

ANNIVERSARY FORUM

THE WORK AND LEGACY OF JACOB RADER MARCUS

“Historian of the Jewish People”: A Historiographical Reevaluation of the Writings of Jacob R. Marcus

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In his insightful obituary on the life and work of Jacob Rader Marcus (1896–1995) in the 1997 *American Jewish Year Book*, Jonathan D. Sarna, professor of American Jewish history at Brandeis University, begins by noting that Marcus “was the first trained historian of the Jewish people born in America and the first to devote himself fully to the scholarly study of America’s Jews.”¹ While Marcus himself was always suspicious of any claim to being “first” at anything or anywhere in Jewish history, he probably would have delighted in Sarna’s description of him as a “historian of the Jewish people.”

Best known for his prolific writing in the field of colonial and early American Jewish history and his herculean efforts in developing the American Jewish Archives as the largest “depository” of primary materials in the field of American Jewish history, Marcus’s remarkably long career included extensive, original scholarship as well as teaching across the entire sweep of Jewish history.² Thus, Sarna’s observation that Marcus was both a “historian of the Jewish people” and the “dean” of American Jewish history is better understood as the seed of a genuine thesis about the place of Jacob Rader Marcus in modern Jewish historiography rather than as a generous but essentially eulogistic flourish.

In my opinion, Marcus’s interest in the Jewish history of the British colonies of North America, the United States, and the Western Hemisphere in general reflected a broader view of the history of the Jewish people held over a lifetime of research and writing. Tempered by his extensive historical training, his liberal theological and political convictions, and his abiding belief in “the promise of America” for the

Jewish people, Marcus maintained a Diaspora-centered philosophy of Jewish history from the beginning to the end of his distinguished career. Even a cursory review of his scholarly writing, from his first attempt as a historian in 1916 to his final historical projects at the full age of ninety-nine, reveals that Marcus was first and foremost a historian of the whole Jewish people and not just a chronicler of the Jewish people in the United States of America.

MARCUS AS "DIASPORA HEGEMONIST"

Marcus maintained a consistent belief in hegemonic centers in Jewish history throughout his long career. Formally trained in Cincinnati by his mentor, Professor Gotthard Deutsch, and in several German universities, his 1920 rabbinic thesis was on sixteenth-century Jewish life in Poland, and his 1925 doctoral dissertation focused on European economic activity during the same era. After returning to the United States, Marcus taught the whole range of Jewish history at the Hebrew Union College and published popular outlines of Jewish history throughout the 1920s. It is interesting to note that Marcus's first major project on American Jewish history, *The Americanization of Isaac Mayer Wise*, was presented in 1931 at the HUC Founders Day. It is important to note, however, that this was not Marcus's first foray into American Jewish history. Indeed, his first published work, done while still a rabbinic student, was entitled "America: The Spiritual Center of Jewery [*sic*]." ³

To some extent, his 1938 apologium and annotated documentary on medieval Jewish history, *The Jew in the Medieval World, A Source Book: 315-1791* (Union of American Hebrew Congregations Press, 1938), proved to be his most enduring and perhaps most widely circulated book. His monographs on *Communal Sick-Care in the German Ghetto* (Hebrew Union College Press, 1947), *Israel Jacobson* (Central Conference of American Rabbis Yearbook, 1928; revised edition, Hebrew Union College Press, 1972), and his disastrous *The Rise and Destiny of the German Jew* (Union of American Hebrew Congregations Press, 1934), as well as much of his extensive ephemeral writing prior to World War II, and his annual reports to the Central Conference of American Rabbis on "Contemporaneous History" all testify to his ability to write about Jewish history on both sides of the Atlantic. ⁴

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*Die handelspolitischen Beziehungen zwischen
Deutschland und England in den Jahren 1576-1685*

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DIE 27. M. Octobris A. MCMXXV

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Jacob Rader Marcus's Diploma from the University of Berlin, 1925
(American Jewish Archives)

By contrast, in the popular and often hagiographic literature on Marcus, some of his rabbinic disciples argue that his long career can be neatly bifurcated into two periods, pre- and post-Holocaust, a view Marcus himself occasionally encouraged.⁵ According to this view, during the pre-World War II era Marcus was principally a historian of the Central European Jewish experience, while after the war he primarily focused on the Jews of the United States and their colonial forebears. Marcus's shift in emphasis in 1942, corresponding to the 450th anniversary of Columbus's discovery of America, was, according to this popular view, occasioned by a growing awareness of the Holocaust and the painful conclusion that the Final Solution indeed marked the end of the German Jewish experience. According to this view, Marcus basically had two distinct careers as a historian of the Jewish people.

