



BOOK

reviews

GIFT OF TOTAL RECALL

TEITELBAUM'S WINDOW, by Wallace Markfield. New York, Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 387 pp., \$6.95.

SENIOR citizens—to unleash the current euphemism—will, no doubt, fail to celebrate the arrival of this book. It is a safe bet to theorize that they will find little to admire in its pages. In fact, they will probably hate it.

In "Teitelbaum's Window," Wallace Markfield has mercilessly caricatured the older generation. He has nary a kind word to offer them. In sketching their bleak portrait, he has pulled all the stops on malice and vituperation. It makes one squirm.

Admittedly, mom and dad had their faults. The number and variety of complaints against them are too numerous, and perhaps already too well catalogued, to bear listing here in any detail. My own favorites (and to my mind it is a damning indictment) is the reckless abandon with which they generally squandered their cultural heritage. It is the fashion these days for young people to seek their own thing, but the Yiddish language and literature which should have been the natural birthright of most Jewish offspring is a closed book for them. American colleges and universities have begun to institute Yiddish courses, but too many of those who enroll come to the field as strangers hunting after their own vanished roots.

Markfield, however, has no such axe to grind. His objection is of a far simpler nature: mom and pop, according to Markfield, were a pair of dithering nitwits. The refinements of culture were as alien to them as space flight, as far beyond them as the distant polar ice caps. They

resided in a twilight world somewhere between American and Yiddish and belonged to neither. They apparently understood nothing; it was the one thing they excelled in truly and effortlessly.

In "Teitelbaum's Window," mom, Malvena the Orphan (as she woe-fully refers to herself at every opportunity) and pop, Shmuel (once exulted capmaker, now, alas, head usher at the Lyric) are conspicuous characters. Easy marks for the satirist's pen, they stand out, for their portrait is a kind of slander.

One can feel neither pity nor sympathy for this pair; they are too mindless to merit either. The lowest Russian *muzhik*, buried in some far-flung hamlet, possesses more savvy than they do. No true tragedies disfigure their lives, for they are too occupied with petty complaints and recriminations to know what tragedy is all about. Crude jokes and pratfalls comprise the substance of their existence.

It is a pity. Mr. and Mrs. Sloan grate on the nerves. "Teitelbaum's Window" is not their story, but that of their son Simon; yet this unappetizing couple sound off like discordant trumpets in its chapters. They strike the one continuous, false note in an otherwise delightful and true account of bygone years on Brooklyn streets (and we shall happily speak of them no more, but move on to better things).

This is Simon's story and that of a time and a place: Jewish Brooklyn, 1932 to 1942. And it is, all in all, (yes!) a breathtaking achievement.

When first met, Simon Sloan is eight; he takes leave of us, 387 pages later, in his eighteenth year about to depart for the armed forces at the start of World War II. Journeying with him through these ten years, the complete *gestalt* of those days rears up for us anew. It is a miracle of remembering. This is the way it was.

"Then late in the morning of Saturday, December 28, 1936, when the Knishe Queen announced the coming of three new flavors (apple-cherry, sour lemon, nutty onion); after Jerky Jacob the Old Clothes Man sent out postcards to his best customers ("I am right now in a good position to make VERY terrific deals on gamps and vest-overs"); two months after Mrs.

Merz finished up her mourning and moved into the junior two rooms at 1864 Brighton 7th Street; a few days only since Dr. Ringelman pleaded with Mrs. Lichter to ease off her girdle so he might check her for pyorrhea; the week that Mrs. Flick's middle girl, Tova, was interviewed outside S. Klein's by the 'Inquiring Photographer' . . ."

Yes, it is all here: the sights, sounds and even smells of that very peculiar, wacky and—given the distance of time—wonderful little corner in busy, old New York. How did Markfield do it?

The old movies are here; the radio programs; the ads in the papers; the distinct products on grocery shelves. . . . But where others end, Markfield begins. He has caught, you see, the people of that time and, once and for all time, put down the manner of their activities and speech; it is now preserved for us and the ages too, and, glory be, what an entertainment it is!

No one, I think, has ever written quite like Wallace Markfield. The language he employs is neither English nor Yiddish, but something altogether new. I have not counted, but it seems as if there must be at least 40 to 50 jokes per page; they come thick and fast, but the characters, each of them, retain their integrity, speak in accents unique to themselves.

And for this reader, at least, Markfield has rendered no small service: he has recalled that distant, almost-forgotten time, with such zest and joy that it has once more become personal property. A gift from Markfield to his public. And, at least, in one aspect, an act of some courage and daring.

For obviously, a considerable investment of time and effort has gone into this book. But Markfield's public cannot be all that vast. This is a volume untranslatable into Chinese. The Russians are bound to pass it by. French literature will never claim it as its own. Perhaps Markfield can do without these constituencies, but what of Texas, Wyoming and Missouri, not to mention Alaska and Hawaii? These too, as potential markets, I fear, have gone by the board. The citizens of these proud states all speak a fine English, but for them Markfield will no doubt prove as intelligible as Swahili. So his was, in part, a labor of love, and we must tip our hats in

grateful appreciation. It is, after all, *our* past that he has restored to us.

