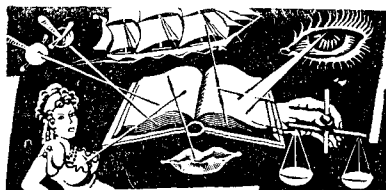

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JEWISH LIFE IN THE AMERICAN NOVEL

by **HAROLD U. RIBALOW**

ALTHOUGH novels on Jewish themes have been appearing in America for more than fifty years, the average American has only a vague idea of what American Jewish life is like; what Jews think about; what their traditions and customs are; what their problems are and how they face them.

Until the rise of Hitler, novels of Jewish content were read mainly by a comparatively small number of educated or synagogue-attending Jews and a handful of intellectuals or *avant-garde* of another generation. Sometimes a sensational novel by an exciting writer, like *A Jew in Love* by Ben Hecht, would titillate the general reading public. Or a solid work like Abraham Cahan's *The Rise*

of David Levinsky or Meyer Levin's *The Old Bunch* would burst the bounds of the Jewish literary ghetto. But in the main, novels about Jews were read solely by Jews, and to hear the complaints of Jewish publishers, rabbis and other communal leaders, even Jews refused to read about their own people to any appreciable degree. As a result, few Jewish writers — and there were many — devoted themselves to writing on Jewish subjects and Jewish readers did not take seriously any Jewish writers until they won recognition on the general literary scene.

During the past decade, however, awareness of Jewish issues and problems was sharpened, and many general publishers included at least one novel by a Jew about Jews on their annual lists. This has led to a trend of a sort. There has been a spate of books on anti-Semitism by writers

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like Arthur Miller, Saul Bellow and Laura Z. Hobson; there have been more than a score of war novels with Jews as major protagonists by such novelists as Irwin Shaw, Ira Wolfert and Norman Mailer; there have been "Jewish novels" by novelists so far apart in style and in material as Pearl Buck and Norman Katkov. Many areas of Jewish concern were treated — and still are being described — in current works of fiction, yet the general reader, picking up these books promiscuously, guided to them either because of the fame of the author's by-line or because of the enthusiasm of a particular critic or reviewer, who often has no background to judge the book accurately, has only a dim notion of Jewish life in this country.

Yet there have appeared, among the hundreds of novels devoted to Jewish themes, a handful which, if read by non-Jews in a number of concentrated sittings, will offer a better-than-fair idea of the American Jew; the background which formed his personality; the reasons for his neuroses, if any; the differences between himself and his fellow Americans. Many of these novels, upon their first appearance, shocked and bothered the Jews themselves. "What will the Gentiles say?" has often been their primary criterion, not only on works of art but on most activities in which Jews participate. For understandable

reasons, Jews in America, like Jews elsewhere, have become hypersensitive. When they read a book which contains a portrait of a mean Jew, one who scarcely does honor to the Jewish people, Jews become uneasy inwardly. Thus a serious work of fiction like Budd Schulberg's *What Makes Sammy Run?* antagonized many Jewish readers and literary critics. When Jerome Weidman's acid portraits of garment-industry Jews were first published, the hue and cry among Jews in America was loud indeed. The fact that these novels were published when Hitler was in the process of wiping out 6 million Jews did not make American Jews any more tolerant of their authors. The measure of a novelist was gauged by other than strictly literary attainments.

But many of the novels castigated by Jews as false and unflattering in their views of American Jews contained a measure of truth, an insight into Jewish living in this country which one would not find in the novels labeled "positive Jewish fiction." It should be added, however, that a huge proportion of novels of Jewish content are acid works rather than mellow, pleasant books. Apparently, "happy Jewish life," which is not necessarily impossible or improbable, is seldom considered good material for the novelist.

There are at least ten books pub-

lished during the past thirty-odd years which offer as accurate an insight into the American Jew as any ambitious social survey could offer. The novels are: *The Rise of David Levinsky* (Harper, 1917), by Abraham Cahan; *Jews Without Money* (Liveright, 1930), by Michael Gold; *Call It Sleep* (Ballou, 1934), by Henry Roth; *Singermann* (Farrar, Rinehart, 1929), by Myron Brinig; *The Old Bunch* (Viking, 1937), by Meyer Levin; *Eagle at My Eyes* (Doubleday, 1948), by Norman Katkov; *The Island Within* (Harper, 1928), by Ludwig Lewisohn; *Wasteland* (Harper, 1946), by Jo Sinclair; *The Victim* (Vanguard, 1947), by Saul Bellow; and *Gentleman's Agreement* (Simon & Schuster, 1947), by Laura Z. Hobson.

