Mekel on Mauch and Salmons, 'German-Jewish Identities in America' and Ravage, 'An American in the Making: The Life Story of an Immigrant'

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Another Look at American Jewish Worlds

The shorthands “German Jews” and “Eastern European Jews” each come with their own set of associations. The latter conjures up images of the teeming streets of New York City, Orthodoxy and radicalism, sweatshops, the sound of Yiddish, and authenticity, however fuzzy that concept may be. The former brings to mind rather different terms: assimilation, Reform Judaism, stiffness and punctuality, Bildung and wealth, and, perhaps, arrogance. American Jews today, the majority of whom are the descendants of Eastern European Jews, often know the “Yekkes” only from the rarely positive accounts of their parents and grandparents; in Jewish American historiography as well, German Jews have frequently been portrayed as reluctant dispensers of charity and anxious Americanizers of what they saw as benighted “Ostjuden.” M. E. (Marcus Eli) Ravage’s memoir as well as the collection of essays edited by Christof Mauch and Joseph Salmons complicate such notions.

As the title already indicates, the chapters of German-Jewish Identities, based on a 2000 conference organized by the Max-Kade Institute for German-American Studies, emphasize the range of experiences of German Jewish immigrants in the United States. Interdisciplinary in its approach, the volume includes essays on history, theater, and linguistics. Unlike many historians, Henry Feingold, the first contributor to the collection, stresses the continuity and similarities between the German and Eastern European immigrants, regardless of the tensions between them. He gives an overview of German Jewish history in America, and of some of the problems facing the contemporary American Jewish community. Fears for the survival, “now stylishly called continuity,” of Jews as Jews in the face of assimilation are no longer assuaged by ever new waves of immigration from Europe (p. 18). Ending on a pessimistic note, Feingold doubts that nineteenth-century German Jewish strategies of synthesizing Jewish and American identity are still viable today, Joseph Lieberman’s much-hailed candidacy for vice president notwithstanding.

In her essay on Jewish charity, Anke Ortlepp demonstrates the importance of charity as a factor in forging and defining the Jewish community of Milwaukee. Despite some minor errors (Isidor Kalish, for instance, was not Orthodox but a Reformer), Ortlepp shows the vital role charity played not only for its recipients but also for the cohesion of the benefactors.
Moving to a larger midwestern Jewish center, Tobias Brinkmann contends that we should depart from an approach that sees assimilation and community as mutually exclusive. On the basis of ethnicity and charity, Jewish communal life in Chicago did not disintegrate, but underwent a transformation. Brinkmann addresses the conflicts between the Reform rabbis David Einhorn, Bernhard Felsenthal, and Isaac Mayer Wise, and persuasively argues that regardless of their passion for the German language, the “Germanizers” Einhorn and Felsenthal were in fact more American than the “Americanizer” Wise. Embracing American freedom of religion, they emancipated themselves from the need to cling to a German-style united Gemeinde. Like Ortlepp, Brinkmann stresses the importance of charity for community building, and like Cornelia Wilhelm, the author of the next essay, that of secular associations, especially the B’nai B’rith.

Wilhelm’s chapter on the B’nai B’rith, the first nationwide American Jewish association, argues that the “Sons of the Covenant” provided a modern, secular way for American Jews to assert their identity and civic virtues as Jews and Americans. Though benevolence and mutual aid were part of their program, the B’nai B’rith strove to be more than a charity. Thanks to the order’s increasing popularity and democratization through the possibility of self-application, membership peaked in the mid-1880s. The B’nai B’rith exerted its influence both within the Jewish community (Chicago’s Ramah Lodge was one of the most active) and in American society at large, through such prominent members as Simon Wolf and Benjamin Peixotto. However, Eastern European newcomers, who felt neither welcome nor at home in the B’nai B’rith, often preferred to found their own fraternal organizations. Although it created the Anti-Defamation League and Hillel, the order lost its previous importance in the twentieth century.

Mitchell B. Hart devotes his essay to Franz Boas, the originator of the “cultural turn” in American anthropology and ethnology, who maintained that “racial” characteristics were plastic and changeable already with first-generation immigrants. Hart argues against the view of Boas as an unbending assimilationist who identified with Germans rather than other Jews and advocated the demise of Jewish life in America through amalgamation. Instead, Hart claims that Boas consciously created a public persona as a scientist in reaction to anti-immigration, even anti-Semitic, trends within American academia. It was precisely in order to fight the arguments of anti-immigration agitators more effectively that Boas had to downplay his own Jewishness, so as to counter any doubts concerning his scientific detachment. Boas’s German credentials were an added bonus at a time when the prestige of German science reached its peak. Yet his strategy did not always work, as can be seen in a letter from Madison Grant that ridiculed Boas’s claim to objectivity.

