BOOK REVIEWS


For the readers of this magazine, it seems necessary to place and identify the author of the book under review. Dr. Jacob R. Marcus is Milton and Hattie Kutz Distinguished Service Professor of American Jewish History at the Hebrew Union College—Jewish Institute of Religion, Cincinnati, Ohio; founder and director of the American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati; former President of the Central Conference of American Rabbis and the American Jewish Historical Society. He is the author of seven volumes in the field of American Jewish History.

Though the essays selected for this volume began appearing nearly forty years ago, the present collection, taken as a whole, may be justly described as possessing a clear-cut coherence and an intrinsic unity. The book constitutes a veritable history of the American Jew from the earliest days to the present day. Dr. Marcus undertakes the role also of historian-prophet in “The Future of American Jewry” (pp. 222-230), and in “The Quintessential Jew” (pp. 231-240) to project a description of the outlook of “the new Jew of tomorrow” of the twenty-first century.

What helped to make for the peculiar unity and coherence in the collection of these essays? It is no exaggeration to say that a consistent spirit and method on the part of the author brought about this approach to the relatively new science of American Jewish history. These essays can never be outdated because of their faithful adherence to the facts; they may likewise be characterized by their critical evaluation of the data, and, above all, by a complete avoidance of apologetics.

The last named characteristic calls for further explication on the part of the present reviewer. All minority groups tend often to be on the defensive in their recording of the history of their respective groups. In their desire to emphasize their contributions to the past, they develop an apologetic tendency in much of their writings. The black people of our own day, for example, reveal in a number of writings an overemphasis, historically speaking, of the contribution which their forbears made to America of yesterday. In the case of the American Jew, Marcus points out (p. 31), that at the close of the
nineteenth century (when American Jewish historical writing was first undertaken) the American Jew wanted nothing so much as to prove his pioneering credentials! The money used to outfit Christopher Columbus' ships, Oscar Straus (one time U.S. minister to Turkey and, later, Secretary of Commerce and Labor in President Theodore Roosevelt's cabinet) 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." Luis de Santangel and Gabriel Sanchez, both of Jewish ancestry, were "really the patrons of Columbus." Straus also took much pride in the fact that there were "undoubtedly five Jews" among the men who sailed with Columbus. The present reviewer is of the opinion that the apologetic and, at times, polemical motif was a more potent factor in the development of the proto-science of American Jewish history than any purely academic mood could have been in the last decade of the nineteenth century. It seems true to say that 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 four hundred years after Columbus' discovery of the New World. Professor Marcus became president of the Society in 1956.

Typical of Professor Marcus' critical and scientific method is the following excerpt, taken from the essay in this collection, "Trends in American Jewish Historical Research" (p. 32).

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 filiopietism 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 backgrounds, 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 elite 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 [The Jews of South Carolina, Philadelphia, 1905], 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.

Fundamental for an understanding of the thesis of Professor Marcus' book is the essay he selected as the first in this collection, a publication made possible by the Alumni Association of the Hebrew
Union College in honor of Dr. Marcus' seventieth birthday. Professor Marcus entitled this essay, "The Periodization of American Jewish History" (pp. 3-14), originally his presidential address at the fifty-sixth annual meeting of the American Jewish Historical Society, held in the Library of Congress, Washington, D. C., February 15, 1958. Our author recognizes rightly that periodization is largely a convenience, a contrivance to ease the study of history. But he also realizes that it is more than a mechanical arrangement; it should become a frame on which to build the complex of events and culture that goes to make up the four great periods of American Jewish history. Marcus calls these four periods the Sephardic, the German, the East European, and the American.

The Sephardic period is so named because the pattern set up by Spanish-Portuguese émigrés in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries predominated in this country until the superimposition of another pattern no later than the year 1840. "I call this," says Dr. Marcus, "the era of The Rise and Decline of Sephardic Jewry, 1654-1840." The Sephardic age had narrowed and shrunk by 1840. The Sephardic unitary synagogue-community died as German Jewish conventicles, formed in Philadelphia and New York, remained outside the Sephardic orbit.

Ever since the middle 1830's, German Jews had been coming into the ports of the East Coast in substantial numbers. Fifteen of the twenty-one congregations in the country were, in fact, Germanic. In 1840, Sephardic Beth Elohim Congregation of Charleston, S. C., deserted Sephardic Orthodoxy and joined the ranks of the Germanic Reform Jews. When in 1841 the Sephardic-oriented Rev. Isaac Leeser, rabbi in Philadelphia (d. 1868), called for a countrywide American Jewish organization, he was joined by a German colleague, and the call to action was published both in German and in English. The German period had begun. "I call this second period in American Jewish history," says Marcus, "The Age of the Rise and Dominance of the German Jew and the Challenge to His Leadership, 1841-1920" (p. 8). The German Jews came into their own and determined the destinies of American Jewry after 1840.

By 1920, the "German" Jews, now largely native-born citizens who had absorbed the small Sephardic group socially, "ruled" an empire of almost four million Jews, most of whom were of East European origin. From 1914 on, however, the East Europeans, sensing the power of their numbers and of their improved economic status, undertook to challenge the leadership of the "natives." The East
Europeans aimed to overthrow the hegemony of the older German Jewish stock, and they succeeded, to a certain extent. Dr. Marcus calls this third epoch in American Jewish life, "The Age of the Advent and the Rise of the East European Jew and His Bid for Hegemony, 1852-1920" (p. 10).

Though it seemed at first glance in 1920 that American Jewry was to be split into two hostile groups, forces were at work which were to compel a fusion of the two elements. That continuing unification is the outstanding characteristic of the fourth period, the one in which we now live. This, Marcus calls, "The Emerging American Jewish Community, The Age of Fusion, The Epoch of the Rise of the American Jew" (p. 12). It began in 1921. Once again, we find it necessary to quote an excerpt from this volume, p. 14:

It is in this age of fusion that there has begun to emerge a homo novus, the American Jew. Because of numerous inter-marriages and other environmental factors, the "Semitic"-looking Jew — more native to caricature than to reality — has all but vanished. Typical Jewish names have begun to disappear. The American Jew, in appearance, dress, and manners, is indistinguishable from his fellow-citizens. He is an urban white-collar worker who is, at the very least, literate and, indeed, often well-educated; he is liberal in his politics, sympathetic to Judaism and to Jewish education, and imbued with a strong sense of kinship for all Jews. Paradoxical as it may sound, this emerging "American" Jew is more assimilated, culturally, than was his father, yet in many respects as good, if not a better Jew.

The essay "Light on Early Connecticut Jewry" (pp. 54-107) is very carefully documented, and is an example of scientific, historical research at its best. All historians can learn a lesson in historiographical method and heuristics by reading carefully Marcus' treatment of "Letters As a Source of Biography" (pp. 23-30).

Research historians find information in strange places and in unexpected sources. One of the essays is an analysis of the oldest known synagogue records of continental North America, which Marcus discovered in the Public Record Office at London among the business papers of a colonial Jewish merchant who returned to London after having made his fortune in British America; the essay is entitled "The Oldest Known Synagogue Record Book of Continental North America, 1720-1721" (pp. 44-53).

The present volume under review will definitely cast a long shadow in the scientific pursuit of American Jewish history for decades to come.

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