

habilitated. The historical lens, focused for far too long on the experience of East European Jewish immigrants, is at last widening to include those who preceded them, and who forged the communal structure which they then inherited and built on. What is emerging is a new and far more accurate view of how American Jewry developed, a view that puts events of our own day into their proper context.

Although German Jews were among the first Jews to immigrate to America's shores, and even in the colonial period achieved numerical superiority over the pioneering Sephardi Jews, it was not until the 1840's that they began to arrive in truly substantial numbers. Their origins were humble, and many began life here trudging wearily over back roads, heavily laden with peddlers' packs. But with the American economy growing at a rapid pace, German Jews were soon able to take advantage of opportunity. Over the next eighty years they prospered, establishing Jewish settlements throughout the country. In the process they created new social, religious, and cultural institutions, assumed positions of communal leadership, and effectively reshaped the American Jewish community along new lines.

So pronounced was German Jewry's influence that an entire period of American Jewish history is commonly referred to as the "German period." This is actually something of a misnomer, since Jews from German-speaking lands formed only a fraction of those immigrating. Other Jews came from Poland, from elsewhere in Europe, and from outside Europe too, and for the same reasons: economic distress, persecution, restrictive laws, and the failure of movements aimed at revolution and reform. It was, however, largely German Jews, writing in the German language, who gave this period its distinctive character. In not a few cases, Jews born elsewhere passed themselves off as Germans—that was one way of achieving status.

German Jews left their imprint on America in such widely diverse areas as religion, culture, politics, philanthropy, and business. Theirs was a community flushed with eco-

nomics success, actively involved in the world around it, fiercely determined to gain acceptance into the American mainstream—but not at the cost of abandoning Judaism itself. Reform Judaism, B'nai B'rith, the American Jewish Committee, the National Council of Jewish Women, the Jewish Publication Society, the American Jewish Historical Society, Hebrew Union College, and a host of other still extant movements, institutions, and organizations testify to the rich inheritance that German Jews bequeathed to those who came later.

Those latecomers offered them no thanks. East European Jews who emigrated to America en masse from 1881 to 1924 tended to view the natives, including the German Jews, mainly in terms of their own treatment at their hands. They noticed in particular some of the worst features of their German-Jewish brethren—their social aloofness, anti-East European bias, and their evident assimilationism. In all this they were not entirely wrong. Many German Jews in America did fear the new immigration, and thought it would provoke anti-Semitism. They saw the newcomers as social inferiors, and at least in the early years doubted that East Europeans could ever succeed in the New World. As for the East Europeans, in their justifiable umbrage at these attitudes they tended to overlook the generous contributions of America's German Jewish philanthropists to institutions designed to aid immigrants—institutions that played no small role in helping East European Jews and their children move rapidly up the ladder to success.

To a lamentably large extent, a balanced view of America's German Jews, even in some scholarly circles, has still not been achieved today. The rift between German and East European Jews in America, often referred to as the split between "uptown" and "downtown," or between the "Yahudi" and the "immigrant," continues to feature in every retelling of American Jewish history, but usually only from the latter's perspective. Worse, pages from the history of German Jews in America have

The German Period

ENCOUNTER WITH EMANCIPATION:
THE GERMAN JEWS IN THE UNITED STATES 1830-1914. By NAOMI W. COHEN. *Jewish Publication Society*. 407 pp. \$25.95.

Reviewed by JONATHAN D. SARNA

AFTER years of being scorned or ignored by historians, America's German Jews are finally being re-

JONATHAN D. SARNA is associate professor of American Jewish history at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in Cincinnati and academic director of the Center for the Study of the American Jewish Experience. His *The American Jewish Experience: A Reader* will be published later this year by Holmes & Meier.

gradually been edged out of textbooks altogether. An increasing number of writers now set the "real beginning" of American Jewish life in 1881, when Czar Alexander II of Russia was assassinated and mass immigration to the United States began from Eastern Europe.

