

OUR UNKNOWN AMERICAN JEWISH ANCESTORS

Fact and Myth in History

OSCAR HANDLIN

PROBABLY Columbus was not a Jew, but, then again, there is a possibility that he might have been. Perhaps it was a Jew that first set foot on the shores of the New World! In any case, there certainly were Jews in his crew; and Jews (converted) financed the Queen who financed the journey.

To the American colonies came large numbers of Spanish and Portuguese Israelites. These were great merchants. Most of them lived in Newport where they built a cemetery and synagogue about which Longfellow later wrote a poem. They became patriots in the Revolution, sustaining the cause in its darkest days with their credit. The father of our country, George Washington, wrote a letter on tolerance to the Jews. Haym Salomon.

THE damaging influence of mythical historical distinctions between early American settlers and later arriving ethnic groups on our immigration policy is well understood by now. That immigrant groups—and among them Jews—nurture similar opinions about supposed national differentiations between “old stock” and “newcomers” is not so well known—but possibly equally harmful, at least to their inner morale, and to mutual democratic relations within the group. This is but one example of many, in this discussion by OSCAR HANDLIN, of some of the totally erroneous notions of the Jewish past in America which mark our history books—and of the sad implications of current misconceptions and ignorance. Dr. Handlin, assistant professor of social sciences and member of the department of history and social relations at Harvard, is the author of *Commonwealth* (1946), *The Immigrant in American Politics* (1944), *Boston's Immigrants* (1941), and many articles. He wrote “Democracy Needs the Open Door” in the January, 1947 COMMENTARY. He was born in 1915, was graduated from Brooklyn College, and received his doctorate from Harvard.

A second period of settlement developed in the middle of the 19th century. The German Jews who came to the United States in that period were liberals; they were wealthy or became wealthy; they brought Reform Judaism with them; they were patriotic. Judah P. Benjamin.

Toward the end of the century came the flow of Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe. These people were poor, orthodox, and they worked in the garment industry. But they also became prominent in the fields of entertainment and the arts. They were patriotic. Bombardier Meyer Levin. . . .

I MAINTAIN that this sample is, except perhaps for its brevity, by no means unrepresentative of the versions of American Jewish history now current. There is no dearth of books dealing with the subject, books that range in political and social perspective from the extreme Right to the extreme Left. Yet all, whether they come from the pens of conservative rabbis, or from the presses of International Publishers, have the same deadly monotony. All give the same emphasis to the same incidents; all make the same basic assumptions.

Unhappily, the emphasis happens to be often wrong, and the assumptions often false. Accordingly, the notions of the past that are derived from them are by and large distorted and misleading.

All the accounts start with the identical tripartite division, a Spanish period, a German period, an Eastern-European period, each with its own characteristics that arise from the presumed qualities of the Jews' presumed country of origin. The nature of the social adjustment, of the economic role, of the intellectual cast, and of the religious structure at each stage of settlement are as-

sumed to be outgrowths of the national traits brought in successive periods by Jews from different lands.

THE delusion, for instance, that there was a time when the great majority of American Jews were Spanish is a deeply ingrained article of faith for most historians. Yet that notion has descended to our days on the simple, heedless basis of generalization from a few individual names. Of course, there are enough equally prominent, non-Iberic names, Haym Salomon for instance, to give pause to the easy generalizers. As a matter of fact, the only serious recent study of an American colonial Jewish community has shown, from the synagogue membership lists, that already in the 18th century a majority of the Jews of New York were either German or Polish.

Nor is the idea of a second, German era, more valid. To begin with, it disregards large and important groups of French and English Hebrews. Even more important is the fact that the implied contrast with the period that follows is dubious. A Jewish traveler who came to New York in 1862 found almost one-half the synagogues there composed of Jews who had originated in Eastern Europe. In Boston there is a reference to a Polish Jewish congregation as far back as the 1840's; and elsewhere, there is enough parallel evidence to suggest that the 19th century was not as Teutonic in its complexion as has hitherto been assumed.

