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IRVING HOWE'S *WORLD OF OUR FATHERS* TWENTY YEARS LATER

By Kenneth Waltzer

My father moved in a world of stories. He told his own in *World of Our Fathers* and *A Margin of Hope*

—Nicholas Howe, *Dissent* 40:3 (Fall 1993): 532.

IRVING HOWE'S *World of Our Fathers* appeared to rave reviews in 1976. Ted Solotaroff called it "a great book" in the *New York Times Book Review*, a "work of history and art" and "of meditation and vision—the eye of knowledge and of imagination seeing together." Nathan Glazer celebrated Howe's "triumph" in telling the story of the East European Jewish immigration and in characterizing the Yiddish culture of the immigrant generation. Pearl Kazin Bell described it as "history and celebration, memory and judgment," and, for her and other second generation immigrants, "an act of redemption."¹ The book garnered unusual high praise from scholars and became an out-and-out best seller.

Several years later, in his memoir *A Margin of Hope* in 1982, Howe explored some of the reasons he wrote *World of Our Fathers*, commented wryly on his fifteen minutes of fame, and noted the book, at best, enabled American Jews "to cast an affectionate backward glance at the world of their fathers before turning their backs on it forever and moving on . . . to a world their fathers would neither have accepted or understood." The book, Howe wrote, was "not a beginning" but "still another step to the end."² Twenty years later, what should we think of *World of Our Fathers*? What is its relationship to American Jewish history, memory, and identity at the close of the twentieth century?

World of Our Fathers appeared at the peak time of renewed interest in the history of East European Jewish immigration in America and in the creation of a distinct immigrant Jewish subculture on New York's Lower East Side. As Howe noted, the Jewish subculture was unique, and fragments of its influence and energy could be found scattered in Jewish life across the United States. Between 1962 and 1979, a spate of books, exhibits, reprinted literary works and studies, memoirs, and collections appeared exploring and evoking a sense of the immigrant

Jewish past. Moses Rischin's *The Promised City: New York's Jews 1870-1914* appeared in 1962. Nathan Glazer's and Daniel Moynihan's *Beyond the Melting Pot* came out in 1963. Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep* reappeared in 1964. Hutchins Hapgood's *The Spirit of the Ghetto* (1902) was republished in 1965, then Jacob Riis's *How the Other Half Lives* (1890) in 1970. The multimedia museum exhibit, *The Lower East Side: Portal to American Life 1870-1914*, opened to great attention at New York's Jewish Museum, April-July, 1967. Ronald Sanders's *The Downtown Jews* came out in 1969. The books continued for a time after *World of Our Fathers*—Howe and Kenneth Libo published a popular collection entitled *How We Lived* in 1979; and Sanders put out a photo book, *The Lower East Side*, the same year.³ More than a half century after working and lower middle class Jews had moved from the East Side across city bridges into outlying neighborhoods in the Bronx and Brooklyn, American Jews, now suburbanized and securely middle class, were looking backward to see from whom and where they had come.

As Allon Schoener noted in his introduction to the exhibit catalogue for the Jewish Museum, the Lower East Side no longer existed as it once had historically but instead symbolized "the epic of Jewish adaptation to America" in Jewish collective memory.⁴ Irving Howe agreed, and a hint of what he would write later as *World of Our Fathers* could be seen in his catalogue essay, "The Lower East Side: Symbol and Fact." To Howe, the East Side had been the spawning ground for a distinct immigrant subculture and way of life drawn creatively from elements of the tension between Eastern European Jewishness and America. On the East Side, immigrant Jews had reenacted patterns of *shtetl* and urban life from Poland and Russia, keeping the American future at a distance, and had also built a utopian world of *Yiddishkeit*, characterized by a moral ethic of secular "humaneness." Here immigrant Jews had lived for a brief historical interval a moment of collective experience in a world of their own on the way to absorption and disintegration. "America took over. America absorbed, transformed, softened, enticed."⁵ The Jewish story from Ellis Island was one of success and progress, but it was not without costs.

