

the book reporter

HOW WE LIVED, A Documentary History of Immigrant Jews in America, 1880-1930, Marek Publishers, N.Y., 1980, 360 pp., \$22.50

Reviewed by
ISIDORE HAIBLUM

How We Lived, by Irving Howe and Kenneth Libo, is a glowing and inspiring collection of photographs and clippings from books and newspapers depicting the lives of our immigrant ancestors. Yiddish-speaking urchins in knickers and peaked caps caper through these pages. Rows of tenement houses stretch endlessly toward the horizon, as on the teeming streets below pushcart vendors hawk their wares.

Benny Leonard, the famed world light-weight boxing champion, attired in spiffy suit and tie, grins out roguishly at the reader. Sholom Aleichem, a timeless wisdom emanating from his bespectacled eyes, poses lovingly with his wife. Acclaimed painters Moses Soyer and Chaim Gross, both champions of the Yiddish word, are seen hob-nobbing with Peretz Hirschbein, the nonpareil Yiddish dramatist; David Ignatov, a pioneer of the Yiddish novel in America; and daring-do poets, Mani Lieb and Reuben Iceland, who wrote their verse after long hours in the sweat shop.

Added to this pictorial confection is a wealth of paragraphs, composed on the scene, as it were, by the likes of Abraham Cahan, not only the distinguished editor of the *Jewish Daily Forward*, but an English-language novelist of renown; Morris Raphael Cohen, the world-famous philosopher, Eddie Cantor, who set a nation to laughing; and Morris Hillquit, the labor leader, an ardent



"ADVENTURERS, DREAMERS, SCHOLARS, BEGGARS—they came at a time when the gates of America were open to the world." Steerage passengers sailing from Hamburg to New York in 1906. From "A Time to Remember" by Marie Jastrow

fighter for the rights of the Jewish worker.

A good many of these small pieces are unavailable elsewhere in English. Many were gleaned from the archives of the *Jewish Daily Forward*. Others came from books and journals in both Yiddish and English long out of print.

Howe's previous book, *The World of Our Fathers*, told us how our ancestors lived. This book shows us. It is a worthy achievement. □□

THE LOWER EAST SIDE, A Guide to Its Jewish Past in 99 New Photographs. Text by Ronald Sanders. Photographs by Edmund V. Gillon, Jr. Dover, N.Y., 1980, 83 pp. \$4.50.

The old tenements still stand. But the Yiddish-speaking masses, who at one time romped through New York's Lower East Side, turning it into their own private turf, have moved on. Some of the famous landmarks still remain and are, in fact, open for business: Yonah Shimmel's knish bakery ("Original since 1910" the sign says). Katz's Delicatessen (That's All!), The Garden Cafeteria—where journalists, editors, and printers of the Yiddish dailies, *Der Forvertz* and its rival *Der Tog* used to congregate for meals and lively chit-chat. Ratner's swank dairy restaurant . . . Only the clientele is a bit different.

Some Yiddish signs still decorate ancient walls and storefronts; a few synagogues still harbor congregations and some of the storekeepers are holdovers from a by-gone era. But the street talk is a multi-lingual

babble that would do the United Nations proud.

Author Ronald Sanders (*The East Side Jews*) and photographer, Edmund V. Gillon, Jr. have come up with a lovely volume celebrating the Lower East Side's past and present. The photographs are knock-outs and the words accompanying them sparkle. A rare find indeed. And one that this reviewer can wholeheartedly recommend. □□

A TIME TO REMEMBER, Growing Up in New York Before the Great War, by Marie Jastrow, Norton, N.Y. 1980. 174 pp. \$8.95.

Only a hop, skip and jump these days from Manhattan's Lower East Side to the snazzy confines of uptown Yorkville. But what a distance it once was. The Yiddish nation that tumultuously held sway over Essex, Delancy and Rivington Streets, was nowhere in evidence in the East Eighties. Here was a grab-bag of nationalities, and their coming together made for a different kind of experience.

Marie Jastrow lived through it all. In *A Time to Remember*, she charmingly recreates a world where a loaf of bread and a quart of milk each cost four cents, and a dozen eggs ten cents. A four-room apartment went for nine dollars. And the meter for the gas stove worked only if periodically fed quarters. Such economic realities were hardly unique. But the Maypole frolics in Central Park, the German social clubs, the ethnically diverse student body of P.S. 96 where the young author received her schooling, all this—for Jews—seems almost exotic.

In fact, it wasn't. Jews, Germans, Irish, Italians, Poles—immigrants all—rubbed shoulders in uptown New York, and striding off toward their new American future, learned something from one another.

Marie Jastrow, now 82, the mother of astrophysicist Robert Jastrow, has written a warm, affectionate memoir of those times. Her book is a pleasure to read. □□

The author of *Holocaust* returns with a fabulous Jewish family saga.

With this powerful story of a remarkable Jewish family, Gerald Green returns to the Brooklyn scene he depicted so vividly in *The Last Angry Man*.