Harley Erdman’s “German Jews and American Show Business: A Reconsideration” asserts that not all Jews who succeeded in American show business were New Yorkers of Eastern European origin; some of the “pioneers” were in fact German Jews. Knowing the taste of heartland Americans from experience, they were ideally suited to mediate between New York and the rest of America. Eastern European Jews often built on the foundations laid by German and Central European Jewish predecessors. Erdman provides several examples of German Jewish entertainers, some of whom, like the Marx Brothers, are often thought to have been native Yiddish speakers, an image they actively fostered. With the foundation of the Theatrical Syndicate in 1895, the impact of German Jews on the management and organization of show business reached its zenith. This centralized Jewish management was often, not without anti-Semitic overtones, depicted as an “evil empire.”
In his discussion of Alfred Uhry’s problematic play *Last Night of Ballyhoo* (1997), Thomas Kovach first provides the historical background of the Jewish community of Atlanta that served as its substrate. While German Jews were in some respects better integrated into white society for much of the nineteenth century, trust in their own acceptance proved tenuous with the arrival of Eastern European Jews. The rude shock of the lynching of Leo Frank in 1915 added to their anxiety. The play, set in 1939, shows a German Jewish family that has retained nothing of German culture apart from its aversion against “Ostjuden.” This attitude appears all the more contemptible at the eve of the Holocaust. However, the last scene shows the family, including its new Eastern European in-law, solemnly assembled to celebrate the Sabbath and greeting each other in Hebrew. As Kovach remarks, this ending constitutes a “wish-fantasy” of an author stemming from the milieu he depicts, trying to undo the often shameful attitude of German Jews toward their coreligionists (p. 131).

Monika S. Schmid’s essay on language attrition is one of the most fascinating contributions to the collection. Schmid shows that the date of emigration of her interviewees, which translates into the degree of persecution, anguish, and terror these refugees from Germany had to suffer, affected the maintenance of their native language. The later the refugees of the three groups Schmid examined left Germany (February 1933 to August 1935; September 1935 to October 1938; and after November 9, 1938), the less positive was their view of the German language, and the weaker their command of it. Since we often assume that one’s mother tongue is “hard wired,” the trauma necessary to cause such a dramatic change, one that indeed crosses from the psychological into the neurological, emerges with brutal clarity. Schmid concludes the chapter with the depressing remark: “for many of them [German Jewish refugees], the German language may have been the last link to their parents, the only thing left that their parents had given them” (p. 151).

The final chapter, Manfred Kirchheimer’s “German Jew or Jewish German? Post-Immigration Questions,” is an adaptation of Kirchheimer’s introduction to his book on the German Jewish refugee community of Washington Heights, New York City. It demonstrates that sometimes even the crudest stereotypes about “Yekkes” are an understatement. While it is mildly amusing to read about these German Jews’ fetish of punctuality, their hyper-Germanic names, and their culinary inflexibility, it is already a little less comfortable to read that Kirchheimer’s grandfather waited in vain for three days outside Emperor Wilhelm II’s palace, sleeping on the steps, to present his idol with a novel he had dedicated to the kaiser. This image of servility turns even uglier when the author intimates that some German Jews believed until their twilight years that Adolf Hitler would never have turned against them, had it not been for the vices of the “Ostjuden.” Such attitudes go a long way in explaining the scorn that often darkens Eastern European Jewish views of German Jews. Yet Kirchheimer, though critical of the less appealing peculiarities of his parents’ generation, portrays the Jews of Washington Heights with a compassionate, sometimes wistful, tone.

Whereas *German-Jewish Identities* offers insights into the variety of the German Jewish experience in America over a long period of time, Ravage’s memoir shifts our perspective to the individual, away from German Jews and onto what many of them would have regarded as their cultural inferior, a Romanian Jew. Ravage, though not a “Russian” Jew, arrived as part of the Jewish mass immigration that started in the 1880s and continued until 1924; however, the decisions he made set him on a path different from that of most Eastern European Jewish arrivals.