Irving Howe (born Irving Horenstein) was early in his life an unlikely candidate to write a lyric epic on East European Jewish immigration and American progress. Raised in the east Bronx, the son of Jewish immigrants who experienced downward mobility in the depression, Howe was distant from his parents and their world, estranged from his

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father, and at a young age found in radical socialist internationalism, namely Trotskyism, true purpose and excitement. At City College in the late 1930s and after, Howe developed as a “young commissar of the revolution,” Trotskyist theoretician, and talented political polemicist, who evinced little conscious interest in Jewishness or in the Jewish fate. Like many radicals of the era, he subordinated his Jewishness to revolutionary socialist politics and cosmopolitan culture until well after the end of World War II.⁶ Yet something happened to Howe in the late 1940s-1950s. He grew slowly alienated from Trotskyite (but not socialist) politics during the early Cold War years, he grew active in the circle of New York intellectuals around *Commentary* and *Partisan Review* which had arisen from the immigrant milieu, and he was drawn increasingly to study Jewish culture, literature, and history. In the 1950s and 1960s, he taught English and Yiddish literature at Brandeis and, with Eliezer Greenberg, began translating collections of Yiddish poems and stories. About the same time, he gradually returned to Jewish attachments, ridding himself of the weights of “nostalgia and shame, aggressiveness and denial,” as he recalled in his memoir, and he struck “a truce with, and then extend[ed] a hand to, the world of my father.”⁷ *World Of Our Fathers* was a product of Howe’s reconciliation and Jewish self-acceptance and his continuing socialist faith in a period of renewed interest and memory about the East Side.

World of Our Fathers told the story of two million East European Jews who came to America in the years before the United States closed the gates in the mid-1920s, who transplanted and transformed Yiddish culture even as they adjusted to modern America, and who later—or whose children—made their way into the larger society and culture. The immigrants arrived from Eastern Europe with collective aspirations as well as personal ambitions; they encountered terrible, exploitative conditions on the East Side as workers in needle trades shops and as peddlers on city streets; they experienced miserable slum conditions in crowded tenements. Nonetheless, for about thirty or forty years, they created and sustained amidst difficult conditions a coherent and self-sufficient culture and way of life—what Howe termed “the improvised culture of Yiddishkeit.”⁸

At the core of *Yiddishkeit* culture was the Jewish family and ethic of parental sacrifice. The Jewish mother was the emotional center and breadgiver of the family; the father was the breadwinner and occasion-

ally a dreamer. Also important were *landsmanshaftn*, immigrant associations based on places of origin, which formalized networks of mutual aid in the community, and immigrant *shuls*, also often based in origins, which sustained the community's relation with God and with a Jewish way of life. In addition, over time, and in interaction with America, *Yiddishkeit* culture evolved and developed to reflect the messianic aspirations of Jewish workers, who excited themselves with "illusions of possibility"⁹ in the new country. On the East Side and in other similar neighborhoods in other cities, spurred on by a vital radical minority, Jewish immigrants built a movement of Jewish socialism and engaged in collective struggle to create novel institutions of Jewish labor. Once built, these organization in turn provided moral power and institutional focus to the community and its aspirations.

A history of Jewish socialism and labor had appeared in more specialized books and journals during the 1950s and 1960s, less visible than the later vogue of writings on the East Side. This history traced the path of Jewish immigrants from socialism to New Deal liberalism. Writers like Will Herberg, Daniel Bell, and others¹⁰ noted that, in a single generation, Jewish labor institutions had shifted from radical origins and commitments to demands for improved wages and working conditions under capitalism. These writers observed that Jewish immigrants had become de-radicalized, assimilated, then integrated during the Roosevelt era. Howe sought to argue with Daniel Bell and others who dismissed the Jewish socialist past or interpreted its purpose as having been simply to acclimatize Jewish immigrants. He wished instead to celebrate Jewish socialism and labor and affirm the dignity and influence of their aspirations and achievements.¹¹ In the process, though, Howe embraced entirely the basic underlying assimilationist framework. *World of Our Fathers* outlined the process by which East European Jews, once socialists and laborites, entered liberal America. Howe's book *Socialism and America* later took up similar themes about the enormous absorptive powers of the American state and society.¹²