Viewpoint, in the end, is a matter of temperament and Markfield is a laugher. Bernard Malamud in "The Assistant" gives us a view of quite another cut. Both, I would guess, are equally valid.

Follow Simon Sloan, then, through the streets of Brooklyn, under the Coney Island boardwalk, up on the el; meet the gang: Boomie, Marshall and Hymie the hitter; trail them into school; watch Simon make love for the first time, encounter radical politics, enter Brooklyn College. Don't worry folks. Remember the words of Sholom Aleichem: laughter is good for you. Doctors recommend it.

So, for the laughers (and other interested parties) there is "Teitelbaum's Window"; to be taken in small doses, perhaps, a bit at a time. It is the work of a master stylist, a superior jokesmith and a man who possesses—astonishingly—a gift of total recall.

ISIDORE HAILBLUM

AN INTELLECTUAL TOUR

ONE MAN'S JUDAISM, by Emanuel Rackman. New York, Philosophical Library, Inc., 397 pp., \$8.95.

I ADMIT bringing to a review of Dr. Emanuel Rackman's new book, "One Man's Judaism," a sort of built-in bias in his favor. Because I do not subscribe to much of his way of religion, it is an unusual bias, that of a generally non-observant Jew for an Orthodox Rabbi because of the rational sense of adjustment he brings to the problems of living as a traditional Jew in the open society of the United States, not a simple thing to do.

At one point, Rabbi Rackman says: "A traditionalist may live with the past, but he lives in the present and must cope with many more challenges than others precisely because he wants to preserve the past in a rapidly changing world."

This is the problem that Rabbi Rackman posed for himself in this collection of thinkings and writings of some 25 years, his personal philosophy. He does it without apologetics, but nevertheless with an understanding of the need for adjustment. He is not uniformly successful, for he has taken on an

impossible task. But he does point the way, and it is for this reason that this book is of value to any middle-of-the-road Jew, that is, any Jew who is not aggressively agnostic or stubbornly traditionalistic.

Dr. Rackman admits Orthodoxy's task is the harder because it has so long ignored it; that it too long relied on the fact that "the preponderant number of American Jews professed to be its adherents," even though he admits that this is no longer true either in fact or illusion.

He is proud that Orthodoxy led the fight against the concept that the United States is a Christian country; that it fought for and defended the right of Sabbath observers to special considerations against Blue Sunday laws; and that of the proud achievement of thirty thousand children in all day schools. He is also proud that contemporary Orthodoxy has had the wisdom to abandon its historic indifference to the education of women, that it has made a start—though not uniformly—in creating a standard for kashruth; and that the more dynamic forces in Orthodoxy have pushed aside the intolerance of an "ostrich-like indifference to currents of thought that prevailed in the world about it." He accepts the fact that most American Jews are not "observant," but he believes that even the non-observant accept the Orthodox insistence on the fight against Jewish illiteracy. He admits that Orthodoxy must meet the challenges of technology and the new social sciences, although, I think, he feels that the time is not ripe for any definitive codes.

Rabbi Rackman seeks an Orthodox leadership who are not only articulate in English, but also masters of western thought, who will thus be able to "create an ultimate synthesis with Jewish learning." Admitting that only "a small percentage of even Orthodox Jews are content with the mandate, the Law is the Law and must, therefore, be obeyed," he says that Orthodoxy must be concerned with the Jewish intellectuals of today, that the disaffection of many contemporary Jews with life must be respected. These writers and thinkers are a greater threat to Judaism than either Marx or Freud in their days, he says. Their stance is comparable to an "all or nothing" situation. "Ei-

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ther God is nothing or He is the source of all meaning . . . the absolute in ethical aspiration and performance." He warns that alienation from Judaism "does not yield meaning or purpose . . . the road of alienation thus proves to be self-destructive and it is not only one's Jewishness that is forfeited but frequently one's humanity as well."

Dr. Rackman says there are two groups of dissenters within Orthodoxy, the isolationists and the critical intellectuals. Although disagreeing with the isolationists, he gives them credit for "giving expression to strong Jewish identification." The second group he calls "creative and visionary," who believe communication—not so much dialogue—could be established with all like-minded people. Sympathetic as he is, he laments their two weaknesses: they cannot organize lest they too become an Establishment; they may become impatient with the bitterness that comes of frustration.

Within the past forty years, Dr. Rackman points out, America has experienced at least three revolutions: economic (the welfare state), social (ethnic and racial equality) and sexual (the new morality), with a fourth in process, chemical (drugs). On these last two, where there is violent disagreement, he feels that Jewry cannot adopt a stance "of non-involvement" — a stance which says that we are simply against the new morality (pills, abortion, drugs, etc.) because it violates the mandates of Torah.

Declaring that he is not arguing for or against a particular point of view, he is arguing for "involvement in a major revolution—either doing something about it or declaring our helplessness in the fact of it."