

# Reviews of Books

A DREAMER'S JOURNEY. The Autobiography of Morris Raphael Cohen. *Boston: The Beacon Press.* 1949. xiii, 318 pp. \$4.00

REFLECTIONS OF A WONDERING JEW. By Morris Raphael Cohen. *Boston: The Beacon Press.* 1950. viii, 168 pp. \$2.50

Morris Raphael Cohen was a legend during his life time. The sting of his cutting satire in the classroom as he demolished systems of philosophy or the opinion of one of his students has become part of the folklore of literary folk. His reputation for possessing an unbelievably large storehouse of knowledge is also part of the Cohen tradition. There is much truth in both of these common beliefs about Cohen, for he was merciless in his attack upon ideas which failed in logic or reason, and he had a fund of knowledge in so many fields that he has been called the Aristotle of our century.

His place among the philosophers, while not directly the subject of the two books under review, is, nevertheless, involved in an understanding of them. Cohen was essentially a philosophers' philosopher in that he was a critic of all systems, but a champion of none. His enemies among his professional colleagues — and philosophers do make enemies if they are true philosophers — accused him of being negative and destructive. It is often said of him that he found the fallacy of all other systems but never created one which could be attacked. Cohen pleaded guilty to the charge, and defended his position with a reference to the fable of the Augean Stables, by saying, "Isn't it enough to have cleaned out the stables?" In all fairness, it must, however, be said that the charge of his critics was founded on a partial reading of Cohen's writings. While it is true that much of his work was directed toward revealing the logical fallacy of the work of others, he did leave behind him enough published material to warrant the assertion that he had a general pattern of philosophy with a positive direction. His basic thesis of Polarity and Relationality are epistemologically unique emphases which Cohen gave to modern thought.

Cohen wrote with authority in a variety of intellectual disciplines. Jurists recognized him as a pioneer in the Philosophy of Law. He wrote with equal influence in the fields of logic, history, science, psychology, and sociology. To each area of human thought he brought a well trained, critical, and informed mind. He fell for no fashions

and was afraid of philosophical fads. He knew that life was too complex and mysterious to be comprehended by any one science or philosophy. His faith was that of a liberal who placed his confidence in man's ability to search for the truth and thereby gain mastery over nature. His great book, *Reason and Nature*, is probably the best summation of his general philosophy.

The volumes under review deal with Morris R. Cohen the Jew. His contributions which will endure will not be those which deal with Jewish subjects. For some of us this may well be a source of regret. Cohen's critical and philosophic approach could have done very much to bring modern Jewish research and writing into proper focus. This becomes all the more regrettable when we run across the few references he has left behind to sources of Jewish knowledge which he possessed. He not only was an ardent student of the Bible, and read the Talmud and Commentaries, but he had access to many sources of exegetical, midrashic, and historical character. What Cohen could have meant to modern Jewish thought had he devoted all his energies to it is indicated in his brilliant essay, "Philosophies of Jewish History." Bringing his vast general knowledge of the philosophy of history to bear upon Jewish history, Cohen reveals the weakness of all attempts thus far to explain in a unilateral fashion the meaning of Jewish existence. It is a welcome corrective to the partisan interpretations which are fashionable today.

Cohen was not a popular figure in many Jewish circles. He was not a religious Jew in the sense that he rejected all theism, including monotheism. He was particularly unpopular with the Zionists, for he found political Zionism unpalatable to his liberal concept of what a modern state should be. While he was moved by the growth and achievement of Palestine and protested against the British policy of discrimination prior to the establishment of the State, he felt that a politically-Zionist Palestine would become a "Tribalism." He feared that there would be no mixing of peoples and races, and that there would be a union of church and state. He hoped that Israel would become ". . . a non-sectarian state that allows equal rights to all Jews, Christians, Mohammedans, and atheists alike."

His major concern with Zionism was that it distracted the minds of American Jews from the solution of domestic problems. He had a fervent faith in America, though he was a critic of much of its social life. He was ever grateful for the opportunity it afforded him as an immigrant boy to achieve a place of distinction in the academic world. He constantly reverts to the theme of the American dream, the land which promises an opportunity to all who want to share in its real idealism. Thus he felt that Zionism was taking the mind of the Jew from the immediate and real scene where the practical

problems could be most effectively envisioned and most realistically worked upon. This led to his faith in the future of the Jews in America, who can and should make a unique contribution to the totality of American life.