Furthermore, quite a few individuals and families casually labeled as German by most authors, prove on re-examination to have birthplaces or to have originated in districts that would not now be so considered. If one were to take away the Czechs and the Hungarians, for example, the ranks of the Germans would be very much attenuated; Isaac Mayer Wise, and the Brandeis and Pulitzer families would thus be lost, to mention only three well-known names.

The question of what was a German Jew becomes even more complicated when the problems of nationality, or of nativity, are examined in the light of the political struc-

ture of mid-19th-century Europe. In 1850, one must remember, a Jew born in Galicia would give as his place of birth, Austria; one born in Posnan would say his place of birth was Prussia. Among so many, and such diverse Austrians and Prussians, how can one distinguish which are really Polish and which German?

As a matter of fact, if our Galician or Posner Jew had landed in Castle Garden in 1850, it is more than likely that each would have been inscribed in the immigration records as German, just as would have been the case with any Bavarian and any Badener, with most Swiss, and with many Alsatians. That practice reflected the fact that the primary basis of group distinction in the United States before 1880 was either religion or language, and that, of the two, language played by far the more important role in the process of group identification and differentiation. If Americans at that time distinguished among Jews at all, they did so on the basis of language. A cursory survey of scattered evidence leads me to the tentative conclusion that any Yiddish-speaking Jew in this country before 1880 would have been classified as German.

If the second period thus loses its exclusively Germanic quality, the presumptive differences between it and the last fifty years disintegrate. As the economic dislocations that were the seeds of emigration spread eastward, both Jewish and non-Jewish movements out of the domains of the Hapsburgs and the Romanovs mounted rapidly in volume. But the Germans also continued to come, and in numbers no smaller than before, particularly if we compensate in our reckonings for the loss after 1918 of territory by the Central Powers to the successor states. A fresh evaluation of the material would, I am sure, prove that through the past century and a half the sources of immigration were always varied—no less for Jews than for non-Jews. Gradual shifts in emphasis corresponded to the gradual changes in the tides of European migration to the United States, but never disrupted the essential continuity of the flow.

IF THESE familiar "three periods" lack basis in the actual facts of nativity and nationality, they are none the less revealing, for they mirror the opinions of Jews already in America about themselves and about their more recently arrived coreligionists. There is a meaningful reason for these divisions, the nature of which becomes clearer by comparison with similar divisions marked out in other American ethnic groups.

Even immigrants who stem from countries with clearly delimited political boundaries make such distinctions. Within many ethnic groups earlier arrivals persistently endeavored to establish a basis for differentiation between themselves and later comers of the same stock. Thus, for instance, the Scotch-Irish attempted to keep themselves apart from the South Irish, the High Germans from the Low Germans (or alternatively, the "grays" from the "greens"), the North from the South Italians, and the Slovaks from the Carpatho-Ruthenians.

Involved in this fragmentation is the desire of people further advanced in adaptation to free themselves of responsibility for the social backwardness of the less advanced "greenhorns." Those who, by length of residence or ease of adjustment, have approached the "native" standards of behavior seek in this manner to purge themselves of the stigmata of foreignness. At the same time, they tend thus to maintain, in fraternal and religious institutions that continue to be used in common, a certain distance between themselves and their social inferiors. I think a case could be made for the argument that those who called themselves Spanish Jews in the 1840's were those who wished to keep apart from the peddlers and petty shopkeepers of these years, just as later the "Germans" were those who wished to separate themselves from the needleworkers of the 1890's.

Approval by those elements in the native population that, for one reason or another, were hostile to foreigners and immigrants, always put a premium upon such differentiations. To the xenophobe, such distinctions seemed a reasonable basis for accepting the American past of an ethnic group while re-

jecting its living members. The Know-Nothing of 1854 could argue away John Paul Jones and the Hibernians of the 18th century with the explanation that those were Scotch-Irish; and from the premise of a difference between the Scotch-Irish and the Irish, could launch an attack upon the patriotism of the immigrants of his own day. The restrictionist of 1910 could argue against further Jewish immigration, despite Haym Salomon and Judah Touro, because the entrants in the later period were nationally—some would have it, racially—unlike those of the earlier period, i.e. "East European." And the weight of that line of argument grew immeasurably heavier when it was supported by the popular contention that there had been a decisive, radical change in the character of immigration after 1880.

