

Jacob Rader Marcus, Salo W. Baron, and the Public's Need to Know American Jewish History

Jeffrey S. Gurock

I knew Dr. Marcus as someone with whom I corresponded and as someone who once honored me by attending a study session that I gave at a Central Conference of American Rabbis meeting in Grossingers, New York, where, typically, he took copious notes on what I had to say and, as always, displayed his renowned ability to encourage younger scholars. Where my professional connection with Dr. Marcus truly lies is in our mutual involvement with the American Jewish Historical Society—he in his own time, I today. As many of you undoubtedly know, Dr. Marcus served as president of the society from 1955 to 1958, following almost immediately after Dr. Salo W. Baron who served from 1952 to 1954. (For the record Rabbi David De Sola Pool served the year in between.) They led during the now legendary era of the tercentenary when the society and the profession took their most profound steps away from apologetics and filiopietism. Although Marcus and Baron would later part company on the direction—political and geographical—that the society should take, it is noteworthy, and worthy of our consideration, that they shared a similar vision of the need for scholars and leaders and the Jewish community of America in general to study their history seriously and comprehensively. They brought that vision to the society's leadership, but the origins of their vision started more than a decade earlier, before there was an American Jewish Archives and while the American Jewish Historical Society was still in the grip of that irascible, isolationist bibliophile A. S. W. Rosenbach.¹ Remarkably and almost concomitantly, early in the 1940s as the inestimable European tragedy was taking place before their eyes, the Cincinnati-based scholar, who had previously specialized in Central European Judaica, and his colleague in New York, who was emerging as the greatest Jewish historian of his era, were moved to tell contemporary leaders that whether this free Jewry was prepared or not, the mantle of international Jewish leadership and the burden of perpetuating Jewish scholarship and communal identity had fallen on their shoulders. In words that ring similar in sound

and content, Marcus in 1940 told his Central Conference of American Rabbis colleagues that the force of emerging events was thrusting world Jewish leadership upon new centers, Palestine and the United States. While hopeful, if not totally sanguine, that the envisioned Jewish state might be “the savior-nation of world Jewry,” Marcus was certain that whether or not “the seeds planted in Palestine should come to full fruition,” American Jewry had to take a large step forward. For Marcus, it was not a question of whether America could become a great Jewish center. We, he wrote, “have already reached that state, the task now confronting us is to become that type of center which will initiate for World Jewry a new Golden Age of learning, inspired by the finest in the civilization of this generation.” “We,” he concluded, “who have been trained in the crucible of the centuries to struggle with courage and dignity have no alternative. In accepting this challenge, we voice our hope not only in ourselves, but in the larger humanity about us. Let the spiritual leaders of American Jewry consider this in their utmost hearts.”²

A year later, in addressing the Jewish Publication Society, Marcus made the more explicit point that American Jewry could no longer look to Europe for intellectual, cultural, and spiritual sustenance. Notwithstanding Palestine’s value as a Jewish cultural and political center, five million Jews in the United States, he asserted—“the vanguard, the main body and the rear guard of free Diaspora Jewry”—were looking to homegrown scholars, teachers, and rabbis to guide them in the future. Speaking to this mixed group of Jewish intellectuals and communal leaders, Marcus confidently asserted that “the literary future of the Jewish people has been squarely placed on our shoulders. There is no question but that we must, and shall, carry that burden gallantly and to the greater glory of our people and of an intellectually free humanity.”³

