

TO OUR READERS . . .

Michael Holroyd, an award-winning British literary biographer, recently bemoaned the decline of biography as a historical genre. During an interview at the Edinburgh International Book Fair a few years ago, Holroyd asserted that “in academia, biography has been subsumed into ‘life writing,’ which is more an aspect of sociology. One takes a representative of a category of people who have historically been overlooked rather than a single ‘great’ figure of their age.” Holroyd’s lament over the present-day tendency to pay too little attention to the “great figures” of an epoch is reminiscent of the “Great Men of History” theory first popularized by the brilliant Scottish writer Thomas Carlyle (1795–1881) who, in the gendered language of his time, famously proclaimed in 1841: “The history of the world is but the biography of great men.”¹

Three decades after Carlyle promulgated his famous theory, it was vigorously criticized by British philosopher and sociologist Herbert Spencer (1820–1903). Writing in 1873, Spencer maintained that upon closer inspection Carlyle’s theory “breaks down completely.” Not “great people,” Spencer insisted, but rather cultural environment—social context—was truly the source of *all* history. Spencer urged historians never to forget that “the genesis of the great man depends on the long series of complex influences which has produced the race in which he appears and the social state into which that race has slowly grown....” Summarizing his ideas in brief, Spencer concluded: “Before [a great man] can re-make his society, ... society must make him.”²

And we should not overlook yet another British scholar—a contemporary of both Carlyle and Spencer—who earned his fame by asserting that *both* of his peers were correct. It was Charles Darwin’s cousin, the British anthropologist and proto-geneticist Francis Galton (1822–1911), who coined the now-famous phrase “nature versus nurture.” Galton insisted that we are shaped by an incalculable interplay between our inherited genetic material and our socio-familial environment.³

Yet Galton has not settled the matter. Scientists today generally consider Galton’s approach passé, because it is fundamentally impossible to separate genetic and environmental influences from one another. As one neuropsychologist noted, the question of whether nature or nurture

contributes more to human personality is the same as asking whether the length or the width of a rectangle contributes more to its area!⁴ Despite these issues, it is safe to say that the behavior of a human being in any era is inevitably shaped by a living, dynamic interchange between the individual's unique personality and the ongoing influence of an ever-changing social context.

Each article in this double issue of our journal demonstrates how this dynamic has influenced our American Jewish past. Reading through these four articles, one cannot help but notice their chronological breadth as well as their topical diversity. The first essay, set in the late eighteenth through early nineteenth centuries, begins a historical excursion that, in the second essay, carries the reader to the Civil War period. The third article is set in the hurly-burly epoch of the Eastern European immigration at the end of the nineteenth through early twentieth centuries, and the last essay deals with a controversy that first erupted in 1938. Yet, despite this chronological expanse and topical diversity, the essays share a unifying, methodological approach that is noteworthy.

Each of the authors in this issue has engaged, to one degree or another, in biographical analysis, and each offers the reader an opportunity to learn about the life of an interesting person who played a central role in the respective episodes that have been recounted: Moses Lopez (1739/40?–1830) of Newport, Rhode Island; Marcus M. Spiegel (1829–1864) of Millersburg, Ohio; Herman Rosenthal (1843–1917) of New York City; and Carl Alpert (1913–2005) of Boston. Delving into these essays, one quickly rediscovers that the interests and passions that consume life's energy are inevitably fueled by an inscrutable mixture of personality and societal context.

In this issue's opening article, Michael Satlow examines the story behind the publication of the first free-standing Jewish calendar in U.S. history. Although it is impossible to state with certainty why the calendar's creator and publisher, Moses Lopez, decided to undertake this project, Satlow reminds us that the calendar was a product of Lopez's own personal needs and interests. At the same time, the calendar reflected the context and circumstances of that particular epoch. Lopez, like his famous uncle Aaron Lopez (1731–1782), was the child of New Christian parents who reclaimed his Jewish heritage after immigrating to Newport. His interest in Judaism was unquestionably shaped by his own biography. He was