World of Our Fathers ended with attention to the dispersion of the Jews outward from places like the East Side to secondary settlements and the suburbs, their rise upward to middle-class status and prosperity, and their journeys into the broader society and culture. Howe explored the enormous Jewish contributions to popular entertainment and the arts. He wrote knowingly of the New York intellectuals, among whom he was one. While old immigrant neighborhoods, however, raised in

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him generous impulses to celebration and elegy, Howe could find few positive things to say about new middle-class Jewish suburbs, which lacked the authenticity of the old. There remained important continuities with the immigrant Jewish past—Jews were committed to liberalism and civil rights, which Howe viewed as the legacy of Jewish socialism; and Howe even recognized links between the East Side and Long Island, folk culture and bourgeois culture. Indeed, the deepest inclinations of conduct, morality, senses of vocation, manner, and modes of argument in Jewish life still carried strains of immigrant Yiddish culture.¹³ Yet little else of what immigrant Jews had created and counted as their true accomplishments, Howe felt, had been able to survive. “The story of the immigrant Jews is all but done . . .,” he closed *World of Our Fathers*. “Let us now praise obscure men.”¹⁴

As might be guessed, Howe's book was quite selective, not merely for what it included but also for what it omitted. *World of Our Fathers* explored the Jewish immigrant milieu as socialism and laborism, not also capitalism and enterprise. Howe described a Jewish community that was mainly secular and universalistic, not also religious and particularistic. Howe missed some of what Deborah Dash Moore has described as “the diversity of immigrant life in the neighborhood;”¹⁵ he missed also the diversity of Jewish life outside New York City, where socialism was always weaker. *World Of Our Fathers* also omitted attention to some of the gender dynamics of Jewish immigrant and family life, focusing more feelingly on the generational dynamics.¹⁶ Overall, Howe selected largely in terms of a framework emphasizing the making of a distinct secular community, creed, and culture, followed by its disintegration on entrance into America. Howe's portrait of an open, inviting America and moderate anti-Semitism during the early twentieth century were especially unsatisfying. Perhaps most interesting, Howe could find no constructive way to integrate attention to the Holocaust, and to American and American Jewish responses to the destruction of the European Jews, into *World of Our Fathers* and wrote merely a lengthy footnote.¹⁷

Howe's book was also highly personal. Howe was writing of himself when he quoted immigrant sons on the lack of culture and books in the East Side home or on the shame they felt for their immigrant fathers. And he was reflecting sorrowfully on his own past when he affirmed the “distance between the generations” and identified “the chasm of silence which neither affection nor goodwill could bridge.”¹⁸ If Howe's

turn to Jewish culture and history and Yiddish literature had helped him to strike a truce and extend a hand to the world of his father; *World of Our Fathers* amounted to an appreciation and elegy.

It is twenty years later, places of the past, like the East Side, already faint memory and symbol in the 1960s and 1970s, fail any longer to provide firm anchor for American Jewish history, memory, and identity, and the centrality of the immigrant experience; *Yiddishkeit*, socialism, and Jewish labor have been displaced by the new centrality of the Holocaust, Israel, and new forms of Jewish particularity. Much has changed in American Jewish life and in the United States since the 1960s and 1970s. American Jews have dispersed further from urban to suburban areas and from a few metropolitan areas to settlements across the country, and they are several generations removed from urban slums and working-class struggles. They involve themselves with new touchstones of memory and identity—for many the Holocaust or Israel, for some renewed religious observation or communal renewal. America too has changed and, despite economic growth and prosperity, is less buoyant, optimistic, or confident in its absorptive powers than in the 1960s and 1970s. It is less hospitable to dreams of political transcendence or collective achievement. American society also appears increasingly fragmented, its public life awash in complaints emphasizing ethnic particularity and victimization. American culture is ahistorical and commercial, and reinforces the contemporary and particular.

