

Major Trends in American Jewish Historical Research

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VICTORIAN FILIOPIETISM

For many Americans — particularly those of the upper classes — the 1890's may have been a "gilded age." For American Jews, however — even Jews of wealth and position — it was an age of insecurity. Generally foreign-born, the community's leaders, however well Americanized, could not forget that they had come from European lands where it was *de rigueur* to impose political disabilities on Jews. They were equally conscious of America's emergent anti-Semitism, of the racialism that had spread through France and Germany in the 1880's and was not long in penetrating American life.

The recognition that anti-Jewish prejudice was not to be confined to the European past colored the American Jew's view of his history in this country. It made for an essentially apologetic tendency in American Jewish historical research — when it was first undertaken in the 1890's — and led the historian of American Jewry to emphasize the Jewish contribution to early America. "As American Jews," said Oscar S. Straus in 1896, "we feel it our duty to cast every light it is possible to bring to bear upon early colonization and development of civilization upon this great continent of ours."

The *fin-de-siècle* American Jew wanted nothing so much as to prove his pioneering credentials. The money used to outfit Christopher Columbus' caravels, Oscar Straus proudly proclaimed, had been "furnished by no other person than the Treasurer General of Aragon, who was born of a Jewish mother and a Jewish father." Louis Santangel and Gabriel Sanchez, both of Jewish ancestry, were

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“really the patrons of Columbus,” and “the reports made by Columbus and sent home were addressed to the first two American Jews, as I think I must call them.” Straus also took much pride in the fact that there were “undoubtedly five Jews” among the men who sailed with Columbus. This desire — to celebrate the pioneer origins of American Jewry — had a great deal to do with the formation of the American Jewish Historical Society in 1892, just 400 years after Columbus’ discovery of the New World.

The Victorians who founded the American Jewish Historical Society were, in many instances, devoted and gifted amateurs, capable of producing thoroughly scientific studies. But it was not science so much as filiofetism that motivated their efforts, and they were at pains to exclude anything that might cast discredit on their spiritual — and, for some at least, physical — ancestors, the early Sephardim, Jews of Spanish-Portuguese background, who had established the foundations of American Jewry. These early American Jews had to be portrayed as victims of Inquisitional bigotry and as a cultured élite which contributed significantly to the nascent American economy. Nothing else was admissible, so that, when Barnett A. Elzas wrote his history of South Carolina Jewry, he stressed the fact that a Sephardi, Jacob Ramos, had landed at Charleston in 1773, but omitted all mention of Ramos’ subsequent conviction for receiving stolen goods from a Negro slave. And when the early minutes of New York City’s colonial congregation, Shearith Israel, were published by the American Jewish Historical Society in 1913, the editors took care to delete the names of all whose behavior at religious services was less than decorous. The name of a Jewish girl who bore a child out of wedlock was meticulously suppressed. For that turn-of-the-century generation, it was out of the question to publish anything that might project a negative image of the American Jew.

ARRIVAL IN ACADEME

By the 1930’s and 1940’s, great changes had taken place in American Jewish life. The gates of immigration had closed in 1924, and out of what had been a dual — and often enough mutually

scornful — community of “Germans” and “Russians” there was beginning to emerge a homogeneous native-born American Jewish community. For this community, much less troubled by immigrant self-doubts, the trappings of Victorianism — including a defensive view of history — had scant appeal. These “new” American Jews had successfully coped with the dislocations of the Great Depression, the anti-Semitic agitation of the 1930’s, the challenges of military service during the Second World War, and post-War attempts to cripple their Palestinian brethren. The self-esteem generated by this experience held much more meaning for them than a quest for colonial forebears, and they were fortified by another consideration as well: the War, with its destruction of European Jewry, had left America’s Jewish community the greatest and most opulent that the world had ever seen. This community — five million strong, generous, interested, proud — was catapulted into a position of hegemony over all other Jewish communities. Such responsibility demanded an increasing measure of self-understanding, and American Jewry began taking a serious — and realistic — look at its own American origins. The result was a developing trend towards American Jewish history as a scientific discipline.

This trend had actually begun even before the War’s end. During the late 1930’s, the Work Projects Administration (WPA), guided largely by non-Jewish scholars for whom facts took precedence over sentiment, had undertaken inventories of American synagogal archives. In 1943, three years after the WPA inventories began appearing, a required course in American Jewish history was initiated at the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati. The first of its kind ever to be offered at an institution of higher learning, it testified to the critical methodology which American Jewish historical research had absorbed and also to the hitherto unprecedented academic respectability that American Jewish history had achieved. After 289 years, American Jewish history had finally “arrived” — in Academe.