born and raised in Portugal, where he had little or no access to Jewish life. He immigrated to the open society of Newport as a young man, and there he was able to pursue his Jewish interests. As Satlow demonstrates, Lopez became a committed Jew who was sincerely interested in the welfare of the Newport synagogue. Lopez was a naturally talented mathematician with a mechanical aptitude, and toward the end of the eighteenth century he witnessed the slow but steady attenuation of Newport's Jewish community. His decision to create a Jewish calendar reflected these biographical details and, particularly, his worries about the uncertain future of Jewish life in his community. Although Lopez left no explanation as to why he decided to compile a Jewish calendar, his achievement can be understood by examining the man as well as the social circumstances in which he lived. As Satlow correctly observes, "Lopez's calendar provides a lens through which to see practice and development of Judaism and the American Jewish community in the early eighteenth century."

Jean Powers Soman's essay on Marcus M. Spiegel is particularly timely, as we are marking the sesquicentennial anniversary of the Civil War. Spiegel's Civil War letters are, without question, a treasure. Driven by a deep and palpable love for his wife and family, Spiegel composed dozens upon dozens of letters that collectively constitute a unique resource detailing the activities, interests, and opinions of this remarkable Jewish officer who served in the 67th and 120th Ohio Volunteer Infantries. Soman, who is Marcus's great-great granddaughter, has devoted a lifetime to the preservation of these documents and the promulgation of Marcus's story. This essay serves as a fitting tribute to a military hero who gave up his life for the Union cause 150 years ago, during the 1864 Red River Campaign.⁵

Spiegel's Civil War experiences, as his letters clearly show, were shaped by his personal biography as well as the tumultuous political, social, and economic developments that overtook his life with the onset of the war. Spiegel was a German-Jewish immigrant who was born in the town of Abenheim, located about ten kilometers northwest of the city center of Worms. His personal ideals were influenced, in part, by the oppression that ultimately drove him, his family, and thousands of his contemporaries to leave their native land and settle in America during the late 1840s. As Soman notes, Spiegel was "well-educated and idealistic," and these qualities unquestionably influenced his response to the political upheaval that ultimately led to the Civil War. Spiegel's letters are compelling testaments

to the powerful interplay between his ideals and values and the national drama that unfolds all around him. Soman's concluding observation captures this dialectic in one insightful sentence—Spiegel's story "is at once a personal story and a national story."

In his essay on Herman Rosenthal, Brian Horowitz dubs this scholar a "Mandarin Jew," meaning that Rosenthal was a person of intellectual and literary significance during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Rosenthal was born and raised in the Russian Empire (present-day Latvia), and he can be classified as an Eastern European Jewish immigrant. American Jewish historians have brought forth numerous examples of the tensions and contentiousness that characterized the relationship between German Jewish and Eastern European Jewish immigrants in America at the turn of the century. These two populations came to America with different cultural, religious, and political sensibilities, and they often followed different paths toward Americanization. These factors and many others contributed to a spirit of intergroup suspicion and, in some instances, resentment.⁶

Rosenthal, as Horowitz emphasizes, serves as an important reminder that "among the 'Russian' immigrants were Jews of high culture who did not rebel against [the German Jewish community in America], but collaborated with them." Once again, Rosenthal's noteworthy contributions to the American Jewish experience reflect his biography as well as the social circumstances he encountered in America. Rosenthal was from a well-to-do family and was afforded an excellent secular education. He spoke numerous languages, including German and Hebrew, and he was reared in a region of the Russian Empire (Friedrichstadt, Courland) wherein German and Russian cultures coexisted. As a scholar and bibliophile, Rosenthal was at home in high culture. In this biographical overview, Horowitz demonstrates the many ways in which Rosenthal established effective relationships in both German and Eastern European Jewish circles.

Interested in helping to establish agricultural colonies for Russian Jewish immigrants, Rosenthal immigrated to the United States in 1881, where he pursued both scholarship and activism. He succeeded in establishing agricultural colonies in Louisiana and South Dakota. At the same time, he wrote German poetry and edited publications of the National Union of German Literature and Art in America, and was a capable Hebraist who founded a literary society dedicated to the promotion of

Hebrew literature. Horowitz's essay also sheds new light on Rosenthal's noteworthy contributions to the Slavonic Division of the New York Public Library, where he worked from 1898 until his death in 1917. Horowitz highlights an interesting ambition that is evident in every facet of Rosenthal's eclectic career. He was, Horowitz concludes, consistently motivated by "utopian" aspirations. He was dedicated to transforming American Jewish culture through his personal commitment to activism, scholarship, literature, politics, and the arts.