Such a presentist bias appears, for example, in Chaim Waxman's generally excellent survey of the sociology of the American Jewish community, *America's Jews in Transition* (1983). Waxman devotes a scant twenty-six pages to "the formative period, 1654-1880," and then proceeds directly to what he calls the first four generations of American Jewish life, beginning in 1881. An incautious reader might conclude that American Jewry was "born again" in 1881, casting off all that came before. Similarly, Milton Plesur in *Jewish Life in Twentieth Century America* (1982) offers background going back to 1881, but makes scarcely any mention of German Jews at all. Twentieth-century American Jewish history can to his mind be understood without them.

To be sure, popular historians have found fertile ground in at least some aspects of the German-Jewish experience, particularly in the story of those German Jews who began as lowly peddlers and by dint of the usual virtues (as well as a few vices), raised themselves up into successful tycoons. Stephen Birmingham in *"Our Crowd": The Great Jewish Families of New York* (1967) transformed this Jewish version of the American myth of success into a happy mélange of history and gossip which became an instant best-seller, and a host of imitators soon applied the formula more broadly. Now there are several journals that actually specialize in stories of forgotten local pioneers, and a cartload of books far less interesting than Birmingham's that include the words "Jewish pioneer" in their titles.

But while focusing much-needed attention on the German period, these works rarely convey any sense of its historical significance. They explain very little about the factors making for personal success, about the relationship between suc-

cess and Jewish identity, or about the impact of German Jewish success on those who came later. If anything, they imply that after the period of the great pioneers, terminal decay set in; one after another of these volumes ends with a crushing account of wayward children, conversions to Christianity, untimely deaths, shattered dreams. They are pervaded by a sense of discontinuity, of a world now totally lost. They thus lend unwitting support to the view of American Jewish history as beginning anew in 1881, as if in some classic myth of death and rebirth.

WITH Naomi Cohen's *Encounter with Emancipation* this myth may now be laid to rest permanently. Her book, which one realizes with astonishment is the first scholarly survey of the German period ever to be published, reintroduces the theme of American Jewish continuity. It convincingly argues that "while the Germans were compelled to make room for the Russians in their synagogues, federations, fraternal orders, and community-wide deliberations, they themselves, now more ethnic-oriented, did not drop out." Instead, the two groups learned to *share* power, a development that "ensured the continuity of those institutions as well as the basic patterns of Jewish behavior" that the 19th-century German Jews had formulated.

Professor Cohen, who has been involved in the study of the German period in American Jewish history throughout her entire academic career, is well-qualified to make this revisionist judgment. Her first book, *A Dual Heritage: The Public Career of Oscar S. Straus* (1969), was a biography of one of America's leading German Jews, a man remembered both for his contributions to Jewish life and for his active involvement in politics on the national scene. Her second book, *Not Free To Desist* (1972), examined the history of the American Jewish Committee, the last great organization founded by German Jews in their effort to exercise stewardship over the American Jewish community. Here she has undertaken the much larger challenge of a comprehensive synthesis,

and in great measure she has succeeded.

In her Introduction Professor Cohen warns that her book makes "no claim to all-inclusiveness." As a pioneering effort, it leaves much unsaid and many questions unanswered. It depends largely on English-language and secondary sources, and not always the most recent ones. Professor Cohen knows what is in the major 19th-century English-language American Jewish newspapers, but not the German ones, the small regional ones, or the lesser known radical ones like the *New Era*. She has also not looked sufficiently at non-Jewish newspapers—which then as now offer perspectives on Jewish communal life that Jewish newspapers cannot match. Still, this volume, which is the product of years of research and careful reflection, is a mature work.

PROFESSOR COHEN builds her synthesis around the theme of Jewish emancipation, the political process that conferred citizenship and legal equality on Jews where they had formerly been second-class citizens. This at first seems strange, since by most accounts America was a post-emancipation country. As Salo Baron has pointed out, "long before the American Revolution the legal status of American Jews was for all practical purposes nearly equal to that of the other inhabitants." But Professor Cohen is referring not so much to America itself as to the *perception* of America on the part of the Central European Jews who came here.

