

of a few days at the beginning of August, 1944, as the German and American armies are perched at the edge of Pisa. The Germans of course occupy the city, and the Americans are less than a mile away. While other Jews have been deported, in Pardo's elegant house several Jews have gathered in hiding and are temporarily safe, not yet caught by the Germans.

As in Boccaccio's *Decameron*, where the group has escaped the plague in town and while away the time telling stories, so in Prado's house the Jews are secluded — and they too have for the time being escaped another plague that has infested the land. They too reminisce and learn and talk to while away the hours.

Since *The Parnas* is a Holocaust work, we cannot expect its inner life to differ from other Holocaust works, where beginnings are different but endings are the same. Obviously, the crux of *The Parnas* is what happens when the Germans come; and the reader anticipates learning how Prado's phobia will fuse with the end of the story.

*The Parnas* not only speaks of Pisa, but in the telling also provides a cogent glimpse into Italian Jewish history. This book is a moving document which excoriates the brutality of the German murderers and elevates the spirit of decency of the victims and the Italian Gentiles who aided the Jews. As David keened Jonathan and Saul saying, "Lovely in their lives and in their death they were not parted," so the compassionate Gentiles became victims along with the Jews.

In the Introduction, Silvano Arieti suggests that he is juxtaposing the mental illness of the hero with the general malaise of the time, and is seeking to show how one individual can rise above illness and convert it into a kind of spiritual salvation. Arieti depicts how in the *parnas* illness heightened, refined the spirit, brought on new sensitivity, humanity, and understanding, while in the Germans illness, bestiality and spiritual obscenity were aligned.

It is this esthetic fabric that points up the graceful artistry of the work. And it may be interesting to note that in Hebrew *ruchani* — from *ruach*

(spirit) — can refer both to spiritual aspects and to mental illness (*choleh ruchani* — a mentally ill-person). Arieti painstakingly limns the double-image of *ruchani* in Pardo's mental/spiritual world.

*The Parnas* is a marvelous and touching book, whose impressions of a lost culture and vanished generation remain long after the genre's problematics have been forgotten. Silvano Arieti, the late distinguished psychiatrist, published several works in his field, most notably his National Book Award-winning *Interpretations of Schizophrenia*.

*The Parnas* had long been brewing in the author; although it was painful for him, he felt it was a *mitzvah* to read *The Parnas*, a lovely memorial to a lovely man, and a paean to the dignity of the spirit. ■

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## America Is Different?

JONATHAN D. SARNA

*Evangelizing the American Jew*, by David Max Eichhorn. Jonathan David Publishers, 1978, 210 pp. \$12.50.

*The Incident at Massena*, by Saul S. Friedman, Stein and Day, 1978, 216 pp. \$9.95.

"America is different," Jews in the United States have long proclaimed, and not without reason. In America, Jews have never lived in imposed ghettos, never suffered from rioting peasants, and never chafed under overtly discriminatory legislation. Anti-Semitism was the exception here rather than the rule. Jews for the most part succeeded — their community flourished.

American exceptionalism is so common a theme in American Jewish historiography that one would wish to welcome two new studies that offer dissenting views. It is high time we realized that missionizing evangelists and mean-spirited Jew-haters have also been part of the American scene. But neither David Max Eichhorn nor Saul S. Friedman succeed even in hinting at a new, more accurate portrait of Jewish-Christian relations in the United States. Instead, both authors have written the kind of narrowly focused, unimaginative, and occasionally inaccurate study that can be termed "useful" — but nothing more.

Eichhorn's *Evangelizing the American Jew* is a revised condensation of his lengthy and important 1938 doctoral dissertation, then a pioneering and invaluable study. The author's aim remains purely descriptive: "an account of Christian attempts to convert the Jews of the United States and Canada." But though Eichhorn fills his book with facts (a few of which are not facts at all), and peppers his prose with sarcastic asides, he neither notices nor explains the cyclic pattern of missionary activity. Because he has scarcely read secondary sources, he fails to realize that missionary thrusts were intimately connected with American evangelical reform movements and with the growth of Jewish immigration. He is also completely uninterested in the long Christian debate over whether missions to the Jews were a "holy duty" or an "un-American activity." As far as he is concerned, the key question is whether an individual missionary

proved to be a “saintly idealist” or a base hypocrite.