Finally, Zev Eleff's article resuscitates a long-forgotten controversy that took place in Boston in 1938. Four young Jewish girls from the neighborhoods of Roxbury and West End were baptized, somewhat unwittingly, while attending a summer camp run by an intrepid proselyte named Maye Hatch. A cub newspaper reporter at the *Boston Jewish Advocate*, Carl Alpert, brought this incident to the public attention. His articles caused quite a reaction in Boston's Jewish community, and a debate arose over how the community ought to respond to the challenge. It was Alpert—a man who possessed a strong sense of Jewish identity and had been actively involved in the Zionist youth movement, Young Judaea, for many years—who initially defined the issue for the public. He was appalled not only by Hatch's missionizing efforts, but also by the Jewish fecklessness of the families whose daughters had become her defenseless prey. Simultaneously, Alpert's coverage prompted Boston's organized Jewish community to face what appeared to be its failure to indoctrinate a new generation into the Jewish community.

Once again, it is interesting to observe how biography and social context enable us to see how people and groups can concomitantly be understood as the subject *as well as* the object of history. On the one hand, Carl Alpert and his colleagues at the *Boston Jewish Advocate* decried the efforts of proselytizers to take advantage of "defenseless" Jewish children: others inflicted the shameful conversions on the community. Yet, as Eleff stresses, this same situation prompted the Jewish community to defend itself. As many at the time argued, it was the Jewish community's responsibility to take its future into its own hands by fostering self-respecting Jews who possess the fortitude they need to withstand the onslaught of conversionary tactics. The American Constitution not only prohibited the establishment of a state religion, but it also endowed all citizens with an unencumbered right to practice their religion openly. Eleff points out that

proselytizers in America have every right to fulfill their perceived spiritual mandate, but American Jews have that same right. Jewish activists energetically reminded the organized Jewish community of Boston that the best way to stymie missionaries in the future was to enable Jews to “defend themselves internally.”

According to one historian, it is the delicate mixture of biography and social context that “encourages us to see the connections between the profoundly local and individual on the one hand, and the global and world historical on the other hand. . . . [It makes] the role of world historical processes in human lives historically visible.”⁷ The essays that follow exemplify and epitomize this lesson.

G.P.Z.

Cincinnati, Ohio

Notes

¹Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History*, ed. H.D. Traill (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1901), 29.

²Herbert Spencer, *The Study of Sociology* (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1874), 29, 30–31.

³“There is no escape from the conclusion that nature prevails enormously over nurture when the differences in nurture do not exceed what is commonly to be found among persons of the same rank of society in the same country.” Francis Galton, “The History of Twins, as a Criterion of the Relative Powers of Nature and Nurture,” *Fraser's Magazine* XIII (July–December 1875): 576.

⁴This simile is attributed to the Canadian neuropsychologist Donald Hebb (1904–1985). See Timo Hannay, “Nature versus Nurture,” in *Edge*, <http://www.edge.org/response-detail/25365> (accessed 5 February 2014).

⁵The Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives (AJA) takes deep pride in preserving the Colonel Marcus M. Spiegel Collection and making these materials accessible to the general public for research. Jean Powers Soman donated these rare materials to the AJA in 1979, after having met and studied with the AJA's founding director, Dr. Jacob Rader Marcus (1896–1995). It is also fitting to note that Soman has recently endowed the new Colonel Marcus M. Spiegel Rare Documents Exhibit at The Marcus Center. This new facility furnishes the AJA with a permanent educational resource that will, in part, highlight Spiegel's life and demonstrate how his letters enrich our understanding of this pivotal epoch in American history.

⁶See Steven E. Aschheim, *Brothers and Strangers: The East European Jew in German and German Jewish Consciousness, 1800–1923* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982).

⁷Edmund Burke III, “How to Write a Social Biography” (undated), on the University of Santa Cruz Center for World History website, <http://cwh.ucsc.edu/Writing.Social.Biogs.pdf> (accessed 8 February 2014).