

THE BOOK REPORTER

The Lower East Side: A Ferment of Hopes, A Conflict of Cultures

THE DOWNTOWN JEWS: Portraits of an Immigrant Generation, by Ronald Sanders. Harper & Row, N.Y., 1969. 477 pp. \$10.00

Reviewed by ISIDORE HAIBLUM

Among my catalogue of lost dreams, prominent are those of the Lower East Side. Only a scattering of monuments now remain: the towering *Forward* building dominating the square at Essex, Canal and East Broadway; a few doors down *The Day and Morning Journal*, the second largest of the Yiddish dailies, and somewhat further along, the Educational Alliance, instructor to the millions. A handful of Yiddish and Hebrew signs still adorn some walls and storefronts, but mostly it is all gone. Only the memories are

IN BRIEF

THE SEVENTH DAY: Soldiers Talk About The Six Day War. Andre Deutsch, Ltd. London. 1970. About \$5. 247 pp.

Soul-searching and deeply moving conversations among young kibbutzniks, who saw service during the Six Day War. They discuss their feelings and conflicts about the enemy, killing, and fears that traditional Jewish philosophy and values may be lost in the continuing struggle to survive.

—P.G.

BETWEEN THE ROCK AND THE HARD PLACE, by Paul Jacobs. Random House, New York, 1970, \$4.95. 155 pp. A fascinating and disturbing account of social activist-author Paul Jacobs' futile attempts to set up a private meeting between Palestinian Arab and Israeli leaders as a first step move toward an easing of tensions.

THE SECOND ARAB AWAKENING: The Middle East 1914-1970, by Jon Kimche, Holt Rinehart and Winston, New York. 1970. \$6.95, 288 pp. A valuable historical and analytical study of the area from the time of the Arab Revolt of 1916 until the 1967 Six Day War. Discusses the role of emerging Arab nationalism, Zionism, the historic aims of the Soviet Union, internal Arab conflicts and the present Arab-Israeli conflict.

THREE MILLION MORE? by Gunther Lawrence, Doubleday, New York. 1970. 214 pp. \$6.95.

THE SILENT MILLIONS: A History of the Jews in the Soviet Union. By Joel Cang. Taplinger, \$6.50.

THE UNREDEEMED: Anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union. Ronald I. Rubin, editor. Quadrangle Books.

Taken together these three books comprise a complete picture of the oppressive situation under which the Jews in the Soviet Union have lived in the past, live with today, and are faced with in the future, unless world public opinion unites to bring pressure on the Soviet Union.

THREE DAYS AND A CHILD, by A. B. Yehoshua. Doubleday, New York. 1970. 260 pp. \$5.95. A remarkable collection of five short stories by an extraordinarily gifted young Israeli writer, unique in its fusion of the poetic and the macabre elements of human nature against a backdrop of contemporary Israel.

—E.F.



(Photo: Courtesy, Community Service Society) Photographer Unknown
THE LOWER EAST SIDE around the turn of the century was a lively and bustling place, as this view of Monroe St. attests. None of the buildings shown here are still standing.

left, but once this was noted as a place of some beauty. Always impoverished, always overcrowded, it was, in fact, a slum. But according to Hutchins Hopgood,* the zestful Yankee chronicler of the ghetto at the turn of the century, it was also a place where men were "intoxicated with ideas."

Hopgood explored these streets, he tells us, "not through motives either philanthropic or sociological, but simply by virtue of the charm I felt in men and things there." Years later he spoke of the "rich deposits of cultural enhancement" the Lower East Side could offer greater America. On his tours of its streets and cafes, Hopgood was often accompanied and guided by Abraham Cahan, then a reporter on the *New York Commercial Advertiser*, but before and after editor of the *Yiddish Daily Forward*, as well as a notable spinner of tales in English—short stories and novels (*The Rise of David Levinsky* becoming something of a classic). Hopgood saw the Lower East Side through the eyes of Abe Cahan.

Cahan as Guide

And so history repeats itself. Ronald Sanders, in telling the story of *The Downtown Jews: Portraits of an Immigrant Generation*, has again chosen Abe Cahan as guide. Cahan's five-volume autobiography serves as a basis for Sanders' engaging chronicle and Cahan emerges as folk-hero from its pages. As Ronald Sanders tells us, "Cahan presided over the entire life cycle of Jewish culture of the Lower East Side from its birth

to its decline." He died less than twenty years ago at ninety-one, and by all accounts was still going strong.

When Cahan first reached these shores on a June day in 1882, a refugee from the Tsarist police (sought as a Socialist revolutionary) the Jewish colony on the Lower East Side was still in its infancy, but already poised on the brink of sudden change. Change came swiftly as one wave of immigration followed another and Cahan was always there, near at hand, to record and guide.

The rights of working men meant little in those days and Cahan and his colleagues set about remedying that condition. Cahan, in an on-again, off-again relationship, was publicist to the Jewish radicals as well as a leader in his own right. Those were turbulent times. Anarchists and Socialists battled for ascendancy, the sweat shops were being painfully organized, the first strikes called, and a Yiddish socialist press was being born. Here is the Triangle sweat shop disaster of 1911: "146 workers perished in the fire, all but 21 of them girls, the great majority of them Jewish." The stormy Yiddish working class poet Morris Rosenfeld wrote the lead story for the *Forward* and the banner headline cried: "The Morgue is Full of Our Dead."

