

DAVID G. ROSKIES, *The Jewish Search for a Usable Past*. (The Helen and Martin Schwartz Lectures in Jewish Studies, 1998.) Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999. Pp. xii, 217. \$24.95.

The Jewish masses, who, from the early nineteenth century, emigrated to America, passed a metaphorical crossroad that David G. Roskies calls the "Jewish Bermuda Triangle." If divers were lowered to the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean midway between Hamburg and New York, they would find a million pair of phylacteries thrown overboard by Jewish men from ships taking them from the old world of Eastern Europe to the new world (p. 89). This was originally a critical remark by an Orthodox rabbi, fearful that values and normative patterns of behavior would be abandoned and opposed to the uncontrolled onslaught of America's temptations that commanded a painful price: assimilation and loss of faith. But it also eloquently illustrates two dimensions of modern Jewish life: the experience of uprootedness and the experience of secularization. They are, in fact, the focus of this captivating, perceptive book by Roskies, a historian of modern Jewish culture and scholar of Hebrew and Yiddish literature, whose identity was shaped by memories of his family's past in Eastern Europe, by the world of Jews in Canada and the United States, and by his empathetic mindfulness of developments in Israeli culture.

The central axis of this fascinating book is the experience of losing the past. Underpinning it is awareness of the intense crisis that gripped modern Jewry and spurred the transformation of their collective memory. Many of these Jews have lost the old Jewish world in Eastern Europe, and along with it, the commitment to religious practice, the acceptance of rabbinical authority, the Jewish library, and memories of the past. But this crisis, as Roskies shows us, is not destructive; rather, it poses an immense challenge to modern Jews, who have become secularized and now must shape for themselves alternative institutions, new ideologies, a new world of images, literature, poetry, and theater to feed the collective memory and reconstruct it.

Roskies maps for the reader the project of creatively rebuilding the collective memory. If there ever was a uniform collective consciousness, it has now been shattered; the cultural conflicts and the various splits into religious streams and political ideologies created differentiation. There is no longer a consensus among Jews about one past; in fact, they have many pasts, a whole, varied repertoire of memories shaped by the modern historical experience and harnessed to the needs of present-day life. There is a pasthood con-

structed by the socialists, one by the Zionists, one by American Jews linked to their Judaism through an ideal image of the *shtetl*, as it was depicted, for example, in *Fiddler on the Roof*, and there is yet another Israeli past linked to the local landscape.

Roskies's book is a study of modernity from the viewpoint of images. Unquestionably, this is a very productive approach that enables him to sensitively penetrate the consciousness of past generations and to understand from within the crisis wrought by modernity, as well as the attempts to overcome it. The heroes of the book are not professional historians but rather writers, poets, playwrights, composers, and singers who were intensely aware of the need to preserve certain forms of the past.

As if in a museum, Roskies takes us to several sites of memory, including Emmanuel Ringenblum's underground archive from the Holocaust period in Warsaw, which Roskies calls a "time capsule," a collection of life experience in the ghetto from a secular perspective; and the *shtetl*, which he regards as the most important invention of modern Yiddish literature. As he argues, it was actually the *shtetl* myth, not the real-life town, that played such an important role as a myth of roots for Jews of Eastern European descent. In a particularly absorbing chapter, Roskies takes us on a visit to the Mt. Carmel Cemetery in Queens, New York, where Jewish socialist leaders and well-known writers are buried, and points out the clear marks of secularity on the tombstones.

This book makes a valuable contribution toward an understanding of twentieth-century Jews' hardships, fears, hopes, and ways of coping with them. Anyone wishing to take a close look at modern Jewish identity or interested in the ways collective memory is constructed in circumstances of catastrophes, destruction and loss, emigration, secularization, a *kulturkampf* and the development of a national movement, will find it absorbing. The words of a leading ideologue, who tried to promote the utopian revival of Yiddish culture among Montreal Jews, aptly fit the spirit of the entire book: "We will forever search for the echo of chords sounded long ago that were never forgotten. Sounds, melodies, smells and memories. What we thereby seek is both our childhood, lost irrevocably, and that total *Yidishkeit* [Jewishness] that was possible under certain conditions once prevalent in the small *shtetl*, but impossible to reproduce here in the metropolitan American exile. That longing and happiness is an important psychic factor in our lives" (p. 146). I believe Roskies himself would have no trouble identifying with these words, and perhaps they deliver the main message of the book.

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MITCHELL B. HART, *Social Science and the Politics of Modern Jewish Identity*. (Stanford Studies in Jewish History and Culture.) Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000. Pp. viii, 340. \$55.00.