According to her, many of these Jews, disheartened by the forces of reaction that rampaged through Europe in the wake of the failed 1848 revolutions, journeyed to America in search of what had been promised to them in Europe but never delivered. What they cherished were the modern forms of individual freedom, not just the corporate freedom that satisfied the earlier Sephardi immigrants, and in this respect they fully expected the United States to be different from the world they had left behind. Where lower-middle-class Catholic and Protestant German artisans immigrated to America to escape in-

dustrialization and modernization, and sought to recreate here the world being destroyed by those forces in their homeland, Jews, Professor Cohen argues, sought consciously "to break with the old." Their motivations were less economic than ideological: "to realize the political, economic, and social aspirations gone sour in Europe."

This argument certainly explains the motivations of some German Jews, particularly the more articulate ones who served as rabbis and leaders. But whether it covers the bulk of the community is somewhat dubious. Indeed, Leon Jick, in his *The Americanization of the Synagogue, 1820-1870* (1976), a more narrowly conceived study, examines similar sources and comes to precisely the opposite conclusions: "The Jewish immigrants were universally poor and usually minimally educated in either Jewish or secular learning. . . . With few exceptions they had little or no involvement in political, cultural, or religious ferment prior to their arrival in America."

Nor is Professor Cohen thoroughly convincing in her broader understanding of the period in terms of "the multiple facets of the emancipation experience"—a European Jewish phenomenon played out on American soil. Others explain the same developments simply on the basis of Americanization. Where she sees secular European influences at work, they discern native ones, and point to significant groups in America for whom emancipation was not an issue.

Considerably more basic research, including quantitative study, still needs to be done on these questions, but even without it one may safely conclude that both views are correct—in part. Old and New World influences converged in America, and jointly shaped the lives of immigrant Jews. Any attempt to disentangle the "American" from the "Jewish" in American Jewish history is foredoomed to fail.

IN TRACING German Jews' impact on American Jewish life, Professor Cohen wisely chooses a thematic rather than a strictly chronological

presentation. Chapters survey the subjects of economic and communal life, Jewish-Christian relations, manners and morals, "the Americanization of Judaism," Jewish politics, anti-Semitism, Zionism, and the relationship between German Jews and the East European Jews who followed them. The discussion of church-state issues is particularly illuminating. Where other historians, basing themselves on limited and tendentious readings of the past, have dogmatically insisted that the American Jewish community has "always" advocated a high wall of separation between the two realms, Professor Cohen uncovers a far more complex attitude—and one which today's American Jews might profitably ponder:

Although they spouted the rhetoric of separationism, and even cited Jefferson's famous letter on the wall of separation, Jews usually meant a neutral-to-all-religions rather than a divorced-from-religion state. Indeed, the latter concept, which in the climate of the 19th century was tantamount to an anti-religion stance, was as abhorrent to Jews as it was to most Americans. Rabbis, long the most influential leaders of the community, taught that religion was a vital component of the good life and, like Christian clergymen, inveighed against the inroads of secularization. Louis Marshall, the national spokesman of American Jews on the eve of World War I [and president of the American Jewish Committee], found nothing intrinsically offensive about Bible reading in the public schools, so long as it did not become sectarian. Prudence also dictated an accommodationist position to the rules of the American game, for any efforts on behalf of complete separationism might have evoked a severe backlash.

Other aspects of the story highlighted by Professor Cohen also have important implications for today's Jews. Her discussion of Jewish communal defense, her analysis of the fight against immigration restrictions, and her important chapter on the theme "All Israel Are Responsible for One Another" support her thesis of historical continuity, and lend effective credence

to her claim that American Jewry's communal structure took shape prior to the period of East European dominance.

Even more significant, however, are Professor Cohen's broader insights in these chapters, coupled with some of her daring leaps across time and her memorable *obiter dicta*, all of which make her version of American Jewish history instructive in a way that amusing anecdotes about pioneers, frontiersmen, and *nouveaux riches* can never be. This is a book that uses history not to entertain but to shed light on some of the larger questions in American Jewish life. It shows American Jews grappling with modernity, seeking to conserve Judaism even as they Americanize it, and struggling with the central tension of their lives: the desire to affirm two identities at once. Without being apologetic or anachronistic, it offers something that American Jewish historical writing has rarely before provided, a past that speaks to contemporary concerns.