The impulse that drove some men thus to set themselves apart is worthy of understanding. But it must not obscure the fundamental fact that the stream of Jewish immigration, like that of all Americans, was continuous; and from the first trickles in 1607 until the final damming up in 1924, was nourished by substantially the same diversified sources.

To clear away the outmoded conception of national periods leaves the whole course of Jewish history in the United States without an explanation. With few exceptions, the entire corpus of literature on this subject rests slavishly on that three-ply nationalistic interpretation. But if there were representatives of the Jewries of every country in each era, then specific national properties can be ascribed to no single period. We must rule out references to Spanish traits, to German qualities, to Polish characteristics. And then there is nothing left—except significant problems awaiting significant answers.

In the present state of our information the answers are not yet available. But it may nevertheless be useful to define some of the questions, if only to indicate where our lack of knowledge is most oppressive.

As I have said, the traditional divisions of the Jewish past in the United States rest

on a false basis. Yet the course of settlement was not uniform and uneventful. There were meaningful turning points that remain to be accounted for. The attitude of other Americans toward the Jews has, for instance, altered profoundly from time to time. In the 18th century and in the early 19th century, Christians in this country viewed the Jews not merely with tolerance but with a kind of exaggerated respect. A prevalent belief in the miraculous character of Jewish history and of Jewish survival, as represented in the writings of Hannah Adams, joined with the Christian idea of Israel as a mystery perpetuated in anticipation of the Second Coming, when the conversion of those who had rejected the Savior would herald the day of regeneration. Earnest missionary societies labored to hasten that end; and writers from Cotton Mather down pointed out that the wanderers must be well treated to bring closer the momentous occasion.

Toward the middle of the 19th century, that attitude died out. Instead, Jews were comprehended in the general multi-national view of the sources of American culture. They were one with the other diverse groups that were entering the United States; all would contribute to the evolution of a new man, the American.

By 1900, that optimistic picture had begun to fade out. Among some people it gave way to the conviction that the Jews were ineradicably different. "This great Polish swamp of miserable human beings, terrific in its proportions, threatens to draw itself off into our country," wrote a distinguished scientist. Some Americans, on the other hand, accepted the Jews, but with the proviso that they be assimilated to the point at which differences between Jews and non-Jews were no sharper in nature than differences among the various Christian sects.

These mutations in attitude were certainly consequential in the history of Jewish life in America. But we cannot ascribe them to a variance in the nativity of the Jews from period to period, once we have discarded the assumption of successive changes in the national origin of these immigrants. The clue

must rather be sought in American society generally.

Similar ramifications in the process of Jewish adjustment in America, once concealed by the old interpretation, are now laid bare. The channels of mobility, for instance, have shifted radically in the course of the last one hundred and fifty years. In the 18th century, the Jews who moved upward in the social scale did so through overseas trade; in the mid-19th century, they resorted to retail business; more recently they have advanced primarily through the professions, and through certain limited forms of industrial entrepreneurship.

Under the old dispensation it was simple to point out that the Spanish Jews were naturally adapted to be merchants, that the Germans had a propensity for business, and the Eastern Europeans for learning or the clothing industry. But the nationalistic pattern simply does not fit, to say nothing of the fact that no one ever troubled to explain what peculiarities in the Spanish character were advantageous in managing ships, what in the German in managing department stores.

The whole problem must be reexamined in terms of the development of the American economy and of the place in it of the Jews.

An analogous situation prevails with regard to the internal structure of the Jewish community. We know practically nothing about the very deep and very real divisions within the Jewish community at any given time. Too often, the premise that all Jewish immigrants at a specific moment originated in the same place fathered the erroneous conclusion that they were all the same and in substantial agreement with each other. A pervasive fog has thus blotted out some of the most fruitful controversies and most productive dissensions in Jewish life.

