

An "Optimistic" Appraisal

A CERTAIN PEOPLE: AMERICAN JEWS AND THEIR LIVES TODAY, by Charles E. Silberman. Summit Books, N.Y. 1985. 458 pages, \$19.95.

Reviewed by ISIDORE HAIBLUM

Ben Hecht, in his autobiography, *A Child of the Century*, tells of trying to enlist Hollywood producer David O. Selznick as cosponsor of a rally in support of a Jewish army to fight the Nazis. This was in early 1942. Selznick did not decline on ideological grounds. He complained that he was an American, not a Jew, and so saw no reason for supporting a Jewish cause. Hecht offered to prove that the producer was a Jew. He would phone any three people Selznick named and if any one of them called him an American, Hecht would acknowledge defeat. All three of Selznick's selections, however, quickly dubbed him a Jew. And the producer

became an unlikely sponsor of a Jewish army.

Those were times when many a Jew was in headlong flight from his Jewishness. As Charles Silberman points out in his fact filled study, *A Certain People: American Jews and Their Lives Today*, until the Second World War, no major corporations would employ Jews in highly skilled technical jobs. There were two exceptions to this rule, GE and RCA. Both had Jewish presidents, and these two, Gerard Swope—who frantically hid his origins—and David Sarnoff, were anomalies. While there were Jewish violinists galore who made no secret of their background, Jews in other professions, if they wished to succeed, often denied their identities, not only to others, but to themselves as well. Silberman cites some examples:

Bernard Berenson, the art connoisseur, converted *twice*, first to the Episcopalian faith, and then to Catholicism which he considered to be more prestigious. Master builder Robert Moses threatened to sue the editors if he was included in the *Jewish Encyclopedia*. Journalist Walter Lippmann could not abide any reference to his Jew-

(Continued on page 19, col. 3)

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the book reporter

(Continued from page 17)

ish origins. Lionel Trilling, the literary scholar, denied that modern Jews had made any contributions to philosophy, poetry, or religion.

All that is long past in America. Jewish pride has displaced Jewish shame. Industry has opened its doors to Jews, the various professions teem with them, and books such as this one, extolling their virtues, fill the bookracks. Silberman contends that Judaism is undergoing a renaissance in the United States these days. Some 366 pages of text and 75 pages of notes and sources back up his thesis. Here are some of his statistics:

Of the 50,000 Americans who changed their names in the late 40's and early 50's, 80% were Jews. Few Jews bother to do so today.

In 1935, only 25% attended synagogue even once a year. Now the figure has risen to 60%.

In 1909, 25% of American Jewish children had religious training; 50% is the current figure.

In our colleges, Jewish studies has climbed from two courses in 1948 to over 300.

While between 22 and 27% of

young Jews intermarry these days, Silberman sees this as bringing new stock into the fold.

The authorities *A Certain People* relies on—Nathan Glazer, Milton M. Cohen, Charles Lieberman, Lucy Dawidowicz, Calvin Goldschneider, to name just a few—are the best in the business. But Mr. Silberman's conclusions are his own, and their optimism leaves at least one reader slightly uneasy.

Most Jews have indeed left the working class, but 15% are still at or below the poverty level.

Anti-Semitism may be reeling on the ropes—enormous strides have obviously been made—but is it really about to be counted out?

And, perhaps most importantly, to what extent will American Jews be able to maintain their cultural and religious identity in the years

to come? Will they still be a *certain* people, or will the content and depth of their Jewishness be a final testament to the powers of the melting pot?

Charles Silberman has written an important and useful book. But the hunch here is that it is far from the last word on these issues. □□

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