to exist, and that unity kind of falls apart in certain places. So French Jews, that very basic term needs to be broken down and American Jews that also needs to be broken down. When we look at American Jews, we see also similar tensions. Even though American Jews are moving away from their linguistic diversity by the post-World War II period, most American Jews speak English. The Yiddish-speaking population is diminishing, even though it's still significant. And from a class point of view, you see the postwar period in the United States as a moment where American Jews are becoming more and more middle class, they're gaining entry into the mainstream to quote the historian, Edward Shapiro. In terms of looking at the philanthropy in this moment as a symbiotic relationship, that's actually the term used by Nancy Green, who happened to be the director of my PhD.

LHF: That notion of, "Well we need givers and we need receivers in philanthropy that brings people together as a group." But it would be naive to assume that that bringing together is on equal terms. Those who give money usually want to see certain results as a result of their money. And so the act of giving money is inherently political in that it is linked to a vision of the future and what the future should bring. So if we look at the aid being given by American Jewish organizations such as the Joint Distribution Committee, they very much want aid to be provided in a non-political way. And French Jews who survived the occupation and whose lives were threatened during that occupation, many of whom who lost family members kind of have a reaction, "Well who are you to tell me how to do things, when we've been managing this?"

LHF: And, yes, we had your financial help because the JDC did send help during World War II and that help did manage to save many lives in France, but where were you?" So there is a great deal of tension around this. And to give an example in terms of training the JDC decided to create a social work school in Versailles, and it was open in 1949, and they brought in professors from Columbia School of Social Work, and these professors they tried very hard to recruit French speakers, so that the local population would not reject the school as overly American. They were very sensitive to this idea of American imperialism. And so they tried to avoid that kind of accusation and to maximize the way in which the school could be accepted by the local population. So they were aware that their work could be perceived as overly intrusive

or overly imperialistic. So there's an excellent example I think of how this tension kind of played out. And French Jews did like that school very much, they attended and they were very open to the new ideas in terms of social work that the JDC was trying to bring to France.

JH: So the fact that it worked, at least in the case you described, and we know of many other ways in which it was profoundly impactful, it calls on the question of the reality or the fallaciousness of two myths. I think that undergirds the power of your story, Jewish solidarity and on the other hand American benevolent power. And when, of course, when I say myth I don't mean false, I just mean elevated to a level of mythologized power. Did you walk away from this book feeling that these grand sublime really quite edifying narratives of Judaism and Americanism are fundamentally meaningful or fundamentally sort of spurious?

LHF: These are great questions. In terms of looking at this question of Jewish solidarity on one hand and American benevolent power on the other, I think a much more salient real thing is that question of Jewish solidarity, and that we can't explain what happened in this period of time without that notion, it took on a very real form. And I mean there is some historical analysis that basically says that all social aid is a way of upholding an unfair system that continues to exploit the poor. And when we have that analysis in this case of, "Well, here we are we have survivors of the Holocaust, and the JDC is essentially saying, 'Okay, well, if you can work, you need to work.'" And we could look at that and say, "Well, this is like exploiting people who have survived horrible Nazi camps, and aren't we maintaining an unfair system through social aid?"

LHF: And and there is one school of thought that really does treat social aid in that way and yet, there's no way to explain or understand what happened, if we don't see that Jewish solidarity was extremely real for many of the people in my book, many of the actors in the organizations. And when I say actors, what I mean are the the people, the individuals who decide to sacrifice their careers in the United States to come to France, because they feel like they need to express the solidarity personally. It's the case of Herman Stein, for example, whose mother's seven sisters were murdered in Warsaw. He was a young social worker and he was told "You're ruining a brilliant career." This is one of the quotes from the book. And he came to to France to work for the JDC. And this is the person who was kind of the mastermind behind the Paul Baerwald Social Work School.