There were other evidences of widespread interest in American Jewish history. The tendency manifested itself during the 1940’s, when the National Jewish Welfare Board inaugurated an annual “Jewish History Week,” the Yiddish Scientific Institute (YIVO)

issued the first volume of the *Yivo Annual of Jewish Social Science* which included material on American Jewish life, the Hebrew Union College established the American Jewish Archives on its Cincinnati campus, and the American Jewish Committee-sponsored *Commentary* magazine called a conference to study the problems of recording and interpreting American Jewish history. Toward the end of the decade, the American Jewish Archives began publishing a semiannual journal, and the annual publication of the American Jewish Historical Society was expanded into a quarterly. In the early 1950's, the American Jewish History Center was founded at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America in New York City, and plans were formulated at the Hebrew Union College to add an American Jewish periodical center to its campus.

NO LONGER A FABLE

By 1953, amateurs as well as professional historians from one end of the country to the other were digging through records in search of material to commemorate the American Jewish community's tercentenary — for 1954 would mark 300 years since a fugitive company of two dozen Jews disembarked at the tiny Dutch village of New Amsterdam on the Hudson River to establish the first Jewish community on North American shores. Before long, a special committee was formed to prepare for publication an ambitious ten-volume documentary source book, dealing with Jewish life in the United States. The boom in American Jewish historical studies achieved further dimensions when local American Jewish historical societies made their appearance in Los Angeles, Richmond, Baltimore, Washington, Detroit, and other communities. All this was additional testimony to the security which Jews had by now found in America. The mass of American Jews had long since abandoned its anxious quest for acceptance and had begun to develop a natural and healthy interest in its past on these shores. This in itself was a trend of no small significance.

As the 1960's dawned, it became evident that the study of American Jewish history was gaining a thoroughly scientific base, and that the field had drawn far away from the Napoleonic approach

to history as "a fable agreed upon." More and more Jews were emerging from the universities with indoctrination in the critical method; some of them had become professional historians and were devoting themselves to various problems related to the American Jewish scene. Today, increasing numbers of researchers in the field, whether they work as students or as professionals, turn to documentary sources and newspapers in an attempt to determine the facts as they actually happened — without partisanship or prejudice. Not all these historical craftsmen are Jews, for many non-Jews, aware that the American people is a congeries of many backgrounds and creeds, have come to see — and to study — the American Jew as an important component of the American nation. Historians recognize that, though Jews constitute only three percent of America's population, their strategic massing in urban centers, their achievements in nuclear physics, medicine, law, music, and literature, and their influence on trade have led them to play central roles in American life and culture.

BASIC DOCUMENTS

The professionalization of American Jewish historical research has been responsible for numerous changes in the portrait of the American Jew. Oliver Cromwell urged Peter Lely to paint him "warts and everything, as you see me," and increasingly that is how historians are now rendering the American Jewish experience. For the professionally trained historian, there are no sacrosanct personalities. Isaac Markens, writing seventy-five years ago, might rhapsodize over Rebecca Gratz's "elegant and winning manners," her "instinctive refinement and innate purity," her "wonderful beauty" and "loveliness of character," but the mid-twentieth-century historian sees in her a woman "outstanding . . . in a limited area," a woman "charming in some ways, . . . prosaic in others . . . a rather strait-laced individual," who "had few, if any, original thoughts, but . . . was sensitive to the needs of others and . . . knew how to care for them." The historian dealing with Jewish life during the American Revolution is no longer anxious to forget that Jews, too, were found in Loyalist (Tory) ranks, nor does he find it difficult

to attempt a dispassionate assessment of Haym Salomon's services to the Revolutionary cause. He has uncovered ample evidence to support the view that Salomon was an energetic fighter for civil liberties, a generous philanthropist, an earnest patriot, a devoted Jew, and an efficient aid to Robert Morris, the Superintendent of Finance, but our latter-day chronicler does not balk at disposing of the myth — for myth it is — that Salomon ever lent vast sums to the Continental Congress. He knows, and does not hesitate to say, that Salomon was most certainly not a vital factor in financing the Revolution!

Reasons abound why American Jewish historical research lacked a scientific and systematic approach before the Second World War, but among the most important of these reasons is that the field was virtually devoid of the auxiliary reference works without which no worthwhile history can be written. It was only after the War that bibliographies — books about the important books — were systematically assembled, or that efforts were made to reconstruct the skeletal outline — the chronology and periodization — of American Jewish history. It is only in very recent years that a vast genealogical compendium of the early families was published at the Hebrew Union College and that a beginning was made in preparing reliable biographical dictionaries of notable American Jews.