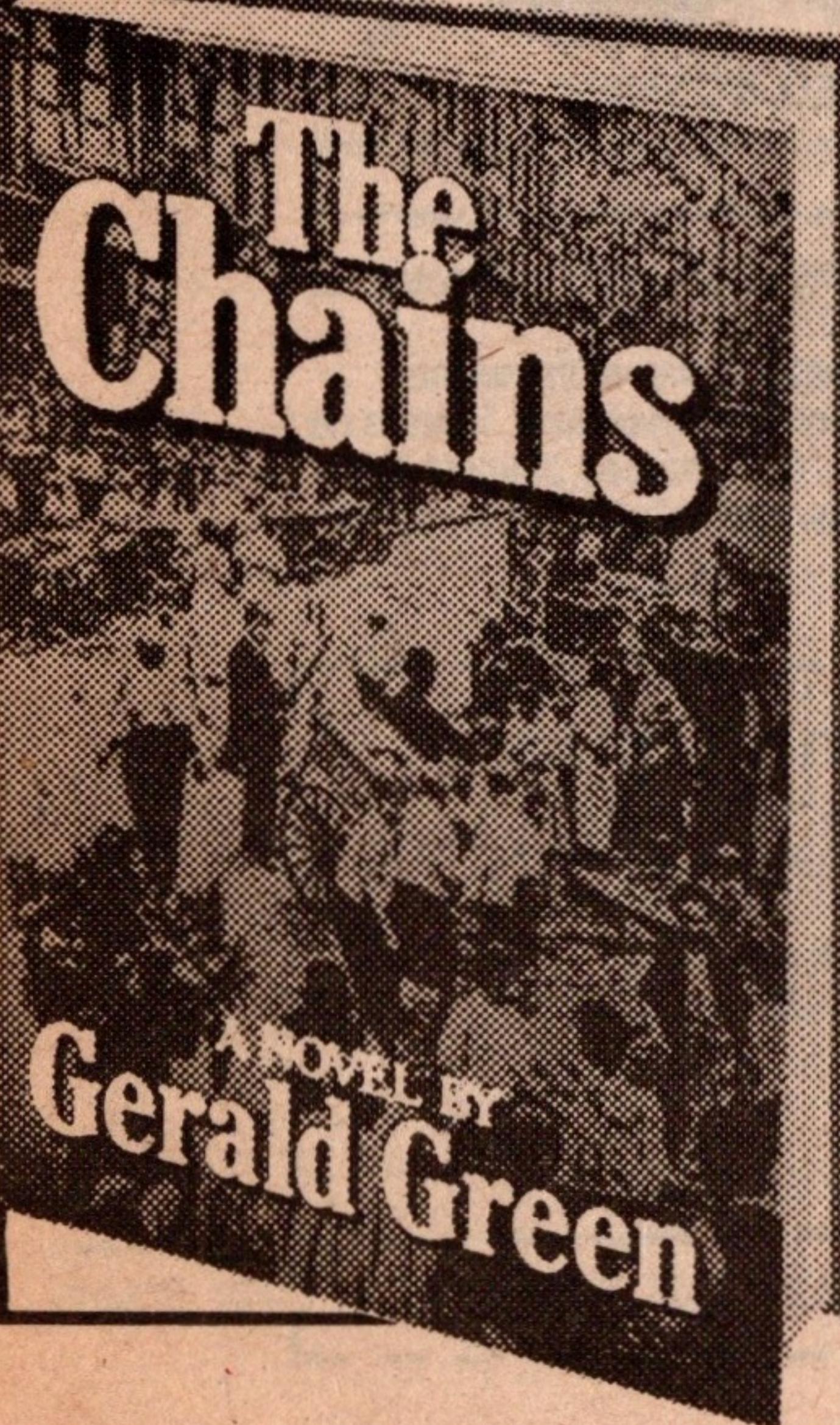
Spanning the years 1910 to 1960, *The Chains* chronicles the rise of the Chain family from its immigrant founding father Jake Chain, a wagon driver who uses his cast-iron fists to protect striking gar-

ment workers, to Jake's Ivy League grandson, Martin, who endows a magnificent medical center. Alongside the Chains in their time of trouble is Dr. Samuel Abelman, that lovable curmudgeon from *The Last Angry Man*.

Peopled with strong characters you care deeply about and brilliantly recreating the turbulent decades since the turn of the century, *The Chains* will hold you enthralled from the very first page.

"Bursting with vitality, vivid characters...a passionate, violent story, streetwise and rich in authentic detail, a lesson in social history, delivered from the barrel of a gun—and it grips at every point"—Publishers Weekly.

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A Remarkable Lady

MOLLY!, by Molly Picon. Simon & Schuster, N.Y., 1980. 311 pp. \$12.95.

Molly!, by the redoubtable Molly Picon herself—with a small assist from co-author Jean Grillo—is an informal, chatty, guided tour through almost 80 years of show business. Molly remains, thank goodness, Molly; her boundless zest, verve, optimism, the very qualities that—along with an extra large helping of talent—made her a standout on both the Yiddish and English stage, shine through these pages.

With her beloved spouse, Yonkel, by her side—writer, director, producer and all-around *kop mentsch*, extraordinaire—Molly has done and seen virtually everything. Anecdotes abound in this breezy memoir. Frank Sinatra, Barbara Streisand, Jerry Lewis, Sophie Tucker, George M. Cohan, Molly's vaudeville, stage or screen colleagues—to pick a few at random—turn up for a bow.

Nor are the Yiddish luminaries short shrifted. From across the footlights we catch merry glimpses of

Henrietta Jacobson, the great comic, Menashe Skulnick, Boris Thomashevsky, Stella Adler, Maurice Schwartz. They are the icing on the cake.

Molly's career is chronicled in some detail. We are behind the scenes as Molly stars in the 1936 Yiddish film classic *Yiddel Aran Riddle*, probably the best musical to ever hit the Yiddish screen. Decades later, we again catch Molly emoting for the cameras, only this time in English, in *Fiddler on the Roof*.

On the American stage, Molly captivates Broadway in *Milk and Honey*, just as she had done countless times before on Second Avenue.

The joy is here, the laughter—along with the tears (Yonkel's battle with cancer is movingly depicted). It is a life lived in the full. And it is told—as only Molly can—in her own words. □□

ISIDORE HAIBLUM, a frequent contributor, writes often on Yiddish and Jewish life on the Lower East Side.