

How to Write the History of Your Community

Jonathan D. Sarna



Suddenly, local American Jewish history is in vogue. A subject which once attracted only a handful of antiquarians now boasts youthful scholars and broad support. Regional, state and local Jewish historical societies have mushroomed. Many Jewish community studies have been made and more are promised.

These developments may be temporary, related solely to the "Roots" enthusiasm. Today's grandchildren who lovingly recall what their parents sought to forget may well find that their own children are not interested in the past. Some communities now so painstakingly being chronicled may not even be on the Jewish map in a few years, for American Jews are in perpetual motion.

At a deeper level, however, American Jewish community studies should have a permanent impact. They present us with the broad range, the infinite variety of American Jewry. They demonstrate that, while New York may be called "the greatest Jewish city in the world," it cannot claim to be anybody's representative city—for there is no one representative city. Each new community study brings out fresh, unexpected and hitherto unrecognized aspects of Jewish life in this country.

For many years the community history field was dominated by amateur researchers and historians; few professionals were involved. Though this situation has changed, work by non-professionals is still needed; much remains to be done.

Sephardic, Ashkenazic, immigrant, native, Orthodox, Conservative, Reconstructionist, Reform, secular, unaffiliated, rich, poor, committed and

assimilationist Jews—all are part of the American Jewish community. All deserve recognition; all should be recorded in the pages of its past. And, because history is more than a list of undigested facts, generalizations and interpretations must appear in healthy balance in the finished product.

In *How to Write the History of an American Jewish Community* (available free from the American Jewish Archives, Clifton Avenue, Cincinnati, Ohio 45220), Dr. Jacob R. Marcus, the "father" of American Jewish history and director of the American Jewish Archives, situated on the campus of Hebrew Union College, advises the amateur historian to "have confidence in yourself." At least minimal familiarity with American, American Jewish and modern Jewish history is always helpful. Other assets include a vivid imagination, insatiable curiosity and a lively writing style. Reading in depth on each subject before tackling it, plus an endless number of questions can add depth and significance to any project. Still, good techniques do not necessarily make good history. Without a firm foundation in fact, even the most inspired study can topple over like a house of cards.

The basic ingredients for most community histories lie hidden away in documents and dusty artifacts of yesterday's world. Synagogues, organizations, schools, cemeteries and, perhaps most of all, private homes hold all kinds of treasures which an energetic search can often turn up fairly easily. Here a word of caution: experienced researchers know that the first step is to have copies or microfilms made of everything they find. Unfortunately, fire has no respect for history.

The American Jewish Archives, the American Jewish Historical Society in Waltham, Massachusetts, as well as the national Jewish organizations listed in the *American Jewish Year Book* may have additional documents of value. So may state, county and local historical societies, government

archives and courthouses. The problem generally lies not so much in finding source materials as in using them effectively. How does one judge the reliability of evidence such as sparse synagogue minutes filled with unanimous decisions and timid resolutions which gloss over behind-the-scenes quarrels? Or polite letters that mask impolite sentiments? Or organization financial reports which have been doctored by officers concerned with their own interests? How indeed does one write "total history" from records which exaggerate the importance of active, upstanding, or wealthy Jews, ignoring the poor, the immigrant, or the disaffected? There is no sure-fire formula, but step one is clear: Put everything under a mental microscope and accept no document at face value.

Local newspapers, an important source for most communal histories, present even greater difficulties. Unless a devoted antiquarian has indexed the local journal, one must be prepared to invest many frustrating hours scanning page after page in search of lonely Jewish references. But such hours are not necessarily wasted, for background material picked up along the way can be invaluable later on.

It is a truism that newspapers do not become more accurate as one goes back in time; if anything, in the "good old days" newspapers had lower standards of accuracy than those of today. Editors rarely hesitated to slant the news by rewarding their friends and attacking their enemies; some printed or omitted news when they were paid to do so. Much of the news most useful for community histories, such as quarrels, prejudices and stories about the disadvantaged never found its way into the press and sometimes what was printed wasn't exactly accurate.

Jewish newspapers of the past had their own particular shortcomings. Editors usually excluded items that cast Jews in an unfavorable light. Their unpaid correspondents, generally rabbis or other notables, habitually painted community life in their own image—which sometimes was not exactly true to life. A stroke of the editor's pen elevated some dying commu-

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nities into "great future centers," and veritable cultural wastelands were made to appear like junior New Yorks. Correspondents and editors sometimes didn't know how to distinguish between news and propaganda. Their words, alas, must be judged accordingly.

Recent communal histories have sought to avoid problems of bias by resorting to the magic of quantification, or history told through numbers, tables and percentages. City directories, school and charity lists, census, tax, business, immigration and voting records and other such materials form the body of these works. Computers serve as their brains, spilling out statistics on which Jews did what, when and how often. The generalizations that emerge take on the aura of scientific truth. To be sure, much can be learned about social structure and economic opportunity through quantification.