A closer examination of Marcus's writings, however, indicates that he did not make a sudden *volte-face* but had a long-term interest in American Jewish history. Marcus's philosophy of history, non-Zionism, and awareness of the immense and unchartered task of writing the history of the Jews in America led to a redefinition of the scope of his original work for practical purposes after 1947 but not, I would argue, to his broader view of Jewish history. Although generally reluctant to define his own work as a historian in ideological terms, a review of his vast oeuvre of historical writings reveals a consistent philosophy of Jewish history. First, Marcus maintained a non-Zionist view of postbiblical Jewish history that emphasized the primacy of the Diaspora in Jewish life. Second, as a political and religious liberal, he believed in what his Reform predecessors and others referred to as "the spirit of the age," especially Judaism's compatibility with modernity. Marcus believed that the synthesis of Judaism and modern culture principally took place in liberal democracies and that their marriage was essentially providential. Finally, as a social historian, Marcus generally focused on the everyday lives of ordinary people as well as their communal institutions and organizations.

MARCUS'S PHILOSOPHY OF JEWISH HISTORY

Viewed from the perspective of Jewish historiography, Marcus was a Diaspora hegemonist. Eschewing all forms of Jewish nationalism, he understood the Jewish people to be a *gemeinschaft*, a "fellowship,"

historically dominated by various hegemonic centers. In his own lifetime, Marcus believed that the world center of the Jewish people shifted from Central Europe to the United States. Moreover, in his opinion, the "German model" of Jewish modernity found its fullest expression in the United States. Thus, to Marcus, the study of the American Jewish experience was not just a simple matter of documenting local history, or even a default position forced upon him by fate, but an expression of the actual dynamic of Jewish history in his own lifetime.

Remarkably, in June 1948, in introducing his journal, *American Jewish Archives*, Marcus wrote in the wake of newly achieved Israeli statehood that the American "Jewish community has now become the pivotal and controlling factor in that historic development which began in the thirteenth pre-Christian century in Palestine and has continued throughout the intervening centuries in Babylon, Spain and Germany-Poland." "When the Jewish historian of the next generation reaches the year 1939," Marcus argued, "he will begin a new chapter in the history of the Jewish people, a chapter which must be called 'The American Jewish Center.'"⁶

Marcus understood the field of American Jewish history to be hemispheric and not just that of the United States or even North America. In fact, his most highly regarded American work was on the colonies before 1776 and therefore technically not on the United States at all!⁷ By contrast, the work of his most important and very capable disciple, Bertram W. Korn, is almost exclusively focused on nineteenth-century Jewish history in the United States.⁸ Finally, in this regard, it is important to point out that Marcus unhappily measured himself against Salo W. Baron, one of the great global Jewish historians of the twentieth century, and not against national or local historians.⁹

Marcus's decision to specialize in American Jewish history at mid-career was shaped not only by world events and the tragedy of the Holocaust but by a specific philosophy of world Jewish history. Playing on Leo Baeck's famous observation, Marcus often remarked that with the Holocaust "a thousand years of European Jewish history" was concluded and that the new center of world Jewry was the United States. Had Marcus's understanding of Jewish history been shaped by a Zionist ideology, he likely would have reached a very different conclusion.

Marcus's non-Zionism, however, cannot simply be reduced to his

education at the Hebrew Union College or to his youthful adherence to the tenets of Prophetic Judaism.¹⁰ Rather, he saw his own work as part of the grand Diaspora historiographical traditions of Heinrich Graetz and Simon Dubnow as well as Salo Baron. Despite a successful trip to the nascent Hebrew University of Jerusalem early in the presidency of Judah Magnes, a fellow Reform rabbi, Marcus remained both a rabbi and a historian firmly rooted in the Diaspora.¹¹

Marcus's Diaspora view of Jewish history should not be construed as anti-Zionist or anti-Israel. To Marcus, the state of Israel, and the Yishuv before it, were and are vital parts of the world Jewish community. However, Marcus did not view Israel as the main center of Jewish life in the twentieth century. In discussing contemporary Jewish intellectual activity, Marcus was quick to point out that "just because a book on physics is published in Hebrew in Israel, it is not a Jewish book." By contrast, he maintained that more than 1,000 books of significant Jewish content had been produced in the United States, the most important of which, he believed, would be translated into Hebrew for Israeli readers.¹²

Moreover, in Marcus's view, the Jewish world was organized in a hierarchic fashion. In different periods of Jewish history, he argued, different centers of Jewish life exercised hegemony over much of the rest of Jewish life. Germany, in Marcus's view, was the principal world center of Jewish life during the Middle Ages and again during the modern period until the Nazis' rise to power. Germany's Jewish culture, Marcus believed, was destined to dominate the Jewish cultural map. He even maintained that it would have been better if Germany had won the First World War! "The Holocaust would not have happened," he once theorized and then added, "and the Polish Jews would have been Germanized."¹³