Ravage, born in the town of Berlad in 1884, arrived in the United States in 1900 after Couza, a visitor...
from New York, had set his mind afire with the myth and promise of America. He joined the “Fussgeher,” walking societies composed of mostly young people who left their openly hostile native Romania on foot. Ravage’s engaging memoir, ably introduced by Steven G. Kellman, is exceptional in several respects. As Kellman points out, compared to other immigrant memoirists, such as Mary Antin, Ravage is critical of America and Americans, insisting repeatedly that immigrants had as much to teach as to learn; he did not furnish any account of the miseries of the ocean voyage whatsoever, and referred to only few iconic places apart from the Lower East Side. Readers will soon discover that Ravage was not only critical of Americans; in fact, his discerning eye missed few shortcomings in his contemporaries. However, it was one of Ravage’s laudable qualities that his skeptical disposition did not lead him to give up on others, be they native-born Americans or immigrants. Despite his initial disillusionment with life in America, he learned to value what the country had to offer. Though highly critical of the materialism, name changes, and pretentiousness he observed in other immigrants, he insisted that they were degraded by their circumstances; they did not create the “ghetto.” His deepest emotions remained private; he related his heartbreaking farewell to his mother, but refused to recall his own feelings when hearing of his parents’ death.

After working in a saloon, Ravage found employment in a sweatshop. Inspired by the intense but informal intellectual climate of the Lower East Side, he decided to become educated. After visiting evening school, Ravage entered college in Columbia, Missouri. In Missouri, Ravage found the “real” America. In Missouri, he initially felt as alienated as upon his arrival in New York. Missourians appeared to him as pagans who only cared about sports and were unable to sustain a spirited discussion. Though they showed no signs of anti-Semitism, they seemed unable to appreciate the cultural contributions of immigrants like himself. Ravage was at a loss to explain why other students avoided him, and why his roommates invariably left: his overly correct but little idiomatic English, and his “conservative” habits of personal hygiene went a long way in accounting for the midwesterners’ attitude (p. 157). Ironically, a habit he had acquired in New York rather than in Europe--his aggressive, heated way of discussing controversial issues--further prevented his acceptance by the nonconfrontational Missourians. One kind of Americanization thus clashed with another. Slowly, Ravage learned to appreciate his new surrounding, including nature and even sports, especially after finding an important cultural interpreter in his new friend Harvey, an outsider himself due to his relative poverty and interest in music. Ravage’s visit to New York was a turning point in his life. Having learned to look at his old friends with “American” eyes, his distance from the immigrant milieu confirmed his conviction that he was now a true American. Twenty years later, this experience repeated itself in similar but harsher form in Europe. Visiting Romania, Ravage found himself sorely disappointed, especially in his former home, Vaslui. His nostalgic idealizations shattered, Ravage compared everything he saw to America, shuddered at the thought of what would have become of him had he stayed, and deplored the situation of European women. Disillusionment with “his” Europe was not without a certain reward: It was the final proof of his complete Americanization.

Ravage’s life story is highly interesting for students of American and European Jewish history. His vivid accounts of the walking societies, their organization, and the help they received from Jewish aid societies; the immigrants’ perception of American English as a mixture of Yiddish and Romanian; and his inconsistency in calling Jews “Jews” (he sometimes speaks of the “Romanian race” when he means other Jews) shed light on his and other immigrants’ everyday problems and identity. Ravage’s description of the sweatshop is surprising: he actually liked it. Despite its filth and squalor, he
maintained that it preserved workers’ humanity thanks to the absence of class differences between employers and employees; in that, he again departed from the stereotype of the huddled masses yearning to become dentists. Another exceptional feature of the memoir is that Ravage did not ridicule the ideals of his youth, and credited his former comrades for their sincerity and commitment.

Not everything Ravage recounted should be taken at face value; his claim that he did not wish to be celebrated the way Couza had been upon his arrival in Vaslui does not rhyme with his disappointment when this “wish” was granted. In this, as in any other autobiographical work, the author presented himself as the person he thought he was.

Kellman’s introduction provides important background information that is especially useful for readers unfamiliar with American Jewish history and immigrant narratives, fills some biographical gaps left open by Ravage (from whom we hardly learn what happened between the publication of the first, 1917, and the second, 1936, edition), and offers a thoughtful analysis of Ravage’s linguistic adaptation and ethnic identity. The only problem I found with the introduction was the application of the charged term “judenrein” to the comparatively idyllic Columbia, Missouri (p. xxv). However few Jews may have lived in the city, to introduce Nazi terminology into the discussion means doing it a grave injustice.

Both volumes are important and enlightening contributions to American Jewish and immigration historiography; read together, they complement each other by encouraging readers to study both Eastern European and German Jews with compassion and discernment.


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