As Michael Berenbaum has written, the Holocaust has become in the last twenty years “central to the identity of American Jewry.”¹⁹ Since publication of *World of Our Fathers*, American Jews have come to think of themselves as a post-Holocaust Jewry as much or more than a post-immigration Jewry. Even the American civic calendar embraces remembrance of the Holocaust. Memory of the Holocaust mobilizes activism, builds solidarity, stirs a sense of continuity and meaning. Where American Jews once explored their identity in books, memoirs, and exhibits about migration and mobility up from city slums, they today snap up books, memoirs, and videos about the Final Solution, and support and flock to the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington DC or regional museums in New York, Detroit, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Houston, and Miami. The archeology of American Jewish memory has shifted. People can visit the Lower East Side Tenement Museum or the new Ellis Island Museum, but greater numbers visit

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Holocaust memorial sites. Books and memoirs, particularly about immigrant women, continue to appear about the East Side,²⁰ but greater interest attaches to memoirs by survivor immigrants, who represent the story of Jewish continuity and the American dream in the more recent past.

It is worth noting that American Jewish preoccupation with the Holocaust began a few years before *World of Our Fathers* appeared, and was boosted shortly after by the television mini-series *Holocaust* in 1978. The same year, President Jimmy Carter created a Presidential Commission on the Holocaust, which eventuated in the Holocaust Memorial Museum and the annual Day of Remembrance. Irving Howe wrote knowingly in *World of Our Fathers* that memories of the Holocaust already pressed deeply into the consciousness of Jews, requiring that they try to remain Jews, at least as a matter of honor. Yet Howe could find no other way in the mid-1970s of remembering other than "in silence, alone," and, as one consequence, Jewish post-Holocaust memory finds in *World of Our Fathers* little to link the story of the immigrant generation with the story of European Jewry during the 1920s-1940s.

American Jews have also since the 1960s and 1970s grown inextricably tied to Israel and its fortunes in the Middle East. In addition, the Israeli state and society to which they become grown attached have moved far from the pioneer immigrant socialist project from which the Jewish homeland began. Howe wrote in *World of Our Fathers* that the emergence of the Jewish state after World War II had sped the dissolution of ideologies in the immigrant generation and contributed to altering its outlook. Over time, American Jewish consciousness has changed even further, embracing practical Zionism as it has become apparent that a Jewish state can do things that failed movements and good will cannot—try war criminals, rescue Jews, take in and absorb Jewish immigrants, and protect Jewish interests. American Jewish giving and identity continues today strongly oriented toward the State of Israel, and Israel-consciousness makes its own inroads on the shaping of American Jewish memory.

Finally, while observers write that American Jews have never been more prosperous, secure, or "at home in America," and that the real challenge is assimilation,²¹ Jewish particularism appears to be on the rise in the United States and Jewish fears about anti-Semitism find disturbing foundation. In a national climate of heightened ethnic particularism, Jews define and protect their own interests, and do so in the

language of ethnos and interest group. They also inhabit a world where anti-Semitism, while seemingly diminished, has turned up at times in high offices, including the White House, and appears on the rise among select urban populations who do poorly in the new post-industrial economy and post-welfare America. What Howe already feared in the mid-1970s, a changed, increasingly particularistic Jewish consciousness, far removed from "the provincial world with universalist values" that the immigrants built after their arrival, seems to be a growing contemporary reality.

In this changed context, *World of Our Fathers* probably speaks less well to many American Jews today than it did twenty years ago, and it surely is no longer as widely read. This is a tragedy. For, despite its faults and idiosyncrasies, *World of Our Fathers* remains a remarkable book, a treasure of insights and wisdom on the people of the East Side who helped make American Jewry, setting in motion important currents in Jewish life. Because of the framework of community decline and one-generation assimilation he adopted, Howe perhaps missed the possibility that the road into America across the generations from immigrant ghetto to suburbs has mainly extended the story of transformation begun earlier on the East Side. Like immigrant Jews, American Jews in the second half of the twentieth century have also moved to new areas, created new Jewish societies, and transformed tradition to recreate community and serve their children. They too have reinvented tradition and reshaped culture. Like immigrant Jews, too, they have embraced their own messianic enthusiasms and had their own political brushes with America, and they have worried uneasily about their place in America, even as they have made it home. What I wish to suggest is that there may be broader continuities in American Jewish life and history than were stated in *World of Our Fathers* but are nonetheless richly hinted at there. So let us praise a man who wrote with insight, knowledge, and lyrical purpose about the immigrant generation, and whose work continues a valued starting place for explorations in American Jewish history, memory, and identity.