The colonial origins of the American Jewish community are now being re-examined — this time without recourse to apologetics — and recognition of the fact that the early history of American Jewry is incomprehensible without an understanding of the seventeenth-century milieu out of which the community came has stimulated the production of works on the Jewish community of Dutch Brazil during the mid-1600's and the equally important community of Curaçao. Today, there are scholars delving into the history of early Mexico in an effort to determine to what, if any, extent the Marranos of Colonial New Spain had a group religious life of their own. The study of the Jewish experience on the North American mainland has been impressively advanced by the publication of source books containing basic documents and memoirs. About ten volumes are thus far available or in preparation, all of them with introductory material and notes and most of them scientifically conceived. All

this work signifies a major trend, for in this way the field is acquiring an effective historiographic apparatus indispensable for comprehensive and accurate research.

The time is not yet for attempting general over-all histories of enduring scientific calibre. Historians of American Jewry recognize that no adequate presentation of the American Jewish experience can precede the preparation of reliable city and state histories, based on careful and critical analyses of available sources. Although the tercentenary celebrations of the mid-1950's called forth at least a dozen local — town and state — histories, not all, unfortunately, were of lasting value or professional calibre. Still, a beginning has been made, and today historians have recourse to recently published works throwing light on Jewish life in, among other places, New York City, Philadelphia, Newport (Rhode Island), Chicago, St. Paul, Milwaukee, Rochester, Buffalo, Utica, Portland (Oregon), Charleston (South Carolina), Des Moines, and Petersburg (Virginia). When enough accurate local histories have seen the light of day, they will serve as the monographic tools which well-trained and literate historians will be able to use in writing the history of the American Jew.

“GERMANS” AND “RUSSIANS”

What are the trends in American Jewish historical writing in this seventh decade of the twentieth century? That is not easy to say. Perhaps 100 good essays in the field appear annually in various scientific and scholarly publications, each writer following his own bent and working in the area that appeals to him most. Still, certain trends are to be discerned.

The pre-“Russian” period — the period prior to mass immigration from Eastern Europe — continues to command the attention of professional historians. Some are working primarily in the colonial period, covering the years between 1649 and 1776. Other researchers, realizing that the nineteenth-century Philadelphia “rabbi,” Isaac Leeser, was probably the leading American Jewish historical figure before the Civil War, have been undertaking detailed studies of Leeser's life and career. The current centennial anniversary of the

Civil War has stimulated a series of studies on the American Jewish attitude to slavery and abolitionism, and it is now clearer that most ante-bellum Jews, those in the North as well as in the South, cared little about the moral issues of human bondage. The Civil War itself, in its effect on the Jews, has found its prime authority in the Philadelphia scholar, Bertram W. Korn, whose book on the subject has just gone into a second printing and is now available as a paperback. There are certain gaps in research on the pre-Russian period, for — excepting three volumes of memoirs, dealing mostly with German-Jewish immigrants — recent years have seen few attempts to describe in detail the life of the “German” Jews who dominated American Jewry through much of the nineteenth century. The German Jewish peddler has caught the imagination of some historians, but the value of his economic services and of his cultural contributions remains to be objectively evaluated.

One of the most interesting and promising of current trends is the increasing attention given to the “Russian” Jew — the Jew of East European background who began coming to America in huge numbers during the 1880’s and whose children and grandchildren now constitute an overwhelming majority in the American Jewish community. As an object of historical research, he is a newcomer on the historiographic scene, and the novelty of subjecting his life to study is thrown into relief only when one considers the sparsity of articles about him in the *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* during the first half-century of the Society’s existence. Up to the Second World War, where the “Russian” was concerned, historians suffered a prodigious *lapsus memoriae*. He was ignored despite the fact that, by 1940, there were in this land nearly five million Jews of “Russian” stock. In part, this neglect was due to the lingering influence of the anti-immigrant Nordic racial views held by nineteenth- and early twentieth-century historians and sociologists; in part, it was due to the “Russian”’s own remoteness from communal leadership and authority and to his desire to Americanize himself by dismissing his immigrant beginnings. But when Jews of “Russian” stock, along with other Americans of immigrant origin — Italians, Slavs, etc. — began to achieve power on the American scene, American historical research generally deserted its



Courtesy, Miss Kathleen M. Moore, Montreal, Canada

Rebecca Gratz
A woman of charm and culture

(see p. 13)



The Hebrew Union College
The Nursery of American Reform Judaism

(see p. 17)

traditional emphasis on "Anglo-Saxonism" and notable historians in the general American field — some of them Jews — realized that the "Anglo-Saxons" were not alone in determining the course of American life. As a result, Nordic historiography and sociology have been rapidly falling into disfavor as well as disuse, a great deal of effort, research, and writing has been going into studies of America's various immigrant groups, and a sympathetic view of the Jewish immigrants from beyond the Vistula River is now gaining ground.