THREE important developments within the American Jewish community will illustrate the manner in which major problems, long unformulated, need now to be confronted. It seemed obvious to the first writers on the subject that the use of the Sephardic

minhag (order of service) in the 18th century was the result of the fact that American Jews were Spanish or of Spanish descent. Hyman Grinstein's study of the New York community in that period (*The Rise of the Jewish Community of New York, 1654-1860*, Jewish Publication Society of America, 1945), revealed that the Sephardic influence originated not in Spain but in the imperial capital, London. In this connection the whole question of the sources of early American Judaism might be worth reopening. A study in the light of the colonial status of the continent, of the absence of a rabbinate or of a learned laity, and of the mixture of men from many lands could not fail to produce illuminating results.

The Reform movement in America has generally been regarded as an importation from Germany, or at least its attractiveness when it took hold has been explained by the German character of the Jews in the United States. Now, Isaac Mayer Wise himself was not a German and, while he may have had some contact with the German movement before he emigrated, he developed his own distinctive ideas only after he came to the United States. In any case, the experience of the congregation in Charleston where there were earlier tentative efforts toward the same end, showed indigenous influences working in the general direction of Reform independently of what was happening in Europe.

It is pertinent to note that there were analogous trends in the other immigrant religions. Both the Lutheran and the Catholic churches, for instance, were for long periods divided by controversies over Americanization, controversies which displayed suggestive likenesses to the struggles over Reform Judaism. On the intellectual level, we find the same discussions as to the place of rationalism and ethics as against faith and mysticism. And on the practical level there was the same uneasiness among communicants—immigrant masses, growing in numbers on one side, and, on the other, the "Americans," fewer but superior in social status.

Certainly there is a most neglected and a

most fertile field for study in the origin and development of these movements. In Judaism, as in the other religions, traditional forms slowly adapted themselves to the conditions of the American environment, to contact on free and equal terms with Gentiles, to the challenge of separation of church from state and from education. More generally, it would be fruitful to try to weigh the impact of American influences upon a wide variety of Jewish religious forms in the United States. The offices of rabbi and *hazan* are not here what they were across the Atlantic; Conservative Judaism seems to have sprung entirely from conditions local to the United States.

Finally, the history of Zionism may be studied to advantage in the same way. I would not minimize the importance of the European background of the struggle for a Jewish homeland. Yet in the United States the development of the movement as a popular phenomenon is impressively akin to the activities of other immigrant groups laboring toward similar ends. The Irish battle for independence, the German striving for unity, showed, in America, a high measure of parallelism with Zionism in aspirations, objectives, methods, and even in divided counsels. That may be coincidental. But if we rid ourselves of the notion that Zionism was no more than an importation by Polish Jews, we are likely to perceive that there was, on the contrary, something in the nature of settlement in the New World that rendered immigrants enthusiastic about such causes.

Thus far, I have mentioned problems that were specifically Jewish, that is, that were encompassed within the communal functions of the group. These subjects have been written about, although, I think, on the whole badly. But there is a wide range of other matters which have rarely been touched upon. The Jews also lived in a broader society; they participated in the total American culture; and there was a constant interplay of influence between the life of the Jewish group and the life of the whole group. A competent study of the Jewish

press, of the Jewish stage, or of Jewish charitable institutions would throw light both on the development of Jewish culture and the development of the American press, the American stage, and American charitable institutions. Understanding these facets of Jewish life would unquestionably contribute to understanding American society, where such group activity plays a critical part.

On this aspect of the problem, our historiography has been particularly one-sided, for it has concentrated only on the survivors, on those who remained Jews, and continued to lead Jewish lives. I know of no attempts to study the causes of "leakage," to assess the extent of loss of faith or of deviations away from the community. Probably there were in the 19th century and early in this century a large number of conversions. I say, probably, because the weight of much scattered evidence seems to indicate that. I do not know; no one knows. Yet it is certainly important in understanding the elements of cohesion in the group to know not only why some people remain Jews, but also why others do not.