A few of these novels achieved best-sellerdom in their day. Others were read by only a handful and even now are completely forgotten by both readers and literary historians. Abraham Cahan, Michael Gold and Henry Roth all wrote of Jewish life on New York's East Side, when Jews from Europe jammed every immigrant ship to America and filled its cities. Yet each of these volumes has something special to offer. *The Rise of David Levinsky* and *Call It Sleep*, written 39 and fifteen years ago, remain solid fictional works, alive, vivid, naturalistic. Michael Gold's *Jews*

Without Money, a bitter series of Jewish vignettes, each tarred with the brush of Jewish poverty, is, in retrospect, over-acid and over-exaggerated. But in its passion, so overwhelming and so deeply felt, there are dozens of pages worth rereading and no reader can fail to ascertain some basic truths of Jewish life in America in a decade which is, happily, part of the past.

The Rise of David Levinsky, the story of a self-made garment-industry king, offers a detailed description of Jewish life in a small town in Europe, as well as a harsh, accurate portrait of the rise of an immigrant boy to eminence in America. Nowhere else in American fiction can one find such evocative and honest passages describing the impact of Jewish religious traditions and culture on a sensitive child; on the irritable and overworked Jews of a small European village in which the peasants always threatened to break loose and pogromize the Jews; on the helplessness and bewilderment of a penniless immigrant fresh from Ellis Island, without a friend in the New World. Less than fifty years ago, this was how Jews arrived in New York. How Levinsky manages to get started; the maneuverings necessary to begin his own business; the drive and ambition of a Jewish boy suddenly aware of the freedom in America; the gradual

manner in which he sheds his past, his surface Jewishness, and becomes "a successful American businessman," has been equaled only once or twice, by such writers as Ludwig Lewisohn. It has not been surpassed.

The Jewish ghetto of the East Side in Levinsky's day was full of hope and opportunity, mixed though it was with real poverty, with red-light districts, with sweat shops and with maladjusted Jews. Indeed, it is typical of the honesty of this novel that Levinsky himself, who experiences an abortive love affair, remains, at the end of the novel, an unhappy Jew, knowing that America has been good to him, but that, somehow, life itself has passed him by in many respects. There are not many David Levinskys in New York now, or in the rest of the country, but the sons of the Levinskys are here and they have been colored and shaped by the lives of their fathers.

II

The same may be said about the Jews in Gold's *Jews Without Money* and in Roth's powerful evocation of the jungle world of the East Side, as seen through the eyes of a sensitive Jewish youngster. Gold's work, which was acclaimed in its day, is uncompromising in its bitterness concerning Jewish life in America's biggest city. The narrator's parents, always fight-

ing to earn tomorrow's bread, must do battle against the cruel environment which breeds disease of the mind as well as of the body. The easy turn to lawlessness and gangsterism, so common in the twenties (and perhaps not uncommon today, as witness the novels of Willard Motley, Charles Gorham, David Dortort and many others), becomes clear to those who read Gold's volume. The mother, the peddler father and a host of other characters, sympathetically and savagely drawn, indicate that this book did more than portray a segment of American life at a particular period of American history. The men and women, the boys and girls who people *Jews Without Money* are reflected in many of today's Jews. The experiences which seared the Jews of a decade or two ago have left their brand on today's Jews, too. The boy whose father stood shivering on Second Avenue in an attempt to make a humble livelihood is a different person because of it. And, parenthetically, this novel, like the other books discussed here, will wipe away any stereotyped images which may be set in the mind of the average American concerning the wealth, power and influence of the Jews as a class of people. That the Jews are completely like other Americans in their struggle to surmount economic difficulties is only the most obvious lesson.

Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep* has been marked by many perceptive critics as the best novel ever written about American Jewish life. Roth never wrote another book. Perhaps this effort drained him of all his memories, of all his talent, of all his ambition. It is a large novel, conceived on a broad scale. In it, Roth lays bare the innermost workings of the heart of little David, the major protagonist of the book, his cruel, heartless father and his quiet, long-suffering mother. The New York jungle is never more dangerous and nightmarish than it is here. The dialogue of New York's cross-section of people, Italian, Irish, Jewish, Hungarian, is startlingly accurate. The vulgar four-letter words which still seem to shock readers today were used with dazzling effectiveness by Roth in 1934. David's world is a harsh one. His father hates him; his mother has a secret which tortures her; David himself is tortured in Hebrew school and envy of a Catholic boy he meets nearly eats him up alive. The novel, with all its harshness, contains a lyricism and pathos seldom met in modern fiction. David's mother, for example, emerges as a full-blooded woman, slightly bewildered by life in America, but capable, at the end of the novel, of facing up to her husband, and realizing that her own past love is forever gone. She is what the

gentile conceives to be "the Jewish mother," and indeed she is a remarkable person. But David, in his own way, is an equally remarkable child. His insecurity, his search for any possible faith and religion, his discovery of sex in its ugly manifestations, all brand and color him. The novel ends with David still a child, and the city closing in on him, with the reader remaining ignorant of David's future life. It is possible that David grew up to be an observant Jew. It is just as likely that he became indifferent to his upbringing, or that he turned to another religion or to atheism. In any event, *Call It Sleep* is a major novel, no matter how it is approached, and if anyone wants to know the elements which go into the making of the American Jew, this novel must be read.

The above-mentioned novels deal exclusively with Jewish life in New York City, which has more Jews than any other city in the world. But Jewish life is by no means uncommon in small towns and in other large metropolitan areas. Thus Myron Brinig's *Singermann* and Meyer Levin's *The Old Bunch* are required reading for any understanding of Jewish life in America, as opposed to Jewish life in New York alone. Yet the phrase "required reading" does not mean that these volumes are in any way dull, preachy books. Both pulse with

life, and the Levin novel is still available to book buyers. Its sales remain high, which is unusual, for the life of a novel, a modern American novel at that, is seldom ten years.

Brinig's *Singermann* is the first novel in a series about a Jewish family living in Montana. Brinig, who has since given up the Jewish field for the slick market and has written a number of popular, fast-selling novels, wrote *Singermann* out of the depth of his experiences. It is an ambitious chronicle about a Jewish family from Rumania which struggles to retain both its Americanism and its Jewishness in a crude, primitive mining town. The conflict is typical of Jewish life in America. The clash between the older and younger American generation is not new, but it has seldom been more clearly drawn than it is here. Moses Singermann, the father of the clan, is bewildered when his oldest son, prodded by his ambitious wife, sets up a clothing store of his own. And as each child goes his own way, the father loses a little more of his newly-won sense of security. The unhappy liaison of his son with a promiscuous woman; the death of his grandchild; the running away from home of a son maladjusted to small-town life — all these events bring to Moses Singermann a feeling that in America, too, in America, the Promised Land, life can be harsh and un-

equivocal. Life is a struggle, whether it be in a small mining town in Montana or in a village in Rumania. Yet these Jews in Montana are respected by their fellow townsmen. They are part and parcel of the community in which they live.

Levin's *The Old Bunch*, very much like James T. Farrell's Studs Lonigan trilogy, but informed with a warmth that Farrell's opus lacks, has been criticized many times by Jewish readers because it contains portraits of Jews who are "bad" Jews or unsympathetic Jews. Levin himself recalls that when his novel first appeared, it was condemned by a number of rabbis from their pulpits. Representatives of Jewish defense organizations called him to task, and Jewish readers largely overlooked the volume. Yet this chronicle of the lives of a group of Jews in a Chicago section is the most detailed, realistic description of Jewish life in this country that has ever been published. True, there are "bad" Jews. But their "badness" is the "badness" common to all Americans. Some are money-grubbers; some are lecherous; but others are idealists. One is a Zionist, probably the first real Zionist drawn in American fiction. Jewish organizational life is a convincing part of Jewish life in *The Old Bunch*, something that is honestly depicted for the first time in American fiction. The Jews who

are indifferent to Jewish customs, the Jews who are sexually promiscuous, the Jews who enter such peculiar fields as six-day bike riding are not uncommon. But neither are the "positive" Jews drawn by Levin. What is significant is not the balancing of the good against the bad, but that these people are alive, that they are drawn from life. As an over-all portrait, *The Old Bunch* remains the most authentic single novel written about American Jewish living in America — it may not be gracious living, or observant Jewish living, but that is how it is, in the main, and that is how Meyer Levin saw it.

