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## Introduction

Mohammed it was who dubbed the Jews a “people of the book”—a people whose spiritual life rested on scriptural foundations. In later generations, the phrase would be appropriated to characterize Jews as *the* people of the book, with “book” now understood to include belles lettres as well as Scriptures. Both constructions of Mohammed’s epithet were true to Old World Jewry. American Jews, however, could provide rather scant support for the belletristic understanding prior to the late 1800’s and the mass immigration from Eastern Europe. Not that American Jewry was ever totally devoid of a belletristic impulse, but it is hard to say much more before the publication of Abraham Cahan’s *Yekl* in 1896.

*Yekl* is a distinguished achievement, though not everyone was able to see the novella as such on its first appearance—the B’nai B’rith monthly *Menorah* found in it none of “the humor and poetry which make the Ghetto stories of [Leopold] Kompert, [Aaron] Bernstein and [Israel] Zangwill so delightful”; *Yekl*, while “cleverly written,” filled the *Menorah*’s reviewer “with disgust at the coarseness of characters introduced.”<sup>1</sup> Cahan offered his “tale of the New York Ghetto” to a generation which, as Joseph Silverman had put it in a lecture at Temple Emanu-El, “yearn[ed] for another world, where truth conquers, where right prevails, duty is the watchword, and where true love meets in everlasting union with its mate.” Fiction which answered to this yearning would “fascinate and charm and enthrall us forever.”<sup>2</sup> *Yekl* reflected a different sort of yearning—all of Cahan’s novels and stories did, and Cahan is the commanding figure among American Jewish writers of the pre-World War I generation. Mary Antin’s *The Promised Land* (1912) won her a great, and not unjustified, reputation, but *The Promised Land* fades in the still intense glow of Cahan’s imagination. Ludwig Lewisohn may well have had Antin in mind when, some years later, he prophesied that Cahan’s “moving and largely wrought narrative,” *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917), would one day “obtain the position given to less sober and more glittering books.”<sup>3</sup>

Cahan's generation may properly be called the first generation of American Jewish fictionists. It produced no other writer of like power. Even so, writers emerged who, though largely forgotten today, have a claim, even an emphatic claim, on our notice. Mary Antin and Anzia Yezierska appear to have escaped oblivion; writers of merit like James Oppenheim and Elias Tobenkin have not—which is our own generation's loss. The present collection is meant to appeal against the adverse verdicts rendered by history and to attempt rescue of writers who have something of interest and significance to tell us about American Jewish life in the 1890's and the first two decades of the 1900's. What these writers communicate may not be aesthetically notable—in fact, in some instances it is—but literary excellence is by no means the sole criterion for preserving a work of imagination. Even a frankly second-rate novel or short story will illuminate the age which produced it. Even infelicities of style and expression recall an historical experience. Historical experience is ultimately what this collection seeks to evoke. That is why non-Jewish writers such as Edward King and Myra Kelly have been included. Their testimony, too, reveals facets of American Jewish life worth recalling.

What is the overriding theme of the three decades straddling the turn of the century? It is the wrench of change—the wrench of immigration from the collapsing feudal economy of Eastern Europe to the boisterous new industrial giant of the transatlantic West, the wrench of passage from a society of tradition and long-established self-definition to a society in becoming, one which perhaps sensed itself but could not be said to embrace a clear recognition of itself, the wrench of flight from familiar, more often than not rural or semirural patterns to a bizarre, frenetic new urban scene. For America itself, quite apart from the coming of the immigrant masses, the wrench of change was central to those decades; the older agrarian-commercial America was rapidly yielding to the novel—and for many an American quite unnerving—America of industrial capitalism. Portents of revolutionary upheaval convulsed the very air of this America; a revolution was in progress, a revolution whose political meaning might be uncertain but whose social or socioeconomic repercussions were inescapable. Everyone, then, was something of an immigrant in the new industrial civilization. Dislocation, physical, psychic, spiritual, was virtually coterminous with turn-of-the-century America as much from a nativist

as from an immigrant perspective. Inevitably tensions flared between Jews and non-Jews and between East European immigrant Jews and their longer-settled, better-established brethren of Central European background. Mutual suspicion and spleen were scarcely uncommon embellishments to Jewish-Christian and to "Russian"- "German" relations. The fissures were not gross, not tragic in that generation, but few could escape awareness of them.