Cohen gave up his belief in a personal God, a belief he brought here from Nesviesh, a town near Minsk, Russia, where he was born. Until the age of twelve he received a rigid orthodox Jewish training and accepted the basic religious tenets of his faith. His studies in philosophy and science moved him to adopt a secular interpretation of nature and life. Yet he never gave up his basic Jewish faith in the idea of "holiness" which he said "enables us to distinguish between good and evil in men, and thus saves us from the idolatrous worship of a humanity that is full of imperfections." This reviewer believes that Cohen was a bit too squeamish about using the word "God" for his "ideal of holiness." He could have done so and remained solidly within a good portion of Jewish theological thought.

Many forces combined to fashion the mind and thought of Cohen, but of most enduring influence were his grandfather in Nesviesh and Thomas Davidson in New York. The former planted in him, while he was still a youth, the love of learning; the latter opened up the windows of modern thought and philosophy. It is interesting to note the recurrence to the faith of his grandfather, particularly in his later years. Disavowing affiliation with organized religion, he could write: "Like vivid illustrations in the book of my life are the prayers of my parents, the services at their graves, the memory of an old man chanting funeral songs at the Yahrzeit of my dear friend, Dr. Himwich, the unveiling of the monument to the beloved comrade of my life's journeys, and the celebration of the continuity of generations in the Passover services in the home of my parents and in the homes of my children. And though I have never gone back to theological super-naturalism, I have come to appreciate more than I once did the symbolism in which is celebrated the human need of trusting the larger vision, according to which calamities come and go, but the continuity of life and faith in its better possibilities survive."

During the last fourteen years of his life (1933-1947) Cohen gave much of his time, his failing energy, and his spirit to the work of the Conference on Jewish Relations, which he organized and by sheer will power kept alive. From this followed the creation of the quarterly, *Jewish Social Studies*, for the publication of sociological studies about Jews and Judaism. This entire activity flowed from Cohen's basic belief that the tragedy of Jewish life brought to focus by Nazism and Hitler needed him for the only talent he had to offer. The way to fight prejudice and injustice was with facts and a proper interpretation of them. Toward the end of his life, he was also drawn

into the work of the Research Institute on Peace and Post-War Problems of the American Jewish Committee.

The two volumes which are here being reviewed can be read with profit by American Jews of today. *A Dreamer's Journey* is a book rich in sentiment as experienced by a man basically a naturalist. *Reflections of a Wondering Jew* is a collection of sharp, critical, yet trenchant opinions about Jewish life and thought. The fact is that we need a Morris Raphael Cohen in our Jewish life to shake the smugness out of our religious, cultural, and communal life. His writings may irritate many, but, like those of the prophets, they are the words of a wise and thoughtful Jew. Mr. Justice Holmes once said that in the company of Morris Raphael Cohen he felt the presence of a Holy Man.

LEVI A. OLAN

Dallas, Texas

GREAT JEWS I HAVE KNOWN. By Max Raisin. *New York: Philo-sophical Library*. 1952. xiii, 249 pp. \$3.25

In publishing in book form a series of essays, most of which first appeared in issues of the *National Jewish Monthly* of the Independent Order of B'nai B'rith, Dr. Max Raisin, the author, has rendered a distinct service to the Jewish reading public.

The individual essays, each depicting the struggles and achievements of a distinguished person whom the author was privileged to know, no doubt gave great pleasure to readers, who thrilled to the story of intense Jewish personalities, born to poverty and pain, yet attaining the great reward of effective leadership among their people.

In book form, however, these portraits took on an enhanced value as they formed a gallery meriting a place in a hall of fame, wherein those who look upon them intently and as one composite picture may gain, in the author's own words, "an understanding of the period in which we live." . . . "The greatest epoch in Jewish history since the destruction of the Jewish Commonwealth by the Romans, and the beginning of the Dispersion nearly 1,900 years ago."

At this point, the reviewer reminds himself that this great modern era of experience is, by the book, seen through the eyes of one personality — that of the author — and we must expect to find in the reflected picture a great deal of warmth, but less objectivity.