LHF: And he's really doing this out of this notion of Jewish solidarity. So without that very real belief in Jewish solidarity, that many of the of the people in my book shared, we can't understand what motivated them. In terms of American benevolent power, I would say that from the beginning people are very skeptical of that notion. The JDC people on the ground know that in order to have their ideas accepted by the local population, they really need to let the local population be in charge. And so there are some very perceptive observers of French Jewish life who work for the JDC, one in particular is Laura Margolis. She was the director of the JDC program in France from 1946-1953, and she spoke French fluently, and she was able really to talk to leaders and to say, "Okay, you're complaining that we're too invasive, so let's create an organization that will take over from the JDC, because we have other places to be. You should be self-sufficient and autonomous."

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JH: The College Commons Podcast belongs to HUC Connect, the online platform for continuing education from the Hebrew Union College. HUC Connect includes webinars, syllabi for community learning, and masterclasses for HUC alumni with interviews, expert panels, and classroom materials on topics ranging from the arts to civil society, Israel and much more. Check us out @huc.edu/huc-connect. Now back to our interview.

JH: Some of your thoughts and comments have already intimated a backdrop of what is in fact a Cold War theme throughout this story in which French Jews, as you described them, are either running the gamut on the political spectrum, which includes Soviet-styled communism and more elite-styled capitalism and everything in between. But also talks about the varieties of French Jews being caught between proverbially Moscow and DC, so to speak. And events such as the "doctors' plot", which are well known to people today, tend to be associated, at least by Americans, exclusively with Soviet antisemitism. But it clearly had very specific and profound resonances among French Jews and especially leftist French Jews. So how did this Cold War story play out in the "Jewish Marshall Plan"?

LHF: Another fabulous question. So it's good that we set up this political diversity of French Jewish life from the beginning of our talk, because it's the only way to understand this question. What we see are huge tensions among the Jews who are politically on the left. On one hand, we have Jewish socialists, on the other hand, we have Jewish Bundists who are socialists, but who are Yiddish-speaking socialists, and who want to revive the Yiddish language and make sure it does not die out in the aftermath of the Holocaust. And then we have Jewish communists. And so this divide between socialists and communists is extremely strong. And at this stage in the game, all of these organizations have children's homes and social programs, and those social programs are being funded by the JDC. Now, when we keep this in mind, the JDC is an American Jewish organization and could easily be targeted during McCarthyism, because it's funding Jewish communists.

LHF: And the JDC, nonetheless, is aware of the fact that their money is going for children's homes, they wanna make sure it's going exclusively for caring for others and not for political propaganda purposes. They're concerned about the bookkeeping of these organizations, but they continue to fund them. And what happens is the Jewish socialists, the communists on one hand, criticizing the JDC because JDC is targeted in the "doctors' plot" already in the Soviet propaganda. And because the Jewish Communists in France follow the Moscow line, basically, they start criticizing the JDC not only in the Yiddish press in France, but also in the French-speaking communist press. So there are newspapers of every political orientation in France. And the communist press runs a series of 10 articles that are extremely negative about the JDC and talk about specific things that happen in France.

LHF: It really hits a nerve. And when that occurs, Jewish socialists in France decide that it's time to take out the communists. And so they really start drumming up an attack of the JDC saying, "How is it that you can be funding these organizations that are attacking you?" And they write about this in the Yiddish press. At this stage in the game, the JDC starts to worry because the

Yiddish press, if it gets out in the United States and then is translated into English, this could really affect the JDC. And it's after the "doctors' plot" that the JDC kind of feels forced to stop funding the Jewish Communist organizations. So there's a great deal of tension in the Yiddish press. I at that stage did not read the press in Yiddish, I found an amazing file of translations in the archives, and that's what allowed me to write that chapter of my book.

JH: I'd like to zoom out and bring us to today. Even as we in the United States are struggling with rising antisemitism currently, American Jews at the same time tend to view France in particular with tremendous skepticism as a deeply anti-Semitic society. How does this story of the "Jewish Marshall Plan" inflect our contemporary perception, American Jews contemporary perception of contemporary France? Does this story validate our skepticism by explaining some of French anti-Semitic roots? Does it contradict that perception or does it complicate it? What do you think?