NOTES

¹Theodore Solotaroff, "What the Jews of Eastern Europe Lost and Found in America," *New York Times Book Review*, 1 Feb. 1976, 1; Nathan Glazer, "World Of Our Fathers," *New Republic*, 24 April 1976, 20; Pearl Kazin Bell, "The Past Recaptured," *New Leader*, 1 March 1976, 18. Solotaroff later recalled he read the book "like an amnesiac who had just received the blow to the head that brings

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everything back." See "The New York Publishing World," in *Creators and Disturbers*, eds., Bernard Rosenberg and Ernest Goldstein (New York: Columbia UP, 1982) 419.

²Irving Howe, *A Margin of Hope: An Intellectual Autobiography* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1982) 341.

³Although American Jews were concerned with history, Alfred Kazin wrote in *Commentary* 37 (Feb. 1964): 76-77, few actually knew much, and members of the newer generation had been uninterested, "precisely because they wanted to break with it." The spate of books, studies, and museum exhibits brought "history" back into focus, recalling the epic of migration, struggle, and adaptation.

⁴Allon Schoener, "Introduction," *The Lower East Side: Portal to American Life 1870-1924*, ed., Allon Schoener (New York: Jewish Museum, 1966) 9-10.

⁵Irving Howe, "The Lower East Side: Symbol and Fact," *The Lower East Side: Portal to American Life* 11-14.

⁶On City College and Trotskyism, see Daniel Bell, in "Remembering Irving Howe," *Dissent* 40:3 (Fall 1993): 517. On Howe's youth, family, radicalism, education, and identity as a "non-Jewish Jew," see *A Margin of Hope* 1, 6-8, 11-14, 24-25, 42, 114, 251. See also Edward Alexander, "Irving Howe and Secular Jewishness: An Elegy," *Judaism* 75:1 (Winter 1996): 104-05.

⁷*A Margin of Hope* 267-69.

⁸Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1976) 169 ff., 225.

⁹*World of Our Fathers* 306-07. The Jewish unions, Howe wrote, mirrored European social democracy and acted not merely as bargaining agencies but as centers of immigrant social and cultural life.

¹⁰Will Herberg, "The Jewish Labor Movement in the United States," *American Jewish Year Book* (1952); J. B. S. Hardman, "The Jewish Labor Movement in the United States," *Proceedings of the American Jewish Historical Society* 52 (1962-63): 98-132; Daniel Bell, *Marxian Socialism in the United States* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1967).

¹¹Howe felt these writers refused to confront Jewish socialism on its own terms, betraying the bias of a later moment, and underestimated the effects of socialism in shaping Jews and influencing America. *World of Our Fathers* 321-24.

¹²Howe, "Why Has Socialism Failed in America," in *Socialism and America* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1985) 105-44.

¹³*World of Our Fathers* 613-21.

¹⁴*World of Our Fathers* 646.

¹⁵"The Construction of Community: Jewish Migration and Ethnicity in the United States," *The Jews of North America*, ed. Moses Rischin (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1987) 107.

¹⁶See Sydney Stahl Weinberg, *The World of Our Mothers* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1988).

¹⁷Howe focused briefly on the shameful record of the Roosevelt Administration during the Holocaust but could not integrate the two stories—Jewish absorption

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in New Deal America and the American and American responses to the Holocaust. *World of Our Fathers* 392-94.

¹⁸*World of Our Fathers* 253-55.

¹⁹Michael Berenbaum, *After Tragedy and Triumph* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990) 3.

²⁰Elizabeth Ewen, *Immigrant Women in the Land of Dollars* (New York: Monthly Review P, 1985); Kathy Friedman-Kasaba, *Memories of Migration* (Albany: State University of New York, 1996). See also Rose Cohen, *Out of the Shadow* (New York: Cornell UP, 1995); Bella Cohen Spewack, *Streets* (New York: Feminist P, 1995).

²¹Leonard Dinnerstein, *Anti-Semitism in America* (New York: Oxford UP, 1994) 226-244.