III

That the Armenian stories of William Saroyan and the Irish-American novels of James T. Farrell are considered so largely a part of American life, while books like Brinig's and, to a lesser degree, Levin's, are so little known by the general American reader, indicates, to some extent, that the Jew does not have the stature of other minority groups in this country. That many basic Jewish problems remain unknown to the general reader is further reflected in other Jewish novels: the novels of Jewish-self-hate, the novels of intermarriage and of anti-Semitism. Generally speaking, non-Jewish readers know about anti-Semitism and intermarriage. But do

they have any true idea of the intensity and strength of *selbsthass*?

A work of fiction which combines all three elements — self-hate, intermarriage and anti-Semitism — is Norman Katkov's *Eagle at My Eyes*, which, when it appeared in 1948, was criticized by Jewish reviewers in Anglo-Jewish periodicals and by rabbis from their pulpits. That there are reasons to dislike the book is evident to anyone who reads it. It is recommended here not because it is fine fiction. As a matter of fact, it has, in spite of some real passion in the writing, large sections of poor writing, some unbelievable dialogue, and incidents which are weakly motivated. Nevertheless, it offers a view of a Jew who hates everything Jewish and of a Jewish couple which rebels against its son's marriage to a Christian. It is important that the non-Jewish world know that there are large numbers of Jewish families to whom the idea of intermarriage is abhorrent. One suspects, on the basis of most volumes on intermarriage, that the Jews are happy about it. Quite the contrary, and Katkov makes it clear. There is another reason why this book belongs on any list of novels which offers some understanding of Jews. Here is a Jew who hates himself, hates his people, hates the world and particularly hates Christians, yet he finally succumbs to the environment he hates

and, in the novel's climax, says to the world in general, to the Christian world in particular, "All right, you bastards, here I come!" Joe Goodman, the hero of this novel, symbolizes what can happen to an American Jew constantly under a barrage of hate. That there is self-animus here is hardly a matter of surprise.

Written twenty years earlier than the Katkov novel, Ludwig Lewisohn's *The Island Within* is a far deeper book than Katkov's. It deals with intermarriage and self-hate, and is informed with a kind of Jewish knowledge which Katkov, in his ignorance and bitterness, can never hope to equal. The attempt of Lewisohn's Arthur Levy and his family to assimilate, to break the "shackles" of Judaism, and the inevitable failure of the attempt, is the theme of Lewisohn's most famous book. The Lewisohn solution for Jewish happiness in America, that Jews turn to Orthodoxy and to the deep sources of Jewish religion and tradition, is an extreme answer which, it is obvious, few have accepted and few will. When Levy realizes that his life is an unhappy one and his non-Jewish way of living a false one, he sinks himself into Jewish communal and philanthropic work and the important task of saving Jewish lives abroad. This solution, promulgated by Lewisohn twenty years ago, seems to have been

good advice, for it has been followed by hundreds of Jews during the past decade or so, who have done mighty deeds in raising huge sums of money for Palestine and Jewish relief. Many of these Jews, active in fund-raising, are the Arthur Levys of today. As an example of the Jew who seeks escape from his heritage and does not find happiness, Lewisohn's *The Island Within* remains an important landmark in American Jewish writing.

Self-hate brought up-to-date (or up to recent psychiatric treatment for all ailments, including Jewish self-hate) is contained in Jo Sinclair's *Wasteland*, a \$10,000 Harper prize novel of 1946. Jake Brown, the novel's major protagonist, hates himself simply because he is a Jew. Brown's insecurity, his deep feeling of self-hatred, is cured by psychiatric treatment, which draws out of the Jew the reasons for his hatred and reveals to him that the very reasons are false ones. He finally achieves a cure at the Passover table, and returns to the Jewish fold. He belongs, and is content. The alienation of twentieth-century man, so widely written about, is made clear in this novel, which is beautifully done and penetrating.

