

likewise disaffiliated from the growth or implications of multiculturalism as an academic trend.

**P**OLITICAL theorist Michael Walzer constructs a lucid social-democratic case for understanding ethnic cohesiveness as state-sponsored as well as privately-developed, but also fails to connect his argument to the mystique of multiculturalism. His critique would have been just as persuasive in an earlier era—perhaps as a pendant to Nathan Glazer's and Daniel P. Moynihan's *Beyond the Melting Pot* (1963), before the frustrated egalitarian and integrationist aims of the civil rights movement gave multiculturalism its rationale. Critic Robert Alter adroitly demonstrates the capriciousness of canon formation among the Jews—from the *Ketuvim* of the Bible to the efflorescence of a secularized Hebrew literature in medieval Spain and then in 19th-century Russia. But even so thoughtful an essay is unlikely to allay the current suspicion that, say, talented working-class Chicana writers were unfairly neglected until the publication of the *Norton Anthology*. One of the two Israeli contributors, Hana Wirth-Nesher, concedes that few American Jews know Hebrew or Yiddish, but locates enough bilingualism—enough “markers of difference”—in some famous literary texts to suggest that Jewish studies merits admission into the multiculturalist ranks. But can a few widely-known phrases, a few letters of the alphabet, make Jews eligible for such inclusion? The case is dubious, and is indeed

irrelevant to the demands of a society that is so resolutely monolingual.

Other authors take for granted the benefits of ethnic (or ethnic studies) alliances in the academy. Seidman writes in favor of “progressive politics,” as though its virtues in this context were self-evident; and literary scholar Michael Galchinsky, in the course of an elegantly-crafted critique of the uses of “diaspora,” hopes to strengthen the black-Jewish liaison through engagement with “postcolonial” theory. Co-editor Susannah Heschel wants Jewish studies to recover the radicalism of a century and a half ago that the emancipated Abraham Geiger displayed when he challenged the norms of Christendom and refused merely to show what a god sport Judaism was in enriching Western civilization. And even though Jewish voices are muffled in the interdisciplinary polyphony marking fields like Afro-American studies and minority studies, literary specialist Sara R. Horowitz sees them as “natural allies.” But the benefits of such gestures of solidarity are nowhere specified, and the thinking registered in this volume ranges from the sharp to the wishful.

**N**OR can *Insider/Outsider* be read as an effort to take seriously—much less rebut—the general critique of multiculturalism. The case for the prosecution is compelling. In the name of inclusiveness the ideal of impartial scholarly and aesthetic standards is weakened; divisiveness is encouraged by impugning the broader civic claims that have long attracted immi-

grants and refugees; and the past is distorted by trying to endow the powerless as well as the powerful with something like equal historical importance. As several contributors seem to acknowledge, multiculturalism is also incoherent in its deployment of even so central a concept as race. On the one hand, its scientific validity has mercifully vanished; it cannot be stabilized or essentialized. It is, at best, only “race.” On the other hand, this fiction has been valorized and enacted in a whole range of practices which multiculturalism endorses. Race has been given greater emphasis than the previous theories of intergroup relations which have been displaced. *Insider/Outsider* doesn't directly deplore such tendencies as bad-for-the-Jews, and perhaps only Sara Horowitz's forthright essay demonstrates how ill-suited Jewish studies look when realigned with the rest of ethnic studies. To see Jewish studies suspended in isolation is not quite the position that many of the contributors want. But the minority group that is the object of such academic scrutiny still confronts a singular fate, even though no melancholy conclusion need be imposed on Biale's claim that Jews now find “themselves for the first time in modern history as doubly marginal: Marginal to the majority culture, but also marginal among minorities.”