Whether Americanization led to the strengthening or the weakening of the community, it entailed all sorts of interesting problems of acculturation. The extent of our ignorance of these matters is appalling. The Jewish family, for instance, is conventionally described as granite-like, as resistant to change, and as possessing a magnetic hold over its members. However, in novels, and in personal narratives like E. G. Stern's *My Mother and I*, we catch glimpses of elements of instability and strain. And from time to time we encounter stray bits of evidence that strengthen that impression. In 1912, Arthur Holitscher, a German socialist visiting the United States, spent some time among the hobos; he noticed a large proportion of Jews in the ranks of the vagrants, a fact which he took as evidence of disrupted family life. All we have is such fragmentary data, from which no one could venture to leap to any conclusions.

All these cases underline the need for studying the experience of the Jews as the

experience of an immigrant group. What is important is not that three thousand were here in 1776 but that they were still on their way in the hundreds of thousands after 1900. Like the other peoples who came to build the New World, their history is the history of the adjustment of old ways to new conditions, of old forms to new contents. And their history must be viewed as an aspect of that process of adaptation.

The Jews did not come empty-handed to the United States. But blanket references to tradition and heritage are unenlightening unless we know how those affected—and were affected by—the American context into which they were brought.

ALMOST thirty years ago, Edward Channing noted in his extensive *History of the United States* that the story of the Jews in America was less completely written and less understood than that of any other major ethnic element in the population of the nation. Three decades have gone by since Channing made those discouraging remarks. But the lapse of time has not added to the total fund of our available knowledge of the American Jewish past. A series of general books have mechanically ground out the same old routine. Occasional biographies have thrown light on the work of notable individuals. But in the realm of writing that digs to the bed-rock of the subject, a few works—the study of New York previously mentioned, for example, and Yivo's (the Yiddish Scientific Institute) account of the labor movement—stand out in lonely and uncomfortable isolation.

This is a deplorable situation. Historians in general find here an intolerable gap in the understanding of the development of American society; they know they cannot estimate the role of an important component of the national population. The gap is even more regrettable from the point of view of the thinking Jews who are today attempting to understand the nature of their identity as a group within American society. At a time when the meanings of Judaism and of its cultural orientation are everywhere being

re-examined, the absence of the raw material for a comprehension of the Jewish past in America is a most dangerous handicap.

The remedy will come from a fresh approach to the history of the Jews as the history of an immigrant group, one of many participating in the development of the United States. But to be written right, the history must be freed of the burden of a

defensive attitude. It must cease to be apologetic; it cannot afford to be distorted by the necessity for justification. The approach must be open and unhackneyed. Leaving behind the respectably heroic individuals, it will rather seek the key to the past in the struggles of the great mass of humble men and women who tried to carry across the ocean a tradition embodied in a way of life.

AND SO BE DONE

JACOB SLOAN

THEIR resolution at the opened gates
Ten days between the writing and the
sealing

Changed no crown in their suspended fate.
All days were New Year's, all were days of
healing,
All days of awe, and of happy kneeling:

The shepherd note of the banished son
Fell straight into the chariot of the king;
Straightway perceived among the barefoot
ones,
His dancing shone beyond the peasant ring;
Israel's pleasant voice was meant to sing.

If we could sing that song, we would be
glad,
Or walk a piece with Benjamin the third,
Or know the troubles Hananiah had—
But we should sing too sweet, and be absurd,
Or feel too much, and perish at a word.

If Teveye could hear our pleading now,
Would he turn his ancient horse aside?
We could not call a prophet from his plow—

But would Carmel join the countryside,
If we should say with Job: Men think, and
gods decide?

It is not true that they had certainty
Of grace, and we have none.
What they could do, and we must learn to
be,
Is simply not to know, and so be done.
To laugh, and shrug a shoulder at the air:
Every therefore poses a new why.
Never question the essential one:
Samson was defeated by his hair;
Let Dagon's pillars stand, and keep your
eye.

We are not pieces, they were not entire.
We, like them, deny the miracle.
They, like us, saw no bush on fire.
That was less a vision than a will,
And we both agree: We will no more.
It were better not to have been made,
It were best to be always still.
Now that we are, ask not what we are for:
Put it off; hope, and be afraid.

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