An important facet of the growing trend towards immigrant history is the fact that scholars are now turning seriously to a study of the "Jewish" labor movement, which produced personalities like Sidney Hillman, David Dubinsky, and Jacob Potofsky. That, where the apparel industry is concerned, Jews, both as employers and as employees, have been a significant force in the American economy is well understood today, and quite a number of works on this subject have appeared in recent years. The subject is, however, a highly complex one, requiring a thorough knowledge of Yiddish, a familiarity with the workers' Russian-Jewish background, and an understanding of their involvement in a host of European socio-economic and political ideologies. To write the history of these Jewish one-generation proletarians — who, in most cases, were neither the sons nor the fathers of manual laborers — the scholar needs also an acquaintance with the Yiddish-speaking Socialist movement of a generation ago. It is not surprising, therefore, that truly definitive studies of the so-called Jewish unions remain to be written. Economic and labor history has been closely associated with the struggle for social justice, and, although some efforts are being made to determine the extent, large or small, to which Jews have pioneered in this area, here, too, definitive studies have yet to appear.

Another, and salient, aspect of the "Russian"'s life and the life of his descendants in the United States is Zionism, that curious mixture of, on the one hand, religious universalism and messianism and, on the other, political nationalism and secular idealism. To what degree it is possible today to speak of Zionism in terms of historiographic trends is problematic. It is true enough that veritable hosts

of essays and books proliferate in the area of Zionism and the Hebraic literature which the movement has fostered in America, but, unfortunately, much of this activity is propagandistic rather than scholarly, and to date no one has presented the story of American Zionism historically and critically. Nevertheless, Zionism is declining today owing to the attainment of its prime objective with the creation of the Israeli republic in 1948, and its decline as a movement may make it possible before long to view the development of this incalculably important and influential phenomenon on the American Jewish scene with historical objectivity and dispassion.

AN ADEQUATE HISTORY

Historians now display a growing interest in the acculturation of the Jew to American life and mores. This process of acculturation has been, of course, remarkable for its speed; in most cases, immigrant Jews in America have become well acculturated in less than a generation. What intrigues scholars most about the process is its communal expression — the way it has been reflected in the rise of a vast network of social welfare agencies and the way it has affected pedagogical standards in Jewish elementary and secondary schools. Acculturation is a prime instance of the interaction between Jewish community life and the American environment, for, on the one hand, Jewish social welfare activities have become exemplary for their general American counterparts and, on the other, American educational practices have vastly influenced Jewish education. Both areas — social welfare and education — have been widespread objects of research, but as yet very few of the studies and monographs in print may be said to meet the needs of the scholar or to represent the best canons of historical writing.

One area, both here and abroad, which suffers no dearth of study is anti-Semitism. Its manifestations in American life have aroused the interest of both Jewish and non-Jewish scholars, and a few good essays and useful books on the subject have already appeared. Still, much more remains to be done, and a definitive work on the subject has yet to appear. The interest in anti-Semitism has, however, been stimulating a great deal of research in the related field of civil

liberties. Since problems involving anti-Semitism and civil liberties perennially are and will be a Jewish concern, historians, constitutional lawyers, and civic-defense technicians work almost feverishly in this field. Much that has appeared, however, is pragmatically and propagandistically motivated, and the subject still lacks a good one-volume book.

Jewish life in suburbia is another subject beginning to attract scholarly attention. The subject, a very complicated one, involves a grasp of social, economic, and political data. For example, the Jews who have trekked to the suburbs during the last two decades have had to cope with problems of civil liberties and civil rights in the public schools where they feel themselves threatened by the constant efforts to breach the wall of separation between church and state. This is, of course, but one of a host of suburban problems. To understand the growth of the Jewish community in the sprawling suburbs, numerous surveys have been made by sociologists, demographers, and social workers, but no effort of enduring value has yet been undertaken in this generation to collate the vast amount of very important data already available. Works on Jewish suburbia have, however, already begun to appear and will no doubt increasingly engage the attention of historians.

All these trends, all this activity, will ultimately lead to a comprehensive understanding of American Jewish life. It will take time, but there is every reason to hope that, within this very decade, new over-all histories of the American Jewish experience will appear, based on the studies which are constantly coming off the presses. An adequate history of American Jewry must be accurate and unbiased, but it can also be extremely interesting and exciting. It will tell the story of a community which began in 1654 with twenty-three Jews and has now grown to over five and a half million people who, though in the main a middle-class, white-collar group of city dwellers, are involved in virtually every aspect of American life and in the last four years have produced over fifty percent of America's Nobel Prize winners.