STEPHEN J. WHITFIELD, *professor of American Studies at Brandeis University, last reviewed Richard I. Cohen's Jewish Icons: Art and Society in Modern Europe in the September/October 1999 issue.*

## Retrieving our Heritage

**The Jewish Search for a Usable Past.** By David G. Roskies. Indiana University Press. 218 pages. \$24.95.

Reviewed by IRVING LOUIS HOROWITZ

**A**NYONE embarking on a review of this fine and remarkably compact volume on *The Jewish Search for a Usable Past* should be prepared to explain his qualifications—not in broad educational terms, but in quite specific cultural terms. The author, David G. Roskies, is professor of Jewish literature at the Jewish Theological Seminary. As he repeatedly points out, his is

an excursion into “the manifold ruptures of the twentieth century,” and how they “have turned all Jewish memory sites into pilgrimage sites.” I am not much for pilgrimages, but having passed the ripened age of 70, I can at least claim some memory of the subject under consideration. I actually saw the theater, heard the music, and participated in the movements Mr. Roskies reconstructs. To be sure, the author makes up for his youth with an exceptional gift for historical reconnection, with site visitations to the Polish and Ukrainian areas where Jewish shtetl life was prominent, and for effective poetic metaphor. All of this stands

him in good stead for the most part, although it betrays him at times, as when he writes of leaving a small town on the Polish-Ukrainian border that “the romance of the shtetl dies within me.” As the essays indicate, this is hardly the case. The force of the shtetl, if not its romance, remains very much within him.

The volume is divided into nine chapters, essays delivered at various places and circumstances, previously published in different forms. It is best to view each chapter as a different entrance point into the theme of the book—retrieving a usable Jewish past. For those interested in Jewish cultural life in New York, or Jewish burial sites of the rich, famous, and notorious, or the shaping of Yiddish culture in Montreal, this book should prove a joyous occasion. But the heart and soul of the volume are



contained in the bookends. The first chapter attempts to provide a scaffolding for the title and contents, and the final chapter covers Zionism, Israel, and the Search of a Covenantal Space. The afterword does not so much provide a wrap to the book as offer a dialectic with which the author himself is still wrestling. He invites us to do likewise.

Professor Roskies has a subtle imagination. His title claims a specific search for a usable past. But in what way can that which is past be usable—except as a guide to the future? Here we come upon the Yiddish Question rather than the Jewish Question. For how can the extraordinarily rich tradition of Yiddishkeit in novels, essays, art, theater, and music, rooted in the shtetl life of Europe, be serviceable for a postmodern world? Today the Yiddish culture of the immigrant generations continues on a countdown to the death of a world shadowy if not lost. I grew up in a home in which my parents went to *shul* annually, but read the Yiddish papers daily. The Yiddish home in America, at least many of them, were more exercises in the liberal imagination of a Thomas Jefferson than the historical writings of a Gershom Scholem.

At its high point, between 1924–1939, Jewish life in New York had an unparalleled flowering. There were as many newspapers in Yiddish at that time as there are dailies in English in New York at present. The *Morning Freiheit* [Freedom] offered the Communist viewpoint. The *Daily Forward* gave the democratic socialist position. The *Day* was essential for the social democratic centrist viewpoint. The *Morning Journal* offered the conservative religious (and often German ethnic) viewpoint. This was in New York alone—and Roskies properly indicates that if New York City did not recreate shtetl life, it at least provided the critical mass to keep Yiddish culture flourishing for much of the period from 1880 to 1934. Jewish pride, patriotism, and memory all came together in New York. In this connection, whether through laughter or tears, all Jews came together on election day to vote for Franklin Delano Roosevelt at the presidential level and Fiorello LaGuardia at the mayoral level. Despite all their demands to have Jewish interests recognized, Jews acted most universally as a bloc in support of the “interests” of others. And that part of the usable past—the vast concern for the welfare of others less fortunate—for better or worse,

with or without patriotism or paternalism—remains part of the present, albeit in more measured and restricted terms.

ROSKIES’S book is essentially a paean of praise to the lost world of Jewish Yiddish culture, a world in which the Marxism rivals the Torah as a source of learning—at least for the Ashkenazic immigrant generation. It is a world of believing Jews who have a “dialectical” sensibility—a need to bear witness to the greater calamity that may be their shared legacy. The legacy of the shtetl is a world whose literary products Roskies both appreciates and loves. This is perhaps the most attractive feature of this work. His book offers as nuanced a statement of the cultural impact of the shtetl as one can read in a brief space. That he dares include Sholom Asch along with Sholem Aleichem, and treat the subject of apostasy as a serious one, speaks well for Roskies’s courage in the face of collective Jewish resentment. But given his flirtation with Christianity, Asch did not—and could not—become part of that usable past, because at stake was not simply a coming to terms with exile, but a departure from the faith of the Hebrew fathers as such—something even the communist writer Mike Gold dared not do in his book *Jews Without Money*. Judaism may have many mansions, but embrace of the Christian faith is surely not among them.