But scientific claims can be exaggerated, for, even if the computer is infallible, the original statistics may not be. Take, for example, the question of population. Today's census problems pale compared with those of the 19th century. In the past, census takers ignored whole areas of some cities, and took liberties with information that would today be grounds for prosecution. When they couldn't understand immigrants, they answered questions for them. When they couldn't find immigrants they answered questions without them. Local records—including business data—are often more reliable.

There are other aspects to the problem of accurate numbers. Many Jewish names, especially those which have been "Americanized," elude detection; as a result, samples are often skewed toward easily identified Jews who may not be representative of the community at large. Where Jewish populations are small, statistics become meaningless. The death of a single patriarch can lower the average age of the community significantly. A large percentage increase in the rate of intermarriage may result from just a few additional intermarriages. Worst of all, numbers don't talk; digits cannot replace words.

Oral history moves in precisely the opposite direction. It relies exclusively

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upon spoken words—and as many questions as the interviewer can pose. Through the magic of recorded sound it permits even the semi-literate to be heard. The advantages are obvious: the technique is inexpensive and requires no lengthy training. For many prospective oral historians, careful reading of a “how-to” book frequently suffices. Among the best are Passi Rosen-Bayewitz’s and Minda Novek’s *Shiloah: Discovering Jewish Identity Through Oral/Folk History*, published by the now defunct Institute for Jewish Life, once a division of the Council of Jewish Federations, Marc Lee Raphael’s discussion of “Oral History in an Ethnic Community: The Problems and the Promise” in the appendix to his *Jews and Judaism in a Midwestern Community: Columbus, Ohio 1840-1975* (Ohio Historical Society). The William E. Wiener Oral History Library of the American Jewish Committee is a valuable storehouse of recollections specializing in civil rights, East European Jewish communities, Holocaust survivors, Soviet Jewish emigrés and American politics.

But oral history has its special problems. At best, it can uncover only the recent past; it cannot provide first-hand information about Jewish life before 1900. Then, memory plays tricks; many interviewees suffer from “deceptive retrospect.” And finally, interviews demand thorough preparation; good answers only result from good questions.

Considering how many inherent difficulties are involved, one marvels at how successful and enlightening some Jewish communal studies are. A British work, Bill Williams’ *The Making of Manchester Jewry 1740-1875* (Manchester University Press, 1976, available from Holmes & Meier in New York) sets the standard. No American work has yet matched its refreshing originality, broad scope and penetrating depth. Its success is based on a thorough combing of *all* available sources, those in libraries and archives and those hidden away in “offices, attics and cellars.” It views the community through the widest possible lens, poses provocative questions and suggests insights that reach far beyond Manchester in their implications.

Four recent works—Myron Berman’s *Richmond Jewry, 1796-1976* (University Press of Virginia), Lloyd Gartner’s *History of the Jews of Cleveland* (Western Reserve Historical Society), Steven Hertzberg’s *Strangers Within the City Gate: The Jews of Atlanta, 1845-1915* (Jewish Publication Society of America) and Marc Lee Raphael’s study of Columbus, Ohio, mentioned earlier—are miles ahead of anything written so far in the field of American Jewish communal history. Berman and Gartner handle traditional documents such as letters, newspapers and memoirs with skill and imagination, demonstrating that “old” history can continue to yield up many new insights. Hertzberg and Raphael lay stress on modern techniques, such as statistical analysis and extensive interviewing. Their insights, happily expressed in jargon-free English, prove that quantification and oral history also have much to recommend them. Together, these volumes open new vistas on American Jewish social structure, mobility, philanthropy and community relations, placing the communities securely within their American framework. Most important, they ask

questions about American Jewry and American Judaism—such as “what” questions, “how” questions and “why” questions—that are essential to any solid Jewish community study.

Still, a host of Jewish communities lie largely unexplored by historians. Though some published studies certainly are valuable, many leave important questions unanswered and are as liable to error as some of their sources. Articles often are as enlightening as full-scale books, and bring new talents and approaches into the field. The Western Jewish Historical Society, the Rhode Island Jewish Historical Society and the Jewish Historical Society of New Haven, among others, have published volumes of regional and local historical studies written by dozens of people on diverse subjects, using innumerable sources and various methodologies. Each of these collections demonstrates, as no book by a single author can, the range of American Jewish communal history, and proves that everyone—professional and non-professional alike—can contribute.

Communal history can truly be a community affair, but should not remain at that level. No American Jewish community is an island entirely of itself. All can learn from one another; all form part of a larger whole. Someday, perhaps, we shall be able to construct the monumental history of that larger whole—that bewilderingly complex and multifaceted phenomenon which is the American Jewish experience. That day, however, lies far in the future. Today we are still trying to understand a few of the pieces. □

What Do They Think of Us?

by Geraldine Rosenfield

A factory foreman in Philadelphia, questioned several years ago about his experience with Jews, said, “They are very aggressive and intimidate you, if they can, to their advantage.” Then he added: “The good things about them are also the bad things.”

This man’s comments typify opin-

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