

COMMENTARY MARCH 1992

## Generations

**MOSTLY MORGENTHAU: A FAMILY HISTORY.** By HENRY MORGENTHAU III. Ticknor & Fields. 501 pp. \$27.50.

Reviewed by JONATHAN D. SARNA

STORYBOOK histories of old-line German-Jewish families in America resemble one another to a remarkable degree. They typically begin with a pedigree, conveniently traced back to some well-known Jewish luminary "whose works are still studied and read." From there, they turn to 19th-century Germany, where conditions are inevitably grim owing to economic discrimination and religious oppression. The hero, a young, enterprising, unmarried Jewish male, courageously resolves to abandon this Old World with its heritage of privation and anti-Jewish prejudice, and to strike out on his own for the New World, where, he has heard, opportunities abound and Jews receive the same treatment as everybody else.

Once on these shores, the new immigrant soon takes up with fellow Jews who, he happily discovers, hail from the same general area

of Central Europe and are ready to extend assistance and credit. And so he trudges off to earn a living, starting as a lowly peddler and then slowly but surely working his way up the economic ladder to modest commercial prosperity. In time, he settles down, marries, starts a family. Taking advantage of opportunities during and immediately after the Civil War, he prospers. His children follow him into the business and expand it.

But with the onset of prosperity, moral and religious decline begins to set in. Members of the next generation, having grown up with all of the comforts of wealth, resent the pressures of the family business. Many come to resent their Judaism, too, and seek to escape it. As the story ends, in the fourth or fifth generation, the business has merged or has been sold, and the family's descendants have ceased to be Jewish.

*Mostly Morgenthau*, the latest and one of the most interesting

examples of this genre, dissents from the storybook version of events in numerous ways. It is not only that the details fail to conform to pattern: it is the sense of inevitable decline and assimilation that turns out to be wrong. Rather than illustrating tired old themes, this volume reminds us that American Jewish history is remarkably unpredictable, and surprises abound.

Henry Morgenthau III, a member of the fourth generation of Morgenthaus to dwell on American soil, springs his most important surprise in the opening paragraph of his introduction. "Early in life," he confesses,

I sensed my parents' malaise in their Jewishness, which they mocked good-humoredly while remaining fiercely alert to attack from outsiders. In the adjustments I made over the years, I moved through stages of self-hatred, anger, assertiveness, and, eventually, acceptance leading to a positive reidentification.

## PROOFTEXTS

A Journal of Jewish  
Literary History

Alan Mintz & David Roskies,  
Editors  
announcing a special issue...

### A Night in the Old Marketplace

VOLUME 12, NUMBER 1 features a never-before-published translation by Hillel Halkin of I. L. Peretz's masterpiece of modern Yiddish drama, "A Night in the Old Marketplace." The issue also includes essays about this extraordinary play, including one by Halkin himself. Subscribe now for a full year (3 issues) and receive this exciting issue! Or, if you wish, you can order just a single copy.

Annual subscriptions: \$19.00, individuals; \$45.00, institutions. Single issue price: \$7.50, individuals; \$16.00, institutions. Send order with payment to the Johns Hopkins University Press, Journals Publishing Division, 701 W. 40th Street, Suite 275, Baltimore, MD 21211-2190. To place an order using Visa or MasterCard, call toll-free 1-800-537-JHUP or fax us your order (410) 516-6998. SPT-2



JONATHAN D. SARNA is the Joseph H. and Belle R. Braun Professor of American Jewish History at Brandeis University, and the author of *JPS: The Americanization of Jewish Culture, 1888-1988* (Jewish Publication Society).



This return to Judaism, what Morgenthau calls his "experience of Jewish rebirth," inspired a quest for the roots of his family's long-standing ambivalence toward its Jewishness. Why, he wondered, did his forebears, along with so many of his German-Jewish relatives in the United States, opt "to homogenize and to camouflage themselves beyond recognition"? Predictably, no definitive answer is supplied here, nor would any be expected from a book billed as "a lively, personal account of a colorful and gifted clan." But the fact that the question is even asked is sufficient to distinguish this family history from many others of its kind.

