

moment

OCTOBER 1999

Notable Books

The Jewish Search for a Usable Past,
David G. Roskies (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998)

Visiting Tishevitz in southeastern Poland, "the romance of the shtetl died within me," writes David Roskies, professor of Jewish literature at the Jewish Theological Seminary. This book and that trip were both animated, says Roskies, "by loss and retrieval." Roskies locates "memory sites" as diverse as the buried milk cans containing Emanuel Ringelblum's searing documentation of the Warsaw Ghetto, a row of gravestones in the Mt. Carmel cemetery in Queens, and Yiddish songs.

The songs chapter spotlights the early Yiddish troubadours of Second Avenue and laments the "loss of Jewish parody ... the art of spoofing that which they hold most sacred." Of all the baggage that came with desperate and hopeful Jews to the shores of the New World between 1881 and 1924, "what traveled best," says Roskies, "was a repertory of Yiddish songs." Roskies' bonus for musical readers is nine pages of musical notation within his pungent historical account.—SFS