Eichhorn devotes only one scant chapter (curiously entitled “The ‘Antis’”) to the American Jewish response to missions. Characteristically, he focuses on people and individual polemics. Yet throughout American history, missionaries have roused the entire Jewish community to action. Unintentionally, they have pointed out to the community its weak points and failings. With astonishing rapidity Jews scrambled to react. The seemingly impossible — newspapers, schools, charities, even Jewish unity — all have suddenly developed whenever conversionist threats loom large. Missionaries and cult leaders, like anti-Semites, have kept the community from becoming complacent.

**M**ore than any other incident in American Jewish history, the Massena “blood libel” typifies Jewish activism in the face of adversity. The adversity in this case was an old canard — that Jews employ Christian blood in their religious ceremonies. When four-year-old Barbara Griffiths disappeared in Massena, New York on September 22, 1928 (two days before Yom Kippur), police and town officials raised the old canard anew.

Barbara was found within a day, profuse apologies were tendered the Jewish community by embarrassed town officials. But if the Massena incident proved unimportant in itself, it is important because of what came afterwards. Jewish community organizations rushed officials into the town and demanded intensive investigations, and new, ever stronger apologies. The American Jewish Congress and the American Jewish Committee competed with one another for the title “defender of the Jews.” A small, easily forgotten inci-

dent became a media event and a subject of state and national attention.

Saul Friedman could have written a fine book on Massena. Had he analyzed in-fighting between Jewish leaders, anti-Semitism during the inter-war period, and the politics of Jewish communal defense, his work would be required reading. Instead, he has written a narrowly conceived volume designed to prove that “it did happen here” and “could” happen again. The author of a book on Simon Petlura and the Ukrainian pogroms should know that in fact it *didn't* happen here. Nor is it clear that anything would have happened if Barbara Griffiths hadn't been found. To compare as he does the Massena police to Ukrainian Cossack irregulars is to my mind shamefully obscene.

Friedman's narration of events surrounding the Massena incident is by far the best available. Though he often relies on half-century old memories or even on stories told by descendants, he has unearthed many new and important facts. Unfortunately, he often digresses into unnecessary asides. Some of the background material that he relates is in rambling, undigested form. Nor is it clear why if Massena was so like other towns, they did not suffer from Massena-like incidents. Still, Friedman does present a new slant on small-town Jews and their problems. Their lives and concerns were different indeed from the lives of Jews in the “promised city” of New York.

Friedman shakes the confidence of this reader by “quoting” imaginary dialogues as if he had heard them. He often imputes to his villains a far better knowledge of Jewish history than they could possibly have possessed. In one case, he even suggests that a town resident “re-called” hearing of an 1850 New York

City anti-Jewish riot, one apparently related to a ritual murder charge. Unless the resident read a scholarly article written long after 1928, it is unlikely indeed that he knew of this obscure report which appeared in a Leipzig Jewish newspaper.

Two vitally important lessons can be learned from Massena: Friedman ignores them both. First, the ignorance of local Jews prevented them from squelching the ritual murder canard as soon as it was raised. “I don't know if such a custom [the use of human blood in synagogue rites] exists in the old country, but in this country they don't have this custom,” one of Massena's leading Jews told the police. They naturally continued their investigation. Second, the community lacked faith in its foreign born rabbi, Berel Brennglass. He might have rebutted incendiary rumors at once, but nobody respected him enough even to inform him of the developing incident. The first news he heard of police suspicions came later — and from the police themselves. Local Jewish businessmen thought that they could handle the situation better on their own.

Was the American blood libel different from its European counterparts? Undoubtedly. In Massena there were no Cossacks and no injuries — only apologies. Jews in America can fight back freely, both against anti-Semites and against missionaries. This freedom to respond — a freedom deeply rooted in American history — is a key component of American exceptionalism. It is one reason — there are others — why bad as things sometimes were, the worst did *not* happen here. Not by a longshot. ■

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