HENRY MORGENTHAU III focuses on three generations of illustrious forebears: Lazarus Morgenthau (1815-97), Henry Morgenthau (1856-1946), and Henry Morgenthau, Jr. (1891-1967). Lazarus, the orphaned child of an impoverished German cantor, made his fortune in Germany producing expensive, high-quality cigars for export to the United States. During the period when thousands of German Jews were emigrating to America for economic and religious reasons, he prospered by remaining where he was. By 1856, he had evolved from strict religious traditionalism to "extreme freedom of religious thought." A year later, his modernity and supreme devotion to the state were rewarded, first with a personal visit to his business by the Grand Duke of Baden and his family, and second with the privilege (accorded only to specially favored Jews) of the full rights of a free citizen of Mannheim. He had achieved, at least for a precious moment, the great ideal of his life: recognition both as a German and as a Jew.

But that moment soon passed. In 1862, a protectionist Civil War tariff abruptly shut down the American market for imported cigars and within four years the Morgenthau business lay in ruins. To avoid loss of face, and in the hope of starting life afresh, the family embarked for America.

Arriving in America at the advanced age of fifty, Lazarus failed to find the success and satisfaction

that had been the "typical" lot of German Jews who emigrated at a younger age. Although he involved himself in the radical Reform temple of Rabbi David Einhorn, and won notice for his "lasting contribution to the art of fundraising," he remained for the rest of his life financially embarrassed, bitter, and unhappy. He is remembered today, if at all, for one reason only: he was the father of Henry Morgenthau.

Henry, the ninth of Lazarus and Babette Morgenthau's fourteen children, was only ten years old when the family emigrated to the United States. His too was not the typical German-Jewish immigrant experience; but his success was as meteoric as any Jewish peddler's. His granddaughter, the late historian Barbara W. Tuchman, writing in COMMENTARY ("The Assimilationist Dilemma," May 1977), described what he accomplished as a very young man in the face of formidable economic adversity:

Speedily learning English, he graduated from public high school at fourteen, entered City College for a career in law but was forced to leave before the end of his first year to help support the family by working as an errand boy at \$4 a week. After clerking in a law office for four years while teaching in an adult night school at \$15 a week, he put himself through Columbia Law School and was admitted to the bar at the age of twenty-one. With two [Jewish] friends he formed a law firm in 1879 when the average age of the partners was twenty-three.

Henry eventually abandoned the law, and made his fortune in real estate. He created one of America's first real-estate investment trusts, and had the foresight to acquire vacant lots adjacent to New York's sprawling subway system. But for him, as for so many other German Jews (and liberal American Protestants) of his day, money was not an end in itself. At the age of fifty, he placed half of his fortune in trust for his wife and children and resolved to devote the rest of his life to altruistic causes. "Repayment in money alone would not suffice," he explained, echoing a common

Social Gospel theme. "I must pay in the form of personal service."

ALTHOUGH he never denied he was Jewish, Morgenthau was, by this time, an avowed assimilationist. Judaism to him was a matter of creed and conscience, not peoplehood, and he exercised his faith by performing good deeds rather than through ritual observances. Unsurprisingly, he felt drawn to Felix Adler's Ethical Culture movement, a de-Judaized faith that placed a premium on moral righteousness and social action. Later, he allied himself with two great apostles of Jewish social action, Rabbis Stephen S. Wise and Judah L. Magnes. Although they were Zionists and he was not, they all shared a common faith in the possibility of social betterment.

At Wise's behest, Morgenthau, in 1912, contributed heavily to the campaign of Woodrow Wilson, then a long-shot candidate for the Democratic presidential nomination. He optimistically expected, when Wilson won the election, to be rewarded for his loyalty with the position of Treasury Secretary, but had to swallow his disappointment and settle instead for the traditional Jewish seat in the American diplomatic corps, the post of ambassador to Turkey (Palestine was at the time under Turkish rule). In many respects, this was Morgenthau's finest hour as a public servant, for he was able to act both as a "100-percent American" and as a publicly-affirming Jew. His grandson here proudly recounts his many achievements as ambassador, especially after the outbreak of World War I when Morgenthau used his good offices to assist those in desperate need, including starving Jews, Protestant missionaries, and persecuted Armenians (among the lives he saved were those of Yitzhak Ben-Zvi, later Israel's second president, and David Ben-Gurion, its first and greatest prime minister). When Morgenthau returned home, in 1916, he received a hero's welcome from Jews and Christians alike.

