

# Commentary

Volume Seventy, Number Two, August 1980

## Into the Past

FROM GENERATION TO GENERATION:  
HOW TO TRACE YOUR JEWISH  
GENEALOGY AND PERSONAL HIS-  
TORY. BY ARTHUR KURZWEIL.  
*Morrow. 353 pp. \$12.95.*

Reviewed by JONATHAN D. SARNA

WHERE ONCE people struggled mightily to conceal their Jewish ancestors, today they devote the same energy to the laborious task of revealing them. The Jewish "roots" industry has indeed become a thriving enterprise. *Toledot*, a new journal devoted to Jewish genealogy, publishes four issues a year, and boasts a growing list of subscribers; Dan Rottenberg's *Finding Our Fathers*, the Dr. Spock of Jewish root-seekers, stands just below *The Jewish Catalog* as a symbol of America's Jewish cultural rebirth; genealogical inquiries pour into Jewish archives at an unmanageable rate.

Family trees do not sprout overnight, of course. Their growth and cultivation depend on precisely those traditional virtues which are otherwise unavailing in our age: persistence, ingenuity, and untiring patience. But if frustrations and false hopes abound on the genealogical trail, and weeks of wearisome research can prove fruitless, in the end the diligent win their reward: a large, many-branched, direct-ancestry chart adorned with illustrious half-forgotten names out of the past. Each and every name points neatly and inexorably in the direction of the single indispens-

able figure who marks the last link in the chain: the researcher himself.

In this emphasis on self, amateur genealogists differ significantly from professional ones who generally follow a more modest course, employing descendant charts, stressing notable progenitors, and consigning succeeding generations to ever humbler positions. Malcolm Stern's *First American Jewish Families*, for example, awards pride of place to the early immigrants who toiled to create a better world for their children. Offspring, no matter how important they later became, are always relegated to lower rungs, fated to be perpetually overshadowed by their pioneering forebears. Biblical, medieval, and hasidic genealogy all work on the same principle. The elders—Abraham, David, Rashi, Isaac Luria, and the Baal Shem Tov—stand at the top; their descendants forever look up to them. The investigations of today's amateur researchers, by contrast, move basically backward from themselves.

The most recent (the publisher calls it "definitive") popular guidebook to Jewish genealogical investigation, Arthur Kurzweil's *From Generation to Generation: How to Trace Your Jewish Genealogy and Personal History*, illustrates this self-centered, tunneled view of history. The volume carries us from Kurzweil's own conversion experience—the discovery of his great-grandfather's picture in the memorial volume of the town of Dobromil, Poland—down through every stage of his laborious past-seeking quest. He traces his father back through the 18th century, his mother "back through some of the most illustrious rabbis of the past several centuries to the Middle Ages." The path is tortuous and full of strange twists, but like the climber of Everest, Kurzweil zealously pushes on, obsessed.

Kurzweil graciously takes time out from his personal quest to guide his readers along a protracted fact-finding tour designed to acquaint them with basic sources of information: relatives, *lands-manschaften*, libraries, archives, and cemeteries. Along the way, he offers historical tidbits, some wonderful quotations, a few outstand-

ing photographs, and a ritualistic pep talk: "Be patient. You do not discover your family history overnight . . . slowly build on your collection . . . seeing that you have really built something to be proud of is what it is all about." But like the proverbial boomerang, this research always leads back to the same spot: one's own doorstep.

Your family is the focus of this process; in tracing their steps, you are tracing the steps of the Jewish people. In tracing the steps of the Jewish people, you will eventually arrive at the beginning of time, and also you will arrive back in the present—at yourself.

NARCISSISM projected backward through time does not, however, explain the "roots" phenomenon; it merely places it in a larger context. Jews are searching for new modes of identity. The old answers, with their emphasis on community and social action, no longer satisfy. The hunt is on for something new.

For Kurzweil, that something new lies in something old. He not only identifies with Dobromil, he has also, in the course of tracing his ancestry, taken up its religious traditions and become a *baal teshuvah*—a born-again Jew. "Why," he asks, "in the year 1970 would a young man in his twenties, born and raised in New York suburbs, be elated at being called a member of a *shtetl*?" Kurzweil candidly admits to having "no answer." At least he has asked the right question.

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Kurzweil is not alone either in his return to an older style of Jewish life or in his incapacity to explain it. Other rerooted Jews of today speak glowingly of the "intrinsic interest" and "deep meaning" of their new ethnic identification, or cite Hansen's Law: the third generation seeks to remember what the second sought to forget. But these are evasions. A fast-growing, heterogeneous movement, with devoted followers from various generations, a burgeoning literature, and a core of fanatical devotees must actually offer some special solace. Why else would so many people set out on this quixotic search?

A clue to the mystery may lie in

the word "roots" itself, as typical of the 70's as the word "revolution," in so many ways its opposite, was of the 60's. The 70's, after all, saw the birth of the "roots" phenomenon in general, as many Americans, recoiling from the present, sought refuge in the past and its traditions. For Jews, disillusionment came with special force in the 70's, as many a universalist dream turned into a particularist nightmare. In response, Jews too retreated, turning inward, backward to the past. By searching for roots in the "old country," they were tacitly admitting what they had often previously denied: that American Jewry formed part of the web of Diaspora history after all.

JEWISH roots are unlike those of other people, however. The past would seem to offer little consolation to those whose relatives were destroyed in the concentration camps of Europe. Yet the current genealogical obsession does contain a puzzling undertone of nostalgia, a tendency to see Eastern Europe as an idyllic world gone by. Kurzweil's book is suffused with yearning for Dobromil as a lost utopia, a peaceful little *shtetl* with "dirt roads, and little houses, and people who stood at the *shul* while the Angel of Death was being plotted against." Is this an attempt to transcend history, to imagine the Holocaust away? The effort is understandable; the picture, alas, is false.

In this connection, one might mention as well the change that has quietly taken place in the image that many American Jews hold of Israel. If the Dobromils of Eastern Europe have now in some sense become their idea of utopia, not so long ago that place was occupied by the dirt roads, the little houses, and the pioneering spirit of the "typical" Israeli village. But Israel in its terrible vulnerability has become less of a dream and more of a constant worry, a community charge whose future well-being cannot be taken for granted with the same sense of assurance. It may not be too far-fetched to suggest that the romantic nostalgia which today colors the view of Dobromil owes something indirectly to this thwarting of the positive emotional investment

many American Jews made in the utopia of Israel.

Jewish history has come full circle. Immigrants from Eastern Europe dreamed about America; their descendants dream about *der haym*. Immigrants Americanized their names to sever their ties with the past; their descendants have begun to re-Judaize them. Immigrants looked ahead to a bright future; their descendants look back yearningly.

There is a certain charm to the symmetry of it all, but it is also troubling. Retreat into the past is as perilous for the continuity of a people as abandonment of the past. Rootless Jews and Jews obsessed with roots employ opposite means to perpetrate an identical error: the substitution of a fragment of Jewish experience for its totality. No mere snapshot can do justice to the Jewish presence in history, only a ceaselessly moving film.