Even the beginnings of the Yiddish theater are germane to these recollections, for Cahan introduced theatrical reviews (as well as literary criticism) to Yiddish journalism. Cahan had little use for the talents of Jacob Gordin, the leading Yiddish playwright of his day, and Sanders' pages bristle with their feud.

"Forward" Editor

But the ubiquitous Cahan's greatest claim on history was as co-founder, (April 22, 1897) editor-in-chief and principal architect of *The Jewish Daily Forward*, largest of all the Yiddish dailies (a quarter of a million circulation at its peak). This was the people's paper, their best friend and most trustworthy guide; it catered to all their needs; showed them, in column after column, the way to Americanization; replied to their most intimate queries in its famous *A bintel brief* (Bundle of Letters) column, where readers "bared the wounds of the soul;" ran "the *Gallery of Vanished Husbands*," containing photographs and descriptions of men who had deserted their families; disputed rival "misleading" publications (a Cahan editorial about editor Miller of the *Wahrheit*—"Miller is considerably less honest than he is arrogant . . . he has a paltry talent for pulling innumerable fast ones, . . . he is a little man with a big, dirty mouth and an endless supply of bluffs that never succeed in fooling anybody"); and insisted from the outset that "The news and all articles will be written in pure, plain Yiddish."

It is here, perhaps, that Sanders' portrait requires some elaboration:

Used English Words

Before Cahan the Yiddish press aped German in a misguided effort at refinement. Cahan changed all that, exorcising the most obvious, if not all, German influences. *But in their place he unleashed a flood of English words.* (After all, wasn't this how the uneducated masses spoke?) News stories and articles often seemed the work of semi-illiterates. (In 1914, when the rival *Jewish Day* began publication, one of its offered inducements was "a truly pure Yiddish" as well as an unbiased account-

ing of the news!) But ironically, in adjoining columns Cahan featured short stories, novels and poetry by the very finest Yiddish authors. And alongside these, an endless string of cheap sentimental serials and "sob sister" stories. Paradoxes indeed.

Sanders notes: "Cahan's critics conceded that the masses had to be won over somehow; but, they argued, Cahan always 'lowers himself to the masses instead of lifting them up.' To this Cahan replied: 'If you want to pick a child up from the ground, you first have to bend down to him. If you don't, how will you reach him?'"

Some, however, maintained that Cahan remained on hands and knees and even rolled in the mud. Sanders gives such ideas short shrift; he is a Cahan partisan and relishes his vigor.

But there is another side to the story and it merits some telling. There is something of it in a volume of Yiddish essays published some forty years ago by Jacob Botoshansky, a Rumanian-born Yiddish critic and journalist who edited Argentina's most influential Yiddish daily, *Die Presse*. In his *Portraits of Yiddish Writers* a picture of Abe Cahan emerges in which Botoshansky asserts that Cahan and the *Forward* debase their own heritage and culture, that they contribute to its demise.

He suggests that Cahan's literary efforts in English are superior to his Yiddish output, for Cahan respected the English language. Sanders, too, alludes to this: "Cahan was pleased with this work [*Mottke Arbel*—a Cahan short story] but it was still less than the real thing for him, above all because it was in Yiddish."

Cahan, Botoshansky observes, is more concerned with the "material accomplishments" of Jews than with their culture. In a moment of insight, he realizes that Cahan's intellectual and cultural standards are really Russian, not Yiddish. Sanders has reached the same conclusion, but does not go on to draw Botoshansky's bitter moral: "He [Cahan] advocated that we must give up our language, our culture and our way of life."

Ambivalence Influenced Many

What are we to make of this onslaught from the past? Cahan's ambivalence toward Yiddish culture is central to Sanders' story; he views it as a personal conflict. Others, however, saw it as a social calamity. Cahan's influence was immense and the standards set by his journal were—consciously or unconsciously—adopted by hundreds of thousands of readers.

There is a moral here for our day, too. We need only glance around us

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Story by WAO PR Director
In Jewish Anthology

A story by Chayyim Zeldis, WAO National Publicity and Public Relations Director, "The Golem," appears in a recent anthology of Jewish stories by Jewish writers edited by Harold U. Ribalow. Published by Thomas Yoseloff, the collection of short stories is titled, *My Name Aloud* and includes works by such well-known writers as Isaac Bashevis Singer, Philip Roth, Henry Roth, Wallace Markfield and lesser known American Jewish authors. According to the publisher: "Some are world-famous and others deserve to have a national reputation as outstanding literary artists. All of them . . . clearly demonstrate a great contribution that American Jewish writers have made to American letters."

The book lists at \$8.95 and can be obtained from A. S. Barnes & Co., Inc., Cranbury, New Jersey 08512.

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**The Spirit of the Ghetto*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1967, \$5.95. 315 pp.

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to witness the estrangement, the alienation of our younger generations from Jewishness. The link that bound them to a thousand years of cultural creativity has been all but snapped.

It would, of course, be nonsense to blame Cahan for this. There were many factors on the American scene working toward these ends. And yet some nagging doubts remain.

Sanders says:

Cahan had lived long enough even to see his grandchildren—the second generation, offspring of the

Yiddish-speaking immigrants—grow up, and to witness in them a cycle of hard struggle, dazzling success, and spiritual anticlimax similar to the one he had himself undergone at an earlier time.

One must wonder if Cahan and his grandchildren would have experienced so keen a feeling of “spiritual anticlimax” had they struck firmer roots in their own culture.

As for Ronald Sanders, he has done a superb job. This may not be the last word on the Lower East Side—but surely, it is a splendid one.

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