IN A replay of his father's experience, however, Henry's shining hour was shortly followed by ignoble defeat. In 1917, with the as-

sent of the administration and the tacit support of Protestant missionary leaders, he undertook a secret mission to persuade Turkey to conclude a separate peace with the Allies. The ill-conceived and badly executed mission was opposed by those—including leading Zionists and British diplomats—who sought to carve up the Ottoman empire and to place Palestine under British rule. Between the obstacles that these opponents placed in Morgenthau's path and his own indiscretions, the mission ended prematurely, and in embarrassing failure.

Henry Morgenthau III tries to put the best possible face on this fiasco. His grandfather, however, seems never to have recovered from it. From that time on, he evinced an implacable hatred for Zionism, believing that his former friends in the movement had doublecrossed him. He severed his ties with Stephen Wise, publicly attacked the Balfour Declaration, and did all in his power to thwart the Zionist dream. "We Jews of America have found America to be our Zion," he insisted. In his 1922 autobiography, he went so far as to deny the very existence of anti-Jewish discrimination in the United States, arguing that the Jew who yearned for social position had "only to cultivate his manners—there are no insurmountable discriminations here against true gentlemen." By the end of his life, in 1946, the former ambassador's self-hatred had overflowed into paranoia. "Don't have anything to do with the Jews," he warned his only son, Henry, Jr., in a final conversation. "They'll stab you in the back."

ONE might have expected, given this background, that Henry, Jr. would have submerged his Judaism. And so for many years he did. While he lived among Jews and married one, the closest he came to any faith at all was his faith in America. In that, as in so much else, he dutifully followed in his father's footsteps.

As a youth, Henry, Jr. suffered from a learning disability. He had the additional disadvantage of being sickly: throughout his life he was tormented by frequent mi-

graine headaches. Despite these obstacles, and with his father's encouragement, he and his wife Elinor became deeply involved in politics, and particularly in the fortunes of Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt, who lived nearby and had become firm family friends. Hitching their wagon to Roosevelt's star, the Morgenthau eventually accompanied the new President and his wife to Washington. There, Henry, Jr. came into his own, and in 1934 a grateful Roosevelt appointed him Secretary of the Treasury—the very position which Henry, Sr. had earlier sought and lost.

The story of how Henry, Jr., while serving in this position, became sensitized to the plight of Jews perishing in the Nazi death camps, and spearheaded the administration's belated efforts to rescue the surviving remnants of European Jewry, has been told many times. *Mostly Morgenthau* adds several new details. In addition to the three non-Jewish Treasury Department lawyers who prevailed upon their boss to act, both Rabbi Wise (despite his falling out with Henry, Sr.) and Henrietta Stein Klotz, the Secretary's Jewish and pro-Zionist personal secretary, influenced him enormously. Given the information his son adduces here, Morgenthau's firm insistence that he took his principled stand "as Secretary of the Treasury and not as a Jew" rings hollow. More likely, the shock of the Holocaust, coupled with the evidence uncovered by his staff of anti-Semitism in the highest circles of government, shattered his assimilationist dreams, and moved him to act on behalf of his people.

Subsequently, Morgenthau became, in his son's words, "the avenging angel for the remnant of world Jewry." He did more than any other senior administration official in behalf of refugee aid. He advocated what became known as the "Morgenthau Plan" to punish Germany for its crimes. And most surprising of all, he became a firm Zionist—so much so that soon after he resigned from the cabinet in the wake of Roosevelt's death, he accepted the general chairmanship of the United Jewish Appeal.

*Mostly Morgenthau* ends with the marriage of the author, Henry Morgenthau III, to the daughter of Orthodox Jews, refugees from Vienna. The wedding was conducted at Brandeis University, and was thoroughly traditional, overseen by three rabbis and the lay head of Boston's Orthodox Jewish community. The three children born of the marriage, their father reports, all have one thing in common: "more than a smattering of the Jewish education of which the author and his parents had been deprived."

This latter-day Jewish "rebirth" of the Morgenthau family offers a timely reminder that the doleful paradigm that condemns American Jews to inevitable generational decline is far from a proven historical law. Reality, in the Morgenthau case as in others, is much more interesting and complex, filled with surprising turns and fascinating exceptions. While no brief for complacency, this does offer a mo-

dicum of communal hope. For in the real-life histories of America's Jewish families, as opposed to the stylized storybook ones, the final chapter can never be predicted with certainty.