Marcus's hegemonic view of history can also be seen in his periodization of American Jewish history. Despite the fact that he had determined that Ashkenazim constituted the majority of Jews in the colonies by the 1720s, he insisted that the Sephardic period continued all the way to 1840. In his view it was not until the Damascus Affair (1840) and the refusal of the old Sephardic elite to lead the anti-Blood Libel protests in America that the era of the Iberian Jew was over, despite the revised views of many younger historians who dated the beginning of the German period in American Jewish history at least twenty or twenty-five years earlier.¹⁴

Closely related to the idea of hegemony in Marcus's historical writings is his use of the concept of a Golden Age. A "Golden Age," according to Marcus, had two criteria: (1) great economic and socio-cultural development, and (2) a flowering of literature. The Jews of Germany and then the Jews of America achieved Golden Age status. It is interesting to note that as early as 1921 Marcus published nine newspaper articles, mostly in the *Portland Scribe*, on the Jews of Spain and their Golden Age.¹⁵

Marcus's belief in hegemony might also account for his limited scholarly productivity in the East European period in American Jewish history. In all fairness, Marcus was probably following a systematic research and archival strategy beginning with the Sephardic and then the German periods. Even the ninety-nine years allotted to Marcus was not enough to do a comprehensive job in the third period of American Jewish history as he understood it. On the other hand, despite his knowledge of Yiddish, Marcus did not find in Yiddishkeit the essence of the Jewish experience in modern times. Rather, according to Marcus, the Golden Age in American Jewish history began with the sociocultural fusion of uptown and downtown Jews in the post-World War II era. Viewed in this light, the rise of an American Jewish hegemonic center was the natural extension of the older German Jewish legacy.

MARCUS'S METHODOLOGY

As we have seen, defining Marcus's view of Jewish history is no easy matter. He consciously chose to leave his deepest historiographical beliefs implicit in his published work and public speaking. Moreover, in the handful of historiographical articles he did publish, Marcus limited his discussion to formal issues such as period, theme, and scope but not on his own ideology of Jewish history. Evidence for Marcus's world view as a historian, then, is mostly to be found in his occasional but usually strongly worded historical opinions, as well as in his use of massive but carefully selected quantities of historical data.¹⁶ This selectivity, for example, helps explain his reticence in reporting mixed marriages among American Jews, even in his latest publications.

Marcus often claimed he had little use for secondary literature, at least for research purposes. In fact, most of his major works were

based on his own original research or research done under his direction by his students. "You cannot ride two horses," he said when challenged as to why he did not, in his own words, "follow the literature." On the other hand, he insisted his graduate students "read the literature."¹⁷ Marcus's purposeful "self-distance" from contemporary historiography debate also helps explain an essential lack of development in his philosophy of history over time.

As a teacher, Marcus was much more focused on methodology than on theory. "I am not an idea man," he used to say to his students, and he focused almost exclusively on document reading in his seminars. His extensive personal library was set up to assist him in conducting Rankean seminars at his home. He believed passionately in what he called critical or scientific history. "Just the facts," he would say and then check his facts again.

Critical history, however, was not just a string of facts to Marcus. He was keenly interested in *sitz-im-leben* and *weltanschauung*. "Marcus is a psychologist," was a favorite personal remark he often used when trying to get his students to understand the person who wrote a particular document. Then, with anecdotal evidence, he made that writer come alive for his students. As evidenced in his delightful storytelling, private publications, humorous writings, and interest in ethical wills, Marcus was, indeed, a remarkably keen observer of the best and worst in human behavior.¹⁸



Dr. Jacob Rader Marcus, circa 1935
(American Jewish Archives)

CONCLUSION

How then are we best to understand Jacob R. Marcus as a historian? First, he believed in scientific, critical historical method. Second, he preferred empirical research to theoretical discussion and strove to write history in a nontechnical fashion. Third, he was a social historian

who believed that a good historian also had to be a good psychologist. But above all, Marcus was a man who genuinely loved the Jewish people and deeply believed in the ethical vision of the prophets of ancient Israel. A non-Zionist, he mainly understood the Jewish experience in terms of a global Diaspora dominated over time by a number of different hegemonic centers. According to Marcus, Jewish cultural hegemony in modern times passed from Germany to the United States during the 1930s. Even though he had a passion for America, Marcus was not strictly an Americanist but a historian of the Jewish people who at different times but for the same reasons focused on different Jewish communities in his historical research and writing.