Roskies succeeds in showing the strong and long tie of Jewish faith to Jewish culture. The voices of Jewish life—from Sholem Aleichem and I.L. Peretz, to Cynthia Ozick and Isaac Bashevis Singer—are well covered. One feels the pain of their “lost world.” More, one appreciates Roskies’s point that the history of Jewish shtetl life was recorded only when the monumental horrors of the century that befell the Jewish people of Europe became apparent. The strange place of the rabbinate and its flirtations with apostasy and Christian iconography are aptly noted. Roskies is not exactly kind to the rabbinate (making few distinctions between Orthodox, Conservative, Reformed, or Reconstructionist, or few concessions to their credentials). He tends to see them as “souvenirs of a tragic past.” Reflecting the radical East European tradition, Roskies holds out some hope for rabbis in the present if they can play an “adversarial role.” Other than the rabbi as some sort of Martin Luther King figure, he denies these pathetic figures much of a role in history, and hence gives the

rabbinate little space in a usable past.

Roskies is essentially a Yiddish scholar with a keen sense of what was lost in the transmigration and transportation of generations. His most stinging comments are in the chapter on “The Art of the Song,” where he claims that American Jews preserve only the memory of the Holocaust and the birth of the state of Israel. The revivalists have discovered “a generation too late—that the loss of Jewish parody, pragmatic Jewish politics, and the loss of the immediate Jewish past were the price they paid for the death of Second Avenue.” It is a metaphor, one presumes, for the suburbanization of the Jew. In the lyrics of Aaron Lebedeff he says: *Vot ken you makh? Es iz Amerike! Amerike un bol’she notshevo* (What can you make of it? This is America. America is a big nothing). Here he speaks of what has been lost, not what is usable from the Jewish past. Having heard Aaron Lebedeff sing in those Second Avenue firetraps called theaters, the tradition of Jewish songs and its Ashkenazic traditions are close to my heart. But it seems to me that in his celebration, the Sephardic elements in the Jewish tradition are badly treated, and even more the American elements in that tradition have also been underrated. For the Sephardim, Ladino is as much a part of the Jewish past as Yiddish (albeit in smaller numbers). The faith of our fathers did not perish in cultural transformations from the Old World to the New World. Pluralism flourished in an American melting pot.

BUT it is for the world of Zionism that Roskies adopts his most brilliant, if perhaps most controversial, position: “As a methodology, Marxism is still going strong, despite its manifest failure as a political-economic system. Zionism, in contrast, despite its notable success, has yet to be adopted as a serious analytic tool. I therefore propose that we substitute ‘exile’ for ‘capitalist society’ . . .” To speak of “Jewish space” as akin to Marxism and the overcoming of the “alienation of labor” strikes me as a risky, if not entirely false, analog. To start with, insofar as Zionism is a Jewish form of nationalism, it is breathtaking to speak of its not being a serious analytic tool. Further, it might be argued that the post-Holocaust issue became less Jewish space than the search for space for Jews. Zionism was a starting point in Jewish redemption, not its terminal point. Arguments still rage about whether the Israeli land can ever be the



singular defining rod of the Jewish faith.

Roskies's clever use of Georg Lukacs and the Marxist tradition to explain the specifically Jewish "contradiction of exile" as if it were akin to the contraction of class strikes me as wide of the mark. This sort of dialectical reasoning makes it all too easy to forget that for more than a century, the socialist vision of the liberation of the Jew was nothing more than the liberation of the Jew from Judaism. The love affair of Jews with socialism took place long before the death of the Soviet Empire. It died with the belief that Judaism is some kind of cultural-linguistic amalgam that could—or should—be torn from its historical and theological roots. The passing of the Yiddish tradition was a victim not just of the Americanization of foreign cultures, but of its over-identification of Jewish life with secularization as such, with a tradition that received its highest expression in the repressive Soviet state.