Moreover, Dr. Raisin's self-imposed limitation of presenting only vignettes, "close-ups" of the personalities portrayed, inhibits in the reviewer any biographical criticism and prompts him to appraise the portraits as they are drawn in the spirit of the author's intense and

unfailing admiration and affection for builders of modern Hebrew, for poets, for protagonists of national resurrection, for great religious reformers, for world-distinguished scholars, for avengers of their people's honor, for spiritual leaders, for outstanding preachers, for neo-Hebrew revivalists — for these and for their philosophy and ideology.

It is this patent hero worship which binds together into a readable presentation essays which thus acquire the unity and the integrated plot of a stirring novel.

One finds it not at all strange, under the author's spell, to see grouped together as actors in the epic of a great era of Jewish life and achievement an Ahad Haam and the Christian-born woman Elisheva, a Shmaryahu Levin and the gentle Henrietta Szold, an Isaac M. Wise and a Schechter, a Deutsch and a Schwarzbard, a Magnes and a Stybel, to mention only half of the notable company.

Here it must be said that the author's intentional avoidance of exhaustive biographical treatment can not entirely disarm criticism. His impressionistic method leads him at times to pedestrian judgments and even to unintended injustice.

To say of Gotthard Deutsch that "his life-long love of Germany prevailed over his sense of duty as an American citizen" hardly disposes of the incident which nearly cost Deutsch his position at the Hebrew Union College. No careful biographer would set such a statement before the world without carefully documented authority, and even an impressionistic portraiture of the man by Dr. Raisin, who loved him, should have no place for it. In this connection, one must remember this: the witch-hunting which we see today so clearly casting shadows of injustice upon innocent men was a form of war hysteria not unknown in Cincinnati during the first World War.

In the opinion of the reviewer, the subjective character of Dr. Raisin's essays led him also to a false appraisal of the career of Judah Leib Magnes. Magnes is depicted as a student who became "vain and uppish" because of excessive praise, and as a leader who developed a "Messiah-complex." His career is summed up as one "noted for its failures rather than its successes." Yet it would be as easy to interpret the alleged failures as evidence of a greatness of soul revealing flashes of great courage in espousing unpopular causes.

Let the reviewer make this clear. Magnes had become head of the Hebrew University on Mt. Scopus. "Then," writes the essayist, "he launched out on political activities which soon made him the stormy petrel of the Yishuv where he organized . . . the Ichud party which aimed at making Palestine into a bi-national Arab-Jewish State. . . . So self-righteous was he in his own eyes that the attacks leveled at him on all sides for being out of step with the vast bulk of Jews failed to make an impression on him, and he occupied himself with

his political work, which was universally condemned, down to the last day of his life." May the reviewer remark that to stand alone working under great emotional pressure and against prodigious opposition seems to be not the attitude of a supreme egotist but of a man of rare moral stamina?

Incidents could be multiplied in the career of Magnes which reveal greatness of soul, though it was often lonely in its greatness.

One would wish, too, that the author, in drawing a warm disciple's portrait of Isaac M. Wise, had not indulged in the luxury of that futile sort of prophecy which writers often use to underline their own ideology, by affirming its posthumous acceptance by the illustrious dead. It adds nothing to the appreciation of Wise's greatness or to the integrity of Dr. Raisin's personal beliefs to guess thus: "Had he (Wise) lived today, I believe he too would have joined forces with all who look Zionward for a solution of the Jewish problem." One could with greater conviction affirm that the truth would lie in another direction.

The reviewer would now express the hope that the above criticisms do not seem to negate his earlier favorable evaluation of Dr. Raisin's opus. The scholarly author, in publishing in book form his subjective studies of great personalities, has given strength and purpose to their influence. He has added much toward an understanding of the great modern period which culminated in the State of Israel.

His own philosophy, his own warm admiration of his heroes and heroines, his own devotion to the ideals for which they labored, succeeded in binding separate careers into a commanding whole — in bringing the portraiture of individuals into larger focus, thus creating a clearer picture of an outstanding epoch of Jewish history.

*New Orleans, La.*

EMIL W. LEIPZIGER