

COMMENTARY

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Lost and Found

The Jewish Search for a
Usable Past

by David G. Roskies

Indiana. 217 pp. \$24.95

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Reviewed by
David Singer

NO CHARACTER from Yiddish
literature is more universally
recognized than Tevye the dairy-

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can Jewish Year Book. p 665

man, the protagonist of Sholem Aleichem's beloved turn-of-the-century stories and of *Fiddler On the Roof*, the hit Broadway musical later fashioned from these tragicomic tales. Indeed, the fate of Tevye and his family has come to serve for many as a kind of capsule history of Jewish Eastern Europe in the late 19th century. A good-natured traditionalist, forever citing Scripture and speaking to God, Tevye watches helplessly as his daughters choose husbands representing the most powerful currents of modernity: a socialist agitator, a Gentile humanist, a rich capitalist. It is their secular world, not Tevye's faith-based one, that will survive the turmoil and persecution that history has in store for these characters and their real-life counterparts alike.

The irony, however, is that even as Sholem Aleichem was dramatizing the rupture in Jewish continuity, he was also creating—in the person and outlook of Tevye—a version of the tradition-dominated Jewish

past that modern Jews could comfortably embrace. In fact, as David G. Roskies shows in his fine new volume of essays, this sort of complex dialectical relation between the old and the new has been at the heart of Jewish collective memory for more than a century. A scholar of Yiddish literature at the Jewish Theological Seminary, Roskies here traces the development of a modern Jewish self-understanding based on a past that has proved compelling precisely because it is safely dead and "usable."

WITH THE collapse of traditional Jewish communities throughout Eastern Europe in the second half of the 19th century, most Jews, Roskies writes, experienced "a profound sense of loss and dislocation." No longer devoted to the strict observance of Jewish religious law, they were open to new creeds, especially those that attempted in some way to explain their predicament as Jews. Secular Jewish intel-

lectuals were only too glad to oblige. In doing so, many of these secularists learned, selectively, to use their people's religious and historical legacy in the service of their own agendas.

There quickly emerged competing versions of the past, or what Roskies calls a "free market of past-hoods." For liberals, whose aim was to complete the separation of the Jews from their benighted piety, one strategy, adopted by the Hebrew novelist Abraham Mapu (1808-67), was to depict an "unbroken chain of [Jewish] idolatry, backwardness, and immorality" stretching all the way back to "the priests of Baal." By contrast, Jewish nationalists of various stripes found much to celebrate in their people's history and culture: Yiddishists elevated longstanding customs and superstitions into folklore, while Zionists, drawing freely on biblical models, fashioned "new national symbols out of old." Only socialists and anarchists had a difficult time, there being, as Roskies wryly observes, no obvious way to "recast the concepts of surplus value, class conflict, and alienation of labor into recognizably Jewish terms."

In several arresting case studies, Roskies shows the workings of memory in popular Yiddish culture, particularly in the United States. Thus, the Workmen's Circle—a left-wing organization prominent early in this century in the Jewish labor movement—sought to reinvent the tombstone as an expression of its secular ideals. Traditional prayers and symbols gave way to carved eagles, torches, and lyres, and to honorific epithets like "comrade" and "fighter"; and yet, in many obvious ways, visible in the photographs Roskies obligingly reproduces, these monuments remained closely indebted to Jewish memorials of the past.

In a similar vein, Roskies focuses on a species of song known as *shund* ("trash"), a staple of Yiddish musical theater on New York's Second Avenue. A "mishmash of sentiment

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D and satire, of patriotism and traditional piety, of sex and schmaltz," this popular music offered a romanticized view of the Old World while at the same time encouraging a "pragmatic acceptance of America." *Shund*, Roskies observes, helped to assuage the "anger and guilt over leaving the *shtetl*."

And, of course, the image of the *shtetl* in modern Jewish memory is itself a literary construct—"the greatest single invention of Yiddish literature." The now-familiar "symbolic landscape" of small-town Jewish Eastern Europe, Roskies argues, was the self-conscious creation of writers like I. L. Peretz (1852-1915), Sholem Asch (1880-1957), and Isaac Bashevis Singer (1904-91). In their work the *shtetl*, whether depicted as an existence "best left behind" or as a "paradise lost," became a "living, speaking, and highly reactive character," every bit as vivid as the Jews who inhabited it.

INTO THESE subjects and many others—including Zionism, the litera-

ture of the Holocaust, and the Jewish school system in his native Montreal—Roskies delves with insight in this book, drawing nuggets of evidence from every sphere of Yiddish life and culture. He is fully persuasive in describing the complicated process of loss and retrieval that has been the chief dynamic in the development of a Jewish collective memory in the modern era.

His discussion might have been usefully extended, however, by a consideration of how the defenders of the *old* order of Jewish life—the Orthodox—also tried to create a usable Jewish past. Indeed, the very term "Orthodox" is a token of this effort, having been coined in the 19th century as part of a rearguard action against the forces of secularism and religious reform. Projected into the past, the label was meant to align Jewish traditionalists with earlier communities of true believers who had gone to battle against heretics.

Along similar lines, one misses as well any discussion of the relative

merits of modern Jewish memory and what Roskies, in setting the stage for his analysis, terms "covenantal memory." Memory of this latter variety—characteristic of traditional Jewish society and discernible even in the musings of Sholem Aleichem's Tevye—strove to assimilate present-day happenings to events in sacred history and especially in the Bible, thereby tacitly assuming God's ongoing interest in the affairs of His chosen people. The function of covenantal memory, as Roskies puts it, "was to transcend the ruptures of history," allowing Jews to remind God "of His promise and of Israel's steadfastness in the past."

Roskies is rightly impressed by the success of Yiddish-speaking Jews in building a serviceable bridge between past and future. Given the disruptions wrought by modernity, continuity of any kind is indeed a precious commodity. Still, covenantal memory, linked to a sense of transcendent Jewish purpose in a way that its distant modern cousin

is not, is also a far weightier and more substantial thing. As has become increasingly apparent in today's America, most of the various bridges built by modern Jewish memory, precisely because they do not deliver on the larger meaning of Jewish history, have proved unable, on their own, to bind more than one or two generations to the Jewish past. That, too, is worth remembering.