JUST how strange this socialist position sounds to contemporaries is evident when Roskies writes "Zionism stimulated a reclamation of space both in Uganda and Palestine." As he well knows, the failure of Birobidjan in Russia, Uganda in Africa, and

Moiseville in Argentina contrast sharply and irrevocably with the success of Zionist aspiration in the ancient Jewish land of Palestine. To end such a discussion by claims that "exile is a literary construct, and so is Zion" does little to assuage the feeling that Roskies himself is not quite secure as to what parts of the Jewish past are usable.

THE four volumes of Daniel Elazar's work on the covenantal tradition are unmentioned in *The Jewish Search for a Usable Past*. Elazar's work makes it plain that Zionism, far from being "the language of exile," is part of the redemptive aspects of Western religious traditions—very much including varieties of Christian fundamentalist beliefs. The covenant that man makes with God is considerably more than a cry for living space. After all, that special contract sustained Jews the world over for a millennium during which they had no such space of their own. Roskies may be right to see the rabbinate as subject to scrutiny, reform, and attack, but Judaism as such seems quite secure in its various branches and parts. And it is that part of the usable past that one wishes would have been subject to greater exploration by Roskies.

One wishes that Roskies had converted his postscript into a preface, and in that way had confronted the contradictions in the "search for a usable past" earlier in the text. As it is, he is understandably reluctant to make distinctions between Zionists and internationalists, Yiddish and Hebrew traditions, secular rationalists and religious zealots, and between generational definitions of Judaism. He does a credible job throughout in distinguishing secularists and religionists, but that is only one of several crosscutting factors that define what he offers as the Jewish Project. For ultimately, as this wise young scholar knows well, the search for a usable past is aimed at meeting a present need, in order to secure a more usable future.

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## Swiss Bank Bashing Is Not Enough

**Swiss Banks and Jewish Souls.** By Gregg J. Rickman. Transaction Publishers. 286 pages. \$32.95.

Reviewed by HENRY R. HUTTENBACH

THE headlines now focus on other matters—killings in Kosovo, mega-media mergers, celebrities crying. But not so far back, perhaps long forgotten by the readers of national newspapers, the front-page headlines zeroed in on a transatlantic morality play whose overture was performed in the 1930s and its final act is only now beginning to be heard: stage center is the fate of the extensive possessions and valuable assets seized from hundreds of thousands of Jews and other victims of the Nazis.

These include real estate (business and private), sizeable art collections, and, of course, cash accounts, stocks and bonds, insurance policies, jewelry, and gold—lots of

gold. Very little of this property has been redeemed to survivors or their heirs; the overwhelming amount was and still has not been restored to its rightful owners. Much was lost; actually the gold was made to disappear: laundered and re-laundered, turned into (almost) anonymous gold bars. Other assets were secreted in closed accounts, some camouflaged behind cruelly insurmountable regulations (e.g., requiring death certificates for relatives who perished in Auschwitz).

At the heart of this bureaucratic maze criminally withholding the wealth of the plundered, innocent victims of Nazism was the international banking system, that of Switzerland in particular. By the end of the 1980s, most claimants had abandoned all hope of ever retrieving their relatives' stolen assets. Though suspicious, little could they have known that a conspiracy of international proportions—involving bankers, accountants, insurance companies, and even

governments—operated in tandem to block access to this looted wealth once belonging to relatives and their families. Lacking documentary proof, how could the heirs demonstrate what seemed obvious: that the Swiss banks acted as Nazi Germany's bankers and, worse, that this was known in detail by the Allied governments? While Sweden refused Nazi gold, the Swiss welcomed it; and, when the war ended, the illicit trade in Nazi gold on the part of the Swiss blatantly continued; this time devoted to its dissemination abroad, out of Europe. For years the Swiss stonewalled, refusing to release information on their holdings of Nazi deposits and open the victims's accounts to surviving relatives. They even hesitated repatriating gold belonging to countries occupied by the Nazis.

FOR all practical purposes, little was done until the early 1990s, thanks to the zealous crusading of Senator Alfonse D'Amato. At once a man of reflexive principle when it came to recognizing an