Saul Bellow's *The Victim* was bought and read by only a few people, although *Time* magazine called it the best novel written on anti-Semitism and Alfred Kazin considered it an

important work of fiction. It is a Dostoevsky-like work, in which the insecurity of a Jew is so basic that he allows himself to be exploited in many ways by a non-Jew, who blames the Jew for troubles of his own making. The clash between Leventhal, the Jew, and Allbee, the gentile, is a subtle one, in which elements of anti-Semitism, neuroticism and sexuality are all brought in. If Jews are overly neurotic and over-sensitive, this novel does a lot to explain why.

The final novel on this list, *Gentleman's Agreement*, is, to be honest about it, no great work of fiction. Laura Z. Hobson is a competent novelist, particularly adept at hitting the slicks. It is, however, an interesting study in social anti-Semitism as practiced by those people who are usually among the first to deny that they have anything against Jews. As a book, a movie and as a serialized novel in a mass circulation women's magazine, *Gentleman's Agreement* was read by millions and seen by many more millions. It hit a mass market. It is popular in both the best and worst sense of the word. But it is a sign of maturity that the work should have had such wide distribution in so many media, even though its theme

was a generally forbidden one. That *Gentleman's Agreement* is slickly written and superficial is not of major importance in this instance. What is important is that the Jew and Jew-hating have interested America's reading public no less (in the case of the Hobson novel) than the breastly historical novels. The fact that this novel is directed at precisely those Americans who think they have nothing against Jews, and that these very Americans have read and are reading this novel, means that the theme of anti-Semitism in fiction has at least left the Jewish domain and is now public property, which is all to the good.

These ten novels, dealing as they do with Jewish adjustment to American life, with anti-Semitism, with family chronicles, with self-hate, and with a variety of other themes peculiar to the Jew, are important to those who would understand the American Jew. Not all of Jewish life is here, but there is enough of it to advance the knowledge and understanding of the Jew who lives in America and is of it and who wants to remain part of it, just as every other American wants to be considered an American, without qualifications.



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HISTORY

THE GRAND ALLIANCE, by Winston S. Churchill. \$6.00. *Houghton Mifflin*. In this third volume of his long history of World War II, Mr. Churchill devotes himself almost entirely to the fateful year 1941, when Hitler attacked Russia and Japan bombed Pearl Harbor. He writes with the same rounded phrases, the same sweeping declarations, the same rumbling sonorities as in the preceding two volumes. Some readers will be endlessly fascinated by this sort of prose, while others will be repelled by its ornateness and its impudent irrelevance to the great theme, which is great enough without being "highlighted" by phrases, however grandiloquent. As always, Mr. Churchill relies heavily upon documents, which he reprints *in extenso*. Mr. Churchill reaches the heights of his history of 1941 in his remarks upon Russia: "War is mainly a catalogue of blunders, but it may be doubted whether any mistake in history has equalled that of which Stalin and the Communist chiefs were guilty when they cast away all possibilities in the Balkans and supinely awaited, or were incapable of realizing, the fearful

onslaught which impended upon Russia. We have hitherto rated them as selfish calculators. In this period they were proved simpletons as well. . . . Stalin and his commissars showed themselves at this moment the most completely outwitted bunglers of the Second World War."

AMERICAN-RUSSIAN RELATIONS IN THE FAR EAST, by Pauline Tompkins. \$5.00. *Macmillan*. A detailed and documented chronicle of our disagreements with Russia on Oriental questions since about 1800. Miss Tompkins, a lecturer in political science at Wellesley, concludes that the record has been "conspicuously lacking in inspiration, ingenuity, or vision"; from the earliest days of these relations down to our sell-out of China at Yalta, she feels, we have never been guided by anything much loftier than expediency.

PUBLIC QUESTIONS

WAR OR PEACE, by John Foster Dulles. \$1.00. *Macmillan*. In this book Mr. Dulles reviews the efforts made by the United States during the past five