In 1942, Baron stood before a gathering of Jewish social and communal workers and delivered a similar message. After noting that “until World War I, despite tremendous increases in population and wealth, the Jews of the Western Hemisphere were largely the recipients of the cultural and political bounty of the Old World,” and while sure to credit the American Jewish community with a rise toward maturity during and after the Great War, Baron stated clearly that “the Second War has placed in [American Jewry’s] hands undisputed leadership of world Jewry with all the challenges and responsibilities which it

entails." Like Marcus, he affirmed the dual centrality of both Palestine and America as locales where the future of the Jewish people would be determined for generations to come. And sounding much like Marcus, Baron called for the raising up of a new generation of leaders "equipped with the knowledge furnished them by the methods of modern social and historical sciences and imbued with the accumulated wisdom of the ages of rabbis and thinkers, [who] will undertake to look courageously into the realities as they are, and to adopt measures which they will consider best, regardless of whether they meet with instant approval of the less informed." He prayed that "these people may yet be destined to render a historic service lesser to none performed by their predecessors in other ages of great transformation."⁴ In practical communal and intellectual terms, this shared vision meant for Baron that he would devote a portion of his far-flung interests to the study of American Jewish history, that he would move the AJHS into communication with the American Historical Association—upgrading the professional standing of our discipline—and, of course, raise a generation of students including Hyman B. Grinstein, Naomi W. Cohen, Lloyd P. Gartner, among others who would be among the most influential voices in the first generation of posttercentenary historiography. But, without gainsaying his contributions to our field, it is safe to say that American Jewish history was not Baron's driving passion. And as a student of a student of "our teacher and master"—as we were taught to say about our teacher emeritus at Columbia—I might be permitted to suggest that in educating the American Jewish public, Baron was an elitist. He would write his books and train his students who would make their contributions, effectively making their knowledge available to those who would look to their work for guidance and inspiration.

Jacob Marcus, on the other hand, was more of a public historian. Obviously, he made our field his lifelong work and he was proud of men like Bertram W. Korn, Stanley F. Chyet, and Martin A. Cohen, among others, who like the Baronians made important historiographical contributions to the field. But he was also very concerned with personally educating the American Jewish public, both through writing guides to how amateurs could write their own communal history with objectivity and sophistication and through his journal, *American Jewish Archives*, which he called his "magazine" and which was designed from its inception to speak to more than just scholars.



*Dr. Jacob Rader Marcus and Dr. Salo Wittmayer Baron in 1985
(American Jewish Archives)*

Moreover, collaterally, he was forever committed to his personal training of his “semi-pros”—his rabbinical students at the Hebrew Union College—to be aware of the importance of American Jewish history in defining their leadership of their movement and the larger Jewish community. (It is noteworthy that most of his academic disciples followed his lead and chose to pursue their careers as teachers of American and Jewish history generally within a rabbinical training environment.) In the meantime, he stayed very close to his erstwhile students as a leader of the Central Conference of American Rabbis where he spoke often of the practical implications and lessons of American Jewish history for contemporary problems. When I got to Grossingers, I frequently heard the adage that “the sun never set on a friend and student of Jacob Marcus.” Generations turned to him for his advice and vision. All told, while we revere Baron as the paradigmatic academic Jewish historian who typified the successful rarefied professional, a status to which so many of us aspired, we adore Marcus for his scholarship, his commitment to teaching our subject, and his determination to have the American Jewish historian walk within the community and actively contribute to the perpetuation of Jewish life in this country.

Jeffrey S. Gurock is Libby M. Klaperman Professor of Jewish History at Yeshiva

University and Chair, Academic Council, American Jewish Historical Society.

NOTES

1. On the early history of the AJHS and Rosenbach's role in the writing of history, see Jeffrey S. Gurock, "From *Publications* to *American Jewish History*: The Journal of the American Jewish Historical Society and the Writing of American Jewish History," *American Jewish History* 81, no. 2 (Winter 1993–94): 190–205.

2. Jacob Rader Marcus, "Mass Migrations of Jews and Their Effects on Jewish Life," *Central Conference of American Rabbis Yearbook* (1940): 299.

3. Idem., "New Literary Responsibilities," *American Jewish Year Book* (1941): 789, 791.

4. Salo W. Baron, "The Second World War and Jewish Community Life," Harry L. Glucksman Memorial Lecture for 1942, republished in *Steeled by Adversity: Essays and Addresses on American Jewish Life* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1971), 455, 460, 471–72.