In the last analysis, however, the United States ultimately held a unique and qualitatively higher place for Marcus. Beyond Diaspora-based historiography, beyond the idea of cultural hegemony and the concept of the Golden Age, America, in Marcus's view, was unique in offering the promise of complete political freedom for the Jew. "Because of the establishment of religion," Marcus once stated, "we are second class in England." "In Israel," he continued, "as a Reform Jew, I am still not a first class citizen."¹⁹ Remarkably, in 1973, Marcus suggested that a United States of Europe was more than just a utopian dream, and if it was founded on liberal principles, it "could once more achieve eminence and exercise a cultural influence of the highest order."²⁰

Twenty years later, in 1993, Dr. Marcus wrote at the end of volume 4 of his magisterial *United States Jewry, 1776–1985*:

The Messiah tarries; there is much to be deplored in the conduct of every state on this planet; the United States is no exception. Yet, there can be no question, for the Jew this is the best country, the freest in the world. This he knows full well; he is happy that his lines have fallen in pleasant places. There may be misgivings but he faces the future with trust, with confidence, with dogged faith.²¹

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NOTES

1. Jonathan D. Sarna, "Jacob Rader Marcus (1896–1995)," *American Jewish Year Book* (1997): 633; for biographical and historiographical assessments written during Marcus's lifetime, see Stanley F. Chyet, "Jacob Rader Marcus—A Biographical Sketch," in *Essays in American Jewish History to Commemorate the Tenth Anniversary of the Founding of the American Jewish Archives under the Direction of Jacob Rader Marcus* (Cincinnati: American Jewish Archives, 1958); Allan Tarshish, *Dr. Jacob Rader Marcus and His Work in American Jewish History*, originally delivered as a seminar, "New Approaches and Insights into Jewish History," at the Central Conference of American Rabbis in 1960 and republished as a pamphlet.

2. The only published bibliography of Marcus's work ends in 1978. See *The Writings of Jacob Rader Marcus: A Bibliographic Record*, compiled by Herbert C. Zafren and Abraham J. Peck (Cincinnati: American Jewish Archives, 1978).

3. *The Americanization of Isaac Mayer Wise* was privately printed in 1931 by Marcus and then republished in 1969 as a pamphlet by the American Jewish Archives. See also Jacob Rader Marcus, "America: The Spiritual Center of Jewery [sic]," in the *Jewish Community Bulletin* (Wheeling, W.Va.) 1, no. 3 (April 27, 1916). The bulletin was edited by Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver.

4. See the yearly entries in Zafren and Peck, *Writings of Jacob Rader Marcus*, for the years 1929 through 1948.

5. An example of the hagiographic literature is Randall M. Falk, *Bright Eminence: The Life and Thought of Jacob Rader Marcus: Scholar, Mentor, Counselor, for Three Generations of Rabbis and Lay Leaders of American Jewry* (Malibu, Calif.: Pangloss Press, 1994).

6. "The Program of the American Jewish Archives," *American Jewish Archives* 1, no.1 (1948): 2–5.

7. Jacob Rader Marcus, *The Jew in the Medieval World: A Source Book: 315–1791* (Cincinnati: Union of American Hebrew Congregations Press, 1938).

8. An assessment of Bertram Korn's historiographical significance is a desideratum for students of American Jewish history.

9. See the essay on Baron and Marcus by Jeffrey Gurock in this issue of the journal.

10. The relationship of Zionism and non-Zionism among Reform Jews is a very nuanced picture. Marcus's attitude toward Zionism defies easy definition, especially as it is outlined in the existing literature, and would therefore require detailed investigation. For a recent analysis of Zionism and American Reform during the period Marcus was a student at Hebrew Union College, see Jonathan D. Sarna, "Converts to Zionism in the American Reform Movement," in *Zionism and Religion*, ed. Shmuel Almog, Jehuda Reinhartz, and Anita Shapira (Hanover, N.H.: Brandeis University Press, 1998), 188–203.

11. "A University That Would Revolutionize World Jewry": An Unpublished Letter from Jacob Rader Marcus to Judah Magnes (1926)," *American Jewish Archives* 40, no. 1 (April 1988): 1–5.

12. Personal comment to Lance J. Sussman by Jacob Rader Marcus.

13. *Ibid.*

14. Jacob Rader Marcus, "The Periodization of American Jewish History," *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* (hereafter *PAJHS*) 47, no. 3 (March 1958): 125–33; it was reprinted as a pamphlet by the AJA.

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15. For references to the articles in the *Portland Scribe*, see the references in Zafren and Peck, *Writings of Jacob Rader Marcus*, for the years 1921–24.

16. Jacob Rader Marcus, "The Theme in American Jewish History," *PAJHS* 48, no. 3 (March 1959): 141–46; it was also reprinted as a pamphlet by the AJA.

17. Personal comment to Lance J. Sussman by Jacob Rader Marcus.

18. *Ibid.*

19. *Ibid.*

20. See Marcus's comments in the preface to *The Jew in the Medieval World*.

21. Jacob Rader Marcus, *United States Jewry, 1776–1985*, vol. 4 (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1993), 812.