LHF: I think it contradicts it, and I hope it complicates it, and I hope it invites American Jews to come to France to see how vibrant Jewish life is in this country. The finishing conclusion of my book, it talks about this life force that exists in French Jewish life, that refused to kind of be squelched and molded by American Jewish philanthropy. French Jews at times decided to accept that aid and run with it, but they have very clear ideas about what vision of Jewish life they have. And we're not at all talking here about what Bernard Wasserstein called a "vanishing diaspora", we're talking about a very vibrant country. Where else in Europe can one learn Latino or Yiddish or Hebrew and have a huge array of classes in different synagogues reflecting all of the different tendencies? I don't think we have a reconstructionist synagogue in France, but we have reformed conservative and orthodox and ultra-orthodox synagogues here.

LHF: But France is also the crossroads of geopolitics. And so the tensions that we see throughout Western societies, France is really faced with them. I think that it's facile and too easy to say that French society is deeply anti-Semitic. French society is a complex place, but how else can we explain why so many Jews choose to live and stay and thrive in France? And I think that my book kind of helps us understand that puzzle of, "How is it that something so horrible could happen, the Holocaust?" And yet you have thousands of people and generations of people who decide to stay put and not move to Israel, when it's created in 1948. Only a tiny fraction of Jews left for Israel in the period between '44 and '48, when there were some boats going to what was then mandatory Palestine.

LHF: And so you have many people who chose to live here, and that is a conscious choice. I think the book really shows how people were able to reconstruct economically, reconstruct with support of American organizations, and that helped them feel safer. And then there's a huge amount of support for Jewish life in French society. At the same time, there is anti-Semitism. And as we see now in the United States, once the genie is out of the bottle, it's very hard to put it back in. But knowing what we know now about anti-Semitism in the US, would we qualify the US as an extremely anti-Semitic society? I wouldn't, but there is anti-Semitism and it's a huge problem. So I think we need to look at it, seeing a glass half full and half empty at the same time.

[laughter]

LHF: And it's very hard for our minds to look at both things at once and to see both things at once. But I hope my book helps people kind of establish a framework for seeing those two things at the same time.

JH: Granting the diversity and complexity of French Judaism and the comparable complexity of American Judaism, I'd love it if you would share two examples that capture the utter Frenchness of French Jews and the utter Americanness of American Jews.

LHF: French Jews were complaining about the fact that the JDC was making too many decisions on their behalf, and so they start to create an organization based on the United Jewish Appeal, which is the American fundraising structure. And they create a French version of that structure, which today still exists and it's called the Fonds Social Juifs Unifiés. And as they're creating that organization, the JDC decided to send their expert in fundraisers to France. And this man really struggled to understand French Jews. And so I found his letters writing to his colleagues in the US, and he's trying to make sense of what he's seeing on the ground. And people warned him that French Jews are complex, and they're not at all going to echo what American Jews would echo.

LHF: And yet you see him struggling with this time and time again. And so he's using a mix of Spanish and Yiddish. And he says, "I can't imagine my chutzpah niche. I can't imagine how much chutzpah, I had in assuming that I would be able to teach them our methods very quickly. And French Jews are fickle and they have this manana attitude." He's trying to make sense of why people are resisting him, even though his ideas are so fabulous. And so I would say that that is one image of the can-do American, who wants to come in and show everyone how things should be done, instead of listening and also maybe taking stock of what people had just lived through. A second anecdote in that same vein is that the JDC was complaining about the fact that their own French local staff was so in-efficient. And then they realized that most of them were suffering from malnutrition. And it's when one of their employees ended up in the hospital, that they found out that he had only eaten potatoes and no butter and no milk products for the past three to four years, and that they needed to start giving food to their employees.

LHF: In terms of French Jews being French, we see this idea that they're not afraid of criticizing American Jews in losing their funding. And this idea that their dignity is important to them and they're willing to take a risk. And I think that just looking at the attacks against the JDC in the Yiddish socialist press, because they're funding the Jewish communists. That is, I think, the prime example of French Jews being French, people are willing to put principles and dignity over their financial interests.

JH: Well, Professor Laura Hobson Faure, thank you so much for the conversation and for this incredible book, which is such an important chapter in our shared history and really filled with incredible stories and an incredible narrative of some of the great power of American Jewish benevolence, French Jewish strength, Jewish solidarity and the United States and France as well. Thank you.

LHF: Thank you very much, Joshua.

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