

The Journal of American History

Vol. 85 No. 1 June 1998



Formerly *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review*

Copyright Organization of American Historians, 1998

Jewish Immigrant Associations and American Identity in New York, 1880-1939. By Daniel Soyer. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997. xiv, 291 pp. \$39.95, ISBN 0-674-44417-5.)

As many as one million New York Jews connected at some time in their lives with *landsmanshaftn*, associations of immigrants from the same hometown. Providing fraternal ties and mutual assistance, these organizations served as "mediating structures." They helped immigrant Jews both to define themselves and

to make the difficult transition from Old World to New.

Until now, the major English-language source on Jewish *landsmanshaftn* has been Michael R. Weisser's *A Brotherhood of Memory: Jewish Landsmanshaftn in the New World* (1985), a semi-popular work based on what the author described as a "unique methodology" that he dubbed "*bubbe mayse* history . . . a mixture of facts, anecdotes, fairy tales, fables, innuendos, truths, half-truths, memories, experiences, and even some outright lies." Now at long last, Daniel Soyer, in a volume awarded the coveted Thomas J. Wilson Prize, provides us with a far richer and more carefully nuanced study of this phenomenon. Firmly grounded in the sources—Yiddish, Hebrew, English, and German—this volume makes a major contribution both to American Jewish history and to the general study of immigrant institutions.

Soyer properly begins his study in the Old World. Eschewing facile comparisons, he carefully traces both similarities and critical differences between traditional Jewish communal associations (*hevrot*) and immigrant *landsmanshaftn*, showing how the latter were both more democratic and more focused on mutual aid (as opposed to charity) than were their Old World counterparts. In general, he concludes, "Jewish *landsmanshaftn* reflected the influences of the surrounding culture more clearly than they mirrored Jewish communal traditions . . . in Eastern Europe." Soyer's discussion of the American-style rituals and symbolism that the societies adopted is particularly illuminating. Male bonding and emulation of the Masons and the Elks explains some of this ceremonialism, but what immigrants found even more important, he shows, was the opportunity to reconcile lingering loyalties to Old World traditions with the desire to integrate fully into American life.

Soyer categorizes *landsmanshaftn* into four different types: (1) religious congregations, (2) fraternal lodges, (3) ideological orders (such as the Workmen's Circle), and (4) independent societies. They thus reflected political, religious, and cultural divisions within the immigrant Jewish community. Yet, through mutual aid, all alike promoted independence, dignity, and self-reliance, and through common social events

(balls, picnics, theater benefits, etc.) they also signaled to the world "that the immigrants were coping successfully in their new environment."

Soyer is unreservedly sympathetic to the *landsmanshaftn*. He defends them against charges that they were conservative, insular, and antilabor, explains away their financial lapses and occasional mistreatments of members, and exults in their "heroic" activities during and after World War I, when they worked to relieve the suffering of their *landslays* back in Europe. The importance of his story, however, lies less in these judgments than in his appreciation for the larger significance of his subject. The history of the *landsmanshaftn*, he understands, is the story of East European Jewish immigration writ small. As opposed to those who still see immigrants as passive victims of "Americanization," he demonstrates that they "exercised a high degree of agency in their growing identification with American society."

Jonathan D. Sarna
Brandeis University
Waltham, Massachusetts

~~*In the Golden Land: A Century of Russian and Soviet Jewish Immigration in America.* By Rita J. Simon. (Westport: Praeger, 1997. xx, 181 pp. \$55.00, ISBN 0-275-95731-4.)~~

~~For more than fifty years, Jews in the Soviet Union, the second largest Jewish community in the world after that in the United States, had been cut off from world Jewry. But beginning in the 1970s, when the exit gates opened a bit wider, and after 1989, when the Soviet Union began the restructuring that would end in its dismantling—there was an emigration of 300,000 Jews.~~

~~More than 100,000 emigrated to some two dozen communities in the United States, from New York to San Francisco. Unlike the Russian Jews who preceded them in the early twentieth century, Soviet Jews brought little if any Jewish background with them. But the challenge of integrating the Jews from the former Soviet Union into a Jewish American community has provided a degree of revitalization for American Jewry.~~

~~The rich Soviet Jewish immigration expe-~~