The religious experience of European, and especially East European, Jewry appears in most of these selections poorly adapted to the New World. Its footing is precarious in an American society which in the years 1890-1920 has yet to turn in the direction of pluralism. A writer for Henry Hurwitz's newly founded *Menorah Journal* asks, perhaps not rhetorically, in 1917: "Must one cease to be a Jew in order to be wholly an American?"<sup>4</sup> Encounters between Jews and Christians in these turn-of-the-century decades are almost invariably problematic. Jews face no legal restrictions, but the social barriers are formidable. Sidney Nyburg's modernist, eminently presentable young Rabbi Graetz "did not fail to perceive . . . how rigidly his intercourse with Gentiles was restricted to activities occurring elsewhere than in their own homes."<sup>5</sup>

American Jewry in these years was overwhelmingly foreign-born or first-generation native-born. What percentage of this population would have had a taste for English-language fiction? For whom, one wonders, were the narratives of this generation written? Was it for a more or less middlebrow readership—non-Jewish as well as Jewish—seeking some insight into immigrant life in particular and a changing America in general? Or was it primarily a quest for entertainment, for romance, for the exotic, which brought this body of writing such readers as it found? Of course *autres temps autres moeurs*: today the immigrant Jewish family chronicle *à la Evergreen* is a staple of American bestsellerdom—but this is a testimony to, a tribute to, the degree of pluralism American society has learned to accommodate. Few of the writers in our collection would have been well advised to anticipate widespread receptivity; not least noteworthy about their effort is that so many of them were able to find commercial publishers. Writers like Jacob Riis (*How the Other Half Lives* appeared in 1890) and Hutchins Hapgood (*The Spirit of the Ghetto* appeared in 1902) always attracted readers, but high journalism and fiction address different

markets.

The general environment of volatility would call forth judgments from American fictionists: Howells, Dreiser, London, Crane, Sinclair fashioned an uneasy new literature unlike any an earlier Puritan and transcendentalist America had known or dreamed possible (though in 1880, in *Democracy*, his only novel, Henry Adams was already speculating about “the great American mystery of democracy and government” and concluding that it was “a lurid nightmare that convulsed the sleep of nations”). Cahan, too, was impelled to give voice to “a brooding sense of emptiness and insignificance.”<sup>6</sup>

Cahan was not representative. He belongs to the roster of great writers, on the basis of *The Rise of David Levinsky* at least. None of the writers in our collection are of Cahan’s stature—to say nothing of the stature of Adams, Howells, Dreiser, et al.—but surfeit of anxiety and lack of ease not infrequently supply their context as well. The gloomy verismo which informs *The Rise of David Levinsky* is not invariably their response, but for them, too, *golus*—exile—is no mere conceit. Even so, there is ample evidence in their work, and in Cahan’s too, for that matter, that America did justify her reputation of *goldeneh medineh* (golden land). Abrasions, bereavements, disasters, all of these are evident in abundance, but also evident is a Golden Land of energy and opportunity. Social protest is not absent from the novels and stories offered here, yet one notes how quickly and thoroughly bourgeois mores attract the immigrants who people these narratives—their circumstances may be proletarian, their aspirations are not. Edward King’s fictive labor leader Zalmonah in a novel of the mid-1890’s dismisses revolution as a remedy for American social problems: “It would be poor policy to . . . blow up a magnificent mansion because one could afford to live nowhere in it except in the basement.”<sup>7</sup> A mixed blessing perhaps, this turn-of-the-century industrial prodigy, but a blessing nonetheless: Such is the portrait of America circa 1890–1920 that the first generation of American Jewish writers and their “fellow-traveling” non-Jewish colleagues have drawn.

—Stanley F. Chyet

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Stanley F. Chyet is professor of American Jewish history and director of graduate studies at the Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of

Religion, Los Angeles. He is co-editor and co-translator (with Warren Bargad) of a forthcoming book entitled *Israeli Poetry: A Contemporary Anthology* to be published by Indiana University Press.

## Notes

1. *Menorah* 21 (1896): 127-128.
2. *Ibid.* 18 (1895): 164.
3. Ludwig Lewisohn, *Expression in America* (New York, 1932), p. 410.
4. Rosalind Schwab, "A New Discovery of America," *Menorah Journal*, December 1917, p. 305.
5. Sidney Nyburg, *The Chosen People* (Philadelphia, 1917), p. 45.
6. Abraham Cahan, *The Rise of David Levinsky* (New York, 1917), bk. 14, chap. 7.
7. Edward King, *Joseph Zalmonah* (Boston, 1894), p. 129.